The Maldives and Its Underwater World

by ***Ir. Chin Mee Poon***

PEOPLE all over the world are attracted to the Maldives for its beaches and underwater world.

The Republic of Maldives is made up of 1190 islands in 26 atolls spread over 820km north to south and 120km east to west, north of the equator. It is about 700km southwest of Sri Lanka. The number of islands in the republic actually depends on the tide and the definition of an island.

The capital of the Maldives, Male, occupies an entire island at the southern edge of the North Male Atoll. The international airport of Male occupies another island which is about a 5-minute boat ride away. Only 200 islands are inhabited. A total of 44 islands consist of resort islands, each with a resort on it but with no human settlement. Most of the 270,000 people of the Maldives are Muslims.

I went to the Maldives for scuba diving twice. The first visit was in June 2002 when we stayed in Club Rinnalhi Resort. While the divers were exploring the underwater world, the wives were enjoying themselves on the beaches and soaking up the ambience of the resort.

My second visit, in December 2009, was a live-aboard diving trip strictly for divers only. Over six days, we dived at various dive sites with the hope of catching sight of two of all divers' Big Four – the manta ray and the whale shark. The other members of the Big Four are the hammerhead shark and the mola-mola (sun fish). We had timed our visit to coincide with the feeding season of manta rays and whale sharks in this area.

As fate would always have it, some of us were luckier than the others and saw both. I was one of the not-so-lucky ones. I did not manage to see any whale shark. I only had a fleeting glimpse of a manta ray during one of the dives. However, I had a memorable encounter with three juvenile manta rays busy feeding on the sea surface when I was going ashore in a dinghy from our dive boat.

On our last evening onboard our dive boat, all of us had a whale of a time enjoying a spectacular acrobatic show put up by three manta rays. Our boat was anchored, the two spotlights at the stern were shining directly on the sea and a high concentration of planktons was attracted by the light. The planktons in turn attracted the three manta rays which happened to be in that area.

For more than two hours, the three manta rays took turns to feed on the planktons, circling and somersaulting again and again with their cephalic fins arched like a scoop. I could even see their gills clearly through their wide-opened mouths. We thoroughly enjoyed the show from the deck. We did not even have to jump into the water. Wow!

I left the Maldives with one regret though – after more than 20 years of scuba diving, I still have not met my first whale shark! ■