



Taking the plunge

Martin Popplewell buddied up with his boyfriend for a diving trip to the Maldives.

When I told Jaime, my Spanish speaking Peruvian boyfriend, we were going to the Maldives there seemed to be some confusion. He couldn't seem to understand why I was so excited about escaping the drab grey of winter London - especially if we were going to the Malvinas. Malvinas is Spanish for the Falklands. Now he understood why I was so pleased.

Imagine a tropical island that conforms to every stereotype of the best kind. A green



Jaime and Martin: Getting ready to take the plunge.

knot of coconut palms, surrounded with a sprinkling of icing-sugar sand, set in an azure sea. Stunning enough on its own.

Then imagine that your desert island has its own luxury spa. Open air treatment rooms with roofs woven out of traditional coconut thatch, take in the warm sea breeze with vistas of the infinite turquoise of the Indian Ocean.

The design must have had a gay man's touch - the clean lines, brushed steel and stylish porcelain fittings wouldn't be out of place in a trendy warehouse apartment. But they all blend perfectly into the natural surroundings.

This is not in my imagination. It's an island called Kandholhudhoo in the Maldives.

Everything from facials, to an Indian head massage is on offer but my favourite was the Adam and Eve. Jaime and I had an Adam and Adam. After an hour long massage we'd been left alone, each with a glass of champagne, in a warm scented bath, surrounded by the gen-



The six foot long grey reef sharks are the muscle marys

tle flicker of candles.

But it wasn't massages which had brought me to the one thousand islands which are the Maldives. I'd come to scuba dive with the big fish which have made the islands a Mecca for divers.

Think of a coral reef as a gay bar. The only bar for miles around, it attracts everything. Magenta, turquoise and saffron butterfly and damsel fish are the scene queens here. Perfectly preened and pretty - all dressed up ready for a night out.

Amongst the reef you'll spy the occasional moray eel. They appear predatory, like one of those single, older men you often see drinking a solitary pint, concealing themselves in a corner waiting for something tasty to pop by before snapping it up.

The six foot long grey reef sharks are the

muscle marys - parading up and down eager to show off their brawn.

Some of the fish even have the ability to change their sex. In appearance at least, these are the drag queens of the reef.

To share this underwater spectacle as you fin along, holding the hand of your boyfriend will be the most memorable experience of the holiday, if the massage doesn't squeeze it into second place.

The island of Kandholhudhoo is small, quiet and very intimate. If you want more people, several fine restaurants and even a bit of a night life - Kuramathi is the island for you.

Its beautiful gardens are adorned with frangipani and hibiscus - their scent hanging heavy in the warm air. Look above the jungle canopy and you'll often see huge fruit bats floating by, beating their wings with a lazy grace.

Here I recommend you stay in a water bungalow. Erected on stilts, they stand in the middle of a crystal clear lagoon. Your balcony has steps down to water and your own private piece of the ocean.

Kuramathi also has diving, massages and a choice of water sports. But if you stay in one of the water bungalows, there's every possibility you won't leave it for your entire visit. We didn't. **D**



Bath-time: Relaxing with a glass of Champagne.

LAWBOX

As your plane lands in the Maldives you fly over the capital Malé. The glint of a gold dome on the main mosque reminds you this is a Muslim country. But the resorts are islands of acceptance and being a gay tourist is not a problem. Some tour operators have had publicity in the past for not allowing same sex couples. We booked through Kuoni and they're about as gay friendly as it gets.

PRICEBOX

- The spa island of Kandholhudhoo is attached to the dive boat the Island Explorer.
- Martin Popplewell travelled to the Maldives with Kuoni. They can arrange a package to suit a range of budgets and experiences. Holidays start from £799.
- Kuoni's website is www.kuoni.co.uk or telephone 01306-747008.

Photos by Jaime Montoya