

# TRAVEL+ LEISURE

SOUTHEAST ASIA

JANUARY 2020

**ON THE RISE  
IN BHUTAN**

**20 TRIPS  
FOR 2020**

*Adventures  
across  
Australia*

SINGAPORE S\$7.90 / HONG KONG HK\$43  
THAILAND TH฿175 / INDONESIA IDR50,000  
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## The Big Blue

Beyond the overwater villas and sparkling lagoons, the friendly giants of the Maldives inhabit a paradise of their own. **Etoise Basuki** jumps into the deep.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY LEIGH GRIFFITHS



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Lunch at signature restaurant Sea, Salt, Fire; a pier with a view; Beach villa with private pool. OPPOSITE: Off the deep end with local grey nurse sharks.

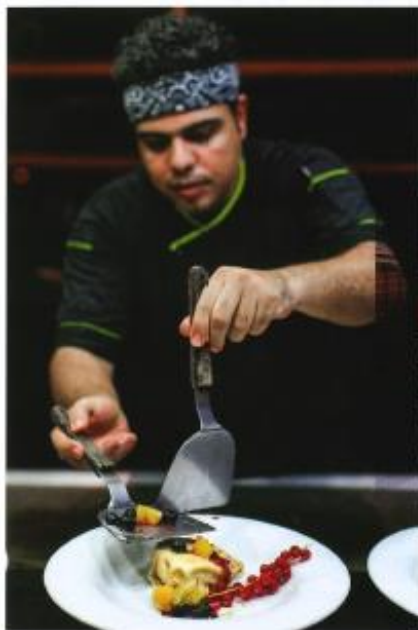
**MY BODY IS RIGID.** My arms crossed tight to my chest. Muffled expletives gurgle through my snorkel as I yelp at the sight of a four-meter-long grey nurse shark staring me down, angling straight for me. We're about to face off, but as she nears, she quickly turns a few degrees and skims right past me, her wake causing a ripple of bubbles in the water and a chill of goose bumps on my skin.

She's not the only local I've interrupted in the last 10 minutes—I'm floating in the middle of a group of at least 30 nurse sharks off the coast of Dhiggaru Atoll, an hour's boat ride from Anantara Dhigu Maldives Resort, who had promised me—multiple times—that this was a safe snorkeling activity. Now, so many sharks above me, below me, to the left, to the right, I can barely see my guides, Mibu and Visam. But there's no need to worry. As close relations of the whale shark, when these guys open wide all you get is a big, toothless grandpa grin.

In, yes, a sea of new resort openings in the Maldives, Anantara Dhigu is one of the originators in South Malé Atoll—built in 2006 on a natural island that existed long before that. But these organic foundations give them an edge over the newer properties that have had to dredge the sand they're built on: the reefs are rich with a community of sea life that has been there for millennia. Introduced a year ago, Anantara's Snorkeling With Sharks provides a chance for guests to see more than just cute Nemos and colorful corals, and get up close and personal with some of the bigger sea creatures that inhabit these waters. Underwater here, I've never felt like such a small fish in a big pond.

**IT ALL STARTED** when I was on the loo. Anantara Dhigu's villas hover above luminescent turquoise seas, and the wooden ensuite not only has a square glass peephole right below the toilet bowl, but floor-to-ceiling windows with endless ocean views. It was here I noticed a black-tip reef shark in the corner of my window. And also here where, later, I watched the sun set all purples and oranges, and noticed a few more black-tips sneaking a feed by the villa's wooden stilts.





Even when you leave your villa, you don't have to stray far to experience Dhigu's watery wonderland. At low tide you can walk to the neighboring picnic island, Gulhifushi, where you can snorkel the house reef. You can even learn to surf in these waters—as I do, with the incredibly patient Coline of Tropicsurf. We take our long boards to the resort's laughably flat lagoon; a perfect learning ground for beginners like me. My upper-body strength barely gets me through the one-hour lesson, but I do manage to learn to jump on my board and switch feet without crashing into the shallows. I consider that a win. More experienced surfers can head to the reef just past Veli Island across the lagoon, where bigger waves break consistently, or venture on a half-day excursion to the best surf spots in North Malé Atoll.



**THE REAL GOAL** of my trip was to meet those sharks. So we boarded the resort's speedboat for the one-hour journey to Dhiggarum Atoll, passing Anantara's adults-only property, Veli, and its tiny Naladhu Private Island, and soon the world becomes 360 degrees of deep blue, with no other sign of life around.

After 30 minutes, the captain cuts the motor. This was earlier than expected, and Mibu and Visam head up to the bow to check out what's going on. The captain points to the distance, then guns the boat back in the direction we came from. As the motor stops again, Visam yells, "Get your snorkels on, there are mantas in the water." By luck, we've come across a group of 15 manta rays having lunch. I jump in and notice the poor visibility—the super-cloudy water is full of plankton, and the mantas are loving it. They barely spot us as they glide through the water with their mouths open, their billowing fins shoveling the plankton in and flushing out the excess through their gills. Manta rays are not dangerous—their tails aren't used to sting, but rather to balance. With a span of three or



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Swinging in the lagoon; aquatic guide Visam; another local resident; sunset views from an overwater villa. OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Origami's Japanese-influenced fare; surf's up; a green way to get around.



four meters, one accidentally tickles me as it glides past. They somersault together and we spend 15 minutes simply taking in this beautiful dance.

But we still have the sharks to get to. I haul myself back on the boat, completely high on this accidental sighting. The motor starts again, but we barely have time to dry off when I hear: "Get your snorkels on, there are dolphins." I stand up to see what's happening, but Visam yells, "Quick! Quick! Dolphins are fast." So I plunge in, flippers askew, and watch about 30 spinner dolphins glide in front of me. The silence of being underwater emphasizes just how dramatic this scene is. I follow from behind and see a big grey cloud up ahead. That's when I realize it's not just 30 dolphins. That cloud is a pod that numbers about 200.

Visam was right, I can't keep pace and they dart away. The boat retrieves us, just as the dolphins return to show off, torpedoing into the air, leaping into the distance.

**OH YES, THE SHARKS.** At this point, they've become an afterthought. How could this day possibly get any better? We pull up to the anchor point and I dive in yet again. Despite everything I've seen today, the sight of 30 adult-sized nurse sharks is a wonder. The sharks are everywhere; it feels like I'm in the

middle of an underwater Shibuya crossing with sharks veering every which way, feeding on the krill that get caught in this particular bay. I duck-dive under and follow a big shark away from the boat. I get so close I can see that its leathery skin is covered in little freckles. Like me, the sharks seem to have also had too much Maldivian sun. Visam points out a crooked shark. One fin is smaller than the other and its tail is warped like it was run over by a car. Beneath me, a mother and baby glide away from the frenzy.

After half an hour, it's time to head home. As the boat speeds off we warm in the afternoon sun. I chat to my guides, who grew up on these waters. "I have been working here for 10 years," Visam says. "I've spent many, many days as a guide, but I've never seen mantas, dolphins and sharks in one day. Today was one of the best experiences of my life." I've been in this country for only 24 hours, and I'd have to agree. 🐠

*anantara.com; doubles from US\$770; Snorkeling With Sharks US\$195 per person; Tropicsurf lagoon surf session from US\$90.*