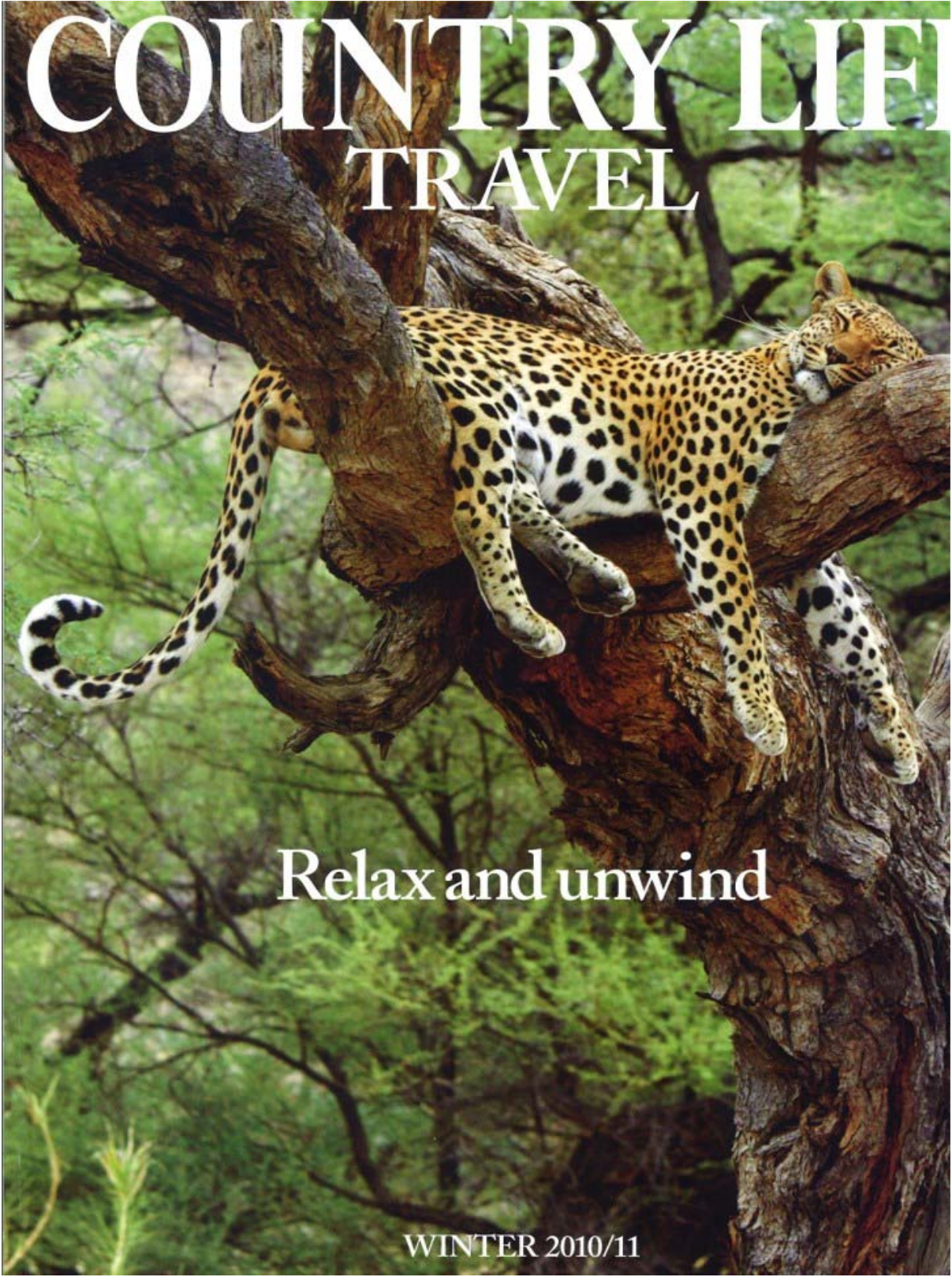


# BAROS

maldives

## COUNTRY LIFE TRAVEL



Relax and unwind

WINTER 2010/11

# BAROS

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## Maldives

### Dive and dine

Why make learning to dive anything other than an experience to savour both in and out of the water? Rupert Uloth dons his mask and scuba tank to enjoy the best that the Maldives has to offer

**I**F you meet a turtle at night, remember to raise the beam of your torch to the surface. If you meet a shark at night, panic and swim like hell. These are the kind of things that you don't really need to know when walking down Regent Street or doing the school run in Sussex, but in the Maldives, it's the sort of knowledge that I found invaluable. Actually, that's nonsense about the charming and friendly sharks you meet on Maldivian reefs. They're complete pussycats. But it was certainly what I felt like doing when I saw my first black-tipped reef shark. And in case you're wondering about the torch etiquette, it's so that turtles don't become confused about which way to head to the surface for air.

**'From our water villa, we simply had to descend the steps to encounter whatever marine life was lurking under our bedroom'**

This was why I had come halfway across the world. Not for me the dreary, chlorinated boredom of a municipal swimming pool. I wanted to learn to dive on the fin. What's the point of spending all that time doing breathing techniques and buddy signals staring at a pale-blue tiled wall and wondering whether you've sent off for your new tax disc? Much better to do it where beguiling sweet lips pout at you like Brigitte Bardot, clown fish show off their flashy colouring and moray eels open and shut their mouths as if continuously on the point of saying something.

My mission was to become an Open Water Diver in just over a week at the same time as enjoying the delights of two different islands. This qualification allows you to dive to 18m (59ft) with a buddy, independent of supervision. Baros, with its dramatic arc of water villas off its northern end, has an excellent dive centre, delicious food and, most importantly, great diving a few paces (and kicks with your fins) away. Eighty per cent of the country is less than 3ft above sea level and many of the islands only take five minutes to cross, but Baros has the

advantage of a 985ft long house reef; you merely walk off the beach and are immediately submerged in another world. From our water villa, it was simply a case of descending the steps to encounter whatever marine life was lurking under our bedroom.

'The people are happy and cheerful,' said archaeologist H. C. P. Bell when he visited the islands in 1922. 'It is an oriental utopia, which, at heart, desires nothing so great as to be left by the outside world as much as possible alone to lotus eat undisturbed in its sea-girt happy isolation.' He could not have imagined the 500,000-plus people who now visit the islands every year. Since gaining independence from Britain in 1965, tourism has become the islands' main industry. As one local told me: 'As the tide rises, all the boats are lifted.' In spite of global warming, the 2004 tsunami and environmental concerns about long-haul flights, the genie is out. But places such as Soneva Fushi, the second island we visited, are doing their best to minimise the impact.

Here, there is a charcoal oven for waste wood, cans are crushed and sold as scrap, some of the island uses solar power and you're encouraged to forget the outer world as your shoes are taken from you on arrival. 'No shoes, no news' is the mantra. It doesn't mean you have to live like Robinson Crusoe on an austerity drive. Far from it. Massages included Balinese and Swedish in a beautiful wooden retreat near the beach. After dinner, we wandered along a tree-high rope bridge to the observatory where we see through the telescope that Cassiopeia is an M for Maldives and not a W as in England. A giant, outdoor screening of the James Bond film *Dr No* was spectacular; the underwater fight scenes seemed particularly apt.

On my final dive, thoughts of baddies slicing through my regulator tube or ripping my buoyancy-control device were dispelled as the serene world of the reef took over: a whole bed of comic-looking sand eels that retracted like gofers as we approached; a stingray sitting calmly on the seabed; enormous shoals of yellow Jacks; and clouds of red-toothed triggerfish. On the boat trip back, I had time for a last swot-up for the theory test.



It was when we were enjoying a wine tasting with enthusiastic and knowledgeable sommelier Sebastian in a beautifully cool underground cellar (complete with water bottles for our feet) that my instructor arrived with my Open Water Diver certificate. We were in the right place to celebrate. 🐠

#### Travel Information

● *Kuoni* (01306 747008; [www.kuoni.co.uk](http://www.kuoni.co.uk)) offers seven nights at Baros Maldives, staying in a deluxe villa with breakfast, including flights with Sri Lankan Airlines and transfers. From £1,648 pp, based on two sharing  
● *Carrier* (0161 492 1358; [www.carrier.co.uk](http://www.carrier.co.uk)) has seven nights for six at Soneva Fushi, in a Crusoe Villa, from £3595pp, with flights  
● The two- or three-day PADI Scuba Diver course at Baros Maldives ([www.baros.com](http://www.baros.com)) costs from £270pp

Reinhard Dirscherl/Photolibary; Josef Beck/Atami

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*Above* Coral fish of every colour will dazzle the eyes of even the most seasoned divers. *Right* Baros has a house reef where novice divers can enjoy the myriad wonders of tropical aquatic life



[www.countrylife.co.uk](http://www.countrylife.co.uk)

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