

BAROS

maldives

THE  TIMES

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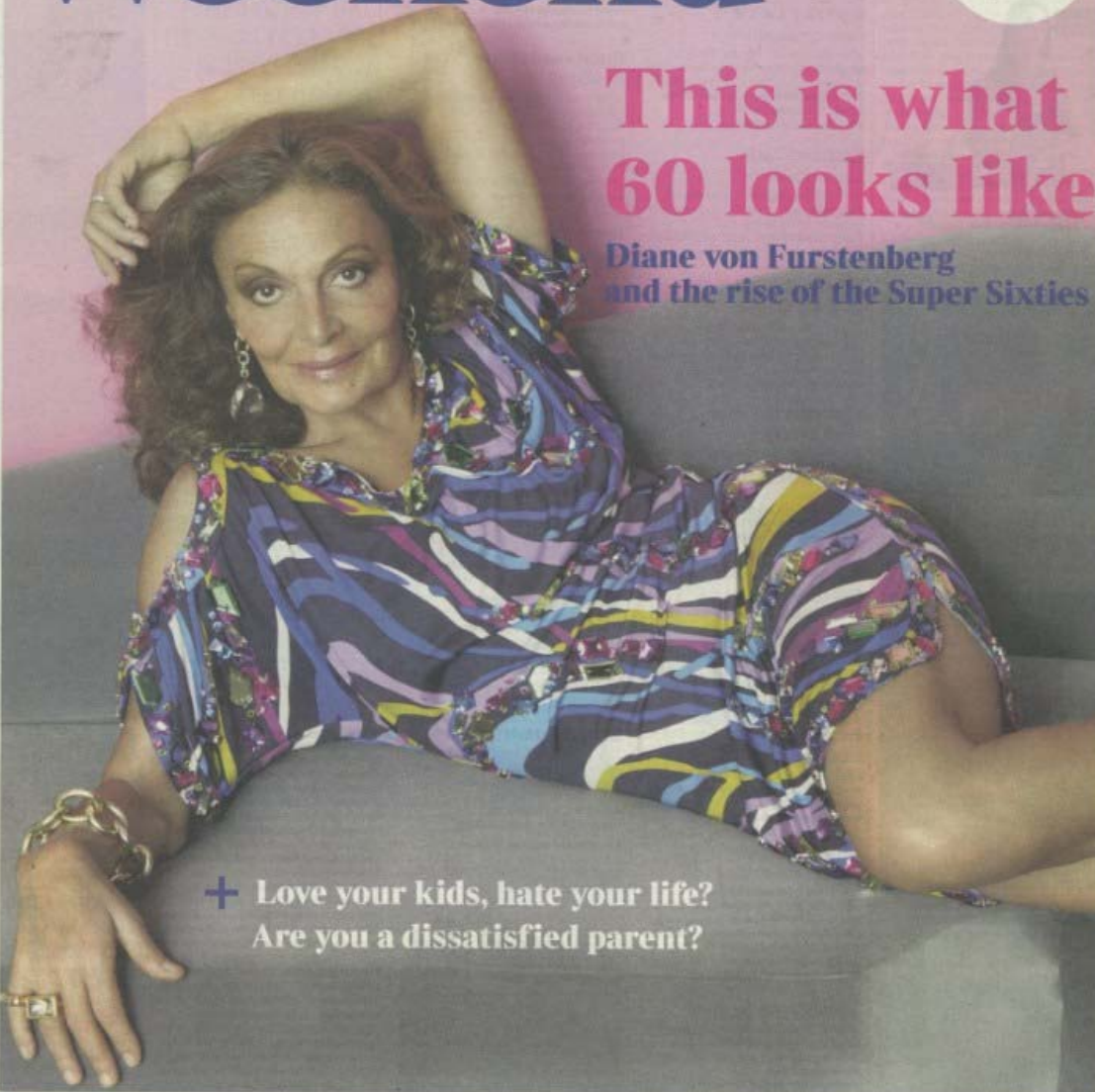
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Weekend

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This is what 60 looks like

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Indian Ocean

Dive down deep

There is more to these islands than pretty beaches and swanky villas.

Nicholas Roe puts on his diving mask

I was sitting on the bottom of the Indian Ocean reaching up to lift my mask and let the water in when I suddenly realised that, until this moment, I hadn't really understood the Maldives at all.

I should have. I'd been warned. "The real Maldives is under the sea," Ronny, my diving instructor had said, leading the way off the beach down to the reef. But what did that mean exactly? What was "unreal" about an island full of lush palms, perfect weather and lovely grub?

Now, sitting on the sandy seabed, lifting my mask under Ronny's hand-waving instructions, his words came back to me together with a sense of extraordinary change from one element to the other, one world to another. As I prised away the rubberseal, Indian Ocean blue began flooding in over my eyes and I was shocked, jolted. Suddenly it was like being dropped into one of those Second World War submarine movies, and on the losing side at that. My own little depth charge went off in my head as the water level in my mask rose and rose and a sense of suffocating, claustrophobic panic budded and blossomed.

Oh, blimey. This exercise was supposed to test how I'd cope if I sprung a leak diving at depth (we were only a couple of metres down at this point, laughably close to land). But how I overreacted. I sniffed water, wanted to cough into my breathing apparatus, frantically snuffed air back into the mask to try to clear all that blurry water, and pointed frantically to the surface.

And we rose together, Ronny Van Dorp and I, into the beautifully unreal sunshine of an ordinary Maldivian day.

I was on Baros Island, an exquisite jewel of a resort only a 25-minute bouncy speed-boat ride from the international airport at Male, a place of 75 luxury villas and — quartered somewhere in the centre, in yet another parallel world — about 250 staff on hand to cater for every whim. The sky shone brightly like the opening scenes of a *Simpsons* episode. The sea outside my villa window was a dozen colours — dark and light — but all of them lavishly blue. On the sandy paths through the palms and lush, elegant vegetation, men and women smiled charming hellos as they pushed barrows or brought goodies to your door.

And all this was classic Maldives. But Ronny was right. Somehow, by itself, it's not quite real. On the surface, these islands are so marvellously acceptable that they almost numb your senses. What you need for real appreciation, real feeling and real experience is the water.

I was taking a first-stage scuba course,



getting the theory in little bursts sitting at a table on a veranda built over the ocean. Ronny — a likeable James Bond type with blond hair and a cheery style — whisked me through the theory in breezy bursts in this fantastic classroom. Then up we'd get, squeezing into masks and tanks and blubbery wetsuits, to waddle down the beach on to the "house reef".

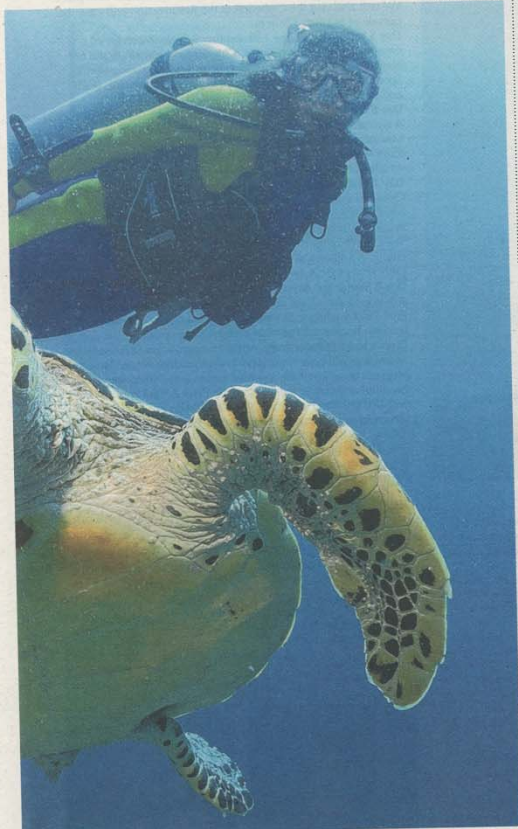
There are at least 30 dive sites around Baros but the nearest is so close that you can walk there in under a minute, my first dive providing three quarters of an hour of quite breathtaking intensity. Never mind emotional numbness. Here, all the expected sights were instantly available but stripped of the usual TV-bound two-dimensional distance and made tangibly real: an aloof turtle sailing by right in front of my mask; a gigantic moray eel barking silently from a crevice, jaws working like a



Getting there

Nicholas Roe was a guest of Kuoni (01306 747008, kuoni.co.uk), which offers seven nights on Baros, Maldives, in a deluxe villa with breakfast, including flights with Emirates Airlines and transfers. From £1572 per person based on two sharing. Diving can be booked locally.

to find the real Maldives



J. W. ALLEN / PHOTOGRAPHY

Ocean views Turtles are only one of the many creatures that divers can see at close quarters

a brisk 50-minute boat ride to a deeper reef where manta rays were promised, though most of us wondered how anyone could possibly guarantee anything in this ocean, let alone a diver's most prized sighting. We descended to about 14m, ears popping and squeaking in a froth of bubbles, the water warm, the colours fiercely bright.

We hugged the bottom, clinging like great limpets to rocky outcrops to keep ourselves still, and after only one minute the distant gloom presented us with a growing and extraordinary sight: five enormous manta rays, wingspans a full 3m across, sailing languidly over our heads, close enough to touch. Round and round they circled as hundreds of fish nibbled lice from their skins, and we watched for 45 stunned minutes.

The other unusually vital moment was much quieter, but as intense in a different fashion. I took my theory exam on the final day (passed) and decided to celebrate by grabbing a snorkel and swimming out alone along the house reef. Fifty metres offshore, lost in underwater sights, I suddenly became aware of a dark, torpedo-like shape swimming lazily around me. A shark. All right, it was only 2m long, a harmless reef shark. But I felt terribly, vulnerably alive, lying there alone in the water, waiting for the creature to go. How I longed for land then — the beach, waiters, fresh fruit, all of it.

Poised between the elements, the real Maldives and the one created for fun coincided scarily but beautifully. Then the shark left, and I swam back.

mad dog; a shoal of frantic squid skidding by like schoolkids late for class; a huge mantis shrimp rearing blindly from a seabed nest; electric blue nameless creatures cruising indifferently past our sets of bubbles.

To say that the Indian Ocean is teeming with fish is like saying London gets busy sometimes. "It's fish soup down there," Ronny said later, as he gave me my homework.

Ah, homework. Oddly, this was another part of the best stuff — the bad bit that was good really. I had a 240-page diving manual to plough through, covering far more than my own basic qualification required, but I read it happily most mornings in preparation for a test due at the end. Sometimes I read it in the evening, too. Any time really, even over breakfast, munching fresh fruit peeled for me by a bloke in a white coat. I was glad of it, just as, really, I was glad of

the incident with the mask (honestly). That little episode took place on my second dive but it was soon over with because Ronny's response was to take me on a calming underwater journey deeper into the fish soup, so that I became only one more natural ingredient among many — happy enough to sit on the bottom with my mask off at the end for the required minute, truly enjoying this fuzzy new world. You've no idea how good that made me feel later, thinking about it over a lamp-flickering dinner in tinkling restaurant quiet.

There were many moments like that, experiences that added a vivid framework to days otherwise loaded with peace and grace. Under water, it wasn't simply that the sights were astonishing, but also that there was a feeling of privileged vulnerability, a sense of living balance. I loved it. The most amazing dive of all came after

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