



UNDER THE SEA

Wary of the water, Lorna V usually keeps her feet firmly on the beach. So how would she manage a diving trip in the Maldives?

Can you cry underwater? Because I'm pretty sure I did. A turtle the size of my torso swam up to me, almost touching me as it passed by. Then slowly it paused, and cocked its big eye towards me, looking me right in my goggle-covered eyes for a long, long moment before carrying on.

I knew that there were seven turtles at Baros, one of around 100 or so luxury resorts in the dream Indian Ocean destination that is the Maldives. Baros, in the west, is one of the few island resorts with its own coral reef, an underground rainforest that starts barely a metre from its shores. I really wasn't expecting to see a turtle. Not actually being a diver, I wasn't expecting to see anything much. I never imagined I'd be capable of going on a snorkelling tour, and there I was squealing with joy behind my mask as we swam

through shades from blue to turquoise with marine life spanning all the colours of a rainbow. It was a bit like swimming in an aquarium with no sides.

Was this really me? Me, pointing out the shark to the others? I went to Baros a beach-brat, and surfaced from the endangered coral kingdom a changed woman. All my life I'd loved the sea and beaches, only now, thanks to the encouragement of the Baros Dive Centre, something else had happened. I felt a divine connection with the cosmos. Decades of meditation and mumbo-jumbo and I'd never felt that. I knew I wasn't one for 'activities' ever since I fell off my first bike around the age of five. Everything that followed confirmed this: last in the school races, failing to learn to swim at school, never picked for the rounders' team, or any team, and ridiculed as a teenager by a bully PE teacher for >>>>

>>> being last and useless. I did eventually learn to swim thanks to my patient dad. As an adult, I was great on beach holidays involving watersports – at guarding everyone’s valuables. When I tried snow instead, fellow skiers weren’t impressed that I couldn’t even walk in my boots, thus holding them up from precious skiing time. The instructor gave up on me.

So, a trip to the Maldives diving and snorkelling? I don’t think so. Past tense: *didn’t* think so.

I looked at the Baros website shaking my head, thinking *no-no-no*, it might be a dream trip for someone else but what with it being a popular honeymoon destination, I don’t want to be reminded that marriage is a box I’ve never ticked either. Then I took a deep breath. Changed ‘no’ to ‘yes’. Felt euphoric.

Life’s too short to do what you don’t want to do. But how do you know if you don’t try? I was curious, having met many divers and snorkellers who were so passionate it was as though they belonged to a cult. What made their eyes light up? I knew from them the Maldives is the aquatic Holy Grail. So my goal was to give the diving and the snorkelling a go, rather than cast myself as the non-adventurous type.

Like yoga underwater

It takes about 20 minutes to walk around Baros, a clever eco-resort that resists crude bling. Once you’re through the coconut palm trees on to ivory coral sand leading to a luminous blue lagoon, it’s hard not to feel a calling. And from spotting the sudden ripples of tuna bobbing up and down when you’re on a sunrise boat trip, to catching sight of black-tipped sharks (which don’t attack humans) swimming up to shallow waters just below the resort’s flagship restaurant, the Lighthouse, you realise marine life isn’t just everywhere: it is *it*.

The Maldives is a cluster of islands known as atolls, which are the result of coral secretions that have taken place over 45 million years. I felt ignorant for not realising until now that coral is a living thing and that stepping on it, touching it, kills it. So I stayed carefully on sand and peered through the water from above at shapes and forms moving underneath.

Fear of going underwater is tied up with issues that can have nothing to do with water. When you fill in the medical form for diving it’s obvious it isn’t for everyone. Aside from a long list of medical conditions, diving is not for those who faint, have claustrophobia issues, or are prone to panic attacks (all of which I’d experienced at one time or another). This actually made me feel better. ‘I don’t have to give myself a hard time,’ I thought. I realised that sometimes our fear is, in fact, a gut feeling for taking care of ourselves. But if I could do a little, if I could make a start, I’d be happy. ‘I’m ready for this now,’ I said to myself.

Ronny, who heads the Eco Diving Centre at Baros, told me to see this as yoga underwater, which was smart, as



‘Not being a diver, I hadn’t been expecting to see much, let alone one of around seven turtles in the waters around Baros, but I did!’



‘You don’t go to the Maldives with maps and lists, you go for the complete beauty’

telling someone nervous to relax makes them feel worse, and I practise yoga regularly. I also do Pilates, so he told me to breathe the Pilates way: out through the mouth, and in through the mouth, too. OK, I could do that.

Once I got the wetsuit on I was excited but the weights around my waist felt strange. In the water I struggled to get the flippers on. Everything felt unfamiliar. Seeing the coral and fish helped distract me but I didn’t like the sensation of the breathing apparatus in my mouth. I felt safe with Ronny right by my side, though, and managed to swim 10 metres with the diving gear. That was my limit.

Hannah, a seasoned diver, congratulated me later, which meant a lot. She told me I was lucky to have my first experience at Baros. Many resorts have induction courses at the hotel pool, sometimes in full view of other non-diving guests. I’d have been too self-conscious. Typically, a group will then be taken out by boat to dive shortly afterwards. I’d have bottled out. The limit at Baros is four people rather than the more usual eight and a big group wouldn’t have suited me at all. The two divers with me, Hannah and Catherine, were both



Lorna triumphant, having taken to the waters around Baros

rooting for me and I realised the obvious: if you’re nervous you need supportive people around you, not impatient alpha adventurers. For the next few days they encouraged me to practise snorkelling so I could do the big educational tour.

Fantasy setting

Just minutes from my villa I could slip underwater for instant wild sea life, getting the hang of coordinating flippers and breathing with a mask. Thanks to Ronny I kept thinking: it’s just yoga, it’s just breathing – I can do this.

The morning before our marine biology lecture and the educational tour, Hannah and Catherine went diving. I had a choice to go and see the Maldivian capital Malé, then in full pre-election fever, or to idle away the morning around my idyllic personal beach spot. But you don’t go to a place like Baros for street life and to check out sights. You don’t go with maps, lists and must-see venues. You go to experience total beauty and to play and be looked after. You don’t even have to worry about nabbing a sun lounger because you have so much space of your own. It’s your moment of being in a Bounty bar

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ad only it lasts for a week or more. The unreality is the point of the trip. And from this unreality, the fantasy me slipped into her flippers to enter a marine reality. It really was me who returned two hours later having followed other snorkellers around the lagoon. There was no question as to whether I’d last the tour that afternoon though I still had to come up to take a proper breath, and consider if I was up to going past that wall into the open ocean. But I did it, entering a state of ecstasy looking down onto steep mountain-like coral.

On our last day, I found out the marine team had identified ‘our’ turtle. It was Pana, whose name means ‘hope’.