

Featured Interview with,
GIUSEPPE D'AMATO

Managing Director, TGI Maldives Pvt Ltd



You are regarded as a pioneer of diving in the Maldives. Tell us when you started the diving school and what was the Maldives like at the time ?

It all began in 1983 when I was on holiday in Sri Lanka. Unfortunately, while we were there, the civil war erupted, leading to fires in Pettah, shootings and general instability. Having freshly arrived in Sri Lanka, we did not want to return home. Our options were limited due to embassy closures, making it impossible to obtain a visa for India, for instance. Consequently, we decided to head to the Maldives, the only destination not requiring a visa for us at the time.

At that point, I had already taken up recreational diving as a hobby. Little did I expect that my diving experience in the Maldives would be so enchanting, as I had initially never planned to visit the Maldives. However, I discovered diving in Maldives. With Italian tour operators beginning to send tourists there in significant numbers, the German-run diving school I was at became concerned because tourists spoke Italian and did not know how to cater to this new clientele. So they approached me to assist them for a month and that is when my journey started in 1984. I had met an Italian individual who owned a resort and offered me the opportunity to run the diving centre there, which happened to be Halaveli. I embarked on this independent venture and the rest, as they say, is history. My journey in the world of diving evolved from there.

Tourism in the Maldives was initially confined to the high season. The logistics were far more complicated back then. Distances between islands were substantial, with no speed boats,

aeroplanes, seaplanes, or other modes of modern transportation available, multiplying the difficulties faced by the tourism industry in those days compared to today.

How does TGI Maldives differentiate itself from other dive centres and watersports providers in the Maldives?

Our approach has always been to actively involve local individuals as much as possible. Initially, this approach faced criticism. As a Course Director, I have trained numerous instructors, including many Maldivian instructors and even the first female instructor. Some of my European colleagues were initially apprehensive about this, fearing that by training these individuals, they would eventually take over. In reality, this transition is a natural progression that would have occurred regardless. Local communities naturally seek to make the most of available resources.

We have consistently strived to maintain fairness in terms of salary, treatment, and benefits for our staff. We firmly believe in not exploiting a situation for personal gain and then moving on. In fact, we have remained dedicated to the Maldives for over 40 years, in contrast to many colleagues who stayed for shorter periods to accumulate wealth and then left. I have always rejected this approach. We offer the highest salaries and benefits in the Maldives and this is a conscious choice on our part. Similarly, we actively encourage our staff to further their knowledge and skills by providing opportunities for licensing and additional training courses. This commitment to employee development is a deliberate choice that we make

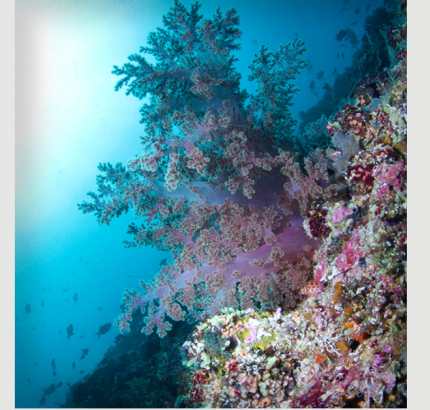
Can you elaborate on TGI Maldives' approach to ensuring safety for divers and other participants in its activities?

We have been pioneers in this field. Personally, I forged a partnership with DAN (Divers Alert Network) a nonprofit organisation dedicated to providing assistance to divers in need. They offer essential services like insurance and emergency transportation for dive-related incidents. I proudly serve as their representative in the Maldives because I have always admired their commitment to this vital mission. In tandem with our collaboration with DAN, we conducted courses designed to enhance safety awareness in diving. This joint effort had a significant impact on shaping safety protocols within the diving community. While we have encountered significant incidents, we can proudly say that we have successfully saved lives.

What advice would you offer to someone thinking of entering the world of scuba diving ?

As a recreational diver, I wholeheartedly encourage you to take the plunge. The beauty of marine life is awe-inspiring and can be found in any place, not just in renowned destinations like the Maldives. It exists wherever there is something intriguing, unusual and in need of exploration. It is not limited to the most famous spots. For those aspiring to become professional divers, my advice is to approach it with utmost seriousness. With the vast resources available on the internet, it is tempting to shortcut your way through exams and training, potentially becoming an instructor without acquiring sufficient knowledge and experience. I strongly recommend taking a diligent and dedicated approach, accumulating





the knowledge and experience necessary to safely guide others, especially if you plan to make diving your profession. Ultimately, as an instructor, you will be responsible for the well-being of novice divers and securing your own competence is important in ensuring their safety.

How has TGI Maldives consolidated and expanded its operations in recent years?

In the initial stages, our focus was primarily on global expansion. When we started, there were three partners and we established centres in various locations, including the Red Sea, the Caribbean, Roatán in Honduras and more. However, a few years ago, we came to the realisation that this widespread approach was not working optimally. It became challenging to manage and oversee such distant locations effectively. As a result, the three of us decided to divide the company among ourselves. One partner took control of the Caribbean operations, another focused on the Red Sea and I assumed responsibility for the Maldives. I am particularly grateful that I took on the Maldives because I have a deep affection for the region and managing operations there has proven to be significantly more manageable. After this transition, I dedicated my efforts to expanding our operations in the Maldives. Today, we proudly operate five centres in the Maldives, with plans for further expansion in the near future.

What makes the Maldives a popular destination for divers worldwide and how has this reputation evolved over the years?

The Maldives is truly breathtaking, no doubt about it. If you have never been there before, the moment you step off

the plane and catch your first glimpse of the turquoise water, it is nothing short of awe-inspiring. What attracts people to the Maldives is the sheer beauty of the place and this beauty extends both above and below the water. Many visitors do not realise the full extent of it until they put on a mask, dip their heads below the water's surface and discover the incredible world beneath. It is astonishing to see just how much there is to explore and marvel at beneath the waves. Not many destinations in the world offer such a rich combination of above and below-water wonders.

Can you elaborate on the various water sports and recreational activities offered to tourists in the Maldives, in addition to diving and their popularity among visitors?

In the beginning, diving centres primarily focused on diving, with water sports and excursions being either absent or managed separately. However, over time, these offerings have merged, and nowadays, every diving school also offers water sports and excursions. Water sports have gained significant popularity in resorts, with a wide range of options available, including Jet Skis, Jet Boards, Seabobs, Kayaks, Knee Boards and Waterskiing, among others. The only activity that poses some challenges is kite surfing due to its perceived risk, making insurance companies hesitant to cover diving schools for it. Other than that, all other water sports are readily available in the Maldives. Additionally, diving schools now offer excursions, which involve taking people to experience various attractions, such as observing marine life.

Can you share a specific example of a challenging leadership situation you have faced in your role within the Mal-

dives tourism and diving industry and how you resolved the challenge?

Handling challenging situations is a routine part of our operations. For instance, imagine a scenario where we have fully booked two boats for the day and suddenly one of them breaks down, leaving us in a tight spot, scrambling to find a solution. These kinds of challenges are something we deal with regularly. However, a more serious situation arises when we encounter staff members who disrupt the workflow with complaints, potentially leading to a strike involving multiple staff members. This can happen while we already have booked guests who are expecting our services. Despite these challenges, we always strive to adapt and find solutions. Fortunately, the proximity of two resorts to each other allows us to call on staff and boats from neighbouring resorts at the last minute to help us manage these unexpected situations.

We face challenging situations with rough seas and limited visibility of only a few metres. Situations like this can be quite alarming for foreign guests, although locals in places like the Maldives are accustomed to it. The key challenge is not the event itself, but the consequences it brings, including complaints from both staff and guests. Typically, captains respond by turning off the engine and waiting for the brief episode to pass, which usually lasts no more than 10 to 15 minutes before conditions improve. However, some guests may misinterpret this cautious approach as a sign of the captain's uncertainty or lack of direction. In some cases, captains may take action like checking GPS coordinates, which can be misconstrued by guests as a cause for concern, even when the captain remains calm and simply wants to ensure safety.