

# DIVE IN

India's sea-diving destinations have seen a steady rise in footfalls in the last few years. Amin Ali finds out more about the aquamania that's gripped the young and old alike



Have you always ogled at the mesmerising images of sea life aired on travel channels? Wondered what it would be like to dive in and explore the beauty of nature in the deep? Well, you don't have to cross the country's borders to let out the sea adventurer in you. India, now, boasts of some of the best sea-diving locations in the world (see box). As the monsoons recede, travellers will make a beeline to these destinations to behold vibrant coral reefs, never-seen-before aquatic life and enchanting shipwrecks.

Sanjeev Arora recalls his first diving experience where 'he almost freaked out with fear.' "It's an experience I can't express in words. Entering the water, and going deep down, equalising the ears, and finally coming face to face with corals and boat wrecks, shining in sunlight, was mesmerising and gripping," he fondly recalls.

Sonal Jain, who conducts professional and fun sea-diving tours to the Andamans, says most Indians are choosing fun dives or solo diving sessions (45-50 minutes). "Even though sea diving is safe, it offers an adrenaline rush that satiates the adventurous streak in travellers. Also, diving as a tourist activity is still relatively unexplored. The novelty factor is attracting a lot of people," she suggests.

Sea-diving instructor Venkat Charloo, who has taken many first timers into the deep, says till three or four years ago, he used to receive just professional divers. Now, he gets a lot of people, some as young as 10 years old, out for a four-to-

five day diving tour. "This activity also allows people to visit smaller islands around the mainland that they otherwise would not visit. Smaller islands offer better underwater visibility and active marine life," says Charloo.

Better connectivity, comfortable travel options and improved safety measures are also getting people to opt for a dive. Sunil Bakshi offers tourists luxurious diving experiences while living aboard a luxury cruise. His weekly tours explore unseen caves, wrecks and volcanic formations. Jeff Gordon, another sea-diving instructor, says, "People are realising that sea diving

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is a safe activity and they need not necessarily know how to swim to try it. That's why more people are undertaking short diving trips." But he recommends a training session that acclimatises a person, followed by a test dive in shallow waters before the actual dive. "It is best to stick to a depth of 12-18 m," he advises.

With October to May being the perfect time for a dive, start planning now.

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## INDIAN SEA-DIVING DESTINATIONS

● **Netrani or Pigeon Island, Karnataka:** Located 19km from the temple town of Murudeshwara, Netrani Island, also known as Pigeon Island, is perhaps the most accessible and popular diving destination in the Arabian Sea. With over 100 fish species, vibrant corals in clear waters with a visibility of over 10 m, it's most popular for tourists from Bengaluru, Mumbai and Goa.

● **Havelock Island, Andaman and Nicobar Islands:** Boasting of one of the best beaches, breathtaking under-and-over-water views and a mesmerising marine life, Havelock Island is frequented by divers from all over the globe. Shipwrecks and boats that have become homes to fish and are covered with underwater vegetation make it a gorgeous sight. Divers visiting the islands also have fond memories of swimming with Rajan, the ocean-swimming elephant.

● **Bangaram Island, Lakshadweep:** White sand beaches, crystal-clear water, pristine tropical setting and an active marine life make Bangaram one of the prettiest dive sites. The coral formation is one of the best in the world. An overnight journey of 250 km from Kochi, in a cruise, is another thrill for travellers.

● **Cinque Islands, Andaman and Nicobar Islands:** Turquoise water offering a visibility of up to 30 m, a sandbar joining two land masses forming a unique beach with water on both sides and a vibrant marine life high on coral reefs are the attractions.

● **Grand Island, Goa:** Even though it isn't one of the best dive sites, people throng to this place for an open-sea dive due to its accessibility. Located a few km from South Goa, one can enjoy an active marine life and see shipwrecks here. Underwater visibility is more than 5 m and allows divers to admire coral gardens.

