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Yacht Rally

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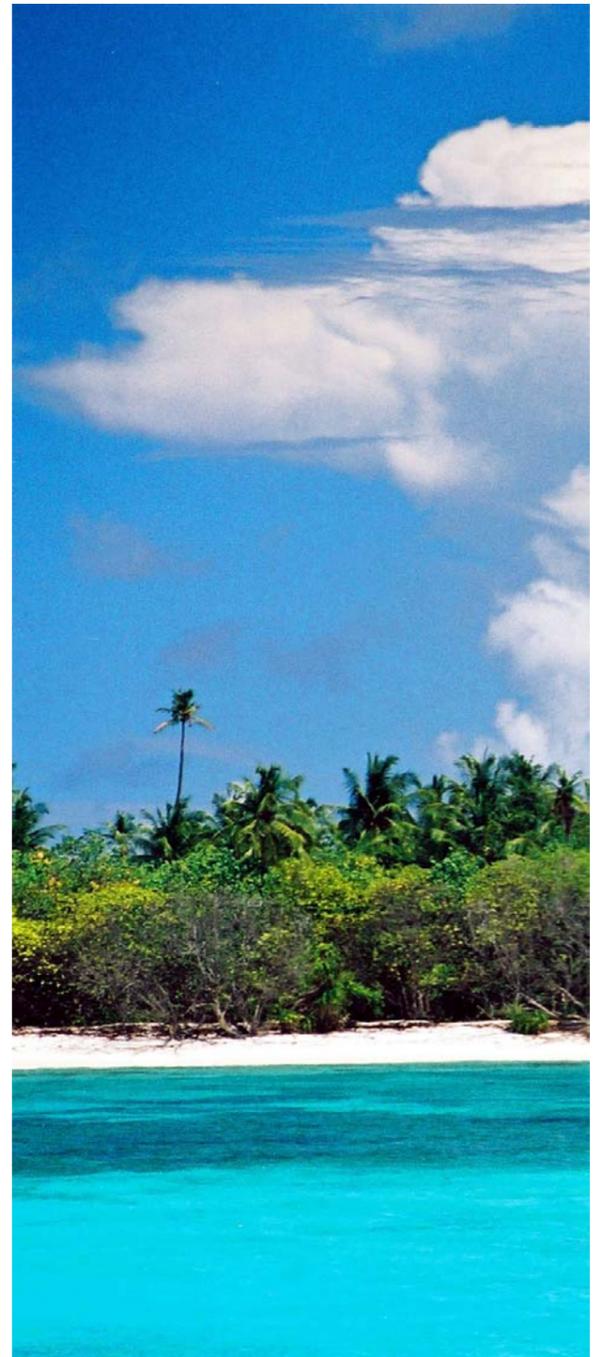
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**MALDIVES**



The idea was simple: we were to sail from Cochin, India, to Uligan, the northernmost island in the Maldives archipelago and wait there for the beginning of the southwest monsoon. Then, with favourable winds, we'd cross the Bay of Bengal to Thailand.

But when exactly was the southwest monsoon going to start? The Indians told us June. According to various sources, including the pilot books, the monsoon, once it's there, is there to stay. The wind appears as though somebody had pushed a switch and turned on a giant fan. But, as it often happens, it didn't work exactly like that.

With her crew expecting an easy passage, *Alea* left the muddy Cochin River with the morning tide on the 18th of May. The passage was marked with squally weather and contrary winds, and it took us four days to cover the 250 miles. Actually, we made more than 400 miles, all together, tacking left and

right, trying to get into a better position according to the expected wind shift as predicted by the forecast, or else simply drifting back towards India during the most violent squalls. None of our tactics were working, and it seemed that the wind blew steadily from the direction of Uligan no matter how far south or north we tacked.

This presented us with a dilemma. Why go to the Maldives and wait for the monsoon, when we already had westerly winds? After all, our goal was to get to Thailand, not the Maldives. The boat was ready for the passage; we could simply turn left and shift into a higher gear. Easy sailing instead of uphill struggle to get to Uligan. The temptation was strong, but we resisted. We held firm, tacking and tacking again until finally we dropped the hook in ten metres of water in the lagoon in front of Uligan village.

We didn't regret the fight with the weather. The place was stunningly beautiful,

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*BOSNIAN SAILOR ENROUTE TO PHUKET*

Monsoons

*Paint the Sky*

Photo Essay by *Senad Svraka Captain S/Y Alea*



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the water crystal clear. Manta rays and big turtles would come to check on newcomers. The island was covered with thick jungle, and the little village was very neat. It looked more like a huge public garden, with big trees providing for a lot of shade. Hammocks were disposed everywhere, so that one could always find a spot to take a rest and chat with a neighbour.

The authorities were very friendly, which added to the pleasure of the visit. We asked them when the southwest monsoon was expected to start in their region.

"It just started," they replied.

But now that we were finally in the Maldives, we didn't want to leave right away. After six months of constant sailing, Alea's crew felt they deserved a vacation. And snorkelling in the Maldives looked like just the right thing to do to gain courage for the last big haul - the 1,600 mile leg to Thailand. But ... There was always a but. Or two.

The anchorage at Uligan was suitable only in the northeast monsoon season. The lagoon was big and deep, and the swell that developed made the anchorage very uncom-

fortable, even dangerous. There was another anchorage on the southern tip of the island, and we moved there after two days, but the problems remained. A rocky bottom snagged the chain, and the swell was going around the island making it impossible to find a piece of flat water. We had squally weather, with the winds coming from all directions ...

Although we liked the place a lot, after a week we gave up. It's not really a vacation when the anchored boat is jumping under your bottom like a wild horse. And, after all, we'd only come here to wait for the beginning

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of the southwest monsoon, for our passage to Thailand. The wind being more or less already there, the only thing stopping us from moving on was that we'd fallen in love with Uligan. Then again, we'd heard that Thailand was also beautiful. And if we fell in love with Thailand, as an old saying has it, having two darlings would be better than just one. ☺

*These pictures were taken at Uligan, the northernmost island in the Maldives. The island is conveniently placed to break the passage from SE Asia to the Red Sea. Chances are that you will do this passage during the NE monsoon season, with clear sunny days and blue skies. Alea had a great variety of weather patterns during it's short stay at Uligan and these pictures witness that variety.*

