



# Finding heaven only to have it snatched away

There isn't much diving off India itself, but **JO CAIRD** thought she'd broken through when she reached, with some difficulty, the island of Kadmat. Just don't bank on following in her wake

**AS WE ARRIVED AT THE SAND PATCH**, the eagle rays took off like a flock of birds. They wheeled around in the water, then returned to the seabed, settling one on top of the other in an orgy of fins and wings.

A moment later all eight were off again, circling up and around before finding the sand for a second time.

One final take-off and they were gone, fading into the blue distance as if they'd never been there at all.

I felt I'd earned this extraordinary experience. Kadmat, a teardrop-shaped island in the centre of the Lakshadweep archipelago, off India's west coast, was not an easy place to get to.

Had I thought about this trip in advance, getting there might not have been such a challenge (there are, in fact, a handful of UK tour operators who can arrange everything for you).

As it was, my boyfriend and I were already in India when we decided to try to reach Kadmat, and made the foolish assumption that it was simply a matter of booking a ticket and hopping on a boat. Alas not.

Kadmat is the only island of the 36 in the archipelago that non-Indians are permitted to visit. And even so, access is tightly restricted in order to protect its unique culture.

All-inclusive travel, board and accommodation packages can be purchased only via a handful of government-authorised travel agencies.

All those I contacted had used up their allocations for the dates we wanted to travel, so my only option was to book directly via SPORTS, the tourism arm of the Lakshadweep Administration.

**SPORTS ACCEPTS ONLY CASH** payments, so we packed our bags and raced the 500 miles from the beach in Goa on which we'd been lounging to SPORTS' offices in Kochi, Kerala in time to put down a deposit to secure the tickets.

This 20-hour journey by rickshaw, bus, train and rickshaw again was followed two days later by 16 hours on an overnight ferry (which we almost missed because of a wildcat strike by dock workers), a ship-to-shore transfer by diesel-chugging fishing-boat and a short ride in the back of a truck.

When we finally arrived at the Kadmat Island Beach Resort, the only hotel on the island, I wasn't exactly relaxed.

Fortunately, it didn't take long to adapt to the pace of island life. The resort has a maximum capacity of 50 guests, but it's rare to find more than 30 visiting at any one time.

Locating a private patch of flawless, white sandy beach is no more of a challenge than running into a noisy traffic jam on the Indian mainland.

Our days were punctuated by mealtimes and, of

On one remarkable dive we saw more than 60 green turtles.

One after another the snoozing reptiles woke up as we approached, some swimming off into the blue, others landing elsewhere, not yet fully awake enough to start their days. At one point, practically everywhere I looked there were turtles.

The following day I got up close to an enormous ray at rest on the edge of a sand patch. Almost my size, the creature fixed its huge black eyes on me, entirely unperturbed by my presence.

## THE HIGHLIGHT OF THE ADVANCED

course was my first-ever night dive, which took place just after sunset at a site they called the Potato Patch.

I was expecting to be terrified of the dark, but as we descended, I was surprised by how peaceful it was in the blackness.

The moon hung far away up at the surface as if through a mirror in a fairytale, its beams too weak to illuminate this alien landscape.

It's only now that I've done night dives elsewhere and in larger groups that I can appreciate how fortunate we were that night to be immersed in darkness so complete, unaffected by the light pollution of too many torch beams. I'm not sure I've ever felt so alone, or so thrilled by that feeling.


I've been dreaming about returning to Kadmat ever since. But it doesn't look like something that's ever going to happen.

The local administration has decided that it no longer wants outsiders running the diving there, so it told Lacadives that it could stay only if it handed over to an entirely local team.

Uncomfortable with that idea – there simply isn't enough diving expertise on Kadmat, it says – the company decided to pull out of the resort.

You can still dive on Kadmat, care of SPORTS, which is now operating its own dive centre. But having seen the shambolic way the resort is run, it's not something I'd be keen to try.

I've asked SPORTS to provide me with detailed information on the new set-up – instructors' experience, courses available, etc – but following an initial acknowledgement of my email, I've heard nothing back.

I feel sad about this and extremely lucky at the same time. At least I made it to Kadmat once. That's not something that very many people can say. 



STEVE PRETTY

course, diving. We started our PADI Advanced Open Water course on the day we arrived, study sessions taking place on the beach and in the cool of the Lacadives dive centre.

This tiny building, the porch of which looks out onto the resort's jetty, doubled up as the home of Marieke and Torben, the delightful Danish couple in charge.

The diving was astonishingly good. We could have gained our underwater naturalist credentials on any of the 13 dives we did that week, picking up the hand signals for the creatures we spotted as if learning sign language – endless varieties of angelfish, boxfish, sharks, coral and nudibranch, to name just a few.