

- In what ways does this text attempt to entertain the reader while also conveying insights into the writer's experience?

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## A Fish With Hair

In The Maldives, going for a swim is going overboard.

*By Ron Martin*

It is long before first light when I arrive at the dock and find the boat that will take me to Fua Mulaku. It is a dhoni, one of those whimsical crafts unique to the Maldives, planked out with tarred palm wood, boasting some 60 feet of waterline and sporting a curlicue bowsprit — a Viking ship with a sense of humor. On the bow, a lone figure sits hunched under a madras sheet, whittling away at a coconut husk — beak of a nose, eyes dark as the ages, a cigarette dangling from his mouth. But upon my “hello,” the figure leaps up. Behold, it is a boy. And he has a knife.

He calls out something in Dhivehi, and from amidships other figures stir beneath the sheets. The boy keeps his eyes on me, silent and suspicious, knife at his side. Now the captain presents himself. His name is Mohammed, a grinning, snaggletoothed fellow who takes my money and gestures me aboard. The boy points questioningly at the mask and fins lashed to my canvas duffel.

“For looking under the water,” I say, pretending to dive in, puffing out my cheeks and performing a faux breaststroke. The boy smirks and says something that prompts Mohammed to take a swat at him. The boy dodges and runs away as the captain hurls invectives at him.

“The boy, it is not so very nice what he said,” Mohammed explains. He looks embarrassed. “He says you are a fish with hair.” I tell him I’ve been called much worse. “Perhaps,” he replies. “But in the Maldives, to call someone a fish with hair is most unkind.” A cultural thing, I guess. And I’m still gnawing over the implications when the boat putters away from the dock.

The Republic of Maldives begins about 300 miles southwest of the tail end of India, comprising a hopscotch of coral atolls that stretches for 510 miles on either side of the equator. Only in the past 40 years or so have tourists been arriving. The many island resorts here are sequestered in a few confined regions. Without jumping through all sorts of bureaucratic hoops like I had, foreigners are not regularly permitted on any of the so-called inhabited islands, like Fua Mulaku, where I was heading. It will take five hours over the wide-open Indian Ocean just to get there.

The boy's name is Abdul. He is 14. And whenever something needs doing on the boat, he is there to do it. Crawling in the engine well to tinker with a gummed-up fuel pump. Climbing out on the bowsprit to navigate Mohammed through a reef. Even taking his turn at the wheel when the captain needs a break. Abdul is indispensable, a born boatman. The other three crewmen have come along, it seems, mostly for ballast.

Every now and then Abdul sits back on his haunches, smokes a cigarette and studies me while he whittles at the coconut husk. I smile and, in various ways, try to connect with him. Nothing. He has already written me off: a fish with hair.

Midmorning we slow to pass through a narrow channel in the atoll's outer reef. A long stretch of coral heads reveals itself, the boat moving past them just above idle speed. I put on a mask and fins, and pantomiming my intentions to a not fully comprehending Mohammed, I grab the stern line and leap off the transom. Behind me, I can hear the commotion as Abdul and the other crewmen storm the gunwales to witness a fool at play. I bodysurf from side to side, taking in the scenery below — vast canyons of coral and reef fish galore. When I am finally back aboard the boat, Abdul is immediately in my face, waving his arms and interrogating me.

"He wants to know what you saw," Mohammed says. I tell Abdul he should put on the mask and see for himself. He shakes his head, appalled by the notion. "He does not swim," says Mohammed. Neither does Mohammed. Or anyone else on board. For all that makes the Indian Ocean instrumental in their lives, Maldivians do not look kindly upon it. The ocean is both highway and grocery store. It takes them places and provides them food. It is not much used for pleasure. If anything, in the Maldives there's a general and altogether valid sense that the ocean cannot be trusted. The country's 1,200-plus islands are flatter than flounder, and if the most dire of warnings about global warming hold true, then the Maldives could, one day not all that far off, quite simply disappear.

That some foreigner with a mask and fins would so willingly cavort with the enemy? I can understand why they might call him a name most unkind.

- Taken from the online magazine ISLANDS [www.islands.com](http://www.islands.com) (February 25<sup>th</sup>, 2010)