Shaff Naeem

50 Hours Underwater

How a Cause Became a Regional Record

Shaff Naeem, two hours into his record-breaking 50-hour dive at the island of Maafushi in the Maldives

Text by Mohamed Rehan
Photos courtesy of
Shaff Naeem / Ocean Six Fifty

At first, when Shafraz Naeem, a former military diving instructor with an impressive 27-year career, decided to take on the ambitious mission of a 50-hour non-stop dive, he had no idea the feat would go on to be recognised as a new record. Mohamed Rehan interviewed Naeem to find out more.

Shafraz Naeem, known to friends and acquaintances by the nickname "Shaff," did not embark on the odyssey with the vision of setting a regional record but rather with the far more sincere and admirable intention of raising awareness about plastic pollution in the seas.

Speaking about his mindset before the dive, Shaff noted that he had decided to undertake the underwater expedition of a 50-hour non-stop dive to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Maldives tourism industry, which the country celebrated in 2022.

The dive

On 25 February 2022, Shaff descended below sea level at exactly 15:34 hours. This dive was conducted in a side-mount configuration, which allowed Shaff greater mobility and flexibility with less strain on his spine, as well as easier exchange of cylinders.

Two days later, on 27 February, Shaff emerged from the water with a sense of relief and accomplishment, having successfully completed his 50-hour dive. Although visibly exhausted, he was in stable condition.

Reaction

The event garnered regional interest, especially from those who were interested in understanding the long-term implications of such a daring dive attempt. Despite attracting praise and recognition regionally, it still flew under the radar of the Maldives government and the media in Shaff's home country.

The story would go unnoticed for another two years before it was picked up by the Maldivian media outlet Sun Online, which was interested in learning about Shaff's diving adventure and the planned release of a documentary chronicling his odyssey.

Shaff at the garbage dump on the island of Maafushi in the Maldives (left)

About Shaff

Shaff's diving career, spanning almost three decades, began as a dive instructor with the Maldives National Defence Force Coast Guard. He then progressed to technical diving in 2002. As a technical diver, Shaff tackled deep exploration dives of the reefs and cave systems of the Maldives in recent years while also trying his hand at underwater photography whenever he could.

While his career was already an impressive tale worthy of recognition in its own right, Shaff said his discovery of new underwater cave systems in the Maldives and winning an underwater photography competition held by the Maldives Tourism Board were chief among his notable achievements.

He went on to set the Asian record for the longest scuba dive, a record he was unaware of either before or after he completed his 50-hour dive. In fact, Shaff might not have realised the extent of his achievement had it not been for a friend who brought it to light.

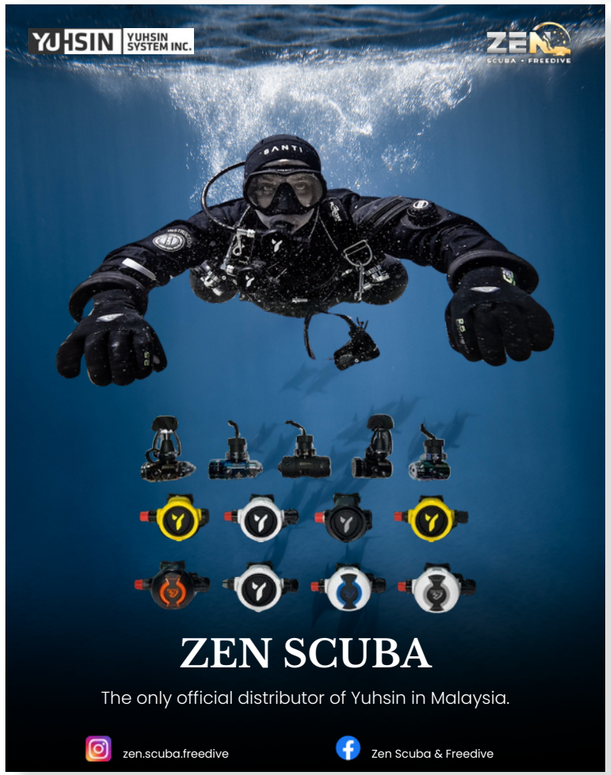
Raising awareness

Speaking about what motivated him to embark on this underwater odyssey, Shaff highlighted the fact that the Maldivian environment is an incredibly delicate and important one, with its vibrant coral reefs, diverse marine life and pristine islands—all complementing each other. He added that the preservation of these natural resources is vital to ensure that they can be safely passed on to future generations.

While there have been attempts and efforts to address environmental sustainability and conservation, Shaff stressed that it is still not enough. He pointed out that while there are plenty of people advocating and proactively working towards protecting the environment, there are others who remain equally indifferent to environmental degradation.

He was also critical of the extent of the Maldives government's current involvement in environmental conservation, stating that while there are a few "good environmental organisations who are doing real work" to preserve the environment, there are others that are merely "name-sake" organisations or those that have been established simply for cash-grab purposes. He added that the Maldives government was

Shaff ready to descend down to 6m (~20ft) for 50 hours on 25 February 2022



Shaff, all geared up and ready to go (left). *Hydrate!* Getting some fluids by using a squeeze bottle (top left). The team of support divers, known as the DTs, pose with Shaff underwater (top right) as he holds up a sign that reads: "Do or do not. There is no try." – a quote from the *Star Wars* character Yoda. Spending time watching a series on Netflix, using a tablet provided by Valtamer (right).

Preparation

The veteran diver recounted his steps leading up to the 50-hour dive. The idea for the dive came to him back in 2018, which was originally planned as a 24-hour dive.

"But I didn't get much support to make it happen [back then]," he said, noting that the Maldives government in 2022 had announced that the country would be celebrating its tourism industry's 50th anniversary that year, which led him to expand the idea of a 24-hour dive to a 50-hour dive, matching the duration of his underwater mission with the age of the island nation's strongest economic industry.

"The planning was hard as I had to prepare myself for such a long dive, which is not good for the health as well," he said. "I talked to a lot of people in the dive community and got their advice and managed to come up with a good plan on how to executive it—especially [from] my close friend and technical diving legend, Ben Reymenants," Shaff said, elaborating on the planning stage.

"I had a very good team of safety divers … They were briefed well on what to do if something happens," said Shaff. "Since the depth was shallow, if I didn't feel well not doing its best either, given all the urbanisation and infrastructure development across the island nation, which almost always came at the expense of nature.

Craving a burger on the last day

or anything [was wrong with] me while I was down there, the team could have brought me up to the surface immediately," he added, noting that a Maldives National Defence Force Coast Guard vessel was stationed at the dive site, on standby and vigilant for any potential need to assist in any emergency scenario.

Acknowledgements

Reflecting on his experience, Shaff was quick to express his heartfelt gratitude to those without whom he would not have been able to complete the long dive. He highlighted the commitment and dedication shown by the Maldivian team of support divers and noted the contributions of some of the best dive gear manufacturers in the world, including Fourth Element, Shearwater Research, Ocean Reef and XDEEP.

Shaff also thanked the contribution and assistance of Dhiraagu, the country's largest telecommunications and internet service provider; the National Boating Association of Maldives (NBAM), the premier association advocating for the rights of tourist vessels; Maldivers; Ocean Warriors; Noo Raajje; Sea Gear; and CROSSROADS Maldives, the country's first-ever integrated tourism island project.

He also highlighted the support extended by the Maldivian tourism board, Maldives Marketing and Public Relations Corporation (MMPRC).

Challenges

Shaff recalled his state of mind prior to the dive, noting that he had sifted through the "what ifs" that could happen, and divulged that on the first night of the dive, he felt nauseous and vomited twice. His woes multiplied during the experience when, on the last day of the dive, his drysuit started to leak and he had to deal with a drop in temperature.

Documentary film

The impressive feat might have gone unrecognised by the Maldivian authorities or the government for two years had the expedition not been chronicled in a feature-length documentary film that was officially premiered on 19 April 2024 at the UCI cinema (AMC Group) in Bochum, Germany.

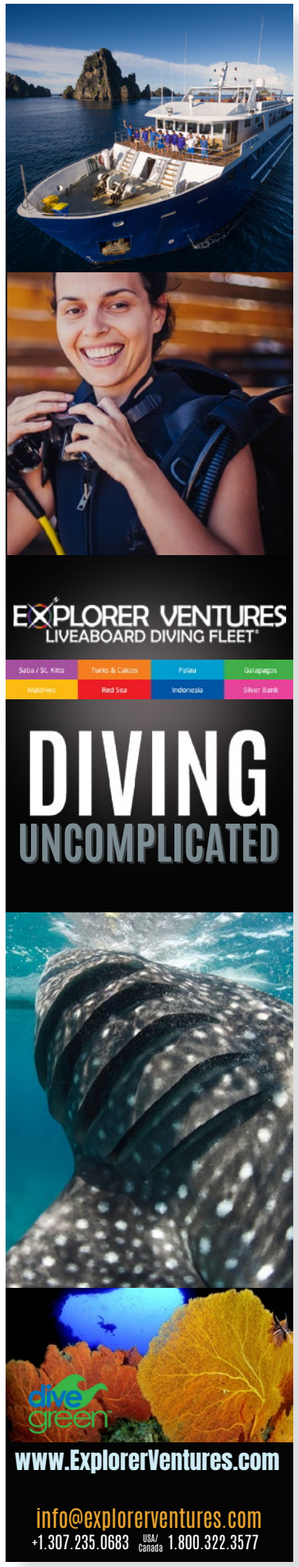
The documentary was screened by an audience of 240 invited guests, including members of the global diving community, local celebrities and the press. The film will also have its official Asian premiere at the Malaysian International Dive Expo on 8 July 2024 at 13:40, with an audience of an estimated 10,000 visitors.

Speaking about the decision to release the documentary, Shaff said that he had never intended to do it, but he was approached by Lifton Media, who expressed an interest in immortalising Shaff's 50-hour dive experience on the silver screen. Given the extensive underwater footage taken during the actual dive, Shaff gave the nod of approval for the documentary, which chronicles the event from start to finish.

He explained that the documentary, which explores the entire expedition, also touches on Shaff's story and his training routines as well. Primarily, the documentary highlights two main aspects: firstly, the personal motivation behind the decision to embark on the lengthy, non-stop dive, and secondly, the urge as a technical diver to push his own limits.

The feature-length documentary also provides an in-depth look at the environmental aspects of the dive, with anecdotes from the dive boat crew members and support divers about their experiences. Lifton Media, the documentary's producer, also covered the "non-touristy side" of K. Maafushi, the island where the dive took place, to better understand the ill effects of plastic waste—which was the secondary and more venerable objective of the event.

Accompanied by Ben Reymenants and Riikka Haakana, Shaff holds up a sign: "Mission complete."



Ascending on 27 February 2022, after 50 hours underwater (left); The team of support divers (below)

What's next?

With a brilliant track record of multiple dives, discovering new cave systems in the Maldives, winning an underwater photography competition, successfully completing a 50-hour non-stop dive that went on to be recognised as an Asian record, and now having a documentary chronicling his marvellous achievement, released on an international front, one would assume that Shaff would be kicking back a little, relaxing under a palm tree and sipping a few tropical mocktails—but no, that is not the case.

In fact, the veteran diver is already gearing up for his next adventure, as he excitedly said: "Yes, I'm planning another extreme dive for next year. Hoping to announce it soon."

Despite the monolithic nature of his achievement, it is unfortunate that his feat has not yet received the recognition it deserves from the Maldivian authorities, even to this date. Commenting on this, Shaff regrettably pointed out the lack of support or acknowledgement by the Maldives government, both previous and current.

However, he expressed his gratitude for the immense support and admiration he has received from the international diving community for his daring odyssey. Among the notable international entities that reached out in praise were the tourism boards of Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines. The event has also been recognised by several international dive magazines.

Insights

If given the chance to re-live the whole experience again and do it differently, Shaff said he would never hire an event manager who lacked the intimate understanding of what the art of diving is, which he learned through bitter experience. He pledged not to fall into the same trap twice, calling it his "biggest mistake and regret", both during and after the dive.

For all the achievements and decorations in his impressive three-decade diving career, Shaff is at heart a Maldivian son who remains infatuated with the pristine island nation's wonderous underwater world and will always be an ardent advocate of environmental preservation. He promised to launch similar initiatives in the future, all with different concepts but with the same profound message: "Protect the environment." ■

DAN
DIVERS ALERT NETWORK

EVERY DIVER SHOULD BE A MEMBER

- 24/7 Emergency Hotline
- Medical Information Line
- Access To Purchase DAN Dive Accident Insurance
- DAN *TravelAssist*® Benefits
- Online Safety Resources
- *Alert Diver*® Magazine
- Medical & Safety Consultations

DAN membership includes automatic enrollment in DAN *TravelAssist*® and this is only a brief description of the coverages available under that program. Refer to the DAN member benefit handbook for reductions, limitations, exclusions, definitions, and termination provisions. Coverage may vary by state or may not be available in all states. DAN membership alone does not provide coverage for costs of a dive accident; dive accident insurance must be purchased separately for each member.

JOIN TODAY
DAN.org/Join

Screening of *50 Hours Underwater* in Kuala Lumpur

The Asian premiere screening of the documentary film *50 Hours Underwater – A Dive for Hope* be held on Saturday, 8 June 2024 during the Malaysia International Dive Expo at the Malaysia International Trade and Exhibition Centre (MITEC) in Kuala Lumpur.

Offering a rare glimpse into the mysterious world beneath the waves, the documentary follows technical diver Shaff Naeem on his quest to raise awareness of ocean pollution by completing a 50-hour dive in the Maldives. The film presents compelling untold stories, vivid visuals and thought-provoking themes that explore resilience, triumph and societal issues.

COURTESY OF MIDE

By celebrating the incredible diversity and complexity of the underwater world, along with its many inhabitants and issues, the documentary's goal is to inspire conversations and a greater understanding and appreciation of the deep blue.

After the screening, attendees will have the opportunity to meet the documentary's creators, who will share their thoughts and insights into the making of the film.

Film highlights

The documentary film features Shaff Naeem, Schasi Ma, Victor Socin Daoonq, Michelle Wettstein, Michael Menduno, Bappu Najeeb, Azim Musthag, Ahmed Basheer, Ahmed Ghiyas, Federico Giunto, Jim Standing, Helen Frances, Daren Marshall, Ismail Hameed, Ahmed Mujthaba, Afsheen Mohamed, Anna Etc, Mohamed Rifshan Shaheem, Raymond Wennekes, Saeed Rashid, Hashma Haidar, Ahmed Shan, Paighdé Voodoo, Mohamed Jinah Ali, Alexander Kassler, Piotr Czernik, Bart Lukasik, Dharshana Jayawardena, Nigel J De Zilwa, Bhushan Bagadia, Ben Reymenants, and Riikka Haakana. ■

For more information, go to:
mide.com.my