This book is a sincere attempt to essay the basic information about the distant land of Lakshadweep and its lesser known people. The authors have tried to touch upon every important arena affecting the life and society of the islanders. The intention was not to say it all but rather to say it right. The text and the images are woven together to ensure better understanding. Lakshadweep may be valued as an indispensable tourist destination, but more importantly it is a land of distinct people with a distinctive culture lying in the Arabian Sea.
About this book

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At a glance
Introduction to Lakshadweep, a brief history, various islands at a glance

Amidst the harsh ocean
A peep into the lives of the Islanders who survive in the middle of the ocean

Livelihood
Understanding their primitive economic system

Cultural choices
A brief explanation of their life, society and culture

Minicoy
The distinct island

Petti
The enigmatic bird island
the only known breeding ground of terns in the sub-continent

What lies beneath
A glimpse of the underwater world

Exotic destination
A perfect place for an exotic getaway for the nature lovers
At a Glance
Captivating, mesmerising, hypnotic, one finally falls short of vocabulary. Exclamation gives way to a growing feeling of contentment, an intrinsic pleasure that knows no bounds and one silently glides across the sea, the lagoon, as if in a reverie. Nature spills many a wonder from its womb, and Lakshadweep provides testimony to the fact. This enchanting group of coral islands in the Arabian Sea, marked by peace, tranquility and scenic beauty, unquestionably satisfies the prerequisites to qualify it for its popular title—"the paradise islands".

The Lakshadweep group of islands can be seen as tiny specks in the deep blue waters of the Arabian Sea. An archipelago consisting of 36 tiny islands, out of which only 11, including the Bangaram Island Resort attached islet of Agatti, are inhabited. These islands lie at about 220 to 440 km off the coast of Kerala, irregularly scattered in the sea. The total land area of Lakshadweep, including all the 11 inhabited islands and the remaining islets and sand banks, is a mere 32 square km. The largest inhabited island is only 4.80 square km, and the smallest inhabited island has a land area of, believe me, only 0.1 square km, smaller than a playground on the mainland. Though the smallest of all states and union territories in area, Lakshadweep has extensive lagoons about 4200 square km in area, 20000 square km of territorial waters, and about four lakh square km of Exclusive Economic Zone. India manages to boast of such a vast Exclusive Economic Zone because of the strategic location of the Lakshadweep islands. The estimated potential of living resources in this Exclusive Economic Zone is a whopping 12 million tons!

One may wonder what on earth made its people inhabit in such small expanses of land in the middle of a harsh ocean. Couldn’t they be transferred to the mainland? Why doesn’t the government try to rehabilitate these ‘poor tribals’ to the nearest possible state, that is Kerala? But the fact is that the people of Lakshadweep are there by choice and not by compulsion. The desire to migrate doesn’t even cross their minds since they consider themselves to be a chosen lot. Where did they come from and since when are they living here? Let’s try to understand...
Formation and Evolution

Lakshadweep is an archipelago that consists of 12 atolls, three reefs and five submerged banks. Though there is no conclusive theory about the formation of these coral atolls, the most accepted one was given by the English Evolutionist, Sir Charles Darwin, in 1842. He concluded that a volcanic island resulted in the formation of a fringing reef, and the continual subsidence allowed the reef to go upwards. When the volcanic island became completely submerged, the atolls were formed encircling the lagoon where, with the action of wind, waves, currents and temperature, the coral islands were formed. In the atolls, firstly the sand banks were formed due to the deposition of dead corals. The sand banks came to be occupied by a variety of seabirds called terns. As a result of the fertilization of the soil by their droppings (guano), ground vegetation became possible and, subsequently, the humans took over. The displaced terns had to move away in search of other sand banks. This process of atoll formation still continues in the archipelago of Lakshadweep, as even today there exists a sand bank called Piti which houses the seabird-Terns.

The name Laccadives or Lakshadweep, which implies one hundred thousand islands, was given by the people of the Malabar coast. These islands were so named, it is said, when the East India Company having acquired control over them in 1791, extracted an annual tribute of one lakh rupees from the Bibi of Cannanore who in return allowed to retain possession of them. The most accepted version of how this group of 36 islands acquired their present name is that the name is derived from the Malayalam word Laks`yam i.e. target. This nomenclature originated presumably from the islands serving as a landmark for sailors sailing across the trade route between Malabar and Africa.

This archipelago was earlier divided into three groups known as the Laccadive, Minicoy and Amindivi Islands. The Laccadive group comprised of Kavaratti, Andrott, Kalpeni, and A��gi, Anvin, Kadmath, Kiltan, Chetlat and Bitra, formed the A≡ndrott group, while Mincoy is an island annexed from the Maldives archipelago. These islands which were administered at various places were grouped into one Union Territory in 1956, and this smallest Union Territory of India was renamed as 'Lakshadweep' with effect from November 1, 1973.

The population of Lakshadweep (as per the census figure of 2001) is 60,650. Its density (1,895 persons per sq km) is highest amongst the Union Territories and the sex ratio stands at 948 females per thousand males even in this matrilineal society.

Though the inhabitants were originally mostly Hindus, due to conversions handed per cent of the native population are now Muslims belonging to the Shaq school of the Sunnis sect. The conversion to Islam was abrupt and universal. Several speculations have been forwarded on the overnight conversion of the entire population centuries ago. Islam here is practiced by all the original inhabitants but is marked by certain practices that have been there prior to the conversion, thus revealing the confluence of Little Traditions with that of the Great Tradition.
Amidst The Harsh Ocean
Life to any temporary dweller may seem precarious in these islands. As you try to close your eyes and drift into a deep slumber, the varying intensity of waves hitting the rocks beneath implants a horrifying thought. What if the romantic soft thuds of the waves keep increasing in intensity till finally they spill over as the ocean declares the island to be its own playground. In no time will my romantic escapade in this territory of beauty and calm be transformed into a living nightmare as the waves pierce through my ear drums, fill into my lungs, and the water surrounding me chokes me to death.

Islanders, however, reassure you that this has neither happened in the past nor will it ever happen in the future. I wonder what the secret of their being so self-assured is? How can you live so full of joy, free of fears right in the middle of the ocean despite knowing that you are totally dependent on few cargo and a couple of passenger ships? Travelling in the passenger ship from the coast of Kerala, if you thought the bumpy ride, nausea and a giddy head desperately trying to sense in which direction the ship is swaying are all there is to it, then you are completely unaware of the climax of this adventurous tour! You are asked to believe the unbelievable and think the unthinkable, these ships cannot go near the shore and strand you in the middle of the ocean, to be ferried ashore in little Pablo boats. It so happens that due to uneven relief contours there is always a fear of shipwreck near the island. Due to either failure of machinery or negligence of the captain many a ship has touched the reef and breathed their last here. Thus all ships, whether cargo or passenger, have to anchor at least two to three km away from these islands.

Disembarkation and embarkation take place in the open sea. Everything and everybody are shifted from the ship to the Pablo boats, which alone can safely enter the lagoon. A local demonstrates the mammoth task of jumping out of the ship into the boat with the help of thick rope hanging overhead, with the ease of none other than Tarzan! Similarly, passengers waiting to board the ship are required to perform the reverse feat of jumping from the boat to the ship. But one wonders how would a lesser mortal imitate this stunt?

Rocking up and down in the Pablo boat along with the rise and fall of the waves, you are carefully escorted out of the not so violent lagoon into the deep sea, where the ship awaits your arrival. Vibrations in the ship are less apparent in the ship as it is less exposed, anchored in the middle of the ocean it is merely to be gliding along in full circles. As the Pablo boat moves closer to the entrance door of the ship the toughest part of the journey becomes well evident. The ship glides up and down, the boat rocks up and down, a small acrobatic stunt is required whereby you jump from the boat into the ship with the help of a thick rope hanging down from the ship; of course the benevolent locals who are ever ready to haul you up. The point is that the stunt is to be perfectly timed. Be on your mark, get set and go only when the ship and the boat are at par with each other and not when one goes up and the other goes down. One false move and you will be mercilessly torn to bits by the fast rotating blades of the ship’s propeller beneath the water. Falling out of the ship would mean falling out of the worldly boundaries. And it was during this bit of synchronization that I dared to falter. One step out of the boat I raised onto the ship but only a wee bit late, and before I could take the final plunge, down went the boat along with the receding wave. Simultaneously I tripped and, before I knew what was happening, with lightning speed I was airlifted back into the boat by the local co-passengers! Phew! Quite an experience I must say. Missed a tryst with the devil by a few inches!

Leave aside coming to the mainland, even inter-island transportation becomes uncertain during the monsoons. Any emergency concerning health or a ceremony of birth, death or marriage or any festival one may desire to attend on another island owes little to prior plans or elaborate preparations. One ventures into the sea only when nature allows him to.
What seems dangerous to us is a part of life for them but that does not rule out accidents. Fishermen do get marooned in the high seas due to sudden changes in the weather; there are others who, though rarely, lose their way back to their islands; there are yet others who fall victim to attacks by sharks; and there are others who mistakenly venture into a high current zone and get sucked in. This brings me to what I may call my final episode of “when I almost died,” I could add arm in arm with my husband just to give it a more romantic touch! Romantic indeed it was: speeding away in the speed boat, cutting into the turquoise green water and leaving behind a hefty white jet stream, we decided to circle round the entire island of Kavaratti. We switched off the power in between to admire this and that, to take a picture here and there. Thoroughly intoxicated, we sped away towards the northern end of the island, brought the boat to a standstill and marvelled at the beauty of the air base. The nods of appreciation immediately got transformed into expressions of horror as our heads turned away from it. Many times higher than us waves from all sides were closing down upon us like the petals of a lotus. This happens to be the most beautiful part of the island undoubtedly, but what had escaped our minds was that it was also a known high current zone where many a fishing boat had capsized. To our indignation our local companion beamed a reassuring smile, walked up to the driving seat and sashayed the boat out of danger!

Kudos to the inhabitants of Lakshadweep. One can’t help wondering how they feel so secure in this land of uncertainty. The constant lashing of the waves may spell music to the tourists and soothe their frayed nerves, but to the islanders don’t they remind them of an impending danger? Does it ever cross their minds that all their vital links with the outside world will snap once the sea chooses to be not so benevolent? Once I chanced to catch a glimpse of nature’s fury and could well comprehend the extent of its recklessness if it desire to be so. It was in July 1999 and we were holidaying in a serene resort on the shores of Kadmath. I woke up in the middle of the night to what seemed like a relentless ghost call accompanied by the shattering of the window panes. In a jiffy I was at one of the windows pressing my nose on the pane to discover what was on. I didn’t have to try too hard, for it was full moon and I could effortlessly see the entire plantation on the beach swaying helplessly to the call of the wind, in the company of continual lightning and rain. God! It’s a cyclone. I had heard of it earlier. Neither my deliberate attempts nor my howls of excitement could rouse my husband from his slumber. Silently I watched the entire show which lasted a few minutes but whose capacity to destroy I shuddered to fathom. As the rain pulled down the outside temperature the air conditioner reverted to its dialectical function of warming up the room. Immediately my “till now dead to the world” husband let out a groan, “what the hell have you done to the AC?” My, my what the ghastly call of the cyclone and a desperate wife’s SOS calls failed to achieve the heat did! In the morning we were informed that the cyclone had deflected from its path and thus missed the island by a few inches. The monsoons continue to be troublesome throughout. Thinking that we had had enough of the rough sea we decided to avail the chopper services to Bitra. A flight of only a few minutes and soon we spotted its enormous lagoon ringed within the coral reef. From amidst the overhanging clouds that all that was visible to us and shockingly to the pilots too! The result, the pilots couldn’t land because the island was not visible due to the thick layers of fog all around. They hovered above it for quite some time yet failed to spot it. They moved on to the nearby islands but faced the same fate everywhere. After a futile flight of around two hours, due to fear of running out of fuel, the pilots were compelled to return to the capital (Kavaratti) which fortunately was still in sight.

There was a cyclonic storm in May 2004 that wreaked havoc in the Lakshadweep islands. Dozens of houses were washed away and property worth crores was lost. The passenger vessel Tipu Sultan which started from Cochin was marooned off Kavaratti island with more than 400 people on board.
Gosh! It hadn’t occurred to me that what seems to be a difficult life to us now is actually hardship turned easy for them. Thanks to administrative efforts and modern technology, communication to these islands has improved to such an extent. Difficult or otherwise, either way the islanders love their life in these islands. A popular belief harps on the fact that these people being the chosen ones have been rewarded with life in these islands. They are the children of the sea hence they play in it. Children dive, swim and fish here with the expertise of a mermaid. Fishermen venture into the sea in all kinds of weather and have almost always returned safe. Once in a blue moon, the fishermen may lose their way during inter-island sea cruises but it is they who often identify their own islands even through thick fog when the pilots fail to do so. Quarters and casualties in the sea being rare, the sea is like a boon granted to them to provide joy, livelihood and a healthy life. With two more new passenger ships M.V. Amindivi and M.V. Minicoy, the transportation to the mainland and between islands has become relatively easier now.

Though these four mechanised barges, almost all the required articles of the islanders are transported through these whenever needed today. These sailing vessels, have a small engine and take about 30 to 40 hours to reach the mainland.
The economic structure of Lakshadweep is a stark example of one-man economy, that is, people here are the producers and the consumers too. The reason: Lakshadweep is a solitary piece of land distant from the mainland. So people here developed the habit of exchanging things among themselves so as to evolve a kind of barter system. The economic condition of these islands was described by Francis Buchanan in 1801 thus: “they are wretched islands, producing no grain nor indeed anything but coconuts, betel nuts, and plantains. The inhabitants are very poor and they subsist chiefly on coconut and fish and employ their leisure time, of which they gave a great deal, in making coir from the husks of their coconuts. The principal exports are coir, copra (coconut kernel in sun dried form) and jaggery, and some coral from the reefs with which the islands are surrounded.” For a very long time there existed an economic system called “coir monopoly” in which the women and children made coir and exchanged it for rice from the coir depot from Amin Kutchery. This scheme is no more in existence. Now rations and all other essential articles are sold through co-operative stores. Men of the household caught fish, and presto! meals of the day were ready, complete with fish and rice. The co-operatives, on the other hand, trade coir for rice, matches and other commodities, which are not produced in the island.

Now, impact of the fast changing economic scenario is visible in these islands as well. Nevertheless, the traditional economy was based on mainly two products, i.e., coconut and fish.

Coconut cultivation

When it comes to coconuts, this place has been amply blessed by nature. Once the seedlings have been planted they require no further attention in the form of manuring or irrigation. Coconut is the only crop to be grown on a massive scale. One or two of the varieties are used for tender coconut (the traditional drink), while some of it is used for making Meera, the sweet toddy of the islands. From Meera is also extracted jaggery and vinegar. But mostly the coconut is cultivated to make copra. From the copra they extract the oil. The leaves are plaited and used for thatching houses and building boats. Copra-making forms the main constituent of the coconut industry as it is the major item of export. To make copra the coconuts are split open, the water is drained out and the nuts are left under the sun to dry. Once the fruit is completely devoid of water it is then scooped out of the shell. Nuts in importance comes the coir which is made out of the left over coconut husks. A funny problem disturbs the coconuts overhanging the tree. Rats, pests that they are, creep up the tree, claw into the fruit and oophs! The water is sucked out of it in minutes. An innovative tin trap, resembling a crown, adorns every coconut tree trunk to put an end to this menace.

As in fishing in the business of coconut cultivation too the whole family gets involved. Years ago these people had planted thousands of coconut trees and waited patiently for them to bear fruit. Once the fruit was ready men of the family plucked the coconuts, ripped it apart for taking out the nut for making copra while women and children made coir out of the left over coconut husks. The water was used in the making of Meera, vinegar and jaggery. These products are now made in the household in five islands like Andrott, Kalpeni, Agatti and Kadmat with the assistance of LDCL and Khadi Board. The shell, branches, dried flowers all were used as fuel. In other words every single part of the tree gets utilized and nothing goes waste. Probably that’s why the coconut tree is called Kalpvriksha or the tree of prosperity.
Cultural choices
In a fast changing world today, where ambition is the way of life and human desires seem to be unlimited, imagine a place where people are happy and content with their lives. A totally crime-free society.

The people in Lakshadweep are extremely religious, who while strictly abiding by their religious virtues have never resorted to communalism. In a place where hundred per cent population is Muslim, temples are not rare. There is a temple at Kavaratti in the India Reserve Battalion camp. In fact in each island there exists at least one temple for the outsiders who serve there. In all those turbulent times when India was enveloped in communal flames, Lakshadweep has been one area where the fire of communalism never reached.

In India, theoretically we have been worshipping women, but cases of bride burning and molestation is not uncommon. Believe it, the islands of Lakshadweep are still matrilineal. What a strange combination, matriliney and Islam co-existing. The status of woman is quite high and that is why probably these islands had been christened in the past as “the female islands”.

The islanders (except the people of Minicoy) originally belonged to the Malabar region but, for reasons yet unknown, had migrated from there centuries ago. Thus there is not much difference between them and the Moplahs of Malabar in dress and appearance. Originally mostly Hindus, the entire population converted to Islam overnight. The Hindus and the Christians living there now are mainlanders serving in the government.
Adherence to Islam is marked by local variations throughout India, similarly deviating from the egalitarian principle of Islam, the Muslims in Lakshadweep resort to a caste-like social gradation. There exist inter-island variations in this scheme; however, in the islands there prevail endogenous groups called Koya, Malumi and Melacheri. In Minicoy the caste equivalents are known as Manikfan, Thakru and Raveri. Manikfans are Koyas, Thakru are Malumis, Thakru and Raveri are Malacheris. The Koyas who claim to be the descendants of the Namboodiri Brahmins and the Nayar of Malabar are the leisured class and landed aristocracy. The Malumis form the middle segment. They are fishermen sailors who sail the boats of the Koyas. They are masters in the art of sailing. The Malacheris are ranked the lowest. They are the serfs, considered as the descendants of the lower class of Malabar. They are the traditional coconut pluckers and toddy extractors. The Koyas, like any other dominant class had prescribed restrictions for the others to follow. It was because of this peculiar social organization that the indigenous population of Lakshadweep has been identified as a scheduled tribe. This is where the influence of the little tradition on the great tradition can be seen very clearly and has attracted many sociologists to study this society.
Minicoy (Maliku) – the distinct island
Minicoy (Maliku)

Minicoy is the southernmost island in the Union Territory of Lakshadweep. The real name of this island is Maliku. The British named it "Minicoy" because of its shy nature. This island is shaped like a sickle or crescent moon and is almost 12 km long and has a geographical area of 4.4 sq km. Geographically this is the second largest island after Andrott. Like every other island in this archipelago the width of this island varies from one end to another. It is one km wide at its widest part and just 100 m wide at its narrowest part, that is, the Kodi point at north end. Minicoy has an attached isle at its southern end named viringli. Though very similar to the other islands, Minicoy is a very distinct island and has a distinct culture that makes this island totally different from the rest.

Minicoy is separated from Maldives by the 8 Degree Channel and the rest of Lakshadweep by the 9 Degree Channel. As per the Ellis manual (1923) this island is an independent oceanic island that does not belong to either Maldives or the Lakshadweep bank. Its unique isolated status has resulted in certain unique cultural characteristics.
Physical profile

Unlike other islands of Lakshadweep, Minicoy is a fertile island and supports dense vegetation. Various trees like Pandanus, breadfruit tree, hardwood trees, etc., are found here besides the planted coconut trees. Physically this island can be divided into 5 sections.

1. Bandara (south pandaram): The southern side of this island is marked by the scenic and shallow backwaters surrounded by mangroves of two species: Ceriops Tagal and Avicinia Marina. Many migratory birds can be seen in this area. This side is far away from the main villages. A 20-bedded tourist complex and a helipad has been built in this side.

Minicoy also has a very famous lighthouse which was built in 1885. The lighthouse is also located in Bandara. This Bandara was government land and was allotted to the people belonging to the 10 avahs or villages in the 1970s. There was a dense forest once on this side.

2. 50/60 Acres: Between the south Bandara and the north village area, there is a patch of 50 to 60 acres of land where mostly one can find government establishments like the tuna canning factory, the Naval Detachment, various government offices and staff quarters.
3. The village area: In the central region this island is densely populated and all the villages are located in this area. Traditionally, there were nine villages, namely, Bada, Aoumagu, Bodukaka, Rammela, Sidhola, Asserd, Fanfil, Kuderi and Falessery. In the recent past a new village was created which has been accepted by all other villages and the Administration, and named as Kendiparti. By the end of 2006, there is another new village named New Boduathri village which is yet to be recognized by the other villages or the Administration. Each village has its own harbour for boat landing on the western side. All the houses are very closely packed together and it is difficult to note the boundaries of the villages. Each village has a beautiful village house which is village property and is used for all the social gatherings and functions.

4. Kodi point: A narrow stretch of land extending 3 km in the north end of the island is known as the Kodi point. Administration also calls it the north Pandaram. The wind is very strong in this area and therefore vegetation is not very thick. In olden days people suffering from leprosy and other contagious diseases were segregated in this area.

5. Viringli island: Viringli is an attached islet which lies in the south-west of Minicoy. People suffering from small-pox were sent to this islet. Hence this islet is also known as small-pox island. Earlier this was the property of Juma mosque and was looked after by each village by turn for one year. Later this was taken over by the government and now it is in the control of the Indian Navy.

Besides the land area, Minicoy has a vast and beautiful lagoon on the western side. The lagoon is 2.5 km at its widest point and around 15 km in length from north to south. The enclosing reef is very strong and gets exposed during the low tide. The reef has a natural entrance locally known as magu from where sailing vessels and boats can enter the lagoon.
PITTI - the enigmatic bird island
The islands of Lakshadweep are deprived of many a creation of nature. Birds like the omnipresent elsewhere crow are not found in Kavaratti. Even the dog is conspicuous by its absence. While marine creatures are found aplenty, land-based wild life is very rare. Crabs and rats may disturb your blissful evenings in the beach but anything more dangerous, specially belonging to the dreadful serpent variety, are not to be found anywhere on the islands. Nature compensates deprivation in its own ways. Hence it has blessed Lakshadweep with a leeward ground for the sea birds (tern), perhaps the only one of its kind in the terrestrial sphere. Almost at a distance of about 24 km from the capital of Lakshadweep, that is Kavaratti island, lies a tiny sand bank in the middle of the harsh ocean known as Pitti. Unlike the other islands the sand here is not the usual fine grained milky white in texture, rather it is coarse and brownish in colour.

During my stay on the islands, I was told so much about this little enigmatic isle that I could not resist planning a visit there. On a Sunday morning along with my local friends I sailed off for Pitti from Kavaratti Island. Though I would have preferred a more comfortable water vehicle, perhaps a speed boat, my companions insisted on taking a small boat, used for fishing purpose. A local friend of mine, surprised me by tying another even smaller boat to be tagged along. Mischiefous that he was, he tried to suspend me in curiosity till we reached our destination by dodging my queries about the necessity of the extra boat. To my indignation all he had to say was "just you wait and watch!".

It was the month of January, the sea was calm and the journey towards Pitti was quite pleasant. After sailing for about four hours, we strained our eyes to see some kind of a convulsion at a short distance, the waves formed just in the middle of the ocean. This was indeed awesome. The waves were gigantic and the natak they created sounded like a thousand lions all roaring simultaneously as if in connivance. When we approached this tiny island, I could not decipher any mode of landing safely on the island in the midst of such enormous waves. It was then that I put two and two together and solved the puzzle of the extra boat. My local companion, reading my thought, smiled in affirmation. The sole solution for a safe landing on the island by dodging past the mammoth waves without a scratch was possible only on this tiniest of custom-made boat. All the four members of our team switched boats, more appropriately tumbled down into the tiny boat, and rowed towards the island. The boat we sailed in was scrapulously anchored. Once we were only a few metres away from the shore, the guy rowing the boat abruptly stopped and started counting his fingers. I was a bit annoyed by this strange gesture for now that the island was fairly visible to the naked eyes my excitement was at its crest and accordingly patience on the brink. Any further wastage of time was not only uncalled for but also intolerable at this crucial juncture, I silently thought. But one look at the waves and I had second thoughts about the necessity of the calculated delay. The counting that the sailor had resorted to helped him in determining the timing of the rise and fall of the waves. The boat was to be sashayed quickly away when the wave was at its lowest ebb and before it rose back to action. In the company of such ace sailors I was certain that we would make it safely to the island and hurrah! indeed, we did.
As the boat approached the island, my heart pounded loud enough for others to hear and at one point I was afraid that it would spring out and reach the destination ahead of me. From the boat it looked like a stretch of barren sand but as we ventured closer to the island, we were enveloped by crowds of shrieking birds. Hundreds of them came at us from all sides and even our faces weren’t spared. Yes, we were in Pitti. These acres of barren land, 24 km off the coast of Kavaratti. One of the 36 islands in the archipelago of Lakshadweep is the Pitti Island. Nobody required to pinch me to assure me of my presence there. Thousands of those birds spread inch by inch on the island and the tumult that they created was enough to stir me wide awake.

These birds, terns, who are essentially fish eating seabirds, are the sole inhabitants of Pitti. The four varieties of resident terns that are found here actually happen to be cousins. Firstly there is the black-and-white tern about the size of a house crow called the Sooty Terns; then there is the smoky brown Noddy Terns smaller than the former in size; yet another type is the yellow-billed Large Crested Terns with black legs and finally the medium sized Brown-winged terns having a thick black band across the eyes. If Sooty Terns and Large Crested Terns are excellent divers then Noddy Terns are marvellous low flyers. They all eat fish, squid and prawns and can be seen judiciously following schools of fish. They also have a knack for flocking around well-lit ships and because of their night-time activity Sooty Terns have been nicknamed “wide awake terns.”

All species of terns lay their eggs on the bare ground. These eggs have a very amusing significance which can be useful to some of the readers who are yet to hit the bull’s eye in their love life. It has been associated with bravado. Men of Lakshadweep gifted these eggs to their sweethearts to establish their macho image. One may wonder what is so brave about gifting an egg to the beloved. Actually it is not the gifting of the egg that is important, rather the gift serves as an evidence of the act of bravery that one undertakes in the daring attempt to sail to and fro from Pitti. Being a tiny island in the middle of the ocean it is constantly battered by powerful breakers and strong swirling currents which make landing on the island dangerous. On top of it, the rocky boundary acts as a further detriment to your landing attempts by making the swirling waves even more ferocious. Even new techno-gEEK choppers are of no avail as you need to land on Pitti on a rubber boat, after landing in the sea.
What Lies Beneath
Ocean has always been calling. Life originated from ocean and finally every dew drop that falls at the peak of the mountains comes back to the ocean. Poets, artists and painters have always been trying to capture the beauty and the might of the oceans. But the fact is whatever we see through the naked eye at the surface of the ocean is nothing. The real enigma lies beneath. The underwater world is far more diverse and richer than what we can imagine.

The coral reef that makes this archipelago one of the best in the world and is often compared with the Great Barrier Reef. This makes Lakshadweep one of the most preferred diving spots in the world.

What lies on the surface is visible to all, but diving into the water reveals the existence of an entirely different world out there. Thanks to the discovery of SCUBA (Self-Contained Underwater Breathing Apparatus) diving is fast becoming a popular hobby in India too.

In Lakshadweep, the diving centre in Bangaram has been operational for many years. Now Lakshadweep Tourism has started diving centres in Kadmat, Kavaratti and Minicoy. Nature has not designed man to be naturally there but thanks to modern technology and worthy instructors even non-swimmers can dare to fathom the depth of the sea. Precautionary measures, however, have to be taken and the instructors make sure to provide you with the required guidelines before you take the plunge.

In case you are a little apprehensive you will be consoled to hear that diving is generally done with a companion aptly called “buddy” and you are also taught a sign language to communicate with him. To ensure that you are finally ready for the final act you are trained to perform what is called a “dummydiving” in the lagoon. In dummydiving, with the help of a snorkelling kit, you are required to dive into the water in the lagoon, touch the sea bed and return to the surface with a handful of sand to show that you can do it.

Once inside the sea you are bound to be mesmerized. It will be difficult to decide what leaves greater impact the roaring of the sea, the transparency of the water, the variety of otherwise unseen fishes, the unheard of sea anemones, the undulating formations of corals or the awe inspiring sharks!

The experience one realizes is both mystical and spiritual. Some compare it to yoga, as diving disciplines you to take charge of your own mind under water. Calm nerves and breath control are its golden rules and equipped with the experience of a lifetime one emerges out of the water thrilled, rejuvenated and satiated.
What Lies Beneath What Lies Beneath
Exotic Destination