

# Destination Maldives

Positive change has recently come to the Maldives, making this a fantastic time to visit a nation in the ferment of transition. Having gone from authoritarian state to vibrant democracy in just a few short years, voting in its first freely elected government in 2008 and turning itself into both a beacon for environmentalism and a glowing, rare example of Islamic democracy, it wouldn't be an exaggeration to call the Maldives today one of Asia's most progressive countries.

Part traditional island nation with a staunchly Islamic culture and identity, part modern tourism emirate attracting over half a million well-heeled luxury sunseekers annually – and looking to increase this even further by building ever more resorts – it can nevertheless be more than a little difficult to put your finger on the 'real Maldives'.

The reality is, quite simply, that there are two versions of this country. When tourism got going in the 1970s, it did so without affecting the abstemious conservative village culture of the atolls one bit. A policy of separating tourists from locals meant that on one island scantily clad holiday makers cavorted on the beach sipping margaritas, while just across the lagoon the island elders drank tea in the shade of the palm trees and discussed the Quran. This remains the case today, though foreign influence is more and more keenly felt with the spread of mobile phones and the internet to even the remotest atoll islands.

Until the democratic election of Mohammed Nasheed in late 2008, the former president, Maumoon Gayoom, had ruled almost unopposed for three decades. His rule is credited with ensuring stability in the country while stimulating development, albeit in which few ordinary folk saw the benefits of the money pouring into the country. What was not so widely known abroad was that – according to international human rights groups such as Amnesty International, as well as the current president – torture, intimidation and imprisonment were commonly used against anyone challenging Gayoom or his policies.

By 2004 a pro-democracy movement was regularly staging anti-government protests and pressure groups abroad were advocating a boycott of government-owned resorts, culminating in Gayoom's own eventual decision to allow free elections in October 2008. Testament to his enduring support, particularly in the conservative atolls, neither Gayoom nor the Maldivian Democratic Party leader Mohammed Nasheed (known to one and all as 'Anni') won an outright majority in the first round of voting, but in the run off Nasheed triumphed, taking 54% of the vote to Gayoom's 45%.

The transfer of power after three decades was remarkable for its smoothness and, on the part of the new government at least, its lack of bitterness. President Nasheed, himself a victim of long imprisonment and alleged torture by the previous government, set a tone of national reconciliation when he told the nation that 'I have forgiven my jailers, the torturers. They were following orders... I ask people to follow my example and leave Gayoom to grow old here.'

Since assuming the presidency Nasheed has wasted no time in implementing sweeping reforms. Having inherited a country with, in his own words, 'empty coffers' – extraordinary for a tiny nation with a multi-billion dollar tourist industry – the key strategy has been to shore up the republic's finances. This is being done by privatising the lumbering state concerns that have run everything from construction to the electricity grid, a not

## FAST FACTS

Area: 90,000 sq km (above water 300 sq km)
Percentage of the country that is water: 99.9%
Number of atolls: 26
Population: 299,000 (2006 census)
Percentage of population living in Male': 35%
GDP per capita: US\$5000
Percentage of GDP spent on defence: 5.5%
Minimum number of Maldivians legally required to be employed at a resort: 50%
Inflation: 12.8%
Number of shark attacks since 1976: none

uncontroversial move that the president hopes will result in short-term liquidity and more efficient market conditions in the long run.

Perhaps most significantly for a nation that will be one of the first to feel the effects of rising sea levels caused by global warming, Nasheed has pledged that the Maldives will be the world's first carbon neutral country within a decade – an ambitious plan that will see oil imports replaced by the use of solar panels, wind turbines and other alternative energy sources.

Yet while Nasheed is feted on the world stage as the Indian Ocean's very own Nelson Mandela, he still faces enormous challenges domestically. Civil society in the country remains in its very early days, with the local media until recently totally unused to open debate or the concept of scrutiny, and there are still many powerful factions and corporations in the country who would be very happy to see Nasheed removed from power.

Even more pressing are the social problems the country faces. On paper the Maldives may be South Asia's richest country, but the lack of trickledown generated by the tourist industry means that an astonishing 40% of the population live on less than US\$1 a day and some 30% of Maldivian children under the age of five are malnourished. Just as worryingly, there's a massive drug problem throughout the country – with anywhere between 10% and 30% of the adult population believed to be using 'brown sugar', a cheap unrefined heroin.

TEAM (Tourism Employees Association of the Maldives), effectively the first union of Maldivian resort employees, has stated that most Maldivians working in resorts earn between US\$80 and US\$120 per month, while most resorts make several million dollars profit a year at the very least. Indeed, the road ahead still looks bumpy for workers' rights in the Maldives, despite a recent amendment that included resort workers in legislation capping working hours and mandating overtime.

The legacy of the 2004 tsunami may no longer be visible in the tourist resorts or Male', but evidence of the devastation is still easy to find in the atolls, with many islands having been abandoned due to damage and several thousand internally displaced people remaining effective refugees on other islands.

You're therefore visiting the Maldives at a challenging but exciting time. While the problems the nation faces are by no mean insignificant, your presence is much needed to help generate tourist dollars that will hopefully now begin to filter down into the wider Maldivian economy. In addition, you'll discover a peaceful people with a rich and fascinating culture of survival in the middle of the ocean, as well as incredible natural beauty and some of the most mind-blowing beaches and resorts in the world.

# Getting Started

A country jealously guarding its cultural heritage and fragile ecology from the onslaughts of Western consumerism, the Maldives is almost exclusively a place for the package tourist. Despite most independent travellers' worst fears, coming on a package offers the best value for money, the easiest organisation and generally promotes preferential treatment – this is the way the Maldives is set up and everyone from the government to the resorts prefers you to travel this way. Fully independent travellers (FITs) are a rare species but, with good planning and some decent financial lubrication, this is an equally possible way to travel. However you arrive, you'll find the same astonishing white beaches, surreally blue water and good service.

## WHEN TO GO

The Maldives specialises in winter sun for Europeans, making high season December to April, when the islands enjoy the dry monsoon with little rain and lower humidity while Europe shivers. February to April is the hottest period. Mid-December to early January comes at even more of a premium due to Christmas and New Year and prices are even higher. Easter and the August holidays also attract peak prices at most resorts.

From May to November is the period when storms and rain are more likely. It's still warm, but skies can be cloudy and the humidity is higher. This is the low season, with fewer people and lower prices, with the exception of August.

Diving is good year-round, although a basic rule is that life on the reef is more varied and visibility better on the western side of any atoll from May to November and from the eastern side of any atoll December to April. This means you'd be wise to choose your resort accordingly.

The surfing season runs from March to October, which is great as this is when resorts are cheapest.

There is no bad time to visit the Maldives, although if you're interested in spending time in Male' or any other inhabited islands, Ramadan, called Ramazan locally (see p172), is a time to avoid as restaurants are closed and people aren't always in the best of moods. This won't affect you in a resort, however.

For climate charts, see p171.

## COSTS & MONEY

The Maldives is no cheap destination – you'll hardly see a backpack the entire time you're here (and if you do it will most likely be being carried for someone by a member of resort staff). This is partly by design: the Gayoom government preferred it this way, maximising revenue while keeping out the stoned hippies who so outraged local conservative values when they began to trickle through in the 1970s. However, since the change of government in 2008 there has been talk of opening the country up to budget travellers and even building hotels on inhabited islands. For now, though, this is all very academic as even the folk here on budget packages are fairly well-heeled, and don't fool yourself – even if you do get a cheap flight and accommodation deal, unless it's full board you'll spend almost as much again on food and drink during your stay.

While it's possible to say that costs are high, it's hard to be much more specific, mainly because two travellers can pay vastly different sums for

## HOW MUCH?

Male'-airport ferry

US\$1 or Rf10

Cappuccino US\$3

Male' whale submarine

ticket US\$75

Bed tax per person

per night US\$8

Flat taxi fare in Male'

US\$1.50 or Rf20

the same deal at the same resort depending on how they book – one travel agent may have an excellent deal on the room rate, another a far worse one, while an FIT will just have to pay whatever rate they are quoted directly by the resort's reservations service.

Extremely roughly then, expect to pay at the very least \$100 per person per day at the lower end for a room with full board. Midrange starts around \$200 per day and extends up to \$500, while for about \$500 a day, you enter the heady heights of the Maldives luxury market, which currently seems to have no cap. As Male' offers very differently priced accommodation options, we've grouped them differently to those in the rest of the country. In Male' budget choices come in at under US\$50, midrange runs from US\$50 to \$90 and top end is anything from US\$90 per night.

For those with a modest budget, the best deal is a full-board or all-inclusive package (including certain drinks, both alcoholic and non) that includes flights and transfers. While it's still a lot of money, you'll spend almost nothing during your stay.

## TRAVEL LITERATURE

While the Maldives has been covered in some detail by photography and nature guides, there's still precious little of any literary merit written about the place. This is perhaps unsurprising given the sun, sand and sea nature of most travel here, but the following titles are definitely worth a look.

Rudie H Kuiter's *Photo Guide to Fishes of the Maldives* is an indispensable book for divers and snorkellers, detailing some 700 species that live on the reefs of the country, all beautifully illustrated with photographs and descriptions of their habits.

*The Maldivian Mystery*, by Norwegian explorer and ethnologist Thor Heyerdahl, is great for anyone wanting an overview of pre-Islamic Maldivian history and the numerous unanswered questions, although many of Heyerdahl's theories are now discredited.

Andrew Forbes' *Maldives – Kingdom of a Thousand Isles* is an odd mix of cultural overview, travel journal and resort guide. It's best employed as the first – the sections on history and traditional crafts are some of the most detailed available.

### DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

- Valid travel insurance
- Lots of sunscreen, sunblock and after-sun
- A good pair of UV-blocking sunglasses
- A sun hat
- Flippers, mask and snorkel – if you'd like to do much snorkelling; most resorts charge for the hire of a kit
- Plasters – small cuts on coral or sharp shells are not unknown
- Three-pin adaptors – the Maldives generally uses the UK-style electricity sockets (see p175)
- Lots of beach reading – don't rely on paperbacks left by other guests unless you're truly undiscerning
- All the medication and birth control you're likely to need
- Plastic bags for wet clothing and a waterproof jacket for the wetter months

*Divers' Guide to the Sharks of the Maldives*, by Dr RC Anderson, is another fascinating title that describes the various shark species divers can encounter in the Maldives.

*Dive Guide The Maldives*, by Sam Harwood and Rob Bryning, is one of the best dive guides in print, with reviews of all the main diving and snorkelling sites in the country.

## INDEPENDENT TRAVEL

Independent travel in the Maldives is a challenge, but one risen to every year by many people, who decide that paradise on a package is not their idea of fun. As a fully independent traveller (FIT), you'll be a rarity, confusing hoteliers and transfer agents wherever you go when you tell them you don't have a tour operator. This is a great, if sometimes expensive, way to travel; however, while you're more independent than most package tourists, you're still not free to travel through the Maldives properly due to the restrictions on foreigners outside of resorts.

Male' is a great place to start for FITs – allow a couple of days in town to shop around several travel agencies and arrange onward travel, accommodation and even excursions and diving. FITs who want to get on a safari boat will certainly have to make arrangements in Male' (see p64), though they'd do much better to organise this before arriving. Due to the system of discounts offered to travel companies, even the most resolutely independent traveller determined to see untouristed areas will benefit from the help of a good travel agent or operator.

Male' has over a quarter of the country's population, relatively few tourists and is quite an interesting place in its own right. If you eat in local teashops, visit the market and walk around in the evenings, you'll meet lots of locals. English is widely spoken and people will be more than willing to chat. There are a few inhabited nonresort islands (Viligili, Hulhumale', Thila Fushi and Himmafushi), which you could reach and return from in a day.

It's perfectly feasible to use Male' airport as a transport hub from which you can take speedboat, dhoni, air and seaplane transfers to visit different resorts – all at your own pace. However, this will be an expensive way to travel and planning will be essential, particularly in high season (December to April) when many resorts are fully booked and last-minute changes hard to arrange. Inner Maldives (p96) continues to come highly recommended as the travel agency best set up to meet the needs of FITs.

It's still government policy to have tourists stay on island resorts or on boats within the 'tourism zone', though change is in the air, with the new government planning to open guesthouses on some inhabited islands, lift restrictions on travellers and even create a national transport network, the lack of which at present is another big impediment to independent exploration.

At the time of writing you still needed a travel permit to stay overnight on any nonresort island. To get a travel permit (see p176) you need a sponsor to invite you to the island concerned. If you want to visit islands that are occupied by Maldivians rather than tourists, you still have a few options.

Firstly, you can stay in a resort and make day trips. Most resorts offer 'island-hopping' trips that visit local fishing villages, though these villages often have conspicuous souvenir shops and persistent sellers. Some resorts are quite close to village islands; you can charter a dhoni to visit the village without a big group. Resorts won't allow you to use catamarans, windsurfers or canoes to visit nearby islands, but if you explain what you want and you find a sympathetic ear, you may get help.

The best resort to choose, if you want to visit local villages, is the Equator Village Resort (p167) on Gan, in the far south of the country. Gan is linked by causeways to four other islands with quite large villages and towns, including Hithadhoo, the second largest settlement in the country after Male', and you can cycle, taxi or walk through all of them.

The second option is to arrange a safari-boat trip to the areas you're interested in and make it clear to the operator that you want to visit fishing villages. The operator will arrange permits for all the people on the boat, and because you stay overnight on the boat, the accommodation problem is solved. You will have to charter the whole boat, so you'll need some other like-minded passengers to share the expense.

### TOP FIVE WAYS TO SEE MORE THAN JUST YOUR RESORT

Many travellers are put off by the idea of spending a week or two on a small island and having little or no contact with the rest of the country. Here are five ways to see more.

- Take an excursion to Male' – the national capital is the best place to get to know the Maldives (p93).
- Visit an inhabited local island – nearly all resorts offer a half-day trip to a nearby inhabited island where you can see a small Maldivian town, buy local handicrafts and meet some residents.
- Take a photography flight – most resorts also offer the chance to hire a seaplane for a 30-minute swoop around the atoll – a great way to see more of the area and to get some great pictures.
- Take a dhoni cruise around the atoll – most resorts offer this and it's another great way to see other islands – ranging from local villages and other resorts to totally uninhabited islands.
- Chat to hotel staff – Maldivian staff are always happy to tell you about their country and share their impressions with you. In some resorts the staff quarters are nicely integrated into the resort, so you don't feel too cut off from the locals.

Adrian Neville's *Male' – Capital of the Maldives* is a beautifully presented coffee-table book with great photos of Male' and its people.

*Mysticism in the Maldives*, compiled by Ali Hussain, documents superstitions, encounters with jinnis, supernatural phenomena and weird stuff. Published by Novelty, it's out of print but still available in a few shops.

*Classical Maldivian Cuisine*, by Aishath Shakeela, is a fascinating and informative book with delicious recipes for fish soup, fish, coconut and curried fish – order from [www.maldiviancuisine.com](http://www.maldiviancuisine.com).

One holiday read that gives a fun behind-the-scenes account of what goes on at a luxury resort is Imogen Edwards-Jones's *Beach Babylon*. While it's not even explicitly set in the Maldives, it's allegedly based on Reethi Rah, one of the country's most exclusive resorts.

### TOP FIVE ECOTOURISM RESORTS

All Maldives resorts these days seem to be branding themselves as eco-friendly places as eco-friendly places for the green traveller. In most cases this is little more than savvy marketing, but the resorts below are some of the very best with good environmental records and a serious approach.

Banyan Tree Vabbinfaru (p122)

Coco Palm Boduhithi (p122)

Soneva Gili (p123)

Soneva Fushi (p151)

Nika Island (p138)

### INTERNET RESOURCES

There's a huge amount about the Maldives online, though try a simple search and you'll find it's nearly exclusively travel agencies that come up. To find more useful resources, check out some of the following sites.

**Inner Maldives** ([www.innermaldives.com](http://www.innermaldives.com)) One of the country's best travel agencies has a great website packed full of information, particularly good for FITs.

**Maldives Info** ([www.maldivesinfo.gov.mv](http://www.maldivesinfo.gov.mv)) A government website providing the latest news on political developments in the country.

**Maldives Story** ([www.maldivesstory.com.mv](http://www.maldivesstory.com.mv)) A history site that tells the story of the country's development from ancient history to the present day.

**Minivan News** ([www.minivannews.com](http://www.minivannews.com)) Excellent independent website reporting news and opinion from the Maldives.

**Visit Maldives** ([www.visitmaldives.com](http://www.visitmaldives.com)) The official Maldives Tourism Promotion Board site has background information and data about virtually every resort, safari boat and tour operator in the country.

### TRAVELLING RESPONSIBLY

Since our inception in 1973, Lonely Planet has encouraged our readers to tread lightly, travel responsibly and enjoy the magic that independent travel affords. International travel is growing rapidly, and we still firmly

believe in the benefits it can bring. However, as always, we encourage you to consider the impact your visit will have on both the global environment and the local economies, cultures and ecosystems.

Of course, as you have to fly long distances from pretty much everywhere to get to the Maldives, you're already contributing to carbon dioxide emissions, which isn't a great start. Many offset schemes are deeply flawed, but still worth paying for to help offset your journey's carbon dioxide. On a more personal level, there are a few simple rules that all thoughtful visitors should adhere to.

There are plenty of steps you can take to help reduce the environmental impact of your visit: see boxed text, p43. In addition, most resorts are happy to answer questions about their green record, and many even have sections on their websites to explain their policy.