



Ari Atoll

Second only to North Male' Atoll as the centre of the Maldivian tourist industry, Ari Atoll sits to the west of the capital, a vast oval lagoon dotted with reefs and as sumptuously inviting as anywhere else in the country. Like Male' Atoll, Ari is known universally by its traditional name rather than its official name of Alif, a usage we have followed here.

While the atoll is one natural entity, it is large enough to have been split into two administrative districts – North and South Ari Atoll. North Ari administrative district includes tiny Rasdhoo and Thoddoo Atolls as well, which aren't naturally part of Ari, but just northeast of it.

To the east, Ari Atoll is separated from South Male' Atoll by a 40km-wide channel, perhaps 500m deep; to the west, the sea floor drops precipitously to over 2000m. Abundant marine life in the atoll creates nutrient-rich water that flows out through channels, attracting large creatures from the open sea and divers from all over the world.

Despite its importance for the tourism industry, Ari Atoll is not a particularly developed part of the country. The regional capital, Mahibadhoo, has a population of just 1780 and there are only 18 inhabited islands in the entire atoll.

The atoll plays host to some of the most famous and exclusive resorts in the country, including the Conrad Maldives Rangali Island, Dhoni Island and W Retreat & Spa, although its exceptional diving – southern Ari is the best place in the country to see hammerhead sharks and whale sharks – means that there are still a host of cheaper diving resorts to choose from as well.

THODDOO ATOLL

Though administratively part of Ari Atoll, Thoddoo is actually a single, separate, oval island about 20km from the northern edge of the main atoll. It's about 1km across, and has a population of 1200. The principal activity is fishing, but Thoddoo is also known for its market-garden produce (watermelons and betel leaf especially) and its troupe of traditional dancers, who sometimes perform in tourist resorts.

Thoddoo is believed to have been occupied since ancient times. A Buddhist temple here contained a Roman coin minted in 90 BC, as well as a silver bowl and a fine stone statue of Buddha, the head of which is now in the National Museum in Male'.

Safari boats can stop here, but usually don't because of the lack of sheltered an-

chorages. You could also arrange a day trip here from one of the Rasdhoo Atoll resorts.

RASDHOO ATOLL

The small atoll of Rasdhoo lies off the northeastern corner of Ari Atoll proper. The main island of the atoll, also called **Rasdhoo** (population 900), is the administrative capital of North Ari Atoll, despite not being within the natural atoll itself. Rasdhoo is an attractive little town with a junior secondary school, a health centre, four mosques and a score of souvenir shops – it's often visited as a day trip from the nearby resorts. The island has been settled for many centuries and there are traces here of a Buddhist society predating the arrival of Islam.

