



# Male

AREA 1.95 SQ KM / POP 103,693

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## Best Places to Stay

- » Traders Hotel (p53)
- » Sala Boutique Hotel (p53)
- » House Clover (p50)
- » Dacé Hotel (p52)
- » Skai Lodge (p50)

## Best Places to Eat

- » Aioli (p54)
- » Sala Thai (p54)
- » Royal Garden Cafe (p54)
- » Shell Beans (p56)
- » Irudhashu Hotaa (p55)

## Why Go?

The pint-sized Maldivian capital is the throbbing, mercantile heart of the nation, a densely crowded and extraordinary place, notable mainly for its stark contrast to the laid-back pace of island life elsewhere in the country.

Male (*mar-lay*) offers the best chance to see the 'real' Maldives away from the resort buffet and infinity pool. Overlooked by brightly coloured tall buildings and surrounded by incongruously turquoise water, Male is a hive of activity, the engine driving the Maldives' economy and the forum for the country's political debate.

Male is pleasant and pleasingly quirky – its alcohol-free bars and restaurants jostle with its shops and lively markets and the general hubbub of a capital is very much present. This city island offers a chance to get a real feel for the Maldives and what makes its people tick and to meet Maldivians on an equal footing.

## Male Highlights

- » Gape at historic artifacts, giant fish and other quirky relics at the superb new **National Museum** (p45)
- » Admire the beautiful exterior of the **Old Friday Mosque** (p45), the oldest in the country
- » Watch the morning's catch being brought in, gutted and sold at the fascinating **Fish Market** (p47), one of Male's busiest places of trade
- » Join locals for 'short eats' at any traditional **teashop** (p55), a delicious way to spend time outside the tourist bubble

## History

Male has been the seat of the Maldives' ruling dynasties since before the 12th century, though none left any grand palaces. Some trading houses appeared in the 17th century, along with a ring of defensive bastions, but Male didn't acquire the trappings of a city and had a very limited range of economic and cultural activities. Visitors in the 1920s estimated the population at only 5000.

Growth began with the 1930s modernisation, and the first banks, hospitals, high schools and government offices appeared in the following decades. Only since the 1970s, with wealth from tourism and an expanding economy, has the city really burgeoned and growth emerged as a problem.

And a problem it has definitely become; despite extending the area of the city through land reclamation over the island's reef, Male is unable to extend any further and so the government is looking to projects such as nearby Hulhumale to accommodate the future overspill of the city.

## Dangers & Annoyances

The main danger in Male is posed by the mopeds that seem to appear from nowhere at great speeds. Keep your wits about you and look around before crossing the road.

The principal annoyance in Male is the lack of alcohol. If you really want a drink, take the approximately hourly ferry from Jetty No 1 to the Hulhule Island Hotel (p53) near the airport, or take the airport ferry and walk the 10 minutes to the hotel for a cold beer by the pool.

## Sights

Male is more of an experience than a succession of astonishing must-sees. The best thing to do is enjoy a stroll and absorb the atmosphere of this oddest of capitals. That said, there are a few genuine sights to keep you occupied for a day.

### Old Friday Mosque

MOSQUE

(Map p48; Medhuziyaarai Magu) **Hukuru Miskiiy** is the oldest mosque in the country, dating from 1656. It's a beautiful structure made from coral stone into which intricate decoration and Quranic script have been carved. Even though an ugly protective corrugated-iron sheet now covers the roof and some of the walls, this is still a fascinating place. The interior is superb and famed for its fine lacquer work and elaborate woodcarvings. One

long panel, carved in the 13th century, commemorates the introduction of Islam to the Maldives. Visitors wishing to see inside are supposed to get permission from an official of the **Ministry of Islamic Affairs** (☎332 2266). However, most of the staff are officials of the ministry, and if you are respectful and well dressed, they will usually give you permission to enter the mosque on the spot.

The mosque was built on the foundations of an old temple that faced west to the setting sun, not northwest towards Mecca. Consequently, the worshippers have to face the corner of the mosque when they pray – the striped carpet, laid at an angle, shows the correct direction.

Overlooking the mosque is the solid, round, blue-and-white tower of the *munnaaru* – the squat minaret. Though it doesn't look that old, it dates from 1675. To one side of the mosque is a cemetery with many elaborately carved tombstones. Stones with rounded tops are for females, those with pointy tops are for males and those featuring gold-plated lettering are the graves of former sultans. The small buildings are family mausoleums and their stone walls are intricately carved. Respectably dressed non-Muslims are welcome to walk around the graveyard; you don't require permission for this.

### National Museum

MUSEUM

(Map p48; Chandhane Magu; adult/child under 12yr Rf50/15; ☎9am-5pm Sat-Thu, closed holidays) The brand new National Museum may be a ferociously ugly building gifted by China, but it nevertheless contains an excellent and well-labelled collection of historic artefacts that serve to trace the unusual history of these isolated islands.

The display begins downstairs with galleries devoted to the ancient and medieval periods of Maldivian history. Items on display include weaponry, religious paraphernalia and household wares as well as many impressively carved Arabic- and Thaana-engraved pieces of wood commemorating the conversion of the Maldives to Islam in 1153.

Upstairs is a display representing the modern period and including some prized examples of the lacquer-work boxes for which the Maldives are famous, and various pieces of antique technology including the country's first gramophone, telephone and a massive computer. Quirker relics include the minutes of the famous underwater cabinet meeting held under President Nasheed in 2009 and an impressive marine collection, the highlight