



Ari Atoll

Includes ➔

Activities	83
Sleeping	85
Getting There & Away	90
Getting Around	90

Best Resorts

- ➔ W Retreat & Spa (p87)
- ➔ Mirihi (p88)
- ➔ Conrad Maldives Rangali Island (p89)
- ➔ Constance Halaveli Maldives (p88)

Best Dive Sites

- ➔ Hammerhead Point (p83)
- ➔ Dhidhdhoo Beyru (p83)
- ➔ Manta Reef (p83)
- ➔ Fish Head (p83)

Why Go?

Centred on a vast, sumptuous and inviting oval lagoon dotted with reefs, Ari Atoll sits to the west of the capital and is famed for its superb diving and stellar beaches. While the atoll is one natural entity, it's large enough to have been split into two districts – North and South Ari Atoll.

The nutrient-rich water that flows out through channels attracts large creatures from the open sea and divers from all over the world – South Ari remains one of the best places in the world to see whale sharks, the world's largest fish, which are spotted year-round on the outer reef, as well as hammerhead sharks in the atoll's northern parts.

Ari Atoll hosts some of the most famous and exclusive resorts in the country, but its exceptional diving means there are also a host of cheaper diving resorts and a vibrant, growing guesthouse scene on some of the inhabited islands.

When to Go

- ➔ **May-Dec** The best time to dive or snorkel with the amazing whale sharks.
- ➔ **Jan-Mar** High season coincides with European winter and the best weather in Ari Atoll; expect blue skies and high temperatures.
- ➔ **Dec-Apr** This is prime hammerhead shark spotting season in northern Ari Atoll.

Ari Atoll

The geographic entity of Ari Atoll is about 80km from north to south, 30km wide and contains 18 inhabited islands out of a total of 81. The most populous island is **Mahibadhoo**, the capital of South Ari, with around 2000 people. There are now several guest-house on Mahibadhoo, and it's a good place to experience life in a large Maldivian town.

Maamigili, also in the south of the atoll, has over 1600 people, many of whom work in nearby resorts. There's an airstrip (the only one in Ari Atoll) here with several daily flights to and from Male.

Other inhabited islands, typically with a population of a few hundred, are dotted around the edges of the atoll. Quite a few islands have ruins or artefacts of ancient Buddhist and Hindu settlements.



Activities

All of the resorts have diving operations and Ari is a top pick for those who love marine life, particularly for its hammerheads and whale sharks.

★ Hammerhead Point

DIVING

Also known as Rasdhoo Madivaru, Hammerhead Point is a more demanding dive on an outer reef where hammerhead sharks, mantas and other large pelagics are frequent visitors. Outside this reef the depth drops rapidly to over 200m and the water is exceptionally clear. Hammerhead dives usually start before dawn, descending by around 6am to have the best chance of spotting these incredible creatures.

★ Dhidhdhoo Beyru

DIVING

From May to September, whale sharks cruise almost continually along the 10km-long Dhidhdhoo Beyru on the southwestern edge of the atoll, which extends from Ariyadhoo Kandhu north to the tip of Dhigurah island. However, even out of season there are consistent whale shark sightings here, which increase during a full moon when the currents become faster.

★ Manta Reef

DIVING

Also called Madivaru, Manta Reef is at the end of a channel where powerful currents carry plankton out of the atoll during the northeast monsoon (December to April) – fast food for manta rays. Mantas also come to be cleaned. Reef fish include Napoleon wrasse, snapper and parrotfish, while pe-

lagics such as turtles, tuna and sharks visit the outer reef slope. It's for advanced divers only, and is great for snorkellers in the right conditions.

There has been concern in recent years that the overuse of this famous dive site is leading to a declining number of mantas coming here. Do ask your dive centre about this and follow their instructions very carefully to avoid contributing to further degradation.

Fish Head

DIVING

Also called Mushimasmingali Thila, Fish Head is one of the world's most famous dive sites. Its steep sides are spectacular, with multilevel ledges, overhangs and caves supporting many sea fans and black corals; its top is heavily encrusted with anemones. Beware of stonefish. The prolific fish life at this Protected Marine Area includes fusiliers, large Napoleons, trevally and schools of hungry barracuda. The main attractions, however, are the numerous grey-tip reef sharks, which can be seen up close. Strong currents can make this a demanding dive, and extreme care should be taken not to damage the superb but heavily used site.

Maaya Thila

DIVING

Maaya Thila is a classic round thila known for the white-tip reef sharks that circle it. Caves and overhangs around the thila have lots of gorgonians, soft corals and schools of reef fish. It's a Protected Marine Area.

Halaveli Wreck

DIVING

The well-known Halaveli Wreck was created in 1991 when a 38m cargo ship was deliberately sunk. It's famous for the friendly stingrays enticed here by regular feeding – keep your fingers away from their mouths.

Fesdu Wreck

DIVING

Fesdu wreck is a 30m trawler with a good covering of corals at a depth of 18m to 30m. Moray eels and grouper live inside the hull, which is easily entered and has good growths of soft corals and sponges. Divers can also check the adjacent thila, which has hard and soft corals as well as lots of fish.

Orimas Thila

DIVING

Overhangs, caves, crevices, canyons and coral heads make Orimas Thila an exciting dive. Marine life includes good growths of soft corals, sea fans, anemones and clown fish. The top of the thila is only 3m down, and can be easily enjoyed by snorkellers if the conditions are calm. It's a Protected Marine Area.