



Male

AREA 1.95 SQ KM / POP 105,000

Includes →

Sights.....	45
Activities.....	50
Sleeping.....	51
Eating.....	53
Entertainment.....	56
Shopping.....	56
Information.....	56
Hulhumale.....	61
Viligili.....	62
Hulhule.....	62
Other Islands.....	62

Best Places to Stay

- Hotel Jen Male (p53)
- Sala Boutique Hotel (p53)
- House Clover (p51)
- LVIS Hotel (p51)
- Marble Hotel (p51)

Best Places to Eat

- Aioli (p55)
- Sala Thai (p56)
- Royal Garden Café (p54)
- Newport (p55)
- Irudhashu Hotaa (p54)

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 tall, brightly coloured 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 struggles.

Male is also pleasant and pleasingly quirky – alcohol-free bars and restaurants jostle with 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.

When to Go

- **Jul** Independence day celebrations on July 26 see floats and dancing children in Republic Sq.
- **Nov** Parades and marches mark Republic Day on November 11, when the capital celebrates.
- **May-Nov** Marginally cooler than the rest of the year, Male isn't as sweaty during these months.

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. Despite this, Male has always been the heart of the nation, and it is even from where the Maldives' name derives.

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. Overcrowding, pollution, traffic and meeting basic human needs are all problems Male residents are familiar with. This was underscored in late 2014, when the city's one desalination plant caught fire and the capital was left without running water for seven days; a real problem in a city with no fresh water sources.

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.

One other danger to bear in mind is that of gang or mob violence. Most are linked to crime but there have been occasional flare-ups of anti-Western feeling in Male, exploited by Islamist organisations with a very specific political agenda. Don't be overly concerned about this, but do keep an eye on the news.

The principal annoyance in Male for most visitors 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 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. Do remember that you are not in a tourist resort, and dress accordingly: women in shorts and low-cut tops may feel uncomfortable here and are likely to offend local sensibilities, though it's rare for anything to be said. Only ask to enter mosques if you are respectably dressed, which means trousers and sleeves for men, and long skirts, long sleeves and head coverings for women.

★ Old Friday Mosque

MOSQUE

(Hukuru Miskiiy; Map p54; Medhuziyaarai Magu) This 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 chiselled. Visitors wishing to see inside are supposed to get permission from an official of the Ministry of Islamic Affairs. Most of the staff are officials of the ministry, however, and if you are respectful and well-dressed they will usually give you permission to enter the mosque on the spot.

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 wood-carvings. One long panel, carved in the 13th century, commemorates the introduction of Islam to the Maldives.

The mosque was built on the foundations of an old temple that faced west rather than northwest towards Mecca. Consequently, 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.

(Continued on page 48)