



Northern Atolls

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Why Go?

The least-developed region of the Maldives, the northern atolls remain scarcely known to foreigners, and that makes them a great place to experience traditional Maldivian life. Maldivian history owes much to this part of the country – national hero Mohammed Thakurufaanu, the man who drove the Portuguese out of the Maldives in the 16th century, was born on the island of Utthemu in Haa Alifu Atoll. The island is today a place of pilgrimage for Maldivians, who come to see his small wooden palace.

There's also huge diving potential throughout the region; there are wrecks along the western fringe of the atolls, many only now being properly explored and documented, while Baa Atoll has been declared a Unesco World Biosphere Reserve, such are its pristine waters and the value of its diverse marine life. With just a handful of resorts and guesthouses, you'll feel like you have the Northern Atolls to yourself.

When to Go

- ➔ **Jan-Mar** Peak season coincides with the best weather in the North, as well as European winter.
- ➔ **Jun-Oct** Manta Ray spotting season brings keen divers and snorkellers to swim with these incredible creatures.
- ➔ **May-Sep** The low season doesn't mean the weather is any worse, and room prices are the lowest they get.

Haa Alifu

Haa Alifu Atoll contains the island of **Utheemu** (population 900), by far the most historically interesting island in the Northern Atolls. The birthplace of Sultan Mohammed Thakurufaanu (who, with his brothers, overthrew Portuguese rule in 1573), the island is centred around a memorial to this Maldivian hero, complete with a small museum and library. There's a gorgeous beach here, though currently no guesthouse, so visitors come on day trips from nearby islands and resorts.

Elsewhere in the atoll is the capital island **Dhidhdhoo** (population 2500), which offers good anchorage for passing yachts, and **Hoarafushi**, the next largest island (population 2200), noted for its music and dancing.

Kelaa (population 1200) was the northern British base during WWII, mirroring Gan at the other end of the country. The mosque here dates from the end of the 17th century.

At the very top of Haa Alifu, **Uligamu** (population 270) is the 'clear-in' port for private yachts arriving in Maldivian waters. It has health and immigration officers, so yachts are able to complete all entry formalities there.

Sights

The main sights in Haa Alifu can be found on small but historically significant Utheemu, which arguably boasts the most important buildings in Maldives outside Male.

Utheemu Ganduvaru

PALACE

(Utheemu; Rf25; ☀ 9am-6pm Sun-Thu) This small palace was the childhood home of Maldivian national hero Mohammed Thakurufaanu, who, alongside with his brothers, overthrew Portuguese rule in 1573. Visitors are escorted around the complex of buildings by a member of staff from the museum and are able to see the fascinating 500-year-old wooden interiors, including swing beds (used to keep cool in the heat), lamps that burn coco palm oil, elaborate wooden carvings and a large palm-thatch shed used as a sleeping room for guests.

Kandhuvalu Mosque

MOSQUE

(Utheemu) The date of construction for this stone and wood mosque is unknown, although Mohammed Thakurufaanu is known to have prayed here in his youth, meaning that there's been a mosque here since at least the mid-16th century. It's a tiny place with a beautiful teak interior that can

be glimpsed from the entrance. Sadly, entry is not possible for non-Muslims. Thakurufaanu's father is buried in the cemetery here.

Sleeping

If you're arriving in Maldives after a long-haul flight, bear in mind that selecting a resort in the far north of the country will add on at least two hours to your journey each way – often more, depending on flight timings. This can come as a shock to travellers, and is the main cause of complaint from those who come here, so be prepared.

Hideaway Beach Resort & Spa

LUXURY RESORT \$\$

(☎ 650 1515; www.island-hideaway.com; r incl breakfast from US\$792; 🍷 🍷 🍷 🍷 🍷) Hideaway is certainly true to its name – located about as remotely as you can imagine in the Maldives' most northerly atoll. But while some resorts might blanch at the idea of being so far removed from Male and the busy international airport, Island Hideaway has effortlessly capitalised on it, attracting those seeking true escape.

Set on a gorgeous crescent-shaped island with beaches 1.5km long on both sides, Hideaway is breathtaking to look at and thickly vegetated. Following a full renovation in 2014, the resort is looking superb, but is also significantly bigger, having more than doubled its number of villas. This hasn't resulted in overcrowding, however, as the majority of these new structures are water villas, which stretch off over the lagoon. These are extremely impressive and spacious structures, each coming with its own 18-sq-metre plunge pool and boasting total privacy. The rooms on the island itself share a rustic style with Maldivian decor and contemporary fittings. All have huge outdoor bathrooms and many have infinity pools. They're enclosed by thick vegetation for privacy and most enjoy their own direct beach access.

The pristine reefs around the island provide superb snorkelling and the untouched sites further afield make diving with the Meridis Diving School another great reason to come here. The resort is totally child-friendly, has a great kids club, and many of the villas are designed to accommodate entire families, so space isn't a problem. Finally, if you're travelling by yacht, Island Hideaway has its own Walcon Marine Marina, with 30 berths for yachts up to 80m. Look no further for total seclusion.