

Understand the Maldives

MALDIVES TODAY 122

A 2012 coup weakened Maldives' democratic credentials, but democratic elections passed off without major incident in 2013.

HISTORY 124

How a small island nation has retained its identity despite centuries of foreign invasion, colonialism and domination.

MALDIVIAN WAY OF LIFE 133

Strict Islamic values, island loyalty and an impressive work ethic define daily life in the atolls.

MARINE LIFE IN THE MALDIVES.....140

Discover the array of underwater life in the Maldives, from coral polyps to whale sharks.

ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES & RESPONSIBLE TRAVEL..... 147

Learn about the problems facing the fragile ecology of the Maldives and how to travel without contributing to them.

ARTS, CRAFTS & ARCHITECTURE..... 153

From *bodu beru* ceremonies to weaving and lacquer-work boxes, there's a surprising amount of local handicrafts to be enjoyed.

TASTE OF THE MALDIVES 157

Even though you'll hardly experience Maldivian food in most resorts, we'll tell you what to try elsewhere in the Maldives.

Maldives Today

The Maldives today is undergoing something of an identity crisis. After decades of tightly controlled one-party rule, the country emerged blinking into a new dawn in 2008 with the election of its first democratically elected president, Mohammed Nasheed. The four years that followed saw momentous, progressive changes, which didn't always go down well with the conservative island populations suspicious of change. Following an alleged coup in February 2012, the former dictator's brother-in-law, Abdulla Yameen, became president, and the country's course now seems very unclear.

Best in Print

Beach Babylon (Imogen Edwards-Jones, 2004) An amusing behind the scenes exposé set in a luxurious Maldivian resort.

Dive the Maldives (Sam Harwood & Rob Bryning, 2009) The best guidebook to dive sites, fish and other marine life for the Maldives.

Best on Film

The Island President (Jon Shenk, 2011) Fascinating and revealing documentary about the rise of former President Nasheed and his quest to make the world care about climate change.

Etiquette

On inhabited islands you must conform to local dress codes. This means shoulders and midriffs need to be covered and, for women, the knees too.

During Ramadan it's not acceptable to eat in public during daylight hours, except in resorts.

In the atolls men don't normally shake hands with women, but it's quite acceptable for women to shake hands with other women. Likewise, foreign women shaking hands with local men isn't seen as unusual.

Democratic Dawn

In many ways it was an incredible feat for the conservative, poorly educated Maldives to move so boldly to full democracy in 2008, becoming one of the first true Islamic democracies in the world. It's sadly unsurprising, then, that President Nasheed fell so dramatically from grace in 2012, mostly because his modernising, reformist agenda was at odds with the conservative island chiefs in the regions as well as the country's rich elite, for whom the pre-Nasheed status quo had been very favourable.

Despite only having been president for four years, Mohammed Nasheed left a huge mark on the Maldives. He introduced a national tax system, public healthcare, a state pension, and a national ferry network; he also lifted travel restrictions on foreigners and allowed the building of guesthouses on inhabited islands for the first time. He arguably moved the country forward decades in less than one full presidential term.

A Return to the Past

Following the coup of 2012, the 2013 presidential election saw the presidency go to Abdulla Yameen, the half-brother of former dictator Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, who ruled unchallenged for 30 years before the democratic elections of 2008. The former president, Mohammed Nasheed, was promptly arrested on charges of terrorism and found guilty on 13 March 2015 by the High Court after a series of trials whose constitutional shortcomings were widely condemned by international and local observers.

Parallel to Nasheed's liberal rule, the Maldives also saw the rise of an Islamist influence, previously kept at bay by the country's one-party state. Since Abdulla Yameen's ascension to the presidency, support for Islamist parties has continued to increase, with hundreds of