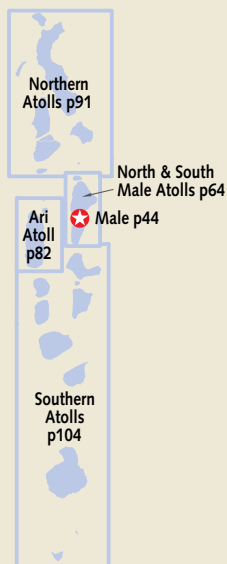




Maldives



THIS EDITION WRITTEN AND RESEARCHED BY

Tom Masters

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Plan Your Trip

Choosing a Resort

Don't worry about being swayed by the judicious use of Photoshop in brochures – almost every resort in the Maldives will get you a superb beach, amazing weather and turquoise waters overlooked by majestic palms. Indeed, so uniform is the perfection, it's often hard to take memorable photographs here – they all just look like they've been lifted from a holiday brochure. The standard of facilities and accommodation in Maldivian resorts varies enormously, from budget and extremely average accommodation to the best of everything – if you can afford to pay through the nose for it. Your choice of resort or guesthouse is absolutely key to getting the holiday you want. Take plenty of time and weigh up as many options as possible before settling for the place or places you'll book into. There are plenty of factors you need to take into consideration when selecting a resort.

Best Rooms

Jumeirah Vittaveli (p79) Huge and sumptuously furnished villas with enormous outdoor bathrooms, surrounded by lap pools and enjoying direct beach access.

Best Pool

Anantara Kihavah Villas (p100) Simply our favourite pool in the country, long enough for swimming lengths and fun for kids too.

Best Beach

Kanuhura (p103) The endless white-sand beach is unbeatable, and the resort owns a private desert island for you to boat over to for a picnic lunch.

Best Restaurant

Six Senses Laamu (p113) You're spoiled for choice here, but our favourite of Six Senses restaurant is Leaf, where sublime Vietnamese cuisine is served at lunch, and Mediterranean fare is served for dinner.

Atmosphere

Every resort has cultivated a distinct atmosphere to appeal to its guests. Before choosing a resort decide on the type of holiday you want and the atmosphere most conducive to providing it. Honey-mooners who find themselves surrounded by package-tour groups and screaming children may quickly come to regret booking into the first resort they looked at. Similarly, divers and surfers may find the social-life vacuum in a resort popular with honeymooners and couples a little claustrophobic after a week on a liveaboard.

Back to Nature

The Maldives has built much of its tourism industry on the desert-island ideal: the fantasy of simplicity, tranquillity, beach and sea. Of course, the fact that many places also provide a butler, a gourmet restaurant and a fleet of staff who cater to your every whim makes the whole experience somewhat more luxurious than being a real castaway. These resorts tend to be well

designed, use imported woods and natural fibres and have little or no air-conditioning outside the bedroom. The simplicity of such places (even at top-end resorts, which admittedly add supreme style and comfort to the mix), not to mention their peacefulness and relaxed feel, is what attracts people. These 'no shoes, no news' resorts are great for a romantic break, a honeymoon or total escape.

High Style

Few countries in the world have such a wealth of choice in the luxury market as the Maldives. Most major luxury-hotel brands have or hope to have a presence here, and at times things can look like a never-ending glossy travel magazine, bringing ever higher levels of comfort and pampering.

And the pampering on offer here is almost legendary. You'll have your own *thakuru*, Man Friday or Guest Experience Manager (all various terms for personal butler), who will look after you during your stay. And you'll nearly always have a sumptuous villa stuffed full of beautifully designed furniture and fabrics, a vast, decadent bathroom (often open air) and a private open-air area (in a water villa this is usually a sun deck with a direct staircase into the sea). Now most resorts in this category also include private plunge pools – some big enough to do lengths in, but all a wonderful way to cool off or wash off the salt after a dip in the sea.

Food in these resorts is almost universally top notch. There will be a large choice of cuisine, with European and Asian specialist chefs employed to come up with an amazing array of dishes day and night. Social life will be quiet, and will usually revolve around one of the bars. Most of the market here are honeymooners, couples and families, but kids will certainly not run riot (most resorts impose a limit on the number of children), and even if they do, there will be enough space to get away from them. Despite the general feel being romantic and stylish, activities will not be ignored – everything from diving to water sports and excursions will be well catered for. Essentially, if you can afford this level of accommodation (and you're looking at a minimum of US\$1000 per room per night, plus food), you are guaranteed an amazing time, whatever your interests.

Romance

Romance is big business in the Maldives, where more than a few visitors are on their honeymoon, renewing their vows or just having an indulgent break. Almost anywhere is romantic. That said, the more budget the resort, the more families and groups you'll get, and the intimacy of the romantic experience can be diminished if it's peace, quiet and candlelit dinners you're after. Nonetheless, romance doesn't necessarily mean huge cost. It's hard to think of anywhere more lovely than little Makunudu Island, for example, where there's no TV or loud music, just gorgeously simple and traditional houses dotted along the beach, and vegetation thick with trees planted by past honeymooners. However, the maxim of getting what you pay for is still true here – the loveliest, most romantic resorts are usually not the cheaper ones.

Be aware that you cannot at present get married in the Maldives, although this may change in the near future. However, if you really want to, you can organise non-legally-binding services and effectively have your wedding here even if the legal formalities are completed elsewhere. Nearly all midrange and top-end resorts can organise such ceremonies, so check websites for details and special packages. Honeymooners are often eligible for special deals and some added extras, but you'll need to prove your recent marriage with a certificate and let the resort know in advance that you're newlyweds.

Diving

All resorts have their own diving school and every resort has access to good diving. It's very hard to say that one resort has better diving than another, when in fact all the sites are shared, but there are a few resorts that have obvious advantages, such as remote Helengeli, which offers access to some 40 dive sites, many of which are not used by any other resorts. You'll find a similar situation in and around Ari Atoll, where the dive sites are excellent, including Kuramathi and Chaaya Reef Ellaidhoo. But above all, divers should go for resorts that are focused on diving, as prices will be lower, and there will be more enthusiasm for the activity than elsewhere.

Ecotourism

Ecotourism can so often be a gimmick that it's important to know who's serious and who's just trying to attract a larger number of visitors. Despite the lip service paid by many resorts, relatively few of them have genuine ecotourism credentials. Look for resorts that offer educational programs, sustainable development, environmentally friendly building practices, minimal use of air-conditioning and electricity in general, and a resort ethos that fosters environmental awareness and care (ie offering you not only Evian when you ask for water, but also water that has been desalinated on-site). The resorts we recommend in this category are leading the way in the use of materials, their interaction with the local ecosystem and the activities they offer guests. Those that are serious about their commitment to ecotourism include Gili Lankanfushi (p72), Soneva Fushi (p101), Rihiveli Beach Resort (p77) and Six Senses Laamu (p113).

Guesthouses

Guesthouses are a relatively new initiative in a country where tourism and the local population were always kept scrupulously apart. There are now scores of these small hotels dotted around the country, and the experience offered here is one totally different to that found in resorts. Forget the infinity pool and cocktails – you're on a dry local island here

and swimming costumes aren't culturally acceptable save in a few places with enclosed swimming pools or screened-off beaches – but you can still enjoy the beach on nearby uninhabited islands, do lots of diving, snorkelling, surfing, fishing, island hopping and cultural tourism. This is the best option for anyone who finds being separate from the local population in a self-contained resort an unappealing idea.

Activities

Few people will want to spend an entire holiday sunbathing and swimming, so resorts are careful to provide a program of excursions and activities for guests. Bear in mind that this is the only way you'll be able to leave the island during your stay, public transport from resort islands being nonexistent and opportunities for sightseeing almost as scarce.

While all resorts have a diving centre, the uniformity ends there; you'll have to check to see if the resort you're planning to visit has a water-sports centre or its own spa, organises guided snorkelling, lays on marine biology lectures or morning yoga sessions or has a resident tennis coach. For example, only Kuredu Island Resort (p103), Velaa Private Island (p97) and Shangri-La Villingili (p119) offer golf courses, while Soneva Fushi (p101) is the only resort to offer an observatory.

RESORT TIPS

- ➡ It's always worth checking a resort website yourself and even contacting the resort for specific, up-to-date information, as things change regularly. Is there construction work happening on the island? Is the spa finished yet? Does it still offer kite-boarding? Also, be aware that many resort websites are not regularly updated. While there are exceptions, it's never a good idea to take the information there as fact – check when the page was last updated and also read up on the resort online.
- ➡ Check the dive centre website. It might provide a discount if you book your dives before your arrival. Email them for specific dive information and to check that they will definitely be visiting any site you want to dive at during your stay.
- ➡ If the trip is a honeymoon, or second honeymoon, or if you will be celebrating an anniversary or birthday, let your resort know – there's usually something laid on in such circumstances. Some resorts require a wedding certificate before they do anything, though.



Top: Resort outdoor dining

Bottom: Water-villa room at Jumeirah Vittaveli Resort (p79)



DAVID EVANS/GETTY IMAGES ©

Day Trips

Day trips from your resort are one of the very few ways you'll be able to see something of the 'real' Maldives occupied by ordinary Maldivians. Even if you are an independent traveller, this is still a good way to see otherwise inaccessible islands.

Almost all the resorts in North and South Male Atolls offer day trips to Male. There's enough to see and enough shopping to make this trip worthwhile, and it's a great way to get a feel for Maldivian culture, as terrifyingly polite resort staff are replaced by a friendly and down-to-earth city populace.

Another popular excursion is a trip to an inhabited island, which allows you to see a small island community, traditional housing, craftwork and lifestyle. The trips inevitably feel rather contrived, but can still be immensely enjoyable depending on how friendly the locals are and how many people are around (with children often in school or studying in Male, and menfolk away for work, some islands feel like ghost towns). While it's often more enjoyable to explore an island on your own, the resort guides will at least know all the locals and can be helpful in making contacts and telling you in detail about local life.

Fishing

Just about any resort will do sunset, sunrise or night-fishing trips, while many resorts can also arrange big-game fishing trips. These work out cheaper if there are several participants, as costs are high: from \$450 for a half-day trip for up to four people. Large boats, fully equipped with radar technology, are used to catch dorado, tuna, marlin, barracuda and jackfish among others.

Snorkelling & Diving

All resorts cater for divers and snorkellers, and most organise twice-daily diving excursions and sometimes snorkelling trips too, especially if there's not good snorkelling on the house reef. If you're keen on diving, it's always cheaper to bring your own equipment, including snorkel, mask and fins, plus buoyancy control device (BCD) and dive computer. Most top-end resorts supply free snorkelling equipment to guests, but it normally attracts a charge at budget and midrange places. Dive schools are generally

of an exceptionally high safety standard, as regulated by Maldivian laws. Most resorts have at least 10 sites nearby and visit them in rotation. If there's a particular dive site you want to visit, you should contact the dive school at the resort and check it'll be running a trip there during your stay.

Spa Treatments

As a destination that has become synonymous with relaxation, the Maldives unsurprisingly offers a huge array of treatments in purpose-built spas. These include many different types of massage, beauty treatments, Ayurvedic (Indian herbal) medicine, acupuncture and even traditional Maldivian treatments. All midrange and top-end resorts have a spa, and even some of the budget resorts now have them. The best are sometimes booked up in advance, so plan ahead if you're interested in certain treatments. With staff often from Bali, Thailand, India and Sri Lanka, you're in safe (if expensive) hands. Resorts well known for Ayurvedic therapy include Adaaran Select Meedhupparu (p98), Taj Exotica (p81), Vivanta by Taj Coral Reef (p69), Four Seasons Landaa Giraavaru (p99) and Olhuveli Beach & Spa (p79).

Surfing

The best resorts for surfing are Chaaya Island Dhonveli (p71) and Adaaran Select Hudhuran Fushi (p37), which are both blessed with their own surf breaks and are very popular with surfers during the season. The popularity of surfing is increasing in the Maldives, with surfer arrivals going up massively in the past few years. However, it's really only these two resorts that are perfectly located near good breaks, although nearby resorts, such as Four Seasons Kuda Huraa (p73) and Paradise Island (p71) can organise boat trips. Meemu Atoll is also great for surfing, and is largely unvisited by travellers, despite there being two nearby resorts making access fairly easy. Another fantastic option to avoid the crowds and explore a pristine region of the country is to join a 'surfari' – check with your resort or travel agent.

Water Sports

In addition to diving schools, most resorts have a water-sports centre. These vary enormously. Some offer the most basic

RESORT BASICS

On meeting you at the airport, your resort representative will usually take your ticket and/or passport for the duration of your stay, which is quite normal in the Maldives.

Unless you arrive in the late afternoon or evening, you'll soon be transferred to your resort – either by a waiting dhoni, speedboat, airplane or seaplane from the nearby lagoon airport. You may have to wait for other passengers to get through customs. You can use US dollars or euros at the airport cafe, and change cash into rufiyaa at the bank.

Travellers arriving after dark may have to spend a night at the airport hotel or at a hotel in Male; seaplane transfers are not carried out after dark for obvious reasons, and so they generally do not leave Male after 4pm. Speedboat transfers can be done at any time of day or night.

On arrival at the resort you'll be given a drink, asked to fill out a registration form and taken to your room. Resort staff will bring your luggage separately.

Room Types

Most resorts have several types of room, ranging from the cheapest 'Superior Garden Villas' to the 'Deluxe Over-Water Suites'. A 'Garden Villa' will not have a beach frontage, and a 'Water Villa' will be on stilts over the lagoon at a big cost hike.

More expensive rooms tend to be bigger, newer and better finished, and can have a bathtub as well as a shower, a minibar instead of an empty fridge, tea- and coffee-making facilities (even an espresso machine), a sound system and maybe even a Jacuzzi. More and more often in top-end resorts a private plunge pool (or even a lap pool) is part of the set up; these are now de rigueur in newly built resorts.

Seasons & Supplements

High-season room rates are December to March for single/double occupancy. Rates also spike over Easter and in August. The cheapest time to visit the Maldives is from April to July and from September to November.

Extra people can usually share a room, but there's a charge for the extra bed, which varies from resort to resort, as well as additional costs for meals and the obligatory US\$8 per person per night 'bed tax', which is collected by the government for each tourist. This was supposed to be retired in 2013, but was still being charged in 2015.

For children two years and younger, usually just the US\$8 bed tax is payable. From two to 12 years, the child supplement will be more, though usually less than a full adult rate.

Be aware that most resorts in the Maldives quote their prices exclusive of taxes, which are significant. In general all resorts add on a 10% to 12% service charge as a tip for staff and a 12% general sales tax (GST). Therefore bear these extras in mind when you're totalling up a trip's cost – the 'plus pluses', as they're known, essentially add around an extra 25% of all your resort costs, as they're added to food, drinks, activities and transfers too!

Pricing Periods

Pricing patterns vary with the resort and the demands of its main market – some are incredibly detailed and complex with a different rate every week. The basic pattern is that Christmas–New Year is the peak season, with very high prices, minimum-stay requirements and huge surcharges for the obligatory Christmas and New Year's Eve dinners. Early January to late March is high season, when many Europeans take a winter holiday. The weeks around Easter may attract even higher rates (but not as high as Christmas). From Easter to about mid-July is low season (and the wettest part of the year). July and August is another high season, for the European summer holidays. Mid-September to early December is low season again.



Beach bar at Eriyadu Island (p67)

array of kayaks and windsurfing, while others run the gamut from water skiing to kite-boarding and wakeboarding. The best resorts for sailing and windsurfing have a wide lagoon that's not too shallow, and lots of equipment to choose from. Non-motorised water-sports tend to be free in better resorts, while they're all charged in budget and midrange ones in general. Good resorts for sailing and windsurfing include: Kanuhura (p103), Four Seasons Landaa Giraavaru (p99), Kuredu (p103), Sheraton Maldives Full Moon Resort & Spa (p67), Villigili Resort & Spa (p119), Ayada Maldives (p115), Four Seasons Kuda Huraa (p73), LUX* Maldives (p86), Vilu Reef (p110), W Retreat & Spa (p87), Kurumba Maldives (p67) and Meeru Island Resort (p70).

Food & Drink

What you eat in Maldives varies tremendously, but essentially boils down to your budget and your choice of resort. At the top end, you'll be cooked for by Michelin starred-chefs, while at the lower end the

buffet – the standard dining option – is still in evidence, and quality is extremely variable. The usual truism that you get what you pay for is especially relevant here.

Alcohol is also becoming more of a feature at resorts – many have spent years building up wine cellars. Reethi Rah claims to have over 8000 bottles of wine in its cellar, while Huvafen Fushi's wine cellar is a work of art itself, buried deep below the island and hired out for private dinners at great expense.

Meals

Typically, breakfast is a buffet wherever you stay in the Maldives. At the bottom end, there will be a fairly limited selection of cereals, fruit, pastries and yoghurts. At the midrange and top end you'll have an enormous spread, usually including omelette stations, fresh fruit, good coffee, freshly baked pastries, curries, rice dishes, full English-style breakfast, meat platters and oodles of sweet cakes.

In budget resorts, lunch and dinner will usually be a buffet as well. This can quickly become repetitive, and while you'll never go hungry, you may find yourself

craving some variety. Some budget resorts have à la carte restaurants where you can dine to have a change of cuisine and scenery – if you're on an all-inclusive deal, meals like this will be charged as extras. However, for the most part there's little or no choice at the budget end. Dinner will usually have the biggest selection, and may be a 'theme night' specialising in regional cuisines such as Italian, Asian, Indian or Maldivian.

If you're in a midrange or top-end resort, you'll have a totally different experience. Almost all resorts in these categories have at least two restaurants, with a few exceptions for small islands where the restaurants are à la carte and have sufficiently long or changing menus to keep you satisfied for a couple of weeks or more. The larger resorts will have multiple choices.

Another alternative to the usual buffet is a 'speciality meal'. This might be a barbecue or a curry night, served on the beach and open to anyone who pays an extra charge. Or it can be a much pricier private dinner for two in romantic surroundings – on an uninhabited island, on the beach, or on a sandbank a short ride from the resort island. Most resorts will do special meals on request, and nearly all top-end places offer in-room dining for those enjoying themselves too much to leave their villas.

Meal Plans

Many guests are on full-board packages that include accommodation and all meals. Others take a half-board package, which includes breakfast and dinner, and pay extra for lunch. Some resorts offer a bed-and-breakfast plan, and guests pay separately for lunch and dinner. The advantage of not paying for all your meals in advance is that you permit yourself the freedom to vary where you eat (assuming your resort has more than one restaurant). However, at good resorts your full-board plan is usually transferable, meaning you can eat a certain amount at other restaurants, or at least get a big discount on the à la carte prices.

Room-only deals are also sometimes available, but they're rarely a great idea. Never underestimate the sheer expense of eating à la carte in the Maldives at any level, although at the top end it's positively outrageous – think US\$75 per head without alcohol for a decent lunch.

Self-catering is of course not possible, and there's nothing worse than being unable to eat properly due to financial constraints. Unless you're very comfortable financially and want to eat in a variety of different places, it's definitely a good idea to book full-board or at least half-board meal plans.

All-inclusive plans are some of the best value of all, although in general they're associated with the core package-tourist market and tend to be available only in budget resorts. These typically include all drinks (non-brand-name alcohol, soft drinks and water) and some activities and water sports/diving thrown in for good measure. Always investigate carefully exactly what's on offer meal-wise before you make a decision – the meal plan can make an expensive package worthwhile or a cheap one a rip-off. One upmarket all-inclusive resort is Lily Beach (p89) in Ari Atoll, where you'll get good wines and brand-name spirits for your (not inconsiderable) daily rate.

HOW TO SPOT A TOP RESORT

In case you have any doubts about where you're staying, this checklist should help you confirm you're in the very smartest of Maldivian resorts:

- ➔ You will not be given a fruit cocktail on arrival, but rather an iced ginger tea, homemade ice cream or fresh melon juice served in a dainty earthenware cup.
- ➔ The staff line up on the jetty when you arrive and you have to work the line shaking their hands and feeling like a minor royal.
- ➔ You have your own lap pool so you don't have to mix with the hoi polloi in the main one.
- ➔ You have more towels than you know what to do with in your room, and more brand-name bath products than you can actually be bothered to swipe.
- ➔ Staff members you have never even seen magically address you by your first name.
- ➔ Every time you leave your room a fleet of staff will swarm in to clean it.

Luxuries

You've come to the right place if this is your main interest. The Maldives' top-end resorts (and even some of its midrange options) offer an eye-watering range of treatments, pampering and general luxury.

Currently indispensable in the luxury industry is the personal *thakuru*, or butler, otherwise known as a 'man Friday' or 'villa host'. The *thakuru* is assigned to you throughout your stay. He's your point of contact for all small things (restocking the minibar, reserving a table for dinner), but given that one *thakuru* will often be looking after up to 10 rooms at a time, the term 'personal' is pushing it a bit, especially when even in the best hotels in the country there are often language problems and some service issues.

The home of pampering at most resorts is the spa. Until recently they were considered optional for resorts, whereas now they are usually at the very centre of the luxury experience. Expect to pay from about US\$100 for a simple massage at a budget or midrange place to US\$500 for a long session of pampering at a top-end resort.

Beaches

Very few resorts in the Maldives do not have an amazing beach. Some beaches suffer a great deal from erosion, but resorts work very hard to redress this with sandbags and seawalls in certain places. These can of course be unsightly, but they are necessary to hold the islands' beaches in place. Obviously, the more expensive the resort, the more effort is made to ensure that sandbags are never visible.

For the record, here are a list of our favourite beaches in the country: Anantara

Kihavah Villas (p100), Sun Siam Iru Fushi Maldives (p96), Kanuhura (p103), One & Only Reethi Rah (p72), Kuredu Island Resort & Spa (p103), Soneva Fushi (p101), Reethi Beach (p99), Coco Palm Dhuni Kolhu (p99), Eriyadu Island Resort (p67), Angsana Ihuru (p70), Bandos (p71), Baros (p74), Banyan Tree Vabbinfaru (p74), Gili Lankanfushi (p72), Rihiveli (p77), Paradise Island (p71), Hideaway Beach Resort & Spa (p92), W Retreat & Spa (p87), Veligandu Island Resort & Spa (p86), Vilu Reef (p110), Huvaafen Fushi (p73) and Conrad Maldives Rangali Island (p89). This doesn't mean that resorts not on this list don't make the grade – these are just our very top choices!

Children

If you're bringing children to the Maldives, it's very important to get your choice of resort right, as only some resorts have kids clubs or babysitters available, and activities for older children can be limited at resorts more used to welcoming honeymooning couples. If you aren't looking for kids clubs and your offspring are happy to spend the day on the beach, then almost every resort will be suitable. Note that Komandoo Island Resort doesn't accept children aged under six and W Retreat & Spa doesn't accept children under 12.

In general kids will love the Maldives, although more than a week might be pushing it unless you're staying in a big family resort where there are plenty of other children for them to play with and lots of activities. Nowadays nearly all top-end resorts have kids clubs, and these can be impressive places, with their own pools and a host of activities, which mean parents can drop off kids (usually under 12) at any time, for free during the day.



OUR STORY

A beat-up old car, a few dollars in the pocket and a sense of adventure. In 1972 that's all Tony and Maureen Wheeler needed for the trip of a lifetime – across Europe and Asia overland to Australia. It took several months, and at the end – broke but inspired – they sat at their kitchen table writing and stapling together their first travel guide, *Across Asia on the Cheap*. Within a week they'd sold 1500 copies. Lonely Planet was born.

Today, Lonely Planet has offices in Franklin, London, Melbourne, Oakland, Beijing and Delhi, with more than 600 staff and writers. We share Tony's belief that 'a great guidebook should do three things: inform, educate and amuse'.

OUR WRITER



Tom Masters

Tom is a British-born, Berlin-based travel writer who has been covering Maldives for Lonely Planet for a decade. While Maldives' incredible geography, amazing beaches and incomparable underwater world were the initial attraction, it's actually the wonderful contradictions of the Maldivian people and the confusingly closed Dhivehi culture that have kept him coming back, although the luxury hotels and amazing food aren't exactly disincentives either.

You can find him online at www.tommasters.net.

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