

Ari Atoll



Second only to North Male' Atoll as the centre of the Maldivian tourist industry, Ari Atoll sits to the west of the capital, a vast oval lagoon dotted with reefs and as sumptuously inviting as anywhere else in the country. Like Male' Atoll, Ari is known universally by its traditional name rather than its official name of Alif, a usage we have followed here.

To the east, Ari Atoll is separated from South Male' Atoll by a 40km-wide channel, perhaps 500m deep; to the west, the sea floor drops precipitously to over 2000m. Abundant marine life in the atoll creates nutrient-rich water that flows out through channels, attracting large creatures from the open sea and divers from all over the world.

Despite its importance for the tourism industry, Ari Atoll is not a particularly developed part of the country. The regional capital, Mahibadhoo, has a population of just 1750 and there are only 18 inhabited islands in the entire atoll. The Indian Ocean tsunami did not massively affect the atoll, due to North and South Male' Atolls bearing the brunt of the wave. All resorts that were affected here have long since been up and running again.

The 28 resorts here are some of the best-established in the country and include the Hilton Maldives, frequently winner of various 'best hotels in the world' accolades, as well as Dhoni Mighili, one of the most extraordinary resorts in the whole country, where guests stay aboard their own customised luxury dhoni. Whatever you seek from the Maldives you'll find it in Ari Atoll.

THODDOO ISLAND

Though administratively part of Ari Atoll, Thoddo is actually a single, separate, oval island about 20km from the northern edge of the main atoll. It's about 1km across, and has a population of over 1300. The principal activity is fishing, but Thoddo is also known for its market-garden produce (watermelons and betel leaf especially) and its troupe of traditional dancers, who sometimes perform in tourist resorts.

There is evidence that Thoddo has been occupied since ancient times. A Buddhist temple here contained a Roman coin minted in 90 BC, as well as a silver bowl and a fine stone statue of Buddha, the head of which is now in the National Museum in Male'.

Safari boats can stop here, but usually don't because of the lack of sheltered anchorages. You could also arrange a day trip here from one of the Rasdhoo Atoll resorts.

RASDHOO ATOLL

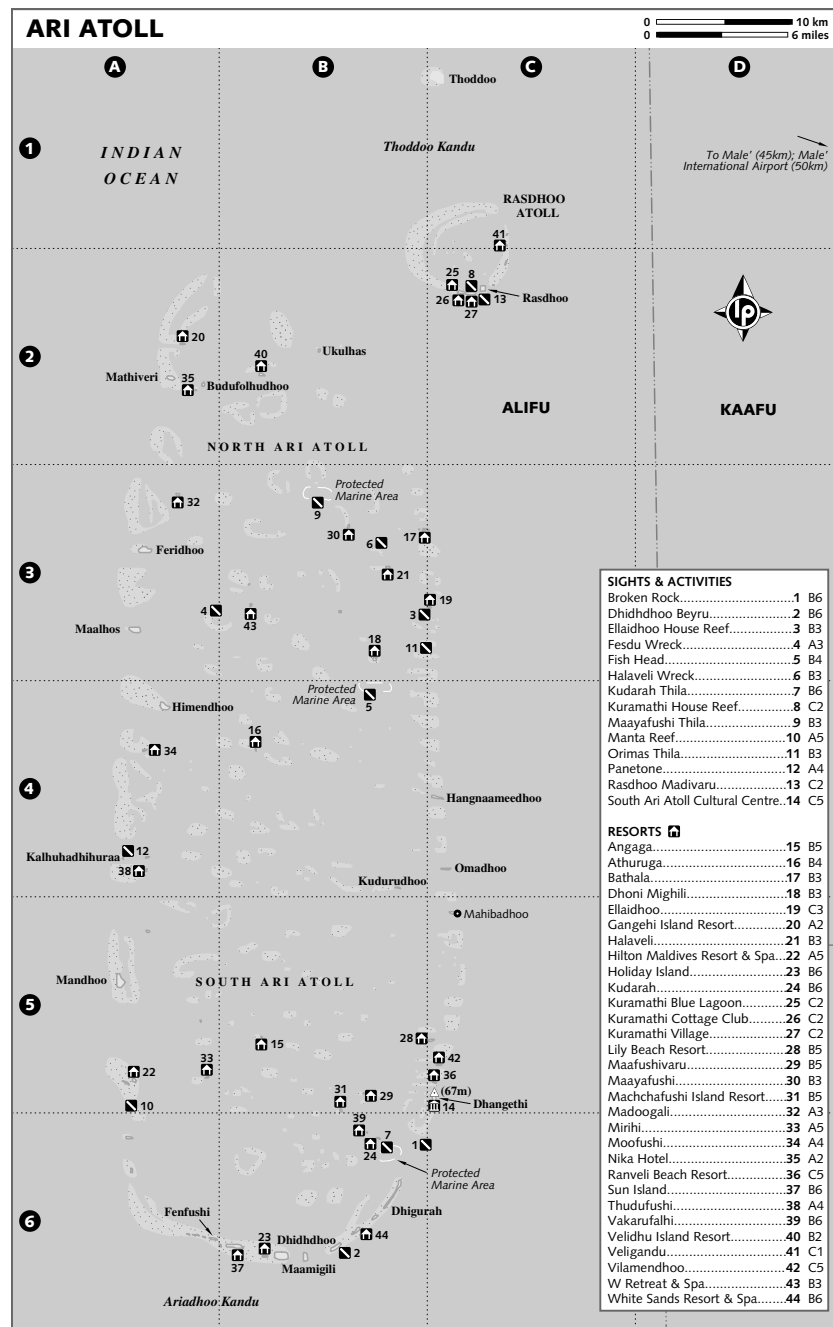
The small atoll of Rasdhoo lies off the northeastern corner of Ari Atoll proper. The main island of the atoll, also called **Rasdhoo** (population 830), is the administrative capital of North Ari Atoll, despite ironically not being within the atoll itself. Rasdhoo has an attractive little village with a junior secondary school, a health centre, four mosques and a score of souvenir shops – it's often visited as a day trip from the nearby resorts. The island has been settled for many centuries and there are traces here of a Buddhist society predating the arrival of Islam.

Sights & Activities

DIVING

The medical centre at Kuramathi has a decompression chamber and trained hyperbaric specialists.

Accessible from the shore, **Kuramathi House Reef** is good for beginning divers



and snorkellers. A small dhoni and a 30m freighter have been sunk off the island to provide an attraction for divers. Sea fans and featherstars decorate the reef wall, while sharks, stingrays and turtles might also be seen.

Also known as Hammerhead Point, **Rasdhoo Madivaru** 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. It's a fine snorkelling site if conditions permit.

Resorts

Kuramathi Maldives (Kuramathi island; ☎ 6660527; www.kuramathi.com; 288 rooms; airport transfer 2hr, US\$120; 🏠 📶 📶) is a unique island in the Maldives, as it houses no less than three resorts, in apparent contravention of the government's beloved 'one island, one resort' policy. In fact, Kuramathi's three resorts are all run by the same management team and are all owned by Universal Resorts, but the island's size has allowed three separate entities aimed at different crowds to spring up here. Kuramathi island itself was once inhabited but population decline led in 1970 to the mass relocation of the remaining islanders to next-door Rasdhoo, leaving Kuramathi ripe for development.

Kuramathi Village (s/d US\$190/198), the largest and least expensive Kuramathi resort, is where the younger, party crowd come to stay. Rooms are basic, high-ceilinged affairs with hot showers and air-con but little else in the way of comforts and are frequented by British and German travellers. The superior and deluxe rooms offer some improved comforts although they're still fairly average.

Kuramathi Cottage & Spa (s/d/wb US\$197/205/285) is in the middle of the island and is a spa resort whose guests come for treatments, pampering and total relaxation. There are an incredible 50 water bungalows here, which are beautifully attired.

Kuramathi Blue Lagoon (s/d/wb US\$232/240/305), at the quiet end of the island, is quieter and more upmarket. It features 20 water bungalows (favoured by honeymooners), and 36 beach cottages, which are popular with families.

The three resorts share all facilities and so these are great choices if you want a huge amount of activities and facilities. There's a marine biology centre here that provides guided snorkelling and diving as well as giving guests informative introductions to various aspects of the natural underwater world, from coral formation to reef structure.

Rasdhoo Atoll Divers (www.rasdhoo Divers.com) serves all three resorts, charging US\$60 for a boat dive with all equipment, US\$52 with tank and weights only, and US\$420 for an open-water course. There's a four-berth decompression chamber on the island as well.

The lagoon is the perfect place for learning windsurfing and sailing. Motorised water sports, including wakeboarding, are available. Stingrays come into the shallows on the beach every evening. All in all Kuramathi offers a lot and it's particularly good for a group of people who might want different things, as you can easily combine diving, spa treatments and partying here in a way that few other resorts can offer.

A charming island fringed with white beaches and featuring a huge 80m sandbank at one end, **Veligandu** (Veligandu island; ☎ 6660519; www.veliganduisland.com; full board s/d/t/wb US\$240/282/381/425; airport transfer by seaplane 20min, US\$175; 73 rooms; 🏠 📶) is all about nature and true escape.

Well vegetated with plenty of coconut palms and located on the beautiful lagoon within Rasdhoo, this is a midrange place built in a traditional Maldivian style, although the rather modern rooms smash any genuine shipwreck fantasies before they can fully set in.

There are no TVs in the rooms, which adds to the 'no shoes, no news' atmosphere, as do the rustic outdoor bathrooms. There's a second bed in each room, so each can potentially be a twin, double or triple. The reception area, bar and restaurant have sand floors, cane furniture and a delightfully casual feel. The meals are mostly buffets, offering a limited variety of very good quality dishes. Guests are mainly German, Austrian and Italian couples.

There are a couple of excellent dive sites nearby, including very common hammerhead shark sightings. The Swiss-run

Ocean-Pro dive base (www.oceanpro-diveteam.com) charges very reasonably. The edge of the house reef is not very accessible and is not great for snorkelling. But Veligandu isn't primarily a diving or water-sports resort – the main attractions are the natural ambience, rustic simplicity and fine beaches.

ARI ATOLL

The geographic entity of Ari Atoll (as opposed to the administrative regions of North and South Ari) is about 80km from north to south and 30km wide. The most populous island is **Mahibadhoo**, the capital of South Ari, with some 1700 people. Fishing and fish processing are the main industries – there's a cold storage and processing plant here. Safari boats might stop here, but there are no resorts nearby.

Other inhabited islands, typically with a population of a few hundred, are dotted around the edges of the atoll. Few of them are accessible from resorts, but safari boats may be able to stop at some of these islands, which are little visited by tourists. Quite a few islands have ruins or artefacts of ancient Buddhist and Hindu settlements.

Maamigili, in the south of the atoll, has over 1500 people, many of whom work in nearby resorts, or in tourist shops that cater to island-hopping visitors. The island of **Fenfushi** (population 550), on the southwest corner of the atoll, supplies sand and coral-stone for buildings in Male' and elsewhere, and is noted for coral carving. **Dhangethi** (population 700), on the southeastern edge of the atoll, is worth visiting for its Cultural Centre.

Sights & Activities

DIVING

All of the resorts have diving operations and some are known as destinations for serious divers. During peak season some sites may have several groups diving on them at one time, but good dive masters will know how to avoid the crowds at popular sites and where to find equally attractive but less popular sites. The following is a brief description of some well-known sites (from north to south), to give an idea of the possibilities.

Maayafushi 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.

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

Fesdu Wreck is a 30m trawler with a good covering of corals at a depth of 18m to 30m. Moray eels and groper 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.

Only accessible to Ellaidhoo's guests, the excellent **Ellaidhoo House Reef** has a long wall just 25m from the beach. It has a row of caves with sea fans, whip corals, schools of bannerfish, Napoleons, stingrays and morays, and even a small wreck. This reef is popular with night divers.

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.

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 attraction, however, is the numerous grey 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 this superb but heavily used site.

The north side of Kalhuhadhihuraa Faru is subject to strong currents, so the caves and overhangs of **Panetone** are thick with soft coral growth. As well as the many reef fish, there are giant trevally, sharks, barracuda and turtles. From December to

April, mantas feed around the outside of the channel; March to November are the best months to see sharks. There's excellent snorkelling in light currents.

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

Kudarah Thila is a very demanding but exciting dive – if there is a current running, this is strictly for experienced divers. There are gorgonians, whip corals, black corals and a whole field of sea fans swaying in the current, surrounded by sharks and trevally from the open sea. In the gaps between large coral blocks, bluestriped snapper, tallfin, batfish, goby and other unusual small fish can be seen. It's a Protected Marine Area.

In the mouth of the Dhigurashu Kandu, **Broken Rock** is bisected by a canyon up to 10m deep and only 1m to 3m wide. Swimming through the 50m canyon is unforgettable, but extreme care is needed not to damage the coral formations on either side. Rock formations around the thila are decorated with sea fans and superb corals, and are inhabited by abundant marine life.

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 Kandu north to the tip of Dhigurah island. There's plenty of fish life on the reef, and mantas also cruise the area. The reef drops off steeply into deep water, and it's quite exposed and subject to ocean currents.

Resorts

While some resorts nearer to Male' operate speedboat transfers to and from the airport, the majority of resorts use seaplane transfers due to the distances involved. These take anything from 20 to 45 minutes. Bear in mind that as seaplanes do not fly at night, if you arrive after dark at Male' airport you'll

have to stop over in Male' until the next morning for your seaplane transfer. This is usually done at the airport hotel, which is a good international-standard business hotel. However, it's not the ideal start to a holiday, so it's always best to land in good time before dusk.

BUDGET

One of the best resorts in the country for diving, **Bathala** (Bathalaa island; ☎ 6660587; www.bathala.com; full board s/d/tr US\$170/200/270; airport transfer by seaplane 20min, US\$180; 46 rooms; 🏠) is a small, pretty island which has a loyal tribe of repeat guests from all over Europe.

The cabaña-style cottages are simple and rustic, but with all the essentials such as air-con and warm running water in their outdoor bathrooms. The style is very much Robinson Crusoe – you won't be in danger of any over-attentive pampering here (although there is now a small spa) and most people come for the superb diving.

The attitude towards diving is extremely passionate here – the dive school actively encourages beginners to take one of their full open-water courses, which are spread out over five days and limited to a maximum of three students per group.

Dive costs are relatively low, but more costly if you need to rent full equipment, again making this a good choice for experienced divers. Multidive packages are available. Bring your own wetsuit if possible. The edge of the house reef drops off steeply all around, and is accessible from the beach or more readily from the jetties – it's a good dive site in itself.

An immaculate beach goes right around the island, as does the house reef. The good mix of clientele, including more than average numbers of FITs (fully independent travellers) gives the whole resort a very laid-back feel.

Maayafushi (Mayafushi island; ☎ 6660588; maaya@dhivehinet.net.mv; s/d US\$150/178; airport transfer by seaplane 25min, US\$235; 60 rooms; 🏠) offers very good value for an unpretentious island holiday. The island is small and quite intensively developed; soft sandy beaches surround it, and the house reef is a beauty. Rooms all have basic furnishings, air-con, hot water, TV, phone and beach frontage. Most of the guests are divers from Ger-

many, Switzerland or Austria, but there are a few families with young children who get on well here. Most meals are set menu (with Indian dishes and lots of fresh fish), but there are a couple of buffet nights each week.

The dive school offers a wide range of courses, night dives and trips to the famous dive sites nearby, all for average prices. Once it was a low-cost divers island, but now Maayafushi has been upgraded and its rooms improved, though it's still a pretty laid-back resort.

More than just a typical Italian resort, **Halaveli** (Halaveli island; ☎ 6660559; www.halaveli.com; s/d US\$145/190; airport transfer by seaplane 20min, US\$178; 56 rooms; 🏠) may be booked predominantly by package giant Gran Viaggi, but it's open to other nationalities and has a fair share of divers and FITs as well.

The island is the shape of a crescent moon with beaches all around and plentiful vegetation. The rooms are individual coral-and-thatch bungalows with outdoor bathrooms, air-con, phone and heavy wood furniture.

A full animation program is provided every afternoon and evening, as befits Italian resorts, and the majority Italian guests are into it with enthusiasm. The breakfast and lunch buffets are a pretty fair selection of tasty dishes with an Italian bias. Dinner is partly à la carte.

The house reef is accessible for snorkelling at several points and it has a variety of fish, but not much coral regrowth. Some of the Maldives' most famous dive sites are in easy reach, and the **TGI dive centre** (www.tgidiving.com) is keen to show them off. Prices are low, but better deals can be got by booking online via the diving school website before you arrive.

With a reputation as the most hardcore diving destination in the Maldives, **Ellaidhoo** (Ellaidhoo island; ☎ 6660586; www.travelin-maldives.com; s/d US\$134/168; airport transfer by seaplane 20min, US\$210, by speedboat 80min, US\$115; 156 rooms; 🏠) has over 100 dive sites within a half-day trip, making it one of the top choices in the country for keen divers. Recently it has upgraded its facilities and added extra services to broaden its appeal, but divers still predominate. One reason is the Ellaidhoo house reef, only a few metres offshore and offering some great snorkel-

ling and diving with a 750m wall, lots of caves, corals, rich marine life (turtles, sharks, mantas and eagle rays) and even a small shipwreck. The Sub-Aqua dive centre organises a huge array of trips at reasonable prices. It also runs courses in marine biology.

The rooms were all upgraded in 2001 and feature air-con, hot water and even satellite TV. The main restaurant now serves all meals as buffet style, and there's a coffee shop as well. A new sports centre has a gym, sauna, spa and facilities for billiards, squash, tennis and tension-relieving Thai-style massage. Water sports (like windsurfing, jet skiing and wakeboarding) are provided on a neighbouring island with a wider lagoon.

It looks like Ellaidhoo will continue to attract real diving enthusiasts, but nondivers will now find it's a more enjoyable, all-round destination.

MIDRANGE

Velidhu Island Resort (Velidhoo island; ☎ 6660551; www.johnkeellshotels.com; s/d/t US\$210/240/300; airport transfer by seaplane 20min, US\$200; 100 rooms; 🏠) is a sizable island with some great beaches and a good house reef. It's not the best-looking resort, with uninspired architecture, haphazard landscaping and rooms with very ordinary interiors, but the food and service are quite good. The new over-water bungalows are the classiest accommodation available (US\$75 extra). The **Euro-Divers dive centre** (www.eurodivers.com) is very professional and enthusiastic about the diving in this part of the atoll. A single boat dive is US\$51 with tank and weights only, or US\$61 with full equipment. To do an open-water course costs about US\$510. The six-day, no-limit package is a good deal if you dive a lot. Nitrox courses (US\$60) and nitrox diving (US\$5 extra) are available. Velidhu could be a good choice for keen divers who are not looking for luxury, and its low-season prices can be very good value.

Another almost implausibly perfect island, **Madoogali** (Madoogali island; ☎ 6660581; www.skorpion-maldives.com; full board s/d/tr US\$185/255/315; airport transfer by seaplane 20min, US\$250; 50 rooms; 🏠) is richly verdant, has gorgeous beaches all the way around its circular shore and is set on a stunning lagoon.

The ethos here is rustic Maldivian relaxation – the coral-walled architecture with thatched roofs and wooden interiors may have air-con, but that's one of the few concessions to the modern world.

The large majority of guests are Italian, but the resort has slowly moved from being an Italian-only place to having a large range of European guests, many of whom are repeat visitors.

The house reef is excellent for snorkelling, and as Madoogali is the only resort in this part of the atoll, there is easy access to lots of little-used dive sites. The Albatros dive centre charges reasonable rates and has professional multilingual staff offering all the usual courses. Madoogali is a natural-style resort with a European atmosphere and all-round appeal.

White Sands Resort & Spa (Dhidhdhoofinolhu island; ☎ 66680513; www.maldiveswhitesands.com; half-board s/d/wb US\$275/348/470; airport transfer by seaplane 20min, US\$300, by speedboat 2hr, US\$156; 139 rooms; 🏠) manages to combine all major resort aspects confidently on its lovely 2km island; honeymooners are accommodated in the excellent water bungalows, while divers have the pick of lots of great local dives and activities on the island around – tennis, badminton, volleyball, the Balinese spa, the great beaches and four restaurants all provide enjoyable pastimes.

The older rooms at one end of the island are a reminder that this resort was once called Ari Beach, a very casual, inexpensive place with a reputation as a party island. At the other end, a long jetty leads to a restaurant and 47 water bungalows perched over the lagoon, all in sophisticated-rusticated nautical style. In between, in price and geography, are the 'superior' rooms, the dive school and spa.

Standard rooms are basic boxes and feel somewhat worn, but they're quite OK – they have air-con and a phone, but no hot water. The over-water bungalows are among the most charming and unusual in the Maldives. The sloping walls, wooden finishes, white fabrics and uninterrupted water views make you feel you're in an old yacht, but all the modern accessories are provided, from hairdryers to cable TV. The over-water bar and restaurant also have a shipboard feel, as you eat and drink on shaded decks with water on every side. The

meals here are also excellent, all served buffet style, with quality ingredients and dishes that are not too elaborate but perfectly prepared.

The island itself is long and narrow with natural, somewhat scrubby, vegetation and long white sandy beaches. The lagoon is wide on all sides, and a good place to learn windsurfing or catamaran sailing. Water-skiing, wakeboarding and fun rides on the banana are also available. For snorkelling, take one of the free boat trips to the reef edge – these go every afternoon. The island has always been popular with divers, especially for the whale sharks that cruise the outside edge of the atoll here from May to November, and the mantas on the west side of the atoll from December to May. The very efficient **Euro-Divers dive centre** (www.eurodivers.com) is involved in whale shark research. A single boat dive is US\$45 with tank and weights only, or US\$50 with full equipment. An open-water course costs US\$346. Nitrox courses (US\$70) and nitrox diving (US\$6 extra) are available.

Villa Hotels have a bad habit of naming their resorts with such dreadful names that they seem naff before you even arrive, which is a real pity as **Holiday Island** (Dhiffushi island; ☎ 6660011; www.villahotels.com/holiday; full board s/d/t US\$305/315/425; airport transfer by speedboat 2½hr, US\$140, by seaplane 35min, US\$260; 142 rooms) is beautiful – wide beaches, lush vegetation and a gorgeous lagoon make this every bit the picture-perfect Maldivian island. Like most of Villa Hotels' resorts this is a midlevel resort but the accommodation is basic, and the whole place rather crowded, though it's not nearly as awful as it sounds.

The rooms are in blocks of two (some with interconnecting doors for families), surrounded by cultivated gardens and fitted out with everything from satellite TV to hot water in the bidet. All meals are served buffet style in the main restaurant – the selection is limited, but the quality is good. The Italian animation includes disco nights, karaoke and fitness sessions, avoided like the proverbial plague by all the non-Italians on the island.

Recreational activities such as table tennis, badminton, billiards, tennis and use of the gym are free. Windsurfing, cata-

maran sailing and motorised water sports are available too. The beaches are lovely around most of the island, but snorkelling is not good in the lagoon, and boat trips out to the reef edge and beyond are charged as an extra. Diving is well catered for by the Villa Diving dive school; there are lots of good dive sites around and a single boat dive costs US\$44 with tank and weights, or US\$48 with all equipment.

While Holiday Island is good value for the quality of its accommodation and meals, it's still a place for a bog-standard package break. However, if so-called animation and its adherents frighten you like they do us, avoid.

Gangehi Island Resort (Gangehi island; ☎ 6660505; www.clubvacanze.it; 25 rooms; 🏠 📺 📶) is a gorgeous, upmarket place that is only marketed in Italy through Club Vacanze. FITs cannot stay here (and nor can kids under 12 for that matter). All stays are all inclusive, with loads of extras including free diving and excursions – keeping the guests as busy as ever in the inimitable Italian fashion. The island is pretty, with lots of palm trees, but unfortunately has suffered from sand movements, so the seafloor rooms have no beach and the over-water bungalows are surrounded by a sandbar.

Meaning 'the island of roots' in Divehi, **Moofushi** (Moofushi island; ☎ 6680517; www.moofushi.com; s/d US\$237/263; airport transfer by seaplane 20min, US\$270; 62 rooms; 🏠) is heavily vegetated with mangroves. Opened in 1990 under the Italian management that continues to run the island today, this is a small, smart resort where the staff to guest ratio is 1:1. As it's popular with Italian package travellers, expect to be animated.

The resort has spacious, natural-style, thatched rooms and 17 water bungalows, all of them filled by Italians. It's a pretty island, but the beach is suffering from erosion and some of the breakwaters are unsightly.

The dive centre offers the full range of courses and equipment. Nearby Moofushi Kandu has some good dive sites and makes a great snorkelling trip. The main attractions of Moofushi are the low price and the diving.

Widely marketed through the big package markets of Europe, **Athuruga** (Athuruga island; ☎ 6660508; www.planhotel.ch/athuruga; s/d

US\$335/470; airport transfer by seaplane 25min, US\$210; 46 rooms; 🏠) is one of two Planhotel properties in Ari Atoll (Thudufushi is the other one) and it's an all-inclusive resort, including most drinks, excursions and unmotored water sports in the daily rate. The air-con rooms are spacious and comfortable and all face onto the superb beach. Guests are mostly from Italy, Switzerland, Germany and the UK, in that order, and the atmosphere is casual. The meals are consistently very good. Other facilities include a Serena Spa, water sports and animation areas.

The house reef offers easy snorkelling and a lot to see, and there are some good dive sites nearby, though it's an hour by boat to the exciting dives on the western rim of the atoll. The **Crab dive base** (www.thecrab.com) charges about US\$60 for a boat dive with tank and weights, US\$68 with all equipment and US\$600 for an open-water course, making it not the most competitive place if you plan to dive a lot.

Athuruga is quite densely developed, but it still has lots of palm trees and a good beach all round – it's a good-value resort with a mainly Italian ambience.

The second Planhotel resort in Ari Atoll, **Thudufushi** (Thudufushi island; ☎ 6660583; www.planhotel.ch/thudu; s/d US\$360/480; airport transfer by seaplane 25min, US\$240; 47 rooms) was closed at the time of research for a refit, expecting to open again in late 2006.

The island itself is just beautiful, especially the beaches. In high season the majority of guests are Italian, but at other times there are also Germans and Brits. The dive centre management and prices are the same as at Athuruga, but Thudufushi may be better placed for dives on the atoll edge. The house reef is superb, and accessible for snorkelling and diving.

It's hard not to be charmed by tiny **Mirihi** (Mirihi island; ☎ 6680500; www.mirihi.com; s/d/t/wb US\$510/550/635/584; airport transfer by seaplane 25min, US\$240; 35 rooms; 🏠 📺 📶). Named after the yellow flower that grows around the island, this gem of a resort keeps it simple and natural. The wonderful beach that rings the thick vegetation in the centre of the island and the fantastic house reef beyond are both first class.

Redeveloped in classy, contemporary style, Mirihi is a tiny island, but 30 of the

rooms are built over the water so it's not too crowded – in fact, if anything, it feels positively spacious.

The beach villas have eye-catching décor, polished timber finishes, white linen furnishings, rich red accents and every facility, including a CD player, TV and espresso machine. The over-water rooms have all this plus water views and very private sun decks. The main restaurant presents a lavish gourmet buffet for nearly every meal, usually eaten on a sun deck or on the sand. Some nights feature à la carte specials or theme dinners. Another restaurant, on a jetty over the water, specialises in grills and seafood.

Use of the gym is free of charge, as are activities like board games, windsurfing and kayaking. The small spa has a range of massage and holistic treatments. Divers come here for access to dive sites all over South Ari Atoll. The **Ocean-Pro dive centre** (www.oceanpro-diveteam.com) charges US\$39/55 per dive with/without equipment and US\$619 for an open-water course.

Mirihi is remarkable for making the most of a small island without overdeveloping it. It's equally attractive as a stylish resort, romantic retreat or quality dive island.

Angaga (Angaagau island; ☎ 6660510; angaga@dhivehinet.com; s/d US\$230/240; airport transfer by seaplane 25min, US\$200; 50 rooms; 🏠) was Ari Atoll's first resort and has been operating since 1989. It's a gorgeous and obvious-choice island. White beaches fringe the island, and the house reef is great for diving and snorkelling – the corals have recovered from the bleaching well here. The thatched-roofed bungalows, with a traditional swing seat (*undholi*) out front, show a little more character than many of the midrange resorts available.

The spacious sand-floored bar and restaurant also show some style – they are built in a distinctive fish shape. All meals are buffet, and include a good selection of Asian and European dishes – seafood barbecues are a regular event. The house wines are inexpensive, but all-inclusive packages are still good value if you indulge. Entertainment is nothing elaborate, but there are plenty of water sports and excursions on offer. Nearby Angaga Thila is a top dive site, but others are some

distance away on the edge of the atoll. The dive centre charges reasonably for a range of diving packages and courses. Angaga is popular with Germans, Swiss, Brits and other Europeans, many of whom are repeat visitors.

Consistently being recommended as a great place for a good-value Maldivian holiday, **Lily Beach Resort** (Huvahendhoo island; ☎ 6660013; www.lilybeachmaldives.com; s/d/tr/wb US\$203/256/344/356; airport transfer by seaplane 25min, US\$200; 85 rooms; 🏠 🍷) inspires popularity that springs from its all-inclusiveness, which generally means guests spend very little on the extras that can be so shockingly expensive at other resorts.

Lily Beach Resort has all its guests on an all-inclusive price plan, which includes all meals, snacks, coffee, beer, wine, whisky, gin, vodka, rum, water sports (except diving), tennis and one island-hopping excursion. If you're keen on windsurfing or drinking, this plan could save you US\$10 or US\$20 per day compared with other resorts. Most guests are European, including a strong British contingent, and quite often families with children (there's a children's play area).

This is an unpretentious resort and the architecture is neat but nothing fancy – squarish white buildings with green tiled roofs. The vegetation is a bit sparse, but there are good beaches on two sides of the island – the main drawback is the circle of ugly breakwaters that protect the beaches. Resort facilities include a good swimming pool, tennis court, gym and games room. Sand floors in the bar and restaurant go with the friendly and informal atmosphere. All meals are buffet, with a varied selection including pasta and some very tasty Chinese dishes. The standard rooms have air-con, phone and outdoor bathroom with hot water, while the 16 water bungalows are in fact only half over the water, but are markedly larger than the standard rooms.

The house reef is very good (turtles are common) and easily accessible for snorkelling – you can do night snorkelling here too. Keen divers come for the many South Ari dive sites such as the famous Kudrah Thila, especially in the whale shark season. The **Ocean-Pro dive base** (www.oceanpro-diveteam.com) offers competitive rates and is extremely

friendly. Lily Beach is quite a well-managed resort that offers great value for those who want to eat, drink, dive and relax.

Vilamendhoo (Vilamendhoo island; ☎ 6660637; www.aaa-resortsmaldives.com/vilamendhoo; s/d US\$265/340; airport transfer by seaplane 25min, US\$210; 154 rooms; 🏠) is a very lush, well-vegetated island that still has some sense of space. The beaches are narrow around most of the island, but there's a big sandy area at one end, or both ends, depending on the season. The house reef is particularly good for snorkelling, and marked channels make it easy to reach the reef edge.

The rooms are divided into three categories; all are air-conditioned, spacious, clean and comfortable, with a thin toupee of thatch as a concession to natural style. The restaurant has a tiled floor, a timber ceiling and no walls, so it's cool and breezy. All meals are buffet style, and offer a wide choice of satisfying dishes, with theme nights for variety and several options for vegetarians. The main bar is the heart of the resort, and the guests on all-inclusive packages make sure it keeps beating.

There are over 40 accessible dive sites in the area, including some of the very best in the Maldives. The **Werner Lau dive centre** (www.wernerlau.com) provides equipment, training and guides at reasonable prices. For non-divers there are numerous excursions, a tennis court, windsurfing and water-skiing, but no pool.

Vilamendhoo is efficiently managed, but friendly and informal, and it attracts a good mix of visitors, mostly from Germany, Italy and the UK. It's recommended for divers.

Fervently focused on diving, **Machchafushi Island Resort** (Machchafushi island; ☎ 6664545; www.machchafushi.com; s/d US\$125/175; airport transfer by seaplane 25min, US\$190; 64 rooms; 🏠 🍷) has a fantastic array of dive and snorkelling sites nearby including the extraordinary Kudrah Thila. The house reef is also superb. Diving is good value, and nearly all the guests here are divers – mainly from Germany and Austria.

The rooms are perfectly adequate and comfortable although guests seem to spend almost no time in them. The restaurant does breakfast and lunch buffets and a set meal for dinner – nothing special, but good

food for hungry divers. There's a swimming pool and tennis court too. This is a great choice for a well-located, easy-going divers' resort.

Simple but stylish, **Vakarufalhi** (Vakarufalhi island; ☎ 6680004; www.vakaru.com; full board s/d/t US\$286/336/454; airport transfer by seaplane 25min, US\$225; 50 rooms; 🏠 🍷) is a fairly run-of-the-mill place – it offers as good a beach as anywhere else (and better than most) – it's wide, white, soft and surrounds the island.

The bar and restaurant at Vakaru (as anyone who's been here for more than five minutes calls it) also feature sand floors, in keeping with the natural style. All the individual bungalows are clean and modern inside, with tiled floors, air-con, hot water and open-air bathrooms; on the outside, they have thatched roofs and a canopy of palm trees. Breakfast and lunch always offer a big buffet selection, while dinners alternate between à la carte menus and theme nights featuring Maldivian specialities (expect fish and curries) or a beach barbecue.

The house reef has caves, overhangs and lots of fish life, sometimes including large visitors from outside the atoll. It's accessible for snorkelling and diving, off the jetties or off the beaches, by day or night. The Pro-Divers dive centre is in fact very professional, and charges standard prices for diving.

A good range of excursions is on offer, along with a little low-key evening entertainment. Vakarufalhi would suit anyone who wants a comfortable beach holiday in a natural environment, with great diving and snorkelling as a bonus.

Ranveli Beach Resort (Vilgilivaru island; ☎ 6660570; www.ranveli-maldives.com; s/d US\$260/340; airport transfer by seaplane 25min US\$205; 56 rooms) seems distinctly overbuilt, with too many rooms on a small island. The main restaurant is offshore, in an elegant pavilion on a pier over the lagoon, and serves a rich variety of quality meals. The house reef is good for snorkelling, excellent dive sites are nearby, and there's a lot of white sandy beach. The guests are all from Italy, and Ranveli offers lots of animation and club-style activities.

Entirely booked through the Italian travel company Turisanda, **Maafushivaru**

(Maafushivaru island; ☎ 6660596; www.turisanda.it; s/d US\$350/390; airport transfer by seaplane 30min, US\$230; 38 rooms) is a modern-style resort crowded onto a rather small island. The beaches are attractive, but the circle of sea walls, which protects them, is not. The rooms are boxy and modern, with distinctive blue tiled roofs, but comfortable and well furnished. All meals are buffet, well prepared and presented. The house reef is good for snorkelling and lots of fine dive sites are close by. But the main attraction at Maafushivaru is the sociable atmosphere and the lively Italian crowd.

TOP END

Another Villa Hotels product, **Sun Island** (Nalaguraidhoo island; ☎ 6660088; www.villahotels.com/sun; full board s/d/t US\$524/534/721; airport transfer by speedboat 2½hr, US\$140, by seaplane 35min, US\$260; 350 rooms; ☎ ☎ ☎) is perhaps more in the style of the Caribbean than the Maldives – this most massive of resorts (the largest in the country) is no place for re-enacting Swiss Family Robinson fantasies – Sun Island is entirely modern, smart and not a particularly charming place.

The rooms themselves are large and have quality indoor-outdoor bathrooms, bidets, minibars, and minisafes. Everything is very modern although it's hardly cutting-edge style and has none of the deeply considered charm of the true luxury market.

If it's an activities-packed holiday you want, though, with endless choice, Sun is a good option. There are 11 bars, five restaurants and the fullest possible choice of water sports, diving, spa treatments, excursions and sports (including a putting range and tennis court), a video arcade and a good gym.

The Sun Island Diving School is quite a big operation with reasonable prices. Most dives are done at nearby sites, and groups can be quite large. Snorkelling is doable at the reef edge off the end of the main jetty. Elsewhere the lagoon is wide, and only good for swimming and water sports.

Nika Hotel (Kudafolhudhoo island; ☎ 6660516; www.nikamaldive.com; full board s/d/wb US\$570/680/750; airport transfer by seaplane 20min, US\$240; 26 rooms; ☎) is possibly the finest old-style, natural resort in the country. Individual villas are spacious and imaginatively designed in a seashell shape. This is utter luxury, but genuinely eco-friendly (no pool and no air-

conditioning – just the sea and natural ventilation) to the point that it looks spookily like a traditional Maldivian fishing village populated by well-heeled Europeans.

Tastefully decorated with thatched roofs and handcrafted timber furniture, the villas have private gardens and preserve a rustic image – cooling is by natural ventilation through wooden louver windows; the wine cellar is the only place to feature air-con. The meals are Italian/international style and excellent, served in the sand-floored dining room or outside on a seaside deck.

Dive costs here are much higher than at other resorts, but groups are small, attention is personal, and the guests can afford it. Fishing, windsurfing, tennis and most other activities are included. Guests are mostly European or Japanese, and value the privacy that Nika provides. Though several new luxury resorts are more sumptuous and have fancier features, Nika is still doing the designer desert island thing to perfection.

Kudarah (Kudarah island; ☎ 6660549; www.clubvacanze.it; s/d \$455/530; airport transfer by seaplane 25min, \$260; 30 rooms; ☎ ☎) is a small, elegant luxury resort catering exclusively to the Italian market. With white walls, columns, arches and tiles, even the buildings look Italian and the entire feel is Mediterranean rather than tropical. Rooms are large with conservative, quality furnishings, and resort facilities include a tennis court and swimming pool. The dive centre provides personal service with basic dive costs included in the price. The resort is superbly located just minutes from superb diving at Kudarah Thila. It's a Club Vacanze resort, and has a sociable atmosphere, but entertainment and animation are very understated. The beaches are not great, however – there is only one decent stretch that does get very busy, though this doesn't seem to bother any of the numerous repeat visitors.

Sumptuous barefoot luxury is the name of the game at the **Hilton Maldives Resort & Spa** (Rangali island; ☎ 6660629; www.hiltonmaldivesresort.com; s/d/wb US\$404/808/1435; airport transfer by seaplane 35min, US\$270; 150 rooms; ☎ ☎ ☎), the Hilton Group's long-standing Maldivian resort. It was established long before the rest of the international chain gang arrived. It's hard to imagine anywhere less

like the Hiltons you see in major cities around the world; this is one of the very best resorts the country has to offer. British glamour model and tabloid fixture Jordan might have spent her high-profile honeymoon here, but nonetheless this is a classy place and one often booked up months ahead.

The Hilton actually occupies two islands in this atoll – the heart of the resort, with the main lobby, restaurants, bars, water sports, dive centres and 100 beach villas, is on Rangalinolhu; on the second island, Rangali, are two other restaurants plus a bar, a separate reception area, and 52 water villas in their very own class of exclusivity. A walkway bridge connects the two islands across a broad lagoon.

With seven restaurants running the whole gamut of cuisines from local Maldivian to Japanese and European, you have plenty of choice. Most amazing is the Ithaa Undersea Restaurant where diners eat in a glass-domed restaurant underwater, an experience quite unlike any other in the country. Other restaurants at the resort include the Sunset Grill for fresh seafood (check out the live lobster pond); Vilu Restaurant, serving up creative Euro-Asian fusion dishes; Koko, an outdoor teppanyaki grill; and the Wine Bar, an epicurean education hosted by the ebullient resident sommelier in a climate-controlled cave surrounded by some 5000 bottles of selected wines.

The rooms are varied and beautifully conceived; the standard beach villas are up to 150 sq metres, all are set on the beachfront with sea views; they have outdoor terraces and outdoor bathrooms as well as sea views from the bath. The spectacular water villas all enjoy their own private terraces, gorgeous wooden interiors and, in the more luxurious, glass floors.

All needs are catered to: tennis courts, a swimming pool, excellent beaches, gorgeous gardens and two spas offering massages, Ayurvedic treatments and beauty-salon service. The over-water spa is especially serene, with a glass floor looking into the lagoon. All the public areas are superbly finished with natural materials and an understated island feel.

Diving, water sports, excursions and light entertainment are all on offer, but the

real attractions at the Hilton are the unobtrusive, efficient and friendly service, the incredible food and wines, and the ultra-attractive water villas.

At the heart of Ari Atoll, the delightful **W Retreat & Spa** (Fesdhoo island; ☎ 3329489; www.whotels.com; s/d US\$816/824; airport transfer by seaplane 25min, US\$275; 78 rooms; ☎ ☎ ☎), which was known as a fairly budget resort for over two decades, has been redeveloped by the W Hotel brand – a boutique, luxury group who is clearly intent on producing something very special for its first Maldivian venture.

The resort was still being built at the time of writing and so we were unable to visit the island during research, although it will definitely be operational by the time you read this book. The resort's central concept is aimed at young, fashionable groups of friends, couples and – shock, horror – single people. While most single people feel a growing sense of nausea and/or exclusion in the Maldives, W is actively encouraging single people and groups of single friends to come here, luring them with such attractions as a 24-hour underground bar (15'Below) where the party never stops (something hard to imagine in the Maldives, admittedly) and a sociable beach-barbecue restaurant where young, single, well-heeled gorgeous things can make new friends. Each 'retreat' (for these are no mere rooms at 188 sq metres for a standard!) comes with its own plunge-pool, day bed and lounge area. Full spa, diving and water-sports facilities complete the picture. It's certainly an interesting concept and will doubtlessly be executed beautifully by the truly boutique W group.

There appears to be at least an interim winner in the war of luxury being waged in the Maldives and **Dhoni Mighili** (Mushimasmingili island; ☎ 6660751; www.dhonimighili.com; s/d US\$1295/2590; airport transfer by luxury dhoni 4hr \$400, by seaplane 30min \$300; 6 dhoni & room pairings; ☎ ☎) is it. The concept is simple – on the island there are six luxury bungalows and each one is paired with a luxury customised dhoni. As well as your standard *thakuru* (butler; no longer such a status symbol in the Maldives, rather astonishingly) you get your own dhoni captain and two crew on permanent 24-hour alert. You can sleep

aboard your dhoni or in your beach bungalow – frankly, you can do whatever the hell you like at these prices.

Both the dhonis and the bungalows are incredible pieces of design and craftsmanship; 20m-long bespoke crafted sailboats fitted with an engine for longer trips (your dhoni can even meet you at Male' airport so you can step off the plane and straight into your hotel room!), they include all possible amenities from king-sized beds to Smeg kitchens and Philippe Starck bathroom fittings. They are definitely rather different to the Male' airport ferry.

On the island the beach bungalows are spread out generously to ensure total privacy. Of the six, four have plunge pools, but all are stunning – featuring private

courtyards, incredible outdoor showers, bathrooms decked out in metallic slate and every luxury from Bose surround sound to espresso machines.

The island itself is charming, with gorgeous wide beaches, a luxurious spa, dive centre, DVD and CD library and a full suite of excursions and entertainments that can be arranged whenever a guest snaps their fingers.

You can't bring children under 16 here unless you book out the entire resort – at a mere \$12,000 per night (understandably this is a favourite with celebrities on the run from the paparazzi). For utter, shameless luxury you can't currently beat Dhoni Mighili, but it's probably only a matter of time until someone tries.