

Getting Started

A country jealously guarding its cultural heritage and fragile ecology from the onslaughts of Western consumerism, the Maldives is almost exclusively a place for the package tourist. Despite most independent travellers' worst fears, coming on a package offers the best value for money, the easiest organisation and generally promotes preferential treatment – this is the way the Maldives is set up and everyone from the government to the resorts prefers you to travel this way. Fully independent travellers (FITs) are a rare species but, with good planning and some decent financial lubrication, this is an equally possible way to travel. However you arrive you'll find the same astonishing white beaches, surreally blue water and exceptional service.

WHEN TO GO

The Maldives specialises in winter sun for Europeans, making high season December to April, when the islands enjoy the dry monsoon with little rain and lower humidity while Europe shivers. February to April is the hottest period and resorts are almost all operating at capacity during this period. Mid-December to early January comes at even more of a premium due to Christmas and New Year and prices are even higher. Easter and the Italian holiday week in August also attract peak prices at most resorts, especially the Italian-oriented ones.

From May to November is the period when storms and rain are more likely. It's still warm, but skies can be cloudy and the humidity is higher. This is the low season, with fewer people and lower prices, with the exception of August.

Diving is good year-round, although a basic rule is that life on the reef is more varied and visibility better on the western side of any atoll from May to November and from the eastern side of any atoll December to April. This means you'd be wise to choose your resort accordingly.

The surfing season runs from March to October, which is great as this is when resorts are cheapest.

DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

- Valid travel insurance
- Lots of sunscreen, sun block and after-sun
- A good pair of UV-blocking sunglasses
- A sun hat
- Flippers, mask and snorkel – if you'd like to do much snorkelling; most resorts charge for the hire of a kit
- Plasters – cutting your bare feet on coral or sharp shells is common
- Three-pin adaptors – the Maldives generally uses the UK-style electricity sockets (see p179)
- Lots of beach reading – don't rely on paperbacks left by other guests unless you're truly undiscerning
- All the medication and birth control you're likely to need
- Plastic bags for wet clothing and a waterproof jacket for the wetter months

There is no bad time to visit the Maldives, although if you're interested in spending time in Male' or any other inhabited islands, Ramadan (see p176) is a time to avoid as restaurants are closed and people aren't always at their most receptive.

COSTS & MONEY

The Maldives is no cheap destination – you'll hardly see a backpack the entire time you're here (and if you do it will be being carried for someone by a member of resort staff) – and the government prefers it this way, maximising revenue while keeping out the stoned hippies who so outraged local conservative values when they began to trickle through in the 1970s.

Even the folk here on budget packages are fairly well heeled, and don't fool yourself – even if you do get a cheap flight and accommodation deal, unless it's full board you'll spend almost as much again on food and drink during your stay.

While it's possible to say that costs are high, it's hard to be much more specific, mainly because two travellers can pay vastly different sums for the same deal at the same resort due to how they book – one travel agent may have an excellent deal on the room rate, another a far worse one, while an FIT will just have to pay whatever rate they are quoted directly by the resort reservations service.

Extremely roughly then, expect to pay at the very least \$100 per person per day at the lower end for a room with full board. Midrange starts around \$200 per day and extends up to \$500, while for about \$500 a day, you enter the heady heights of the Maldives luxury market, which currently seems to have no cap.

For those with a modest budget, the best deal is a full board or all-inclusive package (including certain drinks, both alcoholic and non) that includes flights and transfers. While it's still a lot of money, you'll spend almost nothing during your stay.

TRAVEL LITERATURE

While the Maldives has been covered in some detail by photography and nature guides, there's still precious little of any literary merit written about the place. This is perhaps unsurprising given the sun, sand and sea nature of most travel here, but the following titles are definitely worth a look.

Rudie H Kuitert's *Photo Guide to Fishes of the Maldives* is an indispensable book for divers and snorkellers, detailing some 700 species that live on the reefs of the country, all beautifully illustrated with photographs and descriptions of their habits.

The Maldivian Mystery, by Norwegian explorer and ethnologist Thor Heyerdahl, is great for anyone wanting an overview of pre-Islamic Maldivian history and the numerous unanswered questions, although many of Heyerdahl's theories are now discredited.

Andrew Forbes' *Maldives – Kingdom of a Thousand Isles* is an odd mix of cultural overview, travel journal and resort guide. It's best employed as the first – the sections on history and traditional crafts are some of the most detailed available.

Divers' Guide to the Sharks of the Maldives, by Dr RC Anderson, is another fascinating title that describes the various shark species divers can encounter in the Maldives.

Dive Guide The Maldives, by Sam Harwood and Rob Bryning, is one of the best dive guides in print, with reviews of all the main diving and snorkelling sites in the country.

HOW MUCH?

Male' – airport ferry

US\$1 or Rf10

Cappuccino US\$3

Male' whale submarine ticket US\$75

Bed tax per person per night US\$8

Flat taxi fare in Male' \$2 or Rf15

Adrian Neville's *Male' – Capital of the Maldives* is a beautifully presented coffee-table book with great photos of Male' and its people.

Mysticism in the Maldives, compiled by Ali Hussain, documents superstitions, encounters with jinnis, supernatural phenomena and weird stuff. Published by Novelty, it's out of print but still available in a few shops.

Classical Maldivian Cuisine, by Aishath Shakeela, is a fascinating and informative book with delicious recipes for fish soup, fish, coconut and curried fish – order from www.maldiviancuisine.com.

INDEPENDENT TRAVEL

Independent travel in the Maldives is a challenge, but one risen to every year by many people, who decide that paradise on a package is not their idea of fun. As a fully independent traveller (FIT), you'll be a rarity, confusing hoteliers and transfer agents wherever you go when you tell them you don't have a tour operator. This is a great, if sometimes expensive, way to travel; although, while you're more independent than most package tourists, you still are not free to travel through the Maldives properly due to the extreme restrictions on foreigners outside of resorts.

Male' is a great place to start for FITs – allow a couple of days in town to shop around several travel agencies and arrange onward travel, accommodation and even excursions and diving. FITs who want to get on a safari boat will certainly have to make arrangements in Male' (see p58). Due to the system of discounts offered to travel companies, even the most resolutely independent traveller determined to see untouristed areas will benefit from the help of a good travel agent or operator.

Male' has over a quarter of the country's population, relatively few tourists and is quite an interesting place in its own right. If you eat in local teashops, visit the market and walk around in the evenings, you'll meet lots of locals. English is widely spoken and people will be more than willing to chat. There are a few inhabited nonresort islands (Vilgilili, Hulhumale', Thila Fushi and Himmafushi), which you could reach and return from in a day.

It's perfectly feasible to use Male' airport as a transport hub from which you can take speed-boat, dhoni, air and seaplane transfers to visit different resorts – all at your own pace. However, this will be an expensive way to travel and planning will be essential, particularly in high season (December to April) when most resorts are fully booked and last-minute changes hard to arrange. Inner Maldives (p91) continues to come highly recommended as the travel agency best set up to meet the needs of FITs.

It's government policy to have tourists stay on island resorts or on boats within the 'tourism zone'. You need a travel permit to visit islands outside the tourism zone or to stay overnight on any nonresort island. To get a travel permit (see p181) you need a sponsor to invite you to the island concerned. If you want to visit islands that are occupied by Maldivians rather than tourists, you still have a few options.

Firstly, you can stay in a resort and make day trips. Most resorts offer 'island hopping' trips that visit local fishing villages, though these villages often have conspicuous souvenir shops and persistent sellers. Some resorts are quite close to village islands; you can charter a dhoni to visit the village without a big group. Resorts won't allow you to use catamarans, windsurfers or canoes to visit nearby islands, but if you explain what you want and you find a sympathetic ear, you may get help. You won't be allowed to stay in any village after 6pm.

The best resort to choose, if you want to visit local villages, is the Equator Village Resort (p171) on Gan, in the far south of the country. Gan is linked by causeways to four other islands with quite large villages and towns, including Hithadoo, the second largest settlement in the country after Male', and you can cycle, taxi or walk through all of them.

The second option is to arrange a safari-boat trip to the areas you're interested in and make it clear to the operator that you want to visit fishing villages. The operator will arrange permits for all the people on the boat, and because you stay overnight on the boat, the accommodation problem is solved. You will have to charter the whole boat, so you'll need some other like-minded passengers to share the expense.

INTERNET RESOURCES

The Internet is an extremely important resource for the Maldives – not only does it allow you to do virtual tours of nearly all resorts, it's also about the only forum for political debate in a country where the press and TV are tightly controlled by the state.

Friends of Maldives (www.friendsofmaldives.org) The website of the controversial British-based campaign group set up to protest against the Maldivian government's human rights record. It's a good if depressing read and tells potential travellers how to avoid putting money into the government coffers. See p47 for details.

Inner Maldives (www.innermaldives.com) One of the country's best travel agencies has a great website packed full of information, particularly good for FITs.

Maldives Culture (www.maldivesculture.com) Australian-based site with lots of background information, Maldives news archive and critical discussion of Maldivian issues.

Maldives Story (www.maldivesstory.com.mv) A government-backed history site that tells the story of the country's development from ancient history to the present day.

Minivan News (www.minivannews.com) Excellent UK-based website reporting news from the Maldives of the sort you won't get in the country.

Visit Maldives (www.visitmaldives.com) The official Maldives Tourist Promotion Board site has background information and data about virtually every resort, safari boat and tour operator in the country.

Snapshot

When hundreds of protesters occupied the main square in Male' in August 2004, it was the first time in any meaningful way the grievances of a nation were publicly aired after three decades of rule by the iron-fisted President Gayoom. The police brutality and repression that followed put paid to the long-standing Maldivian whitewashing of its own dictatorship in the name of tourism numbers – something the government is seeking to redress by hiring international PR firms to wipe down its image again. Don't be fooled by the idyllic photographs, the white sand and the dreamy blue sea; there's trouble in paradise, and it's official.

Despite this, it's perfectly ordinary for people visiting the Maldives to have no idea about the political background to their holiday. The tourism industry has been carefully engineered to avoid interaction between travellers and locals as much as possible, bringing in massive revenues without contaminating the population with liberal Western ideas. Despite the veneer of freedom, travellers have no real chance to visit islands independently or to even spend the night anywhere but in an (albeit rather lovely) resort.

A political survivor through and through, to appease his critics Gayoom has promised changes to the constitution and multiparty elections by 2008. However, the prospect of his giving up power voluntarily is remote – his family and allies run all aspects of the economy, they own resorts and reap much of the financial benefits of this country.

Increasingly discredited internationally and hated internally, Gayoom cannot last much longer: that much is clear to most. But it's anyone's guess what will follow him. While political parties are now legal, what will happen if one actually has the audacity to win an election remains to be seen. The leader of the main opposition group was arrested in 2005, later charged with terrorism and sedition and is believed to have been tortured in prison – and this before his party was even able to fight an election.

Rural poverty remains a further problem; the legacy of the 2004 tsunami may no longer be visible in the tourist resorts or Male', but visit an uninhabited island and evidence of the devastation is still easy to find. Furthermore there are an estimated 11,000 internally displaced people who have yet to rebuild their lives.

Even if the Maldives overcomes its internal unrest, there remain far bigger problems on the horizon, namely global warming. Just 1m above sea level, the Maldives is expected to disappear almost totally by the end of this century. Not for nothing did the government tourism board once famously consider using the slogan 'come and see us while we're still here'.

Travellers lucky enough to visit this wonderful country will discover a peaceful people with a rich and fascinating culture of survival in the middle of the ocean, as well as incredible natural beauty. It's been a tough few years for the Maldives, but this is no time to turn away from it. Go and spend a wonderful holiday here, meet the locals and don't be afraid to ask awkward questions; you can contribute to building freedom in a country denied it for too long.

FAST FACTS

Area: 90,000 sq km
(above water 300 sq km)

Percentage of the country
that is water: 99.9%

Number of atolls: 26

Population: 360,000

Percentage of population
living in Male': 27%

GDP per capita: US\$2509

Percentage of GDP spent
on defence: 5.5%

Number of internally
displaced people since
the tsunami: 11,000

Inflation: 6.8%

Number of shark attacks
since 1976: none

The Author



TOM MASTERS

Tom Masters is a London-based travel writer. His latest foray for Lonely Planet took him across the Maldives, researching its incredible hotels and resorts by speedboat, quite a change from his usual stamping ground of Russia and Eastern Europe, but one that – it's fair to say – he didn't mind one bit. Going back to Siberia will never be the same.

CONTRIBUTING AUTHOR

Dr Trish Batchelor wrote the Health chapter. She is a general practitioner and travel-medicine specialist who works at the CIWEC Clinic in Kathmandu; she is also a medical advisor to the Travel Doctor New Zealand clinics. Trish teaches travel medicine through the University of Otago, and is interested in underwater and high-altitude medicine, and in the impact of tourism on host countries. She has travelled extensively through Southeast and East Asia and particularly loves high-altitude trekking in the Himalayas.

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