

History

The history of the Maldives is that of a small, isolated and peaceful nation constantly trying to contain the desires of its powerful neighbours and would-be colonisers. It's also an incredibly hazy history for the most part – of which little before the conversion to Islam in 1153 is known. Indeed, the pre-Muslim period is full of heroic myths, mixed with conjecture based on inconclusive archaeological discoveries.

The Maldivian character has clearly been shaped by this tumultuous past: hospitable and friendly but fiercely proud and independent at the same time, it's safe to say that no conquering armies have got very far trying to persuade the Maldivian people of its benevolence.

More recently the history of the country has been defined by the dictatorship of Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, president for three decades and a man often jokingly referred to as the CEO of the Maldives, because he runs it like a giant tourist corporation. It's no joking matter though, as the police brutality and human rights abuses that have occurred under his rule are shocking and – perhaps worst of all – virtually ignored around the world.

EARLY DAYS

Some archaeologists, including the now much-dismissed Thor Heyerdahl, believe that the Maldives was well known from around 2000 BC, and was a trading junction for several ancient maritime civilisations including Egyptians, Romans, Mesopotamians and Indus Valley traders. The legendary sun-worshipping people called the Redin may have descended from one of these groups.

Around 500 BC the Redin either left or were absorbed by Buddhists, probably from Sri Lanka, and by Hindus from northwest India. HCP Bell, a British commissioner of the Ceylon Civil Service, led archaeological expeditions to the Maldives in 1920 and 1922. Among other things, he investigated the ruined, dome-shaped structures (*hawittas*), mostly in the southern atolls, that he believed were Buddhist stupas similar to the dagobas found in Sri Lanka (Ceylon).

CONVERSION TO ISLAM

For many years, Arab traders stopped at the Maldives en route to the Far East – their first record of the Maldivian islands, which they called Dibajat, is from the 2nd century AD. Known as the 'Money Isles', the Maldives provided enormous quantities of cowry shells, an international currency of the early ages. The cowry is now the symbol of the Maldives Monetary Authority. It must have been an almost magical land at the time – forget money growing on trees, in the Maldives it was washed up on the shore!

Abu Al Barakat, a North African Arab, is credited with converting the Maldivians to Islam in 1153. According to the legend, young virgin girls in Male' were chosen from the community and left alone in a temple as a sacrifice to Rannamaari, a sea jinni. One night Barakat took the place

Travels in Asia & Africa 1325-54, by Ibn Battuta, has been reprinted in paperback by Routledge Kegan Paul. Ibn Battuta, a great Moorish globetrotter, was an early visitor to the Maldivian islands and wrote this history of the early Muslim period.

TIMELINE 1153

Islam officially adopted as the national religion

1558

The Portuguese invade the Maldives from India

of a prospective sacrificial virgin and drove the demon away by reading from the Islamic holy book, the Quran. The Maldivian king at the time was sold on Islam, and ordered that the whole country convert.

A series of six sultanic dynasties followed, 84 sultans and sultanas in all, although some did not belong to the line of succession. At one stage, when the Portuguese first arrived on the scene, there were actually two ruling dynasties, the Malei (or Theemuge) dynasty and the Hilali.

THE PORTUGUESE

Early in the 16th century the Portuguese, who were already well established in Goa in western India, decided they wanted a greater share of the profitable trade routes of the Indian Ocean. They were given permission to build a fort and a factory in Male', but it wasn't long before they wanted more from the Maldives.

In 1558, after a few unsuccessful attempts, Captain Andreas Andre led an invasion army and killed Sultan Ali VI. The Maldivians called the Portuguese captain 'Andiri Andirin' and he ruled Male' and much of the country for the next 15 years. According to some Maldivian beliefs, Andre was born in the Maldives and went to Goa as a young man, where he came to serve the Portuguese. (Apart from a few months of Malabar domination in Male' during the 18th century, this was the only time that another country has occupied the Maldives; some argue that the Portuguese never actually ruled the Maldives at all, but had merely established a trading post.)

According to popular belief, the Portuguese were cruel rulers, and ultimately decreed that Maldivians must convert to Christianity or be killed. There was ongoing resistance, especially from Mohammed Thakurufaanu, son of an influential family on Utheemu Island in the northern atoll of Haa Alif. Thakurufaanu, with the help of his two brothers and some friends, started a series of guerrilla raids, culminating in an attack on Male', in which all the Portuguese were slaughtered.

This victory is commemorated annually as National Day on the first day of the third month of the lunar year. There is a memorial centre on the island of Utheemu to Thakurufaanu, the Maldives' greatest hero, who went on to found the next sultanic dynasty, the Utheemu, which ruled for 120 years. Many reforms were introduced, including a new judicial system, a defence force and a coinage to replace the cowry currency.

PROTECTED INDEPENDENCE

The Portuguese attacked several more times, and the rajahs of Cannanore, South India, (who had helped Thakurufaanu) also attempted to gain control. In the 17th century, the Maldives accepted the protection of the Dutch, who ruled Ceylon at the time. They also had a short-lived defence treaty with the French, and maintained good relations with the British, especially after the British took possession of Ceylon in 1796. These relations enabled the Maldives to be free of external threats while maintaining internal autonomy. Nevertheless, it was the remoteness of the islands, the prevalence of malaria and the lack of good ports, naval stores or productive land that were probably the main reasons neither the Dutch nor the British established a colonial administration.

In the 1860s Borah merchants from Bombay were invited to Male' to establish warehouses and shops, but it wasn't long before they acquired an almost exclusive monopoly on foreign trade. The Maldivians feared the Borahs would soon gain complete control of the islands, so Sultan Mohammed Mueenuddin II signed an agreement with the British in 1887 recognising the Maldives' statehood and formalising its status as a protectorate.

THE 20TH CENTURY

In 1932 the Maldives' first constitution was imposed upon Sultan Shamsuddin. Until this time the Maldives had always had an unwritten constitution much like the British, and historical records show that

The Story of Mohamed Thakurufain, by Hussain Salahuddeen, tells the story of the Maldives' greatest hero, who liberated the people from the Portuguese.

THE LEGEND OF THAKURUFAANU

As the man who led a successful revolution against foreign domination, and then as the leader of the newly liberated nation, Mohammed Thakurufaanu (sultan from 1573 to 1585) is the Maldives' national hero. Respectfully referred to as Bodu Thakurufaanu (*bodu* meaning 'big' or 'great'), he is to the Maldives what George Washington is to the USA. The story of his raid on the Portuguese headquarters in Male' is part of Maldivian folklore and incorporates many compelling details.

In his home atoll of Thiladhunmathee, Thakurufaanu's family were known and respected as sailors, traders and *kateeb*s (island chiefs). The family gained the trust of Viyazoaru, the Portuguese ruler of the four northern atolls, and was given the responsibility of disseminating orders, collecting taxes and carrying tribute to the Portuguese base in Ceylon. Unbeknown to Viyazoaru, Thakurufaanu and his brothers used their position to foster anti-Portuguese sentiment, recruit sympathisers and gain intelligence on the Portuguese. It also afforded the opportunity to visit southern India, where Thakurufaanu obtained a pledge from the rajah of Cannanore to assist in an overthrow of the Portuguese rulers in the Maldives.

Back in Thiladhunmathee Atoll, Thakurufaanu and his brothers built a boat in which to conduct an attack on Male'. This sailing vessel, named *Kalhuoffummi*, has its own legendary status – it was said to be not only fast and beautiful, but to have almost magical qualities that enabled it to elude the Portuguese on guerrilla raids and reconnaissance missions.

For the final assault, they sailed south through the atolls by night, stopping by day to gather provisions and supporters. Approaching Male', they concealed themselves on a nearby island. They stole into the capital at night to make contact with supporters there and to assess the Portuguese defences. They were assisted in this by the local imam, who subtly changed the times of the morning prayer calls, tricking the Portuguese into sleeping late and giving Thakurufaanu extra time to escape after his night-time reconnaissance visits.

The attack on Male' was carefully planned and timed, and allegedly backed by supernatural forces – one story relates how a coconut tree mysteriously appeared in the Portuguese compound, and provided cover for Thakurufaanu as he crept close and killed Andiri Andirin with a spear. In the ensuing battle the Maldivians, with help from a detachment of Cannanore soldiers, defeated and killed some 300 Portuguese. Most versions of the story have the Portuguese drinking heavily on their last night, making it a cautionary tale about the evils of alcohol.

The Thakurufaanu brothers then set about re-establishing a Maldivian administration under Islamic principles. Soon after, Bodu Thakurufaanu became the new sultan, with the title of Al Sultan-ul Ghazi Mohammed Thakurufaanu Al Auzam Siree Savahitha Maharadhun, first Sultan of the third dynasty of the Kingdom of the Maldives.

The Maldivian Mystery, by Thor Heyerdahl, the Norwegian explorer of *Kon-Tiki* fame, describes a short expedition in 1982–83, looking for remains of pre-Muslim societies.

1573

Expulsion of the Portuguese

1834

Moresby begins his celebrated charting of the Maldives

1887

Maldives becomes a self-governing British Protectorate

1932

The country writes its first constitution, curbing the sultan's powers

pre-20th century Maldives was relatively progressive and democratic by the standards of the time. However, the imposition of the constitution marks the dawn of true Maldivian statehood. The sultan was to be elected by a 'council of advisers' made up of Maldivian elite, rather than being a hereditary position. In 1934, Shamsuddin was deposed and Hasan Nurudin became sultan.

WWII brought great hardship to the Maldives. Maritime trade with Ceylon was severely reduced, leading to shortages of rice and other necessities – many died of illness or malnutrition. A new constitution was introduced in 1942, and Nurudin was persuaded to abdicate the following year. His replacement, the elderly Abdul Majeed Didi, retired to Ceylon leaving the control of the government in the hands of his prime minister, Mohammed Amin Didi, who nationalised the fish export industry, instituted a broad modernisation programme and introduced an unpopular ban on tobacco smoking.

When Ceylon gained independence in 1948, the Maldivians signed a defence pact with the British, which gave the latter control of the foreign affairs of the islands but not the right to interfere internally. In return, the Maldivians agreed to provide facilities for British defence forces, giving the waning British Empire a vital foothold in the Indian Ocean after the loss of India.

In 1953 the sultanate was abolished and a republic was proclaimed with Amin Didi as its first president, but he was overthrown within a year. The sultanate was returned, with Mohammed Farid Didi elected as the 94th sultan of the Maldives.

BRITISH BASES & SOUTHERN SECESSION

While Britain did not overtly interfere in the running of the country, it did secure permission to re-establish its wartime airfield on Gan Island in the southernmost atoll of the country, Addu. In 1956 the Royal Air Force began developing the base, employing hundreds of Maldivians and resettling the Gan people on neighbouring islands. The British were informally granted a 100-year lease of Gan that required them to pay £2000 a year.

When Ibrahim Nasir was elected prime minister in 1957, he immediately called for a review of the agreement with the British on Gan, demanding that the lease be shortened and the annual payment increased. This was followed by an insurrection against the Maldivian government by the inhabitants of the southern atolls of Addu and Huvadho, who objected to Nasir's demand that the British cease employing local labour. They decided to cut ties altogether and form an independent state, electing Abdulla Afif Didi president.

In 1960 the Maldivian government officially granted the British the use of Gan and other facilities in Addu Atoll for 30 years (effective from December 1956) in return for the payment of £100,000 a year and a grant of £750,000 to finance specific development projects. Later, Nasir sent gunboats from Male' to quash the rebellion in the southern atolls. Afif fled to the Seychelles, then a British colony, while other leaders were banished to various islands in the Maldives. Afif later became the Seychelles foreign minister.

The Maldivian Islands: Monograph on the History, Archaeology & Epigraphy is HCP Bell's main work. The Ceylon Government Press published it in 1940, three years after his death. Original copies of the book are rare, but Novelty Press has reprinted it and it's available from several tourist shops and bookshops in Male'.

A Description of the Maldivian Islands for the Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society, by HCP Bell, the most renowned historian of the Maldives and former British commissioner in the Ceylon Civil Service, draws from his archaeological expeditions in 1920 and 1922.

In 1965 Britain recognised the islands as a completely sovereign and independent state, and ceased to be responsible for their defence (although it retained the use of Gan and continued to pay rent until 1976). The Maldives was granted independence on 26 July 1965 and later became a member of the UN.

THE REPUBLIC

Following a referendum in 1968 the sultanate was again abolished, Sultan Majeed Didi retired to Ceylon and a new republic was inaugurated. Nasir was elected president. In 1972, the Sri Lankan market for dried fish, the Maldives' biggest export, collapsed. The first tourist resorts opened that year, but the money generated didn't benefit many ordinary inhabitants of the country. Prices kept going up and there were revolts, plots and banishments as Nasir clung to power. In 1978, fearing for his life, Nasir stepped down and skipped across to Singapore, reputedly with US\$4 million from the Maldivian national coffers.

A former university lecturer and Maldivian ambassador to the UN, Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, became president in Nasir's place. Hailed as a reformer, Gayoom's style of governing was initially much more open, and he immediately denounced Nasir's regime and banished several of the former president's associates. A 1980 attempted coup against Gayoom, involving mercenaries, was discovered and more banishment occurred. What had started as a forward-looking, reform-minded regime was already beginning to look very suspect.

Gayoom was re-elected in 1983 and continued to promote education, health and industry, particularly tourism. He gave the tiny country a higher international profile with full membership in the Commonwealth and the South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation (SAARC). The focus of the country's economy remained the development of tourism, which continued throughout the 1980s.

THE 1988 COUP

In September 1988, 51-year-old Gayoom began a third term as president, having won an election where he was the only candidate, again. Only a month later a group of disaffected Maldivian businessmen attempted a coup, employing about 90 Sri Lankan Tamil mercenaries. Half of these soldiers infiltrated Male' as visitors, while the rest landed by boat. The mercenaries took several key installations, but failed to capture the National Security Service (NSS) headquarters.

More than 1600 Indian paratroopers, immediately dispatched by the Indian prime minister, Rajiv Gandhi, ended further gains by the invaders who then fled by boat towards Sri Lanka. They took 27 hostages and left 14 people dead and 40 wounded. No tourists were affected – many didn't even know that a coup had been attempted. The mercenaries were caught by an Indian frigate 100km from the Sri Lankan coast. Most were returned to the Maldives for trial: several were sentenced to death, but reprieved and returned to Sri Lanka.

The coup attempt saw standards of police and NSS behaviour decline. Many people in police captivity faced an increased use of torture and the NSS became a widely feared entity.

Norwegian explorer and ethnographer Thor Heyerdahl was fascinated by the Maldives and its pre-Islamic culture. Although he spent many years trying to uncover the secrets of the past, many of his conclusions were later rejected.

1953

The Republic of Maldives is declared and the sultanate abandoned

1965

The Maldives finally gains full independence from Britain

1972

Kurumba Island, the Maldives' first holiday resort, opens

1976

The British Naval Base at Gan closes

GROWTH & DEVELOPMENT

In 1993 Gayoom was nominated for a fourth five-year term, and confirmed with an overwhelming referendum vote (there were no free elections again, obviously). While on paper the country continued to grow economically, through the now massive tourism industry and the stable fishing industry, much of this wealth was concentrated in the hands of a small group of people, and almost none of it trickled down to the people of the atolls.

At the same time, the Maldives experienced many of the problems of developing countries, notably rapid growth in the main city, the environmental effects of growth, regional disparities, youth unemployment and income inequality.

The 1998 El Niño event, which caused coral bleaching throughout the atolls, was detrimental for tourism and it signalled that global warming might threaten the existence of the Maldives. When Gayoom began a fifth term as president in 1998, the environment and sea-level rises were priorities for him. For all his failings, Gayoom has certainly done a good job of promoting awareness of environmental change and rising sea levels, which are likely to see the country totally submerged by the end of the 21st century (see p44).

The 1990s saw the Maldives develop hugely – the whole country became linked up with a modern telecommunications system, and mobile phones and the Internet became widely available. By the end of the century 90% of Maldivians had electricity and basic hospitals and higher secondary schools centres had been established in outer atolls. With Japanese assistance Male' was surrounded by an ingenious sea wall, which was to prove very useful just a few years later when the tsunami struck. In 1997 work began on a new island, an extra metre or so above sea level, near the capital to accommodate a growing population. It's the only logical future the country has, given the total lack of action to prevent global warming by the international community.

THE EVAN NASEEM KILLING

In September 2003 shots rang out in Maafushi Prison in South Male' Atoll, easily within earshot of tourists enjoying romantic evening walks on the beach of nearby Coco Island. Little were they to know that these were indiscriminate shootings of inmates protesting at the brutal murder of 19-year-old inmate Evan Naseem, a prisoner who was beaten to death by prison guards.

When Evan Naseem's family put their son's brutally tortured corpse on display there was a huge public outcry. Male' spontaneously erupted in rioting, the People's Majlis (Parliament), also known as the Citizen's Council, was stoned and police stations were burned by the mob. The NSS orchestrated mass reprisals and beatings against the rioters, making an ugly situation even worse. To fan the flames of popular anger, in the same month President Gayoom was renominated as the sole presidential candidate for the referendum by the Majlis, which is stacked full of Gayoom family members and other appointed flunkies. Realising that something was up, Gayoom did make an example of the torturers who killed Evan Naseem, but stopped short of punishing or removing any

JENNIFER LATHEEF

A young journalist, human rights activist and member of the Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP), Jennifer Latheef was arrested during the Male' riots following the Evan Naseem murder in 2003, where she was protesting peacefully for an end to police brutality. She was eventually sentenced to 10 years' imprisonment for 'terrorism', was subjected to cruel and degrading treatment in jail and was declared a Prisoner of Conscience by Amnesty International. Jennifer was subsequently released after a presidential pardon she initially refused to accept, because it did not exonerate her of crimes. She continues to campaign for the release of political prisoners.

senior ministers or Adam Zahir, the NSS chief of staff. Gayoom's other measure was to hire the London office of PR giant Hill & Knowlton to whitewash his dictatorship, a job they continue to do today with sickening success. Meanwhile, the Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) was founded in Colombo in nearby Sri Lanka.

BLACK FRIDAY

Under pressure from colleagues, and clearly trying to outsmart the reformists, Gayoom launched his own reform programme in 2004. His proposals were astonishingly all encompassing, including having more than one candidate in the presidential referendum, a two-term limit for the president and the legalisation of political parties.

However, just a month later Gayoom banned political meetings of prodemocracy activists in Male' as they are proving too popular. The darkest moment so far for the democracy movement, known to all now as Black Friday, took place on 13 August 2004. Reformist and prodemocracy campaigners all gathered in the capital's main square, encouraged by the apparent lack of obstruction from the NSS. Former political prisoners and well-known reformists all attended with the apparent blessing of Gayoom, and carried out a successful meeting calling for reform. Suddenly the NSS cleared the square, arresting and beating over a thousand people in the process. Women and children were savagely beaten, and many were taken into solitary confinement, where they remained for months.

Tsunami

The stand-off between government and people continued without any obvious resolution throughout 2004, although international protests increased with human rights advocates Friends of Maldives attending the World Travel Market and handing out flyers to delegates to increase awareness of the country's domestic problems and the increased readership of anti-Gayoom Internet sites within the Maldives.

On the morning of 26 December 2004 the Indian Ocean tsunami devastated countries throughout the region. While it could have been much, much worse for the Maldives, whose vast, deep inter-atoll channels absorbed much of the strength of the wave, the result was still devastating. Eighty-three people were confirmed dead, with a further 25 feared dead, their bodies never having been discovered. Twenty-one islands were devastated, with over 11,000 people made homeless, many of whom continue

'On the morning of 26 December 2004 the Indian Ocean tsunami devastated countries throughout the region.'

Read about the human-rights situation in the Maldives in the Amnesty International reports 'Republic of Maldives: Repression of Peaceful Political Opposition' and 'Maldives: Human Rights Violations in the Context of Political Reforms', at <http://web.amnesty.org/library/engindex>

1978

President Gayoom comes to power

1982

The Maldives rejoins the British Commonwealth

1988

A coup d'état attempt by Sri Lankan mercenaries in Male' is quickly foiled with Indian assistance

1998

The El Niño weather system causes coral bleaching in the Maldives

today to exist as IDPs (internally displaced persons). Large numbers of resorts were closed and although one was totally abandoned, the rest were rebuilt with incredible speed, nearly all being open again a year later.

In the aftermath of these terrible events, President Gayoom did at least drop charges against many of the Black Friday protestors and they were released, although at the time of writing the situation is still not very positive. While it's clear that torture has ceased being a major part of imprisonment in the Maldives, brutality both in and out of jail continues and basic freedom of expression is still not respected anywhere. The next few years will probably be key to the future of the country – Gayoom is under pressure and few expect him to last much longer. However, with no tradition of democracy, no independent print media and paper-thin civil society, there's little reason for optimism even if Gayoom does relinquish power any time soon.

2004

Indian Ocean tsunami wreaks havoc on the island chain

2005

Parliament votes to allow multiparty elections

The Culture

NATIONAL PSYCHE

The recent prodemocracy movement has revealed one deep truth about Maldivian people: their fierce independence, which runs true domestically as well as internationally. Tacitly accepting one-party state for years, until the alleged corruption and police brutality outstripped the benefits gained by the country through the vast-scale development of tourism, the Maldivians finally decided they had had enough in 2003 and the staunch and brave reform movement has made some huge gains over the past few years.

Maldivians are devout Muslims. In some countries this might be considered incidental, but the national faith is the cornerstone of Maldivian identity and it's defended passionately at all levels of society. Officially 100% of the population are practising Sunni Muslims. There's no scope for religious dissent, but there's also almost no desire *to* dissent. This deep religious faith breeds a generally high level of conservatism, but that does not preclude the arrival of hundreds of thousands of non-Muslim tourists to the islands every year, coming to bathe seminaked, drink lots of alcohol and engage in extra-marital sex. It's definitely an unusual contradiction. Arguably, were the tourist industry not so carefully engineered to separate the tourists and local population, there would be far more cultural clashes and tension between devout Islam and Western liberalism.

A deep island mentality (familiar to the British) also permeates the country. Not quite Asia, not quite Africa and not the Middle East despite the cultural similarities, the Maldives has been slow to join the international community (it joined the Commonwealth and the South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation only in the 1980s) and remains a nonaligned nation with no particular enemies or allies.

The hardship implicit in survival on these relatively barren islands so remote in the ocean has created a nation of hard workers. The work ethic runs throughout the country; historically a lazy Maldivian was a Maldivian who didn't eat.

Another much-ignored feature of the Maldivian people is their earthy humour and cheerfulness. Joking and laughter is a way of life and you'll notice this without even leaving your resort – take a few minutes to speak with the local staff and you'll see this for yourself.

LIFESTYLE

The most obvious dichotomy in lifestyle in the Maldives is between people in the capital Male' and those 'in the atolls' – the term used by everyone to denote 'islanders' or anyone who lives outside the immediate area of bustling modernity that is Male'.

In Male' life is considerably easier and more comfortable than in the rest of the country on most fronts, with the obvious exception of space. Life in Male', one of the most densely populated places on earth, is only good for those who have decent-sized houses. With all the new developments on Hulhumale' island near to the capital, there should be a gradual decrease in population and thus a slight easing of the population crush there in the next few years. The Gayoom years have created a massive economy in Male', although many more intellectual residents of the city complain that while there are plenty of opportunities to earn and live well in the commercial and tourism sectors, there's a great lack of challenging,

The annual rate of population growth is about 3%.

The Maldivian caste system has effectively disappeared today. Traditionally the very lowest caste was that of the palm-toddy tappers (*raa-veri*).

creative jobs if exporting fish and importing tourists is not your idea of fun. With limited education beyond high school and a lack of careers for the ambitious without good connections in the government, it's no surprise that many young people in Male' dream of going abroad, at least to complete their education and training.

In the islands things are far more simple and laid-back, but people's lives aren't always as easy as those in Male'. In the atolls most people live in the extended family homestead (it's unusual to live alone or just as a couple in a way that it wouldn't be in Male'), and both men and women assume fairly traditional roles. While men go out to work (in general either as fishermen or on jobs that keep them away from home for long stretches at a time in the tourist or shipping industry), women are the homemakers, looking after the children, cooking and maintaining the household. Fish is traded for other necessities at the nearest big island. Attending the mosque is the main religious activity, and on smaller islands it's probably the main social and cultural activity as well.

The most important ritual in a man's life comes when he is circumcised at the age of six or seven. These are big celebrations that last for a week and are far more significant than marriages (not a big deal) and birthdays (not celebrated). Marriage is of course important, but it's not a massive celebration like in most of the rest of Asia.

Rural life for the young can be fairly dull, although despite appearances even tiny fishing villages are surprisingly modern; most now have telephones, radio and TV. Nevertheless many teenagers effectively go to boarding school, as provision for education outside population centres is scant. There are a few preschools or kindergartens, where children start learning the Quran from about the age of three. There are government primary schools (madrassa) on every inhabited island, but some are very

small and do not go past fifth grade. For grades six and seven, children may have to go to a middle school on a larger island. Atoll capitals have an Atoll Education Centre (AEC) with adult education and secondary schooling to grade 10 (16 years old).

Officially, 90% of students finish primary school, and the adult literacy rate is 98%. English is taught as a second language from grade one and is the usual teaching language at higher secondary school – Maldivians with a secondary education speak excellent English.

The best students can continue to a free-of-charge higher secondary school, which teaches children to the age of 18 – there's one in Male', one in Hithadhoo, in the country's far south, and one in Kulhuduffushi, in the far north. Students coming to Male' to study generally take live-in domestic jobs, affecting their study time: girls are often expected to do a lot of housework.

The Maldives College of Higher Education, also in Male', has faculties of health, education, tourism-hospitality and engineering. For university studies, many young Maldivians go abroad, usually to Sri Lanka, India, Britain, Australia or Fiji.

There is a system of bonded labour under which people must work for the government at a meagre wage for a period that depends on the length of their education in government schools. For many this means a period in the National Security Service or in a government office. They may pursue another occupation part-time to establish their career or to make ends meet. Many people in Male' have a second job or a business interest on the side.

ECONOMY

Fish and ships just about sum up the Maldivian economy beyond the tourist industry. Despite this, the economy continues to experience large growth, even if it was inevitably curtailed by the tsunami in 2004. Despite a 5% contraction in GDP in 2005, the Maldives was already staging a strong recovery in 2006, with full capacity in most resorts, a great feat considering many had thought the tsunami spelled the end for the massive growth in travel to the Maldives.

Tourism is the country's biggest earner, accounting for around 20% of GDP. Fishing accounts for about 18% with skipjack tuna making the principal catch, followed by yellowfin tuna, little tuna and frigate mackerel.

Government policies have helped to mechanise the fishing fleet, introduce new packing techniques and develop new markets. Nevertheless, the fishing industry is vulnerable to international market fluctuations. Most adult males have some experience in fishing, and casual employment on fishing boats is something of an economic backstop. Men are unlikely to take on menial work for low pay when there is a prospect that they can get a few days or weeks of relatively well-paid work on a fishing dhoni (boat; see the boxed text, p29).

Trade and shipping (nearly all based in Male') is the third biggest earner; nearly all food is imported and agriculture accounts for less than 3% of GDP. Manufacturing and construction make up 15% of GDP: small boat yards, fish packing, clothing and a plastic pipe plant are modern enterprises, but mostly it's cottage industries producing coconut oil, coir (coconut-husk fibre) and coir products such as rope and matting. Some of the new industrial activities are on islands near Male' while others, such as fish-packing plants, are being established in the outer atolls. There is no income tax.

Life expectancy for a Maldivian is about 63 years for men and 65 years for women.

You can address Maldivians by their first or last name. Since so many men are called Mohammed, Hassan or Ali, the surname is more appropriate. In some cases an honorary title like Maniku or Didi is used to show respect.

DOS & DON'TS

Maldivian resorts make it quite clear what guests should and shouldn't do. Guests must respect the environment (no damage to fish or coral) and they must respect Muslim sensibilities. Nudity is strictly forbidden and women must not go topless; bikinis and brief bathers are quite acceptable in resorts, though most prefer that you cover up in the bar, dining and reception areas. In Male' and on other inhabited islands, travellers should make an effort not to offend local standards. Men should never go bare-chested and women should avoid low-cut tops and tank tops. Long pants or long skirts are preferable, but shorts are OK if they cover the thighs.

It's best to dress neatly and conservatively when dealing with officials and businesspeople. Maldivian professional men always wear long trousers, clean shoes (often slip-ons), a shirt and usually a tie. Women usually wear dresses below the knee and covering the shoulders and arms.

Those who spend time outside the resorts should be aware of a few more points:

- Lose the shoes – people take their shoes off before going inside a house or mosque. Maldivians can slip off their footwear without breaking step, but visitors may find it inconvenient. Slip-on shoes are easier than lace-ups, and thongs (flip-flops) are easier than sandals.
- Keep your cool – be patient and polite, especially in government offices that can be painfully slow and frustrating.
- Payment etiquette – if you ask someone to lunch, that means you'll pay for it; and if someone else asks you, don't reach for the bill.
- Religion rules – Islam is the state religion, so be aware that prayer times take precedence over business and pleasure, and that Ramazan, a month of fasting, places great demands on local people. Visiting a mosque requires long pants or a long skirt and no shoes. Never consume alcohol or pork outside resorts.

Cars remain the ultimate status symbol here, even in a country with virtually no roads. Some atoll chiefs have cars simply to show off, on their entirely sand-covered islands. At least it's environmentally friendly...

POLITICS

The Maldivian parliament, the People's Majlis (Parliament; also known as the Citizens' Council), has 50 members. Male', the capital island, and each of the 20 administrative atolls have two representatives each, elected for five-year terms. All citizens over 21 years of age can vote. The president chooses the remaining eight parliamentary representatives, has the power to appoint or dismiss cabinet ministers, and appoints all judges.

The Majlis considers candidates for the presidency for each five-year term and makes a nomination, which is put to a national vote. Until recently only one candidate was put forward, so the vote is not so much an election as a national referendum. Since the nascent democratic movement became a big political player in 2003–4, President Gayoom has agreed to multiple candidates for the presidency as well as legalising political parties. However, at the time of writing the situation was looking bleak, with opposition leaders intimidated, in exile or imprisoned. The main opposition party, the Maldivian Democratic Party, was founded in Sri Lanka in 2003 and is most likely to succeed the Gayoom regime should free and fair elections be held and the results honoured.

In March 2006 President Gayoom launched his 'road map' for democracy, a hugely positive step that has nonetheless been greeted with great suspicion by reformists, coming as it does from the iron-fisted dictator himself. The road map foresees fully free presidential elections in mid-2008; although it's very possible pressure on the government will force them before that date. As they say, we'll believe it when it happens.

POPULATION

Roughly a quarter of the Maldives' estimated 359,000 population live on the tiny capital island of Male', where some 80,000 people are packed into a rectangle of land just a couple of kilometres across. The rest of the population is spread out on the atolls – there are hardly any other towns in the whole country. The second city is Hithadhoo on Addu Atoll, with a population of 13,000 and beyond that very few settlements with over 5,000 inhabitants. The annual growth rate is estimated at 2.8%, meaning the Maldives is a young country with a median age of 18 years. With no permanent migration, the Maldives is almost entirely ethnically homogenous.

The most recent census, in 2000, put the population at 270,101, with 74,000 in Male', however, the 2006 estimated population was 359,000, a big increase.

It is thought that the original settlers of the Maldives were Dravidian and Sinhalese people who came from south India and Sri Lanka. There has also been a great deal of intermarriage and mixing with people from the Middle East and Africa.

MEDIA

Nearly all print and TV media within the Maldives is strictly controlled, ensuring a pliant and largely ignored fourth estate, for the most part. However, there are some inspiring exceptions, mainly as a result of pressure on the Gayoom government after the prodemocracy protests in 2003 and 2004. Most notable is *Minivan Daily*, a Divehi newspaper that was granted a licence in 2005 and is an offshoot of the foreign-based radio station and Internet site of the same name, which makes an interesting case-in-point for how things work in the Maldives. Since being granted a licence as a sop to the international community, *Minivan* (meaning

'Independent') has been subject to harassment and intimidation. Ravidly anti-Gayoom (it's far less measured than the English-language website), its printing press was closed down, several of its journalists and editors were imprisoned and it was being printed using an office printer at the time of writing! The government is hoping to exploit a clause in the media law, which says a newspaper's licence can be revoked if it misses four successive editions. However, if the staff heroically keep it coming out regularly, it's such a popular paper that the government are likely to close it down at some point in the near future.

The Internet is the medium of choice for people who want to write freely – any educated person with Internet access in Male' will start the day by reading the **Dhivehi Observer** (www.dhivehiobserver.com), a tabloid run from exile in the UK by modern-day folk hero Ahmed Moosa, known to one and all as Sappe'. Irreverent, hard-hitting and a self-declared anti-Gayoom site, the *Dhivehi Observer* is what anyone wanting to know the truth about the Maldives should read as a matter of urgency, written as it is by anonymous sources throughout the country. Other great Internet sites include the UK-based **Minivan News** (www.minivannews.com), which is also a radio station serving the Maldives when it's not jammed.

An interatoll ferry service, which was due to be inaugurated in 2004, has been put on hold indefinitely. If it ever makes a comeback, the scope for individual travel will increase massively.

ALL-PURPOSE, ALL-MALDIVIAN DHONI

The truck and bus of the Maldives is the sturdy dhoni, a vessel so ubiquitous that the word dhoni will soon become part of your vocabulary. Built in numerous shapes and sizes, the dhoni has been adapted for use as an ocean freighter, inter-atoll cruiser, local ferry, family fishing boat, excursion boat, dive boat, live-aboard yacht, delivery truck and mini fuel tanker. The traditional dhoni is thought to derive from the Arab dhow, but the design has been used and refined for so long in the Maldives that it is truly a local product.

Traditionally, dhonis have a tall, curved prow that stands up like a scimitar cutting through the sea breezes. Most Maldivians say this distinctive prow is purely decorative, but in shallow water a man will stand at the front, spotting the reefs and channels, signalling to the skipper and holding the prow for balance. It can interfere with boarding or loading, so it's often dispensed with on modern utility craft, or there is the removable prow-piece that slots into the front of the boat to look good, but lifts out of the way for loading. If you want to stand at the front of a dhoni, be aware that a removable prow-piece can be a slightly wobbly balancing post!

The flat stern is purely functional – it's where the skipper stands and steers, casually holding the tiller with his foot or between his legs. The stern platform is also used for fishing, and for one other thing – when a small dhoni makes a long trip, the 'head' is at the back. If nature calls, go right to the stern of the boat, face forward or backwards as your need and gender dictate, and rely on the skipper, passengers and crew to keep facing the front.

The details on a dhoni are a mix of modern and traditional. The rudder is attached with neat rope lashing, but nowadays the rope is always plastic, not coir (coconut fibre). The dhoni design required very little adaptation to take a diesel engine, and a motorised (*ingeenu*) dhoni has the same shallow draft as a sail-powered (*riyalu*) dhoni. The propeller is protected so it won't snag on mooring lines or get damaged on a shallow reef. Despite modern materials (cotton caulking instead of coir; red oxide paint as well as shark oil), a modern dhoni will still leak, just like a traditional one, so there is a bilge pump just in front of the skipper – it's a simple but effective gadget made from plastic plumbing pipes.

Most inhabited islands have a dhoni or two under construction or repair and you may see them on an excursion from a resort. The best dhoni builders are said to come from Raa Atoll and teams of them can be contracted to come to an island to make a new boat. Twelve workers, six on each side of the boat, can make a 14m hull in about 45 days, if their hosts keep them well fed. The keel is made from imported hardwood, while the hull planks are traditionally from coconut trees. A lot of the work is now done with power tools, but no plans are used.

Check out www.presidentcouncilmaldives.gov.mv for the latest information on what President Gayoom is up to.

Keep informed about the developments of Hulhumale' island, the reclaimed land that is to provide the future base for Male' and the government in the wake of rising sea levels, at www.hdc.com.mv.

RELIGION

Islam is the religion of the Maldives, and officially there are no other religious groups present. All Maldivians are Sunni Muslims. No other religions or sects are permitted.

The Maldives observes a liberal form of Islam, like that practised in India and Indonesia. Maldivian women do not observe purdah, though many wear a headscarf. Children are taught the Arabic alphabet and learn to read and recite the Quran.

Most mosques are of simple, unadorned design, but some of the older mosques have intricate woodcarvings inside and elaborate carved grave-stones outside. The Islamic Centre (p93) in Male' is especially imposing, with soaring ceilings and big carved wood panels and screens.

The Prophet Mohammed

Mohammed was born in Mecca (now in Saudi Arabia) in AD 570 and had his first revelation from Allah in 610. He began to preach against idolatry and proved to be a powerful and persuasive speaker. His teachings appealed to the poorer levels of society and angered the wealthy merchant class.

In 622 Mohammed and his followers were forced to migrate to Medina, 300km to the north. This migration, known as the Hejira, marks the start of the Islamic Calendar: AD 622 became year 1 AH. By AD 630 Mohammed had gained enough followers to return and take Mecca.

Within two decades of Mohammed's death, most of Arabia had converted to Islam. The Prophet's followers spread the word, and the influence of the Islamic state soon extended from the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean, south into Africa and east to the Pacific.

The Five Pillars of Islam

Islam is the Arabic word for submission and underlies the duty of all Muslims to submit themselves to Allah.

Shahada, the profession of faith that 'there is no God but Allah and Mohammed is his prophet', is the first of the Five Pillars of Islam: the tenets guiding Muslims in their daily life.

The second pillar, salath, is the call to prayer, and Islam decrees that Muslims must face Mecca and pray five times each day. In the Maldives, salath is also called namadh.

The third pillar is zakat, the act of giving alms to the needy. Some Islamic countries have turned this into an obligatory land tax that goes to help the poor.

IDOLATRY

Most countries prohibit the importation of things like narcotics and firearms, and most travellers understand such restrictions, but when you're forbidden to bring 'idols of worship' into the Maldives, what exactly does that mean? The Maldives is an Islamic nation, and it is sensitive about objects which may offend Muslim sensibilities. A small crucifix, worn as jewellery, is unlikely to be a problem, and many tourists arrive wearing one. A large crucifix with an obvious Christ figure nailed to it may well be prohibited. The same is true of images of Buddha – a small decorative one is probably OK, but a large and ostentatious one may not be.

Maldivian authorities are concerned about evangelists and the things they might use to spread their beliefs. Inspectors would not really be looking for a Bible in someone's baggage, but if they found two or more Bibles they would almost certainly not allow them to be imported. It would be unwise to test the limits of idolatrous imports – like customs people everywhere, the Maldivian authorities take themselves very seriously.

Officially only Muslims may become citizens of the Maldives. It is possible for foreigners to convert and later become Maldivian nationals, although this is extremely rare.

The fourth pillar is the fast during the day for the month of Ramazan, the ninth month of the Islamic calendar.

The fifth pillar is the hajj (pilgrimage) to Mecca, the holiest place in Islam. It is the duty of every able Muslim to make the hajj at least once in their life.

Prayer Times

The initial prayer session is in the first hour before sunrise, the second around noon, the third in midafternoon around 3.30pm, the fourth at sunset and the final session in the early evening.

The call to prayer is delivered by the *mudhim* (muezzin). In former days, he climbed to the top of the minaret and shouted it out. Now the call is relayed by loudspeakers on the minaret and the *mudhim* even appears on TV. All TV stations cut out at prayer time, although only MTV (the national channel) cuts out for the entire duration – satellite channels just have their broadcasts interrupted to remind Muslims to go to the mosque.

Shops and offices close for 15 minutes after each call. Some people go to the mosque, some kneel where they are and others do not visibly participate. Mosques are busiest for the sunset prayers and at noon on Fridays.

Ramadan

Called Ramazan in the Maldives, this is the month of fasting, which begins at the time of a particular new moon and ends with the sighting of the next new moon. The Ramazan month gets a little earlier every year because it is based on a lunar calendar of twelve 28-day months (see p176).

During Ramazan Muslims should not eat, drink, smoke or have sex between sunrise and sunset. Exceptions to the eating and drinking rule are granted to young children, pregnant or menstruating women, and those who are travelling. It can be a difficult time for travel outside the resorts, as teashops and cafés are closed during the day, offices have shorter hours and people may be preoccupied with religious observances or the rigours of fasting. Visitors should avoid eating, drinking or smoking in public, or in the presence of those who are fasting. After a week or so, most Muslims adjust to the Ramazan routine and many say they enjoy it. There are feasts and parties long into the night, big breakfasts before dawn and long rests in the afternoon. Kuda Eid, the end of Ramazan, is a major celebration.

Local Beliefs

On the islands, people still fear jinnis, the evil spirits that come from the sea, land and sky. They are blamed for everything that can't be explained by religion or education.

To combat jinnis there are *fandhita*, which are the spells and potions provided by a local hakeem (medicine man), who is often called upon when illness strikes, if a woman fails to conceive, or if the fishing catch is poor.

The hakeem might cast a curing spell by writing phrases from the Quran on strips of paper and sticking or tying them to the patient or writing the sayings in ink on a plate, filling the plate with water to dissolve the ink, and making the patient drink the potion. Other concoctions include *isitri*, a love potion used in matchmaking, and its antidote *varitoli*, which is used to break up marriages.

The mother-goddess cult of pre-Muslim Maldivian tradition has survived centuries of Islam and remains a key belief of islanders.

The Giravaaran people, who most believe were the first to settle in the Maldives, remain ethnically distinct from the rest of the population. However, they have left their native Giravaaru and now live in Male' since their number has decreased so dramatically. Their former home is now a resort.

SPORT

Soccer is the most popular sport and is played all year round. On most islands, the late-afternoon match among the young men is a daily ritual. There's a league competition in Male', played between club teams with names such as Valencia and Victory, and annual tournaments against teams from neighbouring countries. Matches are also held at the National Stadium (p102) in Male'.

Cricket is played in Male' for a few months, beginning in March. The president is a keen cricket fan and played for his school in Sri Lanka. Volleyball is played indoors, on the beach and in the waterfront parks. The two venues for indoor sport are the Centre for Social Education, on the

WOMEN IN SOCIETY *Aishath Velezinee*

In the 14th century, long before the call for equality took momentum, the Maldives were ruled by women. Three queens reigned; one, Sultana Khadija, held the throne for 33 years from 1347 to 1379. The shift from monarchy to a constitutional republic barred women from the post of President, and this fundamental clause is retained in the 1997 Constitution.

Traditional lifestyle, especially in the islands away from the capital, dictated gender-specific roles for women and men. Women tended to their children and the household duties during the day, and cooked fish in the evenings. Men spent the day fishing and then rested in the evenings. Modernisation and development changed the traditional way of life and conferred a double burden on many women – income generation plus domestic responsibilities. More opportunities and better education mean that more women are ready to join the workforce or take up income-generating activities at home. This has become a necessity rather than a choice for most women living in Male', as rising expenses and changing lifestyles demand a dual income to meet basic family expenses.

In Male' women work in all sectors, but mainly in teaching, nursing or administrative or secretarial positions. The government, which is the major employer of women, employs fewer than 5% women at policy level. Less stereotypical jobs such as the police force also recruit women and offer equal opportunities. With no childcare facilities available, and little help from husbands on the domestic side, working mothers depend heavily on the efforts of other women in the extended family – grandmothers, aunts, sisters etc. While the movement of women from domestic roles to paid employment has been rapid, there is very little progress in getting men to pour their own water, let alone share in domestic work.

On the outer islands, with little opportunity for formal employment, women tend to be self-employed, but with little financial gain. Markets are limited by geography, demography and the lack of regular and reliable interisland transport. Women on islands close to the tourism zones grow fruits and vegetables for sale to resorts. They also weave coconut-leaf matting (*cadjan*) and make rope and other products from coir. On remoter islands women make dried fish, a product that can withstand the long boat journey to the market. At least a few women on each island are experts at sewing and most women do home gardening for consumption. Some island girls get an education and train as teachers and health workers, but most prefer to stay on Male' where there are wider career choices, rather than return home. Recent appointments of a few women to the posts of *atolu verin* (atoll chief) and *kateeb* (island chief), till now the realm of men alone, opens new opportunities for educated women.

Marriage is seen as a must for all Maldivian women, and less than 1% of those over 30 have never married. Marriage and divorce have always been casual, giving a woman no security within a marriage. Until recently, she could be divorced on the whim of her husband, without reason or compensation. Divorce carries no stigma, and early marriage, divorce and serial marriages are the norm. A woman retains her own name after marriage – this is sensible as she could be Mrs X, Mrs Y and Mrs Z in the space of a single year.

west side of Male', and a new facility just east of the New Harbour, used for basketball (men and women), netball, volleyball and badminton.

Traditional games include *bai bala*, where one team attempts to tag members of the other team inside a circle, and a tug-of-war, known as *wadhemun*. *Bashi* is a girls' game, played on something like a tennis court, where a girl stands facing away from the net and serves a tennis ball backwards, over her head. There is a team of girls on the other side who then try to catch it.

Thin mugoali (meaning 'three circles') is a game similar to baseball and has been played in the atolls for more than 400 years. The *mugoali* (bases) are made by rotating on one foot in the sand through 360 degrees,

The word 'atoll' in English is generally accepted to come from the Divehi word *atolu*, the only known example of a Maldivian word being used in English.

In an effort to strengthen family and bring down the high divorce rate (which was once the highest in the world), the first-ever codified Family Law came into force on 1 July 2001, raising the minimum age of marriage to 18 and making unilateral divorce illegal. Prenuptial contracts registered at the court can strengthen a woman's position within the marriage as she can stipulate her rights. Where once a man could divorce his wife merely by telling her that she was divorced, now both partners must go through the court to initiate divorce, and it is permitted only when all reconciliation attempts fail. While the divorce rate has gone down, questions remain as to whether fewer divorces mean a better life for women. Polygamy is legal, and men can have up to four wives at a time, although it is not common practice to have more than one wife.

Traditionally, a woman could choose a suitor and name a bride-price (*rhan*). The bride-price is paid by the husband to the wife, at the time of marriage or in instalments as mutually agreed, but must be paid in full if there's a divorce. Young women today quote higher bride-prices, reflecting higher expectations, and perhaps a scepticism about the fairytale happy-ever-after marriage. The wedding itself is a low-key affair, but is often followed by a large banquet for all family and friends, who can easily number in the hundreds.

Women in the Maldives can, and do, own land and property but, as in the rest of the world, women have a fraction of the property that men do. While inheritance generally follows Islamic Sharia'a law in the Maldives, land is divided according to civil law, whereby a daughter and son inherit equal shares of land.

There is little overt discrimination between the sexes. Though it's a fully Muslim society, women and men mingle freely and women enjoy personal liberty not experienced by women in most Muslim societies. However, Islam is used as a tool by some patriarchs to counter gender equality, even as they proclaim that Islam grants equality to women and men. Local discourse tends to say that the factors limiting gender equality are cultural rather than Islamic, and therefore it is possible to change them.

Movement of women is not officially restricted, but women's mobility is limited by factors such as domestic responsibilities and societal attitudes as to what is a woman's place. Home is where 'good girls' are. Although physical assaults against women are very unusual, women on streets and other public spaces can be harassed.

Most women in the Maldives go bareheaded though many are adopting a headscarf, a sign of growing commitment to Islam. The government has banned face coverings to limit the appearance of radical religious ideas. Gyms and fitness centres attract Maldivian women, as do hair and beauty salons. Formal functions require women to wear one of the officially sanctioned 'national dresses', which includes the traditional *libaas* (dress) and *dhiguhedhun* (traditional full-length dress with long sleeves and a wide collar) as well as a Malay-style skirt and blouse with *libaas*-style neck embroidery. For everyday wear, young women dress in T-shirts, tank tops, flimsy blouses, fashionable jeans, pants and short skirts. The more self-conscious choose Indian-style *shalwar kameez* (loose blouses and pants). Older women wear the traditional *dhiguhedhun* and *libaas*.

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leaving a circle behind. You'll sometimes see *bashi* in Male' parks or on village islands in the late afternoon, but traditional games are becoming less popular as young people are opting for international sports.

ARTS

Though performances of traditional music and dance are not everyday events, contemporary Divehi culture is strong and adaptive, despite foreign influences, which range from martial arts and Hindi movies to Eminem and Muslim fundamentalism.

Western and Indian fashions, pop music and videos are highly visible, but on public occasions and festivals the celebrations always have a Maldivian style. Three daily newspapers and several magazines are published in the unique national language and rock bands sing Divehi lyrics. It's remarkable that such a tiny population maintains such a distinctive culture.

Song & Dance

Bodu beru means 'big drum' and gives its name to the best-known form of traditional music and dance. It is what tourist resorts put on for a local culture night, and it can be quite sophisticated and compelling. Dancers begin with a slow, nonchalant swaying and swinging of the arms, and become more animated as the tempo increases, finishing in a rhythmic frenzy. In some versions the dancers enter a trance-like state. There are four to six drummers in an ensemble and the sound has strong African influences.

This is also the entertainment at private parties, where a few guys will play the drums and everyone else dances – more and more frenetically as the night goes on.

Local rock bands often perform at resorts, where they do credible covers of old favourites. They may incorporate elements of *bodu beru* in their music, with lots of percussion and extended drum solos when they're in front of a local audience. Two popular bands are Mezzo and Zero Degree Atoll – CDs from these, and quite a few other bands, are sold in Male' music shops.

Literature

Despite the unique Maldivian script that dates from the 1600s, most Maldivian myths and stories are from an oral tradition and have only recently appeared in print. Many are stories of witchcraft and sorcery, while others are cautionary tales about the evils of vanity, lust and greed, and the sticky fates of those who transgressed. Some are decidedly weird and depressing, and don't make good bedtime reading for young children. Novelty Press has published a small book called *Mysticism in the Maldives*, which is still available. The Hammond Innes thriller *The Strobe Venturer* is about the only well-known novel that is partly set in the Maldives.

Architecture

A traditional Maldivian village is notable for its neat and orderly layout, with wide streets in a regular, rectangular grid. Houses are made of concrete blocks or coral stone joined with mortar, and the walls line the sides of the streets. Many houses will have a shaded courtyard in front, enclosed by a chest-high wall fronting the street. This courtyard is an outdoor room, with *joli* and *undhohi* seats (see the boxed text, opposite), where families sit in the heat of the day or the cool of the evening. A more private courtyard behind, the *gifili* has a well and serves as an open-air bathroom.

Rates of thalassaemia, a hereditary blood condition that makes regular blood transfusions necessary, is extremely high in the Maldives, with 18% of the population carrying the condition in some form.

To support the Society of Health Education (SHE), which works with victims of thalassaemia, visit www.she.org.mv.

At intersections, the coral walls have rounded corners, which considerably soften the streetscape. These corners are seemingly designed to facilitate turning vehicles, but they are like this in small island villages that never see a vehicle. The same style is used in Male', where it does make turning easier for cars and trucks. On the upper floors of a modern building, the rounded corners are more for appearance than practicality, and seem to be a deliberate adaptation of a traditional feature.

The architecture of resorts is eclectic, imitative of anything from a Balinese *bale* to an African rondavel or an American motel. The most identifiably Maldivian feature is the open-air bathroom, a delightful feature popular with guests.

Visual Arts

There is no historical tradition of painting in the Maldives, but demand for local art (however fabricated) from the tourist industry has created a supply in the ultra-savvy Maldivian market, with more than a few locals selling paintings to visitors or creating beach scenes for hotel rooms.

Some islands were once famous for wood and stone carving – elaborate calligraphy and the intricate intertwining patterns are a feature of many old mosques and gravestones. A little of this woodcarving is still done, mainly to decorate mosques. The façade of the new Majlis building in Male' is decorated with intertwined carvings.

Crafts

MATS

Natural-fibre mats are woven on many islands, but the most famous are the ones known as *tundu kumaa*, made on the island of Gadhdhoo in Gaaf Dhaal Atoll. This may have been an endangered art form, but renewed interest caused by the growing tourist industry has arguably saved it from disappearing. A Danish researcher in the 1970s documented the weaving techniques and the plants used for fibre and dyes, and noted that a number of traditional designs had not been woven for 20 years. Collecting the materials and weaving a mat can take weeks, and the money that can be made selling the work is not much by modern Maldivian standards. Some fine examples now decorate the reception areas of tourist resorts, and there's a growing appreciation of the work among local people and foreign collectors.

LACQUER WORK

Traditionally, lacquer work (*laajehun*) was for containers, bowls and trays used for gifts to the sultan – some fine examples can be seen in the National Museum (p93) in Male'. Different wood is used to make boxes, bowls, vases and other turned objects. Traditionally the lathe is hand-powered by a cord pulled round a spindle. Several layers of lacquer

Coral stone was the main building material until relatively recently, and you can still see plenty of mosques and houses built with the unmistakable grey material. It's often engraved with beautiful designs and is a highlight of many villages.

SITTING IN THE MALDIVES

The Maldives has two unique pieces of furniture. One is the *undhohi*, a wooden platform or a netting seat that's hung from a tree or triangular frame. Sometimes called a bed-boat, the *undhohi* is a sofa, hammock and fan combination – swinging gently creates a cooling movement of air across the indolent occupant.

The *joli* is a static version – a net seat slung on a rectangular frame, usually made in sociable sets of three or four. They were once made of coir rope and wooden sticks, but steel pipes and plastic mesh are now almost universal – it's like sitting in a string shopping bag, but cool.

are applied in different colours. They then harden, and the design is incised with sharp tools, exposing the bright colours of the underlying layers. Designs are usually floral motifs in yellow with red trim on a black background (most likely based on designs of Chinese ceramics). Production of lacquer work is a viable cottage industry in Baa Atoll, particularly on the islands of Eydafushi and Thuladhoo.

JEWELLERY

Ribudhoo Island in Dhaalu (South Nilandhoo Atoll) is famous for making gold jewellery, and Huludeli, in the same atoll, for silver jewellery. According to local belief, a royal jeweller brought the goldsmithing skills to the island centuries ago, having been banished to Ribudhoo by a sultan. It's also said that the islanders plundered a shipwreck in the 1700s, and reworked the gold jewellery they found to disguise its origins.

Environment

‘Our fate tomorrow,’ Maldivian President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom has repeatedly warned the world, ‘will be your fate the day after.’ Hardly bestriding the international stage like a Colossus, the diminutive Maldivian leader has nevertheless done much to promote awareness of global warming and rising sea levels, the net results of which are likely to submerge this low-lying island nation almost completely by the end of the century. Kofi Annan has called him ‘the godfather of environmental awareness’ and the country’s record at speaking up about and bringing attention to the grave realities of global warming make it one of the most ecologically aware in the world.

Along with Tuvalu, Bangladesh and parts of Holland, the Maldives has the misfortune to be one of the lowest lying countries in the world at a time in history when sea levels are rising. Its highest natural point – 2m – is the lowest in any country in the world. Realising that the political will to do anything about the upcoming disaster is extremely weak throughout both the developed and developing worlds, the Maldives are at least making a contingency plan by constructing an island near to Male’ that’s 2m above sea level, and will eventually be home to some 150,000 people, or about a half of the country’s population. Several thousand people have already moved there in the first phase of development, and it’s a compelling, if rather bleak look at the country’s future to spend a few hours wandering around on a trip from Male’.

THE LAND

Where is the Maldives? That’s almost always the first question people ask when you tell them about going on holiday here. Confused with Mauritius, Martinique, Montserrat or Madagascar (there are indeed a strangely large number of tropical beach destinations beginning with M), or simply an unknown quantity, the Maldives is effectively a tiny country, whose land totals far less in area than the tiny European principality of Andorra, despite an overall area of 90,000 sq km, 99.9% of which is the Indian Ocean.

This 300 sq km of land is split up into an almost incalculable number of islands, spread out ‘like a string of pearls’ (copyright all guidebooks) due south of India and west of Sri Lanka, deep in the Indian Ocean. The number of islands is incalculable simply because the islands, or what we

The tsunami, while still a national disaster, was actually far less damaging to the Maldives than it could have been. Scientists suggest the islands were saved by the deep channels running between the atolls, which absorbed much of the power of the waves.

RESPONSIBLE TRAVEL IN THE MALDIVES

- Drink water desalinated at your resort rather than imported mineral water.
- Take all batteries and plastic home with you for disposal.
- Offset your air travel by using companies such as www.climatecare.org.
- Minimise the use of air conditioning.
- Keep the use of running water in your room to a minimum – water is still expensive to desalinate, which uses fossil fuel to do so.
- When diving or snorkelling do not touch, feed or otherwise interfere with the fish and coral.
- Ask for your towels not to be rewashed every day.
- Don’t purchase turtle-shell products.

define as islands, are so fluid. Some 'islands' exist at low tide and disappear at high tide, others are just sandbanks with no vegetation, potentially washed away by the next big storm.

Officially, it's a matter of vegetation – an island means a vegetated land area, but even this is not definitive. Some sandbanks sprout a small patch of scrub while others feature a single coconut palm, like the desert island of the comic-strip castaway.

The geological formation of the Maldives is fascinating and unique. The country is perched on the top of the enormous Laccadives–Chagos ridge, which cuts a swathe across the Indian Ocean from India to Madagascar. The ridge, a meeting point of two giant tectonic plates, is where basalt magma spews up through the earth's crust, creating new rock. These magma eruptions created the Deccan Plateau, on which the Maldives sit. Originally the magma production created huge volcanoes that towered above the sea. While these have subsequently sunk back into the sea as the ocean floor settled, the coral formations that grew up around these vast volcanoes became the Maldives, and this explains their idiosyncratic formation into vast round atolls.

Today then, the national territory officially comprises 1190 coral islands and innumerable reefs forming 26 atolls that are the natural geographic regions of the country – the English word 'atoll' actually derives from the Maldivian word *atolu*. The natural atolls are today divided up into 21 administrative districts, whose easy-to-pronounce code names are the ones we use to divide up the country by region in this book (see opposite).

WILDLIFE

The Maldives is notable for a concentration of several species that you'll see a lot of on the land and in the sky: compared to neighbouring countries, there's not a lot of variety. However, under water the variety is astonishing – hence the massive diving market here. The best thing about wildlife in the Maldives is that it's universally safe. You don't even get mosquitoes for the most part. Who said this wasn't paradise?

Animals

One of the most unforgettable sights in the Maldives is giant fruit bats flying over the islands to roost in trees at dusk. Their size and numbers can make it quite a spectacle. Colourful lizards and geckos are very common and there is the occasional rat, usually dismissed as a 'palm squirrel' or a 'Maldivian hamster' by resort staff keen to avoid cries of vermin.

The mosquito population varies from island to island but it's generally not a problem. There are ants, centipedes, scorpions and cockroaches, but they're not problematic at all.

AN ALTERNATIVE GEOGRAPHY

While the Maldives has appeared in the *Guinness Book of Records* as the world's flattest country, with no natural land higher than 2.3m above sea level, it's one of the most mountainous countries in the world. Its people live on peaks above a plateau that extends 2000km from the Lakshadweep Islands near India to the Chagos Islands, well south of the equator. The plateau is over 5000m high and rises steeply between the Arabian Basin in the northwest and the Cocos–Keeling Basin in the southeast. Mountain ranges rise above the plateau, and the upper slopes and valleys are incredibly fertile, beautiful and rich with plant and animal life. The entire plateau is submerged beneath the Indian Ocean and only scattered, flat-topped peaks are visible at the surface. These peaks are capped not with snow, but with coconut palms.

Bodu raalhu (big wave) is a relatively regular event in the Maldives, when the sea sweeps over the islands, causing damage and sometimes loss of life.

Local land birds include crows, the white-breasted water hen and the Indian mynah. The rose-ringed parakeet is introduced. There are migratory birds, such as harriers and falcons, but waders like plover, snipe, curlew and sandpiper are more common. Thirteen species of heron can be seen in the shallows and there are terns, seagulls and two species of noddy.

ENDANGERED SPECIES

Most turtle species are endangered worldwide. Four species are known to nest in the Maldives: green, olive ridley, hawksbill and loggerhead. Leatherback turtles visit Maldivian waters, but are not known to nest. Turtle numbers have declined in the Maldives, as elsewhere, but they can still be seen by divers at many sites. The catching of turtles and the sale or export of turtle-shell products is now totally prohibited.

Turtles are migratory and the population can be depleted by events many miles from their home beach, such as accidental capture in fishing nets, depletion of sea-grass areas and toxic pollutants. Widespread collection of eggs and the loss of nesting sites are problems that need to be addressed. The consequences do not show up in the adult turtle population for 10 to 20 years.

Turtle eggs are a traditional food and used in *velaa folhi*, a special Maldivian dish. Development of resorts has reduced the availability of

Maldivian turtles are protected, but they are still caught illegally. The charity Ecocare Maldives has almost single-handedly raised awareness of the turtles' plight.

THOSE UNPRONOUNCEABLE ATOLLS

Confusingly enough, the 26 atolls of the Maldives are divided for all official purposes into 21 administrative districts, which are named by the letters of the Thaana alphabet and as such are a lot easier to pronounce. Would you rather talk about South Miladhunmadulu Atoll or Noonu? Thought so. However, it's not that simple, as the traditional atoll names are still universally used for North and South Male' Atolls, North and South Ari Atoll and Addu Atoll in the far south, so we also use these instead of the more obscure names Kaafu, Alif and Seenu. The following table gives both traditional and administrative names for most parts of the country; those marked with an asterisk are the ones used in this book.

Administrative name	Atoll name
Haa Alif*	North Thiladhunmathee Atoll
Haa Dhaal*	South Thiladhunmathee Atoll & Maamakunudhoo Atoll
Shaviyani*	North Miladhunmadulu Atoll
Noonu*	South Miladhunmadulu Atoll
Raa*	North Maalhosmadulu Atoll
Baa*	South Maalhosmadulu Atoll
Lhaviyani*	Faadhippolhu Atoll
Kaafu	Male' Atoll*
Alif	Ari Atoll*
Vaavu*	Felidhe Atoll
Meemu*	Mulaku Atoll
Faafu*	North Nilandhe Atoll
Dhaalu*	South Nilandhe Atoll
Thaa*	Kolhumadulu Atoll
Laamu*	Hadhdunmathee Atoll
Gaaf Alif*	North Huvadhu Atoll
Gaaf Dhaal*	South Huvadhu Atoll
Gnaviyani*	Foammulah Atoll
Seenu	Addu Atoll*

nesting sites. Artificial lights confuse hatchling turtles, which are instinctively guided into the water by the position of the moon. Beach chairs and boats can also interfere with egg laying and with hatchlings. Some attempts are being made to artificially improve the survival chances of hatchlings by protecting them in hatching ponds.

Plants

Most islands have poor, sandy soil and vegetation ranges from thick to sparse to none at all. The vegetated islands have mangoes, breadfruit trees, banyans, bamboo, pandanus, banana, heliotrope, caltrop, hibiscus, tropical vines and numerous coconut palms. Larger, wetter islands have small areas of rainforest.

Sweet potatoes, yams, taro, millet and watermelon are grown. The most fertile island is Foammulah in the extreme south, which supports a wider variety of crops, including mangoes and pineapples. Lemons and limes once grew all over the islands, but a fungal disease killed them off, and virtually all citrus fruit is now imported.

Marine Life

Seaweeds and hard coralline algae grow on the reefs, but are continuously eaten by various herbivores. As well as the many types of coral, there are various shells, starfish, crustaceans and worms inhabiting the reef. There are more than 700 species of fish in the Indian Ocean, and these can be divided into two types: reef fish, which live inside the atoll lagoons, on and around coral-reef structures; and pelagics, which live in the open sea, but may come close to the atolls or into channels for food. These include some large animals, such as turtles and cetaceans, which are very popular with divers.

CORAL

These are coelenterates, a class of animal that also includes sea anemones and jellyfish. A coral growth is made up of individual polyps – tiny tube-like fleshy cylinders, which look very much like anemones. The top of the cylinder is open and ringed by waving tentacles (nematocysts), which sting and draw any passing prey inside. Coral polyps secrete a calcium-carbonate deposit around their base, and this cup-shaped skeletal structure is what forms a coral reef – new coral grows on old dead coral and the reef gradually builds up.

Most reef building is done by hermatypic corals, whose outer tissues are infused with zooxanthellae algae, which photosynthesise to make food from carbon dioxide and sunlight. The zooxanthellae is the main food source for the coral, while the coral surface provides a safe home for the zooxanthellae – they live in a symbiotic relationship, each dependent on the other. The zooxanthellae give coral its colour, so when a piece of coral is removed from the water, the zooxanthellae soon die and the coral becomes white. If the water temperature rises, the coral expels the algae, and the coral loses its colour in a process called ‘coral bleaching’.

Polyps reproduce by splitting to form a colony of genetically identical polyps – each colony starts life as just a single polyp. Although each polyp catches and digests its own food, the nutrition then passes between the polyps to the whole colony. Most coral polyps only feed at night; during the day they withdraw into their hard limestone skeleton, so it is only after dark that a coral reef can be seen in its full, colourful glory.

HARD CORALS

These Acropora species take many forms. One of the most common and easiest to recognise is the staghorn coral, which grows by budding off new branches from the tips. Brain corals are huge and round with a surface looking very much like a human brain. They grow by adding new base levels of skeletal matter then expanding outwards. Flat or sheet corals, like plate coral or table coral, expand at their outer edges. Some corals take different shapes depending on their immediate environment.

SOFT CORALS

These are made up of individual polyps, but do not form a hard limestone skeleton. Lacking the skeleton that protects hard coral, it would seem likely that soft coral would fall prey to fish, but they seem to remain relatively immune either due to toxic substances in their tissues or to the presence of

RISE & RISE OF THE ATOLLS

A coral reef or garden is not, as many people believe, formed of multicoloured marine plants. It is a living colony of coral polyps – tiny, tentacled creatures that feed on plankton. Coral polyps are invertebrates with sac-like bodies and calcareous or horny skeletons. After extracting calcium deposits from the water around them, the polyps excrete tiny, cup-shaped, limestone skeletons. These little guys can make mountains.

A coral reef is the rock-like aggregation of millions of these polyp skeletons. Only the outer layer of coral is alive. As polyps reproduce and die, the new polyps attach themselves in successive layers to the skeletons already in place. Coral grows best in clear, shallow water, and especially where waves and currents from the open sea bring extra oxygen and nutrients.

Charles Darwin put forward the first scientific theory of atoll formation based on observations of atolls and islands in the Pacific. He envisaged a process where coral builds up around the shores of a volcanic island to produce a fringing reef. Then the island sinks slowly into the sea while the coral grows upwards at about the same rate. This forms a barrier reef, separated from the shore of the sinking island by a ring-shaped lagoon. By the time the island is completely submerged, the coral growth has become the base for an atoll, circling the place where the volcanic peak used to be.

This theory doesn't quite fit the Maldives though. Unlike the isolated Pacific atolls, Maldivian atolls all sit on top of the same long, underwater plateau, around 300m to 500m under the surface of the sea. This plateau is a layer of accumulated coral-stone over 2000m thick. Under this is the ‘volcanic basement’, a 2000km-long ridge of basalt that was formed over 50 million years ago.

The build-up of coral over this ridge is as much to do with sea-level changes as it is with the plateau subsiding. When sea levels rise the coral grows upwards to stay near the sea surface, as in the Darwin model, but there were at least two periods when the sea level actually dropped significantly – by as much as 120m. At these times much of the accumulated coral plateau would have been exposed, subjected to weathering, and ‘karstified’ – eroded into steep-sided, flat-topped columns. When sea levels rose again, new coral grew on the tops of the karst mountains and formed the bases of the individual Maldivian atolls.

Coral grows best on the edges of an atoll, where it is well supplied with nutrients from the open sea. A fringing reef forms around an enclosed lagoon, growing higher as the sea level rises. Rubble from broken coral accumulates in the lagoon, so the level of the lagoon floor also rises, and smaller reefs can rise within it. Sand and debris accumulate on the higher parts of the reef, creating sandbars on which vegetation can eventually take root. The classic atoll shape is oval, with the widest reefs and most of the islands around the outer edges.

Test drilling and seismic research has revealed the complex layers of coral growth that underlie the Maldives. The evidence shows that coral growth can match the fastest sea-level rises on record, some 125m in only 10,000 years – about 1.25cm per year. In geological terms, that's really fast.

Maldives: Un mur contre l'océan is a French documentary by Patrick Fléouter. Investigating the construction of massive sea defences around Male', it raises questions about what will happen to the rest of the country's population as the waters rise.

sharp limestone needles. Soft corals can move around and will sometimes engulf and kill off a hard coral. Attractive varieties include fan corals and whips. Soft corals thrive on reef edges washed by strong currents.

REEF FISH

Hundreds of fish species can be spotted by anyone with a mask and snorkel. They're easy to see and enjoy, but people with a naturalist bent should buy one of the field guides to reef fish, or check the attractive posters, which are often displayed in dive schools. You're sure to see several types of butterflyfish, angelfish, parrotfish and rock cod, unicornfish, trumpetfish, bluestripe snapper, Moorish idol and oriental sweetlips. For more on fish see p72.

SHARKS

It's not a feat to see a shark in the Maldives, even if you don't get in the water; juvenile reef sharks love to swim about in the warm water of the shallow lagoon right next to the beach and eat fish all day long. They're tiny – most never grow beyond 50cm long – but are fully formed sharks, so can scare some people! They don't bite, although feeding or provoking them still isn't a good idea.

Get out into the deeper water and sharks are visible, but you'll have to go looking for them. The white-tip reef shark is a small, nonaggressive, territorial shark, rarely more than 1.5m long and often seen over areas of coral or off reef edges. Grey reef sharks are also timid, shallow-water dwellers and often grow to over 2m in length.

Other species are more open-sea dwellers, but do come into atolls and especially to channel entrances where food is plentiful. These include the strange-looking hammerhead shark and the whale shark, the world's largest fish species, which is a harmless plankton eater. Sharks do not pose any danger to divers in the Maldives – there's simply too much else for them to eat.

CORAL BLEACHING – DEATH ON THE REEF

In March 1998, the waters of the Maldives experienced a temporary rise in temperature associated with the El Niño effect. For a period of about two weeks, surface-water temperatures were above 32°C, resulting in the loss of the symbiotic algae that lives within the coral polyps. The loss of the zooxanthellae algae causes the coral to lose its colour ('coral bleaching'), and if this algae does not return, the coral polyps die. Coral bleaching has occurred, with varying degrees of severity, in shallow waters throughout the Maldives archipelago. When the coral dies, the underlying calcium carbonate is exposed and becomes more brittle, so many of the more delicate branch and table structures have been broken up by wave action. Mainly hard corals have been affected – soft corals and sea fans are less dependent on zooxanthellae algae, are less affected by the sea temperature changes and recover more quickly from damage.

Some corals, particularly in deeper water, recovered almost immediately as the symbiotic algae returned. In a few places the coral was not damaged at all. In most areas, however, virtually all the old hard corals died and it will take years, perhaps decades, for them to recover. Some of the biggest table corals may have been hundreds of years old. Marine biologists are watching this recolonisation process with interest (see p72).

The Maldives' dive industry has adapted to the changed environment, seeking places where the regrowth is fastest and where there are lots of attractive soft corals. There's still a vast number and variety of reef fish to see, and spotting pelagic species, especially mantas and whale sharks, is a major attraction. Some long-time divers have become more interested in the very small marine life, and in macrophotography.

Maldivian sharks are rapidly decreasing in number, despite high ecological awareness. The small but active shark-meat trade still claims thousands of these incredible animals each year.

WHALES & DOLPHINS

Whales dwell in the open sea, and so are not found in the atolls. Species seen in the Maldives include beaked, blue, Bryde's dwarf, false killer, melon-headed, sperm and pilot whales. You'll need to go on a specialised whale-watching trip to see them, however (see p53).

Dolphins are extremely common throughout the Maldives, and you're very likely to see them, albeit fleetingly. These fun-loving, curious creatures often swim alongside speedboats and dhonis, as well as swimming off the side of reefs looking for food. Most resorts offer dolphin cruises, which allow you to see large schools up close. Species known to swim in Maldivian waters include bottlenose, Fraser's, Risso's, spotted, striped and spinner dolphins.

STINGRAYS & MANTA RAYS

Some of the most dramatic creatures in the ocean, rays are cartilaginous fish – like flattened sharks. Ray feeding is a popular activity at many resorts and it's quite something to see these muscular, alienesque creatures jump out of the water and chow down on raw steak. Stingrays are sea-bottom feeders, and equipped with crushing teeth to grind the molluscs and crustaceans they sift out of the sand. They are occasionally found in the shallows, often lying motionless on the sandy bottom of lagoons. A barbed and poisonous spine on top of the tail can swing up and forward, and will deliver a very painful injury to anyone who stands on one.

Manta rays are among the largest fish found in the Maldives and a firm favourite of divers. They tend to swim along near the surface and pass overhead as a large shadow. They are quite harmless and, in some places, seem quite relaxed about divers approaching them closely. Manta rays are sometimes seen to leap completely out of the water, landing back with a tremendous splash. The eagle ray is closely related to the manta, and often seen by divers.

NATIONAL PARKS

There are 25 Protected Marine Areas in the Maldives, usually popular diving sights where fishing of any kind is banned. These are excellent, as they have created enclaves of huge marine life that's guaranteed a safe future. While there are no specially designated island reserves in the Maldives, there are a huge number of uninhabited islands and permission from the government is needed to develop or live there. With some of the tightest development restrictions in the world, the Maldives future as pristine wilderness in many parts is assured.

ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

As a small island nation in a big ocean, the Maldives had a way of life that was ecologically sustainable for centuries, but certainly not self-sufficient. The comparatively small population survived by harvesting the vast resources of the sea and obtaining the other necessities of life through trade. The impact on the limited resources of their islands was probably minimal.

Now the Maldives' interrelationship with the rest of the world is greater than ever, and it has a high rate of growth supported by two main industries: fishing and tourism. Both industries depend on the preservation of the environment, and there are strict regulations to ensure sustainability. To a great extent the Maldives avoids environmental problems by importing so many of its needs. It could be asked

'There are 25 Protected Marine Areas in the Maldives, usually popular diving sights where fishing of any kind is banned.'

whether this is environmentally friendly or whether it just moves the environmental problems offshore.

Bluepeace Maldives (www.bluepeacemaldives.org) is a fantastic organisation campaigning to save the turtles, rare birds and coral of the Maldives.

Global Warming

There are no prizes for guessing what the country's long-term environmental concern is. With waters rising faster than previously believed, low-lying islands are set to start disappearing in the next few decades.

WATER, WATER, EVERYWHERE

Ensuring a supply of fresh water has always been imperative for small island communities. Rain-water quickly soaks into the sandy island soil and usually forms an underground reservoir of fresh water, held in place by a circle of salt water from the surrounding sea. Wells can be dug to extract the fresh ground water, but if water is pumped out faster than rainfall replenishes the supply, then salty water infiltrates from around the island and the well water becomes brackish. Decaying organic matter and septic tanks can also contaminate the ground water, giving it an unpleasant sulphurous smell.

One way to increase the fresh-water supply is to catch and store rainwater from rooftops. This wasn't feasible on islands that had only small buildings with roofs of palm thatch, but economic development and the use of corrugated iron has changed all that. Nearly every inhabited island now has a government-supported primary school, which is often the biggest, newest building on the island. The other sizable building is likely to be the mosque, which is a focus of community pride. Along with education and spiritual sustenance, many Maldivians now also get their drinking water from the local school or the mosque.

Expanding tourist resorts required more water than was available from wells or rooftops and, as resorts grew larger, the tourists' showers became saltier. Also, the ground water became too salty to irrigate the exotic gardens that every tourist expects on a tropical island. The solution was the desalination of sea water using 'reverse osmosis' – a combination of membrane technology and brute force.

Now every resort has a desalination plant, with racks of metal cylinders, each containing an inner cylinder made of a polymer membrane. Sea water is pumped into the inner cylinder at high pressure and the membrane allows pure water to pass through into the outer cylinder from which it is piped away. Normally, when a membrane separates fresh water from salt water, both salt and water will pass through the membrane in opposite directions to equalise the saltiness on either side – this process is called osmosis. Under pressure, the special polymer membrane allows the natural process of osmosis to be reversed.

Small, reliable desalination plants have been a boon for the resorts, providing abundant fresh water for bathrooms, kitchens, gardens and, increasingly, for swimming pools. Of course it's expensive, as the plants use lots of diesel fuel for their powerful pumps and the polymer membranes need to be replaced regularly. Many resorts ask their guests to be moderate in their water use, while a few are finding ways to recycle bath and laundry water onto garden beds. Most have dual water supplies, so that brackish ground water is used to flush the toilet while desalinated sea water is provided in the shower and the hand basin.

Is desalinated water good enough to drink? If a desalination plant is working properly, it should produce, in effect, 100% pure distilled water. The island of Thulusdhoo, in North Male' Atoll, has the only factory in the world where Coca-Cola is made out of sea water. In most resorts, the water from the bathroom tap tastes just fine, but management advises guests not to drink it. One story is that the water is too pure and lacks the trace minerals essential for good health. Another is that the water is purified in the plant, but in the pipes it can pick up bacteria, which may cause diarrhoea. Usually, the resort and hotel management will suggest that guests buy mineral water from the bar, shop or restaurant, where it will cost between US\$2 and US\$4 for 1.5L. This water is bottled in the Maldives using purified, desalinated water.

In the long term it's simply not an option to protect low-lying islands with breakwaters, and if the sea continues to rise as predicted then there is no long-term future for much of the country. While a wait-and-see attitude appears to that adopted by most, there are clear efforts being made to support human life in the Maldives after the water has risen by 1m – most importantly the land reclamation project that has created 2m-high Hulhumale' island next to the airport, and one day will house around half the country's population.

If the day does indeed come when waters engulf the entire country, there are repeated rumours that Gayoom has struck a deal with Australia to take the people of the Maldives in return for signing over Maldivian fishing rights to them. This is denied strenuously by both sides, but may not be that fanciful – somebody, somewhere will have to agree to take the 300,000-plus people that global warming will one day leave homeless.

Tsunami

On 26 December 2004 the Indian Ocean tsunami caused devastation throughout southern Asia. Compared to Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Thailand, the Maldives escaped relatively lightly, although over 100 people were killed when the waves hit.

Despite fearing the worst, divers who took to the water to see the damage were heartened to discover that relatively little had been done. Many corals were destroyed by the power of the tidal wave, but the tsunami's effects have been negligible compared to the 1998 coral bleaching that occurred here.

Beaches on many islands were washed away or at least partially displaced. These were still being restored using sand pumps at the time of writing, but the chances are that during the lifetime of this book, the Maldives tourism industry will look just as good as it did before the tsunami, and perhaps even better.

Fisheries

Net fishing and trawling is prohibited in Maldivian waters, which include an 'exclusive economic zone' extending for 320km beyond the atolls. All fishing is by pole and line, with over 75% of the catch being skipjack or yellowfin tuna. The no-nets policy helps to prevent over-fishing and protects other marine species, such as dolphins, from being inadvertently caught in nets.

The local tuna population appears to be holding up despite increased catches, and Maldivian fisheries are patrolled to prevent poaching. But the tuna are migratory, and can be caught without limit in international waters using drift nets and long-line techniques.

Tourism

Tourism development is strictly regulated and resorts are established only on uninhabited islands that the government makes available. Overwhelmingly, the regulations have been effective in minimising environmental costs – the World Tourism Organization has cited the Maldives as a model for sustainable tourism development.

Construction and operation of the resorts does use resources, but the vast majority of these are imported. Large amounts of diesel fuel are used to generate electricity and desalinate water. The demand for hot running water and air-conditioning has raised the overall energy cost per guest.

Check out www.bluepeacemaldives.org for information on this excellent Maldivian NGO's work protecting the local environment.

Sewage must be effectively treated on the resort island itself – it cannot be pumped out to sea. Efficient incinerators must be installed to dispose of garbage that can't be composted, but many resorts request that visitors take home plastic bottles, used batteries and other items that may present a disposal problem.

When the first resorts were developed, jetties and breakwaters were built and boat channels cut through reefs, without much understanding of the immediate environmental consequences. In some cases natural erosion and deposition patterns were disrupted, with unexpected results. More structures were built to limit the damage and sand was pumped up to restore the beach. This was expensive and it marred the natural appearance of the island, and now developers are more careful about altering coasts and reefs. Environmental studies are required before major works can be undertaken.

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 white sands overlooked by majestic palms. Indeed some visitors jokingly complain that any photograph they take just looks like one lifted from a promotional pamphlet, so uniform is the perfection.

It's what nestles among the trees beyond the beach that should most concern you, and we're not talking about creepy crawlies here. The standard of facilities and variety of accommodation in Maldivian resorts is enormous – from budget and extremely average accommodation to the best of everything if you can afford to pay through the nose for it. Therefore your choice of resort 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 resort or resorts you'll book into. This chapter will help you navigate the various factors to take into consideration when selecting a resort, as well as listing some of our favourites in the country.

George Corbin is credited with kick-starting the Maldives tourist industry. In 1971 he brought a small group of Europeans to the country despite there being no hotels.

ATMOSPHERE

What is surprising is that every resort has a fairly distinct atmosphere. Not totally unique in all cases – but it's surprising how quickly you can tell if you're visiting a honeymooners' paradise, a diving mecca or a family bucket-and-spade affair. This is the one thing that's totally impossible to judge from a website or brochure, so the most important decision to

FRIENDS OF MALDIVES RESORT BOYCOTT

In 2005 British-based campaign group **Friends of Maldives** (www.friendsofmaldives.org) unveiled a carefully targeted boycott of some of the Maldives' most popular resorts. Outraged at the torture in Maldivian prisons, the police brutality on the streets and the human rights abuses, the group unveiled its selective boycott to pressure the regime from within. The boycott targets any resort owned wholly or in part by a member of the government, the hope being that the loss of revenue will in turn cause associates of President Gayoom to put pressure on him to end human rights abuses, hold free and fair elections and rein in the police and National Security Services. Supporters of this boycott include **Tourism Concern** (www.tourismconcern.org.uk), Amnesty International and *Ethical Consumer*.

We support this cleverly targeted campaign and suggest you do too; it fully supports tourism in the Maldives, conscious that it's the country's only major industry, but it tells adherents to avoid about one-fifth of the resorts, which bring ministers and other senior government figures significant revenue each year. The full list can be found at www.friendsofmaldives.org/fom-resortlist.htm – we do not publish it here as it could change; resorts often change hands and, also, some ministers have already responded to the boycott, resigning their positions in government in order not to be targeted, and thus sending a very clear message to the regime.

Friends of Maldives has been roundly discredited in the Maldives by a smear campaign calling them both Islamic terrorists and Christian missionaries. We can confirm that this is not the case, and that the Anglo-Maldivian staff who run the organisation have only the human rights and general welfare of the Maldivian people at heart. They have set up a separate charity, **Maldives Aid** (reachable through the Friends of Maldives website) that sends aid to the poorest regions of the country. Donations can be made here to projects that will help rural residents rebuild their lives and invest in their future.

TOP FIVE BACK-TO- NATURE RESORTS

Nika Hotel (p144)
Makunudu (p112)
Soneva Fushi (p154)
Thulhaagiri (p110)
Vadoo (p131)

make before choosing a resort is the type of holiday you want and the atmosphere most conducive to providing it. Honeymooners who find themselves surrounded by package tours and screaming children may quickly come to regret booking into the first resort whose website they looked at. Similarly divers and surfers may find the almost total social-life vacuum in a honeymoon resort a little dull after a week.

Back to Nature

If you've ever fancied the whole Robinson Crusoe experience, or the slightly less lonely Swiss Family Robinson get away, the Maldives is way ahead of you, having built much of its tourism industry on precisely this desert island ideal, albeit in many places also providing a butler, gourmet restaurant and a fleet of staff catering to your every whim, making it somewhat more fun than a Daniel Defoe novel. These resorts tend to be very well designed, use imported woods and natural fibres, have little or no air conditioning and often open-air rooms with no windowpanes. The simplicity (even at the top end) of such places, not to mention their peacefulness and relaxed feel, is what attracts people.

High Style

Maldives is surfing the current wave of the luxury and boutique-hotel craze without working up a sweat at all. Indeed, few countries in the world have such a wealth of choice in this market. All major luxury hotel brands have or are hoping to establish a presence here and at times things can look like a never-ending glossy *Condé Nast Traveller* editorial. As well as our personal favourites, at the time of writing there were a host of new properties opening by such brand names as W Resorts, Four Seasons and Shangri-La, and these are likely to be in the same league.

The pampering on offer here is almost legendary. You'll have your own *thakuru* (personal butler), who will look after you during your stay, you'll nearly always have a sumptuous architect-designed villa stuffed full of beautifully designed furniture and fabrics, a 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). Some of our very favourite resorts in this category include private pools – OK, not big enough to swim in, but still a wonderful way to cool off or wash the salt off yourself after a dip in the sea. Food in these resorts is universally top notch. There will be a huge choice of cuisine, with European, Asian and Japanese 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 children will certainly not run riot (most resorts impose a limit on children numbers) 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, you are guaranteed an amazing time, whatever your interests.

Over-Water Villas

The over-water villa was introduced to the Maldives in the 1970s from Tahiti and has slowly become the ultimate status symbol and a feature at almost every resort – with the exception of the low budget. The variation in water villas is immense – at the cheaper end (Paradise, Summer Island) they are little more than cheap-looking modern structures that happen to be built on stilts over the water. However, where design has been

TOP FIVE HIGH-STYLE RESORTS

One & Only Reethi Rah (p125)
Dhoni Mighili (p145)
Island Hideaway (p148)
Hilton Maldives (p144)
Soneva Fushi (p154)

TOP FIVE WATER VILLAS

Soneva Gili (p126)
One & Only Reethi Rah (p125)
Huvafen Fushi (p125)
Full Moon (p113)
Taj Exotica (p132)

considered they can be fabulous experiences, built with sunset watching, privacy and sea access direct from the bedroom in mind. The massive, almost entirely open-air villas at Soneva Gili are frankly impossible to beat, although the super sleek Lagoon and Ocean Villas at Huvafen Fushi run a very close second, largely as they all have their own infinity pools. Essentially you get what you pay for, so it's probably false economy to go for the very cheapest available. Prices have been driven down though, and midrange resorts nearly all have very high-quality water villas. Some good midrange options include Olhuveli, White Sands and Full Moon.

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 with their significant other. Almost anywhere is romantic; although again, the more budget the resort, the more families and big charter groups you'll get – the intimacy of the romantic experience can be diminished if it's peace, quiet and candlelit dinners you are after. Romance does not 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 usual Maldivian maxim of getting what you pay for is still true here – the very most lovely, romantic resorts are certainly not cheap ones.

Be aware that you cannot actually get married in the Maldives; you'll have to do that elsewhere. 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.

Diving

Every resort has its own diving school, and all are run to extremely professional standards as required by Maldivian law. Every resort has access to good diving, although nearly all diving is from boats – even if the house reef is excellent, any diver will tell you that variety is what they look for. 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 the Equator Village, where coral was not affected by the bleaching in 1998, or Helengeli, from where some 40 dive sites can be reached, giving a huge choice.

Ecotourism

Ecotourism can so often be a gimmick that it's important to sort the wheat from the chaff when selecting a place that claims to be approaching tourism in a unique way, both sustainable and educational. Despite the lip service paid by many resorts there are actually relatively few that have genuine ecotourism credentials. These include educational programmes, 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 not only offering you Evian when you ask for water – an accusation that can be laid at the door of many resorts – but water that has been desalinated on site as well). 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.

TOP FIVE ROMANTIC RESORTS

Makunudu (p112)
Meeru (p110)
Soneva Gili (p126)
Baros (p115)
Banyan Tree (p116)

TOP FIVE DIVING RESORTS

Helengeli (p111)
Bathala (p138)
Equator Village (p171)
Ellaidhoo (p139)
Machchafushi (p143)

TOP FIVE ECOTOURISM RESORTS

Banyan Tree (p116)
Angsana (p116)
Soneva Gili (p126)
Soneva Fushi (p154)
Nika Hotel (p144)

ACTIVITIES

Few people will want to spend an entire holiday sunbathing and swimming (although some do!), and so all resorts are careful to provide a programme 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 being nonexistent and opportunities for sightseeing almost as scarce. It's therefore important to give some thought to what you'd like to do other than sun-worship, and check that the resort you're interested in can cater sufficiently to your interest.

While all resorts have a diving centre, the uniformity ends there; you'll have to check and see if the resort you're planning to visit has a water-sports centre or its own spa, organises guided snorkelling or yoga and does any number of other activities you're interested in. For example the only resort to offer a golf course is Kuredu in Lhaviyani, although there are plans to build a second golf course on one of the islands in the new wave of resort development.

Day Trips

Day trips from your resort are one of the very few ways you'll be able to see something of the Maldives. Even if you are a fully independent traveller (FIT) this is still a good way to see otherwise inaccessible islands of the Maldives. Most commonly offered are day trips to the charming capital Male' from resorts in North and South Male' Atolls. These can be fun, but check that you're able to ditch the group and explore on your own if you want to. There's enough to see for a few hours plus plenty of shopping to merit this trip and it's a great way to get a feel for Maldivian people – you'll find the terrifyingly polite resort staff replaced by a friendly and funny city populace.

Another popular excursion is a trip to an inhabited island. These are a poor substitute for individual exploration of the country, but until that becomes possible this is as close as most people will be able to get to seeing a small island community, traditional housing, craftwork and lifestyle. The trip inevitably feels 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 more like ghost towns than centres of population).

Fishing

Just about any resort will do sunset, sunrise or night-fishing trips, but they are a more authentically Maldivian experience at small, locally run resorts like Asdu Sun Island and Thulhaagiri. Most resorts near Male' can arrange a big-game fishing trip, including Bandos, Baros, Club Med Faru, Full Moon, Kurumba, Laguna and Nakatchafushi. These work out more economically if there are several participants, as costs are high: from \$400 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, jackfish and sharks.

Snorkelling & Diving

The underwater world is definitely one of the best reasons to come to the Maldives. All resorts cater for divers and snorkellers, and organise twice- or thrice-daily diving excursions and usually at least one snorkelling trip a day. If you're keen on either, it'll always be cheaper to bring your own equipment, including snorkel, mask and fins, plus buoyancy

Island Hideaway offers a nearby landing strip for those coming by private jet. The less fortunate must use IAS flights from Male'.

Banyan Tree and Angsana won huge acclaim when they helped neighbouring inhabited island Naalaafushi rebuild after the tsunami in partnership with the United Nations Development Programme.

control device (BCD) and dive computer, if you're a diver. Dive schools vary enormously in standard and helpfulness, but all are of an exceptionally high safety standard, as regulated by strict Maldivian laws. Resorts themselves are not so important for divers – it's their location and the ease of access to dive sights nearby. 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. See p61 for more about snorkelling and diving.

Spa Treatments

As a destination for relaxation, the Maldives has also become well known for offering a huge array of treatments in purpose-built spas. These include all types of massage, beauty treatments, Ayurvedic medicine, acupuncture and traditional Maldivian treatments. Almost all midrange and top-end resorts have a spa and the best are sometimes booked up months in advance, so it can pay to plan ahead if you're interested in certain treatments. With staff often from Indonesia, India and Sri Lanka, you're in safe (if expensive) hands. You can check most resort websites for a full treatment list, but resorts well known for their spas include Full Moon, Banyan Tree, both One & Only resorts and both Soneva resorts. The underwater spa at Huvafen Fushi is the first of its kind in the world and is truly unique; you can be massaged while watching the fish swimming around the glass walls

QUALITY TOURISM STRATEGY

The first Maldivian resorts were basic beach huts made of local materials. Early visitors loved them, but the local economy didn't benefit much, environmental problems loomed, and the cultural impact was seen as a real threat, especially as the islands initially attracted pot-smoking, free-loving hippies rather than the smarter, more conservative crowd you'll find here today. In 1978 when President Gayoom came to power, the country adopted a strategy based on 'quality tourism', which is administered by tourism laws, all of which have proved prescient and extremely important in preventing overdevelopment in the Maldives.

Resorts can be established only on uninhabited islands when the government makes them available for commercial leases. Corporations bid for the lease with a development plan that must conform to strict standards. Resort buildings cannot cover more than 20% of an island's area or be higher than the tallest palm tree. Not a single tree can be cut down without explicit permission. The maximum number of rooms is limited according to the size of the island, and the resort developer must provide all the necessary infrastructure, from electricity and water supply to sewage treatment and garbage disposal.

When the lease on an island expires, the government can require a major renovation and upgrade as a condition of renewal, or it can make the island available for a new lease and call for bids and a redevelopment proposal. The bidding process is very competitive (not to mention frequently accused of being horrendously corrupt). Environmental impact and staff welfare are considerations in selecting the successful bid, but the main criterion is money – how much rent will the developer pay the government? This means that successful developers must earn the maximum return on each room, so new resorts are pushed towards the quality end of the market and old resorts are progressively upgraded. It also means that resorts need to fill their rooms, so prices are also competitive, especially during off-peak periods.

Because every resort is on its own island, a Maldives resort is an isolated and totally managed environment. Resorts can offer every modern convenience but still preserve that perfect tropical island ambience – the 'Robinson Crusoe' factor. There is minimal contact with the local people, and therefore little of the 'cultural pollution' that Maldivians saw as so undesirable in tourist destinations like Goa, Bali and the Thai coast. As resorts have a vested interest in preserving their immediate environment, there's no litter, no noise and no pollution.

RESORT BASICS

You'll be met at the airport by your resort representative, who will usually take your ticket and/or passport from you, something that is quite normal here despite feeling rather odd to the seasoned traveller.

Unless you're arriving after dark you'll soon be transferred to your resort – either by a waiting dhoni, speedboat or seaplane from the nearby lagoon airport. You may have to wait for other passengers to get through customs, but it shouldn't be too much of a wait. You can use US dollars or euros at the airport café, as well as change some cash into rufiya at the bank.

Travellers arriving after dark will have to spend a night at the airport hotel or at a hotel in Male', as neither boat nor seaplane transfers are carried out after sunset for obvious reasons.

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

Some resorts have just one type of room, which confusingly may be called 'Superior', 'Deluxe', or 'Super Deluxe'. Most bigger, newer 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 – and twice the cost.

More expensive rooms tend to be bigger, newer, 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 CD sound system and/or a Jacuzzi. Smaller over-water accommodation is called a water bungalow, although the delineation of the terms water bungalow and water villa is fluid and largely interchangeable.

Single Supplements & Extra Beds

This book gives room rates for single/double occupancy, but most package-deal prices are quoted on a per-person basis, assuming double occupancy. Solo travellers have to pay a 'single-person supplement' for the privilege of having a room all to themselves.

Extra people can usually share a room, but there's a charge for the extra bed (at least US\$15 for a child, US\$30 for an adult) as well as additional costs for meals. In a package-tour price list, this appears as a supplement for children sharing the same room as parents, or for extra adults sharing a room.

For children two years and younger, usually just the US\$6 bed tax is payable. From two to 12 years, the child supplement with full board will be from US\$15 to US\$30 in most budget to midrange resorts, but much more in expensive resorts. Transfers from the airport are charged at half the adult rate. A more expensive option is to get two adjacent rooms, ideally with a connecting door. You might get a discount on the second room.

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 surcharges for Christmas dinner and New Year's Eve. 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, August and September is another high season, for the European summer holidays. Mid-September to early December is low season again.

Specific markets can have their own times of high demand, such as the August holiday week for Italians, Chinese New Year in the Asian market or the end of Ramadan for some Middle Eastern guests.

of the room. Resorts well known for Ayurvedic therapy include Meedhup-paru, Vadoo, Hilton Maldives and Olhuveli Beach & Spa.

Surfing

The best resorts for surfing are Dhinveli Beach and Lohifushi, which are both great. The popularity of surfing is tangibly on the increase 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 and Club Med Kani, can organise boat trips. Truth be told, the best option for the serious surfer is to go on a 'surfari'. See p79 for details on surfing in the Maldives.

Water Sports

Second only to diving schools, most resorts have a water-sports centre (but not all, so check before booking). These vary enormously – some offer the most basic array of canoes and windsurfing, while others run the gauntlet from water skiing to kite-boarding and the ever-popular banana boat. The best resorts for sailing and windsurfing have a wide lagoon that's not too shallow, and lots of equipment to choose from.

Resorts with particularly strong water-sports facilities include Kuredu, Lohifushi, Dhonveli Beach, Alimatha Aquatic, Bandos, Kuramathi, One & Only Kanuhura, Meeru, Summer Island, Club Faru, Club Med Kani, Vilu Reef, Olhuveli and Reethi Beach.

You'll find jet skis and other not-so-cheap thrills at Kuredu, One & Only Kanuhura, Dhonveli Beach, Ellaidhoo, Hilton Maldives, Reethi Beach, Fun Island, Holiday Island, Vilu Reef, Paradise Island and Royal Island, among others.

Wildlife Watching

Most resorts offer dolphin cruises, and although there's no guarantee you'll see anything, dolphins are a common sight in the Maldives and so you're always in with a good chance. Depending on favoured dolphin-feeding grounds near your resort the cruises can last from one to three hours and are usually by dhoni. These are often billed as 'champagne sunset dolphin cruises' – and it's often only one out of three on this score if the dolphins don't show, as the 'champagne' is Prosecco, even at top-end resorts.

Whale watching can be organised from a number of resorts. Be aware that the Whale Submarine (p95) in Male' is something of a misnomer; it's a submarine that visits a reef nearby – there are no whales to be seen here.

FOOD & DRINK

A miniature revolution in fine cuisine has occurred in the past few years in the Maldives. Once even the top-end hotels had decidedly average offerings at meal times, but now things are quite different, with luxury hotels offering a huge choice from an ever-growing number of eateries, allowing guests to eat somewhere different every day for several days.

The buffet, the standard lunch and dinner option is still in evidence, however, and extremely variable they can be too – the usual Maldivian maxim that you get what you pay for is true here. Some particularly good buffets we enjoyed while researching this book included those at Olhuveli, Banyan Tree and Soneva Gili.

Alcohol is also becoming more of a feature at resorts – many have spent years building up wine cellars to rival any French restaurant, and

Kuredu is the only resort to offer a golf course – a real luxury in a country where land is at a premium!

The twin-otter seaplanes used to transfer guests to resorts are all built in Canada and have to be flown around the world, a 16,700km journey that is still more economical than stripping the plane down and shipping it.

as you'd expect these are not cheap. Reethi Rah claims to have over 8,000 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.

However, in all cases alcohol is expensive and with a few luxury exceptions, limited in range. Beers available will not thrill connoisseurs – although Kirin and Tiger are commonly seen amid the Heineken and Carling. All-inclusive packages include certain designated drinks, usually the cheapest non-brand-name beer going, a house red and white wine and non-brand-name spirits. People on these tours can usually be found drinking, perhaps to justify the price of the package.

MALDIVES RESORT RATINGS

Each resort is given a number out of three for how it scores on each front, three being the very highest standard in its field. A zero means that the resort has absolutely nothing worth mentioning on a subject; for example if it doesn't accept children, it gets a zero for children's activities.

A = Beach	F = Food
B = Romance	G = Design
C = Social Life	H = Diving
D = Pampering	I = Snorkelling
E = Children's Activities	J = Water Sports

Resort	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J
Alimatha Aquatic	3	2	2	1	1	2	2	3	3	3
Angaga	3	2	2	1	2	2	2	3	3	2
Angsana	3	3	1	2	0	3	3	3	3	2
Bandos	2	1	3	1	3	2	1	2	3	3
Banyan Tree	3	3	1	3	1	3	3	3	3	2
Baros	3	3	1	3	1	3	3	3	2	2
Bathala	3	2	2	1	2	2	1	3	3	3
Bolifushi	2	2	2	1	2	1	1	3	3	3
Club Med Kani	3	1	3	1	3	2	2	3	3	3
Club Rannalhi	3	2	3	1	3	2	1	3	3	2
Cocoa Island	3	3	1	3	1	3	3	3	3	3
Dhiggiri	2	2	2	2	3	2	2	3	3	2
Dhoni Mighili	3	3	1	3	0	3	3	3	2	2
Dhonveli Beach	3	1	2	1	2	2	2	3	3	3
Ellaidhoo	3	1	2	1	2	2	2	3	3	3
Embudu Village	3	1	2	1	2	2	1	3	3	2
Equator Village	1	1	3	1	2	1	1	3	3	2
Eriyadu	3	2	2	1	1	2	1	3	3	2
Fihalhohi	3	2	2	1	2	2	1	3	3	2
Filitheyo	2	1	2	1	2	2	2	3	1	1
Full Moon	3	3	1	2	2	3	3	2	2	2
Hakuraa Club	3	3	2	1	2	2	2	3	1	1
Halaveli	3	2	2	2	2	2	2	3	2	2
Helengeli	3	2	2	1	1	1	2	3	3	0
Hilton Maldives	3	3	1	3	2	3	3	3	3	3
Holiday Island	3	1	2	1	2	1	1	3	1	2
Huvafen Fushi	3	3	1	3	1	3	3	3	3	3
Island Hideaway	3	3	1	1	3	3	3	3	3	2
Kihaadhuffaru	3	3	2	2	3	2	2	3	3	2
Komandoo	2	3	1	2	0	2	3	3	3	3

MEALS

Typically, breakfast will include a choice of cereals, fresh fruit, fruit juice from cans or concentrate, instant or real coffee, tea, bread rolls, toast, omelettes or fried eggs done as you like, sausages, bacon, baked beans, and often a curry and rice. At more upmarket resorts you could also have muesli, yoghurt, more fresh fruits, fresh-squeezed fruit juice, brewed coffee, better bread, croissants and real ham. You get what you pay for, remember.

For lunch, most resorts manage soup and a simple salad, pasta, rice, instant noodles, and at least one each of fish, beef and chicken dishes, often prepared as curry, casserole or stew, with fruit and dessert to

Resort	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J
Kudarah	1	2	3	2	2	2	2	3	2	2
Kuramathi Blue Lagoon	3	2	1	2	1	2	3	3	3	3
Kuramathi Cottage & Spa	3	2	1	3	1	2	2	3	3	3
Kuramathi Village	3	1	3	1	1	2	1	3	3	3
Kuredu	3	2	3	2	2	2	1	3	3	3
Kurumba	3	2	1	2	3	3	2	3	3	3
Laguna Beach	3	2	2	2	3	2	1	3	2	2
Lily Beach	2	2	3	1	2	2	1	3	3	1
Lohifushi	2	1	2	1	1	2	1	3	2	3
Maayafushi	3	2	1	1	1	2	1	3	3	1
Machchafushi	2	2	2	1	2	2	1	3	3	1
Madoogali	3	3	1	2	1	2	2	3	3	2
Makunudu	2	3	1	2	1	2	2	3	3	1
Meedhupparu	3	2	2	2	2	2	1	3	2	3
Meeru	3	2	2	1	1	2	2	3	2	3
Mirihi	3	2	1	1	2	2	2	3	2	2
Moofushi	2	2	2	1	1	2	1	3	2	1
Nika Hotel	3	3	1	3	1	3	2	3	3	2
Olhuveli Beach	3	3	1	3	1	2	2	3	3	3
One & Only Kanuhura	3	3	2	3	3	3	3	3	3	3
One & Only Reethi Rah	3	3	1	3	1	3	3	3	3	3
Palm Beach	3	3	2	2	2	2	2	3	1	2
Paradise Island	3	1	2	1	2	1	1	3	3	3
Ranveli Village	3	2	2	2	2	3	2	3	3	2
Reethi Beach	3	2	1	1	1	2	2	3	3	3
Rihiveli Beach	3	3	1	2	1	3	2	3	1	3
Royal Island	3	2	1	2	1	2	2	3	3	3
Soneva Fushi	3	3	1	3	1	3	3	3	3	2
Soneva Gili	3	3	1	3	1	3	3	3	3	3
Summer Island Village	3	1	2	1	2	1	1	3	3	3
Sun Island	2	1	3	1	3	3	1	3	3	3
Taj Coral Reef	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	3	3	1
Taj Exotic	3	3	2	3	1	3	3	3	3	2
Thulhaagiri	3	2	2	1	1	2	1	3	3	2
Vadoo	3	3	1	2	1	2	1	3	3	2
Vakarufalhi	3	2	2	1	1	2	1	3	3	2
Velavaru	3	3	2	2	1	2	3	3	3	2
Velidhu	3	2	2	1	1	1	1	3	3	3
Veligandu	3	2	2	2	1	2	1	3	3	2
Vilamendhoo Island	2	2	2	1	2	2	2	3	3	2
Vilu Reef	3	3	2	3	1	2	2	3	3	3
White Sands	3	2	2	2	1	2	2	3	3	3

finish. Better resorts offer more varied salad vegetables, pasta freshly tossed with a choice of sauces, Hokkien noodles, freshly fried fish fillets and more creative chicken and beef dishes.

Dinner will usually have the biggest selection, and may be a 'theme night' specialising in regional cuisines such as Italian, Asian, Indian or Maldivian (usually meaning fanciful versions of local dishes, not authentic for the most part). Most resorts will have soup, salad and a dozen or so hot dishes, with at least two each of fish, beef and chicken. A few dishes will be vegetarian – ratatouille, vegetable curry, *pasta alla funghi* or potatoes Provençale. There'll be a pasta dish or three, possibly a lasagne, and stir-fried noodles, as well as plain rice, saffron rice, fried rice, and maybe risotto. There's a trend for 'live cooking stations' at one or more places along the buffet tables, where food is fried or barbecued to taste while you watch – great for fresh fish, prawns, pasta, steak and shish kebab. Whole fish and roast meats are carved and served as you like. Fancier resorts feature more and fresher seafood and it's less likely to be overcooked – the best places serve sashimi. Salad is another class marker – a budget resort will serve iceberg lettuce, coleslaw and cucumber with a basic bottled mayo, French or Thousand Island dressing. A better resort will have cos lettuce, rocket, radicchio, spinach leaves and three kinds of cabbage, with freshly made mayonnaise and your choice of vinegars and olive oils. Only the very best resorts have ripe, red, tasty tomatoes.

Desserts can be delicious, with pastries, fruit pies, tarts, tiramisu, mousse, blanchmange, custard and cheesecake all on offer at the far end of the buffet. The best resorts might have crepes prepared at a live cooking station, and a choice of cheeses too.

Budget resorts might offer a set menu only for some meals – perhaps for lunch, or on alternate days for dinner. These are OK, and will give your waistline some respite. At the other end of the market, the best resorts serve some meals à la carte – the chef has a chance to do something special and creative, and the waiters enjoy giving full table service.

As well as the main buffet restaurant, big resorts usually have 'speciality restaurants' serving regional cuisine (Thai, Japanese, Italian, Indian etc) or grills and seafood. These can be expensive (main courses US\$15 to US\$50) but in better resorts are excellent.

Most resorts have a 'coffee shop' serving light meals, coffee and drinks, often 24 hours a day. They're good for people on half board who want a snack in the middle of the day.

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 the extra charge, perhaps US\$25 (unlike a theme night

Always ask for desalinated water to drink; any good resort will provide this (preferably free) and not just a US\$8 bottle of imported Evian, which is exorbitant in both cash and carbon.

A TASTE OF THE MALDIVES

It used to be rare to find Maldivian food in tourist resorts – the opinion was that Western stomachs couldn't cope with the spices. Now many resorts do a Maldivian barbecue once a week, which is very enjoyable if not totally authentic. These barbecues can be on the beach, by the pool or held in the restaurant. The main dishes are fresh reef fish, baked tuna, fish curries, rice and *roshi* (unleavened bread). The regular dinner buffet might also feature Maldivian fish curry. Less common is the Maldivian breakfast favourite *mas huni*, a healthy mixture of tuna, onion, coconut and chilli, eaten with *roshi*. If there's nothing Maldivian on the menu, you could ask the kitchen staff to make a fish curry or a tray of short eats – they may be making some for the staff anyway. Small resorts are usually amenable to special requests. Otherwise, do a trip to Male' or an island-hopping excursion to a fishing village, and try out a local teashop.

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? Do they still offer kite-boarding? Also, be aware that many resort websites have never been updated since they were created. While there are exceptions, it's never a good idea to take the information there as fact – check when the page was last updated.

Check the dive-centre website. It might provide a discount if you book your dives before your arrival. Email them for any specific dive information.

If the trip is a honeymoon, or second honeymoon, or if you will be celebrating an anniversary or birthday, let your travel agent or tour company know – the resort might surprise you. Some rather tacky resorts on the other hand might require a wedding certificate before they do anything – the Maldives is notorious for couples claiming to be on their honeymoon just to get some freebies!

in the main restaurant, which is not charged as an extra). Or it can be a private dinner for two in romantic surroundings – on an inhabited island, on the beach, or on a sandbar in ankle-deep water. Most resorts will do special meals on request.

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\$100 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, we strongly encourage you to book full- or 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.

ENTERTAINMENT

Beware the animator! These lively people are forever trying to encourage group work-outs or karaoke competitions in Italian-dominated resorts even though they have been roundly rejected by the smarter resorts. Their days in the Maldives are numbered as the country's tourist industry increasingly tries to define the Maldives as a stylish and fashionable destination, but they're still determinedly hanging on in some places for the time being.

Look out for the barefoot pilots on Maldivian Air Taxi and Trans Maldivian. Not only do they go to work in shorts, many of them spend the nights in luxury resorts before flying back to Male' the next morning – not the world's worst job.

Be prepared to get on the weighing scales yourself if you are flying on Island Aviation Services, the domestic airline. The planes are small and everyone's weight needs to be taken into account.

The truth is that the Maldives is not a premium destination for entertainment. What little of it there is can be fairly naff and uninspiring, and the resorts that insist on a nightly disco often find them empty. Simply put, honeymooners, divers and families, the core demographic of Maldivian tourism, don't really come here for any kind of entertainment, preferring quiet romance and daily activities to night-time ones.

The biggest party and entertainment resort is Club Med Kani, with its tireless round of animator high jinks and nightly disco, and to a lesser extent Bandos, where visiting air crews can often be the life and soul of the party. The W Retreat & Spa, opening in late 2006, plans to be something of a party island with a 24-hour underground bar.

SAFARI CRUISES

Safaris are a superb option for anyone wanting the best possible combination of diving sites, the chance to travel outside the standard tourist zone and a sociable arena where both couples and noncouples will feel totally comfortable.

The massive expansion in the market for safari cruises has meant an increasingly sleek approach from the tour companies that run them; a typical, modern boat is air conditioned, spacious, and serves varied and appetising meals. It should have hot water, a sun deck, fishing and diving gear, mobile phone, full bar, DVD player and cosy, comfortable cabins.

Costs start at around US\$90 per person per day, including the US\$8 per day bed tax and all meals, plus roughly US\$50 per day for diving trips. There's usually a minimum daily (or weekly) charge for the whole boat, and the cost per person is lower if there are enough passengers to fill the boat. You'll be charged extra for soft drinks and alcohol, which are priced as you'd expect to find in most resorts. You might splurge for the occasional meal at a resort, but generally there are few extras to spend money on.

The most basic boats are large dhonis with a small galley and communal dining area, two or three cramped cabins with two berths each, and a shared shower and toilet. Passengers often drag their mattresses out on deck for fresh air, and sleep under the stars. Food is prepared on board and varies from very ordinary to very good – it usually features lots of freshly caught fish. The bigger, better boats have air conditioning, more spacious accommodation, and a toilet and shower for each cabin. The best boats, like the best resorts, spare no effort in making their guests comfortable.

Most safari trips are for diving (see p63) or so-called 'sarfaris' for surfing (see p82). A minority of safari trips are primarily for sightseeing, and usually offer a fair amount of fishing and snorkelling, stops at fishing villages and resorts, and picnics or a camp-out on an uninhabited island. Obviously it's important to make sure you're joining a trip that will cover what you want to do.

On a scheduled trip, a single passenger may have to share a cabin with another, or pay a premium rate. Compatibility isn't usually a problem on diving or surf trips, where everyone has a common interest, but it can be an issue on longer sightseeing cruises. If you arrange your own group of six or so people, you can charter a whole boat and tailor a trip to suit your interests.

Choosing a Safari Boat

More than 80 safari boats are operating in the Maldives. Some specific suggestions are given here, but you'll need to do some research yourself. When you're considering a safari-boat trip, ask the operator about the following.

- Boat size – Generally speaking, bigger boats will be more comfortable, and therefore more expensive, than small boats. Boats with more than 20 or so passengers may not have the camaraderie you'd get with a small group. Most boats have about 12 berths or less; few boats have more than 20.

Most resorts have some low-key entertainment a couple of evenings a week. Usually it's a fairly cringe-inducing covers band, although other more interesting performers such as traditional Maldivian *bodu beru* (big drum) players, Sri Lankan fire dancers or a jazz band are also common.

LUXURIES

You've come to the right place if this is your main interest – the Maldives' top-end resorts (and to a good extent even its midrange options) offer an eye-watering range of 'treatments', pampering, and a general level of luxury that you can find in few other places.

- Cabin arrangements – Can you get a two-berth cabin (if that's what you want)? How many cabins/people are sharing a bathroom?
- Comforts – Does the boat have air-con, hot water and desalinated water available 24 hours?
- Companions – Who else will be on the trip, what language do they speak, have they done a safari trip before? What are their interests – diving, sightseeing, fishing, surfing?
- Food and drink – Can you be catered for as a vegetarian or vegan? Is there a bar serving alcohol and, if so, how much is a beer/wine/scotch etc?
- Recreation – Does the boat have a video player, CD player, fishing tackle or sun deck? Does the boat have sails or is it propelled by motor only?

Safari Boat Operators

Safari boats often change ownership, or get refitted or acquire a new name or both. The skipper, cook and divemaster can change too, so it's hard to make firm recommendations. The following boats have a good reputation, but there are many others offering good facilities and services. The boats listed here all have a bar on board, oxygen for emergencies, and some diving equipment for rent. Universal's Atoll Explorer is like a mini-cruise ship with a swimming pool on deck, and the Four Seasons Island Explorer is the most luxurious and the most expensive of all. The websites are those of the boat operators. Many of these operators have other boats as well, which may also be very good. If the website does not give booking information (or it's not in your language), most of these boats can be booked through the bigger tour operators in Male' (see p91), or by overseas travel agents. The official **tourism website** (www.visitmaldives.com) has reasonably up-to-date details on almost every safari and cruise boat.

Adventurer I (☎ 3326734; www.maldivesdiving.com; 📶) Boat 22m, six cabins, 12 berths, hot water.

Atoll Explorer (☎ 3314873; www.atollexplorer.com; 📶) Boat 48m, 20 cabins, 40 berths, hot water.

Eagle Ray (☎ 3314841; www.maldivesboatclub.com.mv) Boat 26m, seven cabins, 14 berths, hot water.

Flying Fish (☎ 3310314; www.movinmaldives.com) Boat 26m, seven cabins, 14 berths, hot water.

Four Seasons Explorer (☎ 6644888; www.fourseasons.com/maldives; 📶) Boat 39m, 11 cabins, 22 berths, hot water.

Gulfaam (☎ 3323617; www.voyagemaldives.com; 📶) Boat 20m; six cabins, 12 berths.

Haveyli (☎ 3320555; www.guraabu.com.mv) Boat 30m, 11 cabins, 22 berths, hot water.

Keema (☎ 3313539; www.interlinkmaldives.com; 📶) Boat 27m; six cabins, 12 berths, hot water.

MV Carina (☎ 3316172 www.seamaldives.com.mv; 📶) Boat 33m; 11 cabins, 33 berths, hot water.

Nautilus I (☎ 3315253; www.nautilus.at) Boat 30m, eight cabins, 16 berths, hot water.

Nooraanee Queen (☎ 3310314; www.movinmaldives.com; 📶) Boat 43m, 19 cabins, 42 berths, hot water.

Soleil (☎ 3320555; www.guraabu.com.mv; 📶) Boat 28m; nine cabins, 17 berths, hot water.

Sting Ray (☎ 3314841; www.maldivesboatclub.com.mv; 📶) Boat 31m, nine cabins, 22 berths, hot water.

Sultan of Maldives (☎ 3310550; www.sultansoftheseas.com; 📶) Boat 30m; eight cabins, 16 berths, hot water.

‘Believe it or not, there’s almost no resort in the Maldives that does not have an amazing beach.’

The current *sine qua non* of the luxury industry is the personal *thakuru*, otherwise known rather patronisingly as a ‘man Friday’ or the simply inaccurate description of butler. The *thakuru* is assigned to you throughout your stay. He’s your point of contact for all small things (restocking the fridge, reconfirming your flight) and resembles a butler in no way at all really. Given that one *thakuru* will often be looking after up to ten rooms at a time, the term ‘personal’ is pushing it a bit.

The main centre of luxury 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\$40 for a simple massage at a budget or midrange place to US\$200 for a long session of pampering.

Resort spas in good resorts are often run by companies such as ESPA, Serena, Per Aquum and Six Senses. At this very highest level they offer a vast range of treatments from the sublime to the truly ridiculous. Some of our favourite names include Fit For Life Aromatic Moor Mud Wrap, Tamarind Fancy Wipe, Potato Purifier and Happy Man Relaxer (no jokes please). Perhaps it’s because we can’t afford to spend US\$200 on a foot massage, but it all seems rather funny to us; there’s a lot to be said for gorgeous relaxing treatments, but you’ll meet your fair share of Bubbles Devere types here who go from treatment to treatment all day long.

BEACHES

Believe it or not, there’s almost no resort in the Maldives that does not have an amazing beach. Throughout the course of researching this book, the only really mediocre beach we saw was at the Equator Village. It’s still swimmable but narrow and strewn with seaweed, making swimming unpleasant. Beaches suffer a great deal from beach erosion and the tsunami did not help this at all, but resorts work very hard to redress erosion with sand pumps, which, while unsightly, are working day and night in many resorts to restore sand to its original place. Giravaru, near Male’, suffers from litter washing up on its beaches regularly, but other than that the quality of beach is almost universally brilliant. However, for the record here’s a few of our favourites: One & Only Kanuhura, Kuredu, Palm Beach, Soneva Fushi, Reethi Beach, Royal Island, Coco Palm, Meedhupparu, Eriyadu, Angsana, Bandos, Baros, Banyan Tree, Soneva Gili, Club Med Kani, Rihiveli, Club Rannalhi, Fihalhohi, Sun Island, Bathala, Thundufushi, Veligandu, Villu Reef, Vakarufulhi, Filitheyo, Fun Island and Hilton Maldives.

CHILDREN

If you’re bringing children to the Maldives, it’s very important to get your choice of resort right, as only a few resorts have kids clubs or baby-sitters 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 kids are happy to spend the day on the beach, then almost every resort will be suitable. Note that Komandoo and Dhoni Mighili do not accept children aged under six and 12 respectively.

In general kids will love the Maldives, although for more than a week it might be pushing it unless you’re staying in a big and friendly family resort where there are plenty of other children for them to play with and an endless parade of activities.

Some highly recommended resorts for children include: Kuredu, One & Only Kanuhura, Bandos, Kurumba, Medhufushi, Filitheyo, Club Med Kani, Paradise Island, Laguna Beach, Kuramathi Meeru, Lily Beach and Sun Island.

Snorkelling, Diving & Surfing

Unless you take some time to explore the magical world underneath the water in the Maldives, you're seeing just one tiny part of this incredibly diverse country. Yes, the flora and fauna on the tiny scraps of land poking their heads above the water are not the most spectacular or varied, but glance into the deep blue all around and you'll see marine life so incredible that you'll quickly understand why the Maldives is a favourite destination for divers around the world.

The visibility is incredible, the water so warm that many divers don't even wear a wetsuit and the sheer variety of life underwater is so fantastic that it's easy to understand why most people dive or snorkel during their travels here. Because of the thoroughly professional and safety-conscious approach from all resorts and excellent facilities it's common to learn to dive in the Maldives as well. Even if you don't do a full PADI or equivalent course, a brief scuba introduction is very cheap and lots of fun, while snorkelling can be done by anyone who can swim.

A further boon about the Maldives' submarine life is that as well as being plentiful, beautiful and accessible, it's also extremely unaggressive. Despite its being rich in sharks, there's not one type likely to attack a human, and the only possible reason it would attack in any case would be self-defence.

Diving in particular requires some planning; decide your level, what you want to see and how much diving you want to do before choosing a resort. Snorkelling is similar – some resorts have no good house reef and thus you have to go on a boat trip to see anything worthwhile. Surfing is the most seasonal of all – but it's an increasingly popular activity in the east of the country, with some great breaks coming off the Indian Ocean.

'Snorkelling is the first step into seeing a different world.'

SNORKELLING

Snorkelling is the first step into seeing a different world. Anyone who can swim can do it, it's very cheap (and often free at smarter resorts) to rent the equipment and the rewards make themselves known immediately. The colours of the fish and coral are far better at shallow depths, as water absorbs light, and so below 5m colours start to become less sharp (hence why so many divers carry torches to compensate). This means a visual feast awaits any snorkeller on any decent reef.

WHERE TO SNORKEL

Usually an island is surrounded firstly by a sand-bottomed lagoon, and then by the reef flat (*faru*), a belt of dead and living coral covered by shallow water. At the edge of the reef flat is a steep, coral-covered slope that drops away into deeper water. These reef slopes are the best areas for snorkelling – around a resort island this is called the house reef. The slope itself can have interesting features such as cliffs, terraces and caves, and there are clearly visible changes in the coral and marine flora as the water gets deeper. You can see both the smaller fish, which frequent the

reef flats, and sometimes much larger animals that live in the deep water between the islands, but come close to the reefs to feed.

You can also take a boat from your resort to other snorkelling sites around the atoll. A giri (coral pinnacle) that rises to within 5m of the surface, is ideal for snorkelling, which is not difficult if it's in sheltered waters inside an atoll. A kandu (sea channel) will usually have excellent soft corals, schools of reef fish and large pelagic species.

The best resorts for snorkelling have an accessible house reef, where the deep water is not far offshore, at least around part of the island. There are usually channels you can swim through to the outer-reef slope. To avoid grazing yourself or damaging the coral, always use these channels rather than trying to find your own way across the reef flat. Another option is to walk out on a jetty to the reef edge – all resorts have at least one jetty, though sometimes they don't extend right to the edge of the reef.

Resorts with excellent house reefs tend to be popular with divers too. Some of the best are Ellaido, Bathala, Vadoo, Mirihi, Biyadhoo, Eriyadu, Machchafushi, Vilamendhoo, Filitheyo, Reethi Beach, Embudu Village, W Resort, Soneva Gili, Olhuveli Beach & Spa, Vakarufulhi and Kuredu.

Resorts that don't have an accessible house reef will usually provide a couple of boat trips per day to a good snorkelling site nearby, but this is a lot less convenient as you're limited in time and not usually alone. Many resorts offer island-hopping trips or snorkelling excursions that stop at really superb snorkelling sites, and these are a far better option. Full-day excursions usually cost from US\$20 to US\$30 or so, but are definitely worth it. Kuredu Island resort has the most comprehensive snorkelling programme, with guided snorkelling trips to many interesting sites, including a shipwreck. Sometimes snorkellers can go out with a dive boat, if the dive site is suitable and there's space on the boat.

TOP SNORKELLING SITES

If you stay in a resort with an interesting and accessible house reef, that will probably be your main snorkelling site. You can visit the same reef again and again, and get to know its nooks and crannies, its resident fish and its regular visitors.

A resort excursion can take you to the best snorkelling sites in your atoll, and if you're on a live-aboard safari boat you'll have an unlimited choice. The best snorkelling sites are also dive sites, with a lot of interest in the shallower water. Fit and experienced snorkellers can free-dive to 5m or more without too much trouble, and if the visibility is good they can appreciate any features down to about 10m. Many of the dive sites described in this book are also excellent for snorkelling.

PREPARATION

If you've never tried snorkelling before, you'll soon pick it up. Many resorts give brief snorkelling lessons free of charge in swimming pools or in shallow parts of the lagoon. Every resort will have snorkelling equipment that you can rent, but this will cost US\$5 to US\$10 per day (although less by the week and free at smarter resorts). It's definitely better to have your own. It's also cheaper in the long run and you can be sure that it suits you and fits properly. You can buy good-quality equipment at reasonable prices at the airport shop and in Male'. Most resort shops sell them too, but the range is smaller and the prices are higher. Ideally, you should bring your own set from home.

The whale shark is the largest fish in the world – they regularly reach up to 12m in length and are one of the biggest diving attractions when they cruise the kandas in May.

Mask

Human eyes won't normally focus in water, but a face mask keeps an air space in front of your eyes so that you can focus under water. Any mask, no matter how cheap, should have a shatterproof lens. Ensure that it fits you comfortably – press it gently onto your face, breathe in through your nose a little, and the suction should hold the mask on your face.

If you're short-sighted you can get the mask lens ground to your optical prescription, but this is expensive. Alternatively, get a stick-on optical lens to attach to the inside of the mask lens, or simply fold up an old pair of spectacles and wedge them inside the mask. There's no problem with contact lenses under the mask, although theoretically they can be lost if the mask is flooded.

Snorkel

The tube has to be long enough to reach above the surface of the water, but should not be either too long or too wide. If it is too big then you have more water to expel when you come to the surface. Also, each breath out leaves a snorkel full of used air, and if the snorkel is too big, you will rebreathe a larger proportion of carbon dioxide.

Fins

These are not absolutely necessary, but they make swimming easier and let you dive deeper, and they give a margin of safety in currents. Fins either fit completely over your foot or have an open back with an adjustable strap around your heel, designed for use with wetsuit boots.

Shirt

A Lycra swim shirt or thin wetsuit top will protect against sunburn and minor scratches from the coral or rocks. Even a T-shirt will give some sun protection – sunburn is a real hazard – but don't use a favourite as the sea water won't do the fabric any favours, unless you're going for that distressed look.

SNORKELLING SAFELY

Don't snorkel alone, and always let someone else know where and when you'll be snorkelling. Colourful equipment or clothing will make you more visible. Beware of strong currents or rough conditions – wind chop and large swells can make snorkelling uncomfortable, or even dangerous. In open waters, carry a safety balloon and whistle to alert boats to your presence.

DIVING

Taking the proper plunge into the deep blue is the most exciting thing imaginable and the rewards massive, especially in the Maldives, which is rightly known as a world-class scuba diving destination. The enormous variety of fish life is amazing, and there's a good chance you'll see some of the biggest marine creatures – a close encounter with a giant manta or a 2m Napoleon wrasse is unforgettable, and the friendly sharks of the Maldives are legendary.

Combine this with warm water, visibility reliably over 25m and professional dive centres, and you'll know why divers come back again and again.

'For keen divers, a safari trip is a great way to get in a lot of dives at a variety of sites, and it will probably work out cheaper than a resort-based dive trip.'

DIVING SAFARIS

On a diving safari, a dozen or so divers cruise the atolls in a live-aboard boat fitted out for the purpose. You can stop at your pick of the dive sites, visit uninhabited islands and local villages, find secluded anchorages and sleep in a compact cabin. If you've had enough diving, you can fish, snorkel or swim off the boat.

Generally, bigger boats are more comfortable, more fully equipped and more expensive. For keen divers, a safari trip is a great way to get in a lot of dives at a variety of sites, and it will probably work out cheaper than a resort-based dive trip. See p58 for general information about cruises and choosing a safari boat.

Everyone on a diving safari should be a qualified diver. If you need to do a diving course, contact the boat operator in advance (you may need a minimum of two to four people for a course). Dive clubs can often get together enough members to fill a safari boat and design a programme and itinerary that suits their needs. Ideally, everyone on board should be of a similar diving standard.

A diving safari should have a separate dhoni that has the compressor and most of the equipment on board. This means that compressor noise doesn't disturb passengers at night, and the smaller boat can be used for excursions near shallow reefs. All dive safari boats will have tanks and weights, and they'll be included in the cost of dives. Regulators, buoyancy control devices (BCDs), depth gauges, tank pressure gauges and dive computers are available on most boats for an additional charge. It's best to bring your own mask, snorkel, fins and wetsuit. Ask about the availability of specialised equipment such as cameras, lights and nitrox. A video player is good for entertainment and playing back dive videos. Facilities for recharging camera batteries are handy. Check www.visitmaldives.com for reasonably up-to-date details on what each boat provides.

For safety, every dive-safari boat should have oxygen equipment, a first-aid kit and good radio and telephone communications with Male'. The divemasters should give thorough pre-dive briefings and emergency plans, have a check list of every diver and do a roll call after each dive. It's good to have descent lines and drift lines available for use in strong currents, and to be able to hang a safety tank at 5m for deeper dives. Night diving requires powerful lights, including a strobe light.

WHERE TO DIVE

There are hundreds of recognised and named dive sites, and dozens accessible from nearly every resort. Many of the best dives are described in detail in Lonely Planet's *Diving & Snorkeling Maldives*. In general there are four types of dive sites in the Maldives.

Reef Dives

The edges of a reef, where it slopes into deep water, are the most interesting part of a reef to dive. Inner-reef slopes, in the sheltered waters inside an atoll, are generally easier dives and feature numerous smaller reef fish. Hard corals on inner-reef slopes were badly damaged by bleaching, but are growing back at various rates. The reef around a resort island is known as its 'house reef', and only the guests of that resort are allowed to dive or snorkel on it.

At some resorts qualified divers can do unguided dives on the house reef. This is cheaper and more convenient than a boat dive, and gives divers a chance to get really well acquainted with the reef. House reefs

can be terrific for night dives too. See p49 for more on the resorts with the best house reefs.

Reef	Atoll	Reef type
Banana Reef	North Male'	reef & kandu
Devana Kandu	Vaavu	kandu & thila
Embudhoo Express	South Male'	kandu
Fotteyo	Vaavu	kandu
Fushifaru Thila	Lhaviyani	thila kandu
Kuda Giri	South Male'	giri & wreck
Kuda Kandu	Addu	kandu
Kuredhoo Express	Lhaviyani	kandu
Lion's Head	North Male'	outer-reef slope
Maa Kandu	Addu	kandu & reef
Macro Spot	Dhaal	giri
Manta Reef	Ari	reef & kandu
Milaidhoo Reef	Baa	kandu
Orimas Thila	Ari	thila
Panetone	Ari	kandu
Rakeedhoo Kandu	Vaavu	kandu
Rasdhoo Madivar	Ari	outer-reef slope
Two Brothers	Faafu	giri
Vaadhoo Caves	South Male'	kandu

Outer-reef slopes, where the atoll meets the open sea, often have interesting terraces, overhangs and caves, and are visited by pelagics. Visibility is usually good, but surf and currents can make for a demanding dive.

Kandus

These are channels between islands, reefs or atolls. Obviously, kandus are subject to currents and this provides an environment in which attractive soft corals thrive. Water inside an atoll is a breeding ground for plankton, and where this water flows out through a kandu into the open sea, the rich supply of plankton attracts large animals such as manta rays and whale sharks. During the southwest monsoon (May to November), currents will generally flow out of an atoll through kandus on the eastern side, while in the northeast monsoon (December to March), the outward flow is on the western side.

Thilas & Giris

A thila is a coral formation that rises steeply from the atoll floor and reaches to between 5m and 15m of the water surface – often it's a spectacular underwater mountain that divers fly around like birds. The top of a thila can be rich in reef fish and coral, while the steep sides have crannies, caves and overhangs, which provide shelter for many small fish, and larger fish come, in turn, to feed on the smaller fish.

A giri is a coral formation that rises to just below the water surface. It has many of the same features as a thila, but the top surface may be too shallow to dive.

Thilas and giris are found inside kandus, where the nutrient-rich currents promote soft-coral growth. They also stand in the sheltered waters inside an atoll, where the sea is warmer and slower moving. Hard-coral structures on sheltered thilas and giris suffered most from the 1998 coral bleaching, and have been the slowest to recover.

The whale shark is an evolutionary oddity, skipping almost the whole food chain to ensure its survival: despite being the biggest fish in the water, it feeds solely on plankton.

Wrecks

While many ships have foundered on Maldivian reefs over the centuries, there are few accessible wrecks with any historical interest. Most were on outer-reef slopes and broke up in the surf long ago, leaving remnants to be dispersed and covered in coral. Any wreck sites of historical significance will require special permission to dive. The wrecks you can dive at are mostly inside the atolls and not very old. They are interesting for the coral and other marine life that colonises the hulk within just a few years. Quite a few of the wrecks have been sunk deliberately, to provide an attraction for divers.

TOP DIVING SITES

Some of the better-known dive sites are described in the chapters covering each atoll and marked on the maps. For examples of the different types of dive sites, look up the following.

Dive	Atoll	Dive type	Page
British Loyalty	Addu	wreck	168
Dhidhdhoo Beyru	Ari	outer reef	138
Embudhoo Express	South Male'	kandu	128
Fish Head	Ari	thila & giri	137
Guraidhoo Kandu	South Male'	kandu	128
Halaveli Wreck	Ari	wreck	137
Helengeli Thila	North Male'	thila & giri	107
HP Reef	North Male'	thila & giri	107
Kakani Thila	North Male'	thila	153
Maa Kandu & Kuda Kandu	Addu	kandu	168
Maayafushi Thila	Ari	thila & giri	137
Bodu Hithi Thila	North Male'	thila	107
Shark Point	Addu	outer reef	168

DIVING SEASONS

January to April are generally considered the best months for diving, and should have fine weather and good visibility. May and June can have unstable weather – storms and cloudy days are common until September. October and November tend to have calmer, clearer weather, but visibility can be slightly reduced because of abundant plankton in the water. Some divers like this period because many large fish, such as whale sharks and mantas, come into the channels to feed on the plankton. December can have rough, windy weather and rain.

LEARNING TO DIVE

Diving is not difficult, but it requires knowledge and care, and a lot of experience before you can safely dive independently. It doesn't require great strength or fitness although if you can do things with minimum expenditure of energy, your tank of air will last longer. An experienced diver will use much less air than a beginner. Women often have an advantage because they don't breathe as much air as men.

There's a range of courses, from an introductory dive in a pool or lagoon, to an open-water course that gives an internationally recognised qualification (usually PADI). Beyond that, there are advanced and speciality courses, and courses that lead to divemaster and instructor qualifications. Courses in the Maldives are not a bargain, but they're no more expensive than learning at home and this way you are assured of high

standards, good equipment and extremely pleasant conditions. On the other hand, if you do a course at home you'll have more time for diving when you get to the Maldives.

We recommend all learner divers do an open-water referral course in their home country (ie all the theory and basics in the pool), allowing you to complete the course in the Maldives in just two days rather than the four or five needed for the full course. After all, you didn't fly half way around the world to sit in a room watching a PADI CD-ROM, did you? If you do this, ensure you have all your certification from the referral course with you, otherwise you'll have to start from scratch.

An introductory dive, including equipment, will cost about US\$30, which is sometimes credited towards a proper course if you decide to do so. Some resorts offer a free introductory dive to get you in.

If you're at all serious about diving, you should do an open-water course. This requires nine dives, usually five in sheltered water and four in open water, as well as classroom training and completion of a multiple-choice test. The cost in the Maldives is from US\$450 to US\$650. Sometimes the price is all-inclusive, but there are often a few extra charges – US\$12 for each boat trip, US\$50 for equipment hire, US\$80 for logbooks, certificates, dive tables, course materials, 10% service charge etc. These can really add up. You could do the course in as little as five days, or take your time and spread it over a week or two. Don't try it on a one-week package – transfers and jet lag will take a day or so, and you shouldn't dive less than 24 hours before a plane flight. Besides, you'll want to do some recreational dives to try out your new skills.

The next stage is an advanced open-water course, which will involve five dives (including one night dive), and will cost from US\$280 to US\$400, depending on the dive school. Then there are the speciality courses in night diving, rescue diving, wreck diving, nitrox diving and so on.

Dive Schools & Operators

Every resort has a professional diving operation and can run courses for beginners, as well as dive trips and courses that will challenge even the most experienced diver. The government requires that all dive operations maintain high standards, and all of them are affiliated with one or more of the international diving accreditation organisations – most are with diving behemoth PADI.

Certificates

When you complete an open-water course, you receive a certificate that is recognised by diving operators all over the world. Certificates in the Maldives are generally issued by the Professional Association of Diving Instructors (PADI), the largest and the best-known organisation, but certificates from Confédération Mondiale des Activités Subaquatiques (CMAS; World Underwater Federation), Scuba Schools International (SSI) and a number of other organisations are quite acceptable.

EQUIPMENT

Dive schools in the Maldives can rent out all diving gear, but most divers prefer to have at least some of their own equipment. It's best to have your own mask, snorkel and fins, which you can also use for snorkelling. The tank and weight belt are always included in the cost of a dive, so you don't need to bring them – sealed tanks are prohibited on aircraft anyway, and

'If you're at all serious about diving, you should do an open-water course.'

'It's best to have your own mask, snorkel and fins, which you can also use for snorkelling.'

you'd be crazy to carry lead weights. The main pieces of diving equipment to bring with you are described in the following sections.

Wetsuit

The water may be warm (27°C to 30°C) but a wetsuit is often preferable for comfortable diving. A 3mm suit should be adequate, but 5mm is preferable if you want to go deep or dive more than once per day. Some resorts don't have a good selection of wetsuits for rental, so this is a good item to bring if you can. When dive centres say 'full equipment rental', that doesn't usually include a wetsuit. Renting a suit will cost about US\$5 per day. It's possible to dive in a T-shirt if you don't feel the cold too much.

Regulator

Many divers have their own regulator, with which they are familiar and therefore confident about using, and a 'reg' is not cumbersome to carry. Rental will cost from US\$3 to US\$7 per dive.

Buoyancy Control Device

These are readily available for hire, costing US\$3 to US\$7 per dive, but bring your own if possible.

Depth Gauge, Tank Pressure Gauge & Timer

These are usually available too, but if you have them, bring them.

Dive Computer

Universally used over dive tables, these are now compulsory in the Maldives. They're available for rent, for US\$4 to US\$7 per dive.

Logbook

You'll need this to indicate to divemasters your level of experience, and to record your latest dives. You can usually buy them for around US\$10 at dive schools.

Other items you might need are an underwater torch (especially for cave and night dives), waterproof camera, compass and safety buoy or balloon, most of which are available for rental. Some things you won't need are a spear gun, which is prohibited, and diving gloves, which are discouraged since you're not supposed to touch anything anyway.

DIVING COSTS

The cost of diving varies between resorts, and depends on whether you need to rent equipment. A single dive, with only tank and weights supplied, runs from US\$30 to US\$70, but is generally around US\$35 or US\$40 (night dives cost more). If you need to rent a regulator and a BCD as well, a dive will cost from US\$40 to US\$80. Sometimes the full equipment price includes mask, snorkel, fins, dive computer and pressure gauge, but they can cost extra. A package of 10 dives will cost roughly from US\$250 to US\$350, or US\$350 to US\$450 with equipment rental. Other possibilities are five-, 12- and 15-dive packages, and packages that allow you as many dives as you want within a certain number of consecutive days. In addition to the dive cost, there is a charge for using a boat – about US\$12 for half a day, US\$20 for a full day. There may also be a service charge of 10% if diving is billed to your room.

If you plan to do 10 dives in a week, budget around US\$600, perhaps US\$100 or US\$150 less if you bring all your own equipment.

DIVING HEALTH & SAFETY

Health Requirements

Officially, a doctor should check you over before you do a course, and fill out a form full of diving health questions (see p187). In practice, most dive schools will let you dive or do a course if you're under 50 years old and complete a medical questionnaire, but the checkup is still a good idea. This is especially so if you have any problem at all with your breathing, ears or sinuses. If you are an asthmatic, have any other chronic breathing difficulties, or any inner-ear problems you shouldn't do any scuba diving.

Diving Safely

In the Maldives the dive base will ensure you are aware of the following points to ensure a safe and enjoyable experience, whether scuba diving, skin diving or snorkelling:

- If you are scuba diving, you must possess a current diving certification card from a recognised scuba diving instructional agency. The resort dive base will check your card and provide training if you need it. A check dive is often required.
- Be sure you are healthy and feel comfortable diving.
- Obtain reliable information about physical and environmental conditions at the dive site. The dive base will always provide this.
- Be aware of local laws, regulations and etiquette about marine life and the environment.
- Dive only at sites within your experience level.

Be aware that underwater conditions vary significantly from one site to another. Seasonal changes can significantly alter any site and dive conditions. These differences influence the way divers dress for a dive and what diving techniques they use.

The following laws apply to recreational diving in the Maldives, and divemasters should enforce them:

- Maximum depth is 30m – this is the law in the Maldives.
- Maximum time is 60 minutes.
- No decompression dives.
- Each diver must carry a dive computer.
- Obligatory three-minute safety stop at 5m.
- Last dive no later than 12 hours before a flight.

Decompression Sickness

This is a very serious condition – usually, though not always, associated with diver error. The most common symptoms are unusual fatigue or weakness; skin itch; pain in the arms, legs (joints or mid-limb) or torso; dizziness and vertigo; local numbness, tingling or paralysis; and shortness of breath. Signs may also include a blotchy skin rash, a tendency to favour an arm or a leg, staggering, coughing spasms, collapse or unconsciousness. These symptoms and signs can occur individually, or a number of them can appear at one time.

The most common causes of decompression sickness (or 'the bends' as it is commonly known) are diving too deep, staying at depth for too long, or ascending too quickly. This results in nitrogen coming out of solution in the blood and forming bubbles, most commonly in the bones and particularly in the joints or in weak spots such as healed fracture sites.

Other factors contributing to decompression sickness include excess body fat; heavy exertion prior to, during and after diving; injuries and

'The cost of diving varies between resorts, and depends on whether you need to rent equipment.'

'Be aware that underwater conditions vary significantly from one site to another.'

illness; dehydration; alcohol; cold water, hot showers or baths after diving; carbon dioxide increase (eg through smoking); and age.

Avoid flying after diving, as it causes nitrogen to come out of the blood even faster than it would at sea level. No resort in the Maldives will allow you to dive less than 24 hours before a flight. Low-altitude flights, like a seaplane transfer to the airport, may be just as dangerous because the aircraft are not pressurised. There are various opinions about the risks and the time required to minimise them – a lot depends on the frequency, depth and duration of dives over several days before the flight. Seek the advice of an instructor when planning the dives during the final few days of your stay, and try to finish up with shallow dives.

Even if you take all the necessary precautions, there is no guarantee that you will not be hit by the bends. It's a diver's responsibility to be aware of their own condition, and that of their diving buddy, after a dive.

The only treatment for decompression sickness is to put the patient into a recompression chamber. That puts a person back under pressure similar to that of the depth at which they were diving so nitrogen bubbles can be reabsorbed. The time required in the chamber is usually three to eight hours. The treatment is usually effective, with the main problem being caused by delay in getting the patient to the chamber. If you think that you, or anyone else you are diving with, are suffering from the bends, get to a recompression chamber as soon as possible; there are two in the Maldives, at Bandos and Kuramathi resorts.

Ear Problems

Many divers experience pain in the ears after diving, which is commonly caused by failure of the ears to compensate properly for changes in pressure. The problem will usually fix itself, but injuries are often caused when people try to treat themselves by poking cotton buds or other objects into the ear.

Emergencies

The **Divers Alert Network** (DAN; in USA ☎ 919-684-8111; www.diversalertnetwork.org) operates a 24-hour diving emergency hotline in the USA. **DAN Maldives** (☎ 6640088) is based at Bandos resort, on North Male' Atoll, where there's a recompression chamber and a complete divers health service. There's also a new recompression facility and fully staffed diving clinic at **Kuramathi** (☎ 6660527), in Rasdhoo Atoll at the far north of Ari Atoll. They are both commercial facilities.

Insurance

In addition to normal travel insurance, it's a very good idea to take out specific diving cover, which will pay for evacuation to a recompression facility and the cost of hyperbaric treatment in a chamber. Evacuation would normally be by chartered speedboat or seaplane (both very expensive). Recompression treatment can cost thousands of dollars, especially since time required in the chamber could reach eight hours.

Some dive operations insist on diving insurance, or will provide it for about US\$10 for three weeks. Others may include the coverage in their rates.

DAN (www.diversalertnetwork.org) can be contacted through most dive shops and clubs, and it offers a DAN TravelAssist policy that provides evacuation and recompression coverage.

'Visitors must do their best to ensure that their activities don't spoil the experience of those who will come in the future.'

MARINE ENVIRONMENT PROTECTION

The waters of the Maldives may seem pristine but, like everywhere, development and commercial activities can have adverse effects on the marine environment. The Maldivian government recognises that the underwater world is a major attraction, and has imposed many restrictions and controls on fishing, coral mining and tourism operations. Twenty-five Protected Marine Areas have been established, and these are subject to special controls.

You'll find dive operators throughout the country are overwhelmingly conservation-minded too, which is a fantastic development. Diving techniques have been modified to protect the environment, and operators now use drift diving or tie mooring ropes by hand rather than drop anchors. The practice of feeding fish has been abandoned, and most operators are careful to ensure that unskilled divers are not taken on dives where they may accidentally damage coral.

Visitors must do their best to ensure that their activities don't spoil the experience of those who will come in the future. The following rules are generally accepted as necessary for conservation, and most of them apply equally to snorkellers and divers.

- Do not use anchors on the reef, and take care not to ground boats on coral. Encourage dive operators and regulatory bodies to establish permanent moorings at popular dive sites.
- Avoid touching living marine organisms with your body or dragging equipment across the reef. Polyps can be damaged by even the gentlest contact. Handling fish can remove the slimy coating that protects the animal's skin.
- Never stand on corals, even if they look solid and robust. If you must hold on, to prevent being swept away in a current, hold on to dead coral.
- Be conscious of your fins. Even without contact the surge from heavy fin strokes near the reef can damage delicate organisms. When treading water in shallow reef areas, take care not to kick up clouds of sand. Settling sand can easily smother the delicate organisms of the reef.
- Collecting lobster or shellfish is prohibited, as is spearfishing. Removing any coral or shells, living or dead, is against the law. All shipwreck sites are protected by law.
- Take home all your rubbish and any litter you may find as well. Plastics in particular are a serious threat to marine life. Turtles can mistake plastic for jellyfish and eat it. Don't throw cigarette butts overboard.
- Resist the temptation to feed fish. You may disturb their normal eating habits, encourage aggressive behaviour or feed them food that is detrimental to their health.
- Minimise your disturbance of marine animals. Chasing, grabbing or attempting to ride on turtles, mantas or any large marine animal can frighten them and deter them from visiting a dive site.
- Practise and maintain proper buoyancy control. Major damage can be done by divers descending too fast and colliding with the reef. Make sure you are correctly weighted and that your weight belt is positioned so that you stay horizontal. If you have not dived for a while, have a practice dive in a pool or lagoon before taking to the reef.
- Take great care in underwater caves. Spend as little time within them as possible as your air bubbles may be caught within the roof and thereby leave previously submerged organisms high and dry. Taking turns to inspect the interior of a small cave will lessen the chances of damaging contact.

'It's true that coral bleaching killed nearly all of the hard coral in the Maldives, but that's not the end of the story.'

BACK FROM THE BLEACHING

It's true that coral bleaching killed nearly all of the hard coral in the Maldives, but that's not the end of the story. In a few places old coral has unaccountably survived, and you can occasionally be surprised by a big-table coral or a long-branching staghorn. Soft corals and sea fans were less affected by coral bleaching and have regrown more quickly. Magnificent soft-coral gardens thrive at many dive sites, especially around channels that are rich with water-borne nutrients, and a few fine specimens can be seen at snorkelling depths on many house reefs.

The underlying hard-coral structure is still there of course – new coral grows on the skeletons of its predecessors. The healthiest living coral has many metres, perhaps kilometres, of dead coral underneath. New coral is growing on reefs all over the Maldives, though the large and elaborately shaped formations will take many years to build. It's fascinating to observe the new coral growth – the distinctly coloured patches with the finely textured surface of a living, growing organism. The first regrowth often occurs in crevices on old coral blocks, where it's protected from munching parrotfish. The massive Porites-type corals seem to come first, but they grow slowly – look for blobs of yellow, blue or purple that will eventually cover the whole block in a crust or a cushion or a brainlike dome. The branching corals (Acropora) appear as little purplish trees on a coral block, like a pale piece of broccoli. Growing a few centimetres per year (15cm in ideal conditions), they will eventually become big, extended staghorn corals or wide, flat-topped tables.

The recovery for coral is not uniform. Some parts of a reef can be doing very well, with 80% or 90% of the old surfaces covered with new and growing coral, while 100m along the same reef, new coral growth cover is less than 20%. Reef formation is a very complex natural process, but surprisingly the marine ecosystem as a whole seems to be undamaged by the coral bleaching. Fish life is as abundant and diverse as ever.

FISH-SPOTTER'S GUIDE

You don't have to be a hardcore diver to enjoy the rich marine life of the Maldives. You'll see an amazing variety just snorkelling, walking in the shallows, peering off the end of a jetty. This guide will help you identify a few of the most colourful and conspicuous varieties; see the colour pictures from p74. A point to remember is that even within the same species, colour and patterning can vary greatly over a fish's life cycle, as well as according to gender.

For a comprehensive online guide to the fish of the Maldives, visit www.popweb.com/maldiva.

Angelfish

Of the many species, there are 14 in the Maldives, mostly seen in shallow water, though some inhabit reef slopes down to 20m. They can be seen individually or in small groups. Small species are around 10cm, the largest around 35cm. They feed on sponges and algae. Regal (or empress) angelfish have bright yellow bodies with vertical dark blue and white stripes. The emperor, or imperial, angelfish (p75) are larger (to 35cm) and live in deeper water, with almost horizontal blue-and-yellow lines and a dark blue mask and gill markings; juveniles are quite different in shape and markings. The shy blue-faced angelfish (p75) also change colour dramatically as they age.

(Continued on page 77)

(Continued from page 72)

Butterflyfish

There are over 30 species in the Maldives; they are common in shallow waters and reef slopes, singly, in pairs or small schools. Species vary in size from 12cm to 30cm, when mature, with a flattened body shape and elaborate markings. Various species of this carnivorous fish have specialised food sources, including anemones, coral polyps, algae and assorted invertebrate prey. Bennett's butterflyfish (p75), bright yellow and 18cm long, is one of several species with a 'false eye' near the tail to make predators think it's a larger fish facing the other way. Spotted butterflyfish, which grow to 10cm long, are camouflaged with dark polka dots and a dark band across its real eye.

Anemonefish

Maldives anemonefish (p74) are indigenous to the Maldives. They are around 11cm, orange, dusky orange or yellow, with differences in face colour and the shape and thickness of the head bar marking. Their mucous coating protects them from the venomous tips of sea anemone tentacles, allowing them to hide from predators among the anemones' tentacles. In return for this protection, they warn the anemones of the approach of fish such as butterflyfish, which feed on the tentacle tips. Juveniles are lighter in colour than adults, and have greyish or blackish pelvic fins.

Flutemouth

One species of flutemouth (or cornetfish; p75) is very common in shallow waters in the Maldives, often occurring in small schools. They are very slender, elongated fish, usually around 60cm in length, but deep-sea specimens grow up to 1.5m. Flutemouths eat small fish, often stalking prey by swimming behind a harmless herbivore. The silver colouring seems almost transparent in the water, and it can be hard to spot flutemouths even in shallow sandy lagoons.

Moorish Idol

One species of moorish idol (p74) is commonly seen on reef flats and reef slopes in the Maldives, often in pairs. Usually 15cm to 20cm long, the moorish idol is herbivorous, feeding primarily on algae. They are attractive, with broad vertical yellow-and-black bands, pointed snouts, and long, streamer-like extensions to the upper dorsal fin.

Sweetlips

Only a few of the many species are found in the Maldives, where they inhabit outer-reef slopes. Some species grow up to 1m, but most are between 50cm and 75cm; juveniles are largely herbivorous, feeding on algae, plankton and other small organisms; older fish hunt and eat smaller fish. Oriental sweetlips (p75), which grow to 50cm, are superb-looking with horizontal dark and light stripes, dark spots on fins and tail, and large, lugubrious lips. Brown sweetlips are generally bigger, duller and more active at night.

Parrotfish

More than 20 of the many parrotfish species are found in the Maldives – they include some of the most conspicuous and commonly seen reef fish. The largest species grow to more than a metre, but those around 50cm long are more typical. Most parrotfish feed on algae and other organisms growing on and around a hard-coral structure. With strong, beaklike

Anemonefish are so called as they cover themselves in a special mucus from the anemone, which protects them from its sting.

Young male anemonefish living within the anemone are under the control of a single dominant female. When she dies the largest male fish changes sex and replaces her as the dominant female.

The sea snake is an air-breathing reptile with venom 20 times stronger than any snake on land. Basically, don't touch them if you're lucky enough to see any!

mouths they scrape and bite the coral surface, then grind up the coral chunks, swallowing and filtering to extract nutrients. Snorkellers often hear the scraping, grinding sound of parrotfish eating coral, and notice the clouds of coral-sand faeces that parrotfish regularly discharge. Colour, pattern and even sex can change as parrotfish mature – juveniles and females are often drab, while mature males can have brilliant blue-green designs. Bicolour parrotfish (p74) start life white with a broad orange stripe, but the mature males (up to 90cm) are a beautiful blue with hot-pink highlights on the scale edges, head, fins and tail. Green-face parrotfish grow to 60cm, with the adult male identified by its blue-green body, bright green 'face' and white marks on fins and tail. Heavybeak (or steephead) parrotfish can be 70cm long, and have a distinctive rounded head.

Snapper

There are 28 species of snapper that have been documented in the Maldives, mostly in deep water. Small species are around 20cm and the largest grow to 1m (snapper, themselves carnivorous, are popular with anglers as a fighting fish, and are excellent to eat). Blue-striped snapper (p74), commonly seen in schools near inshore reefs, are an attractive yellow with blue-white horizontal stripes. Red snapper (or red bass) are often seen in lagoons.

Rock Cod

Hundreds of species are currently classified as Serranidae, including rock cod and groper which are common around reefs. Smaller species reach 20cm; many larger species grow to 50cm and some to over a metre. Rock cod are carnivorous, feeding on smaller fish and invertebrates. Vermilion rock cod (or coral groper; p74) are often seen in shallow waters and near the coral formations in which they hide; they are a brilliant crimson colour covered with blue spots, up to 40cm long.

Stingray

Several species, such as the black-spotted stingray (p75) are often seen in very shallow water on the sandy bed of a lagoon where they are often well camouflaged. Most rays seen inshore are juveniles, up to about 50cm across; mature rays can be over a metre across, and maybe 2m long including the whiplike tail. A barbed and venomous spine on top of the tail can swing up and forward, and will deliver a painful injury to anyone who stands on it.

Reef shark

Several smaller shark species frequent reef flats and reef edges inside Maldivian atolls, often in schools, while larger pelagic species congregate around channels in the atoll rim at certain times of the year. Most reef species are small, typically 1m to 2m. Reef sharks hunt small fish (attacks on swimmers and divers are almost unknown). White-tips grow from 1m to 2m long and have white tips on dorsal fins. They are often seen in schools of 10 or more in the sandy shallows of a lagoon. Black-tips, distinguished by tips on dorsal fins and tail, grow to 2m. Grey reef sharks (p74) are thicker in the midsection and have a white trailing edge on the dorsal fin.

Surgeonfish

The surgeonfish are so named for the tiny scalpel-sharp blades that are found on the sides of their bodies, near their tails. When they are threatened they will swim beside the intruder swinging their tails to inflict

cuts, and can cause nasty injuries. Over 20 species of surgeon, including the powder-blue surgeon (p75), are found in the Maldives, often in large schools. The adults range from 20cm to 60cm. All species graze for algae on the sea bottom or on coral surfaces.

Triggerfish

There are over a dozen species in the Maldives, on outer-reef slopes and also in shallower reef environments. Small species grow to around 25cm and the largest species to over 75cm. Triggerfish are carnivorous. Orange-striped triggerfish (30cm) are common in shallow reef waters. Titan triggerfish have yellow and dark-brown crisscross patterning, grow up to 75cm and can be aggressive, especially when defending eggs, and will charge at divers. The clown triggerfish (up to 40cm; p74) is easily recognised by its conspicuous colour pattern with large, round, white blotches on the lower half of the body.

Unicornfish

From the same family as the surgeonfish, unicornfish grow from 40cm to 75cm long (only males of some species have the horn for which the species is named), and are herbivores. Spotted unicornfish are very common blue-grey or olive-brown fish with narrow dotted vertical markings (males can change their colours for display, and exhibit a broad white vertical band); their prominent horns get longer with age. Bignose unicornfish (or Vlaming's unicorn; p75) have only a nose bump for a horn.

Wrasse

Some 60 species of this large and very diverse family can be found, some on reefs, others on sandy lagoon floors, others in open water. The smallest wrasse species are only 10cm; the largest over 2m. Most wrasse are carnivores; larger wrasse will hunt and eat small fish. Napoleonfish (also called Napoleon wrasse and humphead wrasse; p75) are the largest wrasse species, often seen around wrecks and outer-reef slopes; they are generally green with fine vertical patterning. Large males have a humped head.

Moon wrasse, about 25cm, live in shallow waters and reef slopes, where adult males are beautifully coloured in green with pink patterning and a yellow marking on the tail. Cleaner wrasse have a symbiotic relationship with larger fish, which allows the wrasse to eat the small parasites and food scraps from their mouths, gills and skin surface. At certain times, large numbers of pelagic species congregate at 'cleaning stations' where cleaner wrasse abound – a great sight for divers.

SURFING

Surfing has been slow to take off in the Maldives, but its popularity is on the increase, especially since the O'Neil Deep Blue Contest was held at Lohifushi in 2005. There's some great surf throughout the country although only a few breaks are in the tourism zone, and they are only surfable from March to November. Surfers have a choice of basing themselves at a resort and taking a boat to nearby breaks, or arranging a live-aboard safari cruise. In either case, make arrangements in advance with a reputable surf travel operator who knows the area well. The Maldives is definitely not the sort of place where a surfer can just turn up and head for the waves.

Male sharks show their interest in females by biting them on the sides, often causing wounds, even though the female shark skin has evolved to be thicker than the male equivalent!

Male and female shark populations live in same-sex groups and rarely meet, save for mating.

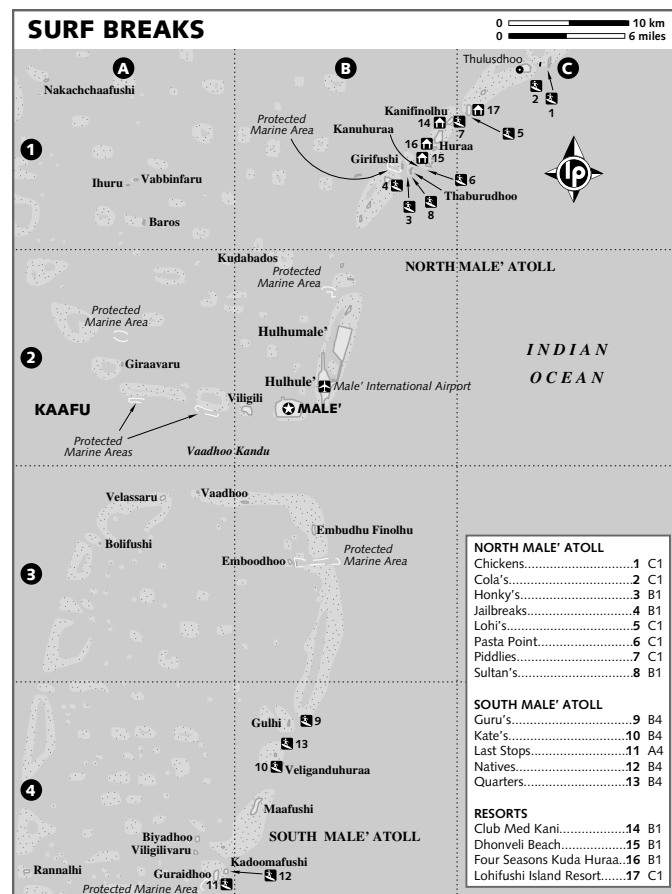
The period of the southwest monsoon (May to November) generates the best waves, but March and April are also good and have the best weather. June can have bad weather and storms, and is not great for boat trips, but it is also a time for big swells. The best breaks occur on the outer reefs on the southeast sides of the atolls, but only where a gap in the reef allows the waves to wrap around.

Surfing in the Maldives was pioneered by Tony Hussein (also known as Tony Hinde), a Sydney surfer who was shipwrecked in the Maldives in the early 1970s. Before the first tourist resorts were opened, he discovered, surfed and named all the main breaks, and had them all to himself for many years. Surfing has caught on with many young Maldivians – check the local surf scene at www.maldivesurf.org.mv.

NORTH MALE' ATOLL

This is where the best-known breaks are, and they can get a bit crowded, especially if there are several safari boats in the vicinity. The following breaks are listed from north to south.

Guided seaplane surfaris around the Maldives are offered year round by Tropicsurf (www.tropicsurf.net) in Australia. Spot the best surf from the sky, land and you're surfing in minutes.



Chickens A left-hander that sections when small, but on a bigger swell and a higher tide it all comes together to make a long and satisfying wave. It's named for the old poultry farm onshore, not because of any reaction to the conditions here.

Cola's A heavy, hollow, shallow right-hander; when it's big, it's one of the best breaks in the area. This is a very thick wave breaking hard over a shallow reef, so it's definitely for experienced, gutsy surfers only. Named for the Coca-Cola factory nearby on the island of Thulusdhoo, it's also called Cokes.

Lohi's A solid left-hander that usually breaks in two sections, but with a big enough swell and a high enough tide the sections link up. You can paddle out there from the resort island of Lohifushi, and guests of that resort have exclusive access to the break.

Piddlies A slow, mellow, mushy right-hander, a good Malibu wave. It's also called Ninja's because of its appeal to Japanese surfers. It's off the island of Kanifinolhu, home of the Club Med Kani resort, but it's very difficult to reach from the shore, and the wave is available to any boat-based surfer, not just Club Med guests.

Pasta Point A perfect left that works like clockwork on all tides. There's a long outside wall at the take-off point, jacking into a bowling section called the 'macaroni bowl'. On big days the break continues to another section called 'lock jaws', which grinds into very shallow water over the reef. It's easily reached from the shore at Dhonveli Beach resort, whose guests have exclusive use of this break. This used to be an all-Italian resort (hence the name of the break), but now it also attracts surfers from all over.

Sultan's This is a classic right-hand break, and the bigger the swell, the better it works. A steep outside peak leads to a super-fast wall and then an inside section that throws right out, and tubes on every wave.

Honky's During its season, this is the best wave in the Maldives. It's a super long, wally left-hander that wraps nearly 90 degrees and can nearly double in size by the end section.

Jailbreaks A right-hander that works best with a big swell, when the three sections combine to make a single, long, perfect wave. There used to be a prison on the island and the surrounding waters were off-limits, but now it's open to surfers.

SOUTH MALE' ATOLL

The breaks in South Male' Atoll are smaller than those in North Male' Atoll and generally more fickle. It will be harder here to find a boatman who really knows the surf scene.

Guru's A nice little left off the island of Gulhi; it can get good sometimes.

Quarters Another small right-hander, rarely more than a metre.

Kate's A small left-hander, rarely more than a metre.

Natives A small right-hander, rarely more than a metre.

Last Stops This is a bowly right-hander breaking over a channel reef. It's a Protected Marine Area, and can get very strong currents when the tides are running.

OUTER ATOLLS

Only a few areas have the right combination of reef topography and orientation to swell and wind direction. Laamu and Addu both have surfable waves on occasions, but they're not reliable enough to be worth a special trip.

Gaaf Dhaal has a series of reliable breaks that are accessed by safari boats in the season. From west to east, the named breaks are Beacons, Castaways, Blue Bowls, Five Islands, Two Ways (also called Twin Peaks; left and right), Love Charms, Antiques and Tiger. They're all outside the tourism zone and can only be visited with permits from Atolls Administration.

RESORT-BASED SURFING

The most accessible surf breaks are in the southeastern part of North Male' Atoll. Half a dozen resorts are within a short boat ride, but only a couple of them cater for surfers by providing regular boat service to the waves.

'The most accessible surf breaks are in the southeastern part of North Male' Atoll.'

Dhonveli Beach (p112) is the resort that's best set up for surfers – the reliable waves of the 'house break', Pasta Point, are just out the back door, while Sultan's and Honky's are close by. A surfside bar provides a great view of the action. Surfing packages at Dhonveli Beach include unlimited boat trips to the other local breaks with surf guides who know the conditions well, leaving and returning on demand. The surf programme is run by Atoll Adventures under the direction of Maldives surf pioneer Tony Hussein and can be booked only through a limited number of surf travel agents.

Lohifushi (p109), a few kilometres northeast of Dhonveli, is a bigger, more expensive resort with more facilities and it also has its own, exclusive surf break at the southern tip of the island. A bar and a viewing terrace overlook the wave, which has hosted international surfing competitions. Most of the rooms are quite a long walk from the surf. Boats to other surf breaks go for three-hour sessions, one leaving at about 9am, the other at about 2pm (US\$10 per person for three hours, extra hours US\$2 per person). Boat trips must be booked by 8pm the day before. Many agents and tour companies sell rooms in Lohifushi.

Club Med Kani (p114) is the other resort island with an adjacent surf break, but you need a boat to reach it from the resort. There's no surfing programme, no surf guides and no boats available for surfers. When Four Seasons Kuda Huraa reopens, it will probably run boat trips to the surf for guests, but surfers should confirm this with the resort.

SURFING SAFARIS

Most of the safari boats in the Maldives claim to do surfing trips, but very few of them have a specialised knowledge of surfing or any experience cruising to the outer atolls. Ideally, a surfing safari boat should have an experienced surf guide, and a second, smaller boat to accompany it, for accessing breaks in shallower water and getting in close to the waves. A surfing safari ('surfari') boat should also be equipped with fishing and snorkelling gear, for when the surf isn't working or you need a rest.

An inner-atolls surfari will just cruise around North Male' Atoll, visiting breaks that are also accessible from resorts in the area. If the swell is big and the surf guide is knowledgeable, the boat may venture down to South Male' Atoll to take advantage of the conditions. A one-week inner-atoll surf trip will start at around US\$850 per person. This might be cheaper than resort-based surfing, but it won't be as comfortable, and it won't give access to a handy and uncrowded house break.

An outer-atolls surfari is the only feasible way to surf the remote waves of Gaaf Dhaal – an experienced outer-atoll guide is essential. Ideally, the safari boat should be based in Gaaf Dhaal, and the surfers take an Island Aviation flight to the domestic airport on the island of Kaadedhoo where the boat crew meets them. This requires good coordination and management, but the experienced surfing tour operators have the procedure well organised. They should also have a good relationship with Atolls Administration, so that they can get the necessary permits before you arrive.

You need at least six people to make a safari boat affordable; the surfing specialists should be able to put together the necessary numbers. Don't book into a safari trip that is primarily for diving or cruising. Allow at least two weeks for the trip or you'll spend too much of your time getting to the waves and back. A 10-night surfari will cost from about US\$2000 per person, including domestic airfares.

SURF TRAVEL OPERATORS

The following agents specialise in surf travel and book tours and safaris to the Maldives.

Atoll Travel (☎ 1800-622310, 03-5682 1088; www.atolltravel.com; PO Box 205, Foster, Vic 3960, Australia) Australian and international agent for Atoll Adventures. It offers surfing packages to Dhonveli Beach resort, premium surfing safari tours in Male' Atoll and to the outer atolls.

Maldives Scuba Tours (☎ 01449-780220; www.scubascuba.com; Walsham Rd, Finningham, Suffolk, IP14 4JGP, UK) Maldives dive travel agency and UK agent for Atoll Adventures.

Surf Travel Company (☎ 02-9527 4722; www.surftravel.com.au; PO Box 446, Cronulla, NSW 2230, Australia) Venerable surf travel operator; it books surfers into Lohifushi resort and does boat-based tours in North and South Male' Atolls.

Turquoise Surf Travel (☎ 04 72 44 29 10; www.turquoise-voyages.fr; 8 rue Neuve St Martin, Marseille, France) This agent offers surfing holidays at Lohifushi Island Resort and boat-based surfari trips in Male' Atoll.

World Surfaris (☎ 1800-611163, 07-5444 4011; www.worldsurfaris.com; PO Box 180, Ste 8, 47 Brisbane Rd, Mooloolaba, Qld 4557, Australia) Offering tours to various surfing destinations, it books surfers into Lohifushi Island Resort and also does boat-based trips in the inner atolls.

'A one-week inner-atoll surf trip will start at around US\$850 per person.'

Food & Drink

Your culinary experience in the Maldives could be, depending on your resort, anything from *haute cuisine* ordered from a menu you've discussed with the chef in advance, to bangers and mash at the all-you-can-eat buffet in the communal dining room. What it's unlikely to be in either case is particularly Maldivian, given the dislocation from local life experienced in resorts. However, anyone staying in Male' or visiting inhabited islands should take advantage of this opportunity to try real Maldivian food (rather than the somewhat fanciful fare produced on Maldivian cuisine nights in resorts, which often owes more to Indian and Sri Lankan cooking than anything local). Maldivian cuisine is unsurprisingly simple and testament to a nation's historic survival on a relatively small, but bountiful, amount of locally occurring ingredients.

STAPLES & SPECIALITIES

All that grows in the Maldives are coconuts, mangoes, papayas and pineapples; the only other locally occurring product is fish, which explains the simplicity of Maldivian cuisine historically.

However, as trade with the Indian subcontinent, Africa, Arabia and the Far East have always brought influences of a more exciting nature, the result is far less bland than it could be. That said, don't expect to see a Maldivian takeaway open up on a street near you any time soon.

The Indian influence is clear in local cuisine above all; Maldivian food is often hot and spicy. If you're going to eat local food, prepare your palate for spicy fish curry, fish soup, fish patties and variations thereof. A favourite Maldivian breakfast is *mas huni*, a healthy mixture of tuna, onion, coconut and chilli, eaten cold with *roshi* (unleavened bread, like an Indian chapati) and tea.

For snacks and light meals, Maldivians like *hedhikaa*, a selection of little finger foods. In homes the *hedhikaa* are placed on the table, and everyone helps themselves. In teashops this is called short eats – a choice of things like *fihunu mas* (fish pieces with chilli coating), *gulha* (fried dough balls filled with fish and spices), *keemia* (fried fish rolls in batter) and *kuli boakiba* (spicy fish cakes). There are also samosa-like triangles of curried vegetables, and even small pizza squares are appearing in teashops now. Sweets include little bowls of *bondi bai* (rice pudding), tiny bananas and *zileybee* (coloured coils of sugared, fried batter). Generally, anything small and brown will be savoury and contain fish, and anything light or brightly coloured will be sweet.

A main meal will include rice or *roshi* or both, plus soups, curries, vegetables, pickles and spicy sauces. In a teashop, a substantial meal with rice and *roshi* is called long eats. The most typical dish is *garudia*, a

Don't be fooled by beer in Male' – it's all nonalcoholic, even if it doesn't look it!

Kavaabu are small deep-fried dough balls with tuna, mashed potato, pepper and lime – a very popular 'short eat'.

DOS & DON'TS

- Always eat with your right hand; your left hand is considered unclean
- Do ask for a spoon if you aren't comfortable eating with your bare hands Maldivian style; this won't offend.
- Remember that during Ramazan it's not acceptable to eat in public during daylight hours outside of resorts.

TRAVEL YOUR TASTEBUDS

If you are feeling like trying something both exotic and dear to the Maldivian people, go for *miruhulee boava* (octopus tentacles). This is not commonly found, but is often prepared in the atolls as a speciality, should you be lucky enough to visit an inhabited island as a guest. The tentacles are stripped and cleaned and braised in a sauce of curry leaves, cloves, garlic, chilli, onion, pepper and coconut oil – delicious.

soup made from dried and smoked fish, often eaten with rice, lime and chilli. The soup is poured over rice, mixed up by hand and eaten with the fingers. Another common meal is *mas riha*, a fish curry eaten with rice or *roshi* – the *roshi* is torn into strips, mixed on the plate with the curry and condiments, and eaten with the fingers. A cup of tea accompanies the meal, and is usually drunk black and sweet.

The Maldivian equivalent of the after-dinner mint is the areca nut, chewed after a meal or snack. The little oval nuts are sliced into thin sections, some cloves and lime paste are added, the whole lot is wrapped in an areca leaf, and the wad is chewed whole. It's definitely an acquired taste.

DRINKS

The only naturally occurring fresh water in the Maldives is rainwater, which is stored in natural underground aquifers beneath each island. This is quite a feat, and water conservation has always been extremely important in Maldivian culture, to the extent that the Maldives Tourism Law states that no water resources may be diverted from an inhabited island to supply a resort. All resorts have their own desalinating plants to keep visitors supplied with their (by local standards incredibly wasteful) water needs.

In resorts, consider the sheer carbon costs of only drinking imported Evian – even if you can afford to at \$5 a bottle – and go for desalinated water, which is perfectly good to drink, if perhaps something of an acquired taste initially.

The main drinks other than rainwater are imported tea and toddy tapped from the crown of the palm trunk at the point where the coconuts grow. Every village has its toddy man (*raa veri*). The *raa* is sweet and delicious if you can get over the pungent smell. It can be drunk immediately after it is tapped from the tree, or left to become a little alcoholic as the sugar ferments.

Fermented *raa* is of course the closest most Maldivians ever get to alcohol; the Maldives is strictly dry outside of resorts (and Maldivian staff cannot drink alcohol even there). Despite this, nonalcoholic beer is very popular in Male'. Soft drinks, including the world's only Coca-Cola made from salt water anywhere in the world, are available in Male' and in villages, at prices much lower than in resorts. The range of drinks is very limited. Teashops will always serve *bor feng* (drinking water), and of course *sai* (tea). Unless you ask otherwise, tea comes black, with *hakuru* (sugar). *Kiru* (milk) isn't a common drink, and is usually made up from powder.

WHERE TO EAT & DRINK

In most cases you won't have much choice – all resorts have at least one restaurant, typically two or more affording some choice. Buffets (always for breakfast, often for lunch and dinner too) allow for lots of different cuisines and plenty of choice to feature everywhere. In Male', where there's a much broader choice, the most obvious place for authentic Maldivian short eats is in any teashop in the town (see p100). Small

Bis hulavuu is a popular snack – a pastry made from eggs, sugar and ghee and served cold. You may well be invited to try some if you visit an inhabited island.

towns and villages elsewhere will also have teashops and are a great way to sample real Maldivian food.

VEGETARIANS & VEGANS

Vegetarians will have no problem in resorts (although if there's only a set meal rather than a buffet spread, veggies will often be stuck with an unimaginative pasta dish or ratatouille at cheaper resorts). In general, resorts are well prepared for all types of diet, and in better resorts the chef may cook you a dish by request, if what's on offer isn't appealing. Vegans, again, should fare reasonably well – soya milk is on offer in most resorts and the buffet allows each diner to pick and mix. Outside resorts and Male' things won't be so easy – fish dominates menus in the islands, but people will make an enormous effort to accommodate your wishes and *something* will always be found.

EATING WITH KIDS

There are very often kids' sections to menus and buffets in resorts, giving youngsters a choice of slightly less-refined foods ranging from spaghetti to fish fingers and chicken nuggets. Even if there's nothing dedicated to the kids' tastes, resort buffets are usually diverse enough to cater to even the fussiest eaters. Baby-food products are not on sale in resorts, so bring whatever junior will need for the trip.

HABITS & CUSTOMS

There's not a huge amount of etiquette to worry about if you eat in Male' or resorts. If you're lucky enough to be entertained in a local house, you should obey some basic rules, but again, the Maldivians are very relaxed and as long as you show respect and enjoyment, they'll be very glad to have you eating with them.

When going to eat, wait to be shown where to sit and wait for the *kateeb* (island chief) or the male head of the household to sit down before you do. Take a little of everything offered and do so only with your right hand, as the left hand is considered unclean by Muslims. Do ask for cutlery if you find it hard to roll your food into little balls like the Maldivians do; this is quite normal for foreigners. Thanks should not be overdone, as this can suggest a person was not happy to do whatever it was in the first place, although expressing gratitude to the head of the household, the *kateeb* and the cook will always be welcome.

EAT YOUR WORDS

Most people you meet will speak at least rudimentary English, although if you are lucky enough to visit an inhabited island and to be a guest in a local's house then it's likely they won't speak a word.

I'm a vegetarian

What is the local speciality?

What is this?

The meal was delicious

Thank you for your hospitality

aharen ehves baavatheh ge maheh nukan

dhivehi aanmu keumakee kobaa?

mee ko-on cheh?

keun varah meeru

be-heh-ti gaai kamah shukuriyya

Food Glossary

Any substantial meal, with rice and *roshi*, is called long eats, and might include the following:

<i>bai</i>	rice
<i>bis</i>	egg

garudia
kandukukulhu
mas
mas huni & hana kuri mas

mas riha
modunu
paan
rihakuru
roshi
valo mas
hiki mas

the staple diet of fish soup, often taken with rice, lime and chilli
a special tuna curry
fried fish; usually refers to skipjack tuna or bonito
dried, tinned, fried or cold fish mixed with coconut, onion, chilli and spices
fish curry
a simple salad
bread
garudia boiled down to a salty sauce or paste
flat, unleavened bread
smoked fish
sundried fish

Short eats (*hedhikaa*) is the selection of little sweet and savoury items displayed on the counter of a local teashop:

gulas fish ball; deep-fried in flour and rice batter
kuli boakiba spicy fish cake
bandi bai rice pudding; sometimes with currants
kastad sweet custard
foni boakiba gelatin cakes and puddings

Most fruit is imported, but the following are grown locally:

kurumba coconut, especially a young or new coconut
donkeo little bananas
bambukeyo breadfruit
bambukeyo hiti breadfruit used in curries
bambukeyo bandibai breadfruit used in desserts

Maldivians love their coffee and you can get very good quality espresso, latte or cappuccino anywhere in Male'.

Wine is available in resorts, but only in the better ones. Expect to pay extraordinary mark-ups; you'll do well to find anything OK for under US\$50.

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