

Northern Atolls

The least developed region of the Maldives, the Northern Atolls are pure tropical island escapism territory. While traditionally the tourism zone has only ever included the three atolls directly to the north of North Male' Atoll, there are a further six even further north that are gradually opening up to tourism as new islands are earmarked for development by the cautious central government. These atolls remain almost totally unknown by foreigners, and this is a great place to visit for a taste of untouched, traditional Maldivian life.

Maldivian history owes much to this part of the country – Muhammad Thakurufaanu, the man who drove the Portuguese out in the 16th century, was born on the island of Utheemu in Haa Alif Atoll, which remains a place of historical pilgrimage today for Maldivians who come to see his small wooden mansion.

There's also huge diving potential throughout the region; there are known to be wrecks along the western fringe of the atolls, but these are only now being properly explored and documented.

In the Northern Atolls there are only 11 functioning resorts at present, making this an uncrowded and truly remote part of the country to visit. Tourism is slowly set to expand here, but at the moment it's still about as remote from elsewhere in the country as you can get.

About 200km beyond Ihavandhippolhu Atoll at the country's northern tip lie the Lakshadweep Islands, which have had a long association with the Maldives. Formerly known as the Laccadives, these islands are now Indian territory, but geologically they are part of the mostly submerged Laccadive-Chagos ridge that underlies all of the Maldives and extends down to the Chagos Archipelago.

HAA ALIF

Traditionally known as Ihavandhippolhu and North Thiladhunmathee Atolls, the very northern tip of the Maldives is generally known to one and all as Haa Alif Atoll, even though this refers to an administrative district that actually comprises the small, trapezoid shaped Ihavandhippolhu Atoll and the northern tip of North Thiladhunmathee Atoll, which together have 16 inhabited islands and a population of just over 14,000. On Minicoy, the largest island of the Lakshadweep Islands, people speak a language very similar to Divehi and readily understand the Maldivian language themselves.

The second northernmost island, **Uligamu** (population 326) is the 'clear-in' port for private yachts – it has health and immigration officers as well as National Security Service (NSS) personnel, so yachts should be able to complete all formalities here (see p184). The Sailor's Choice store (on VHF) has basic supplies and some diesel (US\$0.50/L). Following a feasibility study, the government has decided to establish a yacht marina in the Northern Atolls, but Uligamu has been ruled out for financial and environmental reasons.

The capital island is **Dhidhdhoo** (population 3400), which offers good anchorage for passing yachts. **Huvarafushi**, the next largest

island (population 2800), is noted for its music, dancing and sporting activities, and it also has a fish-freezing plant.

The island of **Utheemu** (population 760) is the birthplace of Sultan Mohammed Thakurufaanu who, with his brothers, overthrew Portuguese rule in 1573. A memorial to this Maldivian hero, with a small museum and library, was opened in 1986. Thakurufaanu's wooden palace has been restored and Maldivians come to pay homage to the great man.

Kelaa (population 1900) was the northern British base during WWII, mirroring Gan at the other end of the archipelago. The mosque here dates from the end of the 17th century. Yams and *cadjan* (mat made of coconut palm leaves) are the island's products.

Resorts

In the increasingly unsubtle war of luxury being waged by major hotel brands in the Maldives, there's one place conspicuous in its silence and relatively rarely mentioned by the media – **Island Hideaway** (Dhonakhli Island; ☎ 6501515; www.island-hideaway.com; s/d/wb US\$810/810/1930; airport transfer by plane then speedboat 65 mins, \$275; 43 rooms; 🚗 🚗 🚗), which, true to its name, is located about as remotely as you can imagine in the Maldives' most northerly atoll. This is about as far from the bucket-and-spade brigade as you can get.

Opened in 2005, this is utter boutique luxury, a gorgeous crescent-shaped island with beaches 1.5km long on both sides. One of its big selling points is its marina, the first in the country. Here there are 30 berths for yachts up to 80m – all state of the art and installed by Walcone Marine.

The five categories of rooms start with the standard Funa Pavilions on the beach – which at 176 sq metres are still rather large – white-walled houses with separate bedrooms and living rooms, teak floors throughout, slate and onyx-finished outdoor bathrooms, all possible conveniences from DVD players to espresso machines and each featuring their own gardens. The astonishingly grand two water villas and the incredible two Hideaway Palaces (1420 sq metres of faintly ridiculous exclusivity coming in at around US\$3000 per night) make up the top end of the resort's accommodation.

The pampering extends to the Mandara Spa (sorry, the Hideaway Spa by Mandara...pretentious, moi?), the infinity pool, a range of restaurants that will effectively serve up bespoke meals 24 hours a day and a range of boutiques for retail therapy (as if you haven't had enough). The pristine reefs around the island and the untouched sites further afield make another great reason to come here – the **Meridis Diving School** (www.meridis.de) is exceptionally smart with luxury boats and tiny groups, but inevitably expensive.

To confirm exactly who it's aimed at, the resort offers landing facilities for private jets at the nearby regional airport of Hanimaadhoo. Those poor things without their own planes will get their own Island Aviation Services charter from Male', or – eek – can even arrive by the daily scheduled IAS flight. For most of us, a trip here is just a fantasy, but if it's anonymous, boutique luxury and pampering you're after this is the place to come.

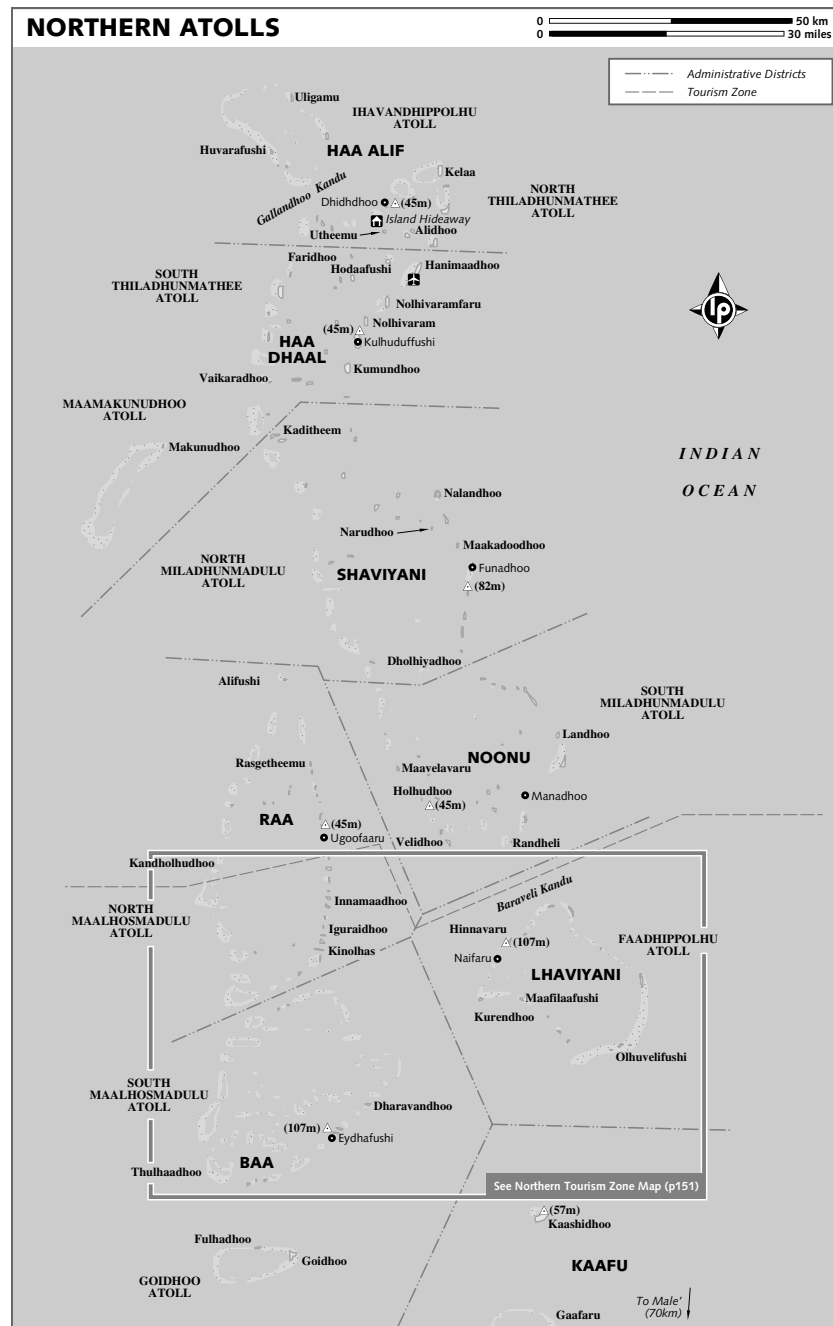
Alidhoo was allocated in 2004 for development in the near future as the atoll's second island resort.

HAA DHAAL

Haa Dhaal is an administrative district comprising some 17,000 people spread over 17 islands and made up of South Thiladhunmathee Atoll – the central section of an elongated reef and lagoon formation extending over 150km north to south – and the far smaller Maamakunudhoo Atoll, a narrow oval of reefs, about 20km to the west.

Kulhuduffushi is the capital island and also the most populous, with 7500 people. It has been chosen by the government as the Maldives' northern regional centre, and has a hospital, a secondary school and all basic services. A new harbour was being completed at the time of research. The traditional specialities here are rope making and shark fishing. The regional airport is on Hanimaadhoo (population 1300). Island Aviation has flights from Male' and back on most days – and this is the only runway in all the Northern Atolls, so flights are busy.

The highest natural point in the Maldives, at about 3m above sea level, is on **Faridhoo** (population 230), where there are ancient Buddhist ruins. On **Kumundhoo** there's a stone circle that seems to be the



base of Buddhist stupa, and *hawitta* (artificial mound) remains can still be seen on **Vaikaradhoo**.

The area around Haa Dhaal suffers severe storms, and quite a few vessels have gone down in these waters. Maamakunudhoo Atoll is the graveyard of several ships, including the English ships *Persia Merchant*, wrecked here in 1658, and the *Hayston*, which ran onto a reef in 1819. In each circumstance, survivors were rescued by local people and treated with kindness, a source of great local pride.

The island of Hodaafushi has been allocated as a resort and plans are currently being worked on to create a 9-hole golf course here.

SHAVIYANI

Looking at a modern map, the Shaviyani administrative district, made up of Miladhunmadulu Atoll and Thiladhunmathee Atoll, appears to be part of one elongated atoll enclosing a single, very long lagoon. Shaviyani administrative district comprises 15 inhabited islands with a total of 11,406 people. This atoll is most famous today as a major breeding ground for turtles, who breed successfully on its pristine beaches.

The capital is **Funadhoo** (population 1330), a pretty island with the ruins of an ancient mosque and 13th-century tombstones. The most populous island, with 1600 inhabitants, is **Komandhoo**. **Narudhoo** island is tiny but has a natural freshwater lake on it – one of the very few open places in the whole country where water collects.

The main mosque on the island of **Kanditheem** (population 1160) incorporates the oldest known example of the Maldives' unique Thaana script – it's an inscription on a doorframe, which notes that the roof was constructed in 1588. Another famous island is uninhabited **Nalandhoo**, where the Thakurafaanu brothers hid their boat between guerrilla battles with the Portuguese.

The beautiful crescent island of Dholhiyadhoo has been allocated as the atoll's first resort island.

NOONU

The southern end of the Miladhunmadulu-Thiladhunmathee Atoll complex is called South Miladhunmadulu, and it forms the Noonu administrative district, comprising

13 inhabited islands with a combined total of 11,000 people. The capital island, **Manadhoo**, has 1500 people, but **Holhudhoo** (population 1900) and **Velidhoo** (population 2100) are more populous.

On the island of **Landhoo** (population 850) are the remnants of a *hawitta* supposedly left by the fabled Redin, a people who figure in Maldivian folklore. The *hawitta* is a 15m-high mound known locally as *maa badhige* ('great cooking place'). Thor Heyerdahl writes extensively about the tall, fair-haired Redin in his book *The Maldivian Mystery*. He believes them to have been the first inhabitants of the Maldives, as long ago as 2000 BC.

Two islands, Maavelavaru and Randheli, have been allocated for development as the first two resort islands in Noonu Atoll.

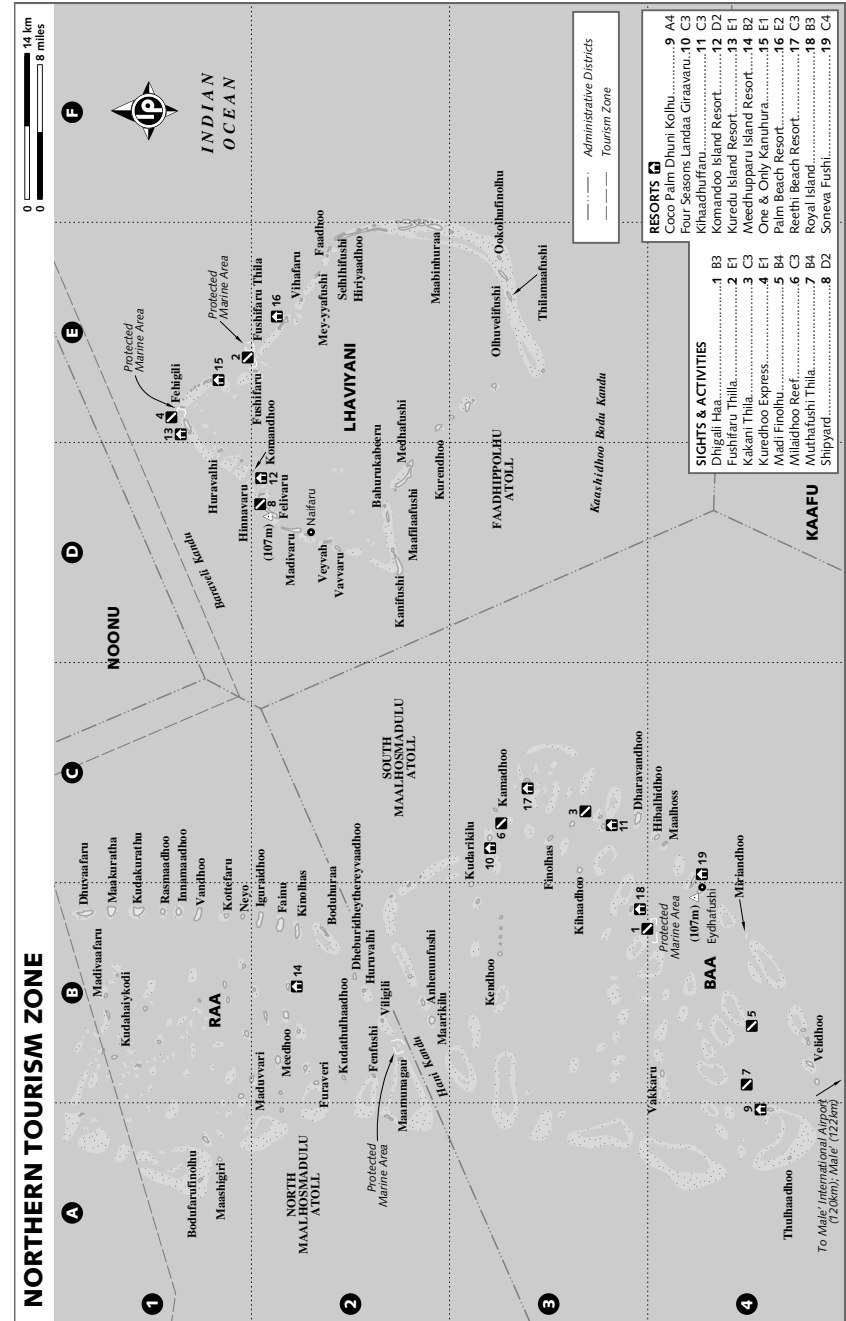
RAA

Raa administrative district, with 15,000 people dispersed throughout 16 inhabited islands and one resort, is made up of North Maalhosmadulu Atoll and the island of Alifushi. Development is slow but sure here – diving safari boats are starting to venture into this area, and new dive sites are being documented.

The sea to the west of Raa has some of the best fishing areas in the country. The capital island **Ugoofaaruu** (population 1250) has one of the largest fishing fleets in the country. On the west side of the atoll the tiny island of **Kandholhudhoo** (also spelt Kandoludhu) is the nearest to the rich western waters, and has 3600 people crowded onto it – a candidate for the most densely populated island in the country.

The island of **Alifushi** (population 2250), which is actually in a small, separate atoll to the north of Raa proper, is reputedly the home of the finest dhoni builders in the country. The government-owned Alifushi Boat Yard continues the tradition, producing a modern version of the dhoni. **Iguraidhoo** (population 1500) and **Innamaadhoo** (population 700) are also boat-building and carpentry centres that are accessible for excursions from Meedhupparu Island Resort.

According to local legend, the now uninhabited island of **Rasgetheemu** is where Koimala Kaloa and his princess wife landed after being exiled from Sri Lanka and before



moving to Male' to found a ruling dynasty. Another important visitor to the atoll was the Arab seafarer Ibn Battuta, who landed at **Kinolhas** in 1343 and then moved on to Male'.

The channel between Baa and Raa, locally known as Hani Kandu, is also named Moresby Channel after the Royal Navy officer Robert Moresby, who was responsible for the original marine survey of the Maldives made from 1834 to 1836. There's good diving on both sides of the Moresby Channel, as it funnels water between the atolls, bringing pelagic fish and promoting coral growth. Mantas abound in October and November. The channels entering the atoll are studded with interesting thilas, and reefs dot the inside of the atoll.

Resorts

Raa Atoll is home to just the one resort – many more are planned but the combination of tourism downturn and the tsunami have held up a lot of development projects.

You are truly remote at the **Meedhupparu Island Resort** (Meedhupparu island; ☎ 6587700; www.meedhupparu.com; full board s/d/t US\$210/250/335; airport transfer by speedboat 4hr, US\$170, by seaplane 45min, US\$300; 215 rooms; 🏠 🚗), the only island resort in the whole of Raa Atoll; and Meedhupparu does not disappoint, with its gorgeous wide white beaches sloping down to the lagoon. While once colonised by the Italian market, Meedhupparu today is mainly marketed in the UK and Germany, whose citizens make up the bulk of the guests here. Italians and Russians make up the other main groups.

Unaffected by the tsunami, Meedhupparu's buildings all date from 2000 when it opened. The resort also features an Ayurvedic Village made up of 24 houses, popular with German guests, as well as an area known as the 'Water Villas' that functions as a resort within a resort, aimed at wealthier clients. The Water Villas complex is marketed separately and non-Water Villa guests are not allowed into the Water Villa area of the island, which includes an exclusive Balinese spa and a charming garden full of Sri Lankan flowers. The rooms elsewhere in the resort are perfectly fine if lacking in character and the rooms in the Ayurvedic Village are identical, but simply feature thatched roofs.

Water sports and diving are big attractions here – the water-sports activities available include two catamarans and the diving is so diverse due to the remote location of the resort that new diving spots are constantly being discovered! Over 27 dive sites are visited regularly by the resort's dive boats and there's a huge variety of species to see. However, the diving isn't as cheap as it is at most resorts. There's a huge pool, gym, tennis and badminton courts and a big choice of bars and restaurants to keep people entertained.

All in all Meedhupparu is a great opportunity to escape from it all and combines remote location with plenty of activities and all-round good value.

BAA

The Baa administrative district includes South Maalhosmadulu Atoll and the small Goidhoo Atoll, 10km further south. Its inhabitants number roughly 11,000 people in 13 inhabited islands and a handful of resorts. Fishing is the most important activity, but Baa is also famous for its lacquer work and the fine woven-cotton sarong, called a *feylis*. **Eydhafushi**, the capital and principal island (population 2700), is also the *feylis* centre. **Thulhaadhoo** (population 2400) is the second largest island and the main centre for the production of lacquered boxes and jars. Both of these islands can be visited on excursions from nearby resorts.

Because of its isolation, **Goidhoo** has traditionally been a place for castaways and exiles. In 1602 Francois Puyard, a French explorer, found himself on the island of **Fulhadho** after his ship, the *Corbin*, was wrecked. Incredibly, in 1976 a German traveller was banished here for the murder, in Male', of his girlfriend – he refused offers of extradition, converted to Islam and later married a local woman.

Sights & Activities

DIVING

Strong currents flowing through the Kamadhoo Kandu provide an environment for soft corals, which thrive on **Milaidhoo Reef**, on the north side of an uninhabited island. The reef top, at 2m, is great for snorkelling, and it drops straight down to about 35m. This cliff has numerous caves and overhangs with sea fans and sponges.

The north side of **Kakani Thila**, at 25m to 30m, retains coral formations in excellent condition, and colourful soft corals fill the overhangs. It's also home to lots of fish, including Napoleons, jackfish and Oriental sweetlips.

The small **Dhigali Haa**, though well inside the atoll, commonly attracts pelagic species (barracuda) and grey reef sharks. Other fish include jacks, batfish and trevally. It's also a good place to see nudibranch, yellow and orange soft corals and anemones (with clown fish).

The sandy **Madi Finolhu** has large coral blocks on which black corals grow. Stingrays can be seen on the sand, and mantas also pass through. This is a good beginners' dive (20m).

Overhangs at **Muthafushi Thila** are home to soft corals and anemones. Many hard corals are in good condition and very colourful, soft corals can also be seen. There are large schools of blue-striped snapper.

Resorts

MIDRANGE

The **Reethi Beach Resort** (Fonimagoodhoo island; ☎ 6602626; www.reethibeach.com; s/d/t US\$125/179/242; airport transfer by seaplane 35min, US\$240; 100 rooms; 🏠 🚗) is all about well-heeled ecotourism, and even through it's very much a smart midrange resort, the management does a great job of making guests feel like it's still a haven for nature and stripped-down pleasure.

This good-sized island has plenty of natural vegetation, soft white beaches, an accessible house reef and an expansive lagoon. The buildings, all with thatched roofs, are designed to blend with the environment, and also incorporate some Maldivian design elements like the deep horizontal mouldings used on the old Friday Mosque in Male'. Rooms are very well finished and have air-con, TV, minibar, IDD phone, quality bathrooms and polished timber floors. The deluxe villas are more spacious and have better beach frontage, while the water villas are decent but nothing show-stopping.

Guests are mostly British, German and Swiss, many on half-board packages that let them try the weekly barbecue and the two speciality restaurants (Chinese and Maldivian) as well as the excellent selection in the main buffet.

For the sporting guests, there's a swimming pool, gym, squash, badminton and tennis. Windsurfing, sailing and other water sports are popular here because of the wide lagoon. Kitesurfing is the latest thrill on offer. Motorised activities like parasailing, wakeboarding and jet skis are available only at certain hours. The spa offers a full range of massage and beauty treatments. The **Sea-Explorer dive centre** (www.sea-explorer.net) is very professional and reasonably priced. Qualified divers can make dives off the house reef, and with few resorts in the area you'll probably have good dive sites to yourself.

Reethi Beach is an excellent resort all round – attractive, well managed, with great food, where you can relax completely or have a full-on action holiday.

Marketed as Kihaad Maldivi for an exclusively Italian market, **Kihaadhuffaru** (Kihaadhuffaru island; ☎ 6606688; www.valtur.it; airport transfer by seaplane 35min, US\$220, by speedboat 3hr, US\$140; 100 rooms; 🏠 🚗) is a very stylish resort on a gorgeous island that enjoys lots of vegetation and some great sand spits out into the lagoon. Italian guests are on packages that include meals, some drinks and lots of activities. The rooms are new, fully equipped (air-con, TV, minibar etc) and attractively designed; deluxe rooms have hi-fi systems, and water villas are also available. The restaurant serves a rich selection of Italian and international dishes: buffet for breakfast and lunch, table service for dinner. The resort has a first-class swimming pool, disco, spa, kids' club and water-sports centre, and the island itself is a delight, with shady palm trees, perfect beaches, a lovely lagoon for sailing and a house reef that's accessible for snorkelling and diving. Bookings are all through the Italian operator **Valtur** (☎ in Italy 39-6-47061; fax 39-6-4706334) and rack rates are unavailable.

Royal Island (Horubadhoo island; ☎ 6600088; www.royal-island.com; s/d/t US\$422/432/583; airport transfer by seaplane 35min, US\$285; 152 rooms; 🏠 🚗) is Villa Hotels' flagship upmarket resort (their others such as Paradise Island, Sun Island and Holiday Island are distinctly lower down the food chain) and it is clearly lucky to have avoided being saddled with a terribly naff sounding name, judging by the fate of its sister resorts. In fact, this is a classy place with attentive staff, an impressive spa and plenty of leisure activities.

The island is long and narrow, with magnificent long stretches of white beach and a brilliant house reef. Most of the natural vegetation has been preserved, including many coconut palms, pandanus, screw pines and seven big banyan trees. An old bathing pool and some mosque ruins have also been preserved.

The modern-looking rooms are nestled in trees and front onto the beach. Inside they have pine walls, hardwood floors and all the gadgets from air-con and IDD phone to electric kettle and satellite TV. The airy main restaurant offers a huge variety of styles – Italian, Indian, Mexican, Maldivian and others – all served as buffets. A second restaurant specialises in à la carte Mediterranean meals, while several bars serve snacks and drinks. Alcohol is a bit pricey here (about US\$5 for a beer; US\$7 for a glass of house wine), but many ‘extras’ are included in the room rate – mineral water, gym facilities, daytime tennis, windsurfing and snorkelling gear. The Royal Araamu Spa is a luxury facility with a relaxing ambience. Eight therapists perform a range of beauty and ‘wellness’ treatments from face massage to pedicure.

The Delphis Diving Centre is keen to have divers explore the many sites in Baa Atoll, and they’re very good guides. A single boat dive is US\$45 with tank and weights, or US\$57 with all equipment. An open-water course costs US\$595.

Though the style here is much more natural than at other Villa properties, it doesn’t have the character of many older, smaller resorts. But with its high-quality facilities and food, beautiful beaches and fantastic snorkelling and diving, Royal Island represents great value for money.

TOP END

The original Soneva resort in the Maldives, opening in 1995, the stunning **Soneva Fushi** (Kunfunadhoo island; ☎ 6600304; www.sixsenses.com/soneva-fushi; s & d US\$640; airport transfer by seaplane 30min, US\$330; 65 rooms; 🍷 🍷 🍷) has been somewhat eclipsed by its even more fabulous sister resort Soneva Gili in North Male’ Atoll, but this is still an incredible and alluring place. Whereas Soneva Gili is about water, Soneva Fushi is about the jungle and the incredible, dense vegetation of this island is one of the first things that strikes you on arrival.

Soneva Fushi is housed on the biggest resort island in the country (more than 1.5km long) but has just 65 luxurious villas. Each one is like a small house built with natural materials, fitted with designer furnishings and finished in rustic style. All the deluxe features are included (air-con, hairdryer, minisafe, CD player etc) but ‘modern’ items are concealed – no plastic is visible. Villas are well spaced around the edges of the island, affording complete privacy – they’re reached by sandy tracks that wind through the lush vegetation, which is kept as natural as possible. There’s a big range of villas as well as prices and even if the 15 ‘standard’ Rehendi Rooms come in comfortably below four figures a night, prices quickly rise as you move up the categories. The most expensive option, the Jungle Reserve, a vast Swiss Family Robinson-style retreat for the mega-rich, has to be seen to be believed.

The reception, bar and restaurant areas all have sand floors and cane furniture, and the chickens are free to wander anywhere. The food is superb, with the freshest, finest ingredients, beautifully prepared and presented. It could be called European-Asian fusion cuisine, with a bias towards light and tropical flavours. Lunch and sometimes dinner are buffet style, but the offerings change daily, and the wine list is wonderful. Meals are often served al fresco, and in-room dining is also available.

Picnics on isolated islands are popular, as are the dozens of different massages and treatments offered at the Six Senses spa. The atmosphere is completely relaxed and delightfully unpretentious – leave your jewellery and your dinner jacket at home.

There is the usual range of resort recreations, many of them complimentary. The **Soleni dive school** (www.soleni.com) has years of experience diving the sites around Soneva. A single boat dive is US\$69 with tank and weights, or US\$81 with all equipment. An open-water course costs about US\$695.

For back-to-nature meets *haute couture*, you’ll find nowhere better than Soneva Fushi.

Four Seasons Landaa Giraavaru (Landaa Giraavaru island; ☎ 6600888; www.fourseasons.com/maldives/; s/d/wb US\$800/800/990; airport transfer by seaplane 30min, US\$295; 102 rooms; 🍷 🍷 🍷), the second Four Seasons resort in the Maldives, was, like it’s badly tsunami-hit sister, still not operational

at the time of research. Unlike the Four Seasons at Kuda Hura, however, this property is brand new and promises to raise the bar again in the struggle for ultimate luxury in an already crowded market.

The accommodation is divided into thatched-roof beach and water villas, each replete with teak furnishings and rustic yet modern décor. Private plunge pools come with many of the rooms, as do personal butlers and the full range of amenities you’d expect from a five-star international chain.

Coco Palm Dhuni Kolhu (Dhunikholu island; ☎ 6600011; www.cocopalm.com.mv/dhunikholu; s/d/wb US\$452/495/914; airport transfer by seaplane 30min, US\$295; 100 rooms; 🍷 🍷 🍷), one of the most architecturally interesting resorts, has large tentlike thatched pavilions for reception, restaurant and bar areas. The beach villa rooms are circular with high, thatched, conical roofs, quality furnishings and open-air bathrooms, while the deluxe rooms have, in addition, an individual, free-form plunge pool. The 14 over-water bungalows are even more luxuriously appointed, and combine privacy with uninterrupted sea views.

The island itself is quite large with soft, white beaches all around and a very accessible house reef. The vegetation has a very natural look, although it’s a little sparse and scrubby – they’re working to thicken it up. Another highlight is the food. All meals are buffet, but the variety, quality and freshness is hard to believe – it’s one of the few resorts with perfect avocados.

With no other resorts around, divers here have access to almost untouched sites. Diving is run by **Ocean-Pro** (www.oceanpro-diveteam.com), which offers professional, personal service. A single boat dive is US\$51 with tank and weights, or US\$70 with all equipment. An open-water course costs about US\$646. Nitrox courses cost US\$207 and nitrox dives cost no extra.

Whale watching is an option in October and November, when the animals migrate through the channel between Baa and Goidhoo Atolls. Excursions include a visit to Thulhaadhoo, an island well known for producing lacquer work, which you can see and buy. For recreation there’s a gym, a spa, tennis courts, and a billiard table, as well as the Mandara Spa for Balinese-style massage.

Coco Palm has developed a well-deserved reputation for being an ideal honeymoon and couples’ hideaway and is maturing into a sophisticated home away from home.

LHAVIYANI

The single atoll of Faadhippolhu makes up the administrative district of Lhaviyani, where fishing is the main industry and tourism is gradually becoming more important. It has a population of about 10,000 living on just five inhabited islands. On the capital island, **Naifaru** (population 4350), the people have a reputation for making attractive handicrafts from coral and mother-of-pearl, and for concocting local medicines. **Hinnavaru** (population 4300) is also densely settled and the central government is promoting the development of **Maafilaafushi** as an alternative, but so far only about 100 people have settled there. Maafilaafushi had a much greater population in the 17th century, but it was later abandoned, though remnants of the old mosque can still be seen. Day trips from the resorts visit all these islands, as well as **Felivaru**, which has a modern tuna-canning plant.

Sights & Activities

DIVING

Usually done as a long drift dive through the channel next to the Kuredu resort, **Kuredhoo Express** is a demanding dive in strong currents but also offers brilliant snorkelling on the eastern side. Napoleon wrasse, grey reef sharks and trevally frequent the channel entrance, while inside are overhangs dripping with soft corals. Look for morays, turtles and stingrays. It’s a Protected Marine Area.

Shipyard is another demanding dive, with two wrecks within 50m of each other. Strong currents around these ships have promoted rapid growth of soft and hard corals, which now form a habitat for many types of reef fish. Moray eels and sweepers live inside the wrecks, while nurse sharks cruise around the bottom.

When the current is strong, **Fushifaru Thila** is no place for beginners, but when the currents are slow the top of the thila is superb for snorkelling. The thila, with lovely soft corals, sits in the centre of a broad channel and attracts mantas, eagle

rays, sharks, groper, sweetlips and turtles. Cleaner wrasse abound on the thila, which is a Protected Marine Area.

Resorts

Though Kuredu has been open for over 25 years, the other resorts are more recent (late 1990s), and reflect the upmarket trend in Maldives tourism.

BUDGET

Kuredu Island Resort (Kuredhoo island; ☎ 6620337; www.kuredu.com; s/d/wb US\$120/140/320; airport transfer by seaplane 40min, US\$250; 330 rooms; 🍷 🍷 🍷) is about as close as you can get to a resort city in the Maldives – this truly is the resort that has everything, and people will love it or loathe it in equal measure for this very reason. Since a comprehensive refit a few years ago Kuredu has managed to go impressively upmarket while retaining its very reasonable prices and it's now a great chance to enjoy a midrange style resort at distinctly budget prices.

Established as a diving camp in 1976, Kuredu is favoured by British and German visitors – the former make up some two thirds of the guests while the latter are the second biggest nationality represented. You can effectively have whatever kind of holiday you're after here – the sheer number of activities and facilities available is mind-boggling. From the only golf course in the Maldives (six holes and 250m driving range) and kite-boarding, to a decompression chamber and a football pitch, Kuredu has it all.

The beach bungalows are recently renovated with air-con, phone, hot water and minibar, but are still very affordable. The new, all-wood beach villas face the best beach, have an open-air bathroom, stereo and coffeemakers, and cost up to US\$30 more. Spa beach villas are more expensive again, and the spacious Sangu water villas, made with the honeymooners in mind, are suitably grand. In fact the Sangu Resort is an exclusive resort within a resort: the restaurant here does first-class buffet meals with live cooking stations as a special attraction and 'wedding' ceremonies or renewal-of-views services are held here.

The main reception, restaurant, bar, swimming pool, shops and dive centre are all near the centre of the island, and cater

for the generally younger, livelier crowd in the less expensive rooms. The buffets in the main restaurant are pretty good, with a fair selection of Asian and international dishes. In addition there are three à la carte restaurants specialising in Italian pizza, Thai food and grills. There's even a teashop where you can get typical Maldivian short eats at typical tourist prices (it's more popular with staff than guests). The big Babuna Bar is the busiest place in the evening and hosts movies, discos, cultural shows, games nights and live bands. Other bars offer poolside drinks or a more intimate atmosphere.

Recreation facilities include a gym, tennis courts, a well-used beach volleyball court and the aforementioned golf course. For water sports there are windsurfing, kitesurfing, catamarans, water-skiing, wakeboards and the ubiquitous banana. A new and palatial spa offers hour-long Swedish, Thai and Oriental massages as well as two-hour lessons so you can learn to massage your partner. Excursions go to a variety of local fishing villages, resorts and uninhabited islands. There's a day cruise on a traditional wooden yacht (US\$75) and a choice of fishing trips too.

Excellent dive sites are accessible to Kuredu and just a few other resorts. The **ProDivers centre** (www.prodivers.com) offers a full range of courses, and does a good job matching divers with others of similar experience and interest. A single boat dive costs US\$49 with tank and weights, or US\$65 with all equipment. An open-water course is US\$595. A nitrox course costs US\$99, and nitrox dives are available at no extra cost. Rebreather courses and dives are also available. Much of the house reef is accessible, and you can do good dives directly from the shore. ProDivers also runs a complete snorkelling program, with instructors taking groups for fish spotting, photography and wreck-snorkelling trips.

It's a well-run resort that has always been popular with young Europeans, giving it a lively, sociable atmosphere. Now it also has more honeymooners, older couples and families. The island is very big and has been intelligently developed to cater for a variety of needs. If you want high-style luxury or intimate island atmosphere, this resort may not be for you. But for activities such as diving and snorkelling, relaxation, recreation, families and fun, Kuredu is hard to beat.

MIDRANGE

Komandoo Island Resort (Komandhoo island; ☎ 6621010; www.komandoo.com; s/d/wb US\$270/280/420; airport transfer by seaplane 40min, US\$270, by speedboat 4hr, US\$120; 65 rooms; 🍷 🍷 🍷), the smaller and more stylish sibling of Kuredu, shares the same management. The feel at this resort couldn't really be more different, though – instead of crowds of excitable holidaymakers going from activity to activity, at Komandoo the pace is far more relaxed and the resort ethos is one of pampering and relaxation. There are no children allowed here, making this a favourite spot for honeymooners and other couples enjoying a romantic break.

The round island is ringed by a strikingly beautiful beach, although the sea breaks that surround much of the island obscure the desert-island perfection somewhat. The visitors here are mainly British and German.

The hexagonal rooms, prefabricated in pine from Finland, come complete with air-con, phone, four-poster bed, minibar, safe and CD player, and they all front directly onto a pure white beach. Fifteen water bungalows were added in 2006 and they are suitably impressive.

The four reefs accessible through two channels from the island have a wide variety of marine life (256 fish species have been documented) and recovering corals, so are ideal for snorkelling from the beach. The very professional **ProDivers** (www.prodivers.com) runs the dive centre, as on Kuredu, but with smaller groups and slightly higher prices – US\$52 for a single boat dive with tank and weights and US\$665 for an open-water course. Nitrox is available.

Perhaps Komandoo's most charming feature is its own uninhabited island just a short boat ride across the lagoon. This is almost too picture perfect to be believed, a perfect circle of heavily vegetated heaven with virgin beaches and total peace and quiet.

The island is not lush, but is impressively landscaped. The main restaurant and bar buildings have sea views, sand floors and tropical-island atmosphere. The food and service get rave reviews, and the new Etoile spa adds another opportunity for indulgence. If you want a small, quiet, quality resort, Komandoo is ideal.

Famous throughout the atoll for being a particularly beautiful island, triangular **Palm Beach Resort** (Madhirguraidhoo island; ☎ 6620087; www.palmbeach-maldives.com; full board s/d/t US\$248/364/489; airport transfer by seaplane 40min, US\$330; 100 rooms; 🍷 🍷 🍷) enjoys some of the best beaches in the atoll. The bungalows dotted along both sides of the island are quite big and have air-con, phone, TV, in-house movies, minibar and other mod cons, though the white walls, tiled floors and bamboo furniture aren't especially stylish. Most of the resort facilities (restaurant, bar, pool, spa, sports centre) are towards one end of the island, quite a way from some of the rooms. Electric carts and bicycles are available to help people get around.

The main restaurant serves all meals as buffets with an Italian bias, and they're very good. Seven bars are dotted around the island. Live music, discos and other entertainment happens in the pool bar. Tennis, squash and most water sports are free, as are some excursions and snorkelling trips (the lagoon isn't good for snorkelling). The Macana Diving School charges very reasonable diving rates and runs the full gamut of courses for beginners.

Palm Beach Resort is operated by Sporting Vacanze and most guests come from Italy, but it's not really a club-style resort and the animation is low key. In fact the whole resort has a very casual atmosphere. It attracts all age groups, and quite a few families with children, so it's perfectly possible to stay here as a FIT (fully independent traveller), unlike at many Italian package resorts.

TOP END

One & Only's first Maldivian resort, **One & Only Kanuhura** (Kanahuraa island; ☎ 6620044; www.oneandonlyresorts.com; s/d/wb US\$664/698/1140; airport transfer by seaplane 40min, US\$309; 100 rooms; 🍷 🍷 🍷) is a sumptuous, charming, impressive place with magnificent beaches, stunning accommodation and top-notch food. This place manages to get it right on so many levels – it's classy and stylish without being too formal, it's romantic without being too quiet and it's welcoming to families without allowing the kids to run riot. If you want a laid-back, high-end beach holiday with considerable style, this may be for you.

The rooms combine classical luxury and elegant simplicity. The beach villas have four-poster beds, a separate dressing area, fabulous indoor-outdoor bathroom, lots of polished timber and a frontage onto the perfect beach. They're equipped with the works – air-con, safe, stereo, satellite TV, DVD, espresso machine, minibar, bathrobes, umbrellas and even slippers. The more expensive suites and water villas are even bigger and feature several rooms, private spas, sun decks and direct sea access.

The resort's public areas are focused around the expansive infinity pool near the main jetty. This has the main Thin Rah restaurant at one end, the Olive Tree Italian restaurant to one side and the wonderfully Arabesque bar at the other. Also near the pool is the One & Only Spa, a serene space that's central to the resort's concept, with some 40 treatments on offer. There's also a gym, aerobics studio, karaoke bar, cigar lounge, games room and library with free Internet access. Other facilities around the island include the Nashaa nightclub, several boutiques, a coffee shop, tennis and squash courts, and an excellent kids' club. This is a complete resort.

At the other end of the island is the high-end outdoor dining option of the Veli Café – overlooking the resort's very own desert islet of Jehunuhura. A complimentary boat shuttles guests back and forth between the two, the main attraction of Jehunuhura being the gorgeous Cove's Beach restaurant, open for lunch, but there's also the

beds scattered about the undergrowth for lovers to lounge in while pretending to be in an upmarket version of *Lost*.

Kanahuraa is a big island, about 1km long, and assiduous landscaping is augmenting the natural vegetation with local species. The environment is a priority here – garden waste is composted, water is recycled, sewage is reprocessed and solar panels provide the hot water. Lovely, squeaky beaches go right around the island, and the wide lagoon makes for smooth sailing – you can follow the reef for 5km and make your own stops at several tiny uninhabited islands along the way. Water-skiing is an option; jet skis are not. Field trips here vary from dolphin watching to one of the most unusual we've come across – a trip to the tuna-tinning factory on nearby Felivaru.

The house reef is not suitable for snorkelling, so take one of the special snorkelling excursions run by the **Sun Dive Centre** (www.sundivecenter.com), a PADI Gold Palm facility that caters for youngsters, beginners and advanced divers. Over 40 dive sites are accessible. A single boat dive costs US\$65 with tank and weights, or US\$75 with all equipment, and an open-water course costs US\$660. Nitrox dives costs US\$5 extra, and a nitrox course is US\$280.

One & Only Kanuhura is a treat and a half, a full resort thought out by a company fanatical about getting everything right. On all fronts it scores maximum points – stay here if you are lucky enough to have the chance.