

The Maldives on a budget

BY SARAH HARVEY

Until recently the Maldives has been synonymous only with luxury travel and exclusivity; affordable accommodation was scarce and even the cheapest resorts were beyond the means of many. But a massive transformation is taking place in the local travel industry which means that the Maldives is opening up a wider range of holiday options to meet the needs of all kinds of travellers. In fact today it's now possible to spend just \$100-200 per day covering accommodation, food and entertainment.

There's still no shortage of ultra-expensive accommodation, with some villas costing more

than \$15,000 per night, and they are just as popular as ever. But guesthouses are now rapidly spreading across the country following changes to government legislation that has allowed them to operate for the first time in decades. This means that the Maldives is now within reach of a wider demographic of traveller (and also more options are available to Maldivians wanting to get away for a short break).

The 1,190 tiny islands that constitute the Maldives are categorised into three main groups: 110 "resort islands" (with just one resort per island), 200 "inhabited islands" (islands with local

communities and guesthouses on them) and the remaining islands are classed as "uninhabited islands". These categories all have different laws applicable to them, the most significant of which is that alcohol, bikinis and pork are only available on islands classed as resort islands.

Until recently it was practically impossible to get a room outside of Male' for less than \$300 per night (the average rate for a three-star resort). Guesthouses were banned and it was illegal for tourists to stay overnight on an island with a Maldivian community living on it. Now, there is decent accommodation from as low as \$30 per night in cheap and simple guesthouses. The biggest benefit to Maldivians from this is that money from the guesthouses goes directly into the Maldivian community as they are mostly owned, operated and staffed by Maldivians. Also in turn these guesthouses support an abundance of other local enterprises such as cafes, diving centres, watersports centres and boat companies by creating a new market for them in order to keep the guests entertained.

Many of the guesthouses consist of a just few homely bedrooms although practically all of

them have air-conditioning, en-suite bathrooms and an activities and excursions programme for guests. The higher-priced "guesthouses" can cost up to about \$150 per night and are more akin to boutique hotels or holiday rentals - some even have private pools and spa facilities. This type of guesthouse is particularly popular among honeymooners and young families because they provide a higher level of comfort, amenities and facilities. No matter where you stay, and whether you're a millionaire or a backpacker, the thing to remember is everyone in the Maldives gets the same white sand, azure sea and brilliant sunshine.

The chain of Indian Ocean islands that make up the country lie to the south-west of India and Sri Lanka, straddling the equator. The proximity to the equator means that the climate is hot and humid; the temperature hovers around 30c all year-round and it never gets cooler than 25c even when it rains. Wet season is from April to November but there's still an average of 8 hours' sunshine per day. Showers are sporadic (often occurring only at night). Bargain-hunters will find the best accommodation deals during this period.

Many travellers use the tiny 2.2sq km capital city of Male' as a jumping-off point as most of the public ferries to surrounding islands and

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some overnight ferries to the further-flung atolls depart from Male' although inter-atoll ferries and of course seaplane flights are better options for covering longer distances. The majority of independent travellers tend to opt for accommodation within Male' Atoll or neighbouring Ari Atoll (which reduces costs and travelling time) such as on the islands of Maafushi, Guraadhoo, Himmafushi and Thulusdhoo. Maafushi is one of the most popular islands amongst backpackers due to the location and choice of guesthouses. There are about 23 guesthouses on Maafushi



which is remarkable considering the island is 1.2km by 0.2km in size.

Getting from one island to another without going back to Male' is harder because the network is Male'-centric (and there aren't any 'taxi boats' unlike in Southeast Asia). But there are a few ferries which come in handy for island-hopping, such as the Male-Maafushi-Guraadhoo-Gulhi ferry. Travellers can also sometimes hitch a ride on a fishing boat or cargo boat if they inquire locally - Maldivians are usually more than happy to try to help travellers.

While for the past few decades the Maldives has only been accessible to affluent travellers (the majority of which were honeymooners) the arrival of guesthouses is changing the demographic slightly. Singles in their 20s and 30s, diving and surfing enthusiasts and groups of friends are opting for guesthouse accommodation. Couples and families are also starting to see guesthouses as a more colourful and affordable alternative to resorts and it's not uncommon on islands such as Dhigurah and Maafushi to see foreign couples pushing buggies around the island.

Raki Bench runs the largest website that specialises in Maldivian guesthouses, Guesthouses-in-Maldives.com. "There's definitely been a big increase in demand for guesthouses recently", he said. "Many guesthouses are fully booked during the high season, new guesthouses are opening all the time; people are becoming aware of alternative options to resorts and are taking advantage of the good value that guesthouses offer."

"We've seen an increase in the Asian market, especially Singapore and Malaysia. Couples and families are the main demographic," he says. "Many people are on a budget but many also don't like the idea of being stuck in a private resort island and being limited to only the things which the resort has to offer."

Dhangethi is one of the newest destinations for travellers. The island is home to 1,200 Maldivians and is located 87km from Male', in Alif Dhaal Atoll. Other than tourism; fishing, handicrafts, carpentry and boat-building are the main sources of employment. At Holiday House Dhangethi you



can have a picnic on a sandbank or go windsurfing for \$20 (compared to at least \$70 at a resort) or hop on a boat for an all-day diving trip for around \$60 (compared to \$90-\$250 at a resort).

Some uninhabited islands also have independent water-sports and diving centres for travellers to choose from, such as Maafushi Dive Centre where it's around \$50 for a 2-dive day trip including equipment rental.

Whale sharks the size of buses, manta rays, moray eels, countless reef sharks and crystal-clear water are just some of the reasons why the Maldives is one of the world's best diving destinations. There



are more than 2,000 species of tropical fish and the sheer quantity of sea-life is barely matched in any other location worldwide. Divers can either book through their guesthouse or stroll around an island to search for a diving centre and then hop on a boat to track whale sharks and mantas (the Maldives is the only place on the planet with a year-round population of whale sharks). There are also countless opportunities to do wreck dives, drift dives, night dives, thilas, walls and caves.

Those who prefer to stay above the waves can choose from exciting water-sports activities, just as they can do at a resort, including surfing, windsurfing, paddle-boarding, kite-boarding and fishing.

Cultural activities are also available at some guesthouses. Guraadhoo is home to the newly-opened Islandway guesthouse. It's in South Male' Atoll, just 31km from the capital with a population of 1,459. Islandway has a unique array of cultural activities for guests including Maldivian cookery

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classes with the only Maldivian female head chef in the country, watching craftsmen at work using traditional skills handed down for generations or spending the day learning pole and line fishing from fishermen.

Backpacker Michaela Krepela, from the Czech Republic, has visited more than a dozen guesthouses in the Maldives, with the islands of Dhangethi and Rasdhoo being amongst her favourites.

"I had amazing time on the local islands," she says. "In the resort islands it is only about relaxing on the beach but to stay in a guesthouse in the local islands is to really experience the Maldives."

While a lot of the guesthouses have their own dining facilities, a trip to a local cafe is a fun way of getting to know the country through the cuisine. The delicious traditional breakfast of mas'huni roshi is always popular. It consists of tuna, coconut, lime and chilli wrapped up in thin tortillas known as roshi and costs around \$1-\$2 a pop, including tea or coffee. Fish curries and Maldivian tapas known as hedika form the backbone of Maldivian cuisine. Most of the fish curries are fairly mild and are served with roshi. "Hedika" consists of small deep-fried squares, spheres or triangles made from fish and coconut with a handful of other local ingredients such as curry leaves, eggs and onion. All of these dishes can be found in cafes on local islands alongside international classics such as spaghetti bolognese, pizza, pasta, fried rice and sandwiches.

Dhivehi Malaafai in Rahdhebi Magu is one of the most authentic dining venues in the capital city, with a coconut thatch roof, a fresco terraces and quality curries and service. Over on Maafushi, Rehendhi is right on the beach and very popular with locals and travellers alike. New Point Cafe on Himmafushi is popular with surfers and locals alike and serves excellent hedika.

Michael Ahmed is managing director of Islandway guesthouse in Guraadhoo and has several more guesthouses in the pipeline.

"For tourists, guesthouses offer a chance to experience and share the real-life experience of the 'real Maldives'," he says. "Our rich culture and the native livelihoods you can see on the islands show that the Maldives is definitely not about 'the art of doing nothing' but rather is a place bustling with friendly, hard-working and very hospitable people who take pride in their way of life. What really makes the Maldives can only be experienced by strolling alongside its unique people and blending in alongside their daily life."

While guesthouses give tourists the opportunity to live alongside Maldivian communities, a few adaptations have been necessary. It's a little-known fact outside of the Maldives but everyone visiting a Maldivian guesthouse should be aware that alcohol, pork and skimpy swimwear are illegal on "inhabited islands" (those things are only allowed on 'resort islands'). This is because as a moderate Sunni Muslim nation the culture is fairly conservative - Maldivians aren't allowed to drink and the women usually bathe in the sea fully-



clothed. Guesthouse owners realised that many of their foreign guests wanted to have a beer or two and wear Western-style swimwear so they have come up with some ingenious solutions.

Take Maafushi for example. The guesthouse owners there have negotiated with the island council to provide a private stretch of beach where bikinis are permitted and it's available for all tourists to use. It's discreetly tucked away from public view behind some coconut thatch screens. With Maafushi as something of a model (being the first uninhabited island to develop large-scale guesthouse tourism) many guesthouses on other islands have followed suit with private beach areas, such as the stunning beaches at Rasdhoo and Dhigurah.

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Most guesthouses also offer day trips to resorts for discounted rates (such as \$25 for a day pass) so that travellers can sunbathe in bikinis, purchase cocktails and beer and generally see what a Maldivian resort looks like.

However, if you're quite happy to "survive" a holiday in the Maldives without those things, then there's no pressure to do so. In fact many guesthouse owners report a significant percentage of backpackers say they don't feel the urge to drink in the Maldives (although they seem to appreciate the tourist beaches a lot!). After all, the reason travellers travel is to experience a different culture, environment and way of life outside of our normal range of experience (as well as to find the sunshine).



Bylo mi ctí poskytnout informace a mé vlastní fotografie pro článek do inflight magazínu "TMA - Trans Maldivian Airways - Inflight Magazine 2014", který vydává letecká společnost provozující hydroplány.

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