

The Maldives for two hundred dollars a day

Renowned as a playground for the rich, the Maldives has seen a shift in tourism thanks to the opening of affordable guesthouses and the launch of low-fare flights

photography Lucie Mohelnikova • words Sarah Harvey



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A jetty in Dhangethi, facing guests from top; Ekibaa restaurant in Dhangethi; typical street scene



Kirsty Campbell
backpacker
On her recent budget visit: "I'd always dreamed of going to the Maldives and it was even better than I imagined. The snorkelling was out of this world."

US\$120 a night and are more like boutique hotels or holiday rentals, equipped with private pools and spa facilities.

No matter where you stay in the Maldives, everyone - millionaire and backpacker alike - enjoys ready access to white sand, azure sea and brilliant sunshine. The wet season lasts from April to November but there's still an average of eight hours of sunlight every day, with rain tending to fall at night. This is the perfect time for bargain hunters looking for the best accommodation deals.

For those willing to forgo speed and comfort, it's possible to save big on transportation. The Maldives can be tricky and expensive to navigate because the islands are scattered far and wide. Private charters can cost up to US\$200 while public ferries will only cost you pocket change.

For example, the ferry to Maafushi, one of the most popular islands with backpackers due to its proximity to Malé and its guesthouses, costs only US\$3 each way and runs daily except Fridays.

Many travellers use Malé as a jumping-off point for trips to the surrounding islands due to the accessibility of public ferries, including overnight services to farther-flung atolls. The majority of travellers opt for accommodation within the Malé Atoll and Ari Atoll, which include the popular islands of Maafushi, Guraidhoo, Himmafushi and Thulusdhoo.

Getting from one island to another without going back to Malé is harder because the network is Malé-centric and there are no "water taxis". But travellers can sometimes hitch a ride on a fishing or cargo boat if they inquire locally - Maldivians are usually happy to help.



what it costs

How you can get a slice of paradise for less than US\$200 a day

CURRENCY
Maldivian rufiyaa (US\$ also widely accepted)

GUESTHOUSES
US\$40-100/night

LUNCH
US\$3-10

WATER
US\$1

EXCURSIONS
US\$20+

TAXI
US\$2 flat rate

FERRY
US\$1-5 (inter-atoll ferries cost more)

"You can see real life and see how people really live. Many Maldivians are very poor but they are so kind to tourists"

Michaela Krepela - Backpacker



The phrase "budget Maldives" may seem like an oxymoron considering the republic's reputation as a place where bronzed movie stars frolic on the sand and millionaires cruise around in mega yachts. Here, there's no shortage of ultra-pricey places to stay, with some villas running to more than US\$15,000 a night. But affordable digs are now available in the form of the many guesthouses that have opened after legislative changes made them legal for the first time in decades.

The Maldives is made up of 1,190 tiny islands, which fall into three main groups: resort islands (with just one resort per island), inhabited islands (those with local communities and guesthouses) and uninhabited islands.

Until recently, it was nearly impossible to get a room outside of the congested capital of Malé for less than US\$300 a night - the average rate for a three-star resort. Guesthouses were banned and it was illegal for tourists to stay overnight on any island inhabited by a local community. Now travellers can stay at a simple yet comfortable guesthouse for as little as US\$40 a night. Many of these guesthouses have air-conditioning and en-suite bathrooms, and offer activities like island-hopping, night fishing, snorkelling and diving. The more upscale guesthouses charge up to

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The budget isles

While for the past few decades the Maldives has only been accessible to affluent travellers, the arrival of guesthouses has signalled a sea change. Singles in their 20s and 30s and surfing enthusiasts are discovering the more affordable places to stay, while couples and families are starting to see guesthouses as an alternative to high-priced resorts.

"There's definitely been a big increase in demand for guesthouses recently," says Raki Bench, who runs Guesthouses-In-Maldives.com. "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."

Bench has also noticed an increase in the number of guests from Asian nations, particularly 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 on a private resort island and being limited to only the things the resort has to offer."

Dhangethi, which is 87km from Malé and home to 1,200 Maldivians, is an emerging backpacking destination. Beyond tourism, the locals earn their livelihoods from fishing, handicrafts, carpentry and boat-building.

At Holiday House Dhangethi, guests can picnic on the sand or go windsurfing for just US\$20 - versus about US\$70 at a resort. An all-day diving trip costs about US\$60 while the same trip runs anywhere from US\$90-\$250 at a resort. Some inhabited islands also have a variety of independent watersports and diving centres such as the Maafushi Dive Centre, where a three-day trip including equipment rental costs between US\$49-\$55.

The Maldives is considered one of the world's best diving destinations: it's home to more than 2,000 species of tropical fish along with whale sharks the size of double-decker buses, manta rays, money eels and reef sharks.

Divers can opt for shore dives to explore the island's "house reef" or 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 opportunities to check out sunken wrecks, try drift diving and night diving, and venture into undersea caves and thias (underwater islands).

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Clockwise from top: street scene; fisherman in Rasdhoo; sea view at Ekibaa Restaurant in Dalghethi

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The culture club

Experience the local way of life through the cultural activities offered at some guesthouses. Guraidhoo is home to the recently opened Islandway guesthouse, which offers Maldivian cooking classes conducted by the republic's only native-born female head chef. Guests can also watch craftspeople at work or spend the day learning pole and line fishing.

Czech Republic backpacker Michaela Krepela has visited more than a dozen guesthouses in the Maldives and her picks of the islands are Dhangethi and Rasdhoo. "I had an amazing time on the local islands," she says. "On the resort islands it's only about relaxing on the beach, but to stay in a guesthouse on the local islands is to really experience the Maldives."

A trip to a local café is a fun way to get to know the local cuisine. The delicious traditional breakfast of *mas'huun roshi* is a long-time hit with travellers. The dish, which consists of tuna, coconut, lime and chili wrapped in thin tortillas known as *roshi*, costs around US\$1-\$2 including tea or coffee. Fish curries and the local version of *chapas*, known as *hedhika*, form the backbone of Maldivian cuisine. Most of the fish curries here are fairly mild and are served with *roshi*. Hedhika are small, deep-fried treats made with fish, coconut, curry leaves, eggs and onion.

Dhivehi Malaafay Café in Rahdhebi Magu is one of the capital's most authentically Maldivian dining venues, with its thatched roof, alfresco terraces and quality curries. The Yellow Rehendhi Inn, right on a beach in Maafushi, serves cheap and satisfying Sri Lankan *kottu roti* (bread with meat or vegetables). New Point Café in Himmafushi is popular with surfers and locals alike and serves excellent hedhika.

The boom in budget accommodation has given the local economy a boost, allowing small business owners to make a living running cafés, dive centres and souvenir shops.

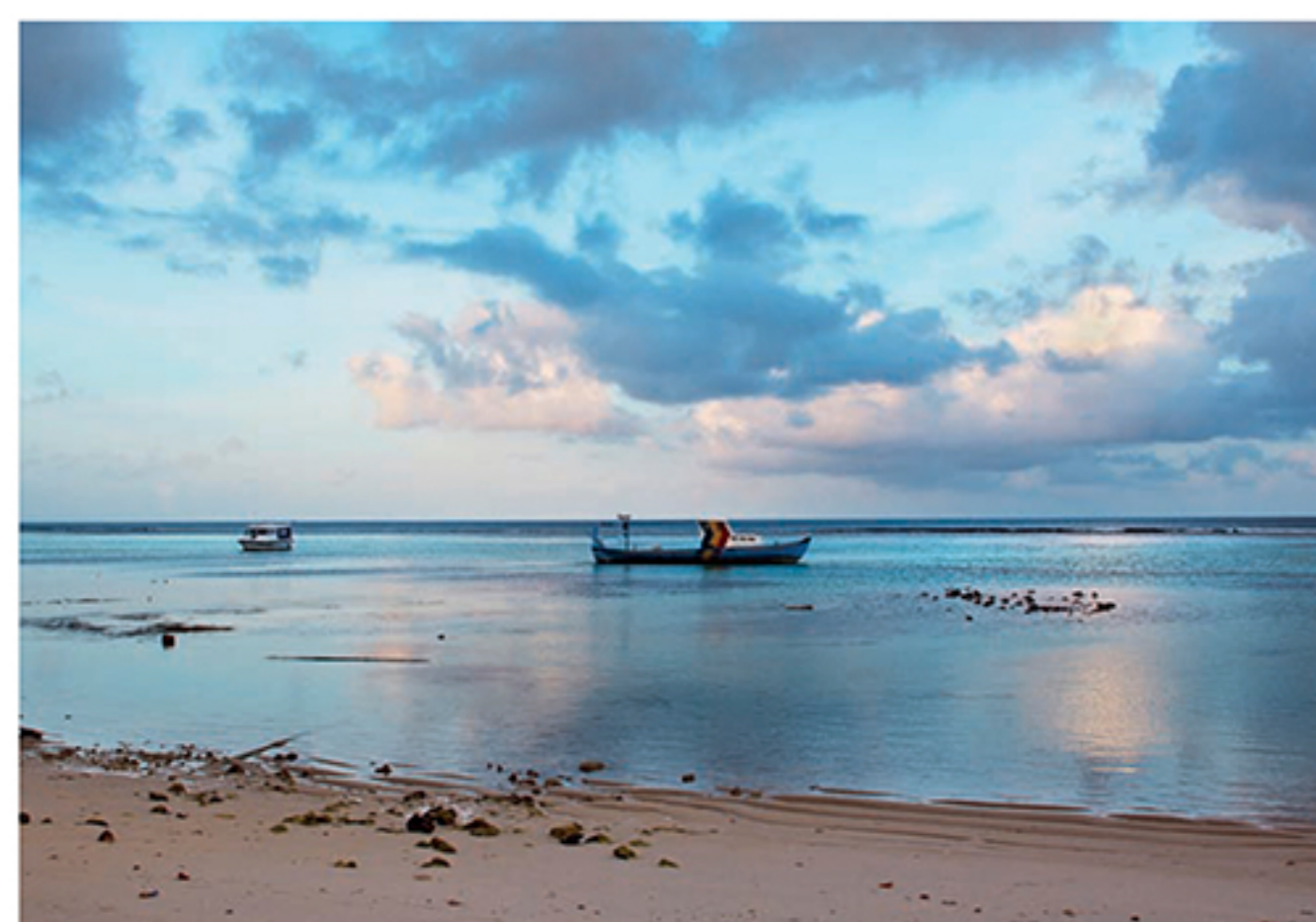
Michael Ahmed, managing director of Islandway guesthouse, has several more properties in the pipeline. Ahmed believes that guesthouses offer travellers a chance to experience the "real" Maldives. "Our rich culture and the native livelihoods you can see on the islands show that the Maldives is definitely not about 'the art of doing nothing' but rather a place bustling with friendly, hard-working and very



Staying at one of the Maldives' newly opened guesthouses in Rasdhoo puts visitors in touch with everyday life



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Raki Bench
The operator of Guesthouses-In-Maldives.com says he has seen a big increase in demand for budget accommodation and "couples and families are the main demographic"

hospitable people who take pride in their way of life," he says. "What really makes the Maldives can only be experienced by strolling alongside its people and blending in with daily life."

Despite ongoing development in the local tourism scene, some things remain unchanged, most notably the fact that alcohol, pork and skimpy swimwear are illegal on inhabited islands (all are permitted on resort islands). As a moderate Sunni Muslim nation, the republic is fairly conservative - Maldivians aren't allowed to drink and women bathe in the sea fully clothed. That said, guesthouse owners have come up with solutions geared to encouraging tourism.

Take Maafushi, for example: its guesthouse owners negotiated with the island council to maintain a private stretch of sand where bikinis are permitted. It's open to all tourists. Many guesthouses on other islands have followed its lead. What's more, Maafushi's guesthouse owners offer day trips to resorts at discounted rates (about US\$25 for a day pass) so tourists can do some tanning in their bikinis and enjoy a drink.

However, for those who are content to do without alcohol while on holiday in the Maldives, there's no pressure to indulge. After all, the reason one travels is to experience a different culture, environment and way of life. ☺

all you need to know

sleep

Holiday House Dhangethi
tel: +960 999 5133, otherwayholiday.com

Summer Villa Maafushi, tel: +960 795444, summervilla.maldives.com

Islandway Guraidhoo, tel: +960 330 0010, islandway.maldives.com

Just Surf Villa Himmafushi, tel: +960 980 7777, justsurfvilla.com

Rasdhoo Island Inn
tel: +960 775 3721, rasdhooislandinn.com

Guesthouses in Maldives
Raki Bench's site lists a range of different guesthouses, all in one place.
guesthouses-in-maldives.com

eat

Dhivehi Malaafay
Bodufenuhage, Rahdhebi Magu, Malé, tel: +960 332 0542

Yellow Rehendhi Inn

Rahdhebi Magu, Valu Magu, Rasdhoo, tel: +960 974 6555

Coffee Olé

Bodu Magu, Rasdhoo, tel: +960 777 8097

ferries

Maafushi

Departs Malé daily at 3pm (except Fridays), Cost: US\$3

Guraidhoo

Departs Malé daily at 2pm (except Fridays), Cost: US\$3

Thulusdhoo

Departs Malé daily at 3.30pm (except Tuesdays), Cost: US\$3

Rasdhoo

Departs Malé on Sunday, Monday and Wednesday at 9am and Tuesday and Thursday at 11am, Cost: US\$3.50

For more ferry schedules and prices, visit mtcc.com



Bylo mi ctí poskytnout informace a fotografie pro článek do inflight magazínu Tiger Tales, který vydává nízkonákladová letecká společnost Tiger Airways ze Singapuru. Článek napsala Sarah Harvey ze soukromých maledivských médií Manta Media.

Pár dní po vydání časopisu a článku letěl úplnou náhodou z Thajska zpět domů jeden můj známý z Rychnova nad Kněžnou, z města, kde jsem dlouhou žila a hned, jak mě v časopise viděl, tak mi psal, že co jako dělám v časáku na druhém konci světa, že mě u nás nepotká, jak je rok dlouhý... Jo, to tak bývá. Já pravidelně náhodou potkávám známé v Dubaji na letišti, ale jinak se nevidíme...

www.otherwayholiday.com