



*Indian Ocean*

# The Maldives

Text and photos by Matthew Meier

— *The Southern Atolls*



Two blackfinned anemonefish in a red and green magnificent sea anemone  
PREVIOUS PAGE: School of bluestreak fusilier fish swimming over the coral reef



Whale shark feeding on plankton in the lights behind the boat at night

**The subtle knock on the door roused me from my slumber. It was 2 a.m. and the wake-up call could only mean one thing. A whale shark had finally appeared to feed on the large aggregation of plankton attracted to the light set out behind the boat. I scrambled out of bed and raced upstairs to get my camera.**

For the next hour and a half, I snorkeled alongside the largest fish in the ocean, as it gulped down mouthfuls of seawater and krill, essentially ignoring my presence as it enjoyed a free midnight snack. Almost everyone had gone back to bed by the time I emerged from the

water. As if seemingly waiting for my departure, a second, smaller whale shark materialized to feed alongside the first. I watched them both from the surface, snapping a few more photos, before calling it a night. It was truly a magical evening and well worth the lack of sleep.

**Remote**

Located on the Equator, 435 miles (700km) southwest of Sri Lanka, the island nation of the Maldives comprises 26 atolls surrounded by the Indian Ocean. Situated on the Laccadives-Chagos Ridge, a 1,243 mile (2,000km) submarine mountain chain created over 2,000 million years ago, the country is spread out over 56,000 sq mi (90,000 sq km) of ocean, though the land portion above water accounts for less than one percent of that area or 186 sq mi (300 sq km).



Blackspotted, or honeycomb, moray eel





## Maldives

A remote, deserted island (right) in the Indian Ocean, Mattidhoo Island, Huvadhu Atoll; Large aggregation of bluestripe snapper and striped large-eye breems (below); Fishing boats (lower right) docked at the harbor with the sun setting in the distance, Bodufinolhu Island, Laamu Atoll



Comprised of beautiful stretches of coral, sand and palm trees, the islands themselves are surrounded by brilliantly clear, turquoise, warm water. The topography is exceedingly flat, with the highest point in the country being

a mere eight feet above sea level. Miles and miles of ocean often fill the space between islands, and it is not uncommon to entirely lose sight of land, as you explore this tropical paradise. There is so little land,

spread out over such a large area, that you will rarely share a dive site with other divers. Often, it feels as if you are on the only boat on an entire atoll.

### Weather

The weather in the Maldives is greatly influenced by the Iruvai ("dry" northeast monsoon that typically blows mid-November to April) and the Hulhangu ("wet" southwest monsoon in May to October). Though air temperatures remain fairly constant between 84-90°F (29-32°C) year-round and water temperatures fluctuate only slightly between 80-84°F (27-29°C), the monsoons affect the climate on land and in the sea.

With the start of the Iruvai,

underwater currents begin flowing from the northeast and visibility typically improves on the eastern edges of the atolls. Stronger currents and winds commonly define the Hulhangu, as the water flow shifts from the southwest, often bringing along with it larger algae

blooms, which can diminish visibility. The plus side of this is the increased food supply that often equates to intensified pelagic encounters.

### Getting there

Getting to this remote destination can be a lengthy process.




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CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Green sea turtle; Tightly packed aggregation of redfin anthias and golden sweeper fish; Bignose unicornfish and a school of redfin anthias swimming over a colony of black sun corals; Spotted eagle rays swimming in formation over hard coral reef



International travelers can stop in Singapore, Bangkok, Dubai or Kuala Lumpur, among others, before boarding a flight to Malé, the capital city of the Maldives.

Upon arrival, most divers walk straight out of the airport and onto a water taxi, which transports them directly to their land-based resort or liveaboard. It is quite possibly the only place I have visited where I did not set foot in a car and yet still traversed more than half of the country.

**Diverse species**

Whether it is swimming with whale sharks, playing with manta rays, interacting with sharks and huge schools of fish or exploring the incredible coral reefs, the Maldives has something for everyone. With one of the most diverse assortments of fish and coral species on the planet, the Maldives

are a bucket-list destination for most scuba divers, and rightly so. The hard corals alone are worth the trip. I have never seen such a wide variety of healthy—and massive—hard coral formations,

which in turn play host to an even greater array of colorful reef fish. There were damsels, fusiliers, chromis, butterflyfish, snappers, jacks, and endemic clownfish to name just a few. Did I forget



## Maldives

Large number of plate corals (*Acropora* sp.) surround a coral bommie in shallow water

into a late morning dive amidst a light rain and small rollers. A short 45 minutes later, we surfaced in a near blinding down-pour with 3- to 5-foot waves crashing over our heads. The wind had switched direction and a storm blew in while we were underwater, causing the waves to crest in the channel. The experience reinforced the significance of staying with your buddy, having and—more importantly—knowing how to use your safety sausage, as well as coming to the surface with air in your tank. An equally fundamental lesson was hav-

to mention the turtles? I had lost count, there were so many turtles!

We had numerous encounters with huge Napoleon wrasse and swam alongside squadrons of eagle rays as they swayed in the current. Tucked into gaps in the reef were large schools of golden sweepers and glassfish, while hiding under the monstrous plate corals were colorful sweetlips. Large sea fans, dark green sun corals and colonies of black coral played host to aggregations of vibrant anthias fish. Beautiful honeycomb moray eels were found hiding amongst the coral reefs, along with sea stars, anemones, thorny oysters, shrimps, crabs and the occasional giant clam.

This level of diversity tends to make a photographer giddy, but also forces one to make hard lens

choices before each dive. If you are like me and shoot a housed DSLR, then you are limited to one lens for the entire dive and hope that the majority of subjects you encounter fit your selection.

Here is where having a seasoned divemaster can make or break the trip for a photographer. Happily, our guides had 15 and 18 years of diving experience in the Maldives, and they were able to suggest a suitable lens for nearly every dive site. Mother Nature does not always cooperate, so as with any dive trip, there were a few instances where I really wished I had made a different lens choice.

### Safety measures

Speaking of Mother Nature, she provided a sobering reminder of the ocean's sheer power and the

need to be well-equipped and properly trained as a diver entering her waters. We had dropped

ing and—again—knowing how to use a snorkel, staying calm and properly utilizing the Nautilus lifeline



Marbled shrimp on reef

# Maldives

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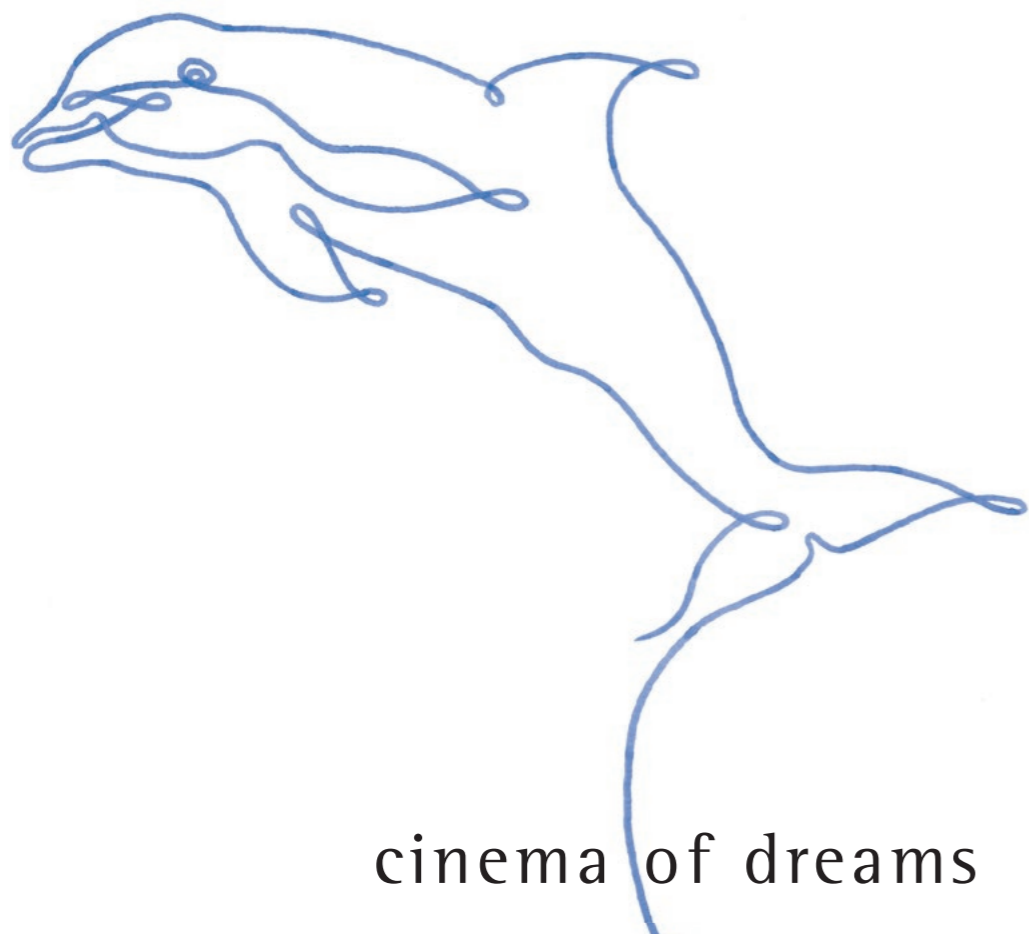


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Maldives

Large marbled ray swimming over the sandy bottom at night

system to locate divers. Happily, all divers were eventually recovered safely and the ordeal provided us a teachable moment to rethink our levels of preparedness.

**Alimatha Jetty.** One of my more exhilarating experiences on this trip was the night dive at Alimatha Jetty. Dropping into a swift current, we used reef hooks to anchor

ourselves to the patches of coral in the shallow lagoon and were soon surrounded by dozens of tawny nurse sharks and several large marble rays. The rays were foraging for food on the bottom, while blackjacks circled in a cooperative feeding behavior, waiting for the rays to scare up food out of the sand.

The nurse sharks alternated between cruising amongst us on the sandy bottom and schooling over our heads. We even had a few seemingly follow us back at the end of the dive to hang out at the surface in the lights behind the boat.

Most liveaboards touring the central atolls visit this dive site and there can be a lot of divers underwater at the same time. If possible, I would highly recommend beginning this dive a little before nightfall, thus avoiding much of the crowds.



Tawny nurse shark swimming near the water's surface behind the boat at night





CLOCKWISE FROM LOWER LEFT: Glassfish swimming above a red, white, black and orange thorny oyster; School of yellowback anthias swimming over staghorn corals; School of white-collar butterflyfish; School of bannerfish over hard coral reef

**Southern Atolls**

The Southern Atolls are only accessible a few months out of the year when the wind and wave

conditions allow for safe passage and the currents allow for safe diving. Typically, this is from January to March, though the past few years have seen favorable circumstances pushed farther back on the calendar due to changing weather patterns.

The word "atoll" is derived from the Maldivian word *atholhu*; and it comprises a ring-shaped bar-

rier reef, remnants from the sides of an extinct volcano. The reef protects a central lagoon, which is situated over the sunken caldera of the volcano. Atolls rely on coral growth, at a rate faster than the eroding volcano, to maintain their existence and are only found in tropical and sub-tropical oceans.

Only a few liveaboards visit the Southern Atolls, and Luxury Yachts Maldives was one of the first to make the journey in 1991. Back in the early days, airport access to the Southern Atolls was limited at best, so guests flew in and out of the capital city of Malé and then

took a 15-20 day round trip tour on the boat. Now, it is possible to get local flights straight to several of the Southern Atolls, making the logistics easier and the trips more varied.

Guests have the option to take one of the transit trips, visiting several of the atolls along the way or to fly into Huvadhoo (the second largest atoll in the world, by surface area), and spend their trip exploring the varied diving there. The transit trips are defined by high-energy dives in channels called a *kandu*, connecting the

lagoons to the open ocean.

These dives are typically done with an incoming tide so that the divers can ride the current into the lagoon after hooking in at the mouth of the channel to watch pelagics swimming in the blue. A reef hook is a must, as is an advanced dive certification,

given that the depths of most of these channels are 80 to 90ft (24 to 27m).

The Maldivians have names for their various reef structures, which are subsequently incorporated in the names of dive sites and this helps divers to visualize the underwater landscape even before





A remote, deserted island in the Indian Ocean, Mattidhoo Island, Huvadhu Atoll, Maldives

The romantic beauty of the islands draw many for weddings and honeymoons (right); MY *Duke of York* liveaboard dive boat and *dhoni* (below); Beach covered with plastic marine debris (lower right)

hitting the water. A deep-water pass or channel was defined previously as a *kandu*, and a *faru* is a circular reef within a channel that extends to the surface. An oblong or circular reef within an atoll whose top maxes out between 20-40ft (6-12m) below the surface is called a *thila*. A *giri* is similar to a thila but is a smaller reef that reaches to within 5-10ft (1-3m) of the surface.

Liveaboards in the Maldives operate differently than most other places around the globe. A separate boat called a *dhoni* is used as a diving platform to transport divers from the main yacht to the dive sites. These large, stable boats allow divers an easy giant-



stride entry, have large rinse tanks for camera gear, provide ample shade and even have their own head.

All dive gear, tanks and weights are stowed on the *dhoni*, which is fully self-contained with air and nitrox compressors to fill tanks between dives. The full benefit of the *dhoni* is realized in the peace and quiet on the liveaboard from the lack of compressor noise.

### Romantic beauty

The Maldives feature hundreds of deserted islands, looking like something straight off of a postcard. One glance and it is easy to imagine walking hand-in-hand down a white sand beach with



a loved one, without another living soul in sight. A scene seemingly plucked from the pages of a romance novel or the daydreams of a young girl's future honeymoon. It is no wonder so many couples choose to get married and/or honeymoon here.

The beauty, isolation and serenity of these islands are incredible.

Traveling by liveaboard, we passed untold numbers of these picturesque exotic islands and secluded sandbars. Occasionally stopping for a stroll on the beach, a relaxing snorkel in between dives or a lavish BBQ at the end of the day. The waters around these island oases are crystal clear and a magnificent shade of blue. As you come ashore, it is easy to imagine that you are the first humans to visit this tiny portion of our blue planet.

Sadly, even if you truly were the first person to set foot on that island, evidence of human existence would have



long preceded you ashore, in the form of marine debris and plastic trash. Most of the beaches I visited were littered with plastic water bottles, utensils, styrofoam





Gray reef sharks swimming in blue water amongst tedtooth triggerfish (above and top right); A terminal phase, humpheaded wrasse swimming in blue water (right); Green sea turtle (left)

food containers and flip-flops. It was a somber reminder that our everyday decisions have a global effect on the planet.

**Adventure**

Diving in the Maldives is synonymous with currents and the varied reef structures provide for a multitude of dive profile options. For the adventurous type, diving at the kandu can provide an action-packed thrill ride and a fantastic show.

If done correctly, the divemaster

will position your water entry so that you drift with the current down to the mouth of the channel, where you will hook in, flying like a kite, as several varieties of reef sharks, large schools of fish, rays, Napoleon wrasse and even the occasional whale shark appear out in the blue. Negative buoyancy entries and the drag of a large camera housing can make this type of diving even more of an adventure. While navigating the Southern Atolls, you will experience one or two of these dives daily as part of your

three-dives-daily routine.

After unhooking from the mouth of the kandu, the current will sweep you into the channel where you will pass walls of coral formations along the edges and isolated reefs growing out of the sandy bottom. Here, you will pass smaller reef fish, eagle rays and lots of turtles.

Occasionally, it will be possible to swim into an eddy in the current, hide behind a large coral head or even rehook into the reef for a closer

view, but often, the current will be too strong and you will simply have to enjoy the ride as you watch the reef rush past. Farther into the channel as the current subsides, there will be more time to inspect the reef and its multitude of inhabitants, so long as you have sufficient air left in your tank.

Diving within the atoll and the protection of the outer reef usually provides for weaker currents and



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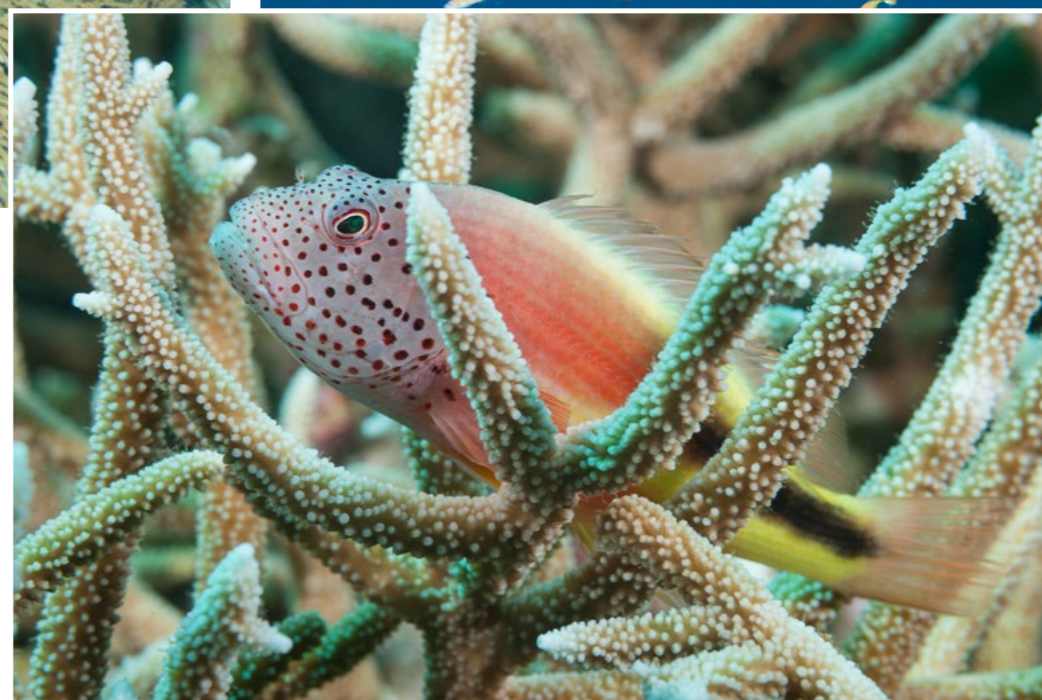


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Sun rays over stony and plate corals (above); Diver with an large, gorgonian sea fan and anthias (far right); Detail of yellow bubble coral (top inset)

easier dives. Astonishing coral formations comprised of massive species of plate corals, staghorn corals and enormous coral domes create the backdrop, as you leisurely drift along, inspecting the incredible diversity living in and around these reefs.

**Final thoughts**

When you visit the Maldives,

bring along your sense of awe and wonder, be prepared for a little romance (whether real or otherwise), and don't forget your adventurous spirit. The beauty of this country, both above and below the water, will impress even the most seasoned traveler, but you may have to work a little harder to appreciate all she has to offer. ■

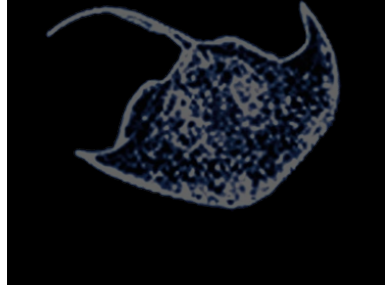
Freckled hawkfish on staghorn corals

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Matthew Meier is a professional underwater photographer and travel writer based in San Diego, California. To see more of his work and to order photo prints, please visit: [Matthewmeierphoto.com](http://Matthewmeierphoto.com).

# fact file



## The Maldives



SOURCES: US CIA WORLD FACTBOOK, XE.COM, VISITMALDIVES.COM

**History** The Maldives are believed to have been first inhabited over 2,500 years ago by settlers from India and Sri Lanka, though the ancient recorded history is incomplete and little archaeological evidence remains. The country is located along the main maritime trade routes and the strategic positioning is believed to have played a role in early colonization. For most of its history, the Maldives existed as an independent entity. There were brief periods of foreign control by the Dutch and the Portuguese, and in 1887, the Maldives became a British Protectorate. It remained under British control until it gained its independence in 1965. The first resort was opened in 1972, and today, the tourism industry is considered one of the best in the world. The Maldives is also

a world leader in promoting for the protection of small countries and conserving the environment. Government: republic. Capital: Malé.

**Geography** The smallest of the Asian countries, the Maldives is located in the Indian Ocean south-southwest of Sri Lanka and India. The country consists of an archipelago of 1,190 coral islands clustered into 26 atolls, which are spread out over 90,000 square kilometers. Roughly 200 of islands are inhabited, with nearly 100 of them hosting tourist resorts. The highest point on the islands is only 2.4 m and thus the country is at risk of being swallowed up by rising sea levels due to global warming. Coastline: 644km.

**Climate** The climate in the Maldives is tropical and is greatly influenced by the Iruvai ("dry" northeast monsoon that typically blows mid-November to April) and the hulhangu ("wet" southwest monsoon in May to October). Air temperatures are fairly constant between 29-

32°C (84-90°F) year-round and water temperatures fluctuate between 27-29°C (80-84°F). Steady sea breezes help offset the high humidity levels.

**Economy** Tourism accounts for nearly 30% of the Maldives GNP and is the largest economic sector. Fishing, which used to lead their economy, now comes in a distant second. Agriculture and Industry play a minor role but are limited by the lack of cultivable land and a shortage of local labor.

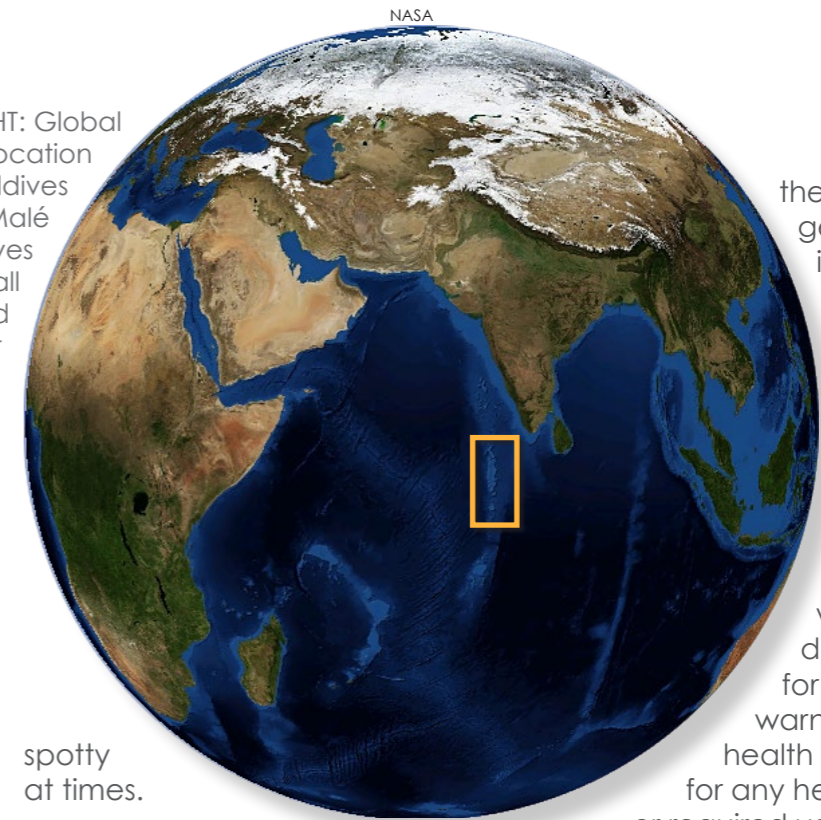
**Environment** Challenges include sea level rise due to global warming; depletion of freshwater aquifers, which is threatening water supplies; and bleaching of coral reef.

**Population** 393,595 (July 2014 est.) Primarily comprised of South Indians, Sinhalese and Arabs. The official religion is Sunni Muslim.

**Language** Dhivehi is the official language in the Maldives. It is a dialect of Sinhala and the script is derived from Arabic. English is spoken in Malé and at most resorts and tourist destinations.



RIGHT: Global map with location of the Maldives  
BELOW: Location of Malé on map of the Maldives  
LOWER LEFT: Three small gobies resting on a red cushion star



spotty at times.

### Voltage

The voltage in the Maldives is 220/240 AC at 50 cycles and they utilize several socket types. An International multi-prong adaptor is recommended.

### Cuisine

Traditional Maldivian cuisine is based on three main ingredients; fish, coconut and starches. Fish is found at nearly every meal in one form or another and is even used as a topping for pizza. Starches are comprised of rice, potatoes, taro, cassava and breadfruit. Coconut is eaten fresh or as coconut milk or oil in various dishes.

### Tipping

A service charge is added to most everything in the Maldives, so tipping is not required. However, tipping is expected on liveaboard dive boats and at most tourist resorts. Each establishment will have their own guidelines and recommendations.

### Driving

The islands only have 88 km of total roadways, most of which reside in the capital of Malé. Boats and small planes are

the only way to get around the islands and atolls of the Maldives.

### Health & Safety

Before you travel to the Maldives, please check with your state department for any travel warnings and your health department for any health advisories or required vaccinations.

### Decompression Chambers

Bandos Island Resort, Bandos Medical clinic and hyperbaric center, tel: + 960 440 088

Kandoludhoo Island Resort, Kandoludhoo Divers Rescue tel: + 960 773 485

Kuramathi Resort, Kuramathi Medical center hotline: +960 777 3485

### Travel/Visa

The Ibrahim Nasir International Airport is located adjacent to the capital of Malé and is the only International airport in the Maldives. Flights from a variety of airlines connect directly to Malé via Singapore, Bangkok, Dubai, Kuala Lumpur, among others. A passport is required for entry and a free 30-day visa is granted on arrival. Customs checks are extremely strict and the import of alcohol, meat and pork products, drugs, pornographic material and underwater fishing spear guns is prohibited.

### Websites

Maldives Tourism  
[www.visitmaldives.com/en](http://www.visitmaldives.com/en)

