

North & South Male' Atolls

At the centre of the country, the two atolls either side of Vaadhoo Kandu are the home of Maldivian tourism, where the first resorts cautiously developed in the 1970s. Today it's home to the Maldives' main international airport as well as to many of the country's most famous and best-established island resorts.

The dynamic national capital, Male', the economic and political centre of the country, lies between North and South Male' Atolls, and yet it's hard to imagine anywhere much more pristine than the islands that surround its bustle. Once you leave the area immediately around the capital and the airport, the nature of Maldivian geography means that even in the most developed part of the country there's little encroachment of the modern world on most islands.

Some excellent dive sites are found on these atolls, despite the coral bleaching caused by El Niño. Sites close to Male' have been heavily used, but in general they are in very good condition. Some of the most interesting sites are on either side of Vaadhoo Kandu, the channel that runs between North and South Male' Atolls. At the outer edge of the atolls, the dive sites are accessible from only a few resorts or by safari boat, and you'll probably have them all to yourself. Gaafaru Falhu Atoll, north of North Male' Atoll, has at least three diveable shipwrecks. Some of the Maldives' best surf breaks are also in North Male' Atoll.

This will be where many people experience the Maldives and both atolls are stunning visions of cobalt-blue water, white sand and island idyll – both worthy introductions to this most beguiling of countries.

NORTH MALE' ATOLL

North and South Male' Atolls together are officially known as Kaafu Administrative District and the capital island is **Thulusdhoo**, on the eastern edge of North Male' Atoll, with a population of about 800. Male' itself is not the capital as it is considered to be its own administrative district.

Thulusdhoo is an industrious island, known for *bodu beru* (big drums), traditional dancing and a government warehouse for salted fish. It is notable for producing Coca-Cola at the only Coke factory in the world where the drink is made from desalinated water.

The island of **Huraa** (population 700) is visited by tourists on island-hopping trips, but it's not yet as touristy as other North Male' islands. Huraa's dynasty of sultans,

founded in 1759 by Sultan Al-Ghaazi Hassan Izzaddeen, built a mosque on the island.

Many tourists visit **Himmafushi** (population 850) on excursions arranged from nearby resorts. The main street has two long rows of shops, where you can pick up some of the least expensive souvenirs in the country. Carved rosewood manta rays, sharks and dolphins are made locally. If you wander into the back streets, you quickly get away from the tourist strip to find an attractive, well-kept village with many modern amenities.

A sand spit has joined Himmafushi to the once separate island of **Gaamaadhoo**, where there used to be a prison. The surf break here, aptly called **Jailbreaks**, is a great right-hander, accessible by boat from nearby resorts.

The island of **Girifushi**, which has a military training camp, is off limits.

Further north, **Dhiffushi** is one of the most appealing local islands, with approximately 1000 people, three mosques and two schools. Mainly a fishing island, it has lots of greenery and grows several types of tropical fruit. Tourists from Meeru Island Resort are regular visitors.

Sights & Activities

DIVING

North Male' Atoll has been well explored by divers and has some superb dives. Some are heavily dived, especially in peak seasons. The following is just a sample of the best-known sites, listed from north to south.

Helengeli Thila, also called Bodu Thila, is long narrow thila on the eastern edge of the atoll famous for its prolific marine life. Reef fish include surgeonfish, bannerfish, butterflyfish and dense schools of snapper and fusilier. Larger fish and pelagics are also common – sharks, tuna, rays, jacks and a resident giant grouper. Soft corals are spectacular in the cliffs and caves on the west side of the thila at about 25m. The large hard coral formations here are recovering from coral bleaching quite quickly, possibly because of the strong, nutrient-rich currents.

Also called Saddle, or Kuda Faru, **Shark Point** is in a Protected Marine Area and is subject to strong currents. Lots of white-tip and grey reef sharks can be seen in the channel between a thila and the reef, along with fusiliers, jackfish, stingrays and some impressive caves.

The alternative, less picturesque name of **Blue Canyon** is Kuda Thila, which means 'small thila'. A canyon, 25m to 30m deep and lined with soft, blue corals, runs beside the thila. The numerous overhangs make for an exciting dive, but require good buoyancy control. This site is recommended for experienced divers.

Bodu Hithi Thila is a prime manta-spotting site from December to March, with a good number of sharks and many reef fish. The soft corals on the sides of the thila are in excellent condition. If currents are moderate this site is suitable for intermediate divers, and the shallow waters atop the thila offer superb snorkelling. Nearby, the **Peak** is another great place to see mantas in season; it is also home to some large Napoleon wrasse.

The outer-reef slope of **Rasfari** drops down to a depth of more than 40m, but a couple of thilas rise up with their tops at about 25m. Grey reef sharks love it here – you might see 20 or 30 of them, as well as white-tip sharks, barracuda, eagle rays and trevally. It's a Protected Marine Area.

A curving cliff near a channel entrance forms the **Colosseum**, where pelagics perform. Sharks and barracuda are often seen here. Experienced divers do this as a drift dive, going right into the channel past ledges and caves, with soft corals and the occasional turtle. Even beginners can do this one in good conditions.

As the name suggests, **Aquarium** (a coral rock formation about 15m down) features a large variety of reef fish. A sandy bottom at 25m can have small sharks and rays, and you might also see giant wrasse and schools of snapper. It's an easy dive and suitable for snorkelling.

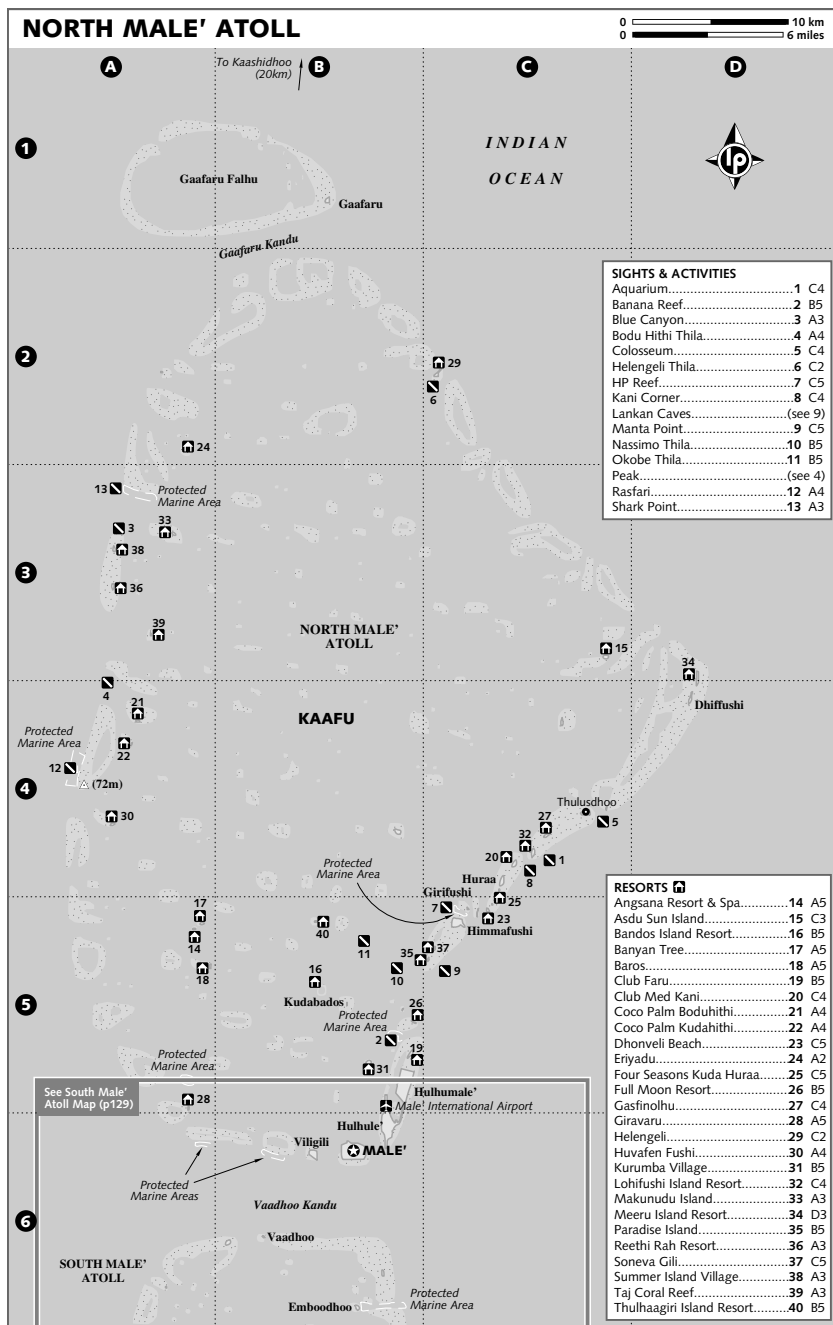
Across the kandu from the Aquarium, **Kani Corner** is the start of a long drift dive through a narrow channel with steep sides, caves and overhangs decorated with soft corals. Lots of large marine life can be seen, including sharks, barracuda, Napoleon wrasse and tuna. Beware of fast currents.

HP Reef, also called Rainbow Reef or Girifushi Thila, sits beside a narrow channel where currents provide much nourishment for incredibly rich growths of soft, blue corals, and support a large variety of reef fish and pelagics. The formations include large blocks, spectacular caves and a 25m vertical, swim-through chimney. It is a Protected Marine Area.

Also called Barracuda Giri, the attraction of **Okobe Thila** is the variety of spectacular reef fish that inhabit the shallow caves and crannies, including lionfish, scorpionfish, batfish, sweetlips, moray eels, sharks and big Napoleon wrasse.

The demanding dive at **Nassimo Thila** follows the north side of a fine thila, also known as Paradise Rock, which has superb gorgonians and sea fans on coral blocks, cliffs and overhangs. Numerous large fish frequent this site.

The best time to see the mantas for which **Manta Point** is famous is from May to November. Coral outcrops at about 8m are a 'cleaning station', where cleaner wrasse feed on parasites from the mantas' wings. Cliffs,



coral tables, turtles, sharks and numerous reef fish are other attractions, as are the nearby **Lankan Caves**.

The Protected Marine Area of **Banana Reef** has a bit of everything: dramatic cliffs, caves and overhangs; brilliant coral growths; big predators such as sharks, barracuda and grouper; and prolific reef fish including jackfish, morays, Napoleon wrasse and blue-striped snapper. It was one of the first dive sites in the country to become internationally known. The reef top is excellent for snorkelling.

Resorts

Most of the resorts in North Male' Atoll are reached by speedboat from the airport, though some of the closest ones use a traditional and far slower dhoni. Some of the most distant ones offer optional seaplane transfers. Unless otherwise noted, airport transfers to the following resorts are by speedboat.

BUDGET

It's hard to think of anywhere more down-to-earth than little **Asdu Sun Island** (Asdhoo island; ☎ 6645051; www.asdu.com; s/d US\$90/130; airport transfer 1½hr, US\$110; 30 rooms). In an age of unbridled boutique luxury this charming resort retains the type of setting that originally kick-started the Maldivian tourist industry in the 1970s and 1980s: simple rooms free of TV and glass windows, no air-con and an informal atmosphere.

Divers, couples and families can be seen here in equal measure – there's some great surf nearby too and the resort organises trips for surfers to each spot. Beaches are lovely, with lots of healthy vegetation and huge palms. Much of the resort looks tired, but it's all part of its charm and if the repeating couples here are anything to go by, Asdu is easy to get hooked on.

Lohifushi Island Resort (Lhohifushi island; ☎ 6643451; www.lohifushi.com; s/d/t US\$87/110/150; airport transfer by dhoni 1½hr, US\$50, by speedboat 25min, US\$80; 127 rooms; ♿ ♿) is one of the best choices for an active water-sports holiday. As well as the usual sailing, windsurfing and water-skiing, there's a very surfable left-hand wave off the southeast corner of the island called Lohi's, overlooked by a surfers' bar and viewing deck. Other breaks are accessible by boat (US\$10

per person for three hours, minimum four persons).

This is a big, modern resort on a long, narrow island. The standard rooms are fan-cooled, but have phones and hot water; air-con is available in more pricey rooms. There are tennis and squash courts, a football field, a volleyball court, a small swimming pool, a children's play area and a Japanese-style spa-massage centre.

Fishing enthusiasts can choose between sunrise fishing, night fishing and big-game fishing. Snorkellers can walk out on the jetty to get to the edge of the house reef, but for great snorkelling you'll need to take a boat trip.

Plenty of good dive sites are accessible, and the resort is quite popular with divers who are catered for by the five-star PADI dive centre.

Lohifushi is quite a big resort and somewhat impersonal, but you can get a great deal here on the rooms (particularly in triples) and it's great for young divers and surfers.

When we visited **Giravaru** (Giraavaru island; ☎ 6640440; www.giravaru.com; s/d US\$125/145; airport transfer 15min US\$45; 65 rooms; ♿ ♿ ♿) the resort was planning to do a total refit and reopen in 2007 as a more upmarket place. However, such claims can often come to nothing, so check via the resort website to see if this has happened or not! The Giravaru people are believed to descend from the earliest inhabitants of the Maldives, and as such they are ethnically distinct from the rest of the population. About 30 years ago the number of people on the island declined to the point where they no longer included the 40 adult males required to support a mosque, so the islanders all moved to Male' and Giravaru became available for resort development. Sadly there's nothing left from the aboriginal Giravaran culture on the island.

As the resort was at the time of research, it would be hard to recommend unreservedly. Admittedly the diving school here is excellent and extremely friendly, with plenty of good diving sites nearby. Yet the whole place was pretty average otherwise – particularly suffering from its proximity to Thilafushi, or Rubbish Island as it's known to one and all. The main jetty and one of the island's two main beaches look out over the smoking stacks of Thilafushi in the distance, while rubbish washes up

regularly on the otherwise lovely white beaches. The tiny swimming pool was also in a state of bad repair and going unused as a result. Lunch and breakfast were particularly lacklustre, although there was often a good choice at the big dinner buffet. The majority Italian guests seem entirely happy with the experience, however, even when being serenaded by instrumental versions of Tears in Heaven over breakfast. Let's hope the refit will include a music policy rethink.

Meeru Island Resort (Meerufenfushi island; ☎ 6643157; www.meeru.com; full board s/d/wb US\$130/155/310; airport transfer 60min, \$100, by seaplane 10min, \$185; 227 rooms; 🏠 📺 📺), a popular and highly recommended family and diving resort, has lots of laid-back charm and some functional style brought about by a late 1990s refit. It's at North Male' Atoll's most eastern point and travelling due east from here you'd hit nothing until Sumatra.

Meerufenfushi actually means 'Sweet Water Island' in Divehi, and the island's wells were used to replenish passing dhonis in the past. The unusual amount of ground water has created a large amount of natural vegetation and now some of the 28-hectare island is used for growing fruit and vegetables. Most guests are from Britain, Germany, France, Italy and other parts of Europe. The resort doesn't organise much entertainment, but the bars are busy most evenings, especially because many of the guests are on all-inclusive packages.

There's a huge choice of rooms – from standards in a U-shaped block near the swimming pool, to the Coral and Dolphin Suites – both at the end of their own private jetties and coming with a personal butler.

The house reef can only be reached by boat and these leave every two hours to take snorkellers and divers off to the outer reef where the aquatic life is fantastic.

All the usual water sports are offered, fishing trips are popular, and the vast lagoon is perfect for learning sailing and windsurfing. Meeru has its own safari boats, and two- or three-day cruises can be taken from the resort. Inexpensive excursions go to the fishing village on neighbouring Dhif-fushi. Those interested in Maldivian history and culture will also appreciate the small museum at Meeru where there's a huge blue whale skeleton on display.

Ocean-Pro dive school (www.oceanpro-diveteam.com) is a large and efficient operation. A single dive is US\$39 with tank and weights only, or US\$42 including full equipment rental, plus US\$10 per dive for the boat trip. A US\$2 discount applies after seven dives, and there's a good six-day, no-limit dive deal. An open-water course costs US\$619. A whole slew of great dive sites are accessible in the channels within 5km. Once known only as a budget resort and dive destination, Meeru now caters to a wide variety of interests and budget levels – it's a big resort but it's not crowded and has retained its personal, friendly feel.

Small, intimate and low-key, **Thulhaagiri Island Resort** (Thalhaagiri island; ☎ 6645930; www.thulhaagiri.com.mv; s/d/wb US\$160/170/340; airport transfer 30min, US\$80; 69 rooms; 🏠 📺) is an astonishingly pretty island with wide, sloping white beaches and a thick vegetation of palms. It represents a great choice for its price range, because although it's less expensive, its small size gives it a more exclusive feel than some of the bigger budget places. Guests are mainly German but hail also from Britain and other European countries.

The diving school offers a full open-water course including all equipment for US\$470, and individual dives at US\$37 each, plus equipment. The problem here is that each piece of equipment you borrow is charged separately and therefore quickly adds up – so if you want to do a lot of diving here, bring as many of the basics as possible. There's a good water-sports centre with catamarans and water-skiing available although the small, rather murky swimming pool is the only real evidence that this is a budget resort despite all other appearances. Rooms – like the slightly dated public areas – are in a rustic style featuring thatched roofs and wooden interiors. The 17 water villas have four-poster beds, colourful fabrics and coffee-making facilities – they're decent, but not especially great value at their high-season price. All meals are buffets, and they're very good for a resort in this range, offering plenty of variety and quality ingredients.

One of the largest resorts in the country, **Bandos Island Resort** (Bodubados island; ☎ 6640088; www.bandos.com; s/d/t/wb US\$143/175/225/1212; airport transfer 20min, US\$50; 225 rooms; 🏠 📺 📺), has developed and expanded enormously since it

opened as the second resort in the Maldives in 1972. It has an enviable range of facilities – a 500-seat conference centre, coffee shop, several restaurants, a disco, tennis courts, a billiard room, sauna, gym, swimming pool, beauty salon and spa-massage service. The childcare centre is free during the day, and only about US\$5 per hour in the evening. With all these facilities, the island is quite intensely developed and resembles a well-manicured town centre rather than a typical tropical island.

Sailing and windsurfing are available, along with a full range of motorised water sports and an active big-game fishing centre. Fine, narrow beaches surround the island, and the house reef is handy for snorkelling and diving. Lots of fish and a small wreck can be seen here. The state-of-the-art dive centre does trips to about 40 dive sites in the area, and offers a full range of courses, including nitrox and rebreather training. A single boat dive costs US\$57, including all equipment and boat charges, or US\$49 with your own equipment. The diving health clinic here has a decompression chamber available to anyone who needs it (though it's very expensive). An open-water course costs US\$520.

Bandos caters for evening visitors and day-trippers from Male', but currently does not provide a regular boat – call the resort if you want to arrange something. Airline crews and travel agents often use Bandos for short-term stays, as well as guests from all over Europe and Asia, so there can be a very mixed group here.

Rooms are modern, with red-tiled roofs, white-tiled floors, air-con, hot water, hair-dryer, minibar and phone. Other categories include the Jacuzzi Beach Villa and the luxurious new water villas, built in 2005. These include services such as a private butler, although the leap in price is quite staggering.

The main Gallery Restaurant does three international buffet meals daily. Other eateries include a fine-dining restaurant, the 24-hour Seabreeze Café with à la carte pasta and curries, and the Harbour Grill for steak and seafood. The Sand Bar hosts live bands, disco nights, cultural shows or karaoke several nights a week. This is one of the liveliest resorts in the country. Bandos is great for families and those who like big resorts where there's potential to meet lots of new

people and to have a huge range of activities available. For a romantic break look elsewhere though; Bandos is not for you.

Helengeli (Helengeli island; ☎ 6642881; www.helengeli.net; s/d/t US\$145/175/238; airport transfer by speedboat 2hr, US\$110, by seaplane 20min, US\$160; 50 rooms; 🏠 📺 📺), the most northerly resort in North Male' Atoll, is highly recommended for divers – almost 40 dive sites are accessible from here, and due to the resort's remote location most of them are used only by Helengeli guests and the occasional passing safari boat. The 2km-long house reef is excellent, so you need not venture far for snorkelling either, and qualified divers can do unguided scuba dives from the beach. Nearby Helengeli Thila is considered one of the best dive sites in the country. Dive costs are around US\$60 for a boat dive with all equipment provided, or US\$50 with tank and weights only. It's US\$2 less after the seventh dive, and there's a good six-day, unlimited dive deal. An open-water course costs US\$619. The **Ocean-Pro dive base** (www.oceanpro-diveteam.com) aims for personalised service and tries to keep guests with the same dive guides for their whole stay.

The resort was extensively renovated in 2004, and has modern rooms with air-con, hot water and open-air bathrooms. All rooms face the water; the best swimming beach is at the western tip of the island. Helengeli is a fair-sized island with plenty of natural vegetation, an uncrowded feel and secluded accommodation. The restaurant alternates between set-menu meals and buffets, including a weekly beach barbecue – the variety of food may sometimes be limited, but the atmosphere and service are good. There's no windsurfing, sailing or other water sports, but a few excursions are offered, including dolphin watching and trips to the inhabited island of Gaafaru nearby. Evening entertainment is very low-key, consisting mainly of a few drinks at the delightful beachfront bar, and an early night in preparation for the next day's diving activity.

Summer Island Village (Ziyaaraifushi island; ☎ 6641949; www.summerislandvillage.com; s/d/t/wb US\$140/210/280/260; airport transfer by fast dhoni 1½hr, US\$90; 108 rooms; 🏠 📺), a long, thin island, is all about affordable fun and wins lots of repeat visits from German and British holidaymakers who enjoy the laid-back approach and profit from the good-value

all-inclusive packages. The management has been making an effort to increase the vegetation and wildlife on the island – an aviary for rearing parrots was brimming with birds when we visited, and gardeners were working very hard on vegetable beds and planting new trees, all helping to make the resort more attractive.

Accommodation is a little spartan but clean and adequate, all rooms being on the beach and all having an extra bed and a spacious outdoor bathroom. The units are tightly packed together, and some rooms are in two-storey units. The modern-style water bungalows at the island's southern end are a recent addition. They're no great shakes, with no direct access to the water and just a small hole in the floor looking into the sea, but they're bigger and more comfortable than the standard rooms.

Sand floors in the public areas and friendly staff give the whole place a relaxed feel. Meals are buffets with a modest selection of curry, fish, salads and vegetables. Weekly theme nights feature Asian and international cuisine.

The lagoon is wide and shallow, so the resort is more suited to windsurfing, water-skiing and sailing than to snorkelling or swimming. The island has quite good beaches on both sides, though some stretches are protected by somewhat unattractive breakwaters, which did at least ensure there was no significant tsunami damage here.

There are some great dive sites within about 5km – a single dive with equipment costs US\$46; an open-water course costs US\$483. The new Serena Spa has massages available from \$30. A daily snorkelling trip is included in the package (excluding equipment), as are table tennis, volleyball and badminton. A decent, economical choice and rightly popular with divers.

MIDRANGE

Dhonveli Beach (Kanuhuraa island; ☎ 6640055; www.dhonvelibeach.com; s/d US\$165/244; airport transfer 30min, US\$70; 150 rooms; 🏠 🚗 🚲) suffered full-scale devastation during the tsunami, being on the outer eastern rim of the atoll and totally exposed. Buildings and vegetation were destroyed and the resort has been in the process of rebuilding ever since. When we visited Dhonveli was up and running again, although work was still

being completed to make this an excellent and high-quality resort. This included the building of 24 brand-new and rather lovely water bungalows, a gorgeous new spa and the re-creation of several stretches of beach that were washed away by the tsunami.

This resort attracts surfers in big numbers from March to November – they even have their own bar area overlooking the island's private surf break, a consistent left-hander called Pasta Point. Outdoor tables here are great for a beer and a view of the surfing action.

The island is small, with scrubby natural vegetation and a few big banyan trees, but extensive landscaping is under way around the main beach, the bar and the swimming pool. The beach on the north side of the island is great for swimming and sunbathing, as well as being safe for children. The new rooms are fully equipped and come in various sizes, with designs that are more imaginative than at many resorts.

All meals are buffet style and feature a fair selection of good-quality food. Dhonveli is not a big diving destination, but there are lots of good dive sites nearby (the Protected Marine Area at HP Reef is very close).

Recovery from the disastrous tsunami should be complete by the time you read this, and Dhonveli is one of the classiest and most convenient surfing resorts anywhere in the country.

The wonderful **Makunudu Island** (Makunudhoo island; ☎ 6646464; www.makunudu.com; s/d US\$220/250; airport transfer 50min, US\$120; 36 rooms; 🏠 🚗 🚲) remains one of our very favourite resorts in the country. Just 6 acres in area, the tiny island almost looks like it might sink under the sheer weight of lush vegetation on it – and the surrounding reef is so big that it's hard for unaccustomed speedboats to find their way into the dock through the shallow lagoon.

Things are extremely tasteful here, but almost unbelievably low-key as well, with individual thatched-roof bungalows hidden among the jungle-like foliage. All rooms face the beach and feature natural finishes, varnished timber, textured white walls, open-air bathrooms, and all facilities except the purposefully excluded TV. The service is of a high standard and the food is excellent, thanks to the French chef. Breakfast and lunch are buffets while most dinners

are a choice of thoughtfully prepared set menus, served in the delightful open-sided restaurant. Beach barbecues are a weekly event and breakfast can be served in your room.

Guests are mainly German, British, French and Italian couples who come to relax, or who are on their honeymoon. Honeymooners from all over the world have planted the island with memorial trees with plaques. This has become too popular though, and the management has had to stop the practice due to a huge proliferation of trees growing everywhere.

There are excellent dive sites in the area, the house reef is great for snorkelling, and an introductory dive is free from the small diving school. Dive groups tend to be small and friendly. Windsurfing and sailing are free, as are shorter excursions. If you want a small, exclusive, natural-style resort, Makunudu is one of the very best in the Maldives.

Established in 1972, **Kurumba Village** (Vihamanaafushi island; ☎ 6642324; www.kurumba.com; s/d/t US\$242/253/342; airport transfer 15min, US\$45; 180 rooms; 🏠 🚗 🚲) was the first resort in the Maldives. It was completely refurbished in 2003 and reopened as a very high-quality place with a relative sense of history. Some may feel its overly manicured gardens and foliage as well as its relentlessly modern architecture combine to make the resort feel a little sterile; others, however, will like its grand country-club style – golf buggies rule the roads here and the resort is big enough for this to be justifiable.

Kurumba is the closest resort to Male', and as such it caters regularly for business conferences and conventions as well as day-trippers from the capital who come for the renowned restaurants. If you're sensitive to aircraft noise, you may find it a little too close to the airport, although Male' International is hardly Heathrow or JFK.

The rooms come in a large range of categories – the pool villas being especially impressive, each with its own pool in a private back garden. For those wanting to splurge there are presidential villas and the Royal Kurumba Residence, which should satisfy even the most demanding international jet-setters.

There's no end to the facilities available, from a huge and well-equipped dive school (US\$57 per dive with all equipment) to a

water-sports centre offering every conceivable discipline, tennis courts, baby-sitters, a gorgeous spa, two gyms, two pools and an incredible seven restaurants. Kurumba is a place for scale and grandeur rather than a desert island hideaway, but it remains a popular choice for both couples and families.

Once Club Med Faru before Club Med's lease expired, and just beyond the Male' overflow island of Hulhumale', **Club Faru** (Farukolufushi island; ☎ 6640553; www.clubfaru.com; s/d US\$190/260; airport transfer 20min US\$25; 152 rooms) reopened as a separate but similar-style resort in late 2005. It's all-inclusive and the rooms are basic but modern, all housed in two-storey blocks, not making it ideal for peace and quiet or privacy. Eventually the island will become part of the Hulhumale' development (see p104) and its future was not certain at the time of research.

Magnificently laid out with real style and class, **Full Moon Resort** (Furanafushi island; ☎ 6642010; www.fullmoonmaldives.com; s/d/wb US\$286/286/418; airport transfer 20min, US\$45; 156 rooms; 🏠 🚗 🚲) has the ambience of an upmarket country club rather than remote tropical island. This is in part due to its proximity to the capital of course, but everything here is clearly aimed at the urbane sophisticate anyway, from the gorgeously understated public areas to the luxurious spa, housed on its own island linked to the resort by a footbridge.

The tsunami hit Full Moon hard, destroying all the water bungalows, although all 52 have now been rebuilt in grand style and are extremely impressive. The standard beachfront deluxe rooms are also charming and feature thatched roofs, shuttered windows and private gardens or terraces.

The Thai restaurant, Mediterranean restaurant and the Italian grill/pizza place serve more interesting food than the buffets at the main restaurant, so it might be best to take a bed and breakfast package and bring extra cash to spend in the speciality restaurants, although this will be more expensive, of course.

A full range of facilities is squeezed onto this small island, including an inviting swimming pool which has its own waterfall, tennis courts, a gym, spa and business centre. There are no motorised water sports, and the lagoon is unsuitable for snorkelling. The efficient dive centre charges about US\$57 for a boat dive with all equipment,

and US\$555 for a complete open-water course. Windsurfing and sailing are available, as is big-game fishing. Full Moon is a great choice for a sophisticated break.

Located right at the top of North Male' Atoll, **Eriyadu** (Eriyadhoo island; ☎ 6644487; www.aaa-resortsmaldives.com/eriyadu; half-board s/d/t US\$192/296/399; airport transfer 50min, US\$80; 120 rooms; 🏠) is pleasantly remote, which is a major incentive for divers who come here for the uncrowded diving. It's also wonderfully laid back without the fussy overservice that characterises so many Maldivian resorts.

After a bad fire it experienced at its power plant in 2005, the whole island is up and running again, having escaped the tsunami with only the loss of a few of its sunbeds.

The island is full of repeat visitors – the vast majority of which are German. Children aren't really encouraged as there are no facilities tailored to them, and this leads to a very quiet and undisturbed atmosphere.

The island is an oval shape, with a good reef all around it, great for snorkelling with turtles and dolphins regular fixtures just metres from the beach. There's no pool but a spa was under construction at the time of our visit.

The **Werner Lau Dive Centre** (www.wernerlau.com) is a very professional operation. A single boat dive is US\$50 with all equipment, US\$45 with tank and weights only, but the six-day no-limit dive package will cost US\$390 – making it a great deal. An open-water course is US\$560.

The rooms are divided into standards and superiors. The standards are in a block set back from the beach, while the superiors are in two-room blocks on the small but pretty beach. They're comfortable and with considerable rustic charm.

The island itself is quite heavily developed, but the buildings are interspersed with lots of shady trees and shrubbery, and there are fine, white beaches all around. Rooms have polished timber floors, TV, minibar and other mod cons. The sand-floor restaurant serves most meals in buffet style, with a varied selection of European dishes, curries and seafood.

The usual water sports and (expensive) excursions are available, as is some low-key evening entertainment, but this resort is mainly for diving, snorkelling and relaxing on the beach.

People who like Club Med tend to love Club Med – and the excited couples and families at **Club Med Kani** (Kanifinolhu island; ☎ 6643152; www.clubmed.com; full board s/d/wb US\$155/310/620; airport transfer 30min, \$US100; 225 rooms; 🏠), the only Club Med resort in the Maldives, seemed to be loving every minute when we visited. Indeed, you pretty much have to come through a Club Med package to stay here, as FIT (fully independent traveller) reservations aren't even accepted until 24 hours before arrival, making advance bookings impossible. French guests make up half of the resort's guests at any time while Italians are the second biggest group.

The resort is large and well set up for activities with a big pool, diving school and water-sports centre, and the place was humming with people coming and going from one activity to another when we visited, not to mention the nightly live entertainment and disco, which make it one of the livelier resorts in the country (though this is possibly not saying much given sleepy local standards).

Day passes are for sale for visitors from Male' – a full pass costs Rf1000 and gives access to the pool and beaches and a buffet lunch, while you can also buy dinner passes and evening entertainment passes (Rf190).

There are three room categories – the beachfront rooms cost a little more than garden rooms, and water bungalows are even more expensive. They're all comfortably furnished and feature lots of natural timber, air-con, a phone and minibar. The meals are very good with accompanying wine, beer or soft drinks included in the package price. Drinks at the bar cost extra (US\$3 to US\$8).

The island itself is quite large and well vegetated, and the beachside bar and entertainment areas are particularly spacious. The wide lagoon is a good place to learn sailing or windsurfing (both included in the price), but not as good for snorkelling (though snorkelling trips to other reefs are also included). Fitness sessions, one daily scuba dive, volleyball and other games and activities are all included, but you pay extra for excursions and spa treatments.

The less exclusive of the two Taj resorts in the Maldives, **Taj Coral Reef** (Hembadhoo island; ☎ 6641948; www.tajhotels.com; s/d/wb US\$290/

310/515; airport transfer 45min, US\$95; 65 rooms; 🏠) is a popular and well-run place at the northern end of North Male' Atoll. The orange roof tiles here may jar somewhat with the Robinson Crusoe look most visitors expect from the Maldives, but the excellent beaches look so good that they more than compensate.

Popular with Japanese divers and European honeymooners, the resort offers plenty for both: some excellent diving nearby with the **Blue In dive centre** (www.blueinmaldives.com), including a great shipwreck at 22m at the end of the main jetty, and romantic, beautifully attired bedrooms for honeymooners; the beachfront rooms are big, comfortable and fully furnished with TV, in-house movies, minibar and the works. The 35 water bungalows are even bigger and the deluxe lagoon villas are especially lovely.

All meals are buffet, with theme nights featuring Chinese, Italian, Maldivian or other cuisines. In addition, a small, à la carte beach restaurant specialises in Indian food. Beach erosion is a problem in places, with beach wideness changing according to the time of year and somewhat unsightly protective walls dotting the lagoon around half the island, though there's an interesting and accessible house reef on the other side, and a good beach at one corner.

Paradise Island (Lankafinolhu island; ☎ 6640011; www.villahotels.com; s/d/wb US\$310/320/550; airport transfer 20min, US\$60; 260 rooms; 🏠) is something of a byword for massive impersonal resorts in the Maldives, the island offering a huge range of facilities and services to travellers from all over the world looking for a bargain. Indeed, pulling into the cobalt-blue waters of the large harbour, the beaches at least do live up to the resort's name.

The facilities are all perfectly good, even if the public areas are rather dated. Extras from diving to drinking add up quickly here, so be careful if your package price sounds too good to be true.

Rooms are clean, with white tiles, white walls, air-con and satellite TV. Water bungalows are a bit bigger but were closed for refurbishment at the time of research. Full board is definitely worth it: you get a decent buffet for every meal and the other three restaurants are nothing to shout about so you won't find yourself wanting to eat elsewhere that much.

The island is well landscaped and has good beaches and a swimming pool. Some rooms are a long way from the restaurant, and some don't have much of a view. Activities include gym, squash, badminton, tennis and billiards – everything costs extra except darts and table tennis. Snorkelling is excellent in the lagoon and on the house reef, which is full of fascinating marine life. The **Delphis dive centre** (www.delphis.com.mv) is very friendly but not the cheapest around. However, there are plenty of excellent diving sites nearby and the location is unquestionably a highlight of the resort.

Paradise is a popular, activity-packed resort with great beaches. It's pervaded by a sense of the naif, but it's good value and always busy.

Understated, sophisticated class jumps out at you from the moment you arrive at **Baros** (Baros island; ☎ 6642672; www.baros.com; s/d/wb US\$430/440/742; airport transfer 25min, US\$95; 75 rooms; 🏠), one of the most popular resorts in the country. Closed for much of 2005 and refitted as a result of a long-planned renovation rather than any tsunami damage, Baros reopened a magnificently rejuvenated place the same year and is definitely a classic luxury resort at surprisingly decent prices.

The centrepiece of the new resort is the impressive Lighthouse Restaurant, a white circus top-style fine-dining and cocktail bar establishment, where guests have to book and which has the feel of a terribly exclusive yacht club. Other dining can be had at the far less formal Cayenne Restaurant, overlooking the reef, where you can have your food cooked anyway you choose by the fleet of chefs. All guests are on a bed-and-breakfast basis, allowing them to enjoy the different eating opportunities throughout their stay (although this adds up quickly of course).

The atmosphere is intimate and quiet, with children under six not allowed – this is upmarket European honeymoon territory through and through. There's 'gentle' jazz and Maldivian music three times a week, and that's about the scope of the nightlife. During the day most people seem to be enjoying diving, swimming and treatments in the luxurious new spa. The three room categories are all beautiful. Even the standard 'luxe villa' is a 95 sq metre dark woodwork of gorgeous refinement with a sumptuous

outdoor bathroom, while the water bungalows are proper holiday-of-a-lifetime stuff.

Baros is one of many upmarket resorts that has made a conscious decision not to have a swimming pool. This is a superbly rejuvenated resort that has rightly earned a huge following of loyal visitors and is a superb choice for a luxurious romantic getaway.

TOP END

You'll be greeted with both a scoop of homemade coconut ice cream and an ice-cold towel when you arrive at **Angsana Resort & Spa** (Ihuru island; ☎ 6643502; www.angsana.com/maldives; half-board s/d US\$759/767; airport transfer 30min, US\$99; 45 rooms; 🏠 📺 🚿), a perfect way for the management to say that they don't do things around here like they do everywhere else.

Just across the water from its sister resort **Banyan Tree**, Angsana opened five years ago and characterises itself, much like **Banyan Tree**, by an innovative management team who combine luxury with thought. It has raised its standards and service considerably, although it still generally works out cheaper to stay here than at **Banyan Tree**.

With its canopy of palm trees and surrounding a gorgeous white beach, Angsana conforms exactly to the tropical-island stereotype and often features in photographs publicising the Maldives. The house reef forms a near perfect circle around the island, brilliant for snorkelling and shore dives. Look near the jetty for the 'barnacle', the oldest of several metal structures on which a small electric current stimulates coral growth.

All nonmotorised water sports are free, including all snorkelling equipment. The best dive sites are some distance away on the edges of the atoll, but boats take divers out morning and afternoon.

The stylish rooms are all decorated in contemporary style, with black furniture, lime-green fabrics and designer bathrooms. There's a modern look in the restaurant too, but most guests prefer to eat dinner on the deck overlooking the sea. The spa consists of eight treatment rooms, almost all doubles, and the treatments are almost identical to the unmitigated luxury of **Banyan Tree**. Angsana offers a very **Banyan Tree** mix of cuisine, comfort and indulgence, but it's somewhat more relaxed and informal.

The intriguing **Banyan Tree** (Vabbinfaru island; ☎ 6643147; www.banyantree.com/maldives; half-board

s/d US\$833/841; airport transfer 25min, US\$99; 48 rooms; 🏠 📺 🚿) is a wonderful mix of shameless luxury and ecotourism project. Part of the international **Banyan Tree** chain, it's actually about as un-chainlike as can be imagined. Remote enough from Male' to feel like the true desert island experience, **Banyan Tree** offers a refreshing take on the top-end experience given that it doesn't have many of the features (such as a swimming pool) that many resorts would take for granted. This is intentional and ties in with the overall guiding policy that tourism must be sustainable and eco-friendly.

This is a romantic resort, extremely quiet and popular with couples. The most unique feature of the resort is the marine laboratory on the island. This is no gimmick, but a serious research facility run by a charming team of marine biologists. Guests are able to help out in various capacities – from planting their own coral in the coral garden, helping with reef cleans and even monitoring the sharks and turtles kept under observation in cages just off the island shore. All of these activities are free and marine biology lessons are given twice a week to any guest whose interest in the sea has suddenly been aroused.

The rooms are similarly unique, with the use of lots of wood imported from Indonesia; they have a gorgeous feel with terrific and unusual outdoor bathrooms. The tsunami did not affect the island so all buildings date from when **Banyan Tree** first opened here in 1995.

The house reef is excellent for snorkelling and diving, but the very best dive sites are some distance away on the edges of the atoll. A single boat dive is very pricey, however, at US\$98 with all equipment (packages of dives become much cheaper); an open-water course is US\$628.

Guests come from all over Europe and Asia, and the superb buffet meals satisfy their varied tastes. Lunch under the palm trees is a delight, with barbecued fish, succulent steak, fresh salads and delicious desserts – even a cheese platter. The restaurant and bar are both casually elegant, open-sided spaces with sand floors and quality furniture.

This was one of the first resorts to have a spa, billed as a 'sanctuary for the senses', where Thai-trained therapists offer you everything

(Continued from page 116)

from a 60-minute turmeric and honey body rub to a Hawaiian Lomi Lomi for two. For the more active, night fishing, windsurfing, sailing and snorkelling are included in the price.

Angsana, **Banyan Tree**'s 'little sister' resort, is just across a small channel next door – a boat goes back and forth every half-hour, allowing guests at each resort to enjoy the other's facilities.

Redefining the luxury market for the Maldives when it opened in 2005, **One & Only at Reethi Rah Resort** (Medhufinolhu island; ☎ 6648800; www.oneandonlyresorts.com; s/d/wb \$900/900/1400; airport transfer by luxury yacht 50min, \$100, by seaplane 10min, price varies; 130 rooms; 🏠 📺 🚿) is the kind of place where you expect to see only movie stars and royalty. Indeed, when we arrived we were immediately asked not to take to photographs, as there were 'top celebrities' on the island.

Reethi Rah ('pretty island') is nothing short of astonishing. One of the longest islands in the country, the resort is scattered with secluded and spectacular villas, 32 of which are over water, all offering privacy and sophisticated luxury.

Far more so than the other **One & Only** property in the Maldives (see p157), **Reethi Rah** is about glamour and style, and shamelessly so. If you aren't comfortable with almost mind-boggling pampering and fly anything other than first class, this probably isn't the place for you.

Rooms have every possible convenience, and are some of the most enormous in the country, beautifully furnished in a modern style that picks and mixes different Asian designs. Some have their own pools.

All guests get around by bicycle, although those unable to ride can call club cars from reception to take them around – the island is rather too large to be covered comfortably on foot. There are several gorgeous beaches and even a charming canal that was built through the island for the sea to flow through. Vegetation is improving quickly – with 16,000 trees and two million plants planted since **One & Only** took over the resort from a low-budget, far smaller island a few years ago. To put this in perspective, the island was just 39 acres when **One & Only** got it, and it now stands at an incredible (for the Maldives, at

least) 109 acres. Most impressively of all, it's hard to see that this is land reclamation as it has been done so well.

There are three superb restaurants: the main one, **Reethi Restaurant**; a chic Japanese restaurant, **Tapasake**; and perhaps the most magical, the open-air **Fanditha**, at the northern tip of the island, an informal Middle Eastern-style restaurant where cuisine from Lebanon to Iran is served on luxurious day beds and massive cushions, described by **One & Only** as 'shipwreck chic'.

The enormous **ESPA**-run spa features 10 treatment rooms, and is predominated by Asian treatments – Ayurvedic therapies and Balinese, Thai and Shiatsu massage, for example. Other attractions include two tennis courts and pro-tennis trainers, a superb diving school and a full water-sports program. The house reef is superb and great for snorkelling. Guests from Germany, the UK and Japan predominate, many of whom are honeymooners.

Book as far in advance as you can; it can be impossible to get a room at short notice. **Reethi Rah** remains the most talked about resort in the Maldives, as exemplified by its notice from *Condé Nast Traveller*, which included the resort on its 2006 Hot List.

Huvafen Fushi (Nakatchafushi Island; ☎ 6644222; www.huvafenfushi.com; s/d/wv US\$1100/1116/1600; airport transfer 30min, US\$120; 43 rooms; 🏠 📺 🚿), a recent **Per Aquum** addition the Maldivian luxury market, opened in 2004 to massive acclaim, making it onto *Condé Nast*'s 2005 Hot List and generally lauded as a milestone in boutique luxury in the Maldives.

Understated and more than a little fabulous, **Huvafen Fushi** is the last word in privacy and modern romance. The rooms are stunning in their simplicity, space and design savvy, all somehow still managing to feature 40-in plasma-screen TVs, Bose surround systems, iPod plug-in points, espresso machines and remote-control everything. The water villas are some of the most impressive in the country – each with its own sizeable plunge pool on an enclosed deck overlooking the sea, with access to the lagoon down a staircase. The bedrooms and bathrooms are massive and both masterpieces of understatement despite including luxuries such as rain showers and the largest king-sized beds we've ever come across. Linen is from Frette and

(Continued on page 125)

furniture by names such as Frank Gehry – the vibe is architect-designed through and through.

Despite this the atmosphere within the resort itself is informal and relaxed. The international clientele is made up mainly of honeymooners and couples, who spend the day by the enormous infinity pool overlooking the sea, lunching in one of the three superb restaurants (Celsius for international, Salt for fish and seafood and Raw for Japanese) and being treated at the spa – unique for having the only underwater treatment room in the world, which really is something you have to see on a trip here.

Diving and water sports are catered for amply, and the entire place feels eerily empty even at full capacity, such is the way in which the resort has been laid out. This is a great place for a honeymoon or a romantic break, but families are welcome too. Definitely one of the most amazing resorts in the country and highly recommended.

Probably our favourite resort in the whole of the Maldives on the grounds of its unique design and utter luxury, **Soneva Gili** (Lankanfushi island; ☎ 6640304; www.sixsenses.com/soneva-gili; wb US\$1145; airport transfer 20min, US\$110; 44 rooms; ♿ ♻️ 🗑️) is essentially Swiss Family Robinson meets *Condé Nast Traveller* and we're smitten. Closed by the havoc wreaked by the tsunami in 2004, Soneva Gili reopened in mid-2005 and is as amazing as ever.

Where to begin? All villas (for there are no mere rooms here) are over water, ranging from the standard Villa Suite that has three rooms as well as a sea garden, a sun deck and bed on the roof for stargazing, to the incred-

ible Private Reserve, a freestanding lagoon complex sleeping nine people in the lap of luxury a short boat ride from the island.

All the buildings are made from natural materials – wood imported from elsewhere in Asia is the main material used – and all villas are as open to the elements as possible – it's only the bedroom that is air conditioned, the rest of the villa is open-air. The attention to detail is incredible with luxurious treats everywhere discreetly hidden away under natural fibres in what is one of the Maldives' most environmentally conscious resorts.

The island itself is very pretty, criss-crossed with sand pathways through which guests can cycle to the main communal areas – the infinity pool overlooking the beach, the charming bar and beachside restaurant where elaborate buffets and à la carte menus are equally impressive. The diving school allows you to dive from a luxury dhoni complete with waiters and a plush leather upholstered sun deck. The water-sports centre offers all nonmotorised sports for free and the lagoon is great for snorkelling a little further out by 'one palm island' – a gorgeous desert island belonging to the resort. Staff are positively obsequious – this is not a good place for those who don't like fussy and unrelenting service where all the staff appear to know your name – but this is the sum total of any gripe we could have with this intelligent place.

When we visited Chelsea FC owner Roman Abramovich's yacht was moored just off the island – his family had dropped by for the day. An indication of price, yes, but

HOW TO SPOT A FASHIONABLE RESORT

In case you have any doubts about where you're staying, this checklist should help you confirm you're in the very smartest of Maldivian resorts:

- You will not be given a fruit cocktail on arrival, but an iced ginger tea, homemade ice cream, homemade lemonade or melon juice, served in dainty earthenware cups.
- Exclusively dark wood interiors, no light wood whatsoever.
- Infinity pools all the way, hopefully even a private one for your own sun deck.
- No glass floors in water villas – you should have your own sea garden or at least a staircase into the sea from your veranda.
- You have more towels than you know what to do with in your room.
- Staff members you have never even seen magically address you by your first name.
- Every time you leave your room a fleet of staff will swarm in to clean it.

ALSO IN NORTH MALE' ATOLL

Four Seasons Kuda Huraa (Kudahuraa island; ☎ 6644888; www.fourseasons.com; 106 rooms; ♿ ♻️ 🗑️) Badly damaged by the tsunami, the Four Seasons Kuda Huraa Resort was still closed for huge-scale refurbishment at the time of research. The Four Seasons brand ensures that this will be one of the most luxurious and stylish resorts in the country, and the Maldivian tourism industry was waiting with bated breath at the time of writing.

Coco Palm Boduhithi (Boduhithi island; www.cocollection.com) Twinned with next-door Kudahithi, Boduhithi will reopen in 2007 as part of the Coco Collection suite of properties in the Maldives.

Coco Palm Kudahithi (Kudahithi island; www.cocollection.com) The smaller of the two islands to have been taken over by Coco Collection, due to reopen in 2007.

Gasfinolhu (Gasfinolhu island; ☎ 6642078; airport transfer 40min, free; 40 rooms; ♿) Catering exclusively to the Italian market, Mahureva offers transfers, most activities and some drinks included. All bookings are by the week, through the Italian tour company **Valtur** (☎ in Italy 39-6-47061; www.valtur.it).

hardly typical of the clientele, the majority of whom are honeymooners and smart but not necessarily plutocratic couples enjoying an absolute trip of a lifetime at one of the world's most sumptuous and inspiring hotels.

KAASHIDHOO

Though in the Kaafu (Male') administrative district, the island of Kaashidhoo is way out by itself, in a channel between much larger atolls. The island has a clinic, a new secondary school, and over 1500 people, which makes it one of the most populous in Kaafu. Some of the ruins here are believed to be remains of an old Buddhist temple. Local crops include watermelon, lemon, banana, cucumber and zucchini, but the island is best known for its *raa* – the 'palm toddy' made from the sap of a palm tree, drunk fresh or slightly fermented.

Local boats going to or from the northern atolls sometimes shelter in the lagoon in Kaashidhoo in bad weather. Dive boats on longer trips might stop to dive Kaashidhoo East Faru, a good place to see large pelagic marine life.

GAAFARU FALHU

This small atoll has just one island, also called Gaafaru, with a population of 850. The channel to the north of the atoll, Kaashidhoo Kuda Kandu, has long been a shipping lane, and several vessels have veered off course and finished on the hidden reefs of Gaafaru Falhu. There are three diveable wrecks – *SS Seagull* (1879), *Erlangen* (1894) and *Lady Christine* (1974). None is anywhere near intact, but the remains all have good coral growth and plentiful fish. Dive trips are possible from

Helengeli and Eriyadu, but most visitors are from live-aboard dive boats.

SOUTH MALE' ATOLL

Crossing the Vaadhoo Kandu, the awesome channel between North and South Male' Atolls, you'll quickly notice that South Male' Atoll has a very different feel from its busy northern neighbour. This is partly due to the lack of population – there are only three inhabited islands here, all of which are on the eastern edge of the atoll and none of them with a big population – and partly to do with the fact that the even the uninhabited islands here are spread out and so you really feel that you're remote from the hustle and bustle of Male' and its surrounding islands.

The biggest island in South Male' Atoll is **Maafushi** (population 1150), which has a prison and a reformatory, providing skill training and rehabilitation for wayward youths. A State Trading Organisation (STO) warehouse here buys salted fish from the local fishing villages and packs it for export.

Guraidhoo island, which with around 1400 people is the atoll's most populated, has a lagoon with a good anchorage, used by both fishing dhonis and passing safari boats. Sultans from Male' sought refuge here during rebellions from as early as the 17th century. Island-hopping visitors come here from the resorts, and a score or so of shops sell them souvenirs, sarongs and cool drinks.

The island of **Gulhi**, north of Maafushi, is not large but is inhabited by around 670 people. Fishing is the main activity, and there's also a small shipyard.

Sights & Activities

DIVING

Some of the best dive sites are around the Vaadhoo Kandu, which funnels a huge volume of water between the North and South Male' Atolls. Various smaller kandus channel water between the atoll and the surrounding sea, and also provide great diving. Some typical, well-known sites are listed here.

The rugged **Velassaru Caves** and overhangs, on the steep wall of the Vaadhoo Kandu, have very attractive coral growth. You may see sharks, turtles and rays on the bottom at around 30m. This dive is not for beginners, but if the current isn't too strong there's excellent snorkelling on the reef edge.

Vaadhoo Caves consists of a row of small caves, plus a bigger one with a swim-through tunnel, as well as excellent soft corals, gorgonians, jackfish and the odd eagle ray. If the current is strong, this is a demanding dive; if not, it's great for snorkelling.

Embudhoo Express is a 2km drift dive through the Embudhoo Kandu, which is a Protected Marine Area. With the current running in, rays, Napoleon wrasse and sharks often congregate around the entrance. The current carries divers along a wall with overhangs and a big cave. The speed of the current makes for a demanding dive, but also provides the ideal environment for soft corals and a large variety of fish. The reef top is good for snorkelling.

Also called Yacht Thila, the attraction of **Kuda Giri** is the hulk of a small freight ship, deliberately sunk here to create an artificial reef. Sponges and cup corals are growing on the wreck, and it provides a home for morays, groupers and large schools of batfish. A nearby thila has recovering coral growth and lots of reef fish to be seen at snorkelling depths. Sheltered from strong currents, this is a good site for beginners and for night dives.

Vaagali Caves is an exciting dive and not especially demanding. It's in a less-exposed location and has many caves on its north side, at around 15m, filled with sponges and soft corals. There is good coral regrowth and lots of fish on the top of the reef, much of it visible to snorkellers.

A central reef splits **Guraidhoo Kandu** into two channels, with many possibilities for divers, even those with less experience. There are numerous reef fish, larger pelagics near

the entrance and mantas when the current is running out. The kandu is a Protected Marine Area.

Resorts

Most resorts in the South Male' Atoll are reached by speedboat from the airport, but some of the closer, cheaper resorts may offer a slower, less-expensive transfer by dhoni. Unless otherwise specified, all transfer prices are by speedboat.

BUDGET

Embudu Village (Emboodhoo island; ☎ 6644776; www.embudu.com; s/d/wb US\$86/144/250; airport transfer by dhoni 45min, US\$40; 124 rooms; 🏠) is a very popular and enduring budget resort with a heavy focus on divers and couples. It's as relaxed as its sand-floor reception suggests, and has lots of thoroughly unpretentious charm. This is a resort where people make friends and socialise without it really being a party island – it's just a friendly and straightforward place. Clearly this is a resort is predominantly European as, unusually for the Maldives, everything is priced in euros. The island has lots of shady trees, some gorgeous beaches and a very accessible house reef.

All accommodation is on a full-board basis, with buffet meals. The standard rooms are fan-cooled, but still very acceptable. Superior rooms, with air-con, hot water, fridge and phone, cost about US\$20 more. There are also 16 deluxe over-water bungalows, although budget water bungalows are always something of a disappointment – these are bare and functional and you may be disappointed if you're after romance. An 'all-inclusive' option, for US\$25 per person per day, includes most drinks and afternoon snacks.

The food is amazingly good for an inexpensive resort, with a varied, well-presented selection and very fresh fruit and vegetables. Entertainment is organised one night per week, but the main attraction is watching the sunset from the casual beach bar.

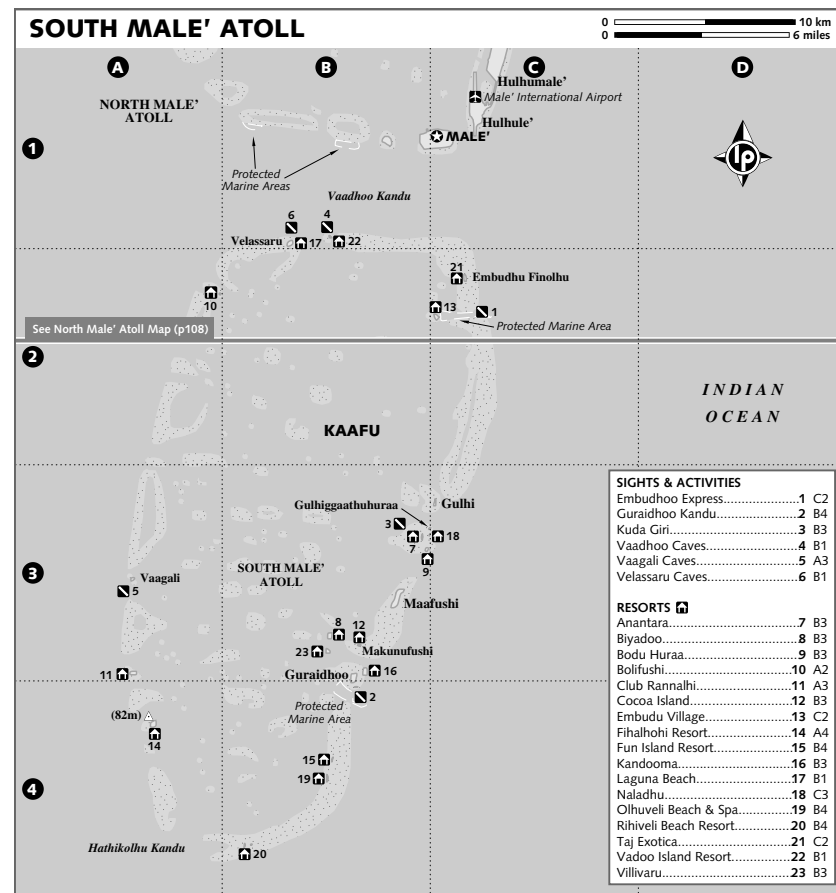
Diving is popular here, thanks to the very professional **Diverland** (www.diverland.com) and the great dive sites in the area (over 90 different sites are reached on a regular basis). A single dive is US\$46 with all equipment (and there are good discounts for multidive packages). A full open-water course costs US\$316 – extremely good value; nitrox and

rebreather courses and facilities are available. Windsurfing is also popular, and there's a good range of excursions to Male' and various other islands. Massage is available at the new, somewhat improvised, spa. If you're not looking for luxuries but an unpretentious beach and diving holiday, Embudu Village is a really excellent and enjoyable resort.

Fihalhohi Resort (Fihhaalhohi island; ☎ 6642903; www.fihalhohi.info; s/d US\$125/145; airport transfer 75min, US\$80; 128 rooms; 🏠), open since 1981, is a charming budget place that retains an unpretentious appeal, a world away from the necessity of having your own butler or private plunge pool. Its dual attractions are its low prices and fantastic reef, making it a great budget diving resort.

The island itself is lovely, with white beaches almost all the way around it and a gorgeous lagoon in front. The house reef is very good for snorkelling, and is also used for night and individual dives. The Ocean Venture dive centre charges US\$45 for a single boat dive with tank and weights, or US\$53 with all equipment. Open-water courses are US\$390.

Meals at the Palm Grove restaurant are mostly buffet, and for variety there's a fun theme meal almost every night, from Middle Eastern to Mexican, flambé to fish and chips. Rooms have been progressively upgraded; all have hot water, but a few have no air-con. Deluxe rooms, in two-storey blocks, have extras like a hairdryer, safe and



minibar. Fihalhohi is a fun resort, and a good choice for families, FITs and divers.

For the price range it's in, **Laguna Beach** (Velassaru island; ☎ 6645903; www.lagunamaldives.com; s/d/t/wb US\$165/175/236/405; airport transfer 20min, US\$60; 132 rooms; 🏠 📺 📺) punches impressively above its weight – this is a very good, modern resort offering full facilities and efficient service. Despite the quite dense development, the island is very attractive with lots of trees and gardens and very pretty beaches. Some rooms are in two-storey blocks, others are individual bungalows with a split-level design; there are also water bungalows. All are bright white and equipped with everything from coffee-making facilities to satellite TV.

The main restaurant buffets have a large selection of fine, but not outstanding, dishes. For a change, try the special Italian or Chinese restaurants, or the outdoor barbecue/grill. The bar has entertainment almost every night in the form of live bands, a cultural show or a disco. Guests are mostly from Europe – a mixture of young couples, older couples and families. The resort offers childcare and a children's swimming pool, as well as rooms with interconnecting doors, which are good for families.

Excellent dive sites are nearby, on both sides of the Vaadhoo Kanduu. The dive centre charges average rates. Snorkelling is wonderful on the edge of the house reef, but it's hard to get to and subject to currents. The lagoon is good for learning windsurfing and sailing, and excursions to Male' and other islands are popular. There are no motorised water sports.

The atmosphere at Laguna is a little formal, rather than casual and laid back, but it's still a good choice for top-end comforts at a reasonable price.

MIDRANGE

Bolifushi (Bolifushi island; ☎ 6643517; www.bolifushi.com; s/d/wb US\$208/244/403; airport transfer by speedboat 30min, US\$65; 55 rooms; 🏠 📺) is a supremely relaxing, intimate and laid-back resort. It's a tiny island peopled with honeymooners, families and divers from all over Europe who come for the two exceptionally pretty beaches and a good house reef close to shore.

Half of the rooms are fairly uninspiring standards, housed in blocks of two, while there are also 13 beach bungalows with

terraces overlooking the sea and 15 water bungalows – nothing particularly sophisticated here but very pleasant.

The PADI dive centre runs trips to the excellent dive sites in the area and there's also good diving on the house reef, including a small wreck. Diving prices are very reasonable.

Water sports are also big here: the island is surrounded by sheltered waters and is well placed for cat sailing and not-too-strenuous windsurfing. Other activities from water-skiing to pedalo hire are available.

The restaurant serves a basic buffet breakfast, set-menu lunch and a reasonable buffet dinner. If you want to do a little snorkelling, diving and relaxing, and you're not looking for high style or *haute cuisine*, Bolifushi is a good choice.

On the western edge of the atoll, **Club Rannalhi** (Rannalhi island; ☎ 6642688; www.aitekenspencehotels.com; s/d/t US\$230/264/352; airport transfer 45min, US\$100; 116 rooms; 🏠 📺) is an Italian club-style resort. It's an attractive island with tall palm trees, fine beaches and good snorkelling on the house reef, but it's so built up that there's hardly any open space left. The rooms are in two-storey blocks, modern and well finished with all the amenities, and there are 16 spacious water bungalows. The big, airy restaurant serves all buffet meals, and they're very good – plenty of pasta of course, as well as other Italian staples.

Many of the guests dive, sometimes commuting to the dive sites in South Ari Atoll. A single boat dive costs about US\$44 with tank and weights, US\$57 with all equipment. Open-water courses are inexpensive at US\$375. Snorkelling is good on the house reef, especially the excellent coral growth on the thila 100m off the service jetty. The main attraction though, if it's your thing, is the programme of animation activities, which start with morning aerobics, continue with volleyball and dance competitions, and finish late at night with amateur theatrics and karaoke. Nearly all guests come through the Italian agent Viaggi del Ventaglio (Club Venta), but there's also a sprinkling of French, British and FITs. Club Rannalhi has an enthusiastic, animated ambience, which will put off most non-Italians, but it's a good place to come if that's your cup of tea.

The extremely friendly **Vadoo Island Resort** (Vaadhoo island; ☎ 6643976; www.vadoo.net; s/d/wb US\$228/272/590; airport transfer by dhoni 1hr, US\$50, speedboat 20min, US\$100; 31 rooms; 🏠 📺) has traditionally attracted divers, but today it pitches itself more as a relaxation centre. Diving remains popular though, mainly because of the resort's great location right beside Vaadhoo Kanduu, with access to great dive sites in both North Male' and South Male' Atolls. While Vadoo's main market is the Japanese, there's a strong European presence too.

The resort has a wonderfully relaxed feel to it, its rustic rooms are simple and clean and its charmingly old-fashioned water bungalows – the first in the country, built in 1988 – have lots of retro charm and feature traditional furnishings while still being extremely comfortable, with great touches.

The beaches are delightful, the public areas are basic but stylish and the new Ayurveda Health Centre is the full deal, with a doctor on hand seven days a week, two treatment rooms, a traditional steam bed and a pharmacy. Packages start from US\$174 per day (minimum three days) and a full week's therapy comes in at US\$878.

The house reef is great for snorkelling, and qualified divers can make unguided dives here. It's not a great place for beginners as rental charges for basics are high – one dive with tanks and weights will cost US\$33, but to include all other equipment (some of which is hired on a daily rate) will set you back an additional US\$36!

The six days' unlimited diving deal is quite a bit cheaper at US\$330. Dive courses feature very personalised instruction, with one instructor per two students, but you should reserve a dive course at least three weeks ahead. An open-water course costs US\$625.

The rooms are all reasonably new, and quite well finished (no TV or minibar) – the cheapest ones are in the Sunrise Wing, which is a block with rooms on two storeys. Each has either a veranda or balcony. All in all, Vadoo is a highly recommended resort, full of unpretentious, easy-going charm.

Olhuvveli Beach & Spa (Olhuvveli island; ☎ 6642788; www.olhuvveli.com; s/d/wb US\$340/360/495; airport transfer 50min, US\$120; 129 rooms; 🏠 📺 📺) is a fantastic resort following major post-tsunami renovations and repairs. Its reopening in late 2005 has heralded the arrival of a very

upmarket midrange resort in South Male' Atoll.

The main market here is Italian, followed by German and a smattering of Japanese and British visitors. The rooms are spread out along the beach in two-level blocks, but they are extremely tastefully done, furnished throughout with dark-wood four-poster beds and all featuring balconies or patios which lead straight out to the gorgeous beaches on either side of the island. There are also two rings of extremely swish water bungalows stretching over the lagoon.

The new Serena spa is popular for its Ayurvedic treatments, aromatherapy and massage. Although narrow, the beaches are attractive, and the wide lagoon is good for sailing, windsurfing and being towed around behind a motorboat. This is one of the first resorts to offer kitesurfing lessons and equipment. Snorkelling is excellent off the end of the jetty, at the edge of the reef, where turtles are common. The first-class **Sea-Explorer dive centre** (www.sea-explorer.net) does lots of drift dives in nearby channels, as well as doing wreck and night dives.

Overall, Olhuvveli offers excellent value. It's the perfect compromise between budget prices and high standards, between romance and diving. There are some extremely good week-long accommodation packages offered through its website, so check for these too.

Rihiveli Beach Resort (Mahaana Elhi Huraa island; ☎ 6643731; www.rihiveli-maldives.com; s/d/tr US\$261/427/597; airport transfer 1hr, US\$145; 48 rooms) is the personal creation of a Frenchman who lived here for 20 years. He has now moved on, and a legion of loyal guests are hoping that the resort will retain its natural, informal charm and quality. So far, so good. While the resort remains popular with French and Swiss visitors, it's in no fear of being overrun anytime soon.

Consisting of just 48 little bungalows, all built in a rustic style from now-illegal coral stone and with traditional thatched roofs, they have all the basics for comfort such as hot water but nothing considered superfluous, such as air-con, fridges, phones or a TV set. This is the secret of its success – Rihiveli ('silver sand') will never be overrun with your run-of-the-mill package group.

The open-air bar has a sand floor and shady trees overhead, while the restaurant is built over the lagoon and has a lovely view as well as truly mouthwatering cuisine.

The usual water sports (windsurfing, sailing, canoeing, even water-skiing) plus tennis are all included in the room price. You can wade across to two other, uninhabited islands where the resort organises regular barbecue lunches. Regular boat trips to other reefs make up for the lack of snorkelling sites next to the resort. The main diving destinations are around nearby Hathikolhu Kandu, and there's a small wreck to explore. A single boat dive organised by the **Eurodivers Dive School** (www.euro-divers.com) costs about US\$41 with all equipment. An open-water course is US\$355.

With its relaxed ambience, French style and natural appeal, Rihiveli is a unique and special resort for those who appreciate the simple things. The resort was closed in summer 2006 for renovations, so it will probably be even better by 2007.

TOP END

Reopening in late 2005 after being disastrously affected by the tsunami, the **Taj Exotica** (Embudhu Finolhu island; ☎ 6642200; www.tajhotels.com; s/d/wb US\$850/900/1000; airport transfer 20min, US\$75; 62 rooms; 🏠 📺 🚿), the most exclusive of the Indian Taj chain's two resorts in the Maldives, is already experiencing full occupancy again.

This elegant, understated resort is all about quiet luxury and indulgence. The resort was one of the original pioneers of fine à la carte dining in the Maldives – the main Asia-Pacific restaurant here wouldn't know a buffet if it hit it in the face. Everything here is ordered and individually cooked from a sumptuous and expensive menu. This is one place where full board would come in handy – the meals here add up very quickly. The second restaurant is built out over the lagoon and is only open in the evenings – one feature here is an open hole into the water, where fish flock in the evening attracted by the light.

ALSO IN SOUTH MALE' ATOLL

Anantara (Dhigufinolhu island; ☎ 3341708; www.anantara.com; 110 rooms; 🏠 📺 🚿) Still a full-scale building site when we visited, the Thai Anantara group will have opened its first resort in the Maldives by the time you read this and it promises to set people talking. The beautiful island, previously a fairly downmarket resort, has been razed to the ground and is being built from scratch. The beach villas and water bungalows we saw were stunning and we fully expect this to become a big success in the luxury market.

Naladhu (Veliganduhuraa island; ☎ 3341708; www.anantara.com) Anantara's second project in the Maldives and next door to the Anantara resort, little Veliganduhuraa is to be developed into a super-luxury hotel of the six-star style, provisionally named Naladhu. Work had yet to begin when we visited, but once it does this will doubtless be something quite special.

Bodu Huraa (Boduhuraa island; ☎ 6640172; www.hotelplan.it; airport transfer 45min; 36 rooms) This relatively new resort offers accommodation in over-water bungalows. The resort is 100% booked by the Italian Hotelplan group and does not accept FITs or anyone who does not come through Hotelplan.

Biyadoo (Biyadhoo island; ☎ 6647171; www.biyadoo.com.mv; 96 rooms) The lease at Biyadoo expired in 2004 and the resort was still shut for refurbishment at the time of research, due to reopen in 2007. The island itself is very attractive, with several fine beaches and an excellent house reef.

Villivaru (Vililigilivaru island; ☎ 6647070; 60 rooms) The sister resort of Biyadoo is also due to be re-leased, refurbished and repositioned further upmarket.

Fun Island Resort (Bodufinolhu island; ☎ 6644558; www.villahotels.com) This big, popular and well-run resort had been operating since the mid-1980s but was badly damaged in the tsunami and was still closed for a complete refit and upgrading at the time of research. The resort will reopen in 2007.

Kandooma (Kandooma island; ☎ 6644452; www.kandoom.info) Badly damaged by the tsunami, charming little Kandooma, a budget island on the eastern edge of South Male' Atoll, was being totally renovated at the time of writing and was due to open in late 2006.

Other public area features include a DVD and book library, a well-stocked games room, the Grand Jiva Spa with six treatment rooms (four of which are doubles) and a gorgeous infinity pool.

The beach is best on the western side of the island; the tsunami decimated the beach on the eastern side of the island but it's gradually being returned to its original condition with the help of sand pumps. All categories of rooms are supremely smart, many of which have their own plunge pools overlooking the beach. The bathrooms in the lagoon villas have wonderful bathtubs next to huge windows allowing you to contemplate the sea as you soak.

All in all, Taj Exotica is a great choice; even though it's a small island, with only a meagre amount of vegetation, it excels with its wonderful style, atmosphere and superb food.

Since its lavish rebranding at the hands of the COMO group, whose diverse hotels include the Metropolitan in London and the Parrot Cay Resort in the Turks and Caicos Islands, **Cocoa Island** (Makunufushi island; ☎ 6641818; www.cocoa-island.com; wb US\$680; airport transfer 1hr, US\$180; 30 rooms; 🏠 📺 🚿) has been a much talked-about luxury resort.

The ethos is one of escape and pampering here, at the very southern tip of South Male' Atoll.

The rooms here are quite something else, all over water, but built in the shape of traditional Maldivian dhoni boats. Inside they look like a glossy magazine editorial – all clean lines, white cotton and dark wood. Every amenity you could need is catered for in the rooms and they are some of the best designed and most consciously fabulous we've seen.

Elsewhere the island is typical of the luxury market: superb beaches, great diving, water sports and a COMO Shambhala spa are all absolutely top quality. There's a fantastic à la carte menu at the resort's main restaurant, with emphasis on seafood cooked in the Keralan style as well as other dishes combining Indian and Sri Lankan cooking. Alternatively, the COMO Shambhala cuisine available is for the health-conscious (no cow or soya milk here, just blended nut milks, honey instead of sugar), featuring raw vegetables and fish dishes for those on total detox.

This is an original, boutique place that will thrill anyone wanting a luxurious, healthy and unusual getaway.

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