

# Southern Atolls

All eyes are currently on the southern Maldives to provide the islands for the future development of tourism in the Maldives. The already-crowded central Maldives and the bad transport links to the northern atolls mean that the pristine south is, in the words of many a developer, ripe for it. There are three regional airports with daily connections to Male' already here and the new international airport at Gan will begin taking long-haul flights from Europe and Asia during the lifetime of this book, so tourism arrivals to this relatively untouched area of the country are set to dramatically increase.

Until a few years ago, the atolls south of Male' and Ari Atolls were isolated and had scarcely seen a foreigner. The exception was Gan, in the far south of the country, where the British had established military facilities in WWII and an air-force base that operated from 1956 to 1976. Even 30 years after the British departed Gan still has an unusually British feel.

Staying at the budget Equator Village remains one of the best ways to experience real life in the Maldives, as a new road has connected Gan to three other inhabited islands that tourists are free to explore by bicycle or taxi without the usual restrictions.

Development is set to be huge over the next decade here: the tourism zone looks set to be expanded to cover all five southern atolls that are currently off-limits to non-permit-holders, safari boats are regularly exploring dive sites as far south as the Huvadhoon Kandoo (famously known as One-and-a-Half-Degree channel), and surfing trips are going to the remotest breaks of Gaaf Dhaal. Despite this, the region is almost totally pristine and a wonderful place to visit.

## VAAVU

The Vaavu administrative district is made up of Felidhoo Atoll (also spelled Felidhe and Fulidhoo) and the small, uninhabited Vattaru Falhu Atoll. This is the least populous area of the country, with around 2000 inhabitants spread over just five inhabited islands. As the area is just south of Male' and thus well served by transport links, this is an area set to be developed far more heavily in the near future than the two resorts currently functioning here.

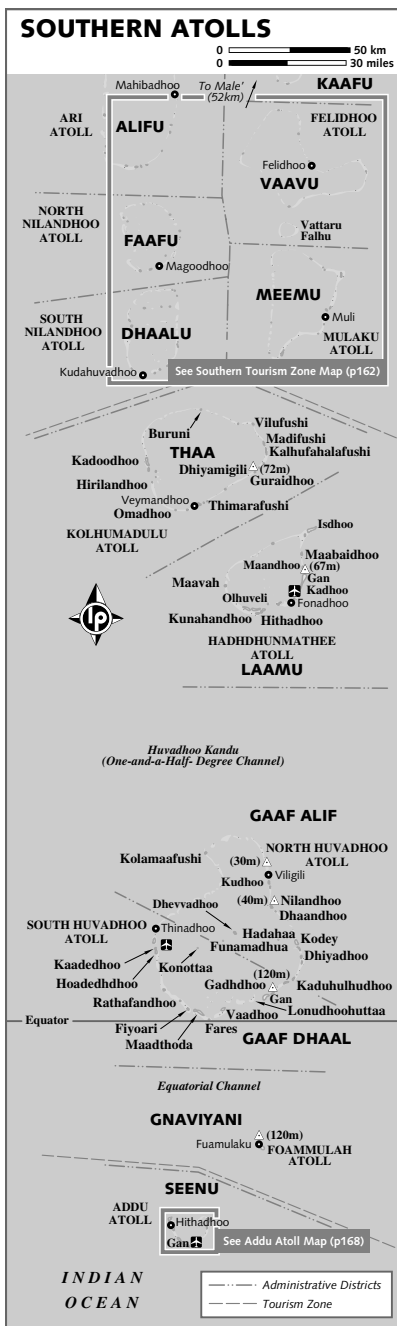
The main industry is fishing, and there is some boat building as well as two tourist resort islands. The capital island is **Felidhoo**, which has only about 500 people, but visitors are more likely to go to its neighbouring island, **Keyodhoo** (population 650), which

has a good anchorage for safari boats. At the northern edge of the atoll, **Fulidhoo** (population 370) is an attractive island, regularly visited on day trips from the resorts – you may see some impressively large boats under construction here. **Ra-keedhoo** (population 360), at the southern tip of the atoll, is used as an anchorage by safari boats taking divers to the nearby channel.

## Sights & Activities

### DIVING

There are at least 24 recognised dive sites in the atoll and only two resorts in the area. Some of them are not readily accessible, even from the resorts, and are mostly visited by safari boats. The following sites are



rated as amongst the best in the Maldives, and they all offer superb snorkelling.

**Devana Kandu** is a not-too-demanding drift dive in a channel divided by a narrow thila; it's a great snorkelling area too. There are several entrances to the channel, which has overhangs, caves, reef sharks and eagle rays. The southern side has soft corals and lots of reef fish. Further in, the passages join up and there is a broad area of hard corals, the deeper parts being less affected by bleaching. The whole channel is a Protected Marine Area.

**Fotteyo** is a brilliant dive and snorkelling site in and around a channel entrance – it's worth making several dives here. There are numerous small caves, several large caves and various arches and holes, all decorated with colourful soft corals. Rays, reef sharks, grouper, tuna, jackfish, barracuda, turtles and even hammerhead sharks can be seen. Inside, the channel floor is known as 'triggerfish alley'.

**Rakeedhoo Kandu** is a challenging dive in a deep channel – the east and west sides are usually done as separate drift dives. Broad coral shelves cover overhangs and caves, which have sea fans and black corals. Turtles, Napoleon wrasse, sharks and schools of trevally are often seen and the snorkelling on the reef top is brilliant.

**Vattaru Kandu**, a remote channel dive on the southern edge of Vattaru Falhu, is now a designated Protected Marine Area. It is not too demanding unless the currents are running at full speed. The reef next to Vattaru island is a fine snorkelling area. Around the entrance are many caves and overhangs with soft corals, sea fans and abundant fish life – barracuda, fusilier and white-tip reef sharks. Turtles are sometimes seen here, and manta rays from December to April.

## Resorts

**Dhiggiri** (Dhiggiri island; ☎ 6700593; mmtours@dhivehinet.net.mv; s/d US\$330/358; airport transfer by seaplane 20 min US\$200, by speedboat 1½hr, US\$130; 45 rooms; 🏠) was completely renovated in the late 1990s and caters exclusively to the Italian market. It's a club-style resort, and all guests are on packages that include activities, a couple of excursions, all meals (with beer and wine) and nonmotorised water sports. The rooms have air-con, TV,

phone, minibar and satellite TV; 10 of them are water bungalows. It's a small island, a little bit cramped, splendidly isolated, with good dive sites nearby and a house reef that's accessible for snorkellers.

As its name suggests, **Alimatha Aquatic** (Alimathaa island; ☎ 6700575; safari@dhivehinet.net.mv; s/d US\$270/295; airport transfer by seaplane 20 min US\$200, by speedboat 1½hr, US\$130; 102 rooms; 🏠) is a resort devoted to the pleasures of diving, snorkelling and water sports. Like its sister resort Dhiggiri, Alimatha was completely renovated in the late 1990s. It's also an Italian club-style resort with the guests on inclusive packages. It's essentially a bigger, more attractive version of Dhiggiri. The lagoon is quite wide and more suited to sailing and windsurfing (included in the package price) than snorkelling.

## MEEMU

Meemu administrative district (traditionally called Mulaku) has only about 5000 people living on its nine inhabited islands. **Muli** (population 760) is the capital island, and now gets a few visitors from the newly established resorts. Nearby **Boli Mulah** and **Kolhuvaariyaafushi** islands, in the south, are more populous, with about 1400 and 1200 people, respectively. Both these islands grow yams, which are an important staple in more fertile islands, and an alternative to rice that must be imported.

The atoll was included in the tourism zone in the late 1990s, and has lots of sites that are recently explored and named, both in the kandus on the edges of the atoll, and inside the atoll around the numerous thilas and giris.

## Sights & Activities

### DIVING

**Shark's Tongue** is east of Boli Mulah, in the mouth of the Mulah Kandu. White-tips sleep on the sandy plateau, and grey reef sharks hang around a cleaning station at 20m. In strong currents, black-tip, grey and silver-tip sharks cruise through the coral blocks, but this is no place for beginner divers.

**Giant Clam** is an easy dive around two sheltered giris, where several giant clams are seen between 8m and 15m, even by snorkellers. Numerous caves and overhangs are

rich with anemones and home to lobsters, grouper and glassfish. Colourful butterflyfish and clown triggerfish are easily spotted, but look hard for well-camouflaged stonefish and scorpionfish.

## Resorts

**Hakuraa Club** (Hakuraa Huraa island; ☎ 6720014; www.johnkeelshotels.com; wb US\$270; airport transfer by seaplane 45 min, US\$255; 70 rooms; 🏠) reopened in 2005 after a US\$3.2 million post-tsunami refit and the results are quite something. Traditionally a water-sports destination, Hakuraa Club is still a resort of choice for those who like sailing, windsurfing, snorkelling and diving, but it is now marketing itself as a romantic place to do these things too.

Catering mainly to British and German guests on all-inclusive packages, Hakuraa offers only over-water bungalows in a massive swathe of construction spread out over the lagoon. The lagoon is not good for snorkelling, though snorkelling gear and twice-daily snorkelling trips are included in the package. Use of windsurfers is also included, but at low tide the lagoon becomes too shallow for windsurfing and sailing – so it's a strange choice for a specialist water sports resort!

The dive school is good value and offers what so few centres in the Maldives can these days – access to truly pristine dive sites. With so many little-visited dive sites in the area, diving might be the best reason to stay at Hakuraa Club.

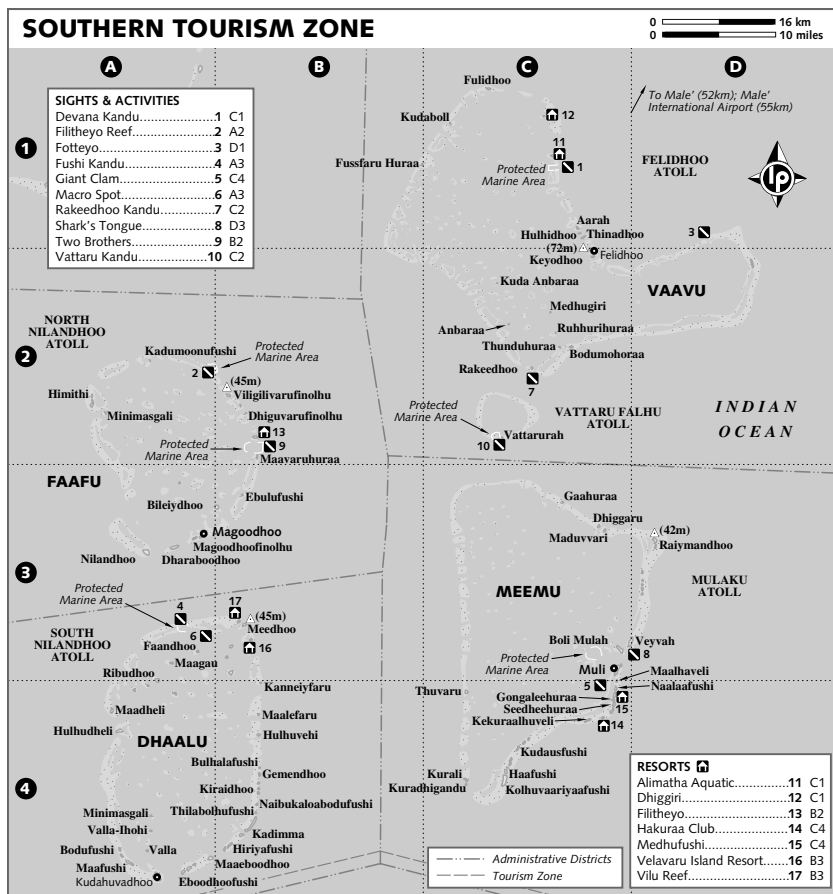
The lovely island resort of **Medhufushi** (Medhufushi island; www.aaa-resortsmaldives.com/medhufushi) was closed at the time of research for a total refit. It is expected to reopen in mid-2007. No further details were available at the time of writing.

## FAAFU

The administrative district of Faafu, also known as North Nilandhoo Atoll, has about 3800 people living on its five inhabited islands. The capital island, **Magoodhoo** (population 630), is a small fishing village with a very traditional Islamic community.

## Sights & Activities

On the southern edge of the atoll, **Nilandhoo** (population 1500) has the second oldest mosque in the country, Aasaari Miskiyyi,



built during the reign of Sultan Mohamed Ibn Abdullah (1153–66). It is made of dressed stone and the interior is decorated with carved woodwork. It's possible that the stones were recycled from the ruins of earlier, pre-Islamic structures.

Thor Heyerdahl's book *The Maldivian Mystery* has an entire chapter about this island. His expedition unearthed many phallic stone carvings, like the lingam associated with the Hindu god Shiva in his manifestation as the creator. Some of these images can be seen in the National Museum in Male'. Heyerdahl's expedition also found ruins apparently from an ancient gate, one of seven surrounding a great pagan temple complex. You can visit Nilandhoo on

a full-day excursion from Filitheyo resort, but the ruins are mostly unexcavated. As Heyerdahl wrote:

Five teams of archaeologists could dig here for five years and still make new discoveries. The magnitude of this prehistoric cult centre seemed quite out of proportion to the size of the island.

The diving in the area is the other main attraction.

**Filitheyo Reef**, the kandu south of Filitheyo resort, is now a Protected Marine Area and has several diving possibilities. Only accessible by boat, the house reef on the southeast corner of the resort descends in

big steps where great clouds of fish school. Swarms of batfish and several Napoleons are resident, while grey reef sharks, rays and trevallies are frequent visitors.

The **Two Brothers** are two thilas placed in a narrow channel. The big brother (north) tops out at 3m and is covered with soft corals and sponges, and attracts snorkelers. Many turtles reside here. Big pelagics cruise around both brothers and there are lots of nudibranch, pipefish, gobies and other small marine life.

## Resorts

**Filitheyo** (Filitheyo island; ☎ 6720025; www.aaa-resortsmaldives.com/filitheyo; s/d/wb US\$268/276/390; airport transfer by seaplane 35min, US\$245; 125 rooms; 🏠 🚗 🚶) is a beautifully designed and finished resort on a large, well-vegetated, triangular island. The public buildings are spacious, open-sided Balinese-style pavilions with palm-thatch roofs and natural finishes. The main restaurant is especially attractive and serves a wide assortment of wonderful food at buffets for every meal. Even at lunch, expect canapés, soup, several types of fish, chicken, a couple of curries, fresh-cooked pasta and a few vegetarian options. Drinks are very reasonably priced here, and at the main bar and sunset bar (beers US\$3 to US\$4; house wine US\$4 per glass; spirits US\$4 to US\$6), but all-inclusive options are available.

Most rooms are comfortable timber bungalows facing the best beach, nestled amongst the palm trees, and equipped with phone, minibar, TV, CD player, open-air bathroom and personal sun deck. Interconnecting rooms are perfect for families. Deluxe villas provide extra space and style, while the water villas have sea views and private balconies. Resort facilities include a gym, small spa, horizon pool, reading room and shops. Some low-key evening entertainment is organised, and there's an interesting programme of excursions and fishing trips.

Beaches are pretty all around, but the lagoon is shallow on the south side, and not suitable for swimming on the east side. The north side has it all – soft sand, good swimming, and an accessible house reef that's great for snorkelling. Qualified divers can do unguided dives off the house reef too.

Filitheyo is a first-class resort with great food, friendly and efficient service and a lovely setting. It doesn't cater for party-goers or pampering. It suits families and those looking for relaxation, and is ideal for diving, snorkelling and other outdoor and water activities.

## DHAALU

The administrative district of Dhaalu is made up of the South Nilandhoo Atoll and has about 5000 people living on its eight inhabited islands.

The biggest and most interesting island is the capital, **Kudahuvadhoo** (population 1450), which has an ancient and mysterious mound. The mound is now just sand, but originally this was the foundation of a structure made of fine stonework. The building stones were later removed to build part of the island's mosque. Heyerdahl said the rear wall of this mosque had some of the finest masonry he had ever seen, surpassing even that of the famous Inca wall in Cuzco, Peru. He was amazed to find such a masterpiece of stone-shaping art on such an isolated island, although the Maldivians had a reputation in the Islamic world for finely carved tombstones. Kudahuvadhoo is a long way from the resorts on this atoll, so a visit would be difficult. The waters around Kudahuvadhoo have seen several shipwrecks, including the 1340-ton *Liffey*, which went down in 1879, and the *Utheem*, which hit the same reef in 1960.

In the north of the atoll are the so-called 'jewellers islands'. **Ribudhoo** (population 700) has long been known for its goldsmiths, who are believed to have learnt the craft from a royal jeweller banished here by a sultan centuries ago. Another version is that they developed their skills on gold taken from a shipwreck in the 1700s. The nearby island of **Hulhudheli** (population 720) is a community of traditional silversmiths. Most of the gold and silver work on sale in Male' now seems to be imported, though the gold chains and medallions worn by many children may be made in these islands. Many of the craftspeople here are now making jewellery, beads and carvings from black corals and mother-of-pearl. Ribudhoo is quite accessible from the resorts, but Hulhudheli would be a long day trip.

## Sights & Activities

### DIVING

A big attraction of these resorts is the access to infrequently explored dive sites.

A channel on the northern edge of the atoll, **Fushi Kandui** is a Protected Marine Area. Steps on the east side have eagle rays and white-tip reef sharks. Tilas inside the channel are covered with hard and soft corals, and are frequented by turtles, Napoleon fish and schooling snappers. Look for yellowmouth morays and scorpion fish in the crevices.

**Macro Spot**, a sheltered, shallow giri, makes a suitable site for snorkellers, novices and macrophotographers. Overhangs and nooks shelter lobsters, cowries, glassfish, blennies and gobies.

### Resorts

A classy but reasonably priced resort is a rare beast in the Maldives and **Vilu Reef** (Meedhuffushi island; ☎ 6760011; [www.vilureef.com](http://www.vilureef.com); s/d/wb US\$200/240/540; airport transfer by seaplane 35min, US\$260; 101 rooms; 🍷 🍷 🍷) is regarded as a well-guarded secret by its many repeat visitors. It's small, with huge palms and great beaches almost all the way around the island, which are especially good on the lagoon side. The island itself is thick with trees and bushes and, despite being quite crowded, has been developed with considerable care.

The style is traditional on the outside (white walls, thatched roofs) and modern convenience inside. The rooms are round and have most mod cons (but no TV), as well as decent outdoor bathrooms.

The main Nautilus restaurant provides big buffets for every meal and they are of a high international standard. This is a quiet resort with the odd bit of live music, but Vilu is certainly not a place for kicking nightlife.

Some British guests on all-inclusive packages might also be up for the crab races, cultural shows and disco. Most guests are from Germany, and many of them are divers with little energy left to party. Tennis, badminton, volleyball and a gym cater for the more sports minded, and there's windsurfing, sailing and motorised water sports. The Amaan Spa offers the full range of treatments from massage to pedicure and has six treatment rooms.

On one side, a wide beach faces a lagoon that's perfect for sailing and sheltered swimming, while on the other side a nice but narrower beach fronts a house reef that offers excellent snorkelling. Divers are well catered for by **Sun International Diving School** ([www.sundivingschool.com](http://www.sundivingschool.com)), which offers very reasonably priced dives and a full range of courses including snorkelling.

Vilu Reef is a good choice – combining friendly informality with some class and style – and it's a great place to come for people looking for diving and pampering.

In 2005 **Velavaru Island Resort** (Velavaru island; ☎ 6760028; [www.velavaru.com](http://www.velavaru.com); s/d/t US\$349/357/442; airport transfer by seaplane 35min, US\$270; 84 rooms; 🍷 🍷) became the Banyan Tree hotel chain's third property in the Maldives, and it was a much needed post-tsunami boost to the country's shaky tourist industry when the Singapore-based luxury hotelier coolly announced that it had bought the property for US\$20m. As well as shoring up the local travel industry, the information also answered, if in a gob-smacking kind of way, the question much-asked by holidaymakers in the Maldives: how much does one of these islands cost anyway?

Immediately the resort, which began operation in 1989, started a process of refurbishing itself along the lines of its now sister resorts Banyan Tree and Angsana Ihuru. The new-look accommodation has a strong Asian feel and the room categories are divided up into beach bungalows, deluxe beach bungalows and island bungalows (the highest category). Each is gorgeously attired in an effortlessly chic way.

Velavaru has wide sandy beaches where turtles once nested – Velavaru means turtle island. The wide lagoon is no good for snorkelling, but there are two free snorkelling trips every day. Dive sites in this atoll are not well documented, but the Velavaru Marine Centre is working on changing that. It charges US\$60 for a boat dive with all equipment provided; an open-water course costs US\$628. Two excellent restaurants, a bar and spa complete the picture of a modern high-end resort at reasonable prices.

Things have been changing fast at Velavaru, but if stylish seclusion, enormous natural beauty and great diving sound like things you're looking for, this is a very attractive resort.

## THAA

Thaa administrative district, or Kolhumadulu Atoll, is a large, slightly flattened circle about 60km across, and one of the major fishing regions of the country. It consists of 13 inhabited islands and is home to about 9300 people. The capital island is **Veymandhoo** (population 1800). All the islands are on the edges of the atoll, mostly clustered around the kandus, and they're quite densely settled. **Thimarafushi** (population 2300), near the capital, is the most populous island, and with two other islands makes up a sizable community. Ruins of a 25m-wide mound on the island of **Kibidhoo** show this group of islands has been populated for many years.

On **Guraidhoo** (population 1700), in another island group, is the grave of Sultan Usman I, who ruled the Maldives for only two months before being banished here. On **Dhiyamigili** (population 484) there are ruins of the palace of Mohammed Imaaduddeen II, a much more successful sultan who ruled from 1704 to 1721 and founded one of the Maldives' longest-ruling dynasties.

The northern island of **Buruni** (population 570) is a centre for carpenters, many of whom work elsewhere, building boats and tourist resorts. The women make coir rope and reed mats. Around the mosque are an old sundial and tombstones that have been dated to the late 18th century. The island of **Kalhufahalafushi** has been allocated but it is not yet operational.

## LAAMU

Geographically known as **Hadhdhunmathee Atoll**, Laamu administrative district has about 13,000 people living on its 12 inhabited islands, and it's one of the major fishing centres in the country. Freezer ships anchor near the former capital, **Hithadhoo** (population 930), collecting fresh fish direct from the dhonis.

The island of **Kadhoo** has an airfield (airport code KDO) that has five flights a week to/from Male'. Kadhoo is linked by causeways to the large island of **Fonadhoo** (population 1700) to the south, which is now the atoll capital. The causeway also goes north to the islands of **Maandhoo** (population 530) and **Gan** (population 2450), forming one of the longest stretches of road in the country – all of 12km. Maandhoo has a

government-owned STO (State Trading Organisation) refrigeration plant and a fish-canning factory.

There are numerous archaeological sites in Laamu, with evidence of pre-Muslim civilisations on many islands. At the north-eastern tip of the atoll, on **Isdhoo** (population 1100), a giant, black dome rises above the palms. Who built the ancient artificial mound, known as a *hawitta*, and for what reason, is not really known. Buddha images have been found on the island, and HCP Bell believed such mounds to be the remains of Buddhist stupas, while Heyerdahl speculated that Buddhists had built on even earlier mounds left by the legendary Redin people. For many years the mound was a landmark for boats navigating between the atolls, but it didn't save the British cargo ship *Lagan Bank*, which was wrecked here on 13 January 1938. The **Friday Mosque** on Isdhoo is around 300 years old. It was probably built on the site of an earlier temple because it faces directly west, rather than towards Mecca, which is to the northwest.

Bell also found quite a few mounds on **Gan** (also known as *Gamu*) island, which he also believed to be Buddhist stupas, and he found a fragment of a stone Buddha face, which he estimated was from a statue over 4m high. Almost nothing remains of these structures because the stones have been removed to use in more modern buildings. There are mounds on several other islands in Laamu, including **Kadhoo**, **Maandhoo** and **Hithadhoo** – one is over 5m high.

The island of **Olhuveli** has been allocated and will at some point become Laamu's first tourist resort.

## GAAF ALIF

The giant **Huvadho Atoll**, one of the largest true coral atolls in the world, is separated from Laamu by the 90km-wide **Huvadho Kandui**. This stretch of water is also called the **One-and-a-Half-Degree Channel**, because of its latitude, and it's the safest place for ships to pass between the atolls that make up the Maldives.

Because **Huvadho** is so big, and perhaps as a response to the 'southern rebellion' (see p167), the atoll is divided into two administrative districts. The northern

district is called Gaaf Alif, and it has 10 inhabited islands and about 8300 people. **Viligili**, the capital island, is also the most populated with about 2900 people. Just south, the island of **Kudhoo** has an ice plant and fish-packing works. The atoll also has some productive agriculture, much of it on **Koduy** (population 420). This island also has four *hawittas* – evidence of Buddhist settlement. Heyerdahl discovered a limestone carving here, which he believed to be of the Hindu water god Makara. The statue must have been here before the Buddhist period, and is perhaps 1000 years old.

In the centre of the atoll, **Dhevvdhoo** (population 970) is not well placed for fishing or farming, but the islanders are famous for their textile weaving and coir-rope making. There are also mosques from the 16th and 17th centuries.

There are two allocated islands for resort development here – Funamadhua and Hadahaa, which should be operational in the next few years.

## GAAF DHAAL

Geographically isolated from Male', but strategically located on the Indian Ocean trade routes, Gaaf Dhaal – or Huvadhoo Atoll as it is geographically – had independent tendencies dating back many years. It had its own direct trade links with Sri Lanka, and the people spoke a distinct dialect almost incomprehensible to other Maldivians. The island of **Thinadhoo** was a focal point of the 'southern rebellion' against the central rule of Male' during the early 1960s. So much so, that troops from Male' invaded in February 1962 and destroyed all the homes. The people fled to neighbouring islands and Thinadhoo was not resettled until four years later. It now has a population of 4900. Huvadhoo Atoll was divided into two administrative districts, the southern part being Gaaf Dhaal, which now has nearly 12,000 people on 10 inhabited islands and Thinadhoo as its capital.

Though remote from any resorts, Gaaf Dhaal has a small but growing number of foreign visitors who make boat trips around the southeastern edge of the atoll to surf the uncrowded waves that break around the channel entrances (see p81). On the island of **Kaadhdhoo**, near Thinad-

hoo, a small airport (airport code KDM) has daily connections to Male' with Island Aviation, and the surfing safari boats meet clients there.

On **Gadhdhoo** (population 2600), women make superb examples of the mats known as *tundu kunaan*, which are woven from special reeds found on an adjacent island. Souvenir shops in Male' and on some resorts sell these mats – those from Gadhdhoo are the softest and most finely woven.

Just southwest of Gadhdhoo, the uninhabited island of **Gan** has remnants of one the most impressive *hawittas*, originally a pyramid with stepped ramps on all four sides, like many Mexican pyramids. The ruin was 8.5m high and 23m square. Heyerdahl also found stones here decorated with sun motifs, which he believed were proof of a sun-worshipping society even older than the Buddhist and Hindu settlements.

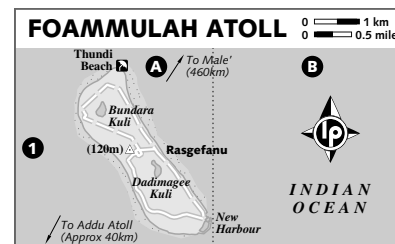
In the south of the atoll, only about 20km from the equator, the island of **Vaadhoo** has two *hawittas*, and a mosque that dates from the 17th century. The mosque is elaborately decorated inside and has a stone bath outside, as well as ancient tombstones carved with three different kinds of early Maldivian script.

Now earmarked for development are the first two islands – Konottaa and Lonudhoo-hutta – which will open at some point as resorts.

## GNAVIYANI

Gnaviyani administrative district is made up of just one island, intriguing **Foammulah** (sometimes called Fuamulaku). It's not an atoll, but rather a solitary island stuck in the middle of the Equatorial Channel with a population of around 10,000. About 5km long and 1km wide, it's the biggest single island in the country and one of the most fertile, producing many fruits and vegetables such as mangoes, papayas, oranges and pineapples. Yams grow so well here that they were once a dietary staple, though rice is now preferred. The natural vegetation is lush, and there are two freshwater lakes.

A beach goes around most of the island, but the fringing reef is quite narrow and is pounded by big waves on whatever side is exposed to the prevailing swells. The lack of



a safe anchorage has always limited fishing activity and made it difficult to get passengers and goods ashore. With help from the national government, a new harbour was completed at the eastern tip of the island in 2003, allowing Foammulah to join the modern world by enabling goods and equipment to be brought in easily and making development of some light industry feasible.

A new road links the harbour and the main village at the island's heart. New roads, wetland reclamation and infrastructure improvements are planned. A 120m-high telecommunications tower in the island's centre is visible from miles away. It makes the microwave connection north to Gaaf Dhaal and south to Addu Atoll, and has reduced the island's isolation, which now has an Internet café and well-used mobile-phone service.

Foammulah is officially divided into eight districts, but most of the people live around the north side and across the centre of the island in villages that appear to be a continuous settlement. Sandy roads crisscross the island, and there are lots of motorcycles and small pick-up trucks. Many of the people work in resorts in the tourism zone, and the money they send home partly accounts for the apparent affluence of the island.

Despite Foammulah's apparent isolation, navigators passing between the Middle East, India and Southeast Asia have long used the Equatorial Channel. Ibn Battuta visited in 1344, stayed for two months and married two women. Two Frenchmen visited in 1529 and admired the old mosque at the west end of the island. In 1922 HCP Bell stopped here briefly, and noted a 7m-high *hawitta*. Heyerdahl found the *hawitta* in poor condition, and found remnants of another nearby. He also investigated the nearby

mosque, the oldest one on the island, and believed it had been built on the foundations of an earlier structure built by skilled stonemasons. Another old mosque, on the north side of the island, had expertly made stonework in its foundations and in an adjacent stone bath.

Foammulah is not an easy destination for modern travellers. It has no hotels or guesthouses and only a couple of teashops, so you'll need an invitation from a local to get a permit. To get to Foammulah you go via Gan, which has several scheduled flights a day from Male'. From Gan it's 50km and you'll need to charter a speed boat or you may be able to take the passenger speed launch which carries about 20 people and takes just over an hour if the weather is OK. Unfortunately until the Maldives opens up to independent tourism, visiting fascinating places like Foammulah will be more trouble than it's worth to most people.

## ADDU ATOLL

Definitely one of the best places for independent travellers to come, heart-shaped Addu Atoll is the most southern extreme of the country and has a very different feel to it for a number of reasons. It's good for so-called FITs (fully independent travellers), as from Equator Village, the charming budget resort on the former British naval base of Gan, you can cycle to three inhabited islands via a causeway – the only resort in the country where you have such access and freedom.

Addu Atoll is the main economic and administrative centre in the south of the country, and the only place to rival Male' in size and importance. Its 28,000 people spread out over seven inhabited islands is a huge number in the Maldives. With the airport being upgraded at the time of writing to accommodate long-haul flights and the huge, luxury Shangri-La resort being built on the nearby island of Viligili, the region will play an important role in the future development of the Maldives' travel market.

There is an independent streak in the Addu folk – they even speak differently from the people of Male'. Tensions came to a head in the 1960s under the leadership of Abdulla Afif Didi, who was elected president of the 'United Suwadiva Islands',

comprising Addu, Foammulah and Huvadhoo. Afif declared independence from the Maldives, but an armed fleet sent south by Prime Minister Ibrahim Nasir quashed the short-lived southern rebellion. Afif fled the country, but is still talked about on his home island of Hithadhoo. He went to live in the Seychelles, where he ultimately rose to the position of foreign minister.

The biggest influence on Addu's modern history has been the British bases, first established on Gan during WWII as part of the Indian Ocean defences. In 1956, when the British could no longer use Sri Lanka, they developed a Royal Air Force base on Addu as a strategic Cold War outpost. The base had around 600 personnel permanently stationed here, with up to 3000 during periods of peak activity. The British built a series of causeways connecting Feydhoo, Maradhoo and Hithadhoo islands and employed most of the population on or around the base. In 1976 the British pulled out, leaving an airport, some large industrial buildings, barracks and a lot of unemployed people

who spoke good English and had experience working for Westerners. When the tourism industry took off in the late 1970s, many of the men of Addu went to Male' to seek work in resorts and tourist shops. They have never lost their head start in the tourism business and to this day, in resorts all over the country, there's a better than even chance that the Maldivian staff will be from Addu.

Tourism development in Addu itself has been slow to start, due to bad transport links. Now there are several flights a day to Male' and direct charter flights to Gan should be in operation from 2007.

## Sights & Activities

### DIVING

A particular highlight of Addu is the magnificent coral here, much of which escaped the widespread coral bleaching of 1998. If you go diving elsewhere in the Maldives and then come here you'll be amazed. On the northern edge of the atoll you can see huge table corals that might be hundreds of years old, and fields of staghorns that

have all but disappeared in most parts of the country. It's not all good, though – corals inside the lagoon suffered as badly as anywhere else from coral bleaching.

The **British Loyalty Wreck** has a good covering of soft corals, and turtles, trevally and many reef fish inhabit the encrusted decks. This oil tanker was torpedoed in 1944 by the German submarine U-183, which fired through an opening in the antisubmarine nets at the entrance to Gan Kanduu. The disabled ship stayed in the atoll until 1946 when it was towed to its present location and used for target practice by another British ship. The 140m wreck lies in 33m of water with its port side about 16m below the surface.

The northeastern edge of **Maa Kanduu** has a wide reef top, between 5m and 7m, covered with live acrophora corals – big brain corals, long branching staghorns and table corals 3m across. White-tip reef sharks, eagle rays and sometimes mantas can be spotted, along with turtles and numerous reef fish. It's an excellent site for snorkelling.

**Kuda Kanduu** is another superb sight near to Maa Kanduu where a huge array of coral thrives between 5m and 15m. Currents can be strong here, so it's not for novices.

Off the northeast corner of the atoll **Shark Point**, sometimes called the Shark Hotel, is a plateau at about 30m. Grey reef sharks cruise around here, white-tip reef sharks lie on the sand and other sharks can be seen in deeper water further out.

### GAN

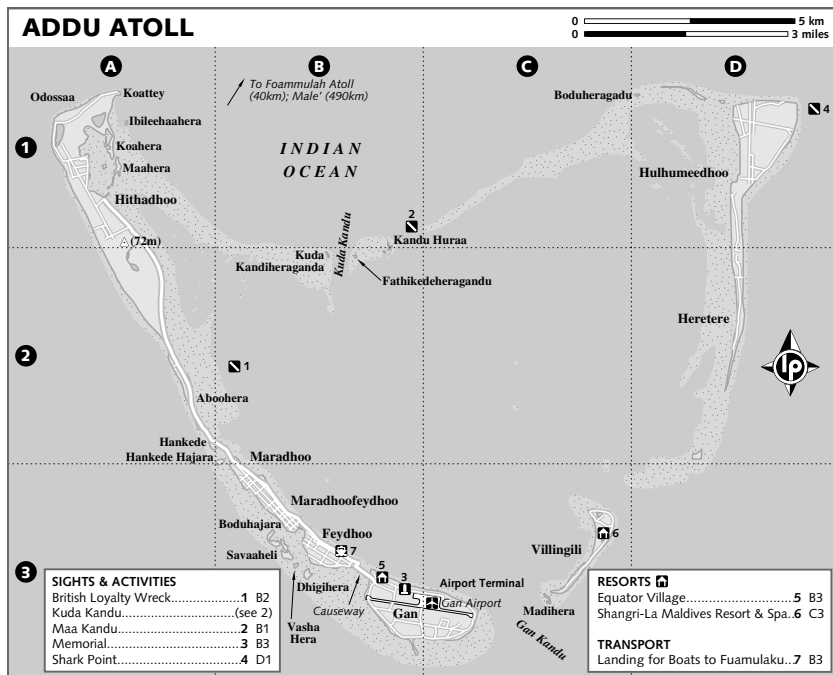
Gan is atypical of the Maldives; it has a far more colonial feel and a refreshingly different atmosphere from anywhere else in the country. Even though you'll be staying at a resort here, there's much more to do and see here than at your standard Maldivian desert island.

Inhabited since ancient times, Gan was the site where HCP Bell excavated a large 9m-high mound. Bell believed it to be the ruins of a Buddhist stupa. His expedition made careful measurements of the site, took photos and made precise drawings that are published in his monograph. This was fortunate, as the archaeological sites and almost everything else on Gan were levelled to create the air-force base in 1956.

The British took over the entire island and constructed airport buildings, barracks, jetties, maintenance sheds, a Naafi (Navy, Army and Air Force Institutes) canteen, a golf course, tennis courts and a 2600m concrete runway. For more information about RAF Gan, go to [www.gan.phillippsmall.me.uk](http://www.gan.phillippsmall.me.uk). Many of these structures remain, some picturesquely run-down, others used for various purposes. Most of the island's lush native vegetation was cleared, but the British then landscaped with new plants – avenues of casuarinas, clumps of bougainvillea, swaths of lawn and even roses. It's much more spacious than most resort islands and it has a slightly weird and eerie atmosphere, but it's very peaceful and relaxed – like an old, abandoned movie set.

One sight is a low-key **memorial** to those who served on the base, including Indian regiments such as the 13th Frontier Force Rifles and the Royal Bombay Sappers & Miners. Dozens died here 'in the service of their country', though the atoll saw no action at all apart from the 1944 attack on the British Loyalty. Big guns, which were part of the WWII defences, now guard the memorial. Across the road are the post office, some telephones and a branch of the Bank of Maldives. The old Astra cinema, a fixture at all RAF bases, has a few nifty 1950s architectural touches. Several times a week it shows Indian and Sri Lankan movies to entertain the Sri Lankan garment workers who now work on the island and live in the former barracks. There are several pleasant cafés scattered around the island.

West of the Equator Village resort is a complex of buildings that used to be the officers' mess and living quarters. It's now the 'Dhoogas', a facility providing accommodation for visiting government officials, and off-limits to foreigners. A small and unimposing building here was once a chapel, but has been converted to a mosque. You can walk or cycle right around the island on narrow dirt roads, crossing the airport runway at each end. You'll see lots of trees and greenery, a couple of graveyards and a few incongruous buildings. There are no decent beaches and no surfable waves – just the Indian Ocean crashing on a broad, shallow reef.



### FEYDHOO, MARADHOO & HITHADHOO

The causeways and the new road go from Gan to the atoll capital Hithadhoo via Feydhoo and Maradhoo as well as some other tiny islands that are now joined together. There are no spectacular attractions along the way, but the smaller villages are an absolute delight. Local teashops serve tea, cakes and 'short eats', and some will have a more substantial fish curry. Though you don't need a permit to visit, tourists are supposed to be back at Gan before dark. Remember that these villages are inevitably very conservative, so dress modestly.

Like most Maldivian villages they are laid out on a rectangular grid with wide, straight, sandy streets and white coral-stone houses. A few vehicles will be seen, but for most of the day the streets are empty. In the early morning, and especially the evening, locals will be out walking or cycling, sitting outside their houses or leaning against the low front walls. Shady trees overhang the streets and you can usually catch a glimpse of the sea at one end of the street or the other.

Most of the houses have corrugated iron roofs, but are otherwise traditional. Older buildings are made of coral-stone while newer ones are of concrete blocks. There's usually a courtyard or an open space with a shady tree and a *joli* or *undholi* providing a cool place to sit in the heat of the day. Notice the big, square chimney blocks – there are wooden racks inside where fish are hung to be smoked. Another distinctive feature can be seen at street junctions, where walls and buildings all have rounded corners.

You can easily walk from Gan to Feydhoo (population 4400), which has several mosques – a large, new white one, a small, pretty blue one, and several old ones on the sandy back roads that look a little like tiny churches. On the new lagoon-side road are several new buildings, like the modern petrol station, a big store and a teahouse/café with a Rf20 buffet. Boats to Foammulah use the small harbour here.

When the British took over, the villagers from Gan were resettled on Feydhoo, and some of the people from Feydhoo were then moved to the next island, Maradhoo, where they formed a new village. Maradhoo now has a population of 3000 in two

villages that have run together – the southern one is called Maradhoo-Feydhoo. The first thing you'll see as you approach up the road is the boat-building activity on the lagoon side.

Further north, the road follows an isthmus that was once three narrow, uninhabited islands. One island used to house an ammunition bunker. After a few kilometres of palm tree-lined road you pass a recycling zone and a sports ground with several football pitches and a grandstand. You're on Hithadhoo, the Maldives' largest town outside Male', with a population of 13,000. The Dhiraagu office near the tower has pay phones and an Internet café. Further up the road are a new mosque and several schools – the high school is one of two outside Male' that teaches up to A level (matriculation). There's nothing in particular to see here, but there are a few shops and just wandering and seeing a real Maldivian town is quite something.

Near the main road there are several light-industry buildings and a power station, while a grid of streets with traditional houses extends to the western seashore. A few teashops and some quite big, new commercial premises are appearing here too. Beyond the built-up area, the tip of the island bends to the east, and is covered with coconut plantations, swampy lakes and a surprising amount of woodland. The coast is mostly too rocky or shallow for bathing, but there are some narrow beaches. Rough roads go right to the tip of the island at Koattee, also called Demon Point. It's said there was once a fort here, and later a British gun emplacement, but there's nothing left to see now. It feels like the end of the earth.

### HULHUMEEDHOO

At the northeast corner of the lagoon, this island has two adjoining villages, Hulhudoo and Meedhoo, both known as Hulhumeedhoo, with a total population of about 5500. Local legend says that an Arab was shipwrecked here in about 872, and converted the islanders to Islam 280 years before the people of Male'. The cemetery is known for its ancient headstones, many of which are beautifully carved with the archaic Dhives Akuru script. A history on this remote little community can

be seen on [www.angelfire.com/country/addumeedhoo/gallery/album.html](http://www.angelfire.com/country/addumeedhoo/gallery/album.html). You'll need to charter a dhoni to get here; inquire at Equator Village.

### Resorts

For our money **Equator Village** (Gan island; ☎ 6898721; [www.equatorvillage.com](http://www.equatorvillage.com); all-inclusive s/d US\$100/130; flight from Male' to Gan 1½hr, US\$271, complimentary bus service from airport; 78 rooms; ♿ ♿) is one of the best resorts in the country and it's also one of the cheapest. The additional expense of flying to Gan from Male' is quickly offset by the low, low room rates and the all-inclusive packages they come with.

Equator Village is relaxed and friendly and more than a little bizarre. The rooms are actually the former barracks of the British Naval Base here – there's been an effort to disguise this but it's clear when you know the truth how little has really changed. Neat lines of rooms fan out from the main reception building, and are surrounded by extremely mature and well-tended gardens that overflow with exotic flowers and plants.

The rooms are modern, basic and thoroughly unromantic – this is not a honeymooners' destination. They are also spacious and have everything you need (although no TV or phone), including an en-suite bathroom and air-con.

The reception, bar and dining areas have been created from the old mess, thoroughly redecorated in very un-military pink, white and grey. These open-sided spaces with their cane furniture and ceiling fans look out onto a sizable free-form swimming pool and through palm trees to the blue sea beyond. The full-size billiard table is a handsome inheritance from the Brits, as are the first-class tennis courts.

The meals are all buffet with a limited selection and a British bias – expect fairly good curry, roast beef, mashed potatoes and tinned fruit for dinner; and sausages, eggs and cereal for breakfast. The Maldivian barbecue buffet is the best meal of the week. Most guests are on an all-inclusive package, and can wash it down with beer or house wine. There's not a lot of organised evening entertainment, but the bar is one of the friendliest and most fun in the Maldives.

Despite the British bias to the food, most of the guests are actually from Germany, although Brits make up the second biggest group along with a mix of other Europeans. More than half are divers, and from time to time ex-RAF personnel who were once stationed here come back for a nostalgic holiday. An RAF visitor's book at reception has more than 50 signatures, and some books and photo albums are also kept here (available on request).

Bicycles are available for exploring the neighbouring islands at \$5/10 per half-/full day, although they're free with the all-inclusive deal, along with an island-hopping excursion, night fishing trip and twice-daily boat to Viligili for snorkelling and beach time.

The only beach on Gan is a few hundred metres east of the resort, and it's not great – don't come here if you want to re-enact the Bounty advert. It's one of the few resorts in the country that doesn't provide the fabulous turquoise-water and white-sand combo. However, divers take note: the coral here is flabbergasting – and this should definitely jump high up the list of top diving resorts. The dive centre is a small but friendly operation run by **Diverland** ([www.diverland.com](http://www.diverland.com)) and includes the great dive sites in the area at very reasonable prices.

FITs and anyone else wanting to see something of the real Maldives will really appreciate Equator Village as it allows you to see much more of daily Maldivian life; you can cycle to Hithadoo via the new road and you generally enjoy a much higher level of freedom here.

Still a building site when we visited, **Shangri-La Maldives Resort & Spa** (Viligili Island; [www.shangri-la.com](http://www.shangri-la.com); 184 rooms; ♿ ♿ ♿), the Shangri-La group's first venture in the Maldives, is a huge undertaking and is due to open in mid-2007. It will bring the high-end luxury market to the very southern tip of the Maldives and hopefully coincide with the opening of Gan International Airport.

The resort is to be split into three accommodation 'concepts' (their term, not ours) with the unbelievably pretentious names Lost Horizon, Whispering Palms and Windance (their spelling, not ours). Of course it will be magnificent when it's open,

as any resort hoping to compete in the increasingly luxurious top-end hotel market here has to be. Watch this space.

### Getting There & Away

Island Aviation flies from Male' to Gan and back two or three times a day. The standard fare for foreigners is US\$271 return.

Private yachts should report by radio to the NSS in Gan or Hithadhoo to arrange security and customs clearance, but may have to continue to Male' for health and immigration checks to complete the 'clear-in' process.

### Getting Around

The best way to get around Gan and over the causeway to neighbouring villages is by bicycle. Equator Village includes bicycle hire in its rates, but they aren't too comfortable for tall people. Taxis shuttle between the islands and around the villages; from Gan to Hithadhoo should cost about Rf100. Taxis wait at the airport and you can order one from Equator Village. The buses you see on the main road are only for workers in the Gan garment factories. Equator Village picks up guests by free minibus from the airport, though you may need to call at arrival.

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