



PAST AND PRESENT COLLIDE IN MALÉ

Malé, the tiny capital of the Maldives, is a fascinating corner of the world — one that's been a centre of cultural exchange for centuries — and it presents a stark contrast to the luxurious resorts that the country is famous for.

WORDS JONATHAN EVANS

PHOTOS PULLMAN MALDIVES MAAMUTAA, MERCURE MALDIVES KOODDOO RESORT, WIKIMEDIA COMMONS, DREAMSTIME

Nothing quite prepares you for your first plane journey over the Maldives archipelago's iridescent, coral-fringed atolls, remote sandbars, and perfect-circle lagoons; it's an otherworldly vision, and makes for a jaw-dropping flight experience. Velana airport, which is situated by a stunning harbourside, is a short drive from the reclaimed island of Hulhumalé — a spotless patchwork of pastel residences, hotels, and restaurants connected to Malé by the Sinamalé Bridge (originally named the China-Maldives Friendship Bridge). Instead of flying straight to the resorts, I decide to spend some time in Malé first.

THE SIGHTS OF MALÉ

The Maldivian capital is a place of startling statistics: More than 210,000 people, or 40 percent of the entire population, are squeezed onto this 8.3 sq km island, which takes 30 minutes to traverse by foot. It's Asia's smallest state, yet it can take more than an hour to fly from Malé to the southern atolls. Numerous Sri Lankan, Bangladeshi, and Indian migrant workers reside here, many Europeans run businesses here, and there are also plenty of curious North Asian tourists exploring Malé. I meet a taxi driver who's spent 20 years running hotels in southern England; it's a former British colony, so while Dhivehi

is the official language, English is the lingua franca.

I've arrived mid-Ramadan, so it's not until *iftar*, the dusk fast-breaking meal, that the city comes alive as residents emerge from the high-rise towers dominating the cityscape. By contrast, all the prominent political, religious, and cultural buildings are modestly sized — aside from the part-Saudi-funded, six-storey King Salman Mosque, which stands like a glittering crown surrounded by five giant minarets.

The Sinamalé Bridge is the first inter-island bridge in the Maldives, and connects Malé, Hulhulé, and Hulhumalé.

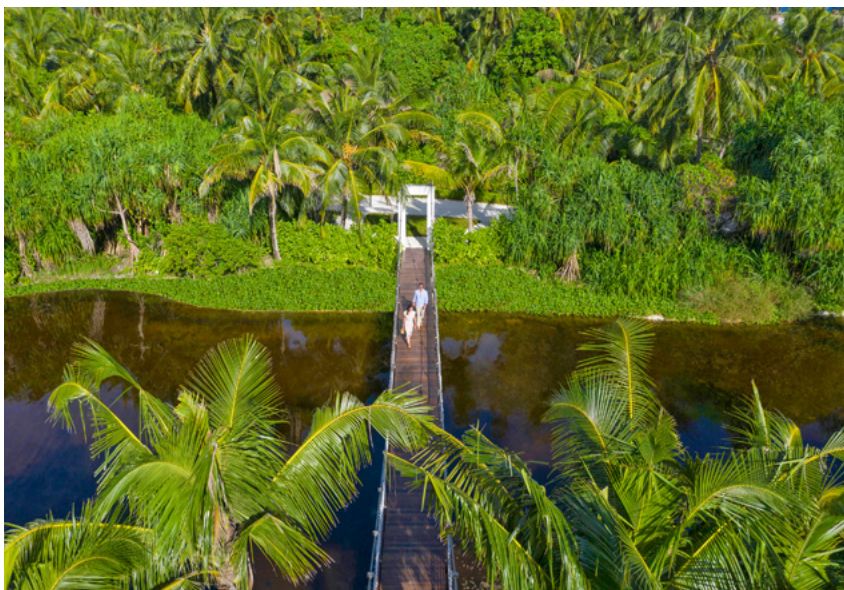


In the Maldivian capital of Malé, calm contentment prevails despite the space shortage. Plastic is banned, and lawmakers work tirelessly to conserve the country's natural beauty.

(From top) The Maldives is home to plenty of luxury resorts such as the Mercure Maldives Kooddoo; the distinctive architecture of King Salman Mosque.

Such is Malé's diminutive scale that almost all its significant buildings can be surveyed within two hours — the sole exception being the scenic Tsunami Monument, located in southeast Malé, which commemorates the 82 Maldivians who died in the 2004 Indian Ocean tragedy. During the afternoon lull, my driver Hossain shows me in quick succession the immaculate People's Majlis (Parliament House); the country's most prestigious school Majeediyya, which conducts classes in English; and the delightful Mulee Aage (President House). Opposite this stands Hukuru Miskiy (Old Friday Mosque) from 1658, with its wedding cake-shaped minaret, the best-known of six coral-stone mosques on a tentative list for UNESCO World Heritage status.

In this affluent area of coffee houses and international restaurants, calm contentment prevails despite the space shortage. Colourful Sultan Park is one of two open-air leisure areas; the other being Malé Artificial Beach, where women in full-body *abayas* (robe-like dresses) trudge barefoot through the shallows with their dogs, friends recline on benches by the lapping waves, and families enjoy the spacious grounds. Plastic is banned, and lawmakers work tirelessly to conserve the country's natural beauty.



(Clockwise from top) Malé Artificial Beach is one of two open-air leisure areas in the city; Alita, a restaurant at the Mercure Maldives Kooddoo, is set above a picture-perfect lagoon; the verdant surroundings of the Pullman Maldives Maamutaa; Sultan Park is a lush oasis in the heart of Malé.



CULTURE, CUISINE, AND CREATURES OF THE SEA

Travelling south requires another staggering hour-long flight from Velana — this time on a minuscule propeller jet. The trip is a good way to view the 26 atolls that are spread out over this 90,000 sq km expanse. Only 188 of its 1,192 islands are inhabited, but at the most decadent resorts, it's difficult to experience authentic local culture, whether you're talking about Maldivian tastes, clothing, lifestyle, or dialects. Fortunately, I'm booked into the Mercure Maldives Kooddoo, an adults-only beach-community resort on Gaafu Alifu. This is the second-most southerly atoll populated by honeymooners and empty-nesters, and is a place where you can truly immerse yourself into the country.

Here, I attempt unsuccessfully to catch a snapper or trevally on an ornate *dhoni* fishing boat propelled by a foot-operated rudder; listen to *boduberu* (a form of traditional dance music); and chat with a fisherman from Addu — the farthest atoll south, and once the site of a secret wartime British air base. I swoon at red, orange, and purple sunsets, and visit schools, mosques, and stores on the vividly coloured, sparsely populated island of Maamendhoo after speeding across the water alongside hundreds of flamboyant, somersaulting spinner dolphins.

One morning, after a Sri Lankan breakfast, I sample a sublime *kandu kukulhu riha* (yellowfin tuna curry), just one of several Maldivian specialities on offer alongside delicacies such as *mas huni* (a traditional Maldivian breakfast comprising tuna, onion, coconut, and chilli), snacks like *kulhi kaajaa* (spicy, deep-fried dough), and *theluli fai* (fried moringa leaves). “Maldivian food in three words? Citrus, spicy, coconut!” enthuses the executive chef, and “varah meeru” (“very tasty”) instantly becomes my go-to Dhivehi phrase as I chat with the wonderfully cosmopolitan workforce at the resort, made up of Filipinos, Sri Lankans, Nepalese, Maldivians, Italians, Burmese, and Indonesians.

Food security tops the list of logistical challenges facing these distant resorts. The Maldives doesn't lack for fruit, vegetables, or seafood (although blacktip reef sharks, dolphins, and moray eels are strictly off the menu), but much of everything else has to be imported from Dubai, Thailand, and Sri Lanka. I find it vaguely comical that at the Pullman Maldives Maamutaa, a five-star sanctuary I stayed at subsequently, one worker's official job title was “coconut tree climber” — his main role consisting of preventing coconuts from plummeting onto hapless guests' heads.

(Clockwise from left)
At the Mercure Maldives Kooddoo, guests can go on a cruise to spot spinner dolphins; a sunset fishing trip is another popular activity; mas huni is a traditional Maldivian breakfast made of tuna, onion, coconut, and chilli.



LUXURY IN THE MIDDLE OF NOWHERE

This all-inclusive resort underscores the vastly different retreats scattered across these islands. I stay in an immaculate overwater villa connected to dazzling sugar-white beaches, bars, and restaurants — Italian, vegetarian, and an all-day diner — by a wooden walkway navigated by foot, bicycle, or electric buggies that purr past with convenient regularity.

Inside my villa is a glass-encased aperture looking down to the sea floor; a gleaming marble bathroom with *two* showers and a bathtub; while outside there is an infinity pool just metres above the ocean where grey herons join me daily, stalking the perimeter. There's tennis, golf, snorkelling, beach volleyball, and nature walks; children can learn to swim like mermaids. Every night, I walk blissfully home above the vast, remote lagoons underneath a clear, unpolluted sky twinkling with brilliant stars — a scene that could move even the most jaded traveller to poetry.

On my final night I relocate to an Aqua Villa, which boasts a giant inbuilt aquarium on its ground floor — a handy vantage point to gaze in wonderment at metre-long

sharks, hawksbill turtles, eagle rays with huge wingspans, and schools of technicolour tropical fish, all floating past before darkness sets in. To combat the ceaseless construction, there are admirable sustainability efforts in place across these resorts — the recycling of glass and plastic, the regenerating of diesel, the composting of trash, the use of solar power, and the nurturing of coral.

It's a cruel irony that the same crystalline waters so irresistible to travellers pose an existential threat to the Maldives' atolls and their population. Some scientists predict that within two generations, rising sea levels will submerge human settlements and the lowest-lying islands of this country. It's just one of myriad compelling reasons to visit this indescribably beautiful country, blessed with a rare natural magic, as soon as the opportunity arises. ■

(Clockwise from top left) When in Malé, take advantage of the stunning scenery and spend your time outdoors, whether that's yoga by the lagoon, kayaking, or snorkelling alongside sea turtles.



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