



OPEN WATER

Paradise if you're happy in a resort, purgatory if you want to explore – that's the usual view of the Maldives. But a liveaboard boat is your ticket to freedom, says Lisa Holm, and it costs a lot less than you think. Cynics, jump aboard...

“Which island do you come from?” asked Bakuru-beh, a fisherman with leathery features I'd just met on Thoddoo island. I told him I'd just arrived from Male', the capital. He shook his head, frowning.

“No! Which island in Europe are you from?” He squinted and took a guess: “Stockholm?”

In the Maldives, a country made up of hundreds of tiny coral islands, the world seems to consist of only two components – islands and boats. Even the word *Divehi*, which describes the Maldivian language and people, translates literally as ‘island’.

As we walked from the beach towards a giant banyan tree, a group of old men chewing betel leaves watched our every move. Sitting in traditional netted chairs, they gave us a once-over, followed by smiles. They then returned to what they were doing before we landed on their island: listening

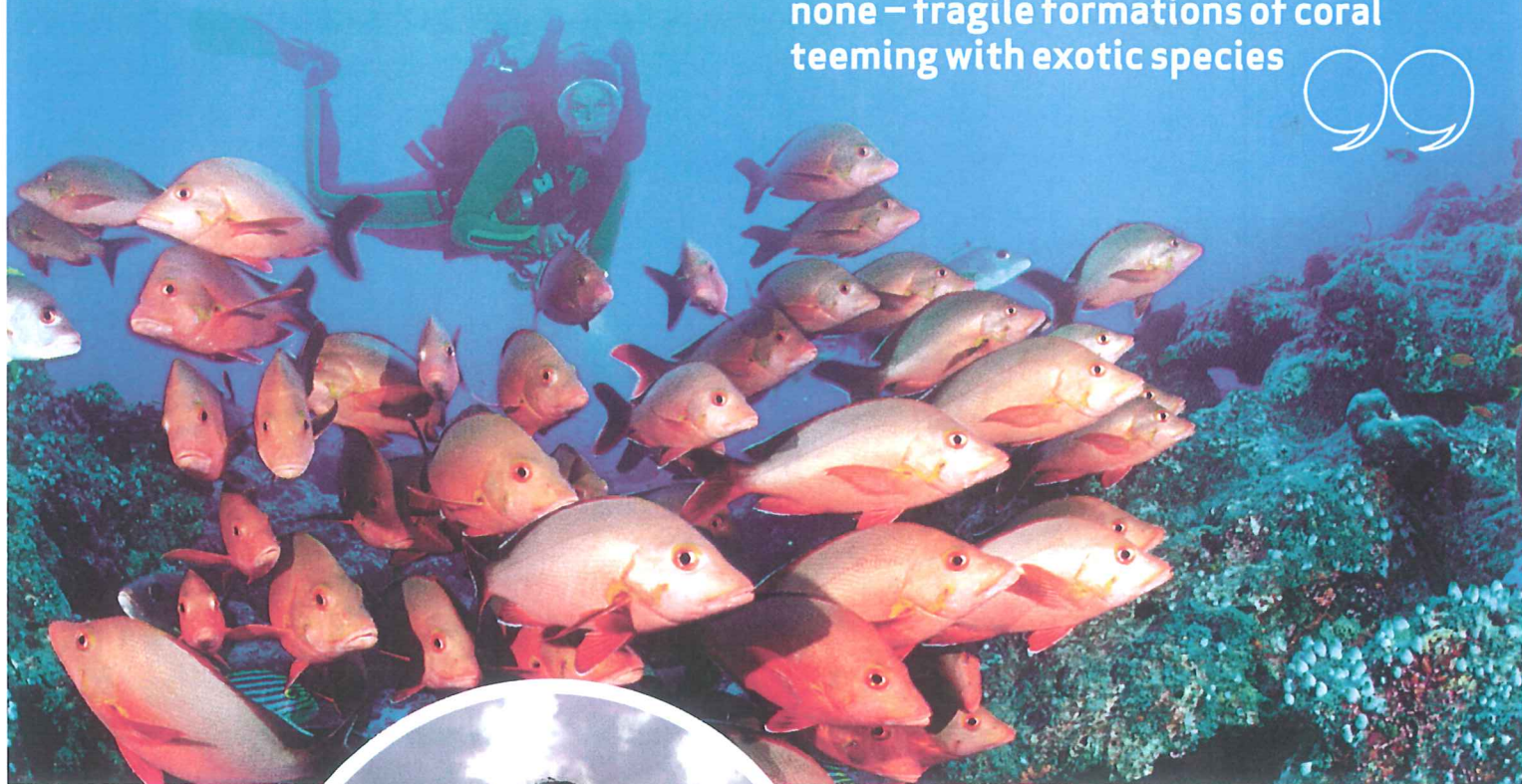
to a battered radio, chatting and observing the Friday-afternoon bustle on Thoddoo's main street. A group of children practised a traditional dance in the playground and the teashop was busy serving spicy fish balls.

Meanwhile, Bakuru-beh's wife gave us crunchy breadfruit chips in the shade of their coral-walled backyard. The entire family watched with friendly bewilderment and lots of giggling as I agreed to taste a bit of pungent dried fish.

Despite being only a couple of hours' boat ride from Male', foreigners are a rare sight on Thoddoo. The reason: most visitors to the Maldives don't go to local islands at all. Legally, politically and logistically, independent travel is complicated – and pricey. Tourist protocol is restrictive: guests travel on fully pre-booked packages and are transferred from the arrivals gate directly to their resort, where they stay until departure. ▶



The country's reefs are second to none – fragile formations of coral teeming with exotic species



Above from top: Glide through shoals of hump-backed snapper; there are big eyes and even bigger smiles when you meet the local youngsters

◀ The strictly regulated nature of tourism in the Maldives is not just a result of the country's unusual geography – a 90,000 sq km nation, 99.9% of which is water, made up of 26 atolls that are comprised of many small islands. There is also a political agenda that has shaped tourism since its beginnings in the 70s and still underpins the system.

The 'secret dictatorship' of President Gayoom, who has been in power for nearly 30 years, has come under fire over human rights abuses and the mismanagement of humanitarian aid in the wake of the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami. The various legal and logistical barriers between locals and visitors are part of the government's attempt to keep up appearances. As a consequence, the Maldives offers visitors all thinkable amenities apart from the freedom to explore.

But there are ways around some of these restrictions: liveaboard cruise ships – such as my home for my trip,

the *Baani Explorer* – attract more adventurous travellers on smaller budgets and offer the closest thing to independent travel in the Maldives. In recent years they have evolved from refitted fishing boats to custom-built safari ships with more space, better service and great food.

The average liveaboard hosts ten to 20 guests and is run by about a dozen mainly Maldivian staff. Unlike resort islands, there's chatting between staff and guests. Maldivians have a great sense of humour – the captain even let me take over the wheel for a while. In the evenings, we held backgammon tournaments and the occasional water polo match. And, inspired by seeing our catch instantly converted into mouth-watering dishes, I went fishing with the ex-fishermen among the crew.

Vijge, the ship's outstanding chef, was the busiest man on board but still made time to share recipes and whip up midnight snacks. He even gave me

samples of his hand-made seasoning mixes to take home.

Anchoring in a different lagoon every night and making friends with locals, liveaboard guests get to see more of the Maldives than resort tourists. However, looking at brochures, you get the impression that there isn't really much to see. With the country's most spectacular sightseeing underwater and with the tightly managed boundaries between tourists and locals, Maldivian culture is usually brushed aside. That is why – ironically – the Maldives is considered a mainstream destination, even though much of the country is practically untouched by tourism.

But there is more to the Maldives than beach-bumming. The country's reefs are second to none – fragile formations of soft and hard corals teeming with exotic marine species. Diving and snorkelling are both best done from liveaboards. There is a high possibility of encountering big, friendly animals such as whale sharks and manta rays – and the good news for snorkellers is that both love to bask in warm surface waters. One afternoon we snorkelled with a group of nine ▶

mantas performing a beautiful water ballet. For more than an hour they somersaulted, glided and jumped around us, before leaving us behind like a mob of star-struck fans.

Life above sea level is also worth exploring. On Isdhoo (Laamu Atoll), Kumundhoo and Faridhoo (Haa Dhal Atoll) you can see remains of Buddhist temples. On Utheemu (Haa Alif Atoll) sits the well-preserved Thakurufaanu family compound, home of the national hero Mohammed Thakurufaanu, who led the rebellion against the Portuguese in the 16th century.

The Maldives may not have the spectacular temples and cities of other South Asian cultures, but exploring its fishing villages offers an insight into an ancient, uncomplicated lifestyle. Village life is the definition of laid-back – locals don't actively engage with visitors, but will be happy to chat and show you around if you approach them. Peddlers are a rare sight, apart from at established day-trip destinations such as Guraidhoo (South Male' Atoll), Himmafushi (North Male' Atoll) and Dhangethi (South Ari Atoll).

Things move slowly on the islands: people just seem to hang out, smoke hubble-bubble and chew betel leaves. Men meet on broad wooden platforms under palm roofs – a communal couch – to chat, listen to the radio and discuss community matters. Another common sight is the *undholi*, a large wooden swing – the perfect place to enjoy some tea with *hedika*, traditional sweet and savoury snacks.

Life in Male', the hopelessly overcrowded capital city, couldn't be



From top: It's easy to get your 'five-a-day' in the markets of Male'; the sleek *Baani Explorer* pulls up alongside a more traditional Maldivian vessel

more different to the tranquil pace of other islands. Markets, shopping malls, restaurants and streets buzz with activity and people, and hawkers work the main streets.

It was quite a contrast to the chilled out villages so, on my city tour, I randomly turned into a side street to escape the pestering peddlers – and, by sheer luck, discovered my favourite café. Sitting on the shaded patio of the Seagull, the city's best ice-cream parlour, I devoured a banana split and watched the ice-cream makers at work through the large kitchen window. One double espresso later and I was ready to delve back in to the crowds.

Modernity and tradition clash at every corner. You can practically watch the middle class expanding – along with the gap between wealth in Male' and poverty elsewhere. The city is one of the world's most densely populated areas, leading to the ongoing construction of Hulhumale', (New Male'), an artificial island that may one day house up to 100,000 people. It's not pretty, but it's an interesting destination for a half-day trip.

The capital's fish and produce markets are easily the busiest places in the country, with a constant come-and-go of customers and *dhonis* (traditional boats) laden with local staples such as tuna, coconuts and chillies. Avoid Chandanee Magu – the main shopping street – where sellers are persistent and

prices high. Venture into the side streets and look out for *tundu kunaa* (hand-made grass mats), *laajehun* (lacquer work) and jewellery from South Nilandhoo Atoll. The city's many traditional teashops are male domains – female visitors will get curious looks. But if a little extra attention doesn't faze you, don't miss sampling local dishes at rock-bottom prices.

One evening we anchored by an uninhabited island – which we nicknamed 'Stockholm', in honour of Bakuru-beh. After an impromptu football match with the crew, we had a sunset barbecue on the deserted beach. The crew put on a *bodu beru* (big drum) performance: starting with a slow beat played on barrel-like drums, their African-influenced folk music built up into a frantic rhythm. There was no way not to be drawn in: the first song had us clapping, singing and stomping to the infectious thumping.

Around midnight I went for a swim in the lagoon and my movements stirred up clouds of glowing plankton. It was an unfeasibly beautiful night, the sparkling particles in the water reflected in the sky above. I was tempted to spend the night on the beach, but – I should have guessed – staying on an uninhabited island is illegal. I slept on deck instead, being rocked to sleep by the gentle waves. It wasn't 'Stockholm', but it was the next best place to spend the night in the Maldives. ■



MALDIVES FOOTNOTES

Vital statistics

Capital: Male'

Population: 369,000

Language: Divehi; English is widely spoken

Time: GMT+5

International dialling code: +960

Visas: Not required by UK nationals; a 30-day tourist visa is issued on arrival

Money: Maldivian rufiyaa (Rf), currently around Rf26 to the UK£. US\$ are widely accepted; it's best to take cash for island visits and Visa or MasterCard for everything else.

Q When's the best time to go to the Maldives?

A For the best value, go right before and after the high season (December to April). The monsoon season (usually May to November) has shifted over recent years, so you can get high season weather in low season. The average temperature is a humid 30°C.

Q I'm worried I'll get bored. How long do I need?

A In one week you can learn to dive, surf or sail, visit two or three local islands, have a beach barbecue and perfect your backgammon skills. If you can, stay for two weeks, but book a non-stop cruise, otherwise you'll be back in Male' picking up new guests at the end of week one.

Q How do I get there?

A Qatar Airways (0870 770 4215, www.qatarairways.com) flies London to Male' via Doha; prices from £538 return.

SriLankan Airlines (020 8538 2000, www.srilankan.aero) flies direct from London to Male'. Return fares start at £612.

Q What about restrictions – can I explore independently?

A Independent travel is difficult and expensive in the Maldives. Travel permits are needed to stay on non-resort islands (except Male'). Permits can be obtained from the Ministry of Atolls Development (Male'; +960 332 3070, www.atolls.gov.mv); they cost Rf10 (40p) and you need a local sponsor to write a letter of invitation for you.

Finding a sponsor and getting the paperwork together can take weeks, especially when correspondence with far-flung atolls is involved. Liveboards arrange travel permits and grant the greatest possible freedom to explore the Maldives.

Q How do I go about choosing a liveboard?

A Select carefully. There are about 90 liveboards in the Maldives, but only a few are operated by professionals. In some cases Maldivian operators offer better prices than agencies, but not always. Local operator contact details can be found on www.floatingmaldives.com.

Ask how long operators have been working with their ship, how long they have been in operation and if they run back-to-back cruises. Find out what kind of insurance they have and when the ship was last refurbished. If you don't get clear answers to any of these questions, steer clear!

Maldives Liveboards (www.maldivesliveboards.com) has been running cruises for nearly 20 years and offers advice on available options. It also runs three excellent ships, including the *Baani Explorer*.

Q I thought the Maldives were super expensive?

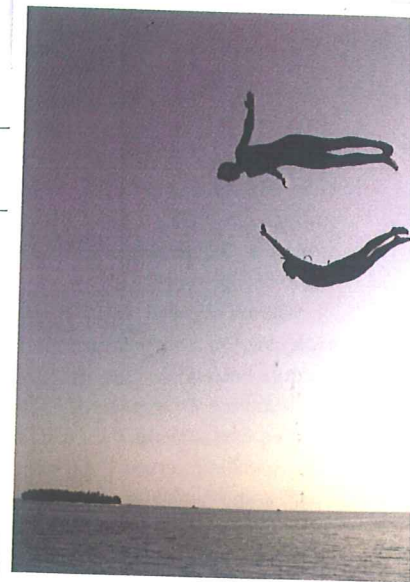
A Liveboards are more affordable than most resorts. Maldives Liveboards offers a seven-night trip from £559pp, which includes full board and three dives a day; non-divers get a 10% discount. In all, a trip like this, including flights, could cost as little as £1,000.

Q Can I just show up or do I need to book ahead?

A It pays to plan ahead. Prices can be higher if you arrive without booking, and you might have trouble at immigration without an onward itinerary. If you prefer to make arrangements locally, Inner Maldives (+960 3315 499, www.innermaldives.com) is a reputable domestic travel agency.

Q Blue seas and pearly beaches – isn't this just for honeymooning couples?

A No, liveboards are great for solo travellers. There are no



single supplements if you are happy to share a twin room. When you make your booking, ask for a single-friendly cruise.

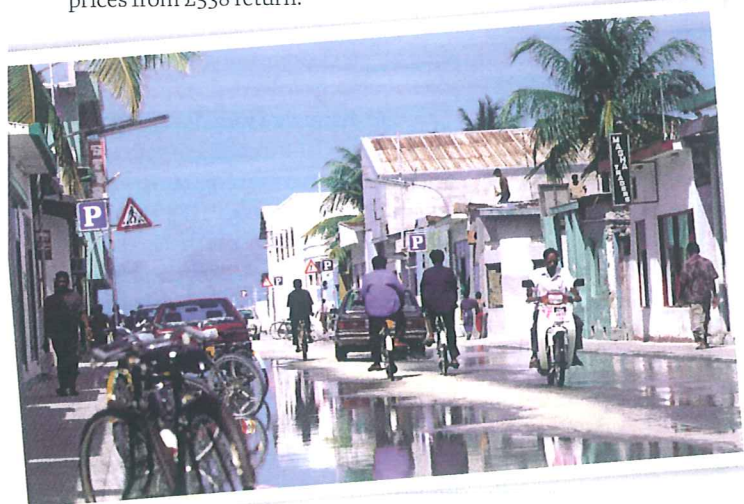
Q OK, what kind of itineraries can I expect? Can I tailor-make my own?

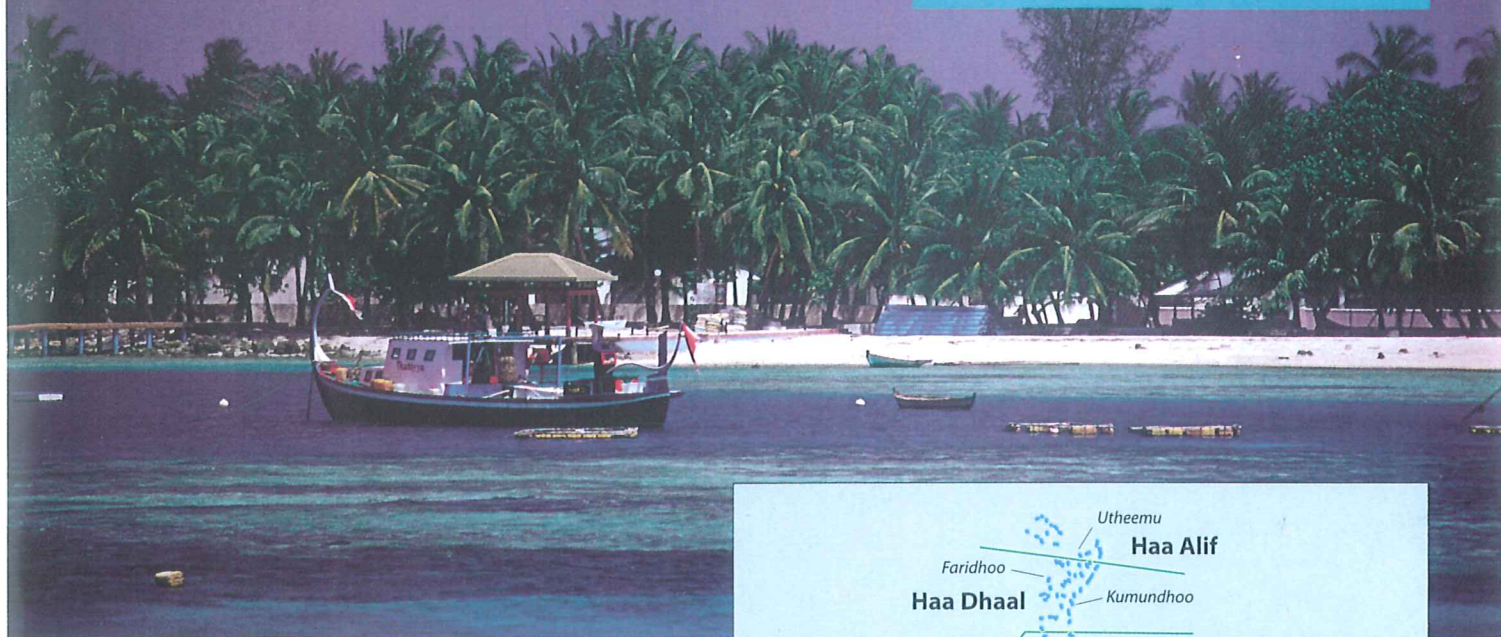
A Most liveboards operate within a 90km radius of Male' and itineraries remain flexible as the weather can change quickly. If you want a tailor-made itinerary, make a full charter booking, which entails exclusive use of the ship and a group discount (a group of 18 or more is usually entitled to two free places).

A popular voyage is through North and South Ari Atoll and back via Felidhoo and South Male' Atoll. Another route is to go north through North Male' Atoll, then north-west to Baa and back south via Rasdhoo Atoll. Cruises to remote areas can be troubled by supply problems, but that's part of the adventure. *MV Sheena* is one of the few good liveboards offering such cruises. Itineraries start from Medhufushi (Meemu Atoll) and cover Meemu, Laamu and Thaa.

Q So, which are the best dive/snorkel spots?

A Guraidhoo Kandu and Cocoa Corner (South Male' Atoll) for sharks, rays and thrilling drifts; Dhiga Thila, 5 Rocks and Kudarah Thila (South Ari Atoll) for incredible coral formations and fish life; and Fotteyo (Felidhoo Atoll) for psychedelic soft corals, swim-throughs and a near-vertical drop-off.





For snorkelling, the best sites are at the outer edges of the atolls, where many top reefs survived the coral bleaching caused by El Niño in 1998. Madhivaaru Rangali (Ari Atoll) and Lankan Caves (North Male') are reliable manta points. Whale sharks are best spotted off the south-west corner of Ari Atoll.

Q I don't dive – what else is there to see & do?

A When you book, make it clear that you require a non-diving programme. The capital Male' has the most varied attractions, the best being the fish market, Sultan's Park, the graveyard, Grand Friday Mosque and the National Museum. To experience tranquil fishing-village life ask a crewmember to be your guide, or accompany the cook on his supply run.

On *Baani Explorer* there are annual Marine Biology Weeks with PADI-accredited workshops, also suitable for non-divers. Canoeing, surfing, sailing and wakeboarding are also available.

Q Motorboating around the Maldives – that's not very eco-friendly!

A Good point. There are a few liveboard sailboats, though they still rely on motor power to bolster mileage. But there are ways to reduce the impact of your cruise. Ask about the operator's waste and fuel management.

Good operators take all refuse to waste processing stations and have fuel-efficient engines.

Q What about the political situation? Will my trip help fund a controversial government?

A UK-based Friends of Maldives (01722 504330, www.friendsofmaldives.org) publishes a list of tourist operations that generate direct revenue for the government – there are no liveboards on the list.

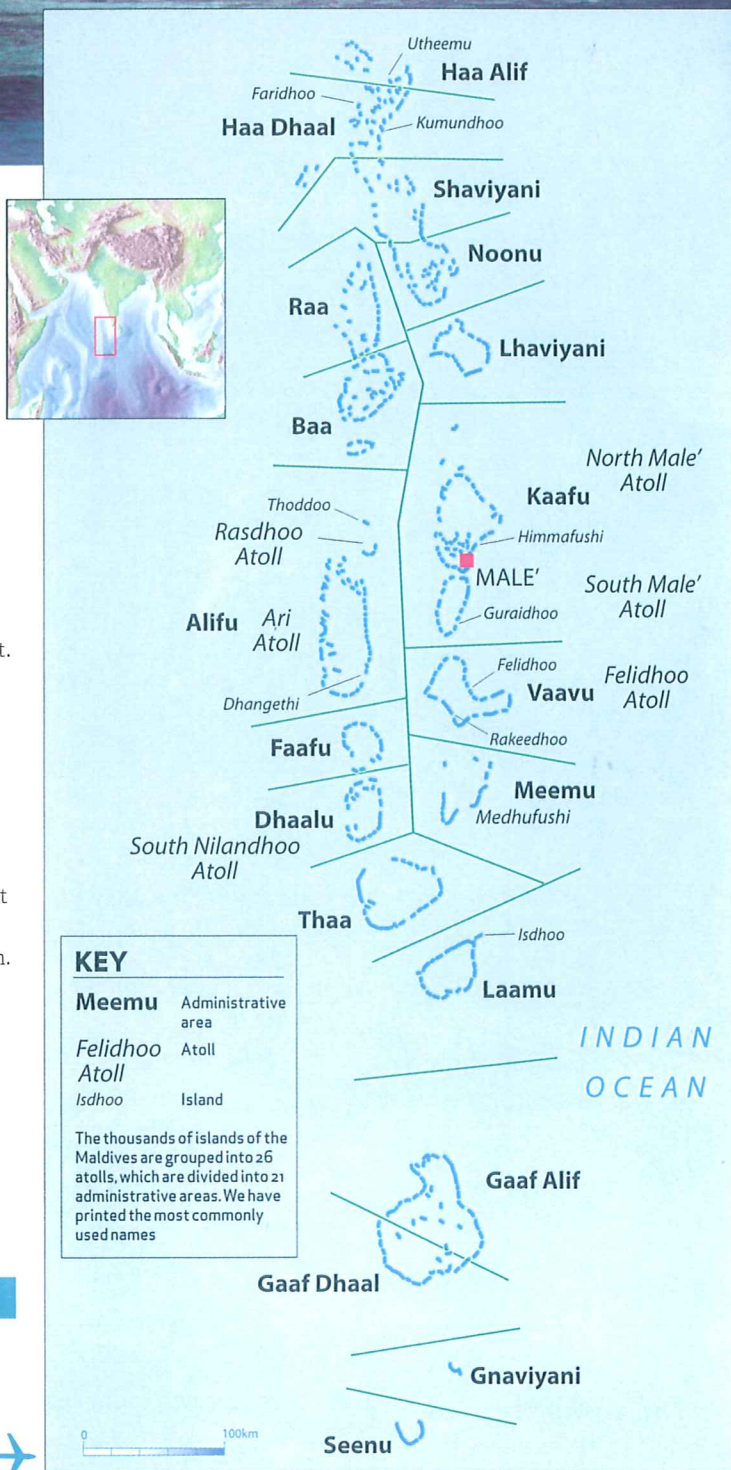
Q Any health or safety tips?

A Not really – vaccinations aren't needed and the desalinated tap water is fine to drink. There aren't any mossies out at sea, so you only need insect repellent for island visits. Consider seasickness medication.

Further reading
Maldives (Lonely Planet, 2006)
Maldives (Bradt, 2005)

Further information
www.visitmaldives.com
www.connectmaldives.com
 Online community/reviews ■

Fly climate-neutral
 London-Male' (return) generates 2.45 tonnes of CO₂. Offset your emissions for £18.35 at www.wanderlust.co.uk/offset



Hannes Kemisch; P.L./Alamy; Reinhard Urscher/Blidberg/Camera Press