

Maldives

Researched February 25-March 1, 2005

Updated June 30, 2005 by Joe Bindloss, Lonely Planet Author

NOTE ON THIS UPDATE

This document provides updated information for Lonely Planet's 5th edition *Maldives* guidebook. Information is provided in the same order as that found in the book and coverage is restricted to the areas and resorts listed in the book. Accommodation in the Maldives is mainly at all-inclusive resorts and most of these are currently operating as normal. However, it's worth confirming that all the resort facilities are operational before you make a booking as some resorts are carrying on rolling repairs. A number of seriously affected resorts have closed their doors until repairs are complete so we have provided provisional dates in the listings for when these resorts will re-open. Divers will be pleased to hear that most of the Maldives' famous coral reefs escaped serious damage — most scuba diving trips and boat safaris are operating as normal.

GENERAL CONDITIONS

Damage from the December 26 tsunami was mainly distributed along the eastern coast of the Maldives, but individual islands seem to have been affected almost at random. Some islands escaped damage entirely, while others were completely devastated, including a number of resort islands. As of June 2005, 20 of the 87 resorts in the Maldives were closed for post-tsunami repairs and refurbishments. Most of these will be out of operation until early 2006.

Despite this, a holiday in the Maldives is likely to be the same idyllic experience it always was. All the resorts that are currently open offer the full 'sun, sand and swaying palms' experience and tourists are unlikely to encounter any major signs of tsunami damage, with the exception of some minor construction work around the international airport and the tree trunks washed up on some island beaches.

In fact, the tourist industry in the Maldives has bounced back remarkably quickly. This is partly a consequence of the 'one island, one resort' policy of the Maldivian government. Under this system, each island functions as a self-sufficient holiday destination, enabling resorts that escaped damage to operate normally while reconstruction continued on neighbouring islands. This allowed tourism to continue throughout the disaster, albeit at a reduced level.

Of course, dozens of islands inhabited by ordinary Maldivians were also badly damaged, with massive loss of boats, buildings and human life, but few tourists get to see these areas because of government restrictions on travel to non-resort islands. Don't be fooled into thinking that the disaster is over just because the damage is hidden from view. Although the death toll was comparatively small, the long term economic effects of the disaster are likely to be severe.

Tourism is the main industry in the islands and around one quarter of tourist beds are currently out of use. Some estimates put the daily loss to the Maldivian economy at more than US\$500,000. With a 25% decrease in overall tourist arrivals predicted for 2005, the slump in tourism is likely to cost the Maldivian economy dearly. Around 10,000 displaced people are still living in temporary accommodation and the economic effects of the tsunami may be felt for a generation.

The reconstruction effort is being further hampered by a US\$113 million shortfall in funding. This is largely a result of dwindling interest by foreign donors in the tsunami in general, and in the Maldives in particular. Many wealthy nations have only provided a fraction of the funds promised at the time of the disaster and there is growing concern that the outstanding money may fail to materialise entirely once the tsunami slips from the popular consciousness.

TRANSPORT

The transport infrastructure in the Maldives sustained very little damage and almost everything is now operating as normal. Several airports (including the main international airport on Male') were briefly flooded and one of the flying boats used to ferry tourists between the atolls was damaged, but air

transport returned to normal within a couple of days. The vast fleet of tourist boats was also surprisingly unaffected, with damage restricted to a handful of boats that were anchored in built up harbours. The government has prioritised repairs in areas that are likely to be visited by tourists, so most people arriving at the international airport on Male' will see few signs of tsunami damage. Some long-distance boat services have been suspended at night because of the risk posed by floating trees and other debris, but these are used mainly by locals and most safari boats and boat excursions operated by resorts are running normally.

DIVING & SNORKELLING CONDITIONS

As the floodwaters receded, the Maldives scuba diving industry was expecting the worst, but when dive schools made their first tentative dives following the disaster they found few signs of damage. Some coral heads had been turned over by the waves and several sandbars were shifted by the surge, but overall, the reef was remarkably unaffected.

It seems that the unique geography of the Maldives protected the reefs to a significant degree. The main bulk of the tidal wave passed along deep water channels between the atolls, and most islands experienced elevated tides rather than massive breaking waves, protecting the reefs from serious harm. This is backed up by evidence from divers who were underwater when the tsunami struck. Most of the waves that hit the islands were under 4m, but one dive team recorded an 18m increase in depth on their dive computers in one of the deepwater channels as the tsunami passed overhead.

It was initially thought that the fringing coral reefs protected the islands, but experts now believe that the worst affected islands were hit by tidal waves generated inside their own coral lagoons. Islands with smaller fringing reefs experienced only a slow upsurge of water, limiting damage both above and below the water.

In partnership with Australian marine biologists from the Commonwealth Scientific and Research Organisation (Cisro), the United Nations Environment Programme and the Marine Research Centre in Male' has carried out a broad-ranging study of damage to reefs and fisheries across the islands, surveying 124 reefs in seven atolls and examining 170km of reef margin. The primary conclusion of the report was that the Maldives' coral reefs suffered very little physical damage during the tsunami.

However, increased erosion was observed on many island beaches and scientists found a significant increase in sediment deposits on reefs throughout the islands. Although this has caused only minor damage to existing coral, it could significantly slow down the recovery of reefs damaged by El Niño bleaching by physically preventing new coral larvae from anchoring to the reef.

The effect of the disaster on fish stocks has been harder to determine as many islanders abandoned fishing during the reconstruction of their islands. Initial reports suggest that populations of reef fish are mostly unaffected, but catches of tuna and other baitfish have been smaller than average in many northern atolls. However, this may be linked to reduced demand for fish from tourist resorts.

From a visitors' perspective, the Maldives remains one of the world's premiere diving destinations and divers and snorkellers are unlikely to notice any serious damage at the main dive sites. The coral appears healthy and fish (including sharks and other pelagics) are plentiful. In fact, most local dive schools have reported little difference in the diving experience before and after the tsunami. However, some broken coral may be visible along reef channels and inside the coral lagoons, where dive schools carry out training dives.

RESORTS

The most serious damage from the tsunami occurred along the east coast, where most of the Maldives' tourist resorts are located. In total, 23 of the 87 resorts in the islands were forced to close because of tsunami damage. Some have since reopened but 20 resorts remain closed for repairs and renovations. As well as the resorts damaged by the tsunami, several unaffected resorts have taken advantage of the slump in tourism to close for essential refurbishments.

Damaged resorts are distributed across the islands, but the worst affected areas were North Male' Atoll and South Male' Atoll. Waterfront facilities such as boat jetties and over-water bungalows were particularly badly hit and several islands lost their power and water desalination plants. Resorts were also damaged in Baa Atoll in the north and Ari Atoll South, Dhaalu Atoll and Meemu Atoll in the

south. See the following regional sections for details of individual resorts that were affected by the tsunami.

MALE'

Although Male' island has no surrounding reef, the existing sea defences largely protected the island. A surge of water swamped the southern coast, grounding boats and damaging factories and the power station, but electricity was restored within hours and the ongoing repairs are largely cosmetic. None of the places to stay listed in the *Maldives* guide were affected by the disaster. The Maldives Tourism Promotion Board (MTPB; 323228; www.visitmaldives.com) is now on the third floor of the H Aage building on Boduthakurufaanu Magu. Internet access was unaffected by the disaster and net-cafes across town are operating as normal. Tourist attractions are also operating normally, including the popular Whale Submarine.

DIVE SITES AROUND MALE'

The coral reefs around Male' suffered only minor damage and visitors can still see huge numbers of fish at Kikki Reef and Thilafushi atoll and on the reefs around Viligili and Bandos Island Resort. SEA dive school (316172; www.seamaldives.com.mv) has moved to Bodufungadu Magu near City Beach.

Transport

Local and long distance transport is operating as normal on Male' but the proposed Island Ferry Service to the outer atolls has been put on hold indefinitely.

NORTH & SOUTH MALE' ATOLLS

These two atolls were hit hard by the tsunami. Many resorts along the eastern coast of the atolls were damaged by flooding and several of the largest and most popular resorts in the Maldives remain closed for repairs. However, tourists are unlikely to encounter any traces of tsunami damage at any of the open resorts, primarily because resort staff keep the beaches clear of waterborne debris. There is little evidence of the disaster below the waterline and little serious damage has been reported from the main dive sites.

North Male' Atoll

The east coast of North Male' atoll was the first place to be hit by the tsunami, but much of the force of the tidal wave was diverted along the deep water channels to the north and south. Male' island, Viligili and the international airport on Hulhule were mostly unaffected, but several resort islands further north were damaged by waves and flooding. The worst affected non-resort islands were Dhiffushi and Huraa, where around 600 people were displaced by flooding. Most of the damaged resorts reopened within weeks but repairs are ongoing at eight resorts and the Club Med Faru resort has ceased operation. Taj Coral and Boduhithi Club were the only resorts on the west coast to be badly affected and Taj Coral has since reopened.

DIVING

The reefs in North Male' Atoll were some of the first to be assessed and the damage appears to be slight. We inspected several reefs around Male' island and saw vast numbers of fish and little obvious damage, just a handful of small corals turned over by the waves and a slight build up of silt on some western slopes. Damage is more extensive inside the lagoons, where debris was forced onto the reefs by the surge, but these shallow areas are rarely visited by recreational divers.

BUDGET RESORTS

Summer Island Village - Open

Asdu Sun Island - Open

Meeru Island Resort - Open

Thulhagiri Island Resort - Open

Giravaru - Open

MID-RANGE RESORTS

Helengeli - Open

Eriyadu - Open

Makunudu Island - Open

Reethi Rah Resort - After extensive renovations, the resort reopened fully on May 1.

Taj Coral Reef - Flooding caused damage to generators and the desalination plant but the resort reopened on February 1.

Boduhithi Coral Island - Following wave damage, the resort has closed for a total refurbishment. Boduhithi plans to reopen in March 2006.

Kudahithi Relais (aka Coco Palm Kudahithi) - Damage was extensive and the resort will be closed for repairs until March 2006.

Nakatchafushi - Open

Mahureva - Open

Lohifushi Island Resort - Following repairs and renovations, it is now open.

Club Med Kani - Closed by severe damage to over-water bungalows and set to reopen on October 21.

Dhonveli Beach - Some flood damage to wiring and plumbing but the resort reopened on January 31.

Angsana Resort & Spa - Open

Baros - Escaped serious tsunami damage but currently closed for renovations until January 2006.

Bandos Island Resort - Open as normal, though floodwaters at one point deposited a shark in the hotel spa!

Paradise Island - Open

Full Moon Resort - Closed after damage to water bungalows and waterfront areas; the owners plan to reopen in early 2006.

Club Med Faru - Closed down following damage to over-water bungalows; may reopen in 2006 under new management.

Kurumba Village - Open

Gasfinolhu Island Resort - The resort briefly reopened following repairs to damaged rooms, but it will be closed for refurbishment from April 25 to early November.

TOP-END RESORTS

Banyan Tree - Damage to the boat jetty was quickly repaired and the resort is operating as normal.

Four Seasons Resort - Some rooms were damaged by flooding and the resort will be closed until December 1 for repairs and renovations.

Soneva Gili - Waves damaged the water plant and electrical facilities but the resort reopened on June 12. However, repair work is ongoing in 10 of the rooms.

South Male' Atoll

Most resorts along the east coast of South Male' Atoll were swamped by the tsunami and seven are still closed for repairs. Floodwaters surged into rooms, damaged power and water-desalination plants and caused structural damage to jetties and bungalows, as well as washing away furniture and contaminating gardens with salt deposits. Construction crews were quickly mobilised to repair the damage but many of the closed resorts will remain shut for repairs until at least December. Away from the resorts, the island of Guraidhoo was swamped by waves and around 720 local people were displaced. Boat trips from neighbouring resorts are currently suspended until essential reconstruction work is complete.

DIVING

The reefs around the atoll were mostly unaffected and dive companies have reported no significant damage at most dive sites. However, toppled coral and rubble damage has been reported at dive sites around the Guraidhoo Kandu, particularly at Guraidhoo Corner and Medhufaru.

BUDGET RESORTS

Embudu Village - Open

Kandooma Tourist Resort - Kandooma suffered extensive tsunami damage and the status of reconstruction is unclear as the resort's telephone lines have been disconnected. According to Maldives Tourism, repair work should be finished by May 2006.

Fihalhohi Resort - Open

Club Rannalhi - Open

Fun Island Resort - The island was entirely flooded and some brick bungalows partially collapsed; the resort will be closed for repairs until 2006.

MID-RANGE RESORTS

Laguna Beach Resort - Open

Vadoo Island Resort - Open

Bolifushi - Open

Dhigufinolhu - Damaged by floodwaters, it will be closed for repairs until November 2005.
Veligandu Huraa/Palm Tree Island - Flooding caused extensive damage on the island and the resort is now being completely rebuilt. It will reopen in January 2006 as the Anantara Resort & Spa.
Bodu Huraa - Open
Biyadoo - Open
Villivaru - Open
Olhuveli Beach & Spa Resort - Waves caused structural damage to some rooms and public areas; the resort will be closed for repairs until November 2005.
Rihiveli Beach Resort - The resort initially closed following damage to the restaurant, reception area, dive school and some bungalows but it reopened fully in March.

TOP-END RESORTS

Taj Exotica - Sustained damage to rooms and shared areas and will remain closed until December 2005 for repairs and refurbishment.
Cocoa Island - It escaped serious damage but will be closed for refurbishment from June 3 to early November 2005.

ARI ATOLL

Ari Atoll experienced slightly elevated tides, causing minor damage to some resort and non-resort islands, but many holidaymakers were unaware that the tsunami had passed by until they turned on the news in the evening. The clean up in Ari Atoll is almost complete, but two resorts remain closed for repairs and refurbishment.

DIVING

Dive companies have reported no damage to major dive sites, though some debris and broken coral can be seen in shallow lagoons.

BUDGET RESORTS

Bathala - Open
White Sands Resort - Over-water areas were damaged by water surges but repairs were completed on January 27 and the resort is open as normal.
Holiday Island - Open
Sun Island - Open

MID-RANGE RESORTS

Gangelhi Island Resort - Open
Velidhu Island Resort - Open
Madoogali - Open
Maayafushi - Open
Halaveli - Open
Ellaidhoo - Open
Fesdu Fun Island - It is closed for renovations but plans to reopen in March 2006.
Moofushi - Escaped major damage but the resort will be closed for refurbishment from May 2 to the end of July 2005.
Athuruga - Open
Thundufushi - Open
Mirihi - Open
Hilton Maldives Resort & Spa - Open
Angaga - Open
Lily Beach Resort - Open
Vilamendhoo - Open
Ranveli Beach Resort - Open
Maafushivaru - Open
Machchafushi Island Resort - Open
Vakarufalhi - Open

TOP-END RESORTS

Nika Hotel - Open
Kudarah - Open

Rasdho Atoll

Rasdho Atoll experienced mild surges along the beaches but no significant problems were caused. Dive schools and safari boats have reported no visible damage to the coral at Kuramathi House Reef and Rasdho Madivaru and the sharks seem to be cruising the deeper water in the usual numbers.

RESORTS

Veligandu Island Resort - Open
Kuramathi Village - Open
Blue Lagoon - Open
Kuramathi Cottage Club - Open

NORTHERN ATOLLS

The northern atolls saw minor flooding from tidal swells, but few resorts sustained serious damage. However, a number of islands inhabited by locals were completely devastated, including Maroshi and Komandhoo in North Miladhunmadulu Atoll, Maafaru in South Miladhunmadulu Atoll, Kandholhudhoo in North Maalhosmadulu Atoll (Raa Atoll) and Kihaadhoo in South Maalhosmadulu Atoll (Baa Atoll). All these islands are the target of major reconstruction projects and feature on the United Nations' 'Adopt an Island' list.

DIVING

Some reefs in Raa and Baa atolls sustained damage from silt build-up and waterborne debris, but dive companies have reported no serious damage to the main dive sites.

North Maalhosmadulu Atoll (Raa Atoll)

No resorts were damaged in this atoll, but the fishing island of Kandholhudhoo was almost completely destroyed. Kandholhudhoo has now been abandoned and its 2800 inhabitants have been relocated to Ugoofaaru and neighbouring islands until a new island (Dhuvaafaru) can be redeveloped as a permanent base for the islanders. However, only 60% of the planned temporary shelters for displaced people have so far been constructed and the arrival of the monsoon has set back the reconstruction effort still further. Competition for space and resources between locals and refugees is contributing to growing social tension on some islands in the group.

RESORTS

Meedhupparu Island Resort - Open

South Maalhosmadulu Atoll (Baa Atoll)

The Reethi Beach and Kihaadhuffaru resorts were damaged, but both were able to reopen quickly after the disaster and tourism to the atoll is operating as normal. The worst hit local island was Kihaadhoo, with around 300 people displaced from flattened homes after the wave hit.

MID-RANGE RESORTS

Reethi Beach Resorts - Some water villas were damaged but the resort reopened fully on April 15, 2005.

Kihaadhuffaru - It sustained some floodwater damage but reopened on January 31, 2005.

Royal Island - Open

TOP-END RESORTS

Soneva Fushi - Open

Coco Palm Resort - Open

Faadhippolhu Atoll (Lhaviyani Atoll)

Some resorts here were damaged by the surge and moderate flooding but all stayed open throughout the disaster. However, One & Only Kanuhura resort has since closed for refurbishment. No serious damage has been reported at the dive sites in this atoll.

RESORTS

Kuredu Island Resort - Open

Komandoo Island Resort - Open

One & Only Kanuhura - Floodwaters caused damage to waterfront areas and rooms. The resort initially reopened, but it is currently closed for repairs until October 14, 2005.

Palm Beach Resort - Open

SOUTHERN ATOLLS

Several islands in the south of the Maldives were inundated by floodwaters and damage to local infrastructure was extensive, but only a handful of resorts were affected. However, Medhufushi Island Resort in Meemu Atoll was hit very badly and will remain closed until at least the end of the year.

Felidhoo Atoll (Vaavu Atoll)

Many homes on non-resort islands were swept away but the tourist resorts in this atoll emerged mostly unscathed.

DIVING

Marine researchers have reported some coral death from smothering by silt in the Vattaru Atoll, but the area is rarely dived by leisure divers. Other dive sites appear to be largely undamaged, though visibility problems have been reported at some locations due to silt.

RESORTS

Dhiggiri - Open

Alimatha - Open

Mulaku Atoll (Meemu Atoll)

This was the hardest hit atoll in the south of the Maldives and the islands of Veyvah, Kolhufushi, Muli and Naalafushi were all added to the United Nations' 'Adopt an Island' list. In total, around 2250 people have been displaced from these four islands. Low-lying Kohlufushi suffered some of the worst human losses in the tsunami, with 1200 displaced people and 16 fatalities. The two resorts in the atoll were also hit by massive surges, destroying bungalows and waterfront facilities, and both remain closed for repairs. The prognosis isn't entirely gloomy though. Naalafushi has recently been adopted by the owners of the Banyan Tree resort, in partnership with the United Nations Development Project.

DIVING

Meemu was one of the atolls investigated by the international reef monitoring team and the official report suggests that the reefs here escaped serious damage. However, as both the resorts are closed, dive companies have yet to report on the condition of the main recreational dive sites.

RESORTS

Medhufushi - Around 75% of the resort was destroyed by waves, including bungalows and the main boat jetty; the resort will be closed until 2006 for repairs.

Hakuraa Club - Water bungalows were swept away and half the island was flooded; repairs should be complete by August 29, 2005.

North Nilandhoo Atoll (Faafu Atoll)

Tsunami effects were minimal in North Nilandhoo and the only resort, Filitheyo, escaped without damage, as did the dive sites in the atoll.

South Nilandhoo Atoll (Dhaalu Atoll)

Several local islands in this atoll were extensively damaged, with around 1500 people displaced from the islands of Nohivaranfaru, Rinbudhoo, Gemendhoo and Maeboodhoo — all were added to the United Nations' 'Adopt an Island' list and Nohivaranfaru has now been adopted by the government of Turkey. The two resorts at the north end of the atoll were also damaged, but both have since reopened.

DIVING

No major damage to dive sites has been reported in this atoll.

RESORTS

Vilu Reef - It sustained floodwater damage but reopened fully on February 21, 2005.

Velavaru Island Resort - The resort reopened on February 21 after flood damage, but repairs to some rooms are still ongoing.

Other Southern Atolls

The atolls of Kolhumadulu (Thaa), Hadhdhunmathee (Laamu), North Huvadhoo (Gaafu Alifu), South Huvadhoo (Gaafu Dhaalu) and Fuamulaku (Gnaviyani) have no resorts, but many local islands were inundated by waves. Vilufushi in the Kolhumadulu Atoll was hit by a massive surge of floodwater and 18 people were swept to their deaths, the highest single death toll in the Maldives. Hundreds of homes were destroyed as water swept up the beaches and over other low-lying islands. Around 1900 people were displaced from Madhifushi and Vilufushi in Kolhumadulu Atoll and a further 1200 people were displaced from Dhabidhoo and Maabaidhoo in Hadhdhunmathee Atoll. In north and south Huvahoo atolls, around 1700 people lost their homes on the islands of Maamendhoo, Villingili, Dhaandhoo and Nilandhoo. Large numbers of displaced people are still living in temporary housing on other islands, particularly in the Thaa and Laamu atolls.

Addu Atoll (Seenu Atoll)

The tsunami largely bypassed the Addu Atoll. Although several islands experienced minor flooding, the main islands of Feydhoo, Maradhoo, Hithadhoo and Hulhumeedhoo were mostly unaffected. The traditional independence of Addu islanders and the low level of tourism in the area may actually serve to protect the islanders from much of the economic fallout from the disaster.

DIVING

No damage has been reported to the reefs and wrecks at Addu Atoll.

GAN

The airport and marine port at Gan returned to full operation soon after the tsunami, and no tsunami damage was reported. The Equator Village resort was unaffected and construction of the new resort on Viligili appears to be going ahead as planned.

RESORT

Equator Village - Open

GETTING THERE AND AWAY

Island Aviation flights between Male' and Gan are operating as normal but plans for a ferry link to Male' have been suspended indefinitely. There are now plans to open the airport on Gan to international flights by the end of 2005.