

# 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 resort have closed their doors until repairs are complete, so we have provided provisional dates in the listings for when these resorts will reopen. 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 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, which enabled 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 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 deep-water 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 Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO), 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 visitor's perspective, the Maldives remains one of the world's premier 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 overwater 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 it. 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](http://www.visitmaldives.com)) is now on the 3rd floor of the H Aage building on Boduthakurufaanu Magu. Internet access was unaffected by the disaster, and Web cafés 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](http://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 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

### **Midrange 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 – open following repairs and renovations  
Club Med Kani – closed by severe damage to overwater bungalows; 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 overwater bungalows; may reopen in 2006 under new management  
Kurumba Village – open  
Gasfinolhu Island Resort – briefly reopened following repairs to damaged rooms, but will be closed for refurbishment from April 25 to early November

### **Top-End Resorts**

Banyan Tree – damage to the boat jetty was quickly repaired; operating as normal  
Four Seasons Resort – some rooms were damaged by flooding; 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 – suffered extensive 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

## **Midrange Resorts**

Laguna Beach Resort – open

Vadoo Island Resort – open

Bolifushi – open

Dhigufinolhu – damaged by floodwaters; 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; closed for repairs until November 2005

Rihiveli Beach Resort – Rihiveli 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 – 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 cleanup 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 – overwater 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

## **Midrange Resorts**

Gangelhi Island Resort – open

Velidhu Island Resort – open

Madoogali – open

Maayafushi – open  
Halaveli – open  
Ellaidhoo – open  
Fesdu Fun Island – closed for renovations but plans to reopen in March 2006  
Moofushi – escaped major damage but 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

### **Rasdhoo Atoll**

Rasdhoo 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 Rasdhoo Madivaru, and the sharks seem to be cruising the deeper water in the usual numbers.

### **Resorts**

Veligandu – 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.

### **Midrange Resorts**

Reethi Beach Resort – some water villas damaged, but the resort reopened fully on April 15, 2005

Maldive Kihaad – 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 Kanuhuraa 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 Kanuhuraa – 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; 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 Nolhivaranfaru, Ribudhoo, Gemendhoo and Maaeboodhoo — all were added to the United Nations' Adopt an Island list, and Nolhivaranfaru has now been adopted by the government of Turkey. The two resorts at the northern 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 – sustained floodwater damage but reopened fully on February 21, 2005

Velavaru Island Resort – reopened on February 21 after flood damage, but repairs to some rooms are ongoing

### **Other Southern Atolls**

The atolls of Kolhumadulu (Thaa), Hadhdhunmathee (Laamu), North Huvadho (Gaafu Alifu), South Huvadho (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, Viligili, 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.

## **GETTING THERE & 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.