

Finding the Maldives

When I was younger, I nearly accepted a job teaching English to people who worked at resorts in the Maldives. The problem was I didn't know where the Maldives were. When I attempted to locate the country, it took me awhile before I saw a series of islands located to the south and west of India. Although it may be difficult to locate on a map, those who make their way to the Maldives will see a beautiful, relaxing and prosperous nation.

The beauty of the blue water and white sand of the Maldives can best be viewed during the arriving flight. The most beautiful atolls are the ones that are the farthest from the capital of Male'. Many of these islands require a seaplane transfer and generally have just resorts. The islands closer to Male' still have great views, however.

Male' is the capital of the Maldives and is the only place in the country that feels like a city, with a population of 80,000. It is shaped like a rectangle and the streets follow a rectangular grid, so it is easy to navigate. There are some cars and trucks here, but the vast majority of people use bikes, mopeds or simply walk.

One area where people congregate at night is the main square on the north side of the island. Near the main square are two mosques of note. The most striking building in Male' is the Grand Friday Mosque. It is fairly simple,



white on the outside with a gold top, but it is huge; the main prayer room can hold up to 5,000 worshippers. One hundred meters to the east is the Old Friday Mosque, with a minaret that looks like a water tower. The mosque is old, dating from 1656, and is constructed from coral stone. The graveyard surrounding the mosque also has coral tombstones, with rounded tops for women, pointy tops for men and those with gold-lettering for the sultans. Modestly dressed non-Muslims can walk around the graveyard although entering the mosque requires government approval.

Both mosques have points of interest across their respective streets. Across from the Old Friday Mosque, is the colorful Muleeage, which was originally built for the sultan, but he was deposed before he could move in. The president used the palace for some time but

since 1994 has taken residence elsewhere. It's an attractive building from the outside, but presently is not being used. Next to the Grand Friday Mosque is the Sultan's Park, which houses the National Museum. The park is full of vegetation and it provides welcome shade during the daytime heat. The National Museum is small, but all exhibits are labeled in English and all visitors are escorted by a museum worker. The museum displays the history of Maldives along with clothing, large bowls and items that were related to the sultan's rule.

The other area where people congregate is an artificial beach on the east side of the island. The beach area has a manmade pool and of course a beach, but it is rather small. Many people assemble here because the city puts up chairs and giant screens and shows movies or television shows. There are a couple of screens in this area and people can choose what they want to see. A couple of other screens are located throughout the island. The shows add to the communal feel of the island as a large part of the city watch the shows.

The importance of soccer was illustrated while watching these shows. The World Cup was ongoing and most of the people choose to watch this instead of other movies. I never really liked soccer and I could care less who won the World Cup but pretending to care was a great way to meet people. I decided to root for Germany, due to my ancestry, and Australia, due to my appreciation of that country while living there. Rooting against England is also a pretty safe bet in most parts of the world. When I sat down to watch, people would ask who I wanted to win, and the conversation would evolve into why I was in the Maldives and life in America. Although there are many tourists in the Maldives, many are Japanese and many go the distant atolls and don't stay on Male', so I was a bit of novelty. While watching the World Cup, I sat next to an older man with an extremely dirty laugh. His wife and him were interested in my story and his wife even went home and prepared a plate of fruit for me.

The type of Islam practiced in the Maldives was more relaxed than the type practiced in Arabia. Although alcohol was forbidden, the women only needed to wear a head scarf. They did keep the scarf on in public even when they were swimming. Women in Arabia were generally fully covered. The women did talk to me and some attempted to flirt with me. Although some women talked to me in Arabia, there definitely was no flirting.

The Islamic Call to Prayer seemed out of place in this island culture. As people were swimming in their shorts, the Call to Prayer beckoned Muslims five times a day. This call seems appropriate in the deserts of Arabia and is haunting and exotic as it crosses the desert sands. The singing seems fitting even in coastal Africa or Southeast Asia, but not on the islands.

The atolls summons tourists to swim and dive, not to visit mosques. There is a small beach on the west side of Male', but there are better possibilities on other atolls. Just one kilometer west of Male' is the island of Viligili, which is being developed for overflow as Male' is running out of room for her population. However, not many people are moving, thus Viligili has less population and is more relaxed than Male'.



This does feel like an island as many people unwind on the beach and lay in hammocks.

Other islands in Maldives have specific functions. Hulhule' is the island that has the airport and much of the boat transport. Hulhumale', connected to the airport, is a man-made island built six feet above sea level. Funadhoo is for fuel storage and oil tankers but is far enough away from inhabited islands. Thilafushi is where the capital's garbage is dumped, while Dhoonidhoo is where the capital dumps political prisoners.

Most people remain on Male' because of the attractions of the city. In addition to the mosques, parks and museums, there is a fish market which sells several types of fish. There are a couple of harbors here as well as the National Football Stadium. Also, there is a wide variety of food served at the male-only teashops or the more typical restaurants. Indian food is popular as is the breakfast staple, *mas huni*, a mixture of tuna, onions and coconut. Also, Male' is where many services are offered such as e-mail, wiring money and travel and government offices.

Although finding the Maldives on a map may take some time, it does not take long to understand why it is an attractive country. The natural beauty of the Maldives is spectacular. There is a relaxed attitude in the country, whose culture is a pleasant combination of the subcontinent, Asia and Arabia. Despite this relaxed attitude, what needs to get, gets done and the people have invested in their country to make it an even more appealing place to be.