

Local Cuisine

Maldives was populated over the years by shipwrecked passengers, pirates, kings, queens and slaves from all over the world. You can find lineage from European, African and Middle Eastern nations, throughout the Maldives. This meant that food and Maldivian cuisine was greatly influenced by the tastes from its concoction of cultures and races. It is a fact that Maldives has tiny islands, scarce in land area and hence allowing for few animals such as hens, roosters and goats to be used for husbandry.

The coral sand was never ideal for planting trees in the smaller islands, further limiting the amount of vegetation that thrives in the Maldives. This also meant, there was limited farming done as



well, due to lack of land and rich soil, and the warm equatorial sun throughout the year. The abundant fish life in the surrounding waters of the islands, meant that the main diet of Maldivians, was based on fish. Whether it be fish, lobsters, crabs or cuttlefish and octopus, these are just some of the delicacies from our clean and fresh waters, that can be commonly found at restaurants and cafés today.

Though, traditionally, the Maldivian diet included mainly tuna and reef fish (such as red snappers), the import of other red meat with the increased tourism, meant that an international menu is now available. The local cuisine, today, is infused with Indian spices and hot chilly tastes from Sri Lanka and with rice as the staple food, as in the southeast Asian nations. The traditional Maldivian diet was tuna curries and a special tuna paste called 'Rihaakuru' (which is derived from cooked tuna in water with salt and few spices) along with white rice. Today, one can find an abundance of western dishes and food available all over the Maldives; very much influenced by the international visitors and the booming tourism industry.

A lot of the young people of Maldives live on a diet of gourmet coffee and short eats made out of tuna and flour. These short eats are similar to those found in the south Asian region, but, still different, in its fresh tuna and coconut usage. One needs to tickle their palate with these short eats during an evening tea from a local tea shop called 'Saihotaa' to truly understand the addiction to it. For you to truly experience the traditional Maldivian cuisine, that is neither spicy nor hot, but as wonderful as a memory that makes you smile, every time you recall; you need to visit some of the inhabited islands, away from the capital city of Male'.

Cultural Performance



Dance and music have been an intricate part of the Maldivian culture and society. This is evident in the current boom of young people engaged in traditional drum and music of 'Boduberu'; where goat skin (sometimes stingray skins as well) drums are beaten and accompanied by harmonized singing and the most fun and hypnotic dance moves you could ever find yourself moving to. There are numerous other cultural performances such as that of women's 'Bandiya Dance'; where they dance with traditional water collecting metal containers, beating a tune on them, as they sing in wonderful harmony, dancing to the beats. The Eid Celebration (a celebration after the end of the Muslim month of fasting as well as at the end of the yearly Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca), showcases traditional parades on the streets of the islands, with giant fishes woven out of coconut palm leaves, called 'Bodumas' and 'Maali' which are mythical creatures that people dress up as.

These parades are accompanied by various games where the whole island folk come together and enjoy and have heaps of fun. It is now far easier to experience these traditions on the islands, if one stays at a local guesthouse. Some of the resorts would also include traditional performances to entertain their guests. These are just a few such performances of music, dance and games, while there are many more, such as poetry recital ('Raivaru') and games such as 'Koadi Kendun' (where the men and women of the island play against one another).

If one wishes to fully experience the traditional fun and cheerfulness of a Maldivian society, it is recommended that you visit the Maldives during a period of Eid celebrations. The cultural performances pay homage to traditions and history of the past generations with such vivid colors, sounds and artistic expression, that one need only experience it once, to leave an everlasting memory, engraved deep in your heart. Within the past 5 years, there have been TV programs and competitions of traditional and cultural performances, allowing the much needed revival. Our thousands of years of rich and diverse history is far more artistically and colorfully depicted through the various art forms, especially, those of oral history, through songs, dance and poems.

Culture & Heritage



Island Hopping

Island hopping is the travelling between the islands of Maldives for leisure. With the increasing popularity of budget travel and guesthouses in inhabited islands, tourists can now immerse themselves into the true local culture and tradition, at a lower budget, as compared to the traditional resort tourism in the Maldives. Island hopping is the new hip, travel adventure, that has gripped the Maldives; whereby, guests as well as the community benefit with exchange of culture and tradition, and enrichment of soul and self. Budget travel across inhabited islands, empowers especially the female gender, and provides local communities with much needed income generation opportunities within their small island communities. Until quite recently, the government of Maldives found it difficult to create jobs and employment within the atolls and islands; causing a migration of people to the already crowded capital island of Male'. Budget tourism in inhabited islands allows for job creation and economic empowerment of the nation as a whole and a much needed relief for the government.

The Maldives is home to a thousand isles, with crystal clear waters and white sandy beaches. Each island is unique in its formation and especially, its people and culture. In the formation of the coral islands that are protected by a living thriving coral reef system, they sometimes tend to have mangroves and fresh water lakes. Mangroves are locally called 'Kulhi'. These mangroves can have opening ducts to allow sea water and fish life to seep in during some seasons. The mangroves boast a healthy growth of unique vegetation inherent to such ecosystems, and fishes and other forms of life in and around the water. The mangroves and lakes also offer a protective environment for some species of fishes to breed their young. Some lakes such as the one in Laamu Atoll are red in color due to algal and fungal growth, giving it a unique and beautiful pallet of colors. These lakes and mangroves also work as tanks and filters to clean the groundwater and maintain the freshwater level of the aquifer. Some islands such as Kulhudhuffushi, used the lakes in the olden times to breed freshwater fish that can be caught during the monsoon season when it was too rough and rainy to go out to sea to fish. Today they are lakes of beauty, and wonderful sites for one to relax and admire nature's wonders and take selfies.

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The local language of Dhivehi, influenced by Sanskrit and Arabic and other regional tongues, has its own script (called Thaana) and three major dialects spoken throughout the 340,000 people scattered across the archipelago of Maldives. The islanders share common norms and traditions, but, each island has its own twists and flavoring that are distinct and observed differently. With the advent of a better transport network between islands, within the past 5 years, via seaplane, small flights, boats, speed launches and cargo vessels, it has become convenient and efficient to travel from one island to another.

Handicraft

In the thousands of years of history of Maldives, we have read of kings of Maldives paying tribute to emperors of Rome and to rulers of Persia. The tribute was more often in the form of dried fish, along with hand crafted and intricately designed artifacts with colorful lacquer work and hand woven coir rope. Though now a rarity, lacquer designed ornaments, make a wonderful cultural and traditional Maldivian gift for the visitor to take back. Today, coir rope is more often used for decorative purposes to remind us of a past when coconut palms provided food, shelter, medicine and day to day materials for living in the remote islands of Maldives.

The Maldivian 'Libaas' or traditional ladies clothing worn on special occasions, feature carefully woven fibers of gold and silver strands (named as 'Kasab-Boavalhu') usually on a red or green dress. These designs are unique to the traditions of the people of Maldives and now kept alive with the thriving tourism industry. The libaas makes a wonderful garment for tourists, as well as locals, to wear on special occasions, especially weddings;



radiating the feminine beauty of the wearer, with a glittering gold and silver neckline, displaying strength and beauty, entwined together. It is common to see handicraft work at the local National Handicraft shop in the capital city of Male'; where you will find lacquer work (containers, plates and ornaments), small hand crafted models of traditional boats called 'Dhoni', as well as dresses and other touristy t-shirts.

With the difficulty in transport, in the ancient times, and scarce resources of iron and other ores, the handicraftsmen of Maldives designed their own tools to craft their products, using mainly coconut wood and other limited forms of timber available. Today, there is a need for a revival of traditional handicraft creations; though modern art forms are developing far more rapidly. Painters and sculptors hold exhibitions and sell their creations as well, though it is still not common to find modern art forms or creations at tourist shops or resorts, available for purchase by the visitors. One should take the time to appreciate the art form that is dying, by purchasing a handicraft item, as it will be a piece of the Maldives that you get to take back home and in turn, benefit the local community, by keeping the industry alive, along with the rich heritage it entails.

Heritage Sites



It is popularly held, (especially by archaeologists such as H.C.P Bell) that the Maldives was inhabited thousands of years ago by seafaring people, shipwrecked travelers and merchants, and at times those seeking refuge. The island nation has a written history evidencing the presence of Hinduism, Buddhism and other religions, and more recently, the conversion of the nation to Islam. It is common to find religious monuments and temple ruins throughout the islands, across the atolls. Statues, figurines, copper plates and scrolls, details the past life of our ancestors that inhabited the Maldives. Some of these sites have been excavated and studied, by local and international experts, and the Heritage Department of the government has declared them as protected heritage sites. Old ruins, mosques and temples make wonderful sites to visit and let yourself imagine the life in the tiny islands thousands of years in the past, in the times of kings, queens, sailing ships and pirates. There are numerous heritage sites that can be seen in the capital Male', as well as many more scattered throughout the archipelago. Depending on your interest, you can decide to visit a public bath house from hundreds of years ago, at the Southern Atoll of Fuvahmulah or a mosque with intricately carved coral stone walls, with Arabic scriptures carved on its beams, in the capital city of Male'. Local heritage department staff are always, more than pleased, to hand you brochures and books on the rich history of Maldives, and tell you the stories of past kingdoms, wars, famines and traditions that form the pages of history of Maldives.

It is not only on land that protected heritage sites remain in the Maldives. Our coral reefs that lie on a popular trade route, have wreaked havoc for many a ship that sailed across it. Hence, there are numerous ships and boats that have sunk and now remain under the protection of colorful coral gardens and home to a thousand colorful fish. These make ideal dive sites for the scuba diver. If you visit the Maldives and do not go scuba diving, you will not only miss out on seeing the colorful coral and fish life, beasty gorgeous sharks and playful dolphins, but also a chance to encounter rare gold and silver filled chests on a sunken Spanish war ship (pirates were not only in the Caribbean).

As a nation under the threat of climate change and rising sea level, an international effort is required to ensure that the island nation as a whole does not become a heritage site, in the very near future.

Visit to the Museum

The National Museum (built by the good will of the Chinese government) located in the capital Male', houses thousands of years of traditional and historical artifacts from all over the Maldives. Visitors to the museum can find themselves face to face with ancient Buddhist statues and figurines, and traditional cookware and household items from our past. There are artifacts of kings and queens that ruled over the thousand isles, historical documents and ancient writings of various scripts of the Maldivian people; from copper plates to scrolls to hand written papers.



The museum is located at the ancient royal gardens where princes and princesses must have had strolled through the flower gardens and under the shade of the cascading oaks. There are few monuments, places of worship or artifacts found on site, in islands, that are whole and in good condition. Most of it have been carefully shipped for display at the national museum, by experts, or weather and lack of care have damaged and destroyed them beyond repair. So, take a walk into the past of the Maldives by visiting the national museum and discover how related in culture and traditions we are, no matter where we might be from this planet we all call home; Earth.

There are presently very few Maldivian archeologists, but it is quite pleasant to know one of them is a woman. Maldivian archeologists are expected to conduct more studies and research on how far the cowrie shells from Maldives, that once was used as the form of currency, had travelled throughout the world; and many other historical topics. As Maldivians were astute sailors, it is not surprising that letters from Maldivian rulers have found themselves at the hands of Roman rulers, that can now be seen at museums in Italy. Portuguese and Dutch are said to have been some of the conquerors who had attacked and taken over the rule of the island nation that lie in a very important trade route; this too can be evident in various historical artifacts found at the national museum.