

# The Maldives



## THE GOOD SENSE OF ECO-TOURISM

**Kate Donnellan reports**

When a nation is made up of over one thousand coral islands in an eight-hundred-kilometre-long archipelago composed of twenty-six geographical atolls—and much of its limited land mass is barely three feet above sea level— words like “Global Warming”, “El Niño and La Niña” and the “Green House effect” takes on a rather close-to-the-bone significance.

A five-year study by the International Panel on Climate Change, a group of researchers from all over the world, predicts that due to the massive amounts of carbon-based pollutants produced by the world’s wealthier nations and the resulting global warming that is its most ominous side-effect, sea levels could rise anywhere from six inches to three feet by the year 2100. The thirty-five nation Alliance of Small Island States, with their very existence at risk, are pushing internationally for a sharp reduction in the

use of all ozone-depleting gases as quickly as possible; after all, for them it’s a matter of survival. And what a loss to the planet it would be if the exquisite Maldives were to sink beneath the waves!

These glorious islands might be perched on a geographical, ecological time bomb in the middle of the Indian Ocean, but their plight has at least forced the republic’s lawmakers to put the environment right at the top of its political agenda. A well-informed, savvy government quickly realized that it made good ecological and long-term economic sense to protect the natural beauty that attracts thousands of well-heeled international tourists annually— at least from foreseeable environmental dangers within its control. When tourism took off in the early 80’s, (it started in 1972) the potential danger of greedy over-development seemed a more imminent threat to the country than the distant worry of Global Warming; it was certainly more easy to do something about. Taking a cue and a lesson from the laissez-faire practices of other tourist-dependent nations such as

Spain (where disastrous over-building along such once-breathtaking stretches as the Costa del Sol has done immeasurable harm to that country’s tourist industry), the Maldivians from the beginning wisely implemented an extremely tough building code for tourist island development to protect their most precious natural resource: the islands’ heart-stopping tropical beauty. As a result, no building on a resort-island can be higher than two stories, which is to say not higher than the indigenous, salt-resistant palm trees. Built-up area of the resort can cover no more than 20% of the total area of the island. Even of the beach-length, only 68% is available for guestroom construction and 32% of the beach-frontage is allowed for construction of public areas such as restaurant or bar. Each guestroom must have 5 metres of beach frontage. (For water bungalow construction, which are guestrooms built charmingly on stilts in the lagoon, the beach-length rules have to be strictly observed, and the same area has to be kept vacant on land, ensuring that congestion is kept to a minimum).

In a country that has always been dependent on its ocean resources, much of what is today considered “ecology” is pretty much a matter of course for Maldivians. Fishing, now a close second to tourism in economic importance, is still a very important source of income; 85,000 tonnes of tuna alone are caught annually. Deep sea dragnets are completely prohibited by law. An ancient Maldivian fishing technique which employs pole, line, and a hook with a design unique to the islands, is the method of choice. “Greenpeace came out to insure that our fishing techniques were environmentally-friendly, and even they went away impressed,” notes Ahmed Mujuthaba, the country’s first Minister of Tourism and himself an ardent environmentalist.

The country’s unique underwater-life is also protected to a significant extent. Endangered species and several species likely to be endangered are protected by law. As a result, delicate species such as the gentle whale shark, members of the ray family and many and varied sea turtles, swim here safely and in relatively large numbers. The presence of these sea creatures is certainly a strong draw that helps attract a “better” calibre of tourist from all over the world. Many come eager to enjoy some of the world’s most spectacular diving; and most of them are aware and respectful of the delicate balance in the underwater world which they are so fortunate to visit. The government has also put a ban on coral mining in and around inhabited islands, tourist resort islands and several reefs as the skeletal remains of these microscopic sea creatures act as a natural barrier and offer protection from the rising sea. “Interestingly, harpoon guns and spear fishing were banned early through tourist influence,” notes Mujuthaba. “Some of our very first guests pointed out to us that it wasn’t a good idea to encourage that sort of thing.” While much of the Maldives’ exotic wildlife is under the sea, fruit bats and eight species of indigenous birds add their own charm on land.

The relative isolation of the Maldives has also played a significant part in protecting it from the dangers of exploitation and unchecked development. The first voice link using a ham radio was installed between Male’ and the Maldives Embassy in Colombo

in just 1972. (Prior to that, the only telecommunication contact with the outside world was a Morse circuit between these two points). A teleprinter circuit between Male’ and Bombay was established in 1974. Although some walkie talkies and telephones were in use on Male’, international telex, fax and telephone came with satellite telecommunications in 1978 and although television started in the same year, live events relayed on national TV commenced in 1981.

Tourist numbers have climbed quickly in direct proportion to increased contact with the outside world. In 1997, 365,000 intrepid travellers made their way to the Maldives, and at least half of those came to dive. The explosion in tourism has brought with it not only increased revenues, but also the need to import foodstuffs and other commodities not locally available, and that in turn has brought with it the twin problems of garbage and waste disposal.

The country’s seventy-plus resorts each has a distinctly individual character and, not surprisingly, each one caters to an identifiable tourist type. Russian, German; French, Italian; honeymooners, airline crew. Nationality, marital status and lifestyle all add subtle components to the rich and complex mosaic that defines tourism in the Maldives. The ever-more common denominator shared between guests and hosts across the board seems to be an increasing environmental sensitivity, a sure result of creating awareness. Environmental awareness has a higher profile both in The Maldives and around the world than perhaps ever before. The ideal symbiosis is to attract the paying guest who is eager and willing to preserve and maintain the Maldives paradise status— even if it means the bed sheets in his hotel room are only changed twice a week instead of daily, and he has to do with less air-conditioning than he might wish. It is a matter of capitalizing on shared values and philosophy; eco-tourism is the obvious answer to the dilemma of an economy based largely on the tourist dollar, yet in dire necessity of protecting its rich, varied, fragile and delicately-balanced environment.

Look at the Maldives from the tourist’s point of view: the plane lands and he proceeds through customs. The arrival lounge is immaculate and formalities are quickly

completed, efficiently and smoothly handled by friendly, smiling officials. It’s the first indication that this is a sensible country whose government does not put its guest through a bureaucratic purgatory in order to enjoy a few restful days of sunshine and peace.

The visitor collects his luggage and steps outside for the first time. The stunning view could easily have been painted by Winslow Homer. The sky is mile-high and a clear, unpolluted blue, freckled with white clouds that do, indeed, look like a flock of cotton-ball sheep out on a casual graze. Who in his right mind would even remotely consider fouling the turquoise of that indescribable, translucent sea?

No wonder eco-tourism is a high priority on the country’s political agenda and, potentially, a real boon to the economy as well. It offers visitors to the Maldives the holiday of a lifetime, and a guilt-free good time. What the modern tourist has in common with environment-conscious Maldivians is a shared philosophy of life, a respect and awe for nature and, most importantly, the values we must all embrace as we enter the 21<sup>st</sup> century. More and more, the answers to the complex and inter-related questions of keeping the Maldivian economy healthy, while at the same time defending its fragile environment, seems to lie in attracting those who share in the country’s protectionist philosophy. ■

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