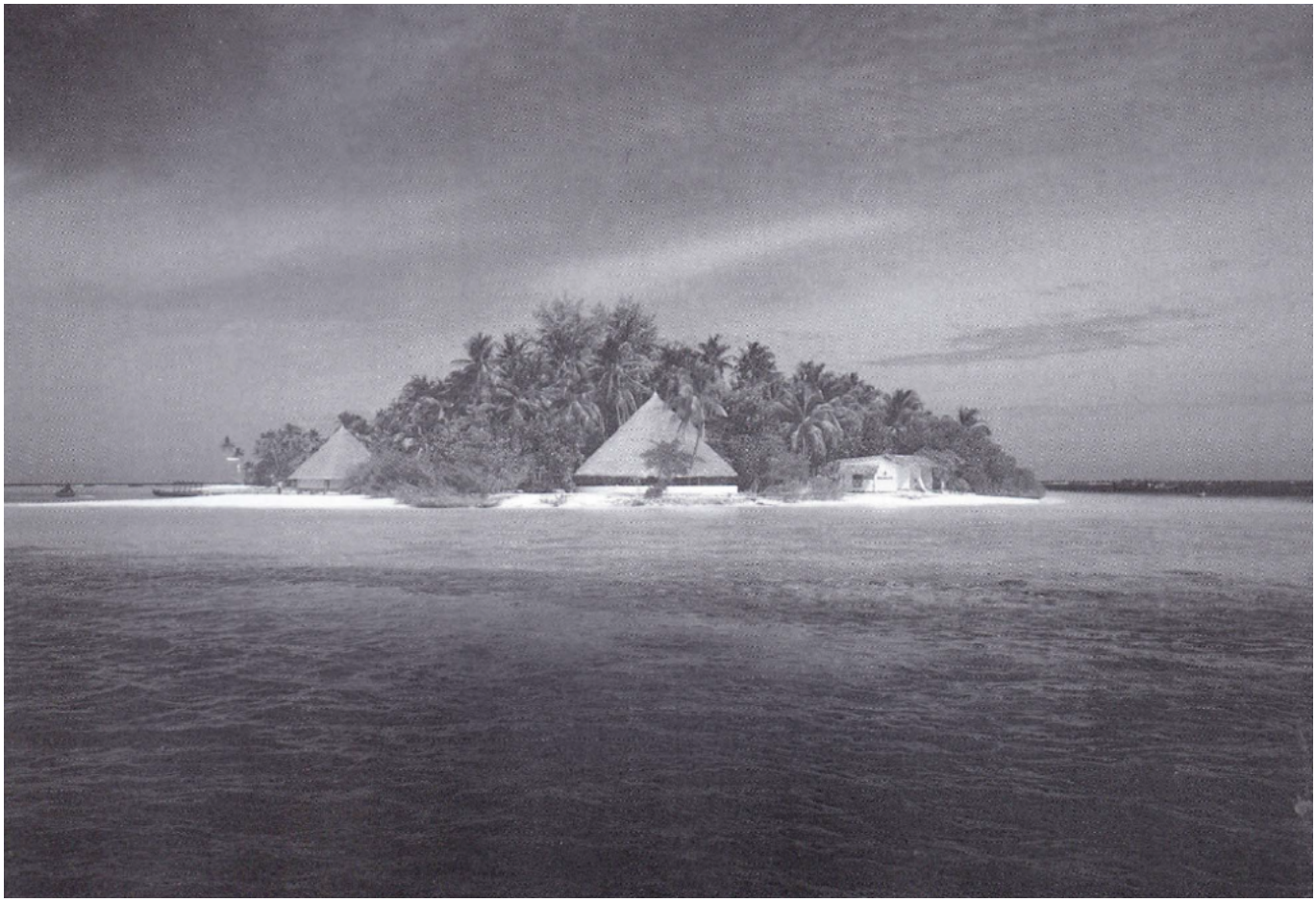
Maldives Round up

Posted on

Royston Ellis takes a look at the Maldives.

Photos: Neel Jayantha

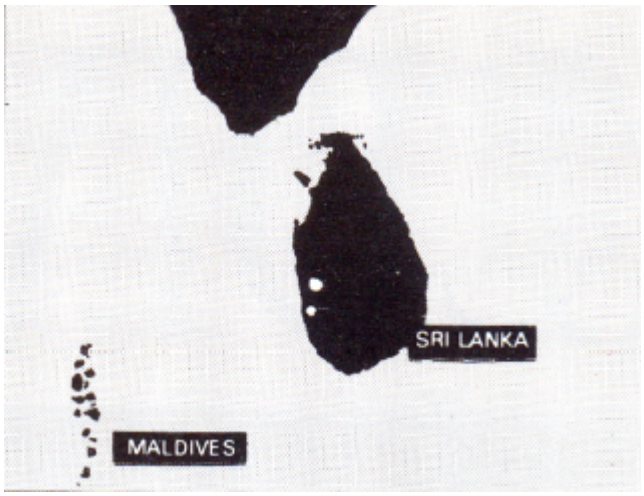


When the jet circles over the islands of the Maldives you feel the pilot is looking for one large enough to land on as you glimpse the blissful lagoons lapping at sandy islets dotted in the Indian Ocean all the way down to the equator.

The name of the Maldives is said to be taken from Malodheep, Sanskrit for “garland”. The word aptly describes the iridescent array of atolls, 725km southwest of Colombo. The very word atoll comes from the Maldivian atolu.

The flight to the Maldives from Sri Lanka takes about 85 minutes but seems faster because of the excellent service on board Air Lanka and Emirates who both serve the islands from Colombo’s international airport.

The Maldives’ international airport is at Hulule, an entire island flattened in the late 1970s to provide easy access for tourists who can now fly there direct from Europe, Singapore and India as well as via Colombo. All visitors, except Sri Lankans who need visit visas in advance, are given a visa to stay for 30 days on arrival. There is a thorough customs check to see that visitors have neither alcohol nor girlie magazines.



The Maldives are officially “dry” but getting a drink either in the capital, Male or in the islands where tourists stay, is no problem. There are some other restrictions you’ll learn quickly, such as “nudity is offensive to our traditions, please do not go nude on the beach or in the water.” There is a minimum dress requirement when you visit an inhabited island and this requires both women and men to dress with nothing less than shorts and decorum.

An “inhabited” island, of which there are over 200, is one with local inhabitants; an “uninhabited” one is where you stay. At the last count there were 64 uninhabited islands with facilities for tourists out of the 1,190 or so which make up the archipelago.

Foreigners are only allowed to stay in Male, the tiny, overcrowded capital, or in the “uninhabited”resort islands where facilities usually consist of cabana style rooms, by a beach, with a central restaurant, bar and reception. For guests who find the resort doesn’t suit them, changing accommodation in a hurry is impossible since there is only one hotel per island, and no regular ferry service linking the islands if you want to make a sudden getaway. So how do you know in advance which island will suit you? If you just want to lie on a beach all day with an occasional splash in a gin-clear lagoon, slurping exotic cocktails and eating what’s put in front of you, it doesn’t matter which island you choose since they all have those ingredients for a good holiday. Choose your island at the airport.

Other amenities will differ. Some islands (although they are becoming fewer as development takes over) offer basic accommodation in thatched cabanas with attached, salt water bathrooms and sand-floored verandahs. Others, such as Kurumba, rival international five-star properties in comfort. Some islands, such as Vadoo, have better diving schools than others; in some the reef for snorkelling is close to the beach while at others it is a long swim away.

Not all the islands are close to the airport. It can take three hours (and US$100) to reach some of them. Male, however, is close to the airport and islands near it are likely to be better served with fresh supplies and thus offer more varied menus. Communications once you’re on an island are the latest; you’ll find fax machines amidst the bougainvillaea and international direct dial telephones m the bedrooms.

If you haven’t got a room booked in advance (essential at peak times such as Christmas) you can choose your island at the airport. There is a tourist information counter at the exit from customs and this is where the hotel representatives congregate to greet new arrivals. These reps have photo albums of the resorts and will answer your questions.

“Guests must tell us what they want,” says Mohamed Arif of Rover Tours, an independent tour operator whose staff meet arrivals at the airport. “Then we can advise them.” The independent operators such as Rover Tours, know which islands have lots of guests, so can direct you there if you want action, and which are quiet and would suit those in search of tranquillity.

Rover Tours can also arrange brief stays on several islands, a boon to independent visitors who don’t want to spend their entire holiday stuck on one atoll. While it is not possible to stay on one of the inhabited “fishing” islands, living with the locals, it

is possible to visit them on organized excursions.

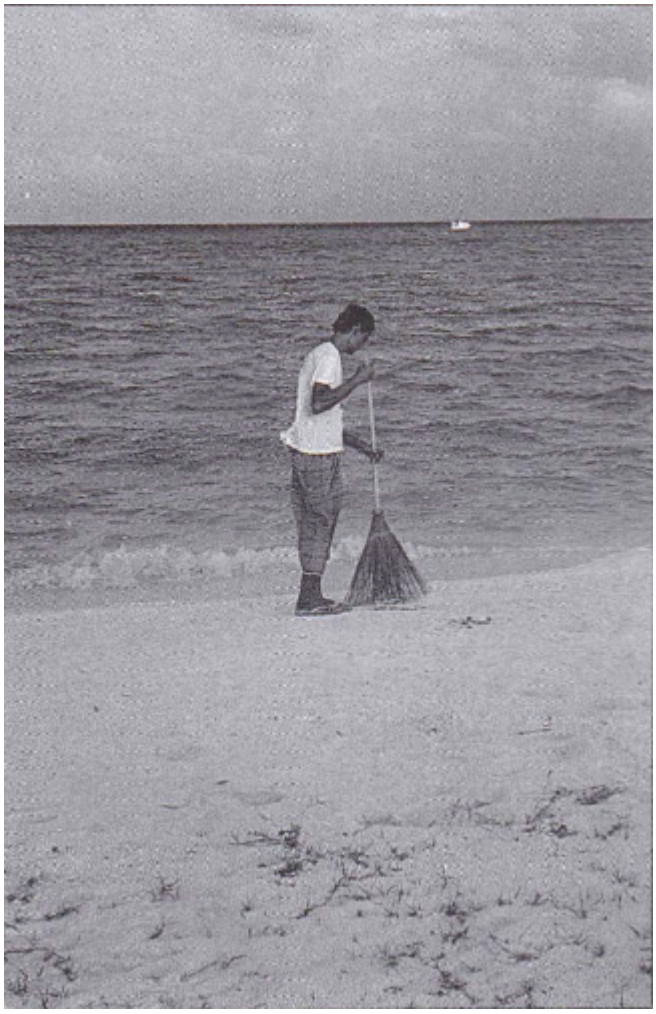


Many islands concentrate on catering for guests of one nationality and have a distinct German, I tali an or French ambience. You can check which ones at the airport. Discounts on regular room rates can be negotiated at the airport. Off season you might be able to stay for as little as US$35 per person per night, full board, but expect to pay at least double that to stay at a popular resort.

Prices depend on supply and demand since there are no regulations governing minimum or maximum charges. You stand a better chance of a good discount during the months of May, June, September and October. July and August can be busy while December and January are the peak months of the winter season which extends from November to April. Year round you'll find an island that's just right for

you.





Keeping the islands clean.



Kurumba village offers the comforts of a tropical suburbia



The coast line of Male, the capital island.