

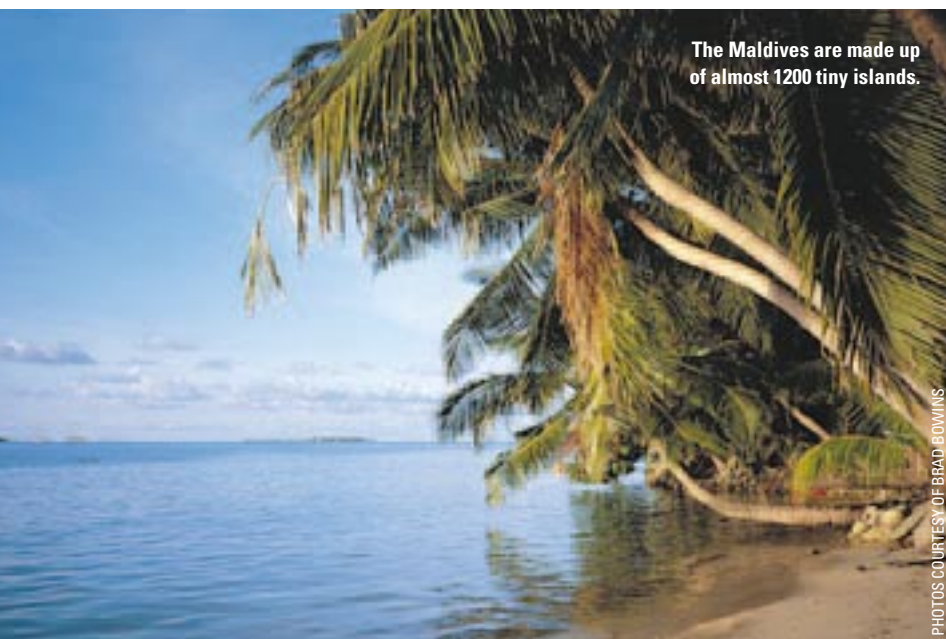
I prescribe a trip to... *the Maldives*

Doctors become
travel writers!

Coral world

An MD explores the underwater beauty of this South Asian nation of islands

by Dr Brad Bowins



The Maldives are made up of almost 1200 tiny islands.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF BRAD BOWINS

Dr Brad Bowins is a psychiatrist working in a private practice and at the University of Toronto Health Service. He began scuba diving when he was 15 and has completed over 1000 dives, most devoted to underwater photography. He has discovered that beyond the stress-reducing benefits of diving, the best sites also happen to be in the most scenic locations in the world, such as the Maldives, Egypt, the South Pacific and Southeast Asia.

The jet passed over the islands, each with a brilliant white circle of sand compressed between a dark green core and a pale ring of turquoise water. I had never seen anything like it. I was 600 kilometres southwest of Sri Lanka in the Maldives, a vast archipelago of miniature islands, protected from the ocean by a barrier reef and clustered into 26 atolls.

Derived from the Maldivian word *atolu*, an atoll is a ring-shaped coral reef formed by the exposed crater of a long-submerged volcano. The Maldives sit atop a 5000-metre-high volcanic mountain range, yet the islands have no natural landmass more than a few metres above sea level, making them one of the low-

est countries on the planet — and one of the first to disappear in the coming decades if the polar ice caps continue to melt.

Since the islands opened to tourism 30 years ago, they have become a magnet as one of the world's best spots for scuba diving and snorkelling. The Maldives are home to over three quarters of the world's reef fish species and both the fringing reefs clinging to the islands and the barrier reef further out contain an amazing range of soft and hard corals. Although many of the latter were damaged by unduly high temperatures brought by El Niño in 1998, regrowth is under way and many of the deeper reefs are well preserved.

SWIMMING WITH SHARKS

A number of yachts ply the waters providing diving excursions ranging from a few days to a couple of weeks. I had come for a 10-day diving safari aboard the *Manthiri*, an excellent ship with air-conditioned cabins, great food and an expert crew who knew the dive sites intimately.

From late April through the end of the summer, when plankton enters the water, larger marine creatures like whale sharks and manta rays are often spotted here. In a single day at Ari Atoll, my dive group encountered seven- to 10-metre whale sharks — an experience every scuba diver dreams of. These grand docile sharks flecked with iridescent blue rings moved effortlessly with small movements of their giant fins as we swam alongside them. They didn't even mind being touched, perhaps they saw us as some new



This photo of an anemone fish took the Toronto Camera Club's top award in the Nature A category.

DIVE IN

While the Maldives is an unusual destination for North American travellers, it's a favourite package getaway for Europeans and charters are available from most large cities. Sri Lankan Airlines has regular flights from major cities, including London and Zurich, which typically go through Colombo, Sri Lanka's capital, giving you an opportunity to visit the country. You can also travel through Singapore, a popular option with US travellers.

There are remarkably few biting insects and mosquitoes — a pleasant surprise — and no malaria. Temperatures remain around 30°C during the day and hover near 25°C at night, with sea temperatures a balmy 27°C.

For a complete listing of international tour operators for charter packages, air travel, hotels and safari boats, contact the **Maldives Tourism Promotion Board** (tel: 011-960-323-228; fax: 011-960-323-229; www.visitmaldives.com).

A stay on the first-class dive safari boat, the Manthiri, can be booked through **Live Well Ventures** (tel: 877-357-0022; www.livewellventures.com) or directly in Malé through **Sea N See** (fax: 011-960-325-633; www.manthiri.com).



These waters are home to three quarters of the world's reef fish species.

breed of cleaning fish. We also encountered manta rays and were mesmerized by these graceful creatures as they glided over the reef.

All the resorts run scuba-diving and snorkelling operations for those who just want a taste of the underwater world. I found the dive operation at Meeru Island Resort, where I stayed for a few days, professional and well organized. The *dhonis* they used worked well for short excursions to dive sites and provided plenty of room for passengers to gear up for a dive or relax afterwards.

VIKINGS IN SOUTH ASIA?

Any vacation in the Maldives is intimately tied to the water. Arriving at the airport — also located on its own island — guests travel to their chosen resort by *dhoni*, a long traditional boat made from the wood of coconut palms. With their distinctive Viking-like bows, *dhonis* are seen throughout the Maldives ferrying passengers and

Resorts are confined to uninhabited islands and cannot cover more than 20 percent of the land

cargo. Once powered by sail, today they run on diesel engines but are still steered in the traditional fashion with the driver's foot on the tiller.

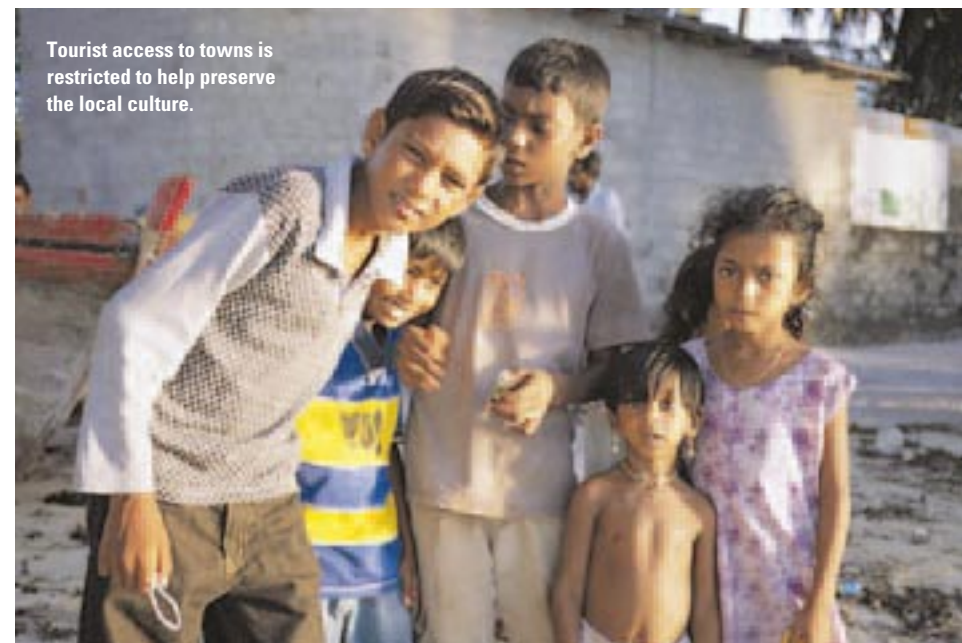
Most of the resort islands are located in either North or South Malé Atoll, close enough for *dhoni* travel. Resorts in more distant locations, such as Ari Atoll, are usually reached by seaplane which has the advantage of providing spectacular views of the islands and reefs.

Of the almost 1200 islands that comprise the Maldives, 200 are inhabited by Maldivians and another 90 or so have been developed, each by a single resort. In line with its commitment to sustainable development, the government ensures that resorts don't cover more than 20 percent of the island or exceed the height of the surrounding vegetation. They can be hard to see from the deck of a passing boat; often only guest rooms built over the water on stilts are visible.

Since few of the islands are more than one to two kilometres long or wide, hotels tend to be fairly small, giving you the sense that you are sharing your own island with a few other guests. Ranging from intimate and romantic properties to larger ones, like Club Med and Meeru Island Resort, there is an option for everyone.

Even though the Maldives is a Muslim country, hotels serve alcohol and skimpy bathing wear is completely acceptable. Locals say that their religion is Islam, but their culture is Maldivian. The combination gives rise to such unusual scenes as Muslim men in sombreros serving Tequila shooters from hip holsters. At my hotel, the pleasant and highly professional staff were very tolerant of inebriated guests, managing them with the locals' characteristic politeness.

Most resorts offer windsurfing, sailing and water-skiing, in addition to the usual relaxing pursuits — massages and lounging on comfortable balconies.



Tourist access to towns is restricted to help preserve the local culture.

More unique activities include visits to deserted islands, cultural excursions to Maldivian towns — which are only open to visitors through tours, in order to limit their impact on the traditional Muslim communities — and a visit to the capital, Malé (pronounced Mah-lay).

TIGHT SQUEEZE

In contrast to the openness of the Indian Ocean and the spaciousness of most resort islands, the one-by-two-kilometre capital is bursting at the seams. Land reclamation has extended it to the edges of a man-made sea barrier, and the only way the city can grow now is vertically. About a third of the 300,000 or so Maldivians live in this almost impossibly small area. However, despite its population density it remains clean, charming and offers some interesting sites. Perhaps the most unique of these is the combined Islamic Centre and Grand Friday Mosque, which dominates the skyline with its gold dome (actually oxidized aluminum) glinting in the sun and dazzling white staircase and walls. The main prayer hall accommo-

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QUESTION 2

Copenhagen's Nyhavn Canal was used for centuries to...



Grand docile whale sharks, flecked with iridescent blue rings, moved effortlessly alongside us


dates 5000 people and can be visited outside of prayer hours.

The Theemuge, or Presidential Palace, is an example of the distinctive Maldivian building style of rounded edges. For a much older site, stop at Hukuru Miskiiy, a mosque built in 1656. Inside, a 13th-

century wood panel commemorates the introduction of Islam to the islands.

At the vegetable and fish markets an amazing array of produce can be seen and purchased. Malé also has its fair share of tourist shops, mostly selling cheap goods imported from India,

though some Maldivian products — primarily mats and paintings — can be had for reasonable prices.

Many people visit Malé as a day tour from their resort island, but a one-night stay provides a better opportunity to see this unique capital. There is a good range of affordable hotels in the city. It is best to book a stay here at the end of your trip, as transfers to resorts take place when flights arrive and it can be expensive to book independent transportation. The real advantage of a short stay in Malé before heading home is to ease yourself out of the serene spell cast by the island resorts and open ocean, so that a return to urban life isn't too harsh. 

The Grand Friday Mosque's main prayer hall can hold 5000.



Bowins toured the islands on a 10-day dive safari.

