



**PROTECTING MOTHER NATURE'S  
HOLIDAY HOME**

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How does one describe paradise in two words?

Pure beauty? Perhaps.

Idyllic environment? Indeed.

Untouched awe?

Ocean oasis?

Lingering luxury?

Coral kingdom?

Palm-shaded playground?

Tropical tranquility?

All of the above apply. But how best to capture the sense of “*oh my goodness....*” natural wonder?

There’s only one answer that really brings it to life. Two little words representing one of the most exceptional places on Earth: The Maldives.

Technically speaking, this small (the smallest) Asian nation is in fact a collection of an estimated 2000 islands - an archipelago. A perfect tropical cocktail of untouched beaches, warm breezes, crystal clear waters and wonderful local culture, the Maldives has emerged in a small amount of time to become one of the desirable of destinations across the globe. Honeymooners dream of it. Divers love it. Photographers celebrate it. Investors seek it. Tourism thought leaders model it. Mother Nature boasts about it. And Maldivians treasure it.

Yet at the same time, environmentalists study it and conservationists pray for it.

An island nation with an economic and social backbone based on tourism, the Maldives has become a case study in sustainable tourism growth.

Once assessed by external development assessment teams to be lacking of any real prospects in terms of tourism sector development as recently as the late 1960s (as a result of the complete absence of essential infrastructure – airports, electrification, trade), the fate of the Maldives was changed when serendipity eclipsed strategy. An unexpected meeting in Colombo, Sri Lanka, between Italian adventurer, George Corbin, and neighbouring Maldivian, Ahmed Naseem, saw the aspirations of the island nation turn from despair into desire.

From the first arrival of paying guests in 1972, with more and more travellers of the world discovering this Asian island paradise, the tourism sector has seen inspired and inspiring growth. As of the end of Q1/2015, the destination is proud to have on offer a rich mix of accommodations across the islands, ranging from resorts and hotels to guest houses and sea safari vessels, generating a cross-destination capacity of just over 32,000 beds for travellers staying an average of 6 nights.

With such inspiring tourism infrastructure having been brought to life in just over 40 years, and a pipeline of new developments well in place, the profound impact of the sector cannot be overstated. Today tourism is an industry representing over 94% of GDP and 86.7% of total national employment. Not to mention almost 25% of government investment.

By 2024, it is estimated that the growth of the sector will take employment up to over 89% for the nation, with GDP growing by over 4%.

### NO TIME FOR ISLAND TIME

Despite the very high, and increasingly steady tourism numbers, the leadership of the tourism sector in the Maldives, and the President himself, are unwilling to take any island, or any tourist, for granted. Time is of the essence. Action is imperative.

For as much as Mother Nature has blessed the people of Maldives with one of the most breathtaking places on Earth, environmental challenges are threatening to cut off the islands' ability to continue breathing. The impacts of climate change are proving a high threat to the archipelago. And with that, its essential tourism industry.

For this reason, in addition to a number of critical environmental protection and dedicated eco-tourism projects taking place across the Maldives, many championed by the World Bank through its Maldives Environmental Management Project, the nation's tourism leadership recently took on the challenge of achieving unprecedented growth in international arrivals.

Their approach: launch of “*Visit Maldives Year 2016*”, officially unveiled by HE Abdulla Yameen Abdul Gayoom, President of the Republic of Maldives, at the 27th Joint Meeting of the UNWTO Commission for East Asia and Pacific (CAP) and the UNWTO Commission for South Asia (CSA) & UNWTO Regional Ministerial Conference, held in the Maldives over the period of June 3rd and 4th, 2015.

Enjoying over 1.2 million international arrivals in 2014, representing a rate of growth of over 7% versus prior year (source: UNWTO Barometer), HE the President of the Maldives announced at the same time a target of 1.5 million international tourists to the nation, representing an annual rate of growth of 23%.

Importantly, as expressed by the President:

*“As a net importing country, the Maldives relies heavily on the influx of tourists for foreign exchange and is an important balance to the outflow in monetary terms by its residents. Furthermore, tourism also creates a platform for boosting domestic consumption. Tourism has taught Maldivians the art of living together in a globalized and fast-evolving world. We have ensured that, contrary to the common misconception, tourism can coexist with the age-old customs, values and traditions of a country. When we look at the traditional sectors such as the handicrafts and lacquerware, one of the overarching reasons for their revival in a continuously changing landscape is the growth of tourism, and the market that has presented itself as a result of nearly one and a half million holidaymakers choosing Maldives.”*

But how will such dramatic growth be achieved? Focus, source market strategy, and tireless promotion.

### GOVERNMENT, INDUSTRY AND ENVIRONMENT ACTING AS ONE

The launch timing of the new “*Visit Maldives Year 2016*” initiative for Maldives is positioned as an immediate follow-on to an important milestone in the island nation's life: 50 years of Independence.

As stated by HE the President of the Maldives when addressing the UNWTO Asia and the Pacific Ministerial Conference,:

*“As we celebrate our Golden Jubilee of Independence next month and proudly share with our friends and partners the catalogue of success stories in our post-independence*

*contemporary history, tourism will indeed take pride of place as the engine of our phenomenal growth. We have indeed proven all the doubters to be wrong. Today, our award winning tourism products have placed us at the very helm of tourism worldwide.”*

To accelerate tourism sector momentum into the next 50 years, the man at the helm of the Tourism Ministry, the Hon. Ahmed Adeb, has developed a continuous line-up of activations for “*Visit Maldives Year 2016*”, showcasing the diverse portfolio of tourism offerings. Tapping into both established and growing source markets, along with embedded and emerging niches of tourism experience, the destination has developed a calendar of continuous, highly compelling reasons to visit, and revisit, the Maldives in 2016. <http://visitmaldives.com/vmy/>

As impressive and inspiring as the destination marketing and product development efforts of the Ministry of Tourism are, what is exemplary is the absolute cohesion that exists between the nation’s highest office, that of the President, and the Tourism sector, led by the Minister of Tourism. The acute awareness of the critical role of the tourism sector in driving the national agenda is unique. And clearly, it works.

As expressed by HE Abdulla Yameen Abdul Gayoom, President of the Republic of Maldives,:

*“Tourism has become an important policy tool dedicated to the change, development and reconstruction of the social and physical environment of our country.”*

With the ability of the tourism sector to not only promote the economic and social growth of the Maldives, but also preserve and protect the islands’ pristine natural environments, both holidaymakers and Mother Nature are so very grateful.

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