

# Maldives



## KEY FACTS

Joined Commonwealth:	1982
Population:	309,000 (2009)
GDP p.c. growth:	5.9% p.a. 1990–2009
UN HDI 2010:	world ranking 107
Official language:	Dhivehi
Time:	GMT plus 5hr
Currency:	Maldivian rufiyaa (MRF)

## Geography

Area:	298 sq km
Coastline:	644km
Capital:	Malé

The Republic of Maldives lies in the Indian Ocean, some 670km west-south-west of Sri Lanka. The 1,190 coral islands, 200 of which are inhabited, occur on a double chain of 26 coral atolls. The archipelago is 823km long and 130km at its widest.

The islands are divided into 20 administrative units, called atolls (although they do not necessarily correspond to geographical atolls). Each is known by a letter in the Maldivian alphabet in addition to its geographical name. Huvadhu Atoll, for example, is divided into two administrative units: Gaaf Alif and Gaaf Dhaal.

**Area:** While the land area is only an estimated 298 sq km, the country's total area of land and sea is some 90,000 sq km.

**Main towns:** Malé (capital, on Malé Atoll, pop. 118,200 in 2009) is the only sizeable town; other settlements are Hithadhoo (Siin, 9,500), Foammulah (Ghaviyani, 7,700), Kulhudhuffushi (Haa Dhaal, 7,300), Thinadhoo (Gaaf Dhaal, 4,300), Ugufaaruu (Raa, 4,000) and Naifaruu (Lhaviyani, 3,700), where the administrative units are in the brackets.

**Topography:** Huvadhu Atoll to the south is the largest true atoll formation in the world and has a lagoon of 2,240 sq km. Most of the islands are very small and rise no higher than 2m above sea level. The islands are surrounded by coral reefs but some, especially those furthest from the windward reefs, are liable to erosion. Some islands are additionally protected by breakwaters. The capital, Malé, is only 1.8 sq km. There is a land reclamation project on Malé Atoll. Distinctive features of Maldives are its white beaches and crystal clear lagoons. There are no hills, mountains or rivers.

One of the most violent earthquakes ever recorded occurred on 26 December 2004 in the Indian Ocean west of Sumatra and generated a tsunami that devastated the islands, causing about 100 deaths.

## did you know?

Maldives is an archipelago in the Indian Ocean, comprising 1,190 coral islands (200 inhabited), on a double chain of 26 coral atolls; none of the islands rise higher than 2m above sea level.

Following the devastating tsunami of December 2004, the Commonwealth Secretariat arranged for deployment of 24 medical volunteers to serve in the islands for periods of up to 15 months.

**Climate:** Maldives has a hot tropical climate. The rainy south-west monsoon season is from April to October; the north-east monsoon from December to March. Average annual rainfall is 1,654mm. The temperature ranges between 25°C and 30°C, but generally stays around the average 27°C. Gales occur during the monsoon. In May 1991, abnormal tidal waters caused great damage through the archipelago.

**Environment:** The most significant issues are: depletion of freshwater aquifers threatening water supplies; global warming and sea level rise; and coral reef bleaching.

**Vegetation:** There is dense growth of coconut palms, breadfruit, screwpines and lesser vegetation on many islands although the soil lacks nutrients. Forest covers some 3% of the land area.

**Wildlife:** Coral reefs support an abundance of marine life. There are over 200 species of coral and over 1,000 species of fish, from the tiny fire goby to the harmless plankton-eating whale shark which can reach 12m in length. On land there are breeding colonies of frigatebirds and noddies, which local fishermen follow to find schools of tuna.

**Transport:** Few of the islands take longer than 30 minutes to cross on foot. Motor scooters are the favoured method of mechanical transport on Malé. There are a total of 88km of paved road.

There are boat and seaplane services between islands during daylight hours. Boat services include traditional small (motor-powered) boats called dhonis and speed boats. With the increase in tourism, glass-bottomed boats for viewing coral reef and marine life, and vessels for fishing trips, diving and other water sports transport, have become common.

Malé International Airport is on the island of Hulhule, 2km from the capital; there is a frequent boat service linking airport and capital. The national airline operates regular services to airstrips in the outer atolls. Seaplanes and helicopters are also used to transfer tourists to resorts.

## Society

### KEY FACTS 2009

Population per sq km: 1,037  
 Life expectancy: 72 years  
 Net primary enrolment: 96%

**Population:** 309,000 (2009); 39% lives in urban areas, mostly in Malé, which was in the mid-1990s doubled in area by land reclamation; growth 1.6% p.a. 1990–2009; birth rate 19 per 1,000 people (40 in 1970); life expectancy 72 years (50 in 1970).

**Language:** The national language is Dhivehi, which has been most strongly influenced by Sinhala and Arabic. English is widely spoken.

**Religion:** Predominantly Sunni Muslims; Islam is the state religion.

**Media:** The leading Dhivehi dailies are *Aafathis*, *Haveeru* and *Miadh*, which post daily online news bulletins in English.

Voice of Maldives radio and Television Maldives are public networks; there are a growing number of private radio and TV providers.

There are 202 personal computers (2006) and 279 internet users (2009) per 1,000 people.

**Education:** Public spending on education was 8.1% of GDP in 2008. There are 12 years of school starting at age six, comprising five years of primary, and seven of secondary, in cycles of five and two years. All administrative atolls have government primary schools and an education centre providing education for all age groups. Most of the many private schools receive state subsidies and are run by the community. The school year starts in January.

There are three streams of Maldivian education: traditional religious schools (makhtabs and madrassas), which teach the Qur'an, basic arithmetic, and the ability to read and write Dhivehi; modern Dhivehi-language primary schools; and modern English-language schools, which follow the British system of education.

Maldives College of Higher Education (with its main campus in Malé) provides post-secondary education leading to diplomas and bachelor's degrees. There is an Institute for Islamic Studies, also in Malé, and pre-university education is provided at the Science Education Centre in Malé. A state scholarship scheme funds tertiary education abroad. Vocational training is available in health sciences, teaching, and hotel and catering skills. Literacy among people aged 15–24 is 99% (2008).

**Health:** 91% of the population uses an improved drinking water source and 98% have access to adequate sanitation facilities (2009). Infant mortality was 11 per 1,000 live births in 2009 (180 in 1960). Malaria has been practically eradicated and diarrhoeal diseases have been considerably reduced.

**Communications:** Country code 960; internet domain '.mv'. There are public phones and post offices on most of the islands. Mobile phone coverage and internet access is good.

There are 158 main telephone lines and 1,479 mobile phone subscriptions per 1,000 people (2009).

**Public holidays:** New Year's Day, National Day (26 February), The Day Maldives Embraced Islam (29 March), Independence Day (26 July, usually celebrated over two days), Victory Day (3 November) and Republic Day (11 November).

The opening day of the Citizens' Majlis (announced by the Majlis each year) is also a public holiday and the weekend is Friday–Saturday.

Religious festivals whose dates vary from year to year include Prophet's Birthday, First Day of Ramadan, Eid al-Fitr (End of Ramadan, three days), Hajj Day, Eid al-Adha (Feast of the Sacrifice, three days) and Islamic New Year.

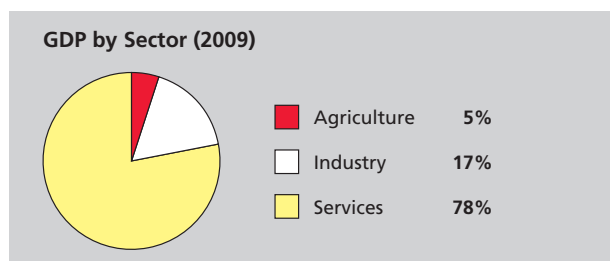
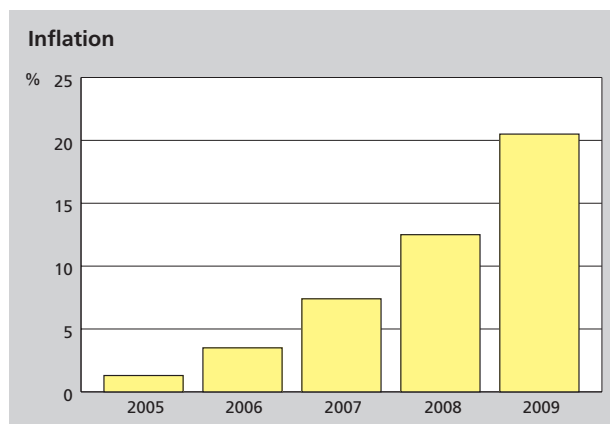
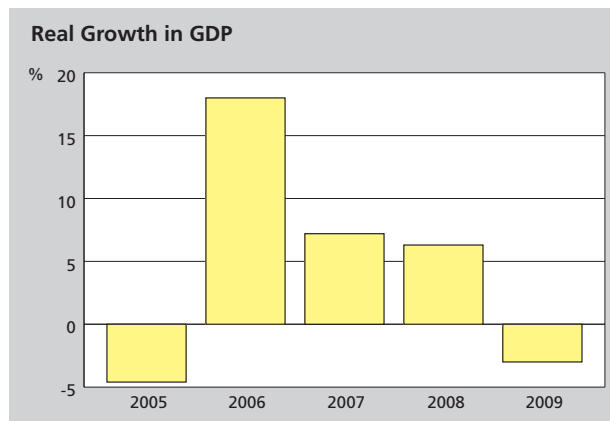
## Economy

### KEY FACTS 2009

GNI:	US\$1.2bn
GNI p.c.:	US\$3,970
GDP growth:	4.5% p.a. 2005–09
Inflation:	8.8% p.a. 2005–09

**Overview:** Maldives is disadvantaged by its small size, the thin scattering of human settlement across atolls spread over hundreds of kilometres of ocean, its distance from centres of economic activity, and the poverty of its coralline soils.

The country has benefited from the support of wealthy Muslim countries, but its steady progress is attributed mainly to its social



and economic stability. Since the late 1980s, economic policies combine a liberal economic and investment regime – focused on tourism, fishing, and a growing manufacturing sector – with well-directed social expenditure on education, health and providing essential social infrastructure to the outer islands.

The country does, however, face longer-term constraints through erosion of the friable coral rock of which the islands are built, caused by construction and population pressure. Climate change resulting in rising sea level and greater climatic instability also gives cause for concern as the country is very low-lying.

Nonetheless, it has achieved high and steady rates of growth with low inflation over a relatively long period, based mainly on tourism. GDP grew by 7.8% p.a. 1989–99. In the 2000s, initially growth slowed in response to the international climate, but picked up again in 2002, becoming strong in 2002–04. However, economic infrastructure throughout the country was then devastated by the massive tsunami in late December 2004 and the economy shrank by 4.6% in 2005. Post-tsunami rebuilding and a rebound in

tourism spurred a remarkable recovery with GDP growth of 18.0% in 2006, 7.2% in 2007 and 6.3% in 2008. But the impact of the world economic downturn on long-haul tourism caused the economy to contract in 2009 (–3.0%).

**Trade:** By far the most significant export is fish products (mainly canned fish and frozen skipjack tuna), followed by clothing.

## Constitution

**Status:** Republic with executive president  
**Legislature:** People's Majlis

The 2008 constitution provides for an executive president and a legislature, the People's Majlis, both elected directly every five years by universal suffrage. A president can serve for a maximum of two terms of office. The Majlis comprises two elected members from each of the 20 administrative atolls and Malé. Where the residents registered in an administrative atoll exceed 5,000, one additional member is provided for each group of 5,000 in excess of the first 5,000. All elections are run on a multiparty platform. The constitution provides for an independent judiciary where judicial power is vested in the courts with the Supreme Court as the court of last resort.

Basic rights and freedoms, including freedom of the media, of assembly and of association, are guaranteed as fundamental rights. Freedom of expression is guaranteed so long as such expression is not contrary to any tenet of Islam.

Separate independent commissions and offices are mandated to defend judicial independence; conduct elections; prevent and combat corruption; promote human rights; and ensure an effective and efficient civil service.

## Politics

**Last elections:** October 2008 (presidential),  
 May 2009 (parliamentary)  
**Next elections:** 2013 (presidential),  
 2014 (parliamentary)  
**Head of state:** President Dr Mohamed Waheed  
**Head of government:** the president  
**Ruling party:** National Unity Government

President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom was elected for a sixth term by the Majlis and was confirmed in his sixth term as president at the referendum in October 2003 receiving 90% of the votes. In June 2004, Gayoom announced proposals for wide-ranging constitutional reforms including a multiparty system and a directly elected president.

The general election in January 2005, observed by a Commonwealth expert team, was to be the last before political parties were allowed in June 2005. The main parties to emerge were Dhivehi Ra'iyyithunge Party (DRP), led by the president, Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP), Adalath (Justice) Party, and Islamic Democratic Party. In March 2006 the government published its 'Roadmap for the Reform Agenda', which provided for the first multiparty elections to be held in 2008.

In a constitutional referendum in August 2007, turnout was 77% and 62% of votes were cast for a presidential system as proposed by Gayoom's DRP rather than a 'Westminster' parliamentary system

advocated by the opposition MDP. The new constitution, which reduced presidential powers while strengthening the Majlis and the judiciary, was ratified in August 2008.

The first multiparty presidential elections were held in October 2008 and turnout was 86%. Gayoom received 40.3% of votes, Mohamed Nasheed (MDP) 24.9%, Hassan Saeed (independent) 16.7% and Qasim Ibrahim (Republican Party) 15.2%. Nasheed defeated Gayoom in the run-off in late October 2008 receiving 54.2% of the votes cast – turnout was 87% – and Nasheed was sworn in as president on 11 November 2008. On 22 November, Ibrahim Nasir whom Gayoom had succeeded as president in 1978 died.

The first multiparty parliamentary elections followed in May 2009. It was a close contest in which the DRP won the most seats (28 seats and 37% of votes); the president's MDP took 25 (33%), independents 13 (17%) and the People's Alliance seven (9%). The first multiparty local elections were held on 5 February 2011.

Commonwealth observers were present at the 2008 presidential, the 2009 parliamentary and the 2011 local elections.

On 7 February 2012, in circumstances that remain unclear, President Nasheed tendered his resignation. His vice-president, Dr Mohamed Waheed, was sworn in as president. Former President Nasheed asserted that his resignation was tendered under duress from the military. The Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG) sent a ministerial mission to Maldives 18–20 February 2012. At an extraordinary meeting on 22 February, CMAG put Maldives on its agenda and Maldives' membership of CMAG in abeyance. In March 2012 Commonwealth Secretary-General Kamalesh Sharma

appointed Sir Donald McKinnon, former Commonwealth Secretary-General, as his Special Envoy to Maldives.

## International relations

Maldives is a member of the Non-Aligned Movement, Organisation of the Islamic Conference, South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, United Nations and World Trade Organization.

## Traveller information

**Local laws and conventions:** Violation of local laws can lead to imprisonment. Visitors will need to respect local customs and sensitivities at all times, especially during the month of Ramadan or when visiting religious sites.

Penalties for all drug offences are severe.

Dress is informal but modest and the wearing of beachwear must be restricted to resort islands only. Handshaking is the most common form of greeting. English is normally used for business and in the commercial sector. Most business is conducted in the morning, by appointment made well in advance. Office hours are Sun–Thur 0730–1430. Friday and Saturday are official rest days.

**Immigration and customs:** Tourist visas for up to 30 days are available on arrival provided visitors have a valid passport, hold an onward ticket and have enough funds to cover their stay.

All those travelling from infected areas require a yellow fever vaccination certificate.



## History

Archaeological finds reveal that the islands were inhabited as early as 1500 BC. The first settlers arrived around 500 BC and are thought to have been Aryans. In the pre-Islamic period (before AD 1153), according to the accounts of Persian and Arab travellers, the Maldives was ruled by women. After that date, only four queens ruled, the last one in the early 16th century.

Contact with Arab travellers paved the way for the Maldives to adopt the religion of Islam, which gradually replaced Buddhism. In 1153–54, King Dovemi Kalaminja officially accepted Islam.

Although the Maldives voluntarily accepted a period of British protection, the country has been an independent state throughout its known history, except for a very brief period (15 years) of Portuguese occupation in the 16th century and an even briefer three months and 20 days of Mopla (south Indian) rule in the mid-18th century. The Maldivian militia (controlled by the Sultan) defended the country and its independence against incursions by stronger powers. Since the country's conversion to Islam, its history can be traced through a number of dynasties, ruled by 93 Sultans and Sultanas, whose laws were only acknowledged when exercised for the benefit of the people. Otherwise, the ruler, who was advised by councillors, could be dethroned.

The period of the British protectorate began in 1887. The Sultan remained head of state. There was no British governor or

representative and Britain did not interfere in the country's internal affairs, confining its interest to foreign affairs and defence. The Maldivian sultanate became elective after 1932.

The country briefly became a republic in 1953–54, but was again a sultanate at the time it terminated the arrangement with the UK in 1965. Following a public referendum in April 1968, the sultanate was abolished and the Maldives was again declared a republic. Ibrahim Nasir, who had been prime minister since 1954, then became president.

The recent history of Maldives has been characterised by stability, growth and gradual adjustment to a modern economy. The only interruption to this steady progress was an attempted coup in late 1988, involving an attempted invasion. This was quickly put down with the aid of Indian troops. In the early 1990s, President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom devolved some presidential powers, introduced other reforms and established an anti-corruption board.

Maldives, which has traditionally been reliant on Sri Lanka for imports and many of its communication links, has become more self-reliant through the development of the international airport, enabling it to accommodate long-distance flights. While the relationship with Sri Lanka remains very important, the government has also endeavoured to improve political and economic relations with India.

It is an offence to import explosives, weapons, firearms, ammunition, pornography, material deemed contrary to Islam, including 'idols' for worship, bibles, pork, pork products and alcohol. The export of tortoiseshell and coral is strictly forbidden.

**Travel within the country:** Traffic drives on the left. A valid international driving permit is required for driving in Maldives. Car hire is available in Malé, though most islands take only around half an hour to cross on foot.

Domestic airline Island Aviation Services runs flights between the major islands, and a number of companies operate seaplane and helicopter services. The main form of local transport is the dhoni, a traditional motor-powered boat; larger boats, called vedis, are used for longer trips to outer atolls. Visitors should note that many services cease before sunset.

Malé and some other islands offer taxi services. Maldivian taxis have a fixed fee whatever the distance.

Tourism is strictly regulated, and independent travel is discouraged because it is seen as disruptive to traditional island communities. Those wishing to visit the islands outside the tourist zone will need an Inter Atoll Travel Permit, and the Ministry of Atolls Administration will only issue them to those whose visit is sponsored by a resident of the island concerned.

**Travel health:** Visitors should ensure they have comprehensive health insurance that includes air evacuation. Medical facilities are limited and although most islands are within easy reach of a general physician, many are far from the hospital on Malé. Dengue fever can occur on the islands, and visitors are advised to take a supply of insect repellent and cover up with suitable clothing to avoid being bitten by mosquitoes. Protection should also be taken against both sunburn and dehydration.

Water in tourist areas is generally safe to drink, but if there is any doubt, water should be boiled before use.

**Money:** Local currency is the rufiyaa (1 rufiyaa = 100 laarees). Island resorts can be costly and visitors should bring sufficient funds for their visit. There are no cash machines, and travellers cheques are not widely accepted. Major credit cards can be used at most resorts, and US dollars can be exchanged at airports, banks and hotels. Banking hours are Sun–Thur 0730–1430.

There were 656,000 tourist arrivals in 2009.

## Further information

The President's Office, Republic of Maldives:  
[www.presidencymaldives.gov.mv](http://www.presidencymaldives.gov.mv)

Commonwealth Secretariat: [www.thecommonwealth.org](http://www.thecommonwealth.org)

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