



Indian Ocean

Explore the Maldives like a backpacker

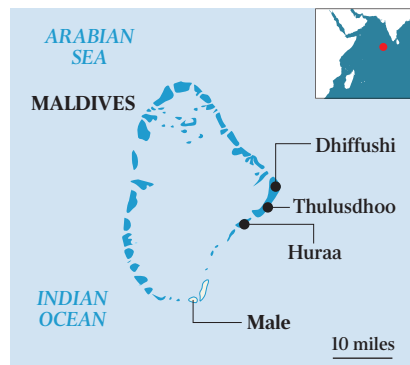
Ellie Ross takes ferries between the archipelago's islands, staying in small guesthouses that serve local delicacies

I am floating in startling turquoise water, raked by shafts of sunlight, staring into the eyes of a hawksbill turtle. Our gazes lock for a moment and the only sound is my deep, metronomic breathing. Then, he's gone, diving down towards the coral, disappearing into the dark blue below.

So begins my first snorkelling experience in the Maldives. Within seconds of slipping over the side of the boat into the warm sea near Dhiffushi, I'm surrounded by the cast of *Finding Nemo*: Moorish idols with their mohican-looking fins, longnose butterflyfish and clown triggerfish with polka-dot bellies. A spotted eagle ray glides by, breathtakingly close.

Swimming with such an abundance of marine life is a first-class experience, yet I'm on a trip that costs just a fraction of the price of the traditional resort-style holiday to the Maldives.

I have joined a new, eight-day Maldives island-hopping tour, a group of 16 people



ranging in age from late teens to mid sixties. Until 2009, tourists travelling to the country's 1,200 islands, strung out like pearls across the Indian Ocean, were restricted to the 100 or so luxury resorts. The reason for this was that officials feared alcohol-consuming, bikini-wearing westerners might spoil the Islamic way of life. But in the past decade inhabited islands have been opened to tourism, with locals permitted to run their own guesthouses. Travellers no longer have to stay beside their infinity pool in resorts, separated from the local population. Now, they can hop between islands — and on a shoe-string budget.

From Male, the pint-sized, densely packed capital, our route will take us to three other islands in the North Male atoll: Dhiffushi, Thulusdhoo and Huraa. Traveling by local ferry (included in the price of the tour), the longest stint will take just over three hours, from Male to Dhiffushi, 23 miles northeast of the capital. The

national ferry network, established in 2010, connects all the inhabited islands regularly and cheaply, with journeys within an atoll costing just Rf20 (£1). It's a marked contrast to taking a seaplane transfer, which — although faster and flashier — usually costs between \$250-£450 (£200-£360) return.

Stepping on to the sturdy *dhoni* (boat) in Male, I notice that we are the only non-Maldivians on board. Locals with shopping bags at their feet doze on the blue seating or chat to barefoot crew who steer us towards Dhiffushi. With the constant hum of the engine, it's a bumpy journey through the waves, and rather slow — yet I am starting to enjoy this relaxed pace.

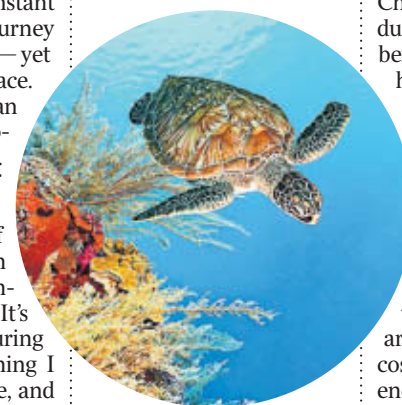
Guiding us between islands is Dan Ibrahim, a 25-year-old marine biologist and diving instructor from Male. Dan has worked on turtle and reef conservation projects around the country and is a constant source of knowledge about the sea. His passion for the ocean and its marine life is infectious. "The ocean is my home. It's where I'm meant to be," he says during the journey. "If I didn't do everything I could to learn more about my home, and how to care for it, that would be a waste."

We arrive in Dhiffushi harbour as a tropical sun bleeds into the horizon. A fisherman hauls in his catch and children play football in a square near by. This small fishing island is home to about 1,000 people, with just a handful of guesthouses. Ours, Rashu Hiyya, is a modest set-up with clean, spacious rooms and sea-facing terrace. It is owned by Saddam Badheeu, who left his office job four years ago to run it with his two brothers and sister.

That evening Saddam arranges a dance and drum performance, known as *bodu beru*, which means "big drum" in Dhivehi. These traditional all-male performances have strong African influences — until the mid 19th-century, African slaves were bought by sultans on pilgrimages and freed on return to the Maldives. This is one of their cultural traditions that took root. As six drummers beat, a dancer sways his arms, becoming faster as the tempo increases and pulling up members of the audience. By the end, almost all of us are dancing in the moonlight.

Dhiffushi is also packed with water-sports. As well as our two-hour snorkelling tour with my turtle encounter, there's free time to explore or try other activities, such as kayaking, paddleboarding, sailing, jet skiing and fishing. I spend a couple of hours windsurfing, which costs \$15 for kit hire, and attracts a crowd of locals, includ-

Thulusdhoo Island, in the North Male Atoll, and, inset below, a hawksbill turtle



Need to know

Ellie Ross was a guest of G Adventures (020 7313 6944, gadventures.com), which has eight-day Maldives island-hopping tours from £649pp, including seven nights' B&B accommodation, two dinners, snorkelling, kayaking and fishing excursions, and a guide throughout. Evening meals can be bought for less than £10. British Airways flies from London to Male from £817pp return (from October to March)

ing some of the bodu beru performers and the island's imam. This kind of mingling between westerners and Maldivians would have been virtually unheard of a decade ago.

The next day, we're bound for a new island. Thulusdhoo has a laid-back vibe, with colourful houses and ancient banyan trees that were once used as lighthouses (sailors could tell islands apart by the tree's shape and location). It also has more westerners than Dhiffushi, lured by the island's two excellent surf breaks, which are called Chickens and Cokes. The waves are best during monsoon season (May to November) when tanned surfers with bleached hair descend. I leave them to the experts and watch from an *undholi* (swing chair) with a fresh papaya juice.

Although most people come to Thulusdhoo to surf, we have a cultural evening in store. We're off to Nuha Firaq's house, to try her homemade *hedhikaa* — small savoury and sweet bites accompanied by black tea. Traditionally these are eaten in teashops and are an affordable way to fill up (each item costs from 20p to 50p). Nuha makes enough for the whole island and sells them in her small shop. At a long table in her front room, we tuck into platters of tuna rice balls, flavoured with chilli and coconut, samosa-like morsels and sweetened condensed milk cake.

Another day, another culinary adventure. A 45-minute hop by ferry and we're in Huraa, where staff from Sea Shine Guest House greet us with fresh coconuts to drink. I check in to my sea-view room, then follow Dan past the island's mangroves — essential as a nursery for the ecosystem and for preventing island erosion.

We reach a beachside shack with smoke billowing from a chimney. This is where tuna is dried and smoked and boiled down into a paste known as *rihakarau*. I stir a pot of fish heads, then taste some of the finished product. It's a bit like Marmite, more salty than fishy, and is thick like treacle. Dan explains that this delicacy is often used to add flavour to rice.

A ten-minute walk away lies a typical Maldivian scene: sugar-soft sand, gloriously clear water and a swing rising out of the jade-green sea. I snorkel out to the swing and clamber on, watching fish slink about my toes. Later, I amble back towards the harbour for a refreshing mocktail at Blue Terrace. From the veranda, I watch as the sun sets in a blaze of orange and pink to match my drink. It's a magnificent sight to round off the trip — and one that doesn't cost a penny.