



Fellows Broadsheet

The Institute of Hospitality Fellows Broadsheet is a monthly thought-leadership article written by a member of our esteemed College of Fellows. Celebrating the wealth of professionalism, knowledge and expertise within our diverse, worldwide hospitality family. The Fellows Broadsheet is published on the first Sunday of every month, exclusively for members.

The Maldives: Islands of hospitality

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Currently Director of Human Resources for Dhigali Maldives, his work in the luxury hospitality sector includes experience at properties in the South Pacific, India, and Indian Ocean.

In this edition of the Fellows Broadsheet: The Maldives: Islands of hospitality, Syed focuses on life and challenges for staff working on an island resort in the Indian Ocean.

Golden Era

2022 marked the 50th Golden Anniversary of the Maldives tourism industry. Considered to be the most sought-after tourism destination in the world, the Maldives is a small island nation comprising 1192 islands, stretching 871 kms in length across the Indian Ocean. With only 168 islands operating as private resort islands.

The Maldives hosted the first group of tourists to its shores in 1972. At that stage they arrived at Kurumba village, now known as Kurumba Maldives resort. Since then the One-island-One-resort concept began to evolve and soon became synonymous with the Maldives as a tourist destination.





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Island life

Until the mid-90s, the Maldives resorts were mostly staffed by the Maldivians, who, by nature are very hospitable people, having immense pride in their rich culture.

In those days, the life of workers on a remote island resort were extremely tough. There was no air conditioning in the staff rooms, no option to enjoy a hot shower at the end of a tiring day and cafeterias provided only limited choices of local foods.

Alongside the friendliness and dedication of those local resort workers and the vision of the resort owners, the islands were quickly secured as a formidable luxury destination on the world's tourist map.

This success meant the number of resorts, entry of international hospitality chains and additional services provided to guests began to increase. Resorts could no longer just depend on the local workforce and began employing non-nationals to maintain their operations.

However, the Maldives government only allow the resort islands to employ up to 50% of its workforce as non-nationals. They must also focus on employing locals in specific positions to help bring young people into the workforce.

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Accommodation Facilities by Type

as of 16 March 2022

Facility Type	Total Capacity		Operational Capacity	
	Nos.	Beds	Nos.	Beds
Resorts	168	39,939	163	38,928
Hotels & Guesthouses	849	17,167	654	12,630
Safari Vessels	152	2,919	149	2,920
Total	1,169	60,025	966	54,478





A temporary halt

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the economy of the Maldives was extremely dramatic. As a country that depends largely on tourism for its income it shut its border to international travelers for approximately four months in 2020. Resort management had the unexpected situation of letting staff go on extended leave, struggling to evacuate staff members to different countries by liaising with the diplomatic missions and having to manage the emotional outbursts of staff who were waiting to be evacuated.

For those that were selected to remain on the resort to look after the properties, it was a tough time to live with reduced access to facilities, adhering to strict restrictions of movement between islands and surviving on limited supplies that were being delivered to the resort.

However, while the rest of the world was going through a full lockdown with restricted movement and house confinement, island life was still a blessing in disguise. The small team that remained on the island enjoyed walks on the beach, swimming and social gatherings without the need for social distancing. Thanks to living in such small groups and being isolated from other islands, it was easier to contain the spread of infection.

Recovery from the pandemic

The resilience of the government and the resort operators paved the way for reopening most of the resorts in the last third quarter of 2020 with strict health and safety protocols. Even after re-opening the resorts, travelling to different islands was restricted. Consequently, even staff members were not allowed to visit nearby islands, some of which were their home islands. This led to frustrations and did impact mental well-being.

By the last quarter of 2021, the situation had changed dramatically with approximately 99% of the resort staff being fully vaccinated and over 70% of them having now received their booster shots. This provided international travelers with the confidence to select the Maldives as a holiday destination once again and for the local government health authorities to ease the restrictions.

Statistics have already shown a steady increase in tourist arrivals since the re-opening of the borders, with record numbers of tourist arrivals on some days. By lifting the health emergency protocols, the Maldives has become a destination that does not require any PCR tests or Rapid Antigen test results for entering, travel related quarantine, mask usage, and all tourism facilities and activities that were available before the pandemic are now available again.

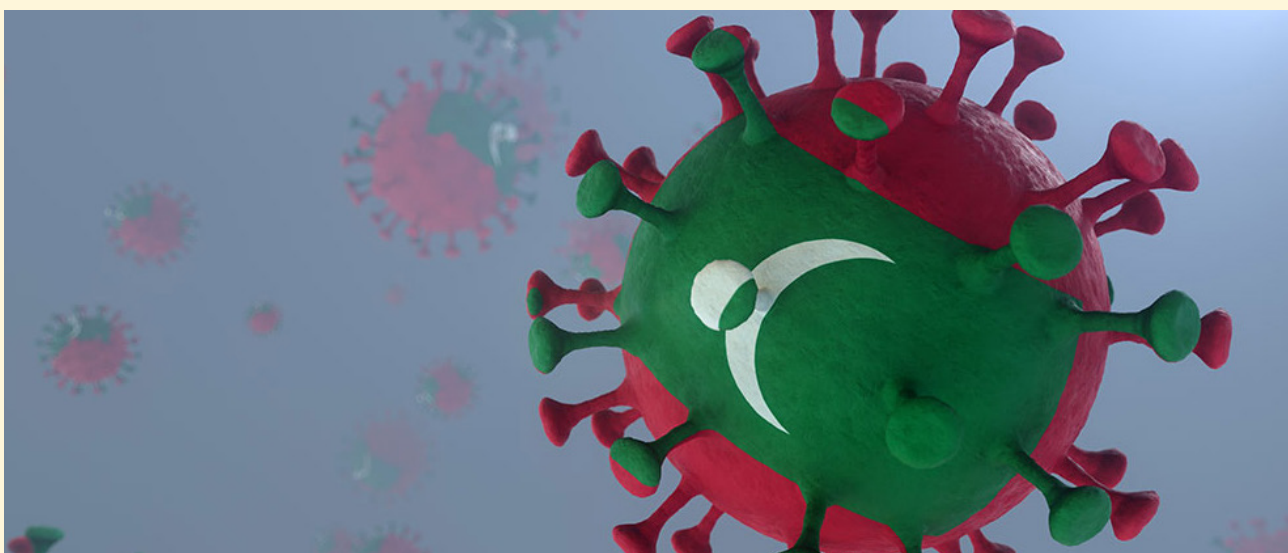
Tourist Arrivals

Total Arrivals 2019
1,702,887
as at end December

Total Arrivals 2020
555,494
as at end December

Total Arrivals 2021
1,321,932
as at end December

Total Arrivals 2022
359,272
as at end March





Working on a remote island

Visiting a small island to enjoy the sunshine, walk on chalky sand beaches and to take a dip in the turquoise water while on holiday is very different from living on an island for long periods, miles away from loved ones.

Job seekers who are exploring opportunities to relocate to the Maldives will often consider not having remote island experience as a disadvantage to getting a job. Besides having the required qualifications and job skills, it is important to consider the challenges of living and working on a small, remote island. The meticulous planning that goes into arranging logistics, hardships faced during emergencies, the emotional balance required to endure the delays, isolation from the world and flexibilities to last-minute changes are some of the important considerations to working and living on small islands.

However, despite the difficulties, working and living on a private island resort in the Maldives has its advantages.

- Live-in benefits on a resort island includes housing, free food, utilities ie., electricity, water, internet and recreation, all paid for by the employer. Providing the opportunity to save a major part of your earnings
- The Maldives has strict regulations on the distribution of service charges collected from guests. A 10% service charge on purchases is imposed by all tourism businesses, which must be equally distributed to the workers in that establishment. This regulation on service charges is an attractive part of remuneration for many tourism workers
- Although the Maldives is no longer a tax-free jurisdiction, personal income tax is comparatively low with tax payable on earning of USD 46,000+ per annum. The highest personal tax rate is 15%
- Living a quiet life by the sea with abundant sunshine and unpolluted air to breathe are some additional perks.

Team villages

Today, each resort island has a team village, usually located in the center of the island, where the staff facilities are located. These are melting pots of culture, hosting staff from different countries living in harmony and valuing the local culture.

These team villages are designed to cater to the health and well-being of its residents. It is not uncommon to see facilities like gyms, sports and recreation areas, free WiFi, cafeterias with multi cuisine buffets, staff bars, access to the beach, ferry services to nearby local islands and various social activities on offer. Options to use guest facilities at a discounted rate to break the monotony of living in a confined area and to attract people towards island living are also available. Perhaps even a staff spa and over-water staff accommodation will be in place someday.

The path ahead

With over 25 new resort islands under different stages of development and the fillip given by the government for promoting tourism in local inhabited islands, the future of the Maldives hospitality and tourism industry looks interesting. It will create a lot of job opportunities and boost the economy. But with any development, it brings many challenges including the need to develop infrastructure, improve internet connectivity, recruit and retain a supply of adequate skilled labour, whilst maintaining the ecology and environment. Let's see if the expansion and balance can be achieved successfully. Time will tell!

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About the author

Syed Thameesudeen FIH lives and works in the Maldives and has been in the hospitality industry for over 25 years specialising in Human Resources. After graduating with a bachelor's degree in Hotel & Catering Management from the University of Madras, India, Syed worked in the F&B departments of renowned hotels. With his passion for training and education he became a lecturer in Food & Beverage Service and general management courses for students pursuing hospitality education.

During his tenure as a lecturer, Syed received his certification from the American Hotel & Lodging Association Educational Institute (AHLEI) as a Certified Hospitality Educator (CHE).

Syed has been in Human Resources as a Training Manager and latterly as Director of Human Resources roles in renowned luxury hotels in India, Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea and in the Maldives.

Committed to life-long learning, Syed is a Certified Human Resources Executive (AHL-EI) and is pursuing his Doctorate in Business Administration. He is committed to sharing his knowledge and experiences gained from the hospitality industry to young, budding professionals through the IoH's Mentor Me initiative.



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