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## Maldives as a backpacker's destination: Supply and demand perspectives

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### Abstract

Tourism policies in countries are often driven not only by economic agenda, but they are also shaped by socio-cultural factors. Islamic countries have had different approaches to seaside tourism development. Since the 1970's and the opening to tourism, the Maldives have been developing strategies to contain tourists to private islands and minimize the contact with locals, whom would live on different islands. Tourism has long since been established as a 'luxury' destination, housing some of the world's most expensive resorts and top brands, while entertaining little to none middle and low-budget tourists. This situation has changed with the recent laws allowing operation of guesthouses in local islands other than the capital city of Male' and the island situated next to the international airport, some parts of the country have experienced a boom in guesthouse tourism. Opportunities for a variety of local business ventures (such as watersports providers, hostels and food outlets) opened up creating more community involvement, which contrasts greatly with the past tourism organisation. More and more guesthouses are opening in different islands and atolls of the Maldives, providing cheaper holidaying options and a more "authentic" experience compared to the one-island one-resort concept. This situation, by its novelty, creates new opportunities and challenges in the socio-cultural context of the Maldives and remains debated.

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## 1. Introduction

Tourism in the Maldives started in the 1970's after the discovery of its tourism potential with the white-sand beaches, clear waters; abundance of marine life and year-round sunshine. The construction of an airport was followed quickly with a tourism boom to a must-go sun, sand and sea luxury destination. The country also welcomed more than 1 million visitors in 2013 (MOTAC, 2013). Despite the development of tourists' arrivals, tourism has been firmly channeled to exclusive island resorts, from the first two resorts in 1972 to the 109 in existence at present day. Beyond these resorts, the current tourism accommodation infrastructure is also made of 20 hotels, 136 guesthouses and 163 Safari vessels. The resorts have always maintained a minimum of 3-star rating that has grown to include '6-star' rated resorts in recent years, catering to the high net-worth market. In the period of the last 10 years, Maldives has become one of the most expensive tourist destinations and has almost entirely neglected the lower-budget sector. As Scheyvens noted, for developing, third-world countries, budget tourists are not of much importance, and governments "tend to assume that more money is earned by attracting tourists who can afford luxury goods and services" (Scheyvens, 2002). Following official policy to keep tourism to high end resorts, budget travelers were not catered for in the past. However since the 2010's several guesthouses have opened on the islands accessible by local ferry from the capital city of Male'. Along with this, the few available activities are also middle-ranged price-wise (from point of view of budget travelers), and although several inner-atoll ferry routes exist, some with multiple stops and some being direct routes between the starting point and destination, since there is not much to do it seems unlikely that conventional "backpacking" could take place in the country. This brings rise to the question of the paper; whether backpacking could be done in the Maldives and what are the points of view from both budget travelers and suppliers regarding this notion. This paper studies the supply and demand perspectives of budget tourism sector in Maldives. The purpose of this paper is two-folds. First it examines the emergence of backpacker tourism in the Maldives in a supply and demand approach. It looks whether budget tourists can be catered for and by doing this could result in a positive development and assesses the possibility of backpacking in the Maldives. Second, it provides new light on the encounters between locals and foreigners in the context of backpacker tourism. It therefore illustrates the current changes in tourism in the Maldives.

## 2. Review of the literature on Backpackers

Pearce (1990) defined the term "backpacker" and distinguished this type of tourist from other tourists using five criteria: shoestring-based budget perceived as a core element of the experience, independently organised, a quest to meet and share with similar travellers, flexibility in itinerary and extensive time, adventure and adrenaline risk-taking that will establish their social-economic status among their peers. Since that backpacker research has been explored majorly from socio-anthropological and market perspectives. Backpacking has become a mass phenomenon despite its identification as non-mainstream, and somehow postmodern (Richards & Wilson, 2004).

However, developing countries governments often scorn international backpackers, professing instead an enthusiasm for pursuing higher-value, luxury tourism (Scheyvens, 2002) which echoes statements that wealthy tourists are being able to contribute more to a country's economy. But it has been found that in the long-term, backpackers have much greater economic potential in contrast to 'package-tourists' due to the nature of their travel habits; they tend to travel for much longer periods than the conventional tourist, have more flexible schedules, and interact with a wider array of local establishments such as taking public or other available local modes of transport where possible and staying in locally owned and managed guest houses and lodging. The spread of economic benefits within communities may be greater when catering to tourists on a budget, as more community members can participate. Catering to backpackers will not usually require community members to have any formal qualifications; rather they can develop skills on the job or build on their existing skills (Scheyvens, 2002). Budget travellers do not seek stiff establishments with high levels of service; instead they opt and seek for a laid-back, easy-going and carefree natured holiday. Local people and products can meet the needs of backpackers largely because they do not demand luxury services (Polit, 1991).

Culturally, backpackers are negatively perceived could be of the association of them being "hippy" or "drifters" as coined by Cohen, sometimes even to the extent of stereotyping them as unkempt, immoral and drug-taking individuals (Scheyvens, 2002). Brenner and Fricke (2007) indicated that while the members of the first generation of backpackers were often referred to as anti-consumerist 'drifters' a diversification took place during the 1980s as the

supply of target group-designed infrastructure and services grew and backpacking became increasingly commercialized. This trend continued in the 1990s, when backpackers began to demand a more sophisticated infrastructure at fashionable places (Scheyvens, 2002; Hampton, 1998). It has been found that along the most popular backpacker routes local people have set up a tourist infrastructure to service the perceived needs of the backpacker market. Most of these are focused on certain destinations, emergence of new routes, or personalities and characteristics of the backpackers. Major backpackers' destinations are located in exotic destinations in South America, South-east Asia, Nepal and India. This includes hostel type accommodation offering both dormitories and smaller rooms, often with common rooms and a kitchen to facilitate socializing (O'Reilly, 2006). However, little research has been done in this field with Maldives in mind, as well as other tourism related research other than those conducted by the government for statistical and planning purposes.

### 3. Main text Backpacker tourism constrained development in the Maldives

The *Lonely Planet* guidebook of Maldives states that *independent travelers are actively discouraged in the Maldives* (Lyon, 1997). More recently the same guide declares that “*you'll hardly see a backpack*”, and that the country “*is almost exclusively a place for the package tourist*” (Masters, 2006). Hopes of travelers who look at traveling on a tight budget in the Maldives are dampened once faced with the expensive costs of accommodation, food, and most of all transportation in a country where logistics are complex and costly. In order to facilitate the growth of tourism, meet the demands, lower the prices and offer more affordable services, much of the supporting infrastructure needs to be developed.

Several factors make the development of tourism constrained and clustered in the Maldives. Firstly, the geographical distribution of the islands and their incredible small size left no choice but to create the ‘one island one resort’ (Tourism, Things to do, Relax and unwind) concept (MOTAC, 2005). Out of the 1,190 islets that make up the country's archipelago, only 200 islands are inhabited and from the remaining 1000 or so, 109 are home to the famous resorts. To have a better view on the Maldives, how it functions as a country and how the tourism industry carries out its operations, one must first understand that when ‘island’ is mentioned, it does not correspond with the geographical features of other islands in the world; the islands of Maldives are low-lying, the highest point being 2 meters above the sea level, and are extremely tiny, most of which are less than 5 km<sup>2</sup> in area with the exception of several islands that exceed 2 km in length.

Secondly, in relation to the archipelagic and scattered geography of the country, transport is difficult for independent travellers. Atolls are scattered across more than 1,000km and easy and affordable mobility is not available. It is time consuming and expensive. Male' airport is the only gateway to the country where all the commercial and chartered flights arrive, and where guests transit for either their domestic flights, seaplane-transfers or board the awaiting speedboats that will whisk them to their choice of resort. As the islands are widespread and open seas separate them, it is not easy to travel by local boats or even speedboats because it will take several hours to reach, and hence opting for a seaplane or domestic flight transfer is necessary. In addition to the time required to travel, the cost of travel is also a deterrent for backpackers, as price of a return seaplane transfer could range between USD 200 – 600 per person, often more than the international flight itself. It explains the current guesthouse infrastructure limited to islands within the vicinity of Male' : Maafushi, Himmafushi, Huraa, Thulusdhoo and Dhiffushi (Figure 1). These island are accessible by public ferries departing from Male' for USD 2 – 3. The rest of the country is still either too far to be accessed by boat or too expensive by air. Consequently accommodation infrastructure for backpackers is not available.

Thirdly, cultural inertia explain the slow and rather confidential development of budget tourism infrastructure. The government strategically separated the tourists and their activities from the locals by confining all services and activities to the resorts. Scott & Jafari (2010) in their review of “Tourism in the Muslim World” underline the importance of cultural and religious traditions in countries with Muslim culture, and the ambiguous place of tourism, often perceived as hedonism and at odds with the values of modesty prevalent in Muslim society. In the case of Maldives, the encounter between *Sea, Sun, Sand* tourists and the local Maldivian islander Muslim society was strategically contained. As Henderson (2008) observed, “*authorities have sought to exercise strict control over tourism which has been directed by a series of master plans dating from 1980*”; and this correctly reflects on how

the government has taken measures since the beginning towards shaping the whole industry and the system. She also observed that in addition to some of the targets of the Third Tourism Plan (that was valid from 2007-2011) which were the same as its forerunners, there was a new objective stating “*spreading the economic benefits of tourism across the archipelago more equitably*”, and also that the stated vision was “*expanding and strengthening the Maldives tourism industry as an instrument of economic and social development in a manner that benefits all Maldivians in all parts of the country*” (2008). Given the strategies of segregation between tourists and locals, the idea of a non-resort based tourism remains confidential in the Maldives, and abroad. Policies encouraging Community-based Tourism (CBT) are not developed.

The policy of segregating resort tourists from locals and maximize profits from the former to the benefits of the latter translated the mainstream view in the society. However, evolving tourism practices and the development of Community-based entrepreneurship is timidly eroding barriers between tourists and locals in the Maldives. Backpackers desire authentic experience with the local population and encounters with local culture. What is the current governmental position on the development of backpacking tourism, after decades of strategies to constrain it? Are they willing to support the development of supply infrastructure for backpackers at the core of the local communities? Could Maldives evolve to a destination for backpacking, providing opportunities for CBT? This study in reviewing both demand and supply in backpacker tourism aims to address these questions.

#### **4. Methodology**

The study uses a qualitative approach, using field data collection through semi-structured interviews. Purposive sampling was used to select the two categories of respondents (supply and demand). Seven interviews were from tourism entrepreneurs and managers operating backpacker market businesses (guesthouses, diving centre, food outlets), while eight international tourists were interviewed in similar venues. Furthermore one government official from the Ministry of Tourism and Culture was interviewed to have the public sector’s perspective on both supply and demand. Primary data was collected from interviews at populated and non-resort islands. Five sites around the Male’ atolls namely Maafushi, Thulusdhoo, Dhiffushi, Hulhumale’ and Male’ were selected. Accessibility to independent travellers, as well as availability to backpacker tourists’ infrastructure were the criteria of choice. Interview guides were developed for both the supply and demand sides in order to address the research question. They included sections on operations, financial and public sector support, market perspectives, cultural aspects and entrepreneurs’ motivation. The backpackers’ interview guides covered various areas of investigation such as self-identification, travel patterns and history, motivation and experience. All interviews were conducted between February and March 2014 and were conducted in English and Dhivehi languages based on the fluency of the respondents, and lasted between 12 minutes and 1 hour. All interviews were recorded after permission granted by the respondents, and were kept confidential. The name of respondents was altered when presented in the findings part of this study.

#### **5. Different stages of backpacker supply and CBT involvement**

The supply side was first approached in one of the first island to develop a limited yet existing infrastructure catering to independent travellers. The testimony of entrepreneurs shows the pioneering mode in which this development is happening, with no institutional support. Most of them developed the ideas through international connections, either friends or business partners willing to venture into the development of a guesthouse. The owners of the two guesthouses, local café and watersports center at Maafushi declared that “*most of the capital came from their own funding; be it their own money and/or with family help*”. One of the owners who operates a guesthouse at Thulusdhoo island, said that he initially ran a very basic operation with two rooms in his house, but a “*repeat guest referred him to an Australian investor who had been very interested to invest and expand the business*”. Because he had no financial input at that time, he did not mind not receiving any return until the investment had been covered. Eventually, he bought the shares back and is now solely managing the business without the Australian investor. A similar pattern was developed by the guesthouse owner at Dhiffushi. He too had built his guesthouse from his own money, and with his French background and contacts, had built relations with a French operator and was receiving guests from them. They had just started their operations in January 2014, so the investment has not yet been covered

back. But they are hopeful as currently only two guesthouses exist in Dhiffushi including them, and from their feedback on the tourists visiting the island as well as their guests, the island of Dhiffushi seems appealing for visitors and they are carrying out the activities in a way that allows the guests to have an authentic experience with the ways of Maldivian life instead of a staged product.

The place of the local culture is also emphasized since it is expected that tourists want genuinely to discover Maldivian culture. Guesthouse owners keep their guests well informed that the locals are all Muslim, and that they must not walk around in bikinis and must be dressed casually and noted that the guests follow and respect the culture. However, parties not involved in tourism supply are more likely to disapprove the irruption of tourists in the populated islands: *“It’s best if tourists stay at the resorts and let us islanders live our lives... I don’t think it’s a wise thing to let them mix with us.”*<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, the response from individuals at Maafushi was different. This island is much more developed and home to over 10 guesthouses in operation with several under construction and a tourist population of a small resort. The locals are more positive and welcoming and do not mind the tourists; they enjoy the benefits and revenue generated from the ventures. However, the immense boom also brings problems such as over populating the island and exceeding carrying capacity. This was expressed by the government official<sup>3</sup> who said that *“we do not have a ‘need’ for a mass expansion of local tourism for the citizens to enjoy financial benefits of tourism”*; instead he believes that with proper taxation and distribution of revenue equally amongst the locals, there will be no need for local tourism.

### 5.1. Different level of acceptance of tourism

It appears that the islands hosting CBT activities and backpackers are unequally benefiting from the tourism activity and consequently perceiving the benefits to develop tourism in the populated islands. Support to tourism development on populated island is linked to the involvement of locals to the tourism development process. It appears clearly between island with a wide entrepreneurship and access to activities linked to tourism and those that are left out. Three stages of tourism development on populated islands can be defined: nascent, basic and growing. At the time being none can be considered matured. Thulusdhoo being situated not that far from the capital and airport makes the island a popular spot for surfers and backpackers. It has 12 guesthouses and has been successful in developing guest house and activities for backpackers such as watersports and diving facilities. Cokes, the uninhabited island opposite has the Chickens point and the remaining neighboring islands combined offers about 6 more spots and present a growing offer (Table 1). In Maafushi, development started in 2010, and even though there are still no full backpacking facilities and services there are lodging that fall within the acceptable price range for a backpacker.

Table 1. Stages of tourism supply development in populated islands

	Supply development	Community involvement
<b>Nascent</b>	Regular ferry service – no guesthouse or lodging	No contact with backpackers. Locals work in resort islands. Tourism is not encouraged (Dhiffushi)
<b>Basic</b>	Less than 5 guesthouses and restaurant	Few entrepreneurs invest and benefit from support from foreign tourists / partners. The rest of the community observes (Hulhumale’)
<b>Growing</b>	More than 5 guesthouses, restaurants, sporting activities offered	More locals try to venture into small business after seeing the example. Tourism is perceived both as a benefit and a nuisance. (Thulusdhoo, Maafushi)

On the other hand, Dhiffushi island, adjacent to the popular Meeru Island Resort which has been in operation since 1976, seems to be reticent to tourism development and remains at the nascent stage (Table 1). In usual cases, resort owners help to improve the standards of living for residents of nearby islands by increasing job opportunities,

<sup>2</sup> Ali, 60, Retired, Dhiffushi island resident

<sup>3</sup> Ahmed, 52, Official, Ministry of Tourism

providing trainings and such. However in the case of Dhiffushi, it seems to have gone the opposite way, where “only a handful locals from Dhiffushi has ever been employed in the history of Meeru Island Resort” and that there were many problems between the two islands. It is also notable that the resort belongs to one of the major key players that has a hand in the politics and market share of the tourism industry. Therefore, the islanders had had to teach themselves everything they knew through whatever education they have had, their own experience and gathered information. Dhiffushi is just at its early stages of local or community based tourism with two guesthouses and a third under construction;

### 5.2. Monitoring safety and position on governmental support

At the water sports center in Hulhumale’, the owner is an experienced man who has over 10 years of work in the field and had previously worked at the resort opposite to Hulhumale’; Club Faru. With his own money, he had opened up the Beach Hut watersports center located on the beachfront, alongside guesthouses and another watersports center down the road to its left. He expressed high concern towards the current situation of watersports and excursion providers; saying that many people were becoming partners, investing in a small dinghy boat and providing very low-cost excursions like going to sandbanks and snorkeling; however, they were not licensed and he did not know to what extent their professionalism lay. He was worried that some guests may not be provided with life-jackets, and also because these locals were corrupting the business for the people who worked hard into maintaining a certain standard and level of operations and who took care in the safety of their guests, who had to operate within a certain budget in order to cover their overheads and other expenses. He also said that the government was not properly regulating or monitoring all the suppliers who are involved in local tourism. Suppliers seemed to have no difficulty with the legal procedures regarding paperwork, registration and operating licenses. Apparently the procedure takes one month for a citizen of Male’, and respondents estimated that for islanders like themselves it would take 3 months as they would not be able to stay continuously in Male’ for 30 days, in order to go through all the necessary government offices. Finally, when asked about current government (People’s Party of Maldives, PPM) and the previous one (Maldives Democratic Party, MDP), all the suppliers favored MDP, since it had opened up CBT for the locals and facilitated services accordingly. The current government had been elected only 3 months prior to the interviews, so none of them had an exact say about its position on tourism development.

## 6. Backpackers perspective: an expensive invaluable experience

The experience from the backpackers was contrasted. Some had flown straight to Maldives without any prior holiday at another destination, while some had spent few weeks in Sri Lanka or Thailand before arriving in Maldives. A Chinese couple said that their route from China had been from Hong Kong to Thailand to Singapore to Maldives, so they had stayed a week in Thailand. With the exception of Michelle (Canadian), who was going to Australia after Maldives for a month, all other participants were heading back to their countries or second home-destinations.

All of them said that they had resorted to the Internet for information on Maldives and cheap holidaying options, and that Maafushi came up easily using social networks and specialized accommodation booking sites. Only one mentioned another channel: “I got information from my friends and I booked my trip with an agent specializing in Maldives<sup>4</sup>”. He is a surfer and had come to Thulusdhoo for surfing purposes only. They had all taken the public transport ferry from Male’ to either Maafushi or Thulusdhoo and did not seem to mind the duration and seemed to enjoy the experience. However, as the ferries run only once a day and there is a lack of options, most of them stressed on the importance of having more ferries operating between the islands. “I arrived at 8am on a Friday morning and learned that there were no ferries as it was Friday, and in Maldives almost all businesses cease

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<sup>4</sup> Thomas, 40 years old, French



operation until after Friday prayers are performed. I had had to wait at the guesthouse owner's house in Male' until the night ferry which departed at 10pm from Male' to Thulusdhoo<sup>5</sup>".

On an average, the guests have spent about USD 115 – 140 per night on their accommodation and breakfast. Additionally, on excursions and activities they had spent about USD 100 – 120 per person, which came with mixed reviews; some felt this was too expensive, some felt that while it was expensive the overall experience made it acceptable and worthwhile, and some felt that it was ok and value for money. They were all glad to be able to experience a cheaper way of holidaying in the Maldives than what it has been known for. However, it is still a bit overpriced, "...because in Thailand you could pay 60 – 70 dollars a night at a hotel that was probably 4 star. Here we are paying with all the taxes and everything is around 120 dollars." <sup>6</sup> Thomash, commented, "I think backpackers would like to go one day here and another day there. Here I think it's a little bit limited to this island because even just to go to Fihaalhohi is like 200 bucks."

Regarding their perceptions on the local community, they all felt warm and welcome at Maafushi and Thulusdhoo: "every time I cross someone I say hello, they say hello too. It's not the case of every place of the world you go. You can say hello, the local guy will just turn the head down, but here no, I found the local people pretty friendly."<sup>7</sup> Thomash said, "For me, probably Maldives was the best. The people are nice and friendly. Like in Thailand even just to call a cab sometimes it looks like we are a pain for them. Even at the shops if you look like it's your first day there, you get charged for a fruit twice or thrice the amount. But here, everywhere is fine." When asked about what they thought on backpacking in the Maldives, the central expectations of backpackers were expressed with the ability to be affordable and relaxed: "you got to find one perfect little island, make it a little backpacker island and there must be alcohol. Because me and my brethren of backpackers all drink beer. And there must be dormitories."<sup>8</sup> Finally the most important factor remains price: "I think you need to be in between 15 – 25 to get backpackers, and these must be the backpackers room with 8 beds inside." The experience of backpackers appears to be rather contrasted between the appeal to the beauty of the place, and the difficulty to have an affordable, although basic accommodation and transport. Their visit to islands already opened to tourists and familiar with foreign visitor doesn't create animosity from the community, with an increased awareness from both parties.

## 7. Conclusion

It is important not to confine the discussions of the relationship between budget tourism and local development to economic criteria. A discussion of some significant social and environmental benefits to communities catering to backpackers is also in order. Encouraging local people to cater to the needs of backpackers poses a challenge to foreign domination of tourism enterprises within developing countries. "There is a global economic concentration of wealth in tourism, witnessed by domination of the package tourism market by a small number of key players... controlling aspects of the industry" (Scheyvens, 2002). This is very clearly seen in the case of the tourism industry of Maldives, where less than ten key players and their clients operate monopolistic control of the tourism-related businesses. Major resort owners also have their own tourist shops or cafes and restaurants in the capital city or nearby islands that excursions are made to, and these excursions will include arranged routine stops to those outlets, thereby maintaining extra inflow of revenue within the parent business. The financial benefits from tourism actually are not redistributed to the people and preventing encounters between local entrepreneurs and budget tourists allow such monopoly to remain in place. The development of Community-based Tourism could change the supply and initiate backpacker and budget tourism. At the time being no official policy is implemented to assist such move and vested interests might invoke cultural sensitivities to deter such evolution. Even though the government's view does not seem to hold much for the local tourism, there is a phenomena taking place and it seems that with more locals

<sup>5</sup> Thomas, 40, French

<sup>6</sup> Thomash and Christina, Hungarian

<sup>7</sup> Thomas, 40, French

<sup>8</sup> Michelle Rose, 46, Canadian

taking part in budget tourism, in an industry where there is no carrying capacity measures or limit stated, the future could unveil more affordable and reasonably priced accommodations and even the possibility of proper backpacking facilities such as hostels featuring dormitories is there. The development of backpacker tourism and CBT is at the centre of socio-economic and cultural dynamics transforming destinations such as Maldives.

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