



MALDIVES DEVELOPMENT REPORT

With new supply on the way, could a nationwide loyalty scheme and the ‘one island, one resort’ concept help drive demand?

Words: Lisa Kjellsson

With its picture-perfect looks and wealth of luxury resorts, the Maldives has long been regarded as a holiday-maker’s paradise. In recent years, thanks to the re-issuing of tourism leases and allocation of uninhabited islands to new projects, it has become a developer’s paradise too.

The archipelago – made up of 1,192 islands in the Indian Ocean – has been welcoming tourists since 1972, when the first resort made its debut in the North Malé Atoll. New hotels, and even new islands, have opened every year since, and the sector has flourished to become the largest contributor to the economy. Despite being the smallest country in Asia, both in population and land mass, it has ambitious targets to increase international arrivals and the number of resorts. In 2019, the government released 29 islands for new tourism developments, an initiative set to add 13,720 beds and create 18,000 jobs for locals.

With so much development under way, is there a risk of over supply? “The tourism development projects are undertaken in line with the tourism masterplan,” says Thoyyib Mohamed, Managing Director of Maldives Marketing & PR Corporation. “If infrastructure and associated developments are met along with marketing initiatives, consumer demand will be created to fill the added supply.”

The masterplan is certainly yielding results –

1.7 million tourists visited the Maldives in 2019 and last year, the destination bounced back strongly from a four-month lockdown, with 500,000 arrivals after reopening its borders in July. There’s no mistaking its appeal, and as travellers found most parts of the world off limits through the pandemic, the archipelago’s main selling point became all the more relevant. The ‘one island, one resort’ concept meant social distancing was part of the package, and with a raft of all-you-can-stay offers, those who could afford it simply sat out lockdown in reassuringly virus-free luxury.

IN THE PIPELINE

There are plenty of hotels to choose from – 154 to be exact, with a dozen new openings scheduled for 2021. Recent years have seen brand debuts from a host of international operators: Accor opened new ventures from Raffles, Fairmont and Pullman; Hilton Worldwide added a Waldorf Astoria and Curio Collection property; IHG introduced InterContinental to Raa Atoll; Radisson Hotel Group opened a Radisson Blu; and Marriott International has new offers from Westin and JW Marriott. Other recent openings of note include Joali, a 73-key resort designed by Autoban; Baglioni, with both beach and overwater villas; and Kagi, an ultra-luxury property from Crown & Champa Resorts.

According to data from STR, the new supply

has so far had little impact on performance, with occupancy averaging 65.8% in 2019, down just 2.2% on the previous year, and RevPAR holding steady at MVR5525.25 (approx. US\$350). 2020 was of course a different story, with occupancy down 51.2% and RevPAR declines of 31%, but developers are optimistic that performance will return to pre-pandemic levels, and are pushing ahead with growth. The latest research from Tophotelprojects counts 16 hotels in the pipeline and what’s notable is the variety on offer, with some developments targeting families and others taking more of a lifestyle hotel approach.

WIDENING THE SCOPE

Keen to build on its own brand, the Maldives recently launched the world’s first tourism loyalty scheme, Maldives Border Miles. Registered visitors earn a number of points depending on criteria such as the duration of stay, frequency of travel, and visits to celebrate special occasions. “The main purpose is to increase the popularity of Maldives as a tourist destination to a wider audience and to encourage repeat visitors,” says Mohamed, adding that the country is so much more than a honeymoon destination.

One operator looking to target the family demographic is Minor Hotels, which already operates five properties in the Maldives,



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Existing properties have been adding to their offer to keep up with the competition; Anantara Kihavah has launched the largest overwater residence in the world (top); Waldorf Astoria Ithaafushi has a new restaurant (middle left); and Finolhu (middle right) and Amilla (bottom) have introduced glamping experiences

including three Anantaras. Avani+ Fares Maldives Resort is scheduled to launch in early 2022 in the Baa Atoll and will feature an extensive kids’ club with a dedicated restaurant concept. “Over the coming years, the Maldives will continue to attract honeymoon couples due to the idyllic nature of the destination. That said, we feel that there is great opportunity to target the family segment which has been under-represented,” says Thomas Meier, Senior Vice President of Operations Asia for Minor Hotels. He believes there’s still room for growth in the market so long as new developments are pitched right. “Currently the majority of supply is focused on the luxury sector, but there is still opportunity for growth in the upper-scale segments, which are more accessible than the luxury segment.”

Widening the scope has been the aim for a number of developments in recent years, whether that be in target audience or through design. The Standard for example made waves when it opened in 2019, bringing its signature mix of social spaces and cultural programming to the islands, while Lux* used design to differentiate, eschewing the typical Maldivian aesthetic in favour of contemporary whitewashed villas styled by Miaja Design Group. The Crossroads development is also worth a mention as the Maldives’ first multi-island, fully integrated leisure destination with dining, shopping and a marina accompanying the Hard Rock Hotel and Saii Lagoon from Hilton’s Curio Collection.

Existing properties have also been adding to their offer in a bid to keep up with the competition. Soneva Jani is soon to open a new wellness centre designed to set the standard in holistic wellness, combining ancient Ayurvedic techniques with cutting-edge therapies. Joali has enhanced its culinary programme with chef partnerships and a new al fresco restaurant serving Levant cuisine, while Waldorf Astoria Ithaafushi has unveiled Shimizu, a Japanese dining experience housed in a bamboo structure designed to mimic an ocean wave. Seaside Finolhu meanwhile has undergone a full

refurbishment to become the country’s first member of Design Hotels. Here, London-based studio Muza Lab devised a kaleidoscope scheme, bringing the turquoise of the ocean and pink and purple hues of the sunset to the 125 guest villas and showstopping Rockstar Villa. The resort has also introduced a Beach Bubble, where guests can spend the night beneath the stars. With travellers increasingly looking for new experiences, a number of other properties have added glamping to the accommodation offer too; Amilla unveiled its transparent beachfront pods earlier this year, and Fairmont Maldives Sirru Fen Fushi has safari-style Tented Jungle Villas as a unique alternative to overwater villas.

Of course, the Maldives wouldn’t be the Maldives without its overwater villas, and new openings are becoming ever larger and more luxurious. Soneva Fushi’s Water Retreats – complete with a slide into the ocean – captured the attention when they launched last year, while Soneva Jani’s Chapter Two expansion will add 27 sprawling Water Reserves with expansive terraces and private swimming pools. Anantara Kihavah Maldives Villas has also upped the ante, launching what it believes to be the largest overwater residence in the world, while Waldorf Astoria has opened The Private Island for guests looking for complete seclusion.

A FRAGILE ECOSYSTEM

While such projects often make the headlines for their scale and level of luxury, they do throw into question the impact on the environment. Soneva has long been championing sustainable practices – applying them to everything from the fabric used in the interior design scheme to innovative waste management strategies – and Crown & Champa’s Kudadoo set a new standard when it opened in 2018, becoming the first fully solar-powered island. But what of building in a fragile ecosystem?

The development boom means there is a constant balancing act between commercial interests and efforts to protect the archipelago and its vulnerable reefs. Of course any kind of

development has an environmental impact, but a particularly controversial issue in the Maldives is land reclamation, in which islands are created by dredging and pumping sand into a lagoon or on top of an existing reef. Whether this is justifiable when there are still plenty of undeveloped natural islands across the atolls is a question met with a unanimous ‘no’ from environmental advocates. “It’s a problem for many reasons,” says Philippa Roe, Head Marine Biologist at Six Senses Laamu. “Disrupting the natural water flow changes the dynamics of the whole area. Some fish and corals thrive in stronger currents and if you disrupt them then those organisms are not going to be able to survive there anymore.” She also points out that manmade islands need a lot of maintenance: “With strong tidal currents and monsoonal waves, they require heavy engineering to stay in place.”

Tree removal is another issue facing the country and one that has caused upset amongst locals. In the past, the nation’s Environmental Protection Agency has come under fire for authorising the mass removal of coconut palms without plans for revegetation, though revised regulations mean that the practice now requires Environmental Impact Assessment approval, and it is mandatory to plant two trees for every one removed.

A POSITIVE IMPACT

Developers are undeterred by the issues, and there’s a conscious effort to ensure a positive impact. “The island creation process can be stressful to nature but when implemented with due care, nature can recover,” explains a spokesperson for Pontiac Land, the Singapore-based developers behind Fari Islands, a manmade archipelago set to feature hotels from Capella, Ritz-Carlton and Patina. “Once complete, the islands will become part of the atoll ecosystem and contribute to the surrounding landscape and marine life.”

The group also believe that land reclamation is a solution to the country’s vulnerability to rising

sea levels. “The islands of the Maldives are famously known to be just above high tide level, exposing them to severe erosion and flooding, as experienced in a number of areas,” the spokesperson continues. “Fari Islands is engineered to accommodate the predicted changes in its lifetime, speeding up its resilience and making it safer compared to other islands.”

Pontiac Land – together with a design team comprising Studio MK27, Kengo Kuma & Associates, André Fu, Kerry Hill Architects, WATG and Urbnarc – highlight a range of precautions taken during construction to minimise environmental impact, as well as initiatives that make a positive impact on the nation, its ecosystem and its people.

At The Ritz-Carlton, due to open later this year, Kerry Hill Architects has utilised pre-fabricated design methods to reduce heavy operations on site, while sophisticated glazing and spaces designed to harness the natural breeze will reduce the need for air-conditioning. Furniture, rugs and fabrics have also been custom designed by Kerry Hill Architects in collaboration with Maldivian artists. Patina

meanwhile has been landscaped with mature trees and shrubs that would otherwise have been destroyed, transported from other islands to create a new habitat for birdlife. It also has its own marine conservationist and supports the Olive Ridley Project dedicated to the rehabilitation of injured sea turtles; guestrooms are stocked with toiletries from Haeckels, made from natural and sustainably-sourced ingredients; and there’s a lab where budding engineers can turn recycled ocean plastics into 3D models.

Pontiac Land is also committed to creating an enriching living environment for its employees. The purpose-built staff campus offers a range of recreational facilities and amenities with a focus on community, education and engagement. It is the first of its kind in the Maldives and dedicated to developing the nation’s next generation of hoteliers. With the volume of new supply that’s on the horizon, there’s a pressing need for staff. Recruiting and training locals will not only bolster the nation’s economy, but contribute to creating the all-important authentic guest experience.

Muza Lab has completed a refurbishment of Finolhu, where a kaleidoscope scheme brings the turquoise of the ocean and pink and purple hues of the sunset to the 25 guest villas and Rockstar Villa





MALDIVES

DEVELOPMENT REPORT

The hotel development pipeline in the Maldives sees brand debuts from international hotel groups as well as new ventures from local players.

1. Patina

As one of three resorts at Fari Islands – an archipelago in North Malé Atoll – Patina is the inaugural property of a new lifestyle brand from Capella Hotel Group. Designed by Brazilian architect Marcio Kogan of MK27, it features 90 one-, two- and three-bedroom villas both on the beach and overwater, as well as four food and beverage concepts and a wide range of wellness and recreation facilities. Kogan’s concept is one of sanctuary and stimulation, with biophilic principles and the use of natural materials representing the idea of sanctuary, and vibrant public spaces designed for connecting with others as the stimulation. “Patina is unique in the Maldives,” explains Kogan. “One of the most remote places on Earth and still a place designed for people to meet one another. Patina Maldives embraces our natural conflicts: desire for peace and party,

for nature and design, technology and rusticity, self-indulgence and deep reflections.” Throughout the interiors, an earthy colour palette combines with natural materials such as timber, stone and linen, drawing the outside world in whilst enticing inhabitants out. The concept showcases the Patina brand’s appreciation of nature and community, while its zero-waste kitchens, sustainable sourcing and energy-positive ethos demonstrate a devotion to the wellbeing of the planet. A member of Design Hotels, Patina will be the first resort to open at Fari Islands, with the wider development anchored by a marina village offering restaurants, bars, boutique shopping and events. There’s berths for 20 yachts, a vibrant beach club and a boardwalk linking the facilities, as well as opportunities for food trucks and live music.



2. Capella

Designed by Kengo Kuma & Associates with interiors by André Fu, Capella features 57 spacious villas and mansions, each with private infinity pools and panoramic views of the Indian Ocean. The resort is home to Auriga Spa & Wellness, as well as a number of dining concepts including a Michelin-starred Omakase Bar, an American steakhouse and various al fresco options. There will also be a signature oceanfront dining destination with immersive concepts in four uniquely designed quadrants. Due to open in 2023, Capella will be the third resort at the Fari Islands development.

Developer: Pontiac Land
Operator: Capella Hotel Group
Architecture: Kengo Kuma & Associates
Interior Design: André Fu

3. The Ritz-Carlton

As the second hotel to open at Fari Islands, The Ritz-Carlton is designed by Kerry Hill Architects to embrace the circle of island life. Comprising 100 villas, seven restaurants and a spa, every aspect of the resort's philosophy flows from 'beru' – the Maldivian word for drums and rounded shapes. Its spherical footprint is inspired by the ring-like forms of nearby lagoons, while architecture is characterised by sweeping curves. Inside, a palette of natural materials and colourways extends to the furniture, rugs and fabrics – custom designed in collaboration with local artists to honour the nation's craft traditions.

Developer: Pontiac Land
Operator: Marriott International
Architecture and Interior Design: Kerry Hill Architects

4. Cora Cora

Opening in Q4 2021, Cora Cora is owned and operated by Maldives-based Trinitas Holdings and comprises 100 villas and suites, five restaurants and bars, and a spa with seven treatment rooms. The pièce de resistance however is a licensed art gallery and museum – the first of its kind in the archipelago – celebrating the region's cultural heritage through 400 local artefacts. The interior design scheme will also honour the spirit of the Maldives, with the renovation and repositioning being overseen by General Manager Martin van der Reijden, who brings a wealth of experience.

Owner / Operator: Trinitas Holdings
General Manager: Martin van der Reijden



5. Siyam World

Created by local operator Sun Siyam Resorts, Siyam World is a 54-hectare island playground slated to open in Q4 2021. Located in Noonu Atoll on one of the country’s largest natural islands, the resort will feature 499 guestrooms across 12 different categories, all with private swimming pools. There will also be more than a dozen different bars and restaurants to choose from, along with an array of signature services and experiences.

Operator: Sun Siyam Resorts

6. Avani+ Fares Resort

Located on the 12.4-hectare Fares Island in the Baa Atoll, Minor Hotels’ Avani+ – an upscale brand extension of Avani – will launch in early 2022. The 200-key resort will feature an open-plan living space combining lobby lounge and gourmet dining options such as The Pantry deli, an Avani hallmark serving comfort food and artisanal grab-and-go bites. Aimed at families, there will also be an extensive kids’ club with dedicated restaurant concept.

Operator: Minor Hotels
Developer: Cyprea Group

7. Le Méridien Resort & Spa

Le Méridien will make its Maldivian debut in Summer 2021, with the Paris-born brand’s Mid-Century design aesthetic presented through a Maldivian lens. Situated on the island of Thilamaafushi, the 154-key resort will feature overwater, lagoon and beach villas as well as a spa, ocean-facing fitness centre and two infinity pools. F&B options include two bars and four restaurants, ranging from a gelateria to a farm-to-table experience.

Operator: Marriott International



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