

Developing a new kind of tourism

INTERVIEW WITH DR AHMED ALI SAWAD

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There has been a restructuring within the government since it took office last year. What has been the impact on the Tourism Ministry?

Over the past 18 months we have seen a major shift in the entire dynamic of how politics is carried out. The emphasis is on accountability, given that one of our election promises was ‘less government’. We have trimmed a lot of the ministries. As regards the Tourism Ministry, one of the main changes has been to highlight Maldives’ unique cultural heritage as part of its tourism offer. The realignment of tourism with culture reflects this. We will be looking at ways to match up arts and culture with tourism. Our programmes are directed towards doing this.

What are the ministry’s main priorities?

We want a society that understands the value of tourism to the nation, and its critical role in the future prosperity of the country and its people. There has been a shift in our strategy in that we want to see a more equitable distribution of the economic benefits of tourism; for example, by creating more and better employment opportunities. The idea is also to make tourism a vehicle for the protection and conservation of nature and natural resources, and the revitalisation and preservation of the nation’s cultural assets.

This will involve increasing Maldivian participation at all levels of the industry, and especially the participation of women in this industry.

What is your strategy for achieving these goals?

We need to create a much bigger role for the private sector in our tourism industry. If we are to remain competitive in the global market we must continuously expand and diversify our tourism product, while enhancing the quality of services, and becoming established as a quality tourism destination delivering good value for money. This will mean developing support infrastructure and activities to ensure hassle-free travel and the safety and security of tourists during their holiday.

The Maldives has traditionally been associated with tourism. From an investment perspective, is this sector still the best option?

There are other areas where we are seeking investment aside from tourism, but it is obvious if you consider

the country’s geography and natural resources that tourism is the logical choice. A beach is a better resource than an oil well. Tourism has proved to be a very successful industry and one that has survived past crises. It sustains large parts of the economy and will continue to do so.

What is being done to improve infrastructure, particularly at the airport?

We plan to develop a joint-venture 30-year project to privatisate the main airport at Malé. We have a very good tourism industry and we have an airport that has done a good job, but it needs to be improved. Let the private sector deal with opening up the aviation sector.

At the same time the government is working to improve transport throughout the islands. This will benefit local people, and also open up the regions to further tourism development. We aim to construct 10 new regional airports.

We are also seeking a party to develop a comprehensive and sustainable transport system in the atolls. The network would divide the archipelago into seven regions. Each region will have 20 to 50 ferry terminals. Successful investors will be granted appropriate incentives and concessions under the agreement.

What plans do you have to develop more islands?

Two additional new resorts as well as six that had been closed for renovation are expected to open this year, increasing bed capacity by 10 per cent. We have 63 islands that we could develop, but we estimate the cost at around US\$2 billion. The main constraint to developing new islands is the lack of domestic finance.

Investment in the tourism sector has been deterred by hikes in lease rents by the previous administration. The government is committed to taking the policy actions necessary to make investment in the tourism sector more attractive, and is seeking to enter public-private partnerships to set up new infrastructure.

We are also considering allowing the construction of two- and three-star hotels and cheap guesthouses on islands – including some of the inhabited ones – to make the country a more affordable holiday destination. Any construction would have to be sustainable and new properties would be approved only if the developers are willing to invest in infrastructure and public transport links on the islands.

What measures are being taken to involve local communities in developing and benefiting from the tourism sector?

The Maldives has initiated a new tourism policy aimed at increasing contact between visitors and inhabitants. We no longer want there to be a “parallel world” of resort islands kept separate from the islands inhabited by Maldivians.

Traditionally there has been little community involvement in tourism here. We want to see more socially responsible investment. That can only happen through commercially viable projects: an investment can only be socially responsible if it is feasible. The government is offering incentives to investors who want to take part in more socially responsible projects.

We are pleased that guests seek the seclusion of a resort island, but we also want to invite tourists to visit our communities. A first step to doing this would be a ferry network linking the some 300 inhabited islands, enabling tourists to island-hop and boosting exchanges among the islanders themselves. Up to now in the Maldives, we have constantly built for tourism and benefited ourselves only secondarily.

How can the Maldives’ unique cultural heritage add value to visitors’ experience here?

Archaeological findings indicate that the islands were inhabited as early as 1500 BC. It is believed that permanent settlements were established around 500 BC by Buddhists or Hindus migrating from the Indian subcontinent. Among the travellers who came here were Marco Polo, the Chinese historian Ma Huan, and the famous Arab traveller Ibn Batuta. Pliny records that Maldivian emissaries bore gifts for the Roman Emperor.

The importance of the Maldives to early explorers in the 16th and 17th centuries can be seen in the grossly exaggerated size of the islands in relation to nearby Sri Lanka and India on maps of the period. The tranquillity of the islands was often disturbed by pirates and the superpowers of the day. Events around this time are recounted by the French sailor Francois Pyrard de Laval, who was shipwrecked in the Maldives in 1602 and lived there for five years. The vessel he came here on lies off the coast near to Malé. We have hundreds of wrecks around the coast, and we would like to showcase them as underwater museums. We will be encouraging visitors to engage with our civilisation and enjoy a multi-layered experience. **F**

To remain competitive we must continuously expand and diversify our tourism product