

GSNSW TRAVELLERS' CLUB MEETING

8 November 2009

The Republic of Maldives

Maria Barrett

Thirty people attended our final meeting for 2009 including friends and relatives of our speaker, one of whom travelled from the Blue Mountains, all were most welcome! Incidentally, our speaker had travelled from her home on the Gold Coast.

A gentle reminder – you don't have to be a member of the Society to attend the Travellers' club – casual visitors interested in a particular topic or speaker and prepared to pay \$10 are most welcome.

The presentation was planned to give an overview of this nation through a series of maps and photos starting with the capital, Malé; visiting a local island, Huraa, and finally the luxury of a resort island, Baros. Maria visited places not seen by most resort tourists and gave a personal view of her recent experiences in August 2009 at the end of the monsoon season.

The Maldives is perceived as a dream destination for tourists desiring solitude in tropical surroundings, the lap of luxury on a desert island. The main industries are fish processing, tourism and shipping. The growth of tourism continues with the building of new resorts and international hotels, to date there are 82 resorts and seven international hotels.

The Republic of Maldives is located 700 km south-west of Sri Lanka in the Indian Ocean, approximately 2 degrees south to 8 degrees north of the equator. It is the smallest Asian country in terms of area and population and boasts the highest GDP of any Asian country, also the smallest Muslim nation in the world (100% Sunni).

This Archipelago is 850 km from north to south and comprises 26 coral atolls encircling 1192 islands of which 202 are inhabited. The word atoll derives from the Maldivian word *atolu*. The definition of an island in the Maldives is a vegetated outcrop in the ocean. Unlike the isolated Pacific Ocean atolls, Maldivian atolls all sit on top of the same long underwater plateau, 300m-500m under the surface. This plateau is a layer of accumulated coral- stone over 2000m thick. Under this is 'the volcanic basement', a 2000km-long ridge of basalt formed over 50 million years ago. Coral growing on top of Karst Mountains formed the bases of individual Maldivian atolls. The highest point on land is in the Addu Atoll – 2.4 metres above sea level.

Sea, sand and sun dominate in this country comprising 97% salt water making it idyllic for tourists from colder climates. The proximity of local Maldivian labour as well as employees from India, Sri Lanka, Indonesia and other neighbouring countries has been a major factor in tourism. In-house training has resulted in a labour force specialising in the many facets of hospitality and tourism, delivering exceptional service.

Malé, the only world capital occupying an entire island has a population of approx 100,000 (Maldives 2009 estimate of population 396,334). The largest demographic is under 19 years of age, visibly evident in Malé and posing social problems now and for the future. The Friday Mosque dominates the Malé skyline, the highest building is 10 storeys and the Chinese have funded a new national museum which will replace the museum in Sultan Park shown in the presentation.

Adjacent to Malé are

- the airport island, which has an international airport and hotel with associated port facilities as all transport between the islands is by sea or plane;
- the ‘rubbish’ island where all refuse from the resorts which cannot be recycled or processed is deposited;
- Hulumale, the reclaimed residential island built to house the growing urban population.
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The impact of the tsunami in January 2004 cannot be overlooked as there is visible evidence on the local island, Huraa, where repair and construction of new buildings is ongoing. Images illustrated the contrast of this small island to the urban congestion of Malé and the opulent perfection of Baros.

Yellow fin tuna abound, fishermen use lines, there is no net fishing in the Maldives, dolphin numbers flourish and now support a tourist activity of dolphin watching cruises!

Maria’s presentation ended with her recent visit to *Baros Maldives*, in the North Malé Atoll. The presentation not only covered the tourist experiences in a resort but also the support in terms of infrastructure (desalination, sewerage treatment, electricity generation) and all the associated hospitality services that are delivered in these remote locations. The images of the resort, its built environment and natural beauty were presented for the audience to appreciate the impact of 21st century tourism.

Footnote

In September 2009, President Mohamed Nasheed addressed the UN and urged the developed countries to be responsible to come to an agreement on global warming in order to protect the future of front-line countries such as the Maldives “To do otherwise would be to sign the death warrant of 300,000 Maldivians”.... “Our country will not exist.”

Some facts:

- ‘Joli’ net seats seen on local island – like sitting in a string shopping bag but cool. Originally made of ‘hau’ rope and timber frame, now metal frames with plastic netting.
- Dhoni – Maldivian fishing boat. Originally with sails but recently motorised and now not only used for fishing but also for transportation and tourist excursions.
- Cowrie shells used as currency (money) exclusive to Maldives and possibly transported by Arab traders in second century. Found in Egyptian tombs, China, Middle East, Indus Valley and Africa.

For me, highlights of the talk included information/glimpses “backstage” in an upmarket resort, e.g. the staff village, the supply vessel, water, sewage and garbage treatment as well as Maria’s arrangements of several photos on one page during a comprehensive yet concise powerpoint presentation.

Thank you Maria!

‘Ela Taranto