















... 2016

... 2016

... 2016

... 2016

... 2016

... 2016

... 2016









...

— 1377 7 - 1957 1 ... 20 ... 1957 - 28 ... 1377 ... 36 ... 7 ... 1965 ... 36 ... 7 ...

● (16) (2016) ...



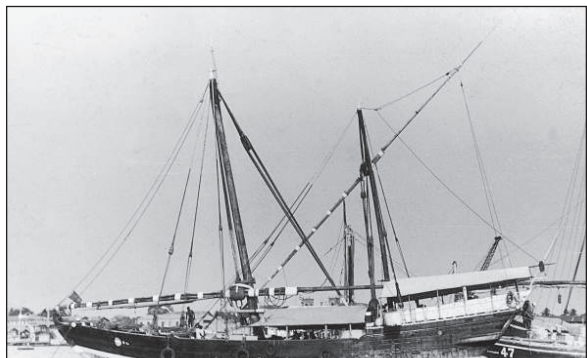
...



...



...



...

...





of the Thirteen Provinces and Twelve Thousand Islands," and he held absolute power. Today he is elected, and there is a prime minister with a parliament, called the Majlis. In 1953 a republic was established, which lasted nine months.

The Sultan today lives in a palace surrounded by thick walls. It was terribly hot when I was there, and a labyrinth of courtyards and more walls shut out the cooling breeze. Tin-roofed buildings, which almost filled the courtyards, added to the heat, and the virgin white sand underfoot blazed back at the fierce sun so that it hurt my eyes, even with dark glasses.

I was ushered at last into a spacious hall, heavy with darkly polished teak paneling and gleaming brass fittings (like an old East Indian). Thence a narrow stairway like a ship's companionway led to the Sultan's audience chamber. Here the Sultan, His Highness Mohammed Farid Didi, awaited me, with his Prime Minister, Mr. Ibrahim Ali Didi, and the official secretary. All were dressed in European clothing.

The Sultan is a tall man with fine, well-chiseled features. He received some of his education in Egypt and speaks both French and English, but he spoke to me in Maldivian, his Prime Minister acting as interpreter. We chatted pleasantly for a few moments, but I was glad to take my leave. The two-story palace was stifling, and I thought, if I were a sultan, the first thing I would demand would be a cooler place to live.

#### Day of the Baggalas Is Dying

When I called on the Prime Minister, I saw on his wall photographs of Queen Elizabeth II of Great Britain and her husband, Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh, taken during their visit to a Maldivian exhibition in Ceylon.

Mr. Ibrahim Ali Didi, a tall and well-built man of strong and dignified features, looked remarkably like the Sultan and was, in fact, related to him. He talked to me of Maldivian progress and aspirations, and of the islands' need for a powered vessel of their own. The day of the baggala, he said, was past.

I'm afraid I had to agree. The picturesque big sailing ships, which had sufficed for many centuries, were no longer able to compete with motorships and steamers. As we were speaking a small motorship came into the lagoon and anchored close by the fringing

reef to take on a sizable cargo of dried fish.

In the winds then blowing, baggalas might take a month to sail the 450 miles from Malé to Colombo, tacking and beating and fighting the adverse currents. The motorship would be there in two days, and back again in Malé within six days, with a cargo of necessary rice and textiles.

Reluctantly I took passage in the motorship, a little German named the *Hugo Arlt*, commanded by a German captain who had been a submarine commander in the war. As I went aboard, his mate was getting the anchor up. I looked overside into the clear water, and then I looked back at the island city a long time.

#### Motorship Heads for Ceylon

The motorship's engines thrashed the blue water to a creamy white. The baggalas in port were flying their Maldivian ensign for our departure, and the old brig was being hove ashore for her last beaching. The sun shone on the twin light towers marking the entrance to the small inner harbor through the fringing reef, and I could still hear the kites buzzing high above the trees.

Now my motorship was under way, heading for the gap in the reefs through which Capt. Mohammed Maniku had sailed by night. Soon the atolls, more sea than land, would sink below the horizon, leaving the coconut palm tops for a while like trees growing mysteriously in the water. Then all disappeared, and only the lonely ocean stretched away toward Ceylon.

It would be a long, long time before I would ever forget the enchanted Maldivian Islands, with their rugged, quiet, and independent citizens, who were making such a success of their islands and their city and their industries, without interference or aid from the outside.

The central position of the islands in the rich monsoon-blown waters of the Indian Ocean had attracted the navigators and the empire builders of the distant past—Indian, Persian, Arab—and long after them the Portuguese, Dutch, French, and the English, in that order.

All had come, for the strategic position of the great atolls was important. All had come, but, seeing how well the islands were doing by themselves, all had gone again, leaving the islands and the islanders alone—a record which is surely unique.



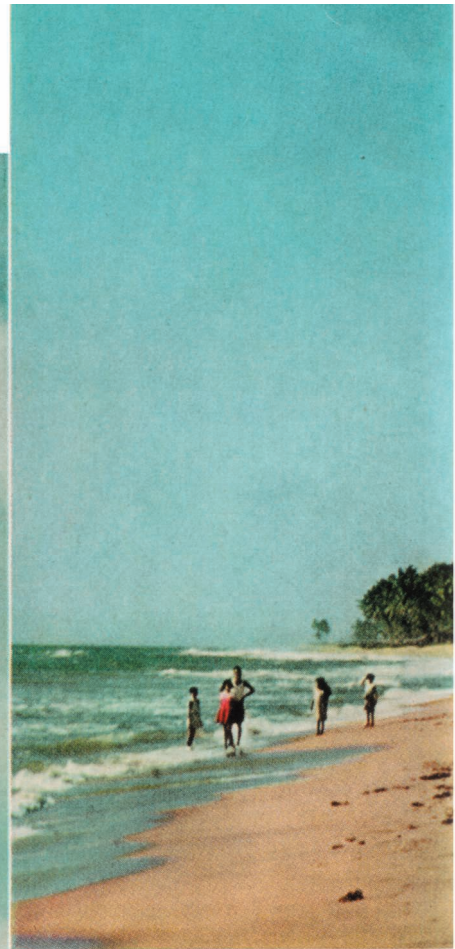




17

↓ Sailors Pole a Cargo Lighter to Pierside at Malé

Hands aloft secure lateen sail along the high, slim yard. Cased goods piled aboard came off a baggala anchored at the harbor entrance.



846

↑ Warm Monsoon Winds Dry Outrigger Sails on a Palm-fringed Beach

Seaside villagers through these shores each afternoon to greet incoming fishermen. The day's catch is sold on the spot, for fish spoil quickly in the hot climate. Islanders make copra and coir rope from the coconut palms. They thatch their homes with the fronds and use the wood for fuel.

18

Outrigger canoes closely resemble those of the South Pacific. Cotton sails billow between twin masts. Steering paddle on boat at right suggests the steerboard of a Viking ship.

Children wading in the surf await fathers' return from sea.

Father Treats Family → to an Evening Sail

Even the babies crowd aboard the small cargo launch as it heads out into Malé lagoon. Girls wear headcloths and long gowns. One of them helps crewmen unfurl the mainsail. Jovial father wears a wrist watch.

19

© National Geographic Society





© National Geographic Society

845

**Malé Fishermen Net Fingerlings for Bait. Their Boat Is Flooded as a Live Box**

16 When the men have loaded their craft almost to the gunwales, they head toward open water a dozen miles or more beyond the reefs. There hovering gulls direct them to schools of tuna weighing three to ten pounds apiece. Bailing live bait overboard, the men fish with short lines on bamboo poles. Silvery, sardine-shaped hooks carry neither barb nor bait. Hungry fish, striking swiftly, are yanked into the boat and released in one smooth motion. ▼ Up comes the seine. The boat's grizzled master inspects its yield.



Walking around Malé was always interesting. The place was walled more than half around, and there were old cannons here and there in emplacements in the walls. I noticed one beautiful weapon made of bronze, decorated with the royal arms of Portugal.

#### Old Cannons Recall Portuguese Rule

The Portuguese were the only Europeans to occupy the Maldives by force. They held control for 10 years, while establishing their power over the Indian Ocean.

The Maldivians took unkindly to their visitors; one night they rose up and slew every Portuguese soldier in the islands. They were never forcefully occupied again.

The lagoon of Malé is so large that it is impossible to see from one end of it to the other; an Indian baggala which sailed one morning was still within the lagoon the next morning, a pinpoint of sail on the horizon.

Other islands lie in the beautiful lagoon. I made a sailing trip to one of them—a low, tree-filled place called Duniu. On it stood a spacious bungalow, a hard tennis court (put there, I was told, by the staff of a Royal Air Force radio station during the war), the remains of an American amphibian aircraft, a large bower anchor and 100 fathoms of cable, two beautiful boats in tin sheds, and a rusty war-built jetty.

Walking by the beach on the seaward side, I came suddenly upon a skull lying beneath a half-tide rock. I wondered whether it was that of one of the Portuguese garrison who had been slaughtered here, or maybe of some fisherman whose thirst-tortured body had been cast up by the sea.

#### Dances Celebrate a Good Catch

I also visited two other islands—Hulele and Wilingili—in Malé lagoon. Hulele's headman mustered the school children for me and showed me the island's industries: copra gathering, and drying tuna and bonito. The deep waters of the lagoon abound in these fish, which are caught from beautiful sailing boats shaped like Viking craft. When the fishermen return with a good catch, they dance along the thwarts in a hazardous manner and bang on skin drums and sing.

The fish are cut into pieces, slightly boiled, and then smoked and dried. There is a tremendous trade in this dried fish, mostly to Ceylon, though it used to be sent to Arabia and East Africa as well.

Another trade (noted by all the commentators who had ever visited the islands) is in cowrie shells. These are beautiful small shells, abundant all around the Maldives. Centuries ago they were so prized they were used as currency, but no one regards them as money now. I could buy a thousand for a Maldivian rupee, less than 10 cents at the time of my visit.

I saw men cutting firewood and women walking across the island to a beautiful white beach. There they did the family wash by simply wetting it in the sea, banging it industriously on the hard sand, and then spreading it on the bushes to dry.

A boy ran up a palm to cut me a coconut, and the drink was very welcome. Hulele was hot and infested with large mosquitoes.

On Wilingili I saw a Government resthouse, where overworked civil servants could bring their families and take it easy for a while. It was another garden island, and it offered splendid fishing off the beach. Tuna, marlin, bonito all swam in great schools there.

#### Ambergris Drifts In from the Sea

The headman offered me a piece of gray stuff which he picked up on the beach. It looked repulsive and of no value. He seemed anxious that I should accept the gift.

"Take it," whispered my guide. "That's ambergris."

Ambergris! I had never seen any before. That is the stuff sperm whales cough up and whalers prize, for it has considerable value as a fixative of the better perfumes.\* The piece I took still smelled of whale.

"We get a lot around our islands," said the guide. "I don't know why. Maybe plenty sperm whales come here to die."

Skimming the lagoon in a swift fishing boat, visiting the old brig which lay rigged down in the lagoon, walking about picturesque and attractive Malé meeting its people and studying its life—my days passed pleasantly and my time was always full.

I was received very kindly by His Highness the Sultan and His Excellency the Prime Minister alike, the one in his palace and the other in his airy and well-built bungalow, which had the only fan in town.

In the old days the Sultan was titled "King  
(Continued on page 849)

\* See "Perfume, the Business of Illusion," by Lonelle Aikman, NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC MAGAZINE, April, 1951.





© National Geographic Society

843





842

**13** A Baggala Sets Sail for Ceylon →

A fleet of Indian and Maldivian baggalas trades between Colombo and the islands. Carved and windowed stern copies the style of 16th-century Portuguese galleons. Lateen rig resembles Arab dhows.

This vessel is somewhat similar in hull to the Pilgrims' *Mayflower*, whose successor, *Mayflower II*, is commanded by Captain Villiers. The baggala is slightly smaller.

Crewman aloft looses the mizzen sail as the ship leaves Malé lagoon. Dried fish in her hold will give way to flour, rice, and kerosene on the return.

**14** Above: Crouched before his firebox, the ship's cook prepares curry, coffee, and bread for the 21-man crew.

↓ Sailors swim ashore from the motorship *Hyacinth* (center), moored in Malé harbor. Fishing vessels jam the lagoon.

© National Geographic Society



industriously in a bowl of the rose water for a quarter of an hour, and applied the resultant fluid to my burns. I was better in three days.

When I left Colombo to visit the Maldives, friends had said in all seriousness, "Take care! The people still believe in witchcraft and know how to use jinn."

I smiled. But I found that in fact there still are magicians in the islands, and official exorcisers of jinn. A jinni, apparently, is an evil spirit which can cause serious harm. In the Maldives, when there is sickness, it is usual first to request one of the qualified sorcerers to come along and try to drive away the jinni, and while I was there the local gazette (published monthly) gave a list of 39 qualified medical men of various types, six of whom were sorcerers.

If the sorcerer's treatment doesn't work, then it is presumed that the illness is not caused by a jinni, and other methods must be used. There is a Pakistani doctor at Malé, with a well-equipped dispensary, but for surgery patients must go to Colombo.

#### How a Sorcerer Casts Out a Jinni

Before scoffing at the idea of casting out a jinni, I reflected that really the Maldivians put first what an increasing number of Western medical men are only now learning—the probability of an illness having a mental cause. So when one of the local sorcerers offered to put on a demonstration for my benefit, I accepted with great interest.

His name was Hajara Mohammed Didi (Didi is a rank, something like Esquire in English), and he was an extraordinary man. He was dressed in the traditional whites of the Maldivian gentleman—white sarong, immaculate white shirt, and well-pressed white jacket. His feet were protected by open sandals, and he wore a gray woolen fez. His powerful, piercing eyes were striking. There was a challenge and a power in them that could not be denied.

Hajara the sorcerer came with my interpreter and the Secretary for Health and another young friend I had made, Abdulla Kaleel. Abdulla was a nobleman of the islands who was studying navigation at the Malé school for pilots. He had been six years at college in Ceylon and was an extremely pleasant young man. He also taught in the high school and worked by day in the customs house. He led a busy life, and he did not believe in jinn.

When Hajara came, we had no jinn for him to cast out, and were grateful for that. So his exercises that morning were purely in the way of demonstration. I half believed that he would not do anything at all.

I was wrong. He called to the kitchen for a few simple utensils—a white soup plate, a small glass with a little water in it, a jar of ink, and a bit of a pointed twig. He sat down beneath one of the orchid bushes and, taking the plate in one hand and the twig in the other, went to work.

If I had not been told that the man was a sorcerer, I would have thought he was playing the children's game of noughts and crosses. All he did, using the twig, was to draw crossed lines on the inside bottom of the plate. The diagram had two upright and two horizontal lines, and he hurriedly scribbled a few Arabic characters in some of the squares. Before I had time to see what these might signify, he erased the whole diagram by dashing water on it.

"This is the moment," my interpreter whispered. "Watch him now!"

I watched, keeping a sharp lookout on the orchid bush in case the face of a jinni might show there. I was not quite sure what such an apparition might be like, but any apparition would do.

#### Water and Words Call No Jinni

Hajara took a sip of the discolored water, holding the plate to his lips.

I saw no jinni.

Hajara mumbled some magic words. The water went cloudy. Still no jinni.

Hajara's face began to work. He looked wild. He swept the garden with fierce glances from his piercing eyes.

No jinni.

Then he got up and walked away. The demonstration was over. He didn't say whether he had seen a jinni.

After all, it was only a demonstration. What had I expected to see? Yet there was one odd thing: that night, the guest bungalow seemed to be haunted. None of us staying there could sleep. I tossed and turned until daybreak and was mightily glad to hear the muezzin calling the faithful to prayer.

I was informed that Hajara had driven jinn out of many men and cured them, but he had never cured a woman. Apparently jinn cannot be exorcised from women, but stay with them always.





840

↑ Sidewalk Artisans  
Fashion Lacquer Vases  
with Primitive Tools 11

Fishing far outstrips other industries in the Maldives, but craftsmen still ply their arts on many of the islands.

Women turn out handmade pillow lace, which the Europeans introduced centuries ago, and weavers produce finely woven mats on hand looms.

Once-flourishing lacquer work is almost a vanished art. Artisans of Turadu Island are the only remaining specialists.

These three demonstrate how they work. Man at left holds a hand-powered lathe which he can fasten in a wooden frame and spin by pulling alternately on each end of the rope. His partner holds a chisel against the mouth of the partially formed vase at the end of the lathe. Axman in center roughs out another vase.

← Slip of the Knife Could  
Spoil a Week's Work 12

Master craftsman Idris Ismael peels away part of a top layer of black lacquer to reveal the red undercoat. Finished articles on the bench show his talent for intricate design.

© National Geographic Society



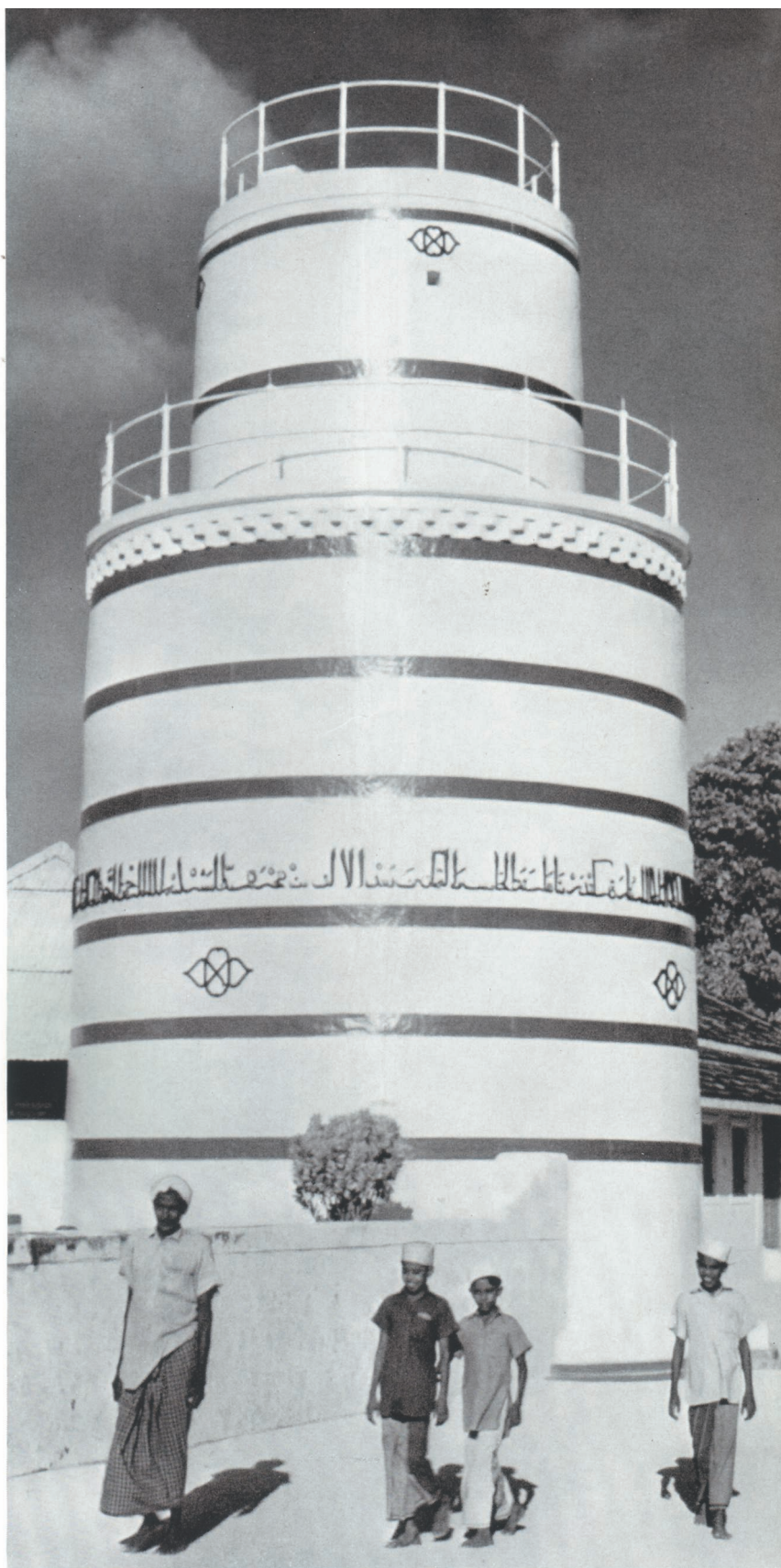


Similar dresses were noted by travelers to the Maldives, of whom the best known are the famed Arab Ibn Batuta and the French adventurer François Pyrard de Laval. Both left accounts of their sojourn, and both married several Maldivian women, so had a better chance to study them than I had.

“I have not seen in the whole world any women whose society is more agreeable,” Ibn Batuta noted 600 years ago. “The wife entrusts to no one the care of her husband’s service: she it is who brings him his food, takes away when he has eaten, washes his hands, presents the water for his ablutions, and covers his feet when he wills to go to sleep.... I married many wives of that country...”

Pyrard de Laval’s ship was wrecked in the islands in 1602, and he was held there five years. His account (published in English by the Hakluyt Society) is the best I have seen of the Maldives. He noted many features which apply equally today, by my own observation, particularly the manner of fishing and of preparing dried fish, and the piety and industry of the Moslem inhabitants.

Ibn Batuta made note of the use of rose water and sandalwood as a lotion. When I was rather badly sunburned during my stay in Malé, and no lotion or ointment I had was of the slightest benefit, a local bonesetter brought some sandalwood and rose water, mixed them carefully by rubbing the sandalwood end



839

**Friday Mosque Dominates Malé Like a Lighthouse**

10

Five times daily the muezzin climbs this minaret to call for prayers. Arabic script mentions the year 1085 A.H. (*am hegira*). The Moslem calendar dates from the Hegira, or flight, of the Prophet from Mecca A.D. 622.

was wakened by the sonorous tones of the muezzin calling the faithful to prayer. After breakfast I would go for long walks around the island with my Maldivian guide and interpreter, who had learned English during World War II when he served with the Royal Air Force on Addu Atoll.

#### Children Stare at White Visitor

On one of the first of these walks we met some small children going to school (the islands are 90 percent literate). When they saw me they stopped, very quietly, and stared at me with the greatest politeness.

"What are they looking at?" I asked.

"You must excuse them, please," my interpreter said gently. "They rarely see a European, so you are a great curiosity."

The sailing ships trading to Malé, he explained, are either Maldivian or Indian, and so are their crews. Addu Atoll is a long way from Malé, and though a flying-boat buoy lay moored off the twin light towers that marked the entrance to the inner harbor, inside the fringing reef, an aircraft was a rare visitor. When they came, from bases in Ceylon, it was on the way to the Seychelles or the island of Diego Garcia, and they did not stay long. This was usually the only contact with Europeans, apart from the very occasional visit by a small steamship which might have white officers aboard. No wonder the children were interested in me!

This was a new experience for me, too. I had never been so completely alone before, not even with the Arabs. The children formed a circle around me, some of the little chaps peering into my countenance with solemn stare from a foot or two away, and before long there was an outer circle of adults behind them, also politely staring.

As interested in them as they were in me, I looked in the children's schoolbooks and saw they were studying Arabic and Maldivian scripts and arithmetic.

#### Girls Go to School at Night

The island city was divided into four wards, and each was responsible for its own elementary schools. The wards combined to build a large, modern secondary school, where the boys were taught by day and the older girls by night. It is considered undignified for girls and young women to be seen on the streets; hence the night schooling.

As a friendly privilege I was invited to

visit the high school by night, when the girls were there. There were about a hundred girls, from 12 years of age to perhaps 16. Even the teachers looked like teen-agers, but I was told that they were married women in their mid-twenties. Perhaps the Maldivian women know the secret of eternal youth, for only the very aged looked old at all.

The girls were all prettily dressed in long frocks with large, pointed collars, long sleeves, and high waists—not a school uniform, but the national style. The dresses were made from colorful gossamer stuff, and the girls' dark tresses were veiled with wisps of gay silk which hung over their shoulders.

Golden ornaments, the gold perhaps taken from the wreck of a galleon, set the girls off, and some of them wore tortoise-shell combs of an exquisite marking. The Maldivian tortoises are noted for their unusual markings, and quantities of the shells are exported to Ceylon, where they are worked into expensive ornaments.

I took some photographs of teachers and pupils, and I visited the high school by day, too, when the boys were there.

#### Homes Have Peering Places for Women

At first I had seen scarcely any older women. But I soon noticed that they were as interested in the stranger as the children were. They had special peering places above their garden walls where they could stand and look over without being seen.

Later, when the soldiers played a football match (which they did with great energy and considerable skill—and in their bare feet), many women came to a special walled enclosure to watch the game. I was able to see the older women then. Most of them wore the same-style dresses as the high school girls, but some elderly ladies still wore an older style national costume, which, I knew, had been in vogue a century before I stepped ashore in the Maldives.

This consisted of an overdress of blue or terra cotta material coming to the knees, and, beneath it, a broad skirt sewn in striped homespun, dropping nearly to the ground. The skirt always had two or three horizontal bands in white. To me the ensemble looked heavy for the intense heat of March in Malé.

These ladies had their hair made up most beautifully, with little buns at the side, and some had combs of great magnificence. They either were barefoot or wore bright sandals.









836

↑ **Island Boys Practice Cricket on a Green Campus in Ceylon**

7

Isolated though the Maldivians are, they boast an amazing literacy rate of 90 percent.

Scholarship winners receive advanced schooling at Colombo, where their government maintains a hostel for them.

These barefooted youths take turns at bat during a respite from studies.

← "Maldivian women seem to possess the secret of eternal youth," says the author. "I found it impossible to guess their ages. Up to 40 or so, they all look like children."

8

Smoking as she strolls, this Hulele Island matron supports her heavy water pipe by hand. She wraps her hair bun in a cloth veil.

**Grimacing Dancers Do a Specialty Number**

9

Full of laughter and contentment, untouched by sophistication, Maldivians lead happy, carefree lives.

Comic faces are an essential part of this performance. While the boys twist and stamp, orchestra members clap hands and beat out the rhythm on drums, bones, and bamboo tubes.

© National Geographic Society



and men were twisting cordage from strands of coir, and making an excellent job of it. From a shed by the waterfront a stream of men were carrying sacks filled with dried fish. The sacks looked enormous and must have weighed well over 100 pounds, but the men were dancing and singing as they worked.

**No Traffic, No Policemen**

There was no sign of an automobile anywhere, nor so much as a ricksha to be seen. No traffic lights blinked their imperious messages; no harassed policeman stood on duty; indeed, there was not a single policeman, or a uniformed figure, anywhere. No newsboys shouted their wares—no vendors, no police, no traffic. What an island was this!

The city was all so neat and well kept and laid out with such geometric precision that it looked as if some martinet of an old gunnery admiral had laid it out and written the regulations for its cleanliness. But the only admiral there was the Captain of the Port, called the Emir of the Sea, and he laid down no rules. As far as I could ever gather, no outside influence had led to all this orderliness and peace. It was spontaneous, and it was 100 percent Maldivian.

I took a great liking to the place on sight, and the liking grew the longer I stayed.

The Sultan gave me an attractive, airy bungalow in a flower garden on a wide street called Orchid Lane. Lizards scampered on the sand and climbed the walls at sundown. Flying foxes screeched by night and pelted mangoes on the roof.

Crows squawked every day but Fridays, when soldiers went about the streets with shotguns to dispatch them. That day the cunning birds kept quiet. They were the scavengers for the town, but it was so clean they had little to do and were a noisy nuisance. And all day kites buzzed above me, except when a rain squall came.

All the Maldive Islands lie close to the Equator, the farthest south being actually 40 nautical miles south of what sailors call the Line. It was late February and March when I was there, and the influence of the northeast monsoon was wearing out. So on most afternoons there was a good doldrums squall—a lot of rain and not much wind, and afterwards the whole atmosphere seemed clean and fresh as if it had been washed.

I settled in at my bungalow on Orchid Lane, where no telephone ever shrilled and no mail came. It was sometimes hot but never stifling. The mosquitoes were a bit of a plague, and the Secretary for Health told me they carried Maldivian fever, a kind of malarial illness which can be serious for European and Maldivian alike. I learned that nearly every European who spent more than 10 days in the islands seemed to contract this fever, which could be fatal. I covered myself with mosquito repellent, but the rascals liked it. Yet somehow I escaped the fever.

Next to the guest bungalow stood a big mosque, and in the cool of the mornings I

**Dockmen Hoist Bags of Rice in Malé Harbor**

The Maldivian staff of life comes from Burma and China by way of Ceylon. Clerk hands a stick to each sack-laden worker as a tally when he leaves the boat. Part of this load trickles to the pier.

6







5 **Maldives Break the Blue Monotony of the Indian Ocean, 450 Miles Southwest of Ceylon**

More than 2,000 palm-clad coral isles make up the Maldives, a tropical paradise seldom visited by outsiders. Once the islands stood athwart the main sailing routes of the Indian Ocean; fringing reefs trapped many a spice-laden galleon. Today most steamer lanes cut north of the sprawling archipelago. Early this year Great Britain announced plans to re-establish an airfield built during World War II in Addu Atoll.

northern end. All the land was low, just a few feet above sea level, marked only by palms and the buildings of Malé.

I landed on Malé's waterfront at a fine teak landing stage by the post office and the customs house. Malé looked a wonderful place. Two smiling figures met me, each wheeling a magnificent bicycle, which I soon discovered was the common means of transport in the islands. Only the Sultan had a small automobile, and there were two light trucks for handling cargoes.

I walked between the cyclists, who were the Chief of Customs and the Secretary for Health, and felt as if I were strolling through a well-kept flower garden. I had heard of the "flowered isles of the South Seas" and had even spent some time fruitlessly looking for such places. Now, unexpectedly, I had found one!

Orchids were everywhere, and flowering creepers flung crimson and violet blooms lavishly over every wall. Breadfruit trees, mangoes, papaw, coconut, and bananas filled the garden of every house, and the great

square before the Sultan's palace, where it was not a luscious green, was ablaze with color.

I entered all this through a well-built white arch by the waterfront, which was crowded with small ships of a distinctive type, all of them with large crews of laughing boys and men. From the great square, in a precise rectangular formation, wide, sanded streets led to the four corners of the island. The streets blazed white in the hot morning sun. Only the Sultan's palace and some of the Government buildings were two-storied. The rest were spacious and well-built bungalows.

There was a shopping area near the main gardens, and as I walked along with my new companions, chatting in English (which they had learned at school in Ceylon), I noticed several shops selling magnificent kites, beautifully decorated with tinsel and pictures. Other shops were well stocked with all sorts of provisions, patent medicines, stationery, and household requirements of all kinds.

On the square, a group of barefooted sailors were sewing on what looked like a huge lateen mainsail. In an alley near the shops boys





good English, and life aboard was pleasant. There were six other passengers, who slept in the bunks. The crew slept on deck, and so did I, on the high, sloping poop. There was a wooden platform just behind the wheel, where the captain and mates took their rest. Up there it was always delightfully cool, and the sound of the water slipping past the quietly moving ship was peaceful.

I was especially interested in all that went on aboard ship, for later I was to sail a reproduction of the Pilgrims' *Mayflower* across the North Atlantic, and the *baggala* was almost the same size, with somewhat the same rig, except she had no square sails.\*

#### Life Primitive Aboard a *Baggala*

The life was primitive. Cooking was done at a firebox on deck, and water was carried in iron tanks. The ship had unloaded dried tuna from the Maldives and in return loaded rice and flour and drums of kerosene. She also carried the mails, for she was a Maldivian Government ship.

A few years ago there was a fleet of 20 of these vessels sailing between the Maldives and Ceylon, with an occasional visit to Calcutta. There was also a famous old brig. Now there is no brig, and only eight *baggalas*. Such ships are no longer being built, and soon they will disappear (page 842).†

The weather was good and the winds favorable for the Colombo to Malé run. Outside Colombo's harbor we set a lateen tops'l; porpoises and flying fish skimmed before us. Soon the city's modern skyline dropped from sight, and we were in a world of our own.

Our passengers were interesting fellows. One was a sick old man returning from a fruitless visit to a Colombo hospital, where surgeons had found him too weak for a needed operation. It was the second time he had made the journey, the second time he had been turned back for the same reason. He had a fine face and a cheerful smile, despite the state of his health.

He was a professional storyteller, and he sat in the shade of the longboat, the only boat the *Glory* carried, and spun yarns all day to the crew. Unfortunately they were in the Maldivian language, which I could not understand, but the way he held those tough mariners spellbound indicated they must have been wonderful yarns. The old lad was returning home to die, but he kept his spirits.

There were also three young fishermen who

had been blown away from the Maldives in a storm eight months earlier. Their boat had capsized and tossed out her gear. Only the fact that they were strong swimmers had saved their lives. They had righted the boat and sat down to last out their ordeal; the wind was southwest and strong, and all India lay to the northeast of them.

Their craft, though frail, was seaworthy and could be trusted to drift. So they sat there for 10 days, hungry and without water. Then their boat touched somewhere along the Malabar Coast, and they dragged themselves ashore, more dead than alive. Now they were going home to carry on fishing again.

Capt. Mohammed Maniku said that Maldivian fishermen are often blown away like that. Mostly they survive. They are excellent seamen, with a rugged endurance. He knew one who was picked up by an oil tanker bound on a long voyage to South Africa. The castaway spoke only Maldivian, which no one understood, and it was years before anyone found out where the poor fellow lived. But now he, too, was back in Malé fishing.

We were only three days sailing to Malé. The captain entered the big lagoon by night. There was moonlight, and we sailed close by several sandy islets, near enough to hear breakers curling on the beaches and the monsoon sighing in the palms. I knew then that our captain was an able sailor, both to find the entrance to the lagoon by night and to have the courage to sail in.

In the morning we were anchored off a flat island at the southern end of a large lagoon, so large that I could not see the islets at the

\* See "We're Coming Over on the *Mayflower*," by Alan Villiers, NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC MAGAZINE, May, 1957.

† See "Ceylon, Island of the 'Lion People,'" by Helen T. Gilles, NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC MAGAZINE, July, 1948.

#### ④ Sails Converge in Malé Lagoon; → Coconut Palms Rise Out of the Sea

Captain Villiers sailed to the Maldives aboard a *baggala*—rakish Indian Ocean craft of a type now fast disappearing (page 842). Borne on the northeast monsoon, his ship (left foreground) made the voyage from Ceylon in three days. Bucking the same winds, such a vessel may require a month to return to Colombo. Here she delivers mail to a launch flying the harbor master's flag. A lighter approaches to transfer cargo.

Dunidu islet (right) and distant Hulele are wooded dots on the rim of Malé lagoon.

© National Geographic Society





© National Geographic Society

831

↑ **Malé Says "Welcome" with a Kite**  
 ② Kite flying is the Maldivian's favorite sport. Men and boys alike sail big tailless toys in the monsoon winds. Noisemakers attached to frames roar like jets and whine like sawmills.

↓ **Bonnets Ward Off the Tropic Sun**  
 ③ Maldivians, a people of uncertain origin, speak a language akin to Sinhalese. Education is compulsory. Necklace of pieces of eight may have come from the wreck of an old Portuguese galleon.







© National Geographic Society

830

Kodachromes by Alan Villiers

**Sultan of the Maldives, Flanked by His Palace Retinue, Parades to the Friday Mosque**

①

For beauty and serenity the isolated, sun-drenched Maldives have few peers. There are no police, no traffic, no television—and orchids bloom over many a wall. Under British protection, the islands are ruled by an independent Sultan with 93,000 subjects, virtually all Moslems. Here, dressed in a green ankle-length robe, His Highness Mohammed Farid Didi walks to prayers through the white-sand streets of Malé, his capital and chief port. Attendants wear sarongs and turbans. Sultan's flag leads the procession.



---

# The Marvelous Maldive Islands

829

Sun-drenched Atolls in the Indian Ocean Hold a Seagirt Sultanate  
Where Phones Rarely Ring and Kites Fly from Office Windows

BY ALAN VILLIERS

*With Illustrations from Photographs by the Author*

“SOME stamps, please,” I said, “for a letter to the United States.”

The clerk looked up and grinned.

“Ah, stamps. Yes, yes,” he said, not making much effort to produce any. He had only one hand to work with, which seemed a little strange. Even stranger was the fact that with the other hand he was slowly manipulating a piece of twine, which led mysteriously upward out of the barred and glassless window beside him. Through this the twine seemed to disappear into thin air.

What was this? The Indian rope trick at last—the trick all travelers have heard about, where a fakir flings up a rope and a boy climbs it and disappears—could this be it?

If so, where was the boy?

## All Maldive Men Like Kites

I turned inquiringly to my guide, Mr. Ibrahim Didi, the all-knowledgeable one, who also was a customs and postal clerk when there was nobody about to guide, which was often.

“He likes kites,” answered Mr. Didi. “All men in the Maldive Islands like kites. Look!”

I followed the sweep of his eyes into the clear blue sky of the monsoon morning outside. There, sure enough, a kite was performing skillful aerobatics, five or six hundred feet up. It was a very special kind of kite, all blue and shining gold, and a sheen of flickering white led away from it like a gossamer thread—right to the window where the clerk was sitting. He was cheerfully flying a kite while carrying on his job.

I had known earlier that I had come to a most unusual group of happy islands. But, after a lifetime of wandering the face of the earth, I was astonished to find at last a clerk who had time and inclination to play with kites out of his office window.

Flung on the map of the Indian Ocean like a double line of blots from some old chart-maker's pen, the Maldives are off the main steamer tracks and, at present, off commercial air routes. This little-known and seldom-visited group of atolls, lying south of the great Indian peninsula, numbers at least

2,000 islands and islets. Two hundred and fifteen of these islands support some 93,000 people, virtually all Moslems. The land area they occupy is about 115 square miles, but the zone of sea around and between the islands is immense (map, page 834).

The capital is the island city of Malé, the only port of entry. The 8,000 inhabitants of Malé live in good homes built beside straight streets and wide sandy roads. The whole island is only a mile long and half a mile or so wide. Though the Maldives are a democracy under British protection, no Britishers live there; in fact, no Europeans of any kind are resident anywhere in the islands—not so much as a consular official or a merchant.

During World War II, Gan Island in Addu Atoll, southernmost of the Maldive group, held an RAF airfield. It was later abandoned, but this year Britain obtained Maldivian consent to re-establish facilities on Gan to fuel and repair aircraft.

## Sailing by *Baggala* to Malé

I had long wanted to visit the Maldives, but it was not easy to arrange. No steamship, no airplane would take me there. The chief means of communication was an old sailing ship from the port of Colombo in Ceylon.

She was a *baggala*, or *buggalow*, a type common in the western Indian Ocean for centuries. I had sailed in such ships before when I was with the Arabs.\* She had a lateen rig and a hull like a galleon of old.

The only accommodation the *baggala* offered was a “great cabin,” which took up the afterpart of the big teak hull and contained eight shelflike bunks, a writing table, an old hurricane lamp, and miscellaneous goods the Maldivian crew were taking home. Prominent among these were umbrellas.

The beautiful carved stern of this venerable craft reminded me of the models of Portuguese caravels I had seen in Lisbon. Her melodious name was the *Glory of Mercy*.

The captain, Mohammed Maniku, spoke

\* See “Sailing with Sindbad's Sons,” by Alan Villiers, NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC MAGAZINE, November, 1948.