

MALDIVES BACKWARDS, BUT INTRIGUING

By Joe McGowan

I reminisced often reminisce about wading ashore to enter Male, capital of the Maldivian Islands, off the southwestern tip of India.

I think back fondly over that visit and realize how lucky I was to find a society little touched by modern civilization with friendly, but shy people.

How much it has changed over the years is hard to determine. You don't see news from the Maldives. One of the country's islands has become a resort popular with Europeans. But a travel agent I spoke with in Italy a few years ago said visitors fly into the resort's own airstrip and there is no connection with the capital island.

Shortly after I arrived, a large loudspeaker in front of a government building began broadcasting Radio Moscow's English news. An hour later, it was Radio Peking. I thought to myself, "the commies have made inroads here."

But then on the third hour, the loudspeaker carried news from BBC. And on the fourth hour, it was Voice of America! This nation of 100,000 people was getting an even ideological split on foreign news.

It was virtually their only source of news as there was no newspaper and no TV. Of course, not many spoke English so the broadcasts had a limited audience.

During my week's visit, I walked the entire island, all of one mile wide and one-half mile long. All of the "streets" were white sand. Police patrolled on bicycles.

As I walked down the narrow lanes between rows of neat, whitewashed houses, I was aware curious people were pulling back curtains and staring at the pale foreigner.

I saw only a few women and all of them wore ankle length dresses with long sleeves, even though it was very hot and humid in this country about 10 degrees latitude north of the equator. The men, however, wore knee length sarong-like outfits, sometimes with short-sleeved western style shirts.

The Maldives were completely Moslem and as a result there were no dogs and no pigs.

Justice was meted out by the sheikh and sometimes a justice council consisting of three men. The death penalty could be imposed, but I was told it was quite rare.

The most common punishment was called "banishment". A person ordered banished would be taken in a boat to one of the many uninhabited islands and put ashore with some limited provisions. He would be expected to exist without outside assistance for the term of his sentence, sometimes five to 10 years.

The banished person would live by catching fish, eating and drinking from coconuts, or catching rodents or other creatures on the island. At the end

of his sentence, a boat would come to pick him up, if he was still alive.

There was no such thing as a souvenir or convenience store. The cook on the freighter that took me to the Maldives, would prepare a sack lunch and thermos of coffee which I took ashore each day.

Most afternoons, while the local populace appeared to be indoors taking a siesta, I walked over to a portion of the beach, which was enclosed by a coral reef and went for a swim. The waters were warm, and clearer and bluer even than Bahamian waters. I gathered several Cowry shells, brightly colored, small seashells, which have been used as currency in some parts of Africa.

I also was told Cowries could be used to purchase a wife! Except for photos, the Cowries were about my only souvenirs of a visit to a truly fascinating corner of the world.

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