Alif Dhaal Atoll: islands, resorts and how to get there

Alif Dhaal Atoll

The only guesthouse atoll with its own international airport, and the one place in the Maldives where whale sharks are resident all year.

CAPITAL ISLAND
Mahibadhoo

ISLANDS IN TOTAL
105

INHABITED ISLANDS
10

RESORT ISLANDS
18

AIRPORT
Maamigili (VAM), with direct international flights

CURRENCY
Maldivian Rufiyaa

LANGUAGE
Dhivehi, English widely used

Complete travel guide - 2026 / 2027 Edition

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Your complete guide to Alif Dhaal Atoll

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Magic Maldives

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1. THE ATOLL IN NUMBERS

Capital island	Mahibadhoo
Islands in total	105
Inhabited islands	10
Resort islands	18
Airport	Maamigili (VAM), with direct international flights
Getting here from Malé	about 2 hrs by speedboat; public ferry 6-8 hrs, three times a week

South Ari is the atoll that gives independent travellers the marquee Maldives wildlife experience. The South Ari Marine Protected Area holds the only resident whale shark population in the country that you can reliably see from a guesthouse island.

2. GETTING HERE

Three ways. Fly to Maamigili and take a short boat. Take a speedboat from Malé, roughly two hours. Or take the public ferry, which is by far the cheapest but takes six to eight hours and runs three days a week.

3. WHALE SHARKS

They are here all year, which is unusual - most whale shark sites in the world are seasonal. Trips run most mornings from Dhigurah and Maamigili. Numbers are best when the water is calm, so the dry months make for easier days on the boat rather than more sharks.

4. WHERE TO STAY

Dhigurah is the main guesthouse island and has grown faster than anywhere else in the Maldives. Dhangethi is smaller and quieter with a long history of hosting visitors. Maamigili is convenient if you are flying in.

5. WHAT IT IS KNOWN FOR

The South Ari Marine Protected Area, where whale sharks are seen year-round, and Dhigurah - the fastest-growing guesthouse island in the country.

6. WORTH YOUR TIME

- Whale sharks year-round in the South Ari Marine Protected Area
- Dhigurah - a 2 km sandspit and the country's fastest-growing guesthouse island
- Maamigili airport, so you can skip the long boat ride if you prefer
- Dhangethi, Omadhoo and Hangnaameedhoo for quieter stays
- Manta cleaning stations in season alongside the whale sharks

7. WHEN TO GO

Whale sharks year-round on the south rim; January to April for the clearest water

8. BEFORE YOU GO

Dhigurah and Dhangethi both have bikini beaches. No alcohol on the islands. Dhigurah's sandbank stretches for two kilometres off the southern tip and is the island's best free attraction.

9. COMMON QUESTIONS

Where can I swim with whale sharks in the Maldives?

The South Ari Marine Protected Area, on the southern rim of Alif Dhaal atoll. Trips leave most mornings from Dhigurah and Maamigili, and unlike most whale shark sites in the world this one has sharks all year.

Can I reach South Ari by ferry from Malé?

Yes, but it is a long day - six to eight hours, three days a week. Most travellers take a two-hour speedboat or fly to Maamigili instead.

Which is the best island to stay on in South Ari?

Dhigurah for whale sharks and the sandbank, Dhangethi for a quieter island, Maamigili if you are arriving by air.

Everything in this guide is bookable with local Maldivian operators.

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