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Bénédicte Auvray

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Tourism in the Maldives: experiencing the difference from the Maldives

Ms. Bénédicte AUVRAY

PhD candidate

Geography

bene_auvray@yahoo.fr

University of Le Havre (Cirtai/UMR IDEES)

+33 2 32 74 41 35

25, rue Philippe LEBON

76086 LE HAVRE Cedex

France

Abstract

According to the official website of the Maldives Tourism Promotion Board, the country looks like a white and blue world for honeymooners, divers and budding Robinson Crusoe. Indeed it is the international representation of the Maldives.

The reason for this touristic development is segregation: vacationers are allowed (and waited) to spend time in luxury resorts whereas Maldivian inhabitants are contained on local islands.

In view of this phenomenon of social and spatial separation, the term “visit” is inappropriate. “Experience” would be more suitable: Maldivian island-hotel is a model of enclosure, repeated at different scales and concerning different people. It enables tourists to maintain their habits in a heavenly environment while the opportunity of a dreaded “cultural contamination” is contained. Staff members are actually the only people experiencing the frontier, both knowing and living in what seems to be two parallel worlds: island-hotels form their workplace and home.

Island-hotel is a social, spatial and politic construction where exotic imaginative world comes true. Moreover it is an enclave where enclosure, containment have different uses: on the one hand staging the resort to offer a landscape and a cultural context beyond reality, on the other hand avoiding cohabitation (apart from the aforesaid case of resorts staff).

Keywords: Maldives – Resort – Enclosure – Enclave – Exoticism

Résumé

Selon l'organisme maldivien en charge du tourisme (Maldives Tourism Promotion Board), les Maldives sont la destination rêvée des touristes en lune de miel en attente d'un paradis blanc sable et bleu lagon, des plongeurs ou des Robinson Crusoe en herbe. Il s'agit d'ailleurs de la représentation des Maldives à l'international.

Le moteur de ce développement touristique est la ségrégation : les touristes sont censés passer leur temps dans de luxueux complexes hôteliers alors que les Maldiviens vivent uniquement sur des îles destinées à la vie locale.

Etant donné ce phénomène de séparation socio-spatiale, il est difficile de dire que les touristes visitent le pays. On dira plus aisément et plus justement qu'ils font l'expérience d'une destination. L'île-hôtel maldivienne est un modèle d'enclavement multi-scalaire et qui concerne différents publics. Ce mode de développement touristique permet aux touristes de maintenir leur mode de vie dans un cadre paradisiaque tandis qu'une hypothétique contamination culturelle de l'identité maldivienne est contenue au sein des complexes hôteliers. De fait, le personnel hôtelier est l'unique catégorie de personnes à faire l'expérience de cette frontière entre deux mondes, en vivant dans tant dans les îles-hôtels qui sont leur lieu de travail que dans les îles locales, leur foyer initial.

L'île-hôtel est une construction sociale, spatiale et politique où vient prendre corps l'imaginaire exotique. De plus, il s'agit de lieux clos où l'enclavement, le retranchement ont différents usages : d'une part il s'agit de mettre en scène un complexe hôtelier pour offrir un cadre paysager et culturel au-delà de la réalité quotidienne, et d'autre part, l'enjeu est d'éviter le côtoiement entre les touristes et les Maldiviens (à l'exclusion notable du personnel des îles-hôtels).

Mots-clés : Maldives – Complexe hôtelier – Enclavement – Exotisme

Tourism and its stakes in a Muslim country

Since the early seventies, the Republic of Maldives considers tourism as a unique opportunity for its economic growth. On that point of view, it is successful: according to the latest statistical results, tourism represents year after year an important and increasing part of the GNP (27% in 2008). Moreover the number of tourist arrivals is still increasing (as the number of resorts) despite the tsunami in 2004.

Since the beginning in the 1970s, the Maldivian state has privileged up-market tourism for couples; most of them are honeymooners. Tourism development based on the principle of the island-hotel is an economic, political, moral and religious decision. Due to the very small size of the Maldivian islands in the archipelago, each island (almost islet) has a specific use in the organization of the country. For instance, among the 200 local islands (*i.e.* inhabited islands), Malé is the capital-island, Thilafushi is known as trash island for being the dump site of the country and Hulhumalé is the airport-island. Specialization is both common and adapted to the context of an archipelagic micro-state.

As a political and religious decision, tourism development is based on further specialization, *i.e.* segregation. To preserve Maldivian Muslim inhabitants from westerner¹ tourists and to avoid a dreaded contamination of Maldivian identity, tourism (and tourists) are contained on different islands. Actually the social, economic and cultural background of tourists and inhabitants are different but spatial separation increases that difference.

Tourism takes place in dedicated islands: islands-hotels. First islands hotels have been built near the airport and the capital city, in north and south Malé atolls, then in closest atolls like Ari. Nowadays, there are 98 hotels-islands in the whole Maldivian archipelago even if Ari and Malé atolls are still the main seats.

This social and spatial separation is suitable for political stakeholders whose aim seems to be checking and watching tourists mobility but tourist themselves are satisfied with this phenomenon because it enables them to live a so-called dream come true.

Organizing a system of exception(s)

Social and spatial segregation is the only principle organizing tourism but contrary to what one might think, this is not enough to create a touristic destination nor to avoid influences on the Maldivian way of life. Thus it supposes some adaptations and legal exceptions. Alcohol consumption will be the first example discussed in this paper. Alcohol consumption and

purchase are forbidden by law and religion in the country. There are two major exceptions: the airport and islands-hotels. Such as any other airport, Hulhumalé has a duty free zone where alcohol and liquors are available. In the picture below, nothing mentions food interdicts and there is no clue to guess the exact location of this duty free zone: it just looks like a cosmopolitan space without local references.



Picture 1: Malé International airport : (il)legal alcohol (Auvray B., Feb. 2010)

Moreover tourists are allowed to drink alcohol and cocktails in their island-hotel. Maybe drinking a pina colada or a dry martini at sunset in front of the lagoon is part of a honeymoon travel! But this situation is very specific to tourists in resorts. This is not the case in Malé even if tourists are allowed to visit the islandⁱⁱ : as a local island, alcohol isn't available in hotels, bars or restaurants, neither for tourists, nor inhabitants. Maldivian waiters (with a pink shirt in picture 2) and barmen aren't allowed to taste beverages. To learn preparing cocktails and advising customers about wines, they can only smell drinks.



Picture 2: A common place: the bar of an island-hotel (Auvray B., Feb. 2010)

Clothing is another example of this concept of exception applied to tourism. On local islands (where visits are controlled by a guide and authorized only during the daytime), anybody is

asked to have a correct wearing, especially women. There is no legal instruction about veil : many Maldivian women wear it but full veil is forbidden. Women have to get dressed so that thighs and cleavage are not bare. In resorts, it is quite different: women are plenty allowed to wear skirts, bikinis (which are forbidden in local islands). Only nudism remains illegal and involves the responsibility of the nudist and the hotel manager. While visiting local islands, tourists have to adapt their clothing and behaviour : eating with the right hand for instance. Airports and islands-hotels, according to the aforesaid examples, can be considered as international places out of the Maldivian cultural and legal context, places adapted to westerner and touristic uses. These spatial and legal exceptions are reinforced by discontinuities and enclosure.

Staging an utopia

Insularity and separation enable tourism stakeholders, hotel managers to stage resorts and create a further gap between how the country is and how the country is experienced. Touristic experience is based on well-known tropical items: white sand, clear and blue waters, palm trees, coconuts, a “sea, sand and sun” *cliché* (Cf. picture 3).



Picture 3: Angsana Ihuru, the tropical luxury paradise (Auvray B., Feb. 2010)

On that point of view, the Maldivian archipelago is a paradise because this sightseeing is very common in the country and the smallness of most of the islands is a popular special feature for tourists. They want to enjoy a heavenly tropical place and experience and to live in a peaceful island (in a much more comfortable way than Robinson Crusoe, even if this character is often quoted in travelogues).

Even though the landscape is the same for each island, the atmosphere in the resorts is different because of the targetted customer and the corporate image of each brand/resort: atolls are neutral places and the brand image goes through staging.

The picture above illustrates the so-called Maldivian tropical authenticity. Villas are hidden behind palmtrees and bushes to preserve intimacy. Roofs are covered with palm leaves, a white sand beach in the foreground surrounds the island. These elements convey a peaceful atmosphere, which was the aim of the brand (Angsana, belonging to Banyan Tree company). In this tiny space, where less than ten minutes are enough to walk around the island and its forty-five villas, most of the customers are couples. Indeed each bungalow has its own private outdoor jacuzzi. The description of the resort confirms this luxury and heavenly atmosphere: *“Ihuru is an exquisite tropical paradise waiting to be discovered. Blessed with palm-fringed beaches, crystal clear waters and pristine house reefs, the eco and guest-friendly retreat is located on the North Malé Atoll, just 20 minutes by speedboat from Malé”*.

The second example I will discuss in this paper is quite different from Ihuru. Kandooma (see below) is a larger resort welcoming families. The atmosphere due to the size of the island (124 rooms) and the numerous customers has something of a city. It looks both exotic and urban. The coconut buildings are the reception desk and the restaurant.



Picture 4: Kandooma resort, building a fiction (Auvray B., Feb. 2010)

In this case, coconut seem to be such an important item in the exotic imaginary about islands that it has become an architectural model and a symbolic element of the resort whereas in the first example, architecture tends to look natural and authentic to build a comfortable and discrete “nest” for tourist. Islands are conceived and staged as protective and ideal places (MOLES & ROHMER, 1982), almost unreal places. Moreover, Maldivian islands-hotels are stages : discontinuities, separation, segregation create a theater where there is a world on the stage, on the scene (GOFFMAN, 1973) and a world in backstage. Local islands and the staff zone in each resort are part of this backstageⁱⁱⁱ which is unknown and sometimes hidden for the tourist.

The Maldives Tourism Promotion Board presents Maldives as the “sunny side of life”. Here is below the other side of life.



Picture 5: View on a local island (Auvray B., Feb. 2010)

This picture is taken from Kandooma resort. On the right a customer is coming out of water. A local island is in the background. Despite social and spatial segregation, up-market resorts and fishermen villages remain very close. This fishermen island is visited by tourists and especially the customers of Kandooma resort because it is the closest one.

During an interview in the resort, I've been told by a woman (customer of the resort) that during a previous trip in the Maldives she had visited such an island. When I asked her why, she answered: *“Because you have to see everything. When you're a tourist you gotta see everything. And it's part of life too. They're poor but, well, it's life”*. The Maldives are not a destination for slum tourism but the only particularity in the country is the possibility to make desert islands exotic and comfortable places. There's no cultural or historic tourism, very few handicrafts. So visiting fishermen island is conceived as a touristic entertainment just as snorkeling and scuba-diving.

Still, tourists may ignore these cultural differences and the specific benefits they're enjoying. There are several reasons: in touristic enclaves, customers are not used to visiting and prefer enjoying the seaside, practicing snorkeling, scuba diving or sun bathing. Moreover, the travel is organized from the very beginning to the end so that they don't have anything to think about: speedboats or seaplanes (for the furthest resorts) are chartered to carry customers from and to the airport without change in Malé or any other island.

To conclude...

Despite enclosure, the Maldives are a part of a globalized world. Changes are emerging and question this organized separation between tourists and inhabitants.

First of all tourism is an important job provider but surprisingly, it might not be a good job provider. Working in tourism (as a waiter for instance) is considered as an opportunity of earning money during a few years and then going back to the family island or leaving the country to study abroad, in South Asia or North American. The way of life for employees in resorts is hard: men live during month in the resort, in the staff area, away from their families. Women employment is an example of the slow changes in the Maldivian society nowadays. Because of conservatism and the way gender are considered, men are almost only the only people at work. Still for several years, the rate of women at work is slowly increasing. Even if Maldivian men and foreign women (from Sri Lanka ou Philippines for instance) are still more numerous, Maldivian women employment is not such a taboo issue.



Picture 6: Adverts in Malé (Auvray B., Feb.2010)

The last reason for talking of social changes may seem anecdotal: it concerns consumption goods (pictures 6 & 7). In the streets and on TV, there is plenty of advertisements for mobile phones and internet packages. Whereas segregation was supposed to preserve Maldivians from foreign influences, anybody (or at least young people) yearns for a usual way of life, which may leads to funny situations (picture 7. A sport car is definitely a symbol of success but is useless in such a case: Malé is less than 2 km².



Picture 7: Common and uncommon vehicles in Malé (Auvray B., Feb.2010)

To conclude, island hotel is a political construction based on segregation which satisfies tourists enjoying peaceful and heavenly fictional landscapes, and politic stakeholders who consider(ed) spatial separation as the only solution to develop tourism and preserve Maldivian Muslim identity.

These times, President Nasheed was aiming to promote a tourism which wouldn't be that up-market but the project has many opponents. Being a touristic destination means social changes, adaptations, cosmopolitanism. Maldivian statesmen are not all ready for these mutations. Moreover the coexistence of Islam and tourists, honeymooners is still nowadays a complicated and polemical issue in a conservative context.

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ⁱ More than 70% of the tourists come from Europe (Italy, United Kingdom and France). (<http://planning.gov.mv/yearbook2009/Tourism/10.1.htm>)

ⁱⁱAccommodation can even be found in one of the hotels of Malé but the landscape doesn't look like heaven as it is supposed to be in the archipelago : Malé is a crowded tiny city very far from the « sea, sand and sun » fantasy.

ⁱⁱⁱEmployees live night and day in the resort away from their families. A part of each island-hotel, called staff zone, is devoted to their everyday life.