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A CHAT WITH MOHAMAD NASHEED

China Discovers **the Maldives**

Talking tourism with the island President.

BY RON GLUCKMAN

When Chinese travelers are choosing a beach resort overseas, they're now picking the Maldives more often than Bali, Phuket or any other destination. The country got 61,000 visitors from China in 2009 and then 119,000 last year, with newlyweds on their honeymoons making up much of the business. In the first nine months of this year the number of Chinese visitors reached 146,668, a 62% jump from the same period in 2010. A new airline focused on the China market, MegaMaldives, started flights this year from Hong Kong, Beijing, Shanghai and Chongqing. China Southern, Sichuan and Hainan airlines also are adding service. Last month China opened an embassy in the Indian Ocean outpost. *FORBES ASIA* sat down with President Mohamed Nasheed in his Male office.

FORBES ASIA: Tourism keeps this nation of 1,200 islands afloat, and China is sending 22% of your visitors this year—almost twice as much as your second-biggest market, the U.K. What are you doing to keep this business coming?

MOHAMED NASHEED: We have to learn about Chinese culture. There is so much to learn. China is on the rise, and the Chinese people are seeking where they want to go in the world. If we're not the place, we will lose out, and they will move on. But so far we are successful, and the future is bright.

The Maldives are part of a trend of Chinese sampling higher-end, more remote spots—Fiji added flights to

Hong Kong two years ago, switching its focus from Japan, where the market had leveled off. Do you expect the number of Chinese visitors to hit a ceiling or keep rising?

We see nothing to indicate it will not continue to rise in coming years. Now we want to expand the market. We need to add more attractions, ways for visitors to enjoy the beauty of the Maldives without disrupting the environment.

You are negotiating with a Chinese company, Chengdu Century City, to develop a series of islands with resort hotels, shops and other attractions in what would be the country's biggest project. Isn't this a huge leap?

We are moving ahead but also considering all the impacts. I'm told, if we know what we want, it's best to

work with one big partner. Then it's easier to do something of this scale, to get everything right. What we want is very clear. We don't want to disrupt our balance. Protecting what we have is the most important thing to us. We aren't desperate for investment. We don't have to be hasty.

You're planning to allow resorts on inhabited islands and reversing a policy that segregates resorts from the Muslim population. Why?

We've segregated ourselves in these little islands for too long. The tourists don't get to see the real Maldives and Maldivian culture. In the past there was a desire to segregate the Maldives from certain influences, but it also kept us from ideas and knowledge. Maldivians are Muslims but modern. The time has come to end the segregation from the outside world. 



"We've segregated ourselves in these islands for too long": Maldives President Mohamed Nasheed.

SINAN HUSSAIN/AP PHOTO

