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Understanding the Consumer

'At Your Service' Spotlight: The Maldives - pivoting in response to a pandemic



A guide from Secret Paradise Maldives welcoming visitors during the pandemic. Photo courtesy of Ruth Franklin

The Maldives, a remote archipelago of 1,000 tiny islands in the Indian Ocean, is heavily reliant on tourism and the industries that support it. In 2019, Maldives welcomed 1.7 million inbound arrivals, an increase of 14.7% on the previous year, and tourism revenues accounted for 56.6% of the Maldives' GDP. The pandemic therefore had a devastating effect on the economy. Soon after the COVID-19 outbreak in January 2020, the Maldives experienced a wave of cancellations after its largest visitor source market, China, suspended group and package vacations. In March, when a lockdown was imposed to control the spread of the coronavirus, tourist arrivals fell to almost zero.

The shutdown naturally had a negative impact on jobs in the Maldives, where one-third of adult males and a quarter of women work in tourism jobs. At the beginning of the tourism shutdown, 90% of resorts sent their workers home without pay or cut their salaries by 15-20%. Ruth Franklin, Co-founder of Secret Paradise Maldives said she took the decision in March 2020 to cancel all remaining tours, and her team of guides were given a 14-day self-isolation period at home. "We then moved into a working from home format with the guide team pivoting their skills from an in-the-field role to a supporting and developing the business role, with each of them working on tasks as an individual and as small groups. This continued until September, even though some of the team had moved out of the capital and back to their home islands."

In response to lay-offs, the Government of Maldives stepped in to protect jobs and livelihoods. The Maldives Marketing & Public Relations Corporation (MMPRC), which promotes travel to the Maldives, continued to advertise, but with toned down messages. "We kept up our visibility in key markets with empathetic, stay safe message", said Thoyyib Mohamed, Managing Director at the Maldives Marketing & PR Corporation. As restrictions eased, MMPRC promoted travel to the Maldives via marketing campaigns such as Facebook Live event, 'Maldives, The Sun Will Shine Again', and an online event 'Dream to Travel Festival'. Like many other DMOs during the pandemic, MMPRC also used virtual reality to showcase various experiences on island properties, such as morning yoga by the beach, snorkeling, or cooking lessons.

The Maldives gradually reopened to inbound visitors from 15 July 2020, and in September the islands were granted the 'Safe Travels Stamp' by the World Travel and Tourism Council. By 15 October, guest houses as well as resorts were permitted to welcome guests subject to stringent health protocols. On arrival in the Maldives, all tourists had to present a negative PCR test for COVID-19, taken no more than 96 hours prior to the scheduled time of departure from the first port of embarkation to the Maldives. "With the vast majority of the population dependent on tourism, opening up in July was a matter of survival," said Ruth Franklin from Secret Paradise. Franklin said the decision to ask for mandatory tests was an important one. "We were one of the first countries to ask for a PCR test and at the time the decision was a controversial one. But now this is common for most tourism destinations, and testing has been critical for us in minimizing risk." Franklin also said that the phased opening was also a wise strategy. "Properties had to have approval before they could open and processes had to be in place to welcome tourists in a safe way."

Hotels and resorts had to make operational changes to comply with new standards and to reassure potential guests. At Anantara Veli Resort for example, a 'Guest Guardian' was appointed to ensure health and safety compliance was adhered to at all touchpoints, and employees received enhanced COVID-19-related health and safety training. The resort also offered a downloadable 'Anantara app' that could be used for making room reservations, requesting in-room