

Investigating guesthouse and cuisine experiences in the Maldives: A new research method utilising a tasting buffet

Oral Presentation Working Paper

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Guesthouses have transformed the tourism industry in the Maldives, from being solely focussed on enclave, luxury resorts, to offering affordable local island tourism to a new market. Food and tourism are closely linked. The lack of previous research concerning Maldivian guesthouses and local cuisine experiences means that further study is warranted. This paper will introduce a novel study participant recruitment method in the form of a local cuisine tasting buffet. Buffets were arranged at three guesthouses on three different islands. International tourists who ate at the buffets were then invited to participate in interviews about their experiences and perceptions of the accommodation, the buffet food, and their overall experiences of holiday cuisine. Initial findings indicated that, surprisingly for participants, the buffet was for many their first opportunity to try local dishes, which most found enjoyable. There was a lack of previous knowledge concerning what local Maldivian cuisine consists of and several tourists recounted memorable experiences of eating unfamiliar foods on their travels.

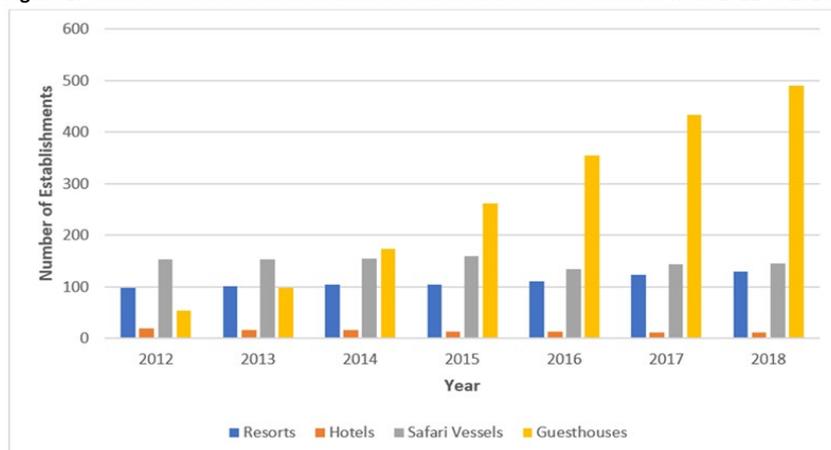
KEYWORDS

Maldives, guesthouse tourism, local cuisine, buffet

INTRODUCTION

The Maldivian tourism industry has traditionally been based on the 'one island - one resort' concept with each hotel facility built on its own previously uninhabited island (Lück, 2008). In 2008, law changes allowed for tourist accommodation to be built on inhabited local islands (Ministry of Tourism, 2014). By the end of 2018, 490 guesthouses were operating on these islands, making up around 19% of all tourist beds available in the country (Statistics Maldives, 2019). Compared to near-by luxury resorts, guesthouse prices are more affordable to the average tourist, opening the door to a new market. Figure 1 illustrates the dramatic growth in guesthouse numbers from 2012 to 2018, compared to other types of accommodation in the country.

Figure 1: Number of tourist accommodation establishments in the Maldives from 2012 to 2018



Source: adapted from Statistics Maldives (2019).

There is little research on the experience of tourists visiting Maldivian guesthouses. The few studies conducted concerning guesthouse tourism in the Maldives explore marketing aspects (Pappayah, Muiz, & Jinus, 2017) or focus on backpacker experiences (Zubair & Bouchon, 2014). A prominent part of any tourist's trip includes food. However, tourist food consumption has often been neglected by tourism researchers. While there are trends in tourism towards more immersive and locally engaging types of tourism (Aquino, Lück, & Schänzel, 2018) that provide culturally richer experiences (Cioban & Cioban, 2018), there has been insufficient qualitative research on the food preferences of tourists, with most studies concerning this topic being of a positivist nature (e.g. Mekoth & Thomson, 2018). The only research relating to local cuisine and tourism in the Maldives is positivist in nature and not focussed on the local cuisine experiences of guesthouse visitors (e.g. Hussain, Lema, & Agrusa, 2012). There is no research relating to local cuisine and guesthouse experiences in the Maldives.

By investigating Maldivian guesthouse tourism, the focus of the study aims to provide an up-to-date, comprehensive, guest-centric enquiry into this fast-developing form of tourism. Furthermore, the study explores international tourists' guesthouse and local Maldivian cuisine experiences, and their food preferences and intentions while travelling, especially concerning unfamiliar cuisines. This working paper focuses on the novel method utilised to explore the tourists' cuisine experiences, which was a tasting buffet of local cuisine and typical guesthouse cuisine.

METHODS

The study utilised a qualitative method of research, enabling an in-depth exploration of the participants' experiences, developing a holistic account of their perspectives (Creswell, 2013). To achieve this, 28 international guesthouse tourists were recruited to participate in semi-structured, in-depth interviews, to explore their accommodation and cuisine experiences as part of the Maldivian guesthouse experience. They were recruited by inviting them to participate in three tasting buffets of traditional Maldivian food, which was served alongside typical guesthouse cuisine. Between 12 to 15 tourists were recruited for each buffet for a combined total of 41.

Few studies have utilised tastings as a research method, especially in the tourism field, with most focussing on alcohol (e.g. Bruwer, Coode, Saliba, & Herbst, 2013) and entomophagy (consuming insects; e.g. Hartmann & Siegrist, 2016). No studies to my knowledge have previously used a tasting buffet to determine international tourists' perceptions of local cuisine, and/or their preferences and perspectives when consuming unfamiliar cuisines.

An audit of menus from guesthouses based on the three islands chosen for this research (Maafushi, Thulusdhoo and Dhipfushi) discovered that only 2% of menu items were traditional local dishes. Most guesthouses serve up familiar western cuisine, such as burgers and Italian pasta as well as south-east Asian style food. It was concluded that most guesthouse visitors are not able to experience local Maldivian cuisine at the properties. In order to explore tourists' perceptions of local Maldivian cuisine, and to prompt discussions about holiday food experiences, the buffets were determined to be an appropriate and helpful tool.

A buffet was arranged at one guesthouse from each of the three islands. Local dishes were served alongside typical guesthouse dishes, with the buffet laid out in a way that allowed for comparison between the items. For example, a local breakfast item was placed next to an international breakfast item. All items were labelled with a brief description. The participants were informed that they could choose what they liked to eat. Each participant was given a five-point Likert scale questionnaire to fill in during the tasting, to determine their enjoyment of the local dishes – ranging from 5 – *would definitely choose*, to 1 – *would definitely not choose*. The questionnaire also

contained brief descriptions of the local dishes that were served at the buffet and aided the researcher during the interview process by determining the participants' taste preferences concerning the local food and acted as a prompt for the participants when recalling the tasting. The buffet table was photographed before and after the participants had taken their food, and food choices of the participants were noted to aid with the interview process. The photographs were also used during the interviews to help participants remember their food choices. After the buffet, the diners were asked if they were interested in participating in an interview and a total of 28 out of the 41 buffet participants agreed to be interviewed. Most of the interviews were conducted directly following the buffets.

RESULTS

Initial analysis of the interviews indicated that most participants expected to eat local food during their stay at a Maldivian guesthouse, and several stated that they had chosen to stay in a local guesthouse in order to experience the local culture, including the food. However, for many, the research buffet proved to be the only opportunity for them to sample local cuisine. There was a lack of previous knowledge on what local Maldivian cuisine consisted of, although several interviewees had guessed that fish would be prominent. The local dishes were viewed favourably by most, apart from those that did not like fish. For some of the tourists, especially those staying in Thulusdhoo – a well-known surfing island – food was not an important part of their trip. They had travelled specifically for surfing, and food ranked low on their list of considerations. Many tourists recounted memorable food experiences from their travels around the world and said they were keen to have new experiences and sample local delicacies, even if they found them unenjoyable.

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