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Marketing Maldives Beyond ‘The Sunny Side of Life’: A role for food?

Local food is used to enrich tourist experiences and differentiate destinations and can play an important role in tourism marketing. This study evaluates the role of local food in Maldives tourism promotion. The success of Maldives tourism is based on the promotion of its environmental features, but with few differentiating factors and limited attractions, Maldives tourism is vulnerable to competitors with similar products. What Maldives tourism needs is broader visitor experiences that enhance product attractiveness.

Through analysis of printed and web-based tourism marketing materials, this study reveals food is not featured as an attraction. However, surveys of operators and industry experts indicate considerable benefits can be expected from linking food and tourism. These stakeholders believe there is a desire among tourists to experience local food. Some constraints that hinder linking local food with tourism are revealed, including under-developed transportation and logistics, shortages of skilled staff and a lack of communication between producers and tourism operators. Suggestions on linking local food to tourism are presented, including potential local foods and food-related events that could be successfully integrated into the tourist experience.

Key words: Maldives, tourism, marketing, local food.

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Introduction

The increasing number of destinations competing in global tourism has created a fiercely competitive industry with nations, regions and communities vying with each other to lure the ‘elusive’ tourist (Ark & Richards, 2006). In order to sustain competitive advantage the tourism industry relies heavily on innovative product development or differentiation and effective marketing (Baker & Cameron, 2008).

Local food as part of culture and tradition enriches tourist experiences and enhances product attractiveness and its relationship with culture gives the potential to create a valuable tourism marketing tool. For destinations with similar primary attractions, local food can provide a crucial differentiating feature.

Many tourist destinations overlook the benefits of promoting food. Instead of being portrayed as a key tourist attraction, food is often marketed as a secondary component of the tourism experience (Everett, 2008). Those destinations that do use food in their marketing do not always do it effectively (Okumus, Okumus & McKercher, 2007). The role of food in marketing destinations has received relatively little attention (du Rand & Heath, 2006). Hence, there is a deficiency in the literature on food and tourism (Everett & Aitchison, 2008). A lack of research is evident on the extent that food is used in tourism promotion in destinations whose success in tourism is generally based on primary attractions other than food (Okumus et al., 2007).

Using a case study of the Maldives, this study seeks to identify the current role of local food in tourism promotion and to gain supply-side perspectives on the role that local food can play in tourism promotion. Maldives has become a successful tourist destination by promoting its natural environment; but the Maldives’ tourism product seems vulnerable to other competing countries, such as the Seychelles or Mauritius (the World Bank, 2006). This study provides information on how an established tourist destination, whose success is based

on primary attractions other than food, uses local food in tourism marketing. It also exposes the potential of local food for marketing that could provide an advantage among competitors with similar products of sun, sand and sea.

Food and Tourism: A Brief Review

Food is a “hot” topic today. It is an integral part of the overall tourism experience and a prime motivation for travel (Hall & Sharples, 2008). The numerous food, wine and travel magazines and continuous television channels devoted to food provide proof of the increasing interest in food tourism (Hashimoto & Telfer, 2006). The central role of food in tourism renders it a valuable tool for tourism promotion (Huang, 2009).

Food presents tourists with an experience that includes excitement, cultural exploration and inspiration (Scarpato & Daniele, 2003). Food is the most important attribute (after climate, accommodation and scenery) in choosing a destination (Hu & Ritchie, 1993). Consumption of food provides unforgettable tourist experiences (Law & Au, 2000), the memories of which are recalled long after the holidays are over (Ravenscroft & Westering, 2002). The opportunities for involvement in the experience, such as preparation and cooking, make food-related activities meaningful tourist experiences (Trossolov, 1995 in Mitchell & Hall, 2003). Increased interest in food has made it an important part of the destination’s image and attractiveness and a key travel motivator (Pearce, 2002).

Cultural exploration is integral to tourism experiences. As competition in the tourism industry increases, culture is seen as an asset for product differentiation (Richards, 2002). Cuisine is an important part of a society’s culture (Kittler & Sucher, 2008) and the meal is described as a “cultural artefact” (Scarpato, 2002, p. 64). The culinary heritage of a destination embodies the character and mentality of a society in the types of food and the way they are eaten, hence it is an integral part of identity formation (Fox, 2007). Therefore,

tourists seeking authentic cultural experiences find food to be one of the most important attractions (Milne, 2009). Destinations with undifferentiated primary resources can find a valuable 'point of difference' in culinary experiences (Okumus et al., 2007). While destinations such as Tuscany and Provence are renowned for their distinguishing cuisine (Zahari, Jalis, Zulfify, Radzi & Othman, 2009) differentiation can also be achieved with more basic culinary experiences and local cuisines (Horng & Tsai, 2010). In fact, one of the major elements of the relationship between food and tourism is the development and promotion of local food (Hall & Mitchell, 2002; Hall & Sharples, 2003). This gives local food the potential to play a key role in innovative tourism marketing strategies (Sims, 2010). Food increases tourism's economic contribution to destinations (Henderson, 2009). Local food enhances and strengthens the tourism product, while tourists provide a market for the expansion and development of local food products (Milne 2009), leading to increases in local agricultural production and assisting in branding and promoting both the menu and the restaurant (Sims, 2010). Food provides a dimension of authenticity, enriches the experience (Symons, 1999 in Scarpato, 2002) and can develop a regional food brand (Smith & Hall, 2003).

Local food, as part of the tourism experience reflects principles of sustainable tourism development. Linking local food and tourism creates backward linkages to food production that enhance and strengthen economic and social vitality (Boyne & Hall, 2003). Local food contributes directly and indirectly to tourism sustainability by stimulating food production and agriculture, conserving authenticity, increasing destination attractiveness, empowering communities through increased job creation and commercial activities, engendering community pride and strengthening brand identity (du Rand et al., 2003). While local food production is viewed as the key to pro-poor tourism initiatives (Goodwin, 2009), using food as a promotional tool makes gastronomic tourists more culturally aware hence, less inclined

towards the issues associated with mass tourists (Fields, 2002). Thus, by linking local food and tourism a niche and high quality experience that reflect sustainable tourism approaches could be created (Boyne et al., 2002).

Considering the substantial benefits that food-related tourism activities can generate, and to gain competitive advantage through them, it is imperative that such initiatives are effectively promoted (Boyne & Hall, 2003; Milne, 2009). Effective marketing also increases the demand for food and food-related activities (Pearce, 2002). Countries and regions that are traditionally associated with fine foods, such as France and Italy (Frochot, 2003), and regions well-known for their cuisine, like Burgundy, Champagne, Bordeaux and Tuscany (Bessiere, 1998; Corigliano, 2002; Santich, 1999), use their food and wine reputation for tourism promotion. In Hong Kong, food has been used as a cultural marker where the range of local and international foods has proved a competitive advantage (Okumus et al., 2007). Several cities across Asia project themselves as “food paradises” featuring aspects of their culture and society through food (Henderson, 2009).

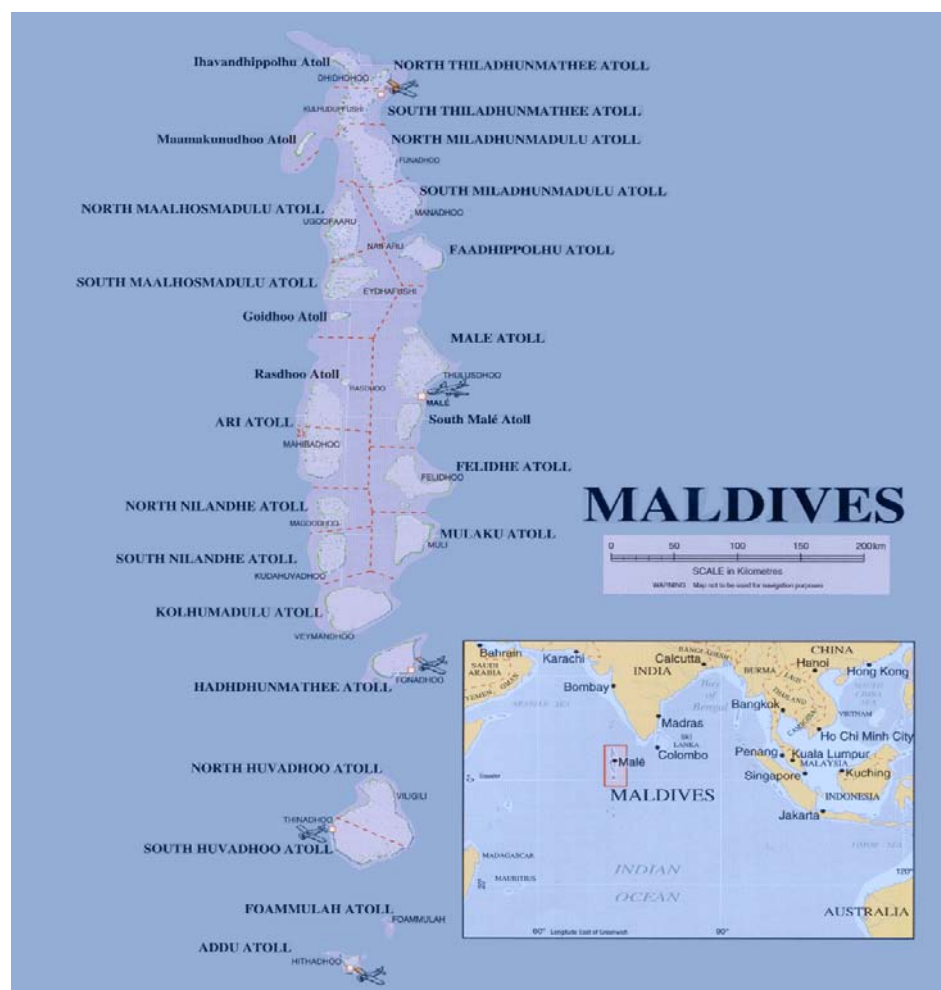
Tourists gather information about potential destinations, prepare and plan their trip prior to travel (Money & Crofts, 2003), and plan their meals in advance (Warde & Martens, 2000). This shows that preconceived ideas can greatly influence the level of tourist satisfaction. Tourists’ knowledge of culinary activities is likely to be less before consumption (Fields, 2002). Therefore, food marketing in tourism should focus on developing “the pre-consumption knowledge” of tourists (ibid, p. 43). The media can be influential in getting the attention of potential tourists, particularly those who do not usually view culinary experiences as key motivators for travel (ibid). The Internet should not be underestimated for presenting this pre-travel information. Food, with its intimate links with culture, heritage and sense of place, is ideal for tourism marketing. However, the challenge remains as to how destinations

like the Maldives, that are not food tourism destinations, can enhance the role of food in tourism.

The Maldives, Tourism and Food

The Republic of Maldives consists of 1196 coral islands (figure 1) which are formed into 26 natural atolls in the Indian Ocean (Lutfy, 1995).

Figure 1: Map of the Republic of Maldives



Source: www.worldmapfinder.com/En/Asia/Maldives

A population of 298,968 (in 2006) lives on 196 islands with nearly a third of the population on the capital island, Malé. Ninety-four islands have been developed as tourist resorts while the rest are used for agriculture and other economic purposes (MTCA, 2007a). Agriculture

plays only a minor role in the economy, accounting for only 2% of GDP. The poor quality of the sandy soil and shrinking freshwater lens in many inhabited islands limit agricultural potential. Most of the domestic agricultural demands are met through imports. The ratio of food imports to domestic food production is 10:1 (ADB, 2008). This dependence on food imports, including the staple foods, makes the country vulnerable and further impedes local production (MPND, 2007b).

In recent years, significant steps have been taken by the government to develop agriculture. Selected larger islands were allocated and leased for long-term exclusively for agriculture (Naseer, 2007). Foreign-aid agencies and private parties run goat and poultry farming and other agricultural projects on these islands (MFAMR, 2004). To combat the lack of fertile land and fresh water, hydroponics farming has been introduced recently. Using this technique, melons, cucumbers, chillies, herbs, tomatoes, Chinese broccoli and lettuce are being produced on commercial and household scales.

Tourism began in the Maldives in 1972 and has experienced steady growth, with tourist arrivals increasing at an average of 9% per annum over the last ten years, except for a dramatic 35.9% decline in 2005 arrivals due to the December 2004 Asian tsunami, which caused the closure of several resorts. However, Maldives' tourism recovered remarkably and in 2006 the annual growth rate in tourist arrivals rose to 52.3%. The annual average occupancy rate from 2002 to 2006 was 75.2%. Tourism accounts for 28% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and more than 60% of foreign exchange receipts (MTCA, 2007b).

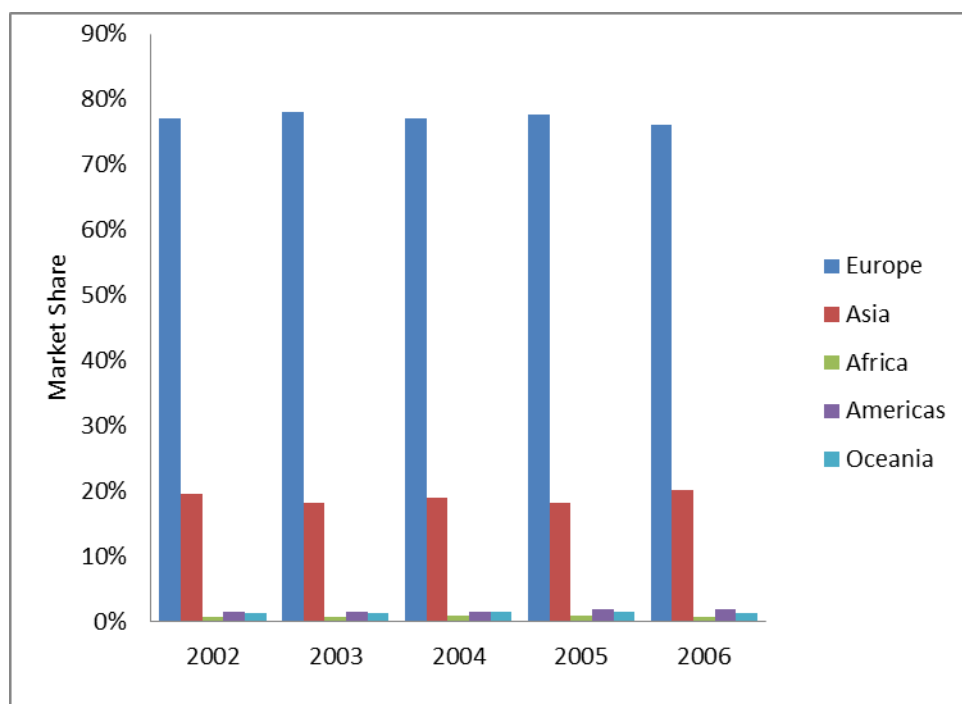
Until recently resort development was restricted to the unique concept of “one-island-one-resort,” where all tourist needs are catered for on the particular island. The Third Tourism Master Plan 2007–2011 (TTMP) launched in 2007 emphasises the development of “a strong identity of a perfect island destination,” with all marketing communications for proposed new products “designed to retain the unique image and brand of the Maldives”

(MTCA, 2007c, p. 50). TTMP emphasises the promotion of culture and tradition to increase the benefit of tourism to local communities.

Tourist activities in the Maldives include water sports such as diving, snorkelling, windsurfing, sailing, water skiing and surfing. Resorts organise fishing and excursion trips to nearby islands and to the capital island, Male'. Night fishing is particularly popular. Aerial excursions by seaplane and submarine diving are provided by some resorts. Live entertainment is provided in the evenings, often with local bands and dance troupes (Amira, 2009).

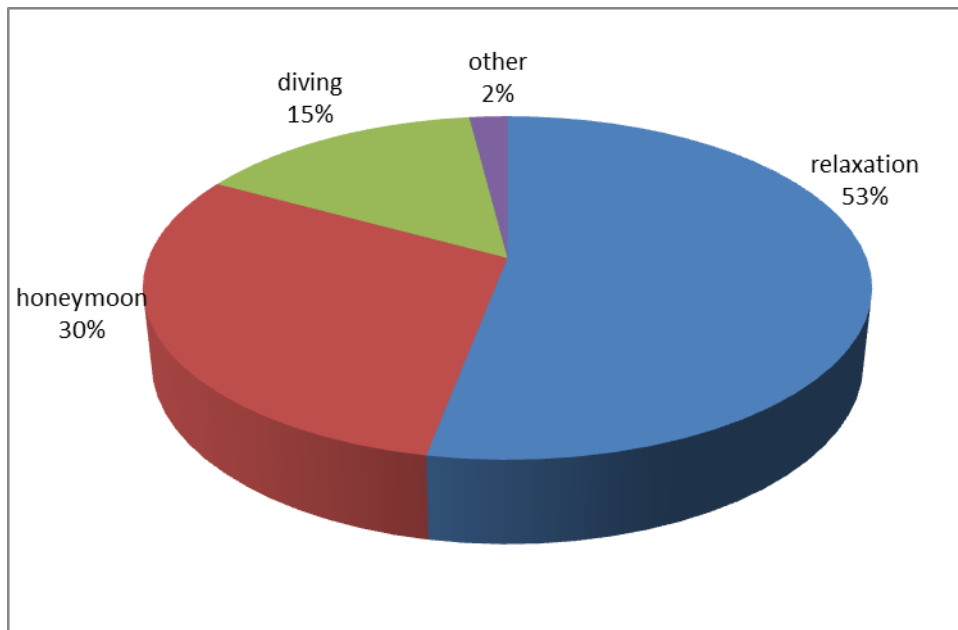
Over the last five years, Europe and Asia have been the Maldives' leading tourist source markets (figure 2). The main reasons that tourists come to the Maldives are for leisure, honeymoons and diving (figure 3).

Figure 2: Maldives Tourism Market share 2002-2006



Source: MTCA (2007b)

Figure 3: Purpose of visit to Maldives - 2006



Source: MTCA (2007b)

The Maldives have a rich variety of traditional cuisine which varies between the atolls (Amira, 2009). Maldivian culture and tradition is rich with festivities involving traditional food. Fish and other seafood are a fundamental part of local cuisine. Traditional fare used to be fairly basic, consisting mainly of fish and coconuts, breadfruit, millet and tubers. The Maldives being an important crossroads in the Indian Ocean, traders and visitors greatly influenced the local cuisine (MTPB, 2007). Today it is a combination of Asian, European and Middle Eastern tastes, blended into a unique culinary identity of its own. Islam being the official religion of the Maldives, all food is Halaal and all meat, both imported and locally produced are Halaal slaughtered. To meet the requirement of foreign tourists, tourist hotels import Non-Halaal products such as pork and alcohol under a special licence from the government. Local cuisine is not given much attention by the tourism industry. All tourist

hotels and resorts provide ‘Westernised’ international food. There are very few Maldivian restaurants and the availability of local cuisine for tourists is limited.

Content and Discourse Analysis of Food in Tourism Marketing Materials

Tourism and food involve several actors and the relationship is a complex one, hence the study of food and tourism requires the use of more than one method. A variety of information from different data sources are called for, that require and a number of different research methods which complement and compensate for the weaknesses and strengths of one another to provide a reliable, valid and complete understanding of the situation and issues. Thus, a case-study method based on a grounded theory approach using multiple methods including content and discourse analysis and surveys was employed.

To identify the extent to which local food is used in Maldives tourism marketing, content and discourse analysis of texts and images was conducted on print and internet marketing materials. Content analysis refers to the examination of texts (Wood & Kroger, 2002) to study the “manifest content” or the “latent content” of “texts, pictures, films and other forms of verbal, visual or written communication” (Sarantakos, 1998, p. 279). Content analysis is endorsed as a research technique in tourism for making “reliable and valid inferences” from pictures or texts in “the contexts of their use” (Krippendorff, 2004, p. 8). It is a valuable and frequently used research technique to analyse “difficult, contentious and usually subjective cultural objects in order to identify the projected image of destinations” (Pritchard & Morgan, 2001, p. 172). Content analysis involves identifying a group of materials to analyse and establishing a system to record particular features about the materials being analysed (Newman, 2003). This technique requires a sample that is representative yet small enough to enable a substantive analysis (Pritchard & Morgan, 2001). Having a context in which to examine the selected texts is very important (Krippendorff, 2004). In this research

the context is the indication of availability of local Maldivian food for tourists. A set of categories is established from the sample and the number of cases that fall under the categories in the context is recorded (Sarantakos, 1998). The reliability and validity of content analysis depends on the accuracy of the categories and the precise counts of cases that fall under each category, so that different analysts will be able to produce the same results with a given set of materials (Silverman, 2006).

The process of analysis can proceed in up to three ways (Sarantakos, 1998, with reference to Mayring 1983, 1985 and 1988):

1. Summation: the data is reduced into categories that integrate and generalise the important themes from the texts.
2. Explication: the aim of analysis is to explain the text based either on the content of the document or in relation to other sources.
3. Structuration: the data is arranged into predetermined categories or an order determined from the texts.

Summation and explication were the methods chosen for this research. The first stage of content analysis was selecting the sample of materials to be used in the research. Since the geographically dispersed nature of the islands of the Maldives made it difficult to obtain material from all of the resorts, the size of the sample was dictated by availability. Thus, the sample belongs to the category of “Haphazard (convenience or availability) samples”, which is one of a number of non-probability sampling methods described by Finn et al. (2000, p. 118). Sarantakos (1994) stated that units of analysis in content analysis could be “texts of books, transcripts of interviews, or other forms of verbal or visual communication” (p. 284). The sample for this research included printed material from tourist resorts, hotels, promotional agencies, tourist guide books, travel agents and cruise operators. The same 24

entities as the printed materials were identified as the sample for website analysis. However, six of the websites were not accessible and one website was omitted as it replicates the printed material.

Employing content analysis at the initial stage of the research helped identify emerging concepts linked to food in tourism and to classify themes. The contrast between the portrayal of local food and other types of food was an emerging theme and Maldivian food and other types of food were selected as categories. The units of analysis were words, sentences, paragraphs and messages that indicated the presence of food. The units of analysis were evaluated using the explication method, which enables the content of the documents to be explained in the context of the case being researched (Sarantakos, 1998).

A total of 12 image and nine textual categories were identified and their frequency recorded. After data consolidation and reduction these were reduced to two categories of images and two categories of textual content: (a) local food and (b) other food. Finn et al. (2000) warned that reliability is a key concern for content analysis because of the tendency for the analysis to be generalised. The reliability and validity of content analysis is based on the accuracy of the categories and the precise counts of cases within each category so that the same results may be obtained from a given sample by different analysts (Silverman, 2006). This research was conducted by a single analyst. Using more than one analyst could have achieved greater reliability. At the same time, using different analysts runs the risk of causing problems of reproducibility (ibid). Analysis of this research is based on secondary data, presenting the option of re-testing. However, websites and promotional materials are temporal in nature.

To improve research validity, discourse analysis was conducted on the same brochures and websites. Discourse analysis is increasingly used in tourism as a means of analysis of both qualitative and textual data such as written documents, photographs and

brochures, which often portray “how a group of people have made sense of and reflected on their own world and that of others” (Hannam & Knox, 2005, p. 23). An important consideration in discourse analysis is the attention paid to the absence of themes. Lack of themes can be seen as a powerful tool in investigating hidden messages in tourism information (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). In this research discourse analysis was applied by carefully analysing images and texts in the marketing materials to understand the extent to which local culture and the environment were represented in relation to food. Cases where food was illustrated, its absence or presence and the extent of the relation to local food, culture and environment were recorded.

Findings

This paper follows Handszuh (2000) in defining local food products as “(p)roducts predominantly made of locally-made or locally-grown, seasonal and locally-produced foodstuffs and based on local culinary heritage” (p. 5). From the analysis of printed materials, a total of 176 ‘local’ and 776 ‘other’ food images and text passages were recorded. One of the most frequently portrayed images of food is fruit (mostly used as displays) which does not represent local food. For example, a papaya in a basket of fruit including grapes, apples and oranges cannot be said to represent local food, because apart from the papaya, the rest of the fruit is imported. One frequently displayed local product is fresh coconut, a popular local drink offered at resorts to welcome tourists. Fresh coconut symbolises local hospitality and the marketing material shows mainly fresh coconuts.

Food and beverage staff are often portrayed in the marketing material (local staff 36 times, foreign staff 12 times). Local staff are mostly pictured either with or serving drinks whereas foreign staff are presented in senior roles. Pictures of local staff with local food

rarely appear, neither are they featured in the text. This means that pictures of local food and beverage staff do not represent “localness” in relation to food.

Images of restaurants and bars appear frequently. Pictures of empty restaurants and table settings appeared more often (26 images) than restaurants with people or people with food (17 images). Table settings without people were featured 13 times. Table settings and restaurants without people seem to somehow disembodify the visitor experience — for example, an image of a couple or group of tourists enjoying a meal projects an image of food as part of the tourist experience.

Images and information about fish and seafood and activities that involve fish are used more frequently than other types of food and food-related activities. The only food labelled as ‘local cuisine’ on menus displayed on websites is also fish and seafood (figure 4).

Images of fish as a local food in the marketing materials are largely limited to fresh or grilled fish. Sometimes fish is portrayed as being used in dishes that are not local in nature, for example, tuna used in sashimi and sushi. Fishing is also emphasised as an outdoor entertainment activity by most tourist resorts, on occasion combining fishing trips with cooking and eating the catch. Fish and seafood are the only ‘local food’ promoted in tourism marketing. Images that portray food-related experiences and interaction with host communities are rare. There is only one picture in the guide book published by the MTPB displaying a typical Maldivian ‘tea’ or *sai* ceremony with short eats (*hedhikaa*) (snacks) and black tea at the home of a local family. Food events and experiences that involve tourists are also scarce. An exception noted on a resort website reads: “Learn how to prepare tasty, traditional Maldivian dishes with our resort chef.”

Figure 4: Barbecue Menus

SEAFOOD BEACH BBQ DINNER	MIXED GRILL BEACH BBQ DINNER
AVOCADO, TOMATO AND MOZZARELLA CHEESE SALAD	AVOCADO, TOMATO AND MOZZARELLA CHEESE SALAD
JUMBO PRAWNS, FILET OF LOCAL FISH, TUNA STEAKS, GRILLED LOBSTER SERVED WITH A LIME AND GARLIC BUTTER	BEEF TENDERLOIN, BEEF SIRLOIN, PORK CHOPS AND LAMB CUTLETS SERVED WITH BBQ SAUCE
GRILLED SEASONAL VEGETABLES	GRILLED SEASONAL VEGETABLES
BAKED POTATO WITH SOUR CREAM	BAKED POTATO WITH SOUR CREAM
CHEF'S SPECIAL DESSERT	CHEF'S SPECIAL DESSERT
FRESHLY BREWED COFFEE OR TEA	FRESHLY BREWED COFFEE OR TEA
US\$100 per person	US\$100 per person

Source: www.veliganduisland.com

Local markets are an important part of culinary tourism and are central to experiencing the culinary heritage of a destination (Long, 2004). Local markets in the Maldives sell locally grown and produced products and don't generally sell imported items. The fish market is an important tourist attraction in Male' and is included in most tourist excursion trips to the capital. Pictures and information about the fish market and local markets were featured in all the guide books but only two of the resort or hotel brochures. Guide books contained descriptions and pictures of local foods, restaurants, cafés and teashops in Male' and provided information about the kind of foods available at those places, information not available in the tourist establishment's marketing materials.

The websites reviewed feature even less information on local food. Events that involve local food were mentioned twice and local theme restaurants mentioned only once. Information about local markets is also scarce. There are 19 images of tourists with non-local foods such as pasta and breads, but only 4 images of tourists with local food. In the textual content, local food was mentioned 70 times, while other types of food were mentioned 371

times. Of 7 websites that mentioned local food, only four described it as an attraction. Of 18 websites analysed, 10 did not have a separate section on food and dining. Information was limited to the name of the restaurant or bar and opening hours. A typical example is: “The Dhonveli Restaurant is the main dining room and serves ‘all you can eat’ buffet style meals for breakfast, lunch and dinner.” In the few instances where dining experiences are mentioned, little emphasis is given to local foods:

...refreshing drinks are offered at the bar while you relax in the shade or tan in the sun. Continental and Eastern cuisine, prepared by professional chefs are served at the restaurant and private dinners on the beach are also arranged on demand. Discourse analysis enables a deeper understanding of food events described as “beach barbecue” and “picnic lunches”. At first glance, these events appear to portray local or traditional food experiences. When subjected to careful analysis, it is clear that these terms do not involve any local food. A clear example is an image that depicts a picnic by the beachside (figure 5) that displays a bunch of coconuts and a traditional boat. The food is laid out on a coconut palm, providing the impression of local culture and tradition, while the white sandy beach and clear sea portrays the environment of the Maldives. However, the food is largely imported. Apart from tuna used in some of the sushi and sashimi in this picture, the only other local food is a plate of short eats.

Figure 5: Picnic Lunch



Source: Maldives Visitors' Guide 2007

Similarly, the words “beach barbecue” in the following passage need to be reviewed carefully:

A very popular excursion arranged by all resorts is visiting different fishing villages, resort islands and uninhabited islands. Most excursions include a beach barbecue. When subjected to discourse analysis, these words reveal no relation to local food experience.

This is clearly evident from “beach barbecue” menus that were available for download from one of the websites. On a menu named “Mixed Grill Beach BBQ Dinner”, none of the items is Maldivian. On another menu called the “Seafood Beach BBQ Dinner” menu, seafood is the only local ingredient.

The Current and Potential Use of Local Food by the Tourism Industry

To gain a clearer picture of how local food is used by tourism establishments and in tourism promotions and to review the validity of the findings from the content and discourse analysis, two surveys were conducted. One sought data from resort operators, while the other sought the opinions of experts in Maldives tourism.

A link to the operators' survey was e-mailed to managers of all 84 resorts that were in operation in June 2008 based on the MTCA listing. A total of 12 completed surveys were received from operators, providing a 14% response rate. The second questionnaire was e-mailed to ten experts that the researcher identified on the Maldives tourism industry. Six completed questionnaires were returned.

The operator survey revealed that a large number of expatriates are chefs in the tourism sector with a ratio of three foreign chefs to two local chefs employed in tourism establishments. The head chefs of six out of eleven respondent resorts are also foreigners. A disparity is evident in the proportion of local and imported food as a percentage of the total food cost. For most tourism establishments surveyed, imported food constitutes the major share of total food costs. Half of the respondents (n=6 or 54.5%) said that a very small proportion (<10%) of the average total food cost is spent on local food products. Only three operators stated that 21 – 30% of their total food cost is spent on local products. Interestingly, the responses suggest a willingness among operators to increase their use of local food and that operators do not believe that the price of local food is high compared with imported food. A large majority of operators (n=10 or 83.3%) believed that food imports could be decreased by using more local food. One manager noted “this is something that we have to think (about) in the tourism industry.”

While there are many local food suppliers, including farmers, fruit growers, snack makers and coconut growers, fishermen are the only suppliers that all of the respondents work with. Other local suppliers that tourism operators frequently work with are fruit growers (n=10 or 83%) and farmers (n=6 or 50%). Fewer operators worked with coconut growers (n=3 or 25%) or snack suppliers (n=2 or 16.7%). Respondents' reflections on their ability to purchase the right quality and quantity of products from local suppliers show that it is relatively 'easy' to purchase the right quality of products from these suppliers. The ability to

source sufficient quantity from suppliers was easiest from fishermen, comparatively easy from fruit growers and coconut growers but not as easy from farmers and snack suppliers.

Over half of the resorts (n=7 or 58.3%) offered a drink to welcome guests upon their arrival. This high percentage explains the frequent use of coconuts in marketing materials. The most common local-food-related souvenir available at tourist establishments was local cook books or recipes available at over 33% (n=4) of the establishments. Two resorts (16.7%) have dried fish and related products and two resorts offer local snacks as souvenirs. Local snacks include packets of fried breadfruit, taro and different short eats.

The 12 participants in the survey provided outdoor activities for tourists. All except one said that the activities include local-food-related experiences including visits to local restaurants in Male' or local markets. Most establishments conduct activities that involve local food. The most popular event was said to be "Maldivian nights" conducted by 11 resorts, followed by Maldivian buffets in eight resorts, and local cooking lessons or classes conducted by six. "Maldivian nights" include local food and cultural entertainment programmes but the food is not solely local – some local fare is presented with imported food. Those surveyed noted that local food was rarely used in tourist materials but alternative methods of advertising were used. The most common mode of supplementary advertising of local food was found to be staff recommendation, practiced by 58.3% (n=7) of businesses. Other methods include food displays (n=6 or 50%) and daily specials (n=5 or 41.7%).

Operators do not consider Maldivian cuisine important in tourism marketing compared with other types of cuisine. Only four respondents answered this question. Foods that were given the highest importance reflect the dominant tourist market groups, Europe and Asia. 'Other food,' which was specified as Japanese and Korean, was selected as extremely important by three out of the four respondents. Operators were asked to select the local produce with the greatest potential to be developed for the tourism industry. The

choices provided were seafood, fish and fish products, local vegetables and fruit, and ‘other’ products. Most respondents (n=11 or 91.7%) chose ‘other’ items which were specified as handicrafts.

The fact that the large majority of operators chose products other than local produce supports the argument that tourism operators do not believe that it is important to develop local produce for the tourism industry. This is an indication of the perception among operators that current promotions are doing well even without including local food in marketing activities. Half of the experts pointed out that all tourism marketing so far has been focused on the natural beauty of the Maldives. The current branding of Maldives as a romantic, relaxing beach destination has been developed and marketed for a considerable time without food aspects. One of the experts noted that the reason for neglecting local food in tourism is “because we have been having double digit growth in the tourism sector for a long time and the players in the industry do not feel the need for other tools to market the product.” It would be a challenge to develop interest among those who engage in tourism promotions to link local food to tourism marketing. An industry expert pointed out that the potential of local food to enhance the tourist experience is not recognised by owners and operators of tourism establishments.

On the other hand, a large majority of operators (n=11 or 91.7%) believe that tourists are interested in consuming Maldivian food and that “tuna fish is very popular” among tourists. The expert survey also pointed to fresh fish and seafood as having great potential to link tourism and local food and that Maldivian cuisine could be exploited as a tourist attraction. Of the six respondents in the expert survey, five strongly believed linking local food with tourism could enhance the differentiation of the Maldives from other competing destinations. It was stated that local food could promote the Maldives for more than just its environmental features.

The experts agreed that there is little or no link between local food and tourism, and for the Maldives, culinary tourism is a new concept. The only linkage between tourism and local food is the weekly “Maldivian nights” hosted by a few resorts. There are no policies to create links between local food and tourism and culinary tourism is not emphasised in the TTMP. Apparently MTPB has been displaying local food in overseas promotional events since 2007. Visitors to these events can watch the preparation of food and enjoy the food too. While it was suggested that these events should continue, it is not evident that when tourists from the countries where these promotions are held visit the Maldives, the local foods that were displayed at the promotional stalls are available for tourists.

The general opinion among the expert respondents that local food has the potential to enhance the ‘Maldives experience’ reinforces the finding in literature that culinary activities enrich tourism experiences (Poulain, 2000 in Frochot 2003). An industry expert pointed out that local food represents a “vital component” of the product mix that so far “we have failed to utilise.” Another suggested that the fact that Maldivian cuisine comprises “healthy and organic foods” should be marketed more clearly. Using local food as a marketing tool could also cater to the demand from the ‘niche market’ of culinary tourism. Referring to a widely used slogan by MTPB: “In the Maldives we teach the art of doing nothing,” a tourism industry expert advised that “Maldives tourism needs more than white sandy beaches, crystal clear waters or ‘the art of doing nothing’ slogans.” This statement supports Fields’ (2002) argument that local food can provide differentiation in tourism destinations.

The isolated nature of tourist resorts restricts the opportunity for tourists to experience local ways of living. According to an expert, this compels tourists to experience “only half of the sunny side of Maldives” — a widely used slogan by MTPB. The other half of “the sunny side” is about “how we live, what we eat and how we celebrate together.” Operators and

experts agree that local culinary events would display culture and tradition for tourists, and tourists would be interested in visiting local islands and experiencing local culture. This is in support of the argument in literature that local food renders cultural exploration for tourists (Hall & Sharples, 2003). However, opportunities are rare for such activities because cultural tours or festivals for tourists on inhabited islands have not developed.

Constraints

One of the key constraints to linking local food and tourism is the success of the Maldives tourism industry. The huge growth in the tourism sector has convinced many key stakeholders that no tools are required to promote and market the Maldives other than the natural environment of the islands. Given the success of the current branding and its excellent results, the rationale behind linking local food to tourism marketing was envisaged as difficult to justify.

The belief among operators that there is not much potential for seafood, fish and fish products to be further developed for the tourism industry is another constraint. Analysis of marketing materials revealed that fish and seafood were often presented as non-local dishes. Added to this, the fact that operators do not believe that seafood, fish and fish products could be developed for tourism suggests that operators are unsure of tourists' reaction to local dishes. The dominant role of foreign chefs is a potential obstacle in linking local food and tourism. Due to the influence of the head chefs in menu creation, their experience and knowledge in local food would play a key role in the amount of local food being used in tourist establishments. Industry experts cautioned that developing local skilled labour will not be an easy task because culinary professions are looked down on by Maldivian society. Opportunities for potential tourists to experience Maldives cuisine before they arrive are rare, unlike for some popular ethnic foods such as Thai or Indian. Unlike some countries where ethnic food is a key motivating factor for visitation, this is not the case in the Maldives. No

efforts have been made to market unique local foods to tourists, and no studies have been conducted on tourists' perception of local food. A lack of awareness about unique Maldivian food may be a constraint in linking local food and tourism.

Limited activities or events related to local food is seen as an impediment to promoting local food among tourists. The only food-related event held on a regular basis is The Culinary Challenge, part of the Hotel Asia Exhibition held annually since 2001 for suppliers to the hospitality industry to display their products and services. It is a competition among chefs from tourist resorts and hotels to display their skills. Although there is an element of local food display, exposure of these products to tourists is limited because the event is not promoted to tourists.

Recommendations

Interest from tourists for local food and culture presents an opportunity to incorporate more cultural concepts into events such as the "Maldivian nights." Tradition and culture can be displayed in the presentation of dishes and cultural dances. TTMP should encourage the promotion of local food in the same way it emphasises food festivals to promote culture and tradition. Those who create innovative local dishes and menus suitable for tourists should be recognised by the government to motivate innovation in local cuisine. Locals from each atoll in the Maldives could be encouraged to participate in the Culinary Challenge so that the richness and uniqueness of cuisine from all the atolls could be displayed.

Professional development of local chefs in local cuisine would link local food to tourism. Incorporating training in local cuisine into the government training programmes would encourage locals to use culinary skills. A recognised qualification could help to change locals' negative perceptions regarding the culinary profession. Their skills and knowledge would also inspire operators to use more local cuisine. Equally important is providing

training and knowledge to farmers. Instilling awareness and appreciation among locals for local products is the first step to developing and marketing local food to tourists as it would pave the way for the development of local products to a standard suitable for the tourism industry. To overcome the issue of scarcity of local products and ingredients, organic gardens could be cultivated in the resorts. Development of local theme restaurants and local food events and activities are also suggested to promote local cuisine. These attractions could then be featured in marketing material.

The recent change in government regulations that allow resorts, hotels and guest houses on inhabited islands should present opportunities for interaction between locals and tourists. Integrating tourism and local food experiences will enrich the tourist experience and generate income for local communities. Research to establish and identify the culinary heritage of the Maldives and documentation of diverse local foods specific to the Maldives was suggested by experts to promote and preserve their authenticity and create awareness among locals of their culinary heritage.

Another critical recommendation is the need to study visitor demand for local food — while this research has revealed critical issues on the supply side, it is important now to conduct more detailed research on the demand side.

Conclusion

Detailed analyses of printed and web-based marketing materials identified the extent that local food is used in Maldives tourism marketing. Local perceptions of the importance of food and tourism links were analysed using on-line surveys conducted with tourism operators and experts. This study reveals that current Maldives tourism marketing does not feature local food as an important part of the tourist experience, but is largely focused on overseas food items and presentation styles. Clearly there is potential for local food to be added to the

tourism experience, with a wide range of local produce and authentic dishes in Maldivian cuisine to be promoted locally and internationally by linking to tourism. Maldives tourism needs to broaden the tourism product line beyond sun, sand and sea and incorporate tourist experiences and activities that arise from local ways of living. Tourism based on undifferentiated environmental features makes the Maldives vulnerable to substitutability from destinations with similar products.

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