

Travel and Adventure: Calm waters of the Maldives soothe the soul

by David Belcher

With nearly 1,200 islands sprinkled throughout 26 sun-baked atolls in the Indian Ocean, the Maldives are the last great outposts of tropical perfection. Movie stars, beach bums, scuba junkies and Asia- and Caribbean-weary Europeans have been flocking here for the better part of a decade. Americans are just beginning to discover these slice-of-paradise islands southwest of India, so get there fast.

SURROUNDED BY WATER - An aerial view of the Soneva Gili Resort in Maldives shows the crystal-clear, shallow lagoon that surrounds it, making for virtually perfect swimming, wading or snorkeling. CNS Photo courtesy of Soneva Gili Resort. **SLEEPING ON STILTS** - Soneva Gili Resort, a short 20-minute boat ride from Male, is a tiny coral island in a sparkling lagoon. The 44 stilted accommodations are crafted in a traditional style from natural materials. CNS Photo courtesy of Soneva Gili Resort. **LOSE THE SHOES** - The first rule when you arrive at Soneva Fushi resort is: no news, no shoes. Everyone walks barefoot throughout the resort. CNS Photo courtesy of Soneva Gili Resort.

READY TO RELAX - A couple relaxes in the private plunge pool of the Maldives at Kuda Huraa with the Beach Bungalow in the background. CNS Photo by Peter Mealin for Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts. What makes the 17-plus-hour trek worth it? Aren't there equally gorgeous islands located much closer to home? The answer is a definitive "no." These 1,190 islands - 202 of which are inhabited, including 87 exclusive resort islands - are unequalled in untouched splendor. Most of the Maldives are quite small, so guest rooms are often built on stilts over lagoons rich with sea life. The islands are teeming with exotic birds and tropical forests spilling over with plants and flowers.

But what make these islands so unique are the shallow lagoons that ring each island, making swimming, wading or snorkeling virtually perfect. The color of the water varies from lime green to navy blue, depending on how deep the water is. When flying over these majestic islands, the colors are mesmerizing. From the deck of your room or from a sandy shoreline where waves hit the shore at about the speed of a bathtub splash, you can swim, wade and snorkel with sea life painted neon and perfectly reflected in the equatorial sun.

Nowhere is this more evident than in four high-profile resorts, varying from rustic luxury to squeaky clean and mere months old. In a country where tourism is less than 30 years old and has really caught on in the last seven years, the Maldives are a study in grass-roots tourism. This feels like what Hawaii and Southeast Asia must have felt like in the '70s.

The grand dame of the four resorts I stayed at is the 12-year-old Soneva Fushi, located on a vast island of tropical forests where guests ride rickety bikes along shady, sandy roads to their rustic but luxurious

bungalows. The first rule when you arrive at the island after a 30-minute seaplane ride from the Male International Airport: "no news, no shoes." Everyone walks barefoot, and the casual, homey approach is evident throughout the resort. Road signs etched on pieces of crooked wood direct you around the island. The beachside bungalows (many of which have private plunge pools) all have vast outdoor bathrooms where water quietly cascades over seven-foot-high walls that ensure privacy. Pools of water catch leaves and buds from towering trees that have grown over the quiet resort with 12 years of overgrowth to give it a genuine, forest-like feeling. Showering or bathing outdoors can include the spotting of fruit bats as they chomp on local berries, or a parakeet-colored gecko that slithers up the side of a wall.

Soneva Fushi's sister resort, Soneva Gili, located on an atoll much nearer the main airport, still offers rustic, cozy luxury, but it celebrates water more than land and forest. On a much smaller island, Soneva Gili's 45 rooms are all over water. The lagoons around the island vary from about one foot to three feet deep, depending on the tide, so wading on the fine, white sand just a few inches below the surface is a dream. The bungalows, open to the elements except for the air-conditioned bedroom, are an interactive experience. The outdoor shower is located at the end of an open-air hallway surrounded by sidewalls for privacy, with views of the azure ocean beyond as its waves crest long before the lagoon that smooths itself out eight feet below as you shower.

At both Soneva resorts, bicycles are the main way to get around. Each room comes equipped with two rustic bikes. Guests pedal to dinner, spa treatments or scuba diving with the feel of a long-forgotten childhood summer where bicycles and bare feet were a daily routine. Escapism was never more beautiful or transporting.

Less about bare feet and more about refined luxury amid nature are the two Four Seasons resorts. Four Seasons Kuda Huraa, which reopened last September after being severely damaged by the December 2004 tsunami, is virtually a brand-new resort. Three top-notch restaurants offer international, Italian and Indian cuisine. The service is vintage Four Seasons: friendly and attentive.

I completed a beginner's scuba diving course with surprising success. Just a few hundred yards from the resort lies water perfect for the novice diver. Huge schools of neon fish flitted around us just 20 to 30 feet below the water. My instructor, Vlado, was patient, comforting and hugely supportive. And the Four Seasons Explorer, a luxurious catamaran that takes three-day or longer trips out to sea, is the ideal vehicle for more experienced divers wanting to take advantage of the Maldives' famous water.

The brand-new Four Seasons Landaa Giraavaru, with its squeaky-clean guest rooms and private, ornate swimming pools, opened in December and has already drawn some of the world's most glamorous travelers. On a much larger island than its sister property, this Four Seasons boasts a massive infinity swimming pool, seaside rooms with private plunge pools and roomy terraces behind blue gates that evoke a homey and private feeling. And its spa, with massive treatment areas underneath overgrown trees where birds chirp and flowers burst with color, redefines pampering and luxury.

With 87 resorts scattered throughout this massive island chain, and approximately 35 on the way in the next five years, the Maldives are the international hot spot for detachment and raw beauty. These four resorts may be the finest example of how pampering, privacy and sheer natural beauty work perfectly together.

Better make it quick: The Maldives are in their tourism infancy, and seclusion is a fleeting image in our world - even with 1,000 untapped islands to spare.

IF YOU GO

The Soneva Fushi and Soneva Gili resorts are the last word in casual luxury - sort of like Robinson Crusoe meets Mr. and Mrs. Howell - and only now are being discovered by U.S. travelers. The company also has the Six Senses and Evason Hideaway brands, which are known throughout Asia for their spas and originality in design. A highly anticipated third Soneva resort will open in Thailand next year. Visit www.sonevaresorts.com. Call 949-640-1198 or visit www.sixsenses.com.

Four Seasons Kuda Huraa and Four Seasons Landaa Giraavaru, with a branding more familiar to U.S. travelers, offer a typical Four Seasons' approach to hospitality. Less casual and less hands-off than the Soneva brands, these two resorts are new, but with old-fashioned service. And the Four Seasons Explorer is a luxurious boat trip for the water-worshipping masses who come for scuba diving. Visit www.fourseasons.com or call 800-819-5053.

Many airlines fly to the Maldives, but it's a long haul and very expensive. I went with LTU International Airways, a trusted German carrier based in Dusseldorf. The airline flies to JFK, Miami and Fort Meyers, and is about to start service to LAX and Las Vegas. I stopped in Germany on either side of my trip to the Maldives, which helped break up the lengthy ride (it's a 10-hour flight from Dusseldorf to the Maldives). The Dusseldorf airport is located along many of northern Germany's main train routes, so a stopover in Hamburg, Dusseldorf or Cologne is ideal. LTU offers fabulous German efficiency and hospitality (my plane left JFK with only minor delays in an ice storm in March that canceled hundreds of other flights). Round-trip flights from the United States to Male (the main city of the Maldives) can be had for as little as \$1,500, which is reasonable for the length of trip and the huge demand for flights. Visit www.ltu.de/docs/us or call 866-266-5588.

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