



A Maldivian Odyssey

Esquire's Lucas Raven on the light at the end of the tunnel



This page and opposite: The gorgeous Soneva Fushi

IF EVER WE'VE NEEDED SOMETHING TO LOOK FORWARD TO, now is the time. What better light at the end of the tunnel than turquoise seas and white sands? Now is the time to start planning your next dream holiday. I've been embracing island life for the past three months (yes, really), giving me plenty of time to discover some of the most enchanting and paradisaical locations in the Maldives – and elicit a healthy dose of jealousy from my pals in the meantime.

The Maldives is an island country, the smallest in Asia, a few hundred miles south of mainland India. The nature of its location means a direct flight from Doha to capital Malé before a seaplane or boat to the island of your choice. Few places in the world can boast water so inviting or sea life so extraordinarily varied. Beaches of white sand are strewn with shells and hermit crabs. There are deserted sandbanks in the middle of the ocean, wildly idyllic for picnics, and sea turtles swimming in the reefs. Once you have decided to trade in your frequent-flyer miles to make the trip, the possibilities of where to stay are endless; there are well over a thousand islands in the Maldivian archipelago, and a huge variety of hotels. The decision is also more meaningful here than in most other destinations since you will likely spend the whole of the trip on a single island.

SONEVA FUSHI

Thirty minutes by seaplane from the capital Malé, the remoteness of the Soneva Fushi island allows you to be your own castaway, albeit of the most luxurious variety. This island is larger than most and incredibly rich in vegetation allowing for jungle villas and tree houses (all still with a sea view, naturally), as well as traditional beachfront huts.

"Each villa is assigned a butler catering to your every whim"

More so, the eco principals of the Soneva brand are worth noting: no cars (you are given bikes on arrival), no plastic, a recycling centre, solar power plant, a glass-blowing studio to turn waste into works of art, and an on-site sustainable vegetable garden amongst other initiatives. With an extensive activity and treatment menu (it makes for good reading on the beach), the celebrated spa is set in the mystery of the forest, with Robinson Crusoe-esque villas dotted along the blindingly white shore, open-air cinema, world-class kids' club and your-wish-is-their-command butler service. I mean, what else could I ask for?

Owned by Indian-British hotelier Sonu Shivdasani and his Swedish wife, Eva, who hand-in-hand rewrote the rules of hospitality in 1995 when they introduced the first barefoot luxury island, Soneva Fushi, and launched Six Senses, a pioneering brand in sustainability and wellness. Though they sold Six Senses in 2012, their sensibility lives on at Soneva Fushi and their thoughtful innovations range from producing their own drinking water to a commitment to a gender balanced workforce.

Service is impeccable. Each villa is assigned a butler who caters to every whim and fancy and this is the kind of resort where everybody knows your name. There's never a dull moment with kayaking, stand-up paddle boarding, diving, fishing, tennis, treetop yoga, stargazing at the fancy observatory and indulgent treatments from scrubs to hot stone massages at the award-winning Six Senses spa.

The 65 fantastical thatched-roof villas, ranging from a one-bedroom Crusoe villa to the nine-bedroom Private Reserve, are decked out with driftwood furniture, billowing mosquito nets and discreet tech such as televisions concealed inside vintage trunks. Al fresco bathrooms are bigger than most London flats, terraces come complete with hammocks, daybeds and most with a private pool, and each is surrounded by verdant jungle (complete with visiting geckos and flying foxes) just steps from





Above right: Scenes from Naladhu. Left: Lucas at Soneva Fushi

the beach.

Soneva Fushi's new overwater villas are stunning – all the other villas fringe a large, lush island – and each castaway-style retreat includes a private ocean-facing lap pool, a second-storey outdoor living space and a 60ft water slide. A gently curved jetty links the eight villas – one-bedrooms are 6,290 sq ft and the two-bedrooms are 9,225 sq ft – on an isolated side of the island, accessed via bicycles, a lengthy walk or golf carts driven by a designated butler.

The one-bedroom Water Retreats are the obvious choices for couples and honeymooners, while the two-bedroom villas would suit families, though a hawkish eye is required with young ones on the deck.

Just as impressive as the size and ocean views is the masterful craftsmanship of the joinery. The villas are a wonderland of assorted, reclaimed woods: thin slivers of eucalyptus make up the ceiling and retractable roof's underbelly, while gorgeous artistic driftwood accents and furnishings enliven the tanned oak walls and sturdy cedar frames.

While it would be easy to self-isolate by choice in these mega-villas, it would be a shame to skip on the varied and fabulous restaurants on the island, such as the organic-driven Fresh in the Garden, dramatically perched above a dense jungle canopy. The bountiful breakfast at beachfront Mihiree Mitha includes juicy mango and papaya, fresh-from-the-

oven pastries, eggs any style and healthy ayurvedic tonics. Watch the sun set from an overwater hammock at Bar(a)bara or head to overwater restaurant Out of the Blue, which features multiple dining concepts, visiting chefs and even a slide into the ocean. soneva.com

NALADHU PRIVATE ISLAND

An easy-breezy 35-minute speedboat ride from the Maldivian capital Malé, this pretty island offers privacy, hush-hush service and some splendid white beaches.

This long-established resort's clientele adore the colonial-inspired décor – thatched roofs and carved wooden columns softened with floral prints and nautical striped soft-furnishings. With only 20 expansive guest houses and one fantastic restaurant in South Malé Atoll, this intimate resort provides a level of privacy and personal attention impressive even in global high-luxury travel standards.

Long noted for its beauty among the locals, the small private island of Naladhu invites you to unwind in blissful seclusion. Spa in-house. Enjoy breakfast at your leisure, a picnic on deserted islands, or dinner by candlelight in a coconut grove.

Naladhu Private Island Maldives was named the Best resort in the Indian Ocean three years in a row and in the top 10 Best Resorts in the World by Condé Nast Traveler 2019 Readers' Choice Awards.

Weathered-wood accommodation comes with a

private garden and an infinity pool, high-ceilinged interiors decorated in cane and tropical hues, and an open-air bathroom and a sea-facing tub for two. Did I mention that you can go surfing too? That's right. Naladhu offers guided surfing and surfing lessons in The Maldives. Maldives' waves can't be considered super powerful, as the swell normally reaches shoulder-to-head high, but it offers big chances of barrels and long fun waves. It's the perfect trip for intermediate and advanced surfers. The surfing season depends on the Atolls, but most of the archipelago is good for surfing from April till October, yet March and November are also good and have the best weather. At Naladhu, a private boat takes you and your surfboard to where the best waves are. A gem of an experience. I felt like Bruce Wayne as my designated butler was waiting for me with a towel in-hand as I returned back to the resort. naladhu.com

RAFFLES MALDIVES MERADHOO

Located in the middle of the gorgeous Gaafu Alifu Atoll, known for its close proximity to the equator and abundance of sea turtles, in the farthest reaches of the Maldives lies Meradhoo. The journey may be a little longer compared to others, the birds-eye views however are so mesmerizing, they'll make up for the distance. It's possible to walk around the entirety of Meradhoo island in ten minutes.

Breezy verandahs, chequered floor tiles, striped monsoon blinds, lazily turning fans and louver windows. The beach is a perfect ring of platinum sands, haloed by watery ribbons of turquoise, aquamarine and royal blue and coral reefs teeming with colourful fish. More than 20 resident hawksbill turtles have been identified as living around the island and it's almost impossible not to bump into at least one of them during your stay.

Alternatively, you could stay on Meradhoo's overwater retreat, a loop of villas and leisure facilities sitting completely separate from the island, reached via a two-minute boat ride. Either way, the island's

"The Royal Residence is perfect for a once in a lifetime experience"

classy new-old ambiance feels like a refreshing change from the ever bling-ier Maldives openings of late.

A highlight of the resort is the Raffles Royal Residence. Occupying an unblemished stretch of the resort's blissful Beach Island, the vast six bedroom villa is perfect for groups of friends gathering for a once in a lifetime celebration, as well as families who want to kick back and take things easy. Stretching comfortably over 1,700 square meters and accommodating up to 15 guests, the Royal Residence's heart is the three consecutive reception rooms that border its 40 metre pool and look towards the property's private beach. Whether savouring a fully catered barbecue, enjoying a pool party or simply admiring unimpeded views of another staggering sunset, everything the property offers can be enjoyed in absolute exclusivity.

High ceilings, fully retractable windows and a spacious roof terrace add to the indoor-outdoor lifestyle it affords. For anyone who stays in this paradisaal retreat, spa treatments can be arranged on-site, the resort's team of Children's Butlers can be enlisted to entertain younger visitors and, making use of the villa's kitchen and dining room, dinner parties can be arranged for up to 24 guests. Overlooking the lagoon, the roof terrace provides the setting for evening sundowners as well as morning yoga sessions to the sound of the gently lapping ocean. raffles.com 📍

Below: Scenes from Raffles Maldives Meradhoo

