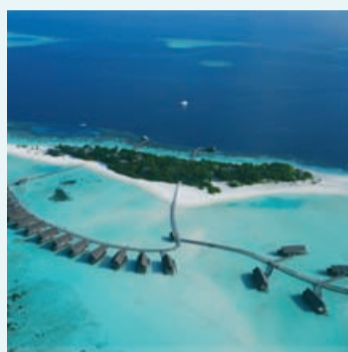


How to find the perfect Maldives

So many idyllic resorts, so little time. Here is **Leo Bear's** two-part guide to the chicest resorts to down towels in this autumn. Next week: best family spots and more



BEST FOR: SPA

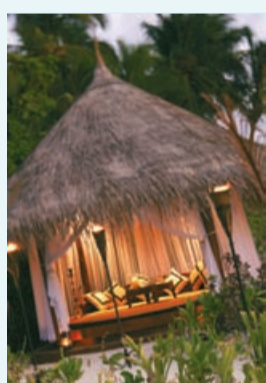
COCOA ISLAND Voted best hotel spa in Africa, the Middle East and the Indian Ocean in this year's Condé Nast Traveller Readers' Awards, Cocoa Island is the go-to resort for spa aficionados. The whole island is effortlessly chic with a neutral, natural vibe. Locally-sourced thatching and bleached driftwood blends seamlessly into the surroundings and there's none of the bling-a-ding-ding of other big name resorts.

The spa is a cut above. Offering a full-on authentic Ayurvedic programme, a hydrotherapy pool, four treatment rooms (including one for couples), steam rooms and a gym, you'd be hard-pressed to find a better place to rinse out



the pollution and restore your energy levels. Treatments include deep tissue, ayurvedic and detoxifying routines, plus facials and cleansing baths.

Must do: Free yoga or pilates classes every evening in an open-air seaside pavilion. www.cocoa.island.com.bz
Wellbeing Escapes offers a seven-night full board 'Chill out at Cocoa' package from £3,600 per person. Price is based on two people sharing and includes: 1hr private yoga class, 1hr private Pranayama (breathing class); 1hr Purify Holistic facial; 1hr Como Shambhala Massage and 1hr Indian Head Massage. Flights with Emirates and transfers are included. Valid from Jul-Oct.



BEST FOR: ROMANCE

NALADHU Kate Moss checks in to Naladhu when city living gets too much. With just 19 colonial-style guesthouses on the island, it is tiny and exclusive – you could call it the Hamptons of the Maldives. Opt for an Ocean House on the exposed side of the island – these have huge decks with swing-beds protruding over the booming, foaming ocean surf, perfect for cosying up on. Each house is kitted out with state-of-the-art entertainment gizmos, coffee machines and walk-in wardrobes. Best of all is the genius bathroom set-up: Think spa garden. Oversized stone baths are set at eye level with your infinity pool and the vast ancient blue beyond.

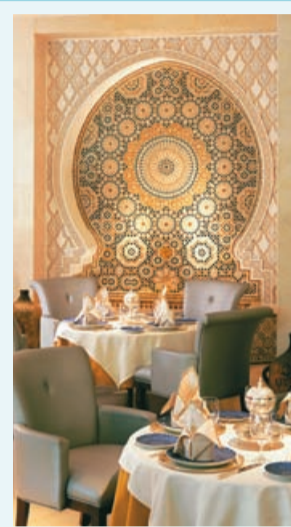
Occasionally, you'll spot Naladhu's private yacht



letting down its sail on the horizon, but otherwise you have complete and utter privacy. Meals are served in a palm-tree shaded area just off the beach called the Living Room, which really does feel like home. Managers Chris and Elmeene can be found most mornings, barefoot in linens, setting a thoroughly relaxed loved-up tone.

Must do: Take an evening sail across the still water in a traditional dhoni with a bottle of champers.

www.naladhu.com
Seven nights from £3,170 including BA flights from Gatwick, accommodation, breakfast and transfers, during the month of September with BA. (www.ba.com/maldives or call 0844 493 0758).



BEST FOR: DO-ERS

SHANGRI-LA VILLINGILI RESORT AND SPA

Shangri-La is eight minutes by speedboat from Gan International Airport, which is handy if you have access to a private jet. It also means there's something to see and do beyond the gates of the resort. Gan is the second most populated island in the Maldives, originally established as a military base for the Royal Navy. Grab your camera and stroll around town for a taste of traditional Maldivian village life, stopping in at local cafés, or watch and wait as fishermen reel in the catch of the day. Gan is also connected to five neighbouring islands via a series of causeways, so you can bikeride a distance of 17km, before pedalling all

the way back to your villa door for a kiwi cooler and a lie down.

Within the resort, book one of the 16 tree house villas, purely for novelty factor.

Perched on stilts among the tree-tops with elevated infinity pools, they make for a much more original Maldives experience – with slightly better views.

Must do: Have lunch on the equator, 75km north of the resort, aboard Shangri-La's private yacht. www.shangri-la.com

Seasons in Style is offering seven nights from £2,295 per person including accommodation in a Pool Villa with private pool, half-board, BA flights and transfers. Valid until 15 October based on two sharing.



BEST FOR: WOW FACTOR

W RETREAT & SPA "Whatever you want, whenever you want it" doesn't even go half way to describing the luxury afforded at this trendy, modern resort. Imaginatively designed villas boast plunge pools with winking star lights, sexy oversized circular daybeds and glass floors lit from beneath at night so you needn't miss out on the subterranean action.

Book the top-notch two-bedroom Ocean Haven with floor-to-ceiling sliding windows if you're looking to impress, although you can't go far wrong with a standard room – all of them have signature W beds (best sleep ever?), lagoon access, Bose sound systems and plasma TVs. The real style statement is made outdoors. Funky dhow-inspired white sunshades give the whole place a sort of



breezy marquee Sydney opera-house look. The over-water spa has a drop-dead gorgeous outdoor treatment area, so it's worth booking in a few massages, facials or private yoga sessions in between sunning sessions.

At night, the resort is buzzing; cocktails flow (95 varieties of vodkas are stashed behind the bar) and international DJs work up sweat for the glossy posse. Grab an alcove and keep things on the down low, or hit the dance floor: your holiday, your choice. Just keep it chic.

Must do: An overnight scuba diving trip to hammerhead shark point. www.starwoodhotels.com. *Seven nights from £2,765 per person including flights, transfers and breakfast in a Beach Oasis with Abercrombie and Kent (www.abercrombiekent.co.uk)*

How to find the perfect Maldives

In Part Two of our special on the idyllic islands, **Leo Bear** shows that whether you've got kids in tow, love diving or are feeling pinched for cash, there's something for you



BEST FOR: FAMILY FUN

ANANTARA DHIGU Lots of resorts in the Maldives have kids' clubs, but it's the little touches at Dhigu that make a difference. From dusk til dawn, your sandy, sticky-handed brood will be smiling. At breakfast, you can send them off to bark orders at the guy in the pancake and waffle shack, and at dinner, you can sit back and sip Sancerre, while waiters do matchstick tricks or weave origami birds from banana leaves. Babysitting can be arranged on request, and there's a wonderful kids' club with wooden houses and a playground, where the nippers can make masks, go on nature walks, get henna tattoos or just mess about with other kids under the shade of a coconut tree. But the best thing about Dhigu is that it's not designed as a kid-friendly resort, these are just bonus features.

For grown-ups, there are contemporary Thai-inspired villas

and a choice of five fantastic restaurants to choose from (some of which are on its sister island Veli, a five-minute pontoon ride away), so you never tire of a menu. Its Thai restaurant, Baan Huaraa, is particularly good (make sure you book ahead) and if the kids are old enough to appreciate, and respect, the power of chillies, there are red-hot cookery lessons to be had. The watersports at Dhigu are excellent too. Take out clear-bottom kayaks or catamarans, go windsurfing, water-skiing, wakeboarding or surfing... you name it.

Must do: Sea bobbing – part James Bond, part dolphin, these hand-held motorised rockets will have you all in hysterics.

Destinology is offering seven nights for £1,759 in a deluxe sunrise beachfront villa, including breakfast, BA flights from Gatwick and transfers, during September.



BEST FOR: THE WALLET

VILU REEF BEACH AND SPA RESORT This small, unpretentious resort has stood the test of time thanks to shell-loads of charm. Ideal for couples that enjoy peace and quiet and the simple things in life, you won't find iPod docks or WiFi here.

Old-school menus feature desserts such as "dried raisin bread and butter pudding" and cocktails come in coconuts with imaginative straw arrangements, but you can't go wrong with straightforward barbecued lobster on the beach with a bottle of Chablis.

Well-run yet laid back, friendliness is Vilu Reef's strong suit. Everyone from the managers to the gardeners have a spring in their step and for this reason, among many, the resort is popular with Brits – one couple has been returning

for 11 years.

Choose from kite boarding, diving, tennis, volleyball, dolphin cruises, line fishing and trips to a traditional island called Bandidhoo, where little has changed in 300 years, or just

enjoy the same style of island living you'd get at any of the other resorts, but at a fraction of the price. In the evenings, there's crab-racing, live music and karaoke, if you're game. **Must do:** Leave your mark by planting a palm tree.

Destinology is offering seven nights from £1,189 per person for July departures, £1,239 for August departures and £1,099 for September and October departures including flights, accommodation in a beach villa on a full-board basis, seaplane transfers, taxes and surcharges.



BEST FOR: DIVING

ALILA VILLAS HADADAA If you're interested in diving, but have never had the time to learn, the Maldives is a great place to get your first certificate. Plenty of Indian Ocean resorts have full service PADI dive centres but at Alila Villas, you're guaranteed brand new equipment, top class instructors and best of all, thanks to its location in the remote North Huvadho atoll, dives sites all to yourselves. Expect close encounters with nurse sharks, whale sharks, chevron barracudas, eagle rays, stingrays, hammerhead sharks and tiger sharks as well as manta rays with wingspans of more than five metres. Exploring the seabed in this largely undiscovered region, 400km from Malé, you'll never turn up at a dive site to find boatloads of other

coral-bogglers there. It's just you, the fish and warm shards of sunshine beaming down from the surface.

Blue Journeys offers a full programme of dive courses, from Discover Scuba Diving day courses and Open Water courses, through to more advanced and technical qualifications.

The resort itself is delightful, just 53 villas with a strong eco element.

Must do: Organise a private instructor and private boat for the day and visit some sites that are yet to be put on the map. www.alilahotels.com. Ampersand Travel

(020 7289 6100; www.ampersandtravel.com) has seven nights at Alila Villas Hadadaa from £2,995 per person including international flights with Sri Lankan Airlines, seaplane transfers and B&B accommodation.



BEST OF THE REST | MALDIVES

Six Senses Latitude Laamu (opening at the end of August) has over-water villas with slides from the bedrooms into the lagoon, plus an ice cream parlour serving 50 different flavours. www.sixsenses.com

Banyan Tree Madivaru has six freestanding tented pool villas, the first of their kind in the Maldives. Each one comprises three individual tents surrounding a large pool, one for living, one for sleeping and one for bathing. www.banyantree.com

Beach House Maldives, recently acquired by Waldorf Astoria, has undergone a revamp including a snazzy multimillion-dollar interactive art gallery with Maldivian artists in residence. www.beachhousemaldives.com

One&Only Reethi Rah is on one of the Maldives' largest islands and has long been rated one of the best resorts in the Maldives. Pack your chicest kalkan; you never know who you might bump into. www.oneandonlyresorts.com

Four Seasons Resort at Kuda Huraa is a veritable surfer's paradise. Its surf school is run by Australian pros Tropicsurf. Guaranteed warm swells. www.fourseasons.com

Conrad Maldives Rangali Island is home to Ithaa, the world's first all-glass under-sea restaurant (set five metres below) and has a wine list of more than 1,450 labels. Great for foodies. www.conradmaldives.com

