

a  
dream  
come  
true

Tranquil emerald waters, sugar-white islands, five-star hideaways... Look no further than the **Maldives**, says Leo Bear

THE STRING of tiny paradise-like islands that make up the Maldives — 1,190 to be exact — have long been considered the world's most romantic destination, serving love-struck honeymooners and the super wealthy alike. But can they possibly be as heavenly as all the travel brochures proclaim?

With several airlines now offering routes to the capital Male, I'm finally able to fulfill a lifelong desire to experience these precious paradise isles for myself and see what the fuss is about.

Sitting side-by-side in a 15-seater plane, my husband and I are visibly excited, pointing (him) and squeaking (me) at strings of coral-fringed islands scattered across the vast Indian Ocean. It feels like a dream...

the  
resorts

One of the many beauties of the Maldives is its year-round hot weather. When we travel, it's December at home with reports of a cold snap all over the news. During our 12 days in the Maldives, however, the temperature rarely strays below 85F.

On arrival at our resort, the first thing we do is tear off our creased winter clothes and sprint for the ocean just a few steps from our double bed decorated with hibiscus flowers. We're staying in a charming over-water villa and as we climb down the steps from our wooden deck and immerse ourselves in the refreshingly cool water, words cannot describe the feeling. The clarity of the water is staggering. Aside from the odd sea cucumber, there's literally nothing but baby-soft sand underfoot.

After a couple of hours striding smilingly up and down the beach, we feel completely at home on our desert island — our hectic city lives seem utterly surreal.

Although most resorts offer beach or jungle villas, the pretty thatched villas on stilts that have become a trademark of the Maldives are worth booking. They offer privacy and the opportunity to swim or snorkel straight from your porch — it's thrilling to peek over your book and see dozens of colorful fish swim past. ▶

Longfin bannerfish, Maayafushi.  
Below: Fishing boats

## in the water

The Maldives is all about natural beauty and the glistening cobalt blue ocean in this part of the world is nothing short of spectacular. As such, there's no shortage of watersports on offer, including diving, snorkeling, kayaking, sailing, surfing, kite surfing, paragliding, glass-bottom boat trips... you name it.

Most you can do year-round, but surfing is limited to June-September, so check before you book. The majority of resorts

offer a plethora of excursions, too. You can take a cruise to see dolphins or whale sharks, visit deserted islands and sand banks, or try a spot of line fishing.

It's great to get off the islands and enjoy the freedom of the open seas — you never know what you might see. We chartered a catamaran with a skipper one day and came across a frisky manta ray that swam right up to the hull of the cat to say hello. Apparently it was a rare, out-of-season

sighting, so we were doubly thrilled. But equally, my husband and I found kayaking around the islands side-by-side, watching the water turn from bright green to dark inky blue, one of our biggest pleasures.

Most fun, though, was a watersport called 'sea bobbing'. This involved clinging on to battery-powered 'rockets' that propel you along like a dolphin at speeds of up to 20km/h. Weaving around the lagoon, we hadn't laughed so hard in years.

## out at sea



Some of the resorts offer a 'catch it and cook it' fishing excursion, in a traditional sailing dhoni, which we boldly signed up to. Cold beer in hand, we learned how to toss a weighted line into the depths and reel it in until the bait (raw tuna) dangled a few meters from the seabed. Our catch was impressive: a large red mullet, an emperor fish and a dozen other nippers.

On dry sand, we helped scale the fish with guidance from Hassan Didi, a broad-smiling Maldivian chef from the resort. We also received a cookery lesson on how to gut and marinade the fish with garlic, ginger,

chilli and lime juice before skewering with palm leaves and roasting on an open fire. By the time the fish were ready, the night sky was heaving with stars and dozens of crabs had started to scamper around our flame torches. Fish has never tasted better.

We spent our last night in the Maldives at the intimate Anantara Naladhu resort, where Kate Moss takes her daughter. We opted for a sunset cruise in a traditional sailing dhoni. As the cotton sail caught the wind and led us out towards the horizon, there wasn't a sound to be heard, except for the gentle fizz of our chilled champagne. ►



out &  
about

Fihalhohi Island

One of the most interesting things to do in the Maldives is to get an insight into traditional living by visiting a local island. From Vilu Reef, we took a short cruise over to a neighboring island called Bandidhoo, where little has changed in 300 years.

There are no cars, motorbikes or traffic lights. It's serene and quiet: just two sandy streets lined with small homes and the odd shop. We discover that some of the oldest houses on the island have been built from coral, which would be illegal these days.

Groups of fishermen sit around tinkering with fish hooks or keep cool swaying in makeshift swings under trees. We check out some boats being constructed from palm

trees and admire gardens bursting with gourdes and guavas. All around, frangipani, bougainvillea and passion fruit trees add bursts of color.

Some resorts offer day trips further afield to Male, the capital of the Maldives. Providing a major contrast to traditional islands, Male is like a cartoon Manhattan, bursting at the seams with pastel-colored tower blocks and kooky buildings. Roads are abuzz with motorbikes, hawkers and children in school uniform. You can grab a bite to eat at one of the many alcohol-free bars and restaurants (it's a Muslim country) or explore its lively markets selling all sorts of knick-knacks. ■



## DON'T MISS

### A PICNIC ON YOUR OWN DESERT ISLAND:

Robinson Crusoe eat your heart out. It doesn't get more romantic than an intimate lunch with a loved one on a secluded island.

**DINNER A DEUX ON THE BEACH:** Lots of resorts offer 'Dining by Design', where you can tailor the menu to your preferences and choose the location of your table.

**SNORKELING ON A CORAL REEF:** An eye-opening experience that's fun for first-timers

and experienced divers alike. The islands north of Male have the best sites.

### CATCH IT AND COOK IT FISHING TRIP:

It's great fun learning how to expertly scale and gut your very own caught fish; you never know when you might need the skills back home!

**LYING ON A SUNLOUNGER:** With a good book and cocktail-in-a-coconut, this is the ultimate Maldivian classic.

BOOK IT NOW

### The Sheraton Maldives Full Moon

**Resort & Spa** has it all — from over-water bungalows to a luxurious spa and over 40 nearby dive sites, all set on a private island surrounded by tropical turquoise waters. Rates start from \$275 per night.

For a truly unique experience, check out the **W Retreat & Spa**. Bi-level beachfront and over-water retreats let indoor and outdoor mingle; roofs with peek-a-boo views of the sky and glass-paneled floors that reveal lagoon fauna below. Privacy is paramount — enjoy your own plunge pool and beach. Rates start at \$760 per night.

## » ESSENTIALS

### Maldives

**» WHEN TO GO:** The dry north-east monsoon season of late December to April.

**» CURRENCY:** Maldivian rufiyaa. \$1 = MVR12.

**» LANGUAGE:** Dhivehi or Mahl, with English widely spoken within the resorts.



MAP: JOHN PLUMER, IMAGES: PHOTOLIBRARY

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TO MAKE YOUR MALDIVES DREAM A REALITY, CONTACT OUR TRAVEL AGENCY — THE NUMBER'S ON THE BACK COVER