



**COCO PALM**

dhuni kolhu · maldives

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# HEAVEN SENT

The Maldives in the Indian Ocean are much more than an exotic hideaway for honeymooners. As British Airways starts direct flights this month, **Jane Dunford** guides you through all that these coral islands have to offer.

For visitors to the Maldives, the island of Male, site of the international airport and the capital city of the same name, is the first port of call. It's a world away from the other islands, with its high-rise buildings, paved roads and teeming streets (a third of the population live here). There are no beaches as such – just a new artificial stretch of sand around the harbour, popular with locals for an evening stroll. Although most holidaymakers simply pass through before jumping on a seaplane or speedboat to be whisked away to other islands – there are 1,190 of them, though just 200 are inhabited – it's worth lingering to explore the shady, tree-lined streets, the local markets on the waterfront, the museum and the 400-year-old Friday Mosque, famed for its coral carvings. There's also a vibrant cultural scene to discover, with music and dance shows and plenty of local craftworks for sale. Among the newest hotels is the 117-room Holiday Inn Male, which opened in September. At 15 storeys, it's the tallest hotel in the Maldives, with unrivalled views of the harbour and beyond. Hilton is opening a property here in 2011 too. >



Dream destination  
Huvafen Fushi is  
one of 87 exclusive  
resort islands

### Luxe out with the stars

The Maldives today are synonymous with luxury – but this wasn't always the case. Back in the 1970s, when tourism first began on the islands, basic resorts offering processed food and saltwater showers catering to a mainly German and Italian market were the norm.

How things have changed. The islands are now home to some of the world's most luxurious hideaways, with beautifully designed accommodation, gourmet cuisine and great service. The mould was broken with the opening of Six Senses' Soneva Fushi by Sonu Shivdasani and his wife Eva in 1995, touting the concept of 'barefoot luxury' with its 'no news, no shoes' catchphrase. 'It took us a long time to convince anyone that luxury tourism would work here, but we've never looked back,' said Shivdasani.

A host of top-end brands have since followed in their footsteps – from Banyan Tree and Four Seasons Resorts to W and Anantara. Six Senses opened its second property, Soneva Gili, the country's first all-over-water project in 2002, and Latitude Lamu opens next year, promising a sociable, hip vibe.



Each island resort has its own particular charm – whether it's Banyan Tree Madivaru's tented villas with pools, or Shangri-La's Villingili Resort and Spa, which opened in July, with treehouse villas among accommodation options (a first for the Maldives).

Hilton Iru Fushi also opened this summer, a sprawling contemporary resort with 220 villas set in 52 acres of tropical vegetation and white sand. It offers a different feel from Hilton's other properties, the Conrad Maldives Rangali Island, with its

wide accommodation choice and sophisticated facilities (think 80 martini cocktails at Vilu Bar or 101 types of cheese in the wine bar) and the boutique Beach House on the Haa Alifu Atoll with butlers and pool villas (part of the Hilton group from November).

Naladhu – a favourite with celebrities, from Kate Moss to Roger Federer – has just 19 houses, all with personal plunge pools and wine cellars pre-stocked to your own preference. Another popular place with A-listers and heads of state is Kurumba (Bill Clinton and Kofi Annan are fans). It's just undergone a £12 million refurbishment and is known for its fine dining, with nine restaurants to choose from.

Huvafen Fushi's new luxury Dhoni experience takes five-star living out onto the water with traditional sailing boats kitted out with cutting-edge technology and creature comforts (Philippe Starck design and Frette linen) as well as private butlers. Guests can combine staying on one with onshore rooms, or just head out for a day. >

 **NALADHU HAS JUST 19 HOUSES AND IS A FAVOURITE WITH CELEBRITIES SUCH AS ROGER FEDERER** 



Others to watch out for include the Mandarin Oriental, which opens next year, offering pool villas and an underwater wine cellar with private dining room, among seven bars and restaurants.

### Retreat to an out-of-this-world spa

Every self-respecting resort in the Maldives has to have a spa. Guests come to the islands to chill – and then chill some more with the help of a spa therapist.

There are some that stand out from the crowd. Huvaafen Fushi has the world's first underwater spa, LIME. Its signature Unite Me-Crystal Ritual uses indigenous ingredients, from local sand to coconut oil.

Conrad Maldives Rangali Island, the only destination spa in the Maldives, features 21 spa water villas each with their own private treatment room and direct access to the Spa Retreat, a self-contained over-water resort (and there's a special glass-floored treatment room for couples).

CHI. The Spa at Shangri-La is located in its own spa village, offering treatments based on Chinese, Himalayan and Asian healing rituals and traditions. The spa at Four Seasons' Kuda Huraa is set on its own island, reached by a traditional dhoni boat. Treatment rooms have private gardens with open-air showers and some have oversize soaking tubs, designed for couples. Its sister property Landaa Giraavaru has a spa and Ayurvedic retreat and both have resident yogi guides for morning and evening practice.

The Taj Exotica Resort's Jiva Grande Spa is an authentic Indian spa designed in collaboration with a Vastushastra (the Indian answer to feng shui) master with seven over-water treatment pavilions, while Anantara's over-water spa lets guests watch the marine life through glass panels while they're pampered.

Cocoa Island offers Asian-inspired treatments at COMO Shambhala Retreat, with complimentary yoga and meditation

sessions and the biggest hydrotherapy pool in the Maldives, while at Velassaru, open-sided treatment pavilions offer uninterrupted sea views.

And of course, if going to the spa is a little too much effort, why not have the therapist come to you. The Banyan Tree Madivaru has spa beds for in-room treatments in the bath tent and the Mandarin Oriental's largest villas will have private spa facilities too.

### Find affordable chic

The Maldives may be known for exclusive resorts – but there's still plenty around that's affordable, and there are some good deals to be had, particularly in the low season, with prices from around £1,000 for a week. The government recently revealed plans to build dozens of mid-range hotels and guesthouses too in a bid to appeal to a new, younger and less affluent market, as well as families.

Lily Beach Rescrt & Spa, which opened in April, claims to offer 'value redefined', with everything that five-star luxury resorts offer included in a significantly lower price.

Another good choice for those looking to save some money is the four-star Meedhupparu on the Raa Atoll – it's one of the more lively resorts, suitable for families as well as honeymooners. Velassaru, which opened in March, promises 'affordable chic' and contemporary design (it's where Denise Van Outen spent her honeymoon recently) whether it's for a romantic break, family or spa holiday.

Another of the newest properties to offer the very top standards of luxury at more affordable prices is the Vivanta by Taj-Coral Reef – part of the exclusive Indian Taj Hotels group. Its rooms cost from £233 per person per night full board. OK, so it's not cheap, but it's still a big saving compared to many luxury resorts in the region. >



Barefoot chic  
Feel the sand between  
your toes at the  
Banyan Tree Madivaru

### Check out the eco credentials

With 80 per cent of the Maldivian islands no more than one metre above sea level, the country is more aware than most of the dangers of climate change and the threat posed to its existence by potential rises in sea level.

New president Mohamed Nasheed has pledged that the country will be carbon neutral within a decade – and is working on a plan to virtually eliminate fossil fuel use on the archipelago by 2020, with help from British climate change experts Chris Goodall and Mark Lynas. Many other schemes are in place to protect the fragile marine and terrestrial environment – the first National Environmental Action Plan was introduced in 1989, the Million Tree project was launched in 1996, and a green levy for tourists is being discussed.

Individual resorts are implementing their own schemes too, proving environmental sustainability and luxurious holidays can go hand in hand. Six Senses adds a two per cent carbon offset rate to room rates and is planning to be zero carbon by the end of next year at Soneva Fushi. The resort already reuses nearly 80 per cent of waste through its Eco Centre, converting biomass into charcoal, has banned imported bottled water and has a dedicated garden producing organic food.

Taj Exotica Resort & Spa also has a range of initiatives to reduce its carbon footprint, including rainwater harvesting and on-site water bottling, while Hilton Maldives has been involved with environmental initiatives such as the Maldives Whale Shark Research Programme, which played a key role in the government's recent decision to create



three new marine-protected areas to help preserve them.

The Four Seasons' Kuda Huraa and Landaa Giraavaru resorts have a coral propagation project to artificially cultivate corals and nurse ailing reefs, and marine biologists guide guests on snorkelling adventures. Along with others, such as the Six Senses properties, the resorts run an environmental education project involving Maldivian communities in its conservation efforts.

### Dive in to the activities

The Maldives are all about lazy days spent enjoying some of the planet's most pristine beaches but for those who want to be more active, there's plenty to do. >



**Jungle life**  
Soneva Fushi's lush gardens with the observatory in the background; saving the turtle at Banyan Tree's Marine Lab (above)

Diving here is among the best in the world. Coral thrives in the warm water temperatures and visibility can sometimes exceed 50m. Many resorts have great house reefs, just a short swim from the beach (Kanuhura's outer reef, for example, drops nearly 2,000m) and most have professional dive schools on site too.

You'll find plenty of marine life, from stingrays to turtles, and even shipwrecks, such as the dramatic British Loyalty, a 140m tanker sunk between the islands of Maradhoo and Hithadoo.

Those who don't want to get wet can experience the underwater world by submarine, descending to a depth of 150m day and night, leaving from Male.

Surfing, though relatively new to the Maldives, is fast becoming a reason to visit too. Most of the recognised surfing spots are in the Male Atoll, particularly on the eastern side, with best conditions from May to October, during the southwest monsoon. The Four Seasons' Kuda Huraa is the only resort to offer a dedicated surf school, with courses for all levels from beginners to experts. You'll find kite-surfing opportunities at some resorts too, including Olhuveli Beach & Spa Resort.

The Maldives is one of the best places for dolphin and whalewatching, with over 20 different species to be seen, from the giant Blue Whale to the Spinner Dolphin. You're almost guaranteed to see dolphins at play on early morning and late afternoon boat trips, while on safari whalewatching trips you may see species rarely seen elsewhere, from the

Dwarf Sperm Whale to the Tropical Bottlenose Whale.

Several resorts offer the chance to get out and explore local life. From Shangri-La's Villingili Resort and Spa, for instance, you can take a boat to neighbouring islands and cycle a 17km trail through pristine Maldivian villages.

Olhuveli also has a new 'catch it and cook it' programme, where guests spend the afternoon fishing with a local fisherman and learn how to scale, gut and cut fish they've caught, followed by a cooking demonstration on the resort's own sandbank island. Anantara has a cooking school, too.

With clear skies and balmy nights, the Maldives are a great place for stargazing. Soneva Fushi has a state-of-the-art professional astronomical observatory. Where better to learn about the night sky? ■

#### WAY TO GO

From 25 October, British Airways flies to Male, the Maldives, from London Gatwick. Join the Executive Club and earn up to 10,587 BA Miles when you fly ClubWorld to Male. Find out more at [ba.com](http://ba.com), where you can also book great value holidays, Avis car hire, hotels and experiences. BA offers seven nights at the four-plus star Coco Palm Dhuni Kolhu from £1,651 per person in November, with breakfast and return nonstop flights. Seven nights at the five star Four Seasons Resort at Kuda Huraa cost from £3,352 per person in November, including breakfast and return nonstop flights. For more details, visit [ba.com](http://ba.com) or call +44 (0)844 493 0758.

Diving deep  
The Maldives' amazing  
underwater world is  
part of the appeal

