

Heaven ON EARTH

Whether you're looking to dive, dine or detox, the Maldives has you covered. Rose Dykins finds her own slice of paradise



From the passenger seats of a tiny DHC-6 Twin Otter seaplane, I'm transfixed by the electric-blue rings of reef around the atolls below. Irregularly shaped and dashed at the edges, they float in the ocean like clouds in an inverse sky. They instantly top the list of the most beautiful things I've ever seen.

Fruits of the Indian Ocean

Some say the Maldives lacks culture. It's true that the resort islands are rather bubble-like and geared towards keeping you relaxed and pampered – but you can experience the culture through the food. Traditional Maldivian recipes take influences from nearby Sri Lanka and India – think fragrant curries, roshi (chapati) and plenty of heat. Ingredients, however, are slightly limited. There's simply no space for large-scale agriculture or livestock, so most produce is

imported. Two things the Maldives has in abundance are tuna and coconut. The former is not only a staple part of the Maldivian diet, it's a precious export – accounting for 18% of GDP – and each fish is caught individually by a line and a pole for maximum sustainability.

Kurumba Maldives, the first resort to ever open in the Maldives, is a great option for sampling local cuisine. On arrival I'm greeted with coconut ice-cream then, the next day, I pull up a chair at the resort's overwater teppanyaki restaurant, Hamakaze, for a cooking lesson with Kurumba's chefs.

The aromas are incredible. Cinnamon, cardamom, coriander and cumin, plus curry and pandan leaves form the base for kandu kukulhu, a spicy curry with succulent pieces of rolled tuna steak. We also try garudihya, a miso-like soup with smoked chunks of fish, which islanders eat for lunch and dinner.

Twenty-five minutes from Malé by

speedboat sits uber-chic Velassaru Maldives resort, a laid-back beach club atmosphere, which attracts a trendy crowd. On Maldivian Barbecue night at its Sand restaurant, I find steamed reef fish wrapped in banana leaves, prawns perked up with lemongrass, and colourful salads featuring indigenous plants, such as breadfruit, which tastes a little like sweet potato. I scatter it all with crispy fried whitebait, as if they were croutons, and devour it in a candlelit pagoda on the beach.

Cleansing the soul

Though the Maldives is the perfect place to indulge, world-class spas also offer incredible treatments using local ingredients. The back-to-nature-style Veli spa at Kurumba Maldives offers a 'Pure Veli' detoxifying treatment – your body is exfoliated by bamboo then covered in a clay green tea, which is left on while you enjoy a head and foot massage.



Make it happen

Kuoni offers seven nights with breakfast including flights and group speedboat transfers to the 5-star resorts mentioned from £1,371pp (based on two sharing). kuoni.co.uk



'We witness turtles chomping at algae surrounding fluorescent coral'

The overwater spa at Velassaru Maldives offers a 'Vinothérapie' body wrap, where you're enveloped in a cocoon of vitamin-rich sea algae and seaweed said to remove toxins and stimulate your metabolism. I go for Velassaru's reviving Swedish massage before tucking into mango sorbet in the relaxation room, then taking a dip in the infinity pool, leaning over the edge to gaze at that endless ocean again.

Follow the crowds

The Maldivian capital is a stark contrast to the island resorts surrounding it. Crammed with colourful low-rise buildings, and shorter in length than the runway of its airport, Malé is a place where islanders flock to live, but live to work. Though the sights aren't mind-blowing, a visit to Malé is likely to be the only chance to see life outside the resorts.

I escape the heat in the colourful covered markets and witness a guy zealously gutting fish after fish. I politely decline the offer a pungent jam jar filled with fish sauce for US\$27, but am tempted by the coconut bars with leaves for packaging, the crispy dried yams and the bunches of tidily bananas.

I also stop in at Juway's cafe to discover how Maldivians take their tea. Tea and short eats is a national ritual and the cafe's award-winning chef, Juwairiya Wajdy, is renowned for her recipes, so it's the perfect place for a taster. I'm surprised when I bite into the kulfi boakiba which has the appearance of a flapjack but the taste of smoked tuna and a hint of chilli. It's odd, but my savoury palate

prefers it to a sugary treat with a cuppa.

Beneath the waves

A 30-minute sea plane flight from Malé brings you to the tiny, verdant island resort of Kandolhu Maldives resort. I'm ecstatic when I check into our ocean villa (on stilts) and discover there's a ladder into the luminously blue water – even more so when rainbow fish congregate at its base.

Kandolhu's reef is unspoilt compared to other places I've dived before, and I've never felt so outnumbered by fish. It's also the first time I find myself face-to-face with an eagle wray. It undulates next to me, for about ten seconds, then suddenly darts back into the blue. For most of the dive we're pursued by playful, smiling bat fish, and witness turtles chomping at algae surrounding fluorescent patches of coral. Just when the Maldives can't get any better, you spend the afternoon watching turtles in the water. Absolute bliss.

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kandu
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