



The Maldives

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A dozen palm tree-topped islands edged by white beach are drizzled across the turquoise ocean, looking exactly like islands in a children's picture book. The Maldives, a chain of 1192 small coral islands lying low in the Indian Ocean south west of Sri Lanka, fits so precisely the collective fantasy of desert islands that it takes a while to adjust your sense of reality and realize that no, it's not a dream.

In 1972, when George Corbin, an Italian entrepreneur, brought 12 guests to what he was convinced was the perfect holiday destination, they found a nation unchanged for decades: 93,000 residents without a single policeman or phone. Within a year of Corbin's visit, a handful of self-contained resorts had opened. By the end of the decade, President Gayoom had passed tourism laws which have sustained the years and growth, presciently safeguarding the islands and successfully resisting dilution of the conservative Islamic culture by restricting tourism to the uninhabited islands.

To Maldivians, 'inhabited' means only those islands with Maldivian villages, of which there are 202. The resort islands are, officially, uninhabited. So for the length of your holiday, you will, in some sense, be a castaway.

The 'Robinson Crusoe factor,' is what the department for tourism called it, identifying as key to the Maldives' appeal a place where all the resorts occupy their own self-contained worlds, made of natural materials and free from traffic and crime, catering to modern-day adventurers with abundant creature comforts.

Indeed, upon deplaning at Hulule airport in the capital, Malé, I board The Four Seasons Resort's luxurious motor launch, which speeds across the sea for the half hour trip, traveling alongside pods of dolphins and excitable flying fish.

The tiny island rises out of impossibly clear green water, palm trees swaying, thatched bungalows peeking through the foliage, and a row of Water Villas built on stilts, snaking away from the island like a tail. Walking around the whole island takes no more than 15 minutes, but golf buggies are apparently on hand for guests who feel too relaxed to bother. (You understand when you visit the other end of the island where a smaller, connecting island houses the newly-opened spa, a world of wooden floors, billowing cotton, delicious smells and exquisite treatments, populated by white-uniformed therapists and serene-looking guests.)

In order to get around building regulations stating that no development must occupy more than 20 percent of an island's area, we have a choice between water villas in addition to beach bungalows. I stay in a beach bungalow with a plunge pool at the front and an outdoor shower set in the back of the bathroom, and count 30 paces from my bed to the shoreline where the waves are lapping the sand. When I eventually emerge from the bliss of my bungalow with its cool terracotta tiled floor and massive bed draped with mosquito net, I realize that this holiday is not for the hyperactive: dipping in my pool in the evening, or eating the tropical frit

left in the room every day while lounging on my poolside divan leaves me in no doubt about that.

But I am called nevertheless to the sea waters of the Maldives, where three-quarters of the world's reef-fish species reside and the real action - world famous diving - exists.

I book a 4-day PADI open water diving course, only to find myself in a classroom with four other diving students, all of us staring wistfully out of the window at the sunshine and wondering why on earth we are poring over books when paradise beckons. But by the third day, when we go for our first dive in open water, we understand. As we all struggle with our bouyancy and the extraordinary fact that we are actually breathing, a shoal of technicolor fish materialize around us and, our eyes wide with wonder, we forget about everything that is odd or uncomfortable and collectively fall in love. As my instructor points out when we emerge from the water with wide smiles, when you learn to dive in the Maldives, you're spoiled forever.

Once qualified, I head out for my first 'real' dive, away from the house reef. It's a dive that takes on mythical status when I come across a pair of majestic manta rays moving elegantly in the water. I hang still and watch them, my breath ringing in my ears. The mantas gliding an arm's length from me, colorful coral bunched below, and walls of neon fish drifting by, I understand the real magic of the Maldives. Whether you find it below the water or above, it is possible to have one moment in paradise.