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Maldives: Huvafen Fushi & Baros

Scattered across the Indian Ocean, the magical Maldives offer a total escape from the rest of the world, whether you're looking for barefoot luxury or high-tech fun and games, says Alicia Deveney

by Alicia Deveney Feb 23 2010

The sails billowed and swelled as they caught the breeze and the gentle sway of the wooden sailing boat was lulling me to sleep as I lay, bathed in sunlight, on the deck of a traditional Maldivian sailboat – a dhoni. As I succumbed to one of life's rare moments of true contentment, my eyes fluttering shut, one of the cabin crew arrived with a tray of pungent fresh coffee, tangy just-squeezed orange juice and a basket of melt-in-the-mouth pastries. 'Well, this is how to do a transfer,' remarked my fiancé (who was sitting on the prow, having come over all Master and Commander).

Though tourism is now the Maldives' lifeblood, most visitors to these magical islands – voted again and again the best on the planet – do very little actual touring, due to the distances between resorts and the expense of getting from one to another (usually by motorboat or light aircraft).



My holiday, however, was to be made up of two contrasting parts. Having bid a sad farewell to the luxury island resort of Baros that morning, we were aboard one of über-lux Huvafen Fushi's private fleet of dhonis travelling the short distance across the North Malé Atoll for the second part of our trip.

The Maldives are a geological rarity, scattered across the equator in the Indian Ocean around 600km southwest of Sri Lanka. Comprising a double chain of 26 atolls, Republic of the Maldives – to give the country its proper name – is made up of 1,192 islets, spread out over

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90,000sq km. Only 200 of these are inhabited, and half are tourist resorts, each fully occupying an island.

Tourism itself is relatively new. It was less than 40 years ago when the first tourists – spear-fishing Italians – were hosted by trailblazing local businessman Mohamed Maniku. Then it was very much rainwater showers and beach huts. But boy, how times have changed – now the Maldives are the world’s foremost luxury destination and a mecca for honeymooners, divers and, as those Italian big-game fishermen would have said, lovers of la dolce vita.

Our first destination, Baros, a 25-minute boat journey from Malé International Airport, was one of those first resorts. A former palm tree plantation, when it opened in 1973 there were 28 wooden cottages and no running water, but Baros, like the rest of the Maldives, has moved with the times. There are now 75 timber and sandstone palm-thatched villas – on land and over water – and though most rooms still have an outdoor shower, Baros has all the mod-cons a 21st-century tourist could desire.

Despite the iPods and flatscreens, it’s still a very barefoot island where you can happily play out all your Robinson Crusoe fantasies. Palm trees swaying in the warm tropical breeze, check. Dazzling azure lagoon teeming with marine life, check. Clean, white picture postcard beach, check.

At Baros, there’s no central pool – until they added five new pool villas in late 2009, the only pool on the island was the private one in the Residence (Baros’s ‘penthouse’). This means that sightings of other guests are a rarity aside from mealtimes (breakfast and lunch are taken on Lime Restaurant’s deck; for dinner, choose from freshly-caught fish at Cayenne Grill or the more refined delicacies of chef Damian Barrett’s Australia-meets-paradise-island menu at the Lighthouse).

The only real sustained personal contact we had was with our charming butler Jaleel.

It was he who arranged for snorkelling equipment to be delivered directly to our villa so we could explore the house reef – a mere wade from our villa. It was he who arranged our side-by-side massages at Aquum Spa, in one of the open-air pavilions, and our private dolphin cruise. (As we sipped Champagne and nibbled canapés, dolphins swam next to the boat, tickling our toes with spray. Later, we stopped for a ridiculously romantic sandbank dinner à deux – the type honeymooners dream of).

Sometimes, though, why be Robinson Crusoe when you can be James Bond? Huvafen Fushi, with its high-tech gadgetry and underground lairs, is the last word in island cool. This resort, which first opened in 2005, is the epitome of urban chic (think Shoreditch House-on-Sea). And young urban couples aren’t the only ones who hang out here – George Clooney, Kate Moss and TomKat have visited too.

Our days started with a glorious view of the ocean from the bed in our over-water villa. Then came the ‘juice of the day’ and a healthy breakfast at Celsius restaurant, with its white sand floor and agreeable blurring of the boundaries of inside/outside (think open walls and deck over the ocean).

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While my fiancé spend happy mornings snorkelling or playing in the lagoon on a Seabobs – a hand-held, jet-driven water rocket – I lounged by the fibre-optic lit infinity pool or visited Lime, the world’s only underwater spa. Built in the lagoon deep beneath the waves and surrounded by coral beds, the spa offers a menu of excellent treatments, all performed for a curious audience of powder blue surgeonfish, angelfish and clownfish swimming by.

Before we knew it the sun was sinking slowly beneath the waves and it was time to watch the resort’s marine biologist feeding the manta rays from the beach before heading to UMbar for preprandial sundowner cocktails.

Huvafen Fushi – aware of the potential for small island resort fatigue – offers diners a plethora of options. We feasted on lobster and fizz by the pool and dined on freshly-caught fish in the island’s signature restaurant, Salt. On the last night came a true gastronomic delight – a wine-matched dinner in the hotel’s wine cellar Vinum (the biggest in the Maldives at 6,000 bottles) located 26ft beneath the beach.

All too soon, we were boarding our Qatar Airway flight back to Doha (next stop Heathrow) our time in the Maldives having passed by much too quickly. We’ll just have to return as newly-weds.

Book it: Save £450pp at Huvafen Fushi (<http://huvafenfushi.peraquum.com/>), or £200pp at Baros (<http://www.baros.com/>) when you book a week’s holiday with Luxury Holidays Direct (www.luxuryholidaysdirect.com). Prices for Huvafen Fushi from £1,899pp, based on two sharing a Beach Bungalow, B&B. Includes one night free, a 60-minute couples’ massage and a three-course lunch at Raw. Prices for Baros from £1,299pp, based on two sharing a Deluxe Villa, B&B. Includes one night free and Qatar Airways flights, taxes and transfers. Huvafen Fushi prices based on travel between 16 May- 31 July 2010; Baros prices based on travel between 20 April-25 July 2010.

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