

Travel

Finally, a desert island without the discs

DAZZLING BEAUTY: Baros, one of the two resort islands where Sue Lawley, right, stayed in the Maldives

After years of imagining a tropical paradise on Radio 4, Sue Lawley visits the Maldives — and discovers a real one

I SPENT 18 years of my professional life coaxing people into imagining life on a desert island. I've lost count of the number of times I posed for publicity pictures for Radio 4's Desert Island Discs in front of a studio backdrop of turquoise sea and blue sky. I always assumed this idyllic picture to be fantasy. In reality, insects would eat you alive, the enticing waters would be menacing and the sun would prove an enemy. I knew the perfect desert island did not exist. And then I went to the Maldives... The Maldives are tiny islands scattered like

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Snorkelling here is like belly-flopping into a bath-warm tropical aquarium

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a string of pearls hundreds of miles long across the Indian Ocean, about 400 miles south-west of Sri Lanka. They are partners with the sea. The highest point on any of them is little more than 7ft above the level of the ocean that nurses them. And the sea is a capricious mate: it gives permission for the islands' existence but if it rises just a few inches, they will vanish.

As you fly in over them, the islands look like turquoise ink blots in a dark blue ocean, a splatter of lagoons fringed by white sand. A long but easy flight (British Airways now flies direct)

brought us to their capital, itself an island, Malé. From there you're transferred swiftly by boat to your chosen island – 100 of them are resorts, another 100 populated by locals. The rest – 1,000 of them – remain uninhabited.

The sky was decorated with small white clouds and a stiff breeze cooled the tropical air as the powerful motor launch plunged across the sea towards our island home. When you land, you discover there are almost no mosquitoes and no snakes; just the odd gecko that scuttles away as soon as you approach, and one or two herons waiting patiently to catch an unsuspecting fish.

It began to dawn on me that the Mal-

dives are a brilliant invention – a world of desert islands that has turned make-believe into reality.

We divided our time in the Maldives between two distinctly different islands. The first was Baros.

It's a special place. This island has managed to combine many of the features of traditional life in the Maldives with all the trappings of international luxury. From the veranda in front of our beautifully appointed room we watched an endless exercise in the survival of the fittest. Shoals of sardines swirled through the shallows at the edge of the beach, moving in dark shadows beneath the clear water, the perfect snack for the young blacktip reef shark.

Gliding effortlessly through the water like a silver flash, attracting the attention of the lone heron standing on the shore. Both shark and bird get their prey. The shark, by the way, is harmless to humans. Approach him and he quickly swims away.

THE islands have probably the highest density of fish anywhere in the world: rainbow runners, triggerfish, oriental sweetlips, humpback snappers, jack fish – all of them can be seen within a few feet of the shore. Snorkelling here – in water that is always the temperature of a warm bath – is like doing a belly flop into a giant tropical aquarium.

On this perfectly round island – you can circumnavigate it in eight minutes, getting gently tanned as you go – I lolled on the warm white coral sand of the beach or lazed in one of the many deep chairs, divans and hammocks.

One evening we were taken on a sunset cruise in a dhoni, a Maldivian boat fashioned from coconut wood with a vast cheese-cloth sail. These chocolate-coloured, shallow-bottomed craft are perfect for exploring the reefs and open waters. You feel as though you are melting into the landscape as a burning sun fades across the rolling waters, and shades of brown and orange mix with the cream of the sail to create a rainbow of soft, protective colours.

Later in the week we ate under a full moon at The Lighthouse –



Baros's main restaurant – where Muscat lobster followed by a meltingly tender piece of Australian beef reminded me that this was a desert island with an endless supply of the best things in life.

The highlight of our stay was dinner on a sandbank – a small raised piece of land, five minutes' boat ride from the island, that refuses to submit to the ocean waves. Here we were brought ashore to a tented pavilion for two, lit by torches, to be served a seafood supper washed down with pink champagne. Alone on the high seas eating a dinner to die for, watched by nothing but the great waters of the Indian Ocean: this was an experience I still dream about.

The natural resources of the Maldives are limited. Fish, of course, but otherwise nothing much but coconuts and scrubby vegetation. In their raw state these islands are beautiful but not bounteous. But that beauty is now being captured and fed – resources important to 21st Century living have been imported to create a world that wasn't there before.

It began in the early Seventies. Until then the Maldives were hidden from the outside world, about which their people knew little and cared less. Then, as the development of harbours began to open up the islands, an enterprising Maldivian, Mohamed Umar Maniku, had the brilliant idea of turning part of his country into the desert-island idyll.

He asked the government to give him a lease on one of the islands. He called it Kurumba, which means 'baby coconut', and set about creating a place that balanced the local culture with

the comforts demanded by international tourists. It was an inspired decision. Today, nearly 40 years on, the Maniku empire runs resorts on five other islands.

Of course the big boys have moved in too: many of the international chains have a lease on one or more of the islands. But both of the ones we visited are owned by that original indigenous company, and it seemed to me their roots lent them a natural charm and quiet confidence.

Our second island home – Huvafen Fushi (Dream Island), a short boat ride from Baros – is more determinedly sophisticated. But it too understands the otherworldliness of the Maldives. It has its own time zone, an hour ahead of its neighbours, which gives you a later sunset and so a longer day: uninterrupted, easy days alone on a tiny promontory or beside the infinity pool. And whatever the time, there's never a need for shoes. The other guests and I went permanently barefoot.

'Island chic', 'barefoot luxury', 'effortless style': these are the phrases Maldives aficionados (of which, of course, I am now one) use to describe the resort way of life. The ethos has attracted glitterati from across the globe – George Clooney and Kate Moss among them.

BOTH the islands I visited had great spas, but the rooms at Huvafen Fushi are below ground with windows on to the ocean. Here you can sink beneath the hands of your masseuse and slowly, deliciously become as passive as the starfish on the sea bed. If Man Friday had offered Robinson Crusoe such treatments, he would never have bothered to get back to civilisation.

The island also provides quite a bit of marine theatre. Each evening at 6.30 a group of stingrays came to shore for a snack. Armed with a bucket of chopped raw fish, one of the island's young marine biologists wades into the water as these great flat fish –

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GETTING THERE

Seasons in Style (01244 202 002, www.seasonsinstyle.com) offers three nights at Huvafen Fushi in a beach bungalow with pool and four nights at Baros in a deluxe villa, starting from £2,140. This includes breakfast at both resorts, Emirates flights from a choice of six UK airports and transfers. Valid for travel until July 15 and from August 11 to November 29, 2010.

For more sun-and-sand getaways, visit www.travelmail.co.uk/sun

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DESERT ISLAND CHIC: A luxurious bungalow with plunge pool on Huvafen Fushi. The Maldives attract a host of celebrities, including Kate Moss, right

their lethal tails twice as long as their bodies - flap around him like puppies in search of a treat. It was reassuring to learn that they sting only if attacked.

I pretended to be unaffected by this exhibition of nature in the raw when I was invited to go swimming with manta rays the following day. Mantas are gentle, harmless creatures. But they are also very big - growing up to 20ft wide - and the idea of swimming alongside these giants was the only thing in the whole holiday that disturbed my sleep. They look like strange underwater aeroplanes as they flap gently, one after the other, in search of plankton, and allow small fish to enter their mouths to clean morsels from their gills before emerging to safety from their gills.

In fact this, too, turned out to be another memorable Maldivian experience - particularly for someone

who finds any nautical expedition a bit testing.

The following morning two schools of dolphin paraded in front of the deck terrace of our villa, their distinctive puffing noise - like a weightlifter who's just pushed the dumbbells high above his head - floating across the water towards us. A magical way to start the day.

And to end it, another exceptional dinner - at Huvafen's thatched seafood restaurant, which prides itself particularly on Eastern dishes. Its ten-course Japa-

nese dinner sounds hefty, but is as light as the breeze that wafted across our table from the open doors beside it. Sashimi served in a 'cave' made of ice; steamed abalone; lobster tempura; chicken; asparagus with sesame paste; pork in sweet soy; black cod marinated in teriyaki; kobe beef flash-fried on a hot stone with egg and garlic rice. This is grub as good as anywhere in the world.

I always used to ask my castaways on Desert

Island Discs to name one luxury, and in the Maldives the favourites are all present: Jacuzzi baths with a view out to sea; a cool, deep cellar stocked with some of the world's finest wines; and a huge bed with clean sheets each day; every bed on Huvafen Fushi is 7ft square.

Our stay on both islands made for the happiest and most relaxing holiday I've had in many a long year. Each has only about 50 rooms - some on the beach, others on stilts above the lagoon or the ocean - so they never feel crowded.

The ratio of staff to guests is generous, more than two to one, and they have an instinctive desire to

FEEDING TIME: A ray takes fish from a marine biologist on Huvafen Fushi. Above: The beach on Baros

please that goes beyond doing their job well. Their love of the islands gives them a sense of pride. So if you compliment them on the comfort of the muslin-draped daybed on your terrace or the glory of the ocean view it offers, their answer, accompanied by a smile, is always the same: 'Thank you.'

Maldives marketing uses the word 'paradise' a lot. An overused noun, I know. But when you sit on your terrace looking out to sea as the sun lowers itself gently into the horizon, and a local fishing boat inches in front of it to bathe in the last rays of suffused light cast across the warm and gentle ocean, paradise seems a perfectly reasonable description.

One word of warning, though. Make sure your ex-husband or lover is not heading for the same desert island as you are. I was told the story of two honeymooning couples who arrived on the same island at the same time. Unfortunately, the husband of one couple used to be a *deux* with the wife of the other. It rather shattered the peace, apparently.

And splendid though it is, you don't want to have to spend the whole of your Maldivian holiday holed up in your room.