

## Marooned in the Maldives, the perfect tropical paradise

AN INDIAN OCEAN DREAMLAND THAT ISN'T JUST FOR HONEYMOONERS

BY SHARON  
**FEINSTEIN**

**I**t would take Linford Christie about 10 seconds to cross the entire island, as it's just over a 100-metre dash. A tiny dot of coral reef in a vast translucent sea, but never once did I feel trapped or bored. If anything, there simply isn't enough time to luxuriate in the paradise known as Huvafen Fushi.

Eminently stylish and sophisticated, our palatial ocean villa had more gadgets than Silicon Valley, but the real joy was basking on our private deck and plunge pool, alone with the spread of the sea. You just step down and into another world below the water – a coral garden, kaleidoscopic shoals of fish and so many black-tipped sharks it became commonplace to say: "There goes another shark".

The resort has 44 rooms spread around the island, which feels twice the size because everything is built outwards, into the ocean. At night, the cool, clever lighting turns the whole place into a kind of mirage, the wooden walkways twinkling like sapphire blue-lined runways, bungalows glowing orange, and inky black ocean beyond.

The dream-like quality extends to the underwater spa where, this time, it's you in the fish tank and them looking in. Imagine the Oriental Sweetlips as they glide by, mouthing to each other, 'that guest's scales could do with a buff'.

You soon lose yourself in the top-class treatments, feeling as sensual and pampered as a high-maintenance mermaid.

Come up for air to the restaurant called Raw where the super healthy, imaginative dishes are worthy of a Michelin star. Down again, and you can lose yourself here too among 12,000 bottles of delicious wine in a circular cellar. And in case you think they've forgotten your personal butler, he's cute, clued-up and always available.

Huvafen has invented itself as a super luxury resort but manages to make you feel so relaxed it's not long before you're barefoot, barely clothed, and barely moving from your hammock. Stress is a distant word.

When Kate Moss, George Clooney or Demi Moore show up, you're as blasé as you've become about the next gliding shark.

But it is the resort's marine biologist, Ulrike Kloiber's

knowledge and concern that open up another dimension of the stark reality of the disappearing Maldives' dying coral and rising seas.

It hits you that you're a mere metre and a half above water here, and all around you the sand is shifting and reforming.

Ulrike has taken fragments of broken, damaged coral and planted them in underwater trays in an awe-inspiring nursery on the sea bed. We snorkelled there to see the coral beginning to flourish, regrow and then be transplanted as small colonies in the house reef.

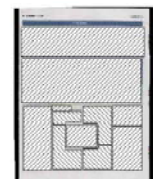
It was painful pulling me away from Huvafen for the 20-minute boat ride to Baros, but little did I know there was something equally stupendous in store.

As you approach, the white-topped Lighthouse Restaurant stands out like a giant carousel, which springs to life when the stars come out. We later discovered the magical atmosphere and colourful menu fulfilled as many fantasies as any fairground.

On Baros you instantly feel rooted in the Maldives. The architecture creates an exotic Eastern atmosphere with its carved, dark wood and vaulted ceilings, surrounded by tall dipping palms, and lush vegetation.

There are no buggies and no children, so you're plunged into total peace and serenity, and for honeymooners, those early days of romantic enchantment.

The striking Sails Bar, with its background of a simulated ship glowing sea blue, has enough cool chic and a cocktail list to rival any Uptown New York bar. Especially when the local jazz band emerges from the shadows and the music drifts through the open air Palm Garden.



# BAROS

maldives

I was loving Baros, but the moment I fell into captures was when I heard that magic word I'd been longing for - turtle! And there she was, little pointy orange head gnawing away at the coral, her shell as ancient and crusty as a dinosaur, and her flippers pushing into the soft sand. We watched her for a good 30 minutes and I very nearly had to come up to try, I was so thrilled.

The reef is one of the best in the Maldives, and as if that isn't enough they take you out on a super slick boat in the hope that you'll see the spinner dolphins.

We were so lucky there too because out of the deep came a pod of around 150, and the more we and the wonderful crew whooped and screeched and lost our English control, the more they danced and spun in return. Clutching white wine, canapés, video, camera, and our sides from laughter and excitement, it was an experience I could never forget.

The sea is ever present, and all doors in the luxurious water villa lead to the deck. I had them open night and day to soak up that rhythmic sound of the waves. The food is delectable and they're adept at making up menus with every possible dietary requirement.

My mud spa was a two-hour trip to heaven with a new skin that felt like silk. Everything is so enticing you don't know whether to go for another spa, try a new menu, or look for a manta ray. Oh, and then there's the hip, slick new manager, who bends over backwards to keep his guests blissed out.

But the Maldives may not be there if you wait too long. The reefs risk more bleaching, the sand is eroding and water is rising. This is a real wonder of the world, a phenomenon of nature and of human ingenuity at carving out paradise from drops of sand in the sea. Ulrike's coral regeneration is a real effort to reverse the fate of this dreamland, and a marvel to see.

## HOW TO GET THERE

British Airways fly direct to Male (Maldives) from London Gatwick operating three times weekly from £653.30 return including taxes/fees/charges ([www.ba.com](http://www.ba.com)). Rates at Baros Maldives start at \$550 (£374) per night including breakfast, staying in a Deluxe Villa.

• For reservation, visit [www.baros.com](http://www.baros.com) or call 0960 664 2672



Main image: the idyllic beach in Baros. Above: Sharon at Raw restaurant on Huvafen Fushi

