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TRUTH IN TRAVEL

NOVEMBER 2011 £5.99

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The Maldives

Barefoot chic to total luxury: which island is for you?

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A woman's silhouette stands on a beach at sunset, looking out at the ocean. The sky is a mix of orange, yellow, and blue, with clouds catching the low sun. The water is calm, reflecting the colors of the sky. The woman's reflection is visible in the shallow water. The overall mood is serene and contemplative.

Which Maldives island is for you?

Forty years ago, no one had heard of holidays in the Maldives. But since then, almost a hundred hotels have opened on as many islands. With so many to choose from, Harriet O'Brien selects a resort for every occasion, from romantic breaks and spa retreats to family holidays and gourmet

THE TURQUOISE SEA IS CRYSTAL CLEAR. The sugar-white sands are fringed by palm trees. In the waters beyond, coral gardens glow with colours of almost unimaginable beauty. Stretching some 475 miles across the Indian Ocean, the Maldives by most estimations the closest you get to paradise on earth. So the nature of two forthcoming anniversaries may be something of a surprise.

Firstly, 11 November will complete only the third year of democracy in the republic. During the 30-year dictatorship of Iqbal Khan Abdul Gayoom, the picture-perfect archipelago of about 1,190 coral islands had seen riches develop from fishing and from tourism. But the wealth was concentrated in the hands of an elite few, while for the rest of the population human rights were flagrantly and often brutally abused. President Mohamed Nasheed came to power in November 2008 on a crusade for liberalisation and environmental preservation. Scientists warn that within 100 years the Maldives may disappear due to rising sea levels, so the current government has created a dynamic programme of sustainable development, with the specific targets of making the nation carbon neutral by 2018 and of halting coastal erosion through preservation of the coral reefs. A significant project is being undertaken on Baa Atoll, where two of today's most serene resorts are located: Soneva Fushi and Four Seasons Resort Maldives at Landaa Giraavaru.

Of course, the tourist industry has had a phenomenal impact on this little republic, and continues to do so. Yet tourism in the

Maldives is only 40 next year. It was in February 1972 that a group of 22 Italians arrived on an Air Ceylon charter flight from Colombo. They were brought to the islands by fellow countryman and entrepreneur George Corbin, who had arrived the year before by cargo boat. The visit generated such interest that, together with two Maldivian business partners (Ahmed Naseem and MU Manik), Corbin quickly developed the nation's first resort. Sleeping up to 60 guests in thatched accommodation with electricity but no air-conditioning, Kurumba Village opened on Vihamanaafushi island in October 1972.

Much altered since, Kurumba remains a popular holiday destination. But it faces stiff competition. Resorts now occupy nearly 100 of the total 300 or so inhabited islands. For the visitor, this is a bewildering choice of accommodation. What's more, the bar is continually being raised with hotels vying to outdo each other in interpretations of luxury almost on a weekly basis. So the question of where to stay requires particularly careful consideration.

Here, we have selected the finest options for several very different types of holiday, based on opinions from across the travel industry in Britain and the Maldives. As a cost comparison, given the wide fluctuations in price (depending on when and how you book), we have included a package price from the UK for travel over the next few weeks, with date restrictions stated where applicable. Unless otherwise indicated, prices are based on two sharing accommodation on a bed-and-breakfast basis and include flights from the UK to Malé and local transfers.

James Bond style

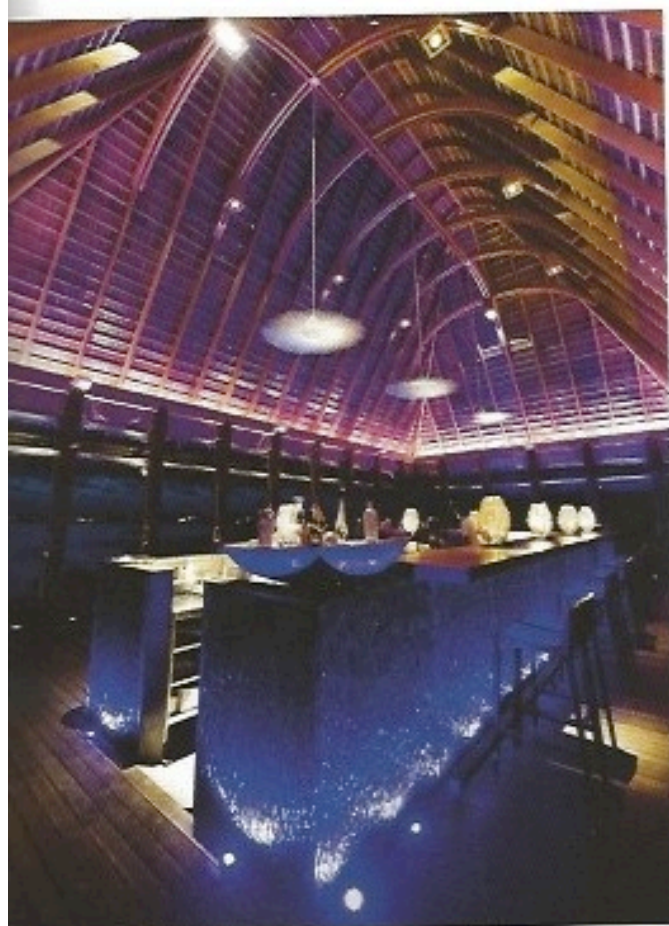
1 One&Only Reethi Rah

North Malé Atoll. You'll find the largest collection of Champagnes in the Maldives here, and a sake sommelier at Tapasake restaurant. You arrive from Malé airport by private yacht and ensconce yourself in one of 130 breathtakingly spacious villas, the sense of luxury enhanced by a host of features ranging from a Nespresso machine to a terrazzo bathtub for two (filled by your butler). Should you wish to leave these lavish surroundings, facilities include three gourmet restaurants and a fabulously big spa; for more intrepid escapes you can charter your own seaplane, take a sunset catamaran cruise, or go big-game fishing. www.oneandonlyresorts.com

Western & Oriental Travel (0845 277 3310; www.wandotravel.com) offers seven nights from £3,175 per person for travel between 13 November and 10 December

2 W Retreat & Spa Maldives

North Ari Atoll. Arrival by seaplane from Malé sets the tone; and from white-tented spa to swim-up pool bar, this resort encapsulates 'jet-set glamour'. The 78 villas offer all the mod cons you could possibly want plus plunge pool, sundeck, wine fridge (as well as mini bar) and barbecue station. Over-water accommodation features glass floors and beach villas are equipped with muslin-draped daybeds that – cleverly – can be cantilevered over the pool. The resort is also big on action, with diving, kite-surfing and SeaBobs (which zoom underwater like dolphins). And there's a subterranean party place, too, with DJs spinning at the resort's 15 Below bar. www.whotels.com/maldives
British Airways Holidays (0844 493 0758; www.ba.com/maldives) offers seven nights from £2,933 per person for travel before the end of November



Romantic escapes

Cocoa Island

South Malé Atoll. The accommodation at this small and very tranquil resort is in 33 chic over-water villas, each with a generous private deck. So you gaze out at views of turquoise sea and fishing boats and when you feel more energetic you simply step down into the water; a coral reef teeming with marine life is a very short swim away. Of course, diving and watersports are available, but staff say most guests prefer to disappear into a world of their own. When they emerge, the tiny island offers an extensive Shambala spa and hydrotherapy pool at one end, while at the other there's an infinity-edged pool, bar, and restaurant serving Maldivian, Mediterranean and Asian cuisine. Sitting out on the soft white sands on this side of the island and watching the sunset soon becomes an addictive evening ritual.

www.cocoa.island.com.mo.bz, Ampersand Travel (020 7289 6100; www.ampersandtravel.com) offers seven nights from £2,625 per person

Four Seasons Resort Maldives at Landaa Giraavaru

Baa Atoll. From Malé a seaplane conveys you to a lush world-apart: Landaa Giraavaru island is set beside a very large, very clear lagoon in the particularly remote and undeveloped eastern side of Baa Atoll. There is plenty of space here for the 102 thatched beach and water villas, each with private, open-air living areas. The service is discreet and sensitive, and staff will happily arrange anything from reconnection rituals at the spa to castaway-style picnics on a desert island nearby. www.fourseasons.com/maldives, Elegant Resorts (01244 897538; www.elegantresorts.co.uk) offers seven nights from £3,845 per person, based on a November departure



Overwater villas at Cocoa Island, modelled on traditional Maldivian fishing boats. Above right, Family dining at Four Seasons Resort Maldives at Kuda Huraa.



Which resort suits you?

James Bond style

1 One&Only Beechi Rah Champagnes, sake sommelier and lavish villas (www.oneandonlyresorts.com)

2 W Retreat & Spa - Maldives Underwater gadgets and an underwater nightclub (www.whotels.com/maldives)

Romantic escapes

3 Cocoa Island Just 33 villas, all with private decks (www.cocoa.island.com.bz)

4 Four Seasons Resort Maldives at Landaa Giraavaru Secluded, with castaway picnics (www.fourseasons.com/maldives)

Family havens

5 Lily Beach Resort & Spa at Huvahendhoo, Maldives All-inclusive with many activities (www.lilybeachmaldives.com)

6 Four Seasons Resort Maldives at Kuda Huraa Spa treatments and surf lessons for children (www.fourseasons.com/maldives)

7 Kanuhura For two very good children's clubs (www.kanuhura.com)

Eco-friendly

8 Six Senses Laamu Stylish yet sustainable (www.sixsenses.com)

9 Banyan Tree Valhinfaru For green sea turtle conservation (www.banyantree.com)

The great outdoors

10 Shangri-La's Villingili Resort & Spa, Maldives Nature trails on land and under water (www.shangri-la.com)

11 Soneva Fushi by Six Senses Has its own observatory and open-air cinema (www.sixsenses.com/soneva-fushi)

Sensational spas

12 Soneva Gili by Six Senses An over-water spa and Ayurvedic doctor (www.sixsenses.com/soneva-gili)

13 Huvafen Fushi Two underwater treatment rooms for marine views while relaxing (www.huvafenfushi.peraquum.com)

Underwater treasures

14 Angsana Ihuru The best house reef in the Maldives? (www.angsana.com)

15 Island Hideaway Spa Resort & Marina Superb dive sites (www.island-hideaway.com)

16 Anantara Dhigo Lauded dive centre with a range of courses (www.anantara.com)

Gourmet getaways

17 Taj Exotica Resort & Spa, Maldives Over-water fine dining (www.tajhotels.com/maldives)

18 Conrad Maldives Rangali Island Superb wine cellar (www.conradmaldives.info)

Luxury for less

19 Vivanta by Taj - Coral Reef, Maldives Recently refurbished (www.vivantabytaj.com)

20 Baros Understated elegance and notable cuisine (www.baros.com)