



Dusit Thani Maldives
Mudhdhoo Island

Taj Exotica Resort and Spa Maldives
South Male Atoll

THREE SHADES OF BLUE
THE MALDIVES

Shangri-La's Villingili Resort and Spa
Villingili Island

The Maldives isn't just a pretty face — it's an ideal escape for any kind of traveller. Here, three writers discover three of its facets: wellness, privacy and proximity to nature





Sailing across the water is as rewarding as admiring it from your own over-water villa

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Must

ESCAPE TO NATURE

Sitting atop one of the Maldives' most abundant coral reefs, Dusit Thani Maldives has luxury in its essence and nature at its heart

Words: Simon Harrington



The reef around Dusit Thani is a biosphere reserve

As the mid-morning sun penetrates the ocean, the light refracts in a spectrum of glittering beams, each jostling for position beneath the glassy surface of the Indian Ocean. Below me, a coral reef bursts with life, as exotic clown fish, vibrant blue tangs and striped Moorish idols meander through the delicate, underwater world, swaying rhythmically in the current. Spurred by curiosity, our Maldivian guide removes his snorkel and, with a flick of his flippers, disappears into the deep murky abyss beyond the edge of the reef.

Small bubbles rise as he returns from the darkness, signalling his discovery with a pointed finger. From the cloudy depths, a spotted eagle ray elegantly glides into focus. Enthusiastically, we follow as it traces the fringe of the reef, where the shallow coral habitat meets the infinite mysteries of the deep sea. In the wake of the ray, schools of small fish disperse and reform in a single unit, and we enjoy a unique

tour of the beautiful waters, courtesy of our new aquatic friend.

Experiencing the peninsula's rich marine ecosystem in such a way, it comes as no surprise that the waters off the pristine, winding coasts of the Baa Atoll are UNESCO-protected biosphere reserves. This area of the Maldivian archipelago hosts some of the country's most significant wildlife events and has subsequently developed a reputation for proactive reef preservation. One such event is the seasonal feeding frenzy of manta rays and whale sharks, during which gentle giants congregate and hunt close to a tiny tropical bay named Hanifaruu, a short boat ride from Mudhdhoo Island, home of Dusit Thani Maldives.

This resort, accessible only by seaplane or boat transfer, sits on the eastern side of the Baa Atoll and boasts one of the most impressive 360-degree reefs in the entire archipelago. As such, it places great value on the conservation of its natural setting. "The reef not only attracts

people to our beautiful resort, but it also protects the island," explains Lauren Arthur, impassioned marine biologist at the resort. "That's why Dusit is part of the sustainable EarthCheck initiative. We are so reliant on nature here, even our beaches shift month by month."

After my snorkelling expedition, I get the opportunity to experience one of these shifting beaches first-hand. To the rear of my Beach Villa, beyond the shaded outdoor terrace, a narrow sandy path littered with delicate pink flowers leads through an area of dense tropical shrubbery onto an expanse of perfect white sand. Met only by the seemingly eternal blue of the Indian Ocean, the small private beach is accessorised with just two deckchairs and overlooks the resort's sprawling Ocean Villa complex, which is delicately perched above the island's wide coral reef.

Taking a leisurely barefoot stroll along the beach, I come across the resort's impressive 750-square-metre infinity pool and, beyond

Maldives

that, the resort's flagship Beach Residences. It was in one of these villas that pro tennis player Roger Federer awoke one morning to find a bale of newly-hatched sea turtles swimming in his private pool, confusing the humble sportsman's residence for their own. Luckily, the resort's marine team were on hand to aid the hatchlings on their forward journey.

Such is the way of life on Mudhdhoo Island. There is a very real sense that you are a guest in the broadest sense of the word — not just of Dusit Thani, but also of the island as a whole. Almost immediately, the pace of life slows and time takes on new meaning. Just as the ocean reclaims your sandy footprints, the pressures of everyday life melt away with each lap of the waves.

At dusk, my personal butler, Hanan, picks me up from my villa in an electric buggy and quickly whisks me to dinner at Sea Grill,

the resort's fine-dining seafood restaurant. Heeding the advice of a knowledgeable waiter, I sample a guest favourite, yellow fin tuna steak; a fish that is abundant in the waters of the archipelago and forms the basis of the local islanders' diet. The delicately grilled fillet, served with a fresh green asparagus salad, bursts with flavour — a taste sensation that is outshone only by the setting in which it is served. Sitting alongside the resort's pool, Sea Grill encourages barefoot dining with its sandy floor, dotted with rogue coconuts from overhanging palm trees. By night, there is an incomparable clarity to the sky, and we dine beneath a romantic peppering of bright white stars, basking in the dim orange light of the restaurant's standing lanterns.

The next evening, it is beneath these very stars that I find myself on a boat transfer to nearby Dharavandhoo Island, and, ultimately,

on to my flight home. As we gain distance from the jetty, the island is slowly reduced to little more than a faint, glowing beacon on the distant horizon, readying itself for the next influx of bliss-seeking guests. I have no doubt that they will find exactly what they are looking for, and, like me, will leave with a greater respect for nature, and harbour fond memories of this secret paradise.

STAY

What: Beach Villa

Where: Dusit Thani Maldives

Price: from US \$700 per night

www.dusit.com



The UNESCO-protected Baa Atoll is a paradise for underwater enthusiasts



Soak in the views from an Ocean Villa



Dusit Thani's vast swimming pool