

After being reliably informed that nothing ever happens in the Maldives, I was desperately looking forward to one of the most relaxing trips of my life. Little did I know that my snorkelling expedition on our first day on the paradise isle of Baros would be anything but uneventful.

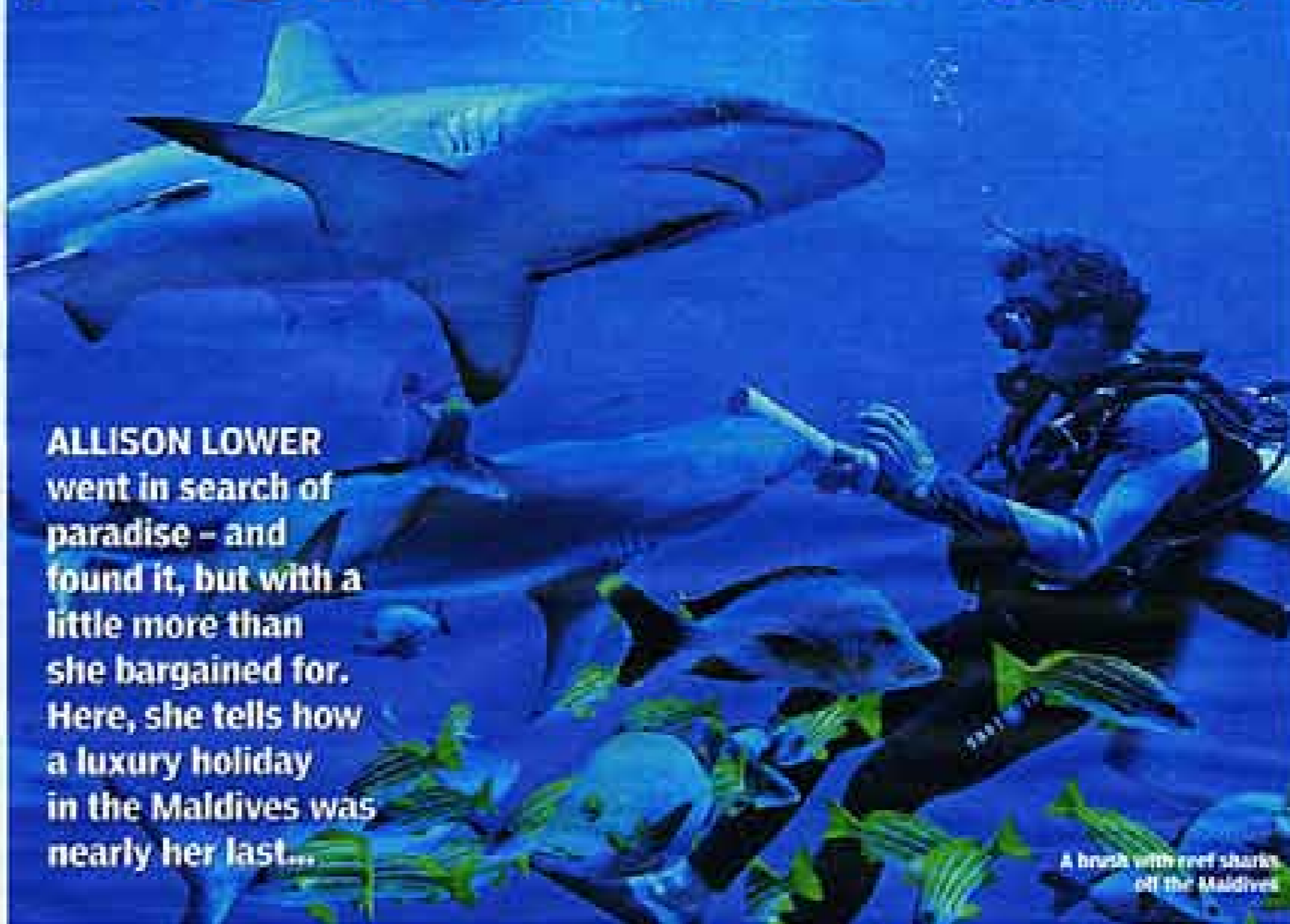
We were fitted with snorkel and flippers and sent off alone to dive around the coast of the island. Having not snorkelled since I was 19, I soon took to it, dare I say, like a fish to water. Once you get outside the lagoon's walls, you see just how precariously balanced these islands are. The rock and coral that hold this small atoll afloat suddenly drop away, plunging the sea from sparkling turquoise to sinister black. To your left is stunning coral with some of the most beautiful fish you will ever see, such as threadfin butterfly fish and imperial angel fish. To your right, darkness. A truly eerie experience.

I had gone snorkelling with an experienced diver friend, Amanda. But suddenly I saw a large grey shape dart in front of me and, with a swish of its huge tail, practically brush my right side. A shark. And a big one at that. I nervously glanced at Amanda to see if this was normal. I was none too reassured when I saw her flippers beating a hasty retreat. 'Was that okay?' I yelled as I spluttered to the surface. 'No!' she screamed. We did a quick rescue to see if our visitor was still around, but felt too uneasy to continue. Amanda told me that people dive for years to see a shark that large, that close. 'Why?' I shuddered. When we later told the staff, they were stunned by its size — it was at least 6ft long — and proximity, although they assured us that it was probably a harmless reef shark. All I could think was, so much for nothing ever happening.

It has to be said, though, that one of the first things that strikes you about the Maldives is the tranquillity. From the moment you set bare foot upon your island — there are 1,200 strung out across the Indian Ocean, 95 of which are now resorts — you can feel the pressures of everyday life slip away.

My villa, set on stilts over the lagoon, was built out of local natural materials but still offered the style of a Philippe Starck hotel with amenities to match — a private deck looking out to the ocean, and a bath for two and open-air shower with the same views. For those who can't quite let go of modern living, there is a flat-screen television and hidden sound system at the end of the four-poster bed, with DVDs and CDs on request — although I can't quite imagine who would want to sit watching the latest Brad Pitt blockbuster when you have giant turtles swimming yards from your door.

A shark's tale



ALLISON LOWER went in search of paradise — and found it, but with a little more than she bargained for. Here, she tells how a luxury holiday in the Maldives was nearly her last...

A brush with reef sharks off the Maldives

You can walk around the entire island in ten minutes, but, despite being told that the resort was almost full, it never felt crowded.

In fact, during the day we were hard pushed to see more than a few sunbathers on the beach, as everyone had their own private bit of island to hide away in.

But if we thought that the Maldives was just for sun-worshippers, it isn't, there are a myriad of other delights to enjoy. Aside from the diving and snorkelling, which is among the most spectacular in the world, there is the food. The cuisine on most of the country's resorts is known as Maldivian fusion. There is no local delicacy as such. Instead, the chef's blend a range of its nearest neighbours' specialities, so you end up with a divine blend of Thai, Indian and Japanese all concocted into the most

gastromically delicious delights. There are only three restaurants on Baros, but you could eat at one every day for three weeks and never have the same meal twice.

Baros has recently had a complete makeover, and one of its first guests was Mark Owen of Take That. For those who want to make the most of their experience, there are plenty of alternatives to lounging on the beach. One day we went island hopping, landing on the uninhabited beaches of Kuda Bandoo, where we passed a yacht of Roman Abramovich proportions with a helicopter parked atop. Every excursion has

that extra special something. You can spend the morning swimming and sunbathing, then enjoy

'A large grey shape darted in front of me and a swish of a huge tail brushed my side'

a champagne lunch with sumptuous salmon and chicken, succulent fruits and mouthwatering chocolate cake. We also gave night fishing a try. It was an eventful expedition, and we returned with impressive fare, including a magnificent white snapper. The offerings can then be taken to the chef in the Cayenne Grill who will

cook your supper right in front of your eyes.

One of the highlights of the trip was a private cooking demonstration by Baros' head chef, Damian Barrett. Damian is a delight. But then nothing was too much trouble for any staff member, and after just a few days, wherever you went you were greeted by name.

The magical ambience extends to the island's spa. With soothing waterfalls, it lends itself to the perfect tranquil setting. I opted for the Moon-son Massage where you are rubbed with oils selected from local herbs and a warm sand poultice infused with seawater.

Despite my brush with death — okay, I know there wasn't much actual danger of my being eaten by a shark, but still — it was the trip of a lifetime. I remember the little things even now — the stingrays swimming under my villa at dusk, or the peacefulness that envelops you like the arms of a loved one. So it was with a heavy heart that I left that idyllic isle for the boat trip back to the airport on nearby Male, and as I cast one last look back at my tropical paradise, it may have been my imagination, but I could have sworn I saw a large fin rising out of the ocean.

PRICE WATCH

UNDER £5,500 PER PERSON

Located on its own private island, seven nights at the Dhoni Mighill resort costs from £5,496 per person. Price includes full board in a private bungalow, international flights and transfers.

Guests also have their own luxury dhoni — handcrafted Maldivian sail boat — with private



crew. Details from JTC Classics, visit www.jtcclassics.co.uk or tel: 01244 355577.

UNDER £1,050 PER PERSON

Seven nights at the Kurumba Resort and Suites — rated four and a half stars by Virgin Holidays, and only ten minutes by speedboat, from the airport — costs from £1,029 per person on a B&B basis. Price, which is valid from February 1 to March 25, includes return Qatar Airways flights from London or Manchester (via Doha) and transfers, and is based on two adults sharing.

Prices may rise if there is a fuel charge and an increase in Air



Kurumba Resort and, below left, a traditional dhoni boat

Passenger Duty. Details from www.virginholidays.com or tel: 0871 322 0307.

UNDER £620 PER PERSON

Seven nights at the three-star Theohogi Island Resort on the North Male Atoll, about 20 minutes

from Male airport, costs from £815 per person on a B&B basis. Price includes return flights from Gatwick and is valid for departures on March 5, and based on two adults sharing. For further details, visit www.thomascook.com or tel: 0870 111111.