

TRAVEL ISSUE

DECEMBER

Maldives

by Charlotte Philby



The pale sea stretches below, punctuated by flashes of green and gold where reefs and sunlight collide. As the plane tumbles forwards, pockets of land, so tiny they are barely visible, emerge from a blanket of blue.

The wheels touch down and we screech to a halt; a long thread of landing strip juts into the Indian Ocean behind us. "Welcome to the Maldives," purrs a soothing voice.

Outside, at 7am, the air is warm and still in Malé, the capital of the 1,192 atolls that make up this predominantly Muslim island nation. Scanning the list of forbidden items as we pass through customs, travellers note the prohibition of spear guns, dangerous dogs and idols for worship.

A former British protectorate, the Maldives has enjoyed a relatively peaceful history. Yet it has suffered its share of blights this decade. A terrorist attack on a park in the capital occurred just weeks after my visit, on 20 September last year, leaving 12 foreign tourists injured.

This followed the devastating impact of the 2004 tsunami, which left parts of the country submerged, and many people homeless. There's been an extensive programme of repairs since, and many resorts have improved on their previous standards. One that has been restored to its former glory is our final destination: Baros.

For the last leg of our journey we are guided from the airport to a private speedboat. During the 25-minute crossing the vessel mows through calm waters, broken only by the chop of waves against the roar of the engine. On the horizon, a wooden deck extends from a secluded shore, where uncultivated palms line the main body of the lush tropical island. We have arrived.

There is only one response to any request on Baros: "no problem". And you must be prepared to yield to the attentions of the staff, of which there are many – the rank-and-file, mainly Maldivian, while the higher orders are shipped in from Sri Lanka, India, Korea and beyond. Laying your own napkin on your lap is met with a look of confusion, if not vague offence.

There are two sorts of accommodation on Baros, both fit for a king – and his entourage. The first, a series of sandstone and timber water-villas (apparently preferred by Asian guests) forms a raised crescent over the water, on the westerly tip of the island.

Each villa is unique and based on traditional Maldivian architecture, flaunting a heavy Balinese influence: generous four-poster beds carry muted silks and cottons. Each villa has its own deck, which is shielded from the next. A spacious stone bath overlooks an expanse of blue; irresistible, hence the step-ladder



The raised crescent of water-villas shows the influence of traditional Maldivian architecture

descending to the ocean below.

The opulent beach accommodation – favoured, we are told, by Europeans – is jase-dropping. Airy, detached villas line crushed-coral sand; each with its own private strip, defined by an enclave of sun-loungers and shaded decking. The view from here, a few metres from the Indian Ocean, is interrupted only by a stretch of reef rising from the water.

Inside, a low beige sofa can be raised to reveal a hi-tech media system, with films and music available from the only shop on the island. Though, with a walk-in shower room, free-standing bath and outdoor waterfall (there is no other way to describe this), within a walled, flower-lined garden – and lest we forget the mini-bar – who needs a DVD?

Culturally, there is little to offer on this tiny atoll, but hey, this is about serious relaxation. There are Spinner dolphins to be admired from the comfort of a small sofa-lined yacht (with champagne and canapés in hand, naturally). And for the active, morning yoga classes can be taken on the main deck.

Dive masters run classes for all levels; harmless white-tip sharks are a staple of the sea, and turtles share the reefs with fish of every colour and size.

After such exertion, try unwinding at the spa, which offers a full range of treatments. These can be tailored and joint sessions are available for couples;

the Baros Bliss comes greatly recommended. And with such a high proportion of honeymooners on the resort, combined treatments are a popular choice.

As is 24-hour room service. Fresh shell-fish, exotic fruit and champagne can be enjoyed from the comfort of your four-poster bed. Then a cocktail on your private deck, below a canvas of stars. With a no-children policy on the island, the beach is mercifully still and the view across the moonlit water alone is worth leaving your room for.

It is just as well this is not flagged as a destination for those seeking culture or action-packed adventures, 'cause you're not gonna get it. Interaction between natives and tourists is discouraged, so little is learned of everyday Maldivian life. In any case, you are unlikely to find any locals, other than the occasional low-ranking staff member. As a rule, resorts do not exist in the same vicinity as native communities.

But this holiday is about self-indulgence, not enlightenment. And for those intent on a thoroughly relaxing break, disturbed only by the pressure of choosing between a fresh watermelon juice and a chilled beer, it doesn't get better than this.

Seven nights including breakfast and flights from £1,908. Kuoni Travel: 01306 747008, www.kuoni.co.uk