

Shell out for a taste of tropical



The Maldives have everything for those who want to escape but would still like life's little luxuries. **LAURA JACKSON** falls for the Indian Ocean resort of Baros



AZURE WATERS: Baros resort is built over an Indian Ocean lagoon. Inset, Laura goes for a swim with the sharks

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luxury in a coral sea

IT WAS the perfect start to the ultimate holiday – a moonlit dinner on the beach of a private island in the Maldives. The staff at the Baros resort had set up a table for two at the water's edge. The stars winked and, with the sound of the Indian Ocean lapping at the shore in the background, I couldn't have wished for a more romantic welcome. Even the food was touched with romance; fresh lobster and a rose champagne sorbet.

Baros is a Robinson Crusoe hideaway with room service. Luxurious, stylish and in the middle of nowhere, the resort's wooden boardwalks and coconut thatched roofs are spread across the island in the North Male atoll of the Maldives, so small you can amble around it in 10 minutes. Permanent sunshine ensures that its restaurants need no doors or walls.

Although Baros is remote, the journey to reach it was simple – just a 20-minute speed-boat transfer from the airport after the 10-hour direct flight from London.

With the temperature gauge stuck at 38 degrees most guests opt for a sedate schedule of sunbathing, reading and swimming, breaking off only to eat.

The natural reef encircling the island makes the lagoon one of the best locations in the Maldives for diving and snorkelling. As a novice, I borrowed equipment from the hotel and headed for a world of honeycombed coral and brightly-coloured angel and butterfly fish. Baby black-tipped sharks, a curious mix of cute and fearsome, swam within touching distance. Snorkelling didn't provide the only

means for sealife spotting. We could watch from the day-bed on our balcony as the cheeky baby sharks darted around and stingray gracefully undulated past.

Our octagonal villa – a traditional hut on stilts with a thatched roof – was perfect, its wicker furniture dominated by a huge double bed, made up with soft white linen and curtained with pristine white gauze. Our favourite feature was the bath-for-two with built in leather head-rests at each end.

There are 74 villas, all of a similar standard, but the island never feels crowded. In fact, it is possible to go for hours without seeing a soul. We relished the seclusion but I decided that I needed some pampering.

The resort's spa is housed in four individual suites, in separate buildings to ensure privacy. Each is equipped for two, with a steam room, shower and two massage tables.

I plumped for a local Maldivian Monsoon Massage. Warm cotton poultices infused with seawater were applied to my back before it was massaged. The only thing keeping me awake was the gentle snuffling sounds of my initially sceptical partner, as he enjoyed his Indian head massage.

The most challenging aspect of my six nights at Baros was sampling everything that the resort's three restaurants had to offer. Drawing on influences from Asia, Europe and Australia ensured that a light snack felt like fine dining.

The experience starts with breakfast on the terrace of the Lime Restaurant. Each morning I watched as a chef deftly carved fresh, exotic fruits, transforming a chunk of watermelon into a bouquet of flowers that, within minutes, was on my plate.

The two-storey Lighthouse restaurant and bar, built out over the sea and reached by a wooden walkway, is for serious foodies. Upstairs, the 360-degree view makes it the perfect place for a pre-dinner bellini with the other guests.

Downstairs, Lighthouse head chef Damian Barrett has created a gourmet menu; lobster bisque, tuna carpaccio, and main courses including duck with cassis and blueberry jus.

Our last night at Baros was the most memorable. We joined a sunset fishing trip with the added incentive of a promise that we'd be able to eat our catch later.

A private boat took us out to sea and, as we dropped anchor, I picked up my rod, cast, and waited for dinner to arrive.

As a novice I didn't expect to haul up so much as an old shopping trolley from the Maldives' pristine waters. But, to my surprise, there was a tug at my line and I proudly pulled up a red snapper which I added to my partner's catch of a toothy barracuda and a giant white snapper.

It was the ideal finale to my stay and, there and then, I decided I'd like to return, if only to even up the fishing score with my other half.

GETTING THERE:

Kuoni (01306 747738/kuoni.co.uk) offers seven nights B&B in a villa on Baros, Maldives from £1,364pp (two sharing), including return flights from Heathrow and transfers.

A Maldivian Monsoon Massage costs from £38 and an Indian head massage from £30, while the sunset fishing trip costs £21 per person.

Republic of Maldives Tourist Information: www.visitmaldives.com