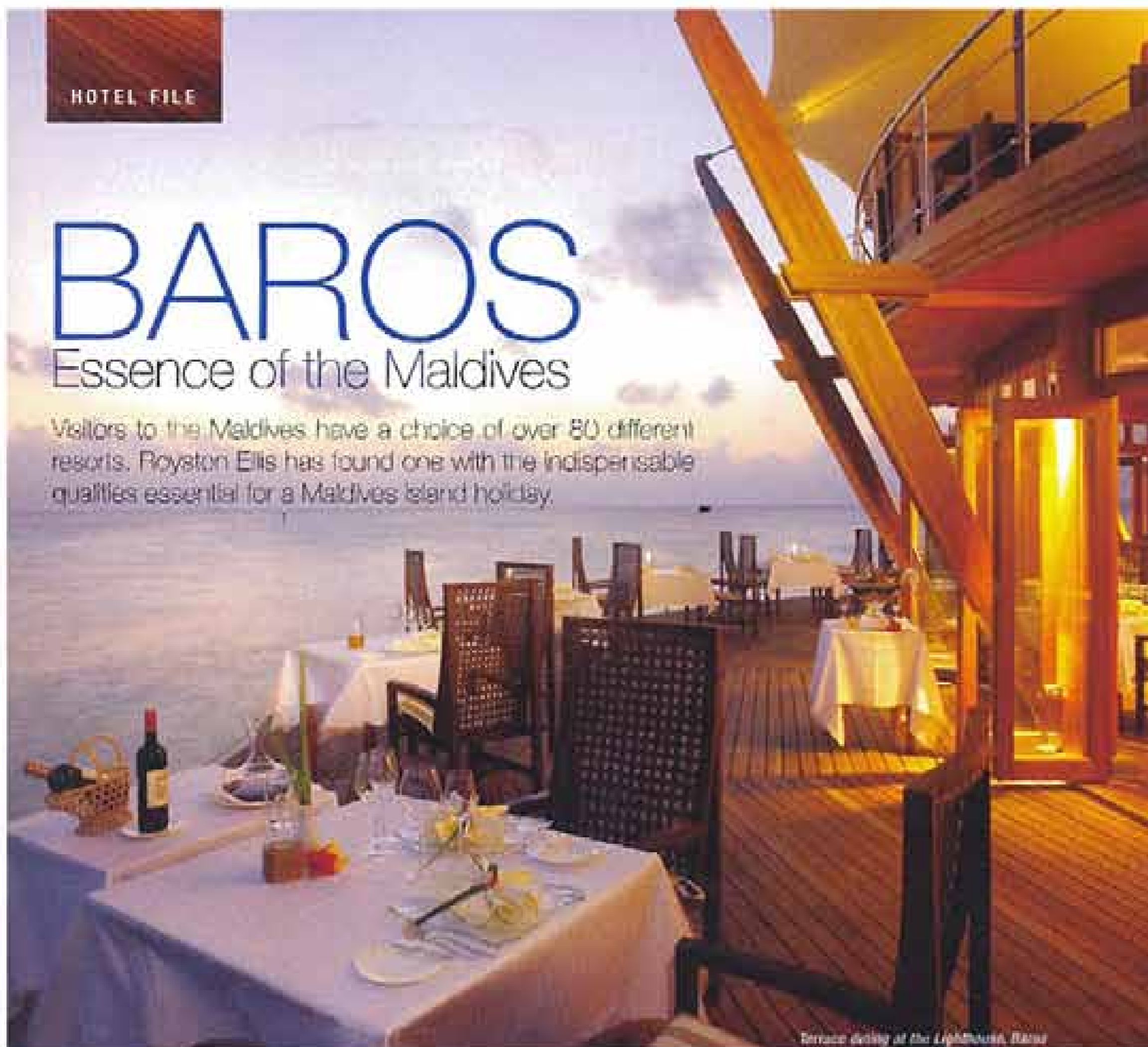


HOTEL FILE

BAROS

Essence of the Maldives

Visitors to the Maldives have a choice of over 80 different resorts. Royston Ellis has found one with the indisputable qualities essential for a Maldives island holiday.



Terrace dining at the Lighthouse, Baros

On my first morning in the resort island of Baros I woke up and found to my utter amazement that the dream I was having was true. I really was lying in pure cotton sheets on the most comfortable bed I have ever slept in, my head nestled on leather-soft pillows. I opened my eyes to see I was in a perfectly furnished villa with timber ceiling and palm-thatched roof, with the seagulls lapping the beach as the rising sun burnished it with a golden glow.

At that moment I knew I had found the island resort of my dreams. The feeling of sheer wellbeing – just knowing that the caress of the sun, the splash of sea, and the shade of the waving palms were real – was blissfully reassuring. I learned later, talking to other guests, that the euphoria induced by Baros is an intrinsic part of its allure.

I had arrived the previous evening after a 20-minute speedboat ride from Male International Airport. A receptionist from Baros, who greets every guest at the hotel's

counter by the airport exit, took care of my luggage and escorted me to the boat.

This short ride to the island is the first of the many elements that, combined, make Baros THE place to stay in Maldives. Baros is secluded but not isolated. There is no long journey squeezed into a seaplane to get to a trendily-designed resort miles away from the airport. Baros is central at the heart of the Maldives, by location as well as character.

The first view took my breath away. Baros is an oval island of palm trees and tropical flowers, narrow sandy paths for wandering through lush foliage, and a beach of heavenly white sand lapped by a lagoon the seductive colour of an exotic cocktail. We glimpsed the thatched roofs of villas nestling among the palms, and the huge canopy, like a beach parasol, of the island's signature bar and restaurant built over the lagoon.

The jetty is short (in some islands you need a golf buggy to get to reception). Guests are invited to relax in the elegant rest-welcome pavilion or under palms in the spi-

dea while filling in the registration form and enjoying a glass of champagne. Since the island takes only 10 minutes to walk around, no villa is far from the public areas, yet each one is private and stands alone.

My luggage was already in the villa (called a Baros Villa) when a personable young lady from guest relations opened its door for me. She briefly explained the features of the room, but I wasn't listening. The comforting, subtle opulence of those teak floors, ceiling and bed, and the soft tropical grandeur of the furnishings and fittings, was enchanting.

I blinked, wishing I had paid more attention to what was being said. "Where is the television?" I asked as the young lady was about to leave.

She smiled triumphantly and went to the ottoman at the foot of the bed. I watched in amazement as she lifted the cushioned top of it and a flat television screen rose up. There was a DVD player as well, all carefully concealed. Behind the bed was a

BAROS

maldives

long bench for luggage, closets with slatted wooden doors, and two service alcoves, one with mini bar, the other with wine chiller and espresso machine and kettle for tea. The bed was king-size with a wooden column at each corner making a pavilion with curtains as light as gossamer to enclose it.

At the side of the wardrobe, I pushed open a door into a walled garden: it was the bathroom. With a pair of washbasins, a free-standing bathtub, separate shower room and a separate toilet, it also had an outside rain shower engulfed in hibiscus. French windows opened on to a tiled veranda where a tall coconut palm grew through a gap in the wooden dock that extended over the beach. The lagoon was irresistible and I plunged in, floating lazily as the sun set.

Baros was one of the first islands in the Maldives to add water villas to its shore. Now it has been rebuilt there are 30 grouped in a horseshoe, reached by boardwalks over the lagoon. Each one has been carefully angled

in relation to its neighbour so it offers complete privacy for sundeck lounging or stepping down into the lagoon. The interiors are ornately Oriental, with curtained beds and all the refinements of the 20 Baros villas. There are also 24 Deluxe Villas, which have smaller bathroom gardens and king-size beds.

The practical design of the villas is matched by the sensible simplicity of the island's three over-water restaurants. All are open to the elements so guests can eschew air-conditioning while enjoying wholesome food that hasn't been mucked about by over-zealous chefs.

The Linc Restaurant has several self-service stations featuring breakfast delights, or a la carte meals all day. The Cayenne specialises in grills while The Lighthouse, with its fine wings and personal touches and impeccable service, is dedicated to the genuine gourmet. All my meals, from the lunch time Assorted Sushi and Sashimi (\$19) to the Petit Mignon (\$48) and the six-course depus-

tation dinner with champagne and five different wines (US\$135) were memorable.

I am neither diver nor sports fan so cannot write from personal experience but my underwater researcher reports the reef is close to the shore and has good snorkelling. The Sen Spa has private suites for blissful pampering. Next time I should try the Detoxification Envelopment at US\$155 for 75 minutes of rejuvenation.

Baros has always been highly regarded as a value-for-money resort and it still is. It has preserved that genuine barefoot, natural charm; there is nothing synthetic and, although it is priced in line with modern trends, it delivers the essence of the Maldives for the discerning.

Baros Maldives, reservations tel 00 960 333 2270, email: reservations@baros.com.mv; web: www.baros.com; villa for two with breakfast from US\$360 plus 10% service charge. Special air transfer from US\$95 per person return.



Watervilla, bedroom and bathroom



Watervilla balcony



Baros villa bedroom



30 water villas grouped in a horseshoe shape off-shore