

October 29, 2006

Section 7

THE SUNDAY TIMES

Travel

**START
COLLECTING
FOR YOUR
FLIGHT TO
EUROPE**

**PLUS
THE 12
GREATEST
TRAIN
JOURNEYS
ON THE
PLANET**

A woman with dark hair, wearing a yellow bikini top and white shorts, is sitting in a meditative lotus position on a wooden swing. The swing is suspended by ropes and is positioned over a clear blue ocean. In the background, there are palm trees and a bright blue sky. The overall scene is peaceful and tropical.

And breathe ...

How Dom Joly was forced to relax in the middle of the Indian Ocean

TRAPPED IN

Dom Joly doesn't like to relax. The voices start tormenting him again. So a week on a tropical island in the Maldives is not his idea of a holiday... or is it?

At anyone who considers their chosen destination and, more than when, they'll give you the tired old cliché of a perfect desert island, pain from floating in the warm evening breeze as, cocktails in hand, they dip their freshly pedicured toes into a crystal-blue sea. As I write this, on a grey, rainy day in the southern Cornwalls, it could happily be my dream destination as well. So could Britain, come to think of it — anywhere but here, and the tourism man, Normandy, though, the desert island animals at my dinner table.

If you honest, I think I've always been slightly nervous about spending too long anywhere that forces me to relax too much, allows me time to think. It's the voices, you see... that's why I gave up swimming. I need distraction, constant distraction. I need the radio and television and traffic — I don't really "do" silence. Maybe I need to see a shrink. I'll probably go to the Sunday, but so far I've just avoided any experiences that include isolation. It's my own home-made cognitive therapy.

When my wife and I

were planning our honeymoon, the inevitable Maldives question came up. I don't know why these islands are so synonymous with one-off holiday of a lifetime honeymoons. We were both mutually filled with dread. We still didn't really know each other that well (it of a shotgun wedding) and neither of us seemed to fancy being stuck in a little shack on stilts for two weeks with only ourselves for company. It should have been a bad omen for our marriage, but, actually, I think we're both quite practical, had travelled extensively and just knew what we liked and what we didn't. We both like having things to do, enjoy adventure and, also, wasn't the whole place about to go underwater?

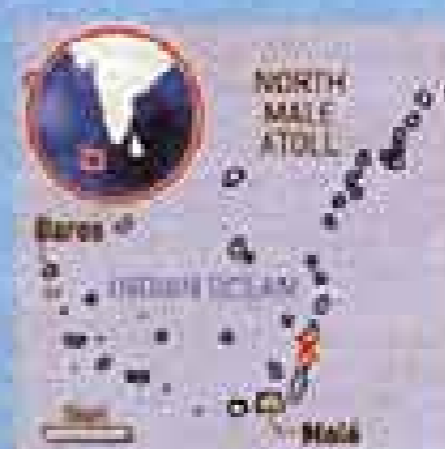
So how did I end up, six years into our marriage, sitting here to my wife on a plane headed for the very destination that we'd vetoed for our honeymoon? I'd like to say we were at a stage in our marriage where we were both extremely confident that we were now ready just to sit and talk to each other for 10 days while stuck in a little house on stilts.

I'd like to say that, but I can't. I was going for the vodka-drinking and Stacy had read about the spa. Having children five years later for adventure. Just being able to leave the children behind and do nothing but rumper journal entry to become your number-one ambition, and Stacy had

seen the spa facilities on the website. She couldn't wait to get stuck into the treatments of Far Eastern cleaning philosophies on offer.

WE LANDED in MAA, the capital. Aside from the bustling fish market, it's a fairly unimpressive backstop of a city perched on one of the central islands of the archipelago. We hadn't come here for fish shopping, so we hopped straight onto a waiting speedboat that whisked us off to our island of choice. There is little more satisfying in life than getting off a plane and hopping straight onto a boat. It allows me to play at being millionaires for a while. Stacy and I had done it once before — in Venice, when a vaporetta had sped us from Marco Polo airport up the Grand Canal at dusk, so we gazed in totally awestruck silence at this magical city sliding by in our wake.

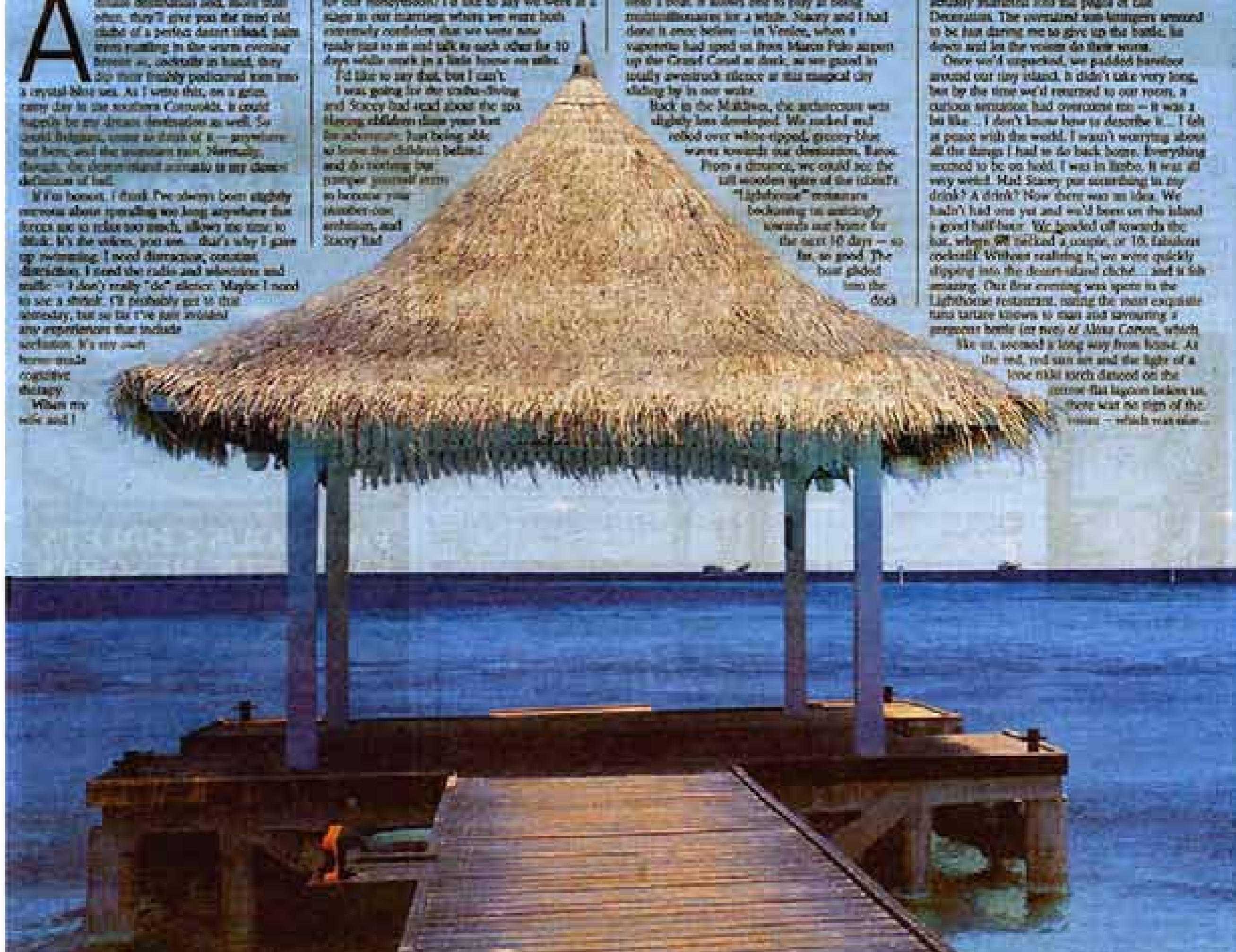
Back in the Maldives, the architecture was slightly less developed. We walked and roiled over white-rippled, green-blue waves towards our destination, Baros. From a distance, we could see the tall wooden spire of the island's "Lighthouse" restaurant beckoning us enticingly towards our home for the next 10 days — so far, so good. The boat glided into the dock



and I half-expected a dwarf to start running up towards the main building shouting, "Bora, the boat, the boat!" Instead, a rather fiery Italian took us straight to our... little home on stilts. Oh God, we both thought. Here we go. We are going to have to be in complete silence on our tastefully decorated terrace, trying to drown out the voices as the waves lap gently and relentlessly against our stilts. We unpacked in silence, both

realising that this was going to be a big test of our marriage. After a couple of minutes, though, we started to look around and realised that we'd actually stumbled onto the pages of *Life* Decorations. The oversized sun-kissers seemed to be just daring me to give up the bottle, lie down and let the voices do their worst.

Once we'd unpacked, we paddled barefoot around our tiny island. It didn't take very long, but by the time we'd returned to our room, a curious sensation had overcome me — it was a bit like... I don't know how to describe it... I felt at peace with the world. I wasn't worrying about all the things I had to do back home. Everything seemed to be on hold. I was in limbo. It was all very weird. Had Stacy put something in my drink? A drink? Now there was an idea. We hadn't had one yet and we'd been on the island a good half-hour. We booked off towards the bar, where we picked a couple, or 10, fabulous cocktails. Without realising it, we were quickly slipping into the desert-island cliché... and it felt amazing. Our first evening was spent in the Lighthouse restaurant, eating the most exquisite tuna tartare known to man and savouring a gorgeous bottle (or two) of Alisa Corson, which, like us, seemed a long way from home. At the end, red sun set and the light of a lone ricki torch danced on the serene flat lagoon lakes us... there was no sign of the voices — which was nice...



PARADISE

The following morning I woke early and after a light, fruit breakfast, a jog around the island and 40 minutes of intense meditation, I wandered over to the dive shop. Okay, that's a lie. I got up about 10 o'clock, necked a couple of strong espresso and ran over to the dive shop because I was late. I met the diving boss — a German guy called Sopp. He'd been in the Maldives for more than 30 years and seemed never to have suffered from the voices. Over the next seven days, he took me to a dozen different dive sites and it was truly spectacular stuff. The sea was teeming with giant turtles, white-tip sharks, stingrays (which I treated with a new and healthy respect) and, a first for me, giant manta rays that washed through the warm, sea like enormous hang-gliders.

One morning, we dropped down to 30 metres and planked ourselves on the top of a steep sea wall. The current at this particular point was very strong and we had to fight hard to stay where we were. It was worth it. As if by some signal, an aqua parade suddenly started. First came a black-tip shark, complete with its entourage of little pilot fish. Then a squadron of eagle rays floated past, closely followed by a flotilla of turtles. The grand finale was an enormous manta ray that came so close I felt its water break my cheeks.

Sopp showed me some "incredible video" footage that he'd shot when the island was hit by the tsunami. You could see chunks of rock tumbling down paths that normally lead visitors to their beachside villas. It was gritty stuff. One of the waiters in the Lighthouse told me how he'd watched the wave make its inexorable way towards them as he stood transfixed on the restaurant's upper balcony. That is the flip side of paradise. The Maldives is one of the few places that global warming and the consequent rising sea levels will affect. Eighty percent of the nation's 1,200 islands are no more than one metre above sea level and the government reckons that the water is rising at about 0.5cm a year. This is a paradise in serious peril.

Sadly, I have to admit that there were not things that were unduly concerning either

Stacey or me as the days floated by. She'd embarked on a systematic, in-depth investigation of the island's spa facilities and had tried every available combination. In a final test of the strength of our marriage, she'd booked us in for a "couple's special" — my personal idea of hell. Surely this would bring the voices in waves?

WE WERE led into an uber-minimalist spa by two tiny women with bare feet. Here, we were left alone for a while and ordered to bathe in a milky bath before getting showered and awaiting the "specialists". For some reason, Stacey had chosen a rather violent Thai massage for me, while she got something a little more sedate. The relaxationist/artist asked me whether I liked my violence gentle, medium or hardcore. Stacey took over and requested hardcore. I had no say in any of this; I was in an alien world. An hour and a half later, I tumbled out of the hot feeling as though I'd just been 12 rounds with Mike Tyson. The whole ordeal

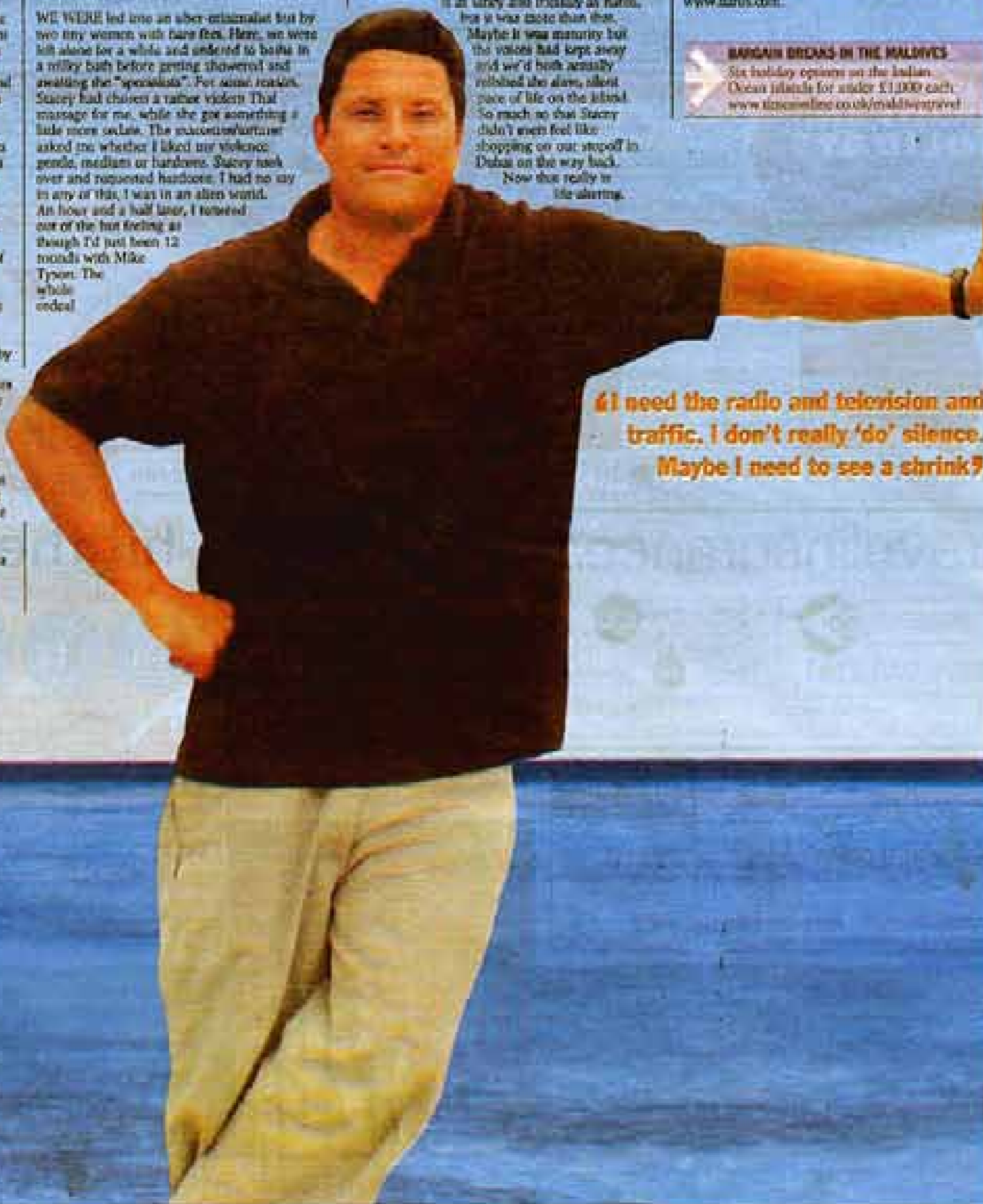
was finished off with a massage and pedicure, so I emerged into the evening sun feeling like a new man — a new man who was slightly hormonal, with overly clean feet.

At the end of our 10 days, we left Baros still married, incredibly relaxed and having completely changed our opinion on desert-island getaways. Granted, it helps if the place is as lively and friendly as Baros,

but it was more than that. Maybe it was maturity but the voices had kept away and we'd both actually relished the slow, silent pace of life on the island. So much so that Stacey didn't even feel like shopping on our stop-off in Dubai on the way back. Now that really is life altering.

Travel details: Kuoni Travel (01306 747008, www.kuoni.co.uk) has 10 night* B&B on Baros in a deluxe villa, including flights with Qatar Airways from Heathrow and transfers to resort, from £1,614pp, based on two sharing. Or try Elite Vacations (01707 371000, www.elitevacations.com). For more information on the island resort, visit www.baros.com.

BARGAIN BREAKS IN THE MALDIVES
Six holiday options on the Indian Ocean islands for under £1,000 each. www.timesonline.co.uk/maldivestravel



‘I need the radio and television and traffic. I don’t really ‘do’ silence. Maybe I need to see a shrink?’