

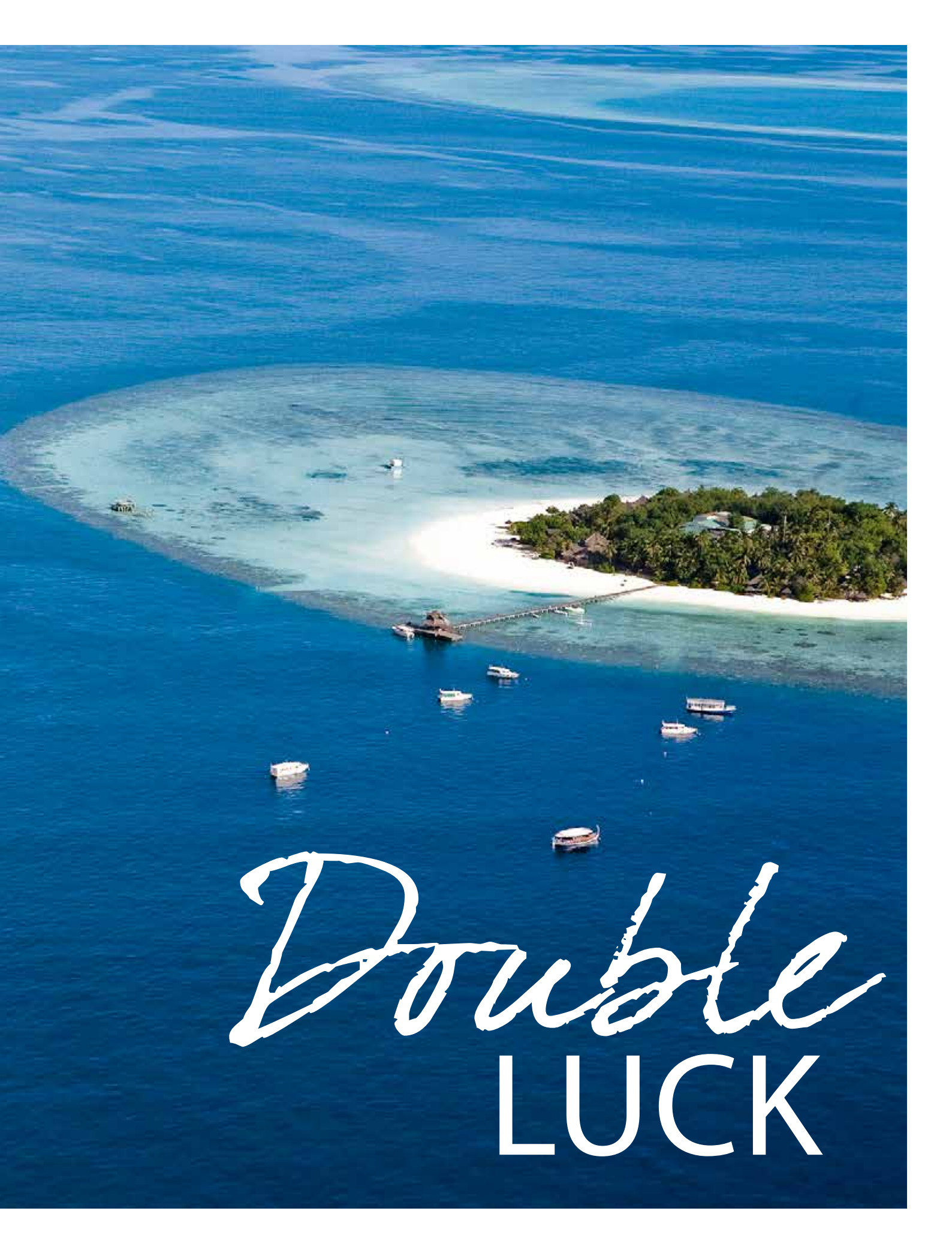
**Angsana Ihuru** and **Banyan Tree Vabbinfaru** belong to the Banyan Tree hotel group, are only two minutes apart, and are just a 20-minute speedboat ride from Malé airport. Best of all, each has its own exquisite “house reef”. Lucky VERNE MAREE took lucky husband Roy to this island paradise.

**A** Maldivian coral atoll is the archetypal island, fringed by a brilliantly white beach that gives way to a shallow lagoon of palest aquamarine, surrounded by a house reef bristling with corals harbouring a myriad of colourful species of sea life. Ideally, you should be able to exit your villa straight onto the beach, don snorkelling gear and reach the house reef with a few lazy flicks of your fins. That's what it's like here.

Though the Maldivian island experience is largely about the reef and the snorkelling, any Banyan Tree resort is also about the spa. Twenty years ago, Banyan Tree pioneered the Asian spa at its first development, at Phuket Laguna, transforming a toxic wasteland into a holistic spa resort of the kind we've come to know and love. Vabbinfaru came next, launched in the same year as the Bintan resort. It's enough to say that Roy and I have never had a better spa experience than the 90-minute signature couple's massage that was his birthday treat at Banyan Tree Vabbinfaru this past May.

What's more, Banyan Tree has a distinct identity that's not just about indulgence: it's also known for eco-initiatives – community greening, marine research, turtle conservation et al – plus social responsibility programmes that include youth outreach and development.





*Double*  
LUCK



## Angsana Ihuru

On our first morning, it was full moon low tide – so low that bits of the reef we'd snorkelled around late the previous afternoon were holding up coral branches to the early sun. Ihuru has an exceptionally narrow lagoon, the first corals and their attendant fish sometimes no more than a few feet from the edge of the water.

At intervals, four or five channels give wonderfully easy access to the outer wall of the reef – one of the best house reefs imaginable, impeccably maintained and home to some 400 species.

Literally the first thing I spotted was a black-tip shark, and my heart skipped a beat; a lucky sighting, apparently, as you're more likely to see them in the evening. At any time of day, though, you're assured of a kaleidoscope of colourful, shimmering fish of all sizes and colours, plus a multitude of corals and the occasional starfish turtle, octopus and more.

Little Angsana Ihuru is in some ways the most perfect of the Maldivian islands I've been lucky to visit. All essential elements – powdery sand, lambent lagoon and rich reef – being in harmonious balance, it has an ultimately satisfying simplicity. One sandy path takes you around the island in four or five minutes. The sea is your swimming pool. There's a souvenir shop and there's a gym to admire, and that's about it.

Each of the 45 villas is right on the beach and they're all the same size. Some, like ours, have a more concealed entrance and more privacy; others have a direct view of the sea that laps just beyond their back deck, swing and curl-up-on-me lounger. All have a spacious, semi-outdoor walled shower area to the front, some with the addition of a spa bath, ideal for those (like me) who like to wallow.







### Nat Geo Moment

Perched on an exposed bit of coral, this heron let me get up surprisingly close. Quick as a flash he had it in his beak, wriggling desperately. For a good few minutes, he stalked up and down the shore – letting his breakfast die? – then repeatedly dropped it onto the sand, stabbed it scissor-like with his beak and rinsed it in the shallows.

Feeling a bit peckish myself, I went to have my own breakfast... smoked mackerel, incidentally.











## Banyan Tree Vabbinfaru

Leaving Ihuru was a wrench, somewhat softened by the knowledge that we could come back on the two-hourly shuttle whenever we liked.

If my Ihuru heron constituted a Nat Geo moment, our first day at Vabbinfaru was a Nat Geo fiesta. First, we cooed over the month-old green turtles in the marine lab next to the dive centre. After that, we swam out to the turtle cage in the lagoon to watch Shameem feed the one-year-olds that are being prepared for release when they turn two. So far, more than 300 turtles have been bred and released from here. (From the trackers attached to their shells, it is known that they survive, often heading off to destinations as diverse as Indonesia and South Africa before coming home to Vabbinfaru years later to lay their eggs.)

We also watched Shameem feeding chunks of fish to the eight or so stingrays that come to the edge of the lagoon next to the main jetty every day at 5pm. He knows each by name, and feeds them individually. This tradition has been going on for the past 13 years; what they get is only a snack, we're told, so they aren't dependent on it.

Later, after a dinner at a table on the beach, we strolled to the end of the jetty to enjoy the surreal sight of a dozen or more ghost-like sharks swimming endlessly through the clear and shallow water, attracted by the jetty lights like moths to a flame.

Unlike those proverbial moths, the sharks here are quite safe. Though sharks abound in the Maldives, we're told, not one attack on a human has ever been recorded. That's partly because of the types of shark found here; but also because their natural prey, fish, are so plentiful.

Like Angsana Ihuru, Banyan Tree Vabbinfaru's public areas include a central arrangement of convivial bar and restaurant, all with airily high thatched roofs and immaculately raked white-sand floors. A small minority of guests totter around on high heels, looking (patently) ridiculous. You could happily go barefoot all the time, or just dress up for the evening in sparkly flip-flops, if you liked.

The Banyan Tree accommodation and general atmosphere is a bit more luxurious than Angsana, which has a younger, more contemporary vibe. Though the villas themselves are not much bigger, they do have a lovely plunge-pool and spa-bath area at the entrance, and at the back – leading onto the beach – your own deck, sala, hammock and sun-loungers. Ours, one of just two Vabbinfaru Villas, even had a thatched alfresco lounge area. I made a concerted effort to make use of all the available seating during the course of our three days, but it wasn't easy.



### Birthday moment

How better to celebrate your birthday, your love or just life in general? An hour-long sunset cruise on a traditional Maldivian *dhoni* came complete with two charming boatmen to attend to the sail and pour the champagne. Later, of course, came the cake, the candles and the singing.

### Food

Each island has only one restaurant, but with fare this good and varied it's all you need. A highlight for me was the array of freshly picked lettuces and herbs grown hydroponically on site. Another nice touch was the array of gourmet salts.

Our first dinner at Angsana Ihuru was a barbecue buffet; the next, a set menu with options – my fresh seafood salad, ginger and carrot soup, tempura-fried wahoo and chocolate brûlée with coconut sorbet was outstanding. (Full board is an additional US\$90 or so per person. Taking at least half-board, meaning breakfast and dinner, can save you quite a bit.)

Banyan Tree Vabbinfaru, on the other hand, is a full-board resort.

Breakfast and lunch are buffet-style, as is dinner on Fridays and Sundays. Otherwise, you choose from a multi-course menu or opt for a somewhat lighter “spa dinner”, for example: salmon sushi, cream of parsnip soup with crisp almond slivers, sea bass on pureed peas. There was some sort of fruity dessert too, but we swapped that for a couple of Dom Pedros\*, kindly whipped up for us by the South African executive chef Neil Firman.

On both islands, we're assured, the bar stays open until the last guest leaves. I'll take their word for it; after days of sun, snorkelling and spa, we couldn't keep our eyes open much past 10.30pm.

\*A **Dom Pedro**, available in every South African bar or restaurant, is vanilla ice cream blended with a dash of whole cream and a good shot of whiskey (or brandy, Kahlua or whatever your poison happens to be). Plenty of calories.

### What about children?

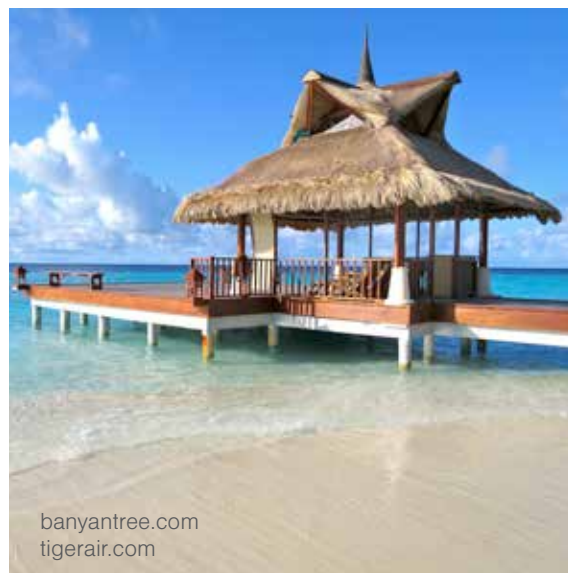
Until some years ago, Banyan Tree did not take children under 12. Now they do – partly, we're told, because of pressure from loyal guests who'd honeymooned at their resorts and were now parents.

Our neighbours in the next-door villa had their five-month-old son with them; no surprise then that they caught the 6.45am sunrise from the beach every day. With no kids' club, baby-sitting, public pool or other family-friendly facilities, I'd recommend leaving little ones at home until they're old enough to entertain themselves.

On the other hand, the English mother of an eight-year-old girl and a six-year-old boy told me that her two were perfectly happy with beach-play, snorkelling, the odd game of table tennis and the books she'd loaded onto their iPads. We're so lucky to be here, she said. “If they told me they were bored,” she added, “I'd have to kill them.”

### Getting There

We took the 9.35am direct Tigerair flight from Singapore to Malé, paying a bit more for leg-room and extra baggage allowance (for the shoes I didn't wear). As it's just a 4½-hour plane trip followed by a mere 25-minute speedboat connection, and Malé is three hours behind Singapore, we arrived at Ihuru in good time for lunch. The same plane leaves Malé each day at 12.10pm and should get to Singapore before 8pm, if it's on time. 🇸🇬



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