

Triple-Decker Maldives treat

The Four Seasons has three stunning facilities in the Maldives – the two island resorts of Kuda Huraa and Landaa Giraavaru, and *The Explorer*, a luxury catamaran that takes up to 22 guests at a time on a blissful island-hopping extravaganza. Any of these idyllic experiences would be a treat. Sandwich a three-night cruise between a stay at each island resort and you have the holiday of a lifetime.

by Verne Maree



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Kudos to Kuda Huraa

It's lovely to arrive in the dark and wake up in strange surroundings, especially such stunning ones. Having trundled along the boardwalk to our over-sea villa, I thought I was prepared for the early-morning view over the lagoon, but this was our first visit to the Maldives and I was entranced, blown away, gobsmacked.

The banana-shaped atoll, thirty exciting minutes by speedboat from the Malé airport, is just large enough to accommodate a string of beach villas on either side, with as many villas again built out over the water at one end.

Huraa for the Villas!

Having already spotted a few electric-blue fish swimming around the stilts the night before, I couldn't wait to be kitted out with mask, snorkel and fins. We were also advised to buy reef shoes, US\$40 from the dive centre, to protect our feet from the coral. Being able to slip off your private deck into the water was great fun. The current was strong, though, and most of the

coral here dead. But there were colourful fish to be seen, and when a curious ray swam directly under my floating body – and that in only waist-deep water – my heart skipped a beat.

The beach villas are lovely, too, spacious affairs with large bathrooms and private outdoor areas boasting a pool, outdoor furniture and, best of all, your own little stretch of white, sandy beach and that unbelievably turquoise Maldivian sea.

Huraa for the Food!

Even if you're not normally a breakfast person, you should acquire the habit when it's included in your package.

Breakfast at **Café Huraa** was superb: everything from fresh fruit and raw honey dripping off the comb to eggs any way, smoked eel and dim sum.

The aroma of prawn-shells singeing on the barbecue lured us to the special Sunday night buffet feast at Indian restaurant **Baraabar**. Highlights were the lentil- and rice-stuffed vegetables done on a griddle; spinach-marinated lobster and giant shrimp from the tandoor; and a procession of baskets of fragrant naan bread.

The resort also has an Italian restaurant, **The Reef**, which has spectacular sunset views from its alfresco deck.



Huraa for the Spa!

Surely all masseuses go straight to heaven, as a just reward for having brought such bliss to others during their time on Earth. It's a one-minute ride to the spa island from the main jetty in a cute little *dhoni* with an ornately carved prow, ensconced in its

cushioned interior like a Maldivian princess. Yini from Bali gave me an outstanding one-hour signature Kuda Huraa massage, a blend of Thai pressure point, Filipino *hilot* and Malaysian *hurut* techniques. Memorably, this was an over-water treatment room: I looked down

through a pane of glass set into the floor to the myriad reef fish in the water below.

A sublimely located **yoga pavilion** juts out over the sea just beyond the pool, and one morning at seven I joined the instructor and a sleepy-eyed bunch of fellow guests there. We literally saluted the sun as it rose over the ocean horizon.

There's a lovely stretch of beach with comfy loungers. It's patrolled by a hot but smiley staff member on a bicycle, who regularly proffers cool towels and refreshments. You can snorkel off this beach to have a look at the coral cages that have been set up by the in-house marine biologist team. Basket-like structures onto which fragments of coral have been attached, they will augment the reef, and are already attracting colourful schools of fish.



Coral "Bleaching"

Resident marine biologist Katie explained that the bleaching of the coral was due to El Niño, not to the 2004 tsunami. Coral is colourful because of the presence of algae, which lives symbiotically with healthy coral in the coral's horny structure. Bleaching occurs when coral that is under stress, for example the high temperatures brought by El Niño, expels its algae; why it does so is not known. If the heat is short-lived, the coral may take back the algae; otherwise, the coral will die after about two weeks.



Points to Note: Four Seasons Kuda Huraa is busiest during the first six months of the year, and generally fully booked months in advance for Christmas. February is still and windless, best for photography, and the rainiest months are June and July.

The Entrancing Explorer

Day One

During our two days at Kuda Huraa, the sleek catamaran had been sitting out at sea like a promise. And as we boarded with our dozen fellow-cruisers – Canadians, Australians and a Swedish couple – for the three-day Island Discovery Cruise, the excitement was almost palpable.

A short-lived squall added drama to the short speedboat-ride out to *The Explorer*. Banish any visions of cramped quarters or bunk beds. The ten cabins are all of equal size and boast blissfully comfortable Four Seasons signature king-sized beds. They have plenty of room to store all your stuff plus stash your cases away, and the bathroom en suite has a combined bath and shower.

Captain Bonifasias hosted welcome cocktails and a captain's dinner on the first night, served on the after-deck, and washed down with Taittinger.

Day Two

Having spent the first night anchored off **Kagi Island** in the **North Malé Atoll**, we weighed anchor at 7am – such a thrilling sound! – and set off for Baa Atoll. After a bit of seasickness, the only time on the trip, I had perked up enough to attend on-board marine biologist Lucy's first "fish talk" in the lounge. Heads packed with pertinent points about piscine proclivities, we piled into the accompanying *dhoni* and headed for nearby **Muthafushi Island** for escorted diving, snorkelling and beach-time.

For **divers**, *The Explorer* is the ultimate live-aboard dive-boat, fully equipped with everything you need. You just turn up with your diver's ticket in hand. As the only licensed and experienced diver among the guests, Roy had the benefit of Angela's individual and undivided attention. For their first dive, they went off in a tender to the Muthafushi outer wall, and were treated to the sight of a flight of five eagle rays flying in formation, a turtle, a tuna, a couple of moray eels – and, of course, fish of all descriptions.

Meanwhile, the rest of us were **snorkelling** off the other side of the little island. Shepherded by Lucy, we floated in pellucid water, enthralled by the ever-changing kaleidoscope of the reef just a metre or two beneath us; and





fascinated by shadowy shapes of larger fishy things lurking and swooping where the reef wall fell away down, down, down to the deep blue.

For someone like me, who likes snorkelling but is no diver and never will be one, this was a phenomenal opportunity to see some of the world's most varied and prolific marine life. The Maldives has about 4,000 varieties of marine species, compared, for example, to the Caribbean's 500. And as the majority of fish, corals and so on hang out in the first ten metres below the surface of the water, you don't need to be a diver to enjoy the splendour of the underwater scenery.

Videographer Sen Wong accompanied us in his diving gear to record our antics. Later, he would edit the day's video catch and put it to music in an amazingly professional 17-minute production to show us after dinner.

When you've had enough, you simply flick your fins a few times to beach yourself on the island, where umbrellas are set out with mats and towels, and cold drinks wait. You can laze in the shade with a book, bask in the sun like a seal, or set off to explore your own uninhabited desert island; *truly* pristine and raked only by the tides, the only debris being hermit crabs, shells and bits of bleached coral.

After lunch back on the boat, you could go off for another dive or snorkel (as the others did), or just read and doze in your cabin (idle me). With a small group and an attentive, flexible crew, you could, within reason, do as you wish.





Day Three

Our snorkelling destination was a spot where manta rays and even whale sharks are sometimes encountered – though not on this day – and Roy set off with Angela to do two pinnacle dives.

After lunching on a jackfish the crew had caught the day before, we cruised off to the island of **Keyodhoo** for some more snorkelling. And although Lucy had given a fascinating Powerpoint lesson on reef fish beforehand, I found myself unable to identify more than a handful of the bewildering variety of angelfishes, butterfly fishes, surgeon fishes, damselfishes, parrot fishes, wrasses, trigger fishes, puffers and porcupines and more – too many to mention.

Hani Faru is another beautiful and uninhabited island, with a

gorgeous reef that begins about ten metres from the beach, presenting a riot of colour and life and then shelving steeply into mysterious blue depths. You hover over that deeper, cooler water and feel yourself part of huge shoals of placidly suspended fish, just hanging out with them.

Next up was a visit to the Maldivian village on the island of **Kendhoo**, where we strolled down wide, sandy roads to admire the neatness of the wooden houses, shops, mosques and schools and marvel at the strange domesticated seafowl that took the place of the more usual chickens and ducks.

It being a feast day, we fetched up at a village gathering, a sports day, which climaxed with a traditional song and dance performance by some of the men of the village. It

went on forever, and clearly told of battles fought and won; but afterwards, no one could tell us what it was about. Apparently, the story is told in a mixture of four ancient languages that no one understands anymore.

Back on board, some of the passengers set off on a fishing trip and came back flushed and victorious, brandishing a fine catch.

After dinner, we watched Sen's video of the trip. He is employed by an outfit called Scubazoo, which sells these videos for a steep but worthwhile \$US175.

Note: There are three-night, four-night and seven-night cruise options. For more information and rates, go to www.fourseasons.com/maldives.

Landaa Giraavaru

It was not easy getting Roy off the boat and onto Landaa Giraavaru. Almost tearful to begin with, he bucked up a bit at the sight of our destination.

Completely different in feeling from the tiny, intimate Kuda Huraa, the 18-hectare "LG" – as its staff likes to call it – is comparatively huge, allowing lots of space for privacy. Cement-washed architecture blends with the ubiquitous Maldivian thatch, and is punctuated by the brilliant blue of the traditional Maldivian front doors.

Our **beach villa** was an enormous affair; I could live in the bathroom, which had a tub clearly designed for at least a *ménage à trois*. French doors (to continue the theme) gave onto an extra outdoor living area, 12-metre pool and shady path to the beach. You could stroll across the beach, slide

into the Indian Ocean and immerse yourself in the wonders of the house-reef just metres from the shore – even before breakfast.

Ocean-friendly

Next to the dive centre is a **marine research centre** with a fish-breeding laboratory, where a team of British marine biologists, supported by Four Seasons and Save our Seas, plays its part in protecting and caring for the Maldivian atolls. Abbey is the corals expert; Guy leads a variety of projects, including a **sea turtle breeding project**, and the cutting-edge **Maldivian Manta Ray Project**, which has already identified and tagged more than 1,500 individual manta rays in a mission to learn more about this relatively unknown beast.





Disappointingly, wind and choppy seas on our first day put paid to the planned **turtle-spotting safari**. Next day, however, the wind dropped and we joined a **dolphin safari**. Before the bliss of being joined by at least a dozen spinner dolphins – which is by no means a sure thing – we were lucky to see two huge manta rays passing not far from the boat.

Health-friendly

At the leafy and expansive **Spa and Ayurvedic Retreat**, Ayurvedic

physician Dr Avinash Tiwari holds court. My consultation with him revealed my *dosha* type – pitta – which determined the ingredients to be used in the two-hour Elakkizhi treatment that followed. In a palatial semi-outdoor pavilion, two sweet, friendly women worked in perfect tandem to massage me with herbal powders and spices that had been cooked in herbal oils and packed in bundles. It was sublime.

Similar synergy is found in the relationship between Dr Avinash and Chef Khalid, who work together to devise tailored diets for guests, for anything from two to 28 days.

That's just one aspect of the cuisine, however. As you'd expect, there's a good variety of restaurants: **Blu**, chi-chi Italian gloriously situated right on the beach; **Al Barakat** restaurant and bar, where you can puff on *shisha* and sample authentic Arabian fare; and **Café Landaa**, which serves both Eastern and Western dishes and has a sushi and teppanyaki bar.

You might not want to leave your exquisite villa, though. And if that's the case, they'll bring it all to you, and serve it hot.



Points to Note

All meals, as well as diving and other excursions, are included in the rate for *The Explorer*. At the resorts, the price of food and drinks is high. Breakfast should be included in your rate, but expect to pay about US\$100 per person per meal, lunch or dinner, and more than that if you're having more than one or two drinks. What's more, it is illegal to take alcohol into the Maldives. The x-ray machine will spot it and it *will* be confiscated.

We were lucky enough to do it all – Kuda Huraa, *The Explorer* and Landaa Giraavaru – and fly back to Malé airport on a Trans Maldivian Airway seaplane (US\$395 per person for one leg) – a fun experience! But you *could* go to Kuda Huraa alone. The convenient four-hour evening flight on SIA to Malé departs at 8.30pm, and a short boat-ride gets you to the resort soon after midnight. 📍

www.fourseasons.com/maldives

