

Second



A wintry jaunt to the Isle of Man after eloping to Gretna Green, just over the Scottish border with England, our first honeymoon was nothing like this.

There was sea, yes – the freezing Irish Sea. There was an island, sure; and a boat trip, too, a vomitorious ferry rolling around in hostile waves. We did have luxury accommodation – a penthouse suite atop a grand hotel in the high street of Douglas, where I spent three days wracked not with passion

but with a disastrous bout of flu. (You never saw such a snotty bride.) It rained, of course. That's what it does there.

Roy booked that one, and to be fair, it could have been a fun and quirky destination if I hadn't succumbed to the lergy. But it wasn't exactly your obvious honeymoon destination – that would have to be the Maldives, and that's where we are: on a second honeymoon timed to coincide with my husband's big, big birthday.

By Verne Maree

Honeymoon



Full Moon Honeymoon

I'm gazing out over the secluded deck of our ocean villa at the **Sheraton Full Moon Resort and Spa**, across the private plunge pool to the spring-tide waves thundering onto the rocks a couple of feet below. The corner of one eye registers the quick flash of a shark outlined against the translucent face of a wave, a split second before it crashes.

Not much more than two years has passed since the Sheraton name was added to the front of the Full Moon Resort and Spa, and the new owners have transformed it into a destination worthy of its five stars. Apart from sprucing up the public areas and guest rooms, they built 20 splendid ocean villas on the eastern side of the island.

Furanafushi Island is part of the North Malé Atoll, just 15 minutes by speedboat from the international airport on the capital island. At just under a kilometre at its widest point, it's fairly large by Maldivian standards.

Accommodation

Our **ocean villa** is simply huge, perfectly secluded and has an uninterrupted view out over the Indian Ocean. Despite arriving so late at night, and the officially advanced years of my now sexagenarian husband – he's having his big birthday tomorrow – we can't resist a dip before bed.

Ten out of ten to the designers of these suites: absolute privacy means you can cavort naked if you like; an expansive deck with all the comforts, including a hammock; a big, comfortable



bed; a massive bathroom with a deep bathtub and glass walls onto a private garden; an Illy capsule espresso machine; a DVD-player and TV for Roy to catch the Spanish F1 race on; and a state-of-the-art lighting system.

Lovely as the ocean villas are, they're only one of the seven styles of accommodation available. The **over-water villa** decks have direct access to the warm waters that lap against their stilts. Compact and romantic, they're very popular with Japanese and Korean guests, particularly honeymooners. For

safety reasons, children under 12 are not allowed in them.

Europeans tend to favour the 55 **beachfront deluxe villas**. Deceptively large (76 square metres) and with dreamy semi-outdoor bathrooms and open-air showers, they'd be our second choice. And if you can't bribe someone to look after your offspring while you're away, there's a divan for one child and an extra bed can be brought in for a second. (At around US\$400 per day, including breakfasts, that's not bad for the Maldives.)

Food

All rates include breakfast, and the buffet at **Feast** is a good reflection of the mix of nationalities that the Sheraton attracts. Apart from the usual fruit, cereals, bangers, beans and bacon and an excellent egg station, there's "hard bread", cheese and ham for the Scandinavians, sushi, soba and congee for the Asians, sugary mini-doughnuts for those who don't plan on living long, and just about anything you could possibly fancy.

Resort meals tend to be expensive in the Maldives, so it's a good idea to request a half-board package that gives you breakfast and dinner. In the evening, Feast has an extensive and varied dinner buffet; or you can choose to have a set dinner at the **Sand Coast** restaurant.

On our second night, Roy's birthday, we join the five-course Thai feast on the beach, catered by **Baan Thai** restaurant. A Maldivian drum-band does its thing, not forgetting to sing Happy Birthday. And when we get back to our splendid villa, someone has taken the trouble

to strew blossoms across the bed and spell out a birthday message in strips of reed.

Sea Salt is the signature restaurant, and it's really top-notch. Your choice from a buffet of live crabs and other recently live seafood, or a range of top-grade meat options, is grilled to order. The sides of fresh green asparagus, truffle-infused pureed potatoes, steamed veggies and more are all sublime.

Before or after dinner, or both, sip a cocktail on the **Salt Bar's** expansive alfresco desk. More than a single margarita may bring on the need to prostrate yourself on one of the lazy daybeds that look out to sea.

Water

Paddling through the shallows of the expansive lagoon, I'm charmed to see large shoals of tiny fish drifting in the shallows, intermittently breaking apart in a flurry of piscine panic at the incursions of little black-tipped sharks – about a foot long – and the occasional ray. Apart from that, there's not much visible marine life in the lagoon, apart

from a couple of patches of branch coral that are reasonably snorkel-worthy at low tide.

Furanafushi does have a good house-reef, apparently, but in a bad location: a bit too far from the beach and – more importantly – made dangerous by strong currents. Surfers are in luck: there's a decent wave to be had, but as it's a reef-break, you need to be reasonably experienced to avoid being dashed on the rocks and cut to ribbons.

We joined the daily *dhoni*-trip (US\$60 per person) to a very pretty reef some 25 minutes from our resort. Apart from the usual multitude of colourful beauties, I spotted a metre-long reef shark – harmless, I had to remind myself.





Wis for Wonderful

(It's also for whimsical, witty, wondrous, winning – and the wow factor.)

While we sip a post-prandial glass of wine under the stars on mattresses laid out on the beach and surrounded by a ring of flickering oil lamps, the house DJ is playing chill music from his station on the sand. When I ask Roy if this achingly hip place make him *feel* like a 60-year-old, he says no – it makes him feel like two 30-year-olds. I tell him he can't have them, birthday or not.

A lot of clever marketing people have developed the “W” theme since the first hotel was conceived and built in New York in 1998. The “whatever, whenever” promise reflects Manhattan’s “whatever-when-ever-24/7” sensibility, appropriately adapted to the destination – in this case, a far-flung coral atoll in the Indian Ocean. It starts when you dial “0” and are greeted with: “What is your wish?”

Every hundred metres or so along the island paths and water-village walkways is a thatched “sweet spot” with towels, ice, a mini-freezer stocked with Magnum and Mövenpick ice-creams, and a fridge offering bottled water, soft drinks, Milo and Nescafe – all included in your rate.

Though I tend to ignore the complimentary toiletries in hotel rooms, nowadays – unless they're Bulgari, of course – I loved the Bliss range in our W beach villa. It's delightful stuff: from Lemon and Rosemary Soapy Sap and a Detangling Hair Rinse to whisper-light Body Butter, they're almost good enough to eat.



Fashion and Music

There's more chill music – this time playing from the state-of-the-art Bose sound system in our bedroom, bathroom, and in the shady area above our cottage where we relax on a swing-bed and catch the afternoon breeze. Not only is it surprisingly un-annoying, but it can be turned off at will.

The same vibes emanate from scores of all-weather speakers installed at discreet intervals along the walkways. They're all Bose; it's the W brand standard, we're told. And, in case you're interested, the programming is by fashion music aficionado Michaelangelo L'Aqua, "discovered" by Tom Ford and appointed music director for Gucci and Yves St Laurent back in 1999.

The W has what is claimed to be the only nightclub in the Maldives, **Fifteen Below**. Conch-like spiral stairs wind down to a cool, low-lit subterranean space; you guessed it, 15 feet below sea level. The sheer scope of the drinks list is mind-boggling, from my Fesdu Island Ice Tea to Roy's cask-strength Caol Isla. We're sticking to the island theme, you see.

What's in a Name?

Catchy place-names up the coolness quotient: you book diving excursions at **Down Under**, separate from the shack on the main beach where you go for windsurfers, kayaks and the like. Off that beach is a big lagoon – **Lagoon?** – where timid Japanese guests in Lycra from the ears down float around in life-jackets, and hardier souls use the prevailing winds to whizz back and forth across the wide stretch of water.

Apart from Fifteen Below, there's the swim-up **Wet** bar at the pool, and another called **Sip**, next to Fire restaurant. At **Words**, you can check your email, find a library book or choose a DVD. **Sweat** is the gym; I liked the free daily aqua-aerobics at 11.30am, and the 5.45pm yoga class on a spit of sand on the beach.

Food

Breakfast is a sumptuous international buffet at **Kitchen**, which is open for lunch and dinner, too. The hot menu includes a delicious Maldivian chilli omelette served with a *roti*, fish curry and tuna *sambal*.

Our meal at **Fish** is amazing: from a buffet of fresh seafood, we point out what takes our fancy and they prepare it for us. After a platter of local reef fish sashimi, we struggle through an enormous lobster each: again a local variety, the flavourful painted lobster, simply with rock salt, pepper and a drizzle of olive oil.

Fire is a favourite of guests: seafood, meat and more cooked to order in theatrical style by various means. There's a Mongolian grill doing brisk business with seafood and veggies, a charcoal grill crisping whole reef fish, a *tandoori* oven perfecting skewered prawns and chicken, and a spit-roast on which a grinning pig slowly turns.



Rooms

Most of the accommodation is in 50 over-water villas that extend from one end of the island, but we're in one of the 26 beach cottages. Big enough, with a lovely semi-outdoor bathroom and shower, it opens onto a deck with a plunge-pool. You also have a barbecue where you can cook up a meal for yourself from ingredients supplied by Kitchen. Roy shows no immediate enthusiasm for this idea, however.

A full wall of amber mirror serves as a sexy bed-head, and there's a pillow menu for the pea-phobic princesses out there. The presence of Red Bull and other "energy drinks" in the fridge reflects the younger age group targeted, and there's a separate fridge just for a range of wines that includes Veuve Cliquot champagne.



Hérons... and a Turtle

Just beyond our deck is a perfect stretch of powdery white beach. It's patrolled by a territorial heron – one of several on the island – that feasts morning and evening on shoals of tiny fish that frequent the blood-warm shallows. I become quite obsessive about photographing these birds whenever I spot them.

We pull on fins and masks and head through a duo of buoys to snorkelling heaven. Within metres, the sea comes to life: colourful three-inch-long fish kissing the lens of your mask or nibbling your shoulder if you linger too long, beige-spotted ones blending in with the sand or shyly wriggling down under it.

The richness of the marine life, the plethora of fish species, the general awesomeness of the experience of floating above a tropical reef just where it drops off steeply into the vaguely terrifying ocean depths is difficult to describe adequately. Once experienced, it is never forgotten.

Early one morning, I spot my first turtle, a large hawksbill. Its head is buried in a bed of branched coral as it chomps off chunks of the stuff; I imagine that it's sucking out the tender polyps like so many strands of breakfast *mee*.

Spa Away

When an afternoon of heavy rain sets in, I head for **Away**, the stunning spa built out over the sea just to the left of our beach. Each gorgeous treatment room is separate from the others, and has a large deck complete with big tub and outdoor shower facing out to sea.

Showers whip across the waves that pound just below us, but Balinese therapist Anggrey is anything but that; calm and sweet, she treats me to the blissful 60-minute **Drift Away** signature massage and a 30-minute **Jet Away** facial, using sublime Comfort Zone products.





For a quick taste of W's distinctive style, pop along to the W Sentosa. Elsewhere in Asia, Seoul, Shanghai, Bangkok, Hong Kong, Koh Samui, Bali, Taipei and Guangzhou are also W cities. They're on our list.

Getting There

The 8.50pm Singapore Airline's flight gets you to Malé in about four and a half hours; a three-hour time difference means you land around 10.30pm. From there, it's 15 minutes by resort speedboat to the Sheraton on Furanafushi Island.

Getting around by seaplane is part of the fun. After three days at the Sheraton, we were taken back to Malé, this time to the Maldivian Air Taxi seaplane terminus for our 25-minute flight (between US\$350 and \$400 return) to the W Resort, Fesdu, where we spent a further three nights before returning to Malé to connect with an 11.25pm flight that touched down at 7am the next morning. 📺

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