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*THE TRAVEL ISSUE*

# Exotic Maldives

It is feeding time on Hembadhu Island, 5:00 p.m. in the North Male Atoll in the Maldives. Twenty to 30 stingrays swim to the shoreline, where guests and staff of Vivanta by Taj resort are ready. “They are the guardians of the island,” says reception manager **Michelle Jauhar** of the daily phenomenon.

**Ibrahim**, who captains the hotel’s *dhoni*, has line-caught a variety of reef fish, which are chopped into food that we hand-feed the stingrays, who then take a postprandial swim around the island.

The Republic of the Maldives, located on an archipelago in the Indian Ocean, is one of the world’s top diving spots. Although Europeans have been vacationing in the Maldives for decades, it is only recently that Americans, particularly from the East Coast, have begun visiting in significant numbers (Maldivian tourism from the U.S. was up about ten percent last year). If Californians think at all of the Maldives, it is generally in the abstract, in the context of environmentalist warnings about rising sea levels.

Resorts range from four-star to five-star, and every major hotel chain either has, or will soon have, a piece of the action. Each island is a property unto itself, known as the “one resort, one island” concept. When guests arrive via air to Male International Airport, they are transferred from the terminal to their destination via speedboat or seaplane. A new domestic airport, Kooddoo, makes transfers easy to resorts in the far south, such as The Residence Maldives, which opened last September on one of the largest and deepest atolls in the country.

The “one resort, one island” setup means that, unlike tropical destinations such as Bali, there is no nightlife. What the Maldives offer is sand, serenity, superb service, and underwater beauty. Island hopping is the exception rather than the rule, as most travelers prefer to spend their week at one resort. There are beachfront villas and over-water villas, and some guests who want it all have been known to split their stay between the two types of accommodations.

The country, which has long been a honeymoon destination, has more recently become a spa destination, with many treatments incorporating Indian ayurvedic principles. Ginger, clove oil, curry leaves, mustard oil, sandalwood paste, and *jamarosa* root are some of the ingredients on offer. “Pineapple is famous for improving the skin’s elasticity and hydration,” says **Nenita Cabrera**, spa manager at the W Retreat & Spa, which offers a piña colada treatment that ends with a massage. “Deep relaxation is the main objective for guests coming to the Maldives,” she says.

“Big game fishing is also catching on quite a bit here,” says Vivanta’s general manager **Vishal Singh**. “Our guests get very excited when they encounter a fight with the most prized catch of a great barracuda or a giant jack.”

Most resorts cater to couples; a few are family friendly. The Sheraton has an adventure program for kids with activities such as coconut bowling, wake boarding, and Maldivian music lessons. The Residence Maldives conducts night snorkeling trips using special flashlights and mask filters to view fluorescent coral and fish that are invisible by day.

Hospitality is the country’s top industry (the second is tuna export), and Maldivians have been perfecting hospitality for decades. The Republic of the Maldives is the only Asian country which has never been colonized, so the attitude the people project is never servile but simply gracious, the hotel staff waving welcome as guests arrive via speedboat, sometimes startling guests by cheerfully and knowingly greeting them by name (*we’ve been expecting you*) before the guests have even set foot on the dock.

The Taj Exotica Maldives (an even more luxurious sister property to Vivanta) is a long skinny island—at some places just 30 feet wide—located on the largest lagoon in the country, 220 acres. Arriving at the resort’s elegantly long pier from the airport via speedboat, one is greeted with a traditional Maldivian

*bodhu beru* drumbeat welcome. Exotica’s presidential suite boasts a private freshwater pool and panoramic Indian Ocean views. On one side of the island, you can step into the water from the white sand beach and keep walking a mile or so out.

The national capital, Male, is small and densely populated. Locals socialize in public parks or squares or at the cinema, as there is little space in their homes. The Maldives has been an Islamic country since the 12<sup>th</sup> century, and the national museum showcases artifacts from the nation’s history. There is

something beguiling about gazing upon the country’s first typewriter on a pedestal with plenty of space around, a few paces from where the head-kerchief of a 16<sup>th</sup>-century sultan is given an equally dignified presentation. The peoples of the Maldive archipelago have seemingly always felt a shared identity, and sent a delegation to Rome during the days of the Roman Empire.

Multiple flight routing options to Male have opened up in recent years. If you are looking for your next exotic getaway, book a week in the Maldives to relax after your business in Dubai, your adventures in Sri Lanka, sightseeing in India, or mountain trek in the Himalayas. ■

**Fredric Hamber** was raised in Napa and San Francisco. His chapter on the Amazon River will appear in the forthcoming volume *Great Boat Journeys of the World*.



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