

Fresh from a morning swim with manta rays, I contemplate how best to sluice off the salt. In the indoor shower, which is large enough to comfortably accommodate 12? Or in the deep free-standing bathtub overlooking the ocean? It's the third option – the al fresco shower enclosed in a high-walled courtyard and fringed by tropical greenery – that wins out.

I'm at the Four Seasons Resort Maldives at Landaa Giraavaru, a jungle-clad coral island fringed by powdery white sands, nestled in the Baa Atoll UNESCO biosphere reserve. After flying in the previous day, touching down in azure waters with a resounding splash that showered the seaplane's windows, I took a short speedboat ride with other guests to the sprawling resort. In the reception area, staff greeted us with frangipani-studded coconut drinks before ferrying us by golf buggy to over-water accommodation strung like jewels along a seemingly endless sun-bleached timber boardwalk.

My sanctuary is one of the resort's water villas, which were refurbished just prior to the pandemic. With interiors by Singaporean-based Cedric Jaccard of the Avalon Collective, the spacious hideaways rock a sophisticated beach-chic vibe. In addition to that dreamy bathroom, there's a king-size four-poster bed anchored by chunky textiles underfoot, a roomy lounge and dining area with a double-sided flatscreen television (in case you can't decide what to watch). The spaces are decorated with lashings of wood, linen and rattan, and dotted with delicate orchids grown in an on-site nursery.

There's twice as much living space outside as in, and it's to here that most guests gravitate. Overlooking the Indian Ocean, a wooden deck extends across 182sq m, a 12m infinity pool juts over the water, and a set of steps leads invitingly into the sea. Among the shady nooks for dining, sunning, reading and relaxing is a swing couch, which becomes one of my favourite spots. There's even a small spiral staircase leading to a loft, a private little perch from which to watch the sky change colour at the end of the day.

You're never far from nature, whether lolling in an over-water hammock, stretching out on sun loungers to catch early-morning rays, or viewing coral trout or reef sharks swimming beneath the glass panel installed in the ensuite floor.

Bicycles, charmingly identified with the guests' initials, are provided to help us get around, and this is when the vast outdoor living area really comes into its own. It's been years since my feet connected with two pedals, so I'm nervous about riding down the boardwalk, one wobble being all that stands between me and an impromptu dip. Yet there's so much space out the back of my villa that after shifting a few pieces of furniture to the side, I have a ready-made track for enough practice laps to build my confidence.

I'm thrilled to rediscover the exhilarating sense of playfulness and freedom that comes with being on two wheels. Even after an encounter with a concrete wall grazes my elbow, I revel in taking the bike everywhere. I ride it down sandy trails and past the luxuriant jungle to the buffet breakfast at Cafe Landaa, where fresh fruit, bircher muesli and maple syrup-dunked French toast line up beside wok-fried noodles and chicken siew bao. I ride it to the pool for an aqua yoga class; to the yoga pavilion for an anti-gravity session; and to other restaurants, including the Blu Beach Club, which offers a six-course menu based around lobster, and is perched high on the beach, waves gently lapping at its pylons.

The bike also spirits me to a massage appointment at the AyurMa Spa, which sits at the epicentre of the resort and underpins its wellness philosophy. Firmly grounded in Ayurvedic and other forms of holistic medicine, the facility offers every guest a complimentary consultation to determine their "dosha", or constitution, which then informs suitable choices from restaurant menus, which are marked with symbols for the doshas: "vata", "kapha" or "pitta".

From Landaa Giraavaru, it's a short seaplane ride to the Four Seasons sister resort at Kuda Huraa, which is easily walkable, so offers more of a village atmosphere, without



TRIPLE TREAT

A trio of high-end lodgings in Maldivian paradise

DENISE CULLEN



Four Seasons Resort Maldives at Landaa Giraavaru, main and above



sacrificing luxury. Its over-water villas were renovated in 2016 and, like Landaa Giraavaru, feature over-water hammocks, deep free-standing baths, and open-air dining areas. Yet its most Insta-worthy features are the private infinity pools, which are only a few steps from cloud-soft king beds and can be reached through sliding glass doors from an amply cushioned alcove.

The journey to The Island Spa is also a fun adventure, as it's located across the lagoon,

requiring a short ride in a traditional kuda dhoni (little boat). The Baraabaru restaurant (meaning "excellent") is another highlight, particularly when chef Ashok Kumar takes us into the kitchen to help prepare tandoori prawns, balti lobster and other Indian dishes on which we later dine for lunch.

Landaa Giraavaru is also the gateway to Four Seasons Maldives Private Island at Voavah, a 20-minute speedboat ride away. I happily tour this 2ha patch of paradise, which

accommodates a maximum 22 guests, making it ideal for an intimate destination wedding, a milestone birthday knees-up or even a hermetic getaway.

Opened in 2016, accommodation options on the island comprise a beachfront three-bedroom villa and sprawling two-storey house, and a two-bedroom over-water villa.

While staff won't reveal names, the retreat is popular with celebrities and captains of industry, who often bring their own chefs, body-

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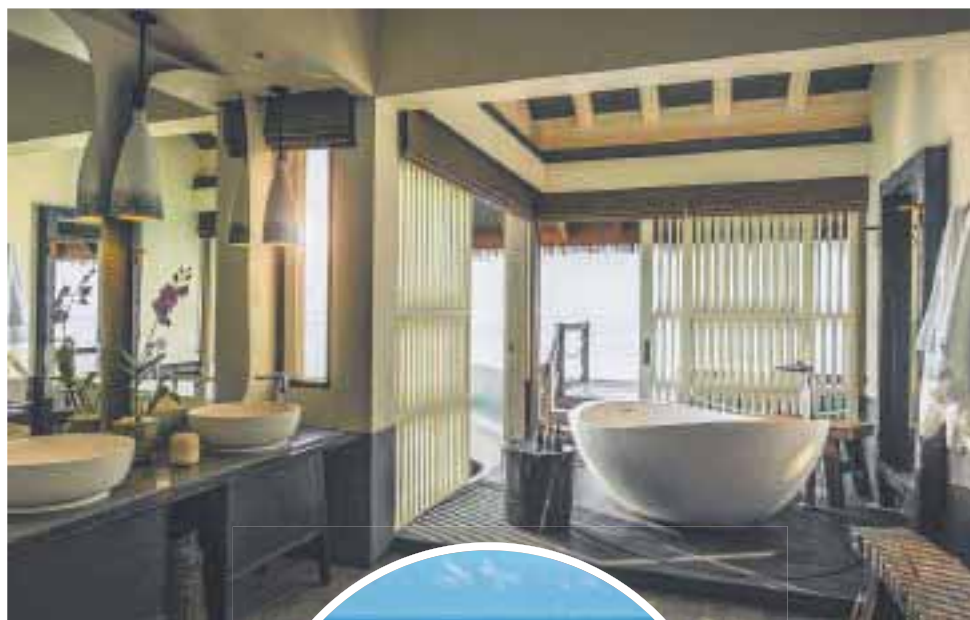


Four Seasons Resort Maldives at Kuda Huraa

IN THE KNOW

Male is the gateway to The Maldives and is 4 ½ hours by air from Singapore. Seaplane transfers between Male International Airport and Four Seasons Resort Maldives at Landaa Giraavaru take about 35 minutes, around the same amount of time as it takes to fly between the two resorts. Speedboat transfers between Male and Four Seasons Resort Maldives at Kuda Huraa take about 30 minutes. Rooms at Landaa Giraavaru from \$US1000 (\$1480) a night plus taxes; \$US1200 at Kuda Huraa. Stays on Voavah from \$US44,000 a night plus taxes.

fourseasons.com



Four Seasons Maldives Private Island at Voavah, above and right



guards and nannies, even though at least 25 Four Seasons staff are deployed whenever the place is occupied. The prying eyes of paparazzi are kept at bay with 24-hour security and patrols, CCTV and night-vision cameras.

The island comes complete with a 19m yacht, allowing guests to chart a course to the best snorkelling, diving, fishing or picnicking grounds. An onsite spa offers bespoke beauty

treatments, as well as yoga, meditation and pranayama (breathing) classes. Equipment, for kitesurfing, jet skiing, snorkelling and scuba diving are included; meals and alcohol are an additional cost. But for the discerning traveller who may prefer lobster to langoustine, and a champagne picnic one day and a scuba adventure the next, freedom to choose is the ultimate luxury.

Denise Cullen was a guest of Four Seasons and Singapore Airlines.
singaporeair.com

MORE TO THE STORY

Shafts of sunlight pierce the bluest depths of the waters at Hanifaru Bay in The Maldives, transforming bait balls and air bubbles into glitter. I fill my lungs and dive to get a closer glimpse of the dozens of manta rays passing beneath. Some whirl in pairs like ballroom dancers; others soar in balletic arcs to the surface.

The Manta-on-Call program at the Four Seasons Resort Maldives at Landaa Giraavaru runs during the southwest monsoon (June to November) and is one way the resort seeks to highlight the beauty and fragility of this 1200-island archipelago. Hanifaru Bay, located in the heart of the Baa Atoll, is one of the world's largest feeding stations for reef manta rays (Mobula alfredi).

The program starts with guests being issued a "manta phone", which staff call when mantas are spotted. Holidaymakers have about 30 minutes to don swimmers, grab mask, fins and snorkel, and head to the Marine Discovery Centre, where a speedboat is waiting.

The Maldivian Manta Ray Project, which is the founding project of the Manta Trust, a British-based conservation group, is based at the resort. A range of other projects are devoted to turtle rehabilitation, dolphin identification and coral propagation. For example, the Reefscapers project allows guests to attach dozens of live coral fragments to a sand-coated metal frame under the supervision of a marine biologist.

mantatrust.org/maldives

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