



GET THE SCOOP

Indulgence comes in many flavours in The Maldives

DENISE CULLEN

From the back deck, through the floor-to-ceiling glass walls of my overwater villa, I see my breakfast arrive. It's contained in a Moses basket big enough to fit a set of triplets and borne aloft by two Maldivian men who have sweat beading on their temples. After decorating the basket with hibiscus flowers, they place it into the plunge pool and give it the gentlest push. Groaning under the weight of a decadent spread of fresh fruit skewers, pastries, pancakes, yoghurt, juices, muesli, sushi, and cooked breakfasts for two, I'm surprised it even floats. I wade into the water and tuck in, aware that a hungry crowd that's just alighted on the outdoor showerhead has called for reinforcements.

I am staying at Outrigger Maldives Maafushivaru Resort, which occupies an island that's barely 350m long. Its small size lends an air of intimacy, and means guests can walk anywhere easily, with no bicycles or golf carts required.

Maafushivaru's blindingly bone-white beaches lead to a shallow lagoon and a reef teeming with fish, while the lush tropical vegetation at the island's heart is manicured every morning. Rise early enough and you'll see staff members raking the sand and trimming the foliage with what appear to be scissors.

Twin piers lead out to 56 overwater villas, many with private plunge pools. There are also 25 beach villas, both with and without pools. The resort was completely rebuilt by its then owners, Universal Resorts, in 2020. After purchasing the property in 2022, Outrigger gave it a further refurbishment, adding hot tubs to 11 of the overwater villas, revamping the now five restaurants, upgrading the coffee shop, and adding an ice-cream parlour, which dispenses scoops freshly churned each day.

As the stresses of the real world slip away, it's to this ever-changing array of flavours that my obsessive focus turns. What will be in the line-up today? Chocolate ice cream or lychee sorbet? Vanilla or coconut? Pistachio or peach? Toddling back to my room with a loaded waffle cone becomes a nightly ritual.

Though Outrigger's reputation for luxury without pretension means it is generally positioned as upscale, rather than ultra-luxury, the brand goes all-out with its Maafushivaru property. My overwater villa with private pool offers 151sqm of open-plan design, with a kingsize bed adorned on arrival with a traditional greeting spelled out using palm fronds. There's a bar area beside the front door, banquette seating, and a small desk and chair for those unable to completely leave work behind. The white marble bathroom sprawls over an area as big as the sleeping space, and is anchored by a deep bathtub, rain shower, and twin vanity units.

Outside is a spacious sun-bleached timber deck with a day bed and sun loungers, in which I nap, journal and daydream in between dips in the plunge pool. Beyond that is a set of steps leading directly into the lagoon and a view of the private island of Lonubo.

On my last day, I join the resort's "whale shark quest", a four-hour expedition to swim alongside the largest fish in the sea, which can grow up to 20m long. Marine biologist Sanya Shete delivers a briefing before members of our group, kitted out with snorkelling masks and fins, set off on the 22-seat Sea Explorer.



Floating breakfast at Outrigger Maldives Maafushivaru Resort, above

IN THE KNOW

Outrigger Maldives Maafushivaru Resort is 25 minutes by seaplane from Velana International Airport. Rooms from \$650 a night, twin-share. The whale shark quest is \$US195 (\$299) a person. Floating breakfasts for two cost \$US220.

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Despite whale sharks' gargantuan size, she explains, they feed mainly on plankton and small fish. And there are rules: no crowding, no flash photography, no touching. These behaviours stress the whale sharks, interrupting their feeding and their ability to regulate body temperature.

Sadly, she continues, these gentle giants are a critically endangered species, due to the trade in their meat, fins and oil, their accidental capture in nets, and being hit by boats. "When you see one, it's amazing, but also a little heartbreaking too," Shete admits.

We cruise for more than an hour before Naail Hassan, perched on top of the vessel, spots one. One by one, we leap into the water. "Go, go, go! Quick, quick, quick! Swim, swim, swim!" I can't see who is shouting.

Hassan, a Maldivian man who I'm sure is part fish, grabs my hand. "Swim with me," he says. We cut through the churning water amid a frenzy of fins and GoPros and flailing arms. He somehow manoeuvres me into a prime position to the right of the whale shark and everything, including time, slows down.

For a precious few seconds, I'm mesmerised by the beast's sinuous movement through the ocean. Ripples reflect off its skin, which is marked with a pattern of spots and stripes as unique as any human fingerprints. It's a moment of awe and wonder.

After lunch, I adjourn to one of five treatment rooms at the Navasana Spa for a relaxation massage. My Tibetan therapist is tiny in stature but exceptionally strong, coaxing the knots out of my shoulders and massaging arnica gel into an old knee injury that she's intuited without me mentioning it.

Later, as I gaze out over the ocean, my mind returns to mull the important questions of the day. Raspberry or rum and raisin? Lemon or lavender? Caramel or chocolate chip?

Denise Cullen was a guest of Outrigger Maldives Maafushivaru Resort.

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