

Kate Morfoot, leading travel writer and founder of www.lovetoeattotravel.com, island hops in the Maldives and discovers paradise and the underwater world.

Magical Maldives

BE ASSURED the Maldives are utterly stunning. It's hardly surprising with it boasting the best beaches in the world, a beautiful year-round climate, warm crystal-clear sea and an enthralling rich and diverse underwater world. The sand really is white and powdery, the sea really is the colour of emeralds. It's a destination of envy, a place where most people dream of taking a glorious holiday and it's the top destination of choice for a honeymoon.

The resorts which occupy the atolls pull out all the stops to give you fine service and the best possible time for your hard-earned cash. With over 133 resorts to choose from, how do you pick one over the other? Other than the price, what ticks the boxes to make the final decision on where to holiday when the resorts are all located in this perfect paradise destination?

I made the ten-hour direct flight from Gatwick with British Airways to the Maldives to find out how two resorts place themselves in the market and operate to offer you the holiday of a lifetime.

Noku Maldives

To get to Noku Maldives I took a seaplane from mainland Male. It's just a 45-minute flight with TMA (Trans Maldivian Airways) from the international airport to Noku, situated on Kuda Funafaru in Noonu atoll. In my view this is an incredibly glamorous way to island hop and it gives you a superb birds eye view of the atolls below.

I describe Noku Maldives as a luxury boutique resort on an island sanctuary of calm. It's a perfect resort for those who want to be peaceful and relax. Expect nothing apart from luxury on this barefoot island. 'Take your time, no rush' is their motto. It didn't take me long to wind down from the journey as I had a wonderful lunch by the sea overlooking the ever-varying blue hues of the Indian Ocean.

The menu is changed daily and caters for all dietary requirements. Taking into consideration that the island is in the middle of nowhere, it is undoubtedly world-class restaurant quality. The breakfasts were incredible, as were the descriptions about your options, which also changed daily!

For drinks; 'Breakfast without coffee and juice is like a day without the sky and ocean.' Options for bread; 'Love and baking cannot be hurried.' For granola; 'Flakes of pleasure.' Even the menu became a simple pleasure of what Chef Tarique had thought of today.

It's fresh and interesting and many of the

dishes have Maldivian and Asian flavours and influences. Fresh fish is caught daily so depending on the catch you can enjoy tuna, reef fish or snapper. At this resort there's only table service, perfect for those who dislike buffets. Noku didn't disappoint with diverse food choices and quality of fresh ingredients. Both Palms Restaurant and their waterside 'dining under the stars' 'Thari' Restaurant were excellent, the menus were tasty with food influences representing their portfolio of hotels which include Thailand and of course, the Maldives.

Noku Maldives has 30 over-water villas and 20 private beach villas. My beach villa was beautifully appointed with high ceilings and spacious rooms just steps from the white sandy beach. The super-sized king bed was situated opposite the French doors, which offered both a view of, and access to via a short walk to, the sea. The roll top bath with luxury sea salts accompanied an indoor shower and outdoor rain shower with access outside to the sun deck with sun loungers, an outdoor table and a hammock. The villas have all been created with the utmost privacy in mind and I was pleased not to have a TV to interrupt the peacefulness I had come to treasure. The fridge is stocked daily with fresh juices and milk in attractive glass bottles and homemade breadfruit crisps.

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The island is focussed on being plastic free; no plastic bags, straws or bottles to be seen. They are also active with its coral growing programme and buy produce where possible from the local farm islands.

Things to do? Apart from relaxing by the infinity pool or on the pristine beach, there's the Sub Oceanic at Noku Maldives. Noku's five-star PADI dive center has a friendly and professional team boasting brand new scuba equipment. It has an excellent dive boat 'dhoni' to take you out to the best diving locations in the area. I took my Aqualung scuba diving kit, but it's not necessary unless you like having your own gear, because most resorts hire top diving equipment.

The resort location in Noonu atoll is right in the middle of a thriving marine eco-system which is surrounded by rich and beautiful house reefs. Here you will find their coral garden project where they are planting coral to create additional habitat for the underwater life and eco-system.

I explored some fascinating dive sites in my quest to become an Advanced Open Water PADI diver. In addition I completed my knowledge development back home online via PADI eLearning*. I then went on to complete five dives with my PADI Instructor at Noku.

One site is called 'Shark Point' which didn't fail to deliver on tremendous shark spotting! On my dive at Orimas Thila, I saw many white tipped reef sharks, sea turtles, shoals of trumpet fish and many colourful fish and corals.

At Bodurah Gaa Giri we found sleeping nurse sharks, sting rays in caves, shrimps and families of lionfish, not to mention snapping moray eels! On another dive I was fortunate enough to scuba with dolphins and say hello to a passing turtle at a depth of 17m and view spotted eagle rays.

The diving visibility is excellent and there's an abundance of underwater life. The house reef beyond the sunset water villas is also excellent for snorkelling. Paddle boarding and kayaking is available to explore the island shores as well as catamaran sailing, fishing or kite flying. Sunset and dolphin cruises are offered as well as an island excursion. With average sea temperatures of around a warm 26 degrees, it's fantastic to enjoy the sea and lovely sunshine.

Noku hosts fish feeding evenings, attracting many fish as well as juvenile reef sharks, while serving tea and homemade treats. There are also movie nights and traditional dancing and music evenings.

There's also daily morning yoga in the Spa Alcove overlooking the sea, a well-equipped gym for working off the excess food and a more tempting Noku Spa, where you can truly relax and unwind with four professional treatments, with indoor and outdoor showers, a swimming pool, together with wonderful lotions and potions to really help you switch off.

What can you expect from Noku Maldives? Five-star personal service, space, tranquillity, luxury, privacy, safety, nature and above all, deliciously fresh food served with a smile in true paradise.



Reethi Faru Resort

The Maldives are made up of an archipelago of 1,192 islands set in 26 natural atolls so expect to have to travel to get to your resort either by speedboat, a seaplane or a charter flight. To get to my next destination at Reethi Faru, I took a 20-minute domestic flight from mainland Male to Dharavandhoo with Flyme, and from there a 40-minute speed boat ride where you are welcomed by happy staff who kindly gave me a traditional Maldivian necklace.

Reethi Faru Resort is a newly opened resort located on the island of Filaidhoo

underwater world as well as the natural landscape. With that in mind, their vision has been to create a resort, that leads the way in sustainability while combining the highest levels of attention to creating the place to holiday for fun, romance, seclusion and privacy.

I stayed in a luxurious water villa and enjoyed very much waking up to the view of the Indian Ocean. It was beautifully appointed and spacious with walls decorated with traditional Maldivian artwork. The king size bed was placed overlooking the view to the sea; also you have a choice of a large bath, an indoor or outdoor shower. The mini bar is stocked daily with drinks. The outdoor space has two decks, one shady area with sunbeds and another level nearer the sea for sunbathing. Sitting out on the sun deck watching the sunset was something I never get bored of. My neighbours spotted a pod of dolphins from their water villa, a memory to treasure from their honeymoon they will never forget.

Reethi Faru prides itself on being a guardian of the island and a leader in sustainability. With the urgent need to care for our environment, the Maldives is under severe threat by global warming.

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in Raa atoll. It has a wonderful choice of accommodation including 20 garden villas, deluxe beach villas (some with Jacuzzis and pools) and deluxe water villas and suites. Reethi was designed to utilise and coexist with the natural surroundings.

It is a stunning tropical eco-resort with a clear and determined focus on sustainability and nurturing its precious natural environment that bans plastic straws, bottles and bags. It's hard to believe the resort has only been open for 18 months, but great care was given to building around the trees and nature that existed, also taking care not to disturb the





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For more information
 about the Maldives: www.maldives.com

In the event that seawater levels will rise due to the warming of the atmosphere, these atolls, that are at no more than about two meters above sea level, will be most vulnerable. The mean altitude above sea level is 1.5 meters, the lowest in the world, the highest point at Vilingili island on Addu atoll is only 2.4 meters above sea level. Saying no to plastic is one positive thing, however, Reethi Faru Resort goes many steps further and will pave the way by setting a leading example for more resorts to do the same.

Not only leaders for their environmental efforts, but also for their activities, Reethi Faru has been awarded prizes for its water sports centre and is one of the top ten in Asia. They have an incredible set up offering so much including dolphin and sunset safaris, island visits, new sea bobs, fly-high jet packs, jet skiing, parasailing, tornado sofa and banana experiences, paddle boarding and sailing. Enquiring how jet skiing fit with their environment philosophy, I was informed that the jet skis are the best in the market for low fuel emissions and they are only used over certain areas of the sea away from the coral reefs.

Scuba diving in the Maldives is one of the best locations in the world to see sea turtles, sharks and parrot fish. It's also known as a Manta hot spot.

Sea Explorer runs the PADI dive centre; I experienced some excellent dive sites at Aarah Bodo Thila, Lhohi Island and Saddle. All scuba diving centres require the correct travel insurance, I always use www.insureandgo.com which includes scuba diving risks on the policy.

This boutique resort plays host to visitors who want seclusion. The island, although at 98% occupancy never feels overly busy. The infinity pool has space for sunbathing, and there's secluded areas on the wonderful sandy beach. The thatched bars along the beach are convenient to pop into for drinks and snacks, also at the main bar where you will find shade and evening entertainment.

There's plenty of dining options where you are spoilt for choice between the six restaurants and bars. The resort's main restaurant Vakaru serves buffet-style meals, or you can opt for other choices depending on your appetite. For example the over-water restaurant offers 24 hr dining or you

can opt for a la carte dining in Dhiyavaru and the romantic open-air Reethi Grill restaurant lit up by candles on the beach.

For those not on the inclusive option, the restaurant menus are reasonably priced; this in my experience is unusual for islands in the Maldives, which are highly priced due to having to import most goods. I particularly liked the Maldivian food corner where you could try dishes including Maldivian tuna curry and traditional roshi flat bread.

Reethi Faru resort captures the essence of a luxury eco tropical hideaway. It has so much to offer the active holidaymaker as well as those of us who prefer a relaxing and romantic high end beach holiday, with picture-perfect sandy white beaches draped with palm trees set against the crystal clear emerald coloured ocean.



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