



TRAVEL // MALDIVES

## HEAVEN, MEET EARTH

She's read the stories, seen the photos, but nothing quite prepared **VICKY SMITH** for how picture perfect the Maldives is. Prepare to be very jealous...

**A**S MORNING SHOWERS go, it was clear this was going to be one to remember. Standing under steamy jets of hot water in a beautiful, mosaic-lined wet room large enough to accommodate its own bench seating and at least three other people besides myself, I glanced down and saw an inky-black stingray glide serenely through the rippling turquoise lagoon beneath my feet. Moments later, a shoal of electric-blue fish hurried along after it, quick (but not too quick) on its tail, before a robust little turtle came bobbing along leisurely in their wake.

It was 6am in the Maldives and even though the sun was yet to fully rise, this breathtaking Indian Ocean country and its rather astonishing array of underwater residents were already providing the most dazzling early morning wake-up I'd ever experienced - with a little help from my snazzy glass-bottomed shower.

My journey to this tropical paradise had started in the much less glamorous surroundings, on a seven-hour flight from Heathrow to Qatar, a four-and-a-half hour flight to the Maldivian capital Malé, then a seaplane ride from there. As a first timer on something that floats but also flies, I'd found the seaplane experience somewhat educational (to say the least), but as a spectacular showreel of turquoise-rimmed coral islands, golden sandbanks and sapphire ocean began to play out 3,500ft beneath us as the plane reached altitude, the jaw-rattling vibrations and noisy whirl of its chuggy propellers quickly faded away.

And that's not the only thing that slipped to the back of my mind shortly after arriving. Such is the captivating nature of the scenery in the Maldives, I had instantly found it tricky to spare a thought for anywhere else at all - or, rather, I simply did not care to.

Not that I was surprised by any of this. I'd seen all the photographs on Instagram and daydreamed about what it must be like to dip a toe into water that clear, but until I saw it with my own eyes, I'm not sure I believed it would really look so idyllic in real life. As I stepped onto the long wooden welcome jetty at my first port of call - Niyama Private Islands resort - and took in the jade water and bright-white sand encircling its deep green, jungle-filled heart, it quickly became clear that it was time to believe the hype.

But it's not just the way it looks that makes the Maldives an exceptional place to visit. I mean yes, it is undoubtedly one of the most naturally beautiful places I've ever seen - and I'd challenge anyone to find otherwise - but what I wasn't expecting to discover was that there's so much stuff to actually do. I'd always thought of it as a 'fly-and-flop' destination, reserved mainly for honeymooners on a →

ISLANDS IN THE SUN: Niyama Private Islands resort is split into twin islands, aptly named Play and Chill.

→ slow-paced, once-in-a-lifetime holiday. But while a trip to the Maldives is indeed a bucket-list activity in its own right, it's actually possible to tick a hell of a lot more off that list while you're there.

Take Niyama. This picture-perfect island playground offers a selection of experiences so extensive, you could come for a month and still fill every moment. It's a resort of two halves – islands literally named Chill and Play – and provides ample opportunity to do a huge amount of both. While Chill island offers the spa treatments, serenity and sunbathing you may already associate with a trip to this part of the world, Play is where things go up a gear, with dramatic dining destinations lit by fire torches, bonkers restaurants where you can dine in a treehouse or watch heart-in-your-mouth displays of flame-fuelled teppanyaki cookery, and watersports including jetskiing, wakeboarding and parasailing.

Thanks to the fact that there's a wave that breaks on one of its many picturesque reef-lined shores, Niyama also happens to be one of the best places to learn to surf in the Maldives. For the uninitiated (me), a session with the in-house instructor, Nathan, was a fantastic introduction to this notoriously tricky activity, thanks to a winning combination of his expert knowledge and the unbelievably gorgeous setting. If you really find you have natural talent for it – or arrive with some experience under your belt already – the team will even take you out on an adventure to explore other surf spots nearby.

Niyama also has its own in-house marine biologist, Philippa, who guided us through a coral planting session. With the ocean such an integral part of life there, it's to be expected that conservation is enormously important to those who live and work in the Maldives, and this activity was an effective way to ensure it matters to visitors, too. The efforts those at the resort – and beyond – go to preserve the health of the water and its occupants is impressive, and as we tied young coral to metal frames before swimming down to the seabed to see it 'planted' in a sandy nursery, it was mind boggling to think of it forming part of the precious underwater ecosystem for many years to come.

That underwater ecosystem is, of course,



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SEA & STARS: [top] SEA restaurant at Anantara Kihavah; [left] the house reef; [right] Anantara's observatory.

central to everything in the Maldives. It's a way of life, provides spectacular seafood – which was abundant on every menu, including breakfast – and, of course, lures plenty of visitors too. A snorkelling session at my next port of call – Anantara Kihavah, a super-luxury, 80-villa resort in the Baa Atoll UNESCO Biosphere Reserve – provided further insight into just how special it really is.

Situated a couple of minutes' swim from the resort's golden shores, Kihavah's house reef has a rep as one of the finest in the Maldives, and from the moment I dipped my snorkel-clad head under the water, I was transfixed. To the right of me, a multicoloured coral reef teemed with sea life of every size, shade and shape imaginable, and on the left loomed a sharp drop into the inky depths of the ocean beyond. Swimming along was like finding myself in the centre of a technicolour disco ball, with the sun illuminating the fish as they darted around, glittering and confetti-like, in all directions.

Despite the frenetic pace of the seafloor, the tranquillity of the reef was hypnotising, and a leisurely half an hour glide was the perfect way to unwind. Hours could have passed, and I wouldn't have noticed, such was the incredible variety of creatures and coral to gawp at. For those wishing to explore further, trips to swim with manta rays are also available – and you can expect to spot a few sharks, too.

Back on dry land, the sights more than lived up to the wonderworld beneath the waves, with bright pink, purple and yellow orchids dangling from towering palm trees, large wooden pavilions housing chic bars and lounge areas, stylish al fresco restaurants serving the freshest, finest food – ranging from Indian-style curries to ceviche, salads and pastas – and bright-white, powder-soft sand giving way to azure-tinted shallows.

Positioned over those shallows at one end of the island was my home for the duration of my stay – a huge, timber-cladded overwater villa. These striking structures have become →



## What I wasn't expecting to discover here was that there's so much stuff to actually do

→ a somewhat ubiquitous part of the Maldives experience, and the ones at Kihavah showed me exactly why. Featuring the likes of wraparound terraces, infinity pools, swings, the aforementioned glass-bottomed showers and little ladders providing direct access to the sparkling water below, these pads couldn't be more at one with their surroundings. Such is their lure, the temptation to spend all day, every day cosseted in my villa was strong – and, given the proximity to the lagoon and its abundance of sea life, I wouldn't have been missing out if I had – but to do so would have meant foregoing the many activities on offer in this slice of paradise.

First stop, the spa. The treatment rooms here are also situated over the water, meaning that when you're lying face down enjoying a heavenly ayurvedic massage, you can gaze straight into the ocean thanks to a square of glass built into the floor. If 'improving' treatments are more your thing, there's the option to go full-on wellness break with epigenetic testing, a non-invasive procedure that uses a strand of your hair to provide a comprehensive rundown on how you can go about optimising your health (my top tip: start when you get home). And for those feeling energetic, there are first-rate tennis facilities to enjoy. But again, this is no regular on-court experience – time it right and you can book in to play with a pro.

At every turn, there was something new to do, from exploring the island's hidden corners

### NIYAMA PRIVATE ISLANDS

Beach pool villa for two adults starting from £1,405 (high season) on a half-board basis up to £2,305 (high season) for all inclusive. All prices include taxes. NIYAMA.COM

### ANANTARA KIHAVAH VILLAS MALDIVES

Beach pool villa for two adults starting from \$1,850 per night (high season). Price includes 23% taxes and services, complimentary daily half board with dinner and breakfast. ANANTARA.COM



**SURF'S UP.** Niyama is one of the best – and only – places to learn to surf in the Maldives. You can just text the resort's surf manager to provide you with the latest condition updates for the multiple world-class reefbreaks.

on a bike painted the exact colour of the ocean to kayaking, paddle boarding, cookery classes, energising sunrise yoga, star-lit barbecues on the beach, and champagne breakfasts in the award-winning underwater restaurant where floor-to-ceiling glass windows made me feel as though I was dining on the seabed – albeit with dry hair and a glass of champagne in my hand. But if I'd thought all this was the pinnacle of bucket-list experiences, I was wrong, because a trip to Kihavah's overwater observatory for a late-night private stargazing session was about to up the stakes.

The session took place at the resort's rooftop bar, where I sat gazing up at the Milky Way – which looked and felt startlingly close – while Kihavah's 'sky guru' pointed out the constellations using a laser pen that shot up into the endless dark like a light sabre. He then led the way into the resort's observatory and invited me to look through a huge telescope – the most powerful in the Maldives – which revealed a startlingly clear image of Saturn at the end. While by this point, I shouldn't have been surprised that this experience felt a little unbelievable, it was a moment that truly took my breath away.

Amateur astrologer status confirmed, there didn't seem much left to tick off the inventory of must-do lifetime experiences, until I was making my way back to the villa and a slow-moving shadow caught my eye in the lagoon below. I stopped to take a look and was informed by Kihava's head villa host Zaheen that what we were seeing was a "guitar shark" (also known as a shark ray, or guitarfish) – and to spot one here was such a rare occurrence that even he was taken aback. We stood in the perfect still of the balmy night

as the precious creature swam gracefully through the calm shallows, blissfully unaware of the frenzied scene it was causing among the guests on the walkway above.

By this point, I felt like the Maldives was just teasing me with its seemingly never-ending array of once-in-a-lifetime experiences. But of course, the real thrill about it all was the knowledge that there's always the option to come back. I'll just need to add a few more things onto the bucket list. ■



GARDEN OF EDEN: [top] The Chef's Garden at Niyama; [above] a garden massage at Niyama's blissful spa.