



No Shoes, No News

A Six Senses Resort experience is all about rejuvenation amid pristine nature. Rebecca Walker travels to the Maldives for a Robinson Crusoe-style mini break.



There are not enough adjectives in the English language to aptly describe the Maldives. At once strikingly picturesque, this corner of the earth is so saturated with natural beauty that one could be forgiven for feeling like you have stepped into a computer-generated television commercial. There are certain places in the world that make urban angst impossible or at least irrelevant, and none more so than these islands in the sun. Renowned worldwide for its beautiful white beaches and dazzling underwater coral gardens, the Maldives is the world's most idyllic tropical holiday destination.

Located 500 kilometres southwest of the southern tip of India, the Maldives consists of 26 natural atolls and about 1190 low-lying (none more than 2 metres above sea level) coral islands, of which only 200 are inhabited. Covered by lush tropical vegetation and palm trees, many of the uninhabited islands are mere sand spits or coral tips covered in shrubs surrounded by reefs enclosing shallow lagoons. Famed for its rare underwater beauty, it is said that the Maldives contain 75 percent of the world's reef species and has some of the best dive sites on the planet. Boasting a profusion of psychedelic colours in infinite shades of blue and turquoise, the abundance of underwater sea life and remarkable visibility of the water makes the Maldives a diver's delight.

Amid this earthly paradise lie two tropical islands owned and run by Six Senses Resorts. Built with the intention "to create innovative and enriching experiences in a sustainable environment," these five star retreats are the *crème-de-la-crème* of Maldivian travel. With a philosophy based around the creation of experiences rather than a product, the resort has an impeccable reputation for high standards that cater to all of the human senses. As described by Sonu Shivdasani, Six Senses Founder, "We create an overall experience that is absorbed by all the human senses and with each concept there is consistency and harmony between what is seen, touched, heard and smelt."





An exotic jungle retreat, Soneva Fushi gives the five-star rating a new meaning. After arriving by seaplane, guests are promptly urged to discard their shoes (Six Senses has a strict “no shoes, no news” policy) while being whisked to the shore via speedboat, all the while sipping juice from a fresh coconut. Upon arriving at shore, they are further welcomed by the resort staff (not a reception or computer in sight) and upon docking the feeling is that of a family reunion. Lionel Valla, Executive Assistant Manager proudly explains, “There are a lot of resorts in the Maldives but Fushi is more than just palm trees and white sand; the atmosphere here is very special and guests notice it straight away. We have an employee/guest ratio of 5:1 (most resorts offer a 2:1 ratio) which means every person arriving on the island is lavished with attention.”

Once escorted to their villa, guests are left to explore the island on foot or by bicycle, and there is certainly no lack of things to do. The lure of the crystal clear water means most people dive straight into the ocean equipped with flippers and snorkel. Guided by Fushi’s on-site Marine Biologist, group snorkeling tours expose the underwater-curious to a plethora of vibrant sea life. On an average dive multi-coloured reef fish, turtles, hermit crabs, stunning coral and the odd reef shark (harmless and only about 30 centimetres long) can be seen within arm’s reach.

Touring around the island by bicycle, it is easy to believe that you might be the only person staying at the resort. Gliding around past the island’s organic vegetable garden (the source of the restaurant’s fruit and vegetables) on the way to the “Paradiso Cinema” (Fushi’s outdoor movie theatre), sightings of chickens, lizards and rabbits are more common than fellow pedestrians. Even when all 60 huts are full to capacity (not to mention the 300 staff living on the island) the tree-covered bike lanes feel deserted. Valla smiles, “It’s quite amazing how quiet the island is even when every cabin is booked, that is part of our charm. It’s a very unpretentious place; everyone is understated here and it is definitely not the type of resort where you need to walk around in designer clothes!”

The most noticeable aspect of the resort is that it melds into the environment, and not the other way around. In fact, in the building of Soneva Fushi only two trees were cut down. “The environment is our number one priority here and we take every step to protect it,” says Valla. This is evident in each and every aspect of daily living on the island. Drinking water comes from the ocean before going through the island’s unique filtration system; the reef and underwater sea-life is closely monitored on a daily basis by the island’s marine biologist; and net fishing is strictly prohibited. Even the bike-racks are custom-made from recycled branches.

Out of sight, out of mind, and although equipped with the latest technical equipment, the island’s “no news” policy means each villa’s TV is discretely hidden from view. Without this distraction, there is only one thing to think about: food. The cuisine on the island is second-to-none and Soneva Fushi’s plentiful wine cellar (with over 6000 fine wines) is sure to keep any wine connoisseur satisfied. The international dining team prepares the freshest of ingredients into a stunning array of traditional Maldivian and international dishes, and if you don’t feel like leaving your villa your food will be brought to you. For those who suffer from food allergies, specially prepared dishes can be arranged, including freshly baked wheat and gluten free bread.



As well as the exceptional wildlife, food and atmosphere, Soneva Fushi offers a wide array of holistic treatments including a number of complimentary therapies including yoga classes, an Ayurveda consultation with Dr Vijay Kumar, the island’s on-site Doctor (who has more than 35 years of medical experience), and a Traditional Chinese Medicine consultation with Maureen Cromey (who has over 18 years of clinical practice).

After the sensory overload of Soneva Fushi, it is hard to imagine an island equal in standard and natural beauty, but indeed, one exists. Arriving at Soneva Gili is just as magical, and it is hard to believe that the entire resort was completely destroyed in the 2005 tsunami. Arriving at one of the island’s three piers, it is impossible not to be overwhelmed by the site of the resort’s 29 Gili villa suites, 8 Gili residences and 7 Gili ‘Crusoe’ Residences (freestanding villas) all on water stilts. Surrounded by a stunning aquamarine lagoon, the resort is truly a sight to behold.

Considerably smaller than Soneva Fushi, it is a short walk to each villa. Once there, guests are left to relax at their leisure and can sunbathe on the private and spacious over-water deck or lounge in the villa’s open-air lounge room. Transparent floor paneling allows guests to view the sea life below and a rooftop terrace is the perfect place to read. The interior design of each villa has an *au naturel* feel with tones that blend into the natural surroundings with gorgeous wooden furniture to match. Gili’s “Private Reserve”, the island’s ultimate retreat, is a sprawling villa which unfolds over 1,400 square metres, with five separate buildings including two master bedrooms plus guest accommodation, a private spa with steam room, sauna, massage pavilion, gym and extensive lounging areas.

An integral part of the Six Senses experience is its spas. Designed to complement the resort experience by offering pampering and healing therapies focused on health, relaxation, beauty, and stress relief, they are the icing on the cake of ultimate indulgence. Though options are countless, five separate general approaches are offered: massages, bodycare, beauty treatments, sensory journeys, and mind and body balancing - they all apply to the five senses and beyond, to the sixth sense.

Each Six Senses Spa features local specialties and signatures of the region, in addition to a wide variety of à la carte treatments detailed in the individual spa menu. “We take a very holistic approach to rejuvenation and nurture the mind body and spirit through a range of unique therapies. Although pampering is lovely, it is only one aspect of whole-body health and wellbeing. Physical symptoms are a reflection of emotional imbalances and at the spa we try to balance each area (mind, body, soul) which ultimately results in a greater sense of inner-peace for the client,” says Anna Garcia, Soneva Gili Spa Manager.

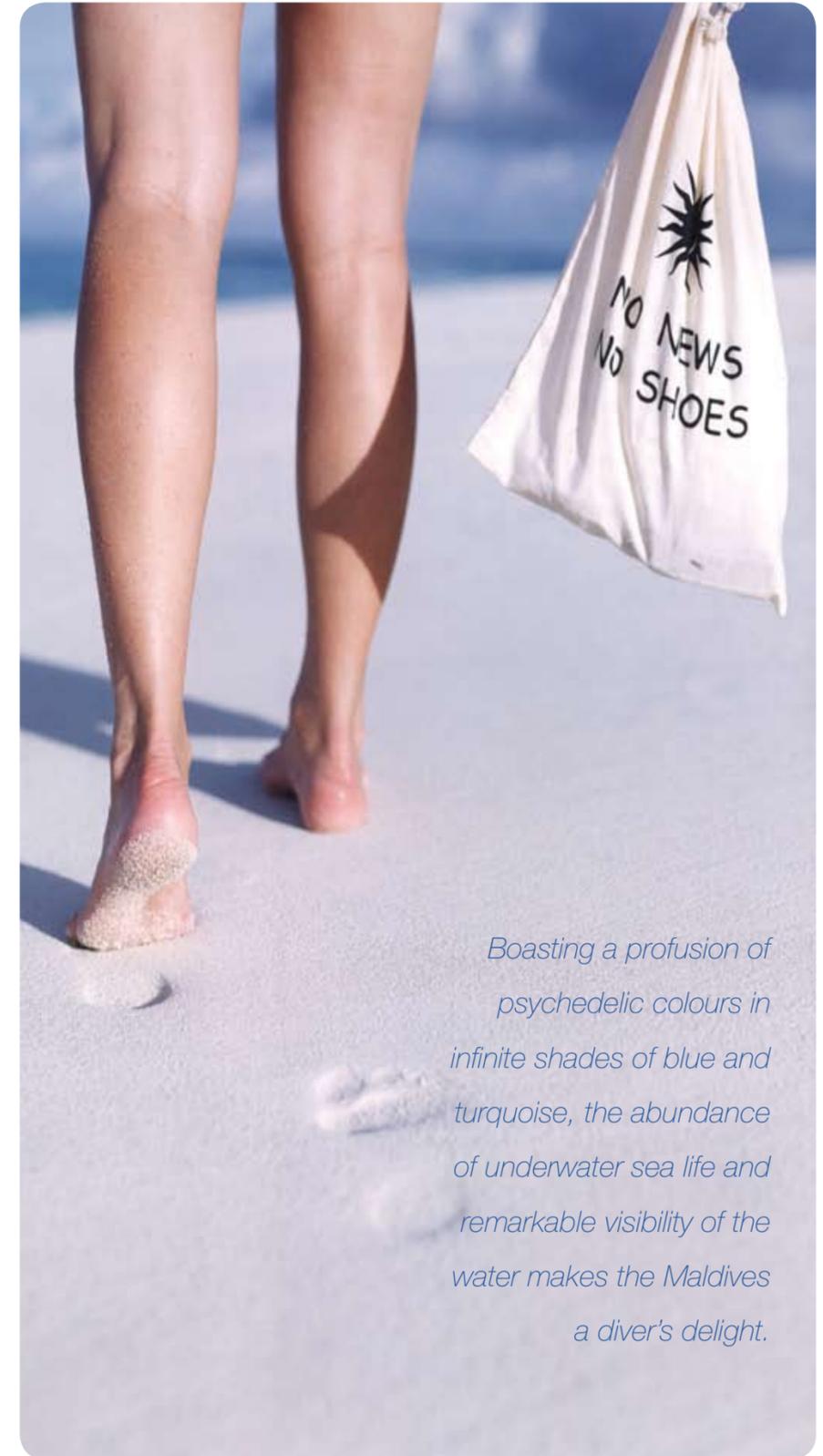
As well as the spa, guests can indulge in a number of exclusive services such as dinner for two on the resort’s private sandbank. Accessed by boat, this experience is as romantic as they come and guests can sit back and relax while a personal chef and waiter cater to their every whim. A way to lap up the setting sun is to take the sunset cruise for two in which a traditional Maldivian boat is equipped with a skipper, Champagne and canapés. Sailing around the reef at sunset in the Maldives is truly magical and is a perfect option for loved-up honeymooners.

Created with environmental awareness as a central core value, the resort has taken every precaution to sustain the natural ecosystem. Resort Manager Frank Wesselhoeft asserts, “All of the Six Senses Resorts share the same policy, we have an environmental conscience and preserve our natural surroundings as much as possible. Anything organic is extremely fashionable right now, but ours is a concept that extends beyond trends.”

Comparing Soneva Fushi and Soneva Gili is a futile exercise. Both are completely different islands which offer guests two perspectives of the Maldives. While Fushi nurtures jungle-style solitude and snorkeling bliss, Gili is based on and around rejuvenation and has more of a “resort” feel. “While Fushi is more rustic, Gili is more polished. Gili is smaller and less secluded, and I think of it as the more urban version of the two,” asserts Wesselhoeft. Both islands are stunning and offer an exemplary standard of service for guests. If you can’t relax at either of these islands, you can’t relax anywhere. ■

Soneva Fushi Resort & Six Senses Spa
www.sixsenses.com/soneva-fushi

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