

Closer to paradise

The perfect crescent of white sand dotted with bean bags and sun beds to sink in, shaded by thatched umbrellas, Maldives gives you a lesson in laziness. SUPRIYA SEHGAL lives the ultimate escapist fantasy

Your personal slice of beach



Sunset at sea



"MORE unfamiliar a place, better are the

chances to get in touch with yourself," I had read in an article recently. But here we were, knee-deep in routine and regimen of city-life, rapidly depleting the zest for anything reflective. Our growing affliction for living in a metro and the need for unplugging landed my sister and I in Maldives. We choose it as the landing ground for a week, to recharge from the concrete hive that is Delhi. A bounty of the sea and sun sounded like the perfect antidote to alarm clocks, traffic-choked streets and air-conditioned cubicles. While the sea is not an entirely unfamiliar slice of the holiday, water-based activities are. You see, Maldives is not quite the popular pick for non-swimmers. But in the hope of proving the adage right, we fly to the island anyway.

The low-lying coral islands of Maldives in the Indian Ocean are nothing short of paradise. On a map, the country looks like someone sprinkled the 1,000-odd islands onto a deep blue watery canvas. These are divided into 26 ringed atolls to give some identity to a cluster. Luxury resorts have colonised hundreds of these islands and make for a large part of the economy



Way to the water villas



Water villas at Olhuveli



of the country. Getting around the islands requires long ferry rides or shorter seaplane journeys, making hospitality an expensive affair. Most of the consumables are imported from various countries since the tropical weather and practically no land makes it impossible to grow anything here. The capital Male, though pint-sized, is the only commercial hub, complete with buildings, markets, offices and opportunities to meet regular Maldivians. Its densely packed streets are a complete contrast to the sparsely strewn, plush resort islands. For most travellers, the charm lies in bone-white beaches, shallow lagoons and reefs, where marine life roams in colossal numbers.

A profusion of brochures and blogs while researching had already etched the striking aquamarine colour of the water in our heads. Since photoshop reigns visual experience in print and the web, we were sceptical that the water would be truly that blue. So when we land and see the miles of emerald colour roll from where we stand at the airport, we are left with jaws dropped. Our boat bumps along the afternoon sea for an hour, before we are deposited at the jetty of our resort.

MOST resorts in Maldives have the same thread of aesthetic running through them — a long wooden jetty that is flung over the lagoon area to connect the main resort on the island, over-water villas in a semi circle, radiating from a wooden spine pathway and a buffet of infinity pools and beach villas with sandy courtyards. The homogenous design often adds to the confusion while booking a place. So we go with the most optimum budget for a holiday for two that includes staying right on the beach, affordable activities for me and an indulging spa for my sister. We decide to be unfussy vegetarians and find ample options. Having closed in on Olhuveli Resort & Spa after much internet rummaging is the most prudent thing. No traffic-trapped towns, no travel scams and hardly anyone else to share our slice of the beach.

As non-swimmers, the cool blue pool near our favourite bar and the infinity one are only used either to dip our feet or wade around in the shallowest portions. The frangipani-strewn spa



GETTING THERE

Air India and Spice Jet are the Indian air carriers among many options that connect major Indian cities to Male. Keep a lookout for deals on the newly-launched MEGA Maldives Airlines for relatively cheaper tickets. From the airport, take a public ferry or opt for the private boats organised by island resorts or seaplanes to the particular atoll you are headed to.

WHERE TO STAY

Olhuveli Beach & Spa Resort situated in South Male Atoll, Madu. Rooms start from \$200. For more information log in at www.olhuvelimaldives.com

TOP TIP

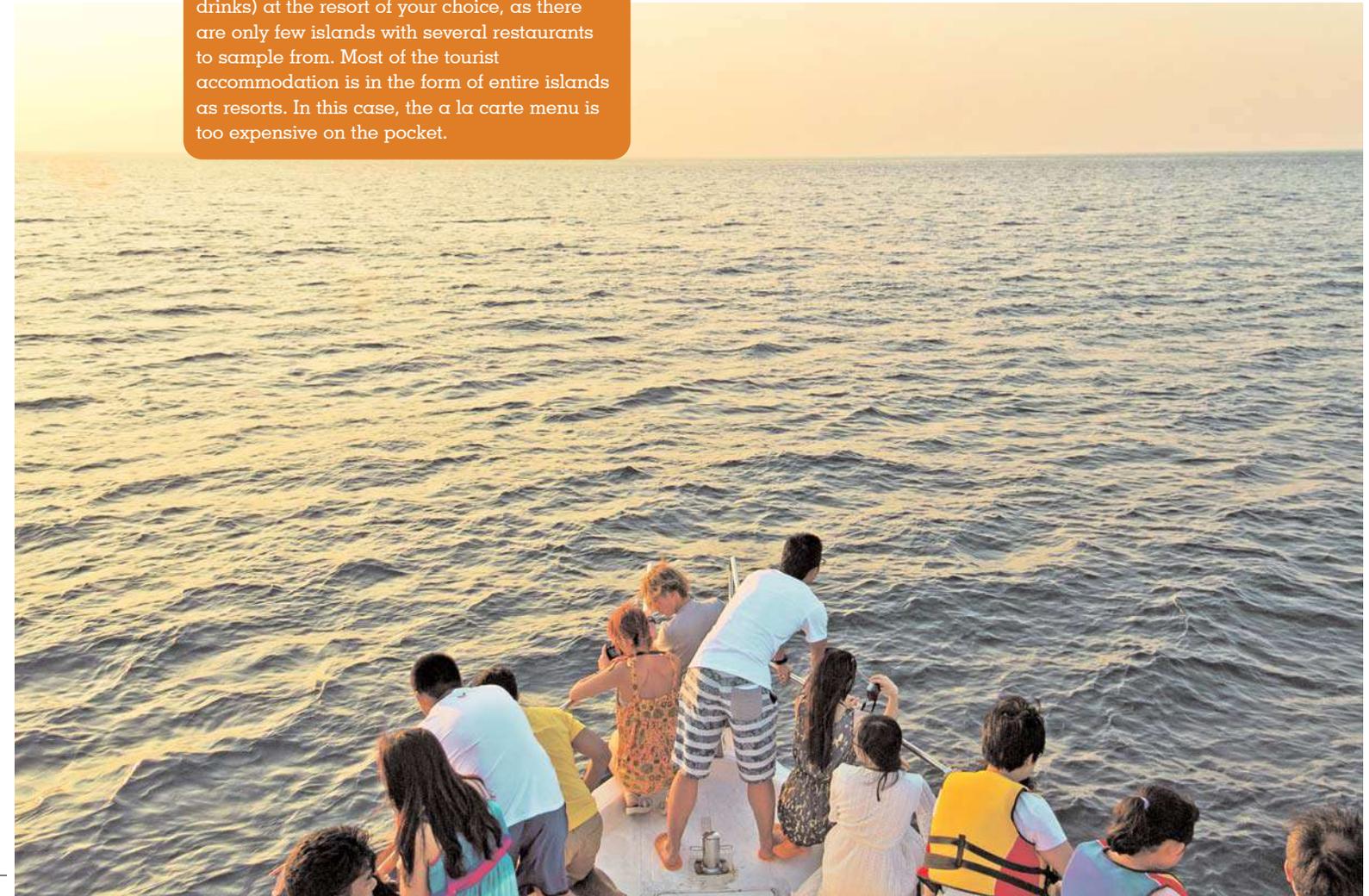
Opt for full board packages (inclusive of drinks) at the resort of your choice, as there are only few islands with several restaurants to sample from. Most of the tourist accommodation is in the form of entire islands as resorts. In this case, the a la carte menu is too expensive on the pocket.

could lure only one of us for oily afternoons of kneading and twisting. Some enjoy that kind of thing, I find it torturous. My eyes are set on the profoundly beautiful water and the hope to get over the nervousness and try some activities.

MALDIVIAN

waters are known for an entire forest of coral reefs, where the marine life is definitely more than your average aquarium. The diving school of Olhuveli is at the head of the jetty where we had landed. One afternoon, unsure of whether I would actually sign up for snorkelling or diving, I go to survey what the school has to offer. Rosa, the senior Portuguese instructor, immediately senses the jitters and casually chats about her life at Olhuveli and the incredible sea creatures of the ocean. Her golden-tanned face and sinewy legs are a dead giveaway of her familiarity with water. In a matter of minutes, I'm sold on a short dolphin watching trip and perhaps a snorkelling outing in the warm waters.

Looking over the boat to spot dolphins





At the edge of the sea

That evening, with a handful of other guests, we head out to the dolphin watching spot, a few kilometres from the resort. While there is no assigned sections for schools but regular outings at sea make the instructors fairly sure of where the dolphins might be roaming. It has been an hour at sea, wine glasses and fruit-on-stick already consumed, and the group is getting angsty. It is nearly sunset and the visibility would soon be limited. Just as we turn the boat to head back, the crew spots a flip in the ocean and starts clapping loudly. In minutes, we are racing a large school of friendly dolphins, which apparently loves getting encouraged with the clapping. Launching themselves in unison for about 15 minutes, the playful lot swim away just as swiftly as they had arrived.

AFTER a heartening flavour of the ocean treasures, the snorkelling time is set up for the next afternoon. Again, packed in a boat, we are off with a clutch of other travellers. The boat is anchored mid-sea, and everyone gets into life jackets and masks. When the time comes to jump aboard, I get cold feet. Prodded

by the driver of the boat, Jamil, who eventually doubles up as my personal chaperon in the sea, I jump. After a few seconds of nervousness fade away, my eyes focus on the floridly impressive corals. The beauty of what lies below the glassy waters is betrayed by the pictures we find on the internet. Scores of fish circle us, unfettered and busy dashing in and out of their coral homes, some even meeting our eyes directly. I had never expected the burst of unimaginable colours that lay below the surface. Jamil, a veteran, asks me to lock fingers with him and go in search for a turtle. Confident in his swimming abilities and my latching on ones, we go far enough for the boat to look like a white spec.

No turtle in sight, Jamil points back to the boat and I nod underwater. I'm happy being pulled along with him all the while keeping my eyes peeled for other sea creatures. That's when he taps on my shoulder. On our left is a large, lone turtle, taking in the last rays of the sun by swimming close to the surface. It comes close enough, as if to get a peek of who is visiting its territory, and then swerves away, perhaps to avoid a traffic jam. Little did the turtle know that this kind of traffic jam is what we had come to experience.