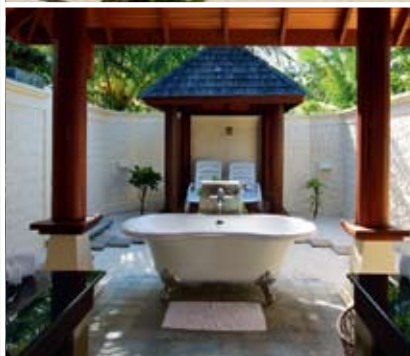


Rest and relax,
clockwise from above:
Olhuveli resort; villas
over the water; bedtime
luxury; outdoor bathing



Maldives

These days there's much more to the Maldives than canoodling couples, says Leo Bear.

After years of hearing about this chain of dreamlike islands where you sleep in thatched villas on stilts and swim in lagoons the temperature of bath water, I wonder how the Maldives can possibly live up to my expectations.

Of the 1,190 islets that make up the country, 200 are inhabited, of which about 97 are resorts. My first stop is Olhuveli Beach and Spa resort (www.olhuveli.com) in the South Malé Atoll, 50 minutes by speedboat from Malé, the capital and main island. This is a big resort that's perfect for families, groups of friends and teenagers – there's even a private karaoke room.

I check into my over-water villa, which has a generous sitting area and deck with steps leading down into the lagoon. After a cooling dip, I head off to the beach for hours of sun-lazing. After all, that's all you do in the Maldives, right? Wrong. There are hundreds of exciting activities on offer, such as windsurfing, wake boarding, water skiing, kite surfing and diving, plus endless excursions here, there and everywhere. I ditch my sunbathing plan and join a catamaran expedition led by a British skipper called Richard. After just 10 minutes, Richard jumps up and points out a frisky manta ray nudging up to the hull. The ray gives us a few cheeky flaps then loses interest and heads off again.

Later on, I sign up for a 'catch it and cook it' fishing excursion in a traditional *dhoni*. Our catch is impressive: one large red mullet, one emperor fish and a dozen other little nippers. On dry sand, I help scale the fish with guidance from Hassan Didi, our Maldivian chef. We

marinate them with garlic, ginger, chilli and lime juice, then skewer them with palm leaves and roast them on an open fire. Fish has never tasted better.

I'm eating incredibly well in the Maldives, and the staff couldn't be warmer or more helpful. The only downside of this resort is that its restaurants lack atmosphere, with many empty tables due to the credit crunch.

The second leg of my trip takes me to Vilu Reef Beach and Spa resort (www.vilureefmaldives.com), a smaller, older resort with shell-loads of charm – ideal for couples and families who enjoy peace and quiet and aren't so interested in mod-cons. The island is 35 minutes by seaplane from Malé on South Nilandhe Atoll and, looking down on it, there's little sign of civilisation. Minutes after landing, I'm swimming up to the resort's house reef to mingle with eagle rays, parrot fish and reef sharks.

Later, I take a snorkelling trip, tuck in to a five-course beach barbecue on a deserted island and, best of all, cruise over to a local island called Bandidhoo. Little has changed on this tiny island in 300 years: locals tinker with fish hooks or keep cool in chair swings suspended from palm trees; gardens burst with gourds and guavas, and all around frangipani, bougainvillea and passionfruit vines add splashes of colour. Our guide points out some curious-looking houses made from coral. There are no cars and, standing at the crossroads of Bandidhoo's two main streets, you can see the ocean at all four ends.

On my last morning, I finally spend three hours lazing on the beach, absorbing every ray of the bone-warming 31-degree heat. I make a mental note to remember how it feels when I'm trudging through the rain in London.

Leo Bear was hosted by Sun Hotels & Resorts ▶



Getting there

Trailfinders (0845 050 5871; www.trailfinders.com) has seven nights at **Olhuveli Beach & Spa Resort** (www.olhuveli.com) from £1,679 per person or **Vilu Reef Beach and Spa Resort**, above (www.vilureefmaldives.com), from £1,699 per person. Valid for selected departures from 1 November–8 December, including return flights from Gatwick, half-board accommodation, speedboat or seaplane transfers, taxes and surcharges.