



# THE BEAUTY BENEATH

Pristine beaches, tropical enclaves, five-star dining and an endless sky that journeys from turquoise to the star-filled night: the Maldives are all its reputation suggests. And that's before you even grab a snorkel.

Words KIRSTEN ROWLINGSON

**T**HERE'S A POPULAR notion with guides when on safari in Africa — don't go chasing the animals, just find a waterhole and stay put. Eventually, all the animals will pass by. It's an idea that doesn't seem out of context while relaxing in a hammock slung over the lagoon at Anantara Kihavah resort on the island of Kihavah Huravalhi in the Maldives. At first, tiny fish leap like a silvery wave out of the sea, chased by a flashing, iridescent blue fish. A stingray glides smoothly past, then another school of fish starts jumping through the water, followed by a large dark shape I'm too scared to get too close to. Next on this aquatic superhighway, a turtle swims past. I had originally been planning on relaxing and finishing my book here, but each new sighting has me jumping back into the water to check out the sea life close up. Relaxing can certainly be hard work when you're in the Maldives.

For a tiny nation of just over 430,000 souls stretched across 1200 islands, only 200 of those being inhabited, the legend of the Maldives as an idyllic beach holiday spot looms large. And with good reason — nature just seems to have dialled up the colour spectrum here. These islands are everything you've read about, and more. The waters surrounding the white sand-ringed islands come in every shade of blue imaginable, from crystal clear to turquoise to inky navy. Beneath the water more wonders await.

The resort's house reef can be reached via a short swim straight off the island's palm-fringed shore. Float over the reef's gentle slopes, covered in soft yellow corals that sway in the tides, and watch tiny swarms of electric-yellow fish surround spiky red branches, while giant clams, with their glowing blue markings, sit like a sheer wall in the dark blue waters below. As you follow the reef, the gradient gets steeper and the parade of colour thicker. Flashes of bright orange and blue fish, interspersed with black and white striped crowds, flicker past your goggles, then angel fish, trigger fish, parrot fish... each seemingly trying to outdo the other in their

bright attire. Take the swim slowly and again, find a place to just hover. Each minute will bring another scene-stealing fishy encounter more flamboyant than any Mardi Gras parade.

If you happen to be a diver, you can treat yourself to an even more audacious show at the Golden Wall. Named for the swaying yellow coral that covers its face, a dive here is on many people's bucket lists. "The variation we have on this reef is so surprising," says Flora Blackett, Anantara's resident marine biologist. "I've seen everything from a manta ray to the smallest little decorator crabs. We regularly see turtles, eagle rays, rock lobsters, moray eels, cleaner shrimp, stingrays and a beautiful array of colourful soft corals."

While the reefs are spectacular and easy to reach, a trophy experience for many visitors to this part of the Maldives is spotting the manta rays. And Anantara Kihavah is perfectly located to give guests access to some of the best manta ray experiences in the world. North of Malé is the Baa Atoll. Both smaller and less touristed than nearby Ari Atoll, it was proclaimed a UNESCO marine protected biosphere reserve in 2011. ➤

**THIS IMAGE** Anantara Kihavah's SKY bar and observatory, the country's only overwater observatory. **OPENER** Take a dive and inspect the colourful sea life.

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## STAY

Lying north of the Maldivian capital of Malé, **Anantara Kihavah** is on the island of Kihavah Huravalhi; [www.anantara.com/en/kihavah-maldives](http://www.anantara.com/en/kihavah-maldives).

## EAT

Try teppanyaki at **Fire** or Asian cuisine at **Salt**. There's also the rooftop **SKY** bar and underwater experience, **SEA**.

**CLOCKWISE FROM THIS IMAGE** Cycle over the boardwalk to your villa; chefs preparing fresh feasts; orchids stud the gardens; dine underwater at SEA.



The resort has a manta tour available that will take keen guests to Hanifaru Bay, a short boat ride away. This bay is a natural haven for huge numbers of plankton, a manta's favourite food, so if you're lucky you can find groups of up to 100 of them swirling through the waters, or, as is the way of these things, you could find yourself swimming furiously to spot just two in the far distance. Disappointment never lasts long out here though, and if you let yourself tap back into the rhythm of nature, she's constantly throwing out experiences to surprise you — and not just in the water.

## ACTIVE ISLAND

The island of Kihavah Huravalhi takes just 20 minutes to circumnavigate by foot, or you can grab yourself a fixie with fat tyres to navigate the sandy paths surrounded by lush landscaping. However, be warned, a quick pedal along the beach can easily turn into an all-afternoon activity. You can spy baby reef sharks honing their hunting skills on the unfortunate bait fish, swimming in a tight ball trying to avoid being eaten. Tiny, almost translucent, crabs march across the sands and stingrays perform their ballet solos as the sun sinks over the horizon.

The island's interior is a horticulturalist's dream. It seems as if the gardeners' work is more about holding the jungle back than encouraging it to grow. Walls of dark green leaves are studded with pops of pink, yellow and purple from the orchids planted throughout the gardens. And, as you circle the island, you'll discover there's so many other distractions to keep you — and your family — entertained. Muay Thai boxing, a trampoline park, fitness centre, archery, tennis courts... experiencing any of this is, of course, dependant on leaving your villa, and that in itself is a challenge.

There are six different villa types spread throughout the resort, from beachside pool villas through to family overwater villas. Built from pale grey wood, the overwater villas are accessed via a wooden boardwalk. Inside, all of your Maldivian fantasies are fulfilled. There's a private pool, a glass-bottomed bath tub — even the toilet offers a window through to the extraordinary coloured water below. The deck is ➤





Enjoy the sea breezes from the deck of your overwater villa.

**REGARDLESS OF WHAT'S ON THE PLATE OR IN THE GLASS, IT'S HARD TO PULL YOUR EYES AWAY FROM THE REEF JUST OUTSIDE.**

furnished with a double day bed, sun loungers and stairs that give you direct access to the water with a hammock slung over its edge. You can order dinner in your villa for a private dining experience, or enjoy the stunning architecture of the buildings.

**EAT UP**

While the words 'buffet breakfast' may instil fear in some, here it's a delightful way to start the day. The morning meal is buzzing with honeymooners and multi-generational family groups feasting at the pancake and waffle station or enjoying the traditional (and delicious) local way to start the day — a fish curry.

Teppanyaki restaurant Fire features a round bar that encircles the chefs, who delight the crowds with tasty food and some serious knife skills. Choose your lobster straight from the sea for grilling, or fresh sashimi. There's also Salt, an open-air dining option serving Asian-inspired food, but SEA is the resort's signature dining experience — and it's literally underwater. Six metres under to be exact. Poached lobster, oysters and wagyu beef, along with a wine list that features some of the best names and vintages in the world, are served under the sea in five-star style. Regardless of what's on the plate or in the glass though, it's hard to pull your eyes away from the teeming reef just outside or the reflection of it in the mosaic-windowed ceilings.

The new SKY bar is the perfect place for a pre- or post-dinner drink, or just a lesson in humility. A huge rooftop circular sofa leads the way towards what is the country's most powerful telescope, and there is certainly nothing like staring into the far reaches of the universe to make you feel small. The resort's dedicated star guru will humble you with his enthusiasm for all things celestial while you enjoy canapés and champagne. Then, move into the observatory and take turns peering through the telescope to the planets far away. Afterwards you may need a stiff drink from the bar's expansive menu of cocktails to bring your head out of the stars and back down into the glorious hypercoloured and hyperreal natural environment of the Maldives. 🍹

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