

go... night fishing in... the maldives

Meeting the Maldivian locals has hitherto been a rarity for tourists visiting the islands. But now you can freely mingle with residents as you experience the generations-old tradition of nocturnal fishing by hand

It's that beautiful time of evening when day and night converge, and here in the Maldives – an idyllic scattering of emerald-hued atolls in the middle of the Indian Ocean – the show is nothing if not captivating. It's also the time when the archipelago's traditional fishermen clamber aboard their brightly painted dhonis and head out to sea in search of dinner.



I've been staying at the Anantara Kihavah, a retreat located in the Baa Atoll, and I watch from the end of the resort's pier as one baby blue dhoni sways and bounces its way through a light chop from the nearby island of Kudarikilu. Ten serious-looking Maldivian fishermen ride the boat, their hands calloused, their eyes boasting the intense 1,000-yard stare of people who live off the sea. But as soon as I climb onboard and don a pair of well-loved cotton gardening gloves in anticipation of the night's fishing, smiles break out as the newest member of the crew is accepted.

While a number of resorts offer night-time fishing experiences, it's done with restored tourist dhonis, small armies of guest relations staff and chilled hand towels scented with lemon. Encounters between Maldivians and foreign travellers remain rare, but resorts like Anantara Kihavah are trying to change that, inviting guests to spend a night working for their supper.

We motor out to sea, our helmsmen steering the rudder with his toes in the traditional style as he scans the horizon and watches clouds form in an evening squall far to the west. The colour drains from the sky and stars emerge high above as the first lines are cast, one crew member skewering wriggling, bright orange bait fish called *gaurung* »



The colour drains from the sky and stars emerge as the lines are cast, one crew member skewering bright orange bait onto hooks

encounters



ANANTARA KIHAVAH

Just a 35-minute seaplane ride from Malé, this resort offers private villas and underwater dining. Baa Atoll, Maldives; kihavah-maldives.anantara.com

onto hooks at the end of single lines. As part of a sustainable fishing initiative, only handline fishing is allowed in the Maldives, which makes me pause for thought when I think of the man-sized tuna on display at the fish markets in Malé and the determination it must take to land a fish of that size by hand.

Fortunately the Maldives' seas are still plentifully stocked, and another fisherman called Mohammad shows me how to throw the now-weighted line overboard, the line unravelling quickly as the lead weight – and my little orange fish – plunge into the dark waters. The crew do likewise, and one by one, lines begin to tug and the catch is on.

Mohammad urges me to start hauling in the line, so I plant my bare feet on the chipped paintwork of the deckhouse and begin to heave in a fishing line that jerks and sways in my hands. It's hard work, but soon I start to see a silver shimmer darting below as my fish inches closer



to the surface, the line biting into my gloved hands, the sweat streaking my forehead in the early-evening heat.

Finally a gleaming jackfish emerges from the deep, wriggling and dancing on the end of the line. Mohammad takes the catch from the line, and it sails into a tank of sea water as another gaurung is skewered. We continue reeling in fish as fast as our arms will let us, the deck now slippery with sea water, the bait man preparing lines as fast as he can – casting and hauling under the stars, just as these fishermen's fathers and grandfathers did in the generations before.

Weary after two hours on the lines, the fishing tapers off and the boatmen sit in the red-lit gloom of the wheelhouse while others pile high a gleaming, motley crew of tropical fish. There are smiles in the moonlight; tonight's been a good catch, and there will be fish left to sell after each family takes its share.

It's a humbling experience as I'm dropped back off at the pier of the Anantara with waves from my new friends as they motor away into the inky darkness of the night, their tanks full for another night under the stars. At last I feel I understand this nation beyond its perfect beaches and glitzy resorts. 🌊



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