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‘I decided to whip my children out of nursery in term time to go to the Maldives’

Before the big schools break is a prime time to travel with pre-schoolers

By William Sitwell

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My mid-life crisis fight-back starts here. I am lying face down on a surfboard. Day four of my young family’s Maldives experience and, as the schedule dictates, experiencing a “Lagoon

Session with Tropic Surf”. I could complete my first beginner’s course with an attempt at actual surfing on waves later in the afternoon, but I’ve opted instead for a 60-minute Meera Spa signature massage. As I drag my board across the sand at the end of the lesson I vow to buy one back in the UK. I’ll do these moves at home, finessing my core strength before attacking the waves somewhere on the North Devon coast.

That’s the pledge. And it’s how things work on the island of Gili Lankanfushi. This island paradise encourages you to fantasise how normal life could be. No shoes (they are actually forbidden); a “Mr Friday” who acts as your personal assistant; an array of restaurants and themed nights to charm your taste buds, from high-end Japanese to Asian street market via poached eggs and bacon. There is luxurious accommodation, of course, over water or on land, sunrise yoga, a vast outdoor cinema and lessons such as cooking and juicing. Or you can learn traditional drumming skills, the art of local thatch-roofing or better napkin folding.



The island paradise encourages guests of all ages to connect with nature and ditch the shoes

Oh, but to bring home to Blighty the ideals and practices of paradise for a better, more holistic life. We’ll see about that, but meanwhile I have a schedule to keep or our Mr Friday will be at my side, gently asking why I have jettisoned the idea of an hour of Maldivian handcraft to sit by the pool and do nothing for a short while.

My wife Emily and I are with the kids for this sojourn. We realised we were in that glorious last-chance saloon with a four- and two-year-old to whip them out of nursery in term time before big school begins in the autumn for the oldest – and thus while it is still legal to do so. So what better plan than to escape to a family-friendly island of warmth and endless sandcastle potential and enjoy it while most other families are on the relentless school run back home. The Maldives is also heaven for kids, with a constant temperature in the high 20s, warm sea and a light wind.

When it's time to leave Gili, we are waved off from the jetty aboard a slick, large speedboat sent from Anantara, our next destination. As the stretches of timber-built villas on the water fade into the distance, the palm trees disappear over the horizon and the densely populated, high-rise capital that is Malé comes into view, we relish the prospect of our next island as we power through a large swell accompanied by a pod of dolphins.

Anantara Dhigu is smaller than Gili Lankanfushi but linked to two other islands: Veli, with its smart restaurants and adults-only accommodation, and Naladhu, a private island (yours for £100,000 a night, excluding food and drink). And like many of the more than 1,000 islands of the Maldives, which lie south-west of Sri Lanka in the Indian Ocean and are generally operated by hotel and resort brands, it is engaged in an arms race of high-end leisure.



William found Gili Lankanfushi to be family-friendly with a charming kids' club

Anantara is very family-friendly, with a charming kids' club and the sea (and sand, for that vital digging) just a few paces from our villa, with its private pool. You can dine on Sri Lankan, Indian, Maldivian, Japanese or Thai on Veli (a quick boat ride away); or a European menu at Fushi (back on Dhigu), where you'll also find an excellent and quieter grill called Sea Fire Salt, with views over that vast, still Indian Ocean.

With the help of our endearing new assistant, Kadir, the children (mesmerised by the sight of fish more colourful than anything on Finding Nemo) relax further and thus so do we. This is aided by an extraordinary massage at the spa where, smothered in cumin, we do leave smelling like a curry but are otherwise seemingly cured of all ailments.

Just the thought of the Maldivian island paradise promise that Kadir personifies, and those miles of sand and warm sea, perk me up when the rain tumbles down outside back home. All I need is, er, that surfboard.

Travel essentials

F&P Travel (01306 264 006; fandptravel.co.uk) offers a seven-night holiday to the Maldives from £9,600 based on two adults and two children sharing on a half-board basis. The price includes three nights at Gili Lankanfushi and four at Anantara Dhigu with complimentary concierge service

Three smart choices for under-fives

Delicious Mauritius

An Indian Ocean island escape on a grand scale, Mauritius is an excellent choice for a tropical adventure with small children. You won't feel hemmed in here – as well as straight-out-of-paradise beaches, there is jungle, a volcano, indigenous villages to visit and unusual wildlife. The sea is clear and the reefs teem with marine life to spot on boat trips; or pop the kids on your paddleboard for a sea safari. It is a 12-hour direct flight, there are bags of family-friendly hotels, and you can do it more cheaply than a Maldives holiday. June is a great time to go – warm and sunny, and not too hot or rainy.

How to do it: Classic Collection (0800 047 1066; classic-collection.co.uk) offers a 10-night holiday staying at Preskil Island Resort (southerncrosshotels.mu), for £4,851 for two adults and one child aged two to five in June (August price: £8,934), including half board and direct flights with Air Mauritius.