

THE MALDIVES PROMISES BEAUTY,
DECADENCE AND A SENSE OF THE
EXOTIC. BUT, ASKS **KIRSTEN GALLIOTT**,
WILL IT ALSO OFFER A ONE-ON-ONE
ENCOUNTER WITH MANTA RAYS?

OUT

OF
THE



BLUE

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IGHT IN front of me is a group of large manta rays suspended in aquamarine. There are too many to count quickly but there must be at least 40 of the majestic creatures, spiralling out in a convoy of sorts. “This is a drone photo from the other week,” explains diving instructor Bo, taking back his phone. “But it’s been four or five days since we’ve seen manta rays. I’m tired of saying sorry to the guests.”

I’ve journeyed to the Maldives to swim with some of the biggest rays in the world. Of course, when your trip is predicated on seeing animals in the wild, there’s always the risk that they might not be as interested in you as you are in them. “Yesterday, we didn’t see any rays,” laments Rilwan, who takes guided snorkelling tours. “We went to three different places – but nothing.”

It seems I may have to rein in my expectations. Fortunately, there are other diversions at Anantara Kihavah (hotel.qantas.com.au/anantarakihavamaldives), a six-year-old resort in Baa Atoll in the archipelago’s west – and one of the most luxurious. This is one time in life to embrace clichés because it’s everything I’d imagined the Maldives to be: blindingly white sand, clear turquoise water, rows of overwater bungalows arcing out across the ocean. Even without the rays, it’s obvious that I have found paradise.

There’s a dream-like quality to the Maldives. That’s partly because the 1200 islands that make up this tropical nation in the Indian Ocean are so remote. This chain of 26 atolls is at least two plane trips from Australia, which adds to the sense of discovery. And to access Anantara Kihavah from Malé, the capital, you must travel by seaplane. As we cross the ocean, I see a never-ending expanse of blue – it’s cerulean; no, it’s cobalt; wait, it’s lapis lazuli – broken only by tendrils of clouds and islands surrounded by vivid coral reefs. From above, some of the islands look to be the same shape as the fish that teem in the waters surrounding them.

The true allure of the Maldives (pronounced *mol-deevs*) is found beneath the surface. Don’t get me wrong, life is *very* sweet on dry land. Anantara Kihavah offers the ultimate five-star experience; it’s all Taittinger champagne, seemingly unlimited choices (which of the 16 types of salt would you like?) and seamless service from the mostly Maldivian staff, some with smiles as wide as the mouths of the manta rays I’m dreaming of seeing. But underwater? You’ll be ridding your mind of every thought but the spectacle before you.

There are creatures I’ve never seen before. A titan triggerfish ploughs past the coral, its mottled yellow skin and dog-like teeth giving it a prehistoric edge. A juvenile box fish – which looks awfully

like an oversized banana, thanks to its bright-yellow hue and black markings – hides in a crevice. And a school of black squid huddle together in the shape of a diamond, pulsing through the water.

And, of course, there’s the tantalising prospect of seeing those gentle giants of the sea. The Maldives is home to an estimated 5000 reef manta rays. From June to November, they migrate south; the best time to see them near Anantara Kihavah, says Bo, is August to November.

I will find out on my third day here – when I’ve scheduled a trip to Hanifaru Bay, the most famous spot in the Maldives to see rays – but until then, there are meals to be savoured, massages to be relished and experiences to discover.

There’s something so meditative about a tropical island: the gentle crunch of sand under the bike I use to get across the island, the joy of a light breeze scudding across the water and the sweet surprise of a gecko or a crab scuttling across the path in front of me.





(Opposite) The Two-Bedroom Beach Pool Residence at Anantara Kihavah; (clockwise from top) the resort has an infinity pool that's long enough to swim laps, a Japanese restaurant, Fire, that serves a standout lobster salad and design details inspired by the sea



Anantara Kihavah's overwater villas

On my first day here, I receive a message from a friend back home. “I can’t wait to hear if you love it,” she says. “I’m keen to go but I wonder if I’d go stir-crazy after three days.”

The answer to that, frankly, depends on how deep your pockets are. This is not a budget trip. Villas at Anantara Kihavah – from the famous overwater bungalows with see-through bathtubs to the tastefully decorated beach villas beloved of Saudi royalty and offering total seclusion and a private pool – start at \$1000 a night. And everything else, other than breakfast, comes at an additional cost.

But what price the experiences of a lifetime? Adventure-lovers will be torn between snorkelling with turtles, watching dolphins cavort in the warm waters, parasailing up to 150 metres in the sky or diving around the resort and marvelling at that underwater garden, all yellow and green and alive.

Restaurants in remote locations can vary dramatically in quality – even at five-star resorts – but the food at Anantara Kihavah is consistently good, from the pan-Asian flavours of Salt to the teppanyaki at Fire. Be sure to book ahead for Sea, one of only three underwater restaurants in the Maldives, which feels both surreal and spectacular.



Go to TRAVELINSIDER.QANTAS.COM.AU to watch the writer’s footage of swimming with manta rays in the Maldives.

This is the resort’s fine-diner but I barely give the nearly 400 labels in the wine cellar a second glance, so entranced am I by the continuous reel of ocean life being played out before my eyes.

Of course, sometimes a dream holiday is simply about relaxing and doing very little: to note the shocking pink of a bougainvillea against a cloudless sky; to succumb in the decadent spa to the hands of shy masseuse Fay, whose petite frame belies her strength; to sit on the deck at Sky bar, champagne in hand, and marvel at the stars leaking through an inky sky.

“Stargazing in the Maldives is a very special experience,” says Shameem, one of the resort’s 307 permanent staff. “There is no light pollution here.” Shameem has been studying astronomy for 15 years and gives passionate, accessible talks to interested guests. “I’m a nocturnal person,” he laughs, pointing his laser pen at the sky. “I come alive at night. I’ve spoken to more than 100,000 people about stars. Every star has a story to tell.”

And off he goes. After explaining a light year (“it’s equivalent to 9.4 trillion kilometres”), he whips out his phone and shows me a photo of VY Canis Majoris, one of the biggest stars in the galaxy. “It would take two days for a plane to fly around Earth,” he says, “but it would take 1100 years to fly to this star!” His enthusiasm is contagious.

The resort’s general manager, Dylan Counsel, has seen enough potential in the sky to build a brand-new stargazing deck and observatory, which is due to open before Christmas, so that guests can view the rings of Saturn. “We will have the biggest telescope in the Maldives,” says Shameem excitedly. “We have a real contrast of experiences – the fish underneath and the stars above.”

And a life less ordinary in the middle.

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INALLY COMES the day I’ve been waiting for. Manta rays. It doesn’t get off to an auspicious start. I wake to a grey sky, the early-morning light dull. Where is the Maldivian sun I’ve become accustomed to? Fat drops of rain dent the pool’s glassy surface. *Ocean Whisperer*, our yacht – or a *dhoni*, as it’s known to locals – sways in the choppy water.

We have a 50-minute trip to Hanifaru Bay. Will we find any rays there today? “I don’t know,” shrugs Bo. Hoare, our captain, puts his hands in the air. “I don’t know.”

We set off past a local isle dubbed “turtle island” for its colony of the marine reptiles. Even its green foliage looks gloomy, the leaden clouds above it drooping like an uneven hem. We venture past another five-star resort, Amilla Fushi, where Leonardo DiCaprio and a gaggle of Victoria’s Secret models partied this year.

Everywhere I look, it’s grey. I have a sinking feeling in my stomach. But then, some news: there are rays up ahead. Within minutes,

we're off the boat and in a dinghy, flippers on, racing across the slate water. "So, the mantas," says Bo with a grin. "We don't touch them. But sometimes they are curious and will come up to you. That's okay. When you're in the water, don't follow me. Follow the mantas."

And with that, he jumps in and gestures for me to join him.

The water seems less grey and more turquoise now that I'm in it. Still, it takes a moment for my eyes to adjust. I blink and blink again. Bo nudges me and points. I swivel my head and see a large, dark smudge up ahead. It comes closer and closer, its features slowly becoming more defined. And there, gliding towards me, is the first manta ray I've ever seen in the wild.

It's majestic. And it's not alone. I count eight flying through the water. With wingspans of about three metres, they are way bigger than me. But even though they're heading straight for me, I don't for a moment feel fearful.

Instead, I'm in awe of their wide, gaping mouths – when open, it's easy to see the frame of their skeleton inside – and their black, velvet-like skin, creased with scratches and scars. They are so close that I'm able to study their every detail. The gills on the white underside of their bodies resemble air-conditioning vents. Coupled with their cartoonish big mouths, they look almost alien.

One ventures away from the group and I follow it to shallower water. For a minute, it's just the two of us, with me kicking furiously to try to keep up as it slices gracefully through the water. They are big, these amiable creatures, but not cumbersome and it easily outswims me, undulating its fins in slow motion and becoming ghost-like as the water beyond swallows it up.

I turn back and find another ray swimming towards me. When it brushes past – yes, it actually touches me, we're that close – I have never felt so small. For the next 45 minutes, we circle each other. I find myself holding my breath, willing time to stand still. It's one of the most extraordinary experiences of my life.

All too soon, Bo is urging me back onto the dinghy. "It's going to rain," he says. And so it does. As we surge across the water, the heavens open and the rain beats down, stinging my skin. But I don't care. I turn my face towards the sky and close my eyes. I can't remember the last time I felt so alive. ●

Flight path

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Qantas offers flights to Singapore then onwards to Malé via partner airlines. qantas.com

