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Sky Full of Stars

Just as no two stars are alike, no two islands are identical in the Maldives. Hashirin Nurin Hashimi finds her atoll bearings and discovers the stellar charms of two Anantara resorts in the archipelago

WITH ITS CLEAR TURQUOISE WATERS and white sandy beaches, the Maldives has held many under its spell. The magic is often cast aboard a seaplane transfer to one of its many luxury resorts in the Indian Ocean. But having touched down in Malé International Airport after nightfall (and a 40min domestic flight to Dharavandhoo Airport later), our first glimpse of this tropical paradise was not of its coral islands and aquamarine lagoons, but that of sparkling diamonds sprinkled across the midnight sky. The open skies, minimal light pollution and the Maldives' location just above the equator meant that stars from both the southern and northern hemispheres were clearly visible—and what a sight it was, as we were whisked away via a 30min speedboat transfer to Anantara Kihavah Maldives Villas, one of Anantara's four resorts in the archipelago, and the first of two we stayed at during this trip.

Set on the Kihavah Huravalhi island, 125km north of the capital Malé, Kihavah Villas is the gateway to Hanifaru Bay, a Unesco World Biosphere Reserve in the Baa Atoll, where seasonal gatherings of manta rays and whale sharks from May to November attract many to its waters. Our over water pool villa was one of the resort's 79 villas and residences—over water or on a stretch of private beach—and opened up to a private pool and sun deck offering uninterrupted views of the ocean's horizon.

Conscious of the El Niño threat on the future of the destination, Anantara works with Coral Reef

CPR marine biologists to maintain, monitor, grow and protect the coral reefs surrounding its resorts. Guests can participate through its coral adoption programme. Some of the reef restoration works were evident in the waters surrounding the underwater restaurant, Sea, where we had lunch the next day. Sitting on the edge of a cliff, the restaurant—home to the world's first underwater wine cellar with over 350 labels—offers a technicolour display of the biodiversity of the Indian Ocean.

While the four-course meal was sublime (the chocolate bomb with warm caramel sauce deserved special mention), we were busy making goo-goo eyes at our dining companions through the glass windows. Funnily enough, it felt like speed dating—with the identity of the various fishes revealed through the *Reef Fishes of the Maldives* book placed on each table—before we went on an actual "date", in this case snorkelling at the house reef. With an instructor from the dive centre as our guide, we set off from the shoreline and plunged into the depths of the marine world. We saw too many fishes to count, but ticked angelfish, clownfish, parrotfish, snapper and trumpetfish off our list, along with a baby shark. A full-sized shark must have been lurking close by, we asked our instructor later, who said yes. We held our collective breaths, before he quickly added, "But in the deeper waters!"

We spent our last evening at Kihavah Villas the same way we started, with a private stargazing session on the rooftop Sky Bar with resident sky guru, Shameem, a protege of Italian astronomer

TIME FOR TWO
Naladhu Private Island Maldives offers many different settings for private dining, such as this one under the stars on an ocean breaker overlooking the lagoon



ISLAND CHARM Two resorts with two distinct styles: Anantara Kihavah Maldives Villas (left) is home to Sea restaurant, one of the most exciting underwater venues in the Maldives (below), while Naladhu Private Island Maldives' colonial-style oceanfront house (below left) offers guests a home away from home.



friendly Anantara Dhigu, and the adults-only Anantara Veli, where Naladhu guests can access their facilities and restaurants, but not vice versa.

Massimo Tarenghi of the ALMA observatory in Chile. He introduced us to some of the constellations, described the pale yellow rings of Saturn and the counter-rotating belts of Jupiter, and even delved into the "are we alone in the universe?" question. His passion was so infectious that we were glad to find out that the resort will unveil this month a new custom-built Ash-Dome observatory, which will house a research-grade 16" Meade LX200 telescope, so guests can get a closer look at the Milky Way's shining Omega Centauri or the Messier 13 globular cluster of stars in the constellation of Hercules.

ISLAND IN THE SUN

From Kihavah Villas, we hopped onto a seaplane for a 35min journey to Malé, where the luxury Sunseeker yacht *Nirvana* took us to Naladhu Private Island Maldives on Veligandu Huraa island in the South Malé Atoll. With just 20 villas and houses, including a two-bedroom residence, along with a butler service to fulfil our every whim and fancy, this was where we lived out our private island fantasy a la *Robinson Crusoe*, the luxe edition. From when we first arrived at the jetty, where we were met by our house master Munzir, to when we sat down to dinner at The Living Room restaurant, it felt as if we had the whole island to ourselves. Naladhu is part of a group of islands that includes picnic island Gulhifushi, as well as sister resorts: the family-

While we felt the need to be active at Kihavah Villas, we had no desire to leave the creature comforts of our ocean house in Naladhu. We rose early to catch the first rays of sunrise, and after a languid swim in our private infinity pool, decided to have Munzir arrange a dine-in breakfast at our private dining sala. We even enjoyed a 60min signature massage on the oceanfront deck, lulled into slumber by the lapping waves. However, a dolphin excursion was too good to miss. While sightings are not always guaranteed, we were lucky to have come across a large pod of bottlenose dolphins out in deeper waters just 10min from the resort. The friendly mammals playfully swam alongside our tiny powerboat, leaping out of the water, spyhopping and slapping their tails, as we watched on with glee.

Also, since we were in the Maldives, a cultural immersion in Maldivian cuisine was in order at the Spice Spoons cooking class. But first, a visit to the Chef's Garden on Dhigu island, where fresh vegetables and herbs were grown, before we headed to the 73 Degrees restaurant on Veli island to whip up signature dishes such as Maldivian tuna curry, potato and crab cakes, and vermicelli pudding, with recipes to take home as memories of a time well spent on this tropical paradise. Resort-hopping is totally feasible in the Maldives. Why not, when each property offers a unique experience. After all, no one ever says no to two holidays in one! 🌴