



# Most Precious PACIFIC

PICK YOUR PRIVATE ISLAND FANTASY IN THE ENDANGERED WONDER THAT IS THE MALDIVES BY AMBER GIBSON

**A** chain of 26 atolls in the Indian Ocean—a constitutional republic since 1968 and with a population of 560,000—the Maldives has gone from obscurity to vacation mecca in just a few short decades. Its vivid blue waters and stupendous marine biodiversity have become siren songs for snorkelers and divers, but even if you prefer to simply relax on the beach, its spas, breadth of cuisine, and wellness facilities are simply unprecedented for such a remote destination.

Although the tourism cash influx has significantly lifted the economy in what the World Bank calls a “development success story,” this is also the lowest-elevation country in the world, and with its fragile ecosystems, is at crisis-level risk as a result of climate change and resulting rising sea levels—its coral reefs already damaged by elevated sea temperatures and acidification. In response, a number of resorts like Four Seasons and Soneva are taking the lead in regional conservation, funding important marine research and helping to restore reefs to ensure that the Maldives’ beauty is preserved for generations. The government, meanwhile, is moving infrastructure from the seashores and mandating higher-elevation new construction. The nation is and will continue to be a leading indicator of how societies can adapt to sweeping change.

## KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

More than one thousand coral islands in the Indian Ocean comprise the Maldives—the smallest country in Asia, and famed for white sand beaches and over-water bungalows at self-contained luxury resorts. Over the past 50 years, tourism has become its largest industry, and Americans do not need a visa to visit, just a passport (a 30-day no-cost visa is supplied upon entering).

The quickest way to get there from the NYC metro area is on Emirates (with a stop in Dubai) or on Qatar Airways (stopping in Doha). It’ll take nearly 20 hours to reach Malé, the capital, and from there you’ll take a seaplane or speedboat to island getaways. Alcohol is prohibited on the local islands of this Islamic presidential republic, but readily available at resorts.

The tropical equatorial climate is reliably warm, with temperatures in the mid-80s°F year-round. The weather is sunniest and most calm from

PHOTO: SHUTTERSTOCK/SVEN HANSCHKE

November through April—a time great for snorkeling and diving excursions. May through October is slightly cooler, rainier, and more windy, but not a true monsoon season. The nation has some of the richest coral reef ecosystems in the world, with thousands of species of fish (including the massive but docile whale shark), along with plentiful sea turtles and manta rays. Wind sports like kite-surfing and sailing are popular.

## ATTRACTIONS

### HANIFARU BAY

There’s no better place to snorkel with manta rays than this centerpiece of the Baa Atoll UNESCO Biosphere Reserve. The bay is best known as home, from June through November, to thousands of these graceful, gentle giants, thanks to plankton-rich waters. It’s also one of



Photo at right: Four Seasons Resort Maldives at Kuda Huraa

the very few known mating grounds for whale sharks. Both Soneva Fushi and Four Seasons Resort Landaa Giraavaru are a short speed boat ride away, and the Four Seasons calls guests on its “manta phone” when there are sightings. Visitors can also help researchers identify rays by taking photos of unique spot pattern on each’s belly (you’ll find the most examples during a full moon).

### LANDAA SPA & AYURVEDIC RETREAT

Spa treatments at the Four Seasons Landaa Giraavaru include yoga therapy, chakra blessings, and tantric traditions, all rooted in Ayurveda, the traditional Hindu system of medicine. Guests can book a complimentary hour-long consultation with Ayurvedic physician, Dr. Shylesh Subramanya, for dietary, lifestyle, and treatment recommendations based on your *doshha*, or range of energies. His comprehensive understanding of Ayurveda and selection of treatments is as extensive and authentic as anything you’ll find in India. For example, a grounding Muladhara blessing balances the root chakra at the base of the spine, while a slow, deep massage with Ila Spa vetiver and ginger oils, combined with Tibetan singing bowls and frankincense smoke, leaves one feeling calm and centered. There are even week-long cleanses to relieve deep-seated stress, and menus at all restaurants are labeled with dish recommendations for the three different doshas

(vata, pitta, and kapha). Baa Atoll, [fourseasons.com/maldiveslg/spa](https://www.fourseasons.com/maldiveslg/spa)

## WHERE TO STAY

### SONEVA FUSHI

Designed as a lush treehouse wonderland, this resort encourages playful curiosity and barefoot exploration. This Maldivian pioneer of eco-luxury just celebrated 25 years—its jungle property perfect for multi-generational travel and larger groups (63 beach villas, ranging from one- to nine-bedroom, which rim the exterior of the island). You feel like a character in a favorite childhood adventure novel while on its SeaBob underwater scooter, and landlubbers will find entire facilities dedicated to both chocolate (So Guilty) and ice cream (So Cool), open 24/7 to fuel late-night shenanigans. Guests can also snip their own garden greens to make a DIY breakfast salad. The Soneva Fushi experience can be further customized with the help of a personal Mr. or Ms. Friday butler. [Kunfunadhoo Island Baa Atoll, soneva.com/soneva-fushi](https://www.soneva.com/soneva-fushi)

### FOUR SEASONS RESORT MALDIVES AT KUDA HURAA

This family-friendly resort caters to all ages, with enough privacy for couples seeking a more romantic experience. The thatched roof Maldivian village consists of 58 beach villas along with 38 more recently renovated over-water



villas that each have a private infinity pool, hammocks, and spacious decks. Snorkeling and diving expeditions are offered daily for all abilities, and the surfing here is the best in the Maldives. Take a boat to the recently renovated island spa for a marine brightening treatment with organic seaweed or a strong Balinese massage. Dozens of daily activities range from stand-up paddleboard yoga to photo tours for the perfect Instagram shot. **Kuda Huraa**, Noordelijke Malé-atoll, [fourseasons.com/maldiveskh](https://fourseasons.com/maldiveskh)

#### FOUR SEASONS RESORT MALDIVES AT LANDAA GIRAAVARU

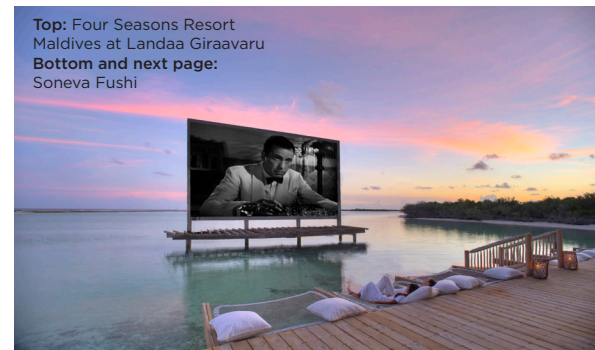
Spread across three times the land mass of Kuda Huraa, Landaa Giraavaru is located in a UNESCO World Biosphere Reserve and claims one of the premier marine research centers in the country. This means that guests can help biologists rebuild coral reefs, rehabilitate sea turtles, and identify manta rays. Beach villas on the south side of the island (the entire collection of over-water villas was just renovated) have

direct access to coral reefs for snorkeling, and guests are given bikes to easily navigate the island. You can even book the Super Falcon 3S submarine—its trained pilot will take two passengers on a cruise over reefs and alongside dolphins and other wildlife. **Baa Atoll**, [fourseasons.com/maldiveslg](https://fourseasons.com/maldiveslg)

### DAY TRIPS AND TOURS

#### SUNSET DOLPHIN CRUISES

You'll find several different species of dolphins in the Maldives, although the most common is the playful spinner variety, famed for its acrobatic displays. Sunset is the best time to search for pods, and a dolphin cruise is a wonderful activity for the whole family. These remarkable animals are quite curious, and enjoy performing for an appreciative audience, swimming alongside the boat and jumping as passengers clap and whistle. Soneva Fushi, Hurawalhi, and Four Seasons Kuda Huraa offer such excursions in comfortable yachts that often also serve gratifying amounts of canapés and champagne.



Top: Four Seasons Resort Maldives at Landaa Giraavaru  
Bottom and next page: Soneva Fushi

#### FISHING CHARTERS

Before tourism took off in the 1980s and the Maldives became the luxury tourism hot-spot it is today, fishing was the primary industry for the nation. You don't need a license to cast here, and can keep what you catch. Four Seasons Kuda Huraa takes small groups line fishing every other evening on a two-hour boat trip, and the chef will clean and cook the catch. Guests frequently take grouper, red snapper, green jobfish, trevally, and other coral reef varieties. All resorts can arrange full-day deep-sea charters for serious anglers looking to catch tuna, marlin, and mahi-mahi—The Four Seasons' is aboard the 55-foot *High Flyer*.

BOTTOM PHOTO BY STEVIE MANN



PHOTO BY JACQUELINE EMILIA GARELLI

### DINE AND DRINK

#### BARAABARU

The home-style and authentic Indian food served here, accompanied by a live sitar band, make for as authentic an Indian dining experience as you'll find anywhere. Its entire kitchen team is Indian, and regional specialties range from Punjabi butter chicken to Rajasthani tender lamb braised in chili yogurt gravy, along with Northern tandoori specialties and plenty of vegetarian curries. Just save room for saffron kulfi, a traditional Indian ice cream. Chef Raj Singh teaches weekly cooking classes, showing off the tandoor ovens and demonstrating how to cook biryani (hint: lots of ghee) and blend spices for the perfect curry. **Kuda Huraa**, Noordelijke Malé-atoll, [fourseasons.com/maldiveskh/dining/restaurants/baraabaru](https://fourseasons.com/maldiveskh/dining/restaurants/baraabaru)

#### AL BARAKAT

Named for a 12th-century North African scholar who lived in the Baa Atoll, Middle Eastern flavors collide here, with Moroccan, Lebanese, and Armenian-inspired dishes all meant to be shared. Begin with a selection of hot and cold mezze, including moutabel, kibbeh, and lahmajoun before a hearty main course of mixed meat kebabs, tagines, or mersini tzoug—the last grilled reef fish with silky eggplant purée, pickled lemon, and harissa. After dinner, relax with a shisha water pipe in the lounge downstairs. **Baa Atoll**, [fourseasons.com/maldiveslg/dining/restaurants/al\\_barakat](https://fourseasons.com/maldiveslg/dining/restaurants/al_barakat)

#### ONCE UPON A TABLE

There's no menu at this eight-seat chef's counter. Instead, fare changes depending on the whims of the internationally renowned chef in residence. Top culinary minds from Europe and Asia visit Soneva's island paradise year-round, delighting guests with extravagant tasting menus, even as their respective restaurants back home book up months in advance. At Soneva, these Michelin-starred pros have a chance to let their hair down, and you can joke and chat with them, sans shoes, while you watch each bite being prepared. **Kunfunadhoo Island Baa Atoll**, [soneva.com/soneva-fushi/dinin](https://soneva.com/soneva-fushi/dinin) ■