

THE MALDIVES FOR ALL



THE MALDIVES IS KNOWN FOR BEING A ROMANTIC COUPLES DESTINATION, BUT IT'S MORE THAN THAT. THERE'S AN ISLAND TO SUIT EVERYONE. GISELLE WHITEAKER ISLAND HOPS IN THE MALDIVIAN ARCHIPELAGO.

For Romance

My boyfriend Elio and I are whisked through Velana International Airport in Male by a representative from Huvafen Fushi and settled onto a speedboat for the 30-minute transfer to the lush island resort. Pulling into a pier that stretches its wooden finger to the edge of the lagoon, we are greeted and introduced to our *khateeb* (Maldivian butler). Naadi will be our right-hand man for the duration of our stay, making sure our every need is met. His first task is to deliver us to our deluxe beach bungalow.

Deluxe it is. Pure white walls meet wooden floorboards, under a high ceiling. "Welcome to Huvafen" is spelled out in reeds on the end of the bed in the centre of the room, which looks out to a deck with a plunge pool. Past the deck is our private, sandy back yard, which leads to the beach, two sun loungers sitting on the border.

The semi-open-air bathroom is through a door at the rear. There's an enclosed shower and toilet, a bath in the middle of the deck, and a private pool with a daybed jutting over

Huvafen is also home to the world's first underwater spa, which is more than a gimmick.



Top: The saltwater flotation pool is called *Lonu Veyo*.
Above: The yoga pavilion is at the end of a wooden pier.



The infinity pool at Huvafen merges with the ocean.

one edge, protected by an umbrella on a swinging arm. I've never had a swimming pool in my bathroom before. We definitely plan to spend time here.

A short while later, Naadi returns in a golf buggy to take us to our first Huvafen experience. He delivers us to a stretch of palm-fringed beach at one end of the tiny island – we could have walked in almost the same amount of time. Alex, Huvafen's resident marine biologist, is chatting with a small group of guests, who are transfixed by a number of stingrays milling in the shallows. They know they are going to be fed. The group of seven or so stingrays visits nightly to consume a small amount of fishy offcuts from the kitchen, allowing guests to have a close encounter. It's a rare opportunity to interact with these creatures, which Elio and I get to know by name after returning for this ritual every night of our stay.

It's these intimate experiences that characterise our stay on Huvafen, whether it's swimming in the freshwater infinity pool, spotting marine life on a snorkelling excursion with Alex, or bobbing in the saltwater flotation pool. Huvafen is also home to the world's first underwater spa, which is more than a gimmick. A set of stairs leads into a room that sits under the shallow water of the lagoon, with panoramic windows looking onto reefs, where fish dash and dart. The signature treatment is delivered in an elevated position, allowing guests to be soothed by the underwater activity should they manage to keep their eyes open. There's also a semi-circular relaxation platform with views into the blue.



Middle: The underwater spa has panoramic aquatic views.
Above: A beach bungalow at Huvafen with a pool on the deck.



Sunset viewed from the main pool at Amilla.

The Javvu Spa is set amidst greenery at one end of the island, a cluster of ocean villas at the other, and Skyhouses, some with a luxurious, air-conditioned Bubble on the deck, in a private area in the centre.



A lagoon villa at Amilla.

This is not the only underground space here, either – the Maldives’ first underground wine cellar, Vinum, sits 8 metres below the island’s surface and is a treasure trove of rare-vintage wines.

On our final night at Huvafen, we forgo digging our toes into the sand floor of Celsius restaurant, instead walking along a pier lit up by the colours of sunset to Feeling Koi. This overwater restaurant combines Japanese flavours with a fiery Latin twist, creating a fusion cuisine that is as distinctive as it is delicious. The water lapping below is the perfect soundtrack for a superb meal.

Huvafen epitomises what the Maldives is all about – indulgence, romance and relaxation. The name sounds a lot like heaven. And it feels like it, too.

For Family Fun

Not only are seaplanes the only way to get to the more remote Maldivian islands, they also offer a broader perspective on the geography of the region. So it is with our flight to Amilla Fushi in the UNESCO-protected Baa Atoll. Like a stone skimming the surface of the water, the flight stops at two islands along the way, with incredible views of the islands, reefs, lagoons and atoll formations before each water landing. At Amilla, we are offloaded onto a floating pontoon, where we are collected by boat.

The first thing we notice as our khateeb Amnee drives us around the island is its size. It’s large enough to warrant the bicycles allocated to each villa, with a number of paths leading intriguingly off the main road. The Javvu Spa is set amidst greenery at one end of the island, a cluster of ocean villas at the other, and Skyhouses, some with a luxurious,



Taquitos at Celsius restaurant at Huvafen.



Seafood bouillabaisse at Fish and Chip Shop at Amilla.



Keto poke at the Wellness Café at Amilla.



Chocolate fondant at Barolo at Amilla.



Some of the Skyvillas at Amilla feature an air-conditioned Bubble on the deck.



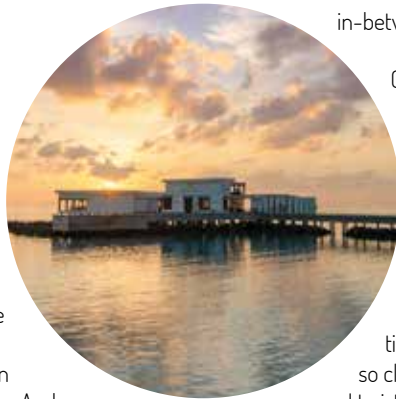
A manta ray at Amilla.

air-conditioned Bubble on the deck, in a private area in the centre. We are housed in a lagoon villa, which has a definite coastal vibe. It sits out over the water, the private infinity pool on the deck visually merging with the ocean.

The inflatable swan bobbing in the main pool, which is ringed by restaurants, is the first sign that Amilla has more of a family orientation. That and the plethora of water sports on offer, from jet skiing to windsurfing, kayaking and banana rides, not to mention diving. We spend one morning snorkelling along the reef outside our back door. On land, there are sports like badminton, tennis, volleyball and soccer. There are sunset and dolphin cruises, fishing trips and local village visits. And if the adults need a break, the Sultan's Village Kids Club offers all manner of entertainment for the younger folk.

The restaurants are bustling here, too. There's casual dining at The Emperor Beach Club and Joe's Pizza during the day, or keto and vegan alternatives at the spa's Wellness Café. At night, the choices include Italian at Barolo, tasty Asian dishes at Wok, and the Feeling Koi concept is replicated here, too. A fine choice is Fish and Chip Shop, which is an enormous step

up from a standard fish-and-chip experience – pick the right night and you can indulge in a set menu of champagne and lobster savouring that starts with bubbles and ends with chocolate truffles, with all manner of seafood in-between.



On our final afternoon at Amilla, we book on a snorkelling tour. On the boat ride over, marine biologist Fabien warns us there's no guarantee we'll see manta rays, but I remain quietly optimistic. A few minutes after we drop into the plankton-rich water, I spot two shadowy forms heading our way. They swoop and dive around us, at times disappearing, at times coming so close I exclaim through my snorkel as I twist to avoid contact. Towards the end of our time, four rays barrel-roll around us, filtering plankton through their large, open mouths. It's an incredible experience that typifies the Maldives – things happen here beyond your expectations.

Whether it's a romantic retreat or a family break, spectacular sunsets, exclusive experiences and fabulous food combine to create a feeling of calm. One thing is true: the Maldives is a destination that can never be forgotten. ■

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INFO

For more information about Huvafen Fushi, see www.huvafenfushi.com

For more information about Amilla Fushi, see www.amilla.mv

Above: Feeling Koi restaurant at Amilla. Left: An aerial view of Amilla Fushi.