



Paradise found



Shangri-La Villingili Maldives Suite dreams

Setting the tone
A neutral interior of natural wood furnishings draws focus to the outdoors

Nicci Perides crosses the equator for a weekend break at **Shangri-La Villingili**

Someone once told me that his idea of paradise is sitting on the verandah of a hut on a remote island, listening to the sound of the rain falling on a tin roof. I'm lying on the bed of my ocean villa on the island of Villingili in the Maldives; I can see the turquoise seas of the Indian Ocean gently swaying under thunderous rain. Only single flashes of yellow as the lightning strikes interrupt a sky of dark grey. There is no other place I would rather be at this very moment.

The Maldives is only a four-hour flight from Dubai, making it a perfect weekend getaway. I touch down in Male, the capital and the most inhabited island of the Maldives, and am immediately met by a Shangri-La representative, who swiftly takes our bags and escorts us to a lounge. He asks if we would like to relax in the lounge or go for a tour of the town while waiting for our domestic flight onwards. Tour it is.

The tour of Male only lasts an hour – the town is very small and has that unique laid-back island feel about it. The highlight has to be the mosque made entirely out of coral. The rest of the tourist attractions are centred on the colourful fruit and fish markets, where surprisingly for an island nation, most of the fish are imported.

Back at the airport, we board the domestic flight to Gan, the airport nearest Villingili Island, our final destination. The plane is comfortable and the 90-minute flight is mainly taken up by gazing out of the window at the tiny islands dotted around the turquoise sea below. As we cross the equator we receive a certificate commemorating the occasion.

We arrive at Gan by midday and another member of the Shangri-La staff greets us, grabs our bags and whisks us onto a speedboat bound for the island. Palm trees, water villas on stilts and the general manager await our arrival, complete with a fresh coconut and our own butler ready to take us to our villa. I'm truly in paradise now.

Check-in is done in the villa, so there is no wasting time in reception. There are several types of villa to choose from. We opt for the stilted variety – a private abode that looks out over the large, crystal-clear lagoon.

Villingili is located on top of a series of reefs, which makes for excellent snorkelling.

Turtles, parrot fish and so much more await just 20 metres or so from our private dock, and snorkelling equipment is available at no charge.

Whether you chose the water villa, ocean villa or the super-private tree house, each option comes complete with breathtaking views, large baths for two, outdoor and indoor showers, a mobile phone to summon your private butler whenever you choose, and two bikes for exploring the island at your leisure. The villas are done in neutral colours to ensure they almost blend into the idyllic environment. In fact as we travel around the island, we notice each set of villas has a unique feel. The tree houses have an emphasis on outdoor living – they are wilder and more rugged than the other categories. The ocean villas have that laid-back beach feel complete with towering palm trees, while the water villas are geared towards pure paradise, offering uninterrupted views across the lagoon. Sunset is simply magical.

If you're feeling particularly active, an organised bike tour takes you to the neighbouring islands to see what 'real life' is like for the Maldivians. Villingili is the only Maldivian island connected to other islands by a causeway.

The island is lush and green – wild on one side while the other is gentle and calm – perfect for relaxing under a palm tree on a white sandy beach.

For those of you who wish to indulge in doing absolutely nothing, your villa is very well equipped: in-villa dining is available at the push of a button, your private balcony is ideal for getting a perfect tan minus the tan lines, and the sea is right on your doorstep for late-night dips.

The following day we hop on our bikes and visit the island spa. The Chi spa is an unrivalled pocket of peace and tranquillity on the island. My partner and I opt for the 'Signature Partner's Treatment' – a 90-minute massage using cowry shells. This is something everyone needs to try. The cowry shells are warmed and then used to soothe away stress, leaving you in a completely relaxed state.

The three restaurants on the island are well worth venturing out for. The first night we try Dr. Ali's, a fusion of three tastes set across three lounges. Choose from Arabic, Indian Ocean or

foods from the South China Sea, or like us, try a little of everything. Delicious. Javvu is for all-day dining. If you choose to, you can have your lunch served in a cabana while you sunbathe by the pool.

For our final night on the island we try the highly recommended seafood restaurant Fashala. This is set on the northern tip of the island and has a panorama of the lagoon. The first and last course is buffet style. For the main course, try the lobster.

After four blissful days of exploring the island's water world, the lush green interior and indulging in the finest cuisine, it is time to go home. One last late lunch in Javvu as we look out over the beach and then onto the speedboat, as we quite literally head off into the sunset. ■

The important bit

What: Shangri-La Villingili Resort and Spa, Maldives

Where: Villingili Island, Addu Atoll, Republic of Maldives

Cost: Water Villa per night ranges from US\$1,100++ to US\$2,400++ depending on the season

Web: www.shangri-la.com



Overwater world
You're never far from the sea in Shangri-La's stilted water villas