



THE MAGIC OF THE MALDIVES

Ease into the rhythm of the wind and water, then let the quiet settle into you.



by **kara kurylłowicz**

Imagine it. Dream it. Do it. Winging it solo to the oh-so-romantic Maldives seemed a bit daft, especially at the height of the family-oriented Christmas season, but I was seduced by the prospect of my very own beach hut, the seaside spa and most importantly, the promise of utter peace and tranquility amidst some of the world's best diving.

The voyage to Komandoo, a tiny island just 100 metres wide and 500 metres long that is home to a small, exclusive resort in the heart of the Indian Ocean, is a whole series of stops and starts.

We leave Paris for a stopover in Qatar, an oil-rich Arab emirate that is otherworldly with buildings dropped haphazardly into an endlessly monochromatic bit of desert that now has the world's highest GDP per capita. Amidst the tourist throngs at the gleaming modern airport, I'm fascinated by the men in their fluttering headscarves and the women in their protective veils.

Yet when we finally leave for Malé, the beachless Maldivian capital that offers still sharper contrasts from its protected spot behind the seawalls, I'm more than ready. In

the smallest predominantly Muslim nation in the world, 25 percent of the Republic of the Maldives' 369,000 people are packed into a bustling, cramped city that hasn't the space to grow. However, the best reminder that I'm somewhere very different comes as dawn breaks and I experience the first of the five daily Adhans or Calls to Prayer, which I escape by arriving at the city's floatplane port.

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It's blissful after the capital's congestion, with more than a dozen red and white de Havilland Twin Otter floatplanes bobbing at the docks as two tanned, barefoot young men in white shorts and shirts with epaulets load our bags and check our tickets. Our baggage handlers/pilots welcome us aboard and go through the safety/seatbelt drill before revving the engines and aiming the 18-seater toward open water and big sky.

Seamless blue – below and above – we're winging it over 1,190 coral islands of which just 202 are inhabited. Eighty-seven little

bits of land are the exclusive domain of island resorts such as Komandoo, part of the Lhaviyani Atoll. After 40 minutes in the air, our pilots, the Kiwi and the Ozzie, both proud members of the Barefoot Pilots' Association, point our Twin Otter toward a raft that's barely as long as the plane itself. Saltwater spray ricochets off the floats. I scramble out, my bags follow me and the plane lifts off as my next ride splashes up for the short trip to the island.

I'm here – at last. Welcomed with a cool drink and many smiles, I'm cross-eyed with exhaustion after the long stopovers and longer flights. My hut, just steps from the water, revives me with its king-size bed and a bathroom that's one-third the size of the sleeping area, with a private but open-to-the-sky shower that has its own tiny garden.

Resorts like Komandoo are retreats. Secluded peaceful spots where you'll fall into the rhythm of the wind and water, your eyes stretching toward far-off horizons as the quiet settles into you. In a day or three I stop asking, "Now what?" and bask in the power of nothing. I eat, I sleep. I look at the water. I let the spa's masseuse chase the knots out of my head, my neck, my >>



back. I read. I nap. I drift along the beach, shadowing a stiff-legged sandpiper fishing for his breakfast.

My eyes track the parrot fish, the juvenile rays and blacktip sharks cruising by the deck at breakfast, lunch and dinner and suddenly, the siren song of the Indian Ocean is overwhelmingly clear. Dive time.

Diving is bliss. Before every dive, that little tingle of excitement, that dash of trepidation. But as I sink below the surface, I am lulled by the rhythm of my every breath. Inhale. Exhale. I hear myself breathe – the only sound in the silence of the sea.

Big beasts and tiny creatures, whether a little curious or a whole lot shy, share their watery world with us. Eels (moray, garden and snake) tuck themselves beneath rocks and frogfishes and scorpion fishes hide in plain view relying on their camouflage to blend in seamlessly. Delicately beautiful wrasses (the “exquisite”, one of the most common, is my favourite), the oh-so-aptly named sweetlips, elegant trumpetfish and glorious antias (“resplendent” antias

truly are gorgeous) make me smile around my mouthpiece. The power and grace of the rays (eagle, stingray) is a treat and the sharks are more entrancing than intimidating.

**I wish that I could show you...
the wonder of three weeks of sun, sky
and the most glorious sea life.**

I find fleeting magic at the Express dive site where the current typically lives up to its name. On this dive, that current carries me, weightless and floating, because I’ve finally learned not to futilely fight it. On a previous dive, Mick, a big-bellied, kindly fiftysomething contractor who spends six weeks a year at Komandoo, said, “Accept it - sometimes you just have to let go and ride it.” An apt life lesson that is working splendidly until the dive master grabs my arm and makes sure I latch on to a big rock. He points at the shark circling. My eyes grow wide, watching as the shark makes his rounds in swirling snowflake-like particulate – I’m respectful. I’m in awe.

Wonder in a night dive in the Indian Ocean. A perfectly flat sea. No moon. Velvet sky. A bazillion stars. Max is my buddy. He’s a Brit and he’s 13. The salt water is bathtub warm. There is infinite peace until my flashlight winks out. I’m so caught up in the moment, I’m happily sinking into the inky blackness until Max hauls me up to a safer, more sensible depth along the wall, which apparently doubles as a snoozery for redtooth triggerfish. They swim face first into the crevices without realizing how temptingly their tails stick out, tips crossed in utter relaxation. Yet Max and I wordlessly agree, it would be unkind to tweak a tail, however gently.

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Out of this world and into the next, sent off on a Call to Prayer—soothing and compellingly exotic, even infinitely appealing.

You can make the magic of the Maldives real – I did.

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