

A Private Paradise

Not just for honeymooners, the peaceful islands of the Maldives are the perfect spot for rekindling the most important relationship you have: with yourself.

By Hannah Bass



Tell people you're going to the Maldives and, as I quickly found out in the run-up to my trip, they'll assume you're taking the man in your life. The tropical nation, formed from two chains of 26 atolls—ring-shaped coral reefs that between them comprise around 1,190 islands—is one of the world's top honeymoon destinations. And, with unreal turquoise sea lapping at crystal white sand under postcard-perfect palm tree fringes, it's not hard to see why. In fact, during my stay at Constance Halaveli, the five-star resort that occupies an island in the Maldives' North Ari Atoll, I saw only one other set of travellers who weren't a loved-up couple.

But who says you need a man to enjoy the Maldives? With Constance Halaveli's focus on wellbeing and relaxation, it's the perfect destination for a rejuvenating getaway with a gal pal, or indeed for solo travellers looking to get back in touch with themselves. So, in the spirit of my generation's feminist anthem (Destiny's Child's *Independent Women*, of course) I decided to take myself on a honeymoon.

Most of the Maldives' resorts occupy their own islands, and Constance Halaveli is no different. At 500 metres long and 200 metres wide, it's pretty bijoux, and arriving by seaplane at dusk, I could see the entire island laid out before me—circled by palm trees and sand, with a densely green clump of jungle

Escape and Explore

at one end and, extending from the other, a long boardwalk from which branched wooden water villas, rising up from the sea on stilts. After a warm welcome on the jetty, I was pleased to see that my decision only to pack flip flops had been vindicated. Shoes are barely necessary here—the reception, bar and restaurant areas are built directly onto sand and I was to be barefoot for the majority of my trip. Not to come over all hippy, but there's definitely something about casting off your shoes that encourages you to cast off your worries, too.

Constance Halaveli offers all types of villas, from a huge "Presidential" house to two-storey villas with their own private gardens and outdoor bathrooms, but I'd gone for one set over the sea, which only deepened the atmosphere of peace and contemplation. The bedroom and bathroom are both spacious and super-luxe, but it was the view that they both opened out onto that made me gasp (literally): A private infinity pool looking out on to the curved tip of the island and the ocean beyond. As you can imagine, this is where I spent most of my time! In fact, I had to drag myself away for my first dinner, at Meeru, the beach grill restaurant, where I ate the freshest tuna tartare I've ever tasted, followed by steak and lobster, beside an open fire pit with my feet in the sand and looking out on to the darkness of the waves.

The food, while I'm on the subject, was one of the most delightful surprises of my stay at Constance Halaveli. Considering guests are quite literally a captive market—you'd have to swim to another island to eat elsewhere—a

more cynical resort might have let standards slip and still charged a premium anyway. But not at the Constance, where every meal we ate at its three restaurants was memorable, from the Japanese buffet at Jahaz, where I loaded up on yummy sushi, to the Asian gastronomy at Jing (I recommend the Chef's Special tasting menu, which began with lobster bisque with caviar and ended on frozen mango with yuzu ice cream). The freshness of the fruit and fish were something to be savoured—a local fisherman brings his catch to the island four times a week and, on the night I arrived, he'd just come up trumps with a bumper haul of huge lobsters. Plus, as the Maldives is a Muslim nation, halal food comes as standard.

After a peaceful first night, lulled to sleep by the sound of waves swirling around the stilts beneath my villa, I awoke at dawn for a private yoga session on the beach. Constance Halaveli offers morning classes in the spa's yoga room and sunset sessions

on the beach, but guests can also book in for a private class. At dawn, we focused on hatha yoga and meditation, which, combined with the crisp sea breeze (a welcome break from Dubai's humid heat) and the slowly rising sun, was the most serene start to a morning. The following day we'd do some fast vinyasa yoga in the fitness centre that I definitely counted as cardio. I really wanted to work on my yoga during my trip and, with all the on-site expertise plus private little nooks on the island in which to

practise, it was the perfect spot. Following my class I found a secluded, jungly area at the tip of the island and finally got into a handstand using a convenient palm tree for support, before cooling off in the gorgeous, sea-facing main pool and heading to breakfast at Jahaz.

Breakfast every morning was a complete joy. Tables and chairs are set out on the beach, under the shade of palm and banyan trees, and I enjoyed a gluttony of fresh, vibrant fruit while looking out onto two



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Getting There

Part of the reason the Maldives is such an attractive destination for holidaymakers from the Middle East? Well, besides the obvious—out of this world scenery—plus the convenience factor of being in an Islamic country, it's a relatively short flight (between four and four-and-a-half hours) from the UAE. Several airlines operate direct flights from Dubai to Ibrahim Nasir International Airport, situated on Hulhulé Island, right next to the capital Malé, and the short distance means that you can also fly for less on budget airlines such as FlyDubai. On arrival, a Constance Halaveli concierge will meet you and transport you to their comfortable lounge—complete with snacks and wifi—while you wait for your transfer. The best way to reach the resort is by seaplane, and the hotel can arrange these flights for you. Trans Maldivian Airways is the main provider and operates flights from 6am-6pm.



and relaxed from my massage, I sweated it out in the steam room and then took a dip in the plunge pool looking out to sea, feeling as though I'd discovered a little paradise at the very edge of the world.

Of course, it's not all about R&R—I also wanted to stay active (and the glass-walled fitness centre and tennis court shaded by tropical trees certainly helped with that!) as well as get out and see some of the marine wildlife that the Maldives is famous for.

Constance Halaveli offers every kind of water sport you could wish for, from sailing to scuba diving, but I opted for a simple snorkel trip.

Having spent half my childhood in the Caribbean, I thought I'd been spoilt for snorkelling expeditions, but the biodiversity around the reefs was astounding. One evening I went for fish-feeding on the jetty, which I mistakenly thought would be rather dull, akin to chucking bread at desultory pond ducks, but instead I saw black tipped sharks, manta rays and huge,

jumping black jack fish all vying for scraps beneath my feet. The snorkelling was no different. We were taken out on a dhoni, a large wooden boat traditional to the Maldives that somewhat resembles the dhows found in the Gulf, but with a flat top on which I sunbathed until we dropped anchor nearby to a collection of coral reefs. Each of the Maldivian atolls is formed by a large, ancient ring of coral and the reefs, like strange, inverted, underwater forests, were vast, plummeting so deep into the water that they disappeared into dark haze. Under the watchful eye of our guide who, like every staff member I encountered at Constance Halaveli was not only supremely helpful but a real laugh, we explored the reefs from just below the surface. Each was alive with colourful fish—from tiny little "Finding Nemos" to small blacktip reef sharks (yup, I can now officially say that I've swum with sharks!). After half an hour, we spotted what we'd really been looking for:

blue rowing boats bobbing on waves so clear and aquamarine that they looked permanently Photoshopped, and watching the cheeky resident heron amuse the other guests (most amusing, apparently, was him stealing the veal bacon right off my plate one morning!).

After breakfast, I headed to U Spa for a relaxing massage. The spa is set on the boardwalk among the water villas and, during my delicious treatment, I looked down onto the water below through a window cut into the floor. Feeling loose

Nestled among the coral, a large, real life turtle. I came to the surface grinning like a kid—and that was before our guide told me that, according to Maldivian tradition, I would now have good luck for a year!

I certainly came back to Dubai feeling lucky. My friends told me I looked rested—and very, very tanned thanks to many hours spent lazing on the beach, by the main pool on the sunbeds set over a pebbled stream, or in my very own infinity pool. But beyond what anyone could see on the outside, I felt I'd regained a sense of true wellness and peace. Whether you choose to indulge in the spa, exercise your inner yogi or just enjoy the tranquil scenery, this dreamlike island will take you on a journey back to your self.