

By The Light Of The Moon

You don't have to travel too far and wide to discover a slice of tranquil paradise—just a short flight and speedy boat ride away from home, the Sheraton Full Moon Resort & Spa is a spectacular hideaway.

By Yi-Hwa Hanna



It would be easy to write off the Sheraton Full Moon Resort and Spa as a convenient option for a pre-packaged, soulless holiday spot if you didn't know any better. After all, it's so close to the airport, and while it certainly isn't cheap, it's a lot more affordable than many of the other options in the Maldives, especially those that offer the same standard of luxury service and quality in

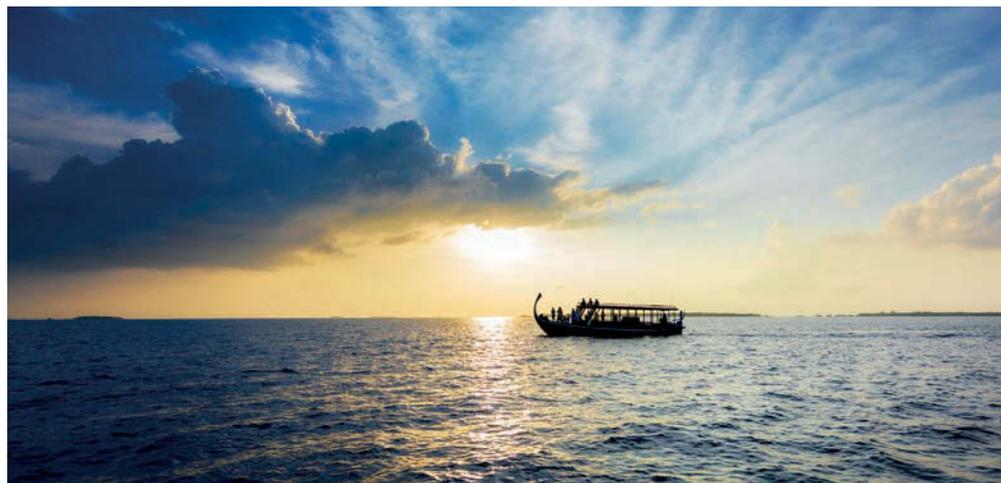
terms of food, accommodation and activities. Thankfully, we do know better, and you'd be remiss to do so since, although it does at first seem almost too good to be true, it is, truth be told, just all good.

First things first, there's that convenience factor: Despite the fact that the Maldives—or its capital, Male, anyway—is just a four-hour flight away, depending on which location in

the Maldives you're headed to, a trip there can actually wind up being more tiring than you think—particularly if you're just going for a long weekend—due to long transfer times, and the fact that seaplanes only tend to operate during daylight hours, which means your travel times instantly become more restricted with resorts that are only accessible by seaplane. The Sheraton Full Moon Resort

and Spa nixes that problem, since not only is it a boat ride away, but on one of their comfortable speedboats, the ride doesn't even take the typical 30-60 minutes—it's actually just a 15-20 trip away. Yet despite its close location to Male airport, it feels like it's a world away, and the only time you remember how close you are to it is when the twinkling lights of the airplanes glitter silently past the resort's skyline at night. This also means that not only do you not lose time in getting there, you're actually getting the most bang for your buck possible since the resort is

The hotel boasts a full-service water sports centre, along with a large tennis court, an impressive gym, and yoga classes



so aware of this, they're used to their guests needing to arrive a little earlier or leave a little later. As a result, they've created little relaxation areas in the hotel—one for Club Lounge members and another for all guests—where you're able to shower, read, connect to the WiFi, and generally kick back and enjoy yourself in comfort until you hop on the boat back to the airport when leaving, after enjoying the beaches and facilities to the max regardless of what your check-out time is. It was a welcome surprise for us, particularly as we had an

overnight flight before returning home straight to work, and was an intelligent feature we'd not yet seen in any of the previous resorts we'd stayed at in the Maldives during our previous visits.

All In The Details

It's thoughtful little touches like this that seem to be the signature of this resort—where the guests' comfort is always the priority, and the management and staff here are able to truly put themselves in your shoes while thinking of what you might need on a very practical level—that can take your stay here to such a high standard. Each room, from the water bungalows to the beachside chalets and cottages, is fully equipped with all of the amenities you'd expect from a five-star resort, from the bathrobes and slippers and hairdryers to beach towels to be enjoyed alongside your individual pools or decks, along with an extensively stocked

mini bar that boasts everything from healthy nuts to gummy bears and a full range of beverages. If you didn't want to leave the confines of your little hideaway, it'd be easy to do so, and even more so thanks to a generously sized room-service menu amassed from the offerings of their various restaurants. Over in the club lounge area, where guests with a loyalty programme for Starwood Resorts are able to enter and spend the day, there's a quiet infinity pool, and a lounge with a full range of snacks, TV services and plenty of other games to be played. In the library and other recreation rooms across the resort, you'll

find a wide collection of books and DVDs that can be watched in the comfort of your room. There's even an orchid garden in the grounds, built simply for the enjoyment of the guests, and it's a beautiful sight to behold with its radiant colours and blooming buds. The attention to detail doesn't just stop in the rooms and the resort's layout, either: It's been thought into the entire framework of how this place operates, with the hotel's various dining establishments designed to hit the sweet spot when it comes to guests' needs. Since the island is quite large, guests staying on the side of the island that's a little further away from the main bar can enjoy a beverage at the quieter Kakuni hut, while those looking for a light snack and just not in the mood for a full-service restaurant can instead pop into the T-For Tea House, where they're able to nibble on a range of Asian dim-sum, other light snacks and desserts. The hotel has also been designed with plenty of activities in mind, with a full-service watersports centre offering an enormous range of activities at individual costs depending on what you choose, as well as a good variety of free-to-enjoy activities, from a large tennis court to an impressively-furnished gym, as well as yoga classes that are offered both in the club lounge's private deck area, or



inside the spa, which is housed in its own island.

Rest and Relaxation

Tucked away on an entirely separate part of the resort, the spa is, quite literally, an oasis of bliss. We'd suggest booking in several hours for your treatments, if not half a day, since both the men and women's areas boast their own individual pool area, along with a shower and steam room, and a hydro-jet shower, making it an excellent place to wind down before enjoying a treatment. When it comes to treatments, there's a full range of services to be enjoyed, from an enormous

There's so much abundant sea life to be seen, *from shoals of colourful fish to turtles and black-tipped reef sharks* /

number of massages targeting everything from muscle aches to relaxation and boosting circulation. The massages can be carried out in individual or couple rooms, and if you choose not to have music playing in the background, you can listen to the soothing natural sound of the waves crashing behind you, and the birds chirping beyond. The spa island is commended for being

one of the most nature-rich areas of the hotel, with everything from tropical birds and fruit bats flying overhead to rays, colourful fish and even the occasional turtle swimming in the turquoise waters beneath it. Our treatment, a soothing massage carried out with aromatherapy oils that left us utterly tranquil, began with a warm foot bath, before leaving us sinking into

the comfortable massage beds an hour later. After your treatment, the relaxation room is a glass-walled haven looking out onto the lush green garden of the island, making it a perfect spot in which to kick back with a magazine and sip on some ginger or lemongrass tea, while snacking on nuts and dates. If it's skincare you're after, the spa offers a range of facials too, along with body



Come Fly With Me

Despite the fact that the Maldives is typically recognised as a luxury destination, getting there from the GCC doesn't have to cost an arm and a leg. FlyDubai operates daily flights to and from Male, your starting point hub for pretty much anywhere you're headed in the Maldives, with more than one timing option on certain days of the week. On arrival, whether you'll be transferring to a seaplane or taking a boat to your final destination (or even just stopping in the capital), the timings are convenient, to boot. If you'd like to travel in comfort, FlyDubai's Business Class makes it a breeze—and not just because you'll get to enjoy the lounge and priority boarding while you're at the airport. On the flight itself, Business Class includes meals and entertainment (which can be purchased in Economy), and its reclining seats are considerably spacious, which makes it easy to get some kip once you're bundled up in one of their velvety blankets and plush pillows.

With average temperatures ranging between 26-25°C at any given time throughout the year, there isn't really a bad time to visit this alluring part of the Indian subcontinent, famed as much for its romantic vistas of azure waters, white sand beaches and stunning sunsets, as it is for its abundant sea life that make up a diver's or snorkeller's dream. Find out more and book flights at FlyDubai.com.

scrubs, manicures and pedicures, and even waxing services, with a full range of both relaxing, pampering and beauty-focused services should you so desire. We'd just suggest booking your spot in early, since it's a popular destination on the island, and once you've been there, it's easy to see why.

Adrenaline Rush

If you're more of the raring-to-go type (or are simply looking for a way to get your heart pumping before you book yourself in for that relaxing massage), one of the resort's strongest fortes is the fact there is just so much to do here. If the tennis courts, gym and yoga classes don't strike your fancy, and you're not in the mood to stretch out by the large

freshwater pool with its verdant surrounds and gushing waterfall—you'll be spoilt for choice when it comes to places where you can soak up some rays, between the private decks and poolside, or the stretches of beach found in most of the accommodation options from the bungalows to the cottages and villas, and the pool that boasts a bar with excellent frozen drinks mere steps away—then the diving and watersports centre is sure to keep you busy. In fact, there's so much to do that you're more likely to struggle to fit in everything you want to try, rather than being at a loss for what to do. During surf season, the resort offers surf lessons and board rentals, while stand up paddleboarding is available at any time in their

turquoise lagoon—where we saw some baby black-tipped reef sharks (relax, they don't bite) along with some rays during our paddle. There are plenty of boat-based excursions as well, offering snorkelling to various well-loved spots that the resort claims first priority over amidst the many other resorts and cruise ships trying to make their way to the most coveted underwater neighbourhoods. Visiting the area without going on a snorkelling trip would be an absolute waste of the incredible aquatic surrounds, since there's so much abundant sea life to be seen, from shoals of colourful fish to turtles and harmless (but exciting) black-tipped reef



sharks. The excursions go to various locations, such as Fish Aquarium (tip: This one's great for shark sightings), Coral Reef, Fish Point and Turtle Reef and Stingray Reef, where you're highly likely to see the creatures the areas are named after. If you're very keen and your schedule allows for it, you can head to all of them, since no one area will be quite the same experience. You can also take a boat out to the capital city for a guided tour (seeing the fish market in town is a great contrast when you've been snorkelling amidst the waters for days), or you can head out for your own fishing trip—there are both handline fishing and deep sea fishing options available—if you so desire. If that doesn't strike your fancy and you're looking for something a little more secluded, you can also take a trip out to a local island, many of which are quite remote,

offering you some quiet and peace of mind. Dolphin watching cruises are another unmissable experience, especially since they're usually timed to coincide with the sunset, promising an incredible view right from the water while the playful dolphins jump for joy and often come up to say hello right by the boat.

The resort also offers PADI courses for both children and adults if it's more deep-sea adventure you seek, with their lagoon being an ideal place in which to learn, before plenty of diving options for every level of diver from the novice to the more experienced, such as Adventure Dive, Open Water Dive, Emergency First Response, Rescue Diver, Dive Master (on request), and Refresher courses offered. They also offer Nitrox, and an Extreme Maldives Dive for those who are adequately certified and can confirm a

24-hour surface interval prior to flying. Valid dive insurance is mandatory for all divers, so don't forget it if that's in your plans. If you'd like to keep your activities above ground (but still wet and wild), the resort also offers jet skiing, fun tube and banana boat rides, seabobs—a unique vessel in which you mimic a snorkelling-like action while whizzing above ground on water, while being able to put your face right into it—as well as speedboat rides, wind surfing, catamaran sailing, water skiing, wakeboarding, and parasailing, which offers an unbeatable view over the stunning waters and islands nearby. It's a must-try for the more adventurous and adrenaline-seeking among us. The daily shark-feeding is another can't-miss activity: Each day, guests are welcome to come and watch the black-tipped reef sharks being fed chunks of tuna

by the bay, though the staff are dedicated to ensuring that the viewings don't disrupt the natural order of the sealife too much, which we admired. It's this endless list of things to do that make the resort equally as appealing for a couple seeking a romantic getaway as it is for a group of friends after an energizing yet relaxing break, or a family looking for a great choice for a mini-break.

Wining and Dining

All of that activity is sure to work up an appetite, and thankfully, the resort's dining options serve up plenty of mouthwatering options to keep your tastebuds happy. With the activities so plentiful that you could easily stay here for weeks on end, the restaurants are diverse enough to keep you satiated throughout a stay without getting bored. The main restaurant, Feast, serves up a wicked breakfast spread in



the mornings, while at night, it offers different themed evenings, often with live entertainment to match what dishes its been cooking up. At Sand Coast, you'll find a diverse menu of options with dishes from East Asia to South Asia, as well as the West, along with separate menu option for vegetarians and vegans, and the more fitness-focused and health-conscious among us. If you're after a bit of spice, we highly recommend Baan Thai, a Thai restaurant that serves up such authentic cuisine it's reminiscent of actually being in Thailand. From delicious (and generously sized) noodle dishes like Pad Thai and Pad

See Ew, to spicy curries and crunchy, warm spring rolls dipped into a savoury sweet and sour sauce, this is a meal that your palate won't easily forget, and it's easy to linger over a meal here with a bottle of vino from their extensive menu, before ambling back to your room or villa with a full belly before you relax on your private deck, or head to the bar.

Seafood-lovers will delight in Sea Salt, an elegant restaurant serving up hearty, juicy and perfectly seared steaks, along with a full selection of fresh seafood that's caught daily and typically available in live tanks. Moreish sides, irresistible desserts, and a long beverage

list complete an evening of romantic barefoot glamour. Private dining is also an option if you so desire, be it on a sandback or right on the resort's quiet coastline.

Once you've finished your meal, it would be remiss to not check out the Anchorage Bar,

due to its almost nightly live entertainment that boasts a number of excellent bands. The bar serves up a full selection of drinks, including some hard-to-find craft hops that we were impressed to see on the menu, and the friendly staff are equally happy to bring you cold ones with your light meals throughout the day here as you watch the sunset, as they are during the busy evenings. It's the perfect place to kick back on a lounge and enjoy the good life by the light of the moon. ■

The resort offers PADI courses for both children and adults, from *Adventure and Open Water Dives* to *Refresher and Nitrox*