

PARADISE FOUND

Sarah Rodrigues stays at the Outrigger Konotta, and discovers that the destination is absolutely worth the journey



Smiling staff are there to greet you as you arrive

We don't yet know that the letters, suspended from a wooden archway on the arrival jetty of the Outrigger Resort, spell out Maruhabaa - 'welcome' in Maldivian - but the smiling faces lined up to greet us say it, ever so eloquently, anyway. Located in the Gaafu Dhaalu atoll, in the southern end of the Maldives, the resort isn't the easiest of places to access - from London, we've changed in Dubai and flown to Male, where we were met by an Outrigger representative who arranged for us to get on an hour-long domestic flight to Kaadedhdhoo. From here, a speedboat whizzed us, rather stomach-lurchingly, to the island. The bottles of iced tea we were given when we boarded were a lovely touch, but it's safe to say that we didn't manage to drink a drop of them.

Still, how can you expect to reach paradise without a fairly convoluted journey? If the Outrigger Konotta was easy to get to, it wouldn't be as remote and untouched as it is - and in any case, it's not as if you have to lift a finger once you've arrived. The devotion to guests' care and comfort is extraordinary, and any memory of the arduous travel soon fades when we're walking the narrow strip of fine white sand to stand with our feet in that water of impossibly shifting blues, the sight of

which had glued us to the plane windows on the final flight.

Inevitably, the fatigue eventually catches up with us - and where better, to give in to it than the supremely comfortable beds of our beachfront villa? I have never known pillows, nor sleep, like it. It's almost lunchtime by the time any of us surface, but our absence at breakfast has been noted and it's not long before our villa host is at our door with a tray of

fresh pastries, juices, coffee and fruit. Who wouldn't tackle such a journey when this level of attention awaits at the other end?

For an island that's less than one square kilometre in size, it's amazing how easy it is to fill the days. The accommodation, so often just a place to change and sleep, is so beautiful and luxurious that it's often difficult to drag ourselves away from it: set over two floors, it features a vast living space, huge bedrooms, enormous bathrooms - one with a decadent circular free standing tub - an outdoor terrace and a private pool. Dense foliage separates us from the beach, and adds to the feeling of utter privacy and seclusion; occasionally, down the narrow pathway that leads to the beach we glimpse someone strolling on the sand - other than that, our only visitors are a series of cheeky lizards. The lagoon villas lack the foliage, but on the other hand you can descend the ladder from the side of your pool directly into the waters of the Indian Ocean to swim with baby reef sharks and luminous fish.

Unusual though it is for every villa to have a decent-sized pool rather than a mere plunge pool, the communal pool has its own appeal as well - not least its proximity to the bar. Lined on two sides by curtained pool beds, you can be as sociable or as private as you choose - and the electric sockets and strong WiFi signal even mean that, if needs must, you can check in with work. As far as daily offices



A speedboat delivers you to the resort's welcome jetty

“How can you expect to reach paradise without a fairly convoluted journey?”

go, this one is pretty hard to find fault with - although some bosses might take issue with the constant staring out at the blue of the sea, just beyond the pool's infinity edge.

Snorkelling gear is available free of charge from the dive centre, where other activities, including jet skiing, windsurfing and water skiing can be booked. From the back of our villa, we can cross the sand and walk just a few steps into that first stripe of milky blue water, to be immediately surrounded by darting fish and sculptural coral formations. Venture further out, to where that pale blue becomes a startling azure, and you're at the drop, the edge of the reef, immersed in an otherworldliness that's as astonishing as it is humbling.

Yes, the coral has been bleached by rising temperatures, but diligent regeneration efforts are already bearing fruit, and the patches to which colour has tentatively returned are wonderfully vivid. Bright schools of fish flick in dazzling displays of synchronicity, huge clams lazily open and shut their crimped lips, and iridescent scales disappear into deep crevasses too quickly for me to identify all of their colours.

Resident marine biologist, Joan Li, is passionate on the subject and eager to raise awareness of the issues among guests, with the OZONE (Outrigger's Zone) initiative, as well as by way of talks and guiding. Those who have never snorkelled before can have instruction in the pool; for guests who don't like to get wet (and surprisingly, given the location, there are many of them) there's the option to explore the reef via a semi-submarine, which glides along the reef's edge, allowing passengers to see the activity among the coral from one side of the boat, and the startling depths of the deep blue from the other. Guests can also join the resort's monthly coral restoration workshop, which has so far given a second wind to over 400 branches of coral - and, given that plastic pollution is such a huge issue for marine



Each villa has a substantial private pool

life, the presence of an onsite desalination plant, which dispenses with plastic water bottles and ensures that fresh water in sterilised glass decanters is available all over the island, is reassuring.

If the thought of the Maldives has generally conjured up images of swooning honeymooners drinking champagne under the stars, then the mix at the Outrigger comes as something of a revelation. There are couples of all ages, and while the beachside barbecue dining option makes it perfectly possible to eat in a gentle blaze

of lanterns on the sand, there are also several families with young children. Time to oneself is made possible by an excellent kids' club, cunningly located just opposite the sublime spa, with its five treatment rooms and hydrotherapy pool that aquapummels you into a state of floppy bliss. Although the resort is small, its design also enhances privacy, so the Thursday night poolside cocktail party, hosted by the management, provides an enjoyably low key way to socialise with both staff and other guests before moving on to dinner.



Lagoon villas enable you to jump straight into the sea from your deck



Dense foliage almost conceals the on-land section of the resort

» It's difficult to articulate just how surprising the food was. On the one hand, we knew full well that a five-star resort wasn't likely to serve up anything second rate; on the other, awareness of its isolated and difficult to reach location made us curious about the logistics of catering. Personally, my curiosity was in no way sated - I still have absolutely no idea how the Executive Chef Chris Long, originally from Doncaster, and his team manage it - but the food, at every meal, was superb, not only spanning a huge range of choices but also sparklingly fresh, packed with zingy flavours and beautifully cooked, with dietary requirements met with apparent ease and genuine warmth. Astonishingly, every member of staff seems to know each guest by name and to know what their requirements are; as a coeliac I'm accustomed to swerving the bakery table at breakfast and stunned when a beaming waiter approaches my table and asks whether I'd like gluten free pancakes or French Toast. No less delightful is a night at Nala Rah, where the Teppanyaki chef throws razor-sharp knives in the air, makes an egg perform a dizzying breakdance on the flat edge of a blade and then throws it into the air before catching it in his hat - all of which would be impressive enough if the food wasn't sensational, which it is, so much so that even the Japanese guests are beaming and applauding.

Aerial photos show the extent to which the vegetation has been allowed to spring back post-construction: from above, the Outrigger Konotta looks for all the world



Paradise is ... fine white sand and crystal clear water

like a dense jungle ringed by white sand, with the odd roof just visible, and the long leg of the jetty from which the over-water villas fan. Walking between restaurant, villa and spa by day, you wander down verdant tunnels of spiky foliage and bright flashes of flower, sheltered from the equatorial heat. Mosquitoes are, unsurprisingly, plentiful, but repellent is supplied in your bathroom; another thoughtful touch that leaves your spending money for coconut husk bowls from the gift shop, and coconut body scrub, produced on site, from the spa.

The thought of a long journey at the end of any holiday is never the happiest of prospects; at the end of this one, it's

positively heartbreaking. As our boat scuds off towards the domestic airport, we watch the waving figures on the jetty until we can see them no more and I'm left to ponder the wisdom of one of the other guests, an Outrigger regular, who had told me that he was breaking up the journey in Abu Dhabi on the way back to the UK.

"Oh, for a night?" I'd asked. "That's such a good idea."

He had looked at me incredulously. "Seven nights," he'd said, with a subtle but unmistakable emphasis on the 'seven'. "You can't just come somewhere like this and expect that you'll be okay with going home again."

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