

# Dip beneath the surface of the Maldives

*Laura Ivill* enjoys diving, dancing and a massage in full view of tropical fish and coral reefs

**A**fascination with the coral reefs of the Maldives, rich in sealife, has made this one of the world's most exotic playgrounds. Divers come to enter a spectacularly different world. There are, however, easier and innovative ways to experience the ocean's wonders — but only by splashing the cash in this luxury destination.

Fly into the capital, Malé, and you are met by an unforgettable sight — the white-sand islets sprinkled with palm trees look like pearls set in an aquamarine sea. Development has been restrained to discreet low-rise resorts of luxurious bungalows and infinity pools, and the powdery-white sand is raked to within an inch of its life by staff at dawn.

The double chain of 1,192 low-lying islands and islets of the Maldives (the highest point is 2.4m) is strung out north-south 400km (250 miles) from India. Clustered into atolls, their formation that holds the key to the richness of the reefs and sealife.

Only 1 per cent of this archipelago is land. Millions of years ago, volcanic islands

would have been visible above the ocean, and corals started to grow around them. Over hundreds of thousands of years, the corals grew up and the islands began to sink until they disappeared, each leaving a lagoon surrounded by a barrier reef. This is an atoll; 26 atolls make up the Maldives, each containing coral islets, which the resorts have colonised.

Fish love reefs — only 0.1 per cent of the oceans' surface has them, yet they are home to 25 per cent of marine life. It is highly likely that your resort will have a dive centre so that you can learn to scuba dive, hire equipment or join a snorkelling group to the best sites.

Whether diving or snorkelling, you will be surrounded by bright orange clown fish with their distinctive black and white stripes, "beaky" parrotfish, wafer-thin butterflyfish and bright blue and yellow sturgeon fish. They swim in schools, darting past in clouds of colour, or mingle in shoals, nibbling at the coral. From an overwater villa, it is a common event to see chunky jackfish swim past in the lagoon, and you are also likely to spot stingrays, manta rays, eagle rays, turtles, friendly whale sharks and reef sharks.

Access to the reefs differ from resort to resort. Taj Exotica is fringed by a magnificent shallow lagoon that is ideal for a dip, but it is a boat ride to the snorkelling reef. At Huvafen Fushi, beach bungalows look out over the sand, so guests can grab their complimentary snorkel and flippers and, just metres from the shore, will discover the wonders of the reef without ever being out of their depth.

Huvafen Fushi has another treat for



nature lovers: the Lime spa offers overwater and underwater treatments. From a glass floor pavilion, wooden stairs descend to an underwater spa. Floor-to-ceiling windows look out on to the sea bed where a coral garden is well established. Some corals have been "adopted" by guests and planted by the resort as a lasting contribution to the marine environment.

Stretch out for a massage and, as sunlight pours down, clouds of tropical fish in their mother-of-pearl coats swim into view.

Oriental Sweetlips add to the allure of clear Maldivian waters

It feels like being in a giant aquarium, yet illuminated by sunlight and visited by sea creatures swimming freely.

So successful has the underwater spa been that it has been followed by the world's first underwater music club, Subsix, Niyama, at a sister resort farther south. This larger resort has activities galore, because sometimes couples want different things — perhaps he wants to flop out on a lounger, yet she loves to be busy. Back together, it will be time to party,

starting with an after-dinner drink at Subsix, built as a watertight circular room for 45 guests, and then sunk 6m below the surface. They should not be surprised to find big-name artists on the bill — Tinie Tempah played the opening party in October and London DJ and producer Kris Di Angelis has held a residency here already.

Into the wee hours, underwater lights illuminate the coral garden while guests drink and dance the night away — without being hampered by a tank and a mask.

### Mood food

Lunch while gazing at the far horizon shimmering in the equatorial sunshine. Dine with the sea beneath your feet. Or try something a little more conventional. The Maldives has a meal for every moment.

How about a light meal of raw ingredients? At RAW, built over the lagoon at Huvafen Fushi, Daniel Johnson, the executive chef, presides over dishes such as horseradish cured Angus beef, tofu guacamole and scallion ginger dressing.

Huvafen Fushi's fine-dining restaurant, Vinium, is an intimate underground room lit by candles and lined with wine stacked to the rafters — a sample of the 700 bins in the cellar.

Anantara Kihavah Villas has the Sea, Fire, Salt, Sky complex. Sea is truly undersea with picture windows and angelfish darting by; Fire features grilled dishes teppenyaki style, such as local rock lobster; Salt has the likes of red snapper baked on a Himalayan salt block; and Sky, the rooftop bar, offers all-day dining with food on skewers; try and rouse yourself after lunch or you will find you are still encumbered there when cocktail hour arrives.

If molecular gastronomy with an Asian twist appeals, try Niyama's overwater restaurant, Edge, accessible only by boat.

# Serendipity, sealed with a nice cuppa

*James Ellis* takes a tour of Sri Lanka's breathtaking sights

**A**NCIENT Arabian travellers knew the island of Sri Lanka, shaped like a teardrop falling from the southern tip of India, as Serendip. It is the origin of the word serendipity, the chance finding of something good or beautiful.

It is an apt name because, whether you come here by choice or accident, there is every chance that you will leave finding that you have discovered so much more than you expected.

For many people, Sri Lanka is a tropical haven. A series of gorgeous Bounty-advert beaches and exclusive hotels, where the chance to fly and flop, luxuriate in Ayurvedic treatments and sample amazing local cuisine (the freshest fish and spicy curries feature highly), is enough.

But explore further and you will find an island redolent with ancient legends, where advanced civilisations once ruled from magnificent palaces and where a verdant interior contains plains, hills and wildlife.

For a beach holiday, most base themselves on the idyllic sands of the west coast that stretch from the city of Negombo, just north of the capital, Colombo, to the fortress city of Galle, a four-hour drive south. From anywhere on the west coast, the island's principle sights can be discovered easily on a round trip — and the journey is comfortable enough, whether by train or car, thanks to decent roads and short distances.

Heading north from the coast, the first stops should be the ancient capitals of Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa. The former, from which Sri Lanka was ruled for 1,300 years until the 10th century, plays a significant role as one of the world's major

Buddhist shrines. According to legend, a cutting from Buddha's fig tree was brought here in the 3rd century and flourished — and palaces, monasteries, lakes and monuments spread out from it.

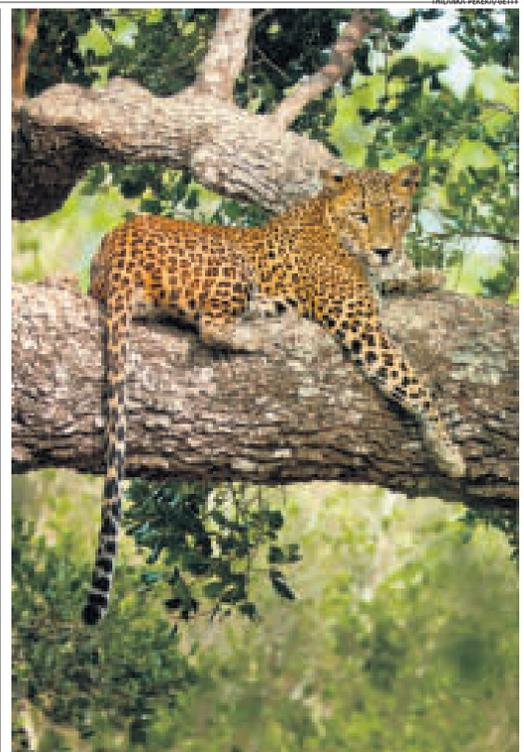
Anuradhapura's glory came to an end in 993. Abandoned when the country fell to Chola invaders, it was overtaken by the jungle and lay undisturbed for many years until the glorious ruins were uncovered and opened to the public.

Nearby Polonnaruwa became the country's first city when King Vijayabahu I defeated the Chola in 1070. It was the country's capital for only 200 years but is as impressive as Anuradhapura and is home to magnificent Buddhist statues. While the two former capitals have some breathtaking architecture, there is breathtaking natural beauty at Sigirya. The vast, clay-red rock that rises from the plains of Central Province remains one of Sri Lanka's most potent symbols. The rock was fashioned into the shape of a lion when an ancient city was placed at its summit in the 5th century and became the country's capital for a short time.

The ruined city is not as well preserved as other ancient capitals, but the trek up is worth the visit. Surrounded by landscaped gardens, the walk takes 90 minutes and offers the opportunity to marvel at frescoes of lascivious ladies in a cave half-way up.

The views from the top are stupendous and it is possible to pick out a number of other sights. Dambulla is a cave-temple with more amazing frescoes and 150 incredible statues of Buddha; Matala Spice Garden is where you can learn all about the herbs used extensively in Sri Lankan cooking, and the Pinnawala Elephant Orphanage is a conservation centre for the mighty beasts.

If the heat and culture overload have started to take their toll, the next stop is the perfect place to catch breath — and have a nice cuppa. Nuwara Eliya is a city high in Sri Lanka's hill country. Once a cooling bothole for British colonialists, it is also home to the country's tea industry.



Leopards are all too easily spotted in Sri Lanka's Yala National Park

“As well as elephants you'll have the best chance to see leopards

You can potter from one boutique hotel to another through magnificent hills and deep valleys. Women still pluck tea by hand and many smallholdings and manufacturers offer tasting sessions — look out for white tea, originally grown for a Chinese emperor. Said to be the most expensive in the world, even today it is supposedly still harvested by virgins in order to retain its purity.

A final stop should be Yala National Park, home to more than 200 species of birds as well as elephants, water buffalo and sloth bears.

Here you will have the best chance ever to see leopards, thanks to it having one of the world's highest population densities of the big cat. How's that for serendipity?

# An adventure from top to bottom

**I**n a lifetime of bizarre experiences, few can match riding a scooter along the seabed. Yet this is just one of many adventures to drag visitors away from the beach on a holiday in Mauritius. After donning a diving suit and listening to a short briefing, I climbed into the two-seater sub-scooter behind a smaller colleague, head and shoulders enclosed in a transparent bubble regularly pumped with air and the rest of my body in the water, and descended into the Mont Choisy lagoon.

The sub-scooter has an engine, steering wheel and accelerator pedal and, under the guidance of an experienced diver, we drove off in search of shoals of tropical fish, coral reefs and a shipwreck. A slightly simpler experience is to let your feet do the work on the underwater sea walk. The helmet, which is fed with air, has a visor and a guide will lead you between the corals and through the fish.

With 330km (205 miles) of reefs, Mauritius has scores of genuine diving opportunities and most five-star resorts have PADI-licensed dive centres. The main season for scuba diving is just starting, with the best sites off the south coast.

For those who like to keep their heads above water, or even in the trees, zip lines will zoom them through the inland forests. At the St Felix sugar estate, visitors whizz along 11 zip lines — death slides, the organisers call them — on a route 30m (100ft) above ground. Should they have time to admire the scenery, there are views of the Rivière des Galets, waterfalls and sugar and banana plantations.

Neither is Parc Aventure a place for the faint-hearted. Two tracks weave through the treetops, one a series of rope bridges (below), the



other comprising nets, swings, trapezes and zip lines. All visitors need is "balance, co-ordination and a willingness for excitement".

Walking with lions and cavorting with crocodiles sounds even more dangerous but staff at Casela Nature & Leisure Park and La Vanille crocodile reserve assure me that these are safe and rewarding experiences. After a briefing on safety and life with the lions, visitors are introduced to the beasts (and their handlers) and then walk, pet and play with them.

The crocodile reserve, established to breed Nile crocodiles threatened with extinction, now has 2,000 of the jaw-snapping creatures. The park also has the world's biggest captive group of Aldabra tortoises, tame monkeys and pathways through tropical vegetation.

Canyoning and rock climbing offer other thrills, along with trekking and mountain biking, while a dozen golf courses, scores of tennis courts and numerous riding stables await those who prefer more traditional sports. No matter which you choose, the spa and/or bar in your resort will be a welcome sight at the end of the day.

**TONY DAWE**

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