

TIME WELL SPENT

PASSIONS



TRAVEL

Melt Into Maldives

The Indian Ocean nation is ready to welcome you back.

BY ALEXANDRA KIRKMAN

▶ **LIKE MYRIAD** high-profile destinations, the Maldives—home to 160-plus resorts (and counting), strewn across its nearly 1,200 Indian Ocean isles—saw tourism plummet in 2020 because of the coronavirus pandemic, drawing some 550,000 visitors versus a record 1.7 million in 2019. But as the travel industry slowly reawakens, sunseekers are flocking anew to the far-flung island nation, lured by its Technicolor-turquoise seas, inherently socially distanced locale, and incomparable

accommodations.

Case in point is the Ritz-Carlton Maldives, Fari Islands, which opened in June. Spanning three lushly landscaped islands in the North Malé Atoll—a 45-minute luxury speed-boat ride from Velana International Airport—the resort is the esteemed brand's long-awaited entrée into the archipelago. In an environment

COURTESY OF THE RITZ-CARLTON MALDIVES, FARI ISLANDS



Your Island Home

Each of the Ritz-Carlton's beach pool villas offers coastal access with unobstructed views of the Indian Ocean.

services each villa (all with private pools), and is just a WhatsApp message away for golf-cart rides to the dive center and spa, restaurant bookings, and special requests.

With seven restaurants—including two at the nearby Fari Islands Marina—the resort's inspired cuisine exceeds the loftiest expectations. Reef fish ceviche with tangy gazpacho and Jaffna-style mud-crab curry win raves at the Beach Shack, a casually elegant seaside eatery, where waves lap the shore seemingly to the chill beats of the DJ's picks.

Summer Pavilion, sister restaurant to the Michelin-starred Singaporean standout, serves up refined Cantonese fare on hand-painted tableware beneath golden paper lanterns. Exquisite Japanese cookery takes center stage at Iwau, where inventive dishes include prawn and foie gras with grilled asparagus, brioche, and vanilla pepper cream—a delectable creation of GM Mark Hehir during his tenure as chef de cuisine at the Hilton Tokyo.

In between dining and imbibing, guests keep busy with a slew of activities from morning till night. Finesse your backhand with the resident tennis coach. Find your zen with sunrise

especially vulnerable to the cumulative effects of climate change—80% of the Maldives stands less than one meter above sea level—minimizing the resort's impact on its fragile surrounding ecosystem took top priority from the start. Kerry Hill Architects used pioneering prefabricated designs to create the 100-room resort's visually lightweight architec-

ture, thus reducing heavy on-site operations and curtailing waste and pollution during construction. The property's primary reliance on solar energy also informs its low carbon footprint, while its physical one helps cultivate new coral nurseries: The hundreds of concrete pillars supporting its overwater structures will spur coral recruitment over time.

Island life's cyclical nature—the resort's defining theme—resonates throughout the property. The sleek, spacious overwater villas, the showstopping infinity pool, and the sculptural spa are all circular in shape. An *aris meeha*—in Dhivehi (the Maldivian national language) an island butler who tends to a royal household—



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2



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and aerial yoga, or try handline fishing aboard a traditional wooden *dhoni* (Maldivian fishing boat) in the gloaming, when glossy red snapper and emperor fish seem to catapult onto your hook the second the sun drops below the horizon.

For a literal immersion in the Maldives' ineffable magic, take to the sea. Snorkelers and scuba enthusiasts can explore the Indian Ocean's staggering bounty, swim with sea turtles and manta rays, and learn about ocean conservation through Jean-Michel

Soak It In

[1] Lagoon villas are powered by solar roofs. [2] World-class snorkeling among the atoll's recovering reefs. [3] Cocktails at the resort's Eau Bar are inspired by local flavors.

Cousteau's Ambassadors of the Environment program. Offerings including "Cities Under the Sea" explain the crucial roles different fauna, such as sharks, play within coral reefs. Those apex predators keep the oceans—which produce more of earth's oxygen than all its rain forests combined—healthy and balanced.

Then it's time to dive

in for up-close encounters with the Maldives' most colorful residents. Yellow-finned Oriental sweetlips striped black-and-white, steephead parrotfish painted lilac and teal—every excursion delivers a kaleidoscope of rainbow hues and stunning species. For the especially intrepid, night snorkels—where eagle and devil rays, octopuses, and nurse sharks often make appearances—provide a thrilling glimpse of the ocean's lesser-known and vastly complex ecology.

Guests can also observe the JMC Ambassadors team as it uses drones to locate ghost nets—discarded fishing nets that entangle and kill hundreds of thousands of marine animals annually. The team has removed a few nets already—a reminder of how much work it takes to protect this oceanic Eden. ■

COURTESY OF THE RITZ-CARLTON MALDIVES, PARI ISLANDS (3)