

Welcome to paradise

At the new Jumeirah Maldives, Olhahali Island, which opened late last year, Yolanda Zappaterra finds A-list cooking, Instagram-perfect angles and romance in spades

From honeymooners and City slickers to influencers and retirees splashing a bit of the grandkids' inheritance on themselves, an island resort holiday in the Maldives is the pinnacle of bucket-list trips for many of us. I never really understood why, until the moment I stepped off the Trans Maldivian Airways seaplane onto the North Malé Atoll island of Olhahali, home to Jumeirah Maldives, Olhahali Island, which opened last year.

It's every clichéd image you've ever seen of a sun-kissed tropical paradise, from those age-old Bounty ads to those very modern influencers' Instagram pics. Pristine white sand is dotted with perfect palms and lapped by azure waters in which, just a few metres out, you can clearly see clownfish, blue tang and other tropical marine life. It's breathtaking, and I immediately understand the appeal of unwinding in such a spectacular setting.

I soon discover that the setting is just the introduction to an unforgettable stay, characterised by the very best service, meals, activities and ambience it's possible to experience on a holiday.

CULINARY STAR

As a foodie, this recent addition to the Jumeirah hotel family is best encapsulated by a fun cookery class with exuberant Aussie chef Taylor Shearman, who deftly steers us through deceptively delicate-looking, packed-with-flavour ceviches made using local catches such as tuna and reef fish, all the while sharing tales from a past that includes a role as a private chef for A-list clients in the Caribbean.

At every meal, Taylor is present – smiling in the background, popping in and out of the kitchen, chatting to visitors, checking the dishes look as good as they taste. She's clearly passionate about her role here and her effusive nature brings joy to every delicious meal, adding to the growing sense of wellbeing and heavenly good fortune we feel as our stay unfolds.

KING'S ISLAND

It's very tempting to totally immerse yourself in this island idyll and its crystal-clear waters, but to get a sense of the wider Maldives, a trip to its capital, the arrowhead-shaped 'King's Island' of Malé, offers a



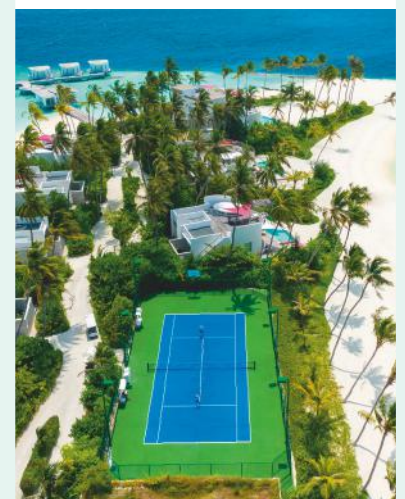
CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: White-sand beach; Talise Spa, Jumeirah Maldives; beach villa **PICTURE:** Ken Kochey



JUMEIRAH MALDIVES, OLHAHALI ISLAND

The Jumeirah Maldives all-villa luxury resort is a sleek, contemporary departure from the tropical aesthetic that characterises many other resorts in the archipelago. Thanks to huge picture windows and minimalist uncluttered decor, Singaporean design studio Miaja's 67 Mediterranean chic beach and overwater villas are gorgeous, light-filled spaces you won't want to leave, especially as they all feature an infinity pool, large rooftop terrace and, in the overwater villas, steps leading directly down to the house reef. Dining options include two award-winning signature Jumeirah restaurants, Shimmers and Kayto, and families are well catered for with indoor and outdoor play areas and an outdoor cinema. There are a host of activities including daily yoga classes, beach volleyball, billiards, tennis and various classes, from underwater photography to making coconut oil. Villas from \$1,300 per night.

jumeirah.com/en/stay/maldives/jumeirah-maldives



fascinatingly different side to island life, with much among the colourful skyscrapers to explore and enjoy.

A walking tour will take in highlights such as the pink coral 17th-century mosque, the sea-crossing Sinamalé Bridge; the eminently Instagrammable fish market, where huge tuna, octopus and grouper, unloaded from the nearby harbour, are gutted; and the early 20th-century Muleeagee Palace.

A boat trip on a traditional Maldivian *dhoni* adds to the experience, and even better is a longer trip to one of the nearby 'local islands'. They are just a handful of the 1,000-plus islands that make up the Maldives, strewn across the sparkling Indian Ocean.

In 2009, the government allowed Maldivians to open guesthouses to stay on what are known as 'local islands', as opposed to private islands with self-contained resorts. Since then, it's been possible to do a reasonably budget version of a Maldives holiday on one of these, staying in pretty, well-appointed guesthouses on islands such as Maafushi, Gulhi, Ukulhas and Rasdhoo. But downsides include having to stay covered up, which detracts somewhat from the sense of being in a tropical paradise.

STAY IN HEAVEN

If it's paradise you're looking for, Jumeirah Maldives, Olhahali Island ticks all the boxes. Glass-bottomed Talise Spa treatment rooms for watching the marine

life while having a massage? Check. Romantic dinner à deux on the beach or in your villa? Check. Food that's as delicate and beautiful as it is tasty and fresh? Check. Butler services 24/7? Check. Sunset cruises, submarine tours, fishing trips? Check. Nothing is overlooked, nothing less than perfect, and it all works together to perfectly deliver a sense of wellbeing and heavenly good fortune.

But there is trouble in paradise. With an average ground-level elevation of just 1.5 metres, rising sea levels clearly pose a threat to the Maldives, while higher sea temperatures have already caused bleaching of coral reefs and marine life has been adversely affected by construction.

Some hope lies in a 2020 study, undertaken by University of Plymouth, which found that as tides move sediment to create a higher elevation, the islands may rise instead of sink. It is hoped that through careful marine-life management and reef reseedling this heavenly archipelago will continue to give people a little slice of paradise for centuries to come. **TW**

BOOK IT

Elegant Resorts has seven nights in a Water Villa with Pool from £4,995 per person. The price includes up to a 35% rate reduction and complimentary upgrade to half-board. Economy flights, speedboat transfers and UK lounge passes are also included. Valid for travel until September 30. elegantresorts.co.uk