

# Best by boat

Speedboat-accessible resorts in the Maldives are cranking up the fun factor – and saving clients' hard-earned cash by avoiding the need for a seaplane. By **Tamara Hinson**

**W**hile gliding down onto the waters of a Maldivian resort by seaplane is an exciting way to begin a trip for some – other clients might feel differently. Fortunately for these customers, whether they're a nervous flier or simply want to keep costs down, there are plenty of resorts that are accessible by speedboat from Malé.

And with flight capacity to the Maldives increasing – Virgin Atlantic launches its three-times-a-week Heathrow to Malé direct service on October 22 – now is a great time to sell a sun-soaked Maldivian

break. Try these speedboat-accessible options, just a short ride from the capital.

#### THE LUXURY RETREAT

Resorts on artificial islands run the risk of looking precisely that – nurturing newly transplanted greenery is no mean feat, after all. But at North Malé Atoll's Hilton Amingiri, on a purpose-built island a 20-minute boat ride from the Maldivian capital Malé, the approach has been carefully considered. Pathways used by guests weave between clusters of palm trees, and the abundance of geckos and ➤

Arrival jetty at Obu Xperience Ailafushi

# DESTINATIONS

## WINTER SUN | MALDIVES



**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:** Aerial view of Anantara Veli Maldives Resort; pool at Hilton Maldives Amingiri Resort & Spa; Deluxe Over Water Pool, Anantara Veli Maldives Resort; restaurant at Hilton Maldives Amingiri Resort & Spa **PICTURES:** bharatagarwal.com; Christopher Cypert

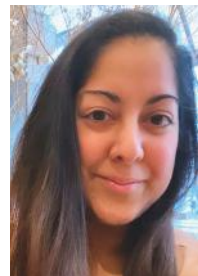
Asian koels (glossy-feathered birds famous for their shrill calls) suggests that nature is already thriving here. The vegetation even extends to the overwater boardwalks, lined with bright green shrubs.

Marine conservation is clearly a priority at this 109-villa resort, which opened in 2022. My first dive takes place just metres from the sand, but I soon spot a huge stingray swooping between vast shoals of tropical fish. Innovation is key to the approach – not only underwater, where items repurposed as artificial reefs include an old bicycle – but above the waves too.

Take the mixology lab, the sleek glass cube where I sign up for a cocktail masterclass. The walls are lined with apothecary-style bottles filled with homemade limoncellos, and there are rows of oak barrels containing guests' bespoke negroni mixes.

There's a huge sense of space, whether it's at Aura, the slick bar where guests can drink and dine with their feet in the sand; Habitat, the semi open-air all-day dining spot; or Origin, where sustainable seafood is served with a backdrop of interrupted sea views.

This spaciousness extends to the villas – all villas have private pools, and beach villas have additional swings at the rear and personal beachfront gazebos. Much



**Sheena Gunnoo,**  
Maldives specialist,  
Audley Travel

"Newly refurbished Anantara Veli is perfect for couples seeking a modern adult-only resort, and clients can enjoy additional facilities and a livelier atmosphere at sister property Anantara Dhigu."

of the public space has been dedicated to younger guests, who can hang out at one of the Maldives' biggest kids' clubs, while teens get their own zone – the Re:Fuel area, which has its own private entrance. Here, teenagers can sip mocktails and kombucha shakes while soaking up sunset views. Who needs negronis?

**Book it:** Luxtripper offers seven nights' full-board at the Hilton Maldives Amingiri in a One Bedroom Overwater Pool Villa from £11,099 per couple, including return flights from Heathrow with Etihad and transfers. [luxtripper.co.uk](https://luxtripper.co.uk)

### THE FOOD LOVER'S ESCAPE

It takes 35 minutes (as the speedboat flies) to get from Malé to Anantara Veli, which emerged from a nine-month renovation in late 2022. This 67-villa resort's makeover involved the addition of a new villa category (six new beach pool villas), a spruce-up of the spa (which now has a beautiful hammam) and major revamps of the restaurants.

There's a strong focus on regional cuisine, and in an era when resorts often compete to cram in cuisines, Anantara Veli's offering feels like it's about quality, not quantity. Cumin, which serves up Indian Ocean dishes, is ➤

## DESTINATIONS

### WINTER SUN | MALDIVES



ABOVE: All-inclusive property Oblu Xperience Ailafushi

new, while Origami, which specialises in Japanese fare (including *robatayaki* – cooking over charcoal) and the oceanfront Dhoni Bar have been renovated.

Anantara Veli is adult-only, but connected to family-friendly Anantara Dhigu by a shuttle boat service (although it's only a few hundred metres away). Veli guests can use Dhigu's facilities and visit its restaurants for no extra charge. This means more choice for clients, whether it's the grilled meats and fish at Sea. Fire.Salt or Italian fare at Aqua. At both hotels, guests celebrating special occasions can opt for Anantara's Dining by Design experience, which includes the services of a private chef, butler and sommelier.

Although Anantara Veli isn't the quietest resort – there's a well-developed local island nearby, and a little more boat traffic due to the wide range of water sports and the inter-resort shuttle – there's still a secluded vibe, along with a huge selection of activities, ranging from tennis, badminton and boxing sessions to cookery classes and pétanque. There's also plenty for adrenaline junkies, who can head to Anantara Dhigu for freediving lessons at the Maldives' first Padi freediving centre, or swim with nurse sharks – famously docile creatures known as the 'couch potatoes of the sea'.

**Book it:** Audley Travel's 12-night Maldives package, including 10 nights at Anantara Veli, costs from £6,500 per person, based on two sharing. Includes flights, transfers and accommodation on a half-board basis. [audleytravel.com](http://audleytravel.com)

“The emphasis here is on fun – sipping cocktails during poolside DJ sets and bouncing across the waves on banana boats

#### THE FUN ONE

Oblu Xperience Ailafushi, which opened in June 2022, certainly looks different to most Maldives resorts. As my boat arrives at the dock, the first thing I notice is the waterslide towering above the sun loungers and funnelling guests – many still clutching cocktails – into the glass-clear water.

The owners' aim was “to make the Maldives more accessible.” And it's certainly that – the speedboat whisks me from Malé to the island in just 15 minutes, and rates start at around £2,000 for seven nights on the all-inclusive Fushi Plan. In fact, it's the only basis. There's no half or full-board, and almost all alcohol, including spirits, beer and house wine, is included. Guests simply pay extra if they want to dine at two restaurants: The Copper Pot Food Truck and Only Blu, the underwater restaurant.

There's even a shop, where a bottle of wine costs £15 (less than a beer at my previous resort). The emphasis here is clearly on fun. It's not about grazing on floating breakfasts launched across infinity pools – it's about sipping cocktails during poolside DJ sets and bouncing across the waves on banana boats.

There's no butler service; after checking in at a vast hotel-style reception area, guests make their own way to their accommodation. My water villa is small but perfectly formed, and I'm grateful that I'm close enough to the resort's centre that I don't have to summon a buggy to get to my ➤

# DESTINATIONS

## WINTER SUN | MALDIVES



ABOVE: Arrival jetty at Oblu Xperience Ailafushi

room. My building also has the lively X360 Bar, which is ideal for those who like a party.

There are plenty more-peaceful options, with 268 rooms and villas spread across four categories: the smallest, Ocean View Rooms, cover 30sq m, while two-bedroom Ocean View Family Rooms, Beach Villas and Water Villas all cover 50sq m.

Skipping certain bells and whistles (for example, no accommodation has private pools and none of the villas have baths) has allowed this resort to ramp up the offerings and provide brilliant value elsewhere. Take Element X – this huge buffet restaurant has the largest selection of dishes I’ve come across, and guests help themselves to fridges stocked with alcoholic and non-alcoholic drinks. My favourite area is the restaurant’s glass-walled refrigerated dessert room.

The resort is connected to premium sister property Oblu Select Lobigili by a meandering boardwalk. Oblu Select Lobigili guests can use facilities at Oblu Xperience Ailafushi, although guests at the latter need to pay extra if they dine at Oblu Select Lobigili.

I spend my final night at Oblu Xperience Ailafushi’s Only Blu, the Maldives’ largest underwater restaurant. As I tuck into my octopus carpaccio (ignoring guilt pangs as one swims idly past), I decide that bath tubs aren’t that important, after all.

**Book it:** Premier Holidays offers seven nights’ all-inclusive at Oblu Xperience Ailafushi in an Ocean View Room from £2,199 per person, based on two sharing, including return flights from London and transfers. [premierholidays.co.uk](https://premierholidays.co.uk) **TW**

## BEST *of the* REST

### Resorts near Malé

Six other properties accessible by speedboat



#### Ritz-Carlton Fari Islands

This luscious five-star Maldivian outpost, opened in 2021, is a 45-minute speedboat hop from Malé airport

– ideal for luxury lovers who want to arrive in style. 100 overwater villas all boast private infinity pools and personal butlers.

**Book it:** Elegant Resorts offers seven nights’ half-board, plus flights, transfers and UK airport lounge passes, for £6,995 per person if booked by December 17.

[elegantresorts.co.uk](https://elegantresorts.co.uk)



#### Patina Maldives

Another stellar 2021 opening, the Patina Maldives is distinguished by its astonishing Modernist design – and it can be

reached in a 45-minute speedboat journey from Malé. The Patina shares facilities with two other resorts, so clients can travel to their evening meal by a traditional dhoni boat.

**Book it:** Caribtours offers seven nights’ B&B, including flights, for £8,499 for stays between January 5 and March 31, 2024.

[caribtours.co.uk](https://caribtours.co.uk)



#### Cinnamon Dhonveli

For a slightly more cash-conscious break, the Cinnamon Dhonveli delivers. Besides three restaurants, three

bars and a great spa, the hotel offers private dolphin watching and some of the best surfing in south Asia – and all within a 25-minute speedboat ride from Malé.

**Book it:** Classic Collection offers seven nights’ all-inclusive from £2,349 per person based on two adults sharing, including flights from Heathrow on May 7, 2024, and transfers.

[classic-collection.co.uk](https://classic-collection.co.uk)



#### Ozen Reserve Bolifushi

Named Tripadvisor’s best all-inclusive hotel for 2023, this no-hidden-costs paradise is a 20-minute

catamaran journey from Malé. Besides fine dining and delicious drinks, the luxurious Reserve programme includes non-motorised watersports and serene spa sessions.

**Book it:** Inspiring Travel offers seven nights’ all-inclusive from £5,799, including flights, valid for stays from April 4 to September 30, 2024.

[inspiringtravel.co.uk](https://inspiringtravel.co.uk)



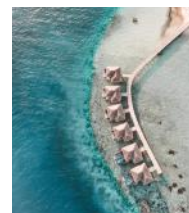
#### Joy Island Resort

Fresh from opening in September 2023, Joy Island is a 40-minute speedboat ride from Malé. Its USP is the epic ‘Extreme All

Inclusive’ package, which includes unlimited cocktails and premium alcoholic drinks, two excursions, a dinner on the sand and more.

**Book it:** Mercury Travel offers a seven-night Extreme All-Inclusive package, including flights from Heathrow on May 10, 2024, and speedboat transfers, for £2,946.

[mercuryholidays.co.uk](https://mercuryholidays.co.uk)



#### Cocogiri Maldives

Although a 75-minute speedboat journey from Malé, checking into Cocogiri makes the journey oh-so-worthwhile.

Thatched beachfront villas blend seamlessly with the white Maldivian sand, while the high-end Pool Jacuzzi Water Villas come with a private spa bath overlooking the reef.

**Book it:** Blue Bay Travel offers seven nights’ all-inclusive at Cocogiri from £1,749 per person. The price includes flights and transfers and is based on a May 8, 2024, departure.

[bluebaytravel.co.uk](https://bluebaytravel.co.uk)