



Atoll order

Don't get mixed up by the Maldives. Amie Keeley gets the lowdown on three best-sellers for Kuoni

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“Are you all ready for a hike?” asks our host, cheerfully. “I’d like to take you to the top of the highest point in the Maldives,” she adds.

Hiking? In the Maldives? What happened to lying horizontal for eight hours, getting up only to eat or take a dip in the pool?

Off we go, leaving the tranquillity of Shangri-La’s Villingili Resort behind for a long, winding tour of the island (via golf buggy), ending up at Mount Villingili, the world’s smallest ‘mountain’, which stands at a mighty 5.1 metres high. Phew. We all breathe a sigh of relief while she stands there grinning. Back to the sunloungers, then.

The Maldives needs little

selling. It’s a picture-postcard paradise of white-sand beaches, turquoise waters and a tropical climate. But finding the right resort for your customer can be a little more complicated, with so many to choose from and little, on the surface at least, to tell them apart.

In recent years, resorts here have upped their game in terms of appealing to the family market and offering more in terms of activities. Yet there’s a lot more to knowing which resort to recommend than being able to list its kids’ club opening hours or its wealth of water sports.

Kuoni took a group of travel agents to the Maldives with SriLankan Airlines as part of

its Worldwide College training programme to see three different resorts for themselves.

► SHANGRI-LA VILLINGILI RESORT & SPA

Getting there: Thanks to a direct flight that began last November from Colombo to Gan airport on Addu Atoll, getting to the Maldives’ most southerly island is more convenient for UK travellers, especially those who want to do a twin-centre with Sri Lanka.

SriLankan Airlines flies direct from Heathrow to Colombo twice a week, with onward flight times to Gan amended in September to better fit UK arrivals and departures. Kuoni added the resort to its

programme on the back of the new service.

Alternatively, flights from Malé to Gan take around 70 minutes. From Gan airport, the resort is a five-minute speedboat ride away.

Villingili Island is in the Addu Atoll, which is just south of the equator and the largest single-resort island, measuring two miles long and 12 hectares. As well as being the Maldives’ southernmost island, it is also home to the country’s highest point – the five-metre Mount Villingili.

Accommodation: There are 132 villas spread around the island, from the overwater Villa Muthee to the land-based Villa Laalu tucked away in the forest. →



LEFT:
Shangri-La
Villingili Resort
& Spa

RIGHT:
Kuramathi
Island Resort

BELOW:
Bageecha
kids' club,
Kuramathi



PICTURES: MARKUS GORTZ; FELIX HUG/ EYESONASIA.NET

→ Uncompromising in both style and size, the villas here are a cut above the others, with expansive layouts, grand bathrooms, open-air showers and spacious sundecks.

Each villa comes with bikes, making exploring the island that bit easier, or there are chauffeur-driven golf buggies available on demand.

What to do: With space not an issue, Villingili has plenty of facilities to keep you occupied, including a nine-hole golf course, tennis and badminton courts and a dive centre. There is also Chi, The Spa, and a kids' area. The hotel also offers cultural excursions to neighbouring islands and a cruise at sunset with guaranteed dolphin sightings.



You could easily think you were in the middle of a jungle, not a resort that's just a mile and a quarter across

Agent verdict: Diane Coleman, owner of Tickets Travel, says: "The bikes are great for getting around and the buggies are unique. The dolphin cruise is out of this world because you're guaranteed to see them. I'd definitely recommend it to families because there's enough space and a variety of things to do."

Book it: Pool Villa with private pool, from £7,650. All prices are per couple with Kuoni, for seven nights with flights.

▶ **KURAMATHI MALDIVES**

Getting there: Located in the Rasdhoo Atoll, Kuramathi is 35 miles south of capital Malé, and takes an hour and a half to reach by speedboat or 20 minutes by seaplane transfer, at extra cost.

Accommodation: Covered in lush green foliage, Kuramathi has been dubbed an emerald jewel in turquoise waters. Wander down one of the many pathways surrounded by huge banyan trees and you could easily think you were in the middle of a jungle, not a resort that's

just a mile and a quarter across.

It is divided into three sections, each with its own reception and restaurant. A reef runs down one side and a lagoon on the other.

It caters well to both couples and families. There is enough space for those on a romantic getaway to find some privacy and plenty to do and explore to keep children occupied.

Testament to that are the 35 new Beach Houses. Ideal for parents with teenagers who want some independence from mum and dad or multi-generational groups, the houses are split into two levels with individual entrances and living spaces. Each can accommodate up to four adults and two children.

What to do: Eat and explore. →



→ There are three buffet restaurants with international-themed dining and nine à la carte restaurants. Whatever cuisine you want, chances are you will find it here. Beyond eating there are plenty of activities, including parasailing, wake boarding, diving and guided snorkelling safaris. On land, the island's Eco Centre houses a sperm whale skeleton, while its Hydroponic Garden, where the resort's salad leaves are grown, is well worth a visit.

It's a good choice for couples on a tighter budget, and a top option for families needing variety and multiple dining options to suit even the fussiest of palates.

Agent verdict: Sarah Busby, manager of Ascot Travel House, says: "It's perfect for families and honeymooners because of the variety of accommodation. The 'Select' all-inclusive dining is well worth the money because you can eat at all the restaurants. Because of its size, everything is spread out, so it still feels very exclusive and intimate wherever you are".

Book it: Garden Villa, full-board, from £2,700; exclusive to Kuoni.

▶ VELASSARU MALDIVES

Getting there: Velassaru is located in the South Malé Atoll, seven and a half miles from the airport. It takes about 25 minutes to reach by speedboat.

Accommodation: Perched on a coral



“**Velassaru has all the postcard-worthy elements of a Maldivian island, plus this resort is small and more intimate**


island, Velassaru has all the postcard-worthy elements of a Maldivian island, plus this resort is small, and as a result, feels more private and intimate than some of its neighbours.

There are 10 room categories, a number of which are being or have recently been upgraded. These include the chic, minimalist Water Villas made from thatch, stone and teak; and the Beach Villas, which include oversized bathrooms and garden showers. Private plunge pools are available in a number of these so you can sit back and take a soak with a view of the ocean.

This resort is a good option for discerning diners. The quality of a hotel's culinary offering can often be judged on its performance at breakfast and Velassaru has the edge on the other two resorts even down to its presentation. There are just enough dining options to give you some variety without being overwhelmed by choice. The cuisine is loyal to the region and is predominantly Asian-inspired, with a few European options.

What to do: This is definitely one of the more laid-back and romantic islands, where relaxing is the best way to enjoy it. But for those who get fidgety after a few days, there are a handful of excursions including night fishing and guided snorkelling, as well as Island Escape where guests can be transferred to a secluded sandbank with a picnic. Expect plenty of couples.

Agent verdict: Felicity Ralfs, owner of Butterfly Travel, says: "This was my favourite resort. I'd describe it as understated luxury. It has a very relaxed ambience. I'd say it's most suited to couples and slightly younger to middle-aged customers."

Book it: Deluxe Bungalow on B&B basis from £2,759. All-inclusive from £5,435. 



ASK THE EXPERT



Brad Bennetts,
national sales
manager, Kuoni

"The Maldives is an iconic and amazingly beautiful destination. The choice of islands is endless and can sometimes be overwhelming, from the luxurious Kandolhu, where it takes just a few minutes to walk from one side to the other, to the vibrant Kuramathi, which is one mile long with its own sandbank. Aside from the fantastic beaches and breathtaking snorkelling, each island offers a unique experience so it is really important to ensure your clients are matched with the right one. For customers who perhaps can't afford the full duration in a water villa, it is worth recommending splitting between a beach bungalow and the water villa to get the best of both worlds."



ABOVE:
Water Suite with
pool, Velassaru

LEFT:
Velassaru
beach