

Blue SWOON

With a host of hotel openings and a new flight via Muscat, the Maldives is looking better than ever, finds Rachel Roberts

The Maldives has long been renowned as a year-round destination for wealthy sun-worshippers, but recently-resumed flights via Muscat have opened it up to those who want to add some culture to a coastal escape.

The Indian Ocean destination is already booming, according to the ministry of tourism. UK arrivals in 2018 hit 114,602, a 10% jump compared with 2017, and well above the 6.8% increase in global arrivals for the same period to 1.48 million.

The resumption of Oman Air's flights from the new terminal at Muscat airport to Maldivian capital Malé, after a two-year hiatus, couldn't have come at a better time.

The airline halted the service in 2016 as part of a cost-cutting exercise but, after reintroducing the route last October, saw such significant demand that it has already extended its winter programme until April 30, restarting for 2019-20 on October 28.

Oman Air chief commercial officer Paul Starrs says: "Our primary goal is to promote Oman and if partnering with the Maldives helps, even better. The redesigned schedule will give passengers from Istanbul, Moscow, Manchester and Heathrow super-quick connections between Muscat airport and Malé."

The move also reflects the growing popularity of Omani capital Muscat as a city destination and stopover spot (box, page 66). Muscat airport's stylish, ultra-modern terminal has already garnered a cache of





ABOVE:
Olhuveli
Beach & Spa



LEFT:
The Sun
Siyam Iru
Fushi

PICTURES: MUJIAPHOTOS.COM; SHUTTERSTOCK

What to do in Muscat

Muscat's notable landmarks include the Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque and the Royal Opera House, both fine examples of Islamic architecture. The National Museum and Natural History Museum are a magnet for culture enthusiasts, and clients

extending their stay for a couple of nights can explore the rest of the Sultanate. The country has a wealth of natural attractions, including world-class beaches, sweeping deserts and dramatic mountain landscapes.

Sultan Qaboos
Grand Mosque



Oman Air flies twice daily from Heathrow to Muscat and daily from Manchester to Muscat, with seven onward services to Malé each week (twice-daily on Saturdays, and daily on other days except Tuesday). Return fares from London to the Maldives start from £650. omanair.com

➔ awards since it opened in March 2018, with capacity for up to 20 million passengers and room to expand to more than double that in future.

Malé's Velana airport is also better equipped to deal with burgeoning visitor figures following the opening of a new runway last year. From here, seaplanes transport holidaymakers on to their Maldivian resort, with journey times of up to an hour, depending on their destination of choice.

▶ A SLICE OF PARADISE

Comprising more than 1,000 coral islands, of which just over 100 are luxury resorts, that choice is about to get bigger with a further 17 resort openings planned this year. These include Lux North Malé Atoll, Waldorf Astoria Maldives Ithaafushi Resort and The Nautilus, a 26-room boutique resort in the heart of the Maldives' Unesco Biosphere Reserve.

Five-star property The Sun Siyam Iru Fushi resort, set in the heart of the Noonu Atoll, is the epitome of what you'd expect from a Maldivian retreat.

Fringed with impossibly soft, white-sand beaches lapped by crystal-clear warm waters, the island truly feels like a pocket of paradise on earth.

Fruit bats circle in the morning, picking the jewel-bright orange fruit from the palm trees, and a fresh treasure of bleached-out shells are washed up by the early morning tide.

Accommodation on the 52-acre property – so small-scale you could go around the whole island in less than 45 minutes – includes 28 overwater villas and 138 on the beach, for clients after complete privacy. These boast a private pool, outdoor shower and Jacuzzi (strewn with flower petals on arrival), all just a three-second stroll from the beach. Rates start at \$385 per room based on two sharing a beach villa, with breakfast, or \$900 for a water villa.

With about 650 staff – comprising Maldivians, Sri Lankans and Balinese – on hand to look after guests in the all-inclusive resort, which houses up to 600 guests at full capacity, the level of service is impeccable.

Housekeepers pedal slowly on

rickety, three-wheeled tricycles and guests are delivered by electric buggy to the award-winning spa by Thalgo, a heavenly escape offering Ayurvedic massages and treatments.

The personal concierge service takes this one stage further, helping clients book activities such as scuba diving, dolphin safaris and flyboarding. Plus, there's a diverse daily timetable of activities including cocktail-making and sushi-making classes.

The biggest decision of the day will be which of the 15 restaurants to dine in, including Islander's Grill, specialising in locally caught seafood, and Bamboo, where top-notch Asian food is on the menu in an idyllic beachside setting.

The resort shop reflects the bank balances of the clientele here: the cheapest swimming costume carries a price tag of around £100, and a beer at dinner costs £12. For clients with a tighter budget, Sun Siyam's sister property, the four-star Olhuveli Beach & Spa, is a more affordable alternative that will still let them enjoy everything the Maldives has to offer. **TW**