

3 WAYS

Look beyond the honeymoon market and you'll find plenty more to sell in the Maldives, writes Katie McGonagle

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It's the place honeymoon dreams are made of - overwater villas, romantic restaurants and service so good it'll make the happy couple feel like they're the only ones on the island. So why is the Maldives rising up the ranks with non-newlyweds?

All the evidence from Indian Ocean operators points to the family market and non-honeymooning couples as being areas of untapped potential.

"Caribtours has seen an 80% increase in business this year,"



PICTURE: AHMED SHAUA; PAUL THUYBAERT

says managing director Paul Cleary, "proving that the Maldives is a rapidly growing market for us and a very popular destination for our customers. In particular, we have seen a huge growth in business for couples and family holidays to the Maldives."

And if you consider that most couples will only take one honeymoon, but could book endless romantic escapes or family breaks, it makes sense to widen your pool of potential customers beyond just the honeymoon market.

FAMILY

The last thing parents want is to worry about their brood disturbing other guests, so find a resort where they'll fit in with the family crowd - and with the biggest kids' club in the country, Kandima Maldives certainly fits that bill.

Set on Dhaalu atoll, its Kandiland kids' club offers daily activities ranging from mini-yoga and mocktail making to crab hunting and cooking up candy floss, followed by fun at the outdoor wet play area, which



→ opens at 4pm each day when the sun isn't as strong. Lead-in Sky Studios can offer interconnecting rooms (from £145 per person, per night, half-board) or kids can stay on a sofa bed to take advantage of an offer allowing under-12s to stay and eat for free.

Keeping an eye on costs is key for families – by the time you multiply hotel rates by four, it can get pretty pricey – but there is some surprisingly good value to be found, if you know where to look. Premier Holidays recommends Adaaran Select Hudhuranfushi in Kaafu, North Malé atoll, for its all-inclusive package, which comes in at just £1,299 per person, including flights, transfers and accommodation.

Nikki Hain, Indian Ocean product manager, says: "It's a good all-inclusive option for families without a big price tag. Youngsters will be entertained with facilities specifically aimed at children, including a pool, table tennis, play area, shopping arcade and exciting excursions available."

When it comes to facilities, few could beat Jumeirah Vittaveli, home of the Maldives' only ice rink. Sovereign purchasing executive Shusma Knight says: "It has really nice two-bedroom beach villas with private pools that come with two bathrooms and kids' amenities including an Xbox. The island is big enough to cycle around and there are plenty of activities, from water sports to cooking classes, as well as the Kuda-Koli kids' club."



The Meeru Island Resort is surrounded by an immaculate turquoise lagoon – it really is a paradise on Earth

ABOVE:
Kandima
Maldives,
Dhaalu atoll

BELOW:
Coco Palm
Dhuni Kolhu,
Baa atoll

COUPLES

Who says you've got to get hitched to want quality couple time? Whether they've been married five years or 50, or have no intention of tying the knot, other coupled-up clients could still benefit from a Maldivian escape.

Tricia Birmingham, Gold Medal senior product manager for the Middle East and Indian Ocean, says: "The Maldives is far more than a destination for honeymooners; with so many fantastic properties in such stunning locations, why should newlyweds get all the fun?"

"I recommend the Meeru Island Resort & Spa. Located on its own secluded island and surrounded by an immaculate turquoise lagoon, it really is a paradise on Earth."

Quiet it might be, but that just leaves more time to have a go at golf, cycling, tennis and kayaking; enjoy a relaxed lunch in one of its casual restaurants; or just kick back on your own private sun deck. A week full-board with Qatar Airways flights between September 7 and October 15 starts at £1,429.

Things are just as relaxed at Coco Palm Dhuni Kolhu Resort, where villas

are hidden among tropical foliage and activities ranges from swimming with dolphins and sailing around deserted islands, to unwinding with yoga or watching a classic film with a glass of champagne at the private Coco Cinema. Caribtours offers a week all-inclusive in an oceanfront villa, with flights and lounge access, from £1,815 for bookings before June 30.

But just when you thought it couldn't get any more chilled out, there's the option of a seven-day dhoni cruise through the islands – and the best news? It doesn't need a honeymoon-sized budget either.

G Adventures' Maldives Dhoni Cruise starts at just £1,049 excluding flights, taking in snorkelling and swimming in the Felidhu atoll, traditional drumming and local life on Fulidhoo, interspersed with time to lounge around on deck. Group sizes are capped at eight, with a guide on board to help guests spot turtles, reef sharks, stingrays and octopuses as they pass by the boat.

DIVING

While many see the overwater villas as the ultimate romantic escape, ask any diver about the Maldives' biggest draw, and it's more likely to be life under the water that really stands out.

Phil North, manager at specialist operator Dive Worldwide, says: "The Maldives is not only for honeymooners, it is also a divers' playground, offering thrilling encounters with marine life big and small. Vilamendhoo Island Resort & Spa is a real favourite of our customers. It is friendly, superb value and perfectly located to experience →



PICTURES: SCUBAZOO IMAGES/JASON ISLEY, VILAMENDHOO RESORT

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DESTINATIONS MALDIVES



LEFT:
Diving with whale sharks at Four Seasons Maldives at Landaa Giraavaru

BELOW:
Vilamendhoo Island Resort & Spa

→ some of the best scuba diving, including a super house reef." A week half-board with flights, seaplane transfers, and six days' diving with tanks and weights, costs from £2,375.

North also highlights Reethi Beach Resort for solo divers, as it waives single supplements at certain times and boasts one of the best house reefs in the country.

If it's value clients are after, ITC Travel Group recommends Ozen by Atmosphere at Maadhoo, where guests get two dives - worth \$98 each plus tax - included in stays of six to eight nights. Provided they're staying on the Atmosphere Indulgence all-inclusive package and have an open-water diving certification, they can take their pick of six nearby snorkelling and diving sites, and round the experience off with an unforgettable meal at underwater restaurant M6m, as part of the all-inclusive package.

But if it's the quality of the diving that takes centre stage, Lusso Travel's specialists steer guests towards the very best



sites such as the Unesco World Biosphere Reserve of Baa Atoll, home of the Four Seasons Maldives at Landaa Giraavaru, where dhoni boat cruises go in search of manta rays and whale sharks.

Uma Campbell, Lusso product and marketing manager for the Indian Ocean, says: "It's hard to pick a resort in the Maldives, as most are stunning and will have a house reef or great diving nearby. The more remote the island, the more untouched the experiences, such as Como Maalifushi in the Thaa Atoll, and Six Senses Laamu in the Laamu atoll." **TW**

