

Water world

Got clients who think the Maldives isn't for them? There's more to these islands than meets the eye, writes **Alice Barnes-Brown**



Oblu Nature Helengeli
PICTURE: mehaphotos2024

I was floating 40 metres above an abyss, yet I'd never been more relaxed. Here, the knobbly house reef of the Oblu Nature Helengeli by Sentido resort falls away into the depths of the Indian Ocean. I wasn't the only creature enjoying the warm Maldivian waters; a turtle munched on brain coral below, while reef sharks wiggled lazily past.

For all its beauty, the Maldives had never previously appealed to me. I prefer going out to staying in, and after a couple of hours of relaxing solo, I fidget and make to-do lists. With no historic landmarks or specific attractions to see, I had visions of being marooned – nay, bored – on a desert island. As Ken said in the 2023 *Barbie* film, the Maldives would be 'just beach'.

A ROOM WITH A VIEW

The 153-room resort is well situated for Maldives novices, as it's just a 50-minute speedboat ride from the airport in Malé. Walking to my overwater villa, I quickly found myself marvelling at slow-moving stingrays beneath the jetty. Once inside, glass panels in the villa floor turned it into my own aquarium.

Helengeli's reef is home to more than 200 marine species, as the island is positioned at an entrance to the North Malé Atoll, with flowing channels on either side. My morning routine switched from catching trains to catching the lagoon at its most active, before I headed to the dive centre to compare notes with the enthusiastic instructors. Clients new to the underwater world can head ➤

UNLOCK THE SEYCHELLES' NATURAL SIDE

Niva Labriz Seychelles offers clients complete seclusion to unwind on picture-perfect Silhouette Island



Sapphire waters lap gently at Niva Labriz Seychelles, inviting guests to slow down and surrender to the gentle rhythm of Silhouette Island. Set within a protected national park, Niva Labriz Seychelles is one of six Indian Ocean destinations that comprise new premium lifestyle-led resort brand Niva Hotels & Resorts, part of the Versa Hospitality (formerly Universal Resorts) family. Niva's collection also includes Niva Velassaru, Niva Kurumba, Niva Kuramathi and Niva Dhigali in the Maldives, while Niva Aria will open in the Seychelles in 2027.

ISLAND LIVING

As if the pristine beaches aren't inviting enough, Niva Labriz is the only resort on Silhouette Island, accessed by a 45-minute boat transfer or 15-minute helicopter ride from Mahé island, home to the archipelago's main airport. Silhouette's towering granite peaks, dense forests and rushing waterfalls make up Silhouette National Park, which covers 93% of the island. The resort's 110 villas are scattered across the island, either surrounded by lush tropical gardens or just a short stroll from its white sands.

SPACIOUS ACCOMMODATION

Niva Labriz Seychelles features nine types of accommodation. Beach Villas, which make up the largest offering, all lie just steps away from Silhouette's pristine shoreline and feature an outdoor rain shower. Guests can also opt for a Beach Villa with a private plunge pool or pool with a gazebo and large patio.

For clients looking to be encased in the island's tropical interior – but still within easy reach of the beach – the Garden Villas range from one bed with an indoor-outdoor living space to two beds with an infinity pool.



Beach Sanctuary Pool Villa



The spa

DESTINATIONS

INDIAN OCEAN | MALDIVES



ABOVE: More than 30 varieties of fruit, vegetables and herbs are grown at Seb's Farm, providing fresh produce to be served up for the resort's guests

INSIDER *insight*

"We offer our UK partners regular training, tailored offers, fam trips and commercial support. We have hosted more than 60 agents and selling partners at Raaya by Atmosphere, giving them the full guest experience, including Seb's Story. Guests uncover treasures left behind by Seb, a [fictional] artist shipwrecked on the island – from Seb's Farm to an artists' zone that offers the opportunity to paint a model of a *dhoni* boat."

Jose Gregorio Manzo,
assistant vice-president
international sales,
Atmosphere Core



skateboarding circuit. However, I found it too hot to enjoy any of these after mid-morning, so advise active clients to book early sessions.

ISLAND TIME

To cool down, I hit the beach. Raaya's house reef is 350 metres from shore and less vibrant than Helengeli's, but there is still plenty to see. Watersports instructor Dom said: "The area around Raaya has a high chance of stingrays, as they move towards Baa Atoll. You might see 10 eagle rays at once – especially when stand-up paddleboarding."

I paddled out in the hope of encountering a member of the spotty species. Instead, I heard a call to prayer carried on the wind from neighbouring Rasmaadhoo island. For an additional \$75, clients can take an excursion to see where locals live, work and play; but I was content to hear the rhythmic chant from the peace of my board.

Returning to Seb's Farm with an empty stomach, I wandered beneath fairy lights to the dining table at the heart of the farm. The four-course menu

"Hatchling turtles reach the sea, their flippers stroking the air and dark eyes blinking in the moonlight

depends on what's harvested, but expect a blend of local and international favourites. My menu featured Maldivian *garudhiya* fish soup, penne in pesto made with sharp Thai basil grown directly behind my seat, and caramelised banana served in a freshly-hacked coconut husk.

BOOK IT

Kuoni offers seven nights' all-inclusive at Oblu Nature Helengeli by Sentido from £3,249, based on two sharing a Deluxe Beach Villa. The price includes transfers and flights via Sri Lanka from Heathrow, based on select November departures. kuoni.co.uk

Gold Medal sells seven nights' all-inclusive at Raaya by Atmosphere from £2,999 per person, based on two adults and a child sharing a Beach Villa with Pool. The price includes transfers and flights from Heathrow via Sri Lanka on October 24. goldmedal.co.uk

KICKING BACK

Reclining on the outdoor sofa of the beach villa on my final night, gazing up at the stars as fruit bats swirled overhead, I noticed a slight rustle in the bushes. The noise was quickly followed by one of the resort's conservationists springing into action to help hatchling turtles reach the sea, their flippers stroking the air and dark eyes blinking in the moonlight.

Wandering to the shore to watch the little ones set out, I pondered how, even without the distractions of city life, I'd started to feel more comfortable in my own company. In the Maldives, time is entirely your own – whether you choose to spend it in pursuit of wildlife, dipping a toe into new activities or simply with your nose in a book. **TW**