

Glamorous Getaway

BY MICHAEL J. KONOWICZ

In my million plus miles of travels around the world, I've stayed at the nicest of places and the worst of places. But rather than a tale of two cities, my story is one of glamour and relaxation in the remote islands of the Maldives. The Maldives are an archipelago, consisting of 1,192 small coral islands within 26 atolls that form a coral barricade, creating a lagoon within the Indian Ocean. Enveloped by powder-

life back at home far away. Incredibly luxurious, pampered guests simply melt into the gorgeous environment within moments of arriving.

As a once-in-a-lifetime getaway, I treated myself to both types of accommodations during my weeklong stay. My 3,299 square foot beach villa was larger than your typical single family home with a large private garden and plunge pool, a huge open-air garden bathroom complete with outdoor rain shower, and a massive bedroom with removable floor-to-ceiling windows on all sides that bring the beauty and the fragrance of the tropics into the room. My over-the-water villa was a fraction of the size of the beach villa, but all 300 square feet of it were just as heavenly. Glass flooring allowed me to peer at the fish that swam under my abode. I could also step outside onto the private deck and soak up the sun in the whirlpool, while watching the sea birds fly overhead.

EVERY DESIRE MET

Over-the-top accommodations came with over-the-top service. Upon arriving at the resort by private sea plane, I was greeted by a personal island host that followed me around throughout my stay, far enough behind me that I could enjoy quiet privacy, but close enough that she could satisfy my every whim. When my host saw I had sweat on my brow from a morning walk on the beach, she brought over a chilled, damp facecloth immersed in mint oils, instantly refreshing me. When I was relaxing on the quiet beach in front of my beach villa and thought out loud, "Hmm, I'm thirsty," she retrieved a pitcher of fresh lemonade for my enjoyment. A team of housekeepers, butlers, and hosts kept my accommodations and my overall stay perfect at all times. If there was anything I wanted or wished for, it was in my hands in nearly an instant.

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The Spa Retreat on Rangalifinolhu Island is set on stilts over the ocean, welcoming guests as much as it does island breezes at the Conrad Maldives resort.

sugar white sands and turquoise waters, the highest point of the islands is a mere seven feet, ten inches above sea level. The islands are sparsely populated, dotted by acclaimed international luxury resorts here and there. Picture Gilligan's Island meets the most luxurious hotel you can imagine.

EXTRAORDINARY ACCOMMODATIONS

For me, that luxurious hotel experience was at the Conrad Maldives Rangali Island, known as one of the best of the best of the Hilton Hotel chain. The resort stretches across two islands within the Maldivian chain and hosts just a few dozen villas, with some perched on stilts over the calm waters of the ocean, the others underneath the swaying palms of the beaches. Near the equator, the weather is nearly the same year-round with tropical sunny skies, accented by puffy clouds, and brief, random afternoon showers. Quiet days with gentle breezes evolve to peaceful nights, with bright stars lighting the sky all the way to the horizon. Fragrant tropical flowers grow everywhere, providing intoxicating aromas that whisk away concerns about

A private plane takes guests on the 30-minute flight from Male airport to the Conrad Maldives resort.



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by insanely colored tropical fish and corals in shades of purple, green, blue, red, and yellow; maybe even taking a peak into the hull of shipwreck at 90' depth.

NIGHT DIVING

Once I became comfortable diving, up came the next challenge – a night dive. Jumping into the inky black sea at night... my husband, who was behind this idea, had to be crazy (boys!). We took the plunge with eight other divers. Thankfully, it is surprisingly bright when there are so many others divers with you. Night dives are beautiful and I've done several since that first one. In the beam of your light, the colors of the coral are magnificent and you're likely to see many different exotic creatures who normally hide during the day. My favorite night dive was on a small shipwreck off the coast of **Bequia**. This sunken tugboat was teeming with life at night. Upon descending to 60', we were greeted by squids, shrimps with glowing bright red eyes, arrow crabs with brilliant blue legs, sponge crabs, slipper lobsters, spotted eels, octopus, and orange cup corals—all residents of the wreck.

MORE DIVE DESTINATIONS

Little Cayman is one of the most beautiful dive destinations in the Caribbean. The water is crystal clear, the corals are healthy, and there is an abundance of sea life. On nearly every dive, a friendly grouper would accompany us as we scanned along the walls of coral that drop over 200' below you.

The **Sea of Cortez** within Baja California Peninsula in Mexico offers a totally different diving experience and the opportunity to dive with larger animals and massive schools of fish called bait balls. We swam into schools of several thousand jacks and sardines; they slowly parted as we swam through the moving wall of fish. We went diving in a sea lion colony; the pups were really interested in divers and very playful. We snorkeled with the great (and illusive) whale shark as it skimmed the water in search of plankton. What a sight...and what a workout to keep up with a swimming creature the size of a school bus!

I have been diving for about eight years in several dive meccas – Bonaire, The Grenadines, Little Cayman, Belize, Utila, and the Sea of Cortez. It's become a real passion. Beyond the natural beauty and the privilege of seeing the undersea world, diving can teach you a lot about yourself. It forces you to get out of your comfort zone, learn new skills, trust yourself and your buddy, and always be prepared for the unknown. The ocean is an unpredictable world.

Scuba diving takes you into magical places, filled with brilliant patterns and colors – beautiful fish, corals, sponges, and some of the oddest creatures you'll ever come across. Yes, you can breathe under water and have the unique privilege of experiencing this environment up close. It is not to be missed. Take the plunge!

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Fresh fish is the staple at Ithaa, the world's first undersea restaurant.

FOODIE PARADISE

Dining options were equally as amazing, with stunning views of the water...or under the water. The Conrad Maldives is famous for Ithaa, the world's first undersea restaurant, which accommodates only 14 foodies and treats them to delicacies from the sea. Another dining option included The Wine Cellar, literally a wine cellar built underground in the middle of the island to keep their wine collections cool from the tropical heat. In addition to seeing the resort's impressive collection of the finest vintages from around the world, one can indulge in a multi-course meal perfectly paired with some of the bottles that surround you. Despite being so remote in the middle of the Indian Ocean, food and drink options were top-notch, as was the service. There were delicious, perfectly prepared dishes to enjoy for every palette, every taste, and every diet.

BUT YOU DO HAVE TO PAY!

Visiting the Conrad Maldives compound is truly a once-in-a-lifetime experience and is priced as such. Comfortable business class airfare from most U.S. gateways for the 30-hour journey (each way) starts at about \$8,000. The seaplane transfer from Male (Capital Island) Airport is about \$600. Accommodations at the Conrad start from \$900/night for the beach villa and \$1,100/night for the over-water room. Other than locally grown greens and fishes from the island, most food and drink are imported to the islands and are extremely expensive as a result; a solid breakfast will start at \$75, lunch will be double that, and a dinner with drinks for one can be in the \$300-\$700 range. If you don't redeem frequent flier miles or hotel points for your visit, plan to spend the equivalent of a new car for a trip to this slice of heaven. Other guests during my stay at the barely-filled resort included American celebrities, Saudi royalty, and Russian oil barons. There were no lottery winners there, but should I ever become one, I'd definitely head back on the next available flight.

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