



A holiday in the Maldives' is mostly about the water and sand PHOTOS BY THE WRITER

Like a Paul Gauguin painting, Maldives is a world of rainbow colours with patterns and striations

A magic called Maldives

KALPANA SUNDER

HERE are lush screw pine thickets with gangly roots like a monster in a cartoon movie, sandbanks with a single palm tree framed against indigo skies, miles and miles of pristine, blue waters, bristling with a variety of marine life. There are at least 1,192 islands spread over 800 km, where the highest point is less than 8 feet high! The lowest, the flattest country in the world... a country with 99 per cent of its area covered by water, the Maldives were once called the 'money isles' referring to the cowry shells which were found there, and used as currency at that time. It was in 1,153 that Islam came to the islands, when, as a legend goes, an Islamic scholar defeated a sea monster by reading the Koran. Today, the Maldives is a devoutly Muslim country with a capital studded with mosques and a population which abstains from alcohol.

From the air, the ring-shaped coral atolls called faroes, in every shade of blue, look like a Paul Gauguin painting... a world of rainbow colours with patterns and striations. It was in 1971 that



A modern mosque on Rasdhoo island

an intrepid Italian traveller reached Maldives and set off a wave of tourism. A UN report at that point had said there was no point in pursuing tourism in the Maldives because of the lack of infrastructure — there were no banks, airports, or

drinking water. In 1972, the first simple resort called Kurumba Village was built with sandy floors, thatched roofs, coral walls and two small generators. Today, more than one third of the country's GDP comes from tourism. There are more than 100 resorts ranging from simple to over-the-top ones frequented by the rich and famous. But still a holiday in the Maldives is mostly about the water and sand.

The world of the resorts is unparalleled luxury from the swish Reeti Rah with its jet set clientele to the eco-friendly and back-to-nature Soneva Gili. It's a great experience to watch a frenzied performance of the *Bodu beru* drummers beating drums made of coconut wood covered with goat hide. This is honeymoon republic as well as family paradise. Every island looks like a botanical garden with lush vegetation, the fragrance of jasmine and frangipani, hermit crabs and fruit bats. There is a world underneath the clear waters with a parade of clownfish, wrasses, angelfish and parrotfish. One can take a dolphin excursion to watch these playful creatures or indulge in water sports such as diving, snorkelling, windsurfing,

water skiing and surfing.

Each island has its own personality fashioned by its history. To get a glimpse of local life outside the resorts, step into a village — there is a football court, a modern mosque, and a row of spotless houses. Bread fruit and almond trees line the spotless sandy streets. Every village has a small boat building yard, a local store and a small school.

Maldivian cuisine has influences of the Malabar Coast as well as Sri Lankan cuisine. Tuna and coconut is omnipresent. *Garudhiya* or fish stew is a local staple. *Bajias* — tuna fish *samosas* and *mas roshi* — a fish and coconut patty are common snacks on the menu. Vegetarians have a range of offerings like bread fruit curry, banana fruit sambal and *kiru garu dhiya* made of drumsticks and coconut milk. To the Indian palate there is the familiar *chapatis* called *roshis* and to indulge the sweet tooth there are desserts like old-fashioned bread pudding and screw pine pudding.

The country has a strong green conscience and tries to reduce its carbon footprint. Each resort attempts to do its bit towards green initiatives. The

Dusit Thani Resort has LED lighting, solar water heaters, recycling of waste water and even a turtle conservation program. At the Anantara Dhigu, you can accompany a marine biologist and watch as he carefully replants broken bits of coral in neat beds in the ocean—a coral adoption program. The Kuramathi Resort has an award-winning eco centre with a reconstructed sperm whale skeleton and many nature appreciation programs like a botanical walk, hermit crab walk and a hydroponics garden. Many hotels support local villages as well as run conservation programs.

A holiday in the Maldives is a return to life in the slow lane. When the sheer luxury of doing almost nothing recharges your batteries and rejuvenates you for life in the urban jungle once again.

A typical Maldivian meal of *roshis* and tuna



FACT FILE

HOW TO GET THERE: Fly Sri Lankan Airlines to Colombo and connect to Male international airport from there. Every resort arranges a pick-up.

WHERE TO STAY: Stay at Dusit Thani in Baa Atoll or the swish Anantara Dhigu in the South Male Atoll, which offers beach villas to over-the-water villas. For those seeking entertainment, musical performances and activities try Kuramathi Resorts located in North Ari Atoll.

WHAT TO DO: Snorkelling, diving, parasailing, jet skiing. Visit a local village. Take a dolphin watching trip or sunset fishing.

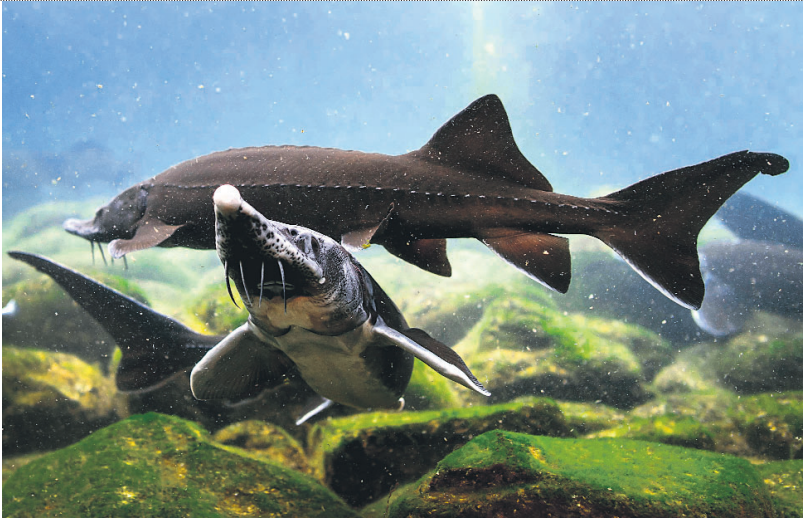
BUY: Locally made mats, lacquer work. **WHEN TO GO:** Maldives has a tropical climate, warm throughout the year. In mid-December to early January rooms come at a premium.

WARNING TIPS: This is a Muslim country, dress modestly. Avoid touching or walking on live corals as it is damaging. Don't buy souvenirs made from endangered animals or coral jewellery.

GLOBETROTTING BLACK GOLD

CAVIAR is a product made from salt-cured fish-eggs of the acipenseridae family. Traditionally, the term caviar refers only to roe from wild sturgeon in the Caspian and Black Seas. Caviar is considered a luxury delicacy and is eaten as a garnish or a spread. In 2012, caviar sold for \$2,500 per pound, or \$3,000 to \$5,500 per kg. The four main types of caviar are beluga, sterlet, ossetra, and sevruga. The rarest and costliest is from beluga sturgeon that is found in the Caspian Sea. Beluga caviar is prized for its extremely large eggs. It can range in colour from pale silver-gray to black. It is followed by the small golden sterlet caviar which is rare and was once reserved for royalty. Next in quality is the medium-sized, gray to brownish ossetra, and the last in the ranking is smaller, gray sevruga caviar. Generally, the lighter the color of beluga caviar the older the fish

is, and older the fish, the more exquisite is the flavour. The word caviar comes from the Persian word *khag-avar* (meaning the roe-generator). An extremely rare and extremely expensive caviar is Almas caviar that comes from Iran. The only known outlet is the Caviar House & Prunier in London's Piccadilly that sells a kilo of the expensive Almas caviar in a 24-karat gold tin for £16,000, or about \$25,000. All caviar has an extremely short shelf life, so if you're able to afford it, make sure you eat it all!



Black Siberian sturgeons are seen in a breeding pool at Tropenhaus Frutigen. Around 35,000 greyish black Siberian sturgeon bask in pools filled with naturally heated Alpine spring water.



Employees of Tropenhaus Frutigen collect eggs from the abdomen of a Siberian sturgeon; and (right) an employee fills up a bowl with caviar.