

A long moment of luxury

Phin Foster leaves all his troubles behind for a heavenly week at One&Only in the Maldives, a resort that stops at nothing to make its guests comfortable. Stopping in at the Royal Mirage Hotel in Dubai on the return journey, he finds a property of real character, vastly superior to most other resorts in the city.

I first realise that I'm onto something special during the foot massage. The bellow of the seaplane is still ringing in my ears, and the unbridled relief of walking on dry land again is yet to wear off, but all this is soon forgotten. One&Only at Reethi Rah triumphs in creating such moments. Within ten minutes of landing, I have been met at the entrance to my villa by a personal butler. Armed with a basin of hot water, oils and towels, he proceeds to ensure that I take off again, this time for cloud nine. It is quite a way to make a first impression.

This will not be the last time that I am made aware of needing something only once it has been given to me. The level of service here is exemplary. Whether it is iPods delivered by the pool or private barbeques on the beach, everything is done with maximum efficiency and minimal intrusion.

Reethi Rah is on the North Male Atoll, some 35km from the international airport. Boasting 130 villas, 12 beaches, 40 swimming pools, four restaurants, and a 9,500m² spa, it certainly operates on an impressive scale. Spend some time here, however, and it is the smaller touches and degree of intimacy that impress most.

All villas are positioned at least 20m apart and have direct ocean access. They are great cavernous structures with an open planned bathroom, bedroom and living area that can be partitioned by vast sliding doors. Heavy, dark woods are underscored by lighter touches and textures; rattan, coconut shell and silk all feature prominently. A vast two-person terrazzo bath makes me curse the fact that I'm travelling alone.

Idyllic setting

But one does not want to stay inside for long. Like the villas, the landscaping also plays on the idea of contrast. Dense jungle is interspersed with sudden clearings or dramatic vistas cut into the overgrowth. With 6km of coastline, the island feels far larger than it actually is. The staff is on call to transport you by electric buggy, but bicycles are also provided for the more adventurous or foolhardy. There is no sense of the claustrophobia one so often associates with island resorts. At times, it can feel as though you are the only inhabitant.

Set slightly away from the rest of the island's attractions, entering the spa grounds heightens this sense of seclusion and exclusivity. Following a blissful 80-minute aromatherapy body massage, the shutters of my treatment room are thrown back to reveal a panoramic view of the sea. It is as though I am suspended above the ocean. I fall asleep to the sound of the waves breaking on the shoreline below.

A good cellar

For the holidaymaker with more old-fashioned thoughts on escapism, it may take more than a state-of-the-art spa to get you travelling halfway around the world. For that, I recommend the wine cellar. When Jean-Sebastien Azais first started training to be a sommelier in France, this must have been the last place he ever imagined putting his skills into practise. Now, having amassed more than 9,000 bottles across over

This page: The lap pool at Reethi Rah (main); relax in the comfort of a beach villa bath. Opposite: the beach villas are surrounded by ocean for ultimate seclusion.



450 labels, he oversees the largest cellar in the Maldives. The variety is staggering: established labels such as Latour, Petrus and Yquem feature alongside surprises such as 15 different varieties of second label Bordeaux and an assortment of New World bottles. Regular wine tasting classes are held for guests, hosted by both Azais and specially invited winemakers.

These bottles are best sampled at one of the island's four restaurants. A mistake that so many resorts make is putting mass appeal before quality or locality and it is a shame not to see more Maldivian specialities on the menu. Reethi restaurant, Tapasake and Fanditha offer international, Japanese and Middle Eastern cuisine, respectively. Unsurprisingly, fresh fish features prominently, although delicacies such as Wagyu catch me rather off guard.

Sports and recreation

A six-course meal at Fanditha, followed by a session on the *sheesha*, meant that any benefits from my earlier spa treatment were quickly nullified. There are, however, a number of activities on offer to help burn off the calories and build up an appetite. The island has a tennis centre, fully equipped with in-house professional, offers fishing expeditions, water sports, and some of the best snorkelling and scuba diving opportunities in Asia.

That is to name but a few, but the most striking feature is that, despite the number of activities and attractions on site, there is a complete lack of hard sell; you could curl up in a hammock with a good book for the duration of your stay without once being disturbed.

Sorry to leave

If my arrival offered a hint of what was to come, my departure only confirms my overall judgement. Sitting aboard the top deck of a 55ft



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yacht hurtling towards Male International airport, I am brought a glass of champagne. This scene summarises everything: the simplicity, the quality of service, the emphasis on small flourishes, and the unapologetic luxury of the entire experience. After 50 minutes my yacht pulls up directly outside the departure gate. I am missing Reethi Rah already.

Travelling back to London via Dubai, I make a quick stopover at the Royal Mirage. This is another One&Only managed resort located just up the coast from the Burj al Arab and I want to see whether the levels of service and escapism found on Reethi Rah can be translated to this city setting.

What I find is both different and the same. Understandably, the Royal Mirage feels grander, livelier and more urbane. There is an in-house nightclub, Bentleys and Alfa Romeos parked out front, and businessmen rubbing shoulders with holidaymakers and hip, young Arabs. Again, though, the entire experience is executed expertly.

I check in to the 250-room Palace – the 65-acre resort has two other hotels: the 172-room Arabian Court and the super exclusive Residence & Spa, which has just 18 suites and 32 prestige rooms. My room opens onto the Arabian Gulf and 1km of private beach. On the horizon are highways, construction sites and countless cranes, but below is an oasis of calm.

A gem in Dubai

Unlike so many of Dubai's resorts and hotels, here there is a real sense of place. Arches, domes, towers and courtyards all pay homage to Arabian architecture. The spa even boasts an oriental hammam: a communal

bathroom where, interspersed by excruciating periods in the steam room, I am cleaned to within an inch of my life.

Again, service is beyond reproach. Lazing by the pool or beach, fresh towels, orange juice and snacks are delivered without prompting. I never want for anything. Minor quibbles, such as the repetitiveness of the artwork adorning the corridors and the vulgarity of calling one's cocktail bar Celebrities, become irrelevant in the face of such professionalism. It quickly becomes apparent why readers of *Business Traveller Magazine* voted it Best Resort Hotel in the Middle East 2007.

Such experiences also raise the question of why so many 'luxury' resorts fail to get the fundamentals of service right. Quality of service has brought me round to the idea of both island resorts and Dubai. Even when living in the lap of luxury, sometimes all it takes is a foot massage. ■

Further information

Getting there

Phin flew with Emirates, which has six flights a week from London Heathrow to Male via Dubai.

Resort contact details:

Tel: +1 960 664 8800

Website: www.oneandonlyresorts.com

Prices: from \$860 per night for basic villa to \$5,400 per night for the two-room Grand Beach Suite.