

A sandbank
at Soneva Jani

I can't even talk about it. Remember that? I used that phrase solidly between 1987, when I was 15, and 1989. New Diet Coke ad – can't even talk about it. Tom Cruise in *Cocktail* – can't even talk about it. Lucy's grown-up brother – can't even talk about it. When something was just too much, too great, too magnificent, my friends and I just couldn't even talk about it. I remember one Christmas my mum gave me a pair of R Soles brown-leather cowboy boots (I know, I was a total tool, but had dreamt about owning some solidly for two years). Anyway, that day I hit the jackpot and apparently just sat and said, 'I can't even talk about it' over 100 times between the hours of 11am and 8pm.

Gather round, as I am that teenager once again, lost for words, unable to explain, totally gobsmacked and just staring at the wall, saying, 'I can't even talk about it.' The object, the thing, the amazing entity that stopped me dead in my tracks is a hotel. It's called Soneva Jani and it's smack in the middle of the Indian Ocean. When *Tatler* very kindly said, 'Ere, love, do you fancy writing about the Maldives for us?', I jumped up and down and skipped about. I had gone seven years ago and was still talking about hermit crabs and sandbanks and the enormous amounts of reading books and chatting and eating (there is genuinely nothing else to do, no important monument/art gallery/museum round the corner. You simply have to do nothing – it's an order).

'Yippe!' I said. 'Will there still be turtles and those melon balls on sticks?' *Tatler* had to

quietly take me to one side and say: 'Dude, you don't seem to understand. The Maldives has moved on from your basic cold towel and club sandwich. It's got seriously cool hotels. It's chicer than Nile Rodgers' Chic, which is virtually impossible, and the places where we're sending you will blow your tiny mind.'

Well, ladies and gentlemen, they were bang on. Soneva Jani is just breathtaking. The second you arrive and look up at the amazing arched wooden dome that shelters the jetty, you will feel a bit trembly and you'll think, 'Is this real?' The hotel is made up of beautiful wiggly walkways that lead you to your home, which is like a wooden heaven. The whole place is so stunning that you'll constantly exclaim, 'Look at that!' and 'Wait! Over here!', as you take in the sunken reading area or the impeccable daybed, ideal for a game of bridge (have I told you I'm 45? I really only get excited about a no-trumps hand and bed linen).

The whole feel of the place is as if *Slendium* had had sex with Ralph Lauren, but they abandoned the stripes and the whole Hiawatha thing. And unlike in most tropical hotels, there are no orange cushions emblazoned with sequin seahorses. There are no tasseled sofas or weird faux-coral mounted fish. The rooms are like cathedrals to great taste and you'll never want to leave.





FROM ABOVE, THE BEDROOM IN AN OVERWATER VILLA; BUTTERFLYFISH; THE WOODEN HUTS & WALKWAYS, ALL AT SONEVAJANI



ABOVE, SWINGS AT AMILLA FUSHI; BELOW, GLAUDA GOES DOLPHIN-WATCHING



At some point, though, you might fancy something to eat, or a massage or a magical yoga session, and then you need to head to the Gathering. I'm not making that name up. That's what the main structure in the middle is called – it's where you eat and drink and watch the sunset. The Gathering makes it sound like you're joining a cult, but this is definitely a cult you'll want to be part of. You can sit at an oversized circular table with a glass bottom, so while you drink your fresh juice and eat your just-caught snapper with miso dressing (it's so clean and lean you'll lose a stone in the first hour), you can watch small pipe- and butterflyfish go about their daily routine just beneath your toes.

Shoes are banned and everyone is super-casual. I wore the same ancient kaftan most of the time and this was to be applauded. No Perspex heels, bronzing sticks or evening clutch bags here. Everyone looks fresh-faced and they're basically wearing what you'd wear on a Sunday morning back home. Perfect. Also, if environmental responsibility is your thing, then all of the Soneva resorts excel at it: no plastic bottles, and they filter their own water, use recycled and renewable materials and take great care to preserve ecosystems.

But before I move on, I need to tell you about astronomy night. Genuinely, when you book, please ask if Mike Dalley is going to be there. He's an infectious, fantastic talker who over supper will unfurl his massive telescope (this is not code) and teach you more about the planets in one night than you've learned in your entire life. Through the largest floating telescope in Asia (I mean, really), we saw Jupiter and brand-new baby stars and all the important constellations. When it was time to leave, I'll be frank, the manager had to prise off our fingers one by one. >





ABOVE, A BEACH HOUSE & BELOW, THE ARTIST'S STUDIO AT THE BEACH CLUB, AMILLA FUSHI



Claudia's husband Kris and son Arthur on the beach at Finolhu

◁ But it was on to the next place, and as we sat despondent in the boat that was taking us away, we said a little goodbye prayer to Soneva Jani and promised we'd never think anything was as wonderful. However, sometimes (not often) it's truly great to be wrong. Amilla Fushi is totally different (there's a pool table and a barista, for goodness' sake), but it's just as good for a family holiday, maybe even (and I feel like I'm being unfaithful) slightly better. I'll come to why exactly in just a tick.

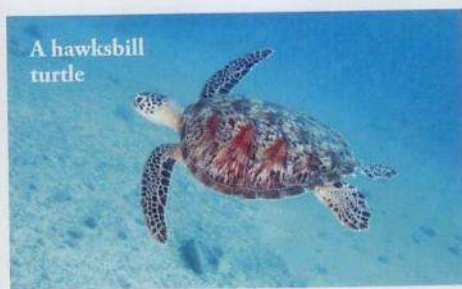
First, though, the rooms are all totally goosebump-inducing and you'll find one that's right for you: there are bright-white boxes suspended over the ocean if you want to be surrounded by sea; or sumptuous oversized beach villas if you like sand between your toes. If you're looking for something a bit more adventurous, then pick a treetop villa. You march up four flights of heavy wooden stairs until you're taller than the palms and then the most amazing house opens up for you – a vast open living space with a beautiful pool. We just stood, starstruck. It was like climbing stairs to find Beyoncé waiting at the top.

There is a lot going on at Amilla, and if you have kids it will be their favourite place ever. There's a teen club, but happily this doesn't involve a room with A/C and a PlayStation – instead they have a great collection of table-tennis tables and a friendly outdoor DJ. There's a pizza restaurant right on the beach that is seemingly open 24/7; there's an artist-in-residence, who will sit and explain how to draw the perfect Nemo for an hour when the sun is at its hottest; and there's a homemade-ice-cream bar that makes Ben & Jerry's seem a bit meh.



BELOW, THE FISH & CRAB SHACK AT FINOLHU; BELOW LEFT, CLAUDIA AT THE GATHERING, SONEVA JANI



A hawksbill
turtle

While you're there, ask to eat at the Fish & Crab Shack at their sister resort, Finolhu, and order the crunchy crab tacos and local steamed fish with buckets of triple-cooked chips. There are baby hermit crabs wandering about everywhere, but once you've got over the fact you're eating their relatives covered in spicy mayonnaise, it just might be the greatest long-lunch location in the whole world. Amilla is magic, and that's the end of it.

Our final visit was to Jumeirah Vittaveli and unlike the other two, it's a 15-minute boat ride from the capital, Malé. This is, in itself, magnificent, as after the long flight with a Dubai changeover you might not be enthralled with the idea of a seaplane. Vittaveli is – how do I say this – super-grand. It's opulent. The rooms are outstanding, the chandeliers are enormous, the sofas are velvet and the beds are the most comfortable on the planet. The baths are oversized and the bedsheets are bigger than sails. The pools are huge and the inflatables for the kids to play with aren't swans, they're luminous unicorns. The jars of cookies in every room are bigger than a Honda Civic and the cocktails are completely splendid.

But the absolute standout star of the resort is the food. There's an Indian restaurant that is so delicious you might actually try and lick the staff after they've served pudding. The chef is amazing and will host a cooking class if you ask. His knowledge of spice is ridiculous – what he can do with a chicken breast and some turmeric is nothing short of awesome. The resort has a Royal Residence (yes, this room deserves capital letters), and it's like nothing we've ever seen. Book it if you want your own beach, your own Japanese teppanyaki restaurant (I'm serious) and two enormous pools. If J-Lo were going on holiday, she'd pick here.

The Maldives, then, still has cold towels and melon balls – but there's a whole lot more. I can't even talk about it. □

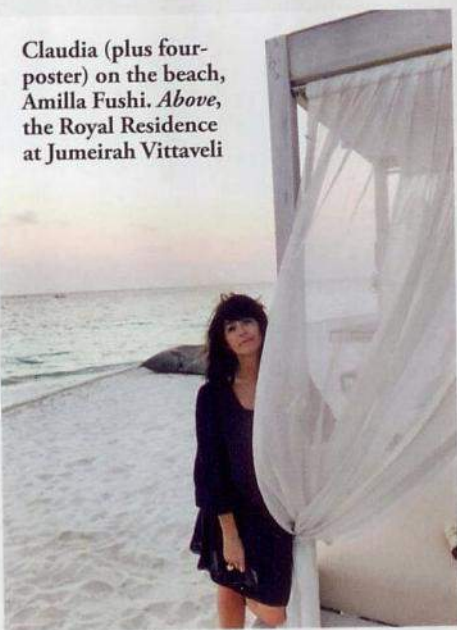
Cleveland Collection (clevelandcollection.co.uk; 020 7843 3596) offer seven nights at *Soneva Jani*, B&B, from £5,449pp; seven nights at *Amilla Fushi*, half board, from £2,815pp; seven nights at *Jumeirah Vittaveli*, B&B, from £2,999pp (all prices based on two sharing and including flights and transfers).

MALDIVES IN THE NEWS

The country has recently experienced major political upheaval. For the latest Foreign Office advice, check www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/maldives.

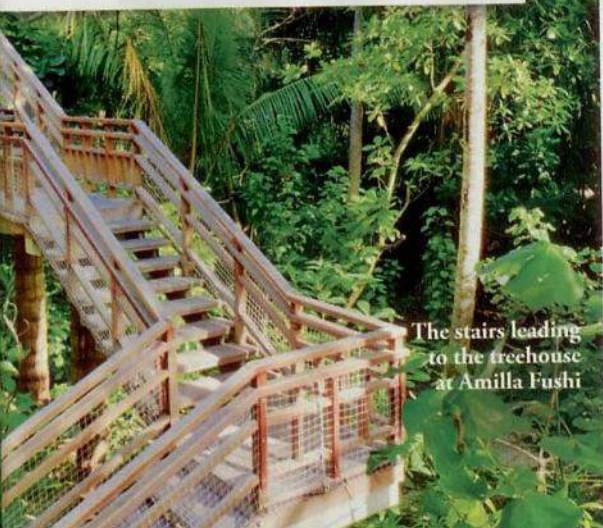


Claudia (plus four-poster) on the beach, Amilla Fushi. Above, the Royal Residence at Jumeirah Vittaveli



Amilla also has, and you should probably sit down for this, a real-life mermaid. She's called Lauren Arthur and she's the resident marine biologist. She took us underwater to meet turtles and eagle rays and every kind of parrotfish. I have no idea how she did it, but my kids and all the children on the island became obsessed with replanting coral and protecting turtles, and they just followed her around like small, happy clams. She filled us all with wonder and you can now test our five-year-old on the differences between a hawksbill and an olive-ridley turtle. I know.

The thing that makes Amilla Fushi addictive is the people. They are simply the most friendly, most up-for-it, most charming group we have encountered on holiday. They're smiley and sweet without being fake, and obviously think they work for the best resort, and by the time you leave, you'll agree. You are designated a helper/butler – a human who just fills your room with plates of mango and pineapple. Ours was called Abdullah. At first I was uncomfortable and told him to have a lie-down. About five minutes later he was unpacking our bags and finding baby gekkos with the kids.



The stairs leading to the treehouse at Amilla Fushi