

# WHERE TO STAY

The smartest hotel updates and the freshest reviews

EDITED BY PETER BROWNE



EXCLUSIVE FIRST LOOK

## EAT, SLEEP, PLAY, REPEAT

THE MALDIVES IS ALWAYS TRYING TO DO SOMETHING DIFFERENT. NOW A PERKY NEWCOMER HAS SPECIFICALLY ZONED IN ON THE POST-IBIZA-CLOSING CROWD

BY MICHELLE JANA CHAN. PHOTOGRAPHS BY JENNY ZARINS

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Clockwise from left: beach sign; Sri Lankan mud crab dish; Baa Baa Beach Club at night; a Lagoon Pool Villa; the Milk Bar; sunbeds. Previous page, the beach next to the club





THE MALDIVES IS TRYING to shed its honeymooner reputation and Finolhu might just be the island to finally put that idea to bed.

It couldn't be more different from its sister hotel, modern and minimalist Amilla Fushi, also by The Small Maldives Island Co, which opened last year with super-sized villas of up to eight bedrooms. That one's about privacy, pampering and staying put. Here, according to CEO Mark Hehir, the inspiration was a hotchpotch of *Thunderbirds*, Elvis Presley's *Blue Hawaii*, *Austin Powers*, Aretha Franklin and the Seventies TV show *Fantasy Island*. He's the former manager of One&Only Reethi Rah, the well-named destination of London's 'rahs', and some of those guests have inevitably followed him.

'The rest of the Maldives is boring,' he says. 'This is Soho House, the beach clubs of St Tropez and Nikki Beach in one.' It's certainly a muddle of muses.

After the high gloss of Amilla, thatch is back, paired with sugar-almond pastels and a back catalogue of eras: faded wooden planks with peeling paint, vintage surfboards and old-school lifeguard towers. Hashtags abound in the signage. The mascot is a large, rather silly golden sheep wearing shades; the words 'Baa Baa' are repeated throughout the property, a play on the location in Baa Atoll, a UNESCO World Biosphere Reserve.

This is a Maldives hotel to live it up in, on a level nobody had dared to do in these parts. The worry was always about scoring the right vibe, mixing disparate guests and pulling enough people on to the dance floor. But Hehir isn't concerned. 'There won't be a question of: shall we go to the underwater club or not?' he says, referring to the nightlife at other properties such as Per Aquum Niyama, which has since converted that space into a restaurant. With Finolhu's beach club at the centre of the action, guests will simply get involved without really trying.

There are 93 over-water villas on the 800-metre-long jetty and 32 on the beach, some facing reef-protected calm waters, the rest with pools. All of which adds up to lots of potential revellers. The rooms are uncomplicated: rattan furniture, patterned rugs, Moroccan-style lamps and lanterns, a Smeg fridge, Marshall speaker unit and record player to play original Diana Ross LPs.


But as bright and breezy as they are, this hotel isn't focused on where you sleep (if you sleep). Instead, it's about finding a rhythm at the Baa Baa Beach Club; at

the entrance is a stopped clock (forget about time is the byword here). There's a swim-up DJ bar, a VW combi van serving burgers and sushi, Pac-Man and Baywatch pinball machines, and a cinema playing classics from Bond to Rocky. A sign points to the beach, hardly necessary given this is an atoll but totally delightful.

The beats begin at lunch and flow into the afternoon pool party: inflatable flamingoes with mermaid acrobat performers, and volleyball on the sand. There's Sixties music at 6pm, Seventies at 7pm and Eighties at 8pm before the party steps up with DJs and live bands, fire-eaters, contortionists and stilt-walkers. Plus, six times a year there will be mega bashes hosted by New York nightclub 1 Oak with themed nights such as 50 shades of blue, tribal bonfires and burlesque. Stay up till 6am and breakfast is on the house.

Finolhu is also hoping to team up with nearby hotels (Soneva Fushi, Coco Palm, Four Seasons and Anantara) to operate an Uber-style boat service around the atoll as an antidote to the potential cabin fever of small-island life. It's a clever idea but probably unrealistic given the varied hotels involved. Still, Finolhu will try to lure other hotels' guests over with the parties, of course, and also with stand-out food: mezzes and shisha pipes at North African restaurant Baa Haa; serious Cantonese cooking at Kanusan, which serves *char siu* pork belly with crispy aubergine, and roast duck with truffle miso.

But the best bait is the Fish & Crab Shack, halfway along a staggeringly beautiful tail of white sand spearing nearly two kilometres into the Indian Ocean. I'd fly halfway around the world for this walk to lunch. Come here for sandy toes, sea breezes, the quivering shade of palms, chilled Whispering Angel rosé, buckets of prawns and soft-shell crab.

Downtime and detox is at The Cove Club with its jungle gym, basketball and tennis courts, and the Milk Bar serves flat whites, protein shakes and açai bowls. It's even sociable here at the spa: sip Martinis on the deck while you have a mini massage or a mani-pedi. Just in case you forget this is a place to live every day as if it's your last and to dance like no one's watching. 

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