



THE HONEYMOON IS OVER

And now you have the children to prove it, but that doesn't mean you can't still go to the Maldives, says Francisca Kellett



TOP, SONEVA FUSHI. ABOVE, RUBY AT LUNCH. BELOW, A MALDIVIAN SEAPLANE



So it's day two of our trip and we're on a boat. And it's glorious, of course – glowing turquoise water, warm breeze, cocktail in hand. All is good. All is very good indeed. But then it gets better, because I suddenly realise that this trip is EDUCATIONAL. This is unexpected. It's the fish that does it. A flapping grey fish on the end of a line; my six-year-old's first ever catch. She is triumphant, and as she hauls it onto deck she yells, 'Yes! White snapper! Let's have it for supper!'

I'm gobsmacked and the reason is twofold: 1) she can identify a species of tropical fish and she's happy to eat it (she's SIX). And 2) I thought nothing would impress her after our arrival on a seaplane, which I found totally thrilling ('It's a plane! But it lands on the sea! Like a boat!') and she found totally boring ('Yeah, can I have the iPad?').

But now it turns out that the Maldives is both exciting and educational. It's not indulgent and selfish and lazy, which, let's be honest, is what you were thinking. It's sort of what I'd been thinking too. We'd barely told a soul we were even going. The Maldives seemed vaguely inappropriate for a family holiday with two under-sevens – a bit like saying we were taking the kids on a gambling jolly to Vegas. It's a schlepp to get to, and when you're there it's just beaches and cocktails and honeymooners. Right?

Well, yes, sort of. But let's start with the beaches. They are not mere beaches; they are the sort of beaches that Pixar might create, so paradise-perfect you almost expect them to pixellate as you approach. Our first stop is Soneva Fushi, one of the oldest and most ravishing of

Maldivian island resorts, and we have a private stretch of beach outside our vast rustic-chic villa: sand that looks like caster sugar shelving ever so gently into the clearest, bluest water I've ever seen.

It's easy to imagine a frisky couple spending their entire stay wallowing in the shallows. But we see no couples. We see no one. So we splash and we look and we splash some more. The three-year-old chases hermit crabs wibbling across the sand. The six-year-old leaps through shoals of silvery fish and pokes at bits of washed-up coral and builds extravagant sand creations. I head out with mask and snorkel to swirls of parrotfish and electric-blue surgeonfish, and my eldest wants to as well, so I teach her and it takes about two minutes and suddenly there she is, floating over the coral reef and squealing into her snorkel every time we see something exciting, which is all the time. Giant clams! Cuttlefish! NEMO FISH! ('Clownfish, Mummy!' she shouts through her snorkel.)

We're learning all sorts of stuff. We're learning that the best way of getting around is by pootling on the bicycles left outside our villa, along sandy lanes crisscrossing the island, the little one perched happily in a trolley in front of me, the eldest wobbling along beneath the palms and banyans. We learn that in the soupy heat of the tropics one must move slowwwwwilly – slowly from vast four-poster to private pool, to enormous daybed to hammock, or to lunch in the breezy outdoor restaurant, for vast platters of multicoloured fruit and barbecued fish and pizza and sushi and about 500 types of salad. And a chocolate room, which is a room filled entirely with chocolate. We learn about tree frogs (loud) and gekkos (cute) and fruit bats (huge, hairy, plentiful – there is one that flaps around the treetops in our own tropical garden. We name him Bernard).

We learn about recycling waste and water on an island during a 'backstage' tour of the resort. Sounds yawn, but is nothing of the sort;

LONG-HAUL



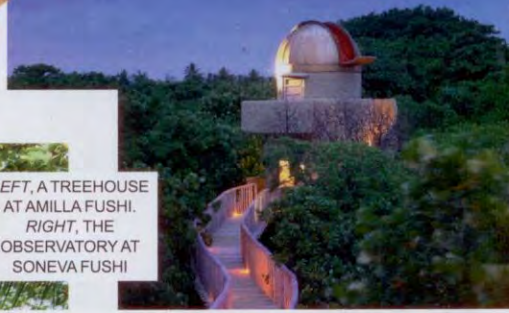
LEFT, A REEF OFF SONEVA FUSHI. RIGHT, FRANCISCA SITS POISED FOR THE BRINY DEEP



Bernard the friendly fruit bat



LEFT, A TREEHOUSE AT AMILLA FUSHI. RIGHT, THE OBSERVATORY AT SONEVA FUSHI



the time. Which is also sort of miraculous. I should be honest now and say that there are a few things I'd rather the children didn't learn. They shouldn't learn that our butler (who is called Saddam Hussein, for real) will bring us ice-cream sundaes whenever we wish. Ditto the gorgeous Reena at Soneva Fushi, our very own Woman Friday who proffers fresh coconuts with straws whenever we look a bit hot, which is often. They shouldn't know that there are such things as chocolate rooms and that pancakes with maple syrup can be eaten at breakfast every day, not just for birthdays, or that tropical fruit is anything other than a luxury – 'I like papaya more than pineapple, Mama' sounds, well, WRONG coming from a three-year-old.

But then some things don't interest them at all. Our departure is via seaplane – I'm once again thrilled; they're once again unimpressed ('It's a boat-plane! A plane-boat!' Nothing.) As we climb up and away from that glowing turquoise water, they don't even look out at the pearl-like atolls seemingly floating in the sea. Until I shout that I can see actual shoals of fish moving in the water. The six-year-old glances down. 'Maybe mahi-mahi. Tasty. Can I have the iPad?' □

BOOK IT *Cleveland Collection* (clevelandcollection.co.uk; 020 7843 3596) offers seven nights at Amilla Fushi and seven nights at Soneva Fushi, including flights and transfers, from £5,899 per person sharing.

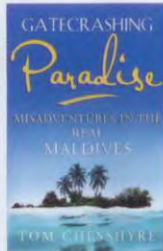


TOP, ROMA AT SONEVA FUSHI. ABOVE, AN OCEAN REEF HOUSE AT AMILLA FUSHI. BELOW, AMILLA FUSHI

seeing a massive charcoal-creating oven in action is all kinds of awesome. (*Gatecrashing Paradise*, by Tom Chesshyre, by the way, is what you should read if you want to learn about the country away from the resorts, which you should.) And about growing lettuces and mushrooms in the shady kitchen garden – we scoff fiery Sri Lankan curry while the children chase chickens and poke around among the tomatoes. We even learn about the universe in Soneva's very own full-blown observatory, where the excitable Ali Shameen shows us Jupiter and its rings, and my youngest pretends to be just as pleased as the rest of us, even though it's only really the toddler over a rope bridge to the telescope that does it for her.

And then it is time to leave for our next stop, the brand new Amilla Fushi, a very different beast with stylish treehouses and weirdly space-age white cubes on stilts and a groovy stretch of Aussie-cool restaurants, and a coral reef RIGHT THERE. So, more snorkelling, and more fish, and more cool stuff to discover. Like that dolphins love it when humans clap from afar, as we find when we head out on another boat, applauding gleefully as they suddenly appear, leaping around the bow, which is sort of miraculous. And that baby reef sharks are best seen from the pier at midday, when they like to cruise around the shadows beneath our feet. And that fish 'n' chips does actually have a place in the Indian Ocean ('Not as good as MY white snapper'). Or that a ginger martini (yes, cocktails do feature here, no point denying it) is best enjoyed while the kids are in the kids' club; ditto the Body Pure massage in the glorious spa.

A word on the kids' club: it is bright and breezy and right in the thick of things, which means you don't feel like you're dumping them out of sight, plus it has these ludicrously smiley and energetic staff bouncing around, and a sweet paddling pool and endless activities (beachcombing, Maldivian-language lessons – more education!), which means the girls actually ask to go, all



AMILLA FUSHI: FAR LEFT, SADDAM HUSSEIN, THE FAMILY'S BUTLER FOR THEIR STAY. LEFT, ROMA & RUBY



I'm living the dream

