

BEFORE SUNSET

A first-timer to the Maldives finds unexpected R&R and much to do, even as a non-swimmer visiting in the off season, at Le Meridien Maldives Resort & Spa—one of the archipelago's stylish new island resorts

BY PRANNAY PATHAK



PHOTO COURTESY: LE MERIDIEN MALDIVES RESORT & SPA



I'm at Riviera, the beachside, adults-only bar. My cocktail is a cucumber green, just like the parasols out front. They wear beachside stripes that never seem to go out of fashion, and are cinched in the centre so they don't keel over in the evening breeze. My new loafers ate some sand, but I like it that way. Derrick, the affable Balinese barman I've struck up a friendship with without him suspecting, wants to know if my London Green & Tonic is the way I had expected it. It is, I answer without thinking, before repeating that it is, this time sure that this may be the first thing that is the way I expected it in the Maldives.

I remember being the eyesore of the flight and then the seaplane that brought me to Thilamaafushi island. If honeymoon destinations had stags and marine biology hotspots had unlettered loiterers, I would fit both descriptions. Hell, I don't even swim. I've always found that the appellations of mountain boy and city bird go with my persona, and the mere thought of seaside sunshine has me sweating in discomfort. Then one afternoon, I find myself sipping a welcome drink at the arrival lounge at Le Meridien Maldives Resort & Spa.

Situated in the southeast of the archipelago's Lhaviyani Atoll, which is regarded as an extraordinary diving destination, the settled serenity and understated glamour of the resort belies its newness. My hosts quickly have me hop on the buggy, a giant ant that takes me around the island, and finally emerges at the other end of it, where the resort's overwater villas sit like buttons on both sides of a placket. A leggy seabird patrols the beach for lunch options and a woman in a wedding dress poses for her photographer husband as we ascend the wooden bridge, pushing on noisily towards Villa 208.

Now, I am quite wary of the sedative powers of plush hotel suites. My exceedingly well-appointed Sunset Overwater Villa affords a direct view of the turquoise ocean whether you're dialling for an espresso or checking your eye shadow at the dresser. Even so, I am often called away to witness from up close a blanket of clouds about to cause an early sunset. Or to respond to a daring mid-day swim undertaken by a White couple with a jog of my own along the gorgeous beach. Having exhausted my breath-cylinders, I then drop triumphantly into the sand, stopping the little gossamer crabs in their tracks. I suppose they disapprove greatly of the unwieldy poses that I practise partly out of loss of self-awareness and partly out of growing fear of early ageing. Slowly, they will transmute themselves into inexistence, helped by the metronomic rumble of the waves.

PRANNAY PATHAK (FOOD). PHOTO COURTESY: LE MERIDIEN MALDIVES RESORT & SPA (SUNDECK)



There's a conspiracy theory on the internet about everyone and everything turning into crabs, eventually. It happens to me momentarily at the Le Meridien Spa, a huddle of therapy villas and an arrival centre perched over a shimmering turquoise lagoon, styled after European bathhouses. My deceptively-assertive masseuse, Tashi, buries me under her strokes like waves washing over my body, which is now experiencing a pleasurable vegetative state. A towel frames the outline of my face, which is facing a coral garden visible through the glass panel on the floor, with Tashi away from the consciousness that vision allows, hard at work to sculpt a new renaissance for my stress-addled body.

On the first evening, my plans to catch a few scenes of *The Gray Man* at the Hub's open-air cinema are lost at sea: It's the business end of the Maldives monsoon. So I seek refuge in the resort's hydroponic garden, where rows of these frilly beauties—that find their way into green salads and meat bowls or as crunchy sides with fresh catch across the six restaurants on the property—thrive in a delicately-sustained environment. It's a veritable monastery for greens; long tubes with peepers hold full-grown lettuce, adolescent bok choy, tweeny spinach and entire nurseries of starter trays cradle little stalks that have just about germinated. My first dinner at the property is a harvest table that shows off the kitchen's handsome reserves of fresh produce from this hydroponic garden that's among the country's largest.

PHOTO COURTESY: LE MERIDIEN MALDIVES RESORT & SPA (SPA). PRANNAY PATHAK (DRINK)



Practise the self-love you crave: be it lunch bowls with in-house hydroponic greens (facing page, top), libations by the beach (bottom), rubdowns at the lagoon-perched spa (top), or sunset-watching at the villa sundeck (facing page, bottom).



I travel for breakfast. For my first, here at Turquoise, the airy all-day diner, I muster whatever I can from the vast spread on offer: kimchi rice (the resort receives a decent number of Korean guests); *mas huni* (a tangy tuna and coconut salad served with *roshi*, the local flatbread); and for good measure, some splendid *pain suisse* at Pastry Chef Rashmi's recommendation. GM Nilesh Singh, who's offered to be my guidebook for Bali, fraternally coaxes me to sample the southern Indian options for the day, and I am glad to cave in. In the coming days, I let the kitchen put its spins on my favourite egg recipes, including an omelette with tuna, the

In case an afternoon swim is out of bounds in the wet season, opt for a soak in the Riviera infinity pool with a signature cocktail from the bar to boot.

fish a Maldivian staple and also reportedly the country's biggest export. My place of choice for all these samplings is a table in the centre with a direct view of the beach. It's from here that I grow rather fond of sipping slowly on my lattes and cold brews from the dedicated barista section, with a wholesome side-serve of the morning reveries of the lapping waves. Pool breakfast? It'll be a hard pass.

As a mountain boy, I know weather-enforced cancellations too well. As a non-swimmer, it doesn't really get me nonplussed. I will simply climb onto one of the bikes at the resort and get my leg muscles

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I SUCCESSFULLY PARSE BARISTA SANAL VINOD'S HINTS ABOUT TERROIRS AND THEIR INFLUENCE ON COFFEE NOTES AND CREMA QUALITY



working as I pedal from one end of the nine-hectare island to the other. I will then head back to my villa, pop into the roomy, ocean-facing shower, and then catch a quick snooze on the overwater hammock before the barista session that I have signed up for. At Waves, the cosy café with laidback seating, Sanal Vinod, the in-house barista from Kerala, hands me a drink to cleanse my palate, and a question to cleanse my mind: How much do I know about coffee? Thirty minutes later, I know I have outdone myself when I am successfully able to tell where the four shots of single-origin espresso I drank are from, thanks to Sanal, whose hints about terroirs

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and their influence on coffee notes I seem to have successfully parsed. His passion and protective purism, a much-maligned trait that I respect, rubs off on me as I go about using terms like crema, terroir and tannins, confidently. He goes on to whip up a perfectly frothy cappuccino—my firm aversion for the drink somewhat allows space for a newfound respect for the layered process of making it.

In the evenings, twilight descends in no time upon the glinting lights of Tabemasu, the Japanese restaurant that my sundeck overlooks. One evening, the rain comes down rather heavily as I make my way here for a mixology class. Deepak, the mixologist and our coach for today, hands out to us their signature, yuzu-based cocktail Sakura in tiny ceramic cups. Over the course of the next hour or so, we're given a quick cocktail history primer, taught the art of shaking and stirring well, and made to whip up a few Old-Fashioneds and aperitifs on our own. Tabemasu also forms the setting for my first-ever *teppanyaki* dinner, where rockstar Chef Ronando Ramos delivers an attractive melange of dishes, including a memorable flambé *hamachi*, a prawn salad bowl that has fresh, in-house hydroponic lettuce, and a chocolate brownie, also whipped up on the grill. My gracious host, Marketing Communications Manager Anahita Nair opts for a vegetarian *omakase* menu, and I make sure to graze as well. This counter, with the ocean faintly discernible in the background, is an excellent venue for *teppanyaki*—which elevates a dinner to a collaborative performed art where eating is just as much of a contribution.

I'm probably grinning in disbelief over the smashing weekend I've had. I know because Derrick just returned it with an even bigger smile. Behind him, an enormous black belly levitates on the horizon like a monstrous shape-shifting antagonist in a manga show, as the besieged setting sun burns coolly one last time. Nursing my next drink, a blackberry-infused, citrus vodka-based tippie called Flight Thilamaafushi, I read a notification on my phone about another cancellation: it's the fishing trip. I drain my highball and make my way to Waves, where my art class with sensei Saittey awaits. I'll be painting the sunset.

For coffee-lovers, the property offers a well-rounded experience, from breakfast specials to midday cuppas and barista sessions.

Essentials

Doubles start at USD \$600/₹47,750 per night, inclusive of buffet breakfast and non-motorised water sports. [marriott.com/en-us/hotels/mlmlemd-le-meridien-maldives-resort-and-spa](https://www.marriott.com/en-us/hotels/mlmlemd-le-meridien-maldives-resort-and-spa)