

## **Maldives Resorts: Eco-Friendly Vacations**

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# Maldives Resorts: Eco-Friendly Vacations



Luxurious, exclusive and remote, the Maldives are the ultimate beach escape. They're also a case study in the risks of global warming. Writer Akhil Sharma visits the country's most eco-friendly resorts and discovers a remarkable cuisine worth protecting.

Six Senses Laamu, one of several eco-conscious Maldives resorts. © *Herbert Ypma*

By [Akhil Sharma](#)



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The Maldives, 1,190 white-sand islands in a string off the western coast of India, are home to some of world's most incredible beach resorts. They are wonderfully remote—to get there, I took a 13-hour flight from New York City to Qatar and then a five-hour flight to the Maldives' international airport (an island unto itself), where I transferred to a speedboat that took me to the first of the four resorts I visited, each on its own island.

The Maldivian islands look like some giant eyedropper has squeezed out drops of iodine into an expansive blue sea. Inside the circles are palm trees and incredible beaches. Outside the circles are lagoons enclosed by coral reefs filled with fish, sea turtles and manta rays. The reefs slow down the waves, making them gentle and lapping.

If you would like to experience the Maldives, the time is now. That's because various consequences of global warming are threatening the islands. The rising temperature of ocean waters is causing the coral reefs to bleach and crumble, making the islands more vulnerable to storms and racing waves. The monsoon rains are no longer reliable, and the unpredictable squalls make fishing more difficult. Most tragically, scientists predict that sometime within the next 20 to 50 years, sea levels will rise so high that most of the islands will be flooded.

The highest point in the Maldives is just eight feet above sea level. From most places on most islands, one can see the sea. To experience the Maldives is to experience the sea.



The Maldives support an incredible array of sea life. Photo courtesy of Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts.

I don't swim.

A snorkeling instructor at the Four Seasons Resort at Kuda Huraa meets me on the beach. He leads me into the water. I put on my goggles and lower my head under the water, and at first, just doing this has me gasping. It doesn't take me long to start floating, though. The instructor holds my wrist and tugs me forward. Schools of fish—blue, yellow, orange like Mexican sodas—scatter around me as the instructor tows my body.

There is still, I am told, astonishing fishing in the Maldives. I have never fished before, either. I board a boat that looks like a porch. Shuddering and spewing plumes of diesel smoke, the boat sets off.

I've heard that fishermen try to keep their favorite spots secret, and so I wonder if the captain is going to take us to some special place. But, just a few hundred yards from land, we stop and drop anchor. The young men of the crew begin attaching pieces of fish to hooks and then hand the passengers fishing lines.

I fling out my line. The hook and fish make a plop in the water. I see the bait sink, appearing to shudder as it falls. It has barely disappeared from sight when the line grows heavy. I pull it up. I wonder if I'm going to be disgusted by the living thing that I am catching.

I reel in a red grouper. It's so colorful that it looks like a tropical parrot. It looks delicious.

That night, dinner is on a sandbank in the middle of the sea. We get out of the Zodiacs that have carried us there and my wife swings herself onto the beach, holding up her sandals. Phosphorescent plankton illuminates the sand. There are torches to guide us to where dinner will be served—my grouper is served simply grilled. Above us, the stars are so thick that I think of all the poems I know about stars, and how rarely I see them in New York City, where I live, and how, over the years, stars have become metaphors to me instead of something real.



The Four Seasons serves dinner on a sandbank in the middle of the sea. Photo © Herbert Ypma.

On another night, the Four Seasons hosts a buffet called Thuna Paha, which means “three to five” and refers to the number of spices in the local curry blends. When we arrive, my wife and I are given a table on a pier. The sun is beginning to set. It is 82 degrees, and > there is a light breeze. The sky is trembling with pink light. My wife takes hold of my hand. We lean against each other, and I suddenly realize how far we are from home, that we are together, that we are the sort of people who get to go to the Maldives. I guess I feel then what everybody who is fortunate enough to come to the Maldives with someone they love feels.

Once we're sitting at the table, I am so content that I stop being hungry. We get up, though, and go back across the pier to the buffet, passing other couples sitting at tables with flickering

candles. The idea of this buffet is to present the very best of the Maldives' culinary traditions—which, because of the area's historical importance as a stopping point for ships traveling between Asia and Africa and the Middle East, includes elements from Malaysia, India and Sri Lanka.

The buffet is laid out in a circle, the circumference of which must be a hundred yards. There are grills with chefs behind them, and clay ovens in which more chefs insert long tandoori spears holding fish, meat and vegetables. The bustle and variety make it not so much a buffet as a bazaar. We begin with a fruit salad of papaya and pineapple with tamarind paste, chiles and peanuts, so surprising in the intensity and variety of its flavors. There is also freshly caught local fish that's been marinated in lime, tamarind and yogurt. Then we try lobster curry, fried prawns, fried bread with minced chicken.

The sun sinks. We sit at our table. Periodically, I get up and go back to the buffet. I do this several times. When we head back to our room that night, I take a last stroll around the options. Seeing all the choices relaxes me.

As an act of self-preservation, the Maldivian government heavily promotes eco-friendly policies. In 2008, the country's president proposed using tourism profits to buy land for the Maldivian people in another part of the world, in case rising sea levels force them to evacuate. Following a government mandate, all the resorts in the Maldives leave a very small ecological footprint. The Soneva Fushi resort, 65 thatched-roof cottages scattered across a dense jungle, is widely considered the pacesetter for environmental stewardship in the Maldives. The resort has committed to reducing its reliance on gas generators by 2013, using a mix of solar panels, wind energy and cutting-edge water-filtration systems.

Not long after arriving at Soneva Fushi—and removing my shoes, as all guests do—I take a tour of the resort's gardens and recycling efforts. The solar panels here are the largest in the Maldives. The extensive herb and vegetable gardens are planted in a sandy soil that was only made viable after years of composting. It is afternoon, and all the plant life makes the air

humid. I'm hot and sweating; being barefoot makes me feel vulnerable and anxious. I keep wondering, When will the tour end so I can eat?

Later that day, we sit down for dinner alongside the garden. A staff member heads into the garden with shears and a basket, bringing back cilantro, gourds, flowers, tomatoes. Using a wok, a chef prepares spinach and lentils, squash and curry leaves, banana flowers and onion with Maldivian fish paste.



Some Maldives resorts serve freshly caught local fish. Courtesy of Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts

Though Soneva Fushi is home to a Michelin-starred chef—Bjorn van der Horst, formerly of London's Greenhouse restaurant—my favorite meals were not cooked by him. As part of its emphasis on simplicity, the resort has also hired little old women from nearby islands to cook. There is an open-air restaurant, and the women stand behind counters rolling dough, stuffing little savory pies, laughing and talking with each other. The intimacy of this, and the way you are welcomed, feels very much like being in someone's home or in a small restaurant on an island that few tourists visit. The food is simple: hot tuna puffs with dough wrappers that dissolve into sweetness in your mouth, releasing fish, coconut and onions; fantastic fish broth that's eaten with rice, lime and blindingly hot peppers. While some resorts attempt to satisfy your every need, to create the sense that anything is possible, Soneva Fushi manages to do the opposite: It creates the sense that very little is needed to be happy.

As a journalist, one gets jaded and cynical, but even for me, the Maldives create a sense of wonder. Walking along a beach one morning at the Four Seasons, I saw what looked like a shiny, dark hump in the water about 40 feet away. It was a manta ray. Another time, in the evening, I was standing on a pier and saw a school of two- and three-foot-long yellow sharks swimming beneath me. Still another time, snorkeling through crystalline water, I had the feeling I was flying. To think that all this will, within a few decades, be lost makes one want to protest. Because one's own conscience is pricked, when people say that they are in the Maldives because it is part of a spiritual journey, this does not sound melodramatic.

I must confess that I have never been especially environmentally conscious. I recycle glass bottles and cardboard because I am forced to, and not because I care. But coming out of the airport back in New York and feeling the energizing air, far too warm for a typical winter day, I felt embarrassed. Global warming was making my day here more pleasant, while across the world, it was causing reefs to crumble, storms to worsen.

I have been home for a little while now. Still, the sensitivity I felt that day has not faded. Now, whenever I leave a room, I turn off the light to conserve energy and think, for the briefest moment, about the Maldives.

*Novelist Akhil Sharma's next book, Stars from Another Sky, will come out in 2013.*

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## More Great Maldives Resorts





Standout Maldives resorts: The Six Senses Laamu. Photo © Herbert Ypma.

## Six Senses Laamu

Most of the villas are perched above the water at this resort on a sparsely inhabited southern atoll. Guests can order a “zero carbon dinner,” prepared with sustainable energy using ingredients from the island. *Villas from \$860; [sixsenses.com](https://www.sixsenses.com).*



Standout Maldives resorts: Four Seasons at Kuda Huraa. Photo courtesy of Four Seasons Hotels.

## Four Seasons at Kuda Huraa

The more family-centric of the two Four Seasons, Kuda Huraa has an especially strong surf program, run by Australian instructors. Kids as young as six can take lessons in the calm lagoon, while boats ferry experienced surfers out to bigger breaks. *Doubles from \$750; [fourseasons.com](http://fourseasons.com).*



Standout Maldives resorts: Soneva Fushi by Six Senses. Photo courtesy of Six Senses.

## Soneva Fushi by Six Senses

There are 65 villas in this jungle resort, one of the most eco-conscious in the country, which uses solar panels and desalinated sea water. *Villas from \$945; [sixsenses.com](http://sixsenses.com).*



Standout Maldives resorts: Viceroy Maldives. Photo courtesy of Viceroy Maldives.

## Viceroy Maldives

Rooms start at 1,300 square feet at Viceroy's first Asian property, located at the country's far-northern tip, with access to rarely seen reefs. *Villas from \$1,350; [viceroyhotelsandresorts.com](http://viceroyhotelsandresorts.com).*



Standout Maldives resorts: Four Seasons at Landaa Giraavaru. Photo courtesy of Four Seasons Hotels.

## Four Seasons at Landaa Giraavaru

This 102-villa resort has an extensive marine-education program. Guests can help repair coral reefs, visit turtle habitats and sign up for a manta ray “on-call” program—the resort will page you when schools of mantas are sighted. *Doubles from \$900; [fourseasons.com](http://fourseasons.com).*



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