

A full-page photograph of a tropical beach. In the foreground, a couple is walking along the shoreline, holding hands. The woman is wearing a bright blue dress and the man is wearing a white shirt and light-colored shorts. They are walking on the white sand. To their left, the turquoise water of the ocean meets the shore with gentle waves. Further back on the beach, two lounge chairs are positioned near a dense thicket of green bushes and palm trees. The background is a thick wall of lush tropical vegetation, including many tall palm trees, under a clear blue sky.

# WELCOME TO THE JUNGLE

It's got everything you want, finds Laurel Munshower, who spends her days at Shangri-La's Villingili Resort & Spa, Maldives hanging from overwater hammocks and cycling through verdant forest, to dining on the freshest fish and giving in to traditional spa therapies





The Shangri-La resort comprises six kilometres of coastline, three freshwater lakes, a golf course and 132 villas on land and sea (top); one portion of Villingili's white-sand beach is home to a restaurant, infinity pool and water-sports centre (above left); guests arrive at the resort via boat at the welcome centre jutting into the lagoon (above right). Previous spread: Lush vegetation covers the island, giving the resort a serious jungle vibe

The 1,200-some islands making up the Maldives are often referred to as a string of pearls in the Indian Ocean. If that's the analogy we're going with, then the island of Villingili – at just about the southernmost end of the so-called string, and one of the largest and most jungle-dense of the republic – is placed like the droplet emerald in the ocean's statement necklace. Away from the crowd in the remote Addu Atoll, it's a 70-minute domestic flight to Gan Island from Malé – although with direct Colombo-Gan flights launched late last year on SriLankan Airlines, it's now easy to bypass Malé entirely for a more streamlined journey. It's a pip for private-jet owners as well, with the exclusive aircraft able to land at Gan Executive International Airport where passengers can kick up their feet in Shangri-La's private-jet lounge while immigration, customs

and baggage screening are all completed on-site. The only hotel with its own executive airport in the Maldives, it's a draw for the global elite, and so private-jet guests and groups check in at the island resort with some regularity – 7-Eleven Australia's billionaire founder, Russell Withers, flew in with his family shortly after my far more ordinary arrival. Whether flying commercial or private, from Gan it's a swift five- to seven-minute speedboat ride to Shangri-La's Villingili Resort & Spa, Maldives which I see spread out before me growing ever-larger. And it doesn't just appear to be large – as the biggest island resort in the Maldives, it truly is. Boasting six kilometres of coastline – two of which are pristine, white-sand beaches – with placid waters on the lagoon side and dramatic crashing surf on the ocean side, a dense natural jungle hiding three freshwater lakes (*kulhi*), the only golf course in the Maldives, the

highest natural point in the Maldives, and notable as the only five-star resort beneath the equator in the Maldives, it feels like a proper destination rather than a bit of mid-ocean, just-above-sea-level sand hosting a smattering of palm trees and island-chic accommodation. I arrive to a welcome from the Shangri-La team lightly placing their hands on their hearts – a traditional Maldivian greeting – a small bouquet of flowers and a local coconut full of fresh juice. I bypass the tropical, open-air reception (it's primarily used for check-outs) to hop in a buggy and make my way directly to my island home. Heading towards the northern end of the island (which, by the way, is shaped rather like a lamb chop with thick jungle comprising the “meaty” northern half and the golf course threading through the “bone” to the south), I pass under sun-shielding foliage and over a turquoise lagoon to be dropped off at my Water Villa, where the



This page: Water Villas are propped up over three different sections of the lagoon, where guests can step directly into the water for snorkelling excursions, or simply laze in the overwater hammock and watch for sea turtles gliding through the azure water as well as an abundance of marine wildlife that appear at night, attracted to the bungalow's water-facing spotlights





A vast swathe of jungle on Villingili means there are plenty of opportunities to explore on foot or bicycle, with the chance to catch a glimpse of one of the forest's most prominent residents, the flying fox bat (above left). The dense jungle is also an ideal setting to stage secluded and romantic destination-dining experiences, in locations such as a jetty on a freshwater lake (opposite page, top) or in torch-lit clearings under grand old trees (opposite page, bottom)

check-in proceeds in privacy. Perched on stilts, I'm surrounded by the Indian Ocean, and the water beneath is rich in seagrass which, I'm told, may attract hungry sea turtles in the mornings and evenings – and much more, I discover after waking up late one night and making my way outside. The surroundings are the very definition of a watery wonderland, and the interior of my capacious villa no less wonderful, particularly with its outdoor rain shower, windows with sea views at every turn and plush bed that deftly snuggles me to sleep each evening. But right now, it's the jungle that calls for my attention – at night-time, this is quite literal, with its inhabitants awake and at their most rambunctious – and with a bicycle parked outside my villa's entrance so I may chauffeur myself around the expansive island, I set off to explore Villingili.

Accommodation – comprising eight categories and 132 villas – on the island resort is essentially split into three sections: Whispering Palms, lagoon-side and palm-fringed, and where the jetty to my overwater villa is found; Palm Breeze, where treehouse and beach villas are hidden

within thick foliage, making for ultra-private residences that are popular with honeymooners and holidaymakers from the Middle East; and Serenity Bay in the south and at the most placid area of the lagoon, with a mix of beach and overwater accommodation. Cycling from the jetty towards the island, I'm plunged into deep forest shade the instant I'm back on land and head into the jungle, where the temperature dips as the sun only just trickles through tall palms and banyan leaves. In addition to grand-looking banyans – some of which are said to be around 200 years old – and a minimum of 17,000 coconut palms (that was the count when the resort opened in 2009; since then Shangri-La has allowed the palms to grow as they will, with new trees regularly bursting forth from fallen coconuts), there are also the ominously named devil's claw trees; noni trees, popular for their medicinal properties and less popular for its fruit that once ripe, looks somewhat alien and smells like pungent cheese; and the pretty, flowering sea trumpet. It's while examining the forest vegetation I notice one of its more surprising, but also seemingly ever-present

residents: enormous flying fox bats. Usually nocturnal creatures, with no natural predators on Villingili they can be seen making their way through the trees all day, feasting on lantern fruit and gliding through the blue skies on their 1.5-metre-long wingspan – there's a wealth of information to be learned about my surroundings and signing up for one of the resort's eco-tours is worth every minute. Further exploration uncovers some of the history of the Addu Atoll, which served as a military base for the British during World War II (Gan was referred to as "Port T", and was a strategic naval base and airbase until the Royal Air Force left Addu in 1976). Walking or cycling around Villingili, remains of bunkers, artillery sites and pillboxes remind guests of its history, although nature relentlessly encroaches with roots and sprouting palms grabbing hold of the structures' stone blocks, persistently working at reclaiming their land.

Today, a small army of Shangri-La employees let the forest run wild in the heart of the island while meticulously maintaining a string of nature paths, destination-dining hideaways, deluxe







Above: Fashala, meaning “the edge” in the local Dhiveeli language, is the resort’s fine-dining destination perched at the end of the island. Opposite page: Dr. Ali’s is named for the Maldivian doctor who travelled the Middle East and Asia collecting exotic spices and recipes, which can be tasted at this restaurant (top); charter a yacht for dining and sight-seeing excursions (bottom left); an Ayurvedic treatment at Chi, The Spa at Shangri-La (bottom right)

accommodation and entertainment facilities – the latter of which are primarily found centrally located, near the welcome jetty and reception, making up a five-star “village” of state-of-the-art fitness facilities, boutiques and jewellers, eco and diving centres, a kids’ club, a bar, lounge and all-day dining restaurant, and infinity pool. Moving further down the island, the forest disperses a bit, and the island turns into a thin sliver so that even while looking at the calm lagoon, the crashing waves on the other side are clearly heard. Sea turtles are known to nest here, the areas carefully marked so as not to be disturbed by intrepid explorers like myself. Taking up the island’s final southern stretch is the 7.5-hectare Villingili Golf Course, nine par-three and par-four holes with distracting paradisiacal views of the Serenity Bay area. It’s also here that the most fit of guests can climb Mount Villingili. The summit of this mount – officially the highest in the Maldives – reaches a gasping-for-oxygen altitude of 5.1 metres above sea level, utterly soaring over the republic’s average of 0.2 metres.

The quiet water seen from this spot is more than just a pretty sight, as I discover when I head out one morning with the eco team to Serenity Bay’s lagoon. Beneath the placid surface, we work to affix broken segments of coral to weighted pots, which will be nurtured in underwater trays for three years before being transplanted to encourage the growth of a healthy coral garden amid the bleaching currently devastating Earth’s aquatic world. The success rate, I’m told, has so far been pretty high and I have lofty hopes that my little coral branch will grow to something grand in the coming years, continuing to attract the stingrays, turtles and parrotfish that I see on this morning’s brief outing.

While it really can be that easy to see the fascinating marine life of Addu, I can’t resist stepping on-board a boat to head out further, where reef cliffs plunge into deep depths, reef

sharks glide amid bulbous, vibrant parrotfish, and sea turtles seemingly fly through the water surrounded by a carnival of fish. After the excursion, my desire for exploration is not quite sated, so I swim out to Villingili’s house reef, just beyond Whispering Palms’ overwater villas at the north end of the island. Following bright orange buoys that mark a safe path to the reef, in no time I’m surrounded by a school of literally thousands of yellow fish that create a veritable fluorescent cloud, moving in perfect harmony between quick breaks to dine on marine vegetation. Shortly, an octopus sprints past before going into hiding – and I realise all this discovery has worked up quite an appetite.

Donning my island favourites – flowing fabrics and boho accessories – I quickly learn there’s no better place to start my evenings than from M-Lounge, a hip beachfront bar that is the ideal setting for catching the sunset with a refreshing cocktail and chilled shisha – the water in the vessel cooled with ice. From there I follow my appetite: Javvu for international fare and tantalising themed barbeques throughout the week; Dr Ali’s which hints at the exotic spiced fare inside with fragrant curry trees and herbs scenting the air at the entrance; or contemporary Fashala, located at the northern tip of the island. This surfside restaurant is chef Daniel Boller’s showcase for fresh ingredients from his island garden and – even better – the local tuna plucked from the sea just that day turned into melt-in-the-mouth tartare served on a heavy plate of Himalayan salt. Chef Boller lauds the fish, noting that it will be difficult finding fresh tuna its equal anywhere else in the world, and I’m inclined to agree – whether totally raw or grilled to seared perfection, it’s phenomenal.

It may also be tricky to find sanctuary to match the laid-back-but-luxe island atmosphere of Chi, The Spa at Shangri-La. Opting to follow the “when in Rome” ethos, I submit to oversized

Maldivian sea shells (*kandu boli*) in the Kandu Boli Ritual. Performed within one of 11 spacious treatment rooms – each with their own changing and bath area, as well as picture-perfect sea views through the vegetation – it’s a blissful hour of being massaged by the shells I had seen tucked into coral while snorkelling just earlier that day, but now warmed and made slick, drenched in heated coconut oil.

While many resorts in the Maldives vaunt the “do as little or as much as you like” philosophy, I find myself drawn to the latter each day, eventually sinking into bed tired, but full of fantastic new discoveries. One night, I’m woken up at 4am to the rumbles of a thunderstorm. I make my way out to my terrace and sink into the overwater hammock to watch the storm roll in. Instead it slowly skirts the island, and I am treated to one of my favourite evenings in memory. The temperature and breeze are perfect while in the distance lightning flashes to reveal epic cumulonimbus clouds; despite the unsettled weather beyond, the sky right above me is clear and sprinkled with innumerable stars. The lagoon too remains calm, and in the villa’s spotlights aimed at the water beneath the hammock, all manner of sea life is attracted. I see spaceship-like cuttlefish grabbing at potential meals on surface; bannerfish swanning about with their long, trailing dorsals; and smaller fish flitting between the swaying seagrass. Behind me, a racketous cacophony emanates from the jungle, and I judge it a night well spent not sleeping. ✂

## Stay

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