

Unreal enclaves

THE MALDIVES' BAA ATOLL UNVEILS THREE OPENINGS, REPORTS *LYDIA BELL*

Incomparable luxury; bath-warm, luminous blue waters; the softest, powder-like sand of tropical dreams; and an underwater world where swimming with 30 enormous manta rays is an everyday occurrence. These realities make the Maldives - an elongated scattering of almost 1,200 button-flat islands in 26 coral atolls in the Indian Ocean - top of most of our wish lists. About a million visitors a year descend on its 350-plus hotels, and openings continue apace.

The three top arrivals this season are in the Baa Atoll. Soneva Jani, sister property to long-standing Soneva Fushi, has playful over-water bungalows with waterslides into the sea, and rain-sensitive retractable roofs so you can sleep under the stars without fear of a drenching. The Soneva en Aqua 'villa boat' at Soneva Fushi spirits guests between the two resorts. From the Small Maldives Islands Company, the sister hotel to Amilla Fushi (celebrated for its Ibiza-style white rendered villas that have reinvented the over-water style; see page 74 for a review of its Bodyism wellness concept), 125-villa Finohlu is the party-island alternative to slow, sleepy Amilla, and the yin to her yang. Imagine fire breathers, burlesque dancers (provided by resident performance artists Area 51) and lively drinking spots for parents whose children are taken care of in the kids' club.

Just opened and Maldivian-owned, Milaidhoo has 50 private-butler-serviced villas. Its concept is to take the island's best components back to basics, celebrating what makes the Maldives unique through a luxury prism. So their chefs have been dispatched into local communities, returning armed with traditional recipes that they have interpreted anew. Fishing trips are also offered with local fishermen and history lessons, and there's an intimate spa on stilts offering Maldivian-inspired healing techniques and ingredients. **D**

ESSENTIALS

Scott Dunn (020-8682 5055; scottdunn.com) offers seven nights in the Maldives from £1,899 per person, based on two people travelling and including accommodation on a B&B basis, flights and private transfers.



Note worthy

This is a Unesco-protected marine reserve, and marine biologists need help to study and protect its reefs and whale sharks. If you want to visit the Maldives but have no interest in a fly and flop, Biosphere Expeditions (biosphere-expeditions.org) can train you as a Reef Check EcoDiver (as it has local Maldivian surveyors) and employ you to gather reef and whale-shark data as a 'voluntourist'.

This year, two expeditions are running in July from a live-aboard boat. Data is passed to NGOs and governments. The very existence of the country depends on reefs. Yet, incredibly, little long-term reef research is done. You do not need to be a scientist to take part, but you do need to be a qualified PADI Open Water diver.