

Lazy days in PARADISE

SHIMMERING WHITE SAND LAPPED BY TIFFANY-BLUE WATER, WARMED BY THE GLOW OF A GOLDEN SUN – THE MALDIVES REALLY IS AN ISLAND PARADISE.

GISELLE WHITEAKER TAKES A BEACH BREAK

On the seaplane flight to The Sun Siyam Iru Fushi resort, 45 minutes from the Capital, Male, the Maldivian islands of Noonu Atoll appear one by one, rimmed by shallow turquoise water deepening to opal-blue ocean. The island-nation's 1,192 coral islands are grouped in a double chain of 26 atolls, with more than 100 exclusive resorts claiming their own private island apiece. If you are seeking an idyllic beach escape, there's no better place to start looking.

As the plane slowly descends, the structures on the islands become more detailed. Beachfront wooden bungalows and over-water villas constructed of wood and thatch blend with the vibrant tropical greenery. It's so perfect it's like flying into a movie set.

The plane sinks lower and lower, skidding gently to a halt by Iru Fushi's landing pontoon, where staff greet the new arrivals. Linda and Georgiy welcome us to the island, guiding us to a waiting golf buggy which whisks us along the wooden pier with its strands snaking off like fingers stretching into the sea. At the end of each tress sits a building made of timber perched on pillars above the lapping water. As the sky fades to mauve, the timber takes on warm hues, while the snowy-white beach sands opposite gleam in the dimming light.

The Sun Siyam Iru Fushi unfolds over 52 acres of natural perfection, a world away from the hustle and bustle of city life. We motor slowly past beach bungalows, their white walls contrasting with the thatched roofs made from local coconut husks. The water villas stretch into the sea in neat rows, offering uninterrupted ocean views, and glass windows in the floor for underwater observation.

Our deluxe beach villa is nestled in lush foliage, the expansive suite light and airy. The bedroom opens out to a private pool, just beyond which lies the beach and the Indian Ocean. Between sits a *Sala*, an open pavilion that I determine will do nicely as my beach office.

The highlight of the villa is, rather unusually, the bathroom. Opening a door at the rear of the room, a deck leads into an open-air space. Two rain showers ensure no-one will be left waiting on the daybed against the back wall. A spa bath demands attention in the middle of the circular space, protected by a coconut-thatched roof yet open to the elements. This is the ultimate indulgence.

Sitting on the deck, lulled into a relaxed stupor by the faint purr of the waves, we see two large bats wheel overhead preparing to hunt for their dinner. We follow suit, wandering

along the beach to The Trio, one of the island's four restaurants. Each restaurant exudes a different ambience, generated by cuisine, location and design, from casual dig-your-toes-into-the-sand seafood at Islander's grill, to local fare and buffet-style dining at Flavours, and over-water feasts at Iru and The Trio.

At The Trio, timber decking provides a platform floating above the dazzling lagoon, the splashes of aquamarine and azure highlighted by mood lighting that casts beams into the water. Silver flashes dart beneath, and as we order from the mouth-watering Mediterranean menu, a reef shark glides languidly past. Throughout the feast we divide our attention between the sumptuous flavours on our plates and gazing into the water for glimpses of our predatory friend.

It's only as we walk through the inside dining area, less populated on a balmy evening such as this, that I understand how clearly Iru Fushi's design is influenced by its island. The Maldivian climate is the perfect match for al fresco dining, and each of the restaurants make the most of its natural outlook, with expansive decks maximising the water-front tables. By the same token, the monsoon season, where a deluge of rain can bucket down in moments, means indoor dining options are a necessity. Iru Fushi's response is in a multitude of windows, glass panels, and terrace-opening doors that gently meld indoors and outdoors to keep guests relaxed and smiling – and dry.



It's not until our snorkelling excursion the next day that we start taking in the coastal elements imbued in the resort's design. As coral islands, the underwater world is a cornucopia of colour. Orange clown fish peek from their anemone homes, while yellow and blue sweetlips shelter under intricate fan corals. Multi-coloured parrotfish shimmer in the sun and jet black damselfish stake out their territory, warning off all intruders, while the brightly coloured butterfly-fish float lazily in the gentle surge.

These vibrant colours are apparent across the resort, the crisp-white walls in the rooms offset with splashes of colour, from cushions to brightly-painted artworks. Even the spa is a riot of colour, although here it is the soothing greenery of the foliage, punctuated with gorgeous tropical flowers. From the moment you enter the spa, it conjures a hidden oasis – a reflexology path with pebbles designed in descending order, large to small, to focus the mind, winds through the blooms and endless shades of green. Splashes of light filter through the palms, casting shadows that dance on the rippling water of a gentle stream, while carp frolic in the ponds. The aromas of sandalwood, peppermint and jasmine scent the air and a slight breeze swirls in the leaves, whispering soothing sounds.

Holistic healing is on tap here with a resident Ayurvedic doctor on hand, but we opt for pure indulgence, with hydrating facials to soothe our sun-kissed skins. The expert practitioners smooth our worries away, the delicate Thalgo lotions and potions gently massaged in to do their magic while we drift off into spa-bliss, the zone between awake and sleep.



The joy of the Maldives is in its serenity. While The Sun Siyam Iru Fushi offers a range watersports and excursions, from fishing trips to local island visits, the allure of the beach is ever-present. The tide washes coral fragments and shells to the shore, making mornings the ideal time for treasure-seeking. In days long past Cowry shells were used as currency throughout the archipelago. On a morning stroll these riches can be discovered in abundance.

The days slip by between beach, spa, pool and dining, time divided evenly between the underwater world and resort-dreaming. The nights bring countless stars and translucent crabs scuttling across the sand during a moonlit walk. Surrounded by calming blue – from the aqua water to the cerulean sky – this island delight quickly claims your dreams. Even before you leave, you will be planning your return to paradise.



For more information about The Sun Siyam Iru Fushi see <http://thesunsiyam.com/irufushi>

FOR YOUR OWN SLICE OF PARADISE, TRY THESE COASTAL PROPERTIES:



QUINTA ARRORIO, ALGARVE, PORTUGAL

This unique property, set in seven hectares inside the Ria Formosa National Park near Tavira, benefits from incredible sea views with direct access to the beach. The single-storey, five-en suite-bedroom house has 300 square-metres of wooden deck terraces. The swimming pool on the roof provides a spectacular view and the property features a complete new landscape with 300 olive trees, 700 nut trees, palm trees, 8,000 square-metres of bougainvilleas and full automatic irrigation.

Guide Price: €7,500,000
Fine & Country Cascais
Tel: +35 121 464 3630



THE NEW SANCTUARY, 18 TILLAMOOK AVE, PLETTENBERG BAY WESTERN CAPE, SOUTH AFRICA

A fresh urban setting, positioned high above the surrounding homes, this spectacular apartment commands 180 degree breathtaking vistas of the bay. This beachfront property is designed for exceptional indoor-outdoor living, crafted in a tasteful modern style with five double en suite bedrooms. The main area includes a fully-equipped kitchen with breakfast nook, an eight-seater dining space, and a comfortable living room which opens through bottom to top glass stacking doors to a covered terrace, flanked by the bedrooms.

Guide Price: ZAR16,000,000
Fine & Country South Africa
Tel: +27 44 533 2000



GOLFE-JUAN, NEAR CANNES, FRANCE

One of the original *Maison de Maître*, or master houses, in Golfe-Juan, this villa is perfect for someone wanting a charming home, within five minutes-walk of sandy beaches. While needing some work, the villa is well-maintained with a private pool and covered patio at the front. The interior offers three bedrooms, an office, a good-sized living room which opens to the deck and swimming pool, as well as a separate studio with private access. The beach is only a stone's throw away.

Guide Price: €1,190,000
Fine & Country Cannes
Tel: +33 4 92 59 25 93/4