

ALONE IN PARADISE

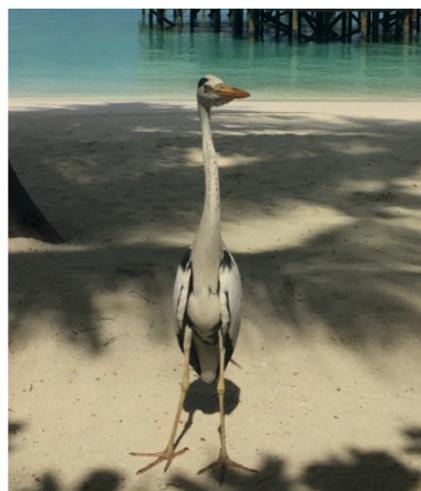
The Maldives are well-known as a romantic escape, but what allure do they hold for those travelling alone? Giselle Whiteaker dips her toes into paradise.

As the plane emerges from the clouds, several of the 1,000-plus islands that make up the Maldivian archipelago come into focus, looking for all the world like a photoshopped image of paradise. Green palm trees are encircled by ice-white sand, lapped by turquoise water that slowly darkens, the further it stretches from the shore. The bleached tan of wooden jetties jut into the water like fingers, reaching out to the boats that slice across the calm ocean as they carry tourists to their temporary haven of choice. It's literally and figuratively miles away from the grey drizzle that waved farewell when I left London yesterday. I know where I'd rather be. →

→ The humid air clings to my skin as I exit the arrivals area, greeted by a glut of drivers and guides holding passenger names at chest level. The appellations are all in twos: Mr and Mrs, husband and wife, boyfriend and girlfriend, his and hers. Who travels to an island idyll alone? Well, me. I booked the trip on a whim, at short notice, unlike the honeymooners milling around in post-wedding euphoria. I wonder if they see me as a sad single? Then I see the beaming grin of my guide and feel the sun kiss my face as we walk across the road to board the private speedboat. It stops me caring.

"Gili Lankanfushi is about twenty minutes away," explains the guide, gently removing my shoes as I lounge diagonally across the couch-style seat for two. "No news, no shoes," he says, echoing the resort's philosophy of leaving your worries at home as he slips my flip flops into a canvas bag. He sprays my feet with a soothing, scented lotion and brings me cool water to quench my thirst. "First time to the Maldives?"

It's my third time here, but my first to Gili Lankanfushi and my first alone. The weather forecasts predicted rain, but today there is not a cloud in the sky. The balmy air flutters through my hair as we speed across the water, docking at a jetty made of plantation teak. I'm handed a cool towel as I'm escorted onshore and introduced to my Mr Friday, named after Robinson Crusoe's loyal friend. Only she's a Miss. Miss Friday is at my beck and call; my own personal butler. She starts by whisking me along the jetty to my over-water villa.



My mouth drops open when we enter the open-air lounge space, which feeds onto a deck, replete with sun loungers and oversized cushioned sofa-style chairs. Wooden stairs lead straight from there into the shallow water and the sun is sinking, tinging the sky a million hues of pink and orange. "There's a deck upstairs," gestures Miss Friday, as if I need

more. Off to the right is an enormous semi-enclosed bathroom, the bath perched in an alcove by the window. A walkway leads to the shower, enclosed by glass bricks and there's a porthole in the centre of the room to allow for marine-life spotting.

On the opposite side of the villa, the bedroom is fully enclosed, white

netting draped over the posts in a heavenly picture. Altogether, I have a generous 210 square metres at my disposal and unfettered access to the lagoon.

"Are you ready for your spa appointment?" asks Miss Friday. I certainly am. I've taken up the offer of a restorative Jetlag treatment at

the Meera Spa. Suddenly, I realise that for the next five days, unlike Miss Friday, I am at no-one's beck and call. It's been so long since I've had a proper break that I've forgotten what it's like to truly relax. Gili Lankanfushi is the perfect reminder.

Gliding out of the spa some time later, I feel completely refreshed. Rather



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soothing me into a stupor, as so often happens, the massage has revived my circulation, smoothed the worry from my brow and left me drifting on cloud nine. It must be dinner time.

There's a daily changing menu at the Main Restaurant, which like every other guest building here, is set over the water. Tonight it's the Maldivian Fisherman's Grill and I have a plethora of oceanic options. I order a mixed seafood plate from the main menu and nibble my way through the buffet starters, featuring local ingredients and tropical flavours.

Leaning back into the plump, cushioned booth, a glass of crisp New Zealand white wine in hand, I survey the other guests. As expected, there are a lot of couples. Unexpectedly, there are also a number of families and groups of friends. No-one is staring at me as I dine solo. The "no worries" attitude is in full force.

Lulled to sleep by the sound of lapping water, I wake up to what promises to be a gorgeous day. A few puffy white clouds drift along the horizon and it's hard to tear my eyes away from the brilliant turquoise of the sea. Only the allure of a beachside breakfast could spirit me away. →





“No news,
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While The Private Reserve is impressive, I'm happy to head back to my own private space to make the most of the glorious sunshine. I while away the afternoon with a book, sipping locally bottled water and dipping in and out of the water, catching glimpses of the crabs lurking on the villa's beams, just above the water line. They're shy creatures, scuttling into the shadows whenever I venture near.



Come evening, I'm ready for some adventure. I make my way to the Marine Sports Centre, where several guests are congregating, ready to immerse into the underwater world. Donning wetsuits as the sun sets, we're briefed on some of the wonders we might see on the Blue Light Night Snorkelling experience. With torches dangling from our wrists, we ferry to One Palm Island and slip into the water.

The thrill of searching for aquatic nightlife with a beam of white light is exhilarating in itself, but even more intriguing is pulling the yellow filter over the mask and switching the torch to the special blue light setting. The corals glow in neon green, with strands of bright yellows and reds woven in and tiny snowflake-shaped anemones glitter from the sandy sea bed. It's spectacular, as is the phosphorescence in the water that,

without lights, glitters around our hands like fairy dust. Emerging from the water we bask in the shared experience, chattering all the way back to shore.

After a rinse off, I venture to the Mediterranean buffet, set up on the beach, where I'm instantly transported into a spice souk. There is such a vast quantity of choice, from barbecued seafood of your choice to fresh made-to-order pasta and French Cassoulet, that no-one walks away hungry. The desserts alone cover an area the size of my London apartment and are so colourful that it's like walking into an art gallery.

Over the next few days, my most difficult decision is where to eat. The tapas lunch menu at the Overwater Bar features an array of delectable temptations, like bacon-wrapped pork with maple syrup and lamb tenderloin satay. There's delicate sashimi, salads and light bites at the

pool bar. In an act of self-kindness I book a private dining experience, feasting on Thai fare delivered to the upper deck of my villa. Would it have been more romantic with a partner? Certainly. Was it lovely doing it alone? Absolutely. Then there's By the Sea, Gili Lankanfushi's intimate Japanese restaurant that dishes up fantastically fresh sushi, as well as fare ranging from tempura to flavour-packed miso soup and Japanese nibbles.

During the day, I sign up for a daytime snorkelling adventure, seeing a different world from the nighttime experience. I watch dolphins spin and dance around the bow of the boat on a Dolphin Cruise, a glass of champagne in hand. My taste buds are put to the test with a wine and cheese tasting in the island's subterranean Gourmet Cellar, as I learn about the complementary flavours, and I take a stroll through the extensive herb garden. I lie in a hammock in the middle of the lagoon,

rocking gently with the tide and spot a stingray following in the wake of a reef shark as the pair play under the jetty. There's so much more I could do – there's all manner of water sports on offer, tennis courts, the Jungle Cinema, sunrise yoga and more – but there's also the simple delight in doing very little; of letting the ocean soothe my soul and quieten my mind.

It's with some reluctance that I leave paradise, dragging my feet in the silky sand before I re-board the private speedboat. For the first time in five days, I'll be donning shoes and dressing in more than a swimsuit and sarong. I'm already planning a return to Gili Lankanfushi. Only one question remains: do I share the experience or do I come alone?

For more information about Gili Lankanfushi's superb offering, see:

gili-lankanfushi.com

