

# Heaven *Can Wait*

*It's not just ocean currents you need to be aware of in the Maldives. Michael Chiang gets swept away by the dangerously hip W Resort & Spa.*

Paradise has a new name, and it's spelt "W". Think of every tourist-brochure cliché you've ever read – sun-kissed sands, azure skies, turquoise waters, dream getaway, island retreat, tropical heaven – and not a single one will ring false at the W Resort and Spa in the Maldives.

Having had some pretty memorable vacations at the Maldives before, I was curious to see what kind of magic the W could wield. Could it live up to the Four Seasons, Banyan Tree or Soneva Fushi experience?

The resort is a 25-minute flight out of Male, the island capital. Quite painless, if you ignore the noise and the cramped space. (Yawn and stretch and you'll punch out cold the Italian woman in the front row.)

Expectations rise as our trusty little sea-plane touches down in the shimmering aquamarine waters. Sitting on the jetty like some surreal runaway artwork from MoMA is a giant "W": A wry touch guaranteed to light up the face of any weary-boned traveller.

The entire resort management team seems to be out on the jetty, greeting you by name (!) as you step out into the furious sunshine. After the flurry of welcomes and iced drinks, you scurry off in a little buggy down the decked boardwalks to your "ocean retreat", which is, basically, your individual villa built over water. And this is where it gets seriously stylish.

ARENA

life

LIVE SMART





**Top: Lounge area**  
View of pool deck and cabana from my king-sized bed.

**Above: The simple**  
life Sun-baked boys on a Maldivian island.

Each ocean retreat is nothing less than a pictorial spread straight out of *Metropolitan Home*. A massive king-sized bed overlooks a spacious living area that spills out onto a huge private deck – which has a personal plunge pool and a huge, circular lounge, not to mention a cabana big enough for a party of eight!

Instead of a welcome fruit platter, there's a chocolate fondue with a luscious mix of fresh berries waiting. There's more: A personal wine-bar, a 42-inch plasma TV, a Bose sound system, with extra outdoor speakers for the pool deck. Reading material? How about *Spectacle*, a hard-cover, glossy picture book detailing various mass-participation events around the world. (So hip it hurts.)

Every hedonistic indulgence has been meticulously anticipated.

No, there is no real reason to leave your room. The Indian Ocean is just two steps away: a metal ladder takes you down from your private deck into the unnervingly clear waters below. (Imagine swimming in a giant pool of Evian.)

And if you don't fancy getting your precious toes wet, just lounge indoors and catch the underwater action through a glass porthole in the bedroom floor. Easy.

Step outdoors, and you will be rewarded with copious supplies of ice-cream and drinks. Dotted strategically around the resort are "sweet spots" – essentially snack stations with mini-fridges filled with Häagen-Dazs, Cornettos, cans of Coke and sodas, plus thoughtful bottles of sunblock (SPF+30).

In addition to the 50 "ocean retreats", there are 28 "beach retreats", which each boast a plunge pool in the front yard and a spacious rooftop deck with a gigantic day-bed – suspended from the ceiling.

The resort, designed by Singapore firm Eco-Id Architects and Poole Associates, is full of smart, witty touches.

Every place reads like a Scrabble-board entry: "Kitchen" (all-day café), "Fire" (barbecue restaurant), "Fish" (seafood eatery), "Sip" (sunset bar), "Wet" (pool), "Sweat" (gym), "Words" (library), and "Wave" (water sports).

There's loads to do, plenty of options for meals, plus a breathtakingly designed spa, ("Away") where you can lie back and be pampered, or sit back with easel and paint brush to unleash your creative spirit.

W Maldives also boasts the island republic's first disco, "15 Below". (Located 15 steps below ground, of course...)



A snorkelling excursion turns out to be surprisingly educational. Instead of paddling and gawking blankly at the teeming marine life, I get an instant lesson on environment care, reef bleaching and more. Thanks largely to the fact that the resort has on hand a guide who's no less than a fully-qualified marine biologist.

Marcos, who hails from Vienna, delivers enthusiastic show and tell, happily pointing out giant clams, sea-turtles and coral beds while nonchalantly pulling up oversized sea-cucumbers (squishy) and starfish (plasticky) to give you a first-hand feel of the Maldives' exquisite marine life.

Another afternoon is spent visiting a nearby island to see typical Maldivian life. Sun-scorched mosques, coral-brick houses with crayon-bright doors, quaint schools with open classrooms – they all line up along simple streets, as if untouched by the 21st century.

Yet barely 10 minutes away, the sensuous, contemporary world of W holds sway, providing us with every conceivable modern amenity.

The irony escapes me as I slip back into my private pool and float, face-up, to soak in another glorious sunset.

**RATES FOR THE W RESORT AND SPA, MALDIVES START AT US\$615++ PER NIGHT (LOW SEASON). WEBSITE: WHOTELS.COM/MALDIVES**

**Clockwise from top:**  
My pool runneth over  
Each "ocean retreat" comes with a private plunge pool.

**Chill, man** Stop for a drink at Sip, one of W's several super-stylish hang-outs.

**Wry spell** You won't get lost on this island.