

DESTINATION ♦ MALDIVES

KICK OFF YOUR SHOES

COMO's Indian Ocean resorts have everything a high-end castaway could need

CELESTE MITCHELL

You don't choose an island in the Maldives, it chooses you," Ben Kreuz says while slipping from a coconut, framed by the sun's theatrical descent into the Indian Ocean. The general manager of COMO Cocoa Island should know – he'd been looking for a way back to the archipelago of islands since his first stint working here a decade ago.

A year ago, he was happily seconded on this 350m-long blip of white sand and, from where I'm sitting, looks every bit the chosen one in his current home and role.

It was the same story when *Playboy* snapper Eric Klemm washed ashore in 1976 on a shoot and promptly decided to set up home, building a four-bungalow hotel in the process.

And again when Singapore hotelier Christina Ong fell in love with the property and decided to transition it from *playboy* pad to holistic luxury resort to join her portfolio of COMO Hotels and Resorts in 2002.

Much has changed in the past 15 years – the number of resort neighbours the most apparent – but the simple luxury of stepping on to Cocoa Island's icing-sugar sand, kicking off shoes (you won't need them) and being greeted with a fresh young coconut could never get old.

FANTASY ISLAND

In the centre of its cerulean blueprint in the Indian Ocean, jutting out like a concrete jungle in a world that's been swallowed by the sea, the Maldivian capital of Malé is one of the most densely populated cities on earth – yet within a 40-minute speedboat ride, it's impossible not to feel a million miles from civilisation.

Here on the shores of Cocoa Island lies everything any high-end castaway could ever want for. All rooms tick the overwater Maldives fantasy with dhoni suites, like ours, standing proudly like a fleet of traditional fishing boats tied to the wooden boardwalk. Warm, clear waters lapping at their pylons provide a real-life *Attenborough* doco in HD as stingrays and baby reef sharks skim across the rippled sands below.

We wander out on to the sandbank the next morning with Dr Anand Peethambar to salute the sun and relish the fact the next few days will present nothing more challenging than deciding what to order from the menu at Ufaa (it means happy in Maldivian). Tables sit nestled in the sand under a canopy of cotton and frangipani trees in front of the open-sided dining pavilion. The colour of the centrepiece pool blends seamlessly with its surrounds, not taking eyes off the prize of the soothing blue of the sea beyond.

Just as the island buried its way into the heart and soul of Klemm, the staff here are intoxicated by Cocoa. One waiter tells us he's been on the island for eight years. Adil, who manages service in the restaurant, has been here "since the beginning".

Once you give your heart to Cocoa, you never really get it back. The resort has a 30 per cent return guest rate – one of the highest in the Maldives.

DESIGNER DIGS

This Maldivian fantasy is luxurious without being ostentatious – a place where you feel comfortable padding into the restaurant barefoot for breakfast, and where the sheer beauty of the lagoon overtakes the

THE COLOUR OF THE WATER COULDN'T EVEN BE REPLICATED IN A SWIMMING POOL

sympathetic design and tones of the rooms. Inside they're simple and lovely – minimalist white-on-white with timber flooring. A daybed faces out to the open ocean through muslin curtains while the soaring pitched ceiling dwarfs a kingsize bed raised up on its own platform.

In the bathroom, amenities such as soft cotton robes, COMO Shambhala yoga mats, Cocoa Island flip flops and a tote to carry it all to the beach mean you could get away with landing here with nothing but the clothes on your back, like a true castaway.

Out on the deck – from which you can climb down a ladder and reach the house reef within a few fin flips – the lapping of the warm waters induces involuntary naps.

THE SIMPLE LIFE

You know you're in a five-star resort in the Maldives when they call you "sir" and "miss" but your pilot flies barefoot. And why wouldn't you kick off the shackles of shoes when your office is the mesmerising garland of 1200 islands over which we're flying?

We've hitched a (seaplane) ride to sister resort COMO Maalifushi – the

newish kid on the Thaa Atoll block, opening in 2014 and fiercely guarding its "only" resort title here until a new project by Spanish resort group Gran Meliá opens this year. Compared to Cocoa Island, Maalifushi is like a capital city. Albeit one where nothing is built taller than the highest palm tree and you know it's rush hour when you spot another guest on one of the plethora of private beaches.

There's a kids' club, fitness centre and spa, vegetable and herb garden, water activities centre, dive centre, surf shack and Japanese restaurant spread out in between garden and overwater suites and villas, all accessible via a casual roll around on complimentary cruiser bicycles.

But it's hard to tear away from our waterside – the minimalist interior by Singapore-based Japanese designer Koichiro Ikebuchi in total harmony with the environment.

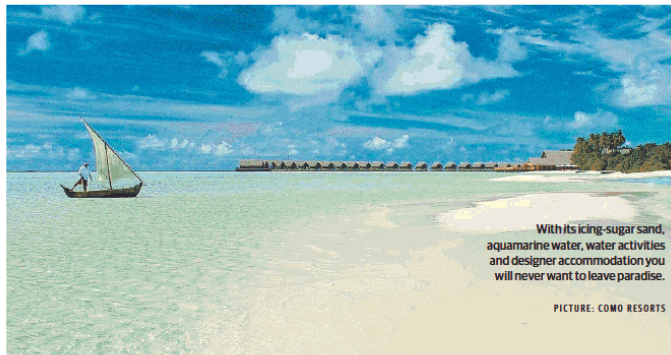
Across the lagoon, a private island looks plucked straight from a mirage. The idyllic scene is made all the more beautiful by a hammock strung up between two leaning palm trees where the resort will set up private picnics for guests.

LEAVING PARADISE

The 5.30pm seaplane whorls to life just beyond the sunset's golden wash across the aqua lagoon. On board: sadness – guests have to fly away from one of the most beautiful spots they might ever see. A place where the colour of the water couldn't even be replicated in a swimming pool.

I succumb to an induced meditation with nature.

THE WRITER WAS A GUEST OF COMO HOTELS AND RESORTS



With its icing-sugar sand, aquamarine water, water activities and designer accommodation you will never want to leave paradise.

PICTURE: COMO RESORTS

ESCAPE ROUTE

COMO MALDIVES

GETTING THERE

Singapore Airlines operates more than 130 flights a week from six Australian cities with daily flights to Male from their Singapore hub. singaporeair.com

COMO Cocoa Island is a 40-minute speedboat ride from the airport while COMO Maalifushi is accessed on a one-hour seaplane flight.

STAYING THERE

COMO Cocoa Island offers 33 barefoot luxury suites and villas from \$1341 a night. After snorkelling, sunset cruises and private picnics have been ticked off the bucket list, dine with sand between your toes at Ufaa, where the menu has an emphasis on local fish and COMO Shambhala healthy eating options. COMO Maalifushi appeals to families and honeymooners with 65 land and overwater rooms, suites and villas from \$1140 a night. Night snorkel with whale sharks (Nov-April), surf nearby "Farms", then breathe it all out with yoga classes and a signature Taksu massage in the COMO Shambhala spa. All rates are subject to 23.2 per cent tax plus \$6 green tax a person a night and include daily breakfast and yoga.

MORE

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