



Unit stills photographer Ishika Mohan Motwane did exactly what Oscar-winning director Danny Boyle told her to: 'grab what you can'

LOOKING FOR SUPPORT STAFF

Instead of a beach-bum, why not come away from a holiday to the Maldives as an eco-volunteer?



TRAVEL

Going off track

Those who go off the beaten track, write for us.

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It's only when the seaplane flown by a barefoot pilot ferried us over a luminous blue expanse, that we realised what the Maldives actually means — no mountains, no rivers, just amoebic blue blips of ring-shaped coral atolls called faroes, sitting like ink drops on a blotting paper.

We were looking at fifty shades of blue pocked with thatched hut resorts arranged in neat symmetrical rows. This was the lowest, flattest country in the world, with a fitting name; Maldives is derived from 'mala dwips' which means garland of islands.

We were fascinated by the world below the clear lagoons: psychedelic wrasse, baby sharks, lethal jelly and puffer fish and the manta rays. In fact, most hotels have glass panels fitted on the floor, allowing

guests to watch a constant underwater spectacle.

Your Robinson Crusoe days here can be deliciously simple — when you slap on the sunscreen and curl your toes in the white sand. But for those who want to do be different, Maldives offers eco-initiatives that travellers can volunteer with.

What's a catchphrase elsewhere, is reality here, since the highest point is just 1.5 metres above sea level and doomsayers predict that most of the country will be under water by 2070.

You sense a strong green conscience among locals, and every resort tries to keep its carbon footprint small by using LED lights, solar water heaters, and recycling of waste water. This makes it easy for eco-conscious travellers to turn their itinerary into a volunteer-driven one. Here's how:

ADOPT A CORAL

Here's an unfortunate statistic. More than 90 per cent of shallow coral reef in the Maldives died when El Niño, a climatic phenomenon, raised sea temperatures by 4°C in 1998.

At the swish Anantara Dhigu Resort located on Dhigufinolhu Island in the South Male Atoll, we visited a fecund 'coral nursery' headed by marine biologist Manuel Dominguez. Healthy coral, he said, protect a cross section of marine life, and the islands too, from wave action and erosion. But coral reefs are under threat from increasing sea temperatures that have a bleaching effect on them. Careless divers can break the coral, while over-fishing damages algae growth, leaving the reefs unprotected. Dominguez's job is

HIGHLIGHTS

» **GETTING THERE:** Fly Sri Lankan Airlines to Colombo and connect to Male international airport from there. Every resort arranges a pick-up either by sea plane or speed boat.

» **PUT UP AT:** The all-new Dusit Thani in Baa Atoll or Anantara Dhigu in the South Male Atoll offer a range of accommodation from beach villas to over-the-water villas.

» **GO:** Snorkelling, diving, parasailing, sunset fishing and jet skiing. And keep aside a day to visit a local village. Locally made mats and lacquer work make for good budget gifts for friends back home.

» **IT'S BEST YOU GO:** Anytime except mid-December to early January. That's when room rates are at a premium. The weather is warm throughout the year.

to gently tend to pieces of broken coral he collects from the ocean. He maintains a photo-documentation, clicking them every month to monitor their growth before he transplants 'healed' coral back into the reef. "You don't need to plant kilometers of coral. Even a small patch will make a big difference," he said. We watched entranced

Some resorts accept donations to save the threatened Spotted Eagle Ray

as he handled bits of finger coral soaking in water and sand, with a hint of reverence. Just like in a garden, these coral are grown before being transplanted into the sea.

We flapped our way through the shallow waters, tackling flippers and snorkel gear, watching shoals of iridescent fish whiz past, to participate in the coral adoption programme with Dominguez.

The piece of coral I was carrying was fixed with a handful of cement on to a specially made concrete stand that carried my name. It was fitted into a frame under the ocean. It's a traveller's way of helping the reef grow. Dominguez said I would monitor my adopted coral's growth online, through images uploaded every three months. Most corals grow painstakingly slowly, only two centimetres a year.

Do it at: Anantara Dhigu Resort and Spa.
It will cost: USD100, 200 and 300 depending on the size of the frame.

PITCH IN FOR A GREEN FUND

As we walked into the Dusit Thani in Baa Atoll near the Hanifaru Huraa, a UNESCO World Biosphere reserve known as a feeding ground for manta rays, we were greeted by a soft toy of a Spotted Eagle Ray that sat on the beds in our rooms. Each toy carried a note that said:

Adopt me.

Shy and wary of scuba divers, the threatened species has been adopted by the hotel as its mascot, and is at the centre of its Ray of Hope programme. Donations hotel guests make go towards the Green Fund that supports a series of environmental initiatives and community-based projects on the island. *Do it at:* Dusit Thani (adopt a Spotted Eagle Ray)
It'll cost: USD 40

TEACH ISLANDERS A SKILL

To get a feel of local life outside swanky resorts, we visited an island that housed a football field, a modernistic mosque that resembled a space ship, a boat building area and rows of spotless homes framed by breadfruit and almond trees. Each house had a joli — a rope seat in a wooden frame standing in its porch. Old men dressed in sarongs sat listening to the Quran on a public address system, while women of the house cooked up the day's lunch. Bright flags of various political parties hung in the streets.

If mingling with locals is your idea of a vacation, a volunteering holiday will allow you to spend time playing a sport with island kids, help pre-school teachers at class work, and train islanders to become certified divers, provided you have the expertise. Volunteers can also take part in conservation programmes on Baa Atoll. Musicians, artists and documentary filmmakers are encouraged to share their skills with island locals.

For a volunteering holiday: Visit volunteer-maldives.com

It'll cost: Between USD 1400-1600 for a 4-week programme (including accommodation and meals).



Visitors can plant a 'healed' coral back into the sea, fitted in a frame bearing their name



Please Adopt Me
Proceeds go towards the 'Ray of Hope' project
Please see our Marine Biologist for more details.