

I S L A N D R E V I V A L

Nothing rejuvenates quite like a wellness-focused break and Taj Exotica Resort & Spa seems purpose-built for life in the slow lane

Words: Rebecca Haddad



Palm-thatched villas and suites look out onto one of the largest lagoons in the Maldives



Poolside dining also serves up pristine lagoon views

They say a holiday is one of the best forms of therapy; the combination of a great location, no schedules and no worries providing a tried and tested tonic for the soul. As my private speedboat bounces across the waters from Ibrahim Nasir International Airport to Taj Exotica Resort & Spa on a bright Thursday morning, the water quickly changes from dark navy to a shimmering light blue. Almost simultaneously, my watch stops, immediately taking care of two of those requirements for a thoroughly therapeutic break.

Taj Exotica Resort & Spa is on Emboodhu Finolhu island in the South Malé Atoll, surrounded by one of the largest lagoons in the Maldives. The resort is an intimate setting of 64 palm-thatched villas and suites, and it seems the only thing strictly adhered to by the friendly staff is the comfort and wellbeing of guests. The resort has won several accolades for it; *Travel + Leisure* has dubbed it one of the best destination spas in India and Southeast Asia, and it's listed

in the top 100 list of TripAdvisor's Traveller's Choice Asia. The resort is also part of the esteemed Leading Hotels of the World.

After a leisurely breakfast of fresh fruit and museli in the beachside 24 Degrees restaurant, my day officially begins with some aquatic therapy in the warm Maldivian ocean. I meet resident marine biologist Jack for a private snorkeling tour of the waters that surround the nearby Embudu Village, home to coral gardens as colourful as the marine life that call them home. Face submerged under the surface, my ears block out all sound as schools of iridescent parrot fish and metallic snapper pass by, choosing to float gently forward then slightly backwards with the current, rather than undertake any rigorous swimming of their own. It's not long before I'm following suit.

Stresses of routine and city life washed away with the sea, I head to the resort's sparkling infinity pool and refuel with a light lunch of fresh sashimi salad washed down with frozen

mango-mint juice. For the most decadent of poolside lunches, guests can order the \$200 pizza, topped with Wagyu beef, foie gras, black truffles, lobster and caviar, and garnished with 24-carat edible gold leaf and a drizzle of 30-year old balsamic vinegar.

I stick with the salad, and bask in the warm sun before heading for the only appointment of my stay: a treatment at Jiva Grande Spa. Stepping into the dark wood reception area of the secluded space at the far end of the island, I'm welcomed by an invigorating, heady aroma and a steaming cup of detox tea before being lead to my treatment pavilion, which faces directly out over the lagoon.

My therapist wastes no time in beginning my treatment with an express head massage. Although I am sat upright, the water views ahead, combined with the oils infused with Indian spices and fragrances, leave me feeling dazed, the way a treatment should. After 30 minutes, I lie down for a back massage using

Maldives

oils infused with ginger and peppermint. The rhythmic pressure of the therapist's hands seems to step in time to the sound of waves lapping against the pavilion. This is followed by 10 minutes in the pavilion's private sauna so the oils can absorb properly into my skin, after which I'm guided to a relaxation pavilion, where one more detox tea awaits. I pull up a lounge on the large outdoor deck and enjoy the sensation of the strong ocean breeze as it cools my hot skin.

The post-treatment ritual continues back at the 200-square-metre Deluxe Beach Villa. I take a dip in the lagoon-facing infinity pool before hanging out to dry on the oversized hammock and rehydrating with water that's purified on-site — just one of the eco initiatives that has earned the resort a gold certification for sustainability. Afterwards, I rinse off under the palatial bathroom's outdoor rainshower, where the shower's steam combines with the outside

humidity to create a second sauna experience. Molton Brown rich eye concentrate, body moisturiser and soothing lip balm wrap up the treatment nicely.

Dinner at Deep End, an open-air restaurant, is an indulgent affair — after all, wellness is all about pleasurable dining experiences, too. The resort's chefs work closely with local farmers to source organic produce, and the result is as good as any high-end city restaurant. After a starter of seafood samplers followed by juicy, sweet lobster medallions swimming in herbed butter, the *pièce de résistance* is saved for dessert. After a plastic sheet is placed over the table, the chef arrives and declares that we are doing away with plates entirely, as he spreads dollops of chocolate, coconut syrup and raspberry purée over the table, adorning his edible art with mounds of crushed nuts, small balls of chocolate, two glossy chocolate mousse eggs and a cylinder of cream-

filled chocolate, which he promptly smashes before we take to the 'Opera' eagerly. Had I not felt so full and ready for the king-size bed waiting for me back in my villa, I would have requested an encore.

As a new day dawns, I take my time strolling down to the boat to depart for the slightly busier Malé and onwards to the hectic pace of home. I feel refreshed, recharged and reassured knowing that island healing lies a mere four-hour flight away.

STAY

What: Deluxe Beach Villa 304

Where: Taj Exotica Resort & Spa

Price: from US \$1,300 per night

www.tajhotels.com



Opt for private dining out on the lagoon



Dining at Deep End restaurant



Bright and airy villa interiors