

Reef encounter

THE FRAGILE BEAUTY OF THE MALDIVES DESERVES CAREFUL STEWARDSHIP. **ANNE CUTHBERTSON** VISITS RANGALI ISLAND, WHERE RESPECT FOR THE ENVIRONMENT IS SECOND NATURE

AZURE THING

Top: An aerial view of Conrad Maldives Rangali Island shows the resort's orderly rows of overwater villas and the islet's well-maintained lush green vegetation
Inset: Rangali's waters are teeming with vibrant marine life to become acquainted with, including shoals of oriental sweetlips

Flying into Malé, the islands of the Maldives lie like a string of pearls below, more than a thousand delicate droplets of pristine aquamarine surrounding gleaming white beaches and coconut palms.

After transferring to a seaplane, you can make out the neat rows of overwater villas beloved by honeymooners, postage stamps of barefoot luxury. But still, the islands barely break the surface of the Indian Ocean. The tallest sand dunes might scale the height of a wardrobe. Eighty per cent of the country lies less than a metre above sea level, making the Maldives the world's lowest-lying nation.

Conrad Maldives Rangali Island guests are immediately on intimate terms with the island. You're only ever a few sandy steps away



from its beloved 'house reef' and marine residents of the South Ari Atoll. My favourite spot quickly became the overwater walkway connecting Rangali's twin islands, where in the gently illuminated night-time shallows colourful rainbow runners dance for you.

Then without warning, on the first night, a manta ray. He was a mere



WAVE CULTURE

Clockwise from top left: Couples can enjoy private yoga sessions at Conrad Maldives Rangali Island's overwater spa; the spa restaurant offers aquamarine vistas; on the 'family island', beach villas are moments from the sand; overwater villas have their own private steps into the sea



junior by all accounts, with a wingspan of two metres (adult rays can grow up to five metres across and weigh 1,400kg). Entranced, I watched him swoop beneath the walkway, this way and that. A nurse shark joined him, another gentle giant of the warm seas. This was a welcome no one could have planned.

However, the other 'bucket list' marine giant of the Maldives proved elusive. These warm, oxygen-rich waters are favoured by young male whale sharks, and sightings of the largest fish in the ocean are extremely common, but in no way guaranteed. Our infectiously enthusiastic guide, marine biologist Filipa Lopes and the boat crew, had hundreds of the community's whale shark Whatsapp group on high alert for us. We met a group of excited snorkellers who had just glimpsed a 'small' five-metre-long whale shark. But, for our group, it was not to be.

Still, the reef and surrounding waters dazzled with smaller gems. A pod of playful spinner dolphins on a sunset cruise. A



Hawksbill turtle drowsily sunning himself on the surface. The kaleidoscope of coloured fish on the house reef: from tiny clown anemone fish busying themselves in soft coral, to green and pink parrotfish crunching hard coral – the architects of the impossibly white sand beaches with one parrotfish producing 90kg of fine sand a year. My favourite was the oriental sweetlips, an outrageously dressed fellow in black-and-white stripes, with a fashionably clashing black-and-yellow spotty tail and fins.

Coral bleaching was sadly all too evident. The El Niño weather phenomena in 1998 and 2016 had devastating effects on as much as three-quarters of the world's reefs, with sea temperatures rising above 30.5°C. The 1998 event alone killed one third of Maldivian coral. While El Niño is a natural weather occurrence, high water

temperatures are linked to global warming.

Marine biologists at the resort are actively addressing the situation, with regular coral plantings. After an informative talk by Filipa, I donned a tough coral glove and tied my own little 4cm coral polyp to a length of rope, which a diver took down to the reef's nursery beds – essentially frames on the sandy sea floor. After two years, the young coral can be planted out using underwater epoxy glue. This is part of the Conrad's Travel with Purpose initiative, and more and more guests are taking part in the activity each year. I look forward to receiving updates on my coral baby's progress.

The resort last year celebrated 25 years on Rangali Island (as the Hilton in 1997, and rebranded as the Conrad Maldives Rangali Island from 2007). Its longevity makes it one of the more authentic and





established resorts, favoured by experienced travellers. Of its 427 staff, 75 per cent are Maldivian. Guests return often. One couple from Antwerp I spoke to, he a diving enthusiast, were on their 13th visit.

It remains a pioneer. Rangali is home to the world's first undersea restaurant, Ithaa, where I dined on miso and truffle-marinated black cod prepared by culinary director Dwayne Krisko, while six black-tipped reef sharks tussled over my head. Then there's the first undersea residence, The Muraka, designed by the same architect, Yugi Yamazaki. Even the elevator in the two-storey private home is the first in the Maldives. The delights of sleeping with the fishes – the master bedroom is a restful cocoon 16ft below sea level, where all you can hear are munching parrotfish – have attracted much social-media attention, with recent visitors including Paris Hilton and American YouTuber Jimmy Donaldson, AKA MrBeast.

For those who prefer their bed above water, the charming beach villas are delightfully

jungly and luxuriously private, with an outdoor shower and day bed, small plunge pool and sandy track where you're but a few steps away from the beach. Villas on the 'family island' sleep up to four. On the 'couples' island' across the walkway, the 50 newly refurbished overwater villas are ideal for honeymooners or those who want more privacy. You can gaze out over the ocean from your own infinity pool, enjoying a 'floating breakfast' on a tray, before taking your own steps down into the warm shallows. On this island, there's also a quiet zone, large infinity pool and overwater spa, where you can watch fish swirl beneath the glass floor during your blissful ayurvedic massage.

The island inspires everything they do at Rangali. Whether it's the fragrantly spiced coconut curries made by Maldivian women at the Atoll Market (one of 12 restaurants and bars on offer), its homegrown vegetables, or lobsters on the beach barbecue grill. The year-round warmth of the climate is matched by the welcome here, the extraordinary

kindness and patience of the staff. Even the sea's spectacular giants are gentle. **L**

Anne Cuthbertson was a guest of Conrad Maldives Rangali Island. Beach villas start from \$560 (£461) per night; sunset water villa with pool from (\$2,000) £1,679 per night; The Muraka residence, from \$9,999 per night. conradmaldives.com



PHOTOGRAPH: CONRAD RANGALI ISLAND

FINE DINING Top: Ufaa by Jeremy Leung is a relaxed restaurant offering Chinese dishes
Below: guests can enjoy a fusion menu under the sea at Ithaa

Barefoot LUXURY



JADE MOUNTAIN

St Lucia, from \$1,100 (£835) per night, based on double occupancy, subject to 10% service charge and tax. This resort invites guests to partake in its Kaleidoscope coral planting programme. jademountain.com



CHABLÉ MAROMA

Mexico, from \$990 (£799) per night for a villa with private pool, inc. breakfast and taxes. Set amid lush protected land, this resort runs native plant restoration projects. maroma.chablehotels.com



WILDERNESS MOMBO

Botswana, from \$2,953 per person sharing per night. Sustainable luxury across three camps, where guests can both spa and spy animals. mombo.co.uk