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To escape a frigid February in Germany and celebrate the completion of my post-graduate degree, my husband and I packed our bags for an escape to the Maldives, an archipelago in the Indian Ocean. We reached the capital city’s tiny open-air airport and sought bathrooms to strip off unwanted layers of clothing. Clad in shorts, sunglasses and sandals, my husband and I felt happier already.

I had been dreaming of this trip for months, thinking back to photos on Pinterest and articles on prominent travel websites. The next six days proved to be the beach vacation of a lifetime that has yet to be outdone. I cling to memories of the Maldives every winter.

Islands by air

We sat at the Kuredu Island Resort’s private lounge and watched a floatplane dock. Tanned travelers reluctantly emerged, realizing their holidays were over. We boarded a short time later, and the plane skimmed rapidly across the bay. Within five minutes of takeoff, we passed over clusters of thatched-roof huts floating on water so clear, I could see the white sandy ocean floor and reefs, even from a few thousand feet in the sky.

No shoes necessary

We landed at the Kuredu pier and removed our shoes at the suggestion of the pilot. I remained skeptical as I held my brand-new beaded sandals and crossed the worn wooden

planks. But when my toes touched the cool velvety sand, I was sold. The paths and sand floors of the open-air facilities were meticulously manicured throughout the day. All of the cute shoes I had brought remained unworn as I embraced the barefoot beach-bum lifestyle.

A waterfront backyard

The adults-only Sangu Water Villas were tucked away on the quiet northwestern tip of the island. The only sound we heard was the lapping of waves against our bungalow’s stilts. The ocean and blue sky stretched as far as we could see from the windows and two-level outdoor deck.

As the sun dipped below the horizon each evening, the sky and ocean surface turned shades of pink and purple. Later, the bright moonlight illuminated the black-tipped fins of reef sharks

Marvelous Maldives

Story and photos by
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as they hunted for dinner. We waded in the shallows of the southwest beach, which sparkled as bioluminescent plankton washed ashore. Before turning in each night, we stopped by the café at the edge of the pier. While sipping liquor-infused coffees, eagle rays and six-foot-long nurse sharks slowly glided by, visible courtesy of underwater spotlights.

A natural aquarium for snorkeling

A few yards from our bungalow, we crossed paths with grazing 300-pound sea turtles and 2-foot-long titan triggerfish. Reef sharks darted near the bottom, while colorful parrotfish and humphead wrasse (larger than the sharks!) stayed near the surface. None of the creatures bothered us, most either oblivious or unimpressed by our presence.

We booked an afternoon boat excursion in the hopes of glimpsing manta rays. We grew anxious because the trip was more than halfway

over, and we had yet to see any. Finally, a crewmember pointed and yelled — we had found them! For 20 minutes, we snorkeled a few meters above a cluster of mantas, each with a “wing” span of 8 feet or more.

Our first diving experience

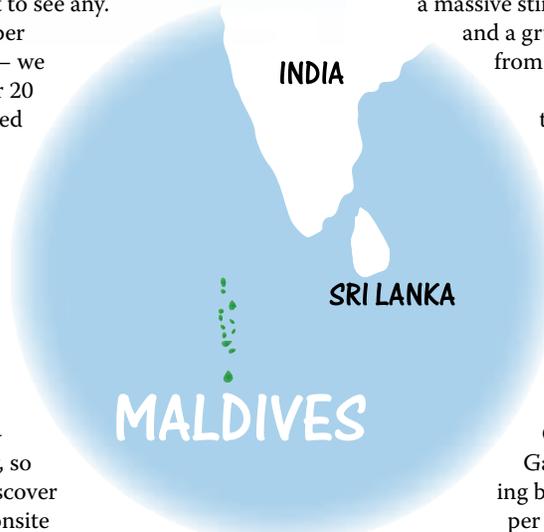
We had to try diving in one of the world’s best destinations for the activity, so we signed up for Discover Scuba through the onsite PADI five-star facility. After a bit of theory, we went to the southeast lagoon to practice. Comfortable with breathing, hand signals and safety basics, like how to clear our masks and retrieve our regulators, we submerged for a resort dive. Highlights were

a massive stingray stirring up food and a grumpy moray eel peeking from his coral home.

The last day of vacation, we geared up for a longer, deeper expedition — we didn’t set foot on a boat. We hopped in from the jetty and swam to the house shipwreck and reef. Covered in colorful plants and corals, the hull looked like something from Catalan architect Antoni Gaudí’s imagination. Hiding beneath, a car-sized grouper waited for his next meal to come by.

At dinner that evening,

we toasted cocktails and listened to the waves. Our waiter had spelled out “C U SOON” in rose petals on the white tablecloth. It’s been two years, and I still dream of returning to paradise.



MY PARADISE

