

SAVING THE MALDIVES

Facing a great environmental threat, resorts across the Maldives are stepping in to save their beloved paradise. From glass studios to hydroponic gardens, the green dream is becoming a reality, says ISABELLA SULLIVAN

ying between India and Sri Lanka, scattered across islands and sandbanks in the Arabian Sea, the Maldives is one of the dreamiest destinations in the world. But, despite its appearance as a luxurious tropical idyll, the archipelagic state is facing one of the toughest challenges in the world – its own preservation.

It's for the same reason tourists visit this idyll – white sand shores almost melting into Indian Ocean – that makes the Maldives so fragile. Of the archipelago's 1,200 islands, 80 per cent are less than one metre above the water, and by 2100, 200 of its inhabited islands could be lost beneath the waves.

But in the face of a potential crisis, an army of protectors are springing into action, from the locals themselves to the dozens of luxury resorts that speckle the Maldives' sun-drenched atolls. The nation hopes to soon be entirely carbon neutral, a bold dream first uttered by then-president Mohamed Nasheed in 2010, and there are big plans to go completely plastic-free by 2023. But perhaps the most creative ideas are coming from the islands' luxury resorts, who, through innovative schemes and initiatives, are working hard to protect their greatest asset – their paradise surroundings.

Located in the immaculate Baa Atoll, Soneva Fushi has been an eco-pioneer since it first opened 25 years ago. The resort is completely carbon neutral and recycles 90 per cent of its waste, and with hopes of hitting 100, it's now getting creative. Utilising the thousands of glass bottles from its outlets, the resort has its very own glass-blowing studio for up-market upcycling. "Typically resorts in the Maldives will crush their bottles and sell the crushed glass to a recycling company, or dump the waste glass into the ocean," reveals owner Sonu Shivdasani. Here, this is not the case.

In the island's rainbow-hued studio, colourful creations like tableware, artwork and stylish glass pieces are created from empty beverage bottles and sold in the curio shop as souvenirs. "Using blowing, casting, and slumping, we create extraordinary items that are of a much higher value than the glass was in its original form as a bottle," adds Shivdasani. Guests are also invited to take part and craft their own unique glass keepsake.

Shivdasani's impassioned ethos echoes throughout the ultra-luxury resort. Guests press cans to make handles for doors, and 30,000 building blocks made from waste glass, cement and styrofoam have aided building projects across the island. The resort has even found a way to reuse the notoriously unrecyclable material, testing styrofoam surfboards to gift locals as part of its education programme. "My belief is that through water sports, education and festivities, children will lose their fear of the ocean and learn to love it. If they love it, they are more likely to protect it," insists the hotelier.

This same creative approach is being shared by Coco Collection's Coco Palm Dhuni Kolhu, home to its own on-site glass bottling plant. The luxury group, which operates properties in the North Malé and Baa Atoll, launched its Coco Dreams Green initiative in 2018 – a detailed list of promises from chic wooden toothbrushes and refillable toiletries to reef clean-ups. The resort's on-site glass bottling plant provides water for the complex ensuring no plastic bottles cross the threshold. "It is a great way for us to spread awareness and start conversations about back of house elements the guests don't normally see," says Coco Collection's group general manager Siraj Waseem. "We keep in mind we are caretakers of these islands. The Maldives are so beautiful yet fragile." →



Clockwise from opposite left: Soneva Fushi, gardening at Soneva Fushi, herb garden at Coco Palm Dhuni Kolhu, recycling, papaya trees





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But perhaps the most exciting project is its lush organic garden, where year-round sunshine is utilised to grow fragrant herbs and juicy fruits and veggies – dramatically cutting food miles and carbon footprint. “Our guests love our chef’s garden,” adds Waseem. “It’s a very beautiful and peaceful area of the island to just walk around in and is also where we host our chef’s garden private dinners. At one stage we even had a surplus of watermelons.”

While enjoying the barefoot luxury expected of a Maldives retreat, guests are also encouraged to take part in the multitude of eco-friendly activities on offer. “Our guests are very keen to take part in our regular clean-up days, where we go around the beach and the house reef to clean away any plastic debris that washes ashore,” concludes the general manager. “Travellers are becoming more discerning when it comes to choosing where they stay, and we’re very thankful so many of our guests share our passion for sustainability.”

Tropical veggie gardens are certainly in vogue, a trend followed on Gili Lankanfushi – where 15 kinds of basil and 30 varieties of lettuce are grown – and on Kuramathi Island Resort in the Ari Atoll. More than 500kg of fresh salad greens and herbs are harvested at Kuramathi’s hydroponic garden each month. Purple basil, ruby red tomatoes, pak choy, curry leaves, bananas and edible flowers sprout in 21 greenhouses and go straight into the hands of the resort’s chefs and mixologists. “Freshly grown mint is a great reason to try the great drinks menu,” laughs operations director Alain Trefois. Nurturing compost is created from

organic waste materials from the resort and irrigated with recycled greywater – it’s an extensive green agenda.

A sign of good things to come, sustainability is becoming engrained in the DNA of Maldivian resorts, and new openings are being shaped by this same desire and responsibility to protect. Crown & Champa recently opened Kudadoo Maldives Private Island, which became the first resort in the nation to be powered entirely by solar panels. In 2019, LUX* Resorts & Hotels added LUX* North Malé Atoll, committing to offset

100 per cent of carbon emissions through schemes like linen reuse and in-house glass bottling. Over in the Maldivian Fari Islands, and soon-to-be-opened Patina Maldives has banned all single-use plastic, along with ensuring all amenities are eco-friendly and sustainable.

For the nearly 150 resorts that dapple this perfect tropical idyll, there’s never been a more poignant mission, but it’s a mission they’ve chosen to accept and embrace. After all, tourism can be a positive force for change, bringing attention to plights that would usually remain beneath the radar and providing funds for conservation and new initiatives. “There are lots of examples where conservation has flourished thanks to tourism, so these are not opposites,” insists Sonu Shivdasani. The truth is, the Maldives is one of the few places left on earth that represent the seemingly distance dream of an untouched tropical paradise, and we must protect it, at all costs. ☺



Clockwise from top: Glass-blowing at Soneva Fushi, Kuramathi’s hydroponic garden, Gili Lankanfushi, Soneva Fushi glasswork on display

