



No Shoes, No News

Story & pictures by Rumney Samson



You have to be a water baby to enjoy fully the azure sea, the golden sand and the blazing sun of the Maldivian Islands. For the truly hedonistic water baby seeking paradise, there is one resort that could be said to be just one rung down on the ladder to heaven itself. Soneva Gili is set on Lankanfushi, a private tropical island. It is one gem in a chain of over one thousand coral islands sprinkled upon the surface of the sparkling Indian Ocean, stretching five hundred miles southwest of Sri Lanka and terminating just south of the equator.

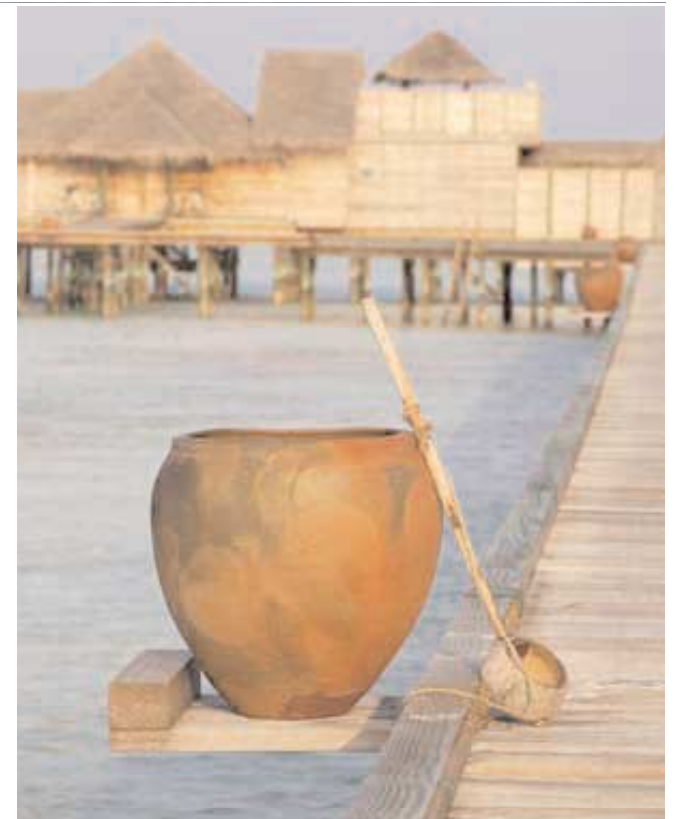
Blazing our way across the deep water channels that separate one island from another, we had our first glimpse of Soneva Gili from the deck of the fast speedboat that had collected us from the airport. Air travel had taken its usual toll and we were weary travellers until we boarded this luxury craft. Our shoes were taken from us by Suzi, the hostess sent to greet us, and she popped them smartly into an unbleached cotton drawstring bag marked 'Welcome to Soneva Gili. No Shoes, No News' – clearly a sign of attitudes to follow. As we slowed, our captain banked his fast craft into a tight turn, squeezing into a tiny gap in the coral reef for our final approach. The colour of the water changed dramatically from deep ocean blue to a tantalising turquoise. Standing on stilts, built out right on top of

the lagoon, were the resort's luxury villas, each looking like the cross between a film set from the Kevin Costner movie *Water World* and the family movie *Swiss Family Robinson*. Neither description should suggest second-rate dilapidation or a chance attack by pirates, for, best described as designer goes rustic, this resort complex is unashamedly aimed at the top end of the market. Eco-friendly from conception, the hotel boasts unbleached sheets and towels in the cabins and food organically grown on the island in the galley. The villas are designed so that we immediately felt at home upon entering this lap of luxury, where you can park your bicycle on the verandah or tie your canoe to the landing stage and walk into a two-storey villa. Upstairs, alfresco on-deck dining and even a double bed to sleep on under the stars is on offer. Downstairs, a separate alternative air-conditioned bedroom with an enormous bed is dressed like a bride in a purely decorative mosquito net. The bathroom featured a bath with perhaps the best view in the world, set as it was inside a pulpit suspended over the ocean with windows on three sides.

In my book, luxury dictates you should do nothing for yourself, and it is in this vein that the words 'room service' take on a totally different concept at Soneva Gili. The chef, Lionel Valla, prefers to call it in-villa



The Maldivian resort of Soneva Gili lies on the tropical island of Lankanfushi, a hideaway hidden within the turquoise waters of the Indian Ocean.
Previous spread: The resort's infinity pool.



dining and he, with his band of creative craftsmen, makes it just that. Your own private dinner party arrives at your door, whilst uniformed stewards serve you at whichever table you choose. For those who wish to be more sociable or less honeymoon-minded, you can stroll along the beach, park a table where the sea meets the shore and dine by candlelight under the stars. The resort believes that dining should be an experience in every respect. The French chef heads a talented team who is as at home with its beachfront BBQ as it is inside the kitchens. Breakfasts and lunches are served in the restaurant built over the lagoon. This is a room where a clever designer has both captured the view of stunning sunrises and made the most of the mid-morning on-shore breezes; it also converts to a cocktail bar, creating concoctions beyond compare each evening. Dinners served direct from the on-beach tandoori oven or charcoal-flamed grill are simply magnificent: tasting fish that was swimming just a few hours earlier in the very ocean that washes your toes as you eat somehow makes the experience just that little bit more special.

Laze by the infinity pool, sail a catamaran speeding across a flat calm lagoon or paddle a kayak lazily out to nearby single palm island. There is so much to do and so little pressure to do any of it. Ride your bicycle to the dive shop where service is better than you could wish for. I am a diver, I love diving, I have dived the world, but here I am a special diver because the dive shop is bursting with enthusiasm to show me the special sights. Elsewhere I would be joining a cluster of fellow divers, but here diving is a one-to-one experience, with one instructor or guide for each small group. Nothing seems too much trouble for this laid-back group of professionals who simply want to please. In answer to their question as to what I wanted to see on today's dive, I decided to put them to the test. Knowing it was not the season to see manta rays, I asked to see these magnificent monsters of the deep. Lars, the diving instructor, smiled and said it would be tricky, but he would try his best. Double bluff! We set off to dive from their dhoni specially outfitted as a dive boat. My equipment had already been taken to the boat: all I did was turn up. On passage we received our dive briefing; we might or might not see mantas but if we did, this is the sight they would be. Double, double bluff! The Sunlight Tila dive site is a tiny, out of the way reeflet, so small as to be of little interest to the casual diver but known and recognised as a fish-cleaning station - where large fish come to be spruced up by little cleaner wrasse, which dart in and out of their gills removing the debris, algae and infestations which can plague a large fish. Four divers tumbled backwards into the water; at 85 degrees it was the perfect temperature. We slowly sank to 18 metres and landed on the sandy

bottom and knelt on the stand to undertake an equipment check. Suddenly I almost dropped my regulator mouthpiece in awe and admiration, for heading towards me was a huge manta ray with a wing span a full eight metres across and looking like a B52 bomber going into Baghdad. Divers generally swim around when they dive and so you will have to trust me when I say for the next 54 minutes not a single diver moved from their original landing spot. We were all rooted to the spot, completely mesmerised as ray after ray glided effortlessly around us, completely oblivious to the fact that we were there watching them as you watch a hairdresser in a shop while waiting your turn in the chair. I have been diving since 1969 and I doubt I will ever be as entranced as I was on this occasion.

Many resorts have a spa attached to them and frequently they are financially motivated towards removing large sums of money from patrons as quickly as possible. In this hideaway heaven, however, fellow castaways receive the most wonderful pampering in an environment which still retains value. Each session is pre-booked to suit your requirements or tastes, but prior to your appointment it is suggested that you take advantage of the complimentary steam room and saunas or use the gymnasiums. These additional activities enhance the experience and lull the senses towards the total relaxation that the spa treatments seek to instill. Once the treatment is over spa attendees are led to relaxation room: a glass of ginger tea was served and we were left alone to complete our own sensual release programme. (I was so taken with the relaxing qualities of ginger tea that I took the recipe and confess to having a glass by my side as I write this.)

Soneva Gill is a fast boat ride away from Male, the capital, which makes an exciting day off the island. Walking around the capital island it is easy to forget your luxury hotel for a while. The streets are bustling, full of fishermen carrying their slippery catch by the tail, caught from local fishing boats called dhonis moored on the waterfront across the street, into the fish market where they lie flapping on the tiles while traders haggle over their value. Market traders pass the time of day under the shade of makeshift stalls selling their wares. Tripping over huge bundles of locally produced coir rope, we made our way to Bite, a local café which smelled so inviting that we stuck our heads around the doorway. Smiling faces and eager, cheerful waves dragged us in and we were shown, with great pride, to a place of honour at a freshly scrubbed wooden table. I was the only woman in sight, and was made very welcome. Plates of local delicacies, known colloquially as 'small eats', were placed before us and we eagerly tucked in, picking up each with our left hand as local custom dictated. Each plate was a wonderful concoction, and some were very spicy. Gulha



Top: the intricate and detailed design of the local beetle nut leaves.
Bottom: A local woman demonstrating the art of coir rope production
Right: A Maldivian fisherman with the 'catch of the day', all ready to be taken to the nearby resorts.





are fish balls made with onion, coconut, chilli and ginger. Bajiyaa are cone-shaped pastries of tuna with lemon grass. Once the savoury dishes were demolished, it was time to move on to the sweet dishes - there are plenty on offer. We had other plans, however, because I had spotted a garden oasis in a small alley leading between two streets earlier advertising home-made ice cream. We emerged from Bite almost full yet eager to taste more local fare and set off to search for the Seagull Café. Inside a walled garden discreetly tucked away, the Seagull offers a sumptuous selection of ice creams featuring such tropical flavours as coconut cream ice and mango sorbet (their passion fruit delight is aptly named).

The island chain of the Maldivé Republic encompasses twenty-six separate atolls. Adding the landmass of all these tiny islands together gives an area of just 115 square miles, yet the slender island chain spans some 35,000 square miles of ocean. Each island is surrounded by crystal clear lagoons encrusted with reefs. Contemplating the problem of rising sea levels and global warming, it is a little frightening to consider that no one island is naturally more than 10 feet high, and very few are heavily populated. English is widely spoken and understood by most Maldivians, especially on the hotel islands that most tourists will visit. Souvenirs are hard to come by. Those on offer in the shops in town are not of as high a quality as prices suggest. It is worth bargaining for what you want or consider buying local clothes, such as a lungih for men or a shawl

for women; they are both attractive and can be of practical use whilst on the islands. Over the years it has been my very great pleasure to travel the globe and visit sights, taking photographs and writing about my experiences. I have seen gauchos on the pampas of Argentina, elephants on safari in South Africa and tigers in Bengal. As a result it takes a great deal to impress me with a new experience. It might, therefore, come as a shock when I reveal that one evening meal at a location at Soneva Gili might rank as my all-time wow factor. If I add that the location was little bigger than the size of the garden of an English home, I might begin to lose some credulity, so let me explain. The occasion was an evening meal when I and the man I have chosen to live with dined together on an uninhabited desert island under the branches of a solitary palm tree in the middle of a lagoon. We watched the sun set as we sipped our cocktails and began our feast at twilight. The arrival of each mouth-watering course with its own specially chosen wine was heralded by the creaking of oars as a boat was rowed out to us. The waiting staff served our courses and discreetly withdrew, leaving us to our castaway luxury. These two words sum up the essence of Soneva Gili: it truly is Castaway Luxury.

Rumney Samson was accommodated at Soneva Gili by Soneva Six Senses Spa Inc. She travelled to the Maldives from India courtesy of Indian Airlines.

Top: The exterior of Soneva Gili's luxurious accommodation - two storey villas on stilts offering the highest levels of comfort.

Bottom: A trike at sunset evoking the quietness and beauty of the island.

