

Headline	Island rhythms & blues (July 17)		
MediaTitle	Thailand Tatler Magazine		
Date	17 Jul 2017	Color	Full Color
Section	News	Circulation	55,900
Page No	132 to 134	Readership	368,000
Language	English	ArticleSize	1865 cm <sup>2</sup>
Journalist	NULL	AdValue	THB 251,108
Frequency	Monthly	PR Value	THB 1,004,432



LIFE | CHECKING IN



## Island Rhythms and Blues

*Ploylada Sucharitachandra* discovers true luxury at two resorts that hit all the right notes during an escape to the Maldives

**O**n the flight via Bangkok Airways to the Maldives—the Indian Ocean’s treasure trove of scattered islands—my thoughts are focused on five days of white sand, turquoise blue water and curtains of palm trees. Malé, the tiny yet densely populated capital of the Maldivian archipelago, is an extraordinary sight. At just 1.7 kilometres long and one kilometre wide, vividly painted buildings dominate the space illustrating a charming contrast to the laid-back island vibe the rest of the country presents. As each islet is somewhat secluded from the next, our main means of transportation between Malé and the two resorts scheduled for this trip is the seaplane.

Our first check-in is Anantara Kihavah Maldives Villas, a stunning retreat enveloped by the azure waters off Baa Atoll. On our 259-square-metre private refuge, the over water pool villa presents a tranquil view of the ocean’s boundless horizon—a beautiful seascape to wake up to. Here you feel in tune with nature, either when basking in the sun in the hammocks stretched out on the deck, gliding down the steps to where baby sharks swim in the glistening lagoon, or relaxing in your glass-bottomed bathtub in the evening.

Thatched-roof luxury at its finest, Anantara Kihavah tastefully puts the ocean at centre stage. Home to UNESCO World Biosphere Reserve Hanifaru Bay, house-reef snorkelling gives a stunning glimpse of the natural atoll,



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**EMBRACING THE BLUES** (Clockwise from left) Anantara Kihavah Maldives Villas' spellbinding underwater restaurant and wine cellar, Sea; enjoying sunset the Maldivian way; the view from the over-water pool villa; (opposite) beautiful shades of azure at Anantara Kihavah



a peaceful sanctuary for protected marine life. Swimming through schools of fish, the highlight of my mermaid expedition was the spectacular sight of a vertical wall of multicoloured hard and soft corals that extends to about 20 to 30 metres in height. On the other side of the island, the resort's underwater restaurant and wine cellar, Sea, presents an extraordinary gastronomic journey. Regarded by many as one of the best subaquatic dining experiences in the Maldives, beautifully executed dishes are complemented by a vibrant display of sea creatures darting across coral reefs.

Against a romantic backdrop of the island's sunset, we bid farewell on our last night at the resort with cocktails and live acoustic music. As darkness descends we are led to the rooftop of Sky restaurant where in-house astronomer Ali Shameem guides us through a spectacular stargazing session, allowing us exclusive views of the moon and some of his favourite planets via his telescope. We

later discover that the dramatic star-filled Maldivian night sky also makes a bewitching milieu for the resort's outdoor cinema.

It is no surprise that Anantara Kihavah has been named the No 1 Resort in the Indian Ocean and No 2 Resort in the World by the *Conde Nast Traveler Readers' Choice Awards 2016*. Under the guidance of general manager Dylan Counsel, the resort gracefully embraces Thai-style hospitality with personable Maldivian charm. And they do goodbyes like no other—that is, the GM and his team taking a bold jump into the sea and waving to us from the water as we drift away from the island.

Our next stop, Per Aquum Niyama Maldives, presents a different vibe—chic and cheeky with a sentiment for adventure aimed at style-savvy travellers. Self-dubbed nature's playground, twin islands they call Chill and Play balance tranquillity with fun-making. In our modern pool studio, a fully automated 175 square metres of space, a crisp white backdrop is brightened by pops of aqua. And while the resort offers the option of a modish break from sea, sand and sunshine at modern fine dining restaurant Edge and underwater club Subsix, its carefree appeal still shines through.

Our morning quest for dolphins proves to be a surprisingly heartwarming adventure. And by adventure, I mean imagine a tiny lady balancing herself at the front of a fast-moving boat with one hand holding on for dear life and the other trying to manage a camera. There are dolphins aplenty frolicking around the boat and we are told that we are lucky because the group the previous day didn't see any.



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**FUN-LOVING HAVEN** (From top) Tribal restaurant at Per Aquum Niyama Maldives presents a tasteful, African-inspired decor; quest for dolphins—complete; sundown time at the surf shack



*Per Aquum Niyama, presents a different vibe—chic and cheeky with a sentiment for adventure*

Per Aquum Niyama is also a popular retreat for surfers, as the waves here are suitable for intermediate to advanced board riders, with some spots perfect for beginners. At Lime Spa, we enjoy a tan-enhancing coconut scrub complete with a striking view of the lagoon. Dinner at Tribal is an exceptional experience, with the menu highlighting a scrumptious fine dining fusion of African, Central and South American cuisines. If it happens to be your birthday, you might even get a full on African-style dance and Happy Birthday song.

Gloominess pervades amongst our small group as we wait for our flight back home in Bangkok Airways' VIP lounge at Malé Airport. The Maldives is definitely captivating but it was perhaps the warm hospitality we received at both resorts that made our getaway extra mesmerising. I should have never rolled my eyes when I saw "Paradise in Shades of Blue" plastered boldly across our travel itinerary—I thought it was the most unoriginal phrase one could use for the destination, but I was certainly wrong.

They say memories are best shared with your loved ones. Until we meet again. 📍

