

Trip of a lifetime Maldives

A long-time hotspot for honeymooners, there's more to the Maldives than sunsets and romance. Travel Editor Emma Winterschladen discovered the joy of solo travel by swapping screens and shoes for underwater adventure and barefoot luxury on Mirihi Island.

Mirihi Island
from the air



‘With no one but the colourful fish and baby reef sharks for company, it was a haven of perfect, sweet solitude’



Pic far left: Shifaaz Shagoon

The seaplane hummed as it started its descent. I looked out of the window at this most famous archipelago below, with its inky mottled depths and haloed islands scattered across the Indian Ocean. Suddenly I got what all the fuss was about. We circled our patch of paradise in the South Ari Atoll, before fluttering to a wet landing on a glittering lagoon. And – just like that – I found myself in another world, a mere 14 hours after leaving home.

Before we could set foot on Mirihi Island though, our home for the next five days, shoes were to be abandoned on the boat. This, I’d soon learn, is at the heart of the island’s ‘no shoes, no news’ philosophy: a focus on switching off from life back home, and grounding yourself into the beauty of now. Which, it turns out, was pretty beautiful.

I arrived with my group of fellow solo travellers on to bleached, powder-soft shores. Warm smiles and fresh

coconut juice welcomed us, before we were given a tour. As just one of the Maldives’ 1,190 or so islands, 100 of which are resorts, Mirihi is small and perfectly formed at only 50m by 350m. Its tropical verdure and white beaches are enveloped by an impressive 6km house reef, which gives it a lagoon ideal for snorkelling and swimming, and a ‘shelf’ from which to dive into the deep ocean – one I’d soon become well acquainted with.

But first, we were taken to our ‘rooms’ – mine being one of the island’s 30 water villas, which sit suspended above the lagoon. Inside, the decor was simple, bright and bold. Local art hung on the walls, the bed was large and comfy, an espresso machine sat ready for my morning coffee, and the bathroom was luxuriously large. The pièce de résistance though was the view, framed by large glass doors which opened on to a private deck, with steps into the ocean. With no one but the colourful fish and baby reef sharks for company, it was a haven of perfect, sweet solitude.



Diving deep

It's amazing how quickly you ease into island life. Mornings in Mirihi started with yoga in a *shala* under the palm trees, soundtracked by the birds singing. Breakfast afterwards was an abundant affair overlooking the lapping waves – platters of fresh fruit and cheeses sitting alongside dhal, omelette and locally caught fish. Each day unfurled before me, bright and brimming with freedom. Mirihi has something for everyone: whether you want to explore the island's azure waters – be it on kayak, paddleboard or snorkelling – or just want to sit in a hammock all day reading your book. Or perhaps you're after some pampering instead, in which case its boutique beachside Duniye Spa offers a wide range of treatments I tried the signature Sense of Touch – a deeply mind-and-body calming combination of massage techniques, inspired by African and Asian healing traditions.

All of the above kept me entertained on the first day or so, but soon I was keen to delve beneath the surface of the resort – literally. So I fished out my eight-year-old PADI certificate and did a refresher class and dive with Mirihi's head dive instructor, Phillip. It was enough to reignite in me a long-lost love for scuba diving – from the slow, therapeutic breathing and mermaid-esque



movements, to the unadulterated privilege of being able to glide through nature's underwater garden. Everywhere I looked there was life: parrotfish, snappers, clownfish and sweetlips dancing around the vibrant coral reef. I even got to meet Emma – the island's beloved moray eel. Phillip told me afterwards that it's the nutrient-rich water and flowing currents of the Maldives that allow for such a healthy plethora of marine life.

I felt the ocean tug me back as soon as I got out of its bath-warm waters. So when Phillip offered me a shipwreck dive the next day, I jumped at the chance. 'Just hold my hand and trust me when we push away from the reef...' he told me before we went under. We descended deeper than before, and I felt that familiar gargle of nerves in my tummy – especially when we swam into the dark blue abyss. Luckily, the ghost-like shadow of the shipwreck soon appeared and I spent the next 30 minutes or so exploring it – squeezing through doors and into its coral-adorned rooms, while mammoth tuna, barracuda and reef sharks circled above.

A culinary education

Our evenings were spent eating (and in my case drinking chilli and passion fruit daiquiri – see recipe over page). Mirihi is home to two restaurants – one, the sand-floored buffet Dhonveli and the other Muraka – an à la carte restaurant on stilts over the lagoon. Maldivian food, it turns out, is some of the freshest, most flavoursome I've ever tasted. The banquet on the first night was a spectacular showcase of Maldivian (as well as



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international) cuisine. I was introduced to dishes such as bitter gourd salad (utterly divine), *mas huni* (tuna, onion, coconut and chilli), and *garudhiya* (fish soup). The ‘posh’ meal at Muraka was just as delicious, in a more refined and extravagant way: think red duck curry with grapes and kaffir lime; scallops with almond and orange crust; and wagyu tenderloin with kempot-pepper sauce served young kale, green mango and pine risotto.

On another evening, we sat under a blanket of stars on the beach enjoying a white-table-clothed four-course BBQ feast. The waves licked the shore as we devoured a Maldivian lobster each – alongside a fine selection of wine. We also enjoyed a yomp through some of Mirihi’s impressive collection of rums, served with handmade chocolates (we slept well that night).

Chilli and passion fruit daiquiri

- 60ml white rum
- 30ml Cointreau
- 30ml passion fruit purée
- 20ml fresh lime juice
- Trace of red chilli
- 6-8 ice cubes
- 1 passion fruit
- Red chilli, to garnish

- 1 Add the rum, Cointreau, passion fruit purée, lime juice, chilli and five ice cubes into a blender. Whizz it up for 20 seconds at maximum speed.
- 2 Spoon out the passion fruit and add the seeds in before blitzing for another couple of seconds.
- 3 Pour the liquid into a glass. Take a whole red chilli and cut in slightly on one side. Use it to garnish the rim.



‘We sat under a blanket of stars on the beach enjoying a white-table-clothed four-course BBQ feast’

But as much as I loved eating the food, I wanted to be able to make it myself too; to bring back home those unpinpointable Maldivian flavours. Lucky then that executive chef Felix offers a cooking class. And so we spent an afternoon in Muraka’s kitchen learning the secrets to the fresh, zesty, deep, umami flavours I’d been swooning over – like how to make the perfect beetroot curry, coconut sambal and dhal. Felix told me that Maldivian cuisine is in many ways similar to Sri Lankan, except it’s lighter and brighter (this is because it uses less oil, which was once too expensive to import). We sat down afterwards to enjoy the fruits of our labour, and left armed with a recipe book of Maldivian recipes to impress.

Marine life

We left our cooking class, full and happy, with dusk in the air – just in time for a Dolphins at Sunset cruise on the island’s 55ft pine-wood yacht. We set off, glass of champagne in hand, into the fiery horizon with Mohammed the musician singing beautiful songs that floated through the air. Elegant canapés were passed around, glasses were refilled and it was all incredibly civilised. That is, until we spotted our first dolphins. I almost popped with excitement to see these playful souls so close up. Two soon became three, then four, and before

we knew it there were tens of dolphins dancing and jumping alongside the boat. It was one of the moments in life I just wanted to bottle up and take home with me.

The final day was spent on a whale shark safari. Mirihi’s surrounding area is renowned for its whale sharks all year round, so we set off in search of these gentle giants. The morning was spent cruising, reading, eating fresh fruit, sipping juice and then: ‘GO GO GO!!!’. Our snorkels and fins were on and we were in the water within seconds, flailing around in the unknown before, suddenly, out of the blue, appeared the most majestic of creatures – all six metres of it. I let out a watery wail of delight which resulted in a mouthful of ocean. Adrenaline coursed through my body as I swam within centimetres of a whale shark. I felt so small, so lucky, so honoured to be sharing underwater space with such a beautiful being. We jumped in and swam with it six more times (a great work-out) and each time I squawked into my snorkel. We arrived back that evening – humbled and bubbling with joy. Which is, in fact, what I can say for the whole trip, actually. To be able to spend time, alone, in such a magical, ever-precious place, really felt like a once-in-a-lifetime privilege.

Mirihi Island truly offers a rare kind of quiet luxury – that is the luxury of time and space to reconnect with nature and yourself. 🌊

EMMA’S ITINERARY at a glance

MORNING YOGA

SNORKELLING & SWIMMING

around the lagoon

DUNIYE SPA

Sense of Touch treatment

SCUBA DIVING

the island’s shipwreck

BBQ LOBSTER FEAST

on the beach

RUM & CHOCOLATE

tasting experience

COOKING CLASS

with head chef Felix

DOLPHINS AT SUNSET

WHALE SHARK SAFARI

The lowdown

Nightly rates at Mirihi Island start from \$600 (£479*) per villa, on a B&B basis, based on two people sharing. Prices are subject to 10% service charge and 12% GST. For more information or to make a reservation, visit mirihi.com.

*Exchange rate correct at time of press.

