



The spa and gym. *Right,*
Crusoe villa with indoor
and rooftop bedrooms

SONEVA GILI

You won't ever want to be rescued, says Victoria Mather

Soneva Gili is in its own time zone. At Gili, you never wear shoes: they are gently removed from you as the boat sails past Paradise Island to a different kind of nirvana. At Gili, the weather is never chilly: you can sleep under the stars and there's an illuminated water garden in the bathroom. At Gili, all pleasures can be achieved horizontally: swimming, snorkelling, scuba-diving, sunbedding. You want to be there, now.

In these troubled times, what we ardently desire is perfect peace. Stop the world, we want to get off. The Maldives is an enchanted place for doing absolutely nothing – such a luxurious necessity. This waterworld, a necklace of atolls on the equator, is 99 per cent Quink-ink sea, in which are dotted 2,000 palm-topped, white-sanded coral islands, each one surrounded by a turquoise lagoon. From the seaplane, they look like Tiffany-blue poached eggs. The Maldives are predominantly Muslim, of which one must be aware, but this is a peaceful archipelago. There are more butterfly-fish (31 varieties, from the Teardrop butterfly-fish to the Gorgeous Gussy) than people.

Soneva Gili is the new hideaway created by Sonu and Eva Shivdasani. He is Indian, she is Swedish, both are very glamorous – very Mayfair and the South of France. What they have done with Gili is the most stylish, mould-breaking design since Adrian Zecha created Aman. Gili time – an hour ahead for extra sunshine – stands still in this Arcadia for sybarites. Soneva Gili is seriously grown-up, in that rustic way which costs fabulous amounts of money, the villas built of wood over the crystalline water. The bar's iridescent centre is a water hole, the drinks tables are made of glass so that fish dart below your margarita; the spa's treatment rooms open out on to the lagoon. The gym is the only one in the world where flying fish flash past your treadmill. What's really cool is the ice room, which is scented with peppermint and rosemary.

This is a hotel which is both contemporary (before you arrive, your favourite drinks, food, CDs and spa treatments will have been established by email, and a man is constantly on stand-by to help with that tricky digital camera) and back to nature. The villas are a theatrical triumph, at one with the universe: in the Crusoe Villas, which you reach in your own canoe, there are two bedrooms, one inside and air-conditioned, the other outdoors on the rooftop. Sleep with the stars above, the sound of lapping water below, and conditioned by the gentle sea breeze.



The bathrooms are vast open-air water temples, with views over the lagoon, steps down to the water garden, a shower that's positively Philippe Starck and a huge dressing area for all the clothes you're never going to wear. Heavens, even the coat hangers are eco-friendly. Room service arrives by speedboat.

The Shivdasanis also built Soneva Fushi, which was certainly cutting-edge in terms of Robinson Crusoe experiences. It is on a much bigger, more jungly, shaded island, the villas tucked in among the vegetation, whereas Gili is small but perfectly formed and totally informed by the sea. Gili is a place in which to restore the soul, to read, to get fit doing watery things, like striding through the shallows from one's villa if one can't be fagged to row the boat. You have a villa reached by a walkway? There are gourds of cold water to ladle across your bare tootsies should they get hot.

It's also a place to eat well and healthily, an essential component of the 21st-century resort. The produce is grown in a charming vegetable garden in the middle of the island; at tea in the shade, there's a fountain in which to wash your hands, cucumber sandwiches and a barrel of Earl Grey sorbet. The food is imaginative and fresh – bread straight from the oven, sushi, sashimi, beef from Australia, wine from France, fish from the bounteous sea. It's an outrageously spoiling experience, and this is precisely what Soneva Gili is about: the ultimate realisation of our castaway fantasy. □

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Rates Villa, from £430;
residence, from £570

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