

Becoming a castaway has become a commodity in our age of rules and regulations. So to arrive on an island speck, 1,400m by 400m: one of the largest of the 1,190 in the Maldives, in the middle of the Indian Ocean offering an environment with at least some room to explore, is a treat.

Already at an advantage for its natural charms, this island – buoyed up on a reef, surrounded by startlingly white sand and settled in a translucent lagoon with hues of blue and green – is called Soneva Fushi, and fulfils the promise of the owners' (Sonu and Eva) wonderful concept: 'luxuriously back to nature'.

Robinson Crusoe was an inspiration for this resort, but what makes it stand out from other island paradises is the thought that has been put into creating the illusion of isolation while accommodating every whim: a spa, a diving school, snorkelling, fishing, boat excursions, cooking lessons, and a nicely full wine cellar with 390 bottles, both Old and New World, built underneath the beach.

Sixty-two rooms are scattered around the perimeters

arrive from the Netherlands twice a week, meats come from Australia. Wine deliveries are collated in Britain. There are two restaurants – one on the 'sunrise' side of the island, and the other on the 'sunset' side.

My first dinner in the main restaurant, with tables in the sand among the mangroves, is a buffet. A stunning array of fresh seafood is spread out on ice: lobsters, giant prawns, a whole side of tuna. We make a choice and hand it over to the chefs attending the blazing barbeque. We return to our table. The plates arrive accompanied by considerable confusion as to whose is whose. After a scuffle and some enthusiastic swapping, no one is sure that we are eating what we ordered but it is all delicious.

Lunch at the Me Dhuniye restaurant is also a pick-and-mix affair but is much more orderly and utterly delicious, with huge platters of fresh raw ingredients to be turned into a customised salad or stir-fry. Also on offer are a popular selection of sushi and sashimi as well as bubbling pots of curries.

Of course, you never have to stick to what is



of the island and every room is flanked by mango, palm and mangrove trees that also fill the interior of the island, making the sandy paths that criss-cross the middle a haven of shady, steamy dimness. Each room comes equipped with a pair of bicycles for cycling home at night across the island after a meal.

The decor is naturalistic and electronic equipment is conscientiously kept out of sight. Most rooms have an outdoor bathroom – an extremely agreeable experience, reliant on the perfection of the ambient temperature – just above body heat. Everything, from floors to furniture, mirror frames and table lamps, is made of wood (from a sustainable source, of course).

Soneva Fushi's young Dutch chef, Remon Alphenaar, is passionate in his quest to get hold of the best ingredients, despite logistical difficulties. Eggs

officially on offer and the kitchens pride themselves on being able to satisfy most tastes. Meals can be taken on the beach, in your room or even out at sea.

DESERT-ISLAND DRINKING

The wine list for both restaurants is fabulous with a large selection of Bordeaux and Burgundy. It doesn't end there though, with good bottles from around the world including Spain, Italy, Germany, Australia and the US.

The *pièce de resistance* of the island, however, is undoubtedly the wine cellar – another example of a refusal to compromise just because this is a desert island. Crusoe gives way to Alice in Wonderland as you pass through a discreet little door and down a curved

staircase into a blissfully chilled circular stone room that can accommodate up to 12 people. As →

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The incredible wine cellar underneath the beach

we settle down at the round table, we are all handed fleece jackets and hot water bottles for which we, in our flimsy summer linens, are soon grateful.

Ramun the chef is a patient and knowledgeable host. He talks us through the basics of tasting. House wine comes from owner Sonu's family Provençal vineyard, Château du Galoupet, and the 390 labels on the list cost from \$30 to \$1,600 a bottle. Prices range from \$40 to \$1,600, for 1982 Mouton-Rothschild. Ramun's aim is to be able to offer tastings that will cater for 'anyone, from complete beginners to Masters of Wine'.

If Robinson Crusoe had been washed up with this wine cellar I don't think he would have worked too hard to be rescued. I can't imagine a more agreeable way to buy into the castaway fantasy than hanging out in a hammock, working my way through Ramun's recent shipment of Cristal Brut 1989, (if only the fantasy stretched past the \$800 price tag). **W**

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Prices from £1,590 per person based on seven nights room-only accommodation, return flights in economy with Emirates Airlines and return sea-plane transfers. A supplement of £59 per person per night applies to upgrade to a Crusoe Villa.

Special offers: From 26 August until 13 October guests receive one extra night for every six booked or three extra nights for every 11 booked. A tax of US\$6 per person per night is payable locally.

Honeymooners: Complimentary Champagne on arrival and a candlelit dinner. From 26 August-13 October honeymooners receive a complimentary desert island picnic and one beauty treatment for each partner at the resort's health spa.

GETTING THERE

Emirates has recently increased services to the Maldives from six to eight flights a week (six direct and two via Colombo). Flight takes four hours direct and six hours 40 minutes via Colombo. Emirates operates out of London Heathrow, London, Gatwick, Birmingham and Manchester, and has a network of 56 routes across the globe.

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