

DEPARTURES



March • April 2017

THE FASHION ISSUE

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STYLISH TRAVELERS
OF ALL TIME

*From Yves Saint
Laurent to Gigi Hadid*

JUST OPENED

HOW TO DO THE MALDIVES

New resorts to book in the big blue

BY ALICE B-B



Clockwise from top left: Noonu Atoll's Soneva Jani, with 24 overwater villas; a Beach Pool Villa at Milaidhoo, within Baa Atoll; the three-bedroom beach villa at Voavah, Four Seasons' private island in Baa Atoll; the Maldives' party island, Finolhu, yet another new Baa Atoll property



The 1,192 islands in the Maldives are already home to more than 120 resorts, including the recently opened **St. Regis Maldives Vommuli Resort** (rooms from \$1,976). (See "Into the Blue," page 158.) So does this collection of atolls in the turquoise waters of the Indian Ocean really need any more hotels?

Sonu and Eva Shivdasani thought so. The husband-and-wife team, who originated Maldivian barefoot luxury when they opened Soneva Fushi in 1995, score again with **Soneva Jani** (rooms from \$1,870), a 40-minute seaplane ride from the Maldives' capital, Malé. Out of Noonu Atoll's 3.4-mile Medhufaru lagoon—one of the biggest in the Maldives—24 bleached-wood overwater villas rise like fairytale castles, complete with turrets and oval windows. Dotted along a curvy pontoon, they are the antithesis of the corporate hotel. In-

stead, Soneva Jani is the product of the couple's wild imagination, creating a paradise for both big and little kids; fun details include a water slide from the top floor of several of the water villas, retractable roofs above the master beds for nighttime stargazing, and bicycles for all. For those seeking space and privacy, there's also a 15,328-square-foot, four-bedroom Island Reserve Villa with a private gym at the end of the jetty, which starts at \$15,150.

The central hub, the multilayered Gathering, has a sushi room, chocolate room, and overwater hammocks for sunset cocktails. On the island itself there are tennis courts and an open-air floating Cinema Paradiso. There are plans for up to 26 more villas and a rum shack on the wild South Beach, at the end of the island away from the main Medhufaru Beach. Be sure to make time for dinner at So Starstruck, an open-air turret from which a mag-

nificent telescope rises from a glass floor and where resident astronomer Mike Dalley is on hand to talk guests through the night sky.

Also a 40-minute seaplane hop from Malé is the Four Seasons' first-ever private island—the only exclusive-use hideaway in a UNESCO biosphere reserve. **Voavah** (rooms from \$38,000) is a five-acre island that sleeps 22; the staff numbers 28. Choose between a three-bedroom beach villa with a master bedroom that opens onto a sandbank or a two-bedroom water villa with suspended catamaran nets and an infinity lap pool, possibly the prettiest spot on the island at sunset. At the heart of the property is a two-story Beach House with two further suites, a children's bunk room, and a vast open-air dining room and sitting room with suspended swing sofas overlooking the main pool and the powder-soft beach. Everything one wants from an island resort is here: an

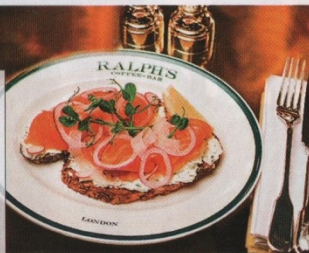
overwater spa, a water-sports center with a PADI dive master, and a 62-foot yacht for dolphin spotting or picnics on a nearby island. And with VIP services at the airport, a private seaplane direct to the island's pontoon, and a no-paparazzi guarantee, Voavah has the highest swank factor for the lowest-key guests. Monophobes needn't panic, however. For a change of scene, there are tennis courts, cocktails at Blu, and good people-watching at the Four Seasons Landaa Giraavaru resort, just a 20-minute boat ride away.

Also within Baa Atoll, famed for hosting one of the largest populations of manta rays in the world at Hanifaru Bay, is the locally owned and managed **Milaidhoo** (rooms from \$1,625). Rather than celebrate the new, the resort, which opened in November after suffering construction setbacks, is championing the old—the Maldives at its best. It aims for desert-island luxury with great spa offerings and island activities, including boating trips with local fishermen and learning how traditional *dhoni* boats are constructed. With 50 overwater and beach villas, each with its own pool, and children accepted only over the age of nine, the tiny, 984-by-590-foot island will certainly be a draw for those seeking peace and romance.

Meanwhile, the polar opposite exists another 20-minute boat ride away. **Finolhu** (rooms from \$850), with its 1970s retro feel, has managed where others have failed: to create the Maldives' first party island. With mermaids in the pool by day and flame throwers on the beach by night, Finolhu swings from morning till dusk. The party that signed and sealed the resort's status was hosted in December by model sisters Cara and Poppy Delevingne, when 160 of their friends and family took over for a five-day fancy-dress fiesta. Hangovers are mopped up over tacos at the Fish & Crab Shack, the best crab spot in the Maldives, positioned along a stunning mile-long crescent-shaped sandbank. Then back for a snooze, to one of 125 overwater or beach villas, where funky props include Marshall speakers and vintage phones that read Press for Champagne, before starting all over again.

Not only does Finolhu dance to the beat of its own drum, but it ticks to the tock of its own clock. The resort sets its own time, two hours ahead of Malé—sneakily coordinating cocktail hour with those magical sunsets. ♦

Clockwise from top left: The menu at Ralph's includes this smoked-salmon sandwich and Ralph's own La Colombe coffee blend; the interior draws from New York's Polo Bar with equestrian accents.



AT TABLE

RALPH LAUREN GOES TO LONDON

The designer takes his popular restaurant from Midtown to Mayfair.

It may come as a surprise that **Ralph's Coffee & Bar**, located in London's Mayfair neighborhood, is Ralph Lauren's first restaurant in the United Kingdom, given that the manor-like finishes, equestrian paintings, and waiter uniform of oxford shirt and repp tie look more at home on Regent Street than they do at his outposts in Chicago, Paris, and New York. "I've always loved the English—not just their style, but their way of living," Lauren says, adding that the opening coincides with his company's 50th anniversary. "Since my first international store was in London, I can't think of a better way or place to start the celebration."

Unveiled in January, the space combines the design and cocktail list of New York's Polo Bar, adjacent to the Ralph Lauren store on 55th Street and Fifth Avenue, with menu items from Ralph's Coffee, upstairs in the store. While this means Polo Bar signature dishes like Ralph's Corned Beef Sandwich and the Polo Bar Burger are noticeably absent, there's the designer's coffee blend from La Colombe, cold-pressed juices, all-day breakfast, shared plates, and clubby favorites like oysters and crudités. Cocktails include classics (Old Fashioned, Smoking Jacket) along with others exclusively for the London set such as The Chairman, a heady mix of WhistlePig Rye and Cointreau Noir, and the Regent Street Sour.

Unlike New York's Polo Bar, which made headlines when it first opened for being the city's most difficult table to get (the reservations line received a thousand calls a day), the new spot caters to English sensibilities: It's in a more intimate setting, seating 24 in the dining area and 12 at the bar, and accepts walk-ins. "Their tradition of taking time out for a cup of tea fits perfectly with the addition of our Ralph's Coffee & Bar," Lauren says. "I hope they will find it a lovely spot for a cup of our custom-blend coffee and a homemade brownie." —*Erin Riley*