

Maldives – Part 1

The Maldives

Part 1 – The Decadent Part

November 14, 2010

Dateline: En route from Washington, D.C to Doha, Qatar

When we first booked our trip to the Maldives, I did not anticipate that there would be enough excitement to qualify this tropical idyll as a great adventure, since I did not think travelogue readers would find our first week of lolling on the beach, tropical drink in hand, snoozing under a palm tree in the equatorial sun, and paddling around in a turquoise lagoon to be travelogue material. For our second week, we had planned a vigorous routine of Eat, Sleep and Dive. Well we did do the lolling, snoozing and paddling part, but we had more wine than umbrella drinks, and we did do the vigorous dive schedule which provided a unique set of adventures in itself, but getting there – that was a story in itself.



An Island
Resort in the
Maldives

So where is “there”, you may ask, and at the same time, why go? The Maldives (pronounced mall-deeves with the accent on “mall”) is an island nation (1,190 islands to be exact) in the Indian Ocean, lying approximately 370 miles west of Sri Lanka

and the Indian subcontinent. The name translates as the “realm of the thousand islands” in the native language which is called Dhivehi, a language only spoken in this area, but English is very widely spoken as well. The local currency is the rufiyaa which was 12.75 to the dollar although dollars are universally used here. As to the “why go to the Maldives”, the simple answer is that it has spectacular diving and fabulous scenery, some of the very best we have ever seen. Here’s a quote from the brochure:

“Scattered across the equator in the middle of the Indian Ocean, the gem-like islands of the Maldives depict the rare vision of a tropical paradise. Palm fringed islands with sparkling white beaches, turquoise lagoons, crystal clear warm waters and coral reefs teeming with abundant varieties of marine flora and fauna, fascinate visitors as it has for thousands of years.

It was all of that and more, but getting there was not easy – the islands are nothing if not remote. We looked at several different airlines and found the best fare by a substantial margin to be via Washington, DC and Doha, Qatar (pronunciation is somewhere between “cutter” and “gutter” or in an alternate pronunciation, it rhymes with guitar). Qatar is a little thumb-like oil-rich country attached to the eastern side of the Arabian Peninsula. It is only a short distance from Dubai, but several centuries behind in terms of Westernization, despite the Vegas-like image portrayed on their website.

From Qatar we would fly to the airport at the capital of Male

(pronounced mah-lee with the accent on "mah"). So now we had booked a 2 hour flight to Washington, a 4 hour layover, and a 12 hour flight to Doha. Being the intrepid travelers that we are, we decided to spend an extra night in Doha to see the sights (a mistake on so many levels, including the pocketbook.) On the surface it was simple – book airline tickets through Qatar Airways and book a room at the Doha Ramada on Expedia. But then the question of a travel visa came up. After much researching and not much readily available information, (it seems the Qatar Embassy in DC does not answer their phones), we decided we would play it safe and get a visitor's visa. We had actually witnessed in South Africa a couple who flew into Johannesburg from Atlanta without an entry visa and was sent packing right back to Atlanta on the next flight, and so we wanted to avoid that at all costs. (Cost being the operative word here).

Although Qatar Tourism is greatly touted on their website, their bureaucrats don't seem to have gotten the memo. We thought we would spend one night, rest up, maybe see a few camel races in a country we envisioned to be a less glitzy version of Dubai. In the course of my research I saw you could get a visa online for about \$35.00 so I decided to give it a try. It was way too easy and this worried me, so I decided to go through a stateside Visa Service so as to ensure no glitches. I got a huge packet of information which I filled out and prepared to send back, but I noticed a warning that visitors to Qatar must not have an Israeli stamp in their passports or else they will not be admitted. Oops – we both had the offending stamps from a February visit. The visa service said they could get us a Second Passport, valid for 2 years (which sounded a little suspect to me), and it cost more than renewal of an existing passport. Since that was the case, we decided to just get new passports, although we still had 7 years left on them. But this was not to be. The State Department will not renew passports unless we lose them – and just in case we get any ideas about "losing" them, it is

literally a Federal offense to fib (or lie) on your passport application. Since I was more than a little suspicious about this second passport business, I verified its legitimacy with the State Department. They said yes, it is quite common for people in the oil business, for example, to have two passports for travel in the Middle East. It seems to be an open "secret". My contact explained that Qatar knows about it, but they want to make a point that they are unhappy with Israel for kicking the Qatari trade mission out of Israel, which Israel did because Qatar supported the Palestinians in the Gaza strip with money and "contraband", which could cover anything from grenade launchers to breakfast cereal. I wasn't sure Hilary would intervene for us here, so we decided to get a second passport, plus the visas, which for 2 people came to around \$900. We were tempted to try our old passports anyway since I had to explain to the visa service agent where the offending stamp was – she was looking for something that said Israel, when in fact it said Ben Gurion Airport, but we didn't want to take the chance that an immigration official in Qatar would be equally clueless.

So for new passports and visas, we had to get new pictures and send them to the visa service, which we promptly did. The passports were no problem but it seemed that the consulate for Qatar wanted a grey background on the pictures (at least this particular week) and ours were white. We trekked back to have another set of pictures made, but the place didn't have a grey background, so Gary bought poster board and spray painted it in two shades of gray to make our own backgrounds, so they could pick which shade they liked. By this time we had spent close to \$100.00 on pictures.

Then we received a call from the visa service announcing that the Qatar Consulate gave Gary a visa, but rejected mine with no explanation given (and they kept all the fees by the way). The visa agent speculated that it is a gender issue and said they had seen this before with a couple applying for a tourist

visa (i.e. yes to the man, no to the woman). We could only assume by this that they do not want any uppity women with loose morals from the West giving their women any ideas. (I knew I should have wiped off that lipstick and removed those dangly earrings for that visa photo).

At this point, we decided we would just transit through Qatar and keep going and thus no visa would be required. Of course change fees applied and the hotel in Doha would not provide a refund, so we could see the higher airline fares for routes other than Doha, might have been a bargain after all. Ironically, with our new reservations, we now had a 12 hour layover, and Qatar Airways provides a free hotel room if their passengers have a layover longer than 8 hours. So this uppity woman would end up spending a night in Qatar anyway and I resolved to conduct myself with all manner of modesty while in their crappy little country (oops, did I say that?). We did miss the camels, which if they raced, had to do so without us cheering them on. From what I understand, there is not much else there to miss so I wouldn't recommend that any women get a gender change operation just to get into the place. They plan on hosting the World Cup in 2022 and so it will be interesting to see how this men-only stuff works out for them.

November 15, 2010

Dateline Doha, Qatar

Latitude at Doha 25.29 East, Longitude 51.53 North

We met our friends, Bill and Mara, at Washington Dulles airport the night of December 14 and traveled overnight to Qatar. Our initial seating was at the front of the plane, directly in front of a woman and a small tray-thumping seat-kicking child, whom she planned to keep on her lap for the entire 12 hour trip. Fortunately the flight attendant found us other seats. The plane was quite full, with the few Americans definitely in the ethnic minority. We joked among ourselves

(but not too loudly) that if ethnic profiling were in effect, almost everyone on the plane would get the extra screening. The flight was smooth and boring, just like we like.

The Doha airport is like something out of a movie set – sort of 1001 Arabian Nights meets Slum Dog Millionaire. The sheer cacophony in the airport terminal belies its small size, and that was just in the immigration part – the chaos multiplied once we got through baggage claim. The people were mostly Arab and Indian, in native dress, with the odd European thrown in, and even more rare, the odd Americans, which of course we were (odd and American both). There were no bare shoulders or thighs (men or women), but a plethora of turbans and saris, burqas, galabeyas, jilbabs and hijabs. A burqa is the tent-like dress where only the eyes show through a little slit or else through netting in the head covering. It is a woman's garment of course and is always a good idea if you want to get a visa to go to Qatar (now why didn't I think of that?) A galabeya is a long floor length shift usually for men, made of cotton. It is our understanding that this is much cooler than wearing trousers and a shirt – no word on what is worn underneath. You don't see much leg showing on men or women either in the Middle East. Sleeves are usually long or at least 3/4 length to protect the wearer from the sun. A jilbab is a fancier version of the galabeya for women and again covers everything from the neck down. This is worn with a hijab, which is a voluminous scarf covering the hair, neck and shoulders. The immigration ladies (all women) wore black jilbabs and black hijabs with some serious bling trim on sleeves. They also all seemed to have designer purses at their work stations (Prada, Hermes, Louis Vuitton). I tried to peek at their feet to see if their shoes were designer, but there were no Jimmy Choos or Christian Louboutins that I could spot. I suspect this may be more of a Croc niche market. Most of these ladies seem quite, umm, "well-fed", and I don't think they would fare well teetering on a pair of stilettos. Supervising the women in black, were men in flowing robes and

Lawrence of Arabia head dresses – all white. The line was extremely slow and we speculated that ladies didn't want to burn too many calories or work up a sweat flipping and stamping those passport pages. Hopefully they can streamline the process and speed it up by 2022 or many soccer matches may be delayed. We were admitted without incident, and if they knew I was officially *persona non grata*, no one seemed to care.

We were taken by mini-bus to a very nice ultra-modern hotel near the airport. There were lots of diplomats and oil people staying there, as well as airline crews and soccer players. We tourists were definitely an oddity. We were tempted to jump into a taxi and bolt into the city (forbidden territory for me), but decided not to press our luck since we were fairly sure we were not free to leave the hotel. We felt like we were sort of under house arrest, but without the ankle bracelets.

Besides, it was late evening by this time and the hotel buffet awaited. The buffet was porkless, but not meatless with a whole lot of curry dishes, but without a whole lot to recommend it. We had hoped to have a glass of wine, but apparently this was the season for Hajj (when the devout make a pilgrimage to Mecca) and even though we, nor anyone in the hotel, was likely going to Mecca, they still observe abstinence, even in hotels that cater to foreigners. Our luggage had been checked through to Male and so we made do with stuff we had put in our backpacks. I went to bed tired, but feeling a little smug that, despite the government's efforts to keep me out, here I am in Doha – an American floozy, albeit a quarantined floozy, sleeping in their midst,.

November 16, 2010

Dateline: Male, Maldives

Latitude at Male, 4 degrees North, Longitude 73 degrees East

Our day began at 0-Dark Thirty (5:10 a.m. pick-up from the

hotel) for our 4 hour flight to Male.



The Pool at
the Hulhule

We were 10 time zones away from the Eastern Seaboard of the US so our body clocks were way out of whack anyway. We left before sun-up, so we didn't see much of Qatar that did not involve lights. Once the sun came up, we were able to see some of the earth through the clouds, but it was mostly thousands of miles of water in every direction. It was really delightful emerging into the tropical air of Male and it was even more delightful that all of our luggage arrived. We had booked an overnight stay at the Hulhule resort, on the same island as the airport, and just across a narrow channel from the island where the city of Male occupies every square inch of land. It is reportedly the most densely populated island in the world.

We had the afternoon free to rest by the pool and enjoy one of the few places in Male that actually serve liquor. We learned that Maldivians are forbidden to drink by law. It is a 100% Muslim country with no separation of church and state, but they don't seem to mind if the rest of us indulge, although the servers of our alcohol were actually Indian or Pakistani, and thus the temptation (or at least the opportunity) to tinkle was at least a little bit removed from Maldivians. We noticed with interest the number of young men (seemingly local) at the pool ogling the forbidden flesh of non-Muslim women and sipping on soft drinks (or if they were really dissolute, forbidden beer). The favorite beer brands appear to

be Lion and Tiger (no Bears, oh my). Lion is a beer brewed in Sri Lanka and Tiger is brewed in Singapore. Locals don't brew it or drink it, but don't mind making a buck (or should I say a rufiyaa?) off the foreigners who do indulge. Their economy has switched from fishing to tourism, which explains so we think, the tolerance of, if not the embracing of, liquor.



Sunset at the
Hulhule Hotel
– Male

From the hotel pool, we can see the city of Male across the water. It has no high rises, but rather some medium rises of maybe 8 stories or so. It is on an island in the Kaafu Atoll. An atoll is a group of islands that are the remnants of the rim of ancient volcano calderas that stick up above the water, forming asymmetrical rings, often many miles across. The 1,190 islands that make up the nation of the Maldives are grouped in two parallel chains of 27 atolls running north and south stretching for 450 miles, from roughly 7 degrees North to 1 degree South along a longitude of 73 degrees East. At its widest point, the country is only 80 miles wide. The winds here are seasonal and are called monsoons, but they are not necessarily the torrential type. The monsoon which comes from the northeast (called *iruvai*) blows from December to March, then in April it shifts to the southwest and is called *hulhangu*. This wind blows until November when it shifts again. The Hulhangu was still hanging on while we were here. There are also two currents that alternate with the winds and are continually filling and emptying the lagoons within the atolls.



Polka Dot
Atolls

The Republic of the Maldives is one of the smallest independent nations in the world with a population of around 320k, with 100k living in Male (which is only about 2 square kilometers so it is indeed very densely populated). We had an Asian fusion delicious meal at the hotel with very gracious wait staff. Fusion in this case meant a combination of Indonesian, Indian, Oriental – meaning Japanese/Thai/Chinese. We sat in a restaurant overlooking the water and the scenic Male harbor. It was an excellent introduction to the Maldives and the start of our days of decadence to follow.

November 17, 2010

Dateline Filitheyo, Maldives

Latitude 3.12 degrees North, Longitude 73.2 degrees East



Boarding Time
on the
Maldivian Air
Taxi

Today we spent the morning by the pool after an excellent

breakfast of fresh fruit, eggs and faux bacon (beef that is) At 1:00 p.m. we flew on a bright red Maldivian Air Taxi sea plane from Male about half an hour south to the island of Filitheyo, (pronounced *Fill-eh-tay-oh* with the accent on "tay") where we would spend 4 days. We were only allowed 40 pounds of luggage per person so we left all our dive gear in Male. The flight was too short for such a truly magical experience, flying at low altitude and looking down on the groupings of islands and atolls below us. They are described as a string of pearls, but I had more the

impression of scattered celery green polka dots (native vegetation and palm trees), ringed in creamy beige (sand), with a smattering of mocha (coral reefs). The beaches are fringed by turquoise (shallow water with a sandy bottom) on a cobalt background (deep water) at times both inside and outside the atoll. All the clichés about tropical islands apply here: tropical paradise, secluded, idyllic, relaxing, romantic, etc. The Maldives are allegedly ranked number 3 of the New 7 Wonders of Nature.



Tattoo
Welcomes Us
Aboard

The flight crew looked to be right out of Central Casting. Our flight attendant was a dead ringer for Tattoo on Fantasy Island, whose most famous line was "De plane, Boss, de plane". He was the only one on board who could stand erect in the cabin with head room to spare. The pilots sported thick black wavy hair and brushy mustaches, like shorter versions of Omar

Sharif. They wore white short-sleeved shirts with the requisite epaulettes, but came up short of looking official with their shorts and flip-flops, which they kicked aside in order to be able to work the rudder pedals in flight.

We expected that our sea plane would land in a lagoon and pull up to a hotel dock, but this was



Gate One (and
Only) –
Filitheyo
Airport

not the case. The landing was on open water about 2 to 3 miles off shore and the “gate” was a floating platform of approximately 10×20 feet. We had to keep an eye on our luggage and ourselves to make sure nothing slipped off into the rolling swells. We finally saw a tiny speck in the distance that proved to be a speed boat from the resort which was coming out to get us and to deliver the passengers that were going to board the air taxi to go back to Male. It was sort of a delicate dance on the small platform as we traded places with the outbound people. We had a short, somewhat damp ride and were off-loaded at the jetty in the tiny harbor created by a manmade breakwater. In addition to our speedboat, the hotel fleet consisted of 3 other boats which we learned were called “dhonis” (pronounced dough-knees with the accent on “dough”). To get the visual here, you should picture the sculpted bow of a Venetian Gondola mounted on the African Queen. We were greeted by the staff with a warm *maruhaaba* (welcome in Dhivehi). We were served tropical drinks and given chilled

towels scented with what we were told was lemon ylang-ylang and relaxed while our luggage was handled and we got a brief orientation of the resort.



Filithayo from
the Air

The island of Filithayo is in the Faafu (pronounced *fah-ah-fu* with the accent on "ah") Atoll. The island is approximately 92 acres and is roughly half a mile long and 1/3 mile wide. Each atoll has its own chief and capital. The capital of Faafu is Nilandhoo, with a population of about 1,500. The island of Filithayo is shaped like a human foot with the narrow heel to the west and the toes to the east.. This time of year the temperatures are consistently in the low 80's, and the breezes reliably out of the west at 5-7 knots, with daily rain showers of approximately 10 minutes. We are at the end of the so-called wet season. The air is very dry and there is no mugginess, even after the daily rain shower. I suppose in the dry season, they do not have the daily shower.



Beachfront
Bungalows at
Filithayo

The resort was built in 1999 and thus the island was occupied full time for the first time in centuries, although there are ruins here believed to be those of a mosque, which is now obscured by dense vegetation. By 1900 the island was still uninhabited on a permanent basis, but there were transients who “squatted” there from time to time and announced their presence to passing ships by erecting a white flag while in residence. Alcohol is banned on non-resort islands so Happy Hour on those islands is not nearly as happy. Filithayo has around 2,750 trees, mostly coconut palms, sea grape and banyans. The most numerous (and only native) mammalians are fruit bats, but the lizard population gives them a run for their money. The resort workers spray a smoke-like insecticide twice a day to control any mosquitoes that the local lizards may have missed. The island is heavily vegetated and paths



have been cut to all of the bungalows. The paths are dirt, but kept spotless (and leafless) by women bundled up in jilbabs and hajibs (that would be the flowing robes and head coverings) using homemade brooms (made from a bundle of sticks and whisk brooms of straw. Their dustpans are made from coconut

husks. The hotel runs exclusively on solar power which creates an interesting technological contrast to the broom squad.



Low Hanging
Coconuts on a
Deserted Beach

There is an old cemetery here with no religious markers, and the name, “Ismail”, engraved on one of the tombstones, is the

only clue as to who is buried here. One theory to explain this is that there was a shipwreck just offshore and when the bodies washed up, Ismail was the only one who had any identification on him. Maldivians tend to be very superstitious and so there were a lot of other theories as well. Some of the island's visitors who came later decided he was a holy man with magical powers. One woman tells a story of putting a white flag on his tomb which caused her son to graduate at the top of his class, but he was reportedly almost 20 at the time so it would make you wonder how special his achievement really was and how soon did Ismail intervene with his magic. In another legend, Ismail was a magician who died at sea and the anthias (colorful reef fish which swarm around coral heads in large schools) were created by his powers. In 1917 two British Royal Navy flyers ditched their plane in a storm and ended up stranded here. They survived on the island by eating coconuts and turtle eggs and were eventually rescued by fishermen. They reported they endured a two mile swim through shark infested waters, but it is believed they greatly embroidered the story.



Maldivian Foot
Rinser

The rooms of the resort are actually bungalows of two types – seaside on the beach or over the water. We had seaside accommodations set amid palms and sea grape, which we found to be utterly charming. There was big clay jar filled with fresh water and a dipper made from a coconut husk to rinse the sand off our feet. We then left our sandals on the generous covered porch complete with table and chairs for lounging. The bedroom

was spacious with no technology except the air conditioning which we appreciated greatly for sound sleeping. The bed was a massive thing with mosquito netting artistically draped on the frame – there not only for the ambience, but in the event a stray mosquito might escape the lizards and the spraying. We had a great open air bathroom with a stone floor with a huge shower with its own resident geckos. There was a door to the outside in case we came back to our room wet or sandy. We managed both daily since the water was just too inviting to pass up.



Secluded
Hideaway for
Journal
Writing

I noticed right away that there were some great journal writing spots here – all I needed was a dose of ambition. There was the beach chair under the sea grape facing the lapping waves and miles of open water to the north. And there the table on our own shady bungalow porch facing the beach next to the lounge chairs in case I needed a nap to fuel my creativity. There were tables at the bar with swaying palm trees with the setting sun over the water for a backdrop, as well as tables and chairs in one of two gazebos built over the water with cooling easterly breezes overlooking the harbor and the open sea beyond.

We walked to the Sunset Bar and Grill for a dinner. It is an open air structure with a swim up bar in a swimming pool on a great beach. The outdoor tables face west so guests can

appreciate the sunset. We ordered fresh fish which is really the thing here – reliably delicious and fresh, served by Mobarak, an expat Bangladeshi, who was able to serve us our wine and cocktails with no repercussions, neither political nor religious. We are thinking we may have to be dragged from here kicking and screaming, although I do think the preponderance of curry in the meals may do the trick after several weeks.

November 18, 2010

Dateline: Filitheyo, Maldives

Today we had breakfast in main dining room with some of the usual – waffles, eggs and so forth, and the unusual – curry dishes, beans, salad, vegetables and stews, etc. It was another elaborate buffet groaning under all the weight of the offerings with lots of tropical fruits, and deliciously sweet little two bite bananas. The omelets were also a standout and we were thinking we might be able to learn to live without pork. The main dining room had a sand floor, raked smooth after each meal (almost after each set of footprints). We spent the morning on the beach and snorkeled what they call the house reef (meaning it is adjacent to the hotel beach) no more than 20 yards off shore. There are channels cut in the reefs for divers who want to go out from shore, but we decided to save our diving for later when we are aboard the dive boat.



Gazebo at
Filitheyo

There are approximately 95 island resorts in the Maldives, and

most often there is only one per island as is the case with Filithayo. However, Filithayo is the also the only resort on the entire atoll. We brought our own masks, fins and snorkels so we were able to plunge right in. Sea life on the reef is so rich and endlessly fascinating, it's hard to stay out of the water; however the sun here has a very effective way of showing you the places on your skin where you missed with the sunscreen – unfortunately when it is too late. The air is so fresh and mild and the sun is strong but not hot – and you can get a whopper of a sunburn before you realize your flesh is cooking. You are lulled into thinking you are gently toasting when in truth, it's more like the broiler is on. But ultimately, it is worth it – we declared snorkeling here to be a tie with the best we have ever seen which was in the Red Sea at Sharm el-Sheik, Egypt. Here there are



The Classic
Maldivian
Dhoni

huge schools of fish, a huge variety of sea life, and huge specimens of sea life (2x to 3x of those we have seen in other places), all set against the backdrop of the most colorful coral imaginable. It is unbelievable beautiful here above and below the water. Just the water alone has a half a dozen shades of turquoise and aquamarine. The water is as clear as gin (prior to the martini olive) and the reefs are in such shallow water that you get the full spectrum of color when snorkeling. Underwater, colors vanish with depth in the same order in which they appear in a rainbow, with red being the first to go and violet being the last. At 60 feet down,

everything looks blue, but these waters are barely over our heads and so abundant with sea life that it easily outshines even the best professional aquariums. We were warned of the most dangerous fish on the reef to snorkelers, and is one which has no relation whatsoever to sharks. The big threat is the Titan Trigger – a fish about the size of small platter (and about that shape) When these fish are preparing a nest or guarding eggs in the nest, they aggressively attack all threats, including snorkelers who get too close. We saw several, rooting on the sea floor excavating rubble from their nests who bared their beaver-sized buck teeth at us and so we gave them an extra-wide berth.



Turquoise
waters and
coral reefs

The water here in the Maldives is a delightfully warm 79 degrees. The air is slightly humid, but there is a steady ocean breeze to keep everything pleasantly cool. While not snorkeling, we were relaxing on the beach reading and napping with swaying palms overhead. At the beach listening to my Ipod today, I happened to listen to Vince Gill singing “Let Their Be Peace on Earth” where the lyrics go on to add “and let it begin with me” and I was thinking how blessed we are to be able to experience this place. It is so peaceful and even spiritual in very subtle ways, and a perfect setting for introspection of the best kind. I went so far as to thinking maybe even Rush Limbaugh and Keith Olberman could get along here – well maybe not those two, but most other people with opposing views. Maybe Middle East Peace Talks should be held

here. Maybe I should have another rum punch and start writing some letters to the editor. Or maybe I'll just stick to writing my journal and minding my own business. To corrupt a Ben Franklin quote: (who said this of beer) I think the Maldives are proof that God loves us and wants us to be happy.



The Sunset
Grill at
Filithayo

We walked to lunch at the Sunset Grill for lunch, just as we walk everywhere. There are pedal carts if you are lazy, but we figured we were getting plenty of rest and besides, we sauntered more than we walked. There are a lot of activities offered that include picnics on nearby Hamza island, or island hopping in the dhoni that we simply didn't have time for (It's amazing how time flies when you are napping in a hammock). However this afternoon Gary and Bill did work up the energy to go fishing for red snapper with some of the local guys using hand lines. The plan was we would eat their catch for dinner. They reported they did catch fish, but they gave their fish to the local guys, and thus we had to order our fish off the menu

Mara and I had fabulous massages from these tiny Balinese ladies at the resort's Nature's Harmony Spa which is comprised of a reception area and 6 bungalows. They report that Bali is even more beautiful than the Maldives so we resolve to put this on our respective Bucket Lists. We picked our treatments from the Spa "Menu" and each went to a different bungalow with our own little person, who seemed so Lilliputian to us, we figured they must see us as female Gullivers. I am afraid

I've used up most of the superlatives in my vocabulary in describing the snorkeling, but I have to say the spa experience was also among the best ever. The bungalows are each glass walled with views onto a garden courtyard. First we soaked our feet in bowl full of warm water and flower petals dressed in warm fluffy robes. When I put my face in the little



Zen Inducing
Floating
flowers at the
Spa

cradle on the massage table, I saw there was a floating arrangement of flowers in a bowl on the floor just below me, which was so much more aesthetically pleasing than the typical bare floor. I had picked the Filithayo Fusion massage – a little of everything from 5 types of massage, with a strong Balinese influence (not so vigorous as Swedish), with lots of rolling motions – designed to stimulate my energy flow – which could really use some stimulation since I have been incredibly lazy since our arrival. The massage lasted 90 minutes, followed by a 15 minute head and scalp massage, but the time seemed no longer than the 9 minutes my Snooze alarm allows on my alarm clock in the mornings. Mara had a pure Balinese massage, which involved long rolling strokes designed to relieve tension and calm the mind. She reports it as an almost out of body Nirvana type experience which has to make you wonder exactly what are the ingredients in those massage oils. As a side note, there was a new twist that I had never experienced in previous massage experiences and that was at one point the masseuse actually was astride my back – sort of

like a jockey riding Seabiscuit to the finish line (but without the whip – that would have been too kinky) to work out those knots and kinks with her tiny (but strong) hands, I must say, she was so light, I never really knew she was aboard. When we reported the pleasures of the spa experience to the guys, it motivated them to schedule their own spa events for the next day. We had dinner in the main dining room,



Porch Swing
for Idle Hours
at the Gazebo

and again it was the groaning buffet, but this time with even more ethnic selections – Indian, Sri Lankan – some so spicy they even made Gary flinch. And of course there were a lot of rice dishes, grilled fish and fresh fruits and veggies for those of us with less adventurous palates. It was quiet and cool in our room with no sounds except for waves lapping and palm fronds clacking in the breeze. We agreed that if we had slept any better, we'd have to have been comatose. We further agreed that if this is not paradise – it will do until paradise comes along.

November 19, 2010

Dateline: Filitheyo, Maldives.



Beach at
Filitheyo

We learned that we are the only Americans here and that most of the guests are European, or expats living in the Middle East and on “holiday” as they say and thus we found it strange that they use US dollars here, not Euros. The local currency, the Rufiyaa is not allowed out of the country and is not exchanged anywhere else in the world.

In the morning we took a snorkeling trip on one of the dhonis to some off-shore reefs. The day was cloudy and the visibility was not as good as we had on Filitheyo’s house reef. Our first stop was at a place called Cathedral Reef, so named for the massive and elaborate displays of coral. There was abundant sea life, including a number of Moray eels poking their heads out and giving us that glassy eyed look with their mouths rhythmically opening and closing as they take in water over their gills. The snorkeling was good with lots of interesting critters, but at the second place we stopped, the jellyfish were as thick as flies at a picnic and so we hopped back in the dhoni to move to another site. There was quite a bit of current so we drifted along and the dhoni followed us to pluck us out of the water (or actually we plucked ourselves out using their ladder) We were treated to hot tea and croissants served between snorkel stops.

The guys went for their massages (they picked hot stone and reported that there was some serious snoring involved so we can assume relaxation was achieved. They were so impressed they signed all of us up for The Works – a 3 and half hour session for the next day.



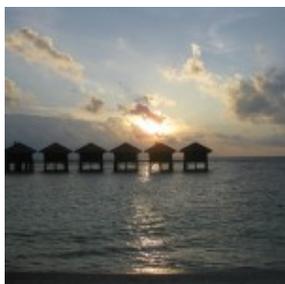
Excellent
Maldivian
Margarita

For our meal tonight, we signed up for a special dinner on the beach, just off the Sunset Bar and Grill and it turned out to be a very special night. We had specially printed menus and our table was set up on the beach with linen, crystal, china, silver, candles and even starched snowy napkins with a fancy fold. Our courses included appetizers of smoked duck breast on spicy cabbage and seared tuna with stuffed tomato wedges. There was a loaf of hot bread, braided with a tomato garlic tapenade and that got a multiple thumbs up from our group. Then the main dish, succulent fresh lobster and fried potatoes and glass noodle salad was served, followed by a luscious lemon custard with ice cream for dessert.

Our service was equally excellent. Most of the people who work here are from Bali, Indonesia or India. There are 300 people who work and live here to cater to guests in 112 bungalows and they spoil us absolutely rotten. Our waiter (or "suwaib" in Dhivehi) was Raj, who was from Bangalore, India. He did not speak a whole lot of English, but he had one English expression down pat, which was "Super Duper". He would add it on to any and all of the English words he knew such as Super Duper Thank You. All the staff we met were quite small in stature and build and have very fine features. It is interesting and sometimes startling to run across occasional Caucasian genetics, such as our receptionist with startling amethyst eyes. Even with the most accomplished English speakers, the accents can be challenging. For example they

pronounce Main Bar like “minbar” which is name for the altar in a mosque. Or then we thought maybe it was a Men Bar with hopefully an equivalent Women Bar. Fortunately we were able to figure this one out fairly early in the stay so we didn’t miss any Happy Hours or other occasions calling for cocktails.

But the wonderful food and great service were not even the best part of our Beach Dining Experience. The evening was so beautiful, almost mystical. The beach sand was the texture of powdered sugar and was as luminescent as a pearl, with waves gently lapping just a few feet



Sunset at the
Sunset Grill

away. Just as we were seated for dinner, the sun was setting before us behind towering clouds. Candles were placed along the beach at the base of the palms and the lights of the bungalows twinkled on the water. As the sunset faded, it turned the mauve (Gary calls this mo-ah-ve) water to inky black and the palm trees were reduced to dark silhouettes along the shoreline. The moon rose full shortly thereafter turning the water and beach to silver, with the clouds turning pewter against a navy blue sky. The full moon obscured many of lesser stars, but here where we were hundreds of miles away from any source of light pollution, there were still thousands to dazzle the eye. It is could easily served as a stage set for South Pacific.

By the end of our meal, we had consumed 3 bottles of Australian chardonnay and a 4th at the bar as a night cap.

Although somewhat “over-served” we found ourselves still to be witty and charming, if not downright hilarious. As we weaved our way to our bungalows, we could only hope our fellow guests were equally amused.

November 20, 2010

Dateline: Filitehyo, Maldives



Relaxing at
the Infinity
Pool Bar

We had another leisurely breakfast, followed by a leisurely morning on the beach as we rested to prepared ourselves for the 3 and one-half hour spa marathon that they guys booked for us. We gathered at the reception area and had our chilled lemongrass tea with time to reflect on the Embrace Nature philosophy posted prominently on the wall and I quote:

We believe in the miracle of nature, not just because its existence is the cycle

that sustains life. It is nature that demonstrates through the seasons

how to overcome obstacles and triumph. It is these life experiences

that bring us awareness to our inner selves and reflective of the magic of our surroundings.

So with that bit of philosophy in mind, we took our inner and outer selves to our respective couples bungalows trailing behind our Balinese masseuses, where we had ample opportunity to absorb the magic for the next 3 ½ hours. We did have kind of a non-tranquil moment of hilarity when we were handed thin paper underwear to put on in a little dressing room. Gary initially put his on backwards and we had a big laugh over that when he emerged, but I (and our Balinese ladies I'm sure) were just thankful he didn't think it was a hairnet.

The Spa Experience came in several phases which were:

Calming Phase— Here we soaked our feet in warm lavender scented water strewn with flower petals and then had our feet dried meticulously with fluffy towels, followed by a most relaxing foot massage, We then spent a few minutes lolling on a futon with big cushions and drinking chilled lemon grass tea before entering our spa suite where scented aromatherapy candles flickered softly to create an aura of tranquility.

Glowing and Polishing Phase— Our next step included a body polishing experience to exfoliate and stimulate the circulation throughout the whole body. We were loofahed and polished with a scrub made with finely grated carrots and coconut mixed with honey which the brochure said would enhance the spa journey. I have to say, I felt quite enhanced at this point, despite my dislike of all things sticky.

Infusing Phase – For this phase we were wrapped up like a couple of mummies in or to ensure our bodies would soak up the glowing and polishing nutrients into the skin and we were left to marinate for a few minutes (or it could have been longer since we both dozed off)

Cleansing Phase – At this point we were gently roused and we toddled off to the outdoor shower (trailing a veritable salad of fresh produce in a white-orange sticky wake) to get the “scrub” out of places where carrots, honey and sugar don't

belong. We were provided with a calming lavender body wash and a fragrant herbal shampoo for this phase, along with more fluffy towels and a fluffy robe.

Relaxation Phase – Clad in our fluffy robes, we were back to lolling on the futon with the big cushions, but this time drinking hot mint tea and nibbling on fruit while all traces of the carrot-coconut-honey scrub and marinade was removed and fresh linens placed on the massage beds. We then had an hour long Balinese massage, including the Seabiscuit maneuver I mentioned earlier. I had to sneak a peek at Gary to see how he was faring with his tiny rider on his broad back. She was not so much astride like a jockey as perched atop like a circus monkey on a prancing horse (of course he wasn't prancing, but you get the idea). This made me titter a bit so I had to work to regain my recently acquired sense of spirituality. We then had a full body massage, that included being anointed with scented oils to introduce divine influence and then our muscles were thoroughly rubbed and kneaded to release earthly tensions. We then had a Reflexology massage for our feet which benefits all sorts of internal organs, or so they say.

Rejuvenation Phase– In this phase we were to have a complete facial including a mask. I was just getting back into my special state of spiritual healing when I made the mistake of sneaking another peek at Gary mid-facial. I just about lost it when I saw the clay and yoghurt mask smeared all over his face like Sitting Bull on the warpath, but with big slices of cucumber on his closed eye lids. However just then I had my own cucumbers applied to my eyelids so the show was essentially over. Gary reports he had no idea what was on his face, but that it felt good.

After the spa marathon, we barely had the strength to dress and amble over to the Sunset Bar for Happy Hour and a swim in the pool. We opted for an early dinner, and an early bed time. That spa experience just wore us out.

November 21, 2010

Dateline: Male, Maldives

Today we have to leave Filithayo – again by seaplane. Sea planes don't have regular service – it is more of a charter business, but typically there are 2 per day arriving and departing from Filithayo. We are going to rendezvous back in Male with the Maldives Aggressor, a live-aboard dive boat. We will spend the next week on what the locals call a “Dive Safari” or what we call a dive trip.



Our Departure Gate (Same as our Arrival Gate) at Filithayo

Our plane was late and so we got a few more hours to enjoy Filithayo. It is cloudy and windy so the sea plane boarding would prove to be an adventure. When “de plane” finally landed, we were taken to the “gate” by dhoni and boarded the air taxi for the short flight back to Male. We thought Tattoo must have had the day off since we had one of the taller flight attendants (maybe 5’2” tops). We had some extra time so our local travel agent sent a gentleman named Ismail (no relation to the Ismail buried on Filithayo) to meet us and to take us back to our tourist quarantine locale at the Hulhule for lunch and cocktails. Later that day we were met at the airport by the boat crew from the Maldives Aggressor and taken to our boat to begin the next chapter of our adventure, thus

concluding the decadent phase of our journey.