



## ART IN PARADISE

Creativity meets sustainability at the naturally chic Joali Maldives resort in Raa Atoll. **By Katie Lockhart**

From top: On approach to Joali Maldives; a Sunset Luxury Water villa.



OVER THE ROAR OF the seaplane's propellers I hear a heaving sound behind me. A newlywed I'd befriended at the airport has her face buried in a sick bag—our flight had encountered stormy weather 30 minutes out of Malé. Upon arrival at **Joali Maldives** ([joali.com](http://joali.com); villas

from US\$1,930) however, queasiness dissipates along with clouds as the couple's *jadugar* makes the bag disappear from her hand, replacing it with a welcome drink. "*Jadugar*," the Dhivehi word for "magician," sets the bar high for Joali's personal butlers, but already I'm impressed.

Moments later, my own *jadugar*, Melih, and I are zipping along the resort's wooden boardwalk, our buggy's tires thudding gently across the planks. Black-tipped reef sharks glide lazily underneath us, a common sight in the waters around the island's vibrant house reef. The corals here are great for snorkeling.

Joali was much talked-about when it opened at the end of 2018, making a splash for its contemporary-cool signature design, its immersive art and its sustainability initiatives. Since then, the resort has won global praise and various design awards, and I'm keen to see what the fuss is about.

Melih opens the door to my villa with a warm, "Welcome home." My Luxury Water Villa with Pool features soaring cathedral ceilings, a plush living room that opens into an even more lavish bedroom and an immense bathroom with soaking tub, every area complete with unobstructed views of the Indian Ocean. I've been to 15 different luxury resorts in the Maldives, but I can't stop saying *wow*. Every sublime detail, from the marble-and-rose-gold drinks bar to the outdoor shower with bright-green bamboo tiles, is perfection, expertly curated to the nth degree. I have no problem making myself comfortable, slipping on an Ardmore silk kimono from a hanger that tells me *This suits you*.

Aesthetically, Joali reflects the style sensibilities of owner Esin Gural Argat, of the family-run

Turkish tourism, industry and construction conglomerate Gural Group. After coming to the Maldives for years and trying different properties around the atolls, she found that none quite had everything she wanted, so she decided to create her own. In 2016, she recruited Istanbul-based design studio Autoban to translate her vision, overseeing everything down to the thread count of the linens.

"There is a feminine touch in the architecture," says resort director Enver Arslan over a tangerine-colored cocktail at the poolside Mura Bar. And that doesn't mean frou-frou old-school design—on the contrary, everything has a fresh, modern feel. "Not only the functionality, but the design is intended to target today's generation," Arslan says, pointing out the in-room iPads that control "everything in

From left: A dine-in manta ray; views from your private pool; Bellinis Italian restaurant.



the room.” Indeed, earlier I had been distracted by my own villa’s all-encompassing control panel, almost to the point of forgetting the wonders that waited outside.

We move on to the topic of Joali’s art and how naturally it weaves into the guest experience. “You see that over there?” Arslan asks, pointing to a big thatched bird head hanging from a tree. “You can lay down inside that. And you can have dinner in the floating wooden manta ray next to the Japanese restaurant, Soake,” he adds.

During my stay there are 13 art installations scattered across the island. Scuba dive down to *Coral Sculpture Garden* by Misha Khan, embedded in the ocean floor. Dine in *Manta Ray Treehouse* and or climb in *Heron Chair* by Cape Town artist Porky Hefer. In front of the spa you’ll find the coral-like *Maldives Vibes* sculpture by Zemer Peled. There’s even take-home art, with glass coral and pineapple pieces by Feleksan Onar presented as gifts for guests in every villa. “It is very much experiential art,” Arslan says. This year, the property plans to expand its collection and to host workshops with featured artists.

While art is the most overt differentiator at Joali, like any worthy Maldives resort their commitment to the environment is also at the forefront. On a mission to become EarthCheck Certified, the resort has hired a resident sustainability manager in addition to a marine biologist who leads its Reef Restoration Programme. The sustainability manager is tasked with making the island waste- and plastic-free as much as possible, and trying to get everything biodegradable, from the tea bags to the toiletries, which are also bespoke, vegan and chemical-free.

There is an organic herb-and-vegetable garden, which they fertilize using recycled kitchen waste



From top: The poolside Mura Bar; Joali’s arrival jetty.

from their Rocket composter. The outdoor Raw Gym was created in collaboration with the children from nearby Ungoofaar School. It features equipment made from coconuts, tree trunks and upcycled sandbags—it is a work of art in itself, and a community effort at that.

On a blissful afternoon I find myself at Joali Spa by Espa in an overwater, oversized VIP treatment room. I sweat out the alcohol of my afternoon cocktails in the room’s private steam room, which offers spectacular views of the cyan-colored Indian Ocean. I watch as a seaplane glides in, giddy newlyweds in tow, their *jadugar* ready to greet them.

This level of luxury is hard to find, even in the Maldives. From ultra-spacious, unabashedly glam villas to an ever-growing collection of art above and below the waterline, every aspect of Joali has been something special. Add to that smiling staff with an uncanny ability to know what you want before you even ask, and the experience is nothing short of magical. ✦

