



The Wellness Report

Restorative new retreats are drawing a different kind of traveller to Maldivian isles

SONEVA SOUL

Hooked up to an IV drip, I feel a cool rush and tingle run up my kaftan-clad body. A nurse brushes around in the background and the windows look out onto thick tropical jungle. I'm experiencing the Beverly Hills Blast, a dose of vita complex, zinc chloride and glutathione straight into the bloodstream designed to rehydrate and restore skin elasticity. In some respects, this experience couldn't be more absurd in a setting like the Maldives, the archetypal tropical idyll, but at Soneva Jani and Fushi, it's the star treatment of the group's new wellness journey, Soneva Soul.

Soneva has been synonymous with wellness since its conception in 1995, when it was founded by wellness pioneer Sonu Shivdasani and born out of Six Senses Resorts & Spa. But while the brand has always had a strong spa offering, Shivdasani wanted something greater, more advanced, a desire stemming from his recovery from stage four cancer. More than 25 years after the opening of Soneva Fushi, Soneva Soul was born, a concept combining ancient healing practices with the latest medical science and technology. The launch brought specialists from across the globe and introduced treatments never seen before in the paradisiacal Indian Ocean archipelago. To house the treatments, an entirely new coastal complex was constructed at Soneva Jani, snaking high atop the ocean mangroves, while a rustic new two-story facility deep in the island's jungle was erected at Soneva Fushi. "The overall vision for Soneva Soul was inspired by our beautiful natural island surroundings," explains Shivdasani. "It was why I chose the area on the island's east coast, high above the mangroves, because it is such an incredible setting and the Soneva Soul concept and design was born from there."

What was born was a treatment list so extensive, encompassing traditional massages and facials, but also therapies that were once the preserve of Harley Street or Beverly Hills doctors now performed on the



remote Maldivian islands. Doctors have been flown in from the US, India and China, with each resort having an Ayurvedic doctor, Traditional Chinese Medicine practitioner, integrative medicine doctor and highly trained therapists. Included in the treatments are heart-rate variability testing, nutrient IV therapy, cryotherapy, ozone therapy and hyperbaric oxygen therapy, along with a dedicated Hydrofacial therapist. “Each Soneva Soul wellness journey can start at any point – whether an individual is looking to kick-start a healthier lifestyle, heal following an illness or injury, improve their physical or mental performance, or simply relax and indulge,” explains Shivdasani.

It’s here, in the dreamy northern atolls, that I find myself venturing on what could be the most against-the-grain Maldives holiday: a solo traveller in search of not just rest and rejuvenation, but improved health, wellness and even fitness. I train in the gleaming high-performance boutique gym at Soneva Jani’s Soneva Soul complex and sip on elixirs named after Shivdasani and his wife, Eva, in the thatched juice bar overlooking the lagoon.

True to the unique DNA of each resort, Jani’s Soneva Soul complex is shiny and commanding, while Fushi’s blends seamlessly with its jungle surroundings, an

take care of your body – it carries you your whole life,” says Dinesh.

Internal wellness is a key focus of Soneva Soul, going deeper into the body than most luxury leisure destinations have done before. Hooked up to a drip in a serene treatment room, I try the most popular treatment of Soneva Soul, IV vitamin therapy. A collaboration with Beverly Hills IV Therapy clinic, the menu offers 10 treatments like “immune booster” and “Beverly Hills Blast.” “We use mineral groups like zinc, magnesium, selenium, all components of a balanced life,” explains IV nurse Renjith Nambyattil. “Many guests get them every second day. After shots, you feel fresh and rejuvenated. When they’re on vacations they have late-night parties, they want to enjoy it, and a short IV treatment can help them recover and remove the toxins,” he continues. “New Year’s Day they were so busy,” he chuckles, flashing a pearly grin. “They were running back and forth to the villas. We can mix a bespoke blend: Biotin for skin hydration; selenium for stress.”

Other treatment rooms house a hypobaric chamber, Celestial Floatation pool, and Hydrofacial machine, and there are plans for platelet-rich plasma (PRP) treatments. All are overseen by Soneva Fushi’s holistic

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understated new two-story complex built near the island resort’s former facilities, but also spread across the lush, forested island. One morning I join resident yogi Pawan Kumar in treetop Turtle Beach Champa studio for one of his popular one-to-one sessions. Originally from the Himalayas, he splits his time between Jani and Fushi, but also travels the world to visit Soneva’s loyal customers at their homes and continue the Soul experience.

Later that day, I’m back in the tranquillity of Soneva Soul, meeting Ayurvedic doctor Vidya Dinesh, specially recruited for the launch of Soneva Soul. She spends her days introducing the ancient practice to guests and running Soneva Fushi’s curated Ayurvedic packages. “We plan for the complete detox, what we call the Panchakarma, or five cleanses,” she explains, a two to three week process utilising the lengthy time guests spend in the idyllic resort. “We factor in one 90-minute treatment a day, with the chance to have diet matching up and a cookery session to take away skills.” A consultation with Dinesh ends with an Ayurvedic massage in a jungle clearing near the beach. Heady, perfumed hot oils are poured over my shoulders and head and nourishing coconut oil slathered on my hair, all to the sound of crashing waves. Other Ayurvedic treatments include powder massages and internal cleansing. “You take your car for a service once or twice in a year, so you need to

physician Dr Arsallan Ahmad, an expert in regenerative medicine flown in from the US. “We want people to visit Soneva as a medical tourism destination, to help not only relax but to heal and rejuvenate,” insists Ahmad. “You don’t have to have something wrong with you to have these therapies, but they’ll give you more energy, better sleep, increased ability to do physical activity. We interact a lot with the kitchens and advise guests, along with educational talks so guests can understand what it takes to live a healthy lifestyle.”

Such medical facilities may seem incongruous in a luxurious Maldivian resort, but with its island set up, the archipelagic nation could be the most perfect destination for a wellness journey. With the sublime natural beauty and weeks spent in a single resort, there’s time to truly rest, track progress and heal. “At Soneva Soul we think that guests will use this time to not only enjoy a holiday but also to address any medical or general health concerns that they may have at the same time,” says Shivdasani. “I believe that nature is awe-inspiring, and its beauty is such an important contributor to one’s total wellbeing.” And where more naturally beautiful than the Maldives.

Soneva Soul packages from AED 1,825 per day; villas from AED 4,900 per night; soneva.com – ISABELLA SULLIVAN →



JOALI BEING

The joy of weightlessness” is scrawled in feathery cursive on the back of the villa card I’m handed after our 45-minute seaplane ride from Malé. The theme of weightlessness is ever-present at Joali Being. But after nearly a month gorging myself on a plethora of resort buffets around the Maldives, I feel anything but.

My partner insists this is the ideal way to end a trip of gluttony: at the Maldives’ first-ever wellness retreat. The sister resort to the glam paradise, Joali, this new concept is a healthy departure from the excess the Maldives has become known for. And with no guests under 14, no public WiFi and not a salt-shaker to be found, it’s a rejuvenating retreat with a dose of luxury and relaxation only the Maldives’ crystalline waters and overwater villas can provide.

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In partnership with Gerard Bodeker, a Harvard University-trained expert on traditional and integrative medicine and wellness, this nature-immersive wellness retreat revolves around the four pillars of energy, skin, microbiome and mind. The resort’s immersion programmes focus on the individual pillars, with options ranging from five to 28 days.

“Most people come here for a change. It could be the mind or improving your gut health,” says resort naturopath Alexandra Demolling. During our Integrative Lifestyle Assessment, we discussed my health habits before taking my vitals and performing a bioenergetic test created to rebalance the organ’s frequencies.

As the sun started to dip below the cathedral-high thatched ceilings of Areka, the resort’s wellness area, we entered Aktar, the herbology centre where 65 different herbs and oils sit in bottles around the room. Here, I was

given an essential oil roller and a daily tea to help my unbalanced microbiome.

“We put in as little additives and preservatives into your food as possible,” says resort chef Siddharth Chogle. Each item on Joali Being’s menu caters to two of the island’s pillars with calories, protein, carbs and fat amounts for each dish listed underneath. Despite a lack of pizza, the portions are satisfying and the flavours delicious.

I was melting after a morning personal training session at Core, the Maldives’ largest fitness centre, with multiple rooms including a kinetic pilates studio and a movement area. And a few hours later, my cryotherapy treatment in the only machine in the Maldives, had me freezing – literally.

While it’s easy to get into a fitness routine, with

classes ranging from boxing conditioning to cardio pilates, the sublime spa experiences at Areka and Kaashi are just as much a part of the daily wellness regime. The impressively varied and gorgeous facilities inside Kaashi, including a Russian banya, Aufguss sauna, Turkish hammam, sensory deprivation pool, Watsu pool and hydrotherapy room, have upped wellness offerings in the Maldives.

But not every guest at Joali Being needs to sign up for an immersion programme. Spending days lounging in your plush, neutral-toned villa with splashes of seafoam green and baby pink while peppering in a massage or two is acceptable – trying to order a Coca-Cola is not.

Immersion programmes from AED 6,115 per person, based on a five-night programme; villas from AED 7,870 per night; joali.com/joalibeing – KATIE LOCKHART 🍷

This page: The façade of a Grand Beach Pool Villa. Opposite page, clockwise from top: A Beach Pool Villa; the Mojo beach bar; inside a Grand Beach Pool Villa

