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**HOTELS & RESORTS**

# THE FIRST EVER LITERATURE FESTIVAL IN THE MALDIVES WAS ONE FOR THE BOOKS

T+L attended the first annual Jaipur Literature Festival–Soneva Fushi. Best book report ever.



**I** **T HAD NEVER OCCURRED** to me that I might be relaxing on a tropical atoll with the grandson of Mahatma Gandhi. But then again, no one has ever accused Soneva Fushi, the barefoot luxury pioneer known for its waterslide villas and treehouse-restaurant zipline, of doing anything by halves. I met Gopalkrishna Gandhi after he and a slate of other writers, politicians, scholars and intellectuals touched down via seaplane for the inaugural Jaipur Literature Festival — Soneva Fushi edition, the first of three annual events the resort has planned to add a splash of literary culture to luxury in their Maldives idyll.

Founded in 2006, the Jaipur Literature Festival (JLF) is the world's largest free literary festival, drawing in staggering crowds of half a million people to the 'Pink City' of Rajasthan. At this Maldivian international offshoot, produced by Teamwork Arts, the audience doesn't even clock into triple digits, creating remarkably personal and open sessions with some of the world's greatest authors, scientists and thinkers. The first event took place May 13 to 22 – 10 days of panels, film screenings, music performances and the odd manta ray snorkel session – and I told my editor at *Travel+Leisure Southeast Asia* that I simply had to be there to get my nerd on in paradise.

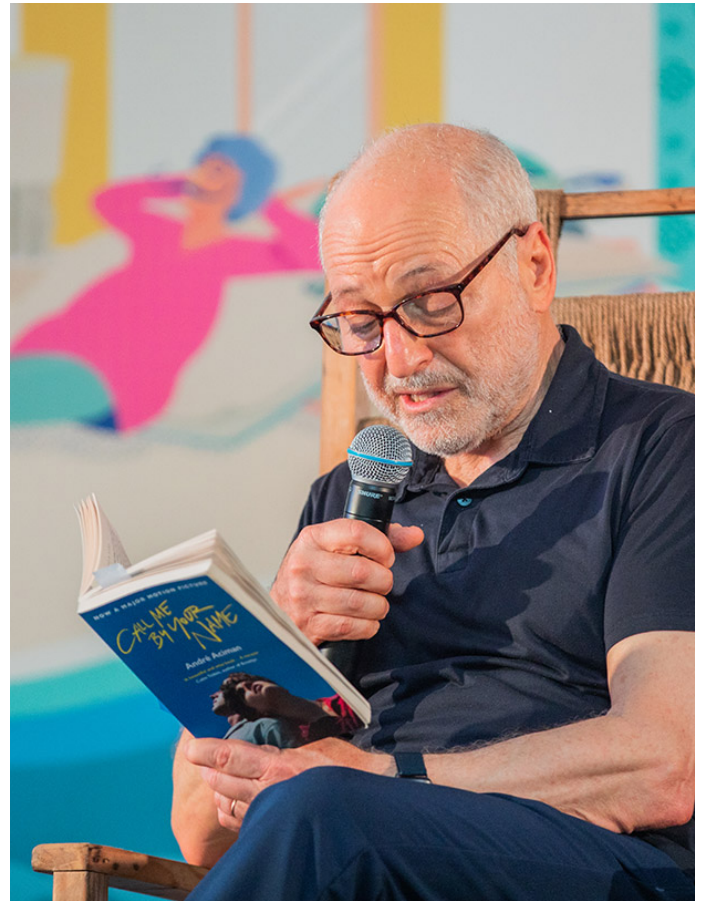




“I’m used to going to quite big festivals. The quality of it being small has been one of its charms,” Marcus du Sautoy, professor of mathematics at Oxford University and author of *Thinking Better*, told me. “The intimacy of the sessions mirrors the intimacy of the island. The laid-back, slow feel.”

Fittingly, the theme of this year’s festival was ‘Slow Life.’ An ever-present vibe at the resort, it organically worked its way into the festival with morning music sessions by Indian musicians like Harpreet, dips in the ocean in between sessions and afternoon visits to Soneva’s ice cream room with authors, discussing anything and everything over a cone.

“There’s a lot of engagement that happens outside of the actual talks that are priceless for both the authors and the contributors,” the CEO and founder of Soneva Group, Sonu Shivdasani, said. “For the audience and the readers, it’s a fantastic opportunity to spend quality time with your favorite author, which you’re unlikely to get at another festival.”



Spread out over two weekends, the first included discussions on democracy and the glaring inadequacies of America's government with Huma Abedin, Hillary Clinton's former deputy chief of staff and vice-chair of her 2016 campaign.

Author André Aciman bit into the infamous peach scene before a screening of *Call Me By Your Name* at Soneva's outdoor movie theater, Cinema Paradiso. And Peter Frankopan, best-selling author of *The New Silk Roads*, also an Oxford University professor, discussed the invasion of Ukraine.





I flew into the Maldives for the second weekend of the Jaipur Literature Festival, and was immediately greeted with a signature Soneva “No News, No Shoes” bag, into which I dumped my sandals then didn’t retrieve for the entire weekend.

The majority of sessions took place in Villa 11, a private nine-bedroom residence with one of those famous Soneva waterslides plus a pool that could have fit every panel speaker and their entire families.

At first, it was hard to focus. My eyes kept wandering around the villa complex and out to the glimmering turquoise water calling me in for a swim. I wasn’t the only one.





“I’m looking at the sea beyond the cameras,” said journalist and best-selling author of 21 books Shobhaa De, during her panel. She went on to talk about the risqué nature of her writing and divulged how her traditional Indian family reacted to its sex scenes.

It was in one of the villa’s many rooms where I sat in for a session with Gopalkrishna Gandhi, the grandson of Mahatma, where he gently spoke of his grandfather’s search for vegetarian food in England, his relationship with his wife and his time imprisoned in South Africa.

The daytime sessions were certainly enlightening, with bouts of laughter and a few heated moments when sustainability and politics entered the ring of conversation. But, as might be expected, the evenings—filled with glasses of wine—were the most memorable. Each weekend night kicked off with cocktails and Indian-inspired bites on Soneva’s private sandbank or its beach.







It flowed into a low-key gala with speeches, Indian curries and whole lamb slow-cooked underneath the sand—Maldivian style. Then, a Southeast Asian feast with stations galore dishing out Indian street food and pad Thai alongside a screening of *Slumdog Millionaire* with the book's author.

On the final night, after a sunset dolphin cruise with the speakers and authors, we went by foot on a journey through the island, stopping at different points under the banyan trees. Always topped up, we followed a trail of lights trying fresh prawns and sauteed scallops along the way. At the end, another “wow” display of different stations grilling seafood, preparing tandoori chicken and tossing handmade tortellini awaited.

As the tabla began to punctuate the sound of crashing waves, everyone rushed to the rock-concert-style stage where The Kutle Khan Project had the crowd dancing—and sweating—until after midnight.

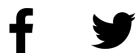




If you're wondering which weekend to go to, the lineup of authors, speakers and movie screenings will help you decide. The programming is decidedly less busy during the week, so if you can, stay for both weekends and, in between, bask in the jungle beauty of the island as spotted bunnies hop around your villa and you maybe finally get around to reading *Robinson Crusoe* in the perfect location.

*Soneva Fushi*; the next Jaipur Literature Festival – Soneva Fushi Maldives will take place May 12-21, 2023.

*All photos courtesy of Soneva*



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