

A bird's eye view of
Vommuli Island, Maldives

luxury escape

Into the great BLUE

Swim, snorkel, spa, sleep; rinse and repeat, with hearty meals in between — one easily falls into this rhythm at the uber-luxurious St Regis Vommuli Resort. **By Charukesi Ramadurai**

As the sea plane took off from Male's tiny international airport, I peered out of the windows into a world of blues that I had never expected to see in real life. This was the stuff of picture postcards and dreamy poetry: a placid Indian Ocean dotted with dozens of small islands and coral reefs glittering in the mellow light of late evening.

After exactly 45 minutes of this, our pilot made a touchdown on the sea, seemingly in the middle of nowhere. He taxied ahead for a few hundred metres towards a private pier, where the team from St Regis Vommuli stood waving in welcome.

I had arrived with a splash.

My welcome to the St Regis brand of hospitality had actually started three hours earlier at the airport, where a valet escorted me to their private lounge to wait for the sea plane. Barely five minutes away by car from the terminal, it was a relief from the searing heat and the incessant bustle of the airport.

Located on a secluded island on Dhaalu Atoll towards the south of the Maldives, the St Regis Vommuli Resort is one of the newest destinations on the uber-luxury scene in this picturesque country. A refreshing drink of coconut water at the arrival alcove — while my luggage was unloaded — and I was whisked off by my valet to a villa at another end of the small island.

On a short ride on an electric buggy, Ravaa spoke about the resort's amenities and the range of services the group of private butlers provide guests — would I like him to unpack and put away my luggage? Or would I like him to book me in for a relaxing massage at the spa? All that could wait though, I thought, as we pulled up in front of the villa on stilts.

It was my first stay in an overwater villa, and I found the experience surreal and surprisingly soothing. As soon as I entered the suite, the cerulean water of the Indian Ocean beckoned to me from across the outside deck. I stepped out with the intention of dipping my

toes into the small pool or stretching out on the daybed to watch the sunset. However, I found something even more inviting — the four hammocks slung high over the water at the very edge of the deck. As I lounged on one of them, the sun began to dip into the sea, making for a perfect Instagram moment.

I could have easily spent all my time at my sprawling villa, looking out on to the expansive views of the Indian Ocean changing colour according to the whims of the tropical sun. The interiors were a riot of blue and brown tones, earth meeting water inside the villa just as it did outside.

However, dinner awaited — more importantly, the wine tasting session awaited — at Decanter, the underground wine cellar. But before that, the champagne sabering ceremony by the knowledgeable wine sommelier from Delhi, Khazan Singh. This ritual, believed to date back to Napoleon Bonaparte's time, is a St Regis signature across the world, and a celebratory way to mark the end of a day.

Of course, Napoleon famously said of champagne that "in victory, one deserves it; in defeat, one needs it". In the moment though, as Khazan beheaded a bottle with a sharp sabre, I was simply content to enjoy the bubbly.

The five-course dinner itself was an ode to the simple pleasures of good and fresh food, thoughtfully designed by the chef-sommelier team, every dish paired with an excellent wine. The next three hours whizzed by in a grapey haze, beginning with a fine Devaux champagne and ending with a sweet pink Moscato, through a series of whites and reds specially curated for the cellar by Khazan.

Decanter was only one of the six distinct dining spaces within the resort, and over the next couple of days, I managed to sample the offerings at most of them. Beginning with the vast breakfast spread at Alba (complete with Mimosas and Bloody Marys), to avocado and sundried tomato bruschetta at Crust and Dal Makhani with butter naan at Orientale, there was something for every taste and mood.



One of the Beach Villas

travel

getaways/retreat



The beach-side Whale Bar

Pointers for Maldives travel

- Most hotels and resorts provide flip-flops and fins for snorkeling/diving.
- Other popular activities include visiting whale shark/manta ray points, kayaking, wake boarding, jet skiing, renting a boat to other islands, picnicking on a private island, island explorations on a 4x4, and dining at Ithaa, the popular underwater restaurant.
- If you visit during the summer months (December to May), whale sharks come up to feed in warm water, as there are more krill for them to eat.
- Local food consist of fresh fish with added spices and you will not find elaborate, creamy sauces because milk or butter is not a product of the island. Their natural oils are derived from plants and healthy Omega-3 fish oil.
- A water-resistant camera is absolutely necessary. Be sure to pack in one to avoid any regrets!



Inside the Overwater Villa

Marine life paradise

On a quick tour of the property, I realised that the design and architecture elements of the resort were a nod to local marine life, especially in the part of the island where the overwater villas were located. From the Whale Bar, obviously named for its flowing form, to the Iridium Spa shaped like a benign lobster crawling out towards the deep sea – not to forget the overwater villas, which resemble mantarays (when seen from the water), every single space within the resort clearly takes inspiration from the natural surroundings.

Although Maldives has over 1,190 islands (divided into 26 atolls – or groups of islands), only 200 of them are inhabited. And the Dhaalu Atoll is among the relatively unexplored regions of the country, which means heaven for those fascinated with marine life.

One morning, our small group kitted out fully at their Dive Centre and set off for a snorkelling trip at the resort's exclusive coral reef, a mere twenty minute boat ride away.

Divided into two teams under the watchful eyes of local diving experts (who were gratifyingly patient with my fear of water), the snorkelling session yielded stunning sightings of colourful fish, turtles and even baby sharks, along with the expected clusters of fragile coral. While I waited out on the boat for others to return, the crew explained that the area was still so untouched that much of the local sea life is yet to be identified. Indeed, from the stories I heard back at the resort, scuba diving in this part of the ocean seems to reveal delightful surprises every day.

Luckily for me, the confirmed opposite of a water

baby, there was no need to actually venture into the sea to spot sea life. Schools of black, yellow and blue fish swam right outside the villas, as if inviting me to join them in their daily swim. Ah well, another time, I promised myself, as I walked on the wooden pathway purposefully to my morning yoga session just outside the spa.

With a total of 77 villas spread over a space of 22 acres, there was ample scope for privacy for every guest, including a swimming pool in front of each kind of room. And although I could not imagine why anybody would want to visit this spectacular island and not stay in a villa overlooking the ocean (if not right above it, as I did), there was also a generous sparkling of garden villas set in a lush area of its own.

The crowning glory of this property is the John Jacob Astor Estate, named after the American billionaire founder of the St Regis brand. This three bedroom, two level villa comes with its individual kitchen, private spa rooms and dazzling chandeliers. And why not? This is after all, one of the most exclusive and expensive suites in all of the Maldives.

At the end of those three days, I came to appreciate the soporific magic of island life: swim, snorkel, spa, sleep; rinse and repeat, with hearty meal breaks in between. I could easily fall into this rhythm for the rest of my life.

The St Regis Maldives Vommuli Resort is on Vommuli Island, Dhaalu Atoll, Vommuli, Maldives. Located 45 minutes by seaplane south from Malé International Airport.

