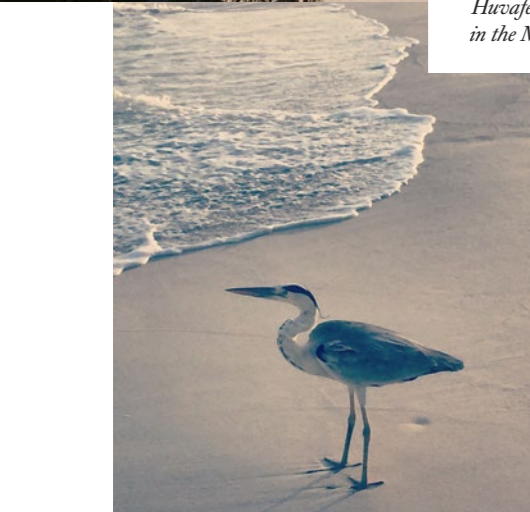


*This page and opposite: Per Aquum Huvaŕfen Fushi in the Maldives*



There is always a risk in returning to a place that you have fallen in love with before; what if it has changed, or the magic has been lost? Yet this was a risk worth taking, I'd decided, in going back to the tiny Maldivian island of Per Aquum Huvaŕfen Fushi for a second time, after a gap of four years. The first visit had been with my two sons (then aged 18 and 22); for all three of us, it had been the most memorable of escapes, to a place where the ivory sand was soft as cashmere, and the clear blue sea an underwater paradise.

On our second trip, we were accompanied by my husband, who feels rather more at home in the Scottish Highlands than a tropical beach resort; but even he could appreciate the charm of Huvaŕfen Fushi, with its air of otherworldly calm and serenity. And much to my joy, it felt as if nothing had changed since we were last there: the shy little hermit crabs still darted across the beach; the elegant grey-feathered herons continued to survey the ocean; and at sunset every evening, the sky flushed pink, and looked closer to heaven than anywhere else I have ever been on Earth.

There are many reasons to be beguiled by this island idyll – the superlative spa, where the expert therapists can unknit even the tightest of muscles; the delicious cuisine, based around seafood and locally grown ingredients; the coral gardens, where shoals of brightly coloured fish swirl in synchronised harmony. But it's more difficult to define what, exactly, makes Huvaŕfen Fushi such a peaceful haven. My husband had been worried that he might find it claustrophobic to spend a week on a very small island. But in fact, there is an immense sense of space here – from the endless views towards the far horizon, to the infinite night firmament, where constellations of stars shine brightly, and rays of moonlight dance on the rippling water.

Most of our days were spent outside, snorkelling in the coral reef that protects the island, or simply floating in the cradle of a turquoise infinity pool. Huvaŕfen Fushi never feels crowded, in part because it has relatively few rooms – just 44 – compared to other Maldivian resorts (we were in one of the thatched beach villas, but there are also wooden pavilions built on stilts over

the lagoon). All of the supremely comfortable villas have a sense of discreet luxury – this is a place that offers outdoor showers, rather than gold taps – and the same good taste is apparent throughout the island, from the Lime Spa to the congenial bar and restaurants.

But what I treasured most of all during a week at Huvaŕfen Fushi is the sense of tranquillity; from the moment one steps onto the island (less than an hour by boat from Malé airport), anxieties and stress seem to dissipate, blown away in the soft sea breeze that whispers through the palm-trees, caressing the skin. By our final day,



*The manta rays that Justine Picardie swam with off the island*

I was so relaxed that a 24-hour delay on our flight home seemed like a blessing, rather than a curse; especially as it provided an unexpected opportunity to set out to sea with one of the resort's two resident marine biologists, in search of the elusive manta rays that I'd heard about, but never seen before.

The sightings of these gentle giants of the ocean cannot be guaranteed, but our guide on this journey explained that they tend to congregate in certain areas, to feed on the plankton that sustains them. Local fishermen refer to them as

'devil fish', because of their black silhouettes and distinctive horn-like fins; but when we were fortunate enough to encounter a pair, and to swim above them, they looked more to me like angels, gliding through the water with infinite grace.

We spent about 40 minutes snorkelling beside the manta rays, in the most magical of experiences; all of us sharing the wonderment and awe of these creatures' beauty, with their huge wings that propel them in a life of perpetual motion. By the time we returned to the island, I felt as if a natural gift had been bestowed upon us; and a heartfelt gratitude for this, and much more besides. Whether or not I ever have the chance to return to Huvaŕfen Fushi, I will always remember it as an exceptional jewel that deserves to be cherished for ever; a miraculous place, where the sky meets the sea, and dark angels fly beneath the waves. □

*Seven nights at Per Aquum Huvaŕfen Fushi, from £3,365 a person B&B, including international flights and speedboat transfers with Carrier (0161 492 1358; [www.carrier.co.uk](http://www.carrier.co.uk)).*

## HEART OF THE SEA

JUSTINE PICARDIE revisits Huvaŕfen Fushi in the Maldives and finds its beauty and tranquillity as enchanting as ever



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