

THE MALDIVES

That sinking feeling

BY KRISTIN VUKOVIC

Hand out flat, like this," Zia instructed. I held the chunk of raw fish in my plastic-gloved palm, making sure my extended fingers were pressed tightly together. The Indian Ocean was choppy that day; manta rays flapped their wings wildly as they glided on to the shore, waves crashing over them as their bellies grazed the sand.

Suddenly, I spotted a large, grey manta coming towards me, its deadly tail thrashing in the surf. Holding the fish lightly with my thumb, I lowered my hand into the churning water. In a second, the manta was in front of me; I felt its underbelly mouth grab the fillet and recede with the tide to rejoin the others, a confusion of wings and tails in an angry, grey ocean.

I had envisioned our honeymoon with sun, sand and perfect weather, but the last few days had been replete with rain and blustery wind. This was unusual weather for the Maldives, the atoll nation off the southern tip of India, renowned for its calm, cerulean waters and idyllic weather.

"Sea not this rough in Maldives, not normal," Zia said, as if reading my mind. He should know. Originally from Bangladesh, Zia has been living on Hembadhu, a tiny island measuring 300x200m, for the last eight years, working as a resort gardener for the Taj Vivanta Coral Reef. He earned his nickname, "The Stingray Man", after he took over the feeding of the stingrays that congregate at the shoreline at 4.30pm every day from his friend Hasan, who had fed the fish for seven years. The stingrays have been coming every day for the past 15 years, same time, same place.

When I asked Zia if the stingrays had injured any guests, he shook his head, explaining that he and other resort employees had removed most of the rays' barbed stingers with scissors. All stingrays have a sharp spine on their tails with venom-secreting glands; when the tail lashes, it can inflict serious injury, but their stings are normally not fatal to humans.

A manta ray riding an incoming wave lunged towards us, and I jumped back. "Don't be afraid, you can touch," Zia said, extending his hand. Gingerly, I touched its slippery grey skin, careful to avoid its "spiracles" (breathing holes) adjacent to its small, beady eyes. The manta disappeared into the surf and the stingrays dispersed, abandoning the shallow,

turbulent tides for deeper, calmer waters. And just like that, they were gone.

Zia smiled. "You come tomorrow?" he said. I assured him I would. He offered to bring fresh coconut water to our bungalow. When he arrived the sun was setting over the ocean, dipping behind ominous clouds. Zia brought *kurumba*, young coconuts used only for their water. On the porch, he sliced off the top of the coconut with a machete and poured the water into glasses for my husband and me.

I was curious about Zia's life back in Bangladesh. He said that

before coming to work at the Taj Vivanta, he had lived in a small village with his family of rice farmers. His brother was hired by the Taj group in Bangladesh, and transferred to the Taj Maldives; Zia followed shortly thereafter. Zia has a wife and 10-year-old son back in Bangladesh, and every month he sends them money. Every two years, he returns for two months to visit his wife Sam-suna and son Roki.

Zia is only 29. Despite his young years, deep lines creased his forehead. I imagine working gruelling 12-hour days, six days a week, just 4 degrees north of the



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Stingray country: (from top) Tourists pet a stingray; a fishing boat; and resorts build bungalows on stilts because there isn't enough dry land.

equator would put lines on my face too.

It started to pour. Sheets of rain blended into the ocean, and we had to raise our voices to hear each other. Zia told us there were 20 other Bangladeshi employees working at the Taj Vivanta, and he felt at home here, not least because the Maldives is 100% Muslim. According to the UN Refugee Agency, there are 80,000 expatriate workers in the Maldives, predominantly from India and Bangladesh.

I asked Zia how much longer he planned to stay in the Maldives, and he said he didn't know. If Zia's son decides to adopt his line of work, he might not find employment in the Maldives, as it might cease to exist. The archipelago nation is threatened by rising sea levels; most of the Maldives' low-lying islands will be completely submerged by the end of the century if sea levels continue to rise at the present rate. On average, islands are 1-1.5m above mean sea level, making the Maldives the flattest country in the world.

Another Taj staff member had told me about an island nearby where he and his friends often play football. One day their boat broke down and they were stranded chest-deep in water, because the island disappears underwater at high tide. This is a chilling example of what could happen to the rest of the Maldiv-

ian islands in the not-too-distant future. If worldwide carbon emissions are not dramatically curtailed, future generations may equate the Maldives with Atlantis.

Already, resorts have constructed bungalows on stilts because there is not enough dry land; they advertise the bungalows as a unique over-the-water vacation experience. The Maldives has set aside a fund from tourist revenues to buy land in India and Sri Lanka, as it will need to purchase a new homeland if the islands disappear.

The following day we went snorkelling off our bungalow deck. Not 10m away, I spied a stingray on the sea floor flapping its wings and kicking up sand, its spiracles winking at me as it breathed. I thought about how humans must coexist with underwater life in the Maldives in a unique way; the Indian Ocean is both front and back yard, and ocean creatures are neighbours and friends. In the next few decades, should the tides keep rising, the stingrays might very well call the Taj Vivanta home.

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Warm weather, beautiful beaches and plenty of action. Children will love the Maldives.

TRIP PLANNER/MALDIVES



Stay Eat Do

Stay Vivanta by Taj—Coral Reef (www.tajhotels.com) is less than 32km (approximately 45 minutes by speedboat) from Male airport, and boasts of one of the best spots for diving. Amateurs and professionals can explore the resort's very own house reef and shipwreck. Room rates start at around Rs30,000 per night on double occupancy. The Sheraton Maldives Full Moon Resort & Spa (www.starwoodhotels.com) is a quick ride from Male airport; rates are about the same as the Taj. If you're in the mood to splurge on an upscale Robinson Crusoe experience, there is Soneva Gili by Six Senses (www.sixsenses.com), where oversized villas stand on stilts in one of the largest lagoons in the Maldives, within one of the atolls furthest from the capital. Expect to spend Rs55,000 for double occupancy per night in high season.

Eat The Maldives caters to an international crowd, so you can find virtually any type of cuisine at your chosen resort. Virtually all the ingredients are imported, so expect to pay top dollar: My small morning latte cost \$8 (around Rs357), excluding tax or tip. Our last meal at the Taj Vivanta was especially memorable; a Teppanyaki chef prepared a private dining experience al fresco ranging from sushi to steak, and put on an entertaining show, skilfully juggling spatulas while tending the griddle.

Do A plethora of ocean experiences are available at Maldives resorts: Take classes at a diving school offering internationally recognized Professional Association of Diving Instructors (PADI) courses and certification; snorkel off your bungalow and explore underwater coral life; take a cruise on a catamaran or paddle a canoe; fish big game at sunrise or sunset; sail or windsurf to your heart's content. If you need to relax after a big day, book spa appointments in advance, as they tend to fill up quickly.

GRAPHIC BY AHMED RAZA KHAN/MINT

