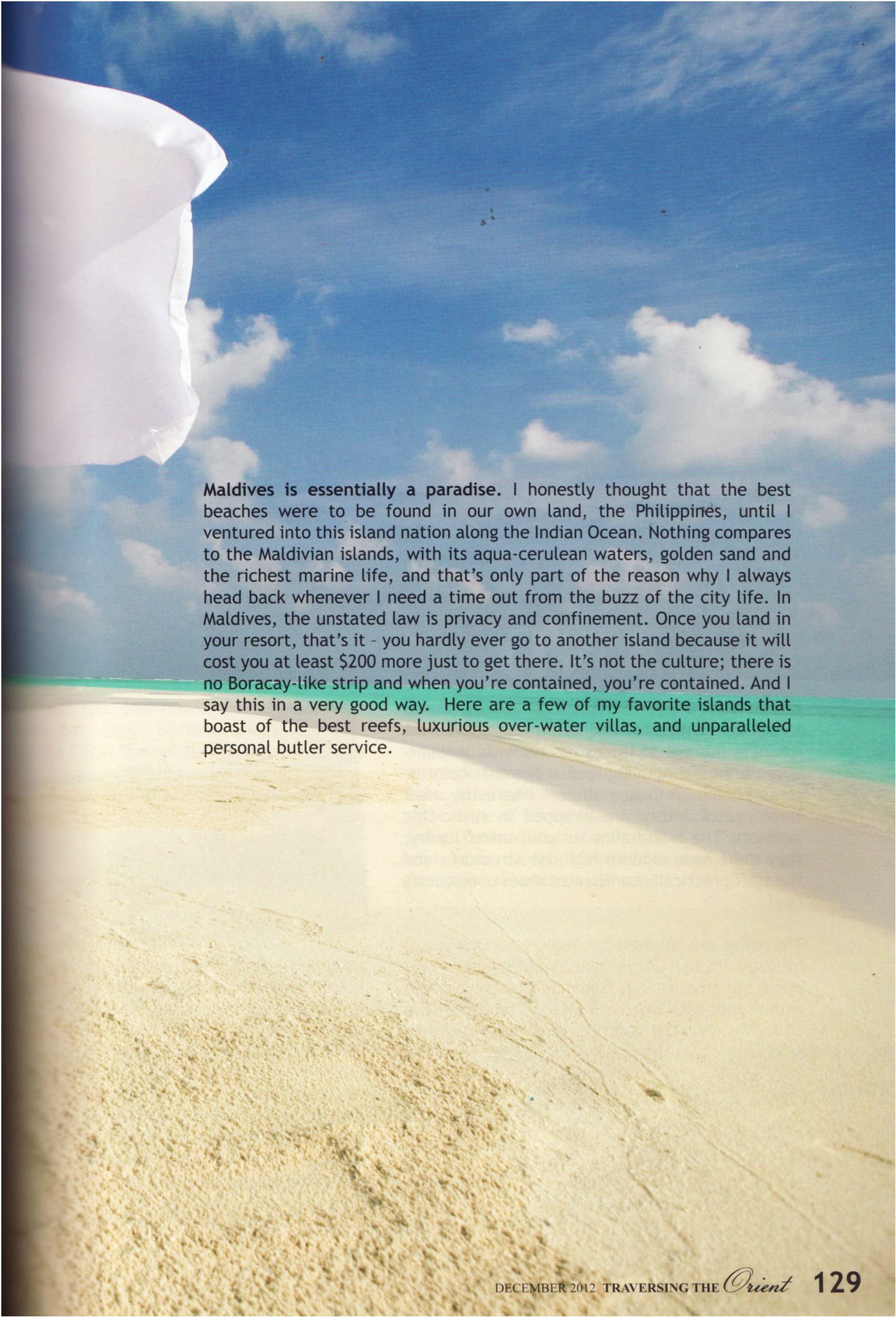


WISH YOU
WERE HERE

RECILY Q.
TABASA

PARADISE UNCOVERED





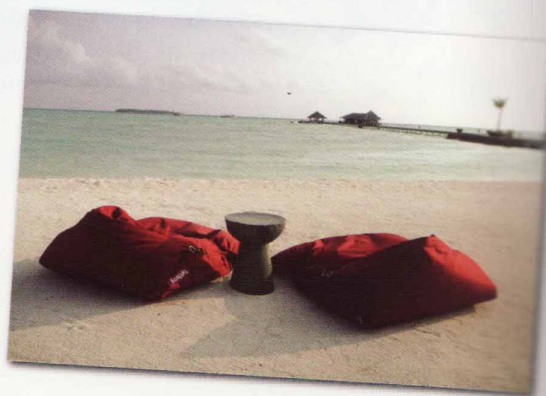
Maldives is essentially a paradise. I honestly thought that the best beaches were to be found in our own land, the Philippines, until I ventured into this island nation along the Indian Ocean. Nothing compares to the Maldivian islands, with its aqua-cerulean waters, golden sand and the richest marine life, and that's only part of the reason why I always head back whenever I need a time out from the buzz of the city life. In Maldives, the unstated law is privacy and confinement. Once you land in your resort, that's it - you hardly ever go to another island because it will cost you at least \$200 more just to get there. It's not the culture; there is no Boracay-like strip and when you're contained, you're contained. And I say this in a very good way. Here are a few of my favorite islands that boast of the best reefs, luxurious over-water villas, and unparalleled personal butler service.



COCOA ISLAND

A boat ride away from the city airport, Cocoa Island is the one of nearest, most convenient island in this tier of luxury resorts with undoubtedly the best snorkeling reef. It has that quintessential Robinson Crusoe allure - where the usual trappings of luxury are wrapped in rustic-chic interiors. The island aims to 'unluxurize' luxury; they don't have modern high-rise structures and the staff practically confiscates shoes once guests land.

The villas are inspired by dhoni boats, a vessel used by locals. Cocoa Island's accommodations curve out from island, connected to the pristine white sands with wooden walkways built over the clear waters. The interiors are all-white with wood accents.



Imagine white cotton curtains dancing as a gentle breeze sweeps into the room. The rooms have their own decks, with outdoor showers and bathrooms. You can literally step out of the deck and stand right outside your villa. Cocoa Island has one of the best reefs in the world, so wherever you are you can just right into the water to view and experience Maldivian marine life. One morning I woke up and there was a stingray floating beside our deck. There were days when baby sharks were swimming by and a turtle floating nearby.



Cocoa Island has one restaurant, Ufaa, and a beachside bar, Faru. Because the resort also employs the Como Shambhala Cuisine, the food is made from locally-grown and organic ingredients. Asian and Mediterranean flavors dominate the cuisine of Cocoa Island, with dashes of South Indian flavor. You can opt to dine at the restaurant, have your food delivered to your villa, or ask for a special beach dinner setup.

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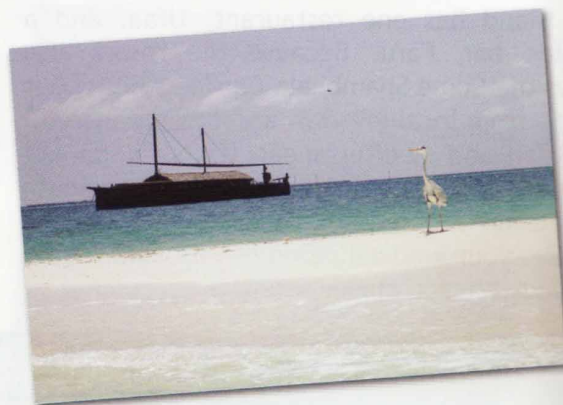


HAVAFEN FUSHI

Huvafen Fushi will surpass your every holiday expectation; You'll feel like you are in a deserted island with every amenity you can indulge in. Its state-of-the-art luxury meets hip club culture meets extreme extravagance.

Definitely not understated, the villas are teeming with both opulence and minimalism - Juxtaposition, but there's no other way to describe the accommodations. It's practically push-button everything. Each glass-bottomed villa houses a private deck that includes a swing, a Jacuzzi whirlpool bath - some pavilions have their own pools.

At Huvafen Fushi, you get all these, plus much more: champagne greets you as soon as you step into your villa, butlers bringing you punch while you paddle, snorkeling steps down your villa's deck, customized music to suit your mood. It is service worthy of modern royalty.



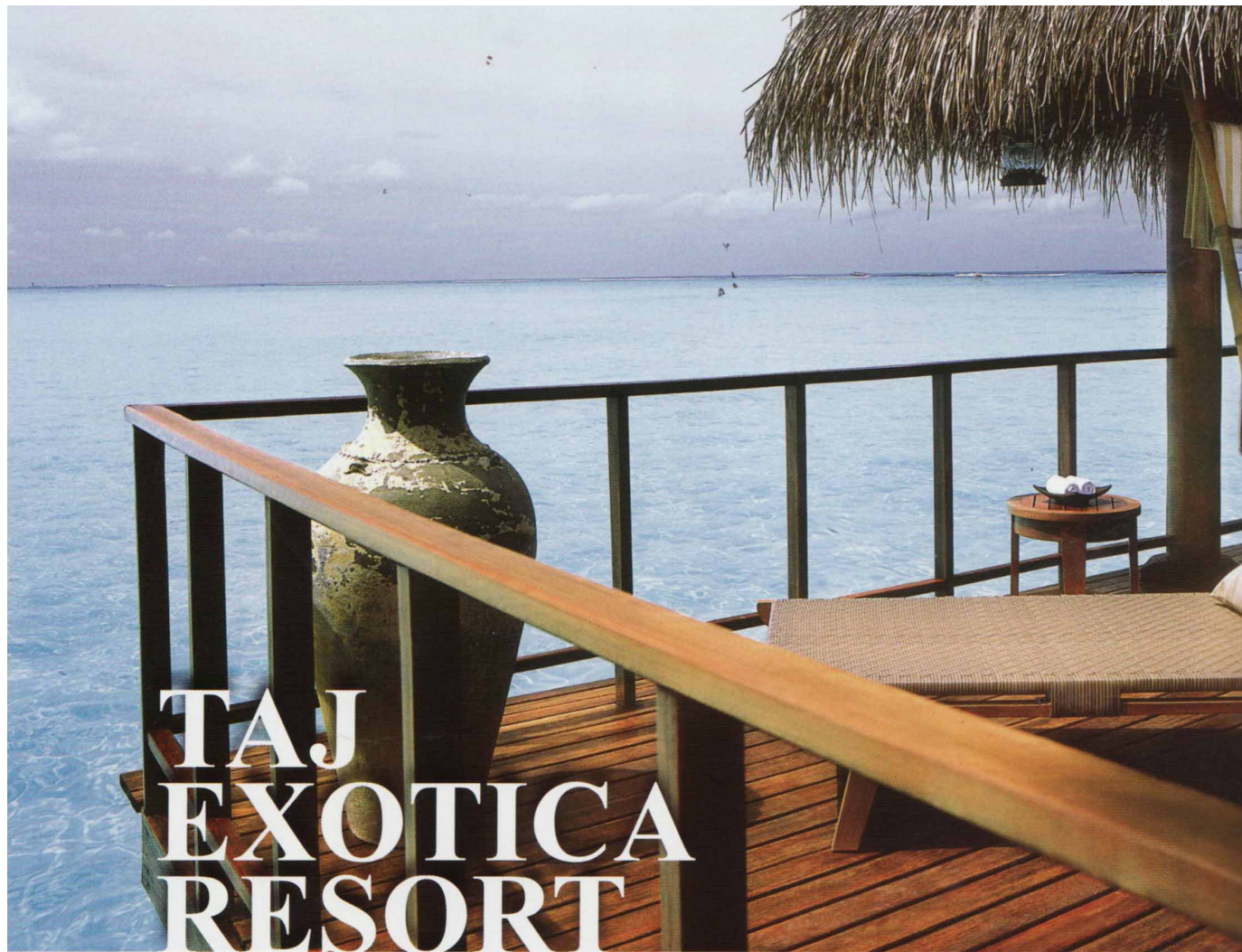
There are so much food options; Huvafen Fushi lodges Raw, where they serve detox-friendly, organic food; Salt, a fine-dining, open kitchen with a 360 view of the sea; Vinum, an underground wine cellar; and UM Bar, where the casual chic vibe made it to the top of my list instantly. The resort has themed dinners every night. Some of which were Lobster Night, Surf-N-Turf and Maldivian. Yet, if you want something else, they will quickly cook it for you.



In Huvaafen Fushi, there are lots of things to do that you probably won't have time to try all. There are guided snorkeling tours, diving sessions, sunset and dolphin cruises; every six in the evening, there's stingray feeding. A family of manta rays living nearby swim by the beachside to be fed.

My favorite? Trying out the first underwater spa in the world! Lime Spa, designed by Richard Hywel Evans, is an architectural masterpiece in its own, but the treatments make it an absolute must-do in Maldives. Immediately, glass walls surrounded me as I stepped into the spa and through it, I could see the rich marine life - corals, fishes, and even a baby shark swam by.

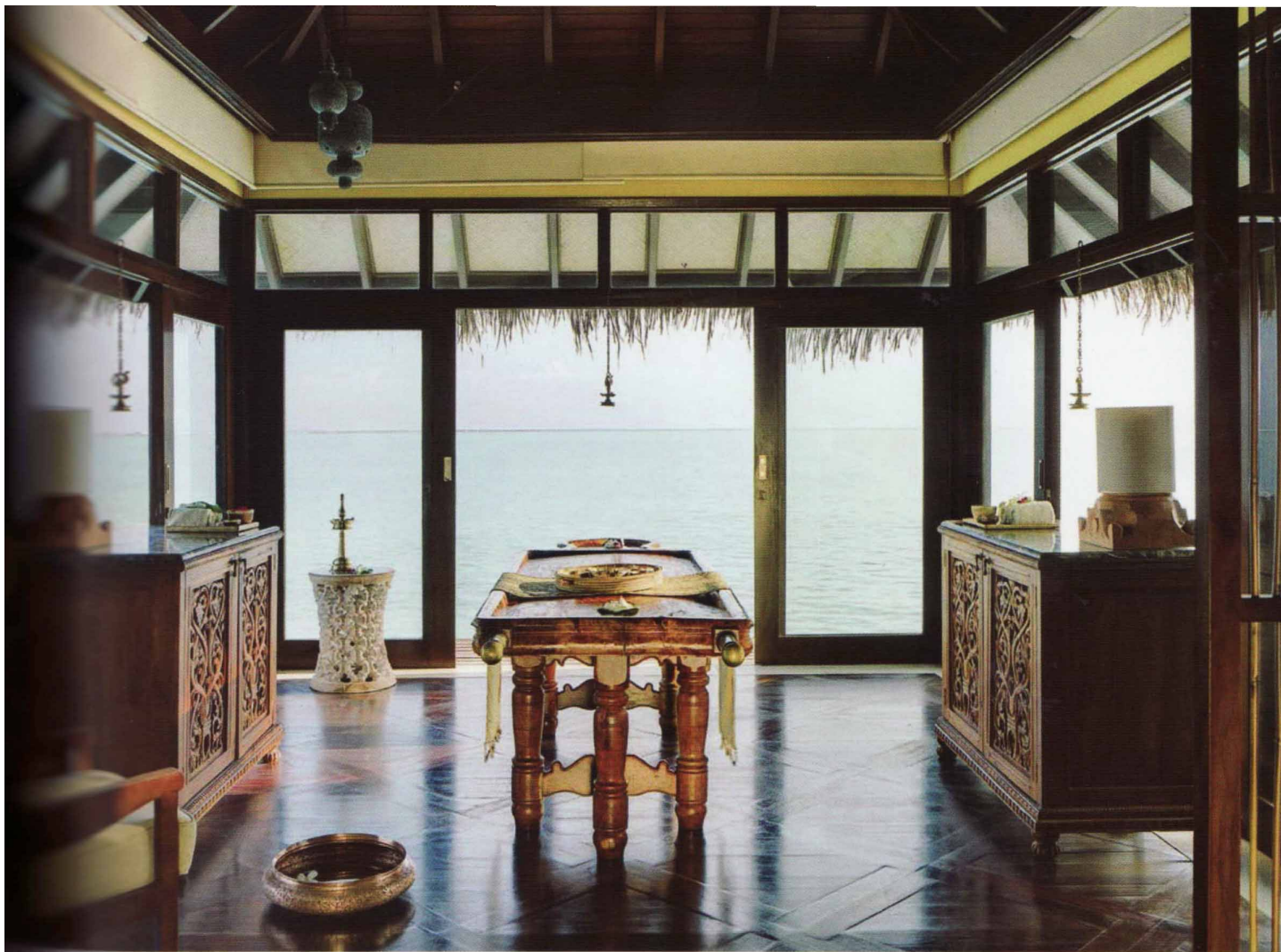




I have always wondered how one can find paradise a mere 15-minute speedboat ride from the Maldives capital Male. Taj Exotica is located on the exotic Emboodhu Finolu Island, which was once known as the Three Coconut Island. Surrounded by crystal blue waters and a lush forest, the reception area of Taj Exotica is simply the best I've ever seen. It immediately sparked thoughts of ultimate relaxation.

Taj Exotica's villas are rested over the lagoon, built with top-quality natural wood finishes. The room's interiors are decorated in a native Maldivian aesthetic, with sun decks that include plunge pools, private spa areas, outdoor showers and sofa lounges. The food is fantastic. It's mostly Indian food, but they also have theme nights; One of the best Japanese meals I've had was in Taj Exotica. It was cooked in front of us in a Nouvelle Cuisine style. Every night, they have something special and original for the gourmands.

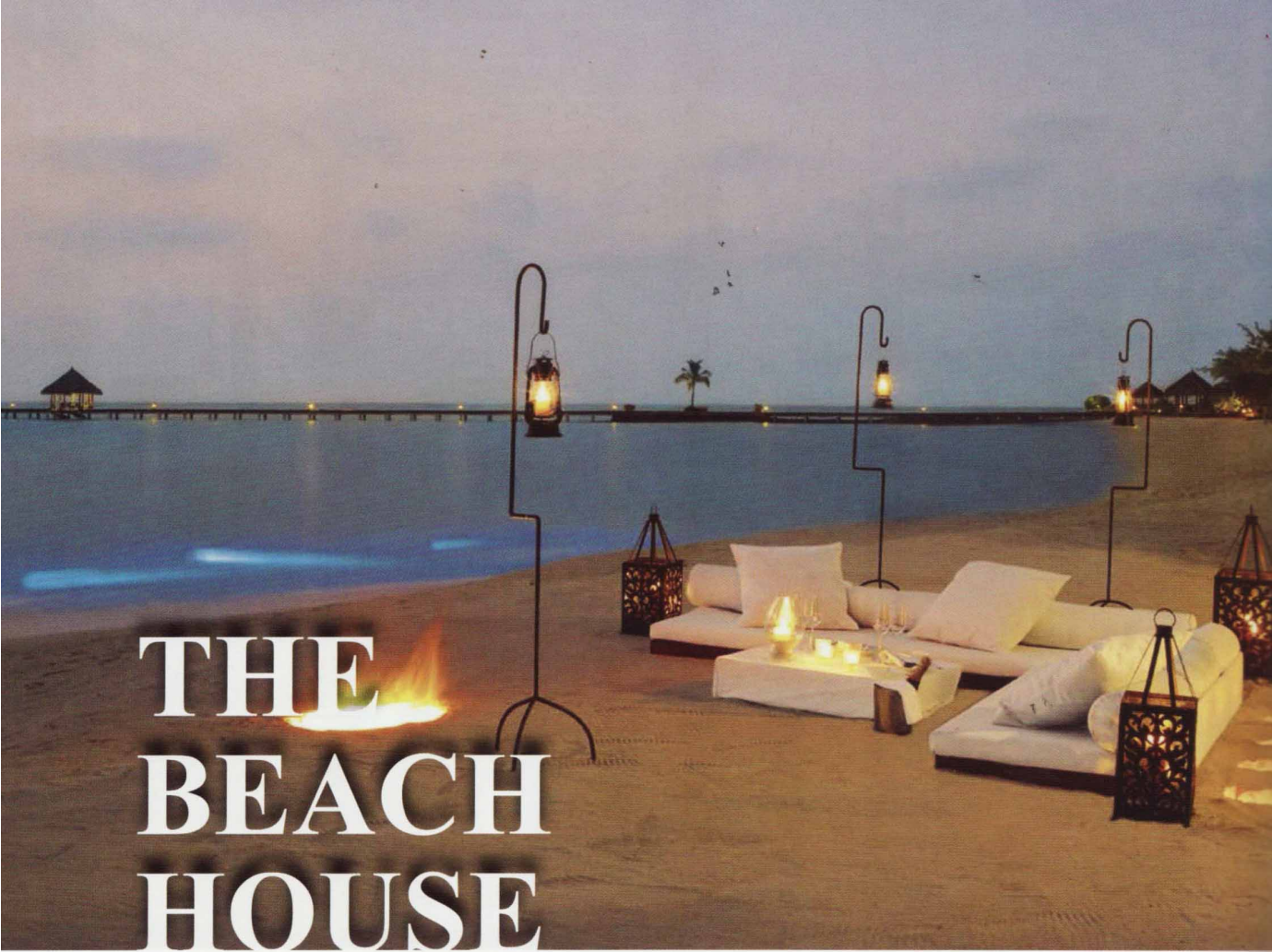




The most noteworthy aspect of Taj Exotica is its holistic wellness services. The resort has the Jiva Grande Spa, an authentic Indian spa which features Ayurvedic and Shiradana treatments. The chat with the resident Ayurveda was one of the highlights of my visit. I had my health assessed in just over an hour.

It's similar to a psychiatric session; he asked me questions and we would go over certain topics. The assessment was that I have high levels of stress and that yoga would be a good solution for this. So I decided to bliss out on one of their Signature Therapies: a yoga journey with Samattva Balance Ritual to a two-hour Vishrama Deep Muscular massage.





THE BEACH HOUSE

This is where I had my first Maldivian experience so even though it doesn't provide amenities like the others did, it somehow still holds a special place in my heart. I would go back to it every time. From the city airport, the resort is a long ways out and you have to fly to get to the Beach House; the thing with flying is that you have to drop people along the way and sometimes, the flights get delayed.

It's a smaller resort, like a mini version of Huvafen Fushi. It boasts of the almost the same amenities: glass-bottom floors, open-planned spaces. The Beach House is definitely a good starting resort for first-time guests of Maldives. It has a more relaxed and chill-out atmosphere than most resorts I have visited, yet at the same time it retains an unparalleled sense of luxury -- simple elegance in a nutshell. The Beach House carries a traditional Maldivian vibe, blending Asian traditions to the overall appeal of the resort.





For a week, guests are treated to a traditional Maldivian program called Bolimalaafai dancing, a reflection of the warm Maldivian culture and hospitality. Each day, I couldn't even bring myself to leave my villa, between lounging in my hammock, dipping in my deck pool, soaking in my outdoor Jacuzzi tub, or going down my deck stairs in search for aquatic creatures, or just taking in the expansive view of the Indian Ocean from my deck swing. This is where I started my affair with Maldives, and it definitely left a lasting mark in my well-travelled heart.

HOW TO GET THERE

Heritage Maldives, Inc.
<http://www.heritemaldives.com>
 (02) 462-0551

