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## A Tropical Indulgence

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*Kristin Luna is a New York-based travel writer who spends more of her time in the air than on the ground en route to exotic, far-flung locales, like her latest obsession, the Maldives. Here, she divulges some of her favorite facets of Manafaru and the northern atoll of Haa Alif.*

**Eats:** The Beach House's "modern Asian-influenced continental" fare, in the chef's own words, can be explored at any of the island's three restaurants—or even from the convenience of your villa's own backyard. There's something intimate about having all of your meals served beneath your private beachfront gazebo, but if you prefer company, there's plenty of that to be had, as well. The resort's signature dining experience, Saffron, offers the tastiest of Asian-fusion cuisine in a stylish and romantic setting perfect for those honeymooning or needing a break from the kids, while Medium Rare (obviously) caters to meat lovers with its mouth-watering steaks and lobsters drawn directly from the eatery's central pond. Four Corners is ideal for the indecisive diner: with a full buffet of food from all over the world, you can sample a little of everything, including comfort food from your own country should homesickness strike.

**Diving:** Prior to my visit to the Maldives, I was a snorkeler and nothing more. But a little urging by the dive instructors on Manafaru had me strapping on a tank and taking the plunge. The crystal-clear waters and extended visibility make the Maldives one of the foremost diving destinations in the world. Beginners can test the waters, literally, by learning the ropes in the shallow end just off the beach, but the more experienced divers have their pick of untainted open water spots. The dive center sends boats out to nearby points, as well as the reefs of uninhabited isles, so the aquatic opportunities are endless. Thousands of species of marine life comb the sandy ocean bottom—from trumpetfish and Napoleons to manta rays and the moray eel—and, if luck's on your side, a school of curious dolphins will swim by to say hello. (Note: invest in an underwater disposable camera or waterproof case for your digital camera before you go.)

**Festivities:** As a Muslim country, the Maldives prohibits drinking (have no fear: resorts are granted alcohol permits to appease their guests), thus the natives must find other means of entertainment. Traditional gatherings like drumming exhibitions, called boduberu, are a popular pastime. A group of locals (usually men) plays a set of bongos in a blend of Indian and East African-inspired music, singing along and gaining momentum and speed with each bar. On nearly every occasion, a brave soul or two will rise and let the beat guide his body, much to the

amusement of the crowds of onlookers. Don't be deterred if you're hand-picked to groove along beside them. Go with it, and you'll be all the more popular!

**Lounging:** It's a sin to visit paradise and not devote at least part of the time to doing absolutely nothing at all. You could spend the duration of your stay on Manafaru just soaking up the rays on the lavish, golden beaches that are never more than a stone's throw away; however, there are other perfectly suitable ways to pass the time while not expending unnecessary energy. The Asian-inspired karaoke lounge lets crooners belt out their favorite Madonna tunes, Tiger Woods wannabes can take delight in the golf simulator by playing 80 of the world's most popular courses without stepping foot off the island, newlyweds can occupy one of the strategically placed benchlike nooks in the lava-stone Amazon Pool. And, of course, you can never be too pampered or relaxed, which is where the island's Jungle Spa, encased by lush banana, papaya and mango trees, comes in. Chocoholics like myself might consider the Chocolate Extravagance, chock full of cocoa specialties like a chocolate butter massage and chocolate almond scrub, topped off with a floral bath, a white chocolate moisturizer, and a steaming mug of—what else—hot chocolate. You'll feel like you've died and gone to Willy Wonka's version of heaven.

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