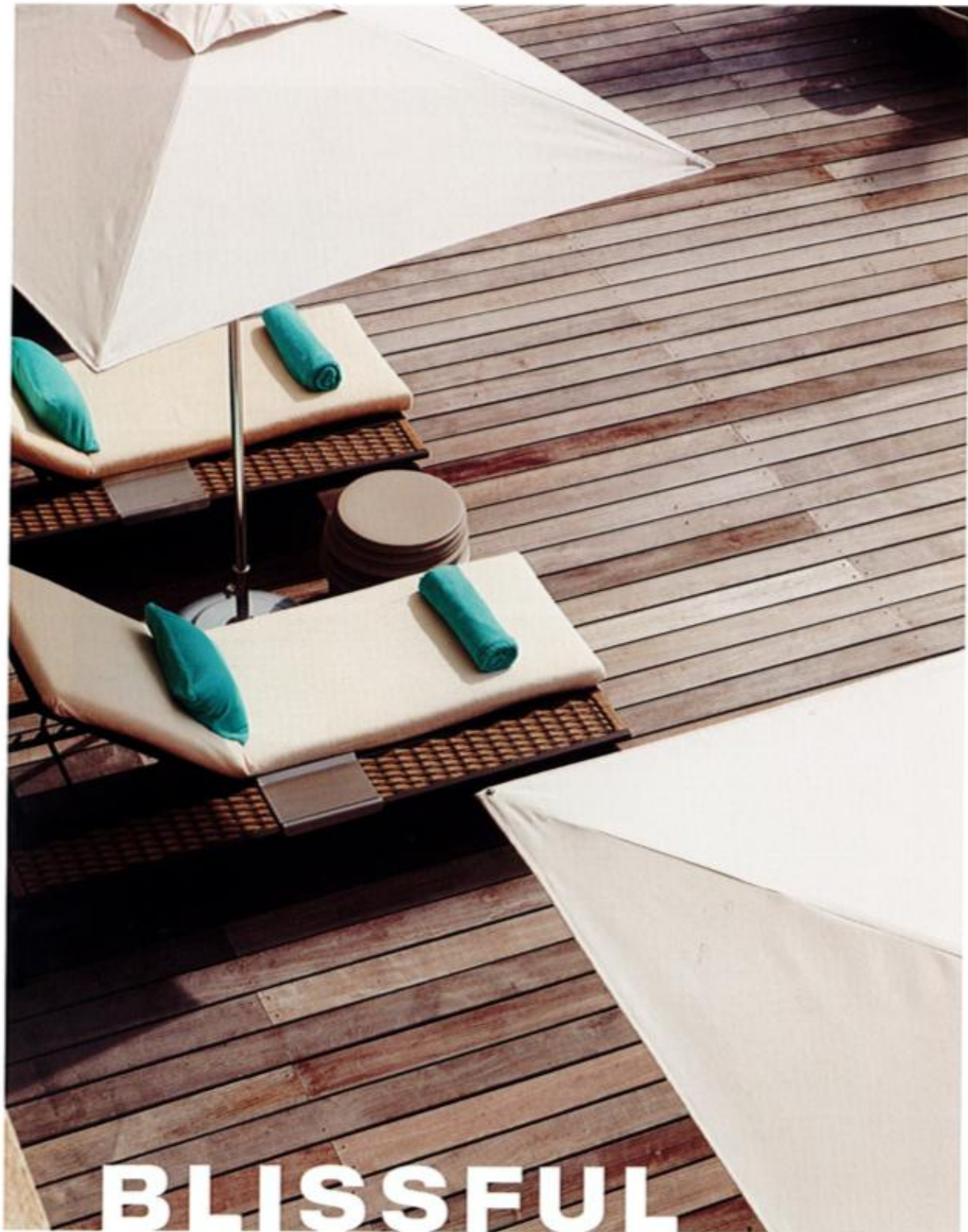


# CENTURION

M A G A Z I N E

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# BLISSEFUL THINKING

There's no need to hang up the "do not disturb" sign. At Voavah, the Four Seasons private resort in the Maldives, the island is all yours.

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY SEAN FENNESSY





In his 1953 travelogue, *Reflections on a Marine Venus*, British writer Lawrence Durrell described "isomania," a disease yet unclassified by medical science. This rare condition, he wrote, affected "people...who find islands somehow irresistible. The mere knowledge that they are on an island, a little world surrounded by the sea, fills them with an indescribable intoxication."

Durrell's book was set almost entirely in Greece, but it could have also been in the Maldives. From the air, the 1,192 low-lying islands that make up this nation look like turquoise shadows barely distinguishable from the surrounding Indian Ocean. Here and there, you see a strand of white sand, a reef curling its way from nothingness to nothingness, a little eruption of palms lost in petrol-blue sea. The larger atolls are now home to the resorts for which the country is famous, places far removed from the Sharia strictures of the government. In 1997, Islam became the state religion, and the 345,000 citizens were

The jetty leading to the two-bedroom Water Villa on Voavah, a private island in the Maldives. Opposite: The deck at the three-bedroom Beach Villa.



forbidden from practicing other faiths. But outside of Malé, the capital, and the more populated islands, Sharia is quietly sidelined. Tourism is king, and the Maldives' economy is largely built upon the Durrellian premise. After a short flight on a seaplane from Malé, you can be in the middle of an ocean at a five-star resort and indulge in that "incredible intoxication."

**V**oavah, in the Baa Atoll, is one of these exclusive enclaves. This five-acre, seven-bedroom island, which rents for \$50,000 a night in the high season and is managed by Four Seasons, opened just one year ago as an offshoot of the brand's larger Landaa Giraavaru resort, only a 20-minute catamaran ride away. But Voavah, unlike Landaa Giraavaru, must be rented whole, the two multi-bedroom villas and main Beach House, with its dining room and library, forming a kind of ultimate gated community—the gates being the sea itself. You approach a thatched, welcoming gazebo situated on the water, with wooden cylinders hanging from the rafters, and walk onto the island along a jetty perched over gemstone shallows and patches of coral where needlefish dart.

The island itself is so small that it's like a three-dimensional treasure map. The paths connecting the Beach House, which has two bedrooms on the upper floor; the villas (one of which sits over the water); and the stand-alone spa (also set above the sea) are hemmed in with bamboo and palms. This gives the island its air of secrecy. From the floor-to-ceiling windows in the villas, the guest sees only the horizontal line of the ocean divided into paler and darker bands by the reefs. Two infinity pools also merge into that view, their blue subtly different.

Voavah can host up to 22 people, in multiple, relatively secluded spaces. This effectively means that close friends or large families can rent it out together. The price also includes the use of a crewed 62-foot private yacht, which navigates the temperate seas between both inhabited and uninhabited islands, and a full staff, who skillfully prepare your just-caught tuna.

The structures on Voavah also possess a quiet coherence and intimacy. This is precise and thoughtful architecture, the creation of the visionary Sri Lankan architect Murad Ismail, himself a pupil and later partner of the great Geoffrey Bawa. Ismail and Bawa have had a remarkable influence both on their country's capital of Colombo and the emergence of a distinctly Sri Lankan modernist style. Before designing both Landaa Giraavaru and Voavah, Ismail traveled across the Maldives and was struck by two things: one, how all the resorts looked the same, with their mass-produced neo-Balinese architecture; and two, how the local houses reminded him of the architectural vernacular of his own country. He was determined to create something Maldivian with Sri Lankan elements, using high gables to open up airy, wide spaces, and a subtle minimalism to accentuate sea and sky. On Voavah, Ismail used plenty of wood, from the carved doors to the weathered decks, to give a back-to-nature feel. As at Landaa Giraavaru, some

of the gathering spaces, like the ground floor of the Beach House, are open to the wind and the salt, screens lowered only when the monsoon rain rolls in.

The idea behind this new breed of private-island resort is, of course, exclusivity. But it's also proximity to the elements—offset by the constant presence of a discreet staff. Voavah's competitors include Laucala in Fiji, owned by Red Bull founder Dietrich Mateschitz; Cousine, in the Seychelles, which concentrates on conservation; and the Brando in French Polynesia, visited by former President Obama shortly after leaving office. In the Maldives, there is also Coco Privé, an exclusive-use island resort with six contemporary villas, and Velaa, a larger but similarly refined refuge owned by Czech billionaire Jiří Šmejč and his wife, Radka. But Voavah stands apart because of its elegant simplicity, which simulates private ownership. In the dining room of the Beach House, you feel as if you are eating at home. The library, the outsize chess table, and the New Age tuning forks in the spa are all yours too. More than that, you are enveloped in Ismail's spatial vision.

Swiss citizen Armando Kraenzlin, the general manager of both Voavah and Landaa Giraavaru, seems perfectly attuned to the environment in which he has now lived for several years. Dressed all in white, he looks a little like a kindly and sophisticated spiritual healer. His view is that a resort of this caliber has to offer both vocational training to Maldivians, which has been done for some time, and to regenerate the imperiled reefs that are, after all, the lifeblood of the business. To that end, the Four Seasons has initiated both a turtle-conservation program and a reef restoration project. Two decades ago, warm waters due to El Niño poisoned 90 percent of the Maldives' fragile reefs. Since then, the Four Seasons has overseen the transplantation of an astounding 60,000 pieces of coral. The hawksbill turtle population is on the upswing too, thanks to land-based hatcheries and protection from poachers.

"Personally, I love islands," Kraenzlin said one night, as we were watching a nocturnal shark feeding from the over-water bar at Landaa Giraavaru. "I bought one years ago in the Philippines. I still go there from time to time, when I need to be alone. Of course, I hardly need to get away, but there's something about being surrounded by water, alone. More alone even than here."

On Landaa Giraavaru, you meet a few of the other guests from time to time, the wealthy Qatari with his three wives and their children walking out in coffee-colored silks onto the sandbar that stretches out into the sea. The mainland Chinese honeymooners looking almost in shock at the clarity of the water, and the older millionaires from Hong Kong sitting with their bottles of Gavi in the shade, transfixed by an ever-unstable sea. But on Voavah there are no strangers and no interruptions. There is only, far off, the breakers created by an invisible reef and the people or person you have brought along with you. It is islomania, pure and simple—and there is no affliction involved. ♦

#### HOW TO BOOK

To reserve the Four Seasons Voavah five-acre, seven-bedroom island (\$50,000 per night) or a Landaa Giraavaru beach bungalow (\$3,200 per night), go to [fourseasons.com](http://fourseasons.com).





The dining room at the Beach House.