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*Dreaming
of winter sun*

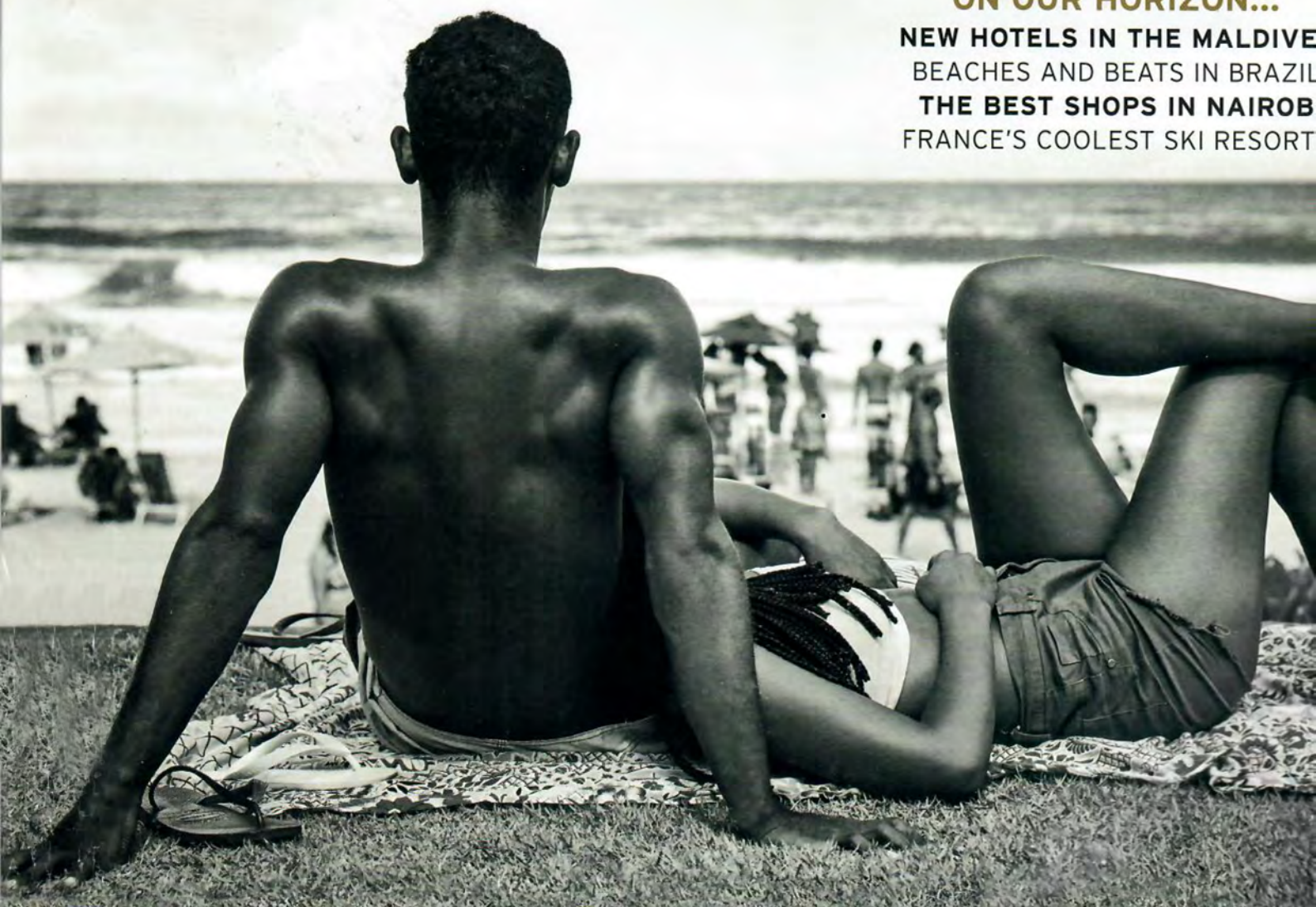
ON OUR HORIZON...

NEW HOTELS IN THE MALDIVES

BEACHES AND BEATS IN BRAZIL

THE BEST SHOPS IN NAIROBI

FRANCE'S COOLEST SKI RESORT





THE RITZ-CARLTON MALDIVES, FARI ISLANDS

Design in the Maldives has been slowly dismantling its thatched-roof image, and The Ritz-Carlton continues the trend thanks to the studio of the late architect Kerry Hill. Its 100 contemporary circular villas are scattered above the water and up and down a stretch of beach. Each is polished, pared back and pulse-slowng, with glass doors that open onto half-moon decks, teardrop-shaped plunge pools and the high-definition blue of the ocean. The rest of the resort, by contrast, feels a little conservative, if still beautiful. Most of the action is confined to the island's southern tip, where there's a gym and photography studio, plus a watersports centre (with the usual kayaks, SUPs and windsurfing) and a large kids' club with dancing fountains hidden in a Teletubbies-style mound of grass. This is also where you'll find Jean-Michel Cousteau's Ambassadors of the Environment programme, the only one in the Maldives, staffed by marine biologists who are monitoring sealife with underwater robots and airborne drones, in addition to guiding guests. Head out snorkelling with them at night for spooky encounters with nurse sharks, unfurling feather stars and bioluminescent squid. At the showpiece restaurant Iwau, knife-juggling chefs prepare pretty nigiri rolls and just-caught lobster, but there are six more restaurants to choose from, including one in a Bedouin tent and a food truck in the Fari marina. One of the island's luxuries is its space (which is why Ritz-Carlton ended up opting for this man-made spot), giving guests with less tolerance for lazing about plenty of opportunity to cycle around on bicycles. Another is the timber-clad spa in the middle of the lagoon – look out for stingrays hovering below on your walk to a treatment – offering therapies by British brand Bamford. Ritz-Carlton is known for its classic, old-school luxury, but here is an exciting forward-looking update. *LC Seven nights in an ocean pool villa from £5,999 per person, B&B, including flights and transfers*

FINOLHU BAA ATOLL MALDIVES

Not all Maldivian islands are made equal; some only have natural beaches along one shore, the other eroded away by the sea. Not here. From above, Finolhu looks like a comet shooting across the heavens, its tail formed by a 1.2-mile platinum sandbank. If resorts here were ranked solely on their beaches, Finolhu would be on the medal table (along with Kanuhura and The Residence at Dhigurah) purely because there's so much sand. And the marine life is just as magnificent. There are dozens of exceptional dive sites within the hotel's orbit, including caves haunted by barracuda, kaleidoscopic gardens of hard-tree coral and Hanifaru cleaning station, where hundreds of manta rays come to be preened by little blue wrasse (visit between May and November for the best chance to swim with them). Almost as exuberant is the hotel itself, which emerged in November 2020 under new management and with a fresh look. Out went the Seventies design in favour of a mood board of colour, with 125 villas kitted out in electric blue, sherbet yellow or lime green. What remains, however, is the Ibiza-in-the-Indian-Ocean vibe; for the full effect book a Rock Star Villa with its giant disco ball and cocktail bar (and a golf buggy decked out like a mini Rolls-Royce). Food at the five restaurants is good, if less dazzling than the rest of the place; the premium all-inclusive option is especially good value, covering everything from wagyu steak in Japanese restaurant Kanusan to post-workout protein drinks at the Milk Lab café and Taittinger Champagne from the bar. And the weekly list of activities runs from the standard yoga and beach volleyball to acrobatic shows and mermaids in the swimming pool. Many hotels have tried to bring the party to the Maldives – Finolhu hits the sweet spot between indulgent fun and carefree affordability. *LC Seven nights in a lagoon villa from £2,489 per person, B&B, including flights and seaplane transfers*

INDIAN OCEAN NEWS

THE INSIDE TRACK ON THE COMINGS AND GOINGS AROUND THE MALDIVES FROM WELLNESS ISLANDS TO WATERSLIDES

Never a destination to rest on its desert-island laurels, the Maldives reopened to travellers in July 2020 with a flurry of new and rebranded hotels. The most high-profile among them was the **Fari Islands**, within speedboat distance of the capital, built using sand ladled from the seabed and layered inside a living coral reef, echoing a process that usually takes 10,000 years (although there is some debate about how much damage this type of construction does to the marine life). Sharing its marina and docking for 20 super-yachts is **Patina**, which opened in May, followed by **The Ritz-Carlton Maldives** in June. **Capella** will complete the trifecta in 2023, with flying-saucer-like buildings by Kengo Kuma (architect of Japan's Olympic Stadium) and interiors by Hong Kong design hotshot André Fu. **Kagi Spa Island** landed on the other side of the North Malé atoll as the first Maldives resort dedicated to wellness, with five- and seven-night programmes

encompassing leadership, self-compassion and living in the now. **Kuda Villingili** launched as an independent (after Chedi hotels pulled out), blending a soft Seventies look – earthy browns and oranges, geometric prints, rattans – with a top surfing scene. And **Le Méridien** added a large family-focussed resort in the bursting-with-wildlife Lhaviyani atoll. In a game of musical islands, Jumeirah closed its flagship Vittaveli and the site was rebranded as all-inclusive **Ozen Reserve Bolifushi**. The Dubai-based hotel group then took over Lux North Male Atoll's 67 oversized villas and natural beaches, renaming it **Jumeirah Maldives**. During the downtime, there have also been fresh coats of paint and a raft of new-look rooms and additions. Barefoot-luxury pioneer Soneva debuted **Soneva Jani Chapter Two**, which adds 27 sensational overwater villas – huge sun decks, waterslides and star-gazing roof panels – as well as three new restaurants and a wellness centre.

Sister resort **Soneva Fushi** also upped the ante, building eight enormous one- and two-bedroom water villas, also with waterslides, something of an Indian Ocean trend. Elsewhere, Anantara's **Naladhu** has had a top-to-toe refurbishment (decluttered, lighter, brighter and better suited to its gorgeous beachside location), **Conrad Maldives Rangali Island** is revamping its overwater villas and updating the spa and the **Waldorf Astoria Maldives Ithaafushi** unveiled a private island retreat for up to 24 guests. And the momentum shows no sign of slowing. Joali will open a spin-off wellbeing island, **Joali Being**, in November, offering customised programmes, German sauna rituals and a Russian banya. Finally Six Senses Laamu will get a northern counterpart in the form of **Six Senses Kanuhura**, set on a trio of islands, two of which are uninhabited for the full castaway effect. The very first-world decision about where to stay in the Maldives has never been more difficult. *LC*

Opposite, clockwise from top left: surfboards at the beach bar boardwalk, sunset deck at Fehi spa, the brightly painted entrance to a treatment room, and the texture-rich interior of a beach pool villa, all at Finolhu Baa Atoll Maldives