

SEA CHANGE

THE FIRST EXCLUSIVELY WELLNESS-FOCUSED RETREAT IN THE MALDIVES IS PUT THROUGH ITS PACES AS VETERAN SPA REVIEWER SUSAN D'ARCY ROAD TESTS FRESH-FACED JOALI BEING

THE MALDIVES ARE SO DEEPLY EMBEDDED in our minds as a honeymoon destination that we may all be missing something obvious. These tropical dots, with their coco-palm buzz cuts, bone-white beaches and Tiffany Blue lagoons may be synonymous with romance, but they might be even better for wellness. Until now, though, among its 150-plus hotels it's been hard to find one fully dedicated to wellbeing.

That's not to say the islands are short of pampering options. I rate the massages at Soneva Jani and Six Senses Laamu as highly as any in Thailand, the facials at Cheval Blanc Randheli a match for any Parisienne aesthetician and the Ayurvedic advice at Four Seasons Landaa Giraavaru on a par with a Kerala clinic. But these places are still mainly for barefoot easy living.

Joali Being, a tiny bouquet of jungle in the far-flung Raa Atoll, really is the first luxury Maldivian wellbeing retreat, with grand ambitions to take on big hitters such as Chiva-Som in Thailand, Vana in India and SHA Wellness Clinic in Spain. It wins instantly on location. The others are all in charmless suburban settings, even if the excellence of their therapists means I'd return to them in a well-modulated heartbeat.

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All things being equal, I prefer self-improvement in paradise, so it's good news that Joali Being has recruited alumni from the famous three for key roles including Ayurvedic doctors, specialist healers and chefs. Programmes centre around four pillars: mind, skin, microbiome and energy, and feature hi-tech diagnostics and a blend of modern treatments and ancient practices to achieve a feeling of 'weightlessness'.

Initially, though, it was the hardware that made me feel lighter. The 68 villas, four restaurants and 39-room spa were built along science-driven biophilic principles to promote a connection with nature. In reality, that means temple-like thatched structures with soaring ceilings, sections of sand floors and rooflines that mimic the waves beyond. Interiors are what Robinson Crusoe might have done with the place had he hit the big time: artisan driftwood finished with brushed-bronze caps, a restrained use of cane and coir, and a soothing pebble-grey, blush-pink and soft-teal colour palette. Open-plan villas have cute touches such as positive affirmations on the clothes hangers. Minibars play things straighter than some modern wellness retreats (I'm thinking of the CBD drinks and kelp jerky at New York's Equinox Hotel, for example): organic juices, raw-fruit bars and vegetable crisps.

The restaurants are more imaginative, albeit with a crowd-pleasing Maldivian mix of culinary styles, from Mediterranean to Middle Eastern. Meat, fish, vegetarian and vegan dishes list calorie, carb, fat and protein content and which of the four pillars the ingredients support. I was gratified that my spicy seafood nasi goreng (290 calories) was doing my brain and microbiome good and grateful that my more-ish coconut tart

(190 calories) was also immune-boosting. The food didn't quite live up to the Michelin-starred wizardry at Palazzo Fuggi in Italy or Les Prés d'Eugénie in France, but I appreciated the freedom of à la carte choice rather than strict set menus, as well as the excellent organic wines. So did my fellow guests, mainly fit-looking forty- and fifty-something couples, although several pined for salt with their meals.

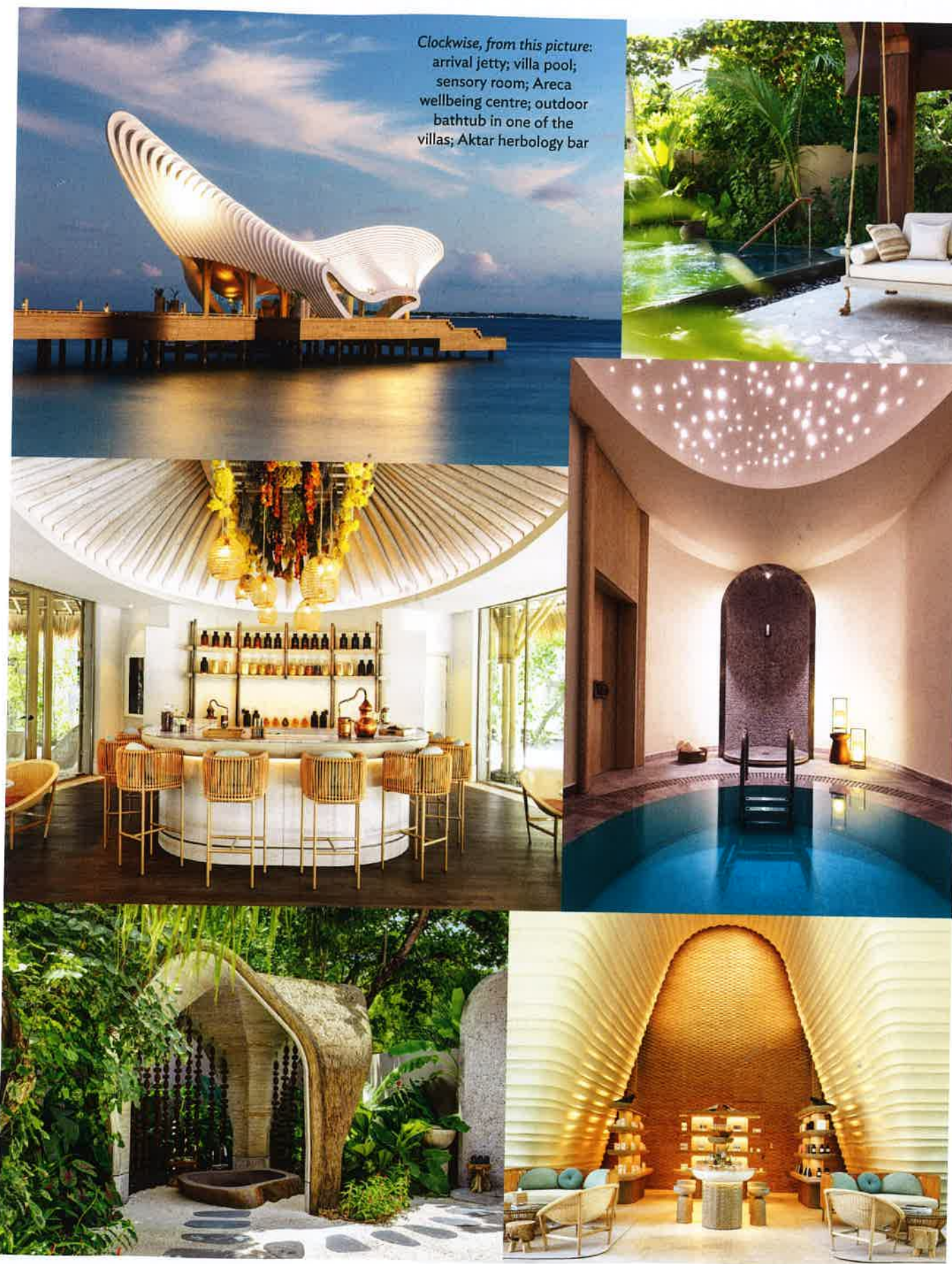
You could easily lose weight here without feeling deprived, but I wanted to improve mental focus and flexibility. My Ayurvedic doctor had one extraordinary insight. He took my pulse and asked kindly if I was grieving. One of my best friends died recently, but how had he intuited that from my heartbeats? Yoga and Pilates, held in the Ocean Sala, with its bird's-eye view of the water, were good but I yearned for a change of venue and sunset yin yoga on the beach or in a jungle clearing. Instead I would go to the wonderful Discovery Sound Path at dusk. It has a series of gongs, tubular bells and lithophones tucked among the pandanus trees, which I struck to create my own healing vibrations in the warm, jasmine-scented air. It was magical. The main complex has lots more distractions: glass-fronted saunas, steam rooms,

ice fountains, hydrotherapy pools and a huge salt room with illuminated pink Himalayan salt bricks, where I spent a happy half hour each day breathing in mineral-rich air to improve my mental clarity. It is even prettier than the salt room at Euphoria Retreat in Greece – until now a firm favourite. There is also a vast Technogym, as well as the Maldives' first cryotherapy chamber. I felt euphoric as I staggered to the fabulous herbology bar for a bespoke stress-reducing infusion. If Vianne in *Chocolat* had been a herbalist, her atelier would have looked like this.

I gave icy blasts a miss in favour of watsu, a water-based body manipulation in a twinkling domed pool. It was like being returned to the womb ready for rebirth as a principal ballet dancer. And I was blown away by the sound healing for which I lay on a bed that featured an integrated musical instrument, heightening the intensity of those transcendental vibes.

There are things I would change – adding open-air treatment rooms to make the most of the great location, or not charging for fitness sessions in a place that is already demanding on the wallet. But if you can afford a honeymoon with your health rather than your partner, Joali Being is a welcome format shift – one that may well ensure you and your inner self live happily ever after. **T**

BOOK IT Healing Holidays offers seven nights from £6,699 per person, half board, including Qatar Airways flights, transfers and activities such as mind and movement classes. A five-night Discovery Immersion Programme costs an extra £1,500. healingholidays.com



Clockwise, from this picture: arrival jetty; villa pool; sensory room; Areca wellbeing centre; outdoor bathtub in one of the villas; Aktar herbology bar