

"I HAVE THE BEST JOB IN THE WORLD!" THE BEAMING Maldivian is grinning from ear to ear as he expertly machetes into a green coconut, adds a paper straw and enthusiastically hands it to me. Forget Bhutan, the Buddhist Kingdom often considered the world's happiest country, I think I've found one of the happiest people on the planet right here at Niyama Private Islands, and guests know him as the Coconut Guru.

Maybe he has special psychic powers, too, because I was just beginning to hanker for a drink when the nostalgic sound of someone whistling made my ears prick up – *when was the last time I heard someone whistle?* As if by magic, there he was on my poolside terrace, and in a jiffy he was off with his cheerful trill to quench the thirst of the next guest. 'Where am I!?' I think. But I only have to look at the door of my villa, where a carved wooden sign reads: "Madelin's Home". Ah yes, silly me. I'm at my island home in the Maldives.

And you'd be one of the happiest people in the world, too, if you woke up here every morning – a destination widely considered one of the most idyllic and breathtakingly beautiful known to man. It may as well be a figment of my imagination, or a CGI scene expertly designed by Oscar-winning Hollywood filmmakers. The ocean is flawlessly blue, the light flawlessly dreamy, the sand flawlessly soft, the coconuts flawlessly sweet and the air flawlessly warm – it really is a nightmare – so naturally, I'm never leaving.

I am a Maldives debutante, so I've gone into this holiday particularly wide-eyed and excited – after all, I've been seeing perfect photos and hearing fairytale stories about this place for years. I expected to be awe-struck, but what I didn't expect was for the Maldives to spark in me a sense of child-like joy and wonder that has taken me quite by surprise.

I embrace the wide-handlebar bicycle I'm given when I check in (replete with another personalised wooden sign) with the enthusiasm of a BMX Bandit straight out of the 1980s, and cycle around Niyama's two small islands – Chill and Play – without a care in the world. I've heard every podcast and read every Oprah's Book Club-worthy tome on mindfulness, but it sure does make it easier to live in the moment when your surroundings are as paradisiacal as those found in the Maldives.

It's a game well played by Niyama. Offering 134 rooms including beach villas, iconic overwater villas and multi-bedroom villas; a kids' club; a lounge room aptly named 'The Lair'; and a Bali-style beach bar, the resort caters to all ages and a widening Maldives visitor market no longer reserved for bedroom-bound honeymooners.

"People want active experiences and adventure," says Deveekaa Nijhawan, Cluster Director of Public Relations at Niyama, and they're coming to the Maldives in droves on boys' trips, girls' trips and family holidays – not just romantic couples' escapes. >>

PLAYDATE IN PARADISE

THE MALDIVES ISN'T ALL ABOUT POOLSIDE LOUNGING AND SPA SESSIONS. **MADÉLIN TOMELTY** TAPS INTO HER INNER CHILD ON A SPIRITED RECESS AT NIYAMA PRIVATE ISLANDS

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Niyama is capturing this breed of restless, experience-seeking tourist that easily gets bored and doesn’t want to dine at the same two restaurants throughout their precious holiday.

Lucky for them there are no less than nine unique restaurants to choose from at Niyama, ranging from the momentous underwater restaurant, Subsix, to the treetop teppanyaki joint, Nest, casual poolside dining at Blu and, set half a kilometre from shore, the slick, overwater experience of Edge. But my personal favourite is Tribal, the Latino-African restaurant in the lantern-lit jungle that has my tastebuds doing the samba just a few mouthfuls in.

It’s ‘choose your own adventure’ at Niyama, and not just when it comes to what’s on your plate. How about sea-tubing? Parasailing? Sea-bobbing? It’s a good thing Niyama caters to children because my travel companions and I all turn into 10-year-olds at the watersports shack, each one of us eagerly putting up our hand to partake in activities we haven’t done since we were kids, if at all. “What’s that one that looks like Buzz Lightyear? Jet-packing, you say? Sure, I’ll give it a go!”

There are surf lessons on offer for those who are game, and a half-day boating adventure with a snorkeling pit-stop. But it’s not the marine life that’s the highlight of our day. Instead, it’s pods of chummy spinner dolphins we encounter – or rather, that encounter us – and wake-surf alongside the boat as we traverse the aquamarine ocean. They put on one hell of a performance, leaping into the air, spinning and flipping like rhythmic gymnasts chasing Olympic gold, and leave each of us buzzing from the thrill of it all.

We play hard in the Maldives, and by our last night in paradise, this toddler is all tuckered out. But there’s no time to notice, because another cinematic moment is unfolding before my eyes: a candlelit beach barbecue Destination Dining experience on the powdery white sand, followed by a private movie by moonlight.

After digging into dinner under the stars we hunker down into our beanbags, plates full of chocolate and sugar-coated goodies. We need to agree on a movie, and it’s an easy decision. After our light-hearted and playful holiday, it seems only right that we pick a film with a similar theme. *Tag*, a comedy about four friends who have been reuniting to play the children’s game of the same name for 20 years, is the perfect fit. As for the Maldives, when I visit again I won’t hesitate to say: “Niyama, you’re it.” 🍹

The Details

Niyama Private Islands is a 40-minute seaplane flight from Malé on the southwestern atoll of Dhaalu. Beach villas start from A\$857 per night. niyama.com

