

TOWN & COUNTRY

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THE WINTER SEASON

EAT, DRINK & BE MERRY *Candlelit suppers, midnight martinis
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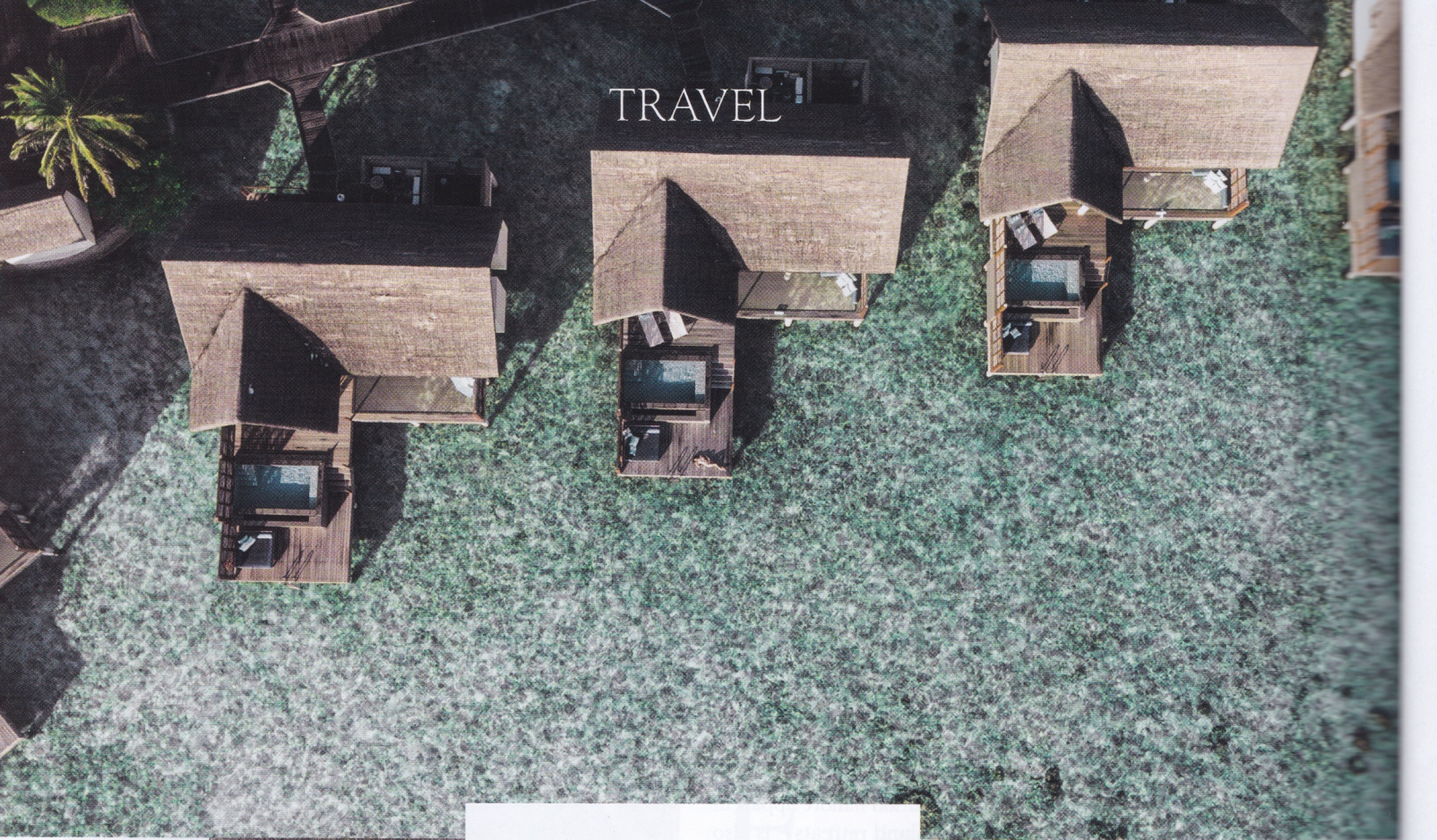
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TRAVEL

SPIRITED AWAY

*Kathleen Baird-Murray
discovers the therapeutic
power of the Maldives*



When Dr Shylesh Subramanya was a little boy in Madikeri, India, he would sit on the bus, close his eyes, and listen to all the passengers – could he guess what they did for a living, what they looked like, what dramas were going on in their lives, all from the sound of their voices? Fast forward some 20 years, and he sits before me in the serene herb garden at the Four Seasons Landaa Giraavaru, now a much-sought-after ayurvedic doctor and the director of the hotel's spa. He reads my pulse and asks questions to establish my dosha, or energy type. How else but by channelling that innate childish curiosity can he ask 'When you sleep, do you stick one foot out from under the duvet?' and already know the answer? (Yes). I am a pitta, by the way.

He has come a long way from Madikeri to the Maldives, much like the two long-haul flights, short car ride, sea-plane, boat and golf-buggy that transported me from London to this strangely artificial yet blindingly beautiful paradise. From the avenue of palms leading from the main reception down to the aquamarine sea, crystal clear and with barely a wave, to the lofty villas with their own pools, just a few steps from the beach, there's something inherently peaceful, freeing and exciting about being here. One of my happiest memories is also the simplest – cycling solo along the pathways, bright-blue sky above, tropical gardens on either side. It is the secret to making my heart sing.

While you don't come to the Maldives for the culture, stories like Dr Subramanya's bring their own spell-binding enrichment. I also meet a massage therapist from Bhutan, whose sound bowls and tuning forks send vibrations quivering down each limb. In my aching elbow she firmly rubs small heated muslin-wrapped balls of Himalayan salt and marigold until the pain dissipates. Then there's Kiran from Kerala, who teaches a small group of us to 'om' correctly on a jetty of soft-grey wood surrounded by lapping waves and baby sharks. We'd had a yoga-therapy one-on-one session the day before, a series of postures that massage the internal organs where needed. (It is claimed that this can help those with type-2 diabetes



to improve the function of their pancreas.) For ailments such as stress, we learn that sooner or later it comes back to breathing properly.

'Our guests come for a long time,' says Dr Subramanya, 'so we started with ayurveda as a base, building the spa around that, and then added traditional Chinese medicine with its acupuncture and cupping, as well as other therapies so that we can help people to understand their body type, why they're like that, and what is bothering them. In a

two-week stay you have time to teach people things.' I also try anti-gravity yoga, which is fun, if a little gimmicky, as well as something called a yoga trail. A honeymooning couple (who even manage to do some stretchy bends on a bar together with their arms romantically entwined – impressive if a little nauseating) and I take part in a three-kilometre jog with 15 yoga intervals interspersed. It starts with a trampoline and ends with a sun salutation. If you are a yoga purist, you might want to skip this one, but if

CYCLING ALONG THE PATHWAYS, BRIGHT-BLUE SKY ABOVE, IS THE SECRET TO MAKING MY HEART SING

on the other hand, you love to move fast and are into yoga for what it can do for your body rather than how it might help your soul... well, you move a lot and you sweat a lot.

But the best thing about Landaa Giraavaru is that it can be as virtuous as you want it to be. You can book in for 21-day programmes, where intensive detoxifying via the traditional ayurvedic approach of panchakarma is not for the faint of heart, or you can experience simpler, shorter treatments, including massages in the open-air pavilions and still leave uplifted and restored. It never stops feeling like a holiday, and the warmth and friendliness of the practitioners is always sincere. And then of course, there is Dr Subramanya. One evening we have dinner together, and after eating far too many puddings, take a break from the table to watch the sharks circling at feeding time. He confides he's a mean cocktail inventor and smiles cheekily. And in an instant, I can see the boy on the bus again, back in Madikeri. □

Seven nights at the Four Seasons Resort Maldives at Landaa Giraavaru, from £6,130 a person half-board, including return flights, based on two people sharing a villa, with Carrier (0161 492 1358; www.carrier.co.uk).

