

THE LUXURY SPA SPECIAL

WHERE TO GO TO
NOURISH YOUR MIND,
BODY AND SPIRIT



ELLE

THE SUNDAY TIMES

LUNA BIJL WEARING
BOTTEGA VENETA
PHOTOGRAPHED BY
DAVID FERRUA

2020

THE LUXURY SPA GUIDE

Make family time in the Maldives, enjoy couples' treatments in Como, find peace in the South African wilderness or have a spa day at home – welcome to the Style team's pick of the best places to relax, reconnect and recharge

STANLEY TUCCI escapes with the family to do nothing. All the time



JOALI IS THE SORT OF PLACE that your stressed imagination might conjure up when you think about paradise. A resort on Muravandhoo, a tiny Indian Ocean haven in the remote Raa Atoll, Joali sits peacefully surrounded by uninhabited islands. To get there, you'll need to go by seaplane from Malé, about 45 minutes away. The only aspect of Joali that isn't

relaxing is getting there. The 11-hour flight from London to the Maldives with my wife, the literary agent Felicity Blunt, and family — my two eldest children and our younger son, Matteo, 5, while our baby stayed at home with a carer — left us all desperate to arrive, but as the seaplane descended over the topaz water, we were so affected by the utter beauty and serenity of the place that the long-haul weariness seemed to filter away.

I was exhausted from a heavy work schedule. After spending the late autumn and early winter filming *Supernova* with Colin Firth in the Lake District, I went straight into another project, and I have been travelling for work a lot over the past year. Even though I was very much looking forward to a break with my family and two friends, I struggled a little with the idea of justifying a vacation like this. Seven nights in an exquisite beach residence with a private pool on a Maldivian island? It might just be my Italian Catholic heritage — I grew up believing that doing nothing wasn't an option — but I had to battle the guilt a bit. Especially as Joali is



designed, quite literally, to indulge you, to put you at ease and remove the pressure to do anything unless you want to.

The resort is so beautifully and sensitively constructed that it complements the natural landscape rather than dominating it. The Espa spa is pushed out over the ocean, so that you almost feel you're floating, cradled by the water. You can have massages every day if you choose to, and some of us did. I feel less guilty about massages than I did when I was younger, when they felt like an unnecessary extravagance — I exercise a lot and it's really helpful when you're tired and your body is stressed. The older I get, the more I can forgive myself some pampering, and, at 59, a massage feels more like resetting your body than it used to.

To keep things from becoming one endless party, we made sure we got to the gym every morning (before starting on the rosé at one in the afternoon), but fun seems to find you at Joali. You can do as much or as little as you like, though there are countless activities on offer: everything from a turtle quest snorkelling expedition to a private cooking demo with world-class chefs.

Matteo found himself a best friend — another London kid, because the world really is that small — almost instantly. They were inseparable for the week, walking together hand in hand down the beach, so the little boy's family sort of merged with ours. We watched him while his parents had dinner, and our son would hang out with them some of the time. It is a wonderful environment for children, and whether they were hunting for shells or fishing as the sun set, everything was oriented around the water and the natural beauty of the island.



While you'll leave the spa feeling that every knot has melted away, what really excited me about Joali was the food. There are four restaurants on site, and wherever I go I tend to insinuate myself into the kitchen — it's where I feel happiest. I've had a passionate love for Italian food all my life and written two cookbooks. People of Italian heritage associate food with family and love, and a lifelong

interest in the diversity and freshness of the country's food will allow you to recognise the real thing when you taste it, and Joali's Italian restaurant didn't disappoint. A highlight was visiting Her Kitchen, where Joali sets you up with a chef to have a personalised lesson or demo. There I watched the executive sous chef Taylor Shearman make tagliatelle with squid ink sepia. Then he showed me how he makes his fresh tomato sauce — it was one of the most beautiful, simple dishes I've ever tasted. A tour through the kitchen garden finished the experience, and I couldn't have been happier, with the fragrance of three kinds of basil and countless other herbs blending with squash, lettuce and the hushed motion of the water beyond. The Japanese restaurant was another highlight. Suspended over the water, it has the freshest fish you can imagine. It's exquisite.

Another fantastic aspect of Joali is the desert-island experience. One day, all seven of us — kids and adults — were taken to a neighbouring deserted island and left to relax and explore for the day before being picked up at six o'clock that evening. Before you leave, the resort packs you a sumptuous picnic, and you eat it on deck chairs on a completely empty beach. My friend and publicist, who came with us, and who had been feeling a bit overworked and tired, cried that day. When I asked why, she said it was because she was overwhelmed. It was so beautiful, so peaceful. You could live your whole life and never experience anything like it. We spent that day exploring with the kids and enjoying the uninterrupted peace; it felt as though we were the only people in the world.

The next day the weather turned and the itinerary went out the window, but the joy of Joali is that it wasn't really a disappointment. If anything, it was an even better excuse to relax. Imagine that beautiful feeling you have when you're snug at home with the rain beating against the window, only in a tropical paradise with possibly the best food you've ever eaten and staff so warm and well trained that they are always there to help but never overly attentive. This was a holiday unlike any other I have ever experienced, and I went home feeling genuinely refreshed. It's not a matter of whether we'll go back, but when. *As told to Laura Kennedy*

■ Stanley Tucci was a guest of Joali Maldives. Double rooms from £1,520 a night, B&B, based on two people sharing; joali.com

THREE MORE TO LOVE



From left Sheraton Maldives Full Moon Resort, North Malé Atoll (marriott.co.uk); Emerald Maldives Resort & Spa, Raa Atoll (emerald-maldives.com); Kudadoo, Lhaviyani Atoll (mrandrsmith.com)