

# Maldives' first castaways

By **SONU SHIVDASANI**

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**SONU SHIVDASANI** is an Indian-British hotelier and founder of Soneva Group which owns luxury resorts in the Maldives and Thailand. He previously founded Senses Resorts & Spas before selling it to concentrate on the Soneva Group. He attended Eton College and he holds an MA in English Literature from Oxford University.

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## When and why did you invest in the Maldives?

I first visited the Maldives with my wife Eva on holiday in 1986 and we absolutely loved the place. I had never seen anything quite like this. We loved the environment and we decided that we would like to open a resort like no other here.

Together we combined our respective experience in management, style and design to develop a resort that would satisfy our desires for a dream destination for those who liked to travel in luxurious style. We both also had an overwhelming desire to protect the environment. What was conceived was a unique philosophy of simple sophistication and returning luxuriously to nature.

We bought an abandoned resort on a far flung 100-acre atoll (Kunfunadhoo Island) in the Maldives and set about creating our dream.

After considerable effort and some good luck, our first resort, Soneva Fushi, opened in 1995. As the first luxury and environmentally friendly resort in the country, Soneva Fushi redefined tourism in the Maldives and soon became known as the premier beach destination.

We had no idea that our intensely personal vision of a locally crafted villa and environmentally responsible lifestyle would form the basis of a successful collection of world-class hotels, resorts and spas. But that's exactly

what happened. Soneva Fushi was the first 'castaway' resort in the Maldives, pioneering a trend for back-to-nature luxury holidays. It established a blueprint for a highly acclaimed international business, followed by spectacular Soneva Kiri on the unspoilt Thai island of Koh Kood in 2009.

My wife Eva and I spend half of the year at our home in Soneva Fushi, as we enjoy living here, it's an amazing climate and environment, and we are comfortable doing business in this country.

This year, 2015, marks our 20th anniversary, so it is fitting that as we celebrate our 20th anniversary we have also decided to invest further in this country with new resorts.

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## Why do you think the Maldives is such a good investment destination?

There are many great factors. There are unique, idyllic locations; good access in terms of infrastructure – both into the country from abroad and from domestic airport to the resorts. Plus, there is little government bureaucracy, and approvals come quickly.

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## What are the strongest benefits of the Maldives as an investment destination?

We have been dealing with government for the last 20 years, and we are extremely impressed by how clear



The Soneva Fushi Resort is the original desert island hideaway in the Maldives

and to the point they are, and how promptly they deal with requests.

We have developed resorts in many countries and the Maldives ranks among the best in terms of government responsiveness.

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**What do you think about Maldives' business environment and culture?**

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The economy has been well managed, and the country has experienced rapid growth but with low inflation. This has been achieved as a result of proactive government policies such as low taxation, no exchange controls, low labour regulation, low import duties and the ability to employ foreign labour (even though at Soneva Fushi around 75 per cent of our employees are Maldivian Nationals). The fact that the market is global makes the country efficient and competitive.

All of these elements have been important ingredients in this successful recipe.

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**What are some of the opportunities and challenges, in your view, in the Maldives?**

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The opportunities are a great central location, a beautiful environment, and the continued growth in infrastructure across the country, facilitating the further development of the tourism sector.

The challenges are the potential for growing bureaucracy and more restrictions, as well as the destruction of the natural environment and the beauty that makes the Maldives so unique.

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**What can we expect next in terms of new projects/development in the coming years?**

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Soneva in Aqua, the pioneering new concept from the Soneva Group will launch at Soneva Fushi in the

Maldives, in late 2015. Soneva in Aqua will further elevate the guest experience by offering the option of a boat villa which will combine all the benefits of this iconic resort's services and amenities with the freedom and exclusivity associated with a private boat charter.

The ultra-luxurious and highly refined yacht measures 19.25 metres in length and 6.40 metres wide with a cruising speed of 6 knots. Whilst supported by engine power, the yacht's mainsail will rely on nature to provide the majority of its energy. The boat has a maximum occupancy of four guests to provide the ultimate sense of exclusivity and privacy whilst offering intelligent luxury of the highest international standard.

The two-cabin boat features a spacious master suite with a glass sunken bath and shower facilities. The second cabin offers a king-sized bed and ensuite facilities. Other features include an external raised sun and dining deck, a lower level bar and dining area plus daybeds, lounge seating and a Jacuzzi. Additional sun deck space is also available on a lower level for spa treatments and an internal library, lounge and dining room provide additional areas ideal for entertaining. The design features natural materials such as rich brown leathers, woods and organic cottons. Soneva in Aqua has been built with environmentally zero-emission materials and all equipment including engines and generators are to the highest specification with regards to fuel saving efficiency.

It is our intention to open three more Soneva Resort concepts in the Maldives over the next 36 months that will be complement Soneva Fushi, but at the same time be quite different. The first new addition, Soneva Jani, will open at the end of next year. 

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Soneva in Aqua is a pioneering new boat villa concept