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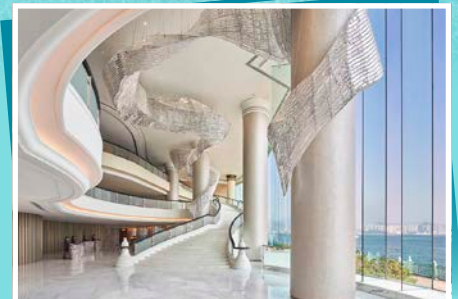
**Over-water luxury  
@ Gili Lankanfushi**



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## Over-water luxury @ Gili Lankanfushi



“No News, No Shoes” barefoot luxury is what one can experience at one of the world's best resort says **Chandragupta Amritkar** after spending four mesmerizing days at this heavenly abode

My favourite resort in Maldives is Gili Lankanfushi. So during ITB, Berlin 2019, when my dear friend Michael Chua, VP Sales and Marketing, HPL Hotels & Resorts informed that a fire broke out at Gili Lankanfushi and literally destroyed the resort, I felt sad (Having visited the resort in 2012 I have categorised it among the top 3 must visits of the 800+ hotels that have hosted me across 47 countries). Michael Chua further said, it would be a pleasure to host you as one of the first few journalists once the resort reopens. I felt humbled as well as elated. HPL Hotels & Resorts owns Gili Lankanfushi as well as 11 hotels and resorts and personally one of my favoured groups. Co-ordinating with Angeline Loh, Director of Marketing Communications at HPL Hotels & Resorts in July we narrowed down on dates in December 1st week and relevant flights (being star alliance gold member, I preferred Air India).



Landing at Male airport I was received by the Gili team and taken down to the jetty. As they were expecting another guest (turned out to be an elderly couple from Germany who were visiting the resort for the 4th time). The resort has its own fleet of luxury speedboats that brought us to Gili in 25 minutes. When they collected our shoes on the boat, I recalled their concept of “No News, No Shoes” barefoot luxury at the resort. He hands me a bag to put them in - on the side is printed: “No Shoes. No News.”

On arrival at the resort's jetty the resort team, including the GM - David Stepetic, the MarCom Manager- Tammy Gan, Mr Friday were there to greet me. I was surprised to see Michael Chua also. “I stayed back just to meet and catch up with you,” said Michael Chua bringing a smile on my face. After introductions and a bit of chit chat Mr Friday (personal butlers provided for each villa) took me in a boat to my villa..

### The water villas

Gili has 45 rustic-chic thatched villas with a mix of some connected to wooden jetties, which thread out from the tiny island and some that are stand alone in the sea. The rustic-chic design that is inspired by the resort's natural surroundings that was there 7 years back still existed. All the villas are located overwater and offer open-air living spaces, roof terraces and private decks with direct access to the sea and rooms with glass floor panels offering a glimpse of the corals blooming below. There are nine villa categories namely - The Private Reserve, Family Villa with Pool, Family Villa, Gili Lagoon Residence, Crusoe Residence, Residence with Pool, Residence, Gili Lagoon Villa and Villa Suite.

They provided me with a villa in Crusoe Residences, these are seven standalone water villas of 2700 sqft each, in a crescent format. These are in isolation (giving privacy) and require a small boat for transportation (you need to call Mr Friday for both pick up or drop). The villa is quite impressive - spread across two floors with a master bedroom, a huge living room which can be a nice



party place for 8-10 people (can also be converted into a second bedroom), spacious semi open-air bathroom and the best part was the private rooftop terrace with a daybed and if you want you can do star gazing at night. It was too windy and a bit rainy so I did not venture into this activity. Also these Crusoe Residences have their own private hammocks in front of the villa. Family villas are also quite popular. Measuring 3800 sqft they have two bedrooms and an outdoor jacuzzi with its own kitchenette.

### Cuisine

In the evening I caught up with Michael Chua over a nice vegetarian dinner at Kashiveli prepared by chef Hari. Located directly on the beach Kashiveli, which translates as ‘coral sands’ in the local Dhivehi language, is open for breakfast and dinner. The breakfast spread is amazing with a wide variety of fresh tropical fruits, an array of smoothies, health juices and other normal breakfast items including eggs, breads, pastries etc.

Michael mentioned that for the first time the resort had an Indian executive chef and he is good. I had to admit as the dishes were tasty. The chef then said in the morning he will have steaming hot idlis (a famous breakfast dish from India) for breakfast. I literally landed up having them on all the days along with other items in the buffet.

## Interaction with Executive Chef Hari Govindaraj

The continued success of any hotel/resort rests on two major pillars – service and food. While many hotels are able to bring their service on par but getting a good chef who not only has a passion for culinary arts but also pays close attention to detail is not easy. This is what I noticed in Gilis Executive Chef Hari Govindaraj. “At the age of 15 I started my education into culinary arts. My first job was in a Taj hotel in Bangalore as a soup chef. In 2007 from India I came to Gili and since then I have been here gaining exposure and experience with numerous top chefs including Michelin chefs.”



Harinath Govindaraj

As he took me on a tour of the organic garden, he explained the numerous herbs and vegetables. “We have our own organic garden and this helps us provide fresh

salads, freshly cooked vegetarian dishes. We have a lot of vegan dishes in the menu. We offer guests one-on-one classes to learn the art of cooking with seasonal produce, providing hand-written recipes for guests to take home as a memory of their stay Plans to expand the garden are there and fortunately I have full support of the GM. In future we will be adding more vegetarian dishes to the menu,” said chef Hari.

I had a great time with the chef and really loved his super foods, ice creams and the yummy chocolates.



The Overwater Bar overlooking the calm waters of Gili Lagoon is the resorts all day dining venue with lunch being the most prevalent. Lunchtimes see the open kitchen cooking up a concise and daily- changing trio of dishes, whilst a lighter option comes in the form of an extensive salad bar. The most popular are chef Hari's super bowls – which I tried and truly relished. In the evenings Overwater Bar becomes the perfect setting for sundowners with delicious cocktails freshly crafted using local flavours and served with light and flavoursome canapes.



Four evenings per week the beach and overwater bar are transformed with a buzzing market experience, with the Asian Street Market, Mediterranean Spice Souk, Passage to India and Maldivian Seafood Grill nights.

By the Sea which is open five nights a week offers Japanese fusion dishes using locally-sourced seafood and reef fish. Guests can enjoy authentic sushi, sashimi, teppanyaki and more. The extensive sake selection brings together only the highest quality sakes from across Japan.

#### Underground wine cellar

When visiting the famous underground wine cellar, I was curious to see if the famed huge piece of a tree trunk that was once swept ashore after the 2004 tsunami still existed as the main table. It was there and I suddenly felt homely. There was a lovely couple from USA who were relishing wine and cheese and while talking to them they said they had saved for 4 years to come and visit



Gili, as they had heard it's one of the best resorts in the world. The cellar is home to a wide range of wines from around the world and knowledgeable sommeliers will enlighten guests about the 500+ varieties of wine.

#### Spa and other activities

The Meera Spa is also overwater with treatment rooms featuring glass floors (I enjoyed the spa treatment while watching the fishes before going into a slumber). The spa section has steam room, sauna and dedicated relaxation terraces on the second floor. The relaxation area is peaceful and you can watch the waves. They have introduced a holistic healing - a five-night programme for those seeking a soulful spa experience.

They have a Jungle Cinema where movies are shown along with popcorn. I liked the small library with a collection of books mainly in English,



German and Chinese/Japanese. Dive & Discover is a five-night programme for budding divers with a passion for marine conservation. They also have guided snorkeling, a sunset dolphin cruise, sunset Champagne and canapés at the castaway platform, private destination dining at One Palm Island etc.

## Largest overwater villa in the world: Gili Lankanfushi's Private Reserve



"Its so spacious that it would be ideal for Indian or Arab families, a group of friends especially with reunions being the norm, a small wedding/get together, a corporate/directors meeting, a CEO get together or even the royals and their events," said David Stepetic.

From my villa I would clearly see this huge structure. "When it's ready it will be the world's largest overwater villa. We call it Gili Lankanfushi's Private Reserve and will be spread over 18,500 sqft. On your next visit it will be a pleasure to host you here," said Tammy Gan.

Located 500 metres from the main resort, Gili Lankanfushi's Private Reserve is sprawled across multi-tiered levels and can be considered an island itself. Comprising five vast buildings, linked by open-air walkways, the Private Reserve offers four bedrooms with spectacular lagoon views. It has a living room including a workstation equipped with a laptop and printer, an infinity pool on upper sun deck, spacious sun decks, two outdoor dining pavilion, couple's spa pavilion with a sauna and steam room, a gymnasium, cinema, bar and finally a water slide that runs from the Private Reserve's top deck into the sea.

## “We always had an eco-friendly approach and commitment to sustainability”

I had the pleasure to spend a couple of hours with the **dynamic GM, David Stepetic of Gili Lankanfushi**. It was lively and lovely conversing with him as he talked passionately about the resort and his dedication towards sustainability.

### The fire must have been a great setback.

Yes. It was devastating. Certainly one of the worst days in my life. The fire occurred at around 11pm and in a matter of few minutes seven over-water villas plus one restaurant were destroyed. My staff was able to safely evacuate all guests from their villas without any untoward incident. Till 7am I, my team along with firefighters from the Maldives National Defence Force worked in tandem to contain the fire. My team also made sure guests were provided alternative accommodation in other resorts and I have to thank my fellow GMs from these resorts.

### So your team played a vital role?

Absolutely. Infact you would be surprised to know that inspite of the resort being shut to guests for almost 11 months we hardly had any attrition rate. HPL management team had 100% confidence in me and we paid our staff during this period. It was an ethical decision. The staff helped us rebuild the resort and today you find it, I am sure, as amazing as it was before.



### Have you been able to maintain the resorts commitment to sustainability?

Sustainability is involved in every decision we make on the island. We always had an eco-friendly approach and commitment to sustainability. Even during renovation we have maintained our rustic-chic aesthetic and use of sustainable materials for the resort's construction. Our Marine conservation effort is much appreciated and welcome our guests to meet the marine biology team and participate in various activities. We try to use eco-friendly amenities and products and you may have noticed our policy - banning of all plastic. Add to this our large organic garden which produces much of the island's herbs, salads and vegetables.

An advanced rocket composter can process up to 100% of the resort's food waste, producing compost which in turn nurtures the island's extensive organic herb garden. I can proudly say we remain a sustainable paradise for the barefoot luxury traveler.

### Gili has already created a niche for itself. How do you plan to bounce back?

We are certainly among the top 5 hotels in the world (TripAdvisor Travellers' Choice Awards). With a new design concept inspired by the island's natural surroundings for a calming effect and new guest experiences + numerous wellness programmes we are sure guests will feel attracted. Our guests are encouraged to make themselves at home on the island and we in turn help our guests to make wonderful memories that last a lifetime.

### What about MICE and weddings?

Though we can't hold huge conferences or large weddings, it can be a nice location for top CEO conclave or director meetings. We are situated within one of the Maldives' largest natural lagoons and close to the airport is one of our biggest plus points. We are already a popular honeymoon destination and have had some good weddings but would truly look forward to host a nice Indian wedding.

