The Alchemists

In the delicate coral atolls of the Maldives, Soneva’s waste-to-wealth ecodesign directive leaves little to chance and little behind

Words by NICOLE TRILIVAS

“Soneva Jani operates on its own clock, one hour ahead of local time,” Mr Friday informs me as I woozily alight from the seaplane and on to a canopied dock. The jetty snakes like an artery towards a collection of overwater villas in silvery sandblasted pine, set against a palette of pure aquas and blues so forceful and insistent that they strain my retinas. This seascape is precisely why I’ve flung myself four degrees north of the equator to a constellation of islands smaller than the Isle of Wight.

He continues: “It’s so we have more daylight and use less energy.” I wasn’t aware until this very moment – as I’m zipped away in an environmentally friendly electric buggy towards my villa – that one may simply decide to alter time. It’s a brave move, one that underscores Soneva’s sky-high sustainability standards. And I’m impressed. Despite the private waterslides, wow-inducing retractable roofs, seawater pools and silent cinemas, Soneva isn’t just here to play.

All three Soneva properties (two in the Maldives and one in Thailand) adhere to this time-change policy, explains Mr Friday – and no, that’s not his real name. The sobriquets of the personal butlers across the resorts are a nod to Robinson Crusoe, one of many small details at the newly opened Soneva Jani and the original “barefoot luxury” eco-resort, Soneva Fushi.

Opened more than 20 years ago, Soneva Fushi was the first five-star resort in the Maldives, and a real game-changer thanks to its owners, Sonu and Eva Shivdasani. The passionate husband-and-wife team not only shepherded luxury to the Maldives, they also rejigged it in the process. “It is rare to enjoy oneself and not damage the environment. It is a luxury in which we too rarely indulge,” says Sonu. “Expense, we would argue, is not indicative of luxury. Rarity, however, is.”
As I step into my villa the floor-level portholes offer a foretaste of the saltwater below, the open-air bathroom feels gloriously isolated, the fans on the high ceiling swirl sea air around the room (and nearly eliminate the need for AC) and everywhere I look it’s blue, blue, blue.

If Soneva Jani is a study in lit-from-within blues, then Soneva Fushi is more green-toned. Contemporary wave-lapped villas are swapped for jungly thatched-roof lodges among treetops, with interiors decked out with handicrafts fashioned out of gnarled banyan tree roots and decorative seeds from corkwood trees (a favourite of the local fruit bats). Both properties rely heavily on indoor-outdoor living – “We build around trees here,” says Irfan, aka Mr Friday – and every villa comes with a bicycle, a green and idyllic means of transport around the islands.

Each resort has its own “Eco Centro”, and at Soneva Fushi 74 per cent of all of the resort’s rubbish is reborn. “The message has always been that there’s value to waste,” says Gordon Jackson, the area’s waste-to-wealth manager. According to ancient folklore, the first people who came to the Maldives couldn’t survive because of the lack of trees, until a great fandita (“sorcerer” in Dhivehi, the Maldivian language) created a magic potion that he placed in the mouths of the dead before burial. Soon thereafter the potion sprouted into the versatile coconut palm, and through the tree’s many uses the people flourished.

Life from death. Something from nothing. Wealth from waste.

I am reminded of the alchemy of the legendary fandita when Gordon shows me the Eco Centro at work. Styrofoam food containers are ground into stuffing for cushions or morphed into lightweight bricks, undersized coconuts are cold-pressed into oil for the kitchen and spa, husks are entwined into roofing and coir rope, sawdust from Indian almond trees becomes nourishment for oyster mushrooms, and jungle trimmings are baked into biochar and charcoal for barbecues. Soneva is now the first property in the Maldives to upcycle plastic waste, although there are no plastic bottles in their haul thanks to the 2008 water-purifying initiative that resulted in an estimated 1.2 million fewer plastic bottles in the landfill at Thilafushi, aka “rubbish island”.

“One of the goals of Eco Centro is to create a model of sustainability that other businesses can adopt as a foundation for their new resorts,” Gordon tells me, putting into words the soulful theme of “greater good” that surfaces again and again at the property. “All our sustainability practices and know-how are open-sourced and shared freely with others. We want to see the whole hospitality industry raise their game to tackle the environmental challenges of our time.”
One of the most direct examples of this modern-day alchemy can be found at Soneva Fushi’s glass studio, where glass waste is turned into practical pieces used throughout the resorts (like cups and pitchers) or into otherworldly works of art that seem at once liquid and solid. “The glass comes from every bottle that is brought on to our island for the purpose of consumption, as well as several other resort islands in the Baa Atoll,” explains Evan Venaas, Soneva’s chief glass specialist. “We process about one ton of glass every two to three months.”

Another colossal contribution from Eco Centro is the compost, which nurtures Soneva’s extraordinary fruit, vegetable and herb gardens. After a few days feasting on the gardens’ organic, pesticide-free harvest of asparagus, miniature bananas, pumpkins, Maldivian chillies, herb-infused oils and at least four lettuce varieties, my skin takes on the smug radiance of a Hemsley sister’s. A few metres above the garden the ingredients go from farm to fork at Fresh in the Garden, a treehouse restaurant (complete with rope bridge) that will soon be 100 per cent raw and vegan. What cannot grow is responsibly sourced. As the Milky Way flickers in the sky I watch dhonis (fishing boats) bringing in blue-grey jobfish, wet scales gleaming like polished marble. An hour later the fish is on my plate.

Soneva’s dedication to community partnerships not only translates into buying locally, but also to hiring locally, with a ratio of about four staff to every one guest. I meet people from all over the Maldives, many of them women thanks to the Women in Soneva incentive, which aims to increase the percentage of women employed in hospitality in the Maldives. Community outreach initiatives often intersect with marine preservation efforts, such as the Soneva Ocean Stewards programme. “We teach children how to swim to make them fall in love with the ocean and therefore protect it,” Federica Siena, Soneva’s marine biologist, tells me.

It’s common knowledge at this point that luxury and sustainability are not mutually exclusive. Properties can do both – and they can do it well. However, at Soneva, as I marvel at a budding abalone mushroom, bike barefoot over a lagoon, stare as a stump of glass psychodelically shapeshifts and shower under ancient red sandalwood trees that will never know a chainsaw’s bite, I wonder if we’ve not ascended farther still. We already know that ecodesign can be compatible with a luxurious experience, but perhaps it is beginning to be the reason we travel in the first place.

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