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Walking ON WATER

The world's most exclusive and paradisiacal accommodation – the **overwater bungalow** – is reaching new frontiers worldwide. The secret recipe of design-savvy villas floating over ocean blues has proved infectious, spreading beyond the cradles of overwater civilization, the Maldives and French Polynesia, to multiple coastlines of Southeast Asia, and even making waves closer to home in reinterpreted form. Not to be outshined, the Maldives continues to wow with its latest haute showstoppers in undiscovered outer islands, while French Polynesia rests on the laurels of its legendary reputation with no new construction to report. Here, we show you some of the latest and greatest incarnations of heaven on earth.

BY PAUL RUBIO



NOONU ATOLL, MALDIVES

Cheval Blanc Randheli

THE BUZZ: The Maldives' latest ultraluxury resort married French sophistication with beachside bliss, quickly earning status as the *ne plus ultra* of Indian Ocean chic. Part of the exalted Maisons Cheval Blanc collection and managed by Paris-based LVMH Hotel Management, the new resort brings a **Saint-Tropez vibe** to the far northwest reaches of the Maldives' archipelago. "It" architect Jean-Michel Gathy of Aman and One & Only fame designed the artistic, eye-catching villas using three-dimensional geometric frameworks to capitalize on the natural surrounds. Think: a hollowed wooden entrance that evokes the feeling of walking into a picture frame, and sunken benches for eye-level immersion into the Maldives' blinding blue waters. Twenty-nine of the resort's 45 villas consummate the overwater bungalow fantasy, while the others stand as extraordinary ocean homes on the island proper, all oversized masterpieces of haute modernism, beginning at about 2,500 square feet and rife with top-of-the-line furnishings and accessories. Beyond the villas, expect over-the-top water toys, restaurants serving Michelin-star-quality cuisine, eclectic art in the common areas, and beaches strewn with A-listers in sun-inspired haute couture.

REACHING PARADISE: Fly through the Middle East or Europe and connect to Malé, the Maldives capital. Transfer to Cheval Blanc Randheli by the brand's private seaplane.

PRICE TAG: From \$1,600

INFO: randheli.chevalblanc.com/en

STEFANO CANDITO (RANDHELI); RON THOMAS (MAP)



SOUTH MALÉ ATOLL, MALDIVES

Anantara Veli Resort & Spa

THE BUZZ: A short speedboat ride from the Maldives’ capital city in the South Malé Atoll, a string of islets converge to host a trio of lavish properties by luxury Thai brand Anantara. Each of these three resorts — Veli, Dhigu, and Naladhu (Maldivian for “sand,” “long,” and “beautiful island,” respectively) — carries a bespoke style, but it’s Veli currently garnering all the attention. In August 2014, the legendary property upped its romance factor with the introduction of 10 new Deluxe Over Water Pool Bungalows, doling out unobstructed ocean views in a **fiercely modish, wood-on-wood understated setting**. With units separated and positioned asymmetrically for maximum privacy, each villa’s plunge pool gazes over an endless — and sometimes surreal — horizon, a scene of living art also gracing

the floor-to-ceiling glass windows of the expansive bathroom. If or when the Robinson Crusoe factor grows old, prolific amenities of the greater Anantara colony are close by, including three swimming pools, nine eclectic bars and restaurants, a cooking school, a dive center, and everything imaginable for the water-sport enthusiast. Unlike most Maldives resorts catering to jet-setters longing to be marooned and isolated, Anantara Veli Resort & Spa and its sister properties fill a niche for those wanting a balance of quixotic escapism and active pursuits.

REACHING PARADISE: Fly through the Middle East or Europe and connect to Malé. Transfer to Veli by private speedboat.

PRICE TAG: From \$458

INFO: veli-maldives.anantara.com





THAA ATOLL, MALDIVES

Maalifushi by Como

THE BUZZ: Singapore-based Como Hotel & Resorts — the boutique brand that brought us Cocoa Island, often cited as the Maldives’ superlative overwater paradise — has opened **its sophomore property in the island nation**, Maalifushi by Como, deep in the Maldives’ southernmost, untouched reaches, where the whale sharks rule and the giant mantas roam. Half of the resort’s 66 villas straddle the crystalline Indian Ocean shallows, each of them an **understated masterpiece of high design** as envisioned by celebrated Japanese architect Koichiro Ikebuchi, uniting whites, woods, and earth tones across 1,150-plus square feet, channeling attention toward the 360-degree aquamarine environs. You get direct access into the picture-perfect saltwater lagoon by way of a miniature wooden staircase that commences atop your private, alfresco terrace, which features a stylish swimming pool, an outdoor shower, and a thatched-roof dining pavilion. Beyond endless aquatic rapture, look forward to Como hallmarks such as yoga classes, superb and health-conscious Como Shambhala cuisine, and the dexterity of top spa professionals at the overwater spa.

REACHING PARADISE: Fly through the Middle East or Europe and connect to Malé. Transfer to Maalifushi by seaplane.

PRICE TAG: From \$1,000 per night

INFO: comohotels.com/maalifushi

MARTIN MORRELL (SUITE)



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KOHRONG ARCHIPELAGO, CAMBODIA

Song Saa Private Island

THE BUZZ: Along Cambodia's unspoiled and lesser-known southern frontier, Song Saa Private Island opens up a brave new world for the luxury traveler, showcasing a national treasure beyond the land-locked ancient temples of Angkor. A brainchild of idealism and sustainability by husband and wife team Rory and Melita Hunter, this five-star private island in the Gulf of Thailand is as much about maximum luxury as it is human growth and development for local communities. All of Song Saa's 28 ocean-chic villas are characterized by **striking Asian minimalism** that feels at once uber-glamorous yet unfussy; 19 rest on the island proper, while the other nine emerge as heavenly overwater bungalows. Through the hotel's efforts, former dreams of a protected marine reserve, wastewater management for local communities, and environmental management have become reality. Overall, Cambodia's freshman foray into the world of overwater bungalows stands on par with the greats of the Maldives and French Polynesia. And in a subindustry that walks on water, that says a lot.

REACHING PARADISE: Fly to Phnom Penh, then transfer by road to Sihanoukville Port (about 3-1/2 hours). Alternatively, fly to Siem Reap and connect to Sihanoukville International Airport. Song Saa is a 35-minute speedboat ride from Sihanoukville.

PRICE TAG: From \$1,415 per night

INFO: songsaa.com

SUNYA THADATHANAWONG (EXTERIOR)



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SEPANG, MALAYSIA

Avani Sepang Goldcoast Resort

THE BUZZ: Malaysia's new Avani Sepang Goldcoast Resort presents an overwater world unlike anywhere else on the planet. First, it's a megaresort: 392 contemporary, stilted chalets constitute the country's largest overwater village. Next, it's within proximate distance to a major metropolis — a mere 45 minutes from Kuala Lumpur, with a daily complimentary shuttle linking the two. Finally, a **family-centric vibe** trumps a classic romantic ambience, with a well-oiled kids' club for keeping tots and teens entertained all day and amenities lending to family diversions aplenty, from paintball to go-karts to pingpong tables, volleyball courts, and bounce castles. There's fun for the big kids, too — the pampering Avani Spa, two personality-driven bars, the fine dining Hai Sang Lou restaurant, and more — though honeymooners might feel out of place in this harbinger of floating family fun.

REACHING PARADISE: Fly to Kuala Lumpur. The resort, in the state of Selangor, is about 25 miles from the international airport.

PRICE TAG: From \$239 per night

INFO: avanihotels.com/sepang



BRENT MADISON (INTERIOR)

Closer to Home

Skip the long intercontinental haul at these floating fantasylands south of the border



LA CRUZ DE LORETO, MEXICO

Hotelito Desconocido

THE BUZZ: Where the jungles of central Mexico meet the coast, the Hotelito Desconocido Sanctuary Reserve & Spa offers North America’s only true overwater bungalows. This low-impact, solar-powered eco-resort intentionally flies under the radar, hence its name, which translates into “Unknown Little Hotel” in English. Each of the hotel’s 27 *palafitos* (thatched-roof chalets) is singular in design, inspired by a different card of the nationally popular, bingo-like Mexican Lotería. For example, El Gallo, or “The Rooster,” employs masculine colors of red and black through the textiles and furnishings, with a feather-patterned headboard and a black, stone-hewn deep-soaking tub. Roughly half of the *palafitos* actually stand over water, **rising from a cerulean lagoon** adjacent to the Pacific Ocean; the others take shape as waterfront or oceanfront cottages. While the hotel indeed constitutes the apex of Boho chic and fosters a sense of complete escapism, this road less traveled is not for everyone. A **bona fide eco-friendly** mantra translates to no air conditioning, and the remote nature of the resort generally means all meals are consumed on-property through all-inclusive packages. Only the adventurous apply.

REACHING PARADISE: Fly to Puerto Vallarta. Hotelito Desconocido is a two-hour road transfer south.

PRICE TAG: From \$539

INFO: hotelito.com



PALAFITO (BOAT), EVA SICA (PATIO)



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BARBARA KRAFT (PATIO)



RIVIERA MAYA, MEXICO

Rosewood Mayakoba

THE BUZZ: Five miles north of Playa del Carmen, along Mexico's Riviera Maya, the 1,600-acre Mayakoba ecological reserve houses a posh resort community over a labyrinth of mangrove-clad freshwater lagoons, fed by the Yucatan's otherworldly sinkholes and spilling into the Caribbean Sea. Among the multiple accommodation types of Mayakoba's three luxury resorts, an innovative incarnation of the overwater bungalow has surfaced at the Rosewood Mayakoba, in the form of the Deluxe Overwater Lagoon Suite. Uniting **1,500 square feet of indoor and outdoor space**, these floating sanctuaries rise from the reserve's natural splendor, with the private plunge pool, expansive terrace, and modernist living room all flanked by the emerald waters. Grand arrival is by way of boat to your personal dock, but rest assured you won't need to navigate these waterways to reach the lounge-lined swimming pools, beach activities, and exalted restaurants. Opposite the lagoon, the suites' land-based back entrance leads to the resort's prolific amenities cast along the Caribbean blues.

REACHING PARADISE: Fly to Cancun. Rosewood Mayakoba is a 35-minute drive south, toward Playa del Carmen.

PRICE TAG: From \$700

INFO: rosewoodhotels.com/en/mayakoba-riviera-maya ■