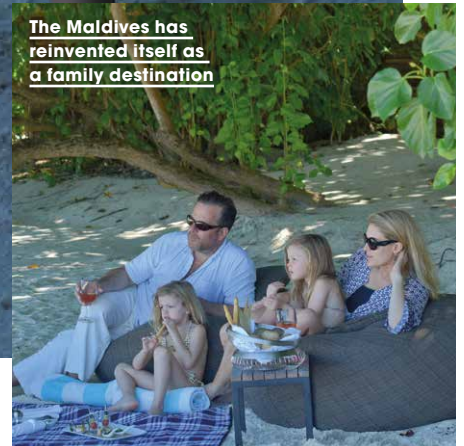


The girls loved having the opportunity to learn more about the ocean



New friends included devoted butler Nassah



The Maldives has reinvented itself as a family destination

A tale of two BEACHES

CAN TRAVELLING LONG HAUL WITH KIDS EVER BE RELAXING, FUN OR CHIC? **OLIVIA FALCON** TAKES HER FAMILY ON A DUAL-DESTINATION BREAK TO FIND OUT

The journey from the grey, London pavement to the soft sands of the Maldives was a long one: a taxi, a train, two planes, a seaplane and a boat, travelling across time zones with two tiny human hand grenades – Grace, four, and Georgia-Mae, three. This was our first long-haul trip as a family of four. Our destination? Amilla Fushi, a pristine beach resort in the Maldives, followed by a short hop to the colonial splendour of Cape Weligama, a hotel on the south coast of Sri Lanka. With their wow-factor design, these hotels are the kind of places I would have picked to holiday *before* I had kids. And after five years of quick and convenient trips, my husband, Peter, and I decided it was time for something more adventurous, free-spirited and grown up.

On arrival at Malé airport, the kids hurtle themselves at the baggage belt, which becomes even less funny when our bags don't show up. But an hour later, the airport drama is eclipsed by one of Mother Nature's most spectacular shows. We're at 3,000m on a seaplane, cruising over tropical atolls; neon-blue blisters of coral reef pop out of a vast ocean.

Once the reserve of canoodling honeymooners, the Maldives has reinvented itself as a family destination. Trailblazing the trend is Amilla Fushi, a postcard-perfect resort that offers pretty much the best of everything; food, accommodation and service, but in a deeply relaxing, unfussy way. The staff have an uncanny power to predict what you want before you actually know you want it: lemongrass-scented cold towels at noon, an icy martini at sunset, or a packet of wet wipes the moment chocolatey fingers threaten to destroy your white linen shirt. This is a place of indulgence and fast-paced fun, where you can eat a Wagyu beef burger with your toes in the sand, swim with dolphins in the morning and take a tour of the house reef on an electric-powered submarine at night.

The rooms are show-stopping. Rather than the traditional, thatched-roofed huts, Amilla makes a statement with modern,

white stilted ocean villas teetering out on the reef. In the jungly interior of the island, there are stilted treehouses with private swimming pools cantilevered 40m high in the trees and, not to be outdone, families with small children can also pimp it up in one of the new Residences (ranging from four to eight bedrooms), which feature pool tables, games rooms and vast private pools (Kates Winslet and Moss have both recently checked in en famille). We opt for a two-bedroom villa that has a pool and garden running out onto a shaded area of beach.

Amilla Fushi's tagline is 'Your island home', but we aren't in Kansas any more, kids. For a start we have a butler, Nassah, who is so devoted he carries the girls up and down the jetty in

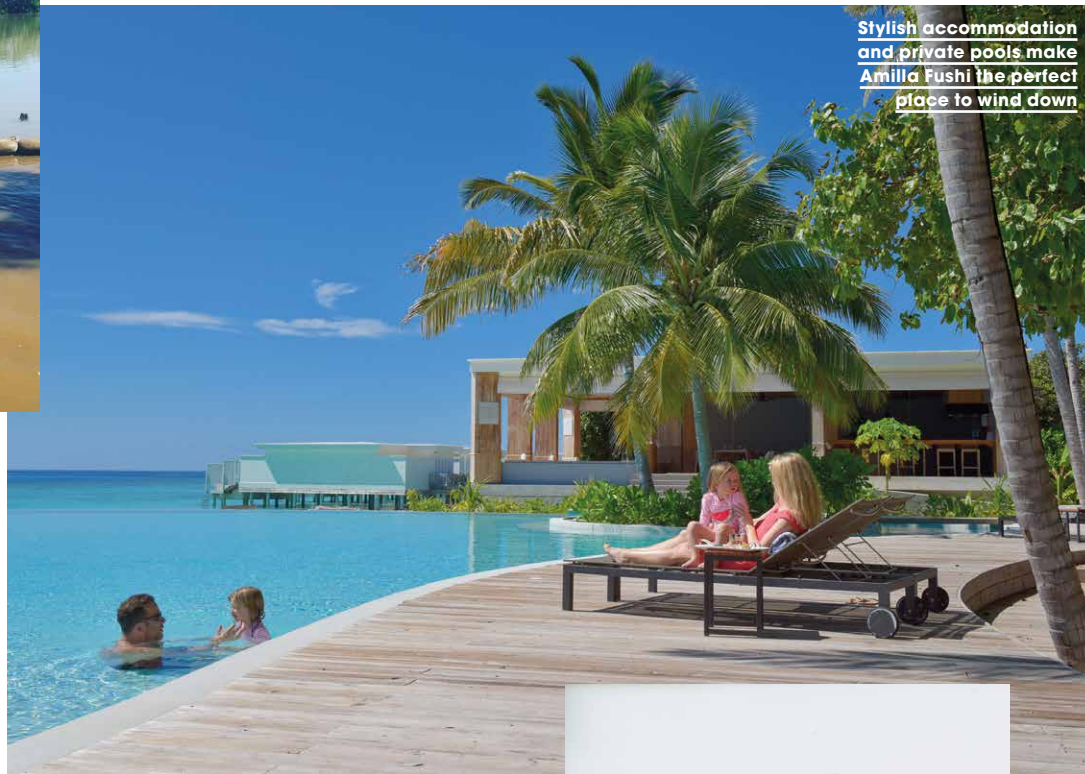
“The staff have an uncanny power to predict what you want before you know you want it”

the hottest part of the afternoon just so they don't burn their feet. There's also an army of adoring local girls at the kids' club, a cheery, Minion-muralled thatched cottage positioned right in the centre of things. It features a shady pool, traditional Maldivian swings, a trampoline and a never-ending schedule of energy-burning activities: treasure hunts, face painting, volley ball and crafts. Older kids are also catered for with top-notch tennis courts, a football pitch and a watersports centre.

We ditch homework in favour of afternoon sessions with in-house marine biologist, Lauren, who takes us snorkelling with turtles, and gamely dons a mermaid tail that has the girls squealing with excitement. She also gives fascinating ocean awareness talks, which spark some pretty interesting dinner ▶



Memories were made when the family bathed Lily the elephant



Stylish accommodation and private pools make Amilla Fushi the perfect place to wind down



The girls commanded tuk-tuk rides at every opportunity – but nothing is too much trouble at Cape Weligama

conversations. “Did you know that Nemo was born a boy but will change into a girl?” announces Georgia-Mae.

“That seems to be happening quite a lot where I come from, honey,” quips a Californian sitting on the table next to us.

Thanks to the staff, we leave Amilla feeling like we’ve had a proper break. Far more than just a fly and flop, the kids have learnt to name endless species of fish, and had the chance to spend a week shoeless, running wild on the beach with new friends. Furthermore, Peter and I have managed to gorge ourselves on the fabulous food and do daily workouts with the personal training team, so we leave without a post-holiday bloat. Departure is emotional. Will anywhere else match up?

A 90-minute plane ride from Malé to Colombo, and the Sri Lankan beachscape offers up a different kind of colour. Local fishermen shimmy up wobbling poles to cast their lines. Cows weave their way between scooters, jam-packed with families, dangling kids on the handlebars. We’re headed south, to Cape Weligama, a luxurious resort overlooking one of Sri Lanka’s best surfing beaches. Our ‘residence’, a family suite with two interconnected bedrooms scattered with plantation chairs and day beds, is stunning. I love the steam shower, walk-in wardrobe and complimentary laundry service. The kids are loving the manicured gardens, named after explorers and sea captains. They are filled with exotic creatures: peacocks, black monkeys and large monitor lizards, who for the duration of our stay desperately try to evade capture.

The heat doesn’t seem to wilt our appetites. We marvel at the tower of cakes and hot scones at the daily high tea, served in Taylor’s Pavilion, a beautiful wooden structure with views of the beach below. It’s hard to keep waistlines in check here. The buffet dinners are devilishly moreish and I’m reliably informed, “This is the best mac and cheese I ever eaten, Mummy.”

Sri Lankans love children, and the

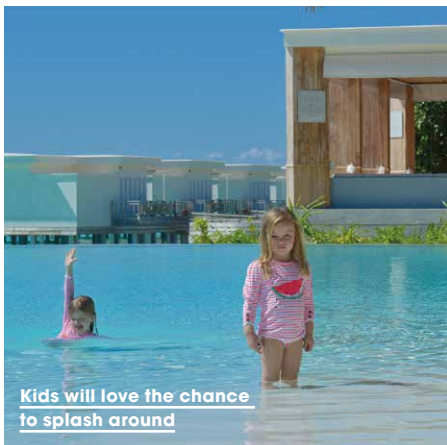


staff aim to please. The rooms are staggered up a hill and the girls command tuk-tuk rides at every available opportunity. The turn-down service becomes legendary when we discover Georgia’s Peter Rabbit has a new girlfriend crafted out of hand towels (a trick that is impossible to recreate at home).

There is no kid’s club at Weligama, the philosophy here is spending quality family time, and there are adventures aplenty. Whale watching is just a 10-minute chug off shore, and there’s a beach club with body surfing classes. You can take guided bike rides through the local villages and paddy fields to visit cinnamon plantations, but by far our highlight is an hour’s drive to Hikkaduwa to give a very special young lady a bath.

Lily the elephant has a proclivity for bananas and having her tummy scrubbed. Under the watchful eye of her owner, Devinda, both girls clamber on Lily’s back to help with her morning ablutions. Lily duly returns the favour by showering them with water. It’s memories like these that reaffirm our decision to adventure off the beaten track. It’s been an epic itinerary that has seen us take in glorious beaches, markets, temples and surf shacks, and we return home with a camera full of memories, and endless scope for show-and-tell glory. **L**

Experience Travel Group offers seven nights at Cape Weligama in a family junior suite and seven nights at Amilla Fushi in a Lagoon House for £4,648 per adult and £4,485 per child, including transfers and flights. 020 3411 3589 | experiencetravelgroup.com



Kids will love the chance to splash around