

The ESCAPE

Per Aquum Niyama in the Maldives features the first island for children in the Indian Ocean

Ultimate E I D A D V E N T U R E S

From the first children's island in the Indian Ocean to the resort where kids can play at being park rangers, Bazaar unveils the holiday season's most family-friendly finds



Quashing the notion that the Maldives is solely for honeymooners, Bazaar's **Louise Nichol** – with two-year-old Leo and six-month-old Fox in tow – finds a family-friendly haven that's chic for grown-ups too

PLAYGROUND PARADISE



Niyama's two bedroom ocean pavilion room



Left and this picture: Louise Nichol and daughter Leo at Niyama



Above: A piece of Dubai at Blu on 'Play' island at Niyama. Right: 'Chill' island from above



I like to think that I have fairly simple demands when it comes to holidays: unspoiled beaches, luxurious loungers, boat-fresh seafood and the ubiquitous outdoor bathroom will pretty much cover it. Anything other than lingering over long breakfasts before getting lost in my Kindle until the sun dips down is pretty much surplus to requirements. This should be easy to achieve, given the myriad destinations on our doorstep, but factor in a toddler and a six-month-old and lying uninterrupted on a sun lounger for longer than 30 seconds is more challenging than scaling Everest.

At least so I thought, before meeting the family travel visionaries at Scott Dunn, a UK-based agency that has expert knowledge of child-friendly destinations and runs its own kids' clubs across the world. The latest of its Explorers clubs to open is at Niyama, a Per Aquum resort in the Maldives, now home to the only children's facility catering to under-threes in the Maldives. It is on hearing this that I start to get excited. The island nation is a four-hour flight from the UAE, totally doable with the littles, and Per Aquum are the people behind the irrefutably classy Desert Palm Resort in Dubai. Could this be the perfect marriage of paradise, Pampers and pampering?

Following Emirates' four-hour flight to Male, the Maldives capital – happily scheduled at a sociable and non-sleep disruptive 9.50am – we are whisked through to Niyama's airport lounge to wait for the seaplane that will take us the 50-minute journey to the Dhaalu Atoll, arriving in the resort by late afternoon.

When it opened four years ago, Niyama was your classic hip Maldivian retreat, made famous by Subsix, the world's first underwater nightclub. By recently cultivating a second, connecting island aimed at families, it's now expanded its reach from club kids to kids' clubbers. Earlier this year, the resort unveiled 48 beach front villas on 'Play', the newly-developed island now dedicated to keeping adults and their offspring entertained without disturbing the newlywed couple in the adjacent cabana. The original island, 'Chill', remains home to 40 overwater villas as well as 94 beach options. Connected by a bridge, each side has its own all-day dining restaurant, pool and cleverly executed cuisine-specific eateries. With the two islands spanning a kilometre in length between them, crossing between the pair is encouraged, with bikes supplied and chauffeured golf buggies on demand.

We are staying in a one-bedroom beach pool suite on Play, which housekeeping have fitted out with a cot ▶

WHAT TO PACK
Leave the heels at home and opt for laid-back beach luxe



1. Rash vest, Dhs935, Orlebar Brown at Net-a-Porter 2. Shorts, Dhs1,715, Talitha at Net-a-Porter 3. Kaftan, Dhs2,720, Talitha at Net-a-Porter 4. Hat, Dhs1,915, Maison Michel at BySymphony 5. Bikini, Dhs1,525, Missoni at Boutique 1 6. Shoes, Dhs2,000, Nicholas Kirkwood at Harvey Nichols-Dubai 7. Sunglasses, Dhs1,990, Dior 8. Bag, Dhs3,280, Missoni at Boutique 1



Niyama provides all baby basics such as children's cutlery and crockery, sterilisers, bottles, cots, three-wheeled buggies, high chairs, baby baths, changing mats and baby monitor. All you need to bring is sun cream and mosquito repellent

1. Romper, Dhs800, Dolce & Gabbana at Harvey Nichols-Dubai 2. Flip-flops, Dhs80, Havaianas 3. Shorts, Dhs438, Vilebrequin at AlexandAlexa 4. Sun hat, Dhs62, Mayoral at AlexandAlexa 5. Kaftan, Dhs260, Melissa Odabash at Salines Boutique



1. Reparative sun lotion, Dhs450, La Mer 2. Face sun protection, Dhs171, Dior 3. Tan enhancing bronzer, Dhs257, Guerlain 4. UV Eye Defense, Dhs175, Skinceuticals 5. Sun serum tan booster, Dhs285, Guerlain 6. Body glow, Dhs225, Nars



for six-month-old Fox and a cosy sofa bed for two-year-old Leo, complete with cuddly seahorse toys. "Mummy, there are bananas in the shower!" is Leo's first scream of excitement on discovering the fruit tree growing in the outdoor bathroom. Luckily, this keeps her occupied while I quickly de-Haribo the generously stocked minibar. The thoughtfully provided in-room popcorn maker provides excitement enough (thankfully of the sugar-free variety), especially when I overfill it with kernels, and freshly popped popcorn flies out everywhere. This is hilarious when you are two.

The next morning we head to breakfast at Epicure, the main restaurant on Chill, ferried by the lovely Scarlet, our 'thakuru', the Maldivian term for butler. Scarlet is our point person for any requests during our stay and Leo takes a particular shine to her, insisting on riding next to her in the golf buggy throughout our stay. Leo's adoration only increases once Scarlet picks up on her love of coconut water and starts stocking the buggy with fresh coconuts lopped directly off the trees. As it transpires, it's helpful that Leo gets some form of nutrition en route to breakfast as getting her to consume anything during an actual mealtime is to prove near-impossible.

Both Epicure and Blu – the main restaurant on Play – are a tantalising toddle to sea and swimming pool, and before we can order so much as an espresso, she's stripped off and run into the ocean with all the social graces of, well, a two-year-old. She'll spend so much of the holiday in the water that I am grateful I packed little more than UV-protecting rash vests and swimsuits. Eventually, we coax her back to the pool, which has a toddler-depth paddling area (it's actually more of an ornamental feature, but no one seems to mind Leo splashing up and down) that keeps her occupied while we get on with the serious business of the breakfast buffet. Given the expanse of normally-prohibited fare on offer, from Coco Pops to chocolate croissants, it is testament to the unrivalled climate and temptingly clear blue water that she shuns pancakes for paddling. For the rest of us it's not all refined carbs; the chefs seem to relish the challenge of elimination diets, frequently bringing me unasked for, yet very welcome, treats such as gluten-free French toast. Children under 12 eat from the kids' menu for free and the island kitchens will whip up a baby purée in moments, delivering it to your table, sun lounger or the kids' club. Over at Blu, a miniature version of the gorgeous infinity pool is a magnet for the island's smaller residents, while the poolside ice-cream parlour offers homemade smoothies, sherbert and crêpes. Should your sun umbrella need moving a degree or two to the left, a 'sunshine thakuru' is happy to oblige and remains on hand with complimentary sun cream, water and Evian spray, leaving you free to focus on filling your Instagram feed with envy-inducing shots, thanks to high-speed wifi across the resort.

One of the many masteries of Niyama is the range and



Little Fox (above) and Leo (below) enjoy life on Niyama, which boasts the biggest children's club in the Indian Ocean (above left)



"Niyama is the perfect blend of paradise, Pampers and pampering"

quality of cuisine on offer; especially mind-blowing when you wrap your head around the remoteness of the geography. Alongside the casual dining at Epicure and chilled Miami vibes of Blu, the two islands are home to Tribal, an Africa- and South American-inspired eatery, which serves a brahman beef dish so good I order it twice. Staged under tents influenced by a safari in the Masai Mara, Tribal is experiential, without straying over to the wrong side of theatricality. Equally just-novel-enough is Nest, a clever construct of treehouse walkways and suspended pods woven throughout banyan trees in the heart of the jungle, from which Asian food and teppanyaki is served. We tell Leo that it's where the flower fairies live, and she spends a happy half an hour darting among the foliage in a bid to spot magical folk lurking in the leaves. But when it comes to indulging your inner adult, hire a babysitter – the kids' club staff are happy to help – and head out on a boat to Edge, a stunning circular venue perched in the middle of the sea. From the sophisticated over-water lounge we order bubbles and set about giving the honeymooners a run for their money in the blissed-out stakes. The accompanying restaurant offers a seafood-based fine dining experience of a calibre to rival any urban culinary destination, made all the more remarkable for the fact that you are in the middle of the Indian Ocean.

Sharing this watery seclusion is Subsix, the underwater restaurant-slash-party venue, which hosts glowstick parties by night and makes for an immersive dining experience by day. We enjoy a lavish lunch while gorgeously coloured fish dart among the mermaid-worthy coral garden visible through 180-degrees of floor-to-ceiling glass. Chairs fashioned after sea anemones and a ceiling covered in thousands of suspended capiz shells transport me into an Ariel-esque fantasy world.



On your bike: Louise explores Chill's over-water villas

While my husband and I are leisurely lunching, Leo is having the time of her life in the Explorers kids' club – the largest children's facility in the Indian Ocean. It includes a splash park complete with water-spurting dinosaur ride-ons, sunken trampoline, climbing wall, cute outdoor kitchen (which is put to use making brownies one afternoon), babies' sleep room and plenty of activity and play areas for children from 12-months to 12-years-old. There is a charge of Dhs90 per hour for leaving children under the age of three unaccompanied, but you are paying for highly-qualified and experienced staff who provide entertainment, education and bucket loads of energy. The aptly named Adam Smith is a whizz with numerical magic tricks – toddler economics! – and every day Leo proudly shows us her Maldivian-themed arts and crafts creations in an explosion of paint, glitter, feathers and the requisite empty loo rolls.

But Niyama isn't only a playground for children. My husband and I opt to bypass the spa and instead make the most of precious time off from parenting duties for more high octane pursuits, such as waterskiing and wakeboarding around the resort or – slightly more slowly – cruising on a stand-up paddle board. A snorkelling safari to one of the many reefs in the surrounding area yields shark and turtle sightings, while on another afternoon we hire a pair of Seabobs and race each other along the shoreline on our underwater rockets. Who says kids have all the fun? One memorable day we take the children along on a dolphin-spotting cruise and are fortunate enough to see shoals of the beautiful animals in the wild, swimming and spinning alongside the boat. It clearly makes an impression on Leo who falls in love with a dolphin toy in the airport duty free on the way home that is now a valued member of her inner circle of cuddly companions.

If you're more of a never-want-to-leave-the-room vacationer, Niyama offers a set of five over-water villas called The Crescent occupying prime position at the peak of Chill, which cater for up to 14 adults and eight children and come with their own housekeeper and personal chef. I grab

Leo for a sneak peek at how the other half – those without toddlers – lives. These chic spaces include a sunken living area, floating day bed and, rather excellently, an amped-up electric guitar, perfect for any of the resort's frequent visiting rock stars (or wannabe rock stars as is the case with Leo and me).

Sadly, my dreams of rock stardom are destined to remain unfulfilled, but Niyama more than makes up for any disappointment with its paradisiacal proposition of pure adult escapism combined with round-the-clock children's entertainment. The honeymoon might be over but the adventure's just beginning. ■

During September seven nights at Niyama starts from Dhs10,165 per person, based on a family of four sharing a Beach studio with pool and includes two complimentary nights, complimentary half-board, return flights from Dubai to Male and transfers. Scottdunn.com; 800 035 703 722