

by ANDREW HARRIS

A CURIOUS country, the Maldives. Over 1,000, mostly uninhabited islands of breathtaking beauty dangling down a 600-mile-long daisy chain of intertwined Indian Ocean atolls, it's the lowest country on earth. Most of it is barely a metre above sea level, the highest point just 2.4 metres. Even Holland has a hill!

It also boasts the highest divorce rate in the world, which isn't bad going for a population of just over 400,000, dwarfed by nearly 1.5 million annual visitors, a significant proportion of whom will be newlyweds.

Perhaps it's just as well official policy has long kept the strictly Islamic, alcohol-free local islands — and their apparent penchant for splitting up — separate from the tourist islands and their irrepressibly romantic allure for champagne-chugging honeymoon couples.

In truth, it would take more than down-in-the-mouth serial divorcées to burst anyone's bubble, once their toes are in the pure white sand, and the tropical sun is slowly strafing through the coconut fronds. The Maldives deliver what they promise and are every bit as gorgeous as they are purported to be.

The airport in the capital, Malé, is next to a huge seaplane centre where, if you're lucky, your resort will have a lounge. I am lucky. Vakkaru, my destination in the Baa Atoll, has a lounge to eclipse many an international business class offering, from where I gaze down on to the strange spectacle of floating planes skimming on and off the water.

THE vast majority of the 130 or so island resorts are tilted decidedly upscale, with commensurate pricing, not least as a result of the 60 per cent alcohol tax. Breaking the flight from Dublin with a welcome walk around Dubai's ever-expanding airport, it's tempting to raid the duty-

Crystal-clear lagoons, pure white sand and spacious beach villas — the Maldives truly is the best place in the world for utter relaxation.



Paradise
FOUN



e