

spatrends

TRENDS – VISIONS – STRATEGIES

underwater TOURISM

writer Laura Miller

First it was outdoor showers and private plunge pools, next it was overwater rooms with glass floors. Hotels and resorts are constantly trying to break new ground and offer guests unusual experiences in the quest to stand out from the crowd. Water seems to be a common thread in many novelty-driven offerings, but the new trend of creating underwater living spaces involves a great deal more investment than installing an in-room Jacuzzi. Is underwater hospitality a genuine trend of the future? Or is it a passing fad with unknown environmental consequences?



THIS PAGES: Huuqen Fushi Lime Spa. OPPOSITE PAGE: Conrad Rangali's underwater restaurant Itha.

any new frontier is virgin territory – ripe with opportunity and glittering with the lustre of unprecedented boasting rights. First. Biggest. Tallest. Deepest. Just ask the Virgin king himself – Richard Branson – who is currently plotting the world's first hotel in space. Human nature drives us to continually push the envelope, hence the fact that we succeeded in putting a man on the moon in 1969, something Jules Verne had only dreamed about when penning his

groundbreaking science fiction novel "From the Earth to the Moon" in 1865. Verne is perhaps better known for another classic, in which intrepid Captain Nemo announces to the passengers of his submarine Nautilus, "You are going to visit the land of marvels!" He is, of course, talking about the underwater world of "Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea," a world which continues to fascinate and inspire the intrepid and curious among us today.

Of course, mere mortals have been able to explore the ocean floor and its coral reefs with scuba gear ever since Jacques Cousteau pioneered the aqua-lung in 1943. His desire to reveal to the general public the wonders of a previously inaccessible world by enabling them to breathe while submerged is shared today with a new breed of innovators: hoteliers. No longer are you restricted to viewing the underwater realm through foggy goggles while clad head to toe in neoprene. The growing trend of underwater hospitality means you can dine, spa and play well below the surface – and has given new meaning to the phrase "sleeping with the fishes".

So, who was first? That depends on what aspect of underwater dominion you're talking about: restaurant, spa, wedding chapel, entire resort... the possibilities are endless. However, this is an expensive trend still in its infancy, and while there are ambitious plans afoot worldwide for extensive underwater establishments, as yet there are only a select few in existence. And notably, bigger isn't better when it comes to this trend. It is the smaller more intimate underwater venues that are making waves so far, while longstanding plans for a number of multi-million dollar undersea resorts have yet to materialise.

CONRAD RANGALI ISLAND RESORT (MALDIVES)

An award-winning resort situated on two islands surrounded by a vibrant coral reef, Conrad Rangali offers the world's first undersea restaurant. Located five metres below sea level, 'Itha' – meaning 'pearl' in Dhivehi – serves Maldivian-Western cuisine while providing guests with 270-degree views of reef and marine life. Crafted from transparent acrylic, also known as Plexiglas, the intimate five by nine-metre restaurant seats 14 and is reached via a spiral staircase at the end of a pier. Says Katherine Anthony, the resort's Public Relations Manager, "The beauty of the reefs and the abundance of stunning sea life was something we wanted to share with all of our guests, not just divers and snorkellers. Once it became architecturally possible to build an underwater space, the decision to use that space as a restaurant was obvious: Because people would want to spend time enjoying the underwater views it made sense to create a restaurant where one could happily pass a few hours." As of April 2010, the space has also served as an exclusive underwater suite for those honeymooners willing to part with USD11,700. Says Anthony, "Based on the number of enquiries from guests wanting to spend the night underwater in Itha, it's a concept that has certainly captured many people's imaginations."

<http://conradhotels1.hilton.com>

HUVAFEN FUSHI (MALDIVES)

The Maldives is an ideal location for underwater venues, boasting pristine coral reefs teeming with sea life as varied as manta rays and dolphins. Huvafen Fushi has taken full advantage of this aquatic

fantasy land by creating the world's first underwater treatment rooms as part of its Lime Spa. Influenced by the colours and textures of the sea, the two double treatment rooms feature floor-to-ceiling windows and interiors designed to reflect the tranquil outer world. Ethereal draped fabrics mirror gently swaying kelp while soft cushions evoke tactile versions of the corals and sponges. Even spa therapies embrace the essence of life below the waterline, with signature treatments "Unite Me – Crystal Ritual" and "Turquoise Explosion".

<http://huvafenfushi.peraquam.com>

There are also those resorts which play with the underwater theme, recreating the effect well above sea level at times...

RADISSON BLU HOTEL (BERLIN)

Situated in the heart of Germany's capital, far from the coast, the Radisson Blu Hotel does well to participate in the underwater

trend. How? By offering a number of rooms with views of the tropical underwater world of the AquaDom. The AquaDom is the globe's largest cylindrical aquarium containing one million litres of saltwater, and is home to many species of tropical fish and other sea dwellers.

www.radissonblu.com

SRI PANWA (PHUKET)

Located on a verdant peninsula on Phuket's southern tip, this resort and villa estate uses architecture to go "under water". Extensive ponds appear to merge with ocean views as seen from the Pool Club and the reception area of the resort's Cool Spa, yet they are, in fact, the rooftops of rooms below. The spa in particular utilises the known soothing effects of running water: The spacious treatment rooms enjoy one wall made of flowing water, created by waterfalls flowing from the ponds above in a continuous hypnotic roar.

www.sripanwa.com



ATLANTIS THE PALM (DUBAI)

The lost city of Atlantis is a legend that has inspired authors, Disney and an opulent 1,529-room resort on the highest 'branch' of Dubai's extravagant Palm Jumeirah archipelago. Visitors to Atlantis the Palm can live out their own Atlantean adventure in The Lost Chambers – a maze of underwater halls and tunnels leading to the lavish Neptune and Poseidon Suites. These boast bedrooms and bathrooms which look into the manmade Ambassador Lagoon – a huge marine habitat teeming with 65,000 marine creatures including sharks, rays and angel fish.

www.atlantisthepalm.com

While the aforementioned hotels offer a taste of what lies beneath, there are several projects afoot which propose entire resorts underwater...

APEIRON HOTEL (DUBAI)

Dubai will up the submarine stakes even further when the Apeiron Hotel opens at an unspecified future date. Still on the drawing board, Apeiron promises to become the second self-awarded seven-star hotel in the territory (the first being the Burj al Arab) and the first to offer an underwater spa, gym and restaurant. With a budget of USD500 million, the resort will no doubt be as sumptuously extravagant as Atlantis the Palm – perhaps even more so.

www.dubaifaqs.com/apeiron-hotel

HYDROPOLIS (DUBAI)

"Hydropolis is not a project. It's a passion," enthuses Joachim Hauser, the developer and designer of Hydropolis, the world's first luxury underwater hotel chain (or will be). "There have been many visions of colonising the sea – Jules Verne, Jacques Cousteau..." he adds. "But no one has ever managed to realise this dream." Yet, Hauser's futuristic vision is a 220-suite hotel with all the trimmings (including a ballroom) built 20 metres below the surface of the Arabian Gulf, just off the Jumeirah Beach coastline. About the size of London's Hyde Park, the hotel is designed in three sections: the land station where guests will be welcomed; the connecting tunnel which will transport people by train to the resort; and the submarine leisure complex itself.



THIS PAGE: *The Lost Chambers, Atlantis Adventure Park. Ambassador Lagoon, 11-Million litre fish-tank with more than 60,000 fishes. Atlantis Hotel, The Palm, Dubai, United Arab Emirates © Photolibrary.com*

However, the USD300 million project has yet to get off the ground (and into the sea). And other Hydropolis resorts in London, Monaco, the Isle of Man, Munich, New York and Qingdao are still just words on the website. Originally scheduled to open in late 2006, the Dubai Hydropolis has been delayed indefinitely due to engineering and environmental difficulties. Concerns have been repeatedly raised about the displacement effect of building a 640-acre underwater structure. Tides and sea levels could be severely affected resulting in flooding and unpredictable wave patterns.

Just because we have the ability and means to build a Plexiglas, steel-reinforced underwater habitat doesn't make it a good idea it seems. But it is certainly an idea that grabs the imagination.

www.hydropolis.com

POSEIDON UNDERSEA RESORT (FIJI)

Already under construction (but way behind its planned 2008 launch), Poseidon Undersea Resort seems to be the most likely candidate to garner 'first underwater hotel' status. Situated 12 metres below the cerulean waters of a 5,000-acre Fijian lagoon, the resort will offer 24 luxury suites and one spectacular apartment beneath the waves, as well as an undersea restaurant, library, lounge, spa and wedding chapel. Rather than trying to impress with grandiose promises and Verne-esque comparisons, the resort's website provides actual information, from safety and maintenance plans to

detailed activity options (such as exploring the ocean's depths in a 16-passenger luxury submersible or maneuvering your personal Triton mini-submarine through the lagoon.)

Construction began on the resort in 2001 in Portland Oregon, with the entire underwater structure built above ground, before being shipped across the world and then submerged. Guests will be able to control lighting on their slice of the reef and even remotely feed the tropical fish. Promises, promises – but no launch date as yet.

www.poseidonresorts.com

A GLOBAL TREND?

Other parts of the world are also buying into the trend. A seven-floor, seven-star underwater hotel (still unnamed) is planned for Istanbul, while a 14-island, 100-room underwater project known as "The Last Frontier" is underway off the coast of Palawan in the Philippines. The USD500 million endeavour is due to open in 2013 – we'll see.

The underwater trend has definitely met with most success so far on a small and intimate scale as demonstrated by Conrad Rangali and Huvafen Fushi. But it is also a trend that has enough potential to hook million dollar budgets. Is it here to stay? No doubt about it. If man had contented himself with climbing mountains rather than reaching for the stars, rockets and moonwalking would still belong in the realm of science fiction. So all we can say is – watch this space. 

