



THEN

NOW



SAME destination SECOND honeymoon

WILL OUR MARRIAGE PAST THE TEST?

To celebrate 20 years together, Louise Atkinson and husband Jonathan hope for wedded bliss as they revisit their original honeymoon destination

Writer Louise, 52, and Jonathan, 53, a graphic designer, live in Oxfordshire with their three children, Florence, 19, Isaac, 16, and Gregory, 14. On the first night of our honeymoon 20 years ago I danced around our beach bungalow naked, singing to my new husband: "Feast your eyes because I will never be this thin, brown and smooth skinned again." I'd been working very hard at the gym in the run-up to our wedding and had been thoroughly waxed and fake-tanned in preparation for the big day. And it turns out I was right. As we drifted in loved-up bliss through two weeks of gorgeousness

in the Maldives, we both gained a few pounds and my skin swiftly faded from mahogany to pink-with-freckles. In the years since, three children and a voracious appetite for food and wine have filled us both out and have – sadly – seen my prediction come true. In the 1990s the Maldives was the top honeymoon destination, promising soft white sand, palm trees and turquoise seas – an idyll of romance and relaxation. So when we talked about celebrating 20 years of marriage with a special holiday for just the two of us – our very first escape together without the children – we decided to splash out and go back. For us, honeymooning was all about taking the time together to reflect about

the big commitment we'd just made and to think about our hopes and dreams for the years ahead. We hoped a second honeymoon would allow us to give our marriage a health check, to reflect on what we'd achieved and to plan a path through the scary prospect of growing really old together. **PARADISE REFOUND** It turns out that like us, the Maldives has changed quite a bit. Some islands were lost in the 2004 tsunami, others have been taken over and re-named. They are a playground for Middle Eastern holidaymakers now and more of a go-to destination for just-wed Chinese couples than Europeans. But we struck out for JA Manafaru, a resort on a

private island in the Haa Alif Atoll, because it shared the same picture postcard gorgeousness we remembered. More enticingly, it offered a layer of luxury we couldn't possibly have afforded the first time around. Some things do improve with time! Before we left we looked at the photos from our first trip. I can't believe how young we look (and how slim we were). We both had glamorous jobs – I was deputy editor of a glossy magazine, Jon was a designer for a Formula One team – and we were full of optimism for the future. There are some things I wish I'd known then, and plenty I'm glad I didn't.

HUSBAND MATERIAL I wish I'd known that a marriage – even a good marriage like ours – would from time to time go through ups and downs with irritation on both sides. It was on that first honeymoon that Jon revealed his incredible affinity with holiday sloth: happily sliding from bed to sunbed and back again, pausing only to drink and eat in between. Whereas I galloped through seven books and signed up for a scuba diving

course, spending more time under the sea than on it. It put the differences between us in stark relief, and over the years Jon has been as infuriated by my slap-dash approach, relentless juggling and reckless desire to wring every last drop out of every day, as I have with his law-abiding, considerate nature and his ability to spend all day (and night if possible) watching cricket on TV. We've had to keep a close watchful eye on the dynamics of our relationship and tension has occasionally bubbled near the surface when it comes to the juggling of work with household chores. I can't say it wasn't tricky when Jon quit his job to become freelance like me and set up his desk beside mine in our very small home office. Now we sit side-by-side all day and sleep side-by-side at night. It's not a situation many couples would relish, but we have learned the value of spending

"I wish I'd known that a marriage – even a good marriage like ours – would go through ups and downs"

time doing our own thing – separately. I've enjoyed travelling with girlfriends, joined a swanky gym and have a new gang of yoga friends. He has *Game of Thrones*, cycling and skiing with the lads and an increased involvement in the local cricket and rugby clubs. It means we have plenty to talk about when we do down tools at the end of the working day. I realise now we have rubbed some of the sharper edges off each other over the years. I've become less impulsive (I'll use Jon as a "sense check" before firing off a stinging email or accepting an invitation to do the Three Peaks Challenge) and he's shown his hard-working nature and dedication to the family and our home. When I look at the happy, line-free young faces in those early honeymoon pictures I'm so glad I didn't know about the tough times that would etch the furrows between my brows and turn Jon's hair white. Like so many couples, we have withstood financial difficulties (rogue tradesmen and unpaid salary cheques) and sadness over the years. Although our eldest child, Florence,



second honeymoon



Same white sands, palm trees and turquoise sea... different swimsuit!

was a conceptual breeze, our attempts to provide her with a brother or sister were plagued by problems (an ectopic pregnancy and two long years of unexplained "secondary infertility"). I needn't have worried. Her brothers came along in their own good time and those agonies were soon forgotten. But, in our 40s, just when we thought we had it all my dad died (Mum had died when I was 21) then, that same year, Jon's mum was diagnosed with a brain tumour and her decline was savage and swift. The two deaths so close together brought back hidden depths of sadness and despair. Those were dark months when we leaned on each other very heavily indeed. Some couples are split by pressure like this, but we took it in turns to support each other. I wish I'd known that 20 years would fly by so fast. I think we thought we had all the time in the world and I should have slowed things down sometimes and taken more time to appreciate the good times as they hurtled past. I'd had a strong gut feeling when I first met Jon that this tall, strong, >>



Petal power – making the most of those romantic extra touches





The enduring romance of dinner à deux with toes in the sand



"I didn't dance naked this time around, but secluded five-star luxury is a powerful aphrodisiac"

kind man would be loyal and faithful, he'd look after me, and would be a great father to our children. By the end of our first honeymoon I knew for sure. Jon says his expectations of me were similarly high, with an added smattering of sex on tap, good food and witty repartee.

SUN, SAND AND SEX

I don't think he's done too badly. I remember thinking if we didn't make every night count on honeymoon it could bode badly for the health and longevity of our marriage. Jon just thought he'd got very lucky. But when we told friends we were off on a "second honeymoon" their raised eyebrows and cheeky side-smiles reinforced the expectation that this would be a sex-fest like the first.

This trip was condensed into a week and our options, thankfully, were

enhanced by the fact we were upgraded to a water villa, a hut-on-stilts linked to the island by a wooden causeway. Not only was this

the stuff of romantic fantasies, but it was completely private – with its own Jacuzzi in the voluminous bathroom, an outdoor "rain shower", our own infinity plunge pool on the deck and steps down to the impossibly blue Indian ocean.

I might not have danced around naked, but the silky new underwear I'd bought specially for the trip did get more exposure than it might have done at home, and secluded five-star luxury is a powerful aphrodisiac at a time when life with three teenagers makes uninhibited lovemaking a rare thing.

So what about our hopes and dreams for the future?

Lying there on a virtually deserted

3 TIPS FOR SECOND HONEYMOONS

- + Embrace your differences – if he's pacing up and down when you just want to read your book, drop him off at the water sports centre.
 - + Secretly inform the head waiter that you'd be happy with communal tables occasionally. Companionable silence can start to wear thin after two or three nights.
 - + Make the most of every minute – book the special romantic meals, the couple's massage, the boat trip. Life is short, you don't know what's around the corner, and it might be 20 years before you get to do this kind of thing again.
 - + Manage expectations. A second honeymoon is a way to reconnect with each other but not a magic wand to erase every hiccup in your relationship.
 - + Capitalise on the closeness and energy the break has given you once you get home by booking to try something new together, from canoeing to a cookery class.
- + jaresortshotels.com

beach without the detritus of everyday life to clutter our brains (no "is it my turn to walk the dog *again*?" or "why is the boiler making that sound?") we could talk about our hopes for the future. We vowed to somehow find time (and funds) to go away together like this more often, but also to celebrate our differences and to continue to pursue our own interests separately rather than trying to find common ground and do everything mindlessly together.

Above all though, I think we realised that the love and companionship that brought us together in the first place still forms the solid foundation of our marriage now and will bind us through to proper old age and decrepitude. We laugh together – a lot. We still look out for each other and we are kind to and about each other (mostly!).

I guess we didn't have to travel to the other side of the world to discover that, but it wasn't a bad way to find out for sure. **w&h**