

Playing it cool

CATCHING WAVES AND
A SCENTED SEA BREEZE.
SWEET DREAMS ARE MADE OF THESE

In Praslin, the bay of Anse Takamaka (in photo) with its dramatic rock formations is a popular spot to catch the sunset. Anse Lazio, a cove with a broad swathe of sand and gentle waves, is the preferred spot for a day out with the family.

By Neha Dara

Photographs by Dhritiman Mukherjee

Seychelles

has the gasp-inducing knack down pat. I've spent the last six days exploring parts of this archipelago of 115 islands off the coast of East Africa and, time and again, I've felt my heart stop, stunned into silence by another striking view or experience. Pulling aside the curtains of my room in the morning unveils a grand bay fringed by the semi-circular arc of Petite Anse beach. While snorkelling, a green turtle eyeballs me curiously instead of swimming away. Sipping sundowners on the beach of a private island, I feel like I'm in a movie set: The location is stunning, the scene picture perfect, and everything is in Technicolor. The setting sun performs like an actor who knows he has his audience enthralled.



Curieuse Island, a short 15-minute boat ride from Praslin, is a sanctuary for giant tortoises. Tourists can interact with the gentle animals under the guidance of a ranger.



Swimming a short way out from Mahé’s Petite Anse beach, visitors can snorkel with schools of colourful fish. There is also a reef nursery where a conservation team is trying to regrow coral and restore the reef.

Since I’ve got here, I’ve visited markets, talked to local experts, scuba dived, and listened to the tales of a treasure hunter, all in an attempt to chase the essence of this tiny island country with a population of just 94,000. Like any other traveller journeying to a land far from home, I felt an urgency to experience as much as I could. I wanted to soak in the local culture, load my bag with regional food ingredients, and have a wealth of encounters that I could tweet about and share on Facebook.

The result was a sort of energetic rushing about, in the course of which I had some memorable experiences. But in between all the hectic activity, I experienced something else: A number of quiet, pleasant moments that lifted my spirits and made my days complete.

On an overnight visit to Praslin, Seychelles’ second largest island, we took a boat to Curieuse Island. The former leper colony is a sanctuary for the astonishingly large giant tortoises that can live up to two centuries, even more. They were brought here from the island of Aldabra, an uninhabited, isolated landmass in the outer Seychelles which has the world’s largest population of giant tortoises. They moved quite fast for creatures that are stereotypically thought to be slow. One sidled up to me quietly while I chatted with the ranger.

My bright red clothes probably made it think I was a large, attractive fruit, the ranger suggested. Crouching down to peer into the old, old eyes of a friendly tortoise, I tentatively touched its leathery, wrinkly skin and was surprised to see it stick its neck out, like a cat, to enjoy the petting. Another visitor held out a branch of leaves and squealed happily as the animal played tug-of-war with her, trying to grab its food.

While in Praslin, we also hiked the trails of the Vallée de Mai, a palm forest that is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. It is the original home of the legendary coco de mer trees that have the largest seeds in the plant kingdom, weighing up to 30 kilos. Sailors who first spotted these seeds floating in the ocean believed they came from enormous trees growing deep underwater. Treading carefully on the path to avoid the thick roots snaking across it, I felt we were transported to a Jurassic world with tall trees and gargantuan 12-metre-long leaves that towered over my head. The heavy leaves creaked as we walked under them, the wind made a powerful racket, and we could hear the sound of waterfalls hidden by the dense growth. The evening sun shone through fallen leaves that had yellowed over time, making them glow as if they had hearts of fire.

Returning to the main island of Mahé, I visited



The main buildings at Denis Private Island are located at the island’s northwestern tip, facing a gentle beach perfect for swimming. In October and November, the beaches are frequented by hawksbill and green turtles that come here to lay eggs.



At the Vallee de Mai UNESCO World Heritage Site (top left), visitors walk under 15-foot-tall leaves of coco de mer trees which bear the largest seed (below) in the plant kingdom; The endangered Seychelles paradise flycatcher (top right) is endemic to the archipelago; Deep sea fishing (bottom right) is popular in Seychelles and practiced ethically with a strict catch-and-release policy for endangered species.



the market in Victoria, the nation's tiny laid-back capital. I stocked up on vanilla and cinnamon, the two spices that the islands have been known for since the 18th century, when the French first established spice plantations here. Spotting a telegram from Bombay in the window display of a store that sold everything from antiques to nails in different sizes, led to a wonderful encounter with an Indian family originally from Gujarat. I spoke to four of 11 siblings, all second-generation Seychellois. Kanchan, 72 years old but looking younger in her white knee-length skirt and long shirt, told me that they don't go out for meals because they're vegetarians, and drinking and smoking are taboo. Framed photographs of their parents and deceased eldest brother hung above a doorway. Three of the four had remained unmarried because they were unable to find spouses from India. Singledom was preferable to intermarrying with the locals, Kanchan emphasised. Like many sections of the Indian diaspora they live an odd dichotomy, making a living in a foreign land yet intent on preserving their forebears' way of life.

In the midst of all the planned activity and sight-seeing, small moments of joy sneaked up on me. On a drive one morning, I was lucky to find Anse Royale, one of Mahé's most popular beaches, absolutely empty because of a light drizzle. Amazed

to have that long expanse of sand to myself, I frolicked unabashedly like a child, twirling an umbrella, playing catch with the waves. At Anse Takamaka, the beautiful beach in Praslin where the Raffles Hotel is based, I found a flat rock where I sat watching the sun go down. For an hour, there was intense drama in the sky. It rained that night while we were having an al fresco dinner, but instead of being a buzzkill, the gusts of wind and cool drops of rain added a frisson of excitement. In the morning, the sky was a tapestry of deep blue and grey with rich silken veins of yellow and orange. As the sun rose, it seemed as though a pot of molten gold had been emptied across the sky.

At the Four Seasons spa in Mahé, which is perched atop a hill, I watched through bay windows as a fruit bat swooped up and around the trees, and a Seychelles kestrel courted its mate with the offering of a green gecko. These unique moments brought it all together for me. Solitary strolls or time spent watching the sun come up or go down became deeply immersive experiences. On one occasion I spotted a piece of rock that looked like a playful dolphin about to jump out of the water. An isolated incident like this doesn't sound like much when you talk about it, but in that instant, the dance of light and water was magic itself, and my mind had emptied of all other thoughts and needs.

RUTH EASTHAM & MAX PAOLI/LONELY PLANET IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES (SEDS)

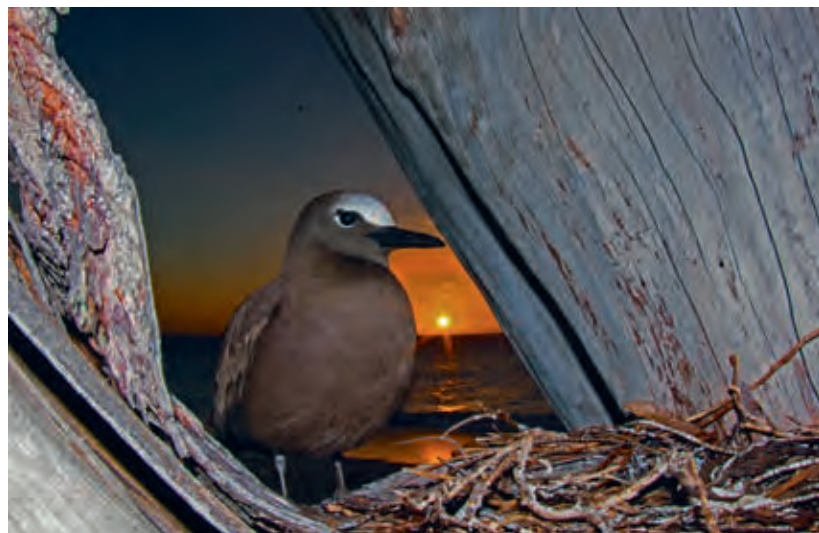


Petite Anse beach is the stuff of dreams. All rooms at the Four Seasons Mahé have views of the perfect semi-circular arc of white sand bordering a calm bay (top); Diving with turtles, sting rays, and schools of fish off Denis Private Island is a truly surreal experience (bottom).



The long, beautiful Anse Volbert is Praslin's most visitor-friendly beach with a number of restaurants and guesthouses located in close proximity.





The market in the capital Victoria is so tiny that you can walk through it in just five minutes. Even so, it bustles with activity (top left); Besides bananas and coconuts, of which there are plenty, most of the fruits and vegetables sold in the market are imported (top right); All beaches in the country are open to the public (bottom left), even if they adjoin a private property; A brown noddie (bottom right) nests in a piece of driftwood on the beach.

Focussing on the smaller experiences also made me more perceptive. From snatches of conversations I had in different places I put together a picture of Seychelles, which is a potpourri of ethnic communities. Some people look distinctively European, others are of African descent, and it's only when they speak in Creole that you know they're all Seychellois. From a hotel manager, who mentioned how she sometimes craves fruits and asks visiting friends to bring her toiletries, I learnt that life on the island is not always easy. For the visitor it is an idyllic paradise, but the limited landmass means that very little of what Seychelles needs is actually grown or produced here. Everyday things that we take for

Crouching down to peer into the old, old eyes of a friendly giant tortoise, I tentatively touched its leathery, wrinkly skin, and was surprised to see it stick its neck out like a cat to enjoy the petting

granted, like shampoos and detergents or fruits and vegetables, have to be imported, resulting in high prices and frequent shortages. Though the Seychellois seem to be a happy people, they are caught on the tipping point between the desire to hold on to the beauty and simplicity of their past, while wanting the advantages that come with change. The tourism boom has meant an increase in the number of jobs, and I met a large number of Indians who've come here to work for a few years, from hotel staff to Tamilian shopkeepers at streetside grocery stores. But this same boom has impacted the islands' resources in adverse ways. I saw rare shells and jewellery made from coral being sold in souvenir shops, giant tortoises kept in small pens outside restaurants, and heard about water shortages occurring with increasing frequency. Hopefully, the young nation (the islands only got independence from Britain in 1976) will find ways to protect its resources.

Our final destination, Denis Private Island, was the highlight of the visit. I was excited about staying on an island with only 25 cottages, where I wouldn't see another person unless I wanted to. There was no telephone signal and Wi-Fi only in one restricted area of the reception. Plunging into the water at sites just a five-minute boat ride from the island, I dived with turtles, sting rays,

and schools of sparkling, colourful fish. I tried my hand at game fishing and snagged a beautiful marlin. The sight of that fish jumping above the water is one that I will never forget. But while it was thrilling to battle the fish and reel it in to tag and release it, I learned that it was not a sport I enjoyed. It seemed cruel to make the creature suffer for my entertainment. The happiness I felt came from simply being out on the ocean in a beautiful boat, buffeted by the sea breeze as I stared at the horizon.

One morning, I cycled around Denis's five-kilometre perimeter, marvelling at how the beaches changed in character even on such a small island. Some were broad swathes of sand, perfect for sunbathing or building castles, while others were like shallow pools with gentle waves and bits of coral reef frequented by turtles, making them ideal for tentative snorkellers. At times the path veered inland, through the island's forested interior, where I spotted birds like the lovely Seychelles black paradise flycatcher, the playful red Madagascar fody, and the Seychelles blue pigeon. Spider webs stretched across palm fronds, glistening in the evening light.

I enjoyed delicious meals made from organic produce grown and reared on Denis. My favourite was a salad of crunchy palm hearts from trees




in the forest, accompanied by salty, grainy feta made from the milk of goats I'd spotted in pens earlier. The island also keeps its own cows for milk, poultry, ducks, and even pigs. It has several greenhouses for vegetables and herbs. In fact, the produce grown there now exceeds the island's requirements and is sold in Victoria, where it is greatly prized.

Whenever I could, I snatched a chance to lounge on the outdoor pavilion at my villa, pretending to read while I gazed out over the ocean. I watched snow-white fairy terns dance above the treetops, their wings spreading gracefully like dancers' fingers. I noted how the beaches brought out the playfulness in everyone. Not far from me, it was fun to watch serious 50-somethings, who could probably make you hiccup in a boardroom with a mere glance, making circles in the sand. This is the allure of the Seychelles: The joy of unplanned and unexpected moments and little discoveries, right under one's nose. ●

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Fish is a staple for the Seychellois (left) and it is common to see diners working their way through stacks of steamed prawns (top right) served with hot sauce. The country's unofficial national dish is octopus curry, dominated by flavours of turmeric, coriander, cumin, and coconut milk; Buggy rides (bottom right) around Denis Private Island give visitors a chance to see the property's farm and conservation efforts.

THE GUIDE

 Orientation	The Republic of Seychelles is an archipelago of 115 islands located in the Indian Ocean, off the east coast of Africa. It is close to other island countries like Mauritius, Madagascar, and Réunion. The capital Victoria is located on the northeast of the island of Mahé, the largest island in the group. The second largest island is Praslin, 44 km northeast of Mahé.
 Getting There & Visa	Air Seychelles operates direct flights from Mumbai to Mahé's Seychelles International Airport (www.airseychelles.com ; four times a week; duration 4.5 hr; from ₹32,000 round trip). Visitors travelling to Seychelles do not require a visa, though they must show a valid passport, return ticket, and proof of accommodation for the duration of their stay.
 Seasons	Seychelles has a warm, tropical climate all year round, with temperatures in the mid-20s to early-30s. Mar-May and Sep-Nov is a good time for scuba diving with maximum visibility. Apr is breeding season for most birds, while Oct is their migration time. Short showers can occur any time, so keep an umbrella handy.



Domestic flights within Seychelles are operated on small 14-seater planes that provide great views of the tiny wooded islands that comprise the archipelago.



Stay

Seychelles is a popular honeymoon destination and most visitors come here looking for a romantic indulgent vacation. There are hotels and resorts that cater to this very well, but there are also guest houses and homestays for those who want to experience the place more intimately or economically.

AFFORDABLE ADVENTURE

Mahé
Glacis Heights Located 15 km from Victoria, this villa has four bedrooms that overlook the ocean and Silhouette Island. It has welcoming hosts and good food (+248-4261280; www.glacisheightsvilla.com; doubles from €91/₹6,700).
Hanneman Holiday Residence This apartment hotel with 7 self-catering apartments is on Beau Vallon, one of Mahé's most popular beaches (+248-4425000; www.hanneman-seychelles.com; from €100/₹7,338).

Praslin
Côte d'Or Chalets Located on a

beautiful section of Anse Volbert, these service apartments have fully fitted kitchens and are just right for families on a budget (+248-4232424; www.cotedorchalets.com; from €150/₹11,090).
Illes des Palmes Eco Resort Perfect for a quiet break: Rest by the pool, kayak around the bay, or enjoy a delicious meal at the restaurant (+248-2711051; www.illesdespalmes.com; doubles from €102/₹7,504).

La Digue
Those who can't afford a stay at a private island can visit La Digue, accessible via ferry from Mahé and Praslin, to enjoy the vibe of a small island.
La Digue Island Lodge This centrally located lodge near Anse Reunion offers great value for money (+248-4292525; www.ladigue.sc; doubles from €112/₹8,220).
Chateau St.Cloud Hotel The property has spacious and tastefully done-up rooms, overlooking a beautiful garden

(www.chateautcloud.sc; doubles from €173/₹12,700).

LUXURY GETAWAY
Four Seasons, Mahé The hotel sprawls down a wooded hillside overlooking a bay and the semi-circular Petite Anse beach, possibly the prettiest spot in Mahé. Rooms are luxurious with plunge pools overlooking the ocean (+248-4393000; www.fourseasons.com/seychelles; doubles from €885/₹64,864).
Raffles Hotel, Praslin Located on Anse Takamaka, this hotel is remarkable for its friendly, welcoming service and for the excellent food (1-800-768-9009; www.affles.com/praslin; doubles from €540/₹35,978).
Denis Private Island A stay here is all about enjoying the natural environment. Guests walk about in swimsuits and flip-flops, cottages have open-to-air bathrooms, and private access to the beach (+248-4288963; denisisland.com; doubles from €800/₹58,646 per night; flights from Mahé extra).



After a day of swimming and snorkelling, visitors including the writer (extreme right) like to watch the sun go down, usually with a cocktail in hand.