

SHE SELLS SEA SHELLS IN THE SEYCHELLES

Well, not quite. But **Iga Motylska** did discover the Seychelles' virgin forests, granite peaks, turquoise waters and pure-white beaches.

FORTY-SEVEN PERCENT OF THE SEYCHELLES CONSISTS OF PROTECTED MARINE PARKS AND NATURE RESERVES, MAKING IT ONE OF THE WORLD'S TOP 25 BIODIVERSITY HOT SPOTS.

"People are really friendly on La Digue, so friendly you'll think everyone is making a pass at you," says Marlon Panagary with a wink. My Seychellois guide drops me off at the Mahé Inter-Island Quay and, before driving off, opens his window to shout across the road: "If you don't come back, I'll understand – I wouldn't want to return either!"

There's a saying in the Seychelles that God created the island nation with sailors in mind, and it's difficult to dispute. Here's a place where the most popular tippie is rum, where masts bob at the Eden Island Marina, where fresh seafood abounds at the marketplace, where restaurants are invariably decorated with sailing paraphernalia and ocean views come standard, and where you can take your pick of boating souvenirs at the Esplanade kiosks.

On maps, the Seychelles seem like mere blips in the sea, and in terms of land area, they cover just 450km². But these blips plus their coastal waters are spread over 1.4-million square kilometres of ocean, so there's a vastness to the 115 islands and islets that make up this enchanted Indian Ocean archipelago. They are necklaced by granitic inner islands and surrounded by outer coralline islands.

Situated just a few degrees south of the equator, there's a remoteness here that's very real – brochures like to brag about the Seychelles being 1 000 miles from the nearest foreign land. And, yet, people have been arriving for centuries, giving rise to a Creole heritage that's an intermingling of French, British, Indian and African influences.

LIFE'S A BEACH

Life on La Digue is epically slow. It may be the Seychelles' third most inhabited island, but it is miniscule – just 3km by 5km – and there's barely any motorised transport. Instead, golf carts go between the ferry terminal and the guesthouses, and hundreds of vintage bicycles line the streets. "The bikes all get mixed up," says the manager of my bed and breakfast, Château St Cloud, as she hands me a chain and padlock for my two-wheel chariot. "They have ours, we have theirs," she says matter-of-factly.

A man rests his chin and hands on the handle of his rake as he watches cyclists pedal uphill. I cycle south along the interior road towards Grand Anse Beach, passing matchbox houses, banana plantations, a shrine to the Virgin Mary, and wooden huts.

The tar road turns to sand at the lake of water lilies. At Grand Anse, two dogs sleep beneath a palm-leaf cabana in front of a beach shack, where the owner entices me with a buffet of octopus curry, barbecued fish, Creole rice, shredded unripened papaya and coconut chutney. Once my meal settles, I set off towards crescent-shaped Petite Anse, a mere 10-minute walk through the forest and over the boulders.

On the western side of the island, I cycle past art galleries and home-bound school children on my way to Veuve Nature Reserve, home to giant tortoises and one of the world's most photographed beaches, Anse Source D'Argent. It's a glorious curve of pure-white sand kissed by emerald waters and backed by sculptural granitic boulders, but my favourite beach is the relatively tiny Anse Patates at La Digue's northern tip. There, my bike-weary calves rest as I drink a mojito in a hammock dangling between two palm trees. ➤



Previous page, main image: A pale white shore gently lapped by emerald waters at Grand Anse La Digue.

Insets (from left to right): Fish stalls at Sir Selwyn Selwyn Clarke Market; a female coco de mer nut; a black parrot, endemic to the Seychelles.

This page, right: Takamaka Bay Distillery.

By morning, I'm so entrenched in the island's laid-back pace that I miss my ferry to Praslin. I run around the boat terminal, pleading with boat owners to take pity on me. But most are too busy offloading the morning's catch or slowly taking care of deck duties. One fisherman measures the value of my desperation and we settle on \$50 for the seven-minute trip to Praslin. I roll up my trousers and clamber into his boat. Soon I'm laughing into the spray with each skid against the water.

Praslin was once known as Iles Des Palmes – the island of palms. It is synonymous with the coco de mer, a palm tree that produces a double-lobed nut resembling female genitalia. The Seychellois call it the "love nut", and its male counterpart produces terribly phallic-looking flowers. These erotically charged palm trees are found in the Vallée de Mai Nature Reserve, a UNESCO World Heritage Site on Praslin, and nowhere else on earth.

Forty-seven percent of the Seychelles consists of protected marine parks and nature reserves, making it one of the world's top 25 biodiversity hot spots and an ideal island getaway for travellers looking for something beyond cushy resorts and scintillating beaches. Some 13 species and 17 subspecies of birds, including Seychelles paradise flycatchers and black parrots (which are actually brown), are found here and nowhere else. Hawksbill turtles float in the waters of Curieuse Marine National Park on the east coast, and Aldabra giant tortoises inhabit the surrounding islets.

GOING UNDER

Back in Mahé, I gear up for my first open-water scuba descent and listen to veteran divers extolling the virtues of these waters. The diving, they say, compares favourably with Hawaii and the Bahamas, the Dead Sea and the Great Barrier Reef.

At Baie Ternay Marine Park, I discover this wonder for myself as I glide between

the coral reefs and am struck by the vivid hues and extraordinary patterns of fish with compelling names: Moorish idols, clownfish and rainbow parrotfish.

Around 70% of Mahé consists of untouched forest, and drives along the island's mountain passes, crossing from one side of the island to the other, are wondrous. Mahé's peaks are a trove of hiking trails. There's the three-hour hike up Trois Frères ("Three Brothers"), a mountain with three peaks, and the steep 45-minute trek up Morne Blanc rewards you with spectacular views of Mahé's southern tip from its summit.

There are adventures to be had, too. At Constance Ephélia Resort, I buckle up my harness and fly through the forest canopy on a zip-line course that stretches between eight different platforms. Before the final platform, the turquoise waters of Port Launay Marine Park appear from behind the foliage. "That's where we'll cool off," says the guide.

But to earn a dip in the sea, I first get a taste of one of the island's tougher exertions: rock climbing. With my chalked fingers and a pair of borrowed climbing shoes, I pick the easiest of five routes up the 18m-high granite rock. There are mounted finger holds, plus the assurance of guides who know every crack and crevice, but the challenge and sweat are real.

I manage to reach the top and then abseil back down and give one of the more difficult climbing routes a bash. It's not quite the lazy, feet-in-the-sand island getaway I'd anticipated, but later, while partially submerged in the tepid shallows of Port Launay, with a crisp SeyBrew beer in hand and the sun melting into the waters, I know that I've discovered my Indian Ocean paradise. ■



A SWEET SPOT (TO WORK)

The Seychelles welcomed 276 233 visitors last year – just 3.6% of those travelled for work or business, which is understandable, given the image of a beach-strewn paradise.

The Seychelles ranks 95th of 189 countries in the World Bank's Ease of Doing Business Index, which measures worldwide business regulations; it ranks fifth in Africa after Mauritius, Rwanda, Botswana and South Africa. Its high ranking indicates a regulatory environment more conducive to running a local business.

South African-Seychellois brothers Richard and Bernard D'Offay and their father, Robert, run Takamaka, the islands' most popular rum distillery on the restored estate of La Plaine St. Andre, a national monument. Built more than 200 years ago, it was originally a working plantation, and today there's also a bar and restaurant.

Their main challenge is that demand and their own production capacity frequently outstrip the availability of raw sugar cane. The other challenge centres on remoteness of the island. "Being remote is one of the challenges we face in the Seychelles," says Robert, "but I guess that's the kind of challenge you're willing to overlook when you live and work in paradise."