



MAHÉ

Magic

Here's the question: Why would you shell out for the Seychelles when Southeast Asia supplies stunning sun, scenery and snorkelling right on your doorstep and generally more affordably?

The answer lies in the unique character of these islands and their fascinating history; a melting-pot community descended from the original 18th-century French settlers and their slaves, subsequent British colonists, slaves liberated from Arab vessels, plus Chinese and Indian immigrants. The result is a nation of people with a distinctive patois, cuisine and worldview.

Most of these elements come together at the famous Pirates' Arms in Victoria, the laid-back capital of Mahé, where we swig the local Seybrew and feast on spicy Creole fish dishes. We people-watch the Friday night crowd of colourful couples, families, tourists and Navy types from all over the world. It's hard to leave while the band is playing island-style covers of numbers from the seventies and eighties – and even older: isn't this one by the Shadows? – so we order a couple of Takamaka dark rums with Coke and linger for a while.

*Story by Verne Maree
Photography by
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Verne Maree*



In the first of a two-part feature on the Seychelles, Rebecca and Verne explore the subtropical beauty of Mahé, the biggest of its islands and home to Victoria, the smallest capital city in the world.

Apparently, we're being people-watched, too. Rebecca fends off a few would-be Romeos. One resident, who calls these amorous types "beach gigolos", tells us that they are a fun-loving and generally harmless breed, mainly after a good time and taxi-fare home. The Seychelles is synonymous with love and romance, and yes: there *are* women who come here as sex tourists.

Around sunset, we took a 10-minute, five-euro taxi ride from our hotel to visit the twice-weekly night market on the outskirts of Victoria. On the way back, the rate seemed to have doubled, so we protested that the hotel staff told us it would be five euros. Taxi-drivers are generally pithy conversationalists, and this one was no exception: "We don't tell the hotels how much to charge for their rooms, and it would be better if they didn't interfere with our rates, either." Good point, really.

It's my second visit to the Seychelles and I had mixed memories of Mahé, this African island-nation's main landmass. In 2002, when Roy and I spent a couple of nights here before meeting up with friends at the splendid North Island resort – a 15-minute helicopter ride away – we found Mahé pleasant but rather rundown. It is different this time. You get the feeling that the government's much-vaunted economic reforms have encouraged investment and injected Paradise with a new vitality.

Stirred, not Shaken

Our accommodation for the first two of three nights on Mahé – the five-star **Hilton Northolme** at the southern end of Beau Vallon Bay – was originally built as the Northolme thirty to forty years ago, and has been rebuilt from scratch since the Hilton group

acquired the property five years ago. A double string of spacious wooden villas overlooking a private cove, this is at the high end of the many and varied Mahé hotel options.

All forty villas are similar in size and layout – a terrace, lots of wood, plenty of wardrobe space, attractive prints of local artwork, cable TV, Nespresso machines and massive bathrooms with top-notch spa baths – but one of them has a distinct identity: If you like a bit of shag-pile under your feet and curling up on a round bed with a library of 007 DVDs, ask for the Ian Fleming Suite. It is named for the eponymous author, who is said to have communed with his literary muse while staying at the Northolme in the seventies.

Before breakfast, we turn right at the firmly guarded entrance gate (this *is* Africa, after all) and walk towards the nearby and famous **Beau Vallon beach**. A bouncy sort of dog determinedly befriends us along the way, ignoring all our attempts to send him home. Here is the Seychelles dream: an azure sky, clear and balmy water, and those iconic and lazy palm trees stretching at impossibly low angles across a wide stretch of white and powdery sand.

Later, staff member Nell takes us **snorkelling** right off the hotel's private beach, and then points out from a laminated card some of the species of fish we've seen.

Lines of black squid hang out here most mornings, families of turtles are regularly sighted, and the season for whale sharks is from May to November. These are rich and teeming seas; Mahé has the world's second-biggest tuna-canning factory.

Back on terra firma, Rebecca is particularly struck by the profusion and variety of flowering plants and shrubs – hibiscus, jasmine and bougainvillea, to name a few. Most spectacular is the amazing blossom of the **cannonball tree**, one of hundreds of neatly labelled plants in the hotel grounds: the only other tree of its type on the island, apparently, grows in the Botanical Gardens near Mahé's capital city, Victoria.

This is an intimate resort with a lovely feel, well-designed around a central infinity pool, bar and dining areas, a gym with gorgeous sea views through its glass walls (yes, we both hit the treadmill! – once) and the resort's **Duniye Spa**. We try *that*, of course: Rebecca has a very good pedicure and we each have a massage. I thoroughly enjoy the expert touch of my massage therapist, transplanted from



Duniye Spa



*Vista from the breakfast lounge
at the Hilton Northolme*



her native Bali to a massage table on an African island. The world is a village, isn't it?

There is plenty to keep you enjoying the amenities of the resort. The **Ocean View Bar** serves snacks all day, and boasts its own selection of infused rums, including one made with macerated orange peel. Off this is a lower deck, where movies are screened after dark on Sundays and Tuesdays. Monday night is sunset cruise and champagne night, and there's a cheese and wine party every Saturday.

On our second night, at a solitary table on the beach (you can choose from several locations around the resort), Rebecca and I may perhaps not have received the full romantic benefit of the four-course gourmet **candle-lit dinner** served to us by our charming butler. Nevertheless, we relished every mouthful, marvelling at how they managed to keep the meal piping hot in such a remote setting, and just about succeeding in solving all the problems of the world.

Two Le Meridiens

At the top end of Beau Vallon beach is the five-star **Le Meridien Fisherman's Cove**. It has been going since 1943, but was recently renovated with local granite and thatched roofs. Rebecca has a

Clockwise from top left:

The flowers of the cannonball tree; view from the Hilton Northolme and its infinity swimming pool; Beau Vallon beach; our snorkelling guide, Nell; the Ian Fleming Suite

grander Hibiscus room (45 sq. m) and I have one of the smaller Frangipani (35 sq. m) rooms, but it is very comfortable and has a lovely balcony with a sea view.

We lose no time in donning swimsuits and making our way to the hotel's beachside pool. There, I'm sorry to say, we lunch on beer and hot potato chips, and pretend that a chatty stroll down Beau Vallon beach will burn off the calories.

Breakfast is included in the rate, as is afternoon tea and coffee with a variety of cakes, even fresh crepes. This seems to be a general feature of Seychellois hotels. There are two restaurants – the a la carte Le Bourgeoisie, and the buffet-style Le Cardinal, where breakfast is served – and a stylish bar, Le Cocoloba, which is perfect for sundowners.

From Le Bourgeoisie, a decked walkway leads over the sea to a gazebo that is (of course) popular for weddings. From here, you have a stunning view of Beau Vallon beach to the right, and the famous outline of Silhouette Island.

Le Meridien has another hotel on the western side of the island – **Le Meridien Barbarons**, a spacious and open structure backed by a mountainous nature reserve and named for the beautiful private beach it calls its own. A four-star property, with rooms that look comfortable rather than luxurious, it nevertheless has a world-class spa: one of the French Cinque Mondes spa group.

From top:
*Beach at Le Meridien Barbarons;
pool, views and villas at Le Meridien
Fisherman's Cove*



Bookings

We warmly recommend Mason's Travel (the other big one is Creole), whose coaches, mini-buses and limos efficiently criss-cross the islands, meeting and greeting, chauffeuring and guiding with a smile that never seems to flag.


A campaign to make the Seychelles more affordable is reflected in a "buy one get one free" promotion, introduced for the 2009 Natas fair but applicable through to the end of February 2010. At the same time, the country is going through a series of economic and other internal reforms.

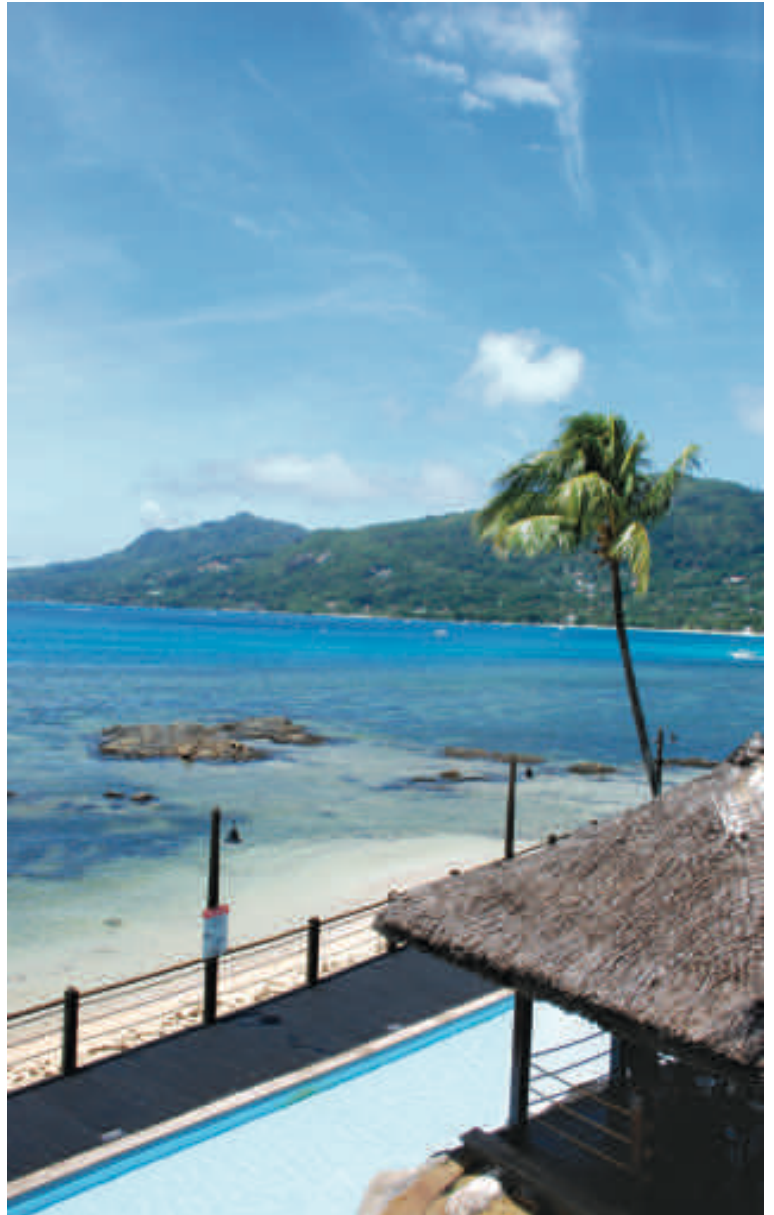
Apart from the hotels we tried, there is a huge range of accommodation for all budgets, everything from luxury resorts to self-catering beach-houses and yachts for charter. Mason's can help you find the option that is right for you. There's plenty of choice on the other islands, too. You'll have to wait for the January issue to read Part Two of this article, which is all about the exquisite islands of Praslin and La Digue.

Getting There

Air Seychelles, the Seychelles national carrier, flies to nine international destinations, including Johannesburg, Mauritius and various European capitals. It also operates multiple daily scheduled flights to Praslin.

It has twice-weekly flights to Singapore: on Wednesdays and Mondays. To us, five days seemed the perfect duration. We took the Wednesday 7.05pm flight, which arrives six-and-a-half hours later in Mahé at 9.45pm; the Seychelles is four hours behind Singapore. For the flight there, we were kindly upgraded to Pearl Class, where the food was tasty and the service friendly, but on the Boeing 767-200 there was no entertainment.

The Monday 8pm flight back took seven-and-a-half hours. This time in Economy class, with a film playing on the central screen, we managed to get a few good hours' sleep before touching down at 7.30am. 



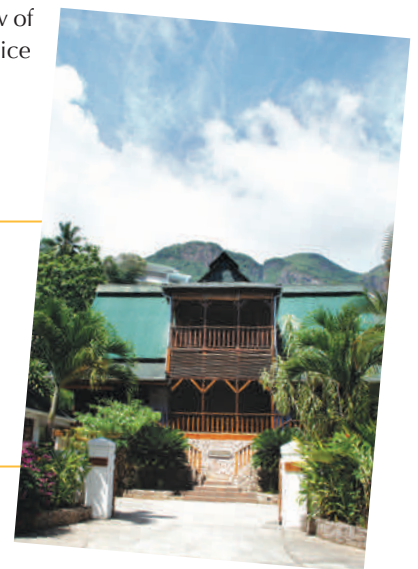
Clockwise from top:
View from the reception foyer, Le Meridien Fisherman's Cove; friendly air hostess on Air Seychelles; a wonderful place for Creole cuisine in Victoria, Marie Antoinette restaurant



FIVE THINGS TO DO in Victoria

1. Get your picture taken at the **Clock Tower**.
2. Admire the colonial architecture and evocative interior of **Kenwyn House**, built around 1855. Previously the residence of the German Consul, it is now a national monument and beautifully restored duty-free shop that sells mainly diamond and tanzanite jewellery, ceramics, clothing and other gifts and memorabilia, as well as fine art from Seychellois artists.
3. Browse through the colourful shells, sarongs and other tourist tat at the row of **tourist kiosks**. You might want to buy a *coco de mer* here; prices for the iconic love nut were higher everywhere else.
4. Drink a Seybrew at the **Pirates' Arms**. If you're still up for it when they open around 11pm, search out the **Love Nut** club in Revolution Road and boogie until dawn.
5. Feast on authentic Creole food at **Marie Antoinette**, housed in a superb example of a colonial Seychelles mansion just beyond the town. Specialities include aubergine fritters, battered parrot fish, chicken curry, and a stew of fish and vegetables, all served with steamed rice and a killer chilli sauce. It's a must.

- www.airseychelles.com
- www.lemeridien.com/fishcover
- www.hilton.com
- www.masonstravel.com



Top left: Kenwyn House; **top right:** Clock Tower and Kenwyn House; **middle:** the colourful market in Victoria, and one of many roadside stalls selling beautiful shells and trinkets; **bottom:** The Pirates Arms