

Four Seasons Private Residences Seychelles

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The world's best beach

Charlie Scott heads to the Seychelles to enjoy one of the world's most beautiful resorts

THERE is a beach in the Seychelles that has long been a hidden secret. The bay of La Petite Anse has been known only to 18th century pirates and more recent intrepid backpackers. The latest Lonely Planet guide suggests that this beach, on a once-inaccessible corner of the island of Mahe, might just be heaven. Once a 20-minute trek from the road through thick jungle, it is now home to one of the newest five-star resorts in the world. The Four Seasons Seychelles having arrived on the forested slopes of this remote cove.

With great granite cliffs as a backdrop, the tropical forest spills right down to this half-mile smile of gleaming white sand. Wrapped up in the perfect cove, the waters are clear and calm, a light turquoise deepening to the sapphire horizon. When the sun starts to set centre stage, a more dramatic, faraway heaven is hard to imagine.

My only company on this otherwise deserted beach is welcome but unbidden. As I lounge on the sands, from underneath a nearby mango tree emerges a white-liveried footman offering cooling flannels and a cocktail.

This kind of barefoot luxury has become the established hallmark of the Indian Ocean getaway. The Maldives and Mauritius have been leading the way with the cool flannels alongside personal butlers, sunscreen sommeliers and sunglasses valets, extraordinary service that matches and occasionally overpowers the extraordinary settings.

ISLAND ARCHIPELAGO

In the last few years a host of stunning hotels have emerged amongst the Seychelles' 115-island archipelago, and now the big names are arriving to complement the existing resorts. Shangri-La, Raffles and Emirates are all set to open, once they have passed the rigorous eco-rating that has denied previous development. This batch of investment is intended to not be repeated, so the Four Seasons could be the first of a rare breed, matching label hotels with conservation standards.

Looking back up the slopes of La Petite Anse you don't see a new resort. It may have only opened in February, but it took six years of planning and two more to build. There are 67 villas and 28 private

residences stilted amongst the palms and spice trees but it still looks like jungle from the shore, with just the pavilion roofs poking through the canopy.

For a five-star, major brand resort the trouble that has been taken to preserve the natural environment is incredible. Trees occasionally shoot through tailored holes in the decking and between the villas and paths is a rich tropical vegetation.

Perched on the hillside and looking out across the bay the villas are clapboard Creole cottages with the five-star touch.

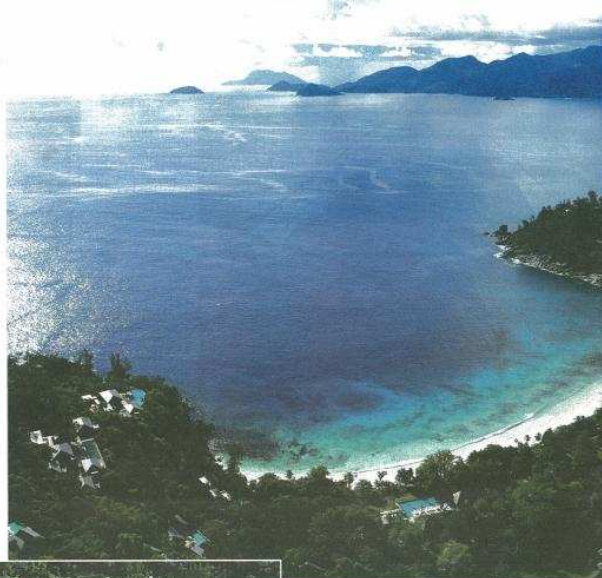
The spacious interiors include painted paneled walls, teak floors, Balinese furniture and vast, shrouded beds. There are outdoor and indoor showers and a glass-enclosed, glass-walled sunken marble bath. Outside there are hardwood deck terraces with dining areas, sun loungers, a separate

pagoda and daybed and an incredible tree-top infinity plunge pool.

I felt I was in my own little Seychellois bolt-hole. With the canopy view and plunge pool there is little incentive to do anything but call room service for some more reef fish carpaccio and enjoy the sunset from your deluxe amphitheatre seat. Only the overcomplicated electronic controls and overpriced internet access remind you that you are in a hotel room.

You can hear the sea from your pod but

There is little incentive to do anything but call room service for reef fish carpaccio and enjoy the sunset from your deluxe amphitheatre seat



Left and above: the beach at La Petite Anse is one of the most beautiful in the world.

it would be a shame not to enjoy the beach and swim in the bay. Some of the local staff remember hacking through the jungle for picnics, perfect swimming and snorkelling with turtles and whale sharks.

It is easier now. Hidden around the hillside is every facility you would expect from a five-star operation. There is a pool, bar, two restaurants and a gym, apparently. Service is slick and there are plenty of those cool flannels and surprise cocktails.

PETAL BATHS

The spa is the resort's crown. Perched at the very top of the bay the setting will enchant you before the treatments even begin. Bright spa suites with petal baths open out to the view. The staff combine their expertise with local touches.

The steep hills mean that golf buggies are the only sensible way to get around, though they're somewhat incongruous in such a paradise. With its buggies and the air-conditioned luxuries, the resort could seem too antiseptic. But sitting just below the equator, 1,000 miles from anywhere, it still manages to feel true to the faraway beauty of the Seychelles.

Faraway, but the airport is only a half-hour transfer away, the time difference is four hours and flights are a very civilised eight hours from London. There are other advantages to being on the main island - attractions and activities are easier to access - but it is a sleepy sultry place. Archipelagos are for island-hopping, after all, and a boat can pick you up right from your beach.

From the sea the coves appear more remote and precious, and you get a sense of the history of pirate legends and the imperial navies from France and Britain. The Seychelles became a British domain

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Above, the Four Seasons resort offers five-star luxury in a mesmerising setting.



ion, but the spirit is resolutely French Creole, and the islands have a relaxed Caribbean sensibility.

WHITE SANDS

Turquoise is the colour of the Seychelles. It is the default colour for corrugated iron roofs and ornate balconies, for buses and shops and even ox carts. After a day cruising the archipelago I was still searching for that perfect beach: white sand framed with black boulders, calm sea, jungle backdrop and west-facing for perfect sunsets. I found it back at La Petite Anse and



The Spa is the resort's crown. Perched at the top of the bay, the setting will enchant you before the treatments even begin

there was a cold flannel waiting for me. The fear, the worry always, is that paradise will be lost as soon as it is found by the tourist omnibus, by the honeymooners and first-timers. Not here, not yet. *Luxury Holidays Direct* is currently offering seven nights for the price of five at the new Four Seasons Resort Seychelles. This package starts from £2,079 and includes villa accommodation on a B&B basis, return flights with Air Seychelles and private airport transfers. Valid until 31 October 2009. www.luxuryholidaysdirect.com

THE SEYCHELLES | NATURE'S PARADISE

It is the wilderness that sets the Seychelles apart. There is an old-fashioned excitement to its jungle, as though scripted for a nature movie. Unique species of plant and animal abound. There is the coco-de-mer palm, the jellyfish tree, magpie robins, black parrots, their own flightless bird and more giant tortoises than the Galapagos ever.

More than any other nation, over half the Seychelles is protected as a nature

reserve. Giant tortoises set the pace of life throughout the archipelago but they hulk from the distant Aldabra atoll where they roam free in great number alongside the flightless Aldabra Rail.

The Seychelles Black Parrot is the national bird of the Seychelles but there are only a few hundred left, and only on the island of Praslin. The Maggie Robin was all but extinct a few years ago but is being successfully protected and even reintroduced to several islands.

The jellyfish tree has extraordinary tentacle-like flowers but it is the coco-de-mer palm that steals the show, with its nuts that bear a rather striking resemblance to the female derriere. Given the male flower is ludicrously phallic, it is no surprise that there are erotic and aphrodisiac myths attached to the tree but it was named because the nuts, when found floating at sea, were thought to come from some notorious subaquatic tree.

TRAVEL NOTES | by Harriet Grecian



Meet the elephants on an African safari.

Breakfast with elephants on safari

If you are bored of munching your muesli at your desk why not take a look at Expert Africa's safari experiences. As you set off for the day's wild animal safari, the team serve up porridge while old bull elephants and buffaloes graze around you. But don't let the idea of camping put you off as this trip offers king-size beds and claw-footed beds. Prices start from £3,654 pp for 7 nights. Call 020 8232 9777. www.exploretours.com

The Easter Island eclipse

Get booking now if you fancy the unique experience of witnessing a total solar eclipse from Easter Island next July. Adventure specialist Explorer's trip to the Unesco site will ensure you are best placed to enjoy the miraculous event. An astronomer will be on hand, while various excursions to the island's remarkable archaeological sites are included. Prices start from £4,295. Call 0844 499 0902. www.explore.co.uk

Whale watching and golf in the Azore Islands

For an action-packed family holiday by the mid-Atlantic Azore Islands. On the nine islands you can enjoy everything from golf to whale watching and swimming with dolphins. Seven nights in June start at £627 pp based on two sharing. Whale watching costs from £39 pp for a half day May to October. Call 020 8758 4722. www.island.co.uk

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