

TRAVEL

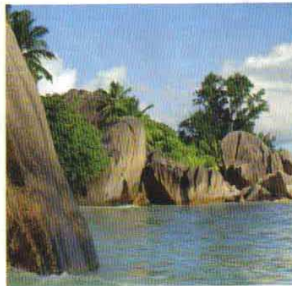


Paradise found

Sarah Standing visits the Seychelles

A few years ago I went to Acton to be hypnotised. I sat on a lumpy armchair and was told to close my eyes. 'As I am talking to you, you will gradually feel your body growing heavier. Allow your mind to empty, and your thoughts to drift,' I was instructed. 'You are on a deserted beach. You can hear the waves softly lapping against the sand and your body is getting heavier. And heavier... and heavier. You are letting go of all negative energy and you are feeling relaxed.' Perhaps it was the grisly thought of being on a deserted beach with a monumentally heavy body that kept me on full alert, but I swear I never went under. I just lay and listened to this man drone on and on for 60 minutes until a bell rang somewhere in the far distance and he snapped his fingers and informed me I was no longer a smoker. If only. I remain convinced it wasn't my lack of willpower that let me down — it was my infertile imagination. Having just returned from visiting the Seychelles I now think I'm ready to give Acton a second chance. This time will be different, for this time I will have no problem picturing myself in paradise.

The Seychelles is an archipelago nation of 155 islands in the Indian Ocean, lying north-east of Madagascar and about 1,000 miles east of Africa. Mahe is the largest island with a population of 80,000 (roughly the same number that inhabit Twickenham) and it is granitic, mountainous and absurdly green. The landscape is surreally, opulently, insanely lush. It's as though a Hollywood film director has been instructed to go off and create the perfect desert island. I can



only assume the producer must have added. 'Take your time, get it right and don't give a damn about the budget,' for Mahe is what happens when you cross Disney with Mother Nature. It's the dream ticket — a utopian paradise worthy of several Oscars. It has simply everything going for it. Layer upon layer of tropical vegetation, a textbook blue-skies-and-sunshine climate, trees pregnant with mangoes, coconuts and bananas, pink-tinged sandy beaches, an ocean that's Hockney-blue and packed with technicolour fish, hibiscus blooms, great food, jurassic-like rocks, no nasty critters and an innate, all-enveloping dramatic beauty. The Seychellois seem to recognise their good fortune and are rightfully proud. 'We have virtually full employment here,' boasted my sweet taxi driver. 'It is a wonderful place because everybody gets on. We mix together so, so happily. We have Catholics, Christians, Hindus and Muslims here, but there's no bother.' He turned the radio up a fraction in time to catch the last verse of 'Hey Jude'. 'I think right now there are just 80 people in jail. But not for very bad things.'

Travel trends and expectations have altered drastically in the last decade and

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Left and below: Four Seasons Private Residences Seychelles; right: Sarah Standing with lunch

the concept of true luxury is one that is constantly being redefined. Conspicuous consumerism and plutocratic playgrounds have been relegated to the tawdry pages of *Hello!* and the discerning, pleasure-seeking traveler now wants real exclusivity, five-star room service and a major reality check. A holiday has to be an adventure as well as a journey and preferably it needs to be life-enhancing too. Of course I'm not pretending the wealthy elite have suddenly morphed into selfless, stay-at-home eco-warriors intent on saving the planet — but at least they've recognised it's a tad more spiritually uplifting to place a footprint in virgin sand, as opposed to treading on a overtly trendy beach besieged by paparazzi.

The Four Seasons Private Residences situated in the Seychelles' Petite Anse Bay seems to have pulled off the near-impossible task of seamlessly combining nature with nurture. By cunningly building 28 indigenous-looking villas and bedding them down in 70 hectares of dense hillside you can pretend to be Robinson Crusoe yet still be surrounded by state-of-the-art amenities. All villas are designed by the award-winning architect Cheong Yew Kuan and each freehold residence is unique. Simple structures but built on a grand scale. Infinity pools that seem suspended in space, bedrooms that are big and breezy, bathrooms with sunken, secluded tubs that look out over acres of vegetation, open-plan living areas with Bose sound systems and silent air-conditioning. They're all drop-dead gorgeous, tastefully decorated, private and secluded. This is basically quasi-carefree living. You are alone yet still discreetly supported by Four Seasons and all that it has to offer — the best of both worlds perhaps. The hotel, restaurants, room service, spas, yoga rooms, chefs, gyms, crèche, beach clubs and concierge services all just a (golf buggy) ride away. Obviously it comes at a hefty price but walking out on to the beach — charmingly called 'The Beach With No Name' — one cannot help but feel deeply privileged.

When I visited last week I was taken deep-sea fishing. After chugging along the ravishing coastline aimlessly working on my tan I suddenly got a bite. A big bite. Half an hour later I had proudly landed lunch — a 16lb dorado. Our skipper Jerry steered the boat towards a hidden bay and we swam ashore, surrounded by friendly, fat, yellow-striped fish. He built a fire and cooked lunch. Dorado sushi followed by baked dorado with fresh lime. Pudding was papaya. I lay back on the warm sand and let my mind empty and my thoughts drift. All negative energy had long gone. I couldn't even be bothered to swim back to the boat to get my cigarettes.

www.spectator.co.uk



Villa prices start from \$7 million. For more information on Four Seasons Private Residences Seychelles please call Hamptons International +44 (0) 207 758 8447 or email seychelles@hamptons-int.com or visit www.seychellesresidences.com.

Air Seychelles flies twice a week direct between London Heathrow and Mahe International. Web: www.airseychelles.co.uk or call +44 1293 596 656

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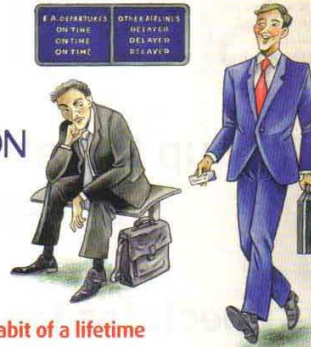
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