

Seychelles Snapshots

Bel Ombre is one of several possible locations for the treasure trove of the legendary pirate Olivier Levasseur, known as 'La Buse' (the Buzzard).

The Seychelles were named in honour of the French finance minister to Louis XV, Jean Moreau de Séchelles.

The Seychelles is a paradise for tourists, no doubt about it, and most tourists leave with a very positive impression of the country, proclaiming to the world that the Seychelles is a 'haven of stability', and 'a very peaceful country'. Whether or not the Seychelles is heaven for its own population is another story. Politically, the situation has not evolved for more than 30 years. The ruling party, the Seychelles People's Progressive Front (SPPF), led by president James Michel, has been governing the country since 1977 and has been staunchly clinging to power ever since. Michel doesn't seem willing to cede his power to any of his opponents; he prematurely dissolved the National Assembly in March 2007, following the boycott of the assembly proceedings by the opposition party, and the general elections in May 2007 returned 18 SPPF members as against seven members of the SPFF opposition party led by Wavel Ramkalawan (exactly the same numbers as before the dissolution). The leadership of the SPPF continues. It's a stalemate.

But, after all, these elections were held democratically. Well, almost. The methods the SPPF allegedly used to obtain votes are more than dubious. The SPPF has a firm grip on the media, and the freedom of the press is threatened, as testified by the closing down of the opposition newspaper, *Regar*, in 2006. Critics claimed that the government bought votes with Rs 500 notes (introduced in July 2005). There were also allegations of gerrymandering and threats.

Whatever the result of the 2007 election, it can't be denied that the situation is deteriorating. In October 2006, opposition protesters and security forces clashed outside the Seychelles parliament after MPs backed a bill restricting private radio-station ownership (which ended the opposition's hopes of running its own radio station) – this violent confrontation was condemned by press-freedom campaigners Reporters Without Borders. Wavel Ramkalawan himself was injured. As one of our contacts put it, 'The Seychellois are a very pacific, somewhat inhibited people. But when they feel a situation has gone too far, they really can go to great lengths to express their anger'. It's true that anger and frustration are simmering in the Seychelles. 'We want new perspectives. The ruling party has been controlling everything for ages. We live in a fake democracy.'

Meanwhile, tourism is picking up, which is good news for the budget of the country. The image of paradise hasn't been tainted – yet.

HISTORY

Until the 18th century the Seychelles was uninhabited. The islands were first spotted by Portuguese explorers, but the first recorded landing was by a British East India Company ship in 1609. Pirates and privateers used the Seychelles as a temporary base during lulls in their maraudings.

THE COLONIAL PERIOD

In 1742, Mahé de Labourdonnais, the governor of what is now Mauritius, sent Captain Lazare Picault to investigate the islands. Picault named the main island after his employer (and the bay where he landed after himself) and laid the way for the French to claim possession of the islands 12 years later.

It took a while for the French to do anything with their possession. It wasn't until 1770 that the first batch of 21 settlers and seven slaves arrived on Ste Anne Island. After a few false starts, the settlers began growing spices, cassava, sugarcane and maize.

In the 18th century, the British began taking an interest in the Seychelles. The French were not willing to die for their colony and didn't resist British attacks, and the Seychelles became a British dependency in 1814. The British did little to develop the islands except increase the number of slaves. After abolition in 1835, freed slaves from around the region were also brought here. Because few British settled, however, the French language and culture remained dominant.

Over the years the islands have been used as a holding pen for numerous political prisoners and exiles – not a bad place to be exiled!

In 1903 the Seychelles became a crown colony administered from London. It promptly went into the political and economic doldrums until 1964, when two political parties were formed. France Albert René, a young lawyer, founded the Seychelles People's United Party (SPUP). A fellow lawyer, James Mancham, led the new Seychelles Democratic Party (SDP).

INDEPENDENCE

Mancham's SDP, made up of businesspeople and planters, won the elections in 1966 and 1970. René's SPUP fought on a socialist and independence ticket. In June 1975 a coalition of the two parties gave the appearance of unity in the lead-up to independence, which was granted a year later. Mancham became the first president of the Republic of Seychelles and René the prime minister.

The flamboyant Sir Jim (as James Mancham was known) – poet and playboy – placed all his eggs in one basket: tourism. He jet-setted around the world with a beautiful socialite on each arm, and he put the Seychelles on the map.

The rich and famous poured in for holidays and to party, party, party. Adnan Khashoggi and other Arab millionaires bought large tracts of land, while film stars and celebrities came to enhance their romantic, glamorous images.

According to René and the SPUP, however, the wealth was not being spread evenly and the country was no more than a rich person's playground. René stated that poor Creoles were little better off than slaves.

THE LONG ROAD TO DEMOCRACY

In June 1977, barely a year after independence, René and a team of Tanzanian-trained rebels carried out an almost bloodless coup while Mancham was in London attending a Commonwealth Conference. In the following years, René consolidated his position by deporting many supporters of the outlawed SDP. Opposed to René's one-party socialist state, these *grands blancs* (white landowners) set up 'resistance movements' in Britain, South Africa and Australia.

The country fell into disarray as the tourist trade dried to a trickle. The 1980s saw a campaign of civil disruption by supporters of the SDP, two army mutinies and more foiled coup attempts.

Finally, facing growing international criticism and the threatened withdrawal of foreign aid, René pulled a political about-face in the early 1990s; he abandoned one-party rule and announced the return to a multiparty democracy.

Elections were held in 1992 under the watchful eye of Commonwealth observers. René and his renamed Seychelles People's Progressive Front won

The Freedom Sq monument known to locals as Twa Zwazo (meaning 'three birds') is said to represent the continents of Africa, Europe and Asia, each of which has played a part in the development of the Seychellois.

William McAteer's *Rivals in Eden and Hard Times in Paradise* trace the islands' history from the first French landing in 1740 up to 1919. Deryck Scarr brings things up to date in *Seychelles since 1770*, which covers the 20th century.

FAST FACTS

- Population: 81,000
- Territory size: 445 sq km
- Languages: English, French, Creole
- Capital: Victoria
- Highest point: Morne Seychellois (907m)
- Largest island: Mahé
- Distance from Mahé to Mauritius: 1720km
- Distance from Mahé to Bombay: 2800km
- Average weight of a coco fesse: 10-15kg

58.4% of the votes; Mancham, who had returned to the Seychelles, fielded 33.7% for his SDP and claimed the results were rigged.

René maintained his grip on power, while the SDP's star continued to wane. Even Mancham himself abandoned the SDP in favour of the centrist Seychelles National Party (SNP) in 1999. In the 2002 elections, the SNP, led by Wavel Ramkalawan, an Anglican priest, confirmed its stand as the main opposition party by winning over 42% of the vote.

In April 2004, René finally relinquished the presidency to the former vice president, James Michel, who had stood by René through thick and thin. After a close race with Wavel Ramkalawan, the opposition leader, Michel won the 2006 presidential election, gaining 53.5% of the vote.

While René has been much criticised over the years, there's no denying that overall standards of health, education and housing have improved, and annual per capita income has grown from around US\$1000 in 1976 to close on US\$7000 today.

THE CULTURE

THE NATIONAL IDENTITY

Seychellois people may appear somewhat indifferent to strangers (at least by comparison with people in other African nations) at first meeting, but once the ice has broken you will find intense friendliness and warmth. There's not much anti-colonial feeling evident – it has long been replaced with a sense of national pride that developed after independence.

As in Mauritius and Réunion, it is the Creole language, cuisine and culture that helps bind the Seychelles society. Over 90% of the population speak Creole as their first language, though most also speak English – the language of government and business – and French.

The government has worked hard to promote social cohesion. As a result, racism is extremely rare, though there are concerns that the number of immigrant workers, particularly Indian labourers brought in to work on construction sites, may upset the balance.

On the whole, however, the Seychellois are pretty relaxed, and traditional work patterns are very different from Western ones.

Despite the apparently easy-going existence, the living standards of many Seychellois are lower than you might expect, mostly because of the disproportionately high cost of living. The islands may seem very westernised, but the minimum wage is around Rs 2000 (€325) per month. As prices creep up and more people struggle to make ends meet, burglaries and petty theft are on the rise. Crime levels are still extremely low, but it's a favourite topic of conversation among islanders.

LIFESTYLE

Thanks to the islands' close links with Europe, the contemporary face of the Seychelles is surprisingly modern. The main island of Mahé is a rather sophisticated place, characterised as much by Western-style clothing, brand-new cars, mobile phones and modern houses as by any overt signs of traditional Creole culture. But beneath this strongly Westernised veneer, many aspects of traditional Creole culture survive. They live on in dance, music, hospitality, ancient beliefs, the language, the carefree attitude, and in many other day-to-day ways of doing things.

The society continues to be largely male dominated. Fortunately for women, the tourism industry is regarded as an equal-opportunity employer.

Most Seychellois are Catholic, but marriage is an unpopular institution. The reasons cited are that not marrying is a relic of slavery, when marriages simply didn't take place, and that marriage is expensive. As a result an estimated 75% of children are born out of wedlock. There's no taboo about illegitimacy, however. Though the children tend to stay with the mother, fathers are legally obliged to support their offspring.

Since the age of consent is only 14 years, there are a large number of teenage mothers. Pregnant girls are not allowed to attend school, and after the birth few bother to return. This obviously has a negative impact on education levels and job options for a certain number of women.

The Seychellois are generally tolerant of gay and lesbian relationships as long as couples don't flaunt their sexuality. Indeed, there are few rules and regulations to be followed, beyond respecting local attitudes towards nudity and visiting places of religious worship.

ECONOMY

The economy is heavily reliant on tourism, which now employs at least 20% of the labour force, with exclusive resorts replacing the spice and coconut plantations. Despite the worldwide downturn in tourism, the sector has been picking up in recent years and the number of arrivals to the Seychelles is on the increase, with more than 150,000 visitors per year at the time of writing.

The other mainstay of the economy is industrial fishing, which actually overtook tourism as the country's biggest foreign-exchange earner in 2002.

Nevertheless, the economy remains extremely vulnerable to external events. Despite attempts to strengthen its agricultural base and use more locally manufactured products, the Seychelles continues to import 90% of its needs. As a result, even a slight dip in export earnings causes major ructions in the economy.

The chronic foreign-exchange shortage has pushed the government to encourage foreign investments thanks to tax incentives and other benefits. Sectors targeted include offshore banking and insurance, trans-shipment and shipping registration.

POPULATION

The population of the Seychelles is more strongly African than in Mauritius or Réunion, but even so you'll see almost every shade of skin and hair imaginable, arising from a mixture of largely French and African genes, together with infusions of Indian, Chinese and Arab blood. Distinct Indian and Chinese communities make up only a tiny proportion of the ethnic mix, however, the rest being Creole. As for the *grands blancs*, most were dispossessed in the wake of the 1977 coup.

About 90% of Seychellois live on Mahé and nearly a third of these are concentrated in and around the capital. Most of the remaining 10% live on Praslin and La Digue, while the other islands are either uninhabited or are home to tiny communities.

RELIGION

Nearly 90% of Seychellois are Roman Catholic, 7% are Anglican and 2.5% belong to the rapidly expanding evangelical churches. The remainder belong to the tiny Hindu, Muslim and Chinese communities largely based in Victoria.

Most people are avid churchgoers. On a Sunday, Victoria's Catholic and Anglican cathedrals as well as the smaller churches scattered around the main islands are full to bursting.

The huge Indian Ocean Tuna plant in Victoria is the world's second-largest tuna cannery.

Since 1982, when Creole was made the language of education, literacy rates have risen to nearly 90%.

There is also a widespread belief in the supernatural and in the old magic of spirits known as *gris gris*. Sorcery was outlawed in 1958, but a few *bonhommes* and *bonnefemmes di bois* (medicine men and women) still practise their cures and curses and concoct potions for love, luck and revenge.

ARTS

Since these islands were originally uninhabited, the Creoles are the closest the country has to an indigenous population. Many aspects of their African origins survive, including the *séga* and *moutia* dances.

Literature

The Lenstiti Kreol (Creole Institute), near Anse aux Pins on Mahé, was set up to research and promote Creole language and literature. It publishes a few books each year in Creole by local authors as well as translations of foreign works; these are available at the Institute.

Among the most important local authors writing in Creole are the playwright Christian Sevina, short-story author and playwright Marie-Thérèse Choppy, poet Antoine Abel and mystery writer Jean-Joseph Madeleine. Unfortunately, their works are not yet available in English.

In fact there is surprising little English-language fiction about these islands. Most authors go in for travelogues and autobiographies. The one exception is long-time resident Glynn Burridge, who mixes fact and fiction in his short stories. They are published locally in two volumes under the title of *Voices: Seychelles Short Stories* and are available in the bookshops in Victoria.

Music & Dance

The Indian, European, Chinese and Arabic backgrounds of the Seychellois are reflected in their music. The accordion, banjo and violin music brought to the islands by the early European settlers has blended with that of the *makalapo*, a stringed instrument with a tin soundbox; the *zez*, a monochord sitar; African skin drums; and the *bom*, a bowed instrument.

You may also come across roving *camtole* bands, which feature fiddle, banjo, accordion and drums. They sometimes accompany the *contredanse*, a dance similar to the quadrille. European influences are also evident in the *mazok*, which is reminiscent of the French waltz, and the *kotis*, which has its roots in Scottish country dancing.

It is the sombre *moutia*, however, with its strong African rhythms, that is the traditional dance of the Seychelles. The slow, repetitive dance routines were originally accompanied by prayers that the slaves turned into work chants, similar to the early black gospel music of the USA. The *moutia* is normally danced around an open fire and serves as the primary evening entertainment.

The Seychelles version of the *séga* differs little from that of Mauritius. Many of the large hotels hold *séga* dance displays at least one night a week.

Patrick Victor and Jean-Marc Volcy are two of the Seychelles' best-known musicians, playing Creole pop and folk music. Other local stars are Emmanuel Marie and the late Raymond Lebon, whose daughter Sheila Paul made it into the local charts with an updated rendering of her father's romantic ballads.

David André's *Esper Sa Sanson*, some of which is sung in English, and Jean Ally's *Welcome* (an entirely English-language recording of *séga*) are both good introductions to local music and should be available in music stores in Victoria.

Did you know that the film *Goodbye Emmanuelle* was filmed on La Digue?

Visual Arts

Over recent decades, more and more artists have settled in the Seychelles and spawned a local industry catering to souvenir-hungry tourists. While shops are full of stereotypical scenes of palm trees and sunsets, there are also some innovative and talented artists around.

Michael Adams is the best-known and most distinctive contemporary artist. He has a studio near Baie Lazare in South Mahé. George Camille is another highly regarded artist who takes his inspiration from nature. He has a gallery on Praslin. Other notable artists are Barbara Jenson, who has a studio on La Digue, Gerard Devoud at Baie Lazare and Nigel Henry at Beau Vallon.

Look out, too, for works by Leon Radegonde, who produces innovative abstract collages; Andrew Gee, who specialises in watercolours of fish and silk paintings; and the sun-drenched paintings of Christine Harter. The painter and sculptor Egbert Marday produces powerful sketches of fish-erfolk and plantation workers, but is perhaps best known for the statue of a man with a walking cane, situated outside the courthouse on Victoria's Independence Ave. Lorenzo Appiani produced the sculptures on the roundabouts at each end of 5th June Ave in Victoria.

FOOD & DRINK

Meat lovers, come prepared: the cuisine of the Seychelles is heavily influenced by the surrounding ocean, with fish appearing as the main ingredient in many dishes. Cultural influences are also distinctive, with a blend of European (mostly French and Italian) and African gastronomic delights.

STAPLES & SPECIALITIES

Fish, fish, FISH! And rice. This is the most common combination (*pwason ek diri*, in Creole patois) in the Seychelles, and we won't complain – fish is guaranteed to be served ultrafresh and literally melts in your mouth. You'll devour *bourgeois*, *capitaine*, shark, *job*, parrotfish, caranx, grouper and tuna, among others. To bring variety, they are cooked in innumerable guises: grilled, steamed, minced, smoked, stewed, salted, baked, wrapped in a banana leaf; the list goes on and on.

Seafood lovers will have found their spiritual home in the Seychelles; lobster, crab, seashells (especially *trouloulou* and *teck teck*, two local varieties of shells) and octopus are widely available.

The Seychelles is dripping with tropical fruit, including mango, banana, breadfruit, papaya, coconut, grapefruit, pineapple and carambole. Mixed with spices, they make wonderful accompaniments, such as the flavourful *chatini* (chutney). Vanilla, cinammon and nutmeg are used to flavour steams and other preparations.

Gastronauts might consider trying *civet de chauve souris* (bat curry), which is considered a delicacy. You'll also find meat, but it's imported.

DRINKS

Freshly squeezed juices and coconut water are the most natural and thirst-quenching drinks around. If you want to put some wobble in your step, Seybrew, the local brand of beer, is sold everywhere. Eku, another locally produced beer, is a bit harder to find. Wine is available at most restaurants, but be aware that some bottles will have been exposed to the heat.

Feeling adventurous? Try the infamous *calou*, a kind of palm wine – devilish. It's not sold in restaurants, but most families prepare their own poison.

The Seychellois are said to be the biggest fish-eaters in the world, with an average annual consumption of 90kg per person.

Traditional Seychelles cuisine is the focus of *Dekouver Marmit*, compiled by the Ministry of Local Government, Sports & Culture.

SEYCHELLES' TOP FIVE

This is a quick selection of some of our favourite places to indulge in fine dining, chosen for palate pleasure over price considerations. Turn to the appropriate page to initiate salivation.

Coco Rouge (p287) Unfussy and laid-back. Killer smoked fish salad.

Le Corsaire (p275) Style meets substance here.

Lanbousir (p293) A beach shack near the most glamorous beach of the Seychelles.

Laurier Guest House (p287) Phenomenal Creole buffet.

Les Rochers (p287) Romantic to boot.

WHERE TO EAT & DRINK

There's a full gamut of restaurant types, from funky shacks and burger joints to ritzy restaurants. Larger hotels have a choice of restaurants, with one always serving buffets (usually Creole or seafood). There is not a vast selection of street snacks to choose from in the Seychelles, but street vendors sell fresh fruit and fish – a good option if you're self-catering. Grocery stores are also widely available in Mahé and in Praslin. The Victoria market is another good place to stock up on fresh food.

EATING WITH KIDS

If you're travelling with the tykes, you'll find that children's menus are not normally offered in restaurants. However, most local eateries will accommodate two children splitting a meal or can produce child-size portions on request. You can also ask for restaurant staff to bring you simple food.

VEGETARIANS & VEGANS

Restaurant menus in the Seychelles are dominated by fish, seafood and meat dishes, though there are actually a few salad and pasta dishes that are meat-free. If you're self-catering, you'll have much more choice, with a good selection of fruits and vegetables.

If you're staying somewhere where your meals are cooked for you (for example in a guesthouse), make sure you tell your hosts in advance you're vegetarian so that they can prepare something for you.

HABITS & CUSTOMS

Dining habits and customs in the Seychelles are similar to those elsewhere in the region, and in the home countries of most Western travellers. Lunch is usually the main meal of the day and is typically served at around noon. Dinner tends to be a lighter version of lunch and is eaten around 7pm. Meals are central to family life on weekends.

ENVIRONMENT

The Seychelles is a haven for wildlife, particularly birds and tropical fish. Because of the islands' isolation and the comparatively late arrival of humans, many species are endemic to the Seychelles.

THE LAND

The Seychelles lies about 1600km off the east coast of Africa and just south of the equator. It is made up of 115 islands, of which the central islands (including Mahé, Praslin and La Digue) are granite and the outly-

ing islands are coral atolls. The granite islands, which do not share the volcanic nature of Réunion and Mauritius, appear to be peaks of a huge submerged plateau that was torn away from Africa when the continental plates shifted about 65 million years ago.

WILDLIFE Animals

Common mammals and reptiles include the fruit bat or flying fox, the gecko, the skink and the tenrec (a hedgehoglike mammal imported from Madagascar). There are also some small snakes, but they are not dangerous.

More noteworthy is the fact that giant tortoises, which feature on the Seychelles coat of arms, are now found only in the Seychelles and the Galápagos Islands, off Ecuador. The French and English wiped out the giant tortoises from all the Seychelles islands except Aldabra, where happily more than 100,000 still survive. Many have been brought to the central islands, where they munch their way around hotel gardens, and there is a free-roaming colony on Curieuse Island.

Almost every island seems to have some rare species of bird: on Frégate, Cousin, Cousine and Aride there are magpie robins (known as *pie chanteuse* in Creole); on Cousin, Cousine and Aride you'll find the Seychelles warbler; La Digue has the *veuve* (paradise flycatcher); and Praslin has the black parrot. The bare-legged scops owl and the Seychelles kestrel live on Mahé, and Bird Island is home to millions of sooty terns.

For further information on marine life, see p33.

Plants

The coconut palm and the casuarina are the Seychelles' most common trees. There are a few banyans and you're also likely to see screw pines, bamboo and tortoise trees (so named because the fruit looks like the tortoises that eat it).

There are about 80 endemic plant species. Virgin forest now exists only on the higher parts of Silhouette Island and Mahé, and in the Vallée de Mai on Praslin, which is one of only two places in the world where the giant coco de mer palm grows wild. The other is nearby Curieuse Island.

PARADISE UNDER THREAT?

Brochures may continue to paint the Seychelles as an unspoilt, green-and-blue paradise, but the environmental impact of construction projects that were under way when we visited cannot be swept under the carpet. Every year, more resort hotels and lodges pop up, most notably on formerly pristine beaches or secluded islands. By the time you read this, there will be new tourist developments on Round Island, Eden Island, Long Island, Mahé (Port Launay and Petite Anse) and Praslin (Beau Vallon). Sure, they have nothing on the concrete-and-glass horrors of, say, Hawaii or Cancun, but they still necessitate additional support systems, including roads and numerous vehicle trips, not to mention cutting down vegetation. So far, the government has traditionally tried to balance tourist developments with the protection of the natural assets that attract the tourists (and therefore revenue) to the islands, but the rising population and the growing demands of tourism are putting a strain on that policy. How long will it resist the temptation of easy money?

Another problem is that many developers are foreigners, which means that the big money goes out of the country. It's of much greater benefit to locals when travellers stay in smaller hotels and guesthouses, rather than the large, foreign-controlled resorts.

Cousin and Aride Islands support huge colonies of lesser (black) noddies. During the birds' elaborate courtship, the male bird offers his mate leaves until he finds one to her satisfaction (she indicates her approval by defecating on it!).

Esmeralda is in *Guinness World Records* as the oldest tortoise in the world. She is actually a he, weighs more than 300kg and is believed to be over 200 years old. He lives on Bird Island.

Arachnophobes may have a difficult time in the Seychelles. Almost every tree branch is draped in sheets of tough sticky silk belonging to the huge palm spider. Despite its size – up to 10cm – this obtrusive arachnid is harmless to humans.

In the high, remote parts of Mahé and Silhouette Island, you may come across the insect-eating pitcher plant, which either clings to trees or bushes or sprawls along the ground.

On the floral front, there are plenty of orchids, bougainvilleas, hibiscuses, gardenias and frangipanis.

The botanical gardens in Victoria provide a pleasant and interesting walk. The Vallée de Mai on Praslin is a must. For chance discoveries, get away from the beach for a day and head into the hills on Mahé, Praslin or La Digue.

NATIONAL PARKS

The Seychelles currently boasts two national parks and seven marine national parks, as well as several other protected areas under government and NGO (non-governmental organisation) management. In all, about 46% of the country's total landmass is now protected as well as some 45 sq km of ocean, providing an invaluable resource for scientific investigation and species protection.

The most important protected areas include those listed in the table on below.

ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

Overall the Seychelles has a pretty good record for protecting its natural environment. As early as 1968, Birdlife International set the ball rolling when it bought Cousin Island and began studying some of the country's critically endangered species. This was followed in the 1970s with legislation to establish national parks and marine reserves.

The Seychelles was also the first African country to draw up a 10-year environmental management plan, in 1990, which ushered in a more integrated approach. Under the current plan the government wants 80% of

protected areas to be under private management by 2010. This is partly for financial reasons (someone else bears the cost) and partly to increase the involvement of local communities in decision-making and day-to-day management. The plan also sets strict guidelines for all new building and development projects.

Not that the government's record is entirely unblemished. In 1998 it authorised a vast land-reclamation project on Mahé's northeast coast to provide much-needed space for housing. This has caused widespread silting, marring the natural beauty of this coast indefinitely, though the alternative was to clear large tracts of forest. A difficult choice.

Tourism has had a similarly mixed impact. Hotels have been built on previously unspoiled beaches, causing problems with waste management and increased pressure on fragile ecosystems, not to mention more difficult access to public beaches. On the other hand, tourist dollars provide much-needed revenue for funding conservation projects. Local attitudes have also changed as people have learned to value their environment.

Further impetus for change is coming from NGOs operating at both community and government levels. They have notched up some spectacular successes, such as the Magpie Robin Recovery Program, funded by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and Birdlife International. From just 23 magpie robins languishing on Frigate Island in 1990, there are now nearly 200 living on Frigate, Cousin and Cousine Islands. Similar results have been achieved with the Seychelles warbler on Cousin, Cousine and Aride Islands.

As part of these projects, a number of islands have been painstakingly restored to their original habitat by replacing alien plant and animal species with native varieties. Several islands have also been developed for ecotourism, notably Frigate, Bird, Denis, North and Alphonse Islands, with the likelihood that Aldabra and other outer islands will follow. The visitors not only help fund conservation work, but it is also easier to protect the islands from poachers and predators if they are inhabited. With any luck, this marriage of conservation and tourism will point the way to the future.

The *Field Guide to the Birds of Seychelles*, by Adrian Skerrett, Ian Bullock and Tony Disley, offers the most comprehensive and informative guide to local bird life.

Get to know more about the Seychelles' fabulous environment and conservation programmes at the Nature Seychelles site at www.natureseychelles.org.

SEYCHELLES NATIONAL PARKS

Park	Features	Activities	Best time to visit	Page
Aldabra Marine Reserve	raised coral atoll, tidal lagoon, birdlife, marine turtles, giant tortoises	diving, snorkelling, scientific study	Nov, Dec & mid-Mar–mid-May	boxed text, p288
Aride Island Marine Nature Reserve	granite island, coral reef, seabirds, fish life, marine turtles	bird-watching, snorkelling	Sep-May	boxed text, p288
Cousin Island Special Reserve	granite island, natural vegetation, hawksbill turtles, seabirds, lizards	bird-watching	all year	p283
Curieuse Marine National Park	granite island, coral reefs, coco de mer palms, giant tortoises, mangrove swamps, marine turtles, fish life	diving, snorkelling, walking	all year	p283
Morne Seychellois National Park	forested peaks, mangroves, glacial habitats	hiking, botany, bird-watching	May-Sep	p275
Port Launay & Baie Ternay Marine National Park	mangrove swamps, fish life, coral reefs	diving, snorkelling	all year	p278
Praslin National Park (Vallée de Mai)	native forest, coco de mer, other endemic palms, black parrot	botany, bird-watching, walking	all year	p280
Ste Anne Marine National Park	forested islands, coral reef, varied marine ecosystems, marine turtles	glass-bottomed boat trips, snorkelling, diving	all year	p273

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Seychelles

You're planning a trip to the Seychelles? Lucky you! Mother Nature was very generous with these 115 islands scattered in the Indian Ocean and has spoiled them rotten. Undeniably, the beaches are the big attraction, and what beaches: exquisite ribbons of white sand lapped by topaz waters and backed by lush hills and big glacié boulders. And nary a crowd in sight.

With such a dreamlike setting, the Seychelles is unsurprisingly a choice place for a honeymoon. But there's much more to do than simply cracking open a bottle of champagne with the loved one in a luxurious hotel. Having earned a reputation as a paradigm of ecotourism, the Seychelles is a top spot to watch birds and giant tortoises in their natural habitat. And a vast living world lies just below the turquoise waters, beckoning divers of all levels. When you tire of beaches you can venture inland on jungle trails, indulge in fine dining or enjoy the sublime laid-back tempo.

And time has come to spread the word: yes, this paradise is accessible to us all. On top of ultraluxurious options, the Seychelles has plenty of quaint, affordable self-catering facilities and guesthouses, often situated on some of the best land. Though it remains an expensive destination, its tourist authorities are now targeting non-millionaires, promoting these economy options. But fear not: mass tourism it will never be.

Which island should you go to? Don't sweat the decision too much. Be it one of the three main islands of Mahé, Praslin or La Digue, or any outlying island, you'll strike gold.

Seduced? Push open your travel agent's door and book your ticket to paradise.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Scratching the leathery neck of a giant tortoise on **Curieuse Island** (p283)
- Splashing around in the jewelled waters of **Anse Source d'Argent** (p291), **Anse Soleil** (p278), **Petite Anse** (p278) or **Grande Anse** (p291) – absolute heaven
- Diving with toothy critters at **Shark Bank** (p31)
- Taking a guided walk in **Morne Seychellois National Park** (p275) to mug up on botany
- Living out that stranded-on-a-desert-island fantasy on secluded **Bird Island** (boxed text, p288)
- Hearing yourself screaming 'Oh, these coconuts are so sexy!' in the **Vallée de Mai** (p281)
- Devouring ultra fresh fish in one of **Praslin's restaurants** (p286)



■ TELEPHONE CODE: 248

■ POPULATION: 81,000

■ AREA: 455 SQ KM

CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

The seasons in the Seychelles are defined by the trade winds. These bring warmer, wetter airstreams from the northwest from October to April. From May to September the southeast trades usher in cooler, drier weather but the winds whip up the waves and you'll want to find protected beaches. The turnaround periods (March to April and October to November) are normally calm and windless.

The rain generally comes in sudden, heavy bursts. Mahé and Silhouette, the most mountainous islands, get the highest rainfall. January is the wettest month by far, and July and August the driest. Temperatures range between 24°C and 32°C throughout the year.

Although the Seychelles lies outside the cyclone zone, cyclone activity elsewhere in the Indian Ocean can still bring unseasonably grey, windy weather between December and March.

Hotel prices shoot up and accommodation can be hard to find during the peak seasons from December to January and July to August. Easter can also get busy.

See p297 for the climate chart for Victoria, the capital of Mahé.

MAHÉ

When it comes to wishing for the archetypal idyllic island, it's impossible to think past the glorious bays caressed by gorgeously multihued waters (the ones you see in travel mags) of Mahé. To the northeast, a range of granite peaks, including Mahé's highest point, Morne Seychellois (905m), adds to this vivid panorama.

By far the largest and most developed of the Seychelles islands, Mahé (named by the French in honour of the 18th-century governor of Mauritius, Mahé de Labourdonnais) is home to the country's capital, Victoria, and to about 90% of the Seychelles' population. Small wonder that it has excellent vacation and adventure opportunities. Best of all, most spots along the coast are easy to reach by bus or car, so travellers have no trouble sampling the full variety of options the area has to offer.

That said, Mahé has its fair share of the mundane, as testified by industrial devel-

opment on the northeast coast and a land-reclamation project that is marring the appearance of the island around Victoria. Yet paradise lies close at hand – a bus or car ride of no more than 20 minutes will bring you to fabulous natural attractions.

VICTORIA

pop 23,300

Victoria may be the country's main economic, political and commercial hub but peak hour here lasts an unbearable five minutes! It is home to about a third of the Seychelles' population, but even so Victoria retains the air of a provincial town. While it may not fulfil all fantasies about tropical paradises, the city still has a little charm and a little promise when you scratch beneath the surface. There's a bustling market, enviable-quality dining options for a place its size, manicured botanical gardens and a fistful of attractive old colonial buildings sidling up alongside modern structures and shopping plazas. It's also a good place to grab last-minute gifts before heading home.

Oh, and there's the setting. Victoria is set against an impressive backdrop of hills that seem to tumble into the turquoise sea.

Information

BOOKSHOPS

Antigone (☎ 225443; Victoria House, Francis Rachel St) Stocks a reasonable range of English-language novels and books on the Seychelles, plus a few imported newspapers and magazines.

Memorabilia (☎ 321190; Revolution Ave) Gift shop and art gallery with a selection of Seychelles titles.

EMERGENCY

Ambulance (☎ 999)

Central Police Station (☎ 288000; Revolution Ave)

Police (☎ 999)

INTERNET ACCESS

Double Click (☎ 610590; Palm St; per hr Rs 40;

☎ 8am–9pm Mon–Sat, 9am–8pm Sun) Great little café open after hours.

Konet (☎ 322000; Pirates Arms bldg, Independence Ave; per hr Rs 20; ☎ 8am–6pm Mon–Fri, 9am–noon Sat)

MEDICAL SERVICES

Behram's Pharmacy (☎ 225559; Victoria House, Francis Rachel St; ☎ 8.30am–4.45pm Mon–Fri, 8.15am–12.30pm Sat)

MAHÉ

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Blue Sea Divers.....	1	B1
Cerf Island Explorer.....	(see 12)	D4
Craft Village.....	2	D4
Dive Resort Seychelles.....	3	C5
Le Jardin du Roi.....	4	D5
Lenstili Kreol.....	5	D4
Sti Anne Island Diving Centre.....	(see 28)	
Tea Factory.....	6	B3
Utetangar Riding Centre.....	7	B3

SLEEPING

Anse Soleil Beachcomber.....	8	C5
Anse Soleil Resort.....	9	C5
Banyan Tree.....	10	D5
Blue Lagoon Chalets.....	11	C5
Cerf Island Marine Park Resort.....	12	C5
Chalets d'Anse Forban.....	13	D5
Chez Batista's.....	14	C5
Fairy Tern Chalet.....	15	C2
Fairlyland.....	16	D4
Koko Grove Chalets.....	17	D5
La Desirade.....	18	D4
La Residence.....	19	C5
La Rocaille.....	20	C5
La Roussette Hotel.....	21	D4
Lalla Panzi.....	22	D4
Lazare Lodge.....	23	C5
Le Jardin des Palmes.....	24	C4
L'Habitation.....	25	C4
Maïa Luxury Resort.....	26	C4
Relax Hotel.....	27	D4
Ste Anne Resort & Spa.....	28	D2
Sunset Beach Hotel.....	29	B1
Valmer Resort.....	30	C5

EATING

Anchor Café.....	31	C5
Anse Soleil Café.....	32	C5
Auberge d'Anse Boileau - Chez Plume.....	33	C4
Chez Batista's.....	(see 14)	
Eclipse.....	(see 11)	
Kaz Kreol.....	34	D5
Le Jardin du Roi.....	(see 4)	
Restaurant-Cafeteria Maria.....	(see 23)	
Sundown Restaurant.....	35	B3
Vye Marmit.....	(see 2)	

ENTERTAINMENT

Katiolo.....	36	D4
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SHOPPING

Art Arc.....	(see 23)	
Gerard Devoud's Studio.....	(see 30)	
Michael Adams' Studio.....	37	C5
Tom Bowers' Sculptures.....	38	D5

SLEEPING

Anse Soleil Beachcomber.....	8	C5
Anse Soleil Resort.....	9	C5
Banyan Tree.....	10	D5
Blue Lagoon Chalets.....	11	C5
Cerf Island Marine Park Resort.....	12	C5
Chalets d'Anse Forban.....	13	D5
Chez Batista's.....	14	C5
Fairy Tern Chalet.....	15	C2
Fairlyland.....	16	D4
Koko Grove Chalets.....	17	D5
La Desirade.....	18	D4
La Residence.....	19	C5
La Rocaille.....	20	C5
La Roussette Hotel.....	21	D4
Lalla Panzi.....	22	D4
Lazare Lodge.....	23	C5
Le Jardin des Palmes.....	24	C4
L'Habitation.....	25	C4
Maïa Luxury Resort.....	26	C4
Relax Hotel.....	27	D4
Ste Anne Resort & Spa.....	28	D2
Sunset Beach Hotel.....	29	B1
Valmer Resort.....	30	C5

EATING

Anchor Café.....	31	C5
Anse Soleil Café.....	32	C5
Auberge d'Anse Boileau - Chez Plume.....	33	C4
Chez Batista's.....	(see 14)	
Eclipse.....	(see 11)	
Kaz Kreol.....	34	D5
Le Jardin du Roi.....	(see 4)	
Restaurant-Cafeteria Maria.....	(see 23)	
Sundown Restaurant.....	35	B3
Vye Marmit.....	(see 2)	

ENTERTAINMENT

Katiolo.....	36	D4
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SHOPPING

Art Arc.....	(see 23)	
Gerard Devoud's Studio.....	(see 30)	
Michael Adams' Studio.....	37	C5
Tom Bowers' Sculptures.....	38	D5

Victoria Hospital (☎ 388000; Mont Fleuri) The country's main hospital has an emergency unit and outpatient and dental clinics.

MONEY

All the major banks have ATMs and exchange facilities.

Bardlays Bank Independence Ave (☎ 383838; ☎ 8.30am-2.30pm, 8.30-11am Sat); Market (☎ 383838; Albert St; ☎ 8.30am-2.30pm, Sat 8.30-11am)

Nouvobanq (☎ 293000; Francis Rachel St; ☎ 8.30am-2pm Mon-Fri, 8.30-11.30am Sat)

Seychelles Savings Bank (☎ 225251; Kingsgate House, Independence Ave)

POST

Central post office (Independence Ave; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat)

TOURIST INFORMATION

Tourist office (☎ 610800; www.seychelles.travel; Independence Ave; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat) Competent staff hand out booklets detailing all the country's accommodation options and decent maps of Mahé, Praslin and La Digue.

TRAVEL AGENCIES

Victoria's three main travel agencies offer the full range of services, including ticketing, car hire, yacht charter and tours around Mahé and to other islands.

Créole Holidays (☎ 224900; www.creoleholidays.sc; Kingsgate House, Independence Ave)

Creole Travel Services (☎ 297000; www.creoletravel.services.com; Albert St)

Mason's Travel (☎ 322642; www.masonstravel.com; Revolution Ave)

Sights & Activities

The focal point of downtown is a downsized replica of the **clock tower** on London's Vauxhall Bridge. The replica was brought to Victoria in 1903 when the Seychelles became a crown colony. The **old courthouse** (Supreme Court; Francis Rachel St) beside the clock tower will appeal to fans of Creole architecture, as will the colonial buildings that are scattered along Francis Rachel St and Albert St. Make a beeline for **Kanti House** (Albert St), a decrepit yet atmospheric building.

When it first opened, the revamped covered **market** (Market St; ☎ 5.30am-5pm Mon-Fri, 5.30am-noon Sat) was something of a tourist gimmick, but over the years it's evolved into quite a lively, bustling place. Early morning is the best time to come, when fishmongers display an aston-

ishing variety of seafood, from parrot fish to barracuda.

The **Natural History Museum** (☎ 321333; admission Rs 10; Independence Ave; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Thu, 8.30am-noon Fri & Sat) is worth a quick visit to learn about the islands' curious creatures, such as the Seychelles crocodile and the giant tortoise, both now sadly vanished from the main islands.

Not to be confused with the Natural History Museum, the **National Museum of History** (☎ 225253; State House Ave; admission Rs 10; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm Mon, Tue, Thu & Fri, 8.30am-noon Sat) contains a small but well-displayed collection of historical artefacts. Other exhibits also relate to the settlement of the islands and to local culture, including musical instruments, games and *gris gris* (black magic).

For respite, the manicured **botanical gardens** (☎ 224644; admission €5; ☎ 8am-5pm), full of streams and birdsong, are about 10 minutes' walk south of the centre. This is a good place to mug up on native plant life before venturing further afield. Star attractions are the coco de mer palms (see the boxed text, p283) lining the main alley. There's also a spice grove, a pen of giant tortoises and a patch of rainforest complete with fruit bats.

Sleeping

Victoria's range of accommodation is disappointingly slim, especially considering it's the capital, but it does make sense to stay elsewhere and visit the town on day trips.

Hotel Bel Air (☎ 224416; www.seychelles.net/belair; Bel Air Rd; s/d incl breakfast €65/86; ♿) On the road to Sans Souci, this affable address has a friendly homely feel and there's a well-established garden with tropical plants. While the modest furnishings and inoffensive fabrics won't snag any design awards, rooms are clean and well kept. It's an easy bus ride from the centre.

Mountain Rise (☎ 225308; mountainrise@seychelles.sc; Sans Souci Rd; s/d incl breakfast €105/130) High above the botanical gardens, this serene colonial bungalow has five immaculate suites equipped to a high standard. There's also a good restaurant.

Eating

Victoria is relatively well endowed with places to eat. In addition to the following, there are many takeaway outlets offering Creole staples such as grilled fish and chicken curry in the streets around the market.

VICTORIA

0 400 m
0 0.2 miles

1 2 3 4 5 6

INFORMATION (see 12)

Antigone.....	(see 12)
Barclays Bank.....	1 B1
Barclays Bank.....	2 C2
Behram's Pharmacy.....	(see 12)
British High Commission.....	3 B2
Central Police Station.....	4 B2
Central Post Office.....	5 B2
Créole Holidays.....	(see 37)
Créole Travel Services.....	6 B2
Double Click.....	7 B1
French Embassy.....	(see 13)
Immigration House.....	8 C2
Kingsgate House.....	(see 37)
Kokonet.....	(see 31)
Marine Charter Association (MCA).....	9 C2
Mason's Travel.....	10 B1
Memorabilia.....	11 B1
Nouvobanq.....	12 B2
Seychelles Island Foundation.....	13 D4
Seychelles Savings Bank.....	(see 37)
Tourist Office.....	14 C2
USA Embassy.....	(see 3)
Victoria Hospital.....	15 C4

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Botanical Gardens.....	16 C4
Clock Tower.....	17 B2
Kanli House.....	18 B1
Market.....	19 B1
National Museum of History.....	20 B2
Natural History Museum.....	21 C2
Old Courthouse (Supreme Court).....	22 B2

SLEEPING

Hotel Bel Air.....	23 A2
Mountain Rise.....	24 A4

EATING

Cafeteria de l'Alliance Française.....	25 D4
Double Click.....	(see 7)
Gelateria Cristallo.....	26 B1
Lai Lam's Bread Shop.....	27 B1
Le Rendez Vous.....	28 B2
Marie-Antoinette.....	29 A2
News Café.....	30 B1
Pirates Arms.....	31 C2
Sam's Pizzeria.....	32 B2

ENTERTAINMENT

Lovenut.....	33 B1
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SHOPPING

Antik Colony.....	(see 31)
Camion Hall.....	34 B1
Ray's Music Room.....	35 B1
Sunstroke.....	36 B1

TRANSPORT

Air Austral.....	(see 31)
Air France.....	37 C2
Air Mauritius.....	(see 37)
Air Seychelles.....	38 B2
Bus Terminal.....	39 C1
Cat Cocos Catamaran to Praslin.....	40 D1
Condor.....	(see 10)
Emirates.....	41 C1
Kenya Airways.....	(see 37)
Qatar Airways.....	42 B2
Schooner Ferries to La Digue.....	(see 40)
Taxi Stand.....	43 B2

Gelateria Cristallo (Market St; ice creams Rs 8-15; ☎ 8.30am-5pm Mon-Fri, 8.30am-2pm Sat) Cristallo's tempting ice creams will satisfy everyone, except your personal trainer.

Lai Lam's Bread Shop (Benezet St; ☎ 8am-5pm) If you're a carbo seeker, head straight to that lively island of yeasty goodness smack dab in the centre. You won't be able to resist the aroma of freshly baked bread and cakes!

our pick News Café (☎ 322999; Trinity House, Albert St; mains Rs 20-40; ☎ breakfast & lunch) This cheerful café-bar overlooking the main drag is an excellent venue to devour a comforting breakfast (muesli!) and read the daily newspapers, or to take a lunchtime break from town. The generous sandwiches and satisfying salads are best enjoyed at the tables out front, allowing premium views of the people parade going past.

Double Click (☎ 610590; Palm St; mains Rs 25-55; ☎ 8am-9pm Mon-Sat, 9am-8pm Sun) This buzzy eatery popular with students rustles up light and healthy meals, including salads and soups. Sandwiches will quell greater hunger pangs. Keep your fluids up with a zesty smoothie or a juice concoction.

Cafeteria de l'Alliance Française (☎ 282424; Bois de Rose Ave; mains Rs 50-70; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-2pm Sat) This *très* French outpost is handy for a bite at lunchtime if you're mooching around the botanical gardens.

Pirates Arms (☎ 225001; Independence Ave; mains Rs 50-130; ☎ 9am-11pm Mon-Sat, noon-11pm Sun) Legendary to the point where it has become the meeting point in Victoria, this central café-restaurant veritably thrums the minute it opens its doors for breakfast. The menu is as long as your arm and runs from salads and sandwiches to pizzas and meat or fish dishes.

Sam's Pizzeria (☎ 322499; Francis Rachel St; mains Rs 60-90; ☎ lunch & dinner) Step into this snazzy spot for an escape from the busy street. Walls are adorned with paintings by local artist George Camille, which gives the place a splash of style. Get things going with pizzas cooked in a wood-fired oven, or well-presented salads, including an excellent tandoori chicken salad.

Le Rendez Vous (☎ 323556; Francis Rachel St; mains Rs 75-175; ☎ 9am-10pm Mon-Sat) Is this breezy, 1st-floor eatery overlooking the main square suitable for a rendezvous? No idea, as we had dinner on our very own, but the food proves a worthy paramour; treat yourself to French-influenced dishes (but avoid the skimpy smoked fish and mango salad). An

oversized ice cream will finish you off sweetly. The Balinese-meets-Amazonian décor is easy on the eye, with darkwood furnishings, tropical plants and candlelit tables.

Marie-Antoinette (☎ 266222; Serret Rd, St Louis; menu Rs 130; ☎ lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) This atmospheric Creole restaurant is a good place to test your stomach capacity. The set menu includes fish and aubergine fritters, tuna steak grilled fish, chicken curry, rice and salad. It's set in a beautiful old colonial house on the road to Beau Vallon. One proviso: this venue is notorious for its ups and downs.

Entertainment

The most popular drinking hole is the Pirates Arms, which doubles as a bar and offers live music (a crooner with a guitar) several nights a week.

Need to let off steam and rub shoulders with local lovelies? Showcase your dance-floor repertoire at the **Lovenut** (☎ 596707; Revolution Ave; admission men/women Rs 100/50; ☎ Wed, Fri & Sat), slap bang in the centre. A cafeteria by day, Lovenut becomes a trendy discotheque at night. Ear-mark Friday 6.30pm for jazz sessions.

Shopping

The majority of craft and gift shops are concentrated in and around the market. **Camion Hall** (Albert St) is a crafts centre with a range of upmarket shops, including Caprice des Îles, which sells fabulous fabrics; Aphrodite Marine, a model-ship manufacturer; Pineapple Studio, which does a nice line of general souvenirs; and the jeweller Kreol'or.

Another souvenir shop worth browsing is **Antik Colony** (☎ 321700; Pirates Arms Bldg, Independence Ave). George Camille's lovely paintings can be found at **Sunstroke** (☎ 224767; Market St).

For a wide selection of Creole music, visit **Ray's Music Room** (☎ 322674; Premier Bldg, Albert St).

Getting There & Around

Victoria is the main transport hub for buses around Mahé and for boats to Praslin and La Digue. For information about these services and for flights around the islands, see p300. For further information regarding air travel see p302.

Coming from the airport, a taxi into town costs around Rs 75 plus Rs 5 per piece of luggage. Alternatively, cross the road and pick up any bus heading north. See p301 for more about local buses.

The following airlines have offices in Mahé.

Air Austral (☎ 323262; Independence Ave) Represented by Horizon Travel.

Air France (☎ 322414; Kingsgate House, Independence Ave)

Air Mauritius (☎ 322414; Kingsgate House, Independence Ave)

Air Seychelles (☎ 381000; Francis Rachel St)

Condor (☎ 322642; Revolution Ave)

Emirates (☎ 292700; 5th June Ave)

Kenya Airways (☎ 322989; Kingsgate House, Independence Ave)

Qatar Airways (☎ 224518; Francis Rachel St)

BEAU VALLON & THE NORTH COAST

A long, brilliant white arc of sands laced by palms and takamaka trees, Beau Vallon (Map p274; on Mahé's northwest coast, 3km from Victoria) is the most popular beach in Mahé, yet not the most appealing. It's one of the few beaches where the water is deep enough for swimming (watch out for large swells between June and November). It's overbuilt by Seychellois standards, but you'll find it remarkably low-key and quiet if you have experienced other tropical destinations. The seaside ambience, with fishermen selling fresh fish late in the afternoon in the shade of takamaka trees, adds a dash of real life to the area.

In Beau Vallon village (Map p274), where the road from Victoria forks west to Bel Ombre and northeast to Glacis, there is a petrol station, a Barclays Bank ATM, a Cable & Wireless internet café and the police station. You'll find convenience stores supplying basic foodstuffs and other necessities on the beach road and around the junction with the Bel Ombre road.

Beau Vallon is the main destination on the northwest coast because of its beach and tourist infrastructure, but there's also some great scenery north, up the coast to **Glacis** and **North Point**. With your own wheels, it's a scenic drive on a narrow road that hugs the coastline, with intermittent, lovely views over secluded coves at the foot of the cliffs. From North Point, you can head down to Victoria via **Anse Étoile**.

Activities

There's good snorkelling offshore and there's plenty of great diving within a 20-minute boat ride (see p31). Established dive shops include the following:

Big Blue Divers (Map p274; ☎ 261106; www.bigbluedivers.net)

Blue Sea Divers (Map p268; ☎ 526051; www.blueseadivers.com) In Glacis.

Diable des Mers (Map p274; ☎ 248385; odream@seychelles.net)

Seychelles Underwater Centre (Map p274; ☎ 247357; www diveseychelles.com.sc) At the Coral Strand Hotel.

Sleeping

Beau Vallon and Bel Ombre offer the widest range of accommodation in north Mahé.

Our pick **Georgina's Cottage** (Map p274; ☎ 247016; georgina@seychelles.net; Beau Vallon; s/d incl breakfast €45/60; 🍷) An excellent option if you're working to a tight budget, Georgina's Cottage offers eight rooms, a communal kitchen, a lounge area and a leafy tropical garden for added appeal. Luxury it ain't – the old-fashioned décor could do with a little sprucing up – but at this price it would be churlish to quibble. A 20m Frisbee throw from the beach, it's also very close to dive centres, restaurants and shops. The copious breakfast is served on the veranda. Patrick, the owner's son, is full of local info. Air-con is extra (€5).

Panorama – Relais des Îles (Map p274; ☎ 247300; www.panorama-guesthouse.com; Beau Vallon; s €75, d €95-125, all incl breakfast) Just above the main coast road, the 10 modern units arranged in a quiet garden won't win any awards for originality and the furnishings are functional rather than luxurious (white walls, white tiles), but otherwise the Panorama delivers the goods perfectly adequately. Location is tiptop and owner Vesna Rakic is well clued-up on the island.

Beau Vallon Bungalows (Map p274; ☎ 247382; www.seychelles.net/bvbung; Beau Vallon; s/d incl breakfast €80/90; 🍷) Another cluster of well-run cottages, tranquilly set in a well-manicured garden, on the same property as Romance Bungalows. The style of the units is modern and functional. It's set back from the main coast road, and is handy to everything.

Villa Gaia (Map p274; ☎ 710690; www.villagaia-seychelles.com; Bel Ombre; villas €95) This elegant villa with lots of personal touches is the pride and joy of Michou Walsh, your English hostess and a mine of local knowledge. Fab for families, the self-contained villa contains enough room to accommodate a small troupe. The only downside might be the coast road nearby, but a wall should seal you off from traffic noise. Fancy a dip? There's a little white-sand beach across the road.

ESCAPES TO STE ANNE MARINE NATIONAL PARK

A definite must-see, Ste Anne Marine National Park (Map p268) off Victoria consists of six islands. Of these, day-trippers are permitted to land on Cerf and Moyenne Islands. For a complete escape, you can stay on Cerf and Ste Anne (and on Round and Long by the time you read this). The park is fantastic for swimming and snorkelling. Sadly, the coral in the park is no longer as awesome as it was. Silting from construction works in the bay has led to significant coral damage, compounded by several episodes of coral 'bleaching'.

The park is primarily visited on glass-bottomed boat tours offered by the main travel agencies in Victoria (see p269). The cost of a full day's outing including snorkelling and lunch starts at €85/50 per adult/child. You can also contact the **Marine Charter Association** (MCA; Map p270; ☎ 322126; mca@seychelles.net; 5th June Ave, Victoria), which charges only €50/25 per adult/child, or **Cerf Island Explorer** (Map p268; ☎ 570043; pal@seychelles.net), based at the Ste Anne Resort & Spa (see below). And yes, there's diving in the park! There are about 10 dive sites, scattered off the various islands. Contact **Ste Anne Island Diving Centre** (Map p268; ☎ 570043; pal@seychelles.net; from €70) at the Ste Anne Resort & Spa.

Note that the park authorities charge a fee of €10 per person (free for children under 12 years) to enter the marine park. Tour operators usually include this in their prices.

Cerf Island

About 60 people live on Cerf Island, including Wilbur Smith, the South African novelist. As with Moyenne and Round Islands, there's good snorkelling and the beaches are seriously alluring.

You can stay at a comfortable little colonial-style hotel, **L'Habitation** (Map p268; ☎ 323111; habicerf@seychelles.net; s/d with half board €208/243; 🍷 🍷), just a 10-minute boat ride from Victoria. Run by the friendly Delta, this 12-room charmer is right on the beach and welcomes families. If you're looking for a place for romance, head to the more exclusive **Cerf Island Marine Park Resort** (Map p268; ☎ 294500; www.cerf-resort.com; s/d with half board from €466/530; 🍷), further south. Another recommended option is the newish **Fairy Tern Chalet** (Map p268; ☎ 321733; www.fairyternchalet.sc; bungalows €125; 🍷), approximately halfway between the two resorts. Digs are in two squeaky-clean bungalows overlooking the beach.

If there's enough demand the restaurants at L'Habitation and Cerf Island Marine Park Resort will usually offer a package including transport and lunch or dinner.

Moyenne Island

Moyenne is owned by Brendon Grimshaw, who has spent the last 40 years hacking back the jungle to create his own tropical paradise. The native fauna and flora have been carefully regenerated and everything is neatly labelled, giving it the air of a botanical garden.

Day tours are organised exclusively through **Creole Travel Services** (Map p270; ☎ 297000; www.creoletravelservices.com; Albert St).

Round Island

This island was once home to a leper colony, but these days it's better known for the offshore snorkelling. A 10-villa luxury resort was under construction at the time of writing. For more information check out www.enchantedseychelles.com.

Ste Anne Island

The largest of the six islands, and only 4km east of Victoria, Ste Anne boasts two ravishing beaches, along which spreads the super-swanky **Ste Anne Resort & Spa** (Map p268; ☎ 292000; www.sainteanne-resort.com; s/d from €682/974; 🍷 🍷 🍷), with 87 glorious villas and top-notch amenities, including a spa, a dive centre and a kids club.

Long Island & Cachée Island

Long Island has long been home to the prison but should welcome a new type of inmate with the opening of a swish Shangri-la Hotel & Spa in 2008. Check out www.shangri-la.com. The smallest island of the lot, Cachée, lies southeast of Cerf. It's uninhabited.

BEAU VALLON & AROUND

INFORMATION	14 D2	D2
Cable & Wireless Internet Café.....1	Panorama - Relais des Îles.....14	
Police Station.....2	Romance Bungalows.....15	D2
	Villa Galia.....16	B3
SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES		
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INDIAN OCEAN

Beau Vallon

Bel Ombre

Danzil

Victoria (2km)

Glacis (2.2km)

Sunset Beach Hotel (800m)

Blue Sea Divers (2.2km)

Glacis (2.2km)

Barclays Bank

Beau Vallon

Bel Ombre

Danzil

Footpath to Anse Major (2.4km)

Bus Stop

Twin Barges

Beau Vallon Bay Beach Resort

Benjaya Beau Vallon Bay Beach Resort

Coral Strand Hotel

Romance Bungalows (Map p274; ☎ 410382, 247732; www.romancebungalows.com; Beau Vallon; s/d incl breakfast €97/105; 🏠) We could tell you that the 'Romance Bungalows' live up to their name and are suitable for a cuddle with your sweet-heart, but we won't. At least they provide all the home comforts, assuming you live in a spacious, well-appointed flat with a spotless kitchen (but no maid). The beach is only steps away and all amenities are within easy reach.

our pick Le Pti Payot (Map p274; ☎ 261447; payot@seychelles.net; Beau Vallon; d €98; 🏠) Three immaculate and roomy chalets with bird's-eye views (No 3 is the best) in a lush garden. What more could you want?

LePetitVillage (Map p274; ☎ 284969; www.lepetitvillage.com; Bel Ombre; d €220; 🏠) Luxury self-catering accommodation in log cabins overlooking the ocean in Bel Ombre. There's a choice between one-bedroom studios and two-bedroom apartments, all equipped to a very high standard. There were talks of changing ownership, so stay tuned.

Sunset Beach Hotel (Map p268; ☎ 261111; www.sunset-beach.com; Glacis; s €370-440, d €390-460, all incl breakfast; 🏠 🍷 🚗) This sunset-friendly seducer boasts

an ace location on a little headland among rocks and trees. Its charm lies partly in its intimate scale, with only 29 cottages. The pool shows some signs of wear and tear, but after one sundowner in the bar overlooking the ocean all will be forgiven.

Also recommended:

Daniella's Bungalows (Map p274; ☎ 247914; www.daniellasbungalows.com; Bel Ombre; s/d incl breakfast €80/100; 🏠) Has 10 clean but ordinary rooms in a well-tended garden. It's a five-minute walk to the beach. Air-con is extra (€10).

Augerine Guesthouse (Map p274; ☎ 247257; Beau Vallon; s €80-100, d €100-130, all incl breakfast; 🏠) This reputable abode was undergoing a major revamp when we visited and should feature 16 spick-and-span rooms (including 13 rooms with sea views) and a restaurant by the time you pop in. On the beach next to the big Benjaya hotel.

Le Méridien Fisherman's Cove (Map p274; ☎ 677000; www.lemeridien.com/fishcove; Bel Ombre; d incl breakfast €545-775, ste from €815; 🏠 🍷 🚗) A splendid resort with plush rooms, though not as glam as the Northolme. Bewowed by the staggering bow-shaped lobby.

Hilton Seychelles Northolme Resort & Spa (Map p274; ☎ 299000; www.hiltonworldresorts.com; Glacis; d incl breakfast €610-755; 🏠 🍷 🚗) This ultraluxurious

establishment has 40 stadium-sized villas blessed with swoony views over the bay. The pool deck alone looks like a photo-shoot set for *Elle*, and the interior follows suit. A place for celebs, royal families and honeymooners. If (s)he takes you there, (s)he's serious.

Eating

Whatever you think of this coastal stretch, you are sure to have memorable eating experiences here.

Baobab Pizzeria (Map p274; ☎ 247167; Beau Vallon; mains Rs 32-60; 🍷 lunch & dinner) Madame Michel presides over this ramshackle, sand-floored eatery wedged between the coast road and the beach. After a morning spent in the waves, re-energise with a piping-hot pizza or fish and chips.

Latino Tropical (Map p274; ☎ 620101; Beau Vallon; mains Rs 40-70; 🍷 lunch & dinner Tue-Thu) Paella? Chicken kebab with salad? The menu is a curious mishmash of Spanish and Seychellois, and the décor is enhanced by African touches, such as masks hanging on the walls, and earthy hues. A trendy place breathing new life into the Beau Vallon area, the Latino Tropical is also a great place for a tippie any time of the day (and night), best enjoyed on the alluring terrace overlooking the seafront.

Al Mare (Map p274; ☎ 620240; Beau Vallon; mains Rs 50-125; 🍷 1-10pm) Large, well-spaced tables, colourful tablecloths, potted plants and high ceilings put diners in the right mood to settle down for a big night sampling the ambitious dishes on offer – mostly seafood and pastas. Or you could simply park yourself with a cocktail (from Rs 40) outside to watch the sunset on Silhouette Island – soul-stirring. Sandwiches are also available in the afternoon.

La Scala (Map p274; ☎ 247535; Bel Ombre; mains Rs 55-135; 🍷 dinner Mon-Sat) An old favourite of visitors and locals alike, this restaurant specialises in Italian cooking. It might feel weird to sit down for *lasagne al forno* and breaded veal on a tropical Indian Ocean island, but go with the flow – the fare is top-quality and the low-lit ambience on the breezy terrace suitably romantic. A respectable selection of wines stands at your beck and call. At the end of the coast road near Danzil.

La Perle Noire (Map p274; ☎ 620220; Bel Ombre; mains Rs 60-150; 🍷 dinner Mon-Sat) The 'Black Pearl' scores high on atmosphere, with an eye-catching nautical theme and seafaring paraphernalia liberally scattered around the dining rooms (can we borrow your superb model

ships?). The eclectic menu features fish, meat and pasta dishes, but the food doesn't quite live up to the promise of the surrounds.

our pick Le Corsaire (Map p274; ☎ 247171; Bel Ombre; mains Rs 65-200; 🍷 dinner Tue-Sun) North Mahé's most prestigious address, Le Corsaire is an atmospheric place just perfect for that special meal. You could lose yourself just in the homemade tiramisu that arrives at the end of the meal. Judging by the *tournedos de bœuf sauce Bearnaise* (a choice piece of steak in a Béarnaise sauce) the beautifully presented mains are just as yummy though, so don't worry *too* much about saving room for dessert. Gastronomers could opt for bat in white-wine sauce. Le Corsaire occupies a half-timbered mansion that seems to have come straight out from rural Normandy. Strong wine list too.

Boat House (Map p274; ☎ 247898; Beau Vallon; buffet Rs 145; 🍷 dinner Mon-Sat) If you want to push the boat out, this perennial favourite fits the bill. Bring an empty tum and dive face first into its massive buffet displayed on an outrigger. With 20 different dishes on offer, it's bound to appeal to both carnivores and vegivores. The front walls are left open to the breeze (very welcome on a hot night).

Shopping

Nigel Henry's studio (Map p274; ☎ 715353; Beau Vallon; 🍷 10am-5pm Mon-Sat) Henry's acrylics capture all the life and colour of the local markets.

Getting There & Away

Buses leave regularly from Victoria for Beau Vallon, either straight over the hill via St Louis, or the long way round via Glacis. The last bus to Victoria leaves around 7.30pm; it's a Rs 70 taxi ride if you miss it.

MORNE SEYCHELLOIS NATIONAL PARK

While the dazzling coastline of Mahé is undoubtedly the main attraction, it's crucial that you take the time to explore the island's mountainous interior. One of Mahé's high-lights, the splendid Morne Seychellois National Park (Map p268) encompasses an impressive 20% of the land area of Mahé and contains a wide variety of habitats, from coastal mangrove forests up to the country's highest peak, the Morne Seychellois (905m). Choked in thick forest formation, the enigmatic, central part of the park is virtually deserted and can only be reached by walking

trails; you don't have to go very far before the outside world starts to feel a long, long way away. Without a doubt, the best way to appreciate the area is a guided walk; see the boxed text, below for more information.

The road over the mountains from Victoria to Port Glaud, which cuts through the Morne Seychellois National Park, is a stunning scenic drive.

EAST COAST

Let's face it: much of the east coast is given over to housing, so there are only a few spots that fit the picture-postcard ideal.

And swimming is not *that* tempting, with very shallow waters and a profusion of algae – hardcore beach-hounds may be disappointed. This is not to say the east coast isn't a worthwhile place to visit. South of the airport are a number of small enclaves and undeveloped areas, where travellers looking for peace and isolation will find both in no short supply. Take the oft-overlooked, little-known **Fairyland beach**: this gem of a beach offers great snorkelling and shimmering waters. Other good strips of sand are found at **Anse Royale**, **Anse Bougainville** and **Anse Forbans**, further south.

WALKING IN THE MORNE SEYCHELLOIS NATIONAL PARK

Unleash your inner Indiana Jones! There's more to do in the Seychelles than simply laze the days away on gorgeous beaches with a Seybrew in hand. If you've got itchy feet, there are excellent walks in the Morne Seychellois National Park, with a number of footpaths and hiking trails through the jungle-clad hills. These are detailed in a series of leaflets which are available at the botanical gardens (p269) or the tourist office (p269) in Victoria. The trails are reasonably well signed and are marked by intermittent yellow splotches of paint on the trees and rocks, but it's not a bad idea to hire a guide, who will also provide natural and cultural insights. **Basil Beaudoin** (☎/fax 241790, 514972) leads hiking and bird-watching trips into the Mahé back country and charges €80 for an informative day's walk with lunch and transport (€50 for a half day). Bring plenty of water. Following is a selection of inspirational hikes.

Danzil to Anse Major

The walk to this lovely and secluded beach takes you along a coast fringed by impressive glacial rock formations. The path starts at the end of the road heading west from Beau Vallon. Though the last stretch down to the beach is a bit of a scramble, it's a fairly easy romp. The beach is blissfully quiet, and is good for swimming, though there can be strong currents. You'll have to return by the same route, a total of roughly 5km.

Tea Factory to Morne Blanc

The imposing white bulk of Morne Blanc and its almost sheer 500m face make a great hiking destination. Although the track is only 600m long, it is quite steep – climbing 250m from start to finish. Unless you're pretty fit, plan on roughly an hour for the ascent. The reward is a tremendous view over the northwest coast and the sight of tropical birds circling below you. The path starts 250m up the road from the tea factory on the cross-island road from Victoria to Port Glaud. You have to descend the same way.

Kopolia Peak

This is the easier of two walks to the peaks overlooking Victoria and the Ste Anne Marine National Park. The trail starts on the cross-island Chemin Forêt Noire about 5km above Victoria. It's only just over 1km to the top of Kopolia (497m), but the final section is quite steep; allow roughly two hours there and back.

Trois Frères Peak

It's a long, steep climb to the top of Trois Frères Peak (699m), behind Victoria, but worth it for panoramic views. The path is well signed from the Sans Souci forest station on the Chemin Forêt Noire, about 4km from Victoria, although the final leg is tricky to follow. Allow four hours in total.

Once you've got your fill of working your tan, head to **Le Jardin du Roi** (Map p268; ☎ 371313; admission Rs 25; ☎ 10am-5.30pm), located 2km up in the hills above Anse Royale. This lush spice garden owes its existence to Pierre Poivre, the French spice entrepreneur. There is a self-guided walk around the 35-hectare orchard-crossed-with-forest, and you can help yourself to star fruit and other tropical delights as you wander around. The planter's house contains a one-room **museum** and there's a pleasant café-restaurant (right) with smashing views down to the coast.

The rather fancy-pants **Craft Village** (Map p268; ☎ 376100; admission free; ☎ 9.30am-5.30pm) at Anse aux Pins consists of a cluster of craft shops grouped around the Domaine de Val des Prés, an old plantation house with a few bits of memorabilia. The rather motley assortment of crafts on offer includes model boats, pottery and products fashioned from the hugely versatile coconut tree. You can also eat here in the Vye Marmite restaurant (right). A two-minute drive from the craft village, you can take a peek at **Lenstiti Kreol** (Creole Institute; Map p268; see p260), which is set in a lovely colonial building.

Sleeping

Lalla Panzi (Map p268; ☎ 376411; fax 375633; Anse aux Pins; s/d incl breakfast €45/60; ☎) Lalla Panzi is not the beachfront paradise you were dreaming of, but it's a neat property leading down to the sea. This friendly guesthouse offers four scrupulously clean rooms arranged around a cosy lounge – room 3 is our favourite, despite the rosy colour scheme in the bathroom. Though on the main road, it's quiet enough at night. The only downside is the resident dogs, which are a bit intimidating at first sight. Cash only.

Koko Grove Chalets (Map p268; ☎ 371538, 712102; Anse Royale; d €95-150) We love this place, in a hilly setting with boggling views of the coast. If you're not desperate to stay within earshot of the sea, then these two timbered chalets, set in a secluded garden with fruit trees and flowers blossoming, represent perhaps the best value anywhere this side of Mahé. The two units are self-contained, with spacious living areas and large private verandas overlooking the swimming pool. If you're preparing your own food, there's a store 400m down the road.

Fairyland (Map p268; ☎ 371700; www.fairyland.net.tz; Pointe au Sel; s/d incl breakfast €95/115; ☎) Though

'Fairyland' is an exaggerated description, it's a good-value option if you're looking for a comfortable base on the east coast. Run by a Seychellois-Swedish couple, it exudes low-key vibes and features six bright, capacious and uncluttered rooms with big balconies; three rooms open onto the lagoon, occupying a beautiful stretch of white sand. It's cruel that the water's not deep enough for swimming – although the proximity of Fairyland beach is adequate compensation. When the sea air piques your hunger, succumb to fish and chips at the downstairs restaurant.

our pick **Chalets d'Anse Forban** (Map p268; ☎ 366111; www.forbans.com; Anse Forban; d €115; ☎) 'Tranquillity; 12 sparkingly clean, fully equipped bungalows with newly tiled bathrooms; expansive lawns; family-friendly; lovely beach with good swimming' – this is what we scribbled on our notepad when we visited. Add a few sunloungers and the proximity of a store, and you have a fantastic deal.

Other solid options:

La Desirade (Map p268; ☎ 373873; Anse aux Pins; r €70; ☎) Three light-filled, self-contained bungalows with an excellent beachfront setting.

Relax Hotel (Map p268; ☎ 382900; www.lerelaxhotel.com; Anse Royale; s €60-105, d €75-115, all incl breakfast; ☎) This attractive 10-room hotel is outstandingly positioned atop a hill overlooking Fairyland beach. Get a load of that cracking view from your terrace (aim for rooms 4 and 5).

La Roussette Hotel (Map p268; ☎ 376245; www.seychelles.net/larousse; d incl breakfast €115-140; ☎) Opposite the Lalla Panzi and set back from the road in gardens, this is a well-managed complex of immaculate yet impersonal bungalows. Three-night minimum stays are preferred.

Eating

our pick **Le Jardin du Roi** (Map p268; ☎ 371313; Anse Royale; mains Rs 50-135; ☎ 10am-4.30pm) The setting is wonderful at this café-restaurant way up the hills at the spice garden (see opposite), and it puts you in the mood for a fruit juice or a crunchy salad as soon as you sit down. Fish dishes and sandwiches also feature on the menu. Save a cranny for ice creams; they are confectioned fresh on the premises. Utterly superlative is the cinnamon, nutmeg and lime combo (Rs 55). The Sunday *planteur* buffet (Rs 125) is a popular weekly event.

Kaz Kreol (Map p268; ☎ 371680; Anse Royale; mains Rs 60-100; ☎ lunch & dinner Tue-Sun) This family-run address sits right on the beach at Anse Royale. The menu strikes a good balance between

seafood, pizzas and meat, not to mention a few Chinese specialities. Dining space is gaily decorated with fish and palm-tree murals, which matches the tropical atmosphere.

Vye Marmit (Map p268; ☎ 376155; Anse aux Pins; mains Rs 75-150; ☎ 11am-9pm Mon-Sat) Here's a suave number with an atmospheric setting – it occupies a planter's house in the Craft Village. The menu is appropriately traditional Creole, with such savoury classics as crab, octopus and ray curries, fish fillet in a banana leaf or *chèvre braisé au vin rouge* (goat cooked in a red-wine sauce). If you want to travel your tastebuds, order the *civet de chauve souris* (bat stew).

Entertainment

Katiolo (Map p268; ☎ 375453; Anse Faure; men/women Rs 100/50; ☎ Wed, Fri & Sat) If you still have some energy to burn, the east coast is home to Mahé's currently most popular nightclub. It's worth checking out ladies night on Wednesday. It's a fairly hip venue, so dress up rather than down.

Getting There & Away

Buses leave regularly from Victoria for the east coast. The last bus to Victoria leaves around 7.30pm.

WEST COAST

The west coast is exquisite on the eyes. There are one or two sights to aim for, but it's the beaches and coastal scenery that are the star attractions. Wilder than the east, this is the part of Mahé where green hills tumble past coconut-strewn jungles before sliding gently into translucent waters.

The coastal drive between Anse Takamaka to the southwest up to Port Launay to the northwest provides tantalising glimpses of a number of beautiful spots. Throw away the guidebook for a day and go looking for your own slice of paradise.

The west coast is easily accessed from the east coast via several scenic roads that cut through the mountainous interior. Starting from Anse Forbans to the southeast, the road wiggles up through the mountain before reaching Quatre Bornes, from where a road leads to **Police Bay**, a splendid spot at the southern tip of the island. Sadly, the currents are too dangerous for swimming, but the beaches are great places to watch the surf (bring a picnic). Another road leads to

the Banyan Tree hotel and the high-profile beach at **Anse Intendance** (from the police station at Quatre Bornes, take the 1.7km concrete road that leads down to the beach).

Coming up the west coast, **Anse Takamaka**, **Anse Gaulettes** and **Anse à la Mouche** all vie for the 'best beach' accolade, though most people plump for the idyllic little beach of **Anse Soleil**, a pocket-sized paradise where you can pause for lunch. It's accessible via a secondary road (it's signposted). Beach-hounds will make a beeline for **Petite Anse**, another top spot accessible after a 20-minute walk. As the sun-low sky deepens to orange, this beach just might be heaven (though a new five-star hotel, the Four Seasons, the construction of which should be completed by 2009, will probably mar the experience).

To the north of Anse à la Mouche the coast is a bit less glam but appealing nonetheless. If you can find access to **Anse Louis** (where the super-swish Maia resort lies), you'll be rewarded with a superlative beach you never knew existed. You'll then go past **Grande Anse** before reaching **Port Glaud**, a laid-back town which lazily spreads itself along the coast. Further north you'll find **Port Launay** and **Port Launay Marine National Park**, Mahé's forgotten corner (which is reason enough to go there), where the road comes to an end. Mangrove swamps. Seclusion. Birdsong. Deserted beaches. You've reached the end of the earth. It's all yours.

Tea-lovers will pause at the working **tea factory** (Map p268; ☎ 378221; admission with/without guided tour Rs 20/10; ☎ 10am-4pm Mon-Fri) on the Sans Souci road about 3km above Port Glaud. It's best to visit before noon, when you can see the whole process from drying to packing. The estate produces about 45 tonnes of organic tea per year for export.

There are excellent dive sites off the southwestern coast (see p27). Diving can be arranged through the reputable **Dive Resort Seychelles** (Map p268; ☎ 361813, 717272; www.seychelles.net/divereso), based at the Plantation Club Hotel.

We also recommend taking a one-hour horse-riding excursion with **Utetangar Riding Centre** (Map p268; ☎ 712355; Grande Anse; 1hr ride €40). There's nothing quite like galloping on Grande Anse beach with the wind in your hair. You'll also traverse some rainforest. Book one day in advance.

Sleeping

Accommodation in west Mahé ranges from modest but charming guesthouses and self-catering apartments to big resort hotels with everything laid on.

La Rocaille (Map p268; ☎ 524238; Anse Gouvernement Rd, Anse Soleil; d €60) This is a pleasant find, on the hill that separates Anse Gouvernement from Anse Soleil. The grounds are nice enough, with lots of vegetation and birdsong. The friendly owners offer fruits to guests and are happy to drive them to the nearest village to stock up on food supplies. Too bad there's just one room. The nearest beach is at Anse Gouvernement, about 400m down the hill, but Anse Soleil is not that far either – about 1.5km to the north.

Lazare Lodge (Map p268; ☎ 361915, 633006; www.lazarelodge.com; Anse Gouvernement Rd, Anse Soleil; s/d €65/100, ste €12, all incl breakfast) Opposite La Rocaille, this all-wood, lodge-like venue (the owner is South African) has five neat rooms, including one suite. Meals are available on request and are served on the splendid terrace overlooking Baie Lazare and the jungle-clad hills – very *Out of Africa*.

Anse Soleil Resort (Map p268; ☎ 361090; fax 361435; Anse Soleil; d €70; ☎) Just four self-catering apartments; the Kitouz is the best, but all are well equipped and spacious. It's on the road to Anse Soleil in a great location, with wonderful views over Anse à la Mouche (if you can ignore the power lines).

Chez Batista's (Map p268; ☎ 366300; www.chez-batista.com; Anse Takamaka; s €76-94, d €135-170, villas €350; ☎) Your only concern here: whether to frolic on the beach *now* or first sip a cocktail at the restaurant. This stress-melting venue boasts an idyllic location on Takamaka beach and features six tidy rooms enlivened with murals as well as three luxurious villas, not to mention a pen with giant tortoises. All in all, it's a bit compact but excellent value. All prices include breakfast.

La Residence (Map p268; ☎ 371733; Anse à la Mouche; d €90; ☎) Perched on a hillside, the six fully equipped apartments and three villas are fresh and light-drenched yet simply furnished. The buildings are functional rather than whimsical but there are good views from the terrace (despite the odd power line).

Anse Soleil Beachcomber (Map p268; ☎ 361461; www.beachcomber.sc; Anse Soleil; s €105-140, d €120-180, incl breakfast; ☎) Among rocks on the secluded cove of Anse Soleil, this small, family-run hotel

with only 14 rooms is a perfect hideaway. The rooms are clean and simple with private terraces. Room 10 has the best setting – it offers more seclusion amid boulders and opens onto the sea shore, but the recent Premier rooms are not bad either. Half board is available. Anse Soleil Café is almost next door.

Blue Lagoon Chalets (Map p268; ☎ 371197; www.seychelles.net/bluelagoon; Anse à la Mouche; d €120; ☎) The friendly owner here offers four well-cared-for holiday units that sleep up to four people and are fully equipped, a hop from the sea shore.

our pick Valmer Resort (Map p268; ☎ 381555; www.valmerresort; Baie Lazare; d €150-380; ☎ ☎ ☎) No, you're not hallucinating, the view is real. Topaz waters in the distance, tropical foliage in the garden. This well-run venue seduces those who stay with tastefully done-out chalets (the standard apartments are more ordinary). If not lounging by the pool, a dazzling mirage that seems to melt into the sea on the horizon, lock the door of your room, draw the curtains and crack open a bottle of champagne. There's an onsite restaurant, run by the brother of local painter Gerard Devoud.

Le Jardin des Palmes (Map p268; ☎ 389100; www.seychelles.net/thepalmresort; Anse à la Mouche; s €153-180, d €230-250, all incl breakfast; ☎ ☎) Perched on a hillside overlooking Anse à la Mouche, this discreet number is a picturesque oasis with a gleaming pool, 10 all-wood rooms and an onsite restaurant.

Banyan Tree (Map p268; ☎ 383500; www.banyan-tree.com; Anse Intendance; d incl breakfast from €1100; ☎ ☎ ☎) A member of the Leading Small Hotels of the World, this is Maia's main competitor. Privacy is paramount at this ultraluxurious, creatively designed resort in an exceptional setting. The villas are enormous, many-roomed affairs complete with personal pools. Nestled in a grove overlooking Anse Intendance, the spa will make you go 'aaah'.

Maia Luxury Resort (Map p268; ☎ 390000; www.maia.com.sc; Anse Louis; d incl breakfast €1610-2230; ☎ ☎ ☎) There is so much to love in this five-star masterpiece – the absolutely sumptuous villas, the 'zero stress' ambience (as one employee put it), the best clifftop views in Mahé, the glorious porcelain sand beaches, the sense of privacy, the spectacular infinity pool and wow-factor spa – that it defies description. Next time you get married, book your honeymoon here!

Eating

Eclipse (Map p268; ☎ 372106; Anse à la Mouche; mains Rs 50-80; ☎ 11am-8.30pm) Across the road from the beach, this lively eatery is high on atmosphere, with well-designed wooden tables and chairs. Alas, no views to speak of. How about the food? Beef fillet in wine sauce, grilled chicken in mango sauce, and tuna steak in coconut milk are examples of the innovative fare on offer.

Restaurant-Cafeteria Maria (Map p268; ☎ 361812; Anse Gouvernement Rd, Anse Soleil; mains Rs 50-90; ☎ 10am-9pm) Maria, the Seychellois spouse of artist Antonio Filippin (see right), had just opened this quirky restaurant beside her husband's studio when we passed through. The cavernous interior is discombobulating, with granite tabletops and concrete walls sprayed with paint. Food-wise, it majors on tried-and-true Creole recipes, such as grilled fish, chicken curry in coconut milk, and pancakes.

Anchor Café (Map p268; ☎ 371289; Anse à la Mouche; mains Rs 50-115; ☎ 11am-9pm Mon-Sat) Cafeteria-style eating is what you'll get at this locale. Tuck into standard dishes such as burgers, salads, pork chops or grilled fish. Eat alfresco, near a huge anchor in the garden.

our pick Anse Soleil Café (Map p268; ☎ 361700; Anse Soleil; mains Rs 60-100; ☎ noon-6pm) This unfussy little eatery could hardly be better situated: it's right on the beach at Anse Soleil. The menu is short and concentrates on simply prepared seafood served in generous portions; the shark steak is superb. Digest all this over a drink afterwards.

Sundown Restaurant (Map p268; ☎ 378352; Port Glaud; mains Rs 60-140; ☎ noon-9pm Mon, Wed & Fri, noon-6pm Tue, Thu & Sat) Well-prepared local seafood, a reggae soundtrack and a laid-back atmosphere make this a heart-stealer. Light years away from the glitz usually associated with the Seychelles, it can't get more mellow than this.

Auberge d'Anse Boileau – Chez Plume (Map p268; ☎ 355050; www.seychelles.net/auberge-plume; Anse Boileau; mains Rs 65-160; ☎ dinner Mon-Sat) It's worth crossing the island for the crafty food at this perennial fave, dressed with white furnishings. A *capitaine* (threadfin) sounds innocuous, but it will arrive slathered with a passionfruit sauce. Bookings essential.

Chez Batista's (Map p268; ☎ 366300; Anse Takamaka; mains Rs 100-300; ☎ lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) Location, location, location. From the impressive thatched canopy, the picture-perfect beach and the endless turquoise bay spread out in

front of you. This is a great place for seafood, including lobster and ginger crab. Good juices too. The eclectic lunch buffet (Rs 150) is the best option on the island on Sunday. It's wise to book on weekends – it's a snug eatery with a big reputation.

Shopping

The glorious southwest seems to be an endless source of inspiration for a number of artists. Visit **Michael Adams' studio** (Map p268; ☎ 361006; www.seychelles.net/adams; Anse à la Mouche; ☎ 10am-4pm Mon-Fri, 10am-noon Sat), where silk-screen prints burst with the vivid life of the forests. They are irresistible and highly collectable, so bring plenty of rupees if you're thinking of buying. Keep some cash for **Tow Bowers' sculptures** (Map p268; ☎ 371518; Anse à la Mouche) and for Antonio Filippin's somewhat risqué woodcarvings. Antonio's quirky studio, **Art Arc** (Map p268; ☎ 510977; Baie Lazare), is perched on a hill between Anse Gouvernement and Anse Soleil. Gerard Devoud's eye-goggling paintings are also sure to enliven your bedroom. **Gerard Devoud's studio** (Map p268; ☎ 381313; Baie Lazare) is at Valmer Resort.

Getting There & Away

Buses leave regularly from Victoria for the west coast. The last bus to Victoria leaves around 7.30pm.

PRASLIN

A wicked seductress, Praslin has lots of temptations: stylish lodgings, high-quality restaurants serving the freshest of fish, tangled velvet jungle, curving hills dropping down to gin-clear seas, gorgeous stretches of silky sand edged with palm trees and a slow-motion ambience. No, you're not dreaming!

Lying about 45km northeast of Mahé, the second-largest island in the Seychelles falls somewhere between the relative hustle and bustle of Mahé and the sleepiness of La Digue. Like Mahé, Praslin is a granite island, with a ridge of mountains running east-west along the centre. The island is 12km long and 5km across at its widest point. The 5000 inhabitants of Praslin are scattered around the coast in a series of small settlements. The most important from a visitor's perspective are **Anse Volbert** (also known as Côte d'Or)

SEYCHELLES' BEST BEACHES

It's gruelling work investigating which beaches qualify as the best of Seychelles. Here's a few of our favourites:

- Beau Vallon (Mahé; p272) – Mahé's longest and most popular beach, sweeping blond sand backed by takamaka trees
- Fairyland (Mahé; p276) – easily overlooked but has good snorkelling
- Anse Soleil (Mahé; p278) – an intimate paradise, killer sunsets
- Anse Takamaka (Mahé; p278) – Mahé's most elegant beach is the perfect place for a romantic stroll
- Anse Lazio (Praslin; below) – excellent for sunbathing and snorkelling, and famous for its beach restaurants
- Anse Source d'Argent (La Digue; p291) – crystalline, glossy, and framed with glaci boulders, this is the most photogenic of all the Seychelles' beaches
- Grand Anse (La Digue; p291) – idyllic stretch of sand, excellent for frolicking in the crashing surf

If you're looking for something ultra-exclusive, you can mark your footprints in pristine sand at Denis, Silhouette, Desroches and Bird Islands (see p288).

and **Grande Anse**. At the southeast tip of the island is **Baie Ste Anne**, Praslin's main port.

Praslin has all you need to decompress and throw your cares to the wind. Prepare yourself for soggy fingers and toes: here you'll probably spend as much time in the water as out of it. But if playing sardines on the strand ceases to do it for you, there are a few walks, boat excursions to nearby islands famed for their birdlife, scuba diving and snorkelling that will keep you buzzing.

INFORMATION

All the major banks have ATMs and exchange facilities. Praslin's two tourist offices can provide maps and basic information and help with accommodation and excursion bookings. Praslin's travel agents all offer similar excursions at similar prices and can organise car hire, boat charters, boat excursions, water activities, air tickets and the like.

Airport tourist office (☎ 233346; stbpraslin@seychelles.sc; Praslin Airport; ☎ 8am-1pm & 2-4pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat)

Baie Ste Anne tourist office (☎ 232669; stbpraslin@seychelles.sc; Baie Ste Anne; ☎ 8am-1pm & 2-4pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat)

Barclays Bank Baie Ste Anne (☎ 232218); Grand Anse (☎ 233344)

Central post office (☎ 233212; Grand Anse; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-4pm Mon-Fri) Next to the police station in Grand Anse.

Creole Travel Services (☎ 294294; Grand Anse) Travel agency.

Mason's Travel (☎ 288750; Grand Anse) Travel agency.
Mauritius Commercial Bank (MCB) Anse Volbert (☎ 232602); Grand Anse (☎ 233940)

Nadia's Internet Café (☎ 233478; Grand Anse; per hr Rs 30; ☎ 8.30am-8pm Mon-Thu, 8.30am-5.30pm Fri, 6.30-8pm Sat, 9am-noon Sun) Inside Ocean Plaza Building.
Seychelles Savings Bank (☎ 233810; Grand Anse)

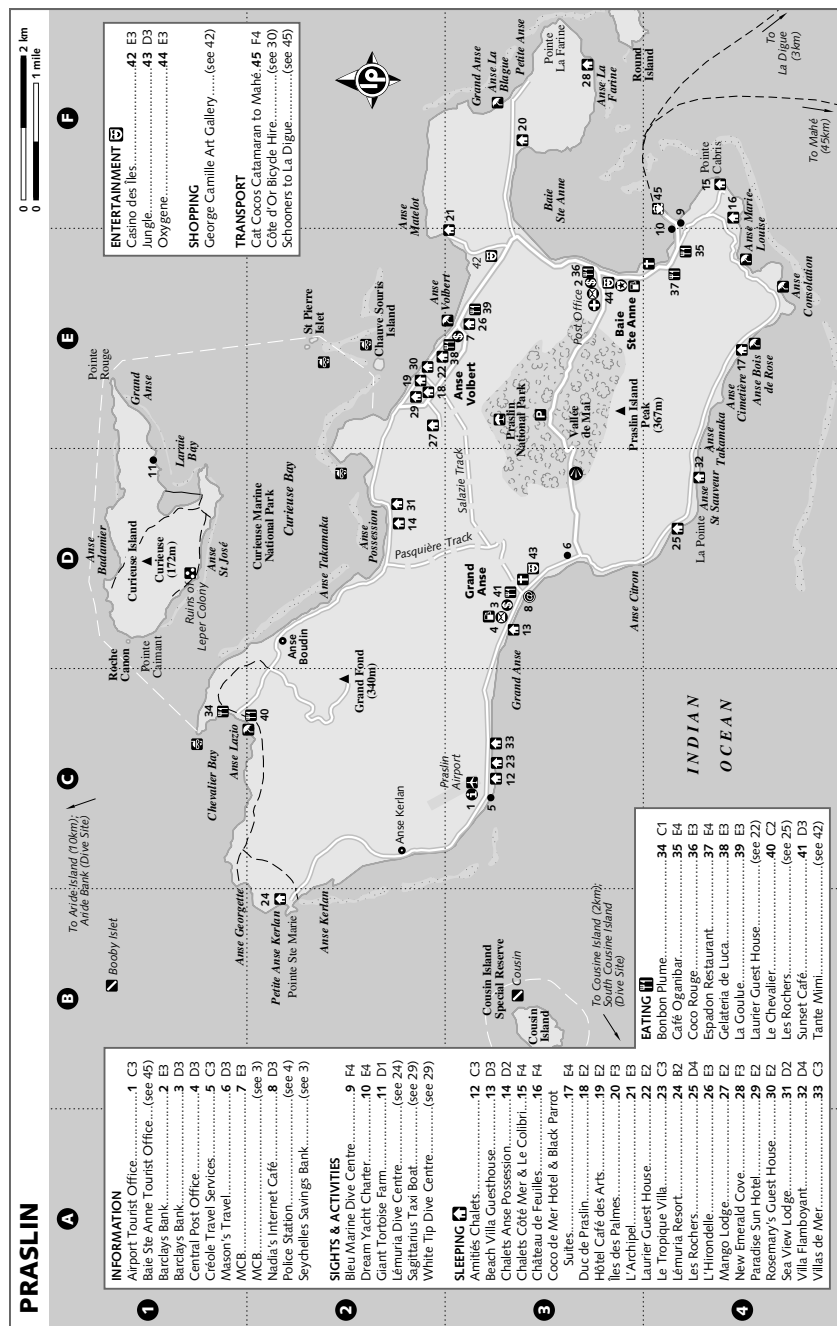
SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Vallée de Mai

Praslin's World Heritage-listed **Vallée de Mai** (adult/under 12yr €15/free; ☎ 8am-5.30pm) is one of only two places in the world where you can see the rare coco de mer palms growing in their natural state (the other being nearby Curieuse Island). If the entry price seems steep, remember this is a unique chance to experience a slice of Eden. Three trails lead through the park, of which the longest takes around three hours. Signs indicate some of the other endemic trees to look out for, including several varieties of pandanus (screw pine) and latanier palms.

Beaches

Is **Anse Lazio**, on the northwest tip of the island, the most enticing beach in the Indian Ocean? It's picture postcard everywhere you look. Here, the long, broad pale-sand beach has lapis lazuli waters on one side and a thick fringe of palm and takamaka trees on the



SEXY COCONUTS

This must be the sexiest fruit on earth, and it could be mistaken for some kind of erotic gadgetry in a sex shop. The *coco fesse* (the fruit of the coco de mer palm) looks like, ahem, buttocks with a female sex. Now you can understand why these strange, sensual fruits excited the 17th-century sailors who first stumbled upon them after months at sea. This rare palm grows naturally only in the Seychelles.

Only female trees produce the erotically shaped nuts, which can weigh over 30kg. The male tree possesses a decidedly phallic flower stem of 1m or longer, adding to the coco de mer's steamy reputation.

Harvesting the nuts is strictly controlled by the **Seychelles Island Foundation** (SIF; Map p270; www.sif.sc; Mont Fleuri Rd, Victoria), an NGO which manages the Vallée de Mai on behalf of the government. Money from the sale of nuts goes towards SIF's conservation work in the Vallée de Mai and on Aldabra.

If you want to lug one of these nuts home, be prepared to pay at least €200. They come in a husky state and will need to be polished; beware of ready-polished nuts, which are often fakes. The safest place to buy is directly from SIF, which will issue you with the required export permit.

other, and it's framed by a series of granite boulders at each extremity. You won't find a better place for sunbathing and snorkelling.

Don't get too excited, though. Come here on a cloudy day (yes, that might happen!) and the wow factor vanishes altogether.

There is another lovely, long stretch of sand at **Anse Volbert**, while right at the island's southern tip, **Anse Consolation** and **Anse Marie-Louise** are also pretty spots.

Sadly, **Anse Georgette**, which is an indescribably lovely stretch of white sand at the north-western tip of the island, has been engulfed by the Lémuria Resort. In theory, it's a public beach that is accessible to anybody. In practice, you might be turned back at the gate of the Lémuria.

Boat Excursions to Nearby Islands

Curieuse Island is a granite island 1km off Praslin's north coast and was a leper colony from 1833 until 1965. Curieuse is used as a breeding centre for giant Aldabra tortoises. The wardens at the **giant tortoise farm** show visitors round the pens, after which you're free to explore the rest of the island. Most visitors to Curieuse arrive on an organised tour arranged through their hotel or any tour operator. Day trips cost around €95/50 for an adult/child including lunch, snorkelling at St Pierre Islet and the marine-park entry fee of €10.

The alternative is to charter your own boat from Anse Volbert. **Sagittarius Taxi Boat** (☎ 232234, 512137), on the beach beside the Paradise Sun Hotel, charges €25 for Curieuse;

Curieuse with St Pierre costs €30. You can also contact Edwin at Laurier Guest House (see p285), whose tours get rave reviews from travellers.

About 2km southwest of Praslin, **Cousin Island** is run as a nature reserve by **Nature Seychelles** (www.nature.org.sc). The bird population is estimated to exceed 300,000 on an island measuring just 1km in diameter. It's an amazing experience to walk through thick forest with birds seemingly nesting on every branch.

The island is also an important nesting ground for hawksbill turtles. As many as 100 turtles nest here between September and February. At any time of year you're bound to see lizards; Cousin boasts one of the highest densities of lizards in the world.

Cousin can only be visited as part of an organised tour from Tuesday to Friday. Half-day tours of Cousin can be arranged through Praslin's hotels and tour operators for around €70/35 per adult/child. The adult price includes a €25 landing fee, which goes towards conservation efforts.

The waters around **St Pierre Islet**, off Anse Volbert, are excellent for snorkelling and sloshing around. Boat trips to St Pierre organised by hotels and private operators cost upwards of €20 per person.

Diving

There is some great diving off Praslin. See p32 for more information on dive sites.

Bleu Marine Dive Centre (☎ 513518; Baie Ste Anne) At the jetty.

Lémuria Dive Centre (☎ 281281; Anse Kerlan) At the Lémuria Resort.

Octopus Dive Centre (☎ 232350, 512350; Anse Volbert)

White Tip Dive Centre (☎ 232282, 514282; Anse Volbert) Based at Paradise Sun Hotel.

Kayaking

It's not a bad idea to rent a kayak and explore Anse Volbert at your leisure and paddle round Chauve Souris Island. **Sagittarius Taxi Boat** (☎ 232234, 512137) handles rentals (from €10 per hour).

SLEEPING

Demand for accommodation is high in Praslin. To avoid disappointment, particularly in high season, book your accommodation well in advance.

Truly budget options are nonexistent, but a number of guesthouses offer perfectly comfortable double rooms with private bathroom for under €100.

Anse Volbert, with its restaurants and other tourist facilities, makes a good base. Grand Anse is busier and less attractive, but less touristy, and there are some decent options within walking distance of the Baie Ste Anne jetty. If you're looking for a real hideaway, head for the wild and empty promontories to either side of Baie Ste Anne.

Most places offer their guests a free shuttle to Anse Lazio.

Grand Anse & Anse Kerlan Area

Beach Villa Guesthouse (☎ 233445; martin@seychelles.net; Grand Anse; d incl breakfast €90; 🍷) With tempting sunloungers, grassy garden areas and a lovely beachfront location, this is one of the

most dependable venues in the area. Rooms are impeccably kept with tiled floors, the service is personable and the ambience unfussy. Air-con is extra (€8). Run by the same family as Amitié's Chalets.

Villas de Mer (☎ 233972; www.seychelles-holidays.com; Grand Anse; d incl breakfast €152; 🍷 🍷) This relaxed operation is recommended for its cheerfully appointed, spick-and-span rooms with terracotta tiles, plump bedding and partial ocean views. A well-tended pool and an excellent beachside restaurant round off the offerings. José, the bartender, concocts a wicked *calou*.

Lémuria Resort (☎ 281281; www.lemuriareSORT.com; Anse Kerlan; d incl breakfast €626-1246; 🍷 🍷 🍷) Praslin's top-drawer establishment occupies the whole northwest tip of the island. If you're not bowled over by features such as the voluminous foyer and the soothing spa, you certainly will be by the three-tiered infinity pool, the three gorgeous beaches and the expansive grounds in which the villas blend in among the rocks and water features. Facilities include three restaurants, a kids club and an 18-hole golf course. One blemish: the property has engulfed the idyllic Anse Georgette, which is now a de facto part of the hotel, though it's a public beach by law.

Other recommendations:

Amitié Chalets (☎ 233445; martin@seychelles.net; Grand Anse; d incl breakfast €90-110; 🍷) Four neat rooms, a well-tended property and a beachfront location make this a good all-round bet. The beautiful little thatched cottage at the back (called 'Round') is our fave. Near the airstrip.

Le Tropic Villa (☎ 233805, 513027; www.seychelles.net/tropic-villa; Grand Anse; d incl breakfast €117-130; 🍷 🍷) Offers six fully equipped bungalows (four of which have sea views) in top nick in a beachside setting near the airstrip.

Anse Volbert Area

Rosemary's Guest House (☎ /fax 232176; Anse Volbert; s/d €45/70) Yes, you read those prices right (we asked twice). Relaxed and friendly, this homey place offers quality accommodation at wallet-friendly prices. The three fan-cooled rooms are simply furnished yet tidy and boast bouncy beds and crisp sheets. Location is ace; you can bask lizardlike in the garden within earshot of the waves. Meals are available to guests on request (€15). There are plans to build four new rooms. Our favourite for budget travellers.

Mango Lodge (☎ 232077; www.mangolodge.com; Anse Volbert; s €88-116, d €116-136, incl breakfast) These digs offer something different, with a cluster of well-appointed bungalows and offbeat, still-raised A-framed chalets precariously perched on a greenery-cloaked hillside. What a hallucinogenic view! It's only 600m from Anse Volbert, but the access road is very steep – you definitely need wheels to stay here.

Laurier Guest House (☎ 232241; www.laurierseychelles.com; Anse Volbert; s/d incl breakfast €90/110) One of the best deals at Anse Volbert. Run by friendly Edwin and Sybille, it features four (more to come) uncomplicated and smallish but neat rooms. The woodcarved posts on the terrace are a nice touch.

L'Hirondelle (☎ 232243; www.seychelles.net/hirondelle; Anse Volbert; r €95) The four rooms, although they won't knock your socks off, are comfortable and come fully equipped, and each has a balcony or a terrace that commands a blue-green lagoon vista. Downside: it's not shielded from the noise of the coast road.

Duc de Praslin (☎ 232252; www.leduc-seychelles.com; Anse Volbert; s €160-215, d €180-250, all incl breakfast; 🍷) Spacious and well-run, clean and comfortable, friendly and serviceable. Yes, all the key words apply here, just as you would expect at a hotel of this kind on an island like Praslin. There's a nicely laid out garden. The owners have plans to redesign the whole place in 2008 to 2009 – stay tuned.

our pick **Hôtel Café des Arts** (☎ 232170; www.cafe.se; Anse Volbert; d incl breakfast €180-225) A pleasant oasis. Personable and homely, the digs are not ultraposh (there's no air-con), but inside they are tastefully designed with natural materials, including bamboo, coconut and takamaka wood. Hot tip: angle for the more expensive beach bungalow – a better deal than the garden digs. The place has an artistic vibe – there's a small art gallery at reception.

L'Archipel (☎ 284700; www.larchipel.com; Anse Gouvernement; d incl breakfast €370-670; 🍷 🍷 🍷) Serious swank. This resort occupies a large, nicely landscaped plot by the beach, at Anse Gouvernement (the eastern tip of Anse Volbert). Squeezed in between the spacious, stand-alone, split-level units are a swimming pool and a restaurant. The walk up to the highest bungalows may leave the terminally unfit short of breath. Naturally, you'll find all the usual resort facilities onsite.

Paradise Sun Hotel (☎ 293293; www.paradiseseun.com; Anse Volbert; s/d with half board €385/546; 🍷 🍷) If you're looking for the classic Seychelles setting, complete with shady palms, lagoon views and a splendid china-white stretch of sand just steps from your door, then this Praslin classic won't disappoint. After a massive post-tsunami refurbishment, this resort-style operation now offers 80 smartly finished bungalows with dark wood fixtures and granite bricks, ample space and heaps of amenities, including a dive centre, a pool and a restaurant. It's kid-friendly.

Anse Possession

Chalets Anse Possession (☎ /fax 232180; Anse Possession; r €80-110) Three two-bedroom villas are set in lush greenery off the coast road. Although not the height of luxury, rooms are clean, comfy, roomy...and bland – perfect for the traveller who's not fussy. Good value.

Sea View Lodge (☎ 711965, 780001; www.kokonet.sc/seaviewlodge; Anse Possession; r €100-120) This place has three newly built bungalows, two of which are perched on a hillside. Needless to say the verandas have stunning views over the bay and Curieuse Island. All are fully equipped and very spacious. For self-caterers, there's a small shop just down the road. No beach.

Baie Ste Anne & Pointe Cabris Area

Chalets Côté Mer & Le Colibri (☎ 294200; www.chez.com/jmc/seychelles; Baie Ste Anne; d incl breakfast €85-125; 🍷) An excellent deal at the southeastern tip of Baie Ste Anne. Features a clutch of A-framed bungalows and comfy rooms perched on a hillside overlooking the sea. The Colibri bungalows are slightly hipper than the Chalets Côté Mer. Some units are lovingly built from hardwoods and decked out with granite floors and takamaka furnishings, and most offer glorious views over La Digue. Lovers of fine food will enjoy the cooking here – the French owner, René Parmentier, has made a name as

IT'S A WILD, WILD WORLD

Robbie Bression is a conservationist who works on Bird Island. After years of supervising numerous conservation projects, such as turtle and bird monitoring, and studying the behaviour of various species in the Indian Ocean, he still thinks the Seychelles is an unmatched haunt for wildlife enthusiasts. 'The Seychelles is a kind of Noah's ark. Take Bird Island: it's predator-free, and hundreds of thousands of birds come each year to nest. You just have to sit on your veranda and birds just land on your head. Not to mention giant turtles; come here and you'll meet Esmeralda, the oldest living tortoise in the world. He (yes, he!) likes being stroked under the neck. And despite his age, he's still sexually active.' A hot tip? 'If you can, try to include Cousin, Cousine, Aride and Frégate islands in your itinerary – they all boast prodigious bird life and turtle populations. But the ultimate in ecotourism and wildlife viewing is Aldabra Atoll. It's absolutely unbelievable. If you can afford to go there, do it, you'll never regret it. There is talk of opening up a few facilities for ecotourists on Aldabra, but it's still too early to trumpet it.'

an adept chef. There's no beach but snorkeling is excellent.

Îles des Palmes (☎ 711051; www.beachbungalow.sc; Baie Ste Anne; bungalows €135-180) Has 18 purpose-built, roomy, self-contained villas strung out along a gentle beach. Hire a kayak (€10) to explore offshore, take a midday snooze in a hammock under the swaying palms, or scratch the leathery necks of resident giant tortoises. Bikes are available (€10).

New Emerald Cove (☎ 232323; www.emerald.sc; Anse La Farine; s with half board €325-377, d with half board €383-474; 🍷 🍷) If you're looking for the perfect compromise between style, atmosphere and seclusion, then look no further than this little slice of heaven nestled in Anse La Farine, and accessible by boat only (from Baie Ste Anne jetty). Facing Round Island, the 42 units are stylishly decorated, the beach is ravishing, and the shimmering pool seems to disappear into the ocean and horizon.

our pick **Château de Feuilles** (☎ 290000; www.chateaudefeuilles.com; Pointe Cabris; d incl breakfast €365-545; 🍷 🍷 🍷) Paradise awaits you here. This bijou hideaway sits on an unfathomably beautiful headland near Baie Ste Anne. The proprietors have made the most of the exquisite landscape, with nine luxurious villas ingeniously deployed over several acres of tropical gardens. A serene symphony of earth tones and natural textures, elegant furnishings, sensational views, high-class amenities (including a complimentary car and a hilltop Jacuzzi), an uber-romantic poolside restaurant – every detail is spot-on. There's a three-night minimum stay. Go on, you know you deserve it.

Anse St-Sauveur Area

Villa Flamboyant (☎ 233036; rosycob18@yahoo.com; Anse St Sauveur; d €90, bungalows €140, all incl breakfast) A true charmer. You'll be impressed by the large building (a converted planter's house) that merges effortlessly with a surrounding panoply of stately flamboyant trees. Much of the heritage structure and charm of its former life remains, but the six rooms have been renovated extensively and are comfortable, and come with parquet floors and exposed beams. Rooms 2 and 3 overlook the beach but are not the most intimate. Also available are two modern, fully equipped bungalows. Rosemary, your charming host, is a good cook. Meals are served in a snug dining room, furnished with Creole chairs and ceilings. Great stuff.

our pick **Les Rochers** (☎ 233034; magda@seychelles.net; Anse St Sauveur; d €100-200; 🍷 🍷) Who knows if this staggeringly beautiful family-run hideaway will be able to handle all this publicity, but it can't go without mention because it's simply seventh heaven. We can't gush enough about the three fully equipped beachfront villas, all decorated with flair and imaginatively laid out. We recommend booking the Kutia, with takamaka furnishings and rooms cut into the rock face, or the Grande Case, ideal for families, with a vast lounge area carved into a big boulder opening onto the beach. As if this wasn't enough, there's excellent swimming and snorkelling at the front, and if you don't fancy cooking, Les Rochers boasts a high-quality restaurant. Joël Confait, the son, can organise any boat trips. Picture-perfect in practically every way. It's in very, very high demand (word of mouth, my friends), so book early.

Coco de Mer Hotel & Black Parrot Suites (☎ 233900; www.cocodemer.com, www.blackparrot.com; s €195-205, d €260-280, ste €318; 🍷 🍷) Choose the Black Parrot Suites if you want some serious cossetting; the Coco de Mer, with 40 rooms, has more of a resort feel. There's no beach (bar an unimpressive artificial one) but you can cool off in the pool in the shape of a *coco jesse* (yes, they dared) or prop up the quirky Mango Bar and marvel at the mango tree that goes through the roof. All prices include breakfast.

EATING

Since most people eat in their hotels or guesthouses, there are relatively few independent restaurants on Praslin. You'll find takeaways at Grand Anse, Baie Ste Anne and Anse Volbert, and a clutch of smarter places scattered around the coast.

Most hotels have excellent restaurants that are open to all comers. You'll eat very well at Lémuria Resort. Others hotels with restaurants that merit a visit for their own sake include Duc de Praslin and L'Archipel.

Anse Volbert Area

our pick **Gelateria de Luca** (Anse Volbert; mains Rs 40-70; 🍷 11am-8pm) Praslin's prime ice-cream parlour will leave you a drooling mess. Order a coppa tropicale (Rs 40), and you'll see why. It also whips up pasta dishes and various snacks, and the vitamin-packed passionfruit juice is killer. Two minuses: the décor is unimaginative and there's no view.

La Goulue (☎ 232223; Anse Volbert; mains Rs 60-140; 🍷 lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) This little eatery doesn't have beach frontage but the terrace catches some breeze and the menu should please most palates. It features Creole staples with a French twist, such as *steak au poivre crème cognac* (steak with pepper in cognac cream sauce), and various filling snacks.

Tante Mimi (☎ 232500; Anse Volbert; mains Rs 100-200; 🍷 lunch Sun, dinner daily) Tante Mimi is a real heartbreaker. At the casino in Anse Volbert, you couldn't ask for a more atmospheric setting – think a lovely old colonial house, creaky parquet flooring, Creole furnishings throughout, candlelit tables, silver cutlery, chandeliers and a wide-ranging menu featuring Creole classics. Unfortunately we found the food only average and the service utterly amateurish. Give it a second chance, perhaps. Free pick-up.

our pick **Laurier Guest House** (☎ 232241; Anse Volbert; buffet Rs 250; 🍷 dinner Thu-Tue) Charismatic Edwin and his Belgian spouse prepare a spectacular buffet at dinner – we walked out belly first. Rejoicing begins with lip-smacking hors d'oeuvre displayed on a boat-shaped table, followed by sizzling meat and fish morsels expertly grilled by Edwin, who is hardly visible from a smoke cloud behind the barbecue. The dining room is atmospheric, especially the new wing, with wrought-iron furnishings. You may be serenaded by a local crooner on certain evenings (we had 'No Woman No Cry'; and you?). Make sure you reserve.

Grand Anse

Sunset Café (☎ 233383; Grand Anse; mains Rs 60-200; 🍷 lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) Lobster for less than Rs 250? Yes, it's possible. This small, pleasantly informal number is worth visiting for the good, cheap and wholesome food created from quality ingredients. It has a few outdoor tables.

Baie Ste Anne

our pick **Coco Rouge** (☎ 232228; Baie Ste Anne; mains Rs 60, dinner menu Rs 125; 🍷 lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) Everyone loves an insider's tip, and Coco Rouge is that easy-to-miss 'secret spot' that locals like to recommend. Run by Tony, a teacher, it serves up a sensational-value set menu at dinner, with the best smoked fish salad (mixed with avocado and veggies) we've had in the Seychelles. The *poisson à la créole* (Creole-style fish), the Chinese noo-

dles and the salad were delectable too. The setting is refreshingly simple, with sturdy takamaka tables. We'll be back – see you there.

Espadon Restaurant (☎ 770453; Baie Ste Anne; mains Rs 65, menu Rs 150; 🍷 lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) This tiny, typically Creole joint is a great place for a cheap and fast meal at lunchtime, or for a fixed menu come the evening. The naive fresco sporting colourful fish is amusing.

Café Oganibar (☎ 232111; Baie Ste Anne; mains Rs 75-140; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Under new management, the Oganibar is big in ambitions, with such concoctions as fish fillet baked in banana leaves, braised chicken with honey, and grilled prawns with garlic butter. There's a Creole buffet on Thursday evening and a Chinese buffet on Saturday evening.

Anse Lazio

Le Chevalier (☎ 560488; Anse Lazio; mains Rs 75-180; 🍷 lunch) Can't get a table at Bonbon Plume? Don't despair. Here's an acceptable plan B. OK, it's not right on the beach and the setting is frustratingly bland, but the octopus curry and the tuna steak go down a treat. Steer clear of the tuna salad (Rs 75), made with canned tuna.

Bonbon Plume (☎ 232136; Anse Lazio; mains Rs 115-180, menu Rs 180; 🍷 lunch) Is it a tourist trap or a seafood mecca? Both, perhaps. With such a location – the palm-thatched canopy is right on the beach – tables are unsurprisingly in high demand. Anything from *moules à la seychelloise* (Seychellois-style mussels) to the catch of the day, this is a simple seafood delight. Your choice of critter will have a huge influence on the fiscal outlay. For grilled lobster or *cigale de mer* (squill fish), you'll be looking at Rs 350.

Anse St Sauveur

our pick **Les Rochers** (☎ 233034; Anse St Sauveur; mains Rs 220-450; 🍷 dinner Wed-Sat) Pray for a table at this suave venue set in a wonderfully secluded property by the sea. Flickering candles, soft music, swaying palms, a thatched terrace and the sound of waves washing the beach make it a real date-pleaser. Order cocktails, clink glasses and fall in love. No alchemy? There's always the delicious food, such as lobster with garlic, and the magical atmosphere at night. It has a can't-go-wrong wine list – treat yourself to a glass of Chateauneuf du Pape (a French

red). Vegetarian options too. Reservations are essential.

ENTERTAINMENT

Nightlife in Praslin? No, really? It usually comes as a surprise to many visitors that the island rocks (by Seychellois standards) on Friday and Saturday evenings. Shakers and movers head en masse to the **Jungle** (Grand Anse; admission Rs 50; 🕒 10pm-4am Fri & Sat) or to **Oxygene** (Baie Ste Anne; admission Rs 50; 🕒 10pm-4am Fri & Sat).

Other than that, most large hotels put on their own entertainment programmes, or you can try your luck at the **Casino des Îles** (☎ 232500; Anse Volbert; 🎰 slot machines noon-2am, gaming tables 7.30pm-3am). Call ahead and you will be picked up from your hotel.

SHOPPING

George Camille Art Gallery (Casino des Îles, Anse Volbert) Camille's work is inspired by the beauty and

nature around him, incorporating stylised fish, geckos and coco de mer palms in his works, as well as more conventional scenes of rural life.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Praslin Airport (☎ 284666) is 3km from Grand Anse and has flights every hour or so from Mahé. For further information, see p300.

It's almost as quick to take the Cat Cocos catamaran from Victoria, or you can save money by hopping on a cargo boat from Mahé to La Digue and then getting a schooner on to Praslin. See p300 for routes, times and prices.

GETTING AROUND

Praslin has a decent bus service as well as the usual taxis. A taxi ride from the airport to Anse Volbert will set you back Rs 125. For more information, see p301.

A car is a great way to see the island. Most travel agents and hotels will assist you in organising car hire.

You can hire bikes through your accommodation or from **Côte d'Or Bicycle Hire** (☎ 232071) in Anse Volbert for Rs 50 per day.

Hopping around the small islands off Praslin is done by chartered boat; trips are usually organised through the hotels or tour operators.

LA DIGUE

Ah, La Digue. Remember that tropical paradise that appears in countless adverts and glossy travel brochures? Here it's the real thing, with jade-green waters, lovely bays studded with heart-palpitatingly gorgeous beaches, and green hills cloaked with tan-

gled jungle and tall trees. The *coup de grâce* (though a bit overhyped for some tastes) is Anse Source d'Argent on the west coast, with its picture-perfect, sea-smoothed glacial rocks. As if that wasn't enough, La Digue is ideally situated as a springboard to surrounding islands, including Félicité, Grande Sœur and the fairy-tale Île Cocos.

Despite its lush beauty, La Digue has managed to escape the somewhat rampant tourist development that affects Mahé and Praslin, and there's only one settlement on the island, La Passe. Sure, it's certainly not undiscovered, and the recent small casino has brought some protest from locals anxious to preserve the island's traditional way of life. But La Digue has a more laid-back feel than the other main islands, with only one surfaced road and virtually no cars, just the odd ox cart. Time moves at a crawl, the atmosphere is chilled out to

THE BEST OF THE REST

If you want to live out that stranded-on-a-deserted-island fantasy, take your pick from the following menu.

Aride Island

The most northerly of the granite islands, Aride lies 10km north of Praslin and supports the greatest concentration of sea birds in the area. Aride can be reached by boat between September and May only. Tours can be arranged through travel agencies, hotels and guesthouses in Praslin. A day trip costs about €100/50 per adult/child. Volunteer programmes are available (see www.arideisland.net).

Félicité

This mountainous island, 3km northeast of La Digue, is run as an extremely luxurious resort by **La Digue Island Lodge** (☎ 292525; www.ladigue.sc; island package €1000; 🍷 🍷) on La Digue. There are some excellent snorkelling sites around the island.

Bird Island

Now is your chance to relive a scene from Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds*! Hundreds of thousands of sooty terns, fairy terns and common noddies descend en masse between May and October on this tiny coral island 96km north of Mahé. Hawksbill turtles breed on the island's beaches between October and February, while their land-bound relatives lumber around the interior. It is also good for snorkelling, swimming and simply lazing around.

The only place to stay is the ecologically friendly **Bird Island Lodge** (☎ 323322, 224925; www.birdislandseychelles.com; s/d with full board from €335/430) – the quintessential island sanctuary and the stuff of castaway dreams. Reservations can be made in person at the office in **Kingsgate House** (Map p270; Independence Ave, Victoria).

Denis Island

The privately owned Denis Island, 85km north of Mahé, is similar to Bird Island, but is even more exclusive. Live like a prince(ss) at the superswish **Taj Denis Island** (☎ 295999; www.denisland.com; d with half board €770-1700; 🍷). Famous for sportfishing and diving.

Silhouette Island

This imposing island 20km from Mahé is named for an 18th-century French minister. With steep forested mountain peaks rising from the ocean above stunning palm-shaded beaches, Silhouette is a truly magnificent island hideaway. The romance is reserved for guests of the exclusive **Labriz Silhouette** (☎ 293949; www.labriz-seychelles.com; d incl breakfast €350-1050; 🍷 🍷). Diving is available.

Frégate Island & North Island

Another paradise awaits you at tiny Frégate, about 55km east of Mahé, where lies the superlative **Frégate Island Private** (☎ 224925; www.fregate.com; d with full board €2200; 🍷 🍷). North Island, about 25km north of Mahé, boasts the ultra-exclusive **North Island Resort** (☎ 293100; www.north-island.com; d full board from €1520; 🍷 🍷). Diving is available on both islands.

Outer Islands

The majority of the Seychelles islands are scattered over hundreds of kilometres to the southwest of the main Mahé group. Sadly, most of these islands are accessible only to yachtsmen and those who can afford to stay at the extremely exclusive resorts.

The **Amirantes Group** lies about 250km southwest of Mahé. Its main island is **Desroches**, which is reserved for guests of the luxury **Desroches Island Resort** (☎ 229003; www.naiaderesort.com; d with full board €750; 🍷 🍷). Diving can be arranged through its onsite dive centre.

Another 200km further south, the **Alphonse Group** is another cluster of coral islands that provides some of the best saltwater fly-fishing in the world. The largest of the group, the 1.2km-wide **Alphonse Island**, is home to the **Alphonse Island Resort** (☎ 229030; www.alphonse-resort.com), which was closed for renovation at the time of writing.

The **Aldabra Group** is the most remote and most interesting of the outer island groups. It includes **Aldabra Atoll**, the world's largest raised coral atoll, which is a Unesco World Heritage Site and nature reserve and lies more than 1000km from Mahé. Aldabra Atoll is home to about 150,000 giant tortoises, and flocks of migratory birds fly in and out in their thousands. Aldabra is managed by the **Seychelles Island Foundation** (SIF; Map p270; www.sif.sc; Mont Fleuri Rd, Victoria) in Victoria. Until now the islands have only really been accessible to scientists, volunteers and a very small number of tourists. However, SIF is considering tapping into the lucrative ecotourism market in order to raise funds. Contact SIF for more information.

the max, and the place is definitely more a back-to-nature than a jet-set-tourist kind of haven, making it possible to find a deserted *anse* (bay) to commune with your quest for inner peace.

Transport to La Digue is absurdly easy. It's only about 5km from Praslin, and getting by boat from one island to the other is simplicity itself, so you've no excuse not to spend a day or two at the very least on this island.

If money's any object, La Digue has a growing number of quaint family guest-houses and self-catering apartments in which to rest your head. While hardly glitzy, they usually boast loads of gracious charm.

INFORMATION

All venues are in La Passe.

Barclays Bank (☎ 234148; 🕒 10am-2.30pm Mon-Fri)

Creole Travel Services (☎ 234411; 🕒 8am-noon & 1-4pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat) An agent for Cat Cocos. Can arrange tours and boat excursions.

Explorer Internet Café (per hr Rs 60; 🕒 9am-noon, 1.30-7pm Mon-Fri, 9am-6pm Sat) Same building as Mason's Travel.

La Digue Video & Internet Café (per hr Rs 60; 🕒 9am-9pm Mon-Sat, 3-8pm Sun)

Mauritius Commercial Bank (MCB); ☎ 234560; 🕒 8.30am-12.15pm & 1-3pm Mon-Fri

Mason's Travel (☎ 234227; 🕒 8am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat) Can organise tours and boat excursions.

Post office (🕒 8am-noon & 1-4pm Mon-Fri)

LA DIGUE

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Safari Club (☎ 234575; 🕒 9am-7pm) Can organise tours and boat excursions.

Seychelles Savings Bank (☎ 234135; 🕒 8.30am-2.30pm Mon-Sat, 9am-11pm Sat)

Tourist office (☎ 234393; 🕒 8am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, 8.30am-1pm Sat) Provides basic information and helps organise tours.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

La Passe

A visit to tiny La Passe almost feels like stepping back in time, so perfectly does it capture the image of a sleepy tropical port. Virtually no cars clog the streets. Men and women talk shop on the jetty while waiting for the schooner to arrive. Children ride bicycles on the tree-lined roads. Youngsters flirt and hang around the Fun Park casino. Come Saturday night, most islanders head to Tarosa for some serious dancing and drinking.

Check out the few souvenir shops near the jetty, sign up for a boat excursion or hire a bicycle and just peddle around a bit.

Beaches

Most new arrivals head straight for the beach at **Anse Source d'Argent**, and we don't blame them. *This* is the tropical paradise we've all been daydreaming about all winter: a dazzling white-sand beach backed by naturally sculpted granite boulders that would have made Henry Moore proud.

Alas, don't expect a Robinson Crusoe experience – it can get pretty crowded here, especially at high tide when the beach virtually disappears. If possible, it's best to come in the late afternoon when the crowds begin to thin out and the colours are at their most intense. Another downside: Anse Source d'Argent is scenic to boot, but not that great for swimming due to the shallow water. Is Anse Source d'Argent overhyped? You be the judge.

Take note that the path down to Anse Source d'Argent runs through the old L'Union Estate coconut plantation. In other words, you'll have to pay the €4 entry fee (valid for a day) to access the beach.

On the southeast coast, **Grand Anse** is a stunning beach to sun yourself on, and it sees fewer visitors because of the effort required to get there (though you can easily walk or cycle the 4km or so from La Passe). One caveat: swimming may be dangerous because of the strong offshore currents during the southeast monsoon, from April to October.

Beyond Grand Anse, two of the island's quietest beaches are **Petite Anse** and **Anse Cocos**. To reach them, take the path heading northeast from Grand Anse. Petite Anse is palm-fringed and idyllic, though there are strong currents here too. Anse Cocos is reached by a rather vague track at the north end of Petite Anse.

On the north coast, **Anse Sèvre** is good for snorkelling when the sea is not too rough. Closer to La Passe, **Anse Réunion** is another alluring beach but there are usually many algae drifting along the shore.

Nid d'Aigle

Ready to huff and puff? Tackle Nid d'Aigle (Eagle's Nest), the highest point on La Digue (333m). It commands such spectacular views of La Digue and neighbouring islands that you'll think you're watching a movie.

From La Passe, follow the inland concrete road that leads up to Snack Bellevue (it's sign-posted). The last section is very steep. After a mood-lifting refreshment at the bar, follow the narrow path that starts behind the Snack. After about 15 minutes, you'll reach an intersection on a ridge; turn right and follow the path until you reach Nid d'Aigle (no sign) after another 10 minutes.

L'Union Estate & Copra Factory

At one time, the main industry on La Digue was coconut farming, centred on L'Union Estate coconut plantation south of La Passe. These days **L'Union Estate** (admission €4) is run as an informal 'theme park', with demonstrations of extracting oil from copra (dried coconut flesh). Also in the grounds are the Old Plantation House, a colonial-era graveyard, a boatyard and the obligatory pen of giant tortoises. **Horse-riding** (per hr Rs 100) is also available on the estate (by reservation only).

Veuve Reserve

La Digue is the last refuge of the black paradise flycatcher, which locals call the *veuve* (widow). This small forest reserve has been set aside to protect its natural habitat, but you're just as likely to see the birds elsewhere on the island. Entry to the reserve is free. There's a small **information centre** (☎ 234353; 🕒 8am-4pm).

Boat Excursions to Nearby Islands

Taking a boat excursion to nearby **Île Cocos**, **Félicité** and **Grande Sœur** will be one of the main highlights of your visit to the Seychelles and

it's well worth the expense. Full-day tours typically stop to snorkel off Île Cocos and Félicité and picnic on Grande Sœur. The best snorkelling spots can be found off the iconic Île Cocos.

Most lodgings and travel agencies on La Digue can arrange such trips. Prices are about €80, including a barbecued fish lunch. Half-day tours can also be organised (€50).

Divng

La Digue has much to offer under the surface. **Azzura Pro-Dive** (☎ 292525; www.ladigue.sc) at La Digue Island Lodge organises dive trips in the area. See p32 for information on dive sites.

SLEEPING

As more guesthouses and hotels open on La Digue it is becoming easier to find accommodation. Prices are usually negotiable if it's slack and if you pay cash. Most places offer half-board options. The cheapest ones don't accept credit cards.

Citronnelle Guest House (☎/fax 234230; s/d incl breakfast €30/60; 📶) If you've been looking high and low for a decent €30 room, you've found it. On the inland road in La Passe is this brilliantly priced guesthouse with five well-kept rooms arranged around a courtyard. Ambience is not this place's forte, but its convenient location and very affordable prices make amends for this.

Chez Marston (☎ 234023; mars@seychelles.sc; s/d incl breakfast €50/80; 📶) Features a row of five anodyne rooms. For the price we'd expect a better view than the back kitchen of the restaurant.

our pick Calou Guest House (☎ 234083; www.calou.de; s/d with half board €80/123) Everything about this place is calming (except, maybe, the occasional barking dog). The five fan-cooled bungalows with private terrace are simple but agreeably designed and rest in a leafy plot; stunning, jungle-clad hills soar as the backdrop. And yes, you can order *calou* wine (devilish!). Recommended.

Kot Babi (☎ 234747; www.kokonet.sc/babi2; d incl breakfast €100; 📶) In a mammoth white colonial mansion, this immaculately kept place has four sparkingly clean rooms. The owner, Robert Labiche, is a former chef at luxury resorts and will whip up delicious Creole meals. The only impediment: its location near the casino is not *that* exceptional.

Fleur de Lys (☎ 234459; www.fleurdeleyse.com; d €115-125; 📶) A chilled universe is created here by a lazy-day garden and a clutch of trim, Creole-style bungalows with spotless bathrooms and kitchenettes. Flake out in the serene setting or chatter with the knowledgeable Scottish owner. Breakfast is extra (€10).

Château St Cloud (☎ 234346; www.seychelles.net/scloud; s €120-250, d €160-350, all incl breakfast; 📶) An agreeable place set in a former colonial estate. One of the most reliable bases on the island, it has well-appointed rooms of varying sizes and shapes, a restaurant and a pool surrounded by a tropical Garden of Eden. If you're flush, book in to one of the deluxe rooms, which marry modern and Creole design influences.

our pick L'Océan Hotel (☎ 234180; hcoean@seychelles.net; d incl breakfast €175; 📶) One of our favourites for original character and oceanfront location, L'Océan has been creatively decorated, providing visual flair as well as a good range of facilities, including a restaurant. Every bedroom boasts stupendous views of the sea and is decorated with driftwood, shells and paintings by local artist George Camille. Hint: aim for the Petite Sœur and Grande Sœur rooms (competition from honeymooners will be fierce, though).

Domaine de L'Orangerie (☎ 248444; reservations@orangerie.sc; d incl breakfast €198; 📶) A quietly stylish place at the northern end of La Passe. Dotted in manicured gardens, the 10 villas are dressed up in a Creole-Balinese fusion with hardwood furnishings, four-poster beds and rich textiles. Step inside and let the Zen-like tranquillity envelop you. The owner has plans to build a pool and additional villas at the back of the property. If only it was on the beach!

La Digue Island Lodge (☎ 292525; www.ladigue.sc; s with half board €170-350, d with half board €230-510; 📶) La Digue's one truly upmarket resort satisfies fantasies of a palm-fringed, white-sand beach overlooking emerald waters (but expect algae at certain times of the year). It comprises A-frame chalets packed rather close together, though the garden setting is attractive, as well as an atmospheric plantation house and standard bungalows. Amenities are solid, with two restaurants, a dive centre, three bars and boat excursions to Félicité Island.

Other options:

Tournesol Guest House (☎ 234155; tournesol@seychelles.sc; s/d incl breakfast €40/80; 📶) This no-frills option in a verdant property tricks its otherwise nonde-

script rooms out with kitschy bedspreads and curtains (read: '70s-inspired floral motifs).

Birgo Guest House (☎ 234518; www.birgo.sc; d incl breakfast €110; 📶) A commendable guesthouse in a balmy garden setting.

Hotel Patatran Village (☎ 234333; www.patatran.seychelles.com; s €118-138, d €151-178, all incl breakfast; 📶) Rooms here are serviceable and blessed with lovely views of Anse Patates but hardly fuel the imagination. Lacks the charm of nearby L'Océan.

Paradise Flycatcher (☎ 234015; mcdurup@seychelles.net; s/d with half board €131/191) Four capacious villas on a grassy property.

L'Union Estate Chalets (☎ 234240; www.ladigue.sc; chalets €425) Four spacious bungalows overlooking the beach at L'Union Estate.

EATING

If eating out in the evening, remember to take a torch with you as there are few street lights, and note that most restaurants close around 9.30pm.

Bor Lanmer Takeaway (mains Rs 25; 📶 lunch & dinner) If you're looking for a quick food fix, check out the options at this cheap-and-cheerful eatery near the jetty.

Snack Bellevue (mains Rs 40-80; 📶 11am-6pm) It's a hell of a hike or ride to get to this eagle's eyrie, but you'll be amply rewarded with cardiac-arresting views from the terrace. It serves up the usual suspects at very reasonable prices (not a mean feat, given the location).

Tarosa (☎ 234407; mains €45-90; 📶 breakfast, lunch & dinner) This is La Digue's social hub, on the jetty. There's a little of everything for everyone, from satisfying breakfasts to sandwiches and smoked fish salad. It features a live band on Friday evening.

Chez Marston (☎ 234023; mains Rs 45-95; 📶 lunch & dinner) This institution serves some of the best food on the island. The wide-ranging menu features salads, sandwiches, prawns, fish or crab curries, pizzas and burgers, among others. The ambience is so chilled, you could kick your feet up on the chair and pull out a novel and no one would bat an eyelid. Or you could discuss the hardships of island life with Marston, the blue-eyed owner, who is a local character.

our pick Lambousir (mains Rs 50-90; 📶 10am-4pm daily) This sand-floored eatery run by three affable ladies is an ideal spot for a filling lunch after (or before) working your tan at nearby Anse Source d'Argent. Start things off with smoked fish salad, move on to a meltingly

tender *job* fillet, then finish off with a rich banana pancake. Wash it all down with a lemon juice or a chilled coconut. A tourist's life is hard, isn't it?

Zerof (☎ 234439; mains Rs 60-85, menu Rs 125; 📶 lunch & dinner) Only your mum could fix a more comforting meal than you'll find at this cosy spot in a garden setting. The menu is a bargain, and the smoked fish salad truly palate-pleasing.

L'Océan Hotel (☎ 234180; mains Rs 60-120; 📶 lunch & dinner) The terrace restaurant of this hotel has killer views to the turquoise sea and even better views on the plate. 'Très bon' (very good) was the verdict of a French couple sitting next to us, after wolfing down a plate of prawns. Judging by the spicy fish cooked traditional-style in a banana leaf, we agree. But avoid the banana cake – too dry. Enchanting setting, with tropical shells encased under the glass table.

Loutier Coco (☎ 514762; buffet Rs 125; 📶 10am-4pm) Feel the sand in your toes at this oasis of a place on Grand Anse beach, but be prepared to share the experience with a raft of day-trippers here to enjoy the lavish buffet at lunchtime. The spread on offer includes grilled fish, traditional Creole curries and salads, fruit and coffee.

Château St Cloud (☎ 234346; mains Rs 60-135; 📶 lunch & dinner) The inhouse restaurant at Château St Cloud is worth considering for its eclectic menu but the food's not fantastically exciting and the atmosphere is a bit staid.

Le Pêcheur (☎ 292525; menu Rs 200; 📶 dinner) Candles, French wines and a table on a palm-ruffled beach are all you need for a romantic night out with your significant other at this attractive restaurant at La Digue Island Lodge. Diners are serenaded by a local guitarist three times a week.

For self-caterers, **Gregoire's Store** (☎ 234024; 📶 8am-7.45pm Mon-Sat, 8am-1pm Sun) near La Digue Island Lodge is the best-stocked supermarket on the island. There's also a small **bakery** (📶 8am-6pm Mon-Sat) near the pier where you can gnaw your way to carbo bliss with fresh bread and cakes.

DRINKING

The restaurant-meets-bar Tarosa is the most 'happening' spot in town and transforms itself into an open-air club on Saturday evening. This is your chance to rub shoulders with La Digue's movers and shakers and relive *Saturday Night Fever* island-style!

SHOPPING

Barbara Jenson Studio (☎ 234406; www.barbarajensonstudio.com; Anse Réunion; 🕒 9am-6pm Mon-Sat) Barbara's work reflects the unique landscape and ethnically diverse people of the Seychelles.

GETTING THERE & AROUND

La Digue is easily reached by boat and helicopter from both Mahé and Praslin. See p300 for details.

Although there's now a stretch of surfaced road running through La Passe on the west coast, elsewhere on La Digue the 'roads' are still just sandy tracks. This, cou-

pled with the fact that the island is less than 5km from north to south, means by far the best – and most enjoyable – way to get around is on foot or bicycle. There are loads of bikes to rent. Operators have outlets near the pier, or you can book through your hotel. Most places charge around Rs 50 per day.

Ox carts used to be a popular mode of transport but are gradually being replaced by open-sided lorries.

There are only a handful of taxis on La Digue, as most people get around on bicycle or on foot. A one-way ride from the pier to Grand Anse costs around Rs 80.

Seychelles Directory

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ACCOMMODATION

Glossy brochures focus on ultraswish resorts but the Seychelles actually has a pretty wide range of accommodation options. Sure, you could easily whittle away your life savings on private island resorts, which are as sumptuous as the hype leads you to believe, but you can also benefit from the cheaper guesthouses and self-catering apartments that have sprung up over the last decade (and are still largely ignored by most first-time visitors).

All accommodation in the Seychelles is registered and regulated by the Ministry of Tourism. This ensures a certain standard of service and facilities. Camping is forbidden anywhere on the islands.

For a double room, you can expect to pay under €100 for budget accommodation, €100

to €250 for midrange and over €250 for top-end rooms. Rates include all government taxes, and often include breakfast. Recommendations in our Sleeping entries are in ascending order of price.

Even in the cheapest guesthouse you can expect to get a room with a private bathroom and a fan. Moving up the scale, there are now some very attractive family-run guesthouses and small hotels offering local colour; it's these that arguably represent the best value for money in the islands. If you want the full range of services, though, you'll need to opt for one of the larger hotels, which generally provide tour desks and a range of sports facilities. Standards have improved dramatically at the top end and some of the newer hotels now put those in Mauritius to shame for levels of service and all-round luxury. Best of all are the private island resorts, where you really are buying into the dream.

Virtually all the hotels and a few guesthouses charge higher rates during peak periods: Christmas to New Year, Easter, and July and August.

You are strongly advised to book well ahead, particularly during peak periods and at any time of year on Praslin and La Digue, where accommodation is more limited. You can contact the hotels direct, or make online bookings through **Seychelles European Reservations** (www.seychelles-resa.com), which specialises in the 'cheaper' end of the market. **Seychelles Secrets** (www.seychellessecrets.com) focuses on charming options.

ACTIVITIES Cruises

The best months for cruising are April and October; the worst are January, July and August. You can charter schooners, yachts and motor cruisers through tour agents or the **Marine Charter Association** (MCA; ☎ 322126; mca@seychelles.net) in Victoria. Prices start at around €600 for a day trip. Tours to islands should include landing fees – make sure you ask when booking.

For the romantics, **Silhouette Cruises** (☎ 324026; www.seychelles-cruises.com), based near Victoria's

PRACTICALITIES

- The Seychelles uses the metric system for weights and measures; kilometres, kilograms, litres and degrees in Celsius.
- Electric current is 220V, 50Hz AC. The plugs in general use have square pins and three points.
- The only daily paper is the government-controlled *Seychelles Nation* (www.nation.sc) which contains international and local news in English, French and Creole. Other newspapers include the weekly *People* (www.thepeople.sc), also government backed, and *Le Nouveau Seychelles Weekly* (www.seychellesweekly.com), the sole opposition paper.
- The *Seychelles Broadcasting Corporation* (SBC; www.sbc.com) provides TV broadcasts from 6am to around midnight in English, French and Creole. The news in English is at 6pm. Many programmes are imported from England, America or France.
- SBC also runs the main radio station, which broadcasts daily from 6am to 10pm in three languages, as well as a 24-hour music station, Paradise FM. The frequencies of these stations vary depending on where you are on the islands.

interisland ferry terminal, owns the delightful SV *Sea Shell* and SV *Sea Pearl*, a pair of old Dutch schooners that offer live-aboard cruises around the inner islands with activities such as deep-sea fishing and scuba diving thrown in.

Some other charter companies:

Angel Fish Ltd (☎ 344644; www.seychelles-charter.com; PO Box 1079, Victoria)

Dream Yacht Charters (Map p282; ☎ 232681; www.dream-yacht-seychelles.com; Baie St Anne, Praslin)

Sunsail (☎ 225700; www.sunsail.com; PO Box 1076, Victoria)

VPM Yacht Charters (☎ 347719; www.vpm-boats.com; PO Box 960, Victoria)

Water World (☎ 514735; www.seychelles.net/world; PO Box 735, Victoria)

Fishing

The Seychelles supports extremely rich fisheries for big game fish such as giant barracuda, sailfish and marlin. There is also excellent salt-water fly-fishing around the Alphonse islands for the dedicated – and wealthy – angler.

A number of operators have jumped on the boat, so to speak, offering all-inclusive trips where they do everything for you but put the fish on the hook. They can be contacted through the **Marine Charter Association** (☎ 322126; fax 224679) in Victoria. Alternatively, most yacht charter companies (see p295) and tour companies also offer fishing expeditions. Expect to pay in the region of €600/800 for a half/full day's outing. 'Tag and release' is widely practised.

Hiking

Because the islands are relatively small and the roads little travelled (away from north Mahé), walking is a pleasurable activity just about anywhere in the Seychelles. There are still lots of wild, hilly and mountainous areas where you can escape the crowds, appreciate the islands' natural scenery and enjoy some of the many alternatives to beach-oriented activities.

The Ministry of Environment produces a good set of leaflets (with maps) detailing individual hiking routes in Mahé's Morne Seychellois National Park (p275). They are available for between Rs 5 and Rs 10 each from the botanical gardens (p269) or the tourist office (p269) in Victoria.

Water Sports

The main draw is undoubtedly the water activities – snorkelling, diving, windsurfing, sailing and the like. Big hotels usually offer at least some water sports to their guests for free. Otherwise, there are plenty of independent operators around; the main centres are Beau Vallon on Mahé and Anse Volbert on Praslin. For detailed information on diving in the Seychelles, see p31.

BUSINESS HOURS

In general banks are open only from 8.30am to 2pm Monday to Friday, and 8.30am to 11am on Saturday. Government offices usually open from 8am to 4pm Monday to Friday. Restaurants are generally open from 11am to

3pm and 6pm to 9pm daily. Shop hours are typically 8am to 5pm Monday to Friday, and 8am to noon on Saturday.

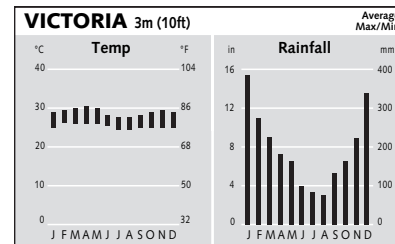
CHILDREN

The Seychelles is a very child-friendly place. The big hotels cater for all age groups, offering baby-sitting services, kids clubs and activities laid on especially for teenagers. While children will happily spend all day splashing around in the lagoon, boat trips around the islands should also appeal. Communing with giant tortoises is a sure-fire hit and, with a bit of creativity, visiting some of the nature reserves can be fun. Finding special foods and other baby products can be difficult, especially outside Victoria, so you might want to bring your favourite brands with you.

Lonely Planet's *Travel with Children*, by Cathy Lanigan, gives you the lowdown on preparing for family travel.

CLIMATE CHARTS

For more information on the best time of the year for visiting Seychelles, see p267.



EMBASSIES & CONSULATES Seychelles Embassies & Consulates

The Seychelles has diplomatic representation in the following countries:

Australia (☎ 03-9796 9412; mazino@iprimus.com.au; 51 Belgrave Hallam Rd, Narre Warren, Victoria 3804)

Canada (☎ 514-2843 322; connsey@cam.org; 67 Rue Ste Catherine Ouest, Montreal, Québec H2X1Z7)

France (☎ 01 42 30 57 47; ambsey@aol.com; 51 Ave Mozart, 75016 Paris)

Germany (☎ 30-8909 0844; rasudhoff@t-online.de; Humboldtstrasse 47, D-14193 Berlin)

Mauritius (☎ 211 1688; gfoke@intnet.mu; 616 St James Court, St Denis St, Port Louis)

UK (☎ 020-7935 7770; seyhclon@aol.com; 111 Baker St, London W1U 6RR)

USA (☎ 212-972 1785; seychelles@un.int; 800 Second Ave, Suite 400C, New York, NY 10017)

VOLUNTEERING IN THE SEYCHELLES

Wanna get involved in turtle-tagging, whale-shark monitoring or researching certain animal species? **Nature Protection Trust of Seychelles** (<http://members.aol.com/jstgerlach>), **Nature Seychelles** (www.nature.seychelles.org), **Seychelles Island Foundation** (www.sif.sc) and **Marine Conservation Society Seychelles** (www.mcss.sc) all have volunteer programmes.

Embassies & Consulates in the Seychelles

Countries with embassies and consulates in the Seychelles include the following:

British High Commission (Map p270; ☎ 283666; www.bhcvictoria.sc; PO Box 161, Olijaji Trade Centre, Francis Rachel St, Victoria)

France (Map p270; ☎ 382500; www.ambafrance-sc.org; BP478, La Ciotat, Mont Fleuri, Victoria)

Germany (☎ 601100; Conservation Centre, Roche Caiman, PO Box 1310, Mahé)

Mauritius (☎ 601100; birdlife@seychelles.net; Conservation Centre, Roche Caiman, PO Box 1310, Mahé)

Netherlands (☎ 261200; consulgeers@hotmail.com; PO Box 372, Sunset Beach Hotel, Glacis, Mahé)

USA (Map p270; ☎ 222256; usoffice@seychelles.net; PO Box 251, Olijaji Trade Centre, Francis Rachel St, Victoria)

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

The Seychelles may lack the range of festivals found in Mauritius and Réunion, but there are some lively cultural bashes during the year and a whole raft of fishing competitions and other sporting events. The local newspapers usually have details of what's on, or you can ask at the tourist office.

JANUARY

Seychelles Sailing Cup (www.seychellescup.com) A seven-day regatta in the last week of January.

MARCH

Semaine de la Francophonie French culture takes over Mahé for a week of song recitals, films and art exhibitions in mid-March.

SUBIOS Underwater Festival (www.subios.com)

Week-long underwater photography competition at Beau Vallon held in mid-March.

MAY

FetAfrik The Seychelles celebrates its African origins with a weekend of music and dance in late May.

FESTIVAL KREOL

Held every year during the last week of October, the vibrant **Festival Kreol** is an explosion of Creole cuisine, theatre, art, music and dance. Creole artists from other countries are invited to participate, and the festival provides young artists with a platform on which to unleash their creative talents. There are various Creole handicrafts and foodstuffs on sale. Events take place on Mahé, Praslin and La Digue.

OCTOBER

Festival Kreol (www.seychelles.net/festivalkreol) Week-long festival of Creole culture; last week of October.

FOOD

For a full explanation of local cuisine and drinks, refer to the Food & Drink section (p261). We usually indicate the price of mains, followed by the price of menus (two- or three-course set menus). Within each eating section, restaurants appear in ascending order of prices. For a full, midrange restaurant meal you should expect to pay €20 to €25 per person with wine.

GAY & LESBIAN TRAVELLERS

There is no open gay or lesbian scene in the Seychelles. The Seychellois are tolerant, but open displays of affection between gay or lesbian couples are best avoided.

HOLIDAYS

Public holidays in the Seychelles are observed as follows:

New Year 1 & 2 January

Good Friday March/April

Easter Day March/April

Labour Day 1 May

Liberation Day 5 June

Corpus Christi 10 June

National Day 18 June

Independence Day 29 June

Assumption 15 August

All Saints' Day 1 November

Immaculate Conception 8 December

Christmas Day 25 December

INSURANCE

A travel-insurance policy to cover theft, loss and medical problems is a good idea. Some policies specifically exclude dangerous ac-

tivities, which can include scuba diving. See also p138.

INTERNET ACCESS

In Victoria, you'll never be far from an internet café. Fees are usually around Rs 40 per hour. Outside the capital, internet access is harder to find. At the time of writing, there was only one outlet with internet access in Praslin and two in La Digue.

Most upmarket hotels offer internet access to their guests.

MONEY

The unit of currency is the Seychelles rupee (Rs), which is divided into 100 cents (¢). Bank notes come in denominations of Rs 10, Rs 25, Rs 50, Rs 100 and Rs 500; there are coins of Rs 1, Rs 5, 1¢, 5¢, 10¢ and 25¢.

There are some complex rules governing foreign exchange in the Seychelles. By law visitors must pay for all accommodation (including meals and drinks at hotels), excursions, marine park fees, diving, car hire and transport in a major foreign currency (euros are the best currency to carry), either in cash or by credit card. Prices for these services are therefore nearly always quoted in euros (and less frequently in US dollars).

When changing travellers cheques or withdrawing money from an ATM, however, you will receive the money in rupees, not in foreign currency. Even when you pay for something in foreign currency, you will often receive the change in rupees. You can use rupees in shops, cafés and restaurants outside the hotels and for taxi and bus fares, but they can be quite hard to spend otherwise, so only change small amounts at a time.

If you pay cash in euros at guesthouses, small hotels or for car rentals, you'll be in a position to negotiate a discount (up to 20% if it's slack). Our tip: bring plenty of cash with you, and use a credit card as a backup.

If you want to change rupees back into foreign currency at the end of your stay, you must go back to the same bank (not necessarily the same branch, but it doesn't hurt) with the original exchange receipt or ATM slip. The maximum you can convert is Rs 800 and it is illegal to take more than Rs 2000 out of the country. If possible, do it in Victoria rather than at the airport.

ATMs

There are ATMs, which accept major international cards, at the airport and at all the major banks in Victoria. You'll also find ATMs at Beau Vallon on Mahé and on Praslin and La Digue.

Credit Cards

Major credit cards, including Visa and MasterCard, are accepted in most hotels, guesthouses, restaurants and tourist shops.

Moneychangers

The four main banks are Barclays Bank, Seychelles Savings Bank, Nouvobanq and Mauritius Commercial Bank (MCB). All have branches in Victoria while Barclays Bank and Nouvobanq have desks at the airport that are open for all flights – in theory at least. There are also banks on Praslin and La Digue. None of the banks charges commission for changing cash but some do so for travellers cheques, generally a flat rate of Rs 25.

PHOTOGRAPHY

The Seychelles is a photographer's dreams and there are myriad opportunities for still and video photography. Bring your own films and supplies. See the boxed text p140 for tips on taking pictures.

SOLO TRAVELLERS

Solo travellers will have an easy time of it in the Seychelles; there are no specific dangers, worries or scams associated with travelling on your own. The only disadvantage solo travellers will face is accommodation costs – quite often single room prices are in fact only marginally cheaper than doubles, and if you're renting an apartment you'll be charged by the unit as a whole in most cases.

BLACK MARKET TEMPTATIONS

Oops, this is a bit of a taboo issue, but it's our duty to inform you: there is a black market in the Seychelles. It's illegal (but tempting) to change money on the black market because official rates massively overvalue the rupee (one euro bought 12 rupees on the black market when we were here, as against one euro buying eight rupees at official rates). Of course we could never recommend an illegal activity, but we hear that if you do indulge you should conduct your transaction very discreetly, with somebody you trust. Euros are the hot favourites.

You won't save that much, though. Rupees are only useful for restaurants, cafés and internet cafés, as well as bus and taxi fares. But if you're a serious foodie, it could amount to, er, a few hundred euros at the end of your trip (wine can also be paid for in rupees).

When eating out, be prepared to be the only single in the midst of honeymooners!

TELEPHONE

The telephone system is efficient and reliable. There are public payphones (both coin and cardphones) on the three main islands from which you can make local and international calls. Telephone cards are available from Cable & Wireless and Airtel offices and from most retail outlets.

Local calls within and between the main islands cost around Rs 0.90 for up to three minutes. For an idea of international rates, calls to America, Australia and the UK with Cable & Wireless cost roughly Rs 8 per minute.

If you have a GSM phone and it has been 'unlocked', you can use a local SIM card purchased from either Cable & Wireless or Airtel.

TOURIST INFORMATION

The very well organised **Seychelles Tourism Bureau** (STB; www.seychelles.travel) is the only tourist information body in the Seychelles. The head office is in Victoria. It has two offices on Praslin and one office on La Digue.

TRAVELLERS WITH DISABILITIES

Most luxury hotels conform to international standards for disabled access, and it's usually possible to hire an assistant if you want to take an excursion.

Apart from that, special facilities for travellers with disabilities are few and far between in the Seychelles, and no beach is equipped with wheelchair access.

VISAS

You don't need a visa to enter the Seychelles, just a valid passport, an onward ticket, booked accommodation and sufficient

funds for your stay. On arrival at the airport, you will be given a visitor's visa for up to a month, depending on the departure date printed on your onward ticket.

If you wish to extend your visa or change your departure date, apply with proof of funds and your onward ticket at the **Immigration Office** (Map p270; ☎ 611100; immig@seychelles.net; Independence House, Independence Ave, Victoria; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-4pm Mon-Fri). Processing takes about a week. The first three-month extension is free of charge.

WOMEN TRAVELLERS

Generally speaking, women travellers should have few problems getting around solo in the Seychelles. As in any country, however, women should use their common sense and remain conscious of their surroundings. Be wary of going to isolated stretches of beach alone.

TRANSPORT AROUND SEYCHELLES

AIR

The **Seychelles International Airport** (☎ 384400), about 8km south of Victoria, is the only international airport in the Seychelles.

Air Seychelles (☎ 381000; www.airseychelles.net) takes care of all interisland flights, whether scheduled or charter. The only scheduled services are between Mahé and Praslin, with around 20 flights per day in each direction. The fare for the 15-minute hop is €61 (€122 return). The luggage limit is only 20kg (€1 per kilo for excess luggage). Air Seychelles also flies to Alphonse, Bird, Denis, Desroches, Frégate and North Islands, but on a charter basis – these flights are handled directly by the hotel on the island.

Note that Mahé is the only hub for flights within the Seychelles.

Helicopter Seychelles (☎ 385858; www.helicopterseychelles.com), based at Seychelles International Airport, operates shuttle flights between Mahé and Praslin (€174 per person one way), Mahé and La Digue (€174), and Praslin and La Digue (€87). It also offers transfers to resort islands (bookings should be made through the hotel) and scenic flights.

BICYCLE

Bicycles are the principal form of transport on La Digue. On Praslin you can rent bikes at Anse Volbert or through your accommodation. Mahé is a bit hilly for casual cyclists and most visitors rent cars, so bike hire is hard to find there.

BOAT

Travel by boat is very easy between Mahé, Praslin and La Digue, with regular and efficient ferry services. For all other islands you have to charter a boat or take a tour.

Mahé to Praslin

The **Cat Cocos catamaran** (☎ 324843, 324844; www.catcocos.com) makes two to three return trips daily between Mahé and Praslin. Departing from Victoria, the journey takes about 50 minutes (not that much longer than the plane, if you include check-in time) and the fare is €40 one way (€45 in the upper, air-con lounge); children under twelve pay half fare. In high season, it's advisable to book your ticket at least a day in advance with the ferry company or through a travel agent.

Mahé to La Digue

Want to get off the beaten trail? Not afraid of seasickness? The schooner **La Belle Seraphina** (☎ 234254, 511345) is for you. This cargo boat runs between Mahé and La Digue from Monday to Friday and carries passengers if there is room. If you don't mind a bit of discomfort it's a fun and cheap way to travel. The boat generally departs around 11.30am from Mahé, and around 5am from La Digue, but check when making the booking. The three-hour crossing costs just €15/7 per adult/child.

Praslin to La Digue

The **Inter-Island Ferry Co** (☎ 232329) operates a schooner service between Praslin and La Digue. There are about seven departures daily between 7am and 5.15pm (5.45pm on Sunday) from Praslin and between 7.30am and 5.45pm (6.15pm on Sunday) from La Digue. The 30-minute trip can be a rocky one, sometimes spraying unsuspecting passengers with water. There are plans to add a faster and more comfortable catamaran service in the near future.

The one-way/return fare is €10/20 per adult and €5/10 per child under eight. It's a

good idea to book ahead – most hotels will do this for you.

BUS

Good news: if you've got time, you don't really need to rent a car to visit the islands.

Mahé

An extensive bus service operates throughout Mahé. Destinations and routes are usually marked on the front of the bus. There is a flat rate of Rs 3 whatever the length of journey; pay the driver as you board. Bus stops have signs and shelters and there are also markings on the road.

Timetables and maps of each route are posted at the terminus in Victoria, where you can also pick up photocopied timetables at the **information office** (☎ 518339; ☎ 8am-4pm Mon-Fri). All parts of the island are serviced. There's a bus roughly each hour on most routes from around 6am until 7pm (slightly later heading into Victoria).

Praslin

Praslin also boasts an efficient bus service. The basic route is from Anse Boudin to Mont Plaisir via Anse Volbert, Baie Ste Anne, Vallée de Mai, Grand Anse and the airport. Buses run in each direction every hour (every half-hour between Baie St Anne and Mont Plaisir) from 6am to 6.30pm. Anse Consolation and Anse La Blague are also serviced. For Anse Lazio, get off at Anse Boudin and walk to the beach (about 15 minutes). Timetables are available at the two tourist offices. There is a flat fare of Rs 3.

CAR

If you want to be controller of your own destiny, your best bet is to rent a car. Most of the

road network on Mahé and Praslin is sealed and in good shape. More of a worry are the narrow bends and the speed at which some drivers, especially bus drivers, take them.

Drive on the left, and beware of drivers with fast cars and drowsy brains – especially late on Friday and Saturday nights. The speed limit is supposed to be 40kmh in built-up areas, 65kmh outside towns and 80kmh on the dual carriageway between Victoria and the airport. On Praslin the limit is 40kmh throughout the island.

Rental

There are any number of car-hire companies on Mahé and quite a few on Praslin, but little to choose between them as regards prices. The cheapest you're likely to get on Mahé is around €50 a day for a small hatchback (slightly less for longer periods). Rates on Praslin are about €10 to €15 more expensive. The tourist office in Victoria has a list of car rental outlets, or you can book through your hotel or guesthouse. The major companies also have offices at the airport. Note that payment must be made in hard currency (preferably euros).

Drivers must be over 23 years old and have held a driving licence for at least a year. Though it's wise to bring an international driver's licence, most companies accept a national licence.

TAXI

Taxis operate on Mahé and Praslin and there are even a handful on La Digue. Though taxis are metered you often have to insist pretty hard to get the driver to use it. In most cases you'll have to negotiate; make sure you fix a price before setting off.

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