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COASTAL LIVING[®]

50 Secret Places

FROM FAR-FLUNG GETAWAYS TO GEMS HIDING IN PLAIN SIGHT

MARCH 2018

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MARCH 2018



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DOES THE GARDEN OF EDEN REALLY EXIST? THE SEYCHELLES, IN THE HEART OF THE INDIAN OCEAN, MIGHT JUST HOLD THE KEY TO A 2,000-YEAR-OLD MYSTERY.

CHASING *paradise*

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHS by *Jad Davenport*



Anse Patates on
La Digue island



Guide Marc Barrallon on Félicité island



Wild coconut trees on Frégate island



Six Senses Zil Pasyon Resort on Félicité



Seychelles fruit bats



Aldabra giant tortoise

Bats as big as hawks flap past my head. I flinch, and my guide chuckles. “It’s mango season, and the bats are going a little crazy,” he says. “They’re in paradise.”

Sunrise has just broken over the island of Félicité in the Seychelles, and wild cinnamon trees perfume the morning mist. For the past hour, guide Marc Barrallon and I have bushwhacked our way up this jungle canyon. We’ve squeezed through toppled boulders, ducked Tarzanesque vines, and, now, dodged drunken bats. This isn’t any ordinary trek. We’re searching for the Garden of Eden.

I fell in love with the legendary paradise in Sunday School at the age of 8, coloring mimeographed scenes of happy lions and lambs and a strategically dressed Adam and Eve. That coloring-book version of Eden lasted for decades, right up until the moment I jumped from a Black Hawk helicopter that had landed in a dusty valley in Iraq.

I was a photojournalist covering the war. We’d set down somewhere between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, inspiring

the door gunner to scream over the roar of the blades, “THIS IS IT! THIS IS THE GARDEN OF EDEN!” I squinted through the rotor wash at the empty, brown valley known as the cradle of civilization. No lions, lambs, peacocks, or even trees in sight. My childhood vision evaporated into the desert air.

Until now. Here in this hidden Seychelles valley, I feel my imagined paradise returning. And I’m not alone: It was on these same islands that the swashbuckling 19th-century explorer Major-General Charles George Gordon found what he described as “a magnificent tree, curious beyond description.” It was, Gordon believed, the fabled Tree of Knowledge.

Barrallon stops mid-jungle, takes off his pack, and pulls out a water bottle. “Not far now,” he says between gulps. “I can hear the trees.”

I stare into the green shadows. All I can hear are fruit bats squabbling in the mango trees and geckos chirping on the wild vanilla vines. But in the quiet moments it comes: a low whisper.

“Is that them?” But Barrallon is off again, vanished into another boulder labyrinth.

If you’re going to search for paradise, the Seychelles is a great place to start. Guarded by the vastness of the Indian Ocean, this archipelago nation of 115 islands scattered across more than half a million square miles was among the last discovered on the planet. When French settlers arrived in 1770, they found a world seemingly untouched by humankind.

When Gordon arrived here as a wounded, battle-haunted soldier in the summer of 1881, he came by ship—the way every visitor did until 1971, when an international airport opened on the island of Mahé. It still takes most Americans two days to reach the islands by air. This remoteness is part of the allure that draws the adventurous as well as the privacy-seeking rich and famous. Prince William and Kate honeymooned here, and the island where I begin my quest—Frégate—is a favorite of Elizabeth Hurley and George Clooney.

Frégate is normally a 15-minute helicopter flight from Mahé. But today there’s a flight delay. “Giant tortoises,” the Danish pilot crackles over the headset. We’re hovering above a grassy helipad. Anders points at a half-dozen gray humps gathered

there and keys the mic again. “They have the whole island to explore, but they sit right there on the airfield.” He sighs. “I guess they like the view.”

I like the view, too. From 200 feet up I have a tern’s-eye panorama. Frégate is barely one square mile, but it’s dense with riotous wilderness and rimmed with seven empty beaches. Every groove and fissure on the island’s granite peaks is bursting with thick takamaka, gardenia, and wisteria forests. Frégate is God’s own Chia Pet.

The tortoises retreat, we land, and I’m golf-carted off to a cliffside villa at Frégate Island Private, the island’s sole resort. I’m distracted for the rest of the day by a mini-Eden here: a plunge pool the size of a backyard putting green that overlooks the beach, and a breeze-cooled daybed. I loll in the chilly waters, nap in the shade, and dream of exploration and discovery.

The next morning I set off with Steven Larue, a native-born Seychellois and the resort’s guest manager. We take a golf cart out to a rocky headland and pick up a trail that circumnavigates the island. While we hike over exposed bedrock, Larue explains

how the mysterious geologic origins of the inner Seychelles islands intrigued Gordon. “Every single other oceanic island is made up of volcanic rocks or limestone,” he says. “But we’re solid granite, created more than 160 million years ago when the world was one piece.” When that “piece,” the supercontinent Gondwanaland, tore apart into Africa, Australia, and Asia, the shattered peaks left behind created the Seychelles. “Gordon loved that,” Larue says. “He thought Adam first set foot here because we were once the center of the world.”

We emerge from the forest onto a glacis, one of the distinctive stone peaks that gives the Seychelles a rocky coastline marked by hidden coves and secret beaches. A fresh wind lifts from the ocean, and we can see sailboats on the horizon. Overhead, in an empty blue sky, a halo of white fairy terns sparkles in the sun.

The island looks untamed, but it’s an illusion. Originally covered by the forests we’ve hiked through, Frégate was clear-cut by settlers who planted more commercial forests of coconuts, cinnamon, nutmeg, and pepper trees. This landscape endured until the late 1990s, when a German businessman who’d fallen in love with the island opened a luxury hotel, and set out to return his possession to its botanical—and zoological—heritage.

“He got rid of the introduced plants and animals, and created a resort to support the conservation efforts,” Larue says. “We only had 150 of the wild Aldabra giant tortoises left. We set up a tortoise nursery, and now the island has more than 2,000 of them. The seabirds are back. The wild fruit is back, so even the bats are back.”

But what about Gordon’s Tree of Knowledge? It turns out to have had mystery attached to it for centuries, Larue says. Sailors reported spotting enormous nuts floating on the water, but never found trees to match. “They thought the coconuts came from trees beneath the sea,” he says, “so they called them *coco de mer*—sea coconut.” To this day, coco de mer remains exceedingly rare, supposedly growing wild on only two islands in the world, nearby Praslin and Silhouette in the archipelago. The trees are tightly guarded, Larue says. The government monitors every nut that falls, and even a small coco de mer nut can cost hundreds of Euros. You need a permit to export even one.

Later, at the island’s natural history museum, I take my first coco de mer nut into my hands. Drained of its meat and milk and then dried, it’s the size of an overinflated basketball and weighs maybe 10 pounds. A fresh, full-grown one can weigh 100 pounds. It’s not the weight, though, but the shape that surprises me. I feel as if I’m holding the Venus de Milo—undraped—by the hips. Turning the nut over in my hands, from backside to thighs and belly, I understand why Gordon believed he’d found the forbidden fruit.

After promising Larue I’ll seek out those wild groves of coco de mer, I’m waylaid like Ulysses by the Seychelles’ siren calls—first, to Félicité island, 19 miles north of Frégate, home to its own new luxury resort, the Six Senses Zil Pasyon, with jungle villas and captivating views. Once there, I hear of yet another Seychelles beauty, La Digue, a tiny island shaped like a shark’s tooth just 30 minutes away by boat. It’s said to have



Villas at Frégate Island Private



Coco de mer husk (left) and regular coconuts (right)



Exploring Eden off Félicité



Octopus curry on La Digue



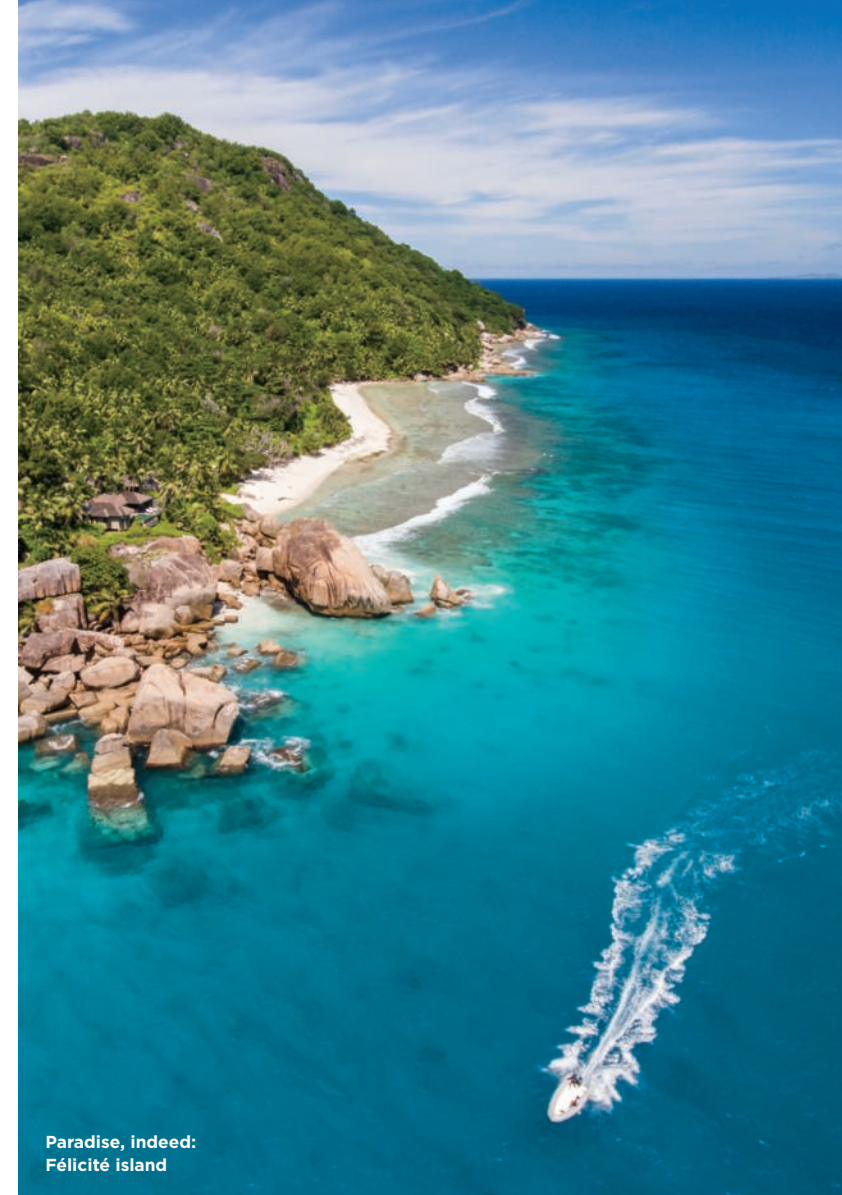
Beach hangout at Six Senses Zil Pasyon



La Digue's bounty: cinnamon (above) and an abundance of fruit



The forbidden fruit? Coco de mer on Félicité



Paradise, indeed: Félicité island

the most beautiful beaches in the entire archipelago. The Tree of Knowledge can wait another few days.

"No airport, no traffic light, no stress," says Andrew D'Souza, a local guide who meets me at the dock with a small motorized buggy. "This is why I love La Digue." The four-square-mile island has around 2,800 residents, he says, about five cars, and about a thousand bicycles.

Cloud shadows dapple the hills above us, and beaches wink out between coconut forests as we leave the sandy streets of La Passe village and head to Anse Source D'Argent. It's a veritable advertisement for paradise: a beach of bright sand and turquoise shallows. We buy a couple of papaya milkshakes and wade through the warm water. Small waves fold over themselves like liquid origami.

Later that afternoon, over a plate of octopus curry, D'Souza confesses his youthful disenchantment with his idyllic homeland. "When you're a kid growing up on an island, all you want to do is get away," he says. "The Seychelles felt so far from the world. We don't have concerts or amusement parks. You see all these things on television and you are sad. You are missing out."

As soon as he could, D'Souza left for England. "I thought I'd find what I was looking for there." But he didn't. "The city was cold and dark all the time, the buildings cut out the sky, and you spend all your time inside because of the weather. I missed the freedom of being outdoors, hiking the mountains, snorkeling the reefs, riding my bicycle around the island."

How lucky it is to have held, lost, but then recovered one's paradise, I think, as the small boat skims me back to Félicité. I fall to chatting with a fellow passenger, Marc Barrallon, who works as a naturalist guide at the resort where I'm staying. I confide in him my desire to journey to Praslin or Silhouette islands to see the coco de mer in the wild. He leans in conspiratorially. "No one knows about it," he says, "but we have them on Félicité island, too." His voice drops to a whisper. "I can take you there tomorrow."

Which is how I find myself on this beautiful morning in the canyon on Félicité. When I finally catch up to Barrallon, the canyon walls have fallen back, and the sun breaks through. I look up, and there they

are, towering over the jungle canopy. Fronds as big as sails sway in the wind. Clutches of glossy coco de mer nuts glow beneath the crowns. I place my hands on the nearest lichen-crusted trunk. The tree is humming in the wind. The vibration sends a thrill through my fingers.

Unlike D'Souza, Gordon never made it back to his Eden. A few years after leaving the Seychelles, he was cut down during the siege of Khartoum. But he left behind a map marking his discovery, and his bold and romantic claim to having discovered the legendary paradise. I think about my own mental map from Sunday school and how I lost it in the Iraqi desert.

And as the tree hums its song to me in this secret valley, on this mounded fragment of the ancient geological world in the middle of a vast ocean, I realize I have returned to that place of beauty and perfection from my childhood. The mimeographed page springs to life: I am touching the Tree of Knowledge. Above me hangs the forbidden fruit. I've found my way back to Eden.

Photographer/writer Jad Davenport is a frequent contributor to Coastal Living. Follow him on Instagram: @jaddavenport.

get here

Air Seychelles connects to Mahé International Airport from Paris, Beijing, Mumbai, Mauritius, Johannesburg, Abu Dhabi, and Antananarivo (on Madagascar).

stay here

Frégate Island Private Resort, the only resort on the island, has 16 family-size villas with large plunge pools, all hidden among a former coconut plantation. The island has seven beaches (you can reserve your own private beach for the day) and more than 2,000 wild giant tortoises. There's a PADI dive center on site. Rates start at

\$3,889; fregate.com. The new **Six Senses Zil Pasyon** on Félicité is a private resort with 30 plunge-pool villas and several white-sand beaches. The resort offers day trips to nearby La Digue island and uninhabited Cocos island. Rates start at \$1,600; sixsenses.com. **The Raffles Seychelles** has 86 villas with private plunge pools on a hillside overlooking the beaches of Praslin island, just a 15-minute flight from Mahé International Airport. The Raffles provides easy access to Vallée de Mai Nature Reserve, with its coco de mer forest. Rates start at \$948; raffles.com.