

HOUSE & GARDEN®

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All things bright and beautiful

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and

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IN THE AGE OF
INSTAGRAM?



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CHRISTOPHER HOWE'S
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TABLES UNDER £700

Big little isles

PETER BROWNE RELISHES THE PLEASURES OF THE SEYCHELLES ARCHIPELAGO, WITH ITS IDYLIC SANDY COVES, FASCINATING WILDLIFE AND THE MOST LUXURIOUS OF ISLAND HOTELS

There can be little doubt that Seychelles is the Indian Ocean's most beautiful island nation. Only the most perverse could find fault with its white sandy beaches, elegantly arching coconut palms and thick forests fringed with warm, shallow lagoons the colour of sparrows' eggs.

A thousand miles off the east coast of Africa and just a few degrees south of the Equator, the 115 Edenic islands are always warm and sometimes hot. Any variations in temperature or precipitation are down to the currents, as well as the wind and her attendant waves; conditions can, and do, change with thrilling speed and spontaneity.

A total of 43 Inner Islands huddle around the capital on Mahé, all but two of which are granitic and festooned with colossal boulders weathered into fantastical pleats and folds. A couple of hundred kilometres south lies the Amirantes group, the closest of the Seychelles' Outer Islands, with the stupendously remote Farquhar and Aldabra atolls further still.

Seychelles is resolutely French, thanks to its eighteenth-century colonisers, strangely Anglophile (it became a crown colony after the Napoleonic wars), but proudly Creole, with the population an intriguing mixture of all the characters to have washed ashore since the seventeenth century. This has included French exiles, African slaves, and Indian and Chinese merchants.

Tourism arrived late in Seychelles. An international airport

opened in 1971 and independence followed in 1976, but the country still preserved its aura of shy egalitarianism, encouraged by its socialist government. Small guest houses serviced the needs of mostly French beachcombers and South African fishermen. Things only changed in the late Nineties, when the country opened up to foreign investors and hotels started sprouting on Mahé and Praslin, and on the exclusive private islands Seychelles is now known for.

The first of these, Frégate, owned by the German industrialist Otto Happel, opened to guests 20 years ago. Today, the island is forested with indigenous trees and traversed with walking trails, thanks to its original landscaper, Steve Hill, and to the environmentalists who have nurtured it over the decades. Their work is also credited with saving the Seychelles magpie robin from extinction. The project was funded by profits

from the resort, which is scented with frangipani and coloured by bougainvillea. Its 16 villas are built on a steep slope that sidles down to a wide, quiet beach. There is also a huge hydroponic farm growing fresh produce that is the envy of everyone in this land-strapped nation. The rest of the island is left largely to the free-roaming giant tortoises, millions of giant millipedes, sleek white fairy terns and fat blue pigeons.

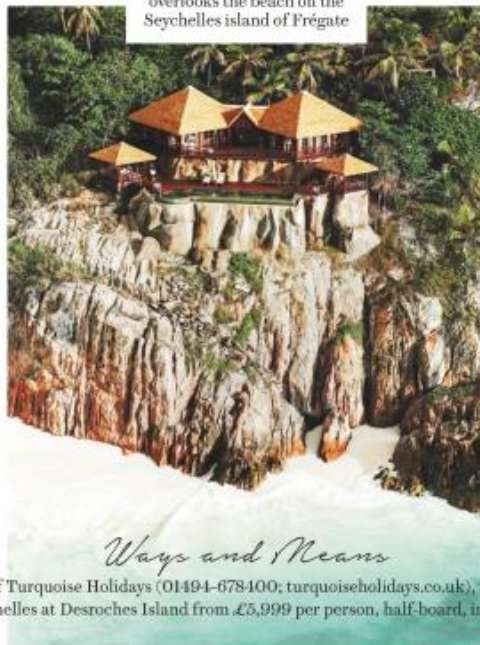
North Island opened a few years after Frégate, but swiftly superseded it in the glamour stakes. Its status was sealed when the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge chose it for their honeymoon in 2011. Now owned by a Russian with deep pockets, the island is still marketed by Wilderness Safaris, the South African conservation outfit that set it on its star-spangled trajectory in 2003. It is limited to its original 11 beachfront villas, designed by Silvio Rech and Lesley Carstens in a style that they describe as 'haute couture Robinson Crusoe'. The resort retains the bohemian quality of a laidback safari lodge.

Frégate and North may have set the standard, but two new arrivals are giving them a run for their money. Six Senses Zil Pasyon opened two years ago on Félicité island, a dramatic outcrop of dark granite. Its 30 villas are secreted in the landscaped grounds (again by Steve Hill) and, as you might expect from the wellness-focused Six Senses group, the glass-fronted spa is a showstopper, balanced on rocks high above the pounding surf. Félicité is not overly blessed with beaches, but guests are free to visit those

on nearby La Digue and Praslin, which are considered to be among the most beautiful in Seychelles. These day trips connect Zil Pasyon with the outside world, quite unlike any of its rivals.

More remote is the new Four Seasons resort, which launched in March on Desroches, a coral cay a 35-minute flight from Mahé. There has been a hotel on this far-flung Outer Island for 30 years, but the new owners decided to start again, doubling the original footprint. The new hotel is remarkable, with 40 smart beach villas set in big, palm-shaded gardens, with superb service as well as outstanding cuisine from chef Olivier Barré. But the secret ingredient is undoubtedly Desroches itself, which is stationed on the lip of a submerged atoll with no earthly neighbours in sight. Out here, the night skies are miraculously clear and the Indian Ocean - like the limitless horizons - is unfathomable.

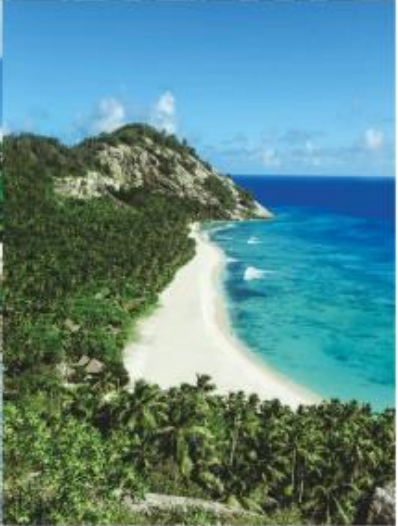
A villa with a private pool overlooks the beach on the Seychelles island of Frégate



Peter visited the Seychelles as a guest of Turquoise Holidays (01494-678400; turquoiseholidays.co.uk), which offers three nights at Six Senses Zil Pasyon and four at Four Seasons Seychelles at Desroches Island from £5,999 per person, half-board, including direct British Airways flights □



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT A beach on Desroches. Frégate is home to giant tortoises. Villas at Six Senses Zil Pasyon. Inside a villa at the new Four Seasons resort on Desroches, North Island. Fishing on La Digue. An infinity pool at Zil Pasyon. Inside a villa on Frégate. The Piazza restaurant on North Island (centre)



JACQUES MARZ, JOHANNA HUBER/ACORN/LES IMAGES