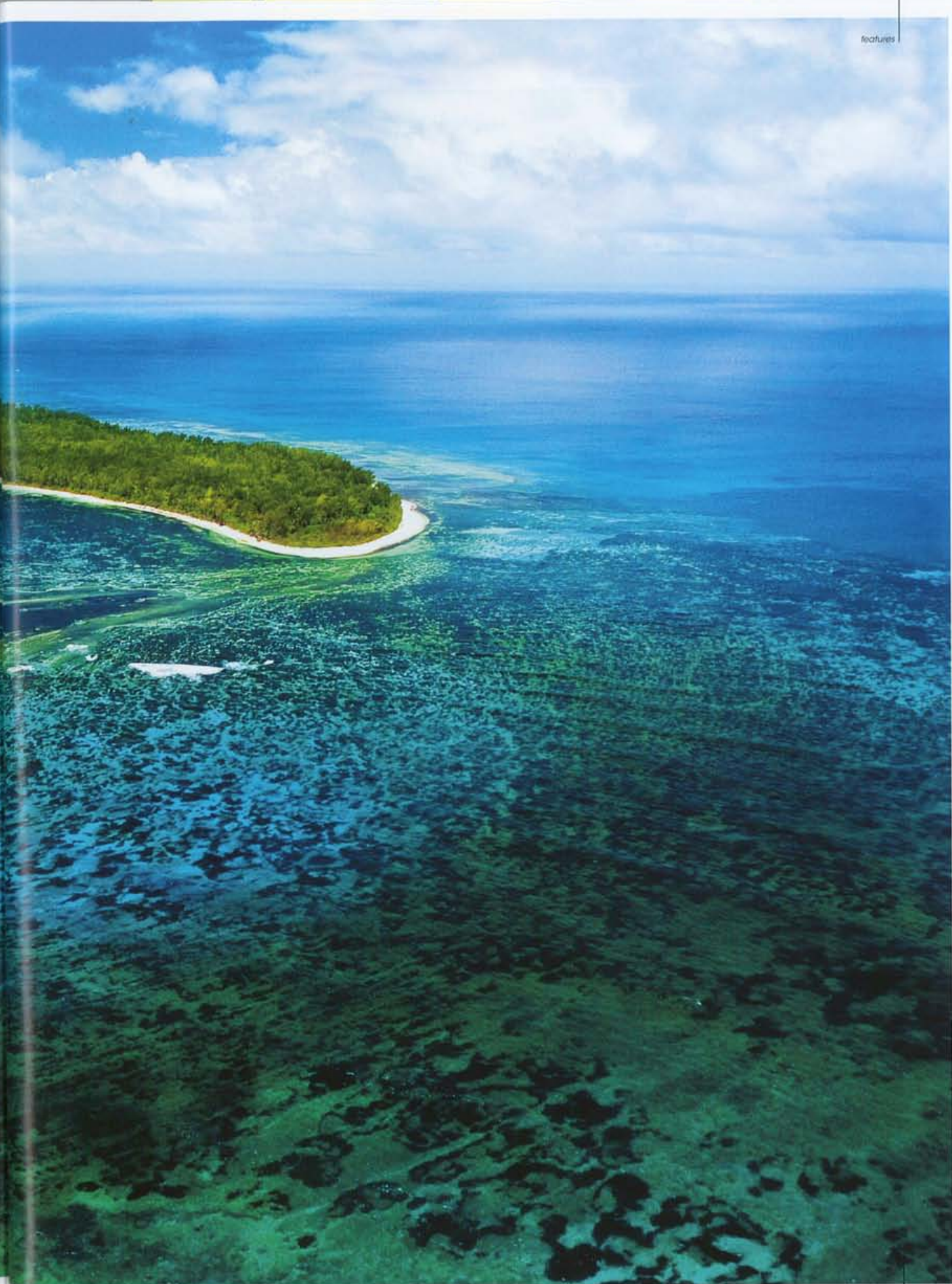


An aerial photograph of the Seychelles archipelago, showing several lush green islands with white sandy beaches, surrounded by shallow turquoise waters with visible coral reefs and deeper blue ocean waters under a bright blue sky with scattered white clouds. A large, semi-transparent purple and blue triangular graphic is overlaid on the left side of the image.

SHE SELLS SEYCHELLES

Story by Leo Bear



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 The man who managed
 Richard Branson's island
 retreat has now branched
 out. Beards not necessary.



One of the things that might surprise you about the Seychelles is the sheer height of the islands. Vast granite mounds tower hundreds of feet above sea level, some of them almost vertical, like the walls guarding a lost paradise. Hopefully, a stress-free paradise because my husband and I are in need of some serious 'R' and 'R' and time out from our tantrum-throwing toddler.

We chose Sainte Anne Resort and Spa as a base for the start and finish of our island-hopping adventure put together by the brilliant people at Quintessentially Travel. Close to the airport but still on its own little island, ten minutes by boat from Mahé, the resort is currently undergoing a five-star makeover courtesy of general manager Herve Duboscq, who, so far, has introduced some Eastern-style ornamental pools and a chic romantic restaurant called Le Robinson situated on the far side of the island.

No nips or tucks necessary in Sainte Anne's botanical garden however. Here, you can track down one of the world's most elu-

sive nuts: the coco du mer. About the size of a rubber ring, it is shaped like a female bottom with a saucy little patch of hair at the base. It's quite the most comical nut you'll ever see and something of a mystery, not just because of its size and appearance but also because, as yet, no one has found a use for it. You can't eat it, you can't crush it for oil and, beyond reinventing it as a rather clumsy doorstopper, it has zero practical application other than providing a silhouette for a stamp in your passport when you exit the country. Try to sneak a coco du mer out of the Seychelles and you'll be locked up for 15 years. Rather, pick up a replica at the market in Victoria while you load up on white chillies, cinnamon quills and fresh vanilla.

A 15-minute hop from the mainland by helicopter lies North Island. Here, the basic concept of a hotel goes straight out the window. There are no menus, no cocktail lists, no pre-planned excursions, no breakfast times, no dress codes, nothing to sign after you order something from the bar - just pure, unadulterated island living.

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 "Flying in animals by helicopter or shipped over Ark-style two by two, the people at North are fully aware that they are playing God."



At North, the sands shift depending on the tides, so there's no knowing if your villa (one of only 11) will have a giant yawning expanse of sand in front of it when you arrive or a thin smidgen of white, such is the ethos of not interfering with nature. And it doesn't really matter either way anyhow.

When Wilderness Safaris bought the property in 1997, it was in a terrible state, over-run with rats and other non-indigenous life. Previously run as a coconut farm with more than 70,000 trees, the company went bust and the place was abandoned. It took seven years to fully rehabilitate the island exterminating animals and reintroducing endemic species, all overseen by former UN volunteer, Linda Vanherck, the island's resident biologist. After 300 years of pirates and Arab traders littering the place with flora and fauna that shouldn't be there, her job is to return the island to its original form using clues from old ship's journals dating back to 1800. Hence the arrival of 20 enormous Aldabra tortoises (all unwanted pets donated from Mahé) which roam the island and take every opportunity

to nibble on the grass around your private pool. Other native reintroductions include blue pigeons, white-eyes, black mud terrapins, takamaka trees, vanilla orchids, coco du mer, six types of palms to name but a few. Flown in by helicopter or shipped over Ark-style two by two, the people at North are fully aware that they are playing God.

Martijn Brouwer, who runs the island, is fairly divine himself. A charming South African with Matthew McConaughey good looks, he's barefoot and open-shirted at the West beach bar most nights. "Lots of people compare North to Fregate island but we're younger, trendier and more flexible," he explains. And he's nailed it. Despite the hefty price tag (£1,800 per person per night), North has an informal, hip feel to it. No designer dresses or hair-sprayed blow dries here. But Martin knows a thing or two about exclusivity. Before dropping his anchor at North, he spent eight years as the manager of Necker Island and counts Richard Branson as one of his good friends but the Virgin boss has yet to visit North. Apparently he tried to book last Christmas but

the island was full. Referring to Branson, Martin adds: "The other problem is there's no tennis court for him at the moment. But we can rectify that. There's a nice spot on the plateau where we could set one up." Like everything at North, anything is possible.

As keen divers, our first port of call was the dive centre housed in one of the original coral buildings from the island's former plantation days. Billy or Patrick will take you out any time you like, night or day. It's basically diving on demand. Underwater at Sprat City, a site just 10 minutes from our villa, we saw sheep crabs, nurse sharks, eagle rays, parrot fish, green and hawksbill turtles. Upon surfacing, a plate of world-class sashimi was waiting for my husband and a hot chocolate for me. It's these touches that make North island stand out: the handwritten welcome note etched onto a leaf, the homemade cookies and banana chips refreshed each day and the keys to our own electric buggy so we could remain completely independent throughout our stay.

Continued on page 101...



It's grim up North Island...
Just kidding.

Continued from page 85...

Fully embracing our new found sense of being shipwrecked, we asked our butler, Elijah, if there is much to be found on the island in the way of food. The next morning, Neil Wager, the island's British-born chef turned up on our doorstep with a big smile on his face. He led us to the plateau, where neat rows of coconut trees still grow in formation and introduced us to a scruffy, chainsaw-wielding Rastafarian. Next thing we knew, BOOM, a 10-year-old coconut tree was felled at our feet. After much hacking with machetes and tearing of husks, all was revealed: a metre-long fresher-than-fresh waxy heart of palm to take back to the kitchen to slice into a 'millionaire's salad'. A splash of lime, ginger and chilli was all that was needed.

Next day, we headed to the West beach for a picnic of grilled prawns, sandwiches and New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc. Needless to say, with only 11 villas on the island, we had the whole beach to ourselves. We ate with our feet in the sand, admiring the Jurassic boulders of rock book-ending the spotless crescent of white, whilst craggy cliffs in the distance rose into the sky, like the splayed feet of a giant tortoise taking a dip. All this and still no mention of the actual villas at North? Well, that's because it's hard to do them justice in words or pictures. Sculpted from local materials sourced during the rehabilitation process, every table, lamp, shutter and surface has been hand-crafted by Seychellois craftsmen to reflect the natural beauty of the island. Strings of porous white stones act as sunscreens and curtains of shells divide the outdoor bathrooms. Each villa also comes with its own projector home cinema. We agreed to our butler's suggestion of a 'movie night' one evening and strolled back to find soft lighting, cashmere throws and bowls of popcorn and pick 'n' mix laid out. Never has watching a film felt so decadent.

Back on the mainland of Mahé, there is another resort famed for its ultra-luxurious villas: Maia. A relative newcomer to the scene, it is built on a private peninsula with half of the villas dug out of the cliffside, the

other half lining the beach. All of them have a contemporary Balinese aesthetic with slatted wood panelling, burnt ochre throw cushions and stone baths the size of plunge pools. The result is a trendy take on zen with pathways overflowing with cinnamon, avocado and star fruit trees. The main bar and restaurant are decorated with dramatic Aztec-style flaming fire towers. So far, so Stargate Atlantis, and after being served bat curry (rather bony), I started to wonder if this forward-thinking resort was a bit over my head. But something you cannot fault at Maia is the service. With 230 staff looking after 30 villas, you'd expect it to be good and our butler Selwyn didn't disappoint. He was always on time, knew how to whip up a stirring breakfast and responded immediately when my husband took one look in the mirror and realised he was in urgent need of a barber. Our only objection was the seemingly constant ring of mobile phones – this is how the staff communicate – which somewhat detracted from the serenity but upon checking into Maia's La Prairie spa for a marathon session of yoga and massage, we'd forgotten all about it.

In contrast to North Island, Maia is the kind of place people go to be seen. It's Mahé's most expensive resort, popular with high-profile types and celebrities. On the day of our departure, the place was aflurry with security and expectant faces. Apparently, "a famous UK arrival" was about to pull up at the gates and according to resort manager Edouard Grosmanin, "we'd be reading about it in the press in a couple of weeks' time." We're still searching the headlines.

Our last stop was the private island of Desroches, a low-lying member of the 'outer' islands. Located 230km south-west of Mahé, an hour by small plane in the direction of the Maldives and Madagascar, Desroches is the most far-flung resort in the Seychelles. Recently named in Forbes' top 10 World's Most Remote hotels, its nearest neighbours are St Joseph – a mecca for fly-fishing with three kilometres of flats – and D'Arros, the island owned by the infamous L'Oreal heiress Liliane Bettencourt.

Everything at Desroches is laid back. Weathered hammocks hang on the beach and faded stripey cushions are strewn across daybeds. At lunchtime, safari chairs and tables are set up in the shade of an enormous rubber tree and staff wearing sarongs take your orders. What's surprising about Desroches is that despite its location, you don't feel in the slightest bit cut off. In fact, of the four resorts we visited, Desroches had the most atmosphere (and the fastest WiFi). Meal times are fixed which brings people together and allows plenty of story swapping to go on – lots of which centres around the subterranean by virtue of the fact that Desroches offers some of the best cave diving in the Indian Ocean. We took

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“All this, and still no mention of the actual villas at North? Well, that's because it's hard to do them justice in words or pictures.”

our cue and headed out one afternoon to check out said caves. As sunlight streamed through dark caves lined with fan coral, we glimpsed giant groupers, spiny lobsters and barracuda. For divers, it doesn't get much better than this. For snorkellers, a spot called the Aquarium provides an equal amount of colour and action but to get there, you have to put in some effort. First you have to cycle six kilometres through virgin forest heaving with spiders of the very long legged variety. Then you have to swim more than 300m to a clearing in shoulder-high seagrass. For most of this swim, you can't touch the bottom and the weed is so tall it brushes against your stomach as you go but the mission is worth it. The Aquarium is a sandy, coral-encrusted oasis teeming with fish and rays. I got to swim with a turtle for the first time which was a delightfully soothing experience; they are such graceful, ancient, unflappable creatures.

Our luck held for another highly pleasurable encounter on Desroches. Chef Reuben, also known as, 'the Gordon Ramsay of South Africa', happened to be staying on the island and kindly extended an invitation for us to join him for dinner in his villa. He rustled up a fine feast of scallops, tempura prawns, Argentinean steaks and chocolate fondants then shared some of his highly coveted cookery tips with us. Sitting there at the table, sun-tanned, satisfied and a million miles from home, we felt restored and full of bonhomie.

We chatted into the early hours and drank the place dry in the safe knowledge that the next day was going to be another thoroughly relaxed affair.

Whilst in the Seychelles, Leo Bear visited the Saint Anne Resort (saintanne-resort.com), the North Island (north-island.com), Maia (maia.com.sc) and Desroches Island (desroches-island.com).