

# Paradise found

Michelle Harbi kicks back Creole-style on the spectacular island of Mahé



**M**ornings are my favourite time on Mahé. Rising early, I snuggle down on the daybed on our hilltop terrace with a cup of tea, watching as the ascending sun turns the sky ever bluer and the forest ever greener, the ocean below glistening under its rays. The previous night had seen rain, and so a delicate rainbow threads through what remains of the clouds as the island's birds conduct their exotic early morning conversation.

Finishing my cuppa, I pad down the hill to Petite Anse beach – a perfect horseshoe of white sand lapped by water the colour of peppermint. Other than a hotel worker starting to pull the covers off the sunbeds, and a man further out to sea in a fishing boat, I'm alone. I wade into the water – warm even at this time – and swim slow strokes, working up a little appetite for the breakfast buffet ahead.

When writing about far-flung beach destinations, it's all too easy to lapse into the well-worn phrases of travel prose – crystal-clear waters, powder-white sands, swaying palms – but, then, few places embody the paradise island idyll quite as effortlessly as Seychelles. Or, rather, paradise islands, the country comprising 115 of them, clustered about 1,600km east of mainland Africa in the vast Indian Ocean.

The largest, home to the international airport and most of the former French and British colony's population, is Mahé. While island-hopping is easy, we're not here for long so are content to stay put and enjoy the less than laborious task of exploring a land mass only 28km by 8km in size.

Our first base is the Four Seasons, open since 2009 on a previously unoccupied site on the island's rugged south-west coast. Its 67 villas and suites are spread across the granite hillside, offering garden or ocean views as spectacular as I've seen anywhere.

Private and expansive, the villas have elegant décor, sizeable infinity pools and huge verandahs. One of your toughest decisions here will be where to lie for the day – on the sun deck, the shaded bed under the pavilion, or the cosy circular daybed? Or will you instead summon a golf buggy to whizz you down to the beach? Most of the time, we opt for the last option, because Petite Anse really is so pretty and peaceful, and the water so calm.

Days are very easily spent swimming and reading, but there are plenty of activities, from low exertion (coconut *pétanque*, watching the native giant tortoises do even less than you) to medium effort (kayaking, beach volleyball) to high energy. Mahé's mountainous interior is popular with hikers, so late one afternoon we take the short but steep ascent up a peak just outside the resort for a meditation session. Halfway up, the 30-degree heat sapping my energy, I doubt my sanity, but when the vista at the

**Pictured:** Two-bedroom Hilltop Ocean View suite, Four Seasons

## ESCAPE TO... Seychelles

top reveals itself, I feel completely exhilarated. As I run through my breathing exercises, the crisp air cooling my skin, the world at large feels very far away.

Next morning, my muscles aching more than they should, I reward myself with a massage at the hilltop spa before heading down to the beach to explore the island's underwater world. Seychelles' abundant marine life offers great opportunities for snorkelling and diving. In the late 1990s, the country's coral was damaged by the El Nino weather phenomenon, which is why Four Seasons has partnered with marine conservation company Wise Oceans ([wiseoceans.com](http://wiseoceans.com)) to restore 10,000 sqm of limestone reef in the bay, collecting and nurturing broken fragments so it can transplant them back.

Marine educator Georgina Beresford takes me on a guided snorkel out towards the coral nursery at the side of the bay. On the way, we spot a pair of bulging blue and yellow Indian redfin butterflyfish flitting through the waters – often seen in twos as they mate for life – together with vibrant striped surgeonfish.

After all this exertion, I tuck into my evening meals with gusto. Fine dining is available in Zez, which also puts on themed cuisine nights – we enjoy a surf and turf meal of succulent shrimp, red snapper and steak – while Kannel serves Asian dishes alongside local specialities such as Creole curry. It's not long before the staff work out our digestif of choice – deliciously dark Takamaka Bay rum ("Spirit of the Seychelles") – suggesting it before we've even taken a seat in the bar. That's indicative of the intuitive service delivered here.

Food and drink, like many things, can be expensive in Seychelles, as so much needs to be imported. Still, there is good value to be found on the island, and for the second part of our trip we head further up the coast for a different kind of resort experience.

In February 2015, Asia's Minor Hotel Group opened its first Seychelles property under its four-star Avani

**Left:** Avani lobby **Below:** Avani shisha lounge



brand. Formerly a Le Méridien hotel, the fully revamped 124-room Avani Seychelles Barbarons is on Barbarons beach, a wide sweep of sand lined with lush greenery. The ocean is more powerful here and the smell of it hits you as soon as you walk into the airy open-plan lobby, the water visible straight ahead.

The property's low-rise buildings are set in attractive tropical gardens, in the middle of which sits a deep-blue 25-metre pool, all backed by the grandeur of the mountains. Dotted around are shaded loungers and hammocks for lazy days in the sunshine, and pool service is provided.

Starting from 33 sqm, rooms are fresh and modern and come with robes, fridges and free wifi – book a first-floor Ocean View one to watch the waves from your balcony. The hotel has two restaurants – Elements, where we have breakfast facing the beach, and the excellent Tamarind, which serves fragrant pan-Asian dishes for lunch and dinner. There's also a bar, a shisha lounge, and a spa with skilled therapists. Throughout, the staff are warm and helpful.

The Avani is well placed for exploring, being located just next to La Misere, one of a handful of

winding roads that cross the island, taking you east to the capital, Victoria. You can drive around Mahé, hopping out at its numerous beaches (all public in Seychelles), in about two and a half hours. For a more local experience, try the bus network, which is comprehensive, if not hugely frequent.

One afternoon, we head to Victoria – while fairly unremarkable, it has a thriving market and a lively lunch spot, the Pirate Arms. More salubrious is nearby Eden Island, a luxury residential marina development built on reclaimed land 200 metres off the coast, linked to the mainland by bridge. Launched in 2005, it's home to the 87-room Eden Bleu hotel, which opened in 2014, as well as shops, bars and restaurants – such as jolly Bravo, which serves plentiful, well-priced fare.

On our last night, we head for chic Delplace restaurant in Port Glaud, a short drive from the Avani, where we enjoy fantastic fish overlooking the water – and one last drop of Takamaka Bay.

■ Visit [fourseasons.com/seychelles](http://fourseasons.com/seychelles), [avanihotels.com/seychelles-barbarons](http://avanihotels.com/seychelles-barbarons). Etihad Airways flies daily from London to Seychelles via Abu Dhabi. It also operates a codeshare with Air Seychelles. [etihad.com](http://etihad.com)

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