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Wonders of the reef in The Seychelles

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I'm listening to my 15-year-old son, Josh, ask a marine biologist how coral bleaching has affected the marine life in The Seychelles while his brothers (Freddie, 9, and Ben, 13) are helping to tie coral fragments to metal strips.

So it may be a surprise to learn that we are staying in the lap of luxury at Four Seasons Resort Seychelles on the island of Mahe, where the chance to be a marine biologist is treated like just another fun activity, such as surfing or kayaking.

The resort is designed so that you hardly notice the wooden villas, built like extravagant tree houses on the steep hillside amid thick jungle with more than 30 varieties of trees, from palms to green bamboo and mango. There are five resident giant tortoises, including Socrates, who Freddie takes a shine to, and wilder inhabitants, such as the huge furry fruit bats that give us a regular evening aerial show. Below is the gorgeous Petit Anse crescent bay, one of the most beautiful in Mahe, where we ride the waves on body boards, snorkel, paddleboard and kayak — when we are not engaged in vital conservation work, that is.

Perhaps it's the Eden-like location that inspired Four Seasons to set an example of how a plush hotel can still be active in conservation. Since March, 2015 it has been funding a 10,000sq m reef restoration project led by the marine biologists at WiseOceans, whose work also includes rescuing the endangered hawksbill turtles that nest on this beach from October to January.

Sixteen per cent of the coral was lost here in the 1990s when El Niño (the band of warm water that originates in the Pacific Ocean) triggered the sea temperature to rise in The Seychelles, causing coral bleaching, whereby coral turns white because it has lost the algae it relies on to thrive until it eventually dies.

They hope to transplant 16,000 coral fragments back to the bare areas of the Petite Anse reef by 2017 so no wonder the resort is keen to get both staff and guests involved.

We meet at the Marine Education Station (an idyllic office on the beach) and borrow snorkel masks and rashie vests to swim out to the reef, which at low tide is just a few metres off shore.

It's difficult not to be distracted when there are parrot, butterfly and angel fish and eagle rays to gawp at, but we concentrate on our task to collect broken coral, place it in containers, and haul our gear back to shore.

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designed because this reef isn't protected by an outer reef, and the coral will only grow if it is sheltered from the wave action and kept secure. It's not an easy process working with brittle coral that doesn't always want to break where you'd like it to. We're told we must do it as quickly as possible to avoid the coral "becoming stressed".

As we chip away, it oozes a clear liquid, which causes Freddie concern. "Is it crying?" he asks. We are assured it is not and focus instead on the happy arrival of the project's first babies — tiny new coral growing on the rescued fragments.

At other times we are typical indulgent holiday-makers but all enjoyed just that little bit more after engaging in our conservation work. We toast the health of the coral with Creole mojitos and look forward to seeing those babies grow.

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