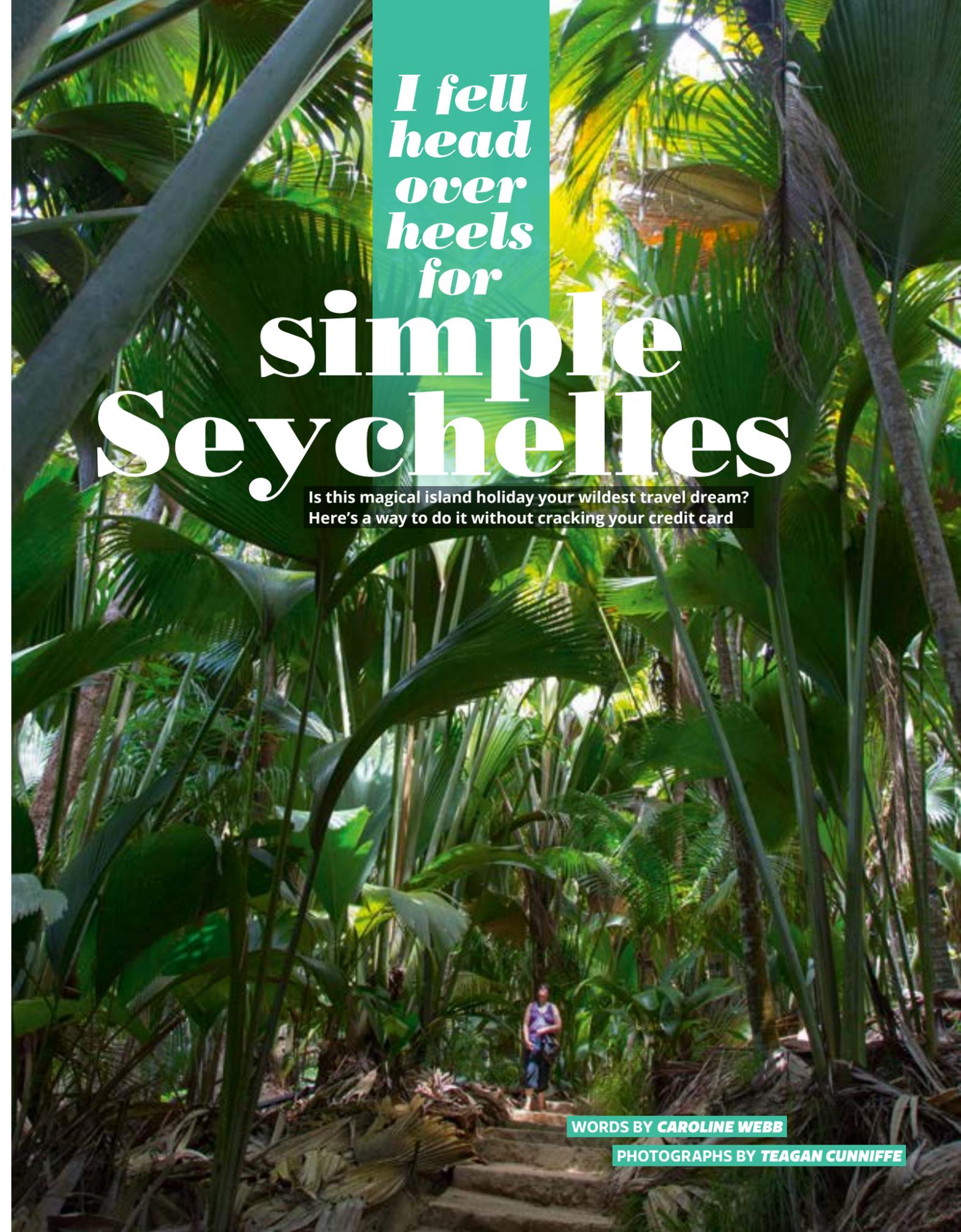




**ABOVE** Snorkelling around Chauve Souris, you will hear 'clicking' noises from the busy coral reef and feel the occasional pinprick sting from tiny organisms in the water. **OPPOSITE** The palm trees at Vallée de Mai, a World Heritage Site, are up to 30 metres high and hundreds of years old.



*I fell  
head  
over  
heels  
for*

# simple Seychelles

Is this magical island holiday your wildest travel dream?  
Here's a way to do it without cracking your credit card

WORDS BY **CAROLINE WEBB**

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **TEAGAN CUNIFFE**

**Y**ou won't believe me, but I felt a little sorry for the guests at the resorts. I sat in the rosy twilight, sipping a piña colada and staring at the same magnificent view as everyone else on Beau Vallon beach, but I was getting that little something 'extra', more authentic, from my sundowner experience. My delicious cocktail had been served in a plastic cup by shy 13-year-old Christopher at a street market stall, had cost me just 75 rupees (around R75, a bargain, believe me!) and I'd merely strolled straight onto the beach to enjoy it – a unique experience for a South African, where drinking on beaches is not allowed. Sure, the hotel guests had their pretty cocktails and their loungers and their waiter service, but weren't they somehow missing out?

Pretty soon they'd be going to dinner, probably at their resort, which meant they might never be humbled by a meal at Baobab Pizzeria... It's nothing grand; a small, plain, open-walled structure with about 20 tables at the far end of the beach. There's no booking, no greeting when you arrive – just wait for

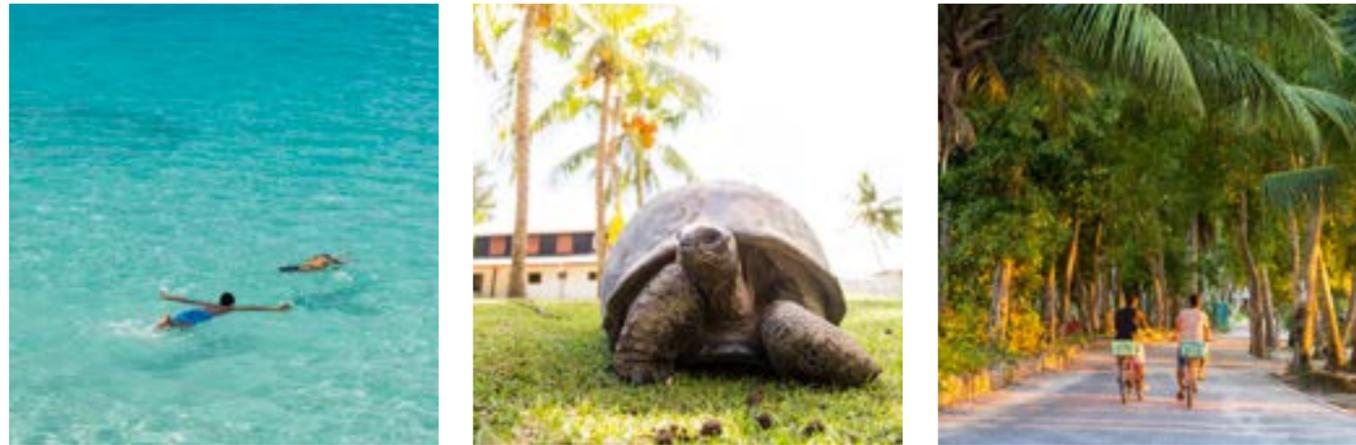
a table to empty and grab it. It's presided over by one woman who runs it like clockwork. You might feel ignored at first, but just as impatience and doubt set in, she arrives with menus, and from this point on everything flows effortlessly. There's no fake friendliness, no 'professionalism', no frills: the restaurant of my dreams – and cheap for the Seychelles.

Afterwards, Teagan and I ambled down the road to The Boat House – it specialises in pricey Creole buffet dinners (420 rupees per person), but we paid 100 rupees to take our pick of the desserts. Not exactly a bargain but it has a great vibe, two wandering minstrels strumming reggae-pop on guitars (live local music is a rare find, unless it's carnival time), and the unique decor alone is worth the price. At the end of the night, we felt we'd had a fairly genuine and interesting evening's entertainment we would not have been able to replicate anywhere else in the world. As we walked back to our apartment, along the now-dark beach, we felt happy and safe. There's no price for that.

Dispatched to the Seychelles, like Cinderella to the ball not in glass slippers but tackies, we had instructions to do it on a budget. We'd be staying in B&Bs, self-catering apartments and chalets; we had >



**TOP ROW** Chalets d'Anse Forbans, just 10 steps across the lawn to the shore; large palm fronds and umbrella-like takamaka trees provide shade on most beaches; a boatman waits for customers at Cote d'Or on Praslin. **MIDDLE ROW** The braai lunch on Curieuse island included fish and chicken, Creole mango salad and spicy relishes; fresh coconut is offered everywhere (like chips or peanuts in SA); step off the beach into Baobab Pizzeria in Mahé's buzzy resort area. **BOTTOM ROW** Jules, the owner of Chez Jules on La Digue, shows how it's done; Georgina's Cottage at Beau Vallon; frangipanis and other tropical blooms are everywhere. **OPPOSITE** The perfect perch to wind down the day, at Anse Kerlan on Praslin.



ABOVE, FROM LEFT These people are looking at the tiny black-and-white striped fish that crowd around bathers at Anse Lazio on Praslin; Curieuse island, once a leper colony, is now for giant turtles only – hundreds roam free here; cycling rules the roads on La Digue.

to use public transport (there is a bus service on Mahé and Praslin); and we had to feed ourselves without feasting. Would we still have a happy ending?

I was rather surprised by the Seychelles – my impression, echoed by everyone whose response when I said I was going there ('Ooh, la-di-dah'), was that it is expensive, upmarket and relegated to that 'special holiday' category (honeymoons, anniversaries). In reality, there is all that but also a down-to-earth, real and distinct Creole culture.

It felt like a place where normal people live and work. The paradise element is there, of course – the powdery white sands, curvaceous boulders and tropical seas – but there are also wild jungly interiors (great for forest hiking), one of the cutest capital cities in the world, and the delightful oddity of seafaring Rastas raving around in their motorboats.

There is also what must be one of the best bicycle rides in the world – on La Digue. Riding beside a turquoise ocean, along the east coast's concrete road shaded by towering palms and dotted with interesting dwellings and beach shacks selling fresh fruit juice, I felt like I could burst with sheer giddy happiness. Freewheeling downhill, hair blowing in the breeze, I soaked up the pinch-me-I'm-actually-in-paradise feeling. We pulled over often to take in the view or cool off in the sea, and watched the owner of Chez Jules cafe expertly chop

**'Twilight is special on the islands ... the whole world on pause for just an hour'**

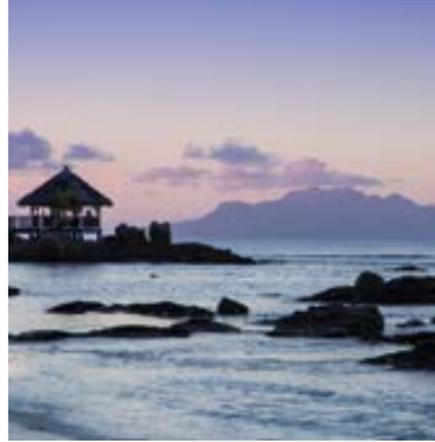
open a coconut, after which he offered some to us. There are over 2000 bicycles on the island, and (almost) no vehicles – this cycling culture allows visitors freedom to explore at their own pace and to feel truly part of life here. It made me fall hard for La Digue. That, and our nightly entertainment: riding down to the jetty, sitting on the quayside, eating a takeaway dinner, looking at the stars – and watching the resident giant stingray glide gracefully around in the shallows right below us.

After our first Seychelles sunset, we determined to always seek out a spot to wind down the day. Twilight is special on the islands – like when falling snow turns the world quiet... That first night at Beau Vallon, it was as if people were trying to squeeze the last drop out of the day – going for a final dip, playing beach bats, bringing boats in or heading out, sunbathers catching the very last rays, people standing around in small groups, all increasingly becoming silhouettes. Even the island dogs came out in packs, along with the fruit bats circling

above. The whole world on pause for just an hour... Landlubbing is all very well, but it's the magnificent sea studded with islands in every direction that would prove too great a temptation to resist. Swimming is free, of course, but any other water-based activity comes at a price. Nearing the end of our trip, on Praslin we finally splurged on a half-day excursion, arranged on the spur of the >



ABOVE There are beach bars everywhere selling fresh fruit juice. This remote one on La Digue was a most welcome sight, after a long, thirsty walk amid Anse Source D'Argent's boulder tunnels. We paid a very touristy 100 rupees for a drink here, but it was the most perfect setting ever.



**A WEEK OF TWILIGHTS** We discovered that sunset (at least in Seychelles) goes through three phases over an hour: a blazing, fiery spectacular, followed by an almost washed-out, pastel light (when one is tempted to think it's over and leave) and a final phase just before darkness falls that has deep, beautiful, velvety tones. (Go online to watch Teagan's time-lapse collection at [getaway.co.za/blog](http://getaway.co.za/blog))

**Top row:** Anse Kerlan, east coast of Praslin; Beau Vallon, north-west Mahé; Anse La Reunion, near the jetty, west coast of La Digue. **Middle row:** From Belle Vue in the centre of La Digue, looking west to Praslin; Sunset Beach, north-west Mahé; a salute to the local rum at Grand Anse, east coast of Praslin. **Bottom:** Anse Forbans, south-east Mahé.



**ABOVE** A final late-afternoon swim at Anse Forbans. The sun rays shining through the water created a beautiful aquarium effect.

moment with a taxi driver. It included visiting the free-ranging giant tortoises on Curieuse island, a short hike through a mangrove swamp followed by a beach barbecue and snorkelling around Chauve Souris islet. Sure, it was touristy (we were a motley crew of nationalities thrown together) and it seriously dented our wallets, but given that it included transfers from the other side of Praslin, the boat trip, food, cold drinks and a terrific little adventure, it was worth it.

But it was our search for sundowner spots each day that would ultimately create some of our best memories – feeding stale bread to swirling schools of tropical fish from the terrace of the Sunset Beach Hotel (and paying a spluttering 200 rupees for a cocktail there!); sitting on the lofty wooden deck of a local family's house above the jungle canopy of the highest point on La Digue; the next day taking a last dip in surprisingly hot water on the island's western shore; watching Rasta families play amid fallen-over trees on Praslin's Anse Kerlan; finding a rock outcrop covered in daisy-like flowers jutting into the sea at Anse Forbans, a turtle beach in Mahé's quieter south.

This daily routine was a simple act of engaging in local life on some level, not tucked away in a luxury hotel. We rarely knew what to expect, or what we'd find when we got there, and often it didn't cost us much at all. There are tourist attractions, to be sure – and we visited many of them – but sometimes just being out and about in the 'real world' was enough. Happy ending? You bet. **6**

## 8 super-useful Seychelles budgeting tips

- 1** Accept that you will want to splurge on certain things – one special meal every other day, a watersport activity or boat trip, taxis to hard-to-reach beaches.
- 2** Look for local takeaway shops for basic meals (stir-fries, curries, stews, burgers). These can be real hole-in-the-wall kind of spots but the food is generally okay. We had a few hits and a few misses, but when you're paying around R50 (as opposed to over R150 in a smarter restaurant), you can't be too fussy.
- 3** Groceries can be a bit more expensive than in SA, or quite a lot more. Some examples: long-life milk R20, box of tea bags R44, single yoghurt R22.50, cereal R50, chicken thighs R200, rice R88, eggs R32 for a box of 10, local lettuce R10, imported tomatoes R60 (800g), steak R100/kg. Fruit and veg stalls, markets (for fish) and bakeries in your area will be cheaper than supermarkets. Many self-catering places kindly offer daily transfers to the shops.
- 4** Drinks are expensive – local beer (Seybrew, about R65) is the cheapest option, while a G&T can set you back around R125, cocktails even more. We bought a bottle of Takamaka rum (around R265, and mixed it with ginger ale as the locals do) for our sunset excursions, which lasted the week.
- 5** Bring your own snorkelling gear – there are countless places to pop your face into the water right off the beaches, and you won't have to hunt around for a place to rent from.
- 6** The inter-island Cat Cocos ferries cost from R680 (Mahé – Praslin) and R195 (Praslin – La Digue), but if you're on a strict budget there is no real need to island-hop lest you 'miss out'. The three main islands are very similar – all have various kinds of beaches (each has at least one super-stunner), a forested interior, the same Creole culture... Choose one based on your interests: buzzy Mahé has more activities and attractions, although the south is quieter; Praslin has a slower pace but also several villages; tiny La Digue is the most provincial, with only two resorts and one vibey port town straight out of a storybook.
- 7** The 'budget' places we stayed in were above average, and a couple were right on the beach. All had ceiling fans and air-con, a kettle, fridge, TV, good beds and linen, and towels and toiletries supplied. All had Wi-Fi (but not for free); and 100MG of data (R98) on a local SIM card did not last long. Note that guest houses often give the choice of self-catering, B&B, half-board or dinners on request.
- 8** If you're not on a bus, transport is pricey. Petrol costs around R17 a litre (note: petrol stations are not open 24 hours); car hire starts from R500 a day. A 17km taxi transfer across Praslin cost us R584, but one advantage is that you can get good info out of taxi drivers. We recommend Marlon Panagary on Mahé (+248-252 6770) and Mike Victor on Praslin (+248-261-9441) – not because they're cheaper but because they were informative and helpful.

## Plan Your Trip

### GETTING THERE

Air Seychelles flies from Joburg, Cape Town and now Durban (launch special R5 000 return valid until 30 September). Normally from around R7 000 pp. [airseychelles.com](http://airseychelles.com)

### WHEN TO GO

It's near the equator, so the temperature is pretty much the same all year. There are trade winds from May to October.

### NEED TO KNOW

Seychellois are rather bemused by South Africans' love of camping. There is no camping – not on the beaches nor in the (protected) forests. Unless you're an experienced and fit hiker, don't enter the forests or try to scramble over boulders to remote beaches without a guide (guides are compulsory at some places). As beautifully perfect as the sea looks, it can be deceptive – even dangerous. Some places are too shallow for a proper swim, or the seabed is too rocky, or there are undertows. The islands' roads are narrow, twisty and very steep in places – only for confident drivers. Bus rides can be quite thrilling, and note that there is often no verge for pedestrians to walk on.

## Mahé

### STAY HERE

**Georgina's Cottage** is a double-storey beach house with different types of rooms (some self-catering) run by friendly

Eddy. Super breakfasts on the stoep, and it's across the road from Beau Vallon's beach and close to restaurants and bars. The bus stops right outside. From R1 230 double room B&B; family room with kitchen R1 740 (sleeps four). Stay eight nights, get one free. [georginas-cottage.com](http://georginas-cottage.com)

**La Fontaine**, amid the forested hills behind Beau Vallon, is a very pleasant Creole-style apartment complex with a pool and braai area. The stylish, serviced flats have all the mod-cons. Free shuttles to the beach but it's actually a quick, if steep, walk there. From R2 234 for two (kids under 12 free). [lafontaine.sc](http://lafontaine.sc)

**Chalets d'Anse Forbans** in the quiet south-east has very pretty, well-equipped cottages right on the beach. If you're looking to chill, this is it. Apart from protecting the hawksbill turtles, the owners are involved in community projects. From R2 220 for two, R3 510 for four (includes a discount voucher for a meal at the Hilton next door). [forbans.com](http://forbans.com)

### EAT HERE

**Baobab Pizzeria** packs them in for two hours over lunch and three hours in the evening. A delicious pizza and a glass of wine costs around R180.

**La Reduit** is a best-kept secret up in the hills on the south-east coast. Chef 'Mr Gerry' has a restaurant in his house amid the trees (spot the fruit bats), cooks inventive Creole food – and will send a driver to fetch you from Chalets d'Anse

Forbans (no cost). Starters from R105, mains around R300. +248-436-6116

### DO THIS

**Stroll around Victoria**, the capital city. There's a picturesque market, a Hindu temple, the grandest priest's house ever – and a Chinese pagoda coming soon.

**See exquisite model ships** at the Domaine de Val des Prés craft village, made by Jean-Louis Marchesseau. Then drive down the road to the Takamaka rum distillery. [takamaka.sc](http://takamaka.sc)

## Praslin

### STAY HERE

**Britannia Hotel** at Grand Anse on the east coast was one of the first hotels on Praslin. The beach, 250m away, isn't great for swimming (free bus three times a week to the best on the island) but the hotel has a lovely pool plus stylish, spacious, modern rooms. R2 422 double B&B (a child under 12 sharing costs R260). Free nights for stays of four or more days. Bonus: the restaurant serves fantastic, slightly retro Creole cuisine. Dishes from R250. [britanniapraslin.com](http://britanniapraslin.com)

### EAT HERE

**Bonbon Plume** is right on stunning Anse Lazio beach – tables under thatch, sand under your feet, mostly-seafood menu (grilled on fires round the back of the bar area). Dishes from R260. Booking essential. +248-423-2136

### DO THIS

**Marvel at the Vallée de Mai**, home of the coco de mer palms. There are three short trails you can follow yourself but it's worth booking a guide to tell you all about these fascinating plants. Entry R300 pp. +248-432-1735

**Hike into the interior**. There are several trails through the forests and up to viewpoints – for example, 200m from the Vallée de Mai entrance is a 1km trail. Consult locals for advice.

**Take a boat trip**, whether a simple lift to a beach only accessible from the sea, or



to a nearby island. We used Lyly's Boat Charter to go to Curieuse Island to see the tortoises, have a beach BBQ and go snorkelling. R1 300 pp. +248-251-2461

## La Digue

### STAY HERE

**Chez Marston** is a short walk from the jetty and very central. It's owned by a real character who is full of stories (Marston St Ange, the maverick brother of Seychelles' tourism minister). It's primarily a restaurant, with a few rooms out back. R1 520 double B&B, add dinner for R215 pp more. [chezmarston.com](http://chezmarston.com)

### EAT HERE

**Fish Trap** is an attractive, trendy spot next to the jetty, with a little beach and tables on the sand as well as indoors. Dishes from R125. +248-251-2111

**Belle Vue** is on top of the 300m hill right in the middle of La Digue. Tables are on a rustic wooden deck built onto a local house – good for sundowners. It also does a special Creole dinner for R500 pp (transport included – a good thing or else it's a long, steep walk). +248-252-7856

**Chez Jules**, a thatched cafe beside the sea at Anse Banane (on the east coast bike route) is a welcome refreshment stop – for cold bottled water, fresh fruit juice or something light to eat.

### DO THIS

**Rent a bicycle** and ride everywhere. It can just be left wherever you stop – no locking up, no worries. From R100 a day.

**Visit the famous Anse Source d'Argent** (within the historic L'Union estate, entry R100 pp), a gorgeous, narrow beach backed by an intriguing labyrinth of boulders. Keep walking south as far as you can to escape the crowds. **Go snorkelling at Anse Sévère** (just past town on the cycle route) – the best spot on the island. However, the Cocos Islands nearby are said to be one of the best spots in all of Seychelles. Find Hyacinthe Bouchereau at La Passe jetty; he charges R725 pp for a half-day trip there. +248-271-6220

\* Prices and conversions correct at time of going to print

Boats parked at Grand Anse on Praslin – but this same scene is repeated just about everywhere in Seychelles.