

Couples Retreat

For editor **Heather Ingarfield**, the rest of the world disappeared the moment she stepped on to the stunning Indian Ocean islands of the Seychelles

Seychelles
EXCLUSIVE



MAIA
LUXURY
RESORT
& SPA
Anse Louis, Mahé
www.maia.com.sc



There's a point in every holiday when you put your phone down, lose the WiFi password, pack away your make-up and stop wearing shoes. It's those moments when you shed any stress and anxiety from city life, and completely surrender to your holiday and the state of relaxation. It can take a few days, weeks even. When we arrived at MAIA Luxury Resort & Spa, it happened the minute we walked through the doors...

'Take your time, settle in. There's a bottle of Prosecco chilling at the outdoor bar and you can just walk down the beach for lunch,' our butler tells us. He finishes the tour of the beach villa and leaves us to take it all in. Tucked away among emerald-green forest-like gardens, towering palm trees and immense granite boulders, our villa is mere metres away from where the waves roll on to the crushed-coral sand. Leaves bigger than flags rustle in the breeze as tiny scarlet-spattered birds bounce around noisily on the grass. The only other sound floating through the air is the soft fizzle and pop from the Champagne flutes in our hands.

Spread over three levels, the villa blends flawlessly into the breathtaking Mahé landscape. The bedroom is the most impressive, with soft wood and hammered copper offset by the floor-to-ceiling glass doors that open up on to the wooden deck and intoxicating view. Walk past the impressive stone basins and you'll find the shower, a glass-walled affair surrounded by the lush forest of the Seychelles. Doors from the bathroom lead on to the open-air bathtub, private infinity pool and garden.

Between the deck chairs and daybed, we don't know where to sit back and enjoy the Prosecco. We grab the his-and-hers MAIA peak caps off the king-sized bed, kick off our shoes, get on the deck chairs and get our feet wet in the top half of the infinity pool.

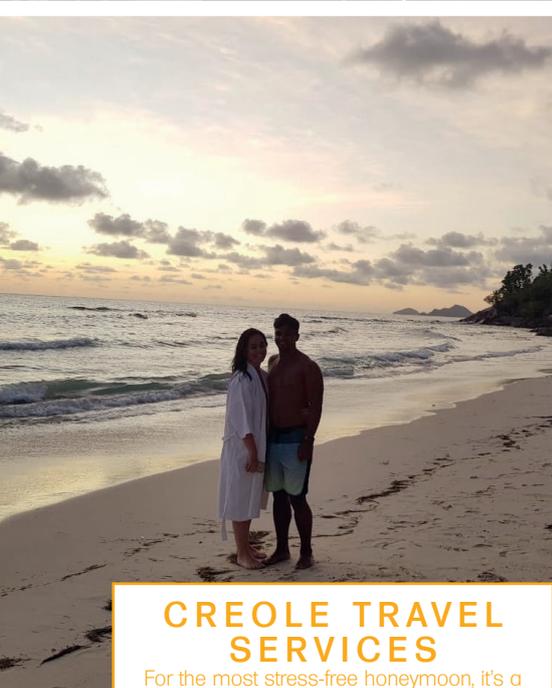
Perched on the shore of a hidden gem of a beach, Anse Louis, MAIA is a resort like no other. Their philosophy is 'Whatever, Wherever, Whenever' - at MAIA, time is an extraneous concept. They believe that to disconnect from the world, and reconnect with yourself, you need to discover a new kind of restorative escape, undivided attention or uninterrupted privacy, and an experience that's yours. You choose when and where, with everything from your meals and cocktails to your candlelit bath or sea-bound adventures.

We gulp back the bubbly and, driven by a hunger and thirst that only seven hours of flying can conjure, stroll down the beach to the restaurant. Anse Louis is one of 38 famous beaches on Mahé, and is known for being the most peaceful and home to nesting hawksbill turtles between October and March. A bundle of 115 coral and granite islands sparkling like gemstones across 1 000 km of ocean, the



Seychelles lie isolated in the Indian Ocean. Comprising two main groups, the granite inner islands and the coral outer ones, only a few of the islands are habitable. Mahé, home to the airport and tiny capital, Victoria, is every visitor's first port of call. With 65 beaches and 20-plus hotels across its 155 km² landscape, it's the most commercial - and diverse - of all the islands.

The MAIA restaurant, Tec-Tec, sits right alongside the main pool and looks out on to the tail-end of the beach. Overwhelmed by the choice on the menu (in honour of the all-inclusive mantra, the menu boasts five



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different cuisines - Creole, Indian, Thai, Japanese and Mediterranean - and a team of chefs waiting in the wings), we get the crispy salt-and-pepper calamari, tandoori chicken burger, and chicken tikka naan pizzette. The menu is not only extensive, gourmet and drool-worthy, but it can be tailored to meet your every desire. Satisfied by the delicious meal, we head over to the shore-side bar, where sommelier and mixologist Anna treats us to a taste adventure with basil-and-grapefruit gin cocktails and frozen lime margaritas.

We spend the next few days lounging on the beach, SUPing on the glassy turquoise water and spying on the stingrays from the safe vantage point, bodysurfing on waves, lounging in

the garden, snorkelling over the coral reef and trying to take a selfie with a squid (if you blink, you'll mistake their slinky, opaque bodies for really weird fish) and eating our way through the vast menu (I found it hard not to order the delicious butter chicken and naan for lunch and dinner, though). I didn't think it was possible to feel so relaxed, so out of touch with the rest of the world, so calm. That is, until we went to the MAIA spa.

Hand in hand, we ambled down to the spa, led only by the scent of lemongrass and orange. Hidden beneath a canopy of island forest foliage and surrounded by ancient boulders, the Balinese-inspired spa combines Balinese massage styles and Omorovicza beautifying treatments. It's an oasis that, from the minute we walked out in colourful sarongs and over to the al fresco treatment room, sends calming shivers down your spine. As the air moved lazily around the giant elephant-ear leaves, we succumbed to the therapists' skilled hands as they gave us MAIA's Signature massage.

Enshrouded in this bubble we had been in since we arrived, our last night was the

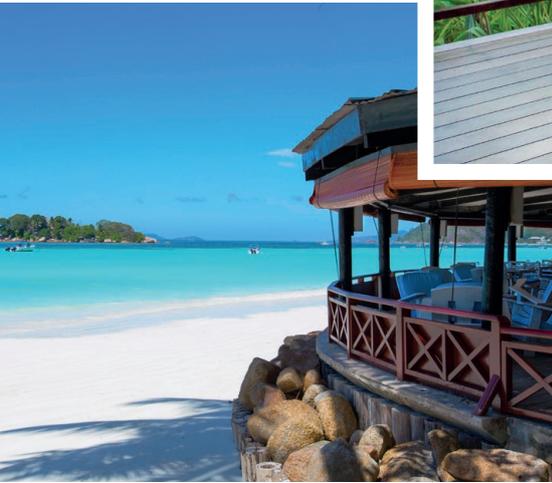


CREOLE TRAVEL SERVICES

For the most stress-free honeymoon, it's a good idea to get a company like Creole to handle all the nitty-gritty details for you. They have an extensive array of services, such as travel advisory, ground handling, sea and land transfers or excursions, groups and incentives event management. From the minute you're greeted at the airport by an enthusiastic and passionate Creole representative, you know you're in good hands. They will be your personal chauffeurs while on the island, taking care of all land transportation, as well as the ferry trips between Mahé, Praslin and La Digue. creoletravelservices.com

**PARADISE
SUN**

Anse Volbert, Praslin Island
paradisessunhotel.com



SUNSAIL

For a honeymoon with a difference, you could charter a boat! Companies such as the world-renowned Sunsail offer bareboat charters and flotilla sailing holidays. Whether you're looking for a tailor-made sailing holiday, a skippered- or yacht charter, a flotilla or a sailing course, Sunsail will look after you every step of the way.



**TOP 3 THINGS
TO DO**

1. Couple's Massage at Paradise Sun

Paradise Sun boasts an exquisite Balinese-style spa, with the unique 4 000-year-old Chinese philosophy of Yi*King incorporated into products, all of which are designed for body and mind balance. We selected our massage oil based on our birth dates – the notes in the oil target different organs and pressure points specific to you.

2. La Digue

Just less than 3 000 Digois people live on the Seychelles' third largest island. The island is small enough to explore, but big enough for a day trip, especially from the saddle of one of the many bicycles you can rent. While Anse Source D'Argent is lauded as one of the most beautiful beaches in the world, it can get rather busy. If you don't want to sit shoulder to shoulder with other tourists, cycle to the opposite end of La Digue, where you'll find Anse Caiman. You'll have to do a bit of boulder-hopping to get there, but once you've settled into the sand, you'll see why it's worth it.

3. Vallée de Mai Nature Reserve

Once declared by the British General Charles Gordon as the Garden of Eden, it is a 20 ha palm forest nature reserve that's home to the highly prized and fiercely protected coco de mer coconut.

perfect finale to the island experience. Enclosed by blazing candles, radiating the ruby hue of the leaves wrapped around their waxy bodies, our dinner table stood along the side of the boulders, away from the main restaurant. Tropical flowers adorned the table, fire hissed from the sculpture in the middle of the pool, waves crashed in the distance. It was all the handiwork of our butler, who wanted to ensure our last night was memorable.

'It's going to be so hard to leave,' I sigh, as the Indian Ocean winks under the moon's glow.

It's during these moments of profound relaxation that your intuitive mind takes over and can produce such a clarity. I realised that I hadn't bothered with my phone or emails or let my thoughts even wander to the real world. That was the power of MAIA.

It was a good thing I hadn't scoured the itinerary or thought too hard about the next leg of journey. Basking in the shadow of the Emirates Boeing 777 at Seychelles International Airport stood the pocket-sized Air Seychelles Twin Otter. It's the 19-seater plane that flies constantly between Mahé and Praslin, the second-largest island and our next stop. The engine roars in our ears as we taxi out to the start of the runway. We're sitting right behind the pilots, in chairs that feel smaller than a baby's car seat, our bags propped on our laps. The buttons on the dash light up like the Rockefeller Center Christmas tree and as the co-pilot manoeuvres the rudimentary handle above his head, the plane glides off the runway noisily over the sapphire water. Twenty minutes later, we cruise down into Iles des Palmes Airport and get into a car for the next adventure.

'Welcome to Paradise,' the receptionist says in a familiar accent. Paradise Sun, our home for the next few days, is owned by South African hotel group Tsogo Sun. At the quiet end of a 2 km stretch of snow-white sand, bordered by granite boulders, Paradise Sun has a collection of 80 charming rooms and 26 ocean-facing French-Creole bungalows, all surrounded by flourishing tropical gardens. With a bustling activity schedule, themed dinner buffets and live entertainment and a waterside bar, it's the perfect place for couples and families to while away the time.

Armed with sunscreen and a shimmering G&T, that's exactly what we did. On the loungers dotted along the beach, we watched the boats come and go, the crabs graze across the sand, couples heading out on paddle boards; the tide sluggishly creeps up while the sun slowly drops behind the cove. Soon, the smells of the grilled fish, lemony prawns and charred lamb chops



ALPHONSE ISLAND

The Alphonse Atoll group is considered one of the most pristine, untouched Edens of the world, making it a nature lover's paradise. The magnificent island threesome, which comprises Alphonse, St. Francois and Bijoutier, lies in the very heart of the Indian Ocean as part of the Seychelles outer island group. Lying south of the equator and 400 km south west of Mahé, it has one of the world's best climates and kilometres of unblemished shorelines, lagoons and sea flats.

GOOD TO KNOW

Getting there

The national airline for the Seychelles, Air Seychelles, flies from OR Tambo International to Mahé regularly.

Currency

The Seychellois rupee, US dollar and euro are the three main currencies. Using the dollar and euro at the hotels and restaurants is fine, but when in the markets, use the rupee, as they'll charge you more when they see you're paying in dollars or euros. Most prices are quoted in the rupee too.

Bills

Restaurants add a 10% service charge to the bill before you get it, so read the fine print before whipping out your wallet.

When to go

The temperature seldom drops below 24 °C or above 33 °C, and the peak of the season is from October to May.

Visa

SA passport holders do not require a visa.

What to pack

The sun in the Seychelles is fierce (we managed to burn in the shade!), so make sure you have plenty of sunscreen. Otherwise, it's beach casual most of the time, but do take a few decent outfits for dinnertime at the hotel.

from the barbeque-style dinner buffet start to waft past...

From the bountiful salad bar and bread selection to the fresh pasta station, grilled meat and seafood, and aromatic dessert bar, the only problem with the food at Paradise Sun is what it does to your waistline. Creole cuisine is not like anything I'd ever tasted before. Up until 1770, the only visitors to the islands were pirates lying in wait for any unsuspecting merchant vessels travelling to and from the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf. What followed was control by the French, and then the British, both of whom shipped in people from Africa, India and China to work on the plantations. Fast-forward to 1976 and Seychelles' independence, and the majority of the island's population were landless, Creole-speaking descendants of slaves, which set the stage for a multiracial culture that pulls inspiration from all over the world, from their French- and English-influenced Creole language to their Indian- and African-flavoured cuisine.

While food is a major event at Paradise Sun, so are the daily activities offered by the resort. So the next afternoon, we hop aboard the sunset cruise that sails out to the most famous of all the Praslin beaches, Anse Lazio. It's one thing to see the Seychelles from land, but once you're out on the water, you realise how vast the collection of islands that make up the romantic destination is. We cruised past empty, postcard-perfect beaches and forest-coated isles and dropped anchor with the beautiful beach of Anse Lazio in sight. You can see why it has such a widespread reputation. The long beach has sparkling blue waters, a broad fringe of palm and *takamaka* trees, and granite boulders at each end. We jump off the boat for a quick



swim, lounge in the sun and watch as the few people slowly (and reluctantly) start to pack up. As the sun dips, the greys of the boulders soften to shades of gold, friendly fruit bats take flight, the yachts bobbing turn on their lights and become lanterns on the ocean and the white sand reflects the candyfloss pinks of the sky. We head back, just in time for the Italian-themed buffet.

It was Italian season on the island, the general manager had told us over breakfast one morning. We hadn't noticed. We hadn't noticed our phones, the WiFi, or shoes either. We'd just noticed the sheer beauty of the Seychelles – and the sheer feeling of rejuvenation rippling through our bodies. ♥

