NATURE'S APOTHECARY in the SEYCHELLES

By Lisa Kjellsson

Seychellois spa rituals are rooted in a rich blend of African, Indian and French influences, forming a herbalism tradition that is passed down through generations. Add to that invigorating rainforest rambles, inspiring conservation initiatives and insightful cultural tours – island hopping in the pristine Indian Ocean archipelago turned out to be a real tonic for mind, body and soul.



Anse Lazio - Image courtesy / Tourism Seychelles

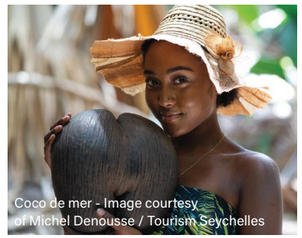
I'm always in search of places where hospitality serves as a force for good – because as we know, our health depends on the wellbeing of our planet. Few destinations manage to weave together luxury tourism with long-term conservation as well as the Seychelles.

My trip, back in May, was supposed to coincide with the start of the slightly cooler and drier season, courtesy of the southeast trade winds that fan the western Indian Ocean this time of year but it was decidedly hot and humid. Boarding the boat whisking me from Mahé to mountainous Silhouette Island, I climbed up to the top deck to enjoy a much-needed breeze with the view of emerald peaks rising from the sea.

Densely forested and home to rare endemic flora and fauna, including latanier palms, the bulbul songbird and sheath-tailed bats, Silhouette is the most biodiverse of the archipelago's 115 islands. Almost all of it is designated as a national park, surrounded by a marine national park that extends a kilometre from the shoreline. Ecotourism has replaced past agricultural ventures – the only resort, Niva Labriz Seychelles, works closely with the Island Conservation Society to protect and restore the fragile ecosystem.


Anse Source d'Argent - Image courtesy of Michel Denousse / Tourism Seychelles

Lisa pictured in Le Jardin du Roi


Coco de mer - Image courtesy of Michel Denousse / Tourism Seychelles


The spa at Niva Labriz Seychelles Felix-Studios-Labriz-Images


Niva Labriz Seychelles





Having explored my surroundings on a guided forest hike to three secluded beaches, I sought refuge from a monsoon shower in the spa, cocooned among hibiscus bushes, mango, lemon and avocado trees. I drifted in and out of dreaming during the aptly named 'Ultimate 100 Minutes of Bliss', a body scrub, full-body massage and facial centred around the ubiquitous coconut.

This and many more tropical fruits, herbs and spices are used not just in the delicious Creole cuisine (which I sampled at the resort's Grann Kaz restaurant) but also traditional Seychellois medicine. Historically, remedies were sourced from nature's apothecary: vanilla to treat high blood pressure and inflammation; ginger to calm nausea; cinnamon, cloves and nutmeg to soothe aches and pains. Curious to learn more about the 18th-century colonial trade that brought these botanical treasures to the islands, I visited one of the sites where it all began.


Vanilla grown on L'Union Estate - Image courtesy of Paul Turcotte / Tourism Seychelles


Madame Georges


Red ginger, Le Jardin du Roi




Cinnamon, Le Jardin du Roi


Damien Doudee


Le Jardin du Roi

On Mahé, in the hills above Anse Royale beach, Le Jardin du Roi traces its roots to 1772 and the spice entrepreneur Pierre Poivre who funded the first group of French colonists to the Seychelles. The current spice garden is a revival of the original and has been owned and run by the same family for five generations. Its proprietor, 90-year-old Micheline Georges, told me how until the 1950s it produced vanilla, cinnamon, cloves, nutmeg, pepper and patchouli for export. Now the produce takes centre stage in dishes served at the open-air restaurant: octopus with saffron, cinnamon and coconut, fish in ginger sauce and banana crêpes for dessert.

A medicinal plant walk and bijou museum provide wider context, detailing the origins and uses of plant medicine in the country and lessons from history. Less than two decades after the settlers had arrived and started clearing virgin forests, they noticed the soil was mediocre in quality and already suffered from erosion. The first decrees to limit the damage to endemic trees and wildlife were enacted in 1788.

Inspired, I continued my research at the National Biodiversity Centre, a short drive away in Barbarons, on the island's western coast. The 17-hectare park was created not just to showcase the islands' rich flora but also has nurseries from which residents can obtain seeds and seedlings for their own gardens. The friendly manager, Damien Doudee, pointed out moringa, neem and bitterleaf – all naturally antidiabetic, plus ferns, traditionally a chickenpox cure. "My parents' generation had the knowledge and it's up to us to pass it on," he explained.

Keen to experience more modern applications of ancestral wellness wisdom, I headed south and checked into Kempinski Seychelles Resort, nestled in Mahé's palm-fringed Baie Lazare. Its spa is among the country's finest and as befits the hotel's sustainability ethos, the treatment menu is based on locally sourced botanicals. The Cinnamon Journey starts with an exquisitely scented body scrub, followed by a massage with organic coconut and vanilla oils. The next morning, on my way to a yoga session at the top of a hill known as Mount Kempinski, I spotted the hero ingredient growing wild in the surrounding woodland.

During my restorative stay I also hiked the Copolia Nature Trail in Morne Seychellois National Park. A progressively steeper path winds through wild cinnamon groves and dense palm forest to a granitic rock plateau with panoramic views of Mahé's northeastern coast and the isles scattered beyond it. On a clear day this includes Praslin, the second largest in the archipelago and just a 20-minute flight away.



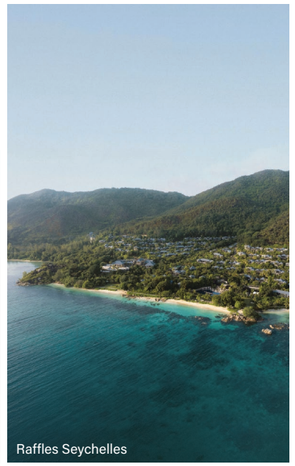
Kempinski Seychelles Resort



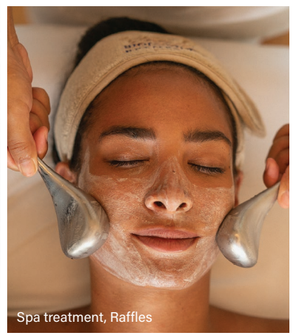




Kempinski Seychelles Resort



Raffles Seychelles



Spa treatment, Raffles

Based at Raffles Seychelles, in a pool villa perched on a verdant hillside in the island's northeastern corner, I was within easy reach of Vallée de Mai Nature Reserve and its rare coco de mer trees. The jewel among the archipelago's six endemic palm species, it produces the largest and heaviest seed in the plant kingdom, resembling a double coconut. The biggest one recorded weighed a whopping 42 kilos. A guide showed me around the park, where dappled sunlight filters through the palm fronds and elusive black parrots hide in the treetops.

Understandably, the country fiercely protects its precious palms; those wishing to bring a hollowed-out and dried 'nut of the sea' back home as a souvenir can only legally buy one from a licensed dealer. Individually priced depending on size and shape, they don't come cheap, however – expect to pay a few hundred pounds for a prime example. I resisted the temptation to purchase the last remaining one in Raffles' gift shop, which also sells coco de mer perfumes. Instead, I opted for a facial utilising the seed extract, said to be rejuvenating and a relaxing Ocean Seashell Massage at the serene spa.



Vanessa Lucas / Tourism Seychelles



Michel Denousse / Tourism Seychelles



Four Seasons Resort Seychelles at Desroches Island





Danio Denousse / Tourism Seychelles





Four Seasons Resort Seychelles at Desroches Island

To plan your Seychelles escape, visit www.nivalabriz.com; www.kempinski.com/seychelles; www.fourseasons.com/seychellesdesroches; www.raffles.com/seychelles; www.seychelles.com

An ever-present backdrop, the sea and calming sound of waves is in itself a wellness booster. One of the world's most photographed beaches, boulder-framed Anse Source d'Argent, is found on the car-free isle of La Digue, a 15-minute ferry ride away. The main draw for me, however, was the plantation that now serves as a living heritage site linking nature, culture and history. L'Union Estate was the heart of the island's economy and one of many similar sites across the country in the mid-1800s when coconut oil and copra production became a major industry. I visited the mill where oil is extracted from dried coconut kernels and cycled along rows of palm trees, vanilla vines and other medicinal plants grown on the plantation during a leisurely tour of the island with lovely Josianna Rose from Pedaler Velo.

Cycling is also the best way to get around the Four Seasons Resort Seychelles at Desroches Island, an outpost in the Amirante archipelago reached by a 35-minute flight from Mahé. Ideal for diving, deep-sea fishing and total castaway privacy, wellness is also at the core of its barefoot-luxury concept which conveys a strong sense of place. The light stretching and rhythmic movements with specially carved wooden tools and implements used in the African Wood massage left me as relaxed as the Aldabra giant tortoises seen roaming free around the island. Saving this endemic species from the brink of extinction, with dedicated nurseries at resorts such as this one, is one of the country's great conservation successes. Seeing it in action left me with a happy heart. With a little help, nature finds a way to bounce back. ■



Anse Source d'Argent on La Digue- Image courtesy of Paul Turcotte / Tourism Seychelles



Paul Turcotte / Tourism Seychelles



Vanessa Lucas / Tourism Seychelles