

Naturally Seychelles

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SV Sea Shell, a refurbished 1920s Dutch Schooner, pulled to a tight halt against her anchor as we moored in the quiet, clear-blue waters of the Indian Ocean, 995 miles off the east coast of Africa; and about a mile off Bird Island in the Seychelles archipelago. We had set sail before daybreak, journeyed with dolphins in the early morning, to moor in gently rolling azure waters that defy description.

Still a landlubber trying to find her sea legs I followed the suggestion of Silhouette Cruises' crew and went for an early morning swim to clear the remnants of nausea and motion sickness from my system - and it worked. I was soon rope swinging from the deck, trying to fall into a graceful dive rather than belly-flop into the ocean below.

Refreshed by a tasty breakfast we were off in the dinghy - with a colourful array of swimming costumes, snorkels, masks and flippers - to the coral reefs off the island. We spent a pleasant, but surprisingly tiring hour, admiring bright corals, a wide selection of waving sea vegetation and an ever wider selection of startled and darting fish.

Back on board for a break - and I find myself signed up for an introductory dive experience!

After a half-hour theory lesson I am given a wetsuit, a heavy tank on my back, a weight belt, and have a thick and clammy glass mask sticking to my face as I nervously contemplate scuba diving for the few seconds left before I have to roll in for a buddy dive or lose face.

Getting out of the dinghy and into the water was the hardest part. Then all I had to do was remember to breathe as I stayed close to my instructor and swam into coral coves and followed gleaming fish with a leisurely flip of my finned feet. What a location for a first dive - and what disappointment when my instructor indicated that twenty minutes had passed and it was time to surface.

Back on board for a lunch break - tasty octopus curry. Then a dinghy trip to take us to Bird Island.

The beaches were white and powder soft, and although we were not visiting in breeding season when the island is overrun by birds, the birding was still prolific. Within minutes I'd seen a white-tailed tropic bird, a brown noddy and taken close-ups of a fairy tern that was kind enough to pose obligingly.

I wandered off to find the island's oldest living inhabitant, Esmeralda, a 125-year-old giant tortoise, and having paid her the appropriate courtesy of a greeting I settled on the shaded veranda with a drink of chilled coconut juice, served fresh, still in the coconut, with a straw sticking jauntily out of the top.

I was intent on a restful break from the morning's activities, but an excited buzz punctuated the laidback tropical summer afternoon quietude on the remote island as word spread among the guests. A rare turtle had just beached to lay her eggs. Robbie, the island guide, motioned for us to follow him quickly …

She was labouring up the white powder-soft incline of the beach, heading towards the cover of some vegetation to dig her nest, as out of breath as we were (from running after Robbie), through her efforts of dragging her estimated 80 kg forward, flipper by alternate flipper.

Robbie told us she was a Hawksbill Turtle and instructed us to give her a wide berth, as any movement nearby would scare her off nesting and send her back to the safety of the Indian Ocean. But once she had settled into her preferred site and dug her nest we were allowed closer.

Close up, she was an inspiring reptile, with a beautiful tortoiseshell-coloured carapace, leathery looking scales on her neck and a sharp beak-like mouth from which the Hawksbill Turtle gets its name. With her body over her nest all you could see was her head bobbing slightly and eyes closing with the effort of laying each egg.

About an hour later she was busy covering her nest and sweeping away signs of the nesting site by flicking sand (usually in my direction) with her flippers, and then she was off at a determined pace heading back towards the azure blue, crystal clear, warm Seychelles ocean.

Robbie explained that although this small to medium sized tropical sea turtle can be found in the Indian, Pacific and Atlantic Oceans it is endangered, and a rare sighting in most places. He said the Seychelles hosts the largest remaining

nesting Hawksbill population in the world and Hawksbills can be seen nesting all over the Seychelles islands between October and January. A feature unique to the western Indian Ocean Hawksbill is that the turtles beach during the day to lay their eggs. Hawksbills in other areas nest at night, as do all other turtle species.

Being close-up to a nesting turtle was the highlight of the trip. The vibrant night life and gyrating dances, the fresh fish meals, the idyllic and almost deserted islands didn't even come a close second.

Even the coco de mer, the largest seed in the world (called the 'love nut' because of its suggestive shape) found on only two of the Seychelles islands did not compare - but the brooding granite rocks of La Digue, seen just before a storm, came close.

Hiring some form of boat is probably the best way to experience the natural wonder of the Seychelles. If sailing is not your strong point, there is a well used ferry service between islands, and for true landlubbers there are also regular (if hair raising for those more used to larger craft) flights between the main islands. This will enable you to experience the warm hospitality, unique character and culinary specialities of the region.

My one regret? I ran out of time and did not get to explore as much as I would have liked. The biggest and saddest omission on my itinerary was Praslin's world heritage site and reputed original Garden of Eden - the Vallee de Mai.

Seychelles Facts

- The Republic of Seychelles is an archipelago of 115 islands in the western Indian Ocean, to the northeast of Madagascar and 995 miles off the east coast of Africa.
- The total size of the Seychelles islands is 176 square miles - about 2.5 times the size of Washington DC.
- Mahe is the largest and most populated island. The capital, Victoria, is home to 80% of the Seychellois population.
- The Seychelles enjoys a warm tropical climate and falls outside the tropical cyclone belt.
- The official languages are French, English, and a local French-based language, Creole.
- Popular tourist activities include: sailing, surfing, golf, deep sea fishing, water sports, island hopping and hiring bicycles to tour an island.
- International charter companies and local operators offer a wide selection of specialised craft that give visitors access to romantic bays and private beaches.
- Scuba diving and snorkelling are popular, with more than 800 different species of fish occurring off the islands.
- Ecotourism is a strong draw card, and a visit to the Seychelles is also always a culinary adventure - inspired by a fresh sea harvest!
- For more information visit <http://www.seychelles.com>