

THE NUT THAT LOOKS LIKE



ABOUT

If you're island-hopping in the Seychelles, stop by Praslin. Like the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge, you just might get to take home a prized "love nut" as a romantic souvenir.

BY CHARUKESI RAMADURAI

ANTHOLOGY

When British general and explorer Charles George Gordon first stepped into Vallee de Mai in 1881, he was convinced that this primeval forest was the actual site of the Garden of Eden.

He also speculated that the coco de mer palm, found almost exclusively in this forest, was the biblical Tree of Knowledge, and its nut the original Forbidden Fruit.

It is an idea that even contemporary visitors to these lush woods in the Seychelles find easy to believe.

Stepping into this forest early one summer morning, I am greeted by an eerie silence and a canopy of palms reaching out to the sky. The trees completely blot the sunlight in some places, effortlessly turning day into night. My guide Junia smiles reassuringly as she walks ahead, pushing the swaying fronds away from her face. "Just keep your eyes and ears open to understand the true beauty of this forest," she says in the

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Famed for its beaches and lush tropical forests, Praslin is the Seychelles' second-largest island but has only 6,500 residents. It is also home to the double-lobed coco de mer palm, which has led many to believe that this was the true Garden of Eden.

TRAVEL

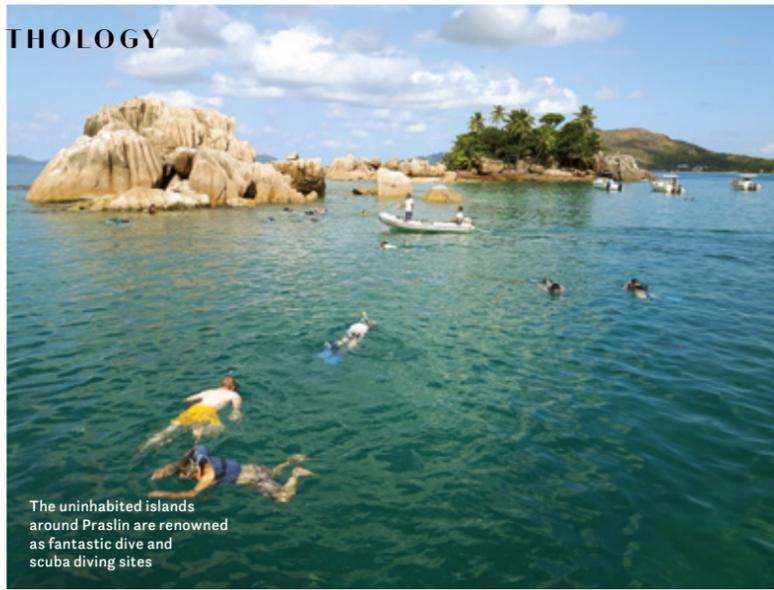
TRAVEL

manner of one who knows and loves this green oasis. “If you are really lucky, you may even spot a black parrot,” she adds, referring to the rare and endangered bird that lives in these woods, along with the blue pigeon and Seychelles bulbul.

I am in Praslin, the second largest island in the Seychelles, less than an hour’s boat ride from Mahe (which, along with La Digue, comprises the trio of inhabited islands in this archipelago of over a hundred islands). Praslin has a tiny population of just 6,500, which means that visitors far outnumber residents most months of the year. Tourists usually come for the island’s picture-perfect beaches — pristine white sands and sparkling blue waters — such as Anse Lazio and Anse Georgette, which often land themselves on the list of the world’s most beautiful beaches.

On my first day at Praslin, I check all the expected boxes: lazing at one of the stunning beaches at sunset after a hectic session of island-hopping to Cousine Island for a spot of birdwatching and Curieuse Island to marvel at the ancient tortoises. Weighing over 300kg, these gentle giants enthrall both adults and children with their all-seeing, all-knowing eyes.

The next morning, I head out to Vallee de Mai, one of the world’s smallest natural Unesco world heritage sites, at just over 19.4 hectares. The Vallee de Mai Reserve is famous for being home to one of the most unique species of palm trees in the world. Prima facie, the coco de mer looks just like any other palm, a sprawling mass of fronds spanning out from tall trees. What is unique about this tree is the seed, also referred to as the nut. This double-lobed nut is not just the largest and the heaviest in the plant world (weighing up to 20kg at full size) but also has the most suggestive form.



The uninhabited islands around Praslin are renowned as fantastic dive and scuba diving sites

Once the outer husk is removed, it resembles a woman’s private parts from both the front and back; in fact, the coco de mer was earlier known as Lodoicea Callipyge, with the second word meaning “beautiful bottom” in Greek. In the local Creole patois, it is still referred to as Coco Fesse, loosely translated as “bum nut”. Correspondingly, the male of the species is a bright yellow catkin (cylindrical flower cluster) that is about three feet long and has an unmistakable phallic shape. I listen

to Junia’s explanations with the straight face of a blasé world traveller who has been there, seen that. But I hear the tween sisters from the American family I had been chatting with earlier giggle loudly and go “ewww”.

General Gordon, on the other hand, seemed to have been endlessly fascinated by this seed, and was said to have gone so far as to exclaim: “The fruit of the coco de mer externally represents the heart, while the interior represents the belly and thighs, which I consider to be the true seat of carnal desires.” To each his own, I suppose.

While the prehistoric male tree can grow up to 80 feet in height, the curvaceous female seed is the star of the show, taking 25 years to bear fruit and 200 years to achieve full size.

Thanks to its shape, the seed is credited with mystical (and aphrodisiacal) properties. Local legend has it that during full moon nights, the coco de mer trees walk around the forest looking for their soulmates, which is how these curiously shaped seeds are produced. In reality, there is no clear answer as to how this seed is pollinated, and theories range from strong gusts of wind to busy bees and mysterious insects.

Dr Frauke Fleischer-Dogley, CEO of Seychelles Islands Foundation, which manages the Vallee de Mai Reserve says: “For many centuries, the palm and its distinctive nut have been shrouded in mystery and legend. Known only from the nuts washed up on beaches, the tree was believed to grow under the sea.” Indeed, mystified marine explorers at the time called it “sea coconut” (hence the name coco de mer), collecting them as exotic gifts for their royal patrons back home.

These are still considered appropriate gifts for monarchs. When the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge (Prince William and Kate Middleton) honeymooned in the Seychelles a few



While the female of the coco de mer species resembles a woman’s private parts, the male species has a distinctively phallic shape

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years ago, the local government gifted them a coco de mer nut as a romantic souvenir of their trip. However, less-elite visitors are advised not to even think about this, given that the seed is highly protected and there is a strict ban on its illegal export. Only the Ministry of Environment is allowed to collect the nuts that have fallen on the ground, to be polished and sold as souvenirs through proper channels and with an official permit, which costs over €300 (\$455). In recent years, there has been an increase in poaching inside the National Park, with the coco de mer smuggled out of the country and sent towards Chinese shores, where it is highly prized as a symbol of potency and virility.

Locals are very proud of the coco de mer, and along with many wink-wink, nudge-nudge jokes, it is one of the most popular symbols within the Seychelles. The image of this nut can be found everywhere, from official currency notes to kitschy fridge magnets and even on signboards for washrooms. Why, even the official visa stamp of the Seychelles bears the provocative image of the coco de mer!

Scientists consider the Vallee de Mai an ancient environment that’s been protected by its relative isolation, creating an incredible ecosystem of trees, birds, reptiles and insects. Apart from the coco de mer, there are five other endemic palm species here — some with names as fascinating as their lineage — including millionaire’s salad, thief palm and latanier millepatts. However, most tourists are drawn here by the idea of the “love nut”; naturally, the Seychellois would agree that nothing else is quite as special. **A**

TRAVEL



In the heart of Praslin, the Unesco-listed Vallee de Mai Reserve has the vestiges of a natural palm forest preserved in its almost original state



The native Seychelles bulbul is known to be highly vocal

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