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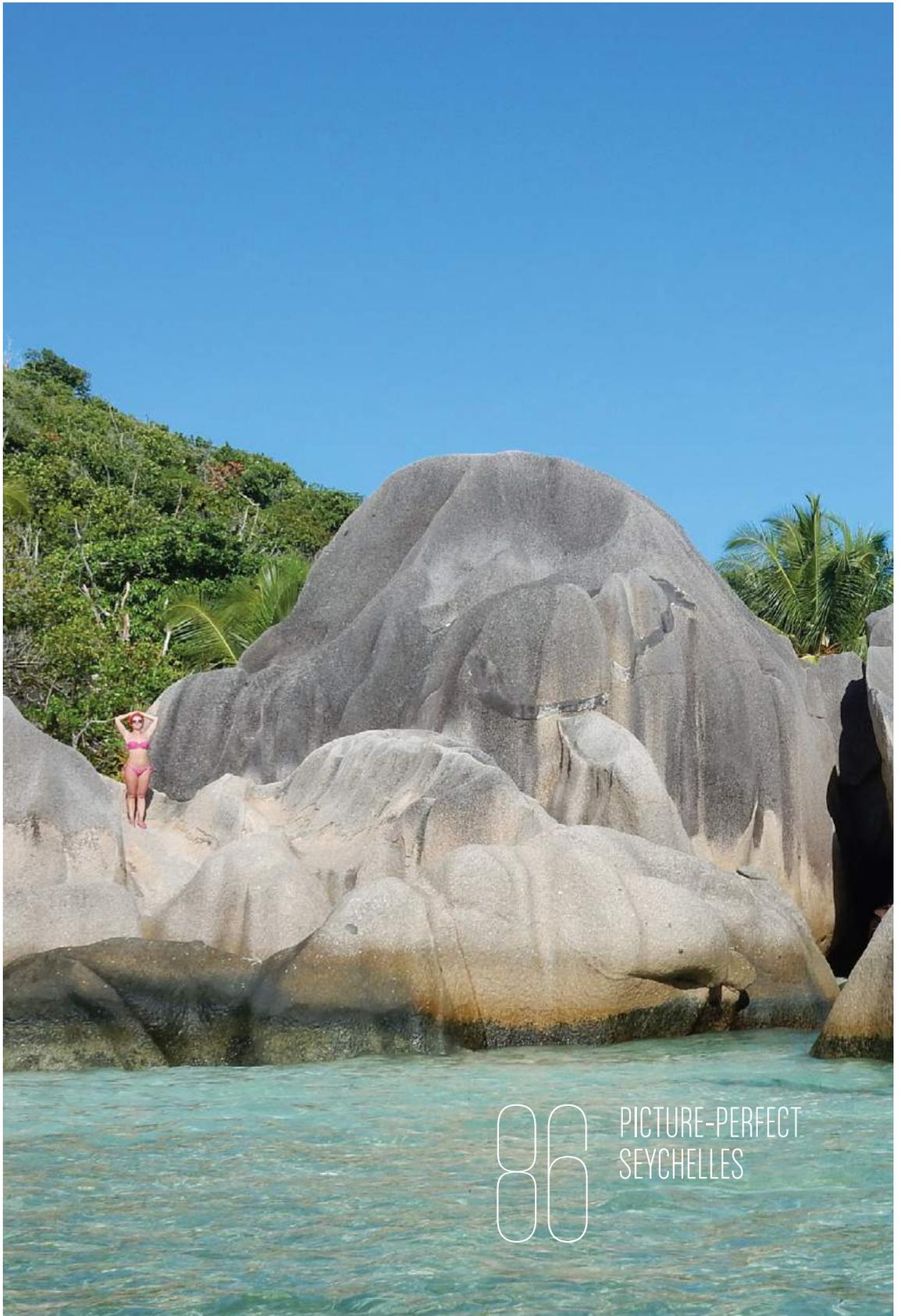
TRAVEL

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SEYCHELLES
Carrie Lyell explores queer life
in this beautiful archipelago

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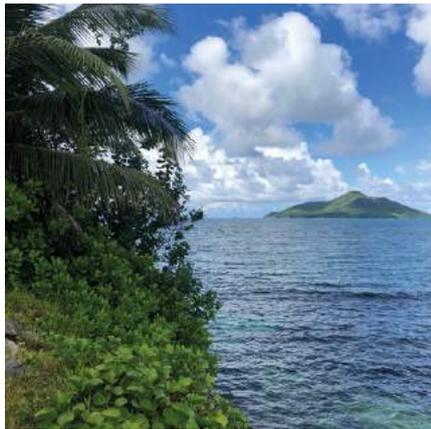
THE DISTILLERY
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PICTURE-PERFECT
SEYCHELLES

PHOTO: CREATIVE COMMONS



Have you ever seen a rainbow from an aeroplane? It's quite something. Coming in to land in the Seychelles on the main island of Mahé, after two long flights with a stranger's elbow in my face for most of the way, I take it as a sign of what's to come, and I'm excited for what's in store in what I'm officially declaring Gaychelles.

SEY YOU'LL BE THERE

It's a super short drive from the airport to our home for the weekend, the stunning Eden Bleu Hotel (edenbleu.com). Situated on a reclaimed coral reef, 200 metres from the main island, we make our way through the exquisite grounds to our luxury villa, where we'll be spending the next few days.

I'm giddy as a baby gay at a Hayley Kiyoko concert as I choose which of the six bedrooms I'd like, before settling on a pool terrace room, which is absolutely gorgeous. Pulling back the curtains to see the view for the first time, I could almost do a cry. I was expecting paradise, yes, but I'm still overwhelmed by its beauty.

After a quick shower to get rid of the smell of a million airports, I melt into the private infinity pool, and swim my worries away underneath the warm Seychelles sun.

FOOL IN THE RAIN

The heavens open not long after, but we decide to brave the monsoon and head to the hotel restaurant for dinner. One terror-filled golf buggy ride later, we arrive soaked to the skin, but the staff are on hand with warm welcomes and towels – and don't laugh too much at us for forgetting to put the buggy's rain cover down.

We soon dry off over cocktails and a delightful menu, specially prepared for this gaggle of gay jourmos. Our bouches are amused with millionaire salad with confit octopus and calamansi dressing, before tucking into a seafood bouillabaisse starter with garlic toast, and a red snapper main served with mussel ragout, grilled prawns and breadfruit croquette. Finally, dessert: a chocolate delight. And was it ever.

As for our gayness? All of the hotel staff were unflinching in the face of our faggy fabulousness and butch brilliance, and at no point did I feel uncomfortable as a masculine of

centre woman. Equally, the boys on the trip with me did not once feel the need to modify or mask their behaviour. I think I speak for all of us when I say we felt very at home at Eden Bleu and able to express ourselves as we would back in the UK. I certainly wouldn't have any qualms about checking-in here with my wife or a group of gal pals.

Bellies full, we pile back into a golf buggy for another hair-raising ride, narrowly avoiding certain death on more than one occasion. Note to self: learn to drive.

“It's as if we've asked Alexa to conjure up heaven on Earth...”

PARADISE ISLANDS

It's an early start the next morning to catch the ferry to Praslin, the second largest island in the Seychelles, and it's worth it for the incredible sunrise. On the hour-long journey, we spot glides of flying fish and try to stay upright as our catamaran bumps its way across the Indian Ocean. It's a bit like being on the tube but, you know, a lot less awful.

A 10 minute drive from the ferry port is Vallée de Mai, a nature reserve and UNESCO World Heritage site in the heart of Praslin. Described as a “slice of Eden”, this ancient palm forest is dedicated to conservation, research and education, and is home to many unique species of plants and animals, including the black parrot, and the famous coco de mer palm – the symbol of the Seychelles – one of only two places in the world where this delightfully vulva-esque “double coconut” grows in its natural state. I try to be mature, really I do, but it all goes to pot when I come across a

“prickly purse”. Mother nature loves a lol.

Hot and sweaty from hiking around the forest, we head to what our guide tells us is the most beautiful beach in Seychelles, and though I'm hardly an expert after 24 hours, I'd have to agree: it's pretty gorge. The greenest palms, the whitest sand and the clearest water: it's as if we've asked Alexa to conjure up heaven on Earth. I've been to some beaches in my time, but this is next level stuff.

A quick swim and a million selfies later, we get back in the car to catch another ferry, this time to La Digue, the third most populated island in the Seychelles, and home to what we're told is the most photographed beach in the world, Anse Source d'Argent.

A slap-up lunch and a few Seybrews later, we jump on our bikes – the main means of transportation here on La Digue – in search of the giant tortoises that call this island home. We stumble upon these majestic beasts, which are only found in the Seychelles and the Galápagos, in L'Union Estate, and it's a wonderful experience feeding our new friends.

We wave goodbye to these rad reptiles and head beachwards, where we're all left a little speechless by the famous Anse Source d'Argent. Here, majestic palms and granite boulders meet shallow emerald waters, and we find a cool spot in the shade to chill for a bit before exploring this gorgeous stretch of coast.

MAHÉ GIRL

Back on the main island of Mahé, we head into the capital, Victoria, for a spot of souvenir shopping in the market before spending an hour wandering around the Botanical Gardens (bgci.org), home to many endemic species including the *deckenia nobilis* – cabbage palm – and the *phoenicophorium sechellarum* or thief palm. We also see several plants on the International Union for Conservation of Nature's “red list” of threatened species, meet some HUGE fruit bats and even huger tortoises.

Hot and thirsty, we make our way to Takamaka, a craft rum distillery on the other side of the island (takamakarum.com). One ice-cold, rum-based cocktail later, our guide shows us round and talks through the process of making the spirit. >>>



>>> We also learn a little about the part slavery has played in shaping the island's identity on this, the site of a former plantation. An 1827 census revealed the population of the Seychelles consisted of 6,638 slaves to 685 "masters", and while slavery was finally abolished eight years later, its legacy remains after almost 200 years, evident in the various cuisines, place names and languages spoken. "Seychelles is the ultimate rainbow nation" our guide tells us. It's a view shared by many, with the country today described as a "fusion of people and cultures".

GAYCHELLES?

After just a few days here, I'm a little bit in love with this island paradise. But how idyllic is it for queer folks? Sure, we've not had any problems, but just how representative is our experience? One evening, I meet up with activists Nadia Ah-Kong and Fabianna Bonne from LGBTI Sey. "How foreigners are treated, especially foreigners from the West, is different," Fabi, 30, tells me. Harassment isn't uncommon for locals, and while both are very publicly out and neither compromise on what they wear or how they act, some in the Seychelles do.

You won't find a gay bar here, but "most places are gay-friendly" and there is an active queer community that is "bigger than you might think", both tell me. The boys have Grindr, but how do the girls meet partners and friends? "We know people who know people," they laugh. For an authentic Seychellois experience, they recommend Barrel nightclub in Victoria – "don't take your valuables!" – plus Boardwalk and Oxygen on Praslin.

While they say it is generally not dangerous to be visibly queer, there have been "isolated cases of attack" and many LGBTIQ are nervous, despite recent changes in the law. A Colonial-era law criminalising male homosexuality was repealed in the Seychelles in 2016 – like many places, it didn't recognise female homosexuality – and employment discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation is banned, making the Seychelles one of the few African countries to have such protections for LGBTIQ people. But societally, there are still issues. "Seychelles is small," says Nadia, 46.

SEYCHELLES BY NUMBERS

The Seychelles is an archipelago in the Indian Ocean made up of 115 granite and coral islands.

The country gained independence from the UK in 1976.

The Seychelles has three official languages: English, French and Seychellois Creole.

The population of the Seychelles is estimated around 95,000.

Male homosexuality was decriminalised in 2016.

"Everybody knows everybody, so this is the main problem. For me, it was no problem coming out [to my family]. I don't know for others."

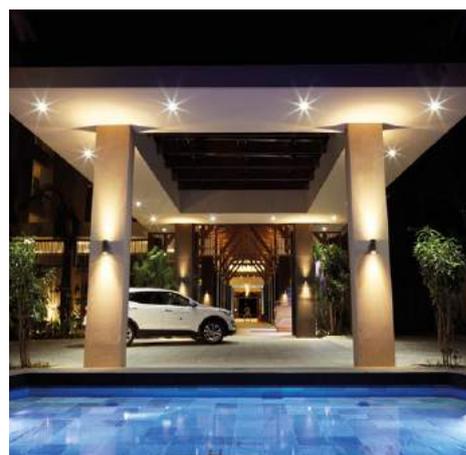
"We try not to get into the public eye because whenever we do there's a lot of negative attention," Fabi, who is co-founder and chairperson of the organisation tells me. "Those who are against it are really, really loud, and you can't shout over them. So what we do, we try to influence policies behind the scenes. This year, we had input in the national youth policy. We also have input in the anti-bullying policy. We try to influence policy and policy makers, and have conversations with people that can understand where we are coming from, instead of trying to engage the wider public, because they do not have a grasp on the issue at all. For them, decriminalising homosexuality is akin to saying pedophilia is fine, or bestiality is ok."

Most people in the Seychelles are Roman Catholic, one of the reasons for the lack of acceptance, both tell me, and the biggest block to overcome

on the road to same-sex marriage, which is not yet legal. Says Fabi: "We do attack the Catholic Church a lot on issues such as adultery, people divorcing and remarrying, illegitimate birth. In Seychelles, 80% of children born are outside of marriage. Teenage pregnancy is out of control. A woman having five children by four, five different fathers? Completely normal. So if they're not speaking up about those issues, then why particularly target this one?"

With a long way to go before queer people are fully embraced by Seychellois society, how do they feel about their country extending an invitation to queer travellers? "Part of our advocacy is to make the business case for decriminalising same-sex marriage," Fabi says. "We're a tourism destination. We're a wedding destination. So you can imagine if we actually legalise same-sex marriage, the high influx, the pink dollar, the pink pound, would be coming to Seychelles. That is something we do push for."

Some queer people might be re-





“ We spot glides of flying fish as our catamaran bumps across the Indian Ocean ”

luctant to visit a country where there are still issues for LGBTQI people, but is refusing to travel to Seychelles, for example, the answer? How can people back home in the UK best support our friends here in their push for progress? “I’ve been in contact with activists from other African countries, like Uganda, where they had a boycott from the US when they introduced the ‘Kill The Gays’ laws. This affects the wider population. Local politicians would say, ‘It’s because of the gays that this is happening’ so it just makes things worse. When they pull funding, it’s affecting the marginalised population, and usually that’s gay people. So that would not work for us. What would be best is that you support the country, but point out that it could be better if it was more inclusive. [During decriminalisation], the British High Commissioner said something that was very interesting. She said that the law that we were changing was actually brought in by the British, and now the British have moved on, and they’ve changed their laws, but Seychellois are still clinging on, saying ‘This is the law of my country!’ It’s not the law of your country. It’s the law of your Colonial master.”

Do they feel hopeful for the future? Nadia smiles. “Yeah. Yeah. I feel it. I will push forward and I know not now but maybe in 10, 15 years time, things will change.” Fabi, though, is not so sure. “I’m still [meeting] people

my age who are struggling with coming out, struggling with dealing with their parents and being closeted at their job, getting bullied at their job. The younger generation tends to be more out there, more ready to accept themselves. Although they are still reluctant, like the older generation, to formalise, to come together, to be activists, to be advocates.

“I have mixed feelings, especially with the political landscape changing in Seychelles. Over 40 years, we had the same party in power, which is also the party that decriminalised same-sex relations through the national assembly. But now we have a new political party that’s in control of the national assembly and they’re less likely to make changes like this because they’re still trying to get a firm grip on power. A lot of their supporters are homophobic, xenophobic, racist, and so they will tend to have narratives that support these points of view. We know that changes are not going to come through the legislative. It’s definitely not going to come from the executive either because the executive right now is the party that was in power for 40 years, and they’re trying to reinvent themselves so that they can remain in power and they’re definitely not going to start advocating

for things that might lose them votes. Our only choice is the judiciary. But the judiciary has also come under fire with regards to how they were appointed, how they run things. So they might also be conservative in their ruling. The populous is becoming more conscious, more aware, but at the same time I feel like the political system is becoming more conservative, and this is going to be problematic.”



Fabianna Bonne
co-founder and
chairperson
of LGBTI Sey

SEY YOU LATER, ALLIGATOR

Flying high above the Indian Ocean with a brilliantly garish snapback on my head and a vulva stamp in my passport, I say a fond farewell to the Seychelles. I’ve met some wonderful people, eaten some wonderful food, and dipped my toes in the most wonderful waters. But it’s been far too short, and I know there’s more to see, do and learn. So it’s not goodbye, my friend. I’ll Sey you later. **D**



PLAN YOUR VISIT

Seven nights bed and breakfast in the presidential suite start from £3,975 per person based on two people sharing, with a luxury marina view room for £1,915 per person for two people sharing at the Eden Bleu Hotel. Nightly bed and breakfast stays in a six bedroom villa start from £1,100 for 12 people per night.

To book your trip, contact Southall Travel on info@southalltravel.com or 0800 408 8042.

For more information on the Seychelles, contact the UK and Ireland tourist office on seychelles@uksto.co.uk or visit seychelles.travel