

Paradise found

BAREFOOT LUXURY ON NORTH ISLAND, SEYCHELLES

BY SUZANNE MORPHET

ROUNDING THE CORNER OF THE ISLAND, the water shifts from dark blue to translucent turquoise. A wide beach comes into view with sand the colour of ivory. It stretches out before us, as straight as a ruler and book-ended by large granite outcrops.

As our motorboat slows, a few thatched roof buildings appear, set against a backdrop of tropical green jungle. The entire beach is empty except for two people who are waving to us. Our boat stops a few feet from shore and we clamber over the side, our bare feet sinking into the deep, soft sand. We've arrived at one of the most exclusive resorts in Seychelles, if not the world.

Of course, you could arrive by helicopter direct from Mahé, as Will and Kate did when they honeymooned here in 2011. Mahé is the largest of the 115 islands that make up the nation of

Seychelles and it's where the capital city of Victoria is located, along with the international airport. Mahé has plenty of high-end resorts and some of Seychelles' signature beaches, but for a haute Robinson Crusoe fantasy, or a desire to holiday like the Royals, North Island is it.

My reason for coming here is altogether different. I've stayed at safari camps in Africa that are owned and operated by the same company that owns North Island — Wilderness Safaris — and appreciate its strong conservation ethic. The company's sole raison d'être is to protect pristine wilderness, which it accomplishes through eco-tourism.

When I learned that the company owned an island in Seychelles, in addition to its numerous camps in southern Africa, I was intrigued. These islands are a long way from Africa — 1,600 kilometres off the continent's east coast — so why

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was Wilderness Safaris here? But now is not the time for big questions. At this moment, my 22-year-old daughter and I have a problem. We need to figure out how to do both *everything* and *nothing* in our short time here. We want to snorkel along the colourful coral reefs with their prolific marine life. We want to hike some of the island's hills and trails and look for giant Aldabra tortoises.

We want to enjoy a spa treatment, check out the library and relax in the expansive lounge. And of course we want to stroll North Island's exquisite beaches, including Honeymoon Beach, where Will and Kate liked to hang out. But once our personal attendant shows us our villa, we don't want to budge from this private paradise.

A husband and wife architectural team from South Africa designed the 11 villas and the public areas at North Island. The couple lived on the site with their two children while creating and executing every detail, right down to the handcrafted wooden beds in the master bedrooms.

We enter our villa through a pivoting wooden door at the top of a long ramp. Expecting to be going inside, we're surprised to find ourselves in a large furnished room that's as much outdoors as it is indoors. One side is completely open, with panoramic views of the ocean. A soaring thatched roof ceiling provides shade and structure. One corner of the thatched roof is anchored to the floor by the upside down trunk of a takamaka tree. (We learn later that a number of these beautiful trees on the island had died and the architects chose to incorporate their trunks and branches in the design.)

Beyond the indoor-outdoor pergola, a private plunge pool and a curtained *sala* with a deep mattress and cushions beckon. If space and privacy are the ultimate luxuries, it doesn't get much better than this — 5,000 square feet of casual elegance to call our own, and not another villa or person in sight.

Dining at North Island is *al fresco*, naturally. That evening we drive our golf cart (there are no vehicles on the island) to West Beach where big waves roll in as the setting sun paints the sky the same shade of orange as our tropical fruit cocktails. Eating freshly caught seafood by candlelight, barefoot in the cool sand, we savour this easy, outdoor life.

The next morning we're up with the sun for a hike before breakfast and before it gets too hot. This is when we learn why Wilderness Safaris purchased North Island. C. J. Havemann, North Island's conservation manager tells us this island was once overrun with rats, cats, cows and other exotic species, introduced when the island was a thriving coconut plantation.

"That whole mountain is basically invasive," he says, pointing at Grand Paloss, the highest peak on the island at 180

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The Wilderness Safari resort in the Seychelles North Island has a little bit of everything.



ONCE OUR ATTENDANT SHOWS US OUR VILLA, WE DON'T WANT TO BUDGE FROM THIS PRIVATE PARADISE.

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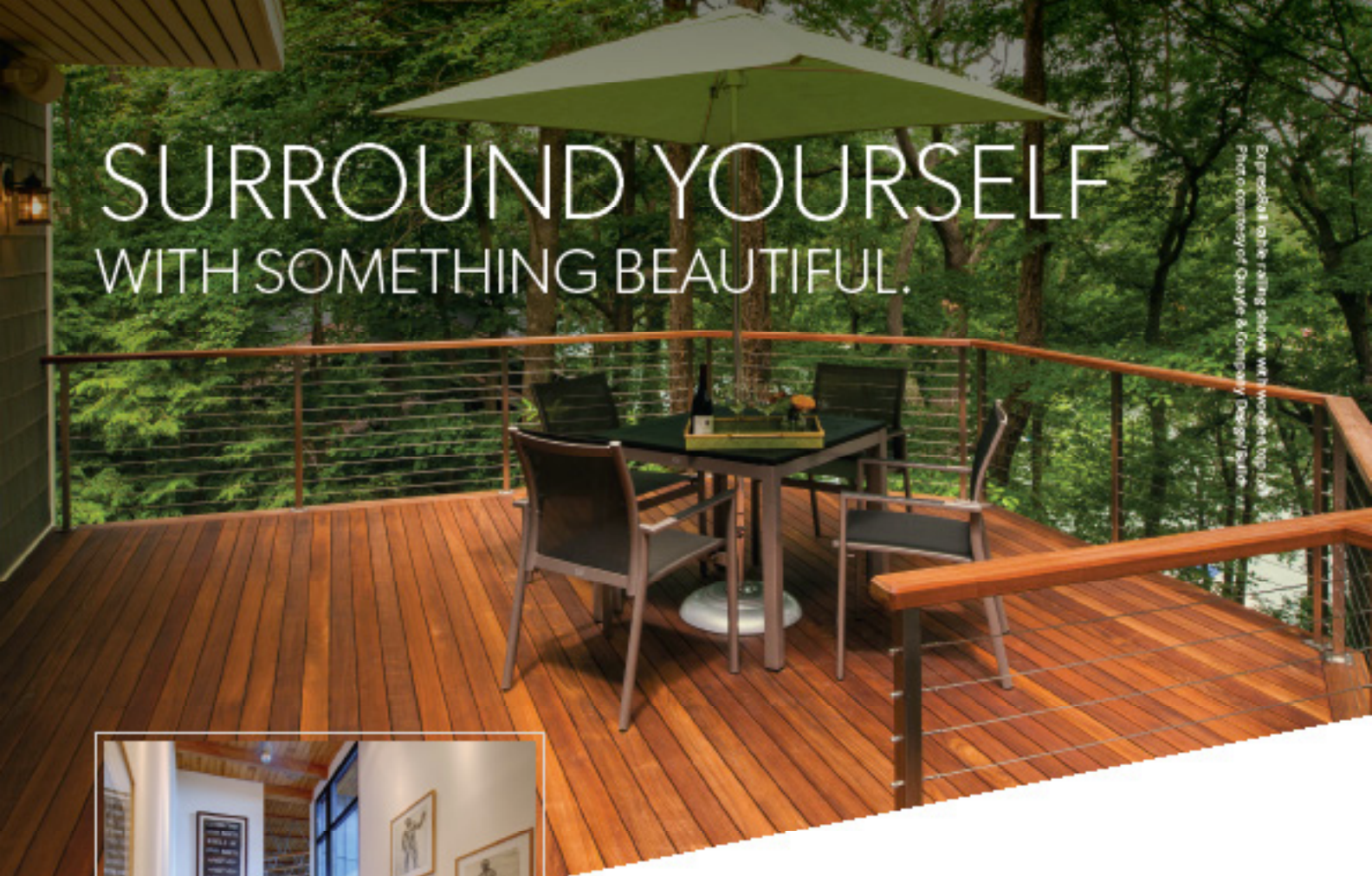
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metres. He sighs, adding, “Coconuts take over the landscape.” It’s hard to imagine the tropics without coconut palms, but they’re not native to the Seychelles. They smother endemic plants, they prevent birds from foraging on the ground for insects and they give rats easy access to birds’ nests and eggs. Populations of Seychelles White-eye and other endemic birds plummeted after rats arrived by boat in 1826, as did the number of Giant Aldabra tortoises. Tiny baby tortoises are no match for omnivorous rats. In 2005, after a large-scale poisoning operation — imagine eight tonnes of poison dropped by helicopter over 40 days — North Island successfully eradicated the European black rat. It’s the largest tropical island with hills in the world to do so. Birds are now returning, although as Havemann points out, it will take 20 years for seabirds to realize the island is safe again.

“We’re patiently waiting,” he says. The owners have also cleared large areas of exotic trees and replaced them with 15,000 indigenous and/or endemic plants. Happily, the tortoise population is recovering, if slowly. Havemann estimates there are now between 80 and 100 Giant Aldabra tortoises on the island, including a big, old male named Brutus. “He was here during the farming days so we reckon he could be over 200 years old,” says Havemann as we approach a younger tortoise, which extends his long neck for a rub. Returning to our villa by golf cart, we come across another tortoise lying in the middle of the road. Havemann stops, gets out and scratches the reptile’s back to urge him to move on. “Tortoises eat so much fruit that it ferments in their stomach,” he explains, “and they get drunk, believe it or not, and pass out on the road!” Clearly, we’re not the only contented creatures on this island. And somehow, by the end of our visit, we’ve managed to do a little bit of almost everything, as well as an agreeable amount of next to nothing. ①

More information: www.north-island.com
Rates: Villas 1 to 10 are 3,050 Euros per person per night
The much larger Villa 11 (where Kate and Will stayed) is 4,800 Euros per person per night. Rates include all meals, drinks, alcohol and most activities including scuba diving, and PADI-sanctioned dive courses.



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