



The Seychelles archipelago was once named the Garden of Eden by ancient Arab sailors, and **AL HORNSBY** reckons the reality can more than live up to its hyperbolic reputation

Photographs by **AL HORNSBY**

It's dawn, the rising sun quickly illuminating our view to the horizon after a night flight from Europe. As far as we can see, there is only the deep cobalt of the Indian Ocean merging with a paler sky; puffy, white clouds are scattered here and there. Finally, small islands begin to appear, and they grow to become a collection of lush, green mountains wreathed in cloud, each fringed by pure, white sand and surrounded by water of the brightest turquoise.

It's easy to see why the Seychelles archipelago is regarded as one of the most-beautiful places on Earth; it was actually considered by ancient Arab sailors to be the fabled Garden of Eden. The inner islands are chiefly pink and grey granite, covered in a rich proliferation of tropical vegetation, with scattered waterfalls and streams splashing down to bright, sun-lit beaches. Off to the southwest, the islands' nature changes, and a string of scarcely inhabited coral atolls meander for 1,150km to fabled Aldabra Lagoon, in the oceanic wilderness toward Africa. Colonies of birds are found seemingly everywhere – boobies, terns, tropic-birds and frigate birds, by the millions during the migratory seasons. And on a number of the islands are giant tortoises, more than 150,000 in all.

Having spent a couple of months of intensive diving and exploring the Seychelles over the years, the islands remain one of my very favourite places. Besides being lovely, the place has a simple 'easiness' to it – it is tropical, but pleasantly not-too-hot; the French Creole cooking and extravagant varieties of fresh fruit and seafood make every day dining remarkable; and accommodations run from simple charm to the most-exquisite luxury, whether on land or liveaboard.

The diving here, centred around the inner islands, is something equally special. The geology provides a dramatic underwater environment like none other I've ever seen. The same granite spires and columns that form the islands have their roots in the sea, and the diving is predominantly among a complex landscape of granite boulders, walls and spires that rise up toward the surface from deeper water, forming caverns and overhangs. They are covered with sponges, wire and hard corals, and soft corals emerge from protected crevices, all fed by warm, clear, nutrient-rich waters.

Beyond all else, however, is the concentration and variety of marine life. The bottom is home to an immense assortment of macro-critters such as shrimps, crabs, nudibranchs and live shells – for shell aficionados, you can find and photograph many, including uncommon varieties, such as *Conus aulicus*, *ammiralus* and *episcopus*, and the lovely *Murex palmarosae*. Massive schools of fish swirl about, and interesting species such as Napoleon wrasse, spadefish and pompano, eagle rays, large marbled rays and a number of different sharks are frequent. And, if that wasn't enough, there are many resident mantas, and some 500 individually-identified whalesharks spend the fall months feeding in the islands' waters.



MAHE

The Seychelles' capital, and the resort hub for travellers, is Mahe. The largest of the islands, covering 155 sq km of lush, mountainous terrain and sandy beaches dotted with huge granite boulders, it is also the centre for Seychelles diving. Around the northern end of Mahe, my favourite dives are:

The Wreck of the Ennerdale – A 100-metre British Royal Fleet auxiliary tanker that sank in 1970, the wreck sits on a 30m sand bottom, its superstructure dramatic. It has a great swarm of fish life, and we found the bridge swirling with glassy sweeper and batfish. Several groups of eagle rays made repeated passes, and we came across a large Queensland grouper, one of several resident to the wreck.

Shark Bank – Large, granite rocks and pinnacles jut up from a 35m bottom, creating a beautiful dive averaging 20 metres in depth. The stone is covered by orange cup corals and there are many small, purple soft corals. We photographed schools of spadefish, fusiliers, blue-striped snapper, mobula rays and large marbled stingrays.

Conception Island – This small island sits just off Mahe's northwestern shoreline. On a flat sand and coralline bottom at 25m, encrusted granite boulders lay scattered about, with lots of large fish. In our dives we saw schools of big-eye jacks and great barracuda, white-tip and grey reef sharks, and several species of rays. At one point, we were surprised by a group of bumphead parrotfish, which noisily swept in and by us. Along the southwestern coast of Mahe, there are also a number excellent dives:

Elephant Rock – An offshore site with a maximum depth of 20m, this dive centres around a large pinnacle sprinkled with low, hard corals and soft corals. It has lots of fish, and resident eagle rays. There are a number of nurse sharks, and loads of bottom dwellers such as shells, octopi, scorpionfish and lionfish.

Alice in Wonderland – Alice is a coral plateau at depths of 12m to 20m. It has stands of staghorn and table corals, and lots of reef tropicals swim in and out of the corals. Like many Seychelles' dive sites, there are many large anemones and several species of clownfish, including false clowns, orange-fin and skunks.

Whalesharks – Throughout the islands, but chiefly around Mahe, is the world-class specialty of the Seychelles – snorkelling with whalesharks. From August through the end of October, hundreds of them migrate in to feed in the rich waters. The Marine Conservation Society Seychelles' Whaleshark Programme monitors the sharks, and during the season, the groups of sharks are tracked from the air; research boats go out for snorkelling encounters. Visitors' fees help to fund the program. And, while such interactions can never be guaranteed, the success rate on the research boats is remarkably high – at times encountering aggregations of 20-30 sharks.

“The same granite spires and columns that form the islands have their roots in the sea, and the diving is predominantly among a complex landscape of granite boulders, walls and spires that rise up toward the surface from deeper water, forming caverns and overhangs”

PRALIN AND LA DIGUE

The next chief diving area is around the islands of Praslin and La Digue, which lie to the north of Mahe. Praslin is the second largest island of the Seychelles, known for exquisite beaches, rare birds and virgin forest. La Digue, just to the east of Praslin, is the top of a submerged mountain surrounded by white sand beaches dramatically interspersed with huge, grey and pink granite boulders. My favourite dives here are:

Marianne Island – The site, which consists of pinnacle rocks and giant, granite needles that rise up from 23m of depth, is often considered the best shark dive in the inner Seychelles. With lots of resident white-tips, nurse and grey reef sharks, things really heat up from September-November, when the grey reef mating seasons occurs. Breeding females arrive in large numbers, moving around the pinnacles and grottos, pursued by males; breath-taking stuff when you are in their midst.

Ave Maria Rock – This very popular dive lies mid-channel between Praslin and La Digue. Large boulders extend into the water, forming walls, swim-throughs and grottos, which we found practically filled with glassy sweeper and silversides, marauding bluefin trevally and coral grouper slashing through their midst, actively feeding. Along the bottom, there were large Napoleon wrasse, and we saw several, very calm green turtles.

DAY ROCHES

Nearly 230km to the south, Des Roches is a tiny, palm-covered coral island, only six kilometres long, well-known as both a romantic hideaway and an exciting dive destination. Its deserted beaches, with their many wading birds, stretch away to the limits of vision. My favorite dives here are along its wall:

Tunnel – Through a large opening in the reef top at 14m of depth, the passageway extends downwards, vertically. Schools of blue-stripe snapper, macaloris snapper and oriental sweetlips practically fill the entrance. At 25m, the tunnel opens out onto the wall face. Leopard sharks are often seen along the drop.

Canyons – In an area where a portion of the reef face has toppled away, it has formed a vertical cavern and a series of deep canyons, down to 38m. Black coral bushes and cup corals grow along the cavern face, and on my last dive there, a huge school of resident big-eye jacks, a moving silver wall, completely enveloped us. Mantas and eagle rays also regularly move through this area, and large bull helmet shells lie about on the sandy bottom.

BACK TO NATURE

Along with the diving, however, any trip to the Seychelles should include the time to visit some of the many nature reserves, which are home to a wide variety of plants, birds and reptiles. Especially interesting is the small island of Aride, a world-renowned bird



sanctuary located just north of Praslin. Hikes along its jungled trails provide close viewing of nesting fairy, noddy, roseate and sooty terns, along with huge frigate birds, which feed and roost around the island.

CONCLUSION

With an article like this about such a large and varied area, there is never enough space to adequately tell the story. This is especially true of the Seychelles, whose culture, natural resources, innate beauty and diving each could easily support its own narrative. And, at this moment in time, this is especially true. Considered one of the ocean's crown jewels, far-flung Aldabra Lagoon is, without argument, one of our planet's most-rare and exquisite locations - a remote, protected ecological paradise that is remarkably untouched, its lagoon and coral reefs crowded with marine species, its beaches and islets home to hordes of birds and giant tortoises. Aldabra and several associated islands - such as Assumption, Cosmoledo and Astove - have been closed to tourism for many years, but are now back within reach of several liveaboards. As one of the lucky few to have dived this area - as part of a three-week-long National Geographic expedition in the early 1990s - I can say, without question, that its hyperbolic reputation, if anything, is modest compared to the startling reality. Without exaggeration, in so many ways, the Seychelles archipelago ranks as a world wonder, worthy of anyone's 'must visit' list. ■

