

EXPERIENCE

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THE PROMISED ISLAND

A sumptuous private-island resort in the Seychelles is redefining responsible tourism while making guests' every wish come true.

BY NATASHA MEKHAIL

TRAVEL: SEYCHELLES

“When you’re driving, watch out for Patrick and Brutus,” says tall, bright-eyed Lavinia as we glide silently in an electric golf cart along the palm-lined path to my villa. “They’re about 200 years old and sometimes fall asleep on the road.”

It’s the first of many surreal conversations I’m sure to have on North Island. Lavinia is my personal host, and the fellows she’s referring to are giant tortoises, two of the 100 or so that inhabit this private Indian Ocean islet.

The tales of North Island begin even before my morning boat transfer, during my overnight on nearby Mahé, the largest of the 115 islands off the coast of East Africa that make up the Republic of Seychelles. “There’s pirate treasure buried there,” the porter tells me, lowering his Creole-accented voice to confide that locals both fear and revere North Island, as most have seen but never stepped foot on it.

There is reason for their curiosity. Over a mere 20 years, they have watched the island’s hilly terrain physically transform from the razed monoculture of a coconut plantation into a dense tropical forest – just as they have heard whispers of the international celebrities, politicians and business leaders surreptitiously whisked in and out. I’m told North Island’s restoration into an ultra-luxe, all-inclusive eco-resort has been called a modern-day Noah’s ark – and I fully expect that its reality exists somewhere between the bewitching and the divine. ➤



FAR-OFF PLACE
Spread out over 500 secluded acres, North Island is ideal for guests’ last-minute wishes and whims (like romantic picnics on the beach).





Lavinia drops me at the stilted boardwalk leading to the villa, where I'm greeted by my attendant Eliya, a smooth-faced Zimbabwean in a crisp white tunic and sea-foam-green trousers. My eyes trace the lines of the building behind him, an undulating, organic structure, all thatched-reed roof, rounded windows and tree-branch beams, as though Ewoks and Hobbits joined forces to build a five-star retreat.

I hardly know where to head first as he ushers me through a carved wooden door to the open sprawl of the villa's many living spaces. I bounce from section to section like a child in a playground, exploring first the wing containing the bedroom and spa-like open-air bathroom, before dashing up the connecting boardwalk to the study that doubles as a cinema. Back outside, I dip my foot in the plunge pool beside its driftwood-framed cabana and gaze out at the ocean just beyond the garden. Then Eliya shows me into the "pantry," a small stone building containing a fully stocked bar alongside shelves of snacks displayed in glass jars.

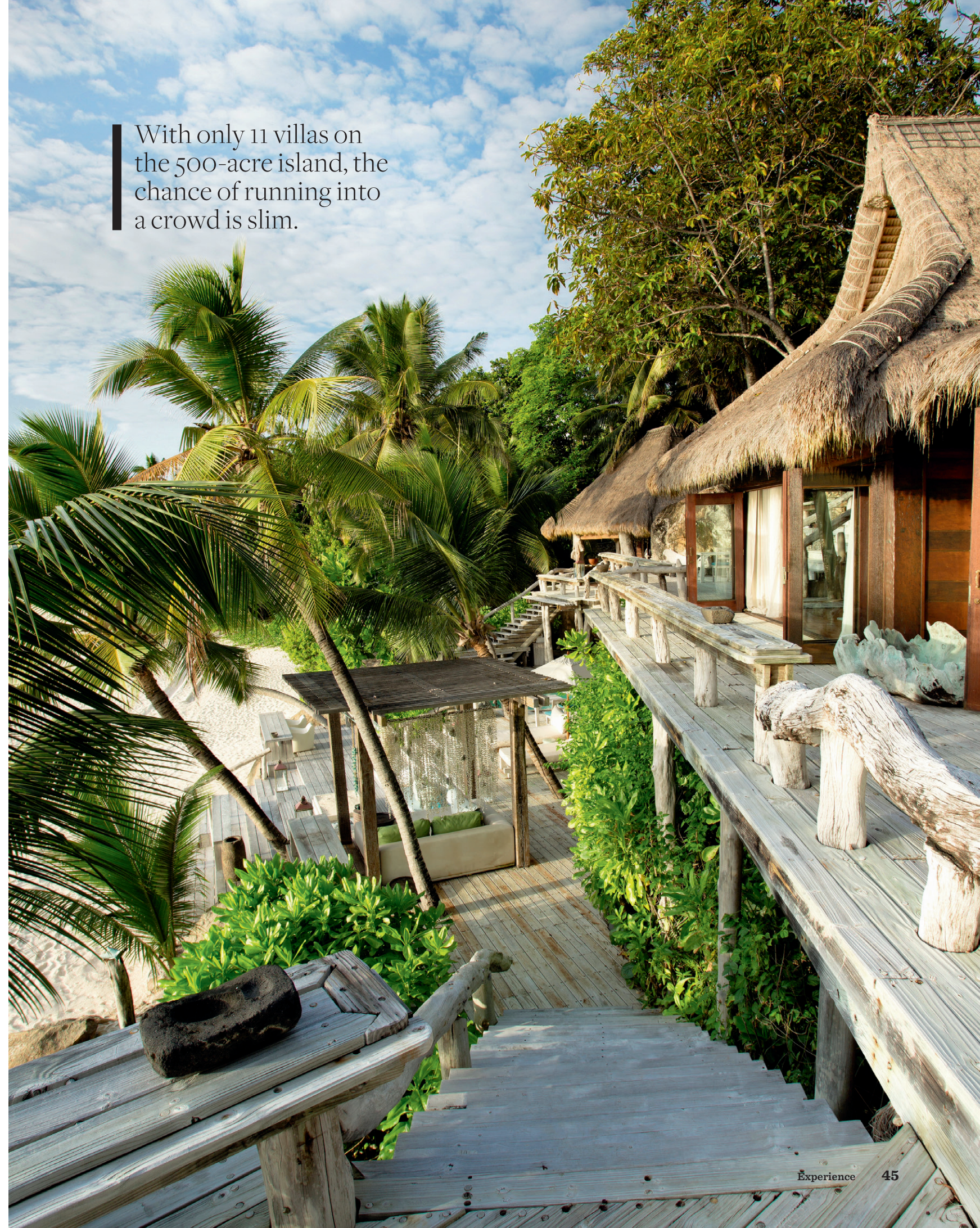
He lays down the ground rules: There are none. Meals are served when and where I want them, in the villa or central Piazza restaurant, on the beach or up one of the island's three peaks. I laugh and then realize he's being serious. After listening to the full gamut of options, I decide to dine on West Beach, which Eliya says is "popular for watching the sunset."

Each villa is equipped with a "North Island buggy" and a set of Schwinn cruiser bikes, the only forms of wheeled transport on the island, so I hop in my golf cart and set off for the beachfront bar, made loungy with lanterns, bean bags and wooden recliners sunken into the sand. Scanning the scene, I see that North Island's version of "popular" is relative. A group is enjoying sundowners further up the beach, and a couple in hiking gear emerges from a break in the tree line. They disappear into the bar and reappear a few minutes later in bathrobes with a bottle of champagne. With only 11 villas on the 500-acre island, the chance of running into a crowd is slim. ➤



A ROOM OF ONE'S OWN
(This page and opposite) Interior design draws inspiration from the natural surroundings, including lush gardens, sandy beaches and the nearby Indian Ocean (each villa has direct access to all of the above, as well as plunge pools and outdoor showers).

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NATURE NURTURE
A former coconut plantation, the resort's natural habitats are being restored thanks to programs protecting coral reefs and endemic species.

“Choice” is a key word on North Island and there is plenty of it, each one an indulgence. First, one must decide between outdoor showers: There’s a rain option or one that releases a pounding flow through a wooden half pipe. Then, breakfast: I turn down a selection of egg dishes in favor of local fruit, house granola and the chef’s special vegan coconut-milk yogurt. Afterward, it’s time to consult with the host on the day’s activities. Diving is a favorite, as outings with a private skipper and dive master are included, as are all levels of PADI training. Deep sea fishing and island hopping by boat are also on the menu, as are surfing and stand-up paddle boarding. The massage therapists are trained in Thai, Balinese and reflexology, and I could visit them in the clifftop spa or simply relax by the villa pool and have one come to me. There are also options to take a guided island hike or attend an evening talk on the island’s restoration.

“Sign me up for both,” I say to Lavinia over the mobile I’ve been issued to reach staff. When I disconnect, Eliya proffers a slate of picnic lunch items and a chalk for ticking my selections.

“Any questions?” he asks, stoic in every way but for the warm smile that spreads so easily across his face.

“Yes,” I say, gesturing my coffee cup toward a rocky outcrop on the southern tip of the beach. “What is that cross on the point?”

“It was used by ships in the time of the coconut plantation. Are you interested in it?” he asks, eyes twinkling. When I nod, he says he’ll arrange for me to learn more.

It’s early morning so I can still squeeze in a hike before the African sun reaches full strength. Near the trailhead, I meet C.J., one half of the South African couple that runs the conservation program. He and Tarryn are the current “Noah and Naamah” in the island’s story, and as we pat

the neck of a friendly tortoise named Timmy (“They love a tickle!”) he begins to tell it:

From the 1700s, shipwrecks off the coast brought invasive plants and animals to the previously hermetic (and hence fragile) island ecosystem. Rats reached land and multiplied, feeding on the eggs of the native tortoises and the thousands of seabirds who had previously considered the island a secure nesting ground.

North Island became a coconut plantation in the early 1800s, producing copra, a highly valued vegetable oil at the time. Settlers brought cows and pigs to farm, and owls and cats as rat chasers, clearing the indigenous forest to plant palms in the fertile soil (made so by centuries of fallen avian guano). But this unnatural landscape ran its course. Without the anchor of a native root system, the hillsides eroded; invasive plants stripped the earth of its nutrients. Then the bottom fell out of the copra industry, supplanted by cheaper and easier-to-produce oil crops like canola. In the 1970s, North Island was abandoned.

“Look at those roots,” says C.J. as he pulls a short leafy shrub from the trailside and holds it up. “They’re as long as the plant itself and suck up all the water, choking out other species.”

From our vantage point atop a granite peak, C.J. can easily spot a fallen coconut that has already sprouted a new invasive tree, as well as a Casuarina, planted by settlers as a windbreak, whose fallen needles lower the soil’s pH.

With my untrained eyes, though, all I see are the successes. When the island was purchased in part by luxury tour operator Wilderness Safaris in 1997, it was considered one of the most disturbed regions in the Seychelles. Its conservationists set out at once to restore the native forest using plants grown from seedlings in the island’s nursery. They rid the island of invasive mammals, most notably rodents, and they reintegrated endemic bird species, including the endangered Seychelles magpie-robin and the white-eye.

Standing under a tree, C.J. spots one of the sparrow-like birds and makes a clicking sound, prompting the inquisitive creature with the telltale white-rimmed eyes to hop to a lower branch for a closer look. The North Island team has increased the white-eye population from 25 to 105 since 2007. Especially impressive considering there are only 500 to 600 of them in the world.

Our hike ends on West Beach, where C.J. points out a sand mound, outlined with a perimeter of wood stakes and topped by a coconut marker with a date carved into its husk. It’s a sea turtle nest mapped as part of a North Island research project.

“In 30 years, the surviving hatchlings will come back to the beach where they were born,” he says, and suddenly I understand something more about North Island’s altruistic formula: The future can exist here because of the pleasures of the present.

Right now, though, those pleasures include finding the buggy, parked at the trail’s end, stocked with fresh fruit skewers, ice water and chilled towels. ➤



PHOTO: MIKE HILL/ALAMY (BIRD)



When the island was purchased, conservationists set out at once to restore the native forest.

What to Pack

Since 1979, Andrew Harper has been traveling undercover to write reviews of the world’s top hotels and resorts for his project, The Hideaway Report. Over time, those recommendations evolved into Harper’s eponymous boutique travel agency – a preferred partner of North Island and Wilderness Safaris in North America. We spoke to Harper about five essentials to pack when southern Africa is your destination.

01 Everyone remembers to take a camera but forgets that the truly essential piece of equipment is a pair of good binoculars. I suggest you opt for Swarovski’s EL 8.5×42.

02 That said, many neglect the 400-mm lens needed to get close-ups of wildlife. My preference is the Canon EF Super Telephoto.

03 Even jet owners need to board a chopper or bush plane to reach remote areas, and both carry luggage restrictions. I like the soft flexibility of the Tumi Astor San Remo 5-pound Duffel.

04 Under the strong African sun, polarized sunglasses are a must, but that doesn’t mean you have to compromise on style. Try the Ray-Ban Outdoorsman Craft Sunglasses.

05 Safari clothing should be light in color and breathable. I always pack the lightweight, khaki Orvis Bush Shirt.

For reservations contact Andrew Harper Travel Office at T 1 800 375 4685 or reservations@andrewharper.com



NIGHT LIGHTS
(From top) Dining al fresco by the Indian Ocean; a fisherman brings in an impressive catch.

Each delight is prompted not by a formal request, but a mere inquiry or wish spoken aloud.



In the afternoon, I go for a dive and spot, amongst the pink coral and schools of blue starfish, eagle rays and even a harmless nurse shark. A goal by 2020 is to have the reef declared a protected marine area, a highly unusual designation for a private island. Returning to the villa, I find a note on the slate that Eliya uses to leave messages. It reads: “What about a tropical bath?” Entering the bathroom, I find the sunken tub drawn with hot water and scented oils under a cloud of bubbles, the edges decorated with glowing tea lights, hibiscus flowers, palm fronds and fragrant frangipani. A bottle of champagne is chilling in a bucket beside a dish of chocolate truffles.

I can’t imagine topping this much-appreciated surprise, but another awaits me at sundown, when I’m directed to the craggy point marked by the cross to find a blanket and plush velvet cushions spread out over a flat piece of rock. While I recline, sipping a sundowner high above East Beach, two men arrive and light a fire in a natural depression at the tip of the point, illuminating the cross. Now I understand: This was the island’s first lighthouse.

Such delights continued throughout my stay. A torch-lit dinner after I mention how lovely the garden looks by moonlight. An afternoon with the executive chef exploring the orchard, after showing an interest in Creole cuisine. Each experience prompted not by a strict schedule or formal request, but a mere inquiry or wish spoken aloud.

Taking a stroll down the white sand after lunch, I run into a small flock of seabirds. The spindly legged creatures with knees that hinge the wrong way round are here to figuratively – and literally – test the waters. I divert course to avoid startling them, doubling back on the lonely trail of my footprints. Because while I may always be welcomed warmly on North Island, these guys are the real VIPs. And everyone very much wants to see them back. ■

PHOTO: AGF SRL/ALAMY (SUNSET)



Safari Circuit

For many travelers, North Island provides a last, relaxing stop after a safari tour. The resort’s partner operator Wilderness Safaris has more than 30 camps, but these environmentally and community-focused Botswana retreats are among our favorites.

DumaTau

This camp’s idyllic setting, on the Linyanti River and in view of the Namibia border, is a crossing for elephants. In summer, you can see thousands of them congregating on the riverbank and even swimming across (yes, elephants can swim!), using their trunks as snorkels. The completely solar-powered camp is magical, particularly at night, when it’s lit up with dozens of lanterns and guests gather for pre-dinner cocktails on a circular jetty with a fire at its center. For something special, request a spin on the river barge for sundowners or a private dinner, then get up close and personal with the hippos.

Vumbura Plains

Set on 148,000 acres in the Okavango Delta, this camp offers guests a hotel-like experience. Rather than the tented-camp style, guests are housed in wooden villas, with outdoor decks and their own plunge pools. This camp is best for spotting large predators (leopards, lions, cheetahs) and its guides’ tracking expertise is exceptional. For options beyond Land Rover touring, choose a helicopter or hot air balloon to get the aerial perspective or take in the wildlife at water level in a gondola-style mokoro. The concession is owned and operated by five nearby villages, and you’ll get to know – and love – the local staff.

Abu Camp

The camp is named for one of its first residents, the tame bull elephant who starred in *White Hunter Black Heart* alongside Clint Eastwood. The camp’s herd of seven ‘ellies’ is headed by Cathy, who spent most of her life in a Toronto Zoo. You’ll fall head over heels for young Naledi, who will surely give you a playful poke of her trunk, as well as baby Pula, the newest addition to the herd. Guests can interact with, feed and even walk alongside the animals, providing a truly unique way of viewing other game, such as zebras and giraffes, who see only the elephants (not their human companions) and are therefore at ease.



PHOTOS: DANA ALLEN (DUMATAU CAMP, VUMBURA PLAINS); ANDREW HOWARD (ABU CAMP)