

# Island life in the slow lane

Luxury castaway **Angelina Villa-Clarke** meets the locals on a remote island in the Seychelles

Paradise found:  
secluded Desroches  
Island in the  
Seychelles

**B**IG PETE has a habit of creeping up on you when you least expect it. The 90-year-old is a natural flirt and the closest thing to a celebrity on Desroches Island, in an isolated archipelago in the Indian Ocean. But I'm not talking about a nonagenarian of the human kind, rather a giant Aldabra tortoise.

Desroches is one of the Amirante Islands, which make up the Outer Islands of the Seychelles. It is a wild and windswept place; door to door, it takes some 24 hours to get there from London, but once you do, you instantly forget the long journey. Your shoulders drop, your shoes come off and it's like you've stepped into the pages of *Robinson Crusoe*.

While the Seychelles is already known for a handful of smart hotels found on its far flung islands – such as Frigate and North Island – Desroches still feels firmly off the tourist path, with an unpolished essence about it, despite it being home to a sustainably minded Four Seasons resort.

For many years, the skinny island, which stretches to just 5.5km long and 1km wide, was simply a coconut plantation, producing around 20,000 of them a month for coconut oil production. Nowadays,

other than the resort, there's a small Creole village and not much else, apart from Big Pete and his companions – 150 giant tortoises – who potter freely around.

"Big Pete is the most outgoing and the largest of the tortoises," says Nasreen Khan, one of the conservationists working with the Island Conservation Society (ICS), which also has a base on the island and runs a tortoise breeding programme. "He adores attention and will follow visitors around to see if you have any tasty leaves in your possession. Most of all, he's probably after a massage. You see him stick his neck out and stand high on his feet if you stroke his shell and neck – he loves it!"

There has been a hotel of sorts on the island for 30 years, the first being a simple fishing lodge. Since then a variety of low key hotels have set up shop, but it was not until 2002, when Four Seasons opened, that Desroches started getting noticed by tourists looking for a sense of adventure with a side serving of luxury.

Most guests arrive after a pit stop in Mahé, the main island of the Seychelles where the capital, Victoria, is found. Four Seasons Resort Seychelles is located here, and guests can spend time there to break up the journey, whether for a few hours or a few days, before taking a 35-minute flight, 250 miles south to Desroches.



Seychelles celebrity: meeting Big Pete, largest of the giant tortoises on Desroches Island

The landing strip on Desroches cuts dramatically through the centre of the island, crooked, towering palm trees fringing it on either side, with the hotel tucked away along the western shore. You stay in one

of 71 villas, which have colourful interiors and winding paths to the beach.

Inside, the aesthetic is a nod to the Seychellois Creole culture, a multiracial blend of African, Asian

and European influences. You'll find cheery pops of colour, such as an overstuffed, fuchsia pink pea cock chair and green palm print cushions.

Grand, high beds are swathed in mosquito net curtains and laid with crisp linens, while a vintage, wooden chest hides the TV. The ceilings are vaulted and the walls have oversized copper bowls as decoration. The huge bathrooms continue the rustic theme with plenty of natural details, such as curvy stone bathtubs, wooden vanity units and traditional woven rugs.

Central to the ethos of the Four Seasons resort is sustainability and conservation and it works alongside ICS and WiseOceans, which runs marine discovery programmes here, to support the region's precious wildlife and environment. As well as looking after a further 174 tortoises in a breeding programme, ICS supports WiseOceans with research and rehabilitation of sea turtles, sea birds, coral reefs and seagrass meadows and guests are encouraged to get involved via the resort's Discover Centre and the Tortoise Sanctuary.

"The ICS centre opened in 2009," explains Nasreen. "Our main objectives have always been to protect wildlife and to make sure Desroches Island is an environmental rehabilitation success. One area we are working on at the moment, for instance, is the