

# Seychelles,

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These idyllic islands at 4° S, 55° E, have a reputation for great beaches, endangered landbirds, sensational seabirds and high-end, luxurious resorts. All of this is true, but seemingly less well-known, there is also a fair selection of medium-price accommodation all over the main islands. The Seychelles are not a budget destination; trips out to Aride and Cousin (no-brainers, regardless of cost, for birders) are pricey, as is getting about between the islands, even if you opt for the shearwater-close-up option of high-speed ferry. However, armed with *Lonely Planet* and after a week or two of emailing and booking, it is quite possible to arrange a week's stay at several centres for a reasonable cost. What follows below is how we did that, and what we saw by doing so.

## Where to stay

Two islands are essential to visit if you want to see the majority of key bird species on the Seychelles. The first is **Mahe**, the only island where the **Scops-Owl** and **White-eye** still occur, although are respectively quite tough and nearly impossible, at least without a guide. **Seychelles Kestrel**, whilst not really common, is still much more likely on Mahe than anywhere else and can be found on your own with a bit of legwork. Happily, everything else is much easier. The second essential island is **Praslin**. Valle de Mai in the centre of the island is a pre-requisite for **Seychelles Black Parrot** and phenomenal, ancient Gondwanaland forest. Further, from Praslin, you can easily do day trips to the smaller islands of **Cousin** and / or **Aride** (preferably both) where **Seychelles Fody**, **Seychelles Warbler** and the **Magpie-Robin** are all slam dunks, and you will be greeted by a seabird extravaganza of (nearly) South Georgian proportions, albeit at a rather more benign temperature. From Praslin you can day trip to (or, better, stay overnight on) **La Digue**, a delightful little island that is fun to cycle round and is the only home to **Seychelles Paradise-flycatcher**, Ace of Spades of the Seychelles endemics and beating the grubby fody, bush-warbler *et al* into a cocked hat. Other endemics, i.e. **Seychelles Bulbul**, **swiftlet**, **sunbird** and, to a lesser extent the **Blue-Pigeon**, are widespread on all the main islands and you can reliably run into them without difficulty.

## Getting about and where to stay

We used the reliable, fast and fun (although fairly pricey) inter-island ferry service. All timetables, costs and booking information is available at <http://www.catcocos.com/> and you can book and pay in advance (recommended). We sent those guys several emails in the course of our booking and found their replies prompt and helpful. These ferries are fast and enclosed; you might be able to pay a bit more for the upper deck or you can just squeeze a place on the outer or upper decks wherever there is room. As hoped for, we got great views of both Seychelles breeding tubenoses from the ferry crossings, much better than we did from land (apart from on Aride, where we got to handle both species!)

We stayed at the following, all booked in advance by email and all pulled out of *Lonely Planet*:

- **La Digue: Pension Hibiscus;** email: [jealicei@seychelles.net](mailto:jealicei@seychelles.net) Very friendly, decent and reasonable family-run guest house / B&B about 1 km from where the ferry comes in. If that isn't good enough, I had the Paradise-flycatcher just outside the garden at dawn. Cost c65 Euros per night. Veuve Reserve, a small forest reserve primarily for the flycatcher, is just across the road, although we found more flycatchers by renting bikes and charging round the island. The helpful owner, Jeanita, sorted out bike rental for us. We spent one night (one full day) here.
- **Praslin: Chalets Anse Possession;** email [tessalablache@hotmail.com](mailto:tessalablache@hotmail.com) In Anse Possession, a scenic bay on the north coast. A nice, spacious apartment with self-catering facilities and great views over the beach (10m away) and Aride to the north; could have slept four easily. Better to self-cater as breakfast was not good value; we didn't try the evening meal. Cost: c120 Euros per night. We took a taxi from the jetty to here (about 10-15 min drive). Note that there are no eating options nearby; however there is a village shop approximately 20-30 mins walk back towards the jetty, on the edge of Anse Volbert. There is a reasonable bus service; we took buses to Vallee de Mai in the centre of the island and the famous beach of Anse Lazio to the north-west. Asking around got a bit of negotiation allowed us to arrange trips to Aride one day and a combined run to Cousin (am) and Curieuse (pm) the next day. The approximate cost of these was c100 Euros per person, per trip. Each trip left from the beach across the road. We spent three nights here.
- **Mahe: Ocean View Guesthouse;** see [www.choicevilla.sc](http://www.choicevilla.sc) In Bel Ombre, just west of Beau Vallon on a fine bay, albeit along a rather busy road (by Seychelles standards) on the north-west side of the island. This is a short hop over the hill from where the inter-island ferry comes into Victoria; it is easy to get a bus or taxi. Nice, friendly place across the road and up the hill a fraction from the beach with a nice restaurant attached; lots of shops etc nearby. Cost c70 Euros per night. This area is busy and populous actually; if you have been to La Digue and Praslin first, Mahe (or at least this bit of it) seems pretty congested. We found Seychelles Kestrel by walking along the beach into Beau Vallon itself (see below); we also saw them by walking the cliff path to Anse Major in the other direction. We took the bus into Victoria to have a look around there one day, and also used buses to get to the north end of Mahe at Carana Beach and to get to Port Launay on the west coast of Mahe. We spent three nights here.

### Weather and what to bring

Not quite like what the holiday brochures said it was going to be! For the days on La Digue and Praslin had quite a lot of cloud, interspersed with sunny spells; it was quite humid at times, but not excessively so. We also had short but heavy rainstorms on most days and then, on Mahe, rain on and off all day for two out of the three days we were there; the last day



started very wet but the cloud broke and lifted by mid-morning. So a rain coat would be a good idea. I did bring a scope but that was definitely not essential apart from getting me good views of Seychelles Kestrel and letting me watch hundreds of Wedge-tailed Shearwaters breezing the offshore swell during squalls off Bel Ombre. Bins and a good DSLR with a 300mm or 400mm lens are, however, essential – the photography opportunities, especially on Aride and Cousin, are sensational.

### What we saw

#### 1 Mahe to Praslin ferry crossing (duration one hour)

Setting aside **Seychelles Sunbirds** in the airport car park in Mahe, and wonderful **White-tailed Tropicbirds** over the cliff across the road from there (both everywhere), this ferry trip is a great start to birding the Seychelles. On both crossings, we had fantastic views of **Audubon's** and **Wedge-tailed Shearwaters**, plus **Lesser Noddies** (hundreds outbound; many fewer four days later) and a few **Sooty Terns** whilst we saw **Fairy Terns** on both legs, including 15 on the way out. The ferry from Praslin to La Digue is just a short hop and too enclosed and brief for any seabird action other than a few noddies; fine scenery and sunset however.

## 2 La Digue

Great place! Right on arrival, when you fall in with nesting **Fairy Terns** on the trees by the harbour, there is lots to see and do here. I had a long march pre-breakfast looking for **Paradise-Flycatchers** in the adjacent forest reserve and nearby, although I saw two briefly early on, that (initially) was it. However, other endemics came nice and steadily; by the end of the day we had totalled 12 **Seychelles Blue-Pigeons**, over 20 **Seychelles Swiftlets** and 50 **Seychelles Bulbuls** and loads of **sunbirds**. We spent most of the day cycling, and covered pretty much all of the island, including as far down the east coast we could. In all we scored nine more **Seychelles Paradise-flycatchers**, with several in the forest alongside the track down to Grand Anse (c1-2km north of that beach) and an amazing noisy, active party, including females and young males in the afternoon at Anse Severe in the north of the island being particularly memorable. Perhaps setting aside seabirds, the experience and spectacle of these flycatchers are head and shoulders above all other birds in the Seychelles; don't miss them.

Charging round the coastline of La Digue also gave us a few waders, with the highlights being **Crab Plover** on the north-east side and an enormous-billed **Greater Sandplover**, presumably *crassirostris*, at the jetty whilst we waited for the ferry back Praslin.

## 3 Vallee de Mai

We took the bus up to here from Anse Possession on the first afternoon we had on Praslin. The site is a forested valley, straddling the main road through the island and it is possible to do an atmospheric walk through the amazing, dense and shady Coco-de-Mer palm forest. This is great, but doesn't directly let you see many birds. We climbed up to an overlook where we could scan the tree tops and valley; this led to **Seychelles Blue-Pigeon** and some **bulbuls**, **sunbirds** etc. Having heard at least a few as they flew over the forest, we had flight views of **Seychelles Black Parrot** from here but saw that species much better still by scanning from the road back near the visitor centre. In particular, hiking steeply downhill westwards produced some good views of parrots in the treetops on the slope to the south of the road. They weren't too far away but a scope would have been useful to get real close ups. Also along this road, not far below the visitor centre, we found **Seychelles Swiftlets** attending a shady waterfall where they presumably were nesting. One other nice thing about the area up here was the (nearly) complete lack of introduced dross such as mynas and Madagascar Fodies.

## 4 Aride Island

Flycatchers apart, and maybe regardless, if you can get out here, this is going to be the birding highlight of a visit to the Seychelles. Aride is the most northerly of the granitic islands, lying 10km north of Praslin. It is difficult or impossible to reach from May to September when the south-east trade winds prevail. It is well worth going to Cousin as well, but the spectacle on Aride is far more impressive and several seabirds that occur here are absent on Cousin (or, least, not nearly so obvious). We went to Aride one day, Cousin the next and with hindsight it may have been better to do it things the other way round. But that was simply because Aride was so awesome.

As on Cousin, you have to take a guide to complete a walk of the island and this, along with the landing fee, is included in the cost of the trip. We were really lucky to be in a tiny group (of four) and have a great, relaxed and knowledgeable guide who was very happy to show us burrow-nesting **shearwaters** (both **Audubon's** and **Wedge-tailed**) and let us spend ages taking photographs. The track goes along the beach and up a gentle hill, eventually leading to a phenomenal outlook, on a cliff top on the west side of the island. **Tropicbirds**, **frigates** (we saw 1000+; mainly **Great**), **Fairy** and **Sooty Terns** are swirling everywhere from here and most (except the frigates) are nearly touchable at or by their nests on the way up. Needless to say, **noddies** (mainly **Lesser** but also **Common**) are super-abundant and it is impossible to miss **Seychelles Magpie-Robin** (they actively seek visitors, in the hope you will dislodge a few tasty bugs from the trail; it is believed that they used to follow the now mostly vanquished Giant Tortoises in a similar manner). We had no difficulty either with **Seychelles Warbler** or **Seychelles Fody**, seeing about eight of each, and we saw a similar number of **Blue-Pigeons**. Interesting endemic geckos are also abundant and, finally, Aride is the place for a less regular seabird or two. Red-footed Boobies from Aldabra appear very rarely, but we did see **Red-tailed Tropicbird** sailing past the cliff viewpoint; this spectacular species is very scarce on the Seychelles. Nesting Roseate Terns were not in residence during our visit but might be seen at other times of year. In all, superb – don't miss it.



## 5 Cousin Island

Cousin was never going to match Aride, but is still a great place and well worth a visit, even if you have been to Aride too. However, it is far, far busier on Cousin (there must have been c150 to 200 tourists on our visit) so, to avert a nightmare, try to get there early (plenty to see as you wait for the throngs to arrive), join a small group if possible and trail off the back, where you might soon be forgotten about. The guides are knowledgeable and there is good information in the visitor centre. Many seabirds are present, but in rather less spectacular variety than Aride, although

**noddies**, **White-tailed Tropicbirds** and **Fairy Terns** are all very abundant and very photogenic. Although we only saw two **Seychelles Warblers**, **Seychelles Magpie-Robins** are just as easy and even tamer (we saw 10, out of c29 present on Cousin) and **Seychelles Fody** is also very easy – we notched up 30. There are also quite a few **Madagascar Turtle Doves** wandering round, arguably looking slightly darker and more maroon than those the bigger islands. But the key word there is *slightly*. **Moorhens** and four fly-over **Garganey** added a bit of variety.

Organised visits to Cousin last only half a day, and usually most tour operators take you to Curieuse Island, close inshore off the north of Praslin on the way back. This is well worth doing as you can visit the Doctor's House, now a fascinating museum (Curieuse was a leper colony until 1965) and have a nice walk over part of the island, to get picked up at another bay on the other side. Part of the trail goes through some interesting mangrove forest with a few waders and **Seychelles Sunbirds** and Coco-de-Mers (endemic to Curieuse and Praslin) also feature. This also a breeding centre for Giant Tortoises, which can be seen easily. There is also a chance to do some snorkelling at St Pierre on the way back to Praslin.

## 6 Bel Ombre, Mahe

Finally, the main island. Despite the rain, we had a nice time here, though it wasn't Praslin or La Digue. The white-eyes are almost gone from the Mahe itself (although apparently still common on hard-to-reach Conception Island, of the west coast) and seemingly unlikely to be seen without tremendous luck, or a guide. They are also in the forested interior of the island, as are the scops-owls. The rain and difficulty of getting into a likely spot without a private vehicle knocked the latter on the head for us, but the kestrel was a different matter. On the first morning I walked into Beau Vallon from Bel Ombre along the beach and, despite the rain, eventually scored **Seychelles Kestrel** in a clearing behind the beach, right alongside the construction site for a big, fancy hotel. This was c500m north of the Coral Strand Hotel. We also saw one or two kestrels along the main road near our guesthouse in Bel Ombre, with a flyover and another (or the same) perching on roadside lights. Finally, on the walk to Anse Major to the south (recommended anyway, a very nice walk with great views out to Silhouette and fine snorkelling at the end) we



found another, perching up on some dead snags. In all we had five sightings of four or five birds over three soggy days but this appears to be a slippery species to get to grips with and really see well; three of those were brief and / or flyovers.

Other birds around Beau Vallon and Bel Ombre included lots of **Wedge-tailed Shearwaters** offshore one morning, **Crested** and even **Common Terns** on the beach and a very low female-type **Lesser Frigatebird** over the harbour. **Seychelles Blue-Pigeon** are pretty common and we also had **Striated Heron** and the odd pair of **Fairy Terns** and **White-tailed Tropicbirds** passing over.

