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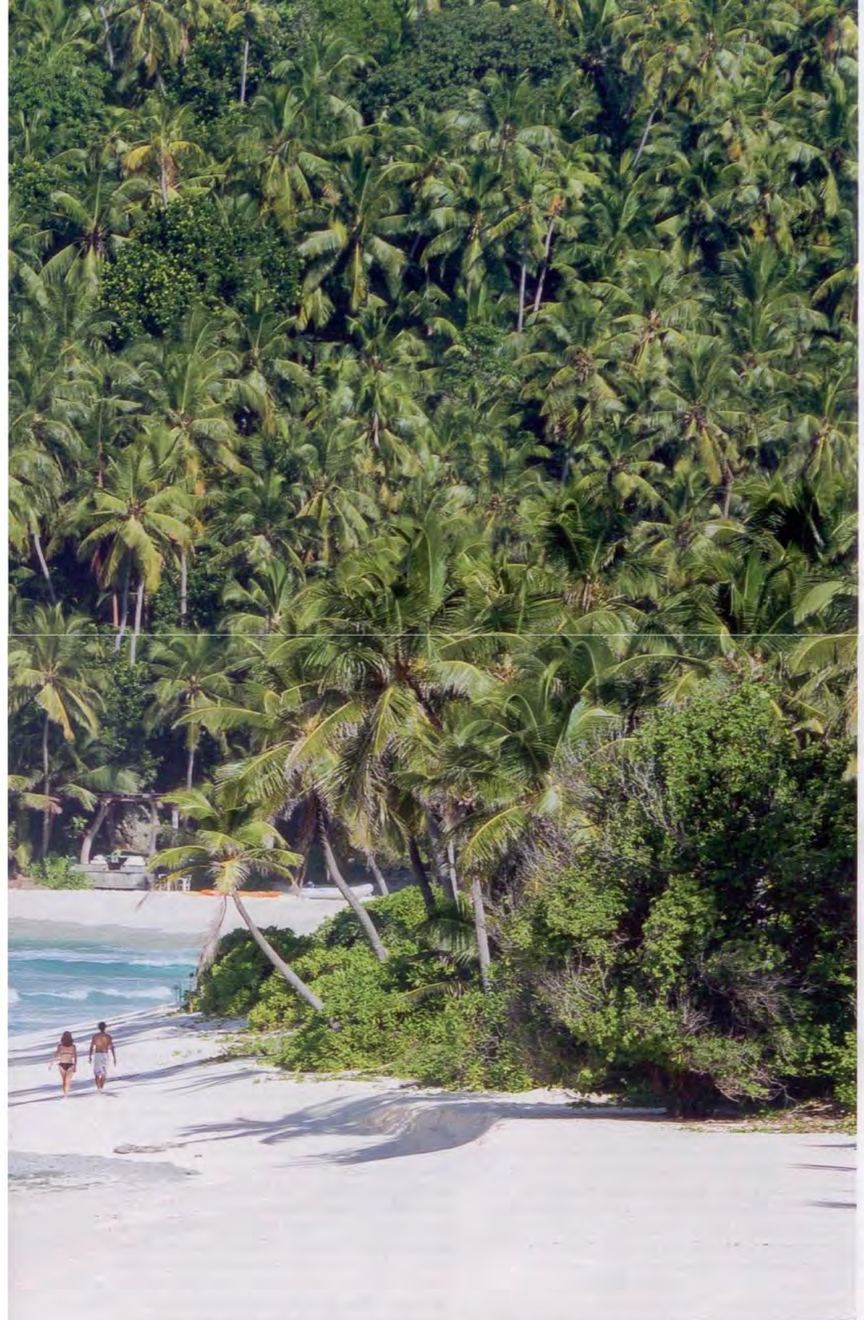

NORTH BY NORTH BEST

A private retreat in the Seychelles, North Island has long topped best-of lists the world over. Now, as it undergoes comprehensive expansion and renovation, the feel-good quotient has never been more authentic. Maria Shollenbarger **reports**

North Island. Does the name ring a bell? If you were literate, or even merely non-comatose, in the first weeks of May 2011, when it was announced that this private island resort in the Seychelles (pictured left and overleaf) was the honeymoon destination of the most exalted newlyweds of the 21st century, the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge, then it probably will. *PARADISE!* trumpeted one UK daily's headline in the wake of the revelation. *The Christian Louboutin… of barefoot luxury!* enthused (rather nonsensically) another. *Designed to appeal to rich people and members of the royal family* stated yet another, putting an obtuse, if not entirely inaccurate, point on it.

And it's true that North, as its habitués call it, has since its debut in 2002 hovered at the very top of bucket lists and best-of inventories, even those of the super-privileged. There are similarly exclusive, and luxurious, private island escapes, cast strategically across the planet's most verdant and secluded reaches. But clearly North Island's 200-odd hectares of jungly mountain and sugary beaches, set in the small constellation of granite isles that make up the Seychelles, contain a surfeit of something special – some occult but very potent alchemy of privacy, isolation and extravagance – to warrant such effusions. Reached by helicopter from the capital, Mahé, and offering 11 thatch-roofed villas, with a minimum of 6,000sq ft of indoor-outdoor space – inclusive of private plunge pools, seaside sunning pavilions bookending vast gardens, alfresco dining rooms and breezy bathrooms the size of a Hong Kong apartment – it ticks all the boxes for the kind of sybaritism that occurs in the absence of a spending ceiling.

Underpinning the glossy surface appeal of the place, however, there has always been an entirely serious mission: that of comprehensive wilderness and wildlife rehabilitation. It's this that sets the former coconut plantation apart from, and above, its very small group of peers. In fact, North Island's conservation remit complements its hospitality one, of coddling guests with a six-to-one staff-to-guest ratio, linen sheets pressed daily and lobster grilled to order and served with Ruinart Blanc de Blancs (at 3am, if so desired, because there is no schedule on North). The place was born of an experiment of sorts: a project to rid a contained environment of centuries of damage wrought by human toil and invasive species, and restore it to its natural state by systematically reintroducing native plants and animals. As Sophy Roberts reported in this magazine in 2011 (see "Care to Make a Reservation?" on Howtospendit.com), North Island's founders were clear: any hospitality or tourism component of the project was equal to the environmental one. Operated by Wilderness Collection, a boutique division of Wilderness Safaris – the 65-strong collection of camps and lodges across southern Africa, listed on the stock exchanges of both South Africa and Botswana – North has thus always had its conceptual roots in the idea that pinnacle-scaling luxury and bar-setting conservation practices can not only coexist, but synergise, if their implementation is informed and intelligent, their executors are all of a single mind, and – crucial, this point – the guests are engaged in the conservation mission from the moment their ZilAir chopper alights amid the casuarinas and coco palms fringing the island's south edge.

Since the summer, both the luxury component and the environmental one have been revisited by the top brass at Wilderness, as North Island undergoes a major revamp. All 11 existing one-bedroom villas, which line the main beach in a broad half-ring, have been totally refurbished; this will be followed in late 2016 and into 2017 by the construction of two ultra-private three-bedroom villas on the other side of the island, immersed in the thickets of jungle along either end of the creamy stretch of sand on the West Beach between the Sunset Bar and Honeymoon

Main picture: a palm tree-fringed beach on the Seychelles' North Island. Inset: the deck at one of North Island's villas

North Island's tortoises sun themselves by the sides of the sand paths that criss-cross the forest, sometimes tipsy from gorging on over-ripe guavas

Left: one of North Island's Presidential Villas. Below: a diver swims beside a turtle

Beach. A new chef is being brought in to join the new manager, Nick Solomon, who previously (and brilliantly) ran La Residence in Franschhoek, part of The Royal Portfolio, an exquisite collection of South African hotels and lodges that also includes Royal Malewane, in the Kruger. Two motor yachts have recently been added to North's collection of dive boats and double-hull catamarans – both clocking the journey time to Mahé at around 45 minutes (and thus perfect for transfers for whoever doesn't want the helicopter). It has recce'd access to beaches and wilderness areas on neighbouring Silhouette, Mahé and Praslin islands for full-day excursions, which were inaugurated last summer.

The funky driftwood bar overlooking West Beach – a catwalk of lime-white sand, enclosed on one side by thick mangrove forest and on the other by a black-granite bluff bristling with slender coco palms, which looks positively engineered for the covers of magazines – will be renovated and upgraded with a full kitchen, creating another dining venue to complement the main restaurant, without forsaking the feet-in-the-sand charm that seems to make it every guest's favourite hangout. Overseeing all of the works will be Johannesburg-based Silvio Rech and Leslie Carstens, the same husband-and-wife architect team who designed and masterminded the creation of the original retreat, a two-and-a-half year endeavour that was a feat of importation (with timber stock sourced from South Africa and Indonesia), transportation (200-plus boat trips were required over the course of 30 months to get all the raw materials onto the island) and restoration (the library and dive centre are both housed in historic stone structures dating back to North Island's 19th-century tenure as a French-colonial coconut plantation, sensitively renovated with Indonesian Langa-Langa roofing and poured concrete floors).

Wilderness Collection COO Bruce Simpson is both articulate and candid about the need for such subtle reinvention. "There are deep structural and organisational changes taking place. The boats, while gorgeous, are almost too big for what we require, but that's the thing about luxury: because we set that bar we need to be perceived as giving guests every aspect of the full experience. Very few of them use our fitness centre, for instance – less than five per cent – but it's part of the package. We have to be seen as generous in that offering, because that's still for many people what luxury is about." In the subtext of Simpson's words is an acknowledgement of the conversation that increasingly dominates the world of experiential travel: the proliferation of new wealth classes with sometimes wildly divergent concepts of luxury, and the capacity of a five-star resort to cater to one sort of discerning guest while not alienating another of a different stripe altogether. Fortunately for Wilderness, what North Island's progenitors – foremost among them the company's founder, the consultant and conservationist Colin Bell – created has enduring integrity of both purpose and function; the particular brand of luxury works, and so does the rehabilitation. Equally importantly, the island's owners, Russians who were frequent guests and who acquired it in late 2010, are genuinely invested in the conservation mission. "What underpins this is – very strictly and culturally – sustainability and conservation… and *care*," says Simpson of them. "We [Wilderness] would not have kept on the operations, the custodianship of North, if we weren't aligned on that point; it just wouldn't be worth it" for the company from a reputation standpoint. "The great news is, they are actually forcing us to revisit our environmental values and practices. Such is their own personal knowledge and expertise – you can't believe how much these people know about alternative energies and energy saving."

So while Simpson dispatches teams to explore power alternatives that harness wind, waves and solar energy, elsewhere the island's bounty is being leveraged. The new menus are not the product of Michelin-starred minds and palates and far-flung exotic ingredients, but rather the inspiration of local foodstuffs and creole traditions, with an organic garden at the island's centre supplying much of the produce. All of the timber deployed in the renovations and to build the new villas is being sourced on the island, from native dead or drift takamaka trees and invasive casuarina (imported and planted by the plantation owners to act as a salt break between the coconut plantations and the sea); native trees will be planted in their place.

The ambitious, and ongoing, rehabilitation of native flora and fauna also continues; North Island is a giant-tortoise sanctuary, and is home to as many as 100 of the native Aldabra species – some born here, some rescued from the surrounding islands. They sun themselves by the sides of the sand paths that criss-cross the forest in the interior, sometimes tipsy from gorging on over-ripe guavas, as guests and staff on mountain bikes and golf buggies pass by. A few are well over 100 years old. A robust population of black rats was eliminated once and for all in 2007, allowing for the restabilisation of nesting turtle and endemic bird numbers. Dozens of indigenous plants, decimated in the last century, were reintroduced from Mahé, then grown in North Island's nursery gardens; the majority of damaging invasive species have been cleared, and less pervasive populations of others, such as frangipani, the aforementioned guavas and the iconic latania palms, are carefully controlled.

Today, however, the majority of the seedlings for all endemic species are grown in the island's own nurseries – home over the years to some 100,000 plants. These nurseries have of late become arguably the island's most charming setting for private meals, during which guests partake of exquisite cuisine that incorporates native flora – breadfruit bircher museli here, a pawpaw pastry there, among others – while the island's resident naturalists, CJ Havemann and Tarryn Retief, expound on the history and importance of various fruits, seeds and leaves.

One morning I awake early to hike half the circumference of the island in the company of Elliott Mokhobo, another resident naturalist with a backstory that more or less encapsulates what North Island stands for. Having arrived from South Africa 13 years before, as one of the construction hands on the initial project, he stayed on and, over the course of a decade, educated himself and was trained in the biosciences of the island. Today he imparts his expertise to guests on such climbs, or over a meal, while also training members of staff. Pushing 60, Mokhobo hops from outcrop to boulder to fallen trunk as nimbly as an ibex; along the way, he introduces me to young tortoises (spryer, and much more timid, than their elder counterparts in the flats, they mostly retreat into the bush, or their shells, when we approach). Nuggets of the island's colonial history and conservation matters are interwoven with amusing character assessments of the endemic animals in residence, as he lifts fronds from the trail here, and there pauses to gently finger the leaves of a budding Vacoa des Montagne (Vakwa-d-Montanny in the creole dialect, another species of pandan palm), with a fruit like a tiny and very sour pineapple. At the summit, we stand on folds of black lavalite granite, the wind buffeting our flanks and kicking up the Silhouette channel hundreds of metres below us into white-tipped wavelets. Down on the beach, the villas spread serenely and gorgeously across the sand's edge. From the nearby takamaka jets a flash of what may be a Seychelles white-eye – one of the four once acutely endangered bird species that has repopulated the island in the past few years. All is solitude, privacy and the luxury of extravagant natural beauty – just as Wilderness had always intended it. ✦

Maria Shollenbarger travelled as a guest of Africa Travel (020-7529 8550; www.africatravel.co.uk), which can arrange a five-night stay at North Island (www.north-island.com) from £11,095 per person, including return flights, onward helicopter transfers, all meals, drinks, laundry, scuba-diving, sea kayaking, mountain-biking, sunset cruises, guided walks, fishing trips and the use of a buggy. Emirates (0844-800 2777; www.emirates.com) flies three times daily from London Gatwick to Seychelles International Airport Victoria via Dubai from £719 return.

ANDREW HOWARD (3), ANTHONY GROTE