

# Second nature

A twin-centre in the Seychelles combines wildlife and wilderness in the midst of the Indian Ocean, discovers **Katie McGonagle**

**Y**ou cannot put a price on nature," says turtle manager Robert Matombe, as he leads his daily nature walk from the resort's 'eco-kiosk' along Grand Anse Kerlan, the wide sweep of wild beachfront where dozens of turtles come to nest each year.

"When we started this project in 2015, we had about 40 nests per season, but now we get up to 95. The beach is like a maternity ward with nests everywhere. It's busy, but it's worth it."

Matombe started at Constance Lemuria on Praslin more than 20 years ago, beginning as a casual worker while volunteering with turtle rescue efforts, before studying to become a full-time conservation manager. He is so dedicated to the area's flora and fauna that during hawksbill turtle egg-laying season, he often sleeps on the beach to make sure baby turtles are not disturbed as they make their perilous journey to the sea. He starts each morning checking for new tracks that might signify a hatching and ends the day with a beach patrol to make sure the coast is clear.

There are signs asking guests to stay off the sand during key

periods, keep light to a minimum and stick to swimming in the smaller, sheltered bay, where you're more likely to find swaying palms and sunloungers than sea turtles searching for a place to lay their eggs.

## WILD ISLE

I join Matombe as he leads a small group of guests – including a French family with a toddler in tow, a British couple in their 50s and a smattering of others keen to learn more about the resort's wilder side – around the grounds. He points out a hedgehog-like tenrec scurrying through the undergrowth, as well as breadfruit and Indian almond trees among the vegetation. He then takes us to see the 10 resident tortoises, handily based near the kids' club so curious little ones can watch them chomping through piles of acacia leaves during daily feeding sessions. The largest, aptly named Donatello, weighs more than 300kg and is still growing at 62 years of age – these Aldabra tortoises can live up to 150 years.

Nature is infused throughout the resort, from my welcoming committee of a peacock with ➤

Golf course and beach at Constance Lemuria



## ASK THE expert

Constance Resorts culinary director **Jordi Vila** is from Barcelona and has worked in fine-dining restaurants in London, France, Sweden, Scotland, Ireland, New Zealand, the Caribbean and beyond, including Michelin-starred establishments such as El Bulli under Ferran Adrià.



"I like to buy as many products from around here as I can. It's important to understand the local flavours. Here, we get the best pumpkin, tomatoes, papayas, sweet potatoes and calabas [squash]. We avoid importing salmon, so use 100% local crab in our sushi. When I travel around the Seychelles, I learn so much. You need to meet people – the mother and grandmother – and see what they cook. Not many restaurants have done real Creole tastes, so people don't know it and don't come to the Seychelles for the food, which is a pity. When you understand Creole food, you realise how important it is for the culture of the Seychelles."

## BOOK IT

**Kuoni** offers a Seychelles twin-centre holiday, with four nights each at Constance Ephelia (half-board) and Constance Lemuria (with breakfast), both in a Junior Suite, with Emirates flights from Gatwick in July, from £3,599. [kuoni.co.uk](http://kuoni.co.uk)



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Lemuria's 18-hole golf course; Katie enjoys a sushi-making class; Ephelia's Presidential Villa; a hawksbill turtle



its resplendent plumage wandering through the grounds, to the flocks of scarlet-breasted Madagascar fody birds that entertain guests over breakfast, swooping in tandem from one tree to the next. It's fitting for an Indian Ocean isle that encompasses prehistoric forests, abundant wildlife and the endemic coco de mer palm tree.

Praslin is also home to the best beaches in the Seychelles, with wide sweeps of golden sand framed by hulking granite boulders and lush tropical foliage. The secluded stretch at Anse Georgette is just a few minutes' walk from the resort (with a shuttle for those who want sand minus the stroll). It's visible from the 'signature' 15th hole of Lemuria's golf course – the only 18-holer in the Seychelles, complimentary for guests – where I practise my swing and watch the ball sailing on to the green below. I don't think I'll be troubling Rory McIlroy any time soon, but it's easy to see why this spot is often requested by couples keen to pop the question or enjoy a private dinner à deux. Players who make it all the way to the 18th hole are rewarded with more views of neighbouring Cousine and main island Mahé.

## FRUITS OF THE FOREST

Mahé is also home to Lemuria's sister property, Constance Ephelia, a 40-minute drive from the capital. What it lacks in Praslin's 'castaway' vibe, it makes up for in amenities, with one of the largest spas in the Indian Ocean, a host of restaurants, plus watersports and fitness facilities.

It's arranged around a protected mangrove marine ecosystem where planting and conservation

efforts have helped seven types of mangrove species to flourish, providing a vital habitat for marine life and a filtering system to help protect coral. Tidal conditions allowing, guests can go kayaking through the mangroves to see the results up close.

There are also nature walks through the forest or even ziplining for brave souls who want a bird's-eye perspective, but we opt to enjoy the view from the water on a rather more relaxing boat trip. Setting off from the beach, it takes only moments for the resort to disappear into the verdant foliage – even the lofty hill villas seem to blend in with the landscape – as we venture out into the protected Port Launay Marine National Park, where waters teem with rainbow-bright fish, coral and even the occasional whale shark.

Learning about marine life is a key plank of the resort's revamped Coconut Tribe kids' club, where little ones can go crab-spotting along the beach or visit the mangroves.

Sustainability manager Markus Ultsch-Unrath says: "They watch so much TV at home, when they're here they should go out and experience nature. So the kids' club focused more on nature awareness. It's not only about the environment – it's the social aspect and the communities.

"Last year, we introduced honeybees into our mangroves and now we have three hives. It's very sweet – not as strong as a forest honey. We also added our own bottling plant almost 10 years ago. This is a good initiative, because before we had 1,000 plastic bottles a day just in the rooms, plus the restaurants



### FOODIE FAVOURITES

**Sushi at sea:** A sushi-making class at Constance Lemuria's barefoot beach restaurant, Takamaka, serves up new cooking know-how in a stunning setting on the shores of Petit Anse Kerlan.

**Creole cuisine:** Seselwa at Constance Ephelia offers an international buffet at breakfast, while a Creole twist at lunch and dinner features the likes of snapper ceviche, octopus curry and local stew sausage rougaille.

**Diva dining:** The culinary creativity at Lemuria's most stylish venue is on a par with any of London's Michelin-starred spots. Look out for the Pink Panther dessert, dreamed up based on Chef Jordi's childhood favourites and complete with a smoking chocolate cigar.

**Asian eats:** Ephelia's Adam & Eve indoor-outdoor venue offers sizzling southeast Asian dishes – a fusion of Thai, Singaporean, Indonesian and Malaysian cuisine – with an open kitchen and an open waterfront setting.



as well. Now we save 60,000 plastic bottles a month."

Other initiatives include turning cooking oil into biofuel, sourcing ingredients such as eggs from nearby farms and hosting a Creole fiesta each week with dancing, handmade crafts and the option to book a Creole cooking class.

While some high-end resorts promise to whisk guests away to an exclusive enclave far from the distractions of everyday life, these resorts have gone in the other direction and are refreshingly well connected to the landscape, people and local culture – making for a truly Seychellois stay. **TW**



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