



Aerial view of Desroches, main island of the Amirantes Group, and now an exclusive holiday resort.

Desroches

The peace and tranquillity of the outer islands makes them quite unlike anywhere else, says *Adrian Skerrett*.

The outer islands of Seychelles to the west and south of Mahé are visited by just a few privileged adventurers each year. In these beautiful and remote islands can be found magnificent beaches, the best dive sites, the best fishing opportunities and the ultimate get-away-from-it-all locations imaginable. Yet the tourism potential of these islands has barely been touched and most islands remain uninhabited. Fortunately, for those seeking to experience their magic without embarking upon a lengthy sea voyage, there is one island just over that blue horizon served by regular flights from Mahé and offering superb accommodation. That island is Desroches.

Desroches is the largest island in the Amirantes. At 230 kilometres from Mahé, it is the closest of the outer islands to the main islands, yet it feels a world away. After just a few days on Desroches, returning to Mahé feels like arriving at a huge, bustling metropolis compared to the peace and quiet of Desroches, where there is no traffic or even any paved roads, no noise other than the sound of the sea and the wind in the casuarinas trees, no pollution and very few people.

Desroches is an atoll, a circle of coral tracing the rim of an extinct volcano and surrounding a lagoon where millions of years in the past, there was a volcanic crater. One edge of that circle breaks the surface to form an island, a long narrow strip of land tracing the perimeter of the lagoon for a length of more than 5 kilometres, but just 330 metres wide at its narrowest point. At one time the island was known on English charts as Wood Island due to the extensive native forest, but in the late

18th Century the French named it Desroches in honour of Francois Julien Desroches, administrator of Ile de France (now Mauritius) and Bourbon (now Reunion).

The letter "C" has always been important in the human history of Desroches, from casuarinas, to coconuts, to (most recently) conservation. First it was casuarinas, tall fast-growing trees planted in 1835 when Desroches was first settled on a permanent basis. The casuarina tree grows tall, straight and fast in poor sandy soils giving a ready source of timber, fuel and charcoal. To this day the trees are exploited for their attractive wood, which has been used in the construction of the hotel and villas on the island.

Around 1880 in a second wave of settlement of Desroches, wall-to-wall coconuts were planted across the island. For more than a century, copra became a vital source of foreign exchange income to Seychelles and Desroches was a major contributor. Then in the late 20th century the industry fell into steep decline in the face of competition from the Far East. The copra mills of the islands fell silent. Fortunately for Seychelles, just as the copra industry was on the way out, and it seemed that many of the outer islands would be abandoned altogether, tourism arrived on the scene. Desroches Island Lodge was the first hotel to be built in the outer islands of Seychelles and, to this day, it is the only one served by five flights per week from Mahé.

Seychelles is the place for those seeking to escape the crowds to discover arguably the most beautiful, pristine tropical island destination in the world. Desroches Island Resort is perfect for those seeking to go one



Sea Turtle, one of many spectacular dive sightings.

step further. There are just 20 luxury Hotel Suites and 26 villas, all only a few steps away from the beach. The hotel and facilities are currently undergoing a complete revamp. The spa and dive and fishing centre are expanding, three new exotic restaurants are being developed as well as a gym, children's edu-centre and a business centre to complement the full range of five star facilities. The resort is situated at the western tip of the island close to the airstrip and blends pleasantly with the surroundings. All chalets have direct access to the beach. Despite the remote location of Desroches, there is satellite TV, telephone, air conditioning, and mini bars available in every chalet.

Getting around Desroches on foot is very easy, with well-kept pathways running parallel to the shoreline. However, to make it easier to reach the village, the conservation centre or the lighthouse at the opposite end of the island to the hotel, bicycles are provided for visitors.

Diving is possible all year around but conditions are best during October to April

The calm waters of the Desroches lagoon are ideal for boating and kayaking. Tuition and guidance for newcomers to sea-kayaking is available at the hotel and the sheltered waters of the lagoon provide the ideal conditions for beginners. Jet skiing and water skiing are prohibited to maintain the peaceful atmosphere. But there are other opportunities for those seeking excitement. Many visitors to Desroches come not to relax but to experience one of the finest locations for scuba diving and snorkelling in the Indian Ocean. The five star PADI and NAUI dive centre located next to the resort is fully equipped with top of the range BCDs, regulators, wetsuits and other necessary equipment. The centre takes divers to some outstanding dive sites, none

There are a number of easily accessible snorkelling reefs and coral outcrops around the island.



of which are more than 20 minutes from the island. There are calm sheltered sites suitable for beginners and more challenging sites for the experienced diver. They vary in depth from around 8 metres up to 40 metres.

Undoubtedly the most thrilling location is the Desroches Drop on the rim of the atoll where the outer reef falls steeply to tremendous depths. Where sunlight penetrates, Gorgonian sea fans cling to the subterranean cliffs but undoubtedly the most fascinating underwater features are a series of long, wide caves that burrow into the steep walls of the atoll. Shoals of colourful snappers or batfish hang motionless near the entrance. Venturing into the caves, the diver never knows quite what might be lurking within. The living curtain parts to let the diver pass and deep within the cave sting rays, turtles, nurse sharks and other creatures may be encountered. Diving is possible all year around but conditions are best during October to April.

Desroches is also famous for game fishing. Just offshore, within easy reach by fast boats, the edge of the Amirantes Bank provides some of the best fishing grounds in the world, where sailfish, tuna, bonito, dorado, kingfish and other much sought-after fish can be found. In addition, Desroches offers opportunities for salt water fly-fishing including bonefish and even blue water fly-fishing for larger pelagic fish. Traditional bottom fishing is excellent, producing some of the finest job fish, snappers and other excellent eating fish. Rods and fishing tackle are available at the hotel, although the serious fly-fisherman will probably wish to bring his own equipment. In between the excitement of landing your catch, a fishing trip is also an excellent opportunity to see dolphins and occasionally humpback whales in the deep offshore waters.

Back on dry land, Desroches is entering a new phase in the human history of the island. While the natural beauty of Desroches remains undiminished, almost two centuries of exploitation have left their mark on the landscape. Rats and cats were accidentally introduced, the native vegetation was largely replaced and seabird colonies were lost in the pursuit of profit. But today the emphasis is on conservation, supported by sustainable tourism. In 2008, the Desroches Foundation was formed as a partnership between the tourism investors on Desroches, Island Development Company as owners of the island, the Ministry of Environment and Island Conservation Society (a leading local nature conservation NGO). The goal of the foundation is to promote the conservation, rehabilitation and enhancement of Desroches Atoll to be among the finest restored tropical atoll ecosystems in the world, in harmony with sustainable low impact human development and ecotourism.

The first act of Desroches Foundation has been to produce a five-year

conservation management plan. In mid-2009, Island Conservation Society engaged a full-time Conservation Officer and other conservation staff to implement the plan. This will include monitoring programmes, marine and terrestrial surveys and a long-term project for the rehabilitation of the island to its former glory. Cats and rats will be eliminated and the evidence from other islands shows that this should lead to nesting seabirds returning to the island within a short space of time. Already, despite the presence of introduced predators two small colonies of wedge-tailed shearwaters survive and the island is used regularly by roosting brown noddies, bridled terns and others.

From both a local and a global perspective, the most important aspect of the terrestrial biodiversity of Desroches is the nesting turtles. Two species nest, the hawksbill and the green turtle. At Desroches turtles nest year-round, with the peak hawksbill season during the months of October to January and that of green turtles during the opposite season, February to September, although green turtles can nest in any month.

Surveys of the coastline of Desroches conducted in 2008 by Dr Jeanne A. Mortimer, a leading world authority on turtles, have identified the most sensitive turtle nesting beaches, worthy of protection. These occur along the north-east and south coasts. She estimates that during the 2007-08 nesting season some 50 females of each species nested. But this is only a rough estimate and one of the tasks of the personnel of the Island Conservation Society who will be permanently based on Desroches in the coming years will be to refine those estimates. These figures are significant in themselves but given the large size of the island and the excellent quality of the beaches, Desroches can easily accommodate even more nesting turtles, says Dr Mortimer. With new protection for turtles and their habitats, we can expect to see a significant rise in turtle numbers as we have at other sites where serious protection has been implemented. For example, at Aldabra atoll and Aride and Cousin Islands nesting turtles have been well protected for almost 40 years. In response, numbers of nesting females have increased some three- to six-fold at these sites.

In addition to the hotel and conservation centre, a small village on the north coast still survives as a reminder of the days when agriculture was the main industry with labourers from the granitic islands working on contract. But today, the main purpose of the Desroches village is to service the hotel. Fruit and vegetables are grown and other supplies from Mahé are landed by barge directly onto the beach. The interior of the island is still dominated by coconut and casuarinas together with scattered native broadleaf trees, especially bwa blan, while the coast is sheltered by a belt of veloutye, a salt-resistant shrub.

All four land bird species found on Desroches are introduced species. It was probably during the plantation days that house

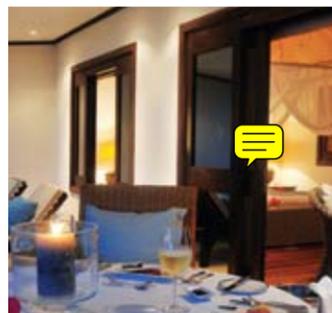
sparrows arrived, perhaps by accident with a cargo of rice, or perhaps deliberately – no one knows for sure. Today, they have ousted the more colourful Madagascar fody from around the hotel and village, but fodies are very common in the woodland. Tame barred ground doves were probably deliberately introduced for their endearing nature and they too are a common sight. Less easy to observe are grey francolin, introduced around 1875 to provide sport for plantation managers and occasional VIP visitors from the main islands. Once these game birds were common on many of the outer islands but today they survive just here and on Coetivy.

Small parties of migratory birds may be seen at the grassy margins of the airstrip, having somehow found their way across the Indian Ocean to spend the winter on this speck of land. Occasionally, rarities are to be seen such as colourful Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters and Amur falcons from north-east Asia. Desroches Island was the first island in Seychelles to record a sighting of Amur falcon back in 1995 and since then they have become fairly regular.

There is even a population of giant tortoises, native to Seychelles but wiped out from all islands except Aldabra by the late 19th century. The animals were introduced in modern times to give them a safe haven away from poachers and the island now supports a population of perhaps 50 or so of these fascinating creatures, just one more surprising aspect to the character of Desroches.

In fact, every island of Seychelles has its own character and a visit to Seychelles is not complete without a visit to at least one coral island. The peace and tranquillity of the outer islands makes them quite unlike anywhere else. However, if Desroches is not on your itinerary this time, never mind, you may just have to save it for next time. Otherwise you will never know what you missed. ☹

Relax in paradise and enjoy the 5 star luxury.



OWN YOUR OWN VILLA IN *Paradise* DESROCHES ISLAND - SEYCHELLES



Desroches Island
seychelles

The perfect paradise... located 230km south-west of Mahé is where you can own your own income generating Villa and dream holiday home. Desroches Island forms part of the Amirantes Archipelago, regarded as one of the most pristine, untouched islands in the world - gems that are passionately protected by the government. Desroches offers an array of activities and facilities unmatched on a tropical island – from a small luxury 20 suite Island Hotel, exotic restaurants, an extensive dive and fishing centre, spa and gym, to a children's edu-centre and a business centre to complement the full range of five star facilities. Activities are endless... with over 13km of unspoilt beaches and forested hinterland and a very low development density.

- The Villas are a mere 25 metres from the beach, and have 40 metres of beach frontage.
- Villas are all fully-furnished and are tastefully styled and equipped with all luxurious amenities. Along with the luxurious turn-key furnishings, 6 bicycles and 2 kayaks per villa complete the package.
- The Desroches Hotel provides a full service for all villa and guests' needs - including food, a butler and laundry service - leaving residents time only to relax and unwind...
- Option of joining the rental pool to earn a Euro income from the Villa optimising the investment even further.
- Seasons in Africa, a premier tourism company manage, maintain and market the Hotel and the Villas within the rental pool, making this a hassle free investment.
- Scheduled flights from Mahé to Desroches operate six days a week.
- As a Desroches Villa owner, buyers qualify to apply for Seychelles residency.

PHASE 1 VILLAS were launched November 2007, with 22 beachside villas sold to date out of a total of 28. The first 6 villas have been completed and handed over to their owners. The balance to be completed by November 2009. Just four remaining 450m² Villas with private rim flow swimming pool, four en suite air-conditioned bedrooms priced at \$ 2.5 Million with 50% and 100% shares available for the investor.

PHASE 2 VILLAS priced from \$ 3.5 Million consist of 22 Villas will split across both coasts. Ranging from 637m² upwards, each Villa comprises either three, four or five air-conditioned en suite bedrooms, with an open-air bath and shower, and three or four pools with timber decks overlooking the ocean. These are a result of extensive research undertaken on similar projects world-wide. Their modular design optimises rental desirability for hotel guests, while still applying the ethos of creating an environmentally friendly, homely island hideaway for Villa owners.

For further information,
contact: Jonathan Meyer

T +27 83 267 5215

E jonathan@m2props.co.za

www.desroches-island.com

Seasons in Africa
ADVENTURES • HOTELS • LODGES

www.seasonsinafrica.com

