



# Superlative Silhouette

Silhouette Island is remarkably unrecognised relative to many other Seychelles islands. Most notably, it is a biodiversity ark – one of the last great island wildernesses of the Indian Ocean – where conservation is at the dawn of a new era with the declaration of 93 per cent of the island as a National Park, and the recent opening of Silhouette Island Conservation Centre, writes [Benjamin Thompson](#).



**D**espite the imposing cloud-crowned façade, Silhouette is fairly unassuming when compared to its inner-island counterparts which gladly flaunt their national parks, beach awards, and exclusivity. A late arrival to the portfolio of paradises on offer to the Seychelles tourist, the island's allure is not so well established. It is even unfamiliar to some Seychellois, many of whom gaze across the seascape from northern Mahé, pondering the veracity of Silhouette's illustrious ghost stories, such as the baby ghost of Eva Dauban which resides on the top floor of the family's colonial plantation house, Grann Kaz.

Grann Kaz is a national monument; an archetype of creole architecture that greets all who emerge from the island's jetty. In 1860, the Dauban family became the first sole owners of Silhouette, allegedly purchasing one portion in exchange for a violin. Head of the family, Auguste Dauban, had the enterprising vision of growing coconut and other plantations, from which natural produce could be exported to neighbouring islands. Cinnamon, vanilla, rubber, and a number of tropical fruit trees were all attempted, but the mountainous topography prevented the business from flourishing. After more than a century of ownership, financial difficulties proved insurmountable and the island was sold, eventually passing to the Islands Development Company – a parastatal company.

Grann Kaz is the focal point of La Passe, now the only major village on the island, which is spread along the eastern plateau. This plateau is also home to the 5-star eco-conscious Hilton Seychelles Labriz Resort and Spa: the only resort on the island, with 111 spacious villas to accommodate holidaymakers along a stunning stretch of palm-fringed white sand.

Hilton Seychelles Labriz Resort and Spa offers a pizzeria and five restaurants that collectively provide guests with epicurean delight. Asian fusions are offered at Sakura; while at Portobello, Italian fare can be relished in the outlandish setting of the restaurant's wine cellar. Perhaps the most prestigious eatery is Tepanyaki: a

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Opposite top: *Grand Barbe beach and Mount Dauban.*

Below:  
*A pitcher plant atop Mount Pot-a-Eau.*

Below right:  
*A Sheath-tailed bat roost housing 28 individuals - the largest single population in the world.*

charming circular pagoda, intimately marooned in the wetland that flows through the middle of the resort. Expert chefs prepare an array of Japanese specialities before one's eager eyes, after which the results of their hard work are devoured. The Tepanyaki experience can only be rivalled by the Creole banquets served on the veranda of the Dauban family's former home, at Grann Kaz. From a refreshing smoked marlin and mango salad, to the attention-grabbing breadfruit fries, it offers the ultimate Seychelles dining experience. Furthermore, as twilight arrives, the talented mixologists at Lo Brizan conjure up luscious potions, that are to be sipped within a fire-kissed milieu, and accompanied by the soothing sound of lapping waves.

Further sensory pleasures can be unearthed at the resort's award winning Silhouette Spa – uniquely set amidst a boulder-rich forest, creating a stunning aesthetic, innate serenity, and concealing spacious treatment rooms built on stilts. Here, mollycoddled individuals can indulge from an exclusive and voguish spa menu, with holistic treatment experiences from Li'tya. Meanwhile, the Degrees area provides a tranquil grotto setting among endemic palms, where guests can unwind from the jacuzzi, plunge pool or lounger, beneath orbiting fruit bats and darting sunbirds.

The presence of the resort and its guests has in no way diluted the character of La Passe village. Most residents have retained their pre-existing professions, evident by sights of machete-wielding, tree-ascending fruit collectors. At low tide the machetes are exchanged for spears, as octopuses are sought from the hard-coral shallows. Meanwhile, an occasional tractor towing fallen palm leaves, roams the island's only road, and is a symbol of the community's determination to maintain

the upkeep of their home. La Passe boasts a beautiful long beach, warm local spirit, and six resident tortoises. However, it is what lies on the western side of Silhouette that is the island's best-kept secret.

The seldom-visited Grand Barbe plateau runs almost parallel to La Passe, along Silhouette's northwest coast. It is undoubtedly the most captivating part of the island, benefiting from the grandiose backdrop of Mount Dauban, the second highest peak in the country at 740 m (metres). Grand Barbe also exhibits one of the largest wetlands in Seychelles: a sprawling mangrove forest that provides an important refuge for an abundance of aquatic life. Likewise, a stunning stretch of sand extends along the shore and provides the most important turtle-nesting beach on Silhouette. It is not just the natural setting, but also the social history that makes Grand Barbe so distinctive. Once said to be bustling with some 60 residents, today a population of just three occupies those buildings that remain standing. The trio is outnumbered by five wild tortoises, which help control invasive vegetation. As such, the contrasting appearance of dilapidated buildings set amongst grazed greenery and well-kept communal spaces leaves ambitious trekkers with a sense of surrealism.

Fringed by a barrier reef creating a rebellious sea, and with Four kilometres of mountainous terrain separating it from La Passe, setting foot on Grand Barbe does not come easy. The rolling waves make mooring a boat challenging, and the only trail across the island is physically demanding. Trekking from La Passe to Grand Barbe involves crossing diverse environments: along the way exists a small shrine with a statue of the Virgin Mary, curiously positioned in the middle of the forest, whilst later, a gruelling, sun-laden descent



along baking slabs of rock must be negotiated to reach the plateau. However, adventurers are well rewarded for their efforts, sharing an empty beach paradise with hawksbill turtles, and meeting a tiny community consisting predominantly of tortoises.

An alternative hiking option is to visit Silhouette's congregation of the famed coco-de-mer – with their supersized seeds – at Jardin Marron. The trail retains an inspiring back story, having initially been trodden by slaves that fled La Passe in the 19th century. Sitting in a dip between two larger peaks, Jardin Marron further hosts a cornucopia of some of the most enigmatic reptiles and amphibians in Seychelles. As dusk approaches, a whistling crescendo of frog calls rings out. Some of these may be coming from *Sechellophryne gardineri*, one of the smallest frogs on earth, with adults easily fitting onto one's little fingernail. Equally elusive are the tiger chameleons (*Archaius tigris*), occasionally seen swaying along branches of guava and thief palm. This charismatic reptile possesses yellow-green body colouration with faint orange stripes or dots concentrated along the spine. Males have a whitish-light blue throat, while that of females is green with light coloration reduced to around the mouth, sometimes like an alluring bluish 'lipstick'. It may even turn out that the Silhouette chameleons are so genetically different from those on Mahé and Praslin, that they are classified as a new species or subspecies – pending on-going scientific analysis of their DNA (deoxyribonucleic acid). Regardless, from their highly specialised, strong, sticky tongue that darts from the mouth with remarkable precision, to their mimetic capabilities, and independently oscillating eyes, these lizards offer a huge thrill to fortuitous hikers. Additionally, one critter that will certainly be noticed is the innocuous giant millipede (*Sechelleptus seychellarum*), as it unhurriedly places hundreds of feet in front of hundreds more, along damp rocks and the forest floor.



Evolution intensifies on remote islands, often incorporating the phenomenon of 'island gigantism'; hereby emphasised by Silhouette's millipedes, tortoises and coco-de-mer palms. The Seychelles islands are the oldest mid-oceanic islands in the world, with the rocks on most of the inner islands having been dated to around 750 million years old. Silhouette however, is an unusual exception – being the eroded remains of a volcano that was created as the Seychelles microcontinent rifted apart from India, some 65 million years ago. The exact geophysical processes are not well understood, but it is theorised that the volcano was born from a rapid and unpredictable eruption akin to that of Mount St Helens (USA) in 1980. The actual volcano would once have towered above Mount Seychellois (the tallest peak in the country at 960m, located on Mahé). However, as time progressed, erosion showed no mercy. Nowadays, the best indicator of this ancient volcanism is the jagged outcrop at Ramasse Tout, a short walk southeast of La Passe. Ultimately, its comparatively recent birth renders Silhouette one of the youngest major islands in the country. Furthermore, unlike other members of the archipelago, it is not made out of granite, but the compositionally different igneous rock, syenite.

Today covering 20 square kilometres, Silhouette is one of the country's largest island destinations, but it is one that has remained quietly exclusive because of its limited development. Construction has been restricted thanks to good land management, a scarcity of flat land, and an awkward island topography that diverts much rainwater away from the catchment that feeds La Passe – inhibiting a larger village population. This lack of development and low anthropogenic impact has fortuitously benefitted a plethora of biodiversity, totalling some 2,000 species. Silhouette provides a final stronghold to an astonishing assortment of the archipelago's rarest fauna and flora.

**FURTHER INFORMATION**

The wellbeing of Silhouette Island is spearheaded by the 'Silhouette Foundation': a registered society that brings together a diverse group of interests. Members include environmental representatives from local NGO, ICS; the Ministry of Environment; Seychelles National Parks Authority; and worldwide conservation authority, IUCN. Seychelles Heritage Foundation and the local community represent cultural and historical interests. Conservation work is carried out by ICS and funded by the Government parastatal, Islands Development Company, and by Hilton Seychelles Labriz Resort & Spa; both of which are also represented on the Silhouette Foundation board, aiding the island to prosper as a praiseworthy tourist destination.

Silhouette is located 19 kilometres northwest of Mahé reachable via a 45-minute boat journey. Day visits can be arranged through the 'Silhouette Experience' package featuring return boat transfers from Bel Ombre jetty, National Park access courtesy of IDC, a 2-3 hour nature walk with ICS, three-course meal at Hilton Seychelles Labriz Resort & Spa, with time to enjoy La Passe beach, the resort's pool, and Lo Brizan bar. For booking enquiries, contact Silhouette Pavilion: 429 39 49.

Opposite top:  
*A dilapidated house  
at Grand Barbe  
village.*



Opposite bottom:  
*An ICS field scientist  
examines a tiger  
chameleon at Jardin  
Marron.*

Confined to the equatorial mist forests atop Mount Pot-a-Eau, is the carnivorous pitcher plant, *Nepenthes pervillei*. This cunning species lures naïve insects, with sugary nectar that is spread on the rim. With one ill-fated step, unfortunate victims slip into the bell-shaped chamber and perish within its viscous liquid. *N. pervillei* is a range-restricted plant, but fortunately lives among one of the most inaccessible locations on the island.

One of the first animals to be sighted by eager-eyed visitors is the giant fruit bat, which has one of the largest wingspans on the island, and soars both high and low, even during the day. The giant fruit bat is thriving. However, this species is one of two species of bat present on the island. The status of the second species, the (much smaller) sheath-tailed bat (*Coleura seychellensis*), couldn't be more contrasting: it is critically endangered, with a known global population of fewer than 100 individuals, and is among the rarest mammals of the world. Twenty-eight of these individuals survive on Silhouette within the sanctuary of a small boulder cave system; the location of which is justifiably classified.

The sheath-tailed bat cave is only visited by the Island Conservation Society (ICS), a resident team of conservationists that are responsible for promoting the natural integrity of Silhouette. The ICS team make a monthly roost count, employ predation deterring methods, and observe the species' foraging behaviour. Further to this work, ICS perform a number of monitoring activities, for example, making daily turtle patrols along Silhouette's beaches. The organisation works particularly closely with Hilton Seychelles Labriz Resort and Spa, offering a weekly nature talk to guests, and responding to turtles nesting outside guest villas. ICS have a conservation centre located adjacent to Grann Kaz, and welcome visitors who want more information on the island's wildlife.

Having attained national park status in 2010, and with an environmentally focused foundation entrusted with its welfare, Silhouette's future is in safe hands. It is one of the archipelago's most biodiverse hubs and understated utopias, where paranormal whispers still linger in the air. Some 65 million years on from its volcanic uprising, today, Silhouette oozes individualism, offering a superlative – yet unsung – Seychelles destination. ☼




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