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Seclusion in the Seychelles.

Delicate Balance

How to find paradise without losing it.

BY COSTAS CHRIST

“THE ONLY TIME I LOST MY TEMPER WITH a guest was when a couple were driving their golf cart back from dinner one night and hit Brutus, and then just kept going,” confided Andy Payne, the Wilderness Safaris visionary behind North Island, as we sat in the shade of a takamaka tree in the spectacular Seychelles archipelago. Brutus, it turns out, is a century-old Aldabra tortoise, one of the rarest species on our planet. “We found him the next morning on the side of the road seriously injured and flew in a doctor who saved his life. I firmly addressed my concerns with the guests.”

It was one of several stories that Andy shared with me about the challenges of managing tourism's impact on North Island. Despite our love

affair with them, wrapped in images of swaying palms and gin-clear lagoons, the truth is that islands and humans have had a very mixed relationship. Think of islands as fragile planets in a galaxy of water. For millions of years they have evolved in isolation, which means they represent some of the most sensitive ecosystems in existence - delicate balances of life so finely tuned to a unique biological rhythm that careless disturbances by an influx of people can lead to their demise. There is even a term for it: paradise lost.

North Island's goal is to reverse that trend. Located just below the equator in the Indian Ocean, it is one of the world's only granitic islands, dating back to the supercontinent of Gondwana, which split apart in prehistoric times, separating India

FRANKLIN/REDFERNS

from Africa. Like that of the Galápagos, the flora and fauna on North and the other Seychelles islands represent unique species. When Europeans arrived some 200 years ago (the islands had remained uninhabited until then), they thought they had found the Garden of Eden – literally. But with the arrival of people came invasive species and, soon, the disappearance of native animals and plants. This makes the North Island story that much more remarkable.

In 1997, Wilderness Safaris bought the island and began working to bring it back as near as possible to its original Edenlike state. The project is appropriately called “Noah’s Ark” – creating a sanctuary for the reintroduction of wildlife on the verge of extinction, such as the endangered white-eye bird, fewer than 500 of which remain today. And the best part of this sustainable tourism conservation project – which Wilderness Safaris funds by operating an exclusive private-island experience – is the role that you, the visitor, get to play. Call it doing well by doing good. Just by staying in one of the ten 4,890-square-foot villas designed by eco-architect Silvio Rech and hand-built with natural recycled materials, you are helping to safeguard biodiversity for future generations. That the villas come with a private butler, spa pavilion, daily chef-prepared meals, and a top-vintage wine cellar is more than an added bonus. Consider it paradise found.

MORE GREEN ISLAND ESCAPES

Easter Island, Chile

Upon reaching Easter Island’s shores in 1774, veteran explorer Captain Cook penned in his journal, “This is the farthest we have come.” Located some 2,200 miles from mainland Chile, Rapa Nui – as the island is called by the descendants of ancient Polynesian mariners who crossed the Pacific to get here – is remote by any standard. Its past remains shrouded in mystery, including the origin of more than 800 monolithic carved statues that encircle it, some weighing as much as 80 tons. Now a designated World Heritage site, its sparse population and stunning geography – natural rock bathing pools, lava tubes, and towering coastal ridges – combined with a plethora of archaeological sites, make it a haven for discovery where few tourists roam. To protect the sanctity of Rapa Nui’s fragile ecology, explorer Rapa Nui’s 30-room **Posada de Mike Rapu** follows strict guidelines – in 2009 it won the most rigorous rating by the U.S. Green Building Council, becoming South America’s first hotel certified for Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED). Daily mountain bike, horseback, and hiking treks set out from the Posada on ancient trails, including one aptly called “te Pito o te Henua” – the Navel of the World – the first inhabitants’ name for the island.

Moyo Island, Indonesia

Amanresorts founder Adrian Zecha may have made his mark as a pioneer of luxury boutique hotels in Asia, but at **Amanwana** (“peaceful forest”), his hideout on 139-square-mile Moyo Island just east of Bali, he turned his attention to ecotourism. The island is a designated wildlife reserve, and the reefs offshore are part of the Coral Triangle, a stretch of ocean that contains the highest marine biodiversity on Earth (there are more kinds of fish found here than there are bird species in the Amazon). And Amanwana aims to help keep it that way by employing local villagers and supporting their efforts in managing the forest and marine resources. The “camp,” as the staff call it, includes 20 walk-in tents and cultivated organic gardens that provide herbs, fruits, and vegetables for the open-air restaurant. But camp, in this case, is more a canvas-walled nature palace, designed with a soft environmental footprint.

Punta Cana, Dominican Republic

Punta Cana is not remote or untouched, but when it comes to green standards, Grupo Puntacana and its signature retreat, **Tortuga Bay**, have forever changed Caribbean resort development. Its Tom Pazio- and P. B. Dye-designed golf courses were the first in the region to use paspalum hybrid grass, which can be irrigated with salt water,



Easter Island’s monolithic marvels.



Doing well on North Island.



Camp in comfort at Amanwana tent resort.

EASTER ISLAND: BOB KRIST/CORBIS



A designer villa at Tortuga Bay.



Kayaking at Clayoquot Wilderness Resort.

saving millions of gallons of freshwater resources. It's one of the resort's many sustainable tourism initiatives, including building a recycling center, providing free health-care services to local communities, and establishing an ecological foundation to

support island conservation. The best part is experiencing the resort's 26 square miles of lush Caribbean landscape firsthand, from the organic honeybee hives to the private nature reserve, while staying at one of 13 expansive Oscar de la Renta-designed villas.

Vancouver Island, Canada

Not all exotic islands are tropical hideaways. The largest among British Columbia's Gulf archipelago, Vancouver Island is cool in climate but has one of the most diverse environments of any island in the world, with dense rain forest, mountain peaks, open meadows, fjords, lakes, waterfalls, and miles of sandy beaches. You can sample it all from **Clayoquot Wilderness Resort** within the Clayoquot Sound Biosphere Reserve, a UNESCO-designated area representing one of the world's most important natural and cultural heritage regions. The setting governs all aspects of the resort's sustainable tourism practices: Guests participate in customized leave-no-trace activities, ranging from learning how to surf on private beaches to kayaking mountain rivers or hiking in a forest of giant cedars more than 1,000 years old. The resort's 20 walk-in tents, each with canopy beds, Persian rugs, and antique dressers, also feature modern composting toilets and raised wooden walkways to avoid damaging the surrounding environment. VI

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