

Jessie and Jules
Seychelles November 2006





On the mountainous main island of Mahe we stayed in a little hotel perched on the steep green hillside directly above the town of Victoria. The hotel is hidden behind the upper white building in this photo.



From our room at the hotel we had a fine view over the town and port of Victoria.



Here you can see what the centre of town looks like on a busy Monday morning.

The clock tower (centre right) is one of Victoria's historic features.



Then, back to the airport to find this colourful little plane designated for our flight to Bird Island. (Not exactly on time because they had to change the tire first!)



In the plane's tiny cabin, too low to stand up straight, we squeezed into our seats just behind the cockpit.

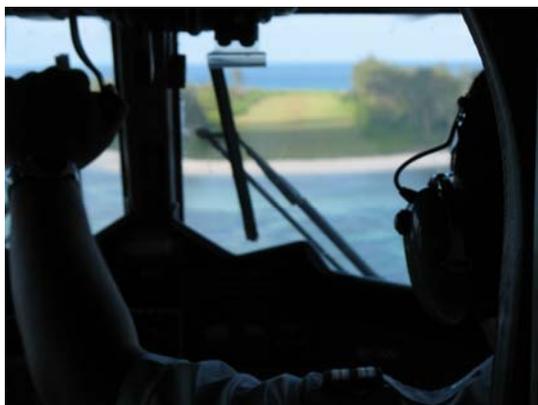


For the next half hour we sat enveloped in roaring engine noise - too loud for much thought, let alone talk. A few mysteries remained unsolved: How old is this plane? And why are the indicators in some of the many gauges pointing so close to the red zones?

At least the sea below looked beautiful, and calm...



Then the plane banked slightly - and right on cue Bird Island appeared below. This isolated little coralline sand cay is the northernmost outlier of the Seychelles, about 100km north of Mahe.



Rather different from landing at an international airport in a jumbo jet!

It was all literally hands-on work for our pilot, lining up the small cleared strip down the centre of Bird Island, and taking care to stop in good time. Beyond the strip there's nothing but deep blue ocean



Welcome to Bird Island!

Within the screen of low shrubs and tall casuarinas along the island's shoreline we found a wide clearing, freshly mown...



... by giant tortoises!



Simple luxury awaited us in our private cabin, including a wide shady veranda just perfect for bird-watching without even leaving home.



Our bird-neighbours vastly outnumbered humans, and most amazing, there was a gorgeous white-tailed tropic bird calmly sitting on her nest right in front of our veranda.



It was only a very short stroll to the beach, with fantastic ocean views anywhere you cared to look, and birds on every branch...just a few of them in the pics that follow below.



Fairy tern
(*Gygis alba*)



Noddies
(*Phaethon lepturus*)



Madagascar Fody
(*Foudia madagascariensis*)



Some of the birds even help clean up at breakfast time – plenty of little ground doves (also called peaceful doves or zebra doves - *Geopelia striata*) that seemed to find the tiniest and tastiest crumbs right under our feet, but needed a bit of help when confronted with a piece of toast.



Bird Island is home to two rare species of tortoises that are native to Indian Ocean islands. The biggest are Seychelles giant tortoises, the smaller ones (still much bigger than any south African or Australian tortoises!) are Madagascan radiated tortoises.



Seychelles giant tortoise
(Scientific name *Dipsochelys dussumieri*, also known as *Geochelone gigantea*)



Madagascar radiated tortoise
(Scientific name *Geochelone radiata* or *Astrochelys radiata*)



Noddy with its chick in the nest.



Fairy tern sitting on her single egg, which is simply wedged in the angle between two branches. It looked a most precarious sort of 'nest' but evidently it works for them.



Seychelles sunbird at its neatly woven nest hanging from the casuarina branches
(*Nectarina dussumieri*)



It was nesting season for sea turtles as well as birds.
Here's a hawkbill turtle emerging from the ocean to look for a nesting place on the island.
Seychelles hawkbills have the unusual habit of nesting during the day, whereas most sea turtles nest at night.
(*Eretmochelys imbricata*)



Even though Bird Island is small, there are so many different birds and turtles all nesting at the same time that the island's conservation officer, Robby, is constantly on the go to keep up his monitoring programs.

In the photo here Robby was measuring and tagging a hawksbill turtle among dense shrubs on the edge of the island, their favourite nesting habitat here.



Then, having laid her eggs and carefully covered and camouflaged her nest, Mrs Hawksbill was in a hurry to leave the beach...



... and dived as soon as she reached the water, heading out to sea for about two weeks of well-earned rest before returning to lay her next clutch of eggs.



While the hawksbill ladies were presumably hanging out well offshore in deep water, Jules went snorkelling regularly in the shallows close to the beach.

The sea was so clear and warm that Jessie went in for a quick dip too!



Among the other interesting creatures around us were these brilliant and gold day-geckoes that scampered about the trees as well as up and down the frames and rafters of our cabin.
(*Phelsuma* sp.)



And there were thousands of ghost crabs, each one diligently scooping out 'arm-loads' of sand to clear out its burrow between tides.
(*Ocypode* sp.)



A gorgeous sunset to round off a lovely day was followed by an amazingly peaceful night despite the thousands of noisy birds all around us.

There were going to be lots more photos but next day we got the terrible news of Paul's sudden death in Cape Town.



The last picture here was just before our hastily arranged early departure from Bird Island – another vintage plane ready to take us to Mahe. By various bigger planes we travelled on from Mahe to Nairobi, Nairobi to Johannesburg, Johannesburg to Cape Town, to join with family and friends in mourning Paul's passing and celebrating his life.