

The Legendary Vallée de Mai

by Adrian Skerrett.

Photos © Christopher Kaiser-Bunbury, Barbel Koch and Aurlen Brusini, Seychelles Islands Foundation.

In March 2013, almost 30 years to the day from the designation of Vallée de Mai as the second World Heritage Site of Seychelles, President James Michel welcomed the arrival of Air Seychelles' second Airbus A330-200 at Seychelles International Airport. Also named 'Vallée de Mai', this was a proud milestone in the history of the national airline. Likewise, the Vallée de Mai on Praslin, is a source of pride for every Seychellois as an emblem of the unique environment of Seychelles.

Most visitors to Seychelles are drawn by the spell of famous beaches and clear azure seas, or by dreams of magical islands fringed with sighing palms; so it is perhaps a little ironic that the nation's number one visitor attraction is in the centre of the second largest island, far from the sound and sight of the ocean. Yet if there is one place to which a pilgrimage is almost mandatory for every visitor it is the Vallée de Mai, a spellbinding and quite unique World Heritage Site which is unlike anywhere else on earth.

You could think of the Vallée de Mai as a secret valley left behind when the rest of the world moved on: part of earth's dim, distant, mythic memory. The atmosphere within has hypnotized visitors since its discovery. Home, visiting in 1870 wrote, "I can conceive of no more antediluvian place in the world than that ravine." Athol Thomas agreed. "There was an atmosphere about the place. The stream had been tinkling across the stones for centuries while the coco de mer trees grew silently inch by inch. How many thousands of years had it been like this?"

General Gordon felt he had the answer. "I found I think Eden in the Seychelles Islands and the two trees of life and knowledge, both very wonderful" he wrote. Gordon was fervently religious but had a scientific mind. He was a friend of T.H. Huxley, who was undismayed by Darwin's theory of the origin of species and yet a firm believer in biblical



truths. In 1881, he was sent to Seychelles at the request of the British Government to advise upon the defence of the islands. Within a short time of his arrival at Mahe he concluded that land defences would be absurd. Seychelles could only be protected by sea power. Job done, Gordon set off to explore Praslin, where he had heard a mysterious tree grew in a mysterious valley. Could this be the legendary Garden of Eden?

Gordon believed it was. The Old Testament taught him that shapes and objects had spiritual meaning. He believed there was a special significance to the coco de mer trees of Vallée de Mai. Writing to Sir William Thiselton-Dyer at Kew Gardens he said, "The fruit is shaped like the human heart, the bud or stem which attached it to the branch is like the male organ of generation. When the husk is taken off, the inner double nut is like the belly or thigh of a woman....In a word, its lines are those of the male and female organs of generation." Gordon remarked upon the presence in the Vallée de Mai of breadfruit, the tree of life, (unaware this was introduced to Seychelles) and of a species of snake. In his design for a Seychelles coat of arms he showed a snake ascending a coco de mer tree to fetch a fruit from the tree of knowledge. He drew a map to illustrate his theory that "the Indian Ocean was once a continent before flood" and the Vallée de Mai was man's lost Paradise.

Apart from an enduring legend which suitably befitted the enigmatic beauty of Seychelles, Gordon's Garden of Eden theory had another more immediate impact. The Governor of Seychelles, impressed by Gordon's passion, wrote to Lord Kimberley, the Colonial Secretary urging that the Vallée de Mai be preserved and proposing that a learned society raise the funds with "...which the coco de mer valley in the possession of the old Scotch sailor Campbell might be bought."



Seychelles, despite its small size, is the only country on earth that donates the entire income from its number one visitor attraction to nature conservation.

Left: Vallée de Mai Visitor Centre opened in 2010 by President James Michel.

Today, the learned society charged with custodianship of Vallée de Mai is Seychelles Islands Foundation. SIF is a public trust established by law to protect the nation's two World Heritage Sites, Aldabra and Vallée de Mai and the President of Seychelles is its patron. Aldabra is itself a remarkable and world-renowned natural treasure house but its isolation means it has few visitors and therefore lacks a source of regular income. Fortunately the Vallée de Mai provides sufficient revenue to support the conservation and research at both locations. In turn, the scientific techniques and skills learned by SIF staff at Aldabra are transferred back to the Vallée de Mai. Current keystone research includes intensive black parrot breeding season monitoring, a study of the pollination and genetics of the coco de mer and a European Union funded project to tackle the threat to the Vallée de Mai posed by invasive species such as the crazy ant.

The valley lies at the heart of the island of Praslin, midway between Grande Anse and Baie St Anne and is open daily from 8am to 5.30pm. At the entrance there is a Visitor Centre, opened in 2010 by the patron President Michel. This is the base from which a visit to Vallée de Mai begins. Education is an important part of the mission of SIF and an Education and Outreach Project Officer is on hand to share the secrets of Seychelles' natural environment with visitors. "We want the Vallée de Mai Visitor Centre to be a stepping stone not just to the incredible ecology of the Vallée, but to a better understanding of conservation in general", says SIF Chief Executive Officer, Dr. Frauke Fleischer-Dogley. "We hope

that the international visitors who come to the Vallée de Mai will leave impressed by what they have seen and learnt, and inspired to get involved in conservation at home."

The education room is also the base for the 'Friends of the Vallée de Mai', a grouping of conservation clubs established in Praslin schools to educate and engage with the next generation. "We do a lot of work with schools, especially on Praslin," explains Frauke Fleischer-Dogley, "because we believe it is essential that young people grow up with an understanding of the importance of environmental protection and conservation, of the need for sustainable resource use, and an awareness that the environment, and especially the Vallée de Mai, is central to culture, employment, community and society on Praslin."

There are signs that this strong investment in environmental education in Seychelles is paying dividends. A recent study by Imperial College London provided the first ever evidence from anywhere in the world that environmental education can be transferred between generations and affect behaviour. In other words, teach the kids to respect the environment and they will teach their parents to do the same. "School children in the Seychelles are fortunate to have a curriculum that emphasises the teaching of environmental concepts across a broad range of subjects," said lead author of the study, Peter Damerell of Imperial's Department of Life Sciences.



SIF's work to ensure visitor satisfaction was also recognised in 2012 with the award of a TripAdvisor Certificate of Excellence, after the Vallée de Mai consistently achieved high scores from visitors, placing it in the top 10 per cent of global tourist attractions rated by the website.

Once inside the valley, you become a time-traveller. Almost instinctively, most visitors begin to whisper, as though they are wandering down the aisles of a great cathedral. The enormous leaves of the coco de mer palms tower high above you like green Gothic vaulting. Even if you have no interest in plants at all, this is an awe-inspiring place. The dry leaf-litter, feet thick, rustles as geckos scuttle by. Somewhere invisible streams tinkle, and the giant leaves clatter in breezes that do not reach the shaded forest floor. Otherwise the silence is broken only by the whistle of the Seychelles Black Parrot, the national bird of Seychelles.

About a quarter of the trees in the valley are coco de mer palms and almost half the remainder are other palms found only in Seychelles. The coco de mer produces the longest leaves and the heaviest seeds in the plant kingdom, the latter weighing 20 kilos or more. In keeping with the slow pace of life of the valley, palms take 15 to 50 years to reach maturity and bear fruits which may take up to 9 months to germinate. The male coco de mer grows to about 15 metres (but can be considerably higher) and the female to 9.5 metres. This size difference may aid wind pollination and also, a smaller female tree, heavily laden with perhaps a dozen coco de mer nuts may be less susceptible to being felled by high winds. Trees may live for 200 years or more and legends tell of even greater longevity, though two centuries is quite remarkable for a palm without any need for exaggeration. According to Seychelles folklore, on stormy nights the male trees uproot themselves and engage in passionate love-making with the female palms. Some say that witnesses to this orgy are certain to die.

Before the discovery of Seychelles, a few coco de mer nuts were washed up on Indian Ocean shorelines and so the myth was created that this 'coconut of the sea' came from a tree which grew on the sea bed. The suggestive two-lobed form of the nut, which resembles the female pelvis, then gave rise to the belief that it had powers as an aphrodisiac. For centuries the nuts commanded high prices because no one knew where to find them. Only in the 18th century, when the islands were mapped and settled, was the secret of the source of the nuts revealed. The market was quickly flooded so that one trader, Charles Casulo, set fire to the forest in an attempt to keep his

prices high. Fortunately, somehow, the Vallée de Mai survived.

Other endemic palms found here include thief palm (*latannyyen fey*), with its broad, undivided leaves which got its English name from the fact that the first specimen sent to Europe was stolen from Kew Botanical Gardens. Millipede palm (*latannyyen milpat*) has divided leaves, reminiscent of the legs of a millipede. Palmiste (palmis) is a splendid, tall palm with a green edible shoot near its tip. This was the source of millionaires' salad, so called because an entire tree had to be sacrificed to obtain it and the species became endangered. It is now protected and today the palmiste on the menu of some restaurants comes from the shoots of coconut trees. Finally, the *latannyyen oban*, the baby of the group has a slender trunk and is of diminutive stature.

Seychelles Black Parrot nests in holes in rotten trees and walking along the nature trail you may see artificial nest boxes, made from hollowed out coconut palms, which have been erected by SIF. Other endemic birds to be seen include the Seychelles Blue Pigeon and Seychelles Bulbul while from the viewpoint on the trail, the Seychelles Swiftlet can be seen hawking for insects above the trees.

The preservation of Vallée de Mai for future generations is no small achievement. Seychelles, despite its small size, is the only country on earth that donates the entire income from its number one visitor attraction to nature conservation. "SIF is responsible for the management, conservation and research of the Vallée de Mai," says Frauke Dogley "But we are quite clear that our role is that of a custodian. The Vallée de Mai belongs to all the people of Seychelles and the world and we want to spread this sense of ownership – and the responsibilities that come with it – as widely as possible." ☺

