

Legends of the Coco de Mer

By Anne Pinto-Rodrigues

Not too far from the Tanglin Gate of the Singapore Botanic Gardens, grow four young palms of a rare and endangered kind. These are the coco de mer (*Lodoicea maldivica*) palms whose only natural habitat is on the islands of Praslin and Curieuse in the Seychelles.

It is said that in ancient times sailors observed large nuts floating at sea and hence, named them *coco de mer*, French for 'coconuts of the sea'. Starved of female company, the sailors considered the nut a welcome sight because its shape bears an uncanny resemblance to the human female pelvic area.

Ferdinand Magellan, the Portuguese explorer who led the first expedition that circumnavigated the world (1519-1522), observed and recorded the presence of these floating, bi-lobed nuts during his voyage. They were also found washed up on beaches as far east as the Maldives, India, Sri Lanka and even the islands of the Malay world. For centuries, the exact origins of the sea coconut were unknown, so legends abounded. According to Malay folklore, this mysterious nut grew on a magic tree (*pauh janggi*) in a massive whirlpool known as the Navel of the Seas (*pusat tasek*).

With such magical origins assigned to the coco de mer and its erotic shape, the nuts were highly prized. Royalty and the wealthy across the world were willing to pay huge sums of money to acquire this iconic nut. The story goes that in 1602, the Sultan of Bantam (also known as Banten, a port city on the northwest coast of Java) gifted the Dutch Admiral Wolfert Hermansson with a single coco de mer for his help in defending Bantam against the Portuguese. Such was the value accorded to this nut. It is also believed that the very same nut was later acquired by Emperor Rudolph II von Habsburg (1552-1612) for 4,000 gold florins, a small fortune even by today's standards. Intricately carved nuts as well as gold and silver gilded wares fashioned from the nuts, made their appearance in royal households across Asia, the Middle East and Europe.



The coco de mer nut which bears an uncanny resemblance to the human female pelvic area

In 1768, French mariners based on the Isle de France in the Indian Ocean (modern-day Mauritius) went in search of food and timber. They arrived on a palm-covered island known as Isle de Palme (Praslin Island in today's Seychelles) and soon realised that the fruit borne by the palms was indeed the much sought-after coco de mer. With hopes of getting rich quick, they harvested these nuts

in large numbers and took them to India for sale. The secret location of the coco de mer palms was now revealed to the world and with a plentiful supply, the nuts soon lost their value.



The towering canopy of the Vallée de Mai, remnant of a primeval palm forest and home of the coco de mer palm.

Today, the export of these nuts is very strictly regulated by Seychelles law.

The coco de mer palm is dioecious; it has separate male and female plants. The female plant produces the huge fruits which contain the nut. The fruit can weigh as much as 42 kilogrammes and holds the distinction of being the heaviest and largest fruit in the plant kingdom. When the fruit is de-husked, the nut it holds inside can weigh up to 20 kilogrammes. The best place to see the coco de mer in its natural setting is the Vallée de Mai, a UNESCO World Heritage Site in the island of Praslin in the Seychelles. This remnant of a primeval palm forest is managed by the Seychelles Islands Foundation (SIF), a public trust. SIF is dealing with several challenges regarding the conservation of this endangered palm species because of nut poachers.

The fabled coco de mer palm is a true marvel of nature and the tales surrounding it are as tall as the palm itself.



The female plant of the coco de mer, bearing fruit which are the heaviest and largest in the plant kingdom

Anne Pinto-Rodrigues recently spent some time observing the flora and fauna of the Seychelles and writes about her experiences there on her blog No Roads Barred (www.noroadbarred.wordpress.com)

All photos by the author