



# Aride

## an island Restored

Seychelles has come a long way since the International Airport opened for business. Whilst the country as a whole has been transformed by the resulting human development, Aride is an exception because it has been travelling back through time, moving closer to being the Eden that existed here before humans discovered these beautiful islands, says **Adrian Skerrett**.

In 1972, tourism arrived in Seychelles. A once-isolated population embraced the modern world. New roads replaced dirt tracks; new hotels and buildings were constructed. Seychelles grew from having a relatively poor subsistence economy into a middle-income country with a prosperous way of life. The beauty of Seychelles remains undeniable but progress always comes at a price. Increased pressure on nature has been inevitable. However, Seychelles has done much to preserve and protect the thing that makes it unique and attracts so many visitors, and in particular its environment. Aride is a shining example of the way in which progress and prosperity can go hand in hand to create a more natural, richer world.

When Aride came up for sale in 1973 with a price tag of £40,000 (equivalent to almost one million pounds at today's values) it was saved for posterity by the philanthropist, Christopher Cadbury. He gifted the funds to UK's Royal Society of Wildlife Trusts (RSWT) who



purchased the island just one year after the airport's ribbons had been cut and ran it successfully for many years before passing responsibility to the local Island Conservation Society (ICS). Today, ICS owns and manages Aride Island and their conservation staff are Aride's only inhabitants.

Even in 1973, Aride was regarded as something special though it had, like other islands, suffered from exploitation. The original forest had been removed, cats had been introduced and seabird's eggs were collected and shipped to Praslin. Fortunately rats never arrived and the absence of streams (hence the name Aride) made the island much less attractive to settlers than others. Landing can be difficult and consequently the size of boats that can

come directly on to the shore is limited. This factor (plus a little bit of luck) meant that Aride is the largest island in Seychelles never to have suffered from the scourge of rats. Despite exploitation, birds and plants survived so that the seeds of recovery were all there. Aride was bruised, but not beaten.

Since Christopher Cadbury stepped in, the number of birds, the variety of species, the native forest and the overall biodiversity of the island have increased in spectacular fashion. Today Aride is a fragment of a lost world, dominated by birds and reptiles that existed before the arrival of man. It is not just another island: it is the best island on which to experience Seychelles as it was before any human footprint appeared on these shores. What is more, because

it requires a little more effort to reach than the easily accessible satellite islands of Mahé and Praslin, it receives fewer visitors. For the discerning tourist this affords the opportunity to escape the crowds and experience something special, for Aride is one of the finest tropical nature reserves in the world. At the same time you do not need to be a nature enthusiast to appreciate how different Aride is. Visit Aride for a taste of Seychelles as it was centuries ago: pristine, stunningly beautiful and positively bursting with life.

Aride is home to more breeding seabirds of more species than the other 40 granitic islands of Seychelles added together. There are land birds unique to Seychelles, a beautiful gardenia shrub found nowhere else, a fabulous coral



## FEATURE: ARIDE ISLAND

reef and one of the highest densities of lizards in the world. At the pinnacle of the nature trail you will find the most spectacular view in granitic Seychelles. Reaching the summit requires some effort but at the top there is a wonderful reward which makes the exertion worthwhile: the cliffs drop away at your feet, the breeze cools the face and the glitter of ocean dazzles the eyes. Delicate white fairy terns flutter curiously almost within touching distance and beyond there are spirals of majestic frigatebirds climbing upwards on two-metre wingspans. Curiously, frigatebirds do not breed on Aride despite the huge numbers present. Aride represents a staging post on their long cyclical foraging journeys from Aldabra and perhaps even further afield.

Among the breeding birds of Aride are the world's largest populations of two species: lesser noddy and tropical shearwater. Noddies nest in trees all over the island, their calls resonating through the forest during the day. A speciality of the Indian Ocean, they get their name from their curious nodding courtship rituals. By contrast, shearwaters are nocturnal, emerging from their burrows just before dawn to climb trees and launch themselves into the air. Other breeding seabirds include roseate terns of a distinctive race found only in the western Indian Ocean. Named arideensis after the island, Aride is of course its stronghold and is the only viable breeding ground in all the granitic islands.

When Aride was purchased by RSWT none of the 12 land bird species unique to granitic Seychelles was present there. Today there are five. Seychelles warblers were transferred to the island in 1989 and it is now the world's stronghold for the species, with greater numbers living here than on all its other island homes combined. Later, Seychelles magpie-robins were transferred and a new population established for a species once described as the rarest

**Right:** Magpie Robin.



*Visit Aride for a taste of Seychelles as it was centuries ago: **pristine, stunningly beautiful and positively bursting with life.***

in the world. Magpie-robins suffered a massive decline following human settlement until fewer than 20 remained, all confined to Frégate. Today, thanks to translocations to other islands, including Aride, numbers have increased more than ten-fold. Later,

**Below:** A fairy tern.



Seychelles fodies were also successfully transferred and, in the meantime, two other species, Seychelles blue pigeons and Seychelles sunbirds did not wait for human assistance: incredibly they flew across open ocean to found new colonies on Aride themselves.

Hand in hand with the recovery of bird populations has come the restoration of the natural forest. Approaching Aride from the sea it is noticeable that, unlike the other islands, coconut palms are confined to the shoreline. Introduced plants have been virtually eliminated and native plants have thrived. Among these is Wright's gardenia, a beautiful shrub with fragrant flowers, found in its natural state only here. Two and a half centuries since the establishment of the first settlement in Seychelles, Aride is the ultimate island for those looking for a window on a world that existed before any human footstep touched these shores.

Trips to Aride can be arranged through Praslin boat operators, tour operators and larger hotels. **Alternatively call Aride on 2719778 for advice.**