

The Seychellois je ne sais quoi

We asked Richard Mancienne, owner of Mahé's popular Boathouse restaurant, for advice on how to fit into Seychelles life.

"To ask somebody how he or she is, say 'Ki dir?' [key-dheer]. It's a bit of French patois. If someone asks you 'Ki dir?' then you say 'Ne pas.' It means there's nothing good and there's nothing bad. Everything is all right."

"People tend to be very open in Seychelles. If they think you've grown a bit, they'll say to you, 'Oh, you've gone fat.' They don't think twice about asking you, 'Is that your wife? She's young for you.' So if you're an outsider and you want to fit in, be openly friendly and talkative."

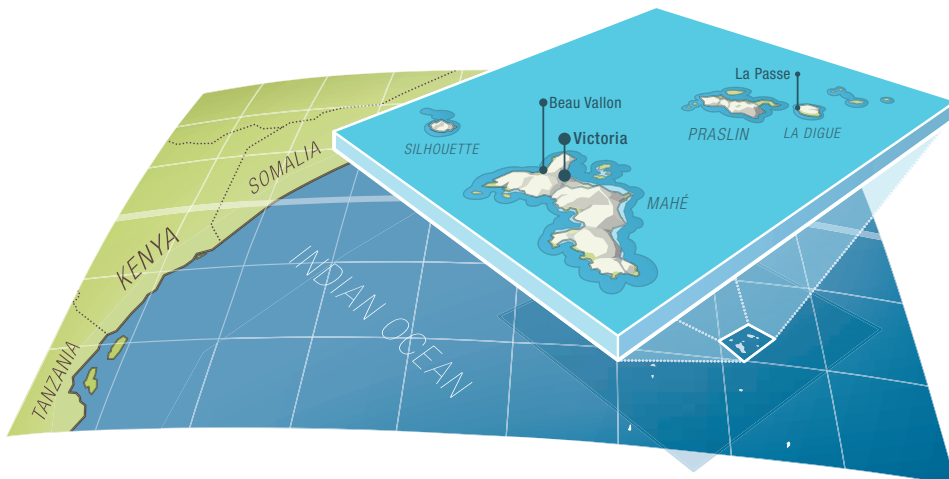
"You don't have to be on your guard in Seychelles. If somebody comes and offers you a lift, you take it. Or if someone says, 'Come around to my house for dinner,' you accept. Don't be suspicious. It's how we do things."

"Giving people little presents always makes you popular. When you meet a family, give the kids a little book, a key ring, anything. That's what Seychellois tend to do when they come back from abroad. And if you offer a man a beer, you'll have a friend for the rest of your stay."

"If you are a young woman and you come to Seychelles, you will find a lot of men will be after you. That's normal. The people are quite promiscuous. Quite. The men will openly make passes at you, whistle at you, and smile at you. But it will be harmless. Smile back and say, 'Excuse me, I've got a boyfriend.' If men don't approach you or you're ignored completely, you should worry a bit."

"Seychellois are not really aware of race, and there's no relationship between certain races and wealth. If you see someone who looks Indian, you don't say, 'Are you from India?' Instead, you should ask, 'Which island in the Seychelles are you from?' Seychelles people do not like to be associated with their roots. They're proud to be Seychellois."

—*Jennica Peterson*



appropriate for his other role as leader of the opposition New Democratic Party.

The government borrowed more than it could repay, Volcere says, skimming off the top and mispending the rest. "Just giving out money free, that is what they've done in the past. It has cost the country millions."

"The economic crisis in the world is a godsend to the government. They are using it as an excuse," he continues. "People are now starting to understand how a system works, the responsibilities of the government and the responsibilities of citizens."

As Volcere concludes his dismal tutorial, he leans in, whispering some final, conspiratorial advice—apropos of nothing, really, except that I have just begun my visit. "Probably, like me, you will end up in hell," he says with a wink. "This is the closest you can get to paradise, so enjoy it."

THE NEXT DAY, as I get off the masted schooner that sails from Victoria, on Mahé, to the island of La Digue, I feel as though I'm traveling back in time. The island has just a handful of cars, so locals rent bicycles or offer rides on oxcarts to the disembarking tourists. Giant tortoises, kept by the La Diguise as backyard pets, mate every day with an uncontained explosion of noise. The magnificent beaches strewn with Jurassic-era boulders would make Fred Flintstone feel at home. Roadside trees are laden with ripening mangoes, papayas, jackfruit, star fruit, coconuts, bananas, and more. I can see why Charles Gordon, a British naturalist who visited Seychelles in the late 1800s, proclaimed that the archipelago must have been the actual site of the Garden of Eden.

The islands were uninhabited until 1770, when France established the first colony with 21 French settlers and seven African slaves. In 1814, France ceded Seychelles to the British, and over the years, the English, French, and African influences blended into a Creole culture. Strikingly unencumbered by racism, Seychellois speak the official Creole language as well as their ancestors' language—English, French, or both. This mélange, later mixed with Indian influences, has created unique forms of music, artistic traditions, and especially cuisine.

Beckoning just to the left of La Digue's ferry pier, a small wooden shack marked "Bakery" sells slices of moist banana bread, pumpkin beignets, fish-filled samosas, and other local delectables for 19 cents apiece. To the right is the island's only take-out lunch place, called simply Takeaway. The goateed and bespectacled owner, Allen Niolo, looks more like a Beat poet than a chef and serves what might be the world's best octopus curry, a Seychellois specialty. In his front yard a mile up the road, Niolo built two rustic side-by-side guesthouses, the La Digue Creole Bungalows. When he tells me that he serves his guests meals and rents them bikes, I decide to stay.

At breakfast the next morning, I meet Niolo's friend Gitain William, the bungalows' caretaker. Scratching his rakish chin, he laments the state of his poor, broke country in a cigarette-tinged baritone. He swooshes his hand in one swift movement from above his head to his waist. "That's how we are going down," he says. "Like a diver on a platform."

"I wish we never got independence," William says. The British, he implies, would never have let this happen.

The British, in fact, kicked Seychelles out

With the abundant local seafood, many Seychellois fish for their dinner or buy the day's catch from local fishermen right off the beach.