

# My Place: Seychelles

*Indra gives us the physical and human geography of this Small Island Developing State (SIDS) where she lives and works.*



Accompanying online materials

Seychelles is my place because it has been home to me, on and off, for the last 20 years. It is an archipelago of 115 small granitic and coralline islands that lies in the Indian Ocean (Figure 1). The granitic islands poke their faces just above sea level (to heights of nearly 1000m in the case of Morne Seychellois, on Mahe Island) and are the tallest peaks of the vast Mascarene Plateau that stretches southwards as far as Mauritius.

Only three of the granitic islands, Mahe, Praslin and La Digue, are home to permanent human communities. I live on the biggest granite outcrop, Mahe. The island's physical beauty attracts thousands of tourists who crave the idyll of a tropical island paradise. The aesthetic qualities of the island's lush mountains, sandy beaches and turquoise seas are unhesitatingly exploited by the tourism industry, although for most Seychellois and immigrants like myself, this allure can be source of both pleasure and pain. We wonder if tourism based development is not a double-edged sword, and worry that current growth rates are unsustainable.

Seychelles has undoubtedly profited from tourism. The industry provides much-needed employment and precious foreign exchange, but its impact on the fragile island habitats and communities is pervasive and, in many ways,

unsustainable (Baldacchino, 2007a, p. 169). Before the international airport was built on Mahe in 1971, only a handful of visitors, about 530 in 1966, arrived by steamer. After the airport was completed in 1972, annual tourist numbers rose to 3100 and by the mid-seventies jumped to around 37,000 (Callimanopulos, 1982). From the 1970s numbers increased to over 230,000 in 2013: so now total tourist arrivals outnumbered the local population by more than 2:1.

To cope with the large number of tourists most hotels employ foreign staff. In fact, to cope with most things in Seychelles – running the police force, collecting taxes, teaching children and tending to the sick – the islands rely heavily on foreign workers. In 1992, fresh from getting my geography PGCE at Sussex University, I too joined Seychelles' imported labour force to teach geography in a government secondary school. Although I subsequently left the islands to return to London, I now find myself back on Mahe, experiencing the paradoxical realities of living in both paradise and prison, in both heaven and hell (Baldacchino, 2007a, p. 165). Seychelles, like many small islands, is simultaneously exposed and vulnerable to externalities while also being socially insular and resilient (Commonwealth, 1997) (Figure 2).

Crime is a prime example of how these contradictions play out. Alcohol, drug abuse, domestic violence and pretty theft are major social concerns, despite Seychelles trading on its



Figure 1: The location of Seychelles.

The Republic of Seychelles gained independence from Britain in 1976. It has a population of approximately 90,000. The main language is Créole, although English and French are also official languages. The country has made significant progress in social and economic terms: but Seychelles faces a series of challenges common to all SIDSs, notably:

- a high dependence on imports: for example 65% of food and 100% of commercial fuel is imported;
- a very small population and therefore a limited human resource base.
- tourism and fishing are the pillars of the economy. Low economic diversity and high dependence on a small number of sectors leaves Seychelles vulnerable to external shocks;
- vulnerability to climate change, especially rising sea level around the low-lying coralline islands and densely populated coastal strips.

Figure 2: Seychelles background. Sources: UNDP (2010, p. 9), UNEP (2014, p. 3-4) and Payet (2009) A full version of this is available to download.

paradisiac image. In response to the high levels of crime, which are indicative of a wide range of social vulnerabilities, Seychelles imprisons the world's largest proportion of its population (greater than 800 per 100,000 people) ([www.prisonstudies.org](http://www.prisonstudies.org)). This alarming rate seems to be the price Seychelles is willing to pay to preserve its 'heavenly' image.

Living on a small, 'remote' island and being so far from neighbours and the wider world, not only gives rise to a deep sense of insularity but also limits the power to resist or turn back influences that arrive from outside.

Heavy reliance on the whims and fancies of rich foreign visitors, flying in from the wealthiest countries of the world, means that Seychelles is particularly vulnerable to the fluctuating fortunes of the global élite. Recent falls in tourist arrivals from some European countries and the prospect of a global economic downturn exacerbate the feeling of susceptibility and dependency.

Global environmental changes also have dramatic local effects. Climate change adaptation is the new buzz phrase in Seychelles, as beaches and coastal communities face changing weather patterns (heavier rains during the rainy season and longer periods of no rain), flooding, salt-water intrusion of farmland, rapid beach erosion and more powerful storm surges.

On the other hand, being so small can instil a greater sense of purpose and resilience. In the face of a major economic crisis in 2008 triggered by the global financial meltdown, Seychelles had few other options but to tighten its belt. The World Bank was called in, the rupee devalued, wages were cut and the government downsized. These measures were quickly executed and, given Seychelles' size, the effects were immediate and widespread.

In spite of the recent cutbacks, currently Seychelles remains politically stable. The people's compliance with the austerity measures is a testimony to their ability to withstand hardship. Yet Seychelles is treading a delicate path. How will it maintain its sovereignty in the face of further global insecurities? How will it become a self-



**Figure 3:** Seychellois on a weekend hike into the forest at Fairyland, Anse Royale, Mahe Island, Seychelles.

determining, future-orientated nation and also retain its tropical island mystique (Baldacchino, 2007b, p. 521)? For the Seychellois people the future is troubling. Not only must they struggle to maintain their livelihoods, they must also cope with rapid cultural change.

The Seychellois, over the course of their history, have been 'fundamentally stricken with exteriority' (Bernabé *et al.*, 1990, p. 886): their identities have been imagined through the eyes of other people (colonial slave masters, the wealthy tourist élite). The tourist industry constantly prioritises exteriority over interiority, or physical superficiality over Créole complexity and, to a large extent, the Seychellois are forced to accept this dichotomy (Mein, 2012). The danger, however, of having to collude with those who foreground the physical, is that Créole culture becomes a convenient plaything, attached like a pendant to the string of natural island charms.

Small islands like the Seychelles, have been regarded as our planet's prophets. They serve as extreme examples of what is currently possible and advance indicators of what other, larger places and populations may face in the future (Baldacchino, 2007a, p. 165). From both social and environmental standpoints, my place may act like a mirror, reflecting a contorted microcosmic image of our planet's extreme beauty and extreme fragility. | **TG**

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#### Websites

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#### Online resources

Go to [www.geography.org.uk/tg](http://www.geography.org.uk/tg) and click Summer 2015 to download a more detailed version of Figure 2.

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