

In Seychelles, nature is prized above mass tourism

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Seychelles is confronting a tug-of-war over how to keep the economy growing, while protecting its fragile ecosystem

In a shady patch along a pristine white beach on Mahe Island, a radio spits out reggae and snapper sizzles on the barbecue, as Seychelloise

Nareen tops up her rum and coke on time off from her job aboard a luxury yacht.

Her family is spending the weekend at the beach where a couple dipping their feet into the turquoise waters off in the distance are the only foreign tourists in sight.

"We don't have mass tourism in Seychelles, and that's great. That is how we want it," says Nareen, 32, who asked for her full name not to be published.

Nevertheless, like most citizens, she earns her living from tourism, which makes up more than 60 percent of GDP in the Seychelles, the only country in Africa considered "high income" by the World Bank.

The Indian Ocean archipelago, a chain of 115 islands, is a byword for luxury holidays, Instagram-perfect beaches and has gained a reputation as a honeymoon idyll.

But it is confronting a tug-of-war over how to keep the economy growing, while protecting its fragile ecosystem.

"More tourists means it's better for the economy, but it's not the only thing that comes into play," Nareen says.

One island, one resort

High-end tourism, from Europe mainly, helped pull the Seychelles from the brink of financial ruin after the 2008 economic crisis.

Visitor numbers almost doubled in the decade that followed, to around 360,000 in 2018, nearly four times the country's population.



Nearly half of the Seychelles 455 square kilometres (176 square miles) are classed as protected areas

But now the Seychelles is grappling with how many visitors it can realistically accommodate. An official study commissioned into the matter is due to begin soon.

In the meantime, the government placed a moratorium in 2015 on the construction of large resorts on the three main islands of Mahe, Praslin and La Digue.

It wanted both to protect the environment and encourage the growth of smaller, locally-run hotels.

On further-flung islands, the Seychelles practises a "one island, one resort" policy.

"It's about controlling the number of tourists that come here, through controlling the number of rooms in the hotels that exist," Tourism Minister Didier Dogley told AFP.

The Seychelles has 6,000 hotel rooms, but another 3,000 are in the pipeline, having been approved before the moratorium took effect, Dogley said.

"We believe that we can go up to 500,000 tourists, that is just an estimate for the time being," he said.

World heritage

Nearly half of the Seychelles 455 square kilometres (176 square miles) are classed as protected areas.

By later this year, 30 percent of its 1.3 million square km of marine territory will have protected status too, under a special arrangement in which conservation groups agree in return to pay a small portion of Seychelles' national debt.

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