

Diversifying tourist appeal

INTERVIEW WITH SHERIN NAIKEN

CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER, SEYCHELLES TOURISM BOARD (STB)



SHERIN NAIKEN previously worked as Principal Secretary at the Seychelles' Department of Tourism. She also headed the Seychelles Investment Board for four years where she was instrumental in broadening the marketing arm of the board and raising the Seychelles' profile internationally. She holds a Bachelor of Arts Degree with Honours in Business Studies and Economics from Manchester University and is currently enrolled on a MSc in Finance with the University of London.

What do you believe is the essence of Seychelles appeal as a tourist destination?

Seychelles has been blessed with many different attributes that are the foundation of our appeal as a tourism destination.

First and foremost, perhaps due to our history and the way many ethnic strains make up our young nation, we have achieved an enviable degree of ethnic integration which has made for a country where harmony between races and religions has, over time, become a way of life. Against the backdrop of international strife and instability, this makes our visitors immediately feel at home.

Secondly, the secluded location of our islands has enabled us to maintain a balance between our tourism and the need to preserve what we have for future generations. It can be said that we are naturally 'green', with half of our limited landmass of only 450km² having already been set aside as national parks and reserves. Despite our size, we have no less than two UNESCO World Heritage Sites: the fabulous Vallée de Mai, an ancient valley where the legendary Coco-de-Mer, the world's heaviest and most erotically shaped nut grows high on ancient palms. The other UNESCO site is one of the planet's largest and most spectacular raised atolls, Aldabra – the Galapagos of the Indian Ocean. Today, in our increasingly spoiled world where ecosystems are disappearing at an alarming rate, this is a boon for ourselves and our tourists who can visit a place little touched since the dawn of time.

Then there is the ace up our sleeves: our diversity. This encompasses the diversity of our islands, divided between the steep granitic inner islands and the low lying sand cays, reef islands and atolls with their shimmering white beaches. We also boast the wonderful ethnic diversity of our people and, therefore, our culture. Our flora and fauna is also very diverse and includes some of the rarest species on the planet such as the Coco-de-Mer; the Jelly fish tree of which only 8 specimens remain as well as the 17 species and 13 sub-species of birdlife which call the islands home. The list of our natural treasures is very long.

We also have many niche markets for visitors to enjoy whilst on holiday: diving and snorkelling in pristine waters; sailing and cruising; some of the best deep-sea and fly fishing in the world; spa & wellness holidays to recalibrate mind, body and soul according

to the rhythms of nature; walks & trails; golf; island-hopping and a whole variety of romantic breaks.

The package we offer is very appealing and there is sure to be something for everyone as they experience one of the most amazing island lifestyles on earth.

What are your priorities in the important drive to promote tourism in Seychelles?

As previously mentioned earlier, our tourism product is very diverse and so we are looking to capitalize on that diversity. There is not one particular thing that we are concentrating on, but we are rather advertising a suite of natural advantages and getting the word out about that. I think it is axiomatic that today's visitors are no longer looking to 'flop and drop' on a beach, but are seeking to enjoy experiences of the country they are visiting, its people and culture. We are therefore looking to develop a well-rounded tourism product that offers many things for tourists to do.

We are also seeking maximum market penetration because no island can afford to be an island unto itself and we need to ensure that the Seychelles brand resonates around the world and that we become known for offering an exceptional, multi-dimensional tourism product. This requires infrastructure and a lot of hard work and we shall continue to apply ourselves to ensure that we have the appropriate conduits through which to direct our energies.

We shall continue marketing Seychelles aggressively, using brand alliances and other tactics to ensure that our budget stretches to the fullest extent and creating new products on the ground that will showcase our many attributes.

How important is it for Seychelles to diversify its tourism markets?

Tourism, is an extremely volatile industry and one that responds to the slightest global stimuli, positive or negative. With this in mind, it is unwise to have all one's eggs in one basket; hence the need to ensure that our drive to market Seychelles as a tourist designation covers as much territory as possible.

Only twenty years ago, a fraction of today's tourists were travelling the globe and certainly not the number of nationalities which are travelling today. Back then, travellers came mainly from Europe and today our core markets remain European, although this market has

been hit by a recession that is lingering and with no strong signs of abating.

Hence, the drive to diversify while still nurturing our much valued traditional markets, which will ensure that the shortfall in tourist arrivals will be compensated for by arrivals from other areas of the world. Twenty years ago the Chinese were not travelling much, yet today they are outnumbering all other tourists and we need to be able to tap into that. The same goes for South Korea, Japan, the Middle East, the CIS countries, Africa and the Americas. We should leave no stone unturned when it comes to attracting tourists to our shores. Tourism is our main industry and we must ensure that we employ vision and forethought in ensuring it remains as vibrant and as far reaching as possible.

How is Seychelles ensuring the sustainability of its vital tourism industry?

We Seychellois are well aware that, as extraordinary as it is, our tourism product is very fragile. We are a small nation with a tiny population and we have seen how badly conceived tourism policies elsewhere have spelt disaster for tourism industries and we are determined not to make the same mistakes.

Our conservation credentials are very good as we have most of our landmass already protected and we are constantly seeking ways of ensuring our tourism's sustainability. Recently, we published a Tourism Master Plan that looked in detail at the nature of our tourism and its various products. We studied the individual carrying capacity of our islands and the underlying social and economic factors which will determine the course of our tourism in years to come. This has been an important exercise and one that will hopefully serve us well as we navigate the best course for the industry.

The Seychelles Tourism Board has recently launched the 'Seychelles Sustainable Tourism Label' which aims to enhance the quality and sustainability of visitors' experiences by mitigating tourism's negative economic, environmental and social impacts on the destination and contributing to the preservation of natural and cultural treasures for future generations. A number of our hotels are presently working to achieve this label.


We are also investigating into appropriate forms of renewable energy as a pillar of the Seychelles tourism industry of tomorrow.

Which challenges remain as you promote further tourism growth in Seychelles?

Tourism is highly organic in nature and at no point can we afford to rest on our laurels, or believe that there is nothing more to be achieved. As society and technology advance, so tourism will change in response to those advances and we need to be ready to adapt to those changes.

Tourism is our lifeline as it is for many other countries but by its very nature it carries with it some adverse side effects in terms of its negative impact on the environment and upon society itself. All this needs to be managed and we have to be sure that we strike the right balance between our tourism and our environment and people because they are the wellspring of our tourism. We must not commit the cardinal sin of sawing through the branch upon which we are seated.

We must also ensure that, notwithstanding the innate exclusivity of our product, we remain accessible and affordable and this means constantly looking at our airlift and at the value for money that our tourism products propose.

Seychelles does not have the budget of most other destinations and so we must ensure that we remain tactical and nimble in pursuing our marketing campaigns in the ever busier international tourism market place. Today, competition is the name of the game in a world where even far-flung Antarctica is engaged in tourism and so we need to be ahead of the curve to ensure we get maximum market share. 

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Vallée de Mai, one of Seychelles' two UNESCO World Heritage Sites

