



**NOAH'S ARK IS DROPPING ANCHOR IN SOME OF THE WORLD'S MOST EXCLUSIVE AND GLAMOROUS PARADISE ISLAND RESORTS AS AMBITIOUS ECO-TOURISM PROJECTS BRING ENDANGERED SPECIES BACK FROM THE BRINK. SO WHY NOT BOOK A ROOM AND SEE THEM DISEMBARKING TWO BY TWO? ASKS AN ENCHANTED LEO BEAR**

**As a holidaymaker, an exotic island in the Indian Ocean, Caribbean or South Atlantic might feel like your natural habitat, especially as you gaze out across your private infinity pool to a seemingly endless azure ocean, cocktail in hand. But, sadly, you'd most likely be kidding yourself. These isolated tropical hideaways where high society so likes to holiday were once home to some of the world's rarest plants and animals, co-existing in delicate, unfringed ecological balance.**

Centuries of marauding visitors reaching their shores by boat, plane and helicopter have imported wholly foreign species of plants and animals, causing the gradual crowding out of native flora and fauna. The effects have often been so devastating

they've been deemed irreversible. But now, with some of the major hotels and resorts hiring energetic biodiversity experts to completely rehabilitate large areas of land, it could just be the enlightened holidaymaker of today that brings the natives back to their natural habitats again.

It's easy to imagine hardy ships' cats and dogs scampering off the pirate ships and into the wilderness to bother the lemurs, but invasive species can be even less conspicuous pests than these. For example, in the West Indies, the Caribbean pine, national tree of Turks and Caicos, is currently under threat from a scale insect thought to have been imported on a Christmas tree. The bug, usually found in northern North America, is causing huge dieback of natural forests in central parts of the islands. These types of sap-sucking insects are among the worst offenders when it comes to invasive species (alongside black rats and goats), while in the plant >>



world, it's mainly grasses and shrubs that are to blame. There is actually a '100 worst list' entitled the Global Invasive Species Database maintained by IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature), should you wish to look them up.

Across the globe, from Australia (who are some of the toughest globally on biological threats to their own borders) to Abu Dhabi, ecotourism companies, governments and NGOs are collaborating to launch comprehensive 'reintroduction programmes' with the aim of exterminating alien invaders and bringing native species back. Colin Clubbe, Head of Conservation of Overseas Territories at Kew Royal Botanic Gardens in London, extols the virtues of these schemes saying: 'Ten years ago there were very few examples of reintroduction programmes, but now that people are documenting their successes and sharing their stories with one another internationally, we are seeing ecotourism becoming increasingly important.'

North Island, part of the Seychelles archipelago in the middle of the Indian Ocean, is a shining example. When Wilderness Safaris bought the property in 1997, the island was in a terrible state, over-run with rats, cats and other non-indigenous flora and fauna. Previously operating as a coconut farm with more than 70,000 trees, the company went bust and the island was abandoned. Alien species such as the coconut trees themselves, casuarina trees, cows, pigs, Indian mynah birds, barn owls and a particularly invasive weed called lantana were smothering the island.

It took seven years to eradicate them before going about the task of reintroducing the island's native species. The backbreaking work was overseen by the island's resident biologist and former UN volunteer, Linda Vanherck. A born fighter, with long grey hair and shining blue eyes, she was determined to restore the island to its native glory. 'After 300 years of pirates and Arab traders littering the place with flora and fauna that shouldn't be there, I had a big job on my hands,' she recalls, but by piecing together clues from old ships' journals dating back to 1800 that, among other things, described 'lots of turtles and tortoises', she has achieved what many might call the impossible.

First was the arrival of 20 giant Aldabra tortoises (all unwanted pets donated from Mahé) which now happily wander about the island nibbling on grass around the guests' plunge pools. Other native reintroductions followed, including blue pigeons, white-eyes, black mud terrapins, takamaka trees, vanilla orchids, six endemic types of palm and the deliciously phallic coco de mer – all of which were flown in by helicopter or shipped over Ark-style. So when visitors recline on their sunloungers to admire North's beauty, they can relax in the knowledge that the flora and fauna, like themselves, is meant to be there.

The island has its own nursery, one of the biggest in the Seychelles, where they also grow a variety of organic vegetables and herbs for their menu-free beachside restaurant (you simply order what you feel like). Over the last five years, approximately 15,000 indigenous and endemic plants have been reintroduced; and today, about 25 per cent of the total surface of the island (201 hectares) has been rehabilitated. Not surprisingly, the resort's 12 heavenly villas are booked up pretty much all year round – we heard that even Branson couldn't get a room.

As with all good ideas, word has spread. Frégate Island, another breathtakingly beautiful granitic private island in the Seychelles with 16 villas but a slightly more formal atmosphere than North, has been working in conjunction with the NGO Nature Seychelles to re-establish the critically endangered Seychelles Magpie Robin on three of its neighbouring islands. Back in 1995, it was estimated there were only 22 of these diminutive black and white birds left, all of them on Frégate – and now, small family groups have been reintroduced to Denis, Aride and Curieuse. At the last count, there were more than 180 across the four islands. Progress indeed.

Beyond the Indian Ocean, if you are planning a trip to the Middle East, why not drop by Sir Bani Yas Island off the coast of Abu Dhabi for some downtime? Once the former private retreat of UAE founder Sheikh Zayed, the island is now home to the Desert Islands Resort and Spa by Anantara. Just two hours by car from Abu Dhabi and three from Dubai, it's already a popular retreat for stressed-out execs looking to reconnect with nature. Here, after you're done being pampered >>

PREVIOUS PAGE: A turtle hatchling swims in the seas close to North Island, Seychelles  
 THIS PAGE: A Wollemi pine cone hanging from the distinctive evergreen tree that's endemic to the Blue Mountains.  
 Indian gaur are rounded up for translocation across India  
 NEXT PAGE: Arabian oryx herd across the plains. The table is set for dining at dusk in the desert. Visitors trek through the sand dunes. All at Sir Bani Yas Island



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Photograph courtesy of JoshuaTroyPhotography



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in the spa or doing lengths in the resort's infinity pool, you can don your khakis and witness the antics of hundreds of Arabian oryx, now extinct in the wild, as well as sand gazelles and hyenas – as they roam the rugged landscape. A massive 4,100-hectare area (50 per cent of the landmass) is dedicated to breeding indigenous animals, and today, more than 4,500 oryx thrive alongside several million indigenous plants and trees that have been planted across the mangroves and desert salt flats.

Herds of sprightly oryx are undeniably a joy to watch, but few animals can beat the overwhelming power of the Indian gaur (bison). Not only is the gaur the most powerful of all wild cattle, it is also the heaviest – a gaur weighs more than a giraffe. Listed as 'vulnerable' on the IUCN red list, it is currently extinct in the wild in many parts of India, but the experts at travel company &Beyond (formerly CC Africa) have recently successfully repatriated 19 gaur from the Kanha National Park to Bandhavgarh National Park where they were previously extinct.

Moving them was no easy feat. The translocation was five years in the planning for Group Conservation Manager Les Carlisle and his team, who immobilised then transported the animals in specially modified vehicles. Carlisle described the project, the first-ever of its kind in India, as 'an extraordinary privilege,' adding, 'the determination of the people involved has made a real difference to the future of conservation in India.'

Even in extreme sports, there are acts of good work to be found. Back in 1994 in Sydney, Australia, an unsuspecting abseiler noticed an unusual tree with

bark like bubbling chocolate, and took a branch home. Little did he know he'd made a remarkable discovery. He'd stumbled upon a Wollemi pine, one of the world's oldest and rarest trees, endemic to the Blue Mountains, presumed to be extinct. Thanks to him, the tree has now been given new hope in a 4,000-acre pine grove in the Blue Mountains, at the heart of which lies an isolated forest retreat called the Wolgan Valley Resort & Spa (part of the Emirates Group). Book a few nights in one of the resort's 40 luxurious lodges and you can take in the true majesty of the 40-foot Wollemis from your private deck, or out and about in 4x4s.

With so many remarkable eco-tourism ventures underway, one might be led to think our planet's biodiversity is in safe hands. But Paul Smith, Head of the Millennium Seedbank that supplies seeds to global reintroduction programmes, warns we have a long way to go. 'All wild, undomesticated species are our toolbox when it comes to innovation and adaptation. With climate change, we will need new crops and new trees; that's why reintroduction is so important. But what these ecotourism companies are doing is minor damage control and repair. We need to restore functional habitats to prevent extinctions happening in the first place.'

These initiatives might be small, but they are certainly setting a good example to the rest of the world. Let's hope more will follow suit. ©

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