

CONSERVATION

THE COAST GUARD

As the frontman of Nature Seychelles, Dr Nirmal Jivan Shah is no typical chief executive. He has rescued birds from extinction, is leading a team developing bleach-resistant 'super-corals', runs the world's first carbon-free nature reserve and describes coming face to face with a bull shark on a dive in the Aldabra lagoon as "exhilarating". As BA launches a new flight to the Seychelles on 24 March, the Indiana Jones of wildlife conservation shines a light on the exceptional inhabitants of this archipelago.

A frog's life

When the ancient supercontinent of Gondwanaland split into Africa and India millions of years ago, the granitic islands of the Seychelles were "left behind", says Shah. And left along with them was a family of tiny frogs: the Sooglossidae. Their closest ancestors are in the Western Ghats of India, Shah explains, and the Seychelles is the only oceanic island group in the world to have its own endemic frog family.

It's easy being green

From top: The coco de mer palm tree is endemic to the islands; the Seychelles treefrog (Sooglossidae)



Unusually, most Sooglossidae lay eggs on land and these hatch directly into baby frogs, says Shah, although the tadpoles of one species piggyback on their mothers until they mature.

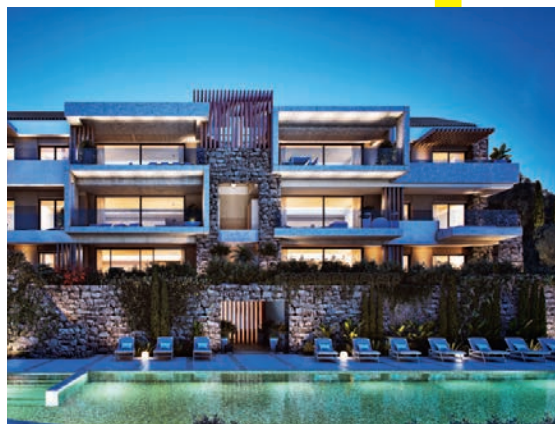
Going native

The magpie-robin is "the cocky, charismatic, million-dollar bird of the Seychelles," says Shah, but the introduction of alien predators such as rats (which arrived with settlers) to the Seychelles meant that their numbers plummeted. At its lowest in 1990, the population fell to just 19 birds. Shah worked with private island resorts to remove rodents and invasive plants, and to replant native forest, before helicoptering in birds relocated from Frégate and Cousin islands. "We now have five islands with a total of about 300 birds," he says.

Green fingers

In 1998, El Niño raised temperatures in the seas, bleaching vast stretches of coral and causing many reefs to collapse. Using 'coral reef gardening', more than 50,000 coral fragments have been regrown, says Shah, and the team has replanted a 6,000-square-metre area in the Cousin Island Special Reserve.

Visit the Cousin Island Special Reserve, cousinisland.net; natureseychelles.org



HOME FROM HOME

ESCAPE TO THE HILLS

Between the Sierra Blanca mountains and the deep blue Med, Real de la Quinta promises to be one of Andalusia's finest residential resorts, only 15 minutes by car from Marbella's boutiques and night spots. This also means that it's just far enough from the Costa del Sol's most papped party town to guarantee you tranquillity, uninterrupted views across the sea to Gibraltar and a roster full of spa treatments and fine dining. The first phase of 90 homes will be ready to move into next year. realdelaquinta.com