

THE ECOLOGY OF THE MISSION SITE

Before the development of Venn's Town, a mid-altitude humid forest existed, composed mainly of endemic tree species such as Capucin (*Northea hornei*) named in honour of Marianne North, Bois Rouge (*Dillenia ferruginea*), and possibly Bois Banane (*Gastonia lionnetii*), which has become very rare. These were mixed with endemic palms such as Latanier Hauban (*Roscheria melanochaetes*) and Latanier Feuille (*Phoenicophorium borsigianum*).

Today, numerous endemic species have been reintroduced, to restore the biodiversity of the area and to remind us of the original flora of Seychelles, which evolved over millions of years. For example, specimens of the famous Pitcher Plant (*Nepenthes pervillei*) have been planted close to the viewing lodge.

However, the most remarkable vegetation "monument" is surely the avenue of Sandragon trees (*Pterocarpus indicus*), planted around 1880. This species, of Asian origin, is so named because of the red sap which exudes when the bark is cut. Unfortunately the increasing number of wounds, inflicted by curious visitors who want to see the "dragon's blood" oozing out, pose a threat to these magnificent trees by increasing the chance of disease infection.

The Mission site provides a peaceful atmosphere which is also appreciated by certain birds. The high branches of the Sandragon trees provide nesting sites for the Tropic Bird (*Phaethon lepturus*), while both the Kestrel (*Falco araea*) and the Scops Owl (*Otus insularis*) use the area as a hunting site, the kestrel during the day and the owl at night. In 1976 there were still White-Eyes (*Zosterops modestus*) present but they have since deserted the site, probably because of rat predation or habitat modification.

So, welcome to Mission! A window through which to see both the human and ecological history of Seychelles.

Tropic bird



The Mission Site

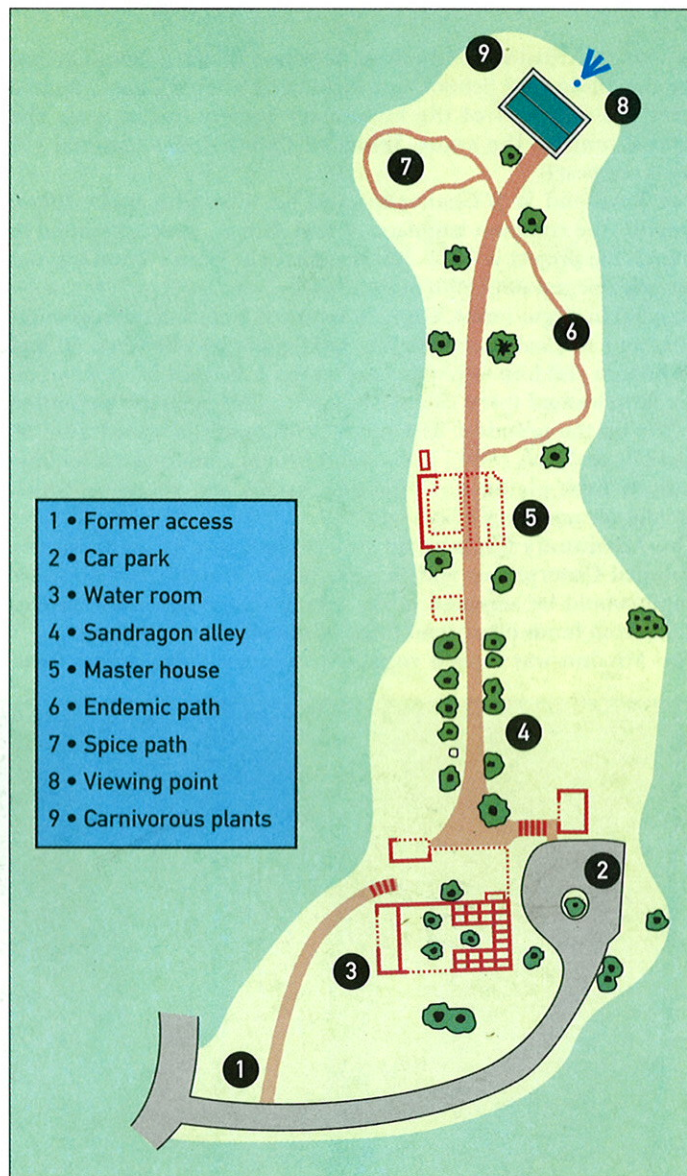


Photo front page: Sandragon alley



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Mission Lodge

— NATURE WALK 1 —



Morne Seychellois National Park - Mahé

HOW TO GET THERE

From Victoria take the Sans Souci road, which leads to Port Glaud on the west coast. Approximately 1km after the summit of this hill road, a signboard indicates the entrance to the site. SPTC bus no. 14 (Victoria - Sans Souci - Port Glaud) passes close to the site. Some taxi drivers specialise in this historic site, serving as both escort and guide.

Aerial view of Mission Lodge



THE HISTORY OF VENN'S TOWN

In 1834 England was the first western country to abolish slavery. Nevertheless, trade in slaves originating from Africa continued in the western Indian Ocean. The British Royal Navy was employed in the suppression of this human traffic, patrolling up and down the coast of East Africa and intercepting the vessels implicated in the trade, notably Arab dhows.

The liberated slaves were released in Aden, Bombay, Mauritius or Seychelles, to be employed as agricultural workers. Between 1861 and 1871, 2,409 people of African origin were set down on Mahé, increasing the Seychellois population to 11,179 inhabitants, according to the official census of 1871.

However, resettlement conditions were inadequate because the Colony could provide neither schooling for the children nor any sort of instruction for the adults. The Anglican Bishop of Zanzibar wrote in 1872 "Seychelles exhibits the strange anomaly of a servile race, permanently settled among Christians who are doing absolutely nothing to wean them from their heathenism, or to teach them the truths of the Gospel."

On 15th August 1875, the Chief Civil Commissioner for Seychelles proclaimed "The condition of the Africans in the Seychelles is a blot to our religion and on our nation. The first and easiest thing to do is to rescue the children from the evil destiny that I have described."

The colonial authorities, based in Mauritius, were sympathetic to the problem but could not make any funds available. So the Anglican Bishop of Mauritius (the Diocese, of which included

Seychelles) appealed to friends abroad to finance the project. The funds were collected in the name of the Anglican Church Missionary Society.

In 1876, the Mauritian Governor allocated 50 acres (about 20 ha) for the "Industrial School and Mission at Venn's Town", named after the secretary of the Missionary Society in London. The annual rent for the estate, renamed Capucin, was nominal (50 cents per year).

The Reverend W B Chancellor and his wife, who spoke fluent Swahili (the common language of East Africa), were appointed to launch the project in 1875. But the school at Venn's Town was not actually opened until 20th March 1876.

Situated in virgin forest, Capucin required a considerable amount of labour to clear and make the land cultivable. Between 50 and 60 African children were educated at the Industrial School and on the farm located there. Some African families were also permitted to live on the premises. The number of pupils increased from 56 in 1879 to 79 in 1889. The establishment obtained its income entirely from plantations of coffee, vanilla and coconuts, which rapidly became inadequate.

The Missionary Society did not receive any grant from the Colonial Government and in 1879 it was decided that no more pupils would be accepted at the school unless maintenance fees came from funds other than those of the Missionary Society.

The Mission was visited regularly by personalities who were

passing through. The most famous was Marianne North, in 1883. During her four months in Seychelles this renowned painter, naturalist and world traveller completed 45 paintings, which today are displayed in the North Gallery at Kew Botanical Gardens in London.

In her memoirs she writes that the children seemed very happy and "did not puzzle their brains with too much learning." Their chief study seemed to be the singing of psalms, which went on from morning to night. Was their reputation as thieves when they went down to the town truly justified? North says that during three weeks spent among them, she found them rather good-natured and honest.

The boarding school ceased to function in 1885. It is not known exactly when the Mission stopped its activity at Capucin but the school closure coincided with the opening of St. Paul's Anglican School and other religious schools towards the end of the century, and with the fact that there were no more freed slave children to be educated. Some reports give the closure as 1889, even 1892, while others claim that the Mission continued to function until 1903, but perhaps only for agricultural purposes. A forestry report of 1908 sites the "Experimental Station of Capucin" but without giving much detail.

More recent famous visitors to the Mission site were HM Queen Elizabeth II and HRH Duke of Edinburgh, who on 20th March 1972 opened a viewing lodge at the present site.

Marianne North - Kew Garden

