

I awoke face down in sand. One by one, long-dormant sensations re-introduced themselves to me — the muted rhythms of the sea, the slap and rustle of foliage blown alive in a warm gusty wind, the flavour of salt encrusted on my cracked lips but above all else, the intense feeling of burning on my back. Millions of grains of sand were in sight and amidst them a pair of expressionless eyeballs on periscopes gazed blandly into mine before being whisked away like a leaf in a breeze into a hole in the beach called home. The sun high in the northern sky blazed through perfect tropical blue. How long had I been lying here?

A movement in the corner of my eye caught my attention; the crab was re-emerging from its cavity with newfound bravado. Beyond it, an eight-carat strip curved languidly in one enormous crescent. On the beach, scattered haplessly by the elements was the flotsam of disaster, the splintered and torn wreckage that once formed the hull of a great ship. I had to get out of the sun!

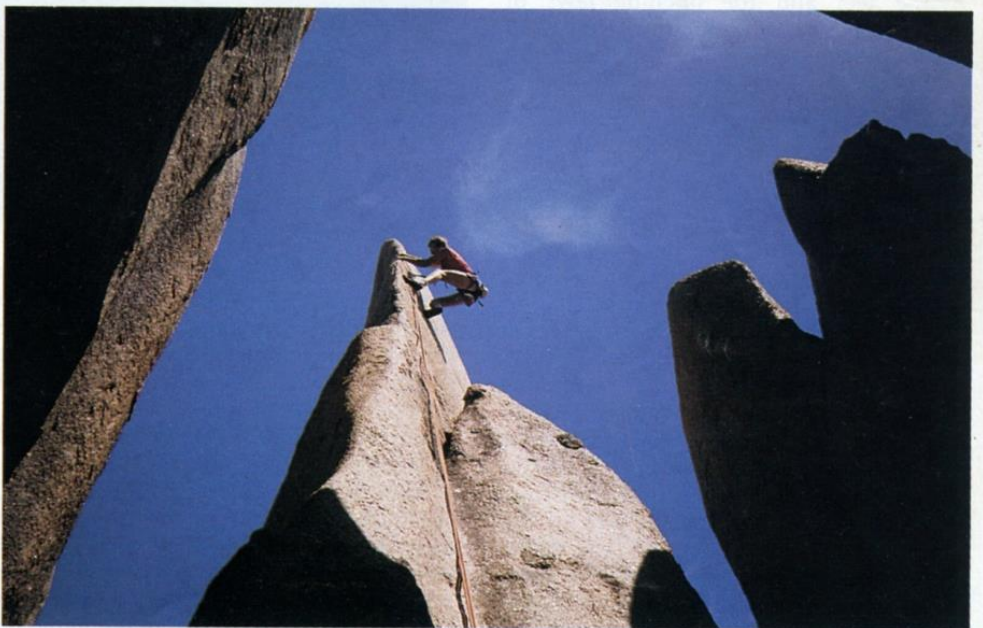
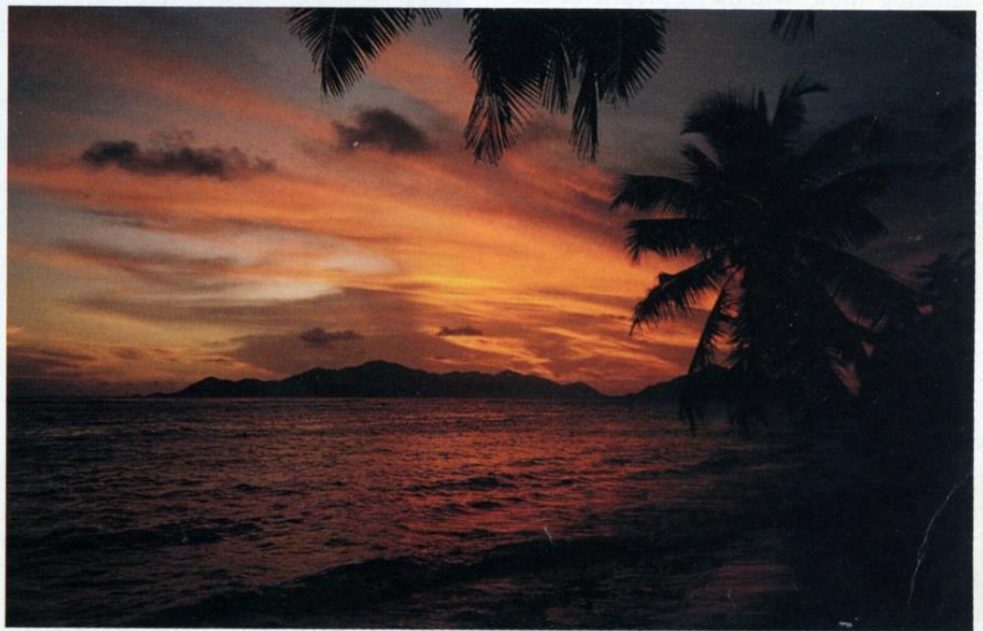
From the mangroves behind the beach a fringe of palm trees were spindling dangerously over the sand, each forced groundwards by the trade winds acting against great pendant crowns of leaves and coconuts. It was into the shade offered by the nearest of these that I clawed my way. Above me, the long segmented trunks creaked like the straining timbers of a ship in distress, though the winds had subsided by now and the surf pounding the reef was a mere echo of the thunder I had miraculously survived. A pair of stark white Fairy Terns screeched playfully to the north and turning my senses towards them, it was then that I first noticed the Sculptures.

Sculptures they must have been. Only the imagination of man could have fashioned and coloured such bizarre and grotesque shapes and organised them into so perplexing a disarray? Fluting, furrows, aretes and edges of every description, faces and pinnacles sharp and bald . . . suddenly I was recovering my will — mentally unravelling the treasures of the granite

Imagine sparkling white beaches fringed by palm trees, with a hot sun blazing from a tropical blue sky. Add to that the relaxed rhythms of the Seychelles, the delicacies of Creole cooking, and the prospect of two weeks climbing on immaculate crags and boulders. MARTIN CROCKER describes his experience of Paradise.



DESERT ISLAND DIGITS



mosaic and playing out the life game on countless virgin edges. Shipwrecked I may have been, but I was marooned in paradise.

Actually, we arrived in "Paradise" (as the native Seychellois proudly describe their islands) on the fated Flight BA065 following one days delay and a night spent in dusty, downtown Kensington. The lavish prospect of bouldering among coconuts and decking out into exotic coral seas had proved impossible to resist during my winter doldrums. Here we were then, on La Digue, the island noted for its serenity as well as its boulders, chundering along on the back of an ox cart, gripping on for dear life but trying not to show it to the gloating, gleaming faces of the natives, who had turned out to watch the daily tourist shake-up! A post long-haul collapse into slumberland was exactly what the

witch doctor ordered.

The granite islands of the Seychelles are well endowed with crags and boulders. Mahe, the largest and commercially best developed island, boasts some impressive cliffs — those situated above the airport being especially spectacular (but on this occasion well out of my league!). I was more than content to explore the five square mile granite outpost of La Digue with its two main coastal boulderfields within quick reach of the 'one-hotel — capital' of L'Union. The route to the first of these, Anse L'Amour passes incongruous tin-roofed houses on stilts which pulsate to a deep reggae base that bounces out from open windows and doors.

Looming above the palm groves the rounded summits of pristine granite pinnacles, blocks and boulders of up to 100

Left: The author committed on the upper crest of Two To Mango, E3/4 5c. Above: On the crux "blade" of Coco de Mer, E5 6a. Above Top: Everybody's idea of paradise, sunset over the Seychelles.

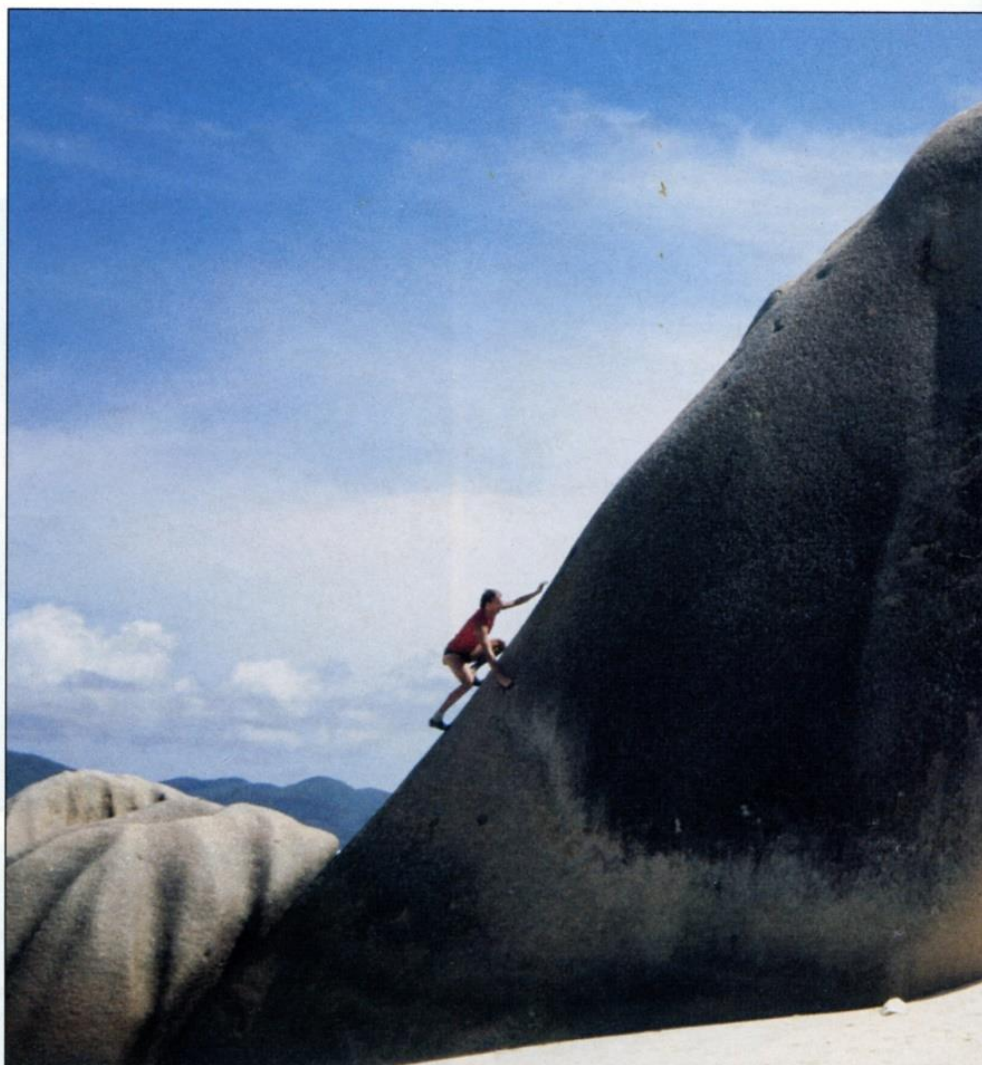
feet in height soon become visible; a sort of tropical cocktail of Ramshaw, Joshua Tree and the Dartmoor Tors all blended into one. Indeed, the brochures had *not* lied! With a sack full of gear safely stashed in the hotel, I mentally noted the possibilities, ignoring those within legs-reach of the sinister five inch diameter spiders that seemed to lurk around every corner. Especially captivating was a thirty foot isolated boulder standing guardian at the entrance of the boulderfield with a furrowed face iced with quartz crystals.

It was, however, amid the boulder-confusion of the Grand Anse headland that I first grappled with Seychelles granite. In the centre of the pile was a delicious, S-shaped fin arete curling thinly over into a horizontal handrail. With my wife mesmerised by the sun and myself carried by the South East trade winds, like Vasco de Gama four centuries earlier, up I went in a ten second sprint unashamedly christening the route after the great explorer himself. Adjacent are two golden brown pyramids, perched like strawberries on a trifle. Both offered three aretes, but six routes in aggregate if you climbed each on both sides! Short problems I agree, but much more menacing when viewed above rolling feet and the opening jaws of no-second-chance landings. Being well suffused with anxiety by this time, the remainder of the day was spent top-roping a myriad of fluting, hinges, flanges, runnels and aretes. The highest point of the pile resembled a mega 'Milky bar', lying on its side but tilted at a high angle. On it, facing the ocean, was a beautiful slab, quartzitic and Apron-smooth. Recalling the inimitable squeaks of rubber on 'glass', I delved back to uncover a technique expressed so infrequently on British rock. These were lines to lead . . . but with bolts?

With the prospect of a diet of endless shellfish, it had been my master plan to conveniently lose half a stone in weight and recover the grades which had been surreptitiously slipping by, over the years. However, the squid, octopus and all the other amorphous rubber bits just didn't materialize and I was soon over-indulging in all manner of niceties cooked in the Creol style. That evening, listening to Denis performing rhythms I would not have believed possible on a triangle, and his buddie, Mathurin flexing muscles in time as he gargled out surprisingly sweet melodies, our excesses of food were eased gently into a splendid starlit night. A casual circumnavigation of the island that had turned suddenly into a harrowing jungle-bash through mangroves, spiders and giant millipedes had left us wasted.

I awoke as something vivid green flashed across the bedroom wall; there it was again. A ghekkko, resembling one of my rock slippers with eyes, was darting across a holdless ceiling filtering the air of everything with wings; the efficiency of the machine amazed me.

"This is not a climbing holiday", Beverly reminded me as I pulled the stealthily concealed gear out onto the beach of Anse L'amour. My stock answer



"Yes, dear", was pitifully inadequate. To the east of the beach, the sun and sea had weathered an exfoliating crust from some huge, rotund boulders. The crust proved so rough, however, that where it remained adherent, it was possible to climb virtually any type of arete, no matter how rounded or steep.

Back in the boulderfield, a ghekkko and red-mandibled crab were making an inter-species first ascent of a striking 25 foot arete I had yet to complete. I gasped with relief as the crab decked it from 20 feet and the ghekkko with its sucker footwear (new from *Vertical*, I believe) retreated in unabashed tedium. It was left to humanity to claim *Ghekkko Blaster*, E3 6a on both sides.

Apart from some 300 foot slabs nestling in the jungle, bigger challenges were taking shape — especially the superb knife-edged arete of a 50 foot sea pinnacle towards the east of Anse L'amour. Separated from the mainland by fifteen feet of ocean and being only two feet square on top, getting into a position where I could establish myself on the pinnacle and practise the arete was to pose a bewildering test of logic and ingenuity. It was time to crack open a coconut!

With plans prepared and body refreshed, it took all of twenty-three lassos and twenty-two blasphemies to net the summit with a loop of rope. I now had the choice of either falling across the yawn and maiming myself on the opposite wall, or soloing up

the seaward arete to a point where I could reach and tie into the loop in order to safeguard the tricky and exposed upper section. Wading chest high to the base of the arete where I had once paddled, I was quickly to realize my error in assuming I had left tidal problems behind me in the Bristol Channel. I struggled out onto slimy wet granite, my slippers exuding a bright green dye. Having baked myself dry, I promptly padded up the now rope-protected arete and triumphantly wrapped a leg either side of my exclusive little summit. In went the abseil bolt and from it, the blade was top-roped five times. Meanwhile, following the insertion of a solitary bolt runner, I had become surrounded by the Indian Ocean. I could neither swim out, gear laden, nor climb out, but from halfway up the arete and with tension from the rope, I could just bridge out to the opposite wall and make a desperate, knee-grinding mantel onto the mainland.

The completion of the exercise in hand had to wait for a days snorkelling as we were whisked off and deposited on St. Pierre, an isolated rocky knoll in the middle of the Ocean, somewhere. Beneath the surface, the sea was alive with the glittering colour of coral and fish. Small fish, big fish, fish with big mouths, fish that bolted carelessly around, fish-eating fish and photogenic fish clad in a scaley collage more dashing than the most resplendent



The author investigates the crux bulge of Monsieur Renee, Anse L'Amour, E5 5c.

lycra; their sheer variety seemed to make a facetious analogy with British climbing society quite appropriate. St. Pierre also conceals a thirty foot granite cube slashed diagonally by a leaning basaltic vein. I must concede that soggy fingers and the thought of our Red Snapper barbecue on neighbouring Curieuse Island, did little to endear me to this vicious but most exclusive boulder problem.

Back on Anse L'amour, we waded across to a small sandbank below the pinnacle arete, fortuitously uncovered during low tide. A thirty foot 5c/6a run-out on greasy, salt-laden granite, where two bolts could have been, thankfully "went" as top rope practice had suggested.

Hyped-up by this ascent, I returned to the landward arete of a nearby encrusted pyramid, the scene of another 'cop out'. This time, I managed to transfer onto the upper crust with only one wobble, the result *Two To Mango* (E3/4 5c) being overall as serious inasmuch the underlying sand is hard! At last I was gaining confidence, sufficiently so as to emerge from the shadows and into the limelight. No more so than on the 'Giant M' boulder which dominates virtually every picture postcard of Anse L'amour. Eschewing the finger-shredding potential of its bulging backside, it was to the main line of the southern, fifty degree arete that I was drawn. An on-sight foray floundered at twenty feet; this was skin graft country and

I wanted to go home a white man! Without further ado, a top rope was flung over and down the arete and used to investigate the crux 5c bulge at half-height. It was hard and high but I felt good and so with jumar disengaged and rope out of arm's reach I smeared up to the bulge . . . "THUD"!! a coconut had fallen onto the exact point where Beverley had been lying ten seconds earlier. Weighing ten pounds a go, the chances of surviving a direct hit by a coconut are very slim indeed. Speaking of survival, my feet had stuck in place — attached half way through the 5c sequence which I hastily completed. That was E5 5c (*Monsieur Renee*) I considered from the safety of retrospect.

Two days left and so much to do! A return to the Apron-like slab was in order and so too was a bolt drilled into its base to counter, at least for a few feet, the macerating potential of the evil slit above which it was perched. With my long-suffering wife cowering in the base of the chasm, woodwasps buzzing angrily overhead and ghekkos' underfoot, four bold runnels were climbed as a spiritous prelude to the impeccable white slab. What followed was yet another hair-raising Seychelles E5 5c, the bolt becoming a mere dressing as five feet above it the long, lonely pad to the top of *Au Revoir Maria* was commenced. In ten seconds I might be shaking hands with my creator — what in hell's name was I doing here? I had arrived

for two weeks relaxed bouldering but was leaving with one year's quota of death routes plus a body saturated with adrenalin — I needed to be squeezed out and hung up to dry, piscine style!

Our ferry was due to depart at 3.30p.m. and so we were touched by our co-habitant reptile belting in through the louvres to give us a final benign stare. Only a few hours remained but so did some amazing problems.

A massive, diagonally-runnelled boulder, the top of which I'd reached by a series of unnerving leaps, had for its support a brilliant 50 foot white slab, itself furrowed but also serrated on top like a giant webbed foot. A tropical storm (read wall of water) had previously washed me away and so I was eager to return to solo the runnels. *Dance The Sega* (E3 6a), the right-hand runnel, proved so compulsive a stemming problem that its spell wasn't broken until after the sixth ascent. Hands and feet pressing outwards, palms and soles against the flared side walls, left, right, left, right, left . . . a simple dynamic momentum gone in seconds, but like a breath of fresh air, to me. In a final fling, I relived the 'old favourites', bounded up the western arete of the Entrance Boulder (*The Jungle Has Ears*, E3 5b) and exhausted myself sufficiently in the hope that the long flight home could be a time to convalesce. But on the way back through the boulderfield I had the misfortune of passing the cutting edge of an incredible sabre-tooth erupting from the sand. Having dismissed from afar the arete as being impossible, I became quite upset to find the blank start equipped with enough micro-edges to reach the start of the edge. Alas, the tide was in and time was running out; each instant I constructed a platform of coconuts to get me started a wave would slither from around the corner and draw my contraption away into the sea. A wild last stab at what was clearly to be another E6/7 solo venture was to prove strictly temporal, I conceded. The sabre tooth remains; it was time to depart.

Our ferry rolled away into the ocean. In its wake, flying fish glided over the surf and beyond in the distance, amongst the palms and golden domes, I could just make out the unforgettable outline of the Entrance Boulder and the Face, unviolated, immaculate and mine. Like the Devil's Tower in Close Encounters it is a shape to remember, to reproduce and to take to the grave. ■