
The Seychelles

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Merket, and up to May 1, when everything had to be abandoned; consequently, there are no observations taken during the last four days' march. I always took my observations three times a day (7 a.m., 1 p.m., and 9 p.m.), this being the rule at the Russian weather bureau at Musgab, Margelan, Taschkent. To enable me to determine the absolute altitudes, I used a thermo-hypsometer and three aneroid barometers. This thermo-hypsometer, when tested in melting ice on February 19, 1895, showed a temperature of -0.1° . My readings will therefore have to be reduced by one-tenth of a degree. On the same day the readings from Petrovsky's mercury barometer were—

Fuess, 932 = 649.9 mm.; temperature of instruments, 14.7° .

„ 764 = 648.0 „ „ „ „ „ 16.1 $^{\circ}$.

The readings from his aneroid barometers (Negretti and Zambra) were—

10,843 = 650.0 mm.

10,004 = 646.5 „

The readings from my own three French aneroid barometers were—

(1) 638.0 mm.; temperature of instruments, 13.6° , and 19° in the air.

(2) 647.9 „

(3) 646.0 „

THE SEYCHELLES.*

By Dr. A. BRAUER.

PRIVAT-DOCENT Dr. A. Brauer has recently spent a year in the Seychelles for zoological and geological researches, with the view of ascertaining the true zoo-geographical position of the group. With the assistance of the English government officials, Dr. Brauer was able to make a thorough examination of not only the chief island, Mahé, but of the more important of the smaller islands. The Seychelles, which lie between $8^{\circ} 33'$ and $5^{\circ} 35'$ S. lat., and $55^{\circ} 16'$ and $56^{\circ} 10'$ E. long., cover an area of about 102 English square miles, and include about eighty islands, only about eighteen being inhabited. The largest are Mahé, Praslin, Silhouette, La Digne, Curieuse, St. Anne, Frigate. The Seychelles, strictly so called, rise from a submarine bank covered by 10 to 40 fathoms of water, the depth increasing suddenly towards the Amirante islands to between 1500 and 2000 fathoms. In contrast to Mauritius and Réunion, which are of volcanic origin, and to the Chagos Archipelago further north, as well as the Amirante, Aldabra, and other small groups to the southward

* Abstract of paper read at the Berlin Geographical Society, June 16, 1896.

between the Seychelles and Madagascar, which are of coralline formation, the Seychelles are wholly composed of granite, and they derive from this certain distinctive characters. The tops of the mountains are mostly crowned by detached blocks, having the appearance of ruins; their slopes rise in high terraces with steep banks, rent by vertical and horizontal fissures, and in places castellated walls and turrets of fantastic outline are formed by the overhanging or precipitous cliffs, and the detached masses surmounting them. In fact, the greater part of the country at all elevations is strewn with granite blocks of every shape and size.

The presence of these boulders is in some respects unfavourable to plant life, but, on the other hand, they prevent the washing away of the fruitful soil by torrential rains. The characteristic appearance of the granite country is largely due to the innumerable gorges cut into the rock by the rain-water and the quartz particles carried along with it. Laterite is the chief product of the weathering of the granite, and only where the primeval forest remains do we find a layer of humus of any thickness on the ground. In the middle and north of Mahé and on Silhouette the mountains rise steep from the sea, and in Mon Plaisir, on Silhouette, the Three Brothers, Mount Harrison, etc., they reach a height of 2600 to 2800 feet, while Morue Seychellois, on Mahé, rises to about 3300 feet. In the other parts of Mahé and on the other islands the mountains are lower, and are faced by wide coast plains of coral sand. The coast being steep, and fringed in most places by a coral reef, the islands are on the whole rather inaccessible; the smaller islands can only be reached by small vessels, and even these are often exposed to considerable danger. The coral reefs are in general of the usual formation: round the living reef, which goes steeply down to from 10 to 12 fathoms, extends a plateau of varying width, consisting of detritus broken off by the surf. Nearer shore the bottom consists of coral sand, and close in the sand is deposited in dunes. Between the live reef and the land is a wide uniform channel. One would naturally classify the Seychelles reef as a barrier reef, but it must not therefore be supposed that it was formed, like many barrier reefs, by a displacement of the coast; for, notwithstanding the common belief that the Seychelles have for long been and are still undergoing depression, raised coral reefs can be found on almost all the islands, and there is abundant evidence that elevation is still going on. It is true that actual uplifting can only be proved definitely for a height of 80 feet, but, from the positions of many of the granite masses, it seems probable that the amount is much greater. On the Aldabras also coral-rag was found at a height of 50 feet.

The climate of the Seychelles is characteristic. As a rule the heat is quite bearable. The south-east monsoon prevails from June to October, and the north-east monsoon from December to April, the hottest

season occurring in the intervening calms during May and November, when the temperature rises to about 95° Fahr. The principal rains fall between December and April. During winter most of the islands receive little or no rainfall, but the higher central parts of Mahé and Silhouette are an exception to this rule, and the rivers are never dried up. The rainfall recorded at Mahé in 1895 was 98·4 inches. Scarcely a day passes on which Morue Seychellois does not appear cloud-capped from Mahé for at least a few hours. Severe thunderstorms are rare. The prolonged torrential rains may in the circumstances give rise to landslips, but the famous slip in 1862 was not of this nature, the cause being rather a local disturbance which dislodged masses of mud and stones.

The Seychelles are exceedingly healthy. Malaria is almost unknown; dysentery and anæmia are more common. The island of Curieuse is specially set apart for the isolation of lepers, and, although the writer saw only four, trustworthy witnesses assured him that the number amounted to as much as 10 per cent. of the whole population. The healthiness of the islands is largely due to the abundant supply of good water. In Mahé alone, no less than 133 rapid streams bring pure water down from the mountains; and only in the south part of the island, and in some of the smaller members of the group, where the sandy plains and ridges absorb the rivers before they reach the sea and so form swamps, is the climate at all unhealthy.

Vegetation is luxuriant. The coast strips are covered with coco-palms. Up to a height of 1000 to 1100 feet, most of the older forest has been cleared, and in some parts only grass and bush grow on these slopes, but others are cultivated, and produce cacao, vanilla, coffee, bananas, pineapples, oranges, lemons, cloves, etc. Considerable tracts of the original forest which once covered the whole islands are still to be found in the centre of Mahé and on Silhouette and Praslin. Most of these are now fortunately government property, and their total destruction is prevented by stringent regulations. The most remarkable plant of the islands is the coco de mer (*Lodoicea seychellarum*), which has its home in certain limited districts in Curieuse and in two small valleys in the north of Praslin, although isolated specimens occur in other islands. The coco de mer does not grow by itself like the coco-palm, but interspersed with other trees. The young palms send out their eight or ten leaves, each 16 to 20 feet long, without a trunk, but the magnificent crown of the older specimens spreads itself over the other trees on a stem 60 or 70 feet high. The seed takes a year to germinate, the first leaves appear in thirty-five years, and seven years are required for the ripening of the fruit. Sometimes one finds two or even three or four double fruits in one shell, and this peculiarity, taken along with the fact that the plants are dioecious, and therefore difficult to cultivate, greatly reduces the commercial value of the tree; at present the fruits are chiefly sold as curiosities at 4s. to 10s. each. Only the strenuous

efforts of Horne, the former director of the Botanic Gardens at Mauritius, have prevented the total disappearance of the coco de mer from the Seychelles and the globe.

Unlike the flora, the fauna of the Seychelles is poor, but it nevertheless includes a number of interesting forms. Rats and mice are a great pest; they destroy nearly every cacao crop, and greatly damage the coffee plants. Thirteen species of birds are peculiar to the islands, and amongst reptilia may be noted the great land tortoise (*Testudo elephantina*), which specially haunts the Aldabras. The fauna is a remainder of that of a once extensive land region, but whether its poverty is the result of deforestation or of some event in the history of the islands is not yet known.

The first settlement of the islands was begun by creoles from Mauritius and Réunion about 150 years ago. In the middle of this century negroes were introduced from the Mozambique coast by the government, as labourers; and besides creoles and negroes, we now find a few Europeans, Indians, and Chinese, numbering in all seventeen to eighteen thousand. The creoles seem to have occupied themselves at first in making the most of the treasures found on the islands, especially the forests, and in piracy; but since the English took possession attention has chiefly been turned to cultivation, first of the coco-palm and sugar-cane, and more recently of cacao, vanilla, cloves, and coffee. Many other plants could be cultivated and larger harvests obtained in so rich a soil, if the creole did not add to his qualities of amiability and hospitality those of drunkenness, untrustworthiness, thoughtlessness, and laziness. Coco-nut oil and vanilla are the chief exports, and will remain so, as they require least labour. Most of the creoles are paupers, or in the hands of money-lenders, and their spendthrift, good-for-nothing habits frustrate most of the government schemes for development. Although the Seychelles have been in English hands for nearly a century, the feeling of the inhabitants has remained almost wholly French. French is the common language; at least, the creoles speak a simplified and degenerate French patois, and the negroes employ a similar tongue. Nor can we expect much change so long as French is exclusively taught in the Catholic schools; and the hands of the government are tied, inasmuch as the treaty taking over the islands includes an undertaking not to interfere with the language or religion. A great blow at the prosperity of the islands has been the discontinuance, during the present year, of the Messageries Maritimes line between Mahé and Aden, and between Mahé and Mauritius. The British-India line between Bombay, Mahé, and Zanzibar is now the only connection with Europe.

The old idea of establishing a sanatorium at the Seychelles has much to recommend it; climate, scenery, and cheap living are all in its favour, and Mauritius, Zanzibar, and East Africa would ensure a large number of visitors.