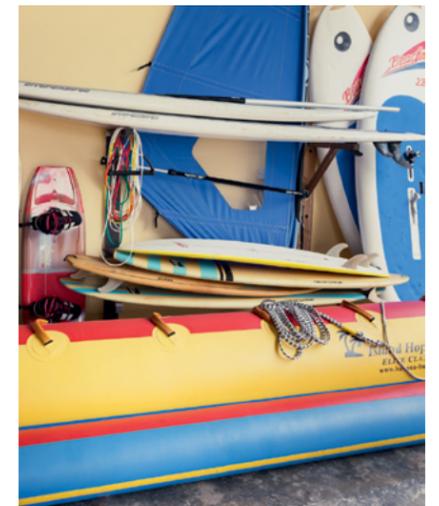
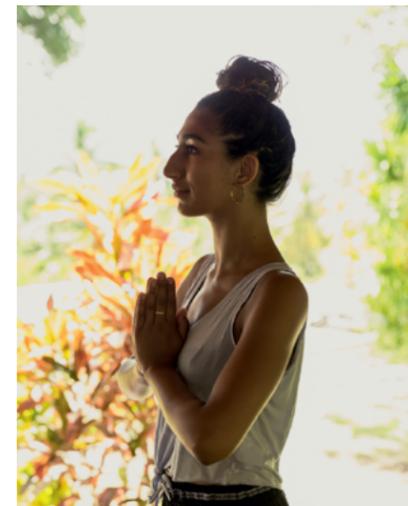
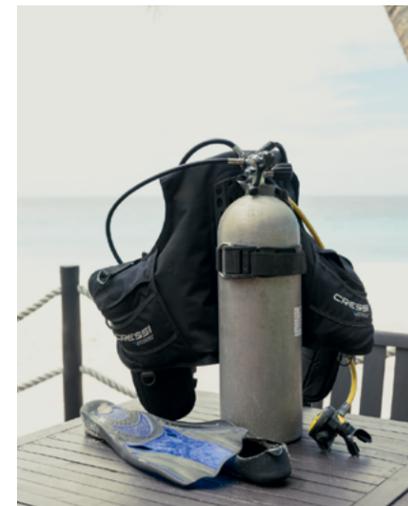
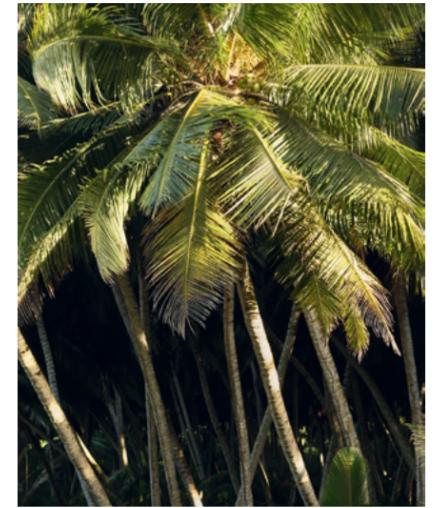
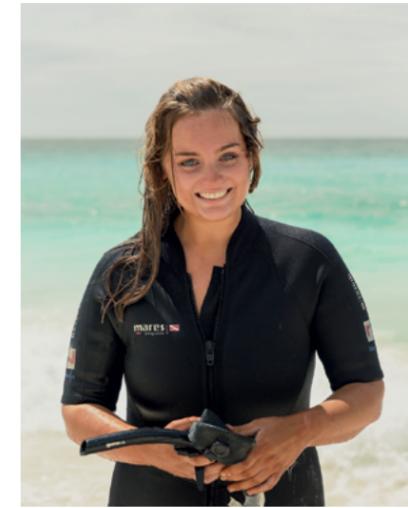


WOULD YOU GO ON HOLIDAY WITH A STRANGER?

Wanderlust isn't only for couples – single travellers are increasingly using friendship apps. RADHIKA SANGHANI and ALI PANTONY head to the Seychelles to find out how – and if – it works



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Ripe coconuts; Pantony glows after her first Seychelles dive; palm trees near Anse Parc on the pirate trail; the view from Plantain House; sports equipment available for guests to use on the island; Sanghani enjoys early morning yoga; no more than two guests are taken on dives at a time; the spectacular Indian Ocean; our strangers bond. Shot on location at Fregate Island Private, oetkercollection.com



VIEWFINDER
Clockwise from left: Fregate Island Private's lobby; the island was discovered in 1744 by French explorer Lazare Picault, who named it after a local bird; Sanghani and Theo the tortoise, who's between 120 and 130 years old

MY HOLIDAY HAS BECOME EXACTLY WHAT I'D BEEN HOPING TO AVOID: ALONE TIME



HOW TO HOLIDAY WITH A STRANGER
by Radhika Sanghani

|>|
SIGN UP FOR SOME JOINT ACTIVITIES

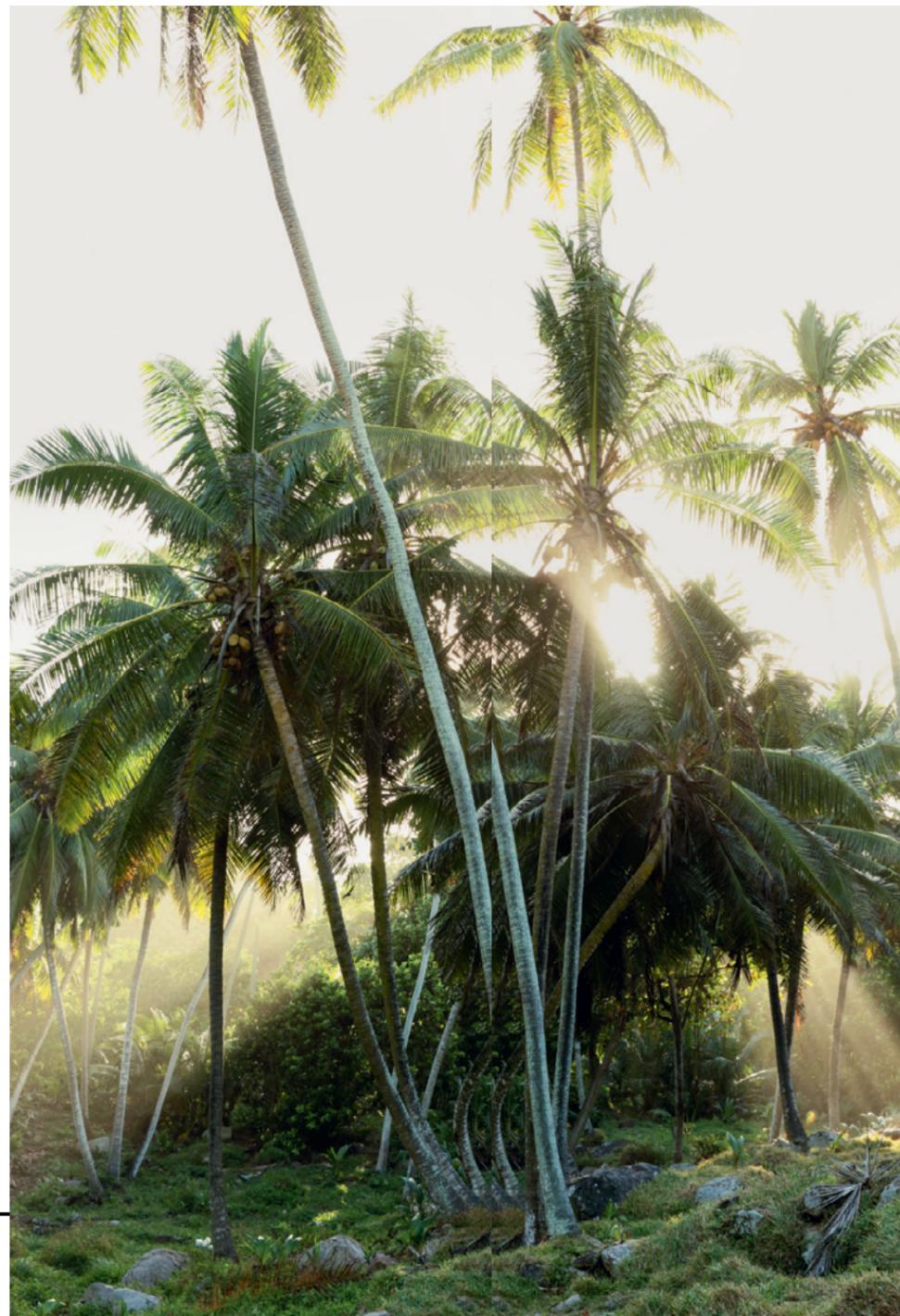
"Especially at the start of your trip. It's the easiest way to have something to bond over."

|>|
COMPROMISE

"It's one thing forcing your best friend to do something she hates on holiday, but there's a lot more potential for disaster if you're with a stranger."

|>|
SCHEDULE IN SOME ALONE TIME

"Your relationship is still new, so don't overdo it."



RADHIKA SANGHANI

"Do you want to come back to my villa?" I ask. "It has amazing views – the infinity pool is right at the top of a cliff so you can see the beach below. I mean, if you want to?"

I don't often invite strangers back to mine on holiday. But, even though I've barely known Ali for 24 hours, I have no choice but to try and get on with her. For five days, we are each other's official travel buddy on a holiday to Fregate Island Private in the Seychelles. The only problem is, that after a ten-hour flight and dinner together, we haven't moved beyond small talk.

My invitation is an attempt to take things to the next level but, when I open the door to Ali a few hours later, I realise there's been a misunderstanding. She is fully clothed in the kind of chic summer outfit I'd wear to work, with a full face of make-up, and clutching her laptop.

I am dripping wet from a swim, topless and holding two fresh coconuts. We laugh it off but, when I go out on to the terrace, she heads into the villa to work. My holiday has become exactly what I'd been hoping to avoid: alone time.

Like many single twentysomethings surrounded by couples, I'm used to travelling alone. While my friends are always keen for a European city break, their 'big' holidays are saved for their partners. A recent study found that 61 per cent of Millennials, such as myself, travel with 'others', which means with friends or alone, compared to just 33 per cent of older generations.

An increasing number of sites and apps have sprung up to help people find their 'others', from adventure groups such as The Yes Tribe, to sites such as Your Travel Mates and Travel Buddies. It was Toby Gunston's own experience of struggling to find a friend to go scuba diving with that led him to found Travel Buddies in 2012. "Travel today is cheaper and more widely available than ever," he tells me. "But many people still struggle to find a partner to go with. We help connect people who have the same travel plans. It's a place to actually meet up with members, travel safely together, and make lifelong friends."

Even before this trip, I was ready to sign up. While I love solo travel, I often miss having someone to have dinner with. So, when offered the chance to play a kind of 'Travel Tinder', I was thrilled – not least because of the aforementioned island, the kind of luxury remote beach resort I dream of visiting, but could never imagine booking alone. A quick stalk of my new companion's Instagram – showing a keen traveller, who also loves a drink – reassured me that we'd get on.

We met at Heathrow, and I was proved right. Ali ordered a large Malbec, and we chatted away happily about our expectations of the trip. But

it didn't take long for our differences to become apparent: while Ali talked about being desperate to scuba dive (something I've never done) and her huge workload, I enthused about early morning yoga, detoxing and turning off my phone to disconnect from 'real life'.

The Seychelles is typically seen as the ultimate romantic destination, and Fregate Island Private is no different. "I'd say 90 per cent of our guests are couples," says our personal butler, Jean-Luke Payet. "The rest are families, or people who rent out the entire island for events. What makes it stand out from other tropical destinations is that we have so much nature and wildlife to see."

So, while it might not occur to a group of friends to go to the Seychelles together, it's actually a brilliant group destination. There's everything from diving with whale sharks to traditional dances and barbecues on Mahé. Great with friends – but still not ideal solo.

And, like a viral cat video on YouTube, the animals facilitated the first seeds of common ground for Ali and me. Giant tortoises roam the entire island and neither of us can resist a selfie with centenarian Theo.

However, after every activity, Ali goes straight back to her villa. In a way it's more nerve-wracking than dating – have I done something wrong? My fears are confirmed over a candlelit dinner at the island's private residence, where George Clooney got engaged to Amal Alamuddin. "I'm lucky. I have an amazing group of friends," says Ali. "I'm not sure I need any more."

I wasn't expecting a proposal, but the rejection is a blow. I've been talking about how much I love making new friends, and how I've met some lifelong ones while travelling, but Ali seems to view this very much as a one-trip thing. It's disappointing because I was hoping she'd become a 'real life' friend – someone I could grab drinks with back in London.

But I don't lose hope, and instead embrace it as a challenge. The next day, after Ali is feeling rejuvenated from the water sports she's been looking forward to and I've done mountaintop yoga, we have a beach picnic. It is stunning – we are entirely alone, the sea lapping at our feet, and we both drop our guard.

I abandon my detox, have a drink, and overshare about my personal life. It works – soon we are laughing together like old friends. That evening, we explore the island in a buggy, befriending staff and tortoises, and even persuading honeymooning

couples to join us for an impromptu barbecue. "This is why it's so good for friends to come to Fregate," says Jean-Luke. "The Seychelles needs more of it."



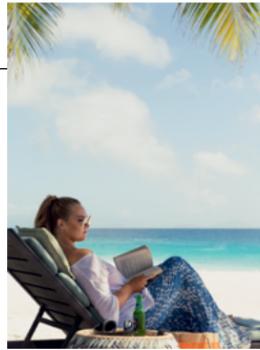
BA flies direct to the Seychelles twice a week from London Heathrow. Flight time: ten hours

@radhikasanghani

ALI PANTONY

The sunset is painting the sky sorbet pink, my toes are sinking into the sand and I'm sipping my third glass of chilled rosé. It's the perfect #romantic Instagram shot. Except the person on the other side of my beach towel isn't my spouse – or even someone I know. I first met Radhika 18 hours ago.

I never thought I'd go on holiday with a stranger. Up until this year, I only travelled with my partner and closest friends. But one break-up (mine), two engagements (theirs) and 15 clashing schedules later, and I'm sick of not seeing the world just because no one's available to come with me. So I'm here, on Fregate Island Private, one of 115 islands in the Seychelles archipelago, with



someone in the same position.

"When you're approaching your 30s, chances are that your friends are either prioritising their careers or having children, which can make booking a mates holiday near impossible," says Radha Vyas, CEO and co-founder of Flash

Pack, a travel company that organises group trips for like-minded solo travellers. "So 'travel buddies' are a growing phenomenon – people feel safer travelling with a companion, and we see clients become fast friends," she adds.

But 'friends' and 'the Seychelles' doesn't chime with me. Yes, the islands have long been at the top of my bucket list. But they're also known as 'the honeymoon islands', so as a single woman I've always assumed it was the wrong place for me.

With Fregate Island Private's seven brochure-worthy beaches and 16 villas, each with their own private infinity pool, it's easy to see why honeymooners flock here. Its 740 acres house just 40 guests. The thought of heading there with someone I don't know is daunting to say the least.

The differences between my new travel companion and me become apparent the morning after we arrive. Radhika sets her alarm for 7am morning yoga, and sips a detoxifying green juice over breakfast. Meanwhile, last night's rosé is taking its toll, and I'm wondering if it's acceptable to order a gallon of coffee on our first morning.

Yet over breakfast, I realise we have a fair amount in common. I love the book she's reading (*Anybody Out There?* by Marian Keyes), and we're both pescatarians who live in North London.

After breakfast, I head to my co-traveller's villa with my laptop in hand. As much as I want to switch off, I have deadlines, and I'm wary of imposing myself. I'm trying to hold back.

"I want nothing more than a swim, but I need to get an hour of work done," I tell her. "Sure, join whenever you can!" she smiles. But I sense she's thinking I'm a dull workaholic.

Desperate to show her my adventurous, laptop-free side, I offer to drive us around the island's winding roads on one of the free-to-use buggies. Exploring deep into the jungle, we bond over our love of animals, stopping to take a photo of a

TESTING THE WATER

Clockwise from left: the islands are awash with lush greenery; on the way to the pirate ruins; Pantony catches up on some essential holiday reading

HOW TO HOLIDAY WITH A STRANGER by Ali Pantony

|→|

GET COMFORTABLE WITH OVERSHARING

"There won't be much opportunity for awkward silences if you're both recounting your worst ever date."

|→|

BE SPONTANEOUS

"Go with the flow. The most fun adventures Radhika and I had on the island were from simply driving around and doing whatever we felt like."

|→|

LEAVE YOUR PHONE IN YOUR ROOM

"It's tempting to retreat to your WhatsApp groups, but being on your phone will drive a conversational wedge between you."

Seychelles giant scorpion. We share a childish giggle when we drive past two of the tortoises arthritically fornicating.

But when it comes to activities, Radhika and I have to compromise. The next day, I'm keen to go scuba diving to see tropical fish, rays and sharks – it's long been a dream of mine to swim with endangered whale sharks, the biggest fish in the ocean. But Radhika has never tried diving before and, to be honest, I don't really want to babysit a beginner. Luckily, she wants to do more yoga. We agree to split up, and meet back for a beach picnic at lunch.

If I were on holiday with my friends, leaving them to do my own thing would make me feel guilty – I'd be there to spend time with them. But when you're on holiday with a stranger, it's easier to be selfish. During a trip to Malta last year with six friends, I ditched my goal of diving by the Blue Hole near the island of Gozo because no one else was qualified and I didn't want to miss exploring the island with my friends.

But this tacit agreement to separate for a while makes the holiday easier to navigate. We're not

obligated to spend *all* our time together – which can't always be said about holidays with partners or friends – and knowing this makes the time we do spend together more relaxed. Plus, we haven't heard the other's anecdotes

a million times before. During a picnic, we laugh about terrible dates, decisions and job interviews, and I'm surprised how comfortable I feel in her company.

After a hungover hike, it's time for our final dinner together. We toast our 'strangers trip' and make plans to play tennis back in London. Again, I find myself confiding in Radhika – all the messy, painful parts of my life, and she responds in kind, with some good advice about both work and love.

It's at this moment I wonder why I was seeing this trip as the friendship equivalent of a fleeting holiday romance. I may already have plenty of incredible friends, but that doesn't mean I can't make room for one more.

🐦@alipantony

High Life stayed at Fregate Island Private. Private Pool Villas start from £2,866 per night on a full-board basis.* oetkercollection.com



WE LAUGH HARD, AND I'M SURPRISED HOW COMFORTABLE I FEEL IN HER COMPANY



*Based on two adults sharing, including all meals anywhere on the island, soft beverages, house wines and local beers, as well as personal laundry, island buggy, non-motorised water sports and guided nature walks

