

SEYCHELLES

Beauty and the bounty

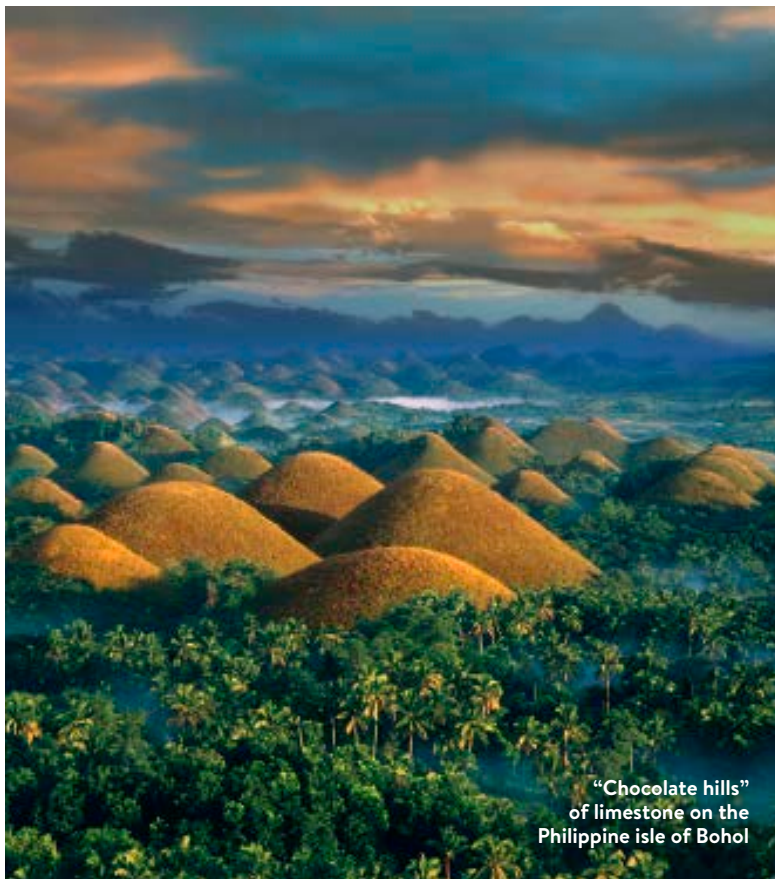
NOTHING COULD KEEP Sherla Mathurin away from her native Seychelles for long, not even the opulence of Bahrain. The former private chef to a Bahrain royal now leads cooking classes in her homeland, using hand-selected spices, line-fished snapper, and octopus speared that same morning to create aromatic creole curries and seafood salads. Seychelles clearly has its own wealth.

Located 1,100 miles off Kenya's east coast, in the Indian Ocean, the Seychelles archipelago of 115 islands dishes up vistas so lush that they can stop a queen in her tracks. During a 1972 visit, Queen Elizabeth II halted her convoy at Mission Lodge, along the Sans Souci mountain road on the main island of Mahé, for an impromptu afternoon English tea with a view.

Six fiercely guarded marine national parks provide havens for endangered hawksbill turtles, spinner dolphins, and more than a thousand types of fish. You'll find Seychelles blue pigeons and other endemic species in the World Heritage Vallée de Mai Nature Reserve, on Praslin island, which looks like something out of *Jurassic World*. Among its large-leafed palm trees rise endemic coco-de-mer trees, which produce fruits that encase the largest seeds in the plant world. As in the garden of Eden, Seychelles flaunts its beauty with abandon. —LOLA AKINMADE



Clownfish in Seychelles waters



"Chocolate hills" of limestone on the Philippine isle of Bohol

PHILIPPINES

An island for every taste

IN EVERY FAMILY, there's always an odd one out—and in the clan of Asia-Pacific nations, that member would be the Philippines. This nation of 7,107 islands (about 2,000 inhabited) began as a loose grouping of Indo-Malay tribes, which endured nearly 400 years of Spanish rule, then 48 years as a U.S. territory. Today the Philippines is a mix of tribal pride, Catholic fervor, American pop-culture savvy, and tropical affability.

Most visitors don't linger in the muggy, traffic-clogged capital, Manila, but you should explore at least one of the Spanish churches in the old, walled center of Intramuros and stroll around Manila Bay at sunset.

Then head to some of the thousands of beaches, from the pink sands of Great Santa Cruz Island to the black sands of Albay. Divers off Palawan, Apo, and Siargao islands delight in hundreds of coral and fish species. On the southern isle of Mindanao, more than 1,300 land species—including the endangered Philippine eagle—reside in Mount Hamiguitan Range Wildlife Sanctuary, which recently joined northern Luzon's rice terraces as a World Heritage site.

If the Philippines is that quirky member of the family, it also is the one that always invites you to dinner, a uniquely Filipino fusion experience that intermingles salty, sour, and savory flavors. —ERIK R. TRINIDAD