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From a distance it looks like a mist-shrouded mountain on the North West horizon. A sullen solitary Silhouette. As you are lured nearer, you discover la isla bonita and she is indeed like a mountain on the sea! And then you are spellbound by Silhouette, the third largest island in the Seychelles archipelago.

Whilst others flaunt their resplendent attractions from far away and provoke sensations of breathless awe, the island of Silhouette is the demurest of all.... Her seeming nondescriptness stimulates a curiosity that draws you nearer and nearer into her embrace where you are then trapped by her enchantment. Yes. Silhouette is strangely seducing....

The island is formed by two main ridges. The 2,428 ft Mont Dauban that runs due East and West and the 1,600ft Mont Pot a eau that runs to the North and South of the island. Two short spurs, one extending from the western end of Mont Dauban towards the North West and the other running from the middle of Mont Pot a eau towards the East completes the steep topography of the island. All these ridges and spurs usually end in sheer precipices of rock or glaciais, save for the coastal littoral of the South Western and North Eastern sides where the mountain seems to slope down gently, leveling off into sandy coastal plateaux that abut with the shores.

With its valleys and gullies, majestic granite outcrops and rugged cliffs, jungles of primeval forest from where gurgling streams and rivers meander down into the sea, Silhouette is a tropical heaven. Situated 19 km North West of Mahé, the island measures approximately 5 km long and 5 km wide and is shaped like a squashy pear.

It was on Monday 28th January 1771 that a French navigator named Charles Ogier on his bark L'heure du Berger came ashore on the east side of the island at Anse La Passe.

Thus, it must have been with rapturous fascination that he took in the splendour of his island and named it Silhouette – after Etienne de Silhouette (1701 – 1767) who had been the Controller – General of France between March and November 1759. Later a rocky promontory

on the West of the island was named precisely Pointe Etienne – thus enshrining the memory of an 18th century French percepteur whose popularity stemmed solely from his evanescent career!

But for the next few decades the island went through periods of ephemeral settlements only. It seemed that her seemingly limited acreage for habitation and its thoroughly mountainous terrain discouraged any attempts at a permanent establishment on her soil. Arab sailors and traders from East India who traveled through the 'sea of zanj' (Arabian Sea) often came ashore to rest and replenish their scuttle butts. And it seems that more than just a few died here, as the graves on the eastern coast of the aptly named Anse Lascar confirm.

Even the grit of the notorious and intrepid pirate Jean-François Hodoul (1765 – 1855) could not confront the daunting prospects of making a permanent abode there. In 1813 already in his late 40's , he ventured into the pristine wilderness of the island and after spending a little less than a couple of years there during which time the 1814 Treaty of Paris made the Island of Seychelles a colony of the British Empire, he left and went to settle on Mahé.

Time passed. Silhouette remained in the dark until the early 1830's when a few French émigré families acquired properties on Silhouette and established coconut plantations in a bid to benefit from the insatiable demand for coprah on the world market. Slaves were sent there to work on the plantations and clear the land. Despite being oblivious to the conditions stipulated in the code noire , they lived tolerably well, subsisting on fish, turtle meat, cassava and plantations. But by the time the coconut trees began to bear fruits, many of the plantation owners had died and their descendants were not interested in maintaining properties on an island that had no school for their children, no church, no hospital and took 5 to 6 hours to reach by pirogue.

Consequently at the end of the 1850's with the Emancipation Act, already in force on all British territories, some freed slaves eventually became owners of many of the properties on Silhouette! And then one day in 1860 a thirty-six year old French man named Auguste Dauban (1826 – 1905) arrived from Mauritius with his wife Catherine Young.

Their arrival came at an eventful period in the history of Seychelles. The Catholic Mission which had arrived in 1851 with the visit of an itinerant 26 year old Capuchin missionary, Leon Golliet des Avanchers (1826-1879) was gradually erasing the inveterate heathenism among the 7,000 or so inhabitants. The Civil Commissioner, George Thompson Wade, passed away in September 1861 after a decade in office and with the strict enforcement of the abolition of

slavery. Shiploads of liberated slaves began arriving in May 1861 as ships of the British Navy prowled the Indian Ocean for those Arab dhows that still engaged in the nefarious and lucrative slave trade. An operation that would continue until 1874 and swell the population by the thousands. Yes, as the Dauban family settled down at Anse Lascar, the dawn of a new era was rising over Silhouette...

This was because during the second half of the 19th century the tropical agricultural industry that was the lifeblood of the economy of most British protectorates experienced an unprecedented boom. This took place as the pharmaceutical plants, confectionery and cosmetic industries of Europe and America hankered for more cinnamon, more vanilla, more patchouli and more coprah from which coconut oil is extracted--- a product which it seems a wonder that even the vast coconut estates of the West Indies, Samoa, Ceylon, Papua New Guinea and the Philippines could not create a glut for.

Here in Seychelles, all private properties and Crown lands were more or less allocated for the large scale cultivation of the precious *cocos nucifera*.

Auguste Dauban was an ambitious enterprising man. And he must have found the prospect of transforming Silhouette into a veritable microcosm of the tropical agricultural empire exceedingly titillating. He had inherited his father's wealth which had accrued from business enterprises in Mauritius. By the time he was forty, Auguste had bought all the properties on Silhouette and ipso facto had become the owner of the entire island. Judiciously, he decided that the sandy coastal plains of La Passe would be the ideal place to make his home. It is situated on the east side of Silhouette thus facing Mahé and has the advantage of a wide passage through the fringing reef which allows boats easy access to the shore.

There, Auguste Dauban built his plantation house, an imposing structure of grace and grandeur that today vividly reflects the 'plantation aristocracy' of the Dauban family. Constructed with the choicest timber obtained from the primeval forests of the island, the large and lofty home is incontrovertibly the Patriarch of colonial plantation houses (*gran kaz*).

By the time the first sprigs of vanilla were brought over from Réunion for cultivation in 1866, Silhouette was in the throes of utter development. A small jetty was constructed and paved tracks were laid out that led from areas around La Passe where coconuts grew in abundance so as to enable mules to carry sack loads of coprah and later cinnamon bark to storage houses.

Infrastructures comprising of all necessary facilities and installations needed for the coconut industry and other agricultural ventures were built at settlements at Anse Lascars, Anse Mondon in the north, and Grand Barbe in the West. These were, unquestionably, important areas of plantation activities that were integral elements in the whole process of the coprah, cinnamon and vanilla production on Silhouette that contributed significantly to the agricultural industry of the colony, whose economy then depended entirely on the exportation of these products.

Indeed, it must have been those extra few kilos of vanilla pods and cinnamon bark, and extra few tons of coconuts harvested from the fertile soil of Silhouette that enabled the colony of Seychelles to achieve such stupendously impressive milestones during the pre-independence years: 12 million coconuts and 71, 899 kilos of vanilla in 1901... 1,043 tons of cinnamon bark in 1909... 6, 574 tons of copra in 1951.

Auguste Dauban passed away in 1905 at 79 years old and was entombed in the family mausoleum that he had constructed especially for his two year old daughter Marie-Louise Eva who had passed away on July 20th 1864 – the year also that his first son Edouard was born.

Long before the arrival of the 20th century, Edouard had taken over the management of the agricultural ventures on Silhouette in the light of his father's infirmities of health. Having inherited his father's enterprising spirit and passion for work, he knew that it had devolved upon him to protect and perhaps increase the family's agrarian fortunes. And he must have been endowed with uncanny precognition or perhaps he was a 20th century islander who merely put plain common sense into practice. Even before the mists of the First World War (1914 – 1918) appeared on the tropical horizon, he made it imperative that all households on Silhouette should grow a breadfruit tree on their premises – as a source of food and as a precaution against famine. And as if to emphasize and endorse the wisdom of his behest, in 1917 the colonial Legislative Council of Governor Charles Richard Mackey O'Brien (1859 – 1923) passed an ordinance that made it illegal to cut down a breadfruit tree. Thus, hundreds of trees of the precious *artocarpus communis* have survived into the 21st century. An inadvertent aspect of the Dauban legacy?...

And yet, if one was to attribute the agricultural prosperity of Silhouette solely to the presence of the Dauban family on the island, one would surely do so at the risk of being grossly discourteous to the facts of history.

It is poignantly evident that it was the toil and sweat of the native inhabitants and those of their descendants, who throughout many years of strenuous, exhausting labor, shaped the economic profile of Silhouette and created wealth for successive generations of the Dauban family.

Yes, many of them were descendants of liberated slaves. They labored and toiled in the cinnamon forests, coconut groves and coastal plantations established by Auguste Dauban. Their grandchildren did likewise for the last of the Dauban breed, Henry Ernest Leon Dauban (1901 -1991) Auguste Dauban's grandson.

Whilst many came to retire on Mahé, many remained on Silhouette where they have been laid to rest among their ancestors. History allows us the privilege of a few names: Caroline Aglaé born 1868, Paulevin Aurelie born 1872, Amad Madsouff born 1857, Elisa Leveille born 1840, Germaine Dubois born 1877, Paul Simeon born 1883,... Their gravestones and tombstones at Pointe Ramasse tout, Anse Mondon and Grand Barbe have succumbed to the ravages of time and have fallen into decrepitude, utter decrepitude. A poignant decay that is reflected and duplicated in the deterioration and dilapidation of the buildings and houses as they inexorably fall into ruins.

Yes, these places where those unsung workers and labourers spent their lives and gave so much of their strength and energy in the course of earning their livelihood, these places smell of time gone by. Feel the beguiling melancholy?

So come, come with me to yesterday....

To Grand Barbe... where everything is like a collective relic of the once lively settlement. The grass is green yes, but the rubble and the rust.... Here on our right, closer to the shore are the ruins of what was once the church of Our Lady of Rosary built in 1969 – sometime in the late 1980's the wrath of a storm stripped it of its corrugated roof, henceforth, the wooden beams of the ceiling collapsed and the walls started to crumble and disintegrate. There was a time, here, when the air of the Te Deum blended with the crashing sounds of the surf... look further inland. That's the administrator's dwelling house, picturesquely decayed. Let's move closer to it, history beckons. There is a sort of poignant ungainliness about this house that seems to flout its dilapidation and decrepitude, as if the spirit of the place knows that ruins are insidiously evocative... mournfully beautiful. Look upwards, at the rafters and ridgepole, the marvelous

craftsmanship that executed the mortise and tenon butt joints. It's amazing! Even in its abject and utter state of decrepitude the building appears to celebrate the sheer artisanal ingenuity that went into its construction. Really amazing! The little staircase is inviting... but it is rickety.

Here, opposite is the copra and cinnamon store. It's all in wood and corrugated iron. It's all very creaky and decrepit, isn't it? The chutes under which burlap bags were placed to be filled with copra pieces and cinnamon bark that were discharged from the drying platform above are still there. Thousands and thousands of kilos of copra and cinnamon must have flowed down these three wooden channels. Copra and cinnamon that eventually ended up as flavouring agents and spices in American and European kitchens. The rancid smell of copra combines with the pungent aroma of cinnamon to produce the narcotic scent of ... nostalgia.

Oh, the bucolic bustle of the workers performing their toilsome occupations beneath the blazing sun – The men coming back from the uplands, sweating and with their bodies bent under the lefty gunny sacks of husked coconuts – The scrapping sound of a machete being boned on the whetstone wheel – The badinage of men as they heaved sacks of cinnamon bark up into the store room – women wearing screw pine hats shucking coconuts and laying vanilla pods out in the sun to dry. Men and women stoking the fire in the copra kiln with eyes smarting from the smoke. From the distance, the hollow mooing of cows grazing in the grasslands... and a waft of the northeasterly breeze betrays the alfresco cooking of the day's lunch: salted fish chutney with mango, turtle meat curry with boiled breadfruit...

Obviously, the workers' dwellings were scattered all across the expanse of the flatland as the ruins indicate. This was the homestead of Grand Barbe – a collection of buildings that served the different aspects of agricultural activities that went on here. There used to be a shop and a school for the worker's children. It was, so to speak, a creole civilization in miniature

Almost a hundred years ago, it was this little 'civilization' that a 23 year old English etymologist named Hugh Scott (1885 – 1960) found when he came to look for specimens of various species of insects in the jungles of Silhouette. One can imagine the quizzical looks on the islander's faces as they saw the 'white stranger' venture into gullies and ravines, and spent nights up in the mountains in search of 'insect fauna'. Interestingly enough, it was one of the native inhabitants named Laurence who Scott relied upon as a guide who made the marvelous discovery of the endemic large white moth up on the summit of Mont Dauban. The moth is the *Portesia pectinata*. It was September 2nd 1908... So these are the ruins of the former 'little civilization' that exists still in our imagination because of the imageries that they evoke – but the rusty bell still bangs from its tottering wooden framework. On countless occasions its clanging sounds have called the workers and inhabitants to gather here at the administrator's house. It's

seems as if time has shown compassion and pity for this single quotidian instrument: which alas is likely to collapse any moment.

For many years during the 20th century people lived, worked and died at Anse Mondon. There, on the coast is a coconut and cinnamon store-house conveniently located for loading the stuff onto pirogues to be taken to La Passe or Mahé. A fairly large structure of masonry, it has remained virtually intact save for its roofing of which it has been “naturally” divested. The last couple to reside here were Edmee Aglaé and Gilbert Ernesta who in the early 1990’s were still harvesting cinnamon for IDC (Island Development Company) – the Government parastatal which acquired the island in the 1980’s. Their little dwelling remains and can still offer shelter to weary travelers. At Anse Lascars we also find the ruins of yet another of these simple and common stone features. And up in the dark shadows of the woods are the pathetic ruins of what was once the administrator’s house William Dubignon (1917 – 1994) who lived there during most of the 1970’s, a time when the scion of the Dauban family, Henry, was contemplating the sale of his island...

Back to La Passe, and here it is that quaint little structure on the coast at the end of the beach opposite the ruins of the old jetty. It invariably provokes rash speculation among some visitors and creates a thrill of tormented curiosity among others – another coconut store house? (pos koko) a jail? (kaso) a boat shed? (langar bato). Well, apparently this is where petrol and sulfur (which was commonly used as an insecticide) used to be stored. The small building is made of cobblestone and clay, and once had a roof of shingles, the evidence of which is to be found among the rocks nearby. Yes, that was the time, and not so long ago... Standing here on this mighty granite bluff at the eastern end of the middle of Silhouette, and gazing down at the churning waters below where the waves crash against the rocky coast in thundering fury, as if the violence of the entire Indian Ocean is unleashed down there below, you can’t help thinking of them, those early inhabitants of Silhouette. The cemetery behind you contains dozens of graves. Yes, here they rest, some of them.

Yes, the name ‘Dauban’ is indelibly engraved on Silhouette. But regardless of what, no matter what, the memories of those men and women whose labour. Strength and courage have made it so, have also been immortalized.

Because on the island of Silhouette, the name ‘Dauban’ echoes their memories.