

Brendon Grimshaw and his tiny island in the Seychelles

Written by Andy Owen



Just imagine...

After a solid and very settled sleep, you slowly wake and hear the sound of rustling palm trees and waves gently lapping against the shore.

You swing your legs out of bed and amble to the open bedroom door and smile, as the view of your own private beach and the stunning Indian Ocean, fill your senses.

There is no one there but you.

You walk out - and as your feet sink into the warm sand, you wish a cheery 'good morning' to the giant tortoises and birds, that also share your paradise and call it home.



A dream? Yes, for nearly all of us.

But it was a reality for one very special man. More of him in a minute...

Scattered over a vast area of the Indian Ocean, the 115 islands of the Seychelles are among the most spectacular on the planet.

They are breathtakingly beautiful with hundreds of secluded beaches.

Paradise...

One of these islands is called Moyenne.

It is a very small island of approximately 24 acres. Just over 2 miles from the main island of Mahé - the largest island in the Seychelles - but far enough away to be remote and enticing.



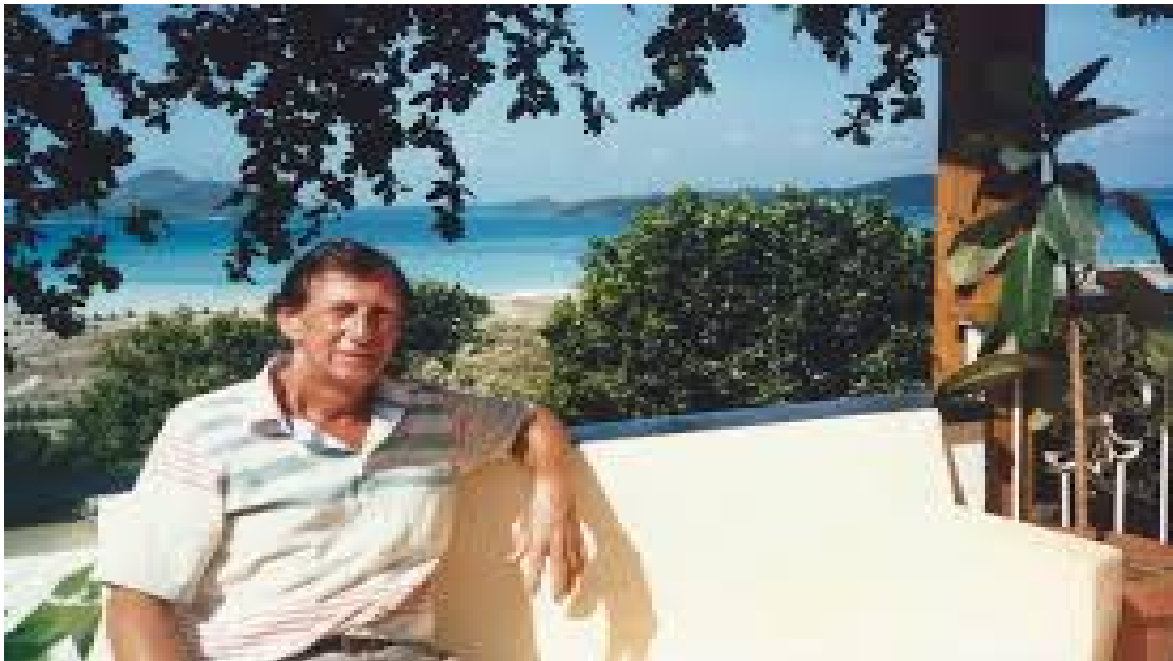
The island's name was derived from the French 'moyenne', meaning 'middle.'

It was used by pirates in the 18th and 19th centuries

From 1915 until the 1960's, the island was abandoned. In 1946, it was purchased by Philippe Georges. But he and his wife Vera Georges rarely visited it and lived in Mahé.

In 1962, the island was about to be awoken from its deep sleep.

Enter, stage right, Brendon Grimshaw...



Brendon was a Yorkshire lad, born and bred.

After cutting his journalistic teeth as a junior reporter on the Batley News, he moved on to add two columns of cinema criticism every week. He quickly branched out into theatre and even music criticism.

After a stint in the Army, his journalistic career continued and, at twenty-three, he became the youngest chief reporter in Britain, switching after two years to The Star in neighbouring Sheffield for his evening sub-editorial training.

He became a 'splash sub', handling the main story of the day, updating the news and changing the banner headline for each of the five editions.

In the pub one evening, after a particularly busy and stressful day, a former splash sub, advised him to seek pastures new.

And that's *exactly* what he did.

He was appointed as senior sub-editor with the *East African Standard* in Nairobi. Yes, *Kenya*. A bit of a change from Sheffield, sure enough.

It was a left-field move and saw him surviving eight years of Mau Mau issues, plus having the inconvenience of carrying a gun in a shoulder holster all day - and sleeping with it under his pillow at night.

He stayed in Africa for eight years and became a very successful editor at some of the largest newspapers in East Africa at the time.

It was a very stimulating time for Brendon - and he was able to meet Tanzania's charismatic leader, Julius Nyerere.



Standard Building, Nairobi

He ended as news and features editor of *The Standard* as well as drama and book critic. But he wanted something else.

He was looking for a new way of life that would allow him to be closer to nature. He had always dreamed of owning property in the Seychelles, perhaps his own island.

A timely opportunity presented itself. Kenya declared independence and Brendon knew that it was only a matter of time before locals would soon take over his job.

He had reached 37 years of age. He quickly decided the time was right to move on. He sold all his possessions and set plans in motion to travel around the globe.

Grimshaw's first stop, was the Seychelles.



The islands had been calling him.

He felt it. And, once he arrived, he knew why.

The archipelago's pristine beaches, lush vegetation and the tranquil waters of the Indian Ocean whispered to him of a life far removed from the hustle and bustle of the newsroom.

"I started thinking about buying property almost as soon as I arrived, but I couldn't find the right place," he told a reporter many years later.

It wasn't until the second last day of his stay on the islands, that his destiny was about to be changed forever.

He heard about Moyenne.

A young man approached Grimshaw in Victoria, the Seychelles' seat of government and asked him if he would like to purchase an island.

They travelled together to Moyenne - a 0.099sq km dot 4.5km off the north coast of Mahé - the largest island of the Seychelles.



Grimshaw immediately fell in love with the silence and wild tangles of vegetation. *"I knew the moment I set foot on the island, that it was the right place for me."*

Contact was swiftly arranged with the owners.

Philippe and Vera were very hospitable and invited Brendon over to their house when he approached them to buy their island.

An agreement was reached after an extended dinner.

Grimshaw purchased the island for £8,000.

Yorkshire's Robinson Crusoe had found his paradise.



Moyenne Island, a 24-acre uninhabited landmass, was as wild as it was beautiful.

The island had been abandoned since the early 20th century - its dense vegetation untouched by human hands for decades.

More than 200 years ago, the Seychelles were a hideaway for pirates, including the infamous Oliver Levasseur, known as 'The Buzzard', who was hanged in Mauritius in July 1730.



He plagued the shipping in the western Indian Ocean, plundering their valuable cargoes.

His missing hoards of treasure, including the fabled Portuguese Fiery Cross of Goa, encrusted with diamonds and rubies, were buried on islands in the Seychelles, including Moyenne.

Or at least that's what the stories say...

One treasure trove is supposed to be worth more than £30 million.

After buying the island, Brendon admitted he initially spent much of his spare time searching for the fortune, poring over old maps, hunting for clues and shifting tons of rock at two excavation sites.

There are graves on the island that are said to be the burial sites of pirates - and Brendon did find real evidence of man-made hiding places.

But if he found gold, he never said anything...

He loved the pirate tales as much as anyone - and was happy to feed the rumours with a conspiratorial nudge and a wink.

When he bought Moyenne, it was overgrown with scrub so dense that coconuts couldn't even fall to the ground.

He had so many plans and ideas for Moyenne.

But he realised he couldn't do it on his own.

So, he hired his own Man Friday, a Seychellois called René Lafortin, who arrived to help him transform Moyenne.



Together, they worked tirelessly to transform the island into their own little patch of heaven.

Moyenne was not just land surrounded by water.

It was a stunning canvas, a place where Brendon could create his own Eden, live in harmony with nature – and, perhaps, find a peace that had eluded him in urban England and Kenya.

With René's help, Brendon firstly began to build and equip his new home. While René came to the island only occasionally, Brendon planned to live there permanently.

He ended up living on it for decades, never leaving.



When he first arrived, there were no birds on the island, so he brought ten from a neighbouring island - which promptly flew straight back.

He brought a few more, which also disappeared. But then a couple returned. Brendon started feeding them, and more birds settled on the island.

Together with René, he cleared the overgrown vegetation, planted sixteen thousand trees, including 700 mahogany trees that reached 60-70 feet tall, plus, mango, pawpaw and palm.

Together, they built 3 miles of nature paths, and brought and bred Aldabra giant tortoises, intending to create an island of incredible beauty

They saved rainwater and pumped it up the hillside by hand, or rowed back to the main island to collect a barrel of fresh water.

It was backbreaking, exhausting work. *"My hands were covered in blisters,"* said Brendon.

Life on Moyenne was not without its challenges. Grimshaw and Lafortin battled tropical storms, sharks, ghosts, a mercenary raid - and a coup d'état.

They endured the scarcity of fresh water and navigated the complexities of living in isolation.

Yet, for Grimshaw, every hardship was a testament to his commitment to the island.

His efforts to reintroduce the giant tortoise and attract birds, created a vibrant ecosystem, making Moyenne a microcosm of Seychellois biodiversity.

Slowly the trees grew and fruited, and eventually water, electricity and a phone cable were piped across from Mahé.

"But we weren't doing it to make it into a national park or anything like that," said Brendon.

"No, no, no! We were doing it to make it habitable for me."

His house was eccentric and well-worn, a bit like its owner - and furnished with African souvenirs and curios that testify to Brendon's years in the tropics.



Brendon's House

Apart from a wide variety of plant and bird life, the island is home to around 120 giant tortoises.

Giant tortoises are indigenous to the Seychelles, but have been killed off on most of the other islands.



Brendon gradually reintroduced them to Moyenne, painting them with identifying numbers and giving them names such as Alice, Florita and Four Degrees South (the islands latitude).

In 2012, according to Grimshaw, the eldest was 76, and was named Desmond, after his godson.

Grimshaw and Lafortin's efforts were not merely about habitation, but about revitalisation.

In 2007, René Lafortin sadly died, and Brendon was left alone on the island with tortoises and several pet dogs, as his loving companions.

He was asked if he's ever been lonely.

"Yes, only once in my life - when I was living in a bedsit in London.

I was miserable then, but never here."

Just to put the record straight, Brendon was not a recluse.

He relished visitors and company - and regretted not marrying.

But he felt it was not an ideal base for a romantic relationship, as he didn't even have running water for the first few years.

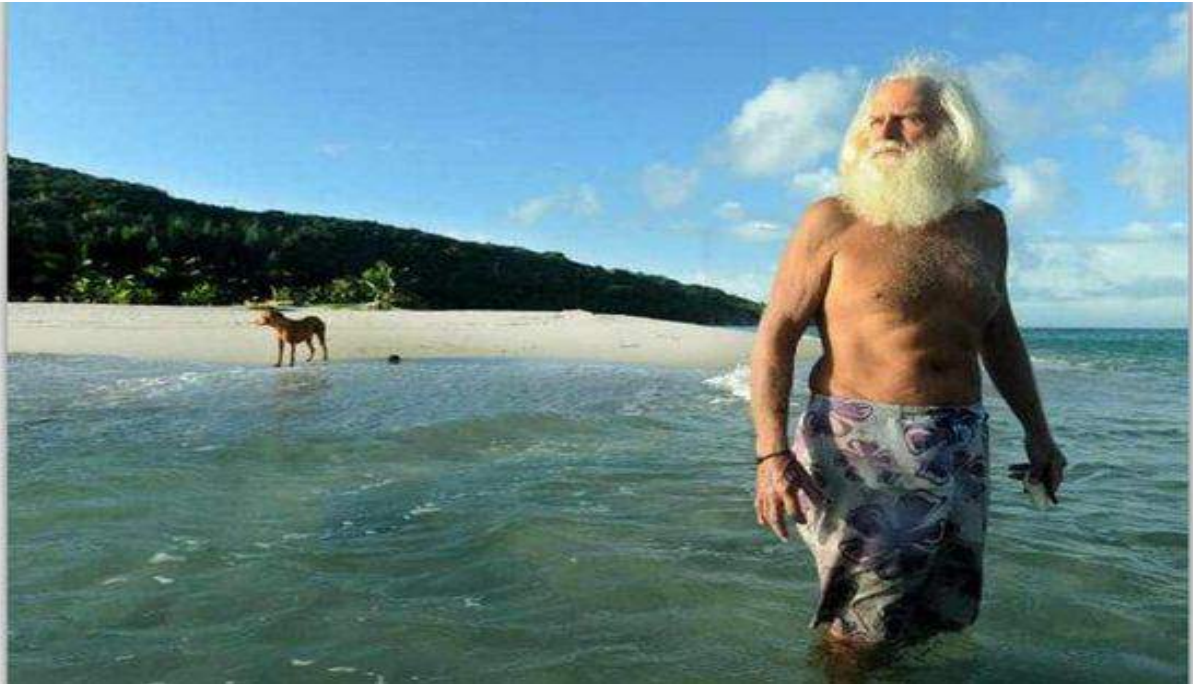
Though his mother always refused to visit Moyenne because she didn't much like abroad, Brendon's sister Sandra did move to Mahé with her husband and opened a cafe.

And when his father Raymond was widowed in 1981, he accepted Brendon's invitation to come and live on Moyenne.

"To my surprise, he moved from Seaford in East Sussex to be with me when he was 88, said Brendon.

We had a wonderful time together and became the best of friends."

Raymond died following a fall five years later and is buried on the island next to a grave Brendon had already dug for himself.



As he grew older, Grimshaw realised that he had limited time to ensure the island's continued success. He did not have any children to delegate responsibility for the island's future to – so he decided to act when René died.

To protect the island, he formed a trust with Suketu Patel, a long-time friend and other key people.

In 2009, Grimshaw signed an agreement with Seychelles' Ministry of Environment, which included Moyenne in Ste Anne Marine Park, but gave it its own status.

As a result, Moyenne Island National Park was established, which is the world's smallest national park.



Isabelle Ravinia, Seychelles National Parks Authority, said: "*Grimshaw returned the island to the country, which was a noble act. Normal people would sell the island to make enough money for something else.*

He did something remarkable instead."

Grimshaw died in Victoria, Mahé, in July 2012. He was 87 years old.

He is buried on his beloved island, next to his father and two unknown pirates.



Thanks to Grimshaw's efforts, the once deserted island now hosts two-thirds of the Seychelles' fauna.

An abandoned piece of land has turned into a true paradise.

It is now home for over 2,000 birds, including the indigenous Pigeon Hollandais, so named because it shares the colours of the Dutch flag, and the beautiful reddish-orange Fody Weaver bird, a native of Madagascar.

After years of persistence, Grimshaw and his assistant Lafortin, achieved their goal of making Moyenne Island a National Park in its own right, separate to that of the Ste Anne Marine Park.

The island is now known as the Moyenne Island National Park.



It has been stated that Moyenne National Park is home to more species of plants per square metre, than any other park in the world.

Patel said: *"His vision was for a untouched island for the coming generations of Seychelloises and the world."*

He wanted to recreate the Seychelles experience and its islands, before tourists arrived.

A few years ago, the prince of Saudi Arabia offered Brendon Grimshaw \$50 million for the island, but he refused.

His vision for Moyenne was not one of commercial exploitation, but of conservation.

He wanted the island to be a sanctuary, a place where all could experience the natural beauty of the Seychelles.

"I don't want the island to become a favourite vacation spot for the rich. Better let it be a national park that everyone can enjoy."

A magnificent gesture. We should all be in awe of him.

Brendon's magnificent legacy endures...



Moyenne Island remains a jewel in the crown of the Seychelles, a testament to one man's love for the natural world.

In 2013, after the island received National Park status, a new hut was built and a warden was posted on the island, collecting the entrance fee from tourists.

Tourists and nature lovers now visit Moyenne from all over the world, eager to explore the island's trails, beaches and its unique flora and fauna.

Grimshaw's house, adorned with African souvenirs and curios, overlooks this Garden of Eden and his legacy is celebrated by all those who visit.

There's the Jolly Roger restaurant, which serves local dishes such as grilled fish and seafood curries with red Creole sauce.



There's also a small museum about Grimshaw's life - and two nurseries that hatch giant tortoise eggs.

The island is rarely visited by more than 50 people at a time during peak tourist season and not more than 300 on a single day.

Those are rules that Grimshaw put in place.

Six islands make up the Ste Anne Marine Park, but Moyenne is the only one with no private land or hotel development.

The neighbouring islands are all owned by billionaires, Arab princes and Russian oligarchs – and include some of the most glorious holiday retreats in the world.

Moyenne is not like that.

It still has that unique sense of abandoned-island exploration that you experience as you swim back to shore, through the shallows.

There is no jetty on the island.



As you reach dry ground, the trees are close behind you.

Then you take your first steps on the gentle ascending forest trail and enter another world.

Patel stated, *"When you go there, there is something that grabs your attention. If you think that you have a problem, once you reach the island, it becomes apparent that it isn't so big. Moyenne should be your way of life."*

It is a place that Grimshaw stated in his last will, was to be kept '*as a place for prayer, peace and tranquillity, relaxation, knowledge, and information.*'

Not just for Seychellois, but for visitors from all nationalities, of all colours and creeds.



Grimshaw was one of a kind.

They threw the mould away when he was born.

Yes, he was quirky, but immensely strong and determined.

He moved to another part of the world on his own, bought an island, believed that pirates existed - and spent his entire life restoring what seemed like a small piece of land.

But, it's abundantly clear that many Seychellois are eternally thankful for the things he left behind to help their adopted country.

Grimshaw's story serves to remind us of the profound impact one individual can have, on preserving the natural world.

His lovely tale, like the rustling palm trees and gentle waves of Moyenne, whispers to every one of us, to play our part in protecting our planet's irreplaceable beauty.

His story is an inspiration. When I stumbled on it a few months ago, I knew I had to research it and share it.

Because it speaks to the adventurer in all of us.

It is a tale of transformation, from a newspaper editor in Yorkshire, to the guardian of a piece of paradise in the Seychelles.

Moyenne Island, once a neglected piece of land, is now a sanctuary for wildlife and a cherished national park.

Just as Brendon wished it to be...



Grimshaw's relationship with Moyenne Island transcended ownership.

It may have started as a crazy adventure, but turned into something much more than that. It became a profound bond, a commitment to preserve and protect and to share with everyone, something truly wondrous and beautiful.

As I said at the start, he was a very special man.

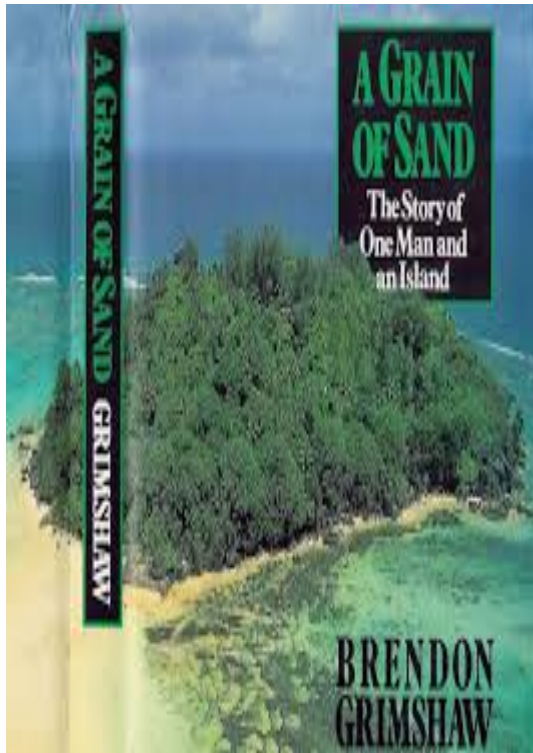
Brendon's book '*A Grain Of Sand*' - was published in 1996 - and it provides rich detail on Moyenne Island and his experience in living there for over 20 years.

By the time of his death on July 3, 2012, just three weeks before his 87th birthday, Brendon had owned the island for 50 years.

An image of the cover of the book is shown below.

It's a great read.

I recommend it to you.



Brendon