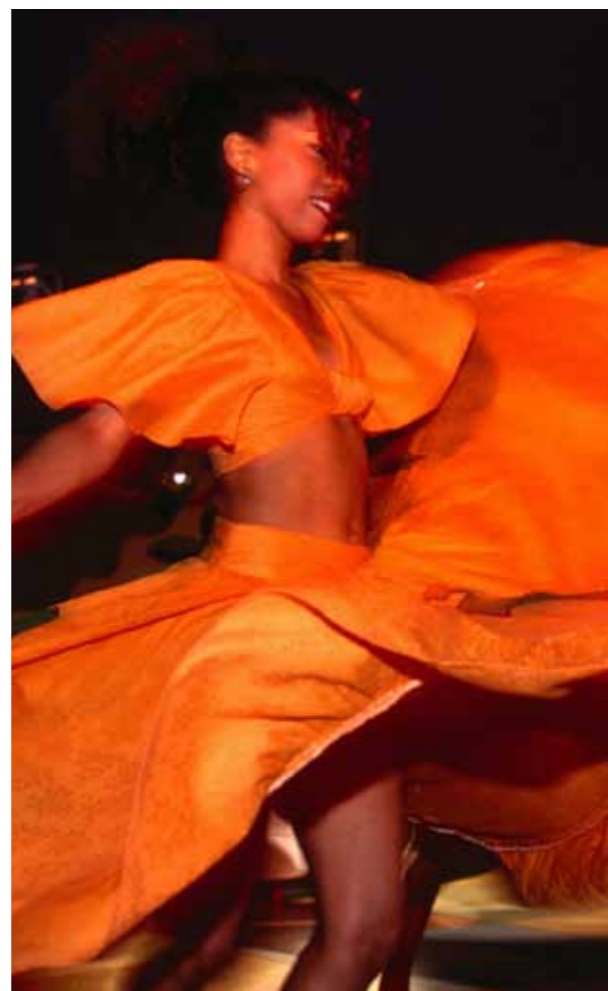




ADVENTURE ISLAND

In Mauritius, luxury living meets one-of-a-kind experiences and an incredibly diverse culture to create unforgettable memories

WORDS: Rebecca Haddad



The view outside the car window could not better encapsulate the term “island paradise”. It’s a cloudless day and the sun beams across water as clear as crystal, meeting pristine sand and lush forest beyond, where the mountain known as Lion’s Head is clearly visible. Suddenly, the weather turns and rain hits the car, blurring the perfect scene. My driver smiles. “Don’t worry, the rain won’t last long. The island is giving you a blessing and a warm welcome,” he says.

Colour and culture
(clockwise from top)
The forest meets the turquoise ocean; lively Mauritian dancing; bright sailing boats take to the clear waters

This uplifting perspective seems to be shared by everyone I meet in Mauritius, a tiny jewel in the Indian Ocean with a history as colourful as its national flag. First colonised by the Dutch in the late 16th century (the island is named for the Dutch Prince Maurice Van Nassau), Mauritius has seen colonies of migrants from France, Britain, India and China. As a result — and with no indigenous culture of its own — Île Maurice’s 1.2 million inhabitants are an exotic bunch.

French Creole is the most widely spoken language in the island nation, though the culture and cuisine are heavily influenced by the island’s South African neighbours and the large Indian population. As this heady cultural cocktail suggests, Mauritius is far more than your standard island paradise — it bursts with the surprising and unexpected at every turn, and retains the characteristics of all those who have called it home. Here, adventures abound, whether you seek them or not.



Inviting hammocks dot Le Touessrok’s Îlot Mangénie

CASTAWAY

As the car winds its way south-east to Blue Bay, a tiny natural reserve in the largely undeveloped part of the island, the heavens clear and we board a speedboat to our final stop: Le Touessrok resort, part of The Leading Hotels of the World. A 40-minute speedboat ride up the east coast takes us across that crystalline water, which seems to melt into the sky, to the resort's dock next to a collection of ocean villas that pop out among the vegetation like sandcastles. 'Touessrok', the resort's lovely guest relations officer Annabelle tells me, is a play on the French phrase "tu es roc" (you are rock), and it's certainly evident that the focus at the resort is, well, you. The rooms, suites and villas are perched along the peaceful shores of Trou d'Eau Douce Bay, far from the hectic pace of the bustling capital, Port Louis — and, it seems, the rest of the world.

Despite the luxurious lodgings, I'm keen to get out and discover Le Touessrok's other surprises. A 10-minute boat ride takes us to Îlot Mangénie, an uninhabited island reserved exclusively for Le Touessrok's guests to come and unwind. Your castaway experience comes with some thoughtful additions, such as a sunglasses-cleaning service and cold towel upon arrival. There's no need to cook your own catch here either — the chefs at the island's restaurant, Crusoe's, do all the hard work for you. Here, I get my first taste of Mauritian cuisine: fresh calamari and fish served with hot chilli paste and cool coconut relish, along with a salad of tender palm heart, nicknamed 'Millionaire's Salad' as it is a Mauritian delicacy.

After a short siesta in the inviting winter sun, I reluctantly clamber back on the boat and over to Le Touessrok's second island, Île aux Cerfs, where hammocks and sunloungers make way for waterskis and windsurfers. A short buggy ride further inland and you'll discover Cerfs' pride and joy: a championship golf course (voted one of the top 10 in the world) with fairways so soft you'll want to play barefoot.



THE LIFE AQUATIC

The next morning, on the winding drive to Trou aux Biches, 10 minutes from the tourist hub of Grand Baie on the northern coast, the road takes us through villages whose names reflect the island's mixed heritage: Camp Ithier, Bramsthan, Petite Retraite. Historic churches stand next to multicoloured confections of Hindu temples, pagodas and brilliant white mosques. "There used to be so many religious public holidays," my driver quips, "that the government had to cut some to keep the economy going."

Blue lagoon

(top) Le Touessrok and its islands from the air

Island bites

(above) Palm heart salad is a national delicacy and a great accompaniment to seafood

Houses with corrugated iron roofs stand in the shadow of newer concrete homes, built to withstand cyclone season. Between the towns, plantations of sugarcane dotted with old sugar mill towers sprawl into the distance.

Despite the plethora of sights to take in above sea level, I'm keen to explore what's happening below. Blue Safari at Trou aux Biches runs ocean tours in a 10-man submarine that wouldn't look out of place in a James Bond film, and I eagerly hop aboard. At a depth of 35 metres, it appears that life below the surface is as colourful as life above.

Clownfish swim circles around blue tang while schools of rainbow runners hover in the water, seemingly suspended in animation. The reef itself stretches as far as the eye can see; a valley of undulating coral hills with sandy roads running between them. For those who prefer to be in charge of their own vehicle, you can opt to ride a subscooter to a depth of three metres. And if you're pressed for time and need to sample as much of the underwater world as you can, there is also an option to eat lunch on board a smaller, five-person submarine, while it tours the seabed.



Setting the scene

(top) Discover Mauritius' famous giant water lilies at Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam Botanical Garden

What lies beneath

(above) A submarine ride lets you get a closer look at local marine life

Back on the surface, it's time to explore the island's land beauty. A 15-minute drive south of Grand Baie, we arrive at Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam Botanical Garden in Pamplemousses, home to Mauritius' famous giant water lilies, banyan trees and bottle palms, the national delicacy in its raw form. It takes seven years for each palm tree to grow to its full height before its fleshy heart can be extracted. As the palm tree cannot regenerate afterwards, the rule is that if you extract one, you must plant another in its place.

This sustainable attitude extends to sugarcane, too. Although no longer the island's primary export (textiles and tourism share the load), no part of the sugarcane plant is wasted. The cane is used in vinegar, perfume and rum, while the remainder of the plant is used in furniture and as fertiliser.

All this exploring must be balanced with equal amounts of relaxation, so we head south to the coast, where Shanti Maurice awaits. The resort, another property from The Leading Hotels of the World stable, is nestled between mountains and sea, and from the



moment I arrive, it's clear that escapism is the aim of the game. Most suites and villas come with their own infinity pools and rain showers, and all open up onto the only section of Mauritian coastline unprotected by reef. With the sound of waves against rocks to lull you to sleep, it feels like it's just you and the island.

INTO THE WILD

Driving northwest the next morning, we pass a mountain shaped like a gorilla's head (dubbed 'King Kong'), facing another mountain shaped like a sitting lion. The pair serves as an omen of what we're about to face.

Mauritius is not renowned for its exotic fauna, but the island continues to surprise when we arrive at Casela Nature & Leisure Park, a 14-hectare sanctuary for exotic animals including flamingos, monkeys, zebra, giant tortoises and tigers. I've come to get up close and personal with the king of them all. The park's 'Walk with the Lions' experience means I get to venture beyond the fence and straight into the home of the big cats. Stepping into the enclosure, it quickly becomes clear that the lions prefer sleeping in the sun than eating visitors, but the experience is both awe-inspiring and thrilling — one can't fully tame a wild beast, after all.

Back at Shanti Maurice, our final dinner of sweet lobster meat, sizzling prawns and squid accompanied by fresh salads and a side order of spirited

Solitary luxury
(above) Sprawling Shanti Maurice makes you feel as though it's just you and the island

Wild things
(right) An affectionate pair of tigers at Casela Nature & Leisure Park



traditional music and dancing is a spectacular way to round off the trip.

Walking back to my villa, I think about how lucky I've been to experience such a fascinating and genuine island culture — something that's a little harder to unearth in other luxe island destinations

like the Maldives. I stretch out by the pool and watch the moon cast light across the water until ominous clouds shadow it. Within minutes, a gentle sprinkling of rain begins — the tears of an island saying goodbye, and a blessing for our safe return. ■

ISLE OF PLENTY

No matter what sort of holiday you seek, Mauritius will deliver



LE TOUESSROK

Ideal for: Adventure seekers

Perched along a pristine stretch of coastline on the north-east coast, Le Touessrok just beckons to be explored. If lounging about a spacious and brightly decorated ocean suite or catching some rays by the resort's main pool doesn't appeal, guests have exclusive access to nearby Îlot Mangénie, an uninhabited island equipped with hammocks, sun loungers, a restaurant and very attentive staff who are on hand to ensure you have everything you need. For more active pursuits, take a boat across the lagoon to the resort's second island, Île aux Cerfs, where you'll find plenty of water activities to get your adrenaline pumping, including windsurfers, kayaks and waterskis. Then, spend an afternoon teeing off on the world-renowned golf course as the sun sets over the mainland.

Tel: +230 402 7700

www.letouessrokresort.com



SHANTI MAURICE

Ideal for: rest and relaxation

Sprawled over 14 hectares on the quiet southern coast, this resort is the last word in seclusion. Ocean villas — most with private infinity pools — are equipped with everything you need to make your stay as comfortable as possible, including king-size beds, Plantation organic toiletries and Nespresso coffee machines. When you can tear yourself away from your room's glorious ocean view, there's plenty to entertain throughout the resort. Enjoy meals made using produce sourced locally and from the resort's own garden at one of the three on-site restaurants. And no relaxing holiday would be complete without a spa treatment. Nira Spa is one of the largest in the Indian Ocean, and combines ancient Ayurveda and yoga techniques with modern wellbeing practices — the 90-minute Segá ritual is a must-do.

Tel: +230 603 7200

www.shantimaurice.com



CONSTANCE LE PRINCE MAURICE

Ideal for: families and groups

As one of the first luxury resorts on the island, Le Prince Maurice has had plenty of time to fine-tune its offerings. With 64 junior suites, 12 family suites, 12 villas and one Princely Suite, there's plenty of space for families and groups of any size. The three-bedroom Princely Suite is located in a secluded part of the resort close to the beach and also comes with the services of a villa master to attend to your every need. Adults can enjoy a treatment in the Spa de Constance by Sisley, fine dining at Le Barchois, a floating restaurant that sits over a natural fish reserve, or a round of golf at one of the two nearby courses. For young discerning travellers, there's Les Petits Princes kids' club, which has its own pool and runs cooking classes and outdoor game days.

Tel: +230 402 3636

princema Maurice.constancehotels.com



ROYAL PALM

Ideal for: being close to the action

While most resorts are a decent drive away from Mauritius' major townships, Royal Palm, on the sun-drenched north-west coast, is just minutes from the popular tourist hangout of Grand Baie, making it ideal for visitors wanting to experience Mauritian life beyond the five-star resorts. All 84 suites face the beach and each are personalised with colourful printed fabrics and artworks, though all have the same relaxed ambience that's quite a contrast to the noise of town. Of course, a stay here grants you all the other luxuries of a typical resort including gourmet dining options, watersports and a Clarins spa. When the sun sets, you have the option to forgo drinks at the hotel's main bar for Grand Baie's buzzing nightlife.

Tel: +230 209 8300

www.beachcomber-hotels.com



MARADIVA

Ideal for: couples

Located on a stretch of ivory sand in the west coast of the island, Maradiva is the only resort of its kind in Mauritius — accommodation is 65 private villas. Although smaller in size compared to many other resorts on the island, the intimate layout makes Maradiva ideal for a romantic getaway. Each villa has its own private terrace, garden and infinity pool, and a butler is available round the clock to attend to your every whim. Such a romantic setting sets the mood for a variety of couples' activities, including an indulgent Indian aromatherapy treatment for two (finishing with a rose-petal bath and champagne, of course) and in-villa dining by candlelight, where Maradiva's staff work with you to create your ideal menu, which is then prepared fresh and then served to you by your butler.

Tel: +230 403 1500

www.maradiva.com



THE ST. REGIS MAURITIUS RESORT

Ideal for: culture vultures

Set abetween lush fields of sugarcane and Le Morne Beach in the island's south-west is the first St. Regis hotel in Africa. The resort celebrates the diversity of Mauritian culture. It is designed to resemble a Victorian sugar baron's manor house; all 172 guestrooms and suites are elegantly appointed with wide terraces affording Indian Ocean views. The top-of-the-range beachfront St. Regis Villa features four bedrooms with private pools and gardens, as well as a bar, a private spa treatment room and personal butler service. An authentic Indian menu from Michelin-starred chef Atul Kochhar is served at the resort's Simply India restaurant, though to keep with the colonial theme, you can enjoy Mauritian-French fusion cuisine at Le Manoir Dining Room.

Tel: +230 403 9000

www.stregismauritus.com