

Eat, DRINK, & be MAURITIUS

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PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY **KERZNER INTERNATIONAL**

Mauritius is a favourite holiday destination for South Africans - foremost for its sun, sand, and sea. But this volcanic island in the Indian Ocean is also a melting pot of cultures and cuisines. "You gather the idea that Mauritius was created first, and then heaven; and that heaven is simply a duplicated replica of Mauritius." Wise words from Mark Twain, and so true when you get to experience the island nation for the first time.



A BIT OF BACKGROUND

Measuring 65km long and 45km wide, Mauritius is part of the Mascarene archipelago (which includes Reunion and Rodrigues) and was formed by volcanic activity around 8 million years ago. But even though Arab navigators knew of the island from the 10th century, it was the Portuguese who officially 'discovered' it in 1505.

Still, it remained uninhabited until the 17th century, which is when the Dutch established a colony and named the island after Prince Maurice van Nassua. But they abandoned the colony in 1710, leaving it open for French occupation five years later.

Because of its strategic position (and because the Suez Canal was not yet opened), Mauritius was considered a "star and key" of the Indian Ocean and an important base for trade between Europe and the East. So, never ones to be left out of colonisation, the British conquered the island from the French.

Fast-forward to 1968 and the island became an independent state (following the adoption of a new constitution) and in 1992, it became a Commonwealth republic with a democratic parliament that drew inspiration from the British model.

I.O.I. MAURITIUS



MELTING POT

The diversity of this history is reflected in the island's 1.3 million inhabitants, whose origins span the three continents of Africa,

Europe, and Asia. As a multilingual country, it's not uncommon to hear both English and French, the two languages that are taught at most schools. There are also other languages like Creole (a deformed version of French, designed by slaves to mock their masters) as well as Indian and Chinese tongues.

The multicultural state of the nation is also reflected in its religion. Indeed, almost as common as the houses left unfinished to avoid paying tax (and built stage by stage because of the difficulty in getting loans), are temples, churches and mosques wherever one goes. But the two holy sites that stood out most for me were Ganga Talao (also known as Grand Bassin), a sacred lake with mythical ties to the Ganges River, and Mangal Mahadev, a 33m statue of Shiva, a Hindu god.

TASTING THE ISLAND

Besides the language and the religion, the multi-ethnic nature of Mauritius comes

across in its food. We had the pleasure of staying at One&Only Le Saint Géran, where we indulged in some impressive cuisine.

There were sea urchins alongside the sushi during our beach buffet at the tip of the private peninsula; pistachio ice-cream in kiddie cones (which gave me the strength to dance "Dancing in September" in the middle of May) after dinner; and Japanese Bento boxes (perfect for hiding your face while you stuff yourself silly) for our final lunch.

For those who prefer to get up close and personal with their food, the hotel offers big game fishing expeditions (for marlin, skipjack, yellow-fin tuna, sailfish, or dorado), or cooking demonstrations with lunch at Maison Eureka.

Built in 1830, Maison Eureka is an historical French home which has entertained three generations of British royalty. The estate was also involved in a complicated feud involving even more complicated laws of inheritance, but is now owned by Jacques Maroussen, who got it in what he describes as "a good divorce". It's also a popular place for large groups, who are often sent to the market with a list of ingredients and then return to prepare traditional dishes.

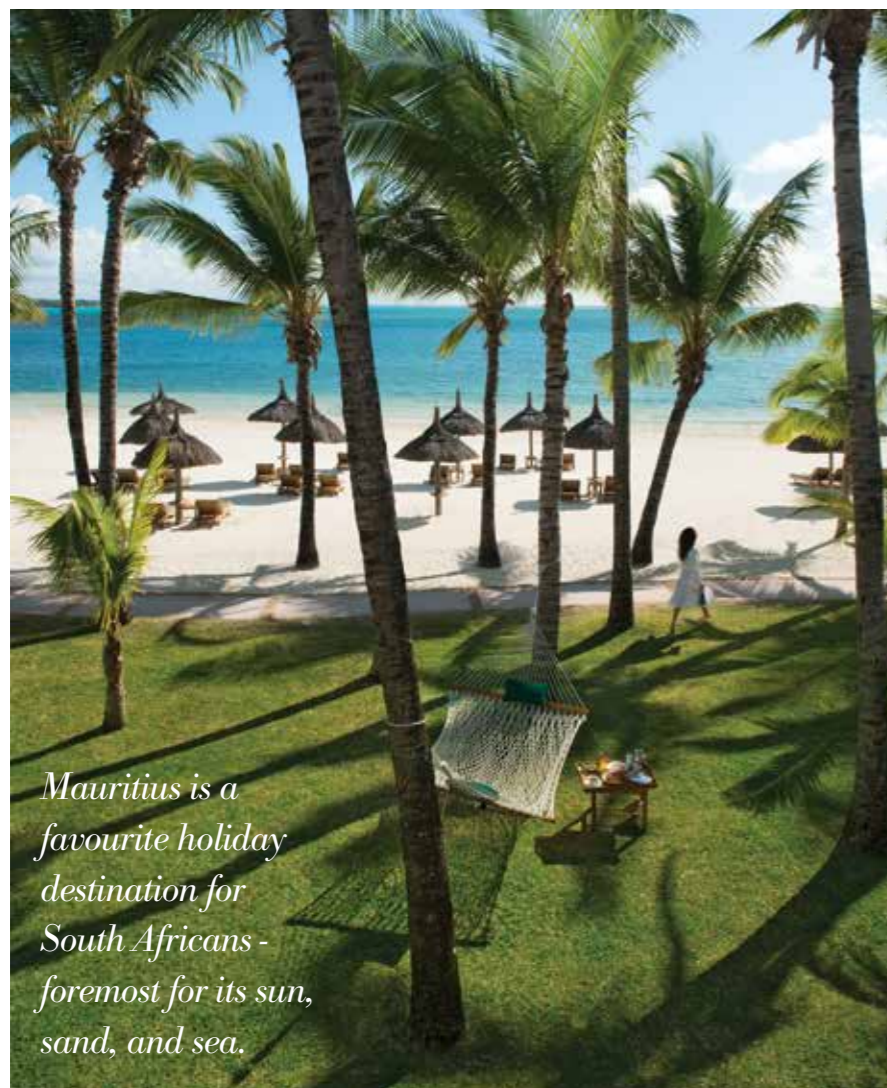
WHERE TO STAY

Located on the Belle Mare peninsula on the northeast of the island, One&Only Le Saint Géran is Sol Kerzner's first non-South African hotel. The resort takes its name from the ship Le Saint Géran, shipwrecked off the shores of Mauritius in "Paul et Virginie", Jacques-Henri Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's romantic legend of star-crossed but doomed lovers.

Each of the 162 tropical-decorated suites features a private terrace or balcony (facing either the deep blue Indian Ocean or cove), or a door opening onto a tropical garden. There's also La Villa, a 622m² classical island home that once accommodated the late Nelson Mandela.

The hotel's Kids Club is available 12 hours a day for children aged 3 to 11, but parents have the option of hiring a babysitter, available 24/7. So popular is the offering (and so loyal are the hotel's visitors) that some of the children return to the hotel when they've grown up (and have families of their own), only to remember the staff they first met when they visited decades ago!

The Kid's Club keeps youngsters entertained all day and even offers lessons



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in Sega: not the ancient video game but a traditional dance that originated from the ritual music of Madagascar and mainland Africa. Although it used to be sung by men and women who were sold as slaves (but whose souls remained sensitive to music), it is now a celebration with bright costumes and lively music.

Before you put your dancing shoes on and enjoy the brilliant performance from Famous 9 (one of the hotel’s regular acts), be sure to dress the part. The hotel requires smart casual wear in the evening. But don’t worry. Each suite features a walk-in closet that comes with more hangers than you’ll know what to do with. So go ahead and pack as much as you need!

UNDER THE SEA

To counteract all the indulgence (we seemed to be eating from noon ‘til night), many in our group chose to get active in the water. Mauritius has over 330km of coastland and 150km of beaches (considered public property), which makes it great for snorkelling. And because the island is surrounded by the world’s third largest coral reef (and tends to have high trade winds on the east coast), one can see a massive variety of fish.

I, on the other hand, chose to take it easy and so rather than diving into the water to discover why Mauritius once hosted the World Festival of Underwater Photography, I opted to see fish and coral from the



comfort of a glass-bottomed boat.

We also took a “Blue Monday” catamaran sailing trip on the way to Rochester Falls. Most of the group were occasionally jumping overboard, swimming in the jewel-coloured water and looking for shipwrecks from the Battle of Grand Port back in 1810. I was too busy enjoying some rum, pineapple juice, and a nap while the crew prepared our lunch at the back of the boat. Clearly, there’s nothing like thinking about the past to make you appreciate the present even more!

DELICIOUS MAURITIUS

“Beyond the magnificent beaches and idyllic lagoons of the coast, the interior of Mauritius boasts a volcanic landscape covered by lush forest and endemic wildlife. The island also charms visitors with its unique culture – a blend of European, Chinese, Indian, and Creole – as well as traditional beliefs, tasty cuisine, various cultural festivals and friendly locals.” ~ Dr Karl Mootoosamy, Director of Mauritian Tourism Promotion Authority. 🌿

HOW TO GET THERE

South African Airways and Air Mauritius from Johannesburg to Mauritius. South African Citizens only require a valid passport, and for residents of other countries, a three-month tourist visa is available upon arrival at the airport. This is renewable for a further three months upon application.

GETTING AROUND

Visitors holding a legal driving license from their respective countries can drive in Mauritius. (To rent a car, contact recognised licensed operators.) But be warned! The winding roads could make a roller coaster technician dizzy. Bring motion sickness pills just in case. You could also use public transport, which is available via bus companies throughout the country. Express bus services are offered from Port Louis towards the north, the south, and the main towns. Taxis are also available at the airport and from hotels.

WHEN TO GO

The temperature is mild in winter (from June to September) and warm in summer (from January to March), which has a minimum temperature of 18°C and maximum of around 30°C. The best times to be in Mauritius would be from April to June and from September to December. (The cyclones prevail in summer and during this period there can be heavy rainfall while trade winds blow more regularly in wintertime.) Besides beach and sports gear, you could need a light pullover or jacket for cooler evenings in winter. Also remember to show respect at religious sites by wearing appropriate clothes and by taking off shoes when visiting temples.

CAUTION: READING THIS COULD INSPIRE A HOLIDAY.

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