

# Delicious Mauritius

The island's two most popular drinks are rum and tea. Eugene Yiga learns how these classic brews are made and uses them to wash down the excellent local food

**D**ark clouds hang in the air and the rain threatens to drench us on this hot, humid Saturday morning in Mauritius. I'm feeling apprehensive as we approach the Central Market in the bustling capital city, Port Louis. Although this is an ideal way to get a taste of local life, I walk cautiously into the meat section. And there, at the entrance, is justification of my fears: the skinless head of a cow, blood dripping onto the dirty floor like a scene from *Game of Thrones*. Still, I'm compelled to carry on 'for

journalism's sake'. I watch a butcher hack through more fresh cuts, vertebrae rocketing to the floor. "I'm a tourist! I'm a tourist!" I declare, in my broken French, whenever he and the others try to sell me their produce, similar to vendors hawking souvenirs. Perhaps, after this, I'll be vegan.

But my nerves subside when I enter the colourful fruit-and-vegetable section. It's crowded with residents going about their shopping, while traders yell out prices as they would at a frenzied stock exchange. This time, I'm happy to linger.

The following day we make our way to the Rhumerie de Chamarel distillery. The journey requires a descent into the heart of one of the island's many sugar cane-filled valleys. It also gives our guide, Iris, the chance to regale us with some fascinating stories. "Sugar is one of the main pillars of Mauritius," she says, adding that the other three are textiles, tourism and financial services. "We have a high level of diabetes and one of the highest percentages of doctors!" We learn that, although the Dutch first introduced sugar cane when they colonised the island in 1638, it was only during subsequent French and English rule that the country exploited its production to the full. Mauritius then exported large quantities of sugar (mainly to Europe) as its predominant source of income and enjoyed great wealth from doing so when prices boomed in the First World War.

The history lesson continues when we arrive at the distillery and begin a tour of the estate, which traces its ownership back to an 18th-century family from France's Loire Valley. The seemingly endless fields are cut early in the morning between June and December, mostly by hand, with machines used only on flat land. "Unlike traditional rum, which comes from distilling molasses, agricultural rum comes from distilling pure cane juice," our guide explains. "This is what gives it the specific aromas and flavours. And the colour? That comes from the time it spends in oak casks."

Afterwards we begin our tasting, starting with white rum. We then try six other varieties, including vanilla, coffee, coconut and mandarin liqueurs. "It's like our first night all over again," says one of my companions, recalling a tasting at One&Only Le Saint Géran, during which bar manager Oliver Ramtohul explained that many people use white rum as a base and then add their own infusions such as cherry, lemongrass, honey and lime. "Except now it's the middle of the day!" →



ONE&ONLY LE SAINT GERAN



MARILJA BELLA PHOTOGRAPHY

MARTIN POOLE / SUNSHINE ON A PLATE BY SHELINA PERMALLOO



FULL OF ZEST: Seabass with coriander and chilli. OPPOSITE FROM TOP: One&Only Le Saint Géran bar manager Oliver Ramtohul; freshly ground tea at Bois Chéri factory

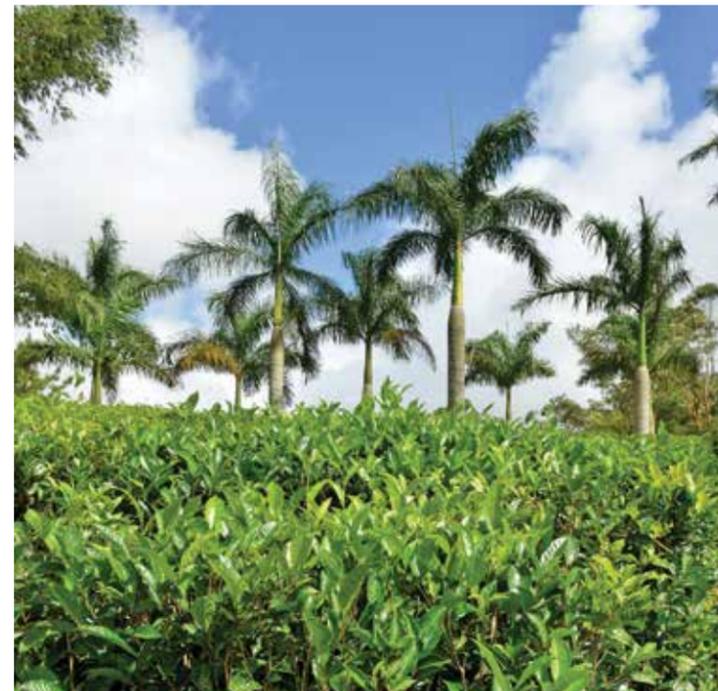
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Never mind that rum is common as an after-dinner digestif or that the alcohol content is a massive 40 per cent. And never mind that it's common for Mauritians to give classic cocktails a local twist by using their own rum instead of the more popular Caribbean varieties from further afield. What we have goes down oh so well...

Another everyday drink in Mauritius is tea. To learn about this, we go to Bois Chéri, an estate dating back to 1892 and now one of the island's three main producers. Because it's a working factory we have to watch our heads while taking photographs and scribbling notes. And there is a lot to take in. The process involves picking, bagging, drying, fermenting, blending and packaging. "Who knew it took so much to make a teabag?" one of my companions says, smiling at the irony that something as soothing as a cuppa begins in such a noisy place.

The factory includes an interesting museum that explains the history of tea on the island, first introduced from China in the 18th century and cultivated commercially a century later. But as was the case at the distillery, the best part of the experience is getting to try the product at the end.

We take our seats on the balcony of the tasting room, which overlooks a small, serene crater lake. It's not long before the group begins to disperse. Some are browsing the store, buying tea, chutney and other products that make for great presents – assuming you don't change your mind and keep them for yourself, of course. I am relaxing, enjoying a third cup of my favourite blend: black tea flavoured with a selection of 'exotic fruits'. How reassuring it is to recognise that even with the dark clouds of life, there can be moments of peace if we slow down enough to look.



**THIS PAGE, FROM TOP:** A stiff drink. Irresistible rum infusions; the tea plantation at Bois Chéri; a cocktail at One&Only Le Saint Géran. **OPPOSITE:** A dish served at the hotel's Indian Pavilion restaurant

## COOKERY LESSON

Tea and rum are not the only things Mauritius has to offer. The tiny island has an incredibly rich and diverse food culture, infused with Creole, French, Chinese and Indian influences. Its soil is very fertile, so there is a wide range of sweet fruit and vegetables, as well as seafood aplenty.

You can learn to whip up some of the country's favourite recipes, too. Built in 1830, Maison Eureka is a historical French home that is popular with keen chefs. Guests are often sent to the market with a list of ingredients and prepare a traditional dish on their return.

An excellent cookbook to use if you would like to conjure up the flavours of Mauritius at home is *Sunshine on a Plate* by Shelina Permalloo (Ebury Press, £20 hardback).



## SAFARI PLANNER

■ **Getting there** South African Airways flies to Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam International Airport in Mauritius. Other options include Air France, Air Mauritius, Air Seychelles, British Airways, Kenya Airways and Malaysia Airlines.

■ **Getting around** You can hire a car, but be warned, the winding roads could make a roller-coaster technician dizzy. There are also buses, with express services offered from Port Louis towards the north, south and main towns. Taxis are also available.

■ **When to go** The temperature is mild in winter (June to September) and warm in summer (January to March), which has a minimum of 18°C and maximum

of around 30°C. But since cyclones prevail in summer (and lead to heavy rainfall), the best times to be in Mauritius are April to



June and September to December.

■ **Where to stay** There are plenty of accommodation options to suit all budgets. The writer was a guest of One&Only Le Saint Géran, which takes its name from the ship wrecked in *Paul et Virginie*, Jacques-Henri Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's romantic legend of star-crossed but doomed lovers. The property is set to undergo major renovations in 2017.

■ **Health** There are no malarial mosquitoes in Mauritius, but you should visit your travel clinic at least four to six weeks before your trip to check whether you need any vaccinations.

■ **Further reading** *Bradt Guide to Mauritius* (8th Edition) by Alexandra Richards.