

Magical Mauritius

With more flights, upgraded hotels and all-new activities, the Indian Ocean destination continues to hit the spot with British travellers, finds Nigel Tisdall



“**d**on’t wear white”, advises the website of Taste Buddies, a plucky little company that offers street food tours at four locations across Mauritius. It’s a good tip, I discover, when our cheery guide Adrien Céline hands me a warm and squelchy *dholl puri*. The popular snack, which costs a mere 18 rupees (33p), is an instantly satisfying rolled flatbread filled with spicy curry, oozing coriander chutney and a spicy tomato sauce known as *rougaille*. Spill that on your brand-new holiday shirt and you’ll look like a blood-stained victim in a Scorsese movie.

Our three-hour group tour walking the streets of Port Louis, the Mauritian capital, is both a culinary adventure and a window on its history. We stop in the shade of the Jardin de la Compagnie – gardens established by the French in the early 18th century and filled

with mighty banyan trees – before admiring the nearby green-and-white Jumah Masjid mosque, which dates from the 1850s. Adrien then leads us through the hectic streets of Chinatown to sample some Mauritian *boulettes* (dumplings) and into the historic Central Market, where we sip freshly prepared fruit juices and stock up on spices to take home.

This hot (and occasionally mucky) excursion feels a long way from the glossy weddings-on-the-beach image usually synonymous with the Indian Ocean isle – a reminder that this culturally diverse destination offers much more than an indulgent tropical escape.

For further proof, I pop into the city’s new House of Digital Art, which opened last July, where artists from the region have created a thought-provoking immersive experience that reflects on Mauritius’s volcanic origins and the stories that maps can tell. ➤

DESTINATIONS

INDIAN OCEAN | MAURITIUS

ASK THE expert



Arvind Bundhun
director, Mauritius Tourism
Promotion Authority

"The new daily flight from Gatwick is a major breakthrough and we've seen the average length of stay increase from nine to 11 nights. This is due to people having more disposable income after Covid and a surge in demand for island destinations. We're finding guests want cultural experiences as much as water-based activities and time on the beach. Nineteen new hotel projects have been approved for the next five years, but we're concentrating on quality, not volume – the average size of resorts on Mauritius is about 200 rooms."



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Zilwa Attitude; traditional Segha dance performance; Veranda Grand Baie; Sugar Beach Mauritius PICTURE: Virginie Tennant

MORE FLIGHTS

Mauritius's popularity with UK travellers is not solely due to its fine beaches and top hotels. The island was a British colony from 1810 to 1968 and English is the official language. Plus, driving is on the left.

Last October, Air Mauritius switched its London base from Heathrow to Gatwick and upped flight frequency to daily. Despite the 12-hour journey, in some resorts Brits still make up almost 50% of guests, and no property is more than a 75-minute drive from Sir Seewoosagar Ramgoolam International Airport in the southeast of the island.

UPGRADED HOTELS

Clients who like to be close to shops, restaurants and nightlife should base themselves in Grand Baie on the northwest coast. Veranda Grand Baie is in the heart of the action, with a free water taxi whisking guests to the town centre. The property was upgraded from three to four stars last year, introducing a stylish 'creole-chic' design and adding a 25m infinity pool. Treatments at the colourful new spa, meanwhile, include a 90-minute lesson in how to massage your partner.

For a five-star stay, Sugar Beach Mauritius borders the extensive sands of Flic en Flac beach,

on the west coast, with 283 elegantly designed rooms set amid gracious lawns. New facilities include a kids' club with a bee theme, while a range of exotic non-alcoholic cocktails has been created to meet growing demand for healthier holidays.

Mauritian hotels make a great effort to involve guests in the spirit of the island. A sunrise voyage in a fisherman's pirogue (canoe) and dinner with a neighbourhood family are among the 'Otentik Experiences' offered at eight Attitude properties across the island, including family-friendly Zilwa on the north coast, which has added a juice bar and street food hut to champion local flavours. This hotel is a superb pick for an all-inclusive package, with six restaurants, four pools and a kids' club centred on an old spice-trading boat.

SISTER ISLAND

Change is in the air for Rodrigues, Mauritius's 'other' island, which lies a 90-minute flight east. Ringed by a bewitching turquoise lagoon, Rodrigues is extremely safe, good value and making a name for itself as a sustainable destination, with impressive nature reserves and a ban on plastic carrier bags.

In December, the first cruise ships returned to Rodrigues in more than a decade – operated

by Ponant on a wider Madagascar/Mauritius/ Réunion itinerary. The airport's runway is being extended to accommodate aircraft larger than the 78-passenger Air Mauritius ATR 72s that currently link the island to the outside world.

The Indian Ocean hospitality giant Constance Hotels & Resorts, meanwhile, recently took over two of Rodrigues's best beach resorts, now branded as C Rodrigues and Constance Tekoma. **TW**

BOOK IT

Gold Medal has seven nights' half-board at Sugar Bay Mauritius from £1,999, including Air Mauritius flights from Gatwick on May 12 and transfers. goldmedal.co.uk

Kuoni offers seven nights' all-inclusive at Zilwa Attitude from £1,749, including Air Mauritius flights from Gatwick on June 18 and transfers. kuoni.co.uk

Air Mauritius flies daily from Gatwick, from £757 return. airmauritius.com

For more information, visit mauritiusnow.com