

# True colours

There's more to Mauritius than its resorts, writes Laura French

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**S**lopes plunging in to lush green valleys, waterfalls plummeting down jagged rock faces and markets overflowing with local goodies – Mauritius may be best known for its beaches but there's plenty more to this nature-rich, culture-filled island. And word is catching on: UK arrivals rose 9% year on year in the first quarter of 2018.

That's been helped along by a string of hotel refurbishments and increased airlift from the likes of British Airways, which added two weekly flights for the winter season, and easy connections via Amsterdam to the new KLM and Air Mauritius code-share service, which began in October.

With 2018 marking 50 years since Mauritius gained independence, we've rounded up some of the best experiences across the island for clients wanting to get to get to know the various cultural threads – Asian, French, British and African – that shape its friendly character.

## ► NATURAL CHARM

Mauritius is chock-full of natural marvels, but cream of the crop has to be the Seven Coloured Earth, a sea of basalt rock formed from frozen lava that looks like a sort of psychedelic marble ocean of waves, flecked with swirls of red, orange, green, yellow, brown and purple. Giant tortoises amble

round an enclosure nearby and tree-carpeted mountains rise in the distance, so it feels like you're half on Mars, half on Earth.

Book a tour to combine it with other southern highlights, including the Chamarel Waterfall – where white water cascades over the cliff from a height of 95m – and Trou aux Cerfs, a dormant volcano that's now a deep crater covered with trees.

Elsewhere in the south you'll find Black River Gorges National Park, a huge protected rainforest criss-crossed by more than 30 miles of hiking trails and scattered with volcanic peaks, where pink pigeons, macaque monkeys and other rare species

meander. Farther west lies Le Morne, the mountain with a moving history that visitors can ascend.

But perhaps the most unusual natural feature is Pamplemousses Botanical Gardens in the north. Established in the 18th century by French governor Mahé de Labourdonnais, this colourful display is the oldest botanical garden in the southern hemisphere and features an exotic collection of flora and fauna from across the world, including more than 85 species of palm. The standout feature is a waterlily pond filled with giant, waxy-looking lily pads that seem solid enough to sit on. ➔



**RIGHT:**  
Lux Ile des  
Deux Cocos  
private island

**BELOW:**  
Port Louis



## Adventure activities

**Ziplining:** Premier Holidays recommends the zipline at River Galets for adventurous types wanting to glimpse the rainforest from on high.

**E-bike tours:** Electrobike Discovery offers cycling tours round the island, giving clients a chance to experience its verdant inclines with a helpful boost.

**Water sports:** For wannabe windsurfers, suggest St Regis Resort Mauritius in the southwest, which offers lessons for all abilities.

## SAMPLE PRODUCT

**Fred Olsen Cruise Lines** offers a 28-night Indian Ocean Islands cruise from £4,999 per person including flights, activities and all meals, with optional excursions in Mauritius including Pamplemousses Botanical Gardens and tours of the north and south (cost extra).  
[fredolsen.cruises.com](http://fredolsen.cruises.com)

**Hayes & Jarvis** offers a week's half-board at The Westin Turtle Bay Resort & Spa from £2,249 per person, including return Emirates flights from Gatwick, departing November 20.  
[hayesandjarvis.co.uk](http://hayesandjarvis.co.uk)

## CASTAWAY ISLANDS

Just as spectacular are the islands surrounding the mainland. Among them you'll find Ile des Deux Cocos, a circular, forested patch of paradise floating off the southeast coast in Blue Bay Marine Park, framed with white-sand shores and towering palms.

Home to an opulent, Moorish-style villa built by British governor Sir Hesketh Bell, this remote island was once the setting for raucous, Gatsby-esque parties cut off from the mainland. Today it offers day-trippers a barbecue buffet on the beach plus an open bar offering flavoured rums that let you embrace your inner Jack Sparrow. Lux Resorts offers a day trip here, or the chance to stay overnight.

Farther north lies Ile aux Cerfs, a private island reachable by ferry, which Sovereign recommends for its snorkel-friendly waters and 18-hole, championship golf course. Beyond that you'll find the likes of Gabriel Island, home to pristine waters and accessed by speedboat, and Ile aux Aigrettes, a nature reserve reachable by catamaran from the mainland, where giant Aldabra tortoises amble in the lush greenery.

## CULTURE TRIP

It's not just natural charm in which Mauritius is rich. For clients looking to explore its cultural side, capital Port Louis makes an excellent starting point. Alongside colonial architecture, key sights here include a historic citadel and the central market – a higgledy-piggledy collection of shoes,




**The sacred lake of Grand Bassin is surrounded by statues and shrines, with locals gathering on the banks to burn incense**

bags, scarves and eclectic handicrafts spilling out from narrow passages, where smells of exotic spices and pungent fish swirl through the air.

The city gives a good insight into the varied cultural influences that make up Mauritius's diverse heritage – with Indian, Creole and French cuisine

pouring out of its restaurants – but to explore its spiritual side further suggest heading south to the sacred lake of Grand Bassin.

The water here is believed to have been brought from the holy Ganges in India and it's surrounded by colourful statues, shrines and temples. Locals gather at the banks burning incense, monkeys bound around the grounds and Hindu songs chime out from the temple. Several operators feature it as part of tours, including Viator, which adds a visit to La Rhumerie de Chamarel, a Mauritian lunch and other highlights (from £82), and Fred Olsen Cruise Lines, which offers passengers a full-day excursion (from £92).

Who said Mauritius was just about spas and beaches? 



PICTURE: MAURITIUS TOURISM PROMOTION AUTHORITY