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Mauritius: A piece of heaven

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(Photo: Wikimedia)

Defined by azure skies and waters, Mauritius is much more than a picturesque postcard island

With a paper parasol. Beyond me the ocean roars as a palette of blues and cobalts merge in perfect unison. Adrift in the Indian Ocean, 1,250 miles off the South-East of Africa, the island of Mauritius has a truly multicultural soul. Four red years of colonial experimentation has created a montage of Hindu temples, mosques and Chinese pagodas, set amid waterfalls and volcanic peaks. Travelling across the length and breadth of the island (it only takes about two hours) one cannot escape its multi-cultural past, several hundred years as a Dutch, French, and then English colony and its 60 per cent plus Indian population adds another unique cultural dimension giving it a Caribbean-Creole meets Arabian nights feel. Women in sarees and men in lungis float magically past us, as do thatched cottages straight out of a Goan palm-fringed village.

Sustainable sunshine

Luckily, the independent government (since 1968) chooses to flaunt and promote its multi-cultural heritage and is determined that tourism in Mauritius does not suffer the same fate as the dodo, its national symbol! Tourism flourishes alongside a sensible and enlightened policy of ecotourism and preservation (a policy that has won the government many international awards) ensuring the island's pristine beauty remains untouched. You won't find hordes of Europeans worshipping the sun gods whilst packed together on a strip of sand. Even the resorts are evenly spread across this 28-mile wide paradise.

Rain, rain go away

Sometimes the best-laid plans go awry and all hopes of me spending a lazy week on the beach come to a halt as the weather gods have other plans. A freak thunderstorm ensures boots replace my bikini as I reluctantly trek to 'The Vanille Réserve des Mascareignes', a unique park in the South, filled with lush vegetation, an insectarium and 2,000 Nile crocodiles and the largest captive group of Aldabra tortoises in the world!

Unlike a zoo or aquarium, the best part of this park is its interactive feel — whether its feeding the giant tortoises as they amble along or clutching a tiny croc. A strong emphasis of conservation at the park thanks to the Mauritian brand of passionate, community-driven tourism has resulted in re-introduction of tortoises on Rodrigues Island.

After my close encounter of the scary kind, the assorted Iguanas, monkeys and bats seem tame as I bravely venture across the Ebony-tree infested park. But wait, I've saved the best for last — the croc fixation doesn't just end there. At the Park's restaurant, I find myself ordering crocodile fritters (yes, you read it correctly) for lunch. A perfect end to an exciting adrenaline-filled morning.

Back at the uber chic Heritage Le Telfair Golf and Spa Resort, I'm pleased to see the sun peaking out of the clouds so I race to soak on the beach for a while as originally planned. The resorts in Mauritius are spread across this 28-mile wide paradise and designed keeping in mind the island's colonial past and heritage with turn-of-the-century plantation houses decked out in teak furniture, evocative shutters and a pastel colour scheme. I've finally found a destination to escape to when the 'world gets too much' and solitude and pampering are the order of the day. Even Mark Twain was moved to admit that "Heaven was copied after Mauritius," so who are we to argue?

If dare devilry is not your cup of Vanilla tea (the national drink after rum) then a visit to Chateau Labourdonnais is a must. Situated in the North part of Mauritius, in the heart of a fertile orchard and splendid garden, lies The Château de Labourdonnais, where endemic plants and large varieties of exotic trees grow in harmony around a stunning neoclassical Italian style mansion that spans two levels and is breathtakingly beautiful. Essentially built in teak, the house is surrounded by a double colonnaded gallery that protects it from the sun and allows for improved ventilation. Inside the home has a Victorian feel with magnificent antiques, bone china and furniture that remind us of how the early colonists lived in pomp and style.

Another must-do is a visit to the 60-acre Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam Botanical Gardens where the giant Victoria water lilies and 80 different types of palm (many planted by Indian PMs) are worth a dekho.

Mouth-watering Mauritius

Finally my favourite part — I also judge a country by its cuisine because truly great nations produce truly great cooks. I'm fortunate to have a local friend Rubeena Vayid Ismail, an expert on Mauritian food who guides me through the culinary landscape of the country. "Mauritian food is a mix of native African, French, Chinese and Indian, with many endemic dishes available only here. Indian curries and pickles are served alongside European favourites like Bouillon de Crabe, which is a clear but flavourful crab soup and stir-fried noodles from China, all using locally available ingredients," she informs.

Street markets that lurk away from the glitzy resorts are the best places to sample these savoury treats. On my last day I head to Port Louis, the Capital to dine on the national snack of Dhollpuri — a flour-based chapatti stuffed with dal (like a savoury version of the Maharashtrian puran poli) and topped with a mild curry, pickles and vegetables all rolled up like a desi Frankie — tangy, spicy yet delicious much like the soul of Mauritius itself!

Fareeda is a travel writer and enthusiast

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