

AN ENCHANTING ESCAPE

Fergus Bisset travels to the island paradise of Mauritius and discovers a wealth of golfing opportunity, together with a heady mixture of beauty, history and culture

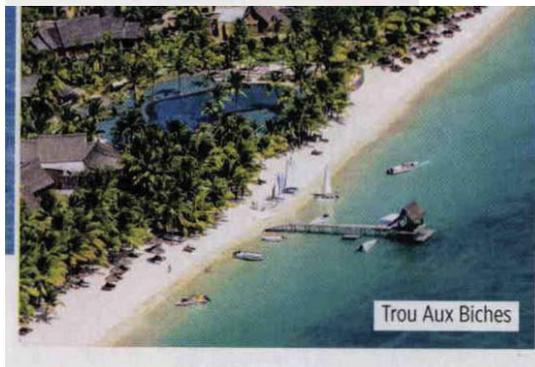
Mauritius has a reputation as a romantic getaway; a favourite with honeymooners or couples celebrating anniversaries. That's understandable – it's a very romantic place with its endless palm-lined beaches, bath-tub-warm shallow seas protected by an island-circling reef, gorgeous sunsets and an abundance of flowering plants and trees. But Mauritius is far from being a one-dimensional luxury resort destination. The island has a long and interesting history that is evident in its language, architecture and culture.

The Dutch were the first to colonise in 1638 and then the French from 1715. During the Napoleonic Wars, France used Mauritius as a base from which to launch attacks on British commercial ships, so a Royal Navy expedition under Commodore Josias Rowley set out to capture the island. France surrendered Mauritius to the British in 1810 and it remained a British colony until gaining its independence as recently as 1968. The British influence is still strong in

Mauritius. The schools follow the British education system, they drive on the left side and road signs are all of British style. Also inherited from the British, Mauritius is now a real golfing destination with nine championship courses across the island.

CLOUD NUMBER NINE

The Heritage Golf Club in Bel Ombre was designed by Peter Matkovich, a Zimbabwean professional turned architect. The course currently plays host to the AfrAsia Bank Mauritius



Open – the first event to be tri-sanctioned by the Asian, Sunshine and European Tours. Although this is a championship course and a venue for top-level competition, it's not prohibitively difficult. A variety of teeing options mean all golfers can find a yardage to suit their ability and, although there are plenty of hazards to be avoided, the fairways are generous and there tends to be reasonable bail-out options.

Many of the fairways are lined by dense grasses, which actually simplifies play. Hit into the really thick stuff and the ball is gone – move on and forget about it! Mauritius is a volcanic island, with evidence throughout the countryside as well as the golf courses. Volcanic rocks of varying sizes are a striking feature around the fairways. There's a great variety of holes at the Heritage, from driveable par 4s to long, sweeping par 5s. There are tremendous vistas of the surrounding mountains and down towards the coast and there's interesting flora and fauna to examine, the latter including mongoose, giant fruit bats, monkeys and an assortment of colourful songbirds.

FIVE-STAR EXPERIENCE

Just a short drive from The Heritage at the south-west tip of Mauritius is the Paradis Beachcomber Resort at Le Morne – an incredible, five-star luxury locale that delivers the 'wow' factor from the moment you arrive. The main building houses superb restaurants, bars and lounge areas, all under a fabulous thatched roof constructed using sugarcane leaves. The luxurious rooms stretch along the beach front, with views of the palms and turquoise sea. Also on the Morne peninsula, Dinarobin is a sister Beachcomber resort and one that perfectly complements its neighbour, delivering a quieter atmosphere and the utmost in sophistication.

At Paradis resort, Paradis Golf Club must have one of the most memorable settings of any course anywhere on earth. The front nine features many enticing

holes and is dominated by the imposing Morne Mountain – a World Heritage Site and one with a tragic history. The Morne peninsula was a refuge for runaway slaves in the early 19th century, and the mountain top was used as a lookout post for military despatches sent to recapture them. In 1835 a police unit was sent to inform the slaves they were freed after abolition but, when they were seen coming, many slaves chose to jump from the rock to their deaths rather than risk re-enslavement.

The second half of the course is set along the shoreline of the beautiful lagoon. There are some incredible holes, but undoubtedly the pick of the bunch is the stunning 16th – a par 5 curling around the lagoon to a distant flag. The

temptation is to cut too much off the corner and countless balls fail to make the carry. This really is a fabulous hole and representative of what is a truly excellent course.

There are, of course, a plethora of activities and sights to enjoy away from the courses on Mauritius. Those who enjoy water sports are spoilt for choice – there's a kite surfing school, scuba diving, paddle-boarding and deep-sea fishing. Or, for those seeking a more sedate option, try a trip on a catamaran to watch the sunset.

IMPRESSIVE NEWCOMER

Mauritius is only 65km long by 35km wide, but the population is 1.3 million. So, although you frequently have the feeling of seclusion and remoteness, it's actually a fairly bustling place and getting around the island can take longer than you expect. From the south-west tip, it's over an hour's drive to reach the new golf course on the northern tip of the island at Mont Choisy, near the spectacular Trou Aux Biches Beachcomber Golf Resort & Spa.



Only opened in November, this is the most recent addition to Mauritius's excellent golfing portfolio. Another layout designed by Peter Matkovich, it's clearly a course laid out to deliver maximum enjoyment for golfers of all standards. It's generous from the tee and there are multiple teeing options. The hazards are well placed, but not overly punishing. There are interesting and challenging slopes and borrows, but they aren't extreme. Volcanic rock piles and evidence of the old sugar plantation provide definition.

Sometimes new courses seem immature, but this isn't the case here. The surfaces are already established and the layout has the feel of one that has been there far longer.

Although the front nine at Mont Choisy is excellent, the real pace and excitement builds towards a climax on the back nine. The 13th is a tremendous short par 4 protected by water hazards and the 15th is a wonderful par 3 to an island green, with the old plantation

tower as a backdrop. Memorable indeed.

These courses are representative of the great golfing variety available on Mauritius. An inland championship course reminiscent of the best resort tracks of Spain and the Algarve at The Heritage, a truly memorable track at Paradis with stunning surrounds and then a brilliant, contemporary design at Mont Choisy showcasing the pinnacle of modern course architecture.

Mauritius is a golfing destination delivering quality and variety. Add into the mix the fact it's a supremely beautiful place with history, culture, sporting and leisure offerings, incredible seafood, tropical fruits, endless beaches and delightfully warm and safe waters, and you have quite a package.

ESSENTIALS

How to get there

BA flies direct from Gatwick, three times a week in summer and five times a week in winter. See ba.com/Mauritius

Where to play

■ **Heritage Golf Club**

W: heritageresorts.mu

■ **Paradis**

W: beachcomber-hotels.com

■ **Mont Choisy**

W: montchoisygolf.com

Where to stay

■ **Trou Aux Biches Beachcomber Golf Resort & Spa**

W: beachcomber-hotels.com

■ **Paradis Beachcomber Golf Resort & Spa**

W: beachcomber-hotels.com

■ **Dinarobin Beachcomber Golf Resort**

W: beachcomber-hotels.com

For more information visit www.beachcombertours.uk



