



MAURITIUS & LA RÉUNION

Pastime PARADISE

ADRENALIN-INDUCING ACTIVITIES FROM
KITESURFING TO FLYING OVER VOLCANOES
ARE REDEFINING THE INDIAN OCEAN'S
CLICKED IMAGE

WORDS: JULIET KINSMAN

IMAGE: GETTY

Parc National de La Réunion



Sand like icing sugar and seawater so dazzlingly blue it looks Photoshopped... I'd heard people gushing these clichés about the Indian Ocean, sure, but I didn't think such honeymoon paradises were for me. I knew the beach scenes would seem as though sprung from a postcard, but with this would also come a sea of bland could-be-anywhere luxury — and I'm someone who likes to feel edified by a break, returning home wiser about a country's true spirit and wowed by its geography.

But a week-long trip to Mauritius and its neighbour Île de la Réunion not only kept me busy, it made me realise there's more to those Indian Ocean escapes than meets the eye. A rich bouillabaise of cultures, traversing unique terrains and dabbling in once-in-a-lifetime watersports is really not to be sniffed at.

Kitesurfing for dummies

Based on the leafy southwest of the African island of Mauritius, more specifically the UNESCO-endorsed Morne Brabant peninsula, it would have been lazy of me not to dip my toes into waters touted as some of the best in the world for kitesurfing. Except I've never surfed. Or flown a kite.

Thankfully, this celebrated three-mile stretch is as suited to beginners as intrepid freestylers. Mention Manawa to fans of this extreme sport, and they'll tell you it's synonymous with a winning surf that's big but safe. Moreover, surfers get in a froth over the most famous of its fast waves: One Eye. It's so named because when a surfer catches these tubes perfectly,

they'll see Le Morne rock through a circular frame, like James Bond standing with his gun in the black-and-white logo.

Listening to professional kiteboarder Evgeny Novozheev of Pryde surf school talk about how these waves crash onto a shallow coral reef gives me shivers. Then again, he holds the world record for crossing the 60-mile Bering Strait from Chukotka to Alaska in seven hours. I happily head with his fellow Russian instructor, Dmitry, into the shallow lagoon. Wetsuited up and strapped into a seriously safe harness, my tow-haired instructor lets me get a feel for the steering with a small trainer kite rather than the vast hi-tech sails the pros use. The equipment has come a long way since kitesailing started in Hawaii in the 1990s, and now the sport is more accessible than ever — even if it's not the cheapest activity to dabble in.

I was never going to graduate to a board in just one session, but a little body dragging is still fun, and trying my hands at handling the kite's power even as it pulls me a few yards through the water is satisfying.

A Chinese health boost

After a blast of physical exertion to muscles my sedentary life doesn't usually acknowledge, the obvious thing would have been to sign up for a relax in the spa. Not me. On hearing that LUX* Le Morne hotel had imported a traditional Chinese medicine treatment said to reduce stress, improve digestion and sleep, I decided to give 'Me Zhengliao' a go. Based on a pain-relief treatment offered only at the Daoji clinic ➤

Above: Kitesurfing in Manawa is second to none

IMAGE: GETTY

The pine-covered peaks and untouched jungle provides thrilling real-life scenes usually the preserve of high-budget movies

Views from the top of La Réunion island

in China's Yunnan province, it aims to drain toxins, repair kidneys, balance *chi* (energy), and regulate *yu* (stagnation). This reduces the trapped energy, blood, phlegm, food, and water we stressed-out urbanites are said to suffer from.

A gong placed over my abdomen kicks off the two-hour treatment with good vibrations (literally). Acupressure points are massaged, before the headline act of cupping — glass balls shaped like laundry-detergent dispensers suck onto my back via a vacuum to boost my blood flow. Next comes the even less predictable heated wooden boxes applied in the same way hot stones are in massages. Please don't ask me for the health benefits of this, but let's just say if you like to be able to brag you've experienced an amazing spa therapy no one else has, this one's for you.

Swimming with bottlenoses

Yu and *chi* realigned, I set myself another in-water challenge — swimming with dolphins. We've all seen the Facebook snaps of people kissing Flipper lookalikes in man-made lagoons in Florida, but here the experience is authentic. You get to hang out with wild pods in their natural habitat. I am booked onto a speedboat at dawn to head to the open seas in search of these wondrous mammals.

Having finally caught up with a family of 20 bottlenose dolphins, guests and guide plop into the water with the aim of swimming as fast as our snorkelling-kitted bodies can carry us. I manage to frantically splash in the water long enough to snatch some of the dolphins' crackly underwater conversation. Magical? Certainly very special. But we aren't alone.

As there has been poor weather a couple of days before this, there is a backlog of other tourists keen to experience this adventure, too. So every time we catch up with the pod, so do all the other boats packed with camera-brandishing visitors from around the world.

There might not have been much chance for that intense emotional connection people speak of when they encounter these intelligent creatures, but in some ways it is almost more enchanting observing them going about their usual day, and politely ignoring us. These dolphins aren't trained or trapped in a tank, and it's an incredible spectacle with an authentic soundtrack.

Bird's-eye volcanic views

My bucket-list ticking peaks on Île de la Réunion. Here, during a 25-minute helicopter tour over the French territory, southwest of Mauritius, east of Madagascar, I ogle the extraordinary wild, rugged beauty of the "cirques" in awe. These *calderas* ➤

Five to try

1. Seven Coloured Earths, Chamarel

Known as Terres des Sept Couleurs, the sand dunes of Chamarel in south-west Mauritius are the spectacular orangey, pinky, purpley geological formation from once-molten volcanic rock. There's an entrance charge, but in the right light, it's worth the cost for the photos you'll get.



2. Pamplemousses Botanical Garden, Pamplemousses

These government-run gardens are in need of a little TLC, but there are plans to invest more in their upkeep. Also known as Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam Botanical Garden, this exotic patch of north Mauritius is one of the few places to spy the tambalacoque or dodo tree — a rare banyan-style tree that flourishes here.

3. Domaine de L'Etoile, Sébastopol

The rolling green hills of this eco-reserve at the site of a former sugar estate are fantastic for slow-paced nature walks and stunning mountain views, as well as higher-gear action, such as quad biking, horse-riding, ziplining and karting. cieletnature.com



4. Black River Gorges National Park

This UNESCO-protected hilly swathe of south-west Mauritius provides an untouched habitat for the island's rare indigenous flora and fauna, such as the Mauritian kestrel, a bird of prey recently saved from extinction.

5. Île aux Aigrettes, Mahebourg Bay

This diminutive coral island in a turquoise-coloured lagoon off the mainland's south-east coast is a nature reserve. Book an eco tour, and catch a boat from the old Sands Jetty at Pointe Jerome. mauritian-wildlife.org

IMAGES: AVL IMAGES; GETTY; DOMAINE DE L'ETOILE



Fish, glorious fish

(collapsed volcanoes) beg true adventurers to come and explore: hikers, canyoneers, paragliders and mountain bikers all hail this paradise for its challenges. A world away from the Indian Ocean I'd been expecting, our spell in a six-seater chopper allows me to appreciate the magnificence of the coral reefs and black-sand beaches from up above, as well as the staggering craggy centre of this island.

Not long after taking off, we swoop over the edge of the pine-forest-covered peaks, the floor dropping from under us, giving way to deep valleys. As we nimbly fly down into them, the waterfalls and untouched jungle provides thrilling real-life scenes usually the preserve of high-budget movies. Réunion may be built up at points along the coastline (good-quality roads are a perk of this development), but much of this high-drama volcanic terrain is still uninhabitable. It's hard to conceive of Creoles living on its peaks — yet they do. Seeing the tiny hamlets of corrugated-iron-roofed huts entirely inaccessible by road from the air is truly once-in-a-lifetime stuff. ■

HOW TO DO IT

Kiteboarding

Pryde Club Mauritius: prydeclub.com

Beginner's two-hour course, €120 (£94).

LUX* Me Zhengliao: luxresorts.com

Treatment, US\$150 (£92)

Dolphins

JP Henry Charters: jph.mu

Rs 2,000 per person (€50/£39)

Helicopter ride: helilagon.com

25-minute flight over Mafate and Salazie cirques, €210 (£165)

Five to try

1. Café des Arts, Trou d'Eau Douce

For authentic Creole flavours served with a generous side of colourful art, this restaurant in a small waterside village is more than a place to eat delicious Mauritian and French cooking. The bold canvases that hang all around this converted sugar mill are by the late Yvette Maniglier, a talented protégée of Henri Matisse.

lecafedesarts.restaurant.mu



2. Eureka Mansion, Moka

Built by a Brit and bought by a Frenchman, this 1830s antiques-filled house in Moka offers a unique window into colonial life, and its aristocratic architecture has been preserved in the form of a museum. eureka-house.com

3. Central Market, Port Louis

Here on Corderie Street in the gritty, buzzing capital, you'll find merchants representing every cultural influence on island life, with Hindu, Chinese, Muslim and Creole sellers offering teas, curry spices and herbal medicines.

Brace yourself for some serious bartering.



4. Galerie Vrot, Grand Baie

It's worth popping into this gallery to see the deep-water seascapes by Françoise Vrot's husband Atmadeo 'Mona' Quedou, one of the island's best-known artists. Mona's day job is taking tourists on snorkelling excursions, but he also likes to paint: underwater. He captures the coral reef in oils while rigged to a scuba tank, his flippered feet on the seabed.

5. Champs de Mars Racecourse, Port Louis

Join the whooping locals at the ever-popular Saturday races from March to December. Horseracing has been a popular social scene for Mauritians for the past 200 years, and it makes for an atmospheric day out.

mauritiusturfclub.com