

Island that is a world of sights and colours

Mauritius is all you could imagine and a great deal more, says *Tony Dawe*

Picture Mauritius in your mind and images of white sand, blue lagoons, luxury hotels and sugar cane swaying in the breeze float before the eyes. Arrive there and the senses will be stimulated by far more, by an endless succession of delights and surprises.

The waves lapping the beaches give way to a striking landscape of intriguingly-shaped mountains, craters and lakes, to vividly-coloured flowers contrasting with the cane and to a multi-cultural community which revels in its many festivals.

Even election time in Mauritius is as colourful as it is passionate, with voters showing their support for their favourite parties by weaving red, purple or green ribbons around trees, from house to house and up and down town and village streets.

While relaxing on the beach or in the spa and sampling delicious and varied foods are prime reasons for visiting, the temptation to explore, to take to the waves, to seek adventure soon overcomes holidaymakers of all ages — and the opportunities to pursue such activities are as varied as the landscape.

This breadth of interests and enterprises owes much to a history as colourful as the island's scenery. Discovered by the Portuguese, colonised by the Dutch, occupied and developed by the French, Mauritius came under British control for a century and a half until independence in 1968.

Under Britain dominion, thousands arrived from the Indian sub-continent and in recent years a few hundred Chinese followed. The result is a country where the official language is English, the Parliamentary system British, the culture French and the population and cuisine a kaleidoscope of Asia, Africa and Europe.

Leave the airport in the southeast of the island, where most locals will be speaking French or Creole, and you will find yourself in a bus or taxi driving on the left, following signs in French and passing Victorian churches, Chinese pagodas and Tamil temples.

Across the island on the southwest peninsula, luxury hotels have taken over the coastline beneath Le Morne Brabant mountain but they are spread decorously along the shore and do not detract from the grandeur of the mountain that rises solidly to 556m (1,824ft). The St Regis Mauritius Resort opened on the peninsula earlier this month, with a choice of six dining venues, Iridium spa and the full range of watersports including kite surfing.

In this corner of the island are such distinctive features as the Chamarel waterfall, Black River Gorges, a national park with water gushing from mountains as high as 800m (2,624ft), and Grand Bassin, the crater lake that is a place of pilgrimage for Hindus and is guarded by a giant statue of Lord Shiva.

In the early morning, the Moka Mountains cast their shadow over Port Louis, the bustling capital with a vibrant market, recently-developed waterfront and statue of Queen Victoria in front of Government House. Its attractions range from the Blue Penny stamp museum to the Natural History Museum, displaying a dodo skeleton and a model of the bird that was done for by the Dutch through over hunting.

A few miles inland are Eureka, a colonial house built in 1836 in a dramatic setting in

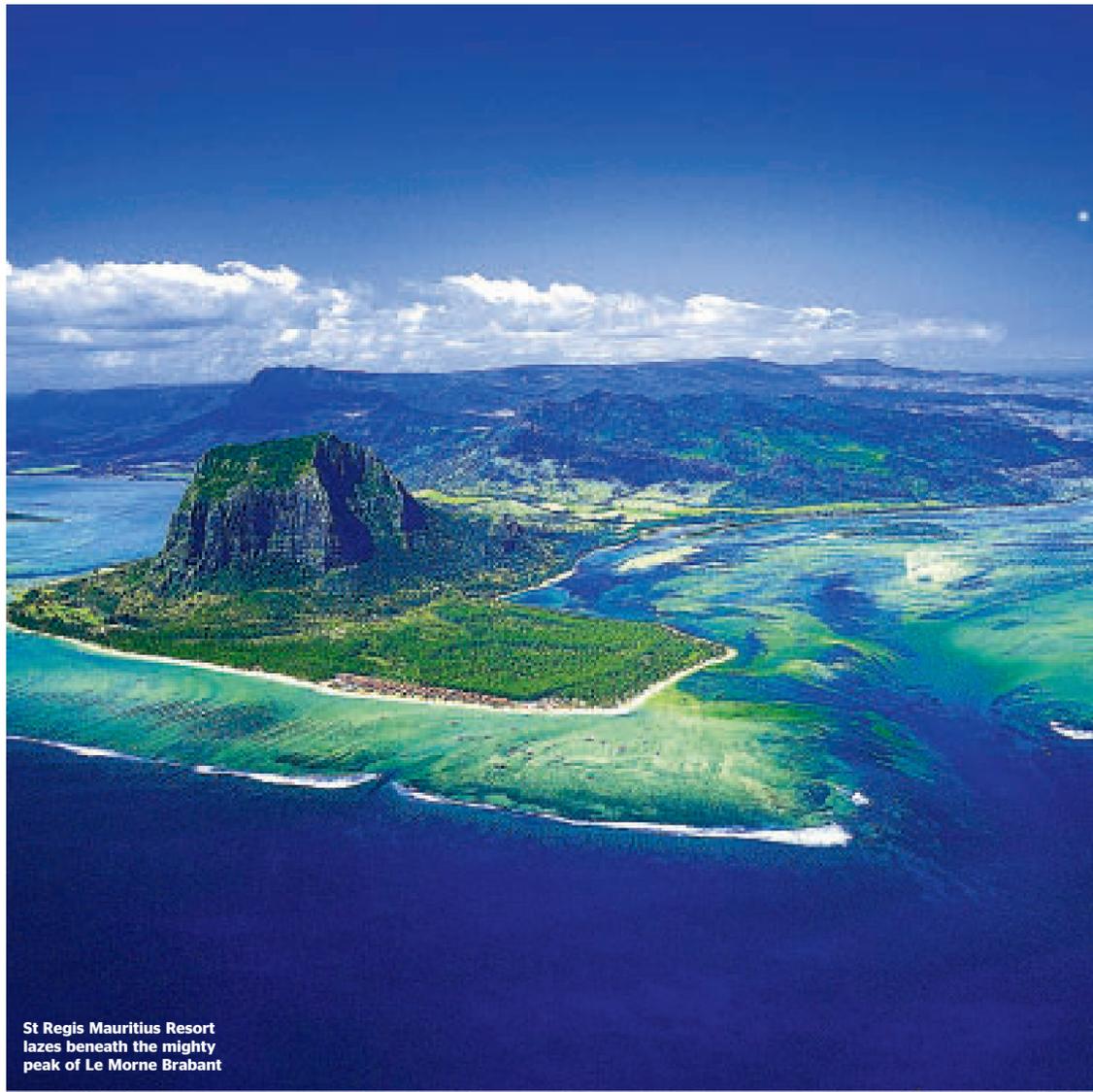
front of Mount Ory, and Pamplemousses Botanical Gardens, known for ponds covered with giant water lilies but also home to a splendid arboretum with more than 80 varieties of palm, as well as ebony and mahogany trees.

North of Port Louis is the Baie aux Tortues, where snorkelling is excellent and the coral in good condition, and Trou aux Biches, where a serene resort of the same name sits on what is one of the island's finest beaches with accommodation in thatched pavilions and a world-class spa.

The greatest delight, however, is the east coast, varied and beautiful, with beaches in the north, picture-perfect islets off the centre and a rocky coast in the south. A string of beaches, safe for swimming and shaded by casuarina trees, start at Poste de Flacq and run south through Belle Mare — where the LUX resort has been refurbished by Kelly Hoppen, the British designer — down to Trou d'Eau Douce.

The water is indeed gentle at this quiet fishing village, which is also the starting point for boat trips to Ile aux Cerfs, probably the most photographed feature of Mauritius with its beaches and lagoon. Its charm faded briefly when the channel between it and the isle of Mangénie, part of Le Touessrok hotel, silted up. But the channel is clear and the island is once again a perfect setting for paddling, strolling gentle paths, parasailing and playing golf.

"Clearing the channel is just one small example of our determination to maintain the identity and quality of our country," Dr A Karl Mootoosamy, director of the Mauritius Tourism Authority, told me earlier this week. "The opening of a new airport next year, new five-star hotels and refurbishments, cultural and cycling trails and new sporting events including a marathon and golf tournaments will ensure we keep pace with the demands of the high-end tourism market."



St Regis Mauritius Resort lazes beneath the mighty peak of Le Morne Brabant

STEPHANIE DUVAL

City streets with a hint of jasmine

Sri Lanka's shops and architecture bewitch *Laura Ivill*

Forming a cultural triangle in the southwest of Sri Lanka, the great cities of Colombo, Galle and Kandy provide a fascinating extra element to any beach holiday.

Colombo and its colonial architecture has survived centuries of different rule. The Portuguese took over in the 16th century, the Dutch replaced them in the 17th century and the British arrived at the end of the 18th century. In 1815, the British proclaimed Colombo the capital of Ceylon — a name that was only changed in 1972.

Restoration is gathering pace and designers are springing up in the shady boulevards. The many markets are a good place to mingle with locals, the Buddhist temples are rich with day-to-day life and there are now more cafés, shops, galleries and museums than you will have time for.

The city might lack "sights", but the differing neighbourhoods are intriguing. The Fort, the chic, old centre, is undergoing a facelift — the Old Dutch Hospital is one colonial gem now restored, housing shops, cafés and restaurants. Stop for lunch at AVP Restaurant, a local favourite with light spilling in through huge, old windows.

Just east is the old quarter, Pettah, with shops, stalls and markets. The many small Hindu temples, the kovils, are oases from the teeming streets. The ritzy, leafy Cinnamon Gardens district, has the National Museum, and colonial mansions that are now smart shops. Splash out on dinner with the glamorous crowd at Asian-fusion Gallery Café, or head for the shore and Beach Wadiya, famed for its seafood.

The Southern Expressway will take you



The magnificent Asokaramaya Temple is one of many delights in Colombo

KEVIN CLOSTON

south to Galle (the bus takes 90 minutes against three hours on the train). The city (pronounced Gawl) has a tranquil air of an old city-within-a-fort, but its streets also bear testament to its elegant colonial past — 17th-century Dutch merchants' houses, some renovated, some still-dilapidated, convey a whiff of old European grandeur, transported to the tropics.

It is a hip city, with cool cafés, boutique hotels and smart restaurants, due in no small part to the abundance of artists here. In April next year, Galle's own Fort area becomes a giant gallery for the bi-annual Galle Art Trail.

This is a Unesco World Heritage Site, yet it's not just a living museum. Its churches, mosques, temples, offices and homes are alive with daily toil, and best discovered on foot. Wander the streets, the scent of jasmine and spices on the breeze, or stroll along the fort walls for the best views.

Boutique hotels and luxury villas are upping the ante on style, and cost. Nightlife is quiet, but there are myriad fashionable restaurants. Mamas Galle Fort Roof Café serves Sri Lankan curries under a canopy of stars, without breaking the bank.

And, with such an arty vibe there is great shopping: lace at Shoba Display Gallery, clothes, arts and crafts at Barefoot, and affordable jewellery at catchily-named PS Weerasekara Fashion Jewellery.

The coastal drive from Colombo

features a wealth of fabulous beach resorts. Take a break from your cultural odyssey at Avani Kalutara, in 22 acres of coconut groves between beach and river. Or Heritage Ahungalla, a five-star resort by Sri Lankan architect, Geoffrey Bawa, famed for blending interior and exterior spaces.

From Galle, the train to Kandy takes six and a half hours as it heads up into Hill Country, one of the island's most scenic journeys. The rolling highlands of mists and soft rain, are much cooler than the coast, but colourful houses and even jollier saris lift the spirits, and the people think well of living in Sri Lanka's second city.

In the centre is Kandy Lake. The best stretch for a walk is near the Temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic, housing Sri Lanka's most important Buddhist relic. During puja (prayers), worshippers and visitors are permitted into the guarded room. But the glorious tooth, said to have been rescued from the Buddha's funeral pyre, is hidden away in a gold casket.

To honour the relic, the festival of Kandy Esala Perahera takes place for ten days at the end of July, Sri Lanka's most awe-inspiring spectacle. Thousands of dancers and drummers take part in processions, elephants are richly dressed in embroidered fabrics and torches are lit.

It draws visitors from far and wide — one highlight of many in the cultural triangle that you will not want to miss.

Best of the Maldives, for sun, sport or spa

In the 40 years since the first resort opened on an island close to the capital, Malé, the Maldives has become an aspirational destination for romantics, watersports and diving enthusiasts and lovers of exclusivity. Its popularity has led to the development of 106 resorts with 14 more on their way. Expansion is being handled with sensitivity because of the threat from the oceans (the islands' highest point is 2.4m above sea level) and growing Islamic influence with protests against the hedonism of the resorts.

In London this week, Ahmed Adeen Abdul Gafoor, the tourism minister, stressed his government's commitment to considering the possible effects to the sea, the island and its population, and transportation in approving further expansion. He said that his challenge was to separate tourism from politics.

With so many luxury resorts now on offer, here is a guide to the best, based on the experiences of *Times* journalists and British Airways Holidays.



Romance Small and exclusive, quiet and secluded, without a disco or aerobics class, Taj Exotica on an island in South Malé Atoll is designed for couples. It has a spa with a range of holistic Indian therapies and treatments and beach villas with their own spa room and pool.

Spas The Spa Retreat, at Conrad Maldives Rangali Island, is a self-contained over-water resort with glass floored rooms offering holistic treatments, the services of

Romance is never far away in the Maldives

a personal trainer, nutritionist and hairdressers — and a serenity spa deck. **Watersports and surfing** On the eastern edge of North Malé Atoll, Four Seasons Resort at Kuda Huraa has a surf school, hosts world surfing championships and offers a great range of watersports.

Diving The long house reef at Olhuveli Beach & Spa Resort is beautiful and safe for learners. There are also 35 sites where it is possible to dive with dolphins, sharks and rays, and a 30m reef channel drift dive.

Families Hilton Maldives Iru Fushi has a large pool in the centre of the island ideal for families, wildlife walks, a children's club with climbing wall, games room and dressing up box and programmes for children at the spa and watersports centre. **Off the beaten track** An island hopping trip from Vilu Reef Beach & Spa Resort takes guests to neighbouring islands, fishing villages and an island where 30 varieties of fruit and vegetables are grown for the resort kitchens.

TONY DAWE

Bring Back the Sunshine

Experience the Indian Ocean's best with British Airways. All prices include flights + 7 nights hotel

AI All Inclusive
FB Full Board
HB Half Board
BB Bed & Breakfast

Terms and Conditions apply

ADVERTISEMENT FEATURE



Let time stand still and bask in the warm sun. The Maldives is the ultimate destination to truly get away from it all.

Maldives
British Airways fly London Gatwick to Maldives 3 times a week

Thulhagiri Island Resort (HB) from £989pp
One & Only Reethi Rah (BB) from £2,329pp

Kanuhura (BB) from £1,869pp
Huvafen Fushi (BB) from £2,249pp
Hilton Maldives Iru Fushi Resort & Spa (BB) from £1,589pp
Taj Exotica Resort and Spa (BB) from £1,969pp
Vivanta By Taj - Coral Reef (AI) from £1949
Four Seasons Resort at Kuda Huraa (BB) from £2,349pp
Four Seasons Resort at Landaa Giraavaru (BB) from £2,919pp
Banyan Tree Vabbinfaru (FB) £2,649pp
Angsana Velavaru (HB) from £1,819pp
LUX* Maldives (BB) from £1,479pp



A honeymoon paradise that has so much more to offer, Mauritius is full of hidden wonders.

Mauritius
British Airways fly London Gatwick to Mauritius 3 times a week

Coin de Mire Attitude (HB) from £829pp
One & Only Le Saint Geran (BB) from £1,379pp
Le Touessrok (HB) from £1,569pp
Long Beach (HB) from £1,329pp
Sugar Beach Resort (HB) from £1,269pp
Trou Aux Biches (HB) from £1,389pp
Heritage Le Telfair Golf and Spa Resort (HB) from £1,549pp
LUX* Grand Gaube (AI) from £1,309pp
Maritim (AI) from £1,289pp
Four Seasons Resort Mauritius at Anahita (HB) from £1,749pp
Sofitel So Mauritius (BB) from £1,139pp

Whether you visit the tea plantations or a safari in Yala National Park you'll be amazed by Sri Lanka's vibrant and diverse culture.

Sri Lanka
British Airways fly London Gatwick to Sri Lanka via Maldives 3 times a week from 14 April 2013

Jetwing Lighthouse (BB) from £859pp
Jetwing Lagoon (BB) from £1,019pp



Jetwing Beach (BB) from £839pp
Heritage Ahungalla (BB) from £929pp
Avani Kalutara (HB) from £799pp
Mermaid Hotel & Club (AI) from £779pp
Royal Palms Beach Hotel (BB) from £829pp
Book by 22 November at ba.com/indianocean



Jetwing Beach (BB) from £839pp
Heritage Ahungalla (BB) from £929pp
Avani Kalutara (HB) from £799pp
Mermaid Hotel & Club (AI) from £779pp
Royal Palms Beach Hotel (BB) from £829pp
Book by 22 November at ba.com/indianocean

