

Mauritius Island Adventure

In the sky, on the ground
and in the water!



by Yzelle van der Vyver

After losing one suitcase in transit, my family and I left the Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam International Airport in Mauritius and headed for our hotel, an hour's drive away. We were welcomed with fresh orange juice and a hot cloth to wipe away the heat of the journey. The weather was hot and humid, but that's usually the price for a stunning sea-view island holiday.

Our rooms were on the second floor, which offered a magnificent view from the balcony. After settling in, we went sightseeing around the hotel. It was a child-free hotel which meant peace and quiet during the day, and party vibes after dark. After sightseeing, we ate at the buffet and enjoyed cold drinks that cost R60 each. The first evening's entertainment was a good old belly-dance performance to make you feel like you are on a real island getaway, just like in the movies.

The next day, we met with our adventure tour guide, Joe. He saw to it that we had the experience of a lifetime. Out of the many choices of things to do and see, we settled on an inland trip to learn a little more about Mauritius, the "Wild South West" trip and a day of speedboat activities – these were spread over three random days during our ten-day trip.

After planning the tour days, we set out to town using public transport to buy essentials. We browsed the streets and marvelled at the interesting buildings. We visited the Historic Marine, where locals build replicas of famous boats or those commissioned by boat owners. They had also made replicas of popular fictional boats, like the *Black Pearl* from the *Pirates of the Caribbean* films. Each boat was specially crafted in fine detail and we were impressed with the skill and accuracy each model must have required.

Wild South West

The scenic drive along the west coast via the Salt Pans in Tamarin leads into the southwest corner of Mauritius, where we saw how salt is made. After passing through Le Morne, La Prairie and Macondé, the road curves back into the mountains to the picturesque village of Chamarel, which also has the Seven Coloured Earths geological formation and a 90 m high waterfall.

Le Morne Mountain is known as a "massif", which is a compact group of mountains. It is a 556 m-high historic slave hideaway; its natural isolation made it an ideal place to escape to for many slaves in



East Africa in the 1700s and early 1800s. Due to this association with the slave trade, it has been declared a World Heritage Site, along with another hideaway called the Maroon Republic. Both are also considered important sites of the Maroon Movement.

The rough mountain has many cliffs and caves – too many to explore, and most too dangerous to even try. The slaves braved the hazardous journey up the mountain to escape captivity. The massif resembles a natural fortress, where the slaves formed settlements. Joe told us the story of the slaves and the journey they endured so passionately that we were truly moved after hearing it.

Our next stop was the Chamarel Falls, coined “The best waterfalls in Mauritius”, which is a must-see. We then headed to the Seven Coloured Earths, a natural phenomenon in which a relatively small area of sand dunes evolved into seven distinct colours through the conversion of basaltic lava to clay minerals. I saw magnificent shades of yellows, purples, greens, blues, and reds, mostly. After the trip, I did some reading about it and apparently, due to the tropical weather conditions, all water-soluble elements such as silicon dioxide have been washed out. The remains are the reddish-black iron and aluminium oxides which create shades of blue, cyan and purple. The various colours developed due to the different mineral compositions.

Before heading to the next destination, we were treated to seeing some very large tortoises having a relaxing graze.

On arrival for lunch at the La Rhumerie de Chamarel we tried the famous rum on the recommendation of locals who say some of the finest rums in the world are produced in Mauritius. We were also shown how they make coffee.

More rum tasting followed lunch, and to me it was like drinking our very own local *mampoer*: strong and vile. Afterwards, we went up a road that led to a high plateau which offers a great view over the Black River Gorges National Park, home to most of the island’s endemic flora and fauna. The Black River Peak (Piton de la Petite Rivière Noire) is part of the Black River range and is the highest mountain in Mauritius at 828 m. Despite its height, its summit can be reached quite easily for a most rewarding view of the peaceful surroundings.



Then it was time to set off to the sacred lake, Grand Bassin; the most important place of worship for Mauritian Hindus. A statue dedicated to Lord Shiva, along with a temple dedicated to other gods, including Lord Hanuman, the goddess Ganga, and Lord Ganesh can be seen here. During the festival of Shivaratri, many pilgrims in Mauritius walk barefoot from their homes to the lake. The Lord Shiva statue is 33 m high and looking at it from the ground was like staring up at an office building.

We stopped at the Trou aux Cerfs crater where we had a 360° view of the island. This is a dormant volcano with a well-defined cone and crater. It is 605 m high and located in Curepipe. Joe said the crater is about 300 m in diameter, and 80 m deep, and could “become active” at any time in the next 1000 years.



Our final stop during the Wild South West tour of Mauritius was the Pieter Both Mountain. Named after Pieter Both, the first governor-general of the Dutch East Indies, the mountain is part of the Moka range and has a gigantic rock formation at the very top, which resembles a human head.

Speedboat activities

On the east coast we departed from Pointe Jérôme and sped along the longest and largest lagoon on the island. We also snorkelled in crystal clear water, before heading to the lighthouse island, Fouquet’s Island. Joe explained that it is a 5 ha island perched on the reef at the end of a “frightful abyss”. The island, which is now a historical monument, played a key role during the era of colonisation as it was the outpost of maritime surveillance in the Grand Port Bay. A large part of its fortifications date back to the Napoleonic era, and is currently undergoing restoration.

Next to the lighthouse island is a separate island on which a war between the British and the French took place in 1810, but unfortunately we were not able to explore it.

Our next adventure was paragliding in the middle of the lagoon. I was strapped in with my sister behind me in control. She was given a brief run-down on how to land without causing a scene. You take off from an anchored float and wait for the boat to gather enough speed and wind to lift you into the air. The coconut rum consumed earlier made the paraglide even more exciting. As the speedboat slows down, you drop into the water, only for it to pick up speed again and take you back up in the air. A few mouthfuls of seawater later, we were having the ride of a lifetime – giggling and taking in the fresh sea air from high above.

On the trip back to the mainland, we stopped at a very small island – more of a random landmass poking out of the water than an actual island by definition – where we disembarked into ankle-deep water and were given crumbed cookies to hold out to the birds which ate out of our hands. The place was covered in starfish and we were terrified that we would accidentally step on them. We picked a few up to hold them, and Joe put one on my head and called me the “African Queen”.

The people of Mauritius are very kind and friendly. They welcomed us and made sure we saw as much as time allowed. This was by



far one of the best places I have visited, and I recommend that a Mauritius vacation be added to everyone’s bucket list.

P.S. We did get our missing luggage back.

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