

Mauritius: Travel Information

Hit the banana lounge for some deep-dish island relaxation



Introduction

Mauritius is the most accessible island in the Indian Ocean, boasting as much tropical paradise as Maui or Martinique and, better still, offering it at a bargain price. Though nestled up alongside Africa, it's actually more influenced by its British and French ties and predominantly Indian workforce. Backed by mountains at the northwestern end of the island, the burgeoning capital of Port Louis is a relatively large city (in proportion to the size of Mauritius), though it contains a relatively small percentage of the country's total population. The town of Curepipe owes its size and prominence to the malaria epidemic of 1867, during which thousands of people fled mosquito infested Port Louis for healthier, higher ground. The bulk of Franco-Mauritians live in outlying communities and come into Curepipe mainly to shop. During the day, it bustles with snarling traffic. By night, in contrast, all is quiet - except for the swish Le Caudan Waterfront, where you'll find a casino, cinemas, shops, bars and restaurants. There's a distinct Muslim area around Muammar El Khadafi Square and a Chinatown around Royal St. With the flavour of an English market town, Curepipe is the centre of the island's tea and model-ship building industries and the best place to scatter your money. The town itself is worth a quick visit at most as the surrounding countryside has a more universal appeal.



Weather Overview

Mauritius experiences a hot, humid summer from December to April and a cooler, drier period from May to November. However, there is considerable variation from one part of the island to another. Coastal temperatures range between 25°C and 33°C (77-91°F) in summer and between 18°C and 24°C (64-75°F) in winter. On the plateau it will be some 5°C (41°F) cooler. The highlands are also the wettest part of the island - it can rain here at any time of year and even when it's not raining, the area can be cloaked in low cloud. Under the influence of the prevailing southeasterly winds, the east coast is slightly cooler and wetter than the west. When the winds are at their strongest in July and August, it can be blustery on the east coast, though the breeze brings welcome relief in summer. The cyclone season lasts from December to March. Although a direct hit happens rarely, cyclones way out at sea can bring days of squally rain.

Visa Overview

All visitors are required to have a passport and onward ticket in order to enter the country. Most visitors do not require visas for stays of up to 90 days. Contact a Mauritian embassy prior to your visit.

History:

Pre 20C

Arab traders knew of Mauritius as early as the 10th century but never stopped to settle it. Portuguese naval explorers stumbled upon it in the wake of Vasco de Gama's voyage around the Cape of Good Hope in 1498. Still, apart from introducing pesky monkeys and

rats, the Portuguese did little to influence the island. This was left to the next wave of immigrants, the Dutch. In 1598, Vice Admiral Wybrandt van Warwyck came ashore and claimed the island for the Netherlands, christening it after his ruler, Maurice, Prince of Orange and Count of Nassau. It was another 40 years before the Dutch began to settle the country, preferring instead to use it as a supply base on the route to Java. The colony, however, never really flourished, and the Dutch departed for good in 1710, leaving in their wake the extinction of the dodo and the introduction of African slaves, Javan deer, wild boar, tobacco and sugar cane.

Five years later, French captain Guillaume Dufresne d'Arzel claimed the island, renamed it Île de France and gave it over to the French East India Company to run as a trading base. Popular settlement began in 1721, and within 15 years the first sugar mill had been built, along with a road network and hospital.

During the second half of the 18th century, the island's capital, Port Louis, became a free trading base and haven for corsairs - mercenary marines paid by a country to plunder the ships of its enemies. Tired of the competition, the British moved in on the corsairs (and on Mauritius) in 1810. After an initial defeat at the Battle of Vieux Grand Port, the Brits landed at Cap Malheureux on the northern coast and took the island. The 1814 Treaty of Paris ceded Île de France, Rodrigues and the Seychelles to the victors but allowed Franco-Mauritians to retain their language, religion, Napoleonic Code legal system and sugar plantations. In 1835, the slaves were freed and the labour force was supplemented by workers brought in from India and China.

Modern

While the Franco-Mauritian plantations supported some wealthy sugar barons (as they do today), Indian workers continued to be indentured by the thousands. Through strength of numbers, Indians gradually bolstered their say in the country's management, aided in 1901 by a visit from Mahatma Gandhi. In 1936, the Labour Party was founded to continue the struggle for labourers' rights. The following year, their burden was lightened by a new constitution granting the vote to anyone over 21 who could sign their name. Under the direction of Dr Seewoosagur Ramgoolam (who was later knighted), membership swelled and the party flourished.



Mauritius was granted independence from Britain on 12 March 1968, and Sir Ramgoolam was elected prime minister, a title he retained for the next 13 years. He was succeeded by a coalition of the leftist Mouvement Militant Mauricien (MMM) and the Parti Socialiste Mauricien, though tensions in the parties' upper ranks rattled the infrastructure throughout their reign. In 1986, three Mauritian MPs were caught at Amsterdam's airport with heroin in their suitcases, and the resulting inquiry implicated other politicians in drug money and led to several resignations. Mauritius officially became a republic in 1992.

Recent

In 1999 tensions between the Créole population, descended from former slaves, and the Indo-Mauritian majority exploded. Popular reggae singer Joseph 'Kaya' Topize was arrested during a rally to legalise marijuana and died of a skull fracture while in police custody. Riots broke out across the island, particularly in Port Louis.

While there have been no more major riots, the economic situation today isn't so rosy. By the end of 2003 growth had slipped back and unemployment shot up to around 10%. The main cause of the downturn is competition from cheap textiles from South-East Asia. Though this has taken the shine off Mauritius's 'economic miracle', it's not all doom and gloom. The number of tourist arrivals continues to grow.

The other major plank in the government's strategy is to encourage foreign investment in telecoms. The latest talk is of Mauritius becoming a 'CyberIsland', fully wired up with all the latest technology and ready to become a key player in the region's information networks.

On the political front, Paul Bérenger made headlines in 2003 when he became the country's first non-Indian prime minister. It was short-lived, however - Navinchandra Ramgoolam, son of Seewoosagur Ramgoolam, took over as prime minister in July 2005.

Places of Interest

Tamarin Falls

Tamarin is awkward to reach, but it's worth the effort for a beautiful, deep, cool bathe at the bottom of a series of seven spectacular waterfalls. They are only accessible via a challenging trail that begins near the Tamarin Falls reservoir, but you will have to explore to find it. It's best to take a local guide from Henrietta.



Black River Gorges National Park

Tel : 507 0128

Hiking trails criss-cross the wild and empty Black River Gorges National Park. Unfortunately, they're not always well marked, so check the route and trail conditions at the information centres before setting off. Look for the rare tambalacoque or dodo tree and wild guavas. Birdwatchers could see the Mauritius kestrel and echo parakeet, among other rarities.



L'Aventure du Sucre

Tel : 243 0660

This excellent museum in the former Beau Plan sugar factory not only tells the story of sugar in fascinating detail, but along the way covers the history of Mauritius, slavery, the rum trade and more. End your visit with a sugar-tasting session and something sticky in the stylish café-restaurant.



Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam Botanical Gardens

These attractive gardens are one of the most popular tourist attractions in Mauritius, but the shady avenues seem to swallow the crowds. One key attraction is the park's giant Victoria regia water lilies, native to the Amazon. There's also an astonishing collection of palms of all shapes and sizes.

Blue Safari

A unique Submarine in the Indian Ocean can make your dreams of a nice trip under the sea come true. The Safari will last one hour.



The submarine can accommodate 5 passengers and the pilot. The submarine is air-conditioned with fully transparent-glassed cabin at atmospheric pressure. You will thus enjoy exceptionally clear panoramic views of the extraordinary underwater world. At 25 or 30 meters undersea, you may notice some rare species, just like on any other traditional safari.

Around a coral massif, at the foot of a ridge, or even at a wreck spot, you will discover a vivid fresque made up of fish and coral. The amazing maneuverability of the submarine and the pilot's dexterity, will allow you to move around or follow a fish or even watch, remaining standstill, a morray eel, coming in and out of its hole.

Diving in the night is also possible. Under powerful spotlight beams, you can well witness the most fascinating show on earth, a silent symphony, fish performing a memorable ballet, a colourful choreography.

Grand Baie

This is the main holiday centre for Mauritians and tourists alike. Grand Baie used to be a tiny fishing village. The northern coastline beyond Tombeau Bay has many delightful beaches. The coastline curves into Grand Baie itself, the main centre for yachting, water skiing, windsurfing, and many other water sports.



Mahebourg

Mahebourg named after the famous French Governor Mahe La Bourdonnais but pronounced May Burg, was once a busy port. Now it is a run down commercial centre with a small fishing fleet. Mahebourg is a lot friendlier, has home character and is more relaxed than the tourist spiels would have you believe.

It is also a nearest centre to the airport and visitors may find themselves spending the first or last few days there. The bay is a picturesque backdrop for the town, with the sea changing from one intense colour to another at greets speed.

Port Louis

The capital and main port of Mauritius, Port Louis, was founded by the French Governor Mahé de Labourdonnais in 1735. The Harbour lies sheltered in a semi-circle of mountains. The town has plenty of character, and shows in certain quarters signs of its past elegance. Off the main square, palm-lined Place D'Armes, there are some particularly fine French colonial buildings, especially the Government House and the Municipal Theatre, both built in the 18th Century. The city has two Cathedrals, Anglican and Catholic, a Mosque, a Chinese Casino, the Caudan Waterfront, a fine Supreme Court.

The lively covered market offers an insight into the fascinating cross-section of Mauritian life. Champ de Mars, originally laid out by the French for military parades is now a racecourse. The best views of the racecourse, town and harbour, are from Fort Adélaïde, a citadel fortified in the time of William IV, and the monument of Marie Reine de La Paix at the foot of Montagne des Signaux. Daytime Port Louis is crowded with people and traffic. Busy hawkers sell their wares at the sides of the road in Chinatown and in doorways near the covered Port Louis Market. A wide range of restaurants cater for all tastes.

The port is active, with many cargo and fishing vessels stopping over or based there.

Botanical Garden

From the centre of a huge pond, the Lily flower opens white one day and closes red the next. Other attractions include Golden Bamboo, Chewing Gum Trees, Fish Poison Trees, a 200-year-old Buddha Tree and for Christians - a Cross Tree with leaves shaped like crucifixes. There's also an art gallery and a cemetery, whichever way your tastes run. Pamplemousses is 11km (7m) north-east of Port Louis, and there are regular buses plying between the two.



Ile Aux Cerfs

Ile Aux Cerfs is a large island found on the East Coast of Mauritius close to the coastal village of Trou D'Eau Douce in the district of Flacq. It is nearly 100 hectares in area. There are a number of sandy beaches. For years the hotel group Sun Resort Ltd has operated two restaurants, a bar, and a boathouse and provided other beach amenities on the island. The hotel also operates a paying ferry service from the mainland to the island that is used by tourists and the public alike. The island is part of the public domain and is made available to Sun Resort on lease from Government. It is a very popular recreational spot for both Mauritians and tourists alike for there are close to 800 visitors to the island per day.



Postal Museum

This little Museum, next door to the main post office, houses a collection of Mauritian stamps and assorted philately. Items on display include a range of old stamps, telegraph machines, printing plates and other interesting postal paraphernalia.



The Museum (tel; 208 2851) is open **Monday to Friday** from 9am to 4pm and also on Saturday from 9 to 11.30 am. Admission is free. There is a collection of stamps and souvenirs for sale.

Pristine White Beaches

In the North of Mauritius are the Pristine White Beaches that make the Island famous. This area is also a water sports lover's paradise.

Wide arrays of resorts are available among them the Maritim Hotel, which



has 180 rooms, free water sports and the best sunsets. It's also possible to see traditional Sega dancing, the national dance that originated in the days of slavery.

Curepipe & Environs

West of the town centre, Couepipe's Botanical Gardens are not as spectacular as those of Pamplemousses but they are well kept and informal, with nature trails branching off of the main paths. Just north of the gardens, "Trou aux Cerfs" Volcano crater is the town's biggest natural attraction. It's been extinct for ages, and the crater floor is now heavily wooded, but a tarred road leads up to and around the rim with rest-stops with beautiful views.



La Vanille Crocodiles Park Park

The road into Le Val is at Union Park Village, about halfway on the Mahebourg Curepipe road, Cluny village, the gateway to Le Val Nature Park in the valley of the Riviere des Creole, is about 7km down the road.



Many of the amazing anthurium flowers are grown at Le Val in shade houses. There are also water fields full watercress, which, complements many Creole meals, and attempts at prawn farming. Other facilities include a small aquarium and a deer park. Le Val is open Monday to Friday from 9am to 5pm. There is a bus service from Curepipe to Rose Belle, via Cluny.

Pamplemousses Gardens

Away from the coast and almost directly south of Grand Baie is the Pamplemousses Gardens, also known as the Royal Botanical Gardens. Pamplemousses stretches for four hectares and features plants from all over the world - wild bananas, camphor trees, clover and nutmeg trees from Manila and huge water lilies, known locally as 'flan tins' as well as a number of palms. There is also an art gallery and a cemetery.

Health Conditions

Malaria

There is a slight risk here.

Chikungunya

virus

This disease is borne by mosquitos, and causes flu-like symptoms. It's rare to die from it, but the joint pain it causes can linger for months. It's now present in Mauritius, although it's by no means as serious as in Réunion and less so than the Seychelles.

Getting there

Overview

Apart from a handful of people who arrive by yacht or cruise ship, visitors to Mauritius fly into the country. Many flights originate in France, but there are also flights from several African, Asian and European capitals as well as from the US (via Europe) and Australia. You must have a return or onward ticket before arriving in Mauritius. Cargo ships ply the Indian Ocean regularly, though few take passengers. You're more likely to find passage on the private yachts that call in at Mauritius outside of cyclone season, berthing at

Grand Baie or Port Louis. Still, opportunities are rare. About the only guaranteed way to come or go by sea is to book fare on the the Mauritius Trochetia or the cheaper and slower Mauritius Pride, which cruises several times a month between Mauritius and Réunion. Twice a month the Mauritius Trochetia also takes in Madagascar as well.

Getting around

Overview

Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam International Airport is near Mahébourg in southeastern Mauritius, on the opposite side of the island from Port Louis. While there are no direct airport buses, express buses travel between the capital and Mahébourg several times a day, stopping at the airport. Allow yourself at least two hours from Port Louis. Air Mauritius flies to Rodrigues Island (about 90 minutes) daily; the company also offers 15-20 minute helicopter tours of Mauritius. For those with money to burn, the helicopters can be hired by the hour. The Mauritius Trochetia and the Mauritius Pride ply the waters between Mauritius and Rodrigues several times per month. Mauritian buses are generally good - albeit a bit slow - and can take you to (or near) just about any place on the island. There are several different operators, none of which cover the entire island. Port Louis and Curepipe are the main hubs. Tickets are cheap and should be kept handy, as inspectors check them frequently. Mauritian roads range from smooth to potholed and pavement-free. Driving is sketchy at best on Mauritius, with speed limits often ignored, headlights a rarity and weaving pedestrians all too common. If you think you're up to it, you can rent a car in one of the major towns or at the airport. Smallish motorbikes can be rented around Grand Baie. All drivers should have an international drivers' licence, and most rental agencies require drivers to be over 23. Driving is on the left. Bicycles and boats can be rented wherever tourists congregate.

Fast Facts:

Time Zone

GMT/UTC + 4

Weight measures

Metric

Area Sqkm

1,860 sq km

Area Code

Country Code: 230

Population

1,200,000

Spoken Language

Hindi (other)

French (official)

Urdu (other)

Bhojpuri (other)

English (official)

Religion

Hindu (51%), Christian (30%), Muslim (17%), other (2%)

Currency

Mauritius Rupee (Rs)

Electricity

220V or 125V 50Hz

Electrical Plug

European plug with two circular metal pins