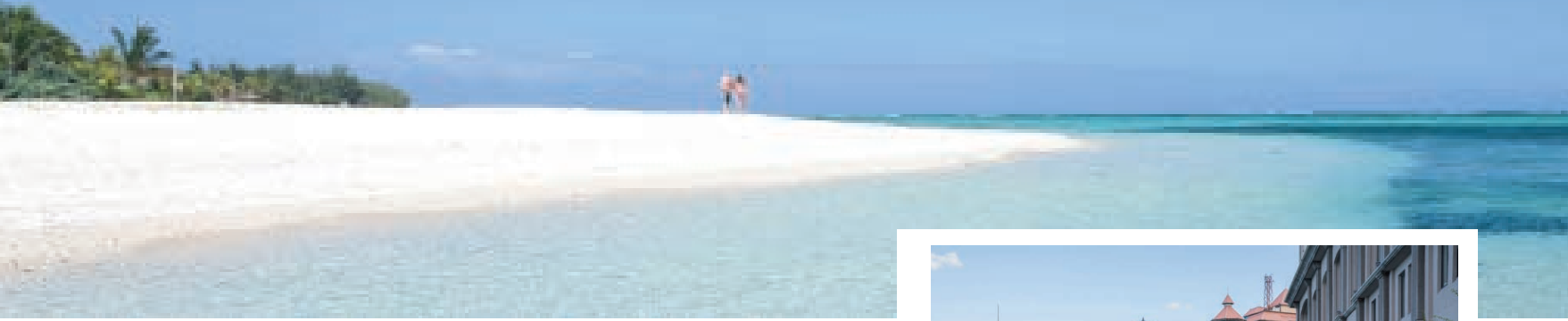


Inside edge

Fifty years after it gained independence from Britain, Mauritius' beaches, lagoons and reefs remain a major draw: but visitors should also delve into what lies within a small landmass packed with high-end experiences



Mauritius was, when Sir John Shaw Renni planted the Union Jack at the Champ de Mars in Port Louis 50 years ago, an obscure colony reliant on sugar cultivation. Today it's one of sub-Saharan Africa's major financial and trading hubs: a place dubbed 'The Switzerland of the Indian Ocean' thanks to its steadily burgeoning economy, stable political scene, generous tax structures and a lifestyle one might refer to, with nary a hint of hyperbole, as 'sublime'.

This verdant, volcanic dot of land (it's barely the size of Surrey), 1200 miles off the southeast coast of Africa, is probably best known, though, as a top-end sun-and-sea destination: certainly, the bulk of its 100,000 or so UK tourists a year come here to recharge themselves on its mostly glorious palm-fringed edges. But while Mauritius does lend itself to two weeks absorbing fine literature, vitamin D and gastronomic wizardry in almost sinful doses, it's actually profligate to stay put in your resort of choice for your whole stay.

"This is a golf destination, a diving destination, a spa destination, a cultural destination, a gastronomic destination – it plays in a lot of different leagues," says Arvind Bundhun, director of Mauritius Tourism Promotion Authority (MTPA). "It's seen as a sun-sea destination but the interiors have lots to offer as well: and not just parks and nature reserves." A good starting point, when it comes to taking in the parts of its inner splendour that your airport transfer won't expose you to,

comes courtesy of *Robb Report UK's* hotel resort of choice, Maradiva Villas Resort & Spa (see breakout box): a bespoke sightseeing tour in a Rolls-Royce Ghost with a picnic hamper, prepared by the resort's chef, aboard.

Partakers who are after an authentic sense of how locals live may want to head to the north, drinking in the island's rugged mountains and lava rocks all the way, to Aapravasi Ghat – a UNESCO World Heritage site that was, between 1834 and 1920, a gateway for half a million indentured labourers from India who came to work the sugar plantations. Unloading the picnic on one of the beaches based around the Grand Baie area, you'll find a congenial family atmosphere offering testimony to Bundhun's assertions when it comes to the island's affable cultural landscape ("It's a melting pot containing Franco Mauritians, Hindus, Chinese, Muslims – and yet all live in peace and harmony," he says).

The trip north would be incomplete without pressing on to the fishing village Cap Malheureux, with its famous red-roofed church, and if it's dinner-time when it comes time for the Ghost's Spirit of Ecstasy figurine to face south again, the Chez Tante Athalie restaurant is recommended for an authentic, local *haute cuisine* experience.

Request that your journey from the Maradiva head for the island's southwest, meanwhile, and you'll be able to take in the



(from top) French colonial architecture in the capital, Port Louis; the Amma Tookay Kovil Hindu temple; Port Louis' bustling food market

Casela Nature Park, the view from Morne Brabant, l'île Aux Benitiers Chamarel village (including the Chamarel waterfall and the geological marvel that is The Seven Coloured Earths), the Trou aux Cerfs volcano crater and, for those more enticed by man-made wonders, Shiva Statue Grand Bassin (by the sacred lake and Hindu temple). Other options for the bespoke tour take in hidden beaches, artists' homes and hunting estates, with an optional stop at the island's rum factory.

At the Champ de Mars Racecourse (*mauritiusturfclub.com*) – the oldest horse-racing club in the Southern Hemisphere – you can spend a day in a private lodge with champagne, canapés and all the trimmings, should a reminder of the spoils of the British Colonial era entice (many races are still named after British royalty; although this is also where the flag hoisting ceremony happened on Independence Day in 1968). A drone's eye view of the island can be enjoyed with Island Wings (*islandwingsmauritius.com*), whose pilots take the seaplanes low enough for passengers to see dolphins and sea turtles below; history buffs will soon be able to enjoy a new tourism village at Mahébourg, where the Dutch first landed in the late 16th century, and La Bataille de Grand Port, where French Navy frigates and those from the Royal Navy did battle during the Napoleonic wars. The adventurous may prefer to wake up at the crack of dawn and have a private guide climb with them up Le Morne Brabant – the basaltic monolith on the island's southwestern tip.

For Bundhun, though, the strongest enticement to draw tourists away from their luxury beach-side hideaways is a 1.2-million-strong population who have a great deal more to them than a curious preoccupation with the dodo and intricately rigged model ships, as implied by so many of the tourist shops here. "What's unique about Mauritius is the Mauritians," he says. "They're so well versed in the art of kindness." Go explore, and you'll find his sentiments validated at every turn. – NICK SCOTT



Peace on Earth

Robb Report's resting place of choice: The Maradiva Villas Resort & Spa

However inquisitive you make your Mauritius itinerary, you'll still require a high-luxe beach-side haven to rest your head and relax during down-time. A string of quality five-star resorts backs the beach along Flic-en-Flac (a corruption of the old Dutch name Fried Landt Flaak, or 'Free and Flat Land') on the island's more sheltered west coast, but one – The Maradiva – takes comfort and tranquillity to all-new levels.

Consisting of 65 villas, spread along five crescents over 27 lush acres (each with a private garden/courtyard and pool with day bed), it feels blissfully underpopulated here even when fully booked, in part thanks to guests being reluctant to stray from their luxurious personal domains, but also because of some cunning plotting of the pathways and gravel thoroughfares linking lodgings to restaurants, the lobby and the beach.

Following a recent renovation, rosewood floors, tropical African wood furniture, Hermès wallpaper and local artworks punctuate a soothing ochre and flaxen colour scheme, while the resort's soundscape has a pulse-slowness quality, in part thanks to a coral bank around 100 metres out to sea that keeps the volume of the rhythmically crashing waves at a hypnotic level.

Presidential Suite Pool Villa starts at €3800 (£3400) a night, including breakfast and dinner. maradiva.com

What's unique about Mauritius is the Mauritians

