

SPHERE

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LONDON LUXE

WORK, REST AND PLAY IN THE
CAPITAL'S NEWEST WELLNESS
SPACES AND WINE BARS

PULSE

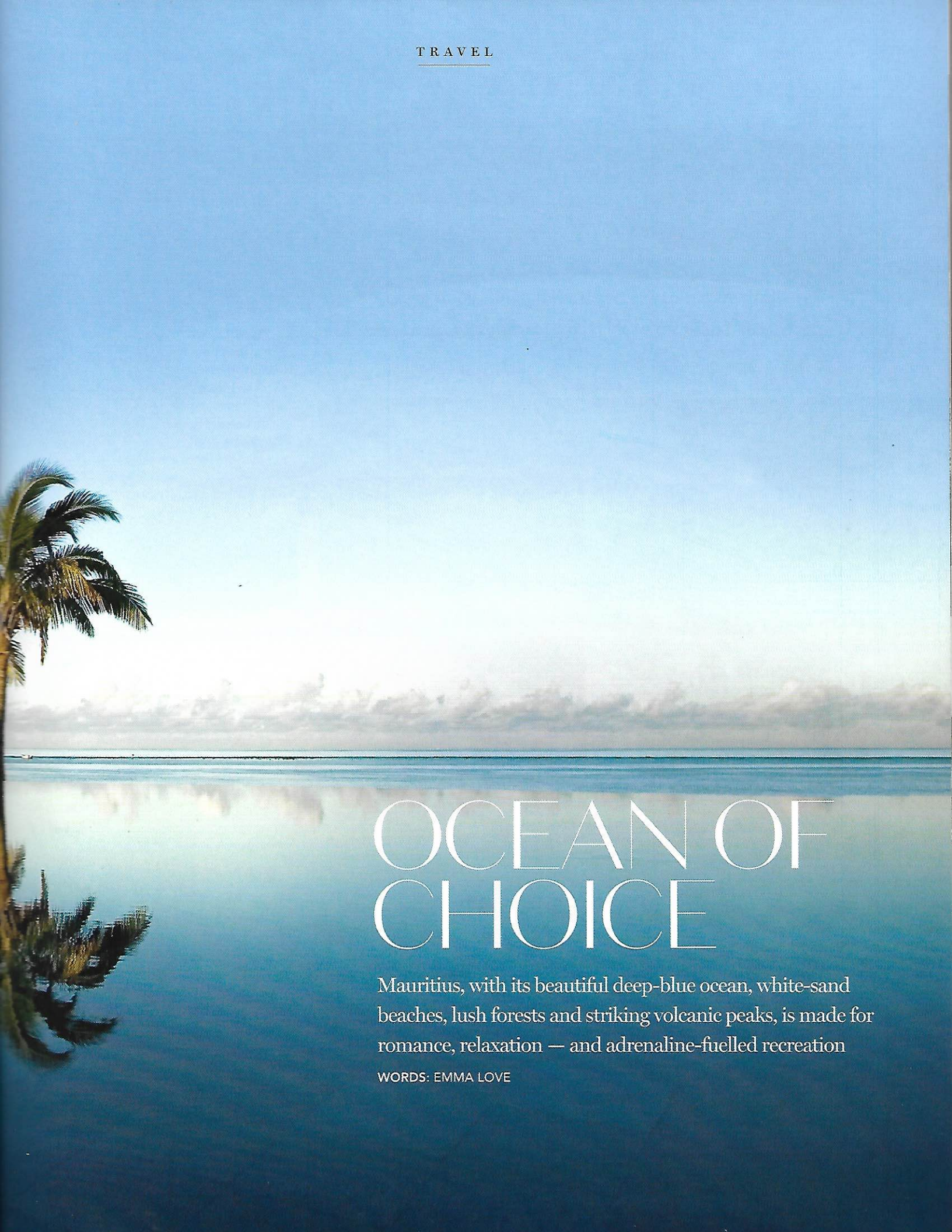
THE SEASON'S
BEST WATCH AND
JEWELLERY TRENDS

The
power
cut





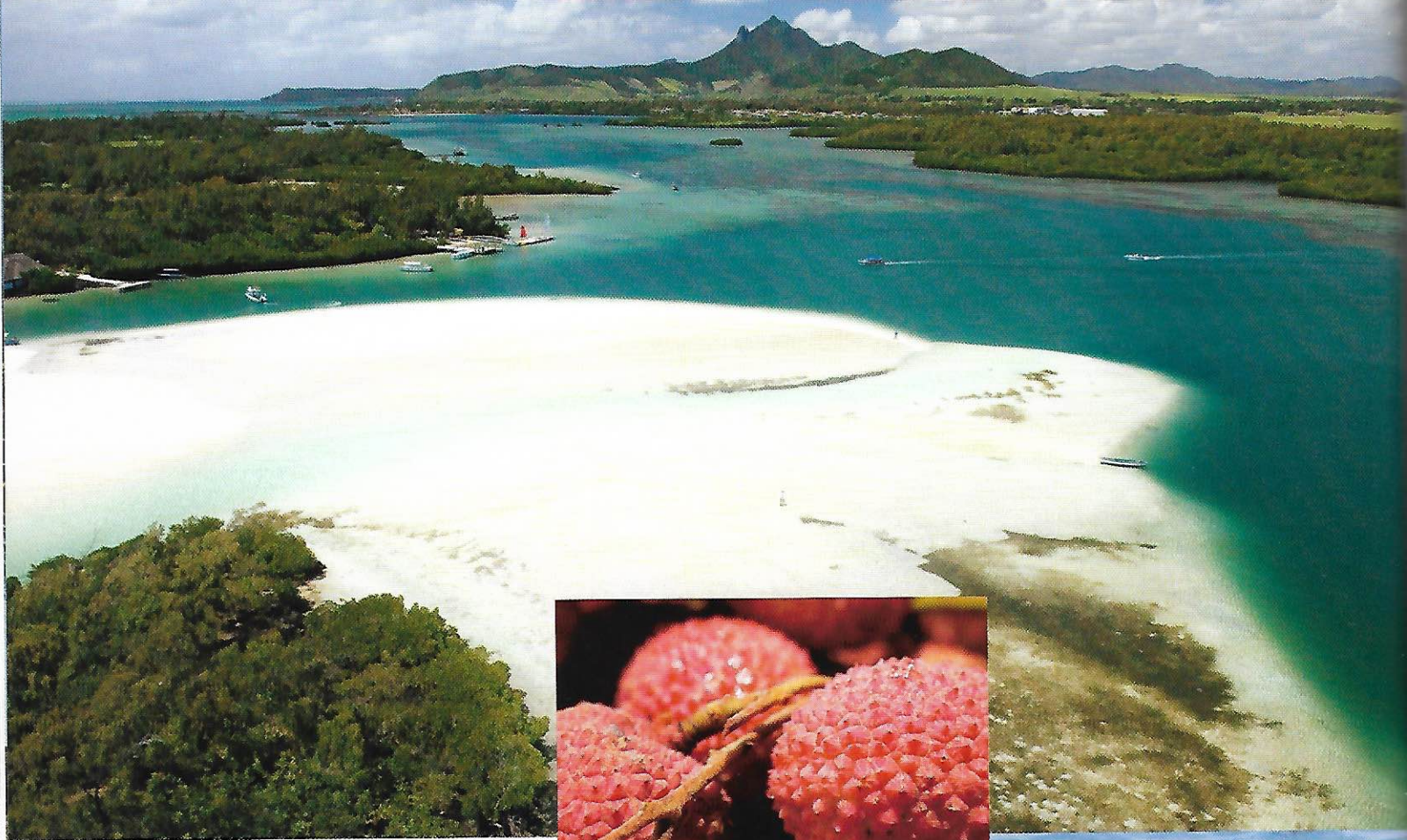
TRAVEL



OCEAN OF CHOICE

Mauritius, with its beautiful deep-blue ocean, white-sand beaches, lush forests and striking volcanic peaks, is made for romance, relaxation — and adrenaline-fuelled recreation

WORDS: EMMA LOVE



Lunchtime on a Tuesday afternoon and I'm standing in the shade at Rhumerie de Chamarel, in the south west of Mauritius, slowly sipping my fifth shot of rum. It's spiced and tastes of Christmas, with hints of cinnamon and nutmeg. At 40 per cent strength I decide to be sensible and make it my last. Think of rum-producing countries and this Indian Ocean island probably isn't the first that springs to mind, but since a government ban (originally imposed because refined sugar was thought to fetch higher profits) was lifted 12 years ago, it has been making its mark on the international spirits market with a not-so-secret ingredient: pure sugar cane juice. Where the majority of rum is made using molasses, several distilleries here (alongside those in Martinique and Guadeloupe) produce agricole rum with distilled cane juice. The result is smoother and often likened to the complexity of a whisky.

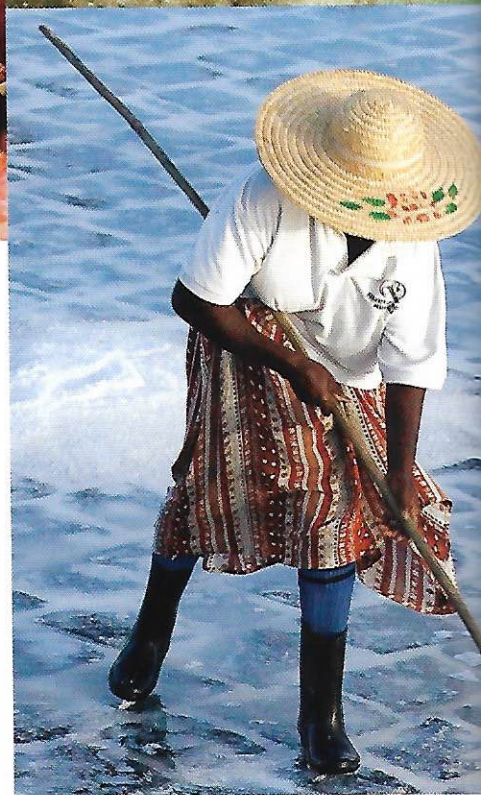
Rum drinking aside, sugar cane isn't just integral to Mauritius' history; it's part of the landscape. As I continue driving around the south, fields of gently swaying cane line the side of the roads, punctuated with guava and lychee trees and neat rows of vegetables. Cultivating land this way dates back to 1630, when the Dutch first settled here and began growing sugar cane, indigo, rice and tobacco. They left (twice, after cyclones destroyed their crops) and were followed in 1715 by the French, who, with the help of slaves obtained from



Mozambique, transformed the island into a prosperous colony. The British invaded a century later, abolishing slavery (industrial labourers from India took their place in the fields) and introducing elected government council representatives. This led, eventually, to Mauritius achieving independence in 1968.

Fast forward 50 years and, as the island celebrates half a century of its independence, it's no longer solely reliant on an agriculturally based economy. Now it's a tourist honey pot — nearly 1.3m visitors came last year — and popular with such royalty as Princess Stephanie of Monaco and the Swedish royal family.

While many come to fly-and-flop, lured by direct flights, the turquoise ocean and the promise of tropical sun, these days back-to-nature thrill-seekers are discovering a more adventurous side to the island, too. For starters, there's the Chamarel Waterfall, surrounded by rolling hills carpeted in a thick blanket of forest green, which plunges more than 95 metres in a single drop (adrenaline junkies can abseil from the top to the pool at its base). Keeping my feet firmly on the ground, I'm content to glimpse it



Top to bottom: the island boasts stunning beaches, clear-blue waters (previous pages) and colourful flora such as lychees; even cleaning the streets adds colour

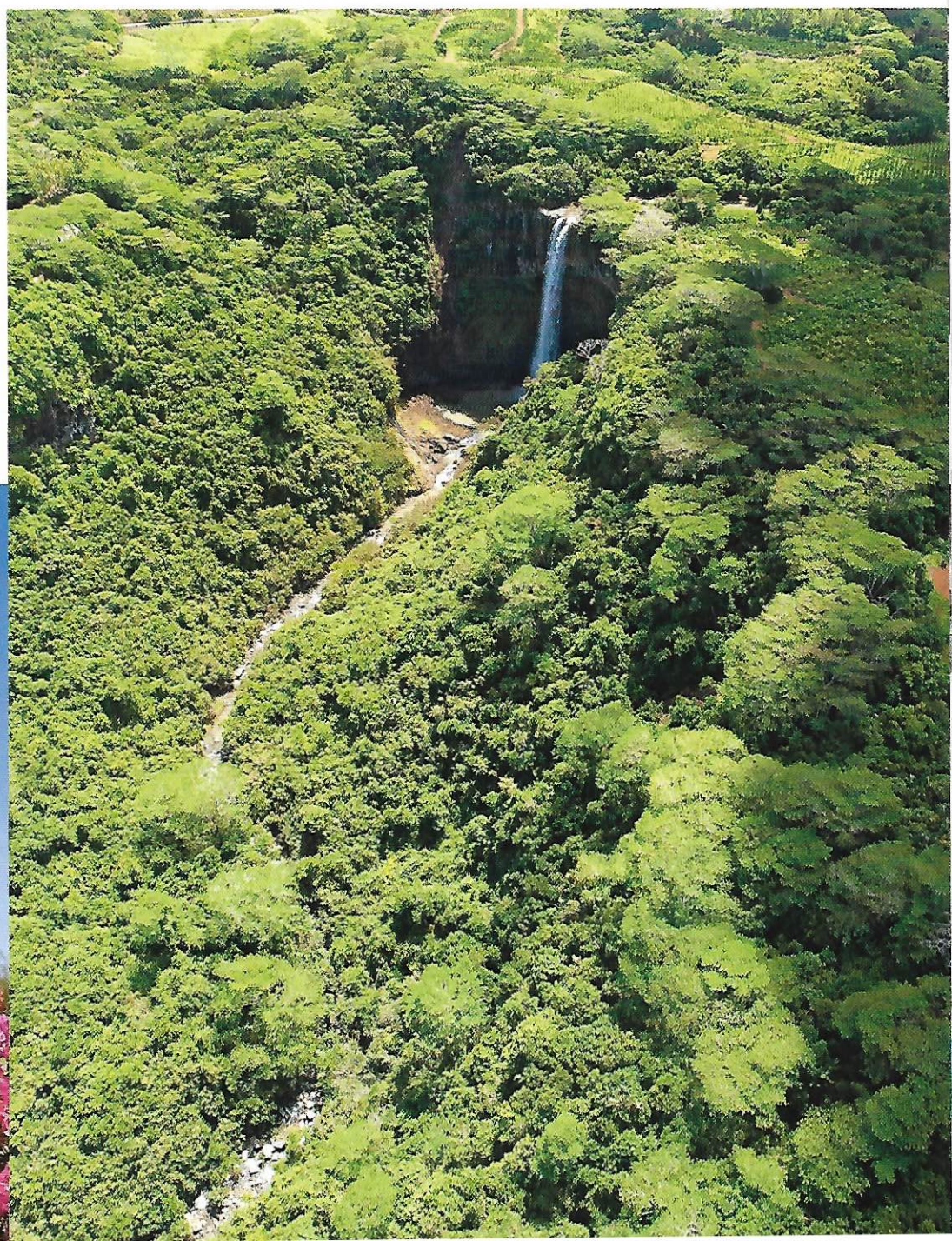
Opposite: the Catholic church in the fishing village of Cap Malheureux is famous for its red roof; stunning scenery at the Black River Gorges National Park

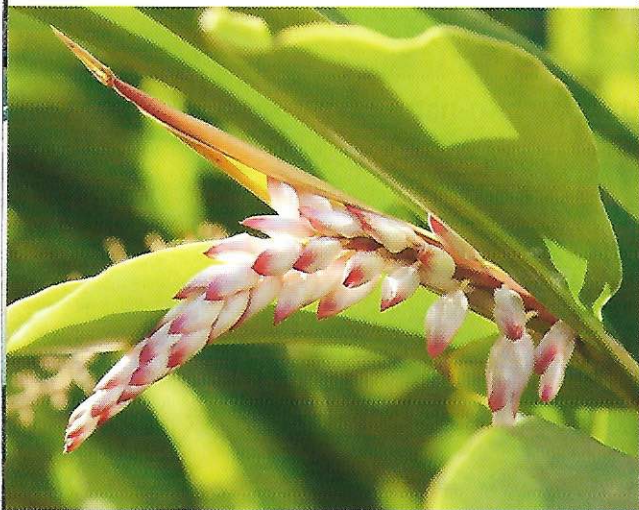
from the safety of my viewpoint within the Black River Gorges National Park.

More than 50km of hiking trails criss-cross the park: pick up maps at the Pétrin Information Centre on the eastern side, which is also the starting point for an easy stroll along the boardwalk. It's here, too, that you'll find the highest point in Mauritius, the 828-metre Black River Peak. Yet there's another mountain to the south west that's far more notorious: Le Morne Brabant, a flat-topped, 556-metre monolith. Once a refuge and lookout point used by slaves who leapt to their deaths from the top rather than be recaptured, this Unesco World Heritage Site draws experienced climbers looking for the next challenge (the upper part of the hike is only accessible with an authorised guide).

It's too windy on my visit to attempt even the lower section of the climb (I'm secretly relieved) so I head to the Le Morne peninsula to watch, mesmerised, as kite surfers appear to effortlessly skim the surface of the ocean. Conditions here — a wide lagoon and flat shallows for beginners and fast-paced waves such as the One-Eye — are considered by many

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to be on a par with Hawaii; book lessons at the Pryde Club, run by kite-surfing champion Evgeny Novozheev, in the village of La Gaulette.

Perfectly positioned in the nearby town of Flic-en-Flac for this and many other water-based activities, including swimming with dolphins, is Maradiva, a 27-acre, family-owned beachfront resort and spa. Anne Hathaway and Matthew McConaughey booked in last year when they filmed *Serenity*, the first Hollywood production to be shot entirely in Mauritius; a film studio is currently being built in an old sugar mill to encourage more movie-making.

What makes this property stand out from others is that it's a villa-only resort — the only one on the island. If you can't tear yourself away at the end of the holiday, more than half of the 65 villas are for sale through an Invest Hotel Scheme that entitles owners to stay up to 30 nights per year. Inspired by colonial sugar cane houses and spruced up last year, each villa comes with teak furniture and a walk-in wardrobe, a private plunge pool and outdoor dining area (some also have Hermès wallpaper, four poster beds and butler service).

Among the resort's most interesting restaurants is Indian Cilantro (the butter chicken curry and Makhani dal are delicious). Next door, the Japanese Teppanyaki Counter (don't miss the grilled lobster with garlic and coriander sauce) offers Mauritian cooking lessons in the kitchen garden with sous chef Deepak, who shows how to make traditional dishes such as palm salad with smoked marlin.

There are also a handful of activities to keep guests at Maradiva busy, from guided walks through nearby Wolinar forest to the village of Tamarin to see the oldest salt pans in Mauritius



“Maradiva is a villa-only resort — the only one on the island — and is inspired by colonial sugar cane houses with each villa featuring teak furniture, a private plunge pool and outdoor dining area”

Above left: Mauritius benefits from volcanic soil and has some 700 types of indigenous plants, including more than 60 species of orchid.

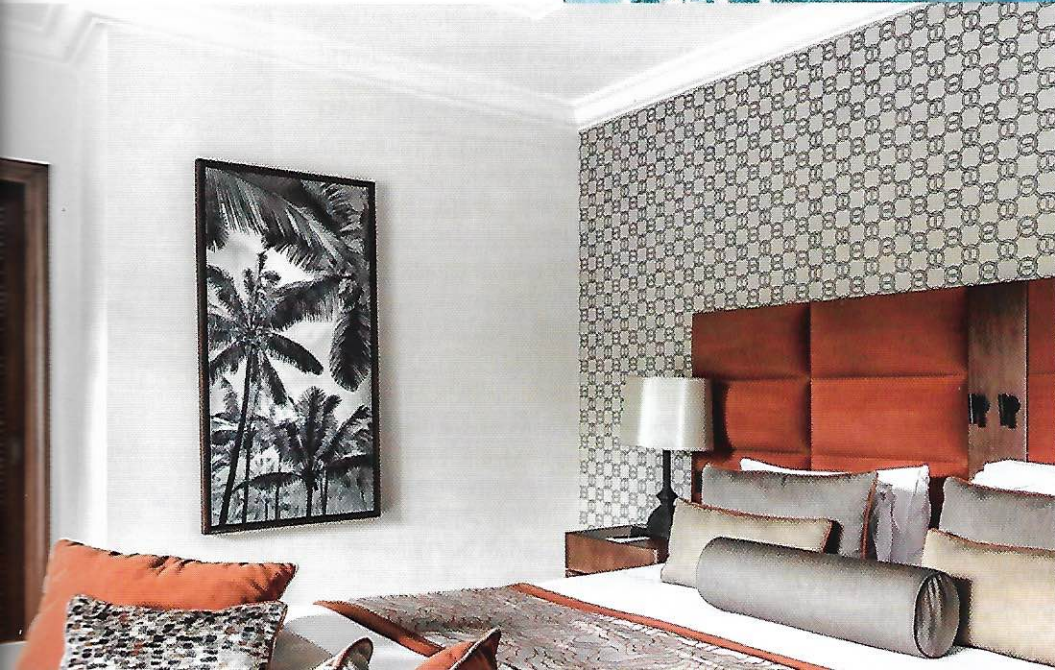
Above: the tranquil design for the spa at the Maradiva Villas Resort is inspired by Indian philosophy and offers Ayurvedic treatments

to a sightseeing tour in a Rolls-Royce Phantom followed by a picnic by the water's edge. At the resort, there are tennis courts, bicycles to borrow, an excellent Ayurvedic spa and a new art gallery.

On my final day, I drive 40 minutes to the capital, Port Louis, best known for its 19th-century Champ de Mars horse-racing track — the oldest in the southern hemisphere. Horse racing is hugely popular among locals, who often arrive early on race days (the season runs from March to December) to watch the horses being weighed and trained. For a bird's-eye view of the track, take the winding road up to the Citadel Fort. It's also worth wandering around the central market, where there are rows upon rows of fruit and vegetables, and wooden flat bowls lined with newspaper that overflow with red and green chillies.

I decide I can't leave without sampling dhol puri, one of the island's most popular-street foods. One of the best examples, I'm told, is at the Dewa & Sons shop in Rose Hill. Originating from Indian parathas, the dish is a pancake made from ground yellow split peas seasoned with cumin and turmeric. It's spread (a bit like a tortilla) with butter bean curry, spicy tomato sauce, pickled vegetables, chutney and chillies. Eaten by hand, it's filling and messy, and the ideal final farewell snack on the way to the airport.

Accommodation at Maradiva Villas Resort & Spa, from £560 per night; maradiva.com



Top to bottom: the island has a rich and diverse cuisine that reflects its Creole, French, Chinese and Indian cultures; the relaxing plunge pool and inviting interior of a Luxury Suite Pool Villa at the Maradiva resort