

TRAVEL

RODRIGUES: THE INDIAN OCEAN'S HIDDEN PARADISE

Steve Dinneen finds a wonderful island retreat teeming with life. And best of all? None of your mates will have a clue where it is.

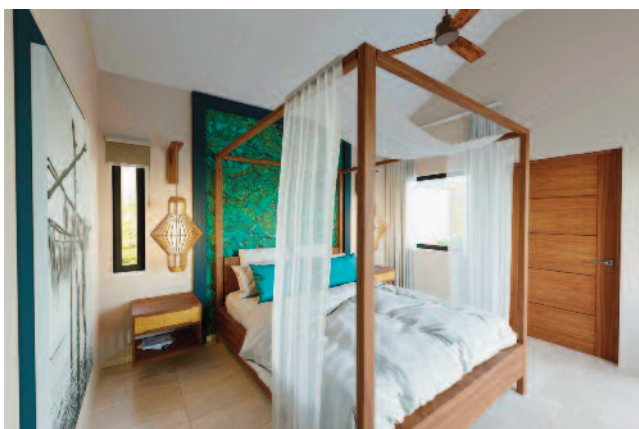


Walking into Rodrigues' Reserve François Leguat is one of those wild moments that will stay with you forever. As you enter a deep, green valley, you're greeted by dozens of giant tortoises, which amble amiably towards you, ponderously dragging their massive bulk across the grass in the hope you'll toss them a lime. They are vast creatures, and the sheer number of them – 1,200, evenly split between Aldabra giant tortoises and smaller radiated tortoises – is hard to take in: you can almost hear John Williams' Jurassic Park theme playing in the background.

Reserve François Leguat is a spectacular ecology project, a huge undertaking aimed at restoring and protecting the islands indigenous plants and wildlife, including 110,000 endemic and native plants. The tortoises are sadly not native to the island – the Domed Rodrigues giant tortoise was wiped out by humans some time around 1800. The Aldabra giant tortoises are the closest surviving species, and have been shipped over from the Seychelles. Each tortoise is painted with a number so the rangers can keep track of them, with the monstrously sized tortoise #1 having been rescued from a public park.

Every so often you hear a crash as a massive, gold-hued Rodrigues flying fox flaps out of a tree, leaving a trail of leaves and branches in its wake. Snaking underneath the park are spectacular limestone caves, which you can explore with a guide, who will point out the densely packed, millennia-old stalagmites and stalactites, with the most impressive sections lit up.

Reserve François Leguat is just one of the surprising things about this thoroughly surprising island. Rodrigues (pronounced "rod-reegs") is



From top: The vivid blue Indian Ocean; one of the giant tortoises; A room at Tekoma; An aerial shot of the Tekoma resort

the little sister to Mauritius – most trips here will be tacked on to a trip to the larger island – which lies around 370 miles to the west. But while Mauritius has 1.265 million people and an international reputation as a high-end, sun-and-sandals destination, Rodrigues is home to under 40,000 and almost nobody has heard of it. And while touring Mauritius will almost certainly involve navigating traffic jams, a drive around Rodrigues is more likely to be interrupted by obstinate goats refusing to get out of the road.

It's a rugged island, the rocky, windswept scenery, full of bowed, squat trees, more reminiscent of the Faroes or the Falklands than your typical tropical paradise, although the temperature is a solid 24-29 degrees year-round. It's also incredibly windy, making it a big destination for kite surfers, who you can see zipping across the ocean at break-neck speed. Rodrigues is a largely agricultural island, and while tourism is a big part of the economy, it doesn't feel touristy, and when I was there during one of the island's quieter periods, bumping

into fellow travellers was rare.

An unusual reef formation surrounding the island means Rodrigues is surrounded by a vast lagoon twice as big as the island itself. This lagoon contains 18 islets, including bird-watching haven Coco Island, home to an astonishing number of birds. Or so I'm told: the unusually high winds that whipped across the island all week meant it was too dangerous to go out.

Another way to traverse the island – one that's not quite so susceptible to high winds – is on the back of a 4x4. Clattering down rocky paths, being propelled a foot into the air with every bounce, is a huge amount of fun, and something pretty much every guide on the island will be happy to arrange for you. It's also a great way to see more of that wonderfully harsh terrain. From the higher outcrops, you really get the sense that you're lost in the middle of the ocean, standing on the last piece of Africa before east Asia unspools further east.

Another must-see is the The Grand Montagne Nature Reserve, which is



home to an astonishing selection of endemic species of plants and animals. My guide through the reserve was a hardened twitcher determined to show me one of the two rare birds that like to hang out here, mimicking their tune in the hope one would arrive (and one duly did). I was more interested, however, in the gigantic orb web spiders that has set up shop in the trees. With the leg-span of a dinner plate and vivid red-on-black markings, these truly are the stuff of nightmares.

I stayed in the island's most luxurious resort, Tekoma, a collection of neat little villas hunkering down on a hillside overlooking the ocean (to be fair, almost everything on Rodrigues overlooks the ocean). The rooms are well presented, making liberal use of driftwood and coming with all the paradise island touches you'd expect, including an outdoor shower/bath and picture windows so you can gaze out to sea from the comfort of your four-poster bed.

The resort – which is expanding to almost double its capacity – has the look and feel of an eco village, and

you could happily while away afternoons just wandering from your villa to the beach a few metres away. From there you can walk for miles, past herds of free-roaming cattle, discovering tucked away beaches and interesting rock pools filled with bright purple anemone.

There's something about the landscape here that makes you want to *do stuff* rather than just hang out on the beach (although that's obviously an option, too). One afternoon I made the reasonably challenging hike from Tekoma up to Gravier beach, taking in the island's secluded coves, including the stunning Trou d'argent Beach (an area that's inaccessible by car), which has a natural wave machine formed by a narrow gully carved out of the rocks.

At the end of every day, I'd return to Tekoma and hole up in the restaurant, ploughing through Phoenix beer and occasionally mixing things up with a spiced rum. The food is excellent, too, heavily skewed towards fish and seafood, naturally, and excellently prepared.

Watching the sun set from the vantage point of the restaurant, the blues of the ocean getting darker until everything fades to inky black is ridiculously romantic. But not in a cheesy, footprints-in-the-sand, picture postcard kind of way. That's not Rodrigues' style. It's romantic in that wistful, almost melancholy way, where you feel like you're standing at the end of the world, a million miles from civilisation. It's blissful.

NEED TO KNOW

- For more information and to book accommodation at **Tekoma**, go to tekoma-hotel.com, call +230 483 49 70, or email reservations@trimetys-hotels.com
- There are two flights a day with **Air Mauritius** from Mauritius to Rodrigues.