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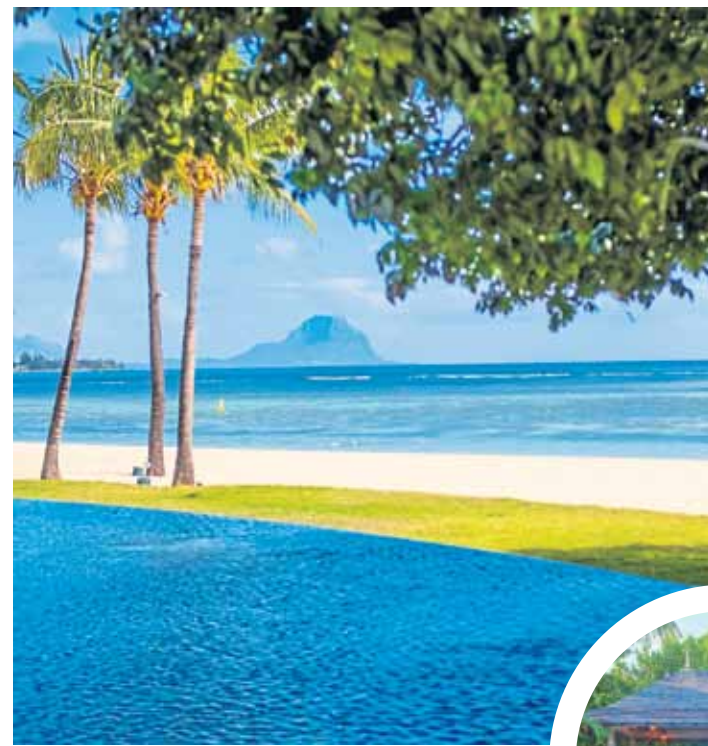


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● Clockwise from main: a bird's eye view of the sun-kissed Mauritian resort, spot the frogs by the plunge pool, Maradiva beach, and meditation pavilion

Films, frogs and fun: A movie-star hideaway

— WORDS JAMES RAMPTON —

The northernmost tip of Mauritius goes by the lyrical name of Cap Malheureux, which means "Unhappy Cape" and is so named because of the number of ships wrecked there. But it is hard to see how anyone could be unhappy on this gorgeous island in the Indian Ocean. And I find myself smiling from the minute I arrive on the island to the minute I depart. You will certainly never feel morose staying at the Maradiva Villas Resort & Spa, an enchanting hotel situated in the splendidly named village of Flic-en-Flac. Half an hour's drive down the west coast of the island from the capital Port Louis, the hotel boasts 65 villas (each with a private pool), spread across 27 acres of exquisite grounds. To enhance

the wonderful garden, you are even encouraged to follow the example of film stars Matthew McConaughey and Anne Hathaway, who stayed here in 2017 while making the movie *Serenity*, and plant a tree in the hotel gardens. The Maradiva has three excellent restaurants – Coast2Coast, which serves Mauritian and Mediterranean dishes; Cilantro, which has marvellous Indian cuisine; and Teppanyaki, a Japanese eatery where you are treated to an exciting show as the chef cooks sizzling seafood in front of you. You are also able to dine at the very pleasant neighbouring hotel, Sands Suites Resort &

Spa. All these restaurants can be summed up by the phrase "delicious in Mauritius". A gloriously romantic hotel perfect for honeymooning couples, the Maradiva enjoys a spectacular location on a curved 750-metre-long beach across the bay from an eye-catching mountain called Le Morne. But there is much to see on Mauritius away from the beach and we venture into the verdant mountain range that runs down the spine of the island. There we peer into Le Trou des Cerfs ("the hole of the deers"), the enormous volcanic crater that created the island. Cloaked in trees, this giant hole is now a bird sanctuary. However, the birdsong is

drowned out by the croaking of myriad frogs from the pond at the bottom of the crater. Passing the town of Curepipe (which translates as "clean pipe"), so named because when people used to ride across the island, they would stop here, change their horses and clean their smoking pipes, we then embark on a hike through the Black River Gorges National Park – a stunning landscape of mountains and valleys. Also worth a visit is the Champs de Mars racecourse in the centre of Port Louis. The oldest racecourse in the southern hemisphere, it was built in 1812 to unite the French inhabitants and British forces that had conquered the island two years previously. Racing remains the most popular sport in Mauritius.

Nearby is The Citadel, a fort perched above the capital and ringed by the majestic Port Louis mountain range. Constructed by the Spanish in the 16th Century, it was subsequently commanded by the French and then the British. It even boasts a secret passage running from the fort to the port below to enable a quick escape from the city. Back at the Maradiva in the evening, we sip cocktails on a jetty and watch the sun set over the island. We are serenaded by a DJ and visited by some unusual guests: a pair of giant eagle rays. Later we are lucky enough to take in the Mauritian sky at night. There are few better feelings than lying on a sun lounger on the beach of an evening, looking up at a star-filled sky completely



The lovely grounds of the Maradiva Villas Resort & Spa are populated by an impressive array of exotic birds. These include the pink pigeon and the cardinal. Listen out for the cardinal's very distinctive song which makes it sound as if the creature is singing, "birdie, birdie, birdie"! Is that the origin of the dreaded "Birdie Song"?

untroubled by light pollution. This is typical of the tranquillity you can experience on the island. By the plunge pool in our villa at the Maradiva is a brass statue of one frog leaping over another. The look on their faces surely mirrors the demeanour of all visitors to Mauritius: sheer joy.

Factfile
Mauritius reopens its borders to international visitors from September 1, with a compulsory airport Covid-19 test. The Maradiva Villas Resort & Spa opens on same date and will be Covid-secure. Call +230-403-1500 or visit maradiva.com/en/. Fly to Mauritius from London Heathrow with Air Mauritius. Refer to gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice for updates.

Before you book

What you need to know as the country prepares to get away

Are overseas holidays possible now?
People from Scotland are now allowed to travel to almost all of the so-called air bridge countries approved by the UK Government and Foreign Office. However, those flying in from Spain and Serbia will still have to quarantine for 14 days, Nicola Sturgeon said last week.

What's the latest guidance?
The Scottish Government announced that the quarantine will be suspended for people travelling from 57 countries where the coronavirus risk is low. Under the new rules, all arrivals into the UK will still have to fill out a form setting out their address and contact details. However, those from "air bridge" countries will not have to self-isolate. The rules include people arriving through the Channel Tunnel and by ferry. The Foreign Office has also updated their guidance on travel, to allow non-essential journeys from the UK to the air-bridge destinations.

Which countries will be covered?
The Foreign Office advice is that it is safe to visit the following destinations: Austria, Andorra, Belgium, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Gibraltar, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Monaco, The Netherlands (not including the constituent countries and special municipalities located in the Dutch Caribbean), Norway, Poland, Portugal (only The Azores and Madeira), San Marino, Serbia (unless travelling from Scotland), Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain (unless travelling from Scotland), Switzerland, Turkey, Americas, Antigua & Barbuda, Bahamas, Barbados, Bermuda, Canada, Cayman Islands, Dominica, Grenada, Jamaica, Martinique, South Georgia & the South Sandwich Islands, St Kitts and Nevis, St Lucia, St Pierre and Miquelon, St Vincent and The Grenadines, Trinidad and Tobago, Turks and Caicos Islands, Australia, Brunei, French Polynesia, Hong Kong, Japan, Macao, Malaysia, New Zealand, Taiwan, Thailand, Singapore, South Korea, Vietnam, Wallis and Futuna, Reunion, Antarctica, British Antarctic Territory.

Is this likely to change?
It may do. The UK Government has said that a "strict handbrake mechanism" will be put in place, meaning that if an outbreak occurs in one of the countries the UK will "immediately reintroduce self isolation requirements".

Will travel insurance cover my holiday?
Most insurers cover travel to air bridge countries.

What happens when I am abroad?
Many countries and territories have screening measures (temperature checks, health/travel questions, quarantine) and entry restrictions at border crossings and transport hubs, so be prepared for these. Check for updates at gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice

Will I need to wear a face mask?
Airports are asking passengers to come prepared with face coverings for use within the terminal building. This doesn't need to be a surgical face mask, it can be a scarf or similar, as long as it covers your mouth and nose. Face coverings should not be used for under-fives.