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Modern love

Bestselling author of romantic fiction **Durjoy Datta** and lifestyle influencer **Avantika Mohan** on keeping old-world romance alive in new-age relationships

On the beach in *Mauritius*

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY STUART FORSTER

Utterly exhausted, I trudge back to my villa. The day has involved relaxed sea swimming, turning the pages of a novel between napping on a sun lounger, receiving a lengthy massage and eating good food. Who knew that beach holidays were so tiring?

Thousands of kilometres away from

everyday stresses, I'm allowing myself the rare treat of a week's total relaxation. My base is the Maradiva Villas Resort and Spa at Flic-en-Flac on Mauritius' southwest coast.

The rustling of palm fronds and sound of the sea lapping against the nearby beach are almost indistinguishable, as I pause to fish my keycard from my pocket. It opens a heavy door leading onto a

terrace with a dining area and an illuminated plunge pool that shimmers blue. Teak pillars support the overhanging roof of a sprawling villa whose design was inspired by the bungalows built long ago as homes for owners of Mauritian sugar plantations.

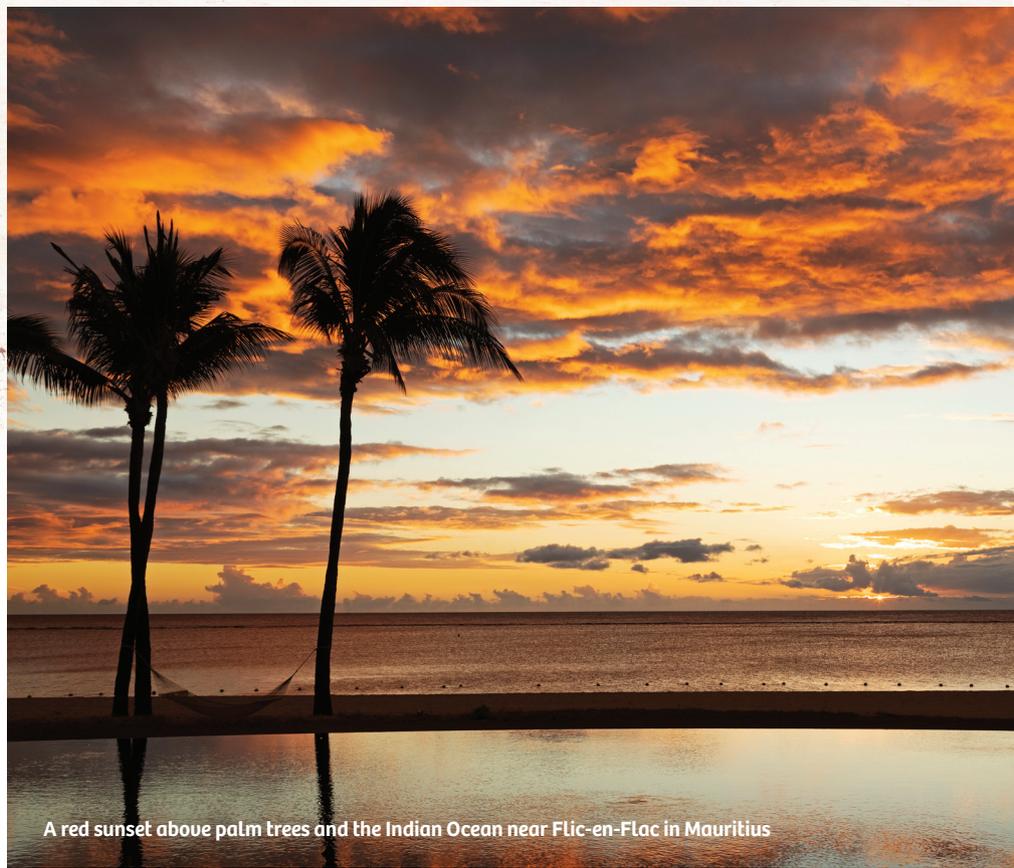
With an indoor shower, one outside on the back terrace, twin washbasins and a spacious bathtub ideal for lengthy soaks,



I'm spoilt for choice when it comes to staying clean. After hanging my clothes in the walk-in wardrobe, I pull on a bathrobe and consider tomorrow's itinerary. It's looking busy – more reading, beach walks, sea swimming and fine dining.

Spanning an area roughly double the size of Abu Dhabi city, Mauritius is a tropical island offering numerous alternatives to its sandy beaches. Hiking trails in Black River Gorges National Park and zip lining over the lush landscape of La Vallée Des Couleurs Nature Park count among attractions ideal for activity seekers. So, too, are boat tours of isles and islets off the east coast that combine sightseeing with stops for snorkelling and swimming.

Few points on Mauritius' mainland lie more than two hours' drive apart. Port Louis, the capital city, is a 30-minute drive north of Flic-en-Flac. The village's name, explain locals, is derived from a Dutch term meaning 'free and flat' land. By 1710, when the Dutch sailed away, they had hunted to extinction the endemic dodo – the large



A red sunset above palm trees and the Indian Ocean near Flic-en-Flac in Mauritius

Travel information

Air Mauritius and Emirates operate direct flights between Dubai and Mauritius' Sir Seewoosagar Ramgoolam International Airport. The flight time is approximately 6 hours 40 minutes.

Maradiva Villas Resort and Spa is a five-star property whose 65 villas all have private pools. Picnics with transport in a Rolls-Royce can be arranged from the resort.

Flic-en-Flac is 40 minutes' drive from Mauritius' international airport. Kreola offers ground transport and excursions in Mauritius.

Mauritius Tourism offers travel-related information about the island in the Indian Ocean.

flightless bird that features on Mauritius' coat of arms.

More than two centuries on, lining up shots of birds using a camera is enchantingly easy. Mynas and red-whiskered bulbuls number among species that seem to take pleasure in posing for photos on branches of trees along the beachfront. Mauritius grey white-eyes and red cardinal birds count among those with colourful plumage that flit between al fresco tables seeking crumbs scattered by breakfast guests.

Each daybreak I head to the beach hoping to view the bottlenose dolphins that feed in Tamarin Bay. Morning swims parallel to shoreline bring opportunities to see shoals of tiny, semi-translucent fish darting in the shallows. Sea cucumbers and starfish lie on the silvery seabed.

Le Morne Brabant juts from the distant shoreline. The peak of the steep-sided mountain rises 556 metres above sea-level. Blessed with one of the island's 20 microclimates and dotted with numerous caves, the rugged terrain was long ago a place of refuge for escaped slaves. The landscape's cultural significance is recognised by Unesco as a World Heritage Site and can be explored along hiking trails that twist toward the summit.

Yesterday, I journeyed to Casela Na-



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A) Jetty on the private beach of the Maradiva Villas Resort ; B) Butter beans served with dhol puree. The dish is a traditional Mauritian breakfast; C) Red-whiskered bulbul at Flic-en-Flac; D) Aldabra giant tortoise from the Seychelles at Casela Nature Parks; E) Hammock hanging between two palm trees

ture Parks, 15 minutes' drive away, for a memorable breakfast. A small group of us handfed giraffes from a freestanding platform before sitting down for omelette and coffee. Nearby peacocks cawed and fanned their tail feathers while we ate. The family-friendly attraction is home to several imported creatures, including Aldabra giant tortoises from the Seychelles.

Back at the resort, I met with Dr Praveen Nair for an Ayurvedic consultation. He outlined the holistic principles and long history of Ayurveda. The ancient 'science of life' that originated in India is now practised in luxury spas around the planet. The Maradiva's sizable wellness area fea-

tures an outdoor pool, steam and sauna rooms plus six tranquil treatment areas. Dr Nair recommended a massage with herb-infused oil. Willingly, I agreed.

Staying at the Maradiva provides access to restaurants at the neighbouring Sands Suite Resort and Spa. On site there's a chic Indian restaurant, Cilantro, a mixed-cuisine dining venue called Coast2Coast, and Teppan, where guests sit around a counter and observe live-cooking. While I'm at the latter, the teppanyaki chef utters something indistinct, prompting me to lean forward. A ball of yellow flame whooshes upwards, inches from my face, just as my brain deciphers the warning to sit back. Thankfully, my eyebrows remain intact and the delectable food ensures the evening is enjoyable.

Participating in a cooking lesson held in the chef's garden means I'll return home, knowing how to prepare a three-course Mauritian meal. But cooking for myself is a distant reality midway through my week in Mauritius. **W**

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