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Paradise

Found

Mauritius is a lush island oasis with a melting pot of languages and cultures. *Attitude's* travel editor meets some of its LGBTQ+ residents to uncover what life is really like here

Words and photography **Markus Bidaux**



Mauritius is a little piece of paradise, an island of lush, green, sugar-cane fields as far as the eye can see and jagged mountains creating a dramatic landscape that's surrounded by pristine beaches and turquoise waters. But this little slice of heaven comes with a dark past, for which its queer community are still paying the price today.

A dot in the Indian ocean some 700 miles east of Madagascar, off the south-eastern coast of Africa, Mauritius is one of the three-island archipelago, the Mascarene Islands. It is populated mainly by people of Indian descent and Mauritian Creoles from Sub-Saharan Africa brought there by European countries who between them dominated the island for centuries.

It was first mapped as an uninhabited isle by the Portuguese in the 16th century, until Dutch seafarers set up home and named it in honour of their Prince Maurice Van Nassau. Then, in the 18th century, the French, who already controlled Mauritius's sister island Réunion, took over and renamed it Isle de France. In 1810, the British seized it and rechristened it Mauritius, occupying it until 1968 when the island won independence.

The first stop for my boyfriend Leigh and I is the UNESCO-listed Aapravasi Ghat, a former immigration depot in the capital of Port Louis and a poignant landmark in Mauritian history. Between 1834 and 1920, nearly half a million

ISLAND OF DREAMS:
(Clockwise from above left) Travel editor Markus (right) and boyfriend Leigh; the Grand Bassin Hindu temple; wildlife at Grand Bassin; the interior of Eureka House. Opposite: elegant Creole residence Eureka House

“Today, the island is a melting pot of cultures, ethnicities and religions”

indentured workers, mostly from India, were lured to Mauritius with the promise of a better life. It was at Aapravasi Ghat that they were processed and photographed before being set to work. After the British abolished slavery on the island, these people represented the ‘Great Experiment’ to test if indentured labour could be a worthwhile replacement. It was merely slavery by another name: workers were contracted but could be fined or temporarily imprisoned if absent from work or if they left their employment before their contract ended. Nearly 70 per cent of modern Mauritians’ ancestors arrived here in this way. As a result, the island nation is a melting pot of cultures, ethnicities and religions, with more than 80 per cent of the population speaking Mauritian Creole, followed by French and English.

After the eye-opening history lesson, we explore more of the capital including the 19th-century Citadelle, which sits atop a hill overlooking the city. We then take a stroll along the waterfront to the popular central market where there are all manner of shops selling clothing and crafts, but it is the colours and hustle and bustle of the fruit and veg market that always lures us when we are abroad.

We pass one vendor whose rows of dried herbs are each labelled with a sign showing the ailment they can alleviate. He cheekily points to the sign that reads ‘aphrodisiac’ and then gestures to Leigh. To my relief, my boyfriend says it’s not necessary. Jokes aside, it is a reminder that we are in a country that is home to another unpleasant remnant of British colonial rule: the criminalisation of sodomy. Although the Mauritian LGBTQ+ community do not hold many of the rights we enjoy in the UK, they are protected from





EXPLORING:
(Clockwise from above left) The waterfalls at Eureka House; the stunning landscape; owner of Eureka House, Jacques de Maroussem; Young Queer Alliance's founder Najeeb Fokeerbux (right) and projects officer Deeksha Lugun; Nicolas Ritter, who started an HIV support organisation on the island

“In front of the parliament there were about 800 extremist Muslims with messages of hate”

While Lugun is a straight ally, Fokeerbux is a gay Muslim. Offering a personal perspective on how people feel about LGBTQ+s in Mauritius, he shares that his parents do not discuss his sexuality, and the fact that his boyfriend is Hindu does not help matters. Fokeerbux's siblings and cousins, however, are supportive, which hopefully signals a generational shift in attitudes towards same-sex relationships on the island.

Afterwards, we return to our hotel, the four-star Sands Suites Resort and Spa. Its open-air reception offers a genuine ‘wow’ moment every time you pass through its teak columns and flying buttresses and catch sight of the infinity pool overlooking the beach and Tamarin Bay beyond. The private beach is made of white coral sand protected by a nearby reef and there is complimentary access to watersports equipment. As its name suggests, Sands is an all-suites hotel, each with views of palm trees and manicured gardens populated by turtle doves, red cardinals, yellow weavers and the odd gecko.

At the hotel's cocktail bar, we meet up with Nicolas Ritter, a former member of Air Mauritius cabin crew who, after discovering he was HIV-positive in 1994, started an HIV support and advocacy organisation on Mauritius because there was no

discrimination, making it one of the most LGBTQ+-friendly countries in Africa.

One organisation spearheading the push for change is the Young Queer Alliance, founded by Najeeb Fokeerbux. When we meet him and projects officer Deeksha Lugun in Port Louis, Fokeerbux tells me that he set it up in 2014 to show that there was a community organisation behind his campaign to lift the ban on gay men donating blood. One of their next goals is marriage equality, but before they fully commit to that, all eyes are on the upcoming ruling on the archaic sodomy law, a reform which has slowly moved all the way up to the Supreme Court.

Fokeerbux expands on this: “Our judges should be mature enough, should be standing up, should assimilate human rights principles enough for them to be able to give a judgement.”

If the Supreme Court fails to decriminalise the law, then it will go to the Privy Council, the highest court in the Commonwealth, where it will finally be repealed.

Outside forces like social media and international businesses arriving on the island are helping to propel LGBTQ+ acceptance, but grassroots organisations like the Young Queer Alliance which offer counselling, safe spaces, advocacy and research are just as vital.



treatment for HIV on the island. He was brave enough to be the first Mauritian to talk publicly about being HIV-positive and fought for HIV treatments to be available without charge on the Mauritius national health service. He succeeded and now even PrEP is available for free here. But he admits he is still not satisfied with how people living with HIV are treated, although stigma towards those with the virus remains a problem on an international scale.

Ritter also helped establish Mauritius Pride 18 years ago. “There is a colourful march open to everyone and then at night there's a party. But in 2018 we had a big clash,” Ritter explains to us. “In front of the parliament there were about 800 extremist Muslims praying and with messages of hate.”

He goes on to say that following a police recommendation they decided not to march that year, but in 2019, it was back on with more police and international ambassadors right at the front of the parade in a show of solidarity.

As he leaves, some of the hotel staff come up to shake his hand. Ruddy, a friendly member of the team, tells us that Ritter is often on television and he is well known for helping people. It's heartening to know that his work is appreciated by so many locals.

As sunset falls, we soak up the glorious views, before being ushered to a surprise intimate dining experience: a sole private table set for two on the beach. The resort has three restaurants, but tonight we are sampling the Asian-influenced

LESSONS FROM HISTORY:

Images of indentured labourers at Aapravasi Ghat. Between 1834 and 1920, almost half a million arrived from India to work in the sugar plantations of Mauritius, or to be transferred to Réunion Island, Australia, southern and eastern Africa or the Caribbean

menu of the Tamarind restaurant. Mauritian flying foxes (aka fruit bats) glide overhead as the sky dims and the waves gently lap the sand, creating the perfect romantic setting. After dinner, frogs croak a soothing lullaby as we make our way back to our suite along a pathway lit by lights strung between the palm trees.

In the morning, we explore sights including Grand Bassin, a crater lake sacred to Hindus and surrounded by colourful statues of gods and temples, including a towering 33-metre-high statue of the god Lord Shiva. When we spot some bouncing tree branches nearby, closer investigation reveals a troop of macaque monkeys. Our next port of call is the Chamarel Rum Distillery, where we enjoy lunch, a short tour and a tasting of flavoured rums.

Back on the west coast, we move on to Maradiva Villas Resort and Spa, the sister property of Sands Suite Resort. Sited next to each other, they connect via the beach. Although both properties are independently owned by a fifth-generation Mauritian, they have very different layouts. At Maradiva Villas, there are 65 suites, which line four avenues with manicured gardens featuring all sorts of plants including flowering cacti and frangipani trees. Each villa has its own front door leading to an outdoor covered living space, a private plunge pool and garden shower, while inside the suite there are dark hardwood floors, a large walk-in wardrobe, and a huge bathroom with Hermès toiletries.



MAURITIAN MAGIC: The impressive statue of Lord Shiva at Grand Bassin Opposite, (clockwise from above left) Beautiful Maradiva Villas Resort; luxury bedrooms at Maradiva; one of the resort's two Rolls-Royces; a makeshift floating cocktail bar on a surfboard

“Mauritius is a very gay-friendly destination – there is no barrier, no negativity”

The Maradiva boasts a bigger beach than Sands Resort and offers a large infinity pool near the bar and boat house. Like its neighbour, it has three restaurants: the Japanese grill Teppan, the beachfront Coast2Coast and the Indian Cilantro, whose chef meets us in the hotel's kitchen garden one afternoon for a tour and an alfresco cooking class in Mauritian cuisine, which, we discover, is an intriguing mix of French and Indian.

There's also a large spa with its own swimming pool, yoga studio and Ayurvedic doctor. On one of our lazier days at the resort, I pop in to see the doctor for an hour-long consultation. As a result, I am prescribed a 60-minute Abhyanga massage using warm, enriching oils specially chosen for me.

For our next adventure, the hotel provides us with one of their two Rolls-Royces along with a driver decked out in a white uniform. He drives us to a marina where we set sail on a catamaran. The boat's three crew take us to a superb snorkelling spot where I dive down to the coral sea floor and am surrounded by small tropical fish. On our way to one beach, we are lucky enough to spot a dolphin – Mauritius is famous for these playful creatures; it's also a great place to spot whales too.

When we arrive at the beach, it is lined with stalls selling jewellery, shells and bottles of rum filled with everything from big chunks of coconut or pineapple to herbs and spices. Along the water, the locals float on makeshift cocktail bars built on top of surfboards. Once back on the boat, we tuck into fried fish and plenty of drinks before heading back to the marina, where we enjoy the looks on the faces of the other seafarers as we step into our chauffeured ride.

During our stay, we also visit Château de Labourdonnais, a 19th-century plantation house, which now has its own rum distillery. It's approached through an avenue of trees that create a picture-perfect walk towards the house, which feels very museum-like, and there's also a beautiful restaurant nearby. But it's another plantation house, Eureka, that earns a special place in my heart. By contrast, it feels lived in, with guests dining on the terrace. When we visit it's the last day of our week-long stay in Mauritius, but there's just enough time to learn more about LGBTQ+ life on the island from its gay owner, Jacques de Maroussem.

When we meet him, one of his staff offers us drinks and chimes, “Enjoy your drinks and Mr Maroussem talking,” with a wry smile. And so he does. The sixth-generation Mauritian waxes lyrical about Eureka's history, including when it was used as the main set for *Prisoners of Paradise*, a British film set for release later this year. It has also hosted four generations of the royal family including George V, George VI, Princess Margaret and Prince Andrew – the latter somewhat tarnishing this glamorous claim to fame.

Over a rustic mix of traditional Mauritian Creole dishes, Jacques tells us about coming out late in his life in 2003 and how attitudes towards LGBTQ+ people have started to change

on the island. However, he states that it can still be difficult and reveals that even his boyfriend remains in the closet because “he doesn't want to make his mother suffer.”

He goes on to say that Mauritius is a very gay-friendly destination, “At any time, you can see couples walking around and it's very peaceful. What is great is the public in general – you talk to somebody on the road and they very quickly understand which is which and they are extremely nice to you. There is no barrier, no negativity at all.”

After lunch, we walk in Eureka's expansive grounds, down a long set of steps made of rocks like something out of an Indiana Jones film. At their foot are several stunning waterfalls – it's worth making the trip here for these alone, they are breathtaking. Although we long to dive into the waters, our flight home is beckoning.

We bid farewell to the island nation with fond memories of swimming in the sea and tanning under the hot sun, but above all, the warmth of its people. 🌺

maradiva.com; sands.mu

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