

See all Travel



## I came to Mauritius expecting beaches and luxury – but I was wrong

On top of the white sands and sunsets, the island surprised our writer with a richness of cultural and natural diversity

By Xenia Taliotis, TRAVEL WRITER

26 November 2022 • 10:00am

I had arrived in Mauritius with more preconceptions than underwear. That's not to say that I had travelled light on pants, but that I had brought a huge number of notions with me. I thought I knew what I'd find – white sands, blue seas, excellent food, a perfect climate, luxury accommodation, and welcoming, English speaking people.

I expected to spend my time swimming, eating and lounging – on the beach, by the pool and by my own pool at Maradiva Villas Resort and Spa, in Flic-en-Flac, on the southwest of the island. It's the World Travel Awards best Indian Ocean Leading Luxury Villa Resort for 2022, and World Spa Awards best resort spa for six out of the past eight years, so my mind was set on total relaxation.

The giant had a name, my driver said – Corps de Garde, or guarding corpse, and he was a 720 metre mountain that was so named because when the French had owned the island, they had established a military post there to watch for runaway slaves. If I wanted to understand Mauritius, to feel its beating heart and know its history, he added, then I should visit the towns and mountains. I should take drives past the island's sugar cane and plantations, spend time listening to its native Creol tongue, visit its rum distilleries and colonial mansions, and hike through its wild mountains where I would discover landscapes split by rivers and ravines, torrential waterfalls and still ponds.





Corps de Garde: A 720 metre mountain overlooking Mauritius

| CREDIT: Getty

He said I'd be able to walk for hours, or even days, without encountering another human. Yet I wouldn't be short of company. The trees would be full of birds I'd never seen before. If I was blessed, I might even spot a Mauritian kestrel, an echo or Mauritian parakeet, or a pink pigeon: three birds that almost followed the dodo – still the country's most famous creature – into oblivion.

It reminded me of me and my misconception-weighted baggage, and I thought about my driver's message. It was clear – to get a sense of this African jewel floating in the Indian Ocean, I'd have to do more than loll around on the beach. For the moment, however – like my little friend the bul bul – I gave into temptation, and within minutes I was in the sea.



I floated on my back in its warmth. Blue below, blue above. Each as deep as the other. In the distance Le Morne Brabant peninsula jutted out into one of those infinite blues, while its giant, granite mountain stretched 556 metres up towards the ether. Later, I researched its history: in the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, maroons – slaves who had escaped – sought shelter there, hankering down and forming small settlements within the barely accessible caves gouged out of the mountain's near-vertical inclines. It was made a Unesco World Heritage site in recognition of its cultural significance as an “exceptional testimony to maroonage and resistance to slavery”.

Wanting to know more about the slave trade in Mauritius, and its loathsome successor – indentured labour – I headed north to Port Louis, the capital, to visit Unesco-listed Aapravasi Ghat. Built in 1849 as an immigration depot to receive bonded workers from India, China, Eastern Africa, Madagascar and Southeast Asia, Aapravasi Ghat is now a deeply moving document of a shameful time in history.



Mauritius was the last place within the British Empire to ban slavery, and the first to have bonded workers. The Great Experiment, as it was called, was Britain's answer to finding labour for the plantations after slavery was abolished. In total, half a million people from India were brought to the island on the false promise of a better life: Aapravasi Ghat is a raw insight into how those dispossessed labourers lived, and is, says Unesco, the "sole surviving example of this unique modern diaspora, its buildings among the earliest explicit manifestations of what would become a global economic system that resulted in the the world-wide migration of more than two million people".

Perhaps the most striking example of the last of these is Ganga Talao, or Grand Bassin – an 18-metre deep, high-altitude lake in the crater of an extinct volcano, which is the island's most sacred site for the Hindu majority. Every year hundreds of thousands of devotees come here – often walking for days – for the festival of Maha Shivaratri, which honours Shiva. A towering 33-metre effigy of the god – the tallest statue in Mauritius – greets all visitors, whether they come for faith to leave devotional offerings of food and flowers, or fascination. I was in the second camp, yet I didn't resist when the priest daubed a vermilion tilaka on my forehead to welcome me into the incensed-filled temple and to wish me well.





Ganga Talao: An 18-metre deep, high-altitude lake in the crater of an extinct volcano | CREDIT: Chlaus Lotscher

The Mauritian nation's roots are also deliciously apparent in its cuisine – an intoxicating fusion of Indian, Chinese and African flavours, with added French finesse. Vanilla, cumin and cinnamon-scented street markets tempt with still-sizzling, deftly prepared samosas and gateaux piments (chilli fritters); beach sellers bring pineapple chunks laced with tamarind and chilli salt, and five-star hotels go the whole hog with lavish white-linen dining.

For all that, the meal I would most like to relive, was the simplest – a beach barbeque prepared by the crew from One Love speedboat excursions. Setting off from the Dutch-then-French colonial town of Mahébourg, in the south-east, we had dropped anchor at Grand River South East Waterfall, the uninhabited coral island of Île aux Fouquets and in a quiet bay near Île aux Aigrettes to snorkel. I had floated weightless on the surface watching polychromatic shoals of angel and butterfly fish; sergeant majors, damselfish and clowns, dart millimetres from my face before they dived down to pick and peck among the vivid coral gardens below. Such colour, such enchantment.



The pier in Mahebourg waterfront | CREDIT: Getty

I was tempted to skip lunch for more time in the ocean, but I'm glad I didn't, for I would have missed the live Creole music performed by the crew, and the effortless switch between French, English and Creole as they spoke to their guests and each other while they had served us a rainbow salads, charcoaled chicken and fish, and too many rum cocktails. What it lacked in refinement it made up for in joy.



The National Park is a story of survival: the three birds my driver told me about on my first day in Mauritius are found here, breeding well in what remains of the country's once abundant rainforest and its swathes of old-growth ebony. I could have stayed for hours, but my departure was fast approaching.





I had come for a week's winter sun expecting to take home nothing more than a tan – but instead, I left with a thirst to return. Mauritius had delivered all I had expected – the most beautiful beaches, sun sets and sea life I had ever seen – but had surprised me with a richness of cultural and natural diversity that I had been ignorant of. Boarding my plane, I bade it farewell in Creol: not goodbye, but “taler nou zwen” – see you later.

## Essentials

Xenia Taliotis was a guest of [Maradiva Villas Resort & Spa](#) and its sister hotel, [Sands Suites Resort and Spa](#). Prices from €639 (£551) per night (bed and breakfast) and £298 (dinner, bed and breakfast) respectively.