

PARADISE: An idyllic beach in the Flic En Flac region of Mauritius.



PURE SHORES

Jenny McBain flew for 12 hours to the Indian Ocean, where she promptly took another flight, this time with added adrenaline



A deluxe suite at the Sands Resort & Spa.

Renowned for its expansive golden beaches, fringed with palm trees and its luxurious hotels, the investment of time and money in a 12-hour flight to Mauritius has the potential to pay dividends many times over.

Crucially, its climate is such that visitors can expect year-round sunshine.

When I arrived at the luxury hotel, Sands, in the western region known as Flic En Flac, I found myself heading directly for the poolside where I was lulled by the hush and crash of the sea as it advanced towards high tide.

Sipping on a rum cocktail, I spent some blissful hours gazing at distant volcanic peaks, before making my way to the hotel's spa for a massage treatment.

There, a therapist deftly unravelled the knots which had been knitted into my travel-weary muscles. Soon, I was soothed into a relaxed state and ready to contemplate some adventure.

The Vallee des Couleurs which is situated on the south coast of the island was the place to start. This former tea plantation provides a scenic backdrop for some white-knuckle activities.

One of these is a series of zip wires, the first of which is 1.5km long. The prospect of the experience heightened my senses and increased my heart rate.

Kitted out in harness and helmet, I allowed myself to be hooked up with the clip to the length of steel wire which was to keep me suspended and mobile.

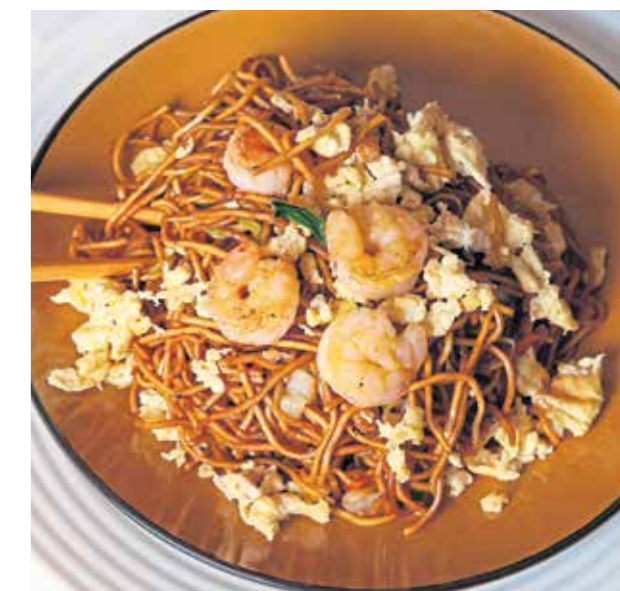
The guide instructed me to lie down and edge forward towards lift off. It is a counter intuitive thing to do, but I managed to override the inner warning system and off I went.

It proved an exhilarating way to travel. Far below, the tree canopy of variegated green was shot through with colourful flashes

“**DARWIN STOPPED OFF ON HIS RETURN FROM THE GALAPAGOS. BY THEN THE DODO, UNIQUE TO THE ISLES, WAS ALREADY EXTINCT**”



Waterfalls, massages, delicious seafood, ancient volcanoes and giant tortoise Big Daddy are among the reasons to get out of your luxury bed in the morning.



of tropical blooms, and exotic songbirds trilled out cryptic melodies.

Absorbed by the experience of being airborne, I was immersed in the present moment. A process of utter enchantment with Mauritius gathered momentum, as did my speed of travel.

Back on terra firma, having been for a dip in the cool of a pool fed by a cascading waterfall, I enjoyed a typical Mauritian lunch of fish curry in the Citronelle Restaurant, before embarking on a terrifying walk across a 350m long suspension bridge swaying up to 100 metres above ground.

Another major land-owning company has made the transition from cash crop to visitor attraction. What was a sugar plantation is now a safari and adventure park called Casela, where people can wander around scenic gardens complete with fish ponds and aviaries, or have close encounters with imported animals such as giraffes – who are tame enough to be hand fed.

The father of evolutionary theory, Charles Darwin, stopped off in Mauritius in 1835 on his return voyage from the Galapagos Islands. By that time the dodo, a large flightless bird unique to Mauritius, had already become extinct. Sadly, the long-necked tortoise which was still around at the time of Darwin's

visit and which was also endemic to this country, became extinct in the 1840s.

At Darwin's suggestion, giant turtles were imported from Madagascar and the Seychelles to take their place. I was keen to see one up close. So, I made my way by small boat to the ile aux Aigrettes. It is a small coral island off the south coast and is a microcosm of the kind of coastal terrain which predominated in times past, before human impact.

It was a hot summer's day when I arrived on the island in the company of fellow visitors and local guide, Laticia. We got to meet Big Daddy, one of 27 tortoises who enjoy a peaceful island life.

He is the patriarch and not to be messed with. He has even been known to bite, but likes to have his shell stroked. It is a sensitive part of the body covered with a network of nerves.

We also got up close to a Telfair skink, a native reptile who is flourishing here, and a pair of rare and beautiful pink pigeons roosted in the foliage above our heads.

The cosmopolitan nature of these islands means it is a place full of culinary delight. I got to eat some of the best Chinese food I have ever tasted, as well as some spicy dishes which reflect an Indian influence. The seafood and fresh fruit are superlative.



I did not buy many souvenirs, but I took home memories of snorkelling among neon bright fish and catching a glimpse of spinner dolphins playing in the warm surf.

I treasure, too, the sight of mega bats, flying in daylight and looking a little like rooks in vampire costume.

I left Mauritius well rested and with a resolve to return for another peaceful tropical retreat.

TRAVEL FACTS

Sand suites resort and spa seven-night half-board in September costs from approximately £1,600 per person based on two sharing. See www.kuoni.co.uk or call 0800 140 4792.