

# La isla bonita



**Following its recent and extensive renovations, Domhnall O'Donoghue (recently crowned Travel Extra's Travel Writer of the Year) visited Mauritius' five-star Maradiva Villa Resort & Spa, the perfect backdrop for honeymoons and landmark celebrations.**

**M**oments after arriving at Mauritius' deluxe Maradiva Villa Resort & Spa, I abandon my suitcase on the bed, creasing the crisp white sheets, and instead of unpacking, soak my

jetlagged body in my private pool, the blue slate tiles mirroring the skies overhead.

It's winter at home in Ireland; here, in the Southern Hemisphere, summer reigns supreme, evidenced by today's warm temperatures. The mighty Indian Ocean, mere metres away, isn't visible from my villa, but I certainly appreciate the breeze and soundscape it's creating.

Through a grove of palm trees, I admire the iconic silhouette of Le Morne Brabant mountain, the UNESCO World Heritage site named after the Dutch ship that ran aground there — its verdant beauty starkly contrasting with its tragic associations with both maritime disasters and the island's former slave trade.

A bird adorned with red patches and a black moustachioed line lands on a sun-lounger and steals not just my attention but also my fruit juice. Despite my limited knowledge of the avian world, I know it's not Mauritius'



most famous bird, the dodo, as that flightless creature became extinct in 1681, unable to survive the arrival of the Dutch, one of several European nations to colonise the island over the centuries.

After some investigating, I discover my new friend is the red-whiskered bulbul, affectionately known as the Prince of Condé in tribute to the former fashionable French royal known for his red, billowing cravat. Fuelled by its sugar injection, the colourful bird suddenly disappears into the nearby red frangipani trees, its presence soon replaced by a frog crossing my patio before disappearing into a communal stretch of land, no doubt looking for mischief.

I've barely been here thirty minutes but already, I feel like David Attenborough.

#### FAMILY-RUN RESORT

Diversity, so prevalent in Africa's wildlife and



Luxury suite pool



Villa bedroom



Maradiva penthouse



The Beach House Grill restaurant



The infinity pool

horticultural offering, is evident across the Maradiva resort – unsurprising, given the cornucopia of nationalities that settled in Mauritius while control ping-ponged between the Dutch, French and English. (The island became an independent state within the Commonwealth in 1968.) Today, the ethnicities of the 1.3 million inhabitants are primarily Indian, followed by African and French Creole, although the Chinese and French continue to enjoy a presence here.

“One of the main goals of the Maradiva is to preserve the island’s rich and diverse cultural heritage,” says its chief marketing officer, Haadiya Pheerungee, as we explore some of their 27 acres, passing a group practising yoga on the manicured lawns. “Mauritius has five main communities from three continents – Asia, Africa and Europe – making us a very welcoming country.

“The resort recognises all these nationalities and their religions, and during the various festivals, we invite our guests to celebrate with us if they’d like to.”

We continue along the beach, where giddy newlyweds partake in a photo shoot, the white ruffle of surf crashing against their bare feet. Behind them, another guest enjoys an afternoon nap on a hammock, his Panama hat protecting his face from the afternoon sun.

Haadiya tells me that Mauritian law forbids the island’s many beaches from being privatised, but there’s a constant police presence here – security, she assures me, is a top priority. Another point of pride for the Maradiva is that they’re Mauritius’ only family-owned resort. Over cocktails in Lantana, the poolside bar, I chat to Sanjiv Ramdane, who, with his sister, is the second generation to oversee the business, which includes the neighbouring, price-friendly Sands Suites Resort.

Understandably, he speaks passionately about his late father, Sir Kailash Ramdane,

a pioneer of the island’s pharmaceutical industry and knighted by Queen Elizabeth

II in 1990. Sanjiv explains that the family acquired the Maradiva in 2009, and over the past year, they’ve invested a sizeable €25 million into renovations that simultaneously preserve the resort’s essence while introducing a new natural aesthetic to complement the surrounding environment.

“We want the Maradiva to be a home from home for guests,” Sanjiv says, describing the new minimalist design elements of the 64 villas. “Our goal is to combine intimacy, luxury and nature to make the resort a haven for wellbeing.”

When I quiz him on guests’ reactions to the upgrade, Sanjiv says that, like him, they’re “really impressed” by the many changes and additions, which include two-bedroom villas, a luxury boutique teeming with high-end fashion brands like Missoni, and a wine and

*Continued overleaf >>*



Ramen Noodle Soup



Futomaki rolls



cigar cellar with Mauritius' most extensive cigar collection.

Guests who view their bodies as temples can opt for the resort's healthier and more holistic offerings instead, like its fitness centre and, in particular, the spa, overseen by an ayurvedic doctor and regularly named Mauritius' Best Luxury Resort Spa by the World Spa Awards — well-earned recognition I later learn when treated to a full-body massage.

"We want our guests to relax and feel the freedom to reconnect with themselves," Sanjiv enthuses.

#### FOOD. GLORIOUS FOOD

Arguably, the resort's greatest new asset is Executive Chef Walter Butti. Over dinner in the gourmet restaurant Cassine, the talented and charismatic Swiss tells me he's determined to bring innovative twists to much-loved Mauritian ingredients and dishes, promising exceptional culinary adventures.

"Across four restaurants, our menus vary — it's a lot of work for me, but I love a challenge," he jokes before explaining that Cassine specialises in daily-caught fish and tender meats while Cilantro and Haiku celebrate authentic Indian and Japanese dishes, respectively. The fourth option is their new Beach House Grill, where diners can enjoy supper under a canopy of stars.

Speaking of stars, returning to my villa that night, I notice a series of trees along one of the boulevards; the names of international celebrities etched into plaques, including Oscar-winners Matthew McConaughey and Anne Hathaway, who stayed here while filming *Serenity* in 2017.

"These plants are endemic to the island," Haadiya reveals. "We ask some



City life in Port Louis



Plant life

**"Even if you're not from Hollywood or Bollywood, every guest here is treated like a star"**

of our celebrity guests to plant them and organise a ceremony in collaboration with the Mauritian Wildlife Foundation — so far, these VIPs have been pleased to oblige."

She adds, with a smile, "Even if you're not from Hollywood or Bollywood, every guest here is treated like a star."

#### OUTSIDE OF THE MARADIVA

While I don't plant any trees during my stay, I happily explore the island's bounty of delights. Granted, it's not an easy task pulling myself away from the velvet sands, but after venturing into the heart of Mauritius, I'm richly rewarded.

"While it's true that Mauritius is known for pristine beaches, blue-green lagoons and tropical forests, there's a lot more here than meets the eye," says Jayaluxmee, a performing artist and guide from My Moris Tours. "And spending an afternoon in our capital, Port Louis, is a great

introduction to our many local communities and cultures."

We explore the city's ultra-modern Caudan Waterfront before surrendering to the perfumed fragrances of Central Market, accessed through hand-forged iron gates, crowned by the letters

VR for Victoria Regina — a nod to Britain's former dominance here.

"Mauritius is an island where 14 languages and dialects are spoken," Jayaluxmee adds. "The different ethnicities live in harmony in this city — from mixed schools to inter-marriages. Walking across Port Louis' centre is like jumping from one continent to another."

What an accurate statement: Port Louis is a whirlwind of smells and sounds, cultures and religions, tastes and flavours. It's not just the weather that's hot, but some of the spicy street food, too, like Dholl Puri, a type of curry in pancakes.

Other highlights include the 19th-century Jummah Mosque, a fusion of Indian, Creole and Islamic architecture; the Blue Penny



Chamarel geopark



Curepipe's Bobato factory



Junmah Mosque



Intercontinental Slavery Museum

Museum, with its world-renowned Post Office stamps; and the newly launched Intercontinental Slavery Museum.

Slavery, once so prevalent on the island, was thankfully abolished in 1835, but in recognition of this dark period in Mauritius' history, the museum documents the daily struggles of an era when the sweetness of sugar cane collided with the bitterness of hours toiling in fields, under an oppressive sun.

"We aim to tell a story of human tragedy, resistance and survival," staff member Ava tells me, pointing to a word cloud on a wall, inspired by locals' feedback on what they want the museum to champion: 'justice', 'reconciliation' and 'vision' jump out.

"We want to give the thousands of people an identity – significant, given that they were afforded so little respect and visibility during their lifetime."

A short drive outside the city is an example of one of these sugar plants, the 19th-century colonial Château de Labourdonnais, one of the island's most popular attractions.

While the tour and exhibitions primarily showcase the architecture and décor rather than its associations with the slave trade, I learn that the former owners imported an elephant from India to help with the work on the estate. However, the long-trunked new arrival had other plans and spent most of the time lolling about the gardens being admired by visitors.

Elsewhere in this area, the botanical gardens are deservedly recognised as the world's third most beautiful, following their counterparts in London and Sri Lanka. However, no matter where you go on the island, Mauritius wows.

Vast expanses of sugar cane fields and tea plantations, overlooked by seemingly endless, dramatic mountains, are dotted with distinctive human-made creations, like 300-odd chimneys from sugar factories and the world's largest statue of the Hindu goddess, Maa Durga.

Sailing enthusiasts should stop by Curepipe's Bobato factory with its array of hand-crafted ship models before visiting the Mahebourg Historical Naval Museum on the southeast of the island.

Another main natural attraction is the seven-million-year-old, seven-coloured



Château de Labourdonnais

Chamarel geopark – partly formed by volcanic activity.

The unique phenomenon also doubles as a home for adorable giant turtles, too busy eating grass to say hello, while a dramatic waterfall cuts through the densely forested landscape nearby. A glass of rum in the Rhumerie de Chamarel distillery is the perfect reward following a day of sightseeing.

Yes, the dodo might be dead, but diverse and vibrant Mauritius is full of life. WW

### Fact box:

- Domhnall stayed in the Maradiva's luxury suite pool villa – prices start from €1,490 per night, including breakfast and dinner, visit [maradiva.com](http://maradiva.com).
- He travelled from London Gatwick to Mauritius with Air Mauritius ([airmauritus.com](http://airmauritus.com)). Jet Prime is Mauritius' stylish arrival and departure lounge for those keen to avoid the headache of busy airports. It is ideally located away from the busy main terminal. While you sip on champagne, staff will take care of your check-in and luggage, making your arrival or departure hassle-free ([jetprime.mu](http://jetprime.mu)).
- Restaurant recommendations on the island include Falaise Rouge, with its breathtaking panorama views, and the delightful family-run Escale Créole, which specialises in traditional Mauritian cuisine. The sausage stew is a must.