

THE  TIMES

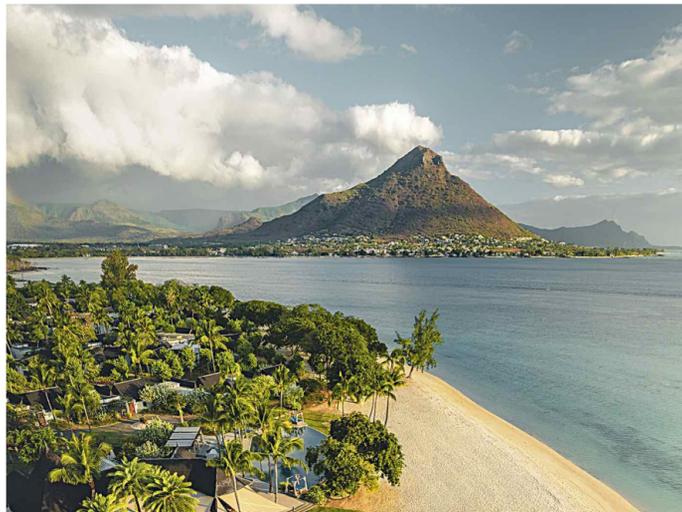
LUXX REPORT

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DRIFT OFF
*The place to
escape in Bali*

THE TRAVEL ISSUE



Do Mauritius like a local

Two homegrown companies are transforming the way travellers experience the island. Lisa Grainger reports

Mauritius has had a pretty tough time in the past decade. In 2020, its formerly crystalline waters were polluted by the biggest oil spill in the nation's history, washing 1,000 tonnes of fuel into a formerly pristine bay. Then a strict Covid lockdown, lasting until 2021, cut off the tourism that's the backbone of the island's economy.

Five years later, Mauritius is certainly back, with a raft of smartly upgraded properties to appeal to travellers who want dreamy beaches and lashings of luxury.

Of the five-star hotels on the island, the Maradiva – if placed under the right management, with additional training for its stretched 250 staff – has the potential to be its loveliest. Located along the pretty, sandy, less windy west coast of the island and first opened in 2004, the hotel was the brainchild of Sir Kailash Ramdane, a Mauritian entrepreneur. It is now run by his children, Sanjiv and Kobita.

It is the property's original Balinese-style buildings in 27 acres of tropical gardens, combined with its Mauritian character, that give Maradiva such charm. Each white, shingle-

roofed villa has its own secluded outside living space. It was here I nibbled breakfast beside a plunge pool, then hung out reading all day without seeing a soul. When I ventured beyond my garden and the beach, there was a spacious spa to have a high-tech facial (or a full ayurvedic detox programme – about 70 per cent of Mauritians are of Indian origin) or take a private cooking class with cheery Mauritian chef Noella Regnaud.

Although my operator, Original Travel, could have arranged for me to go on private excursions to vanilla farms, rum distilleries or markets, I chose a boat trip with the enthusiastic marine conservationist Emmanuel Mamet, to swim with dolphins (far from the unethical crowded boats that relentlessly chase the mammals), and to snorkel amid clouds of multicoloured fish.

It was out with Mamet that I began to appreciate the significant changes in the island's accommodation. From the sea, I spotted the new sprawling luxury residential developments of Akasha, Eko Savannah and Legend Hill above



Private dolphin trips can be arranged. Top left: the view over Maradiva's wide sandy beach

Tamarin: for buyers with multimillion-euro budgets rather than locals, Mamet said regretfully. And when I drove to the opposite side of the island, to the residential Anahita golf resort, vast areas were being carved out of hillsides to create homes for ultra-high-net-worth individuals keen to take advantage of the island's great weather (more than 300 sunny days a year), low taxes (about 15 per cent) and residency rights (buying a property over \$375,000

guarantees a permanent residential permit).

For those who don't have the millions to buy a home, or don't fancy staying in a hotel, Muse Villas is the smartest company to call. Co-founded four years ago by the Mauritian villa expert Mathieu Appassamy and the hotelier Xavier Doger de Spéville, who'd worked at Le Bristol in Paris, Muse manages 14 exclusive villas overseen by a team of 36 Mauritian staff. Most have worked at iconic properties, from Hotel du Cap to the Royal Mirage in Dubai.

The three to six-bedroomed homes they look after are, Appassamy said, "the very best on the island" and exclusive to Muse. Some are brand new: contemporary family spaces with pools or architectural beauties adorned with curiosities from around the world. Others are old plantation homes filled with antiques. They even manage a 5,000 sq metre private island with a house designed by the renowned architect Eric Chavoix.

Muse's latest addition, the double-storey Diamant, where I stayed, is the contemporary beach home of a well-known Paris-based Mauritian lawyer. Its six bedrooms are adorned in cooling whites, rich tropical woods and natural textiles, its walls hung with covetable art. Its

manicured grounds sit above a quiet beach from which to swim out into the protective lagoon.

Although I could have lain for hours on a chaise longue in Diamant's colourful contemporary interiors, I'd asked the Muse staff to show me their island – which they did in style. They organised a boat trip (aboard the \$6 million, 24m Mercocoeur motor yacht), an excursion in a chauffeured electric car to Ferney valley to hike up forested mountains to waterfalls, and even a meeting with a botanist in one of the island's remaining strips of virgin forest, to hear about her family's attempts to replace tracts of ebony.

In between, my villa host was on WhatsApp 24/7 in case I spontaneously fancied a picnic in a forest or an outdoor cinema to be set up on a beach – or a full-scale party, with DJ and mixologist. My sweet chef, Tommy Etiennette, beavered away, creating feasts from exotic fruit platters in the morning to seared tuna at night. If I'd requested it, the Muse team could have rustled up four different styles of "restaurant", with matching tableware, so I could have had an Indian thali one night, Japanese sushi another and an Italian-style sunset picnic atop the island's famous Le Morne mountain after a hike.



Top: the presidential villa at the refurbished Maradiva. Above: Muse Villas' six-bedroomed Villa Diamant

In December, over nine days, I reviewed five Mauritian hotels and one villa. Muse was hands down the most wonder-filled. That may have been due to the team's quiet, caring professionalism and joy – or, perhaps, because there is nothing quite like having a beautiful beach home and staff to call your own, if only for a few nights. maradiva.com; musevillas.com. Original Travel offers ten nights to Mauritius, with five nights at Muse Villas and five at Maradiva, from £8,500pp B&B, based on two sharing and including return flights, private transfers and guided activities; originaltravel.co.uk ■