

# Holidays

Immerse yourself in the fascinating culture and natural beauty at the 'top' of this charming, sunny Indian Ocean country

## Northern soul of MAURITIUS

**W**ERE an hour out to sea on a catamaran, whisking us from Grand Baie, a harbour town on Mauritius's northern coast, to the tiny islet of Ilot Gabriel, when a man on deck swivels his head so sharply he almost drops his rum punch.

'Dolphins!' he shouts excitedly. The captain is duly consulted and it transpires, even more excitingly, that the pointed dorsal fin coursing through the water is attached to a small humpback whale. And then there are three, keeping pace with the boat, delighting all on board with flicks of their tails and – so swears the guy with the rum punch – a full flip up out of the sea (suffice to say, he was the only one to observe this).

However, spotting them is enough to cheer up the 30 passengers aboard the good ship Wahoo – named after a local fish – who up until this point have been in lowish spirits thanks to a squall that has been whipping up the waves.

As we approach our destination, rounding the hulking, volcanic nature reserve of Coin de Mire, whose cliffs rise impressively out of the sea, the clouds start to clear. And by the time we drop anchor in sight of both Ilot Gabriel and its neighbour, unimaginatively called Flat Island, the sun is shining fiercely.

We are disgorged by dinghy on to Gabriel's dazzling white sands, fringed with the kind of palm trees and clear aquamarine water you normally only see on adverts. Within minutes I've renamed it Instagram Island, thanks to the frantic photo-snapping.

Women are draping themselves prettily, if riskily, across rocks, or posing with oversized straw hats in the water. But who wouldn't, when the scenery is as incredible as this?

Mauritius is in the middle of the Indian Ocean, 1,200 miles off the south-east coast of Africa. It has changed hands regularly over the centuries, falling at various times under Dutch, French and, finally, British rule, until its independ-

By Laura Millar

ence in 1968. Along with the islands of Rodrigues and Reunion, it forms the Mascarenes Archipelago, so-named by the Portuguese who were here before the Dutch.

Combined, these colonisers have left various legacies, not least in language – French is most widely spoken, alongside English and local Creole – and in food.

First, let me make clear what you won't be consuming: dodo. The hapless, flightless bird, now a symbol of the island that you'll find on everything from bottles of local rum to boxes of matches, was eaten to extinction by the Dutch in the 1600s. Thankfully you'll find much more delicious fare these days, a fusion of Indian and African with roots coming from labourers who were brought here to work on sugarcane plantations, as well as French and even Chinese.

I get my first taste of a typical dish at my hotel, Veranda Grand Baie, a charming property with 95 rooms spread around its gardens. A recent renovation was designed to honour Creole decor, with natural, woven fabrics, lazily whirring ceiling fans, bamboo blinds and leafy plants everywhere.

As part of a drive to connect guests more closely to Mauritian culture, there are a range of complimentary activities, including Creole language lessons. Our engaging teacher, Manisha, explains that speaking



is as much about the emphasis of the words and accompanying facial expressions as it is about pronunciation.

'Can you guess what "ene zoli 36" means?' she asks her spell-bound group of pupils. Blank faces. 'How about now?', as she repeats the phrase but outlines with her hands the kind of ridiculously curvy female physique you might have seen on the Benny Hill Show.

They also offer cooking classes, which is how I find myself dipping balls of mashed chickpea blended with spring onion, red onion and chilli into boiling oil to make the local snack chilli bites.

These, and other delicious morsels, can be found for sale from many of the shacks which line the curved beach of Grand Baie, a ten-minute walk away.

Bobbing in the harbour are small, traditional wooden fishing boats known as pirogues. At tables close to the water, fishermen casually chop up their catch of the day, ready for everyone from housewives to restaurant owners to snap up fillets of marlin, sailfish, tuna and wahoo.

The northern end of the island is known for being busier and more developed, home to resorts, shops, restaurants and nightlife. It's also good for game-fishing, as evidenced by

the many enterprises with chalk boards outside listing their most recent catches by weight and size.

But peace and quiet can still be found here, such as at the charming fishing village of Cap Malheureux, at Mauritius' northernmost tip. Despite its unfortunate name – it means 'unlucky cape', which was bestowed by the French after an invading British force took them by surprise by landing there in 1810 – it's a pretty place to explore.

Don't miss the striking, red-roofed Notre-Dame Auxiliatrice Church or the less-crowded Bain Boeuf Public Beach, which of course features the obligatory dreamy golden sands and turquoise sea.

I round off my trip with a visit to the serene Botanic Garden, located within the village of Pamplemousses.

It was created in 1770, making it the oldest botanical garden in the Southern Hemisphere, covering about 90 acres. Here you'll find a vast array of both native and non-native plants, flowers and trees, from the ebony and macadamia, to ferns and elephant's foot palms.

Then we come on to an utterly beautiful spot.

It's a small lake, completely covered in giant water lilies. They flower between June and September, when you'll see pink or white blooms adorning the flat, green, coffee-table-sized circles of the lily pads.

I gaze at them, the sunlight sparkling off the water, and a Creole phrase that I learned earlier at the hotel springs to mind: 'Moi ben kontent.' It roughly means: 'I'm pretty happy right now.'

And for that, I thank Mauritius.

### TRAVEL FACTS

**DOUBLES** at Veranda Grand Baie from £240 half-board (veranda-resorts.com); London to Mauritius flights from £650 return (airmauritius.com). Catamaran trips £52pp (croisieres-australes.com). More information at mymauritius.travel.

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**STRIKING:** The iconic Notre-Dame Auxiliatrice Church

# Up, up and away... for a big, beautiful balloon festival

By Debbie Marshall

**T**HE bus to Chateau-d'Oex was, as one can rightly expect in Switzerland, on time. Our cheery driver navigated the twists of the mountain road until I was treated to a surge of joy upon spotting a bright red hot air balloon high in the sky. Rounding the next bend another balloon appeared, followed by so many that the sky became a constellation of primary-coloured bubbles.

The Festival International de Ballons in Chateau-d'Oex takes place over nine days at the end of January, and is now approaching its 44th year.

Just outside Gstaad, the town plays host to enthusiasts from around the world who gather to watch, participate and compete in the sport of 'la montgolfiere', named after the pioneering Montgolfier brothers who launched the first piloted balloon ascent by humans in 1783.

Thanks to its microclimate and location, Chateau-d'Oex is internationally acclaimed as a perfect launch pad for balloons, with warm air in the valley rising and cold air on the mountain slopes descending, creating the thermals needed to take off, glide and (all being well) return.

Mission control is on a large meadow, overlooked by a pretty church, which is a perfect vantage point for spectators. Wind-conditions permitting, each morning and afternoon there's an orchestrated performance on the snow stage. Balloons are carried out, their fabric unfurled and wicker baskets attached.

Then it's time for the magic. The fire is ignited, gradually inflating the balloon which billows and flutters, and at a given moment the pilot and passengers climb on board and the whole contraption is delicately manoeuvred into the air.

I met tourists from Canada

for whom visiting here was a long-awaited dream. And young children can also have a turn with tethered flights.

At noon there's a break, giving the opportunity for a fondue (bookings are essential at most restaurants) and a visit to the Espace Ballon museum with its collection of ballooning paraphernalia as well as a detailed history of the sport.

Local heroes are the multiple generations of the Piccard family. Auguste Piccard broke records travelling into the stratosphere in a hydrogen balloon in 1931, and grandson Bertrand joined Britain's Brian Jones for the first non-stop round-the-world flight in Breitling Orbiter 3, which launched from Chateau-d'Oex in 1999. This was their third attempt to circle the globe, and their space suits are on display at the museum. Bertrand is still a regular pilot and one of the main attractions at the festival.

That afternoon, as a third balloon ascended, it was followed by an announcement that the wind had become too strong and there would be no more flights.

Balloons were refolded and packed, wicker baskets carried away, and the pilots retreated to the bar until the next morning when the weather would be fine and calm again.

Back on the bus at dusk I was transfixed by a full moon that looked like a huge balloon, and wondered if it had inspired the Montgolfier brothers nearly 250 years earlier to take to the skies.

● The 44th Festival International de Ballons takes place from January 20-28 (festivaldeballons.ch/en or myschweizerland.com). For a tailor-made holiday to Chateau-d'Oex, visit switzerlandtravelcentre.com.



**WE HAVE LIFT OFF:** Balloons at the festival earlier this year