



Exotic plans for island paradise

With Mauritius in the process of rebranding itself as a top-end luxury destination, Nigel Bowen gets a taste of la grande vie, island style.

01 The Le Touessrok terrace villa

If one wishes to get a sense of the marvellous mélange that is Mauritian society, there are few better ways to spend a sunny Saturday afternoon than at Champ de Mars racecourse in the centre of Port Louis, the nation's capital. In the member's enclosure (ask your concierge to arrange tickets) you'll find the French-Mauritian business elite mingling with senior Indian-Mauritian government figures, while in the stands will be more Indian-Mauritians (making up almost 70 percent of the population) happily rubbing shoulders with Chinese-Mauritians and African-Mauritians. They might have different religious and racial backgrounds, but all the racegoers will be speaking the same language (Creole) and lapping up the party atmosphere.

A trip to the races illustrates that Mauritius is an island paradise in more than the travel brochure sense. Uninhabited until four centuries ago, after which the Dutch, French and English played pass the parcel with it, importing African slaves and indentured labourers from India and China to work on vast sugar plantations. After independence was gained from the British in 1968, things could easily have gone downhill but instead a well-governed, relatively prosperous, vibrantly multicultural nation emerged.

Natural advantages

Which is not to say Mauritius doesn't have its problems. One of the main ones is that the business model that's sustained its tourism industry for decades, the place the French and English go for a relaxing beach holiday, is no longer working.

So Mauritius is reinventing itself to appeal to potential visitors from the 21st century's powerhouse economies, particularly Brazil, Russia, India, China and Australia.

While Mauritius has always had plenty to offer the upmarket traveller, it has perhaps suffered in comparison to its northern neighbours, the Seychelles and the Maldives. Rather than attempting to compete directly, Mauritius hopes to trade on its natural advantages to offer well-heeled visitors a different experience.

One of the major initiatives has been an attempt to establish itself as the Hong Kong of the Indian Ocean, offering fabulous shopping to the newly affluent. To that end, the inaugural Mauritius Shopping Fiesta was staged from June to August and a sequel is planned for mid-2013.

With a number of upmarket, modern malls it also has a large textile industry, with a number of fashion houses converting wool from New Zealand to garments for North American and European markets.

Tommy Hilfiger and Ralph Lauren have factories on the island, and a number of other luxury brands



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02 The royal suite at the Royal Palm
 03 Enjoying a treatment at the massage villa at Le Touessrok
 04 Some of the stunning scenery on offer
 05 The stunning beach at Le Saint Géran
 06 The king size bedroom villa at Le Touessrok

have outlets in the larger cities. At the Fiesta visitors can either stock up on all the latest winter or summer fashion, depending on which hemisphere they are heading back to. What otherwise might have been a straightforward exercise in consumerism, was enlivened by a range of high energy shows plus a parade.

Elegant eco lodges

Other initiatives to entice high-net-worth individuals range from constructing elegant eco-lodges, to encouraging India's plutocrats to use it as a venue for their children's multimillion rupee nuptials and staging kite-surfing festivals to attract Russia's nouveau riche, who regard the sport as the new polo.

Royal Palm in the north, One and Only Le Saint Géran and Le Touessrok in the east, and Paradis Hotel & Golf Club and St Regis (opening November 1) in the south are the places to stay. Even if the coastline isn't quite up to Maldives standard, it's still spectacular. Almost entirely surrounded by a barrier reef, emerald green lagoons are filled with colourful fish. It is possible to swim with

friendly wild dolphins thanks to a host of speedboats operating out of Tamarin Beach. Deep sea fishing trips for marlin, yellowfin tuna and barracuda are available while catamaran day trips offer the chance to explore remote islets. There is also water-skiing and parasailing and Île aux Cerfs, Île Plate and Pointe d'Esny boast the best beaches in the whole island of Mauritius.

A visit to the Casela Nature and Leisure Park is high on compulsory with many species of rare and endangered birds as well as animals and you can stroll with unrestrained but (thus-far) well-behaved lions.

With plentiful fresh seafood and a blend of French, Indian, Chinese and African cuisine, Mauritius is foodie heaven. Grand Baie, the island's nightclub and restaurant hub, provides the highest density of impressive eateries. Having set their sights on winning us over, the Mauritians might find there's no shortage of adventurous Australians willing to experience an intriguing melting pot of cultures plus a warm and friendly people. ●

Getting there: Air Mauritius flies to Mauritius from Sydney, Melbourne and Perth. Staying there: Constance Le Prince Maurice www.princemaurence.constancehotels.com, www.tourism-mauritius.mu