



Island time

With picture-perfect beaches and mountain ranges, a tropical climate and a vibrant mix of cultural influences, Mauritius is a spectacular African island destination. Giselle Whiteaker explores this slice of heaven.

Above: The infinity pool at Maradiva Villas Resort and Spa.



Lush gardens packed with tropical blooms lead down to a golden-sand beach. Clusters of trees dotted along the beach provide welcome patches of shade, protecting punters from the full force of the afternoon sun. The turquoise water is clear and inviting, gently sloping to swimming depth and while several other sunseekers are lying under thatched umbrellas, they are well positioned, allowing for a feeling of privacy. I claim a sun-lounger, unrolling the plush beach towel and dropping my sarong onto the sand. I can't wait any longer to dip my toes in the Indian Ocean.

I've been in Mauritius for all of four hours. My first hour was taken up by the transfer to Maradiva Villas Resort and Spa, my home for the next few days. The hotel's high occupancy and my early arrival meant my room was not yet available, so my second hour was spent sipping on a much-needed coffee at Coast2Coast, Maradiva's casual all-day dining restaurant. It's largely open air and birds flit from table to table, checking for crumbs.

My next two hours were all about the Maradiva Spa. The spa's design is strongly influenced by Indian philosophy and I started with a consultation with Dr Praveen Nair, the spa's Ayurvedic Doctor. He explained that Ayurvedic treatments are not for everyone, but suggested I would benefit from one, making me feel special. He handed me over to a therapist who guided me to the changing rooms, collecting me as I popped out the other side by the pool that forms the centre of the spa structure.

The treatment room was the first hint this was not going to be an ordinary spa experience. The massage table is made of wood, looking more like a torture device than an instrument of relaxation. Looks can be deceiving though, and with the therapist's ministrations teasing the flight tension from my muscles, the wooden table was simply a firm support. Post-massage, it took a cup of herbal ginger tea in the relaxation area by the pool to reacquaint me with my senses.

A quick bite to eat, and now I'm about to dip my toes in. The water temperature is that perfect balance between refreshingly cool and soothingly warm. There's a current that drifts along the shore and I kick lazily to stay in place. Across the bay is Le Morne Brabant, a basaltic monolith, with Tamarin Bay at its base, providing a mesmerising backdrop. A few white, puffy clouds inch across the brilliant-blue sky as if reluctant to leave the bay. I can understand why.

Late afternoon, I drag myself away from the beach to check in. The 65 elegant villas are dotted along the avenues that gently wind between the main parts of the hotel and the beach. Nowhere is too far to walk, but the less energetic can summon a golf cart for transport through the gardens to wherever whim dictates.

Every villa has a private pool with a daybed. Mine also has a spacious outdoor lounge and, inside, there's custom-designed Hermes wallpaper behind the bedhead, wooden floors, and a colour palette of burnt orange and beige. There's a large walk-in wardrobe and a generously





Clockwise from top left: Chateau de Labourdonnais; the outdoor villa lounge; Coast2Coast restaurant; the Maradiva lobby.

proportioned bathroom, with a free-standing bath and a monsoon shower. The external wall of the bathroom is entirely glass, opening onto a small garden oasis, leaving me feeling like I'm showering outdoors. In case the indoor-outdoor shower experience is not sufficient, there's an additional shower on the garden wall.

Refreshed and dressed for dinner, I head to Cilantro, where a trio of musicians entertains guests. This temple of gastronomy dishes up delicious modern Indian specialties with a large dose of flair. Maradiva also has an extraordinarily skilled Japanese Chef. She oversees the Teppan counter in a dedicated space that's reminiscent of theatre in the round – and she puts on a stunning performance; expect expert knife skills, quick flipping and flames. Guests at Maradiva can also dine at one of the three restaurants at sister property Sands Suites Resort & Spa, a short walk along the shore, with Pink PepperCorn dishing up salads, sumptuous fresh seafood dishes and grilled dishes right by the beach. Should anyone wish to dig deeper into the blend of flavours that makes up Mauritian cuisine, cooking classes are available, often held in the hotel's lush organic garden, 'Karo du Chef'.

There's more to Mauritius than fantastic food and beautiful beaches, though. Beyond the hotel, there are bustling markets selling food and trinkets, colourful Hindu temples, and colonial mansions, such as Chateau de Labourdonnais, awaiting exploration. At the local beach at Cap Malheureux, beyond the distinctive red-roofed church Notre Dame

Auxiliatrice, fishermen stand at tables in the shallow water selling their wares. The Pamplemousse Botanical Garden, located just outside the capital, Port Louis, is one of the oldest gardens in the Southern Hemisphere.

Around the island, boat and catamaran charters whisk sightseers to snorkelling sites and remote islands and visitors flock to the sand dunes of the Seven Coloured Earth in the Chamarel mountains, where a natural geological phenomenon caused by the volcanic activity sees the sands aligned in a rainbow of red, copper, yellow, green, blue and purple stripes. Nearby, Black River Gorges National Park offers signposted hiking trails that lead through green forests, with wild monkeys, waterfalls and breathtaking views.

In Port Louis, Fort Adelaide, built by the English, towers over the city, offering spectacular views that include Champ de Mars, the world's second-oldest horse racing track. Races have been held here since 1812 and continue every Saturday from May to November. There are tea plantations and rum distilleries, museums, restaurants and nightlife, mountains, temples, churches and mosques.

No matter how long you stay on the island, there is not enough time. Perhaps that's for the best. That's why Mauritius stays in mind and heart – there is always more. Mark Twain said it all: "Mauritius was made first, and then heaven; and that heaven was copied after Mauritius." ■

For more information about the family-owned Maradiva Villas Resort and Spa, the only five-star luxury all-villa resort situated on the west coast of Mauritius, see www.maradiva.com.

To experience the magic of Mauritius on a permanent basis, consider these lush properties

► *Beau Champ*

This well-positioned, contemporary four-bedroom villa is situated in a secure golf estate in Beau Champ on the stunning east coast of Mauritius. The ultimate blend of ultra-modern living, security and aesthetics, the architecturally designed coastal property benefits from generous open-plan living space with state-of-the-art appliances. The main features of the home include a large swimming pool and spacious terrace, which is an ideal entertaining space. This looks out onto beautifully manicured gardens. The exquisite home provides an oasis of solitude and tranquility.

Fine & Country Mauritius

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\$2,128,628



◀ *Bel Ombre*

This charming four-bedroom villa is located in the south coast village of Bel Ombre, in the heart of one of the well-preserved areas of the island. Set within a secure golf estate, the property has access to two five-star hotels and a championship 18-hole golf course, providing residents with the opportunity to step through the door and onto the fairway. The home is in immaculate condition, with beautifully presented interiors and modern furnishings. The view stretches from the mountains all the way to the turquoise blue lagoon. It is a haven of relaxation in a beautiful tropical sanctuary.

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► *Grand Baie*

This outstanding five-bedroom family home is ideally located in a secure complex in the heart of Grand Baie, a seaside, north coast village known for its emerald waters and pleasant climate. Situated right on the beachfront, the colonial-style, double-storey property offers direct access to the beach and has a private boat ramp and unbeatable views of Le Coin de Mire island and the Indian Ocean. The villa features a large swimming pool surrounded by palm trees and offers privacy and grandeur on this paradisiacal island.

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