

good taste *guaranteed*

Stunning mountain scenery, beautiful beaches and exclusive hotels are a given in Mauritius, says **Nicki Grihault** – but you'll be blown away by the delicious cuisine, colourful culture and activities from kite-surfing to stargazing

It was the Mauritian painter and poet Malcolm de Chazal who said: 'Mauritius seems to have been sculpted and painted by a tasteful giant...' Most people visit the island for its luxurious beaches and azure lagoon almost entirely encircled by a coral reef, with its velvety volcanic peaks, pockets of verdant forest with soaring ebony trees and sun-bleached sugar cane forming a picture-perfect backdrop.

About the size of Surrey, Mauritius has the highest concentration of exclusive hotels on the planet – boasting top-flight golf courses, world-class spas and gourmet restaurants – and the best service in the Indian Ocean. Dream holidays are its forte, but there's more to this gem-shaped tropical

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island than palm trees swaying in the breeze.

The portly, flightless dodo and the giant tortoise once roamed this isolated outpost, giving the island a certain mystique and making it a biodiversity hotspot. Colourful markets, colonial architecture and vibrant religious festivals testify to a rich past and give Mauritius a touch of the exotic. In the interior, it's easy to see how Green Island rum got its name, and the island's potpourri of peoples – French, Creole, Indian and Chinese – guarantee that it's a paradise for gourmands.

This year's *Masterchef* winner, Shelina Permalloo, was taught to cook by her Mauritian mother and aunt, while the annual Mauritian Gourmet Food Festival attracts Michelin-starred chefs. Meanwhile, hotels have increasingly gone

native. Culinary experiences include Grandma's Kitchen at Shanti Maurice, where guests dine on traditional specialities at the home of a Mauritian grande dame; and LUX* Resorts' Island Kitchen, where tastings of dishes such as banana flambéed with island rum are accompanied by craft stalls and the traditional hip-wiggling sega dance.

THE NORTH-WEST COAST

The 18th-century French Gun Powder Room, an atmospheric wine cellar at the Oberoi Mauritius on the island's north-west coast, is the setting for a Mauritian tasting menu, serving delicacies such as raw marinated fish with palm heart and coconut emulsion, and sweet potato, crab and mustard-seed samosas.

This boutique hotel, with luxury pool villas and pavilions under sugar-cane thatch on the reef-fringed white sand beach of Turtle Bay, is one of the island's most romantic. The spectacular sunsets and mountain views are an added bonus.

The hotel complex is set in a 20-acre botanical garden around an ancient banyan tree; top-notch service in a private, club-like atmosphere means the general manager greets guests on arrival, restaurants are all à la carte, and guests are offered a complimentary 'Touching Senses' programme to connect with the island's nature and culture. Activities include cookery classes in the organic herb and spice garden, stargazing sessions with Hindu mythology, and visits to local temples. Also locally inspired is the award-winning spa, offering Africology and Ayurveda experiences.

The Oberoi is within easy reach of the lively Grand Baie resort, with its nightlife, as well as



A COLOURFUL STREET MARKET; LOCAL COCKTAIL; OBEROI MAURITIUS; NIGHTLIFE; LE MORNE MOUNTAIN



OPPOSITE: BEAUTIFUL BEACHES, HIDEAWAYS AND HOTELS, INCLUDING THE OBEROI MAURITIUS (MIDDLE COLUMN). ABOVE: LOCAL CUSTOMS; TANDEM SKYDIVING; BUYING FRESH PRODUCE

a thrilling tandem skydive from 15,000ft for spectacular views. It's also close to the island's capital, Port Louis, and Central Market – the best place to try street food such as *dholl puri* (flatbread

the Blue Bay Marine Park. Champagne served in a billowing white tent, snorkelling from a glass-bottom boat, and a gourmet buffet lunch with silver service and homemade *rhum arrangé* – infused with anything from coconut to chilli – at the rustic bar are the order of the day here. Beside the blinding white sands is a 1920s Moroccan-style villa, where British governor Sir Hesketh Bell

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stuffed with split peas), *gateaux piments* (chilli cakes) and *alooda* (iced milk flavoured with basil seeds).

HEADING SOUTH

The drive along the coast of the 'green' southwest, past remote Creole fishing villages and deserted beaches, is the island's most scenic. At the end of the road lies The St Regis Mauritius Resort, due to open on the pristine white sands of Unesco World Heritage site Le Morne on 1 November. Barefaced Le Morne Brabant mountain, where runaway slaves hid in the 19th century, is the stunning backdrop to its 172 ocean-facing rooms, suites and villas with expansive terraces, all offering the signature St Regis butler service. A manor with private cinema, plus the Iridium spa with a men's grooming salon, add to the opulence. The hotel's epicurean promise is six culinary experiences, from French to Japanese, and Inspiration, led by executive chef Olivier Belliard, where 16 guests enjoy a tailor-made dining experience.

One Eye at Le Morne is one of the world's top kite-surfing spots. Equally compelling is the early-morning 500m scramble up Le Morne with wiry mountain guide Yan de Maroussem, for a stunning view of coral gardens beneath blue seas.

In contrast, cold, perfumed towels await guests at the jetty at LUX* Resorts' private hideaway Ile de Deux Cocos (Island of the Two Coconuts), in

once entertained his mistresses. Rumour has it he discovered pirate treasure here, as he mysteriously hurried home. As I mentioned, there's more to Mauritius than palm trees.



FACT FILE

GETTING THERE
Air Mauritius flies to Mauritius from London Heathrow four times a week, from £715 return. Flight time is 12 hours. airmauritius.com

WHO TO TRAVEL WITH
Luxury Holidays Direct offers seven nights B&B at The Oberoi Mauritius, with one complimentary dinner for two (excluding beverages) at The Gun Powder Room, economy flights, VIP private transfers and taxes, from £1,499 per person – a saving of £895 on travel until the end of 2012, excluding the festive season. 020 8774 7299; luxuryholidaysdirect.com

WHEN TO GO
 Although it's a year-round destination, for winter sun the best time to travel is between October and April.

WHERE TO STAY
The Oberoi Mauritius, luxury pavilions from £371, including breakfast and taxes; minimum stay five nights. oberoihotels.com/oberoi_mauritius
The St Regis Mauritius Resort, doubles from £424, including breakfast and taxes. stregis.com/mauritius

WHERE TO EAT
Château de Bel Ombre Romantic à la carte fusion food in a 19th-century colonial mansion; note that it is dinner only. domainedebelombre.mu
Tante Athalie Great-value Creole prix-fixe lunch near Pamplémousses, beside a garden filled with vintage cars. +230 243 9266
Escale Créole One of the best table d'hôte's on the island, near the village of Moka. escalecreole.net

FIND OUT MORE
tourism-mauritius.mu