

On the Road



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Hawaii? No, Réunion. Here I'm standing at the Pas de Bellecombe viewpoint. The big volcano you see in the background is the Piton de la Fournaise (p217), Réunion's iconic attraction. That day I got up at the crack of dawn to climb up to the rim of the caldera and gaze into the jaws of the giant, but I was not lucky – it started raining soon after I set off. I completed the hike, though, and by the time I came back to the car park, conditions got brighter, just in time for that picture!

BRANDON PRESSER It's a guide to Mauritius, of course it's a beach photo! Except this isn't Mauritius, it's Rodrigues (p135). My trip to this sleepy sister island was the perfect antidote to the aggravating traffic jams on the mainland. On Rodrigues I could zip around on a scooter, and when the roads faded away I'd continue my mission on foot. The island's wild eastern shores were particularly rugged, but the technicolour lagoon called out to me with its inspiring tapestry of sapphire, emerald and topaz. I couldn't help but take a little break in the powder-soft sand to jot down a few notes and reflections. Welcome to my office.



For full author biographies see p338.

Destination Mauritius, Réunion & Seychelles

Raise your hand: who wants to go to Mauritius, Réunion or the Seychelles? We thought so. Three unique destinations cast in the warm azure waters of the Indian Ocean, Mauritius, Réunion and Seychelles can all stake a convincing claim to being a piece of paradise. Indeed, there are worse things in life than splashing about in glinting turquoise seas, sampling gourmet fare in a fancy restaurant and sipping a cocktail on your private terrace. While you'll probably see some of the best beaches you've ever come across, there's so much more to each destination that any trip will be an exciting experience, whether it be trekking in the lush volcanic landscape or Réunion's steamy interior, exploring Mauritius' fascinating colonial past or just island hopping between deserted islands in the Seychelles.

On top of offering sexy attractions, what this trio of islands also has in common is French influence. Despite the British being the last colonial power to dominate the region, it's actually the French influence that permeates and informs the experience of Mauritius, Réunion and Seychelles today. While Réunion remains a part of France, independent Mauritius and Seychelles retain so much of their French past (mixed in with their equally beguiling Afro-Asian cultural influences) that even the most cosmopolitan traveller will be impressed.

The comparison ends there. Each country is confronted with specific issues. In Réunion, the major concerns are related to raising the capacity of the transport system. The island is congested, and the local political leaders plan to build new expressways. But these projects, given the tortuous terrain of the island, involve massive investments; small wonder that the métropole (mainland France) is somehow dragging its feet when it comes to subsidising such herculean civil engineering in a context of global recession and public debt. At the same time, such projects would be beneficial to the local workforce and sustain growth. A dilemma.

The Seychelles, which has long billed itself as a paradise, is now experiencing the reality principle. Gone are the good old times of the welfare state. As of November 2008, the country was forced to enter global competition under the tight control of the IMF and accept the fact that it can't live beyond its means and finance its lifestyle by continuously borrowing internationally. It was decided to float the rupee, and prices rose by 30%. The population was hard hit but suffered in silence. Paradisiacal Seychelles has also recently realised that hell is on its doorstep. Since 2008 the area has been increasingly unsafe due to regular attacks led by Somali pirates on vessels cruising in the Seychellois territorial waters. To alleviate the fears of the population (and the foreign tour operators), the government has established defence agreements with the USA and other Western fleets to improve the safety of the Seychellois waters. Don't fret, though; at the time of writing, only the Outer Islands, including Aldabra, were off-limits to travellers.

And now, Mauritius. Paradise on the wane? Maybe. Government corruption and an increase in crime are the order of the day in Mauritius. The tourist industry remains afloat but the destination has partially lost its image of exclusivity. Why? Cheaper package deals are increasingly available, and now that China is crushing the textile industry and tourism isn't booming like a few years ago, Mauritius has no other choice than to hard sell its assets.

Getting Started

Travel to Mauritius, Réunion and Seychelles is exceptionally safe and easy. There are superb tourism infrastructures in each country, excellent planning resources online, a good level of English is spoken everywhere (bar, maybe, in Réunion) and the choice of activities, hotels and eating is hard to rival anywhere. Of course islands this beautiful are rarely free of crowds and development, so it's important to read up on specific destinations to see if they'll provide the kind of holiday you're looking for – divers looking for social life and entertainment should avoid honeymooner magnets (and vice versa), while those looking to get away from crowds should steer clear of big resorts and head off the beaten path.

Outside the busiest periods of the high season, it's not necessary to book everything, especially if you're a bit flexible.

WHEN TO GO

Nestled between the Tropic of Capricorn and the equator, all three countries offer year-round heat and there's almost no time in any country when travel isn't advised. However, there are of course nuances, and depending on what you're interested in doing there are considerations to take into account. For example, if you're planning a hiking trip to Réunion, the best time is during the dry season, which runs from late April until October. Likewise, diving in Mauritius is best from October to December and March to April.

The time of year perhaps best avoided is January to February when it's the peak of the cyclone season. Although direct hits are rare, cyclones way offshore can still bring grey days and strong winds, even to the Seychelles, which technically lies outside the cyclone belt.

The climate in all three destinations is broadly similar: a hot, rainy summer from December to April (October to April in the Seychelles) is followed by a cooler, drier winter from May to November (May to September in the Seychelles). Rainfall levels are much higher in the mountains, particularly in Réunion, which boasts a number of world records. Cilaos holds the world record for most rain in a single day – a total of 1870mm fell on 16 March 1952.

Coastal temperatures rarely drop below 20°C in Mauritius and Réunion, or below 24°C in the Seychelles, making these islands a truly year-round destination.

For all three destinations you are advised to plan your travel well in advance, especially during the French holidays when hotels can be booked up months before. Ask your travel agent for advice on the dates of school holidays in France, which vary slightly from year to year. The Christmas to New Year period is also particularly busy. Airline reservations may be difficult to get at this time, so book well ahead to avoid disappointment. Keep in mind that many hotels hike up their room rates during the peak seasons.

For more information on the best times to travel, see p64 for Mauritius, p176 for Réunion and p279 for the Seychelles.

COSTS & MONEY

None of these destinations are ever going to be bargains, the main expense being the flights needed to cover the huge distances most visitors have to travel to get here. However, despite enjoying a reputation for opulence and exclusivity, it's perfectly possible to visit all three countries on a limited budget.

Seychelles has traditionally been the most expensive of the lot, and while it remains the most exclusive today, its tourist board is now keen on promoting

For climate charts for
Mauritius see p150,
Réunion p260 Seychelles
p313.

cheaper accommodation options such as guesthouses; as a result the country has become a far better destination for independent travellers. Réunion is the next most expensive, while Mauritius is a budget-friendly option for those who want to backpack, although five-star hotels also proliferate, making the huge choice of accommodation options part of the island's attraction.

You can keep accommodation costs down by staying in self-catering apartments or small guesthouses and by basing yourself in one place; the longer you stay (and the more of you there are), the cheaper it becomes. It helps to travel off-season as well: prices are generally discounted and there's more chance of being able to bargain.

On the positive side, it's possible to eat reasonably cheaply, even in the Seychelles, by patronising snack stands and getting takeaway meals – or, of course, by self-catering. Restaurants cover a huge scope of price ranges, from barely more expensive than takeaways to almost as expensive as those in London or Paris. In four- and five-star resorts and hotels, restaurants tend to be very pricey, although as most guests are on half- or full-board packages, the costs are reduced. Buses in all three destinations provide a cheap method of getting around, although car hire is reasonably priced everywhere too.

It's also worth investigating package holidays, including flights and accommodation, since these can often work out cheaper than travelling independently.

Mauritius

Due to the unstable fluctuations in the global economy, many tourist-focused establishments – namely accommodation – have priced their rooms in euros. Restaurants tend to charge Mauritian rupees (with the exception of several ultra-upmarket options found at high-end resorts). As far as a daily budget is concerned, backpackers staying in the barebones guesthouses and eating meals at street stands can expect to spend in the region of €25 to €35 per person. Opting for a midrange hotel and smart restaurants will push it up

DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

- Getting any necessary vaccinations and visas.
- Nonbeach clothing: some of the best restaurants in all three countries are smart affairs and shorts or bikini tops simply won't do – think lightweight but smart clothing, decent shoes and nondenim trousers for men. Also if you plan to go into the mountains, bring a long-sleeved top for the cool night air.
- Plenty of sun cream, after-sun lotion and bug repellent. Since the Chikungunya epidemic (see p325) most hotels will provide free electronic mosquito repellents to put on at night, but an extra layer of protection is always good, especially for evening dining outside or for long walks.
- Walkers should bring binoculars, walking boots, a lightweight waterproof jacket, a compass and a basic medical kit.
- Divers should bring their certification and log, as well as any equipment they want to use for diving.
- Even nondivers will save money and time bringing their own mask, snorkel and flippers so they can dive right in and start exploring.
- Everyone should bring flip flops, a sun hat and good sunglasses with UV protection.
- Bring a driving licence if you want to hire a car and travel insurance details to know what activities are and aren't included in your policy.

to at least €60. These costs are calculated on the basis of two people sharing a room; single travellers will need to budget extra. Travellers interested in three-, four- and five-star hotels should consider booking at discounted rates through a travel agent or online. Most resorts now include half-board meal plans. Figure anything between €90 and €650 per person.

Réunion

Prices in Réunion are roughly similar to those found in mainland France. The absolute minimum daily budget, possible if you're staying in the cheapest guesthouses and eating takeaway meals or self-catering, will be €40 per person on the basis of two people sharing a room. For a reasonably comfortable midrange hotel, with a light lunch and dinner in a decent restaurant, you're looking at around €70 to €100 per person.

Seychelles

Visitors to the Seychelles on a tight budget will struggle to get by on less than €80 per person per day (on the basis of two people sharing a room in a guesthouse or self-contained bungalow), without excursions and activities. A more realistic budget, allowing you to stay at a moderately priced hotel and treat yourself to a few good restaurants, will come in at around €100 to €150 per person per day. Living it up in a top-end resort will usually cost at least €250 per person per day, but will shoot up very quickly with meals and activities. Island hopping and indulging in excursions and other activities also jacks up costs considerably.

TRAVELLING RESPONSIBLY

As well as creating much of the region's wealth, tourism has cost local people and, most particularly, the local environment dearly. Worst affected are the coasts and particularly the fringing lagoon, where areas of the coral reef and the fragile marine environment are seriously degraded. The sheer number of tourists also makes extra demands on water supplies, electricity and other resources; creates problems of waste management; and puts more vehicles on the roads.

The good news is that all three countries are now taking these problems seriously and generally as a result development has been curtailed to a more considered pace. Ecotourism has been expanded enormously too, although in many places it is more of a buzzword than anything particularly beneficial to the environment.

Not that tourism can be blamed for all of the region's environmental woes of course, but there are positive steps that we as individual travellers can take to lessen our impact on the environment (see the boxed text, p21).

For further guidelines regarding the underwater world see the boxed text, p35; for tips on low-impact hiking, see the boxed text, p248.

TRAVEL LITERATURE

There's a surprisingly small amount of literature about each island, although there are definitely some interesting writings available if you persevere. Bernardin de St-Pierre's 1773 *Journey to Mauritius* describes Mauritius in its early colonial period, complete with a horrendous account of the treatment of slaves, the experience of which would inform Bernardin de St-Pierre's later works, including his classic *Paul and Virginie* (1787), the now deeply unfashionable love story of two young French émigrés brought up in Mauritius (see the boxed text, p131).

A more recent addition to the writing about the island is Patrick O'Brian's enjoyable historical novel *The Mauritius Command* (1977), a swashbuckling

HOW MUCH IN MAURITIUS?

Scuba dive Rs 1250

Meal in an upmarket restaurant Rs 1000

Car hire per day Rs 950

One night in a *chambre d'hôte* on Rodrigues Rs 1500

A six-pack of Phoenix beer Rs 320

HOW MUCH IN SEYCHELLES?

One night in a swish resort – the sky's the limit

Local bus ride €0.50

Boat excursion €110

One dive €50

Bottle of Seybrew beer €1.50

HOW MUCH IN RÉUNION?

Tandem flight paragliding in St-Leu €75

Car hire per week €220

Stodgy *carri* (curry) €10

One night in a *chambre d'hôte* (double) €45

Glass of local rum €3

adventure in the Aubrey-Maturin series, which sees Captain Jack Aubrey sent on a mission to rid Mauritius and Réunion of the French during the Napoleonic Wars. It's considered by some to be the best of the entire Aubrey-Maturin series.

In his funny and informative book *Golden Bats & Pink Pigeons*, naturalist Gerald Durrell tells of his time spent rescuing a number of Mauritian species from the brink of extinction. Durrell was too late for the dodo, but Errol Fuller does the bird proud with his comprehensive and quirky *Dodo: From Extinction to Icon*, which covers the history and the myths surrounding this endearing creature.

TOP 10

MAURITIUS

BEACHES IN THE REGION

Competition is stiff in this department. Here's a list of our favourites.

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|---|---|
| 1 Anse Source d'Argent, La Digue, Seychelles (p302) | 6 L'Hermitage-les-Bains, Réunion (p189) |
| 2 Anse Lazio, Praslin, Seychelles (p295) | 7 Eastern Beaches, Rodrigues (p135) |
| 3 Anse Intendance, Mahé, Seychelles (p291) | 8 Île aux Cerfs, Mauritius (p130) |
| 4 Baie Laraie, Curieuse, Seychelles (p297) | 9 Pointe d'Esny, Mauritius (p118) |
| 5 Étang-Salé-les-Bains, Réunion (p199) | 10 Ile Plate, Mauritius (p86) |

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Festivals in the Indian Ocean are always spectacular and often unusual. For other events, see Festivals & Events in the individual country directories.

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|---|---|
| 1 Teemeedee – December and January, Mauritius (p152) and Réunion (p236) | 6 Sakifo – August, St-Pierre (p261) |
| 2 Maha Shivaratri – February or March, Grand Bassin (p109) | 7 Festival Kreol – last week in October, Seychelles (p314) |
| 3 National Day – 12 March, Mauritius (p153) | 8 Divali (Dipavali) – late October or early November, Réunion (p236) and Mauritius (p152) |
| 4 FetAfrik – May, Mahé, Seychelles (p314) | 9 Grand Raid – October or November, Réunion (p262) |
| 5 Independence Day – 29 June, Seychelles (p314) | 10 Abolition of Slavery Day – 20 December; Réunion (p262) |

GREEN FORAYS

Go slow, go green and buzz sustainable in these havens off the tourist track.

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|--|--|
| 1 Îlet des Salazes, Réunion (p205) | 6 Cousin Island, Seychelles (p297) |
| 2 Cirque de Mafate, Réunion (p212) | 7 Bird Island, Seychelles (p308) |
| 3 Grand Bassin, Réunion (p213) | 8 South Coast, Mauritius (p121) |
| 4 Rivière des Remparts, Réunion (p228) | 9 Black River Gorges National Park, Mauritius (p107) |
| 5 Morne Seychellois National Park, Seychelles (p287) | 10 François Leguat, Rodrigues (p137) |

TIPS FOR RESPONSIBLE TRAVEL

- Be careful not to damage coral reefs when diving or snorkelling.
- Never buy souvenirs made from materials such as turtleshell, seashells or coral.
- Never drop litter anywhere and bring a bag to pick up any litter left by less considerate people.
- Buy locally made produce, souvenirs and other day-to-day objects whenever possible.
- Don't light fires and be very careful when disposing of cigarette butts, particularly during droughts or the dry season.

An unusual book about Réunion's social history is Françoise Verges' *Monsters and Revolutionaries*, which looks at the complex relationship between the colonisers and colonised on the island through a number of different prisms.

Seychelles travel lit is best represented by Athol Thomas' *Forgotten Eden*. Though written in the 1960s and now out of print (but available as an ebook), it still paints a vivid picture of the beauty and magic of these islands.

Beyond the Reefs by William Travis takes a look back at the Seychelles of the 1970s, before conservation issues came to the fore, when Travis saw plenty of action as a shark fisher and latter-day adventurer.

Empires of the Monsoon by Richard Hall is the most informative and entertaining history of the Indian Ocean. It only touches briefly on Mauritius, Réunion and the Seychelles, but it does place them in a broader context.

INTERNET RESOURCES

Lonely Planet (www.lonelyplanet.com) Summaries on travel to Mauritius, Réunion and the Seychelles; the Thorn Tree forum; travel news and links to useful travel resources.

Mauritius Government Portal (www.gov.mu) This huge and multifaceted site contains all the information you could ever need about Mauritius including a huge selection of links.

Mauritius Tourism Promotion Authority (www.tourism-mauritius.mu) Has a great selection of hotels, activities and other useful information including plenty of ecotourism suggestions.

Réunion Tourisme (www.reunion.fr) Réunion's official tourist website is an encyclopedia of things to see and do.

Seychelles.com (www.seychelles.com) Official home of the Seychelles Tourism Board, this website overflows with great tips and ideas.

Nature Seychelles (www.natureseychelles.org) An excellent resource for anyone interested in environment-related matters and conservation issues in the Seychelles.

Itineraries

CLASSIC ROUTES

JAUNT AROUND MAURITIUS

Two Weeks

Start near the airport along the stunning sands of **Pointe d'Esny** (p118). Snorkel through the sparkling azure lagoon at **Blue Bay** (p118), eco-explore **Île aux Aigrettes** (p118), then slip up to sleepy **Mahébourg** (p113) for the Monday market.

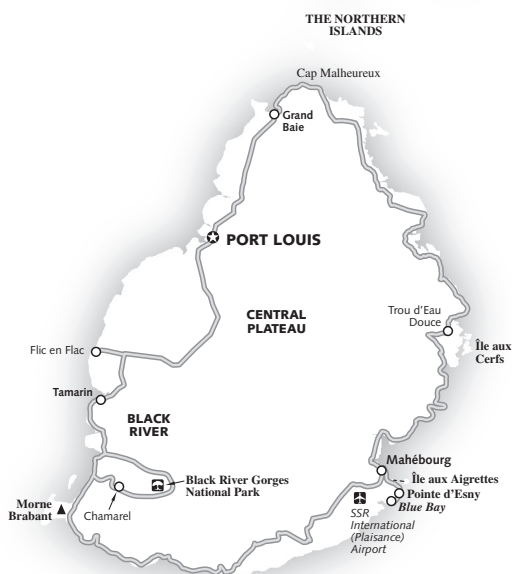
Drive north along the coast. Embrace the fisherman lifestyle in **Trou d'Eau Douce** (p128) then glide through the crystal lagoon to **Île aux Cerfs** (p130).

Pass through the endless acreage of sky-reaching sugarcane before emerging on the north coast to take in the views at **Cap Malheureux** (p94). Hop on a catamaran bound for the scenic **northern islands** (p86) then treat yourself to a round of repasts in lively **Grand Baie** (p88).

The wonderfully chaotic streets of **Port Louis** (p64) are next on the itinerary. Then head south through urban sprawl that stretches along the **Central Plateau** (p73).

Emerge on the west coast for a spot of diving in **Flic en Flac** (p119) then base yourself around **Black River** (p103). From here, there are plenty of exhilarating options to get the blood flowing: canyoning through the **Black River Gorges** (p107), biking in **Chamarel** (p108) or climbing the iconic **Morne Brabant** (p112). Don't miss a morning of dolphin-watching just off the coast of **Tamarin** (p104).

The two-week circuit of Mauritius will take you to sun-drenched beaches, botanical gardens, idyllic islands and lively market towns, all packed into just 300km.



TOUR OF RÉUNION

Two Weeks

In two weeks, you can loop around the island, take a couple of jaunts into the interior and even visit a volcano.

Spend the first day sampling the infamous nightlife of **St-Gilles-les-Bains** (p189) before heading to the beach to recover at **L'Hermitage-les-Bains** (p189). Allow three days to make the most of the area's botanical gardens, museums and water sports.

Head next to the **Cirque de Cilaos** (p202), where you should allow at least two days to soak up the rugged mountain scenery and the laid-back atmosphere.

The volcano awaits at **Piton de la Fournaise** (p217). Base yourself at the Gîte du Volcan, ready to make a dawn ascent for stunning views.

Next make for the bright lights of **St-Pierre** (p220) – if possible, get here for the huge Saturday market and stay the night near **St-Joseph** (p227). Don't miss **Ste-Rose** (p239), where lava laps at the door of a church and narrowly misses the Virgin Mary.

As you head back to the north of the island, go inland and stay at least two nights in **Hell-Bourg** (p210), exploring the **Cirque de Salazie** (p209). Finally, set off towards the capital via the Indian-influenced **St-André** (p235) and end your trip sampling café-culture and Creole architecture in the capital, **St-Denis** (p176).



From sophisticated beach resorts to mountain villages, art galleries to volcanoes, two weeks is perfect to sample the variety Réunion has to offer. Get hooked on the hiking, and you could easily fill a month. This tour covers around 400km.

ESSENTIAL SEYCHELLES

Two Weeks

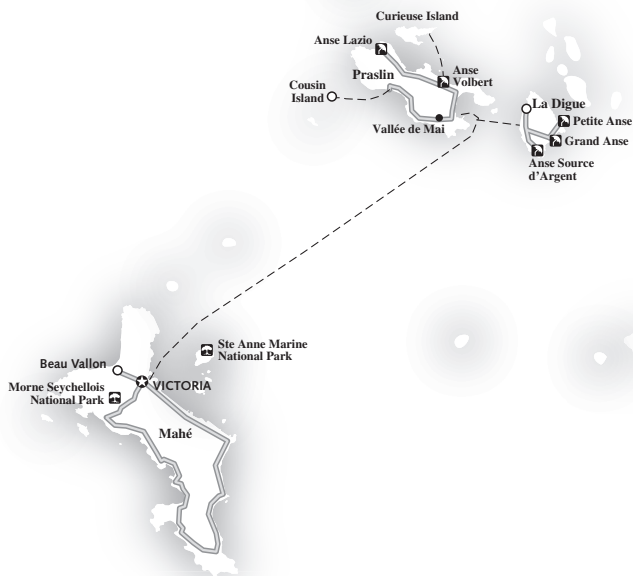
Two weeks is fine for a taster of the Seychelles' islands – allowing plenty of time for enjoying the very best of the country's superb beaches.

On the first day, tune into island life in the capital, **Victoria** (p279), checking out the market and strolling among the palm trees in the botanical gardens. Move on to **Beau Vallon** (p283), where three days can easily be spent messing around in and on the water – schedule in a day's diving or a boat trip to **Ste Anne Marine National Park** (p288). Devote the next two days to the beaches and byways of **Mahé** (p279), and walking in the **Morne Seychellois National Park** (p287).

Next, cruise over to **Praslin** (p294). Ogle curvaceous coco-de-mer nuts in the **Vallée de Mai** (p295), before flaking out on the perfect, sugar-white sands at **Anse Lazio** (p295). Fill the next four days with snorkelling, diving and swimming off **Anse Volbert** (p295), getting up close and personal with giant tortoises on **Curieuse Island** (p297) and walking among cacophonous clouds of sea birds on **Cousin Island** (p297).

From Praslin, make sail for **La Digue** (p302). Three days is the perfect amount of time to lapse into La Digue's slow vibe. Visit **Anse Source d'Argent** (p302) – the archetypal paradise beach. Get there late afternoon for the best atmosphere. Take a snorkelling trip around nearby islands, then find solitude on the beaches of **Grand Anse** (p302) and **Petite Anse** (p303). All too soon, it will be time to tear yourself away for the trip back to Victoria.

In just 200km and two weeks, this tour will cover the three main islands and a smattering of satellite islands, plus a sampler of marine parks, bird reserves and native forests. There's even time for boat trips and water sports.



ROADS LESS TRAVELLED

RODRIGUES – THE OTHER MAURITIUS

One Week

Some call Rodrigues a mini-Mauritius, even though it's different in almost every way. What they really mean is that this is the closest you can get to what Mauritius was like before tourism took off, with an almost total lack of development compared to the mainland, and few tourists make it out this far on the 1½-hour flight into the Indian Ocean. A week is ample time to discover the delights of this small, mountainous island. Depending on the weather you can divide the days between walking, diving and taking boat trips to nearby islands.

First, though, spend half a day strolling the streets of **Port Mathurin** (p137). The island's endearingly sleepy 'capital' springs into life on Saturday morning when it seems the entire population descends for the weekly market.

The classic coastal hike starts at **St François** (p139), then heads south via a gem of a beach at **Trou d'Argent** (p139) to **Graviers** (p139), from where there are buses back to Port Mathurin.

You're spoilt for choice when it comes to diving. Top spots include the channel off St François, **La Passe St François** (p30), on the edge of the lagoon, with more options beyond the reefs. As for boat trips, first choice should be **Île aux Cocos** (p137) for its wealth of birdlife. There's good snorkelling around the little-visited **Île aux Chats** and **Île Hermitage** (p137) off the south coast.

On your last day, treat yourself to a seafood feast at one of the great family-run restaurants scattered around the island.



Leave behind the commercialism of Mauritius' main island for a week to discover a more traditional way of life among the fishing and agricultural communities of Rodrigues. Divers are in for a treat, too, exploring the underwater world of the massive, encircling lagoon.

RÉUNION'S SUD SAUVAGE

One Week

Réunion's 'Wild South' offers volcanic landscapes, massive ravines, wave-lashed cliffs and sensational hiking trails. You can discover the best of the region in a reasonably leisurely week.

Start at **Ste-Rose** (p239) and head south to find the first tongues of lava tumbling down to the sea. Pay a quick visit to the **Vierge au Parasol** (p240) before crossing the threatening lava fields of **Le Grand Brûlé** (p232), to spend a night or two near **St-Philippe** (p231) or **St-Joseph** (p227); stay up in the hills for a real taste of rural life. From here you can visit a spice garden, learn about vanilla and local crafts or hike the spectacular **Rivière des Remparts** (p228).

Pass quickly through **St-Pierre** (p220) en route to the high plateau of **Plaine-des-Cafres** (p214) to visit the **Maison du Volcan** (p215). Take the magnificent forest road up to **Piton de la Fournaise** (p217), Réunion's restless volcano. Climb to the top at the crack of dawn to leave the crowds behind.

Now drop back down to Plaine-des-Cafres, where you could spend a couple of days hiking to **Grand Bassin** (p215), a village at the end of the world. Finally, head for **Plaine-des-Palmistes** (p218), where the hikes through the **Forêt de Bébou-Bélouve** (p219) and to **Trou de Fer** (p220) provide unforgettable experiences.

This one-week tour of southern Réunion takes you across lava fields, past breathtaking coastal scenery and up a volcano to gaze into the jaws of the giant. It ends 200km later among the quiet rural villages of the high plains.



TAILORED TRIPS

THE ADRENALIN RUSH

Réunion rightly markets itself as the ‘intense isle’; almost every conceivable stomach-churning, heart-pumping activity is on offer. With a bit of planning – and a fair amount of cash – adventure-sports enthusiasts can test their stamina in an action-packed week. Check your insurance policy, take a deep breath and go for it!

Kick off day one in **St-Gilles-les-Bains** (p202) with an ear-popping helicopter ride, ducking and weaving around the three Cirques. On landing, hotfoot it up to **Le Maïdo** (p187), grab a mountain bike and hurtle down to the coast again along vertiginous biking trails.

Later that day push on to **Cilaos** (p204). Make a crack-of-dawn start to scale the almost vertical **Piton des Neiges** (p206); to really enjoy the experience, spread the climb over two days. On day four, there’s a choice between slithering down canyons, bouncing down rivers on a raft or galloping amid forests and pastures in the Hautes Plaines in Réunion’s heartland.

At the end of day four, head for **St-Leu** (p195). Spend days five and six swooping high above the lagoon by paraglider, plunging off the reef to scuba dive with sharks, or surfing the world-famous left-hander – La Gauche de St-Leu – at the mouth of the **Ravine des Colimaçons** (p196); less-experienced surfers will find thrills and spills aplenty riding the area’s quieter waves.

Day seven? Definitely the day of rest!

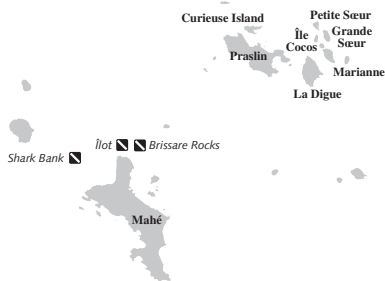
DIVER’S & SNORKELLER’S DELIGHT

You could spend a lifetime diving the reefs and granite outcrops of the Seychelles, but a week is enough time to sample a range of sites, including some of the very best in the Indian Ocean.

Jump in at the deep end at **Shark Bank** (p33) off the northwest coast of **Mahé** (p33). No prizes for guessing what’s in store here: sharks aplenty with their stingray sidekicks, barracuda and other bruisers. Off Mahé’s north tip, **Ilot** (p33) offers an unbelievable variety of smaller fish in shimmering shoals. Nearby, **Brissare Rocks** (p33) is ablaze with fire coral.

On day four, head over to **Praslin** (p33) for a change of scene. The waters around **Curieuse Island** (p297) are teeming with fish life in dazzling, dizzying displays.

Spend your last day exploring the islands northwest of **La Digue** (p33). The rock formations around **Île Cocos** (p304), **Marianne** (p34) and the sisters, **Petite Sœur** and **Grande Sœur** (p304), are out of this world. Marine turtles are common, while stingrays, eagle rays and reef sharks add a touch of spice. Even the odd manta and whale shark cruise through from time to time.



The Authors



JEAN-BERNARD CARILLET

Coordinating Author

Paris-based journalist and photographer Jean-Bernard has clocked up numerous trips to the Indian Ocean and written extensively about Réunion and the Seychelles. Being a diving instructor, he was all too happy to don his mask to check out the best dive sites in the region, before putting on his hiking shoes to explore the rugged Cirques and scale up the iconic Piton des Neiges in Réunion. In the Seychelles he examined every burg, shore and cove searching for the perfect beach, the best grilled fish and the best-value hotels, and ended playing castaway for a week following an eruption of an unpronounceable volcano in Iceland.

Jean-Bernard has contributed to many Lonely Planet titles, both in French and in English.



BRANDON PRESSER

Mauritius Snapshots, Mauritius, Rodrigues, Mauritius Directory

Dreams of island living started early for this landlocked Canadian, so naturally he jumped at the opportunity to explore some of the Indian Ocean's treasures. Armed with his non-Métropole French background, a penchant for spicy curries and a Divemaster certification, Brandon managed to fit right in – he even tricked a few Mauritians into showing him their secret haunts!

Brandon works as a full-time freelance travel writer and spends most of the year trotting the globe, pen in hand. He's authored around 20 Lonely Planet guides covering a variety of other far-flung island destinations such as Borneo, Iceland, the Caribbean and southern Thailand.

LONELY PLANET AUTHORS

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