

Mauritius



JEAN-BERNARD CABILLET

Mauritius Snapshots

Mauritius is squaring up to be one of the Indian Ocean's most progressive and dynamic nations, with an increasingly impressive and malleable economic model, and a liberal democratic political culture that has become the envy of many African neighbours.

With its traditional industries of sugar, tea, tobacco and textiles bottoming out after a long decline, Mauritius is in the process of reorienting itself towards the private sector with advancements in IT and banking to ensure its long-term economic viability. Mauritius also has close relationships with the two economic and political powerhouses of the region, South Africa and India, and its unique position both culturally and geographically between Africa and Asia has allowed Mauritius to punch well above its weight internationally. Although tourism numbers have dipped due to the shifting economic climate, locals are optimistic that rampant consumerism will resume once the financial dark cloud lifts.

Despite this positive outlook, Mauritius is not a place without problems. Racial conflict simmers in some urban areas, particularly between Hindu and Muslim populations, creating an atmosphere of tension in and around Port Louis which, while unnoticeable to most visitors, rather goes against the culture of tolerance and mutual respect that underpins Mauritian society – officially at least.

Internationally, tensions continue between Mauritius and its former colonial master, Britain, over the shabby British treatment of both Mauritius and the Chagos Islanders in the dispute about ownership of the Chagos Archipelago. The British-owned islands are leased until 2016 to the US, which uses the main island, Diego Garcia, as one of its major air bases (see p52). Mauritius claims the archipelago as its own territory, and the British, who have removed some 2000 Chagossians to Mauritius and the Seychelles (despite several international legal cases that have deemed this illegal), are refusing to budge an inch. Legal battles continue to wage regarding whether or not to allow the Chagossians to lawfully return to their homeland.

Domestically, corruption remains a big issue in all walks of life – it brought down the first government of current prime minister, Navin Ramgoolam, in 2000 when two of his senior ministers were accused of taking huge backhanders. Ramgoolam is back in power now after a brief hiatus when Paul Béranger, the first non-Hindu prime minister of Mauritius, led the country. The same names conspicuously crop up again and again in Mauritian politics – Navin Ramgoolam is, after all, the son of Sir Seewoosagar Ramgoolam, Mauritius' independence leader and the island's first prime minister. Politics is definitely a family affair, as exhibited once more on 5 May 2010 when Ramgoolam once again defeated Béranger.

In 2005 an epidemic of Chikungunya (a viral disease spread by mosquitoes) swept across Mauritius and the neighbouring nations in the Indian Ocean. This resulted in a sharp drop in hotel reservations, but the numbers bounced back by the end of 2006. The Ministry of Health promptly eradicated the problem and an emergency action plan was put in place should a similar situation happen in the future. Tourist numbers fell once again in 2009 – this time because of the global economic recession. Nonetheless, the luxury travel market seems to be slowly turning back in the right direction and construction and refurbishment have forged forward with full force to accommodate the projected numbers once the world's markets realign.

Despite Mauritius making economic progress in recent years, this isn't felt at all levels of society. Patches of extreme poverty still exist throughout

FAST FACTS

Population: 1,277,300

Area: 2040 sq km

Total coastline: 177km

Highest point: Mt Piton
(828m)

Literacy rate: male
88.4%, female 80.6%

Unemployment rate:
7.8%

Life expectancy: 72.6
years

Annual GDP: US\$16.1
billion

Population living below
the poverty line: 10%

Languages: English,
Creole, Bhojपुरi & French

After a mostly steady increase in tourism over the last 20 years, Mauritius' tourist numbers dropped by a noticeable 5.7% from 2008 to 2009 due to the global economic recession.