

# Réunion



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# Réunion Snapshots

After having faced a major health crisis in 2006 and 2007 due to the mosquito-borne Chikungunya virus, Réunion is back on its feet. By mid-2007 the 'Chik', as it's dubbed in Réunion, was eradicated. The future looks brighter now. Despite the worldwide downturn in tourism, the sector has been slowly picking up again. Local authorities lay emphasis on the island's 'green' image and its fantastic opportunities for ecotourism and outdoor activities. Their aim is to tap into new markets, especially the German and Anglophone ones, in order to reduce the dependence on the French market.

Paradoxically, one of the greatest immediate concerns is not the environment but the ever-growing population. Recent estimates suggest that the population of Réunion will reach one million by 2020. Housing and transport are the main problems. Already there is tremendous pressure on building land. Most of the population is concentrated on the coastal strip, where the towns are gradually beginning to merge into one continuous urban 'ring'. Houses are also spreading slowly up the hillsides and traffic congestion is becoming a major headache. To relieve some of this pressure, the government invested in an ambitious expressway, the Route des Tamarins, between St-Paul and Étang-Salé-les-Bains, which was inaugurated in June 2009 after six years of work. Another mammoth project, the 'Tram-Train', was in the pipeline until May 2010, when it was dropped for lack of funding. It was a sort of tramway, which would have connected Ste-Marie to St-Paul (40km) via St-Denis. That said, environmentalists still hope that this project will be reactivated.

## FAST FACTS

Population: 820,000  
(estimated)

Territory size: 2512 sq km

Languages: French,  
Creole

Capital: St-Denis

Highest point: Piton des  
Neiges (3070m)

Distance from Réunion to  
Mauritius: 220km

Unemployment: 30%

Estimated number of  
cars: 350,000

Lychee season: Dec-Feb

The most ruthless hunter of runaway slaves was François Mussard, whose name is now remembered only because it has been given to a dank, dark cave near Piton des Neiges.

## HISTORY

Réunion has a history similar to that of Mauritius. It was colonised by the French after the mid-17th century but later fell briefly under British rule. As in Mauritius, the colonisers introduced plantation crops and African slaves. Later came Indian indentured labourers and Chinese merchants, creating an ethnic diversity which is one of these islands' most distinctive characteristics. While Mauritius gained its independence in 1968, Réunion remains an overseas department of France.

## WELCOME TO PARADISE

The first visitors to the uninhabited island were probably Malay, Arab and European mariners, none of whom stayed. Then, in 1642, the French took the decision to settle the island, which at the time was called Mascarin. The first settlers arrived four years later, when the French governor of Fort Dauphin in southern Madagascar banished a dozen mutineers to the island.

On the basis of enthusiastic reports from the mutineers, King Louis XIV of France officially claimed the island in 1649 and renamed it Île Bourbon.

However appealing it seemed, there was no great rush to populate and develop the island. It was not until the beginning of the 18th century that the French East India Company and the French government took control of the island.

## COFFEE, ANYONE?

Coffee was introduced between 1715 and 1730 and soon became the island's main cash crop. The island's economy changed dramatically. As coffee