

# En mer à l'île\* Maurice

By Marc Cloete  
Photos [www.jonivins.com](http://www.jonivins.com)



★ Mauritius by sea



THE PADDLE TO BERNACHE ISLAND FOR LUNCH IS TYPICAL MAURITIUS - CALM WATER, CLEAR SKIES AND WHITE BEACHES.

Stop reading your book, put your cocktails down and get off your lounge because beautiful coastlines, crackling coral, unique wildlife and a venerable heritage lie waiting to be explored. Mauritius is not all about hotels and downtime, and as the SA Paddler team discovered, there is so much more to do than work on your tan.

As one of the Indian Ocean's 'Paradise Islands' it's easy to see what has made the tiny country such a popular tourist destination. The picture postcard clichés of white sand melting into a sheet of turquoise water can be found around practically every corner. Not to say that you'd ever get bored of the scenery, but thankfully familiarity does creep in to the point where you can keep your jaw shut. The island has made its name as a place to kick back and soak up the sun, and there can't be many better places to be than sprawled on the shore with warm water lapping at your feet and not a plan for the day. There is an alter-ego lurking below the utopian surface, as unkept city centres heave under the population strain and the local creoles eke out simple livings, most off the back of tourism. Still, Mauritius more than lives up to its reputation as a tropical lazy-days paradise, plus there is a burgeoning adventure market that you wouldn't associate it with on face value.

We had quite an introduction to the island as Olivier Bourquin fetched us in his van and took us through a sugar cane plantation to a river called Eau Bleue, in the southern interior. The activity involved a crash course in abseiling and then literally a float down the river in wetsuits. The water and rock formations seemed unbeliev-

able, and the four waterfalls en route to the finish all posed a tough question: jump or abseil? With heights varying from 5m to 16m, the decisions turned out to be painfully important! But we were there to paddle, and a day later the group was soaking up the immaculate coastline of this fascinating country from the best vantage point possible.

2000km off the east coast of mainland Africa, Mauritius is a mass of coral reefs risen from volcanic eruptions roughly 10 million years ago. It was first discovered by Arab sailors in the 9th century AD, probably more by accident than anything else because it was quite far off any established trade route and was totally uninhabited. Around 1507, Portuguese sailors spotted Mauritius and named it Cerne, while the group of three small islands in the area including Réunion and Rodrigues were collectively named the Mascarenes after the Portuguese captain. The island was never settled until 1598 when a small colony of Dutch arrived from the Cape of Good Hope. Apart from giving the island its present name of Mauritius after Prince Maurice de Nassau, they would have the greatest influence of all colonists on the land. They introduced a famous species of stag from Java that thrived, and now wear the brunt of the hunting industry, as well as the sugar cane that now accounts for 25% of Mauritius' exports. After battling to withstand cyclones, pirate visits and food shortages, and due to general degradation of the settlement, the Dutch abandoned the island in 1710. By this time they had destroyed the forests of ebony trees and famously killed the last of the Dodo – a large,

innocent, flightless bird that the Portuguese had dubbed 'simpleton.'

The local people today have a vast knowledge of the country's history and each can proudly tell a story behind some historic fact. The sight of wrecked ships near random parts of the coral reef serves as back up to the tales. Like any top guide, Patrick Haberland knows more than most about his 'office'. As the owner of Yemaya Adventures, he has lead eco-friendly paddling, mountain biking and hiking activities all over the island, and knows more than a thing or two about its heritage and natural environment. Yemaya, he later explained, is the name of the African God of the Sea. His tall sinewy frame hints back to his days as a top cyclist who has represented his country in the Commonwealth Games, and he now boasts the impressive talent of paddling and talking on his phone at the same time. We met up with him one morning in the northern suburb of Goodlands and were immediately whisked off to the coast. After a brief safety drill we eased onto the aquamarine road that would become our highway for the next three days. The first day would be spent tripping his regular and most popular day journey to Ile d'Ambre, a small island off the northeastern coast that is characterised by thriving mangroves bordering channels of sea life. After snorkelling around a lively brain coral, it was off to Bernache Island for a baguette and sailfish lunch on the beach, and a casual laze in the warm shallow waters. Lunch, drinking water and snorkelling kit were all supplied, and stored in the front and back hatches of the comfortable sit-on-top kay-

## Fast facts:

- Exchange Rate:** (Rupees) MR4.60 = R1.00
- To get there:** Air Mauritius offer flights direct from Durban and via Johannesburg - roughly 4 hours flight time.
- Health Risks:** The island has been mildly affected by the Chikungunya

virus, carried by mosquitos and characterised by severe headaches, chills, fever and joint and muscle pains after a 3-12 day incubation period. There is no vaccine or specific therapy available so prevention through insecticides is recommended.  
**When in Mauritius:** Drink the locally made beer (Phoenix) and eat the local roti-style foods (Faratas and Dholi Pourri) filled with beans, lentils and rice.

"You get the idea that Mauritius was made first and then heaven, and that heaven was copied after Mauritius."

Mark Twain (1863-1910)



WEAVING BETWEEN THE MANGROVES ON YEMAYA'S MOST POPULAR DAY TRIP.



THERE'S ACTION APLENTY AROUND THE ISLAND, AND JUMPING OFF 13M WATERFALLS TOPS IT ALL.



THE SNORKELLING IS SIMPLY WORLD CLASS AND THE UNDERSEA LIFE IS INCOMPARABLE.

aks. Stomach's satisfied, it was a short paddle to the breakers at the reef and then a downwind to Patrick's home at Calodyne. The reef is so protective that paddling inside it is literally like cruising a lagoon. The difference is that the water is the richest blue-green colour imaginable, clear enough to watch the world carry on below you as you stroke harmlessly above it. Sea kayaking is becoming increasingly popular as a tourist attraction in Mauritius because of the calm, safe water and excellent snorkelling opportunities right off your boat - notwithstanding the fact you're paddling around a stunning tropical island!

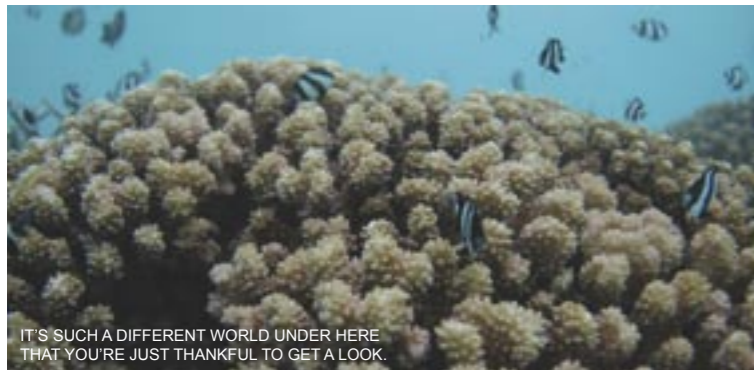
The property where his house stands is shared with his parents and uncle's homes, and includes a newly renovated cottage for his clients. It is the embodiment of comfort, complete with hammock, beach access and vistas of the bay and Coin de Mire Island. His German father and Franco-Mauritian mother welcomed us as part of the family, and that's exactly how we felt sitting around a traditional dinner of tuna curry, lentils and rice.  
The French occupation of the island from 1715 to 1810 accounts for most of the culture including food, laws and language. Their landing

transformed a stripped, abandoned land into an orderly, thriving colony with a new name – Ile de France. Even though English and French are now the official languages, and almost all media and literature is in French, a colloquial derivative developed among the slaves that arrived with them. Creole, as it is now known, is the everyday tongue of nearly all the inhabitants - who together make Mauritius arguably the most multicultural of all Indian Ocean islands. Descendants of Indians, Africans, Asians and Europeans all combine today in a friendly, relaxed atmosphere that gives truth to the saying 'No problem in

The reef is so protective that paddling inside it is literally like cruising a lagoon



THE REASON MAURITIUS IS SUCH A POPULAR HOLIDAY DESTINATION.



IT'S SUCH A DIFFERENT WORLD UNDER HERE THAT YOU'RE JUST THANKFUL TO GET A LOOK.



CANYONING AT EAU BLEUE, WHICH MEANS BLUE WATER. GUESS WHY.



THE DEPARTURE POINT FOR THE SECOND DAY FROM POINTE AUX PIMENTS, WITH THE LOCAL BOATS (PIROGUES) MOORED IN THE BACKGROUND.

Mauritius.'

That's until you crash two of your host's fibreglass boats into each other while riding a wave! After much embarrassment and apologising, we had to cut the party by two for the rest of the day. Patrick was extremely accommodating and summed it up with the apt phrase, "Shit happens!" Pointe aux Piments on the north west coast had been our departure point after a breakfast at a local seaside café. We then paddled out around the coastline and onto Balaclava for some snorkelling at the Marine Park. This particular section of coast was packed with hotels side-by-side and the Park, ironically, had a motorboat 'lane' right through the middle of it. Patrick, however, is involved with the marine conservation society and placed this at the head of all activities – swimming with fins was also prohibited because of its effect on the seabed.

Interestingly, all beaches are public property, but the hotels employ guards to keep 'their' sections clear – unless you know the law!

Out of the protected bay we paddled behind the breakers and around an exposed point that was being pounded by the sea. Cresting the swells and looking back into the hollow break was an exhilarating experience. The day finished at Tombeau Bay, just north of the capital Port Louis. As always, Patrick's sidekick Hemraj was there to fetch us and help load the boats onto the trailer.

Driving back north, we chose to spend the afternoon strolling through the streets of Grand Baie, lapping up the local culture and dodging the primary form of transport - 50cc motorbikes that include pedals for when the petrol runs out! The shops are all so well cared for, and the owners are only too willing to try and sell you some-

thing. The popular town is also home to some good bars and restaurants overlooking bays where boats and the local pirogues are moored, waiting for the next day's fishing action.

Our final day's paddling was possibly the most spectacular. We had a picnic breakfast at the well-known surfing spot Tamarin Bay on the East coast, before paddling out around the waves, and keeping clear of the local surfers. Dolphins are quite regular visitors at this particular bay but we weren't lucky enough to crack their nod. We paddled south and stopped for another snorkel before playing around a unique mushroom-shaped coral island in the middle of nowhere. Ile aux Bénitiers was the lunch spot for the day where Kissen's generous fish braai (whole fish on the flame and then onto your plate) hit the perfect spot. Patrick makes excellent use of the local people's skills wherever he

can, bridging financial divides and enriching his offering. The afternoon cruise was further down the south coast to Le Morne – a large sheer rock mountain that rises out of nothing. The story goes that a group of escaped slaves went and hid high in the caves of the mountain. When the English abolished slavery in 1835, an expedition was sent to tell the slaves that they were free and could come out of hiding. The slaves saw them coming and, preferring death to slavery, jumped off the top of the mountain. For such a sad history, it is an unbelievably beautiful coast with some of the top hotels.

Apart from the local tour operators, the hotels

have also begun giving tourists some really good adventure opportunities. Beachcomber's Shandrani Hotel in the southeast corner of Mauritius offer a host of activities, including a paddling trip to the tiny coral island off Mahebourg called Ile aux Aigrettes. This is a must-visit place for all nature lovers because of the fascinating information on the indigenous flora and fauna imparted by the knowledgeable guides. It is also home to thriving rehabilitation projects involving birds like the Pink Pigeon and Mauritian Kestrel (there were only six left at one stage), and a number of indigenous plants. The local market is also an eye opening, and bargain riddled attraction that

can soak up hours of interest. The vendors all travel together, spending each day of the week in a different town. And then all you've got to make time for is to learn how to sail a hobie-cat, go mountain-biking through the sugar cane plantations, take kite-surfing lessons, go deep-sea fishing and experience the mountainside of things by horse-trail.

There's a whole other side to Mauritius that you don't often hear about in travel brochures. It means losing the beach-lounging stereotype and getting out there to experience the best of what the island has to offer. And it also means the time of your life. ★



Yemaya Adventures offer flexible, customisable sea kayaking, mountain biking and hiking trips to suit all abilities and all objectives. Contact Patrick Haberland on (230) 752 0046 or email [haberland@intnet.mu](mailto:haberland@intnet.mu) Visit [www.yemayaadventures.com](http://www.yemayaadventures.com) for more info.

The Shandrani Hotel is a 5-star adventure-packed paradise, located in the southeast area of Blue Bay only 6km from the airport. Visit [www.beachcomber-hotels.com](http://www.beachcomber-hotels.com) for rates and a full list of services and activities offered.

Canyoning trips are the adrenaline rush of the island. Otélair offer half and day trips at Eau Bleue. Contact Olivier Bourquin on (230) 696 6750, email [otelair@intnet.mu](mailto:otelair@intnet.mu) or visit [www.otelair.com](http://www.otelair.com)

For exquisite mountain lodges offering horse trails, hikes and more, contact Caroline from Les Ecuries de la Vieille Cheminée, in the tourist attractive Chamarel area overlooking the west coast, on (230) 686 5027 or visit [www.ecuriecheminee.com](http://www.ecuriecheminee.com)

Ara tours offer comfortable, affordable car hire, and are based in Peyreybere in the far north. Phone Arasen on (230) 729 1197.