

Mauritius Snapshots

Despite a serious recession following the millennium, Mauritius is today squaring up to be one of the Indian Ocean's most progressive and dynamic nations, with an increasingly impressive economic model and a liberal democratic political culture many of its African neighbours are sorely in need of.

With its traditional industries of sugar, tea, tobacco and textiles at the end of a long decline, Mauritius is in the process of reorienting itself towards IT, banking and tourism to ensure its long-term economic viability. With its close relationships to 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, Mauritius continues to punch well above its weight internationally, and has continued to be an investment-friendly market place, with enviable stability by regional standards.

Despite this positive outlook, Mauritius is not a place without problems. Racial conflict still 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 as well, tensions still continue between Mauritius and its former colonial masters, 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 p42). Mauritius claims the archipelago as its own territory, and the British, who have removed some 2000 Chagossians to Mauritius and Seychelles (despite several international legal cases that have deemed this illegal) are refusing to budge an inch. Following a new ruling by the UK's Court of Appeal in 2007, however, they may be forced to – the judge described Britain's acts as unlawful and ruled that the Chagossians had the right of return to all islands save Diego Garcia itself with immediate effect.

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 was back in power at the time of writing, however, after a brief hiatus when Paul Bérenger, 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 Seewoosagur Ramgoolam, Mauritius' independence leader and the island's first prime minister – and politics is definitely a family affair here, although this is something shrugged off by locals on the whole.

Another recent problem was the Chikungunya epidemic (see p309), which afflicted many countries across the Indian Ocean, and resulted in a sharp drop in hotel reservations and visitor numbers in 2005 to 2006. Numbers bounced back by the end of 2006, however, and although Chikungunya is still present in Mauritius, there's no longer the epidemic there was in 2005. In general Mauritius came off far better than Réunion, where deaths and infections were both much higher.

Despite Mauritius making great economic progress in recent years, this isn't felt at all levels of society. Patches of extreme poverty still exist throughout the island (particularly in Port Louis, some shanty towns

FAST FACTS

Population: 1,250,000

Area: 2040 sq km

Total coastline: 177km

Highest point: Mt Piton (828m)

Literacy rate: 85.6%

Unemployment rate: 9.4%

Life expectancy: 72.88 years

Annual GDP: US\$16.7 billion

Population living below the poverty line: 10%

Languages: English, Creole, Bhojपुरi & French

around the country and – most pronouncedly – in Rodrigues) although most visitors are unlikely to witness this first hand.

All in all, things look rosy today for this buoyant and ambitious island nation, aware of its problems but fiercely proud of its multiculturalism, tolerance and stability, just off the coast of a continent where these traits are in all too short a supply.

HISTORY

Mauritius had no native population predating the European colonisers (unless you count the ill-fated dodo), and so unlike many other small islands for which colonisation resulted in the savage destruction of the native inhabitants a short period later, Mauritius' initial history is pleasantly guilt-free (again, unless you count the dodo). This historical point is vastly important to understanding the country's inclusive culture of tolerance and easy acceptance of all people: there's nobody in the ethnic melting pot able to claim precedence over the others. Broadly speaking Mauritius experienced four distinct historical periods in its colonisation leading up to full independence from the UK in 1968.

THE FIRST COLONISERS

Although Arab traders knew of Mauritius – which they rather unfairly called Dina Arobi (Isle of Desolation) – perhaps as early as the 10th century, the first Europeans to discover these uninhabited islands were the Portuguese, around 1507. They, too, were more interested in trade and never attempted to settle.

In 1598, a group of Dutch sailors landed on the southeast coast of the island and claimed it for the Netherlands. For the next 40 years the Dutch used Mauritius as a supply base for Batavia (Java), before deciding to settle near their original landing spot. Settlement ruins can still be seen at Vieux Grand Port, near Mahébourg.

The colony never really flourished, however, and the Dutch abandoned it in 1710. Nevertheless, they left their mark: the Dutch were responsible for the extinction of the dodo and for introducing slaves from Africa, deer from Java, wild boar, tobacco and, above all, sugar cane.

ÎLE DE FRANCE

Five years later it was the turn of the French, when Captain Guillaume Dufresne d'Arzel sailed across from what is now Réunion and claimed Mauritius for France. The island was rechristened Île de France, but nothing much happened until the arrival in 1735 of the dynamic governor, Bertrand François Mahé de Labourdonnais, Mauritius' first hero. He not only transformed Port Louis into a thriving seaport, but also built the first sugar mill and established a road network.

It was around this time that Mauritius' best-known historic event occurred when the *St Géran* went down during a storm off the northeast coast in 1744. The shipwreck inspired Bernardin de St-Pierre's romantic novel *Paul et Virginie*, an early bestseller (for more details of the event see the boxed text, p83).

As the English gained the upper hand in the Indian Ocean in the late 18th century, Port Louis became a haven for pirates and slightly more respectable corsairs – mercenary marines paid by a country to prey on enemy ships. The most famous Franco-Mauritian corsair was Robert Surcouf, who wrought havoc on British shipping.

The Dodo: From Extinction to Icon is a fascinating history of how the demise of this one species due to human behaviour has become such a powerful worldwide metaphor for the dangers humans pose to their environment.

Mauritius was originally named in honour of the Dutch prince Maurits van Nassau by the Dutch explorers who first settled the island in the 17th century.

During the early colonial periods before they were made extinct, the indigenous Mauritian giant tortoise was so large that two adult men could comfortably sit on its back and enjoy a (slow) ride.

In 1789, French settlers in Mauritius recognised the revolution in France and got rid of their governor. But they refused to free their slaves when the abolition of slavery was decreed in Paris in 1794.

BRITISH RULE

In 1810, during the Napoleonic Wars, the British moved in on Mauritius as part of their grand plan to control the Indian Ocean. Things started badly when they were defeated at the Battle of Vieux Grand Port, the only French naval victory inscribed on the Arc de Triomphe in Paris. Just a few months later, however, British forces landed at Cap Malheureux on the north coast and took over the island.

The new British rulers renamed the island Mauritius, but allowed the Franco-Mauritians to retain their language, religion, legal system and the all-important sugar-cane plantations, on which the economy depended. The slaves were finally freed in 1835, by which time there were over 70,000 on the island. They were replaced or supplemented by labour imported from India and China. As many as 500,000 Indians took up the promise of a better life in Mauritius, often to find themselves living and working in appalling conditions on minimum pay.

By sheer weight of numbers, the Indian workforce gradually achieved a greater say in the running of the country. Their struggle was given extra impetus when Indian political and spiritual leader Mahatma Gandhi visited Mauritius in 1901 to push for civil rights. However, the key event was the introduction of universal suffrage in 1959, and the key personality Dr (later Sir) Seewoosagur Ramgoolam. Founder of the Labour Party in 1936, Seewoosagur Ramgoolam led the fight for independence, which was finally granted in 1968.

INDEPENDENCE

The prime minister of newly independent Mauritius was, not surprisingly, Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam. He remained in office for the next 13 years and continued to command great reverence until his death in 1986, since when a host of public buildings has been named in his honour.

Since then the political landscape has largely been dominated by the trio of Anerood Jugnauth, the Indian leader of the Mouvement Socialiste Mauricien (MSM), the Franco-Mauritian Paul Béranger with his leftist Mouvement Militant Mauricien (MMM) and Navin Ramgoolam, son of Sir Seewoosagur and leader of the Mauritian Labour Party. The former two parties formed their first coalition government in 1982, with Jugnauth as prime minister and Béranger as finance minister. In the years that followed, the two men were in and out of government, sometimes power-sharing, at other times in opposition to each other, according to the complex and shifting web of allegiances which enlivens Mauritian politics. In 1995 and again in 2005, Navin Ramgoolam beat the MSM-MMM coalition with his Alliance Sociale coalition.

On the economic front meanwhile, Mauritius was undergoing a minor miracle. Up until the 1970s the Mauritian economy could be summed up in one word – sugar. Sugar represented more than 90% of the country's exports, covered most of its fertile land and was its largest employer by far. Every so often, a cyclone would devastate the cane crop, or a world drop in sugar prices would have bitter consequences.

From the 1970s the government went all out to promote textiles, tourism and financial services, much of it based on foreign investment. Soon Mauritius was one of the world's largest exporters of textiles, with Ralph Lauren, Pierre Cardin, Lacoste and other famous brands all manufactured

Slaves, Freedmen and Indentured Laborers in Colonial Mauritius is a newly published collection of academic essays about the various social classes in Mauritius throughout the colonial era, and fascinating reading for anyone interested in the brutal history of slavery.

During the Napoleonic Wars, Port Louis was renamed Port Napoleon until the British took the capital and rechristened it after the French king.

Helen Morgan's fascinating look at the birth of philately, *Blue Mauritius: The Hunt for the World's Most Valuable Stamps* includes very atmospheric descriptions of the circumstances under which the Mauritius Blue became the world's most valuable stamp.

on the island. Income from tourism also grew by leaps and bounds as the government targeted the luxury end of the market.

The strategy paid off. The 1980s and 1990s saw the Mauritian economy grow by a remarkable 5% a year. Unemployment fell from a whopping 42% in 1980 to less than 6% by 2000 and overall standards of living improved. Even so, rates of unemployment and poverty remained high among the Creole population, many of whom also felt frustrated at their lack of political power in the face of the Indian majority. These tensions spilled out on to the streets of Port Louis in 1999, triggered by the death in police custody of the singer Kaya, an ardent campaigner for the rights of the disadvantaged Creole population, people of mixed Afro-European origin. The riots brought the country to a standstill for four days and forced the government to make political concessions.

THE CULTURE

Mauritius is often cited as an example of racial and religious harmony, and compared with most other countries it is. On the surface, there are few signs of conflict. However, racial divisions are still apparent, more so than in the Seychelles or Réunion. Tensions between the Hindu majority and Muslim and Creole minorities persist despite the general respect for constitutional prohibitions against discrimination, and constitute one of the country's few potential political flash points.

THE NATIONAL IDENTITY

Despite being a relatively young country (less than 40 years old) with a diverse population, there is a surprisingly strong sense of national identity in Mauritius that transcends racial and cultural ties. Of the various forces binding Mauritians together, the most important is language. Not the official language of English, but Creole, which is the first language of 70% to 80% of the population and understood by virtually all Mauritians. Another common bond is that everyone is an immigrant or descended from immigrants. Food and music are also unifiers, as is the importance placed on family life. Mauritius is a small, close-knit community. Living in such close proximity breaks down barriers and increases understanding between the different groups. Respect for others and tolerance are deeply engrained in all sectors of society, despite the occasional flare up of racial tension.

KAYA

It was a black day for Mauritius, and a blacker one still for the Creole community. On 21 February 1999, the singer Joseph Topize (aka Kaya) was found dead in his police cell, seemingly a victim of police brutality, after being arrested for smoking cannabis at a prolegalisation rally.

As the pioneer of *seggae*, a unique combination of reggae and traditional *séga* beats, Kaya provided a voice for disadvantaged Creoles across the country. His death in the custody of Indian police split Mauritian society along racial lines, triggering four days of violent riots that left several people dead and brought the country to a standstill.

An autopsy cleared the police of wrongdoing, but the events have forced the Indian-dominated government to acknowledge *la malaise Créole*, Creoles' anger at their impoverished status in a country that has been dominated by Indians since independence.

In contrast to these violent scenes, Kaya's music is full of positive energy. The classic album *Seggae Experience* is a tribute to the singer's unique vision.

'Respect for others and tolerance are deeply engrained in all sectors of society'

Mauritians place great importance on education – not just to get a better job, but as a goal in its own right. Lawyers, doctors and teachers are regarded with tremendous respect. The pinnacle of success for many is to work in the civil service, though this is beginning to change as salaries rise among artisans and businesspeople.

As individuals, Mauritians live up to their reputation of being friendly, laid-back, hospitable and generous. Many go out of their way to help strangers, and there's nothing a Mauritian likes more than a good chat. They are gentle people, more likely to make a joke about something than get angry. Cultural differences do occur, however: the Chinese tend to be more reserved than the happy-go-lucky Creoles, who work hard but do love a good party.

LIFESTYLE

In general, each ethnic group maintains a way of life similar to that found in their countries of origin, even if they are second- or third-generation Mauritian. Several generations typically live together under one roof and the main social unit is the extended family – as witnessed by the size of family parties on a Sunday picnic. Mauritians are usually married by the age of 25. The majority of wives stay home to raise the family, while the husband earns the daily bread. Arranged marriages are still the norm among Indian families, while the Hindu caste system has also been replicated to some degree. Among all groups, religion and religious institutions continue to play a central role in community life.

As with elsewhere, this very traditional pattern is starting to break down as the younger generation grows more individualistic and more Westernised. They are far more likely to socialise with people from other communities, and intermarriage is on the rise. Other forces for change are the rise in consumerism and the emergence of a largely Indian and Chinese middle class. Middle-class couples are more likely to set up their own home and to have fewer children, while the wife may even go out to work. Statistics also show a slight decline in the number of marriages, while the divorce rate has doubled over the last decade.

Women's equality still has a long way to go in Mauritius. Many women have to accept low-paid, unskilled jobs, typically in a textile factory or as a cleaner. Even highly qualified women can find it hard to get promotions in the private sector, though they do better in the public service. This may be set to change, however, as in 2003 the government passed a Sex Discrimination Act and set up an independent unit to investigate sex discrimination cases, including sexual harassment at work. The unit's also charged with raising awareness levels and educating employers about equal opportunities.

There is little evidence of premeditated discrimination against gays and lesbians in Mauritius. Nevertheless, it's a very macho society, and gays and especially lesbians tend to keep a low profile. At the time of writing the Attorney General and Minister of Justice and Human Rights, Rama Vallyden, was planning to introduce comprehensive anti-discriminatory legislation protecting sexual minorities.

Despite the fact that all forms of discrimination are illegal under the Mauritian constitution, it is widely recognised that the Creole minority has been socially, economically and politically marginalised. It's a vicious circle. Creoles find it harder to get work, partly because of low levels of literacy, but few Creole children complete secondary school because they're needed to help support the family. Expectations are also lower – and so it goes on. Creole poverty is particularly noticeable in the almost exclusively Creole island of Rodrigues.

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RESPONSIBLE TRAVEL

The people of Mauritius have a well-deserved reputation for being exceptionally tolerant. That said, there are a few 'rules' of behaviour to abide by.

Although beachwear is fine for the beaches, you will cause offence and may invite pestering if you dress skimpily elsewhere. Nude bathing is forbidden, while women going topless is tolerated around some hotel pools, but not on the beaches.

Mauritius has many temples and mosques. You are welcome to visit, but should dress and behave with respect: miniskirts and singlet tops are a no-no, and it is normal to remove your shoes – there's usually a sign indicating where to leave them. Many temples and mosques also ask you not to take photos, while some Hindu temples request that you remove all leather items, such as belts. At mosques, you may be required to cover your head in certain areas, so remember to take along a scarf. Never touch a carving or statue of a deity. If at any time you're unsure about protocol, the best thing to do is ask.

As a result of the economic boom, overall living standards have improved in recent years and the majority of houses now have piped water and electricity. However, the gap between rich and poor is widening. It is estimated that the top 20% of the population earns 44% of the total income and that 10% lives below the poverty mark. A labourer's wage is just Rs 6000 per month, while a teacher might earn Rs 12,000. There is minimal social-security provision in Mauritius; people rely on their family in times of need. You'll find a few beggars around the markets and mosques, but the visible presence of poverty on the streets is relatively discreet.

Crime levels also remain relatively low, though petty crime is on the rise. It mostly involves burglaries, but tourists can be a target for thieves (see p135). While drug use is even less of a problem, it too is increasing. Small amounts of heroin are smuggled in from South Africa en route to Réunion and elsewhere and some is consumed locally.

One thing that is rife is corruption, though the only form likely to affect tourists is the commission system prevalent among taxi drivers (see p135). Local drivers fume about police 'fines'; connections are used to the maximum; and newspapers are full of financial scandals in the cosy, closed world of the Hindu-dominated administration. But after years of inaction, the present government seems serious about tackling the problem. In 2002 it set up the Independent Commission Against Corruption, which has unearthed some pretty dirty dealings. Among a number of high-profile cases, two senior bank officials were arrested for embezzling Rs 866 million and a former cabinet minister for accepting Rs 4.5 million in bribes.

ECONOMY

Former Prime Minister Paul Bérenger envisaged Mauritius enjoying a 'quantum leap' to a 'knowledge island' during his brief premiership, making Mauritius the Indian Ocean's internet hub, and while progress continues to be made along these lines, traditional agricultural activities, tourism and textiles continue to provide most of the jobs in the country.

But Mauritius has effectively run out of space to develop its tourism industry significantly further, with all the best beaches having been taken. The last major expansion, the building of four huge hotels on the southern coast on the former Bel Ombre Sugar Estate, was surely the last of its kind. Meanwhile the sugar industry is being downsized; vast work forces are being laid off because of increased mechanisation or factory closures. In light of these developments it's clear that Mauritius needs a sound economic vision for the future to stave off mass unemployment and

Culture Shock Mauritius is a useful read for anyone wanting to know the dos and don'ts on the island.

crippling recession as the 21st century gets underway. You can expect to see lots more call centres here (with much of the population speaking fluent Hindu or Mandarin, there's lots of scope for service industries for both China and India being based here) as well as IT free-trade zones.

The banking industry – Mauritius' shady little secret world of massive international money transfers – continues to see huge benefits for the economy, although not as obviously at street level.

For the moment Mauritius still hums along nicely. Its people, many of them naturally mercantile traders by heritage, love to barter, haggle and hawk – and if a stroll through Port Louis or Curepipe can be seen as a microcosm of the country in general, then it's clear than Mauritians are eager workers who highly value material success.

POPULATION

Mauritius is made up of four ethnic groups: Indo-Mauritian (68%), Creole (27%), Sino-Mauritian (3%) and Franco-Mauritian (2%). Another small group you might come across are the Chagos Islanders (see the boxed text, below).

Although the population growth rate (currently 0.9%) is quite low, a quarter of Mauritians are under 15 years of age. The country also has one of the world's highest population densities, with an average of nearly 600 people per sq km, rising to a staggering 3000 per sq km in urban areas. Worst are Port Louis and the Central Plateau towns, which developed in the wake of the malaria epidemics that hit the coast in the 1860s (p90). Even more people are drifting to urban areas in search of work as the sugar factories mechanise or close down altogether. The vast majority of Mauritians now work in construction, industry and the service sector – all very urban activities.

THE CHAGOS ISLANDERS

One of the most prolonged betrayals in British colonial history is that surrounding the secret exile of the Chagos Islanders from their homeland in the 1960s and 1970s, in order to lease the main island, Diego Garcia, to the United States for use as a military base.

The islanders were 'resettled' in Mauritius and the Seychelles between 1965 and 1973. Some 5000 now live in abject poverty in the slums of Port Louis, where they continue to fight for their right to return home. The islanders won derisory compensation of £4 million from the British in 1982, which was paid out to the poverty-stricken islanders in return for them signing away their rights – many of them not realising at the time what the legal documents they were signing meant.

In 2000 the High Court in London ruled that the Chagossians had been evicted illegally and upheld their right to be repatriated. Nothing happened, so the Chagossians went back to court. In October 2003 the judge rejected their claim for further compensation, though he acknowledged that the British government had treated the islanders 'shamefully' and that the compensation had been inadequate. In May 2007 the Chagossians won a further case at the Court of Appeal in London, in which the government's behaviour was condemned as unlawful and an abuse of power. The judges in the case also refused to place a stay on the ruling, meaning the Chagossians were free to return to all islands (with the exception of Diego Garcia itself) with immediate effect. The British government is likely to appeal the decision with Britain's supreme court, the Law Lords, although what will happen between the two cases is anything but clear.

John Pilger's superb 2004 documentary is essential viewing for anyone who wants to learn the truth behind the British government's claims to respect human rights. You can watch it online here: www.johns.net/freemovies/stealing_a_nation.htm. Further information and ways to help the Chagossians can be found here: www.chagossupport.org.uk.

'Mauritians, many of them naturally mercantile traders by heritage, love to barter, haggle and hawk'

The Indian population (the majority of which is Hindu) is descended from the labourers who were brought to the island to work the cane fields. Nowadays, Indians form the backbone of the labouring and agricultural community and own many of the island's small- and medium-sized businesses, typically in manufacturing and the retail trade. The Central Plateau towns such as Rose Hill have a strong Indian flavour.

Indians also tend to be prominent in civic life. Because they are in the majority, Hindus always win elections. The prime minister between 2003 and 2005, Franco-Mauritian Paul Bérenger, was the first non-Indian at the helm in the country's history, and he only managed that through a deal struck with his predecessor, Indian Anerood Jugnauth (see p38).

After the Indo-Mauritians, the next largest group is the Creoles, descendants of African slaves, with varying amounts of European ancestry. Creoles as a whole form the most disadvantaged sector of society. The majority work in low-paid jobs or eke out a living from fishing or subsistence farming, most notably on Rodrigues, where Creoles make up 98% of the population.

Mauritius' 30,000 Sino-Mauritians are involved mostly in commerce. Despite their small numbers, the Chinese community plays a disproportionate role in the country's economy, though they tend to avoid politics. Most came to the country as self-employed entrepreneurs and settled in the towns (particularly Port Louis), though most villages have at least one Chinese store.

Franco-Mauritians, the descendants of the *grands blancs* (rich whites), have their hands on Mauritius' purse strings. Most of the sugar mills, banks and other big businesses are still owned by Franco-Mauritians, who tend to screen themselves off from their former labourers in palatial private residences in the hills around Curepipe, and own almost all the luxurious holiday homes along the coast. Many others have decamped completely to live in South Africa and France.

RELIGION

There is a close link between religion and race in Mauritius and a remarkable degree of religious tolerance. Mosques, churches and Hindu temples can be found within a stone's throw of each other in many parts of the country.

Over half the population is Hindu, all of whom are of Indian origin. Festivals play a central role in the Hindu faith and the calendar's packed with colourful celebrations. See p136 for a rundown of the most important ones.

There's a certain amount of resentment against the Hindus in Mauritius, not for religious reasons but because the Hindu majority dominates the country's political life and its administration. Up until now, with the economy in full swing, this has merely resulted in grumbling about discrimination and 'jobs for the boys', but there's a fear this might change if the economy really begins to falter.

Nearly a third of the population is Roman Catholic. Catholicism is practised by most Creoles, and it has picked up a few voodoo overtones over the years. Most Franco-Mauritians are also Catholic and a few Chinese and Indians have converted, largely through intermarriage.

Muslims make up roughly a fifth of the population. Like the Hindus, Mauritian Muslims originally came from India. In Mauritius, where Islam coexists in close proximity to other religions, it tends to be fairly liberal, though attendance at mosque is high and many Muslim women wear hijab.

Sino-Mauritians are the least conspicuous in their worship. The one big exception is Chinese New Year, which is celebrated in Port Louis with great gusto. There are a few Chinese temples in Port Louis.

Grand Bassin in southern Mauritius is the largest Hindu pilgrimage outside India. Believed to have been created when Shiva spilled some water from the Ganges that he was carrying on his head, the lake is visited by half a million pilgrims each year.

ARTS

Mauritian architecture, literature and fine arts are all firmly based in the French tradition. The country's music, however, is African in origin and is very much alive and kicking.

Literature

Mauritius' most famous contribution to world literature – one that has become entangled in the island's history – is the romantic novel *Paul et Virginie* by Bernardin de St-Pierre, which was first published in 1788 (see the boxed text, p83). An English translation of the novel is widely available in Mauritius. The author captures the landscapes beautifully, though his ultramoraleistic tear-jerker is less likely to appeal to modern tastes.

Joseph Conrad's oblique love story *A Smile of Fortune*, collected in *'Twixt Land and Sea* (1912) is set in Mauritius, although it's hardly very flattering about the place. Set in the late 19th century it does, however, give a taste of the mercantile activity of the time and the curious mix of 'negroes', Creoles, 'coolies' and marooned Frenchmen who populated the island then. Visitors to the island will certainly identify with Conrad's description of Mauritius as the "Pearl of the Ocean"... a pearl distilling sweetness on the world', but will undoubtedly find the current inhabitants far more pleasant to deal with than the characters described in the story.

Those who want to read a 20th-century Mauritian novel should try something by Malcolm de Chazal, whose most famous works are *Sens Plastique*, available in translation, and *Petrusmok*. Chazal was an eccentric recluse, but he inspired a whole generation of local writers. His works are a highly original blend of poetry and philosophy, and are peppered with pithy statements, such as 'Avoid clean people who have a dirty stare'.

Of living writers, perhaps the best-known internationally is Carl de Souza. In his novel *Le Sang de l'Anglais* he looks at the often ambivalent relationship between Mauritians and their countries of origin, while *La Maison qui Marchait Vers le Large*, set in Port Louis, takes intercommunity conflict as its theme. *Les Jours Kaya* is a coming-of-age book set against the violence following Kaya's death (see p39).

Other contemporary novelists to look out for include Ananda Devi, Shenaz Patel and Natacha Appanah-Mouriquand. Unfortunately, their works as yet are only available in French, regarded as the language of culture.

In more recent times, the French author JMG Clézio, whose father was Mauritian, has also set a number of novels in Mauritius, of which *Le Chercheur d'Or* (The Prospector) has been translated into English.

Music & Dance

You'll hear *séga* everywhere nowadays, but in the early 20th century it fell seriously out of fashion. Its revival in the early 1950s is credited to the Creole

RECOMMENDED RHYTHMS

- *Île Maurice*, Ti-Frère (Ocora; 1991) The best of Ti-Frère, with lyrics translated into English.
- *Île Maurice: Séga Ravanne*, Fanfan (Ocora; 1999) *Séga* taken from the oral tradition.
- *Album d'Or*, Cassiya (Cassiya Productions; 2000) Modern *séga* interpretations.
- *Makoutia: Chants et Danses de Rodrigues*, Racines. Good introduction to Rodriguan music, with English text.
- *Seggae Experience*, Kaya (Meli-Mela; 1999) Kaya's classic album is still widely available in Mauritius.

SÉGA!

Séga is the powerful combination of music and dance originally conceived by African slaves as a diversion from the injustice of their daily existence. At the end of a hard day in the cane fields, couples danced the *séga* around campfires on the beach to the accompaniment of drums.

Because of the sand (some say because of the shackles), there could be no fancy footwork. So today, when dancing the *séga*, the feet never leave the ground. The rest of the body makes up for it and the result, when the fire is hot, can be extremely erotic. In the rhythm and beat of *séga*, you can see or hear connections with the Latin American salsa, the Caribbean calypso, and the African origins of the people. It's a personal, visceral dance where the dancers let the music take over and abandon themselves to the beat.

The dance is traditionally accompanied by the beat of the *ravanne*, a primitive goatskin drum. The beat starts slowly and builds into a pulsating rhythm which normally carries away performers and onlookers alike. You may be lucky enough to see the dance being performed spontaneously at beach parties or family barbecues. Otherwise, you'll have to make do with the less authentic *séga* soirees offered by some bars and restaurants and most of the big hotels, often in combination with a Mauritian buffet. Nonresidents are usually welcome, though may have to pay (generally around Rs 200/100 per adult/child, which is then deducted from your food or drink bill).

singer Ti-Frère, whose song 'Anita' has become a classic. Though he died in 1992, Ti-Frère is still the country's most popular *séga* star. More recent Creole groups and singers with a wide following include Cassiya, Fanfan and the prolific Jean-Claude Gaspard.

Séga evolved slightly differently in Rodrigues. Here the drum plays a more prominent role in what's known as *séga tambour*. The island's accordion bands are also famous for their surprising repertoire, which includes waltzes, polkas, quadrilles and Scottish reels. Over the years these were learned from passing European sailors and gradually absorbed into the local folk music. They're now an essential part of any Rodriguan knees-up.

A new Mauritian musical form was invented by Creole musician Kaya in *seggae*, which blends elements of *séga* and reggae. With his band Racine Tatane, Kaya gave a voice to dissatisfied Creoles around the island. Tragically, the singer died in police custody in February 1999. Following in Kaya's footsteps, Ras Natty Baby and his Natty Rebels are one of most popular *seggae* groups; sales gained an extra boost when Ras Natty Baby was imprisoned for heroin trafficking in 2003.

Recently, *ragga*, a blend of house music, traditional Indian music and reggae, has been gaining a following. Mauritian *ragga* groups include Black Ayou and the Authentic Steel Brothers.

Architecture

Caught up in the need to develop its economy, Mauritius paid little attention to its architectural heritage until recently. As a result many splendid colonial mansions and more humble dwellings have been lost under the sea of concrete. Those still standing may be luckier. In 2003 the government set up a National Heritage Fund charged with preserving the country's historic buildings.

Those which have fared best are the plantation houses dating from the 18th and 19th centuries, which you'll still see standing in glorious isolation amid the cane fields. Many are privately owned and closed to the public, such as Le Réduit (p94), near Moka, which is now the President's official residence. Others have been converted into museums and restaurants, including Eureka (p94), a beautifully restored mansion also near Moka. But rescuing these houses is expensive and time-consuming. Many of the

The website www.sega.mu is devoted entirely to Mauritius' much loved national music, which developed from the songs and dances of slaves. You can listen to *séga* here as well as read a very detailed history.

Another great music site is www.radiomoris.com, where you can listen to the radio station live and hear lots of great *séga*, *ragga* and *seggae*.

'Visitors to the island will certainly identify with Conrad's description of Mauritius as the "Pearl of the Ocean"'

THE ARCHITECTURAL HERITAGE

The first French settlers naturally brought with them building styles from home. Over the years the architecture gradually evolved until it became supremely well suited to the hot, humid tropics. It's for this reason that so many of the grand plantation houses have survived the ravages of time.

Flourishes that appear to be ornamental – vaulted roofs and decorative pierced screens, for example – all serve to keep the occupants cool and dry. The most distinctive feature is the shingled roof with ornamental turrets and rows of attic windows. These wedding-cake touches conceal a vaulted roof, which allows the air to circulate. Another characteristic element is the wide, airy *varangue* (veranda), where raffia blinds, fans and pot plants create a cooling humidity.

The roofs, windows and overhangs are usually lined with delicate, lace-like *lambrequins* (decorative wooden borders), which are purely ornamental. They vary from simple, repetitive floral patterns to elaborate pierced friezes; in all cases a botanical theme predominates.

Lambrequins, shingle roofs and verandas or wrought-iron balconies are also found in colonial-era town houses. The more prestigious buildings were constructed of brick, or even stone, and so are better able to withstand cyclones and termites. In Port Louis, Government House and other buildings lining Place S Bissoondoyal are all fine examples.

At the other end of the scale, traditional labourers' houses typically consist of two rooms (one for sleeping, one for eating) and a veranda; because of the fire risk the kitchen is usually separate. Nowadays they are built of corrugated iron rather than termite-resistant hardwood, but are still painted in eye-catching colours that offset the white *lambrequins*. The garden overflowing with edible and ornamental plants is almost as important as the house itself.

raw materials, such as tamarind wood, are in short supply. It's easier and cheaper to rip down the old timber frames, and throw up brand new concrete blocks on the sturdy foundations beneath.

The majority of Mauritians now live in nondescript concrete apartment blocks in the towns and cities. Middle-class families might possibly afford a seaside apartment or villa. The coast around Trou aux Biches and Flic en Flac is lined with these uninspiring boxes, all cheek by jowl. A few more enlightened developers are beginning to add traditional flourishes, such as *lambrequins* (decorative wooden borders) and bright paintwork. Hotels and restaurants are also getting better at incorporating a bit of local colour.

As for major civic projects, the most prestigious in recent times has been Port Louis' Caudan Waterfront development. Given its location at the very heart of the capital, the architects decided to incorporate elements of the traditional architecture found around nearby Place S Bissoondoyal. Further inspiration came from the nearby stone-and-steel dockyard buildings to provide another link with the past.

Visual Arts

Historically, Mauritian artists took their lead from what was happening in Europe and, in particular, France. Some of the 18th- and 19th-century engravings and oils of Mauritian landscapes you see could almost be mistaken for Europe. The classical statue of Paul and Virginie in Port Louis' Blue Penny Museum and the one of King Edward VII in the city's Champ de Mars were both created by Mauritius' best-known sculptor, Prosper d'Épinay.

In the 20th century, the surrealist writer and painter Malcolm de Chazal injected a bit of local colour into the scene. Inspired by the island's prolific nature, his paintings are full of light and energy. You'll see numerous copies of the *Blue Dodo* and other Chazal works around, but originals are extremely rare.

Mauritius Style: Life on the Verandah is a beautiful coffee table book depicting the many different Mauritian interiors that have so artfully combined French, Asian and African aesthetics.

Contemporary Mauritian art tends to be driven by the tourist market. One artist you'll find reproduced everywhere is Vaco Baissac, instantly recognisable from the blocks of colour outlined in black, like a stained-glass window. His gallery is in Grand Baie (p77).

Other commercially successful artists include Danielle Hitié, who produces minutely detailed renderings of markets as well as rural scenes, and Françoise Vrot, known for her very expressive portraits of women field-workers. Both artists are exhibited in galleries in Grand Baie, where Vrot also has her studio (p77).

Keep an eye out for exhibitions by more innovative contemporary artists such as Hervé Masson, Serge Constantin, Henri Koombes and Khalid Nazroo. All have had some success on the international scene, though are less visible locally.

FOOD & DRINK

The rich and diverse heritage of Mauritius makes for some good reading on restaurant menus, with Indian, Chinese, French and African cuisine all having a 'greatest hits'-like showing in most places you'll visit. Mauritian, or Creole, cuisine takes various elements from each when preparing the fish and seafood dishes that are the national staple. For food-related vocabulary and expressions, see p316.

STAPLES & SPECIALITIES

Mauritian cuisine is very similar across the island, a rich and delicious mix of Indian spices and local fresh seafood and fish prepared with strong influences from Chinese, French and African cuisine. The cuisine of Rodrigues is quite different, less spicy but with more fresh fruit and beans used as ingredients.

In Mauritius, rice, noodles, fish and seafood are the staples of everyday life, although to a great extent what people eat depends on their ethnic background. A Sino-Mauritian may well start the day with tea and noodles, a Franco-Mauritian with a *café au lait* and croissant, and an Indo-Mauritian with a chapati. However, come lunchtime nearly everyone enjoys a hot meal – whether it be a spicy seafood *carri* (curry) or *mines* (noodles) and a cooling beer. Dinner is the main meal of the day and is usually eaten *en famille* (with family). The Mauritians love their cocktail hour, and so you'll nearly always have an *apéro* (apéritif) or a *petit punch* – usually a rum-based fruit cocktail. While meat is widely eaten (especially in Chinese and French cuisine), the most common mainstays are fish and seafood. Marlin is a big favourite, as are mussels, octopus and calmaris.

DRINKS

Unsurprisingly the national drink is rum, and although most agree that Mauritian rum isn't up to the standard of the Caribbean equivalent, there are still some excellent brands produced, particularly Green Island – the dark variety of which is superb. Despite a long history of rum production in Mauritius, the socially preferred spirit tends to be whiskey – a hangover from the 150-year British rule.

The national beer is Phoenix, an excellent pilsner produced at the Phoenix Brewery since the 1960s and a regular prizewinner at festivals around the world. The other premium brand of the brewery, Blue Marlin, is also very good.

Unlikely to be at your local multiplex any time soon is Mauritius' first ever film, *Benares*, made on the island in 2005. It's a touching portrait of two friends from the country travelling to Port Louis to find wives.

Genuine Cuisine of Mauritius (Éditions de L'Océan Indien; eolibooks@intnet.mu; 1998), by Guy Félix, is a great Mauritian recipe book.

To make a 'millionaire's salad' you must cut down a whole palm tree, just to use the edible heart of palm. Once the heart of palm is removed, the plant dies.

The Mauritians are also great tea drinkers and you shouldn't miss trying the range of Bois Chéri teas on sale throughout the country. The vanilla tea is the most famous and is quite delicious and refreshing even in the heat of the day, and you'll have a chance to see it being made and to taste it at the Bois Chéri Factory in southern Mauritius (p119).

During Hindu and Muslim festivals, deliciously flavoured drinks such as *lassi* (Indian yoghurt drink) and almond milk (almond- and cardamom-flavoured milk) are prepared.

WHERE TO EAT & DRINK

There tends to be quite a bit of segregation between 'tourist' restaurants and 'local' ones, particularly around bigger resort areas. In places such as Port Louis and the central highlands this is a lot less pronounced, and most places have a mixed clientele.

Throughout this chapter we've tried to avoid including solely tourist eateries unless they are very special or the only things on offer. Nearly all restaurants have menus in English, or at least staff who speak English, so communication difficulties are kept to a minimum.

Most restaurants have several cuisines served up cheek by jowl, although they're nearly always separated from each other on the menu. While in better restaurants this will mean each cuisine is prepared by a different expert chef, on the whole most chefs are decent at cooking one cuisine and prepare the remaining dishes with something approaching indifference. The rule is a fairly obvious one – don't go to a Chinese restaurant for a good curry.

The best places to eat throughout the country tend to be *tables d'hôte*, private hosted meals often given by people who run guesthouses as well, but just as often offered alone. These give you a unique insight into local life, as you'll usually dine with the host couple and often their children, plus any other travellers who've arranged to come by (or people staying in the guesthouse). It's nearly always necessary to book a *table d'hôte*, preferably a day in advance, although it's always worth asking – bigger operations will sometimes be able to accommodate last-minute additions.

Opening hours tend to be quite flexible (and unpredictable in smaller places!) although as a rule it's good not to leave eating too late – even though many places are officially open until 11pm, if they're empty by 10pm then there's a chance they'll shut early. Port Louis is a ghost town for everything including eating in the evening as the middle classes tend to live out of town, so it's usually the Caudan Waterfront or nothing after dark.

Quick Eats

Places to enjoy quick eats on the run are in plentiful supply in Mauritius. Street vendors are at every bus station and town square, and takeaway shops can be found in numerous shopping centres and markets; both offer inexpensive local treats, including Indian, French and Chinese delicacies. Almost all restaurants, except the most upmarket, will do takeaway. In Mauritius, roadside food stalls serving dinner dishes such as *biryani* (curried rice), Indian rotis and *farattas* (unleavened flaky flour pancakes) are popular.

The atmospheric markets are worth visiting for the popular *gâteaux piments* (deep-fried balls of lentils and chilli), which are cooked on the spot. You should also try the delicious *dhal puris*, rotis, samosas and *bhajjas* (fried balls of *besan* dough with herbs or onion).

Indian and Chinese restaurants offer quick and inexpensive meals and snacks. Remember to buy some Indian savouries such as *caca pigeon* (an Indian nibble) or the famous Chinese *char siu* (barbecue pork).

Look out for delicious, thirst-quenching almond-based drink *alouda* while visiting Mauritius. Topped with ice cream, it's the perfect antidote to the midday heat or after enjoying a particularly hot curry...

Bat Curry is a speciality in some restaurants in Mauritius, although you won't see it on the menu; it tends to be a speciality the islanders keep to themselves.

Try cooking some delicious recipes for yourself by visiting Madeleine Phillippe's excellent website at www.ile-maurice.com.

VEGETARIANS & VEGANS

Vegetarians will fare well in Mauritius, although they may be disappointed by the lack of variety. Indian restaurants tend to offer the best choice, but often this is limited to a variation on the theme of *carri de légumes* (vegetable curry). Chinese restaurants are also good for vegetarians, while Creole and French places are much more limiting, although almost everywhere has a vegetable curry on the menu. Pescatarians will be spoiled for choice as almost every eatery in the country offers fresh seafood and freshly caught fish cooked to perfection.

Vegans will find things harder, but not unassailably so – most resorts will be able to offer vegan options with advance warning, and again Indian restaurants will offer the most choice.

HABITS & CUSTOMS

Eating habits vary across ethnic groups. Some groups eat with their fingers, others don't eat meat on Fridays and some abstain from eating pork – it's hard to generalise across the community.

Breakfasts are normally very quick and informal. Lunch is also a fairly casual affair, although at the weekend it tends to be more formal, when family and friends gather to share the pleasures of the table. In restaurants, special menus are offered for weekend lunches. Before dinner, which is a very formal occasion, *gajacks* (predinner snacks) and predinner drinks (*un apéro* or *un petit punch*) are commonly served; during the meal, wine or beer is usually served.

As eating and drinking are important social activities, behaviour at the table should be respectful. Locals can be strict about table manners, and it's considered rude to pick at your food or mix it together. You are also expected to be reasonably well dressed. Unless you are in a beach environment, wearing beachwear or other skimpy clothing won't be well received – casual but neat clothing is the norm. When invited to dine with locals, bring a small gift; perhaps some flowers or a bottle of wine.

If you are attending a traditional Indian or Chinese meal or a dinner associated with a religious celebration, follow what the locals do. Generally, your hosts will make you feel comfortable, but if you are unsure, ask about the serving customs and the order of dishes. Definitely attend an Indian or a Chinese wedding if you get the opportunity – these celebrations are true culinary feasts.

ENVIRONMENT

THE LAND

Mauritius is the peak of an enormous volcanic chain that also includes Réunion, though it is much older and therefore less rugged than Réunion.

The island's highest mountains are found in the southwest, from where the land drops slightly to a Central Plateau before climbing again to the chain of oddly shaped mountains behind Port Louis and the Montagne Bambous range to the east. Beyond these mountains a plain slopes gently down to the north coast.

Unlike Réunion, Mauritius has no active volcanoes, although remnants of volcanic activity abound. Extinct craters and volcanic lakes, such as the Trou aux Cerfs crater in Curepipe and the Grand Bassin holy lake, are good examples. Over the aeons, the volcanoes generated millions of lava boulders, much to the chagrin of the indentured farm labourers, who had

Les Délices de Rodrigues (in French), by Françoise Baptiste, presents recipes from Rodrigues. Madame Baptiste also arranges bespoke Rodrigues cookery courses at her guesthouse in Grande Montagne, Rodrigues. Contact her for details (see p130).

to clear the land for sugar cane. Heaps of boulders dot the landscape. Some that have been piled into tidy pyramids are listed monuments!

Mauritius also includes a number of widely scattered inhabited islands, of which the most important is Rodrigues, 600km to the northeast. Rodrigues is another ancient volcanic peak and is surrounded by a lagoon twice the size of the island itself. Mauritius also owns the sparsely inhabited islands of Cargados Carajos northeast of the mainland and the Agalega Islands, two islands adjacent to the Seychelles.

Mauritius also stakes territorial claim to the Chagos Archipelago, officially part of the British Indian Ocean Territory and controversially ceded to the US military until 2016 (see p42).

WILDLIFE

Mauritius is a haven for botanists, zoologists, ornithologists and all sorts of other 'ologists'. To experience some of what's on offer in the way of flora and fauna, visitors must go to the botanical gardens at Pamplemousses and Curepipe, to Casela Nature Park and the Black River Gorges National Park in the southwest, and to Île aux Aigrettes, La Vanille and the Domaine du Chasseur in the south.

The best source of information is the **Mauritian Wildlife Foundation** (MWF; ☎ 631 2396; www.ile-aux-aigrettes.com/pages/mwf.htm), which was founded in 1984 to protect and manage the country's many rare species. The MWF vigorously supports the creation of national parks and reserves, and the monitoring of whales, dolphins and turtles. It has had significant success in restoring the populations of several endangered bird species and in conserving endemic vegetation. Nevertheless, there is still a long way to go.

For information on marine life, see p33.

Animals

Mauritius has only one native mammal, the wonderful fruit bat – a common sight at twilight each evening as they come to life and begin their night's foraging. All other mammals present on the island were introduced with varying degrees of success by successive colonists. Mongooses are typical of the slapdash ecological management of the past – they were introduced from India in the late 19th century to control plague-carrying rats. The intention was to import only males, but some females slipped through and soon there were mongooses everywhere. They remain fairly common, as are the bands of macaque monkeys that hang out around Grand Bassin and the Black River Gorges. Java deer, imported by the Dutch for fresh meat, and wild pigs also roam the more remote forests.

Native reptiles include the beautiful turquoise-and-red Ornaté Day gecko and Telfair's skink, a clawed lizard, both of which can be seen on Île aux Aigrettes. You can rest easy if you see a slithering critter – there are no dangerous reptiles in Mauritius.

As for bird life, the best-known representative was the dodo, the super-sized pigeon that found its docility rewarded with extinction (see the boxed text, p78). The dodo was only the first of the many now extinct victims of Mauritius' colonisation. Several other local bird species looked doomed until a few years back, although thanks to phenomenal conservation efforts, some now have a chance of survival.

The Mauritius kestrel was the victim of pesticide poisoning, habitat destruction and hunting. By 1974 just six birds remained: four in the wild and two in captivity. A captive breeding programme established in 1973 has led to an amazing recovery, with numbers now over 800. With luck,

All the indigenous giant tortoises of Mauritius and Rodrigues are extinct, but similar Aldabra giant tortoises from Madagascar have been reintroduced in captivity to the islands in recent decades.

For a full lowdown on the excellent conservation work undertaken by the Mauritian Wildlife Fund and for details of how to volunteer, check out www.mauritian-wildlife.org.

you might see kestrels in the Black River Gorges and at the Domaine du Chasseur, north of Mahébourg.

The lovely pink pigeon has also been pulled back from the brink thanks to captive breeding. From a mere 10 or so individuals in 1990 there are now around 400. A colony has now been established on Île aux Aigrettes, off Mahébourg, safe from egg-stealing rats and monkeys and human poachers.

Similar captive breeding programmes are helping to preserve the echo parakeet, found mainly in the Black River Gorges, and the Rodrigues fruit bat (see p124), among other endangered species.

The birds you're most likely to see, however, are the introduced songbirds, such as the little red Madagascar fody, the Indian mynah (its yellow beak and feet giving it a cartoon-character appearance) and the most common bird of all on Mauritius – the red-whiskered bulbul. Between October and May the Terre Rouge estuary north of Port Louis provides an important wintering ground for migratory water birds such as the whimbrel, the grey plover and the common and curlew sandpipers.

Plants

Almost one-third of the 900 plant species found in Mauritius are unique to these islands. Many of these endemic plants have fared poorly in competition with introduced plants such as guava and privet, and have been depleted by introduced deer, pigs and monkeys. General forest clearance and the establishment of crop monocultures have exacerbated the problem, so that less than 1% of Mauritius' original forest is intact.

Mauritius' forests originally included the tambalacoque tree, which is also known as the dodo tree and is not far from extinction itself. It's a tall tree with a silver trunk and a large, tough seed that supposedly only germinates after being eaten by, and passing through the stomach of, a dodo. Scientists are sceptical about this rumour, but there's no denying the tree is extremely difficult to propagate. The easiest place to find this and other rare plant species is in the botanical gardens at Pamplemousses.

For a tropical island, Mauritius is not big on coconut palms. Instead, casuarinas (also known as *filaos*) fringe most of the beaches. These tall, wispy trees act as useful windbreaks and grow well in sandy soil. Along with casuarinas, eucalyptus trees have been widely planted to help stop erosion.

Other impressive and highly visible trees are the giant Indian banyan and the brilliant red flowering flamboyant, or royal poinciana.

Staying with shades of red, one flower you will see in abundance is anthurium, with its single, glossy petal and protruding yellow spadix. The plant originated in South America and was introduced to Mauritius in the late 19th century. The flower, which at first sight you'd swear was plastic, can last up to three weeks after being cut and is therefore a popular display plant. Now grown in commercial quantities for export, it is used to spruce up hotels and public meeting places.

Mangroves are enjoying a renaissance in Mauritius today. Originally cut down to reduce swamp areas where malarial mosquitos could breed, they've been discovered to be an important part of the food chain for tropical fish, and thus large projects to develop mangrove areas have been undertaken, particularly on the east coast.

NATIONAL PARKS

Since 1988, several international organisations have been working with the government to set up conservation areas in Mauritius. About 3.5% of the

Gerald Durrell's highly readable account of his adventures in Mauritius, *Golden Bats and Pink Pigeons*, remains a great companion to any trip, especially given that many of the species Durrell describes are extremely rare and even extinct today.

IMPORTANT NATIONAL PARKS

Park	Features	Activities	Best time to visit
Balacava Marine Park (p66)	lagoon, coral reef, turtle breeding grounds	snorkelling, diving, glass-bottomed boat tours	all year
Black River Gorges National Park (p87)	forested mountains, Mauritius kestrel, black ebony trees, macaque monkeys	hiking, bird-watching	Sep-Jan for flowers
Blue Bay Marine Park (p115)	lagoon, corals, fish life	snorkelling, diving, glass-bottomed boat tours	all year
Île aux Aigrettes Nature Reserve (p116)	coral island, coastal forests, pink pigeons, giant Aldabra tortoises	ecotours	all year

land area is now protected either as national parks, managed mainly for ecosystem preservation and for recreation, or as nature reserves.

The largest park is the Black River Gorges National Park, established in 1994 in the southwest of the island. It covers some 68 sq km and preserves a wide variety of forest environments, from pine forest to tropical scrub, and includes the country's largest area of native forest. Two of the most important nature reserves are Île aux Aigrettes and Île Ronde, both of which are being restored to their natural state by replacing introduced plants and animals with native species.

In 1997 two marine parks were proclaimed at Blue Bay, near Mahébourg, and Balacava on the west coast, but the number of visitors to the area makes it difficult to establish rigorous controls and there is a need to encourage local fishermen to use less destructive techniques.

ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

The environment of Mauritius has paid a heavy price for the country's rapid economic development. Tourist arrivals have been increasing at a rate of 9% a year for the last 20 years and, despite the set backs of the Chikungunya virus, there's little sign of a slow down. If anything, the government is keen to encourage even more tourists – at least, the rich ones – to plug the gap left by a declining sugar industry. However, the expansion of tourist facilities is straining the island's infrastructure and causing problems such as environmental degradation and excessive demand on services such as electricity, water and transport.

For many species it is already too late, but there is a growing awareness of the need for conservation among decision makers and the general public. The difficulty is to achieve a balance between protecting the immensely fragile island ecosystems and easing the ever-increasing pressure on land and other natural resources.

One area of particular concern is the amount of new development along the coast, much of it tourist related. Luckily, Mauritians are very keen to put environmental concerns first: a proposal for a hotel on Île des Deux Cocos in Blue Bay, for example, met with such fierce resistance that it has been abandoned.

The government now requires an environmental impact assessment for all new building projects, including coastal hotels, marinas and golf courses, and even for activities such as undersea walks. Planning regulations for hotel developments on Rodrigues are particularly strict: they must be small, single storey, built in traditional style and stand at least 30m back from the high-tide mark. Since water shortages are a problem on Rodrigues, new hotels must also recycle their water.

To combat littering and other forms of environmental degradation, the government has established a special environmental police force charged with enforcing the legislation and educating the local population. To report wrongdoers, there is even a **hotline** (☎ 210 5151).

If anything, the marine environment is suffering even more from over-exploitation. The coast off Grand Baie is particularly affected by too many divers and boats concentrated in a few specific locations. In addition, silt-ing and chemical pollution are resulting in extensive coral damage and falling fish populations. For more information on marine conservation in Mauritius, see p34.

The Mauritian Wildlife Foundation is heavily involved in raising awareness of conservation issues among the local population and tourists. A visit to see MWF's work on Île aux Aigrettes (p116) is highly recommended.

'the Black River Gorges National Park preserves a wide variety of forest environments, from pine forest to tropical scrub'

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