

# Réunion Directory

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## ACCOMMODATION

While accommodation in Réunion might not reach the stellar heights of Mauritius and Seychelles, there is still plenty of choice. The smarter hotels tend to be concentrated around the coast and in the attractive mountain towns of Cilaos and Hell-Bourg. In the midrange bracket, there's a smattering of small, family hotels and lots of *chambres d'hôtes* (B&Bs), the best of which offer excellent value for money. Budget travellers will find it hard to keep costs down in St-Denis and the coastal towns around St-Gilles-les-Bains, but elsewhere youth hostels, *gîtes* and the cheaper *chambres d'hôtes* fit the bill. Generally, for a double room you can expect to pay under €40 for budget accommodation, between €40 to €100 for midrange, and over €100 for top-end accommodation.

It is wise to book well in advance, particularly in high season (the mainland France and local school holidays, particularly July and August and around Christmas), when the best places fill up weeks, if not months, ahead.

Recommendations under Sleeping entries are in ascending order of price.

## Camping

Bad news for those who want to spend their holiday under canvas: there's only one official camp site, on the southwest coast at Étang-Salé-les-Bains.

However, you can camp for free in some designated areas in the Cirques, but only for one night at a time. Setting up camp on Piton de la Fournaise (the volcano) is forbidden for obvious reasons.

## Chambres d'Hôtes

*Chambres d'hôtes* are the French equivalent of B&Bs. They are normally tucked away in the hills or in scenic locations and offer a window into a more traditional way of life. Options include everything from restored Creole houses or modern buildings to rooms in family houses. On the whole standards are high, and rooms are generally excellent value. B&B rates are from around €40 for a double room. Breakfast is always included.

Many *chambres d'hôtes* also offer *table d'hôtes* (hearty evening meals) at around €17 to €25 per person (set menu), but this must be reserved in advance.

Many *chambres d'hôtes* are members of Gîtes de France, which is represented at the **Maison de la Montagne et de la Mer** (Map pp170-1; ☎ 0262 90 78 90; www.reunion-nature.com in French; 5 Rue Rontaunay, St-Denis). It has a brochure listing all the *chambres d'hôtes* in Réunion. They are also listed on the website. *Chambres d'hôtes* can be booked either through Gîtes de France or by phoning the owners directly.

## Gîtes de Montagnes

*Gîtes de montagnes* are basic mountain cabins or lodges, operated by the government through the Maison de la Montagne et de la Mer. It is possible to organise a walking holiday using the *gîtes de montagnes* only.

## PRACTICALITIES

- Réunion uses the metric system for weights and measures.
- Electric current is 220V, 50Hz AC; plugs have two round pins.
- Video recorders and players run on the PAL system.
- If your French is up to it, keep a finger on the pulse by reading the daily regional newspaper *Journal de l'île de la Réunion* (JIR; [www.clicanoo.com](http://www.clicanoo.com)) and *Le Quotidien*, both good for features and events listings.
- TV viewers have the choice of two government channels, Télé Réunion and Tempo, as well as the independent Antenne Réunion. Most of the programming on the public channels comes from mainland France.
- Tune in to *RFO* ([www.rfo.fr](http://www.rfo.fr)), *Kreol FM* ([www.kreolfm.fr](http://www.kreolfm.fr)) or *Radio Free Dom* ([www.radiofreedom.fr](http://www.radiofreedom.fr)) for local news (in French and in Creole), reports and... gossip!

The *gîtes de montagnes* in Réunion are generally in pretty good condition. Thanks to solar power, they all now have electricity, although not all get as cushy as providing warm showers. The Gîte de la Caverne Dufour at Piton des Neiges is the most basic: it has no hot water, but there are now inside toilets.

*Gîtes de montagnes* must be booked and paid for in advance, and charges are not refundable unless a cyclone or a cyclone alert prevents your arrival. You can book through the **Maison de la Montagne et de la Mer** (Map pp170-1; ☎ 0262 90 78 78; [www.reunion-nature.com](http://www.reunion-nature.com) in French; 5 Rue Rontaunay) in St-Denis or through affiliated tourist offices, including those in Cilaos, Salazie, Hell-Bourg, St-Gilles-les-Bains, St-Pierre, St-Leu and Bourg-Murat (see individual town entries for contact details). It's highly recommended that you book well in advance, especially during the busy tourist seasons. One night's accommodation without food costs around €14.50 per person.

When staying in a *gîte de montagne*, you have to call the *gîte* at least two days ahead to book your meals (or you can ask for this to be done for you when you make the original booking). Dinner costs from €14 to €16, and usually consists of hearty *carris* (curries). Breakfast costs around €5 and normally consists of coffee, bread and jam.

Sleeping arrangements usually consist of bunk beds in shared rooms, so be prepared for the communal living that this entails, although the newer *gîtes* usually have a few private rooms. Sheets and blankets are provided, though you might want to bring a sheet sleeping bag (a sleep sheet).

It's not a bad idea to also bring along toilet paper and a torch. It can get quite chilly at night, so warm clothing will be in order. Some places will let you cook, but many kitchens are so basic – and sometimes grimy – that you probably won't bother.

On arrival and departure you must 'book' in and out with the manager, who will collect your voucher and payment for meals. In theory, you're not meant to occupy a *gîte* before 3pm or remain past 10am. For more information about these *gîtes* and for hiking-related information, see the chapter Hiking in Réunion (p231).

## Gîtes d'Étape

*Gîtes d'étape*, sometimes simply called *gîtes*, are privately owned and work in roughly the same way as the *gîtes de montagnes*, offering dorm beds and meals. One main difference is that you can book these places directly with the owners. There are numerous *gîtes d'étape* in the Cirque de Mafate, and others dotted around the island; most are in the vicinity of walking trails. The host will often offer meals or cooking facilities.

You'll find a number of *gîtes d'étape* listed in the Gîtes de France leaflet, *Île de la Réunion* (see Chambres d'Hôtes, p245). Local tourist offices should be able to provide lists of others in their area. Also check out the website [www.reunion-nature.com](http://www.reunion-nature.com) (in French).

## Rental Accommodation &amp; Gîtes Ruraux

*Gîtes ruraux* are private houses and lodges that families and groups can rent for self-catering holidays, normally by the week or

weekend. There are dozens of *gîtes ruraux* scattered all over the island.

Most offer lodging for four or more people, with facilities of varying standards; you may have to bring your own bed sheets in some cases. Costs vary from around €300 to €400 per week and from €150 to €250 for a weekend (note that not all offer bookings for just a weekend).

Contact Gîtes de France, represented through **Maison de la Montagne et de la Mer** (Map pp170-1; ☎ 0262 90 78 90; [www.reunion-nature.com](http://www.reunion-nature.com) in French; 5 Rue Rontaunay, St-Denis), local tourist offices or check out the website [www.reunion-nature.com](http://www.reunion-nature.com) (in French). *Gîtes ruraux* can be booked either through Gîtes de France or by phoning the owners directly. A deposit of some sort is usually required in advance.

## Youth Hostels

Réunion has four *auberges de jeunesse* (youth hostels), which are located in Bernica, Entre-Deux, Hell-Bourg and St-Denis. They are operated by the **Fédération Réunionnaise des Auberges de Jeunesse** (Map pp170-1; ☎ 0262 41 15 34; [www.auberge-jeunesse-reunion.com](http://www.auberge-jeunesse-reunion.com); 2 Pl Étienne Regnault, St-Denis). Bookings can be made directly with the hostel.

Officially, the hostels are only open to Hostelling International (HI) card holders. In practice, you can stay at a hostel even if you're not a member, but you'll have to pay a small extra charge (about €2 per night).

Guests over 18 years of age pay €13 per night and an additional €3 for breakfast. Evening meals are usually available for €9.50 per person.

## Hotels

If you're after serious cossetting and ultra-posh digs, you've opened this book on the wrong page. Most hotels on the island are rated as one-, two- or three-star, and lots are unclassified. There is only a sprinkling of four-star hotels.

Réunion isn't flush with hotels, so getting a room can sometimes be difficult. Primarily, they're found in St-Denis and around the beach resorts of the west coast, especially St-Gilles-les-Bains, though you'll also find some scattered in the interior.

Most room rates include breakfast, but check when booking to be sure.

## ACTIVITIES

Want to get the heart pumping and the lungs gasping? You've come to the right place. Réunion offers a smorgasbord of activities for the adventure-seeker all over the island. Do you want to shoot down a river in a raft? Explore the countryside on horseback? No problem: it's all here, plus more; surfing, canyoning, paragliding, mountain biking and even Parcs Aventure are yours for the doing.

And if you need to recharge the batteries after all that exertion, rest easy: good restaurants serving wholesome *carris* are never far away.

High standards of professionalism are pretty uniform whatever the activity you choose. Just one quibble: the operators don't have much experience in dealing with English-speaking clients – brush up your French!

## Canyoning

If walking, sliding, rappelling, diving, jumping and swimming down canyons is your thing, Réunion's canyoning hotspots are found in the Cirque de Salazie and Cirque de Cilaos, which are famous for their deep throats, torrents and narrow gorges. For seasoned canyoners, Takamaka, on the east coast, and Trou de Fer, accessible from the Hautes Plaines, are talismanic.

## Deep-Sea Fishing

As elsewhere in the Indian Ocean region, the season for deep-sea fishing is tied to the feeding habits of bait-fish species; you stand the best chance of hooking a monster marlin from January to March. A boat with crew costs roughly €400/700 per half/full day (maximum of six people).

The main operators are based in St-Gilles-les-Bains (p184).

## Diving

Réunion is certainly not a hardcore diver's destination, but that doesn't mean you should give it a wide berth. The west coast boasts its fair share of underwater wonders and deserves attention for its number of relaxed sites, with the added lure of a few wrecks and wall dives. You'll find professional dive centres in St-Gilles-les-Bains, St-Leu, Étang-Salé-les-Bains and St-Pierre.

For further information, see p29.

## Hiking

Hiking is without a doubt the most rewarding activity in Réunion, with an excellent system of well-marked trails and an extraordinarily varied terrain. No visitor to the island should miss the superb rugged Cirques of Cilaos, Salazie and Mafate. For the less energetic, the volcano climb makes a manageable day trip and offers some of the most unusual and impressive scenery on the island.

For more information about hiking in Réunion, see p231.

## Horse Riding

Saddling up is a fun and ecofriendly way to commune with the wilderness and enjoy the glorious hinterlands and lush forests. Horse riding is commonplace on the island. You don't need any riding experience, as riding centres cater to all levels of proficiency. Rides range from one-hour jaunts (from around €16) to multiday, fully catered treks. Particularly good areas include the Hautes Plaines, the Wild South and even the volcano.

## Mountain Biking

In recent years Réunion has seen an explosion of interest in the *vélo tout terrain* (VTT) or mountain bike. More than 1400km of special biking trails winding through its forests and scooting down its mountainsides have been established. Sadly, maintenance is poor and most trails have now overgrown with weeds. Truth is, there's only one active hotspot: Le Maïdo. But what a hotspot! An outfitter based in St-Gilles-les-Bains (see the boxed text, p180) organises downhill runs from the upper reaches of Le Maïdo down to the coast.

### RÉUNION FOR CRAZIES

If you want to work off any extra pounds gained in Réunion's fine restaurants, here's the solution: take part in the Grand Raid, one of the world's most challenging cross-country races. It's held every October or November. The route roughly follows the path of the GR R2 hiking trail, which traverses the island from St-Denis to Mare Longue, near St-Philippe, taking in parts of the Mafate and Cilaos Cirques, the Plaine-des-Cafres and the lunar landscape around Piton de la Fournaise.

Covering some 130km, the Grand Raid would be a challenging race over level ground, but runners also have to negotiate a total of some 7000m of altitude change, hence the race is nicknamed the 'Cross-Country for Crazies!' The pack leaders can complete this agonising run in 18 hours or less, but contestants are allowed up to 60 hours to finish.

Feel like entering? Contact the **Association Le Grand Raid** (☎ 0262 20 32 00; www.grandraid-reunion.com). We'd be curious to hear about your performance!

## Paragliding

On the west coast, the St-Leu area ranks as one of the best paragliding spots in the world, with consistently excellent upliftings throughout the year. Local companies offer everything from tandem flights over the lagoon for beginners to longer outings soaring over the Cirques. Prices range from €65 to €130 depending on the length of the flight. Children are welcome.

## Parcs Aventure

Another thrilling way to see nature, this French-inspired activity allows you to swing through the forest à la *George of the Jungle*. There are two Parcs Aventure in Réunion: one near Le Maïdo (p181) and the other in Forêt de Bébour-Bélouve (p211). Each one consists of a series of fixtures built into the trees, at varying heights, usually including aerial platforms, walkways, 'Tarzan' swings, suspension bridges and steel-rope lines (also known as tyrolean slides), which are all connected. Visitors are strapped into harnesses and hooked onto a cable-and-pulley system that allows them to move safely from tree to tree. Children are welcome provided they are over 1m in height.

## Rafting

The wealth of scenic rivers that decorate eastern Réunion make it a water-lover's dream destination. Rivière des Marsouins and Rivière du Mât offer top-class runs to get the blood racing.

The price for all these activities (with a guide and equipment) usually starts at around €50/70 per person for a half-/full-day excursion.

### BEACHED DREAMS

Those who've come to Réunion buoyed by dreams of lounging on idyllic white-sand beaches with their beloved were badly advised by their travel agent. The island is quite lacking in those sandy excuses to laze about. Réunion is much more an outdoor and mountain destination than a beach destination. That said, there are a few good surprises on the west coast within the protective barrier of the lagoon. They include the beaches at St-Gilles-les-Bains, L'Hermitage-les-Bains, La Saline-les-Bains and Étang-Salé-les-Bains, all suitable for swimming. The beach as far as locals are concerned is Boucan Canot. All these beaches have lifeguards and designated safe swimming areas. There are also a few beaches in the south, including some black-sand ones. There are dangerous currents, so take advice before plunging in.

## Surfing

Réunion has a good mix of quality waves perfect for beginners and experienced surfers. Reefs, rocky shelves and hollow sandy beach breaks can all be found – take your pick! Surfing has become increasingly popular in Réunion and some of the breaks are internationally known, especially the tricky Gauche de St-Leu. Today there are surf schools up and running at most premier surf beaches, including St-Gilles-les-Bains, La Saline-les-Bains and St-Leu.

In general, there are good conditions from May to November.

## BUSINESS HOURS

As in mainland France, lunches are long, relaxed affairs in Réunion, and most shops and offices close for at least two hours at lunchtime.

Banks usually open 8am to 4pm, Monday to Friday or Tuesday to Saturday.

Government offices are open from 8.30am to noon and then 2pm to 5pm Monday to Thursday, 8.30am to noon and 2pm to 3pm Friday. Shops are open from 8.30am to noon and 2.30pm to 6pm Monday to Saturday (some close Monday).

Restaurants open for lunch between noon or 12.30pm and 2pm and for dinner from 7.30pm; they are often closed on one or two days of the week.

## CHILDREN

Fire the baby-sitter and bring the kids: Réunion is an eminently suitable destination if you're travelling with the sticky-fingered set. With its abundance of beaches, picnic spots and outdoor activities, from paragliding to scuba diving, plus its healthy food, it offers plenty to do for travellers of all ages in a generally hazard-free setting.

Most locals have a number of children themselves and will not be troubled by a screaming child at the next table, should your little treasure throw a tantrum over dinner.

Few hotels offer kids clubs, but on the other hand many places provide cots for free and additional beds for children at a small extra cost. Most *chambres d'hôtes* welcome children.

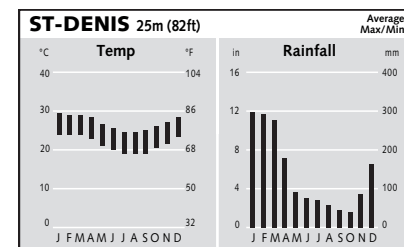
Many restaurants will provide high chairs and have children's menus with significantly lower prices.

There are excellent medical facilities in the main cities.

Lonely Planet's *Travel with Children* is a great before-you-go resource containing general tips on vacationing with the kiddies.

## CLIMATE CHARTS

For further information on choosing the best time of the year for visiting Réunion, see p169.



## CUSTOMS

The following items can be brought into Réunion duty-free: 200 cigarettes, 50 cigars, 1L of strong liquor or 2L of liquor that is less than 22% alcohol by volume, 2L of wine, 50g of perfume and 0.25L of *eau de toilette* and other goods up to the value of €880. Anything over the limit must be declared on arrival.



There are restrictions on importing plants and animals, for which import permits are required.

With regards to currency, anyone entering or leaving the island must declare sums in excess of €7600.

## DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Attacks by *les dents de la mer* (sharks) occasionally happen, and most years see a shark attack on a surfer or spear fisherman. This is no reason to be paranoid, though; the risks are statistically very low. The locals know their ocean, so it's best to seek their advice before entering the water.

Swimmers should always be aware of currents and riptides. Drowning is a major cause of accidental death for visitors. If you're not familiar with water conditions, ask around. It's best not to swim alone in unfamiliar places.

Unfortunately Réunion has a bad record when it comes to road safety, which means that you must drive defensively at all times. Potential dangers include drunk drivers, excessive speed, twisting roads and blind bends.

Hikers setting out into the wilderness should be adequately prepared for their trips.

Overall, Réunion is relatively safe compared with most Western countries, but occasional robberies do occur. Don't leave anything of value in a rental car or on the beach.

Violence is rarely a problem, and muggings are almost unheard of. Intoxicated people are the most likely troublemakers.

## EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

### French Embassies & Consulates

**Australia** Canberra (☎ 02-6216 0100; www.ambafrance-au.org; 6 Perth Ave, Yarralumla, ACT 2600) Sydney Consulate (☎ 02-9261 5779; consulat@consulfrance-sydney.org; Level 26, St Martin's Tower, 31 Market St, Sydney, NSW 2000)

**Canada** Ottawa (☎ 613-789 1795; www.ambafrance-ca.org; 42 Sussex Dr, Ottawa, ON K1M 2C9) Toronto Consulate (☎ 416-925 8041; www.consulfrance-toronto.org; 2 Bloor St East, Suite 2200, Toronto, ON M4W 1A8)

**Germany** Berlin (☎ 030-590 039 000; www.botschaft-frankreich.de; Pariser Platz 5, 10117 Berlin)

**Ireland** (☎ 01-277 5000; www.ambafrance.ie.org; 36 Ailesbury Rd, Ballsbridge, Dublin 4)

**Mauritius** (☎ 202 0100; www.ambafrance-mu.org; 14 St-Georges St, Port-Louis)

**Netherlands** (☎ 020-530 6969; www.consulfrance-amsterdam.org; Vijzelgracht 2, 1000 HA Amsterdam)

**New Zealand** (☎ 04-384 2555; www.ambafrance-nz.org; 34-42 Manners St, Wellington)

**UK** London (☎ 020-7073 1000; www.ambafrance-uk.org; 58 Knightsbridge, London SW1X 7JT) Consulate (☎ 020-7073 1200; www.consulfrance-londres.org; 21 Cromwell Rd, London SW7 2EN) Visa section (☎ 020-7073 1250; 6A Cromwell Place, London SW7 2EW) Edinburgh (☎ 0131-225 7954; 21 Randolph Cres, EH3 7TT)

**USA** Washington (☎ 202-944 6195; www.ambafrance-us.org; 4101 Reservoir Rd NW, Washington, DC 20007); New York Consulate (☎ 212-606 3600; www.consulfrance-newyork.org; 934 Fifth Ave, NY 10021); San Francisco Consulate (☎ 415-397 4330; www.consulfrance-sanfrancisco.org; 540 Bush St, CA 94108); other consulates are located in Atlanta, Boston, Chicago, Houston, Los Angeles, Miami and New Orleans.

## Embassies & Consulates in Réunion

Since Réunion isn't independent, only a few countries have diplomatic representation:

**Belgium** (☎ 0262 97 99 10; chatel@runnet.com; 72 Ave Eudoxie Nonge, BP 32, 97491 Ste-Clotilde)

**Germany** (☎ 0262 21 62 06; fax 0262 21 74 55; 9c Rue de Lorraine, 97400 St-Denis)

**Madagascar** (☎ 0262 72 07 30; consulat-madrin@wanadoo.fr; 29 Rue St Joseph Ouvrier, 97400 St-Denis)

**Seychelles** (☎ 0262 57 26 38; hrop@wanadoo.fr; 67 Rue de Kerveguen, 97430 Le Tampon)

**Switzerland** (☎ 0262 45 55 74; 107 Rue Crève Coeur, 97460 St-Paul)

## FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Major festivals in Réunion involve street parties, exhibitions, sports events, music, dancing and various other activities. Rural fairs are also hugely popular and usually celebrate local produce, which can be anything from *chou chou* (choko; a green squash-like vegetable) to sugar cane. For foreigners, they offer the chance to be immersed in local culture and to buy top quality regional specialities.

Abolition of Slavery Day (a national holiday) is taken very seriously, particularly among the Creole population, who still occupy a disadvantaged position in society.

The Indian community is principally made up of Tamil Hindus and they hold some amazing rites, including *cavadee* (in which pilgrims practise self-mutilation) and impressive fire-walking ceremonies. The Hindu temple in St-André is the most popular location for these events. For more about these festivals, see p136.

To find out what's happening during your stay contact any of the tourist offices in the relevant town.

Main festivals in Réunion:

### January

**Fête du Miel Vert** (Festival of Honey) Plaine-des-Cafres.

**Fête des Vendanges** (Wine Harvest Festival) Cilaos.

**Fire-walking ceremonies** Various locations.

### February

**Cavadee** Tamil procession; St-André.

**Chinese New Year** Various locations.

### March

**Leu Tempo** Theatre festival; St-Leu.

### April

**Tamil New Year** Dance displays; various locations.

### May

**Fête du Chou Chou** (Festival of Chou Chou) Hell-Bourg.

**Fête du Choca** (Festival of Choca) Crafts made from choca leaves; Entre-Deux.

### June

**Fête des Goyaviers** (Festival of Guava) Plaine-des-Palmistes.

### August

**Fête du Vacoa** (Festival of Vacoa) Crafts made from screw-pine fronds; St-Philippe.

**Pèlerinage à la Vierge au Parasol** (Pilgrimage to the Virgin with the Parasol) Ste-Rose.

**Sakifo** (Festival of Creole music) St-Leu.

### September

**Florchidées** (flower show) St-André.

**Fête de Notre Dame de la Salette** (Festival of Notre Dame de la Salette) Fair and street events over 10 days; St-Leu.

### October

**Fête de l'Ail** (Festival of Garlic) Petite Île.

**Fête des Bichiques** (Festival of Bichiques) Bras-Panon.

**Fête du Safran** (Festival of Saffron) Plaine-des-Grègues.

**Semaine Créole** (Creole Week) A week of cultural events; various locations.

**Grand Raid** Cross-country race in October or November from St-Philippe to St-Denis.

**Divali** (Dipavali) Tamil festival of light in late October or early November; St-André and other locations.

### November

**Fête du Curcuma** (Festival of Curcuma) St-Joseph.

**Fête des Lentilles** (Festival of Lentils) Cilaos.

## December

**Mégavalanche** Mountain-bike descent in early December; Maïdo to St-Paul.

## FOOD

Eating reviews listed in the Réunion chapter usually indicate the price of mains, followed by the price of menus (two- or three-course set menus). Set menus include all courses but no wine, except in some *chambres d'hôtes*, where wine may be included. Within each eating section, restaurants appear in order of ascending prices.

You should be able to get a reasonable *plat du jour* (dish of the day) at lunchtime for between €8 and €12. For a full, midrange restaurant meal you should expect to pay €25 to €35 per person with wine.

For information on Réunionnais gastronomy, see p162.

## GAY & LESBIAN TRAVELLERS

French laws concerning homosexuality prevail in Réunion, which means there is no legal discrimination against homosexual activity and homophobia is relatively uncommon.

Throughout the island, but particularly on the west coast, there are restaurants, bars, operators and accommodation places that make a point of welcoming gays and lesbians. Certain areas are the focus of the gay and lesbian communities, among them St-Denis, St-Pierre and La Saline-les-Bains. Tourist offices have a leaflet that lists gay-friendly venues in Réunion. The **Comité du Tourisme de la Réunion** (☎ 0262 21 00 41; www.la-reunion-tourisme.com in French; Place du 20 Décembre 1848, 97472 St-Denis Cedex) has a useful link on its website (see 'Gay Friendly' at the bottom of the home page).

## HOLIDAYS

Most of Réunion's offices, museums and shops are closed during *jours fériés* (public holidays), which are as follows:

**New Year's Day** 1 January

**Easter Monday** March/April

**Labour Day** 1 May

**Victory Day 1945** 8 May

**Ascension Day** late May or June

**Bastille Day** (National Day) 14 July

**Assumption Day** 15 August

**All Saints' Day** 1 November

**Armistice Day 1918** 11 November

**Abolition of Slavery Day** 20 December

**Christmas Day** 25 December

## INSURANCE

Insurance requirements for Réunion are the same as for Mauritius; see p138 for more information.

## INTERNET ACCESS

Currently, internet cafés tend to be found only in bigger towns and resort areas such Cilaos, Salazie, St-Denis, St-Gilles-les-Bains, St-Leu and St-Pierre, and consider yourself lucky if you can find more than one or two outlets in each city. Most hotel rooms are not really geared towards travellers seeking to connect to the internet and usually don't have the necessary plugs and sockets, and wi-fi access is still in its infancy.

The connection is generally good and rates are fairly standard at around €6 per hour.

## MAPS

For most purposes the IGN Carte Touristique La Réunion map, at a scale of 1:100,000 (1cm = 1km), which covers the island in one sheet, is perfectly adequate. The most detailed and accurate maps for hiking are the six-sheet 1:25,000 series (see p233).

## MONEY

As in France, the unit of currency is the euro (€), which is divided into 100 cents. Euro coins come in denominations of one, two, five, 10, 20 and 50 cents and one and two euros. Banknotes are issued in denominations of five, 10, 20, 50, 100, 200 and 500 euros.

For exchange rates, see the table inside the front cover. For information on costs, see p17.

## ATMs

Most banks and post offices have an ATM (known as a *guichet automatique de banque* or *gabier*) which honours major international credit cards. Visa and MasterCard are the most widely accepted. They are the easiest way to access funds while in Réunion. If you're heading off into the Cirques, it's wise to stock up with euros beforehand. There is only one ATM in Cilaos and one in Salazie.

## Credit Cards

Credit cards will prove the cheapest and easiest way to pay for major purchases in Réunion. Visa (Carte Bleue) and MasterCard (Eurocard) are the cards most widely accepted by hotels, restaurants, supermarkets, major

petrol stations and stores. Credit cards are mandatory if you want to rent a car, as they'll be used as a form of *caution* (deposit). Smaller places, however, sometimes refuse cards for small amounts (typically under €16) and it's rare for *chambres d'hôtes* and *gîtes d'étape* to take credit cards.

## Moneychangers

Changing money in Réunion? Dream on! The number of banks that have foreign-exchange facilities and do change cash has been dramatically reduced since the introduction of the euro. This service tends to be dropped in favour of ATMs. Therefore, consider yourself very lucky if you find a bank that changes foreign currencies on the island.

There are no exchange facilities at either Roland Garros International Airport or the ferry terminal in Le Port, though the airport does at least have an ATM.

As a general strategy, it's sensible to bring a fair supply of euros with you and to top it up from the ATMs.

## Travellers Cheques

Travellers cheques are not widely accepted in Réunion; you'll find that most banks are reluctant to change them. Stash up on cash and rely on your credit card.

## PHOTOGRAPHY

Print and slide film are widely available in Réunion and you'll find decent developing studios in major towns. For tips on how to take great photographs of the island's stunning scenery, see the boxed text, p140.

## TELEPHONE

Réunion's telephone system is efficient. There are numerous public telephones scattered around the island and you can directly dial international numbers on them. They only accept *télécartes* (phonecards), not coins. Phonecards are available at post offices and shops.

Alternatively, there are various prepaid calling cards (available at newsagents) that require you to dial a free number and enter a personal identity number before you place your call.

When making a call to Réunion from abroad, you'll need to dial the international code for Réunion (262), followed by the local number minus the first 0. All mobile phone numbers start with the prefix 06. If

calling a Réunion mobile number from overseas, you would drop the first 0, that is dial 00 262 6, then six digits. There are no area codes in Réunion.

## Mobile Phones

If you have a GSM phone, check with your service provider at home about using your mobile phone in Réunion and the charges involved.

If your GSM phone has been 'unlocked', it is also possible to buy a SIM card with either of the two local network operators: Orange (France Télécom) and SFR.

The network covers most towns and villages throughout the island, even in the interior.

## TOURIST INFORMATION

There are generally *offices du tourisme* (tourist offices) in most main towns across the island. Most of them have at least one staff member who speaks English.

Tourist-office staff provide maps, brochures and the twice-yearly magazine *Guide RUN*, which is a useful directory of hotels, restaurants, discos and other places of interest to visitors.

The **Comité du Tourisme de la Réunion** (Map pp170-1; ☎ 0262 21 00 41; [www.la-reunion-tourisme.com](http://www.la-reunion-tourisme.com) in French; Place du 20 Décembre 1848, 97472 St-Denis Cedex) is Réunion's regional tourist office.

You can also contact the French tourist office in your home country; these are listed on [www.franceguide.com](http://www.franceguide.com).

## TOURS

Reputable tour operators in Réunion include **Bourbon Tourisme** (☎ 0262 33 08 70; [www.bourbontourisme.com](http://www.bourbontourisme.com) in French) and **Papangue Tour** (☎ 0262 41 61 92; [papangueprod@wanadoo.fr](mailto:papangueprod@wanadoo.fr)). Both can organise tailor-made trips and provide English-speaking guides.

## TRAVELLERS WITH DISABILITIES

Independent travel is difficult for anyone with mobility problems in Réunion. Only the newest of newly remodeled businesses have features specifically suited to wheelchair use.

Negotiating the streets of most towns in a wheelchair is frustrating given the lack of adequate equipment, and most outdoor attractions and historic places don't have trails suited to wheelchair use. One notable exception is the newly refurbished Kelonia, in St-Leu (see p190).

## VISAS

Though Réunion is a French department, it's not part of the Schengen treaty. The visa requirements for entry to Réunion are almost the same as for France, bar a few exceptions. For EU nationals, a national ID or a passport suffices. Citizens of a number of other Western countries, including Australia, the USA, Canada and New Zealand do not need visas to visit Réunion as tourists for up to three months; they need only a passport.

Other nationals should check with the French embassy or consulate nearest your home address to find out if you need a visa. For example, Brazilian citizens do not need a visa to enter mainland France but do require a visa for Réunion.

Except for EU nationals, those who don't need a visa and wish to stay for longer than three months need to apply for a *carte de séjour* (residence permit). Contact the **Service des Étrangers** (☎ 0262 40 77 77; 4 Place de la Préfecture) at the Préfecture in St-Denis.

## WOMEN TRAVELLERS

The sight of women travelling, be it in a group or alone, is not met with too much surprise or curiosity, and women travelling by themselves should encounter no difficulties, as long as sensible precautions observed in most Western countries are adhered to.

Women can enter most bars alone, but there are still a few places where this may attract unwanted attention – you'll get a pretty good idea when you enter.

It's not advisable to walk alone on the trails in the interior.

# TRANSPORT AROUND RÉUNION

## AIR

Réunion has two international airports. The vast majority of flights come into **Roland Garros International Airport** (☎ 0262 48 81 81; [www.reunion.aeroport.fr](http://www.reunion.aeroport.fr)) about 10km east of St-Denis. Coming from Mauritius, you have the option of landing at **Pierrefonds Airport** (☎ 0262 96 80 00; [www.grandsudreunion.org](http://www.grandsudreunion.org) in French), in the south of the island near St-Pierre.

For more information regarding air travel, see p302.

## BICYCLE

The traffic, the haste of most motorists and the steep and precarious nature of the mountain roads means that those considering cycling as a form of transport in Réunion should be prepared for some hair-raising and potentially dangerous situations.

## BUS

Réunion's major towns and many of the little ones in between are linked by bus. The island's bus service is known as **Car Jaune** (☎ 0810 123 974) and has distinctive yellow buses. The main *gare routière* (bus station) is on Blvd Lancastel on the St-Denis seafront.

Buses on most routes run between about 6am and 7pm, with a limited number of services on Sunday. For a few sample fares, you'll pay €7 from St-Denis to St-Pierre, €3.50 from St-Denis to St-Benoît and €7 from St-Benoît to St-Pierre via Plaine-des-Cafres. You can pay the driver as you board. To get the bus to stop, you ring the bell or clap your hands twice loudly.

Car Jaune provides regional minibus services for several areas on the island; these services are known as *Ti' Car Jaune* (from *petit*; 'small'). *Ti' Car Jaune* buses run from St-Benoît, St-Joseph, Ste-Rose, St-Leu and St-Paul. These convoluted local routes can be fairly confusing, particularly if you don't speak much French. Of most use to travellers are the buses from St-André to Salazie, Salazie to Hell-Bourg, Grand Îlet and Le Bélier, and the buses from St-Louis to Cilaos, Îlet à Cordes and Bras-Sec.

## CAR

With most attractions located in the hills, we strongly recommend hiring a vehicle. No other form of transport lets you explore the island's secret backwaters as a set of motorised wheels. There are some gorgeous runs, cruising along the island's dramatic roads; heading into the mountains via the Cirques roads is a magnificent experience. The superbly engineered roads snake through hair-pin bends, up steep slopes and along sheer drops, surrounded all the while by glorious – and distracting – scenery.

The road system on the island is excellent and well signposted. Route Nationale 1 (RN1), the main road around the island, approaches international motorway standards in

parts. *Routes départementales*, whose names begin with the letter D (or RD), are tertiary local roads, many of them very tortuous (use your horn!). By the time you read this, large chunks of the new Route des Tamarins, which will connect St-Paul to Étang-Salé-les-Bains (34km), will be completed. It will certainly reduce the horrendous traffic jams that plague the west coast.

The experience is likely to be marred somewhat by the local drivers, who insist on driving these roads at breakneck speeds.

Petrol stations are very easy to come by. A litre of unleaded costs about €1.25. Most stations accept credit cards.

## Hire

Good news: *location de voitures* (car hire) is extremely popular in Réunion, and rates are very reasonable. Most companies stipulate that the driver must be at least 21 (sometimes 23) years of age, have held a driving licence for at least a year, and have a passport or some other form of identification. EU citizens can drive on their national driving licence; from elsewhere, you'll need an international driving licence.

Prices and regulations don't vary much between the main international rental companies. Rates start at €40 per day (including insurance and unlimited mileage) and can drop as low as €30 per day or €25 if you rent for several days. Most companies require a credit card, primarily so that you can leave a deposit. They'll probably ask you to leave a signed credit-card slip without a sum written on it as a deposit.

All major firms have a desk at the airports, and most offer delivery. They also have representatives in St-Gilles-les-Bains and St-Pierre. There are also plenty of cheaper independent operators around the island – tourist offices can give you details. Alternatively, **Autoescape** (☎ 0808 2341 362; [www.autoescape.com](http://www.autoescape.com)) organises reliable car hire at favourable rates through partner firms.

## Road Rules

Like mainland France, Réunion keeps to the right side of the road. Speed limits are clearly indicated and vary from 50km/h in towns to 110km/h on dual carriageways. Drivers and passengers are required to wear seat belts. The alcohol limit is 0.5g/L.

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