

It's been a tough 18 months during the pandemic, but the idyllic holiday paradise of Mauritius has lost none of its sparkle says Josh Payne

# Marvellous Mauritius

## Travel

**T**HE warm glow of an African sunset sweeps the skies of Indian Ocean gem Mauritius. Sitting on the beach at the Sands Suites Resort on the island's west coast, it's easy to get distracted by the dipping sun's reflection off the clear, calm ocean water.

A beautiful backdrop of mountains, accompanied by the soothing sounds of bird song and gentle waves, might help any traveller forget about two years of relentless restrictions on our freedoms, but the island republic takes the pandemic as seriously as any other country, with government enforcement of wearing face masks indoors and outdoors by the vast majority of locals – and indeed, tourists.

When I arrive in the country a traditional welcoming Sega dance performance immediately uplifts my spirits. Bright blue costumes and lively chants instantly quash any hesitancy I might have had about visiting the island during a pandemic.

Mauritius had been eagerly anticipating the reopening of its borders to travellers on October 1, with many islanders telling me that tourism was their only form of income before the pandemic kicked in.

Not too long ago the thought of travelling halfway around the world to catch a glimpse of some winter sun seemed like a far-fetched dream. But the collective goal of Mauritian hoteliers is that tourists will feel safe at their sites – and that's certainly the case at Preskil Island Resort in the south east of the island.

I'm greeted by white-suited hotel staff in surgical facemasks who immediately take my temperature and whisk me off into a private medical clinic for a Covid test which the government has made mandatory for day one and five of a tourist's trip.

With the health admin taken care of, I can take the winding path towards my room, with bird song greeting my every step and the endless wall-climbing plants instantly confirming my arrival at a tropical paradise.

My arrival at Preskil is a small taste of what's to come as almost every hotel, market

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The sun sets over the Tamarin Mountain as seen from the beach at the village of Flic-en-Flac on the east coast of Mauritius

and shopping centre hints at constant temperature-gun checks becoming the new normal.

But the beaming smile of the Mauritian Wildlife Foundation tour guide, Rose Marie Pierre, tells us all we need to know about how happy locals are to see tourists return to popular sites such as south east coast wildlife haven Ile aux Aigrettes.

The breathtaking sights of a critically endangered songbird, the Mauritian Fody, and an 110-year-old Aldabra giant tortoise on Ile aux Aigrettes lure me into the magical world of incredible wildlife scattered all over the country.

There's plenty to see underwater, too. I have never been snorkelling, but my first experience in the Blue Bay Marine Park makes me wonder why it's taken me so long to get round to.

As I dip my head below the surface a vibrant array of tropical fish emerges from the coral reefs, which are clearly visible in the turquoise waters surrounding the island.

Ile aux Aigrettes and snorkelling in Blue Bay Marine Park are just two examples

of the variety of activities on offer to complement a luxury beach holiday.

During the pandemic the Lagoon Attitude hotel in the northern village of Cap Malherieux has invested money in becoming a sustainable, plastic-free site without compromising on luxury.

“It's an investment,” general manager Rubens Maureemootoo acknowledges. “We want to promote responsible tourism and reduce the negative effect tourism can have on the environment.”

Maureemootoo says he felt it was his responsibility to help to protect an island where the effects of climate change are acutely felt through fluctuating rainfall, rising sea levels and an unpredictable anticyclone season.

The island boasts a population of over one million people who embrace different religions, cultures and nationalities – something which is clearly conveyed through the food.

Curries, seafood and barbecues are all on the menu at luxury hotels – but perhaps the most surprising offerings are all-you-can-eat

buffets. I assumed buffets were a thing of the past, but the Constance Belle Mare Plage hotel reminds visitors of pre-Covid times with Indian, Mediterranean, Asian and locally-sourced seafood all on offer.

As I continue my travels it becomes clear golfers received the memo about the country opening its borders before other tourists.

Every other hotel guest I come across at both Constance Belle Mare Plage on the east coast and Heritage Le Telfair on the south west coast, appears to be carrying a set of clubs on their backs.

It's easy to see why, with almost all the luxury hotels boasting their own custom-designed 18 holes.

With the gentle breeze rustling through the palm trees and the sun beaming down on the first tee at Heritage Le Telfair's main course, I'm pleasantly surprised to only lose two balls in the impressive water hazards.

Even for an amateur golfer, it's easily one of the most enjoyable rounds I've ever played – although I'm sure the weather and the magnificent tropical backdrop play a major part in that.

Other than the sandy beaches all around the island, any tourist's head would be turned by the jaw-dropping mountainous views at the Ebony Forest Reserve, the colourful volcanic sands of Chamarel and the spectacular Black River Gorges National Park.

It's been a difficult 18 months for Mauritian communities, but they've found a potentially profitable new focus in eco-tourism.

Trying the tastebud-tingling food, exploring the wonderful wildlife the country has to offer and speaking to the incredibly welcoming Mauritian people can turn a great holiday into a truly memorable experience.

## Travel facts

■ Pure Breaks ([purebreaks.com](http://purebreaks.com)) offers a seven-night trip from £1,855pp (two sharing), including B&B accommodation and flights.

A waiter wears a medical facemask while waiting beach tables at the Preskil resort



Rose Marie Pierre walks between tropical plants and wild animals on the protected island of Ile Aux Aigrette