



## Escape to Mauritius

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When I was a teenager, my parents gave me an “islands of the world” calendar featuring 12 months of impossibly turquoise water. You know, the ones with coconut trees bending over a white sandy beach? I’d cut out the photos, taping them to the walls on my bedroom, dreamily staring at them long after the months ran out and a new calendar arrived. The islands had wonderfully exotic sounding names: The Maldives, Tahiti and my favourite, Mauritius. Something about the way it rolled off the tongue. It sounded delicious.

It was no short flight to get to Mauritius, a pit stop and decompression on my way to visit family in South Africa. Located 900 kilometres east of Madagascar, Mauritius is a small teardrop of a tropical island home to 1.2 million people, mostly descendants of Indians brought by the British to work on sugar-cane plantations. Since the country’s independence in 1968, the official language is English, everyone speaks Creole, and reads and writes in French, a throwback to its colonial days. Not that I paid too much attention, soaking in my first warm summer night and an all-night Creole celebration outside the capital of Port Louis. At last, I was invading those dog-eared photos on my old bedroom wall.

As one of the most popular honeymoon and holiday destinations for French, German and British tourists, the island has about 100 resorts, primarily congregated in the north and west. I headed south, a region that is slowly shifting away from sugar cane and into exclusive golf courses and luxury villas. Like other tropical islands, Mauritius is refocusing its resources on tourism to offset declining sugar prices. The Heritage Le Telfair resort is part of four properties developed under the same locally owned hotel group, oozing class and Old World service. Every night, I dug my toes in the sand watching a picture-perfect sunset, as one is prone to do on island escapes. A short golf cart ride away is the Villas Valriche, where foreigners can now purchase luxury four-bedroom villas overlooking a stunning 27-hole golf course. While you can expect to shell out a couple million dollars for the privilege, it comes with handy Mauritian citizenship. Sell your villa, however, and you lose your passport.

On a boat cruise to the nearby Ile de Cocos, a pod of Spinner dolphins are practising their aerial gymnastics. In the distance, I see a mountain called Le Morne Brabant, where escaped slaves took refuge and preferred to jump to their death rather than be captured. The captain plucks spiny sea urchins off the shallow lagoon floor, cuts them open, cleans them out and hands them to me with a dash of white wine and lemon juice. Seafood never tasted so good. Like other Mauritians I’d met, the captain was cheery and good-natured, sporting a toothy, watermelon smile. He tells me about Snake Island (which is round and has no snakes) and Round Island (which has snakes and isn’t round). He tells me that people here leave their religion at home, which is how Hindus, Muslims and Christians co-exist peacefully. And that 70 per cent of the staff in the resorts springing up in the south are from neighbouring villages. As Creole pop music blasts from the speakers, I crack another cold Stag beer, knowing that it can’t be that simple. A small white minority own most of the land, there are traffic jams every day inside Port Louis, and basic goods can be pricey, imported from as far away as

Australia and South Africa. Mauritius is not cheap on the Canadian dollar, but with its English/French split, it's a natural fit for Canadian travellers journeying to the other side of the world.

I took a break from the beach to visit a roadside attraction called Casela, a bird and safari park, where I petted lion cubs and drifted among zebra on an off-road Segway. Around me were honeymooners and families, the Europeans loving their ultimate tropical island getaway. I could drive from south to north in just three hours, leaving the mountains for the traffic of Port Louis, and the more developed north. Here, at Legends, I found myself in one of the world's most romantic hotels (according to TripAdvisor), with rows of couples facing each other over candlelight at a poolside restaurant. Fortunately, I had my own partner to enjoy the moment, because this is really not an island you want to experience on your own (nor does it much cater to singles and younger travellers).

At this time of year, there are enough snowflakes falling in Canada to inspire a visit to any tropical island. Unless you fly via hubs like Dubai, Paris or London, Mauritius may remain one of those elusive calendar dreams, brightening up our office walls. Or, you could cross off the days, dream big, and one day find yourself under the shade of a coconut tree.

*Special to The Globe and Mail*

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