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Never heard of Rodrigues? That's why Oh, the joys of being in the middle of NOWHERE!

by **TERESA LEVONIAN COLE**

THE 76-seater twin-prop took off into unblemished blue, its whirr accompanied by the clucking of baby chicks, loaded behind the cockpit.

Chickens in the cabin was a clue: the 90-minute flight from the Mauritius capital Port Louis would transport me 400 miles to a backwater few have heard of.

I was off to Rodrigues, a small island in the Indian Ocean. I'd been told it was like Mauritius — to which this island of 38,000 souls belongs — 50 years ago. And that I should expect sunshine, beautiful beaches, pristine nature, and a relaxed vibe. Oh, and that Princes William and Harry used to holiday here incognito, free of paparazzi. That's about all I knew. Now, as I peered from the window, I saw below me a fish-shaped island in a lagoon of the most impossible, milky jade, surrounded by a sapphire ocean. Promising.

A short runway and relative inaccessibility have saved Rodrigues from development and mass tourism. That's just how the islanders, who live from fishing and agriculture, like it.

That's why this sublime island in the middle of nowhere is such a joy. After driving to our hotel,

over hills of black lava and lush vegetation, negotiating free-range livestock with little road sense, we reached the pristine beaches of the East coast. Whereas most accommodation is in guesthouses inland, or along the North coast, the Tekoma, one of half-a-dozen hotels on Rodrigues, has pride of place. My bungalow had direct views over the ocean and I woke to pyrotechnic sunrises, and saw fishermen bringing in their traps, brimming with colourful reef fish. These unpolluted waters

yield squid, emperor fish, marlin, the prickly shoemaker fish, tuna and the most succulent parrot fish. For both snorkelers and gourmands this is nirvana. When not snorkelling, or scuba-diving beyond the reef, brimming with over 250 species of coral, we explored the island.

Smaller than Manchester, it's easily seen in a day. We passed little houses, all selling homemade pickles, honey, baskets woven from leaves, and octopus hung out to dry from washing lines. Much of this produce is to be found at the market in Port Mathurin, advertised on cardboard in the local Creole language ('3 ti po pou Rs100').

We drove inland, through alpine-like scenery, passing what must be the most inviting prison on the planet — with sea views, and an outer wall painted with colourful murals. 'When I first came here, I thought I'd go mad,' a French expat I met in town told me. 'Mauritius, by comparison, is like New York. But then, you get used to the pace, and you never want to leave.'

No wonder tortoises once flourished here. Rodrigues was home to thousands of giant tortoises but by the 1770s they'd all been eaten. Thanks to Charles Darwin, an early proponent of breeding endangered animals



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PERFECT PERTH
IT'S almost a year since Qantas launched non-stop flights from London to Perth and they've been a huge success — flights are 92 per cent full on average. The cliff-top walks, wineries and surfing beaches of Margaret River, a three-hour drive south of the capital of Western Australia, are a good reason to grab a seat. qantas.com, visitwa.com.au

GOING GREEK
NEED an easy summer getaway? British Airways starts flights from Gatwick to the island of Kos on May 15 — just in time for the opening of the new all-inclusive Ikonos Aria beach resort with eight

READY FOR TAKE-OFF
Flights ++ Airports ++ New routes

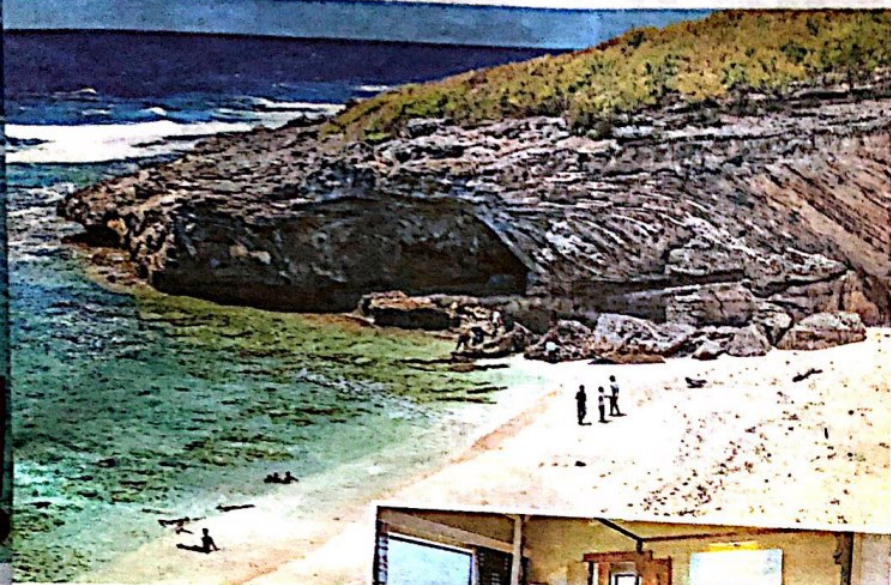
restaurants, spa and children's clubs. ba.com, ikos-aria.com

SMILE PLEASE!
IF THE face fits... you may board. Cathay Pacific is inviting passengers at Amsterdam's Schiphol airport to trial facial recognition

technology as a way to speed up getting to your plane. cathaypacific.com, schiphol.nl

AFRICAN SKIES
FANCY a whirlwind tour of Africa in high style? Book an 18-day Pears of Africa air cruise and you'll fly to seven

Escape: Long-haul this Indian Ocean beauty is such a treat



Mellow: (clockwise from top) Pristine beach on Rodrigues, a room at Tekoma Hotel; and one of the island's many tortoises

in captivity, the late 1800s saw giant Aldabra tortoises brought here. And in 2007, the Francois Leguat Tortoise Reserve opened, staffed by a skeleton team and eco-conscious volunteers. 'Our residents are descendants of Darwin's tortoises,' says Arnaud, a reserve manager. 'We brought some from Mauritius and now have around 2,300.' They were mating as we walked through the Canyon Tiyel, a few hopeful singletons lumbering up to us, to be tickled under the chin.

WE MEET one tortoise, released into the wild, and duck under six-inch spiders hanging between the trees, while the island's last surviving native birds flutter around us — the brilliant yellow Fody and Rodrigues warbler.

A day was spent visiting the Ile aux Cocos. Only 15 fishing boats have a permit to bring tourists to this nature reserve, about an hour's journey into the lagoon. Twelve of us came ashore, among hundreds of nesting noddies and skittish white fairy terns.

We lunched on the local staples of octopus curry, rice, papaya salad, pickles, and a lethal rum arranged made by our boatman, Rico, surrounded by white beaches and the

most limpid waters I've ever seen. But the best was saved till last. On a day when the 32c heat was tempered by a breeze, my guide and I undertook a three-hour coastal walk, from my hotel to Gravier.

It took us on a rough path, through forests of casuarina trees and wild flowers, across beaches and over cliffs, and into deserted coves where we stopped for refreshing dips.

Along the way, we passed only a fisherman caulking his wooden boat, and sunbathing goats. Lunch awaited at journey's end: a feast of crab, octopus salad, fresh fish, and huge lobsters, straight from the deep.

There is little to beat such barefoot simplicity. Just make sure you leave your watch behind.

TRAVEL FACTS

LUXURY Holidays Direct (020 8774 7299, luxuryholidaysdirect.com), seven nights half-board at Tekoma Rodrigues from £1,485pp, includes return flights from Heathrow via Mauritius, (airmauritius.com).

countries in a Boeing 737 fitted with 56 business class seats. The five-star adventure includes stops at Victoria Falls, Zanzibar and Muscat, plus a ride on the Rovos Rail luxury train in South Africa. All-inclusive fares start at £43,995 per person but the departure's not until March 26, 2020 — so you've got a year to save up. aircruisecollection.com

will be another trailblazing aircraft to get nostalgic about. Production of the Airbus A380, the double-decker superjumbo carrying around 525 passengers, will end in 2021 — a result of a cut in orders by air giant Emirates. The world's largest commercial jet is quiet and roomy and used by 14 carriers including British Airways, Qatar Airways and Singapore Airlines, so don't miss the chance to experience it. lyja380.com

NIGEL TISDALL



PICTURES: SHUTTERSTOCK/ACORNERS/ALISSIMO/REXNAO

5 other Indian Ocean secrets

COMORO ISLANDS

NORTH of Madagascar and east of Mozambique, not many people make it to this remote archipelago of volcanic islands. There are four main ones: Grande Comore, Moheli, Mayotte and Anjouan. Most tours begin in Grande Comore, taking in the medina and ancient sultans' palaces at Moroni, the capital, before travelling to Moheli to visit spice gardens. nativeeyetravel.com

DESROCHES ISLAND

PART of the Amirante Islands, Desroches is administered by the Seychelles, about 150 miles to the north-east. The total population is about 100 and it was once part of the British Indian Ocean Territory but was returned to the Seychelles in 1976. It's home to a Four Seasons hotel (right), but remains almost untouched with a dense tropical interior and long, undeveloped beaches. scottdunn.com



LA REUNION

THIS French overseas department is a dramatic island with extinct volcanoes that form an

extraordinary series of craters, known as 'cirques', surrounded by rainforest. There are also a handful of pretty little seaside resorts. Explore the island by car along twisting roads through the hills, staying at small hotels. French is spoken and Reunion creole. rainbowtours.co.uk

PEMBA

ABOUT 50 miles north-east of Zanzibar, Pemba Island is part of Tanzania. It's a sleepy place with clove farms, fishing villages, mangrove swamps, sandy beaches that are home to nesting turtles and a handful of hotels facing coral reefs teeming with fish. Most visitors fly from Zanzibar, 30 minutes away. Arab sailors named Pemba, El Huthera, 'The Green'. audleytravel.com

CERF

JUST off Mahe, the Seychelles capital, Cerf Island is a mile long and half-a-mile wide. It's a ten-minute boat ride from Mahe and set within St Anne National Marine Park. There's a little resort, a scattering of villas, a beach, a tropical interior — and not much else. Novelist Wilbur Smith once owned a villa here. tropicalsky.co.uk

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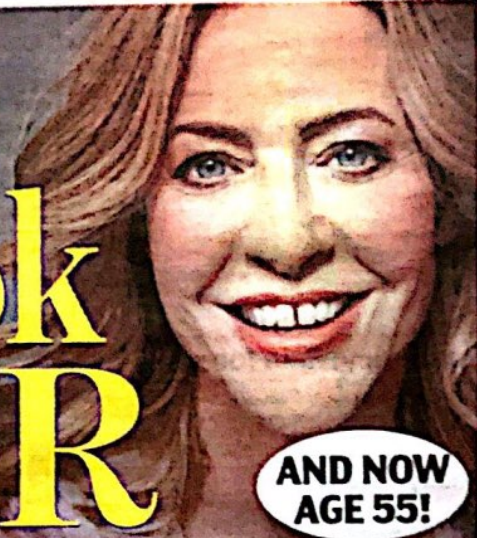


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PAGES 38-39

THE £1BN PARKING ROBBERY

Motorists face charges rising by up to 230%

TOWN halls are set to pocket a record £1billion profit from parking fees over the next year.

Motorists face increases of up to 230 per cent from next month, an audit reveals today. As well as charging more for town

By **James Salmon** Transport Editor

car parks, many councils are raising the cost of residential permits.

Shoppers and churchgoers will be hit by the end of cheaper Sunday parking in some areas.

Hampshire, Nottingham, Reading, Cambridge, Brighton and Exeter are all planning big hikes. Councillors

insist higher fees are necessary because of major budget cuts from Whitehall. They also cite the need to tackle congestion and air pollution.

Families are already facing the second highest rise in council tax in a decade, with typical Band D rises of £76 from next month.

Councils expect to make a record

Turn to **Page 4**

PLUS



TESTED
The shakes that could help to

**REVERSE
DIABETES**

SEE PAGE 49