

Travel & Outdoors

WISH YOU WERE HERE



Perfectly peaceful Mauritius

With welcoming people and the seductive luxury of attentively staffed hotels and beach bars, I leave with a resolve to return, writes **Jenny McBain**

About eight million years ago, some 2000km off the southeast coast of Africa, an archipelago emerged out of the depths of the Indian Ocean. That original volcanic eruption formed the country we now know as Mauritius. Within the context of geological deep time the birth of these islands was a recent event. However, it is a place which stands as testimony to the resilience of nature in the face of the impact of successive waves of European influence, from early modern times to the present day.

Documentary sources suggest that Arabic people were aware of Mauritius as far back as the 12th century. There were no indigenous inhabitants, and the Arabs chose not to make landfall. Portuguese mariners passed by too, and they did go ashore but there is no evidence of them having settled.

It fell to the Dutch to make the

island part of its vast colonial empire in the 16th century. Subsequently the French took up residence before seceding power to the British following major naval battles in 1810. The father of evolutionary theory, Charles Darwin, stopped off in Mauritius in 1836 on his return voyage from the Galapagos Islands. It is possible to follow in his footsteps. I wish to seek out wild places and do just that.

Having arrived at a luxury hotel called Sands in the western region of the mainland, I head for the beach where I am lulled by the hush and crash of the sea as it advances towards high tide. Sipping on a rum cocktail, I spend some blissful hours gazing at distant volcanic peaks, before making my way to the hotel's

I take a cooling dip in a pool fed by a cascading waterfall



The Sands Hotel infinity pool, main; one of the beachfront suites, above

spa for a massage treatment. There, a therapist deftly unravels the knots of tension from my travel-weary muscles.

After some more luxurious cossetting and a few nights' rest, I make my way to the southeast of mainland Mauritius. From there I take a boat trip to the Isle Aux Aigrettes in the company of local guide, Laticia. This carefully managed nature reserve is a coral island somewhat older than its neighbouring, volcanic landmasses. It is also a microcosm of the kind of coastal terrain which predominated in times past.

The dodo, a large flightless bird unique to Mauritius, became extinct in the 17th century. At the time of Darwin's visit the long-necked turtle which was also endemic to this region was still in existence. Less than 10 years after Darwin departed it too disappeared. At Darwin's suggestion giant tortoises were imported from Madagascar and the Seychelles.

Big Daddy is one of 27 giant tortoises enjoying a blissful island life within the reserve. He is the patriarch and not to be messed with. He has even been known to bite but likes to have his shell stroked, because contrary to common perception, the shell of a tortoise is a sensitive part of the body covered with a network of nerves. We also get up close to a Telfair skink; a native reptile which is flourishing on the island. And a pair of rare and beautiful pink pigeons roost in the foliage above our heads.

For much of the Second World War, British troops were stationed here awaiting a Japanese invasion that never happened. During their tenure they cleared a lot of native vegetation which negatively impacted on an already fragile ecosystem. We guests

become increasingly optimistic as we learn the story of how this habitat is being restored. In less than two decades invasive plants have been eradicated and native ones put in their place.

The former army barracks have been made into a plant nursery and a group of biologists is resident on Isle Aux Aigrettes. They spend their working days propagating seeds, planting seedlings, and monitoring the behaviour of the animals and birds.

One of the extraordinary things about Mauritius is the sense of mutual respect and harmony which exists between different ethnic groups. There are those who are descended from former colonialists and others whose ancestry is rooted in slavery. The main cash crop was, and is, sugar cane and its cultivation requires considerable manpower. Another swathe of the population can trace their heritage back to indentured workers who were imported from countries such as India to fill the gap left by abolition.

This mass immigration was called the "the Great Experiment" and it was finally brought to a conclusion in 1920. The story of these displaced people is evocatively told in the "Aapravasi Ghat" – a museum situated within the actual buildings where prospective workers were processed before being allocated to plantation owners. Now designated a world heritage site, these archaeological remains are well worth a visit. They can be found close to the docks in the Mauritian capital, Port Louis. The photographs of economic migrants, enduring hardship in the quest of a better life hang on the walls of the main, roofed display area. They are as haunting as they are prescient.

The food in Mauritius is reflective of a cosmopolitan society. Spicy dishes sit side-by-side with Chinese ones. Classical French cuisine asserts its presence too. One day, I visit a former tea plantation called La Vallée Des Couleurs Nature Park. Having tested my mettle on a series of high-rise zip wires, I take a cooling dip in a pool



fed by a cascading waterfall before enjoying a typical Mauritian lunch of fish curry in the park's Citronelle restaurant.

Relocating from Sands to a private villa in the grounds of Maradiva Hotel, I get a brief taste of the seclusion and privacy so beloved of honeymooners and of wealthy jet setters who are keen to keep out of the public eye. Ranked as one of the world's finest hotels, an in-villa breakfast is something of a speciality. I sit in a small enclosed garden and am serenaded by a red cardinal fody, as I tuck into tropical fruits and freshly baked French pastries.

The investment of time and money in a 12-hour flight to Mauritius pays dividend many times over. Visitors can expect year-round sunshine, although it may be advisable to avoid the rainy months of December to February.

I do not buy many souvenirs. But I take home memories of mountainsides covered with variegated green and spinner dolphins playing in the warm surf and getting to snorkel amongst neon bright fish. Ultimately, though, it is her people who make Mauritius the perfect place for a peaceful, tropical retreat. They are welcoming and generous of spirit. It was not always easy to wrest myself away from the seductive pull of attentively staffed hotels and beach bars. But, I leave glad that I did and with a resolve to return.



Visitors to Mauritius can expect year-round sunshine

STAYCATION



The ultimate

The Bay apartments overlooking Coldingham Bay are an ideal holiday base, finds Gaby Soutar

What makes a perfect beach is subjective. Some might insist on conch shells, white sands, cocktails and tame dolphins. I could be persuaded but, generally, I prefer something a little less exotic. In fact, I think I've discovered mine at Coldingham Bay, which is situated within the St Abbs and Eyemouth Marine Reserve.

At this small and sheltered beach the sand is the colour of sponge cake and the water is toe-shrinkingly ice-cold – we're in the Scottish Borders not the Maldives, after all – but it has a shallow gradient, so professional paddlers like us needn't unexpectedly get their jean hems wet. There are public toilets, as well as a lifeguard station, in case the paddling goes horribly awry, sugared-almond-coloured beach huts, a post box nearby and even a Beach Cafe, where they stock Giacobazzi's ice-cream, made nearby in Eyemouth, and homemade cakes, all served alongside bright Aerobies and water-wings.

We could see this idyllic walking spot from our window, when we stayed at one of the upmarket holiday home rental company Crabtree & Crabtree's new The Bay beachfront apartments, which are a couple of

minutes' walk from the sands, just past St Veda's Surf Shop and School. They're in an angular contemporary building, painted an Art Deco-ish stark white, with one of the best outlooks in the lovely Berwickshire village of Coldingham, where there's an ancient priory and a couple of decent pubs.

We're at 7 The Bay, which we chose purely for the decor, which varies slightly from apartment to apartment. In common with the others, apart from the ground floor deck, where they have a patch of grass, they all feature floor-to-ceiling windows and large balconies. Ours has a breakfast table and chairs, as well as a bright yellow wicker bench, and plants strung with fairy-lights that come on at night.

The living areas are open-plan with top-of-the-range everything, and we had two double bedrooms, one of which was en-suite. Although the decor is monochrome, with pale wood floors, there are lots of homely nick-nacks, contemporary prints and velvety sofas, so it doesn't seem cold or stark. Everything is practically and ergonomically designed, and there is also a utility area, where you'll find yoga mats, wet suits, a washing machine, wind-breaks and picnic baskets, among other useful stuff.



beach break

These apartments only opened last summer, and still feel completely box fresh. We were careful not to tramp sand all over the place. Not that the beach was the only place we strayed to. We also headed along part of the Berwickshire Coastal Path, which follows a wooden staircase up from one end of the bay. Go the other way, and you'll end up in Eyemouth.

I wouldn't take errant small and naughty children up here, as, in parts, it gets pretty vertiginous. We made it all the way to St Abbs Lighthouse, on what seemed to be the windiest day of the year. At some points we felt as if we were going to be dashed onto the rocks below just like Martello, the

These apartments only opened last summer, and still feel box fresh

ship whose sinking in 1857 prompted the building of this lighthouse by David and Thomas Stevenson – the father and uncle of Treasure Island's Robert Louis Stevenson.

The hilly-ness made our hike feel a bit longer than the step count suggested and I promised myself I'd invest in one of those Nordic walking sticks that everyone else had. We hoped to see puffins at the promontory that is St Abbs Head, but the plain-beaked birds that are terns and a couple of pigeons will have

Coldingham Bay, main; The Bay apartments, top; the open-plan living area, above

to do. "Have you seen any puffins?" I asked another walking pair, as I squinted at the rocks. "No, do a boat tour, that's when you see them," was their advice. Aha.

It was all beautiful anyway, from the tiny purple thrift flowers, bobbing in the wind, to the red rocks and clear water that makes this part of the world so appealing to scuba divers.

Along the route from Coldingham, there is St Abbs, where you can have crab rolls at cafe Ebbcarrs, or check out the village's visitor centre. According to this place's literature, the surroundings include many of the locations for the Marvel Avengers: Endgame and the new Thor: Love and Thunder film, in which St Abbs appeared as New Asberg. That may account for some of the young visitors we saw, taking lots of selfies.

We left them to it and headed back to our perfect beach and apartment combo. We don't need movie stars, or, for that matter, tame dolphins, though we're hoping for a puffin sighting next time.

Crabtree & Crabtree have six beachfront apartments sleeping up to four guests in two bedrooms. Seven nights available from £750. To book, visit www.crabtreeandcrabtree.com or call 01573 226711

EUROPEAN LAKES

A refreshing alternative to the coast this summer

Calm, reliably warm and naturally serene, Europe's lakes are worthy of a dip, says Sarah Marshall

When Europe's temperatures start to soar, there's no better place to be than by the water. But that doesn't necessarily mean heading straight for the coast.

Inland, around 15.5 per cent of the world's freshwater can be found on the continent, providing a calm, clean and refreshing environment to swim, kayak or relax on beaches, rocks or pebbly shores. From family-friendly camping resorts to secluded, pine-shaded cottages, there are options to suit every budget. Consider splashing into one of these landlocked waterways this summer.

Lake Saimaa, Finland
summer water temperature: 18.7C

Not sure where to take a dip? There are more than 188,000 lakes to choose from in Finnish Lakeland, located in the south-eastern corner of the outdoor-loving Nordic country. The largest is Lake Saimaa, a watery labyrinth dotted with thousands of islands providing plenty of scenic spots to sunbathe on rocks or take waterside strolls. Away from the water, rural roads wind through pine forests, farmlands and charming towns.

How: Baltic Travel Company (baltictravelcompany.com) offers the eight-day Finnish Lakes & Forests tour from £915 per person. Fly with Finnair (Finnair.com) from London to Helsinki.

Lake Constance, Germany
summer water temperature: 25-26C

Fringed with orchards, vineyards and views stretching towards the

Alps, this scenic body of water sits in a region dubbed the German Riviera. Combine easy half-day strolls with visits to the gardens of Mainau or the monastic island of Reichenau using the efficient local boats, trains and buses to move around.

How: Inntravel (inntravel.co.uk) offers a six-night B&B trip in July and August from £1,260pp (two sharing), including return rail from London. St. Pancras, luggage transfers, route notes and maps, free use of some buses and trains.

The Italian Lakes, Italy

synonymous with glitz and glamour, Italy's northern lakes have always been popular with the rich and famous – making the region as much of an A-list star as the Amalfi coast.

Try out a variety of water sports on Lake Como, Europe's deepest lake, and visit the 18th century Villa Balbianello, used as a location in James Bond film Casino Royale. Italy's second largest lake is also within easy reach of Cannero and Stresa, towns favoured by walkers.

How: Citalia (citalia.com) offers an eight-night Lake Maggiore and Lake Como twin centre holiday from £1,049 per person, including flights from London, and private transfers. Regional departures from the UK are also available.

Lake Skäringsjön, Sweden

Sweden are masters of lakeside escapes. Every holiday season, people retreat to their summer houses to celebrate the longest days of the year. Foreign families can tap into the Scandi culture by booking into a lakeside, off-grid eco lodge.

How: Responsible Travel (responsibletravel.com) offers three-night breaks from £630pp. Includes meals, evening tours, bushcraft session, return transfer from Skinnkatteberg.



Lake Saimaa in Finland