

Sixties pop hit summed up Mauritius and my hotel experience there

Paul Harris is wowed by the all-suite hotel that even tempted him not to explore the paradise island

THE melody and opening lyrics of Amen Corner's 1968 Number One hit kept playing in my head:

"If paradise is half as nice as heaven that you take me to. Who needs paradise..."

I had only recently landed in Mauritius and seen little of the island on my drive from the airport (more of that VIP experience later).

But it was the first sight of my accommodation at the Maradiva Villas Resort & Spa in the quaintly named Flic-en-Flac that fairly took my breath away.

I had reached it via golf buggy (although the walk from the reception block would scarcely have caused me to break sweat despite the glorious sunshine) and opened the front door to my domain for the next four days.

A shaded outdoor lounge area and my own small pool greeted me before I even opened the doors to my bedroom, which, with a bathroom, dressing room and two further showers (one gloriously outdoors in a further small, private garden), was the size of many a reasonably sized apartment.

Owned by a second generation Mauritain family, the Maradiva is the only all-villa hotel on the island and the only privately owned establishment in the five-



HAND-CRAFTED model ships are produced in a number of places



TWILIGHT view from the bar at the Maradiva Hotel

star de luxe category.

Pretty good going since there are 134 hotels in Mauritius.

Despite the beauty of the island, had I not been part of a media group with an itinerary to follow, I might well have been tempted not to venture outside the Maradiva's verdant and colourful 27 acres of tropical gardens.

What more could anyone want in paradise than being a short stroll to a white sand beach, a view of Tamarin mountain and the warm blue sea?

Or wonderful dining options, an adventurous array of cocktails in the bars and an ayurvedic spa with therapists who are trained in-house in a range of exclusive treatments?

There's a sauna and hammam, too, and, for the more energetic, a tennis court.

Staff ratio to guests is impressive... three to each villa, which means that unlike so many hotels, you are never left hanging on the end of a phone waiting for a receptionist to answer, or for that golf buggy should there perchance be a tropical rainstorm or just the need not to stretch weary legs.

Children are welcome and there's even a kids' club to entertain them, and relieve mum and dad of parental duties while they relax.

Dining options are varied, ranging from the Haiku Japanese restaurant, to Cilantro, an Indian fusion restaurant, Cassine for

gourmet dining and the Beach House Grill, next to the sea.

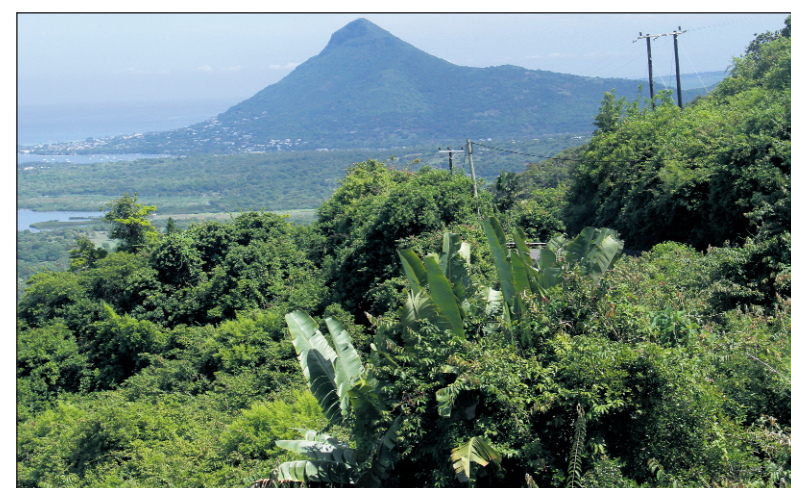
Many of the ingredients are sourced from the hotel's organic kitchen garden.

There is the option for in-villa dining and the possibility of visiting three restaurants at the nearby sister property, Sands Suites Resort.

If you fancy splashing out, you can get there, to the beach or airport in the Maradiva's own Rolls Royce Phantom.

What of Mauritius itself, lest my concentration on the Maradiva might suggest that life begins and ends there?

Some 38 per cent of its area is



THE Corps de Garde looms large

covered with sugar cane plantations, which were not indigenous to the island, having been introduced by the Dutch in the 17th century.

In 1810, the United Kingdom seized the island, and four years later, under the Treaty of Paris, France ceded Mauritius and its dependencies to the UK, which left in 1968.

Looming large in Mauritius is the Corps de Garde, or guarding corpse, a 720-metre mountain named by the French because they established a military post there to watch for runaway slaves.

I passed palm-fringed white sand beaches, experienced a mix

of French, Indian, African and Creole cultures and sampled the hybrid cuisine.

The so-called flame tree, a spectacular sight, also called Royal Poinciana, was in full bloom when I visited in December.

Visitors to Mauritius can enjoy relatively little seasonal variation in temperatures, making it a year round destination, enjoying a warm, subtropical climate.

Golfers will find this perfect and the island boasts ten 18-hole and three nine-hole courses.

For fans of *Homes Under The Hammer*, a visit to Curepipe, in the western highlands region, is a must with its elegant colonial properties.

Legend has it that it was so named because people escaping the malarial plague in the lowlands in the 1800s 'cured' their pipes in the highlands.

Trou aux Cerfs in Curepipe is a dormant volcano with a well-defined cone and crater, 605 metres deep and 350 meters in diameter.

While there, I searched with my guide almost in vain for the Amicale Maurice Israel Centre, Mauritius's last remaining synagogue.

We found it eventually, derelict and no longer in use, its Magen David-adorned gates firmly locked.

Chamarel La Terre des Couleurs Waterfall and Geopark is a unique site, where visitors can see a spectacular natural phenomenon of seven different



THE outdoor lounge and pool at my Maradiva Hotel villa



AN unusual display at the Intercontinental Slavery Museum

coloured solidified sands all fused together.

That, together with much of Mauritius's mountain ranges, craters, reefs and lagoons are the result of massive volcanic eruptions millions of years ago.

Once cooled, the hot lava turned into basalt, which then endured the humid, tropical climate of Mauritius — intense heat, torrential rainfall and cyclones.

Over thousands of years, this endless weathering formed what is known as gullied clay, resulting in the seven coloured sands.

The Intercontinental Slavery Museum in Port Louis recalls one of the less savoury aspects of the paradise island.

Housed in the former Labour-donnais military hospital, where slaves were tried during the Napoleonic era, it is the oldest building in Port Louis and a stark, visually unusual and well-presented reminder of a black period.

Mauritius was the last place

within the British Empire to ban slavery, and the first to have bonded workers.

It was known as The Great Experiment, which was Britain's solution to finding labour for the plantations after slavery was abolished.

Sadly, I never got to track down the dodo which legend has it became extinct when Mauritius, its only known habitat, was first occupied in 975 by Arab sailors.

Perhaps I might be more fortunate on my next visit when I intend to travel far lighter so I can buy one of the superb hand-crafted model ships available from a number of manufacturers, and carry it on board the plane.

These can take up to eight months to build and cost anything from 100 to 500 Euros depending upon size.

The craftsmanship captures even the finest details of some of the world's most famous old ships, including Nelson's *Victory*.

When the third ship, the *Atlantic*, arrived, British soldiers began transferring passengers to the *Patria*.

A short time later, there was an explosion onboard. More than 250 people died in the blast, including some British officers.

The Hagana, the pre-state Jewish militia that eventually became the IDF, was against the deportation and wanted to stop the ship from sailing and force the British to negotiate.

After the incident, however, the British decided to take all the survivors and house them in the Atlit detention camp.

The remaining passengers on the *Atlantic* were also detained in Atlit, before being deported two weeks later to Mauritius, which was then a British

Simple dishes are prepared with rice, pulses, vegetables and accompanied by chutney. And desserts are made from produce from Escale Creole's garden.

Food throughout the island never disappoints. It's a fusion of Indian, Chinese, African and French.

It's not often that I welcome a flight cancellation, but the opportunity to spend an extra night at the Maradiva and dine out under the stars at the Beach House Grill was irresistible.

Even the unearthly hour of the following morning's rearranged Air Mauritius flight could not detract from my pleasure, particularly thanks to the super Jet Prime Business Aviation Lounge.

This literally offers a glimpse into how the other half lives, but any visitor to Mauritius can avail themselves of it.

It is a VIP lounge in the true sense of the word, way above the level of the normal premium lounges, with a welcome from the steps of the incoming aircraft (and the same in reverse on the return) and direct transfer to and from the lounge, which serves food and fine wines.

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colony. Some 1,580 refugees landed on the island on December 26, 1940. At that time, there were around 400,000 inhabitants living there.

Mauritians didn't know about the deportation. There were rumours weeks before that soon there would be refugees coming to the island but no one told them about the punitive measures and they lined the road to welcome the visitors.

But when the people arrived, they were transferred to the Beau Bassin prison, where they were kept for nearly five years, before being liberated at the end of the Second World War.

During their detention, there was no family life for nearly 18 months. Then, finally, married women were given a pass to be allowed to visit their husbands at designated times.

The main reason they were detained was because the British believed there were Nazi spies among them.

When it was finally realised that was not the case, some went to work outside the prison and marriage was allowed among the single detainees, resulting in about 60 babies being born in Mauritius.

Only those who lived in the vicinity of the prison knew about this part of history, but it is now being taught in some local private schools as it begins to become more known.

In the cemetery (pictured above) there are 130 graves, of which 128 are refugees.

In 1946, the South African Board of Deputies gained ownership of the cemetery.

Little known story of Holocaust refugees who were sent by Britain to Mauritius



AN auspicious part of Holocaust history is the story of the Atlit detention camp and the Jews who escaped the horrors of Nazi Europe with the hopes of reaching the Holy Land.

However, there's a forgotten piece of that story, one that even few local Mauritians know.

On the outskirts of the western Quatre Bornes district on the island sits an unusual cemetery and memorial museum.

Buried there are Jewish detainees who died between 1940 and 1945.

The refugees, European Jews arriving from Romania, were travelling on three ships: the *Milos*, the *Pacific* and the *Atlantic*.

The passengers on the first two vessels arrived earlier and were transferred by the British to an old French ship in Haifa named the *Patria*.

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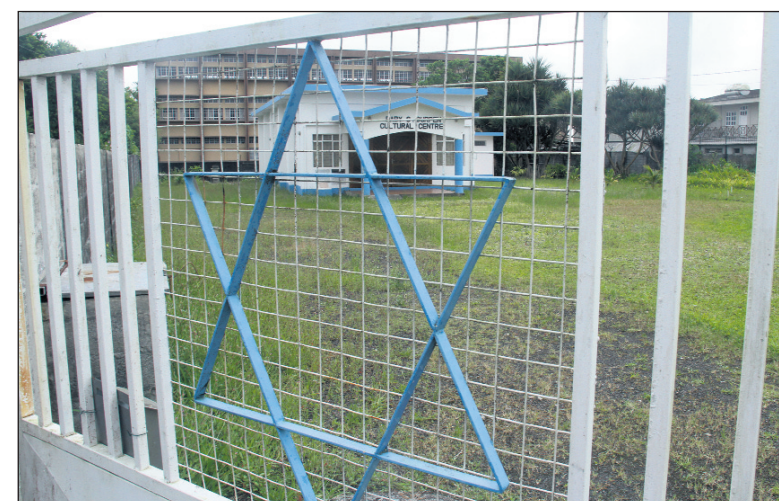
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THE locked gates of the former Amicale Maurice Israel Centre

FACTFILE

■ Luxury suite pool villas at the Maradiva start at 1,825 per night for single or twin occupancy maradiva.com/en

■ For further information on Mauritius visit mymauritius.travel

■ For a VIP arrival and departure experience visit jetprime.com

■ IF you're flying from Manchester Airport Vacation Care Parking is a well-established, reliable company with whom to entrust your car.

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GLORIOUS flame trees in full bloom