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January 18 2014

Edited by Brendan Seery

Reunion Rocks!

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Thompsons
Holidays

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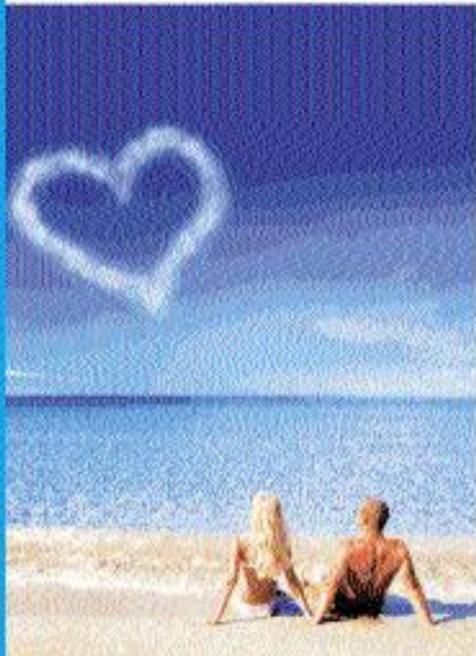


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View from Palm Hotel and Spa in the savage south.

A reunion with feelings of joy

Revelling in thrill sports, flying over volcanic scenery and braving the steep roads, Gillian McLaren explores Réunion

POISED high on the mountain slope an hour's drive from Saint-Leu – with a panoramic view of the Indian Ocean on the west coast of Réunion Island – I take a deep breath and run.

Behind me a parasail unfurls in the wind and whisks me up into the mildly cloudy sky, which is good for thermals.

It is a wildly exhilarating sensation to soar above neat homes with their tidy gardens; over cane fields and river valleys flanked by immense mountain cliffs, to gaze at the lagoon and blue beyond. The only sound is a gentle rush of wind and the beating of my heart.

As I glide out over the water, sculptured sand on the ocean floor and patches of coral are visible, as

well as a pod of dolphins. I float towards the beach at Saint-Leu and lightly descend, until my feet touch earth. My first experience of paragliding is sublime.

Réunion is the perfect spot for adventure activities and extreme sports, as it is a volcanic island, with dramatic cliffs of black rock plunging hundreds of metres, almost vertically, into ocean.

Rock climbers test their skills and endurance on the challenging buttresses of these ancient volcanoes and enjoy the unrivalled views.

I watch in awe as people abseil a waterfall. Although it is illegal, adrenalin junkies base jump from bridges over the deep ravines.

People of all ages, sizes and fitness levels hike on roads, in

forested areas and even across solidified lava fields. They carry day-packs and wield walking or hiking sticks. Trails in the national parks, Unesco world heritage sites, are well signposted and provide frequent picnic spots to rest or gape at the awe-inspiring scenery.

Mountain biking is popular, but not for the faint-hearted, as the roads are steep and winding, some have hairpin bends that require buses to do three-point turns to proceed. The roads are kept in excellent condition, as the island is a territory of France.

I invest in a 3D model plastic map of the island, to better understand the topography, then hire a small Peugeot and enjoy the novelty of traversing the mountainous roads, which are feats of engineer-

ing. Occasionally, I have to change to first gear.

Bold as I am, I am not quite crazy enough to career down the spectacular slopes of the *pistes noires* (black runs) on a bicycle.

Driving on the right-hand side is disconcerting at first, but the people of Réunion are grudgingly tolerant – no instant castigation here, as in Johannesburg.

Traffic is slow, but steady, which provides an opportunity to appreciate details of small towns like Cilaos, isolated in one of the three cirques – steep bowl-shaped volcanic craters with precipitous walls – on the north of Réunion.

Cilaos is picturesque, with an orderly shopping precinct, well-preserved Creole architecture, resplendent with its own cathedral-like

church, Notre Dame des Neiges. The quaint restaurants offer a blend of French and Creole fare. I pass a pâtisserie and don't resist trying an almond tart, warm from the oven, which is delectable.

From Blue Margouillat Hotel – a gracious colonial-style building in Saint-Leu with a superb view of the ocean – I drive east towards Piton de la Fournaise, the active volcano, up steep roads, through rural villages, where cows graze in verdant meadows evocative of Switzerland.

When crossing the Plaine des Sables, with its gravel road and wide, barren area strewn with volcanic rocks, I stop often to hop out of the car, breathe in the pure air and imprint the eerie Mars-like landscape in my mind.

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From Pas de Bellecombe, I hike to view Formica Leo, a scoria cone in the outer crater of the volcano. This is a challenge, as the path down is steep and I know I have to walk up again. For the remarkable silence, the invigorating air and the view into the cone, it is well worth the effort. Intrepid hikers can climb to the crater's summit across solidified lava in about eight hours.

The next morning I drive on the newly constructed highway to the colourful harbour front of Saint-Gilles-Les-Bains, where O Sea Bleu Dive School kits me out.

Enormous volcanic boulders under the lagoon make for fascinating scuba diving.

As I swim along the tops of these underwater peaks, I look down vertiginous slopes, deep into crevasses filled with myriads of tropical fish including long-nosed butterflyfish, broadbarred firefish and green birdmouth wrasse. Safe behind the reef, fish use this area as a nursery, so I see thousands of small fish of many different species, as well as nudibranchs, moray eels and turtles.

The visibility is over 30m, with imperceptible current, so diving conditions are perfect.

Intrigued by the magnificence of the rocks, I enjoy finning down into chasms, under overhangs and through tunnels, where the formations of cooled lava are as fascinating as the abundance of sea creatures.



To page 4 A crater in an active volcano on the island, with solidified lava which stretches down to the east coast into the ocean.



Blue Margouillat Hotel in Saint-Leu.

IF YOU GO

Air Austral has direct flights from Johannesburg to Saint Denis, the capital of Réunion Island, on Thursdays and Sundays. It is a comfortable four hours, with exceptionally good food. Telephone 011 326 4440/4443 or e-mail: johannesburg@air-austral.com

No visas are required to travel to Réunion. Euros are used and credit cards are widely accepted.

French is spoken, so take a dictionary. English Speaking Tour Guide – Dynamic, knowledgeable Nicolas will ensure you have a memorable trip. www.toursreunion.com

Contact Details

Réunion Island Tourist information in South Africa: Atout France reunionisland.za@atout-france.fr www.reunion.fr/en

Palm Hotel & Spa www.palm.re

Blue Margouillat Hotel www.blue-margouillat.com

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Where sea and sky blend

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Fear generated from recent bull-shark attacks on swimmers and surfers has drastically affected the water-based activities of Réunion. Scuba divers, however, have not seen any sharks in the lagoon. As it has many world-renowned breaks in the reef, Réunion draws surfers in search of the perfect wave. Until marine biologists—who are closely monitoring the situation—establish the best ways to keep the shallow waters safe, surfing has been banned.

Beach areas are striking to photograph, especially Etang Salé with its charcoal-black sand. Anse des Cascades, near Sainte-Rose, has a series of waterfalls spilling over cliffs on to a wooded area next to the beach.

From Palm Hotel & Spa—a comfortable five-star hotel in Petite Ile, with a splendid view of the open ocean—a 15-minute walk takes me down a steep path to the beach. It is a glorious spot locals favour for wedding photographs.

Anticipating more arresting photographic opportunities seated

in the front of a helicopter—with transparent ceiling and floor—I fly over Le Volcan, as the locals call the active volcano, which last erupted in 2010. The crater is vast, with shades of yellow and terracotta rock strata. Cooled brown-black lava on the sides is like viscous chocolate sauce.

I experience that sense of the enormity of the universe, of the power of untamed nature and am overwhelmed at the privilege of witnessing such an extraordinary piece of the earth.

The helicopter swoops between towering peaks, which begin to narrow. In front of us is sheer rock and it looks as if we will surely fly into it. I will myself not to close my eyes. Abruptly we rise vertically, sweeping around to see waterfalls cascading down the ramparts.

Disinclined to leave Réunion, I reluctantly fasten my seatbelt on the Air Austral flight. I am granted a parting gift: we jet over the impressive three cirques, in the north of Réunion. Within minutes we are above Piton de la Fournaise, then over the sea where sky and sea seamlessly blend.



Flanked by blue cornflowers, this Creole-style house in Cilaos adds a splash of dusty rose.



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