


Isle of plenty

For those seeking an exclusive island wedding and an intimate honeymoon, Mauritius blends off-the-beaten-track charm with fabulous food and a dose of luxury.

BY HELEN COLLIER



The sign that greets you as you arrive at Mauritius Airport says 'Welcome to Paradise'. And for once, it's not a trumped up marketing message. This tiny volcanic island in the Indian Ocean more than deserves its reputation as a sub-tropical idyll. Lolling off the east coast of Madagascar, this dreamy isle was discovered in the 16th century by the Portuguese, occupied by the Dutch, then colonised by the French and British until independence in 1968. The multicultural make up of Mauritius makes it a fascinating place to visit: move to the African rhythms of its Sega dance; celebrate Hindu festivals at the Grand Bassin sacred lake; explore elegant colonial buildings and soak up the lilting French, English and Creole languages spoken by the locals.

Water babes

Most honeymoon destinations promise 'something for everyone', but Mauritius actually delivers. Measuring just 58 kilometres (north to south) and 47 kilometres (east to west), with year-round sunshine and a natural lagoon formed by a protective reef, Mauritius packs a punch with ocean-lovers. Take your pick of kite surfing, diving or snorkelling the reef, swimming with dolphins at Tamarin Bay, big game fishing (September to March), piloting a submarine scooter down to the ocean floor, or simply strolling along the powder-white sands. And with 330 kilometres of coastline sporting swoon-worthy beachfront resorts, you're spoilt for choice when it comes to choosing a place to stay. »

Most honeymoon destinations promise ‘something for everyone’, but the island of Mauritius truly delivers.

Natural wonders

Nature-lovers should set course for the rugged south-west of Mauritius. Here you'll find the extinct volcanic crater of Trou-àux-cerfs, the Seven Coloured Earths at Chamarel, and plunging waterfalls in the Black River Gorges National Park, all set against a dramatic backdrop of volcanic mountains and jagged outcrops. For many visitors, the Walk with Lions experience (safari-adventures-mauritius.com), in the Casela Nature & Leisure Park is a highlight – and can make for some unique wedding snaps!

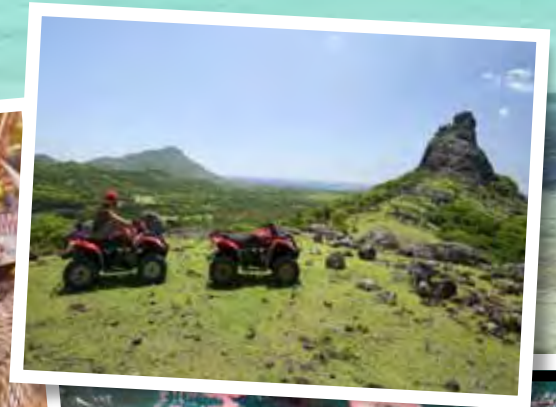
Green scene

The 2600-hectare estate of the Domaine de Bel Ombre (domainedebelombre.mu), in the south-west, includes the 1300-hectare Frédérica Nature Reserve. This pristine park is best explored on a quad bike. Your guide will escort you to remote lookouts with jaw-dropping ocean vistas, taking you past waterfalls and grazing deer en route, and giving insight into the island's rare birds and indigenous flora. For those who really want to get away from it all, stay at the reserve's remote hunting lodge, high up overlooking the plains to the ocean. Your nearest neighbour is miles away.

Heritage hideaway

The estate is also home to Heritage Le Telfair Golf & Spa Resort (heritageletelfair.mu), where chic suites boast absolute beach frontage, and the surrounding mountain ranges beckon for treks, horse and mountain-bike riding and 4WD tours.

Domaine de Bel Ombre offers a daily glass-bottom boat trip over the reef, included in your room rate, but sporty types can also seek out the Beach Club for snorkelling, waterskiing, diving and kite-surfing. Or, simply sit back and enjoy a sunset catamaran cruise on the calm, clear lagoon. The catamaran can be booked for wedding ceremonies, with a capacity of up to 35 guests. Alternatively, say your vows on the beach with the ocean as your witness, in the magnificent grounds of the chateau, or in the 18th-century chapel in nearby Chemin Grenier, accompanied by a Mauritian choir.



Clockwise from top: the turquoise Indian Ocean; quad biking in Frédérica Nature Reserve; snorkelling on the reef; the seafood shack on the beach at Shanti Maurice.



BE SURE TO...

HIRE A CAR

Explore each side of the island – they're spectacular and different.

SEE A SEGA SHOW

This rhythmic drum-based performance is symbolic of Mauritius' slave history and is now part of the island's traditions.

BOOK A CREOLE COOKING CLASS

Chef Carl at Heritage Le Telfair brings Mauritian cuisine to life.

VISIT LE CAFE DES ARTS

Book ahead as this restaurant and gallery is open only on demand.

LUNCH WITH A VIEW

After exploring the Seven Coloured Earths in the island's south-west, enjoy a fabulous Creole lunch at Le Chamarel Restaurant (le-chamarel.restaurant.mu).

Pro golf or pampering?

If a round of golf appeals on your honeymoon (or as a pre-wedding buck's event for the boys), the island boasts eight 18-hole championship golf courses, all attached to 5-star resorts. Nestled between majestic mountains and the sea, Heritage Le Telfair's 18-hole course will challenge the best golfer, and affords postcard-worthy views from every hole. After you've wrapped your round, choose from 11 dining options split between the estate, the resort and its sister hotel, Awali, next door.

Fancy a spot of pre-wedding pampering? Heritage Le Telfair's Seven Colours Spa offers special packages for brides, and can tailor treatments to suit your beauty needs. The spa practises a holistic approach to wellbeing, offering sessions that indulge all of the senses. An exclusive area for brides provides the perfect setting for hair, makeup and relaxation.

Spa-spangled stay

A few kilometres further along the coast from Le Telfair, Shanti Maurice (shantimaurice.com) boutique hotel promises privacy and seclusion. Shanti Maurice's 61 villas and suites are set just metres from the beach, offering sigh-inducing sea views.

Voted Best Luxury Hotel Spa in Mauritius 2012, Shanti Maurice's spa is one of the largest on the island (7000 sq metres), with 25 beautifully appointed treatment rooms. The spa menu is so vast it reads more like a book, offering a harmonious union of Ayurvedic techniques and natural Africology products. Relieve any pre-wedding stress with a moonlight therapy, which includes a quartz massage under the stars to balance your chakras. After your day spa session, kick back in the enchanting tea pavilion, where you can sip herbal brews and soak up the tranquillity of the lily ponds and fragrant blooms.



Indulge in a massage on the jetty at Shanti Maurice.

Shanti Maurice's accommodation is equally ravishing. Each villa is set in a private garden with a sumptuous swimming pool, outdoor rain shower and a thatched dining pavilion overlooking the ocean. Around-the-clock butler service ensures your every whim is catered for. If you're bunking with your bridal party, plump for the palatial two-bedroom Presidential Villa, which offers a spacious sitting room, two outdoor terraces, a jacuzzi, pool and gazebo, all with 180-degree ocean views – perfect for your wedding photos.

The resort offers romantic options for newlyweds, such as private dining in the wedding pavilion on the jetty with your own chef, accompanied by a violinist. After the sun has set, the gazebo curtains are drawn, the waitstaff retreat and the pavilion becomes your bed for the night, guarded until morning.

A host of exclusive extras round out a stay at Shanti Maurice. On arrival, you're welcomed with a refreshing coconut drink, a cool towel infused with Soma, the hotel's signature fragrance, and a shoulder massage courtesy of the spa. The resort's newsletter, *The Shanti Times*, is delivered to your room and details daily activities, such as meditation or yoga, bike excursions to the nearby village, tennis sessions, or a herb garden tour with the executive chef. Seafood barbecues at the Fish and Rhum Shack are a dining highlight.

Taste of the tropics

The island's aromatic Creole cuisine is a fusion of flavours from Europe, Africa, India and China. Must-try dishes include spiced duck salami, palm-heart salad with chicken or prawns, and the French-accented *rougaille*, a fragrant tomato, ginger and garlic stew with seafood or sausages. Many resorts offer multiple



Clockwise from bottom: Shanti Maurice's sunset pool; kitchen garden tour at Shanti Maurice guest room at Heritage Le Telfair; the Presidential Villa at Shanti Maurice.



TRAVEL TIPS

WHEN TO VISIT

September is the ideal time to visit Mauritius. The average daily temperature is 26 degrees, hotel rates are still at off-season prices, it's not too humid and there are no cyclones – perfect!

GETTING HITCHED

Your travel agent or hotel wedding planner may offer to take care of civil and administrative formalities, and charge a fee to cover legal costs. If you opt to do this yourself, you'll need to take your papers to capital Port Louis at least 72 hours prior to your ceremony.

HOW TO GET THERE

Air Mauritius (airmauritius.com) flies from Perth to Mauritius on Wednesday and Sunday. Return flights are on Tuesday and Saturday. Partner airline Virgin Australia has convenient early morning flights.

TOP TIP

Beachcomber Hotels offer the best deals for weddings, with a host of extras and up to 50 per cent off accommodation for the bride. For a honeymoon that blends luxury and adventure, look to Beachcomber's packages that team a beach break in Mauritius with an African safari. For details on these exclusive stays, visit beachcomber.com.au.

dining options, so you'll find there's little reason to stray. Local taxis are expensive and driving at night can be confusing when road signs don't correspond with the map in front of you, so staying in your luxury hotel becomes even more enticing!

One meal that's worth venturing out for is Grandma's Dining, an intimate experience offered by Shanti Maurice. Up to eight guests dine at the home of 75-year-old Grandma Goindoo, with her grandson Arunen acting as translator. This relaxed, convivial affair is a unique way to sample incredible Indian-Mauritian dishes, while getting to know a local family and learning about everyday life on Mauritius. Grandma makes a mean sweet potato pudding with rum and vanilla, as well as a delicate lemongrass sago dessert garnished with fresh tropical fruits from her garden.

Eastern escape

For those staying on the breezy east of the island, romance-revving resorts include the Residence (theresidence.com/mauritius), Le Touessrok (letouessrokresort.com) and Four Seasons (fourseasons.com/mauritius). Dinner at Le Café des Arts in Trou d'eau Douce (maniglier.com), a 10-minute drive from the hotels, is a must – be sure to book ahead. This extraordinary restaurant and gallery is housed in a restored 1840s sugarcane mill, and every inch of wall space is devoted to the life's works of artist Yvette Maniglier, who studied under Matisse. Yvette's son, Jocelyn Gonzalez, now runs the venue, which can be privately booked for a romantic dinner or full wedding ceremony and reception. Jocelyn personally arranges your whole event, from horse-drawn carriages, to flowers, music and menu choices. All that's left for you to do is kick back and enjoy this patch of paradise. ◌



Grandma's Dining