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## MAURITIUS GUIDE

wordtravels



Mark Twain is quoted as having said that 'Mauritius was made first, then heaven was copied from it', and anyone who has experienced the island would no doubt agree with him.

It is easy to run out of adjectives when attempting to describe the natural beauty of the small tropical Indian Ocean island paradise of Mauritius. The volcanic island, covered with lush forest, streams and waterfalls, and fringed with palms, dazzling white sands and teeming coral reefs, lies east of Madagascar just south of the Equator. Mauritius, covering just 720 square miles (1,864 sq km), is the archetypal dream destination for an idyllic beach holiday, equipped with modern resorts that have been carefully developed to preserve the island's beauty.

Along with its natural beauty, Mauritius has a valuable tourist resource in the warmth and friendliness of its multicultural population. Since being officially 'discovered' in 1505 by the Portuguese, the island has been occupied by the Dutch, the French and the British. All have added to the melting pot that constitutes the island's human heritage, along with injections of African slaves, Arab traders and Chinese indentured labourers over the centuries.

Most of the tourist resorts in Mauritius are situated along the 205 mile (330km) coastline, with the capital Port Louis, on the west coast, being the centre of operations for most visitors. The bulk of the population, however, reside on the central plateau around Curepipe, the island's other major town.

Although everybody who takes a holiday in Mauritius comes for the sandy beaches and blue lagoons, most are delighted to discover that the island has plenty of other attractions too, from some of the world's rarest stamps to the first ever race course to open in the southern hemisphere. Of course no holiday would be complete without good food and entertainment and Mauritius offers both, with some delicious local cuisine that makes use of tropical fruits and vegetables, and the chance to learn the island's indigenous wild dance, the Sega, which originated among the African slaves of yore.

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### THE BASICS

#### TIME

Local time is GMT +4.

#### ELECTRICITY

Electrical current is 230 volts, 50Hz. Square three-pin plugs and round two-pin plugs are commonly used.

#### LANGUAGE

English is the official language of Mauritius, but the most widely used language is French and the local dialect, Creole. Hindi, Urdu and Chinese are also spoken.

#### TRAVEL HEALTH

No vaccination certificates are required for entry into Mauritius, unless travelling from a country infected by yellow fever or where yellow fever is classified as endemic. Vaccinations are usually recommended for hepatitis A and hepatitis B. It's also a good idea to pack shoes that can be worn in the sea to protect against sharp coral, sea urchins and stonefish. Stonefish stings are uncommon but can in some cases be fatal. You should obtain urgent medical attention if stung; many hotels stock anti-venom serum. Visitors should take precautions against mosquito bites, as there have been several cases of the Chikungunya virus, which is spread by mosquitoes, although this is more common from October to May. Malaria medication may also be necessary, if visiting rural areas. Travellers should stick to bottled water. Medical facilities are good and free in public hospitals, but private clinics are expensive and medical insurance is recommended.

Medications are usually easily available, but for peace of mind it is better to take any prescription medication with you, in its original packaging, with a signed and dated note from your doctor detailing what it is and why you need it. Note that visitors can bring common medicines for personal use but must carry a copy of the prescription and proof that the drugs have been obtained legally. Other drugs like tranquilisers, hypnotics, narcotics and other strong pain killers will require prior authorisation.

#### TIPPING

Tippling in Mauritius is discretionary. However, some extra money paid for services, such as a taxi ride, waitering or cleaning, is appreciated. In the hotels travellers can add around five percent of their incidental expenses when paying the bill on departure, if service has been good. Government tax is added to all hotel and restaurant bills and this is included in the basic price. However, all incidental hotel expenses will incur tax, which is generally included in the price quoted.

#### SAFETY INFORMATION

A holiday in Mauritius is usually trouble free; however, petty crime can be a problem and it is not wise to wander alone at night outside the grounds of hotels. Visitors should be aware of pick pocketing in the central market in Port Louis. Care should be taken of bags and valuables when visiting popular tourist areas such as Pereybere, Grand Baie, Flic en Flac and Tamarin. There has been an increase in break-ins in self-catering accommodation and visitors are advised to only rent accommodation from registered proprietors. Cyclone season is from November to May.

## LOCAL CUSTOMS

Homosexuality is not technically illegal in Mauritius, but sodomy is and it is best to exercise discretion as the locals are sometimes conservative. Penalties for drug trafficking and use are severe, and any personal medicinal drugs should be covered by a prescription. Scheduled drugs, such as tranquillisers, morphine and other strong painkillers require by law authorisation before import.

## BUSINESS

Port Louis is the main business hub of Mauritius. Standard business practice applies to the island: punctuality and politeness is important, handshakes and the exchanging of business cards takes place at meetings, and business attire is worn. It is, however, possible to be somewhat more casual in terms of dress and visitors can take the cue from their hosts. Lightweight materials are recommended due to the tropical climate. Business hours vary, but most businesses are open at least from 9am to 4pm Monday to Friday, with some businesses open for a half-day on Saturdays.

## COMMUNICATIONS

The international access code for Mauritius is +230. The whole island is covered by the mobile network; the local mobile phone operators use GSM and 3G networks, which are compatible with most international operators. Handsets and SIM cards can be hired at the airport. Internet cafés are widely available.

## DUTY FREE

Travellers to Mauritius over 18 years do not have to pay duty on 200 cigarettes or 50 cigars or 250g tobacco; 1 litre spirits and 2 litres of wine, ale or beer; perfume and eau de toilette for personal use. Prohibited items include sugarcane and fresh fruit from parts of Asia. Other prohibited items include dangerous drugs, obscene literature and pornographic materials.

## CLIMATE

Mauritius has only two seasons, with minimal differences between them, making it a perfect year round destination. Summer runs from November to April, with temperatures reaching as high as 93°F (34°C) on the coast. Humidity is highest from December to April but is never unbearable, particularly on the coast where there is an almost constant sea breeze. The northeast (around Grand Baie) is more protected from the southeast trade winds. Cyclones, with strong winds and heavy rain, can occur between January and March. Mauritius will normally experience about three or four cyclones a year during this period, each usually lasting a couple of days, and flooding can result. During winter the temperature drops a few degrees; however, there is still plenty of sunshine and it is a very pleasant time of year to visit. Sea temperatures vary between 75°F (24°C) in the winter and 82°F (28°C) in the summer. The peak holiday season runs from October to April, with hotel prices dropping over the winter months. If you plan to visit during peak season be sure to book accommodation far in advance to avoid disappointment. To avoid the rainy season, visit anytime between April and December.

## ENTRY REQUIREMENTS FOR SOUTH AFRICANS

South African citizens must have a passport that is valid for the period of intended stay in Mauritius. No visa is required, for stays of up to 90 days.

## ENTRY REQUIREMENTS FOR UK NATIONALS

British citizens must have a passport that is valid for the period of intended stay in Mauritius. No visa is required for holders of British passports (irrespective of the endorsement regarding their national status contained therein), for stays of up to 90 days.

## ENTRY REQUIREMENTS FOR AMERICANS

US citizens must have a passport that is valid for the period of intended stay in Mauritius. No visa is required, for stays of up to 90 days.

## PASSPORT/VISA

All foreign passengers to Mauritius must hold (i) a confirmed booking for accommodation in Mauritius, (ii) return or onward tickets to their country of origin or residence, (iii) the necessary travel documentation for their next destination, and (iv) sufficient funds to cover their expenses while in the country (a minimum of USD 100 per day). Note that the final decision to admit any passenger into Mauritius rests solely with the Immigration Authorities, and that any visitor who remains in Mauritius after expiry of the period granted on their visa or entry permit, shall be deemed to have committed an offence, and shall be liable for prosecution by a Court of Law. A yellow fever vaccination certificate is required to enter Mauritius, if arriving within 10 days of leaving or transiting through an endemic area. NOTE: It is highly recommended that your passport has at least six months validity remaining after your intended date of departure from your travel destination. Immigration officials often apply different rules to those stated by travel agents and official sources.

## MONEY

The currency of Mauritius is the Mauritian Rupee (MUR), which is divided into 100 cents. Foreign currency can be exchanged at banks, bureaux de change and larger hotels. ATMs are widely available in most big towns and some hotels, and major restaurants and large retailers accept major credit cards.

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## PORT LOUIS

The capital of the island of Mauritius is a town full of character and slightly faded elegance, set prettily within an amphitheatre of mountains at the mid-point of the western coastline. Port Louis is a noisy, bustling town with a charm all of its own.

Reminiscent of its multi-faceted colonial history, the city boasts some fine French buildings dating from the 18th century, an Anglican and a Catholic cathedral, a mosque, and a fortified citadel, known as Fort Adelaide. The fort is the best place from which to enjoy a panoramic view of the town, harbour and famous racecourse (which was once a French military parade ground, and became the first racecourse in the southern hemisphere).

It may be the capital, but Port Louis is not home to the vast majority of Mauritians; the main residential areas are in the cooler, wetter highlands inland. However, Port Louis is the gateway to the prime beaches and resorts of the Mauritian coast, including Flic en Flac and Grand Baie. Although the reason most people visit Mauritius is for sun and sea, the capital city has some interesting museums and entertaining excursions to offer for those who choose to make it their base for exploring the rest of the island.

## ATTRACTIONS IN PORT LOUIS

### Port Louis Central Market



The diversity of the Mauritian population is never more obvious than during a visit to the lively, bustling and colourful Central Market in Port Louis, accessed from Farquhar Street, near the harbour. When you enter take note of the intricate ironwork on the gates, erected in 1844, and dedicated to Queen Victoria. Inside the market you will find a whirl of Muslim traders, swarthy Indian touts, Chinese and Creoles, all demanding attention as they offer their wares. You can buy almost anything in the market including fresh produce, clothes, crafts, art and souvenirs. Textiles, carved wooden figurines, essential oils and spices are all good buys. It is advisable to visit the market early, before the heat of the day descends (it opens at 6am every day including Sundays), and be prepared to have your senses assailed with a variety of odours from the fruit, herbs, spices, potions, lotions and various other goods offered for sale. Visitors will be expected to haggle and should be firm but friendly; as many of the stalls sell the same merchandise it is always a good idea to compare prices before settling. Tourists are generally charged far more than locals and having a local friend along is a big asset.

### Blue Penny Museum



The lively Caudan Waterfront in Port Louis features the Blue Penny Museum, which is primarily devoted to Mauritian art and history, but whose place of pride is given to two of the rarest stamps in the world: the Mauritian 1847 'Post Office' Penny Red and Twopence Blue, estimated to be worth more than US\$1 million apiece. Mauritius was the fifth country in the world to begin issuing postage stamps, back in 1847, and some of the few remaining early island stamps are now highly valued around the world. The museum is run by the Mauritius Commercial Bank, which formed a consortium of local companies to purchase the stamps at an auction in Switzerland in 1993, and bring them home for posterity. The originals are housed in the museum but are not always on display; for preservation purposes the Blue Penny Museum also displays replicas. There is a gift shop at the museum which sells all sorts of souvenirs - the shop has some wonderful merchandise but it is relatively expensive. Tours of the museum are available and take between 30 and 90 minutes. It is a small museum and is not interactive or particularly exciting but it is well-organised and has some fascinating exhibits for visitors interested in artefacts of this sort.

### Royal Botanical Gardens of Pamplémousses



About seven miles (11km) northeast of Port Louis, and easily reached by regular buses, lies one of the island's premier tourist attractions, the Pamplémousses Gardens (now officially called the Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam Botanical Gardens, in honour of the late Prime Minister, but still colloquially referred to by their original name). The gardens are enclosed by beautiful wrought iron railings which are today in disrepair but when first manufactured in 1862 won a prize at an international exhibition at Crystal Palace in London. The gardens were first laid out in 1735 around a mansion house called Mon Plaisir as a vegetable garden to supply ships calling at Port Louis. Later the house was bought by horticulturalist Pierre Poivre, who introduced plant species from around the world interspersed with indigenous species.

The garden is redolent with the perfume of fruit and spice trees, and the 24 hectares (60 acres) also sport a collection of stately palms, ebony, mahogany, latania and pandanus. A great attraction is a pond full of the Giant Amazon water lily. There are some animals in the gardens, including giant tortoises. There are usually guides available to give informative tours of the gardens for those who are interested, but it is also just a charming place to stroll or picnic, particularly on hot days when the shade and greenery is refreshing.

### Beaches in Mauritius



The beaches of Mauritius are close to perfect, with fine white sand and clear water running to heavenly shades of blue. Some of the island's best beaches, on the west coast, are easily reached from Port Louis. Flic en Flac is the longest beach in Mauritius and features a beautiful lagoon. Grand Baie, 12 miles (20km) to the north of the capital, is a major tourist centre, offering watersports, shops, nightlife and restaurants to complement its splendid beach and deep sheltered bay. Also on the north coast road is Pereybere, one of the island's favoured swimming spots. Close to Pereybere visitors can find the gorgeous little beach, La Cuvette, which is a weekend favourite with locals.

The Baie du Tamarin is at the mouth of the Tamarin River, in a beautiful setting, and is popular for surfing, with Indian Ocean rollers washing the beach all year round. In the southwest is Le Morne Brabant, characterised by a basaltic outcrop and beaches shaded by casuarinas and coconut trees. Snorkellers enjoy Trou-àux-Biches which has shallow waters and coral reefs. The peaceful east coast of the island offers Constance Belle Mare Plage, a long stretch of beach which is the ideal spot to watch sunrises and sunsets. Another east coast favourite is Roche Noires, named for the dramatic black volcanic rocks that line the water. The east coast is great for sailing.

### Domaine Les Pailles



A short taxi ride to the south of Port Louis is the Domaine Les Pailles cultural centre and nature park, covering more than 1,500 hectares (3,707 acres) in the foothills of the Moka Mountains and offering plenty of entertainment for visitors. The centre was once a sugar cane estate and some of the 18th-century features can still be seen. Activities include horse-drawn carriage and train rides, viewing a working replica of an ox-powered sugar mill, a rum distillery museum, exploring a herb garden and natural spring, and adventure safaris into the mountains in 4x4 vehicles. There is also an onsite horse riding centre, several restaurants, a jazz club and a casino. The centre is a wonderful excursion for families travelling in Mauritius with children; the perfect place to enjoy a long, drawn-out meal while the children scamper all over the lovely grounds. Visitors should note, however, that Domaine Les Pailles doesn't always offer all the tours and activities listed above, especially outside of the peak tourist season. It is best to phone ahead to find out what's on offer at any given time, and to see which of the four restaurants are open, to avoid disappointment. The drive from Port Louis to the estate takes only ten minutes.

## AIRPORTS

## **SIR SEEWOSAGUR RAMGOOLAM INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT (MRU)**

### **LOCATION**

The airport is 26 nautical miles (48km) southeast of Port Louis.

### **GETTING TO THE CITY**

There are three bus services that operate to and from SSR International Airport: Bus 09, Bus 10 and Bus 198. Buses are fairly frequent but the journey takes over an hour to most major destinations on the island; passengers should factor this in to their travel time. Taxis are also available.

### **TIME**

Local time is GMT +4

### **CONTACTS**

Tel: +230 603 6000.

### **CAR RENTAL**

Car hire companies Budget, Europcar and Hertz are represented at the airport.

### **AIRPORT TAXIS**

Taxis wait outside the terminal, and the journey into Port Louis takes around 45 minutes.

### **FACILITIES**

The airport has a currency exchange office and banks. There are duty-free shops in the arrival and departure lounges, and various other shops. There is a spa, post office, a children's corner and a variety of restaurants and bars.

### **DEPARTURE TAX**

### **WEBSITE**

[mauritius-airport.atol.aero](http://mauritius-airport.atol.aero)

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