

letter from **Mauritius**
words: Vicky Fawcett

ROYAL WELCOME

The paradise island of Mauritius is a civilised mix of idyllic beaches, dramatic scenery and the most heavenly service

The stewardess approached me with a glass of champagne and a smile, "Your Majesty, how would you like me to address you during the flight?" Mmm, let's see... 'Your Royal Highness' works every time and I've always enjoyed a well-executed curtsy. It seems having my time off sorted by Mauritius's top holiday guru was certainly a good move. I could certainly get used to this. Shame my lack of monogrammed luggage gave me away as the Queen of Denmark took her seat in the row behind.

Out of the airport and blinking into the glorious sunshine, we were greeted by the warm smile of our driver. Mauritius is the quintessentially tropical isle - the dictionary definition of paradise. Off the south east coast of Africa, this jewel of the Indian Ocean, is almost totally encircled by the third largest coral reef in the world. Powder white sandy beaches make up much of the 200 miles of coastline and, in the dramatic interior, a backbone of volcanic mountains rise 800m above the turquoise sea. Add to that, year-round

sunshine and overnight flights from the UK and it's little wonder that it tops the list of luxury destinations.

Vinay is just the sort of driver that starts your holiday on the right foot. As we zipped along smooth roads, between fields of sugar cane, he was knowledgeable and passionate about his island. Mauritius is a tolerant, ethnic melting pot of cultures and peoples. Everyone is an immigrant, or descendent of one, and no one culture can claim precedence over the other. As a result, everyone speaks English, French and Creole (Hindi and Mandarin are also spoken by those of Indian and Chinese descent). This makes it an extremely civilized, cultured and harmonious place to visit. It's no surprise to learn that this young, dynamic and educated workforce is the choice for foreign investment and the IT, telecoms and financial services industries are growing as the more traditional sugar and textile production tails off. We chatted away. What did we think of Barack Obama? How was the global financial gloom affecting Jersey? In our over-excitement to be on holiday, we had left our camera on the plane. No trouble at all. A call through to his White Sands colleague and it was retrieved and delivered to our hotel that afternoon. This seemed par for the course, "You come with Susie Freeman, all Susie Freeman's guests are VIP's."

In these days of online holidays, we have all become experts at sorting our



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own travel. Our dream holiday is only a few clicks away and we are all adept at shopping around and comparing prices. So where's the need for a travel specialist in the 21st century? But you're not buying car insurance; our precious holidays shouldn't be a gamble. You need someone who understands precisely what floats and what rocks your boat. You need honest and impartial advice. After all, you are spending your hard earned cash and trusting your valuable time, so it should be perfect. There's nothing more gutting than a disappointing holiday.

Step in Susie Freeman. With her eponymous travel company, she has more than 20 years' experience in top trips to Mauritius. She knows all the island's hotels personally, and, just as importantly, they know her. Susie can make an individual recommendation to match your needs and exceed your expectations. Whether you are looking for the best spot for a romantic twosome, a family break or planning a wedding or honeymoon, you want to eliminate the very possibility of error. How can the web blurb understand

that you don't want to be up at 6am to reserve your sun lounger, that you need a totally chilled spa, seriously good food and your husband might want a round of golf and is very tricky when it comes to pillows? One Jersey couple weren't happy with the kids' club in their hotel. One call to Susie and by lunchtime they were sitting in another sumptuous hotel up the beach, sipping a chilled glass of rosé with happy children splashing in the waves. Isn't that the sort of unbeatable service you want?

Our first stop was the Shrandrani resort in the south west of the island. Its 300 rooms open onto a perfectly private peninsula, fringed with white beaches. On one side is a safe turquoise lagoon, ideal for sailing, waterskiing, kayaking and snorkelling and on the other is a wilder beach, largely left to the pleasure of keen kite surfers.

The location is fab but the best bit is that the Shrandrani is one of the new breed of five-star, all-inclusive resorts. Don't worry, there is nothing of the mass-

market horror of acres of sunburned flesh queuing at the all-you-can-eat buffet. The tone is smart and relaxed. The four restaurants are absolutely top notch and you can choose from a good wine list, French champagne and holiday cocktails. Also included is an endless list of water sports – including diving – golf, tennis, football, mountain biking, aerobics and yoga. The hotel is perfect for families, with safe pools for tinies and an excellent kids' club. There's everything for couples and groups of friends who like being active, or the idea of being active (not necessarily the same thing) or alternatively being very, very lazy. Everyone's happy. And your final bill will be for little more than a couple of spa treatments - a 45-minute massage is complimentary but it's such a perfect oasis, you'll want to come back for more. Huge peace of mind when you want to stick to your holiday budget.

My work-worn, winter husband (he of the pillows) wanted to be pampered and applied himself seriously to working through the menu of luxurious spa treatments from Ayurvedic to Shiatzu, while I did sun salutations to the real sun, on the sports centre terrace. We did venture out on a Hobie Cat, under the watchful eye of the experienced sailing school. It had been years since I'd taken the helm of a little boat but we tacked up to the edge of the reef and skimmed back over the clear blue sea for a celebratory beer.

An hour and a half's drive away, on Grand Baie, one of the island's most beautiful beaches in the north, was our next hotel - the superlatively lovely, six-star Royal Palm. You arrive into a striking open-sided structure, combining stone, wood and thatch that is remarkably both solid and light. Installed at the bar, sipping a mojito, looking out at the dazzling horizontal strip of azure sea perfectly framed by the dark thatch, wave of perfect bliss

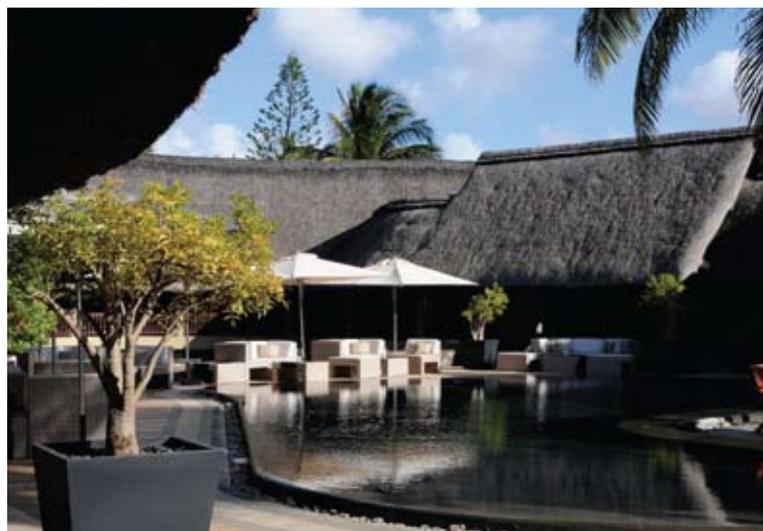


washes over us. The Royal Palm is grown up and sophisticated, private and intimate. The pools are lined in polished slate, the outdoor furniture is über-chic Dedon, the gardens are beautifully planted with hibiscus and bougainvillea and, of course, royal palms. Suites are smart, with 200-thread linen, changed daily. By night the low lighting gives a subtly warm, romantic glow and guests dress for dinner. Not surprisingly, this is the favourite choice of French presidents and those celebrities with little to prove. We were half expecting to see Sarkozy and Carla, jogging along the beach or checking into the spectacularly impressive new Clarins spa to try the Abhyanga four-hand, full body massage.

The restaurants are overseen by head chef, Michel de Matteis, winner of numerous awards, including Michelin stars. The food is first class French with some Mauritian influences and using the freshest local produce. The wine list is pretty serious with some big hitting French names. Jean-Luc Naret, head of the illustrious Michelin guide, says the Bar Plage is his favourite ever lunchtime spot. It's easy to see why. Under the wide leaves of the century-old badamier tree, smiling waiters bring refined yet simple dishes. Heaven. The Royal Palm is arguably the best hotel on this island of soaring standards and service is so smiley and charming you feel like you must have done something wonderful. We swam, ate, drank and wafted around in an exquisitely perfect bubble. If you are looking for the ultimate treat à deux then look no further.

With all this spoiling, it's easy to see why most guests don't venture outside their hotel. But you'd be missing out because, unlike other beach spots, there is plenty to do in Mauritius. The wild expanse of the Black River Gorges Natural Park, high up on the volcano is a haven for wildlife and fauna. You can see guava and rare black ebony tree and spot the famous pink pigeon, Mauritius kestrel or macaque monkeys. (Animals in Mauritius have the grace not to be poisonous or dangerous, just as the volcanoes have the decency to be extinct.) We got an authentic taste of the 18th century colonial world at the perfectly preserved Eureka, an Creole mansion and swam in one of the island's many waterfalls below. Vinay suggested a catamaran sail to the northern isles of Gabriel and Plate where we were joined by dolphins off the front of the boat.

The credit crunch means that the island is bracing itself for a difficult year. Good news for visitors who will find hotels at less than full capacity and hot deals to be had. Mauritius doesn't do mass tourism but the global crisis means that you will be able to get luxury for less. The charming locals will be pleased to see you and you'll always be treated like royalty.



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Luxury for less

Susie Freeman is offering a 7 night stay, with economy return air fare, all airport taxes, private transfers and accommodation for 2 adults

Shandrani £1595 per person
all inclusive in a Superior Room

The Royal Palm £2180 per person Junior Suite
on a half board

Book by the end of February for holidays from 1st May - 30th Sept

Mauritius Directory

Susie Freeman Travel
01488 668821
www.susiefreemantravel.com

The Shandrani
www.shandrani-hotel.com

The Royal Palm
www.royalpalm-hotel.com

White Sand Tours
www.whitesandtours.com