



Inspired by its French-colonial past, Mauritius is emerging as the island idyll by which others are judged. Julian Allason discovers the new face of paradise

High above the south-west coast of Mauritius is a secret place. Amid forests alive with monkey and wild boar, and within earshot of mountain cataracts, stands Le Chamarel, one of the last *maisons créoles*. For almost two centuries the verandas of these ravishing plantation houses shaded a life of dalliance and intrigue, as the French colonial dynasties fenced with British governors for sway over *L'Île Maurice*. Now, behind stockades of frangipani and bougainvillea, the greathouses rot. Having survived cyclone and political change, barely a dozen now remain home to the noble families who control the island's stumbling sugar industry.

In 1858, the chimneys of 259 sugar mills – each with its own plantation house – pierced the tropical sky. Today only seven puff sweet-scented smoke out over the saw-

toothed mountains and coral beaches. With the cane fields no longer adequate to preserve these châteaux in wood from melancholy decay, the romantic Creole way of life seemed doomed. At Moka, the 109 doors of gracious Maison Eureka are open to the public and guests are offered bed and breakfast in rooms furnished long ago by the East India company. Gorgeous Le St Aubin, built in 1819, has become a distillery and party venue: its four-posters, once notorious for the exuberance of their traffic, now lie chastely fallow. Even at the magnificently restored Le Chamarel, the cost of upkeep is offset by periodically letting the house to the likes of Michael Douglas.

Now, somewhat surprisingly, it is this sumptuous heritage that is transfusing life back into a luxury hotel sector suffering from premature ageing. As recently as five years ago,



A very gallic getaway

Mauritian luxury hotels such as le Saint Géran and Prince Maurice were the last word in comfort, personal service and – thanks to the French influence – cuisine. While standards never faltered, the world moved on. Sensational new over-water resorts in the Maldives caught the imagination of sophisticated travellers, while Dubai offered grande, if flashy, luxe at sharply lower prices. By 2003, Mauritian revenue had gone into reverse, triggering widespread alarm – and the determination to respond. *Très vite*.

The result has been the launch in rapid succession of four resorts in the undeveloped south that are quite distinct from existing properties on the 38-mile-long island. Each inspired by a different aspect of Creole life, they are now being marketed with an unprecedented degree of collaboration between the *Comtes de sucre*. At the recent opening of Le Telfair Golf & Spa Resort, Prime Minister Paul Berenger, himself a member of the tiny Franco-Mauritian elite, commended the hoteliers on their recreation of the gilded plantation lifestyle. For the 20 daz-

zling clapboard villas, each housing six to eight guestrooms, resemble *maisons créoles* both inside and out (albeit with a dash of Cape Cod to justify translation to the beach). Suites include sitting rooms in turrets, and sea- or river-views. Le Telfair's main restaurant, Annabella's, is modelled upon the bungalow of a plantation overseer, rendered with sufficient restraint to spare the staff fancy dress.

The aim – largely achieved – has been to recreate the drowsy rhythm of the life now seeping from the real plantation houses, of lazy days and sensuous nights, attended by the charming service that is the Mauritian genius. Guests dress up for it, one beauty making her entrance at dusk in a slinky couture gown. There is even an historic greathouse in which to dine, although what the great Gouverneur de Labourdonnais would have made of the golf course it now overlooks can only be guessed at.

Le Telfair's Mauritian appearance is, in fact, a novelty on the tropical island. The

grand dame hotels (a phrase now officially proscribed by their managements) that made Mauritius's name as the sanctuary of luxury, look anything but vernacular. But while the Creole aesthete of newcomers such as Le Telfair may win over luxury travellers, standards of service may yet be a sticking point. Despite infusions of management talent from some of the *grand dames*, the agreement with government permitting construction on the Bel Ombre sugar estate specifies the employment of a high proportion of inexperienced local labour, many of them former workers in the cane fields. Another consequence of this cheap labour has been a covert price war, in which even the most famous hotels have retaliated with substantial discounts to tour operators – reductions that have not generally been matched in published room rates.

Along the beach from Le Telfair is the no less extraordinary Voile d'Or, the latest creation of that impresario of hoteliers,

Main picture: extraordinary views are the norm in Mauritius
Left: Le Telfair Golf & Spa Resort recreates the plantation lifestyle



To reach their table, a couple walk out over stepping stones just below the surface, appearing to walk on water

Philippe Requin. Various inspired by the Alhambra Palace in Granada, a Burgundian chateau, and the *maisons créoles*, the resort offers such spectacles as mirror pools lined by flaming torches and a castellated solarium with watch towers from which to admire the sunbathers. Guestrooms, by contrast, display languorous simplicity – and some sharp thinking. Aware of the unsuitability for children of the Maldives and (in summer) of Dubai, Requin has aimed at the increasing number of families prepared to fly long-haul in search of the exotic. Eliminating the need to book additional rooms for one's offspring, family suites offer a smaller adjoining bedroom with bunk beds, a Sony PlayStation and a second television. Unlike in other resorts, the kids' club is close to the beach restaurant, its pool reassuringly in full sight of parents.

Unaccompanied couples can cavort in sophisticated junior suites with Jacuzzis. In a characteristically outrageous

Heritage Golf & Spa Resort – the third of the new resorts – the original plantation house up on the hill is being restored to create a restaurant of equal dedication to gastronomy. Alas for the Château de Bel Ombre, the beauty of its double verandas has been marred by an adjoining staircase block of unsympathetic modernity. Already there is talk among local gourmets of a subscription to plant a mature Flamboyant tree to mask it, or, failing that, for dynamite.

If, as Requin and his *copains* intend, Bel Ombre is to become the St Tropez of Mauritius, it is not just the Côte d'Azur that the new development must trump, but other destinations in the Indian Ocean and the Gulf. The tradewinds appear to be blowing in their direction.

Sri Lanka and the Maldives are recovering from the devastating Christmas tsunami, and the Seychelles has yet to achieve critical mass. And at the very moment when Mauritius has begun to compete by offering intelligent luxury and value for money, Dubai appears at risk of wandering into a wilderness of mega-resorts and fantasy islands populated by British footballers and Russian courtesans. "At the best hotels in Dubai, the view is now of construction, onshore and off," winces one travel agent specialising in the premium market. "In Mauritius it is of mountains, islets, and waves curling over the reef."

Nowhere is this description more apt than at the recently opened Taj Exotica, whose launch has alarmed hoteliers far beyond the Indian Ocean. For the hotel, situated near Flic-en-Flac in the lush south-west, consists entirely of villas, ingeniously designed to surf the Mauritian tradition of indoor/outdoor living. Spread over 27 acres, each of the 65 villas enjoys a sea view, its own plunge pool, and (when the foliage grows a little more) the privacy to bathe *au naturel*.

Even the bathrooms, temples of light enclosed within a curving garden wall, are arranged to offer both outdoor sluices and indoor monsoon showers, as well as bathtubs encircled by stones. The spacious bedrooms are air-conditioned, looking out towards the beach. The living room, open-sided under a high roof of coconut tiles, invites lounging by day, flirtation at dusk, and dinner *à deux* by the light of a hundred candles refracted in the pool. This is the romance of simplicity that a planter

Top: flaming torches line the mirror pool at the Voile d'Or
Below left and far left: simple lines and dramatic sunsets at the Taj Exotica Resort & Spa

would recognise, allowing the view across the bay to substitute for decorative extravaganza. For most resort operators this would betoken restraint; for the Taj group, that most Indian of hoteliers, it represents almost yogic self-discipline.

On lawns sloping to the beach, tented pavilions provide shade from the midday sun. Guests loll upon divans, refreshed by a cascade of fruit cocktails and sorbets, or just a mist of Evian spray. Framed by the pavilion is the green of cocopalms, the aquamarine bay, and the indigo of the mountain rising from it. Meals can be served here, there, and just about anywhere including at a table set up in the sea. The executive chef is Nobu's protégé, Shaun Gilmore, so the cooking can take an unexpected turn – not least in the pan-Asian restaurant, where the flavour control (sometimes absent without leave at Alain Ducasse's nearby Spoon des Isles) is exercised with an iron wok.

What worries international competitors is that a well-executed all-villa model raises expectations right across the luxury travel sector. On most sites such space and privacy simply cannot be realised, except by halving the number of "keys" (hotel jargon for rooms). Already, five-star block resorts around the world are struggling to fill their rooms, even at discounted rates, in consequence of evolving tastes. The Taj Exotica may, like the other new arrivals, still have some climbing to do to reach the service heights achieved at the *grande dame* hotels. But the omens look promising. Opening my suitcase after it had been packed by a Taj butler, I found every item carefully wrapped in tissue paper, pens and breakables in individually sealed bags. And not a crease visible.

If Mauritius is recovering the initiative, lateral thinking has everything to do with it. Where holidaying here formerly involved a choice between luxury hotels that were fundamentally similar, the new diversification offers distinctive experiences: the St Tropezian buzz of the Voile d'Or, sensuous privacy at Taj Exotica, and the colonial languor of Le Telfair. These charisms are reflected even in their approach to spas. Enclosed within walled gardens, the Voile d'Or's spa is a stage set in which actor/guests cross stepping stones to treatment cottages surrounded by lily pools.

At Le Telfair, the Six Senses Spa inhabits a fantasy world of oriental courts and cascades, where couples share private pavilions for a whole day of applied sensuality. The Jiva Spa at Taj Exotica provides a yoga retreat overseen by Ayurvedic doctors that is as authentic as any in India. My prescription from Dr Sasi – for a period of fasting and abstinence – might not have pleased the barmen or chef



touch, two of the junior suites are furnished with frolicsome circular beds. At night the Voile d'Or transforms into something altogether more sophisticated – and theatrical. From the great barrel-vaulted restaurant, a second mirror pool shimmers toward the beach; at the far end a gazebo swathed in muslin floats upon the surface, drenched in light. To reach the table set for two, a couple will venture out over stepping stones just below the surface, appearing to walk on water. Unlike the vast resorts in Dubai, illusion is underwritten here by intimate service – and a strong performance from the kitchen. The first true *maison créole* to be built in years is the setting for Le Gavroche des Tropiques, under the direction of Michelin-rosetted chef Michel Roux Jnr. It is doubtful whether better cooking is to be found anywhere on the island.

While the old sugar factory of Bel Ombre is being demolished to enhance the approach to the four-star



Gilmore, but would doubtless have been beneficial if rigorously pursued.

The initial success of the new resorts is already harvesting side benefits. The *grandes dames* have hitched their skirts up to mid-thigh with glamorous refurbishments and new facilities. Air Mauritius is increasing capacity from the UK by a third, doing much to reduce peak-period seat famine. Already, Mauritius specialists such as Susie Freeman Travel are reporting a significant uplift in hotel bookings across the board, both from past visitors returning and by couples keen to escape hectic professional lives at some of the best resorts to be found anywhere in the world. Demand is even spilling over into villa rentals by guests with a yen to expe-

Above The faithfully restored **Le Chamarel**, one of the last of the island's colonial mansions

rience Creole life. This in turn is drawing on to the market superb properties such as Villa Bagheera with its incomparable views over Ile aux Bénitiers and Black River, and Ilôt Malais, a romantic if slightly ramshackle private islet.

For visitors determined to experience the authentic plantation lifestyle, there is always the possibility of renting one of the remaining *maisons créoles*. At Le Chamarel, the setting is incomparable: on a clear day you can see the French island protectorate of Réunion, 94 miles and a dream away. But in the surrounding estates stand abandoned agricultural machinery and dark ziggurats of rock laboriously cleared from the cane fields by indentured labourers, silent memorials to Mauritius's other past.

ISLAND INSIGHTS

The best times to visit Mauritius are April-June, and Sept-Nov.

Julian Allason travelled with **Susie Freeman Travel** (01488-668 821; www.susiefreemantravel.com), which offers seven nights midseason, at the following resorts, including flights from London: **Le Telfair Golf & Spa Resort**, from £1,855 half-board; **Taj Exotica Resort & Spa**, from £2,850 including breakfast; **Voile d'Or Resort & Spa**, from £1,455 half-board. Upgrades to business class from £310 per person.

Hotels (for double room midseason including breakfast, unless stated): **Le Prince Maurice, Poste de Flacq** (00230-413 9100; UK reservations 020-7235 3245; www.princemaurice.com) from £540. **Le Saint Géran**, Poste de Flacq (00230-401 1000; UK reservations 01753-899 800; www.saintgeran.com), from £610. **Le Telfair Golf & Spa Resort, Bel Ombre** (00230-601 5513; UK reservations 01494-676 858; www.letelfair.com), From £210 half-board. **The Royal Palm, Grand Baie** (00230-209 8300; UK reservations 01483-445 610; www.beachcombertours.co.uk), from £450. **Taj Exotica Resort & Spa, Flic-en-Flac** (00230-623 5000; UK reservations 0800 282 699; www.tajhotels.com), from £350 per person per night half-board. **Voile d'Or, Bel Ombre** (00230-623 5000; www.voiledor.com), from £250.

Villas and *maison créoles* (midseason rates per night): **Maison Euréka, Moka** (00230-433 8477; www.maisoneureka.com), B&B from £70 for double room. **Chamarel Estate** (01296-334 138; UK reservations 01296-334 138; www.villasdemaitre.com), sleeps 10, from £1,323 full board. **Ilôt Malais, Black River** (00230-263 7777), sleeps 6 adults and 2 children, from £425. **Villa Bagheera, Le Morne** (01296-334 138; UK reservations 01296-334 138; www.villasdemaitre.com), sleeps 8, from £675 May & June, £880 all other times.

Abercrombie & Kent 0845-0700 611; www.abercrombiekent.co.uk. **Azure Luxury Hotel Collection** 01244-322 770; www.azurecollection.com **Carrier** 01625-547 030; www.carrier.co.uk. **Elegant Resorts** 01244-897 888; www.elegantresorts.co.uk. **Elite Vacations** 01707-371 000; www.elite-vacations.co.uk. **ITC Classics** 01244-355 527; www.itcclassics.co.uk. **Kuoni World Class** 01306-747 001; www.kuoni.co.uk.

Air Mauritius (020-7434 4375; www.airmauritius.com) flies up to eight times a week from London to Mauritius, from £590. **BA** (0870-850 9850; www.ba.com) flies three times a week from

London to Mauritius, from £645.

White Sands Tours (00230-208 5454) offers access to *maisons créoles* and other sights.