ADVENTURE ISLAND

Mauritius is a tempting choice for a fly-and-flop holiday, but those who give the beachlounger a (temporary) miss can find diverse ways to appreciate this Indian Ocean island – anything from soaking under waterfalls to climbing to the top of a landmark peak.

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WATERFALL BAGGING FOR BEGINNERS

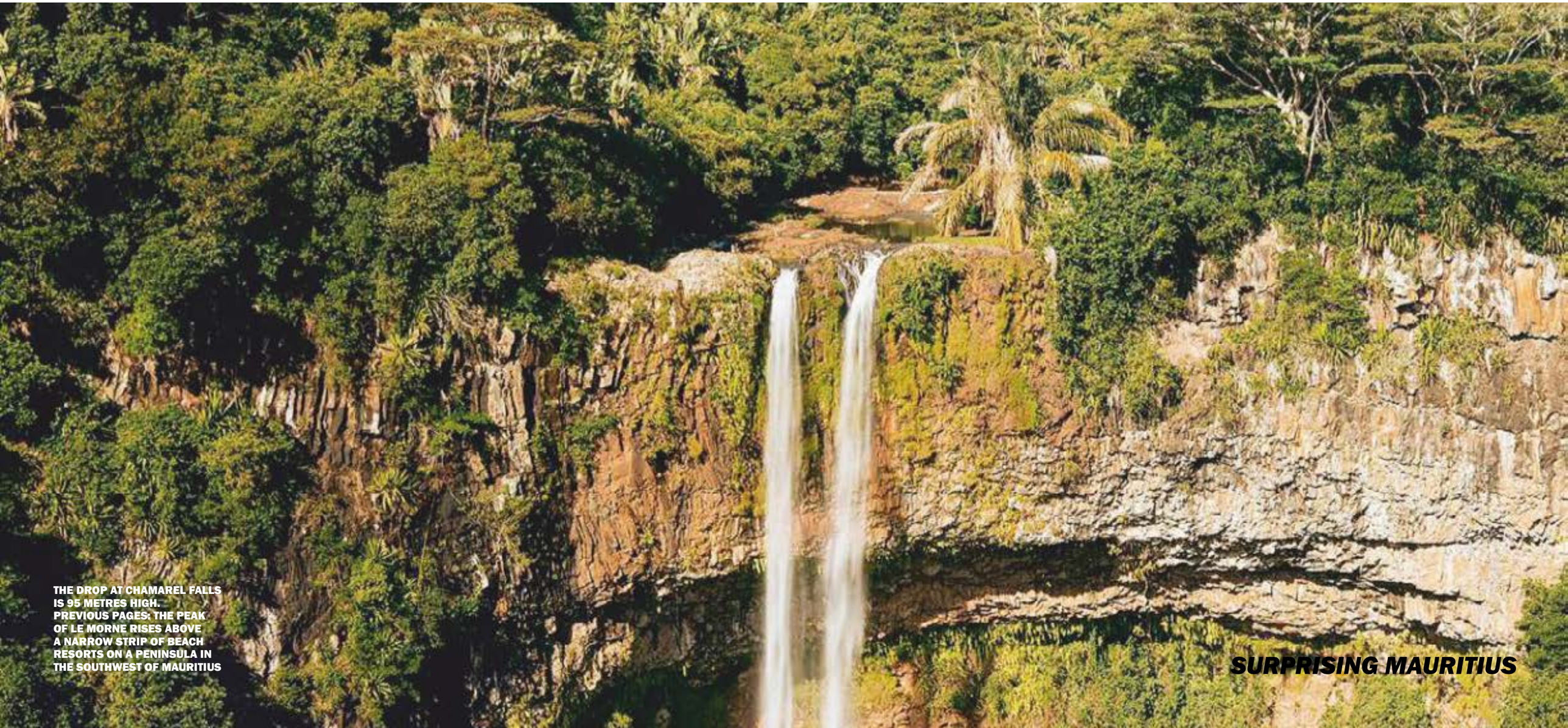
If you stand in the right places in Mauritius, and the main viewpoint in Black River Gorges National Park is one of them, a hazy memory of the geography classroom may may come flooding back. The water cycle, unnaturally compressed into one image, is illustrated here in a real-life, 180-degree view: freshly rain-soaked uplands spill their bounty into tall waterfall, from whose bases the river valleys zigzag away to reach the sea, where a hot sun conjures up puffs of cloud. Rinse, repeat.

Mauritius is the 'star and key of the Indian Ocean' to quote its motto, and beach-time is understandably the prime goal of most visitors. But I've come to see what other activities might be found here, and inland seems the obvious place to start. On an island where the ocean is rarely more than ten miles away, rivers don't have much time to put on a show, so the fine waterfalls are a point of national pride. I head to the mountainous southwest of the country to seek out a favourite.

On looks alone, it probably has to be Chamarel Falls: two white ribbons falling in parallel, in a clear drop from a dress circle of rock. With a drive-up viewpoint, though, the payoff comes almost too easily. Tamarin Falls, by contrast, are hard to see without getting wet. Canyoners need ziplines, hard hats and easy-dry clothing to descend this sequence of seven cascades and pools.

Rochester Falls is the one that quietly grows on me. The bumpy access track through sugarcane fields helps to thin visitor numbers. Those who persist find a trail running down past banana plants to reach a pool ringed by trees. Water tumbles over columns of black rock, like a Giant's Causeway transported from Northern Ireland to the tropics. Dragonflies flit over the pool where swimmers with a moderate sense of adventure pull themselves up onto the old lava to have shoulders pummelled by the falls. Taking dives off the top is best left to the surefooted local daredevils who know where the deeper landing spots are, and leap off with a joyous whoop.

Chamarel Falls is part of the Seven- Coloured Earth Geopark (£6; chamarel 7colouredearth.com). Rochester Falls (a mile inland from Souillac town) and Black River Gorges National Park are free to visit.



THE DROP AT CHAMAREL FALLS IS 95 METRES HIGH. PREVIOUS PAGES: THE PEAK OF LE MORNE RISES ABOVE A NARROW STRIP OF BEACH RESORTS ON A PENINSULA IN THE SOUTHWEST OF MAURITIUS

ASTRONAUT-WORTHY BEDS ON A TEA PLANTATION

Plants need no encouragement to run riot on this shamelessly fertile island, and in the southern highlands the rolling hills wear an emerald corduroy of tea bushes. In the 600-acre grounds of the Bois Cheri tea plantation, I am following a hillside path that leads into a thick grove overlooking a lake. It passes clove plants, their green buds not yet dried into the spice-cupboard staple, and strawberry guava – an invasive species in Mauritius, but much snacked on all the same. Even though I know what lies at the end of the trail, my first glimpse of it is still a surprise: three bubble-dwellings, which wouldn't look out of place in a sci-fi tale of space explorers landing on an unfamiliar world.

TEA PLANTATIONS AT BOIS CHERI. OPPOSITE: A BUBBLE LODGE ROOM. RIGHT: ENJOYING THE SHADE OF A FILAO (CASUARINA) TREE ON PALMAR PUBLIC BEACH

There are two Bubble Lodge locations in Mauritius, and this is the original. Leaving the humid heat behind, I step through the airlock at the entrance to my clear plastic pod, a necessity given that it's the air pressure within that keeps the whole structure up. There's a brazen lack of bedroom curtains, but the foliage and setting do the job of providing privacy. Dusk passes quickly in the tropics, and as the plant life outside the bubble darkens to ambiguous shapes, the slowly circling constellations above serve as a night-light. Eye masks and earplugs are included, should sleepers wish to delay the unalterable wake-up call from blue skies and the morning chorus of the condé, or red-whiskered bulbul – but there's only so long I can stay in a bubble as the heat of the day begins to rise. With the tea plantation building just a short walk back along the forest path, I know that at least one breakfast essential is taken care of.

Double rooms at the two Bubble Lodge locations start at £290 (bubble-lodge.com). Bois Cheri tea estate tours cost £9, or £16 with lunch (saintaubinloisirs.com).

WALKING WITH GIANTS

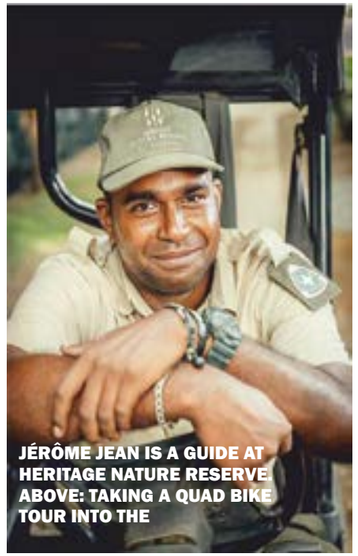
Île aux Aigrettes is a small offshore island, christened in a past century for a vanished colony of egrets. For another species of bird, however, this nature reserve has meant a step back from the brink of extinction: from just nine pink pigeons in 1990, the population has climbed back up to 400 across Mauritius. 'It was very hard work,' says Rose Marie, a guide for the Mauritian Wildlife Foundation. 'They're such a fragile bird.'

The boat ride to Île aux Aigrettes is short, but enough to keep away the rats and other invaders that threaten native birds. Rose Marie leads the way along a narrow trail, and soon she motions to a pink pigeon half-concealed in the low but dense canopy. Even with the story of the species' comeback, in visual impact it's hard for them to compete with the giant tortoises. These are actually native to Aldabra, an atoll a thousand miles to the northwest. But they are the closest equivalent for the two extinct species of Mauritian giant tortoise. First, we pass some baby tortoises sharing a cage with some orphaned fruit bats that can't be returned to the wild. Then we come across a female. 'Her carapace is made of keratin, and it's sensitive to touch,' says Rose Marie, who then demonstrates by stroking it. 'She can feel that – she enjoys it!' As impressive as the female is, the four-foot long male we find picking through the leaf litter deeper into the island is twice her size.

A statue further along the path recalls a local unseen since 1662 – the dodo. It was the strange fate of Mauritius to give the conservation movement its most famous animal martyr.

Take a boat trip to and guided tour around Île aux Aigrettes for £19 (mauritian-wildlife.org).

EBONY AND DUST ON A QUAD BIKE



JÉRÔME JEAN IS A GUIDE AT HERITAGE NATURE RESERVE. ABOVE: TAKING A QUAD BIKE TOUR INTO THE

It's not the first time that Jérome Jean has heard one of his tour party describe the Heritage Nature Reserve as looking like a setting from Jurassic Park. The hills above the spot he's halted at preserve the remnants of the forest rhat would have covered most of the island before humans came. The open lower slopes look more landscaped, and could almost be temperate Europe were it not for the red earth showing through the grass A two-hour quad bike ride following Jérome up ridge-line tracks and down cool folds in the hills leaves me covered with a fine film of ochre dust.

The bike are not the subtlest means of transport, but they trace the contours of the land with ease. Jérome stops for us to venture into the forest, and after the engines cease to thrum, the stillness reveals the small dramas taking place around us. A termites' nest in a nearby tree will ultimately spell the end of its host. 'Termites were here before the arrival of man, so it would be unfair to kill them,' Jérome says. The reserve's founders, however, had no qualms about ridding the land of sugarcane to begin returning it to native Mauritian plants.The termites have also got to an ebony tree, but the prized black heartwood is too dense for them. We continue deeper into the forest, drawn by the sound of yet another waterfall, as fruit bats flap overhead. On reaching the stream, I'm tempted to rinse off some of the dust – but I know another coating awaits me on the return ride.

A two-hour quad bike tour at Frédérica Nature Reserve (within the Heritage Nature Reserve) costs £90 (heritagenaturereserve.com).

A MATURE MALE ALDABRA GIANT TORTOISE CAN WEIGH UP TO 250KG, AND SOME ARE THOUGHT TO HAVE LIVED FOR MORE THAN 180 YEARS

CLIMBING THE THUMB OF MAURITIUS

The first hikers of the day on Le Pouce are usually groups of women from the town of St. Pierre, who come for a dawn constitutional on the lower slopes. 'The Thumb', as 18th-century French colonists named the mountain, sticks up 812 metres. And two of its ridges reach out seawards to enfold the Mauritian capital Port Louis in a green embrace. The panorama from the top takes in most of the island: one past climber who enjoyed it was Charles Darwin in 1836, returning on his round-the-world voyage aboard the HMS Beagle.

Today my bid to see the same view lies in the very capable hands of Krishan Moonowa, formerly of the police mountain rescue team and now a guide for Vertical World, where he goes by the nickname of Zinc. The ascent comes in three stages: quite steep. Less steep and very steep. Climbing through forest, just when I'm starting to feel the first exhaustion, we pass a snail with a shell the size of my fist.

I look to the crown-like peaks of Le Pouce's neighbour, Pieter Both, and beyond it to the small islands leading odd to the north. Turning west, I see the shadow cast by Le Pouce pointing, sharp as a sundial, towards, distant Madagascar. After all the effort spent to get to the summit, it's hard to take a last glance from this supreme overlook. But the way down feels lighter with every step. And perhaps it's time, at last, for an appointment with a beach lounger.

Vertical World runs guided hikes up Le Pouce (£37), as well as canyoning, rock climbing and more activities (verticalworldltd.com).

THIN CLOUD FILTERS THROUGH THE PEAKS OF PIETER BOTH, MAURITIUS' SECOND-HIGHEST MOUNTAIN, AS SEEN FROM THE SUMMIT OF LE POUCE – THE ISLAND'S THIRD-HIGHEST

RORY GOULDING TRAVELLED WITH SUPPORT FROM THE MAURITIUS TOURISM PROMOTION AUTHORITY. HE IS KEEPING ISLAND MEMORIES ALIVE WITH SUPPLIES OF VANILLA-FLAVOURED TEA.

EASY BEACH CYCLING ON THE EAST COAST

In 2006, seven years before he won his first Tour de France, a young Chris Froome bagged a lesser-known title, at the Tour de Maurice. A full circuit of the island would mean a trip of more than 110 miles. For those like me who rarely travel on two wheels, however, a trip by electric bike on the east coast of Mauritius is an introduction to one of the country's quieter corners. It's home, too, for Jonathan Permal, who leads local bike tours out from the Salt of Palmar hotel. 'Mauritians like to cycle,' he says. 'Especially older men. We bought my grandfather an electric motorbike, but he said no!'

While the e-bikes aren't for cycling purists, their fat tyres cope well with tree roots and sandy paths as we head south along the public beach at Palmar. On a point where the reef-dampened waves break gently, three men are fishing on their lunch break. Among the small, weather-worn Hindu statues perched on the rocks is one of Ganesha, remover of obstacles. Shade comes not from coconut palms, which are more often seen on resort beaches, but from casuarinas. These trees, called filao in Mauritius, help anchor the sand, and provide cover for traditional Sunday family picnics.

After four miles, Jonathan and I turn back at a Gothic-arched stone church in the village of Trou d'Eau Douce. Fishing boats are pulled up under the almond trees at a curve of beach where the sea shows the barest minimum water can lap at. We take a shortcut through overgrown old pineapple plantations, while deer brought from Java by Dutch colonists more than 300 years ago flap their ears at us. There is hardly any other traffic to interrupt their grazing.

E-bikes can be rented at Salt of Palmar from £11 per hour (saltresorts.com). Guided bike tours are from £38pp.

ON RESORT EATING

On the southeast coast, Falaise Rouge has a covered terrace with a superb view of the bay of Grand Port. Classic Mauritian lunch dishes include venison vindaye, a kind of curry (mains from £9; 00 230 5729 1080). At the foot of Le Morne's landmark peak, Wapalapam makes up for the lack of sea views with a beach hut vibe, and is open from breakfast to dinner. Chilli prawns with sweet papaya sauce (pictured above) are among the bright flavours from around the Indian Ocean (mains from £10; wapalapam.com). A 19th-century sugar mill turned arts centre in east-coast Trou d'Eau Douce is the setting for elaborate yet homey multi-course dinners amid colourful canvases at Le Café des Arts (set menus from £60; maniglier.com).

SALT OF PALMAR

Opened in 2018, Salt of Palmar is smaller than most Mauritian beach resorts, but has the kind of style to put it in the big league. The salmon pink buildings have the look of a kasbah transplanted to 1960s Miami, with bold black-and-white stripes played out across tiling and pool umbrellas. Guest rooms echo this design, and come with yoga mats and Roberts radios. The hotel is on a relatively quiet part of the east coast, hugging a promontory between two long beaches. The restaurant menu is all about ingredientled dishes that point to Mauritians' far-flung global roots, whether it's South Asian spices or French baking (from £145/£422 all inclusive; saltresorts.com).

HERITAGE AWALI

At Bel Ombre on the southwest coast, Heritage Awali is a luxury resort that's part of a domain that includes the Heritage Le Telfair just along the beach, and also the Heritage Nature Reserve two miles away (see p44). The common areas at the heart of the Awali are a Southeast Asian-style collection of shingle-roofed pavilions set around mirroring pools and tall coconut palms. Inside, however, and in the bedrooms, the decor has a few African touches, including masks and patterned baskets on the walls. Among the various restaurants, make time for dinner at Zafarani, which serves Indian cuisine amid a whirl of sari silk colours (from £330 halfboard; heritageresorts.mu).

SHANDRANI BEACHCOMBER RESORT

This well-priced southeastern resort is a bit of a paradox: it's almost the closest you can stay to the airport (there are some take-offs overhead), and yet its peninsula setting makes it feel more secluded than most island hotels. Two of its beaches look across a lagoon towards mangroves and green hills. The third is a long, wild stretch facing the ocean. Guest rooms are mostly in warm colours or wood tones, and are quite spread out, with an extra pool-restaurant-bar area serving ones furthest from reception. If you're after something more intimate than the main buffet restaurant, book at the Teak Elephant for a thoughtfully designed Thai set dinner (from £210/£270 all-inclusive; beachcomber-hotels.com).

GETTING THERE

Air Mauritius and BA fly in 12 hours from Heathrow and Gatwick respectively to Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam International, near Mahébourg in the southeast (from £580; ba.com). Non-direct flights are often cheaper.

GETTING AROUND

If you're only making a few excursions, taxis are abundant in Mauritius. It's best to book via a hotel, but reckon on about £50 for a whole-day tour. For more flexibility, hire a car at the airport (from around £50 per day; avis.co.uk).

WHEN TO GO

Mauritius is a year-round destination, with only slight temperature difference between summer (November to April) and the less humid 'winter' (May to October). Peak visitor times are around Christmas, New Year, July and August.

GETTING THERE

BEHIND THE SCENES If you hang around at popular tourist spots in Mauritius, you'll probably be joined by one or more long-tailed macaques. These non-native monkeys work the crowd like pros, though they really shouldn't be fed. We thought that if we could escape them anywhere, it would be on the climb up Le Pouce. Shortly after arriving at the 812-metre summit, however, a macaque poked his head above a rock and hopped over to join us. He was mildly curious about photographer Jonathan Stokes' camera equipment, and very interested indeed in the snack bars kept in our backpacks. This monkey was clearly out to tap a new market, free of competitors. Rory Goulding

FURTHER INFORMATION Our Mauritius, Réunion & Seychelles guide (£16.99) includes a comprehensive chapter on Mauritius, which you can also download as a separate PDF (£2.99; lonelyplanet.com). For further details on the country, visit tourism-mauritius.mu.