

SEA, SUGARCANE, AND THE SHORE

On a week long road journey across Mauritius, **MEENAKSHI J** encounters littoral villages, charming national parks, and remnants of the great Indian migration.

“ARE WE LANDING on the Indian Ocean?” I wondered as the Air Mauritius in-flight entertainment system displayed ‘Port Louis’ on screen, but no land was visible in the midst of blue waters. I pinched the screen to zoom in, but no joy!

Was it an emergency landing or was I tired of waiting for the ‘Land of Dodo’ after an arduous journey from Shillong to Mauritius, a speck in the vast Indian Ocean?

The speck grew larger as our flight touched down at the Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam International Airport, around 48 kilometres south-east of Port Louis, the capital city of Mauritius. The visa-on-arrival process was seamless and paved the way to an exciting road trip across this jewel on the Indian Ocean.

The week-long trans-Mauritius road journey began in Tamarin, a charming littoral village located on the west coast, around 34 kilometres from the airport, known for dolphin watching, surfing, 18-century cobblestoned salt pans, and a relaxed nightlife.

The first day was spent in visiting Maconde, a hamlet sandwiched between the historic Le Morne and Baie du Cap. It offers breathtaking vistas of the Indian Ocean on one side, and a curved portion of the picturesque coastal road from a viewpoint off a cliff. This was followed by a late lunch at Wapalapam Island Eatery (wapalapam.com) located on the foothills of Le Morne Brabant mountain (a UNESCO

For one of the most beautiful vistas of Mauritius, visit the Chamarel viewpoint.



site), and run by Rok Flander, a former snowboard champion turned restaurateur. We ended our sightseeing a bit early, to unwind by the terrace pool of Hotel Veranda Tamarin, a property with bohemian decor, located opposite the Tamarin Beach.

The west coast experience wouldn't be complete without an early morning boat ride into mid-sea to spot pods of dolphins frolicking around travellers. This was followed by an hour-long road trip to Ganga Talao and Chamarel. The Ganga Talao, commonly known as Grand Bassin, is home to 33-metre tall statues of Mangal Mahadev and Durga Maa. The nearby crater lake formed in a now extinct volcano is considered sacred and is adorned with shrines dedicated to the Hindu pantheon. Today, Ganga Talao is a sacred pilgrimage site for the Hindus of Mauritius, so much so that it has been declared a national heritage.

After a quick darshan at Ganga Talao, we drove up to the picturesque Chamarel village through misty winding roads flanked by sugarcane and pineapple plantations. Situated at an elevation of 259 metres in the western hills near Black River Gorges National Park, Chamarel turned out to be riveting. It is also home to a large Creole population, the force behind the many family-run restaurants and homestays, which are a huge hit with tourists visiting its natural wonders, tea-plantations, and distilleries.

Our first stop here was Rhumerie de Chamarel (rhumeredechamarel.com), a distillery that not only specialises in manufacturing rum out of sugarcane, but is also designed to provide a holistic experience to guests. We were given a guided tour of the eco-friendly rum making process—freshly harvested sugarcane is transferred within four hours of its harvest to be pressed and filtered to make sugarcane juice, and later initiated in huge 25 hectolitre stainless steel vats for

the fermentation process to take place. Once fermented, it is distilled in copper column stills and stored in steel and wooden vats to age and obtain aroma, colour, and roundedness. The finest of this rum is offered to guests like us as part of a complimentary rum tasting session.

With a few giddy heads amongst us, we then drove up further to soak in clutter-free vistas of the western coast and its forested hillsides, over a satisfying lunch at the Le Chamarel restaurant. Post lunch, it was time to be awed by the geological wonder, Seven Coloured Earth Geopark that sports multicoloured dunes owing to molten

Ganga Talao, commonly known as Grand Bassin, is home to 33-metre tall statues of Mangal Mahadev and Durga Maa. Above: Dolphins in Tamarin Bay.



FROM TOP: PETER CROME/ALAMY; SHUTTERSTOCK



volcanic formations. Here, we also spotted the spectacular Chamarel Waterfall and giant turtles.

The next morning, we met leopards at Casela Nature Park (caselaparks.com) that is spread over 350 hectares near the Cascavelle village, with a backdrop of the Rempart mountain. The park offers a mix of activities like wildlife safaris, canyon swings, avian enclosures, and quad-biking. After the adrenaline fix, we drove 55 kilometres north towards the Grand Baie region. Our night halt was at the contemporary Domaine de Grand Baie luxury apartment, but not before a dinner that was an ode to the island's migrant cuisine, aesthetically plated by the property's award-winning chef Ajnisha Ungnoo.

In northern Mauritius, we went cruising on the waters of the Indian Ocean. We reached a historical site and disembarked to chase butterflies and explore the knee-deep emerald waters of Flat Island, a nature reserve of 253 hectares. What we did not know then was that we were retracing a historical journey. This would dawn upon us the next morning, at Apravasi Ghat (around 26 kilometres from the Grand Baie area). Located on the bay of Trou Fanfaron in the capital of Port Louis, Apravasi Ghat (aapravasi.govmu.org) is where close to half a million Indians landed as early as 1829. They had signed a contract with the colonists, in pursuit of land just a little way off from India, but were instead sent on a long sea journey to work in the sugarcane farms of Mauritius.

"The indentured labourers brought in from India were quarantined on the northern islands off Mauritius like the Flat island," informed Meenakshi, one of the guides at the Apravasi Ghat, a UNESCO Heritage Site. She also added that Flat Island was once delegated as a quarantine station, locally known as lazaretto, that offered bare minimal living conditions, and

▲ *From left: Seven Coloured Earth Geopark has multicoloured dunes formed from molten volcano; Chamarel Waterfall is the tallest single-drop waterfall in Mauritius at about 100 metres high. Below: Apravasi Ghat is a UNESCO World Heritage Site.*

GETTING THERE Air Mauritius

(airmauritius.com) offers six weekly direct flights from Mumbai to Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam International Airport in Mauritius.

STAY

Veranda Tamarin Hotel and Spa offers chic bohemian rooms with multi-cuisine dining options. *Doubles from ₹16,024; veranda-resorts.com*

Domaine de Grand Baie in the northern neighbourhood of Grand Baie offers contemporary luxury rooms and service apartments. *Doubles from ₹14,144; domaingrandbaie.com*

Le Meridien Ile Maurice offers rooms and suites with unbeatable sea views. *Doubles from ₹25,836; marriott.com*



deplorable sanitary facilities. Owing to this, many of the migrant labourers who landed perished in the first few months of their arrival. The others who survived and recovered, went on to work on the many sugarcane estates run by the colonists in mainland Mauritius for pittance.

On the last leg of the trip, we opted to stay at Le Meridien Ile Maurice in Pointe aux Piments—a fishing hamlet that turned out to be a dreamy romantic getaway. We also explored its outskirts dotted with French chateaus and sugarcane plantations. Back at Le Meridien, we indulged in a special cooking session with chef Maken Shiv Aum who taught us to prepare the Sept Cari meal. With origins in southern India, the Sept Cari meal, meaning 'seven curries' is a spread consisting of several vegetable preparations served on fresh plantain leaves along with hot rice. It turned out to be the perfect ending to the seven-day road trip. Accompanying the meal was a rainbow in the sky and the ivory sands of Mauritius. ✦



CLOCKWISE: MEENAKSHI J.; SHUTTERSTOCK; HEMIS/ALAMY