

'One Eye' – Great wedges of water
thundering onto urchin infested
coral – locals only



MAURITIUS

PETER HART REPORTS FROM THE MAUI OF THE INDIAN OCEAN

Words: Peter Hart Photos: Annette Hart

Mauritius is a right old dump – full of gangsters, shysters, pestilence and disease. As for the windsurfing, if you were lucky enough to find a puff of wind, you'd find yourself clambering over coral and urchin beds to get to the foul, polluted, beige coloured water, which of course you have to share with the fishermen who hold their Great White shark fishing contests right off the beach. Frankly I would have felt safer taking a weekend break in Beirut. Okay, okay, okay...I'll come clean – it's wonderful. For eight days I was fully powered on a 5.2m, sharing my time between sailing the most perfect waves imaginable on the outer reef and tricking and a splashing on the smooth shallow waters on the inside. At most I counted eight other windsurfers on the water. Only three of us were sailing the waves. So as I headed back to the white sand beach for the last time, the desire to keep this little secret to myself was, for a moment anyway, overpowering. But we windies like to share our toys – just please don't tell too many of your mates about this one.

WHERE?

Mauritius lies in southern Indian Ocean in the tropic of Capricorn some 500miles east of Madagascar, which is itself about 500miles off the east coast of Africa, level with Mozambique. It is about 20miles north to south and about the same at its' widest; with an area of around 1,500 square miles, it's about twice the size of the Isle of Wight.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF EVERYTHING

Like so many paradise islands in the tropics, Mauritius (named after Prince Maurice de Nassau of the Netherlands) over the centuries was colonised by most of the major seafaring nations. The Portuguese stumbled over it 1498 but didn't leave much of a mark apart from introducing rats and monkeys. The Dutch then arrived in 1598. Over the next hundred years they introduced slaves, sugar cane, deer, wild boar and tobacco; in that short period they were also responsible for the extinction of the sweet, docile and all too trusting 'Dodo' bird. It wasn't the happiest time, blighted by cyclones and other natural disasters and the Dutch left in 1710 to be replaced by the French, who built roads, hospitals and sugar mills, and generally provided infrastructure and stability. The capital Port St Louis became a free-trading base and therefore a haven for pirates. Tired of having their ships plundered, the Brits moved in on the 'Corsairs', as they were known, in 1810. While they were at it, they took the island off the French, but generously left them their language, religion, Napoleonic Code legal system and sugar plantations. In 1835, they freed the slaves. The sugar cane industry depended on cheap labour, so that is when literally thousands of workers were drafted from India to keep it going. Hindus now make up over 50% of the population. Mauritius gained its independence from Britain on 12th March 1968, when

Dr Seewoosagur Ramgoolam became Prime Minister. It's his long and barely pronounceable name that adorns the international airport. In 1992 the island officially became a republic.

With such a history and subject to so many influences, Mauritius now comprises an ethnic mix of amazing religious, cultural and lingual diversity. There was a little political unrest in the early 90s but now, on the surface at least, the various factions seem to live in enforced harmony. I love it. At any time you may be spoken to in French, Creole or English. Stop at a roadside 'snackery' and the spicy, homemade tid-bits on offer may have a decidedly Indian flavour; a few miles up the road and the more traditional hotel restaurant may be offering 'coq au vin avec pommes de terre Dauphinoises'. Driving through the cane fields, it feels like the classic Caribbean – until you stumble on a Hindu temple. The look of the people, it's a touch Indian, maybe a hint of European, actually they are just Mauritian, a nation unto themselves.

PRECONCEPTIONS

We were told by a misguided-friend that it wasn't that windy. Restrained by the 32kg maximum bag weight rule, I just packed a big freestyle board and a 6.5m. It was only at the last moment that I added a wave board and a 5.5m and chanced my luck with the litigious baggage handlers. As it was, even the latter combo

was too big most of the time. That Mauritius does not have a windy reputation and isn't on the hit-list for mainstream British windsurfers, is, and I'm guessing here, because the main tourist areas are in the north and east, where the wind is offshore and pretty light. I suppose being a small island, you'd assume it wasn't much better anywhere else and would not think of driving to the southwest where for much of the time the wind averages over 25knots. Anyway, we touched down at the stylish Seewoosagar Ramgoolam airport delighted to be somewhere warm and exotic in early December, but with no great expectations of returning a week later with blistered palms.

WELCOME

As welcomes go, it was one of the most eccentric. "Ah! Mr and Mrs Hart, welcome to Mauritius," sang our rep, a sharp suited local gent in his late fifties. "Now we have to get your crocodile (board bag) to the bus, so we must move it, move it; I like to move it, move it..." He kept singing that Ibiza anthem along with pelvic gyrations until we reached the parking lot in the minibus, which had no roofrack for my 'crocodile'. Here was a classic opportunity for a jobs-worth driver to do the big sulk and quote Health and Safety rule number 345 concerning blocked doorways, but instead he joined in the 'move it, move it' chorus and helped us squeeze it over the seats. First impressions were already positive, when Lindsay, our dancing rep, leaned his head through the window and said, "Now please, please be careful on your windsurfing board. You know we have so many accidents people getting swept away all the time. It is very very dangerous here – so much wind, so many big waves, so strong currents." It's encouraging when a stranger with brutal honesty is telling something you want to hear, whilst believing it to be something you don't want to hear. I'd been there less than 20minutes and already I really liked this place.

INDIAN RESORT

We were headed for Indian Resort, THE place to stay if you like the idea of falling out of your hotel room onto

the best windsurfing beach on the island. It lies on a small peninsula on the south-western tip in an area called Le Morne. In general, I'm not a fan of hotels...least of all resort hotels. They conjure nightmarish images of forced jollity, aquarobics and dire nightclub singers; and of vast barricaded compounds with a big sign at the door reading 'Natives KEEP OUT!' Give me a simple rented shack anytime where you have your independence and half a chance of getting under the skin of the local scene.

Well, at over 1km long, Indian Resort is big, but that's where its similarity with Butlins ends. It's low rise and spacious and highly luxurious...in an under-stated sort of way. Looking back at it from the sailing area, you can hardly see it nestling amongst the palms and its own tropical gardens. It's the sort of place that would convince even the most committed eco-tourist to hang up his rucksack and sandals and just kick back for a week. I knew we were onto a good thing when check-in consisted of being handed a pink cocktail and invited to sit in a wicker sun-longer, before being instructed in the way of things by your own personal member of staff with the absolute minimum of paperwork. All this I only remember in retrospect because it was howling and my whole attention was devoured by the view through the open reception area of the most perfect sailing area imaginable. I was on the water within a breath of dumping the bags.

WINDSURFING AREA

Now about this sailing area...Mauritius is a classic reef-fringed island that offers that idyllic combination of shallow flat-water lagoon on the inside and wave breaks out to sea, over reefs that vary from the mellow to the fully suicidal. Much of the southwest coast is unsailable. The lagoons are too shallow and the reefs too gnarly, with waves crashing often onto bare coral. Off the Indian Resort, however, it's more or less perfect. Imagine this. You step off the whitest sand beach straight into the wind line and onto water lagoon so turquoise that it must have been run through Photoshop. The lagoon runs some 300metres out to

sea before you hit the first of a series of reefs. Straight in front of your launch spot, you have 'Little Reef' so called because, and I'm guessing here, it's quite small. The waves thrown up here are reform swells coming off the outer reefs, so they're soft and slow. The wind-chop and rip leave the wave faces a little corrugated. However it's good for jumping and with the action fairly close to shore, good for first time wave sailors who just want to get a feel. It's quite shallow over the inside section, but you'd still be unlucky to break anything on Little Reef (but that is not to say it isn't possible!).

REEFS, REEFS AND MORE REEFS

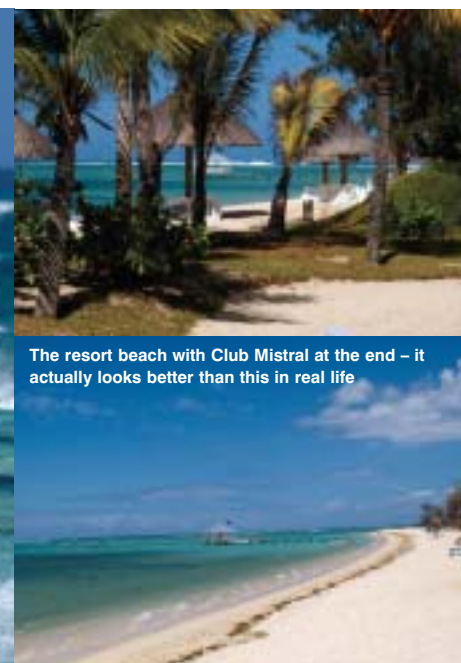
Just to the right of Little Reef, as you look out to sea, lies Chameau Reef (meaning 'camel' in French). The twin peaks of this crunching wave obviously reminded some early poet of that humped animal. Although a few fin-less kites sometime ride it, it's not really approachable by a sane windsurfer being just inches deep over the impact zone – and what an impact zone! However, 'Chameau' is but a ripple in the bath compared to the world famous 'One Eye' reef, which thunders in some 400metres to the right (downwind). It is a world-class wave – fast, often huge, hollow, uncompromising and that leaves very little room for error, to the extent where unless you take off in exactly the right spot you will NOT have the speed to outrun the section and will be gobbled by the white water. And unless you kick out at the right moment, you WILL end up being dragged over an urchin-infested, almost dry seabed. However, the star of the show in wave sailing terms has to be Manawa – more about that in a moment.

CLUB MISTRAL

The Club Mistral centre lies at the north end of Indian Resort. As I think of ways to make my millions with the minimum of fuss I often dream of finding that venue where in the same frame you have a table covered in cocktails, white sand, blue water, a windsurfer gybing right next to the beach just 20 feet from his happy partner who is happily videoing him from her sun-lounger; whilst in the distance a more ambitious performer is cracking one off the lip, off a glassy



Frolicking on the dreamy turquoise waters of the lagoon. 'The waves of Little Reef' and 'Chameau' are tumbling in the background



The resort beach with Club Mistral at the end – it actually looks better than this in real life

THE CLUB MISTRAL CENTRE LIES AT THE NORTH END OF INDIAN RESORT...AND IT'S CURRENTLY RUN BY FELIX (GERMAN), ABLY ASSISTED BY DANI (FRENCH/CORSICAN) AND LOCALS MAITRIX AND JOHNNY. THEY ARE A TRULY GREAT TEAM DOING IT FOR ALL THE RIGHT REASONS – THEY LOVE WINDSURFING.

peeling wave. Then I usually wake up with a bump. That, however, is basically the vista from Club Mistral. The centre started in mid-2004, and boy, have they lucked out! It's currently run by Felix (German), ably assisted by Dani (French/Corsican) and locals Maitrix and Johnny. They are a truly great team doing it for all the right reasons – they love windsurfing. They are efficient, organised and helpful, but without being military. The conditions have dictated the nature and size of the hire fleet. Although they do have a few entry-level boards for those rare calm days, the bulk of the boards are freemove and wave designs between 110 and 69 litres. They carry a couple of 6.9m sails but the vast majority are 5.8m and less.

RESCUE CHALLENGE

The place offers a real challenge with regards to safety. Inside the reef, you can work on the waterstarts, carves, spocks, grubbies, chachos and whatever, in the knowledge that if you have a problem, you can walk home. The problems arise when those with too much ambition and too little open sea experience keep going when they should have turned round. It's the classic 'rip' scenario where a huge body of water tumbles over the reef into the lagoon and then escapes back out along the shore and through the gaps in the reef and the channels.

FELIX TAKES UP THE STORY:

"The bad current is right in front of us. You can't swim back against it and so can get pulled directly to Reunion Island (if you're lucky) 340miles away. You're better off staying in the waves on Little Reef because at least then you get swept to the inside." This is what our wacky rep Lindsay was on about.

Apparently countless windsurfers and kites, doing their own private thing, have had severe problems when they've broken something. The massive advantage of being with Club Mistral is that they keep an eye on you all the times and have an active rescue boat, which will even haul you off the outer reef of Manawa. Now about Manawa...

MANAWA

I sailed out to have a sniff at Manawa on my first afternoon. It was a mile offshore and pretty big; I'd never sailed it before, but had been warned about the currents, so retreated to find some mates. A couple of days later when the wind had swung back to the favoured SE, I went out again with Felix and Dani. Traditionally the last good sail you had was always 'the best of your life' because it's most recent in your memory, but this one genuinely was right up there. Manawa is what surfers would call a 'dry paddle'. That is to say you could ride it all day with dry hair, assuming you didn't fall off, because you never have to go back through the white water. I'll let the pictures tell the story but it's one of those waves you see in those 'Endless Summer' type videos – blue, translucent and gently rippled that just keeps on winding. It's also quite flattering in that it gets very big but isn't so crunchy that every wipe-out will be hurtful. I got spanked a couple of times and on one occasion made a very gentle contact with the bottom. It's also easy to take it easy and just to make gentle carves on the shoulder well away from the trauma zone. If you can convince them of your proficiency, Club Mistral are happy to let you sail Manawa so long as you go out as a group of at least three. One carries a walky-

talky to radio back in case of trouble. The other restriction is the size of the swell. If it's so big that the channel is closing out then they can't get the boat out and the match is postponed.

WIND AND WAVES

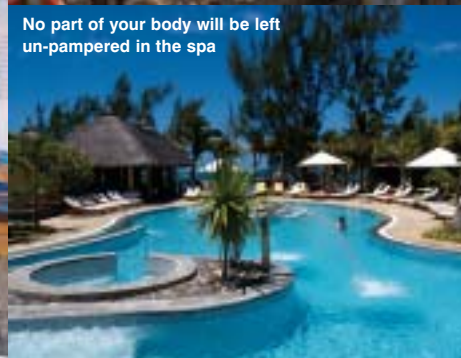
When you go to somewhere new and get wind and waves everyday, you fall into the opposite of "If only you'd been here last week..." syndrome. This was obviously THE week we should have been there, but were we just very lucky? Is it like this all the time? Each day I tried to beat a confession out of Felix as to whether this was 'normal.' On the last day he admitted that for the time of year, the wind was perhaps a little more consistent than usual, but that the waves were more or less ever present. The island gets a lot of swell, most of it pumping up from south and southeast from those stormy waters off the Cape of Good Hope. Mauritius is a very well known surf island with reef and beach breaks dotted all round the south and west coasts, catering from beginner to pro. The best known of them is Tamarinid on the west coast where they hold the Billabong Challenge every year. 'One Eye' does attract a few nutty surfers but, and here's a good sign, it's generally considered too windy. Returning to the wind – it's early days for Club Mistral. They have less than nine months of statistics and this apparently has been a strange year. However, generally the really windy months are April through to September (their summer). Looking at the available stats, it seems that the only months to avoid are January and February. Having said that, last February was excellent, as was November. I asked the boys what the chances of being completely skunked; they said that the longest no wind patch they'd



Felix, Club Mistral manager, and local boy Maitrix. They've got plenty to smile about



The Club Mistral – bar, boards, water, wind and waves lie within a few feet of each other



No part of your body will be left un-pampered in the spa



The primary colours of the glorious Indian Resort



The public launch spot just downwind of Indian Resort



experienced had been four days. The wind itself is a classic trade, predominantly SE (dead side-shore on the reefs), although it can flick a few degrees either way. It's also the sort of wind that either comes in at 20knots plus in the morning...or doesn't at all. There's none of this tantalising 'will it or wont it' 10-11knot thermal stuff, which makes planning your days so much easier.

SEASONS AND PEOPLE

We were sailing waves cleaner than Hawaii and sharing them with just two other people; and then messing around on a massive flat-water freestyle/free-ride/free-whatever area so empty that you often forget to obey the old 'mirror signal manoeuvre' routine. I kept saying to Felix that finding wind and waves like this is one thing, but having them all to yourself is beyond belief in this day and age. The reality is that we were there in low season and in mid-winter (June, July, August), it goes nuts. On one weekend he counted two-hundred boards and kites on the water. There are a fair number of locals and being a former French colony and French speaking, it's unsurprisingly very popular with the French. Just downwind of the Club Mistral there's a public car park and launch spot, and it seems that many Europeans do a DIY deal, bringing their own kit and renting houses or apartments. The impression I got is that those months can be a little hardcore for many

tastes. The waves are often so big that they even chop up the water on the inside of the reef. And although it's in the tropics, it's noticeably chillier. Most wear a shorty. Out of the wind it's delightful, but those watching the action on the beachfront would be happier in a fleece. In summer (November to May) shorts are the standard uniform and prepare to roast.

THE NOT SO GOOD

I've got to find something dodgy to say about the place or suspicions will fly that I've received a 'bung'. There are only two potential downers. The first is the tide. The tidal range is only a couple of feet. However on low tide springs it's too shallow to sail safely in the lagoon. So if the peak of low falls in the middle of the day, you can be banished to the beach for up to five hours. It doesn't happen very often and wasn't an issue whilst we were there. The other concern is the locals. The local surfers are famously aggressive at certain spots, to the extent where a couple of friends I talked to, both good surfers and hardened travellers, wont go back. I was curious to know if that same atmosphere extended to windsurfers. Felix: "There is localism at One-Eye, but we have a policy that we won't let our guests go there, so they're pretty cool. There aren't actually that many locals and on Manawa there are so many waves that

you just let them take what they want."

I never received the cold shoulder and got a wave back when I greeted what I assumed to be a local wave sailor. Dani has lived on the island a while now. He sails and surfs One-Eye and is pretty much accepted. You just have to do your apprenticeship. And let me affirm straight away that any dodgy reputation of the resident water folk, unfounded or otherwise, does NOT extend to the normal population who were friendly to the 'n'th degree. Oh yes...there's one other thing...the wind's from the left (I'm sorry, but port tack venues are a blight on nature).

TO SUM UP...

As a litmus test as to how good (and benign) the sailing area really is, my wife Annette was five and a half months pregnant at the time. Originally content just to veg and gestate, after 2 days, she rose from her lounge and announced: "I can't watch any more of this," and so saying strapped my outsized harness around her protuberance and disappeared for two hours on a 4.0m. She returned beaming to announce that it reminded her of her one-time home of Camp One on Maui. Staying at the Indian Resort will not be the cheapest thing you've ever done, but then nor will it be the most



The author flirting a little too closely with a classic Manawa lip



[MAURITIUS]

expensive. Given the level of luxury, it's good value. For families there is an excellent kids club and baby-sitting service. And here's the clincher – this is a place more than any other where you can abandon a non-windsurfing partner with total impunity. There are beautiful chill-out zones and a wonderfully decadent spa, which offers limitless treatments. I had no understanding of the levels to which it's possible to pamper every cranny of your body. If these partners are the active kind, they might make use of the string of first class tennis courts, the golf course round the corner and the on-site diving school. The interior of the island is definitely worth a look and (apparently) there is some fine shopping in the northern resorts and in the capital of Port St Louis. I was so impressed, and I apologise for exploiting the situation, that I'm running a clinic there in November 2005.

FACT FILE

TRAVEL Air Mauritius run a direct flight from London Heathrow five times a week. The cabin service is excellent. The flight time is about eleven and a half hours. Outbound it's a night flight. We left at 9.00pm and arrived at 12.30am the next day. The airport seemed unusually calm and efficient. Our boards were through before we were. There were no crowds (perhaps due to low season) and plenty of trolleys, which, praise be, roll sideways as well as forwards – essential for board carriage. We were recognised and greeted by the ever friendly Mauri-Tours and were on our way to the hotel within half an hour of landing. The transfer time from the airport in the south to Indian Resort in the southwest, is just over an hour. Try and stay awake as the coastal scenery in the south of the island is stunning. Our return flight left at nine in the morning and dumped us back in the UK at 5.30pm in

the afternoon of the same day. It feels like you're losing a day of your holiday, but you arrive home feeling strangely human. You probably have already done the maths but Mauritius is four hours ahead of the UK.

CURRENCY The local currency is the Mauritian Rupee (MUR), which, at the time of writing is worth about 2pence; i.e. you get about 50 of them to the pound.

LANGUAGE There's an opportunity to practise your French, but almost everyone speaks English as a second language.

TRANSPORT There are a ton of colourful, albeit run-down local buses, none of which would pass an emissions test. They are very cheap but stop running in the early evening, at which point you're never far from a taxi. We hired the smallest car in the world (a 'Kancil'?) for about £30 per day including insurance. Cars along with scooters and bicycles can be hired directly from the hotel. Driving in Mauritius is relatively stress-less. For a start, to the chagrin of just about all other visitors apart from us, they drive on the left. The roads are well maintained and well signposted. Navigation is easy. The island is more or less circular so you if you keep the sea on one side or the other, you can't go far wrong. Apart from the odd taxi driver, the locals don't seem to be in much of a hurry. The speed limit around most of the island is 80kph.

EATING OUT Indian Resort boasts no less than five restaurants all of which are available at no extra charge to those with the half board deal (some of the fancier dishes carry a supplement). There's an open buffet with a different theme every night, as well as an Italian, French, Indian and a seafood restaurant on the beach. They were all fine but the Indian was the real thing. Away from the resort you have to travel a little to find anything local and different. The humming town of Flic-en-Flac 25minutes up the coast has a number of bars and restaurants. Then way up on the north coast you are apparently spoiled for choice with generic clubs, pubs, bistros and touristy hang-outs. I'm afraid you'll have to

wait for the next instalment for the full restaurant guide as we were too wasted from sailing everyday to do much nocturnal exploring. Personally I loved all the little shops on the street where you can pick up the tastiest homemade snacks for literally a couple of rupees.

NIGHTLIFE On public and religious holidays every little town and village makes a huge effort, but generally nightlife is not such a big thing in Mauritius, compared say, to certain parts of the Caribbean. You will, however, find a few clubs in the hotels and resorts in the north.

GOOD AND BAD EGGS The local people are unbelievably gentle and friendly. Felix described them as almost too nice, "They just want to give you everything." He also was happy to report that in the south of the island at least, crime is almost non-existent. He doesn't lock his door at night. It seems that the glitzier north attracts a few more bad eggs.

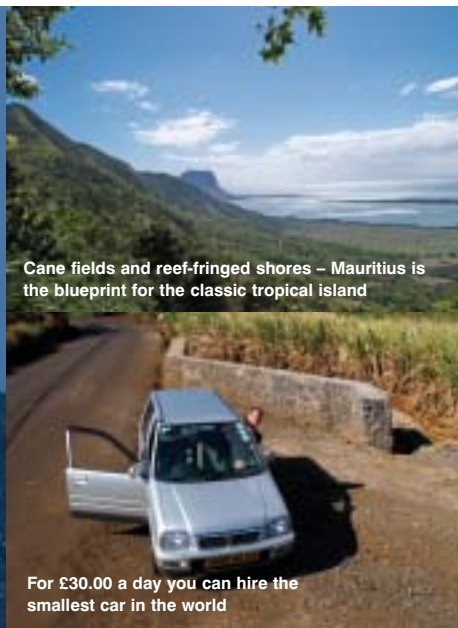
WINDSURFING EQUIPMENT The Club Mistral is the largest and best-equipped centre although some 100metres down the beach there is a much smaller RRD/Pryde outfit. Board storage for your own kit is available at £50 for two weeks, for which you also get to join in the Club Mistral activities and enjoy their rescue cover.

Tsunami DISASTER We all currently shudder at the very mention of the Indian Ocean. I write this some ten days after the Tsunami struck. I was immediately in touch with the guys at the Club Mistral centre. They got a warning on the Sunday afternoon, secured the boats and cleared everyone off the water. But although both Kenya and Somalia were hit to the north, happily Mauritius was untouched.

HOLIDAY BOOKING Sportif (01273 844919) organise the full package and get favourable rates on flights, hotel, transfer and board hire. They also have a special relationship with Air Mauritius and can organise the carriage of your own equipment at an excellent rate. If you want more information on prices and package options, check out their brochure.

STAYING AT THE INDIAN RESORT WILL NOT BE THE CHEAPEST THING YOU'VE EVER DONE, BUT THEN NOR WILL IT BE THE MOST EXPENSIVE. GIVEN THE LEVEL OF LUXURY, IT'S GOOD VALUE.

Instructor Dani on a classic Manawa face



Cane fields and reef-fringed shores – Mauritius is the blueprint for the classic tropical island

For £30.00 a day you can hire the smallest car in the world