

( Kiting, windsurfing and more traditional craft, all catered for on this gem of an isle)



# A TINY SPECK IN THE OCEAN

WORDS BY: MARK KASPROWICZ

WHAT MAKES THE IDEAL get-away-from-it-all windsurfing venue? Indeed has such a place managed to survive in these days of world-wide travel? **Mark Kasprowicz** visits a peaceful island that's about as remote as they come.

**T**ake a tiny island, surround it with a coral reef and drop it in the middle of the Indian Ocean 400 miles away from anywhere, and you've pretty well described Rodrigues. It's a speck in the ocean, just 41 square miles in area and home to about 38,000 people.

There's one thing you have to accept from the start. This is not an island oozing with luxury hotels like its administrative capital, Mauritius. Locals will tell you that Rodrigues (pronounced Rod-reegz) is like Mauritius perhaps twenty or thirty years ago. It is one of the Mascarene islands, together with Reunion and Mauritius and is volcanic in origin. Until 1968 it was a British colony as a result of a brief battle with the French in 1809. But it was forced into a union with Mauritius when that island became independent. The locals were not happy about the situation and went on strike in protest, but eventually they succumbed. However there are reminders of the British presence as you look around, even though you're more likely to encounter French spoken than English. The local language is Rodrigues' Creole.

There are no direct flights to Rodrigues, the airport is only suited to small aircraft, so getting there involves a twelve hour flight from London to Mauritius, arriving in the morning followed by a one and a half hour flight to Rodrigues in the afternoon. You can temper that wait by staying at the Indian Resort hotel as we did. The hop to the island is by a twin

engine turbo prop plane and once you see it you realise why it's not that feasible to take your own windsurfing gear. Air Mauritius might bring it from London in their 747, but the tiny ATR 42 or 72 would have to tie it down in the gangway! (British Airways, the only other direct flight to Mauritius from the UK refuses windsurfing equipment altogether – so it's largely academic). As the plane descends the first glimpse you get of Rodrigues is the inner reef enclosing the vivid colours of the lagoon. With the island being so small, just eleven miles long by five, nothing is very far from anywhere and although the roads meander crazily close to the coast, it's a short journey from the tiny airport to the hotel. But here's a surprise, they drive on the left! It's reminder of nearly 150 years of British presence. Quickly we arrive in the tiny village of Mourouk – just a handful of houses and the Mourouk Ebony hotel. Built in Creole style it sits on the island's southern shore facing the lagoon, perfectly placed for watersports.

The view from our room is spectacular. As we stroll from room to hotel restaurant, the sun starts to set across the ocean. It's well past five o'clock and we choose cocktails from the bar menu and watch the sun drop below the horizon. The island is surrounded by a coral reef, enclosing an area about twice the size of the land area and concentrated mostly around the western side. Standing on the white sand beach, there stretched out in front of us is a huge area of water, with colours varying from mid blue to turquoise. In the distance the reef is marked by white water as the ocean breaks on it at low tide. A continuous line across the horizon as far as the eye can see, except for one point where a narrow band of dark blue marks out the deep channel and the route to the open ocean. Also in the distance but still within the lagoon are three or four of the bigger islands accessible either by board or boat. This is the stuff that tropical island postcards are made of! ☺



### “THIS IS THE STUFF THAT TROPICAL ISLAND POSTCARDS ARE MADE OF!”

#### So what makes this lagoon so attractive to windsurfers?

It's a combination of a number of things. This is flat water sailing and if you can hold onto it, you will achieve some serious speeds. The South East trade winds are most dependable during our summer – June to October is the best time to go. The wind pattern is pretty constant. Light winds in the morning gradually build until by the afternoon they'll be blowing between force five or six. The wind at Mourouk beach blows from the left, so it's port tack sailing, but in reality it doesn't make the slightest difference as the water is so flat. Water depth varies throughout the inner reef and some of the reef can show at a spring low tide. In many places the water is only waist deep and you can walk back to the shore – the area right in front of the hotel is one. But for most of the time there is plenty of crystal clear water to blast across, around fifty square miles of it, so your windsurfing isn't likely to be curtailed by a lack of water although sometimes the sandy bottom seems a little closer than you'd like it. All the same heed advice as to where and when you can sail because there are times and places where you could easily lose a fin (fins in this part of the world are not easily replaceable). There are also a handful of secret spots where the water is mirror flat and very shallow and where some serious speeds have been recorded on both windsurfing and kitesurfing equipment. There's even talk of running World Sailing Speed record attempts here!

So for the most part there is no doubt that Rodrigues is all about flat water blasting. You can sail from right in front of the hotel where the Osmosis centre run by Jerome Branellec, the convivial French owner, is based. He will hire you Tushingham and Starboard equipment. If you get blown downwind he, or one of his team, will be the ones to haul you back. Jerome also teaches windsurfing and kitesurfing and with the warm, shallow waters, sandy bottom and light morning winds the sailing area in front of the hotel is ideal for those first few steps in either discipline.

#### JIMMY'S PASS

The island's main surfing break lies about seven miles offshore on the outer reef and it's a beaut. It's called Jimmy's Pass and among the surfing fraternity it ranks as world class. It has been windsurfed on very rare occasions, but only when conditions are perfect. The reef here is very shallow and very sharp, but can throw a great wave. It takes no hostages and one mistake can lead to an accident, so access is limited to experts. In some ways it's a bit like Jaws, which requires a tow-in and only the 'invited' get to go there. Seven miles from shore makes Jimmy's Pass inaccessible except by boat and as Jerome has the boat and it's probably his windsurfing gear that you're using, he pretty well controls the situation. In fact any wave sailing on the island is too remote to contemplate.

#### THE HOTEL

The hotel is comfortable but simple, at least by current international standards. There are other places to stay, but here again they're not in the windsurfing area but the capital, Port Mathurin. So if you want to step out of your room and straight onto a board, this is the place to be. The Mourouk Ebony has thirty rooms in chalet accommodation, all with en suite bathroom, air conditioning and a ceiling fan. Each room opens out onto a small terrace, there are also six deluxe rooms, which have a TV, mini bar and tub and their own private swimming pool set in a private terrace.

The 'le Bois d'Ebene', the hotel's restaurant, overlooks the lagoon. A lot of the menu is produced locally. As the island is so remote local people tend to grow their own food, rather than pay high prices for imported produce. The allotment is alive and well here and in this climate pretty well everything grows well. Local people grow their own food to the extent that the capital, Port Mathurin, is deserted after four in the afternoon as people go and tend to their livestock and plot in the hills, a sharp contrast to mornings when the town is very busy with food markets. ☺

## RODRIGUES: A GUIDE

Seafood rules here and it's rare that either lunch or dinner at the Mourouk doesn't include at least one excellent fish dish – certainly it didn't happen while we stayed there. Local specialities include dried octopus, salted fish and pickled chillies as well as a dish called Rougaille Saucisse – sausages, lentils and rice in a red, spicy sauce. The main reason for eating at the hotel, apart from the fact that most bookings are taken on a half board basis, is that there's nothing else within walking distance. You could also eat in the capital, Port Mathurin, which is home to the islands only disco, or at the Cotton Bay hotel, but both entail a car ride. Talking of cars, few bother hiring a car for their stay, if you want to explore the island it's easier to book a 4WD tour with one of the local companies or a mountain bike which you can hire from Osmosis for €18 per day or a 200cc. scooter for a little under twice that.

### EXPLORING THE ISLAND

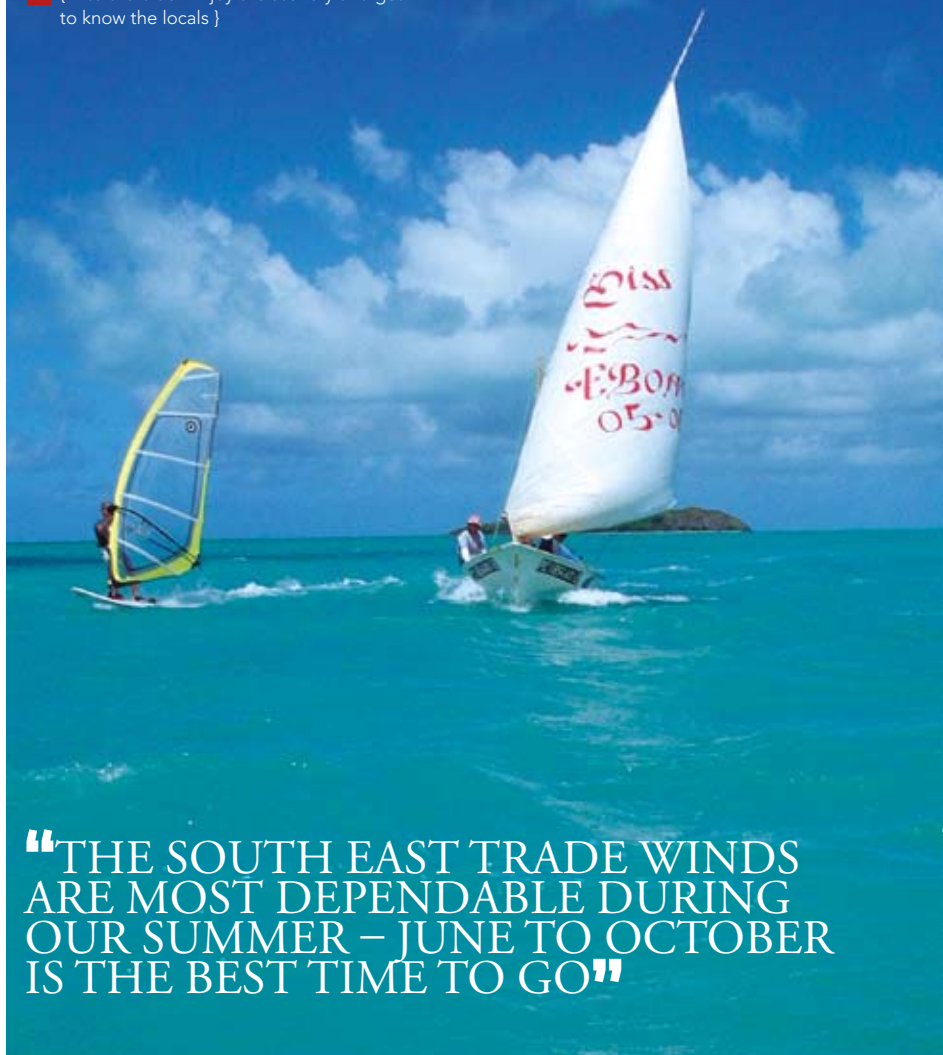
It would be a great loss if you didn't spend some of your time exploring the island and its surroundings. There are boat trips to some of the islands. Ile aux Chats for instance is inside the lagoon, has a white beach and is uninhabited. During the trip over the boatman will usually trawl a line to see what he can catch. The island itself boasts a natural pool between two and five meters deep. This is a live coral area with a huge variety of tropical fish. Snorkelling Couzoupa, as the pool is known, is a must. There are more white sand beaches at Anse Ally and Fumier, which are within walking distance of Pointe Cotton where the Cotton Bay Hotel is sited. Then there's Trou D'Argent, a natural creek sited next to a narrow lagoon where the colours of the two stretches of water contrast sharply. The name comes from a bit of folklore that tells that during exceptionally low tides a chain leading to a cave filled with silver coins is revealed. A boat trip will take you to another nearby island: Ile aux Cocos, with another immaculate beach and vegetation but, unlike most of the other beaches where you're likely to be the only person there, this island is noisy. It's a twitchers paradise with four different varieties of sea birds accompanied by the surf breaking of the nearby reef. Then there's the diving, the early morning market at Port Mathurin with its brightly painted houses and the Caverne Patate, a cavern running over six hundred meters underground full of stalagmites and stalactites and the nearby coral quarry.

This is about as close to a tropical island paradise as I have ever seen and I've walked some of the most beautiful places in the world. If you're into clubbing until the early hours, Rodrigues is probably not for you, but if the idea of a stretch of tranquillity, a beer or two watching the sun go down or just lazing on a deserted beach watching the clouds move by as you wait for the trade winds to build, this place might just hit the right spot. And it's about as close to knowing how Robinson Crusoe felt, as you'll ever get.

### CONTACT DETAILS

Sportif International are the UK agents for the Mourouk Ebony hotel and they will fly you there via Air Mauritius. The ticket price to Mauritius also includes the hop to Rodrigues. Prices start at around £1250 for an eight day stay, rising to over £1500 at peak times. Add another £220 if you're going to stay for a fortnight. This includes all flights and transfers and is based on two people in half board accommodation. Sportif can arrange for a two centre holiday staying one week on Rodrigues and the other at Le Morne on Mauritius. *For more details call 01273 844919.*

{ Into the blue! Enjoy the scenery and get to know the locals }



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