

Wide horizons, huge skies and endless space;

the beauty of Rodrigues

TRAVEL INDIAN OCEAN

WHINGING IN PARADISE

Ian 'James May' Leonard flies east to check out one of the most magnificent new windsurfing destinations to hit the scene, but things don't all go quite according to plan...
Pix by **Alex Williams**

The good news for adventurous windsurfers pioneering the windy and remote holiday venue of Rodrigues Island is that the Mourouk Ebony Hotel can now unite them with freeride heaven by providing shiny new Starboard and Tushingham kit. Unfortunately this wasn't the case on Tuesday 4 April when Air Mauritius flight MK130 pulled to an extremely abrupt halt on the tiny runway of this little known speck of land somewhere near the middle of the Indian Ocean.

We were met by Jerome, the athletic, sunburned, French watersports manager based with our hosts, the Mourouk Ebony Hotel. His first question sent a chill down my spine. My fellow travellers Gabe and Rou both gave the anticipated 'right' answer of 'yes'. Jerome's obvious and audible relief drowned out my quieter and now worried sounding 'no'. His question:

"Have you brought your own kit?"
Oh dear!

You don't always get superb locations, mouth-watering food and great hospitality on press trips – but this one was out of the top drawer. A week split between two potentially great windsurfing venues, business class upgrade from London to Mauritius, film-star treatment and accommodation, gourmet food with entertainment thrown in and super-helpful, friendly hosts! Telling this to any non-windsurfer might possibly disengage their sympathy from the awful predicament I found myself in but I'm sure that any true windsurfer will appreciate my unfolding plight...

The previous two days had been spent in the Indian Resort at Mauritius, a well-publicised Mecca for windsurfing that boasts great waves for both riding and jumping beyond the flat water. Well, we weren't in the windy season but Club Mistral boss, Felix, reckoned we were still very unlucky not to get any planing winds. Perhaps if there'd been no wind at all it would have been better. But two days hovering around 10-12 knots with the reefs working in the distance and my time to get amongst them quickly running out was like torture. Still, no worry, the unknown mysteries of Rodrigues were sure to provide compensation...

"Oui, zere ees some equipment at zee hotel but..." Jerome's voice trailed off with a Gallic shrug and a shaking head. An ancient Fanatic Rabbit with no non-slip and several major





repairs with fins and straps that hadn't impressed us much when new greeted me at the hotel. Apparently no sails above 5.0m were still intact and 12-18 knots were predicted. It's not really what a spoiled long-term equipment tester requires to get the juices flowing.

"Tomorrow we will go out to zee reef and..." Jerome must have seen my quivering lower lip "...you can use my equipment". The words gave me the temporary false hope that they were intended to deliver.

In case you were thinking I might be able to borrow equipment from my fellow travellers, Gabe and Rou, I should explain that while I was the token windsurfer on the press trip, Gabriel 'Gabe' Davies was the token surfer and Rupert 'Rou' Chater the token kitesurfer. Unlike bulky windsurfers, their kit was just about compact enough to fit in the twin-prop plane to Rodrigues but my cross-discipline skills were way short of being able to enjoy any of it. The only other equipment available were several cameras belonging to our

venerable snapper – the right honourable Alex Williams – and these were mainly reserved for taking poncey 'look at me carrying my logoed surfboard' shots of Gabe. I should perhaps explain that while Rou and myself are salt of the earth magazine hacks, Gabe is a surfing celebrity (and friend of Kelly Slater, don't-you-know) who, apart from being irritatingly friendly, is also apparently better looking and younger than me and rather good at surfing. But I wasn't resentful.

Five Men in A Boat

Rodrigues is a small island surrounded by a massive shallow lagoon several times its size, ringed by an almost continuous reef. *Miss Ebony* is the heavy, open topped, gaff rigged sailing boat in which 'Captain' Jerome often takes the Hotel's clients around the massive lagoon and its tiny islands and out to the reefs. For the next several days it became our daytime home.

1st mate Gabe stowed his two surfboards, able seamen Alex and Rou stowed their cameras and kite equipment while, relegated



"I'm sure the secret map said to dig here..."



The Camaraderie of three sports in perfect harmony. 'Captain' Jerome (left) with his boat and three guests: Kitesurf mag editor Rou Chater, myself, and ex British Surfing Champ Gabe Davies..

Left Trust a kitesurfer to stand bang in front of the word 'kite' in my otherwise carefully set up shot, and for God's sake how many logos can you fit on the nose of one surfboard? Look at that little pixie smile underneath that flower pot on his head ... and if old slaphead had only worn a hat he wouldn't have complained of sunstroke morning, noon and night. And why we had to go to the only bloody reef where the wind was dead offshore and unsailable ... gnnn-gnnn...

to cabin boy, I got to load up Jerome's minuscule, ten year-old custom waveboard 'for me to use'. The fact that it was made for French Atlantic gales in the last century and couldn't possibly work in the offshore reefs or flat water of Rodrigues was certainly not lost on me, but I didn't want to look disproportionately ungrateful so I threw it on anyway. Besides, it gave me the opportunity to scratch up Gabe and Rou's fancy boards unnoticed.

And thus we spent the next four days; sailing and motoring between deserted reefs and deserted islands across vast expanses of open lagoon, seeing just the odd fisherman in their traditional boats (probably planted by the tourist board for idyllic effect). Every now and then we'd pull up on some deserted sandbank so that Rou and Jerome could remind me that, while they had the perfect equipment for flat water and a steady Force 4, I didn't! How I longed for a freeride or freestyle and 6.5m sail.

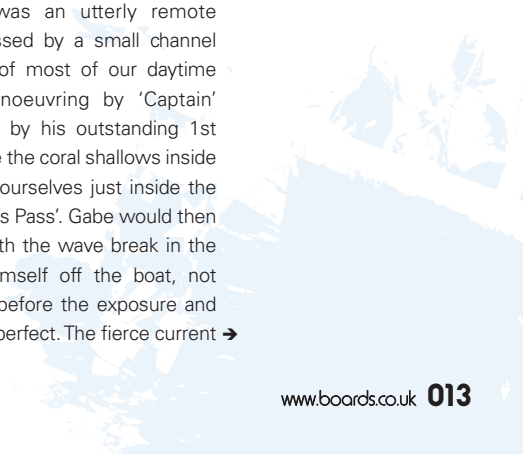
Rou would watch Jerome for a while do huge kite jumps and impressive looking bits of showing off, tutting all the while and muttering "old-school, old-school" under his breath. Then he'd head out and repeatedly catapult himself into ankle-deep water at crazy speeds. He'd come back looking a bit beaten up but pleased with himself asking if photographer Alex had snapped his "kiteloop", or "death twirl" or whatever. Of course Alex hadn't. He was far too busy taking more pix of Gabe carrying his surfboard across a deserted sandbank. We'd then load back up and sail on leaving Rou to kite along, with and around us like a dolphin that goes up instead of down. If only it had been me flitting around the boat. How I longed for a small shotgun or air rifle.

There were, however, compensations for devoting more of my time than the others to *Miss Ebony*, and before too long I'd worked a succession of promotions to become 1st mate

with special responsibility for hoisting sail and dropping anchor. Although the higher post didn't come with extra pay or rations I thereafter had the opportunity to accidentally drop the sail, mast or rigging on anyone who looked too comfortable whenever we went about. Such petty victories are important to a man watching other people enjoy themselves far too much.

Gabe's playground was an utterly remote downwind reef accessed by a small channel which was the goal of most of our daytime journeys. Clever manoeuvring by 'Captain' Jerome ably assisted by his outstanding 1st mate saw us negotiate the coral shallows inside the reef and position ourselves just inside the channel called 'Jimmy's Pass'. Gabe would then take his board and with the wave break in the background launch himself off the boat, not once, but four times before the exposure and composition was just perfect. The fierce current →

Top Left Poise, style, grace and athleticism off picnic Island... Despite 16" harness lines!



Jerome, never professing to be the world's best surfer, surprised himself with a great ride and the best wave pic of the day at Jimmy's Pass



flowing with the wind out through the channel then took him and Jerome quickly to the outside and gave me brief cause to hope that they might struggle to paddle back. Jerome had taken the sensible precaution of not showing me how to work the outboard motor.

Thus read the suggestive little card of my welcoming offer on arrival in Mauritius. What the Thalasso Energie Centre failed to appreciate is that the well-being of a windsurfer on a mission half-way around the world depends little on facial care, steam

Baron Bic himself, the owner of the French Biro and watersports empire. This irregular windsurfer, and sporadic visitor to Rodrigues, entrusts his compatriot Jerome with the safekeeping of his favourite freeride gear. On the last day of our stay in Rodrigues, Jerome's resistance to my obviously increasing misery crumbled and despite a mightily troubled conscience he broke out a nearly new Tiga Hyper-X 95 and 5.4m sail for me. Oh joy, and it was the windiest day of the trip!

It would be dishonest to pretend that blasting on flat water with a 66cm wide board is my normal ideal of what to do with solid 5.4m weather, but there was nothing normal about this outing. The surroundings, the circumstances, the anticipation ... everything was exceptional. The twin priorities of showing off and maybe maiming Rou on the pretext of 'sailing close together for a nice shot' led me to sail near the camera for a while. Alex, Jerome and Gabe were photographing and watching from the clifftop of our tiny picnic island. That done I simply

surrendered to the surroundings. I could see the white strip of the reef separating the turquoise-blue lagoon from the blue-turquoise sea and sky in the distance. It didn't look too far away and it was beckoning. The showing off hadn't gone too well so I'd show them how fearless I was instead and sail recklessly into the distance, shaking off any lingering feelings of non-windsurfing confinement. At times the bottom, though mostly just sand, seemed dangerously close to the bottom of my fin. It was often no more than three or four feet deep and looked twice as shallow in a very anxiety producing way. Ten solid minutes of fast beam reaching and the reef seemed barely any closer even though the island I'd come from was now a mere speck in the distance. The beautiful clear water was obligingly flat and with no rocks or sharks it just dared me to carry on and on. Another five minutes at full speed and the doubts started to creep in even though the actual danger was minimal. If anything broke I'd eventually drift to somewhere I could stand up and they'd come

TRAVEL INDIAN OCEAN



and rescue me ... or would they? How popular had I actually made myself over the past week?

The distances were huge and unsettling and anyway I'd now broken my shackles; my disquiet soul was much lighter, my moment of well-being finally delivered, so back I went. By the end of my sail I was so flushed with well-being that I even harboured some stirrings of warm and friendly feelings towards Gabe and Rou. In fact for a moment I even considered putting some ding-stick in the little holes I'd made in their boards earlier...

Location Facts

It is hard to imagine anywhere in the world that offers such a remote and beautiful expanse of clear, flat and relatively safe water to break your shackles and blast your worries away. It is without doubt a freeride paradise. Now, I may have already done enough of that to last a lifetime but a place like this doesn't just give you ideal opportunity, it actually begs you to go out cruising. There's little doubt that it would also be a paradise for freestyle.

You can sail straight off the beach at the Mourouk Ebony Hotel where Sportif now offer holidays with modern Starboard and Tushingham equipment. Unfortunately I didn't get to do this so can't report on the exact conditions but the wind blows slightly cross-offshore, there's no shorebreak and the equipment store is right on the beach. The water's flat to mildly choppy and there are vast expanses to explore. True wavesailing isn't really on the agenda as there are few breaks in the almost continuous shallow surrounding reef and unless you had a support boat they would be too remote anyway.

There are no wind statistics for the island at present but reliable local info suggests that it is windier than elsewhere in the Mauritius. The windy season tends to be summer through to Christmas but when we were there in April you could have got planing just about every day, so it is potentially a year-round location.

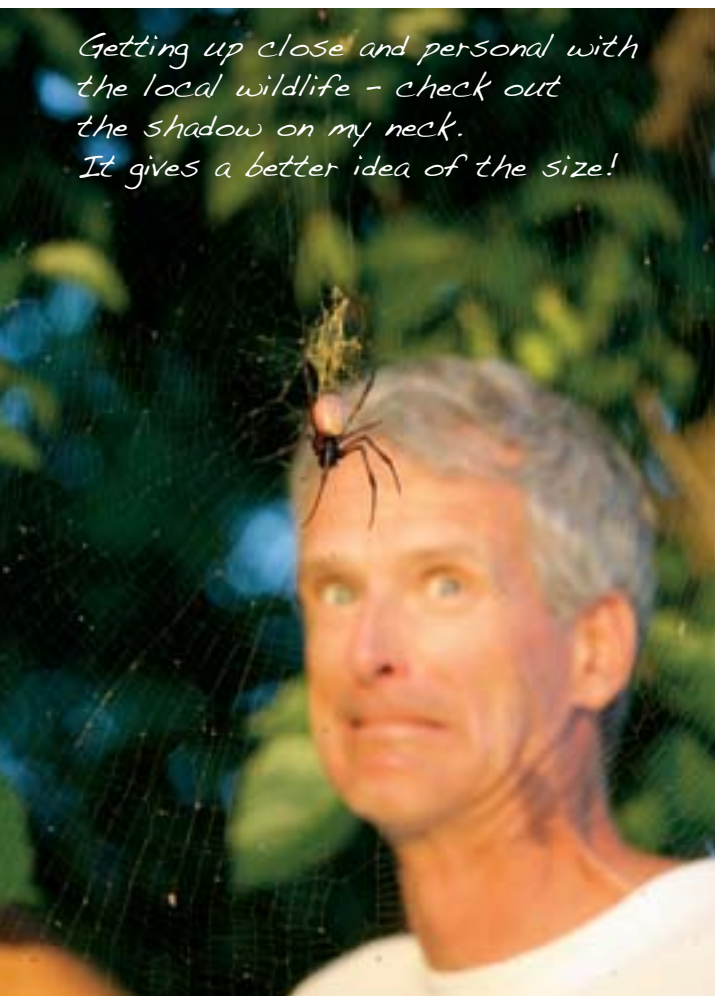
The Island's about twelve miles long by five wide, the population is low and there's almost

Above Riggering up in the lee of Picnic Island

Below "Oh, guess what? I just happened to be walking along a deserted sandbank with my board and all my sponsors logos showing when who should I bump into but Alex the photographer."



At long last, I got let out to play...



Getting up close and personal with the local wildlife - check out the shadow on my neck. It gives a better idea of the size!

beautifully warm. However, it isn't hot and sweaty, certainly not in April anyway as it's fanned by a pleasant wind. It looks like a cross between Scotland and the Mediterranean with a bit of Caribbean thrown in. It is green, but not lush.

Its main attraction, other than the wind, has to be its remote and unspoilt nature. You're about as far as it is possible to get away from Western city life. The horizons are wide, the sky is huge and on-water space endless. What's more the locals are either friendly or

to be out of this world, almost completely undiscovered and extremely rich and diverse.

While non-windsurfing partners may find activities a little restricted, the grounds and beach of the hotel are quite sheltered from the winds and the grounds are very pleasant and include a lovely pool. It would be paradise for sunbathing, reading and relaxation.

Lots of Thanks...

Many thanks to Air Mauritius who provide non-stop flights from Heathrow to Mauritius

“ ...like a cross between Scotland and the Mediterranean with a bit of Caribbean thrown in. It is green, but not lush... ”

totally unconcerned and you feel completely safe everywhere you go.

Whilst windsurfing will clearly be the main attraction for most readers, the kitesurfing is also exceptional and it's possible to take your own kit in the plane from Mauritius to Rodrigues (though you should check this). Surfing can also be very good although the remoteness of the reefs make it much less accessible, requiring a boat. There is a dive boat based at the Hotel and the diving is said

and can take windsurfing and kitesurfing kit.

Thanks also to Sportif who provide the only organised holidays to Rodrigues as well as being old hands in Mauritius.

We were splendidly looked after by the friendly Mourouk Ebony Hotel in Rodrigues and the luxurious Indian Resort in Mauritius. Thanks also to Club Mistral in Mauritius who did their very best to get me on the water.