

Beyond the BEACH

The islands of the Indian Ocean have great beaches, bluer-than-blue seas and an abundance of waving palms. But you knew that already, didn't you? Richard Holmes shows you what else will draw you to our nearish neighbours

Luckily, there's more to the most gorgeous islands on earth than sitting on the beach all day. Pack your adventuring shoes and head for these intoxicating destinations where slip-slops and deckchairs simply won't do...

RÉUNION

Driving the precipitous road to Réunion's remote village of Cilaos, it's easy to believe the island is trying to kill you. Calmly, and with true Gallic flair, it's doing its utmost to toss you into the ravine below.

Switchbacks, blind corners and single-lane tunnels make this mountain pass the stuff of Thomas Bain's dreams; a white-knuckled, heart-in-the-throat commute from the coast into the interior. But as with all things terrifying it's oh-so worth it when you finally make it to this lost-in-time village cast away in the Cirque de Cilaos, an ancient volcanic crater.

La Réunion is all about volcanoes, making it the perfect option for an Indian Ocean escape with a difference. It's an island built by fire and, although today it's lush and forested with whimsical winding roads to explore, the 2 631m Piton de la Fournaise still throws up a bellyful of lava from time to time.

Trekking in the Rempart de Bellecombe (the Piton's relatively safe caldera) is one of the island's highlights, but simply marvelling at the volcanic mountaintop desert is impressive enough to make you forget all about those French drivers on the 'wrong' side of the road.



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Who needs the beach when you have this? Grand Étang in Réunion.

TOP LEFT
Stone Town in Zanzibar is a Unesco World Heritage Site.

TOP RIGHT
The lush, tropical Vallée de Mai on Praslin in the Seychelles.

ABOVE LEFT
Did you know that Mauritius had scenery like this? The Chamarel Falls in the Black River Gorges Park in Mauritius.

ABOVE RIGHT
The star-shaped Fort of São João Batista on Ibo Island in the Quirimbas.

There's still an undeniable French connection on Réunion (it remains an overseas department of France, so you'll need a visa – visit your nearest Visas Zone for one) and it's not hard to imagine that you're exploring a corner of coastal France.

As you wind your way down to the coast, small villages boast boulangeries on every corner, with piles of piping-hot croissants and local cheese just begging to be packed in a picnic basket and enjoyed on the pristine beaches of the west coast.

MAURITIUS

Together with Réunion, Mauritius and its neighbouring Rodrigues form the island chain known as the Mascarenes, named after the 16th-century Portuguese explorer who discovered these coral-fringed islands.

Mauritius has long been popular with South African holidaymakers, who flock to the island's range of resorts where the luxury on offer is proportionate to the size of your bank balance ... or overdraft.

The island has proven especially popular with family travellers, with activities and childminders on tap to allow frazzled parental units the chance to relax, recharge and perhaps order another multicoloured drink, complete with umbrella, while the kids run riot.

Most resorts offer extensive kids and teen programmes with everything from sandcastle competitions to cooking classes to keep them entertained. You'll also usually find a selection

of complimentary water sports on offer, all of which are carefully supervised by instructors and lifeguards. Safe, shallow waters are perfect for young ones learning to swim and snorkel.

It's not all about the beach though. If you can wash the sand off your feet and drag the kids out of the water, you'll find life is also sweet in the island's lush interior.

Mauritius was built on the cultivation and harvest of sugar cane and the modern, interactive exhibition at L'Aventure du Sucre is sure to keep kids entertained. The museum traces the way simple sugar cane transformed the island and brings to life the process of transforming cane into crystals. To make it more family-friendly, kids are led on their 'Sugar Adventure' by two mascots common to the island; a mynah bird and a mongoose.

If you need to get the kids to work off the sugar rush, the Black River Gorges Park is another must-see in the hinterland. This 6 574 ha national park protects some of the last remaining indigenous forest on the island, along with endemic plants and rare bird species. Follow the marked trail from Le Pétrin Information Centre and tell the kids that if they spot a dodo, they can have another ice cream.

Now doesn't that sound more appealing than a day on the beach?

SEYCHELLES

But if there's anywhere on the planet where a deckchair and powder-soft sand is likely to prove irresistible, it's the Seychelles. This island chain, cast away in the northern reaches of the Indian Ocean (it's a five-hour flight from Johannesburg), is all about luxury and boasts some of the world's most exquisite hotels.

If you don't want to mingle with the masses, and feel like giving your credit card a workout, there are even private islands to enjoy. Hop on a flight to North Island or Frégate Island Private and you'll find a tropical paradise to be shared with just a handful of other lucky souls.

All sounding a little rich for you? You can still enjoy the flour-soft sands and crystal waters on the main island of Mahé, where four- and five-star hotels abound. Beau Vallon, Anse Souillac, Sainte Anne, Anse Patates ... how is any mere mortal meant to resist the charms of these impossibly idyllic beaches?

Well, perhaps tales of an erotic seed that love-starved sailors believed came from a mystical tree on the bottom of the ocean could help?

To discover the real story behind the seductive seed of the Coco de Mer palm you'll need to tear yourself from your deckchair and hop on the fast ferry (about €8/R90) from Victoria, the Seychellois capital, to the island of Praslin.

It's here that you'll find the Vallée de Mai, a Unesco World Heritage Site that is home to more than 6 000 of these rare palms. The Coco de Mer may produce the world's largest seeds, but it's true that size doesn't matter. It's the shape that counts, with the male and female seeds mirroring the human form in blush-worthy detail; a curvaceous, hip-shaped seed for the female and a long tube for the male.

You can discover more of the intriguing history and horticulture of the Seychelles, along with some pirate history, at the magnificent Jardin du Roi on Mahé or the L'Union Estate on tiny Praslin.

QUIRIMBAS

The tropical islands of the Indian Ocean are inextricably linked to colonialism. While the French and English made themselves at home in the Seychelles, the Portuguese sailed the length of East Africa claiming harbours as their own. In 1522 they chanced on the Quirimbas Archipelago, in northern Mozambique, and set up shop.

Of course the Arabs, who'd traded slaves and spices here for centuries, were none too happy about that and the inevitable clashes ensued. It's just one of the many intriguing tales to be discovered at the star-shaped Fort of São João Batista on Ibo Island.

While the islands of Matemo and Medjumbe to the north offer tropical paradise by the beach-bucketful, the intriguing history of Ibo is certainly worth venturing south for.

Walking tours led by local guides from Ibo Island Lodge take you on a wander through the crumbling ruins left behind by Arabs, Chinese and Portuguese traders. Of course, the mass deportation of foreigners after independence didn't help either.

As the tour ends at the Fort, history echoes into the present to the sound of silversmiths' hammers. It's a craft that's been on the island for generations and today their fine filigree jewellery makes a perfect, and affordable, souvenir.

Historic tours aside, you can also explore the nearby mangrove forests by kayak, cast a fly for

READER OFFERS

SIX NIGHTS IN FIVE-STAR SEYCHELLES FROM R23 220 PPS (EXCL TAXES)

You don't need to be a honeymooner to appreciate the romantic atmosphere at Sainte Anne Resort & Spa. Located on a private island and surrounded by one of the largest marine parks in the Indian Ocean, this is paradise at its very best. Be treated to superb cuisine at any of the four restaurants, take advantage of the fabulous spa or just enjoy the surrounds. This offer means you're paying for five nights, but staying for six. Valid from 1 November to 19 December 2009.

SEVEN NIGHTS IN FOUR-STAR MAURITIUS FROM R11 447 PPS (EXCL TAXES)

Expect relaxed, cosmopolitan four-star luxury at Le Mauricia resort. Fantastic for families and groups of friends, the resort is within walking distance of Grand Baie village, where a choice of restaurants, bars and clubs will keep you entertained by night and the free sports (land and water) will amuse the kids during the day. This offer means you pay for six nights, but stay for seven. And if you depart on 1 December, you save R470 pp.

For complete details on both offers, visit www.aa.co.za. The offers include return flights from Jo'burg, return transfers, accommodation and breakfast and dinner daily. They do not include airport taxes (approx R1 775 pp for the Seychelles and R1 789 for Mauritius), personal items, insurance and anything unspecified. Terms and conditions apply and the offers are subject to availability. Rates are subject to exchange rate fluctuations.

For more information, to book or for more offers, contact your nearest Travel Experience store (see page 10 for a full list).

kingfish or enjoy a castaway lunch on your own deserted island.

As you leave Ibo behind and soar above the eddies and reefs of the Quirimbas, it's easy to see why Bob Dylan sang: 'I like to spend some time in Mozambique/The sunny sky is aqua blue/And all the couples dancing cheek to cheek/It's very nice to stay a week or two.'

ZANZIBAR

It would certainly be easy to stay a week or two on the island of Zanzibar, not far north of the Quirimbas. Arab dhows that sailed the coast of Cabo Delgado province no doubt stopped here on their way north, and the 'spice island' has a long and chequered history that is well worth exploring. While most travellers spend a day wandering the narrow alleys of Stone Town before heading to their beach resort, the island has much more to offer history buffs.

The Mbweni Ruins is a good place to start. Built on the site of an old Arab house, Mbweni was originally the St Mary's School for Freed Slave Girls. Built in 1871 by the Universities Mission to Central Africa (UMCA), an organisation established by explorer David Livingstone to educate freed slaves, the ruins are now managed by the Mbweni Ruins Hotel.

Other ruins, built with less noble intentions, include the Maruhubi Ruins, built in 1880 by Sultan Burghush as a retreat for himself and his many concubines.

Bathing beauties abound on the islands of the Indian Ocean, but remember that it's not all about the beach. Put on your hiking shoes and explore the hidden hinterlands beyond the sands. ●



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