



GETTING THERE

SAA launches its first-ever direct service between Cape Town and Mauritius on 9 December 2025. This will be a three-weekly service operating every Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday. Bookings open. Visit flysaa.com

The undiscovered corners of

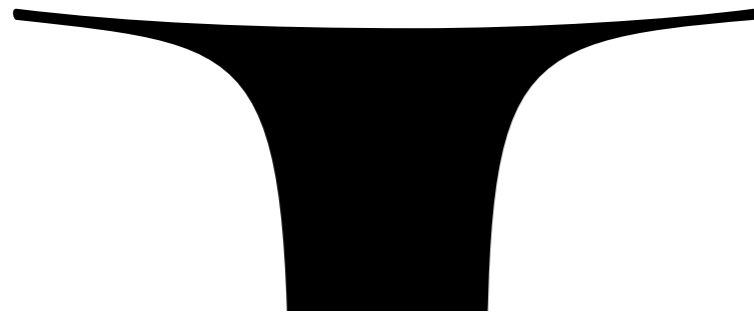
MAURITIUS

Beyond the postcard-perfect beaches, the real Mauritius is out there: in its villages, studios, rum shops, and reefs. Step outside of the resort to get to know this island of surprises and to experience Mauritius' unexpected side.

WORDS | SOPHIE BAKER



IMAGE: istockphoto; supplied.



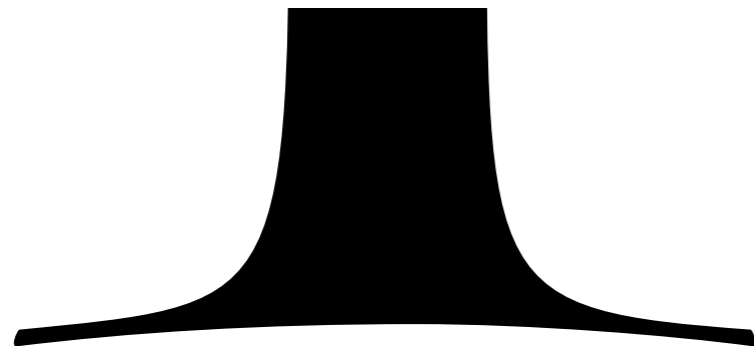
I DIDN'T EXPECT to find myself in the gardens of Takamaka Boutique Winery on a rainy Mauritian afternoon, swirling a glass of wine made not from grapes, but from litchis. Winemaker Alexander Oxenham pours with a generous hand as he tells me that his award-winning wines could ferment for a matter of weeks. Still sceptical, I brace for syrupy sweetness. But I'm pleasantly surprised when the first sip is unexpectedly crisp and dry, closer to a Stellenbosch Sauvignon than dessert wine. Takamaka is just one of the small but striking examples of Mauritian ingenuity: a country that's pivoted from sugar to textiles to tourism, now finding new ways to create with what's local.

That afternoon, I was worlds away from the Mauritius you see in glossy brochures. For decades, Mauritius has been shorthand for barefoot luxury, and for many visitors the island's reputation begins and ends with beach loungers, sea vistas, and cocktails by the pool. A sunny escape from reality, sure. But one that's often confined to the manicured grounds of a resort which, save for the kaleidoscope of blues on the water, could be anywhere in the world.

And yet, in a week that nudges guests beyond the comfort of the all-inclusive bubble to experience the people and places shaping the real Mauritius, I discovered an island shaped by reinvention, innovation, and spirit.

As the morning rain disappears and the familiar island sun breaks through, I head for the uplands of Ferney Valley. Among the thick green hills is Indika, a small business transforming endemic plants, like ylang-ylang, citronella, lemongrass, into oils, balms, and soaps. I'd already experienced them during a massage at the hotel spa, but seeing herbs drying in the sun and oils infusing in glass jars created an appreciation for how much knowledge and heritage can be bottled into these products – something a polished spa menu simply can't convey.

Back in Port Louis, the capital is a collision of old and new. On the one hand, there's the waterfront with its modern shops; but step into the city's heart and you'll find colonial-era buildings painted in bright murals, alleys thick with the scent of curries, and a pulsing energy that never quite sits still. At the edge of the old town, EDITH (a 19th-century mansion reborn as a cultural hub) now hosts pop-up eateries and cocktail bars under strings of lights, while upstairs, the House of Digital Art draws crowds with immersive, avant-garde projections of Mauritian landscapes and Sega rhythms. Port Louis is never dull. At dusk, traffic stalls in a chorus of horns, kids play football down side streets, and families go about their business down by the waterfront. If you only have one afternoon,



PREVIOUS SPREAD: The red church at Cap Malheureux village, Notre Dame de Auxiliatrice, is one of the most photographed sights in Mauritius. Join mass or have a look at the holy water basin made from a giant clam shell.

ABOVE: Along a popular shopping street at the Le Caudan waterfront, you'll find the 'Umbrella Sky'.

BELOW FROM LEFT: A crisp Sauvignon-style white and a sweet rosé from Takamaka's range of small-batch litchi wines; Attitude Ravenala's Madame Ming showcases the Asian influences on Mauritian cuisine, blending flavours from Thailand, China, and Indonesia.



walk with an appetite and a willingness to get lost.

Food here is inseparable from Mauritius' history. Every meal is a reflection of the island's layered past: Indian indentured workers brought their spices and curries; French colonists added sauces and baking; Chinese immigrants contributed dim sum and stir-fries; Creole kitchens wove it all together with fresh seafood, tropical fruit, and local chilies. The result is one of the world's few true fusion cuisines. It's distinctive, surprising, and somehow harmonious, much like Mauritius itself.

If you're a resort loyalist, don't settle for bland buffets. Kot Nou, the signature Attitude restaurant, serves rustic Creole dishes inspired by family recipes: aromatic fish curries, fiery pickles, lightly spiced lentil *dhal*. Their Otentik Dinners, hosted in staff members' homes, give you a rare chance to taste Mauritian food culture where it's most alive – around a kitchen table.

But for the more adventurous, the island's food scene outside the hotel gates is unpretentious and accessible. Central Market in Port Louis hums with stalls selling *boulettes* (Mauritian dumplings), *gateaux piments*, and perfect *dhal puri*. Family-run spots like Chez Tante Athalie and Escale Créole serve home-style Creole classics, and along the coast, village restaurants offer whatever was caught that day, grilled and served with little fanfare but lots of heart. Ask your taxi driver for their favourite spot – they always have a valuable opinion. If you want to eat like a local, try a plate of *rougaille*, order octopus curry by the beach, and

always say yes to an extra spoonful of pickles.

As my time on Mauritian shores starts to draw to an end, I join the crowd at Le Fangourin, a restaurant at the historic L'Aventure du Sucre sugar estate. Gardens are strung with fairy lights and a live band is in full swing. It's not put on for tourists; everyone here seems to know every word. With the old stone chimneys lit against the night, reminders of a country shaped by sugar cane, it's easy to imagine how much this island has weathered. Sugar once ruled everything; now it's music and memory that fill the night air and tourism that keeps this small island's story evolving.

They call it the Mauritian miracle: this transformation from a single-crop colony to something far richer and more complex. But tonight, I'm less interested in GDP and more in the human side of that story. I think of all the places I've passed this week: bustling markets, rain-damp hills, family tables set for strangers.

Mauritius bared its soul to me on this trip. Yes, I saw the postcard-perfect beaches, infinity pools, and palm-fringed shores. But I also met the people, smelled the spices, touched the soil, and heard the stories that bring the island to life.

You could spend a week in Mauritius and fly home with only photos of perfect water and sundowners. But if you step beyond the guidebooks, Mauritius opens up in ways no camera can capture. The real Mauritius is out there: in its villages, its studios, its rum shops and reefs. I've had just one precious, intoxicating glimpse of it. And yet I know I'll be back for more.



The Essentials

GETTING AROUND

Taxis are plentiful, and your hotel can organise them for you. Rent a car if you want to explore even further. Mauritius is considered very safe for travellers, and solo exploring feels refreshingly easy compared to many destinations.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

May to December offers warm, dry weather with an occasional stormy downpour. January to March brings occasional tropical showers but stays pleasantly warm.

STAY, EAT, AND DO

Attitude Hotels has ten properties island wide, each offering hands-on options like Otentik Dinners, coral planting, and Creole meals at Kot Nou (www.hotels-attitude.com). Try street food at Central Market in Port Louis – *boulettes*, *gateaux piments*, dim sum, *dhal puri*. Escale Créole is famous for homestyle curries; Le Fangourin, on a historic sugar estate, serves classic island dishes.

After you've eaten your fill, treat yourself to a tasting at Takamaka (www.takamakawinery.com). Or for a change of pace for art and culture fans, visit Bactory in Rose Hill, or HODA for digital exhibitions.

CURRENCY

Mauritian Rupee (MUR). Credit cards are accepted at hotels and most restaurants.