

Idyllic island in the Indian Ocean

I am jogging barefoot along the crescent of a golden beach on the tropical island of Mauritius. Not a soul in sight for miles. Early morning sunbeams dance on the radiant, crystal-blue waters of the Indian Ocean. Feathery casuarina trees ruffle in the daybreak breeze. On the horizon, craggy green-mantled mountains plunge abruptly into the sea.

In a waterside grove of lofty palms, I stop and listen to the breathless sounds intruded on only by the muted roll of the surf surging against the outlying reef. Emerging again onto the sweeping curve of sandy shore, I look up to see two misty iridescent arcs—a double rainbow—bridging sea and sky. I am all but overwhelmed by the idyllic beauty of the scene. It remains an indelible memory.

My love of Mauritius, a coral-ringed island located 1200 miles east of the African continent, 2300 miles southwest of India, and nearly 4000 miles west of Australia, puts me in good company. Such questing travelers as Charles Darwin, Mark Twain, Joseph Conrad, and Charles Baudelaire had visions of Eden here. Darwin, who had visited many of the world's exotic locales, expressed it this way: "How pleasant it would be to pass one's life in such quiet abodes."

Off well-worn tourist routes and rarely in the news, Mauritius is so little-known that international postal services often misdirect their mail to the sun-baked postboxes of Mauritania, in the wilds of the Sahara Desert.

Though most travelers reach Mauritius from Europe or the far East, our roundabout route took us from New York via the Ivory Coast down to South Africa. There, where we visited my wife's family, Mauritius' charms have long been known, the island being a popular escape destination easily accessible from Johannesburg. To Adam, my eight-year old son, the prospect of going to a tiny, hard to pronounce dot in the middle of the vast Indian Ocean was exciting enough.

(Adam has traveled with us since he was six months old. As a travel writer, I have enjoyed having my family along on working trips to far-flung corners of the world. Thus, Adam, by the time he was five, had already paper airplanes out of hotel rooms on six continents.)

Our four hour flight from Johannesburg landed us in Mauritius after dark, so the lush beauty of the landscape had to wait for discovery until morning. At our hotel, La Pirogue in the western coastal area of the marvelously named Flic-en-Flac, a jovial porter with a flashlight led us through the humid darkness to our rustic palm-fetched cottage situated just a cowrie shell's toss from the shoreline.

History

Although Arab and Swahili voyagers of ancient times are said to have discovered Mauritius, when Portuguese explorers waded ashore in 1510, they found no natives to embrace or chase them. Far more interested in reaching the opulent spice lands of the East, the Portuguese went on their way, leaving no mark except a pin-point that they called *Cirne*-for "Swan." With no such birds on the island, the choice of name remains a mystery.

Ninety years later, when the Dutch showed up, the island was still uninhabited except for vast flocks of plumpish, clumsy birds that not only couldn't fly but couldn't run fast enough to escape the barbeque-minded Dutch sailors. The Hollanders called the birds *douido*, meaning "stupid," and feasted on the hapless fowl so voraciously that within fifty years the Dodo bird, as it came to be known, became totally extinct. It is mostly remembered today as one of the whimsical characters in Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*.

The Dutch named the island Mauritius in honor of their sovereign, Prince Maurits of Nassau, and entrenched themselves for two centuries, lucratively exporting shiploads of ebony and sugarcane. When the ravaged ebony forests finally vanished, like the dodo, the Dutch hoisted anchor and sailed away. Aside from the island's name, the Hollanders left one most important legacy, sugarcane, which they originally brought from the Java and planted here. Today, it is Mauritius' most vital crop and its major foreign exchange earner.