

Réunion Snapshots

First, the bad news. Réunion faced a major health crisis in 2006, a year which is considered an ‘annus horribilis’ in the history of the island. The mosquito-borne Chikungunya virus (p309) hit this Indian Ocean island in late 2005 and by 2007 had infected about 266,000 people (over one-third of the population). In reality, the whole region was hit, including Mauritius, the Seychelles, Comoros and Madagascar, but not on the same dramatic scale as Réunion. Unsurprisingly, the epidemic had a negative impact on tourism in Réunion. Bookings plummeted by more than 60% in 2006 and early 2007.

Now, the good news. Réunion is back on its feet, thanks to a massive effort to kill off the mosquito population. Army troops and firefighters were mobilised and deployed on the island, spraying every potential risk zone with insecticide. Though not exactly environmentally friendly, this strategy paid off. By mid-2007 the ‘Chik’, as it’s affectionately (well, almost) dubbed in Réunion, was eradicated, and the situation was considered to be back to normal, according to French health officials. The future looks much brighter now.

In 2007 the much-awaited Parc National des Hauts de la Réunion was created. It encompasses a huge chunk of the rugged interior, and it will go some way to protecting (and promoting) the island’s unique cultural and environmental heritage. Local authorities lay emphasis on the island’s ‘green’ image and its fantastic opportunities for ecotourism and outdoor activities. Their aim is now to tap into new markets, especially the German and Anglophone ones, in order to reduce the dependence on the French market.

Paradoxically, one of the greatest immediate concerns is not the environment, but the ever-growing population. Recent estimates suggest that the population of Réunion will reach one million by 2020. Housing is the main problem. Already there is tremendous pressure on building land. Most of the population is concentrated on the coastal strip, where the towns are gradually beginning to merge into one continuous urban ‘ring’. Houses are also spreading slowly up the hillsides and traffic congestion is becoming a major headache.

To relieve some of this pressure, the government has invested in an ambitious new expressway, the Route des Tamarins, between St-Paul and Étang-Salé-les-Bains, which will open a large swathe of mountainside to new development. Constructions work is well under way.

At the presidential election in April–May 2007, the 500,000 or so Réunionnais voters were wooed by most candidates, who spent a few days campaigning on the island. The results were significantly different from mainland France; while Nicolas Sarkozy (right) won over 53% of the votes in mainland France, he was massively defeated in Réunion – Ségolène Royal (left) triumphed on the island, winning 64% of the votes. According to analysts, on an island that’s heavily subsidised by mainland France, the social aspects of Royal’s programme were considered much more reassuring for most Réunionnais.

HISTORY

Réunion has a history similar to that of Mauritius. It was colonised by the French after the mid-17th century but later fell briefly under British rule. As in Mauritius, the colonisers introduced plantation crops and African slaves. Later came Indian indentured labourers and Chinese merchants, creating an ethnic diversity which is one of these islands’ most distinctive

characteristics. While Mauritius gained its independence in 1968, Réunion remains an overseas department of France.

WELCOME TO PARADISE

The first visitors to the uninhabited island were probably Malay, Arab and European mariners, none of whom stayed. Then in 1642, the French took the decision to settle the island, which at the time was called Mascarin. The first settlers arrived four years later, when the French governor of Fort Dauphin in southern Madagascar banished a dozen mutineers to the island.

On the basis of enthusiastic reports from the mutineers, the King of France Louis XIV officially claimed the island in 1649 and renamed it Île Bourbon.

However appealing it seemed, there was no great rush to populate and develop the island. It was not until the beginning of the 18th century that the French East India Company and the French government took control of the island.

COFFEE, ANYONE?

Coffee was introduced between 1715 and 1730 and soon became the island’s main cash crop. The island’s economy changed dramatically. As coffee required intensive labour, African and Malagasy slaves were brought by the shipload. During this period, cereals, spices and cotton were also introduced as cash crops.

Like Mauritius, Réunion came of age under the governorship of the visionary Mahé de Labourdonnais, who served from 1735 to 1746. However, Labourdonnais treated Île de France (Mauritius) as a favoured sibling, and after the collapse of the French East India Company and the pressure of ongoing rivalry with Britain the governance of Île Bourbon passed directly to the French crown in 1764.

After the French Revolution, the island’s name was changed to La Réunion (meaning ‘Joining’ or ‘Meeting’).

THE BRITISH MOVE IN...

In 1810, during the Napoleonic Wars, Napoleon Bonaparte lost the island to the *habits rouges* (redcoats). Under British rule, sugar cane was introduced to Réunion and quickly became the primary crop. The vanilla industry, introduced in 1819, also grew rapidly.

The British didn’t stay long: just five years later, under the Treaty of Paris, the spoils were returned to the French as Île Bourbon. The British, however, retained their grip on Mauritius, Rodrigues and the Seychelles.

BLACK HISTORY

The late-18th century saw a number of slave revolts, and many resourceful Malagasy and African slaves, called *marrons*, escaped from their owners and took refuge in the mountainous interior. Some of them established private Utopias in inaccessible parts of the Cirques, while others grouped together and formed organised communities with democratically elected leaders. These tribal chieftains were the true pioneers of the settlement of Réunion, but most ultimately fell victim to bounty hunters who were employed to hunt them down. The scars of this period of the island’s history are still fresh in the population’s psyche; perhaps from a sense of shame, there’s surprisingly little record of the island’s Creole pioneers except the names of several peaks (Dimitile, Enchaing, Mafate, Cimendef) where they were hunted down and killed. The Maison du Peuplement des Hauts in Cilaos (p197) and Hell-Bourg’s Écomusée (p203) provide excellent introductions to these sensitive subjects, tracing the history of slavery and ‘*marronage*’ and celebrating the achievements of these unsung heroes of the Cirques.

The most ruthless hunter of runaway slaves was François Mussard, whose name is now remembered only because it has been given to a dank, dark cave near Piton des Neiges.

For a general introduction to the island, pick up Catherine Lavaux’s classic *La Réunion: Du Battant des Lames au Sommet des Montagnes*. It covers everything from the geography and flora of Réunion to its history.

From around 1685, Indian Ocean pirates began using Île Bourbon as a trading base.

FAST FACTS

- Population: 800,000 (estimated)
- Territory size: 2512 sq km
- Languages: French, Creole
- Capital: St-Denis
- Highest point: Piton des Neiges 3070m
- Distance from Réunion to Mauritius: 220km
- Unemployment: 30%
- Estimated total cars: 340,000
- Lychee season: December to February

... AND THE FRENCH COME BACK TO STAY

In 1848, the Second Republic was proclaimed in France, slavery was abolished and Île Bourbon again became La Réunion. Like Mauritius, Réunion immediately experienced a labour crisis, and like the British in Mauritius, the French 'solved' the problem by importing contract labourers from India, most of them Hindus, to work the sugar cane.

Réunion's golden age of trade and development lasted until 1870, with the country flourishing on the trade route between Europe, India and the Far East. Competition from Cuba and the European sugar-beet industry, combined with the opening of the Suez Canal (which short-circuited the journey around the Cape of Good Hope), resulted in an economic slump.

After WWI, in which 14,000 Réunionnais served, the sugar industry regained a bit of momentum, but it again suffered badly through the blockade of the island during WWII.

Réunion became a Département Français d'Outre-Mer (DOM; French Overseas Department) in 1946 and has representation in the French parliament. Since then there have been feeble independence movements from time to time but, unlike those in France's Pacific territories, these have never amounted to much. While the Réunionnais seemed satisfied to remain totally French, general economic and social discontent surfaced in dramatic anti-government riots in St-Denis in 1991.

In March 1998, there was a major eruption at the Piton de la Fournaise – the longest eruption of the volcano in the 20th century, with a total of 196 days of volcanic activity. The turn of the century marked a new era for Réunion; the local authorities managed to sign a few agreements with the French state, which confirmed the launching of subsidised 'grands chantiers' (big infrastructure works), including the new expressway called the Nouvelle Route des Tamarins and the future Route du Littoral. These massive works are expected to sustain growth on the island.

THE CULTURE

THE NATIONAL IDENTITY

The physical and cultural distinctions between the various ethnic groups are far less apparent in Réunion than in Mauritius. In Réunion there has been much more interracial mixing over the years. Ask the Réunionnais how they see themselves and the chances are they'll say 'Creole' – not in the narrow sense of having Afro-French ancestry, but simply meaning one of 'the people'. That is, someone who speaks Creole, who was born and bred on the island and is probably – but not necessarily – of mixed ancestry. This sense of community is the gel that holds society together.

The Réunionnais are in general more reserved than the Mauritians, but within this overall pattern there are local differences: southerners are reckoned to be more relaxed and friendly, while perhaps not surprisingly the people living in the Cirques are the most introverted.

While the Réunionnais do also regard themselves as French, they don't really identify with people from the mainland. There is even a slight undercurrent of resentment towards the 100,000 or so mainlanders who dominate the island's administration and economy. The locals refer to them very slightly derogatorily as Zoreilles (the Ears); the usual explanation is that they are straining to hear what's being said about them in the local patois.

LIFESTYLE

Contemporary Réunionnais are a thoroughly 21st-century people. The vast majority of children receive a decent standard of education and all islanders have access to the national health system, either in Réunion or in France. There are traffic jams, everyone is on a mobile (cell) phone, and flashy cars are ubiquitous. But beneath this modern veneer, there are many more traditional aspects.

One of the strongest bonds unifying society, after the Creole language, is the importance placed on family life. At the weekend there's nothing the Réunionnais like better than trundling off to the seaside or the mountains for a huge family picnic – think giant-sized rice cookers replete with hearty *carris* in the company of *gramounes* (grandparents) and *marmailles* (children). To get the most sought-after picnic shelters, some members of the family sometimes arrive at 4am to reserve them! Religious occasions and public holidays are also vigorously celebrated, as are more personal, family events, such as baptisms, first communions and weddings.

Though Réunion can't be mistaken for, say, Ibiza, Réunionnais share a zest for the fest. On weekends St-Gilles-les-Bains, L'Hermitage-les-Bains and St-Pierre are a magnet for Réunionnais from all over the island. The towns turn wild on those evenings as flocks of night owls arrive en masse to wiggle their hips and guzzle pints of Dodo beer and glasses of rum.

On a more mundane level, you'll quickly realise that the possession of a brand new car is a sign of wealth and respect. The 'car culture' is a dominant trait. Small wonder that traffic jams are the norm on the coastal roads. Many Réunionnais spend up to two hours daily in their car going to work! One favourite topic of conversation is the state of the roads, especially the tricky Route du Littoral between St-Paul and St-Denis, which is sometimes closed due to fallen rocks.

Another noticeable (though less immediately so) characteristic is the importance of gossip (*la di la fé*). If you can understand a little bit of French (or Creole), tune in to *Radio Free Dom* – you'll soon realise that gossip's a national pastime.

A cagier issue is the RMI (see Economy, p160). For the French mainlanders, the Réunionnais are *assistés* (spoiled children) who get a lot of funds from Paris and from the generous welfare system. For the Réunionnais, it's just resourcefulness, and a way to improve their standard of living.

People are relatively tolerant of homosexuality, though by no means as liberal as in mainland France; open displays of affection may be regarded with disdain, especially outside St-Denis.

There's a refreshingly liberal attitude towards women, and younger Réunionnais women especially are quite outspoken and emancipated. Divorce, abortion and childbirth outside marriage are all fairly uncontentious issues. However, it's not all that rosy: women are poorly represented in local government and politics, and domestic violence is prevalent. This is closely connected to high rates of alcoholism.

Despite the social problems that blight any culture, on the whole it's a society that lives very easily together.

ECONOMY

Réunion is one of the richest islands in the Indian Ocean. The standard of living is fairly high, and it's no surprise. As a French department, the island receives a lot from mainland France (*la métropole*). However, Réunion faces numerous challenges. The unemployment rate, for example, currently hovers around 30%, way above the national average (about 8% at the time of writing), but at least it's down from the peak of 38% in 1998. It's particularly

It's estimated that 450,000 Réunionnais (almost half of the population living on the island) live in *métropole* mainland France.

The tourist office in St-Denis has put together a guide to 12 *créoles* villages, including Cilaos, Hell-Bourg and Entre-Deux, chosen for their particularly rich architectural heritage and traditional way of life.

problematic for women and young people without qualifications. Why isn't there any major social outburst? It's simple: the generous French social system, especially the RMI (Revenu Minimum d'Insertion, an allowance that any unemployed person aged over 26 can claim), acts as a lifesaver for many individuals – not to mention the high level of moonlighting (*travail au noir*), on top of the RMI. You won't see homelessness in Réunion, not simply because of the existence of the RMI but also because of family ties, which remain strong.

Réunion imports around 60% of its needs from *la métropole*. In turn, mainland France accounts for some 70% of Réunion's exports. The vast majority is sugar, with other agricultural and marine products coming a distant second.

For the present, Réunion's sugar producers have managed to hang on to their European quotas and guaranteed prices, but following EU enlargement and with the reform of the EU sugar sector that was adopted in 2006, they may not be able to do so for much longer. As a result, the movers and shakers of Réunion's economy are increasingly looking to closer ties with Mauritius and the rest of Africa for their financial future.

Tourism is another major source of income, but it plummeted to 278,000 visitors in 2006 (from 410,000 tourist arrivals in 2005), as a result of the Chikungunya epidemic. The vast majority of visitors are French. It's expected to pick up again in 2008. There's a huge potential for growth, but there are a few hurdles: it's under-promoted in the Anglophone markets; English is not widely spoken on the island (to say the least); and the cost of flights is still prohibitive.

POPULATION

Cultural diversity forms an integral part of the island's social fabric. Réunion has the same population mix of Africans, Europeans, Indians and Chinese as Mauritius, but in different proportions. Creoles (people of Afro-French ancestry) are the largest ethnic group, comprising around 40% of the population. Malabars (Hindu Indians) comprise about 25% of the population, Europeans (ie the French) 6%, the Chinese 3%, and Z'arabes (Muslim Indians) make up about 2%.

The bulk of the island's population lives in coastal zones, with Malabars living predominantly in the east. The rugged interior is sparsely populated. Because the birth rate has remained quite high, a third of the population is under 20 years of age.

Réunion also sees a continual tide of would-be immigrants. With a system of generous welfare payments for the unemployed, the island is seen as a land of milk and honey by those from Mauritius, Seychelles and some mainland African countries. In recent years there has been significant immigration from neighbouring Comoros and Mayotte Islands.

RELIGION

An estimated 70% of the population belongs to the Catholic faith, which dominates the island's religious character. It's evidenced in the many saints' days and holidays, as well as in the names of towns and cities. Religious rituals and rites of passage play an important part in the lives of the people, and baptisms, first communions and church weddings are an integral part of social culture.

About a quarter of Réunionnais are Hindus, which is the dominant faith in the east. Traditional Hindu rites such as *teemeedee*, which features fire-walking, and *cavadee*, which for pilgrims entails piercing the cheeks with skewers, often take place. (For more information on these rites, see

p227.) Muslims make up roughly 2% of the population; as in Mauritius, Islam tends to be fairly liberal, though a number of Muslim women wear the veil.

Interestingly, a great deal of syncretism between Hinduism, Islam and Catholicism has evolved over the years. In fact, many of the Malabar-Réunionnais participate in both Hindu and Catholic rites and rituals.

Apart from celebrating the Chinese New Year, the Sino-Réunionnais community (making up about 3% of the population) is not very conspicuous in its religious or its traditional practices.

As in Mauritius, religious tolerance is the norm. Mosques, churches, Hindu temples and pagodas can be found within a stone's throw of each other in most cities.

ARTS

One of the greatest pleasures of visiting Réunion is experiencing Creole-flavoured French culture or French-flavoured Creole culture, depending on how you look at it. For news of cultural activities on the island, keep an eye on the local press and visit local tourist offices, where you can pick up flyers, theatre programmes and a number of free events guides such as the monthly *Kwélafé* (www.kwelafe.com in French).

Literature

Few Réunionnais novelists are known outside the island and none are translated into English. One of the most widely recognised and prolific contemporary authors is the journalist and historian Daniel Vaxelaire, who has written a number of evocative historical novels. His *Chasseurs des Noires*, an easily accessible tale of a slave-hunter's life-changing encounter with an escaped slave, is probably the best to start with.

Jean-François Sam-Long, a novelist and poet who helped relaunch Creole literature in the 1970s, also takes slavery as his theme. *Madame Desbassyns* was inspired by the remarkable life-story of a sugar baroness. In *La Nuit Cyclone* he explores the gulf between Whites and Blacks in a small village, against a backdrop of black magic and superstition.

Other well-established novelists to look out for are Axel Gauvin (*Train Fou, L'Aimé* and *Cravate et Fils*) and Jules Bénard.

There are several up-and-coming writers who deal with contemporary issues. Joëlle Ecomier spins her first novel, *Plus Légère que l'Air*, around a young islander living in France who returns to Réunion to face her past. *Les Chants des Kayanms* by Agnès Gueneau also revolves around Zoreilles-Réunionnais relationships, in this case a love affair between a local woman

THE ODD CULT OF ST-EXPÉDIT

St Expédit is one of Réunion's most popular saints, though some scholars argue there never was a person called Expédit. Whatever the truth, the idea was brought to Réunion in 1931 when a local woman erected a statue of the 'saint' in St-Denis' Notre-Dame de la Délivrance church in thanks for answering her prayer to return to Réunion. Soon there were shrines honouring St Expédit all over the island, where people prayed for his help in the speedy resolution of all sorts of tricky problems.

Over the years, however, worship of the saint has taken on the sinister overtones of a voodoo cult: figurines stuck with pins are left at the saint's feet; beheaded statues of him are perhaps the result of unanswered petitions. The saint has also been adopted into the Hindu faith, which accounts for the brilliant, blood-red colour of many shrines. As a result the Catholic Church has tried to distance itself from the cult, but the number of shrines continues to grow.

Creoles are called Cafres locally. The mainland French are called Zoreilles or Métro, and the French who have adopted the island's lifestyle and can speak Creole are called Zoréol.

KABARS

If you're passionate about Creole music (and we're sure you will be), try to attend a *kabar*. A *kabar* is a kind of impromptu concert, or ball, that is usually held in a courtyard or on the beach, where musicians play *maloya*. It's usually organised by associations, informal groups or families, but outsiders are welcome. There's no schedule; *kabars* are usually advertised by means of word of mouth, flyers or small ads in the newspapers. You can also inquire at the bigger tourist offices.

and a man from the mainland. It's a lyrical tale, evoking the rhythms of *maloya* (traditional slave music).

Music & Dance

Réunion's music mixes the African rhythms of reggae, *séga* (traditional slave music) and *maloya* with French, British and American rock and folk sounds. Like *séga*, *maloya* is derived from the music of the slaves, but it is slower and more reflective, its rhythms and words heavy with history, somewhat like New Orleans blues; fans say it carries the true spirit of Réunion. *Maloya* songs often carry a political message and up until the 1970s the music was banned for being too subversive.

Instruments used to accompany the *séga* and the *maloya* range from traditional homemade percussion pieces, such as the hide-covered *rouleur* drum and the maraca-like *kayamb*, to the accordion and modern band instruments.

The giants of the local music scene, and increasingly well known in mainland France, are Daniel Waro, Firmin Viry, Gramoun Lélé, Davy Sicard and the group Ziskakan. More recently, women have also emerged on the musical scene, including Christine Salem (see p11) and Nathalie Nathiembé. All are superb practitioners of *maloya*. Favourite subjects for them are slavery, poverty and the search for cultural identity.

As for Creole-flavoured modern grooves, the Réunionnais leave those to their tropical cousins in Martinique and Guadeloupe, although they make popular listening in Réunion. It's all catchy stuff, and you'll hear it in bars, discos and vehicles throughout the islands of the Indian Ocean.

Architecture

The distinctive 18th-century Creole architecture of Réunion is evident in both the grand villas built by wealthy planters and other *colons* (settlers/colonists) and in the *ti' cases*, the homes of the common folk.

Local authorities are actively striving to preserve the (few) remaining examples of Creole architecture around the island. You can see a number of beautifully restored houses in St-Denis and in the towns of Cilaos, Entre-Deux, Hell-Bourg and St-Pierre, among other places. They all sport *lam-brequins*, *varangues* and other ornamental features. (For more information about this exotic type of architecture, see Architectural Heritage, p46.)

FOOD & DRINK

Réunionnais like to eat and their food is a pleasure on the palate, with a balanced melange of French cuisine (locally known as *cuisine métro*) and Creole specialities and flavours, not to mention Indian and Chinese influences. A good number of eateries, *chambres d'hôte* (family-run B&Bs) and cafés offer a wide variety of quality food, and not just in the larger towns, with the added bonus of a great choice of drinks.

STAPLES & SPECIALITIES

It's impossible to visit Réunion without coming across *carri* (curry), also spelt *cari* locally, which features on practically every single menu. The sauce comprises tomatoes, onions, garlic, ginger, thyme and saffron (or turmeric) and accompanies various kinds of meat, such as chicken (*carri poulet*), pork (*carri porc*), duck (*carri canard*) and guinea fowl (*carri pintade*). Seafood *carris*, such as *carri thon* (tuna *carri*), *carri espadon* (swordfish *carri*), *carri langouste* (lobster *carri*) and *carri camarons* (freshwater-prawn *carri*), are also excellent. Octopus *carri*, one of the best *carris* you'll eat, is called *civet zourite* in Creole. Local vegetables can also be prepared *carri*-style – try *carri baba figue* (banana-flower *carri*) and *carri ti jaque* (jackfruit *carri*) – but they incorporate fish or meat. *Carris* are invariably served with rice, grains (lentils or haricot beans), *brèdes* (local spinach) and *rougail*, a spicy chutney that mixes tomato, garlic, ginger and chillies; other preparations of *rougail* may include a mixture of green mango and citrus.

The word *rougail* is a bit confusing, though. It's also used for some variations of *carris*. *Rougail saucisses* is in fact sausages cooked in tomato sauce, while *rougail boucané* is a smoked-pork *carri* (without saffron), and *rougail morue* is cod *carri* (also without saffron). You'll also find *civet*, which is another variety of stew. A widespread Tamil stew is *cabri massalé* (goat *carri*). On top of this, you'll find excellent beef meat (usually imported from South Africa), prepared in all its forms (steak, sirloin, rib).

Seafood lovers will be delighted to hear that the warm waters of the Indian Ocean provide an ample net of produce: lobster, prawns, *légine*, swordfish, marlin, tuna and shark, among others. Freshwater prawns, usually served in curry, are highly prized.

Réunionnais love vegetables, eating them in salads or in *gratins* (a baked dish). You'll certainly come across *chou chou* (choko; a speciality in the Cirque de Salazie), *bois de songe* and *vacoa* (a speciality in the Wild South), not to mention *bringelles* (aubergines) and *baba figue* (banana flower).

Snacks include samosas, *beignets* (fritters) and *bonbons piments* (chilli fritters).

Fruits also reign supreme. Two iconic Réunionnais fruits are *litchis* (lychees) and *ananas Victoria* (pineapple of the Victoria variety). Local mangoes, passionfruit and papaya are also fabulously sweet. The local vanilla (see the boxed text, p228) is said to be one of the most flavoured in the world.

Breakfast is decidedly French: *pain-beurre-confiture* (baguette, butter and jam), served with coffee, tea or hot chocolate, is the most common threesome. Added treats may include croissants, *pain au chocolat* (chocolate-filled pastry), brioches and honey.

What about desserts? If you like carb-laden cakes and pies, you'll be happy in Réunion. They might knock five years off your life but they taste so good you won't care. Each family has its own recipe for *gâteaux maison* (homemade cakes), which come in various guises. They are usually made from vanilla, banana, sweet potato, maize, carrot, guava... Our favourite is *macatia* (a variety of bun), which can also be served at breakfast.

DRINKS

Rum, rum, rum! Up in the hills, almost everyone will have their own family recipe for *rhum arrangé*, a heady mixture of local rum and a secret blend of herbs and spices. In fact, not all are that secret. Popular concoctions include *rhum faham*, a blend of rum, sugar and flowers from the faham orchid; *rhum vanille*, made from rum, sugar and fresh vanilla pods; and *rhum bibasse*, made from rum, sugar and tasty *bibasse* (medlar fruit). The family *rhum arrangé* is a source of pride for most Creoles; if you stay in any of the rural *gîtes* or

For those interested in a simple taste of Réunion cuisine, the *Grand Livre de la Cuisine Réunionnaise* by Marie-France et al contains a range of easy-to-follow traditional recipes. *La Cuisine Réunionnaise* by Carole Iva covers similar ground, with the added benefit of colour illustrations.

Unlike *rhum arrangé*, *punch* is made of only one fruit (most commonly banana, vanilla or lychee) and is served as an apéritif. *Rhum arrangé* is usually served as a *digestif* (post-meal drink).

Stay tuned – the website www.runmusic.com (in French) is your chaperone to Réunionnais music.

chambres d'hôte you can expect the proprietor to serve up their version with more than a little ceremony.

Réunion being French territory, wine is unsurprisingly taken seriously. Along with French wines, you'll find a good choice of South African reds and whites. The island also has a small but blossoming viticulture in Cilaos, where you can do a tasting (see the boxed text, p199).

The local brand of beer, Bourbon (known as Dodo), is sold everywhere. It is a fairly light, very drinkable beer. Foreign beers are also available. For a refresher, nothing beats a fresh fruit juice or a glass of Cilaos, a high-quality sparkling water from Cirque de Cilaos.

The French take coffee drinking seriously and it's a passion that hasn't disappeared just because they're now in the Indian Ocean. A cup of coffee can take various forms but the most common is a small, black espresso called simply *un café*.

WHERE TO EAT & DRINK

There is a wondrous array of eateries in Réunion, from snack-bar-cum-café to high-class restaurants serving fine French cuisine and to *tables d'hôte* (home-cooked meals served at *chambres d'hôte*) and beach restaurants. For self-caterers, there's no shortage of very well-stocked supermarkets, not to mention numerous markets, where you can stock up on delicious, fresh ingredients. On Sunday, most Réunionnais opt for a picnic on the beach or in the Hauts.

On top of *la carte* (menu), most restaurants have *menus* (set courses) and daily specials. You'll also find numerous roadside stalls selling fruits, especially during the lychee season from December to February.

The service charge is included in the bill, and tipping is not necessary. If you want to leave something extra, that's up to you.

HABITS & CUSTOMS

There are relatively few strict rules of dining and etiquette. Though formal restaurants certainly exist, a casual atmosphere and boisterous families are the norm, especially at weekends.

Table manners are more or less the same as those in mainland France. And as in France, lunches are taken seriously in Réunion – long, lingering midday meals are *de rigueur*.

VEGETARIANS & VEGANS

Despite the Indian influence, Réunion is an island of meat lovers. To our knowledge, there aren't any dedicated vegetarian restaurants. That said,

TRAVEL YOUR TASTEBUDS

If you're a gastronomic adventurer, start your culinary odyssey with *salade de palmiste*, a delectable salad made from the bud of the palmiste palm trees, known as the 'heart of palm'. The palm dies once the bud is removed, earning this wasteful salad delicacy the title 'millionaire's salad'. For something a bit more unusual, try *carri bichiques* (a sprat-like delicacy), which is dubbed *le caviar réunionnais* (Réunionnais caviar). You might need to seek out *larves de guêpes* (wasps' larvae), another local delicacy that is available from April to October. Fried and salted, they reputedly increase sexual stamina.

You may also want to learn the terms for *carri pat' cochons* (pig's trotter *carri*) and *carri anguilles* (eel *carri*) so you don't accidentally order them in a restaurant. Réunionnais also drool over *carri tang* (hedgehog *carri*), which you're not likely to find served in restaurants. If you happen to eat it at a private home, let us know if you've survived it...

vegetarians won't go hungry. Salads, rice and fruits are ubiquitous. In Chinese restaurants, menus feature vegetarian dishes, such as chop suey and noodles. Most supermarkets have vegetarian fare too, and *chambres d'hôte* owners will be happy to cook vegetarian dishes if you let them know well in advance. And there's always dessert!

ENVIRONMENT

Réunion lies about 220km southwest of Mauritius, at the southernmost end of the great Mascarene volcanic chain. Réunion's volcano, Piton de la Fournaise, erupts with great regularity, spewing lava down its southern and eastern flanks. The last major eruption occurred in 2007, when lava flows reached the sea and added another few square metres to the island. Since 1998 there have been spectacular eruptions almost every second year – an attraction in its own right. But don't worry: the volcano's perfectly monitored by local authorities and there are strict security measures when it's erupting.

THE LAND

There are two major mountainous areas on Réunion. The older of the two covers most of the western half of the island. The highest mountain is Piton des Neiges (3069m), an alpine-class peak. Surrounding it are three immense and splendid amphitheatres: the Cirques of Cilaos, Mafate and Salazie. These long, wide, deep hollows are sheer-walled canyons filled with convoluted peaks and valleys, the eroded remnants of the ancient volcanic shield that surrounded Piton des Neiges.

The smaller of the two mountainous regions lies in the southeast and is still evolving. It comprises several extinct volcanic cones and one that is still very much alive, Piton de la Fournaise (2632m). This rumbling peak still pops its cork relatively frequently in spectacular fashion, and between eruptions quietly steams and hisses away. No-one lives in the shadow of the volcano, where lava flowing down to the shore has left a remarkable jumbled slope of cooled black volcanic rock, known as Le Grand Brûlé.

These two mountainous areas are separated by a region of high plains, while the coast is defined by a gently sloping plain which varies in width. Numerous rivers wind their way down from the Piton des Neiges range, through the Cirques, cutting deeply into the coastal plains to form spectacular ravines.

WILDLIFE

Animals

Because it was never part of a continental land mass, Réunion has relatively few animal species. The island's only indigenous mammal species are two types of bat, both of which can sometimes be seen around the coast at night. The mammals you're far more likely to see are introduced hares, deer, geckoes, rats and, if you're lucky, chameleons. Tenrecs (called *tang* in Creole), which resemble hedgehogs, were introduced from Madagascar.

The most interesting creepy crawlies are the giant millipedes – some as long as a human foot – which loll around beneath rocks in more humid areas. Another oversized creature is the yellow-and-black *Nephila* spider whose massive webs are a common sight. You'll also find the *Heteropoda venatoria* spider, called *babouk* in Creole.

As far as bird life is concerned, of the original 30 species endemic to the island, only nine remain. The island's rarest birds are the *merle blanc*

Piton de la Fournaise is undoubtedly the island's most iconic attraction and one of the world's most accessible active volcanoes. The website www.fournaise.info (in French) will keep even nonvolcanologists enthralled. Features pictures and even a webcam.

Drool over your keyboard while checking out the recipes on the following websites (all in French): www.cuisinereunionnaise.com; www.creole.org/cuisine.htm; www.goutanou-cuisine-reunionnaise.org; and www.iledelareunion.net/cuisine-reunion/.

Meet Réunion's feathered creatures in Nicolas Barré and Armand Barau's beautifully illustrated field guide *Oiseaux de la Réunion*.

or cuckoo shrike – locals call it the *tuit tuit*, for obvious reasons – and the black petrel. Probably the best chance of seeing – or, more likely, hearing – the *tuit tuit* is directly south of St-Denis, near the foot of La Roche Écrite. Only an estimated 160 pairs remain.

Bulbuls, which resemble blackbirds (with yellow beaks and legs, but grey feathers), and are locally known as *merles*, are also common. The Mascarene paradise flycatcher is a pretty little bird with a small crest and a long, flowing red tail.

Birds native to the highlands include the *tec-tec* or Réunion stonechat, which inhabits the tamarind forests. There's also the *papangue*, or Maillardi buzzard, a protected hawklike bird which begins life as a little brown bird and turns black and white as it grows older. It is Réunion's only surviving bird of prey and may be spotted soaring over the ravines.

The best-known sea bird is the white *paille-en-queue* or white-tailed tropicbird, which sports two long tail plumes. It can often be seen riding the thermals created by the Piton de la Fournaise volcano. Other sea birds include visiting albatrosses, petrels and shearwaters.

Mynahs, introduced at the end of the 18th century to keep the grasshoppers under control, are common all over the island, as are the small, red cardinal-like birds known as fodies.

The best spots to see bird life are the Forêt de Bébour-Bélouve above Hell-Bourg, and the wilderness region of Le Grand Brûlé at the southern tip of the island.

Plants

Now this is Réunion's strong point! Thanks to an abundant rainfall and marked differences in altitude, Réunion boasts some of the most varied plant life in the world. Parts of the island are like a grand botanical garden. Between the coast and the alpine peaks you'll find palms, screw pines (also known as pandanus or *vacoa*), casuarinas (*filao*s), vanilla, spices, other tropical fruit and vegetable crops, rainforest and alpine flora.

Réunion has no less than 700 indigenous plant species, 150 of which are trees. Unlike Mauritius, large areas of natural forest still remain. It's estimated that 30% of the island is covered by native forest; some areas – particularly in the ravines – have never been touched by man.

Gnarled and twisted and sporting yellow, mimosa-like flowers, the *tamarin des Hauts* or mountain tamarind tree, is a type of acacia and is endemic to Réunion. Locals compare them to oak trees because the timber is excellent for building. One of the best places to see these ancient trees is in the Forêt de Bébour-Bélouve east of the Cirque de Salazie.

At the other extreme, the lava fields around the volcano exhibit a barren, moonlike surface. Here the various stages of vegetation growth, from a bare new lava base, are evident. The first plant to appear on lava is the heather-like plant the French call *branle vert* (*Philippia montana*). Much later in the growth cycle come tamarind and other acacia trees.

Afforestation has been carried out mainly with the Japanese cryptomeria, *tamarin des Hauts*, casuarina and various palms.

Like any tropical island, Réunion has a wealth of flowering species, including orchids, hibiscus, bougainvillea, vetiver, geranium, frangipani and jacaranda. Flower-spotters will enjoy the several excellent botanical gardens on the island, including the Conservatoire Botanique National de Mascarin (p192), the Jardin d'Eden (p182) near St-Gilles-les-Bains and the Jardin des Parfums et des Épices (p224) in St-Philippe.

NATIONAL PARKS

It is estimated that nearly a third of the 25km-long lagoon along the west coast from Boucan Canot south to Trois Bassins has already suffered damage from a variety of causes: sedimentation, agricultural and domestic pollution, cyclones, fishermen and divers. To prevent the situation deteriorating even further, a marine park was set up in 1997. In addition to educating local people on the need to keep the beaches and the water clean, the **Association Parc Marin Réunion** (www.chez.com/parcmarin in French) has been working with local fishermen and various water-sports operators to establish protection zones. A fully-fledged nature reserve was created – at last! – in 2007.

There are big plans afoot to protect the interior of the island, too. The **Parc National des Hauts de la Réunion** (www.parc-national-reunion.prd.fr in French) was established in early 2007, resulting in half of Réunion's total land area being now under protection. There's a tightly regulated core area of 1000 sq km, including the volcano, the mountain peaks and the areas around Mafate and Grand Bassin, surrounded by a buffer zone of some 700 sq km to encompass most of the ravines. The plans envisage a totally integrated approach, not only to protect the animal and plant life, but also to preserve traditional ways of life and to encourage sustainable development, including initiatives linked to ecotourism.

ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

As in Mauritius, the central problem confronting Réunion is how to reconcile environmental preservation with a fast-growing population in need of additional housing, roads, jobs, electricity, water and recreational space.

Unlike Mauritius, however, the authorities here have access to greater financial resources, backed up by all sorts of European rules and regulations. In general, they have been able to adopt a more coordinated approach, introducing measures to improve water treatment and reduce nitrate use by farmers, for example, at the same time as cleaning up the lagoon.

Despite the establishment of the Parc National des Hauts de la Réunion and the Parc Marin Réunion (see National Parks, above), the island is facing major issues, all related to three massive engineering works that are currently under way.

The 'smaller' is the Route des Tamarins, a 34km expressway that slices across the hills above St-Gilles-les-Bains and requires more than 120 bridges over the ravines; construction work is under way and the road is due for completion sometime in 2009. Local environmentalists have raised objections to the scheme, which cuts across the only remaining savannah habitat on the island and will force displaced farmers onto areas of marginal land.

The second major engineering project is a piece of technical prowess. The idea behind this herculean scheme is to transfer water from the east coast, where supply exceeds demand, to the dry and heavily populated west coast. The solution someone came up with was to drill a tunnel 30km long and 3.5m high right through the island! Tunnelling began in 1989, but needless to say they hit a few hitches along the way. It is reckoned that the project should be completed by 2013.

The third project is the 'Tram-Train', a sort of tramway which will connect major coastal cities, thus avoiding the horrendous traffic jams that plague the west coast. Preliminary studies have started and the first stretch between St-Paul and the airport (via St-Denis) should be completed by 2012.

A number of traditional distilleries continue to produce essential oils from geranium and vetiver leaves – a great gift for envious friends back home.

Find information on local birds and where to spot them on www.seor.fr (in French).

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