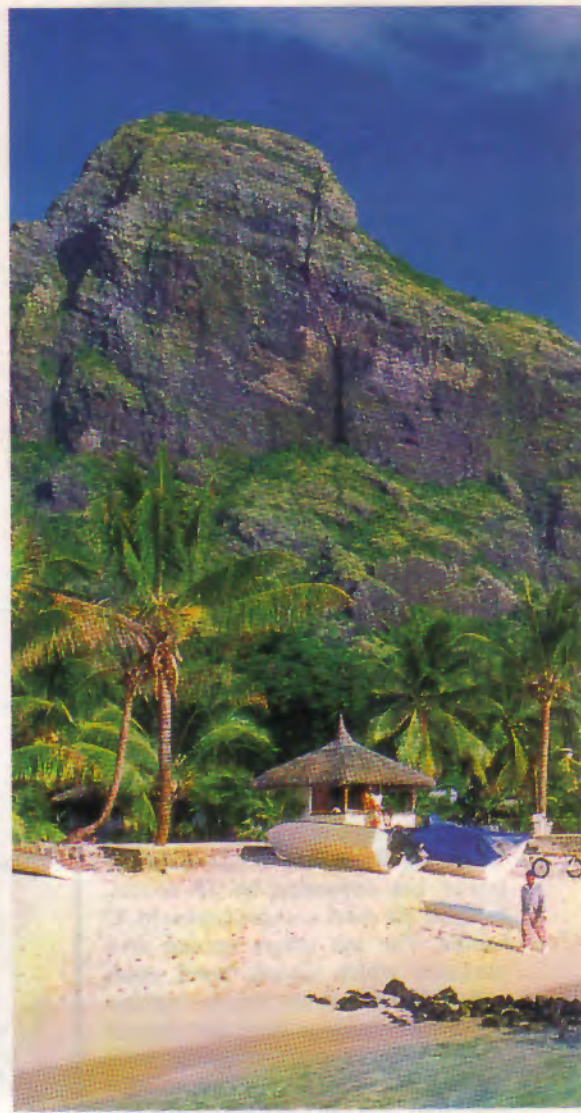


EDEN OF THE INDIAN OCEAN MAURITIUS

BY
DALE
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The 747's wing dipped steeply as what seemed to be a near endless sea of cobalt blue rapidly became emerald then turquoise. Sheer volcanic escarpments covered in a velvet green emerged, each looking as if they had been carved by a master sculptor. Virgin white beaches bounded by tranquil coastal lagoons nearly encircled this ocean oasis. Soon it became obvious why Mark Twain proclaimed "that God modeled heaven after the island of Mauritius."

Mauritius, just east of Africa and Madagascar, basks amid the tepid waters of the Indian Ocean. The islands melting pot of culture dates back to early Dutch and Portuguese explorers, followed by the French where by it earned its name Isle De France. More recently colonized by the British, it now has a vast populous from India with mosques and shrines commonly found throughout the island.

Collectively, this potpourri of cultures

makes Mauritius the unique place it is. Clearly it is not just another exotic island in the sun, but an island nation, shaped by the richness of Asia, Europe and Africa, yet free and fully independent.

Mauritius' uniqueness doesn't stop with its culture. Both topside and underwater, visitors will encounter a profuse richness in life and natural beauty. From our host hostel, located on an 18th century historical estate known as Balaclava, it was possible to escape among the grounds ruins, waterfalls and lush tropical vegetation, or out from its beaches to Turtle Bay, the island's first national marine park. In this blue-green lagoon thick with hard corals, snorkelers can explore Mauritius' underwater world with some of the most bizarre fin fish populations on earth.

Directly offshore from Turtle Bay is a site known as Poison Reef. Divers will find this gradually sloping coral-covered bottom riddled with fissures and caves. The dive spot gets its name from the large population of stinging sea creatures which make these crevices their home. The distinguished populous of Poison Reef include overweight venomous lionfish,

and highly camouflaged and more dangerous stone fish. Besides these hazardous creatures this same area is blessed with enormous stands of anemones each with their own colony of clown, anemone or domino fish. Beyond the above, divers will also find sand eels and the mysterious ghost moray lurking amongst this fractured reef.

Just north of here, off Grand Bay lies one of Mauritius' most popular shallow dive sites. The Aquarium, although not original in name, is truly a horn of plenty when it comes to marine diversity. This flourishing reef system, in 30 to 60 feet of water, is said to contain over 200 species of marine life. However, the stars of the show here are two semi-tame giant morays. Similar in disposition to two love struck puppy dogs, these usually timid creatures interact closely with visiting divers here.

Out of Trou Aux Biches (pronounced Tour Beach) divers will be treated to one of Mauritius' best deep water dive sites known as Whale Rock. Huge basaltic boulders jut up from depths reaching 130-plus feet. Many of these massive struc-