Mountains such as Mont Saint Pierre rising up from the cane fields are a typical sight of the lush Mauritian countryside

Travel

Sweetness and light

Beautiful Mauritius does very nicely, thank you, as a tropical holiday destination. But it's not just about blazing sun – sugar and colonialism have had a lot more to do with shaping this island nation. Tonia George goes off-beach to explore

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **JONATHAN GREGSON**

Opposite: **It all comes back to sugar, from the island's landscape to its multiethnic people, whose ancestors came here to work in the plantations**

Sugar is the heart of Mauritius. Between the volcanic mountains and the white sand of the Indian Ocean nation's picture-perfect beaches lies an undulating carpet of cane. These towering green blades cover half the island's surface and have made Mauritius, which lies 900km east of Madagascar, one of the richest countries in Africa.

A trip to the capital, Port Louis, makes me realise it is also one of the most ethnically diverse. Mauritius was uninhabited, except for the not-dead-yet dodo, until the sugar-hungry Dutch settled it in 1598. There followed other colonists (French and British), African slaves, indentured Indian workers, Chinese and Arab traders – each with their own culture, cuisine and language. So behind the banyan, eucalyptus and baobab trees lining Port Louis's roads are gaudy Hindu temples, grandiose mosques and grey stone churches. English may be the language of official signage, but French and Creole are the languages that buzz in my ears as I stroll through the central market. In this noisy, colourful mass of people and stalls, women draped in colourful saris buy *dholl puri* (curry-filled flatbreads), *gateaux piments* (chilli cakes) and stock up on the abundant tropical fruits. On the streets of the city's sizeable Chinatown, meanwhile, I see Creole families snacking on *meen frit* (fried noodles).

As I travel around Mauritius, it's not just the emerald fields that remind me of its history – the crumbling brick chimneys of disused sugar mills soon become a familiar sight, too. Back in 1858, when the island was a plantation colony, there were 259 mills scattered across the countryside. Today, due to falling prices and increased global competition, only six mills are still in operation. Now the islanders rely for a living on the visitors who come to luxuriate on the unspoilt coastline, with its dappled shallows and colourful, swarming reef. It is easy to see why the honeymooners and winter sunseekers flock here; though a few locals I speak to wryly describe the holidaymaker demographic as "newly weds and nearly deads".

The legacy of slavery is evident everywhere, from hotels to beauty spots to the ubiquitous abandoned sugar mills. The luxurious, far-from-crumbly, colonial-style Le Telfair hotel inhabits the old sugar estate of Belle Ombre, in the south of the island. The plantation once belonged to Irishman Charles Telfair, who seems to have been one of the good guys; he is remembered for his sympathetic treatment of slaves, as well as his botany – he introduced hundreds of new plant species to the island, many of which can be seen in the SSR Botanical Gardens in Pamplemousses today.

In the southwest corner of the island, however, the history has a more sombre note. The black, tomb-like mountain Le Morne has a beauty that »

Things to do

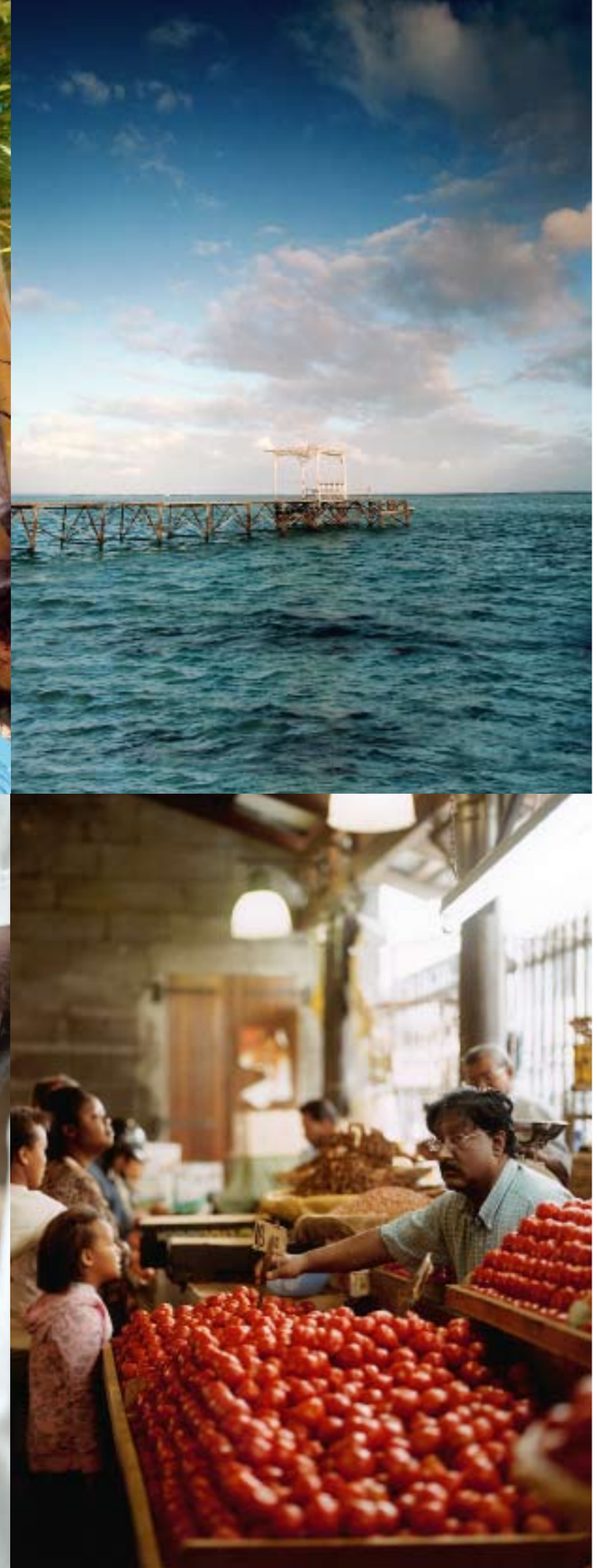
• **L'Aventure du Sucre**
Visitors flock to this interactive museum and former sugar mill in Pamplemousses to learn how sugar has shaped the island and its people. Le Fangourin restaurant provides refreshment.
aventuredusucre.com

• **Spoon des Iles**
Sip Creole cocktails at the bar before sampling Alain Ducasse's menu in this restaurant at One&Only Le Saint Géran Hotel. Stroll under the palm trees after a European-influenced meal of delicious local seafood, fruits, and spices.
oneandonlyresorts.com

• **La Belle Creole**
Situated in a quiet fishing village near Mahébourg on Mauritius's south coast, this local restaurant serves up some of the tastiest curries on the island.
labellecreole.com

• **Ile aux Aigrettes**
Tour the lush forests of this island nature reserve to spot the region's rarest species, from pink pigeons to giant tortoises. Getting there couldn't be simpler – it is just a five-minute boat ride from Pointe d'Esny, south of Mahébourg.
mauritian-wildlife.org »

Rajesh Bheemul pauses amid the charred canes at Belle Vue sugar plantation; *Opposite:* tourists relax on Mont Choisy beach



***Opposite*: Mauritius made a name for itself as an upmarket tourist destination, with luxury holidays as much a local product as coconuts, sugar and tomatoes**

‘No sugar cane is wasted. After we crush it, the leftover fibrous *bagasse* is a great source of renewable energy. It powers all the mills’

has been recognised with Unesco World Heritage status. Here in early 1835, a group of runaway slaves were hiding on the rock; on 1 February, some white islanders came to share with the fugitives the news that slavery had that day been abolished. Mistaking their approaching emancipators for captors, the slaves jumped to their deaths off the high cliff, leaving Le Morne to serve as a shrine to the sorrows of slavery.

Turning back to the present, I am intrigued by the remaining working sugar estates. At Belle Vue in the island’s north, I meet the Franco-Mauritian estate manager Denis Pilot. As we head out to the fields, he explains how the sugar is just part of the value of the cane.

“None of our cane is wasted. After we crush it, the leftover fibrous *bagasse* is a great source of renewable energy. It powers all the mills, and we even sell excess energy to the national grid.” Even the scum produced during the clarification of the cane juice is recycled – it goes back to the fields as fertiliser – and the final unusable molasses is sold to rum distilleries, or is added to animal feed. The industry is diversifying, but some traditions remain; Denis tells me that the brown, crispy canes I notice have been burnt to remove excess foliage. Only small growers, who harvest by hand, still employ this practice. The owners of the big mills are also owners of resorts and ash is no good for the tourists.

Although sugar defines the landscape, the history and even the identity of the whole island, I’m surprised to find that it doesn’t play a similar role in the local cuisine. Denis explains with a twinkle in his eye that Mauritian sugars “are much too valuable an export to be consumed on the island”.

With or without sugar, it’s tricky to define the cuisine of multiethnic Mauritius. The closest there is to indigenous food is Creole, the legacy of African slaves. At La Belle Creole, in a sleepy southern fishing village near Mahébourg, I get to sample some – mostly local game, including venison, hare and wild boar, braised until tender in spicy curries and bulked out with cassava, or jackfruit. I also try the island’s signature dish, *rougaille*, with locally caught, freshwater prawns. *Rougaille* is a rich tomato sauce that unusually yet successfully blends African and Indian aromatics – ginger, chilli and coriander – with the more Mediterranean flavours of thyme and bay leaves. Before I leave, the owner insists that I down a shot of his rum, homemade from molasses. Once again, everything comes back to sugar.

WFI travelled with the Mauritius Tourism Office. For further information, call 020 7584 3666 or visit tourism-mauritius.mu. For details of packages, including accommodation at Le Telfair and the Dinarobin resort at Le Morne, see page 102.

• **Blue Safari**
Take a leap into the deep on a two-person underwater scooter – with your head cocooned in a giant bubble you can see right along the north Mauritian reefs. A great alternative to scuba diving.
blue-safari.com

• **Le Domaine de l’Etoile**
Shoot up the Mauritian mountains on a quad bike or trek through the estate on a pony, keeping an eye out for monkeys and wild deer. Indulge in lunch at the riverside restaurant.
cieletnature.com/letoile

• **Maison Eureka**
Get lost in ‘the house of 109 doors’, a colonial mansion-turned-museum in Moka, in the heart of the island. If the sunshine tempts you outside, try Mauritian tea on the veranda, or a stroll in the gardens to admire the lush plants and waterfalls.
maisoneureka.com