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Visiting Mauritius

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Introduction

Mauritius, an island nation nestled in the vast expanse of the Indian Ocean, approximately 2,000 kilometers off the southeastern coast of East Africa, is a jewel renowned for its breathtaking natural beauty and vibrant cultural tapestry. East of Madagascar, it forms part of the Mascarene Islands, alongside Rodrigues and the nearby French overseas department, Réunion. This beautiful archipelago forms the Republic of Mauritius, encompassing the main island along with Rodrigues, Agaléga, and St. Brandon (Cargados Carajos shoals). The capital, Port Louis, located on the main island, serves as a bustling hub of culture and commerce, reflecting the diverse history and rich tapestry of influences that define Mauritius.

With a total area of 2,040 square kilometers, Mauritius may seem small in size, but it offers a vast exclusive economic zone stretching over 2,000,000 square kilometers. The island's allure lies in its stunning white-sand beaches, crystal-clear waters, and lush landscapes that promise an unforgettable escape for those seeking both relaxation and adventure. Its multicultural society is a harmonious blend of African, Indian, Chinese, and European influences, which can be seen throughout the local customs, cuisine, and festivals. Mark Twain's famous quote fittingly encapsulates its charm: "Mauritius was made first and then heaven, and heaven was copied after Mauritius."

Travelers to Mauritius can expect a warm welcome and an array of experiences to choose from, ranging from sunbathing on its idyllic beaches to exploring the vivid underwater marine life through snorkeling and diving. The island's interior is also a playground of lush landscapes, with hiking trails leading to breathtaking viewpoints and natural wonders such as waterfalls and forested hills in Black River Gorges National Park. For those with an interest in cultural and historical exploration, Mauritius offers a rich heritage, from the bustling streets of Port Louis with its vibrant markets to the serene beauty of colonial-style mansions.

Mauritian cuisine is another facet of this island's unique identity that tourists are certain to enjoy. A scrumptious fusion of flavors, the local dishes offer a delightful taste of its cultural mosaic, where African, Indian, Chinese, and European culinary traditions intertwine. Whether you're indulging in street food like Dhol puri or relaxing at a beach-side restaurant savoring seafood lovingly prepared with local spices, you'll find the island's gastronomic scene as varied and inviting as its people.

While tourism is a vital part of Mauritius's economy, both the government and local businesses are committed to sustainable tourism development. Concerted efforts are being made to protect the island's pristine environment, promote eco-friendly

practices, and encourage tourists to engage in responsible and sustainable activities. As you explore Mauritius, you will encounter various initiatives aimed at conserving its rich natural habitats, ensuring that future generations can savor the same wonders today.

In essence, Mauritius is more than just a travel destination; it is a profound experience at the crossroads of nature, culture, and heritage. This book serves as a definitive guide to navigating this island wonderland, offering insights into its many attractions and practical advice for making the most of your visit. Whether you are drawn to its majestic landscapes, intrigued by its cultural diversity, or simply looking for the perfect island escape, Mauritius promises an adventure that is both luxurious and rewarding.

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CHAPTER ONE: Getting There

So, you've decided to heed the call of paradise and make your way to Mauritius. Excellent choice! But before you can dip your toes into the turquoise waters or sip on a local rum cocktail under the filao trees, there's the small matter of actually arriving on this speck of volcanic beauty floating in the middle of the vast Indian Ocean. Unlike popping over to a neighboring country on the continent, reaching Mauritius requires a bit more planning, primarily because, well, it's an island, quite a respectable distance from anywhere else.

Lying roughly 2,000 kilometers off the southeastern coast of Africa and east of Madagascar, Mauritius isn't exactly on the way to anywhere. Getting there predominantly means taking to the skies. While tales of ancient mariners and trade winds paint a romantic picture, the modern reality for almost every tourist involves navigating the world of international air travel. The journey itself can be part of the adventure, a transition from your everyday world to the laid-back rhythm of island life. Depending on where you're departing from, this transition might involve a significant amount of time spent airborne, crossing continents and oceans.

The sole gateway for international flights is the Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam International Airport, universally known by its airport code, MRU. Named after the first Prime Minister of Mauritius, often considered the father of the nation, the airport is located in the southeastern part of the main island, near the town of Plaisance. This location is worth noting; it's not particularly close to the main tourist hubs like Grand Baie in the north or Flic en Flac on the west coast. Expect a transfer time of anywhere from 45 minutes to well over an hour, sometimes creeping towards two hours depending on traffic and your final destination on the island. Don't fret though, the drive itself often offers your first glimpse of sugarcane fields stretching towards volcanic hills, a scenic introduction to the island's landscape.

MRU airport itself has undergone significant modernization and expansion, boasting a sleek, contemporary passenger terminal opened in 2013. It's designed to handle the increasing influx of visitors drawn to the island's shores. While not on the scale of major global hubs like Dubai or Singapore, it's efficient, clean, and generally provides a pleasant arrival experience. The architecture incorporates elements inspired by the Traveller's Palm, a plant symbolic of Mauritius, giving it a distinct sense of place right from the moment you step off the plane. As you make your way through the terminal, you'll find the usual amenities expected of an international airport, geared towards smoothing your entry into the country.

A good number of international airlines connect Mauritius to the rest of the world. The

national carrier, Air Mauritius, naturally plays a significant role, operating a network of routes linking the island to major cities across Europe, Africa, Asia, and Australia. Flying with the home airline can often add a subtle Mauritian touch to your journey right from the start, from the cabin crew's greetings to perhaps a hint of local flavour in the in-flight meals. Air Mauritius often operates direct flights from key European capitals like Paris and London, as well as regional hubs like Johannesburg and Reunion Island.

Beyond Air Mauritius, several other major global airlines include MRU in their schedules. European carriers like Air France (often code-sharing with Air Mauritius), British Airways, Lufthansa (via its subsidiaries), Turkish Airlines, and Condor provide connections, primarily from their respective hubs. This means travellers from across Europe and North America often have multiple options, usually involving one stop. Paris Charles de Gaulle (CDG) and London Heathrow (LHR) are particularly common transit points for European travellers.

Middle Eastern giants such as Emirates (via Dubai), Qatar Airways (via Doha), and Etihad Airways (via Abu Dhabi) also offer frequent flights to Mauritius. These airlines provide excellent connectivity for travellers coming from virtually anywhere in the world, leveraging their extensive global networks. Dubai (DXB) especially serves as a major crossroads, making Mauritius accessible with a single connection for passengers originating from North America, South America, Asia, and Australasia. The service levels on these carriers are typically high, making the long journey more comfortable.

For those travelling from Africa, besides Air Mauritius, airlines like South African Airways (connecting through Johannesburg) and Kenya Airways (via Nairobi) offer regional links. Connections from Asia are facilitated not only by the Middle Eastern carriers but also potentially through airlines flying routes via hubs like Singapore or Kuala Lumpur, although direct flights from East Asia are less common than from Europe or the Middle East. Similarly, reaching Mauritius from Australia usually involves a connection, often through Perth with Air Mauritius, or via hubs like Dubai or Singapore with other carriers.

Given the distances involved, direct flights are the most convenient but are not always available or the most economical option, depending on your starting point. From Europe, direct flights typically take around 11 to 12 hours. From hubs like Dubai, the flight time is approximately 6.5 hours. From Johannesburg, it's a shorter hop of about 4 hours. If you're coming from further afield, like the Americas or East Asia, be prepared for total travel times exceeding 20 hours, including layovers. Planning your route and considering layover times becomes crucial. While a short layover might seem efficient, ensure you have enough time for connections, especially at large, busy airports, factoring in potential delays. Conversely, an excessively long layover can be draining, though some airports offer comfortable transit hotels or lounges.

Booking your flight to Mauritius is a step that deserves some attention. As with most popular destinations, flight prices fluctuate based on season, demand, and how far in advance you book. The peak tourist season, particularly around Christmas, New Year, and European school holidays (July/August), sees the highest demand and consequently, the highest fares. Booking several months in advance is highly recommended if you plan to travel during these periods. Conversely, travelling during the shoulder seasons (like May or October, as mentioned in a later chapter regarding the best time to visit) might yield better deals on flights and accommodation.

Utilising flight comparison websites can be helpful in finding competitive fares across different airlines and dates. Be flexible with your travel dates if possible; shifting your departure or return by even a day or two can sometimes result in significant savings. Also, consider flying mid-week rather than on weekends, as fares can often be lower. Keep an eye out for special promotions or sales offered by airlines, particularly Air Mauritius or the major carriers serving the island. Signing up for airline newsletters or fare alerts can be beneficial. Remember to factor in the cost of baggage; while some legacy carriers include checked baggage in the base fare, others, or certain fare classes, may charge extra, which can add up on long-haul flights.

When considering connecting flights, pay attention to the total travel time and the duration of the layover. A very short connection (less than an hour) at a large international airport can be risky. If your incoming flight is delayed, you might miss your connection to Mauritius, leading to unwanted stress and rescheduling hassles. Aim for a layover that gives you a comfortable buffer, perhaps 2-3 hours, allowing time to navigate the transit airport, clear security again if necessary, and reach your departure gate without rushing. Some travellers might even opt for a longer layover deliberately, allowing them to briefly explore the transit city or simply relax in an airport lounge, breaking up the long journey. Check if your luggage will be checked through to your final destination (MRU) or if you need to reclaim and recheck it during your layover, which requires significantly more time.

Preparing for the long flight itself is also worthwhile. Dress comfortably in layers, as cabin temperatures can vary. Stay hydrated by drinking plenty of water and avoiding excessive caffeine or alcohol. Try to move around the cabin periodically to stretch your legs and improve circulation, reducing the risk of deep vein thrombosis (DVT). Pack essentials in your carry-on luggage, including any medications, a change of clothes (just in case your checked bag gets delayed), toiletries, entertainment (books, music, downloaded movies), a neck pillow, eye mask, and earplugs. Noise-cancelling headphones can be a godsend on long flights.

Adjusting to the time difference, or jet lag, is another consideration. Mauritius operates on Mauritius Time (MUT), which is UTC+4. Depending on where you're coming from, the time difference can be substantial. Try to gradually adjust your sleep schedule a

few days before departure, if possible. Once onboard, attempt to sync yourself to Mauritius time. Upon arrival, try to stay active during daylight hours and expose yourself to natural light to help reset your internal clock. While the temptation might be strong to nap immediately, pushing through until a reasonable local bedtime usually helps you adapt faster.

Upon landing at MRU, the arrival process is generally straightforward. You'll disembark, often via an air bridge directly into the terminal, and follow the signs for Arrivals and Immigration. Be prepared to queue for passport control, especially if several flights have landed around the same time. You will need to present your passport, your completed Mauritius All in One travel form (which should be filled out online prior to arrival – it's essential to check the latest government requirements for this digital form before you travel), and proof of your onward or return flight ticket. Having accommodation details handy might also be requested. The immigration officer will process your entry; the specific visa requirements based on your nationality are covered in the next chapter.

After clearing immigration, you'll proceed to the baggage reclaim area to collect your luggage. Check the information screens to find the correct carousel for your flight. Luggage trolleys are usually available free of charge. Once you have your bags, you'll head towards the customs check. The regulations concerning what you can and cannot bring into the country are detailed in Chapter Three. Assuming you have nothing to declare or have followed the declaration procedures correctly, you'll pass through customs and emerge into the arrivals hall.

The arrivals hall at MRU is where your Mauritian adventure truly begins on the ground. It can be quite bustling, with taxi drivers, tour operator representatives holding signs, and families waiting to greet loved ones. Here you'll find currency exchange counters and ATMs if you need to get some Mauritian Rupees (though Chapter Twenty covers money matters in detail). Car rental desks are also present if you've pre-booked a vehicle or wish to arrange one upon arrival (covered further in Chapter Ten). Various options for onward transportation, from taxis to hotel transfers, are available right outside the terminal doors (see Chapter Six and subsequent chapters for transport specifics). Take a moment to orient yourself, perhaps grab a coffee, and prepare for the final leg of your journey to your accommodation.

While flying is the overwhelmingly dominant way tourists reach Mauritius, it's worth briefly mentioning alternatives, though they are far less common. The island is a port of call for some Indian Ocean cruise itineraries. Arriving by cruise ship offers a completely different perspective, docking usually at Port Louis. However, this typically allows only a short stay, perhaps one or two days, as part of a larger voyage. It's not the method most people use for a dedicated Mauritian holiday but might appeal to those already on a regional cruise.

For the truly adventurous (and well-resourced), arriving by private yacht is also a possibility. Mauritius has marinas, such as the one at Le Caudan Waterfront in Port Louis, capable of accommodating visiting vessels. This requires navigating complex maritime regulations, immigration procedures upon arrival by sea, and significant sailing expertise, placing it outside the realm of typical tourist travel but rounding out the picture of accessibility to this island nation.

Ultimately, for the vast majority of visitors, the journey to Mauritius culminates in stepping out of Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam International Airport into the warm, tropical air, often fragrant with the scent of sugarcane and the nearby sea. The flight might be long, the connections potentially tiresome, but the effort is invariably rewarded the moment you catch your first glimpse of the island's vibrant green interior set against the backdrop of the impossibly blue Indian Ocean. Careful planning of your flights, considering timing, airlines, routes, and comfort for the long haul, will ensure your trip starts smoothly, setting the stage for an unforgettable experience in this slice of paradise. The journey there is just the prelude; the real magic begins upon arrival.

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