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Cities of Mauritius

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Introduction

Mauritius, described by early travelers as a sparkling emerald adrift in the Indian Ocean, is a land where history, culture, and natural splendor intertwine in remarkable ways. Its cities are not just clusters of buildings and people—they are living, breathing centers that reflect the story of an island nation shaped by centuries of immigration, colonization, and transformation. From the bustling streets of the capital, Port Louis, to the serene fishing villages turned resorts on its coasts, each city bears unique traces of the many peoples and powers that have touched its shores.

The evolution of Mauritius's urban centers mirrors the evolution of Mauritius itself. Once the domain of Dutch settlers, then a French colony and later a British outpost, the island's cities developed as administrative, commercial, and cultural strongholds at different points in their history. This colonial legacy is still visible today in grand government buildings, creole-style houses, and the cosmopolitan mix of peoples who call these places home. Over time, waves of migration from India, Africa, China, and Europe have layered new traditions onto old, resulting in an urban tapestry that is as diverse as it is vibrant.

Urban development intensified in the decades after independence, as Mauritius made a determined march toward economic diversification and modernization. The main urban corridor, stretching from the historic port of Port Louis to the misty heights of Curepipe, is now home to a majority of the island's population. Yet, large parts of Mauritius still retain their village character, even as "accidental urbanization" blurs the boundaries between rural and urban. The rise of new cities like Ebène, engineered to embrace the digital age, stands as a testament to the country's evolving ambitions and its commitment to blending progress with sustainability.

Cities in Mauritius are more than just spaces to live and work—they are hubs of cultural expression. There, the pulse of daily life is set by a medley of festivals drawn from Hindu, Muslim, Christian, and Chinese traditions, and by the rhythms of séga music and dance echoing through marketplaces and public squares. The culinary scene, bursting with flavors from across the world, offers street food delights and fine dining in equal measure, while vibrant markets and craft centers preserve and reinvent the island's artisanal heritage.

For visitors, exploring the cities of Mauritius is an invitation to experience these multiple layers: the grace of colonial architecture sitting alongside shiny office towers; the scent of spices wafting through historic markets; the laughter of children in seaside parks; and the warm welcome extended by locals proud of their cosmopolitan heritage. The island's cities, large and small, are gateways not just to Mauritian history

but to the myriad possibilities of its present and future.

In this book, we journey through the great cities of Mauritius—delving into their histories, uncovering their cultural riches, and offering practical guidance for travelers who wish to discover them. Whether you are planning your first trip or returning for new discoveries, "Cities of Mauritius" aims to be both a companion and a window into the complex, beautiful, and ever-evolving urban heart of the island.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Island Setting: Geography and Early Settlement

Mauritius, a shimmering emerald in the vast expanse of the Indian Ocean, is a land whose very existence is a testament to the colossal forces of nature. Geologically young, the main island was born from a series of volcanic eruptions that began approximately eight to ten million years ago. These fiery beginnings forged a dramatic landscape, with basaltic rocks and the remnants of ancient volcanic craters scarring the terrain. Over millennia, the relentless work of erosion and weather sculpted these raw volcanic features into the verdant mountains, deep valleys, and fertile plains that characterize Mauritius today.

The island of Mauritius is roughly 65 kilometers (40 miles) long and 45 kilometers (30 miles) wide, covering a land area of about 1,865 square kilometers (720 square miles). It lies approximately 2,000 kilometers (1,200 miles) off the southeastern coast of East Africa, situated east of Madagascar. Along with Rodrigues and Réunion, it forms part of the Mascarene Islands, a collective born from the same powerful underwater volcanic activity.

The topography of Mauritius is quite distinctive. From a small coastal plain, the land gradually ascends to a central plateau, which varies in elevation from about 270 to 730 meters (900 to 2,400 feet) above sea level. This plateau is fringed by a broken ring of mountains, believed to be the remnants of an ancient volcanic caldera. The highest point on the island is Piton de la Petite Rivière Noire, soaring to 828 meters (2,717 feet) in the southwest. Other notable peaks include Pieter Both, with its distinctive human-shaped silhouette, and the historically significant Le Morne Brabant. The mountainous areas are often punctuated by deep valleys, river gorges, and stunning waterfalls, such as the Chamarel waterfalls, which are the highest on the island.

Mauritius is almost entirely encircled by a vibrant coral reef system, the world's third largest, which plays a crucial role in protecting the coastline. These reefs create tranquil, shallow lagoons and contribute to the island's renowned white sandy beaches, many of which are lined with casuarina and coconut trees. Numerous short rivers and streams crisscross the island, flowing from the central plateau down to the coast. The Grand River South East and the Black River are two of the major rivers, and they are also primary sources of hydroelectric power. While Mauritius has only two natural crater lakes, including the sacred Hindu site of Grand Bassin (also known as Ganga Talao), it also boasts ten man-made reservoirs, with Mare aux Vacoas being the largest and a chief source of water for the island.

The climate of Mauritius is characterized as a mild tropical maritime climate, influenced by its position in the southern hemisphere and the moderating effect of the surrounding Indian Ocean. The island experiences two main seasons: a warm and humid summer from November to April, and a relatively cooler and drier winter from June to September. May and October are considered transitional months. Mean temperatures generally range from the mid-20s Celsius (mid-70s Fahrenheit) at sea level to the upper teens Celsius (upper 60s Fahrenheit) on the higher plateau. The warmest months are typically January and February, while July and August are the coolest. Rainfall varies across the island, with the central plateau receiving significantly more precipitation than the drier west and north coasts. While there isn't a distinct rainy season, most of the rainfall occurs during the summer months. Despite the rain, the sun shines for a good number of hours, even during the wetter periods, ensuring plenty of bright days.

In terms of natural resources, Mauritius possesses relatively few viable mineral deposits. Basalt and lime are mined, primarily for use in building and construction. Electricity generation largely relies on imported petroleum, although a small percentage is derived from hydropower. Interestingly, sugar plantations often utilize bagasse, the fibrous residue left after sugarcane juice is extracted, as a fuel to produce electricity, showcasing an early form of sustainable resource management. Arable land is a significant resource, with a substantial portion dedicated to sugarcane cultivation, a crop that has historically been, and remains, vital to the Mauritian economy. Forests cover approximately one-fifth of the island's land area, contributing to biodiversity and supporting efforts in soil and water conservation. The marine environment also provides valuable fish and seafood resources, though sustainable practices are essential to prevent overfishing. Additionally, the waters around Mauritius hold polymetallic nodules rich in manganese, iron, and cobalt, presenting potential for deep-sea mineral extraction, albeit with significant environmental and technical challenges.

Before human settlement, Mauritius was a haven for unique and endemic flora and fauna. The most famous, or perhaps infamous, resident was the dodo, a flightless bird that had evolved in the absence of predators. Sadly, this natural paradise was irrevocably altered with the arrival of humans. While the exact date of the island's first discovery is debated, it is believed that Arab seafarers may have known of Mauritius as early as the 10th century, possibly naming it 'Dina Arobi'. However, they did not establish permanent settlements.

The Portuguese were the first Europeans to visit the island in the early 16th century, around 1505 or 1511. They charted the waters and referred to the island as 'Ilha do Cirne' (Island of the Swan), likely due to the presence of the dodo. Don Pedro Mascarenhas, another Portuguese sailor, lent his name to the entire group of islands: the Mascarenes. However, the Portuguese, primarily focused on protecting their trade

routes to India, also did not establish a lasting presence on Mauritius, using it mainly as a stopover for fresh provisions.

The first permanent human settlement on Mauritius began in 1638 with the arrival of the Dutch. They named the island Mauritius in honor of Prince Maurice of Nassau, the Stadtholder of Holland. Cornelius Gooyer was appointed the first Dutch governor, and he established a garrison of twenty-five men. While the Dutch attempts at colonization were not always successful, facing challenges and eventually abandoning the island in 1710, they left a lasting legacy. It was the Dutch who introduced sugarcane to Mauritius, a crop that would fundamentally shape the island's economy and landscape for centuries to come. They also brought domestic animals and deer to the island. Despite their relatively short tenure, the Dutch period marks the true beginning of human interaction with and transformation of the Mauritian environment, setting the stage for the diverse cultural and urban landscape that would emerge in the centuries that followed.

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