

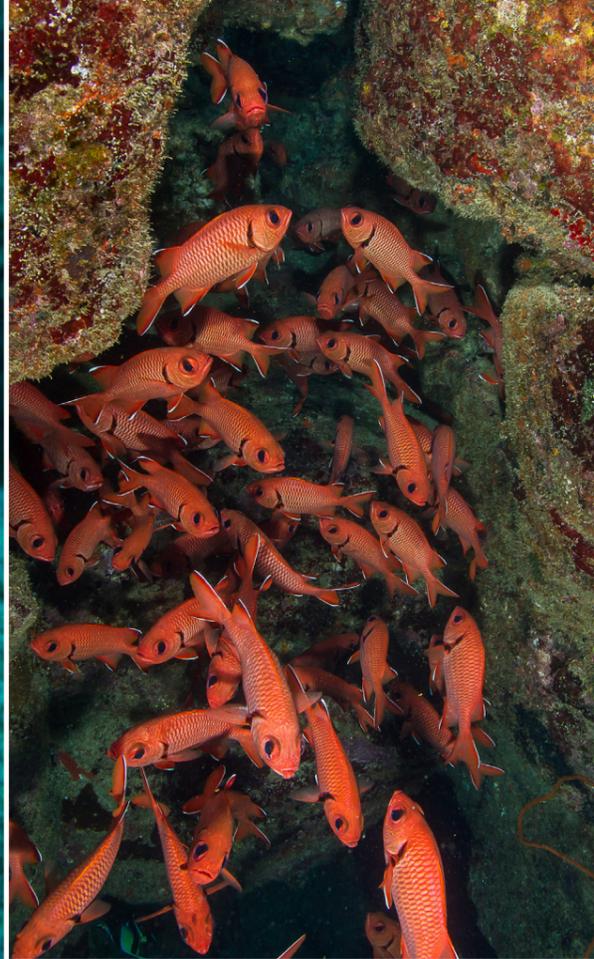


MAURITIUS

A PEARL AMONGST THE INDIAN OCEAN

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Mauritius Island is an island with character found nowhere else.



With the summer upon us, it becomes a time for some of us to go off in search of adventures and make new discoveries. I decided to head south for my break to a destination with unique character: Mauritius Island is in the same time zone and only a 6 hour flight from the UAE. With it being in the southern hemisphere, I figured I could beat the summer heat with it being the winter season there. With 3 or 4 flights a day, you get the choice to travel overnight or during the day.

This small island is found in the middle of the Indian Ocean, 65km long and 45km wide. Mauritius is formed by several peaks, lagoons and luxurious forests.

Mauritius is well known as a honeymoon destination, for its 5-star hotels, and for its traditional rum distilleries. It has been an independent republic since 1968. With its diverse population, this island possesses a cosmopolitan atmosphere with a unique mix

of Hindus, Creoles, and Asians. The people are very welcoming and friendly, and don't hesitate to guide you if you ask for information.

The island has numerous lagoons which protect the coast from waves and winds. Because of this, there are plenty of sheltered beaches. The lagoons are not exploited by divers because they are not deep enough, but are very rich with fish life and corals and are easy to explore snorkelling.

I chose to dive with the very organised and professional dive centre, Sundivers which is found at La Pirogue hotel on the west of the island. Gérald Rambert, the manager, has run the dive centre since 2002 which he manages with his wife and with the help of 10 employees. There are 2 boats that take you from the pontoon to 24 dive sites all located within 5-10 minutes from the dive centre, varying between 15 and 40 metre depths. They are all relatively easy dives, making them

accessible to divers of all levels. There are different types of dives to be explored such as wall dives, plateau reefs, rocks and boulders and 4 wrecks. The dive centre offers Nitrox for those certified and does 2 dives in the mornings and one in the afternoons.

I found Gérald online during my trip's research as he showed up as a professional photographer. Gérald can organise guided group tours for photographers looking to be led by a connoisseur. Fascinated by photography for a long time, Gérald has won several photography competitions and has written a book on the marine fauna of Mauritius Island. Undoubtedly, he is the man to talk to about underwater photography on this paradisiacal island.

During my first few days, I chose to take a standard lens such as my 17-70mm. It allowed me to take wide angle photos when needed, but also portraits of fish.

The water is a deep blue in Mauritius with good visibility all year round, between 20 and 40 metres. These conditions are especially great for photographers.

THE DIVE SITES L'VEILLE

This plateau of coral and rock lies at 18 metres with a drop down to 30-35 metres. A chimney leads to a very wide archway where divers can pass underneath with ease. Along the chimney, black corals slowly grow shielded from water swirls. Squirrelfish have taken up residence on both sides of the drop as you make the descent down to a sandbank and you can then look back up and contemplate the large archway which acts as a roof. Care needs to be taken not to stir the sand and disrupt the visibility with your fins as you move on forward.

A big fish swimming quietly in circles takes no notice of the divers and is easily approached.

Suddenly, a big jackfish arises from the slightly darker environment; maybe in anticipation to surprise other fish for its lunch. On leaving the archway, Stéphane, my guide, shows me a large black cavity. At first sight, it does not seem to be anything special except a black hole, but shining my light into the entrance, I notice that it's a small tunnel where dozens of spiny lobsters have taken up residence.

By slowly going back up to the plateau, we cross paths with a nudibranch. Once back on the plateau, a moorish idol – very common in Mauritius – hunts in search of food amongst the rocks, revealing a camouflaged grouper trying to hide from us. To finish our dive we are greeted by butterflyfish, red groupers, unicornfish and other fish scattering around our fins as we ascend.

CATHEDRAL

This site is one of the most popular dive sites on the island. It had previously been classified

amongst one of the most beautiful dive sites of the world. It is an enormous cave with archway that drops down to a depth of 30 metres. When you penetrate inside, do not forget to switch your light on. Even if the cave's opening appears to give enough natural light, there are plenty of fish to see hiding in the nooks and crannies which you would otherwise miss. At the bottom of this cave, there is a statue which was placed down there by divers, but it is not known why.

On going back up towards the fault which acts as the exit, I crossed paths with a large squirrelfish. His long spine could easily dissuade several predators. When you exit Cathedral, another fault, the size of a window distinguishes itself straight ahead of you where 2 divers easily fit to look inside. There, I spot 4 or 5 whitetip reef sharks. They lay resting their heads in a source of flowing warm water which comes from the bottom of the fault. These sharks, along with nurse sharks and



carpet sharks, are the only other sharks able to stop swimming. As we leave the area, a school of blue and yellow anthias rise up into the blue to feed on plankton and other microscopic animals.

Having explored the inside of Cathedral and having passed under its archway and its chimney, the second part of the dive is done by going back up the wall of the reef to the plateau between 20 and 12 metres. There, at the foot of a small cave, a carpet anemone moves in motion with the light current. In its dressage, two shrimps with peacock-like tails walk through its short tentacles.

On the reef, undercover in its hole, a black moray eel with a white mouth watches us crossing over. Once we're at the highest point of the reef to end our dive, we are suddenly surrounded by a shoal of racoon butterflyfish casually swimming into the blue. These fish normally swim in a pair, and so I took the opportunity to take some photos of them in such a large group. These butterflyfish with their dominant yellow colouring are easily recognized by their black and white masks.

AQUARIUM

This site is located just in front of the Cop Splash beach. The reef starts from 10 metres and slowly heads down to 25 metres. This dive site is usually done as the second dive. It is made up of large rocks with some patches of sand. In the deepest part, an enormous rock is raised up in front of us with its summit covered in an enormous green coral. Some scorpionfish and damselfish hide within its green branches. At the beginning of the reef, a large plateau of fire corals serve as shelters to a number of other fish. Make sure to stay clear of fire coral, don't touch or brush against them or you will feel an intense pain that can last an undesirably long time. Fish use it as cover and are not affected by the burn it can inflict as they clearly show you!

As we move on, a feeling of being watched takes over. Hawkfish actively glare at you from

the various coral branches, they are rested upon. These fish are very common here and they make good models for photographers. You can easily approach them and guaranteed they won't hesitate to give you their best profile. If you try to get too close though, they will disappear deeper into the corals. In some of these corals, you may also find the yellow scorpionfish. It too, uses the coral for its home.

Do not hesitate to inspect several corals, because you may just get lucky and see the very shy spotted coral croucher. This fish knows exactly how to be discreet within the intricate branches of the coral and it is almost impossible to spot one. While following the bed of fire corals, I suddenly came across a peacock mantis shrimp cleaning up in front of its hole. This very fast shellfish does not often allow to be approached. During this particular encounter, I was able to have a few minutes with it to observe its beautiful colours. A little farther along, mixed in with the fire coral, an enormous bubble coral steals the limelight. This coral is magnificent but very fragile, so care must be taken not to damage it, especially with fins.

During our swim over the reef, I caught glimpse of an octopus moving slowly over a coral. By the time I had signalled my buddy over, it had already squeezed into a hole, revealing only a small part of its head.

BAMBOO

There is a big archway at 20 metres and the site continues down to 30 metres to a mass of fallen rocks. Within the rocks' nooks and crannies, fish with big eyes hide. We stop for a moment to observe a titan triggerfish in search of shellfish and other shells for its meal. In one fine swoop it easily finds its prey which often hides in the sand or among the small pebbles.

Far off in the distance settled on the sand is an enormous rock with a large crack in its centre filled with semi-opened shells filtering the water to feed. On the top, an anemone

and her orange and white occupants allow us to observe them peacefully. A porcelain crab holds on tightly in her protection.

The dive comes to an end and we slowly make our way back up along the rock to make our way back to the surface.

SNAKE REEF

This reef is displayed over 30 metres long by 10 metres wide and sits on a white sandy bottom at 25 metres deep. It is strewn with pebbles on white sand made from the coral. This site may look poor at first sight, but when one looks more closely, it's a small paradise filled with so many fish and shellfish. Before we had got into the water, Gérald turned to me and said, "It is my favourite dive site". On every dive, he comes across something new. Gérald warned us beforehand to keep an eye out at all times as there is a dense population of camouflaged venomous species such as the red lionfish and the flathead scorpionfish. Indeed, we had barely reached 5 metres and we had already spotted 4 or 5 red lionfish swimming between rocks. I was quite intent on avoiding getting stung, especially equipped with my macro lens, where I often have to lean against a rock or on the sand to take a photo.

During my search between the various pebbles, I came face to face with a spiny red lobster. This very shy shellfish, normally only comes out in the dark, but on this particular day, this one seemed to want the attention.

Not far from there, Gérald pointed out 2 leaf fish hitched side by side being gently rocked by the light current. I was also able to add a twin-spot lionfish, giant moray, marbled eel, a nudibranch, flange blennie and a peacock flounder to name just a few, to my photography archive.

Accompanied by Stéphane, a former Mauritian dive guide, we lingered over a rock on which we observed a shy midas blennie. This is a blennie with a strong yellow coloured dominance that likes to hide in small holes in





rocks. Its tail is V-shaped but it does not often allow us to see it because it prefers to stay in the comforts and safety of its hole.

During the safety stop, we heard a very sudden and sharp noise. It is simply that of the dolphins swimming along the surface most probably followed by the tourists' boats. Indeed, along the coast, one or two groups of dolphins are generally seen and tour operators don't miss the opportunity to get the tourists out to swim with them.

WRECK KEI CEI 113

This wreck lies on the bottom at 35 metres and peaks at 28-30 metres. This wreck was previously a boat restaurant. Following bankruptcy, the owner decided to give his boat to the State to create a wreck for divers. It was sunk on October 11th, 1987.

Take a step backwards and we're back in the underwater environment. Guided down by the anchor's rope, we can make out the outlines of the wreck on our descent. The boat is not very big, but big enough to shelter a large quantity of fish such as snappers, soldierfish, goatfish,

lionfish, cardinals and other fusiliers. Inside the wreck, 2 enormous giant morays have taken up residence. On this day, we are lucky enough to have seen only one of them. The other one was most probably hiding in a hole. Having made the small tour around the wreck, Gérald signals us to follow him. Followed by 4 other divers, Gérald guides us towards a small reef approximately 38 metres deep. There, again, the underwater world shows us its glorious colours. On the right, schools of snappers with yellow stripes mix with the squirrelfish of lively red. To the left, fusiliers with yellow bands show us their synchronized ballet. In front of them, a yellow trumpetfish rests for a photo. In masses of fallen rocks, surgeonfish sneak between the small cracks.

Try not to forget and make sure to check your dive computer often, especially when at such depths. Gérald signals the group to begin the ascent back up towards the boat.

As you can clearly see, Mauritius possesses many diving marvels to be discovered! But it also offers hikes in beautiful forests, over hilly landscapes, there are distilleries of dark rum to

be visited and Port Louis, the capital, with the botanical park and walks by the sea. More still waits to be discovered on this island which, I think, will satisfy all the family.

I would like to thank Gérald and his wife Estée again who were very professional and very helpful as were the rest of their team. It was a pleasure to have dived in their company. Their knowledge of the reefs and the marine life inhabitants was very appreciated.

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SUNDIVERS

GERALD RAMBERT
UW PHOTOGRAPHY