

SE Escape
HD Explore beyond the blue lagoon
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Katherine Howell discovers there's much more to this tropical paradise than its beautiful beaches, stunning sunsets and spectacular scenery

TWO things immediately set the tone of our stay when we arrive at the newly opened Outrigger Mauritius Resort and Spa: the stunning view through the open air lobby to the deep blue of the Indian Ocean, and the smiling staff who offer us hot towels, iced tea, and a comfy lounge on which to relax.

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It's no surprise to learn from Outrigger owner Bitsy Kelly that this is part of the **company's** ideal of welcoming guests as if into the host's own home, begun when her grandparents opened their Waikiki house to guests in the 1920s, because that's exactly how it feels.

Just 60km long and 40km wide, the **island** of Mauritius is 2000km east of Africa and 5900km west of Perth. When stumbled upon by Portuguese explorers in 1507 it had no indigenous inhabitants, and has since been settled by the Dutch, French, and British before becoming a republic in 1992. Now home to 1.3 million people, the **island's** main language is English but most people speak French and Mauritian Creole, so the English you hear has a French lilt.

Outrigger Mauritius sits on the southern coast of the **island**, 40 minutes drive from the SSR International Airport and next to the beach village of Bel-Ombre. All 181 rooms have seaviews and with the reef only 100m from shore, the white foam of the breaking waves forms a striking contrast with the blue of the lagoon.

We spent most of our stay relaxing on a shaded sunlounge by one of the four pools and looking out over the beach. Bottled water is complimentary in the bars and rooms, though if you want something stronger there's always the swim-up bar.

Bel-Ombre is a quiet rural area surrounded by hills covered with lush rainforest and river plains growing sugarcane, which is one of the country's main exports and the chief ingredient in another, rum. Twenty minutes drive along winding roads through tiny townships brings you to the Saint Aubin Distillery and Vanilla House (rhumsaintaubin .com) where you can sample and **buy** the local rum flavours (an eye-watering 120 proof) and see the stages of vanilla production then **buy** at a price so cheap it had my partner gasping. There is also a highly regarded restaurant, idyllic tropical gardens and an animal reserve for the kids to explore.

Fifteen minutes from the Outrigger in the other direction takes you to the Chameral Falls, the **island's** highest at 83m and part of the spectacular Black River National **Park**.

The Chameral area is also known for the geological oddity, the "Seven Coloured Earths" – a collection of dunes where the soil forms itself into different coloured layers and stripes.

The action is thought to be the result of different rates of cooling of the volcanic rock, though nobody's certain about that nor about why nothing grows on the dunes despite the thick surrounding rainforest nor why the dunes don't appear to erode even under the heaviest and most prolonged rainfall.

The **site** is intriguing but the kids will love it best for the four giant tortoises that lumber about in the field down the hill.

Kids are a priority at the Outrigger. The kids-only Coral Club has its own pool and waterslide and friendly staff who will greet families at reception and show children around while parents relax after their journey.

The main restaurant, Mercado, has a kids' section complete with chocolate fountain and staff who will entertain and feed children while parents have a peaceful dinner together. Family rooms are available at every level of accommodation.

While the kids are being entertained, visit the resort's Navasana Spa for a little pampering. Built around a delightful courtyard garden, the spa has a range of massages and treatments as well as two steam rooms, two saunas, scrub rooms, and a plunge pool.

The resort has multiple restaurants, the main being Mercado, Spanish for "market" and so named for the range of food on offer.

It offers a variety of delicious Italian, French, Indian, Moroccan and Asian dining, each with chefs in attendance.

The Edgewater Bar and Grill overlooks the ocean and offers a la carte lunch and dinner. Other resort eateries include Willie's Rum and Crab Shack and The Plantation Club.

If you get tired of the food and cocktails, the resort has a fitness centre complete with sauna and gym, tennis courts and table tennis tables, all free for guests.

Bikes are available for hire, as are guides, or you can join the regular Wednesday rides into the local village market.

Also free for guests are guided snorkelling trips, glass-bottom boats, kayaks, windsurfing and waterskiing, while nearby there are golf courses, mountain biking and kitesurfing.

Half an hour's drive will get you to the famous Casela Nature Reserve where you can interact with white tigers, and to Tamarin Bay, where you can swim with a **group** of wild dolphins who've made this area their home, then float in the warm blue water and marvel at the magnificent coastal scenery.

Air Mauritius flies twice a week between Mauritius and Perth, and the flight takes about seven hours. Visit airmauritius.com The capital of Mauritius is Port Louis, 60km north of Bel-Ombre. Resort reception staff can arrange a tour to the city or any other area. A full-day's taxi hire will cost 2000 Mauritius rupees (\$A70).

If you plan to rent a car and drive yourself, be aware that the roads are narrow and twisting and have few footpaths, so you need to constantly watch for pedestrians and dogs.

GO2 MAURITIUS GETTING THERE The Republic of Mauritius is 5900km west of Perth and 1100km east of Madagascar in the Indian Ocean. No visas are required for Australian citizens.

Air Mauritius operates up to three direct flights a week between Perth and Mauritius.

Return economy airfares start from \$1565. Air Mauritius partners with Virgin Australia for other capital city connections. Direct flight time between Perth and Mauritius is about 7 hours.

Mauritius can be reached from Asia with direct flights from Singapore, Kuala Lumpur and **Hong Kong**. Emirates services Mauritius from Dubai.

airmauritius.com **WHERE TO STAY** Outrigger Mauritius Resort and Spa Outrigger Mauritius Resort and Spa is 90-minutes from the capital of Port Louis and 45-minutes drive from the new Mauritius International Airport. Taxi services are available between Outrigger and the airport (about \$70 one way).

Guests can enjoy four swimming pools, Coral Kids Club, tennis, beach and poolside dining, three restaurants, two bars, Navasana wellness spa, many water sports activities including kitesurfing lessons with an accredited instructor, scuba diving and a host of on-**site** amenities and off-**site** experiences through a dedicated tour desk.outriggermauritius.com

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