



Divers drop on to the stern of a wreck...



...while another explores a bow

A match made in heaven

ROSE AND UDO KEFRIG followed in the footsteps of world-famous author Mark Twain and visited the Indian Ocean paradise that is Mauritius

Text by ROSE KEFRIG and photographs by UDO KEFRIG – TEAM OCEANPICS.DE

The globe-trotting Twain was so enchanted by the island's exceptional beauty that he proclaimed: 'You get the idea that Mauritius was made first, then Heaven, and that Mauritius was undoubtedly copied by Heaven.' High praise indeed, and a true declaration of love from the American literary genius.

Mauritius, up until many years ago, was the preserve of the rich and famous, but has since become the destination of the everyday traveller. Luxury hotels with pools, golf and the ever-trendy health spa resorts come beckoning with ever more offers and affordable accommodation. Cheaper, prettily designed hotels near the town centres, with their family-friendly comforts, will leave you with no doubt that you are in the midst of the colourful life of the islanders. It's not every traveller's wish to be within the confines of the hotel, however comfortable, and why should Mark Twain's paradise be missed out on? After all, it's right on your doorstep!

Mauritius is steeped in the history of colonial times. As far back as the 10th Century, Arabic traders knew of the island, located some 800km south-east of Madagascar. The first Europeans to arrive were the Portuguese, in 1505. They were followed later by the Dutch and French occupying the small islands until the English arrived in 1814 and ruled half-heartedly, as it had little strategic importance, until Mauritius finally gained its independence in 1968.

With its independence came plenty of workers from India, Asia, Africa and Arabia, planting huge plantations for sugarcane and tea. They also cultivated vanilla, spices and increased rum production. With the increase in workforce diversity came different cultures, languages and religions. Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, Christians and Chinese all live in peaceful harmony in this delightful, diverse, cultural blend. Churches, temples, pagodas and mosques form one harmonious mix. The fact that so many religious festivals take place within the same neighbourhood only accentuates the tolerance of the Mauritians in this mixed society.

The Mauritian landscape is as diverse as its local populace. It's a must to hire a car, bus or mountain bike, to explore in depth the volcanic island with its fire-breathing mountains long dormant, or to go on one of its many excursions. To come to Mauritius for only a beach or dive holiday would be a waste! The picturesque landscape constantly changes. The lush green and undulating fields in the north, with its plantations, change to vegetated mountain chains and fascinating, bizarre, volcanic craters. The south, however, surprises with its steep, rugged cliffs. No sooner has the eye got used to changing scenery, than tropical jungle - with endemic flora, fauna, waterfalls, lakes and countless rivers, which can be best viewed from elevated positions - takes your breath away. Here, the island is surrounded by reefs, where the ocean meets beaches full of high dunes, offering a paradise for windsurfers, kites and wave-chasers of all varieties. However, it is at the quieter places where you will find the divers. Behind the reefs, in the sheltered lagoons, the tranquil Hotel Merville Beach (www.mervillebeach.com) offers year-round sunshine, fun and watersports of every kind in the warm waters of the Indian Ocean. The local cuisine in Mauritius is fantastic and will leave you satisfied, with a variety of restaurants on offer. It may be the esteemed restaurant, hotel or the 'Flying Kitchens' on the street corners. In the Indian and Tamil Kitchen, Chinese, Arabic and European cuisine dominate, but then you find that the French chef is influenced by a touch of Creole. The endless amount of fresh fish and tropical fruit will leave you wanting for nothing and the choice is endless. If you like sugary sweet and colourful desserts, then here is your calling. The English have left their legacy behind with its own culinary delights!

Duty-free shopping is the highlight, especially in the town of Port Louis (population circa 157,000), with small high-rise buildings and its exciting life. It is regarded as the main centre and is the only big port the island has. Designer label clothes, jewellery and Artisan model ships in all shapes and sizes are sought after by the visitor.

All this can leave the credit card gasping! Souvenirs are in great demand and can be purchased reasonably along the Caudan Waterfront, an exclusive shopping mall facing the harbour. However, why not throw yourself into the midst of the lively and upbeat Central Market, where the cultural diversity of the island is still very much in evidence. This is emphasised by the opulence of the exotic and colourful wares on offer. Among a host of mosques, pagodas and churches is the city - with all its museums, different styles of houses and architecture from the old Colonial Times it is simply an attraction not to be missed!

The visitor should not miss the underwater world of Mauritius. Don a mask and snorkel and check out what the sea has to offer near the beach. Even better, hop into your dive gear and explore the dive sites all along the island. There is always something to see at any time of the year. Some sites are more for the experienced, as the dives take place mainly on the outside of the reefs and are often dominated by a restless sea. However, you will find calmer spots for beginners. The less wind-affected leeward side can be found mainly in the north and north-west near the Grand Baie. Here, you will find most of the dive centres, including Orca Dive Club Mauritius (www.orca-diveclub-mauritius.com), with its many interesting and varied dive sites. It says a lot for the region that most of the wrecks have been sunk artificially. They are true highlights with beautiful flora and fauna and are, ultimately, fish magnets. Natural wrecks, from past times, are not typical in Mauritius and, due to the coastal profile, lie at mostly inaccessible depths. The archipelago was formed due to volcanic activity through fire, lava and water. Typical drop-offs are rare, as are significant hard coral landscapes or walls, covered with the usual gorgonians and soft corals. Big fish can mainly be observed in strong currents, exposed areas, on wrecks and at greater depths.



Mauritius has wrecks and reefs



Inside the engine room



Vibrant soft coral



Exploring the seabed on a 'helmet dive'

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The smaller reef population dominate the shallower areas, as do the fields of anemones, sponges and the plentiful lobster. The visibility at all these places, which can be reached with a boat in between 12 to 45 minutes, varies and depending on the situation can be between ten and 40 metres.

No matter whether you're above or below the waves, Mauritius cannot be fully explored in one holiday. With a variety of highlights, even the true signs of the once-English colony fade like famous stamps: the Blue and Red Mauritius, from 1847. Once your trip has ended, and you leave the island, cast your eye out of the window of your plane. Underneath, you will see the striking volcanoes, deep rainforest, steep cliffs and palm-fringed beaches with their turquoise blue waters. Out at sea, you remember the imposing wrecks, and the extensive coral reefs with their symmetry and form still visible from the altitude of your plane. It is then you will agree with Mark Twain, that this piece of paradise was made before Heaven. ■