

# Latest French hot spot

Tourists at the rim of crater Formica Leo of the Piton de la Fournaise volcano.

There is now another route to Europe for Australian travellers. JAMES LANE enjoys a trip to the French island that is creeping out of the shadows cast by neighbours Madagascar and Mauritius.

**FOR A TINY SPECK OF AN ISLAND,** Reunion rises impressively out of the Indian Ocean with a rugged grandeur that makes an immediate impact upon arrival.

Shaped by one of the world's most active volcanoes, the Piton de la Fournaise, this remote piece of "Europe" is pitching for an equally seismic shift in widening its tourism appeal. Long overshadowed by neighbours Madagascar and Mauritius, Reunion has remained something of a secret destination, packaged mainly for French travellers.

The good news for Australians is that this unique island has been opened up by the national carrier Air Austral which flies twice weekly from Sydney to the capital St Denis.

The attraction for it is twofold. Reunion is a diverse shard of tropical France lying off the coast of Africa and also the island's proximity to Europe, a 10-hour hop to Paris from St Denis. In short, there is now another route available to Europe from Australia.

Why it is unique? For a start, Reunion is regarded as an offshore region (or department) of France and is part of the European Union with full voting rights for the French and EU parliaments. It's also the outermost part of the Eurozone meaning the euro is the currency.

Ethnically, Reunion's mix of cultures is just as interesting with Africans, Afro French, Indians, Chinese and Malagasy making up the majority of the 800,000 plus population. Our guide Sully explains that Creole is the uniting thread for Reunion, a term which also refers to the island's cooking, architecture and its lifestyle.

"Creole really means to be one of the people," he says. "I guess one way to define Creole could be that it's an integration of peoples or that it's the common bond - a reunion of cultures."

Reunion became a French department in 1946 after being initially visited by the Portuguese then being colonised by the French in the mid 17th century before a brief period of British rule.

The Reunionese are clear on where their loyalties lie despite their proximity to Africa.

"We are French," Sully says without

hesitation. "France is where our customs, government and language all come from. It's where we look to, not Africa."

Those longing for a Francophilia fix will feel right at home with the cafes, boulangeries and brasseries, particularly in St Denis. Added to this are some lovely beaches - St Gilles les Bain, Grand Anse and the surfing haven of St Leu - with each coast varying from fine white sands to black rock cliffs. However, this is just part of Reunion's diversity.

What really sets Reunion apart from



Le Grand Coule above the Riviere des Ramparts.

other tropical islands is the volcano and three major cirques - mountainous amphitheatres.

Journeying up the dizzying road to the Piton de la Fournaise is an experience in itself as the climate shifts from the hot coastal fringe to sub-Alpine temperatures.

A stop at a lookout over the Riviere des Ramparts offers a superb vista with verdant

mountains hulking towards the sky while the river below snakes towards the ocean.

The lookout is just a taster for the otherworldliness of the Pas de Bellecombe. This entrance to the volcano "arena" reveals a landscape that is as close as I'm ever likely to get to Mars. Sparse, smooth, dotted with craters and framed by the 2632m peak of the Piton de la Fournaise.

A few days later our group gains an even better overview during a 45-minute helicopter flight. We weave through Reunion's towering cirques (Salazie, Mafate and Cilaos) and later hover over the barren volcanic expanse. The scale of the peaks, ravines and gorges is mind blowing. One of the flight's final acts is to dip down a dramatic waterfall (Trou de Fer) before pulling sharply up. Our bodies are reeling as the pilot asks innocently if we're OK. He eases us back over the southern town of St Pierre to bring down the curtain on an unforgettable experience.

After looking at the volcano from above, we get up close and personal on a cave tour beneath lava fields on Reunion's southern tip. Our group arrives at an area known as the "hot spot", just out of St Philippe, where the volcano has sliced through the forest, overrunning the land and road during its last major eruption in 2007.

Our guide, Roby lowers us through an opening into a subterranean labyrinth of tunnels, pointing out the chocolate-like array of stalactites dripping from above. We navigate a narrow course through various cave formations with torches to illuminate the treasure trove of dank, dark lava sculptures. Roby excitedly points out the changes in lava colour (caramel, red, noir) due to the processes of sulphur and oxygen.

Perhaps the Creole jewel on Reunion is the eastern inland mountain village of Hell-Bourg, which is surrounded by the Cirque de Salazie. After an overnight stay in dinky bungalows (Hotel Les Jardins d'Heva), we stroll through town on a sleepy Sunday.

The further we walk, the more the Creole colours and architecture grab the eye, not to mention the varied and elaborate gardens.

The fresh mountain air, houses, gardens and lofty location have all ensured that Hell-Bourg is the only place on the island to be awarded France's prestigious most beautiful village award - the Les Plus Beaux Villages de France.



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For an insight into Hell-Bourg's glory days as a prosperous spa town, Maison Folio is worth a visit. This historic colonial building has been lovingly conserved in 19th century Creole style by its owner of the past 40 years, Rafael Folio.

Maison Folio and its lush, tropical garden is packed with plants and ferns all picked from the surrounding forest. The garden's sometimes unkempt sections are nicely contrasted by stone paths, gazebos, a greenhouse and the odd fountain.

After five days I've come to understand that it's this paradox of straddling between the refined and the raffish which nicely distils the essence of Creole. Its breezy charm and vibrancy added to Reunion's Gallic heritage makes it such a seductive culture to explore and enjoy. Beguiling.

■ The writer was a guest of Reunion Tourism Board and Air Austral.

## Trip tips

Air Austral flies twice a week from Sydney to St Denis. Visit: [www.air-austral.com](http://www.air-austral.com). For details on helicopter flights from St Pierre visit [www.corail-helicopteres.com](http://www.corail-helicopteres.com). For details on lava tours - the Volcano Run - visit [www.hotel-aloes.com](http://www.hotel-aloes.com). Maison Folio, 20 rue Amiral Lacaze, Hellbourg. Admission is 5 euros (\$A8.40) for adults, free or charge for children under the age of 10. For further details: [www.maisonfolio.lareunion.com](http://www.maisonfolio.lareunion.com). Hotel Les Jardins d'Heva, 16 rue Auguste Lacaussade, Chemin de Bellevue, Hell-Bourg. More information: [www.naiade.com](http://www.naiade.com); [www.la-reunion-tourisme.com](http://www.la-reunion-tourisme.com)