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French hotspot

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TRAVEL: Born of volcanic activity, the island of French Reunion boasts a vast array of natural wonders and exotic cuisine. By Melanie Ball

THE canyon wall rushes towards me, cliff and clinging greenery are all I can see — so close I could almost touch it. Suddenly the helicopter banks and a chorused "Wooooooowwww" rings out as we climb a plunging waterfall.

"Everything okay?" the pilot asks as we clear the Trou de Fer (Iron Hole). "Yes," I reply with fellow passengers, my stomach having rebounded from its bungee jump.

But the volcanic cirques at the heart of Reunion Island are more than okay.

About 200km south-west of Mauritius and a 12-hour non-stop flight from Sydney, the French Overseas Department of Reunion is unlike anywhere in mainland France — and not just because sugar cane, coffee beans and bananas patch the island's coastal plains, and virgin forest cloaks inaccessible mountain slopes, or that the most popular beverage is rum.

The difference is the Reunionais — the people of the Reunion, who are a diverse cultural mix.

"Being Reunion Creole is as much a state of mind as a state of being," says guide and interpreter Sully Chaffre, whose Catholic mother's background is Breton and Chinese, father is Hindu, and wife's ancestors were original French settlers.

While French is the official language, Reunion Creole is commonly spoken by the majority of the population.

The cuisine also reflects this mix of cultures. You might lunch on fish samosas (Muslim), Cape Town beans (Hindu), shrimp balls (Chinese), dried salt cod (African) and canard (duck) a la vanille, eased down with lychee rum punch.

Born of and continuously reshaped by three million years of volcanic activity and erosion, Reunion is a geological jewel. Surfers are drawn by the offshore breaks and reefs lure landlubbers into the water off black sand and coral beaches.

Mountains entice hiking boots and canyons attract thrill seekers to rope ends. Whale-watching cruises draw those hoping to spot a migrating humpback, while scenic helicopter flights give tourists the chance to look into the heart of a volcano.

Safely out of the Iron Hole, we fly over Cirque de Salazie, one of three amphitheatres crafted by cyclonic rain and erosion around Piton des Neiges (Snow Peak) — at 3070m the highest mountain in the Indian Ocean.

Among the Creole villages on the plateaus, which were first settled by runaway slaves from coastal plantations, is Hell-Bourg, where we will meet delightful Monsieur Rafael Folio later in the week. An octogenarian whose ancestors came to Reunion in the 17th century, M. Folio moved inland four decades ago and restored an elegant 1860s Creole aristocrat's house so the public could see how people used to live. Villa Folio is nestled among a luscious collection of medicinal, edible and beautiful tropical plants.

Flying south-east now, the high plains give way to reddish-grey ash and lumpy lava surrounding Reunion's master craftsman — Piton de la Fournaise (Peak of the Furnace). The wrinkled lava skin laid down the mountain's south-eastern flank in the April 2007 "eruption of the century" is still steaming.

Clearly visible is a walking track descending into the volcano's outer crater. The drive to walk that track starts with a climb from the coast, through communities nestled amid bougainvillea, paw paw trees and banana palms, continuing through grassy plains and conifer forest to Belvedere du Nez-de-Boeuf, where the view down the gorge is breathtaking.

The road ends abruptly in a car park crowded with vehicles.

The incongruity of their presence on the lip of an active volcano fades as I gaze in wonder at the treeless crater — and jealously at travellers with a whole day to spend exploring this crucible on foot.

Consolation comes a few days later when I kangaroo hop (you are supposed to run) down a grassy slope before take-off above Saint-Leu. In front of me is Reunion's west coast, a ribbon of rock and sand trimmed with reefs and variegated ocean that drops away as I rise into the air.

Reunion is perfect for paragliding, explains the guide who is steering me from behind, because of the landscape with varied textures of foliage creating different thermals.

We ride them for half an hour, dropping low over gaping ravines and cane fields, climbing over walled houses with luxury pools and neighbours with goats in their yards, drifting past boardriders on Saint-Leu's point break.

I would wave to the watchers below if we weren't suddenly sweeping down to meet them.

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Getting there: [Air Astral](#) operates twice-weekly flights direct from Sydney to Reunion, with onward connections to neighbouring islands, African mainland countries, and four French cities.

Getting around: For helicopter flights visit www.corail-helicopteres.com

Accommodation: For luxury coastal accommodation try [Grand Hotel du Lagon](#) on the west coast or [Palm Hotel & Spa](#) in the south. Gites (like B&Bs) are a less expensive option. Visit www.bardzour.com/gites.php (in French only). In HellBourg, stay at www.fransurf.com/lareunion/jardinsdheva/ (French only).

More information: Visit www.uk.franceguide.com/

Ms Ball visited Reunion as a guest of Air Astral.

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