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Bow down at the peak

ANDREW BOCK
December 5, 2009

Walkers file across a barren volcanic plain towards a black hole in the landscape. The dark hole is rimmed with earth like the entrance to an ant colony but it is wide enough to swallow a house.

Beyond the hole and the distant rim of the crater, a blue ocean reaches out to the sky.

It is a timeless, primal scene but I'm not entirely convinced humans should be here. The active peak on Reunion Island, Piton de la Fournaise (Peak of the Furnace), rises above a "hot spot" and I know it is one of the world's most active volcanoes. The last lava flow occurred early last month and there are small eruptions almost every year. Locals revere their volcano like a national symbol - images of the last big eruption, in 2007, are proudly displayed everywhere. From the air, Reunion looks like a giant turtle floating in the Indian Ocean, east of Madagascar.

The oval-shaped island, just 65 kilometres long, is backed by 3000-metre volcanic peaks that shoulder the sky.

On the first day we are driven straight to the active peak and our guide almost persuades us the volcano is safe. We are told observatories monitor the volcano's every mood and eruptions cause flows only in the uninhabited south of the island. But it is a few days later, when we visit the site of the 2007 flow, that my insecurities change to reverence.

The eruption cut a black swath through rainforest and disgorged new earth into a smouldering sea. It's here I realise volcanoes don't destroy earth - they create earth. Lava eventually becomes soil.

Walking across the top of the lava is like walking on pottery baked with the first patterns on earth.

We are amazed to see young green plants already growing on these ceramic fields.

Reunion is a young island created by eruptions 2 million years ago and its rich soils and flora are studied as present examples of the geological past of many countries.

Not far from the 2007 lava flow, Le Jardin des Parfums et des Epices is a testament to this fertility.

The garden of perfumes and spices is a botanical rainforest garden green with every species of flower and tree, ornamental and agricultural, that grows on the island. There are elephant



Reunion's white sand. Photo: Getty Images

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trees with wrinkled trunks and flowering heliconia and orchids. Our passionate host and plant farmer, Patrick Fontaine, describes the intelligence of flora. He points out medicinal plants and shows us indigenous plants that grow only in these six square kilometres of the planet. Plant oils, such as vanilla and geranium, which is used in French perfumes, are important exports. The magical orchid, vanilla, perfumes the whole island and came to scent the world after a Reunionnais slave discovered how to manage the plant's pollination.

Slavery is often linked to drugs and exotic substances. Reunion was also farmed to grow sugarcane for rum and the drug that now virtually enslaves Western civilisation - coffee. The French East India Company settled the uninhabited island in 1665 and generations of slaves and indentured labourers from Africa, India and China enrich the blood and culture of the people.

Reunion has remained a remote "departement", or state, of France. Though 12 hours' flight from the mother country, the island is very French and, in true French fashion, proud of it. And like their northern compatriots, the Reunionnais commonly enjoy Bordeaux with long lunches on vine-shaded patios overlooking the Indian Ocean.

Reunion has been kept a French secret for centuries, with 80 per cent of visitors coming from France. Only 700 Australians travelled here last year but that number is rising quickly after the launch in April of Air Austral operations in Australia and the first direct flights from Sydney to Reunion and on to France.

The Reunionnais love good wine, barbecues, picnics, seafood, beaches and sports, so Australians should feel at home. Restaurants serve Creole and French cuisine. Vanilla duck curries, samosas and rice share menus with delicately herbed swordfish, salad vinaigrettes, French cheeses and wines. Rum punches - variously guava, lemon, coconut, pineapple, banana, lychee and vanilla - sit on restaurant tables even at lunchtime.

In France, life is an aperitif for eating. In Reunion, rum is an aperitif for life. And just as the rum is infused with tropical spices and fruit, French culture in Reunion is infused with Creole joie de vivre and tropical languor.

Roses and bougainvilleas flower over white paling faces around cottages painted in bright tropical pastels. French signs in traditional blue cursive fonts hang over streets alive with Creole children. Strawberry, tomato and garlic roadside stalls are as common as tropical fruit stalls. In cemeteries, the deceased rest beneath Catholic crosses and frangipani copses.

I'm charmed and intrigued by the Creole blend of cultures. The Reunionnais live in tacit racial harmony, a model for a racially mixed-up world. People just accept that others have different racial backgrounds.

Many towns, including the capital, Saint-Denis, are named after Catholic saints but the Reunionnais observe the practices of a range of religions. Our guide, Sully Chaffre, himself part French Breton, Tamil Nadu, Cantonese and African, says he tries to "inspire [himself] with the positive aspects of each religion and many of the new generation are doing the same thing". Half the island's population of 800,000 is under 25.

Living on the sides of an active volcano also gives the locals a good sense of humour. Michael Asprey, alias Mickey Rat, is a resident Australian surfboard shaper and the official warden for Australian travellers. "Creole people get together and they just laugh," he says outside his surf shop in Saint Leu. "All day they crack jokes. It's one of the things I really enjoy here."

The coast is frequented by giant leatherback and loggerhead turtles but the national animal seems to be the gecko. Images of the lizard with a cheeky spirit appear everywhere: on houses, cars, clothes and jewellery.

This youthful spirit expresses itself in thriving bars and nightclubs and a sport-focused culture. With a summer sea temperature of

Confession: I was fooled by a ladyboy



DAVID BARBELER 8 Apr | I was fooled by a ladyboy. Several in fact. I admit it.

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about 30 degrees, travellers and locals go big-game fishing, diving, paragliding and surfing.

From a paraglider above Saint Leu on the west coast, surfers look like coloured reef fish on a dappled coral seabed. Soaring at 800 metres, I feel as birds feel and see as birds see. The entire coast. The entire ocean. The entire sky.

From the shore, every view of Reunion is backed by the peaks of three collapsed calderas, or "cirques", that form the volcanic high country.

Still relatively uneroded, the sides of the cirques are unnaturally and spectacularly vertical. Villages and roads cling seemingly impossibly to razorback ridges.

The island is famous in Europe for hiking and canyoning. An annual 150-kilometre foot race, the Grand Raid, starts beneath a fairytale village on a plateau in the clouds. Two thousand competitors run day and night through the high country. But short walks in national parks, around ridges and volcano craters, are accessible to walkers of all levels of fitness.

I discover a new extreme sport when I hire a car and drive to Cilaos. This sport involves driving on the wrong side of a single lane road with 300 blind turns, 50 hairpin bends and unlit, oneway tunnels between cliffs with 300-metre drops.

The reward is Cilaos, a beautiful Creole mountain village with two hot springs and a popular starting point for the best walks in the high country.

Locals buy helicopter charter flights over the volcanoes for their loved ones. This doesn't sound too extreme until we take a chopper sideways through a vertical canyon to the waterfall in Le Trou de Fer ("the iron hole"). We emerge screaming.

There are two distinct environments to explore: the volcanic high country and a diverse coastline of cliffs, white- and black-sand beaches, coral reefs and rocky stretches punctuated by blowholes. The sheltered west coast, known as "la Cote sous le vent", has 22 kilometres of coral lagoon overseen by deckchair resorts such as the elegantly renovated French colonial Grand Hotel du Lagon. There are glamorous sunbaking beaches and lively bars and nightclubs around nearby Saint-Gilles-Les-Bains.

Reunion is a member of the European Union, with French infrastructure and wages in euros. This means the island is not overly reliant on tourism and there is little of the ugly divide between international tourist culture and local culture that bedevils many tropical destinations. The Reunionnais enjoy the best of their island. And I'm delighted not to let French travellers have all the fun.

Andrew Bock travelled courtesy of Air Austral and Naiade resorts.

FAST FACTS

Getting there Air Austral flies non-stop from Sydney to Reunion for about \$1187; Melbourne passengers pay about \$1400 and fly Virgin Blue to Sydney to connect (fare is low-season return, including tax). For the same fare, you can fly on to Mauritius but the tax will vary. You can also fly via Mauritius with Air Mauritius.

Staying there The four-star Grand Hotel du Lagon has pools, coral beaches and rooms from €300 (\$490); see naiade.com. The three-star Hotel le Recif has rooms from €240; see naiade.com. Gites de Bardzour, a typical farmside hostel 200 metres above sea level, has simple cottages and ocean views from €65.

Things to do

- Tandem paraglides with Parapente at Saint Leu are €75 and easy for beginners. See www.parapente-reunion.fr.
- Corail Helicopters conducts 45-minute flights over volcanoes into the Trou de Fer for €240. See corail-helicopteres.com.
- Reunion Fishing Club at St Gilles-les- Bains charts game-

fishing boats. See reunionfishingclub.com.
- La Maison Folio at Hell-Bourg is a restored 1860 French colonial timber mansion and garden that has survived 100 cyclones.
- Ethnix Tours has good Englishspeaking and Creole guides. See ethnixtours.com.

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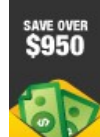
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