Its unique wildlife is world famous, but in Mauritius Steve White also uncovers a colourful colonial past and more adventure than he bargained for

Mauritian mix

In Mauritius, salvation comes in many guises. Port Louis, the island's capital, has a cluster of mosques, churches and Hindu and Buddhist temples. All are within a short stroll of the bustling central market, where the bookstalls are heaving with self-help spirituality, the Bhagavad Gita rubbing spines with *Descriptions of Hell from the Qur'an and Hadeeth*, *Jesus lived in India* and *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Teens*. For Andrew Loiterton, the photographer accompanying me, salvation came in more mundane form. Having trouble with a lens, he was looking for a set of jeweller's screwdrivers. Suddenly he was pounced on by a tall Indian youth hustling for trade. In his outstretched hand was the very article Andy needed.

The volcanic origin of the island has blessed it not just with fertile red earth, but also with a high central plateau topped by a crown of irregular basalt pinnacles

While Andy marvelled at his luck, I was approached by another Indian, proffering a card which read "Roger's Grocery – A visit is a must. Advantageous prices." He introduced himself as Kevin, a name Western-sounding enough that I asked where he was from. "I am Mauritian," he said, spreading his arms to show he had nothing to hide, "not Tamil, not Hindu, not Muslim."

As I was to discover, Kevin's readiness to blur religious lines is not unusual in Mauritius, for this small Indian Ocean island is at a confluence of cultural currents, a place where Indian, African, Asian and European heritages seem at ease with each other. But this enlightened coexistence is a recent development. For centuries after its discovery, Mauritius remained completely uninhabited, treated less as a promised land than as a staging post en route to somewhere more interesting.

Just 50km wide and 60km long, and situated 850km off the coast of Madagascar, Mauritius didn't detain either the Arabs who first found it, or the Portuguese who stopped briefly on their way to the Far East. Then in 1598 came the Dutch. In the course of little more than a century, they changed the face of Mauritius forever. They slaughtered much of the indigenous bird life – including the famous dodo – cut down the ebony forests and brought in sugar cane together with African slaves to harvest it.

After the Dutch came the French who developed the island's infrastructure and put down deep cultural roots that are most clearly seen today in the Créole language, a patois of French which is the island's most commonly spoken language. In 1810, the British claimed Mauritius from the French, abolished slavery and brought in 500,000 indentured labourers from India, transforming the racial profile of the island.

Today, around 68% of the population of 1.2 million is of Indian stock (three-quarters Hindu and one-quarter Muslim), 27% are Créole (African roots with often mixed descent), 3% are Chinese and 2% are Franco-Mauritian. While the Indian community inevitably dominates economically and politically, thanks to the island's hodge-podge heritage there is a tolerance for all ethnic and religious backgrounds.

Nowhere is the mix of peoples more vividly demonstrated than in Port Louis, the commercial heart of the island where ships still tie up to be loaded with sugar cane. Today the ships share the waterfront with new mall developments, but there are

Opposite top: **The coast near Chamarel, looking southwest towards Le Morne Brabant, a 243m-high plug of basalt that the locals used to describe as unclimbable. In fact anyone with a head for heights can make it, though you'll need permission to cross the privately owned land that encircles it.** *Inset left:* **The creased face of a Creole market trader.** *Above:* **Today's huge freighters mean fewer trips to ship out the sugar cane harvest. With quayside to spare, a new mall called Le Caudan now graces Port Louis.**

still quaint, colonial-era cornershops and provisioners, handed down from generation to generation. Nearby is Chinatown with its astrologers and firework shops, and the Jummah mosque, the most important on the island. Here, five times a day, the faithful come to pray in the trellised courtyard. Non-Muslims are welcome to visit outside of prayer time, and I climbed to the roof among the white minarets to admire the much higher natural rock spires that form Port Louis' spectacular backdrop.

The volcanic origin of the island has blessed it not just with fertile red earth, but also with a high central plateau topped by a crown of irregular basalt pinnacles. You'll need climbing equipment to scale some of them, but others can be walked up with care and of these, a thumb-shaped outcrop called Le Pouce is the closest to Port Louis.

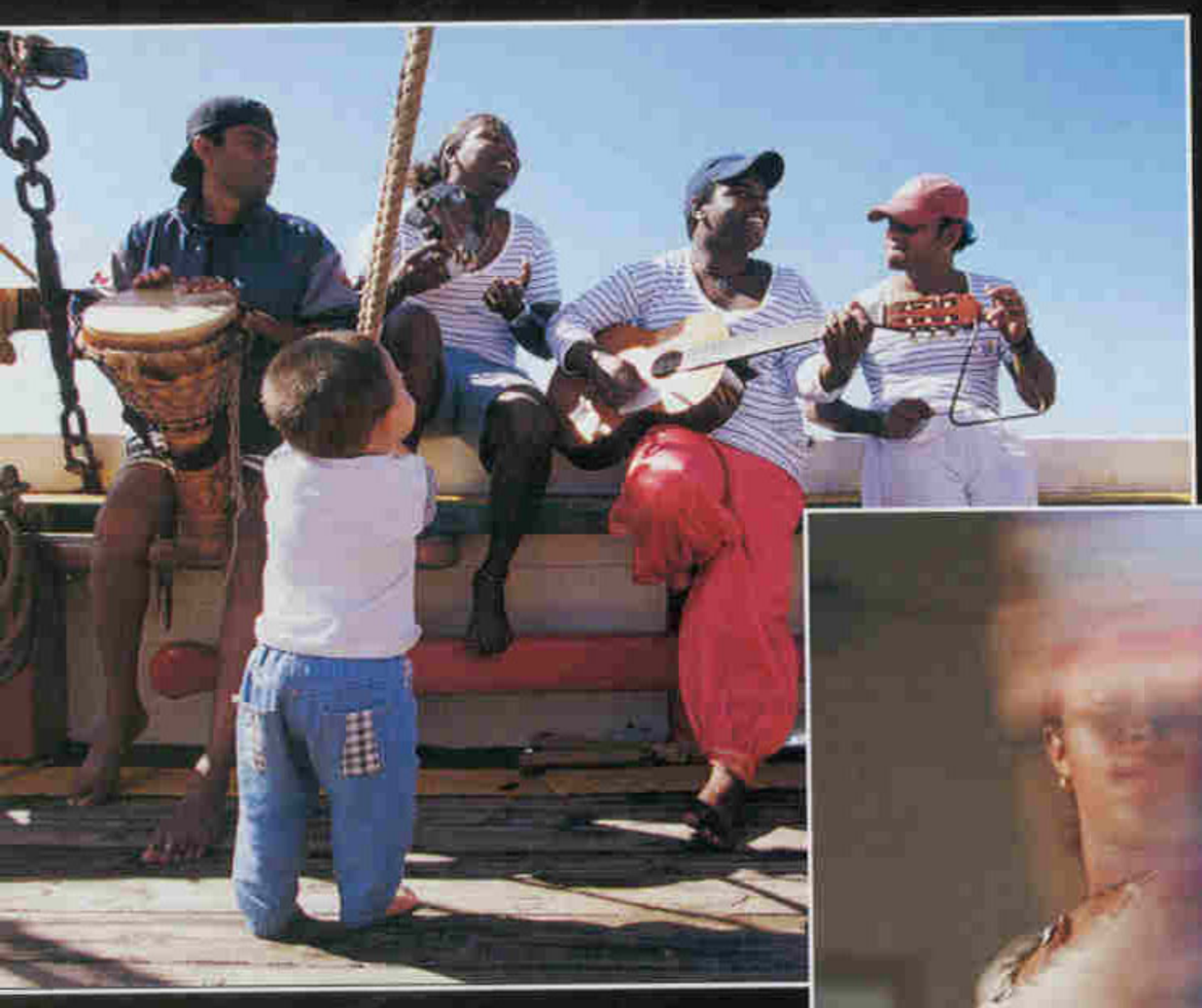
Watching the sun set over the town from such a viewpoint was too good to miss. But convincing our taxi driver of this was another matter. "Le Pouce?" he said, bemused, steering the car into heavy rush hour traffic. "But, it's too late!" Looking around us at the press of vehicles supported his argument, but we persisted. "But I don't know the way," he said. "That's OK, we do," we lied. We pointed the driver towards the area of town closest to the hills. "Up there," we said helpfully.

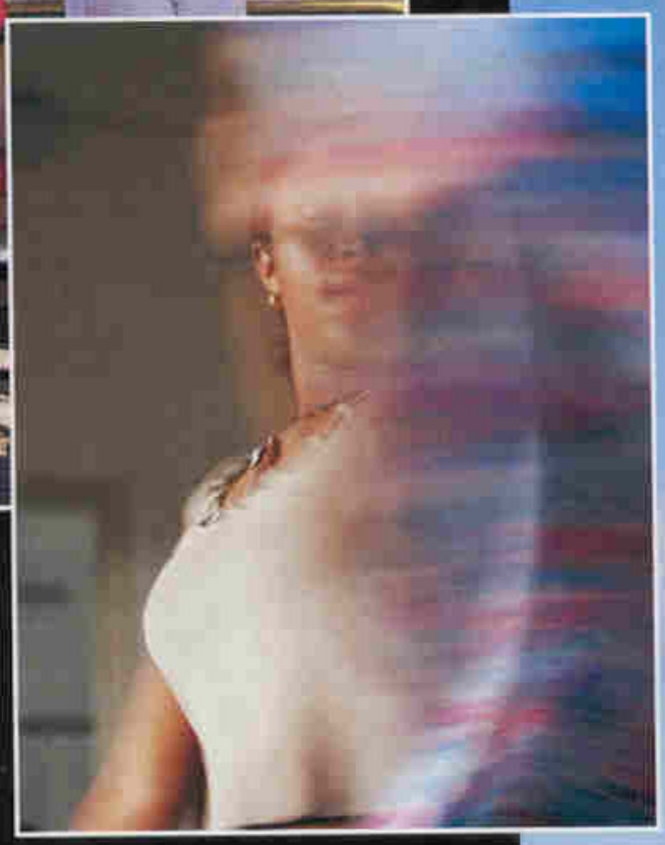
Several wrong turns later we found the trailhead and, asking the driver to wait, we headed up a track that quickly narrowed and steepened. Dusk was fast closing in as we made the saddle. The driver had been right and the peak itself was beyond our reach. We turned and savoured the view of Port Louis and the neighbouring peaks tinted with gold as the last rays fled the sky, before fleeing ourselves, slipping and stumbling down the now dark path to the waiting taxi.

The heart of adventure

The island's other major towns are inland and 600m higher than Port Louis on the central plateau. Up here, the climate is much wetter and temperatures 5°C lower than on the coast, and on a typical central plateau morning we travelled up to the crater lake of Grand Bassin. Surrounded by Hindu temples, this is the unlikely scene of the annual Maha Shivaratri festival, when up to 500,000 worshippers come from all around the world for the most important Hindu festival outside India. On this drizzly morning

Sweet soul music





Above: Today's musicians play a mix of traditional *sega* tunes and popular songs from around the world. *Right:* True sega style from a rehearsing dancer, her skirt a blur of colour.

When African slaves were brought in to work on the sugar cane harvest, they brought their *shega* music with them. It was their one escape, allowing them to forget their backbreaking labours and lose themselves to the irresistible pounding rhythm and soulful singing. Frequently danced on a beach by the light of a fire, the movements combine shuffling steps with increasingly wild whirling, often ending in the dancers kneeling face to face, their bodies swaying close together.

Today known as *sega*, it's one of the most characteristic art forms of Mauritius yet it is rarely performed with authentic intensity. Tourists can easily see the dancing at the big hotels, and those that are lulled by the beat or dragged in by the dancers can even try it themselves, but these performances lack the spontaneity and sensuality of the original.

In more recent years, Créole musicians looking for an outlet for their frustrations have drawn inspiration from the Rastafarian movement, blending sega with reggae to form the hybrid sound of seggae. Ras Natty Baby and his group, the Natty Rebels, were in the vanguard of the movement, but it was *Seggae, Nou Lamizik*, a 1990 album by singer Kaya that really attracted attention to the new form. His subsequent death while in police custody sparked protests that led to nine further deaths and ensured that sega's new incarnation retains the same sort of grassroots appeal that goes beyond the purely musical.

More traditional forms do still exist however, particularly in the Seychelles. Artists like Jean Marc Volcy and Manahé continue to make dance music fuelled by an infectious driving beat. For a local Mauritian performer, check out the late Ti Frère, whose ribald rapping style spanned the generations from the 1950s to his death in 1992.

in June though, there were just a few families going quietly through their rituals: laying out offerings, lighting incense, bestowing garlands on the statues and collecting a sample of sacred water to take home.

We hadn't come to take the waters though, for we were meeting Patrick Haberland, a genial Franco-Mauritian whose wiry build betrayed his former career as a professional cyclist. Who better to take us mountain biking in the Black River Gorge National Park.

Quickly getting off the road, he led our group of seven up a red earth track that skirted the edge of the national park. After the early rain, the trail was muddy in parts and Patrick warned us to stay spread out so a slip for one wouldn't become a pile-up for all. The fence running along the right side of the trail marked the limit to the hunting grounds next door, but even without it the difference between the two sides of the trail was clear to see. At our first stop, Patrick pointed out the mass of Chinese guava plants over the fence, where our side of the fence had none.

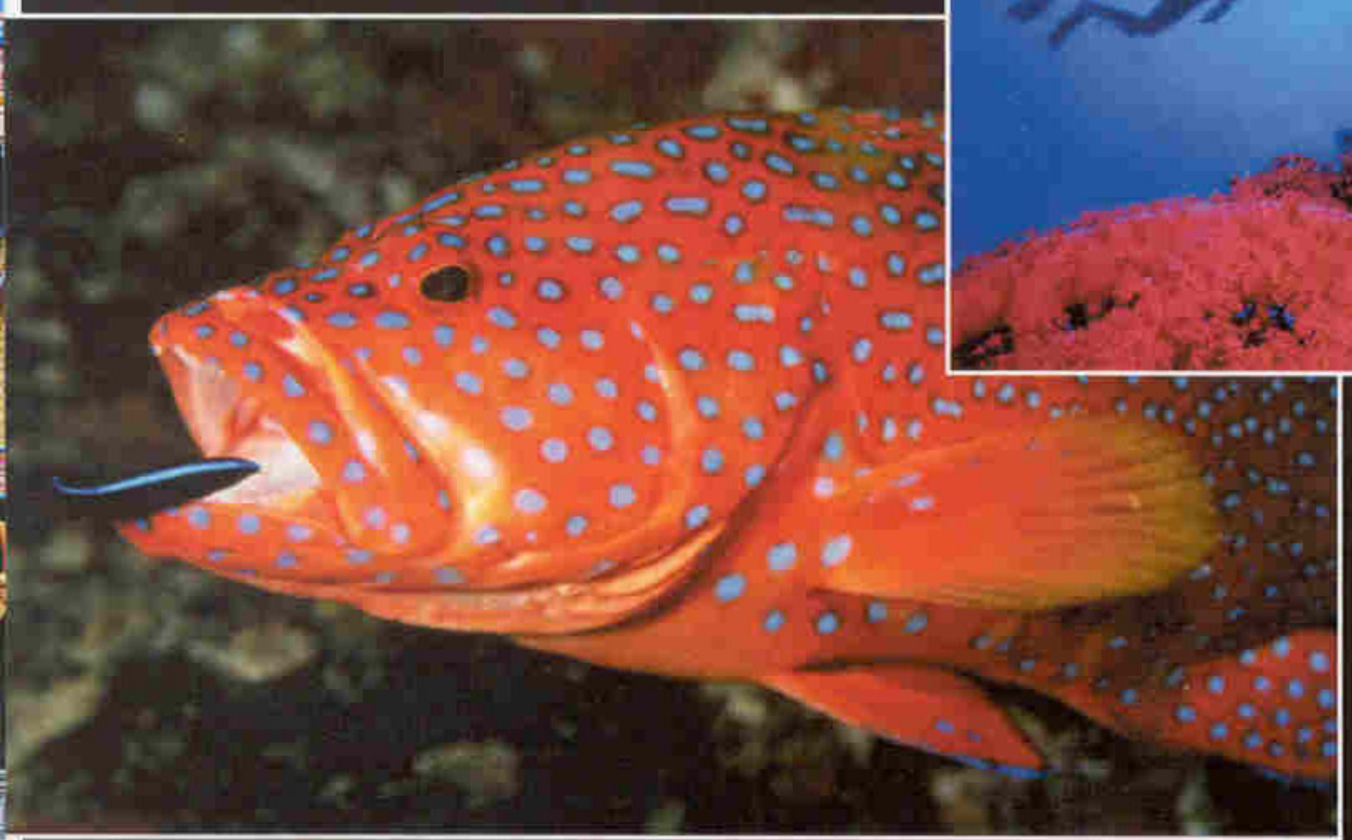
As its name suggests, the plant is another of man's introductions to the island, and one of the most prolific of all non-

Patrick Haberland looks out over the Black River Gorge, one of the few truly wild areas left on Mauritius.

endemic species. While its delicious tang was a welcome refresher as we biked through the Macchabée Forest that skirts the Black River Gorge, the guava has been much less welcome for native species, muscling them out of their natural niches in the ecosystem. The same problem exists for animals, with introduced mammals from mongooses to wild boar making the most of their fertile new home free of their usual competitors. Mountain bikers are the newest competitors for space on the trails, though they are not advised to treat an encounter with a boar as a special technical section. They may be pests, but as Patrick warned, wild boars should be approached with a healthy respect.

In several places the trail brought us to viewpoints where we could look out over the Black River Gorge itself. A more committing downhill route leads deep into the valley, but we were content to be looking out across a good portion of the island's remaining native forest towards its highest point, the Piton De La Rivière Noire. It may be 828m high but it's much less dramatic than Le Pouce or other peaks, with broad shoulders that make it one of the easiest hill walks on the island.

The underwater world



Coral reefs ring the island, separating the lagoon from the much rougher ocean waters, each with its own gaudy world of marine attractions.

Different coasts, same desire: wherever you are there's a range of watersports to try. *Main picture:* Kayaking off Tamarin. *Below right:* Windsurfing at Mahébourg.

The turquoise lagoon that almost entirely encircles Mauritius is inviting enough to make even a non-diver want to explore the underwater world. And here, canny operators have come up with ways to allow just that.

While the diving is not equal to that in some other parts of the Indian Ocean, there are still some interesting spots, notably Cathedral Cave off Flic en Flac on the west coast, Whale Rock in the northwest, and several sites off the islands of Coin de Mire and Île Ronde. *The Dive Sites of Mauritius* by Alan Mountain (New Holland), provides more details of these and many other sites. Diving is possible all year round but the Mauritian summer provides the best conditions, with an average surface temperature outside the lagoon of 27°C in March.

There are around 40 dive centres scattered around the island, many of them to be found at the major hotels. Of these close to 25 are affiliated to the Mauritian Scuba Diving Association (tel: (230) 454 0011, email: msda@intnet.mu) which means they are run by experienced dive instructors trained to international standards. In the past the reefs were treated carelessly, but awareness of environmental issues is spreading. Spear fishing is banned and there's now a project to introduce mooring buoys over the reefs to reduce damage caused by boat anchors. For more information contact the Mauritius Underwater Group, tel: (230) 696 5368, email: mugdiveclub@intnet.mu

There are also endless opportunities for enjoyable snorkelling as well as glass-bottomed boats, submersibles (Le Nessee, tel: (230) 674 3695 and Blue Safari, tel: (230) 263 3333, email: bluesaf@intnet.mu) and even "helmet diving". The latter appeals to non-divers, allowing them to walk on the lagoon floor 5m down supplied with air down a hose. Note that some operators encourage feeding of the fish (a practice generally discredited as harmful to the marine environment in the long term).

twist around in the air, my legs sticking uselessly out in front of me. Then I relaxed as the scene about me swung into view. The Tamarin River Gorge rose up to meet the pool below my feet in a series of steps similar to the one I was now hanging from. On my left the steep, forested wall of the gorge reared up towards the unglimpsed summit of Simonet at 632m; to my right, a lower but no less steep slope led out to the plateau we had descended from. I let out a whoop. What had seemed scary moments before was now fun. With growing confidence, I slid down the remaining rope to the slippery rocks lining the pool to wait for the others to take their turn.

Within minutes we were reunited at the bottom, all of us ready to go again. A quick scramble back up worked off the chill we'd felt in the shadow of the fall, and we watched as Krish now moved the rope to drop it straight down inside the fall itself. Ken demonstrated how we should slide forward in the water until we were over the edge, then allow the force of the fall to turn us into the more usual position. This time I was the first to go. The wet rope was harder to handle, and when I reached the lip of the falls gravity added its irresistible weight. Now the only

way was down, with every step made harder by the pressure of the cascading water, making me feel like a street protester caught in the blast of a water cannon. This time it was a relief to be clear of the cliff so I could have fun by letting the rope run through faster. I covered the last metres buzzing with achievement. Krish's "being part of it all" made perfect sense.

Pulling strings

Man has always experimented with ways to mimic a bird's freedom of movement in the air, and kitesurfing has to be one of his most spectacular attempts yet. Couple a short board to a huge Day-Glo wing, add the sort of wind and wave conditions that make Mauritius justly known for its surfing and windsurfing, and you have heavier-than-air flight wild enough to make the Wright brothers weep.

One of the most experienced kitesurfers in Mauritius is South African Nico Kux, who lives in the far north of the island at Cap Malheureux. In translation, Cap Malheureux means "unhappy cape", which at first glance makes it seem the most inappropriately named place on the island. There is a reason for the name though – it comes from the ferocious weather that has battered and broken many ships along this stretch of shore during cyclones and storms.

Most days however the cape is a lovely spot, with views out across the turquoise lagoon to a line of raging surf and beyond to a cluster of offshore islands. Kux certainly doesn't seem to be too unhappy to find himself here. With a steady business renting out holiday bungalows and running dive trips, he also has time most afternoons during the off-season to indulge his love for kitesurfing.

Within a few minutes of our arrival, he was suiting up and