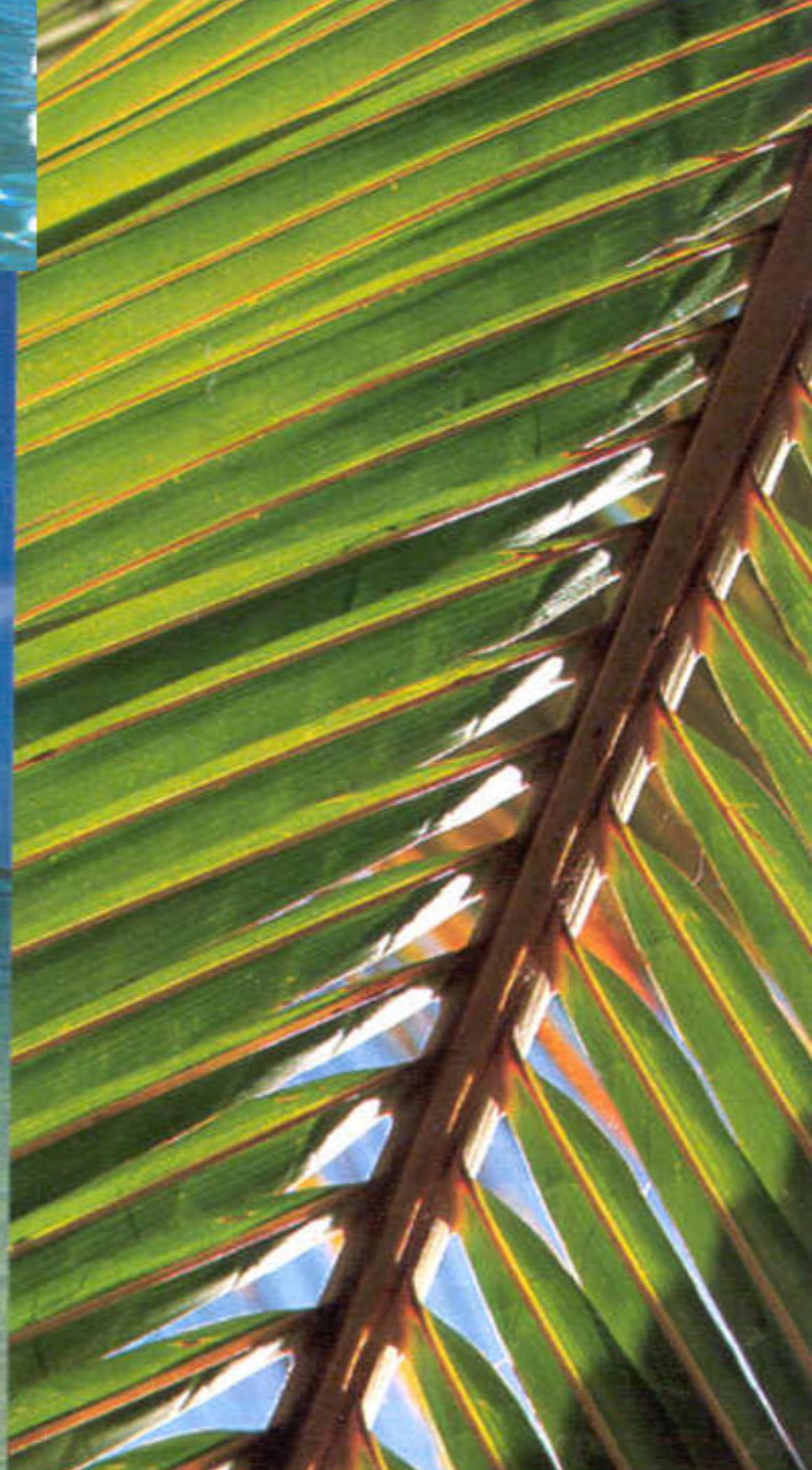


Mauritius is a place for glorious sun-baked inactivity, followed by cocktails. Unless, like **Cathy Lanz**, you meet up with a cycling champion turned sea kayaker.

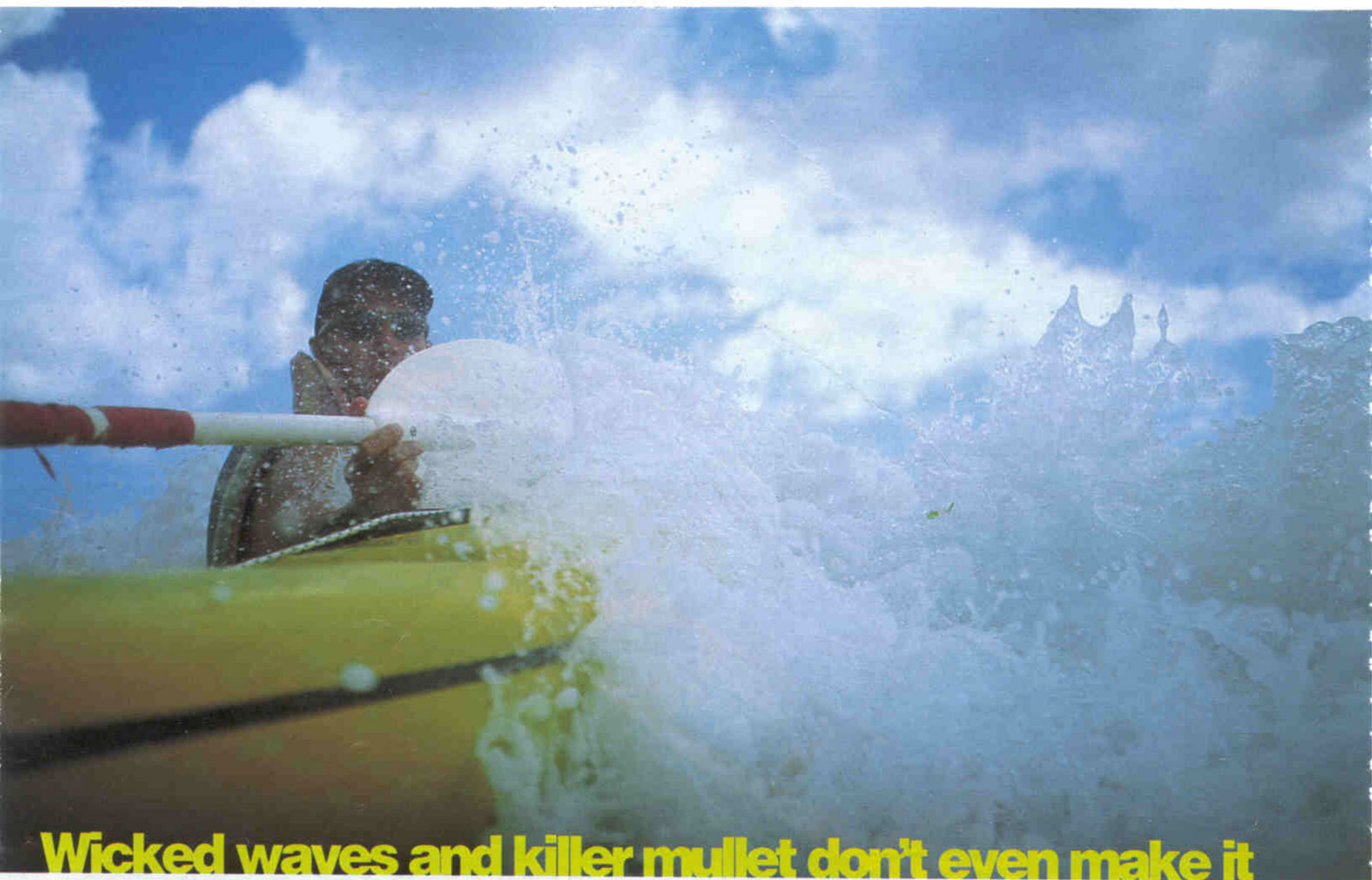
Mauritius

beyond the bougainvillea









Wicked waves and killer mullet don't even make it

Above: Tamarin Bay held a few surprises – and it wasn't dolphins. Above right: Our guide gets a little help from the wind out towards Coin de Mire (Gunner's Coin), one of four north-coast islands.

Right: Swap paddles for pedals and coral reef idling for downhill exhilaration in the southern highlands.



Not so for the mullet. As we stroked lazily up Rempart River later, they came at us, swathes of silver bullets erupting from the glassy surface, cutting the air between face and paddle. At one point Marc was scything his paddle defensibly like a tail-end batsman facing the final onslaught from Allan Donald. One caught me on the knuckle; I jerked back in fright, nearly capsizing the kayak.

Gradually the mullet flack lessened and by the time we reached the take-out point, the only evidence of the attack was a few translucent scales on my shorts and a hand which smelled slightly fishy.

It had not been a typical day in Mauritius. To the average tourist the island is a place where you lounge on white beaches in string bikinis and sip cocktails under palm trees in the tropical gardens of hotels. Wicked waves and killer mullet don't even make it into the small print on glossy travel brochures.

But this time I hadn't come to Mauritius for a pool lounge and a multi-coloured beverage pretentious enough to warrant its own umbrella. I'd come to meet a man known to me only as Patrick.

"WHERE ARE YOU STAYING?" ASKED THE AIRPORT customs officer.

"Eh, um, with Patrick," I stammered. The fine Bordeaux on the Air Mauritius flight had

made me rather more vague than I should have been in the face of officialdom.

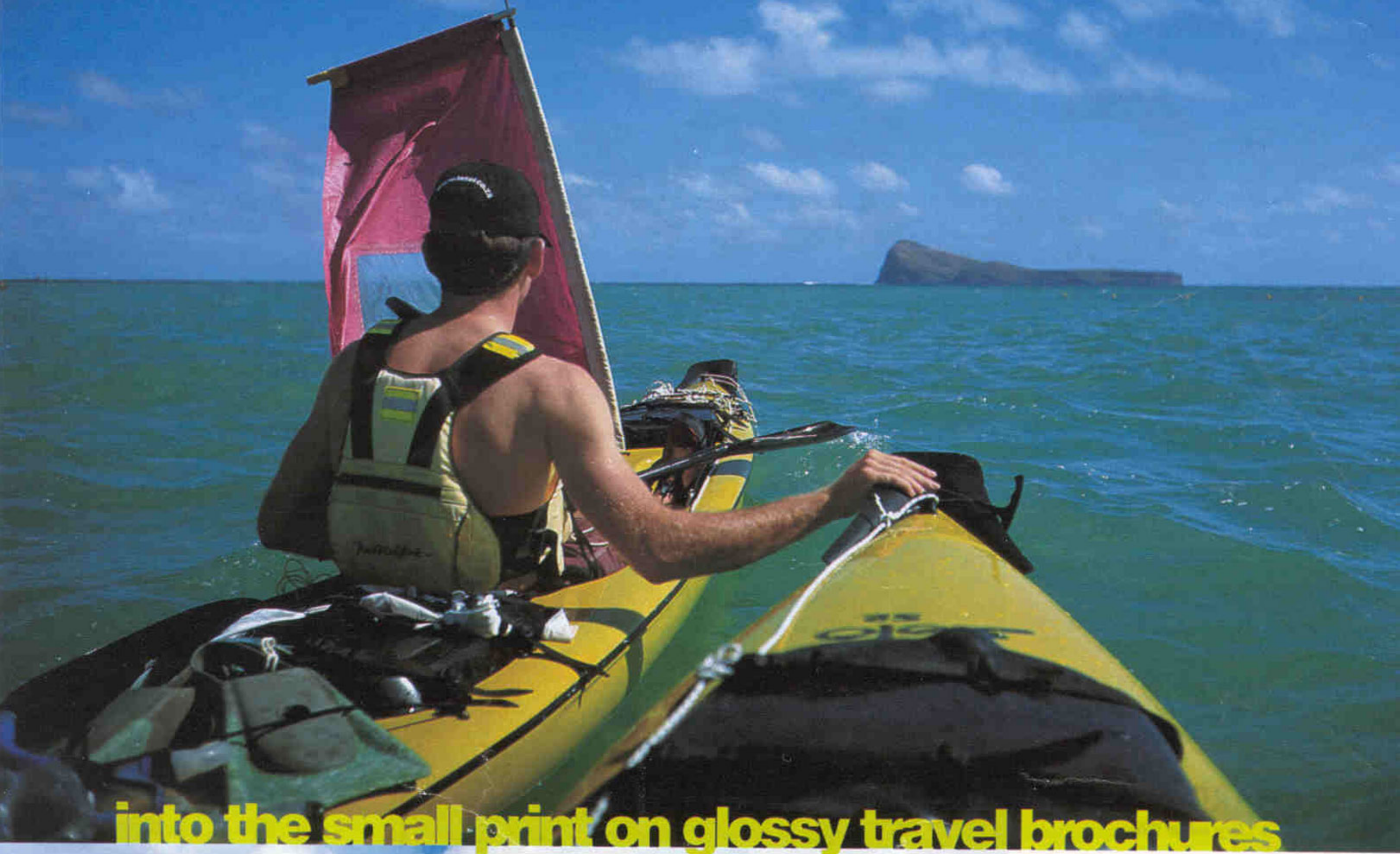
"Patrick?" he repeated. "Ah Patrice, *le champion cycliste?*"

I nodded enthusiastically and he let me through. Patrick, when I found him outside the arrivals hall, turned out to be a lean, compact package, with tousled hair and a grin stretched between two prominent ears.

Reading through his cycling honours list, it's no wonder he's well-known to even customs officials: Mauritian national champion several times, victor's medals in Cuba, Réunion, France, 14th place at the Commonwealth Games and a 14th place (in two hours 20-odd minutes) in the Giro del Capo/Cape Argus Cycle Tour in South Africa. And I was going mountain biking with this guy!

Fortunately for his clients, Patrick has since retired from the international cycling circuit and now runs an adventure company called Yemaya, offering hiking, mountain biking and sea kayaking. Why Yemaya, I wondered. "She's an African goddess of the sea," Patrick enlightened me.

Patrick's operation is based at his parents' home on a residential peninsula in the Calodyne area, near the northeast tip of the island. Two self-catering apartments in the back garden would also be home base for our party of three South Africans.



into the small print on glossy travel brochures



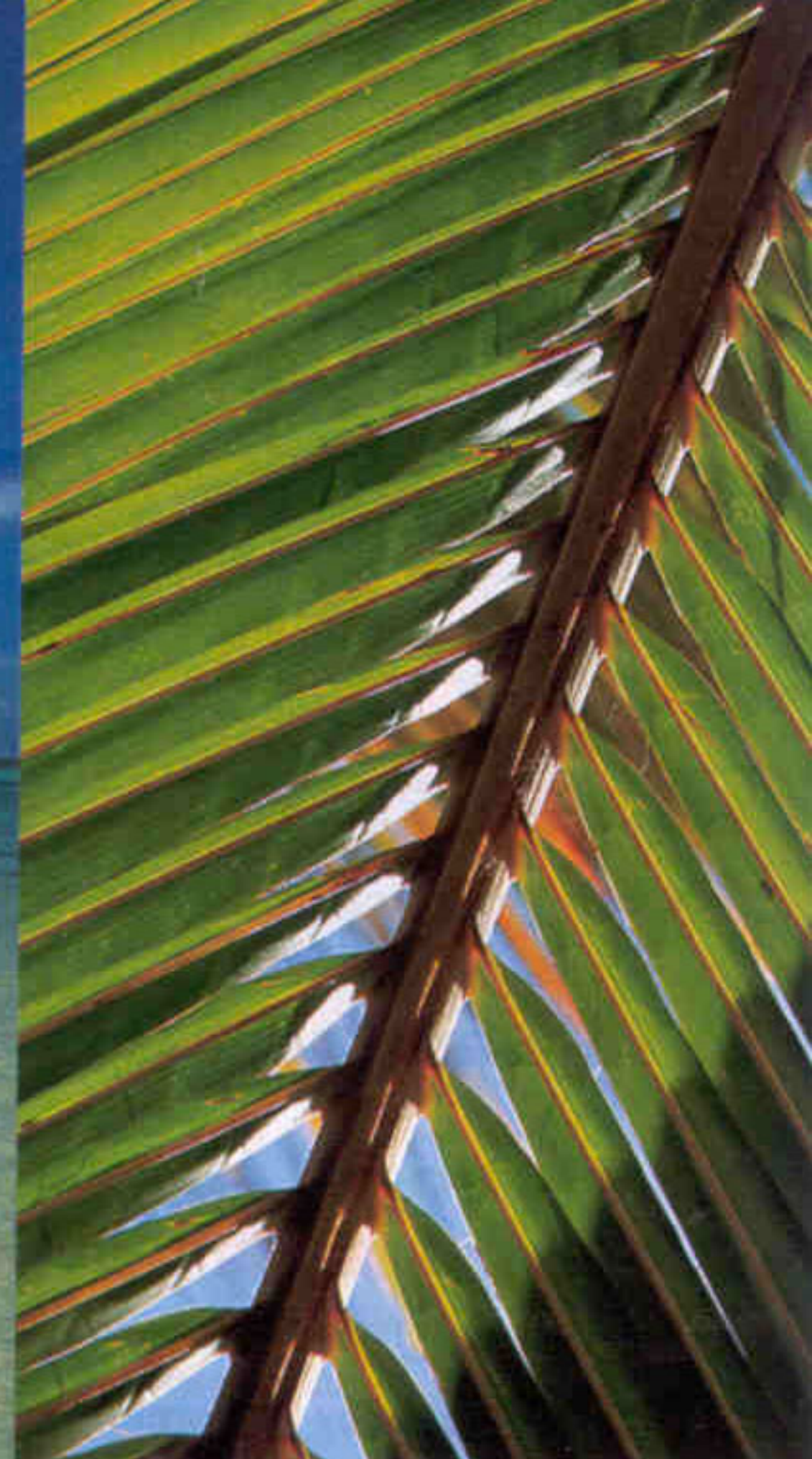
Our accommodation came with fresh rolls for breakfast, a private beach, views across a spectrum of blues to Coin de Mire Island, hibiscus and bougainvillea blossoms but no umbrella-bedecked cocktails. I liked it already.

MAURITIUS IS A SEA KAYAKER'S FANTASY which unfolds in brilliant reality round every twist in the island's coastal road. Small and roughly pear-shaped, it's fringed almost entirely by coral reefs enclosing sheltered blue-green lagoons. Patrick has explored all 160 kilometres of it, staking out the most scenic routes for day outings. Ile d'Ambre seemed as good a place as any for us to start.

Safety briefing completed, life jackets zipped, we took our places behind sluggish wooden fishing skiffs queueing to exit through a narrow gap in the reef. The tide was low, the mullet jumpy.

Soon we were stroking across glassy water through a maze of channels bordered by mangroves, their exposed roots like a mass of upturned Hanukkah candelabras.

The tropical Sun unleashed its power; first life jackets came off, then T-shirts and soon we were snorkelling above little striped fish fitting between corals. Landing on Ile d'Ambre, we walked to the ruins of old settlements, crumbling coral homes, overhung by monkey ropes. The island's uninhabited now save for



giant crabs which crawl out of their sand burrows only at night.

Then we paddled out towards Point Bernache, skimming over labyrinthine brain and stag's head coral. Ribbons of black volcanic rock bisected aquamarine water and fishermen standing in the prows of their skiffs prodded the coral for octopus and squid.

More snorkelling, followed by grilled chicken, rice salad and baguettes in the shade of casuarinas as the rising tide pulled blueness into our white-beached inlet. I dozed and thought of shipwrecks.

This same idyllic setting was the scene of Mauritius's most famous shipwreck, the *St Geran* in 1744. The real-life tragedy gave rise to a romantic novel *Paul et Virginie*, now an island legend. Virginie, the beautiful and virtuous heroine of the novel drowns, dragged down by the layers of clothing which she won't remove in front of the man she is destined to marry.

I was in the company of *three* men, none of them my husband, wearing little more than factor 20 sun screen. Progress certainly has its upside.

Progress on Mauritius has taken the form of rampant beachfront hotel development. Although the northeast coast has largely been spared, our seaward route home did take us past a couple of tourist hives, their beaches a bustle of water-skiing, honeymooning, glass-bottom-boated activity – and colourful cocktails.

Talking of progress, there we were, paddles dipping rhythmically into blue water, kayaks cutting into a small chop when Patrick's cell

phone rang. "Good news," he said, catching up to us after a lengthy conversation in French. "I've organised tomorrow night for us at a hunting lodge."

THAT'S HOW, ON THE FOLLOWING EVENING, we came to be standing round a braai, beers in hand, enough spare ribs on the grill to make a Pietersburg *vleisfees* look vegetarian.

From a lofty chassé in the Nouvell France highlands of the south, we looked out over rolling grasslands, dense tropical forest all the way to the black cliffs of the southern coast. From the depths of the forest came snatches of pitiful deer sounds.

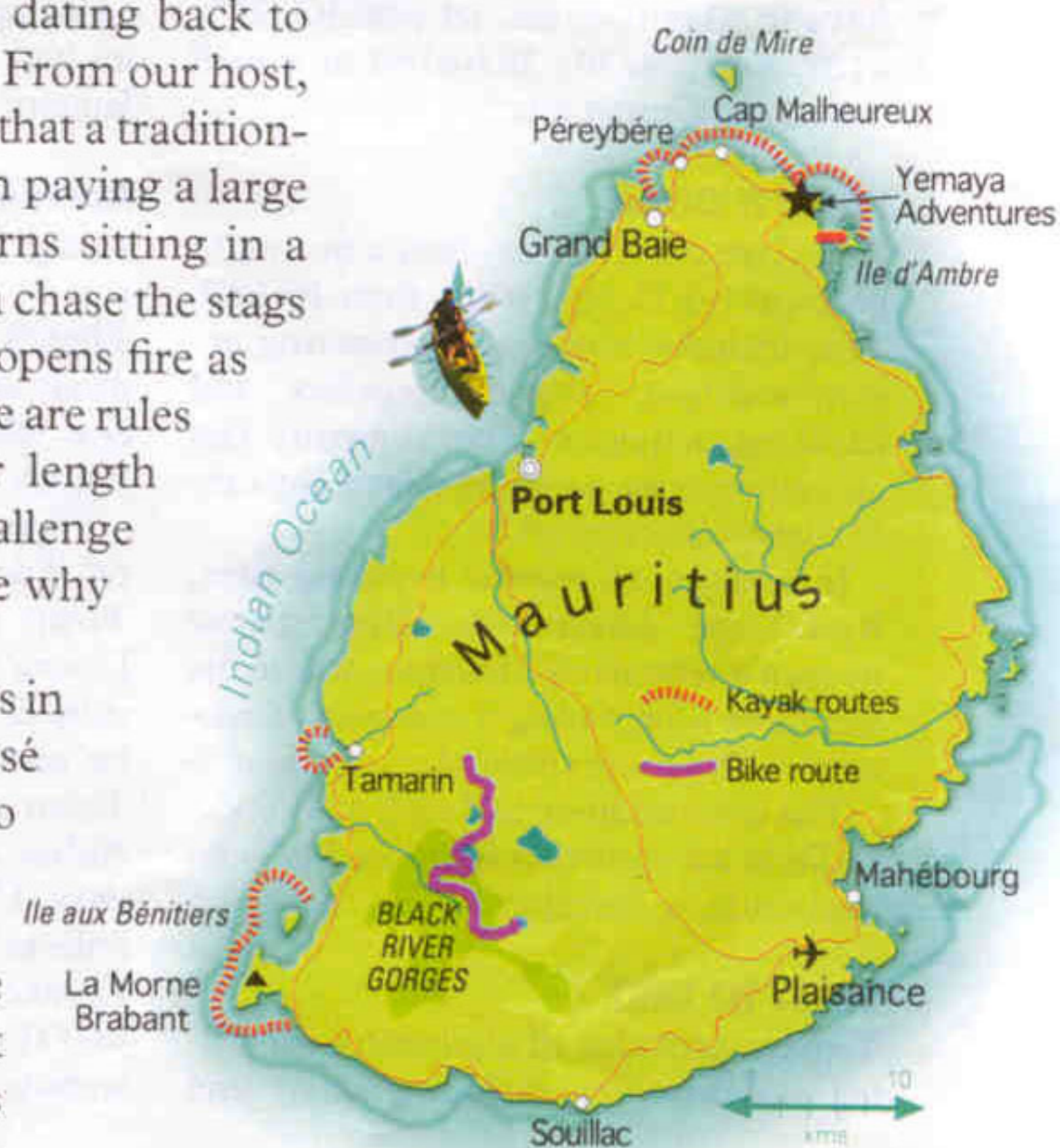
Deer hunting is a tradition dating back to the Dutch days on Mauritius. From our host, Frederic, I managed to garner that a traditional hunt consists of several men paying a large amount of money to take turns sitting in a chair. Dogs and 'flushers' then chase the stags past the chair and the hunter opens fire as they run, panicked, past. There are rules and regulations about antler length which make it more of a challenge than it seems. Still, I could see why the deer were bleating.

Hunts happen only a few days in a year and for the rest the chassé stands empty. Patrick is keen to use it as an overnight option for his mountain bike trails.

That's essentially what we had come for – biking. A short drive next morning brought us to the Black River Gorges Na-

Above: Palms trees are not, in fact, indigenous to Mauritius.

Above left: The island's rich favour the sheltered coves on the north-east coast for their beach cottages. Land prices are exorbitant, but by kayak the white beaches are all free.





Ribbons of black volcanic rock bisected aquamarine water and fishermen standing in the prows of their skiffs prodded the coral for octopus and squid.

Backdropped by Le Morne Brabant mountain, this aquatic curio seller was soon regaling us with perky tunes on his hand-carved flutes.

tional Park. Our route through the park was mostly downhill, front shocks taking the worst pounding out of the rough jeep tracks as we raced along. Intermittently through the trees we caught glimpses of the steep-sided gorges carved out by the Black River.

This park is the only place where you might still see the island's most endangered trio of avians – the Mauritian mountain kestrel, the

pink pigeon and the echo parakeet. I decided bird-watching on a flying bicycle would end in disaster so concentrated on the route instead.

At one point we abandoned the bikes for a short hike to Mare aux Jones Waterfall, where you could add in an abseil if you are that way inclined. Lunch was roast beef baguettes by a lake, and the afternoon ride took us through cane fields with views dropping to the white beaches of the southwest coastal resorts.

Yesterday we had been down there in the bay, arms propelling us in search of dolphins. Today it was the legs' turn, pumping the pedals along mountain ridges and through indige-

nous forest. Tomorrow we'd be back in the kayaks to circumnavigate Le Morne Peninsula, stopping to snorkel at Ilot aux Bénitiers, alias the pot plant in the sea.

New days brought new highlights: like paddling into the dazzling blue bay of Péreybere for a slap-up brunch of omelettes, sausage and cappuccino; the flautist who arrived by boat on Ilot aux Cocos to play and barter his hand-carved flutes; eating *mine* with locals in a back-street restaurant; spicy rotis from a bicycle vendor, juicy *pomme d'amours* (love apples) from a Creole gardener – food hotel guests seldom get to taste, people they never meet.

OUR FINAL EVENING FOUND US, LIKE MOST others, sipping cold beer at the end of the stone jetty which fronted our apartments.

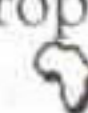
The tide was mid, the water calm and fishing skiffs drifted lazily at anchor. In the distance waves crashed on the reef, white bursts of spray against the black wedge of Coin de Mire. The Sun was resisting the Earth's call to bed, instead playing peek-a-boo behind looming anvil clouds.

Suddenly, from behind the rocky point, a fluttering neon apparition hove into view, high in the sky. Losing wind propulsion in the lee of the bay, it contorted into formlessness and plopped into the water with a loud clock.

The kite was followed shortly by a tanned fellow in harness, pulling a kite board. He waded up to the beach then reeled in the kite, deflating it with a loud rush of air.

"Would you like a beer?" called Dale. That brought him over smiling.

"Hi, I'm Jacques," he said, popping open a Phoenix and sat down to join us.

This time Mauritius had pulled out all the stops – even a delectable Frenchman dropping out of the sky for sundowners. 

Getaway Adviser

WHERE TO BOOK

Contact local booking agent **Real Cape Adventures** on tel/fax (021) 790-5611 or e-mail johan@mweb.co.za. The web site address is www.seakayak.co.za. You can also book through Getaway Travel, tel (021) 551-6552, fax (021) 551-6594 or e-mail info.getaway@galileosa.co.za.

Contact details for **Yemaya Adventures** in Mauritius are, tel (09230) 283-8187, fax (09230) 283-0180 or e-mail haberland@intnet.mu.

WHAT IT COSTS

Real Cape Adventures offers a five-night package (ex Cape Town) from R6950. This includes airfares, self-catering accommodation, airport transfers and kayaking activities. The company can also tailor-make packages to suit any other client requirements.

In addition to regular kayaking trips, Real Cape Adventures offers special women's retreats to Mauritius where the emphasis is on having a complete break-away with a more spiritual component.

The latest addition to their kayaking expedition adventures is far-flung Mafia Island south of Zanzibar.

WHAT TO TAKE

Yemaya provides all equipment for biking and kayaking including safely and

snorkelling gear. Essentials are sunglasses, hat and plenty of *high factor, waterproof sun cream*. Recommended items are board shorts, a Lycra paddling top, booties or kayaking shoes and cycling shorts.

Mauritius is not a malarial area.

WHEN TO GO

Mauritius is a year-round destination but it's best to avoid the cyclone season from January to April.

AIR MAURITIUS

Flying Air Mauritius is a perfect precursor to your tropical island holiday. There's plenty of in-flight entertainment, meals offer a choice of Mauritian delicacies, which slip down with a glass of real French wine.

Flights leave from Joburg via Durban on Tuesdays and Fridays, from Cape Town direct on Saturdays and from Joburg direct on Sundays. For the December/January holiday season there will be additional direct flights from Cape Town on Wednesdays (utilizing a new Airbus 319), and from Durban on Mondays. The airline also operates convenient links to other Indian Ocean destinations. Contact Air Mauritius on tel (011) 444-4600 for further details or check out their website at www.airmauritus.com. 