

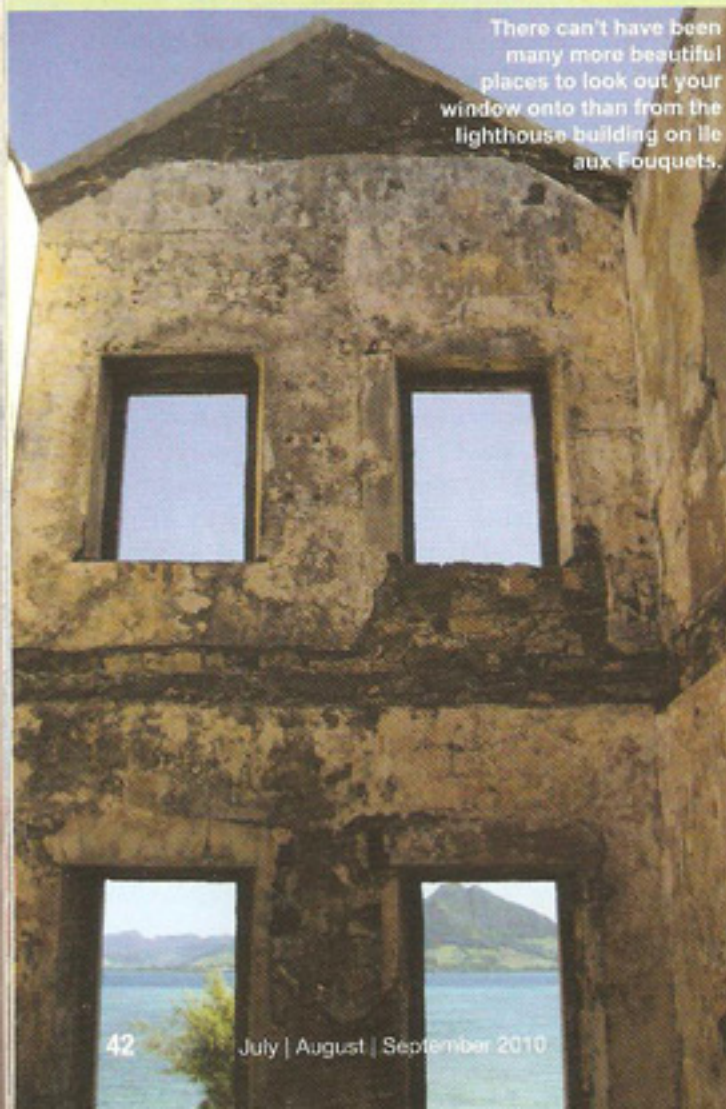
Easily accessible by kayak, the Grand Riviere Sud Est waterfall is a major tourist attraction, with hundreds of holidaymakers being ferried for viewing every day.

RETRACING THE BATTLE FOR PARADISE

By Marc Cloete

Pics © Marc Cloete & Patrick Haberland

EXPLORING THE SOUTHEAST ISLANDS OF MAURITIUS



There can't have been many more beautiful places to look out your window onto than from the lighthouse building on Ile aux Fouquets.

We've all seen photographs of the palm trees stooping on endless white sands caressed by gentle turquoise water. Mauritius has long been known as one of the top beach holiday venues in the world, and is traditionally a popular destination amongst South Africans because it's only a 4-hour flight away. It's easy to book at short notice, hop on a plane, and escape to paradise for a week or two, leaving reality behind. Warm waters, year-round sunshine, a stew of different cultures, and homely service contribute to an experience that often brings visitors back many times over. However there is also a side of Mauritius that is not as well known to the casual traveler. The island's

history is littered all over its shores, and the locals are very proud of their individual heritages. It even appears on the first World Map ever, Alberto Cantino's Planisphere published in 1502, which includes only tiny parts of the Americas and not even Australia.

Over the months of July and August 2010, the Mauritian spotlight falls on the southeastern area of the Grand Port district, and highlights one of the most famous naval battles in world history – the 1810 Battle of Grand Port. The country has been gearing up for over two years to celebrate the 200-year anniversary of Napoleon's one and only naval victory, which is now inscribed on the Arc de

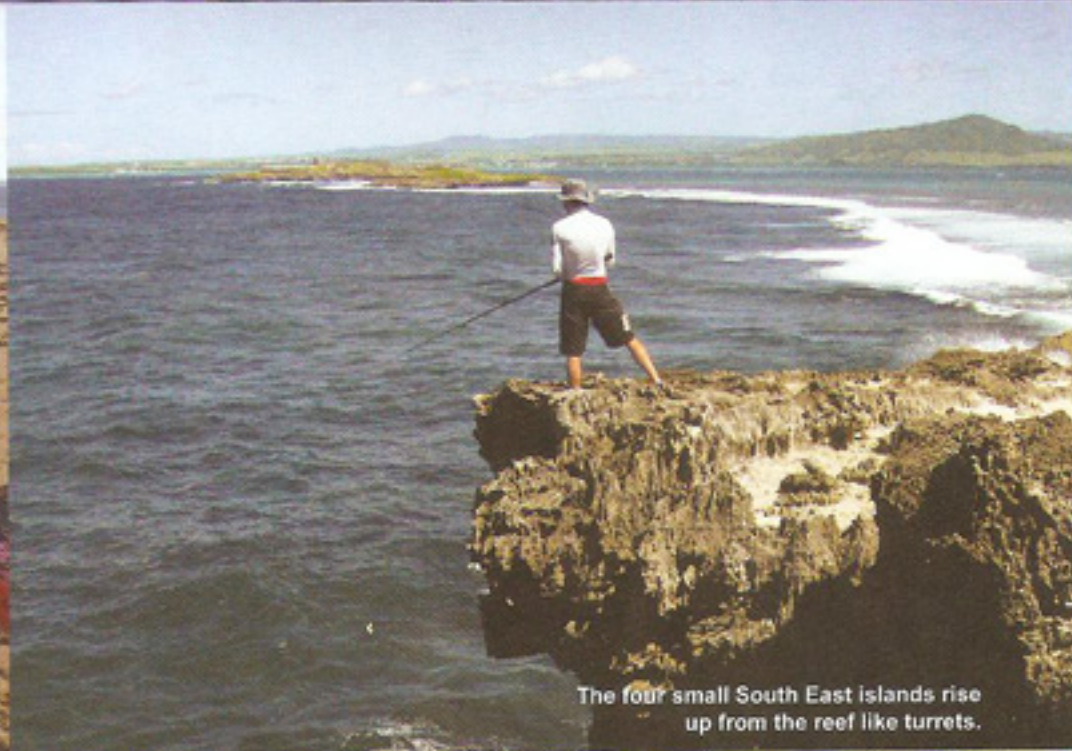
Although there were plans to reconstruct the old British kerosene lighthouse on Ile aux Fouquets, it still stands in ruins as a tourist attraction.



Entering the bay of the Vieux Grand Port (Big Old Port) in the south east corner of Mauritius, ready to take on the headwind to reach the islands off the mainland.



A sandbank just inside the reef provided a surreal overnight campsite, in the middle of the ocean 7kms from the nearest land.



The four small South East islands rise up from the reef like turrets.

Triomphe in Paris.

In the midst of the preparations, I was lucky enough to be a guest of Yemaya Adventures, and taken on a trip around the southwestern corner, soaking in the history of the mainland and the strategic islands anchored off the coast. Being looked after by passionate locals Patrick and Hemraj instantly settles you into the island vibe, and the operators are expert at choosing activities to suit their guests, and attending to every need. The Mauritius Tourism Promotion Authority has done an excellent job promoting the island to tourists, and thankfully there are companies like this to look after visitors. Vieux Grand Port in the south east of the island is the cradle of Mauritian history, as this is the port where inhabitants first landed on 9 September 1598 under the command of Wybrandt Van Warwyck of

the Dutch East India Company. The Dutch named the island after their Prince Mauritius Van Nassau, although their interest in the Far East led to them withdrawing from the island in 1712, deciding it was more worthwhile to consolidate their base in Cape Town. This allowed the French to move in and give the island its prevalent language.

In 1735 French Governor Mahe de Laboudonnais decided to move the main port to the opposite side of the island, where Port Louis remains today on the west coast. The governor gave his name to Mahebourg, now the largest city in the southeast region, and the area quietened down considerably – the way it has remained ever since. Today the South is the least developed and most authentic region of Mauritius.

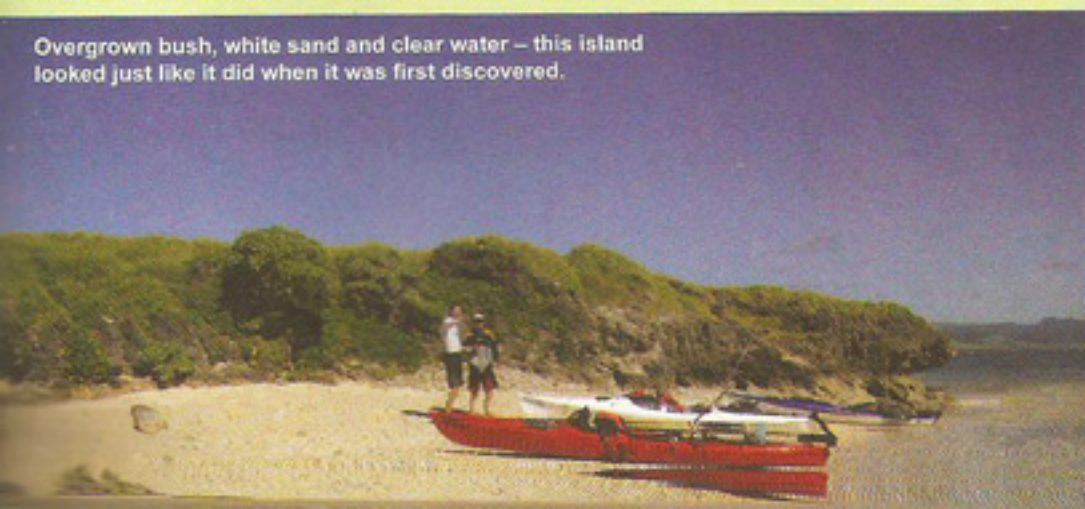
Our overnight trip started on a shallow river

that trickled over mossy rocks and alongside mangroves before opening into the main bay of Mahebourg. Our first destination was the small, tactical stronghold of Ile de la Passe, roughly 6kms off the mainland and the northern point of a deep channel that was the entrance to the Old Grand Port. The burnt wreck of the Sirius, a victim of the battle, lies at the bottom of the channel.

It was on this small Ile de la Passe that British Captain Willoughby landed ahead of the battle, and began distributing propaganda pamphlets around Mauritius. When he saw three French boats returning to their base, he hoisted a French flag, tricking them into entering the channel, and beginning the battle.

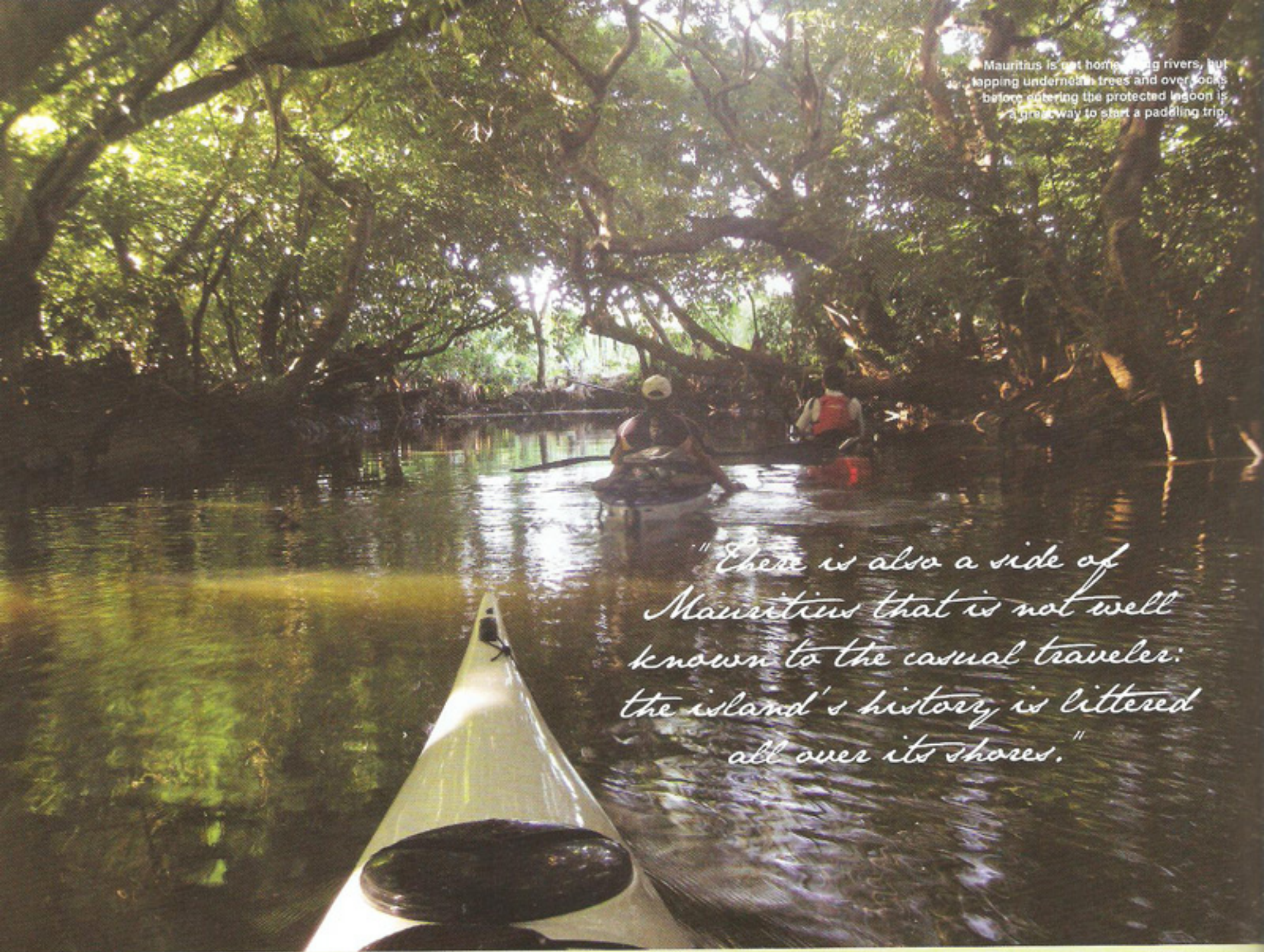
We paddled out to the island in a brisk Easterly, with the tough work eased by stopping every now

Overgrown bush, white sand and clear water – this island looked just like it did when it was first discovered.



Leftovers on the strategic Ile de la Passe from the famous 1810 Battle of Grand Port.





Mauritius is not home to big rivers, but tapping underneath trees and over rocks before entering the protected lagoon is a great way to start a paddling trip.

"There is also a side of Mauritius that is not well known to the casual traveler: the island's history is littered all over its shores."

and then to absorb just where I was – heading out into the deep blue off the coast of a tiny island. Arriving at Ile de la Passe blew away any previous expectations I had about the islet. Walking up the rocks from the sea onto the level land, I was greeted first by two small, ancient and rusted cannons. When I had a little longer to soak in the scene, I was astounded at the richness of the ruins still lying there. There were towers, storage buildings, outhouses, a large central hall area, an underground bunker or storage hold, and more cannons, all in remarkably good condition. I could picture ships attacking this small piece of land, while soldiers took cover and retaliated from different vantage points. The island also marked the start of a long section of reef, which we would stay inside for the rest of the paddle. Having explored every building, including most of the bricks engraved with past soldiers' names, we left to paddle across to another smaller island north of Ile de la Passe, barely 200m further along the reef. Totally undeveloped, it was overgrown with low bush and sharp rocks, but provided spectacular views back to the mainland and along the reef to its neighbouring islands. Another short paddle over unspoilt coral took us to Ile aux Fouquets, where the famous old British lighthouse stands. Walking through it, I couldn't help but think there were worse places to live in the world. The Mauritian government apparently had plans to restore the lighthouse as part of the anniversary celebrations, however it still looked in the same condition it's been in for the past 80 years.

The coral and fish life surrounding this island was spectacular and well worth fighting the strong currents pushing in through the reef for. There's no doubt that the reef and coral in some areas of the island has been spoilt by fishermen and recreational activities, but Mauritius still has some of the best snorkeling in the Indian Ocean. A further 200m north was a fourth smaller island, also part of the reef and again without any permanent structure on it – battered by pounding white waves on its eastern side, and calmly protected by the reef on the inside. We then had a further 7kms to paddle to our secluded overnight stop – a tiny 40m by 40m sandbank that was part of another section of reef. Pitching tent and enjoying some drinks and a braai that night was surreal. We were perched in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by ocean, 7kms from the closest land. Seeing the lights on the distant mainland and watching the stars made the rest of the world feel a thousand miles away. There was more exploring the following day – to the waterfall at the end of the Grand Riviere Sud Est, and the coastline all the way back down south, past the cannons at Pointe du Diable. It was strange to think we were paddling through waters that two centuries earlier were stained red with the blood of hundreds of bodies as 200 canons had thundered incessantly for two days. Eight vessels were involved in the battle – four British and four French. When the final shot had been fired, two British frigates had been sunk and Napoleon's navy had staved off the attackers. Commanders from both sides had been wounded and treated by

the same surgeon in the same room of a Creole mansion, which has today been converted into a Naval Museum. However, the British returned a few months later, landing at Cap Malheureux in the far north and marching towards Port Louis. The French surrendered in December 1810 on terms allowing settlers to keep their land and property and to use the French language and law of France in criminal and civil matters, and Mauritius became a British colony until independence in 1968. As South Africans, we are generally proud about our own history and heritage, but we are not unique. On the surface Mauritius is all sun, beach and party, but it is so much more than just another tropical island. Steeped in history, it is a place where one can go back in time, enjoy the simple things and feel detached from the rest of the world. And as always, there's no better way to see it than from a kayak.

Yemaya Adventures offer multi-day kayak tours, day paddles, mountainbiking and hiking all over Mauritius. Each trip is carried out with expert knowledge and total respect towards nature and Yemaya make it their priority to stress the importance of its preservation. They are the island's adventure experts.

Visit www.yemayaadventures.com for more.