

"THE TOUR WAS THE FIRST OF
IT'S KIND IN THE COUNTRY AND
SERVED A DUAL PURPOSE"

Paddling along the South West coast at Le Morne where
some of the top hotels line the shore.

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Mauritius

Words and photos by
Marc Cloete

a new event,
better conservation

The magical tropical island: where pure white sand laps the trunks of palm trees; where time seems to stand still as the fairytale sea tenderly laps the shore; where it seems paradise was born. There are few islands as beautiful, and popular, as Mauritius. Amidst the challenges of conservation and tourism, it is only a matter of time before the island really explodes as a paddling destination.

Having spent a few days tripping the coastline early last year with Patrick Haberland, owner of Yemaya Adventures, I had to jump at the opportunity of returning to my maternal homeland for another adventure. Such was the haste with which things were organised, I knew little about arrangements – except that aesthetics wouldn't be an issue. After one of the more pleasant flights in history and a couple of nights in the friendly Merville Beach Hotel, Aurelien fetched me to get to Roches Noires on the North East coast, and the start of the Yemaya Adventures Kayak Tour 2007.

The Tour was the first of it's kind in the country and served a dual purpose. Apart from being used as a

sort of scouting mission or trial for a possible permanent annual event, it was also closely aligned with Reef Conservation Mauritius, a division of the Marine Conservation Management Consortium, which looks after the island's sea life. More specifically, it aimed to raise awareness and some funding for the Fixed Mooring Buoys (FMB's) project – where buoys are deployed at popular dive and snorkel sites to protect the coral from the indiscriminate use of anchors by fishing boats in particular, and also to protect nearby snorkellers and divers.

Mauritians are a very charismatic nation, full of light-hearted humour and always on top of the world. They are a great advert for Africa's diversity, with many different races and religions all living peacefully together, and contributing to sub-Saharan Africa's best governed country. So throw 13 of them together, add in an American honeymoon couple and an expat Scot, and you've a recipe for non-stop entertainment. With vastly different levels of paddling experience among us, the first 12km stage to Ilot Bernaches (a tiny island off the North East coast of the mainland)

was a great warm-up for the following four days. Stopping at Ile d'Ambre en route to our overnight campsite gave us a chance to get in some snorkeling among the mangroves, and also for the first-timers to rest their virginal paddling muscles. There's no denying the fact that the Mauritian sea is as beautiful as anywhere in the world. And we all know there's no better way to experience the water than sitting in a boat and paddling it. So the obvious next step is to create a paddling event to capitalize on the exotic location and favourable conditions – something Haberland and sponsors are trying to start. There are already successful running and mountain-biking events, but the potential of a top-class paddling event surpasses all of them because the island is recognized first and foremost as a seaside destination. The format of an event is the tricky part though. The coral reef that protects the shore and creates the lake-like lagoon around most of the coastline also means less than ideal conditions for the mushrooming sport of surfski racing. No swell and very little current would reduce a race inside the reef to a flatwater grind. But outside is a surfski



The coral reef creates a calm pool-like lagoon around most of the Mauritius, making for easy paddling.

haven as the open Indian Ocean heaves around the small landmass, and currents rip along the sides of the island. With decent winds in place, there would hardly be a more beautiful, and exciting place to race on earth. Regular gaps, or passes, in the reef could create a truly unique setup if paddlers had to run in and out along the course. And of course you could throw in the option of racing inside the lagoon for those less experienced – opening it up to all markets. The second 18km stage to Grand Baie took us around the northern point of the island, with reward being a night in the luxury of Merville Beach. One of the main sponsors of the event was the Naiade Group, who run a chain of hotels around Mauritius and recently

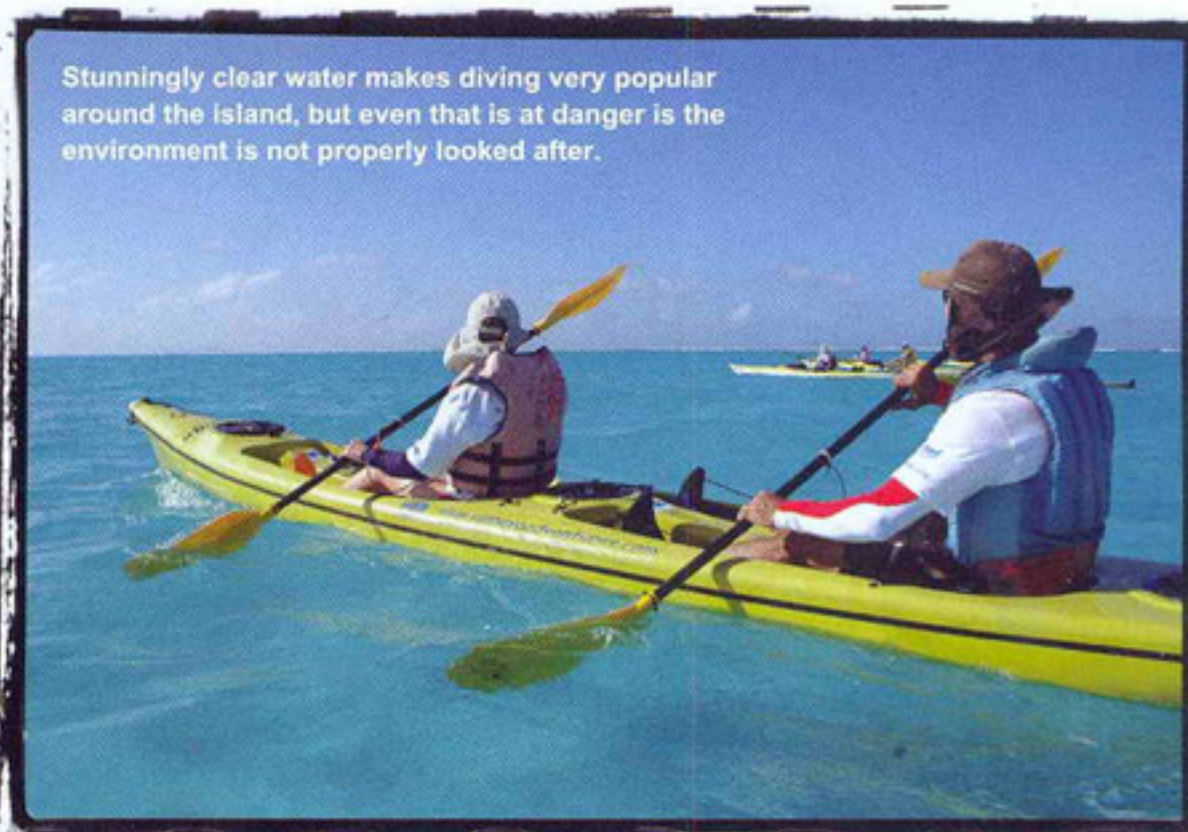
started an evening side to their operations. They see the value in creating an ocean paddling event for the tourist potential around it, as well as the conservation awareness it would develop.

Paddlers and the environment have always had a special relationship. It's a pretty obvious one on the face of it since the sport takes its followers out into nature and onto the world's waterways, but the general awareness and actions of paddlers as a group sets them apart from many other sportspeople. Being so close to rivers and the sea means we are in an excellent position to comment on the state of the waters, and to create awareness about them to lobby action from local communities and government.

Mauritius finds itself in a delicate position. On one side are the local communities who have fished the coastlines for centuries using methods handed down from generation to generation - that have little regard for fish populations or for the delicate coral reefs that surround the island. On the other side are the hotel developments that attract nearly 1 million tourists a year (and which government wants to grow to 2 million in the next decade), putting serious pressure on natural resources. And inbetween them both is the environment that generates all the tourism and the majority of the country's GDP in the first place. Sugar cane farming, over-fishing and poor waste management all threaten the environment, and



The coral reefs are under threat from boat anchors and propellers, fishermen walking on them, and people clearing passes to the open ocean. @JONIVINS.COM



Stunningly clear water makes diving very popular around the island, but even that is at danger if the environment is not properly looked after.



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although legislation covering sustainability and environmental impact is excellent, the laws are poorly enforced and easily overlooked.

Iain Watt, the Scot in our group, is an environmental consultant who has been living on the island for ten years and points out the dangers of not paying attention to the country's natural assets. "If you put more and more hotels along the beaches then of course that is going to have an environmental impact. Eventually there will come a time where the beaches have become so degraded that people will not want to come here because the product you are offering has lost its value." However government maintain they are very conscious about the environment because of its effect on tourism, and are satisfied

with the projects currently being implemented.

Stage three was the longest of the Tour, from Grand Baie down the West coast to the capital city, Port Louis. Throughout the five days there was a pirogue, catamaran or motorboat carrying supplies and reserve paddlers that followed us along the journey, and the reward at the end of this stage was to get escorted into the harbour by two luxury 'cats' as the local newspaper reporters welcomed us in. The added bonus was to fall asleep to the gentle rocking of the harbour waters onboard our escorts.

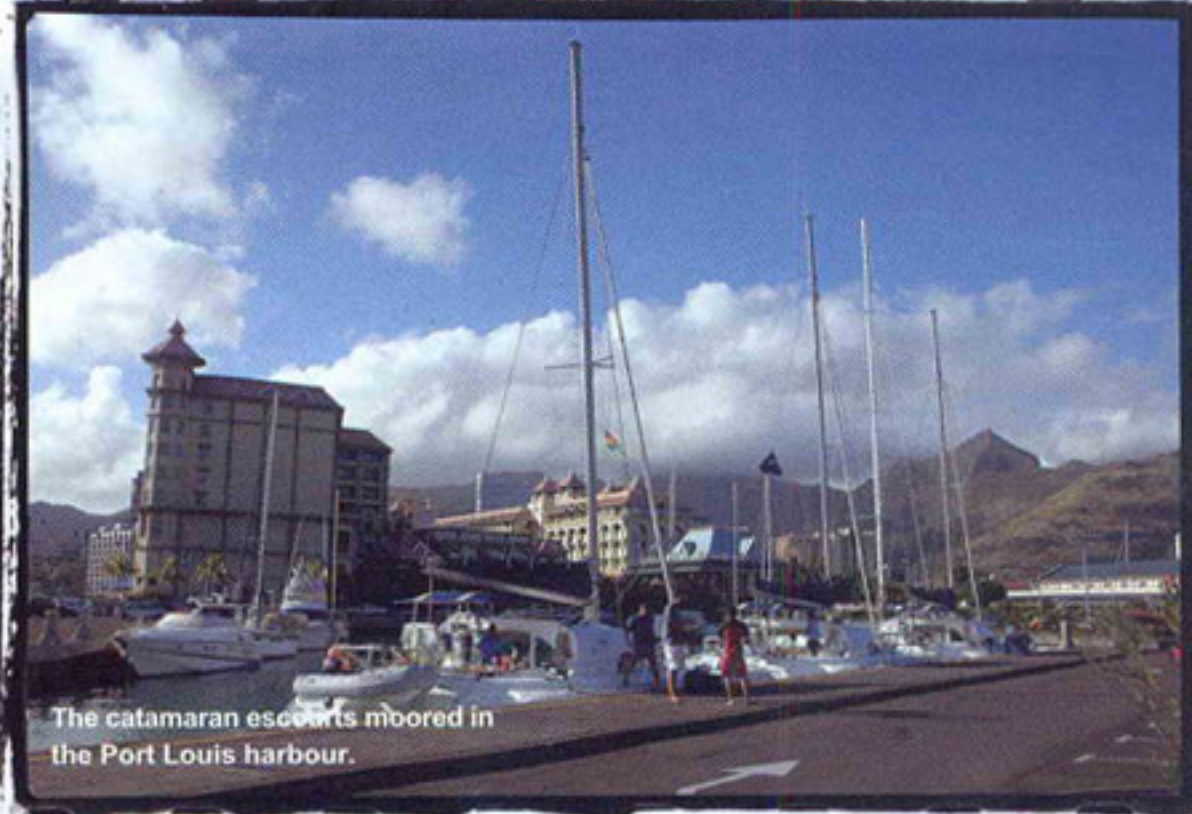
It was a great precursor to probably the most spectacular paddling of the Tour the next day – along the western coast of the island from Port Louis down to Flic en Flac. The coastline changed

dramatically to become dark, high cliffs, with the brilliant turquoise sea crashing onto the rocks at their bases. The clarity of the water is unbelievable as you can see for metres down to the ocean floor below you, and serves as great motivation to help keep it that way. Flic en Flac is a small but popular tourist town with some good restaurants, and once again it was great to be able to set up camp right on the shore.

Arriving at Le Morne after the final day's 23km stretch completed the 100km journey, and culminated in a traditional welcome from the sega dancers and a much-appreciated cocktail from Les Pavillons Hotel. The Tour generated some excellent coverage for Reef Conservation Mauritius, and great possibilities



Camping on the picturesque Ilot Benitiers off mainland Mauritius.



The catamaran escorts moored in the Port Louis harbour.

for an event. Currently plans are being made to run a surfski event in early December of 2008 over 5 days around the island, so keep your diary and your eyes open for interesting developments in paradise.

TRAVEL MAURITIUS:

FLIGHTS:

SA Paddler was flown by British Airways, operated by Comair. The company recently added a permanent second weekly flight to Mauritius in their schedule, and now fly on both Wednesdays and Saturdays. Flights depart Jhb at 9:00am and land at 15:30, with the return flight departing Mauritius at 16:00 and arriving at 18:30.

The quality of the aircraft and the service is a big improvement on most other airlines, with legroom one very noticeable plus. There's nothing like arriving at your destination fresh and loose, having had the space and comfort to stretch the legs en route, while airline meals have improved immeasurably and were

really enjoyable during the flight.

Priding itself on consistent and exceptional customer service has seen an upgrade in BA's Club (Business) Class, resulting in a new menu, easier check-in facilities and top quality lounges and attention from the Special Services Team. For more information visit www.ba.com

TRANSFERS:

White Sands Tours offer impeccable service, a well-maintained fleet and prompt service between airport and any hotel on the island, as well as any other transport requirements. See www.whitesandtours.com

ACCOMMODATION:

Naiade Resorts are one of the biggest and most popular chains with 7 hotels on the island and 12 in total on Indian Ocean islands. Merville Beach in Grand Baie and Les Pavillons in Le Morne were both very comfortable and equipped with all the extras you would expect of top class resorts. Mauritius has

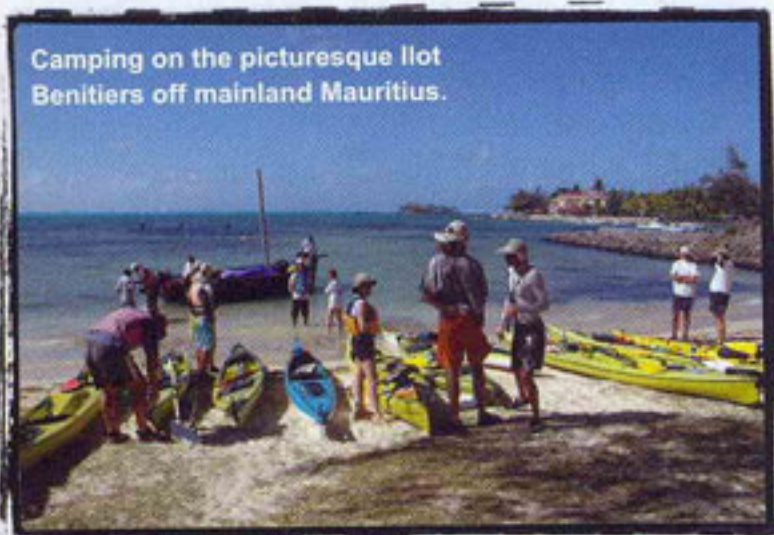
a reputation for its outstanding customer service, and staffs at both resorts were genuinely friendly and helpful. Meals were buffet style breakfasts and a mix of buffet and set-menu dinners, with a huge variety to cater for any palette. And of course the bonus is their beach-fronting location and wide choice of water sport events. Visit www.naiade.com for more

PADDLING:

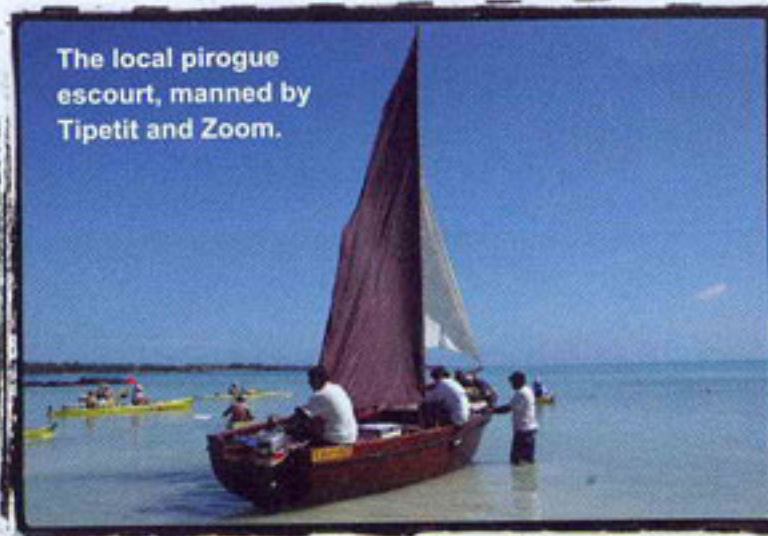
If you want to paddle in Mauritius, there's only one place to go – Yemaya Adventures. Run by former cycle champ Patrick Haberland, he has a variety of single- and multi-day trips to suit all abilities. Boats are stable and solid and the service as always is outstanding. Patrick's local knowledge is a real bonus and his easy-going character will keep anyone relaxed and entertained. He also offers mountain-biking, hiking and team-building on the island.

For more information go to www.yemayaadventures.com

Camping on the picturesque Ilot Benitiers off mainland Mauritius.



The local pirogue escort, manned by Tipetit and Zoom.



The team outside Les Pavillons Hotel having completed the Tour.

