

A vibrant tropical garden scene featuring clusters of bright red flowers, likely Hibiscus, amidst lush green foliage. A large, dark brown tree trunk is visible on the right side, and the background is filled with various tropical plants and trees, creating a dense and colorful environment.

SMALL IS BEAUTIFUL

Mauritius: sun, sand, sea and lots of sprawling resorts – right? Well, yes, and many of them heart-stoppingly gorgeous. But there are other ways to 'do' the island if you're looking for something a bit different, as **Pippa de Bruyn** set out to discover



IN THE RED
A garden pool suite at
Lakaz Chamarel, a chic
jungle hideaway in Black
River Gorges National Park



I'll be frank. Mauritius has never really featured on my wish list. A few rungs above the Comores – that rather embarrassing skid mark on the dirty linen of South Africa in the 80s – but still not really quite the Maldives, or Seychelles, or a Mozambican archipelago. I know, I know: it has long palm-fringed beaches lapped by the same

warm ocean, tropical reefs and coconut groves caressed by sultry trade winds – what's not to like? In a word: Resorts.

Mention Mauritius and I'd imagine some thatched monstrosity looming over an enormous pool, hundreds of umbrellas polka-dotting their way along the beach, and identical chalets spread out on grounds so sprawling you'd get a stitch just getting to breakfast. Which would be a buffet, like every other meal.

Of course, it's not fair to pigeonhole the resort experience – that kind of vacation has its place, there is clearly a market for it, and most Mauritian resorts are world-famous and much lauded. But if you, like me, prefer a more authentic and atmospheric sense of connection to place, then vacationing in a 150-room hotel, with economies of scale taking precedence over personality, is not really going to cut it.

When the opportunity to actually set foot on the island arose, I had to shed my assumptions about Mauritius quicker than a fur coat in summer. The brief was simple: I was to circumnavigate the island in search of 'non-resort' options, rooting out the most charming properties – preferably owner-managed (and decorated), definitely with fewer than 40 rooms, preferably quite a bit fewer; small house-hotels or privately owned villas outside of gated estates; places that offer visitors a chance to connect with the vibrancy of local life.

I inspected 18 properties – along the way discovering a Mauritius I never knew existed. From the fabulous multi-layered flavours on my plate (apply a fusion of Indian and French cuisine to an abundance of fresh seafood and subtropical fruit, and the outcome is predictably mouthwatering) to sampling a cross-section of rums in a tasting bar next to a 19th century chateau, the island kept unfurling new layers.

I could be drinking cane and coconut juice with bleary-eyed locals in a neighbourhood bar in the morning, then struggling to pack a basketful of Zara clothing picked up at flea market prices in the afternoon. Stopping periodically to photograph a temple entrance, its fluttering red flags etched against a blue sky, to toasting a sunset with the wonderful aroma of a G&T served with fresh curry leaves. Getting constantly lost on the myriad lanes criss-crossing the island, but always finding a friendly face to help.

Here is the result of my exploration – the best small places to stay in each corner of the island.





NORTHWEST

HOTEL 20° SUD

The island's first boutique hotel is a very clever conversion of a two-storey timber beachfront bungalow by Anne Bourgeois, a shapely ex-flight attendant from Belgium, and her pilot husband, Michel. The couple – classy, elegant, glamorous, like their hotel – are very much in attendance, gliding between their predominantly French-speaking guests, many of them regulars.

THE NEIGHBOURHOOD The northwest is historically the most popular weekend bolt-hole for the local yacht and jet set. As a result it's densely developed, with sophisticated restaurants, chichi bars and vibrant nightlife options. Hotel access is off a tiny lane and is situated on its own (admittedly small) private beach; easy access to Grand Baie is via the hotel's regular water shuttle (included in the rate).

STYLE The hotel is all informal Franco-colonial elegance, with pools of light next to comfortable leather armchairs, a large aquarium filled with tropical fish, floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, floor-length brown linen on tables overlooking the meandering pool, and so on. It's also very romantic (no children under 12).

THE ROOMS (36) vary considerably in size and outlook – it's worth booking one of the beachfront rooms – but share the same cool white palette



warmed by natural materials. Most have four-poster or sleigh beds and designer Belgian furnishings; bathrooms feature Victorian bathtubs.

DINING is a real highlight, as you'd expect from a Relais & Châteaux property – aside from the fantastic setting (ten metres from the sea) and romantic lighting, Mauritian chef Sanjeev Purohoo produces a delectable menu featuring fresh local seafood. The pricing can be complicated, with some meals included in the DBB rate and others attracting a surcharge. High tea is included.

IN A NUTSHELL A worthwhile splurge for a special occasion. From €196 double B&B. 20degreesud.com



 **SOUTHWEST**
Too Fine
LAKAZ CHAMAREL

Mauritius is full of surprises, and this exclusive little lodge is perhaps the biggest of them all. Located in the subtropical jungle of Black River Gorges National Park, it's spread across five hectares of lush gardens that grew from the green fingers of Virginie Lagesse, a seventh-generation Mauritian, and her husband Jean-Marc. I thought the hillside location would be a drawback, but in fact the views – from textured greens above mirror-lakes to an enormous fish-eye ocean horizon – are completely mesmerising, and the beach a short drive away.

THE NEIGHBOURHOOD The southwest is the most topographically beautiful part of the island. While the coastline in the north and east is fairly flat, this southern corner has all the drama: long white beaches backdropped by green-flanked mountains that rise up almost perpendicularly from the coast. While resort-lined, there are plenty of public pockets here where you can watch the locals at play. Diving on the west coast is better than the east, and this is also where you swim with the dolphins; the hotel will arrange for you to go with a small, exclusive operator who leaves before the hordes arrive – well worth the early rise.

STYLE Too steep to farm successfully, the degraded land was purchased by Virginie and Jean-Marc in 1998. Initially accommodation was only for family and friends but as the garden grew, the thought occurred (Jean-Marc being an internationally deployed five-star hotel GM) that hospitality could supplement their increasingly ambitious project. The lodge has continued to grow organically, with the latest suites offering the ultimate in luxury. But the roots are very much in the gardens: a fertile spiritual retreat, with stone deities and labyrinths,



and hidden nooks for contemplation and meditation.

ROOMS (20) vary enormously in size and layout but each is individually planned and decorated with hand-picked pieces by artistic Virginie. If you can afford it, don't think twice about opting for a suite: privately located bungalows with their own plunge pools. Top pick is the Piton Canot Suite – the size of a small house, with the most breathtaking views from the private pool and terrace, this has to be the best room on the entire island.

DINING Just when you think Mauritian food can't get any better, you sit down to a three-course Creole meal created by Chef Eddy. Red tuna tartar and a palm heart salad could be followed by red snapper roasted in a banana leaf (served with satay sauce) and a lemongrass crème brûlée. If his Table Créole is on offer, you're in luck!

IN A NUTSHELL A classy eco-lodge providing a real restorative respite, close to nature. From €195 double DB&B. lakazchamarel.com





NORTHEAST

LA MAISON D'ÉTÉ

In 2012 Brigitte Baranès Conseil set about creating exactly what she was looking for: 'A small chic hotel, but with the ambience of a big family house, with good music, good food and a nice bar.' La Maison d'Été epitomises the idea of a house-hotel, with just 10 rooms sharing a great bar-dining area, a good masseuse, two pools and snorkelling right off the beach.

THE NEIGHBOURHOOD The northeast is the sleepy, undeveloped coastal corner. Here the gentle ocean backtrack could be interrupted by a cocky rooster, and the coast-hugging single-track road is almost always empty of traffic. Not the place to come if you're looking for nightlife, and it's right in the teeth during cyclone season (November to May). Outside of this, though, the area is supremely tranquil, pretty, and has by far the best selection of private villas on the island. And, of course, La Maison d'Été (which is itself surrounded by private residences).

STYLE 'It's a simple paradise here, and I wanted guests to experience this,' says Brigitte, who has employed a striking white and red palette to contrast the azure sea fringed by outcrops of black volcanic boulders. It's well-managed and maintained, a stylish, comfortable beach house – the kind of place where you live in a sarong.

THE ROOMS all feature sea views, though some are better than others; if you can, book one of the two rooms on the first floor with private balcony.

DINING is very good. The atmosphere



is more laidback than the fine dining at 20°Sud, with Buddha-bar backtrack while you tuck into simple but delicious food (order the seared tuna in citrus butter – so good I ordered it every night; my mouth juices up just thinking about it).

IN A NUTSHELL A family-friendly barefoot-chic hotel in a spectacular location. From €155 double B&B. lamaisondete.com





SOUTHEAST

ASTROEA BEACH

Located at Pointe d'Esny in the southeast, this is not owner-managed and so has not as much character as the other three contenders, but the location is fantastic and the staff super.

THE NEIGHBOURHOOD The southeast offers good swimming and snorkelling (Blue Bay Marine Park is just 2km from Astroea Beach, but one can snorkel off the private beach right in front of the hotel, too), and shopping at Mahébourg market. It's a supremely peaceful option despite being just 15 minutes from the airport (which does mean that you will see planes).

STYLE Like La Maison D'Été, this is a low-rise villa-style building right on the beach, but here the similarity ends. Architecturally it's low-key and old-fashioned, but the décor is a tad corporate bland and rooms could do with more TLC.

ROOMS (16) vary a great deal – the ones at the back have no views, but it's only a few steps to the beach, where you are likely to spend your days.

DINING takes place in the casual beachside restaurant. Lunch



is simple à la carte and dinner a choice between two starters and mains (seafood or meat, with a vegetarian option). The food is good, not exceptional, but the waiters are excellent.

IN A NUTSHELL Far and away the best boutique option in this part of the island. From €195 double DB&B. southerncrosshotels.mu



GET GOING DESTINATION: MAURITIUS

British Airways flies to Mauritius from Johannesburg and London. Visit ba.com.

For more on Mauritius, its beaches and fascinating coral reefs, visit highlife.ba.com.

A VILLA OF YOUR OWN

For many, the best way to experience a destination is to rent a beautiful house, so I went looking for beachfront homes that were in great locations, attractively decorated, serviced daily, and with an optional concierge service to book interesting tours and excursions. I didn't want cookie-cutter villas that were part of gated estates, golf or otherwise. They had to be really private, with individual character and managed by an efficient and friendly agent (renting directly from an owner can be fraught with problems – enough to ruin a holiday).

Local villa specialist OAzure ticked every box. Owner Guillaume de Bricourt and his reservations specialist Kerstin Kirkby took me on a whirlwind inspection tour, working our way from the northwest clockwise to the southeast, and the variety of the villas is unbeatable. Stand-outs were:

- **Ylang Ylang** [at Pointe aux Canoniers, near Grand Baie], all modern angles and the latest luxury finishes, and right on the beach.
- **Maison Coloniale** [at Trou d'Eau Douce on the east coast], an enormous sprawling 70s villa that belongs to an eminent Mauritian family.
- **Sankhara**, a Bali-inspired villa in the northeast [close to La Maison D'Été hotel], also right on the beach (sankhara-villas.com).
- **Silver Beach** [at Roches Noires, in the northeast], perhaps my favourite, a character-filled authentic thatched Mauritian beach house.

OAzure services range from airport transfers and tour bookings to restaurant recommendations and supplying bicycles, yoga instructors, chefs, babysitters etc. oazure.com

I also inspected a few stand-alone properties, one of which made me weak at the knees. I'd encountered l'Îlot (lilot.biz, pictured below) in the pages of décor magazines before and coveted a stay here; in the flesh it is even more special – a simply designed, elegantly furnished villa on a small island off the northeast coast (close enough to Maison D'Été to choose to dine there one night). Directly in front of the island villa is a small tidal bay that serves as a private pool, and the on-site staff are wonderful. The SA agent, Perfect Hideaways, calls it 'Island House'; the rate depends on number of guests and time of year, €300 –€1,500 per night. perfecthideaways.co.za

