



ISLE OF GOLF

Mauritius has it all; endless shimmering sandy beaches, elegant beachside resorts, a kind and courteous people and a growing number of golf courses. BY DAVID J WHYTE

What more could you possibly ask for? Sighting a Dodo perhaps? Hardly, for the national bird is already extinct although its spirit still stands tall in the form of memorabilia in shops all across the island. Set deep in the Southern Indian Ocean – a thousand miles east of Madagascar and South Africa - it is fast developing a reputation as a proper golf venue with eight 18-hole jaunts and a few 9-hole courses and a major Senior European Tour

event held at the tail end of the season. Come May 2015, there will be another key tri-sanctioned golf event that looks to feature the very best of South Africa, Europe and Asia in an event named, AfrAsia Bank Mauritius Open.

This first-ever tournament by the Sunshine, European and Asian professional tours will take place at the Heritage Resorts on Domaine de Bel Ombre on the southern shores of this idyllic island. With a prize fund of €1 million and an open invitation for players to bring their families to enjoy the

sumptuous beachside facilities, it is expected to be a top-drawer for all three Tours.

But how does this tropical Garden of Eden stack up for mainstream golfers more interested in finding the fairway than fancy poolside cocktails? In the past, the island of Mauritius was considered a luxury winter escape for families, honeymooners and couples. A game of golf could be uncovered on courses established by British army personnel as far back as 1834.

But when the island's ubiquitous sugar cane industry faltered (though you would never think it looking at the place today) golf gained a foothold and resorts saw the wisdom of offering a round or two to their clients. Over the past 20 years, seven championship courses were built near to resorts in the southwest and northeast of the island, in addition to the old British track Gymkhana golf club that is the oldest in the southern hemisphere and 4th oldest in the world.

The southwest corner currently offers three excellent tracks with another due to open in September 2015. They are Heritage, Tamarina and Paradis, all within easy reach of one another. The new Avalon Golf Estate built in the hills overlooking the southern shores will be equally accessible.

To the northeast there are four more: Belle Mar Plage's Links and Legends courses, the jaw-slackening Le Tousserok and Ernie Els' inimitable Anahita.

And you'll want to play all of them! But travel between both sides of the island is a little tricky taking the best part of two hours through villages and towns. It is quaint and interesting to do so but not the kind of drive you'd want over several days. It is perhaps better to consider Mauritius a two-centre destination where you spend a few days enjoying the amenities and golf facilities of both regions.

We based ourselves at Heritage Resorts Le Telfair, one of the finest 5-star properties you'll find anywhere. I visited here 10 years ago when the resort first opened and was fascinated to see how it might have changed or settled. It seems they got it right from the start, as I could see no perceptible change other than the feeling of a mature, well-functioning resort.

Heritage Resorts actually offer two luxury properties side by side on this part of the island. Heritage Awali Golf and Spa Resort has a relaxed bohemian feel while Heritage Le Telfair is a touch more sedate. Don't get me wrong; you'll be extremely comfortable in either. Guests are free to

use the facilities of both and between them are 12 restaurants, two spa villages, a beach club, a 1,300-hectare nature reserve and the 19th century colonial mansion restaurant known as Château de Bel Ombre.

If you should get bored of staring at the Indian Ocean from your beachside lounge, having freshly opened coconuts presented to you by the resort's gardeners, there are activities galore, most of them gratis to guests and include green fees on the Heritage course, tennis, watersports (including waterskiing) and bikes to explore the coastal road.

But when it comes to golf, the Heritage course was recently ranked in the top 10 in Africa by CNN. And it is challenging no matter which tees you choose. From the tips, the tour elite will be both tested and entertained. There's room off the tee but strategy is key to every hole. On a course like this you need to play it more than once to fully appreciate its subtleties.

Elevation changes, defiant par 3s and wide water hazards come at you with great regularity. My playing partners informed me there had been changes made in preparation for the AfrAsian event such as enlarging a few greens to create more pin positions. It was here that I found my

putting nerve sternly tested on greens that weren't too fast but noticeably motile.

Beyond that there are amazing panoramas especially looking back towards the resort and the Indian Ocean with the barrier reef better appreciated from this height. Stepping onto or off the course, there's also superlative Mauritian service. Staff could not be more attentive in setting us up for our round and welcoming us back to the clubhouse with a wet flannel and cooling drink. You soon get used to this standard of service – but it's never taken for granted.

While it would never be a chore to play at Heritage, you will be keen to try what else the island has to offer. Just along the coast - a mere 20-minute drive westwards -

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OPENING SPREAD FROM PREVIOUS PAGE: Aerial view of Heritage Golf Course in Bel Ombre.

LEFT PAGE - CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Teeing off at the site of the AfrAsia Bank Mauritius Open; Heritage Le Telfair Resort's colonial architecture; The sprawling grounds at Heritage Golf Course belie a difficult test ahead for the unique Tri-sanction professional tournament in May 2015.

RIGHT PAGE - LEFT TO RIGHT: Tamarina Golf Club, par 3, 13th hole; Le Tousserok.



Destination Focus

is Paradis Hotel & Golf Club. A resort course more in line with the skills of the social golfer, it is nevertheless worth sampling for its breathtaking location. Next to the sea, the fairways are uniformly flat, some tree-lined, others hugging palm fringed shores along a peninsula with Le Morne Mountain towering over the entire scene. The dark mountain is a great contrast to the lush, amusing beachside holes. All in all, it is an easy round, gentle and well paced.

From there, head further north and discover a course of an entirely different character. Tamarina Golf, Spa & Beach Club is a track with neither palm tree nor beach view in sight. This looks like a track carved out of Africa with giraffes roaming its fairways or the roar of a lion expected at every turn. All we saw was a wee monkey skirting the forest.

It, too, has mountain views; again somber and foreboding yet another dramatic backdrop to mark your drive off. The course winds through rugged savannah framed with mature trees along with hidden dips and fall-offs. The holes seem to have been designed to give ever more splendid views of the impressive Mount Rempart and its jagged peaks. While we were captivated with the layout - and it is a great course to play with plenty of length and tricky turns amongst forest-lined fairways - we could not hide our disappointment at the course condition. Green-keeping seems to be an issue here. I decided to drive from Tamarina straight across the island to Le Touessrok on the opposite shore. I'm not going to say it was a mistake. I very much enjoyed seeing towns like Quatre Bornes as I make my long commute eastwards. I might have taken a wrong turn somewhere and the drive and subsequent weariness didn't have a good effect on my game. GPS is unreliable on the island, and signs not easy to find let alone read. Yet somehow, I made it to Le Touessrok and boarded a water shuttle to cross over to the heavenly Ile aux Cerfs, an island where golfers and sunbathers gather in private enjoyment.

This island is hugely popular with Mauritians who board boats in their dozens to picnic on its idyllic eastern beaches. For a golf course, there are few finer sites. Bernhard Langer was commissioned, or at least put his name to the project, and the result is a course even he would find tricky to navigate. After some recent, fairly major modifications to make it more golfer-



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Spectacular view of the Ile aux Cerfs Golf Course; Anahita Golf Course designed by Ernie Els; Anahita Exclusive Beach at Ile aux Cerfs; Bicycles are an enjoyable mode of transport within the resort; Uniquely curved swimming pool at the resort.

friendly, Le Touessrok is still a test and a half. Therefore, you don't want to arrive here without your A-game. Unfortunately, I left mine in the car park.

If you are in good form however, this is perhaps one of the most exciting games of golf you'll ever encounter. I'm actually very keen to get back and take the Le Touessrok challenge again. It's that kind of course; one that intrigues and beguiles. There are some magnificent holes especially near the end where you are forced to cross dense gullies with nothing but trouble between you and a safe landing. There are no better examples than at the 17th, and again at the 18th, with a glimpse of the 19th temptingly set behind that ultimate green.

Then, there is Anahita, just a couple of miles south of Le Touessrok - or the Four Seasons Golf Club Mauritius at Anahita to give it its full title. It is a massive 7,500 yards long with fairways wide enough to accommodate even the most errant drive. You'd be hard pressed to find the rough here but don't be lulled into complacency. It is still packed with challenge and character and in perfect condition. There are some stunning oceanfront holes interwoven with rocks and tropical shrubbery. To one side is mountains and the other a vast crystal-clear lagoon so it is a great amphitheatre of golf with plenty of movement in the holes to keep you thinking.

The Resort at Anahita is a new lifestyle concept in holiday accommodation. Guests reside in rambling, spacious suites and villas scattered throughout a wide tropical garden. We took a grand tour of some of the commodious villas and were delighted to learn you could have a butler arrive to cook breakfast, or indeed, have dinner delivered directly from the restaurant. Each villa has its own infinity pool and offers a fully equipped kitchen, spacious lounges and well-appointed bedrooms.

The whole property is sited within 213 hectares of tropical lushness next to the crystalline waters of the lagoon. 'La Place Belgath' lies at the heart of the Resort, a lively village centre with bustling boutiques, a health and fitness centre, tennis courts, a

Useful Links

www.heritageresorts.mu
www.anahita.mu
www.fourseasons.com/mauritius
www.constancehotels.com
www.letouessrokkresort.com
www.tamarina.mu
www.beachcomber-hotels.com/golf

Destination Focus



Kid's club, a water sports centre as well as the golf clubhouse. There is a good choice of restaurants but for my money after a good game of golf I'd be happy to pick up the phone for a home delivery and stay chilled by the villa pool.

And finally, there is Constance Belle Mare Plage's twin wonders, The Legends and The Links. At the time of our visit, they were hosting the MCB Tour Championship, the European Senior Tour's season-ending event. While our managing editor is busy languishing in the resort's many wonderful offerings and taking in some exciting golfing action from the best over-50s of the continent, it is also interesting to note that they are trodding on the grounds of a deer nature reserve.

Offering two entirely different challenges, the Legends, where the championship is played, is built deep into the forest reserve, blending natural beauty, wildlife and tight, challenging play that has water hazards guarding fairways and greens every step of the way. The Links course, as its name suggests, is open but do

not let that lull you into believing it is any easier. With blind holes and sharp doglegs interspersed with harsh rock outcrops to trap the wayward shot, it is as engaging as it is enlightening to walk across.

While the golf is great, it is worth sneaking out of the resorts to explore this magical island. Taxi fares are reasonable, especially if you share. Markets are plentiful and colourful and the less touristy the better especially when it comes to prices. Driving in Mauritius is at best an adventure. We paid £40 per day for a well-used, very small Hyundai that came complete with its own set of rather unusual noises.

Roads along the west coast and through the middle are good but driving through the villages of the south and east was nerve-jangling with pedestrians, motorbikes, dogs and cats all using the road as an appendage to their everyday activities. Signage is also difficult to find let alone read. Still, it was fun driving and it does give you flexibility to explore island life. However, if there are say four of you,

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Cocktail Bar at Constance Belle Mare Plage is one of 11 restaurants and bars in the resort; Legends Golf Course built within a deer preservation site holds the annual MCB Tour Championship; The Deer Hunter serves as clubhouse for both courses as well as fine dining at night; The Links course, designed by Rodney Wright and Peter Allis is the newer of two courses.

it might prove wiser hiring a car and driver for the day.

One of the most delightful aspects of Mauritius are the people. Mauritians really are an elegant, gracious people with a natural charm and friendliness. It is interesting that they are also one of the most culturally diverse populations on the planet. The majority is of Indian descent (68 percent). Creoles of African descent another quarter and the rest an interesting mix of Chinese, South African and French with a few Brits thrown in from the old colonial days. There is even some Taiwanese looking after the fishing industry. Muslims mix with Christians and Hindus and in this day and age, it really does seem to be an exemplary society.

Perhaps living in Paradise helps. 