

MAURITIUS

Today we are escorting two of the 13 coaches that are leaving the Van Gogh on the "Highlights of the south of the island" tour. The coaches are small, underpowered, 20 seater affairs, although they are air-conditioned - just as well in this heat.

Firstly, we travel through downtown Port Louis, with its shabby shacks, grubby streets and hordes of people, cars, mopeds and flea-bitten dogs. We still have memories of the last time we visited this port, when Owain "lost" his wallet, so we are perfectly happy to be on a tour today.

As we travel out into the countryside, we drive through acres of sugar cane, pineapples, bananas and coffee beans. There are large irrigation systems in place to water the crops in this, the dry season. Between the rows of crops we can see dark red, volcanic soil. Trees along the road are a mixture of Guava, Lychee, Mango, Breadfruit and Coconut. Our guide tells us that breadfruit chips are much tastier than ones made with potatoes, and points out the local vegetable delicacy - the "Shoo Shoo" (not sure if this is the correct spelling!)



We then drive by an upmarket village, where select houses are being built on the side of the hill. There are a number of banks and posh shops here, and yet only 1 mile away there are some very poor houses made of decaying wood and rusty metal. Yet again we can see the wide gulf between the world's rich and poor.

Further on, we are shown some salt pans where sea water is collected and evaporated to produce salt for use in the clothes dyeing business. This is the driest part of Mauritius, and ideal for this process.

Our guide also shows us an area of the coastline where mangroves have been planted by poor fishermen. Apparently, fish are attracted to the mangrove roots, and fishermen who do not have their own boats can still fish from the shoreline.

We now travel up into the mountains, along winding, steep roads until we reach the cooler windward side of the island. A stop is made at the Chamarel waterfalls, and also at the "Terre Des Couleurs", a geological curiosity of 7 coloured soils.



These soils were brought about by the erosion of volcanic ash, and even after rain they still stay separate. Small test tube samples of these soils can be bought locally. Alongside the fenced-off soils, there is a pen with 3 very large and old tortoises. We are able to photograph and stroke these amazing creatures. Our guide tells us that the most sensitive part of a tortoise's body is it's shell, so asks us to be gentle with these venerable animals.

Our next stop is at a restaurant for a quick drink, and some fantastic views,



before travelling towards the Sacred Lake of Grand Bassin. Just before the lake, we stop at the 110 foot high Hindu Statue which is made of bronze- painted cement. At the lake itself, which is in the crater of an extinct volcano, we are shown the many Hindu Statues here, and are told of their meaning. Apparently Mauritian Hindus flock here in February to celebrate Maha Shivaratree, and to place offerings of flowers onto the lake.



Our next scheduled stop is at the Black River Gorges, where we have splendid views into the valley. White, long-tailed Tropic birds dance in the sky, and a couple of Fruit Bats fly noiselessly overhead. Our guide tells us that there are monkeys here too, but they must be hiding today!

It is now getting quite late, our trip has already lasted more than the scheduled 5 hours, and we still have 2 more stops to go! The next visit is to the compulsory(!) gift shop, where there are numbers of intricately carved model ships - a Mauritian speciality. No one on either of our coaches buys one of these expensive items, although many people buy smaller souvenirs. Eventually, we manage to get everyone out of the shop and into the coach just in time to visit our last viewpoint before dark.

Just as the sun is setting, we arrive at the volcanic crater of Trou aux Cerfs, and are able to take some photographs of the sunset and the inside of the crater itself.



We arrive at the quayside weary, but very happy that we have spent such a wonderful day here on this lovely island, such a far cry from our experiences last year. We also feel happy that we have successfully completed our first new role as Cruise Company Couriers