

LA REUNION

Today we are travelling on another excursion to the second highest peak in La Reunion - the Piton Maito. Here we will be able to view the Cirque of Mafate, one of 3 erosion-worn volcanic craters surrounding the highest point, the Piton des Neiges. We should also be able to see the mountain itself, and the plains far below.

Our 50-seater coaches, unlike yesterday in Mauritius, are very powerful, and travel upwards into the interior of La Reunion with ease. Unfortunately, the roads twist and turn so much, that the coaches need both sides of the road in order to negotiate the many hairpin bends. At times the coach has to stop while cars reverse out of the way, and sometimes the body of the coach is overhanging the deep ravines underneath.

For over 2 hours we travel onwards and upwards, towards the dormant volcano. La Fournaise (The Furnace) volcano is further south and this last erupted one year ago. Our guide tells us that the lava flows are quite slow-moving, and therefore not dangerous. There have never been any pyroclastic flows here.

As we travel up into the mountains, we drive through a number of small villages, including "Petit France", so named for its traditional French style houses. The houses are small, painted, concrete structures with tin roofs. They seem well cared for, and the gardens are a riot of tropical colour. On the roadside, vendors are doing a good trade with their barbecued chickens - the smell from these roadside stalls is making us feel very hungry!



Further on, the vegetation changes again, and now we can see Acacia trees, fuchsias and bamboo. A little higher, we see tree ferns, a type of indigenous bamboo and Mountain Tamarind trees. These trees grow in soil that has been scorched by mountain fires, which are common here in the dry season.

Under the shade of these Tamarind trees, there are grassy areas where there are picnic tables and barbecue areas. As this is a Sunday, there are many local people out here enjoying the fresh mountain air, and cooking their Sunday lunch. Higher again, and we now see that the trees have been replaced with heathers, gorse, and verbascum and tracts of lava run amongst the vegetation.

Eventually, we arrive at our first stop, the viewpoint on Piton Maito towards the crater of Mafate. Unfortunately, the view is obscured by upward swirling clouds that arise out of the crater itself. Occasionally we catch a brief glimpse of the highest peak of the island, and also of the plains below. Our guide tells us that the best view here is usually at 6 am, and often the clouds arrive later on to spoil the vista. We hope that one of our computer club members on the earlier coach will have taken a good photograph!



After 15 minutes, it is time to follow the same route down the mountain. A stop is made at a geranium distilling factory, where we are shown the process of drying the leaves of the lemon-scented geranium, passing it through boiling water, condensing it from the steam, and finally separating out the geranium oil.



Apparently, it takes 700 kilos of geranium leaves to make one litre of essence. After the process is finished, the spent leaves are put back onto the soil as fertilizer.

The last stop on this tour is the seaside town of St Gilles. We have been here before, and are looking forward to visiting the local supermarket to buy some supplies. Last year we bought some cheap Vodka here, and also some sugar free chocolate and coffee bags. Unfortunately, we only have 15 minutes here, which is not long enough to walk to the shops.

We feel that this has not been a good tour. Our guide did not tell us the things that mattered to us (ie when to get back on the coach, where the toilets are etc), and we had very little time at the scheduled stops. It seems even worse when we think back to the wonderful trip we had yesterday in Mauritius. It goes to show that the tour is only as good as the Tour Guide you have on the day.

