

Mauritius, *eco-paradise?*

Louise Atkinson visits a resort on the blissful East African island that promises its guests a completely carbon-neutral holiday

The gently undulating road that snakes along the coast of southern Mauritius is consistently ranked as one of the most scenic coastal drives in the world. On one side, sugary white sand dips into the crystal-clear turquoise sea; on the other, rich verdant jungle climbs up steep mountainous slopes.

My electric bike makes the 25km round trip from Bel Ombre to Le Morne feel completely effortless and I soak up every magical minute, slowing down to catch the eye of a gnarly old fisherman climbing out of his boat with a silver marlin the size of a small child slung over his shoulder; to inhale the garlic tang of curry being prepared at one of the road-side café shacks; swerving to avoid a grubby stray dog snoozing on the hot tarmac; and stopping to snatch a photo of a road sign randomly urging villagers to 'Help ever; hurt never'.

I've flown more than 10,000km to get here and I'm determined to make the most of every minute.

Thanks to the pioneering work by Greta Thunberg and Sir David Attenborough, we are all much more aware of our environmental impact, and I have been on a mission to try to reduce my carbon footprint. So the 3.5 tonnes of CO₂e (carbon dioxide equivalent) I effectively burned flying halfway across the world is weighing heavily on my conscience.

Environmental campaigners are urging us to cut back on flying and holiday closer to home, but I'm keen to chant the mantra of Mike Berners-Lee, professor at Lancaster University's Environment Centre. In his book *How Bad Are Bananas?*, he says if you do travel:

'I catch the eye of an old fisherman climbing out of his boat with a silver marlin the size of a child slung over his shoulder'



'Make your flights count, go for longer but less often, and do things you really couldn't do at home.'

Thankfully, Mauritius offers much more than your usual soak-up-the-sun tropical destination, although the beautifully warm weather (around 30 degrees with a refreshing breeze from October through to February) does make a beach day tempting.

This small island (the size of Oxfordshire) sits in the middle of the Indian Ocean to the east of southern Africa and 1,000km from Madagascar. The roads are pretty good (you drive on the left, just like in the UK) and by (electric!) car you can get from one end of the island to the other in a few hours (I spotted an electric car charging point in my hotel's car park), taking in waterfalls, coffee plantations, historic ports, geoparks and 330km of white sandy beaches along the way.

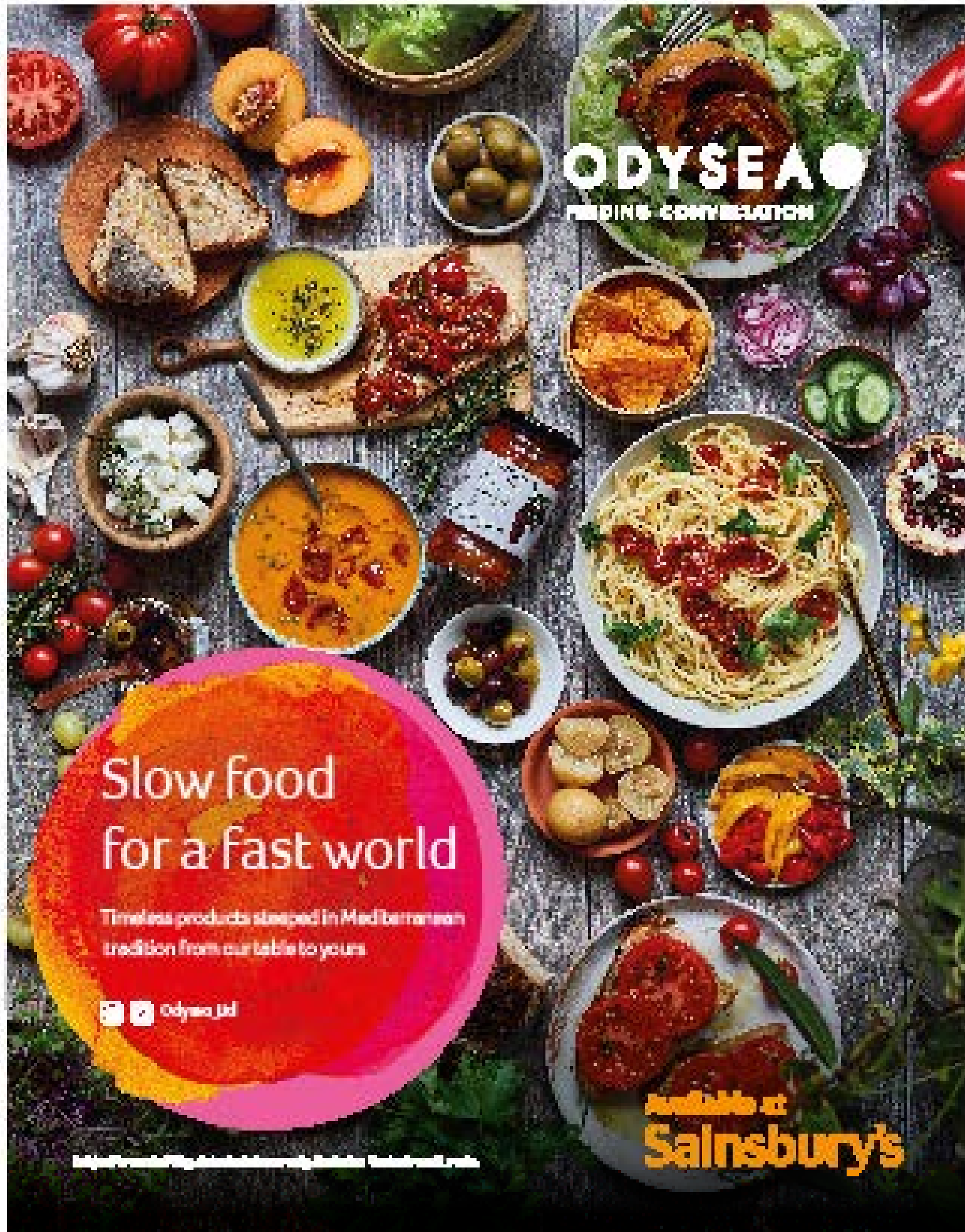
With paddleboarding, kite-surfing, kayaking and snorkelling on the agenda, and tennis, golf, hiking, climbing, or paragliding available too,

I've got enough going on to keep Prof Berners-Lee happy. But for me, there's an extra climate-friendly bonus: Heritage Resorts, the Mauritian company that runs two hotels (Le Telfair and Awali) and high-end villas in the south of the island where I'm staying, claims to be working so hard to reduce its carbon footprint that it can offer its guests a completely carbon-neutral holiday.

How is that even possible?

A video running on a loop in reception and all the rooms proudly tells how the team has gone to great lengths to monitor and reduce the resort's carbon footprint, offsetting everything through the purchase of 'carbon credits' that fund solar farms on the island and investing in reforestation to preserve the rainforest and the coastline.

The rooms are single-use plastic-free (even my electronic room key is a thin credit-card-size piece of wood); ►



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drinking water bottles are washed and re-used; the sinks, baths and showers are freshened up with environmentally friendly cleaning products; all suppliers are grilled for their sustainability credentials; boats are powered by electricity; waste glass (from wine and fizzy drinks) is crushed and re-used in swimming pool filters; and mini guests at the kids club get eco-themed coaching and environmentally friendly tips to ensure the message filters through to their parents.

But you can put aside any thoughts of rough rustic charm or compost loos. My bedroom at Le Telfair is larger than my sitting room back home (with a far more stylish sofa and reclining chair) and boasts a private terrace just metres from the sea.

Naturally, this is the sort of place that you'd expect to be offered a fulsome breakfast, but here I wake every morning to face seven types of bread, nine types of croissant, 10 types of jam (including homemade papaya, pineapple and guava jams, plus marmalade, caramel sauce, local honey and peanut butter), a dedicated omelette station, a pancake and waffle station, a chef who spends his entire morning cutting fresh fruit, freshly squeezed juices, porridge, curries, an entire honeycomb in a rack, and a generous plethora of cold meats, cheeses and cereals. There's also the usual eggs, sausages and bacon.

THOUGHTFUL FOOD

With so much excess, I confess I'm a little worried about food waste – uneaten food forms a huge part of our carbon footprint and who hasn't grabbed more than they could eat at a free-for-all buffet?

But I manage to pin down the resort's executive chef, Ravi Kanhye, who tells me his team is on a massive waste-reduction mission. Buffet plates have been discreetly shrunk by five centimetres and 'live cooking' stations have been introduced at mealtimes so food can be cooked to order in smaller quantities rather than prepared in bulk and left to sweat under heat lamps. Stale bread is made into breadcrumbs, orange peel becomes marmalade (he gifts me a jar – it is delicious!) and pineapple peelings are crystallised for dessert garnishes. Ravi invites me into the kitchens to see the new 'waste area' where food scraps are weighed, graded and monitored. He tells me untouched food is batch frozen and delivered to local food banks, and the rest goes to feed local pigs or to a composting unit that is run by the resort's gardeners.

Ravi is clearly very proud that all the food on site is now locally sourced – from Mauritius or the surrounding Indian Ocean – in a bid to keep a lid on transport costs. 'That means no salmon at the sushi bar anymore,' he says. What about king prawns (a carbon disaster if shipped in from Thailand where prawn farms are destroying mangrove fields)? 'From Madagascar!' he declares. And beef (animal products are carbon heavy, but beef is one of the worst)? He hesitates.



'My bedroom is larger than my sitting room back home and boasts a private terrace metres from the sea'



'Would you take steak off the menu?' I persist (annoyingly). Ravi flashes a delightful smile but shakes his head. The mainly European clientele here clearly wouldn't countenance a holiday without the chance to tuck into a juicy piece of sirloin.

A MAURITIAN MIX

Ravi and his team are clearly doing a great job, but I get the distinct impression the other guests aren't quite as ethically minded as me, and foie gras remains popular on the menu at the resort's fancy dress-up-smart restaurant, Le Chateau.

The classic Mauritian dish is a fragrant curry (meat or fish) served with rice and a kind of green lentil dhal (and unlike the Caribbean or the Maldives, food and drink is not particularly expensive here), the exotic flavours influenced by the melting pot of different cultures that make up the Mauritian people.

Although the island was originally discovered by the Dutch in the 1500s, it was taken over by the French, who brought thousands of slaves from Africa to work the sugar plantations. Slavery was abolished by the 1830s once the Brits took over, so workers were shipped over from India instead ▶



From top: the reception rotunda at hotel Le Telfair; lettuce leaf-styled prawn cocktail at the Infinity Blue restaurant; writer Louise at Awali's Coco Shack beach bar

This picture: The Bel Ombre Nature Reserve; below: a Mauritian 'flying fox'



3 Best BITES

and then Chinese merchants arrived in force. As a result, the modern Mauritian population is now a mix of African, Asian and European cultures all officially speaking English with a delightful French accent.

When you consider that the island's national mascot is the dodo – the large flightless pigeon that was chased into extinction on these very shores in the 1700s – it would be surprising if the Mauritians were *not* working hard to protect the biodiversity of their wildlife, and no trip to Mauritius would be complete (or eco-minded) without a four-wheel drive through one of the mountainous national parks.

GOING GREEN

It is so lush, green and hilly, that as we drive along the bumpy tracks in an open-sided Land Rover I find myself humming the *Jurassic Park* theme tune and fully expect a velociraptor (or two) to burst out of the undergrowth.

Our guide, Zino, is not-surprisingly passionate about preserving the local flora and fauna, enthusiastically pointing out fluorescent green parakeets and geckos and tiny fody (sparrow-like birds that look like they have been dipped in scarlet paint), and we spot deer and catch occasional glimpses of pigs. Zino rather grandly calls them 'wild boar' but these are the roughened-up ancestors of the domesticated pigs that escaped from farms over the decades and have been left to fend for themselves.

1 At the beachside Gin'ja restaurant (part of Le Telfair), a tantalising sushi selection of delicately flavoured maki, nigiri and gyoza arranged along a seven-foot-long platter is carried to the table high above the diners' heads.

2 A modern take on prawn cocktail at Infinity Blue, a sand-floored restaurant at the Awali resort. Tiny local prawns that burst in your mouth are arranged on a layer of avocado purée, which is smeared and lifted off the plate to look like a lettuce leaf.

3 Dangling on a rope swing seat at Awali's Coco Shack beach bar, sipping a sweet and spicy rum cocktail at 'golden hour', which makes your skin look flawless and every photo seem professionally filtered.

Everywhere I look, tree branches are weighed down by rows of giant fruit bats. These Mauritian 'flying foxes' are as big as cats and have a wingspan of over a metre, which is quite disconcerting when they swoop over your head at sunset, interrupting your cocktail hour chit-chat with their incessant bat bickering.

It might have been environmentally unfriendly to fly here, but I have discovered there are distinct advantages to thinking green on holiday – there's so much I might have missed if I hadn't tried to maximise my time here and had treated Mauritius like any other winter sun beach holiday.

When I ask safari guide Zino whether there's anywhere in the world he's hankering to see, he takes off his bush hat to scratch his head in confusion, and says: 'Why would I need to go anywhere, when I already live in paradise?' ■



THE DETAILS

Louise stayed at Heritage Le Telfair Golf & Wellness Resort in the Bel Ombre district in the south of Mauritius, in a deluxe sea-view suite (rates start from £236 per room per night for two adults). To book and for more information, visit heritageresorts.mu/mauritius-hotels/le-telfair-resort Flights with Air Mauritius or British Airways take around 11 hours (usually overnight), with prices from £550.