

Mauritius, The Gorgeous Paradise!

Our flight was delayed by one hour—which was spent on board the aircraft itself. On reaching the Ramgoolam Airport, Mauritius, we were received by a representative of the travel agent, Leena. We were their only clients that night, so we had the SUV to ourselves. The drive to the hotel took us 1-½ hours to a height of 1000 ft. Leena was very friendly. Like many of the local people she knew some Hindi, English and French, and of course Creole is the colloquial language. The population is made up of 60% Hindus while the rest were Christians and Muslims. Three generations ago the Hindus came mainly from Bihar, who came as labor to earn money. Everything looked very clean and awash in the moonlit night. I was fascinated by the cane fields. The landscape was interspersed with cane and rice fields with some wooded areas in between. We passed some villages, where people were singing and dancing. The houses and the merry making groups could have been Goa, for all we knew. It turned out that we had arrived on the Independence Day of Mauritius --- in fact our President was also in town to celebrate the same!

The hotel seemed very appealing. We were made to sit with a welcome drink, while somebody checked us in. But we were also talked into having dinner soon, as the dining room would be closing. Now that was a disappointment, because it meant no drinks before dinner! Anyway, we had the buffet, and we were pretty tired anyway. A bellboy, whose ancestors were from Maharashtra, escorted us to our room in a club car. The room seemed good. It was big and so was the bathroom, and had a verandah attached. We soon discovered that water had to be bought. Leena had warned us that we should buy water from the market, but

we never realised the severity of the situation. We expected at least one bottle to be complimentary. To top it all, there was no bottle in the mini bar too! So we had to order from room service, which cost us, Rs150 for a bottle of water!! The other surprise that awaited us was that the security tape that had been put around our baggage had to be cut and we had nothing to cut with! On asking room service, it took them a long time to agree to give us a knife or something—I would have thought they would have loaned us a knife or sent someone to cut it for us. No way! The bottle of water we ordered took forever to arrive. This was certainly not a very happy beginning. It was almost midnight before we went to bed.

The first hour or so after breakfast was spent in orienting ourselves with the hotel and its facilities. We booked ourselves for snorkeling. So equipped with flippers, goggles and mass, we got on to the glass bottomed boat, with 6 others. Watching the colorful fish was very mesmerizing! The colors were not as varied as we had seen in Seychelles, but they were white, turquoise and black ones. Chatting with the boatman Stephen was rather interesting. He informed me that his mother was Christian and father was a Hindu. On asking his father's name, he told me it was, Baizenutt. After some contemplation it dawned on me that the original name must be Baijnath! Stephen said the food they ate was mostly Creole. Since the Father was a fisherman, they had fresh fish everyday. He would have liked to be a chef himself, but could not afford the training required. There was this distinctive flat-topped hill which



The Berjaya Le Morne Beach Resort

really stood out in the landscape. Legend has it that in the old times, the slaves who erred (according to the rulers!) were taken up to the top and dropped down from there as a punishment. Unfortunately, I have forgotten the name.



View from the Boat

The sea along the shore here is so calm, that were it not for the corals, it would be like a pool! The water was as clear as glass. But the corals were quite pokey. It was rather late but I remembered at that point that someone had told us that we should plan to get into the water with shoes on (naturally, suitable ones!)

In the evening we strolled on the inner road along the sea. The entire route was lined with hotels. There was a public park also. In fact we were to discover that this was a pretty uniform layout for their public parks. This was also along the sea and had a 'forest' of Casuarinas. In India

one is so used to seeing coconut trees along the coast, that this was a good change. Somebody was having a party for which they were busy preparing a whole suckling pig on a rotisserie over a fire.

Dinner was pretty good that night. They had a buffet every night. The Chicken Satay and Roast Pork Tenderloin were particularly good. There was always an Indian section too, mostly Goan and South Indian. And after that we were ready for bed. Tomorrow was to be a bit early. We had booked a tour for which we had to be ready and waiting at 8.30 am, after breakfast.

Breakfast was one meal that I enjoyed throughout. The breads were good all through our stay in Mauritius, whether in the hotels or restaurants. This was another common factor with Goa. The fruit array was stupendous and the fresh pineapple juice was awesome. Most of their fruit was imported from all around the world, so there was always a confusing spread to choose from. Unfortunately one can eat only 'that much'! Breakfast also had an idli or a wada, or puri also Gujerati style. In short there was a great amount of Indian influence in the food along with the western and of course Creole.



Equipped for the Undersea Walk

The first stop on this tour was Belle Mare. The drive was 1 ½ hours long, through cane fields and we crossed the highway also at a point. At Belle Mare we got into a boat to go to the jetty, which was the center for the sea activities. We chose undersea walking. They put a huge glove like mask on your head resting on the shoulders. This has oxygen out let for when you are under sea. Then an iron belt is tied on to the waist and you go down! Yes you go down to the bottom to be amidst the fish. A bit scary, but once you settle at the bottom and know that a leash ties you, you feel okay. The guide throws bread

pieces now and then, so the fish crowd towards it. My opinion was that it is something to be done, but not the most pleasurable experience. The 15 minutes allotted to this experience was more than enough!

Coming out of Belle Mare we got some chilled beer to quench our thirst before we reached L'eaux Cerfs. One of the popular roadside food we discovered here, was a roti (thin chapatti with a spicy potato dish). Seemed like a legacy from India! To reach the island we drove for another half an hour and took a speedboat from the shore. And a speedboat it sure was! We literally zoomed to the island. I had to hold him on to my cap to prevent it from flying off! On reaching we bargained with the boatmen for a ride to the falls and snorkeling. He quoted 2500, and settled for 1000! The falls were at the end of a tranquil stretch of water, which was framed with clumps of green foliage. We just sat there in the boat for a while drinking in the quiet and the serenity. The only sound was of a few birds and the falls near by. On climbing the falls we were surprised to see a big Ganesh Moorti on top. We found a little spot where we could sit under the falls and get drenched. It had been raining intermittently and most of us were wet anyway.

From there the boat man took us to the spot where the enterprising ones could jump off and do some snorkeling. Even though I did not snorkel, I thoroughly enjoyed sitting in the boat which was floating gently and moving with the breeze. There was certain peacefulness about it.

The return drive seemed pretty long, as by now we were not only tired but since we had our damp costumes on, we were cold too. Besides that the traffic was at its peak, with people going home after work. We were so tired that we got a club car to give us a lift to our room from the lobby of the hotel.



Our stay at Berjaya was at an end. After breakfast, we checked out. We were leaving for a tour, with our bags and then going on to La Plantation. This day's agenda was Botanical Gardens and Port Louis. We all decided that we were not interested in the Gardens and would go to Port Louis only. For the tourist Port Louis consisted of the waterfront basically. The Caudan Waterfront had a huge mall along its length with a number of eating-places. On the opposite side was their naval set-up.

It was a very hot day, so it was nice to be indoors. After browsing around for a while I went into the casino to try my luck at the slot machines. Of course came out minus what I had taken in, as usual. We found Black Steer on the first floor inviting enough to have lunch. And the Fish and Chips we ordered were great. After seeing the museum in the complex, we reached the La Plantation around 3.30pm. We requested for a room change, because it was near their generator and pretty noisy (though we discovered later that all their rooms had a lot of 'machine' noises). The pool was spread out and not deep, but good to 'chill'. The beach here was disappointing, in that it was very small and looked crowded all the time.

Staying at La Plantation it is nicer to stay in their higher graded rooms as they have a patch of lawn in front and a hop, skip and jump away from the sea. The standard rooms did not even have a tea/coffee facility.



Flying High

For dinner we tried their beach restaurant—in all these hotels they have a scheme, which allows you a discounted price for their restaurants if you do not have the buffet or they have a special menu for the residents. I had a flavorsome-grilled tuna with a lemon butter sauce with mint. The fish was pan fried, till crisp on the outside and succulent inside. It was good! The next day was adventure day! Some went snorkeling, some went kayaking and some of us like me, went Para gliding. I was a little apprehensive, and my little grandson was assuring me there was nothing to be scared of, as he had done it the previous day! I have to admit; it was literally a 'soaring' experience. Suspended up in the air for almost 10 minutes. Everything looked far

away. It was a wonderful feeling floating in the air high above everything, but also a bit of an uneasy feeling that if you wanted to shout, you could not be heard, you just had to wait for somebody to look your way! Surely this is what it must feel like to be a bird. Unfortunately it got windy and a little cold when it was my turn, so I was glad to come down.

From enjoying kayaking, my other grandson had a bit of a nightmarish experience. He had got carried away with the tide, and was out of control. After some screaming and shouting they managed to get someone to rescue him. Made us realize that it is very important to see that the people concerned are paying attention to you while you are doing these sports.

We spent the morning at the hotel, exploring the surroundings. We walked along the sea and came back and relaxed. Went for a drive around the area. Checked the Oberoi Hotel, which was almost next-door. It was an exclusive 7 star resort, the ultimate in luxury. We then drove up to Grand Bay, the town nearby. We realised that this area had service apartments, which were close enough to town and yet away. Seemed a good way to spend time in Mauritius, in relation to a hotel.

The last evening at the hotel was spent enjoying the happy hours in their bar, which had some hot snacks on the house---This was done every Friday. The bar was a happy one, which the local population seemed to patronize too. There was a live band and some dancing. Gave us a little peep into the local life style! After dinner we went to see some Segga Dancing by the natives. What a beautiful sight! There were these tall, dark, beautiful women, with enviable figures. Dressed in their long skirts and colorful make up, these women were rhythm, personified. The calypso beat was so contagious, that I felt like joining them on the floor. One could keep watching them dance for hours together. I was



Segga Dancing



glad I did not give it a miss, as I had contemplated for a few seconds. A nice finale to an enjoyable stay!

This, the last day we had booked ourselves for a Dolphin sighting trip along with some snorkeling. We went a lot into the interior and did see a lot of Dolphins. Unfortunately, as with the whales, the dolphins jump out and into the water again, so fast that one cannot capture them into the camera! It was fun seeing how the various groups that were out Dolphin watching, would gather around spots where the dolphins were sighted. In fact it was a bit like Masai Mara in Kenya, when as soon as an animal was sighted the cars informed each other, and gradually all

the vehicles would collect, but the animals were not bothered whatsoever! We saw quite a bit of the shoreline of Mauritius. After the snorkeling, we were on our way back to the hotel. We had enough time to have a swim, before we checked out. Thus started our homeward journey.