

# Discover Shangri-La

**Try and picture a country where everyone gets on together. A gem in a warm ocean. A place where locals, tourists and strangers, greet with 'Good morning'. Where everyone is gentle and friendly to each other.**

This is a place where the police and civil servants are respected; a place where the whole population hit the beaches at the weekend to picnic, bathe and barbecue and clear up their mess afterwards. Please don't give up on me, I'm not going mad. Such a place does exist.

The place I speak of is Mauritius and it is a diamond in the Indian Ocean. I was returning to Ishak Mautbars visit, as Ishak had visited us from Mauritius last summer.

The first language is French. The second language is English, so that was OK. History records the French took the Island and the English took it from them, but the locals prefer French. This slight inconvenience is amply compensated by the fact that the driving is on the left.

When I arrived at the hotel after a fifteen hour journey, two days without sleep felt like two weeks without sleep. When Ishak arrived I recharged my batteries with a couple of glasses of the local Phoenix lager and we set off for a whistle stop evening tour of Grand Baie that took in some very vibrant restaurants and a full blown Creole music concert on the beach. By the time I got back to the hotel I was ready for bed and slept like a hedgehog in January.

My hotel, the Casuarina at Trou Aux Biches is lovely. It is a self contained resort and spa that is built in a delightful landscaped environment covering seven hectares.

It wasn't just the people that proved friendly. Ishak had promised that I would be 'interacting' with lions. Well, I have always thought lion cubs to be cute and cuddly. Ishak then told me that the interaction would be with adult lions. 'Yer, right,' I laughed and dismissed his suggestion as an absurd wind up. Fast forward to the following day. Casela Nature Park at Cascavelle is set in two thousand acres of hills and rolling savannah and was created in 2007. A ride out in an open top safari vehicle had us meeting among many other species, wildebeest, deer, zebras, peacocks and ostriches. Herds of wild deer gather along the banks of the Riviere du Rempart. It was then on to the lion cubs;

fifteen of us brave souls had elected to cuddle up to these fur balls. When we arrived at the large enclosure I realized Ishak hadn't been winding me up at all.

Of lion cubs there was no sign. What was in evidence in all their glory were plenty of Panthera leo. Er, full sized male and female lions weighing between 330 and 500 pounds. I instantly considered cancelling my impending 'one on one' experience between man and beast citing sheer cowardice as the reason. Instead a stunning Russian girl that I couldn't help noticing earlier nudged me through the gates and I found myself with Ishak and fourteen far more enthusiastic individuals, being eyed up by at least half a dozen beasts.

Rather un reassuringly we were all handed a small stick and told that the male roar can be heard up to five miles away and that they eat up to seven kilograms of food per day. Will they hear the loud symbol of my imminent death at the Casuarina Hotel, I wondered. The Russian girl fearlessly interacted, squatting down next to a female Leo and stroked its back with an affectionate keenness that I could never match.

With an ever increasing sense of doom I realized I was next up and animatedly stepped forward with my little stick, squatted next to the female lion and stroked her neck and back. The shame of refusing to do so at this late stage would have been too great so I grinned and pretended to enjoy myself. Meanwhile the huge male, sitting on a nearby tree branch with its tail trailing in the grass, seemed to eye me up with the nonchalance of one calmly contemplating its next meal. Ishak interacted with the skill of a veteran even vigorously scratching the females neck. She clearly enjoyed his scratching and directed his efforts by moving her head and purring in as gentle a manner as you could expect the Queen of the Jungle to manage. In a little while, after everyone had survived the Queen it was time to interact with the King. In this case, the large fanged full sized beast nestling on the tree branch. Again the Russian girl and her boyfriend stepped forward with their



fearless enthusiasm and once again my fate was sealed. The lengths I was willing to go to to avoid shame! In no time Ishak and I were stroking its mane and after giving the King one last pat on the head we moved away and out of the enclosure. I did feel a special sort of euphoria born of the fact that Casela is one of only three places in the world where such interaction can take place. It proved that a bit of fear is indeed a healthy thing. Ishak then suggested cheetahs. Sorry to disappoint you mate. NO. I set off to interact with a peacock! Ishak then took me on one of the things I like best – the mystery tour. On the way to the lions Ishak showed me Choisy Beach up the road from my resort. It is a three mile long curving bay of totally un-spoilt white sandy beach. A place where I was to spend a little free time in total peace during every day of my stay. From there we tipped the top of the Island seeing Grand Baie in its daylight glory and then we took the drive down the west side to Trou d'Eau Douce. The fun started. I didn't know it at the time but our destination was to be the beautiful Isle aux Certs. It was speedboat rides all the way. With four of us and the pilot on board we skimmed the waves at forty miles an hour racing other boats with their powerful Japanese outboard engines cutting hundreds of meters of wake behind them. It was bouncy and we all totally left our

seats, banging down with laughter and exhilaration all the way. The Isle aux Certs is magical, the waters so crystal clear shoals of fish can be clearly photographed right at the waters edge. We joined a barbecue next to the beach where we enjoyed fish, lobster and beer. It is an uninhabited island and at the end of the day everything is cleared up and everyone goes home. After the barbecue it was onwards again in a speedboat where we hit the coast again and ventured up a river and visited a waterfall.

The waterfall turned out to be the backdrop to a rather glamorous model shoot. Even Ishak couldn't have arranged that. The speedboat trip back was the best.

It was a speedboat race across open sea, waving at yachtsmen and catamaran crews on the way. Utterly unforgettable! We moored on a jetty and spent a couple of hours sunbathing and snorkeling on another part of Isle aux Certs before returning to the mainland in equally

exciting fashion. Ishak had excelled himself in his planning and introduced me to the boss of the whole tourist operation. He is a friendly, unassuming young Mauritian who was patient and polite enough to hear me wobble on about the fun day I'd had.

The next day Ishak took me to the South and East side of the Islands. Of course words to describe this are 'stunningly beautiful'. The beaches here are a bit more dangerous with tides that might be a bit much for poor swimmers. Photographically, as everywhere else, the coast is striking. It was the weekend and we met Ishak's family on a beach on the south coast. The community spirit is so great on Mauritius that large numbers of neighbours and friends hire buses at the weekend to transport everyone to the beaches along with their entire picnic and barbecue kit. The whole day is spent socializing. Ishak's family involved me in their Saturday picnic and the swimming was great. I really felt at home with this friendship and kindness.

I had the following day to myself because of a course Ishak had to work. He is employed as a Personal Protection Driver on Mauritius's elite driving team. That means transporting the Prime Minister, senior government officials and foreign dignitaries around the Island in the police' extensive fleet of four wheel drives, Mercedes and BMW vehicles.

For a young man, that is a lot of responsibility. So while Ishak worked I drove first to the Sugar Museum and on to the botanical gardens which date from 1735. A wonderfully tended tropical paradise set just outside the capital, Port Louis.

The next day was the day I'd been looking forward to. It was to be IPA day in Port Louis. I had the privilege to meet the Mauritius Police new Commissioner, Mr Dhun Rampersad, to discuss the benefits of promoting the IPA in the country. Of course Mauritius is a member, but membership has decreased with officers retiring and the former Committee being fractured. Mr Rampersad was gracious enough to allow me an hour's discussion on the merits of re-igniting the IPA. Not only as an obvious basis for officers visiting abroad, but also as an opportunity to share skills and

experiences. Ishak was present at this meeting and he is a pioneer in this respect. Mr Rampersad, along with his Staff Officers, appreciated Ishak's enthusiasm and agreed to set up a Committee to rekindle what has been lost. Of course this on the condition that the IPA International Executive can give them the support and advice necessary.

After that I met Mr Bruneau, Ishak's ultimate boss and a Deputy Chief of Police responsible for the northern part of the Island. After a very interesting discussion covering many subjects I left feeling I'd met a new friend. We met again at a later date and his enthusiasm for IPA cemented the importance of my trip. He is very much on board for Mauritius's new IPA awakening. This is a country with a huge amount of talent in their police force. They cover everything from neighbourhood watch to anti terrorist squad and Coast Guard duties.

There is a really good future for the IPA in Mauritius and thanks to the efforts of those mentioned we shall see a bright spark in the Indian Ocean. It was another day on my own and I fancied something a bit different. Five minutes drive away is the base for Blue Safari. It is a safari with a difference. It is underwater. To achieve this I handed over the fare and was conveyed with ten others out to the reef in Choisy Bay. There, after a briefing we boarded a ten man submarine and dived to a depth of one hundred feet exploring the reef and circling a wreck. The views of the coral and the fish were stunning. Each of us had our own large porthole and the adventure lasted fifty minutes. The submarine was built in Finland in 1998 and can dive to a depth of eighty meters at a speed of three knots. The pilot, a young French lad, kept us informed with a commentary in French and English. On our return to the surface we were given a certificate as a keepsake. I understand that since operations began in 1998 this submarine has taken in excess of twelve thousand passengers. When I hit Choisy Beach for my afternoon swim and meditation I reflected that the submarine trip was one of the most unusual things I had ever done. Apart from petting lions!

Oh I could expend another few thousand words to describe my visit, but the space in the magazine is too limited. Take my advice. Put a visit to Mauritius on your wish list of things to do before you die. You won't be disappointed. I returned to the UK the day before the country was struck by the worst winter weather in forty years and it was two weeks before I released my grip on the living room radiator!

George Palmer, Two Cities Branch.

