

A Little Piece of Paradise, Half a World Away

Off Africa, the Island of Mauritius Blends Many Cultures and Lush, Simple Beauty

By JACK GOLDFARB

PORT LOUIS, Mauritius—I am jogging barefoot along the crescent of a golden beach on the tropical island of Mauritius. Not a soul is in sight for miles. Early morning sunbeams dance on the radiant, crystal-blue waters of the Indian Ocean. Feathery casuarina trees ruffle in the daybreak breeze. On the horizon, craggy green-mantled mountains plunge abruptly into the sea.

In a waterside grove of lofty palms I stop and listen to the breathless silence intruded on only by the muted roll of the surf surging against the outlying reef. Emerging again onto the sweeping curve of sandy shore, I look up to see two misty iridescent arcs—a double rainbow—bridging sea and sky. I am all but overwhelmed by the idyllic beauty of the scene. It remains an indelible memory.

My love of Mauritius, a coral-ringed island 1,200 miles east of the African continent, 2,300 miles southwest of India and nearly 4,000 miles west of Australia, puts me in good company. Such questing travelers as Charles Darwin, Mark Twain, Joseph Conrad and Charles Baudelaire had visions of Eden here. Darwin, who visited many of the world's most exotic locales, expressed it this way: "How pleasant it would be to pass one's life in such quiet abodes."

Off well-worn tourist routes and rarely in the news, Mauritius is so little-known that international postal services often misdirect its mail to the sun-baked post boxes of Mauritania, in the wilds of the Sahara.

Though most travelers reach Mauritius from Europe or the Far East, our roundabout route took us from New York via the Ivory Coast down to South Africa. There, where we visited my wife's family, Mauritius' charms have long been known, the island being a popular escape destination, easily accessible from Johannesburg. To Adam, our 8-year-old son, the prospect of going to a tiny, hard-to-pronounce dot in the middle of the vast Indian Ocean was exciting enough.

The four-hour flight from Johannesburg on South African Airways landed us in Mauritius after dark, so the lush beauty of the landscape had to wait for discovery until morning. At our hotel, La Pirogue (booked in New York), in the western coastal area of Flic-en-Flac (marvelous name!), a jovial porter with a flashlight led us through the humid darkness to our rustic palm-thatched cottage, a cowrie shell's toss from the shore.

Though some visitors to Mauritius prefer switching accommodations to enjoy more of the diverse terrain, we spent our entire week based at La Pirogue; its laid-back friendliness, uncrowded beach and gratifying menus amply suited our style. For the more gregarious, the hotel offered nightly dancing and even a casino. A



Photos by WOLFGANG KAEHLER

A dot in the Indian Ocean, Mauritius is so little known that international mail sometimes ends up in the African Sahara nation of Mauritania.



English is official language but French persists, as in herbalist's signs.

redoubt successfully breached by Adam, who came up with modest one-armed bandit winnings before the management discovered his youthful presence.

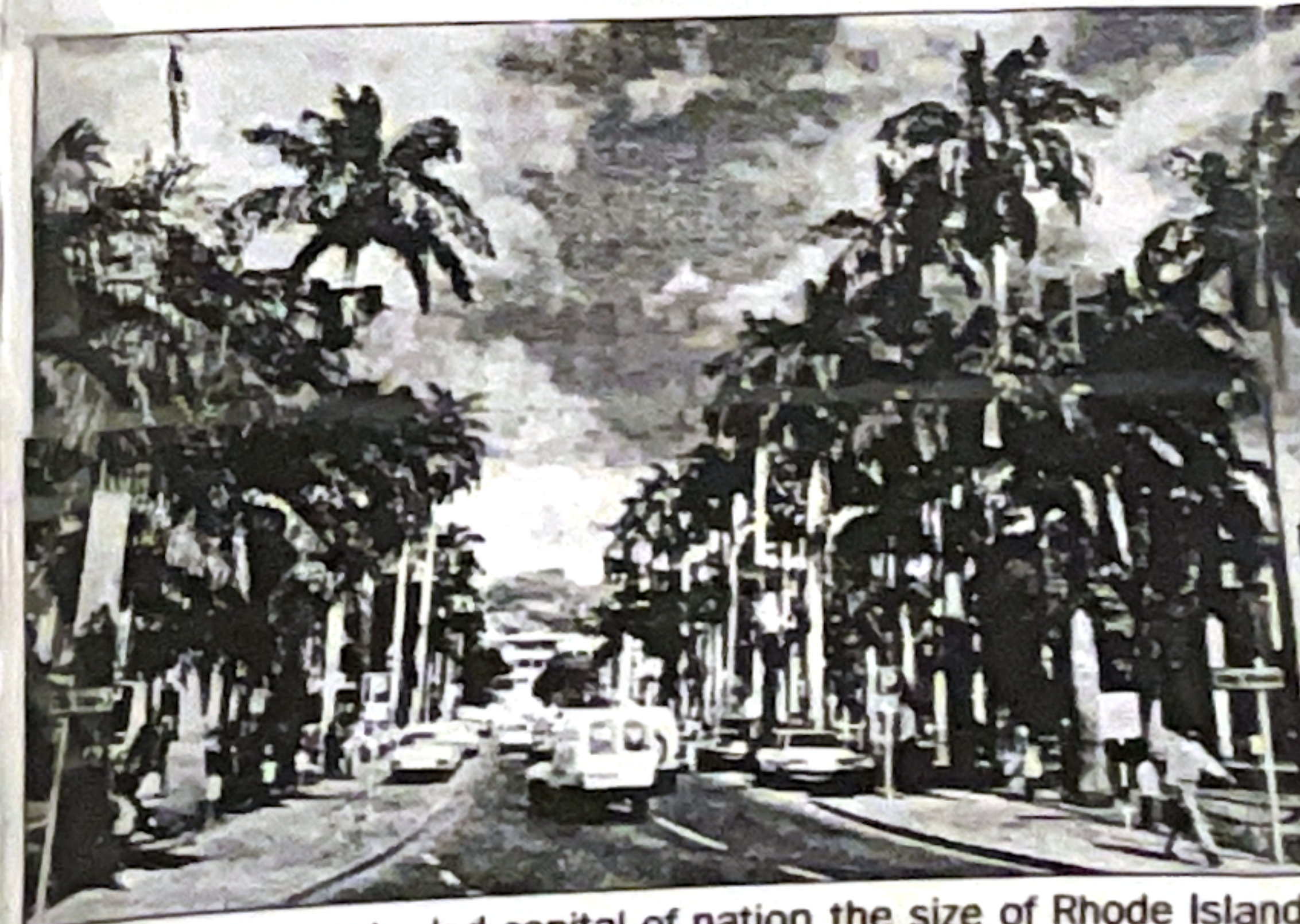
We tailored our own tours, informally viewing the island's attractions by rented car, avoiding hop-on, hop-off sightseeing bus rides. On our drives past the lagoons and creeks of the north coast, long stretches of white sand on the eastern side, and crisscrossing the 720-square-mile island, we never felt this was just another picturesque tropical paradise. Here, we encountered a remarkable mosaic of peoples of an ethnic mix that reflected the kaleidoscopic pattern of Mauritian history. The mélange of Indian, Chinese, African and European

"How pleasant it would be to pass one's life in such quiet abodes."

CHARLES DARWIN

ancestry has flowered into a population of striking physical beauty.

Although Arab and Swahili voyagers of ancient times are said to have discovered Mauritius, when Portuguese explorers waded ashore in 1510 they found no natives to embrace or chase them. Far more interested in reaching the opulent spice lands of the East, the Portuguese went on their way, leaving no mark except a pinpoint on their sailing charts that they called Cirne—for swan. With no



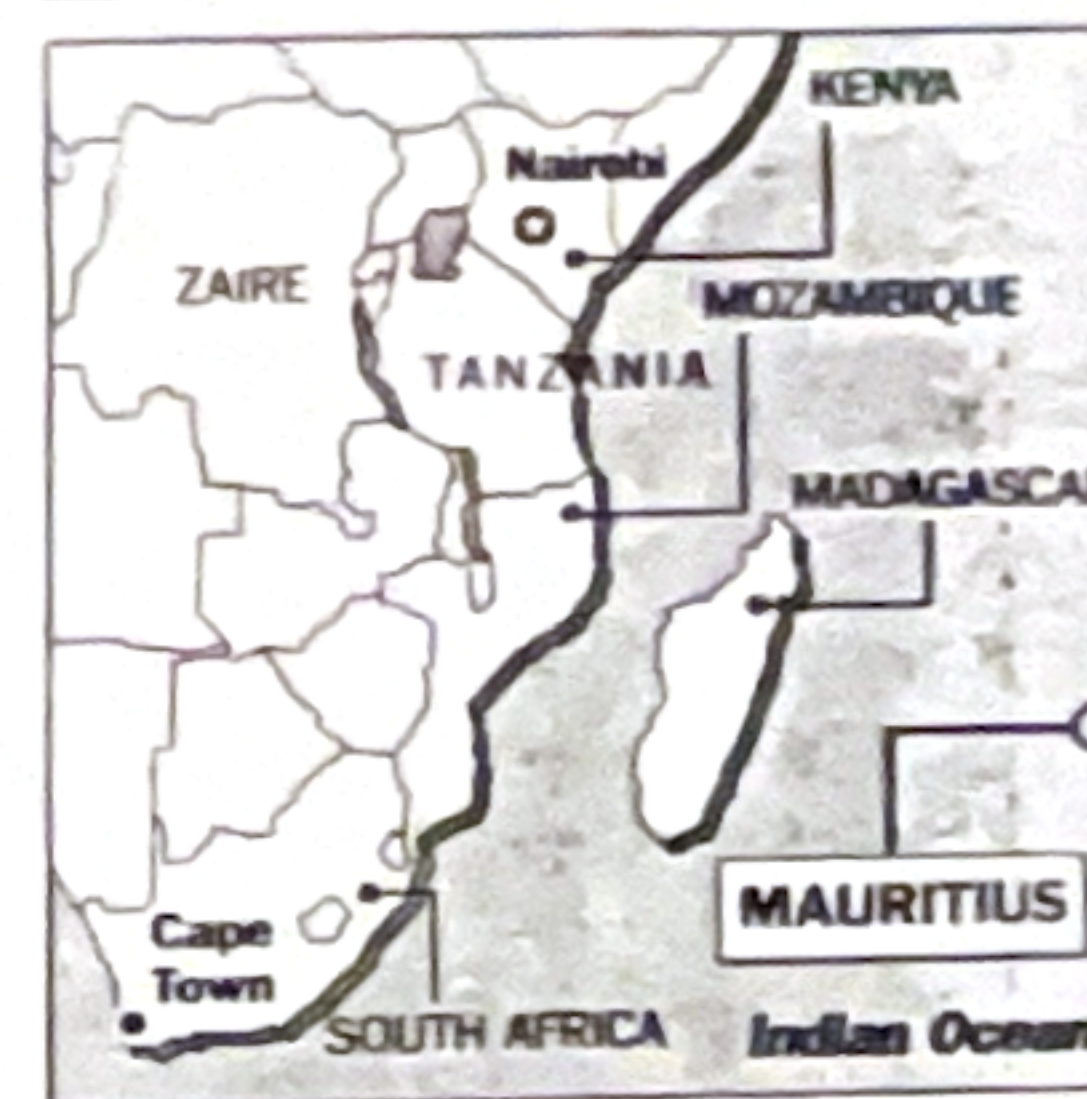
Port Louis, palm-shaded capital of nation the size of Rhode Island.

such birds on the island, the choice of name remains a mystery.

Ninety years later, when the Dutch showed up, the island was still uninhabited except for vast flocks of plumpish, clumsy birds that couldn't fly or run away fast enough to escape the barbecue-minded sailors. The Hollanders called the birds *doudo*, meaning "stupid," and feasted on the hapless fowl so voraciously that within 50 years, the dodo bird, as it came to be known, became extinct.

The Dutch named the islands in honor of their sovereign, Prince Maurits of Nassau, and entrenched themselves for two centuries, lucratively exporting shiploads of ebony and sugar cane. When the ravaged ebony forests finally vanished, the Dutch hoisted anchor and sailed away. Aside from the island's name, the Hollanders left one most important legacy. Sugar cane, which they originally brought from Java and planted here, is Mauritius' most vital crop today and its major foreign exchange earner.

Our island road map read like that of a French province. Most towns bore Gallic names such as Port Louis (the capital), Beau Bassin, Curepipe, Quatre Bornes. Even the street names were



VICTOR KOTOWITZ, Los Angeles Times

French. Often we stopped to admire French colonial-style wooden mansions and wrought-iron balcony railings.

My wife, whose distinctly French name is Simone, wondered as I did how the strong French influence came to Mauritius. With Mauritius' profusion of bookshops and libraries, it wasn't hard to find out the country's history. Off the shelf of a bookstore in Port Louis, we learned that after the Dutch departed, the French, in 1715, sailed in, raised the tricolor and renamed the place Ile de France. A tough French governor, Mahe de Labourdonnais, whose name is still a byword on this island, and who had sailed these eastern waters since he was a boy of 10, drove out the gangs of marauding pirates who had installed themselves. Today, treasure hunters still sift through the Mauritian landscape searching for buried loot.

The French were here for less than a century when the British expelled them during the Napoleonic Wars. Restoring the Dutch name, Mauritius, they abolished slavery and pledged to respect the religions, languages and customs of the inhabitants. But the Mauritians preferred to speak French, and gradually Mauritian French evolved into a Creole patois, a kind of alphabet soup with a robust Gallic flavor, heartily seasoned with Hindi, Chinese, Malagasy and Portuguese words and expressions.

The potpourri of languages boiled over in the late 19th Century when Muslim traders, South Indian artisans, Hong Kong merchants and masses of Chinese and Indian laborers poured into Mauritius. The multicultural explosion brought

Please see MAURITIUS, L18

MAURITIUS: A Tropical Hunger

Continued from L3

with its multi-culinary benefits for everyone, including hungry visitors like us.

For starters, satisfying our hunger at the Sunday buffet at the posh Hotel Saint Geran on the east coast seemed like a wonderful idea. This well-known spread, served on the terrace, dazzled us with its display of Creole, Indian and Chinese dishes by a virtuoso chef named Mesh Boyoonauth.

Simone and I dug deep into the goodies. We partook of smoked marlin, yellow pea soup with aubergine, tandoori chicken and a delicious Chinese-style *vieille roquet*, fleshy redfish sautéed in sesame oil. For tropical-fruit freaks like us, what better dessert than lavish helpings of papaya, litchi, jackfruit, mango? We ended with aromatic citronella tea and French

pastry tidbits.

While we gorged ourselves on the local delicacies, Adam was much more intrigued by the 3-foot-high buffet centerpiece, an ice sculpture of a three-masted sailing ship. He spent an hour gaping at the liquefying ice ship. I gaped also—at the tab, when it came. At 960 rupees (about \$65) per person, I thought it expensive.

Though this repast was the gustatory highlight of our stay, we enjoyed many other meals at restaurants and hotels across the island. The local boast of “the finest food between Rome and Hong Kong” wasn’t too exaggerated; we indulged in such exotica as a French chicken *pâté* in aspic, zesty Chinese fish-ball soup, pungent Indian goat curry and garlicky, tomato-rich Creole beef *rogaille*.

Exploring the country, we relied on road signs in English that

led us to Chinese shops where we bought French bread and looked at multilingual newspapers listing television and radio broadcasts in 12 languages including Urdu, Tamil and Bhojpuri. We couldn’t travel far without seeing the distinctive landmarks of this cosmopolitan island: elaborate Hindu temples, majestic white mosques, ornate Chinese pagodas, stately Protestant and Catholic cathedrals, and a storied little Jewish cemetery.

Diverse communities, living cheek-by-jowl, have absorbed so much of one another’s culture that Hindus, Muslims and Buddhists often exchange Christmas presents and Easter eggs, while Christians hang oil lamps in their windows for the Hindu Festival of Lights and set off firecrackers for the Chinese New Year. In the towns and villages

Please see MAURITIUS, L19

MAURITIUS: A Fascinating Blend of Cultures

Continued from L18

es, dissonant sounds somehow harmonize into a Mauritian medley. Within one afternoon we listened to the resonant plucking of a sitar, the plangent prayer call of a *muez-zin*, the click of mah-jongg tiles and the compelling drumbeat of the local dance, the Sega.

As varied as the sounds of Mauritius are, so are the sights, the most beautiful of which are produced by nature. A hundred miles of powdery, reef-sheltered beaches and secluded indigo lagoons are prime attractions, but the verdant interior of the island holds fascinating features, too.

At Chamarel, near the southeast edge of the pineapple-shaped island, we visited the mysterious Colored Earths, billowing layers of blue, green, red and yellow soil. Adam watched in fascination as the colors changed before our eyes in a chameleonic effect created by shifting light.

We trekked to the rim of an awesome crater—280 feet deep and 600 feet wide—peering nervously into the extinct volcano called Trou Aux Cerfs. From this height we had a bird's-eye view of much of the island shimmering in the afternoon heat. We went to the Casela Bird Park near the Black River, a sanctuary for more than 2,500 winged specimens from around the world, including the very rare Mauritian pink pigeon. In

this natural setting of streams, little cascades and pools, a number of misplaced monkeys, tortoises

and fish have also found a home. In the north, at the splendid Pamplemousses Gardens, imaginatively laid out under French rule two centuries ago, Simone, a lover of gardening and flowers, had a field day roaming the grounds.

Prized showpieces are the huge "floating saucer" waterlilies, more than five feet in diameter and sprouting enormous rose-white flowers, and the legendary talipot palms, which blossom once in 40 years, then die. The collection of palm trees at Pamplemousses is among the finest in the world.

Paradisal as it may be, Mauritius cannot escape problems of the modern world. On the day I booked a taxi to pick me up from my beach cottage at Port Louis, all the cab-drivers went on strike to protest rising gasoline prices. To my rescue came a friend, Somdath Bhuckory, one of Mauritius' leading writers, who fetched me in his car and, en route to his home for tea, made sure I didn't miss the highlights of the island's picturesque capital. The old town, built by Mahe Labourdonnais, preserves the French ambience with its colonial government buildings and its tiny shops squeezed into side streets leading down to the port. An ancient hilltop fortress overlooks the newly built sugar-loading dock at harborside and the Champs de Mars, an 18th-Century French military parade ground now converted into a racetrack.

Just off the palm-shaded main square, Place d'Armes, teems the crossroads of Port Louis, of all



JACK GOLDFARB

Domes of Tamil Hindu temple.

Mauritius itself, the central market. Redolent with the heavy aromas of spices, flowers and incense, and overflowing with tropical fruits, the sprawling Marché with its hawking, hailing and haggling, is by far the liveliest place on this island. The market offers everything from basketry and seashells (1,500 varieties in Mauritian waters) to the morning's catch of colossal fish and herbal remedies for every conceivable ailment.

On our last day in Mauritius I lunched at the Bonne Marmite Creole Restaurant with Kreshnowles Bhuckory, who works with the Government Tourist Office to bring more visitors to the island. "I

have qualms about wishing you too much success in your work," I said. She laughed. I hoped hordes of tourists would not endanger the uniqueness of this unspoiled isle. Besides natural beauty and pristine beaches, Mauritius has much else going for it. A sunny climate tempered by sea breezes. A virtually unpolluted ocean. No sharks, snakes, noxious insects. I read an apt description somewhere while there: "Away from the world, yet a place to capture its essence."

Along the winding cross-island road to the airport (taxis were rolling again), we drove through earthbound rainbows: scarlet flame trees, purple bougainvilleas, pink and white oleander bushes, lavender jacarandas, crimson hibiscus and yellow frangipani. And the emerald green of the ubiquitous cane fields, studded with black rocks piled pyramidally like primordial art forms, stark symbols of the island's volcanic origins. At the airport, customs formalities were as disarmingly informal as taking leave from a friend's house. The officials chatted amiably; we exchanged a joke or two; each of the officers wished Simone, Adam and me a personal bon voyage, complete with handshakes.

All of which saddened us more. We felt it was Eviction Day in the Garden of Eden. Especially Adam. He still keeps asking, when are we going back?

Goldfarb is a New York free-lance writer.