

Eating in Mauritius

11 Jan 2008 by Nick Lander/FT

Although the executive decision to forego our usual turkey for something spicier in much warmer Mauritius was not initially enthusiastically embraced by all of our traditionally-minded children it was reinforced by two professional conversations.

The first was with Indian chef, Vineet Bhatia (due to open his less expensive, cleverly-named Urban Turban restaurant in west London next week), who has operated a branch of his more elegant Rasoi by Vineet on the island for several years. "I must have been there twenty times or more now," he told me "but I am always so sad to leave that every time I land back at Heathrow there is a tear in my eye."

The second intriguing observation came from a Frenchman who explained how Mauritius's culinary mix of French, Indian, Chinese, and Creole food, based on its compelling mixture of indigenous ingredients and spices, has now become a magnet for numerous French chefs, an attraction facilitated by its proximity to the French island of Reunion.

Maximising my exposure to all these influences then became the challenge as, although most of the best restaurants are in the hotels around the coast they are, I feel, physically cocooned and only offer half board at this time of the year, something that is a professional impediment.

The solution arrived via a beach house on the island's north-east coast which came with the added advantage of Nira and Premila, both, it transpired, excellent cooks. Whatever food I bought they would prepare Creole style as mild or as spicy as we specified.

This presented the opportunity to hit the spice trail – although I was told off the first day I did so for forgetting the essential masala powder, a combination of coriander, cumin, pepper, cloves and cinnamon. These were supplemented with local chickens, butchered to Halal specifications, local venison (that makes an excellent curry) and frozen Australian lamb. Mauritius also produces excellent peanut butter while a particularly unctuous honey comes from Rodrigues, the small island 500 kilometres to the east. But once again, it transpired, the proximity of the sea does not necessarily mean it is easy to buy fresh fish.

Best of all however, this arrangement enabled me to stop at the island's most distinctive food shops, the small wooden roadside stalls where two generations fulfil two very distinct functions: while their mothers weigh, serve and take the cash, the children calculate what is owed using their mobile phones. Here are pungent peppers and chillis; sweet, small bananas and pineapples, which are thoughtfully available peeled; luscious lychees on the branch, sold for one Mauritian rupee, or two pence, each; and tomatoes, green beans and aubergines that would not look out of place in any market in the south of France.

This arrangement meant not just an introduction to the skills of cooking a karri, as a Mauritian curry is called, but also left us free to explore the wide and contrasting range of the island's restaurants.

This began with two meals in the small coastal town of Trou D'Eau Douce at Tino's and Le Four à Chaud. The former is an enjoyable, simple fish restaurant but the latter is definitely more sophisticated with a waiting team that seems animated, welcoming and genuinely keen to please. Their role was made easier by some very well-prepared food including a squid starter that was only possible because it was delivered to the kitchen as our order was being taken; the local grilled lobster for £16; and two desserts of yesteryear, crepes suzettes and bananas flambéed in rum although this tasted as though the rum, rather than the bananas, were in fact the main ingredient.

Our forays to the two very different restaurants in the One & Only's Le Saint Geran hotel provided a striking contrast to these two meals in many ways - not least that the much higher prices are in euros rather than the local currency. But Spoon by Alain Ducasse and Rasoi by Vineet also provided an object lesson in how, if the hotel management is going to outsource its restaurants, it can do so very successfully.

These two chefs, chosen initially by its South African chairman Sol Kerzner and then integrated by Patrick John, his COO for hospitality, have an obvious logical and sympathetic reason to be there, with Ducasse's team picking up on the French connection and Bahtia on the island's Indian influences. But sensitively too they have been physically separated so that Spoon is in a rather anonymous but determinedly chic room off the hotel's lobby dominated by a vast open kitchen as though to reinforce its commitment to culinary precision, while Rasoi is a short walk from the hotel in a much more open wooden construction overlooking the lagoon.

Spoon's original distinction - that its menu layout allows you to choose any sauce or accompaniment with any main course - has seen it spread to numerous locations round the world. But it seems here to reach its apogee, mainly because the kitchen can so easily call on so many exciting ingredients. Squid comes stuffed with coconuts and cashews; spaghetti is enveloped in a thick seafood sauce topped with clams; the meat of a marron, a small lobster, is artfully picked from its shell, mixed with a mild turnip curry, and is an excellent accompaniment to braised palm hearts, another local delicacy; while a shoulder and rack of milk-fed lamb are enlivened by those essential garam masala spices. What also distinguishes this restaurant is the make-up of its management structure: a French chef, Philippe Duc and a Mauritian team of waiters supervised by Andreas Landsvik, the benevolent Norwegian maitre d'.

Rasoi's setting may seem Polynesian but the staff leave you no doubt of its Indian origins with those on the polished dark wooden floor in brightly coloured silks and a row of tall chefs in their whites in front of another open kitchen, this time dominated by a tandoor oven. It is Indian food but with Bhatia's deftness of touch with the herbs and spices, most obvious in a first course of smoked marlin with a palm heart salad, a Mauritian curry of prawns and chicken and bourgeois, a local, firm white fish in a sumptuous coconut curry sauce. Two other welcome distinguishing marks on this intriguing island are his chocolate samosas and an excellent wine list.

Le Four à Chaud, Trou d'Eau Douce, tel 480.1036

Restaurant Tino, Trou d'Eau Douce, tel 480.2769.

Spoon des Iles by Alain Ducasse and **Rasoi by Vineet** at Le Saint Geran
www.oneandonlyresorts.com/flash.html

Urban Turban, 98 Westbourne Grove, London W2, 020-7243 4200.