

# REUNION ISLAND,

# SECRET

## of the Indian ocean

By Ted Cookson

**La Possession port**



**View into Cirque de Mafate from port**



**Welcome band at dock**

**Lava beach on west coast**



**West coast white sand beach**



Reunion, an overseas department of France, is situated some 800 km (500 miles) east of Madagascar and 200 km (130 miles) southwest of Mauritius. With a length of 63 km (39 miles), a width of 45 km (28 miles) wide, and an area of 2,512 square km (970 square miles), Reunion was visited by the Portuguese in 1635 and then first occupied by the French from 1642 to 1649. Although under British control from 1810 to 1815, immigration from France over the succeeding two centuries plus immigration of Africans, Indians, Chinese and Malays has given rise to a mix of ethnicities on the island.

My last visit to Reunion was by cruise ship in April 2008. I had reserved a Hertz rental van which the firm had agreed via email to deliver at the port. Although Hertz kept reassuring me by phone that the van was on the way and would arrive shortly, after an hour and 45 minutes of waiting I finally gave up and hired a taxi van for 200 euros to take our party of six on a six-hour circular drive around the beautiful verdant island.

From the port at La Possession on Reunion's west coast we drove past the many beach resorts which stretch south from St. Paul 45 km (28 miles) to St. Louis. The best sandy beaches are on the west coast of the island. Although we didn't have time that day to make the side trip from St.



**Our tour group with taxi van**

**Channel in west coast lava flow**



**Plaine des Sables in volcanic crater**



**High Plains through van windshield**



Louis into the centre of the island to view Cirque de Cilaos, luckily I had done that on a previous visit. Reunion boasts three cirques, which are spectacular calderas in the interior of the island formed long ago by collapsing underground lava chambers. Eventually deep canyons were eroded from these amphitheatres out to the sea. The roads into the cirques wind through these canyons up to grand vistas of volcanic peaks and forested ravines. The 37-km (22-mile) road from the coast at St. Louis up to Cilaos boasts over 400 bends. Cilaos, situated at a height of 1,200 meters (3,937 feet) and with a population of 6,000, was developed as a spa in the late nineteenth century. On 15-16 March 1952 1,870 mm (73.6 inches) of rainfall fell at Cilaos. This is the world record for the most rainfall ever recorded in a 24-hour period! Tourists with enough time should attempt to view or visit all three of Reunion's cirques.

From St. Pierre south of St. Louis we headed inland, driving up to Reunion's High Plains which lie at about 1,000 meters (3,281 feet) and which separate the island's cirques from its volcano. As we climbed, the temperature became much more comfortable. The highlight of our day trip to Reunion was the lunar-like crater of Piton de la Fournaise, one of the world's most active and yet most accessible volcanoes. This shield volcano has erupted more than 100 times since 1640. The lava flow from Piton de la Fournaise is roughly three million cubic meters (about 4 million cubic yards) per day! Piton de la Fournaise is similar to the volcanoes on the Big Island of Hawaii in that they are all located above hot spots in the earth's crust.

Following our visit to the volcano, we stopped at the Nez de Boeuf viewpoint over the spectacular canyon of the Riviere des Remparts. A popular ten-hour walk leads from this point down the steep cliff and onward by trail through a national forest to the town of St. Joseph on the south coast. Then, after crossing through Reunion's interior, we descended to St. Benoit on the island's east coast and then continued north to the capital of St. Denis. Founded in 1668, St. Denis was named for a ship which had sunk there. With a population of 140,000, St. Denis, constructed on a grid pattern along the north coast, has a few buildings interesting for their architecture as well as a pretty seaside park.

Although the population of Reunion is over 800,000, about half of the inhabitants actually live in France. Nevertheless, interestingly, there are some 340,000 automobiles on Reunion! Needless to say, the road system is excellent, and there is a motorway which wraps around a fair amount of the island's coastline.

Reunion is not usually thought of as a dive destination. However, the island's west coast boasts some colourful, even stunning diving sites offering a wide array of tropical fish. In October and November pelagic species such as barracuda and tuna are also in evidence. The Indian Ocean waters

**Nez de Boeuf viewpoint**



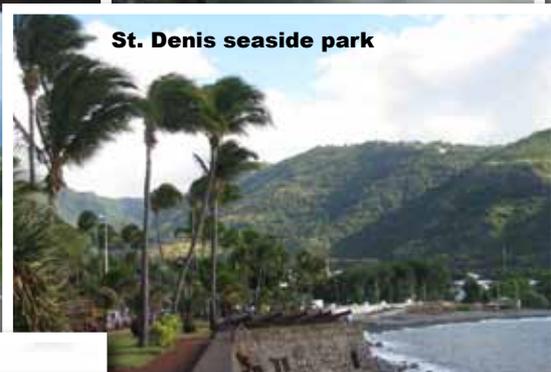
**Road into St. Benoit**



**View over Riviere des Remparts**



**St. Denis seaside park**



**North coast rocky beach & cliffs**



**Downtown St. Denis**



surrounding Reunion are warmest (28°C/82°F.) between October and April. At the other extreme, water temperatures drop to 21°C/70°F in August. Divers will want to avoid the height of the cyclone season, which is in February and March. (Cyclones may arise anytime from December through March). Reunion's hot and rainy summer stretches from December until April while the cool, dry winter lasts from the end of April until October. Reunion attracts most tourists from late June until early September but there are also tourists aplenty from October until early January.

**ABOUT TED COOKSON:** Egypt's most widely-traveled travel agent, Ted has been to every country in the world! He has also visited 310 of the 319 destinations on the list of the Travelers' Century Club (visit [www.eptours.com](http://www.eptours.com) and refer to World Travel Club). A travel agent in Cairo since 1986, Ted manages EGYPT PANORAMA TOURS, a full-service travel agency, at 4 Road 79 (between Roads 9 and 10, near the "El Maadi" metro station) in Maadi. Contact Egypt Panorama Tours (open 7 days a week 9 AM-5 PM) at: Tel. 2359-0200, 2358-5880, 2359-1301. Fax 2359-1199. E-mail: [ept@link.net](mailto:ept@link.net). Web site: [www.eptours.com](http://www.eptours.com). The password for residents is eptcool. Both text and PDF versions of all of Ted's travel articles published since 2002 are archived online at [www.eptours.com](http://www.eptours.com) under "Ted's International Travel Articles." Many of the archived articles also contain video clips!