

5 things every South African should experience on Reunion Island

 By [Ryan Enslin](#)

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"Pack your bags, we're off to Reunion Island next week."

My thoughts immediately drifted to scenes of a typical island holiday. Visions of loungers on a beach shaded from the harsh African sun by locally grown grass made into thatch; cocktails for days on hand as a speedboat towing a middle-aged gentleman, complete in the raptures of rekindling his former glory, whizzed past. Speedo and all. Grand hotels in the order of The Palace of the Lost City with Club Mykonos-esque organised entertainment for all.

I couldn't have been more wrong.



Firstly, Reunion Island does not form part of the African continent at all, despite being a mere four-hour flight from Johannesburg and just east of Madagascar. It is indeed a department of France.

Effectively, Reunion Island is a province of France, which just happens to not be on the same continent. Like, if Cape Town

was not actually on the African continent, but somewhere else. Her residents are fully European, and French at that.

Secondly, and most importantly, Reunion Island is not your typical island getaway. There are other islands that offer that type of holiday. The island came into being as a result of a volcanic eruption some 2,5 million years ago and today plays home to the world's most active volcano, the Piton de la Fournaise.



She also boasts over 1,900km of mountain, forest and coastal trails to explore – be it on foot or by bike. Such snippets of information should have been among my first clues as to what experiences lay ahead, north of the Tropic of Capricorn and south of the Equator.

So, herewith, I present my essential list of the five must-do things every SA'ffer should experience while on Reunion Island.

Have breakfast with a local

My first day on Reunion Island saw us head, literally, for the hills, and the farm AVPPHSM (Association for the Promotion and Preservation of the Heritage of the Sainte Marguerite Highlands) owned by Philippe Morel.

A sprightly 60-something-year-old, Philippe, looks at least 15 years younger than what his identification book declares; but I put that down to the sugarcane farm he runs. He is also a passionate cook and prepared a traditional Creole breakfast of fried rice and fish sausage, cooked on an open fire in his modest kitchen.



Ever the showman, Philippe shared his insights into local Creole culture as the meal literally came to life before my very eyes. As I enjoyed my first taste of Reunion Island, Philippe spoke of the challenges facing his farming operation, lamenting the fact that his sons had opted to move to mainland-France, rather than work the fields.

This was to be a recurring theme throughout the days spent on Reunion Island, as the advantageous position of being a department of France (remember, that if Cape Town was not actually on the African continent but elsewhere example?) offered locals truly European opportunities.

After breakfast, we walked off the meal with a stroll through the sugarcane fields – perhaps this is how Philippe maintains his rather fit and healthy disposition?



Attempting to eat sugarcane straight from the abundance of Mother Nature proved to be a challenge, but I, fortunately, left with all my teeth intact. Truly, on the top of a mountain in rural Reunion, I found my first glimpse into a culture that spoke deeply to my soul. You have to do breakfast with a local.

Drive 421 hairpin bends over 32km to Cilaos

You're going to need three hours for this, check it out [here](#).

Capetonians will love this one with scenes reminiscent of Chapmans Peak Drive but on a larger scale.



At the end of this journey, you arrive at the Piton de la Fournaise, the world's most active volcano, which happened to be

erupting during our time on Reunion. That same day also happened to be rather overcast, which severely limited our viewing opportunities. That said, I rather like the shot I was able to grab below.

Be sure to stop off at the La Roche Merveilleuse (AKA the wonderful rock) for a spectacular view of Cilaos. I would seriously recommend overnighting in the village, to allow time to take in all that is on offer, including the Eglise Notre Dame Des Neiges in all its resplendent beauty, as well as the street art found throughout the village.



Although we did not overnight in Cilaos, check out the fine establishment of [Tsilaosa Hotel](#) for an authentic Cilaos experience.

Visit the Volcano Museum on the way back from Cilaos

Interactive displays and the clever use of lighting result in a wonderful synopsis of the formation of Reunion Island. The 4D cinema with a simulated journey through a lava tunnel was lots of fun.

Entrance to the museum is free although there is a nominal cost for a guided tour, which is the best way to experience this rather unique space.



Engage with nature in one of four ways

Boasting the highest mountain peak in the Indian Ocean, the Piton des Neiges at 3,069m and over 200 micro-climates, not to mention that 40% of its surface area has been declared a Unesco Natural World Heritage Site, Reunion Island is for the outdoors lover.

Mpumalanga locals, you will feel right at home on this island.

Firstly, take in her splendour by helicopter for a view of the island that puts her natural beauty into perspective. Local charter [Helilagon](#) offers an ultimate tour option for €279 for a 45-minute flight as you soar over the three calderas of Reunion, Le Trou de der, the acclaimed lagoon and the picturesque West Coast.

Flights leave from the west coast town of St Gilles, so I recommend you do this towards the end of your stay on the island,

perhaps on your way back to the airport in St Denis in the north.

Secondly, for a view of Reunion from a different perspective, set sail on a sunset cruise on the largest catamaran in the Indian Ocean, built-in Cape Town no less. The [Le Maloya](#) sets sail from the Titan Marina in La Possession and is a great way to end off a day spent exploring. Sip on cocktails and enjoy tapas while lounge music coaxes you into a well-deserved, trans-like state of relaxation.

Thirdly, and admittedly I did not engage in this particular pursuit myself but others in our group did, enjoy a variety of canyoning activities from various spots spread across the island. Reunion is suited to these activities, thanks to her geographically-diverse landscape forged from volcanic rumblings and resultant lava flows, from deep within the Indian Ocean. Even if you just take in her natural beauty while others head off armed with ropes and hooks of all sorts, she is quite breathtaking.



Lastly, marvel at the effects of lava flows to be found throughout the island. Whether it be the famed Lava Church, the Notre Dame des Laves, found at St Rose on the east coast, which was miraculously spared destruction in 1977 after an eruption of the Piton de la Fournaise, or the fiery [Cap Mechant](#) with its splendid black cliffs beaten and shaped by the mighty Indian Ocean, such are sights you will not encounter every day.



Take time out on a beach on the west coast

All South Africans will appreciate the beautiful beaches found along the west coast of the island, famed for the markets, marinas, open-air theatre and bustling nightlife. We took time out at the newly established four-star [Hotel Residence and Spa Ness by D-Ocean](#).

Nestled in a tropical garden and surrounded by a coconut grove on the La Saline Les Bain lagoon in the town of St Gilles les Bain, time spent in this tropical paradise allowed for some much-needed downtime after four days of exploration.



Think Atlantic Seaboard meets Durban's Umhlanga mile, but with a French accent. The west coast of Reunion is where you'll spend your typical beach getaway, hopefully, without the midlife crisis speedboat incident of my initial island visions.

Getting there

Hopping over to Reunion Island is easy and hassle-free, especially as it's visa-free for South Africans. Regional carrier [Air Austral](#) operates up to three flights a week direct from Johannesburg.

Being a department of France, the Euro is the currency used on Reunion Island and the locals speak French. Do yourself a favour and purchase a local sim card on arrival at Roland Garros Airport to prevent communication hassles with the infamous French (islanders are French in every respect, so Google Translate will come in handy).

A big thank you to the guys from Reunion Island Tourism for hosting me as part of a media trip to this most gorgeous of island destinations. Find out more about Reunion Island on their social pages on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#) or head on over to their [website](#).

See you on the beach at St Gilles les Bain?

All content shot on the Olympus OMD EM10 Mark II.

For more information, contact the Reunion Island Tourism Board South African Office on +27 10 205 0201/, or follow on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#).

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Ryan Enslin is an accountant by training, a writer and content creator at heart and, by day, an avid proponent of the tourism and hospitality industry. Exploring and story-telling are the name of his game as he seeks to weigh-in on the relevant conversations of the day.

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