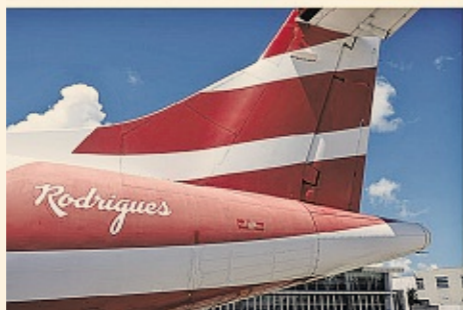


In 1691, when the French adventurer François Leguat arrived on the remote and uninhabited Indian Ocean island of Rodrigues, he was astonished to find huge tortoises “in troops of two or three thousand” that were so densely packed “one can walk on their backs for a hundred paces without touching the ground”.

It is a bizarre and, with modern hindsight, disturbing image that haunts me as I fly towards this volcanic speck just over 600km east of Mauritius. The 90-minute journey brings home just how far-flung this easternmost corner of the African continent is.

Leguat and his seven male companions were Huguenot refugees searching for somewhere to establish a Protestant colony and expected to land on Île Bourbon (now Réunion). Instead, their ship’s captain abandoned them more than 800km off course. The castaways planted crops and lived well on fish and tortoise meat but after two years decided to build a boat and escape. Their trigger for leaving Rodrigues, as Leguat later wrote and also recorded in a message left there in a tree trunk, was that they were missing women, “the only joy of man”.

If only the Frenchmen had waited. Today women outnumber men by three to one here, as many of the latter have left to work on Mauritius. Autonomous since 2002, Rodrigues takes pleasure in being markedly different from the



insensitivities of the past. While Bertuchi entertained himself with attempts to catch a shark, I choose to join a Sunday excursion to Île aux Cocos, a pancake-flat sanctuary for some 45,000 seabirds, principally noddys and terns.

At 9am, like some grand regatta, we set off for the hour-long crossing in a fleet of fishing boats shaded with striped awnings, each one helmed by a skipper with a cooler-box picnic for his guests. Trippers are only allowed into a section of this haven where, to a ceaseless chorus of avian outrage, we sit by the beach tucking into a rich octopus and kidney bean stew washed down with Mauritian rosé.

Across Rodrigues, fresh, plentiful and inexpensive fish and seafood is a prime attraction with lobster, prawn, shrimp and crab all on the menu. Another draw is how relaxed and safe the island feels, as I discover when I rent an e-bike from Hervé Grimaud, a Frenchman who moved here 15 years ago. “How do I lock it?” I ask. “There’s no need,” he replies, and when I raise my eyebrows he grins and responds “why do you think I live here?”.

And so I pedal off to the lively Saturday market in the capital, Port Mathurin, and park a €2,000 bike under the trees next to a flock of scooters, some of which have their keys left in the ignition. It’s still there when I return carrying a heap of Rodrigues treats including pickled sour lemons, hot sauce, air-dried sausage and homemade papaya tart.

Such trust isn’t a one-off. During a sublime lunch of wahoo ceviche with pink peppercorns at L’Atelier Gourmand, its new Mauritian proprietor, Romain Sauzier, tells me how he had just bought a house in the hills for his

The tortoises seem quite perky to me – like cats, they love to be stroked under their necks

motherhood. Never blighted by sugar estates or heavy industry, it has barely any traffic and its air is so clean beekeepers can create an exceptional honey. While Mauritius saw just under a million international tourist arrivals in 2022, Rodrigues received only 13,000 (fewer than the British Museum in London can get in a day).

Only permanently inhabited since 1735, its 44,000 residents are mainly descended from white settlers and enslaved Africans from East Africa and Madagascar. The islanders’ traditional music, song and dance, known as sega tambour, is so distinctive Unesco has designated it a part of humanity’s “intangible cultural heritage”.

As I start exploring, relishing the 25C heat and gentle waves of the reef-protected sea, I have as my guide *The Island of Rodriguez* published by John Murray in 1923. Stationed here for three years during the first world war, its author, AJ Bertuchi, felt it “his duty” to compile one. I fancy guilt played a part, for while Europe was busy slaughtering itself he was safely harboured in a tropical paradise with 6,000 islanders whose lives revolved around fishing and farming.

He noted with admiration how everyone sang as they worked, be it planting haricot beans or pulling in fishing nets. Most people were early risers and went to bed at sunset, and they showed little interest in “*le grand pays*”, as the outside world was known. The tranquillity was so utter Bertuchi records how spiders could construct enormous webs between the trees that “stretch from one side of the road to the other, a distance of eight to ten feet”.

Slowly does it on Rodrigues

Indian Ocean | With its giant tortoises and flying foxes, the far-flung island outpost of Mauritius remains a blissfully peaceful escape. By Nigel Tisdall

Clockwise from top left: looking out to sea from Port Mathurin; a shop in the capital; coconut and papaya tarts at the Saturday market on Fisherman Lane in Port Mathurin; Billy Nemours, of the François Leguat Nature Reserve, with one of its tortoises; a lush valley near Rivière Banane; an Air Mauritius ATR 72; and a room at the C Rodrigues hotel. Below: the Rodrigues solitaire, a flightless bird driven to extinction — Alamy, Nigel Tisdall



Rodrigues is still blissfully peaceful, only now the spiders have learnt to sling their intricate traps between the telegraph poles bordering roads, which hang in the sunlight like huge, gossamer nets. The island is only about 18km by 6km, and a map of it reads like a drive-around feast: there is Rivière Banane, Caverne Patate and Pointe Manioc. The highest point, at 393 metres, is Mont Limon, and when I climb it the view is of hilly farmland fringed by a mesmerising turquoise lagoon. This extends for over 7km in parts, and just looking at its shimmering blues lifts the spirits. It reminds me of the gilded halos that crown holy figures in Christian art.

Leguat finally made it back to Europe in 1698, and a decade later published a book about his travails that inevitably alerted the world to the abundance of domed and saddle-back giant tortoises residing on Rodrigues. They proved easy meat for passing ships. One French frigate, L’Oiseau, carted off 18,635 between 1759 and 1761 (as the naturalist Gerald Durrell noted when he described

a visit here in 1976). By around 1800, both the endemic domed and saddle-back giant tortoises had been hunted to extinction.

Durrell’s mission was to catch some endangered Rodrigues flying foxes (also known as fruit bats), which were eventually transported to Jersey Zoo where their descendants live on. At the time there were only 70 left in the wild, but thanks to conservation efforts there are now some 20,000 on Rodrigues and I often spot them swooping above the treetops in the apricot dusk.

The place to tune into how Rodrigues might have looked before humans arrived is the François Leguat Nature Reserve, which is spread around 20 hectares of limestone canyons and caves. Opened in 2007, it is home to some 4,000 tortoises, principally the Aldabra giant and radiated species which are the closest surviving relatives to those that once flourished here. “The Aldabra can live for 250 years,” says Billy Nemours, a manager at the reserve, as we take a tour “And I’ve seen some sleep for five days.”

The animals seem quite perky to me – like cats, they love to be stroked under their necks, and some get very excited about colourful trainers which they assume to be food.

Rewilding is also at the heart of the 25-hectare Grande Montagne Reserve in the east of the island where a last vestige of native forest survives. Here ranger-led walks provide a chance to spot the island’s two remaining endemic birds, the Rodrigues warbler and Rodrigues fody, while its information centre has a complete skeleton of the solitaire. Like the better known dodo, this flightless bird was hunted to extinction but thriving in Leguat’s time. He recorded how they could out-run his men and if captured would shed tears and refuse to eat.

A happier tale is that of the celebrated café marron. This tree was presumed lost until 1980 when a schoolteacher showed his biology class a picture. “There’s one near my house,” a keen-eyed pupil piped up, and after cuttings were sent to the Royal Botanic Gardens in Kew, and seeds propagated, local replanting has followed. Tracking down the original in Mon Plaisir I find it thriving but sadly caged in protective wire, its white blooms shining bright like a trapped beauty staring out from the iron-barred window of a seraglio.

Out on the reef, there is a similar sense of an island trying to recover from the

family. “After everything was signed,” he reflects, “I went to the owner and asked for the keys – and he just laughed and said there weren’t any.”

Can this peace last? Inevitably, change is coming. Last December the first cruise ships in over a decade called into Port Mathurin, operated by the French luxury company Ponant. Constance Hotels & Resorts, an Indian Ocean hospitality giant, recently took over two of the island’s best beach resorts, and work is under way to extend the airport runway in order to accommodate aircraft larger than the 72-seat Air Mauritius ATR 72s that currently link Rodrigues to the world.

“We don’t want mass tourism,” Jean Alain Wong So, the island’s commissioner for tourism, assures me. “Instead, we want to preserve our authenticity and ecosystem.” Plastic bags are already banned and measures are in place to use solar energy and harvest rainwater. His plan is to add three or four new hotels and increase visitor numbers by 40 per cent. Rodrigues is finally embracing *le grand pays*, but let’s hope life remains at the slow and measured pace of a giant tortoise.

i / DETAILS

Nigel Tisdall was a guest of Mauritius Tourism Promotion Authority (mauritiusnow.com), Rodrigues Tourism Office (no website, though it is on Facebook or email info@rodriguestourismoffice.org) and Air Mauritius (airmauritius.com). Flights from London Gatwick to Rodrigues via Mauritius cost from £868 return. Double rooms at C Rodrigues cost from €220 per night, half-board (c-resorts.com) and at Constance Tekoma from €325 half-board (constancehotels.com)

POSTCARD FROM ... SWITZERLAND

I’ve skied since I was seven but in recent years, as I’ve ventured further from the pistes, large boxes of mountaineering kit have crept into the cupboards of our bedroom at home in London. Each contains shovels, avalanche probes, ropes, boots, survival shelters and so on. The emergency equipment all remained sealed in its packaging despite being taken on multiple trips, until one day late last winter, when I gratefully tore open every last piece.

With three friends, I was on a week’s ski touring trip in Switzerland. We’d begun in Grindelwald, riding the rack-and-pinion railway up to the Jungfrauoch, Europe’s highest station, then heading south on to the vast expanse of the Aletsch glacier where we stayed in a series of mountain refuges.

On Saturday morning, we woke in the Konkordia Hut, ate breakfast, then the hut guardians wished us well as we set out again across the glacier, roped together in single file. We were heading for the Hollandia Hut, though we would never make it.

The weather forecast was reasonable

but four hours later visibility became worse and soon snow was falling faster than I’ve seen it in 40 years of skiing.

We skied roped in pairs to avoid any chance of falling into crevasses; our progress was painfully slow. Suddenly one of my skis sunk about a metre down into the fast accumulating snowfall. As I tried to draw my boot upwards my ski detached and the leash snapped. I could sense my friend Nick’s impatience at the front of the rope as I dug down to retrieve my ski. But as I did so, I heard a scream from behind.

I took a split second to process the words: “Oh my god, he said avalanche!” The thing I’d dreaded my whole life in the mountains.

Then a bomp and a whoosh. A wall of white engulfed me, a freezing cold wave.

“Try to stay on top and swim” is what they tell you. Which sounds simple but not when you’re spinning over and over with one ski still attached. “Try to create a breathing space with hands over your mouth,” they say. But I was gasping for air in terror, powder snow quickly filled my mouth and I began to choke.

“This is it,” I thought. I was filled with anger that I had let down my daughters and wife. Dad’s not such a whizz on the mountain after all.

Within seconds, it was over. I came to, glanced down and saw my legs covered in snow but the rest of my body wasn’t buried. Nick shouted up: “We’ve been avalanched. Is everyone OK?”



I took a split second to process the words: ‘Oh my god, he said avalanche!’ The thing I’d dreaded my whole life in the mountains

Remarkably, all four of us had ended up on the surface. I spotted my helmet a few yards away; one pole lay behind me but there was no sign of the other, and no chance of getting the ski now.

We knew more avalanches were likely, and that we urgently had to get to flatter ground. I rested my free foot on the back of Nick’s ski and like a three-legged race, we awkwardly descended. We reached a plateau but we were still close to the side of the slope. Every few seconds we could hear the thunder of another avalanche releasing somewhere above us. At that moment, there was a brief lull and a swallow appeared. We stopped in our tracks and all stared up as it repeatedly circled around us, then seemed to lead us to safer ground.

We followed it another 200 metres west. By now it was 5pm, the storm was continuing to build, and we were cold and wet from the avalanche. Continuing the 10km down the valley to the nearest village, Blatten, seemed too risky, as did attempting to climb up to the hut, so we decided we’d build a “shovel-up”, a sort of basic igloo, and shelter until help arrived. Nick said he’d built one before, though never “in anger”.

We put our four rucksacks into a pile and began shovelling snow on to them. After an hour we had a meringue-like mound that we tamped down with skis. Next we began to excavate a hole inside it, pulling out the rucksacks to form a cave that we then moulded with the shovels. Finally it was big enough for all four of us to retreat inside.

There started a very uncomfortable 15 hours. We opened all our survival blankets to try to make the floor of the cave a bit less cold. We phoned mountain rescue. There was an option to send up rangers and dogs but being so high up, in a worsening storm, with plunging temperatures and impending darkness, they would have been putting their own safety at risk. We decided to hunker down for the night.

As the air inside began to heat up so lumps of ice would periodically drop down from the roof. I then started worrying we’d all suffocate so we devised an air hole using skis. It was a difficult balancing act – too much ventilation and our damp bodies began

to get cold; not enough and thoughts of suffocating occupied our minds. I kept a shovel very close to hand, so paranoid was I that the roof would collapse at any minute.

We tried to lie down and get some rest but I found that every time I did I began to shiver. One friend did a good job of telling jokes to keep spirits up, another even managed to get to sleep, his snores strangely comforting as we wished the hours away.

At last, dawn broke. Looking out, we found fresh snow had risen to the roof of our 2-metre-high shelter, but the storm had passed. We phoned mountain rescue again and 10 minutes later we could hear the distant but unmistakable sound of helicopter rotors. I felt overwhelmed with relief.

The rescuers complimented us on how well-prepared we were in terms of survival bags and blankets and I noticed one giving a nod of approval when he looked inside our shelter. No mountaineer wants to be rescued but these comments were somehow a great comfort as we swooped back down through the valley in the helicopter, reflecting on our escape. Looking back, all of us wonder if the swallow that appeared in the midst of the storm was some kind of guardian angel.

Scott Whitehead

The author is a production journalist on the FT’s World desk