

Mauritius Travelogue



A wee little island surrounded by great swathes of ocean. What can you possibly expect from it?

Perhaps its seclusion & beauty! But here I am talking about Mauritius, an exception. It is in every sense like India. Mauritius is famous for its 4 S's – Sun, Sea, Sand and Sugarcane, the last one being added by me for its importance in Mauritius' economy.

Mauritius is the melting pot of traditions, religions and cultures. Various ethnic groups are present here, such as the French, English, Indians, Cantonese and African.

I had heard a lot about its beauty and hospitality but my Mauritius experience was way beyond my high expectations.

The capital of Mauritius is Port Louis. Mauritius lies about 900 km east of Madagascar and is roughly 2000 km away from Africa's west coast. It is a part of cluster of small uninhabited islands. This island is guarded from the deep sea by shallow coral reefs. The origin of this island is due to undersea volcanoes.

The currency of Mauritius is Mauritian Rupee. One Mauritian Rupee is equivalent to approximately two Indian Rupees. The main religion here is Hinduism like India. Official languages are English and French. Bhojpuri and

Hindi are spoken by a majority of the people but Creol, a mix of English and French, is the language of masses. Let me now tell you about my experience, which I am sure, will enrich your knowledge more than bunches of boring facts devoid of any emotion.

Initially when I heard of the exchange program between my school, Study Hall and Universal College in Mauritius, my first reaction was “Forget it, who will go to such a far flung-off island?” But over the next few days I had to reverse my decision, which I can proudly say was the best thing I did.



After that, all I can remember is a whirlwind of activity, where each day was full of excitement, thrill, ecstasy and frenzy. Our contingent for the exchange program consisted of fourteen children, six of us from class 8th and rest of them from class 9th, and two teachers. We prepared a poem on Mauritius, a dance on the song “Maa Tujhe Salaam” and prepared PowerPoint presentations on our school and India. I along with my best friend, Abhilaksh, were chosen to be the anchors. We prepared these because for one day we would have to showcase our heritage and culture to Universal College.

Before I tell about my trip, I'll shed some light on the two schools. Study Hall is one of the few schools in Lucknow and maybe also in India, which focuses more on nurturing the individualistic traits, bringing out the creativity from each child and it encourages the child to participate and excel in every field rather than putting emphasis only on academics. This kind of philosophy has helped me a lot. The Universal College is a senior school established in 1961. It has 5 departments. It is situated in Rivere du Rempart, which falls in the eastern

part of Mauritius. Nearby, there is a statue of Gandhiji which was made to mark Gandhiji's visit when he travelled from South Africa to India.



Coming back to our trip, we were restless from our anticipation and time seemed to move very slowly. On the day of departure (18 August 2012), during our way to the airport, heavy rains lashed out and strong winds blew. It seemed that God wanted to delay my flight to Delhi in order to give parents more time to spend with their children. As we arrived at the airport most of my friends and their parents were already there. We, the children, discussed what we would do the moment we would go into the airport while our parents discussed their concerns and gave their children last-minute instructions, precautions and what-not.

Finally, everybody came. Suddenly, there was a flurry of activity. The children checked their bags, kissed their parents and bade them goodbye. My first step in the airport was full of heady excitement and a feeling of independence. We started chatting animatedly, not believing that our parents wouldn't accompany us for the next ten days and ten thousand kilometres. Fast forwarding to Delhi Airport - Instead of sleeping during the night in the airport, we roamed about, gossiped and fiddled with iPods and other miniature electrical gadgets made purely for spending time.

The principal of the college, Mr. Chumroo, along with some senior teachers received us warmly at the Mauritius airport.

On the way to Universal College, there were lush green meadows and 10 feet tall sugarcane farms on both the sides of the road. The French introduced this crop in the eighteenth century. It helped Mauritius to become self-reliant and today it is in the top 30 sugar producing countries. During olden days, the whole economy was dependent on it, although now it has diversified into tourism, services and textiles.

The roads were very narrow and hardly any soul or traffic was in sight. This panorama was in sharp contrast to all the places I have seen till now, be it the cities, villages of India, Malaysia or Singapore. On the contrary, when I recently checked Mauritius' population density, shockingly it is above India and is in the top 25. Now I think so that I was under some spell when I was there.

On reaching the college we were taken to an auditorium where our buddies were waiting for us expectantly. In this type of an exchange program, each visiting student is allocated a partner from the other school, with whom he will live when visiting his partner's school. The term 'buddy' refers to the partner.

We were given refreshments leaving us reinvigorated from our flight. After that, we exchanged introductions. My buddy's name was Dwijesh Keesoon, affectionately called Arav. Arav's home was a few minutes' walk from the school. During this walk I tried my best to absorb the Mauritian way of life as much as I could, thanks to Arav who answered my countless questions arising one after the other due to my unquenchable curiosity at that time.

An interesting observation I made was that all the people looked alike and one couldn't distinguish the rich from poor. Houses more or less were simple and there were no lavish bungalows. In short the economic and social disparity is very marginal. For example, I met a garbage collector, who to my astonishment spoke fluent English and even claimed that he had been to Mumbai.

Another example, we were once returning from one of our local trips when a plain black sedan passed by us. I hardly gave any attention to it. Later on, I came to know that it was the PM's car. I just couldn't believe it for there wasn't any police bandobast or traffic blockades which happen in India every time a VIP passes by. Everybody right from a lowly sweeper to the President is given the similar respect. We, Indians must learn from them, respecting the fact that they are descendants of slaves and Indians and yet they have managed to bring about such a change in their society. The PM of Mauritius, Navin Ramgoolam, has his roots in Bihar.

Their government is also very supportive like they have provided free primary education, free public transport for the senior citizens and students and has ensured that the news channels have special news bulletins in sign language so that the deaf and dumb can comprehend and so on. All these schemes have been implemented successfully. Their government has also been rated as among the best by several reputed agencies. Mauritius' democracy has been officially declared as the only "complete democracy" in the whole of African continent.

As we neared Arav's home, his mother was waiting for us with a puja thali in her hands. She performed a simple Hindu ritual and applied tilak on my forehead before welcoming me to their modest home. This kind of hospitality made me feel as if I was a very distinguished guest. Also it left a touch of Indianess. Arav's family was extremely warm and lively. Their attitude drove out any uneasiness or doubts about them from my head.

Afterwards, in the evening, I played a game of carrom with Arav and his father. Their mastery over carrom held me in awe. Later on, we went to see our friends and buddies. They were playing football. We too joined and had ourselves drenched in sweat. Football is the most popular sport there but the national sport is horse-racing.

For dinner we had chicken biryani and for the following breakfast I had French bread, which was huge in comparison to the bread we eat, and milk. Mauritius is the best place where one can have seafood. Before I went there, I had distaste for seafood but there I kept on asking for more till my stomach exploded. Overall their cuisine is a mix of Indian and French cuisines.

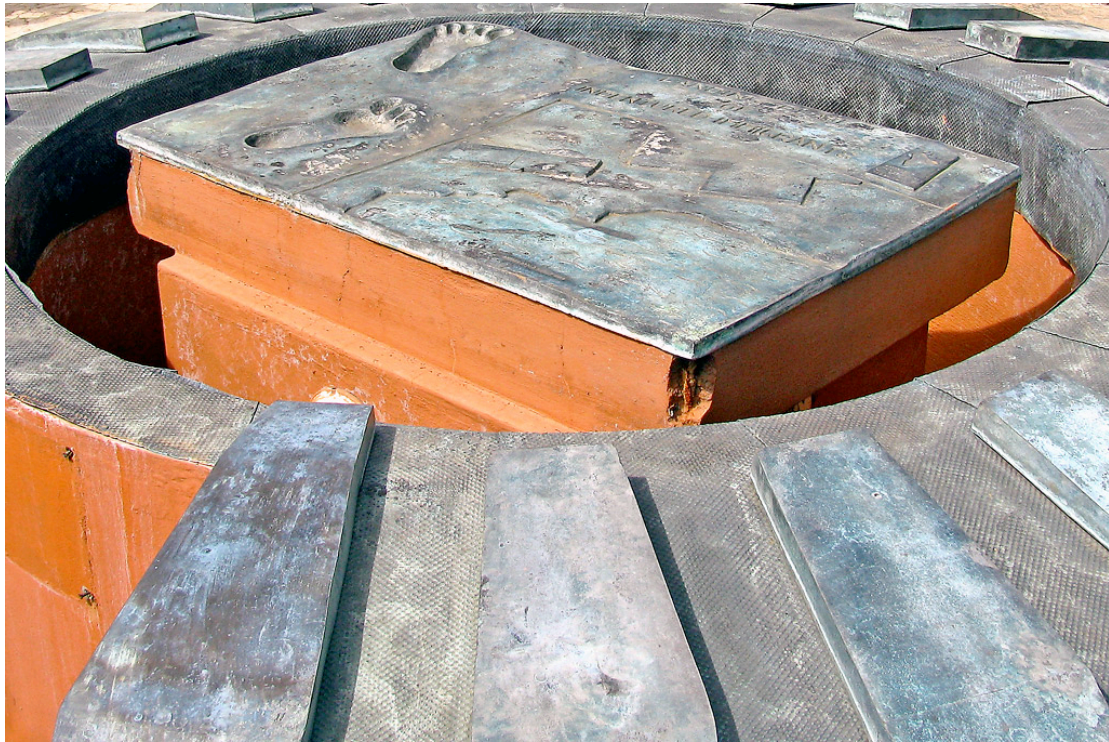
For a few days we spent our time at school to understand their philosophy, style of teaching, curriculum and to interact with the teachers and students and explore their campus and their routine.

On the second day of the trip, Arav's family took me to Point de Lascars spiritual Park. It is a temple-cum-spiritual park. Its main deity is Lord Murugan, a south Indian God. There are no lavish shikharas but simple wooden huts which housed idols made up of black stone. All these structures were surrounded by never-ending groves of trees. This complex is situated at the meeting point of a river stream and the Indian Ocean. This park was made up of tranquility and serenity. The canopies acted as a ceiling and barks as walls. This was one giant nature house and was a perfect place for meditation and spirituality.



The most famous temple is Shiva Temple at Grand Bassin. Another name for this is Ganga Talao. A colossal 100 feet statue of Lord Shiva welcomes you to the complex. The temple is situated on the banks of a lake in a crater of an extinct volcano. They hold it in strong faith that the 13th lingam exists here. After the spiritual park visit we saw some underground streams. It was truly fascinating and enchanted. In the darkness one could hear the swishing and the gurgle of the stream. In fact, there's a huge network of underground streams below the island.

Throughout the exchange program we visited a lot of tourist attractions such as beaches, nature parks, shopping malls, and ruins. But I'll describe only a few which stood out from the rest. First, let us start with the capital, Port Louis. There are two places worth seeing here – The Apravasi Ghat and Le Caudan Waterfront.



The Apravasi Ghat is a small ruin but then is a very symbolic one and is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. This is the landing place of the half a million Indian slaves who arrived during the first half of the nineteenth century. For these Indians, this was the first glimpse of Mauritius. This port had an immigration office and a bare shelter to contain them. Here, they were issued cards, which served as ID card and was their sole way of proving their identity. From here they were sent to various sugarcane plantations, owned by wealthy Europeans, across the island. Today it is dwarfed by a much bigger and modern port, which is the biggest in that region.



The Le Caudan Waterfront is a bustling upscale commercial complex having everything right from casinos to cinemas. It is not a flea market but a luxurious one. There's a postal museum named Blue Penny Museum which has some of the rarest stamps in the world. Mauritius was the fifth country in the world to issue stamps, way ahead of India. This is a great place for philatelists, both novices and experts.

Mauritius had a diverse biodiversity due to being uninhabited till the first discoverers, the Dutch, came in the 17th century. This was the only known habitat of the dodo, the world famous extinct flightless bird. Most of the plants and animals found here are endemic to this region. The best place to view this is the Black River Gorges National Park. Unfortunately this wasn't a part of my itinerary but I visited a zoo park-cum-safari and a bird park. The name of the bird park is Casela Bird Park. It had exotic birds and hybrid parrots. Many birds were allowed to move freely outside their enclosures. I even caught a peacock with its tail spread open and dancing. There were several hybrid parrots which ranged from pink to black.



The zoo's name was La Vanille which translates into "The Crocodile". It was mainly established for crocodiles but later expanded into a safari zone.

For the first time ever, I sat on tortoises, who were over 150 years old. Here, people are aware of their surroundings. Like, nearly every house has a pet, most of them being adopted strays. In the neighbourhood, woodpeckers, weavers and sparrows are found in plenty.

Now for the most beautiful aspect of Mauritius – beaches. There are many to choose from like rocky ones, dressed in white sand, covered densely with palm trees, cliffs, overcrowded or desolate ones. There are some private beaches like Arav's sister's fiancé lives in a beachside bungalow. That beach was totally cut-off from the outside world. Just seeing it acted as a stress-buster. There was absolute privacy and it freed you from the pressures of daily lives. Such beaches are rare in India.

Gris Gris beach is another must-see beach and has stunning view. A cliff overlooked it which gave one a great view of the Mauritius' shoreline. The name means 'Grey' but the beach was a deep shade of blue.

Various water activities are held here such as surfing, sailing, speed boating and scuba diving. Leaving me and 2-3 children, the whole group went for an undersea walk. Judging by their reaction it must have been a unique one. But then I went for glass boating and had the privilege to go on a catamaran. I went on a catamaran to a nearby island. Wah! What an experience.

We danced to the tune of several Bollywood songs and ate sumptuous food which left us only more ravenous. On the way we even saw a waterfall. The island's name is Ile aux Cerfs.



This trip changed our thoughts, feelings, perspectives, and broadened our horizons, considering the fact that we spent time with the local people of a foreign land and learnt their customs and traditions. Like on the day of arrival in Mauritius, most of us cried in the night but again on the day of departure we were in tears again.

There are many more things which I wish to tell you but the best way to know a country is to experience it by immersing yourself among the sights and the sounds of the country. I want to end this travelogue with a quote by Mark Twain, the famous American author, which sums up all my feelings-

You gather the idea that Mauritius was

Made first,

Then Heaven,

And that the Heaven was copied after Mauritius.

Yash Kumar

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Study Hall, Lucknow