

REPORT ON REUNION HIKE

HIKE: ISLAND OF REUNION

DATE: 4 – 11 SEPTEMBER 2016

TYPE: DAY PACKS

AREA: REUNION ISLAND



This was indeed an experience of a life time. From the time in April when most of us were approached I could hardly wait to receive the next bit of information.

Reunion is a small island in the Indian Ocean situated just east of Madagascar and is an absolute hiker's paradise. There are numerous hiking trails, and unfortunately we were limited to the amount of time that was available to us to explore all of what is available.

DAY 1 - SUNDAY

10 strangers, all hikers, met on Sunday 4 September 2016 at OR Tambo International Airport with much expectation and I am sure quite a bit of trepidation for our adventure on Reunion. We flew Air Austral, to St Denis the capital. The flight was by no means long, less than four hours and the added bonus was not needing a Visa.

Our guide for the week, Clovis, met us at the airport - Roland Garros – and for a minute there I expected to see tennis balls bouncing around. We then met our driver Bruno, who was to transport us

around for our time on the island. As we had arrived in the dark we were not able to see much as we were transported to our first night in the mountains at a gite (much like a basic B&B – a la hiker style) in the first of the 3 cirques, (much like a round valley) Salazie, in the village of Hell-Bourg. We were immediately introduced to the local drink – a rum cocktail – served with our meal. Their staple food is rice, imported from India, and we soon became used to seeing the bowl of rice being served. We were also entertained by a drum serenade from the owner. We were given 2 dorm type rooms, and we split up into ladies and gents in each room.

DAY 2 - MONDAY

We started relatively early, after a typical continental breakfast. We were finally able to enjoy some of what we experienced for the rest of our stay on the Island – namely the gorgeous views, even though the roads are very twisty, narrow and windy. We had our first view of one of their famous water falls, much visited by tourist in a helicopter, Mare à Vieille Place. We finally set off crossing the ridge Col des Boeufs, into Mafate cirque.



DAY 3 - TUESDAY

This cirque is only accessible on foot, there are no roads leading in at all. The views were quite breathtaking and we soon found that the hiking trails were very similar to those here in South Africa. We descended for the rest of the day (with the odd – “oh dear not an uphill” along the way). We had presented Clovis with a South African flag which he very proudly carried for the duration of our visit (Thank you Clovis!).

Our first lunch stop proved to be quite an eye opener and also a breaking of the ice for all of us, in the small village of La Nouvelle, where once again we were served their rum punch as well as some divine red wine. How we managed the rest of the way is a miracle. We then had a very interesting walk to our overnight gite in another very small village Marla, crossing a stream and finding daisy the cow. As there were no roads leading in we had to all carry whatever was needed for the evening as well as the next day – and some of us ended up looking a bit worse for wear for the supper – which incidentally we had to walk to at a nearby restaurant.



Another early start as we had some serious uphill ahead of us, before we began the long descent of about 800m into Cilaos cirque. We were once again able to enjoy the gorgeous views, and managed some photographs of the ridge we had come over the day before. All too soon we arrived at the pit stop where Bruno was waiting for us with the transport. As we were driving down one could see the trail we would have taken, going further on down the mountain – I would have loved to have been able to do that stretch. Bruno delivered us safe and sound in Cilaos for our lunch, and we then all did a lovely walk about, getting a bit more of a feel for the Creole life style.

For this night's stay we were in a dorm type of accommodation at La Roche Merveilleuse, and here we were introduced to an orchestration of snoring that kept a few of us out of our beauty sleep.

DAY 4 - WEDNESDAY

After our usual breakfast we once again boarded our bus and had the most twisty windy beautiful trip out from the town of Cilaos in the Cirque du Cilaos to the coast. Some of our intrepid group were a tad prone to car sickness so much hilarity ensued, and the passenger side of the bus had some extra stripes added. The road was so narrow and winding in parts that the bus had to reverse to get around the bends. Clovis had Bruno do a quick stop for us to take a few photos and as we took off again we had to go through a tunnel that was so narrow, the truck with its tree trunk load, in front of us scraped against the sides and the roof as it went into the tunnel. WHAT A SIGHT!

We ended up in Le Vingt-septième where we were taken through the volcano museum, La Cite du Volcan. We unfortunately were a bit pushed for time and I honestly feel that more time needs to be allocated for this extremely interesting and educational tour. We had a short walk up to our lunch spot and we were then once again on the road to the Gite du Volcan.



DAY 5 - THURSDAY

We had our earliest start here – for our walk to the rim of the main volcano. The difference in the vegetation is quite amazing. It definitely helped having Clovis along as a guide as he was very informative and informed us of all the differences between the various lava flows. The volcano is the most active volcano in the world, and had last erupted in May 2016. We were once again a bit pushed for time to get back in time for lunch at the Gite. On the return path we passed a whole lot of soldiers from the army and my thoughts were still – what a lovely place to bring them all for a training exercise !! Little did we know. After lunch we set off for what was to be our overnight for 2 nights in St. Pierre on the beach front.

DAY 6 - FRIDAY

Friday, Tim was not with us, he was meeting with all the powers that be to get the talks and arrangements underway for future visits. We had another bus ride up to the top of the ridge, and Clovis had a surprise for us – his wife had baked a tart for us from one of the local plants, and we then had a relatively easy amble down to where Bruno waited with the bus to take us to one of the local markets.



DAY 7 - SATURDAY

Saturday, our last day on the island, we no longer had Clovis or Bruno, and I am sure we all felt just that little bit of a loss, and we were advised that we would be doing Aqua hiking, and none of us really had any clue as to what to expect. Our new driver drove us into one of the gorges and we were introduced to Christopher our “guide” for the Aqua hiking, who had an extremely limited command of English (and no Clovis to translate for us!) We all had to squeeze ourselves into wetsuits, and Tim decided he would not participate. We were also presented with life jackets and yellow helmets, and once the instructions got underway there were a few more who decided it was not quite for them. We proceeded to jump off the rock face into pools, crept under the waterfalls, and slid our way down water cascades. All in all, a very exhilarating experience.

After all we had experienced one could hardly expect anything to still top that, and then we had our last excursion into the lava tunnels with our guide Julien – who also had a very limited command of English, another very interesting and educational tour, totally awesome. Our new driver then drove us to our last night at the Hotel Juliette Dodu in St Denis, just a few km's from Roland Garros airport.

A very early wake-up and a quick 5am breakfast then saw us being taken by Bruno to the airport for our flight home.

In conclusion – a truly once in a life time experience – that I can honestly recommend without a moment's hesitation as a must do for any hiker – and even the non-hiker.

We were then to hear via social media that the Volcano had in fact erupted that morning at 8.41am, exactly as we flew out at 7.55am, and then of course the presence of the army on our way to the rim of the volcano became obvious.



COMMENT:

We were a group of 10 hikers representing various clubs in Gauteng, who were invited to go along on this special excursion.

The flight to St Denis Reunion is about 4 hours with Air Astral. Jacana has now been tasked with putting together travel packages for hikers. The whole trip will cost around R14000 with 2 meals a day, sleeping in Gites (luxury hiking accommodation) and perhaps one night in the hotel.

Flights are late morning on a Sunday and return very early the following Sunday. Money well worth spending for a very special experience. We were pleasantly surprised and enjoyed every minute of this trip.

Flo from Florida Hiking Club wrote this report. Thank you for sharing this with us.

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