

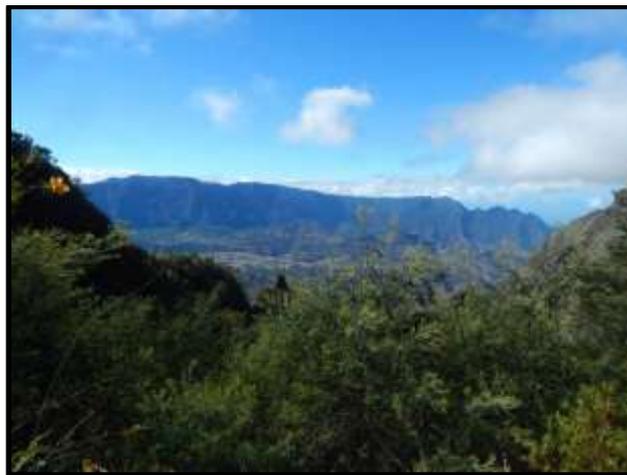
Cirque De Mafate – Reunion

Tim Hartwright - A Hikers Diary on La Reunion

- 16 September 2016

There is a small French island in the Indian Ocean, east of Madagascar and south of Mauritius that is a hidden gem, called La Réunion.

It is no surprise that Réunion, is a hiker's paradise. With more than 900km of marked hiking trails that vary from strenuous hikes across the island of more than 130km stretching over 13 days to shorter and unlimited options to suit everyone's needs and abilities.



(image by Tim Hartwright)

Tim Hartwright, South African hiking enthusiast, Author of a hiking guide, Director of the biggest travel agency specializing in hiking trips, Chairman of Footprints Hiking Club and a member of the board of Hiking Organization of Southern Africa, is by no means a stranger to the outdoors. He took on the hiking trails of Reunion with enthusiasm and put them to the test.

The Journey

On a Sunday morning in early September, a group of 10 hikers gathered at OR Tambo International Airport. The destination, La Réunion. The goal, to explore the hiking trails that stretch across this island paradise. We flew to St Denis, the capital of Reunion on Air Austral and it was certainly one of the best airlines I have flown with. The flight, which takes you less than four hours, and South African passport holders not needing a visa, we were soon met at Roland Garros airport by our guide Clovis Etchiandas and a representative of Reunion Island Tourism Board. We were then transported by coach to our first night in the mountains at a gite or hiker's accommodation, La Mandoze gite at Hellbourg in the Salazie cirque (valley/basin). For our weary and hungry group, what a surprise! A feast was laid out for us accompanied by a rum cocktail and the owner singing a local song to the rhythm of his drum. Soon however, we all settled down for a comfortable night, to the sound of a few snores!

Monday

Monday morning started early for our group, as most mornings do for hikers. A delicious continental breakfast, which we were soon to become accustomed to, started the day off. We then boarded our coach to the starting point of our hike at Col des Boeufs, the mountain saddle between Salazie and Mafate cirques. Along the way we took a break for a photo shoot at the amazing waterfalls, Mare à Vieille Place.



After a photo call at the entrance to the trail, we shouldered our packs and took to our feet for a climb along an easy path until we reached the summit of the Col. From here, we marvelled at the beauty of the mountains that surrounded us, a panorama of rocky crests that spread out for 360°.



Now we began a zigzag descent to the bottom of Mafate. Eventually we reached the bottom and took a well-earned break among Tamarind Trees. Not one to sit still, we were soon on the go again as we made our way to our lunch destination at La Nouvelle, a small Creole hamlet in the heart of Mafate. The afternoon's hike consisted of an undulating path to the southern border of Mafate at Marla Gite. Here we found a recently built, wooden building and a nearby restaurant that we called our home for the night.

Tuesday

Tuesday morning greeted us early again as we had some serious climbing ahead of us, followed by a daunting descent of 800m into Cilaos Cirque. The scenery was nothing short of spectacular and Cheris, our guide pointed out the route we had taken since we had embarked on our hike. Lunchtime found us in the town of Cilaos, followed by a walk around the town. Our night was spent at the next hiking gite, La Roche Merveilleuse, where we were billeted in a dormitory similar to what we as South African hikers are used to.



Wednesday

Wednesday morning held in store one of the most spectacular road trips I have ever taken, the trip from Cilaos south to the coast. The hairpin bends, that you only see in the movies, proved to be nerve-wrecking, but what a trip! We encountered a logging truck which at one point scraped through two narrow tunnels much to our amazement! (We could hear the sides of the truck's load scraping against the walls of the tunnel with nothing to spare). But the mountain scenery and the never ending gorge was so worth the nail biting experience and the road is a credit to the engineers that dared to build it! Once at the coast we turned south east and then in a north easterly direction until we reached Le Vingt-septième where the volcano museum is situated. This is a must-see for all visitors and two hours of exploring this exciting and well run exhibition leaves one in awe at these wonders of nature.

Thursday

Thursday morning greeted us bright and early for our trek into the volcano, Piton de la Fournaise. This was an amazing experience across a fascinating landscape of different contorted examples of lava flows until we reached the lip of the main cone of the volcano. Many stunning photos later, we were all too soon on our way down again to St. Pierre and our hotel for the evening.



Friday

Friday morning, our party headed for the mountains once again to explore another part of the cirques before an afternoon discovering one of the local markets.



Saturday

Saturday, our final day on the island, we entered one of the numerous river gorges on the island to experience 'Aqua hiking' which is similar to Canyoning. Donning wetsuits and helmets, our intrepid group proceeded to enjoy themselves, jumping off waterfalls and being swept along the fast flowing river.



The final experience of our trip was to be had on Saturday afternoon when we explored a natural tunnel underneath the lava flow. Breath taking! Late that afternoon we booked into our hotel in St Denis for a final night before the reluctant but inevitable flight home. But oh, what an adventure!