

Module 2

THE MAJESTIC MOUNTAINS OF REUNION ISLAND



The Reunion Island was born from a surprising marriage: water and fire. This is what makes the landscapes of this island unique today. Le Piton de la Fournaise and le Piton des Neiges cover a tropical forest streaked with rivers and ravines and the three extraordinary cirques of the island compete in beauty.

A vast natural playground

Its mild temperatures make the island an extraordinary tropical garden: more than 1600 plant species and an amazing fauna thrive here. During your walks, keep your eyes open to notice the sparkling chinaberries and the unusual endormis (sleepy chameleons) The Tec-tec (Réunion stonechat) takes you along hiking trails and in the skies of La Réunion hovers a tail straw, an emblematic bird of the island. Flower and shrub lovers, you can let yourselves be bewitched by the enormous flamboyant orchids and frangipani trees which bloom on this terrestrial paradise. La Réunion is also a marvellous natural playground. 900 kilometres of marked trails, 1,000 kilometres of coastal slopes await tranquil travellers as also high level sportsmen. On foot, horseback, mountain bikes, segway, quadbike, helicopter, ULM, paragliding, canoeing or rafting, you can explore this exceptional nature in a thousand and one ways.



Montagne Salazie Mare a Martin

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Montagne salazie Cirque

“Pitons, cirques and ramparts”, UNESCO World Heritage

The property “Pitons, cirques et ramparts of the island of La Réunion” listed in the UNESCO World Heritage List since 2010 is comprised of the centre of the national park and 4 adjacent sites:

- the forest of Mare-Longue at Saint-Philippe houses the best preserved remains of the low-level tropical rain forest at low altitude also called the forest of Bois of the colour of les Bas;
- la Pain de Sucre et la Chapelle in the cirque de Cilaos are situated in a narrow gorge carved by the water of a torrent: le Bras-Rouge. The visitor can thus enter an old magma chamber which no longer fans the eruptions since 100 000 years;



Plongée Fonds Marins

© Laurent Beche

- le Piton d'Anchaing, in the cirque de Salazie, attains 1 356 metres in height and dominates the bottom of the cirque;
- finally, la Grande-Chaloupe, between Saint-Denis and la Possession, houses one of the last relics of the semi-dry forest, formerly spread over the whole Western coast of the Island. A vast programme of reconstruction and restauration has been undertaken since 2009.

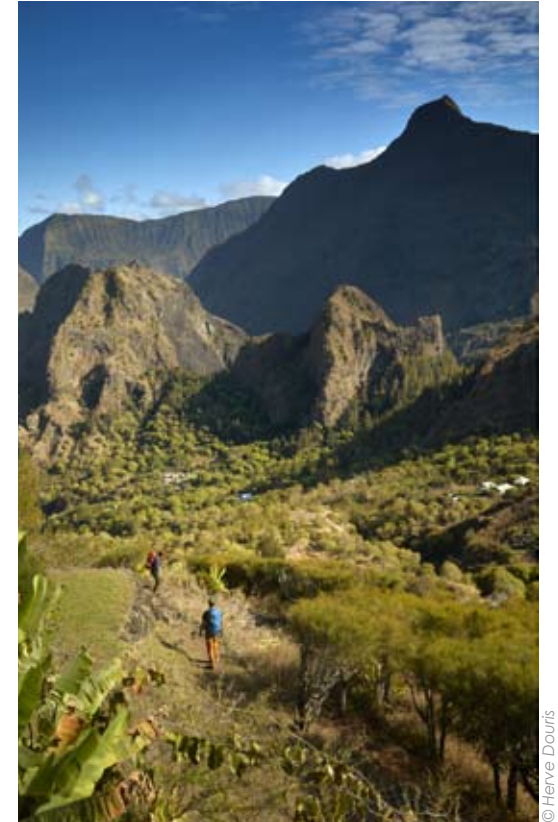
Ecotourism

Birds unique in the world. Primary forests, like they were at inception. Wild orchids. A volcanic and basaltic soil with an exceptional geological heritage. A young lagoon with a thousand rare and fragile coral beauties. The island of La Réunion dazzles us with its natural wealth and its precious biodiversity. This environment is a treasure to be preserved, as we are all aware. This is why the island is committed to its protection.

The National Park: a unique natural space in the world

Les Hauts de l'île de La Réunion and its mountainous centre offer awesome landscapes and exceptional nature to visitors. The Parc National, which covers more than 40% of the total area of the island, is a mechanism for protecting this wealth of heritage unique in the world. It is the only French national park whose entire centre and four adjacent sites are entered on the prestigious heritage list by the UNESCO. The "Pitons, cirques et ramparts of the island of La Réunion", natural wealth listed, register a record rate of endemism making the territory one of the thirty-four landmarks of world biodiversity.

The relief of the island is built by two adjacent volcanic mountains. Le Piton des Neiges is famous thanks to its three cirques, a result of major landslides and erosion. Arranged in the shape of an « Ace of Club "around the old dormant volcano, they are bound by giddy ramparts. The massif of the Piton de la Fournaise shelters one of the most active volcanoes in the world. In 2019, it erupted twice.



Randonnée Pedestre Mafate

© Herve Douris



Montagne Salazie Guetali Maison Folio

© Oliver Octobre

The National Park of La Réunion also has the particularity of sheltering inhabited zones. The inhabited centre consists of the islets of Salazes and the islets of the cirque de Mafate. The latter is only accessible on foot. Its inhabitants live in harmony with this extraordinary nature, in a preserved space « at the end of the world” An alternative to the effervescence of the urban coastal belt

To know more: Appointments are given throughout the island on week-ends and bank holidays. The National Park Rangers thus share their knowledge with the public on natural, cultural and landscape heritage of the island. To know the programme of appointments, consult: **www.reunion-parcnational.fr**.

The National Park in a few figures :

- The “heart” of the park covers an area of approximately 105 400 hectares, i.e. 42% of the territory, of which nearly 100 000 hectares of natural space. It also has cultivated or dedicated zones for livestock breeding (“cultivated centre”) as well as inhabited islets of Mafate and les Salazes.

- On the periphery of the “Cœur”, 88 000 hectares comprise an open area. 24 communes, have joined in around a shared territory project, the Charter of the national park. In 2014, 17 communes joined in.
- The national Park national shelters a good part of 43 varieties of vertebrates and 2000 species of invertebrates of the island, with a record rate of endemism (40 % for certain groups), as well as most of the 1 600 listed indigenous plant species (30 % endemism).
- Created in 2007, the national Park is a protection valuation tool of the exceptional heritage a mechanism for protecting and promoting this exceptional heritage.
- La Maison du Parc, a reception and discovery area.



Parapente Mafate

© Serge Gelabert

La Maison du Parc opens its doors to you for an interactive experience, through les Pitons, cirques and ramparts of La Réunion. With its new discovery and interpretation area, la Maison du Parc offers you a virtual crossover of the island to view the vast landscapes of nature and men. Travel from Mare-Longue to Saint-Philippe up to la Grande-Chaloupe and discover nature in La Réunion as you have never seen before.



Montagne Piton des Neiges

Three cirques to take your breath away

- Geological marvels
- Mountains, flowers, waterfalls, ravines, rivers
- Breathtaking panoramic views

La Réunion is comprised of three natural and exceptional cirques with timeless landscapes adjoining the Piton des Neiges: Salazie, Mafate and Cilaos, they are listed as World Heritage by the UNESCO since 2010. These magnificent sites are protected by ramparts of grandiose rocks and greenery, they are the most beautiful spots in the island: hike trails, magnificent landscapes, unexpected islets, wild nature, cultural discoveries, Créole huts and gardens, traditional food, local products... Each cirque is an awesome site bathed in light, absolutely breathtaking.

- **Mafate**, picturesque due to isolation is a unique place
- **Cilaos**, is a much-visited and a must-see stage during your holidays
- **Salazie**, the greenest, its waterfalls and its islets are mind-blowing.

The cirque de Mafate

A majestic site, le Cirque de Mafate is a world apart, magical, unreal, mysterious, accessible only on foot or by helicopter. Mafate, is the cirque for hikers (120 km of trails). Warm and friendly inhabitants live there in the midst of luxurious nature, immense ramparts, sharp ridges, lush green valleys, plateaux, islets, ravines, peaks and waterfalls connecting the Grand Bénare (2,896m) to Maïdo and with la Roche-Ecrite (2,277m), le Cimendef (2,228m) and le Gros Morne (3,013m) up to Piton des Neiges, the bed of the Indian Ocean (3,071m). Lodges are very well provided and offer authenticity and warmth/ friendliness.

Le cirque de Salazie

Accessible through a unique route, the cirque of Salazie flows almost spontaneously, into the mouth of the gorges of the River Mat. The cirque fully listed as part of world Heritage by the UNESCO is dominated by the Voile de la Mariée (the Bride's Veil), one of the most beautiful waterfalls of the island and other dizzy and unmistakable falls

Vegetation is lush and allows some typical cultivation: water cress, cabbages... In the centre of the cirque stands the imposing piton d'Anchaing (1.352m). Cultural heritage is revealed by the charm and authenticity of its creole huts and gardens, its villages and islets among which Hell-Bourg which, since 1998, has the label of the "most beautiful village of France" and has been hoisted to the fourth place in 2018 in the competition « the preferred Village of the French. The cirque de Salazie is the most accessible of the three cirques of the island and is also the only trail resort of La Réunion, the cirque has joined the international network 'Stations de Trail' (c).



Montagne Mafate îlet Plaine aux Sables

© Jean Luc Allegre

The cirque de Cilaos

Cilaos is a creole village of high mountains endowed with incomparable charm, pure and cool air. Its « pitons, cirques et remparts » are listed as part of world heritage by the UNESCO. The setting is majestic, high ramparts, steep valleys, peaks, torrents and other islets (Palmiste Rouge, Mare Sèche, Peter Both, Ilet à Cordes, Ilet Chicot, Bras Sec) make a paradise for sports enthusiasts, mountain runners, hikers, canoers, climbers or mountain bikers. Opt for a lift to the majestic Piton des Neiges (3.071 metres altitude) the highest in the Indian Ocean. Several leisure options are offered, among which hiking on the long trail GR®R1 « Tour du Piton des Neiges » named the preferred GR of the French 2019, acrobatic trails in the forest of cryptomerias, walks on the streets of the city-centre, discovery of creole huts and flower gardens, visits to artisanal boutiques, the embroidery house, Chais, wine house, relaxation at the thermal spa Irénée Accot, as all these assets make Cilaos, situated around 1200m altitude, an unforgettable place. Cilaos has many options for boarding and lodging: hotels, guest rooms, mountain lodges, greatly appreciated by visitors.



Bassin la Paix

© Stephane Godin



Plaine des palmistes grand etang femme

© Michel Vespasien

Plains: the high-altitude plateaux of La Réunion

The volcanic island offers a vast variety of landscapes, including more rural plains. They hide primary forests, waterfalls and paths that invite you to a stroll.

Plains not only have rugged terrain and beaches bordering the sea but there are also plains on heights. The only crossroad of the island therefore avails of it to make a passageway. It connects Saint-Benoît, to the East, and Le Tampon, in the West, including the Plaine des Palmistes and la Plaine des Cafres.

La Plaine-des-Palmistes is a green plateau sprinkled with pastures, steep peaks resulting from volcanic activity, refreshing waterfalls and a rich endemic flora. An invitation to a walk as on several hiking trails, that of the forest of Bébour-Bélouve, or that of the waterfall Bibéron which falls from a height of 240 metres into a small pond, surrounded by lush vegetation.

The botanical paths of the Petite Plaine and the Piton des Songes lead to a discovery of trees with original names: bois maigre, bois de papa, bois de fer, bois de cannelle, bois de violon, bois de pomme, etc. Nature is amazing but creole architecture is also awesome. The Domaine des Tourelles, dedicated to the regional promotion, is a very beautiful example. Other huts and creole gardens are grouped in a circuit in the vicinity.

La Plaine-des-palmistes is reputed for its tranquillity, its freshness, its guava trees, its walks, a place where it is good to live, a place for change of air in the week-end

La Plaine des Cafres also offers agricultural fields and authentic landscapes where one can practice different activities : hiking (to the Piton des Neiges, especially), horse riding, biking... This high plateau is traversed by the volcanic forest road which leads to the Piton de la Fournaise, passing through the Bourg Murat and the Cité du Volcan.



© Serge Gelabert

Piton de la Fournaise

Other high plains are scattered throughout the centre of La Réunion : the Affouches, Chicots, Lianes, Fougères... In the South, the Plaine des Grègues, with a lower altitude favours the cultivation of saffron or turmeric, an emblematic spice of Reunion cuisine. It also has its 'Home' at Saint-Joseph which traces back its transformation, from the root to the spice..

Le Piton de la Fournaise

- The Piton de la Fournaise volcano that remains active
- Walks, drives, horse rides
- Lunar landscapes

« Le volcan la pété ! » If you hear this expression during your stay in La Réunion, don't be afraid! On the contrary, that means that you are among the lucky ones: the rock star of the island has woken up once again to dazzle its numerous fans in an unforgettable sound and light show.

La Réunion emerged from the bottom of the ocean 3 million years ago, today La Réunion shelters one of the most active volcanoes in the world, le Piton de la Fournaise. It culminates at 2,631 metres altitude. A real star, le Piton de la Fournaise comes on stage regularly each year and offers its sound and light show under the astonished

gaze of the visitors. Experience it, its eruption is fascinating, its landscape unveils itself, mysterious and stupefying. Its Hawaiian type morphology is without danger for the people. You access it in a basaltic setting, after crossing the Plaine des Sables, in the image of a lunar landscape, a magical place which remains engraved in your memory. Non explosive, le Piton de la Fournaise is inoffensive in spite of its incandescent lava and its spectacular fireworks. Before arriving at the Pas de Bellecombe, starting point of the hike towards the crater, you need to cross the Plaine des Sables. A soil of hardened lava, orange brown slags. You will then have the impression of having arrived on the Moon! Like a true star, the Piton de la Fournaise has left its mark beyond the stage. Repeated lava flows into the ocean have extended the island in a very pretty way. The setting of the coast of the Sud Sauvage is a kind of a visual happening between steep basalt cliffs, green with the lush vegetation and the deep blue of the Indian ocean. The lava route alone is worth the journey with its lava flows solidified for ever. To enjoy the volcano even more and understand it better, you can play speleologists in lava tunnels and visit the Cité du Volcan, a true mine of knowledge.

Le Piton des Neiges

Le Piton des Neiges, a heritage declared by UNESCO. The UNESCO, in 2010, listed the « Pitons, cirques et remparts » of la Réunion as part of natural wealth of world heritage, because of their exceptional universal value. Le Piton des Neiges can continue to be dormant in total serenity, its natural heritage is well protected, since it is part of the national Park of La Réunion. With its 3,071 metres altitude, the Piton des Neiges is a culminating point of the Indian ocean. The volcano, extinct since a very long time, fascinates by its majestic presence in the centre of the island. The culminating point of La Réunion, le Piton des Neiges is a very beautiful hiking destination. The opportunity to dream of exploring marvelous preserved nature. The long trail GR®R1 « Tour du Piton des Neiges » was chosen as the preferred GR (long hike trail) of the French people in 2019.

La Réunion cannot be separated from the Piton des Neiges. In fact, the volcano, dormant since 120 centuries, is the origin of the creation of two thirds of the island, more than three million years ago. Eroded by weather and the absence of volcanic activity, it is however the highest summit of the island, at 3,071 metres altitude. But its name is deceptive, as this peak of La Réunion is rarely covered with a white cloak: there is no eternal snow and snow falls are very infrequent. Nevertheless, it is cold there and hikers who want to undertake its ascent must be well-equipped. Ascents and hikes: it is possible to take on its mythical slopes from the Plaine-des-Cafres or le cirque de Salazie. But generally, the valiant walkers leave from the cirque de Cilaos, also at the centre of the island. They then halt at the only lodge of the Piton des Neiges, the indispensable refuge of the Caverne Dufour. After a good night of rest in one of the four dormitories (48 places totally) and an invigorating meal, they get up very early, before dawn, to go through the last kilometres before the summit. After a little more than an hour, their efforts are rewarded. They see the sunrise on practically the whole island with the Indian ocean in the horizon, whose turquoise waters mingle with the sky. Down below, the three cirques, from Mafate (in the north west), Salazie (in the north east) and Cilaos (in the south) arise too. They have been formed after the collapse of the arch Piton des Neiges : the collapse has created gigantic cliffs, then were partly filled by the lava flow escaped from the volcano.



Volcano

Le Piton Maïdo

Situated on the heights of Saint-Paul in the west of the island, at 2,190 metres altitude, the Piton Maïdo is one of the most spectacular view points on the cirque Mafate and the west coast of the island, hemmed by magnificent beaches. This natural site accessible by car goes through a beautiful tamarind forest, appreciated by picnickers. On your hike on foot, you will discover authentic islets, it is recommended to visit the Maïdo early in the morning, the presence of clouds in the course of the day tends to mask all these marvels. The Maïdo is the starting point of numerous hikes towards the cirque of Mafate, but also towards Grand Bénare, the third highest peak of the island with its 2.898 metres. Cycling enthusiasts can get astride their all-terrain bikes and mainly to enjoy the speed in descending the paths developed from the peak of the Piton Maïdo up to the sea-side resort of Saint-Gilles.



Volcano

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