

Coast to coast

Leo Bear is taken on a sensorial and culinary tour de force as the first British journalist to visit the new St Regis in Mauritius



I'm in a brand-new white Jaguar XJ speeding along the Mauritius coastline with the Indian Ocean on one side and a handsome Tic-Tac-proffering driver on the other, but all I can think about is the cold sensation creeping up my back.

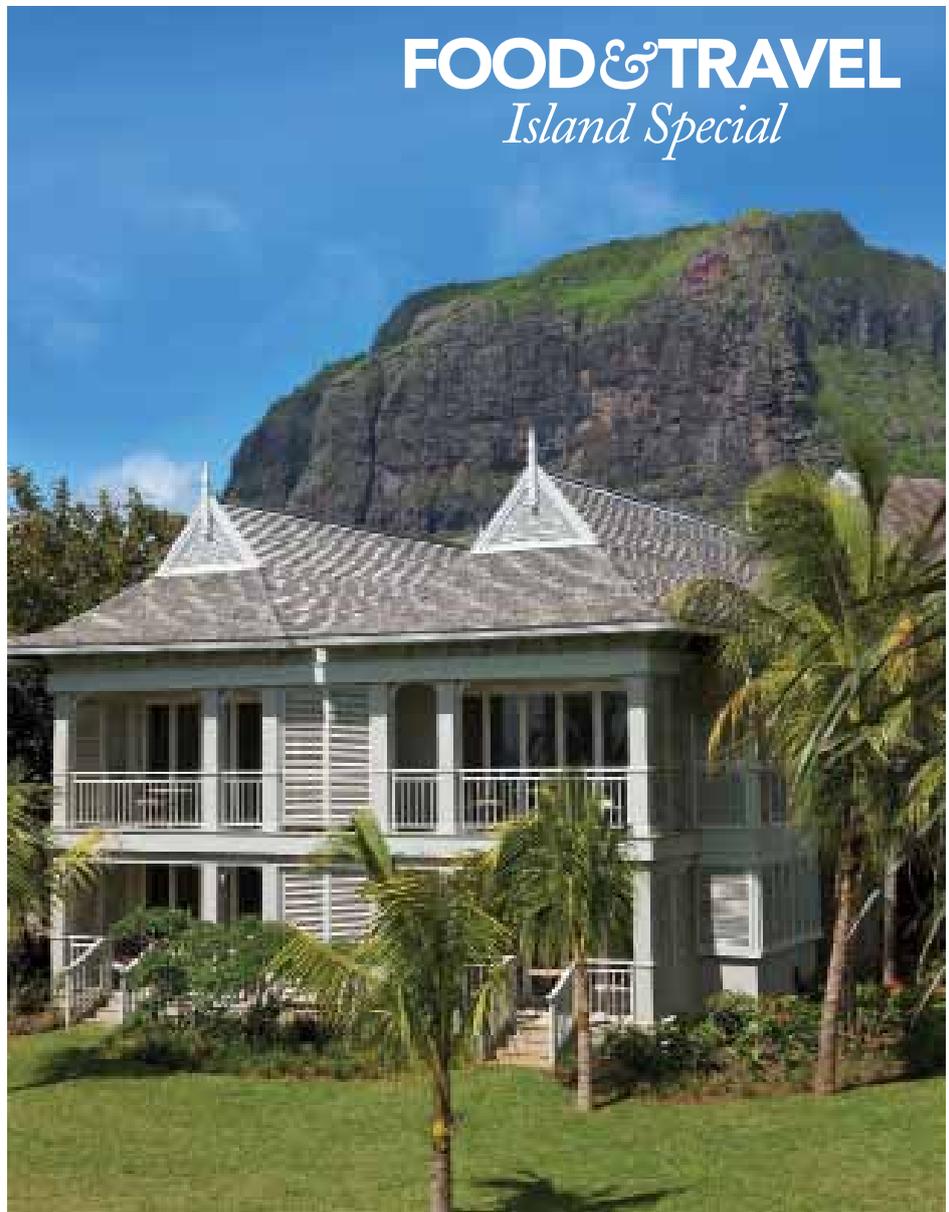
As ramshackle towns with little more than a beaten-up *épicerie* or *boulangerie* give way to fields of sugar cane and vast stretches of forest, I gaze at tree-encrusted pitons rising like shards of green glass in the distance. But I still can't shake the icicles rising up my spine.

'What on earth is going on with my seat?' I finally ask the driver. 'Climate control' he says with a chuckle. 'The leather is injected with a state-of-the-art cooling agent.' So far, so James Bond.

In fact, I am something of a spy today because I'm the first British journalist to see the new St Regis hotel on the southern tip of the island. They certainly chose their location well. Le Morne, a 550m mountain and one of Mauritius' best-loved landmarks,



provides a dramatic backdrop to the resort. The surrounding area is a protected nature reserve with strict laws forbidding any new construction. But this didn't stop the St Regis. Instead of building anew, they flattened an existing hotel and built on top of it matching its floor-plan inch for inch, right down to the little wooden jetty that protrudes from the beach. Accommodation comes in the form of chic thatched cottages arranged in clusters, or 'villages', each served by teams of butlers housed in elegant open-fronted wall-papered sitting rooms. A grand plantation-style manor house lies at the centre of the hotel. Boasting a smart Victorian colonnade, it's peppered with armchairs, perfect for an afternoon snooze or nibbling on scones with a pot of Earl Grey. The four restaurants sit shoulder to shoulder along the colonnade, giving the hotel a sociable, buzzy feel, and I can testify that the spaghetti bolognese at the beachside Boathouse restaurant is superb. 'Simply India' is the place to be though.



Michelin-starred chef Atul Kochhar, one of India's most famous exports, is whipping up a taste tornado in the kitchen with his daring modern dishes. Chicken tikka pie anyone?

As it happens, Kochhar is not the only VIC (very important chef) on the island. Last year, Shelina Permalloo (winner of MasterChef 2012) launched a Mauritian cookery school at Maradiva Villas Resort & Spa, and Tom Aiken is currently packing his Vilebrequins for a sojourn in March. There's still time to book a master-class with him at the Royal Palm.

Food lovers checking into the Four Seasons Anahita get an altogether different treat in the form of keys to a convertible Mini Cooper and a pre-programmed Sat Nav route taking in various tea plantations and rum distilleries, concluding in Port Louis' China Town.

On closer inspection, Mauritius' ascending culinary standing is, for the most part, thanks to a prestigious cookery competition held each spring at the Constance Belle Mar Plage on the east coast. Esteemed chefs from all corners of the globe battle it out for a clutch of modest silver trophies, but really it's all about exchanging recipes (and sun bathing). Angela Hartnett and Bruce Poole of Chez Bruce have both taken part in the past, and this year, bets

are on Frances Atkins, one of Britain's best female Michelin-starred chefs, bringing home a prize. Incidentally, the Belle Mar's sister hotel, Le Prince Maurice, a little further up the coast, has recently undergone a transformation. With a new Sisley spa, a slate lap pool and an injection of Asian chic to the common areas, it's looking better than ever. Repeat visitors will be pleased to hear that rooms retain a colonial feel with hardwood floors, wicker day-beds and marble bathrooms but new snazzy touches include Mac Minis and slightly lower beds (after complaints they were too high). The rest of the five-star big-name hotels will certainly be standing to attention. After a two decade reign, many are starting to look tired and if they want to compete with the handsome new St Regis, major refurbishments are required.

It seems that now is quite clearly the time to embrace a new generation of Mauritian luxury – gel-seated Jaguars and all.

Leo flew to Mauritius with Air Mauritius – airmauriti.us.com – and was a guest of Constance Le Prince Maurice.

Visit princemaurence.constancehotels.com and stregismauriti.us.com for more information