



#### WHY IT'S WORTH THE VISIT

- South Africans do not require a visa for Reunion for short stays.
- Piton de la Fournaise is one of the most active volcanoes in the world. It's also one of the most accessible and enjoyable to climb.
- The diving is spectacular and safe, and for the adventurous, the island is the gathering point for one of the largest populations of bull sharks in the world.
- You can hike for seven days across the spine of the island, up mountains and through breathtaking valleys, staying in gîtes or private homes, without seeing a road or a car.
- Reunion has some of the best bakeries, boulangeries and pâtisseries in the world. I would return just for the vanilla éclair I ate in the village of Le Tampon on the way to the volcano.

Sheer cliffs fall away to the still-steaming crater floor.

# LIFE IS LIKE A volcano...

*Do you have a travel bucket list? Darrel Bristow-Bovey does, and climbing an active volcano was Number 12 on it. For him, it brought on melancholia and metaphors, but in the end there's a reason it should be on any traveller's list. Photographs by Teagan Cunniffe*

At the summit of Reunion's Piton de la Fournaise, one of the most active volcanoes in the world.

**D**arrel, where are you?  
 'I'm here,' I called.  
 'Where?'  
 'I don't know.'  
 'Turn your headlamp on.'

But I didn't, even though I was afraid. Sometimes the best way to beat a big fear is with a little one.

I was on the island of Reunion, and while there's plenty on Reunion to widen your eyes – sheer heights, plunging depths, haunted pirate graves and dark, narrow underground tunnels, none of which is as scary as the price of a bottle of wine – the big fear wasn't any of those things: it was my birthday.

I have many symptoms on my birthday. I become melancholy and moody. I muse philosophically, the way a cartoon mouse might muse if the storyline of the cartoon required him to be in Paris, wearing a beret and a stripy shirt. I start seeing everything as a metaphor for our mortality. I take to reciting sad poetry aloud, which can be unpleasant for anyone nearby.

On the first night on the island I sat on the sea wall at dusk in the capital Saint-Denis. Old men sipped Pernod at streetside tables or played pétanque on the cinder track, and argued and waved their tape measures at one another. The sky was the colour of pumice stone, the sea turned violet and small waves sucked through the smooth shingle of the shore. Teagan the photographer was doing something involving apertures and the light. 'Begin, and cease, and then again begin,' I morosely instructed the waves, 'and bring the eternal note of sadness in!'

Teagan gave me a funny look.

I'm at that stage of life when I'm no longer young and not yet old, but one of them is coming closer and the other moving further away. I have a list of Things To Do Before I Die, and I've managed some of them (Number 27 – walk with mountain



gorillas; Number 44 – swim in the Amazon River; Number 3 – live past 40), but every day the list gets longer and life does not. Number 12 is to climb a live volcano, so there I was in the Indian Ocean on a small piece of France suspended in the warm southern seas.

Reunion isn't just a former French colony like its nearest neighbour and frenemy Mauritius – it's an actual department of France. Its language is French, its people are French, its wine, bread and prices are French. I ate brioche from boulangeries and frogs' legs in bistros, and I crossed the road without looking left or right: it was just like France, except it's nothing at all like France. Reunion might be the wildest fragment of Europe and one of the most unusual places I've ever been.

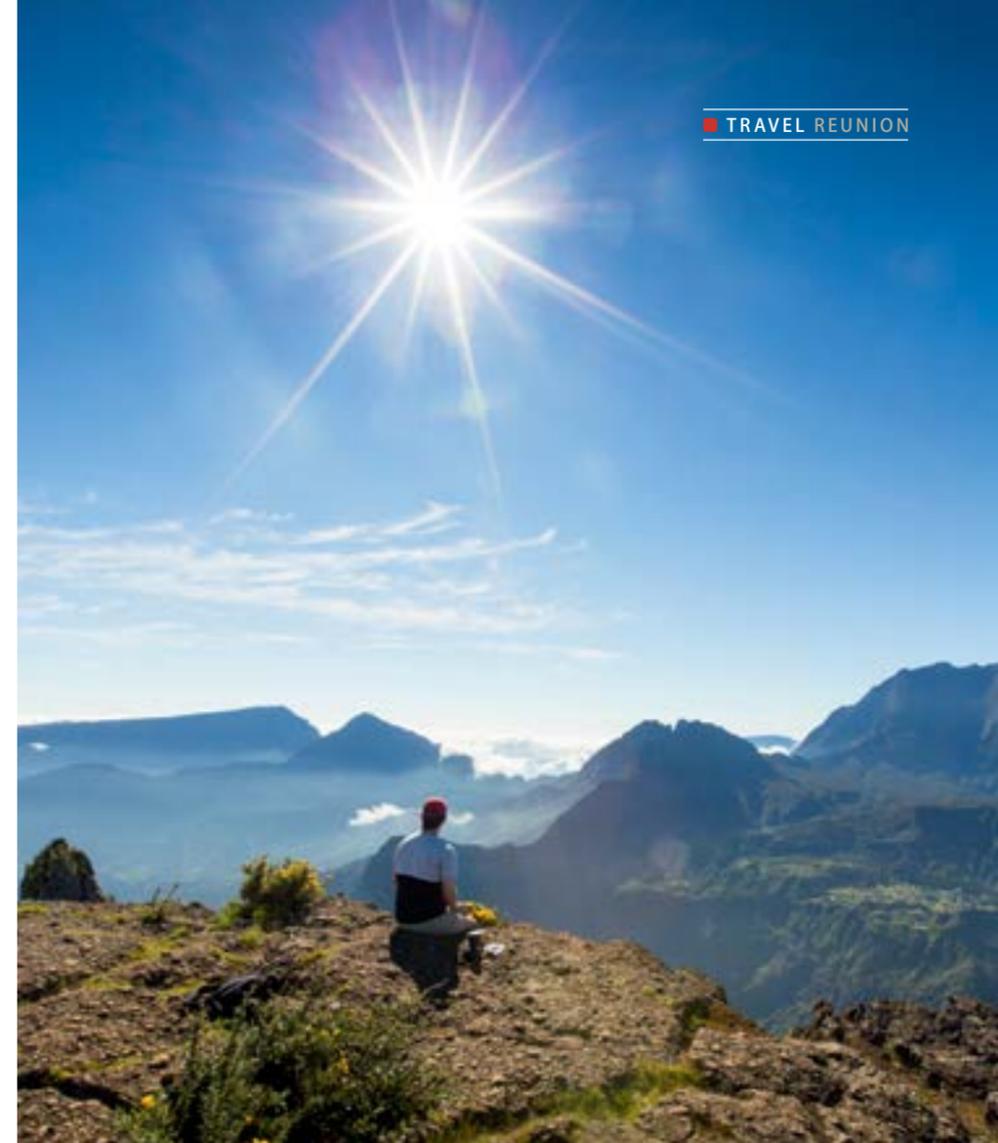
The west coast of the island is all white-sand beaches, shallow lagoons and coral reefs, but the east and south are where the action is – wild, choppy and unprotected, with steep drop-offs from the island shelf to the bottomless blue ocean that brings in sharks, game fish and mysterious creatures of the deep. Every few years the coastline advances by increments into the sea as Piton de la Fournaise, one of the world's most active volcanoes, bleeds liquid rock and sends it in great pyroclastic flows over forests and coastal highways, sliding into the sea in plumes of steam and salt. It erupted in 2007 and again in 2008, and again twice last year. After each eruption dead fish float to the surface from the deep water and scientists discover species they've never seen before. After each eruption people move back and rebuild their homes.

'Why do people move back to the same place?' I asked our volcano guide, a Frenchman named Fred Melon who has a spectacular helmet of curly silver hair and a splendid Gallic beak of a nose. He shrugged like an existential philosopher.

'Property is cheap,' he said.

We stood on the shoulder of the rebuilt highway and looked up and down the

**FROM TOP** Cracks run through the ledge, which feels as though it can shear away at any moment; sudden bright bursts of green where new life sprouts from the rock. **OPPOSITE** The most direct route up the steep volcano is to climb straight up the folded lava flow.



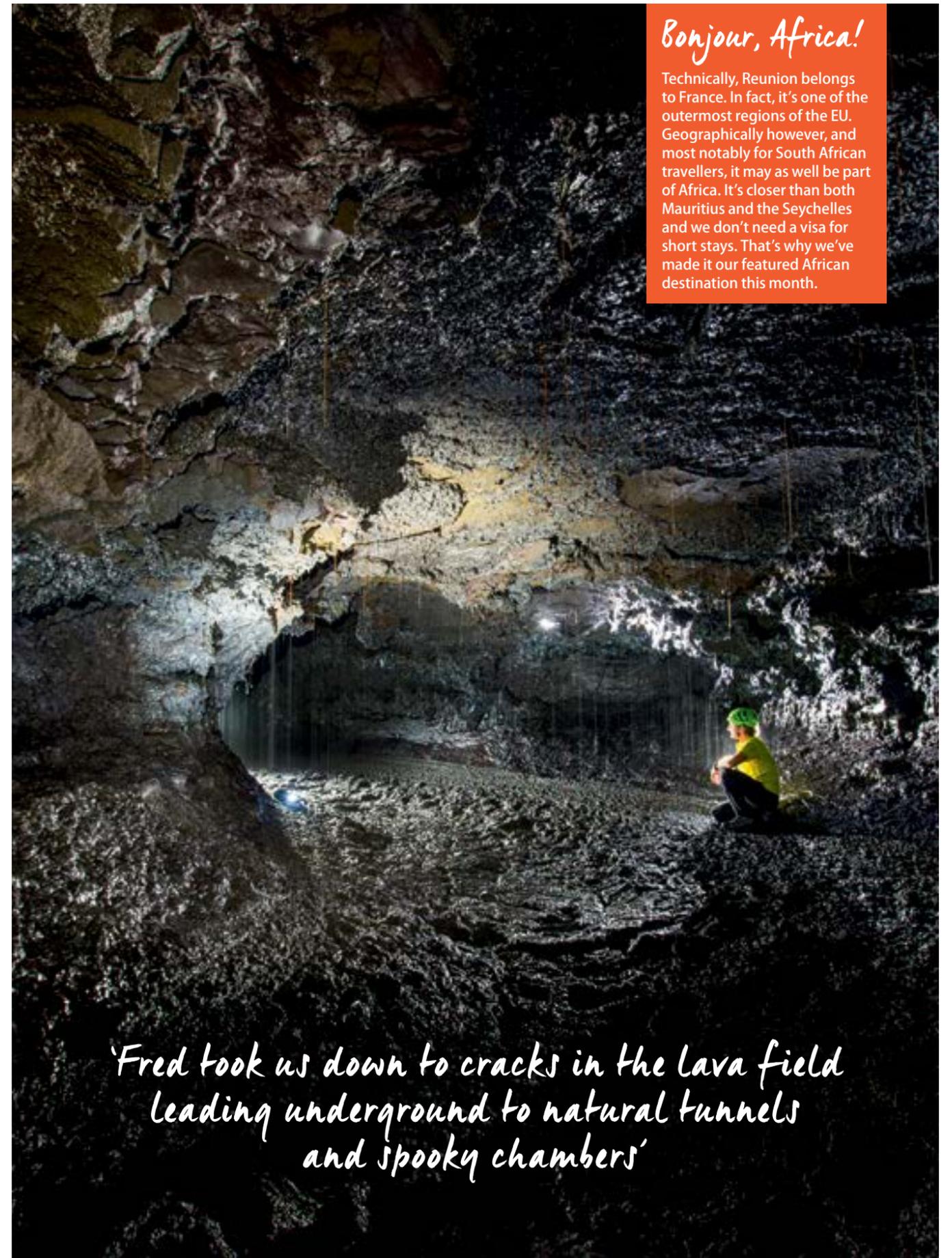
silver-smooth lava fields, studded with sudden bursts of green where new life sprouts from the rock – flecks of emerald in a vast pewter brooch. Cloud flowed down the volcano slopes like misty lava.

Fred took us down to cracks in the lava field leading underground to natural tunnels and spooky chambers. Mostly you can stand and walk upright, but sometimes you bend double or crawl on hands and knees. He gave us hard hats, headlamps and knee pads, and when we asked if it's scary down there he raised his eyebrows and turned down the corners of his mouth like a Paris waiter when you ask for the bill.

It was scary down there, but also beautiful. The passages lead into caverns and chambers smooth and chocolate-brown like an éclair, or glittering white like an ice cave, or honeycombed like the inside of a silver lung. The tunnels and chambers are formed by convection currents and differential rates of cooling. As time passes, the outside of the lava >



Grand Galet waterfall is near the town of St Joseph. **OPPOSITE** Fred watches over his underground chamber like an elegant French dragon, philosophically brooding over his stolen treasure.



## *Bonjour, Africa!*

Technically, Reunion belongs to France. In fact, it's one of the outermost regions of the EU. Geographically however, and most notably for South African travellers, it may as well be part of Africa. It's closer than both Mauritius and the Seychelles and we don't need a visa for short stays. That's why we've made it our featured African destination this month.

*'Fred took us down to cracks in the lava field leading underground to natural tunnels and spooky chambers'*

## Don't ask about the dodo

The dodo is big in Reunion. It's on their beer labels, T-shirts, graffiti and key rings. They're very fond of the dodo, and very proud of it. They also see Mauritius as their great rival, so they don't take kindly to being asked why they love a Mauritian bird so much.



cools to rock, but inside the molten heart still flows, hollowing itself out.

'Just like a human being,' I murmured philosophically. Teagan fiddled with her lens and pretended not to hear.

Reunion isn't scaled like the rest of the world. It's top-heavy – seemingly too high in the middle for its narrow base. From the coast the land rises in sheer cliffs running silver with waterfalls. The heights and altitude jumps are too extreme for the human eye. You can stand atop a cliff half a kilometre high and watch a wall of water falling 800 metres from another cliff just to reach your eye level. You can reach the top of the world and discover that there's a whole new world of villages and plains in the clouds above you. This is a landscape for giants or dragons. These are cliffs for King Kong.

We took a helicopter over the island into Coleridge's Xanadu, through canyons and caverns measureless to man, following rivers and sinuous rills to the heart of the island, unreachable on foot, where waterfalls drop a kilometre down vertical faces to a small, sunless sea – a bottomless pool that will only see direct light for the minutes at midday when the sun passes directly overhead.

We hiked half a day into an ancient caldera through Jurassic forests and a plain of ghostly tamarinds, gnarled as fingers and glowing in the pearly half-light, to La Nouvelle, a village unreachable by road, a former refuge for runaway slaves and now an alpine hamlet with wooden A-frame houses where children hide their faces from cameras and where every item has been walked in on foot or choppered in from the coast.

I dived in the clear Indian Ocean off Saint-Gilles and dropped like a hawk into sunken canyons of basalt and coral, thick with turtles and giant parrotfish and one long blue ravine where a forest of moray eels swayed in the current like seaweed.

But the main event is the volcano. We drove up the winding road from the

**FROM TOP** Deux dodo at Le Passage du Chat Blanc in Saint-Denis on a Sunday night; the stairs down to the lava plain, Le Grand Brûlé, with the small crater Formica Leo in the background and behind it the dome of Piton de la Fournaise. **OPPOSITE** The water off the coast of Saint-Gilles is so clear, once you're in, you forget it's there.



coast, up and endlessly up to Bellecombe Pass and walked to the edge of the great caldera, where stone steps lead you 1300 metres down again to the coppery moonscape, Le Grand Brûlé, gnarled and twisted like the skin of someone who has been very badly burnt. It took half an hour just to walk down, and my legs were trembling as we set out towards

the dome rising from the lava plain just too perfectly, impossibly like a volcano.

I was worried about how I'd do. I wasn't walking fit; everything about me felt creaky and unoiled. Teagan tried to make me feel better by saying she's unfit too. Do you know what's worse than being old and unfit? A 25-year-old pretending she knows what you mean.

We walked for an hour over the uneven, twisted ground. There's a natural formation making a kind of hollowed-out spire called the Chapelle de Rosemont. People bring candles, icons and dried flowers as devotions. There is also an overpoweringly unholy smell. Some people use it as a church, others as a toilet.

'There's a metaphor there,' I muttered. >



We reached the foot of the volcano and started upwards. It was hot, and became hotter as we climbed. The sun burnt us through our hats and sunscreen.

'One hour on the volcano is like five hours on the beach,' said Fred.

The cone's peak is 2200 metres above sea level. In winter it can glisten with frost or snow. In some places the lava is hard and solid; elsewhere it's hollow and

*'As the sun moved,  
the lava turned  
from copper  
to black to  
magnesium'*

rings like a gong beneath your heels. In some places it crunches like sugar cubes.

As the sun moved, the lava turned from copper to black to magnesium. It glittered green with crystals of olivine. My legs ached, but they held, and the longer they held the better it felt to be rising though the thin air through the efforts of my body. Good old legs. Good old body.

'Are you okay?' asked Teagan, because she is very well-brought-up and worries about her elders.

'It's like life,' I wheezed grandly. 'It starts off all flat and you think, *This is easy! I can do this!* Then it starts to get steep.'

'You're really into metaphors, aren't you?'

We reached the rim of the crater. One minute you're climbing and the next you're one half-step away from the abyss. Down in the crater steam rose through vents in the earth and drifted up into the blue sky. We walked around the perfect circle of the lip and sat with our feet



dangling in the void. Or Fred did – I was too scared. Even where there was solid rock and no empty air, there were cracks and fissures running through the solid rock, so how solid could it be?

'You think maybe that's enough metaphors yet?' asked Teagan.

I thought about how when we were crawling through the tunnels I let the others push ahead and when I was alone I switched off the lamp to experience the panic of the perfect darkness and I held it as long as I could, then scrambled to catch up with them. Even in the darkness underground, it's the company of human beings, your fellow travellers, that gives the most comfort. That's a metaphor too.

But I lay on my back and stared up through the empty sky and felt the

**ABOVE** Misty-morning cliffs at Cap Méchant in the wild south. **OPPOSITE** Lava crunched beneath our feet as we descended Piton de la Fournaise.

metaphors lifting from me. I felt the fear and the fretting drift away. The world is not a metaphor, the world is what it is, and it's here for us to live in and to love. We'll all die and every year we get closer to it, but right now we are not dead, we are very beautifully, intensely alive, and I am on the edge of an active volcano on an island in the Indian Ocean and all the world is stretched out below me and I think of a Philip Larkin poem and I smile as I stare up through the deep blue air that shows nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless. 6

## PLAN YOUR TRIP →

### GETTING THERE

I flew Air Austral from Joburg to Saint-Denis. Tickets are from R5 800 return. Air Austral is one of my new favourite airlines – plenty of legroom, good meals and a pleasant flight of about five hours. [air-austral.com](http://air-austral.com)

### WHEN TO GO

Reunion can be steamy and subtropical, so the best times to visit are the southern spring and autumn. Summer months are very hot and can be very wet. I was there in April, when there was still some rain about, but mostly the days were warm and fine.

### NEED TO KNOW

The local beer is officially called Bourbon – which can be confusing if you order it in the wrong accent – but no one calls it that. There's a picture of a dodo on the label, so everyone calls it 'La Dodo'. Simply say, '*Deux dodo, s'il vous plaît.*'

### DO THIS

#### Hike Piton de la Fournaise.

There are no park fees or costs involved with climbing the volcano. It's possible for anyone who's reasonably fit to climb it – you need a strong pair of legs, good shoes and sun protection. Our expedition took most of the day, but if you don't take a photographer with you, you can probably do it in four hours up and down. Volcano guides are optional and probably not necessary, except when you're going down into the tunnels. Climbing or walking on or around the volcano is strongly discouraged after sunset, but it's France, so no one will actually stop you. Camping on the



volcano is officially frowned upon, but again, it's France... **Dive with Bleu Marine** in Saint-Gilles on the west coast. It has excellent equipment, meticulous safety standards and a short boat ride will take you to crystal waters with 30 metres of visibility – one of the nicest, most relaxing diving experiences I've had. R880 pp for one dive, which includes equipment hire. [bleu-marine-reunion.com/an](http://bleu-marine-reunion.com/an) **Visit the Saint-Paul Market**, where you can buy anything from curios and clothing to cheap dodo (beer) and fresh produce. [en.reunion.fr/markets](http://en.reunion.fr/markets)

### STAY HERE

**Le Saint-Pierre Hotel** in Saint-Pierre, the capital of the wild

south, was my favourite hotel. New, clean, comfortable and close to the beach, I had my birthday dinner there and felt that everything was going to be all right. From R961 pp. [hotellesaintpierre.fr](http://hotellesaintpierre.fr)

### EAT HERE

Eating and drinking can be expensive in Reunion, as prices are pegged to France, with the additional cost of flying out the ingredients. When in Reunion you can't avoid drinking rum arrangé, an infusion of local rum with citrus, vanilla, banana or a protected endemic orchid. Every establishment and household makes its own blend, and every meal ends with a ceremonial consumption.

It's offered free as a gesture of hospitality, so only an oaf and a killjoy can decline.

**Le Bistrot de la Porte des Lilas**, in Saint-Denis, offers reasonable and delicious French food, fine wine, warm hospitality, elegant ambience ... and Teagan had her first order of frogs' legs. Meals from R200. 38 Bis Rue Labourdonnais, Porte des Lilas. **Chez Moustache et Rose-May**, in the wild south-east is great for traditional Reunion cuisine of curries, seafood, palm-heart salads and cold beer. Meals from R160. 9 RN2, Tremblet, Saint-Philippe.

\* Prices and conversions correct at time of going to print

