MAURITIUS

Location

Mauritius is a paradise island situated in the Indian Ocean. It is just above the Tropic of Capricorn at 20°15 and 19°68 South latitude and 57°35 East longitude and forms a part of the Mascarene Islands chain. It lies approximately 2400 kilometers off the South East coast of Africa and covers an area of about 1865 square kilometers or 720 square miles. Along its length and breadth, Mauritius stretches about 64 and 47 kilometers respectively. Among the nearby accessible places, Mauritius is 855 kilometers from the Island of Madagascar; 2,000 kilometers from Durban, South Africa; 1,800 kilometers from Mombassa, Tanzania; 6,000 kilometers from Perth, Australia; and 4,700 kilometers from Bombay, India.

Geography

Mauritius is a volcanic island and has originated from such eruptions about 100,000 years ago. It has a central plateau that is about 400 meters above sea level and is characterized by extinct volcanic craters, crisscrossed by rivers and waterfalls. Encircling the plateau are scattered rainforests and discontinuous mountains with beautifully shaped basalt deposits. The highest peak in Mauritius is “Le Piton de la Rivière-Noire”, reaching a height of 828 meters. Some other peaks are “Pieter Both” (823 meters) and “Le Pouce” (812 meters).

About 330 kilometers of the coastline is almost entirely surrounded by the world’s third largest coral reefs. These have created beautiful lagoons with exotic marine life and white sandy beaches and also protect them from the open sea. The maritime claims are that the continental shelf is 200 nm or to the edge of the continental margin, the exclusive economic zone, 200 nm and the territorial sea 12 nm.

Climate

Mauritius has perfect tropical holiday weather throughout the year. The summer, from November to April, is warm and dry. The temperature varies from 20°C to 28°C on the central plateau and from 25°C to 33°C on the coast. The water temperature reaches around 27°C. During the winter months, May to October, the weather is warm and humid. The average temperature is 19°C in the plateau and 24°C on the coast. The water temperature is approximately 22°C. The hours of daylight are approximately from 5 am to 7 pm in summer and 7 am to 5 pm in winter. The coolest month is July having a temperature of approximately 22°C, while the warmest is February (28°C). Heavy rainfalls are likely between January and March.
The only drawback about this beautiful weather is that the warm season is sometimes disturbed by tropical cyclones. These unpredictable cyclonic winds can be as violent as 140 m.p.h and can cause severe damage. However, such cyclones are quite rare and to date have occurred only about a dozen days in ninety years.

**History**

The Arabs knew about the Island of Mauritius in the 10th century. Discovered by Portuguese navigator, Padro Mascarena, the island was used as a victual stop for their long journeys to Asia. The Dutch were the first colonists, who named the island after the prince “Maurice van Nassau”. They exploited the existing environment of the island for 115 years and finally left in 1712.

Mauritius was then taken over by the French and renamed “Ile de France”. They were settled here from 1175 to 1810. In 1814, the British occupied this island. On March 12th 1968, Mauritius gained independence and is since then a member of the British Commonwealth. On March 12th 1992, Mauritius was proclaimed a democratic republic.

**Flag**

The Republic of Mauritius has a flag designed as horizontal stripes of red, blue, yellow and green from top to bottom. The Air Force marking is a roundel of the national colors.

**Important Dates**

The important dates and public holidays in Mauritius are:

- New Year, January 1st and 2nd;
- Independence/Republic day, March 12th;
- Labor Day, May 1st;
- All Saints Day, November 1st;
- Christmas Day, December 25th.

There are seven more important days related to religious festivals whose dates vary from year to year. These are: Thaipoosam Cavadee in January/February; Maha Shivaratree in February; Chinese Spring Festival in January/February; Ougadi in March; Id-El-Fitr in May/June; Ganesh Chaturthi in September and Divali in October/November.

**Population**
Mauritius is one of the most densely populated countries in the world with a population of around 1.2 million. As of July 2001, the distribution of the main ethnic groups has been 68% Indo-Mauritians, 27% Creole, 3% Sino-Mauritanian and 2% Franco-Mauritian. The religious groups comprises of nearly 52% Hindu, 28.3% Christian (Roman Catholic 26% and Protestant 2.3%), 16.6% Muslim and 3.1% others. The population growth rate is about 0.9%. The birth and death rates are approximately 16.4births/1000 population and 7.0 deaths/1000 population. The infant mortality rate is same as the death rate. The average life expectancy among the Mauritians is 68.9 years for the males and 73.95 for females.

The labor force of the huge population is almost equally distributed between government services, agriculture, fishing, manufacturing, and others.

**Currency**

The monetary unit is the Mauritian Rupee (MUR). 1 MUR is equivalent to 100 Cents. The Rupee is circulated in the denominations of 1000, 500, 200, 100, 50, 10 and 5 notes and 5 and 2 coins. The coins are in the denominations of 50, 25, 10, 5 and 1 cents. Currently ('04) 27.58 MUR is equivalent to 1 US Dollars.

In Mauritius, the import of more than 700 Rupee and the export of more than 350 Rupee is forbidden. Other currencies can be imported and exported without any limit. Major credit card and travelers` cheques are widely accepted.

**Educations**

Primary education is free in Mauritius. With a literacy rate of 86% (2003 est.), it is one the highest educated countries in Sub-Saharan Africa. The educational system has a provision for instruction in seven Asian languages. The percent distribution by gender is almost the same. Some of the colleges in Mauritius are the Imperial College, the French College Lycee La Bourdonnais, Royal College and St. Joseph’s College.

**Language**

English is the official language in Mauritius and is widely understood. However, French and Creole are the more dominant ones. A large population of the people also use other oriental languages like Hindi, Urdu, Hakka, and Bhojpoori.
Religion

In 1721, with the arrival of the French, Roman Catholicism was declared the official religion of Mauritius. However, since the Indian population is the largest ethnic group, Hinduism is widely practiced. The island has more than 150 Hindu temples. The second largest religious group is the Christians. Islam has the third largest number of followers on this island. There are several Buddhist pagodas as well. The Mauritians respect all religions different from theirs and often participate in the religious practices.

Agriculture and Industries

Agriculture in Mauritius plays a vital role in determining its economy. The island uses about 90% of its arable land in growing sugarcane. Other products that are grown are tea, corn, potatoes, bananas and pulses. The island also raises cattle and goat. Fish is their largest natural resource.

Mauritius has a large number of food processing industries, most of which are sugar-milling industries. The island is also engaged in textiles, clothing, metal products, transport equipment, non-electrical machinery and tourism.

Trade and Economy

Since their independence, Mauritius has grown as a low income, agricultural economy to a middle income, diversified economy. The cultivation of sugarcane accounts for about 25% of the export earnings. Other exported commodities comprise of clothing and textiles, cut flowers and molasses. The total exports value amounts to approximately $ 1.965 billion (2003 est.). The export partners are UK, France, US, Germany and Italy.

Mauritius imports commodities worth about $2.136 billion (2003 est.). Among the imports are manufactured goods, capital equipment, foodstuffs, petroleum products and chemicals. The import trading countries are mainly France, South Africa, India, Hong Kong and UK.

The GDP or Purchasing Power Parity, as of 2003, is $13.85 billion and $11,400 per capita. The real growth rate is 4.1%, but at the same time, the unemployed population is 8.8%.

Food
The Mauritians have been under the rule of the British for about 150 years, but have still maintained their exotic and innovative culinary skills. The French, Indian and the French cooking styles mainly influence the Mauritian cuisine. The people also have Creole food, which is influenced by African, Indian and French cuisines. The Indian influence is evidenced by the use of spices and curries. Indian snacks like samosas are also very popular. Chinese cuisine is also one of the favorites. The most popular Chinese dishes are fried rice, port foo, yong and sweet and sour fish. The influence of French is evident in the desserts. In hotels and restaurants a wide range of food is available because they not only serve the guests but also the native inhabitants.

**Landmarks**

Mauritius is a splendid place to vacation. Its white sandy beaches, the crystal clear waters in various shades of blue and the large unbroken coral reefs are a major tourist attraction. The Baie du Tamarin bay at the mouth of Tamarin River is the center of surfing. This bay experiences gigantic waves throughout the year. The Baie du Tombeau beach, overgrown with cocos, is just 15 minutes by car from the capital city, Port Louis. The biggest tourist center with a variety of water sports, gift shops and excellent restaurants is the Grand Baie. The Trou-aux-Biches is perfect for children and also for snorkeling because of its low depth waters.

Mauritius has a good amount of museum collections that are displayed in a few museums. The Eureka House at Moka displays antique furniture, old lithographs and other private objects. The historical and naval museum contains naval relics and objects of historical importance. The only memorial museum is the Robert Edward Hart Museum at Souillac, which is built entirely out of coral.

This remarkable island hosts independent and guided tours and safaris for their guests to Africa and the Indian Ocean. There are a plethora of leisure time attractions and excursions on this island. Some of them are the Botanical Garden of Pamplemousses, Chameral Colored Earths, Casela Bird Park, la Vanille Cocodile Farm, and the Grand Bassin.

The traditional entertainment is the Sega dance. Originating from the ritual music of Madagascar and the mainland of Africa, the Sega dance expresses the joy and sorrow of the peasants and the fishing folks. The traditional instruments, the Ravane, the Cocos, the Calebasse, and the Triangle are being replaced by the conventional orchestra ensemble.

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