

Réunion

Oh la la! After a long-haul flight, you step off the plane and you're greeted with a *bonjour*. Then you breakfast on *croissants* and *chocolat chaud* (hot chocolate). At first glance, Réunion is like a chunk of France teleported to the tropics. But beyond the Gallic panache, you'll soon realise it's a resplendent tapestry, which also blends Indian, African and Chinese influences.

Jutting out of the ocean like a basaltic shield cloaked in green, Réunion is a mini-Hawaii, with astounding geographical diversity. Within an hour or two, the landscape morphs from lava fields to lush primary forest, from jagged peaks to sprawling coastal cities. The *pièce de résistance* is Piton de la Fournaise, one of the world's most accessible active volcanoes. Depending on nature's whims, you might even witness fiery-red molten lava. When the volcano has finished working its magic on you, there are horses to ride, majestic mountains to trek up or paraglide from, drop-offs to dive from, big waves to surf, extinct volcanoes to fly over, and canyons to explore. But it's not all about nature, landscapes and adrenaline – Réunion has its cultural gems as well, with stunning Creole architecture in cute-as-can-be villages, as well as colourful religious buildings and festivals.

We'll be honest, though. Réunion is a tropical island, but one that doesn't fit the cliché of a sun-soaked Edenic paradise. Sure, you'll find appealing palm-ruffled stretches of sand, but none that rivals the super-sexy beaches that are *de rigueur* in the Seychelles or Mauritius. All the better for you: mega-resorts are nonexisaaatent. Open the Pandora's box, and you'll leave the island proclaiming to the world that *La Réunion lé gadiamb* ('Réunion is lovely', in Creole).

HIGHLIGHTS

- Gorging your senses on the Martian landscapes of the **Plaine des Sables** (p211) and the smouldering volcano of **Piton de la Fournaise** (p210)
- Flying high over the mystical, rugged topography of **Cirque de Mafate** (p206), **Cirque de Cilaos** (p197) and **Cirque de Salazie** (p202)
- Going heritage-hunting among the Creole buildings of **Hell-Bourg** (p203), **Entre-Deux** (p194) and **St-Denis** (opposite)
- Quickening your pulse with a rip-roaring mountain-bike descent from **Le Maïdo** (p180), through cryptomeria forests and sugar-cane fields
- Swapping stress for bliss in the perfect valley-village seclusion of **Grand Bassin** (p209)
- Surfing and paragliding by day in **St-Leu** (p190) before diving into **L'Hermitage-les-Bains'** steamy nightlife (p187)



■ TELEPHONE CODE: 33 ■ POPULATION: 800,000 ■ AREA: 2512 SQ KM

CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

Because of the high mountains, Réunion's climate varies more than that of Mauritius. It still, however, experiences only two distinct seasons: the hot, rainy summer from December to April and the cool, dry winter from late April to October. The east coast is considerably wetter than the west, but wettest of all are the mountains above the east coast – around Takamaka, Plaine-des-Palmistes and the northern and eastern slopes of the volcano. As with Mauritius, the cyclone season is roughly December to March.

Temperatures on the coast average 22°C during winter and 27°C in summer. In the mountains, they drop to 11°C and 18°C respectively. Clouds generally cover the peaks and high plains from mid-morning. The drier winter months are the most favourable for hiking (see p231 for more information).

The peak tourist seasons are during the French school holidays from late June to early September. From October through to the New Year holidays is also reasonably busy, but after this everything eases down during cyclone-prone February and March. The weather normally changes for the better in April, which isn't a bad time to a visit.

See p249 for the climate chart for St-Denis.

ST-DENIS

pop 140,000

Francophiles will feel comfortable in St-Denis (san-de-nee), the capital of Réunion. Except for the palms and flamboyant trees to remind you that you're somewhere sunnier (and hotter), St-Denis could be easily mistaken for a French provincial enclave, with a flurry of trendy shops, brasseries, bistros, and *boulangeries* (bakeries). Mmmmm...those little *pains au chocolat* (chocolate-filled pastries) will linger long on the palate!

With most of Réunion's tourist attractions located elsewhere on the island, most visitors only stay long enough to book *gîtes de montagne* (mountain lodges), pick up a few tourist brochures and rent a car before dashing off to more magnetic locations. But St-Denis warrants more than a fleeting glance. Scratch beneath the French polish and you'll

soon realise that the city also boasts an undeniably Creole soul, with a portfolio of delightful colonial and religious buildings and a casual multi-ethnic atmosphere.

If that's not enough, there are always epicurean indulgences. Sip a black coffee at a chic pavement café listening to a *séga* or *maloya* soundtrack or indulge in fine dining at a gourmet restaurant. *Bon appétit!*

HISTORY

St-Denis was founded in 1668 by the governor Regnault, who named the settlement after a ship that ran aground here. But St-Denis didn't really start to develop until the governor Mahé de Labourdonnais moved the capital here from St-Paul in 1738; the harbour was in general more sheltered and easier to defend, and water more abundant.

The 19th century ushered in St-Denis' golden age. As money poured in from the sugar plantations, the town's worthies built themselves fine mansions, some of which can still be seen along Rue de Paris and in the surrounding streets. But in the late 1800s the bottom dropped out of the sugar market and the good times came to a stuttering end. St-Denis' fortunes only began to revive when it became the new departmental capital in 1946. To cope with the influx of civil servants, financiers and office workers, the city expanded rapidly eastwards along the coast and up the mountains behind. Even today the cranes are much in evidence as St-Denis struggles to house its ever-growing population.

ORIENTATION

The centre of St-Denis is built on a grid pattern on a coastal plain dropping gently northwards towards the sea. Life revolves around the seafront Barachois area, and Ave de la Victoire, the main thoroughfare heading inland.

The main shopping area stretches along the semi-pedestrianised Rue Maréchal Leclerc, which strikes east from Ave de la Victoire, and spills over into the surrounding streets.

INFORMATION

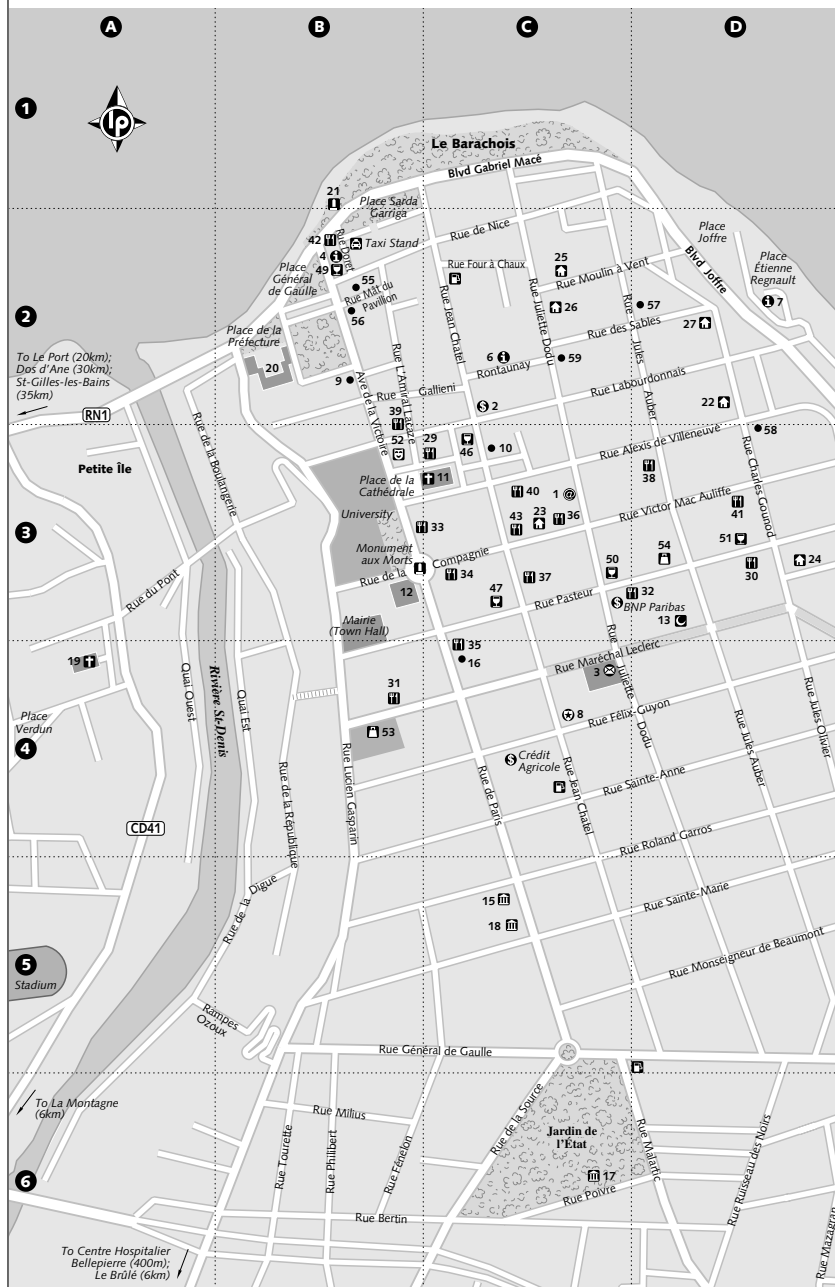
Emergency

Ambulance (☎ 15)

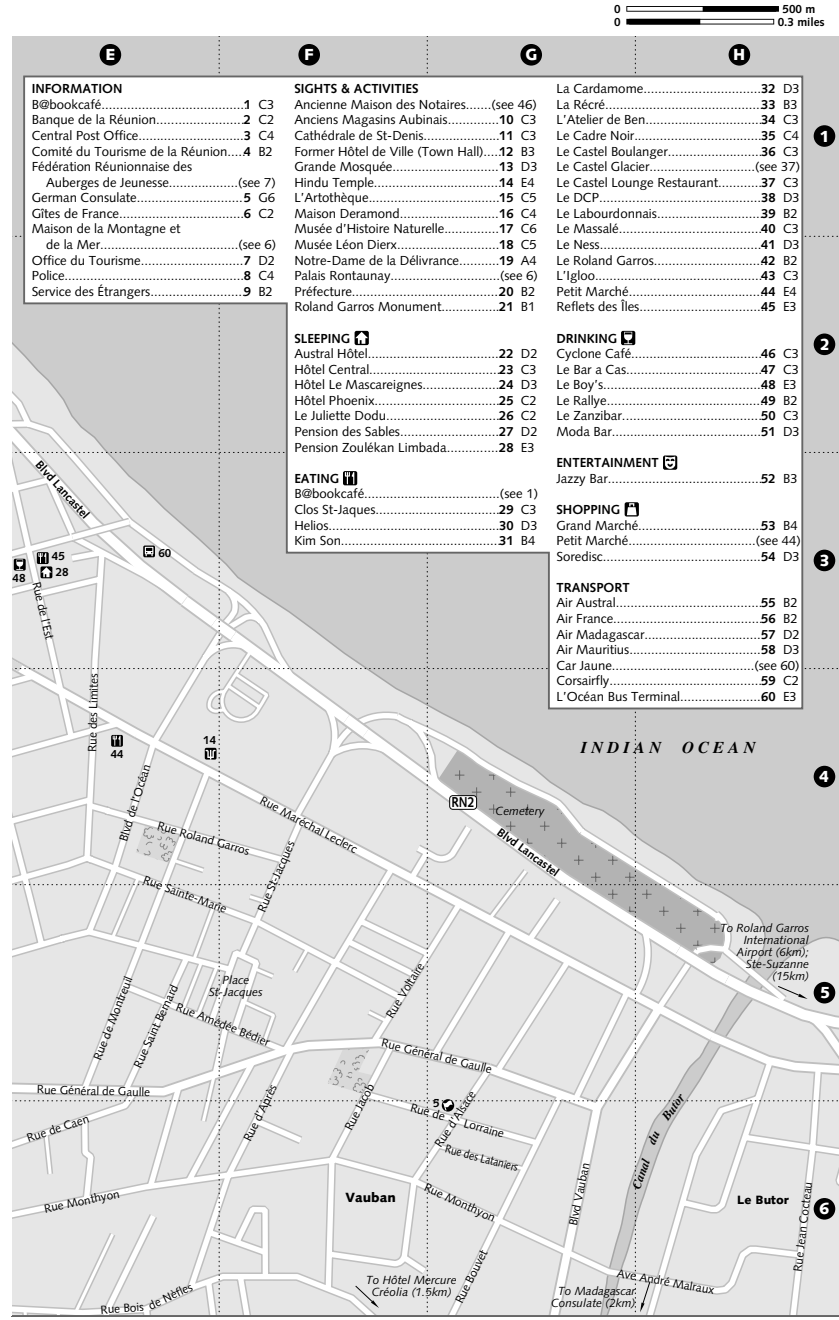
Fire services (☎ 18)

Police (☎ emergency 17, headquarters 0262 90 74 74; 133 Rue Jean Chatel)

ST-DENIS



RÉUNION



RÉUNION

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Comité du Tourisme de la Réunion.....	4 B2	Former Hôtel de Ville (Town Hall).....	12 B3	Le Cadre Noir.....	35 C4
Fédération Réunionnaise des Auberges de Jeunesse.....	(see 7)	Grande Mosquée.....	13 D3	Le Castel Boulanger.....	36 C3
German Consulate.....	5 G6	Hindu Temple.....	14 E4	Le Castel Glacier.....	(see 37)
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Internet Access

B@bookcafé (☎ 0262 90 90 65; 82-88 Rue Juliette Dodu; per hr €6; ☎ 8.30am-6.30pm Mon-Fri, 8.30am-7pm Sat) Pleasant atmosphere upstairs in the Librairie Autrement.

Medical Services

Centre Hospitalier Bellepierre (☎ 0262 90 50 50; Allées des Topazes, Bellepierre) Réunion's main hospital has 24-hour medical and dental treatment, a pharmacy open round the clock and English-speaking staff.

Money

Bring your credit card or stock up with euros beforehand! There's no moneychanging service – it has been superseded in favour of ATMs. You'll find a cluster of banks with ATMs near the junction of Rue Jean Chatel and Rue Labourdonnais; all the main banks and the central post office have ATMs.

Banque de la Réunion (☎ 0262 40 01 23; 27 Rue Jean Chatel; ☎ 9am-4pm Mon-Fri)

Post

Central post office (60 Rue Maréchal Lederc; ☎ 7.30am-6pm Mon-Fri, 7.30am-noon Sat)

Tourist Offices

Gîtes de France (☎ 0262 90 78 90; www.reunion-nature.com in French; 5 Rue Rontaunay; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Thu, 9am-4pm Fri) Information on *chambres d'hôtes* (family-run B&Bs) and *gîtes d'étape* (walkers lodges).

Maison de la Montagne et de la Mer (☎ 0262 90 78 78; www.reunion-nature.com in French; 5 Rue Rontaunay; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Thu, 9am-4pm Fri) Same location as Gîtes de France. For hiking information and booking *gîtes de montagne*.

Office du Tourisme (☎ 0262 41 83 00; otinord@wanadoo.fr; 2 Pl Étienne Regnault; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Sat) Housed in a former railway station, the St-Denis tourist office has English-speaking staff and can provide plenty of information, maps and brochures. You can also book *gîtes de montagne* here. Also runs tours (in French only) of St-Denis that take in historic sights such as the mansions of Rue de Paris (€8).

SIGHTS

St-Denis' most important sights are concentrated along the main road running from Le Barachois in the north to the Jardin de l'État (botanical gardens) a couple of kilometres inland.

There is a variety of impressive **Creole mansions** in St-Denis, a number of which have now been declared historic monuments and

are being slowly restored. See the boxed text (opposite) for further information.

The place to promenade in St-Denis is **Le Barachois**. This seafront park, lined by cannons facing out to sea, has an area set aside for *pétanque* (a game similar to bowls), cafés and a **monument** to the Réunion-born aviator Roland Garros, leaning nonchalantly on a propeller. Garros was the first pilot to cross the Mediterranean. Shady Pl Sarda Garriga, across the road, was named after the governor who abolished slavery in Réunion in 1848.

St-Denis is home to a smattering of attractive religious buildings, including **Notre-Dame de la Délivrance** church (1893), which sits on the hillside across the usually dry Rivière St-Denis. It's noteworthy for the statue of St Expédit just inside the door, dressed as a young Roman soldier. For more information about this unusual saint see the boxed text, p161.

Smack bang in the centre, it's impossible to miss the **Grande Mosquée** (121 Rue Maréchal Lederc; ☎ 9am-noon & 2-4pm), also known as the Noor-E-Islam mosque. The cool white-and-green interior is a haven of peace. The Islamic community in St-Denis is very traditional, so if you wish to visit, dress and behave with respect. Also worth a peek is the fairly unassuming, Tuscan-style **Cathédrale de St-Denis**.

St-Denis' small but wildly colourful **Hindu temple** (Rue Maréchal Lederc) stands out among the shops east of the centre. If you wish to visit, remember to remove your shoes and any leather items. Photography is not allowed.

St-Denis' strong point is its buildings, rather than its museums, but it's worth popping your head into the rewarding **Musée Léon Dierx** (☎ 0262 20 24 82; 28 Rue de Paris; admission €2; ☎ 9.30am-5pm Tue-Sun). Housed in the former bishop's palace, built in 1845, it hosts Réunion's most important collection of modern art. The more high-profile works include paintings, sculptures and ceramics by Picasso, Renoir, Gauguin and Vlaminck, but the majority are by local artists such as the poet and painter Léon Dierx (1838-1912). The handsome pale-yellow villa next door to the Musée Léon Dierx contains **L'Artothèque** (☎ 0262 41 75 50; 26 Rue de Paris; admission free; ☎ 9.30am-5.30pm Tue-Sun). This contemporary art gallery hosts changing exhibitions of works by local artists and those from neighbouring countries.

If you're in search of a shady haven where you can flake out, head to the attractive **Jardin de l'État** (botanical gardens; admission free; ☎ 7am-6pm),

ARCHITECTURAL HEIRLOOMS

St-Denis is devoid of beach, but it boasts a gaggle of well-preserved colonial buildings harking back to the city's heyday in the 19th century. The larger colonial piles are mainly strung out along Rue de Paris. Since few are open to the public, you'll have to content yourself with peering through the railings. This saunter covers the not-to-be-missed buildings in the centre.

One of the grandest is the **Préfecture** (Blvd Gabriel Macé), which stands proudly on the seafront. It began life as a coffee warehouse in 1734 and later served as the headquarters of the French East India Company. Rue de Paris, however, consider the neoclassical **Former Hôtel de Ville (Town Hall)**, at the north end of Rue de Paris, to be the city's most beautiful building; it's certainly more imposing, with its regimented columns, balustrades and jaunty clock tower. By contrast, the Tuscan-style **Cathédrale de St-Denis** (Rue de Paris) standing nearby is a much more sober affair.

Also of interest are **Palais Rontaunay** (Rue Rontaunay), built in 1854, and **Maison Deramond** (15 Rue de Paris), which was the family home of former French prime minister Raymond Barre and the birthplace of the poet and painter Léon Dierx. On Rue Jean Chatel, you'll stumble across **Anciens Magasins Aubainis** (37 Rue Jean Chatel), a former warehouse, and the **Ancienne Maison des Notaires** (18 Rue Jean Chatel).

Many of these palatial residences feature elaborate verandas and intricate *lambrequins* (ornamental window and door borders). The roof shingles are traditionally made from the wood of the *tamarin des Hauts* (mountain tamarind tree). For more on traditional architecture, see p46.

at the southern end of Rue de Paris. It features numerous plants used in the manufacture of perfume, tropical oddities from around the world and lots of orchids. At the far end of the gardens stands the somewhat austere Palais Législatif, dating from 1834, which houses the **Musée d'Histoire Naturelle** (☎ 0262 20 02 19; admission €2; ☎ 10am-5.30pm Tue-Sun). Very little of Réunion's natural history survived long enough to make it into the museum, but there are a few displays of extinct and nearly extinct native species, including the Réunion owl, kestrel, parrot and ibis.

SLEEPING

There's a good choice of midrange hotels scattered around the city but surprisingly little in the way of upmarket accommodation. Advance booking is highly recommended.

Budget

Pension Loulékan Limbada (☎ 0262 41 05 00; 35 Rue de l'Est; dm €10, d €20) Increasingly popular with travellers, this Indian-run guesthouse occupying a virginal-white building has a quiet location. The four smart but low-key rooms tick all the right boxes, but party animals take note that guests are asked to be quiet at all times and respect prayer times.

Pension des Sables (☎ 0262 40 91 03, 0692 27 72 77; 28 Rue des Sables; d with shared bathroom €28) Quite a snip at these rates: despite its joyless façade, this guesthouse supplies just the right kind of

simple budget accommodation, and you could hardly get a better central location. Transfers to the airport can be arranged.

Midrange

Hôtel Le Mascareignes (☎ 0262 21 15 28; www.hotel-mascareignes.com; 3 Rue Laferrière; s €32-38, d €37-43, incl breakfast; ☎) A small block, albeit with some value squeezed in. All rooms are enlivened by murals featuring local critters. Be sure to ask for the more luminous rooms at the front (Nos 6, 7 and 8). Good English is spoken.

Hôtel Phoenix (☎ 0262 41 51 81; fax 0262 40 99 51; 1 Rue du Moulin à Vent; s/d incl breakfast €40/45; ☎) A well-run little number with a central location, the Phoenix offers neat rooms, sparkling bathrooms and a small, flower-filled garden. The air-con is on from 7pm to 7am only, but that's about the worst surprise you'll get. With only eight rooms, advance reservation is recommended.

Austral Hôtel (☎ 0262 94 45 67; hotel-austral@wanadoo.fr; 20 Rue Charles Gounod; s €70-75, d €80-85; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) Distinctly unimpressive for the price, the Austral is not quite the three-star heavyweight it thinks it is, but the rooms have the requisite comforts and location is tip-top.

Top End

Le Juliette Dodu (☎ 0262 20 91 20; www.hotel-jdodu.com; 31 Rue Juliette Dodu; s €83, d €101-124, ste €195; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) Escape the plebeian hordes and

live like a colonial administrator in this stylish Creole building dating from the early 19th century. Although the rooms are unextraordinary, there are still enough vintage touches in the reception area – period furnishings, plump armchairs and old-fashioned tiles – to satisfy the snob within, with the added lure of a pool. It's a two-minute strut south of the Barachois.

Mercurie Créolia (☎ 0262 94 26 26; www.accorhotels.com; 14 Rue du Stade, Montgaillard; d €100-170; 📍 📺 📶) Located some way south of the city centre in a tranquil neighbourhood, your efforts in getting up here are rewarded with splendid views over the coast. Rooms are functional and unflashy, but you'll be too busy lounging by the pool and drinking up the view to mind.

EATING

Oh to have a few more hours in the day to squeeze in more epicurean delights! Thanks to the French passion for gastronomy, St-Denis is a nirvana for food-lovers, with a smorgasbord of eateries to suit all palates and budgets. French or Creole? Chinese or Indian? Fusion or traditional? Throw budgetary caution to the wind and splurge. Most places accept credit cards.

Restaurants

Le Roland Garros (☎ 0262 41 44 37; 2 Pl Sarda Garriga; mains €11-25; 📍 lunch & dinner) *Oh la la*, this heavenly place has the feel of a true Parisian bistro – packed, buzzing and full of attitude. You can't really go wrong – everything is pretty good – but if you want a recommendation, go for the *tartare de poisson* (fish tartare).

Le Castel Lounge Restaurant (☎ 0262 41 38 85; 81 Rue Jean Chatel; mains €12-22, menu €26; 📍 lunch Tue-Sat, dinner Tue-Sun) When the owner of Le Castel Boulanger, chef Jérôme Brudhon, opened this place in 2006, it was an instant hit. Tastebuds are kept on the move at this ode to design – a sleek, loungey space with low-hanging table lights and cocoa-hued furnishings. It mostly serves up creative contemporary dishes.

Clos St-Jacques (☎ 0262 21 59 09; 5 Rue de l'Édouard; mains €13-18, menus €20-24; 📍 lunch Mon-Fri, dinner Tue-Sat) Subdued lighting, elegant furnishings and a smattering of fancy decorative touches, including quirky replicas of cicadas hanging on the walls, provide the perfect setting for a romantic dinner.

La Récré (☎ 0262 23 83 41; 21 Ave de la Victoire; mains €13-17; 📍 lunch Mon-Sat, dinner Wed-Sat) Set in a courtyard that opens onto a busy street (but a hedge of tropical plants protects you from the hustle and bustle), La Récré is a popular joint for informal dining, with a wide-ranging menu focussing on fish and meat dishes. If you want to impress (or shock) your friends at home, order a *tartare de cheval* (horse tartare).

Reflets des Îles (☎ 0262 21 73 82; 27 Rue de l'Est; mains €13-21; 📍 lunch & dinner daily except Wed & Sun) This much-lauded eatery specialising in Creole food is the perfect place to try out *cuisine lontane* (traditional dishes). Dip into one of 15 cracking *carris* (curries) and *civets* (stews). The menu is translated in English – a rarity in Réunion. The waiters play the tropical-island card with their snazzy shirts.

Le DCP (☎ 0262 20 10 14; 46 Rue Jules Auber; mains €16-17, menus €20-26; 📍 lunch & dinner) If you have a weakness for ultrafresh fish, Le DCP is the place to indulge. The décor is another clincher: it occupies a restored Creole building with an agreeable terrace. Inside, aquatic murals and shades of blue and white create a 20,000-leagues-under-the-sea-like ambience.

Le Ness (☎ 0262 47 62 53; 52 Rue Victor Marc Aulifex; mains €18-29, menus €19-38; 📍 lunch Mon-Fri, dinner Mon-Sat) Spice up your day or night at this refreshing fusion place. Le Ness serves lush menus of French fare with a tropical twist such as grilled duck in a fruit sauce.

L'Atelier de Ben (☎ 0262 41 85 73; 12 Rue de la Compagnie; mains €18-28; 📍 lunch Tue-Fri, dinner Tue-Fri & Sat) A true alchemist, the French chef here fuses French with Asian to create a cuisine that stuns and seduces. The *filet de bœuf poêlé*, *pain perdu aux truffes*, *wok de légumes et noisettes torréfiées* (beef fillet served with a special truffle-scented bread, wok-fried vegetables and roasted hazelnuts) is even more delicious than its poetic name suggests. The décor? Best described as 'contemporary plain'.

Other temptations:

Le Cadre Noir (☎ 0262 21 44 88; 11 Rue de Paris; mains €10-12; 📍 11am-6pm Tue-Sat) Art-gallery setting ideal for a light lunch comprising a main course and dessert, all homemade. Also does great afternoon tea and cakes.

Kim Son (☎ 0262 21 75 00; 13 Rue du Maréchal Leclerc; mains €10-20; 📍 lunch Tue-Sat) Offers well-prepared Vietnamese and Chinese fare in rustic surrounds.

Helios (☎ 0262 20 21 50; 88 Rue Pasteur; mains €13-25; 📍 lunch & dinner Tue-Sat) This St-Denis icon has a

good repertoire of flavoursome *métro* dishes, best enjoyed on the flowery terrace.

Le Labourdonnais (☎ 0262 21 44 26; 14 Rue L'Amiral Lacaze; mains €15-25, menus €22-35; 📍 lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) One of the town's top-drawer eateries, with prices to match. The décor blends rustic beams and stone walls with colonial-era elegance.

Quick Eats

Le Castel Boulanger (☎ 0262 21 27 66; 43 Rue de la Compagnie; 📍 6am-2pm & 3.30-7pm Mon-Sat, 7am-noon Sun) Hands-down the best bakery-deli in St-Denis, with such a tantalising array of brioches, croissants, *macatias* (a variety of buns) and sandwiches that we almost made ourselves a nuisance here. Excellent breakfasts too (from €7.50).

Le Castel Glacier (☎ 0262 41 38 85; www.lecastel.re; 81 Rue Jean Chatel; ice creams from €2; 📍 10am-11pm Mon-Sat, 2.30-11pm Sun) We also lost all self-control at this talismanic ice-cream parlour a short waddle away from Castel Boulanger (same management). Just thinking of chocolate makes us salivate; you don't want to know what happens when we recall the *fèves du Tonka* (a variety of cocoa). Also serves up snack options, including salads, at lunchtime.

Le Massalé (☎ 0262 21 75 06; 30 Rue Alexis de Villeneuve; 📍 10am-8.30pm Mon-Sat, 11am-8.30pm Sun) Another divine tooth-killer is this teeny outlet that tempts you with its colourful array of Indian snacks and sweets to eat in or take away. Perennial favourites include *samosas* as well as candy-pink or apple-green *balfi*. Wash it down with a glass of cardamom tea.

B@bookcafé (☎ 0262 90 90 65; 82-88 Rue Juliette Dodu; mains €7-12; 📍 lunch Mon-Sat) A snazzy spot upstairs in the Librairie Autrement. Good salads.

L'Igloo (☎ 0262 21 34 69; 67 Rue Jean Chatel; mains €8-12; 📍 11am-midnight) One day we were unfaithful to Le Castel Glacier and had an ice-creamy affair with L'Igloo, unable to resist the phenomenally creamy *fruits des bois* ice-cream concoction. It's equally adept at serving up omelettes, fish dishes and salads. True to its name, the refreshing décor screams 'Antarctica', with white-and-blue murals.

La Cardamome (☎ 0262 21 25 46; 48 Rue Pasteur; mains €10-14, buffet €8-11; 📍 lunch & dinner) With its dramatic pink-and-green interior (no chubby Buddha by the door!), this little Indian joint has to be St-Denis' kookiest spot. Nothing beats its buffet featuring about 10 Indian offerings, a steal at €8 at lunchtime. Takeaways available.

Self-catering

For fresh fruit and vegetables, there is a wide range of cheap produce at the **Petit Marché** (Rue Maréchal Leclerc; 📍 6am-6pm Mon-Sat, 6am-noon Sun).

DRINKING & ENTERTAINMENT

If it's Ibiza-style nightlife you're after, you're barking up the wrong tree here. Most of Réunion's action is down the coast at L'Hermitage-Bains (p187) and St-Pierre (p216). However, there's a handful of OK nightspots to keep you entertained in the centre of St-Denis.

Le Bar a Cas (☎ 0262 20 17 68; 19 Rue Pasteur; 📍 7am-midnight) A studenty in-the-know set favours this funky drinking spot with violet walls and a décor that distracts. Snag a seat on the buzzing street terrace or in the vivacious room. Feeling peckish? Keep up your strength with a beefsteak or an omelette.

Cyclone Café (☎ 0262 20 00 23; 24 Rue Jean Chatel; 📍 5pm-2am Mon-Sat) Like bees to Bacardi, students (and the odd grizzled geezer) swarm on this pub-like, beer-friendly watering hole when live bands perform certain evenings. Good blend of electro, *maloya* (traditional dance music of Réunion), hardtek and drum 'n' bass. A small *pression* (draft beer) will cost you €3.

Alternatives:

Jazzy Bar (☎ 0262 21 85 01; 20 Rue Labourdonnais; 📍 7pm-2am Tue-Sat) A jazz lounge and a great late-night haunt for aspiring insomniacs.

Le Boy's (☎ 0692 66 25 53; 108 Rue Pasteur; 📍 9pm-4am Fri & Sat) Gay friendly – you guessed it.

Le Rallye (☎ 0262 20 34 66; 3 Ave de la Victoire; 📍 6am-midnight) A trendily downbeat bar (with local DJs) and a café that's a popular hangout.

Le Zanzibar (☎ 0262 20 01 18; 41 Rue Pasteur; 📍 lunch Tue-Sat, bar & dinner 5pm-midnight) A bar and a restaurant. Gay friendly.

Moda Bar (☎ 0262 58 76 14; 75 Rue Pasteur; 📍 7pm-2am Thu-Sat) A formulaic but friendly place offering regular karaoke nights. Also features live bands.

SHOPPING

The main shopping streets are the semi-pedestrianised Rue Maréchal Leclerc and Rue Juliette Dodu.

Grand Marché (2 Rue Maréchal Leclerc; 📍 8am-6pm Mon-Sat) This place has a mishmash of items for sale, including Malagasy wooden handicrafts, fragrant spices, woven baskets, embroidery, T-shirts, furniture and a jumble of knick-knacks.

Petit Marché (Rue Maréchal Lederc) On the east side of town, this is mainly a fresh-produce market, but you can buy herbs and spices and local *rhums arrangés* (flavoured rums) here at competitive prices.

Soredisc (☎ 0262 21 68 29; 61 Rue Pasteur) For tapes and CDs of *maloya*, *séga* and other local music, this store has by far and away the biggest selection.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

The vast majority of flights come in to **Roland Garros International Airport** (☎ 0262 28 16 16; www.reunion.aerport.fr in French), about 10km east of St-Denis.

Airlines with offices in St-Denis:

Air Austral (☎ 0825 013 012; 4 Rue de Nice)

Air France (☎ 0820 820 820; 7 Ave de la Victoire)

Air Madagascar (☎ 0262 21 05 21; 31 Rue Jules Auber)

Air Mauritius (☎ 0262 41 23 26; 13 Rue Charles Gounod)

Corsairfly (☎ 0262 40 96 72; 37 Rue Juliette Dodu)

For further information regarding air travel see p253.

Bus

L'Océan bus terminal, the main long-distance bus station, is on the seafront. From here **Car Jaune** (☎ 0810 123 974) operates various services. Information for Car Jaune regarding all its routes and *horaires* (timetables) around the island and the airport bus service is available from the information counter at the bus terminal. You can also pick up timetables at the tourist office. Some of the more useful routes include the following:

Line A West to St-Pierre via Le Port, St-Paul, St-Gilles-les-Bains, St-Leu, Étang-Salé-les-Bains and St-Louis (€4.20, 1¼ hours, about 10 daily).

Lines F or G East to St-Benoît via Ste-Suzanne and St-André (€3, one hour, about 12 daily).

Z'éclair (express) East to St-Benoît via St-André (€3.50, one hour, about 10 daily).

Z'éclair (express) West to St-Pierre via St-Leu (€7, 1¼ hours).

For more information on buses around the island, see p254.

Car & Motorcycle

There's not much point in having a car in St-Denis unless you're using it as a base to explore the rest of the island. If that's the case, you can either pick a car up at the air-

port or avoid paying the airport surcharge (around €20) by having it delivered to your hotel. Multinational rental companies have booths at the airport. Several local companies also rent cars that are cheaper. Ask your hotel or the tourist office to suggest a company. For more information on car hire, see p254.

Ferry

St-Denis' ferry terminal is at Le Port located 20km west of St-Denis. For further information see p305.

GETTING AROUND

St-Denis is relatively small and getting around the centre on foot is a breeze.

To/From the Airport

Taxis between St-Denis and Roland Garros International Airport cost around €20 during the day and €30 at night. Cheaper and almost as convenient is the regular Navette Aéroport service, which runs from L'Océan bus terminal to the airport about once an hour between 7am and 7.45pm (between 7.30am and 7.15pm coming from the airport). The fare is €4 and the journey takes a minimum of 20 minutes.

To/From the Port

The terminal for passenger ferries to Mauritius is in Le Port, 20km west of St-Denis. There are no bus services direct to the terminal. All nonexpress buses between St-Denis and St-Pierre stop at the bus station in Le Port, from where locally operated buses depart roughly every 30 minutes for the Gare Maritime, Port Est. You're better off splashing out on a taxi (€40 from St-Denis).

There is a small information desk at the ferry terminal, open for arrivals, but no other facilities for tourists. Taxis wait on arrival.

Taxi

Taxis around town are generally expensive. The minimum fare is €2.50 and a trip across town will set you back at least €8.

During the day you should have no problem finding a taxi. It gets more difficult at night, when you might have to phone for one. A reliable company offering a 24-hour service is **Taxis Paille-en-Queue** (☎ 0262 29 20 29).

THE WEST

Welcome to Réunion's Sunshine Coast, or Réunion's Riviera, or the leeward coast. However you label it, say hello to this 45km-long string of seaside resorts and suburbs running from St-Paul to St-Louis. Truth is, there's a bit of a Groundhog Day feel about this series of getaways along the RN1, and tourist development has got a little out of hand to the south of St-Paul. But this region does have a wealth of developed tourist facilities and attractions, including the best of the island's beaches (which is not saying a lot). It's an easy introduction to Réunion, but traffic jams on the coastal road go pretty far toward shattering any illusions of a tropical paradise.

Sea, sand and sun are not the only *raison d'être* on the west coast. There's also a superfluity of activities on land and sea. Big surf breaks issue a siren's call to surfers, steep drop-offs tempt divers, spectacular slopes beckon mountain bikers, while paragliders soar over the lagoon.

But while the west is synonymous with beach culture and traffic snarls, it also contains the antithesis to these. In this most populous, most visited region there remain hidden corners of untouched wonder, where you can soothe your soul. Despite the new, monstrous Route des Tamarins that zips along the flanks of the mountains down to Étang-Salé-les-Bains (due to be completed in 2009), it's easy to leave behind the coastal hedonism and explore the glorious hinterland and its bucolic offerings – think sugar-cane fields, lush orchards, geranium plantations and cryptomeria forests swathing the slopes of the mountains, studded with character-filled villages that retain a palpable rural air. Oh, and charming *chambres d'hôtes* where you can retreat in homely comfort.

With the exception of St-Louis and the Hauts (hills), this region is predominantly Zoreilles (the name used in Réunion for people from France) territory and feels closer to mainland France than South Africa. Brush up on your French!

DOS D'ANE

After St-Denis' busy streets and before tackling the seaside resorts further south, a drive up to the isolated village of Dos d'Ane, in

the hills above Le Port (take the D1), will give you a breath of fresh air. It's an excellent base for **hikes** in the interior; from here you can walk to the Plaine d'Affouches and La Roche Écrite, as well as into the Cirque de Mafate via the Rivière des Galets route. An easy day's walk from Dos d'Ane will get you to the *gîte* at Grand Place, while a magnificent but a more challenging route will take you up the beautiful Bras des Merles to Aurère. For a shorter ramble, there are superb views to be had from the Roche Verre Bouteille lookout, less than an hour's walk from the Cap Noir car park above Dos d'Ane. The beginning of the path is signed.

If you like peace, quiet and sigh-inducing views, you'll have few quibbles with **Chambre d'hôtes et Gîte Les Acacias – Chez Axel Nativel** (☎ 0262 32 02 34; Rue Germain Elisabeth, Dos d'Ane; dm/€15/40), which offers two *chambres d'hôtes* and three spick-and-span six-bed dorms. The hearty evening meals (dinner €18) go down well after a day's tramping and the views from the terrace are stupendous.

To get to Dos d'Ane by public transport you'll have to change buses in Le Port. All nonexpress and some express buses between St-Pierre and St-Denis stop at the Le Port bus station. From Le Port, there are six buses a day from Monday to Saturday but only three on Sunday.

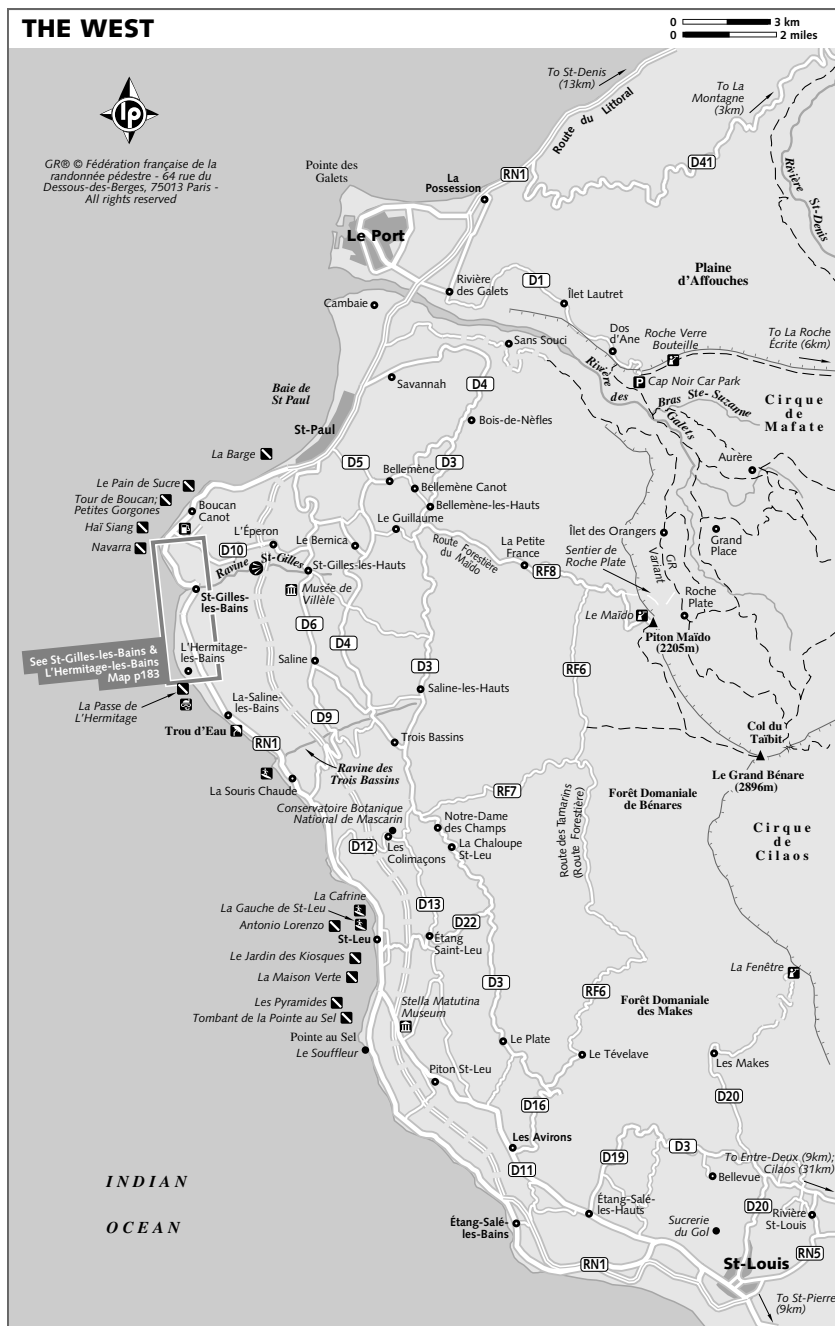
ST-PAUL

pop 20,000

Lively if not jaw-dropping in beauty, Réunion's second-largest *commune* after St-Denis deserves a quick stop if you're into history. It's also an obvious point if you plan to reach Le Maïdo (p180) by public transport.

Most tourists who do come here visit the bright and well-kept **Cimetière Marin**, the cemetery at the southern end of town. It contains the remains of various famous Réunionnais, including the poet Leconte de Lisle (1818–94). The cemetery's star guest, however, is the pirate Olivier 'La Buse' Levasseur (The Buzzard), who was the scourge of the Indian Ocean from about 1720 to 1730, when he was captured, taken to St-Paul and hanged. People are still searching for the location of La Buse's treasure in Mauritius, Réunion and the Seychelles. The grave is marked by the pirates' trademark skull and crossbones.

Make sure you save energy for the animated **market** on the seafront promenade.



It's held all day on Friday and on Saturday morning. With its heaps of local vegetables, fruits and spices, it makes for a colourful experience.

Sleeping & Eating

La Veranda (☎ 0692 69 70 23; d €32-34; ♿) This very central place to stay was partially renovated and extended in 2007, with a series of uncluttered but clean rooms with air-con and private bathrooms. It's nothing fancy but will do for a night's kip.

Snack La Bergère (☎ 0262 45 13 07; Place du Marché Forain; mains €6-10; 🍴 lunch & dinner) This cheap and cheerful *camion-snack* (snack van) on the seafood market place is a good-value pit stop. Fork out €8 for a plate of grilled fish or a voluminous salad and you'll leave patting your tummy contentedly.

Cabane Bambou (☎ 0262 57 10 32; 93 Rue Marius et Ary Leblond; mains €7.50-11; 🍴 lunch daily, dinner Mon-Fri) This cosy little eatery set in a restored Creole home prepares delectable *métro* fare with a creative twist served in a snug décor, with bamboo sticks and colourful fabrics adorning green walls. The *brochette royale* (skewered swordfish and freshwater prawns) certainly won our heart. It's opposite La Veranda.

Restaurant de l'Étang (☎ 0262 45 29 68; 1 Blvd Jacob de la Haye; mains €12-17; 🍴 lunch daily, dinner Tue-Sat) North of the centre, this haven of peace is blessed with a lush garden that's a perfect spot for a relaxed feed or tippie. There's nothing unorthodox on the menu, just the usual Creole suspects cooked to perfection: *cabri massalé* (goat *carri*) and *espadon cambava* (tuna with a variety of aromatic citrus), among others.

Getting There & Away

St-Paul lies on Car Jaune's bus route between St-Denis (€2.70) and St-Pierre (€4.30). There are express buses every one to two hours in either direction (fewer on Sunday) and much more frequent nonexpress services.

The local bus company **Réseau Éolis** (☎ 0262 22 54 65) operates fairly infrequent services from the central bus station to villages up in the hills such as Le Bernica, La Petite France, Villèle, Le Guillaume and L'Éperon, among others. Walkers, take note: there's also a special bus to Le Maïdo (that takes you to the start of the Sentier du Maïdo) three times daily except Sunday.

LES HAUTS DE ST-PAUL

A world away from the hurly-burly of the coast, the verdant Hauts de St-Paul is wonderful country for exploring off the beaten track, but unless you have a lot of time, you need a vehicle. Buses serve most places from St-Paul, but they aren't really convenient for the Hauts. We won't suggest any set itinerary, for this area lends itself to a DIY approach – from St-Paul, use the D5 as a launchpad, then follow your nose (but bring a good map). You'll come across hamlets with such charming names as **Bellemène-les-Hauts**, **Bois-de-Nèfles**, **Le Bernica**, **Le Guillaume**... It's as cute as it sounds! Start early morning to get the best views of the coast.

Sleeping & Eating

Chambre d'hôtes Chez Suzy et Gaia (☎ 0262 32 45 14, 0692 59 84 39; <http://monsie.wanadoo.fr/chegayae> in French; 197 Route Hubert-Delisle, Bellemène Canot; d €37) This mellow *chambre d'hôte* run by a hospitable Indian couple is manna from heaven for vegetarians. No artery thickeners at dinner (€24), but homegrown vegetables. It has two rooms – be sure to ask for the 'vue mer' (room with a sea view). A few electric wires in front of the panoramic terrace spoil the overall look (and the views), but that's just about it.

Chambre d'hôtes L'Alambic des Palmistes (☎ 0262 32 86 17; Chemin des Palmistes, Le Guillaume; s/d €40/50) This quirky B&B is a winner, not least for the marvellous sense of timelessness that is still patent in this property – a converted geranium distillery, with all the fixtures. The three dinky wooden bungalows look like they've fallen off a gypsy caravan train, and are decorated with local flair. But the real draw is the setting – total hush and seclusion, and lush vegetation. It's about 6km up from Le Guillaume (it's signposted). Dinner (€20) is available for those wanting a total retreat.

our pick Villa La Clé des Champs (☎ 0262 32 37 60, 0692 20 17 04; www.ilereunion.com/cledeschamps in French; 154 Chemin des Barrières, Bellemène-les-Hauts; d €120, ste €150) Looking for a night at some place extra-special? Make a beeline for this lovely *maison d'hôtes*, the pride and joy of friendly owners Martine and Léon. Set high in the hills above Bellemène-les-Hauts, it has five rooms done out in chic warm Provençal or oriental colours, with sensational views over the coast thrown in for free. This author's choice: the 'Rose', sporting *tadelakt* (Moroccan

stucco) walls. Food is a big thing here (dinner from €45); Martine is a real cordon bleu chef, mastering such gourmet dishes as *terrine d'espadon fumé au coriandre avec confit de poivron au miel* (smoked swordfish terrine with coriander, preserved green pepper and honey). If you're in the mood for it, Martine can arrange a candlelit dinner on the terrace. Oh, and there's a Jacuzzi in the garden for a spot of late-night nuzzling with your beloved.

LE MAÏDO & AROUND

Be prepared to fall on your knees in awe: far above St-Paul and St-Gilles-les-Bains on the rim of the Cirque de Mafate, Le Maïdo is one of the most impressive viewpoints in Réunion. The lookout is perched atop the mountain peak at 2205m and offers stunning views down into the Cirque and back to the coast. As with other viewpoints, you should arrive early in the day – by 7am if possible – if you want to see anything other than cloud.

Getting there is half the fun. The sealed Route Forestière du Maïdo winds all the way up to the viewpoint from Le Guillaume (14km) in the hills above St-Gilles-les-Bains, offering a scenic drive through majestic cryptomeria forests. You'll also find a smattering of attractions along the way to keep you entertained.

A word of warning: expect traffic snarls on Sunday when hundreds of picnicking families set up base in the shade of trees along the road.

THRILLING DOWNHILLS

The spectacular flanks of Le Maïdo will prove a sort of nirvana for mountain bikers who prefer sitting back and letting gravity do the work. The 35km, 2205m descent follows trails that wind through tamarind and cryptomeria forests and sugar-cane fields. Throughout the ride you're presented with astounding views of the lagoon and the coast.

Rando Réunion Passion (Map p183; ☎ 0262 45 18 67, 0692 21 11 11; www.descente-vtt.com; 3 Rue St Alexis) in St-Gilles-les-Bains is a professional and enthusiastic set-up that offers a range of mountain-bike trips for riders of all levels. The most popular ride is the 'Classique du Maïdo' descent, from the lookout to the coast. If you're a beginner, fear not! You won't ride at breakneck speed, and various stops are organised along the way, where the guide will give you the lowdown on flora and fauna. Half-day packages including bike hire, transport to the start (by minivan) and a guide cost around €45 per person (minimum four). Children over 12 are welcome.

If you want to open up the throttle a little more, opt for the 'Maïdo Sportif' (€52) or the 'Méga, Tête Dure' (€60) descents.

The ultimate is the 'Rando du Volcano' (Volcano Ride), which takes in the southern flank of the Piton de la Fournaise down to St-Joseph (€150). Memorable!

Sights & Activities

MOUNTAIN BIKING

The Maïdo area, with its thrillingly steep descents and spectacular mountain scenery makes it a top two-wheel destination. The Megavalanche Mountain Race – the biggest downhill race in the Indian Ocean region – takes place here each year. It is a 2205m descent using a mass start and draws riders from across Réunion and the world.

Fancy a downhill ride at your own pace? See the boxed text, below.

HIKING

Hiking options abound near Le Maïdo. The peak is the starting point for the tough walk along the Cirque rim to the summit of **Le Grand Bénare** (2896m), another impressive lookout (allow at least six hours for the return trip). Hikers can also descend from Le Maïdo into the Cirque de Mafate via the Sentier de Roche-Plate, which meets the GR R2 variant that connects the villages of Roche-Plate and Îlet des Orangers (allow three hours to reach Roche-Plate). Ambitious walkers can head in the direction of Îlet des Orangers and down to the hamlet of Sans Souci near Le Port for a very long day's walk (at least eight hours). See p231 for more information on hiking in Mafate.

HORSE RIDING

The **Centre Équestre du Maïdo** (☎ 0692 67 54 47; Route du Maïdo, La Petite France; horse riding per hr €25, poney rides €7-12; 🐾 9am-noon & 1.30-5pm Wed, Sat & Sun school term, daily school holidays) organises gentle

jaunts around La Petite France. Pony rides are available for children.

PARC AVENTURE

For Tarzan types, **La Forêt de l'Aventure** (☎ 0692 30 01 54; adult/child €20/15; Route Forestière des Cryptoméras, La Petite France; 🐾 9am-5pm daily school holidays, by reservation school term) has set up two wonderful adventure circuits in a 3-hectare perimeter, with a variety of fixtures, including tyrolean slides. There's a 'Mini Forêt' for the kiddies (over five). It's signposted, about 500m to the north of La Petite France, after L'Alambic Bègue (see below).

OTHER ATTRACTIONS

The hamlet of **La Petite France** (1000m) is famous for its traditional **distilleries** producing essential oils from geranium, cryptomeria and vetiver leaves (nice smell!). They run small shops where you can stock up on perfumes, soaps and other natural health products – if you're looking for an aphrodisiac concoction, this is your chance. Stop off at the following places, all scattered along the main road in La Petite France:

Distillerie du Maïdo – Chez Nanou Le Savoyard (☎ 0692 61 75 43; www.distilleriedumaïdo.com; La Petite France; 🐾 8.30am-6pm)

La Maison du Géranium Rosat (☎ 0692 82 15 00; La Petite France; 🐾 8.30am-5pm daily except Wed & Fri afternoon)

L'Alambic Bègue (☎ 0692 64 58 25; La Petite France; 🐾 8.30am-6pm)

Further up, at an altitude of 1500m, the **Relais du Maïdo** (☎ 0262 32 40 32; Route du Maïdo; 🐾 Tue-Sun) is a kind of theme park, with a smattering of attractions, mostly geared to children, including pony rides (€5), quad bikes (€5 to €10) and archery (€6). There's also an onsite restaurant.

Sleeping & Eating

Why not escape the heat and stop overnight in La Petite France? It makes a convenient base for an early-morning start up to Le Maïdo. Choose from **Chambre d'hôtes Chez Rose Magdeleine** (☎ 0262 32 53 50; Chemin de l'École, La Petite France; d €34, dinner €18), a well-run B&B just off the main road, or nearby **L'Es-Sens-Ciel** (☎ 0262 55 37 75; Route du Maïdo, La Petite France; d €60, dinner €25), another reputable B&B set in a massive blue house, with four neat rooms.

If hunger strikes, **Chez Doudou** (☎ 0262 32 55 87; Route de Maïdo, PK3; mains €12-13; 🐾 lunch Thu-Tue) and **Chez Ary et Lucette** (☎ 0262 32 40 69; Route du Maïdo, PK3; mains €10-13; 🐾 lunch Wed-Mon), opposite Chez Doudou, whip up comforting Creole *carris* served with all the traditional accompaniments. With its barn-like surrounds, Chez Doudou boasts a kind of ramshackle charm while Chez Ary et Lucette enjoys the best views. Both are full to bursting at weekends.

Getting There & Around

Réseau Éolis (line 2) runs three buses a day (Monday to Saturday) taking walkers from St-Paul to the start of the Sentier du Maïdo, the footpath into the Cirque de Mafate, which strikes off the road about 4km below the summit. The first bus up the hill leaves at 6am and the last one down is at 5.20pm (€1.50, one hour).

BOUCAN CANOT

pop 2000

Some say Boucan Canot (the final 't' is pronounced), dubbed the Réunionnais St-Tropez, is *très branché* (very hip) and fashionable. We think it's parvenu and pretentious. But hey, after (or before) roughing it in the Cirques, a whiff of pose and glitz doesn't do any harm. Whatever your verdict, bring your designer sunglasses in this attitude-fuelled little resort town.

The obvious focus here is the beach. It's been listed as one of Réunion's best, and once you get a glimpse of the gentle curve of the bright white sand, lined with palms and casuarina trees and framed with basalt rocks and cliffs, you'll see why. It gets packed on weekends. Caveat: currents can be strong.

Sleeping

La Villa Du Soleil (☎ 0262 24 38 69; www.lavilladusoleil.com in French; 54 Route de Boucan Canot; s/d from €40/46; 🐾 🐾) Wedged between the highway (noise!) and the beach, this family-run hotel is the most affordable establishment in Boucan Canot, with 12 ordinary rooms arranged around a courtyard. It feels a tad compact, but at this price we're not complaining.

Résidence Les Boucaniers (☎ 0262 24 23 89; www.les-boucaniers.com in French; 29 Route de Boucan Canot; d from €72; 🐾 🐾) Rumbling with the heavyweight hotels in this neck of the woods, these fine-looking self-catering studios and apartments have lovely views of the beach. Breathe in

L'Hermitage, is definitely worth an hour or so for anyone interested in tropical flora. Sections of the gardens are dedicated to interesting concepts such as the sacred plants of the Hindus, medicinal plants, edible tropical plants, spices and aphrodisiac plants.

Activities

BOAT EXCURSIONS

The best way to discover St-Gilles' iridescent lagoon is by joining a boat excursion. Various operators offer *promenades en mer* (boat excursions) and *observation sous-marine* (glass-bottomed tours) along the coast towards St-Leu or St-Paul. 'Safaris Dauphin' (dolphin encounters), sunset cruises and daylong catamaran cruises are also available. Depending on the duration of the cruise (the shortest tours last 30 minutes) and the type of boat, rates range from €10 to €90 per adult and from €5 to €50 per child. Tours go every day but are weather-dependent.

The following outfits have a booth at the jetty beside the aquarium:

Le Grand Bleu (☎ 0262 33 28 32; www.reunioncroisieres.com in French) Has the largest range of tours.

Visiobul (☎ 0262 24 37 04; www.visiobul-reunion.com in French)

SURFING

Hawaii it ain't, but Plage des Roches Noires has respectable waves that are suitable for beginners. **École de Surf et de Bodyboard des Roches Noires** (☎ 0262 24 63 28, 0692 86 00 59; bertrand.surf@wanadoo.fr) is a 'travelling' surfing school that runs lessons (€27 for two hours) and courses (€122 for 10 hours). Children are welcome.

DIVING

The waters off St-Gilles offer plenty of scope for diving (including the chance to explore a few wrecks), whatever your level. See p30 for more information about diving.

Reputable dive operators in St-Gilles:

ARESS (☎ 0262 24 23 30; www.ress.fr in French; Port de Plaisance)

Bleu Marine Réunion (☎ 0262 24 22 00; www.bleu-marine-reunion.com; Port de Plaisance)

Corail Plongée (☎ 0262 24 46 38; www.corail-plongee.com in French; Port de Plaisance)

Ô Sea Bleu (☎ 0262 33 16 15; www.reunion-plongee.com in French; Port de Plaisance)

MOUNTAIN BIKING

Downhill rides from Le Maïdo (p180) can be arranged with **Rando Réunion Passion** (☎ 0262 45 18 67, 0692 21 11 11; www.descente-vtt.com; 3 Rue St Alexis).

SPORTFISHING

St-Gilles is a good base for fans of Ernest Hemingway. The waters off the west coast are a pelagic playpen for schools of marlin, swordfish, shark and tuna. A fishing trip (six people) will set you back €400/600 per half-/full-day. Three recommended outfits:

Blue Marlin (☎ 0262 33 73 48; Port de Plaisance)

Maevasion (☎ 0262 33 38 04; www.maeva-fishing.com in French; Port de Plaisance)

Réunion Pêche au Gros (☎ 0262 33 33 99; www.reunionfishingclub.com; Port de Plaisance)

Sleeping

There's plenty of accommodation in the area, but almost everything is booked out during holiday periods and on weekends. The more appealing hotels and *chambres d'hôtes* are in the countryside just north of town or to the south in L'Hermitage-les-Bains.

ST-GILLES-LES-BAINS

Hôtel de la Plage (☎ 0262 24 06 37; fax 0262 33 20 05; 20 Rue de la Poste; d with/without bathroom from €36/€32; 🚽) Checking into the Hôtel de la Plage is a bit of a lucky dip; some rooms have bathrooms, some don't, some are spacious, some are boxy, some open onto a terrace, some don't. Luckily they're all fine for the price you pay. Very central too.

Hôtel La Rocaille (☎ 0262 33 29 29; www.hotellaroaille.com; 45 Chemin des Lantanas; d incl breakfast €77-85; 🚽 🚿) Accessed by a dirt road a few kilometres east of the centre (in the direction of St-Gilles-les-Hauts), the modernish La Rocaille won't disappoint, with spotless rooms, well-chosen tiles and an enticing tropical garden. And did we mention the pool? It's signed down a lane beside the Total petrol station.

our pick **Senteur Vanille** (☎ 0262 24 04 88, 0692 78 13 05; www.senteurvanille.com; Route du Théâtre; bungalow €60-120, chalet €97-120; 🚽) A true find for peace seekers, Senteur Vanille makes you feel you've stepped into a Garden of Eden, with mango, lychee and papaya trees all over the grounds (the owner is a major fruit producer in Réunion). Curl up in a well-equipped chalet or in a cute-as-can-be Creole bungalow. The

wonderful setting makes it easy to meet the three-night minimum stay. The nearest beach is a 15-minute walk down a path. Same direction as La Rocaille.

Other places to rest your head:

Thimloc (☎ 0262 24 23 24; 165 Rue du Général de Gaulle; d €47-54; 🚽) This place offers little to attract the eye inside, but does offer every possible convenience in terms of location. Has six adjoining rooms.

Hôtel des Palmes (☎ 0262 24 47 12; fax 0262 24 30 62; 205 Rue du Général de Gaulle; d €52) This two-star offers good-sized villas, but its location ain't so great – it's sandwiched between the highway and the main road to L'Hermitage.

L'HERMITAGE-LES-BAINS

Budget

Villa des Tisserins (☎ 0262 33 15 23; villa.des.tisserins@wanadoo.fr; 25 Ave de la Mer; d €35-50; 🚽) If you're looking to save and be close to the beach, this laid-back guesthouse in a distinctive Creole house is a bonanza. Mellow out in the garden or take a dip in the kidney-shaped pool. Excellent value.

Coco Island (☎ 0262 33 82 41; http://cocoisland.france.com in French; 21 Ave de la Mer; d €33-54; 🚽) A few doors from Villa des Tisserins, this is another popular budget option, with 12 unimaginative rooms of varying size and shape – have a look before committing. Cheaper rooms share bathrooms. Guests can use the communal kitchen.

Midrange & Top End

Les Perles du Lagon (☎ 0262 33 83 45; www.location-vacance-reunion.com in French; 1 Ruelle des Bougainvilliers; d €49; 🚽) Clean, tiled rooms with self-catering facilities and a location a mere stone's throw away from the beach make this one of the best deals in town. There are only three studios, so book ahead if you can. A three-night minimum usually applies.

Les Bougainvilliers (☎ 0692 22 15 23; www.bougainvillier.com; 27 Ruelle des Bougainvilliers; d €50-59; 🚽 🚿) A short stroll from Les Perles du Lagon, this well-run guesthouse offers eight simply furnished rooms. The catch? Some cop a bit of road noise from the highway, and privacy is almost nonexistent – the pool almost licks the terrace of the downstairs room.

Alamanda Hotel (☎ 0262 33 10 10; www.alamanda.fr in French; 81 Ave de Bourbon; s €62-105, d €86-152; 🚽 🚿) With its Creole architecture, garden and bright, modern rooms, this two-star

provides for a very agreeable stay, though make sure you're overlooking the garden, not the car park.

Les Villas du Lagon (☎ 0262 70 00 00; www.villas-du-lagon.com; 28 Rue du Lagon; s €160-220, d €200-280; 🚽 🚿 🚿) Simply stunning, Les Villas du Lagon pays elegant homage to luxurious colonial architecture, with a gaggle of Creole-style villas scattered amid a verdant property overlooking the beach. It attracts holidaymakers looking for comfortable rooms and plenty of resort amenities, including three restaurants, a big pool and a kids club. At the very south end of the beach at L'Hermitage.

Other options:

Novotel Saint-Gilles (☎ 0262 24 44 44; www.accorhotels.com; Ave de la Mer; s/d €140/180; 🚽 🚿) Accor's flagship Réunionnais resort is popular with airline crews, which is a good omen.

Les Villas du Récif (☎ 0262 70 01 00; www.villas-du-recif.fr; 50 Ave du Bourbon; s with half board €150-205, d with half board €200-260; 🚽 🚿) After a much-needed renovation, this three-star venue now flaunts its rejuvenated look with pride. Same ownership as Les Villas du Lagon.

Eating

St-Gilles is well endowed with eating places, and new restaurants are constantly opening up. As a result of the continuous flow of hungry tourists, standards tend to be more variable than elsewhere on the island.

ST-GILLES-LES-BAINS

La Case à Pain (☎ 0262 33 27 89; 27 Rue du Port; 🕒 7am-7pm Tue-Sun) Hmm! We can still smell the scent of freshly baked *pain frotté à la vanille* (a variety of bread flavoured with vanilla) wafting from the door (available on weekends only). Its other offerings, including brioches, are worth the dental bills, too.

La Vague Gourmande (☎ 0262 24 53 06; 13 Rue de la Poste; ice creams from €1.60; 🕒 8am-8pm Wed-Mon, 2-8pm Tue) Since the '80s Claude Jaminet has been satisfying ice-cream devotees in his refreshingly attitude-free den and we know why. There are lots of original flavours, such as *litchis* (lychee) and *cœur de boeuf* (custard apple).

Chez Loulou (☎ 0262 24 40 41; 86 Rue du Général de Gaulle; mains €6; 🕒 7am-1pm & 3-7pm Mon-Sat, 7am-1pm Sun) The most iconic Creole case (house) for miles around, with a distinctive turquoise façade on the main drag. The belt-bustingly good *tartelettes* (fruit pies) and *macatias*

(a variety of bun) continue to torment us! Good sandwiches and takeaway meals at lunchtime, too.

O'Casier (☎ 0262 33 17 38; 190 Rue du Général de Gaulle; mains €10-22; ☎ lunch & dinner Tue-Fri & Sun, dinner Sat) Get in early here as this sassy *bistrot chic* (gastropub) teems with punters anxious to wrap their lips around *tartines* and *métro* dishes. Since wine also features high here, get stuck into the list of well-chosen French tipples.

our pick **Le P'tit Zinc** (☎ 0262 24 07 50; 58 Rue du Général de Gaulle; mains €14-25, menus €10-15; ☎ dinner Mon-Sat) This venue has a tantalising menu showcasing all the classics of Creole cuisine, served in snug surrounds complete with wood beams, elegant furnishings and tropical plants. Feeling adventurous? Go for the *carri pat' cochon* (pig's trotter *carri*). The spiffing balcony on the 1st floor (two tables only) is a good place to linger over a meal.

DCP (☎ 0262 33 02 96; Place du Marché; mains €16-19, menus €20-26; ☎ lunch & dinner Tue-Sun) Fish lovers, you'll find nirvana here: the DCP has a wide assortment of fish delivered daily from the harbour. Order it grilled, *à la vapeur* (steamed) or raw, accompanied with a curcuma, pineapple or Roquefort sauce.

A Table (☎ 0262 20 00 24; Place du Marché; mains €18-20, menus €17-21; ☎ lunch & dinner Tue-Sat) This slick loungey place features parquet floors and wood furnishings and doubles as a teashop in the afternoon. Its forte? *Métro* fare with a sophisticated twist, such as *filet mignon au thé rouge* (tenderloin of beef flavoured with red tea). One minus: there's no view from the terrace.

Restaurant L'Oxygène (☎ 0692 03 40 34; 1 Rue de la Plage; mains €18-21, menu €36; ☎ lunch & dinner Tue-Fri, dinner Sat & Mon) L'Oxygène boasts contemporary furnishings, colourful paintings on the wall and elegantly presented concoctions, such as a succulent *caviar d'aubergine au curry* (puréed aubergine with curry). Pity about the dull location, though; it's on the ground floor of an unremarkable building.

Le Saint-Gilles (☎ 0262 24 51 27; www.lesaintgilles.net; Port de Plaisance; mains €18-45, menu €42; ☎ lunch & dinner Tue-Sat, lunch Sun) A bastion of *haute cuisine*, Le Saint-Gilles attracts gourmets keen to enjoy elaborate fish and meat dishes, such as *feuilleté de crevettes au gingembre* (flaky pastry stuffed with shrimp and ginger) or a seafood platter. The vanilla *crème brûlée* is a perfect coda to a delightful meal. Nab a seat

on the terrace and perve on boats you wish you owned.

Other recommendations:

Ti Coq (☎ 0262 33 22 98; 79bis Rue du Général de Gaulle; mains €10-24; ☎ lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) Dripping in tropical garb, Ti Coq is widely acclaimed for its hearty Creole dishes served on banana leaves. Good *métro* fare, too.

Les Tipaniers – Chez Dante (☎ 0262 24 28 84; 58bis Rue du Général de Gaulle; mains €10-26, menu €29; ☎ lunch & dinner Wed-Mon) A good choice for an intimate meal, with an enticing veranda and candles at night. Various preparations of *magret de canard* (duck) and Creole dishes compete for your attention.

Restaurant L'A Côté (☎ 0262 32 10 26; 122 Rue du Général de Gaulle; mains €12-25; ☎ dinner Mon-Sat) This newcomer is always bustling at dinner. It specialises in French cuisine and pastas.

Cap Ouest (☎ 0262 33 21 56; Port de Plaisance; mains €14-23, lunchtime menu €12; ☎ 8.30am-midnight except Wed) Light meals are available at this buzzing eatery.

L'HERMITAGE-LES-BAINS

Coco Beach (☎ 0262 33 81 43; Blvd Leconte de Lisle; mains €10-19; ☎ lunch & dinner) Brimming with good cheer, this eatery overlooking the beach has garnered high praise for its grills and ultra-fresh fish, salads and pastas. It's also a good place to hang out and just enjoy the tropical atmosphere and fashionable buzz with a fresh Dodo beer in hand.

La Bobine (☎ 0262 33 94 36; Blvd Leconte de Lisle; mains €12-25; ☎ lunch & dinner) This sprightly restaurant slap bang on the beach woos diners from afar. Grab a seat on the breezy alfresco deck and tuck into delicious fish or meat dishes, such as *filet de voilier* (swordfish steak) or *assiette grand cru* (a combo platter of fish), which transcend their simple ingredients. Smart service too. In mid-2007 this place was closed following a mini-tsunami; the timing of its reopening was uncertain.

Le Manta (☎ 0262 33 82 44; Blvd Leconte de Lisle; mains €14-20; ☎ lunch & dinner) Specialities like kangaroo fillet and *filet de Saint-Pierre* (John Dory fillet) make a good argument on behalf of Le Manta, as does the lush garden. No, it's not right on the beach – it's just across the road.

Drinking

St-Gilles is one of the top places in Réunion (on an equal footing with St-Pierre) for bar-hopping. The atmosphere is very *Zoreilles* – you could be mistaken for thinking you're in the French Côte d'Azur. Most places are

scattered along Rue du Général de Gaulle and the chi-chi seafront. As the bars fade from about midnight on, the centre of pleasurable gravity shifts to L'Hermitage (see Entertainment).

Cubana Liste Rouge (☎ 0262 33 24 91; 122 Rue du Général de Gaulle; ☎ 6pm-2am) Kick off the night with a few shots at this salsa-inspired venue featuring bordello-red curtains.

Le Mex (☎ 0262 33 04 05; 122 Rue du Général de Gaulle; ☎ 6pm-2am) Slightly reminiscent of a Mexican hacienda, Le Mex is best experienced in the evening when a posse of inebriated bodies can be found dramatically propped at the bar. Skip the food.

Coco Beach (☎ 0262 33 81 43; Blvd Leconte de Lisle; ☎ lunch & dinner) This beachside restaurant in L'Hermitage is packed on Sunday evening, when there's live music. There's also plenty of Dodo beer with which to lubricate your gutlet.

Jungle Village (☎ 0262 33 21 93; Rue du Général de Gaulle; ☎ 7pm-2am Mon-Sat) Big, bold and cheesy – it's hard to miss the log-cabin exterior and the ugly monkey mannequin above the entrance – sums up this popular bar on St-Gilles' main drag.

Kaz Bar (☎ 0262 96 04 16; 49 Rue de la Plage; ☎ 5pm-midnight) This pleasant, open-air bar with lively tropical décor was *the* happening scene when we visited. It usually gets going around 9pm as casually fashionable young things gather for a pre-disco warm-up. Don't miss the *apéro-concert* (live band and an apéritif) on Thursday evening. You can also eat here. On the seafront.

La Gueule de Bois (☎ 0262 24 78 26; 5 Rue des Îles Éparses; ☎ 6pm-1am Tue-Sun) Was also in-vogue at the time of writing. The name of this cheerful den is a French expression meaning 'hangover' in French, which is pretty appropriate given the incendiary rums on offer. It hosts live bands certain evenings. Food is also served.

Entertainment

Party, party, party! L'Hermitage rocks on weekends. By far the capital of Réunion's club scene, it has the greatest density of discos on the island. The fun starts late – after 11pm – and places typically close around 4am. Cover charges vary between €10 and €15 at most venues (but some are free). You don't need to be completely dolled up but if you're wearing shorts or flip-flops you'll

be turned away. Check the flyers posted around town or ask the locals to find out which clubs are the flavour of the month – it's constantly changing.

Le Privé (☎ 0262 24 04 17; www.le-privé.fr in French; 1 Rue du Général de Gaulle) St-Gilles' sole club (all others are in L'Hermitage). It's been around for a while, but it's still a big draw. Young, old, gay and straight pack into Le Privé for a wild night of fun. Famous for its ladies night on Thursday.

Moulin du Tango (☎ 0262 24 53 90; www.moulin-du-tango.fr; Ave Bourbon) Bump hips with a more mature crowd in this self-styled 'retro' dance club in L'Hermitage. Famous for its Bal des Célibataires ('singles' ball) on Wednesday.

Le Living Room (☎ 0262 33 15 00; 2 Mail Rodrigues) Ground zero for sexy young things shaking it up all weekend. Catch local DJs spinning a smorgasbord of deep house, dance, techno and funk.

Other staunch favourites:

Africa Queen's (☎ 0262 33 01 68; 205 Rue du Général de Gaulle) Weekend nights you can barely breathe for the crowds. Expect R&B, hip-hop and electro house.

L'Amnesia (☎ 0262 33 00 11; 71 Ave Bourbon) Another crowd-puller in L'Hermitage. Latin and dance music dominate the play list.

Le Loft (☎ 0262 24 81 06; 1 Rue des Îles Éparses) Another hot spot that's cookin' after 2am, with scantily clad clubbers posturing on podiums.

Le Safari (☎ 0262 25 99 13; 1 Rue des Îles Éparses) A local place that pulls in just about everybody on the island on weekends, when a DJ cranks up the salsa, R&B and other soundtracks.

Getting There & Away

Car Jaune's nonexpress buses between St-Denis and St-Pierre (lines B and C) run through the centre of St-Gilles down Rue du Général de Gaulle. Buses run about every half-hour in either direction from 5am to 6pm. The trip to St-Denis takes at least one hour and costs around €3.

Getting Around

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

There are also numerous local operators and a few international outlets in St-Gilles. Find them along Rue du Général de Gaulle.

BIKE

Rando Réunion Passion (☎ 262 45 18 67; www.descente-vtt.com; 3 Rue St Alexis) rents out mountain bikes (€12 for a half day).

ST-GILLES-LES-HAUTS & AROUND

pop 2000

If all these beaches start to overwhelm and if you need a break from the commercialism of the coast, a 20-minute drive from St-Gilles-les-Bains transports you to yet another world up in the hills, in St-Gilles-les-Hauts. For some cultural sustenance, head to the **musée de Villèle** (☎ 0262 55 64 10; admission €2; ☎ 9.30am-5.30pm Tue-Sun), south of St-Gilles-les-Hauts on the D6. It's set in the former home of a wealthy coffee- and sugar-baroness who, among other things, owned 300 slaves. Legend has it that she was a cruel woman and that her tormented screams can still be heard from the hellish fires whenever Piton de la Fournaise is erupting. She died in 1846 and her body lies in the **Chapelle Pointue**, on the D6 by the entrance to the museum. The house itself, which is only accessible on a guided tour (in French only), was built in 1787 and is full of elegant period furniture. After the tour, you're free to wander the outbuildings and the 10-hectare park, which contains the ruins of the sugar mill.

You could also stop off in the village of L'Éperon and visit the **Village Artisanal de L'Éperon**. Housed in a picturesque old grist, it's home to a small community of artists and artisans. There are also a number of boutiques selling ceramics, locally tanned leather and other *objets d'art*.

The villages of St-Gilles-les-Hauts, Villèle and L'Éperon can all be reached by fairly infrequent minibuses out of St-Paul (see p179).

Sleeping & Eating

There are several options for accommodation in the hamlets that dot the hillside above St-Gilles-les-Hauts.

Chambre d'hôtes Mme Edith Ramassamy (☎ 0262 55 55 06; ramassamy.anthony@wanadoo.fr; 100 Chemin des Roses, St-Gilles-les-Hauts; d €31, dinner €18) Your friendly hosts, an Indian couple, have built a reputation for warmth and savoury Indian cuisine. Guests return year after year to these five simple rooms in a modern house. It's signposted from opposite the Chapelle Pointue.

La Villa des Songes (☎ 0262 22 03 36; www.lavilla. dessonges.fr in French; St-Gilles-les-Hauts; d €78; ☎ ☎) Don't be discouraged by the modest exterior and the unspectacular location, on the main road, opposite a petrol station. This newish, welcoming, traveller-savvy haven in a beautifully restored Creole house is best described as 'scrubbed-up rustic' – a rare species on

the island. It has 12 rooms, all decorated in classical local style – parquet flooring or tiles, colourwashed walls, wooden and wrought-iron furnishings – and an enticing restaurant, La Frigousse (see below).

L'Imprévu (☎ 0262 55 36 34; 72 Rue Joseph Hubert, St-Gilles-les-Hauts; mains €8-20; ☎ lunch Mon-Fri, dinner Mon-Sat) Chef Ludovic works his magic at this cheerful restaurant in a little Creole building on the main road. The menu has a split personality: it features ordinary pizzas and the usual *carris* as well as more refined preparations, such as *pavé de légine en croûte d'épice* (thick piece of *légine* fish encased in pastry).

La Frigousse (St-Gilles-les-Hauts; mains €12-25; ☎ lunch daily, dinner Mon-Sat) The restaurant of La Villa des Songes, La Frigousse tempts the foodies with *cuisine métro avec une touche créole* (French fare with a Creole twist). How about *espadon sauce gingembre* (swordfish with ginger sauce) for a meeting of culinary cultures? It also majors on vegetarian dishes (yes, vegetarian dishes).

LA SALINE-LES-BAINS & AROUND

pop 2750

If you find the scene in St-Gilles and L'Hermitage a little too much, head to La Saline-les-Bains. Though immediately to the south of L'Hermitage along the coast, it has a distinct atmosphere. Here it's more mellow, more alternative, more non-conformist, and the beach of **Trou d'Eau** is usually less crowded. Not a fan of tan-lines? Head further south and

PERFUMED ISLE

In keeping with the French love of perfume, Réunion has long been the garden of the great fragrance houses of Paris. Essential oils, which are used as a fixative in perfumes, are extracted from roots or leaves. The mainstays of the essential-oil business are vetiver (an Asian grass), geranium and the evocative ylang-ylang, which you can often smell in the night air all over the island. All are cultivated in the Hauts (hills), and the oils are extracted in traditional distilleries. It is still a cottage industry, concentrated mainly around Le Maïdo and St-Joseph. The cultivation of these plants is in slow decline, but certain Parisian perfumers still insist on the best oils from Réunion for their fragrances.

lay your towel on **Plage de la Souris Chaude**, a 'maverick beach', which is a favourite among nudists (only just tolerated) and gay men (head to the northern tip of the beach).

The area is also popular for **surfing**, especially for beginners. To the south of La Saline, surfers gather at the mouth of the **Ravine des Trois Bassins**, where the waves are generally easier and more consistent than around St-Leu. A number of operators park their vans on the clifftop and offer lessons for adults and children (see p190).

Sleeping

LA SALINE-LES-BAINS

Le Vacoa (☎ 0262 24 12 48; www.levacoa.com; 54 Rue Antoine de Bertin; d €50-52; ☎ ☎) A five-minute stroll from the beach, this little two-storey *résidence hôtelière* (mini-resort) contains 15 modern, well-appointed (albeit hanky-sized) rooms arranged around a central courtyard. There's a kitchen for guests' use.

La Maison du Lagon (☎ 0262 24 30 14; www.la.maisondulagon.com in French; 72 Rue Auguste Lacaussade; s €65-100, d €85-120, ste €190; ☎ ☎) This villa has a compact but respectable collection of various-sized rooms – try to snaffle a seafacing one or, better yet, splurge for the suite. The real bonus here is the location – it's *les pieds dans l'eau* (right by the beach).

Hôtel Swalibo (☎ 0262 24 10 97; www.swalibo.com in French; 9 Rue des Salines; s €90-99, d €115-130; ☎ ☎) This intimate two-storey hotel stands out as the most polished retreat in town. The rooms are well appointed and decorated with vivid frescoes. The gleaming pool is an instant elixir when it's swelteringly hot. There's an onsite restaurant. It's 200m away from the beach.

LA SOURIS CHAUDE

With your own wheels, you'll need a code to enter La Souris Chaude residential area – phone your accommodation ahead and they will give you the code.

Kitouni Guesthouse (☎ 0262 34 05 82, 0692 60 84 05; http://site.voila.fr/kitouny in French; s/d with shared bathroom €25/30) Kitouni means, er, 'naked bum' in Creole. Fear not, this is a respectable port of call on top of being a cast-iron bargain for budget travellers and surfies, with three tidy rooms, a kitchen for guests' use, a lounge with TV and a lovely garden to snooze under swaying palms. You're only steps from the beach.

Le Dalon Plage (☎ 0262 34 29 77, 0692 04 94 26; ledalon@wanadoo.fr; d €45; ☎ ☎) It's *au naturel*

at this hedonistic, gay-friendly place almost next door to Kitouni. Guests are allowed (if not incited) to swim naked in the gleaming pool. Well, we were too prudish to get our kit off and instead preferred to slumber in the fully-equipped bungalow – a wonderful retreat.

Eating

LA SALINE-LES-BAINS

Planch'Alizé (☎ 0262 24 62 61; Rue des Mouettes; mains €12-18; ☎ 10am-dusk) For a decent beach lunch, nothing can beat this casual eatery. It also rents canoes, kayaks and paddleboats.

Le Copacabana (☎ 0262 24 16 31; Rue Lacaussade; mains €13-21; ☎ lunch daily, dinner Fri & Sat) Simple meals are the order of the day at this convivial little bar-restaurant right on the beach. It's also a laid-back spot to sip a *rhum arrangé* or a refreshing fruit juice any time of the day. You'll find it about 150m further south from La Maison du Lagon.

Ourpick La Tomate (☎ 0262 33 02 42; 25bis Rue des Argonautes; mains €19-24; ☎ dinner Tue-Sat) Tucked away in a side street running parallel to the main road, this hip venture provides an enjoyable dining experience with innovative food. Whet your palate with tandoori-style *camarons* (freshwater prawns) salad and finish off your meal with, say, the *gratin de mangue au lait de coco* (mango gratin with coconut milk – more, please). It also scores high on atmosphere, with dark-wood parquet floors and red-accented walls highlighted by quirky-chic lighting and furnishings.

LA SOURIS CHAUDE

Attitude Kfé (☎ 0262 24 80 86; RN1; mains €19-30; ☎ lunch & dinner Thu-Tue) Perched on a hill overlooking the main road, this hip restaurant will satisfy capricious gourmets, with particular emphasis on *métro* fare. Another highlight is the setting – there's a pool and a tropical garden.

ST-LEU

pop 25,000

Since the good old days of the sugar industry ended, forward-looking St-Leu has transformed itself into a mecca for outdoor enthusiasts. This is the place to get high – legally: no doubt you'll be tempted to join the paragliders who wheel down from the Hauts to the lagoon. Scuba divers swear that the drop-offs here are

the best on the island and surfing fiends rave about the tremendous Gauche de St-Leu.

And culture? St-Leu has a smattering of handsome stone buildings dating from the French colonial era, such as the *mairie* (town hall) and the church opposite. Other attractions are the shady park along the sea-front and a protected beach that is popular with families.

St-Leu is also optimally placed for explorations of the coast and forays into the Hauts.

Information

Cyber Cafi (☎ 0262 49 83 84; 82 Rue Haute; per hr €3.50; ☹ 9am-noon & 1-6pm Mon-Fri, noon-6pm Sat) Internet café.

Laverie Océane (5 Rue de L'Étang; ☹ 8am-6pm Mon-Sat) Same location as Palais d'Asie (see opposite).

Office du Tourisme de St-Leu (☎ 0262 34 63 40; ot.stleu@wanadoo.fr; 1 Rue Le Barrelier; ☹ 1.30-5.30pm Mon, 9am-noon & 1.30-5.30pm Tue-Fri, 9am-noon & 2-5pm Sat) At the north end of the main road passing through the centre of town. It has brochures galore and helpful, English-speaking staff.

Sights

Feeling superstitious? Head straight to the little white **chapel of Notre-Dame de la Salette**, perched on the side of the hill to the east of town. It was built in 1859 as a plea for protection against the cholera epidemic sweeping the entire island. Whether by luck or divine intervention, St-Leu was spared from the epidemic, and thousands of pilgrims come here each year on 19 September to offer their thanks.

About 2km north of St-Leu, **Kelonia** (☎ 0262 34 81 10; www.kelonia.org in French; adult/child €7/3; ☹ 9am-5pm) is a well-organised turtle farm, which has been redesigned recently to good effect. There's lots of information, and you get a close-up look at the five different varieties of turtle found in the waters around Réunion. The kids will love it!

On the cliffs at Pointe au Sel, between St-Leu and Étang-Salé-les-Bains, **Le Souffleur** (The Blowhole) is a rocky crevice that spurts up a tower of water as the waves crash against it. It's only worth making the journey, however, if the sea is pretty rough.

Activities

DIVING

The dive spots off Pointe au Sel to the south of St-Leu offer some of the best underwater landscapes in Réunion, while the lagoon closer

to St-Leu is good for coral. See p27 for more information about diving.

Reputable dive centres:

Abyss Plongée (☎ 0262 34 79 79; www.abyss-plongee.com; 17 Blvd Bonnier)

Aqua Bulle (☎ 0262 34 88 58; www.aquabulle-plongee.com; 30 Rue des Cocotiers)

Bleu Océan (☎ 0262 34 97 49; www.bleuocéan.fr; 25 Rue du Général Lambert)

Excelsus (☎ 0262 34 73 65; www.excelsus-plongee.com in French; Pointe des Châteaux)

Réunion Plongée (☎ 0262 34 77 77; www.reunionplongee.com; 13 Ave des Artisans)

PARAGLIDING

St-Leu is one of the world's top spots for paragliding, with excellent uplifting thermals year-round. If you're new to dangling yourself in the air, you can tandem paraglide with one of the many operators offering flights (from €65 for a 20-minute aerial buzz). They also run introductory courses from €150. The most popular launch pad is at an altitude of 800m, high above the town. There's another launch pad at 1500m. The descent from the mountain is amazing, with heart-stopping views over the lagoon and the coast. Children over six are welcome.

Operators with good credentials and professional staff:

Aïranx (☎ 0692 68 81 81; www.airanx.com in French; 38 Rue du Général Lambert)

Azurtech (☎ 0262 34 91 89; www.azurtech.com in French; Pointe des Châteaux)

Bourbon Parapente (☎ 0262 34 18 34, 0692 87 58 74; www.bourbonparapente.com in French; Rue du Général Lambert)

Parapente Réunion (☎ 0262 24 87 84; www.parapente-reunion.fr in French; 1 Route des Colimaçons)

SURFING

One word: awesome. The surf break known as La Gauche de St-Leu ('the Left of St-Leu') has achieved cult status among surfies from all over the Indian Ocean. Certainly not for the faint-hearted, it instils profound respect (if not fear) even in the most seasoned surfers. The best season runs from May to October.

Beginners should make for a spot called La Cafrine, which is a bit more innocuous, or head to La Ravine de Trois Bassins (see p189) or St-Gilles-les-Bains (p184).

To brush up on your surfing skills or try a first lesson, contact **École de surf Cyril Theveneau** (☎ 0692 04 40 40; cyriltheveneau@yahoo.fr) or **École**

de surf de St-Leu (☎ 0692 65 44 92). Both outfits offer tuition and courses for all levels (€15 per hour). They don't have shops – call ahead for an appointment.

Festivals & Events

If you plan a visit to St-Leu in August, try to make it coincide with the **Sakifo festival** (www.sakifo.com), the best music festival on the island and a definite must-see. Mouse-click your way to the website for more information.

Sleeping

Dodo Spot (☎ 0262 34 76 98; www.dodospot.com; 67 Rue du Général Lambert; d with shared bathroom €30-39, studios €45-55) On the northern edge of town, this is a good standby, if you can forgive some flagrant omissions in the brochure and on the website. Sure, it's almost 'two steps away from the lagoon', but there's no mention of the traffic-congested highway in between! Rooms vary in size and standards, but are functional and the plant-filled property is welcoming. The studios are well worth the few extra bucks.

Résidence des Alizés (☎ 0262 34 82 31; marie-josee.comette@wanadoo.fr; 48bis Rue des Alizés; d €33-45; ☹) If it's modern comforts you're after, this is one of St-Leu's best bargains, with four impeccable rooms and two bungalows. Ask for a room with a sea view. On the southern outskirts of town.

Iloha (☎ 0262 34 89 89; www.iloha.fr; Pointe des Châteaux; s €65-80, d €73-90; ☹ ☹) It's not quite the upscale option it thinks it is, but the pool, the onsite restaurant and mature gardens do add a resort flavour. Views take in the lagoon. Good for families. It's on Route des Colimaçons, north of town.

Blue Margouillat (☎ 0262 34 64 00; www.blue-margouillat.com; Impasse Jean Albany; r €129-200; ☹ ☹ ☹) This delightful, small hotel on the southern outskirts of St-Leu adds a welcoming touch of glam to the local hotel scene, with just 14 artfully designed and sensitively furnished rooms, a romantic restaurant that serves dinner (mains €25, menus €29 to €43) daily and smashing views.

Other places:

Ti Som (☎ 0692 24 18 12; 228 Rue du Général Lambert; dm €15) Far from flash, but this is the cheapest place to stay for miles. The shared kitchen is a plus.

Palais d'Asie (☎ 0262 34 80 41; 5 Rue de l'Étang; d €32-45; ☹) The 'Palais' bit is a gross misnomer but it's a good pick for the thrifty traveller, comfortably central,

with functional rooms. And no, that icon's not a misprint – it really does have its own (small) swimming pool.

Repos Laleu (☎ 0262 34 93 84; http://perso.orange.fr/repos.laleu in French; 249 Rue du Général Lambert; d €41-55) Offers eight fully equipped apartments, smack dab in the centre.

Eating

Chez Lulu (☎ 0262 34 89 53; Rue Le Barrelier; mains €8-9; ☹) closed lunch Sun) Blink and you'll miss the tiny entrance of this little eatery next to the tourist office. Long on character and short on frills, it whips up well-prepared Creole dishes at wallet-friendly prices. Its *rougail morue* (cod rougail) is especially good.

Villa Vanille (☎ 0262 34 03 15; 69 Rue du Lagon; mains €12-20; ☹ lunch Wed-Mon, dinner Wed-Sun) This zinging spot was the flavour of the month when we visited. No plastic chairs (sweet mercy!), but teak furnishings and an agreeable terrace. Choose from frondy salads, meat and fish dishes – the *steak d'espardon à la vanille* (swordfish flavoured with vanilla) was delicious – and ice creams. Lounge on the beach across the road once you've finished your meal – this is the life!

O'Jacaré (☎ 0262 34 88 88; 55 Ave Général Lambert; mains €14-22; ☹ Mon-Sat) After an adrenaline-pumping tandem paragliding flight, you're going to need to regain your equilibrium with some proteins, including a toothsome *tartare de thon* (tuna tartare). If you find the shady terrace too noisy – it's on the busy roundabout near the tourist office – retreat to the dining room, which boasts an odd Brazilian theme, with yellow-and-green walls.

Other recommendations:

Chez Stephanie (☎ 0262 34 89 30; 135 Rue Général Lambert; mains €10; ☹ lunch & dinner) Prices are inflated at this longstanding institution but it's very central and open every day. Food-wise, expect *mamma-style carris and civets*.

Le Lagon (☎ 0262 34 79 13; 2 Rue du Lagon; mains €10-16; ☹ lunch & dinner except Tue) This beachfront place won't start a revolution but the menu covers enough territory to please most palates.

Drinking & Entertainment

Le Comptoir 974 (☎ 0262 33 55 36; 228 Rue du Général Lambert; ☹ 6am-midnight Mon-Sat) St-Leu's best drinking spot (an easy distinction, given the lack of competitors). Take a seat in the room or join the happy din at the main bar, which also features a vibrant dance floor. Chances are

that you'll bump into your diving/paragliding/surfing instructor. Live music on Thursday.

Le Séchoir – Le K (☎ 0262 34 79 69; le.sechoir@wanadoo.fr; 125 Rue du Général Lambert) One of Réunion's venues for contemporary theatre, dance and music, as well as puppet shows, circus acts and other cultural activities. The organisers also put on open-air concerts and film shows in the area. Contact the tourist office to find out about the latest shows.

Getting There & Away

Car Jaune buses between St-Denis and St-Pierre run through the centre of St-Leu (about 10 daily). The bus station is near the town hall. From there, Ti' Car Jaune minibuses have services for most villages in the Hauts.

AROUND ST-LEU

After all that exertion in St-Leu, there's no better way to wind down than by exploring the villages that cling to the sloping hills high above the town. The zigzagging roads are scenic to boot and the atmosphere wonderfully laid-back.

To the north of St-Leu, take the D12, known as Route des Colimaçons – a series of intestine-like S-curves – then veer due south on the D3 to **La Chaloupe St-Leu** before plunging back to the coast via **Piton St-Leu**. If you really want to get away from it all, you could continue to drive uphill from the village of **Les Colimaçons** until you reach the Route Forestière (forest road), also known as Route des Tamarins, which threads for 36km across the slopes from Le Tévelave and Le Maïdo – sensational. Whatever your itinerary, a good road map is essential for it's easy to get disorientated.

Aside from the scenery and the astounding vistas, there are a few not-to-be-missed attractions in the area. On the Route des Colimaçons, on the slopes north of St-Leu, you'll find the **Conservatoire Botanique National de Mascarin** (☎ 0262 24 92 27; 2 Rue du Père Georges, Les Colimaçons; adult/child €5/2; ☎ 9am–5pm Tue–Sun). This attractive garden is in the grounds of a 19th-century Creole mansion. You can easily spend half a day exploring the site, which spreads over 7 hectares and contains an impressive collection of native plant species, all neatly labelled, as well as many from around the Indian Ocean.

Another must-see is the well-organised **Stella Matutina museum** (☎ 0262 34 16 24; 10 Allée des Flamboyants; adult/child €7/2.50; ☎ 9.30am–4.45pm

Tue–Sun), which lies 4km south of St-Leu on the D11 to Piton St-Leu and Les Avirons. It's dedicated primarily to the sugar industry, but also provides insights into the history of the island and has exhibits on other products known and loved by the Réunionnais, such as vanilla, orchids, geraniums and vetiver.

Many of the villages in the hills above St-Leu, including Piton St-Leu and Les Colimaçons, lie on the Car Jaune bus route E from St-Pierre to La Chaloupe St-Leu. They can also be reached from the bus station in St-Leu.

Sleeping & Eating

There are several peaceful villages within 10km of St-Leu that offer accommodation in a relaxed, rural setting. All the places listed below boast bird's-eye views down to the coast (and the new expressway between St-Paul and Étang-Salé-les-Bains, alas).

Chambre d'hôtes Caz' Océane (☎/fax 0262 54 89 40; 28 Chemin Mutel, Notre-Dame-des-Champs, La Chaloupe St-Leu; s/d €25/28, dinner €17) Run by a friendly Zoreilles couple, this B&B in the hamlet of Notre-Dame-des-Champs offers good value for money. No one would accuse the three rooms of being over-decorated but they are adequate and guests can use a terrace with million-dollar views – perfect for an *apéro* (apéritif) after a bout of sightseeing. Excellent breakfast too (the homemade fruit salad is a killer).

Chambre d'hôtes Chez François Huet (☎ 0262 54 76 70; 202 Chemin Potier, Les Colimaçons; www.lareunion.com/chezhuet; d €40, dinner €18) Delivering style and substance, rooms here are sparkling, fresh and colourful. Shell out for the Creole-style *gîte* (€45) in the flower-filled garden if you intend to stay more than three nights. When it comes to preparing fish dishes, François Huet knows his stuff. It's signposted, uphill from the botanical garden.

Chambre d'hôtes Bardzour – Chez Marie-Claire Vion (☎ 0262 34 13 97; www.bardzour.com in French; 22 Chemin Georges Thénor, Piton St-Leu; d €45–55, dinner €20; ☎ ☎) This is a lovely option if you're looking for a secluded, rural atmosphere. These well-equipped rooms set among orchards provide a very cushy landing after a hard day's driving. *Table d'hôtes* meals are available twice a week (usually on Tuesday and Thursday). To find it, take the D11 towards Stella Matutina and Piton St-Leu, then continue to the very end of the lane.

LES AVIRONS & LE TÉVELAVE

pop 1500

Les Avirons is nothing inspirational but Le Tévelave, about 10km up an impossibly twisty road in the hills above Les Avirons, is a gem of a village. It offers a real taste of rural life and is a great base for walkers. You can really feel a sense of wilderness and seclusion here, light years away from the bling and bustle of the coast. At the top of the village is the starting point for the Route Forestière, more poetically known as the Route des Tamarins. This road leads through a cryptomeria forest and emerges 36km later below Le Maïdo.

Sleeping & Eating

Ferme-Auberge L'Écorce Blanc (☎ 0262 38 31 52; 46 Rue Francis Rivière; d incl breakfast €30, meals €20) Aaargh, the 600m-long access road is dreadfully steep, but you'll be rewarded with sensational views over the coast. Perched on the side of a hill, way above town, this friendly *ferme auberge* (farm inn) is beloved by locals for its authentic home cooking (by reservation). Sadly, the indoor dining room is as atmospheric as a dentist's waiting room. There are also four simple rooms that open onto the dining room (noisy at meal times); toilets are shared.

ourpick **Chambre d'hôtes Case Namasté** (☎ 0262 38 35 89; namastedufayet@wanadoo.fr; 17 Rue Francis Rivière; s/d with shared bathroom €35/45) This B&B with an affable hostess will smooth away any stresses that the traffic jams on the coastal road might induce. The whole place is full of grace and a Zen-like ambience you won't find elsewhere. The large communal area, with an open fireplace and exposed beams, is cosy to boot, as are the three shiny-clean rooms, with wood-panelled walls and feminine touches. And mercifully, Maud Dufayet's cuisine is low on calories; here it's more easy-to-digest tofu than stodgy *carri*. It's near the *terrain de pétanque* (pétanque pitch). It's not signposted.

Les Fougères (☎ 0262 38 32 96; fax 0262 383026; 53 Route des Merles; s/d incl breakfast €50, mains €13–16; ☎ lunch & dinner Tue–Sat, lunch Sun) The panoramic views and the secluded location, right at the start of the forest road, are the biggest perks to staying in this rural hotel with Creole architecture. Otherwise, the atmosphere is a bit staid and the rooms are functional. Angle for a room at the back.

ÉTANG-SALÉ-LES-BAINS

pop 12,000

Miles away from the hullaballo around St-Gilles, Étang-Salé-les-Bains is more a low-key resort for locals than foreign tourists, and the black-sand **beach** is much quieter than the coast further north.

The **Office du Tourisme de l'Étang-Salé** (☎ 0262 26 67 32; otsi.run@wanadoo.fr; 74 Rue Octave Bénard; ☎ 9am–5pm Mon–Fri, 9am–noon Sat) is housed in the old train station on the roundabout that marks the town centre.

Very few visitors know that **diving** is available at Étang-Salé-les-Bains. And what diving! The owners of **Plongée Salée** (☎ 0262 91 71 23; www.plongeesalee.reunion.com in French; Centre Carine) take only small groups. The sites are almost untouched.

If your idea of ocean activity is reeling in a big one, make a beeline for **La Reine Claude** (☎ 0692 17 02 39; Port de l'Étang Salé). This small, convivial outfit offers personalised service and organises **deep-sea fishing** trips for about €70 per person (maximum three people).

There aren't too many options for accommodation in or around Étang-Salé-les-Bains, although it does boast the island's only official camp site, **Camping Municipal de l'Étang-Salé-les-Bains** (☎ 0262 91 75 86; camping.letangsale@wanadoo.fr; Rue Guy Hoarau; camp site per night €10–13), in a shady spot a short walk back from the beach. If you don't want to spend your night under canvas, the three-star **Le Floralys – Caro Beach** (☎ 0262 91 79 79; www.carobeach.com; 2 Ave de l'Océan; s €72–120, d €150; ☎ ☎), set in a 3-hectare garden beside the roundabout in the middle of town, features serviceable rooms. A short walk south of the main roundabout, **L'Été Indien** (☎ 0262 26 67 33; 1 Rue des Salines; mains €8–15; ☎ lunch & dinner Tue–Sun) specialises in pizzas, grills and ice-cream concoctions.

ST-LOUIS

pop 44,000

If St-Gilles and L'Hermitage are very Westernised and touristy, St-Louis, by contrast, is very Indian and falls below many travellers' radars. This is the heart of Tamil culture on the west coast, and it won't take long to feel that the city exudes an undeniably exotic atmosphere. The town doesn't have anything fantastic to offer, but it is certainly worth a stop to soak up the ambience and admire a handful of religious buildings, including a Tamil temple, a splendid mosque and the biggest

church on the island. St-Louis can also be a convenient springboard for the mystifying hinterland (Entre-Deux, Les Makes), St-Pierre and even Cilaos.

A highlight (and a major landmark, with its big chimneys) is the **Sucrerie du Gol** (☎ 0262 91 05 47; visitesucrerie@gqf.com; adult/child €5/3), about 1.5km west of St-Louis. You can tour this old sugar refinery, one of only two on the island still functioning, during the cane harvest (July to December). Visits take place daily (except Sunday and Monday) with prior reservation.

our pick **Chambre d'hôtes Case Tatave** (☎ 0262 39 72 54; www.location-gite-ile-reunion.com in French; 55 Rue Hubert Delisle, Rivière St-Louis; s €38, ste €50-54, dinner €16; 🍷) is a peach of a place. Genuine locals, Veronique and Frédéric, are passionate about Creole culture and have renovated this lovely house with a happy respect for the spirit of the place. Curl up with your sweetie in one of the three oh-so-inviting suites complete with parquet flooring, period furniture, Creole ceilings and rich fabrics. Case Tatave would be a 'find' just on the strength of its character, but when you factor in the warm welcome, the affordable prices and the yummy meals, this charming B&B is a discovery. One minus: bathrooms are not ensuite in two of the suites. It's in Rivière St-Louis, about 6km from St-Louis.

Car Jaune buses between St-Denis and St-Pierre run through St-Louis (about 10 daily). Buses to Cilaos run from the bus station (€1.50, six daily).

LES MAKES

pop 2500

One of Réunion's best-kept secrets, Les Makes boasts a wonderful bucolic atmosphere and a lovely setting. Snuggled into the seams of the Hauts, it's accessible via a tortuous secondary road from St-Louis (12km). At almost 1200m, breathing in the fresh alpine air here is enough therapy for a lifetime.

The area is ideal for **stargazing**. The **Observatoire astronomique** (☎ 0262 37 86 83; www.ilereunion.com/observatoire-makes/ in French; 18 Rue Georges Bizet; adult/child €9/5) offers stargazing programmes from 9pm to midnight. It's best to call ahead to confirm the programme is on.

It's a sin to visit Les Makes and not take the forest road that leads to **La Fenêtre** (The Window), another 10km further uphill. Hold on to your hat and lift your jaw off the floor as you approach the viewpoint – the view over the entire Cirque de Cilaos and the surround-

ing craggy summits that jab the skyline will be etched in your memory forever. La Fenêtre is also a wonderful picnic spot. **Hiking** is another option, with a series of well-marked trails leading from the lookout. Hint: arrive early, before it gets cloudy.

Horse riding is also a terrific way of exploring the surrounding forests. It can be arranged through **Centre Équestre de la Fenêtre** (☎ 0262 37 88 74; Route de la Fenêtre, Les Makes; per hr €16; 🐾 Tue-Sat).

Should you fall under the spell of this charming village (no doubt you will!), you can bunk down at the **Chambre d'hôtes Le Vieil Alambic – Chez Jean-Luc d'Eurveilher** (☎ /fax 0262 37 82 77; 55 Rue Montplaisir, Les Makes; d €40, dinner €20), an adorable B&B on the road to La Fenêtre, with four tidy rooms (no views) and highly respected *table d'hôtes* meals. Rejoicing begins with, say, *beignets de papaye verte au fromage* (papaya fritters with cheese), followed by *carri canard mais* (duck *carri*). Save room for desserts – the *mousse des cimes* (a homemade mousse with local fruits) is a victory for humanity. Self-caterers will opt for **Chalets des Makes** (☎ 0262 37 80 10; www.bungalowrun.com in French; 5 Rue Raisins Marrons, Les Makes; d €46), which comprises four chalet-like bungalows in flowering gardens. Meals are available on request.

ENTRE-DEUX

pop 5170

This sweet little village high in the hills 18km north of St-Pierre got its name (which means 'between two') because it is situated between two rivers – the Bras de Cilaos and the Bras de la Plaine, which join to form the Rivière St-Étienne. Entre-Deux is a delightful place to stay and get a taste of rural life. It boasts a wealth of *cases créoles*, traditional country cottages surrounded by well-tended and fertile gardens, many of which are being restored. There's also a strong tradition of local crafts, including natty slippers made from the leaves of an aloe-like plant called *choca*.

The **tourist office** (☎ 0262 39 69 80; ot.entredeux@wanadoo.fr; 9 Rue Fortuné Hoareau; 🕒 8am-5pm Mon-Sat) occupies a pretty *case créole* on the road into the village. Staff give guided visits (usually in French) of the village (adult/child €9/5) and can provide leaflets on walks in the region (including climbing Le Dimitile) and on local artisans.

Opportunities for **hiking** abound. Many visitors come here for the tough hike up the slopes of iconic **Le Dimitile** (1837m) to a

sensational view over the Cirque de Cilaos. If you leave at dawn, the ascent and descent can be done in a single day. You should plan on at least eight hours, however, and unless you're superhuman it's preferable to stay at one of the two *gîtes* near the summit. The tourist office can provide information and sketch maps detailing the various routes.

Feeling lazy? Join a 4WD tour. **Kreolie 4x4** (☎ 0262 39 50 87; www.kreolie4x4.com in French; 4 Impasse des Avocats) runs day trips that include Entre-Deux and the viewpoint at Le Dimitile (€92, including lunch). Guides are informative, providing interesting tidbits on the area's flora and fauna (in French).

SLEEPING

Auberge de Jeunesse (☎ 0262 39 59 20; 120 Chemin Defaud, Ravine des Citrons; dm €14; 🍷) The most obvious choice if funds are short, this youth hostel occupies an enticing villa in a tranquil neighbourhood, about 3km from the centre (follow the Ravine des Citrons sign). Inside, it's much less eye candy, with monastically plain two- to eight-person rooms. Evening meals are available for groups only.

Chambre d'hôtes Mirest – Lucienne Clain (☎ 0262 39 65 43; www.mirest-reunion.com in French; 1 Chemin Sources-Raisin; d €40, dinner €20) What sets this *chambre d'hôte* apart is the stunning architecture – no plain, concrete building, but a cheerful mix of wood and lava stones. Its three rooms are airy and comfortable and open onto a flourishing garden. The dining room serves up panoramic views along with *table d'hôtes*.

Chambre d'hôtes Les Durentas (☎ 0262 39 64 03, 0692 68 68 82; www.lesdurentas.com in French; 35 Chemin Defaud, Ravine des Citrons; d €42, dinner €18; 🍷) Lovely, clean *chambre d'hôte* with two plain but restful rooms, opposite the youth hostel. There's a pool in the flowering garden. Top that off with the affable welcome of Madame, who is a good cook too, and you have a *chambre d'hôte* that beckons you to stay for a few extra days.

our pick **Le Dimitile** (☎ 0262 39 20 00; www.dimitile.eu; 30 Rue Bras Long; d incl breakfast €130; 🍷 🍷 🍷) A place of easy bliss, miles from the hustle and bustle of the coast. This beautifully manicured haven is run with flair and care by a couple from Alsace. Saffron yellows on the façade, cosy reds on the floors, attractive Creole furnishings and natural stones create a warmly authentic atmosphere in the 18 rooms. Flat-screen TVs, glistening bathrooms and a well-regarded onsite restaurant (mains €16 to €28;

open lunch and dinner) are also *de rigueur*. The cherry on the icing? A lovely pool for cooling dips.

Up on Le Dimitile, **Gîte Émile** (Map p218; ☎ 0262 39 66 42, 0262 57 43 03; dm with half board per person €31) run by M François Payet offers basic accommodation in five- to twelve-person dorms. You can also hunker down in the *gîte d'étape* run by **Mme Franca Bardil** (Map p218; ☎ 0262 39 60 84, 0262 57 64 29; dm with half board per person €33), which also has rustic dorms. Hearty meals are served at both *gîtes*.

EATING

Le Chocas (☎ 0262 69 56 06; 12 Rue de l'Église; mains €9-13; 🍷 lunch Tue-Sun) Don't know what *chocas* is? It's time to get a hands-on education. Nestled in a lush garden, this reputable eatery specialises in this quirky-tasting vegetable, prepared in all its forms (with fish, shrimps etc). You can also pick up the usual Creole suspects. The fuchsia tablecloths add a touch of fancy.

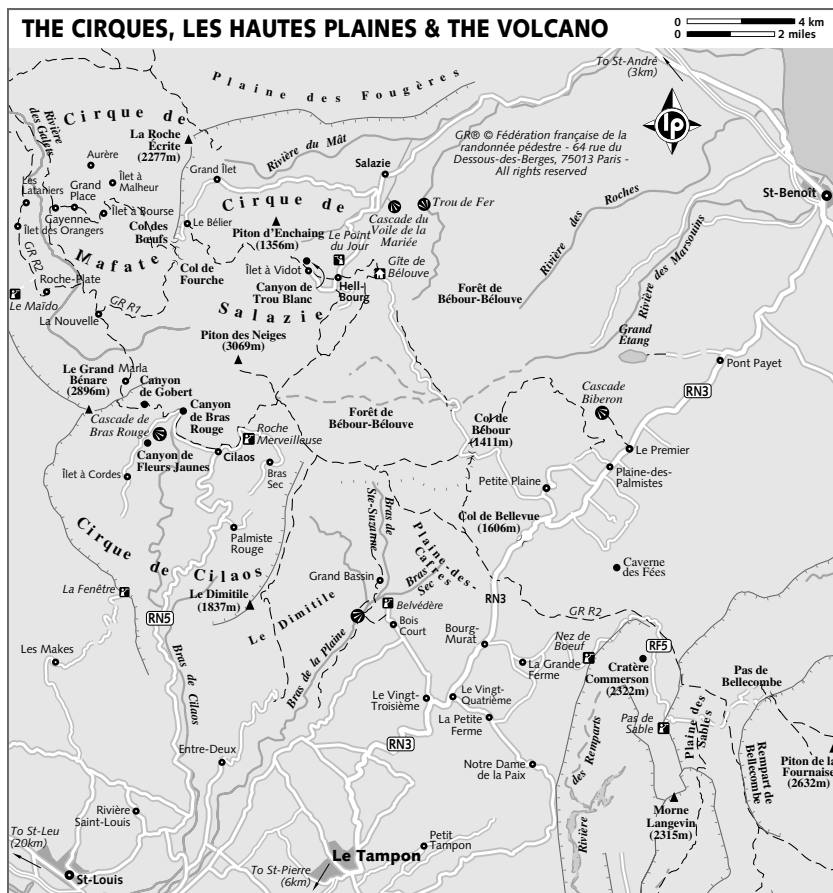
Le Longanis (☎ 0262 39 70 56; 9bis Rue du Commerce; mains €8-13; 🍷 lunch Mon-Sat, dinner Mon-Tue & Thu-Sat) This venue right in the centre boasts a happy buzz at lunchtime. The menu is a who's who of Creole specialties, with the odd salad and *suggestions* (daily specials) thrown in. It's more honest than refined, but at these prices you're unlikely to have much to complain about.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Car Jaune operates a bus service between Entre-Deux and the *gare routière* in St-Pierre. There are five buses a day from Monday to Saturday and two on a Sunday.

THE CIRQUES

A trip to the Cirques is an iconic Réunion experience. No amount of hyperbole could ever communicate the astonishingly gulleless beauty of the island's heart and soul, where the earth swells as mightily as an angry sea. Knitted together like a three-leaf clover, the Cirques of Cilaos, Salazie and Mafate are different in spirit from the rest of the island – more inward-looking, more secretive, more austere, less commercially minded. Quintessentially Réunionnais. The fast-paced and hedonistic coastal life seems light years away. The few roads daring to traverse the



gorges and ranges are more crooked than a politician, winding in and out of tortuous valleys.

The whole island was once the dome of a vast prehistoric shield volcano, centred on Piton des Neiges, but the collapse of subterranean lava chambers formed the starting point for the creation of the Cirques. Millions of years of rainfall and erosion did the rest, scouring out the amphitheatres that are visible today.

No prize for guessing that this rugged region is a fantastic playground for the stimulus-needy, with staggering mountain scenery, a mesh of well-marked trails and jaw-dropping canyons that beg to be explored. But if all you need is to decompress,

there are always epicurean delights, including a robust cuisine scene and welcoming accommodation options where you can rejuvenate mind and body. Nothing glam, just a good balance of warmth, hospitality and comfort.

Nature is not the only drawcard. The Cirques are also of strong historical interest. They first began to be settled by runaway slaves or *marrons* (see p157) in the 18th century, and their descendants still inhabit some of the wild remote villages of the Cirques. The people residing here are an independent and unhurried lot, adamantly tied to their *îlet* (village) and their traditions.

Each Cirque has its own personality – try to include the three of them in your itinerary.

CIRQUE DE CILAOIS

The setting couldn't be more grandiose. Think snaggle-toothed volcanic peaks, deep ravines and forests that are straight out of a Brothers Grimm fairy tale. At times, swirling banks of cloud add a touch of the bizarre. A sweet sprinkling of secluded hamlets top off this area's indisputable 'wow!' effect.

Thrill-seekers, rejoice: the Cirque de Cilaos is the mother of all canyoning experiences on the island, with three iconic canyons that are set in some of the most impressive scenery in Réunion. Hiking is also extraordinary (see p238). Another pull is the smattering of well-priced hotels and B&Bs.

To get here, clunk in your safety belt and take a deep breath: the RN5, which connects St-Louis with Cilaos, 37km to the north, is Réunion's premier drive (and that is saying a lot!). Snaking steeply around more than 400 twists and turns along the way up into the amphitheatre, it provides vista-point junkies with a steady fix. *Bon voyage!*

Cilaos pop 6000

Cilaos is ensnared by scenery so mind-blowingly dramatic it's practically Alpine. One word says it all: Piton des Neiges (3069m). The iconic peak towers over the town of Cilaos, acting like a magnet to hiking fiends. But there's no obligation to overdo it: a smattering of museums, a slew of underrated vineyards, regenerative thermal baths and plenty of short walks mean this incredible dose of natural magnificence can also be appreciated at a more relaxed pace.

The largest settlement in any of the Cirques, Cilaos sits 1200m above sea level. Developed as a spa resort at the end of the 19th century, the town's fortunes still rest on tourism, particularly hiking and canyoning, backed up by agriculture and the bottled mineral-water industry. The area is known for the production of lentils, embroidery and, increasingly, palatable red and white wines.

Cilaos fills up quickly on weekends. But despite its popularity it manages to stave off changes that would detract from its appeal as an 'ecotourism' destination – there are no massive hotels or blaring discos, only low-key, small-scale operations. Enjoy it to the hilt.

INFORMATION

There aren't any banks in Cilaos. There is an ATM at the post office that accepts Visa and MasterCard, but don't rely on it completely: it occasionally runs out of euros, especially on weekends.

Maison du Tourisme (☎ 0262 31 71 71; mmocilaos@wanadoo.fr; 2bis Rue Mac Auliffe; ☎ 8.30am–12.30pm & 1.30–5.30pm Mon–Sat, 9am–noon Sun) The tourism office is particularly helpful, with multilingual staff who provide reliable information about local and long-distance walks and dispense lists of accommodation, restaurants and activities. You can also book *gîtes de montagne* here.

Post office (76 Rue du Père Boiteau; ☎ 8am–4pm Mon–Fri, 8–11.30am Sat)

Vidéo Club 3 Salazes (40 Rue St-Louis; per hr €12; ☎ 9am–noon & 2–9pm Tue–Sun)

SIGHTS

Maison du Peuplement des Hauts

Close to Cilaos' church, the informative **Maison du Peuplement des Hauts** (☎ 0262 31 88 01; 5bis Chemin du Séminaire; adult/child €5.50/3.20; ☎ 10am–noon & 2.30–6pm Wed–Mon, 9.30–11.30am & 1.30–4.30pm Sun) is dedicated to the escaped slaves who first settled the hostile landscape of the Cirques. The displays are imaginative and provide a much-needed monument to the unsung Creole heroes of Réunion (see p157).

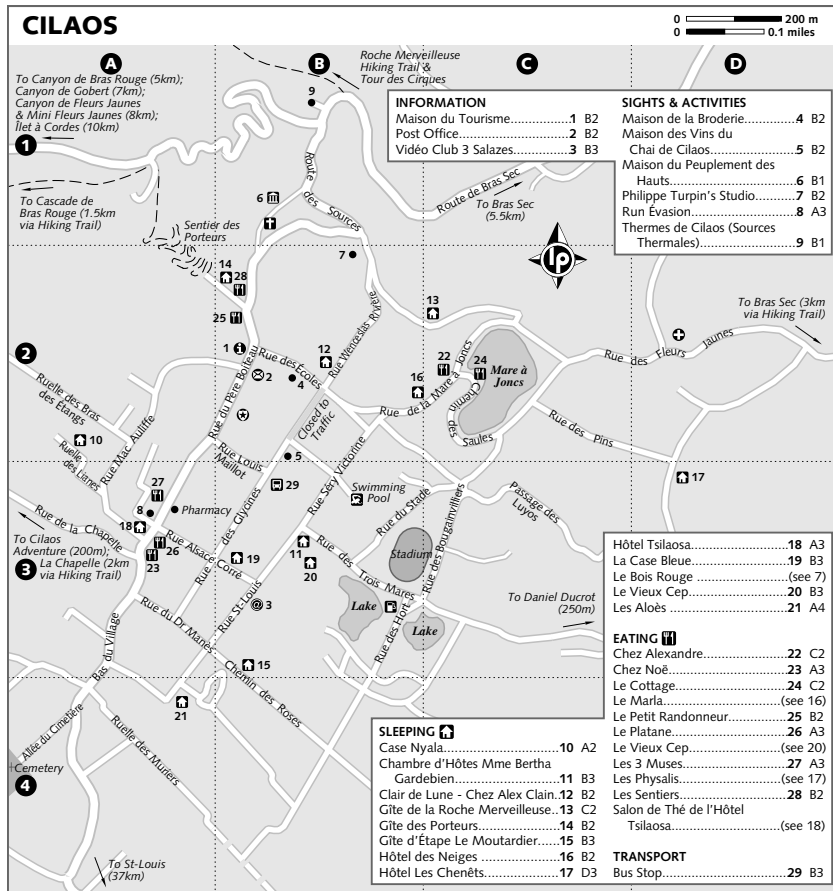
Maison de la Broderie

The originator of Cilaos' embroidery tradition was Angèle Mac Auliffe, the daughter of the town's first doctor of thermal medicine. Looking for a pastime to fill the long, damp days in the Cirque, Angèle established the first embroidery workshop with 20 women producing what later evolved into a distinctive Cilaos style of embroidery.

Nowadays, the **Maison de la Broderie** (☎ 0262 31 77 48; Rue des Écoles; admission €1; ☎ 9.30am–noon & 2–5pm Mon–Sat, 9.30am–noon Sun) is home to an association of 30 or so local women dedicated to keeping the craft alive. They embroider and sell children's clothes, serviettes, place settings and tablecloths. It's laborious work: a single placemat takes between 12 and 15 days to complete.

Sources Thermales

The *sources thermales* (thermal springs) of Cilaos were first brought to the attention of the outside world in 1815 by a goat hunter from St-Louis, Paulin Têcher. A track into the Cirque was constructed in 1842, paving the



way for the development of Cilaos as a health spa for rich colonials. The spring is heated by volcanic chambers far below the surface. It's said to relieve rheumatic pain, among other bone and muscular ailments.

The old thermal station was opened in 1896, but the spring became blocked in a cyclone that occurred in 1948. The project was revived in 1971, only to close in 1987 because of damage to the buildings caused by the chemicals in the spa water. The latest incarnation of the Cilaos spa is the **Thermes de Cilaos** (☎ 0262 31 72 27; thermes-cilaos@cg974.fr; Route de Bras-Sec; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Sat, 9am-5pm Sun) at the north end of town. All manner of health treatments are offered, including a 20-minute hydromassage (€17). This is a perfect way

to rejuvenate tired and sore muscles after your hike.

Maison des Vins

You can learn more about Cilaos wine at the **Maison des Vins du Chai de Cilaos** (☎ 0262 31 79 69; 34 Rue des Glycines; ☎ 9am-noon & 2-5.30pm Mon-Sat). A short film (in French) is followed by a guided tour of the modern vinification plant and a wine tasting. Take home a bottle from about €10.

Philippe Turpin's Studio

The sculptor and printmaker Philippe Turpin, who etches on copper and then rolls the prints off the inky plates, has a **studio** (☎ 0262 31 73 64; 2 Route des Sources; ☎ 9am-noon & 2-6pm) that is open

to the public. Turpin captures the wonder of Réunion in a fantastical, almost medieval way; his renditions of the Cirques resemble illustrations of fairy kingdoms.

ACTIVITIES

Canioning

Of the stellar spots for canioning in Réunion, the Cilaos area tops the list, with three major canyons that draw action-seekers like bees to a honey pot: Canyons de Gobert, Fleurs Jaunes and Bras Rouge. All are very atmospheric; you can expect various jumps, leaps into natural pools and jaw-dropping rappelling. Access to the canyons involves a preliminary 15-minute hike. The time spent in the canyon is about three hours. The most suitable canyons for beginners and families are Canyon de Gobert and Mini Fleurs Jaunes (which is a section of Fleurs Jaunes). Plan on €45 to €70 per person. All canioning outings are led by a qualified instructor. The major operators include the following (some don't have offices but can be reached by phone):

Bouisset Fabrice (☎ 0692 66 22 73)

Canyon Ric a Ric (☎ 0692 86 54 85; www.canyon.reunion.com)

Cilaos Adventure (☎ 0692 66 73 42; 12 Chemin de la Chapelle)

Daniel Ducrot (☎ 0262 31 76 33, 0692 65 90 67; www.canioning-cilaos.com; Chemin des Trois Mares)

Run Évasion (☎ 0262 31 83 57; www.runevasion.fr in French; 23 Rue du Père Boiteau)

Hiking

There are fabulous hiking options in the vicinity of Cilaos, with well-marked trails suitable for all levels of fitness. The tourist office produces a small leaflet that gives an overview of the walks in the Cirque. The most popular walks include Cascade de Bras Rouge (2½ hours), Roche Merveilleuse (two hours), Sen-

tier des Sources (a one-hour loop), Col du Taïbit (five hours) and the mind-boggling ascent of Piton des Neiges (about nine hours in all).

See p231 for more about hiking, and p238 for the ascent of Piton des Neiges.

SLEEPING

Cilaos has ample choice of accommodation options, but it can become crowded at weekends and during the tourist season.

Budget

La Case Bleue (☎ 0692 65 74 96; 15 Rue Alsace Corré; dm €14) An excellent choice, this *gîte d'étape* spreads into two attractive Creole houses painted in blue. Both boast an impeccable communal kitchen, pathogen-free bathrooms, new mattresses and crisp sheets. Breakfast costs €5.

Gîte de la Roche Merveilleuse (☎ 0262 31 82 42; 1 Rue des Platanes; dm €14.50, d €33-36) This all-wood *gîte* looks like a Canadian chalet transplanted to Cilaos. Its best asset is the panoramic view from the terrace. Meals can be arranged if there's a minimum of five persons.

Clair de Lune - Chez Alex Clair (☎ 0262 31 88 03; 10 Rue Wenceslas Rivière; dm incl breakfast €15) Run by Alex, who knows a thing or 50 about Cilaos and adopts all guests like stray kittens, this congenial spot has rooms of varying size and shape, with three- to nine-bed dorms and one double. Bathrooms are shared. The living area is a good place to swap tales with like-minded travellers.

Other options:

Gîte d'étape Le Moutardier (☎ 0262 31 76 06; Chemin des Roses; dm €14) This solid option in two Creole houses is brought to life with lashings of colourful paint on the façade. Rooms can sleep two to six, and there's a communal kitchen.

Chambre d'hôtes Mme Bertha Gardebien

(☎ 0262 31 72 15; 50 Rue St-Louis; s/d €25/35, dinner

A TOAST IS IN ORDER

You mustn't leave Cilaos without sampling a glass (or three) of *vin de Cilaos* (Cilaos wine). Not to be deprived of their wine, the French brought vines with them to Réunion in the 17th century. They were originally grown along the west coast, but in the late 19th century settlers introduced vines into the Cirques, cultivating them on trellises outside their houses or on tiny terraces hacked out of the hillside. For years, the wines they produced were sugary sweet whites, reminiscent of sherry and tawny port. In the late 1970s, however, a few enterprising growers in Cilaos upgraded their vine stock and began producing something far more palatable. In addition to sweet and dry whites, growers now produce reds and rosés. They are not necessarily the most distinguished of wines but they're improving in quality.

€15) Perfect for travellers looking for budget tariffs without the hype, this unassuming B&B run by a retired couple provides three no-frills rooms (with shared bathroom).

Midrange & Top End

Gîte des Porteurs (☎ 0262 31 82 88; les.porteurs@wanadoo.fr; 1 Rue des Thermes; d €40) Next door to the restaurant Les Sentiers, this newish operation features four rooms in a gleaming white Creole villa.

Hôtel des Neiges (☎ 0262 31 72 33; www.hotel-des-neiges.com; 1 Rue de la Mare à Joncs; s €51-61, d €60-70; 🚗) The candy-pink exterior is a bit migraine-inducing (and seems to have spilled over onto the website!) but otherwise this two-star hotel is a safe-bet pad, with well-maintained rooms and professional service. A neat garden, a smallish pool and a restaurant complete this rosy picture.

Case Nuala (☎ 0262 31 89 57, 0692 87 70 14; www.case-nyala.com; 8 Rue de la Mare; d incl breakfast €65-75; 🚗) On a quiet backstreet close to the centre, this little Creole place is oh-so-sweet with its lemon-yellow walls and green shutters. Inside is a clutch of cosy, contemporary rooms and a well-appointed communal kitchen. Yes, the rum in the glass flasks on the shelves is complimentary (thanks, Monsieur Frossard!). Families will opt for the larger, self-contained bungalow at the rear.

Hôtel Tsilaosa (☎ 0262 37 39 39; su.dijoux@outremeronline.com; Rue du Père Boiteau; s €78-84, d €94-102, all incl breakfast) For discerning visitors with fatter wallets (and creakier joints), this three-star abode in a restored Creole home offers a smooth stay, with 15 rooms that are imaginatively decked out in local style; those upstairs boast mountain views.

Le Vieux Cep (☎ 0262 31 71 89; www.levieuxcep-reunion.com; 2 Rue des Trois Mares; s/d incl breakfast €79/86; 🚗) Though slightly ageing, Cilaos' starlet hasn't lost its sheen, with an enviable location, flower-filled gardens, sunny rooms and solid amenities, including a small sauna, a Jacuzzi, a pool and an onsite restaurant. Rooms in the older block are more rustic; newer rooms have less character, but better bathrooms. All rooms peek out onto the Piton des Neiges. Mountain bikes are available for rent.

Hôtel Les Chenêts (☎ 0262 31 85 85; leschenets@ilereunion.com; Rue des Trois Mares; d incl breakfast €98; 🚗) Cilaos' most luxurious hotel is a big, colourful place with a touch of a hunting lodge about its foyer. The rooms are spacious and come with gleaming bathrooms. There's a heated

pool, a sauna, a bar and a good restaurant, Les Physalis.

Other recommendations:

Le Bois Rouge (☎ 0262 31 73 64; 2 Route des Sources) This boutique-ish hotel with a handful of rooms artfully decorated by artist-owner Philippe Turpin had just closed when we visited, but the owner was planning to sell it to new management. Ask while you're here.

Les Aloès (☎ 0262 318100; www.hotel-aloes.com in French; 14 Rue St-Louis; s/d €51/65) Friendly two-star hotel on the edge of town. Bright blues, yellows and ochres colour the well-tended rooms. The upstairs ones have the best views. The owner is very knowledgeable about hiking.

EATING

We'll be honest: despite the choice of eateries on offer, don't expect gastronomic thrills in Cilaos. Most places tend to rest on their laurels, with rather stodgy fare served in generic surrounds. On the bright side, Cilaos holds a few surprises up its sleeves. It's noted for its lentils, grown mainly around Îlet à Cordes, and its wines (see p199).

Self-caterers will find grocery stores and bakeries (croissants and *macatias* – delish!) along the main street.

Salon de Thé de l'hôtel Tsilaosa (☎ 0262 37 39 39; Rue du Père Boiteau; cakes €3-4; ☕ 2-6pm) This delightfully peaceful venue in the hotel's tea room (see left) will torment the sweet-toothed and weak-willed with homemade cakes and pies, including a *tarte à la confiture de pêche* (tart with peach jam), and about 15 varieties of tea. Enough said, we're drooling on the keyboard!

Le Platane (☎ 0692 63 20 64; Rue du Père Boiteau; mains €6-14; 🍴 lunch & dinner Tue-Sun) Here you can wrap your mandibles around omelettes, salads and *carris*, but skip the unexceptional pizzas – Cilaos is not Naples. Despite some splashes of colour on the walls and the attractive Creole architecture, Le Platane is lacking in atmosphere.

Les Sentiers (☎ 0262 31 71 54; 63 Rue du Père Boiteau; mains €10-13, menu €19; 🍴 lunch daily except Wed, dinner daily except Tue & Wed) Come lunch and dinner, this cute *case créole* is alive with action. Tables spill from inside out onto a breezy terrace. The food isn't the best, but it's filling and the rustic décor is easy on the eye, with exposed beams and flashing laminate floors. The only weak point on our visit was the flimsy service.

Chez Noë (☎ 0262 31 79 93; 40 Rue du Père Boiteau; mains €11-19, menus €22-27; 🍴 lunch & dinner Tue-Sun) A longstanding institution, Chez Noë is almost a

rite of passage in Cilaos, but some say it rests on its laurels – we agree. It churns out invigorating Creole favourites such as sausage with lentils and *gratin de chou chou* (choko; a green squash-like vegetable that is served baked).

Les 3 Muses (☎ 0262 31 86 62; 25 Rue du Père Boiteau; mains €14-19; 🍴 lunch & dinner Sat-Wed) At this seething place on the main drag, the menu runs the gamut of *métro* and Creole standards.

Le Vieux Cep (☎ 0262 31 71 89; 2 Rue des Trois Mares; mains €12-28; 🍴 lunch & dinner) Don't eat here if you want to remain on good terms with your dietician! After sampling half of the *côte de porc fumée aux lentilles de Cilaos* (smoked pork rib with Cilaos lentils), the signature dish, our bulging insides forced us get horizontal. The service is old-fashioned and the décor seriously rustic, with an open fireplace, stone walls and exposed beams.

Other places to get your fill:

Chez Alexandre (☎ 0692 48 86 25; 7 Rue de la Mare à Joncs; mains €7; 🍴 lunch & dinner Wed-Mon) The paltry bill, cool staff, copious Creole daily specials and hearty sandwiches here are sure to keep you feeling satisfied.

Le Petit Randonneur (☎ 0262 31 79 55; Rue du Père Boiteau; mains €9-16; 🍴 lunch & dinner Sat-Thu) The quality isn't earth shattering at 'The Little Walker', but neither is the bill.

Le Cottage (☎ 0262 31 70 38; 2 Chemin des Saules; mains €11-16; 🍴 lunch & dinner Sat-Thu) The all-wood surrounds boast a kind of rustic charm and the dining rooms overlook the Mare à Joncs. Has no-nonsense traditional fare.

Le Marla (☎ 0262 31 72 33; 1 Rue de la Mare à Joncs; mains €15; 🍴 lunch & dinner) The restaurant at the Hôtel des Neiges (see opposite) offers homely Creole meals.

Les Physalis (☎ 0262 31 85 85; Rue des Trois Mares; mains €11-25; 🍴 lunch & dinner) A well-regarded venue, at the Hôtel Les Chenêts (see opposite). Sadly, the sterile dining room seriously detracts from the atmosphere.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Cilaos is located 112km from St-Denis by road and 37km from the nearest coastal town, St-Louis.

Buses to Cilaos depart from St-Louis. There are about 10 buses daily, with eight on Sunday (€1.50, 1½ hours). The last service up to Cilaos leaves St-Pierre at 5.15pm; going down again, the last bus leaves Cilaos at 4pm, but this terminates at St-Louis.

There are nine buses a day (four on Sunday) from Cilaos to Bras Sec (€1) between 7.30am and 7pm. The tourist office in Cilaos has timetables.

For Îlet à Cordes (€1) there are about nine buses daily (only four on Sunday) from 7.20am to 7pm, with the last bus back just after 3pm. Another option for Îlet à Cordes is the minibus service offered by the **Société Cilaosienne de Transport** (☎ 0262 31 85 87, 0692 66 13 30), which costs €28 for two people. The same outfit provides transport from Cilaos to Le Bloc on the GR R1 to Hell-Bourg (€15 for two people) and to the trailhead for the Col du Taïbit on the GR R1/GR R2 to Mafate (€15 for two people), saving you about an hour's walking time in each case.

GETTING AROUND

Run Évasion (☎ 0262 31 83 57; 23 Rue du Père Boiteau) rents out mountain bikes for about €16/20 for a half/full day.

Îlet à Cordes

Îlet à Cordes is a marvellous 'stop the world and get off' place and you'll leave with reluctance. The setting is truly photogenic: wherever you look, this tiny *écart* (settlement) is cradled by soaring mountains, with major peaks looming on the horizon.

SLEEPING & EATING

Gîte d'étape et Chambre d'hôtes de l'Îlet (☎ 0262 25 38 57, 0692 64 74 48; 27 Chemin Terre-Fine; dm/d €18/40, dinner €18) This venue offers bog-standard dorm beds in several wood-panelled rooms, which are somewhat lacking in privacy. Solange Grondin, your amenable hostess, prides herself on her farm cooking, which usually means pork with cauliflower, *brèdes chou chou* (a mix of local vegetables) and girth-expanding *gâteaux pays* (homemade cakes).

Chambre d'hôtes Chez Carole Maillot (☎ 0262 25 74 57; 18bis Chemin Terre-Fine; s/d €34/38) Offers two exceedingly clean rooms (aim for the upstairs one) in a modern house at the far end of the village. The secluded location makes for great stargazing and the views over Le Grand Bénare and Piton des Neiges never fail to impress. No meals are served but there's a communal kitchen. You can also have dinner at Chez Héléne Payet (by reservation), a five-minute jog away.

Chambre d'hôtes Chez Héléne Payet (☎ 0262 35 18 13, 0692 68 49 68; 13 Chemin Terre-Fine; d €40, dinner €18) Madame Payet has four reassuringly Air-Wicked rooms in an alluring tropical garden. The food is more poultry with homegrown vegetables than creative concoctions.

Le Reposoir (☎ 0262 25 14 36; Chemin Terre-Fine; ☎ 7am-7pm Mon-Sat, 7am-1pm & 5-7pm Sun) Across the road from Gîte d'étape et Chambre d'hôtes de l'Îlet, this modest café-bar serves snacks and sandwiches, and has a limited selection of goods if you're fixing your own food.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

See p201 for buses to/from Îlet à Cordes.

Bras-Sec

As in Îlet à Cordes, you've reached *le bout du monde* (the end of the Earth) in Bras-Sec, about 12km from Cilaos. This is a place to just kick back and enjoy the get-away-from-it-all atmosphere.

SLEEPING & EATING

our pick **Domaine des Fahams** (☎ 0262 96 03 87; www.lesfahams.com in French; 3 Chemin Saül; bungalows per person €10, dinner €15) One of the area's best-kept secrets, this trippy venue in splendid isolation offers superb views over the surrounding peaks. Digs are in three all-wood bungalows and one quirky 'tepee'. Meals come in for warm praise, with an emphasis on produce from the farm (goose, duck); there's even a microbrewery – here's your chance to sample unique, homemade nectars, flavoured with *faham* (a local plant). And look at the rates!

Les Calumets (☎ 0262 35 40 63; http://calumets.neuf.fr; Chemin Saül; s/d with shared bathroom €15/30, dinner €17) The setting is bona fide wild: free-ranging geese foraging on the lush grounds, a fish pond and a pristine cryptomeria forest at the back. Bridging the gap between *gîte d'étape* and B&B, this quirky affair run by an empathetic Breton couple is a good deal. Angle for one of the two rooms in the all-wood building at the front; the two other rooms at the back of the main house feel rather claustrophobic. Good French-inspired cooking at dinner, *en famille* (with the family).

Gîte d'étape Les Mimosas (☎ 0262 96 72 73; 29 Chemin Saül; dm incl breakfast €16, s/d incl breakfast €25/33, dinner €18) This is an unflashy but friendly place with functional two- to seven-person dorms.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

See p201 for buses to/from Bras-Sec.

CIRQUE DE SALAZIE

If you need a break from beach-bumming and want to cool off in forested mountains, head to the Cirque de Salazie. Like the Cirque de

Cilaos, the Cirque de Salazie has bags of natural panache, with soaring peaks, soul-stirring vistas, thundering waterfalls, tortuous roads and a spattering of rural hamlets thrown in for good measure.

The winding mountain road that slithers into the Cirque from St-André on the north-east coast offers awesome views and is reason enough to make the trip. Yet the prize at the end of it is golden too: with its Creole colour, Hell-Bourg is the crowning glory of the Cirque.

The Cirque de Salazie is a bit 'flatter' (although 'flat' is not the first word that will spring to mind when you see it!) than the Cirque de Cilaos, but the scenery as you approach is nearly as awesome. The vegetation is incredibly lush and waterfalls tumble down the mountains, even over the road in places – Salazie is the wettest of the three Cirques.

For detailed information on the Tour des Cirques, a hiking route that takes in the Cirque de Salazie, see p238.

Salazie

The town from which the Cirque de Salazie takes its name lies at the eastern entrance to the Cirque. There's not much to detain you here, and most visitors press on to Hell-Bourg. You'll have to change buses here if you're heading further up into the Cirque.

The post office, opposite the hotel, has an ATM (the only one in the Cirque). There's also an internet café, **Cyber Salazie** (☎ 0692 05 62 24; per hr €5; ☎ 9am-10pm Tue-Sun), just up the road.

If everything is full in Hell-Bourg, the **Hôtel Salazien** (☎ 0262 47 57 05; fax 0262 47 51 65; 134 Rue Pompidou; s/d €35/45), on the main drag, is a good plan B, though atmosphere is not its strong suit. If you're a light sleeper, ask for a room at the back. The attached restaurant is nothing to write home about; instead head to **Le P'tit Bambou** (☎ 0262 47 51 51; mains €10-12; ☎ lunch daily except Wed), further up, which serves hearty fare with a zesty Chinese twist in rustic surroundings.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

The road alongside the gorge of the Rivière du Mât from St-André to Salazie winds past superb waterfalls. The road to Grand Îlet turns off the Hell-Bourg road just south of Salazie.

There are seven buses daily from St-André to Salazie (€1.60) between 6.10am and 5.45pm (in the opposite direction, buses run from 5.30am to 4.40pm). On Sunday buses leave St-

André at 8.40am, 1.30pm and 5.45pm (8am, 12.40pm and 2.40pm from Salazie).

Buses from Salazie to Hell-Bourg (€1.10) run about every two hours from 6.45am to 6.20pm. In the opposite direction, there are services from 6.15am to 5.45pm. There are four buses in each direction on Sunday.

Services to Grand Îlet (€2.20) run from 6.45am to 6.20pm (9.15am to 6.20pm on Sunday).

Hell-Bourg

The town of Hell-Bourg emerges like a hamlet in a fairy tale after 9km of tight bends from Salazie. You can't but be dazzled by the fabulous backdrop – the majestic mountain peaks that encase Hell-Bourg like a grandiose amphitheatre. No prize for guessing that this rugged terrain offers fantastic hiking opportunities. It offers plenty to more sedentary types as well. Culture aficionados will get their fill in this quintessential Réunionnais town with its enchanting centre, where old Creole mansions line the streets.

Hell-Bourg takes its curious name from the former governor Amiral de Hell; the town itself is anything but! It served as a thermal resort until a landslide blocked the spring in 1948. Visitors can still see the ruins of the old baths.

The helpful **Maison du Tourisme** (☎ 0262 47 89 89; pat.salazie@wanadoo.fr; 47 Rue Général de Gaulle; ☎ 9am-noon & 1-5pm) is the local tourist information centre and can also arrange bookings at *gîtes de montagne*. There is also a

post office on Rue Général de Gaulle, but no banks.

SIGHTS

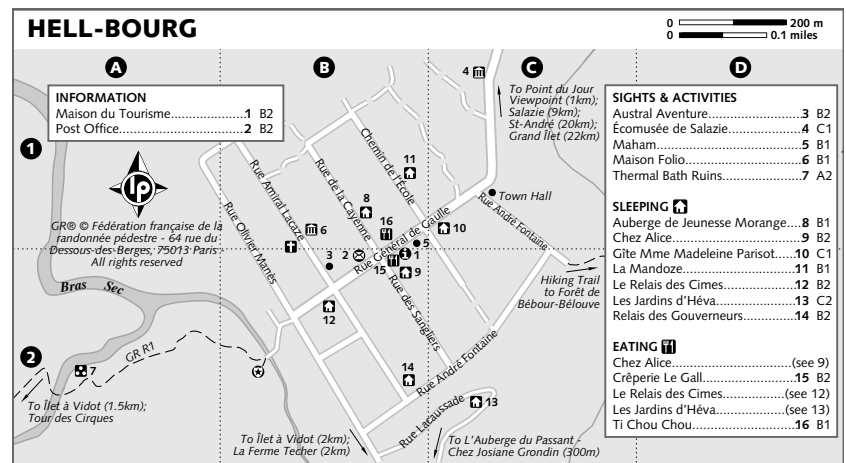
First up, architecture and history buffs should take a look at the town's appealing **Creole buildings**, which date back as far as the 1840s, when Hell-Bourg was a famous resort town that attracted a rather well-heeled crowd. You can go on a guided tour (in French) organised by the tourist office or the Écomusée (see below); it takes about an hour and costs €4.

One of the loveliest of Hell-Bourg's Creole houses is **Maison Folio** (☎ 0262 47 80 98; 20 Rue Amiral Lacaze; admission €4; ☎ 9am-11.30pm & 2-5pm), a typical 19th-century bourgeois villa almost engulfed by its densely planted garden. The owners show you around, pointing out the amazing variety of aromatic, edible, medicinal and decorative plants, and give insights into local culture – unfortunately, only in French.

The small **Écomusée de Salazie** (☎ 0262 47 89 28; admission €2; ☎ 9am-4pm) on the north side of town encapsulates the history and culture of the Cirque.

The **thermal bath ruins** are found in the ravine a short walk west of town. There's not much left now, but it's a quiet and leafy spot.

A kilometre below Hell-Bourg on the road to Salazie is a superb viewpoint known as **Le Point du Jour**. From here you have a stunning view over the peaks of Salazie, or, alternatively, a view of dense cloud, depending on the weather. Further along the same route, just north of the turn-off to Grand Îlet, don't



miss the **Cascade du Voile de la Mariée** (Bridal Veil Falls). These towering falls drop in several stages from the often cloud-obscured heights into the ravine at the roadside. You get an even better view from the Grand Îlet road.

ACTIVITIES

Not surprisingly, the Salazie area is an adventure playground for outdoor enthusiasts. Popular day **hikes** from Hell-Bourg include Forêt de Bébou-Bélouve (about four hours), Piton d'Enchaing (six hours) and Source Manouilh (about five hours). The town makes a pleasant alternative to Cilaos if you're planning to hike up to Piton des Neiges or into the Cirque de Mafate via Col des Bœufs. Hikers doing the Tour des Cirques route will have to pass through Hell-Bourg as they cross the Cirque de Salazie. For more information on all of these hiking possibilities, see p231.

Just thinking of the **canyoning** options available in the Cirque makes our spine tingle. Get wet at Trou Blanc, which is said to be the most 'aquatic' canyon in Réunion. Some sections are appropriately named 'The Washing Machine', 'The Bath', 'The Aquaplaning'... Other reputable canyons include Trois Cascades and Voile de la Mariée. Note that getting to the sensational canyon of Trou de Fer (see p212) is feasible from Hell-Bourg, but you have to be very fit – it's an exhausting 14-hour excursion. Count on €42/65 for a half-/full-day excursion.

Reliable operators:

Alpanes (☎ 0692 77 75 30; www.alpanes.com in French) Doesn't have an office in Hell-Bourg. Offers canyoning trips to Trou Blanc, Voile de la Mariée and Trou de Fer.

Austral Aventure (☎ 0262 32 40 29; www.creole.org/austral-aventure; Rue Amiral Lacaze, Hell-Bourg) Has canyoning trips to Trou Blanc, Voile de la Mariée, Trois Cascades et Trou de Fer (from Hell-Bourg), as well as guided hikes to Forêt de Bébou-Bélouve.

Maham (☎ 0262 47 87 87, 0692 86 50 67; www.randoneereunion.com in French; Rue Général de Gaulle, Hell-Bourg) Beside the tourist office. Can arrange guided hikes to Forêt de Bébou-Bélouve and canyoning outings to Trou Blanc.

SLEEPING

La Ferme Techer (☎ 0692 31 29 52; 21 Chemin Bras Sec, Îlet à Vidot; camp site per person €10) For that 'end-of-the-earth' feeling, you could head to this homely camp site, in the hamlet of Îlet à Vidot, about 2km northwest of Hell-Bourg. You'd be hard pressed to find a more peaceful setting to

pitch your tent, within a grassy, manicured property. The ablution block is in top nick. Laurent, the sporty owner (he's the local fireman and has run the Grand Raid race) can take you to various scenic spots in the area and provide you with a wealth of information (alas, in French) about local plants and architecture (€10).

Auberge de Jeunesse Morange (☎ 0262 47 41 31; 2 Rue de la Cayenne; dm weekdays/weekends €14.50/16.50; ☎ 7.30-9am, 11am-2pm & 5-7.30pm daily) Backpacking in style. How can you not be blown away by this colonial mansion soothingly positioned in verdant grounds, with a majestic entrance, high ceilings, typically Creole reddish floors and million dollar views over the peaks? Beds are in two- to eight-person dorms.

La Mandoze (☎ 0262 47 89 65, 0692 65 65 28; Chemin de l'École; dm/d €14.50/36) This *gîte* set in a Creole house has all the hallmarks of a great deal; renovated, well-maintained (if a bit boxy) rooms that can sleep six people, well-scrubbed bathrooms, a tranquil location and a tab that won't burn a hole in your pocket. For those wanting more privacy, a few doubles, with wood-panelled walls, are available. The owner, Patrick Manoro, is a mine of local knowledge and occasionally plays guitar for his guests in the evening.

Gîte Mme Madeleine Parisot (☎ 02 62 47 83 48; 16 Rue Général de Gaulle; dm €16, dinner €16) The energetic Madame Parisot runs a homely *gîte d'étape* spread over several old Creole houses in the centre of town. Some rooms can charitably be termed 'compact', so ask to see a few before committing.

Chez Alice (☎ 0262 47 86 24; 1 Rue des Sangliers; s/d incl breakfast €25/35) Clad in more wood than a Swedish sauna, this is a good option if you're counting the pennies. The nine rooms feel a tad hanky-sized but are perfectly acceptable. Some of them have private bathrooms. It's behind the restaurant.

L'Auberge du Passant – Chez Josiane Grondin (☎ 0262 47 86 28; Rue du Stade; d €40, meals €16) Peacefully positioned on the outskirts of town, this *chambre d'hôte* is the perfect place to decompress, with two adjoining rooms occupying a neat bungalow surrounded by lots of greenery. Bail out if you're offered a darker room in the main house. *Table d'hôte* meals come in for warm praise, especially the duck with vanilla.

Relais des Gouverneurs (☎ 0262 47 76 21; 2bis Rue Amiral Lacaze; d €45-70, meals €18) If you have a soft

spot for romantic places, you need look no further. Park your backpack (or your suitcase) in one of the two thoughtfully decorated Prestige rooms complete with four-poster beds, wooden floors and pastel-coloured walls. The cheaper Standard and Familiale rooms are more ordinary but excellent value.

Le Relais des Cimes (☎ 0262 47 81 58; www.relaisdescimes.com in French; 67 Rue Général de Gaulle; s/d €55/68) One of the most reliable players in town, the Relais des Cimes has luminous rooms, prim bathrooms and professional service and gets consistently good reviews from visitors. It's a tad impersonal and we found the mattresses a bit saggy, though.

our pick Les Jardins d'Héva (☎/fax 0262 47 87 87; 16 Rue Lacausade; d incl breakfast €85) This recent entry hits all the right charm buttons. The five handsomely designed bungalows feel like cosy doll's houses; each has a theme and is decorated differently: the Indian has a pink-and-green colour theme, the Belle de France boasts Creole ceilings and exposed beams, the Creole features frescoes, the Malgache is all about earthy tones and the Chinese combines grey-and-red hues. An added bonus is the spa, where you can reinvigorate weary feet after a busy day's walking. Alas, no views to speak of.

EATING

While Cilaos is known for its lentils, Hell-Bourg is synonymous with *chou chou* or *choko*, a green, pear-shaped vegetable imported from Brazil in 1834. It comes in salads, gratins and as *chou chou* gâteau to finish. You can stock up on basic provisions at the grocers and other food shops along the main road.

Crêperie Le Gall (☎ 0262 47 87 48; 55 Rue du Général de Gaulle; mains €3-9, menus €9-16; ☎ noon-6pm Sat-Thu) The only place for miles around that serves succulent pancakes. Yes, pancakes! Wash it all down with a *bolée de cidre* (bowl of cider). Lovely.

Chez Alice (☎ 0262 47 86 24; 1 Rue des Sangliers; mains €10-13, menus €17-20; ☎ lunch & dinner Tue-Sun) The fare at this family-run veteran is certainly not gourmet but has a temptingly pronounced regional flavour. Among the many winners are the Hell-Bourg trout, the *gratin de chou chou* (choko gratin) and the *carri porc aux pommes de terre* (pork with potatoes), all served at affordable prices in rustic surrounds. Portions are large enough to satisfy the most voracious hiker. It's often mobbed at weekends.

Ti Chou Chou (☎ 0262 47 80 93; 42 Rue Général de Gaulle; mains around €11, menus €14-22; ☎ lunch & dinner Sat-Wed, lunch Thu) This small restaurant with its appealing colourful façade on the main drag is run by a friendly young team. Herbivores will opt for the *assiette ti chou chou*, which offers a combination of *chou chou*, *cresson* and *capucine* (all local vegetables).

Le Relais des Cimes (☎ 0262 47 81 58; 67 Rue Général de Gaulle; mains €11-15, menus €14-22; ☎ lunch & dinner) Nothing mediocre will ever pass your lips at this Hell-Bourg classic, so order from the varied menu with abandon. If you want a recommendation, go for the trout with vanilla flambéed in rum, the house speciality. The setting is mildly rustic, with wooden ceilings and red-and-white chequered tablecloths.

Les Jardins d'Héva (☎/fax 0262 47 87 87; 16 Rue Lacausade; menus €15-22; ☎ lunch & dinner) No, you're not hallucinating, the view from the terrace is real. Central Hell-Bourg at your feet, the jagged peaks of the Cirques in the distance. Tuck into well-prepared *carris* and fish dishes.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Buses run between Salazie and Hell-Bourg (€1.10) about every two hours from 6.45am to 6.20pm. In the opposite direction, there are services from 6.15am to 5.45pm. There are four buses in each direction on Sunday.

Grand Îlet & Around

This is a sweet, picturesque spot. About 17km west of Salazie, accessed by a scenic white-knuckle road, Grand Îlet really feels like the end of the line. The village sits at the base of the ridge separating the Cirque de Salazie and the Cirque de Mafate. Above the village are the mountain passes of Col des Bœufs and Col de Fourche, which form the main pedestrian routes between the two Cirques; access is via the village of Le Bélier, 3km above Grand Îlet, where you'll find the start of the *route forestière* that leads to Col des Bœufs. Toss aside that mobile phone, shed all the stresses nibbling your psyche and set about the serious business of relaxing or walking.

While there's nowhere to stay in Le Bélier, you'll find several *chambres d'hôtes* in Grand Îlet as well as a few shops selling basic foodstuffs.

SLEEPING & EATING

Chambre d'hôtes Liliane Bonnard (☎ 0262 41 71 62; fax 0262 47 73 34; Chemin Camp-Pierrot; d €38, meals €18) In

a modernish house on the road to Le Bélier, the five rooms upstairs won't be selected for a *Wallpaper* photo shoot but are kept tickety-booby and boast a few fancy touches, such as Creole ceilings and wood panelling on the walls. Liliane Bonnald, your affable host, is a good cook too (ah, the *porc à la patate douce*; pork and sweet potato) and may well treat you with a wicked rum flavoured with wild orchid.

Chambre d'hôtes La Campierelle – Chez Christine Boyer (☎ 0262 47 70 87; Chemin du Camp-Pierrot; d €38, meals €18) Cross the road from Chambre d'hôtes Liliane Bonnald and you'll be greeted by an old lady wearing a straw hat, Madame Boyer, the mother of Liliane Bonnald. She rents out four humble rooms in a small Creole house just off the road. It's no great shakes and the bathrooms feel a bit dated, but it's OK and when it comes to concocting traditional *carris* at dinner, Madame Boyer knows her stuff.

Chambre d'hôtes Le Cimendef – Chez Noeline et Daniel Campton (☎ 0262 47 73 59; www.chambresdhotocimendef.com in French; Route du Bélier; s/d €33/40, ste €85, meals €18) All five rooms are pleasing and are graced with ravishing views over the Cimendef (2226m), but we were smitten by the darling Prestige suite, which features a Jacuzzi, timber floor, a luminous bathroom with well-chosen tiles, Creole ceilings, flat-screen TV, teak furniture, an enticing orange colour scheme and your own terrace – seventh heaven after

roughing it in the Cirque de Mafate. You'll also eat well here.

Snack Le Grand Îlet (☎ 0262 47 71 19; mains €8; ☎ lunch & dinner daily) Looks like nothing from the outside but this economical, neon-lit eatery is worth stopping at for its copious daily dishes (pork rib with mushrooms and chicken with *brêdes*). Find it just northwest of Grand Îlet's main square.

GETTING THERE & AROUND

There are seven buses a day (five on Sunday) from Salazie to Grand Îlet and Le Bélier (€2.20) between 6.45am (9.15am on Sunday) and 6.20pm. Heading back to Salazie services depart from Le Bélier between around 5.45am and 5pm (7am to 5.20pm on Sunday), calling at Grand Îlet 10 minutes later.

If you're coming here to hike and have your own car, you can leave it in the guarded **car park** (parking 1/2 days €2/10) at Le Petit Col, 6km up the *route forestière* and only 20 minutes' walk below the Col des Bœufs; the attendant also runs a 24-hour snack kiosk.

CIRQUE DE MAFATE

We only need to say one word: mesmerising. Nothing can prepare you for that first glimpse of this geologic wonder, with its dramatic scenery, shifting colours, blissful serenity (except for the occasional whirring of choppers) and unsurpassed grandeur. No cars, no

towns, no stress. Just soaring mountains, jagged peaks, giddily deep ravines, thick forests and a sprinkle of tiny *écarts* where time seems to have stood still.

Apart from its grandiose topography, what sets the Cirque de Mafate apart is its relative inaccessibility, despite being very close to the coastal fleshpots. There are no roads that lead into the Cirque (although a *route forestière* runs right up to the pass at Col des Bœufs), so the villages that are scattered in this giant extinct volcano are accessible only by foot.

Unsurprisingly, the Cirque de Mafate is a walker's paradise, with a good network of paths connecting the villages.

The Cirque was named after a runaway slave, the chieftain and sorcerer Mafate, who took refuge among its ramparts. He was hunted down and killed in 1751 by a hunter of runaway slaves.

Sights & Activities

Despite its remoteness and seclusion, the Cirque de Mafate is populated. In the valleys, plateaus and spurs that slice up the jaw-dropping terrain are scattered discreet little Creole settlements that retain a rough-diamond rural edge. Not much happens in these villages but it's hard not to fall under the spell of their phenomenal setting. They provide a few trappings of civilisation if you're walking through the Cirque.

The southern part of the Cirque is called Haut Mafate (Higher Mafate) and receives the bulk of visitors. It comprises peaceful **Marla**, the highest hamlet of the Cirque at an altitude of 1621m; **La Nouvelle**, dubbed the 'capital of Mafate' and one of the main gateways to the Cirque, perched on a plateau at an altitude of 1421m; and **Roche-Plate**, at the foot of the grandiose Maido.

The northern part of the Cirque is called Bas Mafate (Lower Mafate) and is considered even more secretive than Haut Mafate. It comprises **Îlet à Bourse**, **Îlet à Malheur**, **Aurère**, **Grand Place**, **Cayenne**, **Les Lataniers** and **Îlet des Orangers**. Aurère is perched Machu-Picchu-like above the precipitous canyon of the Bras Bémale. The two tiny communities of Grand Place and Cayenne lie above the rushing Rivière des Galets near the Cirque's main outlet.

Mafate offers some of the most inspirational **hiking** trails in Réunion, so pack your sturdy shoes and delve into the Cirque (see

the chapter Hiking in Réunion, p231). If you'd prefer to take it easy and see all this fantasyland from the air, book a **helicopter** or an **ultralight aircraft** tour (see opposite).

Sleeping & Eating

You don't need to carry depressing freeze-dried food to visit Mafate. You'll find a slew of decent *gîtes* (*privés* or belonging to the Maison de la Montagne et de la Mer) that offer *petit ravitaillement* (supplies), soft drinks, alcohol (beer and wine) and meals. Don't expect gastronomic ecstasy, though – it's normally satisfying, wholesome *carris* and homemade cakes. Plan on €13 to €15 for a meal. Digs are in basic dorms but a few *gîtes* also offer double rooms. You'll find water at every *refuge*, but between stops there are very few sources of drinking water.

Check out the website at <http://runrando.free.fr> for more information about *gîtes* in Mafate.

LA NOUVELLE

Gîte Joseph Cuvelier (☎ 0262 43 49 63; dm €13.50, breakfast/meal €5/15)

Gîte M Oréo (☎ 0262 43 58 57; dm/d €14/31, breakfast/meal €4/14)

Gîte Martial Gravina (☎ 0262 43 01 73; dm/d €14/32, breakfast/meal €4/14) At Plaine aux Sables, a 45-minute walk from La Nouvelle. Has two doubles.

Gîte Serge Paul Bègue (☎ 0262 43 51 74; dm €13) Accommodation only.

Relais de Mafate (☎ 0262 43 61 77; dm/d €15/35, breakfast/meal €6/16)

ROCHE-PLATE

Auberge du Bronchard (☎ 0262 43 83 66; dm/d €4/35, breakfast/meal €5/15) Has two doubles.

Gîte M Thomas (☎ 0262 42 28 79; dm €12, breakfast/meal €4/14)

MARLA

Gîte Expedit Hoareau (☎ 0262 43 78 31; dm €13, breakfast/meal €5/15)

Gîte Giroday (☎ 0262 43 83 13; dm with half board €30)

Gîte Maison de la Montagne (☎ 0262 43 78 31; dm €14, breakfast/meal €5/15)

ÎLET À MALHEUR

Gîte Guy Libelle (☎ 0262 43 56 96; dm €14, breakfast/meal €5/14)

Gîte L'Arbre du Voyageur (☎ 0262 43 50 60; dm/d with half board €35/70, camp site per person €10)

THE CIRQUES & THE VOLCANO FROM ABOVE

Helicopter tours of the magnificent Cirques and the volcano offer a sensational view of the tortured landscape of the interior. While they aren't cheap, most travellers rate such a trip as a highlight of their visit to Réunion – well worth the splurge.

Helilagon (☎ 0262 55 55 55; www.helilagon.com in French), based at L'Éperon, in the hills above St-Gilles-les-Bains, offers three different tours, including a 45-minute flight above all three Cirques and Piton de la Fournaise (€260 per person, or €220 without doing the volcano). Prices include transfers to the heliport from hotels in St-Gilles-les-Bains. **Corail Hélicoptère** (☎ 0262 22 22 66; www.corail-helicopteres.com) runs similar tours from Pierrefonds airport, near St-Pierre.

If you really want to feel the wind in your hair, several outfits offer tandem microlight flights with a qualified instructor. They run about 10 different tours around the island, starting at €30 for a gentle tour above the lagoon. It costs around €140 for a tour of the three Cirques. If the volcano is active, they usually run a Spécial Volcan tour, taking in the volcano in eruption – hair-raising, literally! Needless to say, all flights are dependent on the prevailing weather conditions. For more information, contact the following:

Felix ULM (☎ 0262 43 02 59; www.felixulm.com in French) Based in Cambaie, near St-Paul.

Les Passagers du Vent (☎ 0262 42 95 95; www.ulm-reunion.com in French) Based in Cambaie, near St-Paul.

Mascareignes Air Lines (☎ 0262 32 53 25; www.mascareignes.fr in French) Based in Pierrefonds, near St-Pierre.

Papangue ULM (☎ 0692 08 85 86; www.fransurf.com/papangue-ulm in French) Based near Ste-Marie.

AURÈRE

Auberge Piton Cabris (☎ 0262 43 36 83; dm €14, breakfast/meal €5/14)

Gîte Boyer (☎ 0262 55 02 33; d €32, dm with half board €32) Has a few double rooms.

Gîte François Libelle (☎ 0262 42 31 36; dm €14, breakfast/meal €5/14)

ÎLET À BOURSE

Gîte Maison de la Montagne (☎ 0262 43 43 93; dm €14, breakfast/meal €4/14)

GRAND PLACE & CAYENNE

Gîte Cœur de Mafate (☎ 0262 51 01 68; dm €14, breakfast/meal €4/14)

Gîte d'Irvrin Pause (☎ 0262 43 40 08; dm with half board €33)

Gîte Le Pavillon (☎ 0262 43 66 76, 0692 66 60 83; dm/d with half board €33/74) Has two doubles.

Gîte Maison de la Montagne de Cayenne (☎ 0262 43 85 42; dm €14.50, breakfast/meal €4/14) Down in the valley at Cayenne.

LES LATANIERS

Gîte Jean-Paul Cernot (☎ 0262 43 82 41; dm with half board €36)

Gîte M Yoland (☎ 0262 43 50 90; dm with half board €34)

LES HAUTES PLAINES & THE VOLCANO

Réunion's only cross-island road passes through the Plaine-des-Cafres and the Plaine-des-Palmistes, collectively known as Les Hautes Plaines (the High Plains; Map p196). At an altitude of about 1000m, the air is refreshingly crisp and often swathed in misty fog – a blessing if you're coming from the scorching coastal cities.

These relatively large open areas actually form the saddle that separates the massif (comprising the three Cirques) from the volcano, Piton de la Fournaise. And what a volcano! It ranks as one of the most active volcanoes on earth, playing in the same league as Hawaii. At the time of writing, it was erupting in spectacular fashion. It's also one of the most accessible ones – you can trek up and around the caldera (when it's not erupting, that is). For detailed information on hiking in the volcano area

and the Cirques, see the chapter Hiking in Réunion, p231.

Because there's a road from the Hautes Plaines that approaches within a few kilometres of the summit of the volcano, nearly all visitors approach it from this side.

PLAINE-DES-CAFRES & AROUND

Vast pastures where cattle graze. Velvet-green hills undulating off into the horizon. Fresh air. Mist. Conifers. Filled with iconic pastoral landscapes, the Plaine-des-Cafres area bears an unexpected likeness to Bavaria. It is cool, relaxing and oxygenated. Chalk that up to altitude and attitude. It sits 1200m above sea level and is regularly massaged by cool breezes. Once a refuge for runaway slaves from the coast, the Plaine-des-Cafres is a vast, gently rolling area that spreads between the Cirques and Piton de la Fournaise.

Approaching from the south (St-Pierre), the Plaine-des-Cafres begins shortly after the sprawling, nondescript town of Le Tampon and ends at Col de Bellevue, at the top of the winding road that plunges down to Plaine-des-Palmistes. North of Le Tampon on RN3 (the cross-island road) are numerous small settlements that are named for their distance from the sea – Le Vingt-Quatrième (24th), for example, is 24km from the ocean.

The most interesting place on the Plaine-des-Cafres from a visitor's perspective is **Bourg-Murat**, which is the obvious launch pad for the volcano. It's in this rural settlement where the Route Forestière du Volcan turns off to Piton de la Fournaise (see p210). The town and the surrounding area have a wealth of accommodation and dining choices, making it a handy base. The perfect bucolic retreat, Bourg-Murat offers a real opportunity to sample authentic rural Réunionnais life.

Pick up some brochures at the well-organised **Office du Tourisme** (☎ 0262 59 09 82; www.sudreunion.com; cnr Rue des Genêts & Rue du Volcan, Bourg-Murat; ☎ 9am-noon & 1.30-5pm Mon-Sat), which is located about 400m east of the Maison du Volcan in Bourg-Murat.

Sights & Activities

Everything you need to know about the Piton de la Fournaise and volcanoes in general should become clear at the excellent **Maison du Volcan** (☎ 0262 59 00 26; RN3, Bourg-Murat; adult/child €6.50/3; ☎ 9.30am-5pm Tue-Sun). Unfortunately, most of the information is in French, but some

interactive displays are in English and the videos of eruptions are self-explanatory.

Horse riding is a fun and ecofriendly way to commune with the pastoral wilderness around Bourg-Murat. The ultimate is a two- to three-day excursion that takes in the eerie landscape around the volcano – highly recommended. Rates range from €16 for a one-hour jaunt to about €110 per day for a multiday trek. Among reputable operators:

Centre Équestre Alti Merens (☎ 0262 59 18 84, 0692 04 12 38; 120 Rue Maurice Kraft, PK26; ☎ closed Mon morning & Fri morning) On the southern edge of Bourg-Murat.

Centre Équestre Notre-Dame de la Paix (☎ 0262 59 34 49, 0692 61 46 79; 41 Chemin de la Chapelle, Notre-Dame de la Paix; ☎ daily by reservation) In the tiny hamlet of Notre-Dame de la Paix (follow the signs from the RN3 at Le Vingt-Troisième).

Écuries du Volcan (☎ 0692 66 62 90; 9bis Domaine Bellevue, Bourg-Murat; ☎ daily by reservation) On the northern edge of Bourg-Murat.

For information on **hiking** around the volcano, see p231.

Sleeping

Chez Dan's (☎ 0262 59 14 84, 0692 26 50 22; 40A, Route Notre-Dame de la Paix, La Petite Ferme; r per person €15, dinner €12-15) Chez Dan's is as cosy as a bird's nest,

with three tidy rooms in a modern house with electric-blue shutters. Walking in you'll be shocked that rooms here don't cost double the price. On a clear day you get a glimpse of the glistening sea from the upstairs room. Good meals too.

our pick **Gîte Marmite Lontan** (☎ 0262 57 46 09, 0692 60 51 38; www.marmitelontan.com; s with half board €34) This little cracker is isolated on the Route du Volcan about 2km from the centre of Bourg-Murat. Entering the property, you feel as if you've stumbled onto the set of *Little House on the Prairie*. In the role of Charles Ingalls you have amiable Pilou, a *Zoréole* (a European who has totally embraced the Creole lifestyle). The neat dorms sleep two to four people and the whole place radiates a ramshackle air – from the quirky dining room, which is a Pandora's box of *objets lontani* (utensils and other knick-knacks from the old days), to the 450-odd types of aromatic rum fermenting in giant pirate-style glass flasks.

Chambre d'hôtes Piton de l'Eau (☎ 0262 59 28 07; Grande Ferme; d €42, dinner €20) There's nothing neutral about this B&B, and the yellow façade announces it's exotic. It has adventurously decorated doubles in 'Brazilian' colours (think appealing vanilla-and-green hues). The *table d'hôte* meals major on *cuisine au feu de bois* (wood-fired cooking). It's in Grande

DETOUR TO GRAND BASSIN – THE LOST VALLEY

The utterly picturesque valley of Grand Bassin (Map p196), known as *la vallée perdue* (the lost valley) or *Mafate en miniature* (Mafate in miniature), can't go without mention because it's one of the few areas in Réunion that is only accessible on foot. Thanks to its splendid isolation, this little morsel of paradise is a dream come true for those seeking to get well and truly off the beaten track.

Grand Bassin is formed by the confluence of three rivers. Near to where they join is a lovely waterfall where you can dunk yourself (just blissful!) and a quiet hamlet with a handful of *gîtes*. The fast-paced coastal life seems a world away.

To get there, follow the road to Bois Court from Vingt-Troisième village. At the end of the road you can look down into the valley from the Belvédère viewpoint. The path down to Grand Bassin begins on Rue Thomas Payet, 800m south of the Belvédère. It plunges almost straight down to the river 600m below; allow 1½ hours for the descent and at least 2½ hours to get back up again.

Grand Bassin is a terrific place to kick off your shoes for a few days and relax. Digs are in rustic dorms, but that's part of the fun. Prices are the same at all *gîtes*: €26 per person with half board in dorm. Daytrippers will fork out €16 for a meal. Some *gîtes* have doubles (€30 per person with half board).

Auberge de Grand-Bassin (☎ 0262 59 21 99)

L'Oasis (☎ 0262 27 51 91)

La Vieille Tonnelle (☎ 0262 27 51 02) Has three doubles.

Les Orchidées (☎ 0262 38 02 73) Has one double.

Paille-en-Queue (☎ 0262 59 03 66)

Ferme, a hamlet about 3km from the centre of Bourg-Murat.

La Ferme du Pêcher Gourmand (☎ 0262 59 29 79; <http://perso.wanadoo.fr/pecher.gourmand/in> French; RN3, PK25; d €44) This modern *auberge* is run by a friendly couple and is surrounded by a pleasant garden. The six adjoining rooms are a bit of a squeeze, but the setting more than compensates.

Chambre d'hôtes Les Zakacias – Chez Madeleine Robert (☎ 0262 59 20 59; gite-les-zakacias@wanadoo.fr; La Petite Ferme; d €45, dinner €19) At the end of a long day's sightseeing, it's a joy to snuggle into the freshly pressed bed sheets of this B&B in La Petite Ferme, to the south of Bourg-Murat. There are two rooms, with a Barbie-esque colour scheme, and a *gîte*, all set in a lush garden. The owner is a fisherman, so expect fresh fish at dinner.

Hôtel l'Ecrin (☎ 0262 59 02 02; www.hotel-ecrin.fr.st; RN3, PK27, Bourg-Murat; s incl breakfast €60, d incl breakfast €82-100) The Ecrin would not be your ideal honeymoon hotel but the amenities are fine, the location very central and most rooms boast lovely views over the mountains.

Other options:

Gîte Chez Myris (☎ 0692 64 20 26; 8 Rue Josemont Lauret, Bourg-Murat; dm/d €14.50/32, dinner €16) This converted Art-Deco-inspired house has a few doubles and dorms that sleep six. The rooftop terrace has lovely views over, ahem, a few electric wires.

Gîte de la Fournaise (☎ 0262 59 29 75; gitedelafournaise@wanadoo.fr; RN3, Bourg-Murat; dm €15, d €32) Has two OK dorms downstairs. The double room upstairs is a bit dank.

Hôtel-Auberge Le Volcan (☎ 0262 27 50 91; fax 0262 59 17 21; RN3, PK27, Bourg-Murat; s/d €29/40) Features stock-standard rooms in two buildings smack-bang in the middle of Bourg-Murat.

Les Gérardiums (☎ 0262 59 11 06; hotelgeranium@wanadoo.fr; RN3, PK24; s/d €57/66) The Gérardiums is a tad overrated but nonetheless of a good standard. Avoid the rooms that overlook the parking lot. It's in Le Vingt-Quatrième on the main road south of Bourg-Murat.

Eating

Most lodging options offer half board.

Palais du Fromage (☎ 0262 59 27 15; Route du Volcan; cheese & pancakes €2-3; ☎ 10am-5.30pm Thu-Sun) This unassuming dairy farm past the Bourg-Murat tourist office on the Route du Volcan has a lot to answer for – namely our raging addiction to *fromage spécial de Sylvie*, the farm's signature product (fromage blanc laced with honey, caramel and cinnamon) – a feast for

the tastebuds, best enjoyed at a picnic table in the cryptomeria forest nearby.

Our pick! Le Vieux Bardeau (☎ 0262 59 09 44; RN3, PK24; mains €10-20, menu €25; ☎ lunch & dinner daily) Recapture the atmosphere of the colonial era in this gracefully ageing diva occupying a lemon-yellow Creole mansion beside the main road in Le Vingt-Quatrième. This is an altar to *cuisine métro lontan* (traditional French recipes) and *coim créole* (traditional Creole specialities), but with an unusual delicacy. Warmly recommended.

Hôtel-Auberge du Volcan (☎ 0262 27 50 91; RN3, PK27, Bourg-Murat; mains €11-13; ☎ lunch Tue-Sun, dinner Tue-Sat) You'll find all the usual Creole favourites and a sprinkling of *métro* dishes served in hearty portions in this country inn in the centre of Bourg-Murat.

Relais Commerson (☎ 0262 27 52 87; 37 Bois Joly Potier, Bourg-Murat; mains €11-27, menus €15-32; ☎ lunch Thu-Tue, dinner Sat) A rustic dining room and a menu laden with inspired Creole fare, including *camarons with morilles* (prawns with morels).

Le Panoramic (☎ 0262 59 36 12; RN3, PK27, Bourg-Murat; mains €13-20, menus €14-27; ☎ lunch & dinner) Do swordfish fillet, minced duck with guava sauce, and kangaroo fillet (!) tickle your fancy? Enjoy a long list of well-prepared *métro* and Creole specialities in this modern abode behind Hôtel l'Ecrin.

La Ferme du Pêcher Gourmand (☎ 0262 59 29 79; RN3, PK25; menus €21-29; ☎ lunch Sat & Sun, dinner daily) Duck is king of the castle in this delightful *ferme-auberge* (farm restaurant) on the main road south of Bourg-Murat. And it's no wonder: the owner's spouse is from Béarn (southwest France). Bring an empty tum: the set menu is a culinary feast revolving around duck preparations and organic vegetables. A *moelleux au chocolat* (cake stuffed with melting chocolate) will finish you off sweetly.

Getting There & Away

There are three buses daily (two on Sunday) each way between St-Benoît and St-Pierre via Plaine-des-Cafres and Plaine-des-Palmistes. From St-Pierre to Bourg-Murat, the fare is €2.70. Coming from St-Benoît, it's €5.40.

PITON DE LA FOURNAISE (THE VOLCANO)

The magnum opus of Mother Nature in Réunion, the Piton de la Fournaise is the island's most famous natural attraction. Simply dubbed *le volcan* (the volcano) by

Réunionnais, the Piton de la Fournaise is not a dormant monster, but an active geological wonder that erupts with great regularity; at time of writing, the central, 900m-wide **Dolomieu Crater** had just collapsed by 300m (!), and new lava fields had just been formed on its southeastern flanks, down to the coast. The smaller **Bory Crater** is inactive. Other noticeable features include the very photogenic **Formica Leo**, a small scoria cone. The good news is that it's one of the world's most accessible active volcanoes, and it's possible to hike up to the crater rim (though this is subject to change depending on current conditions, so ask while you're there). See Hiking in Réunion (p241) for a detailed description of the hike. You can also fly over the volcano (see p206), or approach the area from the saddle of a horse (see p209).

The main gateway to the volcano is Bourg-Murat (p208), where you can visit the Maison du Volcan. From there, a scenic, zigzagging secondary road leads to **Pas de Bellecombe** (2400m), the 'entrance' to the volcanic area, about 30km southeast of Bourg-Murat. The gradual change of scenery is mind-boggling. The grassy meadows and cryptomeria forests typical of the Hautes Plaines progressively change to scrubland and Martian landscape. Be sure to pause at **Belvédère du Nez-de-Bœuf** (viewpoint), blessed with unsurpassable views over the valley gouged by the Rivière des Remparts. About 22km from Bourg-Murat, you'll plunge down to a wide windswept plain, made of ashes, **Plaine des Sables**. With its lunar landscape, it's reminiscent of a *Mad Max* scene. There's a fabulous viewpoint at 2360m – Pas des Sables – that will leave you speechless.

If you wish to stop overnight to soak in this grandiose scenery, the **Gîte du Volcan** (☎ 0262 51 18 29, 0692 85 20 91; dm €14.50, lunch €12-16, dinner €16) boasts a stunning location, a 15-minute walk from Pas de Bellecombe. Hot water is limited. Bookings must be made through Maison de la Montagne et de la Mer in St-Denis (see p172) or through any tourist office. The restaurant is open at lunch for daytrippers.

PLAINE-DES-PALMISTES

There were once large numbers of palm trees on the Plaine-des-Palmistes (hence the name), but as a result of heavy consumption of palm-heart salad, few now remain. The town itself is spread out along the highway and is a pleasant escape from the coast. Its only specific sight is

the **Domaine des Tourelles**, a lovely 1920s Creole building just south of the town centre, which now houses a shop selling local crafts and produce, and a small tourist office (temporarily closed when we passed by).

For Tarzan types, **Forestia** (☎ 0262 49 69 20; Route de la Petite Plaine; adult/child €22/17; ☎ by reservation) has six adventure circuits of varying levels of difficulty, including a very safe one for the kiddies (over four). The setting, in a dense cryptomeria forest, is enchanting. It's on the road to Forêt de Bébour-Bélouve, about 3km from the highway (direction Petite Plaine).

Another great way to commune with nature is to walk to the **Cascade Biberon**, a 240m-high waterfall and natural swimming lake to the north of Plaine-des-Palmistes. It's situated a half-hour stroll away from the highway (it's signposted).

Sleeping

Gîte du Pic des Sables (☎ 0262 51 37 33, 0692 64 54 97; Route de la Petite Plaine; dm/d €15/50, breakfast/dinner €5/17) This cheery but cramped *gîte d'étape* in a peaceful setting is popular with walkers and canyoning groups. For more privacy, shell out for one of the newish *chambres d'hôtes*. Elian Jista, the affable owner, has mountain bikes for rent (€18 per day). It's on the road to Forêt de Bébour-Bélouve, about 4km from the highway (direction Petite Plaine). If you phone ahead, the owner will collect you from the bus stop in Plaine-des-Palmistes.

Chambre d'hôtes Le Conflore du Piton (☎ 0262 51 41 04, 0692 67 62 33; 91 Rue Dureau; d €48, dinner €22) Despite an overly exuberant deployment of greens and oranges in the two rooms, this smart Creole house located 1.5km south of the RN3 is a welcoming option, with soaring mountains forming the picture-perfect backdrop.

Chambre d'hôtes L'Échelle (☎ 0262 51 48 55, 0692 08 99 38; www.ilereunion.com/echelle; 16 Allée des Agapanthes; d €52, dinner €22) From your first glimpse of the virginal-white façade and spacious grounds, it's clear that this imposing Creole-style modern home is in top nick. The added bonus is that it's also relaxed and unpretentious, thanks to the friendly owners, a Breton couple. Watch out for their devilish *faham*-flavoured *rhum arrangé*!

Auberge Créoline (☎ 0262 51 30 36; www.auberge-creoline.com; 303 Rue de la République; s/d €45/60) Has four tidy rooms at the back of the restaurant (see p212).

colonial-era train station is now occupied by a nightclub. Nearby is the **Bassin de Radout**, a dry dock dating from the 19th century. Another must-see is the **entrepôt Kervéguen**, which was used as a warehouse by the French East India Company. In the same area, keep your eyes peeled for the **médiathèque Raphaël Barquiseau**, another building dating from the thriving era of the French East India Company. There are many other Creole mansions and houses that beg to be admired, especially along Rue Marius et Ary Leblond. If you still have energy to burn, it's well worth exploring the **Terre Sainte** district, to the east of the centre. Though no longer the traditional fishing village it used to be, this area has its own peculiar appeal.

The **cemetery** at the western end of Blvd Hubert-Delisle is worth the wander. The grave of the African sorcerer, Le Sitarane, is still a popular pilgrimage spot for Réunionnais who believe in *gris gris* or black magic. It is covertly used for black magic rites by people looking to bring misfortune upon others. The grave is usually covered with offerings, from glasses of rum, candles and pieces of red cloth to neat and tidy rows of cigarettes and even the occasional beheaded rooster! The grave is on the right-hand side at the west end of the cemetery.

No trip to St-Pierre would be complete without a wander through the **main market**, which takes place on Saturday morning (7am to noon) and sprawls along the seafront at the west end of Blvd Hubert-Delisle. During the week (8am to 6pm Monday to Saturday) there's a smaller **covered market** (Rue Victor le Vigoureux) under a hall in the town centre. Alongside fresh fruit and vegetables, stalls sell souvenirs such as local spices and herbs, *vacoa* bags and the usual assortment of Malagasy crafts.

After having succumbed to all-night carousing and luscious cuisine in St-Pierre, you might want to repent your sins. Head straight to the charming **St-Pierre church** (Rue Auguste Babet) if you are Catholic, to the splendid **mosque** (Rue François de Mahy) if you're Muslim, to the impressive **Hindu temple** (Ravine Blanche) if you are Hindu, and to the discreet **Chinese temple** (Rue Marius et Ary Leblond) if you are Buddhist. But if, like us, you are a hedonist beyond redemption, you might rather lounge on the white-sand **beach!**

Activities

Kayaking and sailing can be arranged through **Base Nautique de St-Pierre** (☎ 0262 25 57 00; Blvd Hubert-Delisle), usually on Wednesday and Saturday. Guided trips cost about €15 per hour.

There's good **diving** off St-Pierre (see p31 for more information). Contact **Base Nautique de St-Pierre** (☎ 0692 86 83 18; Blvd Hubert-Delisle) or **Plongée Océan Indien** (☎ 0262 31 03 91, 0692 69 41 57; Harbour) at the yacht harbour.

Sleeping

St-Pierre has a variety of hotels that cater for a range of budgets. Most are concentrated down towards the seafront.

Tropic Hotel (☎ 0262 25 90 70; www.tropic-hotel.com; 2 Rue Auguste Babet; d €28-36; 🏠) Although the Tropic Hotel scores low on the charm scale, its competitive prices and central location make it a worthwhile option if you don't want to deplete your accommodation budget. Avoid the cheaper rooms – they share toilets and don't have air-con. If you have your own wheels, note that there's no private parking.

Chez Papa Daya (☎ 0262 25 64 87, 0692 12 20 12; www.chezpapa.com in French; 27 Rue du Four à Chaux; s with/without bathroom €25/16, d with/without bathroom €35/25; 🏠 🏠 🏠) Papa Daya is something of an institution for bargain-hunters, but its standing has been challenged in recent years by two newcomers whose owners are members of the same family as Monsieur Daya. Overall it's more homely, if a bit more cramped, than its competitors, with lots of greenery and jolly murals around, and facilities include a simple kitchen, a laundry room and a TV lounge.

Le Nathania (☎ 0262 25 04 57; www.hotelnathania.com in French; 12 Rue François de Mahy; s with shared bathroom €20, d with/without bathroom from €30/25; 🏠 🏠) Another traveller-friendly stalwart. What it lacks in style is made up for by an ace location and tidy rooms with TV. The cheapest have shared facilities. There's also a well-equipped kitchen and laundry area. Prices drop after two nights. Credit cards are accepted.

L'Escale Touristique (☎ 0262 35 20 95; 14 Rue Désiré Barquiseau; d with/without bathroom €35/25; 🏠 🏠) Almost a carbon copy of Le Nathania (same family, same ambience, and probably the same architect). For those who like the idea of being able to dip in and out of central St-Pierre at will, this is another attractive option. Rooms are well scrubbed, but a bit samey though it's

hard to argue with the prices. Added perks include free parking, a kitchen for guests' use and a laundry room. Don't expect dollops of atmosphere.

Alizé Plage (☎ 0262 35 22 21; www.ilereunion.com/alizeplage; 17 bis Blvd Hubert-Delisle; d €75; 🏠) The Alizé thinks it is irresistible because its position right on the beach is peerless. Hubris: only three rooms come with sea views, and though they are nicely appointed, they won't contend for a design Oscar.

ourpick Villa Belle (☎ 0692 65 89 99; www.villabelle.net in French; 45 Rue Rodier; s/d €140/150; 🏠 🏠 🏠) If you could smell charm, this super smooth boutique B&B in a converted Creole mansion would reek of it to high heaven. It's the epitome of a refined cocoon, revelling quietly in minimalist lines, soothing colour accents and well thought-out decorative touches, including contemporary art works by the owner himself. Like the rest of the place, the communal areas are a sensory interplay of light, wood and stone. After a day of turf pounding, relax in the stress-melting pool. Gay friendly.

Villa Morgane (☎ 0262 25 82 77; www.villamorgane.re in French; 334 Rue de L'Amiral Lacaze; d €120-200; 🏠 🏠 🏠) Style guru will go giddy over this revamped, reworked and reinvigorated *maison d'hôte*. The tropical garden is easily surpassed by an opulent interior. No expense has been spared in dousing guests in sassy swank. The four themed rooms have been creatively designed, some with Italian flair, some with Asian touches. If you're willing to impress your sweetie, opt for the Pompéi suite, complete with frescoes, parquet floor and ornate stucco ceilings – it has to be seen to be believed (check out the website). Just one quibble: there's no private parking.

Other recommendations:

Les Chrysalides (☎ 0262 25 75 64; www.chrysalides-hotel.com in French; 6 Rue Caumont; d €45; 🏠 🏠) Middle-of-the-road sums up this two-star venture with a handy location and unmemorable rooms.

Résidence Mers du Sud (☎ 0262 25 39 09, 0692 61 43 41; www.mers-du-sud.com in French; 27 Blvd Hubert-Delisle; d €50-91; 🏠) It's certainly not 'South Seas', but this set of well-scrubbed yet compact rooms makes this waterfront establishment a good-value choice. There's a bit of street noise but nothing to lose sleep over.

Eating

The excellent Creole, French, Italian and Asian restaurants make this town as pleas-

ing to the belly as it is to the eye; you won't want to be skipping any meals here.

Aloha (☎ 0262 35 53 53; 51 Rue François de Mahy; ice creams & pancakes from €2; 🕒 11am-6.30pm Mon-Wed & Fri, 10am-11pm Fri, 2-7pm Sun) There is an argument for skipping dessert wherever you lunch or dine and heading straight to this drool-inducing ice-cream parlour instead. Amid a mind-boggling array of flavours, the electric purple *pitaya* screams 'try me'. Lip-smackingly good pancakes too.

Kaz Vitamines (☎ 0262 25 30 86; 6 Rue François de Mahy; mains €4-5; 🕒 10am-6pm Mon-Sat) If you've reached your *carri*-eating limits, head down to this quirky den for a cold veggie soup (€4) or a salad, just off the main drag.

Belo Horizonte (☎ 0262 22 31 95; 10 Rue François de Mahy; mains €8-14; 🕒 lunch daily, dinner Fri & Sat) Walls saturated in cheery coloured accents – baby-pink, citrus, apple-green – and other fancy decorative touches set the tone of this zinging quick-eat joint where you can tuck into salads, hot tarts and other healthy dishes.

L'Osteria (☎ 0262 25 14 15; 16 Rue Marius et Ary Leblond; mains €8-26; 🕒 lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) *Mamma mia!* Italian food does not always suit the tropics but this Mediterranean redoubt set in a rustic stone house fits the bill. Pasta offerings span *carbonara* through to tasty spaghetti with smoked swordfish, as well as pizzas dense enough to drown grandpa's dentures. Satisfying grilled meats too.

Festi Viandes (☎ 0262 25 22 84; 12 Rue Augustin Archambaud; mains €9-17, menus €10-22; 🕒 lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) In a city where fish dishes are the norm, this meat-lover's paradise, discreetly located on the 1st floor of an unremarkable building, is a happy exception. Sink your teeth into a juicy beefsteak or a succulent *brochette* (skewered meat). Enough proteins? Wood-fired pizzas are also available.

Le Rétro (☎ 0262 25 33 06; 34 Blvd Hubert-Delisle; mains €9-23, menus €11-23; 🕒 lunch & dinner) Of all the things you might not expect to see on the seafront, an 'authentic' Parisian brasserie ranks quite highly. But that's exactly what this is, except that *serveurs* are less surly than in the City of Light. Pastas, salads, seafood and meat dishes grace the menu.

Le Flamboyant (☎ 0262 35 02 15; 11 Rue Désiré Barquiseau; mains €10-15, menus €16-35; 🕒 lunch Mon-Sat, dinner Mon, Tue & Thu-Sat) In this staunchly Creole classic, blow your tastebuds (and your arteries) with one of 15 hearty *carris*. Be brave and try the *carri pat' cochon* (pig's

trotter *carri*). You might surprise yourself. Sample the whole thing on the terrace in the shade of a stately flamboyant tree.

Le Marin Bleu (☎ 0262 35 61 65; 45 Rue de L'Amiral Lacaze; mains €12-25; ☎ lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) This immutable seafood favourite in the Terre Sainte district gets the thumbs up for its choice of fish dishes cooked to crispy perfection. The loosely nautical décor, with a blue-and-white colour scheme, matches the menu.

Flagrant Délice (☎ 0692 87 28 03; 115 Rue François de Mahy; mains €13-25, lunch menus €14-18; ☎ lunch Tue-Fri, dinner Tue-Sat) *The* hippest eatery at the time of writing, Flagrant Délice is a gourmand's playpen. Be good to yourself with kangaroo fillet with onion chutney, John Dory fillet, beef with morels and luscious wines. Try to nab a seat at the 'Petit Coin Exotique' (little exotic corner), complete with cushions, by the pool (yes, the pool is an integral part of the décor).

Alizé Plage (☎ 0262 25 80 63; 17bis Blvd Hubert-Delisle; mains €15-22, menus €25-40; ☎ lunch & dinner) We found the *célèbre tartare de thon rouge* (famed red tuna tartare) a bit disappointing on our visit. Hunker down à la carte with less pretentious dishes, such as the swordfish fillet with vanilla sauce. Bag a seat on the small terrace overlooking the beach.

Le Carpe Diem (☎ 0262 25 45 12; 47 Blvd Hubert-Delisle; mains €16-25; ☎ lunch Mon-Fri, dinner Mon-Sat) Another dash of culinary flair in cosy surroundings (parquet floors and teak furniture), the Carpe Diem offers ambitious French-inspired dishes with a twist, from *souris d'agneau au thym* (a choice piece of lamb flavoured with thyme) to skewered duck with banana.

Le Pétrél de Barau (☎ 0262 35 14 88; 16 Rue Augustin Archambaud; mains €24-35, menu €45; ☎ lunch & dinner Mon-Fri, dinner Sat) Cognoscenti saunter here for upper-crust French-inspired fare with a creative bent, a respectable wine list and smart service. The masterfully renovated Creole house provides the perfect setting in which to sample star-worthy dishes such as beef fillet with truffle vinegar. Room should be kept for desserts.

Other flavoursome feeds:

La Détente (☎ 0262 25 66 77; 4 Rue François Isautier; mains €10-15; ☎ lunch & dinner) No culinary acrobatics in this few-frills haunt overlooking a parking lot, just keep-the-faith Creole staples, including a very affordable *carri bichiques* (a curry made from tiny sprat-like fish; €15) in season.

Pot a G (☎ 0262 59 66 94; 7 Rue Auguste Babet; mains €10-17; ☎ lunch Tue-Fri, dinner Thu-Sat) Sick of stodgy

carri? Then head here for loveable *métro* fare served in a strong design-led interior.

L'Utopia (☎ 0262 35 15 83; 8 Rue Marius et Ary Leblond; mains €15-25, menus €10-39; ☎ lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) Good atmosphere and affordable prices were let down by some sketchy service and skimpy daily specials when we visited L'Utopia. Chef's day off perhaps? You be the judge.

Drinking & Entertainment

Night owls, rejoice: St-Pierre has a well-established party reputation. Nightlife swings until the morning hours at weekends. The best buzz can be found on the seafront and in the vicinity of the town hall. Most places open from 6pm and close at around 2am or later. Admission prices, when there are any, usually run from €5 to €12.

Kaz Vitamines (☎ 0262 25 30 86; 6 Rue François de Mahy; juices from €4; ☎ 10am-6pm Mon-Sat) This juice bar is perfect to recover from a hangover, with smoothies and vegetable and fruit concoctions. Try the explosively fruity (and eye-poppingly purple) *cocktail La Kaz*, which is a mix of *pitaya*, banana and lime.

Malone's (☎ 0262 25 02 22; 36 Blvd Hubert-Delisle; ☎ daily) St-Pierre's long-standing hip, hot (it gets congested) and happening spot on weekends. Swill a beer or two to imbibe the feel-good vibe before hitting the clubs.

Café de la Gare – Latina Café (☎ 0262 35 24 44; 17 Blvd Hubert-Delisle; ☎ Tue-Sun) One of the most atmospheric spots for a drink is the terrace of this café in the old train station. In the evening it transforms into a convivial bar. It's full of attitude and atmosphere; booze it up with new friends or spend a quiet hour by yourself, people-watching.

Le Bug (☎ 0262 43 87 78; 4 Rue des Bons Enfants; ☎ Tue-Sat) Techno reigns supreme here, with a fiery nod to rock 'n' roll once a week. Come evening, the oompah-pah music can rattle the brain into oblivion.

Kabarhum (☎ 0262 35 39 44; www.kabarhum.com in French; Blvd Hubert-Delisle; ☎ Tue-Sat) A beautifully rustic bar, the best rums in town, a friendly atmosphere, a mixed crowd and scattered tables – what more could you want?

L'Africa Queen (7 Blvd Hubert-Delisle; ☎ Fri & Sat) If there's a constant here, it's the promise that the music, whatever the style, will get you groovin'. DJs roll through salsa, hip-hop, house, electro and soul but always find a way to keep the dance floor filled. Heart-start the night with a few shots at Café de la Gare, in the same building.

Jet Set Bar (☎ 0262 32 83 86; 32 Blvd Hubert-Delisle; ☎ daily) The ultimate chill-out bar by day, this place is equally enjoyable by night on weekends when groovy DJs take over with deep and chill house, electronica and other beats, depending on their whim. It's cool, funky and low-key at the same time.

Khalif (7 Blvd Hubert-Delisle; ☎ Fri & Sat) One of the hottest spots in St-Pierre when we dropped by. If you're after *maloya*, *séga* or some sexy tropical sounds, look no further than Khalif. Same location as Café de la Gare.

Cherwaine's (☎ 0262 35 69 49; 6 Rue Auguste Babet; ☎ daily) This bar is a pillar of St-Pierre's gay scene. Sets aside certain nights for entertainment offerings, including karaoke.

Bato Fou (☎ 0262 25 65 61; 15 Rue de la République) To the west of town, this is one of Réunion's prime concert venues and a launch pad for local bands on the boil.

Other happening places include the club-like **Blue Cat** (☎ 0262 96 70 06; www.bluecat-bar.com in French; 33 Blvd Hubert-Delisle; ☎ daily), which prides itself on its two bars and its pool; **Aquarhum** (☎ 0262 96 34 12; 18 Petit Blvd de la Plage; ☎ Tue-Sun); and **Piano Bar** (☎ 0262 25 85 17; 6 Rue des Bons Enfants; ☎ Tue-Sun), which caters for an older crowd with down-tempo jazz and soul beats.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Air Mauritius and Air Austral operate daily flights between **Pierrefonds Airport** (☎ 0262 96 77 66; www.grandsudreunion.org), 5km west of St-Pierre, and Mauritius. See p302 for more information.

Airlines with offices in St-Pierre:

Air Austral (☎ 0825 01 30 12; 14 Rue Augustin Archambaud)

Air France (☎ 0820 82 08 20; 72 Rue Luc Lorian)

Air Mauritius (☎ 0262 96 06 00; 7 Rue François de Mahy)

BUS

Car Jaune's long-haul buses stop at the long-distance bus station beside the junction of Rue Presbytère and Rue Luc Lorian, west of town. Regular and express buses to/from St-Denis (€7) run frequently along the west coast via St-Louis and St-Gilles-les-Bains. There are also two or three services a day to St-Benoît via Plaine-des-Palmistes (€7.50) and the same number around the south coast through St-Joseph and Ste-Philippe (€7). For Cilaos, change in St-Louis.

THE WILD SOUTH

Aaaaah, the *Sud Sauvage* (Wild South), where the unhurried life is complemented by the splendid scenery of fecund volcanic slopes, occasional beaches, waves crashing on the rocky shoreline and country roads that twist like snakes into the Hauts. In both landscape and character, the south coast is where the real wilderness of Réunion begins to unfold. Once you've left St-Pierre, a gentle splendour and a sense of escapism become tangible. The change of scenery climaxes with the Grand Brûlé, where black lava fields slice through the forest and even reach the ocean at several points.

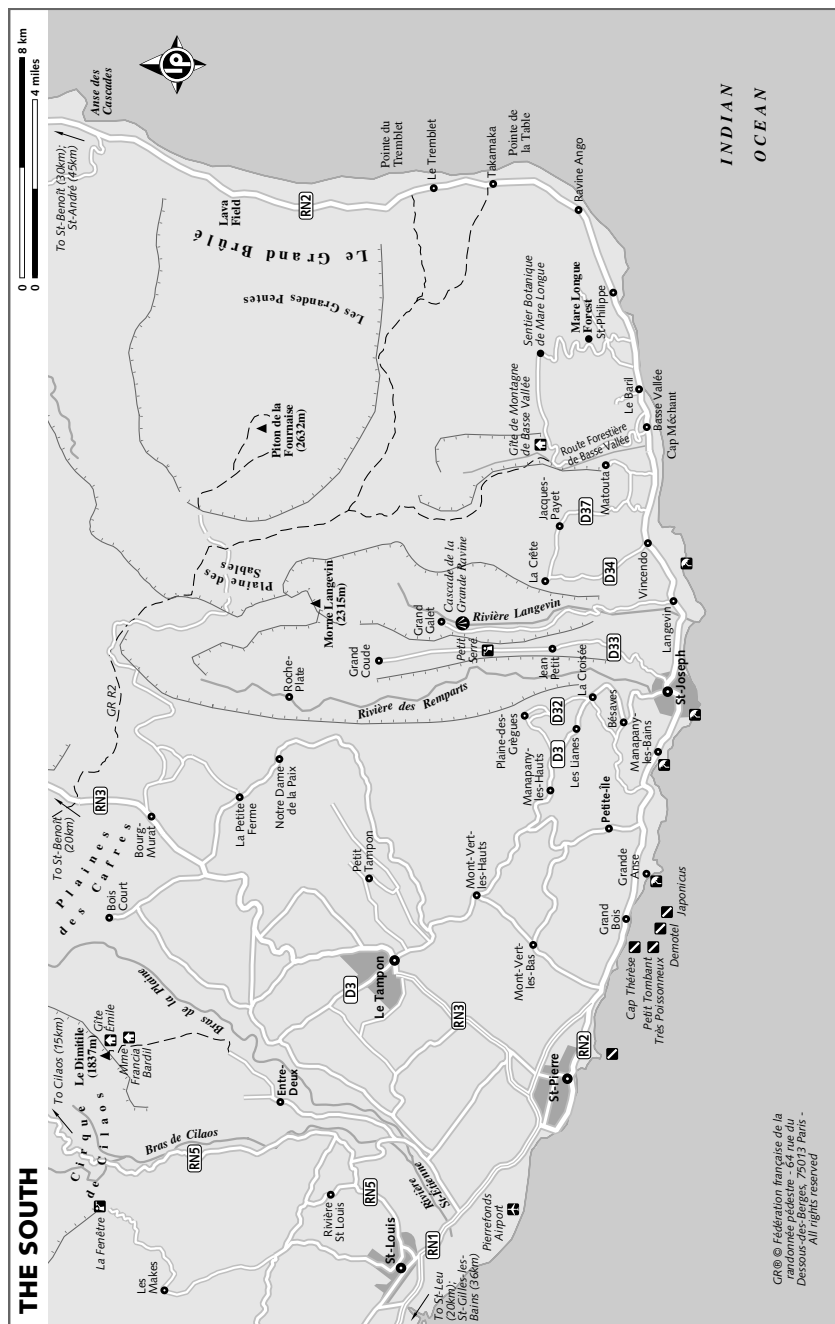
The Wild South has charming treasures and enough elbow room to make it special. A car is the ideal way to cover the region, but it's possible (if not expedient) to get from town to town by bus. It's a great area to sidle down for a few days, ditch your guidebook (but not your map) and poke around, but don't tell others where you'll be!

ST-PIERRE TO ST-JOSEPH

At last! No more traffic snarls (well, almost). Life – and travel – becomes more sedate as one heads west through some of the south coast's delicious scenery. With only a few exceptions urban life is left behind once the road traverses **Grand Bois** and snakes its way along the coastline.

Beach lovers should stop at **Plage de Grande Anse**, which is framed with basaltic cliffs and features a white-sand beach, a protected tide pool and picnic shelters (take the D30 that branches off the RN2 and winds down for about 2km to the beach). Alas, don't expect a Robinson Crusoe experience on weekends, when the beach is often swamped with visitors. Pick up some brochures at the small **tourist office** (☎ 0262 31 27 73; Plage de Grande Anse; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat), at the end of the parking lot.

Backtrack to the RN2 and drive east until you reach the turnoff for **Petite Île**. From Petite Île, a scenic road wobbles slowly up to some charming villages in the Hauts. Continue uphill until the junction with the D3. If you turn left, you'll reach **Mont-Vert-les-Hauts**, approximately 5km to the west (and from then it's an easy drive downhill to the coast via



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Mont-Vert-les-Bas); if you turn right, you will cross **Manapany-les-Hauts** before reaching Les Lianes for St-Joseph.

Seeing the area from the saddle of a horse is a fun way to experience the visual appeal of the region, even if you're not an experienced rider. **L'Écurie du Relais** (☎ 0262 56 78 67, 0692 00 42 98; <http://monsie.wanadoo.fr/ecurie.du.relais> in French; 75 Chemin Léopold Lebon, Manapany-les-Hauts; ☞ Tue-Sun by reservation) has guided trips in the Hauts as well as day tours to Grande Anse. Expect to pay around €17 for an hour and €110 for a day tour.

Back on the coastal road, head to **Manapany-les-Bains**. This charming spot lies at the mouth of an impressive ravine and boasts a protected tide pool where you can splash about.

Sleeping & Eating

Despite some signs on the road, many places are not easy to find, but that's part of the charm. Check locations on the website (if any) or call ahead. Of course, some words in French for directions always help.

ourpick Gandalf Safari Camp (☎ 0692 40 78 39; www.gandalfsafari.com; 87 Blvd de l'Océan, Manapany-les-Bains; r with shared toilets €25; ☑) Bargain! Christina and Claus, the German owners, have long lived in Africa, hence the name. They launched this venue in 2006 and brought a refreshing dash of originality on the accommodation scene in the Wild South. The five rooms are individually designed, with such themes as Kreol, Malagasy, Arab, Chinese and Indian. We fell for the Malagasy, complete with wooden masks, a fake baobab tree and other delightful knick knacks. English is spoken.

L'Eau Forte (☎ 0262 56 32 84; www.eau-forte.fr; 137bis Blvd de l'Océan, Manapany-les-Bains; d €40) Another bargain. Perfect for self-caterers, this fully equipped, spick-and-span villa boasts an ace location, right above Plage de Grande Anse. If hunger beckons, Chez Jo is a coin's toss down the road. There's a two-night minimum stay.

Chambre d'hôtes Les Embruns (☎ 0262 56 76 16; www.les-embruns974.com in French; 24 Chemin Neuf, Petite Île; d €43-46) Next door to Lé Gaillard, this is another reassuring B&B with a manicured garden and meticulously maintained rooms. Oh yeah, and the ocean views are straight from heaven.

Chambre d'hôtes Chez Maoul (☎ 0262 56 82 26; 6 Rue du Piton, Petite Île; d €45, dinner €17; ☞ ☑) The

four wood-clad rooms in this homely B&B have a cabin-in-the-woods feel but offer a fine sense of originality, as testified by the cute Do-Myel room: walls are bedecked with newspapers (as in old Creole houses) and a copy of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (translated into Creole). Maoul is a former *maloya* musician and is known to break out in song at dinner time.

Chambre d'hôtes Vérémer (☎ 0262 31 65 10; www.chambre-gite-veremer.com; 40 Chemin Sylvain Vitry, Petite Île; d €45-52; ☞ ☑) Three cocoon-like rooms in a neat Creole building nestled in a well-tended tropical garden, with superlative views and a splendid pool that guests can use in the morning and in the afternoon. Aim for the Mer room, which opens onto the garden and the pool. Coming from St-Pierre, it's signposted off the main road just beyond the turning for Petite-Île. Grande Anse beach is 3.5km away.

Chambre d'hôtes La Cour Mont Vert (☎ 0262 31 21 10; www.courmontvert.com; 18ter Chemin Roland Garros, Mont-Vert-les-Bas; d €60, dinner from €20) Your hotel will lift at the dreamy views over the coast; your body will rejuvenate with the Valatchy's healthy meals; your soul will find peace in the four button-cute Creole bungalows set in rural grounds awash with mangoes and lychees. Simply arrive, absorb and enjoy.

Chambre d'hôtes Lé Gaillard (☎ 0262 56 77 68; www.le-gaillard.net; 26 Chemin Neuf, Petite Île; d €70; ☞ ☑) An inviting B&B, despite the price tag. It's obvious that great care has gone into decorating each room – not in an ostentatious way, rather in a quirkily exotic manner that puts a smile on your face. Add in a lovely pool and jaw-dropping ocean views and you have a winning formula.

Palm Hotel & Spa (☎ 0262 56 30 30; www.palm.re; Grande Anse; d incl breakfast €80-200; ☞ ☑ ☑) If you're really looking to push the boat out in the Wild South, then to be honest there's only one choice. Opened in April 2007, this new temple of luxury was an instant hit. In an ambience of effortless sophistication, you'll find all the trappings of a big-league player. These include spacious villas and lodges on stilts that are artfully decorated, two restaurants, two pools and a luxurious spa. The sweeping views of the ocean below from the terraces make a sundowner taste all the sweeter. Wholly delightful.

Restaurant Chez Jo (☎ 0262 31 48 83; 143 Blvd de l'Océan, Manapany-les-Bains; mains €7-20; ☞ lunch Tue-Sun,

dinner Fri & Sat) In this buzzy eatery overlooking the tide pool in Manapany-les-Bains, you're bound to find something on the menu that takes your fancy. Whether you treat yourself to ostrich steak, salads or chicken with *pleurotes* (mushrooms), or just pop in for an exquisite fruit juice (from €2.50), Chez Jo is a rare treat with virtually zero guilt factor.

Le Vacoa (☎ 0262 56 95 17; 25 Route de Grande Anse; mains €10-15; 🍷 lunch & dinner Tue-Sun) Strategically positioned on the road to Plage de Grande Anse, this modest eatery offers a full menu of familiar favourites, including Creole and Chinese dishes. Bag a seat on the breezy terrace and be wooed by the vistas over the cobalt-blue waters of the Baie de Grande Anse, or take away and eat on the beach.

ST-JOSEPH

pop 13,000

The Wild South's hub, modernish St-Joseph (say 'St-Jo' if you want to sound local) won't leap to the top of your list of preferred destinations in Réunion but it's a good place if you need to catch some urban vibes. It also offers useful services, including a tourist office and banks with ATMs, but no internet café. While it oozes the kind of sunny languor you'd associate with the tropics, the snarled traffic and bustling shopping streets at peak hours impart the energy (and stress) of a city. That, combined with the dearth of atmospheric accommodation options, makes it good for a pit stop but there are better places in the Hauts to really kick back and hang out.

If you can, plan to be in St-Jo on a Friday morning, when the streets spill over with numerous stalls.

The **Maison du Tourisme du Sud Sauvage** (☎ 0262 37 37 11; www.sudsauvage.com; 3 Rue Paul Demange; 🍷 9am-5pm Mon-Sat) is near the bus station in the centre. The centre's staff can tell you just about everything you need to know about travelling in the Wild South, and there are enough leaflets to paper your living room. English is spoken.

At the entrance of St-Joseph (it's sign-posted), the **Orchidarium** (☎ 0692 25 86 26; €4; 🍷 by appointment) is worth a peek if you're into tropical flowers. The owner, Bertrand Hoareau, will be happy to explain everything you ever wanted to know about orchids (in French) but were too afraid to ask.

Psst! One of the best-kept secrets in the Wild South is a secluded cove with a splen-

did black-sand beach, at the entrance of St-Jo (coming from St-Pierre). Drive past the first roundabout (where the Quick lies), then take the first right on to Rue de la Station de Transit. Follow the road for about 300m until you reach a skate park. Leave your car here and walk for about five minutes down a path to the shore... Enjoy!

Sleeping & Eating

Accommodation options are thin on the ground in St-Jo. Frankly said, your best bet is to bunk down in a cosy *chambres d'hôtes* in the Hauts.

La Case (☎ 0262 56 07 50; www.case.fr; 2 Rue Jean Bar; d €40-47; 🍷 🍷 🍷) La Case's zero personality compound and sterile rooms are balanced by self-catering facilities, pool, friendly staff, and the choice of air-con or fan, meaning you can sacrifice character for comfort. It's on the eastern edge of town, on the road to St-Philippe.

La Case (☎ 0262 56 41 66; 31 Rue Leconte Delisle; mains €13-30; 🍷 lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) No misprint – same name as the previous venue. Don't miss this soulful restaurant right in the thick of things – it gets favourable word-of-mouth reviews along with our stamp of approval. Stepping through the Creole doorway is like zapping away a century; expect timber beams, darkwood parquet and old-fashioned paintings adorning the white walls. The perfect setting for an intimate *dîner à deux* (dinner for two). The snapper fillet with crab sauce and the *tarte tatin à la papaye* (a variety of papaya pie) are divine.

L'Ambroisie (☎ 0262 31 51 99; 306 Rue Raphaël Babet; mains €10-18, menu €18; 🍷 lunch Tue-Sat, dinner Tue & Thu-Sat) After having fallen for La Case, L'Ambroisie pales in comparison, with its naive murals featuring Greek gods and a standard selection of *carris* and *métro* staples. That said, you can eat decently at a fraction of the price.

Getting There & Away

St-Joseph lies on Car Jaune's coastal bus route between St-Pierre and St-Benoît. In addition to the central bus station, buses stop in Petite-Île, Vincendo and Manapany-les-Bains.

LES HAUTS DE ST-JOSEPH

Lose yourself in the Hauts! Starting from St-Joseph you can cherry-pick an itinerary in the hinterland that takes in drowsy hamlets where locals all know each other, green velvet

BACKROADS: GRAND COUDE, THE END OF THE WORLD

The timeless hamlet of Grand Coude, perched on a plateau at an altitude of 1300m, boasts a marvellous setting, with the soaring Morne Langevin (2315m) as the backdrop. Here you'll be smitten by mellow tranquillity and laid-back lifestyle (whisper it softly).

From St-Joseph, take the narrow D33, which passes through **Jean Petit** and twists its way across splendidly rugged scenery of looming peaks and deep gorges. Pull over for a picnic at **Petit Serré**, where a narrow ridge divides two valleys, the valley of the Rivière Langevin on your right and the valley of the Rivière des Remparts on your left. At one point the ridge is little wider than the road itself – you have the feeling of driving on a razor's edge! The views over the valleys are awesome. At the end of the D33, about 20km north of St-Joseph, Grand Coude appears like a mirage.

Soak up the rural atmosphere and visit **Le Labyrinthe En Champ Thé** (☎ 0692 60 18 88; Grand Coude; adult/child €5/4, guided tour €8/4; 🍷 9am-noon & 1-5pm Tue-Sat, 9am-5pm Sun). It's definitely worth an hour or so for anyone interested in tropical flora, with an emphasis on tea.

You can stop overnight at **Chambre d'hôtes L'Eucalyptus** (☎ 0262 56 39 48; 24 Chemin de la Croizure, Grand Coude; s/d €32/40, dinner €18), where absolute peace and quiet prevail. Choose between the dinky all-wood bungalow or one of the two simple rooms in a white-and-yellow Creole building. Unwind in the generous garden, where coffee and geranium fill the air (ask for a cup of Bourbon Pointu coffee). Venison and wild boar feature prominently on the menu.

Another no-frills but authentic place is **Ferme Équestre Equi-Libre** (☎ 0262 56 25 90, 0692 08 06 63; Rue Théophile Gautier, Grand Coude; camp site per person €10, dm €25, bungalow €50-75, lunch & dinner from €16).

mountains cloaked in layers of wispy cloud, rolling sugar-cane fields, twisting roads and panoramas to make the heart beat faster.

Follow the picturesque D3 that cuts inland before swinging northwards to Manapany-Les-Hauts. You'll pass **Bésaves** and **Les Lianes**. You could also drive up to **Plaine-des-Grègues** (follow the D32, which branches off the D3 in La Croisée), the highest village of the area, which crouches in a bowl of mountains. This village is famed for its plantations of curcuma and vetiver, which are both used in perfumery. Learn more about the virtues (and fragrances) of these plants at the **Maison du Curcuma** (☎ 0262 37 54 66; 14 Chemin du Rond, Plaine-des-Grègues; admission free; 🍷 9am-noon & 1.30-5pm).

Les Hauts de St-Joseph are a source of inspiration for many artists and artisans who sell their *objets d'art* and crafts. Many of these artisans' workshops are open to the public. Pick up a brochure from the St-Joseph tourist office, which contains their contact details.

Indiana Jones-types will make a beeline for the **Rivière des Remparts**, an easily overlooked splendour immediately north of St-Joseph. This valley – one of the wildest in the south – is accessible on foot (or by 4WD). The classic hike is along the river, up to the hamlet of **Roche-Plate**, about 18km to the north, and on to Nez de Bœuf on the road that leads to Piton de la Fournaise (see p210). In Roche-Plate, you can break up your journey at the welcoming

Gîte de Roche Plate (☎ 0262 59 13 94; Roche-Plate; dm with half board €35). Allow about four hours to reach the *gîte* from St-Joseph, and another four hours to Nez de Bœuf. Unforgettable.

Sleeping & Eating

Chambre d'hôtes Chez Nathalie Hoareau (☎ 0262 37 61 92; 205 Rue Edmon Albius, Bésaves; d €40) A village address in the gently rolling Hauts de St-Joseph. There are two plain rooms at the back, but with one of the most delightful gardens you'll find in this price category. The owner, Didier Hoareau, is a sugar-cane producer and grows a high-quality variety of coffee and is happy to lead guests in this Garden of Eden.

Chambre d'hôtes L'Arpège Austral (☎ 0262 56 36 89; 53 Rue des Prunes, St-Joseph; d €48, bungalow €55, dinner €20) Wonderful to be so near St-Joseph (2.5km), yet in such a serene spot. Sylvie and Hary, your hosts, are musicians and their B&B is an ode to good taste, with two rooms with sloping ceilings and teak furniture. For more privacy, the adjoining bungalow, sheathed with soothing yellows and decked out with a private terrace, fits the bill. Book in for a *table d'hôtes* meal and you may feast on a *carri diététique* (a low-calorie *carris*) on the shady terrace overlooking a garden dotted with mature trees. It's on the road to Grand Coude (follow the D33).

Chambre d'hôtes La Plantation (☎ 0262 56 08 86; www.laplantation.net; 124 Chemin de Jean Petit; d €75,

ste €95, dinner €25; 🍷) This B&B nestled amid sugar-cane fields boasts a small pool and lush tropical garden with staggering views of the coast. There are three rooms and one gleaming suite, all featuring handsomely designed bathrooms. Marie-Laure, your chirpy host, has applied all her flair to the décor, marrying vital colour harmonies and high-quality fabrics. At the end of the day, treat yourself to a sumptuous *table d'hôtes* meal on the veranda. Downsides: access to the pool is restricted (no dip by moonlight!), and only two of the rooms come with sea views. Monsieur is a serious hiker and a mine of local information. Rates drop for stays of more than two nights. Find La Plantation on the road to Grand Coude, about 5km from St-Joseph.

ST-JOSEPH TO ST-PHILIPPE

The coastline between St-Joseph and St-Philippe is definitely alluring: a string of rocky coves and dramatic cliffs pounded by crashing waves and backed by steep hills clad with dense forests and undulating sugar-cane fields, with a few black-sand beaches thrown in for good measure.

Inland, it's no less spectacular. Abandon your map and follow the sinuous *départementales* (secondary roads) that wiggle up to the Hauts and creep through beguiling settlements, which warrant scenic drives and boast killer views over the ocean and plunging canyons.

About 4km east of St-Joseph, you'll reach **Langevin**. From the coast, the **Rivière Langevin** valley slithers into the mountains. A narrow road follows the wide stony bed of the river and leads to **Cascade de la Grande Ravine**, an impressive waterfall about 9km from the junction with the coastal road. If you need to cool off, there are plenty of natural pools along the river where you can dunk yourself. Our favourites include Trou Noir (it's signposted) and a pool that lies about 200m before the Cascade de la Grande Ravine (you can't miss it). Come prepared: this valley is extremely popular with picnicking families on Sunday.

Further east, in **Vincendo**, follow the D34 that goes uphill to the north and takes you to the hamlet of **La Crête**. From there, the D37 leads due east to another peaceful settlement, **Jacques-Payet**, before zigzagging downhill until the junction with the coastal road. In Vincendo, few visitors get wind of the black-sand beach fringed by *vacoa* trees a few kilometres

south of the main road. There are some dangerous currents at certain times of the year, so ask around before diving in.

And now, **Basse-Vallée**. The area is known for its production of baskets, bags (called *bertels*), hats and other items from *vacoa* fronds. You can see them being made and learn more about this versatile palm at **Cass' le Coïn** (☎ 0262 37 09 61; 57 Rue Labourdonnais; 🕒 10am-noon & 1:30-4pm Mon-Sat) and **Association Vacoa Sud** (☎ 0262 37 16 96; RN2; 🕒 9am-5pm). Then head to **Cap Méchant**, one of the eeriest landscapes in the Wild South, with huge lava fields, windswept black cliffs and rows of *vacoa* trees. There's an excellent coastal path along the sea cliffs (bring sturdy shoes).

Further east, **Le Baril** is the last settlement before St-Philippe.

Sleeping & Eating

RIVIÈRE LANGEVIN

If you haven't brought a picnic, there's a bevy of cheap and cheerful eateries along the river at the entrance of the valley. They're pretty much of a muchness and serve up Creole classics, which you can eat in or take away.

Recommended options:

Le Benjoin (☎ 0262 56 23 90; Route de la Passerelle; mains €6-11; 🕒 lunch Tue-Sun) Famed for its *thé dansant* (tea dance) on Wednesday and Sunday afternoon.

Les Pieds dans L'Eau (☎ 0262 37 13 64; Route de la Passerelle; mains €6-11; 🕒 lunch daily) Cheap Creole staples.

VINCENDO & LES HAUTS

Rougail Mangué (☎ 0262 31 55 09; 12 Rue Marcel Pagnol, Vincendo; dm €13, s/d €20/39, dinner €12-20) You'd never guess it from the road but this unfussy abode is as welcoming as an old friend's hug thanks to its Italian owner, Cosimo. The ground floor is occupied by a smart communal room, two dorms that can accommodate two to eight persons and two squeaky-clean rooms; thumbs up for the cheery double blessed with addictive ocean views. After a long day's driving on twisty roads, nothing can beat a dip in the pool followed by a sundowner. Breakfast is extra (€5) and can be enjoyed alfresco under a gazebo. It's on the main road, between Langevin and Vincendo.

Gîte La Table des Randonneurs (☎ 0692 61 73 47; 17 Chemin des Barbadiennes, Jacques-Payet; dm incl breakfast €15, bungalow at weekends €200, dinner €20) Way up in the hills, 'The Hikers' Table' is a safe bet. Dorms and dining room are in no danger of appearing in *House Beautiful*, but everything is in immaculate shape and functional. The menu features local delicacies like smoked

duck with *vacoa*. It's about 7km northeast of Vincendo (follow the D37).

Ferme-Auberge Desprairies (☎ 0262 37 39 45; www.ferme-auberge-desprairies.com in French; 44 Route de Matouta; d €34, meals €18) One of the best things about this inoffensive inn is the road to it, which travels through sugar-cane fields despite being only a couple of kilometres from the coast. The walls are decorated with shades of red not seen since mood rings went out of style – not to mention the bedspreads with floral designs. Corny? Yes, but rooms are clean and in this location for this price, you won't hear anyone complaining. Follow the D37 to the east to get here.

La Médina du Sud (☎ 0262 37 32 51; www.lamedina-loc.com; 23 Chemin de la Marine, Vincendo; d €45; 🍷) There's nothing Moorish in this modern building by the turn-off for the beach, except the owner's origins. The four rooms are characterless but fully equipped, well proportioned and perfectly serviceable, with the added bonus of a pool. There's a two-night minimum.

Le Tagine (☎ 0262 37 32 51; 23 Chemin de la Marine, Vincendo; mains €10-20; 🕒 lunch daily, dinner Thu-Sat) Next door to La Médina du Sud (same owner), Le Tagine is a good place to give your tastebuds something new to sing about, with toothsome Moroccan couscous and tajines. Traditional Creole dishes and salads also feature on the menu.

BASSE-VALLÉE & CAP MÉCHANT

Gîte de Montagne de Basse Vallée (☎ 0262 37 36 25; Basse-Vallée; dm €14.50, dinner €16) This *gîte de montagne* is about 8km above the village of Basse Vallée, along the Route Forestière de Basse Vallée. Bookings must be made through the Maison de la Montagne et de la Mer (p172) or a tourist office.

Gîte de Théophile (☎ 0262 37 13 14, 0692 18 86 84; Route Forestière, Basse-Vallée; dm with half board €38, dinner €18) Another rural paradise, lost in the middle of the forest, and accessible on foot (about 30 minutes) via a scenic *sentier forestier* (forest dirt track) or by 4WD only from the Route Forestière (signed at the junction). It can't get more Wild South than this.

Ferme-Auberge Le Rond de Basse Vallée (☎ 0692 85 40 37, 0692 69 65 51; Basse-Vallée; d €40, meal €20) A recent addition in this superbly unspoilt area, this inn is a great place to commune with nature. There are four rooms with virginal-white walls and spick-and-span bathrooms in a Creole-style

building. The restaurant is across the road and features regional dishes with authentic flavours, including – you guessed it – *vacoa*. It's about 5.5km above the village of Basse-Vallée, along the Route Forestière de Basse-Vallée.

On the seafront in Cap Méchant, locals disagree about which outpost does the best *carris*, chop sueys and *porc au palmiste* (pork with palm hearts) – you'll just have to try them all for yourself: **L'Étoile de Mer** (☎ 0262 37 04 60; mains €10-17; Cap Méchant; 🕒 lunch daily); **Le Pinpin** (☎ 0262 37 04 19; Cap Méchant; mains €12-17; 🕒 lunch daily except Wed); and **Le Cap Méchant** (☎ 0692 85 39 28; Cap Méchant, Basse-Vallée; mains €10-13; 🕒 lunch Tue-Sun). They are mobbed at weekends but almost deserted on weekdays.

LE BARIL

Chambre d'hôtes Le Pinpin d'Amour (☎ 0262 37 14 86; damour-marieclaud@wanadoo.fr; 56 Chemin Paul Hoareau, Le Baril; d €50, dinner €23) Spending a night at this original *chambre d'hôte* makes a good story to tell the folks back home. Your hosts have a passion for *vacoa* and pinpin (the palm's edible artichoke-like fruit), meaning you'll be guaranteed to taste them at dinner (and even at breakfast), prepared in all their forms. Accommodation-wise, the six appealing, if a bit itty-bitty rooms, sport pastel colour walls and honey-boarded floors. It's in the hills above Le Baril, about 2km from the coastal road. Alas, no sea views from the rooms.

Hôtel-Restaurant Le Baril (☎ 0262 37 01 04; www.anthurium.com in French; RN2, Le Baril; s/d €51/57; 🍷) Despite its location above the rocky shoreline and its onsite restaurant, we can't help feeling the 13 units are a tad overpriced for what you get. If you're in one of the bungalows on the front your stay will be accompanied by the crash of waves right below, which can be either soothing or a little nerve-wracking.

Snack-Bar P'ti Lu (80 Puits-des-Anglais, Le Baril; mains €7-11; 🕒 lunch Tue-Sun) Never short of rambunctious families at weekends, this no-fuss little restaurant beside the tidal swimming pool at Puits-des-Anglais is a good spot to carbo-load after a dip. Eat in or take away.

ST-PHILIPPE

pop 5000

Vegetarians will reach Shangri-la in St-Philippe, the self-proclaimed capital of *vacoa*. No joke – no less than 5000 visitors turn up to join St-Philippois townfolk for the 10-day Fête du Vacoa in August.

The only town of consequence in the Wild South (along with St-Joseph), St-Philippe has a wonderfully down-to-earth, unfussy ambience. Although this friendly little town is devoid of overwhelming sights, it has a slew of (good) surprises up its sleeves and is optimally placed for explorations of the coast and forays into the Hauts. Oh, and St-Philippe lies in the shadow of the Piton de la Fournaise.

The small **Eco-Musée de St-Philippe – Au Bon Roi Louis** (☎ 0262 37 16 43; adult/child €5/2; ☞ 9am–noon & 2–4.30pm Mon–Sat), a few doors down from St-Philippe's town hall, makes for a perfect introduction to the area's history and culture. The little Creole house is stuffed with an eclectic assortment of antiques and agricultural equipment. Visitors receive a very detailed tour (in French) from the owners.

With its handful of colourful fishing boats, the teeny **fishing harbour** is also worth a peek.

Inland, don't miss the 3-hectare garden, **Le Jardin des Parfums et des Épices** (☎ 0262 37 06 36; www.jardin-parfums-epices.fr in French; adult/child €6.10/3.05; ☞ tours 10.30am & 2.30pm). It contains over 1500 species in a natural setting in the Mare Longue forest, 3km west of St-Philippe. Knowledgeable and enthusiastic guides present the island's history, economy and culture through the plants; tours (in French) must be booked at least one day ahead. Continue a few kilometres further up to the **Sentier Botanique de Mare Longue**. This pristine forest has an end-of-the-world feeling that will appeal to those in search of hush. From the car park you can tackle one of the three interpretative trails in the primary forest.

St-Philippe's **tourist office** (☎ 0262 37 10 43; Place de la Mairie; ☞ 10am–5pm Mon–Sat) is on the main road beside the town hall.

Sleeping & Eating

There are slim pickings in the eating and sleeping departments.

Chambre d'hôtes Au Domaine du Vacoa (☎ 0262 37 03 12, 0692 68 28 07; 11C Rue du Centre; d €50, dinner from €22) This newish B&B set in a pert little *case créole* features two spacious rooms enhanced with splashes of colour, back-friendly mattresses, crisply dressed beds and pathogen-free bathrooms. And sea views. At dinner warm your insides with duck (freshly slaughtered when we dropped by!), *vacoa* and other vegetables from the garden – all organic, of course.

Marmite du Pêcheur (☎ 0262 37 01 01; 18A Ravine Ango; mains €12–30, menu €17; ☞ lunch daily except Wed) Stuffed to the gills with *vacoa*? Can't stomach

one more morsel of *carri poulet*? Then opt for this eatery where cuisine is predominantly fishy – crab, shrimps, fish, and mussels, climaxing with a gargantuan *marmite du pêcheur* (€30), a kind of seafood stew. Downside: the dining room doesn't register a mere blip on the charm radar. It's just off the main road.

LE GRAND BRÛLÉ

The crowning glory of the Wild South, the arid, eerie landscape of Le Grand Brûlé is a 6km-wide volcanic plain formed by the main lava flow from the volcano. This is where the action goes when the volcano is erupting. The steep slopes above, known as Les Grandes Pentes, have funnelled lava down to the coast for thousands of years. Because of the lack of population, this area forms an important nature reserve for native birds.

In 1986, in one of the most violent eruptions in recent years, the lava unusually flowed south of Le Grand Brûlé to reach the sea between **Pointe du Tremblet** and **Pointe de la Table**. This eruption added over 30 hectares to the island's area, and more than 450 people had to be evacuated and several homes were lost. An interpretative trail has been set up at Pointe de la Table and makes for a lovely hike on the basaltic cliffs pounded by the ocean.

THE EAST

With competition like the rural idyll of the Wild South, the majestic landscapes in the Cirques, the magnetic power exerted by the Piton de la Fournaise and the sybaritic temptations of the West, the east coast from St-Denis to Ste-Rose is shamefully underrated, thus largely ignored by travellers. All the better for you: this gentle, less-visited part of the island remains something of a 'secret'.

The east coast is everything the west coast is not: low-key, unpretentious and luxuriant (yes, it *does* get much more rain). It has a more soothing beauty. While this coast lacks the beaches of the west, the region makes up for it with spectacular waterfalls and lush tropical vegetation. The main produce of the area is sugar cane, but the region is also known for its vanilla plantations and fruit orchards, including lychees.

This coastal stretch is also considered to be 'other', partially as it's the bastion of Tamil culture in Réunion. Here you'll find

a distinctive atmosphere, with numerous temples and colourful religious festivals. For visitors it's an opportunity to discover a Réunion you never imagined.

Tourism in this area remains on a humble scale, with no star attractions. However, it's worth taking a few days to explore the quiet recesses of this stretch of coast where you can experience Réunion from a different perspective and soak up a gentle ambience.

STE-SUZANNE & AROUND

pop 20,000

The seaside town of Ste-Suzanne is usually glimpsed in passing by most tourists on the route down the coast, which is a shame because there are charming pockets in the area that beg discovery. Just beyond the church towards the southern end of town is a road signposted inland to **Cascade Niagara**, a 60m waterfall on the Rivière Ste-Suzanne. At the end of the road, about 2km further on, you wind up at the waterfall and attendant tropical pool just ready for a refreshing dip. On weekends it's a popular picnic site.

Garden fans and architecture buffs will especially enjoy a visit to the classic **Domaine du Grand Hazier** (Map p226; ☎ 0262 52 32 81; tours €5; ☞ daily by reservation), a superb 18th-century sugar planter's residence 3km northwest of Ste-Suzanne. It's an official French historical monument with a 2-hectare garden planted with a variety of tropical flowers and fruit trees.

The nicest place to eat in Ste-Suzanne is **Le Bocage** (☎ 0262 52 21 54; mains €8–20; ☞ lunch Tue–Sun, dinner Tue–Sat), in a tranquil park by the river at the south end of Ste-Suzanne. It serves mainly Chinese food plus a smattering of *métro* and Creole dishes.

Ste-Suzanne is served by Car Jaune bus routes F and G running between St-Denis and St-Benoît.

ST-ANDRÉ & AROUND

pop 44,000

St-André is the anti–St-Gilles. While St-Gilles (and the northwestern coast) is appropriately dubbed 'Zoreille-Land', St-André is the epicentre of Tamil culture in Réunion, and you'll see more women draped in vividly coloured saris than Zoreilles wearing designer glasses and trendy shirts. Busy streets transport you to a city somewhere in India with curry houses, sari shops and bric-a-brac traders. You'll definitely feel closer to Bombay than Paris.

The mainly Tamil population is descended from indentured labourers who were brought from India to work in the sugar-cane fields and factories after slavery was abolished in 1848.

Orientation & Information

St-André is very spread out – it's best to get around by car.

You'll find banks with ATMs in the centre. The **Office Municipal du Tourisme de St-André** (☎ 0262 46 91 63; omt.standre@wanadoo.fr; Parc du Colosse; ☞ 9am–5pm Mon–Sat) is inconveniently located in the coastal leisure park 3km north of the town centre.

Sights

St-André's Indian atmosphere is most apparent in the Hindu temples dotted around the town. The most imposing are the **Temple of Colosse** (Chemin Champ-Borne) and **Kali Temple** (Ave de l'île de France); the latter is open to visitors (shoes must be removed before entering).

Also worth a look are **Maison Valliamé** (Rue Lagourgue), a handsome colonial villa a short walk northeast of the centre. A huge seafront leisure park, the **Parc du Colosse**, is being developed on the former sugar-cane fields on St-André's eastern outskirts.

The **Sucrerie de Bois-Rouge** (Map p226; ☎ 0262 58 59 74; www.bois-rouge.fr in French; 2 Chemin du Bois Rouge; guided tour adult/child €8/4, distillery €3.50/1.75; ☞ by reservation Mon–Fri, closed 20 Dec–20 Jan) is on the coast 3km north of St-André. During the cane harvest (July to December) visitors are shown around the huge, high-tech plant, following the process from the delivery of the cut cane to the final glittering crystals. The two-hour tour includes the neighbouring distillery, where the by-products (cane juice and molasses) are made into rum. From January to June, you can only visit the distillery. Children under seven years aren't allowed into the refinery. English-language tours are available.

Sleeping & Eating

Chambre d'hôtes Au P'tit Coin Exotique (☎ 0262 46 46 07; 460 Rue Virapatrin; s/d €38/40, dinner €18) Run by an affable retired Tamil couple, this 'little exotic corner' in a modern building surrounded by luxuriant gardens is a safe bet, with three unadorned but well-kept rooms. Madame Patou-Reverdy, who keeps the place shipshape, is a great cook too – she'll probably prepare a *massalé* (Indian-style stew) during your stay. Don't miss out on her *rum tisane* (aromatic rum) – incendiary!



Chambre d'hôtes Véronique Savriama (☎ 0262 46 69 84; 1084 Chemin Quatre-Vingt; d €38, dinner €17-20; 🍴) This place is efficiently run but not as welcoming as the previous *chambre d'hôte*. The four upstairs rooms are a tad sombre and smallish but come with air-con and have their own entrance. Best asset is the tasty *table d'hôtes* meals, with an Indian emphasis.

Pity about the very ordinary dining room, though. It's in the hamlet of Rivière du Mât les Bas on the coast southeast of St-André.

Chambre d'hôtes L'Auberge du Désert – Chez Éric Bédier (☎ 0262 46 64 43; Bras-des-Chevrettes; d €40, dinner €18) Find this secluded B&B about 2.5km from the town centre (it's signposted). Featuring six comfy rooms in an imposing

LITTLE INDIA

Who said that Réunion was too Westernised? If you happen to be around Ste-Suzanne and St-André at certain periods of the year, you'll discover a very exotic side of the island, with lots of colourful festivals organised by the Tamil community. If you're around, be sure to join in the heady hype of these local festivals! In January, don't miss **Tamil fire-walking** ceremonies, when participants enter a meditative state and then walk over red-hot embers as a sign of devotion to various deities. Thousands of goats are slaughtered as offerings and are distributed among the participants. Another must-see is the **Cavadee** festival, which usually takes place in January or February. In October or November, make a beeline for **Divali** (aka Dipavali), the Festival of Light. Dancers and decorated floats parade through the town centre. Visitors are welcome. Contact the tourist office in St-André for specific dates.

building ensnared in a tropical garden, its standout feature is the large pool at the back – bliss after a long day's driving.

Le Beau Rivage (☎ 0262 46 08 66; Chemin Champ-Borne; mains €12-29; 🍴 lunch Tue-Sun, dinner Tue-Wed & Thu-Sat) True to its name ('the beautiful shore'), Le Beau Rivage boasts a fantastic location – it's on the seafront, beside the church ruins in Champ-Borne (ask for a table near the windows). The cuisine flits between China, France and the Indian Ocean.

Le Champ Borne (☎ 0262 46 16 67; Chemin Champ-Borne; mains €12-28; 🍴 lunch daily, dinner Thu-Sat) Another respected option, across the road from the seafront (read: no views). The mile-long menu roves from Creole dishes to Chinese specialities at prices that are more sweet than sour. One negative: the dining room is utterly functional. Call a designer, please!

Getting There & Away

Buses from St-Denis to St-Benoît pass through St-André. If you're travelling to Salazie by bus, you will have to change here; there are seven buses daily in each direction (three on Sunday). From Salazie there are connections to Hell-Bourg.

BRAS-PANON

pop 9800

Bras-Panon is Réunion's vanilla capital, and most visitors come here to see (and smell!) the fragrant vanilla-processing plant. The town is also associated with a rare sprat-like delicacy known as *bichiques*. In early summer (around November or December) these are caught at the mouth of the Rivière des Roches as they swim upriver to spawn.

The **Coopérative de Vanille** (☎ 0262 51 70 12; 21 RN2; admission €5; 🍴 9am-noon & 2-4.15pm Mon-Sat),

a working vanilla-processing plant, offers an introduction to the process of producing Réunion's famous Vanille Bourbon. After the 40-minute guided tour, visitors are welcome to pick up a few samples in the factory shop. It's worth a visit just for the dreamy smell.

Car Jaune buses (lines F and G) stop outside the vanilla cooperative en route between St-André and St-Benoît.

Sleeping & Eating

There's not much in the way of accommodation in Bras-Panon. Restaurants are easier to find.

Ferme-Auberge Chez Éva Annibal (☎ 0262 51 53 76; fax 0262 51 52 01; Chemin Rivière du Mât; d with shared bathroom incl breakfast €30, dinner €20) Pack a hearty thirst and giant-sized appetite before venturing into this plain but feisty inn. The Full Monty feast comprises rum, *gratin de légumes* (baked vegetables), fish curry, duck with vanilla, and cakes, all clearly emblazoned with a Creole Mama stamp of approval. There are also three functional but clean rooms with sloping ceilings and communal facilities upstairs.

Chambre d'hôtes La Passiflore (☎ 0262 51 74 68; www.lapassiflore.re; 31 Rue des Baies-Roses; d €45, dinner €20) Run by a well-travelled *métro* couple, this B&B stands in a haven of tropical peace in a side street near the Coopérative. Monsieur has a friendly handshake, Madame is gentle and welcoming, and meals on the shady *varangue* may include *gigot flambé au whisky* (a piece of meat flambéed with whisky) or vitamin-loaded salads. The three clinically clean rooms are embellished with a few exotic bits and bobs. Float in the scintillating pool or bask in the sunny garden. Air-con is extra (€4).

Le Bec Fin (☎ 0262 51 52 24; 66 RN2; mains €10-13, menu €12-18; 🍴 lunch daily, dinner Thu-Sat) Tickle your

tastebuds with a slurp of *planteur* (aromatic rum), then continue your indulgence with a feisty portion of *sarcives* (a variety of sausage) or *porc sauce grand mère* (pork in grandma's sauce). On weekdays it lays on an excellent buffet lunch for just €12.

Le Beauvallon (☎ 0262 50 42 92; Rivière des Roches; mains €7-25; 🍴 lunch daily) Le Beauvallon is well known to everyone in Bras-Panon, not least for its location beside the mouth of the Rivière des Roches and its seasonal, scrumptious *carri bichiques*. On the flipside, the vast dining room doesn't contain one whit of soul or character.

Le Vani-La (☎ 0262 51 56 58; 21 RN2; mains €10-15; 🍴 lunch Mon-Fri) Vanilla is king of the castle in this little restaurant right beside the Coopérative de Vanille. It turns up in both savoury and sweet dishes.

ST-BENOÎT & AROUND

pop 31,500

Sugar-cane fields, lychee and mango orchards, rice, spices, coffee... Great carpets of deep-green felt seem to have been draped over the lower hills that surround St-Benoît, a major agricultural and fishing centre.

No one can accuse St-Benoît of being overburdened with tourist sights. The area's best features lie elsewhere; turn your attention from the coast and plant it firmly in the cooler recesses of the hills and valleys to the west. The Rivière des Marsouins valley in particular is a delight, with its plunging waterfalls and luxuriant vegetation. Small wonder that there is excellent white-water rafting here.

VANILLA UNVEILED

The vanilla orchid was introduced into Réunion from Mexico around 1820, but early attempts at cultivation failed because of the absence of the Mexican bee that pollinates the flower and triggers the development of the vanilla pod. Fortunately for custard lovers everywhere, a method of hand-pollination was discovered in Réunion in 1841 by a 12-year-old slave, Edmond Albius. Vanilla was highly prized in Europe at the time and Albius' discovery ushered in an economic boom, at least for the French 'vanilla barons'.

The vanilla bubble burst, however, when synthetic vanilla – made from coal – was invented in the late 19th century. Réunion's vanilla industry was almost wiped out, but in recent years the growing demand for natural products has led to something of a revival. You'll now find vanilla 'plantations' hidden in the forests from Ste-Suzanne south to St-Philippe.

The majority of Réunion's crop is exported (Coca Cola is the world's single biggest buyer), but vanilla is still a firm favourite in local cuisine. It crops up in all sorts of delicacies, from cakes and pastries to coffee, liqueurs, even vanilla duck and chicken. Best of all is the sublime flavour of a vanilla-steeped *rhum arrangé* (a mixture of rum, fruit juice, cane syrup and a blend of herbs and berries).

Sights & Activities

TAKAMAKA

North of St-Benoît the D53 strikes southwest, following the Rivière des Marsouins 15km upstream to end beside the Takamaka viewpoint. Be prepared to fall on your knees in awe: despite a small power plant near the viewpoint, the overwhelming impression is of a wild, virtually untouched valley, its walls cloaked with impenetrable forests. Here and there the dense green is broken by a silver ribbon of cascading water.

Takamaka provides an incredible stage for action-seekers in search of an adrenaline fix. **Canyoning** trips in the valley can be arranged through **Alpanes** (☎ 0692 77 75 30; www.alpanes.com in French) as well as other outfitters (see p199) based elsewhere on the island, but it's not for the faint-hearted – you'll have to be experienced. But what a thrill!

GRAND ÉTANG

Around 12km southwest of St-Benoît along the road towards Plaine-des-Palmistes, is the 3km road to Grand Étang (Big Pond). This pretty picnic spot lies at the bottom of an almost vertical ridge separating it from the Rivière des Marsouins valley. Most people simply walk around the lake. It's muddy in places, but shouldn't take more than a couple of hours, including a side-trip to an impressive waterfall.

Our tip: saddle up! **Horse riding** is the best way to soak up the drop-dead gorgeous scenery. The **Ferme Équestre du Grand Étang** (☎ 0262 50 90 03; www.ferme-equestre-grand-etang.fr in French; Pont Payet; half/full day €45/110; 🐾 daily), just beyond

the turn-off to Grand Étang, arranges half-day treks to Grand Étang; the full-day trek includes lunch. It's also possible to arrange longer excursions to Bras Canot (two days), Takamaka (three days) and around Piton de la Fournaise (minimum three days). Ask for Fanou, who can speak English.

WHITEWATER RAFTING

Réunion's best white water is found near St-Benoît. The Rivière des Marsouins and the Rivière du Mât offer magical white-water experiences for both first-time runners and seasoned enthusiasts. A half-day excursion will set you back €45.

Some companies specialising in rafting trips in the area:

Cilaos Aventure (☎ 0692 66 73 42; www.cilaosaventure.com in French)

Oasis Eaux Vives (☎ 0692 00 16 23; www.oasisev.com in French)

Run Aventures (☎ 0262 64 08 22; www.runaventures.com)

Sleeping & Eating

Hostellerie de la Confiance (☎ 0262 50 90 50; La Confiance; s/d €55/60; 🍴 🍷) The stables of this once grand 18th-century Creole mansion surrounded by a 2-hectare garden of lush tropical vegetation have been converted into an eight-room inn. Though the setting is superb, the rooms are a tad long in the tooth. The restaurant (mains €13 to €19; open lunch Sunday to Friday, dinner daily) overlooks the garden. It's about 6km from St-Benoît along the road towards Plaine-des-Palmistes.

Chambre d'hôtes L'Orangerie (☎ 0262 50 97 60, 0692 01 18 87; http://monsie.wanadoo.fr/orangerie; d €47, dinner €20) A good port of call if you want to get away from it all. The rooms are ordinary but the setting is fabulous – tropical plants everywhere – and Madame is a good cook. Much of the produce cooked up is straight from the *potager* (veggie patch). At breakfast, you can dip into six varieties of homemade jams. Hmm, just thinking of the ginger jam makes us lick our fingers! It's about 7km from St-Benoît along the road towards Plaine-des-Palmistes (take the RN3 in the direction of Plaine-des-Palmistes and follow the signs from the Ferme Équestre at Pont Payet).

Getting There & Away

From St-Benoît a scenic road (the RN3) cuts across the Plaine-des-Palmistes to St-Pierre and

St-Louis on the far side of the island. Alternatively, you can continue south along the coast road, passing through Ste-Anne, Ste-Rose, St-Philippe and St-Joseph to reach St-Pierre.

St-Benoît is a major transport hub. Bus services to and from St-Denis run approximately every half hour. There are also two services linking St-Benoît and St-Pierre: line H follows the RN3 over the Plaine-des-Palmistes; line I takes the coast road via St-Philippe and St-Joseph. In both cases there are about four buses daily.

STE-ANNE

The village of Ste-Anne, about 5km south along the coast from St-Benoît, is noted for its surprisingly extravagant **church**. The façade of the building is covered in stucco depictions of fruit, flowers and angels. The overall effect is flamboyant rather than tasteful, and is reminiscent of the mestizo architecture of the Andes in South America.

There's no beach in Ste-Anne, but if you need to cool off, there's no better place than **Bassin Bleu**, appropriately dubbed 'the lagoon of the east', at the mouth of a river, on the southern edge of town. It's a superb swimming spot, with crystal-clear water and big boulders. Take a plunge! Take note that it's mobbed at weekends.

If you need to recharge the batteries, **L'Auberge Créole** (☎ 0262 51 10 10; 1 Chemin Case Ste-Anne; mains €7-25; 🍴 lunch daily except Wed, dinner daily except Mon, Wed & Sun), not far from the church, fits the bill, with an eclectic menu featuring Creole, *métro* and Chinese dishes, as well as wood-fired pizzas. Service is unpredictable. Hint: take your order to go and eat under *vacoa* trees at Bassin Bleu.

Between Ste-Anne and Ste-Rose is the graceful **Pont des Anglais** suspension bridge over the Rivière de l'Est, now bypassed by the main highway but open to pedestrians. It was claimed to be the longest suspension bridge in the world at the time of its construction in the late 19th century.

Ste-Anne is a stop on the coastal bus route from St-Benoît to St-Pierre.

STE-ROSE & AROUND

pop 6600

South of St-Benoît, the landscape becomes more open and less populated as the road hugs the coast around Piton de la Fournaise, the volcano which regularly spews lava down

its eastern flanks. The small fishing community of Ste-Rose has its harbour at the inlet of La Marine. There's a monument here to the young English commander Corbett, who was killed in 1809 during a naval battle against the French off the coast.

South of Ste-Rose the first tongues of lava from Piton de la Fournaise start to make their appearance.

Sights & Activities

Notre Dame des Laves is in **Piton Ste-Rose**, 4.5km south of Ste-Rose. The lava flow from a 1977 eruption went through the village, split when it came to the church and reformed again on the other side. Many people see the church's escape as a miracle of divine intervention. A wooden log 'washed up' by the lava now forms the lectern inside the church, while the stained-glass windows depict various stages of the eruption. Next to the church stands **La Vierge au Parasol**, a statue of the Virgin Mary optimistically holding an umbrella as protection against the volcano! A local planter set it up at the turn of the century in the hope of protecting his vanilla pods from volcanic hellfire and brimstone.

Anse des Cascades is beside the sea about 3km south of Piton Ste-Rose. The water from the hills drops dramatically into the sea near a traditional little fishing harbour. The coconut grove is splendid and is a hugely popular picnic spot.

Beyond Anse des Cascades, the main road continues south along the coast, climbs and then drops down to cross the 6km-wide volcanic plain known as Le Grand Brûlé (see p224).

Sleeping & Eating

STE-ROSE

Ferme-Auberge La Cayenne (☎ 0262 47 23 46; 317 Ravine Glissante; d incl breakfast €40-55, dinner €20) This well-run guesthouse scores points with its location – it's perched above the sea in La Ravine-Glissante, 1.5km south of Ste-Rose, which means lots of breeze and smashing views. Of the six rooms, the cheapest share communal toilets and have no views (not to mention the minuscule cubicle showers) – angle for a more expensive one. The owner, Madame Narayanin, cooks beautifully, using mostly home-grown ingredients. Let the breeze tickle your skin while you eat authentic cuisine alfresco on the covered terrace. The

only downside is the Roz d'Zil disco on the main road just behind La Cayenne; it can be a bit noisy on Friday and Saturday nights.

Chambre d'hôtes La Roseraie – Chez M Adam de Villiers (☎ 0262 47 21 33; 206 RN2, Ste-Rose; d €40-45, dinner €18) Another safe bet for the weary heat-drenched travellers: La Roseraie's most memorable features are the riot of greenery all round the sprawling property, the tastefully adorned rooms and the antiquated charm that wraps the place – it's a converted sugar-cane plantation. One weak point: some rooms are a bit close to the main road.

Hôtel-Restaurant La Fournaise (☎ 0262 47 03 40; www.hotellafournaise.fr; 154 RN2; s/d €40/65; ♿ ♻️) There's a fresh feel in this newish venture off the main road. Spruce rooms, shiny-clean toilets, colourful walls, air-con, an onsite restaurant and a pool are the order of the day here. The catch? It lacks charisma.

PITON STE-ROSE

Chambre d'hôtes Le Joyau des Laves (☎ 0262 47 34 00; www.joyaudeslaves.com in French; d €36-55; menus €11-25; ♿) lunch daily, dinner daily except Fri & Sun) On a headland 7km south of Ste-Rose, this is a comfortable *chambre d'hôte* run by a delightful young couple. Even if you're not staying, it's worth phoning ahead to eat in the restaurant and try local specialities such as palm hearts and *baba figues* (banana flowers) from the surrounding gardens.

Two pleasing eateries in the centre: **Les 2 Pitons de la Fournaise** (☎ 0262 47 23 16; RN2; mains €8-16; ♿) lunch & dinner) It's opposite the church – good to know if you feel guilty (of gluttony, that is).

Flours de Canne (☎ 0262 47 92 33; 43bis Lot Lacroix; mains €10-20; ♿) lunch daily except Wed & Sat, dinner daily except Wed & Sun) A vast array of Creole and *métro* dishes await at this reputable eatery.

ANSE DES CASCADES

Restaurant des Cascades (☎ 0262 47 20 42; mains €10-20, menu €10; ♿) 9.30am-5.30pm daily except Fri) A local and tourist favourite, this ramshackle beach restaurant in a lovely coconut grove bursts to the seams on weekends. It serves fresh fish and Creole dishes as well as sandwiches. Nab a seat if it's not too busy, otherwise take your order to go and enjoy it in a quieter spot near the beach.

Getting There & Away

Buses running from St-Benoît to St-Pierre make handy stops near Notre Dame des Laves, Anse des Cascades and La Vierge au Parasol.

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