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SAINT-DENIS GUIDE

wordtravels



Reunion's small but spirited capital is Saint-Denis, a picturesque town flanked by three mountains and situated at the mouth of the Saint-Denis River. Saint-Denis is a mixture of sophisticated French-style restaurants, bars and nightclubs, and more traditional sights and sounds. Sadly, it is often sidestepped on trips to the island, used merely as a starting point due to its close proximity to the airport. However, it is well worth taking some time to explore its charms before moving on.

The chic, upmarket seafront area with its lovely promenade is known as La Barachois, and remnants of the small port that once existed can be found here including an old warehouse of the East India Company that now houses the French Administration Offices. The Grande Marche (market) is a treasure trove of Malagasy arts and crafts, fragrant spices and textiles, while smaller markets offer mouth-watering fresh tropical fruits and vegetables. A distinctly French flavour mixes with African, Chinese, and Indian, creating a rich *mélange* that is evident even in the cuisine. Try a delicious *cari* (a meat or fish stew cooked in a sauce and eaten with rice) and *rougail* (a spicy tomato salsa), sample some excellent Chinese food from a tiny take-away or indulge in juicy mangoes or litchis off the stalk.

Saint-Denis boasts a fascinating mix of religious architecture including mosques, Tamil and Buddhist temples, and a cathedral, illustrating the cultural diversity of the island. There are several quaint old buildings, an interesting Natural History Museum, a modern art museum named after the poet Léon Dierx, and the facades of old East India Company buildings. It is also well worth getting out of town and climbing one of the three surrounding peaks for a gorgeous view. Perhaps the most breathtaking is from Route de la Montagne (the Mountain Road), a steep track that winds up to the top of a lava cliff that drops dramatically into the sea. Once the delights of Saint-Denis have been explored, the rest of the island paradise of Reunion awaits.

THE BASICS

TIME

Local time is GMT +4.

ELECTRICITY

Electrical current is 220 volts, 50Hz. European-style plugs with two round pins are standard.

LANGUAGE

French is the official language but the most widely spoken language among locals is Reunion Creole. English is taught at school level.

TRAVEL HEALTH

There are no real health risks associated with travel to Reunion. A yellow fever vaccination certificate is required for travellers arriving from countries with a risk of yellow fever transmission. Vaccinations are recommended for hepatitis A and hepatitis B. There is no chance of contracting malaria but precautions should still be taken against mosquito bites as there are occasional outbreaks of mosquito-borne diseases like dengue fever and chikungunya.

Reunion's medical facilities are very good. Most towns have doctors and clinics, while the principal hospital is in Saint-Denis. Tap water is usually safe for drinking. Public water sources are unsafe if labelled '*Eau non potable*'. There is a reciprocal health agreement with the UK and most EU countries, whose citizens are entitled to emergency medical treatment on presentation of a European Health Insurance Card (EHIC).

TIPPING

Tipping is not necessarily expected but is usually appreciated in Reunion. Some restaurants do add a service charge to the bill but if they don't a tip of about 10 percent is appropriate for good service.

SAFETY INFORMATION

Most visits to Reunion are trouble-free. Crime levels are low but visitors should still be vigilant and avoid extravagant displays of wealth. Swimmers should be aware of currents and riptides; take note of signs on the beaches and, if unsure, ask the locals. Shark attacks are a concern off the island. The cyclone season is from November to April and travellers in Reunion during this time should keep track of storm alerts. The Piton de la Fournaise volcano is still active and an eruption is always possible, but volcanic activity is carefully monitored.

LOCAL CUSTOMS

Broadly speaking, Reunion follows French tradition and culture, although the island is influenced by its many different population groups. There is a mix of Catholicism, Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam on the island and visitors should respect the different religious groups and their customs.

BUSINESS

The business culture is quite relaxed in Reunion and only the most formal of occasions will require suits. French is the language of business and an interpreter should be brought along if needed as there are few professional interpreters on the island. Business hours are generally 8am to 12pm and 2pm to 6pm, Monday to Friday.

COMMUNICATIONS

The international access code for Reunion is +262. The outgoing code is 00, followed by the relevant country code (e.g. 0027 for South Africa). City/area codes are not in use. Three local mobile phone companies provide service, and some international roaming agreements exist but these tend to be expensive. Internet cafes are available in the main centres and hotels generally provide internet access but it isn't always free.

DUTY FREE

There are no restrictions on the import of local or foreign currency but amounts exceeding €10,000 or equivalent must be declared if arriving from a country outside the European Union.

Travellers over 17 years of age entering Reunion can bring in the following items duty-free: either 200 cigarettes, 50 cigars or 250g tobacco; one litre of spirits, four litres of wine and 16 litres of beer; perfume for personal use; and goods up to the value of €1,000 if arriving from an EU country, and €430 if arriving from a non-EU country.

CLIMATE

Like the rest of Reunion, Saint-Denis has a tropical climate. November to April is hot and rainy, while the rest of the year is slightly cooler and drier. In Saint-Denis the summer temperatures average between 73°F (23°C) and 84°F (29°C), and in winter temperatures average between 64°F (18°C) and 75°F (24°C). Saint-Denis is home to the Indian Ocean's only tropical cyclone monitoring centre, although the island itself is seldom affected. The cyclone season runs from mid-November to mid-April and the island is occasionally affected.

Saint-Denis is a pleasant holiday destination year-round and is never cold, though it may be humid and rainy. Travellers generally prefer to visit in the cooler dry season, between May and October.

ENTRY REQUIREMENTS FOR SOUTH AFRICANS

South African nationals require a passport valid for period of intended stay; a visa is not required for touristic stays of up to 90 days.

PASSPORT/VISA

Passports must be valid for length of intended stay. Travellers must have proof of return or onward tickets, sufficient funds or lodging certificate and all travel documents needed for onward journey. A Schengen visa is also valid if endorsed "also valid for Reunion". It is highly recommended that passports have at least six months validity remaining after your intended date of departure from your travel destination. Immigration officials often apply different rules to those stated by travel agents and official sources.

MONEY

Reunion is an overseas departement of France and uses the Euro as its official currency. There are plenty of banks and ATMs on the island, and most shops and hotels accept major credit cards (though many require a minimum amount for card payments). Most businesses display their prices in their windows and restaurants and hotels should have their rates visible from the exterior.

TRANSPORT

There is a good local bus service that operates within Saint-Denis, while another bus service links the city to the rest of the island. The roads are well maintained and car hire agencies are available. Renting a car is a good option for those who want the freedom to explore independently, but really shouldn't be necessary for a stay in the capital alone. Taxis can also be found at taxi stands or ordered by phone within the city. The historic core and seafront area of Saint-Denis can easily and safely be explored on foot.

ATTRACTIONS

A holiday in Saint-Denis, with its brasseries and bistros, cafes and Creole character, is a great jumping-off point for exploring this island paradise while absorbing the town's architectural beauty, lively ambience, shopping for souvenirs (especially spices) and sampling its many good restaurants. Anyone who is seeking a tropical getaway with the added bonus of French flair, will enjoy a holiday in Saint-Denis. The city is usually just a pit stop on a Reunion itinerary, as the island's main attractions are not actually in Saint-Denis, but the city is rather charming and worth a day or two of exploring.

Tourist attractions in Saint-Denis include the Parc du Colorado, a park and playground which is ideal for a picnic or a barbeque and boasts beautiful views; the Jardin de l'Etat, a pretty little garden in the heart of the city; the Musee Leon Dierx, with its impressive modern art collection; and the Natural History Museum, where visitors can learn about the animals, plants and geology of Reunion. Of course, there are many glorious excursions possible from Saint-Denis, which is best used as a travel hub for explorations of the natural wonders of the island.

MUSEE LEON DIERX



The Musee Leon Dierx, in Saint-Denis, houses an impressive collection of modern art, with works by some of the great masters of the genre such as Gauguin, Matisse, Picasso, Vlaminck and Morisot. Much of the collection was once that of the French art dealer, Reunion-born Ambroise Vollard, and was donated to the museum by Vollard's brother, Lucien, after Ambroise's death in 1939. The museum is a must for art lovers and is lauded as the best art collection in the Indian Ocean. Tours of the permanent and temporary exhibitions can be arranged but must be booked in advance. The museum is closed on Mondays.

Address: 28 rue de Paris;



NATURAL HISTORY MUSEUM

The Museum d'Histoire Naturelle (Natural History Museum) of Saint-Denis opened its doors in 1855 and was the first of its kind in the Indian Ocean. The museum houses fascinating exhibits of the region's creatures, from shells to rare birds and mammals, as well as books and engravings. In the 1940s, cyclones destroyed much of the museum's collection and it was forced to close its doors for several years, but today it boasts roughly 42,000 specimens. The museum is within the State Gardens (Jardin de l'Etat), a beautiful botanical garden home to numerous species of trees from around the world and numerous beautiful plants, ponds and walkways. A

particular favourite in the gardens are the flowering lotus plants.

Address: 1 rue Poivre, Jardin de l'Etat;



SAINT-GILLES-LES-BAINS

Close to Saint-Paul, on the northwestern side of the island, Saint-Gilles-les-Bains is a highly popular weekend destination, offering a beautiful 12-mile (20km) lagoon and gorgeous white-sand beaches. Saint-Gilles was once a sleepy fishing village, but now it is Reunion's most popular resort, attracting crowds of visitors intent on enjoying the leisure activities, watersports and lovely beaches. Snorkelling, scuba diving and swimming are a must, but those tired of the beach can head to the Garden of Eden, a lovely botanical garden with roughly 700 species of tropical plants. Saint-Gilles has plenty of hotels and restaurants, though these tend to get very crowded at peak

holiday periods and weekends.

AIRPORTS

AÉROPORT DE LA RÉUNION ROLAND GARROS (RUN)

LOCATION

Roland-Garros Airport is located approximately five miles (8km) east of Saint-Denis.

GETTING TO THE CITY

Taxis are available from the airport, as is an airport bus to and from Saint-Denis that operates every day. The trip takes about 20 minutes.

TIME

GMT +4.

CONTACTS

CAR RENTAL

Car rental companies at the airport include Europcar, Hertz, Sixt, Budget and Avis.

FACILITIES

The airport has a snack bar, restaurants, ATMs, a bookshop, cell phone rental shop, boutiques, a restaurant, post office, a children's play area, a bank and a bureau de change.

DEPARTURE TAX

None.

WEBSITE

www.reunion.aeroport.fr
