

Picture Perfect But....

We recently visited Mauritius for a family holiday and had the experience of stepping into paradise. Many of us have seen pictures of amazing destinations, spotless beaches and azure seas, immaculate poolside furniture and boutique ice-cream shacks.

We are usually thumbing through a well-read magazine, whilst in a waiting room on a damp Wednesday morning, thinking, "Ooh, that looks lovely". Somehow, we found ourselves in a holiday destination like no other.

Mauritius is an island, a small dot of land in the Indian Ocean. It is 65km long, 45km wide and is home to 1.2 million people. The landscape is breath-taking; mountains covered with trees and shrubbery, little macaques popping out to say "Hello" and bird of paradise flowers lining the sides of roads, free-growing and unspoilt.

The seas are full of life too. Different shapes, sizes and colours of fish abound, even in shallow water, including tiny sea anemones clinging to the coral reef: great to see using a mask and snorkel!

However, within this paradise lies a dark past. As you drive around Mauritius, you see acres of sugar cane growing and sometimes locals working the land in the midday heat. Random wrought iron railings and gates appear from nowhere as you travel, unconnected to walls or other structures, rusting and forgotten, yet stubbornly present.

Port Louis is the capital of Mauritius and it has several museums, which contain artifacts of slavery and oppression. They hold the record of many thousands of people who, passed through the port from Madagascar and all over Africa, forced to work in the fields cultivating sugar cane and tobacco between 1639 and 1835.

After the abolition of slavery, indentured labourers came from as far afield as China, India and Singapore to work in Mauritius. Labourers were offered a contract, which gave a better life, a place to live and payment for their labours. At the end of their contracts, they were free to remain in Mauritius, build homes and become citizens.

Between 1834 and 1920, over half a million Indians came to live and work in Mauritius, bringing with them their culture, faith and skills. Today, the currency is the Mauritian rupee and the dominant faith is Hinduism.

The resort where we stayed was beautiful, we ate our breakfast there each day and our evening meals in the villages. Their food was delicious; many people queued up outside noodle, curry, rice and burger eateries each night, happy to talk to us and ask us questions about Manchester and our football teams

The unspoilt beauty of Mauritius shows God in all His creative splendour. The history lessons from Port Louis remind us that we often fall short of God's basic expectation that human beings treat each other equitably and with love.

In his recent address Rev. Walter Houston spoke about the breadth of God's forgiveness, the need for repentance, contrition, punishment and salvation. Whilst we cannot change the past or provide comfort to the many thousands of slaves, who suffered under cruel conditions, we can minister to those around us, support them in their time of need, and work with them to secure their future.

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