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# REUNION ISLAND

## *Sonia Chant*

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Piton de la Fournaise "The Furnace" began its most recent phase of activity in March 1998, continuing right through until late September, unfortunately ceasing just ten days before our holiday to Reunion Island began.

A typical shield volcano, Piton de la Fournaise is one of the world's most active, with more than 170 recorded eruptions since the first documented event in 1644. It first made its appearance some 300,000 years ago on the eastern flanks of the then active Piton des Neiges, now extinct, which forms the spectacular 10,000 foot high point of the central range.

Despite our initial disappointment at not witnessing the latest eruption, we settled down to enjoy a wonderful holiday on this paradise island in the Indian Ocean. With the exception of Piton de la Fournaise's eight mile wide barren crater, the island is green and tropical, surrounded by coral fringed beaches and towering up to the lush and deeply eroded mountain ranges of the interior, culminating in the three, so called Cirques, high valleys surrounded on all sides by canyon walls enveloped in mist and pitted with fabulous rock formations. Most remote of the three Cirques is Mafate, named after an African slave

who sought refuge here after escaping from the coastal coffee plantations in 1751. Today, around 500 people, some descendants of those early slaves, live in the many hamlets of Mafate, but, with no roads and a difficult two day trek from the coast, they remain isolated. A few of the older inhabitants, it is rumoured, have never ventured outside the Cirque.

The highlight of our holiday was a flight by microlight aircraft over Mafate, revealing farmsteads perched in the most inaccessible plateaux beneath the towering black peak of Piton des Neiges.

Equally memorable was our trek into a deep gorge of Cilaos Cirque, surrounded by tropical fruit trees and fragrant pine, with spectacular waterfalls cascading down the mountainside, colourful birds flitting overhead, and the strange echo of bull frogs.

Reunion Island, little known outside its mother country of France, remains an unspoilt paradise, offering unrivalled scenery, coral beaches, many miles of footpaths, and, for the geologist, the great active volcano of Piton de la Fournaise, which is guaranteed to erupt again soon.