

ESCAPING DEVIL'S ISLAND

CARINYA SHARPLES JOURNEYS TO FRENCH GUIANA'S SALVATION ISLANDS TO EXPLORE THE EMPTY CELLS OF ONE OF THE WORLD'S MOST NOTORIOUS EX-PRISONS...

Uhe most eerie part of Île Royale was the children's cemetery. It was deathly silent apart from the rustle of monkeys in the trees and the loud chirping of crickets. The epitaphs on the crumbling gravestones were pitifully simple: 'Jean Girault. Décédé à l'âge de 9 mois. Le 18 Janviers 1915. Regrets'. Suddenly the grim history of this strange, James Bond-esque island – with its shark-filled waters, picturesque ruins and wild nature – became uncomfortably real.

Together, Île Royale, Île du Diable and Île Saint-Joseph form the Îles du Salut (Salvation Islands), also known as the Devil's Islands because of their treacherous surrounding rocks. This triangular archipelago lies 15km off the coast of French Guiana, or La Guyane to locals – a French overseas département perched on the top of South America. Once a refuge for 18th-century French colonists escaping malaria and mosquitoes

on the mainland, the islands later became a notoriously brutal penal colony and the setting for one of the darkest ever periods in French history.

Today, the little-known islands are overgrown with lush, green vegetation and dotted with tall palm trees. On Île Royale, guinea pig-like agoutis scurry between the crumbling ruins, carrying chunks of coconut shells in their teeth, while Île du Diable has its own population of iguanas and even a few wild goats. Instead of prisoners, there are small groups of travellers, peering into abandoned cells and dodging the warning signs of 'INTERDIT' placed liberally along the rocky coastal path.

I'd vowed to visit the Îles du Salut some months earlier when a friend – hearing I was off to French Guiana –

mentioned Île du Diable. How could I resist a place called Devil's Island? As it turned out, exceptionally sharp rocks prevent boats from docking on Île du Diable itself, so I settled for a two-day trip to nearby Île Royale instead. One-day trips are available but it's worth staying overnight if you can.

LAUNCH PAD

Île Royale is a short 50-minute boat ride from Kourou, a coastal town



WRITER PROFILE.

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“SUDDENLY THE GRIM HISTORY OF THIS JAMES BOND-ESQUE ISLAND WITH ITS SHARK-FILLED WATERS BECAME UNCOMFORTABLY REAL”



» best known for its Centre Spatial Guyanais. This state-of-the-art international space centre attracts many French professionals to the country, who live, somewhat uneasily, alongside the rest of the population – a fascinating mix of Maroon (the descendants of escaped slaves), Creole, East Indian, Chinese, Amerindian and Laotian, to name but a few.

I stopped off in Kourou for a few days towards the end of January, when the weather alternates between beautiful sunshine and heavy downpours. A savvy French traveller had recommended staying in the Amerindian Village at Chez Taliko, a residential house with a *carbet* out back. A *carbet* is essentially a shack where you can sling your hammock (and mosquito net) – a common concept in French Guiana and a popular option for adventurous travellers, plus those, like me, scandalised by the ridiculous Paris-style hotel prices. The *carbet* at Chez Taliko cost just €8 a night and was a simple structure of wood with flimsy metal sheets as low walls. It was also right on the beach.

I arrived in Kourou just as dusk was settling, with no booking – in fact, no idea where Chez Taliko was. Luckily the minibus driver knew, and when Taliko himself appeared at the door he was unfazed by my unexpected appearance, although a bit surprised I was travelling alone. Not being able to properly suss out my surroundings in the dark, I spent

the night on edge. Every crash of the waves, swish of leaves and clank of the metal sheets had me imagining someone was approaching. In the morning – after little, if any, sleep – I woke to find someone had been there after all and was still perched nearby, staring at me intently... Then it squawked, and I realised my intruder was a parrot.

The next few days were spent visiting the space centre on a fascinating tour, walking along the beach and visiting a local market on Avenue de France, which sizzled with the delicious smell of rotisserie chicken and offered up a tantalising array of food, representative of the diverse populace. There was everything from fresh Vietnamese

summer rolls and local honey to fresh fruit and *accras de morue* (a fried snack I remember from Accra in Ghana – hence the name, presumably). Another day, I wandered through Saramaca Village – a newly urbanised area populated by Saramaca (a group of Maroon people) with a strange mix of cabin-style terraced houses and roads with names like 'Rue Rosa Parks' – only to be warned later not to go there alone.

THE HARD CELL

On the day of my trip to Île Royale, I left the Amerindian Village at the same time as Taliko and his wife, so they offered to drop me on Avenue Général de Gaulle, a popular street lined with restaurants and bars, at

the end of which is the Ponton des Pêcheurs or fisherman's dock – my point of departure. Public transport in French Guiana is practically non-existent, other than expensive cabs and the odd minibus or taxi *collectif*, so I was glad for the ride. Later in my trip – when travelling through the wild nature reserves of Kaw and Tresor, the capital city of Cayenne, and Cacao, home to a farming community of Hmong refugees from Laos – I was to discover another money-saving custom of the country: hitchhiking.

I'd already booked my €39 return ticket at the Guyanespace Voyage travel agents in Kourou, opting to travel by Royal Ti'Punch's sleek catamaran. As the departure time inched closer, its smooth, white



Caymans live in the reservoir on Île Royale



The prison quarters room on Île Royale



Military hospital
on Île Royale

seats were filled by a lively mix of soldiers on leave, young couples and older travellers. Everyone was French – bar the friendly crew who were Guianese. British visitors, I soon discovered, were something of a rarity in French Guiana. The ride was choppy and the military troupe, whose members had immediately stripped down to their bikinis and trunks to lie on the trampoline-like net, squealed in delight as the waves splashed over them.

From the Île Royale jetty, it was a steep, sweaty climb to the hotel with my backpack. It wasn't until the next day, when I was leaving, that I discovered the pick-up truck that carries guests' luggage. There are three different types of accommodation to choose from on

Île Royale: the well-rested prison administration building that now serves as a hotel, where prices start at €166 (including two lunches, dinner and breakfast); the more basic former guards' block (from €60); and the *carbets*, costing just €10. I'd opted for the final option, not realising that I'd be staying in one of the original prisoners' quarters. When I peered through the heavy door, I found row upon row of army-style hammocks identical to my own – except these were actual military hammocks, owned by the 30 or so French soldiers stationed on the island at the time. Bunking down in a room full of French squaddies? Not tonight, Napoleon!

I marched back to the reception desk, explained the situation and was relieved to be given a key to my own 'cell'. After the near al-fresco *carbet* in Kourou, this long building with faded pink paint and a fully tiled bathroom felt like the presidential suite. I tied my hammock to the metal hooks embedded in the wall – trying to forget that they had once held prisoners' chains – and enjoyed a long shower, sidestepping the seed husks or insect wings (I couldn't figure out which) that littered the bathroom floor. Maybe 'presidential suite' was a slight overstatement.

GRIM FINDINGS

Île Royale covers just 21 hectares so you don't need a guide, although tours are available. One of the boat

crew had promised to show me around but then disappeared as soon as we docked (for lunch, I later found out), so I set off alone. Luckily when I'd booked my tickets, I'd picked up a leaflet with a map of the island, which proved indispensable and helped me identify all the different buildings. After happening on the disturbing children's cemetery, I retraced my steps past my 'bedroom' and

"I TIED MY HAMMOCK TO THE METAL HOOKS EMBEDDED IN THE WALL – TRYING TO FORGET THAT THEY HAD ONCE HELD PRISONERS' CHAINS"

headed towards the picturesquely ruined former military hospital and the new-looking red brick chapel – part of the restoration project of the French government's space agency, Centre National d'Études Spatiales (CNES), which took over ownership of the islands in 1965.

Just reading the names of the buildings as I passed there was chilling – 'le pénitencier' (the condemned prisoners' quarters), 'la maison des fous' (the mad house) and the 'asile d'aliénés' (lunatic asylum). In 1923, journalist Albert Londres visited Île Royale and was taken to this asylum by the island's doctor. In a later report, he would recall encountering an inmate who threw stones into the sea from the same point on the island every day. His plan, Londres explained; to

build a bridge from South America to France so he could walk home. The more I read about the prisoners' inhumane existence on the islands, the more I understood the wild desperation the man must have felt.

The first prison ship docked on 10 May 1852 and by the end of that year there were some 1,000 inmates on the islands. Between 1852 and 1862, an incredible 12,780 convicts (including 329 political prisoners)

were sent from France. Soon other penitentiary units took precedence, including ones in New Caledonia, Saint-Jean du Maroni and Saint-Laurent du Maroni, a small town on the Maroni River at the French Guiana/Suriname border.

Then in 1887, the passage from France to the Îles du Salut was revived and new waves of prisoners, condemned for crimes ranging from espionage and treason to desertion and forging currency, flooded in – troublemakers and escapees were sent to Île St Joseph; common-law convicts to the colony's administrative heart, Île Royale; and the rest to Île du Diable, the smallest but most feared of the three islands. And so it continued until 1947, when the penal colony finally closed.





View from Île Royale
to Île du Diable



Entrance to the Camp
de la Transportation



Ruins on Île Royale



Camp de la Transportation,
Saint-Laurent du Maroni



Papillon's 'tag'?



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Devil's Island's famous inmates

PAPILLON

Convicted murderer Henry Charrière's autobiography chronicling his daring escape from Île du Diable captured the attention of the world. The book, entitled *Papillon* after his nickname (meaning 'butterfly'), was later adapted in the 1973 film starring Steve McQueen and Dustin Hoffman. Although now thought to have incorporated experiences of other prisoners, Papillon's adventures continue to fascinate, and a remake of the film is said to be in the pipeline, with Robert Downey Jr. and Philip Seymour Hoffman tipped to play the lead roles.

DREYFUS

In 1895, France was captivated by the trial of Captain Alfred Dreyfus who was condemned of treason and sentenced to life on Île du Diable. He was kept in solitary confinement, confined in the day and shackled at night, for four brutal years before finally being found innocent in 1899.

BASE CAMP

While I was in French Guiana, I visited the sleepy town of Saint-Laurent du Maroni, just three hours from Kourou by minibus. Most of French Guiana's main attractions lie on or near the 350km coastal strip, so travelling from one town to the next rarely takes longer than a couple of hours.

As the main processing point of the penal colonies, Saint-Laurent du Maroni is best known for its Camp de la Transportation (Transportation Camp). Although you can enter for free, you don't get access to all areas unless you go on one of the guided tours – and for €5 a pop, it's worth it.

The camp contains a chapel, clothing store, court and even an anthropological room, where prison doctors once studied inmates to put together a 'criminal profile'. Some of the former administration buildings have been restored and

two, somewhat bizarrely, now serve as a public library and theatre.

But it's the prisoners' quarters that proved the most fascinating – and disturbing. The long blockhouses, which officially housed around 40 men (although often held double), are lined with long stone 'benches', each with iron bars embedded on top. While the individual cells drip with water and decay, the wooden planks that once served as beds still fixed with feet shackles. After years of abandonment, the walls are black with mould, sprouting with moss and missing their doors – though conditions probably weren't much better when they were in use.

Cell number 47 caused everyone the most excitement, as it is believed to be where Papillon (see boxout) had been detained at one point. Clearly a highlight of the trip – I hadn't known who Papillon was until about five minutes before –

the rest of the group snapped away. Inside, we took turns to see where the name 'Papillon' had been scratched into the stone floor. I dutifully photographed it – fully aware that the chances of it being an authentic 'tag' of the infamous escapee were pretty low.

At the far end of the complex, our Amerindian guide led us to a stone circle flanked by cells. This was, he told us, where the guillotine once stood – a constant, visible reminder to all the convicts that their lives hung in the balance. The kitchen, he pointed towards a building nearby, was where their final meals would have been prepared. We looked on solemnly. I tried to stop picturing what my final meal would have been.

LIGHTS OUT

Back on Île Royale, I continued down the coastal path – strewn with coconut shells and palms – to



Our guide at Camp de la Transportation



View from Île Royale to Île Saint-Joseph

infobox.

Daily Air France flights depart from Paris to Cayenne, the capital of French Guiana. www.airfrance.com

ACCOMMODATION

Chez Taliko, Village Amérindien, Kourou
05 94 325 927

VISAS

British passport holders do not require a visa.

HEALTH

Vaccinations against diphtheria, hepatitis A+B, rabies, tetanus, TB and typhoid should be considered. There is a high risk of yellow fever and malaria throughout the country.

MORE INFORMATION

Îles du Salut official website: offers information on boats and accommodation. www.ilesdusalut.com

a square pool formed by rocks, which turned out to be the prisoners' swimming pool. The next turning took me to a rocky cove scattered with sunbathing tourists and soldiers with regulation haircuts and tropical tans. I'd already been warned that the rocks were slippery but still managed to lose my footing and end up sitting down rather forcefully with a wet thud. Still sitting, I gradually edged my way forward until just my head bobbed above the powerful waves. After a while, I slid my way back up to dry off in the sunshine and look out for the sea turtles that live off the coast.

Later that evening, as I was sitting in my hammock eating the rations I'd bought in Kourou – baguette and butter, bananas, papaya and biscuits – there was a knock at the door. It was one of the soldiers from the first 'salle de hamacs' inviting me to a birthday do they were holding.

I'd already planned to visit the hotel restaurant, but watching other people tuck into fresh fish, grilled chicken and mouthwatering desserts while drinking a €2,60 can of peach iced tea turned out not to be much fun, so I headed back towards my room and on the way got sucked into the party.

“THE PRISONERS’ QUARTERS PROVED THE MOST FASCINATING – AND DISTURBING. AFTER YEARS OF ABANDONMENT, THE WALLS ARE BLACK WITH MOULD, SPROUTING WITH MOSS AND MISSING THEIR DOORS”

A barbeque had been set up, the smell of sizzling sausages filled the air and a long table of drinks was being steadily consumed by the chattering troops. I was plied with fruit juice, sausages and breadfruit, before being joined by a welcoming party wanting to find out why I was on the island and keen to list

everything they knew about England – which mostly seemed to consist of Mr Bean! Turned out they weren't soldiers after all, rather the French equivalent of the Royal Marines who had recently finished a tour in Afghanistan. After their questions and once my French had been exhausted, I decided to turn in

– not entirely reassured by their parting promise to shoot any monkeys that came to my room.

The next day, I continued to explore the island, escaping a sudden burst of rain by taking refuge in the museum located in the former Director's House, where I discovered a series of fascinating

displays (in English and French) about the history of the islands and their most famous prisoners. I emerged after the rain had subsided to find everything looking even more lush and green than before and headed back to browse the hotel gift shop before joining some of my new military friends for a final lunch of fish soup.

On the way down to the shoreline I got chatting to a Chinese-French woman travelling with her boyfriend and another couple, only to discover I'd missed a morning expedition to Île Saint-Joseph. She described it as even more wild and rundown than Île Royale, and I was gutted to have missed out. At 4.30pm, the catamaran pulled away from the jetty and we began the return trip to Kourou, sipping complimentary glasses of red punch and watching the islands until they sank back into a sea of memories. ■