

AHASoc: Placement guides

Outre-Mer (France)



I was an assistant in La Réunion 2007-2008, a small French island in the Indian Ocean located some 240km from Mauritius. La Réunion is a département and as such is governed by Paris just as the rest of Metropolitan France is. It is a small island and, providing that there are no traffic jams, can be driven around in 4 hours. It has a population of 800,000.

On arrival I worked and lived in St Andre in the East and moved into the capital, St Denis, in the North half-way through my stay. I was an assistant at a collège and at a lycée.

Transport

Everyone in La Réunion has a car and they are very useful but naturally there are traffic jams everywhere you go. Driving in Réunion is not for the faint-hearted, often tail-gating occurs and trying to find a parking space is like trying to find a needle in a haystack. However it does have its advantages. Cars are relatively cheap to buy and can easily be sold on. Insurance is not too pricey either but make sure the car has its carte grise (registration certificate) and check the car is controle technique ok, this is to ensure that cars more than 4 years old "roule bien". A good website for help is:

<http://www.angloinfo.com/countries/france/cartegrise.asp>

Buses are really useful but not as cheap as you might think; you can get student bus passes, which your responsible should help you with but by far the best thing is the car jaune. These little yellow minibuses go all the way round the island and, although more expensive, are a comfortable (think sweltering heat) air-conditioned ride to the most popular parts of the island with only a few stops along the way.

Faire du stop - Hitch-hiking is acceptable in Réunion so long as you offer to pay for a bit of the journey. Use common sense though, you choose the cars to get into and never hitch hike alone. I did it many times in Réunion always with a boy and didn't have any problems. Most people who picked us up dropped us exactly where we wanted to go but told us not to hitch hike.

Cycling is hugely popular and acquiring a bike is pretty easy - usually for around 100 euros.

There are no trains in Réunion

Finance

As an assistant on the island you are one of the best paid assistants in the world with an average salary of 1000 euros per month. Beware though, this quickly goes after food and rent!

Opening a bank account is easy and the most popular choice is Bred. Some things are different though as you will be charged for your bank account each month; also, you will be charged for using a cash machine owned by a rival bank.

You will need your carte de sejour (if a non-EU citizen), your passport and your original letter of job application and they in turn will give you a RIB which has all your account details on it until you have your card etc.

You will need to open your bank account ASAP to ensure you get paid on time and don't have to wait until after 2 months.

At the end of your time you can close your account or have the mail forwarded to England. However it is very difficult to close it from the UK, so try to do it whilst still there.

Healthcare

As an assistant working for the French government you are entitled to a carte vitale, a chip card which is read by the doctor's or pharmacist's terminal and a 13-digit "numéro de Sécurité Sociale" which ensures almost free healthcare.

In France, the Healthcare system (Assurance Maladie) is based on the concept of providing a large amount of help for any medical need, and total help when it is serious : on the basis of a standard cost, medical care (doctors appointments and visits, dental care, etc..) is reimbursed around 80%, medicine from 80% when corresponding to a real medical need to 40% for less needed and of course 0% for others ; standard cost for a doctor is 22 Euros (sometimes, they can charge 30 Euros or more: *dépassement d'honoraires*) ; serious illnesses, including those due to old age, are covered 100%.

You will have to go to your local with all the paperwork you have. Sometimes it can take a while to get your carte vitale and you might have to go several times but don't be put off just keep going and be firm but polite. I found the line, I cannot leave until I know this has been done always works, accompanied with the line, but it's necessary for the Rectorat.

Often if there is a problem with your dossier, it simply won't be processed and you won't be told until you go back to find out why.

Living Costs

You have a high salary because living costs are high. Rent can cost between 300 – 600 euros per month.

A mobile phone can be cheap and in fact a contract phone works out quite well; I had to only show my one way ticket out of Réunion (the return half) and I could cancel my contract. This should be checked before signing your contract. Orange were by far the best - offering cheap rates and free minutes / texts to fellow Orange customers.

Accommodation

You need to be quick to get the good places in Réunion and word of mouth is an excellent way to go. I originally lived with my responsible and when I felt confident enough, I moved in to the city and shared a house with one réunionnais and one métropolitaine. I got a great deal simply because the landlord had heard good things about assistants being responsible etc.

Le quotidien and Le journal are the two most popular newspapers and each release listings for finding accommodations in les petits annonces. House shares are usually the cheapest option and great for improving your French, if you want to spend money and have transport living in the villas in the hills are great but not cheap. Don't be put off if you lose out on places or people tell you they don't want a foreigner living there; it's not personal - they think it will be easier for them and many have concerns that you won't stay long.

Bureaucracy

You will never have dealt with so much bureaucracy in your life as you will do in France. Whatever official document you have, make 10 copies of and get each one signed / stamped new each time on them where appropriate. When sending documents to any official agencies you will be required to send three copies and if possible ask for a receipt saying you have given in your documents. Keep any reference numbers you get extremely carefully.

Weather & Climate

Reunion has the opposite seasons to Britain and I spent my Christmas sunbathing on the beach. However it does get hot - beware - take plenty of sunblock!! This may sound silly but the number of assistants in my year that didn't wear it so that they would get a tan and end up with heatstroke was ridiculous.

Jan / Feb until March / April is cyclone season, you will need a few light jumpers or cardigans to layer up and definitely a light rain mac! The rain can get very bad if a cyclone nears the island - so be prepared and always make sure you have tinned food, bottled water, matches and candles wherever you live!!

Fitting-In

Creole society is very extroverted and the people are not known for their subtleties. People will be direct with you whether complimenting you or not and can be very blunt. Try not to take anything personally. The Réunionnais' had very particular ideas about the Brits. I was always expected to be on time, drink tea and love the Queen. It was also a hysterical joke if they told me 'my cat is black' 'Brian is in the kitchen' and 'my tea is rich'.

In general the people there are very flirtatious and you will hear the phrase 'ils sont chauds là-bas'. And they're not talking it being hot weather.

Be aware that sometimes you will be seen as a trophy but generally the people are exceptionally warm and friendly and enjoy talking to you and finding out where you're from etc.

La di la fé means gossip in créole and people who have never met you will know who you are from a friend's daughter's cousin's son's neighbour who has a friend that saw you once in Carrefour. Just smile, go with it and be aware that stories (true or false) get round this island like quick fire.

Leisure

The great advantage of being on this beautiful tropical island is that there is so much to do, think of every water sport available, brilliant hiking (un rando(nnée)), horse riding, walking, seeing the sights of the cities, the many festivals across the island, volcanoes, waterfalls and so much more.

As soon as you finish class get out and about!

<http://reunion.runweb.com/page-266-lang-EN-2V-page,Essential-sites.html> has many ideas and lists of events

I took up a kick boxing class as a way to get fit and meet new people, it was great I made new friends and my French improved, the more time you spend with the locals, the more you get to see the place through a different set of eyes.

Food

The food is fantastic and, like the people, a vast mix of Chinese, Indian, African, French and Malagasy.

The fresh fruit and veg are great and there are many markets, you will also see street food, little snacks, like bonbon piments, samosas and, of course, bouchons.

The Sandwich americain has to be seen to be believed, baguettes filled with whatever you like then with chips in on top and finally melted cheese. Not for the faint hearted.

The most popular / traditional meal is rougail saucisse and for those that don't like chilli beware, every créole meal is served with a rougail, usually a very spicy relish / chutney style dip that you put a bit with you rice, the piments cabris (chillis to you and I) will blow your head off.

Vegetarians might have a bit of difficulty to begin with and you might have to explain a few times what that means that you can't eat but it does get easier.

Rhum arrange is a secret weapon, it's a local rum (usually Charette) which has been matured with something. Many Créoles do this themselves and the longer you leave it the better it is. It's commonly done with litchis, orchids, lemon and vanilla pods. And you drink it neat.

Tutoring

Many assistants earn extra money through giving private tutoring sessions. Prices range from 15 to 30 euros.

Be cautious of where you hold your classes and how you advertise them; often the best way is through word of mouth and your teachers might recommend people to you.

If you don't feel comfortable at any time you can stop the lesson or not give anymore.