

## VAN LIFE IN REUNION ISLAND

Little Flashback! I would like to start my articles on Reunion Island with my little van road trip. When you read my first article (Reunion Island) you can say to yourself, why do a road trip in van on such a small island? Moreover, when we know the offer in terms of lodges and free camps, the van is not the first choice.

But I was still in the Australian mood, I had just finished my first three months here, working as a waitress. I hadn't really started my exploration yet and let's face it, living in a van is cool! Well, today I 'd tell you that sleeping in a hammock is pretty cool! But it's another story!

Two friends, with whom I lived, were willing to go on a little adventure in a van and this was convenient for me because a van rental is not cheap when you are alone. They were free at the dates I had planned in my little head. So, I started to prepare this road trip. I already had an idea of what I wanted to do and a real goal: to leave the west coast where we lived.

First step: the choice of the van!

You can find several rental agencies, just type in a search engine "van rental" and you will come across the main agencies and private sites. The famous "Blacksheep" is on the island. They offer some good deals but a little more expensive than others. For our trip, we chose runavan ([rwww.unavan.re](http://rwww.unavan.re)). You can find on their website, several ranges of van options and several "packs". Of course, like any rental, you must pay attention to what is included in the basic price. There are always packs to add utensils or gadgets. You will have to pay for any surplus. It's important to know in advance what your real needs are. For example, a USB adapter for charging phones can be a good idea to avoid wearing out the batteries when you go on a complete autonomy. The websites are well done, and you can follow how much each option would cost. Depending on the site you will have to count the insurance separately and for a van it can be quite expensive.

The island is very good for bivouacs (free camps). You will find plenty of spots equipped with toilets and barbecues. Guides exist to explain where the spot is, how to get there and what are the facilities. The guide provided with the rental was: "La Réunion Pique-niques et camping" from Austral Edition (not wanting to favour any site I let you search on the net). Very useful! They added a small sign for the van! Because many free camps are accessible for tents, hammocks but not for vans. There is even a part about the wilder bivouacs allowed.

So, we chose our VW T4 California, it was too beautiful!

We defined our drop-off points. I absolutely wanted to take advantage of these few days to go to the volcano, the Piton de la Fournaise! So, we planned a trip like this:

(Map on the French version)

We drove to SAINT-PIERRE in the south, to get some groceries.

The van is cool, but not so cool with curves and uphill. Switching between the first and the second speed permanently is tiresome! But the show that was taking place was worth it. On the top, we were on a sunny day with a cloud pool.

Then here we are, the Plain of sands. A lunar place. A huge desert of volcanic stone. Morning, noon or evening this place is breathtaking.

Arrived on the parking of the Pas de Bellecombe we left the van to go and see the view on the crater and admire the sunset. To know a little better now, even if it's further from the start of the hike, the parking Foc Foc can give something wilder if you want to sleep there, and with an even more beautiful sunset.

We were lucky to have a starry night, a full and red moon. Another magical moment, despite the cold.

Our first evening in the van. Did I tell you that it was cold? Well, when you sleep in a van with a roof that turns into a bed, via a tent system, I can tell you that you feel the cold really well. So, you have to take that into consideration when you rent a van on this island. If in the lowlands the cold will surely not bother you, the highlands of this island often frost during the austral winter and when comes the evening on the heights of the volcano it is very cold! (Even if we were in summer, I must admit).

The night was short. We were also woken up by people who came around 2-3 am to climb the crater at night and see the sunrise from above. One of us didn't really sleep and could see the dawn appearing at 4 am.

Anyway, with this special night we were up on time to watch the sunrise! What a sunrise... maybe my favorite! You can see later the one of the Piton des Neiges (The summit: 3070 m) It was also something, but I have a preference for the Fournaise one.

After this sweet moment, it was time to climb it. When you start the hike, you already have to count the descent into the enclosure, via some nice steps...which will have to be climbed back up on the way back!

I like challenges, so I twisted my ankle as soon as I started. A little pain that would not let me go but without being too annoying.

The first part is rather flat, these stretches of dried lava are always impressive. We call it "graton". Be careful as our friends the dogs are very sensitive, it can cut their paws!

Then comes the ascent of the Dolomieu crater! The one I told you about in my first article "Reunion Island".

We had the chance to have a beautiful weather, we could admire a blue sky and a sea of clouds.

You must be careful where you walk because the gravel is not a smooth and practical surface. Moreover, the way is not intuitive. We have to turn around the crater while climbing it. That's why there are small white marks to help guiding to the top. It is still early for us, but we cross already people who come down again, it is the nice guy who woke us up at 2 am on the

parking. They watched the sunrise from above and are thus on the return. I won't hide that it could be a little pleasure to do it again the same way.

I have to tell you that as in many places, people have a hard time to respect the nature. For a hike like this, it's an advantage, you only have to follow the handkerchiefs to the top... but for a site like this, it's also sad. I can't say it enough but what the hell are we doing throwing stuff in your backyard? And I don't think I'm being extreme when I say that littering is not normal. Anyway, we arrive at the top. The view is magnificent. This crater is gigantic. After a small snacking and photos, of course, we go down again.

Having started with two fast guys I quickly found myself alone in this descent. I have to say that I tend to talk to people, so it slows down the pace.

It was hot. It was only 9am but it was still pretty hot. I passed a military regiment going up, equipped like never before. I didn't want to be in their shoes. I had talked to the boys on the phone, and they had left me a bottle of water at the steps, because yes, they had abandoned me (always go hard on the drama) without water or sunscreen. Finally, I survived, found my bottle, and finished this round trip like a big girl.

Little advice for the crater hike:

- Leave early. You'll have a better chance of having good weather (the fog often lifts mid-morning), and less heat if you're lucky enough to have good weather. Don't forget you are on a volcano, so on lava and there is no shade.
- Bring water and sunscreen. But also, something to cover yourself just in case. The Panoply of the hiker! But no need to overload yourself.
- Officially, it takes 5 hours back and forth. But it's feasible for less time, depends on your "level". I could see people of 70 years old+ climbing it as youngsters.
- Be careful, depending on the weather, avoid being alone. It is not so rare to hear that someone has disappeared. The weather is treacherous and the place a bit hostile. It is easy to lose your sense of direction when the weather is foggy.

Besides, like all the hikes on the island, there is a website and an application: [randopitons.re](http://randopitons.re) where you will find all the useful information for each hike and updated comments to know the real state of the trail.

We take off the shoes, we have a small snack (again...) and direction the wild south! This part of the island is my favorite. I did not know it yet as I do now and already, I was under the charm!

We stopped in Bassin Bleu for a small barbecue and quiet bath moment. It was really nice. This Pool is between the ocean and a freshwater spring. If you drink the cup, it will be much less salty. Actually, at the time of writing this article, it has been closed because the water was contaminated.

Then we took the road to Anse des Cascades. This place is just magical. At the water's edge, forming like a small fishermen's cove. A path with walls of waterfalls and in the middle of it all a palm garden, a beauty. You can find a restaurant and a snack bar there. Just be careful with the opening hours.

We left the van here and enjoyed the much milder evening than on top of the volcano. I'm not going to lie, we fell asleep like babies after a few (and then some) glasses of rum.

Day 3 was chill. We got up in this crazy place to take a shower under one of the waterfalls. It was a great time! The place is equipped with toilets/lavabos! Thanks to the tourist places! Also, very nice for the morning toilet after 48h of road trip.

Small advice for Anse des cascades:

- It can be crowded so choose your time well.
- Bivouac/Free camp possible in tent, hammock, and van.
- Be careful, the sanitary facilities close at the end of the afternoon and all night.
- Do not count on the snack bar to drink your coffee. They do not open so early.

We took the road again all cleaned up but one of us was still a bit hungover.

After having taken advantage of it, we left. We had a little road until our final point, Takamaka. If there was anything we were waiting for, this was it. Takamaka is not really considered as a circus (if you want, I talk about it on my article "REUNION ISLAND"), but the view is magnificent. This is where the hydroelectric plant was built. There is a tunnel dug about 300 meters deep and about 800 meters long. This power station required a lot of work, but it brings electricity to more than 35,000 homes.

This area of the island is not the sunniest and we spent the rest of the day at our bivouac point napping and having a fire to warm up. We had a long and dangerous hike ahead of us the next day, so we played it pretty serious that night. Meal, laugh and sleep.

For the day 4, the last of the road trip, we got up at dawn with a rather mild weather, and a magnificent view on Takamaka. Light breakfast, then we prepare to take again the road. We were 5 min from the point of departure with the van.

And there...the van which does not start. No, no it is not a joke. We were lucky to have a bunch of strong guys (sorry but yes in these cases the muscular men are more useful.) They helped us to push the van. The objective? to return on the road going downhill and hope that it's only the battery. But we doubted it. We were right. So, we were on the side of a road between two curves, at 7:30 am with a van that wouldn't start anymore. I can tell you that I had a little nervous laugh. For those who know my adventures, a similar experience happened to me during a road trip in the Melbourne area.

We had to wait for the rental agency to open, then we had to wait for the insurance to open as well. With nothing to do but wait, we put on some music and passed the time as well as we could. After several phone calls and 3 and a half hours of waiting, the tow truck arrived. 11h30. That was it. We had a good laugh. The truck could take only two people, I was stashed in the van at the back on the trailer. We arrived at the renter after having made the tour of the island and, for my part, a small nap.

We got the refund for the last day, which seems normal. At least for me. But that's all. Not having been able to fill up the van before returning it, they did not forget to withdraw the

consumption we had during the days when the van was working. Perhaps that a gesture on this point would not have been too much. We had after all a problem with the van, which was rented, and we had a rather long wait. Furthermore, we learned afterwards that the assistance had limited hours (no 24/7 here), we had to wait, and we had more the impression to annoy them than anything else.

But overall, I can't say "no, don't go there» because the whole service was still good. Oh yes, as for any rental, don't forget that a deposit will be requested! For us it was a bank loan, not debited, of 2 500 euros... You must have it on your account.

You will have understood that there was no hike in Takamaka that day. But our memories are full, and this little adventure made me want to explore the island, which I have continued to do regularly since. So, you'll have to follow this up by reading my next articles!

I hope you enjoyed my little adventure I Take care!

Kiss kiss bang bang