

The History of Turtle Bay

For centuries, 'Turtle Bay' was known by sailors to be an excellent harbour anchorage. They could safely stop to refuel for their journey, to and from the east.

Between 1598 and 1710, the Dutch tried several times to establish a colony there. It is precisely those Dutch captains of the "Compagnie des Indes" that named it "Schildpatt's Baai" (Turtle Bay) due to the number of sea turtles living in the bay.

The northern part of the island also had abundant ebony forests, an ideal material for repairing damaged ships. On some old Dutch maps, the bay is also called 'Ebbenhauten Baai' (the Ebony bay).

After having exploited most of the resources, the Dutch gave up and decided to leave the island.

In 1636, English ships began to anchor in Turtle Bay to look for wood, meat (goats, ducks and geese which were living there in colonies), fish and oysters, water and also to treat their ill men, and for the carpenters to make seines to catch fish.

In 1735, the French Governor of the 'Compagnie des Indes', Mahé de Labourdonnais, undertook the construction of the city of Port Louis and the development of its harbour.

The activity of Turtle Bay nearby then started to a full extent. In 1739, the construction of a hospital for sailors suffering from scurvy was completed.

Around 1740, an arsenal was built, which are now the 'Ruins of Balaclava', as well as an iron foundry and a powder mill. In order to provide water to the workshops, a dam was built on the Citron River in 1743, a dam that still exists today.

Much of the iron production for the construction of Port Louis and its harbour was coming from Turtle Bay. The canons, gunpowder and weapons that were used during the victorious campaign of Mahé de Labourdonnais in India in 1746, were manufactured in Turtle Bay. 400 slaves worked there during this period.

The bay was thereafter nicknamed 'La Baie de l'Arsenal' and the small village that lies on the road from Port Louis to Grand Bay was called 'Arsenal'.

Upon request of the "Compagnie des Indes", Mahé de Labourdonnais ordered the construction of a defence battery along the bay. The mill and the foundry situated near the Citron River estuary were therefore safe.





On 8 May 1748, the Admiral Boscawen arrived at Turtle Bay with a fleet of 23 British ships in an attempt to take the island from the French but without success.

Under fire for more than 4 days from the guns of the bay and the munitions stored in the arsenal, they surrendered without being able to put a foot down. They then left to reach India before the monsoon season.

On the 21st September 1774 a terrible explosion occurred resulting in 40 victims, of which 11 died. All the buildings, with the exception of the saw mill and the flour mill, were destroyed.

For security reasons, the new mill was rebuilt further inland to avoid it being hit by potential enemy firing from the sea.

In the early 19th century, Joseph Dioré became the owner of Turtle Bay. Due to problems with water supply in Port Louis, he decided to transfer his flourmill there.

On the 29 November 1810, a British fleet of 74 ships arrived in Mauritius with 16,000 men on board who finally took over the island from the French. They signed a negotiated capitulation the 3rd December 1810.

In 1856, the estate was bought by Mr. George Courson of the Villeneuve, Mayor of Port-Louis from 1859 to 1861.

He renamed the property "Vallio City". He enjoyed a great lifestyle and was renowned for his brilliant receptions however he went bankrupt in 1863.

Pierre Adolphe Wiehe, a merchant of Port-Louis, bought the property and increased the capacity of the flour mill. It is probably at this time that the area was called Balaclava after the Crimée battle in 1854 that made this name famous.

The wheat that was coming from Australia was transported by boats anchoring in the bay to the dock and then through a small railway (the first of its kind in Mauritius) which provided a liaison between the quay and warehouses. The flour mill, operated by two big wheels, produced up to 4500 pounds per day, and the adjacent warehouses could contain up to 10,000 bags of wheat.

The property also had the most modern rum distillery on the island (which was placed under a strict government control) and 6 lime kilns. About 95 workers were working there at that time. Mr. Wiehe also built a school (open three hours per day) for the children of its Indian origin labourers.

He built a splendid country house named 'My Desir' in the beautiful gardens approximately at the same place of the actual Château Mon Désir.

During the second half of the 19th century, the wealthy citizens of Port-Louis considered Turtle Bay the perfect location to spend their holidays. The whole area which now houses the Maritim Estate was bustling, and there was even a restaurant in the area.

The activity of Turtle Bay gradually decreased and lost its importance over the years due to malaria disease which encouraged people living in the area to seek refuge in the highlands, but also due to the development of the sugar industry.

It was in 1990 that the Turtle Bay really came to life again with the opening of the Maritim Hotel Mauritius. In 1973, the German chain, 'Maritim Hotels' became owner of the land with the Harel family. Maritim Hotel Mauritius opened in 1990 with the 'Mon Désir' restaurant then located in the grounds of the hotel. It was in 2009 during the renovation of the hotel that the present 'Château Mon Désir' was built.

This fine dining restaurant overlooks the ruins that were also partially renovated in 2009. Those well-preserved ruins of the old flour mill, the distillery and dam built by Mahé de Labourdonnais were declared National Monuments and are now part of the historical heritage of Mauritius.

The preservation of the natural environment of Balaclava and the Turtle Bay is a priority for the management of the hotel.

The Turtle Bay has been recognised in 1987 the first protected Marine Park of the island.

