

Destination: Paradise

Imagine a breezy, palm-fringed island in the Indian Ocean. There's no money, no Internet or TV, and a single phone line to the outside world. Only a handful of people are allowed to visit each year. Tempted? The author was, and he tells what he found.

by William F. S. Miles

The island of Agalega is forbidden to the casual tourist and off limits even to curious citizens of the nation that claims it. Proscription makes it all the more enticing, of course, to the diehard adventurer. Agalega is actually two small islands (27 square miles in all) narrowly separated by shallow tidal waters and sitting by themselves off the southeast coast of Africa in the Indian Ocean, about 1,000 miles due east of the border between Tanzania and Mozambique. Agalega's closest neighbors are the southern group of the Seychelles archipelago and the northern tip of Madagascar. Yet the island has ties with neither. It belongs rather to Mauritius, an island state more than 600 miles to the south. And the government of Mauritius has decreed that no one—Mauritian or foreigner—may set foot on Agalega unless sent by the government on official business. Because the only approved way of getting to Agalega is with the Mauritian Coast Guard or by government-chartered ship, the travel ban is easily enforced. (There's an airstrip on Agalega, but there are no commercial flights to the island. The Mauritian Coast Guard uses a small, noisy, unpressurized plane to get to and from the place when necessary.) Anyone alighting by other means would be energetically interrogated by a police force whose main duty it is to assert Mauritian sovereignty over the remote outpost. Not that any other nation contests Mauritian sovereignty.

Agalega's most precious natural resources are modest amounts of coconut and octopus, the former shipped off as copra, the latter dried into a local delicacy. Mauritius, in contrast, is an economic dynamo. The size of Rhode Island, it has a population of more than a million, exports millions of tons of sugar, manufactures tens of millions of dollars' worth of textiles, and is visited annually by half a million tourists. The place is overcrowded and polluted, which may help explain why it regards distant Agalega as paradise and is determined to keep unspoiled this bit of Eden accidentally bequeathed to it by history.



Mauritius was a French colony from 1715 until 1810, and then a British colony until its independence in 1968. These days you hear not just French and English spoken on the island but Creole, Hindi, Urdu, Arabic, Tamil, Telegu, Marathi, and Mandarin Chinese. I was there as an American Fulbright scholar doing research on multilingualism, and when I first heard of the restriction on travel to Agalega, I made up my mind to visit the island. When the permission process turned into a great bureaucratic challenge, the venture became all the more irresistible. A casual conversation with a Mauritian police sergeant at the birthday party of our housekeeper had planted the idea in my head.



The tip of South Agalega, one of the most remote islands in the world.

“Now *that* would be an interesting place for you to visit,” Michel advised. “That’s where you will find the true island life. A place where people live without money. Where you live in tranquility, as part of nature. A total break with your normal routine, away from modern life, away from the pressures of home and work.”

Michel was wistful, though he spoke only from hearsay. “I have colleagues who’ve done tours of duty in Agalega,” he explained, “and before I retire I’d like to do one too. But it’s hard to get the assignment. One has to be very lucky. But for you, it’s different. If the American embassy were to write a letter on your behalf, I’m sure you’d have no trouble getting permission. Just tie the trip to your research. You don’t get seasick, do you?”

Visiting Agalega had not been part of my research plan when I arrived six months earlier. In fact, I hadn’t even heard of Agalega. Most Mauritians, I was soon to discover, knew virtually nothing of the island either. Agalega had a primary school, and that provided a pretext. For the previous three months, I had been visiting schools all across Mauritius. Was Agalega not an integral part of the Republic of Mauritius, and was its school any less deserving of a visit than those on Mauritius proper?

The case had to be made at several levels: to the U.S. embassy, to the commissioner of police, to the ministry of the interior, to the office of the prime minister, to

the commandant of the coast guard, to the ministry of education, and to the university dean there in Mauritius. One after another, the “no objections” miraculously filtered in. Then I received a call from the final gatekeeper, the Outer Islands Development Corporation (OIDC), which in practice rules Agalega.

“Professor, we have no objection to your conducting research in Agalega. But the OIDC is accountable to the government for every person we send and every rupee we spend. In your case, the fee will be 20,000 rupees. This will include your passage to and from Agalega and room and board for the three days you’re there. You’ll be well provided for.”

Has paradise a price? Does heaven post an entrance fee? How much would you pay for the privilege of going where no casual traveler can lawfully go?

Even the most compulsive explorer has a budget he or she must respect. Twenty thousand rupees (about \$1,000) exceeded mine. I informed the OIDC director, sadly, that my research stipend could not handle what was, after all, the equivalent of six months’ salary for the average Mauritian. He said he understood and promised to get back to me.

A week later, the fee dropped by half. I explained how much I appreciated the efforts made to accommodate my finances but apologized that even 10,000 rupees was a

Destination: Paradise

cost beyond my means.

A few days later, the fare was reduced to 5,000 rupees, the equivalent of about \$250. Agalega, here I come!



The *Mauritius Pride* is a freight-cum-passenger vessel that plies the Mascarene Islands circuit of Mauritius, Réunion (which belongs to France), and Rodrigues, Mauritius's other inhabited outpost. The privately owned *Pride* is hired two or three times a year by the O IDC to service Agalega, and, for several reasons, it's not an assignment the crew members relish. The sailing time to Agalega is more than twice as long as that to Rodrigues or Réunion, and in winter months, the open seas can be extremely rough.

In the eyes of the ship's hostess and restaurateurs, passengers to Agalega are a social cut below those bound for the two "R" islands. No tourists journey to Agalega, only returning islanders, laborers, and government agents. And crew members are not allowed to go ashore. Bound by the same legal restrictions as the rest of the world, they, too, can view Agalega only from afar.

As payback for my shameless bargaining with the O IDC, I was assigned not to the first-class quarters aboard the *Pride*, where my companions would have been three solar energy technicians, two O IDC officials, a skiff manufacturer, a couple of nuns, and a priest, but to the second-class level, among Agalacians returning to the island, a few policemen, and some 40 construction workers. For reasons of proletarian solidarity and anthropological authenticity, I was initially pleased by the placement, however befuddling it was to the ship's purser and welcome hostess. It wasn't long, however, before I thought I'd been condemned to maritime purgatory.

Physically, the accommodations were correct enough. If we second-class passengers didn't have the cabin berths enjoyed by our betters, we at least had plush reclining chairs of a type normally associated with first-class airplane seating. If we didn't dine at white-clothed tables, attended by solicitous waiters, we at

least had decent cafeteria-style meals, in unlimited portions. And though our bathrooms were communal and the *vomitoire* public, the showers had hot (actually, scalding) water, and the toilets never ran out of paper. No, what turned second-class into outright hell were other accouterments, of an electronic nature.

In each corner of the eight lower-deck sections was a video monitor, from which blasted, virtually nonstop and late into the night, the lowest-grade movies produced anywhere on the planet, ranging from American gangster flicks to Oriental kung fu flops. The air in the compartment was pierced repeatedly by machine-gun firings, bomb explosions, martial arts grunting, hysterical screams, torture-victim shrieks, death-throe gurgles—sometimes in harrowing combination. Each appearance of our pretty hostess, Sonya, in her quasi-sailor outfit, provoked in me a Pavlovian response of dread and rage. Her descent to the netherworld of second class had a single purpose: to replace one execrable video with another. Escape was impossible, because the doors to the decks were locked at dusk, and sleep was unsustainable. My misery was complete when I developed a first-class case of seasickness.

The reality of my nausea initially sank in at lunch, while I was squashed between some enormous construction workers with voracious appetites. An intellectual incomprehension of the ability of my maritime messmates to ingest second and third helpings of curry aboard a pitching and rolling vessel turned to revulsion at the very sight of their overflowing plates. The architectural wisdom of installing the *vomitoire* in an easily accessible location became apparent.

It was evening, it was morning, and it was the third day. Two lights glowed faintly in the predawn darkness. Agalega! Women removed their curlers and changed into fancy, bright dresses. Policemen donned their uniforms. The excitement grew as sunlight gradually illumined a vista of white dune beach bordered by wind-bent, needle-leaved filao trees, and a tender sputtered off the north island to meet us.

First aboard the *Mauritius Pride* was the commander of the police forces stationed on

>WILLIAM F. S. MILES is a professor of political science at Northeastern University, in Boston. He is the author of several books, including, most recently, *Bridging Mental Boundaries in a Postcolonial Microcosm* (1998).



Waiting on Agalega for the Mauritius Pride and the long, rough sea trip back to Mauritius.

Agalega, who quickly dispensed with the formalities. No sooner had he greeted and back-slapped his counterparts than he became engrossed in our latest edition of *Le Mauricien*. Were people stationed on Agalega so starved for news of the outside world that reading a newspaper took priority over clearing exhausted passengers for disembarkation? Not necessarily. Reports of police brutality on Agalega had recently become national news, and the police commander wanted to know at once how his role in the beating of a young Agalacian man had been reported in the Mauritian press. A surfeit of alcohol and a scarcity of women had apparently strained relations between transient Mauritian officers and native Agalacians. In a drunken row over an island girl, an Agalacian had been so severely beaten by Mauritian policemen—in the station house—that he required evacuation, by air, to a hospital in Mauritius. The police commander seemed satisfied with the uninformative newspaper account.

Agalega is controlled so completely by the OI DC that not even native-born islanders can own land or possess a right to residence. Every adult living on the island is an employee of

the corporation or a registered dependent of one. If freedom from the tyranny of money is one idea of paradise, then Agalega satisfies it. The OI DC provides each employee with a credit account and allocates one time slot per week for shopping in the corporation store. All transactions are conducted by OI DC ledger; there's no money on the island. Because the corporation holds a monopoly on civilian transport, it knows exactly who's leaving, who's arriving, and who's a current resident. The rhythm of life on Agalega is calibrated to excitement over the arrival of coast guard and police vessels and the OI DC-chartered *Mauritius Pride*, and regret over their inevitable departure.

The OI DC's rule over Agalega may be absolute, but the corporation is benevolent. It does, after all, view development, not profit, as its primary objective. In early colonial days, in the 1800s, Agalega was run as a private plantation and the workers were personal slaves, not corporate employees. During the early years of its independence, Mauritius neglected Agalega, but it's now taking the island in hand and looking to the welfare of the inhabitants. The OI DC put in

Destination: Paradise

place the nonmonetary economy to shield Agalacians from a pattern of debt and improvidence, and it's for their benefit that the company store sets a limit on the amount of liquor available to each worker. And thanks to the prefabricated housing and scores of well-fed construction workers our ship was disgorging onto the island, Agalega's ramshackle tin huts were soon to be replaced by modern dwellings.



As we coasted along this island, it seemed very fair and pleasant, exceeding full of fougère and coconut trees: and there came from the land such a pleasant smell as if it had been a garden of flowers.

In 1596, that's how Sir James Lancaster, an English navigator and pioneer of East Indian trade, described the desert island named after the early-16th-century Portuguese explorer Juan de Nova, otherwise known as Jean Gallégo on account of his Galician origins. Three and a half centuries later, Agalega was still idyllic, at least according to the British geographer Robert Scott, who wrote this in 1961:

The impressions which Agalega leaves are of light, freshness, color, and incessant movement. The sun makes constantly changing patterns of green and cobalt and gold. It accentuates the whiteness of the long, straight roads and the spaciousness of the grass-covered aisles between the coconut palms. In turning to flashing green and silver the breaking rollers and shoal waters, it emphasizes the deep, changing blue of the ocean. The steady breezes temper the heat of the sun and the constant movement of vegetation gives vitality to the landscape. Whether it is the rush and murmur of the surf; the dance of light and shadow in the groves; the sudden flight of birds; the whirring of a carriage behind the beat of a pair of cantering horses; the swirl of a herd of wild horses as they gallop with flying tails towards the deeper shelter of the groves, followed sedately by their more inquisitive entourage of mules, there is always a feeling of liveliness.

Much of what Scott described two generations ago has disappeared. There are no horses or donkeys left; the roads that impressed him so much have either shrunk or been reclaimed by nature; street lighting has vanished, as have trolleys and a narrow-gauge railway. Agalega was once the "pearl" of the so-called Oil Islands, those British Indian Ocean islands from which coconut oil used to be exported in significant quantity. When the British took over Mauritius from the French, in 1810, they allowed the French elites to remain and guaranteed by treaty their cultural, linguistic, and property rights. So even under British rule, local concessions were still very much dominated by a Francophone upper class. Agalega was developed principally under the tutelage of appointed administrators, of varying degrees of enlightenment, both before and after Great Britain abolished slavery in 1835. With the founding of the Société Huilière d'Agaléga (Oil Company of Agalega) in 1892, a somewhat less arbitrary regime emerged.

There are still three settlements on the twin islands—La Fourche, Sainte Rita, and Village 25, the last so named because, according to local lore, slaves who misbehaved were taken there to receive 25 lashes of the whip. But there are half as many people as when Scott visited. Indeed, with fewer than 230 islanders, Agalega is less populated today than it was in the middle of the 19th century. You would expect the absence of humanity to make for a pristine natural setting, and Agalega is, in many respects, still as beautiful as Lancaster and Scott found it. Trees that in the local Creole are called "good God's coconuts" sway to Indian Ocean breezes along the coastline and in the interior, and the softly lapping coral-green waters mesmerize with their translucence. Yet though the place would seem cut off from the world, Agalega's otherwise lovely powdery sand beach is periodically blighted by debris brought from afar by ocean currents.



Speak of expatriates on islands, and you evoke images of wizened and overtanned colonials, hippies, and volunteers going either native or stir-crazy. On Agalega, though, the expats are themselves islanders: Mauritians. (The differences in skin color are less pronounced than in the classic expat scene: Mauritians, mostly of South Asian ancestry, are brown; Agalacians, descendants of Africans, are black.) Although the Mauritians serving as teachers, nurses, and technicians on Agalega have officially never left their own country, some manifest the same symptoms of isolation and culture shock shown by American Peace Corps volunteers parachuted into Pago Pago or Vanuatu. Typical case: A Mauritian signs up with the OIDC for a one-year contract, and after those 12 months he's supposed to sail home. But the *Mauritius Pride* doesn't show up to repatriate him, and three, maybe four, months elapse beyond the contractual expiration. The worker is stranded on Agalega.

When that happened to Rajesh Tataree, a young paramedic on North Agalega, he became philosophical. On an island that enjoys only two hours of electricity a day, Rajesh relishes his unobstructed view of the stars each night, a virtually impossible visual experience on superlit Mauritius. Santosh Bissessur, on the other hand, views every extra day as the extension of a prison sentence. For Santosh, life on Agalega is absurd. He copes by imposing an unflinching strictness on his hours of operation as manager of the island's sole telephone link to the outside world—and his rigidity inconveniences and frustrates everyone else. In 1799, in the first attempt to settle Agalega, a French physician convinced the governor of Mauritius to dispatch a sailor and a slave to conduct a survey. By the time the physician remembered to relieve them three years later, the sailor had gone mad. Reading about that unfortunate seaman, I can't help but think of Santosh.

In contrast, Santosh's fellow OIDC contractee Abeeluck copes by "attending" courses over the telephone from Brahma Kumari Raja Yoga Spiritual University in India and functioning as unofficial Hari Krishna missionary. Thanks to Abeeluck's Hindu evange-

lism, when you go to Santosh's tiny Mauritius Telecom office to place a phone call from Agalega, you're greeted by a "Faith in God Means No Fear" sticker at the counter.

The best-acclimated expatriates on Agalega are no transient, childless Hindus, as are Rajesh, Santosh, and Abeeluck, but a Muslim family man, Parvez Sultan Husnoo, and his wife. (Sensitivity to Muslim modesty stopped me from asking Madame Husnoo her first name.) The couple constitute the entire teaching staff at the government primary school, where they instruct 26 students, including their two sons, in grades one through six. (I observed classes taught in English and French at the school.) This is the couple's second extended sojourn on Agalega. Previous teachers, ostracized by ornery parents or racked by island fever, fled Agalega in dejection and loneliness. But when the island's parents invited Parvez to return after his first assignment, he accepted eagerly.

"This is not an easy teaching post," Parvez explains in flawless French with a Mauritian lilt, "but it has its rewards. The main problem is that there's no clear connection between what goes on inside and outside of school. Hardly any parents of our pupils are themselves literate. There's no reinforcement of children's reading or schoolwork. There's no work ethic at all on Agalega, certainly no study ethic. Only one or two kids here have any chance at all to go on to high school. For the rest, school is just a place to spend a couple of hours a day for a couple of years before going out into a world on the island in which their education is irrelevant.

"The second problem is a lack of continuity. The arrival of the *Mauritius Pride* is a great disruption to learning, not so much because we have to cancel classes when the ship arrives but because parents will just yank their kids out of school in the middle of the year and take them on board back to Mauritius. Sometimes parents will leave on the ship and *not* take their children with them. That's also disruptive." It was clearly so for one boy who sat face down and crying at his desk. His mother had decided to leave for Mauritius the next day, and the fatherless boy was to be looked after by his older sister.

"A third problem is alcohol. What is there to do on Agalega? What distraction, what entertainment? All the men do is drink. All they



Schoolchildren returning home after lessons in Agalega's primary school.

care about is getting around the regulation that rations run. Since there's no money on the island, people trade in liquor. That's what got some of my predecessors in trouble. If teachers refuse to trade in alcohol, parents turn against them. If they get sucked into becoming suppliers, that brings trouble as well."

"How do you avoid the trap?" I ask.

"I'm a Muslim," Parvez explains, "so I don't use alcohol. I made that clear to the parents from the outset, and it's something they understand and respect. In the same way, I lay down rules for the students that I demand the parents to respect."

The Husnoos work nonstop through the morning, then send the students home and eat their family lunch in Mrs. Husnoo's classroom. Classes resume in the afternoon, and when the session's done, Parvez goes fishing for the evening meal's entrée. His is the life of Robinson Crusoe, pedagogue. It's clear that the Husnoos have not chosen to reside on Agalega for the financial bonus given all Mauritian civil servants who live there. The Husnoos savor the simplicity of existence on the island, the closeness with nature and the sea. It's a way

of life not available on their native Mauritius. Yet they pay a high price. Housing is scarce, and the Husnoos' modest one-story home is not within easy walking distance of the school. They commute to work by motor scooter, over unpaved tracks, and the grueling cross-island travel has caused Mrs. Husnoo to miscarry.

I am put up at the comfortable OIDC guesthouse, within easy walking distance of the school.



Sainte Rita, erstwhile "capital" of Agalega, resembles a ghost town. The hamlet, on South Agalega, no longer has, as it did for Scott, "a smiling . . . aspect, the mellow, comfortable look of a place that has been a loved home for generations, its old buildings carefully preserved." Agalega's administrative center was moved to the north island because it was so dangerous for ships to berth at Sainte Rita. Fronting the large village square are government stores and offices, a police station, a school, a church, and a dispensary. But the steel frames of the government buildings have been exposed and twisted by a cyclone, the

church is desolate for lack of a priest, and tropical vines creep through the closed-down schoolhouse. The companion-starved policeman, Louis Nilkamul, who argues with the “doc” in the dispensary, Paul Coralie, over who will host whom for lunch, reminds me of the abandoned French sailor of yore. We visitors from the north island, with whom I’d sailed on the *Mauritius Pride*—the solar technicians, the two nuns, the priest, and Paul’s wife, Alix—make up more than half the people now on South Agalega. Other than the lonely cop and the paramedic, only a few old men and some young mothers with their children regularly occupy Sainte Rita.

Passage between North and South Agalega is much less ceremonious than it was in Scott’s day. Forty years ago, the crossing was expedited by “cheerful burly men very neatly dressed in sailors’ white duck uniforms” working out of a permanent boathouse. Nothing of the sort exists today. Once there was even a causeway for wheeled traffic, but that was more than a century and a half ago. At low tide one can walk the mile-and-a-half channel, and that’s how Alix made her way to her husband’s side. (I traveled by motorboat.) Before Paul’s assignment to Agalega, the Creole couple, married for 20 years, had never spent a night apart. But their elder daughter wanted to study art and theater in France; to make that possible, Paul needed the salary bonus from the hardship posting to Agalega. A Michelin map of France adorns his wall and is the most prominent fixture in his humble home, an extension of the church.

Constable Nilkamul, a large Catholic wearing a Marlboro T-shirt, insists that, despite the dearth of available Christians, the visiting priest ought to celebrate Mass: “If you’re doing it on [the] north island, you should also do it in the south.” The priest says that he hasn’t enough wafers for two Masses, so he will conduct a service but not perform the Liturgy.

The policeman, the priest, and I are three at the table, and Constable Nilkamul has only two teacups, both of them chipped. When a visitor empties one, Nilkamul takes it and, without rinsing or wiping, pours himself a drink. Never before in my life has a

stranger—an Indian Ocean policeman at that—been so solicitous about my physical comfort. The constable insists that I take more tea, that I unload my heavy backpack under his protection, and that I follow his advice about tying my shoes. “Don’t lace them so tightly,” he admonishes me in French, after the obligatory siesta. “It’s not good for the feet.” When I loosen my laces under his guidance, he murmurs approvingly, “*Ah, ça, c’est mieux ça.*”

Despite his obvious hunger for companionship, the lonely constable claims he is happy in Sainte Rita. At his regular post on Mauritius, he explains, the police register at least 3,000 cases a month. During the past three months on South Agalega, he has had to file only two reports. It’s true that both involved fatalities, but then again, neither death was human. The first creature to die was a pig. That case was closed when it was determined that the swine had died of natural poisoning, after having eaten something lethal. The second to die was a cow, and the suspicion is that the animal was deliberately poisoned with insecticide. The affair is still pending, and the constable, in the meantime, spends much of his time spearing and drying octopus and taking siestas in the hammock that’s plainly visible in front of the Agalega-South Police Substation.

South Agalega seems a lugubrious place, and a visit to its two burial grounds—one for the white overseers of yesteryear, the other for their black hands—reinforces that impression. Not even in death do the two races mingle. But in a counterhistorical twist, the cemetery for blacks is preserved and the one for whites is in ruins. Once-powerful masters become poignant in their anonymity. The tallest tombstone reads:

Administrateur de l’Île
Décédé le 13 Février 1897
Agé de 42 ans

On North Agalega, an old woman is dying in the dispensary. She has had a stroke and presents a major managerial problem for the ethically responsible but cash-strapped OIIC. Should she be taken to Mauritius by air or by sea? What are the chances of her expiring en route? If she should die in Mauritius, where she

Destination: Paradise

has no relatives, must her next of kin be transported from Agalega to bury her? The OI DC does its level best to ban dying on “its” islands. Old age, illness, and death are too administratively inconvenient.

That’s why Tonton René, a sprightly septuagenarian who has no blood relatives on the island, is being evacuated against his will from Agalega. The man has been shifted back and forth between Mauritius and the island for some time now, at mounting expense to the OI DC. René’s knee is bad, and the authorities have decided he cannot be properly cared for so far from Mauritius. “I want to die and be buried on Agalega,” he confides in a strong but sad voice. But his wish for a tranquil demise on his peaceful island is being thwarted. Tonton René will most likely end up in the Mauritian capital, Port Louis, in a hectic, grimy slum.



On the return journey to Mauritius, the crew and Rajesh Tataree, the paramedic whose tour of duty had expired four months earlier, took pity. Rebuffed in my pleas that there be at least one “no video” section in second class, I’m upgraded to share a first-class cabin with Rajesh. And so I join the genteel company of members of the cloth, OI DC officers, solar energy technicians, and a Franco-Mauritian builder of yachts and skiffs, the only other white passenger on board the *Mauritius Pride*. It seems to make everyone more comfortable, the crew as well as the first- and second-class passengers, that I’m where I “belong.” I now have an acknowledged status and nickname: “Prof,” I’m called, just as the priest is always “Mon Père,” the nuns are “Ma Soeur,” and Rajesh is “Doc.” It’s quaint (and not a little colonial) the way we use these intimate but formal epithets. Seasickness returns, of course, but at least I’m miserable in the semiprivacy of a cabin, where I can put myself out of sight, mind, and video.

Sister Julie, a pint-sized and energetic nun originally from Madagascar, is a non-stop source of conversation, no matter what the sea conditions. “I’m no saint,” she explains, repudiating any spontaneous first

impressions. Sister Julie will return to Agalega one day, perhaps accompanied by “Mon Père.” When she does, she will no doubt see the Husnoos, the Mauritian Muslim answer to the Swiss Family Robinson, and Paul Coralie, the lonely “Doc” of Sainte Rita, changing bandages and dreaming of Alix, his wife in distant Mauritius. They’re among the privileged few to whom Agalega cannot be forbidden. With a little luck, even Tonton René may get his wish and return to die on the island of his youth.



I do not plan to return to Agalega. One visit was enough for me. Yes, its crystal-green waters were splendid to behold from shore and an irresistible enticement to wade. But I was unprepared for the detritus that mars the island, both physically and culturally: the bottles and footwear from Indonesia, clear across the Indian Ocean, that wash up on the beach; the violent videos that make up a large share of the imported celluloid entertainment. Remoteness no longer guarantees either a pristine land or a pristine soul.

After all my strenuous efforts to reach Agalega, I kept encountering, during my three days there, people who couldn’t wait to escape the place. Islands, after all, may be exotic to us continental folk, but are not necessarily so to islanders.

Still, from Parvez I learned that you don’t have to be an urbanized Westerner to want to get away from it all. The Muslim and his wife love having escaped the stresses of life on their developing island-nation of Mauritius. On Agalega, they contemplate their faith and raise a family, out of range of the siren songs of fanaticism and materialism. Parvez is master of his school, where he begins the day inspecting the fingernails of his few pupils and encouraging them to say their Christian prayers. Far from the intrusions of school inspectors and ministerial mandates, he performs his job faithfully, a true professional, answering above all to his conscience.

No man is an island unto himself? Could be. After Agalega, I rather think that an island can set you free or make you flee. One man’s paradise is another’s prison. □