

**MISSIONS ATLAS PROJECT  
AREA OF THE WORLD  
COUNTRY**

**Snapshots Section**

**Country Name:** *la Le Département de Réunion*

**Country Founded in:** French settlers arrived between 1638 and 1642. In 1946, France changed the status of the island from a colony to a full department of the French government.

**Population:** 784,000

**Government Type:** Réunion is an overseas department of France.

**Geography/location in the world:** Réunion is an island off the coast of Madagascar in the Indian Ocean.

**Number of people groups:** 16

**Picture of flag:**

(local flag—not official)



(French flag—official)



**Religion Snapshot**

Major Religion and % of population: Roman Catholic 84.36%

All religions and % for each:

*(At least 6.39% of the people in the following categories are affiliated with two of the groups and thus the numbers will be somewhat approximate due to this double affiliation.)*

Roman Catholic	84.36%
Protestant	5.53%
Independent	.49%
Marginal Christian	.91%

Hindu	6.7%
Non-Religious/ Other	6.18%
Muslim	2.15%
Baha'i	.07%

Information provided by *Operation World*

Government interaction with religion: The French Constitution promotes religious freedom.

## Country Profile

### Basic Facts

**Country Name:**      **Réunion**

#### **Demographics:**

All statistics in this section were gathered during 2005. The estimated population of Réunion was 784,000. Approximately 383,000 of these were men and 401,000 were females. Preschoolers the age of four and below accounted for 9.4% of the population. Children between five and fourteen years of age accounted for 17.6% of the population. Young adults between the ages of 15 and 24 accounted for 16.6% of the population. People between 15 and 59 equaled about 62.8%. Senior adults 60 years and older accounted for 10.1% of the population. The median age was 29.5.

There are about 15,000 births every year. There are an estimated 2.44 children born to every woman. The infant mortality rate is 6.7 deaths for every 1,000 live births. The death rate is 5.5 deaths for every 1,000 people. The life expectancy for the total population is 76.4 years. The life expectancy for males is slightly lower at 72.3 years while the life expectancy for females is slightly higher at 80.5 years.

There are approximately 16 different people groups in Réunion. The largest group is the Reunionese Creoles. Other groups include Comorians, Malagasy, Chinese, French, and Indians.

<http://www.joshuaproject.net/countries.php>

<http://esa.un.org/unpp/p2k0data.asp>

#### **Language:**

The people largely speak Reunionese Creole which is a derivation of French mixed with many other languages including Malagasy. French is used for business and political meetings.

#### **Society/Culture:**

The society which evolved on the island developed from the mixing of French cultural norms with African, Chinese, Indian, and Malay customs brought by other immigrant groups. The descendents of French planters, which are known as Grand Blancs, often shaped political and societal trends. Yet, all other groups have contributed to the overall culture which has commonly come to be known as Creole.

Most people continue to be Roman Catholics and the rituals of the Church influence the daily practices of people. Weddings and funerals are grand events as are christenings. Some Catholics mix beliefs from African tribal religions with their faith. These people will visit diviners when sick in order to gain help. The diviners often delve into the world of the occult.

Unemployment among lower classes often causes a sense of dissatisfaction and unrest. People see education as a means for bettering their economic and social standing. Young people may tend to adopt French fashion in order to appear as if they belong to a higher social class.

People on the island celebrate both public and religious holidays. The public holidays are usually similar to those of France. For example, people celebrate Bastille Day on July 14th to commemorate the storming of the Bastille prison during the French Revolution. Islanders remember the victory of the Allied Forces over the Nazis on May 8th and the abolition of slavery on December 20th. May 1st is Labor Day and November 11th is Armistice Day.

Christian religious holidays often center on Catholicism and its feast days. August 15th remembers the Assumption of Mary while November 1st is All Saints' Day. Families also remember the birth of Christ on December 25th.

Different ethnic groups celebrate special holidays. The Chinese celebrate New Year's around the middle of February. Tamils, on the other hand, do so in April. Tamils and other Indian groups celebrate Cavadee in April and Dipavali in October. Muslim families set aside special times at Ramadan, Eid-ul-Fitr, and Eid-ul-Adha.

Eating is a very important daily event in the lives of most islanders. Rice is a main ingredient of many dishes. Spices such as cloves, turmeric, saffron, ginger, and peppers add many rich flavors to local dishes. Curry, which is a stew made of meat or some type of fish, is a very popular dish. It is often served over rice, beans, or lentils. Sometimes rougail, a sauce made from tomatoes, lemons, and pistachios, is added to dishes. Local greens such as chayote leaves, Chinese cabbage, and watercress are used as vegetable dishes. Rum is a popular alcoholic drink which accompanies many meals.

Minahan, James. *Encyclopedia of Stateless Nations Volume L-R*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 2002.  
<http://us.franceguide.com/special/INTERVIEW.html?nodeID=1474&EditoID=181724>  
<http://www.everyculture.com/No-Sa/Reunion-Island.html>

### **Government:**

Reunion is an overseas department of France and as such has some autonomous local government. Law is based upon French law. There is a national Court of Appeals, which is the highest law of the land. There are also various levels of subcourts. Reunionese can elect and send three people to represent them in the French Senate and five people to speak for them in the French National Assembly.

The local government consists of a unicameral General Council which has 49 representatives. Anyone over the age of 18 is welcome to vote in open elections for the members who serve six year terms. There is also a unicameral Regional Council which has 45 seats and whose members also serve for six years.

The capital is located in Saint Denis. There are 4 major regions called *arrondissements*. These regions are further divided into 24 communes. These communes are sectioned into 47 cantons.

"CIA: The World Factbook: Reunion." *CIA World Fact Book* (January 2005): N.PAG. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed July 9, 2009).

### **Economy:**

The economy of Réunion is largely dependent upon France. In 2004, the Gross Domestic Product was \$4.57 billion. The real growth rate was 2.5%. Agriculture accounted for about 8% of the GDP while services took 73%. Industries equaled 19%.

It is estimated 309,900 people were working in 2000. About 75% of these workers were in the services sector while 13% worked in agriculture. This represented a shift from previous years when most of the economy had been dependent upon the production of agricultural products such as sugarcane and vanilla. The unemployment rate was quite high at 36%. People of French and Indian descent often had better educations and thus were more financially stable.

People working in industrial pursuits were often involved in the production of sugar or rum. About 63% of the export commodities in 1993 were from sugar while 4% were from rum and molasses. The primary export partner was France.

Islanders had to import several different types of products including food and manufactured goods. The top import partner was also France.

"CIA: The World Factbook: Reunion." *CIA World Fact Book* (January 2005): N.PAG. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed July 9, 2009).

### **Literacy:**

In 2003, about 88.9% of the people over the age of fifteen could read and write. About 87% of males were literate while 90.8% of females were. Schools are generally modeled after the French system.

### **Land/Geography:**

Reunion is a volcanic island about 39 miles in length that lies about 500 miles off of the coast of Madagascar in the Indian Ocean. An inner mountain range divides the island into different geographic areas. The slopes of the mountains may be covered with lush forests. The lowlands are used for cultivation and the largest concentrations of population lie along the coastlines.

There are two major volcanoes on the island. Piton de la Fournaise lies on the eastern end of the island. It is about 8,565 feet above sea level. It last erupted in 2004. Piton des Neiges, which is the highest point on the island is further west, but is now extinct.

The average temperature on the coast usually ranges between 64 and 87 degrees Fahrenheit. The interior of the island tends to have cooler temperatures. The southern and western parts of the island tend to be drier than the northern areas. Southeast trade winds do affect the weather patterns. Cyclones pose significant dangers between the end of November and the first part of April.

<http://www.iledelareunion.net/uk/index.php>

[http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia\\_761577876/R%C3%A9union.html](http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761577876/R%C3%A9union.html)

<http://www.reunionisland.net/>

## **History**

Arab sailors probably explored the islands as early as 1153 A.D., but no permanent settlements were established. Europeans did not begin to use the island until the early 1500's when a Portuguese ship landed in 1507 on a Saint's day and christened the island Santa Apolonia. Again, the mariners did not stay but rather used the island as a layover to get fresh provisions on their journeys along the spice route. English pirates also found the remoteness of the island enticing when hiding from authorities. The French would ultimately take final possession of the island in 1638. They would temporarily rename it Mascarin.

The first inhabitants to actually settle permanently on the island were 12 escaped slaves from Madagascar who fled there in 1646. The reigning French authorities on Madagascar let them stay there for about 3 years before a new French governor came and insisted upon their return. At this point the island was also re-christened Bourbon in honor of the current French king. This same governor would later use the island once again as a place to send rebels. These expelled men and slaves would build a village close to Saint-Paul but would abandon their efforts after a cyclone ruined the village.

The French government would use the East India Company to eventually establish settlements that would last. In 1664, Etienne Régnault and others came to the island to stay. Three years later about 200 people settled there. Others followed, but complained that there were few to no French women available to marry. Some men chose to take Malagasy women as wives or concubines. Others got the government to send some girls from France or India. The East India Company went broke in 1764 and the French Crown took control of the island.

Most of the early settlers were slaves imported from Madagascar and Mozambique. In fact, the slave population quickly outnumbered the French planters. Slaves usually lived in deplorable conditions and were treated poorly. They had to work to produce coffee and sugar and were punished severely if they offended their owners. They did adopt French language and customs while still retaining many of their own. The slaves would simply hide the practice of their own indigenous customs from the owners so that they would not be punished.

The instigation of the French Revolution brought some changes to the island including its final name of Reunion. The revolutionary government renamed the island in memory of an important battle between the forces of the monarchy and the French rebels. The new government also officially banned slavery in 1793. This ban did not take full effect since the island was so far from France and since the demand for labor on the plantations continued. In fact, the planters basically refused to comply with the abolition order and continued to own slaves.

When Napoleon Bonaparte came to power, he tacitly allowed slavery to continue. He did, however, send new administrators to the island to assume power over the planters. These new administrators asserted their authority and caused the island to lose much of its sense of autonomy. Bonaparte also renamed the island in honor of himself.

When the British became incensed with Napoleon's tactics, they began to attempt to seize power of France's island possessions. Part of these attempts included a naval blockade of Reunion which caused food shortages and much suffering. Ultimately, the British would gain control of the island and hold power for five years. During that time, they renamed the island "Bourbon" once again. When the Treaty of Paris was signed in 1815, the island returned to French control. The island returned to the name of Réunion around 1830.

Many new immigrant workers were recruited to come to the islands to work on the sugar plantations during the latter part of the 19th century. Some Indian workers had already been enticed to come to work, but they often abandoned the work on the plantation, when possible, due to the miserable living conditions and the disrespect shown by landowners. Consequently, the landowners then asked Chinese workers to come to the island to work. The Chinese immigrants also disliked the working conditions on the plantations and sought to find new ways of supporting themselves when their labor contracts ended. As a result, plantation owners went to the African mainland and hired laborers there to come to work. All of the new immigrants were expected to absorb French culture and language. They also needed to learn Creole.

Life on the island remained focused primarily on production of agricultural products until after World War II. In 1946, the French National Assembly changed the status of the island from that of colony to full overseas department. This change brought opportunities for representation in the National Assembly and also gave islanders rights as French citizens. Consequently, when France joined the European Union, Reunion also became a member.

Currently, Reunion is still officially an overseas department of France. Some islanders have sought to gain autonomy from France and thus various independence groups have formed. The movement towards independence is strongest among the Creole population and less favored by descendents of the original French settlers. Those against autonomy share grave concerns about the economic well-being of the islanders were they to lose the financial support of the French government since the island economy still largely depends upon French aid.

Minahan, James. *Encyclopedia of Stateless Nations Volume L-R*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 2002.

<http://reunion.runweb.com/page-619-lang-EN-2V-page,Reunion-Islands-history.html>

<http://reunion.runweb.com/page-m615-lang-EN-2V-page,The-abolition-of-slavery.html>

## **Christian History**

Catholic priests first arrived around 1653, but did not stay to form permanent churches. French planters and their slaves depended upon occasional visits of the priests and the ministries of ship's chaplains. A prefect was appointed in 1712, but real missions work did not begin until the arrival of nuns from the Congregation of St. Joseph of Clun in the 1800's. These nuns, and then priests, worked to baptize the slaves in mass conversions, but did not always thoroughly explain the Catholic teachings. Rather, slaves would outwardly acquiesce to the sayings of the priests while still retaining their own beliefs concerning African tribal religions. Over time the people simply mixed their own tribal beliefs with Catholicism and syncretism occurred.

Indians who migrated to work on Reunion after the abolition of slavery faced similar choices. While their contracts indicated that they could keep their Hindu beliefs, the workers found that their employers and the surrounding community strongly encouraged them to convert to Catholicism. Similarly to the African workers before them, many of the Indian workers chose to outwardly adopt Catholicism while still privately continuing to practice their beliefs in Hindu gods. As a result, Indians today also have a mixture of religious beliefs.

Protestant work began when Seventh Day Adventists arrived on the islands around 1936. Missionaries from the Assembly of God Churches and the Reformed Church later sent representatives. Some of the most successful church planting occurred when missionaries from

the African Evangelical Fellowship arrived in 1970. The Protestant presence on the island is still somewhat small.

<http://www.sim.org/index.php/country/RE>

[http://cesa.imb.org/TheRegion/Reunion/Info\\_Reunion.htm](http://cesa.imb.org/TheRegion/Reunion/Info_Reunion.htm)

## **Religion**

All information unless otherwise noted is taken from *Operation World* and *World Christian Encyclopedia* Volume I.

### **Non Christian**

*Baha'i*—About .07% of the population belong to this faith.

*Catholic Church*—Catholic priests came to the islands in 1653. In 2005 there were 76 parishes and 329,609 mass attendees.

*Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (Mormons)*—This denomination started sending missionaries around 1975. In 1995 there were 3 churches and 180 members.

*Hindu*—About 6.7% of the population is Hindu. They are largely Indian workers who migrated there and kept their religious beliefs. They may remain somewhat segregated from the rest of the islanders.

*Non-Religious/ Other*—About 6.18% of the people do not indicate any type of religious belief.

*Muslim*—About 2.15% of the population is Muslim. Many of these are from the Swahili or Bantu peoples although some are also of Indo-Pakistani descent.

*Temoins de Jehovah (Jehovah's Witnesses)*—This group began work around 1960. In 2005 there were 30 churches and 2,701 members.

### **Christian/Evangelical**

*Assemblees de Dieu*—This group entered the islands around 1960. They have established congregations throughout the island. In 2005 there were 160 congregations and 20,000 congregants.

*Centre Chretien (Christian Center)*—This group started work around 1985. In 1995 there was one congregation and 150 congregants.

*Eglise Adventiste Septieme Jour*—Missionaries began this denomination around 1936. In 2005 there were 18 congregations and 1,238 members.

*Eglise Baptiste (Baptist Church)*—This church group began as a mission of the Southern Baptist Convention. It started in 1978. In 1995 there were 8 churches and 625 members.

*Eglise de la Pleine Evangile (Full Gospel Church)*—This church started around 1985. In 1995 there was one church and 80 members.

*Eglise Evangelique de la Bible (Gospel Bible Church)*—This church formed around 1985. In 1995 there was one church and 70 members.

*Eglise Evangelique de la Reunion (Evangelical Church of Reunion)*—This church started in 1969 as a mission of the African Evangelical Fellowship. In 1995 there were 12 churches and 2,200 members.

*Eglise Jesus Sauveur (Jesus Saves Church)*—This church formed around 1985. In 1995 there was one church with 50 members.

*Eglise Neo-Apostolique (New Apostolic Church)*—This group began evangelization efforts around 1993. In 1995 there was 1 church with 30 members.

*Eglise Reformee de la Reunion (Reformed Church of Reunion)*—This group formed around 1968 due to the efforts of French military and civil chaplains. In 2005 there were 4 churches and 580 members.

## People Groups

### 15468

#### Chinese, Yue (22,740)

The Chinese Yue people speak a dialect of Chinese known as Yue. They migrated to Reunion to work coming at different times. The first immigrants came as contract laborers after the abolition of slavery. Plantation owners were not always kind to them.

Today the Chinese population is largely small shop owners and business people. The people may practice a form of ancestor worship or may have adopted some type of European religious beliefs. The number of evangelical Christians is unknown. Many Christian resources exist in their language including a complete translation of the Bible and the *Jesus* film.

<http://chinaperspectives.revues.org/document650.html>

### 15469

#### Comorian (547)

Comorians immigrated from one of four islands of the Comorian archipelago. They may speak one of four dialects of Comorian. They primarily practice Islam. There are no known evangelical Christians. The New Testament has been translated and the *Jesus* film is accessible. Gospel audio recordings exist.

### 15470

#### French (55,767)

The French originally settled the islands in the 1600's. They imported slaves from Madagascar and other areas. The French families that retained their sugar plantations and wealth are sometimes known as Grand Blancs. Families that lost their wealth and retreated to the mountains are called Petit Blancs. They both either speak French or Creole. Many Christian resources exist in French including a complete translation of the Bible and the *Jesus* film.



**15471****Gujarati (18,593)**

The Gujaratis were recruited by the French to come to work on the plantations after the abolition of slavery. They migrated and found harsh working conditions. They adapted to French customs outwardly while privately continuing to practice many of their own ethnic customs. The majority of the people are still Hindus. Less than 1 percent of the people are evangelical Christian.

Several Christian resources exist in their language. The complete Bible had been translated by 1823 and several tracts have been printed. The *Jesus* film has also been produced in their dialect. Gospel audio recordings and radio broadcasts can be heard.

**15472****Malagasy Reunionese Creole (600,444)**

The Malagasy Reunionese Creole population is largely the descendents of slaves imported by the French planters to work on the sugar plantations. The majority of the inhabitants are Catholics who attend mass, but who practice parts of African indigenous religious beliefs. The number of evangelical Christians is unknown.

The Bible has not been translated into Reunionese Creole. There is a Bible translation in French which they have access to. The *Jesus* film and *The Father's Love Letter* are available in their language. Gospel audio recordings exist.

**15474****Tamil (85,878)**

The French began to recruit Tamil workers after the abolition of slavery. Tamil males signed contracts to come to the island to work for five years in the hopes of improving their socioeconomic lot.

Most of the workers found situations far different from what they expected. They were often treated about the same as slave laborers and could be denied their wages. Furthermore, some French planters tried to keep workers from returning home when their contracts ended. The French largely demanded that the workers learn Creole and adopt French culture as well as Catholicism.

As a result, many of the people today may outwardly practice some form of Catholicism publically while privately adhering to Hindu customs and beliefs. The number of evangelical Christians is unknown.

Several Christian resources exist. The entire Bible has been translated and gospel tracts have been printed. The *Jesus* film, *The Father's Love Letter*, and *God's Story* have all been produced in Tamil. Audio recordings and gospel radio broadcasts can be heard.

<http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/SSEAL/SouthAsia/tamil.html>

## **Missiological Implications**

1. Evangelical Christians and churches should seek to introduce materials to help local believers evangelize and start churches for the Malagasy Reunionese Creole who number as many as 600,444. The Chinese, Yue (22,740), Tamil (85,878), Gujarati (18,593) are people groups from outside of Reunion who need the gospel.
2. Evangelical Christians and churches should seek to strengthen the work of the churches that exist in Reunion with leadership training, evangelistic training, and biblical teaching. More youth workers are needed to help teens develop into the strong church leaders needed to grow the church.
3. Evangelical Christians and churches should introduce the methods of Bible Storying and small group dynamics (house churches) to achieve a greater outreach.
4. Evangelical Christians and churches should seek to provide business opportunities and work for the peoples of Reunion. There is much unemployment among poorer classes. Christian businessmen could provide job opportunities while also providing a strong witness for Christ.
5. Evangelical Christians and churches should seek to relate to the majority who while claiming Catholicism or other religions actually practice Malabar Religion that is a synthesis of Hinduism and African Traditional Religion. Evangelicals should share ways the local believers can withstand these religious movements. People may nominally belong to some religious group while participating in witchcraft or African tribal religions as well. Prayer is needed to break the power of the occult over the lives of islanders.
6. Evangelical Christians and churches should seek to encourage additional training for church leaders. Bible training is needed for current pastors. Pastors could also benefit from further leadership training opportunities.

## Pictures



## Links

<http://www.reunionisland.net/>  
<http://www.everyculture.com/No-Sa/Reunion-Island.html>  
<http://www.lonelyplanet.com/reunion>  
<http://www.noonsite.com/Countries/ReunionIsland>  
[http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/country\\_profiles/4469169.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/country_profiles/4469169.stm)  
<http://www.mbendi.com/land/af/re/p0005.htm>  
<http://us.franceguide.com/destinations/france/regions/reunion-island/home.html?NodeID=174>  
[http://hvo.wr.usgs.gov/volcanowatch/2001/01\\_03\\_29.html](http://hvo.wr.usgs.gov/volcanowatch/2001/01_03_29.html)  
<http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/EID/vol12no10/06-0596.htm>  
<http://www.reunion.fr/>  
<http://www.france24.com/en/20080405-comoros-bacar-anjouan-reunion-island-extradition-french>  
<http://www.newswiretoday.com/news/49105/>  
<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/500226/Reunion>  
[http://www.newadventures.com/tips/reuni\\_tips.html](http://www.newadventures.com/tips/reuni_tips.html)  
[http://www.cham.asso.fr/pages\\_site/p\\_reunion\\_gb.php](http://www.cham.asso.fr/pages_site/p_reunion_gb.php)