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# Islands in the stream

Go island hopping this summer around the Indian Ocean from the remote volcanoes of Reunion, and the exotic and unusual forests of Madagascar to the peaceful paradise of Quirimbas Archipelago off Mozambique

By Keri Harvey

**T**he Indian Ocean is sprinkled with tropical islands big and small, so diverse and different each one embodies a world of its own. Reunion was born of fire and is a place of adventure and voodoo; Madagascar is ancient and primeval with steamy rainforests, unique wildlife and quirky customs; the Quirimbas Archipelago of Mozambique is idyllic, serene and a little piece of pure heaven. All have unique offerings; all are completely evocative and unforgettable. >

## FIRE ISLAND

Reunion was created in anger. It's home to one of the world's most active volcanoes, Piton-de-la-Fournaise, that continually reshapes the island with almost annual eruptions. Her bad temper has created dramatically beautiful landscapes, black volcanic beaches and unusual beliefs. She's also ensconced Reunion on the map as the ultimate destination for adventure sports and thrill seekers, because here you can trek, abseil, canyon, paraglide, surf or scuba dive amidst inspiring scenery – like nowhere else on earth.

Piton de la Fournaise, or 'Peak of the Furnace', completely intrigues most visitors to Reunion. At over 2 600m, it is one of the world's largest and most impressive shield volcanoes and attracts thousands of adventurers to trek up her steep slopes to gaze into her smouldering crater.

She erupts the day we arrive in Reunion, and as we stand gazing from a safe distance, it's a surreal feeling to be enveloped in volcanic smoke and fine ash from the earth's core.

Locals tell us Reunion, lying east of Madagascar, is really "just a big volcanic rock with three holes poked in it", and we soon see clearly that the island is entirely solid rock. The extinct 3 000m high Piton Neiges is the mother rock that rose from the Indian Ocean eons ago to create Reunion, and the three holes are the volcanic cirques of Mafate, Salazie and Cilaos.

Mafate is completely lost in time. There are no roads into the cirque and most of the 650 people who live there have never even seen a car. It's so inaccessible that the only way in or out is on foot, so the inhabitants subsist off the land and are completely cut off from the outside world. But this is also wildly welcoming terrain for intrepid hikers.

The cirque of Salazie is the exact opposite in every way – easily accessible by tar road, lush and wet. Over 100 waterfalls gush down the steep sides of the cirque, one even flowing directly onto the road. The colours are sparkling emerald green, jewelled with bright tropical flowers. Salazie means 'good place to stay' and many people do just that.

A car ride into the cirque of Cilaos requires steely nerves. It's the ultimate rollercoaster ride. Just 34km long, you climb 2 000m on a

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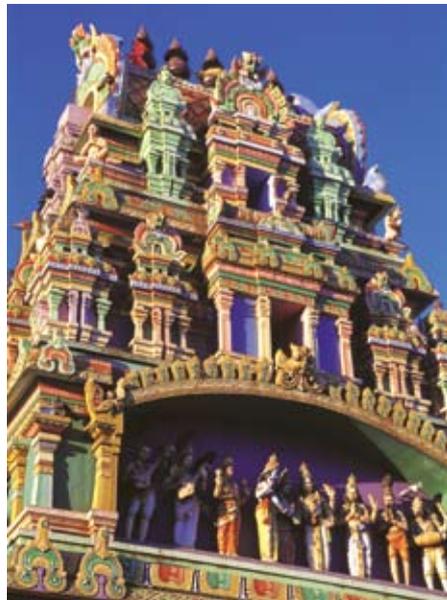
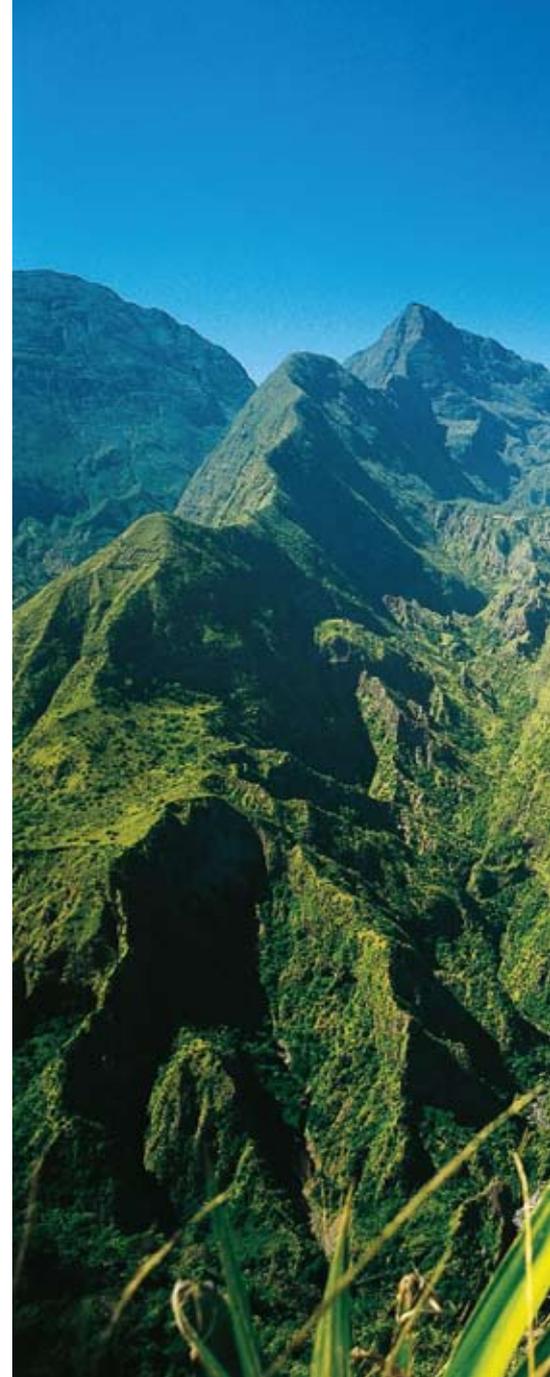


Photo courtesy of Unusual Destinations



steep, narrow road and have to negotiate 200 hairpin bends en route. Bizarre pinnacle rocks that look like witches hats pierce through the clouds, and old man's beard gives the scene a mysterious appearance. But this landscape is a serious playground for thrill seekers who come to hike, canyon or mountain bike the treacherous slopes.

Over a dinner of traditional cari (hot, spicy curry) and a glass of vanilla rum, local Lilian Besombes regales us with tales of Reunion and its many quirks. The island now has UNESCO World Heritage Site status, but we are tickled and amazed that beneath the natural Frenchness of Reunion – the idyllic beach resorts and elegant towns – lie tales of voodoo and pirates.

As we steer our car along the circular road that hugs the coastline all the way around Reunion, there are Mosques and Tamil temples, Catholic churches and religious icons all over, especially Madonnas. Much loved is the Black Virgin or 'La Vierge' in the village of Riviere des Pluies. Locals pray to her for good health, prosperity and protection, and it's believed children who have their first haircut at her feet enjoy good luck for life.

Life happens mostly along the coast. Towns and cities are built here because it's the most accessible area of the island. The wild southern coast is dramatically beautiful, with a pounding shoreline and salt and pepper beaches favoured by surfers. In the east the beaches are pitch black and surreal, while the western shores are snow white and flanked by tranquil lagoons and coral reefs preferred by sunbathers and snorkellers. But wherever you go, you drive through quaint, shuttered, French villages made colourful with Creole flair and tropical gardens of orchids, hibiscus and poinsettia.



Photo courtesy of Unusual Destinations

**Visas:** South African passport holders require visas, from the Embassy of France in Johannesburg.

**Getting there:** Air Austral flies between Johannesburg and St Denis, Reunion, twice weekly. Tel 011 452 0244; see [www.air-austral.com](http://www.air-austral.com)

Unusual Destinations arranges independent travel and resort trips to Reunion. Tel: 011 706 1991 or email [info@unusualdestinations.com](mailto:info@unusualdestinations.com); also see [www.unusualdestinations.com](http://www.unusualdestinations.com)

**Best time to go:** avoid cyclone season from January to March. Summers are hot and wet on the coast, inland is temperate. It's always good somewhere as Reunion has 200 microclimates.

**Currency:** Euro

**Languages:** French and Creole

The north coast is the tamest by far, with the pure white capital of St Denis clinging firmly to the mountainside for fear of slipping into the sea. Here are beautiful, intimate hotels and vibrant restaurants serving spicy Creole food, busy fruit and flower markets, and a cemetery that's the resting place of infamous pirates.

Reunion is a bit of an adventure novel in real life, a place of constant surprises with touches of France, Africa, India and China. It's the First World and Dark Ages together, a place of fiery fury and perfect calm, extreme adventure or relaxation. But the thread through it all is one of inspiring beauty, watched over eternally by St Expedit. >



Photo: Shutterstock

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## WORLD APART

It could easily be another planet, with unique plants, animals and culture found nowhere else on earth. Unusual, bizarre, quirky, colourful – these are all elements of Madagascar, a place of nostalgic beauty and antiquity that's steeped in mystery.

Arriving in the capital Antananarivo is a bit like being in a time warp. The colourful, multi-storeyed houses, replete with shutters and tiny balconies, look like doll's houses clinging hill in the city. In the low-lying areas are flooded rice paddies, resembling patchwork throws in shades of green.

Antananarivo is smoggy and sprawling, but highly evocative. It's an assault on the senses and home to two million of the country's 15 million people. Rated by many travellers as one of the most charming of Third World cities, 'Tana' swarms with old cars and pedestrians pick their way through the chaos.

### TRAVEL TIPS:

**Visas:** South African passport holders require a visa to enter Madagascar, obtainable on arrival at Ivato Airport on arrival in Antananarivo. There is currently no charge for visas for visitors staying less than a month – applicable until December 2010.

**Getting there:** AirLink flies between Johannesburg and Antananarivo daily. Tel: 011 451 7300, see [www.flyairlink.com](http://www.flyairlink.com)  
Air Madagascar flies between Johannesburg and Antananarivo twice weekly. Tel: 011 289 8222; [www.airmadagascar.com](http://www.airmadagascar.com)

**Travel arrangements:** Using a reputable and experienced land operator is essential as Madagascar is extremely difficult to navigate independently. Unusual Destinations specialises in tailor-made trips to Madagascar – with excellent service in South Africa and through their agents in Madagascar. Tel: 011 706 1991; email: [info@unusualdestinations.com](mailto:info@unusualdestinations.com); [www.unusualdestinations.com](http://www.unusualdestinations.com)

**Best time to go:** avoid the cyclone season from February to March. The cooler, drier months are April to September.

**Currency:** Ariary

**Languages:** French and Malagasy



Drivers are patient, everyone is friendly, and there's always time to stop for a quick chat or a bowl of rice with a friend.

But the island really belongs to the unusual plants and animals that live there – with most species found nowhere else on earth. It's difficult to grasp the diversity of Madagascar's natural life, with 200 000 species living in habitats that range from rainforests to deserts, mountain tops to mangrove swamps.

One of the greatest attractions to Madagascar is the lemurs, small primates unique to the area and highly endangered. Ranging in size from the large Indri (the size of a toddler) to the diminutive Pygmy Mouse Lemur that can recline comfortably in an eggcup, there are also dancing Sifakas and an array of other lemurs, some of which only come out at night. Fifteen species have already become extinct.

"That's the call of the Indri," says guide Maurice Ratsisakanana, "can you hear it?" A lilting melody bounces across the treetops in Andasibe Perinet Reserve. It sounds like a combination of whale song and shrill siren, and doesn't match the appearance of the piebald, teddybear-like Indri.

We are transfixed. We're completely captivated by these intriguing creatures, which the Malagasy believe are their ancestors – so it's forbidden to kill or eat them. Indris also share this forest with giant Parson's Chameleons – that grow up to two foot long and weigh in at a hefty 2kg, an assortment of brightly-coloured frogs, birds, lazy boa constrictors, and the ultimate masters of disguise: leaf tailed geckos. They are so well camouflaged against tree trunks that you can only see them when they blink.

The Ring-Tailed Lemurs of Berenty and Anja reserves are straight from the Wild West. They have the swagger of bandy-legged cowboys and a brazen attitude to match, but they meow and have long tails like cats. The rare Golden Bamboo Lemur and tiny Mouse

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Photo courtesy of Unusual Destinations

Lemur live in Ranamofana rainforest in eastern Madagascar.

Though Madagascar is well loved for its lemurs, the island is also an Eden for eccentric flora like wild trumpet lilies and carnivorous pitcher plants. More renowned are the baobabs, seen in the Avenue of Baobabs, near Morondava on the west coast. Here five species of towering baobab can be seen living together, all racing to touch the sky. "But I still prefer my forest," says Maurice of Andasibe Perinet, as we walk on through the cool forest, "I never tire of listening to these crazy indris or finding brightly coloured chameleons. Every day there is something new to see here."

Encircling the massive island is both wild and calm coastline, some with forest running all the way down to the sea. And there are lots of other islands to hop onto too. Most popular is Nosy Be, or Big Island, with plenty of accommodation options, magnificent beaches, and easy access to more outlying islands, some populated with lemurs, some completely deserted. But on Nosy Be, with its curiously named capital Hellville, are sacred lakes to visit where crocodiles live.

The whole island is fragranced with ylang-ylang and vanilla, while little villages with handmade lace hanging in the windows and long-horned zebu cattle grazing nearby, line the roadsides. Everyone is busy doing something, except in the heat of the day when rest is encouraged.

The people of Madagascar are hospitable and friendly. Ready smiles are everywhere, even though most of the population is poor, living just on white rice. The Malagasy are warm-hearted and welcoming, always willing to chat and give of their time.

They're a hard working and industrious nation, with African blood mixed with that of China, India and France. While men plough their fields with antiquated implements behind their prized Zebu cattle, women do cutwork and intricate, colourful embroidery, fashion bright raffia bags and craft handmade paper from flowers.

It's an island of strange, exotic wonders, with rare beauty and unique offerings. Madagascar is so ancient and life here is so simple, it feels as if you stepped off the world into timelessness. And that's exactly what a real holiday is all about.

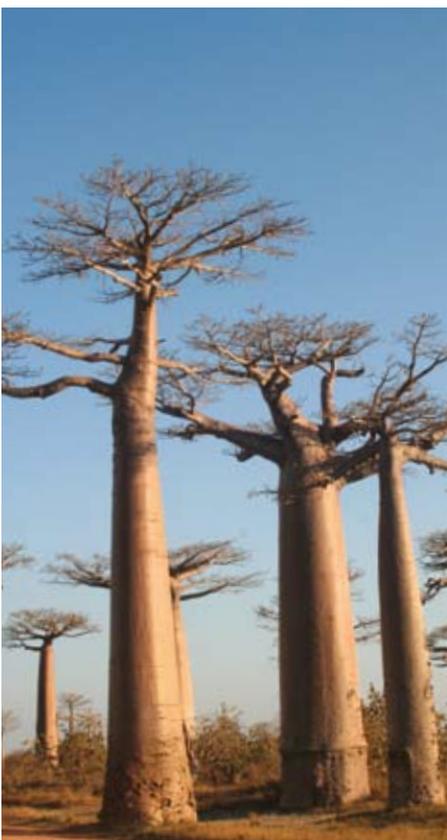


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## PARADISE FOUND

If ever you have dreamed of a deserted island experience where the rhythms of the ocean rule the day, the Quirimbas Archipelago is it. Over 30 islands make up the archipelago that stretches for 250km in the warm waters off northern Mozambique, but Ibo, Matemo and Medjumbe are three of the most magical. Each is a distinctly different face of the Quirimbas that together embody old world charm, barefoot luxury and romance.

If you say “Hello João” on Ibo Island, you could be greeting just about anyone. Most of the men on the island are named João, and so are the fort and church. The name also alludes to the huge influence the Portuguese have played in the island’s history, along with Arabs and Africans and plenty of pirates.

Old colonial buildings slowly crumble and allude to an opulent past, yet renewal is happening simultaneously. The gracious Ibo

Island Lodge is one of the island’s prized restorations. Once a colonial manor house, it has been delicately coaxed back to life, with traditional lime-washed walls and cool cement floors. Suites are soothing and exquisitely appointed to reflect the deeply historical roots of Ibo.

For its cultural significance and historical importance on the East Coast of Africa, Ibo is also being considered for World Heritage Site status. But in the hearts of the locals, external recognition is not important. Ibo is already the world to them, and most have never ventured beyond the island and their favourite fishing grounds. They live as they always have, sell their fish on the smooth sand streets of town, and play football in the evenings. That’s all they need from the day.

Self-proclaimed historian of Ibo, João Baptiste, is proud to have lived on the island all his life – with his gentle wife and 10 children. Over his 83 years he’s seen plenty and stored it all too sharp memory. “After the Portuguese left in 1975,” he says, “Ibo stood still and we lived in complete isolation. Now Ibo is alive again and I am so happy. There are already two cars on the island.”

João has seen both war and peace on Ibo, and once had to take shelter in Fort São João, one of three forts on the island. Today the fort stands pristine and white on the shore and is a workshop for the renowned silversmiths of Ibo. Here they sit cross legged crafting lacy silver jewelry from melted old coins. It’s all done by hand, link by link, shone with lemon juice, and sold to enchanted tourists as well as galleries across the globe.

A short hop from Ibo by CFA charter flight and you are on idyllic Matemo Island. Right in the Quirimbas National Park, this is a sanctuary for whales, dolphins and turtles that glide through the clear waters. There are schools of tropical fish, swimming beneath the waves, as



traditional white-sailed dhows waft above like sea butterflies. These fishing boats are everywhere in the Quirimbas, catching an assortment of fresh fish for dinner and to sell.

Matemo is very much a working island and has been for centuries. The Arabs first traded there in 600AD and, nearly a thousand years later, the Portuguese – and it was once an infamous trading place for the slave trade. Now everything has changed for the better, and the locals have little interest in what happens beyond Matemo. They live peacefully across eight villages on the island, making their renowned indigo Maluane cloth of silk and cotton.

Sheltered from the sky under rustling palm trees, the chalets of Matemo Island discretely line the beach. Inside they're romantically and decadently adorned to reflect the exotic character of Arabic East Africa. Carved four-poster beds draped in nets are an evocative welcome after sipping sundowners

of tangy Caipirinha cocktails, made in the Mozambiquan style. Then, as local fisherman Miguel de Sousa says: "A good night's sleep is very important, if you are to fish well." But aside from fishing, Matemo also offers diving and snorkelling trips and day visits to surrounding islands in the archipelago.

Medjumbe remains the pinnacle of romance, and deserted island magic. It's a tropical nirvana, a sweep of white sand in the turquoise ocean, fringed with tall palms and marked with a derelict but atmospheric lighthouse.

The island is just a kilometre long and half as wide, but Medjumbe Private Island is all yours. The lodge has 13 private beach chalets and that's it, so there's complete seclusion if you choose. With the highest point on the island just four metres above sea level, the tidal range on Medjumbe is enormous. High tide the warm Indian Ocean laps at your chalet steps, and at low tide there's just a distant strip

of turquoise sea on the horizon.

Somewhere in that strip lies the inky Medjumbe Channel, so deep it is yet to be measured accurately – but it's believed to be over a kilometre deep.

Diving and snorkelling amidst waves of neon coloured tropical fish hints at how unspoilt this area really is. Dolphins may even swim alongside you, or a sea turtle could paddle past. Anything's possible in this balmy ocean paradise. For some, cocooning in your luxurious seafront villa is the ultimate island getaway experience, or take a dip in your private plunge pool and dry off with a good book relaxing in a hammock. In Medjumbe, time doesn't exist.

That's really the atmosphere throughout the Quirimbas, because life follows the natural rhythms of each day. Here all is just as it should be. Everything works together. The sun always shines. And the result is paradise. 



Photo courtesy of Rani Resorts



Photo courtesy of Rani Resorts

#### TRAVEL TIPS:

**Visas:** South African passport holders no longer require a visa for Mozambique

**Getting there:** Airlink direct Johannesburg to Pemba (and the Quirimbas) on Wednesdays and Saturdays: [www.flyairlink.com](http://www.flyairlink.com) or Tel: 011 451 7300. Inter island transfers are offered by CFA Air Charters on tel: 011 312 0196; see [www.cfa.co.za](http://www.cfa.co.za)

Matemo Island and Medjumbe Private Island: Tel: 0861 77 RANI; email: [info@raniresorts.com](mailto:info@raniresorts.com) or see [www.raniresorts.com](http://www.raniresorts.com) or Unusual Destinations can arrange the entire trip for you – Tel: 011 706 1991, email: [info@unusualdestinations.com](mailto:info@unusualdestinations.com) or see [www.unusualdestinations.com](http://www.unusualdestinations.com)

Ibo Island Lodge: Tel: 021 702 0285; email: [reservations@iboisland.com](mailto:reservations@iboisland.com) or see [www.iboisland.com](http://www.iboisland.com)

**Best time:** year round, though it is hot and humid in summer

**Currency:** Meticaís, but credit cards and major currencies are accepted at lodges

**Language:** Portuguese, but English is spoken at the lodges.