

Red island MAGIC

Enigmatic, quirky, ancient and utterly exquisite — that's Madagascar. It's a place lost in time, with ribboning beaches and unusual wildlife — and the most warm-hearted people you'll ever meet.

by KERI HARVEY

beautiful cutwork curtains drape the tiny windows and open doorways of stilted wooden homes. Around them, fields of yellow-flowering ylang ylang and vanilla, grow with bright pink bougainvillea in between. The heady aromas waft on the breeze. For the Malagasy living on the island of Nosy Be, it's just another beautiful day in the sun.

Meaning "big island", Nosy Be is just off the north-west tip of Madagascar, a slice of tropical island paradise. It offers a bit of bush, a lot of beach, plenty of lemurs, some low-slung hills and a collage of sacred lakes. Much like the massive mainland of Madagascar, there's something for everyone to enjoy. The variety of attractions is huge, and many you won't find anywhere else on earth. This is because, of the 200 000 living things on Madagascar and its islands, 150 000 of them occur nowhere else on the planet. Madagascar, quite literally, is a world of its own, a place that is so unique that you just have to see it to believe it.

"Endormie, endormie," shrieks Eddie Tsiadiso excitedly, simultaneously slamming on brakes. He hops out of the driver's seat of his ancient Citroen and dives towards a small tree, grabbing a stick *en route*. "Beautiful endormie, huh," he says with a wide smile, as he gently holds up a chameleon clinging to the stick. How he spotted the chameleon from a

moving vehicle remains a mystery, but as our local guide for the day, Eddie is intent on showing us some of Nosy Be's unusual offerings.

From the top of Mount Passot, the highest peak on Nosy Be and just 300m above sea level, we can see the surrounding islands punctuating the Indian Ocean, including Nosy Komba, or Lemur Island, which is tomorrow's destination. Mount Passot is surrounded by eight inky-blue crater lakes that are sacred, because it's believed the spirits of the Sakalava and Antakara princes live in them. With names like Amparihimirahavavy and Antsahamanavaka, and it is forbidden to fish in them. It's also taboo to smoke, wear a hat, trousers or any garment pulled over the feet while on the lake shores. Such are the quirks of Malagasy culture and traditions.

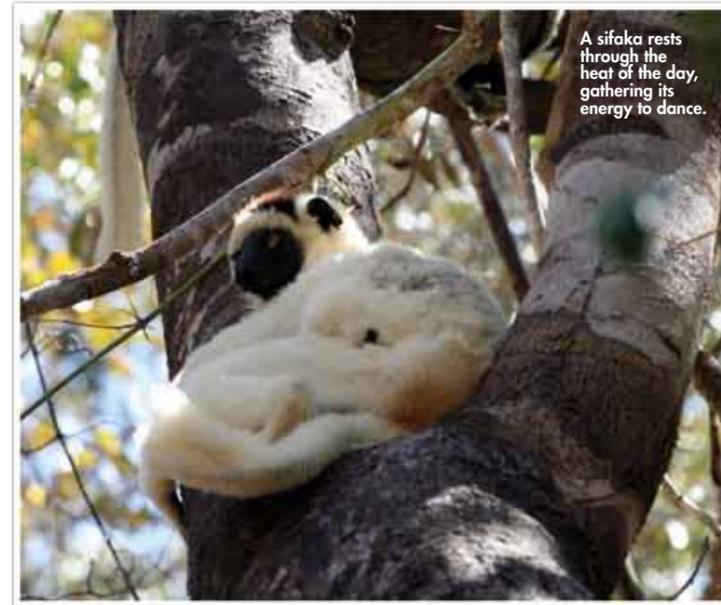
The wildlife here sometimes resembles a science-fiction film set, with creatures so bizarre they can't possibly be real — yet they are. From neon-coloured frogs in red, black and yellow, and leaf-tailed geckoes that are virtually indistinguishable from tree bark until they blink, to rickety stick insects and others that take camouflage to a new level. Giraffe beetles are red with long, black, crane-like necks, and chameleons range in length

from two feet, weighing in at 2kg to the size of a fingertip joint.

Yet with all these unusual creatures, plants and critters to see, lemurs remain the great drawcard of Madagascar. There are over 50 different species, ranging in size from the pygmy mouse lemur that can recline in an eggcup, to the 7kg piebald, teddy-bear-like indri that lives its entire life in the high treetops. When it calls, the sound is a mixture of whale song and city siren, and the Malagasy believe these endearing creatures are their original ancestors. If you want to see lemurs dance, the sifakas will entertain you in a wildlife experience you'll never forget. Sifakas' feet are designed for clinging to tree trunks, not walking. So when

"The eight inky-blue crater lakes are sacred, because it's believed the spirits of the Sakalava and Antakara princes live in them"

IMAGE: GETTY IMAGES/GALLO IMAGES



A sifaka rests through the heat of the day, gathering its energy to dance.



Ring-tailed lemurs are a curious mix of monkey and cat, and walk with a cowboy swagger.

TRAVEL ADVICE

BEST TIME TO VISIT: The climate varies greatly across the island. September/October is generally good everywhere, but it is not necessarily the best time for specific wildlife in specific areas. January to March is cyclone season and best avoided.

HEALTH: Precautions against malaria are essential.

GETTING THERE: AirLink and Air Madagascar fly between Johannesburg and Antananarivo. AirLink: 011 451 7300, email: info@flyairlink.com or visit www.airlink.com. Air Madagascar: 011 289 8222 or visit www.airmadagascar.com. Air Madagascar flies direct to Nosy Be on Saturdays.

TRAVEL ARRANGEMENTS: Madagascar is extremely difficult to navigate independently. Booking through an experienced, reputable operator is strongly advised. Visit www.unusualdestinations.com, email: info@unusualdestinations.com, or call 011 706 1991. Visas are required for South African passport-holders. They are available from the embassy in Durban, or on arrival at Ivato airport, Antananarivo.

CURRENCY: Ariary (R1 = approx 300A)

EATING AND DRINKING: Drink only bottled water and eat at reputable restaurants or hotels. Alternatively, buy food from a supermarket.

FURTHER READING: *The Bradt Guide to Madagascar* by Hilary Bradt.

they need to cross open ground, they tango-skip along the earth, ending their dance by grabbing back onto a tree trunk.

“Hold on tight,” instructs Captain Maurice, as he opens the throttle and his small, wooden boat skims the surface of the sea. We’re headed to Nosy Komba, a small volcanic island lying halfway between Nosy Be and the mainland, just 15 minutes by boat. A visionary chief on Nosy Komba proclaimed it taboo to kill lemurs, so the black lemurs here are sacred and protected.

An up-close-and-personal experience with the lemurs can be arranged for visitors. We follow a sand path through the village to an open clearing – lemur territory. “Just sit on a rock and wait,” says an old man with a creased face and milky eyes. “Be patient and the lemurs will come to you.”

Then he makes an unusual call, and within minutes, fuzzy black heads with orange eyes pop up in the bushes around us. These black lemurs have lived with the local villagers through the ages, and now rely on being fed – are called for meals by the Lemur Whisperer. Before long, four lemurs are sitting around me, and another is trying to climb on my shoulders for a better view. They have animated faces and appear part monkey, part cat – though they have a distinct taste for bananas. The experience is enchanting and probably as close as you’ll ever get to looking in the eyes of a free-roaming lemur.

“My boat doesn’t have any

‘Two million souls live in Tana, rated by many travellers as one of the most charming cities in the third world’



The capital Antananarivo has rice paddies patchworking the city together, in shades of green.

IMAGES: KERI HARVEY

headlights,” says Captain Maurice, calling us to hop in. The sun is setting and he wants to get back to Nosy Be before dark. More relaxed on the return trip, the captain regales us with stories of game fishing off the surrounding islands and diving in the warm, clear waters. It sounds like an idyllic life, but Captain Maurice says life can get stressful too. “Like when a big fish breaks your line and you lose it, when you really wanted to eat that fish for dinner. Or when I have to go to Tana for anything,” he rumbles.

The capital Antananarivo is fondly known as Tana. Here you’d be excused for believing that you’d arrived in an enormous playground. Multi-coloured, multi-storey houses cling to the many hillsides around the city. In between, on low, level areas, are velvety rice paddies, resembling patchwork throws in shades of green. Scattered wherever space allows is washing, carefully arranged on the grass to dry to a crisp in the sun.

Two million souls live in Tana, rated by many travellers as one of the most charming cities in the third world. Colours are vibrant and the atmosphere is energetic, enchanting and dusty. Rattling old Renaults and Citroens swarm through the city’s narrow streets in a mesh of traffic chaos. When the traffic tangle gets too much, drivers simply switch off their engines and socialise in the street – or do a spot of shopping.

Tana also has an evocative outdoor market, where everything from traditional embroidered linen and raffia crafts to wooden inlay pictures, spices and a variety of cut semi-precious stones are sold. It’s a craft market on a grand scale. A must-stop for all committed shoppers.

Nosy Be is a complete contrast to Tana, with wide, white beaches, tepid, clear waters and perfect weather virtually all year round. Just before the end of our adventure, we stop off at a little roadside store and bump into Eddie. He’s buying cooking oil, but includes a small bottle of ylang ylang in his purchases, slipping it into my hand.

“This is the aroma of Madagascar,” he says. “Think of us when you wear it, and when your perfume is finished, do come and get some more.” ■