

Central Madagascar



Driving the thousand odd kilometres between Antananarivo and Toliara on the famous Route Nationale 7 (RN7; Route du Sud) takes you straight through Central Madagascar, where the scenery is as stimulating and surreal as the culture. The RN7 might be Madagascar's busiest highway (not to mention tourist trail), but to the barefoot Bara herdsman, walking from as far as Toliara with nothing but a stick and the clothes on their back, it's just a footpath useful for herding hundreds of zebu to market in Antananarivo.

Some parts of Central Madagascar feel as far removed from the conventional vision of Africa as possible. Glassy, terraced rice paddies juxtaposed against cool, misty mountains and thick-walled red huts constructed from crimson soil, make you think you've been transported to Southeast Asia. Meanwhile the expanses of green rolling hills and golden fields dotted with medieval villages and tidy rows of grapes look European. Hit a city, however, and you slam back into chaotic Africa. Brightly painted *pousses-pousses* (rickshaws), their drivers hustling hard for fares, compete with zebu carts and overpacked buses for space along rutted streets where touts hawk everything from price-guns to strawberries.

To really experience Central Madagascar's chameleonlike ability to change, you'll have to get out of your car. There is fantastic trekking through cloud forests and volcanic craters in the region's stunning national parks, home to vegetation and animals (lots of lemurs) found nowhere else on earth. For a more cultural experience, spend three days trekking through Betsileo villages. Central Madagascar is also famous for its beautiful handicrafts. Best of all, it's one of the cheapest, and easiest, places to travel in Madagascar.

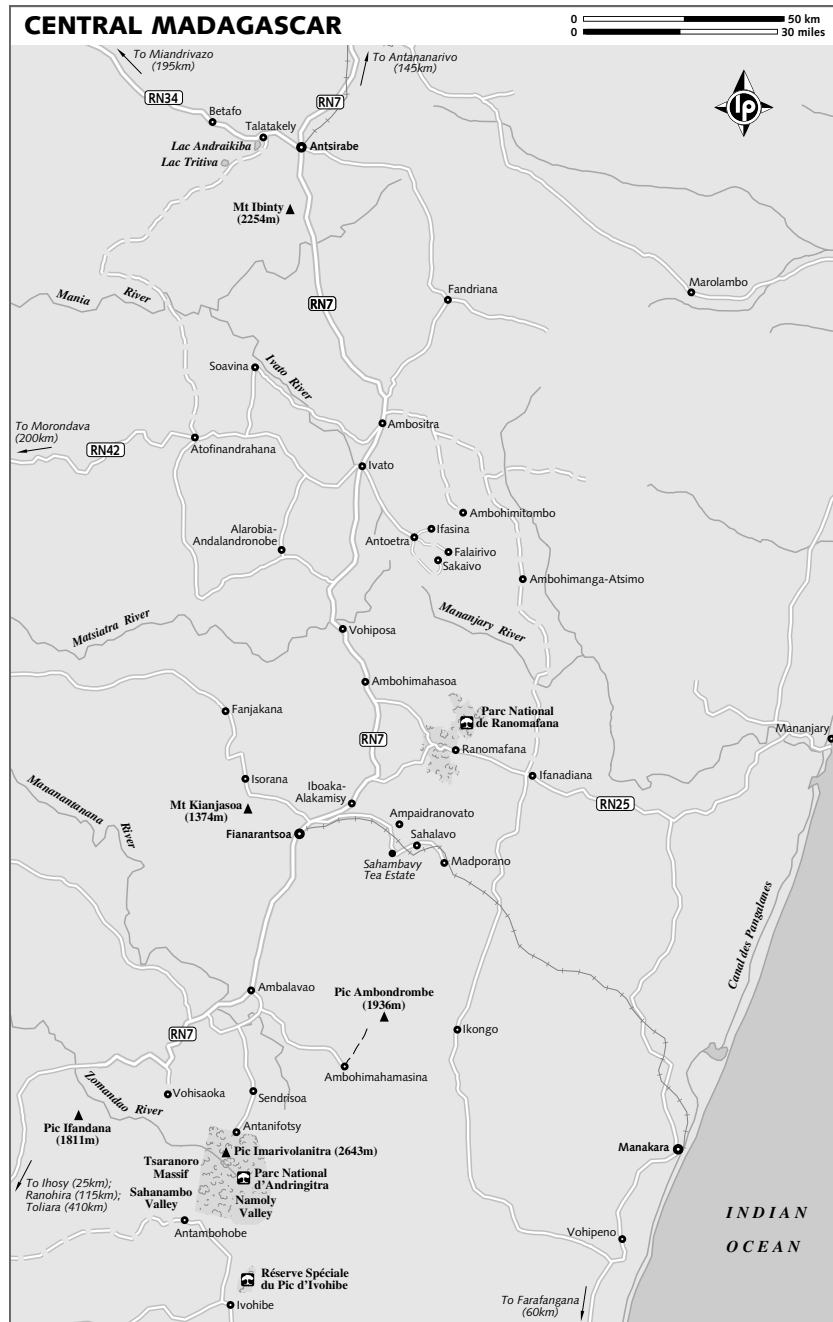
HIGHLIGHTS

- Walking through cloud forests and tracking lemurs in **Parc National de Ranomafana** (p103)
- Summiting Madagascar's second-highest mountain, Pic Imarivolanitra, in spectacular **Parc National d'Andringitra** (p110)
- Checking out intricate woodcarvings by Zafimaniry artisans in the **villages** (p102) around Ambositra
- Supporting home-grown tourism by visiting the community-run **Anja Reserve** (p110), where lemurs are plentiful
- Riding Madagascar's only rails on a **train ride** (p108) through the countryside from Fianarantsoa



■ HIGHEST POINT: 2643m

■ PRINCIPAL TRIBES: Betsileo, Merina



Getting There & Around

Traversing the RN7, either by taxi-brousse (mostly minibuses now) or rental car, is one of the most popular, and easy, journeys in the country. Nearly all of Central Madagascar's towns and attractions lie on, or just off, this highway, one of Madagascar's few. The RN7 is paved, well maintained and relatively fast.

Taxis-brousses regularly ply the road between the capital and the coast; some go direct from Antananarivo to Toliara (Ar25,000, 24 hours with an overnight stop in Fianarantsoa). If you have the cash, this trip is best done by private vehicle. It costs more, but allows you to tailor your own trip and stop when something catches your eye. Locally owned cars (which nearly always come with a driver) can be hired in Antananarivo, Toliara and Fianarantsoa, and sometimes in the smaller cities in between (ask at hotels or the bus station). The thousand or so kilometre drive from Antananarivo to Toliara takes at least three days, but many require you rent for at least five days – or pay a lot more. The longer you hire for, the cheaper the rate. Expect to pay between Ar75,000 and Ar125,000 per day for a five-day rental, with price entirely dependent on your bartering skills and whether the driver has much business at the moment. You will also have to pay for all the petrol, including for the return trip, regardless of whether you return. Most drivers also charge an extra day's fare for their return trip. When we made the journey, petrol cost Ar300,000 return from Antananarivo to Toliara. **Roger Felix** (☎ 032 077 3330, 22 328 09), based in Antananarivo, is a recommended driver to hire. He does the trip in a big white minibus, which he even lets you sleep in if you don't want to pay for a hotel. Roger is honest, friendly and knows the region well. He speaks a bit of English, and has all the necessary government permits to carry tourists.

Most people drive this route one way from Antananarivo to the south, which means dozens of empty vehicles head north each day. If you happen to be going to Antananarivo, or somewhere along the way, you may be able to score a comfortable direct ride north pretty cheaply. Unless you negotiate for a whole regional tour (which should still be cheaper from this direction, as nearly all the drivers live in Antananarivo), your driver may pick up locals and other travellers along the way, but the ride is usually less crowded than taxi-brousses.

The airport in Toliara is a good place to check for available rentals. Arrive right before a flight arrives or departs – drivers often drop their clients at the airport then wait around in hopes of finding another fare.

Once in the central highlands it's easy to get between cities by local taxis-brousses (they make more stops than the direct ones). These are cheap, crowded and depart when full from the town station.

From Fianarantsoa, a passenger train goes to Manakara on the east coast (p231) – it's a popular and worthwhile trip.

ANTSIRABE

pop 159,000

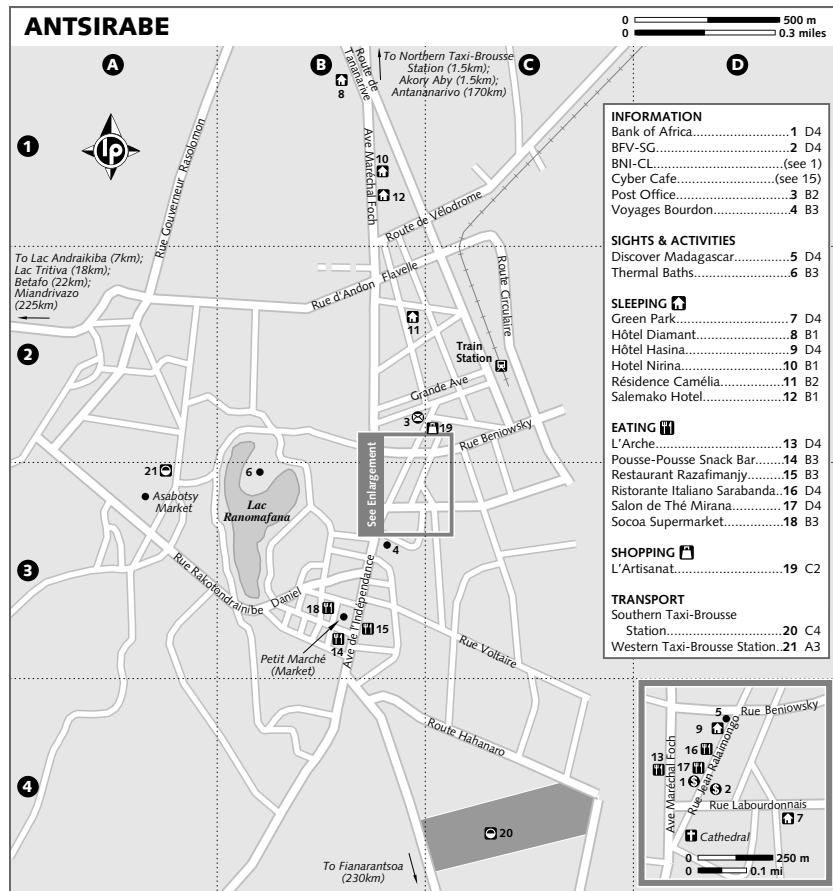
There seems to be a *pousse-pousse* (rickshaw) for every person in Antsirabe (ant-sira-bay), a bustling city where the look and attitude is classic highland Madagascar. The urban oasis in a rural desert is an almost elegant place where the fresh air, cool climate (nights can be freezing) and therapeutic springs led Norwegian missionaries to build a health retreat in the late 1800s. When the French came to town, Antsirabe became a chic spa getaway for wealthy colonists wanting to escape Antananarivo's hustle.

Today, the city thumps to a uniquely Malagasy beat – it's colourful, chaotic, cluttered, gritty and poor. Brightly painted rickshaws crowd wide palm-lined boulevards, their drivers hustling hard for enough fares to feed their families, and gangs of scraggly children and young mothers with furrowed brows beg on the streets.

If you're looking for Madagascan art, Antsirabe is definitely worth the three-hour drive from Antananarivo. The town has numerous artisan workshops with quality handicrafts – in some cases the attention to detail on even the smallest metal bicycle is truly amazing. To check out these places, help the community and gain a uniquely Madagascan experience, visit the shops with a *pousse-pousse* tour – these start from as little as Ar400 for one stop, but we'd suggest paying a bit more. On the activities front, Antsirabe is the best place to find a tour operator for a three-day run down the Tsiribihina River in Western Madagascar.

Orientation

North of the cathedral is an area of long wide boulevards and colonial-era buildings, plus banks, the post office and several hotels and



restaurants. The dusty and bustling lower-lying part of the town contains the southern taxi-brousse station and the market.

Information

The big banks all have ATMs that accept international cards these days. They also change money. Choices include the Bank of Africa, on the eastern side of Rue Jean Ralaimongo, BNI-CL next door, and BFV-SG, which is opposite. The post office is near the train station, and there is a card phone nearby.

Cyber Cafe (Rue Jean Ralaimongo; per min Ar30;

☎ 8am-midnight) Attached to Restaurant Razafimanjy, this internet café stays open late.

Voyages Bourdon (☎ 44 484 60; Ave de l'Indépendance) This travel agency can assist with booking

Air Madagascar flights for other parts of Madagascar (there are no flights to or from Antsirabe). It can also arrange car rental.

Sights & Activities

Saturday is market day in Antsirabe, and it's worth a wander around the town's two big markets, Asabotsy Market and Petit Marché. The town also has numerous handicraft shops and is a good place to stock up on gifts for the folks back home. The Norwegian built **thermal baths** still exist, but are so dirty you wouldn't want to swim.

FAMADIHANA

Famadihana (literally, the 'turning of the bones') is the name given to the traditional

exhumations of dead ancestors by the Betsileo and Merina people. *Famadihana* are joyous and intense occasions, which occur in each family roughly every seven years. Amid feasting, drinking, music and dancing, the bodies of the dead are disinterred from the family tomb, wrapped in bamboo mats, and carried and danced around the tomb. The bodies are then re-shrouded and reburied.

Famadihana ceremonies occur in the region around Antsirabe between July and September only. Local tour operators or *pousse-pousse* men can help you find one and arrange an invitation. If you receive an invite, it's polite to bring a bottle of rum as a gift for the host family, and to ask before taking pictures. Foreigners are generally warmly welcomed, and most people find that the experience, far from being morbid, is moving and fascinating. For more information, see the boxed text, p37.

Tours

Antsirabe is the best place to pick up a tour down the Tsiribihina River (p149) in Western Madagascar. Most float trips departing from Antsirabe (transport included) are combined with a visit to Parc National des Tsingy de Bemaraha (p151) and last around seven days. You can also organise shorter excursions to Parc National de Ranomafana (p103) or to the Zafimaniry villages, near Ambositra (p100). Besides the places listed here, nearly every hotel in town offers some kind of excursion.

Discover Madagascar (☎ 032 40 322 50;

discovermad@yahoo.com; Rue Jean Ralaimongo) In the Hôtel Baobab, this company has a good reputation. Guide Désiré speaks impeccable English and runs a variety of trips, including the popular Tsiribihina River and Tsingy de Bemaraha combo – which includes a transfer by zebu cart.

L'Arche (☎ 032 12 591 52; robinsoncruso20032000@yahoo.fr; Ave Maréchal Foch) Guides Laza and Robinson Crusoe (yes, that's his real name) are based in the L'Arche restaurant and do trips down the Tsiribihina River and to Tsingy de Bemaraha, together or separately. They can also organise car hire. Laza speaks better English than Robinson.

Mr Raheison (☎ 033 11 662 72; laicriri@yahoo.fr; Hôtel Hasina) Affiliated with Hôtel Hasina, this guide runs Tsiribihina River descents. The hotel can provide information, but contact Mr Raheison directly for booking and prices.

Roadhouse Tours (☎ 44 492 26; www.madagascar-info.de) A German-run outfit that does Tsiribihina River descents, hikes around the Zafimaniry villages near Ambositra, and excursions around the whole country.

Sleeping

Winter nights in Antsirabe are bitterly cold, and none of the hotels have heat. Bring enough warm clothes.

Green Park (☎ 032 07 535 81; Rue Labourdonnais; camping per tent Ar5000, r Ar25,000) This place has a beautiful garden and picnic ground. There are three excellent round rooms, very prettily decorated, all with hot water and balconies. Green Park is often full.

Akory Aby (☎ 032 40 878 73; akoryaby@messagerie.net; s/d Ar12,000/16,000; ☎) Just outside town, this is a new guesthouse run by a friendly Frenchman who speaks a bit of English. It has five rooms for now, although there are plans to expand (and also to build a snack bar), with shared bathrooms. Room 1 is the best and biggest, but all are spacious, colourful and great value. There is a rooftop deck and cheap internet (just Ar20 per min). It's across from the northern taxi-brousse station.

Hôtel Diamant (☎ 44 488 40; diamant@madavel.com; Rte de Tananarive; s/d Ar17,000/28,000; ☎) A big

BE WARNED: IT'S COLD OUT HERE

If you're coming from the beaches and it's July or August, get ready for quite a shock – a cold shock that is – when you hit the central highlands. The climate in the *hauts plateaux* (highlands) is cool, with crisp air and clear blue skies during much of the year. In the winter it can seem downright freezing.

None of the hotels have heating and many are extremely drafty, so nights can be particularly punishing if you're not prepared. If you are coming through this area in winter – and everyone driving the RN7 (Route de Sud) will spend at least a few nights here (it's impossible to do in one day) – pack a pair of lightweight moisture-wicking long underwear (top and bottom) with you. These will keep you warm under your clothes during the day, and you can sleep in them at night. A light sleeping bag is also good – some places only provide one blanket. Rain gear is not really necessary, but you will want long pants and shirts and a light jacket, especially if you plan on trekking (camping can get really, really cold).

POUSSE! POUSSE!

Brightly painted and sporting racy names such as 'Air France' and 'Zidane', *pousses-pousses* (literally, 'push-push') are the Malagasy version of the rickshaws found in Asia. Hundreds of them fill the wide avenues of Antsirabe and cluster like oversized prams in front of the post office and the market. Passengers and freight vary – from haughty teenage girls, reclining like queens, to newly slaughtered cows, heads lolling and hoofs protruding.

When it rains, the price doubles and a sheet of plastic is pulled over the *pousse-pousse* as a makeshift hood. Most *pousse-pousse* men – who are also sources of information about almost anything in Antsirabe – rent their vehicles, and have to make a certain number of rides a day just to break even. In pursuit of their goal, they hound pedestrians relentlessly with whistles, hisses and cries of '*pousse!*'. Rides cost Ar400 per person.

Chinese-style edifice in the exhaust-fume-ridden northern part of town. The rooms, though, are peaceful, wood-floored and good value. Mattresses are firm, and each bedspread has a different pattern. The restaurant (Chinese dishes Ar5000), café and disco on site are all very tacky, but civilised and extremely popular.

Salemako Hotel (☎ 44 495 88; salemakojulia@yahoo.fr; Ave Maréchal Foch; r Ar24,000-38,000) Horse lovers looking to ride will be happy here: there are equines on the property and horseback rides start at Ar16,000 for one hour. Rooms are in a lumbering old mansion with sweeping ceilings and a grand dark-wood lobby with a stained-glass window. Rooms are massive, but a bit drafty and quite sparse in the decoration department.

Hôtel Hasina (☎ 44 485 56; Ave de L'Indépendance; r from Ar29,000) Right in the village centre, Hôtel Hasina is the best value in town. Rooms get great sunlight streaming through big windows and dappling the lovely hardwood floors. Beds are good, with mattresses neither too soft nor hard. There is a small table and chairs, and some rooms have balconies. The owner speaks excellent English; tours are organised.

Hotel Nirina (☎ 44 486 69; Ave Maréchal Foch; r incl breakfast Ar30,000) The five rooms at this family-run and friendly place are rather small and come with shared bath. The exterior, however, is lovely, with grapes growing in the well-maintained yard. Excursions can be arranged. No English is spoken.

Résidence Camélia (☎ 44 488 44; camelia@simicro.mg; Ave de L'Indépendance; r Ar52,000-85,000) A very genteel little guesthouse with a tranquil shady garden, it offers rooms in various shapes, sizes and prices. The nicest come with lovely curtains, bright colour schemes and rugs to keep your feet warm.

Eating

In the lower end of town, and in the area just south of the cathedral, are numerous places serving inexpensive Malagasy food and other meals.

Pousse-Pousse Snack Bar (rice dishes Ar1200; ☎ lunch & dinner Thu-Tue) Near the market, this is one of the better places for really inexpensive Malagasy food.

Salon de Thé Mirina (Rue Jean Ralaimongo; mains Ar2000-5000; ☎ breakfast & lunch Tue-Sun) An unassuming little tin-fronted restaurant that makes a great pit stop on your way out of town in the morning. It serves a number of breakfast options, as well as pastries, ice cream and snacks come midday.

ourpick Restaurant Razafimanjy (☎ 020 44 483 53; Rue Jean Ralaimongo; mains Ar3000-5000; ☎ lunch & dinner) This locally recommended place (you see a lot of couples dining with their drivers) cooks Malagasy-seasoned Chinese food with excellent results. The menu is very long, with meat, chicken and seafood cooked dozens of different ways. There are also a number of vegetarian choices. The stir-fried Chinese noodles we ate here were the best we found in the country. There is cabaret at night, and the attached internet café stays open until midnight.

Ristorante Italiano Sarabanda (☎ 032 44 17 307; mains Ar6000-8000; ☎ lunch & dinner) A small pizza joint with just a handful of tables, including a few out front, that does about a dozen different combinations of cheese, sauce, topping and dough. It is nicely laid out with colourful woven tablemats and deep-red walls adorned with local art. The wood-oven pizzas are delicious and big enough to share.

L'Arche (☎ 032 02 479 25; mains Ar6000-9000; ☎ lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) This long-established place serves homely French favourites and

pizzas to expats, river guides and tourists – a Tsiribihina River company is based out of the bar. L'Arche grooves after dark on nights when reggae and traditional Malagasy bands rock the place.

The best-stocked supermarket is **Socoo**, behind the Petit Marché.

Shopping

There are several shops in town selling carvings and Antaimoro paper. One to try is **L'Artisanat** (Ave de L'Indépendance), which is near the post office. You might also be approached in the street to buy gemstones – not a good idea unless you're an expert.

Getting There & Away

Antsirabe is 170km south of Antananarivo. There are three taxi-brousse stations: the northern one for transport to Antananarivo (Ar7000, four hours) and all points north; one in the southern end of town for transport to Ambositra (Ar5000, two hours), Fianarantsoa (Ar10,000, five hours), Mian-drivazo (Ar10,000, five hours) and Morondava (Ar15,000, 15 hours); and another one on the western edge of town for transport to nearby villages.

Getting Around

Antsirabe can be easily negotiated on foot, but there are also a few taxis that can be chartered for getting around town and to destinations in the surrounding area, or you can take the bus.

Car rental can be arranged through **Voyages Bourdon** (☎ 44 484 60) and a guide called **Omega** (☎ 032 04 912 46), who can be found at L'Arche restaurant. Prices are around Ar90,000 per day for a 2WD vehicle, not including petrol.

The *pousse-pousse*, or rickshaw, is the main form of local transport in Antsirabe. The standard fare for town rides is about Ar400.

**AROUND ANTSIRABE
Lac Andraikiba & Lac Tritiva**

In the hills west of Antsirabe are two volcanic lakes, both easy day trips from town. **Lac Andraikiba**, the larger of the two, lies 7km west of Antsirabe off the Morondava road (RN34). In the 19th century, it was a favourite retreat of Queen Ranavalona II; today it is dirty with sewage, although it's possible to walk around the shores of the lake. According to tradition, Lac Andraikiba is haunted by the ghost of a pregnant girl who drowned during a swimming competition with another girl for the prize of marriage to a Merina potentate. Villagers say that each day at dawn she may be seen resting for a few minutes on a rock by the lakeshore.

The turquoise **Lac Tritiva**, which lies in the hills about 18km southwest of Antsirabe, is smaller and more picturesque than Lac Andraikiba, and makes a better excursion. It is said that the lake's water level inexplicably falls during the rainy season and rises in the dry season. An easy walk circles the lake. To enter the area around Lac Tritiva you'll need to pay a Ar2500 fee, which will also get you

SOS CHILDREN'S VILLAGE IN ANTSIRABE

SOS Children is a charity that cares for more than 60,000 orphaned and abandoned children in 123 countries. Sponsors and individual donors around the world support the charity, which provides children with a new family in a village environment. The charity also provides education for more than 100,000 children and funds programmes that assist vulnerable families to stay together. A children's village was opened in Antsirabe in 2003 with 12 family houses. The village also has a nursery, a school and a medical centre, which are shared with the local community.

In 2007 the family of Tom Parkinson, who died during the writing of this book, set up the Tom Parkinson Memorial Fund in his memory. Donations to the fund have gone towards the construction of an Asama classroom at the SOS school in Antsirabe. Asama classes are for teenagers who never attended school or dropped out of primary school because their parents couldn't afford to send them. The classes are aimed at helping young people to earn their primary school certificate within a year, which will give them the chance to obtain higher paid employment and better support themselves and their families. The Memorial Fund will continue to support the costs of Asama classes at the school. If you'd like to make a donation to the fund, visit www.soschildrensvillages.org.uk.

a couple of kids to guide you (while trying to sell you polished stones).

As with Lac Andraikiba, a tragic legend surrounds Lac Tritiva. The waters are supposedly haunted by two star-crossed lovers who leapt from the cliff's edge when they were refused permission to marry. Their spirit is said to live on in two intertwined thorn trees above the lake. In accordance with local *fady* (taboos), you shouldn't bring pork to the region and should not swim in the lake.

Camping is possible at both lakes; village accommodation can also be arranged. Taxis-brousses go from Antsirabe to Talataky, on the northeastern side of Lac Andraikiba; the lake is 1km south of the main road.

Betafo

The Merina town of Betafo (the name means 'many roofs') is 22km west of Antsirabe. As well as the roofs in question, the village has numerous arcades and intricate wrought-iron trimmings, plus amazing views over the surrounding rice paddies. There's an imposing **Catholic church** behind the taxi-brousse station with some modern stained glass inside.

The interesting old town is dominated by **Lac Tatarina**, a crater lake. A short circular road at the northern end of the lake passes a **cemetery** with tombs of local kings.

From the lake, follow the signs for the 5km return walk through often-muddy fields to the **Chutes d'Antafofo** – a two-tiered, 20m waterfall slicing through basalt rock.

There are no hotels in Betafo, but basic meals are available at *hotelys* (small roadside place that serve basic meals).

Buses and taxis-brousses to Betafo leave Antsirabe throughout the day from the western taxi-brousse station.

AMBOSITRA

pop 28,000

High on a plateau surrounded by misty green peaks, the lively village of Ambositra (am-*boo*-sh-tr) boasts as much fresh mountain air as you can gulp. It is the arts-and-crafts capital of Madagascar – in between the tall red-brick Betsileo houses lining crooked streets are over 25 artisans' shops, selling woodcarvings, raffia baskets, polished stones, *marqueterie* (objects inlaid with coloured woods) and paintings. The souvenirs here are cheaper than those in Antananarivo, and the atmosphere in the shops less high-pressure.

Orientation & Information

Coming into town from the north, Rue du Commerce (the main road) passes the market area before it forks. To the left, it continues through a congested area towards the banks and the southern taxi-brousse station. The right fork leads to the quieter upper part of town, with a church and the post office.

BNI-CL in the town centre changes cash and travellers cheques and does advances on Visa cards. It also has an ATM. There's a BTM-BOA branch too.

Sights & Activities

There are many good walks from Ambositra through the nearby villages, where you can see the artisans at work in their homes, working the wood with homemade tools or spreading brightly dyed raffia out in the sun to dry. At the western edge of town is a **Benedictine monastery**, where the monks and nuns sell postcards, cheese and jam in a small **shop** (☞ until 6pm).

Tours

For visits to the Zafimaniry villages or local beauty spots contact the **Maison des Guides** (☎ 47 714 48; guides per day Ar20,000), a guide co-operative which has a small office next to the Grand Hôtel.

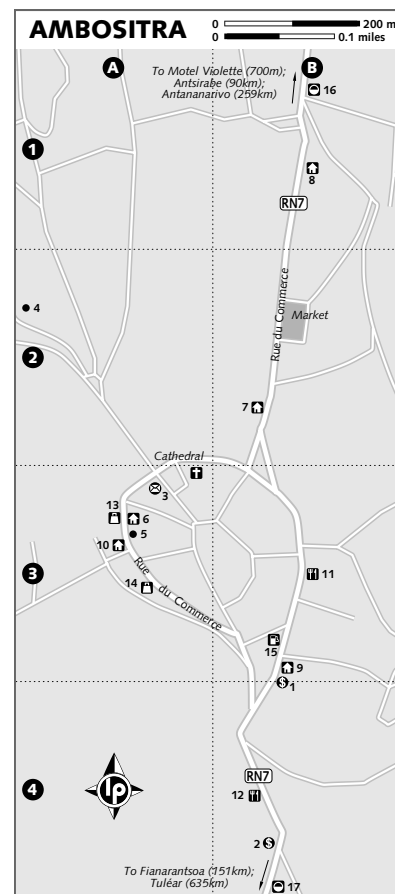
Alternatively, ask at the Grand Hôtel or Prestige Hôtel for François Nirina, a highly respected guide, who organises trips around Ambositra and may also be able to hire out mountain bikes and arrange adventurous tours further a field.

Sleeping

Winter nights are beyond chilly here; make sure your hotel provides blankets. We came, unprepared, in winter, and froze our arses off. Ambositra is severely lacking in independent restaurants – be prepared to eat where you sleep.

Prestige Hôtel (☎ 47 711 35; Rue du Commerce; camping Ar5000, r Ar20,000) A simple and very good-value hotel. There's a wide choice of rooms with very comfortable beds, and a lovely little garden with a nice view. Breakfast is served for an extra Ar3000. It's also one of the few hotels in town that allow you to camp.

Hotel-Restaurant Jonathan (☎ 47 713 289; r Ar21,000-30,000) This new hotel must be doing something right, because they were full when we stopped by. The 10 rooms feel pretty modern with TV and decent mattresses – the



cheapest share baths. The restaurant (mains Ar3000 to Ar8000) is a good choice even if the hotel is full. It serves a big selection of pizzas, meats, Malagasy dishes and breakfasts.

Motel Violette (☎ 47 610 84; Rue du Commerce; r Ar24,000, bungalows Ar41,000) At the north end of town near the taxi-brousse station, this place has a comfortable setup. Rooms are very simple, but have good bathrooms and some have views. The on-site restaurant (mains Ar3000 to Ar9000) serves good French and Malagasy food.

Hôtel Mania (☎ 47 710 21; r from Ar25,000) Tucked away in a leafy, gated courtyard in the centre of town, it has big, clean rooms with a peach colour scheme and spotless marble bathrooms.

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our pick **Hotel Sokela De La Mania** (☎ 47 711 95; r Ar27,000-35,000) On the outskirts of town, this very peaceful place has fabulous views, especially at sunset. Rooms are in a big white colonial building and offer lots of space and light with huge windows – get one facing out onto the rice paddies. There is an onsite restaurant serving simple meals (Ar2000 to Ar7000) including cold sandwiches. It can be very cold and drafty at night.

Eating

L'Oasis (☎ 47 713 01; mains from Ar1000; ☞ breakfast & lunch) To stock up on fresh bread and other basic groceries for the long taxi-brousse ride south, head to this little place just north of the southern station. It also does a few hot Chinese dishes if you want to sit down.

Hotely Tanamasoandro (Hotely Gasy; ☎ 47 713 65; mains from Ar2400; ☞ lunch & dinner) This unpretentious local favourite is very popular for both its ambiance and huge portions. The restaurant's interior is a strange mix of Malagasy and Scottish themes, but it's very attractive.

Getting There & Away

Transport to points north, including Antsirabe (Ar5000, two hours) and Antananarivo (Ar7000, five hours), departs from the far northern end of town, about 2km north of the fork and down a small staircase from Rue

du Commerce, where you'll find a whole lot of taxis-brousses lined up on the side of the road. Departures for Fianarantsoa (Ar6000, four hours) and other points south are from the southern taxi-brousse station, just south of L'Oasis restaurant.

ANTOETRA & AROUND

The cluster of villages southeast of Ambositra is a Unesco World Heritage site inhabited by the **Zafimaniry people**, a subgroup of the Betsileo who are known for their woodcarving. Many of their homes are works of art, with shutters and walls carved into geometric designs.

The main village is Antoetra, which is linked with other villages higher on the massif by a good system of walking tracks. Sadly, Antoetra has been marred by deforestation and tourism – you can expect bare hillsides, mud and very persistent souvenir sellers.

You're most likely to enjoy a visit to this area if you do a trek of at least three days, which will allow you to get far enough off the beaten track to experience real village life, watch skilled woodcarvers at work and enjoy the surrounding hills and forests.

All tours must start in Antoetra, where you'll need to pay a 'community fee' of Ar3000 at the mayor's office in the centre of the village. The best villages to visit are **Sakaivo** (five hours' walk from Antoetra), **Falairivo**, the highest of the villages (two hours from Sakaivo), and **Antetazandrota** (one hour from Sakaivo).

For all the villages, except Antoetra, you will need to visit with a guide, who can help you communicate with the locals and instruct you in local *fady*. Guides can be arranged in Ambositra (p100) or Antsirabe (p97). Expect to pay around Ar25,000 per day for an English-speaking guide, a bit less for a French speaker.

The best times to visit are the months of May, June and September. During the rainy season the paths get very muddy and some become impassable.

Sleeping & Eating

There is no lodging in Antoetra, but you can usually arrange camping. Get permission first from the mayor – you have to see him anyway to arrange the permit. **Camping** (Ar1500) or super-basic **hut accommodation** (Ar10,000) can normally be arranged at the other villages.

You will need to be self-sufficient with food and water as nothing is available in the

villages. Tours arranged in Ambositra sometimes include basic meals.

Getting There & Away

Antoetra lies about 40km southeast of Ambositra. Taxis-brousses travel weekly (departing at 6am on Wednesday) between the two towns (Ar5000, two hours).

None of the other villages are served by taxis-brousses, but they can all be reached from Antoetra via the network of walking trails.

RANOMAFANA

Nestled in the hills next to the rushing Namorana River, the village of Ranomafana (Hot Water) is a friendly place. For a long time it served as a thermal bath centre and was a popular spot during the colonial era. Today it's mostly used as a jumping-off point for visiting Parc National de Ranomafana, which is just 7km away. With more sleeping options than the park, many people choose to spend the night in this tiny village. The market is huge, both in size and popularity, and worth a wander. Look for sweet juicy strawberries and bright woven basket. Streets are filled with lots of dogs and kids and lots of people just sitting around, but it's a friendly place that's not intimidating.

Sights & Activities

The **thermal baths** for which the town is named are across a bridge, behind the now-defunct Hôtel Station Thermale. The baths are in a beautiful setting, but they are still a bit dingy – although they're cleaner than the ones at Antsirabe. Some people don't mind a little algae and dirt in their mineral water, and if you are that type you'll probably like the rustic feel here. Plus the water is supposed to cure various ailments, including rheumatism, asthma, stomach ailments and sterility. Just below the baths is a deliciously warm, and much cleaner, **swimming pool** to float on your back and admire the forested hills. Village women also offer **massage** (Ar12,000 per 30 min) here.

On the road out of the village, about 400m towards the park, is the grandly titled **Environmental Interpretation Centre** (admission free; ☎ daily), which has explanations of forest biodiversity in French and English, plus a small gift shop.

Sleeping & Eating

Note that sleeping places are strung out along the main road, quite a long walk from each

other. Ranomafana doesn't have any Western-style restaurants outside its hotels, so check the menu where you're thinking of staying to see if it will suffice. Walking at night is not recommended – there are no street lights and it gets very, very dark.

Hôtel Manja (bungalows Ar18,000, r Ar38,000, mains Ar5000) Bungalows here are small weathered affairs that have seen their share of wet seasons. But they are clean, relatively comfortable and much better value than the rooms, which are nothing special. The hotel's best asset is the gigantic wooden restaurant with a porch overlooking the river. It serves tasty, inexpensive Malagasy meals. This is also a good choice if you arrive late at night off the taxi-brousse from Manakara or Mananjary – it's easy to spot in the dark, and there's always someone around to let you in. Look for the hotel about 500m before town as you arrive from the east.

Hôtel Domaine Nature (☎ 75 750 25; desmada@malagasy.com; r Ar40,000, mains Ar12,000) This very charming hotel, 4km out of the village on the road to the park, has rustic bungalows on stilts and fantastic views of the forest and waterfalls. Be warned, however, that there are a lot of steps to climb.

our pick Ihary Hotel (☎ 75 523 02; bungalows from Ar42,000, mains from Ar5000) We loved Ihary's tranquil thatched-roof bungalows right on the river – snag the one closest to the water and let its babble lull you into slumber. Bungalows are small, but very tidy and breezy with lots of windows. The restaurant serves good food and even has a few pool tables. Ihary fills fast; book ahead.

Centrest Hotel (☎ 75 523 02; r Ar62,000, mains from Ar6000) In a great hillside location on the edge

of town, Centrest is the most upmarket option in the village. Rooms are big and spotless and sit off stone pathways that meander through a lush tropical garden filled with local flowers and trees. Even if you're not staying, the restaurant is worth visiting. It serves a big menu, including yummy pastas and veg options. Malagasy dishes and seafood are also plentiful. Guests can visit the hotel's private reserve at Mahakajy, 9km away, which has chameleons and 80 species of orchid. English is spoken.

Getting There & Away

Taxis-brousses go daily from Ranomafana to Fianarantsoa (Ar5000, three hours) and Manakara or Mananjary (Ar20,000, six hours). If you're arriving from either place, let the driver know if you want to get off at the park entrance rather than in the village. Taxis-brousses from Manakara usually arrive in Ranomafana in the middle of the night.

Chartering a taxi from Fianarantsoa for a day visit to Ranomafana costs about Ar100,000.

PARC NATIONAL DE RANOMAFANA

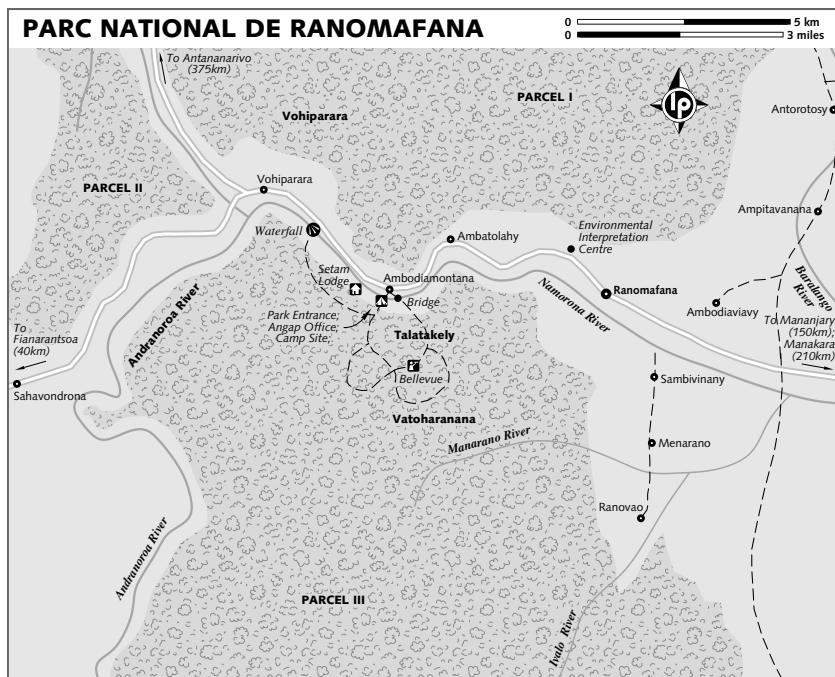
Trekking through Parc National de Ranomafana's 40,000 hectares of misty and magical cloud forest is a soul-soothing experience. The air always feels fresh and cool (it can rain anytime), and the scenery is spectacular. The landscape consists of odd-shaped rolling hills, thick with dark-green vegetation, and numerous small streams that turn into waterfalls as they plummet off slate-grey rocks and into the rushing Namorana River below. Ranomafana was set up in 1986 to protect two species of rare lemur – the golden bamboo lemur and

THE BETSILEO

The Betsileo, Madagascar's third-largest tribe, inhabit the *hauts plateaux* area around Fianarantsoa and Ambalavao. They only began viewing themselves as a nation after being invaded and conquered by the Merina in the early 19th century.

The Betsileo are renowned throughout Madagascar for their rice-cultivation techniques – they manage three harvests a year instead of the usual two, and their lands are marked by beautiful terracing and vivid shades of green in the rice paddy fields. Betsileo herdsman are famous for their trilby hats and the blankets they wear slung in a debonair fashion around their shoulders. Betsileo houses are distinctively tall and square, constructed from bricks as red as the earth of the roads.

As well as the *Famadihana* (reburial ceremony), which was adopted from the Merina after the unification of Madagascar, an important Betsileo belief centres on *hasina*, a force that is believed to flow from the land through the ancestors into the society of the living. Skilled traditional practitioners are thought to be able to manipulate *hasina* to achieve cures and other positive effects. The reverse of *hasina* is *hera*, which can result in illness and misfortune.



the greater bamboo lemur. Today it's one of Madagascar's most popular parks, with fabulous forest walks, lemur-spotting and excellent tourist facilities, including a posh new resort and a well-organised info centre.

Information

The park entrance, the Angap reception, information centre, the campsite and Setam Lodge are all in the tiny village of Ambodiamontana, about 7km west of Ranomafana village.

Entrance permits, available at reception, cost Ar25,000 per person for one day, and Ar40,000 for three days; 50% of this park fee goes to local people for use in community projects. Taking a guide is compulsory. Two-hour circuits cost Ar15,000 (up to four people) during the day and Ar20,000 after dark. Multiday treks are Ar60,000 per day. Guides speak English, French, Italian and German, and should be booked through reception.

The best time to visit is during the drier July to November season. However, the park can get very crowded during this time, particularly in July and early August. Temperatures range

from 20°C to 25°C during the day and regularly drop as low as 10°C at night.

Wildlife

Parc National de Ranomafana is home to 29 mammal species, including 12 species of lemur. On a typical day's walk, you are likely to see red-bellied lemurs, diademed sifakas and red-fronted lemurs. With luck, you may also see a golden bamboo lemur. This species was first discovered in 1986; Ranomafana is one of its two known habitats.

Even rarer is the broad-nosed gentle lemur, which was thought to be extinct until it was rediscovered in Ranomafana in 1972; it was observed again in the late 1980s, and is very occasionally seen by visitors to the park.

Night visits to the park involve a trip to a clearing where bait is set to attract woolly, mouse and sportive lemurs, as well as the striped civet (*Fossa fossana*). Baiting wildlife for tourist observation is a controversial practice, and for some visitors the whole experience can seem rather contrived and artificial.

Not to be confused with *F. fossana*, the much larger *fosa* (*Cryptoprocta ferox*), a puma-

like creature and the largest of Madagascar's predators, is the bane of local farmers, who blame it for night raids on stock and other mischief. The *fosa* is rarely sighted.

The park's bird life is also rich, with more than 100 species. Of these, 68 species are endemic to Madagascar. The forests abound with geckos, chameleons and frogs.

Although most visitors come for the animals, the plant life is just as impressive, with orchids, tree ferns, palms, mosses and stands of giant bamboo.

Hiking

There are three major walking trails that go through the park. The short **Ala Mando trail** (Petit Circuit) takes a leisurely two hours up and back and heads as far as the lookout at Bellevue, with lemur-spotting along the way. The **night walk** follows the same route, ending up in the Place du Nuit to see the nocturnal lemurs and the civet. The three- to four-hour **Moyen Circuit** goes a bit further in its search for lemurs.

Multiday treks not only allow you to spend a night in the forest, they also take you deeper into the park and away from the crowds.

Sleeping & Eating

Angap has a set of **campsites** (per tent Ar2000) at the entrance to the park, but you will need your own tent. Camping elsewhere in the park is only allowed on the guided treks organised through Angap. Again, you'll need a tent.

our pick **Setam Lodge** (☎ 22 234 31; www.setam-madagascar.com; rAr112,000) If you want to splash out in this region, there's no better setting to do so than this luxurious new place. Perched on a hill about 500m into the park from the entrance and up a steep set of stairs, it blends beautifully into its surroundings. Staying at this eco-lodge allows you to experience Ranomafana's magic by day (it runs its own walking tours) without sacrificing comfort come night. The spotless rooms are entered through carved wood doors and include enormous beds with real duvets, white walls adorned with artistic photos and, best of all, space heaters for freezing winter nights! The restaurant has huge windows featuring fabulous cloud-forest views. It serves breakfast (Ar7000 to Ar9000) and a set three-course meal at lunch and dinner (Ar20,000). Guests are encouraged to book online, where you'll also find the best deals.

Getting There & Away

The park entrance is 7km west of Ranomafana village on the main road. Getting to and from the park by taxi-brousse is now organised and easy. Buses to towns on the eastern coast stop by the entrance around noon each day to pick up and drop off passengers. About 20 taxis-brousses heading west to Fianarantsoa (Ar5000, three hours) stop here between 7.30am and noon. These buses will stop in Ranomafana village if you ask.

Hitching is also pretty easy – dozens of tourist rental cars head to and from the park every day.

FIANARANTSOA

pop 138,000

Madagascar's second-largest city, Fianarantsoa, is nothing to write home about. Although it resembles Antananarivo with its hillside location, steep cluttered streets and pollution, it lacks most of the capital city's charm. If you're travelling the RN7 by chartered car, however, you will almost certainly spend the night here, as the central location of Fianarantsoa (or Fianar as it's often called) makes it an ideal overnight rest stop. Wander the chaotic old town's narrow streets, crammed with touts and vendors and sleeping dogs, and stop for a drink at a little *hotely* along the way. Or visit one of Fianar's popular markets, where mamas draped in bright sarongs shop for kiddie clothes and veggies with a squawking chicken tucked nonchalantly under one arm.

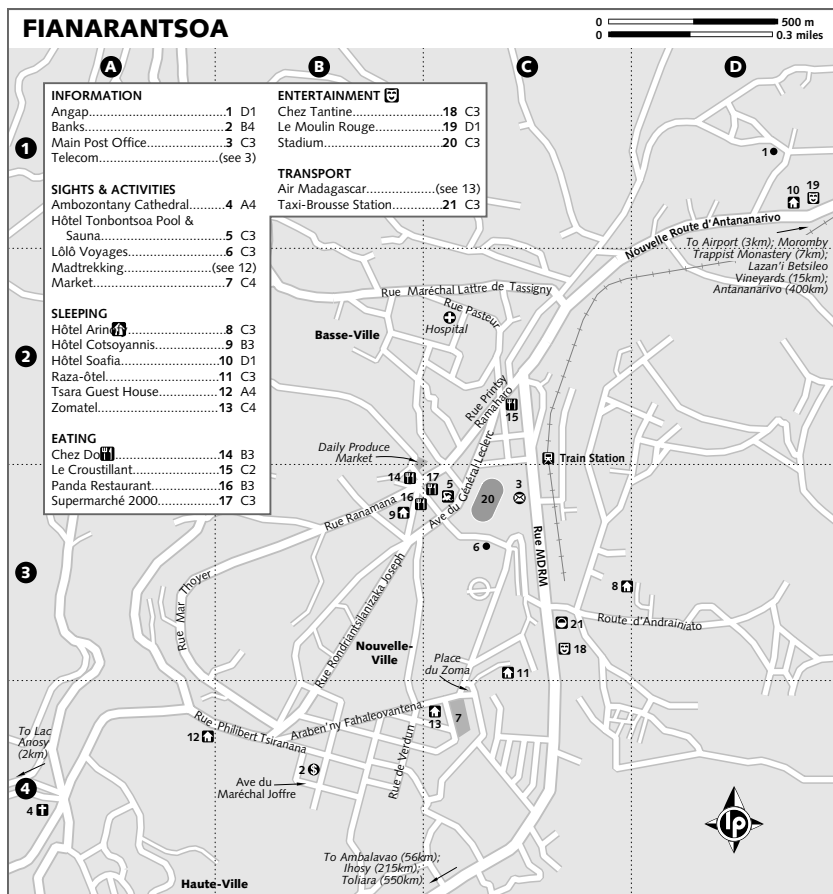
Orientation

Fianarantsoa is divided into three parts. Basse-Ville (Lower Town), to the north, is a busy, chaotic area with the main post office and the train and taxi-brousse stations. Up from Basse-Ville is Nouvelle Ville (New Town), the business area with the banks and several hotels. Further south and uphill is Haute-Ville (Upper Town), which has cobbled streets, a more peaceful atmosphere, numerous church spires and wide views across Lac Anosy and the surrounding rice paddies.

Information

Fianar has many banks with ATMs that also change currency and do Visa card cash advances.

Angap (☎ 75 512 74; angapfmr@dts.mg) Can provide information and permits for the parks near Fianarantsoa. Permits can also be purchased at the parks themselves.



Main Post Office & Telecom Office (internet access per min Ar50; ☎ 7am-9pm Mon-Sat) Opposite the train station.

Sights & Activities

The oldest and most attractive part of town is **Haute-Ville** (known as Tanana Ambony in Malagasy). A stroll (or climb) around the cobbled streets here offers great views of the surrounding countryside. In the centre of Haute-Ville, and dominating the skyline, is the imposing **Ambozontany cathedral**, which dates back to 1890.

Fianar is a market town, with at least one small market open every day. Fianar's largest market is the weekly **Zoma**, where you'll find everything from beef sausages to party hats. It's held on Friday along Araben'ny Fahaleo-

vantena, and is hugely popular with locals who come as much to catch up on the week's events as to purchase dinner.

In hot weather, head for the large **pool** (admission Ar15,000) at the Hôtel Tombontsoa. There's also a **sauna** (per hr Ar20,000) for sweating out Fianar's pollution.

Tours

Several hotels and tour operators can organise excursions to Parc National de Ranomafana, Ambalavao and the Sahambavy Tea Estate. It is also possible to arrange walking tours to the many picturesque Betsileo villages surrounding Fianarantsoa.

Tsara Guest House, Hôtel Cotsyannis and some other hotels in Fianarantsoa will hold

your luggage while you visit Parc National de Ranomafana or go trekking.

The Ranomafana treks advertised in Fianarantsoa focus on the Tanala villages in the area surrounding Parc National de Ranomafana. These multiday treks can be tough going, especially in the rainy season, when you will spend a lot of time slogging through rice paddies and dense patches of forest. You will need good shoes and long trousers to dissuade the leeches.

Places that organise treks and excursions include:

Hôtel Arinofy (☎ 75 506 38) This hotel organises treks and homestays in the Betsileo villages around Fianarantsoa.

Le Maison des Guides (☎ 75 517 30) This new company is a village initiative that's well worth supporting. It specialises in mountain and village treks with an emphasis on community tourism.

Lôlo Voyages (☎ 75 519 80; lolovoyages@dts.mg) This recommended guide specialises in treks and hikes in the Tanala villages around Parc National de Ranomafana. He also can arrange excursions to nearby attractions, pirogue excursions on the Matsiatra River (Ar150,000 for two days), and private transport between Fianarantsoa and Antananarivo that stops at points of interest along the way.

Madtrekking (☎ 75 502 06; mad.trekking@wanadoo.mg; Rue Philibert Tsiranana) This excellent company affiliated with Tsara Guest House (its office is right next door) offers a wide variety of excursions, including trekking in Parc National de Ranomafana, day hikes through villages around Fianarantsoa and pirogue excursions on the Matsiatra River. It can also hire out 4WDs, with driver, for around Ar150,000 per day.

Sleeping

Hôtel Arinofy (☎ 75 506 38; camping/s/d Ar12,000/15,000/19,000) Northeast of the taxi-brousse station in a quiet area, this is a friendly local guesthouse that also organises community tourism in the villages around Fianarantsoa. It has a variety of rooms at different prices and allows camping (tents provided in the price) when rooms are full. The restaurant serves Malagasy dishes (from Ar4000), and there's a kitchen (rare) for self-caterers. Cars can be hired.

Raza-ôtel (☎ 75 519 15; d Ar17,600-24,600, mains from Ar6000) Set back from the main street in a quiet courtyard off a side road, this is a charming and nicely decorated family-run guesthouse. There are just four rustic rooms, unfortunately with saggy mattresses, but the restaurant and bar area are super-cosy with

lots of comfortable seating. You need to order in advance for evening meals – the restaurant closes if it doesn't have any customers.

Hôtel Cotsyannis (☎ 75 514 72; cotsy@malagasy.com; d from Ar29,000, mains from Ar6000) 'Le Cotsy' has a garden courtyard and rustic, simple and attractive rooms that are great value for money. There's also a cosy restaurant with a log fire and good pizzas and crepes, which are its speciality. It also runs Camp Catta, a rock-climbing hotel just outside Parc National d'Andringitra on the Tsaranoro Massif (see p112).

Tsara Guest House (☎ 75 502 06; www.tsaraguest.com; Rue Philibert Tsiranana; r Ar35,000-111,000, mains Ar5000-15,000) Wildly popular, this orange-painted converted church enjoys a reputation as one of the best guesthouses in Madagascar. The public area décor is excellent – a roaring fire and bright-red walls in the reception area, a glass-walled restaurant serving delicious food, and a charming outdoor terrace with great views. Prices vary considerably here. The cheapest rooms, with shared bathrooms, seem a bit overpriced, as do the midrange 'chambres confortables', but you are paying for the ambiance more than the amenities. The most expensive rooms are quite posh, however, and fairly priced – one has a king bed. English is spoken, and excursions can be arranged. Advance bookings are recommended.

Ourpick Zomatel (☎ 75 507 97; www.zomatel-madagascar.com; Araben'ny Fahaleovantena; r from Ar45,000, mains Ar5000-13,000; ☎ ☎) If you just want a good night's sleep in a comfortable Western-style business hotel, head to Zomatel. The mattresses are fantastic – no sagging here – and beds have soft duvets. Set back from the road in a gated complex, the hotel also has a formal restaurant, internet centre and low-key pizzeria with pool tables. It's also where you'll find the Air Madagascar office.

Hôtel Soafia (☎ 75 503 53; soafia@simicro.mg; Nouvelle Route d'Antananarivo; r from Ar45,000, mains from Ar7000; ☎ ☎) Surely a contender for the weirdest hotel in Madagascar – an enormous Chinese-style palace, fitted out like a kitsch 1970s theme park, plastic pagodas and all. There's an equally large swimming pool, a vast, empty restaurant, a travel agency, a 'dance club' and an arcade of shops. Labyrinthine corridors lead to rooms fitted out haphazardly with gilt trimmings, some with bathrooms you could play football in. The prices are reasonable for the facilities, so lovers of the surreal might want to stay here for sheer novelty value.

Eating

For excellent French cuisine visit the restaurant at the Tsara Guest House. Hôtel Cotsyannis' restaurant is famed for its wood-fired pizzas and crepes. **Supermarché 2000**, in Basse-Ville, is the best-stocked place for self-caterers.

Le Croustillant (☎ 75 920 13; mains Ar3000-6000; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) The service can be very slow, but it's worth the wait – our stir-fried seafood noodles were about as fresh as you can get. The small and unpretentious restaurant has a large menu that includes everything from omelettes to pasta. The Chinese dishes are particularly good.

Chez Dom (☎ 75 512 33; Rue Ranamana; mains from Ar5000; ☺ lunch & dinner; ☑) A smoky backpacker café with internet access and a bar specialising in local rum. Freelance guides, available for excursions and treks, loiter here.

Panda Restaurant (☎ 75 505 69; Rue Ranamana; mains from Ar6000; ☺ lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) If your ultimate fantasy involves dining on sautéed bat while staring at murals of copulating pandas painted on a restaurant wall, fulfil it here. Definitely a top contender for Madagascar's strangest eating establishment, Panda serves an eclectic menu that includes bat, pigeon, frog and wild duck. It also does excellent Chinese. Ring ahead if you're absolutely craving bat or pigeon, as they are not always available.

Entertainment

On Sunday afternoon, spirited games of football (soccer) are played at the **stadium** (off Ave du Général Lederc), near the train station. There are also occasional beer festivals here, attended by university students from as far away as Antananarivo. Look out for posters around town.

For dancing, try **Le Moulin Rouge** at the northeastern end of town, which plays everything from Malagasy to Euro-pop. **Chez Tantine**, by the taxi-brousse station, is also fun and attracts a lively Malagasy crowd.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Air Madagascar (☎ 75 507 97; Arabeny Fahaleovantena) flies once weekly between Fianarantsoa and Antananarivo; look for the booking agent in the complex behind the Zomatel. The Fianarantsoa airport is 3km northeast of the city.

TAXI-BROUSSE & MINIBUS

Frequent taxis-brousses connect Fianarantsoa with Ambositra (Ar5000, three hours),

Antsirabe (Ar7000, about seven hours) and Antananarivo (Ar10,000, nine to 10 hours).

Minibuses also go daily to Ambalavao (Ar400, two hours), Ihosy (Ar7000, four hours), Ranohira (Ar9000, seven hours) and on to Toliara (Ar12,000, 11 hours). Departures from Fianarantsoa are at around 5pm, arriving in Toliara at about 4am the next day. If you're heading east there are multiple vehicles daily between Fianarantsoa and Ranomafana (Ar5000, three hours), Mananjary (Ar8000, eight hours) and Manakara (Ar10,000, 10 hours). It's no longer possible to go from Fianarantsoa straight to Fort Dauphin (Taolagnaro) as the road is impassable – you have to go to Toliara first.

TRAIN

Fianarantsoa is connected to Manakara on the eastern coast by Madagascar's only functioning passenger train service, the FCE (*Fianarantsoa-Côte Est*). The train leaves Fianar early each morning and chugs on lines built in the 1930s through plantations and past hills and waterfalls, reaching Manakara around seven hours later. It takes about an hour longer in the other direction as the train has to go uphill. Despite its antiquity and unreliability, the train is still an economic lifeline for the people of the inland villages, who use it to transport their cargoes of bananas and coffee to be sold and exported.

Departures from Fianarantsoa are scheduled for Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Saturday and Sunday at 7am, and from Manakara on Monday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and Sunday at 7am, although there are frequent delays and cancellations. Tickets cost Ar25,000/16,000 in 1st/2nd class.

No advance reservations are taken – simply arrive at the station about an hour before departure. The only actual difference between 1st and 2nd class is that the seats and windows are bigger, and it's less crowded. First class is generally only used by tourists, while 2nd class is packed with a noisy and friendly crowd of Malagasy, all leaning out of the windows at each tiny station to haggle with hordes of vendors balancing baskets of bananas, crayfish or fresh bread on their heads.

For the best views of the cliffs, misty valleys and waterfalls en route, sit on the north side of the train (ie the left side when going from Fianarantsoa to Manakara). However, the most impressive waterfall is on the right as you go towards Manakara, just after Mad-

porano, about two hours from Fianarantsoa. Bring water, and, if you're making the journey in winter, plenty of warm clothes – it's often freezing early in the morning, when some of the best views can be hidden by fog.

For a more detailed history of the railway and the regions through which it passes, pick up a booklet called *The FCE: A Traveler's Guide* by Karen Schoonmaker Freudenberger. It's available in English and French for Ar7500 at the station or at the reception of the Zomatel hotel.

Getting Around

Taxis to the airport, 3km to the northeast, should cost between Ar2500 and Ar5000 depending on the time of day and the driver's willingness to barter!

Taxis charge Ar1500 per person for rides within Fianarantsoa. Villages and destinations in the surrounding area are served by *buxi* (minivans), which have route numbers marked in their front window. The fare to all destinations is Ar800; departures are from the taxi-brousse station.

AROUND FIANARANTSOA

Home to vineyards, tea estates and quaint medieval-style villages, the area around Fianarantsoa feels a lot like Europe. It is also considerably more attractive than the town itself and is well worth visiting.

Heading south from Fianarantsoa the landscape changes dramatically. Gone are the deep crimsons of the north, replaced instead by huge golden savannas punctuated by giant boulders.

Vineyards

Wine production in the area around Fianarantsoa began in the 1970s, with technical expertise and funding from a Swiss corporation. Today, Fianarantsoa is Madagascar's wine-making centre. Several of the largest vineyards lie northwest of town along the route to Isorana, or northeast along the road to Ambositra.

The most popular and accessible vineyard is **Lazan'i Betsileo** (☎ 75 516 24), about 15km north of Fianarantsoa. If you're visiting on your own, ring in advance.

About 7km outside Fianarantsoa is the **Maromby Trappist monastery** (admission Ar1000), where you can observe the wine-making process and taste the wine. To get here, take *buxi* No 24 (Ar500) towards Vohipeno and ask the

driver to drop you off at the junction, from where the monastery is about a 2km walk.

You can easily charter a taxi from Fianarantsoa for transport to either vineyard (or both). This should cost between Ar30,000 and Ar50,000 return.

Sahambavy Tea Estate

The **Sahambavy Tea Estate** (admission Ar7500; ☺ 7.30am-3.30pm Mon-Fri) produces high-quality tea for export and a lesser grade for local consumption. It lies near the village of Ampaivanovato, about 15km east of Fianarantsoa and along the rail line towards Manakara. A visit includes a tour of the tea-processing factory and ends with a tea-tasting.

Organised day excursions can be arranged in Fianarantsoa for about Ar75,000, including the entry fee. To visit on your own, take a taxi-brousse heading towards Sahalavo to the signposted turn-off, from where you will need to walk about 1km. Alternatively take the train to Sahambavy station (the second stop after Fianar) and walk about 500m from there.

The only place to stay around here is the **Lake Hôtel** (☎ 75 518 73; r from Ar25,000, set dinners Ar10,000). It's a well-run Chinese establishment near the station.

AMBALAVAO

pop 25,000

Ambalavao (New Valley) is one of the most beautiful towns in the *hauts plateaux*. The brightly painted buildings of the main street look a bit like gingerbread houses with their steeply tiled roofs and carved, weathered wooden balconies. Outside, women sit in the clear highland sunlight, spinning silk or kneading dough, little raffia hats perched on their heads and blankets around their shoulders. Every Tuesday and Wednesday, the town plays host to the largest zebu market in the country, with tough, wizened herdsman walking from as far away as Toliara to sell their cattle.

The World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) and the **Parc National d'Andringitra office** (☎ 75 340 81) is on the northern edge of town, opposite Ambalavao's only petrol station. The office can provide information on the park and assist with transport and guides.

If you're looking for gifts made from wild silk and a chance to visit a silk workshop look for a shop called **Nathocéane** on the main street.

Sights

FABRIQUE DE PAPIER ANTAIMORO

The **Fabrique de Papier Antaimoro** (Antaimoro Paper Factory; ☎ 75 340 01; admission free; 🕒 7.30-11.30am & 1-5pm) lies behind the **Hôtel Aux Bougainvillées**. You can see the women of the factory making paper from scratch. They start with the bark of the *avoaha* bush, which is first boiled in water to form a pulp, then it is pounded, spread out over cotton cloth on wooden frames and left in the sun to dry. Once it's almost dry, fresh flowers are pressed into it. It is then left to dry again, after which the paper is removed from the frames and made into cards, envelopes and picture frames, all of which are for sale.

ANJA RESERVE

Readers love this small village **reserve** (admission Ar7000), about 7km from Ambalavao, that features a semi-tame colony of ring-tailed lemurs and some Betsileo tombs in a small patch of forest. Not only do you get great lemur close-ups, the reserve is a total community initiative. A local guide named Adrien started the park about a decade ago to promote regional tourism, create jobs and teach villagers the importance of conservation.

The reserve's relatively small size (although the terrain is tough going – lots of rock scrambles and bush walking) means you pretty much have a 100% chance of spotting a lemur. Its popularity has put it on the tour circuits, however, and you are likely to find yourself bumping into other groups of tourists on your hike. Guides are mandatory and cost Ar10,000 per person for two hours.

Besides managing the reserve, Adrien runs two-night **trips** (☎ 032 48 479 30; adrientre@yahoo.fr; trips Ar100,000) in Parc National d'Andringitra that can focus on either rock-climbing or hiking. Rates include guide, entrance fees, food, transfers and all equipment. Adrien's tours are very fairly priced, and he speaks excellent English and comes well recommended – Tom Parkinson spent a few days trekking with him while researching this guidebook. Adrien is based at the **Hôtel Aux Bougainvillées**.

To get to the reserve, you can make a day's walk of it, or catch a taxi-brousse towards Ihoany and ask to be dropped at the office of the reserve. If you've chartered a vehicle, most include a stop here on their RN7 (Route de Sud) itinerary.

Sleeping & Eating

There are around half a dozen hotels, of varying quality in town, if this place is full.

Hôtel Aux Bougainvillées (☎ 75 340 01; ragon@wanadoo.mg; r Ar4,000-60,000, mains around Ar10,000) On the grounds of the paper factory, this hotel has a bit of character. The rooms are comfortable and clean, but only the more expensive have hot water and private bathrooms. There's a decent restaurant, which is popular with tour groups at lunch. If you need information, look for Adrien, the well-respected guide based at the hotel part-time.

Getting There & Away

Ambalavao lies 56km south of Fianarantsoa. The town has direct taxi-brousse connections with Fianarantsoa (Ar3000, 1½ hours), Ihoany (Ar5000, two hours) and Ilakaka (Ar6000, five hours). For destinations further north, you'll have to go to Fianarantsoa first.

PARC NATIONAL D'ANDRINGITRA

The beautiful Parc National d'Andringitra (an-*dring*-itry) is a paradise for walkers and climbers. It has spectacular views of huge granite peaks towering above the Namoly and Sahanambo Valleys, 100km of well-developed hiking trails and the opportunity to climb Pic Imarivolanitra, which at 2643m is Madagascar's second-highest peak. The roads into the park are no less spectacular, surrounded on all sides by the glittering mud and symmetrical patterns of thousands of paddy fields.

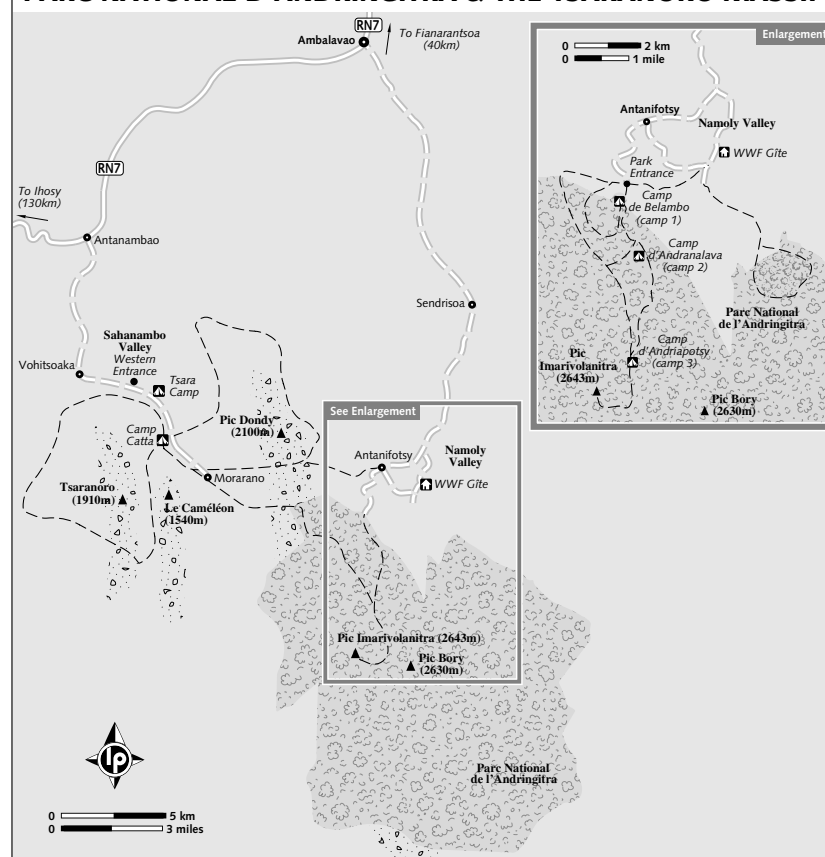
The areas around the northern part of the park (where the main tourism area is located) are primarily inhabited by the rice-cultivating Betsileo, while the largest group in the south is the cattle-herding Bara. Andringitra is administered in partnership with the local communities, who can be visited in the villages bordering the park – ask your guide to arrange a trip, or inquire at the WWF *gîte* near the park entrance.

Information

The **WWF/Angap office** (☎ 75 340 81) in Ambalavao can provide information on the park and on weather conditions, verify camping-ground availability, and help find guides.

The main entrance to the park, and the most common starting point for treks, is in the Namoly Valley on Andringitra's eastern side. There is another entrance at the Sahanambo Valley on the park's western border.

PARC NATIONAL D'ANDRINGITRA & THE TSARANORO MASSIF



When visiting the park, you will need to be self-sufficient with both food and water. It's also important to respect local *fady*, which are taken seriously in this area. There is a *fady* that pork should not be consumed in the valley or near the sacred waterfalls, and another that no boats should cross the Zomandao River. Your guide can help you with others. Andringitra is a 'pack it in – pack it out' park, so you'll need to take all rubbish from your visit out with you.

Temperatures in Andringitra drop as low as -7°C at night during the winter months of June and July, while daytime highs in December and January reach 25°C. You will definitely need extra warm clothing and a good sleeping bag if camping during the winter. Afternoon mists are common, and you should be prepared for

bad weather at any time of year. The park is officially closed in January and February when heavy rains make access difficult.

Permits (Ar10,000 for three days) can be arranged at both the Namoly Valley and Sahanambo Valley entrances.

Local guides can be arranged at either entrance gate and are required for all hikes. Fees start at Ar10,000 and are dependent on how far you want to hike.

Wildlife

Fourteen lemur species have been identified in Andringitra – more than in any other park in Madagascar – but sightings by visitors are rare since most of their habitat is outside the tourism zone. Among Andringitra's lemur

species is an ecotype of *Lemur catta* (ring-tailed lemur) adapted to living in the mountains, which has been sighted on the upper reaches of Pic Imarivolanitra. The park's rich flora includes over 30 species of orchid, which bloom mainly in February and March.

Hiking

Andringitra's 100km of trails traverse a variety of habitats and offer fantastic trekking. There are four main circuits catering to various abilities. One of the most popular is the climb to the summit of Pic Imarivolanitra (2643m). There is now a natural trail up the mountain, which makes the summit accessible to most visitors with no technical climbing skills, although you'll need a reasonable degree of fitness for the hike. The circuit takes about 12 hours, so it's best to allow at least two days from start to finish. There is a beautiful camping ground for overnight stays about 3.5km before the summit.

Other circuits include the easy Asaramanitra (6km, about four hours) and the scenic Diavolana (13km, six to seven hours). The best route for lemur-spotting is Imaïtso (14km, about eight hours) which goes through the eastern forests. Pocket maps and details of the various routes are available from the WWF/Angap office in Ambalavao.

Sleeping

Camping grounds (camping per tent Ar5000) The park has four wilderness camping grounds, all with running water and flush toilets. Tents can be rented from some of the local guides.

WWF gîte (☎ 75 340 81; s/d Ar13,000/20,000) The gîte, in Namoly, is outside the park bounda-

ries about 6km from the start of the trails. It offers very simple accommodation in a lodge with a lobby fireplace, communal toilets and a self-catering kitchen. Advance reservations are recommended.

Getting There & Away

The Namoly Valley entrance lies east of Andringitra, about 100km south of Fianarantsoa. Allow about 2½ hours from Fianarantsoa in a private vehicle. The road is in good condition and negotiable with 2WD at most times of year.

The Sahanambo Valley entrance to the west of the park is about 110km from Fianarantsoa and four hours in a private vehicle.

Taxis-brousses go to Namoly from the western side of the market in Ambalavao on Thursday. On other days you can find transport to the village of Sendrisoa, 17km before Namoly, then walk in. For Sahanambo, you'll have to get a taxi-brousse to Vohisaoka, 15km before the entrance. Alternatively, you can charter a vehicle in Ambalavao for the very scenic drive up to the park (about Ar75,000 per day).

TSARANORO MASSIF

Just outside the western boundary of Parc National d'Andringitra is the Tsaranoro Massif. It has an approximately 800m-high sheer rock face considered by rock climbers to be one of the most challenging in the world.

Camp Catta (☎ 75 505 68; www.campcatta.com; tent per person €7-11, bungalow per person €17-53), on the western edge of the park, is run by the Hôtel Cotsoyannis in Fianarantsoa, and specialises in rock climbing.