

# Eastern Madagascar



Pirates aren't stupid. They figured out how juicy Eastern Madagascar's treasures were and looted its coastline centuries before the rest of us caught on. A couple of hundred years later the real pirates are gone and the secret is out: there's plenty of leftover booty in the form of dazzling pearl beaches, sparkling sapphire water and lush jade rainforests.

Travel in large parts of Eastern Madagascar isn't easy in anyone's book, but you can't say it's not an adventure. In fact, for some just the lure of trying to get around is enough reason to come. Author Tom Parkinson 'spent weeks researching via canoe and foot, it was the only way to get around...but he said it was a highlight of his trip', his mother wrote to us after his death.

Periodically ravished by cyclones, infrastructure along the wild and rugged long eastern coastline is poor at best. In the course of your travels, transport here will usually include riding in a zebu cart, long hikes through thick forest, and chugging along the region's multiple waterways in a flat-bottomed boat. It's not for everyone, but if you're bored of the easy travel life, this coast should get your blood pumping again.

Not everywhere along the Vanilla/Pirate/Cyclone (it goes by all three) Coast is hard to reach. The well-surfaced road between Antananarivo and Toamasina is one of Madagascar's most travelled, with most folk flocking in this direction to see (and hear) the indri, Madagascar's biggest lemur, in Parc National d'Andasibe-Mantadia. Further north the beautiful Île Sainte Marie is also easy to reach, and the island's palm-fringed beaches and turquoise water are beginning to edge out Nosy Be's as a sun-worshipper's favourite paradise.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Lying out in the sun, swimming in the sea or looking for whales on gorgeous, and accessible, **Île Sainte Marie** (p206)
- Trekking through one of Madagascar's best rainforests on the **Masoala Peninsula** (p223)
- Exploring the otherworldly, Jurassic Park-like scenery at **Réserve de Nosy Mangabe** (p219) while on a mission to find its golden beach
- Experiencing Madagascar at its most watery remote, boating down the **Canal des Pangalanes** (p228), where you're unlikely to see any other foreigners
- Listening for the eerie wail of the indri at popular **Parc National d'Andasibe-Mantadia** (p192), not far from Antananarivo



■ HIGHEST POINT: 1785m

■ PRINCIPAL TRIBES: Antaimoro, Betsimisaraka, Tsimihety

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

Air Madagascar has flights from Antananarivo to Toamasina (€80, one hour) daily, and several times a week from Antananarivo to Île Sainte Marie (€209, 1½ hours). You can also fly into Sambava or Antalaha, but these flights are scheduled less frequently. Air Madagascar also operates regional flights direct from Réunion to Toamasina.

Air Austral flies from Toamasina to Réunion, continuing to Mauritius.

### BOAT

Toamasina is linked to Mauritius and Réunion by a passenger boat that departs approximately every two weeks. For more information, see p202.

Cargo boats from Diego Suarez occasionally round the Masoala Peninsula as far as Maroantsetra, but they are few and far between and facilities are minimal.

### LAND

The twisting, turning Route Nationale 2 (RN2) from Antananarivo to Toamasina is well served by taxis-brousses and buses.

Coming from the south, travel by road is only possible with plenty of time and patience, and even then you'll only get as far as Mananara, 225km south of Toamasina. From the north, the road stops after Antalaha, where you may have to don your walking boots, flag down a passing cargo boat or, quickest of all, buy an air ticket.

## Getting Around

### AIR

Air Madagascar makes small plane hops up and down the northeast coast from Toamasina and Antananarivo, stopping at Maroantsetra (€128 from Toamasina) and Antalaha. Several weekly flights connect Île Sainte Marie to Toamasina (€80).

### BOAT

From rusty-bottomed canal barges to overloaded cargo vessels, boats figure highly on the transport map of the east.

The French-built Canal des Pangalanes, which runs from Farafangana to Toamasina, is silted up and impassable in places but is definitely the main thoroughfare of the region. Regular cargo vessels and motorboats ply the most visited northern waters between



Ambila-Lemaitso and Toamasina. For more details, see p228.

Boats replace taxis-brousses as the main form of public transport for the coastal towns north of Soanierana-Ivongo. Few of the boats have any passenger facilities, however, and none has fixed schedules – it's simply a matter of hanging around the ports and waiting for something to arrive that's going your way. Several ferries a day, some equipped with such luxuries as seats and lifejackets, do the run across from the mainland to Île Sainte Marie. See p209 for details.

### BUS & TAXI-BROUSSE

From the towns on the RN2, you'll be able to find onward transport to places like Andasibe and Ambatondrazaka, although once off the RN2 the roads are generally poor.

North of Toamasina, taxis-brousses continue daily as far as Soanierana-Ivongo, from where you catch the boat to Île Sainte Marie. Taxis-brousses are usually prevented from travelling further north due to collapsed bridges and enormous potholes. Likewise, no taxis-brousses go south from Toamasina, but further down the coast the towns of Mananjary, Manakara and Farafangana are linked by regular, if rickety, vehicles.

### TRAIN

The once-famous passenger train between Antananarivo and Toamasina is currently suspended, but a limited service has restarted between Andasibe and Brickville. Ask locally or in Antananarivo for the latest news.

The only other trains in the region are the cargo engines that run along the single-gauge railway linking some of the villages on the Canal des Pangalanes. These are supposedly forbidden from taking passengers, but if you're lucky you might be able to talk your way on board.

## ANTANANARIVO TO TOAMASINA

### MORAMANGA

pop 24,000

The market town of Moramanga lies along the Antananarivo–Toamasina road, 115km east of Antananarivo and 30km west of Andasibe. It's hardly a tourist town, but you'll have to stop here if you're heading to or from

Parc National d'Andasibe-Mantadia on public transport.

The BNI-CL and BFV-SG banks have branches with ATMs on the main road.

If you have a bit of time to kill between taxis, the **Musée de la Gendarmerie** (Police Museum; ☎ 56 821 39; Camp Tristany; admission Ar3000; ☎ 9-11am & 2-5pm Sat & Sun, other times by appointment), about 1km southwest of the market, exhibits cannons, police uniforms, a vintage taxi-brousse and, strangely, an enormous bunch of dried marijuana.

### Sleeping & Eating

**Motel-Restaurant Rindra** (☎ 56 821 53; r with shared bathroom Ar10,000-17,000) On the single main road. Offers simple, spacious rooms with wood floors and furniture, plus some balconies and a popular restaurant. Note that there are just two communal bathrooms for all the rooms.

**Hôtel Nadia** (☎ 56 822 43; s/d/tr Ar10,000/14,000/20,000) Another basic budget option in the middle of the busy market – it's serviceable and has a cafeteria, but could be cleaner.

**Hôtel Restaurant Espace Diamant** (☎ 56 823 76; r Ar25,000-36,000, with shared bathroom Ar20,000) A short walk west of the *gare routière*, it has the best standards in town, with new tiled rooms, big beds and a big restaurant. Staff seem refreshingly eager to please!

**Le Coq d'Or** (☎ 56 820 45; mains from Ar2000; ☎ lunch & dinner Mon-Sat, lunch Sun) A neat painted café on the main road, serving *soupe chinoise*, fried chicken and other Malagasy meals.

**La Flore Orientale** (☎ 56 820 20; mains from Ar3000; ☎ lunch & dinner) A big yellow Chinese restaurant with an extensive menu, right by the market.

**La Sirène Dorée** (mains from Ar3000; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Just a tad smarter than its rivals, with mirrored windows concealing restaurant, pizzeria, patisserie and *salon de thé*.

### Getting There & Away

Taxis-brousses leave regularly from Antananarivo's eastern taxi-brousse station for Moramanga (Ar5000, 2¾ hours). There are direct taxi-brousse connections from Moramanga to Andasibe (Ar2000, 1½ hours) every few hours.

To get to Toamasina (Ar11,000, five to seven hours), you may need to wait until a vehicle coming from Antananarivo arrives with space.

A limited passenger-train service has now started running along with the freight services,

shuttling one tiny carriage from Moramanga to Brickaville and back, via Andasibe, every Tuesday and Saturday (Ar3500). It's slow and not particularly practical, as the station is some distance from the town centre.

## PARC NATIONAL D'ANDASIBE-MANTADIA & AROUND

One of the most popular attractions in Madagascar, thanks to its unique wildlife and convenient location near Tana, this 12,810-hectare park encompasses two distinct areas: the smaller Réserve Spéciale d'Analamazaotra (sometimes referred to as Périnet, its French colonial-era name), in the south by Andasibe, and the much larger Parc National de Mantadia, to the north. There are also several small private reserves near Andasibe.

The landscape in both sections consists of beautiful primary forest studded with lakes, but the real draw is the rare indri, Madagascar's largest lemur. The wondrous indri has been described as looking like 'a four-year-old child in a panda suit' and is famous for its eerie wailing cry, which sounds like something between a fire engine and Pavarotti in pain – hearing it through the early-morning mist is a truly affecting experience. Indris can be heard calling almost daily in the Réserve Spéciale d'Analamazaotra, mainly early in the morning and at dusk.

As it's easiest to access, d'Analamazaotra gets the most visitors, and tends to fill up during July and September, Madagascar's tourist high season. The best times to visit are from September to January and in May. During the

winter months of June to October, the park can get very cold, so bring enough warm clothing with you. If the weather has been wet (which it often is), watch out for leeches on the trails.

### INFORMATION

Opening hours for both d'Analamazaotra and Mantadia are 6am to 4pm, plus night visits by arrangement. Entry permits (one/two/three days Ar25,000/37,000/40,000) allow access to both parks, and can be purchased at the main entrance to d'Analamazaotra, near Andasibe. Guides gather here from around 6.30am waiting for clients; it's worth following your instincts and being a bit selective, as some of the less qualified guides show very little effort or enthusiasm. A list of official Angap-approved guides is displayed at the reception, with details of their skills and qualifications, and fixed guide fees (valid for groups of up to three people) are shown on a board outside. You can also contact the **Association des Guides d'Analamazaotra** (☎ 56 832 35; assoquiand@yahoo.fr; ☎ 7am-5pm) at the Angap office to arrange your circuit.

All of the guides speak French and some also speak English, German, Spanish, Italian or Japanese, though not always sufficiently well to explain the park properly – check before setting out. Don't hire guides who approach you in Andasibe or Moramanga, as they may not actually have authorisation to enter the park.

Most travellers stay in or near the very charming village of Andasibe (see p195). The closest hotel to Mantadia is Vakóna Forest

Lodge. You can **camp** (tent sites Ar5000) behind the Angap office at the main park entrance.

### WILDLIFE

In d'Analamazaotra, there are about 60 family groups of two or five indris; their cry, which can be heard up to 3km away, is used mainly to define a particular group's territory, though there are also distinct mating and alarm calls. Indris are active on and off throughout the day, beginning about an hour after daybreak, which is usually the best time to see them. Despite the incredible cacophony of sound that comes out of the forest, each individual only calls for about four or five minutes per day.

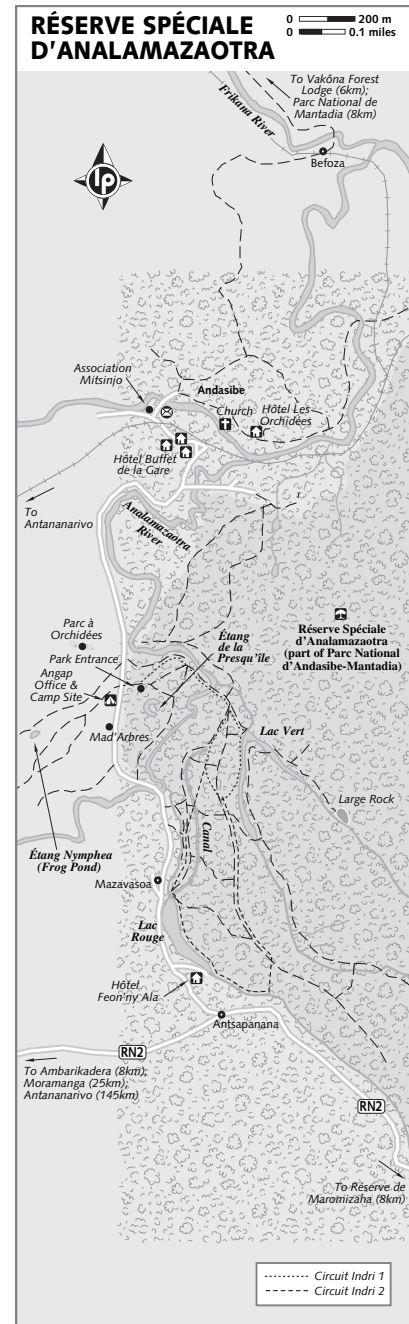
Indris eat complex carbohydrates, and therefore need to spend much of their day in a sedentary manner digesting their food. They spend most of their time high in the forest canopy, feeding, sleeping and sunning themselves. Their powerful hind legs make them capable of 10m horizontal leaps from tree to tree, perfectly balanced despite their stumplike tail. Indris are also very sensitive to any change in environment, which is the main reason for their endangered status – not only does deforestation threaten their habitat, but no indri has ever survived in captivity, as they simply stop eating and die.

The indris are very much the stars of the show, but you may also see woolly lemurs, grey bamboo lemurs, red-fronted lemurs, black-and-white ruffed lemurs and diademated sifakas. In 2005 the Goodman's mouse lemur was discovered here and identified as a distinct species. Eleven species of tenrec, the immense and colourful Parson's chameleon and seven other chameleon species are also found here. Over 100 bird species have been identified in the park, together with 20 species of amphibian. The park is also home to the endemic palm tree *Ravena louvelii*, found nowhere else on the island.

### Réserve Spéciale d'Analamazaotra

The entrance to d'Analamazaotra is 2km along a sealed road from Andasibe. Because the reserve is small, most of it can be covered in short walks. The best time for seeing (and hearing) indris is early in the morning, from 7am to 11am.

Before you begin exploring, it is worth visiting the interpretation centre at the park reception, which has a display on indris and information about the park.



### THE LEGEND OF BABAKOTO

The indri is known in Malagasy as *babakoto*, meaning 'Father of Koto'. The word *indri* actually means 'look up there', and was mistaken for the animal's name by a European explorer being shown the *babakoto* by locals.

Tradition relates that the *babakoto* got its name when a young boy named Koto climbed a tree in the forest in search of honey. Koto disturbed a bee's nest and, stung all over, released his grip on the branches. He was saved from falling to the ground by an indri, which caught him in its arms, and thus earned its name.

An alternative version of the legend has young Koto venturing into the forest to look for food. When he fails to return, his father goes out to look for him, but he, too, never comes back. Eventually the villagers send out a search party, but all they can find is two indris crying mournfully from a tree; seeing their strangely human appearance, the villagers decide the missing pair must somehow have been turned into lemurs, and name the creature *babakoto* in honour of the father who searched so faithfully for his son.

Whichever story you prefer, it's still *fady* (taboo) for villagers here to kill or eat indris, which has played a considerable part in their continued survival.



D'Analamazaotra has two small lakes, **Lac Vert** (Green Lake) and **Lac Rouge** (Red Lake). Behind the Angap office is the small **Parc à Orchidées** (🕒 7.30am-noon & 2-5.30pm), which is at its most attractive in October; by late summer it's almost completely dried up, and as there's no signage you need a good guide to appreciate it fully.

There are three organised walking trails, all of which are generally easy going. The most popular trail is the **Circuit Indri 1** (Ar4000, about two hours), which includes the main lakes and the territory of a single family of indris. The slightly longer **Circuit Indri 2** (Ar8000, two to four hours) visits the lakes and encompasses the patches of two separate families. The **Circuit Aventure** (Ar12,000, up to six hours) does all of the above, plus some moderately more strenuous walking.

Night walks (Ar8000) take place along the road on the perimeter of the reserve, and are not permitted in the forest itself. You will probably be able to see tenrecs and mouse and dwarf lemurs on this walk – bring along a strong torch (flashlight), and discourage your guide if they try to take an illegal detour into the woods.

### Parc Mitsinjo

Based at the d'Analamazaotra forest station on the Andasibe road, about 150m from the Réserve Spéciale d'Analamazaotra, this private park (☎ 56 832 33; mitsinjo@hotmail.com; 🕒 7am-5pm & 6.30-9pm) is run by local guides, who formed the Association Mitsinjo to promote conservation and community tourism.

It's a great idea to add Mitsinjo to your itinerary before or after visiting the main park: the guides here are very friendly and knowledgeable, and here you can do a night walk inside the actual forest (Ar12,000), which gives you a much better chance of seeing the smaller nocturnal lemurs, sleeping chameleons and rare leaf-tailed lizards. Standard daytime circuits start at Ar15,000, going up to Ar35,000 for two four-hour walks on consecutive days, and there's no separate entry fee.

The Association Mitsinjo also works in conjunction with **Mad'Arbres** (☎ 032 43 105 48; www.madarbres.com), a fantastic adventure company that lets you get a completely new perspective on the forest: an indri's-eye view from up in the trees themselves! A canopy tour costs Ar50,000/80,000 per half/whole day, or you can combine climbing with a circuit in the

park for Ar80,000. Camping (Ar5000) and pirogue trips (Ar10,000) are also available, and the whole set-up is highly recommended.

For information, the Association Mitsinjo also runs a small handicrafts shop in Andasibe itself, opposite the post office.

### Parc National de Mantadia

The Parc National de Mantadia (10,000 hectares), about 17km north of d'Analamazaotra, was created primarily to protect the indris. It also hosts two species of lemur not found in d'Analamazaotra: the diademéd sifaka and the black-and-white ruffed lemur. The park, a quiet, beautiful area with numerous waterfalls, is undeveloped and seldom visited compared with its popular neighbour to the south, so if you're here in high season it's well worth the detour to escape the crowds.

Established circuits include **Circuit Rianaso** (Ar4000, one hour), **Circuit Chute Sacrée** (Ar8000, about 1½ hours) and **Circuit Tsakoka** (Ar12,000, about three hours). For more of a challenge, you can also embark on an Adventure Circuit of two to three days, camping in the park. Guides, information and tickets can all be obtained at the main park entrance near Andasibe. You'll need all your own camping equipment if you're planning to stay the night; the Angap **camp site** (tent sites free), just outside the park, has no facilities.

To get to Mantadia from the main park entrance, you will most likely need your own vehicle or bicycle. Transport can usually be arranged with park staff, or sometimes through guides and local hotels.

### Réserve de Maromizaha

This 10,000-hectare ecotourism reserve, about 8km southeast of the Parc National d'Andasibe-Mantadia, offers good camping, numerous walking tracks, stands of rainforest and panoramic views. The area is also home to 11 lemur species, although you probably won't see many of them. They include diademéd sifakas and black-and-white ruffed lemurs, both of which are also found at Mantadia. Visits here can be organised with the guides at Parc National d'Andasibe-Mantadia. The reserve is accessible from the park gate via an easy trail. No permit is necessary.

### Vohimana Forest

Established as a private reserve in 2001, this crucial forest corridor links Andasibe-

Mantadia with the forests of the south, and is administered by the NGO **Man and the Environment** (MATE; ☎ in Antananarivo 22 674 90; www.mate.mg), which is developing it as an ecotourism site in conjunction with their conservation work. At present facilities include around 20km of walking trails, three picnic areas and a botanical garden, and local guides have been trained in some interesting specialist circuits highlighting medicinal plants and 'agricultural rock-climbing'. Contact MATE for all details on access, tariffs and facilities; volunteer placements are also available.

### ANDASIBE

Andasibe (an-da-see-bay) is a muddy former logging village that makes a convenient base for visiting both the Réserve Spéciale d'Analamazaotra and Parc National de Mantadia. It's also a charming little place in its own right, surrounded by forest, straddling a river and bisected by a railway line that is slowly regaining regular traffic. The only concrete buildings are the station, the post office and a couple of churches, and you won't find any banking facilities here.

### Sleeping & Eating

**Hôtel Les Orchidées** (☎ 56 832 05; s/d/tr with shared bathroom Ar12,000/15,000/20,000) Housed in a wooden building right in the centre of the village, this well-signposted guesthouse has basic wooden rooms with mosquito nets. Good-value Malagasy meals (mains Ar2000 to Ar4100) are available at the restaurant, a few doors down.

**Hôtel Buffet de la Gare** (☎ 56 832 08; r Ar23,600-35,400, bungalows Ar35,400-64,900) Not just for train-spotters – this Andasibe institution is housed in the declining but still impressive 1938 station building (enter via the platform!), and has berthed visiting wildlife luminaries from Gerald Durrell to Sir David Attenborough. The main building retains some nostalgic character, but really you want to choo-choo your way to one of the smart new bungalows opposite or 500m up the road, where you'll find unusual luxuries such as stone hearths and log fires.

**Hôtel Feon'ny Ala** (☎ 56 832 02; bungalows Ar38,000-64,900) Whoever named this charming garden hotel 'Song of the Forest' was pretty much on the money – the site is virtually part of the forest, so close that you can hear the indris doing their vocal exercises. The thatched bungalows are rather close together but very

comfortable, with hot showers. A couple of basic bungalows with shared bathroom are also available (Ar17,700). The restaurant does good evening meals and can provide picnic lunches for walkers. It's a handy 300m from the RN2 Andasibe junction, but about 1.5km south of the entrance to the park.

**our pick Vakóna Forest Lodge** (☎ in Antananarivo 22 213 94; www.hotel-vakona.com; r from €60; 🍷) How many hotels do you know that come with their own lake? This little piece of paradise is Andasibe's most upmarket hotel, and quite possibly one of the best in Madagascar. The beautiful gardens are set in a 'forest' of eucalyptus trees, centred on the lake, where the main island holds a beautiful glass-walled restaurant with sun deck and log fire. Once you get over the setting, the facilities are pretty astounding too: the grounds encompass a zoo and crocodile farm, lemur sanctuary and equestrian centre (Ar9000 per hour), plus squash court, pool table and table tennis if you prefer your sports competitive. Should you happen to find time to visit your room, you'll discover terracotta-coloured bungalows resplendent with wood floors, whitewashed walls, big bathrooms, minibar and terrace. Vakóna is on the road between Andasibe village and the Parc National de Mantadia; to get here you will need to have your own vehicle, arrange transfers with the hotel (Ar15,000) or try to hitch a lift.

### Getting There & Away

From Antananarivo, the best way to reach Andasibe is to take a taxi-brousse to Moramanga, where you'll find direct taxi-brousses to Andasibe which can drop you at your hotel of choice. Otherwise, you can take any taxi-brousse along the RN2 to the Andasibe junction, from where you'll need to walk or hitch the 3km to the village itself.

Reaching Toamasina from Andasibe can be tricky. There are two direct taxi-brousses a day (Ar11,000, up to six hours) to Toamasina, but they're often full, so it's worth asking at your hotel about making a reservation (Ar4000) if you're on a tight schedule. Solo travellers may be able to find a vehicle with a free seat on the main road at the Andasibe junction, but expect a long wait and a fare of anything between Ar7500 and Ar12,000. If you can't start early, you may be better off going to Moramanga and catching a vehicle there.

In theory you could also charter a taxi from Antananarivo and visit as a long day trip,

though this is unlikely to be much cheaper than hiring a car for the day. Allow at least three hours each way, and keep in mind that to arrive early enough to hear the indris, you'll have to leave by 6am.

The tiny Moramanga–Brickaville passenger train passes through Andasibe every Tuesday and Saturday (Ar3500).

## LAC ALAOTRA

The area around Lac Alaotra, Madagascar's largest body of water, is a centre of biodiversity, supporting 74 species of water birds, including two unique species, the Madagascar pochard and the Alaotran little grebe, and animals such as the Alaotran gentle lemur (entertainingly known as *hapalémur Brando* in French).

Sadly, Lac Alaotra also exemplifies the environmental damage that affects many parts of Madagascar, with the gentle lemur critically endangered and the two endemic bird species most likely extinct. Population growth, hunting, burning and clearance of marshes, overfishing, pollution from pesticides and invasion by introduced plants and fish have all contributed to the degradation, as seen in the red-tinged waters of the 20,000-hectare lake itself.

The good news is that steps are being taken to restore the ecological balance. The Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust has led a six-year project to raise awareness of the value of the marshes, foster pride in the Alaotran gentle lemur and encourage commitment to wise use of the wetlands. As a result, in 2003 the government added Alaotra to the international Ramsar

list of important wetlands, making it one of just three protected wetland sites in Madagascar.

At a local level, fishermen have agreed to limited mesh sizes and a closed season, while marsh clearance is being reduced and new marshes planted. With fish stocks increasing and lemur populations recovering, it's now hopeful that the effects of environmental degradation here can be repaired, if not reversed.

Vehicle access to Alaotra is tricky due to limited infrastructure. One of the few places where the road meets the lake is at Andreba, on the east of the lake (accessible by taxi-brousse from Ambatondrazaka), where there is a **lemur reserve**. Ask for the *responsable*, who will organise a canoe and a guide. It's best to visit in the early morning for the best chances of sightings.

## PARC NATIONAL DE ZAHAMENA

West of Fenoarivo-Atsinanana is the 41,402-hectare **Parc National de Zahamena** (admission Ar10,000). Still in the development stage, Zahamena protects important areas of rainforest, 13 species of lemur and 61 endemic bird species.

The park is managed by Angap with support from Conservation International; for information, contact the **park office** (☎ 57 300 33) in town. There are some basic camp sites in the park and simple local accommodation in the nearby village of Vavatenina. You will need to be self-sufficient with food, water and equipment. Depending on road conditions it may be easier to reach Zahamena from Ambatondrazaka (opposite).

## BONE IDOL

In the last few years, nearly 1000 ancestral tombs in the Ambatondrazaka region have been broken into by thieves intent on stealing human bones. Although the thieves themselves have often been caught and sentenced, the reason behind the crimes remains mysterious. The unknown traffickers, who have so far evaded capture, offer as much as US\$4000 for a kilogram of bones.

The thefts of the bones, which are regarded as sacred, have caused widespread distress among families of the region, and wild rumours abound as to what they could be wanted for, with suggested culprits ranging from foreign mafiosos to desperate AIDS victims convinced the bones could cure them. No convincing theory has yet been raised, however, and the thefts continue.

## AMBATONDRAZAKA

pop 35,000

Ambatondrazaka is the nearest major town to Lac Alaotra, out on a tricky road well away from the major tourist routes. It's a sprawling place surrounded by rice fields, which have replaced most of the area's original forest cover – if you pass over the region by air, look out for the striking erosion gullies that striate the battered countryside.

**Hôtel Voahirana** (☎ 54 812 08; r Ar12,000), near the market, has clean rooms and a reasonable restaurant, and can help organise excursions and treks in the region. **Hôtel Max** (☎ 54 813 86; r Ar15,000–25,000, with shared bathroom Ar10,000), near the train station, is more comfortable, with TVs and hot water in the more expensive rooms.

A taxi-brousse runs most days on the rough road between Moramanga and Ambatondrazaka (Ar9000, four to six hours). Direct taxis also depart many times weekly from Antananarivo's eastern taxi-brousse station (Ar11,000).

From Ambatondrazaka, there is usually at least one vehicle daily to Imerimandroso (Ar2000, one to two hours).

Air Madagascar no longer serves Ambatondrazaka.

## ROUTE DES CONTREBANDIERS

The Route des Contrebandiers (Smugglers' Path) is a muddy and slippery five- to six-day trek connecting Imerimandroso (50km north of Ambatondrazaka on the eastern edge of Lac

Alaotra) with the village of Anjahambe (about 35km to the west of Mahambo). Historically, the Route des Contrebandiers was used by smugglers bringing goods from Réunion and Mauritius into the Merina highlands.

Today, few travellers attempt the trek, primarily because access is difficult and the going is tough. If you do attempt it, you'll need camping gear, including a waterproof groundsheet, although some villages along the way have small, very basic hotels. You'll also need to be self-sufficient with food; water is available, but a good filter is essential. Seek out a guide from the Hôtel Voahirana in Ambatondrazaka.

## BRICKAVILLE

Brickaville, reached by train (Ar3500) or taxi-brousse (Ar6000, three hours) from Moramanga or taxi-brousse from Toamasina (Ar5000, three hours), is an old sugarcane-growing town on the RN2 between Antananarivo and Toamasina. The town itself is little more than a string of buildings along the road, with a couple of basic hotels and *hotelys* near the diminutive station, but it's possible to start trips on the southern Canal des Pangalanes (p228) from here.

## TOAMASINA (TAMATAVE)

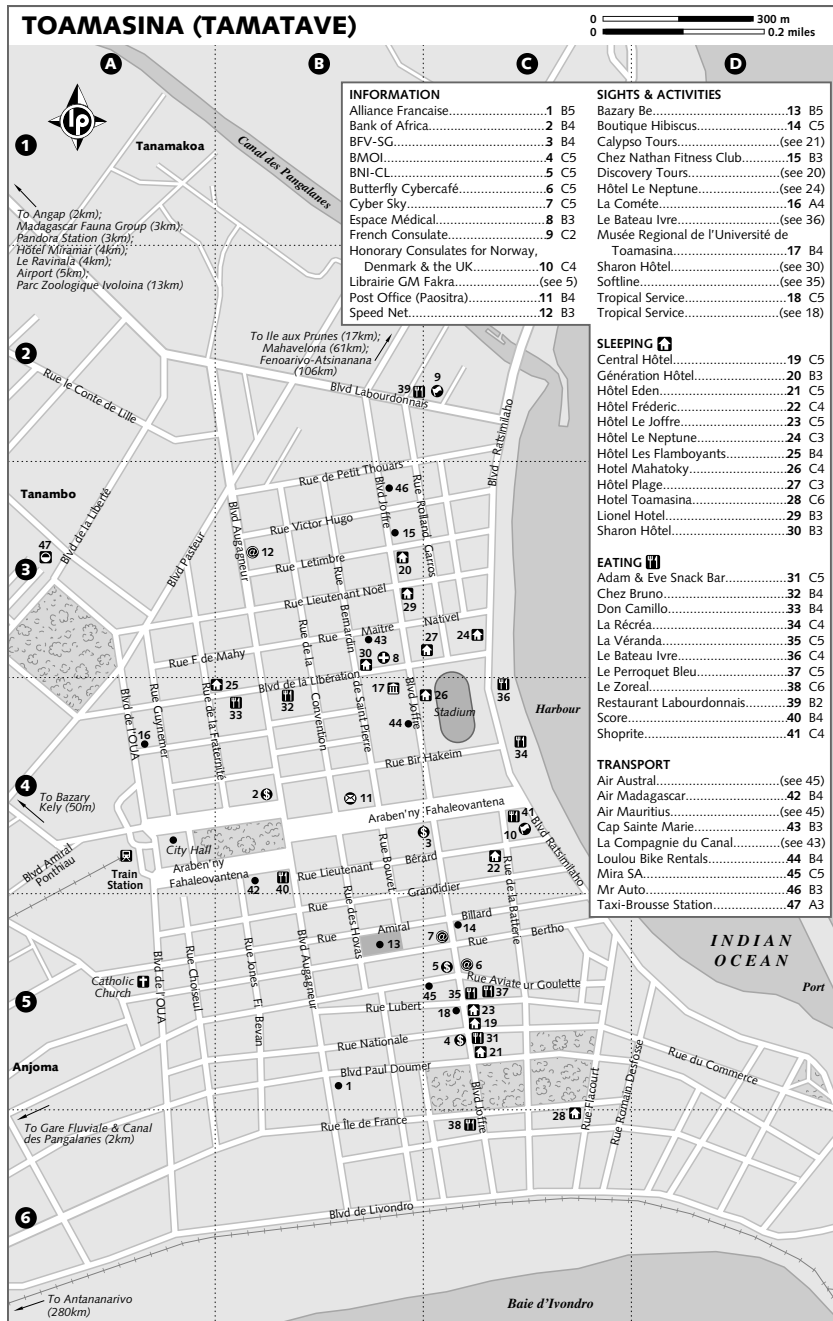
pop 174,000

Mada's second city, Toamasina (often still known by its French name Tamatave) was developed as a resort during colonial times. Photographs from a hundred years ago show French holidaymakers posing in long bathing costumes in front of wooden beach huts. These days, the town is a popular holiday destination among the more affluent Malagasy. Every Sunday, come rain or shine, the town's fashionable youth gather on the seafront to promenade, flirt and ride around in high-wheeled *pousses-pousses* (rickshaws).

Despite its reputation as a pleasure resort, first impressions of the town are not edifying, especially if you arrive during one of the frequent downpours. Once-grand colonial buildings, now covered in mould, line the streets.

But despite this atmosphere of decay, Toamasina is a vibrant and important town, a centre of commerce for the east and one of the country's major ports. It's also a convenient





spot to break the journey between Antananarivo and Île Sainte Marie, or to organise a trip down the Canal des Pangalanes.

## HISTORY

The origin of the Malagasy name Toamasina is disputed. One theory states that it was derived from the 16th-century Portuguese name São Tomás (St Thomas), while another attributes it to King Radama I's first visit to the ocean in 1817, when it's said that the king knelt to taste the water and said 'Toa masina' – 'It is salty!'

Thanks to its importance as a commercial port and slaving centre, Toamasina was one of the first major targets of the European colonial powers; the British captured the town in 1811, but then ceded it to France in 1816 as part of the Treaty of Paris. The new owners promptly burned everything and left the remains to the increasingly powerful Merina until 1883, when the city was taken to allow the establishment of a French protectorate in the region. Civil unrest obliged the French to retake the city in 1894, and it remained an official territory right up to independence.

During the political strife in 2002, the Toamasina region was one of the centres of support for former president Didier Ratsiraka, whose family originated in the area. Militant factions blockaded the RN2, cutting the main fuel supply lines to Antananarivo. The blockades were removed by force, but not before a thriving black-market trade in petrol had sprung up.

## ORIENTATION

Central Toamasina operates on a slightly irregular rectangular grid system bounded by the north-south streets Blvd Augagneur and Blvd Joffre (the main commercial street, with many of the town's shops and hotels). The waterfront road Blvd Ratsimilaho runs roughly parallel to them for much of its length. Araben'ny Fahaleovantena (or Ave Poincaré) is the main east-west thoroughfare, connecting the waterfront with the train station.

## INFORMATION

### Bookshops

**Librairie GM Fakra** (Rue Joffre; ☎ Tue-Sun, afternoon Mon) Some English newspapers and magazines, plus maps of the region and postcards.

### Cultural Centres

**Alliance Française** (☎ 53 334 94; aftamatave@dts.mg; Blvd Paul Doumer) French film screenings a few times a

week, plus the usual exhibitions, concerts, language, music and dance classes.

### Internet Access

**Butterfly Cybercafé** (☎ 033 02 088 72; Blvd Joffre; per hr Ar1800)

**Cyber Sky** (Blvd Joffre; per min Ar30; ☎ 8am-8pm Mon-Sat)

**Speed Net** (☎ 53 916 03; Blvd Augagneur; per min Ar15)

### Medical Services

**Espace Médical** (☎ 53 315 66; Blvd de la Libération; ☎ 24hr)

### Money

The main banks in the centre all have Visa ATMs. There are numerous moneychangers around Blvd Joffre; Hôtel Le Neptune may change travellers cheques outside of normal banking hours.

**Bank of Africa** (BOA; Blvd Augagneur)

**BFV-SG** (Cnr Blvd Joffre & Araben'ny Fahaleovantena)

**BMOI** (Blvd Joffre)

**BNI-CL** (Blvd Joffre)

### Post & Telephone

**Mastercom** (☎ 033 14 977 60; Blvd Joffre) International calls for around Ar600 per minute, plus bureau de change.

**Post Office (Paositra)** (☎ 53 323 99; Araben'ny Fahaleovantena) Main post office. There are cardphones here and around town. Also offers internet.

### Tourist Information

**Angap** (☎ 53 327 07; Rte d'Ivoloïna) General information about national parks in the region, a few kilometres out of town on the road to the airport.

**Madagascar Fauna Group** (☎ 53 308 42; mfgmad@dts.mg; Rte de l'Aéroport) Information on the Parc Zoologique Ivoloïna (p203) and related conservation programmes.

### TOURS

The following companies can assist with car hire, excursions down the Canal des Pangalanes, air packages to Île Sainte Marie and trips to Parc Zoologique Ivoloïna, Mahambo and the beach resorts north along the coast. You could also ask about visiting the Île aux Prunes, a tiny island 16km northeast of town, with its unusual 1932 lighthouse.

**Boutique Hibiscus** (☎ 53 334 03; Blvd Joffre) A half-day trip on the canal costs Ar150,000 per boat.

**Calypto Tours** (☎ 53 312 90; www.calyptotour.freesurf.fr; Hôtel Eden, Blvd Joffre) A budget tour company



offering day trips on the Canal des Pangalanes for Ar60,000 per person.

**Discovery Tours** (☎ 032 02 456 75; fidelysco@yahoo.fr; Génération Hôtel, Blvd Joffre) Tours on the Canal des Pangalanes for Ar60,000 per person per day.

**La Comète** (☎ 53 339 53; cometetam@yahoo.fr; Blvd de l'OUA) Speedboat transfers for six to 10 people to hotels on the Canal des Pangalanes.

**Softline** (☎ 53 329 75; softline@dts.mg; 20 Blvd Joffre) Trips on the Canal des Pangalanes for Ar60,000 per person per day; also offers bike and scooter hire.

**Tropical Service** (☎ 53 336 79; www.croisiere-madagascar.com; 23 Blvd Joffre) Top-end local tours, cruises, car hire, transfers and travel services.

## SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

### Musée Régional de l'Université de Toamasina

The small **University Museum** (admission by donation; ☎ 9am-4pm Tue-Sun) constitutes barely 2½ rooms of farming tools, fishing implements, archaeological finds and tribal charms, along with poster displays on deforestation and local conservation projects. Some of the captioning is in English, including translations of some typically cryptic Malagasy proverbs.

### Markets

Toamasina's colourful **Bazary Be** (Big Market) sells fruit, vegetables, spices, handicrafts and beautiful bouquets of flowers (should you feel the need to brighten up your hotel room). The **Bazary Kely** (Little Market) sells fish and produce in the ruins of a commercial complex on Blvd de la Fidélité, west of the train station.

### Swimming & Sports

Hôtel Miramar (opposite) and Hôtel Le Neptune (opposite) both have swimming pools charging Ar2000 to Ar3000 for nonguests. Le Bateau Ivre (p202) offers free swimming if you eat there, or charges Ar2000 if you don't. The Sharon Hôtel (opposite) has its own fitness centre and luxury beauty salon; if you want a cheaper gym or cardio workout, try **Chez Nathan Fitness Club** (☎ 032 02 721 15; Blvd Joffre; per day from Ar6000; ☎ 8am-8pm Mon-Sat), opposite the Génération Hôtel.

### SLEEPING

As befits its status as a holiday town, Toamasina is fairly well equipped with hotels, although they're mostly faded and overpriced. There are lots of mosquitoes in Toamasina, so opt for a hotel with nets, or bring your own.

### Budget

**Hotel Mahatoky** (☎ 53 300 21; Blvd de la Liberté; r Ar8000-15,000) If you just need a crash pad before getting an early taxi-brousse, this little maroon place by the *gare routière* should do the job. It's very basic, but you do get mosquito nets and surprisingly good-looking showers in the better rooms (the cheapest share a bathroom and squat toilet).

**Hôtel Eden** (☎ 53 312 90; calypsojour@netcourrier.com; Blvd Joffre; r with shared/private bathroom Ar13,000/15,000) The simple but functional rooms at this popular 1st-floor backpackers' hotel towards the busier end of Blvd Joffre have fans but no nets. Calypso Tours is based here, so it's a good place to organise tours on the Canal des Pangalanes, if you can get the staff to cheer up a bit.

**Le Ravinala** (☎ 53 308 83; fgbaril@wanadoo.mg; Rte de l'Aéroport; r with shared/private bathroom Ar15,200/17,200) Funky polished bamboo furniture makes this friendly beach guesthouse an attractive option, though it's a long way from the centre so you'll have to take taxis or get to know the minibus routes. There's an attached restaurant, open Wednesday to Monday.

**Lionel Hotel** (☎ 032 02 543 56; cnr Blvd Joffre & Rue Lt Noël; r Ar16,000-30,000, with shared bathroom Ar12,000-15,000; ☎) A good-value option a couple of blocks from the waterfront, offering tiled rooms with nets, hot water, a communal lounge area and optional TV (Ar1400 per day). Prices may be quoted in Fmg, so check carefully before paying!

**Hôtel Plage** (☎ 53 320 90; hotel\_plage@simicro.mg; Blvd de la Liberté; r Ar17,000-28,000, with shared bathroom Ar14,000-15,000) Even Toamasina's pushy *pousse-pousse* men don't rate this big central block: the huge, bare lobby leads onto dim rooms with big saggy beds and wire on the windows for an extra prison feel. It's only really a back-up if other places are full. Sailors and prostitutes tend to frequent the bar-disco.

### Midrange

**Génération Hôtel** (☎ 53 321 05; generationhotel@wanadoo.mg; Blvd Joffre; r Ar22,900-53,900; ☎) Cheery pinks and yellows enliven the good range of rooms here, which also get the benefit of rugs and slightly period-effect furniture. The English-speaking staff are helpful and friendly, and the terrace restaurant is well-liked locally. The hotel also has an annexe in Mahavelona (p204), on the coast north of town.

**Hôtel Frédéric** (☎ 53 347 40; Rue Lt Béard; r Ar26,900-34,900; ☎) This fading block on a quiet corner,

formerly the Capricorne (if they haven't managed to change the signs yet), has a mixture of tiled and parquet rooms with some fridges but no nets. Terrace rooms 101 and 102 are easily the best seats in the house. A pizza restaurant and cabaret/piano bar complete the picture.

**Hôtel Les Flamboyants** (☎ 53 323 50; Blvd de la Libération; r with fan/air-con Ar28,000/32,000; ☎) The first port of call for many expats, foreign residents and regional businessmen, Les Flamboyants has plenty of space over several floors, with personable staff, small TVs, nets and individual boilers for hot water. It's an easy distance from the *gare routière* and has its own big Chinese-themed restaurant at ground level.

**Hôtel Miramar** (☎ 53 332 15; www.miramar-hotel-tamatave.com; Blvd Ratsimilaho, Salazamay; r Ar30,000-50,000, bungalows Ar70,000-74,000; ☎) A slightly faded upmarket establishment with a scout-camp air, on the beach about 4km north of town. The multicoloured bungalows, some split into separate rooms, are scattered around the quiet garden and have little sitting areas outside, but no mosquito nets. The hotel is also the local American Express travel service representative, and runs the Hôtel Betty Plage (p215) on Île Sainte Marie. Be careful when walking on the beach, as there have been reports of muggings in the area.

**Hôtel Le Joffre** (☎ 53 323 90; www.tamatave-hotel-joffre.com; 18 Blvd Joffre; r Ar30,000-90,000; ☎) As you'd expect from anywhere named after a mustachioed old-school general, the Joffre commands some remnants of colonial charm, particularly on the trellised café terrace, perfect for an evening beer. Once inside, however, the rooms are plain and functional rather than luxurious; all have nets, TV and phone, and some have a balcony overlooking the road. The hotel is often full of tour groups in high season, so it's best to book in advance. Like many other places, it also has a sister hotel up the coast, Le Grand Bleu (p204) at Mahavelona.

**Hotel Toamasina** (☎ 53 335 49; www.hotel-tamatave.com; 13 Rue de la Colonne; r Ar33,900-55,000, ste Ar47,960-55,880; ☎) This endearingly quirky guesthouse-hotel is a nice little find, tucked away to the south of town a short walk from the busy main streets. The rooms are a mixed bag of shapes, sizes and styles; the suites in particular are good value, rejoicing in animal-print armchairs, satellite TV, VCR, phone, safe and fridge. There's a hair salon and a small souvenir shop on site, as well as the very reasonable Pousse-Pousse restaurant.

**Central Hôtel** (☎ 53 340 86; www.central-hotel-tamatave.com; Blvd Joffre; r Ar35,200-50,000; ☎) The Central, a whiteish four-storey block, has smart rooms with balconies, elegant beds, four-poster mosquito nets and orange stripey bedspreads, plus phone and TV. Its excellent restaurant, La Véranda (below), is just up the street.

### Top End

Neither of Toamasina's top-end hotels is particularly amazing; they offer little in the way of character and only a few extra facilities to separate them from the midrange options.

**Hôtel Le Neptune** (☎ 53 322 26; neptune@wanadoo.mg; Blvd Ratsimilaho; d/tr Ar64,000/74,000; ☎) Relishing its plum location opposite the seafront, the Neptune has a sundeck, casino, slot machines and a disco (open Monday to Saturday). The smart but not overplush rooms have new bathrooms, old-fashioned balconies, TV, minibar and white linen, but no mosquito nets. For once the sea-view rooms aren't where you want to be, as they get the karaoke noise from the outdoor bar! Rates were discounted at research time due to renovations, so don't be surprised if they've risen considerably by the time you arrive.

**Sharon Hôtel** (☎ 53 304 20; sharonhotel@wanadoo.mg; Blvd de la Libération; r Ar184,000, ste Ar312,000; ☎) Toamasina's most modern and upmarket option. The spotless contemporary style here does much to warrant its four-star rating, furnished in fake walnut with blue walls, red carpets and gilt trimmings. The huge suite comes with its own whirlpool bath as well as all the standard equipment like TV, phone and minibar. There's a pool, sauna, spa (massages Ar20,000) and gym on site, and a pizzeria in the courtyard to supplement the main restaurant. Visa cards accepted.

### EATING

**Chez Bruno** (☎ 53 333 78; Blvd de la Libération; snacks from Ar500; ☎ breakfast & lunch) A handy patisserie café near Hôtel Les Flamboyants, known for its above-average coffee.

**Adam & Eve Snack Bar** (☎ 53 334 56; Blvd Joffre; mains from Ar2000; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner Tue-Sun) One of the most popular budget options on Blvd Joffre, the open bar and terrace of this cheap-eats Eden have a loyal following for their Malagasy dishes, juice, ice cream and crêpes.

**La Véranda** (☎ 53 334 35; off Blvd Joffre; mains Ar4000-9000; ☎ lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) If you've just returned from Île Sainte Marie, you may find yourself dining with most of your flying companions

here – this is the terrace of choice for the vast majority of French expats and visitors thanks to its wide-ranging menu and very reasonable prices. The three-course set menu (Ar13,000) changes daily, and is usually far too tempting to let you settle for a light meal.

**Le Zoréol** (☎ 53 332 36; 11 Blvd Joffre; mains Ar5000-8000; ☺ lunch & dinner) This a fairly typical expat-run bar, with free pool tables, Beaujolais Nouveau and lots of rum, but also offers pizza, pasta and Réunionnais cuisine (*zoréol* is a common nickname for French residents of this other Indian Ocean island). On Wednesday and Sunday it's only open in the evening.

**Don Camillo** (☎ 032 07 668 10; Blvd de la Libération; pizzas Ar5000-9000; ☺ lunch & dinner) We're not convinced the staff are Italian, but in most other respects Don Camillo delivers the authentic thin'n'crispy goods to a thoroughly edible standard. Takeaway is also available, though it'll cost you an extra Ar1000 for the box.

**Le Perroquet Bleu** (☎ 032 40 270 55; Rue Lubert; mains Ar6000-14,000; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Another friendly wood-clad restaurant with a barlike feel to it, serving up all kinds of French and regional dishes. The eponymous blue parrot is still just about clinging to its perch, though it's a scraggy shadow of its former self if the oil-painting portrait on the wall is anything to go by.

**La Récra** (Blvd Ratsimilaho; mains Ar6000-15,000; ☺ lunch & dinner) Toamasina waterfront's latest arrival is a fantastically conceived thatched edifice combining restaurant, cocktail bar and souvenir shop, with stylish all-bamboo furniture and fixtures, pool tables, seating spilling out towards the beach and even an old light aircraft outside. The menu covers Malagasy, Italian, French fusion and even fondue.

**Restaurant Labourdonnais** (☎ 53 350 67; Blvd Labourdonnais; mains Ar6000-16,000; ☺ lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) Next door to the French consulate, this unflashy green-and-white establishment sits discreetly in its walled compound, providing refined creole cuisine for the regular dining diplomats.

**Le Bateau Ivre** (☎ 53 302 94; Blvd Ratsimilaho; mains Ar7000-16,000; ☺ lunch & dinner; 🍷) Next to La Récra, the 'Drunken Boat' assures its own popularity with a 25m swimming pool (open from 9am) and boisterous live music in the evenings, plus a seafood-oriented menu. It's a great place for kids, but the pool gets packed at weekends.

Self-caterers and treat-seekers should try the **Score** (Araben'ny Fahaleovantena; ☺ 8.30am-1pm & 2.30-7pm Mon-Sat, 8.30am-12.30pm Sun) or **Shoprite** (Araben'ny Fahaleovantena) supermarkets.

## ENTERTAINMENT

Toamasina's nightlife tends towards the dodgier end of the scale, particularly when large groups of foreign sailors come through on shore leave. Most of the restaurants listed under Eating also function as respectable bars if you just want a few quiet drinks.

The most popular nightspot in the town centre is the disco and casino at **Hôtel Le Neptune** (☺ Mon-Sat; see p201). Further out towards the airport, there's **Pandora Station** (Rte de l'Aéroport; ☺ Tue-Sat), which also has pool tables and a snack bar, and **Bar Code** (Rte de l'Aéroport), a similar bar-club with food and karaoke. If you're feeling brave try **L'Univers** (Blvd Joffre; ☺ 24hr), a 'gritty' all-hours locals' bar with a pétanque pitch.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

### Air

**Air Madagascar** (☎ 53 323 56; Araben'ny Fahaleovantena) flies at least once daily between Toamasina and Antananarivo (Ar203,000), sometimes via Île Sainte Marie (Ar163,000). Other services connect Toamasina with Sambava (Ar203,000, weekly), Maroantsetra (Ar163,000, three weekly) and Antalaha (Ar203,000, twice weekly). Be warned that during the vanilla season (June to October), the planes that fly up and down the northeast coast can be full.

**Air Madagascar** and **Air Austral** (☎ 53 312 43; 1 Rue Latre de Tassigny) each have two weekly flights to St-Denis on Réunion (from Ar974,700).

### Boat

Boat travel is generally slow and uncomfortable, but is often the only option when roads on the northeast coast are impassable. Bear in mind, however, that weather conditions can make sea voyages dangerous, particularly around the cyclone season (December to March); always check forecasts and ask local advice before travelling. Standards vary widely; cabins are sometimes available, but on most boats you can expect to be bedding down on deck, and you will need to bring your own food and water.

Cargo boats leave from Toamasina for Île Sainte Marie, Mananara, Antalaha, Antsiranana and Taolagnaro, although you generally have to wait to find one that accepts passengers. Fares and schedules vary wildly, so you'll need to ask around regularly in the port area, and be prepared to wait at least several days. **Mira SA** (☎ 53 349 28; sa.mira@wanadoo.mg; 79 Blvd Joffre) is one company with an office in town, and has roughly monthly boats head-

ing north and south; a ticket to Iharana or Manakara will cost you Ar60,000, while Nosy Be and Toliara come in at Ar100,000.

The luxury cruise liner **MS Mauritius Trochetia** leaves Toamasina for Réunion and Mauritius approximately every two weeks. One-way fares to Réunion are €210/177 for a 1st-/2nd-class cabin (based on two people sharing), and €247/227 to Mauritius. More expensive deluxe cabins are also available. For tickets, go to **Tropical Service** (☎ 53 336 79; 23 Blvd Joffre), near the Hotel Joffre.

If you're heading to Île Sainte Marie, the boat company **Cap Sainte Marie** (☎ 53 351 48; cap-sainte-marie@wanadoo.mg; Rue Maître Nativel; ☺ 6-7am & 10am-5pm Mon-Sat, to noon Sun) has an office in Toamasina and runs daily bus transfers to meet their shuttle at Soanierana-Ivongo (€60 return). Sharing the same office, **La Compagnie du Canal** (☎ 032 02 183 87; compagnieducanal@wanadoo.mg) has daily services to Manambato (€50) via Ankanin'ny Nofy (€35), on the Canal des Pangalanes.

### Taxi-Brousse

The taxi-brousse station at the northwestern edge of town serves Antananarivo as well as points north as far as Soanierana-Ivongo (Ar8000, four hours) and south as far as Mahanaro. Minibuses and coaches run along the RN2 throughout the day to Moramanga (Ar12,000, five to seven hours) and Antananarivo (Ar13,000 to Ar15,000, at least seven hours). It is best to leave early to ensure that you reach your destination during daylight.

Three weekly MadaBus services run between Toamasina and Antananarivo (€25), calling at Brickaville and Andasibe. For tickets and/or connections to Île Sainte Marie, go to the Cap Sainte Marie office.

If road conditions permit, you may be able to find a *camion-brousse* (truck) or similar large vehicle heading towards Mananara or Maroantsetra (Ar70,000, two to three days). See p206 for more details on this route.

### Train

There was no regular train service to or from Toamasina at time of research. Plans are afoot to reinstate passenger services eventually, so inquire at the Toamasina or Antananarivo stations for an update.

## GETTING AROUND

Taxis between town and the airport (5km north of town) should cost around Ar7000,

though drivers will demand Ar10,000 at arrivals. Taxi rides within town are Ar2000.

Some local minibuses shuttle passengers around town for Ar300, if you can work out the routes; service No 4 goes to the Bazar Kely and the port.

With its wide, flat avenues, Toamasina is ideal for cycling. For bike rental try **Loulou Bike Rentals** (☎ 032 04 414 83; Blvd Joffre; per day Ar8000; ☺ 7.30am-6pm), opposite the stadium.

To hire a car locally, look for posters offering private rentals in restaurants around town, or ask at an agency such as Tropical Service (p200; per day from €42) or **Mr Auto** (☎ 53 305 38; Blvd Joffre; per day from Ar70,000). Prices may rise if you want to take the vehicle beyond Mahavelona.

*Pousse-pousse* drivers charge from Ar500 per trip within the town centre. The 'drivers' seem fairly friendly but are very persistent and have a reputation for hassle, particularly at night.

# NORTH OF TOAMASINA

## PARC ZOOLOGIQUE IVOLOÏNA

The **Parc Zoologique Ivoloïna** (☎ 53 012 17; www.seemadagascar.com; admission Ar10,000; ☺ 9am-5pm) is a conservation-friendly and very well-run zoo and botanical garden set on a lovely lake just north of Toamasina. The Madagascar Fauna Group, a worldwide association of zoos and conservation organisations, has set up an education centre, captive breeding programmes for endangered species and a halfway house for animals being reintroduced into the wild. It's not just a tourist attraction but also a key site for raising local awareness of wildlife and conservation issues – around 70% of an estimated 14,000 annual visitors are Malagasy nationals.

The zoo's beautiful grounds cover 282 hectares and contain more than 100 lemurs from a dozen different species, including the aye-aye, as well as chameleons, radiated tortoises, tree boas and tomato frogs. There are both caged and semi-wild lemurs; feeding is not permitted (though you may still see locals turning up with a bunch of bananas to tempt the wild ones down for photo ops). As part of the reintroduction programme, 13 captive-bred ruffed lemurs were recently released into the wild at the MFG's nearby Réserve Naturelle Intégrale de Betampona.

The botanical garden contains more than 75 species of native and exotic plants, and there is a model farm on site designed to demonstrate



sustainable agricultural methods. Four walking trails of between 500m and 2.5km give you the opportunity to explore the park thoroughly; the 'Puzzle Trail' is ideal for kids, with a leaflet giving questions and clues to follow, and on the first Saturday of every month there is a 4km guided walk at 8am (Ar12,000). It is also possible to hire a pirogue for a turn around the lake (Ar2000), or to picnic on the shores. A kiosk by the lake sells the admission tickets, explanatory booklets in English, French or Malagasy, and a small selection of drinks and snacks.

For detailed information on Ivoloïna, and on how your local zoo can support conservation efforts in Madagascar, stop by the office of the **Madagascar Fauna Group** (☎ 53 308 42; www.savethelemur.org; Rte de l'Aéroport), 4km north of central Toamasina.

Ivoloïna's **camp site** (tent sites Ar4000), in a pretty spot next to the lake, has toilets, showers and sheltered picnic tables.

Parc Zoologique Ivoloïna is 13km north of Toamasina. A charter taxi from town costs around Ar30,000; taxis-brousses to Ivoloïna village (Ar1500) leave every hour or two. From Ivoloïna village it's a scenic 4km walk to the park entrance. Tour companies in Toamasina charge about Ar75,000 per vehicle.

## MAHAVELONA (FOULPOINTE)

Mahavelona, more commonly known as Foulpointe (*fool-pwant*), is a small, nondescript coastal town near some white-sand beaches. There are sharks offshore; swimming anywhere away from the hotel area, which is protected by a reef, is risky. The best beaches are at the southern end of town, which has acquired a distinctly resorty air, with a hatful of tourist hotels and overpriced restaurants attracting attendant posses of hawkers, kids and fishermen proposing souvenirs, boat trips, snorkelling or beach barbecues. Bargain hard before taking up any of these offers.

Ruins of the 19th-century Merina **Fort Manda**, built for Radama I, are about 500m north of Mahavelona. Its walls, which are 8m high and 6m thick in places, are made from coral, sand and eggs, similar to the material used in the walls of Ambohimanga (p90), near Antananarivo.

## Sleeping & Eating

**Pension Colargol** (Chez Mamabako; ☎ 57 220 26; bungalows with shared bathroom Ar7000-20,000) You couldn't get much further from the image of a seaside re-

sort: this collection of very basic, shabby shacks behind the Manda Beach Hôtel has no beach access, overlooks a slightly swampy stream and doesn't offer meals. However, at these prices the farmyard atmosphere and genuine family welcome may just sway budget hardliners.

**Génération Hôtel Annexe** (☎ 57 220 22; www.generation-hotel-foulpointe.com; r Ar17,900-37,900, bungalows Ar29,900-59,900) Under the same management as Génération Hôtel in Toamasina, this garden site towards the southern end of the strip offers a choice between standard concrete rooms and nicer thatched bungalows, some two-tier models sleeping up to six people. It's not directly on the beach but the big terraced restaurant is only 20m away.

**Le Grand Bleu** (☎ 57 220 06; www.hotel-grandbleu.com; bungalows s/d Ar35,000/40,000, r Ar40,000-46,000; 🚻) The 'Big Blue' has a similar set-up to the Génération, with two main differences: the complex fronts directly onto the beach, and here it's the rooms that come better equipped, though if you're any judge of character you'll forego air-con for the subtler breezes of the cute wickerwork bungalows. Pirogue trips and other activities are organised here. Bookings can be made through the Hôtel Joffre (p201) in Toamasina.

**Manda Beach Hôtel** (☎ 57 220 03; www.mandabeach-hotel.com; r Ar38,000-57,000, bungalows Ar67,000; 🚻) Mahavelona's most upmarket option, about 100m south of Le Grand Bleu. The thatched beachside cabins here have polished wooden walls, sundecks and ethnic-printed bedcovers. If you opt for one of the underwhelming row of rooms, make sure you at least get one that faces towards the sea! The hotel's stretch of beach is the best you'll find, and it has a pool table and tennis courts in the grounds. Direct transfers here from Toamasina airport cost Ar53,000 for up to three people.

## Getting There & Away

Mahavelona lies 58km north of Toamasina. Minibuses depart from the Toamasina taxi-brousse station daily, generally in the mornings (Ar4000, 1½ hours). For short hops, such as to Mahambo or Fenoarivo-Atsinanana, you can try flagging down just about any vehicle going in the right direction; hotel vehicles may be able to take you all the way to Toamasina, but you'll have to pay at least the equivalent of the taxi-brousse fare.

Several vehicles daily pass Mahavelona on their way between Toamasina and Soanierana-Ivongo. Heading south, the time they pass Ma-

avelona depends on what time the ferry from Île Sainte Marie arrives at Soanierana-Ivongo. Heading north, wait by the road side before 9am to get there in time for the best boats.

## MAHAMBO

Mahambo is a coastal village with a safe swimming beach and luxuriant vegetation that comes right down to the shore in some places. For the moment it's much quieter and generally more enticing than Mahavelona, primarily because it's further from the main road, and while facilities are already expanding it should still be some time before resort life starts to take over in the same way.

Halfway down the long track between the main road and the village you'll find **Quad Evasion** (☎ 032 04 011 96), a new venture with a vast litter of quads, scooters and bikes for hire. They're all great ways to explore the area if you're staying for a while; a basic pushbike costs Ar25,000 per day, while quads go for Ar100,000. You can also take a complete quad package, including guide and drinks, for €60 per day.

## Sleeping & Eating

**Le Zanatany** (☎ 57 301 35; bungalows from Ar12,000) Resplendent in its bright-blue paint job, this little restaurant in the centre of the village also has the cheapest rooms you'll find here.

**Ylang-Ylang** (☎ 57 300 08; mamitina@wanadoo.mg; bungalows Ar20,000-25,000) If you can't be on the beach, then this wonderfully scented garden site is a fine substitute. The bungalows all come with veranda, nets and nice linen, but the split-level raffia versions have the edge over the standard wood'n'brick models. The meals are near Foulpointe prices though (mains Ar12,000 to Ar40,000).

**Le Dola** (☎ 57 300 50; bungalows Ar25,000-50,000) A short distance past La Pirogue, Le Dola enjoys an equally good beach position but is a much less sophisticated operation, offering simple thatched concrete huts with nets and scrappy bathrooms. It can seem a bit deserted at times, which may explain why the restaurant's such good value (mains Ar2000 to Ar6000).

**La Pirogue** (☎ 57 301 71; www.pirogue-hotel.com; r Ar50,000-75,000, bungalows Ar55,000-112,500) One of the best accommodation options on the whole east coast, imaginatively designed with actual pirogues built into the fabric of the charming wooden bungalows! Even the rear-facing rooms muster up plenty of character, with nets and hot water, and the food's excellent (mains

Ar5400 to Ar18,000), especially if you do a full seafood barbecue. It's right on a small bay, and a whole host of boat-based activities are on offer, such as deep-sea fishing (€280 per boat), whale safaris (€30 to €50 per person) and of course pirogue trips (€12 per hour). Bungalow rates rise by up to 20% in high season (July to August, Christmas and Easter); if you're hesitating at the price, bear in mind that 5% of profits are donated to a local charity.

## Getting There & Away

Mahambo is 30km north of Mahavelona (Ar2500) and about 90km from Toamasina (Ar6000). Coming here, ask the driver to drop you at the intersection (you'll see the hotel signs), then walk about 2km down the sandy track heading east. For information on travel along the coast north of Toamasina, see p206.

## FENOARIVO-ATSIANANA

The bustling clove-scented town of Fenoarivo-Atsinanana (usually referred to as just Fenoarivo, which means 'Thousand Warriors', or Fénérice-Est) was the first capital of the Betsimisaraka. It was here in the early 1700s that the founder, Ratsimilaho, united the tribe and proclaimed himself king. Ratsimilaho's modest **tom** is on a tiny lemur-inhabited island just offshore, opposite a popular local swimming area known as the  **piscine**; a pirogue across should cost around Ar3000 (negotiable).

About 3km south of Fenoarivo is Vohimasina, the ruins of an old **pirate fort** with triangular water wells; it's not signposted so you'll need local help to find it. You can also visit a nearby **clove factory**.

The town is the major population centre along the coast road, and has a post office, a lively market, a card phone and a Bank of Africa branch. Visitor facilities aren't really up to the standard of its coastal neighbours, and it's better for a brief day trip than an extended stay.

## Sleeping & Eating

**Le Girofla d'Or** (☎ 57 300 42; r with shared bathroom Ar13,000-17,000) In the centre of town, near the taxi-brousse stop and not far from the market, the 'Golden Clove' has basic rooms with nets and a dusty restaurant serving Malagasy food.

**Hôtel Belle Rose** (☎ 57 300 38; r Ar16,000-28,000) About 500m from the centre on the road leading to the hospital, this is a bit more comfortable than the other options but is some distance from the beach.

**Le Girofla Beach** (☎ 57 300 42; r Ar17,000-19,000, with shared bathroom Ar15,000-17,000) The Girofla's seaside annexe overlooks a rocky patch of beach about 1.5km east of town. It's a nice site, with thatched brick-weave bungalows, but standards aren't great and the bathrooms are distinctly grotty. The turn-off is signposted; follow the road past the piscine to reach the hotel.

### Getting There & Away

Fenoarivo is about 15km north of Mahambo, and is serviced by taxis-brousses on the Toamasina to Soanierana-Ivongo route. You can ask to be dropped at the beach turn-off or in the centre of town.

### SOANIERANA-IVONGO

Soanierana-Ivongo is a small town notable primarily as a port for boats to and from Île Sainte Marie. If the pronunciation of the name defeats you, you can get away with referring to it as 'Sierra-Ivongo'.

There are no really good accommodation options, so it's best to try to time your travels to avoid having to stay overnight. If you do stay, the obvious place is **Hôtel Les Escalles** (☎ 032 43 174 63; bungalows with shared bathroom Ar10,000), right next to the boat jetty. Les Escalles is also the place to come for boat and taxi-brousse information and tickets, although the touts will be sure to find you as soon as you step out of your vehicle anyway. There is a restaurant here – order well in advance as meals can take hours to cook.

If you're heading to Île Sainte Marie it's best to get here as early as possible to have your pick of the boat companies. Departures vary according to the tides; for full information on boat connections to and from the island, see p209.

Taxis-brousses head to Soanierana-Ivongo from Toamasina (Ar8000, three to four hours) departing from around 6am every morning. However, they are not necessarily coordinated with boat departures. Returning to Toamasina, vehicles wait for the arrivals from Île Sainte Marie.

The road from Soanierana-Ivongo north to Mananara is dignified with the name Route Nationale 5 (RN5). However, for much of its length it's still no more than a collection of deep potholes joined together with either dust or mud, depending on the season. There are six major river crossings en route, served by ferries and/or fragile bridges. Assuming there are any taxis-brousses running, and that nothing else goes wrong (a big assumption), you

can expect to cover the 127km in about two days, including an overnight stop.

There have been several instances of taxis-brousses overturning along this route or falling through weak bridges. In all of Madagascar's rough, tough journeys, this one particularly stands out – so it's only to be attempted by the seriously masochistic or truly desperate. Should this describe you, you can expect to be quoted about Ar40,000 for the journey. Private vehicles attempting the route will charge about the same for a lift.

The only other way to get up the coast from Soanierana-Ivongo is to take a boat across to Île Sainte Marie, then look for another boat for the onward journey.

### MANOMPANA

This small coastal village 38km north of Soanierana-Ivongo is becoming an increasingly popular stop for alternative tours from Toamasina, skipping the busier resort spots in favour of rural isolation. Nearby attractions include the scenic Point Tintingue, the protected Ambodiriana forest and the even smaller fishing village of Antanambe. A French charity has also set up an education and cultural centre here, staffed partly by volunteers.

As yet there are few facilities, and public transport is limited, but with a bit of time it should certainly be possible to come here independently. **Tropical Service** (☎ 53 336 79; www.croisiere-madagascar.com) in Toamasina is the main operator for organised trips, charging €255 for a four-day package (€352 including Antanambe).

## ÎLE SAINTE MARIE

Said to resemble a mildly pregnant woman lying down, the slender 57km-long island of Île Sainte Marie lies 8km off the coast. It's been popular with Europeans ever since the days when it was inhabited by pirates, and even now its Malagasy name, Nosy Boraha, is rarely used. The pirates are gone, of course, but the island is still a favourite spot for expats and tourists, and beach hotels take up much of the western coastline. Despite this, Île Sainte Marie has avoided some of the resort excesses of Nosy Be and still retains considerable charm, particularly in the remoter beaches and the small villages that dot the lush agricultural interior.

While there's plenty of scope for sunbathing and beach-bumming, Île Sainte Marie re-

wards the active type, and its rugged interior is a particularly good place for hiking, cycling or motorcycling. Water sports are on offer everywhere, and between July and September the waters around the island play host to migrating humpback whales, a major attraction for visitors (see right).

Rain can be expected year-round on Île Sainte Marie, although the weather is usually least wet from late August to late November. Between December and March, the island is subject to violent cyclones.

Because it sees so many foreign visitors, prices are slightly higher on Île Sainte Marie than on the mainland.

### History

The Malagasy name of the island, Nosy Boraha, is thought by some European sources to mean 'Island of Ibrahim' or 'Island of Abraham', a name perhaps bestowed by early Arabic or Jewish settlers. Though this is theoretically possible, local lore traces it to the legend of a fisherman named Boraha who was saved from drowning by a whale in an echo of the biblical story of Jonah. The commonly used French name, Île Sainte Marie, is indisputably derived from Santa Maria, the name originally given to it by 16th-century Portuguese sailors.

French settlers attempted to found a colony on Île Sainte Marie in the 1640s, but were thwarted by strong tropical fevers, which killed most of the pioneers. From then on the island became the hideout of a motley international band of English, Portuguese, French and American pirates. Presumably the hardened buccaneers had stronger constitutions and lower standards than the sheltered settlers – either that or the rich pickings from silk-laden ships passing en route to India made the profits worth the privations.

Around this time, according to the popular story, a Frenchman named Jean-Onésime Filet (known as 'La Bigorne', or 'The Horned') was shipwrecked on a beach here while fleeing the repercussions of an affair with the wife of a fellow officer. One of the local women who found him and restored him to health was none other than Princess Betia or Bety, the daughter of Betsimisarakaka king Ratsimilaho (himself the son of an English pirate). Bety and La Bigorne were married, and in July 1750, after the death of her father, Bety ceded the island to France.

In fact it's unlikely that Filet played any role in the process, which was probably orches-

trated by the French commercial agent Gosse, but whatever the reality, in 1752 the local population revolted and massacred the French settlers, exiling Bety to Mauritius and returning control of the island to the Betsimisarakaka. In 1818 the French returned, eventually turning the island into a penal colony. In recognition of Princess Bety's magnanimous gift to France, the independence agreement of 1960 allowed the inhabitants of Île Sainte Marie to choose between French and Malagasy nationality. Although the majority chose Malagasy, many retain French names.

### Activities

#### DIVING & SNORKELLING

Île Sainte Marie may not have all the coral it once did, but it still offers some decent diving. The season runs from July to January; the best time is from October to December. Dive centres are often closed between February and May.

Some popular diving sites are found around the two shipwrecks in the far north and along the eastern coast, offshore from Sahasifotra. Snorkelling gear is also widely available at the various beach hotels. There are three independent dive centres on the island.

**Il Balenottero** (Map p212; ☎ 57 400 36; www.ilbalenottero.com; Ambodifotatra) Dives €30, PADI/SSI courses €350. Also offers whale-watching, yacht cruises and fishing trips.

**Le Lémurien Palmé** (Map p212; ☎ 57 400 15; www.lemurien-palme.com; Ambodifotatra) Dives €35, try dives €42. Also offers whale-watching and motorcycle hire.

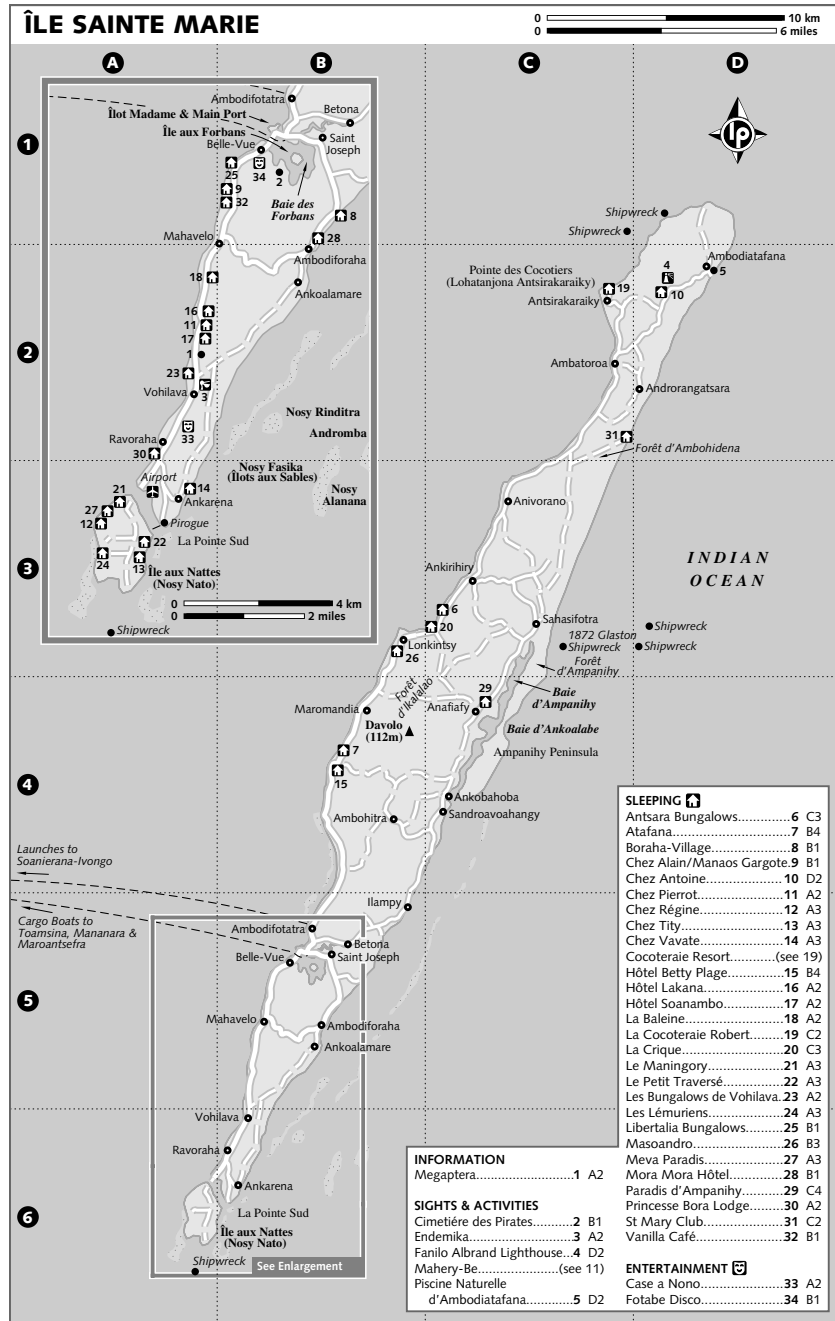
**Mahery-Be** (Map p208; ☎ 57 401 48; maherybe@wanadoo.mg) On the coast road south of Mahavelo. Dives €30, try dives €40, courses from €275. Also offers whale-watching, fishing and boat hire.

#### FISHING

The best season for deep-sea fishing is between late September and March/April. Il Balenottero, Mahery-Be, Le Maningory hotel and some other upper-end hotels organise game fishing expeditions, including boat hire, drinks and equipment.

#### WHALE-WATCHING

Every year from July to September, several hundred humpback whales swim through the waters off Île Sainte Marie, with many staying in the Baie d'Antongil to the north to give birth or to look for mates. During this time, virtually everywhere on Île Sainte Marie offers 'whale safaris' around the island; the dive centres



## THE PIRATE KINGDOM

By the early 18th century, Île Sainte Marie had become the headquarters of the world's pirates. At one stage the pirate population of Madagascar numbered close to 1000. English and French naval policing had slowed profits in the once-lucrative Caribbean to a trickle, so Madagascar, and Île Sainte Marie in particular, was an ideal base from which to ambush traders sailing around the Cape of Good Hope between Europe and the Far East.

One of history's most infamous pirates, Captain Kidd, arrived on the island after a long siege on the high seas, and was supposedly buried here after his execution in London. The wreck of his ship, the *Adventure*, was discovered by divers in 2000 at the entrance to Baie des Forbans, but much of Kidd's treasure has never been found...

The pirates frequently took up with local women, and their offspring came to be known as Zanimalata (Children of Mulattos). Of these, it was Ratsimilaho, the son of Malagasy princess Antavaratra Rahena and English pirate Thomas White, who would have the greatest impact on Madagascar. Ratsimilaho was leader of the Zanimalata and, thanks to a number of military victories, he became founder and chief of the unified Betsimisaraka, feared throughout the region as ruthless and very successful pirates and fighters. Even today they're still the second most influential tribal group in Madagascar, after the highland Merina.

and shuttle-boat companies are good places to start, as hotels without their own boats often arrange trips through them anyway. Getting to see these amazing creatures close up can be a real highlight of a visit to Madagascar.

The standard price is €30 per person for a half-day trip, including lunch, though some local operators may go as low as €21. Be sure the boat is seaworthy before handing over your money, don't go out in bad weather, and make sure your captain doesn't try to take you too close to the whales (300m is the official limit). Budget travellers take note: if you really can't afford an excursion, you have a slim chance of seeing a distant tail on the boat trip to or from the mainland!

For more details about the whales, see the boxed text, p222. If you speak sufficient French, look out for the *Petit guide pratique à l'usage des observateurs des baleines à bosse à Madagascar* (Ar5000), on sale at some hotels, or visit the office of **Megaptera** (Map p208; www.megaptera.org), an international whale conservation body, on the south coast road near Vohilava.

## Tours

There are few independent tour operators on Île Sainte Marie apart from the dive centres, but most midrange and top-end hotels organise tours around the island by 4WD, pirogue or boat, including day excursions to Île aux Nattes, Pointe des Cocotiers at the north of the island, and Baie d'Ampanihy. Prices vary according to group size and where you start your tour.

Adventure company **Madaventure** (☎ 032 04 782 37; www.madaventure.com) has a base in Ambodifotatra and offers multiday quad and beach-buggy tours of the island, as well as individual vehicle hire.

## Festivals & Events

Île Sainte Marie has a pretty active calendar of parties, exhibitions, sports competitions and the like, especially in summer – look out for the posters scattered around Ambodifotatra and elsewhere. **Festival des Baleines** (Zagnaharibe), the Festival of the Whales, is the year's main cultural happening, held on the Îlot Madame over five days in late August/early September. Events include exhibitions, talks, craft sales, concerts and the Miss Zagnaharibe beauty contest.

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

**Air Madagascar** (☎ 57 400 46; Ambodifotatra) flies daily between Île Sainte Marie and Antananarivo (Ar280,300) and six times weekly to Toamasina (Ar163,000). Flights to Mananara, Maroantseira and destinations further north usually involve a stopover at Toamasina. Flights up the northeast coast are often full; in the vanilla season (June to October) book as far in advance as possible, and reconfirm all bookings.

### BOAT

From Soanierana-Ivongo, several boat companies run *vedettes* (shuttles) to Ambodifotatra's harbour. The fastest and most reliable is **Cap Sainte Marie** (☎ 57 404 06; www.cap-sainte-marie.com),



which has daily morning departures (€24, one hour). Boats leave Ambodifotatra at 6am and Soanierana at 10am, connecting in each direction with the company's direct Toamasina minibus (€11, three hours).

The **Princesse Saphira** (☎ 032 04 681 86) is a similar fast service, or there are a couple of cheaper, slower boats such as the *Rozina IV* and the *Magnifique*, which leave later and cost around Ar25,000 (two hours).

Don't be fooled by the regularity of the crossings: this can be a dangerous route, especially between June and August when water levels are low, and while most journeys pass without incident, there was a fatal accident as recently as 2006. Sailings should be cancelled in bad weather or rough seas; if in doubt about conditions, it's best to wait until the weather is better before attempting the crossing and to choose one of the more seaworthy boats.

All the launches have offices by the ports in Ambodifotatra and Soanierana-Ivongo. Before sailing out to the island, passengers are required to go to the police station in Soanierana-Ivongo to register. There's a fair bit of spray on the boats, so it's worth bringing something waterproof to protect you and your luggage.

Many travellers choose to fly one way between Antananarivo and Île Sainte Marie and then travel the other way overland, stopping off at a few places along the way. You can travel by road and sea between Toamasina and Île Sainte Marie via Soanierana-Ivongo in one day if you get an early start.

Cargo boats also sail between Île Sainte Marie and Mananara, Maroantsetra and Toamasina. There are no set schedules; inquire at the port on Îlot Madame. Departures from Île Sainte Marie are often in the evening or at night, depending on the tides, and you'll probably have to wait at least a few days for something to turn up. For more information, see the individual town sections.

## Getting Around

Apart from the stretch of tarmac between La Crique and Belle-Vue, most roads on Île Sainte Marie are in bad condition, often comprising little more than rocky, muddy or sandy tracks.

## TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

The airport is located at the southern tip of the island, 13km south of Ambodifotatra. Hotel transfer prices range from Ar2000 to Ar30,000 one way, depending on distance and hotel.

If you can find one, taxis-brousses usually charge Ar3000 between the airport and Ambodifotatra. A private taxi costs Ar18,000. Allow plenty of time – it can take a good half hour or so to travel down the bumpy road.

## BICYCLE

Île Sainte Marie is ideal for mountain bikes, although some of the steeper roads at the northern end of the island (particularly the road north of Lonkinty) are too rutted and rough to be enjoyable, particularly in the rainy season, when they can become very slippery.

Virtually every hotel and all kinds of other places have bikes of varying quality for hire. The going rate is around Ar7000 per day.

## BOAT

The dive centres (p207), boat companies (p209) and some of the upper-end hotels can usually help arrange private boat rental for transfers, excursions or fishing trips. Prices start at around €225 per day for a boat for up to four people.

Inexpensive pirogue trips along the coast, or to Île aux Forbans or Île aux Nattes, can easily be arranged with locals.

## CAR & MOTORCYCLE

A couple of top-end hotels rent out cars with drivers for expeditions around the island, although this is seldom the best way to get around. Try Hôtel Soanambo (p214) in the south of the island, or the Boraha-Village (p216). Rates are around Ar100,000 per day for a 4WD.

Hiring a motorcycle or quad is a much better way of getting around the island and off the beaten track. Many of the roads are heavily potholed, so you'll need to be a fairly confident rider to negotiate them safely; if you're hesitant there'll usually be someone who can do the driving for you for no extra charge.

The easiest place to pick up some wheels is from the guys who set up in front of the Bank of Africa in Ambodifotatra every day; the going rate is Ar50,000 for a trail bike. Several other shops and stalls in town, along with the majority of the mid- to upper-end beach hotels, also have fleets of motorbikes, scooters, quads and bicycles for hire.

## TAXI & TAXI-BROUSSE

There are a few taxis-brousses on Île Sainte Marie. Most run along the route between the airport and Ambodifotatra (Ar3000); a few travel north along the road from Ambodi-

fotatra up as far as Ankirihiry and La Crique (Ar2500). Elsewhere on the island, they are few and far between. At night there's no service at all, although a couple of minibuses known as *ramassages* may run at weekends to ferry passengers to the nightclubs.

Private taxis are more common, though disproportionately expensive, and usually hang out by the harbour in Ambodifotatra; you have a reasonable chance of flagging one down along the airport road, but anywhere else you may have to get your hotel to phone for it. Tariffs are fixed and posted at the tourist office and hotel receptions: it's Ar18,000 to La Pointe, Ar20,000 to Ambodiforaha and Ar30,000 to La Crique, or Ar100,000 for a full day's hire.

## AMBODIFOTATRA

Ambodifotatra (am-bodi-foot-atr) is Île Sainte Marie's only town and has all the island's practical facilities. It's really just a string of buildings around the harbour about a quarter of the way up the island's single main road, with no major attractions of its own, but if you haven't preplanned your stay you'll find everything you need to organise yourself here.

## Information

The **Bank of Africa** (BOA; Map p212; Arabe La Bigorne) and BFV-SG (Map p212) handle cash, travellers cheques and card advances, though the latter may take a couple of hours. Both have Visa ATMs. Outside banking hours, local traders may be willing to change euros or dollars at mainland rates – ask around.

The post office (Map p212) is in the upper part of Ambodifotatra, just south of the main part of town. There's a Telma (Map p212) telephone office on the main street.

Internet access is available at **Cyber Corsaire** (Map p212; ☎ 57 403 59; Arabe La Bigorne; per hr Ar7200; ☎ 8am-noon & 2.30-6.30 Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat), on the main road.

Ambodifotatra now has an excellent tourist office, the **Office Régional du Tourisme** (ORT; Map p212; ☎ 032 40 084 43; Arabe La Bigorne), run by the dynamic young M Orpheu, who speaks fluent English, helps organise many of the island's regular events and knows just about everything that goes on here. Brochures, leaflets and a full accommodation list are available.

## Sights

Sites of interest in the town itself include Madagascar's oldest **Catholic church** (Map

p212), which dates from 1857 and was a gift to the island from Empress Eugénie of France. Near the post office you'll also find a granite **fort** (1753; Map p212), which is still a military facility and closed to the public.

Just south of the fort is the **tomb of Sylvain Roux** (Map p212), France's first commercial attaché on the east coast of Madagascar and a pivotal figure in French colonial expansion. At the northern end of town is the **tomb of François Albrand** (Map p212), a French military commander of the island who died in 1826 at 31. If you read French, the rather melancholy epitaph may just shame you into phoning home.

A **market** (Map p212) is held daily in the town centre.

## CIMETIÈRE DES PIRATES

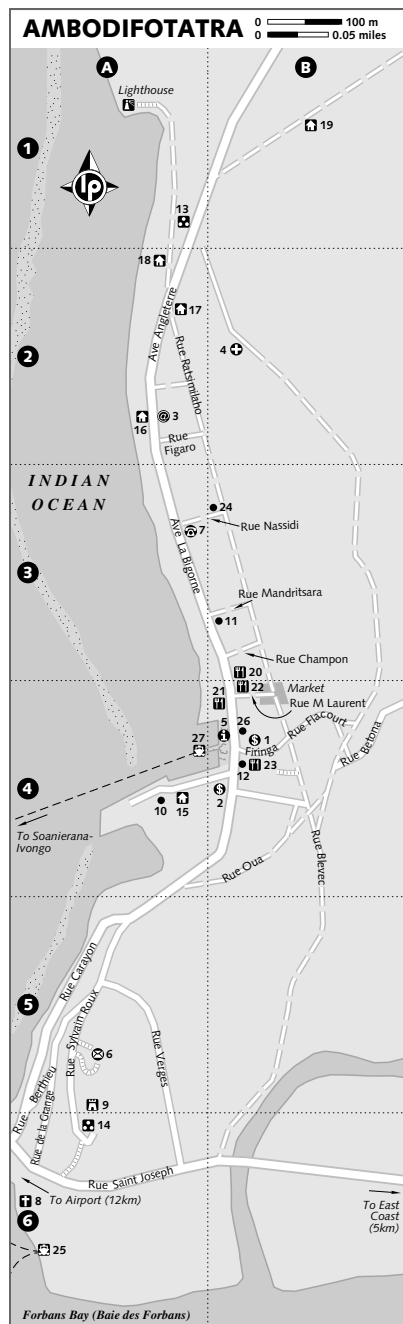
This appropriately eerie and overgrown pirate cemetery (Map p208) is located beside Baie des Forbans, about a 10-minute walk south-east of the causeway. There's not a whole lot of solid evidence that the faded gravestones really do belong to brigands, though one does bear a recognisable skull and crossbones. The large black tomb in the centre of the plot is supposedly the last resting place of William Kidd, buried in an upright position as a symbolic punishment for his crimes; sadly the brass plaque confirming this was stolen some time ago.

Guides hang around the turn-off to the cemetery to collect the 'community tax' entrance fee (Ar2000), show you the way and provide a commentary on the graves. They can be helpful in deciphering and explaining the very worn inscriptions, but be sure to negotiate the fee first – the usual starting price is an exorbitant Ar15,000 per couple, but Ar3000 to Ar5000 per person is ample.

Access to the cemetery is via an isolated foot track, which crosses several tidal creeks, slippery stones and logs. The cemetery can only be reached on foot at low tide, but it may be possible to get here by pirogue – signs on the path give a phone number for pick-ups, or ask at your hotel.

## ÎLE AUX FORBANS

This small island (Map p208), located opposite the cemetery in Baie des Forbans, is the site of the ruins of an ancient **gateway**. Its significance is unknown, but it is thought to have been a pirate landmark or lookout post.



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## ÎLOT MADAME

This tiny island at the entrance to Baie des Forbans is connected by two causeways to Ambodifotatra to the north and Belle-Vue, in the south. The island served as the fortified administration centre of the French East India Company until it was taken over by local government offices. It has a deep harbour for larger cargo boats and yachts, and also houses the **Centre Culturel Reine Bety** (☎ 032 02 507 94; admission Ar2000; 🕒 7.30am-5.30pm Mon-Sat), which contains a small museum.

## Sleeping &amp; Eating

Unless you're on a tight budget, waiting for a boat or allergic to sand, there is no great reason to stay in Ambodifotatra, where there is no beach. Note that restaurants here close relatively early, often by 9pm.

**Le Drakkar** (Map p212; ☎ 57 400 22; bungalows with shared bathroom Ar10,000, r Ar13,000-18,000) A colonial-looking old house that has a rather Caribbean air to it. It's a bit scruffy, but charming, with rum, soul music, kids and dogs everywhere. The bungalows behind the house are quite

simple, but perfectly clean and adequate. The restaurant serves cheap seafood. An interesting option if you're on a budget.

**La Banane** (Map p212; ☎ 032 02 280 26; Arabe La Bigorne; dm Ar10,000, r with shared bathroom Ar18,000) A manky double and a spartan six-bed room above a much nicer bar-restaurant, listed here purely because it's one of the few dormitories in the whole of Madagascar.

**Hôtel Zinnia** (Map p212; ☎ 57 400 09; r with shared bathroom Ar12,000-15,000) Few-frills accommodation right by the harbour (and next to the noisy electricity substation). The bungalows behind the main house here are rather basic, but have their own bathrooms. The rooms upstairs above the restaurant are big and well decorated, sharing a bathroom with hot water.

**Les Palmiers** (Map p212; ☎ 57 402 34; bungalows Ar15,000) A little compound with smart, good-value bungalows with a fan and net, up a path from the centre of town. There's cold water only in the bathrooms.

**La Bigorne** (Map p212; ☎ 57 401 23; Arabe Angletterre; bungalows Ar20,000-33,000) The best choice in town. Very well-maintained polished dark-wood bungalows behind a good French restaurant have fans, but no nets. There's a dining terrace (mains Ar7000 to Ar19,000) on the wooden veranda in the garden.

**Restaurant William Kid** (Map p212; ☎ 57 400 72; mains Ar6000-16,000; 🍳 breakfast, lunch & dinner) If the good Captain was still aboard he'd probably have whoever misspelled his name keelhailed, although the flattery of being painted as Johnny Depp might soften the blow. Either way, this prime spot opposite the harbour does fine juices, breakfasts and all the usual Franco-Malagasy staples for piratical appetites.

For the cheapest eats on the island, try the food stalls that appear in the market area around 6pm daily. Self-caterers can investigate **Choco Pain** (☎ 57 400 28) and its adjoining supermarket, near the harbour, for pastries, cheese and imported items, or **Chan Kan** (☎ 57 400 06), opposite, for general groceries, although supplies at both are fairly limited.

## SOUTH OF AMBODIFOTATRA

About halfway down the southern road, just before Vohilava, **Endemika** (admission Ar10,000; 🕒 8am-noon & 2-5pm Mon-Sat) is a small private zoo and botanical garden showcasing some of the island's indigenous flora and fauna.

**Ankarena**, the southeastern tip of Île Sainte Marie, has a fine stretch of peaceful reef-

protected beach and a deep **cave** in the base of the cliffs, which is home to hundreds of bats. The cave has given rise to several pirate legends, most of which concern hidden treasure. To reach Ankarena, walk across the small hill to the east of the airport.

## Sleeping &amp; Eating

Most of the island's hotels are along the strip between Ambodifotatra and the airport; wherever you arrive you can expect to be met by touts proposing one or other of the midrange rivals. The beach is narrower here, but still white and beautiful, and staying close to the town and airport will save you spending time and money on transfers to remoter parts of the island. Another advantage is that the hotels are close enough together for ease of evening dining.

The smaller and better-value bungalow complexes in the south and around the island have limited space and are frequently booked out during the high season (mid-December to mid-January, April to May, and July to October), as well as on weekends and Malagasy holidays, so it's worth making reservations at these times. Reduced rates are usually available in the low season.

## BUDGET

**Chez Alain/Manaos Gargote** (Map p208; postal address BP 515, Île Sainte Marie; camping/d Ar8000/16,000) This budget camp site also has reed bungalows with no electricity. About 3.5km south of Ambodifotatra. Malagasy meals can be arranged.

**La Baleine** (Map p208; ☎ 57 401 34; lantoualbert@wandadoo.mg; bungalows with shared/private bathroom Ar10,000/20,000, with hot water Ar25,000) A bit more comfortable than Chez Alain, but still fairly simple – although the bungalows here have nets. Restaurant meals and internet access available.

**Chez Vavate** (Map p208; ☎ 57 401 15; r Ar18,000) A slightly eccentric set-up at the top of a hill overlooking the airport. Neat bungalows have good sea views, and there's a beach at the bottom of a steep path. Snorkelling is possible nearby.

**Vanilla Café** (Map p208; ☎ 032 07 09 050; d Ar20,000) A small place near Chez Alain/Manaos Gargote, which has basic bungalows with shower and shared toilet. There's a good beach here.

**Chez Pirot** (Map p208; ☎ 57 401 43; r Ar20,000) Spick-and-span bungalows with bright bedcovers are arranged in a neat garden with cropped lawns next to the sea. Each bungalow has its own deckchairs, and hammocks are strung here and there in the shade. Good value.

**MIDRANGE & TOP END**

**Libertalia Bungalows** (Map p208; ☎ 57 403 03; www.libertalia.com; d Ar54,000) About 2.5km south of Ambodifotatra, this is one of the classiest mid-range choices on the island. The setting and beach are lovely, there's snorkelling off a private jetty, and the bright blue-and-white bungalows have fans and mosquito nets. It's a small place on a small beach, but it's friendly and very well maintained. Excursions and rental bikes can be arranged.

**Les Bungalows de Vohilava** (Map p208; ☎ 57 402 50; www.vohilava.com; r Ar62,000) The rooms here are absolutely enormous, with a similarly huge attached sitting room and terraces with hammock. It's a low-key and very relaxed place, with a bar, a good beach and some pet tortoises. You can hire bikes, motorcycles and kayaks. The restaurant does snacks and evening meals.

**Hôtel Soanambo** (Map p208; ☎ 57 401 37; hsm@dts.mg; s/d €32/42, dinner €12; 📞 📺 📺) One of Île Sainte Marie's most upmarket complexes, with rows of whitewashed bungalows strung along a narrow beach. The cheaper bungalows, although very well decorated, are small for the price. Bigger, plusher bungalows with TV and telephone, and 'condos' with a sitting area, are also available. There's a pool and sundeck, a pontoon for swimming at low tide, tennis courts and car/motorcycle/mountain-bike hire. It's very comfortable, but a bit 'resorty', and often full with package tours.

**Hôtel Lakana** (Map p208; ☎ 57 401 32; http://taniko.free.fr/lakana/hotel\_eng.htm; r €33) This is a well-regarded but perhaps slightly overpriced hotel with a set of bungalows on stilts over the sea (each has its own bathroom back on land) and smarter rooms (with inside bathrooms) clustered together in the garden. There's a shop, restaurant and bar on site. Various excursions can be arranged, along with bike, car and motorcycle hire.

**Princesse Bora Lodge** (Map p208; ☎ 57 040 03; www.princesse-bora.com; d half board per person low/high/whale-watching season Ar230,000/270,000/310,000) The most luxurious of the lot. The huge round bungalows have a fan, net, safe, suspended wooden bed, enamel bathroom, terrace and balcony. You even get a little footbath outside for washing the sand off your feet! Some two-storey family bungalows are also available. The beach has comfortable sun beds and an outdoor shower, but there's no pool. The restaurant is quite expensive,

naturally. The hotel organises conservation-friendly whale-watching trips in conjunction with an organisation called **Megaptera** (www.megaptera.org). There is also a wide range of watersports, diving and excursions on offer.

**Entertainment**

The main nightlife spots are Fotabe Disco (Map p208), about 1.5km south of Ambodifotatra, and Case a Nono (Map p208), near the airport.

**NORTH OF AMBODIFOTATRA**

The west coast north of Ambodifotatra also has some good beaches. The hotels here are further apart and a little bit harder to access. North of La Crique, the road is abysmal, so you're better off going by boat. The **Piscine Naturelle d'Ambodiatafana** (Map p208; admission Ar2000) is a natural swimming hole at the northeastern tip of the island, formed by a series of hollow basins in the coastal rocks, which are filled by the high tide. To reach them, walk 8km northeast along the main track from Ambatoroa on the west coast. Access with a motorcycle or mountain bike is possible, although it's tough going.

Southwest of Ambodiatafana and along the same access track is the **Familo Albrand lighthouse** (Map p208). From the ridge, it's sometimes possible to see Maroantsetra and Baie d'Antongil.

**Sleeping****BUDGET**

**Chez Antoine** (Map p208; r with shared/private bathroom Ar10,000/20,000) This well-established and fun local place in the far north offers good value if you don't mind being miles off the beaten track and not being on the beach. Antoine can also cook a slap-up lunch for those on their way to Piscine Naturelle d'Ambodiatafana. Very peaceful.

**Antsara Bungalows** (Map p208; ☎ 57 401 59; r Ar10,000-40,000) On the other side of the road from a rather swampy looking beach, this charming old wooden building on stilts has bungalows up the hill behind it, plus a few down by the water. Room facilities vary widely, from barely functional huts to rooms with bathrooms and hot water.

**WARNING**

Many areas of the coast north and south of Ambodifotatra are home to sea urchins. Check locally before going swimming and always wear something on your feet.

**MIDRANGE & TOP END**

**Hôtel Betty Plage** (Map p208; ☎ 57 400 66; bettyplage@yahoo.fr; bungalows Ar30,000-80,000) This good-value hotel is the base for the Lemurien Palmé dive operation. The bungalows are smart and spacious, with mosquito nets, and the beach is narrow but sandy. It's a very comfortable place to base yourself if you're planning lots of diving.

**Atafana** (Map p208; ☎ 032 04 637 81; bungalows Ar40,000-60,000) A very friendly and welcoming family-run place. The bamboo bungalows are fairly simple for the price, with four-poster beds with mosquito nets and spacious bathrooms. The more expensive rooms have a little sitting area as well. This is a great spot to watch the sunset, and swimming is possible even at low tide. Family bungalows for five people are also available. The food is better value than the rooms; half-board options are available.

**La Cocoteriaie Robert** (Map p208; ☎ 57 401 70; s/d €14/16) This established hotel has wooden bungalows with big, clean bathrooms in a gorgeous spot among the palm trees. The beach here is one of the best on the island. The downside is that it's rather difficult to get to – you have to call the hotel for a boat transfer from La Crique or the airport. There are some bikes for hire.

**La Crique** (Map p208; ☎ 57 401 60; bungalows €21) La Crique's rooms have mosquito nets and verandas with deckchairs from which you can look out to sea over a rose garden. The shared bathrooms only have cold-water showers. There's a terraced restaurant. Airport transfers are available, or you can get here by taxi-brousse from Ambodifotatra; ask to be dropped at the top of the rutted track that leads down to the hotel.

**Cocoteriaie Resort** (Map p208; ☎ 57 401 73; soanambo.tan@simicro.mg; s/d €47/68, dinner €12) Next door to La Cocoteriaie Robert, this is a much more upmarket place on the same fantastic beach. The bungalows are painted a rather gaudy yellow and green, but are very well constructed and decorated. The hotel is managed by the same people as Soanambo in the south, and has the same rather resorty feel to it. Excursions and watersports are all on offer. Airport transfers (€25 per person) combine boat and car.

**Masoandro** (Map p208; ☎ 57 040 05; masoandro@simicro.mg; r half board per person €53) Masoandro, near Lonkinty, is definitely the most chic of Île Sainte Marie's hotels – the interiors of the main building and bungalows are decorated in a stunning ethnic style that brings in many

elements of traditional Malagasy design. The beautifully simple bedrooms have polished wood floors, cream cotton bedcovers and murals on the walls. Steps run down to a sandy bay beach from the hotel.

**ÎLE AUX NATTES**

Also known as Nosy Nato, Île aux Nattes is off the southern tip of Île Sainte Marie. It's got just about everything you could want in a tropical island – curving white beaches, turquoise sea, a lush green interior and a good range of cheap and chilled-out guesthouses, plus one upmarket hotel. Access is via pirogue, leaving from the beach just southwest of the airport runway. You can swim or walk across the narrow channel at low tide; the water is about chest height. If you're heading around to the southern tip of the island, a pirogue transfer should cost about Ar7000.

The island itself can be explored on foot in less than three hours – but why hurry? Better to stay a night – or several nights – and adjust to the feeling of sand between the toes.

**Sleeping**

The places following don't have telephone numbers and many of them are located on nameless streets; asking around is your best bet.

**Chez Tity** (Map p208; r Ar24,000) This is a friendly local place, popular with backpackers, with a bit more character than the rest. Some of the simple huts have their own deck on stilts over the sea. The beach is quite narrow here. Snorkelling equipment and pirogues can be hired.

**Chez Régine** (Map p208; r Ar24,000) Some readers have highly recommended this simple, inexpensive guesthouse in a peaceful spot on the west coast of the island. The food is very good, but order several hours in advance.

**Le Petit Traversé** (Map p208; ☎ 57 402 54; r Ar40,000) A simple and overpriced option, but it's got a good beach and is opposite the airport, so you can get off the plane and be up to your neck in turquoise sea soon afterwards. No hot water.

**Meva Paradis** (Map p208; ☎ 032 022 07 80; r €20, bungalows €30) Recently taken over by new owners, this hotel sits in manicured gardens on the west coast. Full-board and long-stay options are available. The beach is excellent, and the bungalows in particular are very comfortable.

**Le Maningory** (Map p208; ☎ 032 709 005; per person half board s/d/tr €63/46/42) The most upmarket option on Nosy Nato sits on a lovely beach in the northwest of the island. The smart bungalows,



made of bamboo and wood and set slightly back from the beach, have verandas, draped mosquito nets and hot water, while the deck bar/restaurant has easy chairs and foosball (table football). It's rustic, tasteful and incredibly relaxing. Excursions, fishing and diving can be arranged. Rates include breakfast and transfers. If you get a pirogue here from the airport beach, the hotel will pay the boatman.

## NORTHEAST COAST

The wildest and least visited part of the island, the northeast coast can be reached via the cross-island road just outside Ambodifotatra. It's a good hike or bike across, but makes for a bumpy car ride. The sand on the east coast beaches is *not* firm enough for motorcycles and the bush is too thick to ride in. The road to the southern hotels is surfaced, so access is easy.

The **Ampanihy Peninsula** offers relative isolation and a beautiful stretch of sand. It is separated from the mainland by the narrow Baie d'Ampanihy. The easiest access to the peninsula is by pirogue from the village of Anafify, followed by a five-minute walk across the peninsula's narrowest point to the beach.

**Paradis d'Ampanihy** (Map p208; fax 57 402 78, addressed to Hélène; r with shared/private bathroom Ar12,000/20,000) The place to stay if you want to spend time on the Ampanihy Peninsula. The restaurant's speciality is dishes with coconut sauce. There are guides for visiting the nearby forest.

**Mora Mora Hôtel** (Map p208; ☎ 57 401 14; www.mora.mora.info; bungalows €35-50) This slightly overpriced hotel has a glass-walled restaurant on stilts with a sea view and lots of books – a good place to while away some time if you're here when it's raining. Two of the rooms are on a pontoon over the ocean, and share a bathroom. There's almost no beach, so you swim off the jetty. The hotel is about 5km southeast of Ambodifotatra; there are two access roads (both signposted).

**St Mary Club** (Map p208; ☎ 57 040 08; www.stmaryclub.it; r €60, bungalow €70-85; 📞) An Italian-run luxury hotel right up on the northeast tip of the island. There's a swimming pool, a huge lounge/dining room, and big, smart bungalows with safes and air-con.

**Boraha-Village** (Map p208; ☎ 57 400 71; www.boraha.com; s/d half board €70/90) An excellent and very well-run upmarket hotel, with fantastic food and personal service. The smart bungalows have big sliding doors, safes, verandas and bright, tasteful décor. There's a huge range of imaginative 4WD and boat excursions on offer, plus fish-

ing, a cookery school and massages. The hotel also runs a tour of the Canal des Pangalanes, concentrating on the behind-the-scenes life of the villages. Guides speak English.

## THE VANILLA COAST

Once north of Soanierana-Ivongo, you're into the remote northeast corner of Madagascar, centre of the vanilla industry.

The recent vanilla boom has led to a new prosperity in the northeast, with many peasant farmers abandoning other crops such as coffee to grow more vanilla. More money, however, has not led to more development, and the infrastructure in the northeast remains very limited, with no roads to speak of and not much in the way of telephone services. People in this area are much more interested in vanilla than tourism, so guides, porters and competent hotel staff are hard to find in some places.

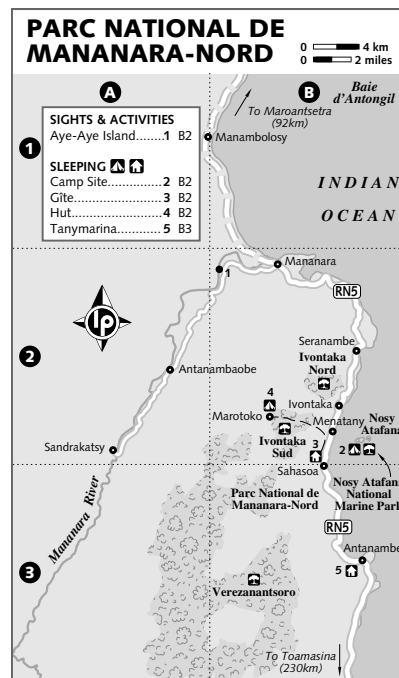
## PARC NATIONAL DE MANANARA-NORD

The very remote Parc National de Mananara-Nord (23,000 hectares) encompasses some of the last remaining lowland rainforest in Madagascar. An additional 1000 hectares of offshore islets and their surrounding reefs are protected as a marine national park. The largest of these islets is Nosy Atafana, southeast of Mananara town.

Mananara-Nord is the only known habitat of the hairy-eared dwarf lemur, but lemurs are not the main attraction in the park, and are not always seen by visitors. The park also protects indris, diademed sifakas, brown lemurs, ruffed lemurs and aye-ayes, as well as a variety of geckos (including the endemic uroplatus and day geckos), and dugong, whales and offshore reef life. The area's primary appeal – apart from its forest – is the opportunity to get to know a remote area of Madagascar and experience rural Malagasy life. The park is still in an early stage of development, so the staff ask that travellers give them advanced warning of their visit via the Angap offices in Antananarivo, Maroantsetra or Mananara. Turning up in the park unannounced is not encouraged.

### Information

Entry permits for Mananara-Nord (including Nosy Atafana) cost Ar15,000 for three days. Guide fees range from Ar10,000/15,000 per



half/full day to Ar45,000 for four days. Porter fees are the same. Guides in the park are still inexperienced and not employed full-time, so to get a good one, and make sure he's available, you'll need to contact the Angap offices in Antananarivo, Maroantsetra or Mananara in advance. The best English-speaking guide is Luther.

The only topographical maps of the area are those put out by FTM (p270). These are not available in Mananara, so you will need to purchase it in advance in Antananarivo. A rudimentary map of the park is available from Angap in Mananara.

### Hiking

Two circuits are available in Parc National de Mananara-Nord, although others are in the pipeline for the future. The circuits both start at Sarasota, about 2.5km south of Mananara. From here you head north along the sparsely travelled coastal road, then west towards the forest of Vintana Sud (four hours). After spending the night at the village of Partook, on the edge of the forest, continue southeast the next day to return to Sahasoa.

The second circuit available in the park is a trip by boat to Nosy Atafana. You can of course combine the circuits by doing the walk and then the boat trip afterwards, or vice versa. For any trip in the park, you'll need to be self-sufficient with food and water. A limited amount of camping equipment is for hire in the park office at Sahasoa.

Hiking in the park is fairly hard going, so you'll need to be fit to attempt a trek here.

### Sleeping & Eating

In Antanambe, **Tanymarina** (Chez Grondin; r from Ar20,000) has rooms and chalets. There is a restaurant here, plus a boat for visits to Nosy Atafana.

There are **gites** (r or camping Ar8000) run by the park in Sahasoa and Antanambe. Both have rooms, a camp site, shower and toilets.

In Marotoko village, at the edge of the forest of Ivontaka Sud, there is a hut where you can stay overnight and some rivers nearby for washing. On Nosy Atafana there is a camp site with a water supply; bungalows are planned.

### Getting There & Away

The park's remoteness makes it very hard to get to. For visits to Nosy Atafana, you can hire a boat from Mananara or Antanambe. Boat transfers to Nosy Atafana take about 2½ to three hours (one way) from Mananara, and about 30 minutes from Sahasoa. However, boats (Ar250,000) are expensive. The park is planning to buy a boat of its own, which will bring the cost down considerably. If you go to Nosy Atafana from Mananara, you'll need to call into Sahasoa on the way to pick up your guide (this must be arranged in advance with the park office in Mananara).

For visits to Ivontaka Sud, you'll need to get to Sahasoa – five hours in a 4WD, six hours by bike, or a long day on foot.

## NOSY ATAFANA NATIONAL MARINE PARK

Nosy Atafana, offshore to the southeast of Mananara town, consists of three islands and the surrounding coral reef. As well as good **snorkelling**, it offers the chance to observe a unique **coastal forest** not found on the mainland.

Nosy Atafana is easily visited on a day trip from Mananara. It's possible to walk between the three islands at low tide.

## VANILLA

The vanilla plant was introduced to Madagascar from Mexico by French plantation owners, who named it *vanille* (*lavaniila* in Malagasy), from the Spanish *vainilla* or 'little pod'. It is a type of climbing orchid, *Vanilla planifolia*, which attaches itself to trees. The vanilla seeds grow inside a long pod hanging from the plant and each pod contains thousands of seeds, which are collected and cured in factories. Dark-brown or black pods are the most desirable because of their stronger aroma.

Madagascar is one of the world's largest producers of vanilla, which – together with other spices such as cloves and pepper, and essences such as ylang-ylang – traditionally has accounted for about one-third of the country's exports. It grows most abundantly in the northeastern parts of the country, particularly on the northeast coast where the hot and wet climate is ideally suited for its cultivation.

Cyclone Hudah, which destroyed more than 20% of Madagascar's vanilla crop in 2000, caused a shortage of supply, a huge escalation in price – in 2003, a kilo of vanilla was changing hands for as much as FMg2,000,000 (Ar400,000) – and a subsequent increase in vanilla-related crime, including thefts and even murders.

## MANANARA

pop 33,000

Mananara is a small and very out-of-the-way town set in an attractive clove- and vanilla-producing area at the southern entrance to Baie d'Antongil. The coast south of Mananara is particularly striking, with small, isolated fishing villages and little else – certainly not any serviceable roads. Mananara has seen big social changes of late, as the price of vanilla has soared. As a result, large shiny 4WD cars bump up and down the potholed streets. Auctions are hosted at the Saturday-evening parties in the town hall, in which newly rich vanilla barons prove their status by paying ludicrous prices for random objects such as roast chickens.

Mananara is also the starting point for visiting Parc National de Mananara-Nord, the Nosy Atafana Marine National Park and tiny Aye-Aye Island. For a bit of snorkelling, walk along the long peninsula behind the airport, which has some white-sand beaches and coral about 100m offshore. Watch out for sea urchins here.

There is electricity in Mananara, but no telephone service.

### Aye-Aye Island

This small, privately owned island in the Mananara River offers the opportunity to observe aye-ayes in their natural environment. Access to the island costs Ar10,000 per person, including car and pirogue transport. It's not an untouched wilderness, but a charming spot nonetheless, and is presided over by the friendly caretaker, Narcisse, his wife, children and dozens of chickens. You can visit the island for a couple of

hours after dark, but there's also a small **gîte** (Ar8000) on the island if you want to stay overnight. Bring a torch and mosquito repellent.

You're almost guaranteed to see an aye-aye here – they have adapted to living in the palm trees, boring holes in coconuts with their sharp teeth and spooning out the flesh with their skeletal middle finger. You'll also have the chance to spot brown lemurs, tiny *Microcebus* (mouse lemurs), fat-tailed dwarf lemurs, grey bamboo lemurs and over 40 species of birds. There are no guides, but researchers are occasionally in residence and will show you around.

The best way to reach the island is by boat, arranged through Chez Roger (below) in Mananara. Alternatively, you can walk for about 4.5km along the paved road that leads west along the river from Mananara towards Sandrakatsy, then cross over to the island via pirogue.

### Sleeping & Eating

**Chez Roger** (r Ar20,000) In the centre of town, this is the best place, especially if you want to visit Aye-Aye Island. The big and comfortable bungalows have bathrooms (bucket showers), and the restaurant does slap-up meals.

**Hôtel Aye-Aye** (r Ar25,000; 🍷) Near the airport, this hotel is also a good spot, with a small pool, bungalows among the palm trees, and a great selection of rums.

### Entertainment

Mananara is, surprisingly, a bit of a party town. Every Friday, Saturday and Sunday night there is a disco and *bal* (party) either at the Hôtel de Ville in the middle of town or at Snack Bar restaurant, around the corner from Chez Roger.

## Getting There & Around

### BOAT

Cargo boats sail relatively frequently between Mananara, Île Sainte Marie, Maroantsetra and Toamasina. There are usually several departures, depending on the weather, although there are no set schedules. This journey is only really safe between September and March – at other times the sea is much too rough to make the journey.

Inquire at the small port in Mananara – boats often come in and leave again fairly quickly, so you'll have to return often on the chance of finding a ship in port. Fares between Mananara and Île Sainte Marie or Maroantsetra average about Ar50,000; the trip takes at least eight hours, often sailing through the night. Decent boats to look for include *Estilina*, *Geralda II* and *Tsiriry*. Occasional cargo boats go as far as Sambava, Antalaha or even Diego Suarez in the north. There are no facilities of any kind on the boats – bring sun protection (an umbrella is handy for shade), food and water.

Another option is to charter a speedboat from Maroantsetra.

### TAXI-BROUSSE

Mananara lies 127km north of Soanierana-Ivongo. There are occasional taxis-brousses between Mananara and Toamasina in the dry season, but the road is abysmal and getting worse.

From Mananara north to Maroantsetra, the road is also in bad condition, and entails several river crossings; there are occasional taxis-brousses during the dry season. Inquire about taxi-brousse departures in the market or at Chez Roger.

## MANANARA TO MAROANTSETRA

If you have the time and energy, Mananara to Maroantsetra (114km) is a beautiful walk or mountain-bike ride along the very rough coastal road, which sees almost no vehicle traffic.

**Manambolosy**, 20km north of Mananara, is the first major town and has a basic **hotel** (r Ar10,000). **Tanjora**, also with a **hotel** (r Ar10,000), is 15km north, followed in a further 15km by the village of **Anandrivola**, which has a sandy lagoon and bungalows at the **Jolex Hotel** (r Ar20,000); meals and motorcycle lifts can be arranged.

About 17km further on is **Rantabe**, from which you can take a pirogue trip 15km up-river through forest. South of town is a beach and some offshore coral. **Bungalows** (r Ar10,000) are available.

Just north of Rantabe you will need to cross the Rantabe River in a pirogue. Transport to Maroantsetra is sometimes waiting on the other side. If not, continue on foot for 12km to **Nandrasana**, from where there are usually at least three vehicles daily to Maroantsetra (Ar8000).

Water is sometimes available in Nandrasana, Rantabe and Manambolosy, and you can get fresh fish in all the villages, but you'll need to bring most supplies with you. If you're coming south from Maroantsetra, you can hire guides (Ar60,000) and porters (Ar45,000) for the trip – see p220 for details.

## RÉSERVE DE NOSY MANGABE

The thickly forested island nature reserve of Nosy Mangabe (520 hectares) is located in Baie d'Antongil about 5km offshore from Maroantsetra. With its dark-green forested hills rising dramatically out of the surrounding sea, and a wonderful yellow sickle of beach, the island has a magical, otherworldly feel rather like a location from *Jurassic Park*. It rains a lot on Nosy Mangabe, however, so you could well end up seeing all this through a wall of water.

The main attraction of Nosy Mangabe is its flourishing population of aye-ayes, which were introduced in 1967 to protect them from extinction. Nosy Mangabe's aye-ayes are fairly elusive these days, and a sighting is by no means guaranteed. Besides the aye-ayes, the island is home to mouse lemurs, white-fronted brown lemurs and black-and-white ruffed lemurs, all of which are fairly easily spotted if you stay overnight.

Walking through the forest in the dark, your torch will pick out a host of reptiles and amphibians – Nosy Mangabe is home to the leaf-tailed gecko (*Uroplatus fimbriatus*), one of nature's most accomplished camouflage artists; several species of chameleons; many frogs; and several snake species, including the harmless *Pseudoxyrhopus heterurus*, which is believed to be endemic to Nosy Mangabe, and the Madagascar tree boa.

There are several walking trails on the island and a small waterfall. At one end is a beach called Plage des Hollandais, with rocks bearing the scratched names of some 17th-century Dutch sailors. From July to September, you can see whales offshore.

### Information

An entry permit for the Réserve de Nosy Mangabe (not included in the permit for nearby

Parc National de Masoala) costs Ar15,000 for three days. Guides (compulsory) are Ar15,000 per group per day. Night walks cost Ar12,000 for groups of up to four, plus Ar8000 for the guide's evening meal. Some guides will cook in the evenings for an extra fee.

Permits can be obtained at the Parc National de Masoala office in Maroantsetra, or on the island itself.

### Sleeping & Eating

There is a very well-equipped **camping ground** (tent sites Ar5000) at the Angap station on the western edge of the island. It has picnic tables, shelters, a kitchen and toilets, and a waterfall nearby provides the showers. You'll need to bring camping and cooking equipment, food, water or purifying tablets, and cooking fuel. Camping equipment can be rented through 3M Loisirs in Maroantsetra (right), and sometimes through the guides at the reserve.

### Getting There & Away

Boat transfers to Nosy Mangabe can be arranged with the guides based at the Parc National de Masoala office in Maroantsetra, or with 3M Loisirs (right). Rates for a return day trip are about Ar85,000 per boat with a minimum of three people. The trip takes 30 to 45 minutes and may occasionally be cancelled or postponed if the weather is bad, so it's best not to schedule a flight too close to your planned return from the island.

### MAROANTSETRA

Maroantsetra (maro-ant-*setr*), set on Baie d'Antongil near the mouth of the Antainambalana River, is a remote and isolated place full of languid charm, surrounded by beautiful riverine scenery. It's well worth spending a day or two exploring the area on foot, quad or mountain bike. On the way you'll pass vanilla plantations, wave-pounded beaches and the occasional chameleon on the side of the road – plus, of course, dozens of waving children.

From July to September there's a good chance of seeing breeding and birthing humpback whales.

Maroantsetra's climate is one of the wettest in Madagascar, with close to 3500mm of rain annually. May to September are the wettest months, although rain can fall at any time of year. The nearest good beach to Maroantsetra is **Navana**, which has a backdrop of virgin rainforest. It's a 30-minute boat ride from town.

### Information

Bank of Africa has a branch here for changing cash and travellers cheques.

Contact **Angap** (☎ 7.30am-noon & 2.30-6pm), two blocks down from the market, behind Maroantsetra's two large radio towers, to organise treks across the Masoala Peninsula, visits to Nosy Mangabe or trips to Parc National de Mananara-Nord. The Parc National de Masoala office is also located here.

### Activities

#### KAYAKING

Sea kayaking is an excellent way to explore the shores around Maroantsetra and the Masoala Peninsula, and there are numerous excellent routes. **Kayak Masoala** ([www.kayakafrika.com/madagascar.asp](http://www.kayakafrika.com/madagascar.asp)) has set up several kayaking camp sites on the peninsula and run trips there from Maroantsetra. Inquire at Le Coco Beach (opposite) for information.

#### QUAD, MOTOR OR MOUNTAIN BIKING

A great way to explore the area around Maroantsetra is by mountain bike. If that sounds too energetic, rent a quad or motorcycle, both of which are just about the only motor vehicles that can make it far along the very rough RN2. All bikes can be hired in town.

#### CANOEING

The tour companies listed here can organise trips by pirogue up the various rivers outside Maroantsetra. Some include a visit to a vanilla plantation and treatment plant. Maroa Tours also organises overnight camping trips by motorised pirogue to the Makira rainforest, newly added to the Parc National de Masoala. These can be a good alternative to Nosy Mangabe if the sea is too rough.

### Tours

There's a lot to do in Maroantsetra, and several well-organised ways of doing it. English-speaking guides are easy to find.

Relais du Masoala, Maroantsetra's most upmarket hotel, organises overnight excursions in the surrounding area, including the Masoala Peninsula (Ar170,000 per person) and to Nosy Mangabe (Ar70,000 per person for groups of at least two).

**3M Loisirs** (write to Boite Postale 83, 512 Maroantsetra) Near the small bridge leading to Le Coco Beach hotel, has a selection of good-quality sporting and camping equipment for hire, including snorkelling gear, tents, quad bikes, 4WD

vehicles, motorcycles and canoes. It also arranges river excursions (Ar55,000 per half day), and boat trips to Nosy Mangabe (Ar80,000 return) and the Masoala Peninsula.

**Maroa Tours** (☎ 57 720 06; Le Coco Beach) Rakoto, an English-speaking Angap guide and 'fixer', does excursions by pirogue to villages upriver from Maroantsetra (Ar35,000 per person for groups of two or more), along with visits to Nosy Mangabe and the Masoala Peninsula. The tours include visits to a vanilla and cinnamon farm and village weaving workshops. The best time to see vanilla is between October and June. Rakoto can also organise guided treks to Mananara.

### Sleeping

**Hôtel du Centre** (☎ 48 via post office; r Ar3000, meals Ar4000) A basic place with rooms in wooden sheds. Meals can be arranged in the evenings.

**Le Coco Beach** (☎ 57 702 06; camping Ar9000, r €25) This friendly midrange hotel has comfortable, well-maintained bungalows and a good restaurant set amid coconut palms. Those of you who are arachnophobes should watch out for spiderwebs and their large occupants strung between the trees at night! Le Coco Beach is a good place to meet other travellers and get a group together for trips further afield. Cross over the small bridge and turn right, about 800m from the centre of town.

**Hôtel Antongil** (☎ 17 via post office; r Ar10,000, dinner Ar4500) There are big, breezy upstairs rooms with fans and mosquito nets around a wide wooden veranda at this two-storey building in the centre of town. Rooms share toilets. The small restaurant serves Malagasy meals.

### THE MEN WHO WOULD BE KING

The Baie d'Antongil has a peculiar history of encouraging delusions of grandeur in some of its early European visitors – at least two displayed quite staggering amounts of ambition in their plans for territorial gain and self-advancement.

The first such pretender was John Avery, a British pirate, who established himself here around 1695. One of his raids was on the ship of a Mogul maharajah on its way to Mecca; among the booty was an oriental princess, whom Avery duly married. After making treaties with neighbouring pirate leaders, he proclaimed himself governor of d'Antongil and tried to establish his own mini-state. Amazingly it isn't known what eventually became of Avery, though some historians believe he returned to England to live out his days incognito.

Almost a century later, in 1773, a Hungarian count by the name of Maurice-Auguste de Benyowski rocked up in the bay after years as a Russian prisoner of war. Having established his own town, Louisville, he proceeded to consolidate his hold in the area with a combination of diplomacy and violence, and in a stunning show of confidence subsequently declared himself emperor of Madagascar. This alone he might have got away with, but he then tried to persuade the King of France to recognise his 'empire', resulting in an instant military overthrow and exile. Sadly for Benyowski, his fate is much clearer than Avery's: when the count returned for a second attempt in 1783 his forces were defeated summarily at Foulpointe, and both he and Louisville disappeared forever.

**Le Maroa** (☎ in Toamasina 032 04 225 20; d Ar12,000, mains Ar6000) Near the Parc National de Masoala office, Le Maroa has a good restaurant (lots of varieties of *soupe chinoise*) and decent bungalows with fans and mosquito nets.

**Relais du Masoala** (☎ 57 721 43/42, in Antananarivo 22 219 74; relais@simicro.mg; r Ar100,000, dinner Ar10,000; P) This is a very tranquil and well-decorated upmarket hotel about 2.5km east of town overlooking a small canal, with the bay and the mountains in the distance. The luxurious bungalows scattered through the leafy grounds have two double beds, huge bathrooms, decks, fans and mosquito nets. A variety of excursions can be arranged from here.

### Eating

Places for a good meal include Les Grillades, near Le Coco Beach, Bar Blanc Vert nearby, and the restaurant at Le Maroa.

The restaurant at Le Coco Beach is good value; try Rakoto's legendary punch coco. Meals at Relais du Masoala are more refined, and there are some delectable desserts. Rive Gauche, in a pretty spot near the harbour, is open in the early evening for ice creams and snacks.

If you're stocking up for a camping trip, Maroantsetra is good for self-caterers. It has great bread, which is available at the market, along with a modest selection of fruits and vegetables.



## NOTHING BUT MAMMALS

Every year between July and September, Baie d'Antongil, just south of Maroantsetra, is the site of the migration of hundreds of humpback whales (*Megaptera novaeangliae*). The whales make their way from the Antarctic northward to the warmer waters around Baie d'Antongil, where they spend the winter months breeding and birthing before the long journey back to Antarctica. En route the whales swim past Fort Dauphin and Île Sainte Marie, where they are often sighted offshore.

Humpbacks can measure up to 15m in length and weigh as much as 35,000kg. Despite their size, they are exceptionally agile, and capable of acrobatic moves such as breaching (launching themselves completely out of the water with their flippers). Humpbacks are also renowned for their singing, which is presumed to be related to mating patterns. Humpback songs can last up to an hour, and are considered to be the most complex of all whale songs.

To maximise your chances of observing the whales and their acrobatics, try to go out on a day when the water is calm – although conditions on the bay vary widely, so the water may be calm in one area and rough in another.

The Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS; based in Maroantsetra) and the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH; based in New York City) have a long-term research and conservation programme for humpback whales and other marine mammals, with a field base on Nosy Mangabe. The WCS-AMNH project has drafted a set of guidelines aimed at ensuring the wellbeing and safety of both whales and whale-watchers. These have since been adopted as national law in Madagascar and local boat operators have been trained to operate within the guidelines, ensuring that disturbance to the whales by whale-watchers will be minimal.

To ensure that you go out with experienced and trained guides and boat operators, organise your trip through the office of Parc National de Masoala (p220) in Maroantsetra. Expect to pay from about Ar90,000 for a half-day trip.

For details of the whale-watching project, have a look at the website of the **American Museum of Natural History** (<http://research.amnh.org/biodiversity/center/programs/whales.html>).

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

Air Madagascar flights connect Maroantsetra a few times a week with Antananarivo (€78), Toamasina (€78), Sambava (€46) and Antalaha (€41). The Air Madagascar office (at Ramanaribe Export) is a few kilometres from town on the road to the airport. Flights to/from Maroantsetra are often full, especially between June and November – be sure to reconfirm your ticket. Weather may affect plane schedules, particularly during the rainiest months (July to September).

### BOAT

During most of the year, the only alternative to flying is to get a cargo boat to or from Maroantsetra. Boat travel is not a safe option between July and September, when the seas are rough.

There are unscheduled but regular sailings between Maroantsetra and Île Sainte Marie (10 hours), Toamasina (two days), Antalaha (12 to 15 hours) and Mananara (nine hours). Inquire at the port in Maroantsetra, and then be prepared for inevitable delays. The boats that take passengers are sometimes extremely

overloaded, and some do capsize, so if the boat looks too full, don't get on. Good boats to look out for to Mananara are *Estilina*, *Géralda II* and *Tsiriry*. To Île Sainte Marie or Toamasina, look out for *Savannah*, *Red Rose* or *Rosita*.

Maroa Tours, 3M Loisirs and Relais du Masoala can arrange speedboat transfers to various points on the Masoala Peninsula.

### TAXI-BROUSSE

Maroantsetra lies 112km north of Mananara at the end of a 'road', which is more of a rutted cart track with several river crossings en route. Occasional taxis-brousses connect the two towns during the dry season from October to December, but this is not a method of transport to be relied upon. To the north of Maroantsetra, there are no roads, and hence no taxis-brousses.

## Getting Around

The airport is about 7km southwest of town. Maroantsetra has a few taxis, which all charge Ar10,000 for a trip out to the airport.

Alternatively, it's possible to get a lift in the Air Madagascar vehicle for a small fee;

ask at the Air Madagascar office when you reconfirm your ticket.

## MASOALA PENINSULA & PARC NATIONAL DE MASOALA

The Masoala (mash-wala) Peninsula is the site of a 210,000-hectare national park containing one of the best rainforests in the country. It also encompasses three protected marine areas: Tampolo Marine Park on the peninsula's southwestern coast, Cap Masoala Marine Park at the tip of the peninsula and Tanjona Marine Park on the southeastern coast. Most of the park is spread across the central part of the peninsula, extending southwest to the coast by Tampolo Marine Park. There are several small discrete parcels (*parcs détachés*) elsewhere on the peninsula, including Andranoala, near Cap Est, Tanambao-Anjanazana, contiguous with Tanjona Marine Park, and Beankoraka, near the tip of the peninsula.

Masoala Peninsula is one of Madagascar's premier **trekking** areas. It also offers excellent opportunities for **sea kayaking**, **snorkelling** and **swimming**. At the peninsula's southernmost tip is the beautiful **Cap Masoala**, which can be

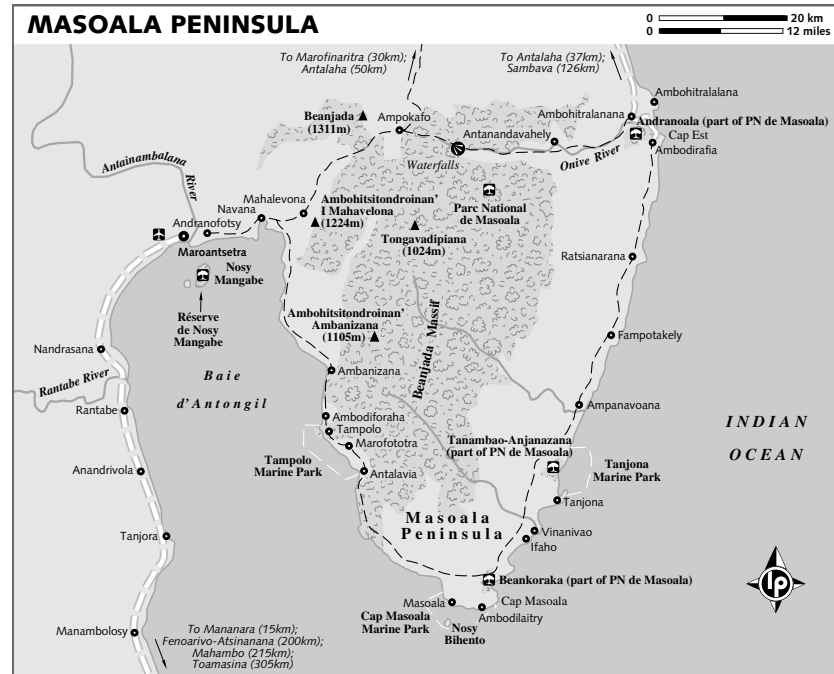
reached on foot or by bicycle from Cap Est. Masoala Peninsula is exceptionally wet. The months between October and December are somewhat drier and are the best months for trekking, although you should be prepared for rain at any time of the year. June and July are the rainiest months; river levels are highest at this time.

## Information

Parc National de Masoala is administered by Angap in collaboration with the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS). Park headquarters are at the Angap office in Maroantsetra (p220). There is also a Parc National de Masoala and Angap representative based in Antalaha.

The best place to arrange permits, guides and treks across the peninsula is at the Angap office in Maroantsetra. The guides here are well organised and many speak English. Treks can also be arranged in Antalaha or in Ambodirafia, near Cap Est, although the staff and guides there don't speak English.

Permits cost Ar20,000 for three days. Guide fees start at Ar12,000/13,000 per day/night for



visits to the park. For trekking circuits, guide fees are Ar75,000 for the Maroantsetra to Antalaha circuit, Ar13,000 per day for a tour of the peninsula and Ar120,000 for Maroantsetra to Cap Est, plus Ar7000 to Ar 13,000 per day for a porter. Food, including for the guides and porters, is not included in these rates and is supposed to be paid by you, although there may be some room for negotiation on this. One reason for the comparatively high fees is that they include the days that the guides and porters need to walk back to Maroantsetra after depositing you in Antalaha or Cap Est (food for this return portion is the responsibility of the guides and porters themselves). Guides are also required for visiting the marine parks.

### Wildlife

The Masoala Peninsula is famous for its dramatic vegetation, which includes primary forest, rainforest and coastal forest as well as a variety of palm and orchid species.

Ten lemur species are found on Masoala, including the red-ruffed and eastern fork-marked lemurs. The helmeted vanga shrike is most often seen here. There are also several tenrec and mongoose species, 14 bat species, 60 reptile species and about 85 bird species, including the rare serpent eagle and Madagascan red owl (both found on the peninsula's west coast).

The marine national parks protect mangrove ecosystems, coral reefs, dolphins and turtles. For details about whales in Baie d'Antongil, see the boxed text, p222.

### Hiking

The main hiking routes are the Maroantsetra to Antalaha direct trip (three to five days); the Maroantsetra to Cap Est route (five to eight days); and a tour of the whole peninsula, which involves starting at Antalaha, travelling to Cap Est by car or bike, trekking to Cap Masoala, then taking a boat to Maroantsetra via Nosy Mangabe. Several shorter routes taking in smaller sections of the peninsula are possible, particularly if you're based at the ecobungalows on the peninsula's west coast.

Of the three main routes, Maroantsetra to Antalaha, which passes through rice paddies and gentler terrain, is the easiest but also dullest, although all the treks are fairly demanding and involve numerous slippery, muddy stretches. If you want to see forest, the best option is the trek from Maroantsetra to Cap Est.

There are river and stream crossings along both routes – primarily small, low streams on the Maroantsetra to Antalaha trek, and some deeper, faster-moving rivers between Maroantsetra and Cap Est (which means you may be wading up to waist or chest height, depending on the time of year, often over slippery rocks). Inquire at the Angap office (p220) about trail conditions when you arrive.

You need an official guide for all treks on the peninsula.

### Sleeping & Eating

**Ecodge Chez Arol** (<http://arollodge.free.fr>; Ambodiforaha; camping per person Ar3000, r Ar10,000, dinner Ar7000) Travellers rave about the good French food at Chez Arol and its wonderful position between the beach and the forest. Numerous trekking and snorkelling trips can be arranged from here. It has a booking office in Maroantsetra, 200m east of the bank.

**Tampolo Lodge** (d Ar16,000, dinner Ar6000) A set of bungalows on the beach near Chez Arol, at Tampolo.

**Kayak Masoala** (mea@dts.mg; camp sites per person Ar10,000, 9-night all-inclusive trip per person €1250) Several wilderness camp sites with bow tents and dining shelters at Cap Masoala are run by Kayak Masoala. The company organises trips here by motorboat, followed by guided sea-kayak tours of the offshore islands. Snorkelling, diving, bird-watching and fishing are also possible. For details, ask at Le Coco Beach (p221) in Maroantsetra.

Ambanizana on the west coast has **bungalows** (r Ar6000) run by Le Coco Beach in Maroantsetra. You can also camp at the Angap base here.

On the Maroantsetra to Cap Est trek, most nights are spent in villages, where it is customary to pay between Ar15000 and Ar2500 per person per night to the village chief. However, you should still carry a tent, as some villages are too small to be able to offer accommodation.

There are designated **camping grounds** (camp sites Ar3000) all the way round the peninsula, including at Marofototra, Cap Masoala, Ambodilaitry, Ifaho and Cap Est. These have wells and shelters for tents, but you'll need to bring in all other equipment.

Bottled water and basic supplies are usually available in bigger villages such as Mahavelona, Ampokafo and Antanandavahe, but you will need to be self-sufficient with most food. There are water sources en route – bringing a good purifier.

### CAP EST

Remote and beautiful Cap Est is Madagascar's easternmost point. Ambodirafia, southeast of Ambohitralanana on the coast, has an Angap station and is the starting point for treks down the peninsula's east coast. The walk from here to Cap Masoala takes about four days. The numerous rivers en route must be crossed by pirogue; allow at least three days for cycling one way.

**Résidence du Cap** (☎ 032 04 539 05; r with bathroom Ar15,000, set dinners Ar7000) is Cap Est's main hotel. It has been destroyed by cyclones and rebuilt twice in four years. Assuming it's still standing by the time you get there, it has five bungalows, electricity from a generator and a restaurant. It's located about 4km southeast of Ambohitralanana and makes a good base for trekking.

**Hôtel du Voyageur** (Ambodirafia; r Ar3000) has simple but picturesque bungalow accommodation with bucket showers. It also has Malagasy meals. Further towards Cap Masoala at Vinanivao is **Chez Marie** (r Ar4000), a similarly simple place.

Cap Est is linked to Antalaha by two taxis-brousses daily (Ar5000, four hours) in the dry season. You can also get there by mountain bike (four to six hours), which can be rented in Antalaha.

To travel to and from Cap Est or Cap Masoala by sea, ask in Antalaha's small harbour about cargo boats heading around the peninsula. Once in Cap Masoala it's possible to take a boat on to Maroantsetra, although this should be arranged in advance if possible or you could be in for a long wait. It's also possible, but hard walking, to continue up the western side of the peninsula by foot to Maroantsetra (four to six days).

### ANTALAHA

pop 30,000

Antalaha, a prosperous coastal town, suffered significant damage during Cyclone Hudah in April 2000 and Cyclone Hiary in 2002. Numerous buildings, including the airport, were partially destroyed and vanilla production was dealt a severe blow, but little sign of the damage now remains in the town centre.

Apart from being a relaxing place to stop if you are travelling up or down the east coast, Antalaha makes a good starting point for visiting Cap Est, about 50km to the south.

### Information

The Angap and Parc National de Masoala representative (for arranging permits and

guides) is in town next door to the Chamber of Commerce.

Antalaha is well known in Madagascar's expat circles for its excellent dentist – inquire at the Kam-Hyo pharmacy opposite Hôtel Florida if you need his services. There are also banks in Antalaha for changing money, and a good internet café – look for the orange sign next to the Kam-Hyo pharmacy.

### Tours

Hôtel Océan Momo can help organise excursions in the area, as can Le Corail restaurant and **Henri Fraise Fils Travel Service** (☎ 88 810 33; port). Le Corail also rents mountain bikes.

### Sleeping & Eating

**Chambres Liane** (☎ 032 04 763 60; r Ar16,000) Small but well-kept rooms with mosquito nets, but no fans, and friendly staff.

**Hôtel Florida** (☎ 032 07 161 90; r Ar15,000, with hot water Ar35,000; ☺) On the main road opposite the white pharmacy. Some more expensive rooms with air-con are also available.

**Hôtel Nany** (☎ 032 40 051 89; port; r Ar24,000) Basic whitewashed rooms around a cheery courtyard full of palm trees. Cold water only in the showers.

**Hôtel Océan Momo** (☎ 032 02 340 69; www.ocean-momo.com in French; d Ar65,000, mains Ar10,000) This comfortable hotel about 100m south of the port is Antalaha's most luxurious option. The imposing white bungalows, in rows beside the beach, have tiled floors, dark wood furniture and four-poster beds with mosquito nets. The restaurant is equally impressive – large and tastefully decorated, with a range of seafood on offer.

**Le Corail** (☎ 032 04 539 05; ☺ lunch & dinner Tue-Sun) Le Corail has good French food, great desserts, and rents out mountain bikes. It's also the booking office for Résidence du Cap hotel in Cap Est, and the owner can give advice on trekking on the peninsula.

**Fleur de Lotus** (☺ dinner) Near Hôtel du Centre, this is one of Antalaha's better dining options; it has a good Chinese menu selection.

For inexpensive food and homemade ice cream, try Salon de Thé Joice, near the police station just south of the market.

### Getting There & Around

AIR

**Air Madagascar** (☎ 88 813 22) has flights linking Antalaha several times weekly with Maroantsetra (€41) and Antananarivo (€99).

The airport is 12km north of town. Taxis between town and the airport charge a ridiculous Ar20,000 per person, so you might want to catch a taxi-brousse from the main road by the airport turn-off, which is cheaper.

#### BOAT

Cargo boats sail regularly between Antalaha and Maroantsetra, sometimes also stopping near Cap Est. There are no set schedules; inquire at the port about sailings. There are also cargo boats to other areas along the east coast, including Toamasina, Sambava and Iharana.

#### TAXI-BROUSSE

Heading north, there are usually several taxis-brousses each day between Antalaha and Sambava (Ar10,000, three hours). Departures are from the taxi-brousse stand about 2km north of town.

Heading south, two taxis-brousses daily go to Cap Est (Ar15,000, four hours) in the dry season. Taxis-brousses towards Cap Est depart from the taxi-brousse station on the way to the airport from town. If you're taking a mountain bike to Cap Est, the taxis-brousses can tie it on top.

#### SAMBAVA

pop 28,000

Sambava is a sprawling beach town set between the sea and the soaring Marojejy Massif on Madagascar's rugged northeastern coast about halfway between Maroantsetra and Antsiranana. The town is nothing special in itself, but makes a good base for exploring the surrounding area, which produces coffee and cloves as well as vanilla. If you want to swim off Sambava's beaches (which are long and sandy, but hot and blustery) inquire locally about sharks and currents.

All major banks have branches in Sambava and you might find yourself using them more often than expected, as everything in Sambava is fairly expensive compared with other towns in the region.

**Best** (☎ 88 922 48; best.sambava@wanadoo.mg; Rte Principale; per min Ar200), 100m from Hôtel Paradis, has internet access.

#### Tours

**Sambava Voyages** (☎ 88 921 10) in the centre of town can organise excursions in the surrounding area. These include visits to a vanilla factory and nearby coffee plantations,

transport to Andapa or Antalaha, and day trips along the river in a pirogue, returning on foot through the villages.

#### Sleeping & Eating

**Sava Hôtel** (☎ 88 922 92; savahotel@gasyonline.mg; Rte Principale; r with shared/private bathroom Ar30,000/34,000) A fairly uninspiring place with big, shabby rooms and a cheap restaurant.

**Hôtel Orchidée Beach II** (☎ 88 923 24; orchideabeach2@wanadoo.mg; Plage des Cocotiers; r Ar46,000) A rustic, welcoming establishment that has more charm than any other in town. Just across the road from the beach, it has small but well-maintained rooms with fans but no mosquito nets. The friendly restaurant serves a good selection of seafood. Cold water only in the bathrooms.

**Hôtel Paradis** (☎ 88 922 97; Rte Principale; d/tr Ar52,000/64,000) This place is highly kitsch but comfortable, with a huge, flashy Chinese-run edifice, a good restaurant and obliging staff. Rooms are vast and cool, but noisy, with fans but no mosquito nets, and painted *trompe l'oeil* bedheads.

**Hôtel Las Palmas** (☎ 88 920 87, in Antananarivo 22 593 96; fax 88 921 73; Plage des Cocotiers; r with fan/air-con Ar60,000/72,000; ♿) Nominally Sambava's most upmarket hotel, this place has a good position on the beach, but is decent rather than luxurious. The rather small rooms, with pink plastic bathrooms, have fans or air-con, but no nets. There's a terrace restaurant and some beach umbrellas. The hotel runs excursions to the palm and vanilla plantations outside town.

**Hotel Carrefour** (☎ 88 920 60; r with fan/air-con Ar64,000/100,000; ♿) A once grand, now faded hotel, down by the beach at the north end of town. If you arrive here after 8pm you won't be able to check in.

#### Getting There & Around

**Air Madagascar** (☎ 88 920 37; Rte Principale) flies from Sambava several times weekly to Antananarivo (€99), sometimes via Maroantsetra (€177) or Toamasina. There are also several flights weekly to Diego Suarez (€62).

The airport is situated about 2km south of town. It's possible to take a taxi to the airport from town, or you could walk.

Taxis to Antalaha (Ar10,000, three hours) and Andapa (Ar10,000, 2½ hours) depart from the hectic taxi-brousse station in the market at the southern end of town. Transport to Iharana (Ar10,000, 2½ hours) and on to Diego

Suarez (Ar50,000, about 17 hours) departs from the northern taxi-brousse station.

#### ANDAPA

Andapa lies in an attractive agricultural valley in one of Madagascar's most important rice-growing areas. Nothing in particular happens in Andapa, but the beauty of the surrounding countryside, the cool climate and the friendly, untouristy atmosphere make it a great place to kick back and just take in a slice of Malagasy life. From town there are a couple of easy and scenic hikes, one which passes through rolling rice fields to a set of impressive rapids about 3km northeast of town. You can also walk 2km south to a waterfall, surrounded by vanilla plantations and fishponds.

There is a very helpful **WWF/Angap office** (wwfandapa@wwf.mg; BP 28, 205 Andapa) in Andapa, from which to arrange treks to the nearby Parc National de Marojejy and Réserve Spéciale d'Anjanaharibe-Sud. If you want to visit either of these areas from Andapa, you'll need at least three days.

**Hôtel Vahasoa** (r from Ar20,000) is a very friendly and homely hotel with a restaurant serving fantastic food. A slap-up, multicourse Chinese dinner, often including lobster, costs Ar20,000. The charming owners, Mr and Mrs Tam Hyok, can help with advice on hikes in the surrounding area or visits to the national park. Taxis-brousses will drop off or pick you up outside the door on request.

**Hôtel Beanana** (<http://hotel-beanana.no-ip.com>; r Ar25,000) is the only other place in town – it's on the way into the village. Meals are available if you order in advance (breakfast Ar6000).

There are also several *hotelys* in town serving very simple Malagasy-style meals.

Andapa lies 109km southwest of Sambava along a winding, sealed road which passes through spectacular scenery. Taxis-brousses go daily between the two towns for about Ar5000 (2½ hours). If you start early, it's quite possible to get to Andapa as a day trip from Sambava.

#### PARC NATIONAL DE MAROJEJY & RÉSERVE SPÉCIALE D'ANJANAHARIBE-SUD

The rugged and precipitous Marojejy (Marojejy) Massif rises north of the road between Andapa and Sambava. It is part of a 60,050-hectare national park that protects a remote wilderness area noted for its vegetation, in-

cluding over 2000 types of plants, and the spectacular views from the upper reaches of the forest. The park is also home to 11 species of lemurs, including the aye-aye, the silky sifaka (*Propithecus candidus*) and the helmeted vanga shrike, endemic to the region. There are over 100 bird species, about 70% of which are endemic to Madagascar, as well as numerous species of frog and chameleon.

The Réserve Spéciale d'Anjanaharibe-Sud (18,250 hectares), to the southwest of Parc National de Marojejy, gained attention in 1997 when the Takhtajania perrieri – a small tree in the Winteraceae family, which is believed to have existed on earth about 120 million years ago – was rediscovered here.

At the park's lower elevations the landscape is dominated by thick rainforest, while above about 800m, the rainforest is replaced by highland forest. At the highest elevations, rising up to the peak of Mt Marojejy at 2133m, the primary vegetation cover consists of heath, mosses and lichens. It can get very cold at the higher altitudes. Trails in the park and up to the summit are very hard and steep, so this destination is for fit trekkers only.

Both de Marojejy and d'Anjanaharibe-Sud are administered by the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF). Local communities on the borders of the park manage portions of the forest in partnership with WWF.

The turn-off to Marojejy is near Manantenina village, 40km from Andapa on the Sambava road (near the 66km post). Once in the park, there are three camp sites, each at different altitudes. The first two camp sites have huts with beds, but the third and highest is a camping ground only. The Réserve Spéciale d'Anjanaharibe-Sud features most of the same vegetation as the park, but walking here is easier. The best times to visit the parks are from April to May and September to December.

For information, and guides and permits, contact **WWF** (wwfandapa@wwf.mg; BP 28, 205 Andapa) in Andapa or the WWF welcome office in Manantenina. **Sambava Voyages** (☎ 88 921 10; Sambava) can also arrange visits to the park.

#### IHARANA (VOHÉMAR)

Iharana (commonly known as Vohémar) lies 153km north of Sambava along a mostly sealed road. It is the last stop north on the east coast before the (rough) road heads inland to Ambilobe and Diego Suarez. Like Sambava and Antalaha, Iharana is a vanilla-producing centre.



One of the main sites of interest for visitors is **Lac Andranotsara**, 7km south of Iharana. It is also known as Lac Vert (Green Lake) because of its coloration by algae. Nearby is a good beach. According to legend, there was once a village at Andranotsara, which one night sank into the earth under the weight of an irritable seven-headed monster who curled up there to sleep. This incident was followed by seven days of rain, which flooded the indentation. The crocodiles that inhabit the resulting lake are thought to be reincarnations of the villagers, and various *fady* (taboos) are in effect. It's possible to walk from Iharana to Lac Andranotsara, though you'll need to ask directions locally.

The main hotel in Iharana is the **Sol y Mar** (☎ 88 630 42; [vohemarina@vohemarina.com](mailto:vohemarina@vohemarina.com); r Ar24,000-190,000), with decent bungalows, some more expensive rooms, and a good restaurant.

**Hôtel-Restaurant La Cigogne** (☎ 88 630 65) is known for its food. La Floride, not far from the Sambirano pharmacy, has good meals, although you'll need to order in advance. There are also some simple rooms here.

Another place to try is Hotely Kanto, which has good Malagasy dishes.

Taxis-brousses travel daily between Iharana and Sambava (Ar6000, four to five hours). There is usually one vehicle daily between Iharana and Daraina (four hours, 60km), northwest of Iharana en route to Ambilobe, where there's a basic *hotely*. At least several vehicles weekly continue on to Diego Suarez during the dry season, via Ambilobe. The stretch between Iharana and Ambilobe is very rough, and can take anywhere from 12 to 20 hours. The journey from Ambilobe on to Diego Suarez is only about two hours.

## SOUTH OF TOAMASINA

### CANAL DES PANGALANES

The Canal des Pangalanes is a collection of natural rivers and artificial lakes that stretches approximately 600km along the east coast from Toamasina to Farafangana, although it's only navigable from just north of Mananjary. More than its rather dull scenery, the canal's charm comes from the procession of boats of all shapes and sizes on its waters, and the small villages on the banks. Here you can stop to see eels drying in the sun, visit local coffee factories, or talk with fishermen mending their wooden pirogues under the trees.

The best times to tour the Canal des Pangalanes are from March to May and September to December.

### TOURS

Most organised tours cruise from Toamasina to one of the nearby lakes, stay overnight at a lakeside hotel – where you may be able to do some water sports or hiking – and then return to Toamasina. Few organised tours travel along the canal for any great distance. In addition to the operators listed on pp199–200, the following companies do trips along the canal:

**Boogie Pilgrim** (☎ 22 530 70; [www.boogiepilgrim-madagascar.com](http://www.boogiepilgrim-madagascar.com)) This Antananarivo-based tour operator organises trips to and from its hotel, Bush House, on Lac Ampitabe.

**Boraha-Village** (☎ 57 400 71; [www.boraha.com](http://www.boraha.com)) This hotel on Ile Sainte Marie organises very high-quality trips on the canal, with the emphasis on local life, agriculture and fishing. Guides speak English.

**L'Aziza** (☎ 032 07 008 66; [l.aziza@netcourrier.com](mailto:l.aziza@netcourrier.com)) No-frills, budget trips on flat-bottomed canal boats from any point on the Pangalanes to any other cost Ar50,000 per person per day, including lunch. It also does hotel bookings. Reduced rates for groups.

### GETTING THERE & AWAY

You can travel along the canal in either direction by boat, by taxi-brousse along a parallel inland road or by cargo train. For all travel on the canal, allow plenty of time, and be prepared to spend time on boats without any amenities at all – not even seats!

To find a boat heading down the canal from Toamasina, ask around at the *gare fluviale* about 2.5km from the centre of town. There are no fixed sailing schedules, so you may have to wait a while. To continue down the canal each day, you will need to keep asking about onward public boats or pirogues, which can be chartered. Allow three to four days between Toamasina and Ambila-Lemaitso, travelling by pirogue and staying in villages en route. If you take public boats all the way, reckon on about Ar50,000 per person, not including accommodation, for the whole trip.

If you are coming from Antananarivo, the usual places to start a tour of the canal are Manombato, a tiny village on the shores of Lac Rasobe, or Ambila-Lemaitso, where there are several hotels.

Watch out for the green barge called *Imitso*, which runs between Toamasina and Vatomanjary, carrying merchandise and a few pas-



sengers (the fare is Ar2500 from Ankanin'ny Nofy to Toamasina).

**La Compagnie du Canal** (☎ 53 351 48; [compagnie.ducanal@wanadoo.mg](http://compagnie.ducanal@wanadoo.mg); Rue Maitre Native); ☎ 6-7am & 10am-5pm Mon-Sat, to noon Sun) runs daily boat services to Manambato (€50) via Ankanin'ny Nofy (€35); there are discounted rates for groups of five or more.

### Lac Ampitabe & Vohibola

Accessible only by boat, Lac Ampitabe is a great place to go and get away after a few days on the river. It is peaceful, with white sandy beaches and a wonderful private wildlife park. The **Palmarium Reserve** (☎ 033 14 847 34; admission Ar10,000; ☎ dawn-night) recently changed ownership (it was Le Reserve d'Akanin'ny Nofy, named for the village of Akanin'ny Nofy, northeast of the lake), and protects 50 hectares of palm-tree forests. Inside you'll find wide, well-maintained trails, and several species of incredibly tame lemur, including Coquerel's sifaka and some very tame black-and-white ruffed lemurs. There's also a good selection of reptiles on another island just offshore.

The adjacent **Le Palmarium Hotel** (☎ 033 14 847 34; [hotelpalmarium@yahoo.fr](mailto:hotelpalmarium@yahoo.fr); bungalows from Ar70,000) is owned by the same people as the reserve. The bungalows are large with hot-water bathrooms – almost posh for the wilderness. Night-time entertainment is provided by Philibert, a tame vasa parrot, and a pair of clowning lemurs. Meals can be arranged for Ar15,000.

The German-run **Bush House** (☎ 22 258 78; [www.boogiepilgrim-madagascar.com](http://www.boogiepilgrim-madagascar.com); r & bungalows per person from Ar75,000), just across from the reserve, is another option. It has charming staff, a great atmosphere and simple but rustically attractive rooms. Rates include full board. Walks, boats and canoe trips can be arranged to visit local village projects supported by the hotel, as well as the lemur reserve and the sea beach on the other side of the lake. All the guests eat together in the evenings, and the food is superb. Speedboat transfers from Toamasina/Manombato cost €159/38 per boat for up to six people. Near Bush House is l'Île aux Nepenthes, an islet containing hundreds of carnivorous pitcher plants.

Don't miss a visit to **Vohibola**, the newest ecotourism initiative from **Man and the Environment (MATE)** (☎ in Antananarivo 22 674 90; [www.mate.mg](http://www.mate.mg)). A visit to this preserve is a great way to see a Madagascan-started NGO with the goal of teaching local people about conservation.

Vohibola in an interesting area between the Indian Ocean, lakes and the Canal des Pangalanes, about 45 minutes south of Ankanin'ny Nofy by boat. The project protects one of the two largest remaining pieces of littoral forest in the country, home to a number of highly endangered tree species. When MATE employees began exploring the forest they discovered a rare and extremely endangered tree, the *Humbertiodendrom saboureaui*, which had not been seen in 50 years and was thought to be extinct. Visitors have the opportunity to plant an indigenous tree from the extensive nursery should they wish. You should. Placing the little tree in the ground is not only a small way to give back, it makes you feel great to boot!

For now there are just two hiking trails, the Discovery Trail and the Wetlands Trail, each with unique scenery. Other activities are planned including canoeing and mountain biking. Contact MATE for all details on access, tariffs and facilities; volunteer placements may be available.

### Lac Rasoamasay

The main place to stay here is **Ony Hôtel** (☎ 030 55 850 88; <http://onyhotel.free.fr>; r Ar30,000), on the northern side of the lake. Camping is also possible.

### Lac Rasobe & Manombato

On the southwestern edge of Lac Rasobe and about 1km south of the village of Manombato lies a beautiful white-sand beach with a number of (expensive) hotels spread along it. This is the starting point for many tours of the northern canal area. Manombato village is connected with the main road by a sandy 7km track (4WD only). The turn-off from the RN2 is about 11km north of Brickville. There's no public transport from Brickville, so you'll have to charter a car there or hitch or walk from the turn-off.

The best hotels are **Chez Luigi** (☎ 56 720 20; d/tr Ar40,000/50,000), which has large and luxurious bungalows and does water-skiing, transfers and canoe trips, and **Les Acacias** (☎ 56 720 35; [socyn@simicro.mg](mailto:socyn@simicro.mg); d with cold/hot water Ar30,000/40,000), which offers boat hire to Ankanin'ny Nofy for Ar150,000 per boat (up to six people). **Hotel Rasoa Beach** (☎ 56 720 18; d Ar35,000) has good-value six-person rooms, but is otherwise overpriced.

The cheapest option is the basic **Hibiscus** (r Ar15,000), which has shared bucket showers and is slightly away from the beach.

### Ambila-Lemaitso

This sleepy seaside village, regularly flattened by cyclones, is a good place to start a tour of Canal des Pangalanes. There's a long, white beach, but ask about sharks and currents before swimming. Canoes (Ar10,000 per day) can be hired from **Kayak Nari** in the centre of town.

Just after the ferry crossing as you come from Brickville is the friendly **Le Nirvana** (r Ar20,000), a very atmospheric but decaying set of bungalows on a narrow strip of land between the canal and the sea. There's a peaceful wooden jetty overlooking the canal. This is a good place to find out about transport up and down the canal.

In the village itself, **Hôtel Relais Malaky** (☎ 56 720 22; d/tr Ar18,000/25,000) has a faded, colonial air and sea views, with a decent restaurant downstairs. A bit further outside the village is **Hotel Ambila Beach** (☎ 030 23 847 85; camping Ar8000, tr Ar20,000), which has a terrace overlooking the river. **Le Tropicana** (r Ar10,000) is the cheapest option, with basic bungalows on a small beach on the river.

To get to Ambila-Lemaitso from Brickville, you'll have to charter a private car in town to follow the sandy road from the northern edge of town east for about 18km to a small ferry crossing over the canal. From the ferry crossing, it's another 4km north along a sandy track to Ambila-Lemaitso. At Ambila-Lemaitso you can inquire about boats heading up or down the canal.

### MANANJARY

pop 24,500

Mananjary (manan-dzar) is an agreeable, relaxed backwater sliced into two parts by the Canal des Pangalanes. It is also a local centre for production of vanilla, coffee and pepper.

Every seven years, the small Antambohoaka tribe holds mass circumcision ceremonies in Mananjary, known as *sambatra* (the actual operations are now performed in the hospital). Similar ceremonies are also held in surrounding villages.

North of Mananjary at Ambohitsara is the locally revered **White Elephant** sculpture. This relic is attributed to the Zeïdistes, descendants of the prophet Mohammed who first landed at Iharana on Madagascar's northeast coast and then moved south. Despite the name, it bears little resemblance to an elephant.

### Sleeping & Eating

The most comfortable place in town is **Hôtel Jardin de la Mer** (☎ 72 942 24; d Ar20,000), near the water, about 1km from the centre of town with well-kept bungalows and a good restaurant. The hotel organises trips on the canal and in the surrounding area.

On the ocean side of the canal, **Hôtel Sorafa** (☎ 72 942 50; fax 72 943 23; r Ar22,000-25,000), formerly called the Solimotel, has decent rooms on the seafront and a restaurant. Mountain bikes can sometimes be hired here.

### Getting There & Away

Daily taxis-brousses connect Mananjary with Fianarantsoa (Ar15,000, six hours) and Manakara (Ar12,000, four hours). For Manakara,

you may need to get off at the junction village of Irondro and wait for a connection.

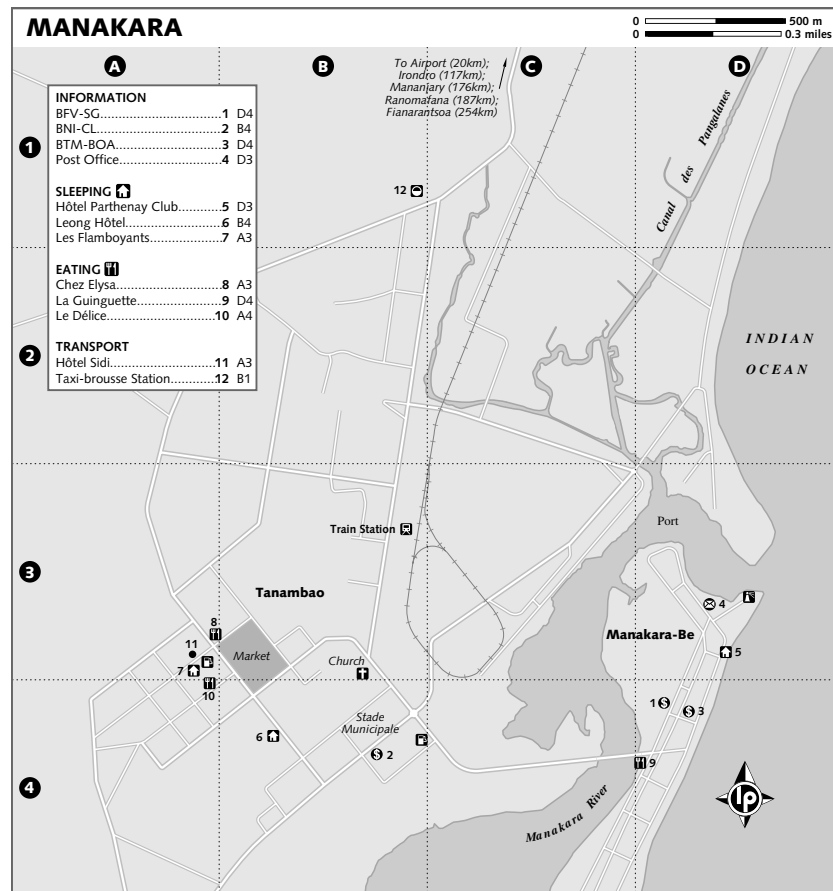
There is no direct road access from Mananjary to Toamasina.

### MANAKARA

pop 31,500

Manakara is a quiet Malagasy town with wide unpaved streets and an end-of-the-world feel. It is known primarily as the terminus of the train line from Fianarantsoa. Manakara has some long, pine-fringed beaches, but sharks and strong currents mean that swimming is not possible here.

Manakara is divided into two parts. In the centre, known as Tanambao, are the train and taxi-brousse stations, the market and



**POUSSE OFF**

The *pousse-pousse* is king in Manakara, but of all the towns in Madagascar, we never encountered as many aggressive, underhand and plain dishonest tactics as we did here. Tourists can expect to be hassled persistently, and even locals might have problems! We strongly recommend avoiding the *pousses* altogether, but if you do decide to take one, be assertive, confirm the price several times up front (it should never be more than Ar1000), and don't take any crap from anyone. Luckily it's easy enough to walk around the town, but if you do need alternative transport, ask at your hotel about hiring a bike, or look for the town's solitary charter taxi.

some hotels. Over the lagoonlike estuary of the Manakara River is the old seaside district of Manakara-Be, where you'll find BFV-SG, BNI-CL and BTM-BOA banks, a post office, a few hotels and the beach.

For bicycle, car or boat trips in Manakara's surrounding area, as well as excursions along the Canal des Pangalanes, contact **Sylvain** (☎ 72 216 68), an English-speaking guide.

One warning: the *pousse-pousse* men here are the worst in the country for cheap tricks and bullying behaviour, and they turn out in force to meet every train arrival – be prepared for the onslaught! See the boxed text (above) for advice and alternatives.

**Sleeping & Eating**

**Les Flamboyants** (☎ 72 216 77; lionelmanakara@dts.mg; r incl breakfast €6.50; 📺) This is an exceptionally good-value guesthouse in the centre of town, with a shady 1st-floor terrace and French poetry on the bedroom walls. There's also lots of local information available. This is the first guesthouse the *pousses-pousses* from the station will take you to.

**Hôtel Parthenay Club** (☎ 72 216 63; Manakara-Be; bungalow Ar25,000; 📺) A slightly decaying but still charming hotel in gardens down by the beach, with a rather forbidding-looking concrete swimming pool and a tennis court (plus racquets). The restaurant food has a good reputation.

**Magneva Hôtel** (☎ 72 714 73; d Ar28,000) If you don't mind being about 2km out of town, this is a very comfortable and peaceful option. The big, tiled rooms and bungalows set amid tranquil gardens have hot water, and a car is available for going in and out of town. Ring for a pickup, as it's too far to go in a *pousse-pousse*.

Hôtel Morabe and Le Délice are two good, simple local hotels near the market. The food at Le Délice is excellent.

**La Guinguette** (☎ 72 213 92; 🍷 lunch & dinner Wed-Mon), down by the beach in Manakara-Be, has a good selection of seafood and French dishes. Chez Elysa, diagonally opposite Les Flamboyants, serves drinks and snacks, and has a lively atmosphere. There's occasional live music.

**Getting There & Away****TAXI-BROUSSE**

At least one taxi-brousse daily connects Manakara and Ranomafana (Ar15,000, six hours) continuing to Fianarantsoa (nine hours). These wait until at least 4pm before setting off, so you'll arrive at your destination in the middle of the night. There is usually one direct vehicle daily to Mananjary (Ar10,000, four hours) and Farafangana (Ar8000, three hours).

The taxi-brousse station is located 2km north of town.

**TRAIN**

Most travellers prefer to travel at least one way by train from Fianarantsoa; see p108 for details.

**FARAFANGANA****pop 22,000**

Farafangana is at the southern extreme of the Canal des Pangalanes, and is 109km by road south of Manakara. It is a quiet town with nothing special to do, but it has a friendly, relaxed ambience.

**Hôtel Les Cocotiers** (☎ 73 911 87; ranarson@dts.mg; r Ar25,000) and its annexe **Le Coco Beach** (☎ 73 911 88) provide the best lodgings in town.

There is generally a daily taxi-brousse travelling between Farafangana and Manakara (Ar8000, three hours). There is no public transport along the 315km road to Fort Dauphin, so you'll have to fly. Air Madagascar has weekly flights for around €100.

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