

History

MADAGASCAR

ARRIVALS FROM ASIA & EUROPE

Considering that humans evolved on the African continent just across the Mozambique Channel, their arrival in Madagascar was comparatively late and by a rather circuitous route. Anthropological and ethnographical clues indicate that Indo-Malayan seafarers may have colonised the island after migrating in a single voyage, stopping en route at various points in the Indian Ocean. Their coastal craft possibly worked their way along the shores of India, Arabia and East Africa, trading as they went, before finally arriving in Madagascar. Linguistic clues also support this theory, as elements of Sanskrit have been identified in the Malagasy language.

These first settlers brought with them the food crops of their homelands, such as rice, and even today the island's glassy tiers of paddy fields resemble the landscape of Southeast Asia. This Asian way of life was tempered over the years by contact with Arabic and African traders, who plied the seas of the region with their cargoes of silks, spices and slaves. Gradually the Asian culture of the new settlers was subsumed into a series of geographically defined kingdoms, which in turn gave rise to many different Malagasy tribes.

Marco Polo was the first European to report the existence of a 'great red island', which he named Madagascar, after possibly having confused it with Mogadishu in Somalia. But Arab cartographers, who at the time were way ahead of their European counterparts, had long known the island as Gezirat Al-Komor, meaning 'island of the moon' (a name later transferred to the Comoros). It wasn't until 1500 that the first Europeans set foot on Madagascar, when a fleet of Portuguese vessels arrived. As Portugal's political and military power waned over the ensuing centuries, the Dutch and British tried to establish permanent bases at various points around the Madagascar coast, only to be defeated by disease and less-than-friendly locals who suspected them of being slave traders.

More successful were the efforts of buccaneers from Britain, France, North America and elsewhere, who for several decades from the end of the 17th century onwards made Madagascar an Indian Ocean base from which they attacked merchant ships on their way to and from Europe via the Cape of Good Hope. The pirates allegedly buried copious amounts of treasure and certainly contributed generously to the local gene pool.

A History of Madagascar, by Mervyn Brown, is the most up-to-date and authoritative work on the islands' history.

Flags, lists of kings and queens, and the chance to listen to Madagascar's national anthem are all at www.worldstatesmen.org/Madagascar.htm.

'NO FRONTIER BUT THE SEA'

As Malagasy trade with Europe grew during the 18th century, several rival kingdoms began to vie for dominance. The Menabe people under Andriamisara I founded a capital on the banks of the Sakalava River, from which the modern-day Sakalava tribe took its name. Meanwhile on the east coast, Ratsimilaho – the son of an English pirate and a Malagasy princess – succeeded in unifying rival tribes into a people that became known as the Betsimisaraka. In central Madagascar a certain Chief Ramboasalama took the snappy name Andrianampoininandriantsimitoviaminandriampanjaka (Andrianampoinimerina for short), meaning 'Hope of Imerina', and unified the Merina into a powerful kingdom that soon came to dominate much of Madagascar.

In 1810 Andrianampoinimerina was succeeded by his equally ambitious son Radama I, who organised a highly trained army that conquered Boina (the main Sakalava kingdom in northwestern Madagascar), the Betsimisaraka peoples to the east, the Betsileo to the south and the kingdom of Antakarana in the far north, whose warrior princes preferred suicide or exile to surrender. Unable to take the Sakalava kingdom of Menabe by force, Radama prudently married Princess Rasalimo, daughter of the Menabe king, thereby fulfilling a vow made by his father that the Merina kingdom would have no frontier but the sea.

His empire-building complete, Radama I set about courting European powers, especially Great Britain. British missionary influence followed; the London Missionary Society (LMS) soon arrived with a contingent of Welsh missionaries, many of whom died from fever when they reached Madagascar. Undaunted, the survivors set about converting the Merina court to Christianity and set up several schools around the country. By 1835 the Bible had been printed in Malagasy.

In 1828 Radama died at the tender age of 36. His successor was his widow Ranaivalona I, who may well have done away with him herself, and she promptly set about reversing Radama's policies. Those who refused to abandon Christianity were hurled over the cliffs outside the Rova in Antananarivo (p77). During her 33 years in power Ranaivalona elevated torture and execution to new plateaus of inventiveness. Boiling water was poured over victims tied to stakes in pits, while some condemned prisoners were sawn in half or had their arms and legs chopped off and were sewn up into sacks for a lingering death. She was said to be sexually insatiable and had a stream of lovers, many of whom were put to death in their turn.

FRENCH CONQUEST & COLONIALISM

One of the few Europeans Queen Ranaivalona tolerated was a French engineer, Jean Laborde, who built her summer palace and began Madagascar's industrial revolution with his huge factory complex at Lac Mantasoa. In 1861 Queen Ranaivalona died, understandably unlamented by what remained of her subjects.

King Andrianampoinimerina gave his soldiers charms made from crocodile teeth filled with magic herbs to protect them from the bullets of their Sakalava enemies.

Criminal suspects under Queen Ranaivalona I were forced to drink a strong poison. If they vomited profusely enough, they were declared innocent. Most died.

TIMELINE Madagascar

2nd century AD

Madagascar is settled by Indo-Malayans who migrate by sea from the distant shores of Indonesia and Malaysia. They bring with them agricultural, linguistic and cultural traits. Most present-day Malagasy are descended from these settlers.

1500

Portuguese sailors under the command of Diego Dias become the first Europeans to set foot on Madagascar; Dias names the island Ilha de São Lourenço, but as Portuguese influence wanes the name is forgotten.

late 18th century

Merina chief Ramboasalama assumes the throne at Ambohimanga and with the help of European arms traders and military advisors unifies the various Merina peoples into a powerful kingdom.

1817

Radama I enters into diplomatic relations with Great Britain, beginning a period of British aid and influence that remained strong until well into the 19th century. Missionaries convert the Merina court to Christianity.

1828

Ranaivalona I becomes queen, commencing a 33-year genocide of her people, killing perhaps 25% of them. She reverses Radama's policies, declares Christianity illegal and denounces European influence, isolating Madagascar from the world.

1861

Ranaivalona dies and Radama II becomes king, abolishing forced labour and reinstating freedom of religion. Missionary activity begins to expand once more and Christianity becomes the predominant religion of Madagascar.

She was succeeded by her son Radama II, who thankfully rescinded most of his mother's policies and welcomed back the Europeans.

After Radama II had been in power for a year a mysterious plague killed thousands of people in Antananarivo. The malady was attributed to the ancestors' discontent over the new king's relations with foreign powers and the growing influence of outsiders in Madagascar. In May 1862, Radama II was assassinated, strangled by a silken cord to avoid the *fady* (taboo) over the shedding of royal blood.

Rainilaiarivony, the king's assassin, took the post of prime minister and married Radama's widow, who took the title Rasoherina I. Any ideas the queen might have had of emulating her powerful predecessor were quickly quashed when the prime minister issued an edict stating that she could act only with the consent of her ministers – effectively leaving the real power to her husband.

Rasoherina survived until 1868 and was succeeded by Ranavalona II, who died in 1883 and was succeeded by Ranavalona III. Prime Minister Rainilaiarivony married both succeeding queens and became the principal power behind the throne, building a magnificent residence for himself in Antananarivo (p78).

By the late 19th century British interest in Madagascar had begun to wane and French influence increased. This turned to outright aggression in 1883 when French warships occupied major ports and forced the Malagasy government to sign a treaty declaring the island a French protectorate.

Further demands ensued, and in 1894 the French accused the Merina government of tyranny and demanded the capitulation of Queen Ranavalona III. When she rejected their demands a French army marched on Antananarivo, taking the capital in September 1895.

On 6 August 1896 Madagascar was officially declared a French colony. General Joseph Gallieni, the first governor-general, attempted to destroy the power of the Merina by suppressing the Malagasy language and all British influence, declaring French the official language. In 1897 Queen Ranavalona III was sent into exile in Algeria and the Merina monarchy was abolished.

MALAGASY NATIONALISM & INDEPENDENCE

In the early part of the 20th century Madagascar's new rulers abolished slavery, although it was replaced with an almost equally exploitative system of taxes, which resulted in forced labour for anyone who could not pay. Land was expropriated by foreign settlers, and a coffee-based import and export economy developed. With economic growth and an expanding education system a new Malagasy elite began to emerge, and resentment of the colonial presence grew in all levels of society. Several nationalist movements evolved among the Merina and Betsileo tribes, and strikes and demonstrations became more frequent.

Nationalist leader Jean Ralaimongo began the Malagasy independence movement in the 1930s, but his campaign was cut short by the outbreak of WWII.

Flashman's Lady, by George Macdonald Fraser, is the fictional account of how a Victorian poltroon became entwined with Queen Ranavalona, and includes plenty of colourful detail on life at her court.

Nationalist leader Jean Ralaimongo shared a room in Paris with the young Ho Chi Minh.

During the first half of WWII the French in Madagascar came under the authority of the pro-Nazi Vichy government. But the Allies, fearing the Japanese could use Madagascar as a base to attack shipping, launched a seaborne attack and captured the town of Diego Suarez (p175). Antananarivo and other major towns also fell to the British after months of fighting but were handed back to the Free French (those who fought on the side of the Allies in WWII) of General de Gaulle in 1943.

Postwar Madagascar experienced a nationalist backlash, with resentment towards the French culminating in a rebellion in March 1947. The rebellion was eventually subdued after an estimated 80,000 to 90,000 Malagasy were killed. Its leaders, Joseph Raseta and Joseph Ravoahangy, were sent into exile. During the 1950s nationalist political parties were formed, the most notable being the Parti Social Démocrate (PSD) of Philibert Tsiranana, and reforms in 1956 paved the way to independence.

On 14 October 1958 the Malagasy Republic was proclaimed, becoming an autonomous state within the French Community. After a period of provisional government a constitution was adopted in 1959 and full independence was achieved on 26 June 1960, with Tsiranana the country's first president.

The colonists retained an economic advantage through Tsiranana, who referred to *les colons* as 'the 19th tribe'. But his government's continued ties with France, combined with a period of economic decline, contributed to the president's increasing unpopularity. After an uprising in southern Madagascar was brutally repressed in 1971, and a massive antigovernment uprising in the capital in 1972, Tsiranana was forced to resign and hand over power to his army commander, General Gabriel Ramantsoa.

THE 'THIRD REPUBLIC'

In February 1975 after several coup attempts, General Ramantsoa was forced to step down and was replaced by Colonel Richard Ratsimandrava, who was assassinated within a week of taking office. The rebel army officers who had announced the military takeover were quickly routed by officers loyal to Ramantsoa, and a new government headed by Admiral Didier Ratsiraka, a former foreign minister, came to power.

Not surprisingly, by this time French expats had begun to leave the country in droves, taking with them their skills, money and technology. Ratsiraka attempted radical political and social reforms in the late 1970s, severing all ties with France and courting favour with former Soviet-bloc nations. Following the example of Chinese leader Mao Zhedong, Ratsiraka even compiled a 'red book' of government policies and theories.

In March 1989 Ratsiraka's dubious election for a third seven-year term sparked riots and 1991 was marked by widespread demonstrations demanding the president's resignation. From May 1991 to January 1992, the government, economy and transportation systems ground to a halt in general strikes and riots, and protests left dozens dead.

Tabataba (The Spreading of Rumours), directed by Raymond Rajaonarivelo, is a film set in a small village near Manakara during the bloody 1947 rebellion against French rule.

1896

Madagascar becomes a French colony; Governor-General Joseph Gallieni declares French the official language and sets about destroying the power of the Merina and removing all British influence.

1930s

A Malagasy independence movement begins to gather momentum, fuelled by resentment of the French colonials by a growing, educated middle class and led by Nationalist leader, Jean Ralaimongo.

1947

A rebellion led by Joseph Raseta and Joseph Ravoahangy is brutally suppressed by the French using Senegalese troops; tens of thousands of Malagasy are killed in the struggle and the rebellion's leaders are sent into exile.

26 June 1960

Madagascar gains full independence from France in a peaceful transition; Philibert Tsiranana is elected president, though in effect the French still run the country, controlling trade and financial institutions, and maintaining military bases.

1975

General Gabriel Ramantsoa steps down after coup attempts; his followers appoint Admiral Didier Ratsiraka as leader. Ratsiraka adopts Soviet-style ideology and severs ties with France, leading to economic decline.

1991

Further economic decline ignites widespread strikes and protests; the so-called 'Third Republic' calls for free elections but Ratsiraka refuses to step down. Opposition leader Albert Zafy is eventually elected president.

Check out www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/madg_1/hd_madg_1.htm for information on Merina history from the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

In late October 1991, an agreement was signed with opposition politicians in preparation for popular elections and the birth of the so-called 'Third Republic'. However, Ratsiraka still refused to step down. In July 1992 there was an attempted civilian coup, but the rebels failed to gain popular support and were forced to surrender.

Civil unrest leading up to the first round of elections culminated in the blockading of the capital and the bombing of a railway bridge between Toamasina and Antananarivo. For weeks, the capital was without petrol and transportation was disrupted.

The first round of elections, which remained remarkably peaceful, resulted in victory for opposition candidate Professor Albert Zafy, ending Ratsiraka's first 17 years in power. But after years of communist-style dictatorship and economic mismanagement, Zafy's government found it difficult to ignite the economy and gain the trust of the people. Zafy was accused of money laundering and dealings with drug traffickers.

After trying to sack his prime minister the 70-year-old Zafy was unexpectedly impeached by his parliament in July 1996 for abuse of authority. New presidential elections were called in November 1996 and to the surprise of everyone, including international monitors, Ratsiraka (who had been in exile in France for the previous 19 months) won. Appealing for Madagascar to become a 'humanist and ecological republic', he took office once again in February 1997.

REFORM & A NEW OPTIMISM

Self-made millionaire Marc Ravalomanana began his path to success by peddling around his hometown on a bicycle selling pots of homemade yogurt. By the time he became mayor of Antananarivo in 1999, his company, Tiko, was the biggest producer of dairy products in Madagascar and he was able to give away his yogurt to supporters on the streets. On election, he started to clean up the capital and won huge popularity.

In 2001 Ravalomanana announced his candidacy for the presidency of Madagascar under the banner of his TIM party (which stands in Malagasy for 'I Love Madagascar'). Using his business skills to court foreign investment, he pushed for rapid economic development and promised to stamp out government corruption, reduce poverty and repair Madagascar's badly maintained infrastructure.

Ravalomanana claimed outright victory in presidential elections in December 2001. But there was just one snag – so did Didier Ratsiraka. A bitter six-month struggle for power ensued, with both men insisting they were the rightfully elected leader of the country; there were accusations of vote-rigging by both sides. As Ravalomanana swore himself in as president, Ratsiraka declared a state of emergency and imposed martial law. As protests by supporters of both sides grew violent, Ratsiraka and several of his provincial governors set up an alternative capital in Toamasina.

The military eventually swung towards Ravalomanana, tipping the balance of power, and in April 2002 the Malagasy High Constitutional Court declared Ravalomanana the outright winner. By August Ravalomanana's administration had received endorsement from the UN, then won a convincing majority in elections for the National Assembly. Ratsiraka refused to accept that the game was over but left for exile in France anyway.

Ravalomanana quickly set about his reform agenda, introducing a new currency (the ariary) and repairing major road networks throughout the country. Foreign investors were cheered by a major hike in economic growth, and wooed by laws providing tax breaks and allowing foreigners to own land on the island. The World Bank issued the new government with a US\$30 million credit to help fight poverty.

Ravalomanana won a second term in office in 2006, and in April 2007 a referendum endorsed constitutional reforms that will increase presidential powers and make English an official language. 'Madagascar is ready for take-off', Ravalomanana once told a press conference. For the moment, most people seem to share his belief, and the consensus is that the country is further than expected down the road to economic recovery.

THE COMOROS

Ancient seafarers traditionally hugged the coastline of continents and used island chains as stepping stones to colonise new lands. The Comorian chain formed a feasible route to Madagascar and it is thus probable that the earliest inhabitants of the Comoros islands were the same Indo-Malayan seafarers who first reached Madagascar about 2000 years ago. But for the same reason – the islands' proximity to Africa and established trade routes – further waves of immigrants settled the islands, including the Shirazis (Persians), who appeared in the Comoros in the 15th and 16th centuries.

The name Gezirat Al-Komor was used by medieval Arab cartographers to describe Madagascar, and at some point the name came to refer to the Comoros themselves. During the heyday of the Swahili civilisation, the Comoros became a major marketplace for goods such as spices, hides, weapons and precious metals. Many of the sailing dhows that landed in the Comoros' harbours also brought men, women and children captured from as far away as Zambia. Some of these slaves escaped or managed to buy their freedom, remaining on the islands to add an African element to the Arabic origin of today's Comorians.

The first reliable European accounts of the Comoros came from the Portuguese travellers Diego Dias and Ferdinand Soares, but until the mid-19th century Malagasy pirates, rather than European explorers, caused the most disruption to Comorian life. Pirate raids were common, with some Comorian women preferring suicide to capture and slavery. During this time the number

The only comprehensive history of the islands in English is Malyn Newitt's *The Comoro Islands: Struggle Against Dependency in the Indian Ocean*.

1996

Among widespread accusations of criminal activities, President Zafy is impeached for abuse of power and general elections are called. Ratsiraka is returned to power and becomes president again in 1997.

2001

Former yogurt peddler Marc Ravalomanana claims victory in presidential elections. Ratsiraka declares martial law and violent protests ensue; world opinion swings behind Ravalomanana, who is declared the winner after a six-month showdown.

2006

Marc Ravalomanana is swept to office for a second term as president. Encouraging economic growth leads the World Bank to wipe US\$20 billion from Madagascar's national debt; Unesco grants Madagascar a third World Heritage site.

2nd century AD

The Comoros are settled by the same Indo-Malayans who eventually went on to colonise Madagascar; in a relatively short time traces of their Asian ancestry are subsumed by African, Arab and Shirazi (Persian) immigrants.

15th century

The Comoros become part of a network of Islamic sultanates set up by the Shirazis along the western edge of the east coast of Africa, absorbing Swahili trade, architecture and culture.

late 19th century

One by one Comorian sultans willingly allow France to annex the islands in return for protection or aid. French planters and traders prosper under France's relaxed attitude to slavery.

of sultans mushroomed at an alarming rate and at one stage there were no fewer than 12 sultans on the island of Grande Comore alone. Inter-sultanate squabbling and even war was a regular occurrence. This situation was exploited by the French, who during the late 19th century were jostling the other European superpower – Great Britain – for a strategic advantage in the region.

In 1830 a Malagasy prince, Ramanetaka, staged a coup on Mohéli, which left him in power as sultan. The French tried to gain a foothold in Mohéli by sending a governess to educate his young daughter, Fatima I. The ruse failed but Fatima began an affair with Joseph François Lambert, a French trader and adventurer from Mauritius. Lambert set up great plantations on Mohéli but by 1867 the affair had begun to wane. Fatima abdicated and fled the Comoros with a French gendarme, opening the way for the island to become a French protectorate.

COUPS & COUNTER-COUPS

Meanwhile on Mayotte, Sultan Adriansouli ceded the island to the French in exchange for protection from his rivals. In May 1843 the island was transformed from a sultanate into a French planters' and slaveholders' haven, then a full colony of France. The ambitious sultan Saïd Ali of Grande Comore was even more forthright: in 1881 he formed a coalition with the French to oust the previous incumbent and take over as the island's *tibe* (grand sultan). And on Anjouan, Sultan Abdallah III ran into problems when at the behest of the British he agreed to halt slavery. Anjouan's landowners, who depended on slaves to farm their plantations, revolted. In April 1886 the ageing sultan turned to France, which had a more relaxed approach to slavery, and signed the treaty making the island a French protectorate. In 1908 Grande Comore was formally annexed, giving France a strategic base to balance the British presence on Zanzibar, and in 1912 Anjouan joined the rest of the Comoros as a full colony of France.

In a referendum held in 1974 the voters of Grande Comore, Anjouan and Mohéli voted for independence; Mayotte elected to stay under French rule. A few months later Ahmed Abdallah Abderemane of Grande Comore announced a unilateral declaration of independence and the formation of the Federal Islamic Republic of the Comoros, which consisted of Grande Comore, Anjouan and Mohéli. France intervened on behalf of Mayotte and the Comoros' transition to independence went ahead without Mayotte. In December 1975 France recognised the new government then stood back and waited for the fireworks.

In January 1976 Abderemane was overthrown in a mercenary-engineered coup by Ali Soilih, who imposed a form of Maoist-Marxist socialism and ruled using a private army that beat and robbed its way around Grande Comore under the euphemistic title of *Jeunesse Révolutionnaire* (Revolutionary Youth). Soilih spent long spells in his palace smoking marijuana and drinking whisky in the company of young women. Meanwhile on Mayotte a whopping 99% of the population voted to stay with France, not surprisingly.

'In 1908 Grande Comore was formally annexed, giving France a strategic base to balance the British presence on Zanzibar'

Relief came for Grande Comore when a band of French mercenaries led by Bob Denard landed at dawn on 13 May 1978. Within a few hours the army had surrendered and people took to the streets to celebrate. Ali Soilih was shot while 'trying to escape' and Ahmed Abdallah Abderemane was reinstated as president.

PLUS ÇA CHANGE...

Ahmed Abdallah was re-elected in March 1987, but allegations of fraud by the government resulted in numerous arrests, tortures and killings. In 1989 Abdallah was shot by his presidential guard in his palace. Bob Denard seized control but was quickly forced to surrender and then deported.

In 1990 Saïd Mohamed Djohar was declared winner of the Comoros' first free presidential elections since independence in 1975. For a while it looked as though things would improve, but his administration was dissolved and a referendum about whether he should continue to rule was held in 1992. Djohar was re-elected but Denard and his mercenaries returned in 1995 and packed the unpopular president off to Réunion. France sent 600 commandoes who forced the mercenaries to surrender and Denard was once again bound for Paris.

Mohammed Taki Abdur Karim was elected as president in December 1996. But after years of 'humiliation' by France and the Moroni-based government, Mohéli and Anjouan declared themselves autonomous republics. Taki ordered an invasion of Anjouan, but the government's forces were routed by the Anjouan militia. In 1997 self-elected president Ibrahim declared Anjouan's full independence from the federal government in Grande Comore. Almost immediately guerrilla war broke out between Ibrahim's supporters and those who wanted Anjouan to remain part of the federation.

Grande Comore also seemed to dissolve into anarchy. President Taki died suddenly in November 1998 and an interim government was appointed. On 30 April 1999 yet another military coup, this time staged by Colonel Azali Assoumani, ousted Grande Comore's interim government. Assoumani promised to reunite the islands as l'Union des Comores with a new constitution. In April 2002 elections were held for the four presidential roles; Assoumani declared himself the winner of the Union elections, and each island elected its own president. But it's just like old times again: with four presidents and only three islands, political and administrative confusion reigns and businessmen protest that they don't know which government to pay their taxes to! Only Anjouan rejected attempts to bring the island back into the Federal Republic until 2001, when a new 'military committee' led by Major Mohamed Bacar seized power.

The UN periodically calls on France to hand Mayotte back to l'Union des Comores but plans are afoot to change the island's status to a full *département d'outre mer* (overseas department), which would bring even closer administrative links with France.

Browse news stories about Madagascar and the Comoros with a humanitarian perspective at www.irinnews.org.

1974

Ahmed Abdallah Abderemane announces a unilateral declaration of independence and the formation of the Federal Islamic Republic of the Comoros, comprised of Grande Comore, Mohéli and Anjouan; Mayotte votes to stay with France.

1976

Ali Soilih seizes power after a coup and unsuccessfully tries to turn the Comoros into a secular, socialist republic; 99% of Mayotte's population votes to remain part of France.

1978

Soilih is toppled in a coup by French mercenaries led by Bob Denard, setting in train nearly 20 years of further coups and counter-coups, including one by Denard himself; Denard is eventually packed off to France.

1999

A military coup staged by Colonel Azali Assoumani ousts the Grande Comore's interim government. Assoumani starts a process of reconciliation with Anjouan and Mohéli and promises a return to civilian rule.

April 2002

Presidential elections are held in the Comoros; Assoumani declares himself the winner and president of l'Union des Comores; Grande Comore, Anjouan and Mohéli elect their own island presidents.

May 2006

Ahmed Abdallah Sambi, a businessman and Islamic moderate educated in the Middle East, is elected as the second island president, taking over from President Azali Assoumani.

The Culture

THE NATIONAL PSYCHE Madagascar

On arrival in Madagascar your first impression is likely to be of a polite but rather reserved, even distant, people. This may come as a surprise if you've already experienced the confidence and ebullience of Africans. But regarding the Malagasy as Africans is a big no-no. As far as the citizens of *La Grande Île* are concerned, they are just that – an island people, by implication far superior to the 'primitive' Africans. When the French colonised Madagascar they used Senegalese troops in some of their military operations, and to this day many Malagasy regard black Africans as nothing more than dangerous brutes.

In reality, the apparent timidity you'll encounter is a reflection of *Fihavanana*, which means 'conciliation' or 'brotherhood'; it stresses avoidance of confrontation and achievement of compromise in all walks of life. Most Malagasy seem reserved in everyday conversation, but in their culture it is unseemly to discuss some subjects. For example, it is considered tactless to air personal problems, even with close friends. Likewise, searching or indiscreet questions are avoided at all costs. *Fihavanana* is enshrined in Malagasy society, but it masks a fierce pride in the superiority of Malagasy culture, which is on the increase. Marc Ravalomanana's government has declared its aim of breaking the French cultural influence on the country and restoring Malagasy language and traditions.

Politeness in general is very important to the Malagasy, and impatience or pushy behaviour is regarded as shocking. Passengers arriving for a flight place their tickets in a neat row on the check-in desk before patiently awaiting their turn. Similarly, bank customers arrange their papers in strict order along the counter while queuing, with no jostling or cheating tolerated. Indeed, customers may take the opportunity to catch up with friends, and someone further back in the queue will invariably call them when their turn arrives. As a foreigner you *may* be waved to the front of a bank queue – especially if, for example, a farmer clutching a shoebox full of old Malagasy francs is ahead of you – but never assume you will be given preferential treatment.

Nonetheless, the welcoming of strangers and the traditions of hospitality are held sacred throughout Madagascar. It is considered a household duty to offer food and water to a guest, no matter how poor the inhabitants are themselves. All over the country you'll come across a version of the same legend about the villagers who refused a cup of water to a mysterious stranger, only to be punished by having their village immolated.

Sexually, Malagasy society is fairly liberated; in some parts of the country young women are quite forward with sexual advances to men, including foreigners. Among the Malagasy, marriage is a pretty relaxed institution and divorce is common. Children are seen as the primary purpose of marriage, and essential to happiness and security. The idea that some people might choose not to have children is greeted with embarrassed disbelief. Women are seen – by themselves, anyway – as the most dynamic force in Malagasy society; wives are regarded as the head of the domestic sphere even if they also go out to work.

The family is the central tenet of Malagasy life, and includes not only distant cousins but also departed ancestors. Even urban, modern Malagasy, who reject the belief that ancestors have magic powers, regard those who are no longer alive as full members of the family. At *Famadihana* (literally, 'the turning of the bones') exhumation ceremonies, it's not unusual to see people lining up for a family photograph with the shroud-wrapped bodies of dead family members laid out neatly in the foreground.

If you see a young Malagasy man wearing a comb in his hair, he's advertising his search for a wife.

The Comoros

A greater contrast could not be imagined than the Comorians, who bear little resemblance to the Malagasy on any level. For the most part they are outgoing, extroverted and emotional, ready to discuss their problems, life stories or political opinions at the drop of a *kofia* (embroidered skull cap). The people of Mayotte are a notable exception to this generalisation, and appear on first acquaintance to be rather stand-offish and surly. A succession of ever less competent governments has left Comorians with a healthy scepticism about politicians; most realise that they must rely on themselves to get ahead but, perhaps understandably, corruption and sharp business practices are rife.

The Comoros are Islamic states, where family values are strictly enshrined, and life revolves around the mosque and religious events such as the fast of Ramadan. Society is strictly divided, with the upper classes defined as those who have made a Grand Mariage (an elaborate wedding ceremony) or completed the pilgrimage to Mecca. Comorians generally regard themselves as African, holding close ties with fellow Muslims in Kenya and Zanzibar. In general they mistrust the Malagasy, whose pirates hounded the islands for centuries. Resentments also run high between Comorians from the different islands, with occasional outbreaks of inter-ethnic violence.

LIFESTYLE Madagascar

The Malagasy home is the centre of the extended family, ancestors included. It is always furnished with care and attention, regardless of how poor the householder may be. Custom dictates that furniture, doors and windows should all be aligned according to astrological principles and placed in specific parts of the building.

In many areas it's considered disgusting to have a toilet inside the house, or to defecate inside a building at all, even if it's a purpose-built latrine. Health workers in Madagascar are trying to change this tradition because open-air toilets carry a higher risk of disease.

Personal adornment and fashion are hugely important to the Malagasy. This is partly influenced by the French colonists, but men and women alike take great care with their appearance. Hats, the most beloved of all fashion items, are worn cocked jauntily over one eye or with the brims demurely turned down to shade the face. It's not unusual to see swaggering young men sporting the sort of floral straw hat that Westerners associate with old ladies at garden parties! The influence of French culture has remained strong since independence: the French language continues to be widely spoken; it's not uncommon to see village women carrying a baguette in a traditional woven raffia shopping bag; and teenage boys play *boules* in the dusty streets of rural towns, avoiding the Citroen 2CVs and Renault 4s buzzing past.

Most Malagasy still believe life is largely governed by the forces of nature. It's still common to find sacred offerings left at the base of baobab trees, beside forest waterfalls or in front of royal tombs. Family outings to a beautiful

The colours of the Malagasy flag represent the red of royal blood, the white of the people and the green of the forest.

FADY

Fady is the name given to a system of local taboos designed to respect the ancestors. *Fady* can take innumerable forms and varies widely from village to village. It may be *fady* to whistle on a particular stretch of beach, to walk past a sacred tree, to eat pork or to swim in a certain river.

Although foreigners and other outsiders are normally exempt from *fady* (or are excused for breaking them), the taboos should be respected. The best thing to do is to ask locals for information, and to be particularly careful in the vicinity of tombs or burial sites.

MALAGASY PROVERBS

- He who refuses to buy a lid for the pot will eat badly cooked rice.
- Other people's children cause your nostrils to flare.
- Done in by his own trade like a water merchant in the rain.

spot of family or tribal significance are a popular leisure activity and are usually accompanied by a picnic.

Concepts of time and date also have a great influence on Malagasy lifestyle. For example, Malagasy strongly believe in *vintana* (destiny), which influences the dates of parties held to mark circumcisions, marriages or reburials. Friday, which is associated with nobility, is considered a good day to hold a celebration.

In tourist hotspots such as Nosy Be and Diego Suarez it is common to see European men with beautiful young Malagasy girls on their arm. Foreign men may find the sexually liberated Malagasy women hard to resist, but prostitution is rampant in some major centres and HIV/AIDS is on the rise in Madagascar (see opposite). In recent years several arrests have been made on grounds related to sex tourism and the abuse of minors.

The Comoros

Islamic culture has led to the adoption of many aspects of Arab dress and custom in the Comoros. For example, men wear long, white robes known in Swahili as *kanzus*, often accompanied by embroidered skullcaps called *kofias*. Women cover their heads when walking outside the home.

Homes are often extremely colourful, decorated with luridly patterned fabrics and elaborate gold-and-black plastic furniture. A picture of the holy mosque at Mecca nearly always has pride of place. The homes of those Comorians who've made the pilgrimage to Mecca usually feature a large photo of the pilgrim standing outside the mosque. Shoes are always left outside the house, as walking on the floor would render it unclean for prayer. Toilet paper is not used – instead a bucket of water or hosepipe is provided for the same purpose.

The centre of local life is the village or town square, known as the *bangwe*, where men spend many hours sitting in the shade of trees, discussing religious or political matters, drinking strong Arabic coffee and playing dominos or traditional board games.

ECONOMY

Both Madagascar and Comoros rank on the UN's register of the world's 50 poorest countries. Madagascar's economy is mainly subsistence agriculture, with rice, cassava, bananas and beans as some of the main food crops. The principal cash crops are coffee, vanilla, sugarcane, cloves and cocoa, with coffee, vanilla and sugar earning a substantial percentage of foreign exchange. There is a small amount of manufacturing, largely restricted to agricultural products and textiles, with some oil refining; and despite the recent sapphire boom the country is relatively poor in mineral resources. After years of socialist mismanagement the country has gone from being a major producer of rice in the 1960s to importing rice for subsistence today. Most foreign trade is with France, Japan and the USA, and Madagascar relies heavily on aid from international agencies.

Even after independence French companies have dominated the Comorian economy, diverting most of their profits overseas and investing little in the islands' infrastructure. As a consequence food crops have declined and the islands have become increasingly dependent on food imports, especially rice.

Excellent articles on Comorian culture and literature can be found at www.comores-online.com/accueilgb.htm – even if it's all in French.

Foreign aid is generally minuscule but has seen steady improvement in public health, education and sustainable agriculture. France receives most of the Comoros' exports, which include vanilla, ylang-ylang and cloves; imports mainly consist of rice, meat, petroleum and building materials.

POPULATION

Madagascar's population is one of the fastest-growing in the region and is growing at a rate of about 3% annually. The island shares one culture and linguistically is remarkably homogeneous.

Malagasy people are officially divided into 18 tribes, whose boundaries are roughly based on old kingdoms. Tribal divisions are still evident between ancient enemies such as the Merina and the Sakalava. Also important is the distinction between Merina highlanders and so-called *côtiers*. Literally, *côtiers* refers to those from the coast, but really means any non-Merina groups.

The main ethnic groups are Merina, who make up 27% of the population, Betsimisaraka (15%), Betsileo (12%), Tsimihety (7%), Sakalava (6%), Antaisaka (5%) and Antandroy (5%); a number of smaller groups makes up the remainder.

In the Comoros the main ethnic groupings are not usually emphasised, but they include the Antalote, Cafre, Makoa, Oimatsaha and Sakalava (who are the descendants of Malagasy pirates).

HEALTH

Since Madagascar's first HIV/AIDS case was diagnosed in 1987, the disease's incidence has increased both as a percentage of population and in real figures. In January 2007, 39,000 people were estimated to be affected in Madagascar. Fortunately, these figures are still comparatively low compared with much of sub-Saharan Africa. In Madagascar HIV/AIDS is spread mainly through heterosexual sex; women account for more than half of the adult victims.

SPORT

Malagasy are of course soccer mad, although the national team has yet to make the World Cup finals. Madagascar participated in the Olympic Games for the first time in 1964 and has entered a team in nearly every Olympics since then, although it is still to win a medal. Malagasy athletes compete mainly in track and field events, but in 2006 an alpine skiing team was sent to the Winter Olympics for the first time.

RELIGION

Traditional Malagasy culture is rooted in reverence and respect for one's ancestors. Among most tribes, this is manifested in a complex system of *fady* (taboos) and burial rites, the best known of which is the ceremonial exhumation and reburial known as *Famadihana* (see boxed text, p37).

Traditional Malagasy religion has been shaped by diverse influences. The funeral rites of many tribes, for example, have Austronesian roots, while the status of cattle is thought to have African roots and belief in *vintana* may originate with Islamic cosmology.

About half of Madagascar's population adheres to traditional beliefs, while the efforts of proselytising Europeans mean that the other half now worship at Catholic and Protestant churches. A small proportion, mainly on the west coast, is Muslim. In recent years, Christian revival meetings held in venues such as sports stadiums and town halls have become popular, with charismatic preachers and lots of singing and dancing. Even among Christians, there is generally great respect and reverence for traditional rituals.

Comorian people are overwhelmingly Muslim.

Forty-five percent of the population of Madagascar is under 14.

LE GRAND MARIAGE

The major events in any Comorian village or town are the immense and overblown wedding ceremonies known as Grands Mariages. The most elaborate sometimes require three years of planning and can plunge the bridegroom into debt for the rest of his life.

Although revolutionist Ali Soilih and his juvenile delinquents (see p30) tried to do away with the Grand Mariage, most Comorian men still aspire to one. Economic factors, however, have dictated that few these days can afford to foot the bill.

A Grand Mariage is almost always arranged between an older, wealthy man and a young bride, often selected when she is still just a child. Not only must the man pay for the elaborate two- to nine-day *toirab* (public festivities), which involve catering for the entire village, but he must also present his fiancée with a huge dowry of gold jewellery, which she is entitled to keep in the event of a divorce.

All this entitles him to wear a special *m'ruma* (sash), which signifies his status as a *wandru wadzima* (grand notable in French). Only *grands notables* may participate in village councils held in the *bangwe* (village or town square).

If you hope to attend a *toirab*, your chances will be best in July and August. Just wait around looking curious about what's happening; you're sure to be invited, or in fact forced, to join in. Bring some kind of present (a small amount of money is best) and don't take photos unless invited.

ARTS Literature

The earliest Malagasy literature dates from historical records produced in the mid-19th century. Modern poetry and literature first began to flourish in the 1930s and 1940s. The best-known figure was the poet Jean-Joseph Rabearivelo, who committed suicide in 1947 at the age of 36 – reputedly after the colonial administration decided to send a group of basket-weavers to France to represent the colony instead of him. Modern-day literary figures include Jean Ndema, Rakotonaivo, Rainifihina Jessé and Emilson D Andriamalala. Nearly all their works are published in French or Malagasy.

The first Comorian literature was in the form of folk tales and histories laid down in Arabic by princes, sultans and aristocrats. A lot of Comorian literature is in Shimasiwa (the Comorian dialect), but some writers look out for are Aboubacar Said Salim, Said-Ahmed Sast and Abdou Salam Baco.

Oral Traditions

Hira gasy are popular music, dancing and storytelling spectacles held in the central highlands of Madagascar. Brightly clad troupes of 25 performers compete for prizes for the best costumes or the most exciting spectacle. An important part of *hira gasy* is *kabary*, in which an orator delivers a series of proverbs using allegory, double entendre, metaphor and simile. The speaker continues for as long as possible while avoiding direct contact with the subject at hand. Unfortunately, unless you have fluent Malagasy, you're unlikely to agree with the proverb that says: 'While listening to a *kabary* well spoken, one fails to notice the fleas that bite one'.

More visitor-friendly are the songs and acrobatic dances that follow the *kabary*. Dancers are dressed in oddly old-fashioned European-style gowns called *malabary*, and women also wear the traditional *lamba* (scarf). The themes are upbeat, extolling the virtues of honesty and encouraging young people to respect their parents. The competition winner is decided by the audience.

Most Comorian literature also derives from oral traditions, which have been passed down through the generations in the form of *hali* (folk tales). *Hali* are similar to fables and normally end with a moral.

Haiteny: The Traditional Poetry of Madagascar, by Leonard Fox, has translations of beautiful Merina poems charting love, revenge and sexuality.

Over the Lip of the World: Among the Storytellers of Madagascar, by Colleen J McElroy, is a journey through Malagasy oral traditions and myths.

Music

Most traditional Malagasy music revolves around favourite dance rhythms: the *salegy* of the Sakalava tribe, with both Indonesian and Kenyan influences; the African *watsa watsa*; the *tsapika*, which originated in the south; and the *sigaoana*, which is similar to South African music.

Apart from at special events such as the Donia festival in Nosy Be (see boxed text, p163), traditional Malagasy music can be hard to find and is often restricted to rural areas. The music you'll hear blasting out of tinny radios and rocking the local discos is usually a cheesy blend of guitar rock, rough-and-ready rap and hip-hop, and soulful ballads. Love songs with catchy choruses are the nation's favourite, and singers such as national treasure Poopy (yes, that's her real name) keep the syrup coming with a stream of identikit but irritatingly catchy hits.

The most widely played traditional wind instrument is the *kiloloka*, a whistle-like length of bamboo capable of only one note. Melodies are played by a group of musicians, in a manner similar to a bell ensemble. The tubular instrument you'll see on sale at tourist shops and craft markets is a *valiha*, which has 28 strings of varying lengths stretched around a tubular wooden sound box; it resembles a bassoon but is played more like a harp. It has fallen out of favour in Madagascar but is still played in Malaysia and Indonesia, which suggests that it was brought to Madagascar by the earliest settlers of the island.

Other well-known contemporary Malagasy pop groups and singers include Jaobjoby, Tiana, Mahaleo, Dama (who was popular enough to get elected to parliament in 1993) and Jerry Marcos, a master of *salegy*. Malagasy groups that have toured internationally, mainly in France and the UK, include Njava and Tarika. The best place to see live performances is at the bigger venues in Antananarivo – look in the newspapers on Friday for event details (p86).

There is a remarkably wide range of musical styles in the Comoros, which have absorbed cultural and musical influences from East Africa, the Middle East, Madagascar and southern India. Contemporary Comorian artists often mix traditional sounds with reggae or rap backbeats in collaboration with European producers. Traditional instruments include gongs, drums, tambourines, rattles, oboes, zithers and five-stringed lutes.

Check out the latest from the Malagasy music scene at www.madanight.com. The site is mostly in French, but there are lots of articles and band interviews.

Voices from Madagascar: An Anthology of Contemporary Francophone Literature, edited by Jacques Bourgeacq and Liliane Ramarosa, contains Malagasy writing in French and English.

FAMADIHANA

On the crest of a hill a grove of pine trees whispers gently. In the shade, trestle tables are spread with sticky sweetmeats and bowls of steaming rice. A band plays a rollicking, upbeat tune as the stone door of a family tomb is opened. Old ladies wait at the entrance, faces dignified under their straw hats. Middle-aged men are getting stuck into lethal homemade rum, dancing jerkily to the rhythms of the band.

One by one the corpses are brought out of the tomb, wrapped in straw mats and danced above the heads of a joyful throng. The bodies are re-wrapped in pristine white burial *lambas* (scarves), sprayed with perfume and meticulously labelled by name with felt-tip pens. A period of quiet follows, with family members holding the bodies on their laps in silent communication, weeping but happy at the same time. The air is charged with emotion. Then the bodies are danced one more time around the tomb, a few traditional verses are read out and the stone is sealed with mud for another seven years.

Famadihana ceremonies take place every year between June and September in the *hauts plateaux* (highlands) region from Antananarivo south to Ambositra. These days it's generally OK to attend one, as long as your visit is arranged through a hotel or local tour company (p285). On no account should you visit without an invitation and never take photos unless specific permission has been granted.

RESPONSIBLE TOURISM TIP

Resist the urge to hand out money or gifts to those cute children in the villages and towns of Madagascar. Rather than helping them, you will be teaching them to beg from every new traveller they see. If you want to do something to aid those you meet, donate money to the local school or clinic instead.

Architecture

Each region of Madagascar has its own architectural style and building materials. The Merina and Betsileo of the *hauts plateaux* (highlands) live in distinctive red-brick houses that are warm on cold nights. The typical Merina home is a tall, narrow affair with small windows and brick pillars in the front supporting open verandas. The Betsileo areas dispense with the pillars and trim their houses with elaborately carved wood. Coastal homes are generally constructed of lighter local materials, including cactus and raffia palm.

In the independent Comoros (but not Mayotte), Swahili architectural traditions are superbly preserved. The old Arab towns in Moroni (p239) and Mutsamudu (p252) are laid out haphazardly with mazelike narrow streets. Townhouses are tall and narrow, with internal balconies running around a central courtyard and an open cooking area at the back. Traditionally doors are elaborately carved with Islamic lettering or abstract motifs, and sometimes inlaid with brass studs. Mosques, particularly those used in Friday prayers, are splendid, glittering, white affairs with high, elegant minarets and rows of galleries around the outside. They are often built using funds from Islamic organisations in the Middle East.

Textile Arts

Textiles have always played a huge part in Malagasy society, with some types of cloth even being imbued, it is believed, with supernatural powers. The Merina used cocoons collected from the wild silkworm to make highly valued textiles called *lamba mena* (red silk). The silks were woven in many colour and pattern combinations, and in the past had strong links with royal prestige, expressed by the colour red. Worn by the aristocracy in life and death, *lamba mena* were also used in burial and reburial ceremonies.

These days ancestral materials such as *lamba mena* are combined with modern textiles such as lycra, or 'found objects' such as shells or even computer circuit boards. Ask at the Centre Culturel Albert Camus (p74) in Antananarivo for details of textile exhibitions.

Theatre & Dance

In addition to *hira gasy* (p36), the best place to see traditional dance performances is at the Donia, the arts festival held every year in Nosy Be (see boxed text, p163). The Centre Culturel Albert Camus (p74) in Antananarivo is the best place to see theatre and dance performances in the capital. In the provinces, the various branches of the Alliance Française can usually provide information on local events.

In the Comoros, dancing forms an integral part of every Muslim festival. One of the most popular is the *mougodro*, a circular dance with African and Malagasy origins in which men, women and children all participate.

On Mayotte, the most popular dance is the *wadaha* (or *danse de pilon*) in which women and young girls dance in a circle around a mortar filled with rice, to the rhythm of drums, guitars and popular songs, simulating the pulverisation of the rice with pestles. It also serves as a pre-nuptial dance. Contact the Comité du Tourisme (p260) in Mayotte for details of performances.

The interesting film

Quand les Étoiles

Rencontre la Mer (When the Stars Meet the Sea), directed by the Malagasy Raymond Rajaonarivelo, is the story of a young boy born during a solar eclipse.

See [http://africa](http://africa.si.edu/exhibits/malagasy)

.si.edu/exhibits/malagasy for a good overview of traditional Malagasy textile arts, with historical context and information on materials used.

Food & Drink

Food is taken very seriously in Madagascar, where French, Chinese and Indian influences have blended with local eating traditions into an exciting and often mouth-watering cuisine. Regional variations are common, with a great variety of fruits, vegetables and seafood dictating local tastes and recipes. Much the same applies in the Comoros, which also has Swahili and African influences.

The most interesting Malagasy food is served up in private homes, so if you're hoping to sample some of the unique local dishes you're probably best off making friends with hospitable local cooks. But if you don't manage to inveigle your way into a Malagasy home, rest assured that restaurants in towns right across the country normally serve excellent French cuisine to suit all budgets, from simple zebu *steack frites* (steak and chips) to *paté de foie gras* (goose liver paté) and *magret de canard* (duck fillet). Western staples such as pizza and pasta are easy to find, too. In the Comoros, restaurants are few and far between, but those that do exist serve up delicious local dishes.

STAPLES & SPECIALITIES

Rice

Eating rice three times a day is so ingrained in Malagasy culture that people sometimes claim they can't sleep if they haven't eaten rice that day. If you don't like rice then brace yourself, because the average Malagasy considers a bowl of rice a perfectly valid meal in itself. Indeed, in rural areas rice is often accompanied only by a bowl of warm water with a couple of cabbage leaves floating in it (this 'soup' is known as *ro*).

However, most travellers will find that the Malagasy staple is served up with a stew made from *hen'omby* (boiled beef), *hen'andrano* (fish), *hen'akoho* (chicken or duck) or vegetables, with a few spices added to give it flavour. A common side dish is *brêdes* (boiled greens) in water.

The most common alternative to rice is a steaming bowl of *mi sao* (fried noodles with vegetables or meat) or a satisfying *soupe chinoise* (clear noodle soup with fish, chicken or vegetables) – dishes that show the Asian origins of the Malagasy. Poorer rural communities supplement their rice diet with starchy roots such as manioc or corn. In the Comoros, cassava (*mhogo* in Swahili) replaces rice as the staple food. It looks like boiled potatoes and tastes like nothing at all.

Meat

Zebu cattle not only provide status, transport and a handy means of obtaining a wife in Madagascar, they are also well known for their excellent meat. Zebu beef in stews or zebu steak, if cooked well, is hailed by carnivores as succulent and delicious. Some eateries specialise in zebu meat and we found zebu shasliks particularly tasty nearly everywhere we tried them. Lower-quality beef is often cut into small pieces, simmered until done, shredded, then roasted until it is browned. Pork is sometimes available in Chinese restaurants, but it's *fady* (taboo) to eat pork in many parts of Madagascar, and entirely forbidden in the Muslim Comoros. Stringy chicken or goat is standard fare at *hotelys* (small roadside places that serve basic meals).

Fish

Lovers of seafood are in for a treat in coastal Malagasy towns and everywhere in the Comoros, for every *resto* (restaurant) menu features freshly caught fish

The growth of a rice plant is described in Malagasy using the same words as those for a woman becoming pregnant and giving birth.

A 2002 survey conducted by the Food and Agricultural Organization of the UN estimated that Madagascar had 11 million cattle, almost two million sheep and goats and 21 million chickens.

of the day and usually lists a variety of fresh lobster, prawn or squid dishes as well. Seafood prices are so low that all but those on the tightest budgets can gorge themselves at whim on these 'fruits of the sea'. The freshwater crayfish caught and sold around Ranomafana make a delicious and unusual variation away from the sea. Hotel restaurants in the area often feature these on their menus, or you can buy these *ecrêvisses* ready-boiled and salted from roadside vendors or as a snack during the Fianarantsoa–Manakara train trip in the dry season.

If you decide to buy your fish from local fishermen while staying near the coast, make sure you find out when the catch is landed. This varies from place to place and could determine whether your dinner is straight out of the ocean or has been sitting in the sun all day.

Fruit

Mangoes, lychees, bananas of all shapes and sizes, and even strawberries are available in various parts of Madagascar. Likewise fresh juice is on sale everywhere in Madagascar and the Comoros. Bear in mind that the juice in cheaper restaurants will be diluted with untreated water. For a delicious thirst-quencher near the beach, split open a young coconut and drink the vitamin-packed juice inside.

Breakfast

Rice is traditionally eaten for breakfast everywhere in Madagascar, but *petit déjeuner* is the great failing of French cuisine. Those used to something substantial to start the day may not take kindly to the slice of stale bread and coffee invariably served up in the morning. If you're staying in more upmarket accommodation you may be offered the option of eggs. You'll eventually get used to it, but if not console yourself by planning lunch – the main meal of the day.

Comorians prefer to start the day with *supu* – an oily meat broth with shreds of beef floating in it, plus the odd knuckle of cartilage. The general form is to buy this from the market and carry it home in a plastic bag.

Snacks

One of the first things you'll notice on arriving in Madagascar is the dizzying variety of patisserie. Presumably a legacy of the French, sticky cakes, croissants, pastries and meringues are on sale in even the most humble of cafés. In the bigger cities, the concoctions on offer at glitzy *salons de thé* (tearooms) would rival the snootiest Parisian *boulangerie* (bakery). Baguettes can be bought everywhere in Madagascar and the Comoros.

Savoury snacks include the ubiquitous *samosas* (called *sambos* and nearly always filled with minced meat), small doughnuts called *mofo menakely*, and *masikita* (skewers threaded with grilled beef). The odd, log-like thing you'll see sold in glass boxes on the pavements of Antananarivo and elsewhere is *koba*, a concoction made from peanuts, rice and sugar, wrapped tightly in banana leaves, baked and sold in slices. More pleasure for the sweet of tooth lies in Roberts chocolate, so good that even nonchocoloholics may be converted.

President Ravalomanana's Tiko company ferries little pots of yogurt and sachets of flavoured milk to the remotest corners of the island. Homemade yogurt is also available in glass pots in even the humblest *hotely*.

DRINKS

Most Malagasy like to accompany a rice meal with a drink of rice water. This brown, smoky concoction, known as *ranovola*, and often jokingly referred to as 'whisky malgache', is made from boiling water in the pot containing the burnt rice residue. It is definitely an acquired taste.

Excellent coffee is usually served at the end of the meal in French restaurants, but if you drink it white you'll have to learn to love condensed milk. In the Comoros, tea is spiced with lemongrass or ginger, and coffee is served syrupy and black in tiny Arabic-style cups.

The most popular local-brand Malagasy beers are Three Horses Beer (known as THB) and Gold, which is slightly stronger and more flavoursome. The most common import brand is Castle from South Africa.

However, Madagascar's speciality is rum. Most bars and restaurants have an array of glass flasks behind the bar filled with *rum arrangé* – rum in which a variety of fruits and spices have been left to steep. Nearly all of them have an alcohol content that will blow your socks off.

Madagascar's small wine industry is centred on Fianarantsoa (p105). You'll probably want to try a glass out of curiosity, but unfortunately it's pretty ghastly stuff and you're unlikely to repeat the experience. Still, hats off to the Swiss vigneron who have tried to establish the industry and you might consider taking a bottle home as a souvenir. Imported French and South African wine is served in better restaurants in Madagascar, but only in the most upmarket, Westernised restaurants in the Comoros. On Mayotte, all wine, beer and spirits are imported from France.

VEGETARIANS & VEGANS

Fish-eating 'vegetarians' should have no problems in either Madagascar or Comoros. French restaurants rarely cater for vegetarians, but small local *hotelys* in Madagascar can usually whip up some noodles, soup or rice and greens. Protein could be a problem for vegans, as beans are not as widely available in Madagascar as they may be elsewhere.

In the Comoros, vegetable dishes are harder to find, but beans are back on the menu – don't miss the delicious Swahili red-bean-and-coconut stew known as *maharagwe*. If you eat eggs, omelettes are available almost everywhere. Neither Malagasy nor Comorians find vegetarianism very difficult to understand and they are often more than happy to cater for special diets if you are polite and give them enough notice. Restaurants that are especially good for vegetarians are mentioned in our listings.

CELEBRATIONS & CUSTOMS

A Malagasy proverb says 'the food which is prepared has no master'. In other words, celebrating in Madagascar or the Comoros means eating big. Weddings, funerals, circumcisions and reburials are preceded by days of

For recipes and presentation tips check out www.sas.upenn.edu/African_Studies/Cookbook/Madagascar.html.

A tip: don't give out sweets to the children who beg for them – without access to dentists, their teeth will rot. Try giving them chewable fruit-flavoured vitamins instead.

DOS & DON'TS

- Do bring a present (a small amount of money or a bottle of rum) if you're invited to a Malagasy celebration. Women should wear modest clothes.
- Do check before eating pork in rural Madagascar – in some places it's *fady* (taboo).
- Do hold your wrist with the opposite hand when passing food or drinks to a Malagasy – they will be impressed with your manners.
- Do offer to pay for food consumed in villages while trekking or visiting.
- Don't eat or pass food with your left hand in the Comoros – the left hand is considered unclean in Muslim societies.
- Don't drink alcohol in the street, public places or most hotel restaurants in the Comoros.
- Don't eat, drink or smoke in public in daylight hours during the fast of Ramadan in the Comoros.

TRAVEL YOUR TASTEBUDS

Look out for these on your culinary travels in Madagascar:

Achards Hot pickled vegetable curry used as a relish.

Betsa-betsa Fermented sugar-cane juice.

Kitoza Dried beef strips charcoaled and often served with cornmeal mush for breakfast.

Punch coco Sickly but delicious alcoholic drink made from sweetened coconut milk.

Ravitoto Bitter-tasting, dark-green cassava leaves, often added to pork dishes.

Tapia Small red berries that taste similar to dates.

We Dare You...

Only for the brave of heart and mouth:

Locusts When a locust storm attacks, the locals retaliate by catching and frying the crop-eating critters.

Pimente malgache The hottest flavour of food.

Sakay Red-hot pepper mixed with ginger and garlic paste; thankfully served on the side, not in the food.

Toaka gasy Illegal and dangerous home-brewed rum, served in plastic buckets.

boiling up food in cauldrons big enough to fall into. Extended family, friends and often passers-by, too, are invited to share the food, which is usually a stew made of chicken, several salads and, of course, a mountain of rice.

The squeamish are advised not to turn up at a venue the day before a party – you're likely to be greeted by the sight of dozens of trussed zebu cattle having their throats slit before being butchered to feed the expected guests. At Malagasy parties, copious quantities of home-brewed rum are consumed, and helpless drunkenness is entirely expected.

A true Malagasy or Comorian serves up a meal without any fancy preliminaries such as cocktails or hors d'oeuvres. In Madagascar heavier dishes with rich sauces are kept for Sunday, celebrations or holidays. Light dishes such as greens boiled in water or peas are served to aid digestion the day after a particularly heavy meal.

When drinking in Madagascar, it's customary to pour a little on the ground first as an offering to the ancestors.

Comorians politely say '*bismillah*' (thanks to Allah) before starting their meal. The food is heaped together on the plate and eaten with a spoon, although many Comorians prefer to eat with their hands. Meals in more traditional households are eaten sitting on mats on the floor. Cooking is done outside the house in an open courtyard.

WHERE TO EAT & DRINK

The least expensive places in Madagascar and the Comoros are street stalls (which are not found everywhere) and *hotelys*, small informal restaurants serving basic meals. These are sometimes called *gargottes* in French and are found in every city and town. They are your best bet for fast food during the day, but they're rarely open much past 7.30pm. Standards of hygiene vary widely and none would be likely to pass a food safety test in the West. For tips on how to avoid health problems with food, see the Health chapter (p286).

The next step up from *hotelys* are *salons de thé*, tearooms that offer a variety of pastries, cakes, ice cream and other snacks, and sometimes sandwiches and light meals as well. All serve tea and coffee. Most close at about 6pm; a few close at lunchtime, too.

Ma Cuisine Malgache (Karibo Safako), by Angeline Espagne-Ravo, contains the best collection of Malagasy recipes in French.

Lastly, there are restaurants (*restos*), which range from modest to top-end establishments and serve French, Indian or Chinese cuisine with a few Malagasy dishes thrown in. Most offer a *menu du jour* (three-course set menu), or a *plat du jour* (daily special), sometimes just called a *speciale*. Most hotel dining rooms offer a set three-course (or more) dinner known as a *table d'hôte*. Prices for these are usually around Ar15,000 to Ar25,000. For à la carte menus, the average price of a main course is Ar10,000.

EAT YOUR WORDS

Menus in Madagascar and the Comoros are almost exclusively in French, even in the cheapest roadside restaurants. In Madagascar at least, we have found the brusque reputation of Gallic waiters to be greatly exaggerated. But to help you avoid puzzled stares we suggest brushing up on your ordering skills and learning some basic French food jargon, which we've listed below. For further pronunciation guidelines, see p293.

Useful Phrases

What's the speciality here?

Quelle est la spécialité ici? kel ay la spay-sya-lee-tay ees-ee

I'd like a local speciality.

J'aimerais une spécialité régionale. zhay-mer-ray ewn spay-sya-lee-tay ray-zhyo-nal

I'd like to order the ...

Je voudrais commander ... zher voo-dray ko-mon-day

well done

bien cuit bee-en kwee

The bill, please.

La note, s'il vous plaît. la not seel voo play

I'm vegetarian.

Je suis végétarien/végétarienne. (m/f) zher swee vay-zhay-ta-ryun/vay-zhay-ta-ryen

I don't eat ...

Je ne mange pas de ... zher ner monzh pa de ...

meat	<i>viande</i>	vyond
fish	<i>poisson</i>	pwa-son
seafood	<i>fruits de mer</i>	frwee der mair

Food Glossary

BASICS

<i>beurre</i>	bur	butter
<i>oeufs</i>	erf	eggs
<i>pain</i>	pun	bread
<i>poivre</i>	pwav-re	pepper
<i>riz</i>	ree	rice
<i>sel</i>	sel	salt
<i>sucre</i>	sew-krer	sugar

MEAT

<i>bœuf</i>	berf	beef
<i>canard</i>	ka-nar	duck
<i>porc</i>	por	pork
<i>poulet</i>	poo-lay	chicken
<i>saignant</i>	say-nyo	rare (steak)

SEAFOOD

<i>crevettes</i>	kre-vet	prawns
<i>langouste</i>	long-goost	lobster

The African Cookbook, by Bea Sandler, has some good recipes from Madagascar.

VEGETABLES

<i>haricots</i>	a-ri-ko	beans
<i>oignons</i>	on-yon	onions
<i>pomme de terre</i>	pom-der-tair	potato

SPECIALITIES

<i>archards</i>	ar-char	hot, pickled vegetable curry
<i>grillades</i>	gree-yard	grilled meats
<i>mi sao</i>	mee-sow	stir-fried noodles with meat or vegetables
<i>poulet au gingembre</i>	poo-lay o zhan-zhom bre	chicken with ginger
<i>ro</i>	ro	a leaf-based broth
<i>soupe chinoise</i>	soop-sheen-waaz	Chinese noodle soup
<i>steack frites</i>	stek freet	steak and chips
<i>zebu au poivre vert</i>	ze-bu o pwav-re vair	beef steak with green-pepper sauce

Environment

THE LAND

Madagascar is the world's fourth-largest island, after Greenland, Papua New Guinea and Borneo. It has remarkable landscapes, wildlife and vegetation, which an understanding of its ancient origins will help explain. What is now the island of Madagascar was once sandwiched between Africa and India as part of the supercontinent Gondwana, a vast ancient landmass that also included Antarctica, South America and Australasia. Gondwana began to break apart about 180 million years ago, but Madagascar remained joined to Africa at the 'hip' – in the region of modern East Africa – for another 20 million years. About 88 million years ago the eastern half of Madagascar broke off, moving northward to eventually become India, by which time modern Madagascar had drifted to its present position. Since then, Madagascar has remained at its present size and shape, isolated from the rest of the world.

Madagascar measures 1600km on its longest axis, aligned roughly north-east to southwest, and 570km from east to west at its widest point. Almost the entire island is in the tropics, albeit well south of the equator, and only the southern tip protrudes below the Tropic of Capricorn. The 5000km-long coastline features many long, sweeping sandy beaches with coral reefs and atolls offshore in some areas, and is dotted with several small islands, including Nosy Be to the northwest and Île Sainte Marie off the northeast corner.

A chain of mountains runs down the eastern seaboard, forming a steep escarpment and trapping moisture that helps create the island's rainforests, which are rich in biodiversity. There is no modern volcanic activity on the island, although it previously occurred in the central highlands; there are extinct volcanoes at Parc National de Montagne d'Ambre (p184), the Ankaratra massif and Lac Itasy, west of Antananarivo. The island's highest point is 2876m Maromokotro, an extinct volcanic peak in the Tsaratanana massif, followed by the 2658m Pic Imarivolanitra (formerly known as Pic Boby) in Parc National d'Andringitra.

Madagascar is tipping east very slowly, and the entire west coast contains mostly marine fossil deposits. Going east from the western coastline, limestone is replaced by sandstone which rises into majestic formations in places such as Parc National de l'Isalo (p122). Sapphire deposits found recently near the park have prompted a rush of fortune-seekers and the sudden growth of boom towns easily seen from Route Nationale 7 (RN7). Further east are deposits of minerals and semiprecious stones, such as jasper, agate, zircon, rose and smoky quartz, moonstone, tourmaline, morganite beryl and amethyst, although few precious stones and minerals are found in commercially viable quantities.

Northern and western Madagascar host impressive limestone karst formations – jagged, eroded limestone rocks that contain caves, potholes, underground rivers and forested canyons rich in wildlife such as crocodiles, lemurs, birds and bats. Karst is known locally as *tsingy*, and is protected within one of Madagascar's three World Heritage sites, Parc National des Tsingy de Bemaraha (p151), as well as in the Réserve Spéciale de l'Ankàrana (p186).

All four of the Comoros' islands are volcanic in origin. Grand Comore is geologically the youngest of the archipelago, and hosts the world's largest active cone, Mt Karthala – a gigantic, steaming time bomb that could go off at any time. All four islands have a rugged hinterland dominated by their peaks, with coastlines fringed by beaches, old lava flows and coral reefs with some fine diving.

The Institute for the Conservation of Tropical Environments (ICTE) at <http://icte.bio.sunysb.edu>, part of the Stony Brook University site, has photos of rainforest wildlife and natural history details, as well as information on research and tourist opportunities in southeastern Madagascar.

Lords and Lemurs, by Alison Jolly, is a history of the Réserve Privée de Berenty that skilfully weaves together the stories of the spiny desert Tandrozy people, three generations of French plantation owners, lemurs and lemur-watchers.

WILDLIFE

Madagascar's 80-million-year isolation created an explosion of plants and animals found nowhere else on earth. When Gondwana broke apart many of the large animals we know today had yet to evolve, but Madagascar took with it a cargo of primitive forms that were then common to both land masses. Thus, when humans first arrived the island supported hippopotami, aardvarks and giant flightless birds similar to modern African forms such as the ostrich. Modern primates had not yet evolved, but Madagascar's world-famous lemurs were probably descended from common ancestors akin to Africa's bushbabies. With the arrival of humans many of the larger forms were wiped out and over the last thousand years 16 species of lemur, plus tortoises, the hippopotami and giant aardvarks, the world's largest bird (the 3m-high elephant bird *Aepyornis*) and two species of eagle have become extinct at human hands. Continued habitat degradation threatens many more species and the conservation of Madagascar's wildlife is now a worldwide priority.

For more information, see the Wildlife section (p49).

Animals

MAMMALS

Madagascar's best-known mammals are the lemurs, of which there are about 70 living species and subspecies. A further 16 – mostly giant – species are known from subfossil deposits; the tragedy is that these remains point to a unique lemur megafauna that died out perhaps only a few hundred years ago. Among those wiped out were gorilla-sized, indri-like species as well as many forms recognisably akin to living species.

Modern lemurs are divided into five families: the nocturnal woolly lemurs or avahis, the beautifully marked sifakas and indris (of which only one species is extant), all well known for their leaping abilities; a family of small, nocturnal species that includes dwarf and mouse lemurs, the world's smallest primates; the 'true' lemurs, such as the ring-tailed and ruffed lemurs, a family that also includes the bamboo lemurs; the sportive lemurs; and, most remarkable of all, the bizarre, nocturnal aye-aye, which extracts grubs from under bark with a long, bony finger. The best places to view lemurs are the national parks of Ranomafana (p103), d'Andasibe-Mantadia (p192) and de Montagne d'Ambre (p184), Station Forestière d'Ampijoroa (p147) and Réserve Forestière de Kirindy (p156). Although it is somewhat contrived, Réserve Privée de Berenty (p136) offers some outstanding lemur photo opportunities.

Madagascar also has many species of small mammal, such as bats, including flying foxes, and rodents, including giant jumping rats, red-forest rats and tuft-tailed forest mice. Although they are not nearly so well known or spectacular as the lemurs, tenrecs also demonstrate how the island's wildlife has taken some remarkable evolutionary turns. These small, primitive mammals are related to shrews and have radiated to fill a similar niche as tiny hunters of the leaf litter. Among their diverse forms are shrew tenrecs, the hedgehog-like spiny tenrecs and even an otter-like aquatic species.

There are six species of carnivore – all are mongooses and civets – including the ring-tailed mongoose, the fanaloka and the puma-like, lemur-eating *fosa*. Offshore, migratory humpback whales provide a spectacle in July and August at sites such as Ifaty (p124) and Île Ste Marie (p206).

BIRDS

Madagascar's birdlife does not attain the mindboggling richness of Africa, but it makes up for it with five endemic families and the highest proportion of endemic birds of any country on earth: of the 209 breeding species, 51% are endemic. A large percentage of birds are forest-dwelling and therefore under pressure from

land clearing. Fortunately, there is an excellent system of national parks and reserves, and bird-watchers stimulate local economies near these reserves by paying for accommodation and the services of skilled naturalist guides.

Among Madagascar's unique bird families are the *mesites* – skulking, babbler-like birds thought to be related to rails; the spectacular ground-rollers, including a roadrunner-like species unique to the spiny forests; the tiny, iridescent *asities*, similar to sunbirds and filling a similar niche; and the *vangas*, which have taken several strange twists as they evolved to fill various forest niches.

As with birds nearly everywhere, each habitat has a suite of speciality species adapted to particular niches, plus more generalised species that can survive in many habitats, and there are a number of predators and nocturnal species as well. Most species are resident (ie nonmigratory), although a few are seasonal migrants to East Africa. Waterbirds are rather poorly represented in Madagascar because there are comparatively few large bodies of water; some of the best concentrations are on the west coast near Station Forestière d'Ampijoroa (p147). The richest habitat by far for birds (and all other terrestrial life forms) is the rainforest of the eastern seaboard, although many of these species are rare and poorly known. The dry forests of southern and southwest Madagascar are also rich in birds, including some unique and highly endangered species.

REPTILES & AMPHIBIANS

There are 346 reptile species on Madagascar, including most of the world's chameleons, ranging from the largest – Parson's chameleon, which grows to around 60cm – to the smallest, the dwarf chameleons of the genus *Brookesia*. If you take a guided walk in many of the excellent national parks, your guides will almost certainly point out a few of these amazing lizards, as well as other interesting species such as the bizarre leaf-tailed geckos and bright-green day geckos. Amazingly, the verdant forests support not a single snake species harmful to people; among the many beautiful snakes are the Madagascar boa and leaf-nosed snake. In contrast, the Nile crocodile is just as dangerous here as it is in Africa and it kills people every year. Madagascar also supports several species of tortoise, some of which, including the radiated tortoise, are highly endangered.

Madagascar also has over 200 species of frog, including the bright-red tomato frog and iridescent brightly coloured Malagasy poison frogs (*Mantella*).

FISH

Most of the freshwater fish are endemic and include colourful rainbow fish, cichlids that can often grow to a large size and the swamp fish. Freshwater

Birds of the Indian Ocean Islands, by Ian Sinclair and Olivier Langrand, is an excellent field guide to all of Madagascar's birds.

Madagascar has the world's smallest chameleon – smaller than your thumb.

Madagascar's wildlife is so little known that as recently as 1986 a new species of lemur was discovered, the golden bamboo lemur, and new bird species were discovered in 1995 (Cryptic Warbler) and 1997 (Red-shouldered Vanga).

Nick Garbutt's *Mammals of Madagascar* is a comprehensive guide to mammals – lemurs, carnivores, tenrecs and bats – that live on the island. It is illustrated with superb photos and is now available in paperback.

GOING, GOING... BACK AGAIN!

The last century saw several Madagascan bird species pushed perilously close to the brink of extinction. Waterbirds have fared particularly badly: the Alaotra Grebe has not been seen since the late 1980s and all three of the country's endemic duck species are rare. One, the Madagascar Pochard, was last seen in 1994 when a female was rescued by a conservation worker from a fisherman's net on Lac Alaotra. The rescuer kept the bird alive in a bath in the hope that a mate would be found, but it succumbed and the Madagascar Pochard was presumed extinct. But in 2006 the unthinkable happened: nine adult Madagascar Pochards were discovered with young on a remote lake in the Alaotra basin in northern Madagascar. Although the bird is seemingly back from the dead, there is no room for complacency and the exact location of the birds is a well-kept secret until effective conservation measures can be put in place.

fish are one of the most endangered groups of animal on Madagascar, owing to silting of rivers through erosion and runoff.

The region's most amazing fish story concerns the coelacanth, a marine species that was known only from ancient fossils until a living specimen was hauled up by a fisherman in 1938. It has since been shown to be quite common in the deep oceanic trenches near the Comoros.

Plants

Madagascar's plants are no less interesting than its animals and its flora is incredibly diverse. About 6000 species are known to science, including the bizarre octopus trees, several species of baobab and a pretty flower that is used to treat leukaemia.

The island's vegetation can be divided into three parallel north-south zones, each supporting unique communities of plants and animals: the hot, arid west consists of dry spiny desert or deciduous forest; the central plateau (known as the *hauts plateaux*) has now been mostly deforested; and the wettest part of the country, the eastern seaboard, supports extensive tracts of rainforest. Mangrove forests grow in suitable sites along the coast, particularly near large estuaries. All of these habitats have suffered extensive disturbance at human hands.

The spiny desert is truly extraordinary: dense tangles of cactus-like octopus trees festooned with needle-sharp spines are interspersed with baobabs whose bulbous trunks store water, allowing them to survive the dry season. The baobabs' large, bright flowers are filled with copious amounts of nectar, often sipped by fork-marked lemurs. About 60 species of aloe occur in Madagascar and many dot the spiny desert landscape. Excellent stands of spiny desert flora can be easily seen at Réserve Privée de Berenty (p136) and Réserve Spéciale de Beza-Mahafaly (p129), and in the hinterland of Ifaty near Toliara. The excellent Arboretum d'Antsoakay (p127) near Toliara makes a fine introduction to Madagascar's dry country plants.

Incredible as it seems, the vast areas of blond grassland of the *hauts plateaux* are actually the result of clear felling by humans, long before Europeans arrived with their advanced technology. The boundary of the sole remaining patch of natural forest, at Parc National Zombitse-Vohibasia (p124), stands in forlorn contrast to the degraded countryside surrounding it. Growing among the crags and crevices of Parc National de l'Isalo (p122) are nine species of *Pachypodia* including a tall species with large fragrant yellow-white blossoms, and the diminutive elephant-foot species that nestle in cliff crevices on the sandstone massif.

Madagascar's eastern rainforests once covered the entire eastern seaboard and still support the island's highest biodiversity, most of which is found nowhere else on earth. Giant forest trees are festooned with vines, orchids and bird's-nest ferns (home to tree frogs and day geckos); and provide the fruits, flowers and leaves that lemurs thrive on. Most trees flower from September to November with fruits abundant when the rains come from November to March. Throughout the forests are more than 10 species of endemic bamboo, with three species of bamboo lemurs that eat them. Tree-like screw palms (*Pandanus*) are abundant in rainforest swamps; villagers harvest the leaves to weave mats, vests and hats.

There are 1000 species of orchid in Madagascar, more than in all of Africa; most bloom from November to March. More than 60 species of pitcher plants (*Nepenthes*) are found in swampy parts of rainforests, and can be seen at Ranomafana. Insects are attracted to the nectar of these carnivorous

(Continued from page 48)

plants, but are trapped by downward-pointing spines along the inside of the 'pitcher' and are eventually dissolved and absorbed by the plant.

Fine stands of rainforest can still be seen in the national parks of Ranomafana (p103), d'Andasibe-Mantadia (p192), de Montagne d'Ambre (p184) and de Marojejy (p227).

Dry, deciduous forest can best be seen in the national park of d'Ankarafantsika and its d'Ampijoroa forest reserve (p147), and the Réserve Forestière de Kirindy (p156). This forest contains giant baobabs, but no palms or ferns. Travellers should not miss the majestic Avenue du Baobab (p156) on the way to Réserve Forestière de Kirindy, which has stands of thousand-year-old baobabs.

NATIONAL PARKS

The environmental movement in Madagascar began in earnest in 1985 with an international conference of scientists, funding organisations and Malagasy government officials. Biologists had long known that Madagascar was an oasis of amazing creatures and plants, but the clear felling and burning of forests all over the island were threatening these treasures. Concerned international donors and the Malagasy government joined together to plan a major conservation programme.

By 1989 Madagascar had the world's first country-wide Environmental Action Plan, which offered a blueprint for biodiversity action for the next 20 years. The first step was to create a national park system, called the Association Nationale pour la Gestion des Aires Protégées (Angap; National Association for the Management of Protected Areas), and then set Angap to work on creating new parks and training new staff.

Since then much has changed: in 1985 there were two national parks in Madagascar and today there are over 14, with more in the pipeline. During the first five years of the Environmental Action Plan, five sites were chosen as integrated conservation and development projects. The national parks were officially mapped and registered, and teams were trained to work in them. Villages were courted with sustainable alternatives to forest destruction, such as bee-keeping, fish farming and tree farming.

In the late 1990s focus shifted from national parks to a more regional approach. This broader view started biological, botanical and anthropological surveys in vast stretches of wilderness connecting the parks, especially concentrating on the southern forest corridor between Ranomafana and d'Andringitra, and the northern forest corridor connecting Mantadia with Zahamena. This included mapping with Geographic Information Systems (GIS) and setting up ecological monitoring.

At the World's Park Conference in 2003 President Ravalomanana announced a bold plan to expand protected areas by three times. At the time only 10% of Madagascar was covered with natural vegetation and 3% of the country was protected in national parks, classified forests or natural reserves.

In 2007 the new government's plan to nominate more World Heritage sites culminated in the declaration of the Rainforests of the Antsiranana World Heritage site, which encompasses six rainforest national parks on the eastern seaboard. Madagascar's only other World Heritage sites are currently Parc National des Tsingy de Bemaraha (p151) and Royal Hill of Ambohimanga (p90).

The rosy periwinkle – a flower endemic to Madagascar – has been a source of alkaloids that are 99% effective in the treatment of some forms of leukaemia.

Madagascar Living Edens, by Andrew Young, is a series of breathtaking images of Madagascar's special wildlife. The predator/prey interactions give this film the suspense of a thriller.

The Duke University Primate Center website at www.duke.edu/web/primat has great photos and up-to-date natural-history facts about lemurs, including details on the release of black-and-white ruffed lemurs back into the wild in Madagascar.

(Continued on page 65)

NATIONAL PARKS & RESERVES

Park	Features	Activities	Wildlife	Best Time to Visit	Page
Parc National d'Andasibe-Mantadia	spectacular pristine forest, excellent local guides, well-marked trails	walking, night-walking, lemur-watching, bird-watching	habituated lemurs, including indris, diademed sifakas, black-and-white ruffed lemurs; superb bird-watching with ground-rollers, bird waves	Sep-Nov	p192
Parc National d'Andringitra	rugged granite peaks with great trails and scenery	hiking, climbing	high-altitude ring-tailed lemurs, held sacred by local people	dry season	p110
Parc National d'Ankarafantsika (Station Forestière d'Ampijoroa)	western dry deciduous forest surrounding a lily-covered lake, knowledgeable guides	excellent walking, lake cruises	mongoose lemurs, Coquerel's sifakas, brown lemurs, waterbirds, fishing eagles, crocodiles	May-Nov	p147
Parc National de l'Isalo	rugged sandstone mountains, gorges with cool pools, great sunsets	hiking, swimming, photography	Verreaux's sifakas, ring-tailed lemurs	Apr-Oct	p122
Parc National de Mananara-Nord	Unesco biosphere reserve, remote park with primary rainforest plus coral reefs	hiking, experiencing local village culture	aye-ayes, hairy-eared dwarf lemurs, tomato frogs, chameleons	dry season	p216
Parc National de Marojejy	remote mountainous peaks covered with lush rainforest, canyon with magnificent cliffs	overnight camping, hiking	silky sifakas, helmeted vangas, large malachite-green millipedes	Apr-May Sep-Dec	p227
Parc National de Masoala	Madagascar's largest national park, rainforest intact from mountaintop to sea level, fishing villages	hiking, snorkeling, swimming, lemur-watching, bird-watching, whale-watching in the blissfully blue Baie d'Antongil	unique birds, aye-ayes, red-ruffed lemurs	Sep-Nov	p223
Parc National de Montagne d'Ambre	lush rainforest on an extinct volcano, spectacular waterfall, old French botanic garden, great views	hiking, lemur-watching, bird-watching	crowned lemurs, Sanford's lemurs, Amber Mountain rock thrushes	dry season	p184

People & Wildlife

Enlightened conservationists know that sequestering natural areas is only part of the solution to preserving biodiversity, and that for conservation programmes to succeed in poor developing nations the goodwill of people in and around protected areas must be sought. From the very beginning of Madagascar's environmental movement, the needs of the people living in and around the parks were incorporated into park management plans, and 50% of park admission fees from tourists are returned to villagers that live around the parks. This money is used to build wells, buy vegetable seeds,

Park	Features	Activities	Wildlife	Best Time to Visit	Page
Parc National de Ranomafana	pristine rainforest watershed straddling mountain streams	great walking, lemur-watching, bird-watching	three species of bamboo lemurs, including golden bamboo lemurs, nine other lemur species, rainforest birds such as ground-rollers, brown mesites, crested ibises & Henst's goshawks	dry season	p103
Parc National des Tsingy de Bemaraha	World Heritage site protecting limestone <i>tsingy</i> & forested canyons	rock-climbing, hiking, camping	Decken's sifakas, brown lemurs, fishing eagles	Apr-Nov	p151
Parc National Zombitse-Vohibasia	last remnant of forest in the sea of <i>hauts-plateaux</i> (highlands) grasslands, excellent guides	hiking, lemur-watching, bird-watching	red-tailed sportive lemurs, Madagascar cuckoo-rollers, Appert's greenbuls, chameleons, day geckos	Apr-Oct	p124
Réserve de Nosy Mangabe	rainforest-covered island wildlife	hiking, camping, spotlighting for fronted brown lemurs, leaf-tailed	best place to observe aye-ayes, white-	Jul-Sep	p219
Réserve Privée de Berenty	remnant gallery forest & spiny desert in a sea of sisal, great local culture museum	hiking, lemur-watching, photography	ring-tailed lemurs, brown lemurs, Verreaux's sifakas, giant couas	Apr-Oct	p136
Réserve Spéciale de Beza-Mahafaly	spiny desert, gallery forest	lemur-watching, photography	ring-tailed lemurs, Verreaux's sifakas	Apr-Sep	p129
Réserve Spéciale de l'Ankàrana	eroded limestone pinnacles, canyons & bat caves, subterranean streams with crocodiles	hiking, caving, lemur-watching, bird-watching	crowned lemurs, Sanford's lemurs, fishing eagles nesting on cliffs, dry-forest bird life, ring-tailed mongooses	dry season	p186

help with tree nurseries, rebuild schools and build small dams to facilitate paddy, rather than hillside, rice cultivation. By visiting a national park, you are economically helping village residents.

Ecotourism has fostered employment opportunities in villages around major national parks, such as Mantadia, Ranomafana and Zombitse-Vohibasia. Bird-watchers in particular are usually keen to see as many of the endemic species as possible and are willing to pay well above the odds for the privilege. This has created its own set of problems but in general the demand for skilled naturalist guides creates well-paid opportunities for Malagasy people in such areas.

Biodiversity Research & Parks

Most of the research on the unique animals and plants of Madagascar occurs in national parks. In 2003 an international Malagasy research and training centre called Centre ValBio was inaugurated adjacent to Parc National de Ranomafana (p103). It is mostly funded by universities from Europe and the USA, and researchers from all over the world visit to take advantage of its modern facilities. Stop in to have lunch, chat with the scientists, see a slide show of the staff's ongoing research and hear about the latest biodiversity findings.

In *Zoboomafoo: Leapin' Lemurs*, Chris and Martin Kratt have created the first wildlife series specifically for viewing by children. A leaping sifaka takes you on an adventure explaining why you should save the lemurs of Madagascar.

Common tenrec mothers can give birth to 25 infants at one time, the most of any mammal in the world.

ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

Madagascar's incredible evolutionary trajectory ground to a halt some 1500 years ago with the arrival of humans. The arrival of people in previously uninhabited lands all over the world has invariably heralded an 'extinction event', whereby large animals are quickly wiped out, followed by varying degrees of ecological change before an area becomes uninhabitable or an equilibrium is reached. Owing to their unique and often fragile ecologies, islands are particularly hard hit; the human impact on Madagascar was devastating.

People, like all biological organisms, must eat, and first to fall were the large ground-dwelling animals that provided an abundant source of ready protein. Wildlife that has evolved without human contact is said to be 'naive', and often lacks the defences or even reflexes to escape human hunters. Madagascar's populations of giant lemurs, aardvarks, hippos and large flightless birds probably fed humans for several centuries, but the end was inevitable and all that remains today are bleached bones and thousands of crushed *Aepyornis* eggs.

The other major environmental factor is habitat destruction; forest clearing goes on even today and as humans encroach on once seemingly limitless parcels of land the animal inhabitants suffer. Erosion, exacerbated by deforestation, is now one of the country's most serious problems, and has given rise to the description of Madagascar as the 'great red island'. In the most dramatic cases, the ground has slumped, leaving eroded landslides of red soil, which now scar most of the highlands and have turned rivers red. When you fly over the country, you can see the red, silted waters of the rivers pouring the soil of Madagascar into the sea. Soil erosion is a major threat to freshwater fish, many of which are on the brink of extinction.

Malagasy soils are old and fragile, and cannot survive the annual burning that occurs across the island. Fire is also used in political protest, its meaning going far beyond agricultural use. You will see the effect of deforestation everywhere; much of it has occurred within the last thousand years. Within a decade of a forest being slashed and burned, it becomes irretrievable. The savannah wasteland of the *hauts plateaux* is covered with an invasive, sun-loving grass, and almost no endemic plants or animals can exist in this 'novel' environment, which covers more than 80% of the island. People also have a tough time living on this fragile landscape, with no fertile soil and polluted water, so it is in everyone's best interest to help people and wildlife live in harmony.

The conservation efforts of the 1990s slowed the devastation of natural resources, and satellite photos suggest most park boundaries have been preserved from slash-and-burn methods. The government has seen that its future depends on preserving and marketing its natural resources – and this bodes well for Madagascar's future.

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