

Southern Madagascar



Hot, weird and wild, Southern Madagascar is a cinematographer's wet dream. Filled with the world's most exotic flora and surreal landscapes, the countryside looks like no other place on earth. This is the Madagascar of the Discovery Channel, and the country's most visited region. It's a mixed-up land where unreal forests of long-limbed spiny succulents compete with baobabs sporting trunks tattooed with psychedelic red and yellow swirls for the title of trippiest attraction. It's also home to some fabulous national parks for trekking, including popular Parc National de l'Isalo, and beautiful deserted beaches with excellent snorkelling around pristine reefs.

The bustling port of Toliara (Tuléar) is worlds apart from the rural countryside. Bedecked in bougainvillea and jacaranda and filled with narrow corridors ripe with the smells of salty ocean water and fresh baguettes, it also has a hint of ethnic spice in the often-gritty air. The wide boulevards here are home to both Arab and French architecture, with elaborate domed mosques sitting next to crumbling, whitewashed colonial buildings.

For a real adventure, head to the southeast, where you'll find Madagascar at its most wild and real. Travel here is rough, and takes a lot of time and patience – roads are often nothing more than dirt tracks, and tourism facilities are pretty nonexistent. But the area is rich in history, and steeped with legends of shipwrecked sailors, rogue spice traders and colonies of pirates. Two oceans collide outside Fort Dauphin (Taolagnaro), home to Madagascar's best surfing, but sadly the town has been taken over by titanium mines and is of little interest to tourists.

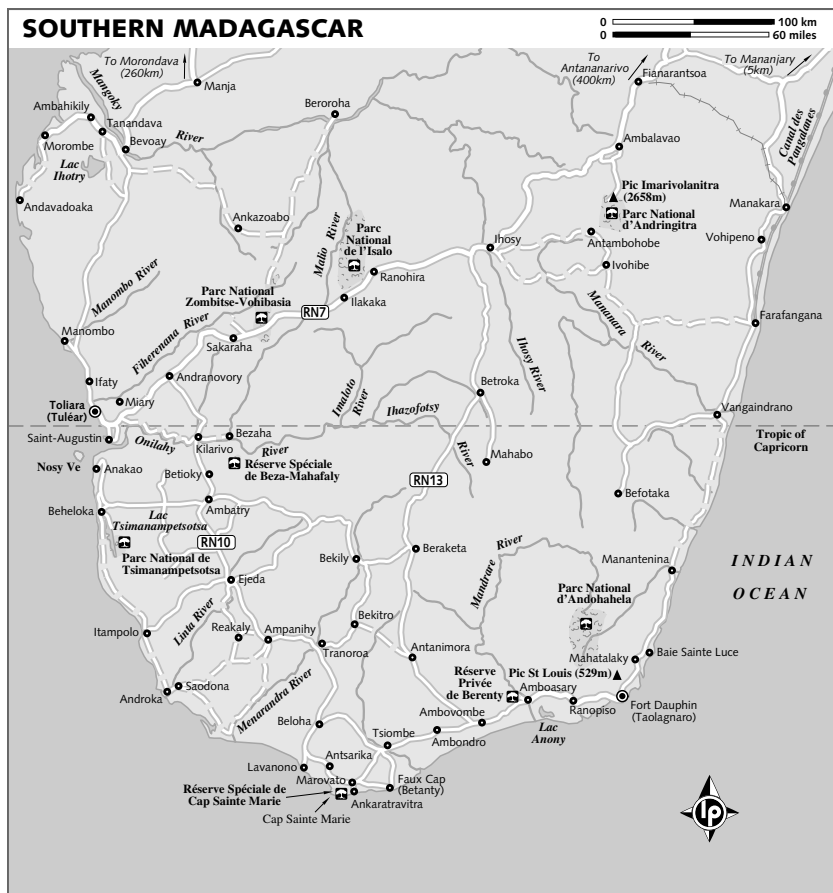
HIGHLIGHTS

- Trekking through the giant boulders of **Parc National de l'Isalo** (p122) and looking for lemurs
- Diving in the pristine, turquoise waters off **Anakao** (p127)
- Spending a few days away from it all on the gorgeous white-sand beaches of **Ifaty** (p124)
- Walking in the bizarre spiny forest in **Parc National d'Andohahela** (p136), home to a forest of spiny cactus-like trees
- Camping in the rainforests or on the beaches around **Lokaro Peninsula** (p134)



■ HIGHEST POINT: 1964m

■ PRINCIPAL TRIBES: Antaisaka, Antandroy, Bara, Mahafaly, Vezo



Getting There & Away

The quickest and easiest options for arriving in southern Madagascar are a flight on Air Madagascar or a road trip down the 'Route du Sud' – the Route Nationale 7 (RN7) from Antananarivo. You can also take the **MadaBus** (☎ 32 42 089 69; www.madabus.com), which has coach lines running between the major cities, is a comfortable way to travel, and is less expensive than flying or hiring a private vehicle. Some sample fares are: Antananarivo–Antsirabe (Ar25,000), Antsirabe–Fianarantsoa (Ar36,000) and Fianarantsoa–Toliara (Ar75,000). Check the MadaBus counter at Office Régional du Tourisme, next to the Central Market (Marché Central) in Toliara.

AIR

Air Madagascar flies daily from Antananarivo to Toliara (one hour) and Fort Dauphin (about two hours). Both cost around Ar550,000, depending on seat availability.

BUS & TAXI-BROUSSE

The RN7 between Antananarivo and Toliara is well served by minibus and the higher-capacity *camions-brousses* (large trucks). The total journey time between the two towns is about 24 hours; but most people do the journey in stages, taking in attractions such as the impressive Parc National de l'Isalo on the way. Off the RN7, the roads are poorly maintained and public transport is scarce. You can try hitching on a passing truck, but you could spend a

week waiting on the side of the road for some kind of ride.

Getting Around

Once you've arrived, transport in southern Madagascar is tricky. But by bus, taxi-brousse, *taxi-be* (big taxi), *pousse-pousse* (rickshaw) or zebu-drawn cart plus patience, you'll be able to follow an itinerary with little trouble. Many of the roads, particularly between Fort Dauphin and Toliara, are in a very bad state and are only negotiable by 4WD vehicles.

BUS & TAXI-BROUSSE

Numerous taxis-brousses (bush taxis) and buses ply the route between Toliara and Antananarivo, stopping at all the major towns. Off this route, possibilities are more limited. *Camions-brousses* do the extremely arduous 30-hour trip between Toliara and Fort Dauphin daily, and go north up the coast from Toliara to Morondava. Around each major town *taxi-be* serve the outlying villages, but long-distance routes off the RN7 are rarely well served by public transport. See the individual town sections for specific details.

CAR

For lovers of 4WD adventures, the south offers plenty of possibilities – the road from Toliara to Fort Dauphin passes through a diverse countryside, which is appreciated better in your own car. Likewise the trip from Toliara to Morondava, taking in some beautiful beaches, is possible in a 4WD during the dry season. You can hire 4WD vehicles in Toliara and Fort Dauphin, or rent one in Antananarivo and drive it south.

Motorcycles are available for hire in Toliara – see p119 for details.

TOLIARA (TULÉAR)

pop 115,000

Slightly grimy and definitely sweltering against the humid backdrop of the Tropic of Capricorn, the 'white city', so-called by central highlanders because of the light-coloured buildings, is becoming southern Madagascar's leading town. The approaching views are outstanding: you can see vast sand dunes which run along the coast. Here, you witness a convergence of the savannah, the bush and the grassy plains, meeting with little monotony. It's a sizzling, dusty place, bustling with brightly painted *pousses-pousses*, refuse-strewn alleys, and dishevelled archi-

tectural remnants from the French colonial facelift – all slipping into heat-drenched languor between midday and 3pm. The city has broad avenues flanked by tamarind and flame trees, sandy crowded alleys concealing narrow corridors and colonial-era buildings ending abruptly in a wall of rubble. Toliara is the end point for those travelling the RN7, and you may very well end up spending a few days here waiting for transport elsewhere (remember: *mora mora* or 'slowly, slowly'). If you have a little extra time, however, and are looking for a good-value and up-and-coming beach destination, try the southern beaches around Ifaty. They see fewer crowds than up north, and are starting to gain attention as an upmarket romantic getaway destination. It's also a good stopping point if you're starting the long trek to Fort Dauphin by road – you can stock up on supplies.

Orientation

Toliara's airport, Ankorangia, lies 7km to the east, along the congested main road from the taxi-brousse station. Blvd Gallieni leads into the town centre about 1km to the west where most banks, hotels, markets and businesses are located. From here Ave de France leads down past the post office to the port.

Information

The BNI-CL, BfV-SG and Bank of Africa all have branches that change cash and travellers' cheques plus ATMs. BNI-CL does cash advances on Visa cards; Bank of Africa can advance money on MasterCard. Socimad, next to the mosque, changes cash and travellers cheques for slightly better rates than the banks, and does advances on Visa cards.

Angap (☎ 7am-4pm Mon-Fri, 7am-noon & 2-4pm Sat & Sun)

Centre Hospital Régional (CHR; ☎ 94 418 55; Rue G Campistron; ☎ 24hr) Has urgent medical care and medicine, and performs surgery.

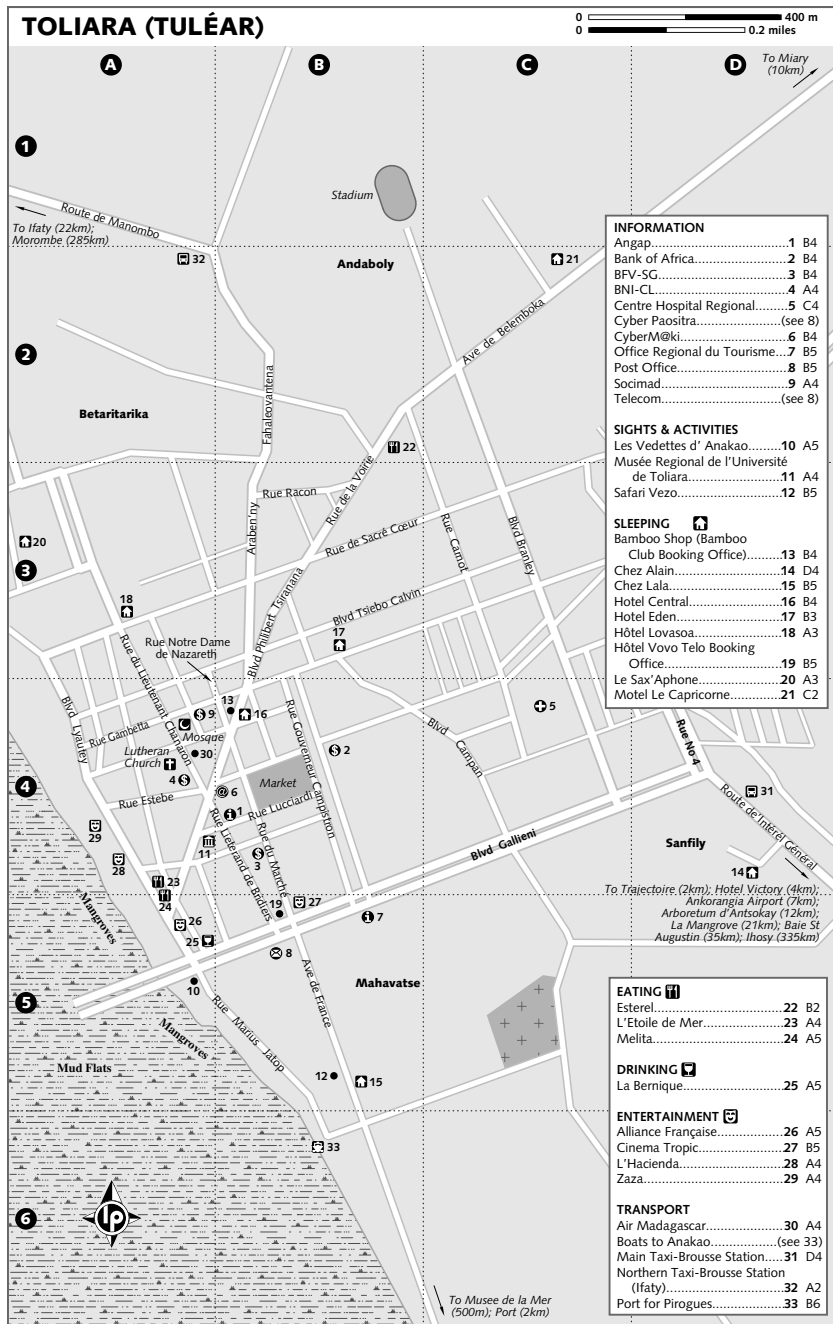
CyberM@ki (per 1hr Ar18,000; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Sat) Surf the web at high speed or burn CDs (Ar2700).

Cyber Paositra (per min Ar50; ☎ 8am-8pm Mon-Fri, limited hrs Sat) Behind the post office in the Agate shop; covers basic email needs with a reliable connection.

Office Régional du Tourisme (☎ 94 446 05; 2nd fl Chamber de Commerce, Blvd Gallieni; www.tulear-tourism.com) Sells maps of the RN7 (Route de Sud) and has other useful information.

Post Office (Blvd Gallieni)

Telecom (Blvd Gallieni) Has card phones.



Sights

A few blocks southwest of the market, the **Musée Regional de l'Université de Toliara** (admission Ar2300; ☎ 8-11.30am & 2.30-5.30pm Mon-Fri) has undergone a recent renovation and features exhibits on local culture, an egg from the pre-historic elephant bird *Aepyornis*, and other oddities including a fairly ancient mask with real human teeth.

Only really worth a visit for sea-lovers, the **Musée de la Mer** (Ocean Museum; admission Ar2000; ☎ 8am-noon & 3-5pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat) has displays of pickled sea life, coral and shells, including a rare coelacanth. It's near the end of the road that leads to the port.

Tours

The following places can organise all kinds of excursions to attractions in the surrounding area.

Chez Alain (☎ 94 415 27; www.chez-alain.net in French; Sans Fil) Down a small lane near the main taxi-brousse station, they have information on tours and activities plus mountain bikes to rent.

Les Vedettes d' Anakao (☎ 94 437 21; vedettes@tulear-tourisme.com; Mahavatsé 2) Formerly Compagnie du Sud, has 4WDs for hire and can help get you started on your own adventure.

Motel Le Capricorne (☎ 94 431 66; capric@dts.mg; Ave de Beleboka) Visits to the remarkable Réserve Privée de Berenty west of Fort Dauphin can be arranged here.

Safari Vezo (☎ 94 413 81; safarivezo@netclub.mg; Ave de France) Does boat transfers (Ar100,000) and excursions to Anakao and Nosy Ve.

Trajectoire (☎ 94 433 00; www.trajectoire.it in French & Italian; Rte de l'Aéroport) Specialises in motorbike and quad hire and off-the-beaten-path cycling, trekking and camping excursions in southern Madagascar.

Sleeping

BUDGET

Hôtel Lovasoa (☎ 94 480 39; r with shared/private bathroom Ar13,000/15,000) Generally acceptable and basic rooms with fans but no nets set around a shady courtyard and garden.

Hotel Central (☎ 94 428 84; r with shared/private bathroom Ar14,000/22,000) Conveniently located in the centre of town near the market and museum, Hotel Central has enormous, breezy rooms with balconies, but no restaurant.

Chez Lala (☎ 94 434 17; Ave de France; r from Ar30,000; ☎) This laid-back and genial guesthouse has parquet-tiled rooms in the main block and smaller but still cosy rooms near the garden. A TV lounge, great espresso and loads of info make this quiet place popular, especially with

budget-conscious travellers. It also rents bicycles and quads, and does transfers to Ifaty and St Augustin (Ar100,000).

Chez Alain (☎ 94 415 27; calain@wanadoo.mg; Sans Fil; r from Ar30,000) A Toliara institution, Chez Alain is very comfortable and boasts uncomplicated and peaceful bungalows in the garden, a convivial bar and an excellent restaurant. They rent mountain bikes, and the dive centre **L'Ancre Bleu** (chez.alain@simicro.mg) is also located here.

MIDRANGE & TOP END

Le Sax'Aphone (☎ 94 440 88; saxaphone@simicro.mg; Besakoa; r Ar20,000-38,000, bungalows Ar45,000) This tranquil French-run B&B has three rooms in the main house and a couple of bungalows in the garden. There's a restaurant, piano bar and friendly atmosphere, plus it has the best mattresses in town – plush, supportive things from Switzerland. English and German is spoken and there is a TV lounge with over 200 CDs to satisfy your musical whims.

Hotel Victory (☎ 94 440 64; www.hotelvictory.net; Rte de l'Aéroport; d Ar49,000-109,000; ☎) This upmarket hotel has a big pool that feels great after a long day on the road. Set back from the chaotic main road, Victory creates a physical and mental reprieve that allows you to enjoy relaxing with a beer, eating in the lovely restaurant or sleeping soundly in clean and comfortable surroundings. Transfers from the airport are free.

Hotel Eden (☎ 94 415 66; eden.hotel@yahoo.fr; r from Ar52,000; ☎) Rooms at this modern, well run and well located hotel have TV, phone, minibar and safe. The hotel offers free airport transfers, has a restaurant and can arrange activities.

Motel Le Capricorne (☎ 94 426 20; capric@dts.mg; Ave de Beleboka; s/d Ar61,000/69,000; mains Ar8000; ☎) Le Capricorne, 1.5km northeast of the town centre, is clean, well-maintained and popular with package tour groups. It's comfortable and spacious, with a whitewashed courtyard restaurant and a casino. The helpful, English-speaking staff organises excursions and transfers to Ifaty and Anakao.

Eating

French food is very popular and found all over town. The cheapest places to eat are the food stalls near the market. A level up, and also inexpensive, are several *salons de thé* (tea rooms) in the centre of town, which do breakfasts and milkshakes, and usually pastries.

Chez Alain (☎ 94 415 27; Sans Fil; mains Ar7000-9000; ☎ lunch & dinner) Chez Alain's restaurant has

long sustained a reputation around the city for serving excellent French cuisine, especially seafood. Attached to the hotel of the same name, it fills quickly at meal times.

Le Sax'Aphone (☎ 94 440 88; Besakoa; mains Ar7000-10,000; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This is a jovial spot in a lovely garden behind an iron gate at the hotel of the same name. It serves a small menu, which changes daily but usually includes some kind of pasta and fish. At night proprietor Alain often plays old jazz hits on the piano.

L'Étoile de Mer (☎ 94 428 07; Blvd Lyautey; mains Ar7000-11,000; ☺ lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) Dishing up good Afghan and Indian food as well as some of the best pizzas in Toliara, this place has been around forever and garnered a good reputation. Try the great fresh seafood.

Esterel (☎ 32 04 697 75; Voirie; mains Ar8000-12,000; ☺ lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) Esterel specialises in French cuisine and offers pasta, pizza and seafood as well as delicious chocolate pudding on the attractive open-air terrace.

Melita (☎ 33 11 598 82; Blvd Lyautey; dishes Ar9000-13,000; ☺ lunch & dinner) This smart restaurant serves European and Malagasy food, and concocts every cocktail imaginable. There's a great breeze from the tables at the clean terrace bar, and the small menu includes pasta and fish along with a variety of meat dishes.

Drinking & Entertainment

Alliance Française (Blvd Lyautey) has schedules of cultural events and French newspapers and magazines. French and occasional subtitled English films are shown at **Cinema Tropic** (admission Ar2000).

Popular drinking hang-outs in town include **La Bernique** (☎ 032 02 606 55; Blvd Gallieni; tapas Ar7000; ☺ Mon-Sat), which has an extensive assortment of malt whiskies, and the bar at **Chez Alain**.

The main nightclubs in town are **Zaza** (Blvd Lyautey) and the huge Mexican-style **L'Hacienda** (Blvd Lyautey), which both get going about midnight. Young Malagasy girls and middle-aged *vazaha* (foreign) men are the main customers at both, but the environment is generally OK.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Air Madagascar (☎ 94 415 85, 94 422 33) has an office northwest of the market. It flies from Antananarivo to Toliara (Ar550,000, one hour) daily, from Toliara to Fort Dauphin (Ar600,000, one hour) about three times a week, and heads occasionally to Morondava (Ar800,000, 1½ hours) via Morombe.

BOAT

For scheduled boat transfers from Toliara to points south such as St Augustin, Anakao and Beheloka, contact **La Compagnie du Sud** (☎ 94 437 21; www.compagniedusud.com in French), which does transfers from Ar80,000 per person. Departures can be cancelled, however, if there's not enough passengers. It has an office in the pirogue port south of the post office.

You can also find pirogues (local cargo boats) at this port that run along the coast to the north and south. Allow plenty of time (three to four days to Morombe), and bring water and food.

HITCHING

It's relatively easy to hitch a lift from Toliara to Antananarivo as many tourist vehicles and supply trucks from Antananarivo return to the capital empty. Expect to pay a bit more than the taxi-brousse fare. The best places to ask are the major hotels.

TAXI-BROUSSE

The main taxi-brousse station, which handles transport to Antananarivo, Fianarantsoa and Fort Dauphin, is in the far eastern part of town along the main road.

Taxis-brousses leave very early every day for Antananarivo, arriving in Fianarantsoa around 5pm, and Antananarivo at about 5am the next day. Destinations and fares include Ranohira (Ar16,000), Ihosy (Ar18,000), Fianarantsoa (Ar24,000) and Antananarivo (Ar35,000). Fares on smaller and slightly faster minibuses are from Ar5000 higher. Vehicles to Antananarivo usually fill up quickly, so get to the station early or book a seat the afternoon before.

A *camion-brousse* leaves daily for Fort Dauphin (Ar35,000), via Betioky, Ampanihy and Ambovombe, taking 30 to 60 hours depending on breakdowns and road conditions.

Transport along the sand road north to Ifaty (Ar3000, one to three hours) and Manombo departs from the northern taxi-brousse station on Route de Manombo. There are a few trucks daily to both destinations, generally departing between 6am and early afternoon.

A taxi-brousse leaves for Morondava a few times weekly (Ar60,000, two days). The road is very rough, and you will need to change vehicles in Beyoay and overnight in Manja on the way.

Taxis-brousses also connect Toliara with St Augustin (Ar4000, two hours) via a good sealed road once a day Tuesday to Saturday. Departures are at noon from Toliara and

2am from St Augustin. There's a taxi-brousse every Thursday to Beheloka and Itampolo (12 hours).

Getting Around

TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

A taxi between Ankorangia Airport and the centre of town costs a standard Ar15,000 and many hotels in Toliara and Ifaty do airport transfers.

BICYCLE

Chez Alain (☎ 94 415 27; c.alain@wanadoo.mg; Sans Fil) Rents out bicycles.

Chez Lala (☎ 94 434 17; Ave de France) Bicycles can be rented or you can arrange motorcycle or quad hire here.

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

Most tour companies listed on p117 hire 4WD cars for excursions around Toliara. Prices start at Ar150,000 per day without fuel. **Trajectoire** (☎ 94 433 00; www.trajectoire.it; Rte de l'Aéroport) hires out motorcycles from Ar140,000 per day without petrol, and quad bikes from Ar153,000 per day.

POUSSE-POUSSE

Standard rates for *pousse-pousse* rides start at about Ar500.

TAXI

For rides within town, taxis charge a standard rate of Ar2000 per person, but can climb as high as Ar15,000 at night. Don't be afraid to barter when you believe the price is unfair.

EAST OF TOLIARA

Ihosy

Ihosy, pronounced *ee-oosh*, is a quiet town of average size functioning mostly as a stopping point for travellers heading south on the RN7. It's also the traditional capital of the polygamous and warlike Bara tribe. The Bara have a distinctly close relationship with cattle, often placing a higher value on zebu than on their wives. It wasn't until French colonial times that the Bara finally ceased resistance to Merina rule. Among Bara, a man's true worth is judged by the number of zebu he owns, with cattle-rustling being a time-honoured rite of passage into manhood. Ihosy is most striking in October when the jacarandas are blooming. You may find yourself overnighing in Ihosy between taxi-brousse and private-hire journeys going to north or south Madagascar.

If you need accommodation, try **Relais Bara** (☎ 75 800 17; r Ar10,000-30,000), near the roundabout, **Hôtel Nirina** (r Ar10,000), which is near the taxi-brousse station, or **Chez Evah** (☎ 32 4323 829; r Ar12,000), 400m down the road to Toliara on the right. Ihosy is a transport junction where the RN13 from Fort Dauphin meets the RN7, which connects Antananarivo and Toliara. Taxis-brousses regularly ply the good 216km road between Ihosy and Fianarantsoa (Ar13,000, four to five hours), and between Ihosy and Toliara (Ar18,000, five to six hours).

Daily taxis-brousses travel along the very rough road to Fort Dauphin (Ar45,000, 36 hours), via Ambovombe.

Ranohira

The small town of Ranohira provides a convenient base for exploring Parc National de l'Isalo and is the nearest significant settlement to Ilakaka, a once sleepy, now bustling town at the centre of the sapphire trade. Acres of waving yellow grass stretch skyward all around the town, randomly broken up by towering rock massifs. At sunset or sunrise, the whole vista unfurls with an unearthly red and pink glow.

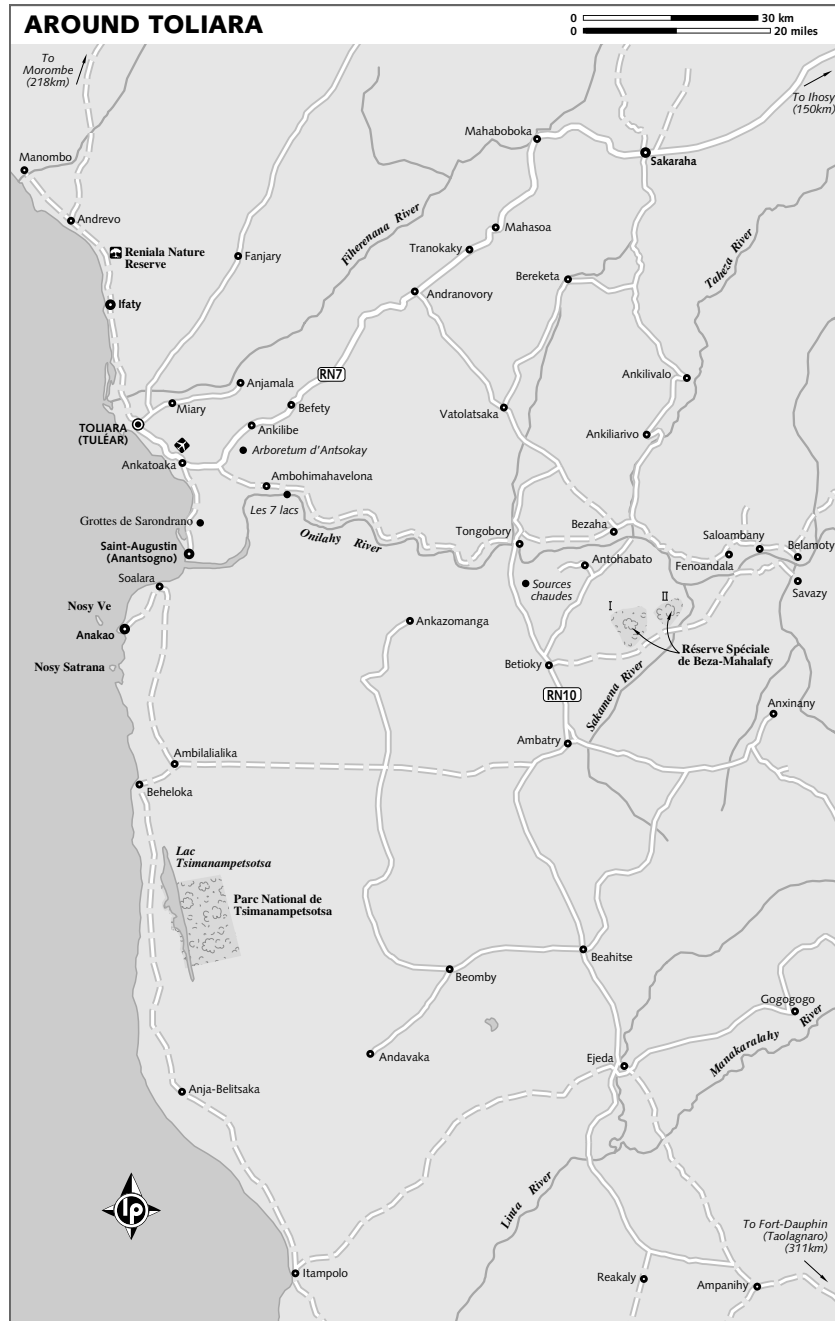
Angap (☺ 7am-4pm Mon-Fri, 7am-noon & 2-4pm Sat & Sun) is next to Hotel Berny, 100m from the centre of town.

ACTIVITIES

The focus of activity in Ranohira is trekking in nearby Parc National de l'Isalo. The best trekking option for budget travellers is undoubtedly **Momo Trek** (☎ 75 801 77). Debonair Momo runs an extremely efficient operation involving porters, equipment (tents, mattresses, sleeping bags and even pillows) and food from his base in the village. You choose your route and your menu, and Momo will organise everything else, including the appointment of one of the Angap guides. The only extras you pay for are your park permit (Ar40,000 for three days), camp-site fee (Ar10,000 per night) and drinks.

Prices vary according to the size of the group – a two-day, three-night trek will cost around Ar65,000 per person for two people, Ar72,000 for four or more. Such is Momo's popularity that you'll usually have no trouble finding other trekkers to share the costs.

Alternatively you can arrange a trek yourself; basic supplies are available in the village and several of the Angap guides can hire out



ZEBU

Together with the lemur, the chameleon and the *ravinala* (travellers' palm), the zebu (Malagasy cow) is one of the most identifiable symbols of Madagascar. Zebu indicate wealth and status, and are sacrificed during ceremonies, yoked in pairs to wooden-wheeled *charettes* (carts) or chased in herds around rice fields to break up the earth for planting. Zebu are herded (and rustled) in vast numbers by the Bara and other southern tribes. According to tradition, a young Bara man must prove himself by stealing zebu in order to be considered a desirable marriage partner. Being imprisoned for zebu-rustling only enhances his appeal in the eyes of his prospective bride and her family.

Zebu have large wobbling humps on their backs and flaps of loose skin dangling lugubriously from their throats. The flap of skin increases surface area and thereby allows better regulation of heat, and the hump stores fat in case of famine. These physical advantages make zebu particularly hardy and well adapted to their often harsh living conditions.

tents and equipment. See p122 for details of guide fees.

SLEEPING & EATING

Chez Momo (☎ 75 801 77; camping/bungalows Ar10,000/25,000) The base for Momo's trekking outfit has Bara-style huts, a friendly bar with a dining room and basic bungalows with outside (cold) showers. It's also a good place to pitch a tent for the night.

Motel Isalo (☎ 22 330 82; r from Ar25,000, mains Ar7000) On the north side of the main road about 2km east of Ranohira, this is a tranquil place with rows of stone bungalows and great views. It has comfortable rooms with attractive mosaic bathrooms plus a restaurant.

Hôtel l'Orchidée de l'Isalo (☎ 75 801 78; r Ar25,000-45,000) L'Orchidée is a very relaxing option in the middle of the village with a nice restaurant. Marble floors, stone walls and nicer bathrooms style out the newer rooms while cheaper ones are older and a bit worse for wear.

Hôtel Berny (☎ 75 801 76; d with shared/private bathroom Ar35,000/50,000, larger r Ar100,000) Hôtel Berny is a wonderful brick-clad establishment with a cosy fireplace that's near the Angap office. The best rooms are inside a little chateau around the garden where pet lemur and tourists can play freely. It has spacious rooms and bathrooms, lots of hot water and a restaurant, and is ideal after an exhausting trek.

Isalo Ranch (☎ in Antananarivo 24 319 02; www.isalo-ranch.com; BP 3, 313 Ranohira; d with shared/private bathroom Ar40,000/64,000, tr Ar80,000; 🍽️) A comfortable midrange place with gorgeous views. It has 19 bright, cheerful and attractively decorated bungalows spread around a garden. It's 5km south of Ranohira on the way to the park. A taxi-brousse from Ilakaka can drop you

off. The owner is the brother of celebrated photographer Pierrot Man, and the place is popular with German tourists.

Le Relais de la Reine (in Antananarivo ☎ 22 336 23; www.3dmdagascar.com/relaisdelareine; d from Ar150,000, mains Ar28,000; 🍽️) About 10km southwest of Ranohira, Le Relais de la Reine sits on the edge of Isalo and is one of the most magnificently located hotels in Madagascar. Its plain-chic rooms and pool are sculpted around natural rock formations, with a skilfully decorated bar, restaurant and sun terrace in the main building. There's also an equestrian centre on site for sunset gallops across the savannah. The hotel organises treks and car excursions in the surrounding area. It doesn't accept credit cards, and booking ahead is mandatory.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

For travel from Ranohira to Ilakaka, the best options are to catch a passing taxi-brousse, hitch or take a *taxi-ville* (Ar15,000). From there, taxi-brousses leave every morning and afternoon for Toliara and Ambalavao (Ar20,000, six hours), and sometimes continue to Fianarantsoa. You may also be lucky enough to find a taxi-brousse travelling between Toliara and Antananarivo with an empty seat. One or two direct taxi-brousses each morning connect Ranohira with Ihosy, 91km to the east (Ar18,000, two hours). You can always ask around in the hotels to see if any empty tourist vehicles are going back to Antananarivo – Chez Momo is a good place to start.

Public transport from Toliara generally arrives in Ranohira between 10am and 1pm, while vehicles from the north usually arrive before 10am.

Parc National de l'Isalo

Parc National de l'Isalo (ish-ah-loo) covers 81,540 hectares of the eroded Jurassic sandstone massif of the same name. It's a marvel of evolutionary processes, with an unearthly, sometimes eerie landscape that's home to endemic plants and ringtail, brown and sifaka lemurs, as well as sacred Bara burial sites. Its flaxen plains are dotted with serrated grins of stratified rock reaching to the terracotta horizon. Its interior boasts valleys, waterfalls and canyons. You won't be alone in admiring l'Isalo's beauty, however – it's one of Madagascar's most popular national parks. If you want to get away from other visitors, you'll need to do a trek further into the park, which could mean several days of hiking. Alternatively, some of the park can be explored easily by car. The entry fee for l'Isalo is Ar25,000 per person.

Numerous local *fady* (taboos) are in effect in l'Isalo and should be respected while trekking. l'Isalo's rocky cliffs and ridges often shelter concealed Sakalava tombs – remember that it's *fady* and disrespectful to point at tombs with your finger outstretched.

A local tradition requires placing a stone on existing burial markers to ask for the fulfilment of wishes and safe passage. It's said that if your wish comes true, you should return to the site to say thank you. The best time to visit l'Isalo is in the dry season between April and October.

Outside the park, south of town and between Isalo Ranch and La Relais de la Reine is **La Maison d'Isalo** (admission free; ☎ 7am–6pm). It features an interactive eco-museum that's kid-friendly, with information about the people living around the park and wildlife biodiversity, plus commentary in English, French, and

Malagasy. Photos, poems and paintings here illustrate the area's cultural significance, and there's a shuttle available from town.

INFORMATION

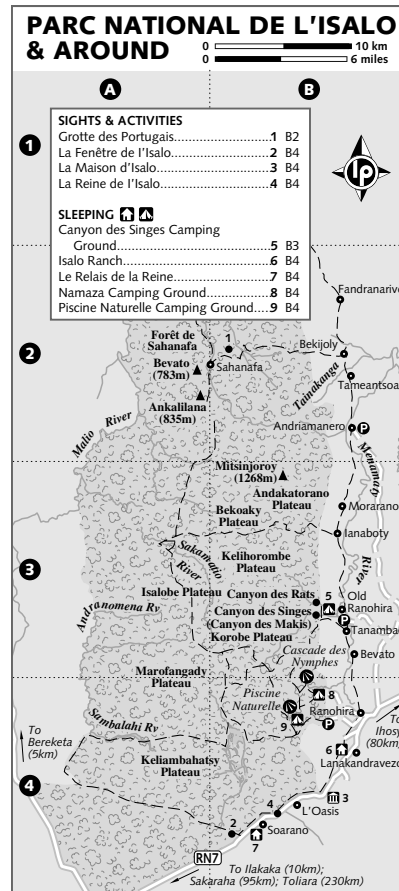
Park permits cost Ar25,000 for one day and Ar40,000 for three, and are available from Angap (p119) in Ranohira; staff speak English. Built into the park tariff, 50% of admission fees go to local independent projects promoting sustainability and conservation.

Official guides are required in the park, and can also be arranged at Angap – their names and competence levels are on display. Many speak English, and some speak German and Italian. Guide fees vary depending on the length and routing of your hike, but range from about Ar25,000 to Ar100,000 per group (up to four people) per day.

WILDLIFE

Although animal life isn't the park's most prominent feature, there are some interesting lemur species to watch out for, including grey mouse, ring-tailed and brown lemurs, and Verreaux's sifaka. The best place for lemur-spotting is the aptly named Canyon des Singes. There are more than 50 bird species, including the endemic Benson's rock thrush, a small grey bird with a vivid scarlet breast.

Most vegetated areas of the park are covered with dry grassland or sparse, low deciduous woodland. Near streams and in the lush pockets of rainforest in the deeper canyons, there are ferns, pandanus and feathery palm trees. At ground level in drier areas, look for the yellow flowering *Pachypodium rosulatum* (especially beautiful in September and October), which



resembles a miniature, almost spherical baobab tree, and is often called 'elephant's foot'.

Unfortunately, fires are an ongoing problem and large swathes of l'Isalo are subject to intentional (illegal) and accidental burning. Poaching and hunting are also rampant, much to the detriment of the local ecology.

HIKING

There are several trails to follow in the park, all starting and finishing at Ranohira. A map of all the current routes is on display at Angap (p119) in Ranohira. On all of the hikes, carry plenty of water and a Steripen or purification tablets for streams and rivers. There's little shade on l'Isalo's wide plains, so bring a hat and sunscreen. You will need to be self-

sufficient with food which you can usually get in town. All distances quoted in this section are from Ranohira.

Piscine Naturelle is a gorgeous natural swimming pool, fed by a waterfall; see the boxed text, opposite. There's a well-kept camping ground (Ar5000 per person).

Other popular day hikes include **Canyon des Rats**, 9km one-way on foot (about two hours), or 16km by car and then 1km on foot. In **Canyon des Singes** (Canyon des Makis) you will have a good chance of seeing sifakas or ring-tailed lemurs leaping through the trees.

You can hike (or scramble) from the peaceful camping ground near the dried-up river **Namaza** through deep gorges full of thick vegetation to a high waterfall called **Cascade des Nymphes**. The gorges in this area are excellent for bird-watching, and there's a good chance of seeing ring-tailed lemurs. If camping at Namaza, try not to use too much firewood.

The **Grotte des Portugais** at the far northern end of the park is a cave about 30m long and 3m high, filled with animal droppings. The surrounding views are wonderful, and this part of the park sees far fewer visitors than the south. In the nearby **Forêt de Sahanafy** are natural water sources and four species of lemur, nocturnal and diurnal.

Trekking to the Grotte des Portugais is more of an expedition than visiting other park attractions, as there is no direct access from Ranohira over the massif. The trip begins with a 33km walk along the front range of l'Isalo to the villages of Tameantsoa and Bekijoly. From Bekijoly, a track heads 19km west to the cave. The return trip from Ranohira takes five days on foot.

Alternatively, if you have your own transport, you can drive to the village of Andriamanero, 20km north of Ranohira, from where it's a two- to three-day trek to Grotte des Portugais and back.

CAR CIRCUITS

If you prefer to explore l'Isalo by vehicle, Angap has a half-day car circuit starting near La Maison d'Isalo and ending up at the canyons, passing several of l'Isalo's most striking geological formations and offering the chance to see the traditional life of the cattle-raising Bara tribe who live on the park's borders. The guide fee for this circuit is Ar25,000 per car.

The rock formation known as the **La Reine de l'Isalo** (Queen of Isalo) lies 10km southwest

TOP THREE ISALO EXPERIENCES

Isalo is so packed with adventures it's sometimes hard to figure out the must-dos; here are three of our favourites.

Canyon des Singes (Canyon des Makis) Lose yourself as the sun is blotted out when you enter the Canyon des Singes, meaning literally 'canyon of monkeys'. It's a fun day-walk from Ranohira, but it's better to stay overnight and leave time for proper exploration and wildlife viewing.

Canyon des Singes to Piscine Naturelle Be prepared for a long walk, but the geography along the way is spectacular, with obscured canyons, colourful mountain ranges and strange flora in addition to the likelihood of seeing sifakas and ringtail lemurs.

Piscine Naturelle At Piscine Naturelle, swimming under the pandanus trees gives you a lush tropical umbrella overhead while a tumbling waterfall pours into a deep green pool. Score! A natural stone cave overlooking the falls is fun to explore and the water is great for swimming. You'll appreciate this natural amenity after the long hot trip over the massif from Canyon des Singes.

of Ranohira. As you are heading south, look for the rock about 10m from the road on the left. The stone is said to resemble a seated queen, and appears to some people to move as they pass by.

La Fenêtre de l'Isalo is a natural rock 'window' that lies southwest of Ranohira about 4km from Soarano. It is covered with green and orange lichen, and affords vistas over the plain. It's best viewed from below in the afternoon sun.

SLEEPING

There are several camp sites in and near the park – including those near Canyon des Singes (Canyon des Makis), Piscine Naturelle and Namaza. They have varying facilities, but the best equipped, at Piscine Naturelle, has showers, toilets, sheltered dining tables and a big cooking area. Camping elsewhere in the park is possible if you are going on a longer trek, but you'll need to obtain permission from the Angap office.

If you don't want to camp, the hotels are for the most part located to the south of the park in the small town of Ranohira, which serves as a great base for visiting l'Isalo. Two of the top-end places listed in Ranohira are actually just outside l'Isalo's boundaries and make great getaways if you're willing to splurge. See p119 for more info on Ranohira.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

The beginning of various hikes in the Parc National de l'Isalo can be reached from Ranohira on foot or in a vehicle.

Ilakaka

Several years ago, Ilakaka boomed from a tiny village to the epicenter of the sapphire trade. Today, tourist buses drive through with windows up while gem dealers swagger under the weight of briefcases handcuffed to their wrists and guns on their hips. Dealers in shiny suits mingle with soiled miners and blasé prostitutes on the dilapidated main street. On the outskirts of town, eagles fly over scoured earth left by the open sapphire mines. South of Ilakaka is a gigantic casino surrounded by dusty plains.

Ilakaka is also a major taxi-brousse hub, and you may end up waiting some time here; if you need to stay there are a few motels in the centre of town.

Parc National Zombitse-Vohibasia

The 36,852-hectare Parc National Zombitse-Vohibasia protects a variety of flora and fauna,

including various species of sunbird, greenbul, *coua* and *vanga*. It is also home to eight species of lemur.

Zombitse, the most accessible section, extends across the main road northeast of the small town of Sakaraha, 75km from Ilakaka. There are two walking circuits in Zombitse, with several more under development here and in the other parts of the park. Permits (Ar15,000 for three days), guides (Ar20,000) and information can be obtained at the Angap offices in Sakaraha or Toliara. There's a camp site (Ar5000) at Zombitse, but no facilities. Make sure to bring all the drinking water you will need. It's 150km northeast of Toliara along the RN7. The area is best reached by private vehicle

NORTH OF TOLIARA

Ifaty

Ifaty is the collective name given to two dusty fishing villages – Ifaty/Mangily and Madio Rano – between which are strung a series of beach bungalow hotels. Ifaty is more visited than Anakao to the south of Toliara, and the beach is narrower and rockier, but the snorkelling is good. Diving, especially for sharks, is better here than further south. In July and August, you may see migrating whales pass nearby through the Mozambique Channel. Inland, a dry desert leads into sparsely scrubbed mountains with much of the terrain parched and several salt flats dousing the air with a sulphury odour. The Reniala Nature Reserve east of the beach is an otherworldly spiny forest with good bird-watching and a must for wandering through ancient baobabs.

There is nowhere in Ifaty to change money, and remember when choosing a hotel that the only sandy beaches are located to the north of Ifaty/Mangily.

ACTIVITIES

The 35m coral reef running offshore along the coastline offers decent diving. While some sections of the reef are dead or damaged, it attracts a wide variety of fish. Most notable are the various species of shark, which are best viewed near a break in the reef known as the Northern Pass. At both the full moon and the new moon, Ifaty experiences sharp tidal variations, so diving trips and other activities must be timed accordingly.

Dive prices are fairly standard, averaging about Ar120,000 for a *baptême* (first-time dive)

and Ar200,000 for a night dive; snorkelling costs around Ar35,000. Most places also offer multi-dive or lodging and diving packages. The main dive centres and water-sports operators are listed here; some are closed in May.

Bamboo Club (☎ 032 04 004 427; www.bamboo-club.com in French) The northern end of Mangily; offers PADI open-water certification courses, has all the water sports and does excursions to the baobab forest.

Lakana Vezo (☎ 032 04 858 60) Runs diver certification courses with a choice of various dive packages, plus windsurfing and deep-sea fishing.

Le Grand Bleu (☎ 032 02 621 38; hotelvovotelo@simicro.mg) Located next door to Hôtel Vovo Telo, but not part of its setup. It's very highly recommended by readers and arranges standard diving packages and introduction dives for beginners. English-speaking.

SLEEPING & EATING

Many hotels in Ifaty have a booking and information office in Toliara. During the July to August high season, it's worth making reservations in advance.

Ifaty's hotels are spread out over several kilometres of beach and most are about 1km to 1.5km in from the road, so if you're arriving by taxi-brousse and want to shop around, plan on a lot of walking or negotiate for the driver to make stops. Here's a sampling of what's on offer.

Chez Alex (☎ 32 04 098 29; r from Ar14,000) Budget travellers should check out these inexpensive beachfront bungalows with shared bathrooms and a restaurant. It organises pirogue snorkelling trips.

La Voile Rouge (☎ 032 04 311 42; lavoilerouge@wanadoo.mg; r with shared/private bathroom Ar35,000/60,000) A friendly budget beach hangout with lots of character and a nice restaurant and bar. Right on the beach, a lagoon sits nearby for swimming at low tide.

DETOUR: RENIALA NATURE RESERVE

Feathered-friend lovers won't want to miss a visit to **Reniala Nature Reserve** (☎ 94 417 56; admission Ar8500; camp sites Ar6000, bungalows Ar11,000; ☎ 8am-6pm summer, 8am-5pm winter), a birder's paradise 500m north of Mangily with hundreds of species calling it home. Experience an otherworldly landscape of barbed plants and rare species that have adapted enough to thrive in the reserve's harsh natural environment. Close to the sea, in a thorny forest of baobab trees and succulents, Reniala is small at just 45 hectares, but it has a floristic and faunistic wealth that includes more than one thousand species. It is also a good habitat to view Madagascar's tortoises and different reptile species. The reserve is just 27km from Toliara; look for it at the end of Mangily village. To really experience the stillness, and wildness, of this dehydrated habitat, spend the night. There are simple bungalows and also camping sites.

Hôtel Vovo Telo (☎ 032 02 621 48; hotelvovotelo@simicro.mg; r Ar42,000, mains Ar15,000) This small but lively and friendly midrange hotel and restaurant, right in Mangily village, has hammocks, excellent French food, horse riding and diving next door. There's a booking office opposite the post office in Toliara.

Lakana Vezo (☎ 94 426 20; lakanavezo@wanadoo.mg; d incl breakfast Ar72,000) Book through the Motel le Capricorne (p117) in Toliara. Lakana Vezo features roomy and well-decorated bungalows with fans, access to a good beach, and a diving and water sports centre on site. Club Nautique, perhaps the best in Ifaty, can organise powerboat excursions to Anakao and Nosy Ve.

Bamboo Club (☎ 32 04 004 27; www.bamboo-club.com; r Ar81,000-150,000, mains Ar20,000) This place caters mostly to divers, but is well set up and comfortable, with bungalows on the beach, a small swimming pool, plus a dive school on site. The booking office is in the Bamboo Shop (bamboo.club@moov.mg) in Toliara. There's an excellent terrace restaurant serving Indian Ocean specialties for an après-dive meal.

Nautilus (☎ 94 418 74; nautilus@wanadoo.mg; r Ar140,000-245,000; ☎) An upmarket hotel with a dive centre and ultramodern rooms shaped like nautilus shells plus a great seafood restaurant all within spitting distance of the beach.

our pick **Hôtel Le Paradisier** (☎ 94 429 14; www.paradisier.com in French; r Ar170,000, set dinner Ar30,000) Entering the luxurious Paradisier, you can't miss the ceiling hole hovering above a tropical mini-jungle lobby that opens into a sea-facing courtyard and dining room. Looking seaward from the stone path, it's hard to determine where the shimmering infinity pool ends and the ocean begins. The rooms here are in two-storey loft-style chalets with a raised third chamber on top. Airy, chic interiors with modern bathrooms, natural hardwood

accents and a 180-degree view of sunny beachfront from the front door or balcony make this our favourite. See turquoise water rising out of a deeper blue, eventually encroaching onto the sandy beach as you dine in the modish glass-front restaurant. Water sports and whale-watching (in season) are also on offer. It's a good place to unwind and enjoy five-star organisation, beach and surf activities, and unexpected comfort in a windswept desert of barbed flora.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Ifaty village lies 22km north of Toliara along a sandy pot-holed road. Several taxis-brousses leave daily from the northern taxi-brousse station in Toliara, usually between 6am and early afternoon; the trip costs Ar19,000 and takes one to two hours. You can get out at Ifaty, Mangily or Madio Rano villages, or along the road in between, although many of the hotels are around 1km from the road – just tell the driver where you'd like to be dropped. Transfers provided by the hotels for their clients cost around Ar27,000 per person, while taxis in Toliara charge around Ar60,000.

Travel to Andavadoaka and points north can also be done by boat (see below).

Andavadoaka

The tiny beachside village of Andavadoaka is fast becoming popular with tourists who come for the pristine beaches, schools of many fish species and relative remoteness. Andavadoaka lies about two-thirds of the way along the coast between Ifaty and Morombe. A reef runs offshore and excellent diving is possible. The area's main attraction is its quiet beaches, plentiful marine life and laid-back pace.

Coco Beach (☎ 22 427 01; bungalows Ar13,000, mains Ar7000) has traditional, brightly painted bungalows and basic but inexpensive meals. Book through Hôtel Baobab (right).

Laguna Blu Resort (www.lagunabluresort.com in Italian; r Ar265,000) is an upmarket Italian package-tour resort with an on-site dive centre; it does excursions into the surrounding area.

Access is possible via boat from both Ifaty and Morombe. From Ifaty, allow about five hours with a speedboat run by a tour operator, or several days via local pirogue (Ar100,000). Boat access is sometimes restricted during the rainy months of January and February.

There is no regular taxi-brousse service from either Morombe or Ifaty. If driving with

your own vehicle, inquire first about road conditions. Coco Beach is run by the same people as Hôtel Baobab (below), and often it's possible to hitch a lift with a supply vehicle running between the two.

Morombe

Morombe (Vast Beach) is a spread-out seaside fishing village about halfway between Toliara and Morondava. As road access is very difficult, it is seldom visited by tourists, and it's less appealing as a destination than the villages to the north and south of it, but it makes a useful stop if you're driving.

The best hotel in town is probably **Hôtel Baobab** (☎ 22 427 01; r Ar28,000; ☺), which is south of town and has concrete sea-view bungalows – plus staff can help arrange excursions in the area.

For inexpensive lodging try the basic **Hôtel Croix du Sud** (r Ar8000) which is comfortable, with hot water. Hôtel Croix du Sud and Hôtel Baobab both have good restaurants.

Air Madagascar flights link Morombe a few times weekly with Morondava (Ar135,000) and Toliara (Ar150,000).

By land, Morombe lies about 285km north of Toliara along a rough and sandy road. There are usually several vehicles weekly direct to Morombe from both Toliara (Ar25,000) and Morondava (Ar35,000); allow about 18 hours from Toliara and 12 hours from Morondava. You can also try to find a pirogue to take you from either Ifaty or Morondava (Ar150,000), a journey of several days for which you'll need all your own food and water.

SOUTH OF TOLIARA

Along the shoreline south of Toliara a string of rather unspoilt Vezo fishing villages, interspersed with some of the most pristine white beaches in Madagascar, offers less touristy resorts than those to the north, even if they're a little harder to get to. Anakao, Nosy Ve and, further south, Beheloka and Itampolo are the area's main attractions. The tide doesn't go out as far in the southern beaches, making swimming possible for most of the day.

If you're just heading to the southern beaches such as Anakao or Beheloka for a few days, your best bet is to take a boat transfer from Toliara (Ar65,000).

To travel by road through the spectacularly arid landscapes between Toliara and Fort Dauphin you will need either a good 4WD

vehicle or the willingness to put comfort (and any sightseeing) aside and spend two to three days squashed into the back of a lorry. There are two routes: most travellers and all public transport follow the inland RN10 via Betioky and Ampanihy. Simple accommodation is available in both places.

During the dry season between May and late October it is possible, and often faster, to take the coastal route via Beheloka, Itampolo and Saodona. You will need your own 4WD for this as there is no regular taxi-brousse traffic, and you'll have to ford at least two rivers (which is impossible in the rainy season).

If you are travelling to Fort Dauphin by *camion-brousse*, a few things are worth noting. Firstly, the vehicles that pass the towns en route are often full, so if you're planning on doing the journey in stages, you could spend a lot of time waiting for a seat. Secondly, there's nowhere along the way to pick up provisions, so stock up on some basics in either Toliara or Fort Dauphin. If you will be riding in the back of the truck, bring along a scarf and pullover for the dust by day and the cool wind by night.

Arboretum d'Antsokay

This interesting private garden, also known as **Auberge de la Table** (☎ 032 02 600 15; admission incl tour Ar8500, r Ar16,000, mains Ar10,000; ☺ 7am-8.30pm), was established by a Swiss botanist and has close to 900 species of plants, with 90% endemic to the region. It's a must if you're interested in the flora of southern Madagascar. An English-speaking guide is included in the price. Simple bungalows are available if you want to stay the night, and the restaurant specialises in goat's cheese.

The arboretum lies about 12km southeast of Toliara, just a few hundred metres from the main road. To get here, catch any bus or taxi-brousse from the centre of Toliara heading towards Befety and ask to be dropped off, or charter a taxi. You can also walk from the junction to St Augustin (2km).

St Augustin

An intrepid group of English puritans arrived in the bay at St Augustin in March 1645, eager to start a new colony like the one in Virginia and spurred onwards by reports of the fertility of the soil and the benevolence of the locals. Sadly for the puritans, the soil proved unfruitful and the locals weren't as benign as

reported – they had begun to equate foreigners with slavery. Disease and starvation took a heavy toll, and only 12 of the 140 settlers ever returned to England. Baie St Augustin was left to become a haunt of pirates.

Today, St Augustin, with its little white church spire contrasting against the cliffs behind it, still has a lost, end-of-the-world feel. There's a lagoon for swimming, and several good hikes are possible from the village; 4km to the north are the **Grottes de Sarondrano**, two caves filled with fresh, translucent blue water. Nearby are several springs and a natural swimming pool – ask in the village for someone to show you the way and instruct you as to local *fady*.

About 5km from the main road and easily accessible by public transport is **Hotel Melody Beach** (☎ 032 02 167 57; moukar@wanadoo.mg; r Ar28,000), which has bungalows overlooking the beach and is a good place to stay if you plan on heading to Baie St Augustin or Anakao.

In St Augustin village proper, try **Longo Mamy** (☎ 032 04 344 64; r Ar12,000) which has simple but comfortable bungalows facing the bay. Meals can be arranged and feature Malagasy dishes. Inquire at Longo Mamy about excursions to the rivers, springs and caves around the village.

About 10km from Toliara on the way to St Augustin is **La Mangrove** (☎ 94 415 27; www.chezalain.net; r from Ar25,000, meals Ar9000), run by Chez Alain (p117). There's no beach, but the jetty is a relaxing spot for sunset drinks. Camping is possible and there are some good walks in the area – you can spot lemurs in a nearby cave. You can also organise boat trips to Nosy Ve and Anakao here (Ar10,000 each way).

St Augustin lies about 35km south of Toliara along a good road; the two towns are connected Monday to Saturday by taxi-brousse (Ar6000). Boat transfers (Ar45,000, two hours) can be arranged from Toliara.

Anakao & Nosy Ve

The petite but pleasantly bustling Vezo fishing villages of Anakao A and Anakao B are blessed with an entrancing semi-circle of white-sand beach, a slice of turquoise water and a fringe of emerald-green vegetation. An assortment of guesthouses on either side of the villages are perfect for recuperating from a tough journey, doing a bit of diving or admiring the hundreds of brightly painted pirogues rocked gently by breaking waves. Very serious divers, however, consider the diving slightly better at Ifaty to the north, especially for seeing sharks.

Most of Anakao's dive sites are around the nearby island of Nosy Ve, a former haunt of pirates. Today, it is visited mainly by those interested in exploring the offshore reef and by fishermen from Anakao. There's a Marine Reserve fee (Ar2000) to visit the island. Offshore about 7km south of Anakao is the island of **Nosy Satrana**, which offers some excellent additional dive sites.

In between the second Anakao village and **La Reserve** is a headland with a big **Vezo cemetery**. *Aepyornis* eggshell fragments can be seen on the dunes around here. Should you find any, remember it's illegal to collect them.

There is nowhere to change money in Anakao, so be sure you have cash – either ariary or euros. At the time of research, the lack of fresh water was a major problem in Anakao and only Le Prince Anakao had running water, which was not always reliable.

TOURS

The tour companies listed on p117 offer trips to Anakao, starting from about Ar50,000 per person. For diving, boat transfers or whale watching, try **Safari Vezo** (☎ 94 413 81; safarivezo@netclub.mg; Ave de France) in Toliara.

SLEEPING & EATING

Anakao villages and the surrounding beaches have several very relaxed and well-run beach hotels, some of which have booking offices in Toliara.

Chez Emile (☎ 032 04 023 76; r Ar16,000, mains Ar10,000) Right behind the village, Chez Emile's economical and basic rooms are breezy and quiet, and quite a long way inland among the dunes. The beach restaurant, with a view of the fishing boats, is the best place to eat traditionally prepared seafood and hang with locals at the friendly bar. Rooms are clean, with bucket showers and outside long-drop toilets; some have electricity.

Longo Vezo (☎ 94 437 64; longovezo@simicro.mg; r from Ar27,000, transfers Ar40,000) The well-appointed bungalows here are discreetly hidden among the sand dunes, with bucket showers, verandas and solar-powered electricity. Guests dine together in the evenings, so there's a relaxed and outgoing atmosphere. There's also a dive centre on site, with CMAS certified instruction. Dives cost Ar120,000, while certification courses cost around Ar800,000. Snorkelling, surfing, whale-watching or 4WD day trips can also be organised. It's peaceful, unpretentious

and definitely one of the best options in Anakao. Book through the office at the pirogue port in Toliara.

Safari Vezo (☎ 94 413 81; safarivezo@netclub.mg; d with shared/private bathroom A34,000/61,000, set menu Ar25,000) Nearer to the village, this long-established place is more gregarious and lively than the hotels to the north. The bungalows are strung out for miles along the beach, with terraces and bucket showers. The restaurant has a maritime theme, draped in fishing nets with gingham tablecloths, and a menu that specialises in seafood. Diving can be organised here, too.

Hotel La Reserve (☎ 032 02 141 55; quad@dts.mg; r Ar37,000, mains 9000) Endeavour the 45-minute walk or quick pirogue ride to reach this gem just around the headland from Anakao and you'll be rewarded. The sand here stretches uninterrupted and uninhabited for miles. La Reserve occupies a prime location, and is comfortable, well run and friendly. Guests dine together with the French proprietors in the evenings. The clean and updated wooden bungalows are perched on stilts, with solar power and stunning views. This is the beach, and the hotel, to go for surfing in the area. The staff can also organise 4WD trips along the coast, whale-watching tours and fishing tours.

Le Prince Anakao (☎ 94 439 57; anakao@simicro.mg; r from Ar72,000) This hotel has more of a resort feel than its two neighbours. Bungalows here are very comfy with modern bathrooms, but do not have hot water or mosquito nets. Cheaper rooms are available in the second row back from the beach. The hotel has an office at the pirogue port in Toliara. It's about a 15-minute walk from here to the village of Anakao.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Anakao lies about 22km south of St Augustin. Safari Vezo and **Compagnie du Sud** (☎ 94 437 21; www.compagniedusud.com in French) offer transfers via motorboat from Toliara for about Ar50,000 per person – one way. If you are booking a hotel in advance, most provide transfers for around the same price, which may include a mixture of road and sea travel. Alternatively, ask around at the pirogue port in Toliara for local transport, or get the taxi-brousse to St Augustin and try to find a pirogue from there (Ar45,000).

Beheloka

This modest fishing village makes a convenient and relaxing stop if you are following the coastal route south from Toliara. For

information and bookings check with **Chez Alain** (p117) in Toliara. **Chez Bernard/La Canne à Sucre** (☎ 94 437 21; compagniedusud@yahoo.fr; camping/d Ar9000/44,000, set dinner Ar7500) provides simple but decent bungalows.

The main Angap office is in Toliara (p119) but there is a smaller branch here – really just a little building a few kilometers before the park's entrance – where you can also purchase tickets and arrange guides.

Taxis-brousses go to Beheloka from Toliara on Thursday (Ar22,000, 12 hours). With your own vehicle, head southeast from Toliara along the RN7 for 70km to Andranovory, then turn south on to the RN10 towards Betioky and Ambatry. About 8km south of Ambatry, turn right onto a track heading west about 75km to Beheloka. Allow up to 12 hours from Toliara. **Compagnie du Sud** (☎ 94 437 21; www.compagniedusud.com in French) offers boat transfers from Toliara to Beheloka for Ar50,000/80,000 one way/return per person provided there are enough passengers. Boats leave at 7am and 3pm daily.

Parc National de Tsimanampetsotsa

The centrepiece of this 43,200-hectare park is the large, shallow **Lac Tsimanampetsotsa** and the sacred **Grotte de Mitoho** on the northeastern rim. The waters of the Mitoho cave are eerily opaque and pale, inhabited only by a species of blind white fish. The park supports more than 70 bird species, including thousands of pink flamingos, and a healthy population of ring-tailed lemurs as well as the park's symbol, the Grandidier's mongoose. There's a Ar10,000 permit fee to visit the park.

There are two camping grounds in the reserve but you will need to be completely self-sufficient with food and water. Angap in Toliara (p119) or Beheloka can provide guides and hire camping equipment. Several hotels in Anakao arrange day trips to the park by 4WD.

The northern part of the lake begins 7km inland from the coast and about 10km south-east of Beheloka. There is a very rough track from Beheloka to the lake and cave. It's also possible to reach the lake by hiring a pirogue or boat down the coast from Anakao to the village of Etoetse, and then hiking inland.

Réserve Spéciale de Beza-Mahafaly

This remote reserve consists of two particular types of forest, spiny and riverine forest, situated 3km apart. During the dry season, the rivers are just a trickle, but when it rains

they can flood and submerge the entire area. Lemur species found at the reserve include ring-tailed, fat-tailed dwarf, mouse and sportive lemurs, all of which are very easily viewed. Other prevalent mammals are the rare large-eared tenrec, the fossa (Madagascar's largest carnivore) plus Verreaux's sifakas. For information regarding the reserve, visit the Angap office in Toliara (p119).

Accommodation is available in Betioky, the nearest major town to the reserve. For camping, you'll need to be self-sufficient with food. To get to Beza-Mahafaly without your own transport, you need to get to Betioky (easy by taxi-brousse from Toliara) and then walk or take a zebu cart the 17km to the reserve.

Itampolo

Itampolo is a lobster fishing village 95km south of Beheloka, an additional stop on the hard 4WD trip towards Fort Dauphin or a boat ride south from Anakao. Another **Chez Alain** enterprise, **Gîte d'Etape Sud-Sud** (☎ 94 415 27; c.alain@wanadoo.mg; camping Ar10,000, r from Ar25,000, set dinner Ar18,000) has accommodation overlooking the bay and a nice restaurant.

Taxis-brousses (Ar30,000, 15 hours) go from Toliara to Itampolo on Thursday and return on Saturday. It's also possible to reach Itampolo from Beheloka on the sand road along the coast (about 100km); allow at least two hours by 4WD.

To continue south from Itampolo along the coastal road, travel about 45km along a rough track to the Linta River, which you will need to drive through (only possible during the dry season). From Saodona, on the river's eastern bank, there is an arduous roadway for about 85km to the northeast, where you join the RN10 at Ampanihy. Allow almost a full day for the stretch from Saodona to Ampanihy, and check the state of the road and river levels before setting out.

Ampanihy

Ampanihy (place of bats) is famed for its mo-hair carpets, has a few amenities and is a good place to break the journey between Toliara and Fort Dauphin. Nearby are imposing stands of spiny forest and several walking trails, as well as numerous Mahafaly burial sites. For walks, it's best to go with a guide; ask at your hotel.

About 20km northwest of Ampanihy, near the village of Reakaly, is a gigantic **baobab**, considered to be one of the largest and oldest

still standing. There are not many taxis in town, but it is fairly easy to hitch a lift out to the tree.

Hôtel Angora (d Ar19,000) is the most comfortable place to stay the night, with decent rooms, camping possibilities in the garden and a restaurant.

Ampanihy lies about 285km from Toliara and 225km from Ambovombe. Most days there is a direct vehicle from Ampanihy to Toliara. There is also frequent transport between Ampanihy and Betioky. Vehicles from Toliara to Fort Dauphin are often full when they pass through Ampanihy, so heading east you may need to wait a day or two for a vacant seat.

The road is particularly bad between Ampanihy and Tranoroa to the east; the 40km trip can take over three hours. If you have your own vehicle, it's often faster to turn northeast at Tranoroa towards Bekitro, from where there is a track heading southeast to Antanimora on the RN13 (which rejoins the RN10 at Ambovombe).

FORT DAUPHIN (TAOLAGNARO)

pop 42,944

Fort Dauphin (its rarely used Malagasy name is Taolagnaro) was just starting to become a popular stop on the tourist trail; then a group of rich foreign companies decided to extract titanium from the soil outside town, and ruined it all. Sure, Fort Dauphin had always been remote and windy and often looked as if it had been hit by a grenade (or more likely a cyclone), with craters in the streets, decaying buildings and too much flying dust. But the

city also was blessed with good surfing and a gorgeous location along a curved sandy bay dotted with half-sunk shipwrecks.

All that changed when a couple of South African and Canadian companies had the grand idea to mine titanium. Not only is the mining destroying the fragile bay, it's also wreaking havoc on the tourist industry. The huge influx of foreign workers needing a place to sleep means nearly all of Fort Dauphin's hotels are fully booked for an entire year straight. Don't arrive without a reservation or you will be sleeping on the street.

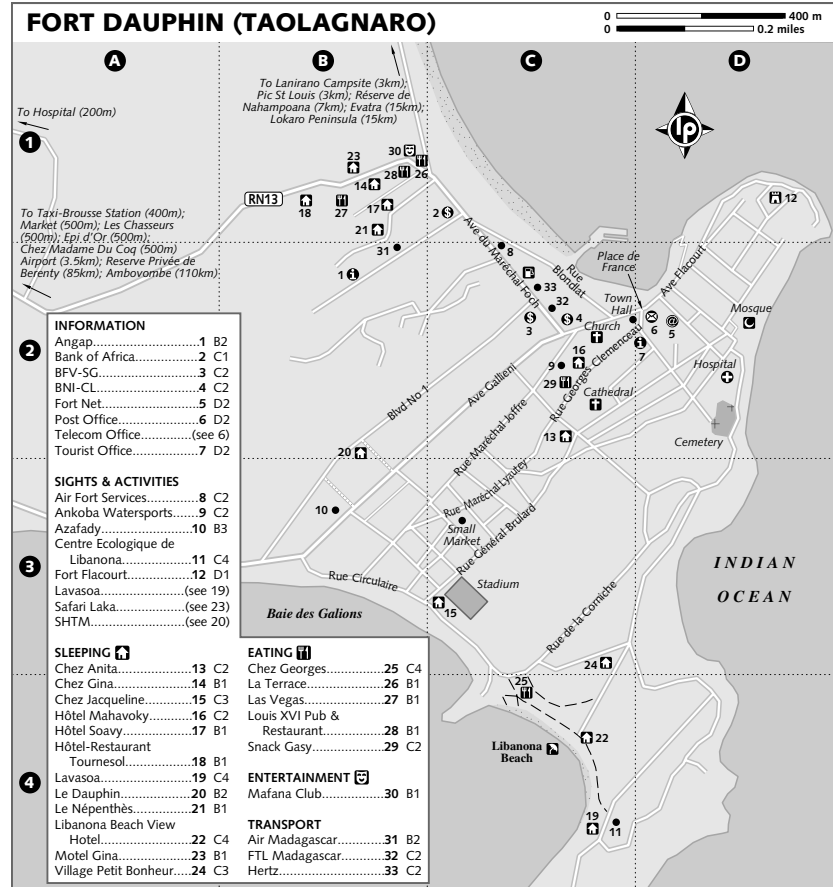
If you can get out of town, however, and are looking for tough travel in beautiful surroundings, then it may be worth stopping off here. A number of excellent ecotourism projects make it relatively easy to get off the mining track and enjoy the lush, semi-tropical landscapes, stands of spiny forest and wild beaches of this corner of Madagascar.

Fort Dauphin was one of the original French territories in Madagascar. In 1643 the Société Française de l'Orient founded a settlement on a peninsula 35km to the south of the present-day town. The colonists constructed Fort Flacourt and named the surrounding settlement Fort Dauphin, after the six-year-old prince who was to become Louis XIV. The colony survived until 1674 when, facing war with the local inhabitants and constant attacks of disease, it was abandoned. Some years later, the French returned in the form of slave traders who used Fort Dauphin as a port. At the end of the 19th century it was incorporated into the united French colony of Madagascar.

TOMB ART

The Mahafaly and Antandroy people of southern Madagascar are renowned for their intricate tomb art, the most colourful and skilfully decorated on the island. Tombs, which are constructed by the community, can take up to a year to complete. The huge monoliths, some of which can be 15 sq m, are painted with scenes from the life of the deceased, and frequently adorned by *aloalo* – wooden posts carved with curved geometric figures. These can be family scenes or events from daily life, such as games, transport, work or sex. Carving *aloalo* has become an art form in itself, and representations of *aloalo* can be found all over Madagascar.

Each stage in a tomb's construction is marked by ceremonies and the sacrifice of zebu, and the finished tombs are also adorned with zebu skulls, corresponding to the number of cattle sacrificed upon that person's death. Very important figures in Mahafaly or Antandroy society may merit as many as 100 bovine victims, but the majority of the tombs are adorned with 10 or fewer. Sadly, many of the tombs in southern Madagascar have been desecrated and robbed in the past, and are now off-limits to visitors, but some are still visible by the side of the road as you drive around the region. Remember not to point at the tomb with your finger – it's a sign of disrespect to the deceased.



Fort Dauphin enjoys one of the sunniest and least humid climates on the east coast, although winds can be strong at any time of year, particularly between September and December. June and July tend to be rainy, with the short dry season beginning around August or September.

Information

Angap office (☎ 92 212 68) Up a hill about 1km west of Ave du Maréchal Foch; has information about Parc National d'Andohahela and other areas of interest. The WWF office is also here.

Bank of Africa (BOA; Ave du Maréchal Foch) Changes cash and travellers cheques, and gives advances on MasterCard.
BFV-SG (Ave du Maréchal Foch) Changes cash and travellers cheques, and gives advances on Visa cards.

BNI-CL (Ave Flacourt) Changes cash and travellers cheques.

Fort Net (per min Ar50; ☎ Mon-Sat 8-7pm) Internet café around the corner from the post office, with a reliable connection.

Post Office (Ave Flacourt)

Telecom (Ave Flacourt) The area code for Fort Dauphin is 92.

Tourist Office (☎ 032 02 846 34; www.fort-dauphin.com; Rue Realy Abel) Tons of information about the region, including a list of tour operators and excursions. Helpful tourism maps illustrate all the main attractions in the area.

Sights & Activities

On Fort Dauphin's northeastern tip is **Fort Flacourt** (admission Ar5000; ☎ 8-11am & 2-5pm Mon-Sat, 2-6pm Sun), built by the French in 1643. Today,

little remains but a few cannons. To see what is left, and to admire the view, you can negotiate a 'fee' with a soldier at the gate who will show you around. Photos of the fort are permitted, but not of the barracks. The **Centre Ecologique de Libanona** (☎ 92 217 54; www.andrewleestrustr.org.uk) was established to help educate locals and visiting scientists about environmental issues. The centre is located in Libanona on the cliff overlooking Libanona beach, and makes for an informative visit if you're interested in environmentalism and speak French.

The cleanest and prettiest beach in Fort Dauphin itself is at **Libanona**, on the southwestern side of the peninsula. The beach along **Baie des Galions** to the north of Libanona is the place for surfing and windsurfing (late August to May only). To hire surfboards or windsurfers call in to **Ankoba Watersports** (☎ 92 215 15; www.ankoba.com), which can also help organise diving and fishing trips. From late June or early July until about mid-September, dolphins and humpback whales are visible offshore from the beaches around Fort Dauphin.

Tours

Several places in town that can organise tours throughout the region, including to Cap Sainte Marie and Réserve Privée de Berenty. For most excursions, it's best to get a group together yourself if you are interested in cutting costs.

Air Fort Services (☎ 92 212 24; www.airfortservices.com; Ave du Maréchal Foch) This company, which also has an office in Toliara, rents a variety of vehicles, arranges a variety of excursions in the southeast, and runs Réserve de Nahampoana (p134).

Azafady (☎ 92 212 65; www.madagascar.co.uk) Azafady isn't a tour operator, but a volunteer organisation working on community tourism projects around Fort Dauphin. It runs several well-equipped camping grounds in village, beach and forest sites in the region and can provide transport, camping equipment and guides to independent travellers who want to experience local life and nature while helping village communities. If you're interested in staying longer in Madagascar, ask the staff about volunteering opportunities.

Lavasoa (☎ 92 211 175; lavasoa.free.fr in French) This quality operator located at the Lavasoa hotel in Libanona offers trips to little-known spots throughout the region. Boat and 4WD rental can also be arranged. It has a camp site on the Lokaro Peninsula and offers boat transfers there for Ar105,000 per person.

Safari Laka (☎ 92 212 66; www.safarilaka.com) A reliable outfit based at Motel Gina with a variety of excursions

to the surrounding area, including a good day trip to the rainforest at Enato and the Lokaro Peninsula.

SHTM (☎ 92 212 38; www.fortdauphinhotel-link.com) An upmarket company based at Le Dauphin, catering mainly to package tours. SHTM is the only option for visiting Réserve Privée de Berenty.

Sleeping

Now that most of Fort Dauphin's remaining hotels (a tourism crisis in 2002 forced many to close and never re-open) are booked solid for months at a time by South African and Canadian mining companies, it's essential to reserve your room in advance if you want to stay.

BUDGET

Hôtel Mahavoky (☎ 032 07 990 79; Ave du Maréchal Foch; r with shared bathroom Ar18,000-20,000) This renovated budget favourite has panoramic views of the bay and the shipwrecks dotting the coast.

Chez Jacqueline (☎ 92 217 68; r Ar19,000) Jacqueline has cute little bungalows and is handy for Libanona beach. The rooms are small and breezy and have hot water.

Motel Gina (☎ 92 212 66; motelgina2005@yahoo.fr; bungalows Ar24,000-77,000) Airy wooden slatted cottages, each sleeping three to four people, have full bathtubs, stone inner walls and thatched roofs, and are set in a verdant garden.

Chez Anita (☎ 92 213 22; anita@fort-dauphin.com; bungalows Ar25,000-38,000) Rather worse for wear, but still comfy, A-frame bungalows arranged around a quiet garden. Chez Anita is on a small lane near the cathedral and has a restaurant.

MIDRANGE & TOP END

Hôtel-Restaurant Tournesol (☎ 92 216 71; r from Ar31,000) Very clean, bright and good-value bungalows sitting behind an attractive restaurant plus wonderful views of Pic St Louis.

Le Népentès (☎ 92 210 61; nepentes@fort-dauphin.com; off Ave du Maréchal Foch; r Ar37,000-56,000) The chalet-style cottages with wooden roofs are clean, have hot water and are situated on spacious grounds. You can arrange transport and guides to Lokaro/Evatra through reception.

Hôtel Soavy (☎ 92 213 59; www.soavy.com; r Ar38,000-75,000) The best rooms here are airy, decked out in bright colours and have TV, hot water and mosquito nets. Smaller rooms are simpler, but just as clean and bright. There are more basic rooms without hot water for Ar24,000.

Village Petit Bonheur (☎ 92 212 60; villagepetitbonheur@fortnet.net; r Ar61,000, mains Ar8500) Knowledgeable management, stunning sea views and

spacious, tiled rooms with balconies make this another superb option near Libanona beach. The owner rents out 4WD vehicles, not including driver and petrol.

Lavasoa (☎ 92 211 75; www.lavasoa.com in French; r/bungalow Ar95,000/122,000) Overlooking Libanona beach, this friendly guesthouse has delightfully planned bungalows in a superb location on the edge of a cliff. All are wooden-floored and gaily painted, with awesome views; some rooms have a mezzanine level. The hotel runs a tour company and also Pirate Camp (p135) on the Lokaro Peninsula. Book in advance as this place is very popular. There's a small canteen on site which serves breakfast.

Libanona Beach View Hotel (☎ 033 12 510 46; libanonabeachview@fortnet.net; ste incl breakfast Ar96,000) This slick upmarket hotel with self-catering facilities is the new kid on the block, but aims to make an attractive impression on visitors to Fort Dauphin. The views of Libanona beach and Pic St Louis in the distance are amazing and the English-speaking staff very helpful in deciding what activity to pursue.

Le Dauphin (☎ 92 212 38, 033 11 300 28; r Ar165,000-260,000) Traditionally the most upmarket hotel in Fort Dauphin, this is the flagship of the de Heaulme hotel empire and the headquarters of SHTM tours, who book tours to Réserve Privée de Berenty. It's clean, bright and comfortable rather than mega-luxurious.

Eating

Les Chasseurs (mains Ar5000-12,000; ☎ lunch & dinner) Near the taxi-brousse station, this friendly neighbourhood institution has seafood, grills, pasta and pizzas.

La Terrasse (mains Ar7000-22,000; ☎ lunch & dinner) With great views of Baie Dauphine (Shipwreck Bay), this classy outdoor restaurant/café has excellent meals with views second to none. It has a fully stocked bar catering to your cocktail whims while you stare at the sunset silhouette on the bay.

Chez Georges (Le Local; ☎ 033 12 515 14; mains Ar8500-11,000; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This popular local eatery enjoys a laid-back surf atmosphere in a hut overlooking Libanona beach. Catch-of-the-day fish and dressed crab are recurrent specialities. Good things really do come to those who wait. As popular as it is, we suggest getting there early, ordering, then going for a swim while it's prepared.

Louis XIV Pub & Restaurant (☎ 033 142 8421; mains Ar11,000; ☎ lunch & dinner) This cheerful establish-

ment serves up standard pub grub plus a few specialities on an al fresco patio and is a fun place to meet other travellers or just chill out and listen to live music in the evenings.

Las Vegas (mains Ar13,000; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) A popular local place with Malagasy dishes, seafood and pizzas early in the evenings, and traditional music and dancing later on.

Several of the hotels in town also have respectable restaurants, including Chez Néné at Motel Gina, Chez Anita and Village Petit Bonheur, which specialises in Malagasy dishes.

There are a few cheap *hotelys* near the taxi-brousse station and around the market. **Chez Madame du Coq** and **Epi d'Or** are two of the better ones, serving pastries, salads and genuine espresso alongside the usual sundries. **Snack Gasy**, near the cathedral, is a vegetarian-friendly, authentic Malagasy canteen that's perfect for a cheap meal and a cold THB.

Entertainment

For a bit of decadent nightlife, try the disco at **Mafana Club** (men Ar10,000, women free; ☎ 5pm-4am Wed-Sun). Get your party on at Fort Dauphin's recently pimped-out nightclub that's fast becoming known as the place to get your swerve on. You'll shake to a mix of Malagasy and Western music, especially on busier Friday and Saturday nights. The interior décor is swanky and the deck looks out over Baie Dauphine. Las Vegas features regular Malagasy music and reggae shows.

Getting There & Away

AIR
Air Madagascar flies daily between Fort Dauphin and Antananarivo (Ar565,000, two hours), and several times weekly between Fort Dauphin and Toliara (Ar486,000, one hour). Smaller twin-engine otter planes also sometimes fly up the east coast from Fort Dauphin to Farafangana, Manakara and Mananjary; all flights to these destinations cost Ar325,000. Bear in mind that flights are often full to any destination in this region, so booking ahead is certainly advised.

Air Madagascar (☎ 92 211 22) is just off Ave du Maréchal Foch, on a hill up from the Bank of Africa.

CAR

Cars are available for hire to do the trip to Toliara at Village Petit Bonheur, near Libanona beach, which has 4WD vehicles for around

Ar150,000 (plus petrol) for the total trip. Drivers are Ar28,000 extra.

TAXI-BROUSSE

Fort Dauphin's taxi-brousse station is in Tanambao, in the northwestern part of town along the road leading to the airport. Roads from Fort Dauphin are rough in all directions, except for the short sealed stretch to Ambovombe (Ar2000, two hours).

Taxis-brousse travel from Fort Dauphin to Toliara (Ar30,000, two days) daily. This is a very rough trip, so it's best to break up the journey and spend some time exploring the various towns and nature reserves along the way. Taxis-brousse stop at Amboasary (Ar10,000 two hours), Ampanihy (Ar20,000, one day) and Betioky (Ar40,000, two days).

To Ihosy (Ar30,000, 36 hours), Fianarantsoa (Ar45,000, about 60 hours, dry season only) and Antananarivo (Ar50,000, three days), the route goes via Ambovombe and then north along the RN13. Heading towards Ihosy and Fianarantsoa, it's not feasible to break the trip until Ihosy, as it is difficult to get onward transport from the smaller villages along the way. The roads are appalling and facilities almost nonexistent, so this isn't a trip for the faint-hearted.

Getting Around

The airport is 4km west of town. Taxis to/from the centre cost around Ar10,000 per person.

You'll need a 4WD to visit most attractions around Fort Dauphin. Rentals cost between Ar125,000 and Ar175,000 (depending on your bartering skills and demand). The rate includes a driver and unlimited kilometres, but you'll usually have to pay for petrol yourself. Make sure to ask whether petrol is included when negotiating, and if it is not, try for a lower daily rate. It is usually possible. Places that rent 4WDs include Air Fort Services and Lavasoa hotel.

Next to the Jovenna petrol station near the town centre you'll find a branch of **Hertz** (☎ 032 05 416 75). The company rents cars for Ar155,000 per day plus fuel and an extra Ar15,000 for a driver.

FTL Madagascar (☎ 92 213 26; www.ftl.mu) is across from the BFV-SG bank and rents bicycles starting at Ar15,000 per day along with motorcycles starting from Ar105,000 per day.

Taxis within town, including to the taxi-brousse station, cost Ar1800 per person.

AROUND FORT DAUPHIN

The tour operators listed on p132 can arrange trips to the following places and other places close to Fort Dauphin. You can organise trips yourself by taxi-brousse to destinations along the sealed Fort Dauphin–Ambovombe road. Elsewhere, the roads are sandy and/or muddy and public transport is infrequent, so hiking, pirogues or a tour may be your only options.

Pic St Louis

The summit of the Pic St Louis (529m), which you can see around 3km north of Fort Dauphin, offers good views of the town and coast including as far as Baie Sainte Luce. From the base, allow 1½ to three hours for the ascent and 1½ hours for the descent. A dawn climb is ideal, before the going gets too hot or windy. You'll need a guide to show you the way – ask in town or contact one of the tour agencies (p132).

Réserve de Nahampoana

This small **forest reserve** (admission incl guide Ar34,000; ☽ sunrise-sunset) offers a short walking circuit to see lemurs, tortoises, crocodiles, birds and a variety of plants endemic to southern Madagascar. It's a good place to visit if you want to see (and stroke) tame lemurs and don't have the time or the money to visit the Réserve Privée de Berenty.

Nahampoana also makes a peaceful place to stay if you don't want to be in among the noise and dust of Fort Dauphin itself. There are **rooms** (r Ar75,000) and a small **restaurant** (mains Ar5000-9000). If you stay the night you can do walks in the forest after dark to see the tiny *Microcebus* (mouse lemur).

The reserve is 7km north of Fort Dauphin. Visits can be organised with **Air Fort Services** (p132) or other travel agencies for about Ar55,000 including the entry fee, or you can charter a taxi or a pirogue.

Evatra & Lokaro Peninsula

Lokaro Peninsula is a spectacular and well-preserved area of inland waterways, green hills, barrier beaches and natural swimming holes. It lies about 15km northeast of Fort Dauphin along the coast, or about 40km by road.

Day excursions offered by travel agencies in Fort Dauphin cost about Ar235,000 per person for a group of three. Most begin with a 3km drive from Fort Dauphin to the shore of Lac Lanirano then continue by boat to Lac Ambavarano. On the northeastern end of this lake

AROUND FORT DAUPHIN



is the tiny fishing village of Evatra, from where it is about 20 minutes on foot over the hills to a good beach. Once at Evatra, you can arrange a pirogue to visit nearby Lokaro Island, or just stay and explore the peninsula itself, which has numerous opportunities for swimming, canoeing, snorkelling and walking. To reach the Lokaro area by road, you'll need a 4WD; allow about two hours from Fort Dauphin.

To reach Lokaro independently, follow the above route, hiring a pirogue from locals, or head northeast on foot from the customs post at the harbour in Fort Dauphin along the eastern beach for about 15km. On foot, it will take a full day; you will need to be self-sufficient with food and water and do not go alone. It's better to do this walk in a group, as there are high incidents of assaults and robberies along this beach.

Once on the peninsula, options include **Pirate Camp** (bungalows Ar51,000), run by Lavasoa in Fort Dauphin, which also has a camp site and hires equipment; or the Azafady camp site, where the profits go to benefit the local community. Azafady can facilitate the pirogue journey, provisions and gear if you want to stay here, or you can arrange things yourself

and just use the site. Contact Azafady (p132) or the Lavasoa hotel (p133) in Fort Dauphin to organise excursions to the peninsula.

Baie Sainte Luce

Baie Sainte Luce was the original site of the first French colony in Madagascar, established in 1642. It was abandoned by the settlers when they built Fort Dauphin a year later. It's a relaxing spot with a slice of unspoilt humid coastal rainforest running almost all the way down to a curved sandy beach. It's often possible to see lemurs in the forest.

The Azafady camp site here is right on the edge of the forest, and guides from the village of Sainte Luce are available to show you the lemurs, flying foxes and crocodiles that inhabit the area. Consult the list pinned up at the camp site for details of possible excursions and prices. It's best to contact Azafady in Fort Dauphin (p132) to let the villagers know you're coming and check the camp site is available.

If you have a vehicle, drive 35km north of Fort Dauphin to the village of Mahatalaky (three hours by taxi-brousse) then continue 4km further and turn right; from there, it's

10km down to the camp site. There are no taxis-brousses on the last stretch. Alternatively, ask Azafady about transport.

Parc National d'Andohahela

This 76,020-hectare park protects some of the last remnants of rainforest in southern Madagascar, as well as spiny forest and 13 species of lemurs. It also boasts over 120 species of birds, as well as a variety of amphibians and reptiles, including crocodiles. Its boundaries encompass the Trafonomby, Andohahela and Vohidagoro mountains, the last of which is the source of numerous rivers and an important catchment area for the surrounding region.

The park is divided into four 'parcels' or areas: Tsimelaha, in a transitional zone where you will see a variety of vegetation including *Pachypodium* and baobab; Malio, made up of low-altitude rainforest; and Mangatsiaka and Ihazofotsy, both characterised by spiny forest. Each section has trail walking; walks range from two to six hours and take in pools and waterfalls.

The whole park is still fairly undeveloped and wild, and requires a 4WD to get around, but for self-sufficient campers it offers the chance to immerse yourself in the landscape of the area without the rather contrived atmosphere and high prices of the Reserve Privée de Berenty.

Drop into Angap (p131) in Fort Dauphin before your visit to the park, as facilities are still being developed and some notice may be needed to organise porters and guides.

The park's well-organised **interpretation centre** lies along the RN13 at Ankazofotsy, about 40km west of Fort Dauphin. You can buy entry permits (Ar25,000 per day) and hire guides (from Ar7000) here – but again these may need to be arranged in advance (and are mandatory to take). Guides speak English as well as French.

Even if you don't have time to spend in the park it's worth visiting the interpretation centre. Built with the help of the WWF and American Peace Corps volunteers, the centre teaches locals and tourists the importance of preserving native forests and waterways for future generations. Exhibits are clearly labelled in Malagasy, English and French.

Camp sites in each parcel cost Ar8000 (except for the less developed camp site at Malio, which costs Ar5000). Cooking and washing facilities are available, but you will need to be self-sufficient with equipment and food.

All taxis-brousses heading west from Fort Dauphin (Ar10,000) towards Amboasary pass the interpretation centre. From here, you will need to walk into the park unless you have your own vehicle.

Tsimelaha is about 13km northwest of the interpretation centre, and is possible to visit on a long day trip. For Malio, which is about 15km northeast of the interpretation centre (4WD vehicles only), an overnight stay is best. Ihazofotsy begins about 30km northwest of the interpretation centre and can only be reached on foot or by zebu cart. To visit this part of the park you will need to stay at least one night.

Réserve Privée de Berenty

This place is the Madagascan version of the grand old East African safari-lodge experience – minus the swimming pool and swanky bungalows. You do get to watch tame lemurs frolic in the garden or walk in peace through quiet forest trails without the constant companionship of a guide.

Berenty was established in 1936 by sisal planter Henri de Heaulme in order to preserve gallery forest. The reserve, together with its small companion reserve of Bealoka, 7km to the north, contains nearly one-third of the remaining tamarind (or kily) gallery forest in Madagascar, nestled between the arms of a former oxbow lake on the Mandrare River.

The reserve is now managed by de Heaulme's son Jean de Heaulme. In the decades since its founding, the Berenty's relative ease of access has attracted numerous researchers, and in 1985 the WWF awarded Jean de Heaulme the Getty prize for nature conservation.

Berenty was first opened to tourists in the early 1980s and has since become one of Madagascar's most visited reserves. It's a very colonial, slightly surreal place at first sight, with the endless, spiky rows of the de Heaulme sisal plantation stretching away on all sides, and white picket fences neatly dividing the bright-red roads that surround the bungalows. It's very popular with pre-booked package tours.

Berenty isn't all sugary sweet; it's got a bit of controversy surrounding it. Some of the reserve's early practices – feeding bananas to lemurs, sweeping leaf debris off forest tracks – led to environmental problems, and some visitors complain that the whole experience is contrived, ecologically unsound and overpriced. Adventurous and mobile visitors with

enough time to visit Madagascar's other wilder parks (nearby Andohahela, for example) will likely find Berenty a disappointment.

Other travellers love it. For visitors with little time or limited mobility, Berenty offers a chance to experience the magic of the forest, observe lemurs up-close (Berenty's photo opportunities are second to none), and get an insight into the Antandroy culture of the region with a visit to the excellent **anthropological museum** on site.

Some of Berenty's early practices have been stopped, and teams have begun to remove non-endemic plant invaders such as sisal, raketa and the rubber vine from the forest.

INFORMATION

Berenty can only be visited on a tour organised by **SHTM** (☎ 92 212 38; fax 92 211 32; Fort Dauphin; half-board €64). If you are coming from Toliara, you can make arrangements through **Motel Le Capricorn** (☎ 94 426 20; capric@dts.mg; Toliara).

Berenty also charge a compulsory transfer fee of €200 for one or two people, or €85 per person for a group of three or more.

The trails are easy to follow and guides are not required. In fact, one of Berenty's main attractions is the chance to wander in the forest alone. However, a good guide can help you with spotting wildlife, particularly on night walks in the spiny desert.

WILDLIFE

The Berenty forest contains over 115 plant species, providing habitat for a variety of wildlife. The 200-hectare forest, which is dominated by the tamarind, is enclosed by spiny desert, sisal plantations and the Mandrare River.

Most visitors come to see the lemurs, of which the ring-tailed are the most prominent. Many animals still have memories of unrestrained banana-feeding by tourists, and in the compound it's not unusual to see visitors being besieged by hopeful animals.

One of the best times to visit Berenty is late September/October, just after the young are born. In late September, the baby ring-tailed lemurs are clinging to their mother's undercarriage, but after a couple of weeks they climb onto her back and cling as she goes about her daily business. Males are normally relegated to the sidelines and, except during breeding season in April or May, are largely exempted from the ring-tailed lemurs' social life.

Berenty's other stars are the Verreaux's sifakas, graceful white lemurs that line up carefully along the patches of open ground around the bungalows before crossing with wild and comical two-footed leaps. Also present in the forest are troupes of red-fronted brown lemurs, which scamper along the ground uttering soft grunting calls rather like furry pigs. This species was transplanted to Berenty from western Madagascar. At night, walking in the moonlit, silvery spiny forest, you might see two species of nocturnal lemur: the sportive lemur (*Lepilemur*) and the grey mouse lemur, whose eyes flash red in the beams of the torch.

Berenty is also good for bird-watching, with 83 bird species, nine of which are birds of prey. The most abundant is the Madagascan buzzard (*Buteo brachypterus*). Others to watch for are the Madagascan coucal, the Madagascan paradise flycatcher, six species of *vanga* and four species of *coua*.

There are 26 species of reptile, including two species of chameleon, the radiated tortoise and the rare Madagascan spider tortoise.

The best times for walks along the forest paths are between about 5am and 6am, in the late afternoon, and just after dark. Although the sifakas and ring-tailed lemurs are habituated to visitors, you'll find the nocturnal lemurs and smaller creatures are still skittish.

SLEEPING & EATING

You definitely need to remember you are paying for the experience of walking freely through a magical forest reserve, because at €64 per room (including a meal), plus all the transfer fees, this place can start to feel overpriced pretty damn fast.

There are 12 new bungalows with relatively consistent hot water that are clean and comfortable. The six older bungalows are dingy, with cold water. Electricity is turned out every night at 10pm, and without a fan to circulate air the bungalows can get very hot, especially the old ones.

Set meals cost about Ar15,000. The food is average and there is nothing whatsoever for vegetarians. In high season the reserve can get very busy, so it's best to book in advance.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Berenty is situated about 80km west of Fort Dauphin and approximately 10km northwest of Amboasary. There's no way of getting there apart from on the expensive compulsory

transfers organised by SHTM in Fort Dauphin. If you arrive in your own vehicle, you are most likely to be refused entry.

AMBOVOMBE

pop 57,500

Driving into the dusty and not particularly interesting town of Ambovombe will gladden the hearts of those who've arrived overland from Toliara – the town is connected to Fort Dauphin by 110km of relatively good sealed road. On Monday the town holds a zebu market, the biggest in the south, from dawn until midmorning.

Few travellers stay in Ambovombe because the area is easily accessible from Fort Dauphin. If you do want to overnight here, try the clean **Hôtel L'Oasis** (☎ 92 700 16; r Ar15,000).

Taxis-brousses run frequently along the good sealed road between Ambovombe and Fort Dauphin (Ar2000, three hours). All traffic towards Toliara also passes through Ambovombe, so finding a lift westward is generally not difficult. Ambovombe is the junction for the rugged trip along the RN13 to and from Ihosy.

RÉSERVE SPÉCIALE DE CAP SAINTE MARIE & FAUX CAP

Madagascar's southernmost tip, Cap Sainte Marie (known in Malagasy as Tanjon'ny Vohimena), is a stark and windswept place where you'll feel you've travelled to the end of the earth. To protect 14 species of bird and two rare species of tortoise, the surrounding area has been set aside as a special reserve. There's the chance to walk on beaches strewn with *Aepyornis* eggshell fragments. Between July and November, you may be able to spot some migrating whales offshore.

There is little human development at the cape other than a religious statue, a lighthouse and the former lighthouse-keeper's house. At the village of Marovato, about 35km southwest of Tsiombe and about 15km northeast of Cap Sainte Marie, is a small Angap station marking the entrance to the reserve area. Guides can be arranged here for Ar15,000.

East of Cap Sainte Marie along the coast is Faux Cap (Betanty), which offers good views,

but little else. There is no direct road access between the two points. **Tsiombe**, 30km north on the RN10, is the closest major town to Faux Cap and a good place to break the taxi-brousse journey between Ampanihy and Fort Dauphin.

There is no accommodation at Cap Sainte Marie. Camping is allowed but, because of the strong winds, it is usually not feasible unless you set up your tent next to or inside the lighthouse-keeper's house. There's no charge, but you will need to request permission at the Angap office in Marovato. You'll also need to be self-sufficient with equipment, water and food.

Most travellers visit Cap Sainte Marie as an excursion from **Lavanono**, 30km to the west (about a two-hour journey by 4WD). The best accommodation option in the Lavanono area is **Libertalia** (madalibertalia@yahoo.fr; bungalows Ar25,000, mains from Ar5000), which also runs tours. It offers five solar-powered bungalows in stone buildings that are simple but not uncomfortable. The surroundings are the best part – there are beautiful views. The restaurant serves the usual mix of Malagasy and French food, but it's good, and the beers are cold. Cap Sainte Marie trips cost Ar140,000 per person, while canoe and kayak rental is available for Ar14,000 per hour.

Cap Sainte Marie, just over 200km from Fort Dauphin, is difficult to reach unless you take a tour, have access to a mountain bike or a good 4WD, or have plenty of time at your disposal. Tours are best arranged in Fort Dauphin (p132). Allow about half a day between Fort Dauphin and Tsiombe if travelling by 4WD and another few hours from Tsiombe to Lavanono.

To reach the region on your own, take a taxi-brousse as far as Beloha, from where there is very sporadic transport south to Lavanono. From Lavanono you will need to walk (about 30km) southeast to Cap Sainte Marie. Cap Sainte Marie is also accessible on foot from Marovato. Alternatively, take a taxi-brousse to Tsiombe, from where it is a hot 30km walk to Faux Cap. Once off the RN10, there is no regular public transport on any of these routes. Between May and November you may be lucky and get a lift with a lobster truck.

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