

Madagascar

One look at a map of Africa, and you can imagine how Madagascar was ripped away from the coast of Mozambique some 165 million years ago. Isolated ever since, Madagascar's plants and animals have evolved into some of the weirdest forms on the planet. Nowhere else can you see over 70 varieties of lemur, including one that sounds like a police siren, the world's biggest and smallest chameleons, and the last stomping ground of the now-extinct elephant bird (*Aepyornis*), the largest bird that ever lived. Extraordinary plants include forests of twisted, spiny 'octopus' trees, bottle-shaped baobabs, pristine rainforests and vanilla, the orchid that has become a household name. Not for nothing is Madagascar regarded by the WWF as one of the world's most important conservation priorities.

And the people are no less interesting: arriving here some 2000 years ago along the Indian Ocean trade routes, they grow rice in terraced paddies, and speak a language that has more in common with their origins in Southeast Asia than with the African continent. Their culture is steeped in taboo and magic, imbuing caves, waterfalls, animals and even some material objects with supernatural attributes. Hill peoples live in traditional multistoreyed brick houses with carved balconies and, in some areas, dance with their dead ancestors in the 'turning of the bones' ceremony, the *famadihana*.

Throw in a dash of pirate history, coastlines littered with shipwrecks, great regional cooking, some of the world's longest place names, and unfailingly polite and friendly people, and you'll experience a refreshing take on the overused 'unique' tag.

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 587,401 sq km
- **ATMs** In all major towns
- **Budget** US\$45 to US\$211 per day
- **Capital** Antananarivo (often 'Tana' for short)
- **Languages** Malagasy, French
- **Money** Malagasy ariary; US\$ = Ar2090, €1 = Ar2942
- **Population** 20.6 million
- **Seasons** Wet (November to March), dry (May to October), hot (October to April)
- **Telephone** Country code ☎ 261; international access code ☎ 00
- **Time** GMT/UTC + 3
- **Visa** One-month, single-entry visa US\$84; issued on arrival



HIGHLIGHTS

- **Réserve Spécial de l'Analamazaotra** (p923) Wake to the eerie cries of indris as the sun burns the mist off the rainforest-covered hills.
- **Île Sainte Marie** (p925) Dive among coral canyons, marvel at humpback whales or laze on soft, white beaches in this tropical paradise.
- **Parc National de l'Isalo** (p920) Cool off under a waterfall while watching the sandstone cliffs turn red at sunset.
- **Antananarivo** (p909) Tuck into the country's finest dining at this most un-African of cities.
- **Parc National de Ranomafana** (p919) Encounter lemurs, chameleons and colourful birds in primeval forest criss-crossed with tumbling steams.

CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

Any time of year is fine for a visit except from December to March, when heavy rainfall in many areas can make some roads all but impassable, and when there's a high risk of cyclones in the east and northeast. In general, the best time to travel in most areas is April and October/November. The coolest time to travel anywhere in Madagascar is during the dry season (ie the winter months, May to October), but during this time the *hauts plateaux* (central highlands; which include Antananarivo) can get cold and windy, with freezing showers.

The west and southwest get searingly hot during summer (November to February), but the winter months in these regions are pleasant, with blue skies, cooler temperatures and little rain. Most rain in the northeast falls from July to September; at this time the sea is too dangerous to travel by boat.

Average maximum temperatures vary from about 30°C in coastal areas (higher in summer) to around 25°C on the *hauts plateaux*. In Antananarivo and other highland areas, temperatures during winter can drop to 10°C and even lower during the night.

Hotels and popular tourist attractions often get full, and prices go up during the European holiday period from July to August and during Christmas and Easter.

ITINERARIES

It's best to choose one or two regions and concentrate on exploring them well, rather

HOW MUCH?

- **Cup of coffee** US\$1.90
- **Seafood feast** US\$7.60
- **National park admission, including a guide** US\$19
- **100km taxi-brousse ride** US\$2.80
- **A zebu** US\$190

LONELY PLANET INDEX

- **1L petrol** US\$1.17
- **1.5L bottled water** US\$1.20
- **Bottle of Three Horses Beer** US\$1.40
- **Souvenir T-shirt** US\$13.80
- **Sambos (samosas)** US\$0.15

than trying to fit too much into one visit. Here are a few suggestions.

- **One Week** Spend the first day and evening enjoying the sights and sampling great cuisine in the capital, Antananarivo (p909). Then, take a two-day trip south through the *hauts plateaux*, taking in Antsirabe (p916), Ambositra (p916) and Ambalavao (p919), and stopping at whichever town takes your fancy. Along the way, you can admire the scenery, and do some walking and souvenir shopping at some of the country's finest woodcarving outlets. Head back to Tana, then wend your way east to Andasibe (p922) and the Réserve Spécial de l'Analamazaotra (p923) for a two-night stay in the rainforest, where you'll be woken by the hooting calls of indris.
- **Two Weeks** For the best of both worlds – national parks and beaches – spend a day and night in Antananarivo (p909) and take a trip through the *hauts plateaux* towns to Fianarantsoa (p918) to see rare bamboo lemurs in the rainforest at Parc National de Ranomafana (p919). Drive down to Toliara (Tuléar; p920) for a taste of the tropics, then fly back to Tana and travel eastwards for two nights at Andasibe's Réserve Spécial de l'Analamazaotra (p923), then fly over to Île Sainte Marie (p925) from Toamasina and spend a few days lazing on a beach, snorkelling or whale-watching. From there, take a boat back to Toamasina (p923) and travel by