



Western Madagascar

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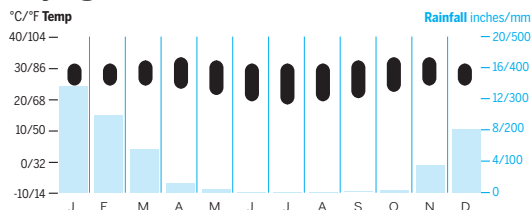
Why Go?

Madagascar's western region – divided in two, with no roads linking the south and north – is a country of extremes: hot and arid during the dry season but so muddy the rest of the year that much of it is inaccessible. Off-road fanatics take note: here the 4WD is king. The region is famous for its bizarre-looking *tsingy* (karst) that rise in spikes and crippled spires and create the kind of landscapes described in sci-fi novels. It is also prime baobab country, with some of the most iconic specimens, looking every bit like their folk nickname 'roots of the sky' with their crooked, spindly branches.

Relief from the hot and dusty plains comes in the form of rivers, natural swimming pools and idyllic remote resorts, all the most unexpected and wonderful surprises in such a harsh environment.

When to Go

Majunga



Apr–Oct The region's dry season and only time to see Parc National des Tsingy de Bemaraha.

Nov Fossa mating season at Réserve Forestière de Kirindy and your best chance to spot one.

Oct–Jan Diving at its best around Belo-sur-Mer.

Getting There & Around

With the exception of the well-maintained Route Nationale 4 (RN4) between Antananarivo (Tana) and Majunga (Mahajanga), and the RN35 between Antsirabe and Morondava, there are no sealed roads in this region so 4WD is imperative to explore sights off the RN network.

The only way to get from Morondava in the south to Majunga in the north is to backtrack through Antananarivo. Unfortunately, there are no flights between Morondava and Majunga.

MAJUNGA (MAHAJANGA)

POP 209,000

Majunga is a sprawling and somnolent port town with a palm-lined seaside promenade, shady arcades and walls draped with gorgeous bougainvillea. With its large Comoran and Indian populations, and historical connections with Africa, it is one of the most colourful and ethnically diverse places in Madagascar.

The city has long been a favourite holiday destination for Malagasies (it gets particularly busy from July to September), with its easy access from Tana, lovely climate and seaside location.

History

Majunga and the bay of Bombetoka have been occupied since the 9th century. Arab traders established a number of trading posts along the coast in the 13th and 14th centuries, and the area became a thriving commercial crossroads between the Malagasy highlands, East Africa and the Middle East.

Swahili and Gujarati traders settled in Majunga and the nearby town of Marovoay in the 19th century; these communities were known for the exquisitely carved wooden doors that adorned their houses, and a few can still be admired in Majunga and Marovoay.

Because of Majunga's strategic location, the French selected it as the base for their military operations in 1895, which ended with Madagascar becoming a French colony.

Sights & Activities

La Corniche

NEIGHBOURHOOD

Majunga is all about the Corniche, the palm-lined promenade bordering the sea made up of Blvd Poincaré and Blvd Marcoz. In the evening, residents come here to enjoy a stroll under the setting sun, sip a soft drink or nibble kebabs from the dozen street carts. Dur-

ing school holidays (July to September), it has a fair-like atmosphere, with makeshift (and slightly scary-looking) Ferris wheels, horses to ride on and families having a great time.

At the T-junction with Ave de France, there is an enormous **baobab tree** (circumference: 21m!) thought to be well over 700 years old. It is considered *fady* (taboo) to touch it.

Hôtel La Piscine

SWIMMING

(Bvd Marcoz; admission Ar10,000; ☺8am-5pm) If you want to sunbathe in style, there is no better stop than the Olympic-size swimming pool of the aptly named Hôtel La Piscine. It's popular with families at the weekend and during school holidays.

Tours

The following travel agencies can organise excursions to all regional attractions, from half-day to all-inclusive camping trips, week-long circuits and fun days out on quad bikes or boats.

La Ruche des Aventuriers

ADVENTURE TOUR

(☎62 247 79; www.laruchedesaventuriers.net; Rue Richelieu) This travel agency organises affordable excursions to all the main sights around Majunga (€52 per day for 4WD, fuel is extra), including three-day camping trips to the hard-to-reach Lac Kinkony.

Aventure & Découverte

ADVENTURE TOUR

(☎62 934 75; www.aventure-decouverte.com; 401 Rue Ampasika) Specialises in quad bike (€130) excursions to nearby attractions; also organises 4WD and pirogue trips.

Maderi Tour

ADVENTURE TOUR

(☎62 023 34; www.maderi-tour.com; Rue Jules Ferry) Catamaran excursions (€210 per day for up to eight people), and pricey 4WD circuits across the region.

Sleeping



Le Tropicana

BUNGALOW €€€

(☎62 220 69; www.hotel-majunga.com; Rue Administrateur Lacaze; d/f Ar90,000/130,000; 🍷🍷🍷) The Tropicana is an oasis of lush greenery right in the heart of Majunga. The lovely bungalows are small but full of character (and often full of guests – reserve ahead), set around a gorgeous pool. It's a peaceful and homey place, where guests can enjoy a quiet read in the garden loungers or catch up on news in the TV lounge-cum-restaurant-bar. Wi-fi works mostly in common areas.