



Northern Madagascar

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Why Go?

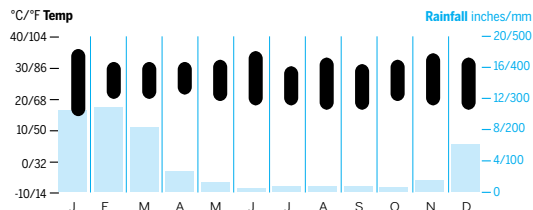
If you're unable to decide between a discovery trip and a 'lace up your boots and forge a new trail' kind of trip, you'll love travel in northern Madagascar. Activity junkies will be spoilt for choice with everything from diving to kitesurfing, while all travellers will revel in the region's diverse landscapes.

The area around Nosy Be is Madagascar's premier beach destination, with more sea-based activities than you'll have time to try, excellent seafood and idyllic scenery. It couldn't be more different from the mainland, where arid plains are fringed with lush ylang-ylang plantations, and two top parks feature both strange geological formations and rainforest. As for the Sava region, those who make it to this isolated part of the country will be rewarded with vanilla-scented air and world-class mountain hiking.

The region also hosts Madagascar's flagship cultural events, the Donia and Zegny'Zo – unique chances to discover Malagasy artists.

When to Go

Hell-Ville



May & Jun
Festivals bring together artists from across Madagascar and the Indian Ocean.

Jul–Sep Hump-back whales make their annual visit to Madagascar and can be seen around Nosy Be.

May–Nov Guaranteed access to the Tsingy Rouges and the western part of Réserve Spéciale Ankarana.

NOSY BE

Despite being Madagascar's number-one beach destination, the island of Nosy Be remains relatively low-key. It's the most expensive destination in Madagascar, and rooms can cost twice as much here as on the mainland. Still, compared to Europe, prices are competitive (except for the most exclusive resorts), and many visitors find the lack of major development and *mora mora* (literally, slowly slowly) lifestyle worth the extra euros.

The climate is sunny year-round, and Nosy Be is paradise for water-based activities. Diving is the island's top draw, and there is plenty of swimming, snorkelling and sailing for those keen to stay close to the surface.

Once you've had enough of seascapes, head for the rolling landscapes of the little-explored hinterland: as well as the brilliant Réserve Naturelle Intégrale de Lokobe, there are cocoa, ylang-ylang and vanilla plantations, crater lakes and waterfalls, and miles of dirt tracks accessible only by foot or quad bike.

Despite all these assets, Nosy Be has a history as the capital of sex tourism. It's true that Ambatoloaka is seedy in places but it is by no means representative of the whole island, and definitely not of the surrounding islands, which are all tiny, remote and heavenly. It's also worth knowing that tourism operators and the authorities in Nosy Be have come down hard on prostitution; perpetrators face heavy prison sentences.

History

Nosy Be's first inhabitants are believed to have been 15th-century Swahili and Indian traders. Later, the island served as a magnet for refugees, merchants and settlers of all descriptions.

In 1839 the Sakalava queen Tsiomeko fled to Nosy Be and turned to the French for help in resisting her Merina enemies. In 1841 the Sakalava ceded both Nosy Be and neighbouring Nosy Komba to France.

In recent years, with increasing tourism development and local environmental pressures, deforestation has become a problem on the island, as has destruction and damage of offshore coral reefs.

Activities

Nosy Be has a plethora of activities. Most are sea-based (diving, snorkelling, fishing, day trips to islands etc), but operators also offer activities exploring the island's beautiful hinterland.

Diving

Nosy Be and the surrounding islands are home to a rich diversity of marine life and offer world-class diving. Boxfish, surgeonfish, triggerfish, damselfish, clownfish, yellowfin, barracuda, eagle rays, manta rays and humpback whales (July to September) can all be spotted. Around Nosy Sakatia you're likely to see clownfish, barracuda, turtles, and perhaps dolphins and whale sharks.

On average, visibility on dives is about 15m year-round – much more on good days. The best months are April to December. July and August can be windy, especially to the north around Nosy Mitsio. The best months for seeing whale sharks are October and November, while manta rays are more prevalent from April to June and October to November.

NOSY BE ON A BUDGET

Nosy Be is expensive compared to the rest of Madagascar. Accommodation is particularly pricey, with most hotels falling squarely in the top-end category. There are, however, a number of ways to visit Nosy Be on a budget and still enjoy the very best of the island.

Accommodation Look carefully and you'll spot a few midrange options in Hell-Ville and Ambatoloaka, and even one on Nosy Komba.

Eating Food is generally good value in Madagascar, and Nosy Be has a couple of excellent budget eating options. The market in Hell-Ville is a good place to pick up picnic supplies.

Transport Use shared taxis or tuk-tuks between Hell-Ville and Ambatoloaka. For touring the rest of the island, rent a motorbike rather than a car: they're super cheap (Ar20,000 per day plus about Ar3000 of petrol for a day's riding) and ideal for exploring Nosy Be.