



TRUE BLUE. This is what a tropical island should look like! At low tide you can park your kayak on a spit of sand that connects the islands of Big Iranja and Small Iranja and admire the beauty around you.

Mora mora in Madagascar

Madagascar's balmy north-east is an unspoilt place with friendly people, tame(ish) wildlife, aquamarine water, fresh fish and cheap rum. We paddled from some small islands to a big island to small islands again, searching for the simple life.

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“It’s positively medieval, man! You’re not going to believe how beautiful it is,” says a fellow airline passenger named Ant, giving me a punch on the shoulder to emphasize his point. He fires off a volley of names of places, each one a machine-gun burst of vowels: “Barabaramahamahamaymay” followed by what sounds like “Beraberavinavina”. I have no idea what I’m hearing.

It’s a Sunday afternoon in October and our SA Airlink flight from Joburg landed on Nosy Be – a big island off the north-east coast of Madagascar – about 20 minutes ago. But we can’t disembark because... Well, it’s a Sunday afternoon in Madagascar. The mobile stepladder that will allow us to get off the plane can’t be found and the only things moving outside are the palm trees swaying in the breeze.

“*Mora mora*,” says Ant. His wife and kids join him in laughter. “Slowly, slowly,” he translates. “Go with the flow. You’ll catch on soon enough.”

Ant’s family did the same paddling safari last year that my wife Ronel and I have signed up for. They enjoyed it so much that they’re back in Madagascar, this time to hop aboard a chartered yacht and explore the islands in the Mozambique Channel. Thanks to Ant’s

enthusiasm I can’t wait for our own adventure to start.

Eventually someone has a brainwave and we disembark one by one by tiptoeing down the luggage conveyor belt. Welcome to Madagascar!

DAY 1

Battling the trade winds

I wake to a chorus of strange-sounding birds and insects outside my hotel room. Ronel and I spent our first night in Madagascar at L’heure Bleue, a pretty, French-run hotel that overlooks Madirokely Bay on the south coast of Nosy Be. Bert Spalding, our paddling guide, came and introduced himself and we got to know our four paddling companions: a couple from Fish Hoek and two friends from Kommetjie.

Bert, a South African who has lived in Madagascar for 12 years, told us that we were there to relax and not work too hard. As we lay in the hotel’s big seawater swimming pool with a Three Horses lager in hand, watching the sun set, Bert gave us a rundown of the week ahead: Our home base would be a dhow called *Salama Tsara* (Hello Pretty), which belongs to Madagascar Island Safaris (MIS), the company that organised our trip. Any time we didn’t feel like paddling we’d be picked up and ferried to

the next island. The experienced crew would cook our meals and ply us with drinks. What’s not to like about that plan?

After breakfast (tropical fruit, strong Malagasy coffee, a croissant with fragrant honey) a driver from MIS picks us up in a minibus for the quick journey to the harbour in Nosy Be’s capital Andoany (formerly known as Hellville), where we’ll meet up with Hello Pretty.

A crew member loads our luggage into a tiny boat and we find places to sit around the edge. The captain of the dhow, Honore Mahavita, balances on the bow clutching a bag full of baguettes and slowly we move across to the dhow, which is lying at anchor.

Once on board and with our bags safely stowed, we stretch out on deck under a shade net. The diesel engine starts up and we putter south-west, towards a small island called Ankazoberavina, about 30km away. Our plan is to snorkel on a reef there, then to paddle about 6 km into Russian Bay to the MIS campsite on the Ampasindava Peninsula.

Slowly the bustle of Andoany fades into the distance. Every now and then a fisherman in a small pirogue passes by, and I start to see bigger dhows under full sail, harnessing the trade winds to deliver goods all along the coast. The scene couldn’t have changed much in 300 years.

Today, however, the trade winds are not in our favour. *Salama Tsara* might be beautiful, but boy is she slow. When I ask Honore how long before we reach the coral reef, the answer is “one hour”. An hour later the answer is still “one hour”. And the same another hour later. It’s time to lie back, relax and surrender to *mora mora*.

It’s late in the afternoon by the time we reach Ankazoberavina. While Bert unhitches the four kayaks from the deck and lowers them into the water, we use the opportunity to snorkel over the reef. Parrot fish, lunar fusiliers, butterfly fish and zebra fish dart around in the crystal clear water.

“The darkness will catch us if we don’t get going,” Bert warns. It’s time to get paddling...

Bert’s kayaks seat two people each and they’re very stable. We soon find our rhythm on the open water. We follow Bert, who heads south towards the mouth of Russian Bay in the distance. It feels like we’re speeding along compared to the pace of the dhow, and when I look behind me I can’t see it any more. (Honore tells us later that he hooked a marlin behind the boat and it dragged him off course. The marlin escaped...)

Once inside the bay, the chop dies down and paddling becomes easier, but we’re running out

I AM SAILING (opposite page).

The fishing villages on the smaller islands and many along the coast of Madagascar can only be reached by boat. A dhow under sail is still one of the most reliable ways to transport people and goods.

WHEN IN ROME (above). This is the view across Madirokely Bay on Nosy Be, where the local residents have a big beach party every Sunday night. Remember your earplugs if, like us, your first night on Nosy Be happens to be a Sunday... Or just join the party!

ADVENTURE MADAGASCAR

ISLAND STYLE (opposite page, clockwise from top left). The *Salama Tsara* lies at anchor in Russian Bay at sunrise. This secluded bay got its name after a Russian ship found shelter here in 1905 during the war between Russia and Japan. The story goes that the crew beached the ship on purpose and spent the rest of the war hiding out in the bay. Uninhabited islands are common along the coast of Madagascar. If there's no potable water, there are no people. Madagascar was once a French colony and you can still see the influence of French nuns in the beautiful tablecloths that are sold in many of the local markets. The nuns taught the women how to sew and do fine needlework. You can walk a winding path up the hill on Big Iranja to take a look at Gustave Eiffel's lighthouse. Your reward will be this view.

THE EDITOR AT WORK (below). There's plenty of time to laze around on a holiday like this – remember to take a good book along.

of daylight. The sun sets quickly and darkness envelops us, but the villagers at our campsite have lit a fire on the beach to guide us home.

I shower using a cup and a bucket of water drawn from a well, eat the bonito and barracuda that didn't escape, drink vanilla-flavoured rum and sleep in a neat hut with a five-star view of the bay.

My suspicion that we are in paradise is confirmed.

DAY 2

A river as sweet as honey

"There's no algorithm for fish," says Ronel. She's commiserating with Barry Birkett, a chiropractor from Fish Hoek. Barry's a keen fisherman and he's brought his rods and lures on this safari, but the fishing gods aren't smiling on him this morning.

We left Russian Bay early, accompanied by a pod of dolphins that had the fish in a froth around the dhow. We're heading south again, keeping close to the coastline but deep enough for Barry to cast his line. He's about to elaborate further about the unpredictability of fish when a crew member on the stern lets out a yell: A kingfish has taken the lure on one of our trawling lines and it's putting up a good fight.

Then the line goes slack. A blacktip reef shark has swooped in and bitten off the kingfish's tail. We reel in two-thirds of a bleeding kingfish, but on-board chef Eliane Tiana doesn't mind. She cooks up a storm in the tiniest of kitchens and the kingfish goes down in history as one of the tastiest fish I've ever eaten.

After lunch we anchor just inside the mouth of the Baramahamay River (Honey River) on the Madagascan mainland. Four

cute wooden huts, each with a colourful hammock on the deck, wait for us on the banks. This is our home for the night, but first we're going to explore a mangrove swamp in our kayaks a few kilometres upriver.

We *schloop-schloop* through the swamp along tributary after tributary. Bert knows his way around and makes sure we don't get lost. There's a cooling breeze on the river, but it's cloying and humid in the mangroves. Hundreds of blue crabs scurry around on the muddy banks and there's a ripe smell in the air. A giant white heron suddenly shatters the silence as it takes off in front of our boat and flaps noisily into the sky.

This is a prehistoric place. You can easily imagine a T-Rex crashing through the low trees towards you...

DAY 3-4

Turtles for Africa

At sunrise I'm lying in the hammock outside my hut, watching green mountains in the distance light up. A cock crows and dogs bark on the opposite side of the river as the fishing village slowly wakes up. One by one, men push their pirogues into the water and sail into the ocean to catch fish for their families.

Today we're travelling to Iranja, a postcard-pretty island named after the turtles that swim in its tranquil waters. When someone shows you a travel brochure for a tropical island (turquoise sea, white beach, palm trees), there's a good chance the photo is of Iranja.

It's actually two islands – Small Iranja and Big Iranja – connected by a spit of sand. At high tide, waves on either side of the sand bank smash into each other, but at low tide you can walk from one island to the other. We'll spend the next two days on Big Iranja, in comfortable A-frame grass huts on a beach close to a fishing village.

There's a semi-decent shower behind the huts, which makes this seem like a five-star resort. That, and the fact that we can replenish our Three Horses at a local bar in the village.

Iranja is especially popular with Italian and French tourists, who take a speedboat taxi from Nosy Be to spend the day snorkelling and sun-tanning on the beach. Once they return after lunch, the island belongs to us and the villagers again.

Ronel and I drift over coral reefs, among turtles that pop their heads out of the water to check us out, then we have an afternoon nap on the beach and wake up at dusk as fruit bats swoop down from a nearby cliff to forage for food.



The next day we decide to paddle around the island to see the local lighthouse built high on a cliff. The lighthouse was designed by Gustave Eiffel (who also designed a certain tower) and was shipped to the island more than a century ago. It's not as grand as the Parisian landmark, but it's worth a look. More impressive are the two white-tailed tropicbirds that are weaving an intricate dance in the sky above.

I'm going to miss Iranja.

DAY 5 Meet the lemurs

We're on the dhow before sunrise, heading north-east to Antsoha (Lemur Island), not too far from Russian Bay. As the name suggests, lemurs are the only inhabitants here. We follow a guide up a steep and narrow path through a tropical forest as lizards and chameleons scurry out of the way.

The guide calls, "*Maki, maki, maki...*" (the local word for lemur) and we hear them before we see their shapes flitting through the dappled light of the canopy. Then they're upon us – black lemurs, black-and-white lemurs, brown-and-white lemurs – on our heads and shoulders, looking for the small bananas we're carrying.

Their hands are soft and their fingers gently take the bananas from us, popping the food into their mouths in a flash. Once they've had their fill they leap into the trees again and disappear into the shadows.

Like most of the animal and plant species you'll find here, these lemurs (there are more than 50 species of them) are endemic to Madagascar.

After lunch, enjoyed by us and the lemurs, we're back in the kayaks. We intend to paddle back to the camp at Russian Bay, but first we're going to visit an Austrian. The bay is a safe haven for yachts and there are plenty of them at anchor just beyond the mouth. This is where an Austrian, known only as Andreas, has built himself a bush pub par excellence.

Andreas is sun-beaten and lean with a short grey beard and piercing blue eyes. He's wearing a sleeveless vest, shorts and a bandage around one leg. He's not in the mood for small talk because he has to prepare supper for some of the yachties in the bay.

He warns us that his beer is warm – there's no electricity or a generator to keep things cold. But you'll struggle to beat the view from his

pub. When he only wants to charge us 10000 ariari (about R50) for our round of beers, rum and soft drinks, he just shrugs his shoulders and says it wouldn't be right to charge more.

I ask him what life is like, here on the edge of Russian Bay. "Sometimes it's paradise. Sometimes it's hell," he says. "Especially in the rainy season in summer when the humidity is unbearable." He shrugs his shoulders again and hobbles off to his tiny kitchen.

We're loath to leave his hellish paradise, but an hour's paddle across the bay awaits. Back in camp, there's fish, crab and mango picked from the trees on the menu. I'm not complaining.

DAY 6 Spoilt for choice

It's our last day on the water and I try to burn everything into my memory: the green coastline that slips past slowly and the barracuda chasing its prey right out of the water.

We're making our way back to Nosy Be, but first we're going to snorkel in a marine reserve off Tanikely Island. After that we'll spend our last night in a guesthouse on the island of Nosy Komba.

The guesthouse, 293 on Komba, is something special. It belongs to another South African – Marcine Cooper – who is a can-do woman from the Border region of the Eastern Cape. Just having a flush toilet, a decent shower, a luxurious double bed with crisp white linen and a mosquito net makes it feel like I've died and gone to heaven. Marcine's place offers all of this and more – it's the reason people want to go on honeymoon.

Komba is one of the most popular tourist destinations in this part of Madagascar and it's easy to see why. There are bars and restaurants, markets to browse, snorkelling and scuba excursions, one-day or extended kayak safaris with Bert (who lives in a grass-roof cottage on the north side of the island) and a nature reserve full of lemurs.

The next morning we have to wait for the tide to come in before we can take a water taxi to Nosy Be and the airport. Ronel and I use the opportunity to walk through the forest with a local guide to greet the lemurs one last time.

Back home, several days and many showers later, I can still smell the sweet scent of lemur on my beard. Madagascar has crept under my skin.

FISHY STORIES. You can trawl for fish from your kayak, or cast if you want to take a break from paddling. Shortly after this photo was taken, along the coast of Iranja, Barry Birkett (blue shirt and hat) reeled in a sturdy fish that made for a tasty meal that evening.





CURIOUS AND CLOSE (opposite page, clockwise from top left). Tamsin Jones takes a selfie with a female black lemur in a nature reserve on Nosy Komba. The Madagascar day gecko is one of about 210 lizard species you'll find on the islands. Local chillies are used to make *sakay*, a condiment that is served with most meals. Beware, it's highly addictive! This little boy takes the scenic (and only!) route home after a morning at daycare on Iranja.



KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

How much does it cost? The flights between Madagascar and South Africa are expensive, but once you're there you can have a relatively cheap holiday. SA Airlink is the best bet if you want to spend time in the north-east. There are direct flights from OR Tambo to Nosy Be on Sundays, with rates from about R10 000 per person return depending on the season. The flight takes about three hours.

We booked our paddling tour with Madagascar Island Safaris (MIS). It costs R23 500 per person and this includes flights between Johannesburg and Nosy Be, airport taxes, local transport in Madagascar, accommodation and meals. If you're not interested in paddling, MIS has several other holiday options.

Visas, insurance and malaria: You can buy a temporary visa on arrival at the Nosy Be airport. It costs 25 euros per person – make sure you have euros in cash to pay.

Travel insurance is always a good idea. Ours cost R660 from Hollard

for two people for the week.

Madagascar is a malaria area so visit your doctor and get the right prophylactics.

How much spending money should I take? It's best to travel with euros. There are a handful of ATMs in Andoany (Hellville), where you can withdraw ariari – the local currency – but euros are accepted everywhere and you can exchange for ariari easily enough.

You'll have to pay for your own drinks, something to eat on your first night on Nosy Be and a small entrance fee when you enter a nature reserve. You might want to buy a gift or two as well. The locally made tablecloths are beautiful, Madagascan vanilla is legendary and some of the rum is exceptional.

Since most needs are met during the week, Ronel and I found 150 euros (about R2 100) to be more than adequate.

What to pack? Things that will protect you from the sun. Lots

of sunscreen! And make sure it's in your check-in bag otherwise the zealous officials at OR Tambo will confiscate it. Take a decent hat, a long-sleeve rash vest for paddling, sunglasses, a sarong or kiki to drape over your legs, insect repellent, hand sanitizer, Imodium tablets, anti-nausea tablets, a headlamp, shoes that can get wet, an underwater camera if you have one, a dry bag and a good book.

What else? If you insist on travelling in luxury and you can't handle washing with cold water, this trip is not for you. If you've camped and you've endured the odd bucket shower, you'll be more than okay. Drink bottled water and use it to brush your teeth.

We spent many hours on the slow dhow, but you soon surrender to *mora mora*. MIS now transfers paddlers to the islands and camps in faster motorboats, but you can still do a dhow trip if you want to. Check with them when you book. They'll customise a trip according

to your requirements.

You'll eat some of the tastiest fish of your life on this trip, as long as the crew (or you) manage to catch it every day. If there's no fish, you'll have crab, prawns or zebu mince (the local name for a Madagascan cattle breed). Every meal is served with fresh fruit like mango, banana and pineapple, plus rice and bread. You won't go hungry.

More info:

- **Madagascar Island Safaris**
📞 021 783 0400;
🌐 madagascarlandsafaris.co.za
- **SA Airlink** 📞 011 451 7300;
🌐 flyairlink.com
- If you want to kayak around Nosy Komba on one-day or multi-day trips, contact **Bert Spalding**:
📧 kayakmadagascar@moov.mg;
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- **293 on Komba** feels like a (more exotic) home away from home. Contact Marcine Cooper:
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