

Welcome to Madagascar

"At the end of an exhilarating day of trekking and tracking we'd rush to get the lamps lit and the fires burning before the African night descended in a rush of mysterious jungle sounds."

Madagascar has been isolated for over 165 million years, creating a biodiversity resource of global significance, with over 80% of species found nowhere else on earth, including leaping sifaka lemurs, lesser mouse lemurs and even the elusive fat-tailed dwarf lemur. Reptiles include tortoises, snakes, iguanas and a vast array of chameleons, including both the smallest and largest in the world. The variety of life is reflected in the strong cultural heritage of the Malagasy people, contributing to the island's name as "Island of the Ancestors" with their belief in the power of the dead to protect and guide the living.

Know your History

Madagascar has an ancient and complex history. Part of East Gondwana, Madagascar separated from Africa around 165 million years ago, but the island itself didn't become an island until between 80 to 100 million years ago when it broke away from the Indian subcontinent.

First settlement

According to legend the island's first inhabitants were the Vazimba, a race of white pygmies who were displaced by successive waves of Polynesian migrants from the Malayo-Indonesian archipelago from as early as the 6th century AD. However, it's not entirely clear who the true first settlers were; the majority of archaeologists believe that human settlement in Madagascar happened around 200 to 500 AD, when seafarers from southeast Asia (popular choices are from Borneo or the southern Celebes) came in outrigger sailing canoes. There is also evidence of Bantu settlers crossing the Mozambique Channel not long after, but Malagasy tradition and ethnography suggests that even they may have been preceded by Mikea hunter-gatherers. The Anteimoro in southern Madagascar trace their origins in Somalia from the middle Ages.

Arab settlement

Arabs came to the island in around the 7th century, marking the beginning of the written history of the island, and established trading posts along the northwest coast. By the 9th century, Madagascar was a major trading centre in the Indian Ocean, something that would later attract European settlers.

Madagascar served as a major oceanic trading port for East Africa, connecting to the Silk Road and vice versa. Made wealthy by trade, Malagasy chiefs during the Middle Ages began to extend their power trading with Madagascar's neighbours, notably in North Africa, the Middle East and India. Large chiefdoms began to dominate considerable areas of the island. Notable chiefdoms included the Sakalava chiefdoms of the Menabe, centred in what is now Morondava, and Boinda, centred in what is now the provincial capital of Mahajanga.

The chiefs began to take on a new divine status, becoming known as the Maroserana. They took on cultural traditions of subjects in their kingdoms and expanded their rule, creating nobility and artisan classes.

European contact

The first European to visit the island was Portuguese sea captain Diogo Dias in 1500, who sighted the island after his ship became separated from a fleet en route to India. The Portuguese named it São Lourenço ("St. Lawrence") and established trade with the chiefdoms.

In 1666, the French East India Company, under the direction of François Caron, established ports on the islands of Bourbon and Ile-de-France (Réunion and Mauritius) nearby, but failed to colonise Madagascar. It wasn't until the late 17th century that French trading posts were created along the east coast.

"Island of the Moon"

Between 1774 and 1824, Madagascar became a favourite haunt for pirates – including Americans, who brought Malagasy rice to South Carolina. In the late 17th century, the infamous Captain Misson and his pirate crew allegedly founded the free colony of Libertatia in northern Madagascar. But Madagascar wasn't just a pirate utopia – the island was often known as "Island of the Moon" for its notorious record for shipwrecks along the coast. Shipwrecked Robert Drury is one of the few men to record life in southern Madagascar during the 18th century.

The British & Merina

However, soon after the British fleet came to dominate the Indian Ocean the Merina tribes, who had favourable trade relationships with the British, succeeded in establishing hegemony over the major part of the island, including the coast. In 1817, the Merina ruler and the British governor of Mauritius concluded a treaty abolishing the slave trade, which had been an important part of Madagascar's economy. In return, the island received British military and financial assistance. British influence remained strong for several decades, during which the Merina court was converted to Presbyterianism, Congregationalism, and Anglicanism.

The Royal Navy's dominance in the Indian Ocean and the end of the Arab slave trade spelled the end for the western Sakalava and it lost its power to the ever growing Merina state. Queen Ranavalona I "The Cruel" of the Merina issued a royal edict that prohibited Christian practices in Madagascar and it is estimated that around 150,000 Christians died during her reign from 1828 to 1861. Commerce with other nations faltered and the island became more isolated.

The French

In 1883, the French invaded Madagascar, sparking the first Franco-Hova War – "Hova" is one of three Merina classes: andriana were the aristocracy, hova the common people, and andevo the slaves. The French were seeking to restore the property seized from French citizens. The war ended when Madagascar ceded Antsiranana (Diego Suarez) in the north and paid 560,000 francs to the heirs of Joseph-François Lambert. In 1890, the British accepted the full formal imposition of a French protectorate.

The second Franco-Hova War was quick. In 1895 a French flying column landed in Mahajanga and marched to Antananarivo, the capital, where the defenders quickly surrendered. 20 French soldiers died in the fight, but 6,000 succumbed to malaria and other diseases. By 1896, France had annexed Madagascar and exiled the royal family to Algeria, ending 103 years of Merina monarchy rule.

World War Two

During World War Two, Malagasy troops fought in France, Morocco and Syria. Some Nazi leaders

suggested deporting all of Europe's Jews to Madagascar, but nothing came of this. When France fell to Germany, it was the Vichy government who administered Madagascar. In 1942 British troops occupied the island in the Battle of Madagascar to prevent Japanese occupation and afterwards it was handed to the Free French.

Independence

Madagascar's independence movement began in 1947, when French prestige was at a low ebb, although the nationalist uprising was suppressed after several months of bitter fighting, after between 8,000 and 90,000 people had been killed. The French established reformed institutions in 1956 under the Loi Cadre (Overseas Reform Act), and Madagascar at last moved peacefully toward independence. On 14th October 1958 the Malagasy Republic was proclaimed as an autonomous state within the French community. After a period of provisional government, a constitution was adopted in 1959 and Madagascar claimed full independence on 26th June 1960.

Madagascar's first President, Philibert Tsiranana, was elected when his Social Democratic Party gained power at independence in 1960 and was re-elected without opposition in March 1972. However, he resigned only two months later in response to massive antigovernment demonstrations motivated by the fact that Tsiranana was put in power with the support of the French government. The nationalist unrest continued and Tsiranana's successor, General Gabriel Ramanantsoa, resigned on 5th February 1975, handing over executive power to Lieutenant Colonel Richard Ratsimandrava, who was assassinated six days later. A provisional military directorate then ruled until a new government was formed in June 1975 under Didier Ratsiraka.

Political unrest

In December 2001, a presidential election was held in which both major candidates claimed victory. The Ministry of the Interior declared incumbent Ratsiraka of the Association for the Rebirth of Madagascar (AREMA) party victorious. Marc Ravalomanana contested the results and claimed victory. A political crisis followed in which Ratsiraka supporters cut major transport routes from the primary port city to the capital city, a stronghold of Ravalomanana support. Sporadic violence and considerable economic disruption continued until July 2002 when Ratsiraka and several of his prominent supporters fled to exile in France.

Ravalomanana

After the end of the 2002 crisis, President Ravalomanana began many reform projects, forcefully advocating "rapid and durable development" and the launching of a battle against corruption. In December 2002 legislative elections gave his newly formed Tiako-I-Madagasikara Party (TIM, or "I Love Madagascar") a commanding majority in the National Assembly. November 2003 municipal elections were conducted freely, returning a majority of supporters of the president, but also significant numbers of independent and regional opposition figures.

In 2006, calls for Ravalomanana to step down during the elections by a retired army general were "misinterpreted" as an attempted coup, but for the most, rule under the TIM were peaceful.

However, in 2009, protests pitting Ravalomanana against opposition leader Andry Rajoelina resulted in the death of more than 170 people. Rajoelina encouraged his supporters to protest against Ravalomanana's "autocratic" style of government. Ravalomanana resigned on 17th March 2009, handing over power to a military council loyal to himself. However, the military announced their support for Rajoelina, who assumed the role of acting president and promising elections in two years, and exiling Ravalomanana at gunpoint. On 20th March 2009, the African Union revoked

Madagascar's membership and the EU amongst other international entities has refused to recognise the new government, as it had taken power by force. Amid increasing worry over humanitarian and environmental issues, Madagascar is still without an internationally recognised government.

Money Talks

The main source of Madagascar's economy is its agriculture – including fishing and forestry, which accounts for 34% of its GDP and over 70% of the country's export earnings. Because of the decline in world coffee demand and the government's reluctance to implement economic reforms, Madagascar's economic output is still growing at a much slower rate than the population.

Exports

Madagascar's primary exports are: vanilla, coffee, shellfish and sugar. Cotton textiles, minerals and gemstones are also exported – though the majority of gems are thought to be smuggled out illegally.

Money

Madagascar has a two-currency system – the Malagasy franc (FMG) and the Malagasy ariary (MGA). The Malagasy franc is the traditional currency and is often the easiest to exchange, although erratic fluctuations in the exchange rate means it is always best to be aware of the rates just before leaving. It's also best to know exactly which currency you are paying in when buying items in the country.

Traveller's cheques, seen as a safer way to carry money, are increasingly difficult to change, so always have your receipt when exchanging them. It's best to change cash (preferably euros, as it tends only to be possible to change new and unmarked £20 notes). Switch cards can't be used, but there are some ATMs in Diego that accept Visa.

Get Culture Savvy

Madagascar's population is largely of mixed Asian and African origin. Recent DNA research shows that the Malagasy are approximately half Malay and half East African stock, although some Arab, Indian and European influence is present along the coast. Asian features are most prominent in the central highlands (the Merina people) and the Betsileo. These together account for about 5 million of the 17 million people living in Madagascar.

Religion

Approximately half of the country's population practises traditional religions, which tend to emphasise links between the living and the dead. The Merina in the highlands particularly tend to hold tightly to this practice. They believe that the dead join their ancestors in the ranks of divinity and that ancestors are intensely concerned with the fate of their living descendants. The Merina and Betsileo reburial practice of famadihana, or "turning over the dead", celebrate this spiritual communion. In this ritual, relatives' remains are removed from the family tomb, rewrapped in new silk shrouds, and returned to the tomb following festive ceremonies in their honour.

About 45% of the Malagasy are christian, divided almost evenly between roman catholics and protestants. Many incorporate the cult of the dead with their religious beliefs and bless their dead at

church before proceeding with the traditional burial rites. They also may invite a pastor to attend a famadihana. The Roman Catholic church is open to its members continuing these practices, while more conservative protestant denominations tend to condemn them as superstitions or demon worship that should be abandoned. Many of the christian churches are influential in politics. In the coastal regions of the provinces of Mahajanga and Antsiranana (Diego Suarez), muslims constitute a significant minority. Muslims are divided between those of Malagasy ethnicity, indo-pakistanis and Comorians.

Food

Rice is the staple of the Madagascar diet. The resourceful natives have developed literally dozens of delicious preparatory techniques for this plentiful grain. But the Malagasy diet is a varied one and heaping mounds of rice are usually topped with zebu, an excellent local beef, as well as pork, chicken, crab, fish, corn, peanuts and potatoes. Fresh fruits and vegetables abound. Spicy curries are popular, as are the numerous exquisite French dishes served at the island's finest restaurants and hotels.

When in Madagascar, you'll be urged to try the national snack, koba, which is a pate of rice, banana and peanut. Unless you're a fan of that peculiar combination of flavours, skip the koba and order one of the island's famous seafood salads. You'll be handed a heaped plateful of luscious ginger-and-lime flavoured crab and lobster meat, resting on a bed of fresh greens. Akoho sy voanio, a chicken dish prepared with rice and fresh coconut, is also quite delicious, as is the foza sy hena-kisoa, a stir-fried crab, pork and rice dish.

Music

Basic Malagasy music is derived from early Austronesian settlers, who brought with them the valiha, a predecessor to the bamboo tube. African influences can be clearly seen in the drumming and polyharmonic singing styles of Malagasy music, whilst Arab musical influence is found in the tendency towards minor chords. Echoes of the days of piracy are found in Malagasy music in the use of the guitar, accordion and piano and the violin, trumpet and clarinet used in hiragasy performances.

Hainteny

Hainteny is a traditional form of oral literature or poetry, literally translated as "knowledge of words". It relies heavily on metaphor and includes proverbs and sayings and rhetoric. Hainteny is often used at special occasions such as weddings.

Zebu

The zebu, or humped cattle, has huge meaning in Malagasy culture. They can take on sacred importance and often suggest the wealth of the owner. In the southern region around Tulear, where African influences are most prevalent, wealth and social status are measured in zebu and the cattle can outnumber people by two or three to one. Cattle rustling, once a rite of passage for young men, has become increasingly dangerous over recent years as herdsmen in the southwest arm themselves with traditional spears in an attempt to stop armed professional rustlers.

Holidays

1st January New Year's Day
 29th March Commemoration of the 1947 Rebellion
 Varies (Monday after Easter) Easter Monday
 1st May Labour Day
 Varies Ascension Day
 26th June Independence Day
 15th August Assumption Day
 1st November All Saints' Day
 25th December Christmas Day

Learn the Lingo

The Malagasy language is of Malayo-Polynesian origin and is generally spoken throughout the island. A former French colony, French is spoken among the educated population. English is becoming more widely spoken of late and in 2003 the government began a pilot project of introducing teaching English into the primary grades of 44 schools. In the current constitution, there is no official language mentioned. Instead, Malagasy is named the "national language".

Pronunciation

The Malagasy alphabet is made up of 21 letters. C, Q, U, W and X are omitted. Individual letters are pronounced as follows:

A as in father
E as in the "a" in late
G as in get
H almost silent
I as "ee" in seen
J pronounced dz
O "oo" as in too
S usually midway between "sh" and "s", but varies according to region
Z ;as in zoo

Stressed syllables

Some syllables are stressed, others almost eliminated. Generally, the stress is on the penultimate syllable except in words ending in "na", "ka" and "tra", when it is generally on the last syllable but two. A word can change its meaning even when it has the same spelling. For example, tanana means "hand" and tanána means "town".

The words "yes" (eny) and "no" (tsia) are hardly ever used in conversation. The Malagasy tend to say "yoh" for yes and "ah" for no.

Note: Nosy means island in the Malagasy language.

ENGLISH	MALAGASY	PRONUNCIATION	ENGLISH	MALAGASY
Greetings			Numbers	
Hello	Salama	Salaam	1	iray, iraiika
How are you?	Manao ahoana	Mana owana	2	roa
What news?	Inona no vaovao?	Inan vovvow?	3	telo

No news	Tsy misy	Tsimees	4	efatra
Goodbye	Veloma	Veloom	5	dimy
See you again	Mandra pihaona	Mandra piown	6	enina
7	fito			
About Yourself			8	valo
What's your name?	Iza no anaranao?	Eeza noanaranow?	9	sivy
My name is...	Ny anarako...	Ny anarakoo...	10	folo
I don't understand	Tsy azoko	Tsi azook	20	roapolo
50	dimampolo			
Useful Phrases			100	zato
Very good	Tsara be	Tsara bay	1000	arivo
Bad	Ratsy	Rats	1 million	iray tapitrisa
Please / excuse me	Aza fady	Azafad		
Thank you	Misaotra	Misowtr		
Long life!	Ho ela velona!	Wella vayloon!		
Where is...?	Aiza...?	Ayeeze...?		
Is it far?	Lavitra ve izany?	Lavtra vayzan...?		
Is there any...?	Misy ve...?	Mees vay...?		
I'm looking for...	Mitady...aho	M'tadi...a		
I'm hungry	Mangetaheta aho	Mangataytah		
Please help me!	Mba ampio aho!	Bampeewha!		
Bartering				
How much?	Ohatrinona?	Ohtreen?		
Too expensive!	Lafo be!	Laff bay!		
No way!	Tsy lasa!	Tsee lass!		
I want...	Mila... aho	I Meel...a		

Lay of the Land

Madagascar, located in the Indian Ocean off the east coast of Africa, is the 4th largest island in the world. Geographic isolation from neighbouring landmasses allowed the evolution of distinct communities of plants and animals. It is home to 5% of the world's plant and animal species, 80% of which are endemic to Madagascar. Some bio geographers refer to the island as the "8th continent", in recognition of its uniqueness and diversity.

Madagascar and neighbouring Indian Ocean islands form a distinctive sub-region of the Afro-tropic ecozone, which botanist Armen Takhtajan called the Madagascan Region. The region is characterised by numerous endemic taxa of plants and animals, such as the lemurs. Madagascar and the Seychelles are fragments of the ancient super-continent of Gondwana. As Gondwana began to break up 160 million years ago Madagascar broke away first from Africa and 89 million years ago broke away from India. Many of Madagascar's plant and animal species are of ancient Gondwanian origin. Madagascar remained close to Africa and for a time to India, and some plants and animals

were able to cross the straits separating Madagascar from the neighbouring continents. The other Indian Ocean islands, such as the Comoros and Mascarene Islands, are volcanic islands that formed more recently and were populated by plants and animals from Madagascar, Africa and the Seychelles.

The eastern region includes two tropical moist broadleaf forest eco-regions: the Madagascar lowland forest along the eastern coastal strip and the Madagascar sub-humid forest which occupies the highlands above 600-800 metres. At the highest elevations (above 2,000 metres) the sub-humid forest gives way to Madagascar ericoid thickets, a montane grassland and shrub land eco-region.

Two xeric shrub land regions cover the southwest and south of the island: dry forests become Madagascar succulent woodlands in the southwest and the drier Madagascar spiny thickets occupy the southernmost region of the island.

What's the Weather like?

Madagascar has a hot, subtropical climate. In the south and west, the country is hot and dry and monsoons and cyclones, which occur between December and March, tend only to reach the north and eastern regions. The rainy season lasts from November to March. The mountainous regions of Madagascar are cooler than the rest of the country, being warm with some thunderstorms from November to April and cooler and windier the remainder of the year. Temperatures fluctuate very little – ranging from around 15°C to 21°C in Antananarivo.

Biodiversity

Considered one of the very few biodiversity hotspots worldwide, Madagascar and its neighbouring island groups, including the Seychelles and Mauritius, boasts eight plant families, four bird species and five varieties of primate found nowhere else in the world. The lemurs, which have made Madagascar's biodiversity famous, have suffered severely since humans have settled – from the original 50 species on the island, 15 have become extinct.

Before the arrival of humans, Madagascar was home to six lineages of mammals: lemurs, endemic carnivores, a pygmy hippopotamus, tenrecs, rodents and bats. The lemurs are thought to be descended from a common ancestor, which crossed to Madagascar over 62 million years ago. Bones of extinct giant lemurs, as large as gorillas, have been found on the island. Recent DNA evidence suggests that Madagascar's eight endemic carnivores, including the Malagasy mongooses (*Galidia*, *Galidictis*, *Mungotictus*, and *Salanoia*), fossa, falanouc, and Malagasy civet, are descended from a single ancestor which crossed from Africa to Madagascar 18 to 24 million years ago.

Thanks to its separation from Africa and India, the species on Madagascar have evolved in a unique way, providing a fascinating study of floral and faunal evolution. Despite its exceptional habitats, Madagascar suffers heavily from human influence – agriculture and slash-and-burn techniques have meant that the ecosystems these rare species of animals and plants need have greatly reduced in number.

Good Books

Guidebooks

- Lonely Planet Guide to Madagascar. Tom Parkinson. ISBN 9781741046083 Lonely Planet Publications, 2008

Wildlife

- Collins pocket guide to the coral reef fishes of the Indo-Pacific and Caribbean. E. Lieske & R. Myers. ISBN 9780007111114 Collins, 1996
- Indo-Pacific Coral Reef Field Guide. G.R. Allen & R. Steene. ISBN 9789810056872 Tropical Reef Research, Singapore, 1994
- The ecology of fishes on coral reefs. P. Sale. ISBN 9780126151817 (2002)
- Coral Reef Animals of the Indo-Pacific. T.M. Gosliner, D.W. Behrens & G.C. Williams. ISBN 9780930118211 Sea Challengers, CA, 1996
- The Biology of Fishes. H.M. Kyle. ISBN 9788170351238 Sedgwick and Jackson, London, 1926
- World Atlas of Coral Reefs. Mark D Spalding, Corinna Ravilious & Edmund P Green. ISBN 9780520232556

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INTO THE WILD
THE GAP YEAR BLOG FROM
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