

Overview Madagascar

Note

Those who intend to make their own arrangements should be aware that bandits operate in certain highland regions and that the terrain and climate make surface travel exceedingly difficult (and often impossible) throughout much of the country for much of the year.

Madagascar is a beautiful island, ringed by golden beaches and palm trees, and with an interior that is resplendent in its variety, from grassy plateaus to volcanoes and opaque forests and natural reserves.

According to local legend, the island was first inhabited by the Vazimba, a race of white pygmies. These people, if they existed, were displaced by successive waves of Polynesian migrants from the Malayo-Indonesian archipelago, from as early as the sixth century AD. In the ninth century, Madagascar was a major trading power in the western Indian Ocean. Moreover, ancient ruins indicate an extensive Arab presence on the island around that time. Bantu tribes from mainland Africa later settled on the west coast. The first Europeans arrived in the mid-17th century. Several French settlements were established on the south-east coast but were destroyed within 30 years.

At the time, Madagascar supported several kingdoms along its coastline and, in the central highlands, the kingdom of the Merina, which was the dominant ethnic group. From their fortress city of Antananarivo, the 19th-century kings gradually conquered the coastal kingdoms and by 1830 most of the island was under unified Merina control. The success of the Merina was partly due to a well-worked strategy of playing off rival European colonists against each other: in particular, the British and the French.

However, the UK – with copious commitments elsewhere – was content by the end of the 19th century to leave the southern Indian Ocean to the French. Without a counter-balancing power, Madagascar was vulnerable to French takeover, which duly occurred in 1896 when the Merina kingdom was overthrown by a French military force.

In 1948, the Malagasy people sought to re-establish their independence through armed insurrection. They were unsuccessful, but the uprising paved the way for independence, which came in 1960. Philibert Tsirana's PSD Party ruled with the support of France and the people of the coastal regions until 1972, when highland agitation against French influence prompted the Army Chief of Staff, Major-General Ramanantsoa, to assume executive power for the purpose of pursuing a more nationalistic policy. Three years later the military government resigned after selecting Lt-Commander Didier Ratsiraka as Head of State. A gradual civilianization of the government culminated in 1977 in elections to the National People's Assembly, which were won by the sole legal party, Avant-garde de la Révolution Malgache (AREMA).

Recent years have been marred by political, economic and meteorological crises. Indeed, some may be deterred by the levels of poverty on this island and the enormous gap between rich and poor. Nevertheless, Madagascar dazzles with its rich wildlife, with a large majority of its species unique to the island, and found nowhere else on earth. Of the popular creature, the lemur, there are over 10 different species alone. The island is a mass of unusual and colorful flowers and other flora. In terms of biodiversity alone, Madagascar really is one of a kind.

Geography

Madagascar, the fourth-largest island in the world, lies in the Indian Ocean off the coast of Mozambique. It includes several much smaller islands. A central chain of high mountains, the Hauts Plateaux, occupies more than half of the main island and is responsible for the marked differences – ethnically, climatically and scenically – between the east and west coasts. The narrow strip of lowlands on the east coast, settled from the sixth century by Polynesian seafarers, is largely covered by dense rainforests, whereas the broader west-coast landscape, once covered by dry deciduous forests, is now mostly savannah. The east coast receives the monsoon and, on both coasts, the climate is wetter towards the north. The southern tip of the island is semi-desert, with great forests of cactus-like plants. The capital, Antananarivo, is high up in the Hauts Plateaux near the island's center. Much of Madagascar's flora and fauna is unique to the island. There are 3000 endemic species of butterfly; the many endemic species of lemurs fill the niches occupied elsewhere by animals as varied as racoons, monkeys, marmots, bushbabies and sloths. There is a similar diversity of reptiles, amphibians and birds (especially ducks), and also all levels of plant life.

The Central Highlands

The capital and several other important towns are situated in the central section of the Hauts Plateaux, the chain of rugged, ravine-riven mountains that run from north to south down the center of Madagascar.

Antananarivo

Antananarivo, often abbreviated to Tana, has a distinctively French flavor and atmosphere: French is widely spoken, and road as well as shop signs are mostly in French. The city is built on three levels. Dominating the city is the Queen's Palace and associated Royal Village or Rova. Now a national monument, it was once the residency of the Merina Dynasty which, in the 19th century, united all Madagascar for the first time. On the lowest level is the market of Analakely. The Zoma Market, claimed to be the second-largest in the world and certainly worth a visit, is held daily. The Tsimbazaza Zoological and Botanical Garden is open Thursday, Sunday and holidays 0800-1100 and 1400-1700. The Tourist Information Office is nearby. It is wise not to wander too far after dark.

Ambohimanga

The birthplace of the Malagasy state, Ambohimanga is 20km (12 miles) from the capital. Known variously as 'the blue city', 'the holy city' and 'the forbidden city', it is surrounded by forests. The citadel was an important Merina stronghold and retains several structures associated with their ceremonies. Its main gate is an enormous stone disc; 40 men were needed to roll it into position.

Elsewhere

Situated 80km (50 miles) from the capital, Mantasoa is a popular spot for picnics. The area was landscaped for the Merina Queens by a shipwrecked Frenchman and includes an artificial lake, pine forests and Madagascar's first industrial park.

Ampefy, 90km (60 miles) from the capital, is a volcanic region with spectacular waterfalls and geysers. Dams are used here to catch eels. Perinet, 140km (90 miles) from the capital, is a nature reserve, home of the *indri* (a tail-less lemur) and many species of orchid.

Also known as *Andasibe*, Antsirabe, 170km (110 miles) from the capital, is Madagascar's main industrial center. The volcanic hills surrounding the town are dotted with crater lakes. Madagascar's second-highest mountain, Tsiafajovona, may be seen to the west of the road from Antananarivo.

The North

The lush north is dominated by two great mountains. Tsarantanana, the island's highest at 2880m (9450ft), is covered with the giant ferns and lichens peculiar to high-altitude rainforests. Montagne d'Arbre (1500m/4900ft) is a national park and is famous for its orchids and lemurs. The monsoon falls in the north between December and March.

Mahajanga

A provincial capital, Mahajanga stands at the mouth of Madagascar's largest river, the Betsiboka. Boats depart for Nossi Bé and several other islands. The beach here is said to be free of sharks. The island's finest grottoes are at Anjohibe, 90km (60 miles) inland. There is a nature reserve at Ankarafantsika.

Nossi Bé

Nossi Bé is Madagascar's most important holiday resort. An island surrounded by smaller islands lying off the northwest coast, it is one hour by air from the capital. Exotic perfume plants such as ylang-ylang, vanilla (Madagascar is the world's largest producer), lemon grass and patchouli are grown here. The main town is Hell-Ville. Nearby, there is a ruined 17th-century Indian village.

Antseranana

A provincial capital, Antseranana (formerly Diégo Suarez) is a cosmopolitan seaport overlooking a beautiful gulf at the northernmost tip of the island. There are many lakes, waterfalls and grottoes in the rainforests above the port. Wildlife and flora includes lemurs, crocodiles and orchids. Permission to visit the national park at Montagne d'Arbre nearby must be obtained from the Ministère des Eaux et des Forêts, which has an office in the town. Boats may be taken to Nossi Bé. There is a good sandy beach at Ramena, but sharks may be a problem.

Ile Ste-Marie

Ile Ste-Marie (Nossi Boraha) lies off the east coast, 150km (90 miles) north of *Toamasina*. Its dense vegetation and the difficulty of navigating the lagoons which surround it made it an ideal base for pirates and, later, a colony for convicts. There are many clove plantations and several historic sites, including Madagascar's oldest Catholic church. The island is also known for its beautiful white-sand beaches and coral reefs.

The East Coast

Situated on the northeast coast, Toamasina is the country's main port and a provincial capital. It is an eight-hour drive from Antananarivo and, like the capital, it has several busy markets, including the Bazary. Around 11km (7 miles) north of the town are the Ivolina Zoological Park and Botanical Garden, containing every kind of vegetable species from the eastern forests and many varieties of animal life. Vatomandry, further south, is a very popular beach resort even though the sharks prevent swimming.

The South

The arid south is noted for its many remarkable species of cactus- and baobab-like plants and for the highly developed funerary art of its inhabitants, past and present.

Southern Highlands

Fianarantsoa, a provincial capital, is an important center for wine and rice production and a good base for exploring the southern highlands. Places to visit in the surrounding mountains include Amabalavao, said to be the 'home of the departed', where *antemore* paper and *lamba aridrano* silk are made; nearby Ambondrome and Ifandana crags, where the revered bones of exhumed ancestors may be seen (the latter was the site of a mass suicide in 1811); Ambositra and the neighboring Zafimaniny villages, where intricate marquetry products are made; the Isalo National Park, situated in a chain of sandstone mountains (camping is possible but it can only be reached by 4-wheel-drive vehicles or on foot with a guide); it is also the gateway to the Ranomafana National Park.

The East Coast

Mananjary is a popular beach resort on the east coast (but not for sea-bathing because of sharks). Taolanaro (formerly Fort Dauphin), in the southeast corner of the island, is the site of the first French settlement. Parts of the 17th-century fort remain. The city and surrounding area are famous for seafood and for orchids and carnivorous pitcher plants, which can be seen at the Mandona Agricultural Center at Sainte-Luce Bay.

The Southwest

Western Madagascar was once covered with deciduous forests, but is now mostly savannah. The economy is based around the *zebu*, a species of ox introduced in the eighth century by settlers from South-East Asia. Toliara, a provincial capital on the southwest coast, has excellent bathing beaches and opportunities for skindiving, fishing, sailing and other watersports.

National Parks

Spread across 152,000 hectares, the Tsingy de Bemaraha Strict Nature Reserve is located 60 to 80km inland from the west coast in the northern sector of the Anstingy region of the Bemaraha Plateau, north of the Manambolo River Gorge. Undisturbed forests, lakes and mangrove swamps are home to a variety of rare and endangered birds and lemurs. Rocky landscapes and limestone uplands are cut into large peaks with a mass of limestone needles. Rivers flow on the plateau and springs arise on each flank of the Tsingy, making this an important water catchment area. Ancient cemeteries can also be found in the Gorge.

Health, Passports and Visas

Passport/Visa

	Passport Required?	Visa Required?	Return Ticket Required?
British	Yes	Yes	Yes
Australian	Yes	Yes	Yes
Canadian	Yes	Yes	Yes
USA	Yes	Yes	Yes
Other EU	Yes	Yes	Yes

Passport Note

Passports valid for six months after date of entry required by all nationals referred to in the chart above.

Visas

Required by all nationals referred to in the chart above except:

(a) transit passengers continuing their journey by the same or first connecting aircraft within 24 hours provided holding onward or return documentation and not leaving the airport.

Note: Return or onward tickets are required; otherwise a deposit must be paid before arriving in Madagascar, which is equivalent to the cost of a flight to the country of origin.

Note: Nationals not referred to in the chart above are advised to contact the embassy to check visa requirements (see *General Info*).

Types of Visa and Cost

Tourist: £40 (single-entry); £50 (multiple-entry). *Business:* £55 (single-entry); £65 (multiple-entry).

Validity

Visas are issued for stays of up to 90 days and are valid for six months from date of issue.

Applications to:

Consulate (or consular section at embassy). Some nationalities are able to get a visa at Antananarivo airport on arrival; however it is strongly recommended to obtain a visa prior to this. Contact the embassy for further information before departure. (See *General Info*).

Working Days Required

Same day (personal applications); up to five days (postal applications).

Warning

Most visits to Madagascar are trouble-free but you should be aware of the global risk of indiscriminate international terrorist attacks, which could be against civilian targets, including places frequented by foreigners.

Travelers should avoid driving outside urban areas after dark, as there have been armed robberies at night on some of the major roads.

The cyclone season in Madagascar normally runs from January to March, coastal areas are particularly affected.

This advice is based on information provided by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in the UK. It is correct at time of publishing. As the situation can change rapidly, visitors are advised to contact the following organizations for the latest travel advice:

British Foreign and Commonwealth Office

Tel: (0845) 850 2829.

Website: www.fco.gov.uk

US Department of State

Website: <http://travel.state.gov/travel>

Health

	Special Precautions	Certificate Required?
Yellow Fever	Yes	1
Cholera	Yes	2
Typhoid and Polio	3	N/A
Malaria	4	N/A

Health Care

Health insurance is strongly recommended; it should include cover for emergency repatriation. Private and public healthcare is available, but public facilities can be very limited. It is highly recommended that visitors bring medication for stomach upsets.

Note

1

A yellow fever vaccination certificate is required from travelers arriving from, or having passed through, an area considered by the Malagasy authorities to be infected within six days; enquire at Embassy.

2

A cholera vaccination certificate is recommended for travelers arriving from, or having passed through, an area considered by the Malagasy authorities to be infected; enquire at Embassy.

3

Immunization against typhoid and poliomyelitis is often recommended.

4

Malaria risk, predominantly in the malignant *falciparum* form, exists all year throughout the country and is highest in coastal areas. Resistance to chloroquine has been reported. The recommended prophylaxis is mefloquine.

Madagascar FAQ

Location

Indian Ocean, 500km (300 miles) off the coast of Mozambique.

Area

587,041 sq km (226,658 sq miles).

Population

18.4 million (UN, 2005).

Population Density

31.34 per sq km.

Capital

Antananarivo (formerly Tananarive).

Population: 1.5 million (estimate, 2003).

Government

Republic since 1992. Gained independence from France in 1960.

Head of State: President Marc Ravalomanana since 2002.

Head of Government: Prime Minister Jacques Sylla.

Recent history: Marc Ravalomanana secured a second presidential term in December 2006, beating former prime minister Norbert Lala Ratsirahonan. Ravalomanana came to power in 2002 following a bitterly fought election in which then-incumbent Didier Ratsiraka refused to accept defeat. The country came close to civil war before Ratsiraka sought exile in France and Ravalomanana took power.

Language

The official languages are Malagasy (which is related to Indonesian) and French. Local dialects are also spoken. Very little English is spoken.

Religion

51 per cent follow animist beliefs; about 43 per cent Christian; remainder Muslim.

Time

GMT + 3.

Electricity

Mostly 220 volts AC, 50Hz. Plugs are generally two-pin.

Telephone

Country code: 261, followed by a two-digit number for an access provider, but a standard dialing code is expected to be introduced soon. After the international and access codes, numbers should be seven digits including two initial digits for the geographical area. The cheapest way to make phone calls is to use a telephone card and call from a telephone booth. Telephone cards can be purchased at post offices and most hotels.

Mobile Telephone

Roaming agreements exist with international mobile phone companies. Coverage reaches major cities and main roads.

Internet

Public Internet access exists in large cities; there are a few Internet cafes in Antananarivo.

Media

Ravalomanana owns the private *Malagasy Broadcasting System*, which operates the *MBS TV* and *Radio MBS* networks. Although nationwide radio and TV broadcasting remain the monopoly of the state, there are hundreds of private local radio and TV stations.

Post

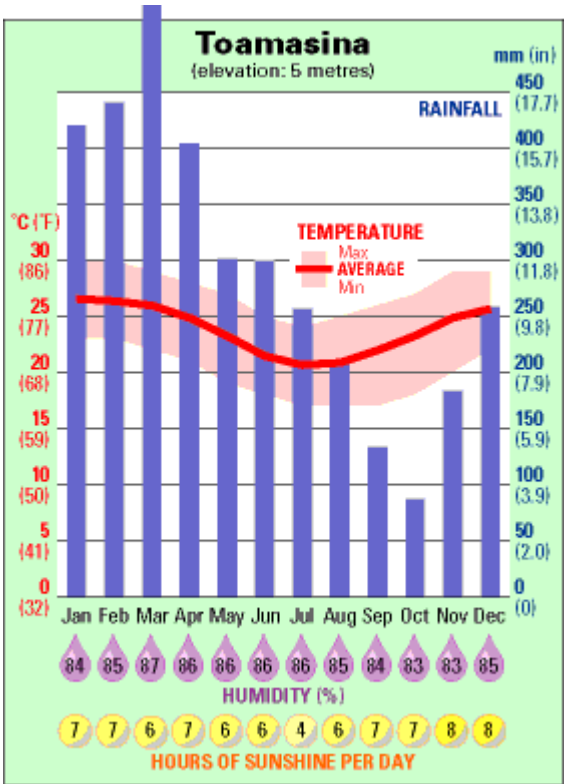
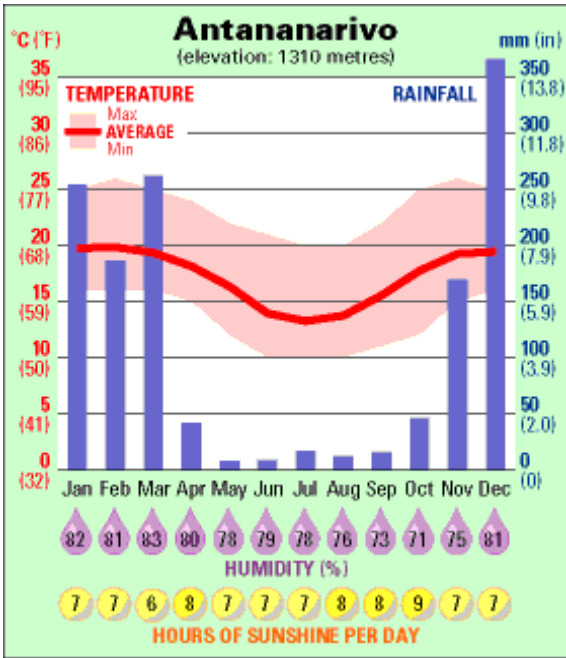
Airmail to Europe takes at least seven days and surface mail three to four months.

Weather:

Hot and subtropical climate, colder in the mountains. Rainy season: November to March. Dry season: April to October. The south and west regions are hot and dry. Monsoons bring storms and cyclones to the east and north from December to March. The mountains, including Antananarivo, are warm and thundery from November to April and dry, cool and windy the rest of the year.

Required Clothing

Lightweights are worn during the summer on high central plateau and throughout the year in the north and south. Warmer clothes are advised for during the evenings and winter in mountainous areas. Rainwear is advisable.



Press

- There are no English-language newspapers.
- Six dailies are published in French and/or Malagasy.
- The main papers include *La Gazette de la Grande Ile*, *Madagascar Tribune* and *Midi Madagasikara*.

Radio

- Many private radio stations in the capital are owned by pro-Ravalomanana politicians. However, a boom in privately-owned FM radio stations and more critical political reporting by the print media followed 1990's law on press freedom.

- *Malagasy National Radio* (RNM) is state owned.
- Privately-owned stations include *Radio Don Bosco* (Roman Catholic FM station), *Radio Tsioka Vao* and *Radio Korail*.
- *Radio MBS* is commercial and owned by Ravalomanana.

Language: Malagasy is the official language, but French is used in business and government and is widely spoken in the main cities. A few people involved in the tourism industry might be able to speak some English, but it is not widely spoken.

Currency: The official currency is the Malagasy ariary (MGA), which has been reintroduced to replace the Malagasy franc. Coins and notes display both currencies, but newer notes display the ariary more prominently than the franc. One ariary is equal to five francs. Foreign currencies can be exchanged at banks and official bureaux de change, but the ariary cannot be changed back into hard currency. Some banks will only accept US dollars or Euro. Travelers cheques can be exchanged at most banks and in major hotels, but some banks refuse to accept them. ATMs are available in Antananarivo. Most major credit cards are starting to be accepted in top hotels and major travel agencies in the capital and other major towns, but have limited usage elsewhere.

Time: Local time is GMT +3.

Electricity: Electrical current is 220 volts AC, 50Hz. Plugs are generally two-pin.

Communications: The international dialing code for Madagascar is +261. The outgoing code is 00 followed by the relevant country code (e.g. 0027 for South Africa). To make an international call to Madagascar, the dialing code of 261 must be followed by a two-digit operator code (e.g. 20 for TELMA, the most reliable), then the regional code (e.g. 22 for Antananarivo) and then the five-digit number. A GSM 900 network is in use, covering major cities and main roads. Public Internet access exists in large cities; there are a few Internet cafes in Antananarivo.

Duty Free: Visitors older than 21 years may bring 500 cigarettes or 25 cigars or 500g tobacco, as well as one bottle of alcohol into the country without incurring import duty. Visitors are allowed to export a maximum of 100g vanilla without cost.

Getting Around: Air Madagascar connects Antananarivo to 51 towns on the island although flights do not depart daily for most locations. The train journey between the capital and Toamasina, and between Fianarantsoa and Manakara is recommended for its scenery. Buses are the most commonly used form of transport for the local population and are generally overcrowded, leave at irregular times and are slow. The island has just three main roads (from Tana to Mahajanga, to Toamasina and to Tuléar), with dirt tracks covering the rest of the country, and many roads are impassable during the rainy season. Car hire is not common, but agencies can be found in the main tourist towns.

Tourist Office

Ministry of Culture and Tourism, Antananarivo: +261 (20)(22) 66805

Embassies

Madagascar Embassy, Washington DC, United States: +1 202 265 5525.

Madagascar Embassy, London, United Kingdom: +44 (020) 3008 4550.

Madagascar Embassy, Ottawa, Canada: +1 613 567 0505.

Madagascar Embassy, Pretoria, South Africa: +27 (0)12 342 0983-6.

Below are listed Public Holidays

1 Jan New Year's Day.

29 Mar Commemoration of the 1947 Rebellion.

9 Apr Easter Monday.

1 May Labor Day.

17 May Ascension Day.

26 Jun Independence Day.

15 Aug Assumption Day.

1 Nov All Saints' Day.

25 Dec Christmas Day.

1 Jan New Year's Day.

24 Mar Easter Monday.

29 Mar Commemoration of the 1947 Rebellion.

1 May Labor Day.

1 May Ascension Day.

26 Jun Independence Day.

15 Aug Assumption Day.

1 Nov All Saints' Day.

25 Dec Christmas Day.

Contact Information:

Ministère de la Culture et du Tourisme de Madagascar (Ministry of Culture & Tourism)

PO Box 610, rue Fernand Kasanga, Tsimbazaza, 101 Antananarivo, Madagascar

Tel: (2022) 66805.

Website: www.tourisme.gov.mg

Honorary Consulate of the Republic of Madagascar in the UK

16 Lanark Mansions, Pennard Road, London W12 8DT, UK

Tel: (020) 8746 0133.

Website: www.madagascar.org.uk

Opening hours: Mon-Fri 0930-1300.