

Out Of Office

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Scientists think Madagascar separated from the African continent about 160million years ago although it is thought the first people only arrived about 2,000 years ago. Many experts say it is likely they arrived in canoes via southern India and east Africa



About 80 per cent of the animals that live on Madagascar are not found anywhere else in the world, including the Indri, left

An island full of the spice of life

Madagascar: Sand-lined freshwater pools, woodlice the size of feet and the world's smallest reptiles await visitors to this paradise country **BY LEO BEAR**

Wow, Madagascar. I've always wanted to go there,' says the pharmacist as he hands my antimalaria tablets over the counter; the other people in the queue are nodding in agreement. This is a typical reaction. It seems everyone has Madagascar on their 'things to do before I die' list. For one thing, Madagascar has the highest number of unique plants and animals anywhere in the world. It also has cities bursting with life, beaches to rival the Maldives and all kinds of weird and wonderful customs. It's a huge landmass – two and a half times the size of Britain – so you need a bit of time if you want to see it properly. I'm heading away from the five-star resorts of the north, from Antananarivo, the capital, south to Toliara along the country's famous RN7 – one of the few good roads. Antananarivo (or Tana) is a good place to get acclimatised.

Zuma market bustles with locals selling shredded vegetables of every colour. Baskets overloaded with crisps are doled out in old tin cans, and everything from Barbie satchels to smoked anchovies is for sale. The flower market is abuzz because a Mazda 6 is being decorated for a wedding under the shade of a blooming Jacaranda tree. Cream Renault 4 taxis line the streets ready to whisk passengers off to Chez Sucett's and Sakamanga – the best restaurants in town. Tana is also where I meet my fellow travellers for the next 15 days. I've signed up on a group tour to save on the stress of maps, logistics and having to book hotels with my limited French. As soon as I meet the rest of the group though, I wonder if I've made a mistake: they're all grandparents. And Madagascar's full of them; groups of nifty, agile European grey-hairs in their sensible walking boots and breathable fabrics, comparing the



Food for thought: Traders sort red peppercorns at one of the island's many vibrant markets

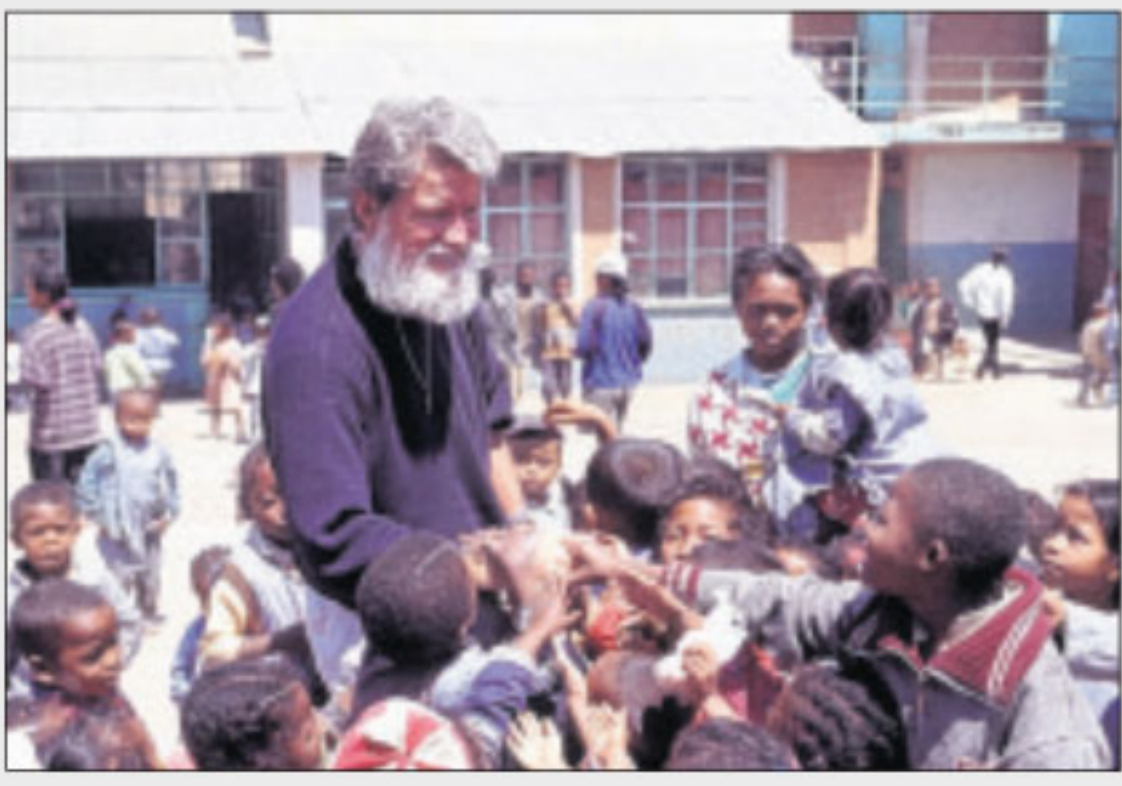
size of their camera lenses. But don't let this put you off. Leaving the capital behind, the RN7 leads us first to Perinet National Park – lemur territory. Our guide, Pascale, hops around snaking tree roots and razor-sharp palms to bring us face to face with the rare primates, native to Madagascar. The diademed sifaka is a caricature of an orangutan and the indri look like skinny panda bears. But the bamboo lemur (left) is the sweetest – a nervous little grey furball with imploring eyes. Adorable.

Back on the road, we travel from village to village, national park to national park, staying a few nights here and a few nights there. The scenery changes dramatically from one day to the next; from electric-green rice fields to baobab-strewn wildernesses striped black by slash and burn. Passing through villages, we watch chickens pick their way through corn drying on the side of the road and half-dressed children totter around on makeshift stilts. We stop off at Reserve Madagascar Exotic to check

out spineless hedgehogs and the world's smallest reptile, a minuscule chameleon that eluded David Attenborough for many years – a miracle in itself. On other stops, we watch craftsmen mould zebu horns into ornaments, and children casting cooking pots from vats of bubbling hot aluminium. In larger towns, men trot past hauling rickshaws of chattering ladies and wherever you go there are people touting sweet-scented vanilla pods. Further south, towns have a darker feel to them – the shadow of

sapphire dealing prevents us from stopping at a couple of places. Stopping off at Ranomofana National Park, we find giant bamboo arches spanning the road like spider legs. We're told it grows 5cm a day. Our guide, Theo, plunges us into the primary rainforest to point out red-fronted brown lemurs and their red-bellied cousins, and we take it in turns to spot woodlice the size of my feet. At last we reach the place I've been looking forward to most, a tropical paradise by the name of Isalo National Park. It's famous for its palm-shrouded

natural pools with sandy bottoms. And after 15 days of coaching it on hot dusty roads, it's just what the doctor ordered. One member of our group can't resist the urge to skinny-dip in the waterfall – luckily we have the place to ourselves. As I stop to catch my breath, I notice movement out of the corner of my eye. It's a family of lemurs leaping past us. Each one bounces on to a rock inches away from me before bounding off into the distance. It's an unexpected sighting and truly wonderful moment; just one of many that should put Madagascar on everyone's must-visit list.



Culture corner

Akamasoa is a hill town outside Madagascar's capital where a handsome and energetic Argentinian missionary known as Padre Pedro is doing work that's been compared with that of Mother Teresa. Akamasoa used to be a community of 'trash people' scavenging for rubbish and, on discovering the soil was suitable for manufacturing bricks, Pedro (pictured) helped the people build 3,200 houses, several schools and the sports hall where he holds his services. Religious or not, Pedro's rousing sermon and the joy on the faces of the hundreds crowded into the stadium prove a moving experience. Needless to say, visitors are welcome.

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Bare essentials

Madagascar is the fourth largest island in the world – it's slightly bigger than France. It is located in the Indian Ocean off the south-east coast of Africa. Language: Malagasy and French. Currency: £1 = 3,730 Malagasy ariaries

Getting there

Leo flew to Antananarivo with Air France. The 15-day Madagascan Discoverer trip from Exodus is available from £1,999 per person. For more information, visit www.exodus.co.uk or call 0845 863 9600

