

A i r l i n k

to Nosy Be, Madagascar

By Athol Franz

So, you may be thinking of spending a week or two in Madagascar on holiday, but you ask yourself why would anyone want to travel to this very large tropical island?



Relaxing on Charter Yacht Gecko - Christine Brits



Children of the island - Christine Brits



Christine Brits



Drone picture of the Charter Yacht Gecko with Lemur Island taken by Paul Changuion of wildweb



Typical Madagascar dhow - Christine Brits

Introduction to Madagascar

Officially the Republic of Madagascar, previously known as the Malagasy Republic, is an island in the Indian Ocean, off the coast of Southeast Africa. The nation comprises the island of Madagascar (the fourth-largest island in the world) and numerous smaller peripheral islands. Following the prehistoric breakup of the supercontinent Gondwana, Madagascar split from the Indian peninsula around 88 million years ago, allowing native plants and animals to evolve in relative isolation. Consequently, Madagascar is a biodiversity hotspot where more than 90% of its wildlife is found nowhere else on Earth. The island's diverse ecosystems and unique wildlife are threatened by the encroachment of the rapidly growing human population and other environmental threats.

The first archaeological evidence for human foraging on Madagascar dates back to 2000 BC. Human settlement of Madagascar occurred between 350 BC and AD 550 by Austronesian people arriving on outrigger canoes from Borneo. These were joined around AD 1000 by Bantu migrants crossing the Mozambique Channel from East Africa. Other groups continued to settle on Madagascar over time, each one making lasting contributions to Malagasy cultural life. The Malagasy ethnic group is often divided into 18 or more sub-groups of which the largest are the Merina of the central highlands.

Until the late 18th century, the island of Madagascar was ruled by a fragmented assortment of shifting sociopolitical alliances. Beginning in the early 19th century, most of the island was united and ruled as the Kingdom of Madagascar by a series of Merina nobles. The monarchy collapsed in 1897 when the island was absorbed into the French colonial empire, from which the island



Ladies at the 'Sacred Tree' - Athol Franz

gained independence in 1960. The autonomous state of Madagascar has since undergone four major constitutional periods, termed republics. Since 1992, the nation has officially been governed as a constitutional democracy from its capital at Antananarivo. However, in a popular uprising in 2009, President Marc Ravalomanana was made to resign and presidential power was transferred in March 2009 to Andry Rajoelina. Constitutional governance was restored in January 2014, when Hery Rajaonarimampianina was named president following a 2013 election deemed fair and transparent by the international community.

In 2012, the population of Madagascar was estimated at just over 22 million, 90% of whom live on less than \$2 per day. Malagasy and French are both official languages of the state. The majority of the population adheres to traditional beliefs, Christianity, or an amalgamation of both. Ecotourism and agriculture, paired with greater investments in education, health and private enterprise, are key elements of Madagascar's development strategy. Under Ravalomanana, these investments produced substantial economic growth, but the benefits were not evenly spread throughout the population, producing tensions over the increasing cost of living and declining living standards amongst the poor and some segments of the middle class. As of 2014, the economy had been weakened by the then recently concluded political crisis and quality of life remains low for the majority of the Malagasy population.

Nosy Be an island in the north of Madagascar

As Africa's largest island, Madagascar itself has many smaller beautiful islands. Nosy Be is an island to the north west of the



Island scene - Christine Brits

mainland and this destination is serviced by Airlink every week on a Sunday. As African Pilot, has undertaken significant publishing work for Airlink over many years, Christine Brits and I decided to take the opportunity to explore this beautiful part of the world. Our trip included many different aspects of what is available to South African and world tourists to this region. On arrival at the international airport, we were whisked away by road and then on a motor boat from the harbour of the local town Hell-Ville, the main town of Nosy Be to the island of Nosy Komba.

293 on Komba Guest House

On Nosy Komba we stayed in a rustic, but delightful guest house built and owned by Marcine Cooper known as 293 On Komba. An ex-East London resident Marcine travelled on holiday to the Nosy Be region and fell in love with the Nosy Komba region. The building of her lodge took six months and then two months to make all the furniture. Mostly local materials were used including wood, thatching and local granite blocks for building. At the time Marcine was still in East London so therefore the building progress was monitored by a local Malagasy man via photographs sent to Marcine. She arrived some two months before the end of the project. This guest house consists of five ensuite rooms that can accommodate up to nine guests at any one time. The rustic lodge is situated in a beautiful and peaceful setting relying on solar power and spring water from the mountain above. Dinner and breakfast meals are to set menus, but are deliciously creative. Marcine learnt to speak the local language and she taught her seven staff members to speak English.

The local village Ampangarinana has a queen who makes all the rules for the 2000 people who live on the island. Marcine says the people of the region are very talented and always friendly. During our two day stay, I did not witness any begging and people were always polite. There is also no bartering, because all the women work together, whilst the men fish, chop rocks, carve wood in the same way they have done peacefully for centuries. We met an Italian named Alfredo who with his wife Madio had the first small hotel in the village built 24 years ago. Alfredo leaves the island every now and again to look after his business interests in Italy.

Contact Marcine: E-mail: stay@293onkomba.com
website: www.293onkomba.com

Then it was the turn of the Nosy Be Tourism Department who took us for an excursion to the Reserve Naturelle de Lokobe National Park to meet the Lemurs. After a three man-power rowing experience in a local dug out boat where I was the manual bilge pump to the local village Ampasipohy, we went on a very exciting two-hour hike through tropical forests. This allowed for several encounters with various types of Lemurs as well as a Boa Constrictor that had recently fed on a baby Lemur. Then it was a visit to the Sacred tree close to main city Hell-Ville, capital of Nosy Be. We also visited the central market in the town of Hell-Ville where one can purchase almost anything that is made or grown on the island.



293 on Komba - Athol Franz



Hell-Ville market - Athol Franz



Boa constrictor - Athol Franz



Lemurs with Christine - Athol Franz



Pool at Ravintsara Wellness Hotel – Athol Franz

Ravintsara Wellness Hotel

That night we stayed at the four-star Ravintsara Wellness Hotel on the western side of the Nosy Be island. As a resort born from the harmonious encounter of nature and luxury, Ravintsara is located only 35 minutes away from Nosy-be airport (Fascene) and 20 minutes away from the city centre (Hell Ville). The resort is facing Sakatia island on the west coast overlooking spectacular sunsets with shimmering colours. The resort features a peaceful and relaxing five-hectare tropical garden which offers a unique and immersive experience of well-being amidst nature's sounds and smells. Spacious and luxurious bungalows offer the finest sophistication and comfort. With its extraordinary setting and its wide range of facilities Ravintsara Wellness Resort offers a luxurious break in the middle of nature.

**Contact: E-mail: info@ravintsara.mg
Website: www.ravintsarahotel.com**



Typical room at Ravintsara Wellness Hotel

Sailing the high seas on the charter yacht Gecko

In the morning, we took a short drive to Ambaro Beach for our speed boat pickup that would take us to Charter Yacht Gecko – the catamaran where we would meet up with our other travel companions Paul Changuion and his father Paul (senior) as well as the delightful three-man crew of Yacht Gecko. Gecko is 11 years old and was built in Cape Town; 11 metres long X 6 metres wide. Powered by two Yamaha 30 hp four-cylinder diesel engines, the boat has a water maker desalination plant capable of making 95 litres per hour of 'fresh' water.

Equipped with a fully battened main sail and a roller furler genoa (front sail), radar, all safety equipment including a life raft, VHF radio and E-purb the boat is very comfortable with an interior lounge with kitchen and an aft deck. It has four berths with showers and toilets, but one must remember that we were sailing in the tropics on very salty seas.



Mr & Mrs Pascale owners of Ravintsara Wellness Hotel



Approaching Charter Yacht Gecko



Paul caught a fish



Meal on Yacht Gecko

Over the two days and two nights we sailed and motored well to the south of Nosy Be towards the main island of Madagascar spending the first night in the sheltered bay of Baie d' Ambaratanila (Kisiman Bay). The second day we cruised past Baie des Russes (Russian Bay) past numerous small islands including the Lemur sanctuary at an island close to Nosy Iranja where we visited the delightful Lemurs that are so tame they sit on your shoulders. During the course of this voyage we were privileged to catch some game fish, which was a first for me. We also had an opportunity to do some snorkelling in the beautiful coral reefs of some of the islands we anchored at for a few hours. The second night we anchored in the quiet waters of Baramahamay Bay. The three outstanding crew members were Captain Albert Ramiandrisoa, cook Alexis Ravo and deck hand Maurich Zafi.

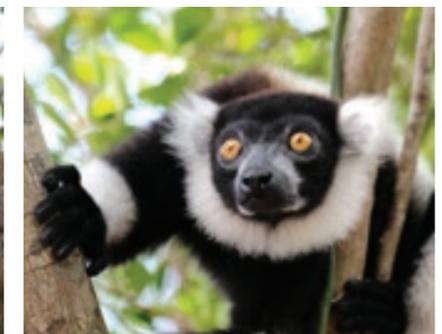
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Onwards to Nosy Saba

On the Friday morning, the four of us were collected from the Charter Yacht Gecko by a fast speed boat, but due to the swells and the prevailing westerly wind this transfer to Nosy Saba took several hours. Imagine a lodge on a relatively flat island surrounded by the most beautiful coral reefs and sparkling clear water. The villas were delightful with every luxury that any holiday maker could wish for, whilst the beaches were pristine white. I understand that this lodge has the only privately owned 600 metre runway in Madagascar and on the Sunday, we were flown out two at a time on board a Piper Arrow 4 by local commercial pilot Tantely Ranaivoarison.

Flight to Nosy Be International Airport

Tantely trained at the local school of aviation situated in the capital of Madagascar – Antananarivo. He also completed some of his safety courses at Cranfield in South Africa and to date he



Lemurs picture by Christine Brits



Nosy Saba pool – Athol Franz



Arriving at Nosy Be Airport Unsolite Travel Fly - Athol Franz

has some 1300 hours flying mostly single engine aircraft. He is presently busy with his conversion to twin engine aircraft such as the Cessna 310 and Piper Chieftain. He plans to eventually obtain his ATPL and follow in his father's footsteps to join an airline so that he can fly turbines and jets. The charter company who Tantely works for is based at Nosy Be's airport called Insolite Travel Fly, which has the following aircraft on its charter licence: Cessna 210; Cessna 172; Piper Pa-28 Arrow 4; Cessna 310; Alouette II helicopter and an Airbus AS350 helicopter.

Contact Website: www.itf.mg • Tel +261 32 11 42727

Airlink's schedule to Nosy Be

Airlink operates the Embraer ERJ 135LR regional jet aircraft once a week on Sundays to Nosy Be International Airport. This aircraft can accommodate a maximum of 37 passengers, but the seats are restricted to 35 due to the mandatory life raft being positioned on two seats in the centre of the aircraft. As a 'pocket rocket' the Embraer 135 cruises at 37 000 feet at 800 Km/h, well above the worst of the weather that frequents this route. The departure time from OR Tambo is at 09h30 and the flight is three and a half hours. After a 45-minute stop at Nosy Be the aircraft departs at 14h45 Madagascar time, but due to headwinds the ERJ needs to land at Beira, Mozambique for a brief stopover where the passengers remain on board to take on two and a half tons of fuel for the short 45-minute flight back to OR Tambo. Both flights were filled almost to capacity with an interesting variety of adventurous people.



Pilots outbound flight

Captain Andre Bakker with a total time of 17 500 hours of which 8 500 are flying the Embraer ERJ
Co-pilot Jannes du Rand with a total time of 3 000 hours and 1 000 hours on the Embraer ERJ

Pilots operating the flights

As always it is an absolute pleasure to meet up with fellow pilots and all Airlink pilots are no exception. On this trip the pilots were as follows:

- Flight to Nosy Be
Captain Andre Bakker with a total time of 17 500 hours of which 8 500 are flying the Embraer 135 / 145 ERJ
Co-pilot Jannes du Rand with a total time of 3 000 hours and 1 000 hours on the Embraer ERJ.

- Return flight to Johannesburg
Captain JJ Siebert with 11 000 hours has been with Airlink since September 2007 and has been a captain on the Embraer ERJ for the past five years. He completed his ATPL in 2005 flying Beechcraft 1900s and then the Jetstream with Airlink followed by the Embraer. JJ says he loves the diversity of the routes that Airlink operates.

Co-pilot Pieter Brits (24) trained at 43 Air School on the first integrated ALTP course from May 2011 until June 2012. He started with Airlink on 3 November 2014. He has 3 000 hours of which 1850 are flying the Embraer 135 / 145 ERJ.

So, after reading this article you would like to consider travelling to Madagascar and Nosy Be in particular? The best way is to book through an experienced travel agent and I recommend MadagasCat Charters and Travel since my dealings with Harriet have been exceptional and this trip to Madagascar was the adventure of a lifetime! 📸

Contact Harriet Joao • Cell: 084 524 9706 • Tel: 021 200 0173



Pilots return flight

Captain JJ Siebert and Co-pilot Pieter Brits (24) who trained at 43 Air School on the first integrated ALTP course from May 2011 until June 2012. He started with Airlink on 3 November 2014. He has 3 000 hours of which 1850 are flying the Embraer ERJ

"Come fly with me..."

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