



# NOSY BE:

## The next BIG thing



With wild beaches, weird creatures and wonderful wandering, a new direct flight from Joburg to Madagascar's little-big island is the final ingredient in the holiday of a lifetime. By **Elizabeth Sleith**

### YOUR NEED-TO-KNOW

**N**OSY BE is an island 19km off the northwest coast of Madagascar. Pronounce it how you read it, in English, or pull up your nostrils and add some French flair, Nossy Beh ... either way it means Big Island in Malagasy. That's kind of ironic since its Momma Bear is the fourth largest island in the world. Still, this zookinz little-big guy — along with its sprinkling of smaller islands — is Madagascar's Magic Kingdom for beach holidays, and rightly so. It's got the coddling climate (even the sea sits at between 26-29°C year-round), marine metropolises under the dream-sequence surface and, up top, palm-edged beaches so fine they're barely legal. So whether you pick one perfect spot and plant roots like a baobab, hotel-hop or charter a crewed boat in the ultimate indulgence, you're guaranteed more Instagram moments than you can shake a selfie stick at. Better yet, just unplug. A holiday here is the ultimate throw-back. It's rough around the edges, but it's all the more exhilarating for that. It's Alex Garland's beach before the comedown. A land before timestare. The perfect polaroid.

### IT JUST GOT CLOSER

**U**NTIL recently, it did take some moxie to get there. South Africans had to go via Antananarivo on the mainland and spend the night before jetting

out the next day. Now, Airlink has a once-weekly return flight direct to Nosy Be, meaning you fly on Sunday morning and will be pool-side with your first caipirinha long before the sun has even hinted at its first yawn.

### CREATURES SMALL (AND GREAT)

**O**N my first day, just a 10-minute boat ride from the Amarina Resort, where I'd slept under the spell of the shushing ocean the night before, I found myself marooned with an Italian girl. Uninhabited Nosy Fahiny is a lazy day-trip destination, a wide, coral beach and a fish-fall reef — snorkelling perfection. The girl, Geneva Simoncini, is the hotel's biologist, here to accompany tourists on excursions and to breathe scientific life into the bounty that surrounds them. From her, I learnt about Madagascar's unique biodiversity — 90% of the species here are found nowhere else on earth. The most famous of these are the lemurs, and Geneva's version of how they came about rivals the most fantastic creation myths. In a time of strife, floods perhaps, their primate ancestors fled on makeshift rafts (read floating vegetation) from the mainland (Africa). Small, nocturnal and able to lower their metabolism to survive life at sea, they finally crashed into this predator-free paradise that, being as large as it is, also had the goods to sustain them. And so they thrived and diversified.

Maki-maki, then, as they are called in Madagascar, are absolute miracles. I must wait a few more days, though, before I see some, in Lokobe Reserve on the southeast. Getting there is an adventure itself. We go by loka, a traditional dugout canoe, from Ambatozavavy, powered by guide Claudio Indrianoahy, and a boatman who speaks not a word but keeps us gliding past gnarled mangroves to the village of Ampasipohy. In the forest, we walk on muddy paths in dappled light. Our spotter, Anwar Alle, darts off frequently, soundlessly, to point his panga at something often initially imperceptible. We South Africans are used to elephants, rhino, zebra ... all hard to miss. But Madagascar's unique wildlife are wily and small. Often, one must squat. Anwar chases them down, picks them up, holds them in his hands or balances them on a luminous leaf. Ah, a chameleon that looks like a twig, smaller than his thumbnail. There, a leaf-fall gecko has assumed the colouring of the bark it squats on, so that only a blinking eye is a cue. We see a slumbering boa, posing in a tree. And up high, hanging out in the canopy, some maki-maki, little tufts of miracles — microcebus, the mouse lemur. They stare down at me with crazy eyes, staring up at them. In the end, we see several on our walk. Every time we move on from a sighting, I turn to catch Claudio lingering to

wave at them. It makes them look, he says.

### ADRIFF ON BLISS

**I**N a series of pinch-me experiences, one of my more sublime is a day and night on a charter boat with MadagasCat Charters & Travel. The Maki Cat arrives to fetch me after my night on the magnificently secluded Nosy Iranja — and then it's three men and me and the sea. They are Stephan Helou, the skipper; Noel Djasanzava, his right-hand man; and Frederik Raphael Zamany, the chef. While they busy themselves in the background, the first two sailing us somewhere and Frederik down below in a steam-filled kitchen, preparing a seafood lunch from the bounty they have caught that very day, I sit up top in the sunshine with a book and a beer. From the boat, islands plod past us, their green tangles crowding up so high into the sky they might almost tip over and the sea is 50 shades of blue, silver on the horizon. My soundtrack is a hum from the boat and the odd plip of a turtle poking a leather face out of the water.

Occasionally, we pass a traditional fishing boat under an enormous sail, why men working their sinewy muscles to stay their course.

Sailing inspires contemplation. Adrift on a little boat in this huge ocean, I feel small and magnificent; humble and invincible, perhaps not unlike the maki-maki who drifted here from Africa a million years ago. Unhappy with their circumstances, they chose another destiny — and isn't that what holidays are for us? For myself, this day, I choose to nod off while another dreamy island floats towards me.

### ALL ROADS LEAD TO HELLVILLE

**N**OSY BE has a population of 100 000 and half of them live in the capital, Hellville. Pity that the name has a less dramatic root than you might expect — it's after Admiral de Hell, a French governor of Réunion. Ignore that and the title still amplifies its ramshackle romance. If Havana and Delhi had a love child, Hellville would be it, a camera-ready faded beauty with character and colour everywhere. It's sexy squalor with soul. Here, traditional dresses pass by high heels and tight skirts; young men loiter in ill-fitting pants and baseball caps. Many of the shops are nothing but grass stalls, roofed with palm leaves, bleeding into the road as a stream of yellow tuk-tuks (the town taxi) curls along the streets among old French cars and zebu, the ubiquitous humpbacked cattle almost as emblematic of Madagascar as the maki-maki. If you find yourself needing cash, you'll come here as it's where the only ATMs are. Don't rush through. A walk along the crazy streets to the heart of the town, the food market, full of fish and spice, is exhilarating.

### UNDER THE SEA

**T**HE land sure is lovely but it's what's inside that counts, right — especially when we're talking seaside holidays?



**SMOOTH OPERATORS:** Clockwise from left: A Madagascan version of the famous dhow; mouse lemurs in Lokobe National Park; dancing women in Ampasipohy village; a tuk-tuk driver in Hellville; and the writer on her amazing dive



JACQUES VIEIRA

Though I've been warned there's been some bleaching, I find the coral here to be some of the healthiest I've seen in years of dipping my masked face into salty waters. I snorkel in several spots — most notably off Nosy Tanikely, a marine reserve; Nosy Iranja; and Nosy Antsoha — and everywhere is an incredible cornucopia. But the island of Sakatia stands out, thanks mainly to the people of Sakatia Lodge, who gave me an ultimate first-timer thrill.

Dive instructor Jacques Vieira, whose family own the lodge and who manages the dive centre with his wife, Sandra, took me out to sea in a small boat for a lesson that ridiculously quickly had me standing on the ocean floor.

Water lapping at our sides, he told me some basic hand signals and instructed me how to equalise. Then we were in.

As an absolute virgin, I must have been apprehensive but I concentrated only on Jacques's eyes and hand signals, obeying everything. He did the grunt work on the apparatus; I only had to hold my nose and blow when I felt pressure in my ears.

As I focused so carefully on that, we sank

almost without my knowing it — and suddenly we had both hit the bottom of the sea.

I have no idea how long the dive was, but I know I loved it. It went by in a haze of tiny creatures and bubbles and the weird sound of my assisted breath.

The next day I was due to leave but Jacques took me out again with just a snorkel this time so I might see a giant turtle. It took some persevering, me missing them repeatedly, him insisting there were enormous ones, right there. Finally, one glided out of the dark towards me. It was all slow motion, a giant shell over dainty fins, a dark spell in deep water that still dances in my dreams.

### THE BOTTOM LINE

**N**OSY BE is a great choice for the curious, adventurous spirit. It's a vacation with a dash of daring so it feels pioneering. Honestly, it's got something that's getting harder and harder to come by: simplicity and so much beauty. Don't hesitate.

● Sleith was a guest of MadagasCat Charters & Travel and Airlink.



### Places to stay

■ **AMARINA RESORT:** An Italian-owned operation whose main market is package tourists from home. It has 58 beach-front bungalows, buffets in the dining room and sunset yoga with a saxophonist. See <http://voihotels.com/en/destinations/madagascar>.

■ **RAVINTSARA WELLNESS HOTEL:** On the west coast of Nosy Be, its luxurious bungalows are spread out across 5ha of tropical gardens so gorgeous the hotel offers garden tours. It has several amenities on site, including a spa, steam room and hairdresser, a pool and kids' playground. The beach alongside the property is not the nicest for swimming but there is a pool and the hotel offers free daily transfers to another beach. See [ravintsarahotel.com](http://ravintsarahotel.com).

■ **NOSY BE HOTEL:** This four-star boutique hotel was one of my favourites. Deep colours and dark wood made it feel like a rambling colonial mansion. My room was floor-to-low-ceiling darkwood with a fairy-tale princess four-poster bed draped in netting. The lovely gardens lead on to the restaurant and then Bellevue Beach, where children walk home from school.

■ **ZAHIR LODGE:** A warm and friendly little spot with eight bungalows around a swimming pool and a super sociable ethos in the bar-dining area. A secret pathway leads to direct access to the 1km-long Madirokely Beach.

■ **ZAHIR NOSY IRANJA:** Nosy Iranja is called the perfect island and a stay here is something really special. The lodge's few wood-and-thatch huts are right on the beach. Just behind them is a small village, whose inhabitants seem to live off the sea and the tourists, for whom they specialise in intricate tablecloths. Day trippers dash over by the boatload but there is more than enough beach for everyone. When the power goes out at 10.30pm, it's just you and the stars.

■ The motor yacht **MAKI CAT** will carry you away with a skipper and a chef and a little boat for trundling off to whatever island takes your fancy. The highest form of bliss. See [madagascat.co.za](http://madagascat.co.za).

■ Family-owned **SAKATIA LODGE** on the eponymous island has bungalows in lovely gardens perched on a hill over the ocean and an extremely laid-back, welcoming vibe, thanks largely to Jacques Vieira (from Gonubie near East London) and his wife, Sandra. It's popular with South Africans and I don't wonder at all why. Of all the places I stayed, it's the one I'd most like to see again. Visit [sakatia.co.za](http://sakatia.co.za).

### SPECIAL OFFER

A seven-night holiday with six nights on Maki Cat with all meals and activities (except scuba) and return airfares from Joburg is R50 100 pp (based on six people travelling). Until end November, Maki is offering two free nights and Airlink has a winter special offering up to R5 000 pp discount (only available through MadagasCat and other nominated agents, valid up to mid-September 2016). Maki's two free nights makes the price R24 845 pp, and the Airlink special drops it to R21 845 pp. See [madagascat.co.za](http://madagascat.co.za).