

# Northern Madagascar



If you're unable to decide between an over-easy beach vacation or a 'lace up your boots and forge a new trail' kind of holiday, you'll dig travel in Northern Madagascar.

White-sand beaches, air perfumed with ylang-ylang and vanilla, snorkelling in a sea of emerald, mangrove swamps and centuries-old baobabs are all hallmarks of Madagascar's most interesting, diverse and, at times, disparaged region. Villages of simple homes made from sticks sit flush with the lux new tourist resorts.

The eclectic region is split into two distinct parts. Nosy Be is Madagascar's premiere kick-back-and-relax beach destination. The island is as swanky (and expensive) as the country gets, with a number of posh resorts (although they're not exactly Bora Bora luxury-wise). Overall it's a charming place, with gorgeous water and delicious seafood, where it's very easy to lose track of time for a week or so.

The Diego Suarez area is Madagascar's best-kept secret, and especially appealing to those seeking paradise lost – it sees far fewer visitors. Here you'll find two national parks still so wild that four new species of lemur were discovered in 2006 alone! There are kilometres of hiking trails through psychedelic forests of spindly red rocks and past trees with tumours shaped like giant squid growing off their sides. On the coast, palm-fringed sandy shores, sparkling sapphire water and an emerald sea keep beach bums smiling for days. Diego is the place to go if you want to race quad-bikes over dunes or try kitesurfing in one of the three beautiful bays framing the city.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Enjoying rum punch and grilled lobster under the palm trees at Chez Loulou, and catching another amazing sunset on Nosy Be's **Andilana beach** (p171)
- Indulging in a little adventure – either via quad-bike or kite-board – and checking out the brilliant scenery around **Diego Suarez** (p175)
- Taking solitary walks in the dappled rainforest of **Parc National de Montagne d'Ambre** (p184)
- Discovering spires of ruby-red *tsingy* and nearly a dozen species of lemur in the wild **Réserve Spéciale de l'Ankàrana** (p186)
- Uncovering the underwater world while diving off **Nosy Komba** (p172)



■ HIGHEST POINT: 1785m

■ PRINCIPAL TRIBE: Antakàrana



## Getting There & Away

**Air Madagascar** (☎ 82 211 93; Ave Sourcouf, Diego Suarez) flies between Nosy Be and Milan (€871) twice a week; it also has flights from Nosy Be to Antananarivo (Ar304,600), Réunion (Ar600,000) and Diego Suarez (Ar132,000) three times a week. From Diego Suarez there are daily flights to Antananarivo (Ar304,600) and regular flights to Sambava (Ar192,000),

Toamasina (Ar525,600) and Mahajanga (Ar288,000). Remember, if you fly Air Madagascar into the country you are eligible for a 50% discount on domestic flights – bring your outbound tickets to the Air Mad office. Note that ticket prices fluctuate wildly in Madagascar, and are dependent on the cost of petrol, as well occupancy, so use these rates only as a guide.

Sailing yachts regularly come into Nosy Be, and many are prepared to take passengers. Their principal destination is the Comorian island of Mayotte.

The road journey from Diego Suarez to Antananarivo is a long and arduous one, particularly if you elect to do it by taxi-brousse (bush taxi; Ar60,000, at least two days). The worst patch of road is the 200km of the Route Nationale 6 (RN6) south of Ambanja. To Mahajanga (Ar55,000, 36 hours), expect a similarly arduous ride. To the east, the route to Ambilobe takes around two hours, followed by at least a day of potholes before you arrive at Iharana.

## Getting Around

Even though the road is sealed all the way, the six-hour minibus ride from Ankify (the port for boats to Nosy Be) to Diego Suarez is as hard on the arse as it is on the attitude. Expect vehicles to be filled to triple capacity, and try to move as little as possible or you'll likely end up with someone's body part across your face! The good news is the route from Nosy Be to Ankify (via ferry) then on to Diego (by road) is one of Madagascar's most organised; numerous taxis-brousses ply the route between the port and Diego daily. If you're coming or going between Diego and Nosy Be you can purchase a boat/minibus combo ticket (Ar40,000). If you aren't on a combo ticket, just show up at the taxi-brousse stand in Ankify at about 9am and ask for a direct – make sure to clarify this before boarding or the trip may triple in length – minibuses to Diego; going the opposite direction taxis-brousses leave Diego around 5.30am.

Ferries and speedboats run between Nosy Be and Ankify multiple times daily year-round, although it's best to arrive between 7.30am and 8.30am as this is when the sea is most placid and the trip safest. The speedboat (around Ar20,000) costs only a little more than the ferry and takes just 30 minutes as opposed to two long hours. The only reason to ever take the ferry is if you have a vehicle with you. Don't expect life-vests on either vessel.

## NOSY BE

pop 40,000

Despite being Madagascar's number-one beach destination, attracting thousands of sunscreen-slathered tourists from across the globe year round, Nosy Be and its surrounding islands

(p172) remain paradise in the buff. Luxury doesn't always mean electricity or even a good mattress, but it's this exact lack of 21st-century fluff that makes it so appealing in the first place. With only one super-pimp package resort (aimed squarely at the Italian charter market), Nosy Be is refreshingly void of bling. This is an island where you can read a trashy novel in the sand without ever hearing the whir of jet-skis.

Although Nosy Be's beaches (and resorts) don't look as fantasy-fulfilling as some in the Caribbean or Greece, they do win points for tranquillity, gorgeous light, sparkling clear turquoise water (void of the seaweed that plagues many Eastern African beaches) and excellent al fresco restaurants serving seafood feasts on the sand.

The air is scented with ylang-ylang and vanilla and the pace of life is as slow and drawn-out as the island's killer sunsets. As the sky turns pink and purple the last rays of sun make silhouettes of the wooden pirogues and women clad in bright sarongs walking home with the day's catch in buckets on their heads. This event, which starts around 5.45pm and manages to stretch on for nearly an hour, is more intense and captivating than any movie you'll ever see. And as most of Nosy Be's infrastructure is on its western edge, you can witness the big yellow ball disappearing into the shadowed sea straight from the comfort of your bungalow's saggy mattress should you choose.

Nosy Be is the most expensive destination in Madagascar, and rooms can cost twice as much here as on the mainland. Still, compared to Europe or North America, prices remain relatively low and many visitors find the lack of major development and *mora mora* (slowly slowly) lifestyle worth the few extra euros it costs to get here. The climate is sunny all year round, but there's a risk of cyclones in February and March.

For the best-hued water and whitest sand head as far north as possible. With its fields of sugarcane, rum distilleries and single-gauge railway, inland Nosy Be has a faintly Caribbean atmosphere. If you can drag yourself away from the beach there are some beautiful out-of-the-way corners to explore.

## History

Nosy Be's first inhabitants are believed to have been 15th-century Swahili and Indian traders. Later, the island served as a magnet for refugees, merchants and settlers of all descriptions.

## NOSY BE & SURROUNDING ISLANDS



In 1839, the Sakalava queen Tsiomeko fled to Nosy Be and turned to the French for help in resisting her Merina enemies. In 1841, the Sakalava ceded both Nosy Be and neighbouring Nosy Komba to France.

In recent years, with increasing tourism development and local environmental pressures, deforestation has become a problem on the island, as has destruction and damage of offshore coral reefs.

## Orientation

Nosy Be's capital, main port and only major town is Hell-Ville, on the island's southeastern corner. There are no good beaches, but it does have banks, internet access and the Air Madagascar office.

Ambatoloaka and Madirokely beaches, which begin 10km west of Hell-Ville, are the two most developed beaches on Nosy Be, and both offer a wide range of accommodation and eating options catering to all budgets. Although neither beach is Nosy Be's most attractive, the more expensive hotels here do such a good job at international and local promotion that many people book them out before arriving (not always with happy results). These beaches are also convenient if you need to be near Hell-Ville's modern amenities or the airport. Madirokely, to the north, is the better of these two (which are really one joint strip of sand).

The further north you go, the better the beaches get. Andilana, at the northwest tip, is by far Nosy Be's crown jewel. A paradise of white sand, swaying palms and the most postcard-worthy turquoise water around, it is one of Nosy Be's least developed parts. It appeals to honeymooners and couples looking for romantic tranquillity.

## Activities

Organised activities in Nosy Be are still in relative infancy. To really get off the beaten path, charter a boat with a local fisherman and spend a day snorkelling and exploring nearby islands. Depending on the number of people you have and your bargaining skills, charters start at around Ar75,000 per person. To live out your stranded-on-a-deserted-island fantasy, ask your driver to take you to the northeast's deserted, and wildly gorgeous, beaches.

## DIVING & SNORKELLING

Nosy Be and the other islands are home to a rich diversity of marine life and offer good

diving and snorkelling. Boxfish, surgeonfish, triggerfish, damselfish, clown fish, yellow-fin tuna, barracuda, eagle rays, manta rays and even the occasional whale can all be spotted. Around Nosy Sakatia you're likely to see clown fish, barracuda, turtles, and perhaps dolphins and whale sharks.

On average, visibility on dives is about 15m year-round – much more on good days. The best months for diving are from April to June and October to November. July and August can be windy, especially to the north around Nosy Mitsio. The best months for seeing whale sharks are October and November; while manta rays seem more prevalent from April to June and October to November. Good spots for snorkelling include Nosy Tanikely and Nosy Mitsio.

Prices are about €37 for a *baptême* (first dive), €35/65 for one/two with equipment, and €40 for a night dive.

You should understand that if you have an accident there is no hyperbaric chamber anywhere in Madagascar. You will have to be air-lifted out to Mauritius or Réunion; make sure you have insurance. If you're at all worried, do an introductory dive (even if you're certified) as these don't go deep enough to cause the bends, but still offer the opportunity to experience Madagascar's unique underwater world.

If you are staying in Andilana there is good snorkelling just offshore on the northernmost portion of the beach. You need to go early – be back by around 11am when the tides come in, otherwise the return swim may be a bit treacherous. The reef is just a few hundred metres off the beach. Enter between the steps leading up to Au Belvedere and the Andilana Resort and it's an easy wade out to the point – the water is only chest deep for all but the last portion of the trip, making it great for novices. With big ocean fish, manta rays and even turtles, not to mention moving conchs and bright coral, there's enough underwater wildlife to keep even experts smiling through their mask. Plus it's free.

Dive courses are conducted in French or English with some staff also speaking Italian or German. Prices start at about €225 for an advanced open-water course; it's best to book certification courses in advance. Dive centres include the following.

**Forever Dive** (☎ 032 07 125 65; forever.dive@simicro.mg; Madirokely) A smaller operator, Forever Dive is run

by the friendly Sylvia and offers intro and double dives at slightly lower prices, and doesn't charge more for solo divers.

**Océane's Dream** (☎ 86 614 26, 032 07 127 82; oceand@wanadoo.mg; Ambatoloaka) One of the most well-established and recommended operators on the island offers single and introductory dives along with catamaran-based diving cruises to Nosy Mitsio, Nosy Iranja and Nosy Radama for €550 per person. A minimum of two people (previous certification required) is needed. It also does CMAS dive courses.

**Tropical Diving** (☎ 032 07 127 90; Madirokely) Offers a good range of PADI courses and a variety of diving excursions to the islands; it's inside the Coco Plage Hotel.

## FISHING

The best months for fishing are from March to June and October to December. For sailfish, the season runs from June to October. Fishing excursions aren't cheap – expect to pay at least €400 per day per boat, including equipment, for a maximum of four people. Fishing operators include the following.

**International Fishing Club** (☎ 86 614 29; hotel.espadon@malagasy.com; Hôtel L'Espadon, Ambatoloaka)  
**Le Grand Bleu** (☎ 86 634 08; www.legrandbleunosybe.com in French; Le Grand Bleu Hotel, Ampasimoronjia)

## OTHER ACTIVITIES

Riding a quad or a motorbike across sand, through water or along a dusty red dirt track is becoming a popular way to spend a Nosy Be afternoon, and many midrange and top-end resorts now offer the sport on their activity menu. There are a few good operators in the Andilana area, including **Le Grand Bleu** (☎ 86 920 23; www.legrandbleunosybe.com; Le Grand Bleu Hotel, Ampasimoronjia). This hotel just south of Andilana proper rents two-person quad bikes and Yamaha 400 motorbikes for Ar171,000 per three hours (pay only Ar121,500 if you're riding solo). The hotel also offers old-fashioned water-skiing for Ar67,500 per person (minimum of two people), and rents sea kayaks (half/full day Ar37,800/48,600) and snorkelling equipment (Ar10,800 per day). Excursions to snorkelling favourite Nosy Fanny cost Ar94,500 per person including lunch and equipment.

On Andilana beach, **Quad Run** (☎ 86 921 51) rents two person quad bikes for €40 per day; get info at **Kokoa Surf, Sun & Fun** (☎ 86 921 122; www.kokoa-nosybe.com; Andilana Beach) on the beach between Chez Loulou and the souvenir stalls. Owned by Roberto Moreni, who also speaks English, it is a first-class company geared pri-

## THE DONIA

Every June, Nosy Be holds a week-long music festival known as the Donia. Groups from Madagascar and neighbouring islands perform at venues in various parts of the island, with attendant carnival, sporting events and seminars. For French-language information, go to <http://perso.wanadoo.fr/jbemisik/donia.htm>.

marily to the Italian market. It also teaches the arts of kitesurfing (per hour €30) and windsurfing (per hour €15). Although prices are a bit steeper than elsewhere, Roberto's clients don't seem to mind paying for the personalised service – many return year after year.

## Tours

Naturally, Nosy Be is home to dozens of tour companies, some specialising in multi-day dive or snorkel cruises around the various islands, while others simply provide inter-island transport or day excursions. Many dive operators also organise boat excursions. In addition to the contacts listed here, touts sell trips directly to hotel guests and sunbathers on the beach. Although not everyone is happy with these trips in local wooden pirogues, most people return quite satisfied, if a little tomato coloured – take plenty of sunscreen! If you know how to barter, these excursions can work out to be significantly cheaper – a day of snorkelling around Nosy Be's sister islands, with stops for lunch and sunbathing, should cost between Ar75,000Ar and Ar100,000.

Organised operators include the following:  
**Daniel** (☎ 032 04 069 59; Hell-Ville) A long-established operator offering glass-bottomed catamaran day cruises to Nosy Komba and Nosy Tanikely. Rates are Ar80,000 per person including a slap-up lunch and free rum (but excluding other drinks) and transport to and from your hotel. Snorkelling equipment can be hired for Ar10,000. The *Daniel* departs daily at about 8.30am from the port in Hell-Ville, returning in the late afternoon. The boat can drop you off at Nosy Komba and/or Nosy Tanikely, and pick you up one or more days later for no extra cost. A minibus to the port departs Ambatoloaka at 8am daily from Location Jeunesse on the main street. Sailing time is about 45 minutes from Hell-Ville to Nosy Komba, about one hour from Nosy Komba to Nosy Tanikely, and about one hour from Nosy Tanikely back to Hell-Ville.  
**Island Quest** (☎ 86 615 52; www.islandquest.co.za) Check out the pimp website at this well-organised South

African company. Trips are based aboard the luxury catamaran *Bossi*, which sleeps up to eight people. This operator offers four- and five-day island cruises; diving and fishing can also be arranged. Book well in advance as it fills fast. Rates start at around €200 per person per day, including meals (but not booze; you can bring your own, however), dives and fishing.

**Jungle Village** (☎ 86 93 102; www.nosybe-jungle.village.com; Ampasipohy) A beach bungalow operation that also runs tours around northern Madagascar. These include visits to nearby islands and trekking in the parks near Diego Suarez. Trips start at €431 per person for seven nights; prices are dependent on the class of accommodation you choose to stay in on the road.

**Kokoa Surf, Sun & Fun** (☎ 86 921 122; www.kokoa-nosybe.com; Andilana beach) Rents luxury villas in Andilana, and runs camping trips to nearby Nosy Itranja (€175 per person). Customised private transport and tours around Madagascar are also arranged – an option for getting to Diego Suarez in style if the planes are full.

**Libertalia Aventure** (☎ 86 925 41; www.libertalia-aventure.com; Andilana) With a slick brochure, this upmarket and eco-friendly company specialises in adventures across Northern Madagascar. Trips from Nosy Be last between two and 12 nights and include everything from tours tailored specifically towards mountain-biking, trekking or sailing. Two-night sailing trips to islands around Nosy Be start at €75 per person per day. Rates include meals and lodging. In Andilana, head to Chez Loulou restaurant to book directly – boats leave from here anyway.

**MadaVoile** (Blue Planet, Escapades; ☎ 86 616 37, 86 620 80; www.madavoile.com in French; Ambatoloaka) Three names, one reliable operator. It offers a wide range of land- and sea-based tours including trips around the islands, and to Réserve Spéciale de l'Ankàrana and Parc National de Montagne d'Ambre. English and German are spoken.

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

**Air Madagascar** (☎ 86 613 60; Rte de l'Ouest, Hell-Ville) flights link Nosy Be's Fasrene Airport with Antananarivo every day (Ar304,600), often via Mahajanga (Ar288,000) or Diego Suarez (Ar132,000). Flights also go to Sambava and Dzaoudzi in Mayotte. There are also international flights to Milan and Réunion.

**Air Austral** (☎ 86 612 40) and **Air Mauritius** (☎ 86 612 40), both in Hell-Ville, can book regular flights to Mayotte, Réunion and Mauritius.

### BOAT

Nosy Be is best reached from the mainland port of Ankify by small speedboat (Ar20,000,

30 minutes). These depart in both directions starting around 7.30am. The channel crossing is best undertaken in the morning, before the afternoon tides make the sea rough. Two ferries also make the crossing, but unless you have your car with you (both take vehicles) there's no reason to take these as they are much slower.

If you're travelling with a vehicle, the **Fivondronana Ferry** (☎ 032 02 358 40) leaves Nosy Be for Anstahampano port, near Ambanja, daily. Departure times vary according to the high tide, and the journey takes about two hours. Passenger tickets cost Ar15,000. You can buy tickets at the port or at the office on the main street.

Cargo boats still travel between Nosy Be and Mahajanga, and less frequently between Nosy Be and Diego Suarez. The trips take anywhere from 24 to 72 hours and is very uncomfortable. Check the blackboard outside the Auximad office at the port in Hell-Ville as departures are irregular.

Most of the private yachts passing through Nosy Be are bound for Mayotte (the passage costs about €300). The best place to ask is at Nandipo bar in Hell-Ville. The yachting season runs between August and November.

### TAXI-BROUSSE

It's a long, hard ride by taxi-brousse between Diego Suarez and Ankify, the port from which boats depart to Nosy Be. See p160 for the scoop on the journey.

## Getting Around

The main road on Nosy Be, between the airport and Andilana via Ambatoloaka is sealed, flat and fast and almost all hotels sit just yards off it. Internal roads are generally rougher and hillier.

### TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

Nosy Be's Fasrene Airport is on the island's east side, about 12km from Hell-Ville. The taxi fare from the airport to Hell-Ville is around Ar15,000. It is about Ar30,000 to Ambatoloaka and Ar40,000 to Andilana – and nearly 50km to the northwest.

### CAR & MOTORCYCLE

Most tour operators and upmarket hotels arrange car hire. Regular cars cost about Ar100,000 per day with a driver; the price does not include petrol. Expect to pay about

€85 per day for a 4WD with a driver, although a 4WD is not really necessary.

**Nosy Red Cars** (☎ 032 07 946 46) in Ambatoloaka hire out groovy little red beach buggies (only for use on designated main roads) for €50 per day with the first 50km included. **Location Jeunesse** (☎ 86 614 08), in Ambatoloaka, rents out Honda 250cc motorcycles (Ar40,000 per day), scooters (Ar30,000 per day) and mountain bikes (Ar15,000 per day) that are sometimes in mediocre condition. Be sure to check your contract and the condition of the bike very carefully before parting with any money.

### TAXI & TAXI-BROUSSE

Shared-taxi fares are Ar1000 between Hell-Ville and Ambatoloaka (20 to 30 minutes), and Ar2000 between Hell-Ville and Andilana (45 minutes). Elsewhere on the island, public transport is scarce. Your best chance for catching a taxi-brousse from Andilana into Hell-Ville is in the parking lot behind Chez Loulou. Although taxis-brousses can be scarce during the week, on Sundays there are dozens lined up to transport the groups of Malagasy, couples and families that come from all over the island to picnic, dance, drink beer, swim and socialise before the working week starts again.

A charter between Hell-Ville and Ambatoloaka costs Ar10,000, to Andilana it's Ar30,000. Short hops around Hell-Ville cost Ar1800 per trip.

## HELL-VILLE

Despite the off-putting moniker (named for Admiral de Hell, a French governor of Réunion), Nosy Be's main town is anything but hellish. Rather, it's an upbeat, if rather dishevelled, place where frangipani and bougainvillea frame crumbling ruins of old colonial buildings, sidewalk cafés bustle with backpack-touting tourists sipping strong espresso, and expats gather at everyone's favourite bar, Nandipo, for a gossip and wood-oven pizza. After a long stay in the bush, or at one of Nosy Be's isolated beach resorts, Hell-Ville is a good place to catch up on world affairs and get a plate of pasta. If you are planning on catching the speedboat to the mainland, it may be worth spending the night here too. Not only are hotels cheaper than elsewhere in Nosy Be, you'll be just minutes away from the port where boats depart (and it's easy to find combo tickets to Diego Suarez from touts around town; just don't pay until the morning when you get a ticket at the

port). For information about getting to and from Hell-Ville, see opposite.

## Orientation & Information

Hell-Ville is relatively compact, with most restaurants and shops clustered in the centre square. Hotels are spread along the main road, Blvd de l'Indépendance. The port is at the extreme southeast corner of town.

### INTERNET ACCESS

**Cyber Café – Impressions Photos** (☎ 032 41 325 49; per min Ar100; ☎ 8am-noon & 3-6pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat) Across the street from the Oasis Café, it is a bit hard to spot. Climb two flights of stairs on the left side of the building behind the big souvenir shop and follow the signs.

### MEDICAL SERVICES

Unless it's a true emergency, go to the hospitals in Antananarivo, which are much better. French is the primary language, although some doctors speak English and Italian.

**Hôpital Principal** (☎ 86 613 95) Emergency facilities.

### MONEY

All the major banks, including Bank of Africa (BOA), BFV-SG and BNI-CL, have branches in Hell-Ville equipped with modern ATMs accepting international cards. The banks also change money and travellers cheques and do credit-card advances – note they all shut down between noon and 3pm every day.

### POST & TELEPHONE

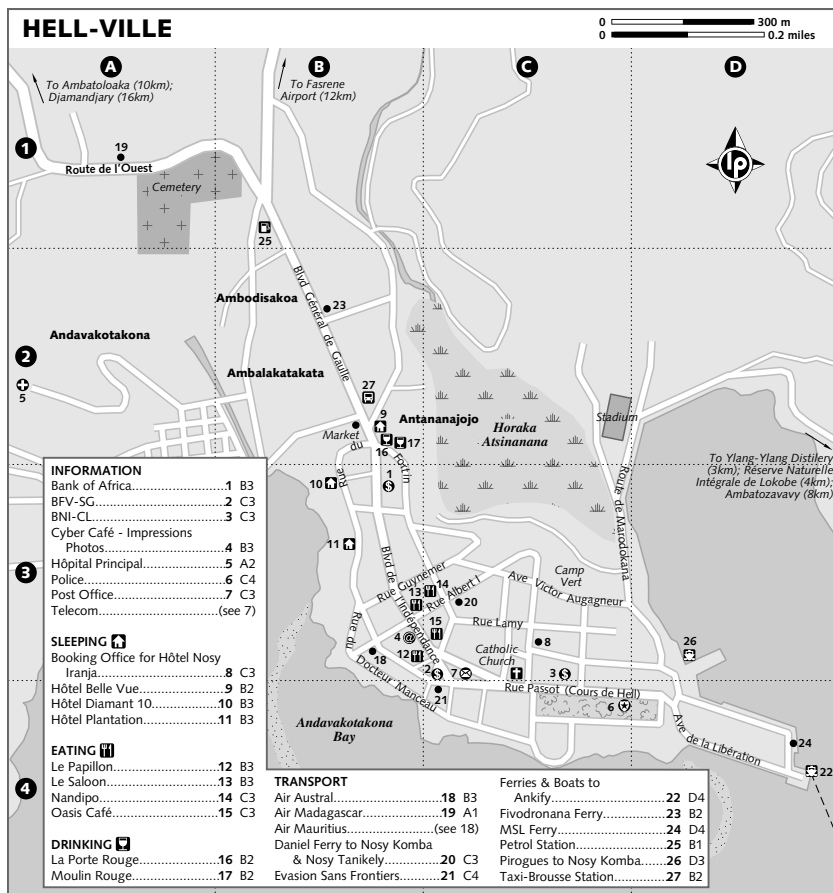
The **post office** and **Telecom office** are on the corner of Blvd de l'Indépendance and Rue Passot. There are several card phones in town.

## Sleeping

It's probably worth staying here your last night if you're planning to leave Nosy Be by speedboat early the next day – the port is just down the street from the centre and you'll pay less to sleep here.

**Hôtel Plantation** (☎ 86 614 38; Rue du Docteur Manceau; r Ar20,000-32,000; ☎) In a beautiful old colonial mansion, this is a charming little place where rooms come with sea-facing balconies. The cheaper rooms have fans, the most expensive air-con. The quaint little bar is perfect for sundowners, while the restaurant serves high-class French cuisine (set three-course menu Ar26,000).

**Hôtel Belle Vue** (☎ 86 513 84; r from Ar22,000; ☎) It works for a night, although all but the most



expensive rooms are very small and have no hot water or mozzie nets. Mattresses are made from very soft foam, but there's air-con and it's only a five-minute walk to the best restaurants in Hell-Ville. If you're interested in checking out the local dance scene, this might be your pick as it's only a stumble away from a popular cabaret. If you want to sleep it can be very loud, but the bar is good about shutting off the music by 11pm. Breakfast is served for an extra fee.

**Hôtel Diamant 10** (☎ 86 614 48; 660405 Rue Docteur Manceau; rAr50,000; 🏠) Near the centre, this bright painted place is one of the town's most upmarket. It has a sort of Miami Art Deco look – lots of glass and pastels. It definitely stands out amid the ruins of its neighbours! Rooms have mod tile floors, satellite TV, safes, minibars and

sea views and are pretty comfortable. There is a big rooftop terrace where you can pop up to watch the sunset. Bring a few beers.

### Eating & Drinking

After eating the same shrimp or calamari dish for a week straight, Hell-Ville's eating options will seem like culinary heaven. Besides the places listed here, a couple of the hotels have restaurants.

**Oasis Café** (☎ 86 611 57; mains Ar6000-12,000; 🍴) breakfast, lunch & dinner) Oasis' sidewalk seating is the hottest dining property in town. The menu includes everything from pesto pasta to warm panini sandwiches, burgers and pizza. Plus there's a choice of Western-style breakfasts with eggs, bacon and the works. Oasis

also sells delicious pastries and ice creams and, best of all, real espresso drinks.

**Le Saloon** (☎ 86 921 77; mains Ar7500-9000; 🍴) lunch & dinner) A wannabe cowboy bar with the Malagasy interpretation of Western US art, Le Saloon is nevertheless a pleasant spot offering daily *plats du jour* and an à la carte menu of grilled meats, seafood, spaghetti dishes and, of course, fresh *poisson*. The indoor and outdoor seating fills quickly at lunch and dinner.

**Le Papillon** (☎ 86 615 82; mains Ar8000-15,000; 🍴) lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) For Italian food – lots of pasta dishes, served with real parmesan cheese, along with pizzas and seafood – and even a few Chinese plates, Le Papillon is probably the best bet in Hell-Ville. It's a cool and breezy place located in a crumbling old colonial house.

**Nandipo** (mains Ar11,000-13,000; 🍴) breakfast, lunch & dinner) This is the yachtmen and expat hangout of choice, where many regulars get stuck into the beer by 9am. It also serves excellent wood-oven pizzas, spontaneous live music and the best ambiance in town. Sit inside amid the cluttered wooden bar and high tables or outside in the garden. Either way the conversation often centres on finding a berth on a boat headed for Mayotte or the islands near Nosy Be.

**La Porte Rouge** (☎ 85 513 84) Next to the Hôtel Belle Vue, La Porte Rouge is a very social watering hole popular with the Malagasy locals. The ambiance is animated and amiable, and there's plenty of dancing and even a cabaret. Nearly cater-corner to La Porte Rouge is **Moulin Rouge**, which offers the same scene.

### MT PASSOT & CRATER LAKES

Mt Passot (329m), Nosy Be's loftiest point, lies about 15km north of Hell-Ville (somewhat further by road). It's a good spot for watching the sunset or admiring the view. Some of the larger hotels arrange sunset minibus tours to the summit of Mt Passot, or you can hire a taxi to the top and walk back down (8km

to Djamandjary. You can also get here by mountain bike or motorcycle.

### RÉSERVE NATURELLE INTÉGRALE DE LOKOBE

The Réserve Naturelle Intégrale de Lokobe protects most of Nosy Be's remaining endemic vegetation. The reserve is home to the black lemur and several other lemur species. Other wildlife includes the boa constrictor and the giant (but harmless) Madagascan hog-nosed snakes, identified by intricate checkerboard markings.

You will need a guide to walk around in Lokobe, which can be arranged at Jungle Village. There is also a fee of Ar1000 per person payable to the village chief, who will approach you with a 'ticket'. Tours with a recommended guide called Jean Robert can be arranged by most of the hotels on the island for around Ar40,000.

A jack-of-all trades resort, **Jungle Village** (☎ 86 93 102; www.nosybe-junglevillage.com; r €32, bungalows from €45, set dinner €12) is in the tiny village of Ampasipohy, in the north of the reserve. The beach bungalows come in different sizes and are made from local materials – lots of thatch. Each comes with a net and outside sitting area. Travellers on a budget can grab one of the slightly cheaper hotel rooms. With lounge chairs (with padding!) in the sand and all sorts of excursions on offer, this is a good place to just kick back and relax. Full board is offered for an extra €22 per person per night. To reach Jungle Village, take a taxi to the village of Ambatozavavy. From here you can walk to the reserve at low tide in about 40 minutes; just follow the curve of the beach, or go via pirogue (about Ar30,000).

### AMBATOLOAKA

Nosy Be's southernmost beach is one of the island's most popular and touristy, but far from its best. Despite its less than model look –

### YLANG-YLANG

The low, gnarled ylang-ylang (e-lang-e-lang) tree is seen in plantations all over Nosy Be. Its scented green or yellow flowers are distilled to make oil, which is exported to the West for perfume. The trees are pruned into low and rather grotesque shapes to make picking the flowers easier.

The large **ylang-ylang distillery** (admission free; 🕒 8am-3.30pm Mon-Fri, 7.30am-2.30pm Sat) is about 3km east of Hell-Ville. You can see the ylang-ylang being distilled on Monday, Wednesday and Friday only.

To reach the distillery head east from Hell-Ville along the Route de Marodokany for 3km. All taxi drivers know where the place is. A fare should cost about Ar5000.

crumbling buildings and massive earthen pot-holes sit next to new luxury resorts with shimmering swimming pools – Ambatoloaka boasts great variety. Sleeping choices range from Nosy Be's cheapest beach digs to some of the island's more exclusive hotels. Numerous restaurants within walking distance keep your stomach from getting bored – that's a real concern in more remote beaches where dining can be limited to just one restaurant and self-catering is near impossible. If you're a beach connoisseur, you can always stay here and grab a taxi north to Andilana (see p171) for a day trip.

The beach, which merges with Madirokely, is a long swath of honey coloured sand that meets a ribbon of deep blue water flecked with turquoise and sapphire. Locals often gather on the sand for a game of pick-up soccer at lunchtime, manoeuvring their homemade ball around the tourists sunbathing on bright Madagascar-made sarongs.

On the downside, Ambatoloaka can seem straight-up sleazy. Its hotels are favourite haunts of old French men who come to seduce, and then usually leave, the poor, desperate and uneducated young Malagasy women who venture here from country villages in hopes of a better life with a Western man. Sadly, this version of their dream rarely comes true. Although you see signs in stores and hotels around the country condemning the use of children as sex slaves, in Ambatoloaka the problem is still obviously illustrated in the hotels and restaurants.

## Orientation

Ambatoloaka sits in front of the tiny fishing village of the same name, about 10km west of Hell-Ville. Many taxi drivers will try to steer you here if you don't give them a location on the way from the airport. For car rentals, ring **Location Jeunesse** (☎ 86 614 08) or ask at your hotel. Be sure to check your car over for damage before signing the contract.

## Sleeping

Places are often full, so it's best to reserve in advance, but only agree to one night at first. This way you can make sure it's what you're looking for *after* seeing it. The following is just a selection of many Ambatoloaka hotels. Lots of places quote in euros and some actually, preposterously, penalise you for using the local currency by tacking on extra 'conversion' fees.

**Authentique, Chez Aly** (☎ 86 616 42; bungalows from Ar15,000) By far the cheapest digs on this beach,

you really do get what you pay for at Chez Aly – don't expect any sort of luxuries. The plain wooden bungalows are set back a way from the beach and can't be described as anything other than rudimentary. Still it is ultra-cheap and sits next to the most popular beachfront restaurant in the neighbourhood, Chez Angeline, which is worth the splurge.

**Le Coucher du Soleil** (☎ 86 616 20; coucherdusoleil@wanadoo.mg; d from Ar36,000) This Swiss-run budget hotel is the best value in its price bracket. The setting is lovely, and there are good sunset photo ops. It has spotless comfortable bungalows, each with a four-poster bed, mosquito net and terrace. Breakfast is available. The hotel is about five minutes' walk from the beach. Look for it about 200m above the main road on a hill. It's signposted.

**Hotel La Residence d'Ambatoloaka** (☎ 032 02 579 48; r Ar72,000, mains Ar6000-20,000; 🍷) This place was full when we stopped by, and guests said the block of 12 bungalow rooms behind the beachfront restaurant were simple but satisfying – although the place seemed quite popular with single foreign men and their lady friends. Regardless of whether you stay the restaurant is a good bet for vegetarian and pasta options, and of course loads of fresh seafood.

**Hôtel Benjamin** (☎ 86 92 764; www.hotelbenjamin-nosybe.com; r €34) Situated in a great little garden and quiet location back from the road (look for it behind Coco Plage) this is one of the best deals for simple sleeping. The wooden bungalows are nothing fancy, but each comes with a stylish petite veranda. Some even have hammocks (although none have hot water). If you're planning a family reunion or just have a lot of friends, you can rent the villa. It sleeps up to 18 people in four bedrooms and has a kitchen and private pool! It costs €220 per night.

**Hôtel Gerard et Francine** (☎ 86 061 05; www.hotelgerardetfrancine.com; r ind breakfast from €40) A beautifully decorated family guesthouse with bright-yellow walls, wooden floors and a veranda overlooking the beach. The rooms come in all shapes and sizes – some are in the main house and some in the garden. The hotel uses solar power, which is not only good for the environment; it also means the lights stay on when Nosy Be's power clicks off, which was pretty often when we were there. It's best to make advance reservations, as this place is often full.

**Coco Plage** (☎ 032 07 769 64; coco.plage@simicro.mg; r €47-75; 🍷 🍷 🍷) If you're interested in diving, this could be a good choice. The long estab-

lished Tropical Diving (see p163) is based here. There are 12 renovated, and tasteful, rooms with beach views and another six facing a pretty garden. You can also organise fishing trips and the Karibo Restaurant is very popular.

**Hôtel L'Espadon** (☎ 86 614 28; hotel.espadon@malagasy.com; r from €75; 🍷) Ambatoloaka's most upmarket option is comfortable and quite popular. Rooms feature giant original paintings of fish, and are large, tiled affairs with white walls and wooden shutters. Satellite TV and minibars in each room, along with beds, umbrellas and drink service on the sand, all lend a resort vibe. The glassed-in restaurant is handy, and usually crowded, specialising in Malagasy and Asian-influenced seafood dishes.

## Eating

Besides the places listed here, check the sleeping listings as some hotels have restaurants.

**Chez Mama** (mains Ar5000-15,000; 🍷 lunch & dinner) For a true Malagasy eating experience, try Chez Mama, located on a little alley before Hotel La Résidence. It serves heaped plates of fresh fish and calamari along with local staples such as zebu and rice. Half portions are available.

**La Saladerie** (☎ 86 614 52; mains Ar6500-20,000; 🍷 lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) This is a smart terrace restaurant and bar with great sea views that serves healthy salads, grilled fish and Italian food. It's a good place to head for a sunset cocktail.

**Baobab Kafé** (mains Ar8000-13,000; 🍷 lunch & dinner) This aptly named café has the best décor in town – it's done up as a shrine to Madagascar's baobab tree, complete with photos and sculptures. It serves a small menu of mostly seafood, fish and zebu, along with cheaper snacks (burgers and sandwiches), kids plates and plenty of cocktail choices. It's popular with both *vazaha* (foreigners) and Malagasy. Look for it in front of Hotel La Résidence.

**Chez Angeline** (mains Ar8000-22,000; 🍷 lunch & dinner) In the centre of the village, Chez Angeline is the best restaurant on this beach. The small but very good French-influenced menu includes sumptuous zebu steak and succulent prawns. The ambiance is animated at night, and there is a very good assortment of local rums at the bar.

**Karibo Restaurant** (mains Ar9000-18,000; 🍷 lunch & dinner) If you're craving a bit of Italian food, this place at the Coco Plage hotel will satisfy your craving. It isn't your grandmother's kitchen in Bologna, but it does a decent selection of pastas –

including a spicy lobster sauce with spaghetti – and pizzas. Meat lovers can have zebu.

## Drinking & Entertainment

**Djembe Disco** (admission Ar2000) is Nosy Be's favourite nightclub, located at the end of the village on the road leading to Madirokely town. It's the place to be seen in the evenings – popular with local couples, expats and single foreign men looking for love. Besides a dance floor, Djembe features pool tables and pictures of poker playing dogs on the walls. At Ar5000 per beer, and Ar3000 for water, it's a bit pricy. But then again, isn't that the truth about clubs the world over?

## MADIROKELY

Madirokely beach is basically a northern extension of Ambatoloaka – there's no visual distinction between the two. It is the prettier half, however, and a bit more tranquil. Madirokely appeals to divers, with a couple of well-established scuba clubs located here and some decent diving in the vicinity.

Just because it's a bit less developed than Ambatoloaka, don't expect it to be less crowded. Madirokely still sees plenty of tourists, many of whom come on prebooked package holidays from Europe and places can fill fast. Don't worry too much if you can't snag a room. Madirokely and Ambatoloaka interlock, so it is very easy to sleep on one and chill or eat on the other.

## Sleeping

There are a couple of good places to stay here, although not all are on the water.

**Le Grand Large** (☎ 86 615 84; r Ar50,000-75,000, mains Ar8000-15,000; 🍷) Located right on the beach in the village, this little guesthouse has smallish (but not bad-value, especially considering the location) rooms in a variety of prices according to view and size. All have a bathroom with hot water. The unpretentious and relaxed bar-restaurant faces the sea and serves mostly seafood dishes with a French flavour. There are occasional barbecues on the terrace overlooking the beach. Rates drop in the low season.

**L'Heure Bleue** (☎ 86 614 21; www.heurebleue.com; bungalows €75-85; 🍷) On a hill overlooking the village and away from the noise, this pretty little hotel has a terrace with great views and a gorgeous swimming pool. The bungalows are made of polished wood and come with smart linen bedclothes and giant sliding glass doors

opening onto balconies with distant ocean views and armchairs for private sunbathing.

**Le Marlin Club** (☎ 86 613 15; marlin.club@simicro.mg; s/d €120/240; ♿) The rooms and bungalows are very classy at this chi-chi Italian-run hotel with brass nautical lamps and wooden floors. The bar and restaurant, however, are a bit tacky. There's a snack bar on the beach, and facilities for water sports, diving and fishing excursions.

### Eating

Remember, it's almost as easy to eat in Ambatoloaka, which has many more choices.

**La Caméléon** (☎ 032 04 311 80; mains Ar10,000-25,000; ☺ lunch & dinner) An unpretentious little place, this restaurant at the extreme western edge of the beach serves a variety of pizzas, snacks and seafood and zebu mains. It also has a few rooms for rent.

**Tsimanin Kafé** (☎ 032 04 016 00; mains Ar15,000-40,000; ☺ lunch & dinner Thu-Sat, lunch only Mon & Tue, closed Wed) You'll be tempted to eat many courses in this attractive wooden restaurant on the beach that offers the complete gastronomic French dining experience. Tsimanin has been around long enough to garner a stellar rep with visiting French gourmets for its sophisticated fresh fare. Expect lobster profiteroles, prawns in oyster sauce, local foie gras and fish prepared Malagasy style, plus a few lighter lunch dishes. Unfortunately there is not much for vegetarians, but there's an extensive wine list.

## AMBONDRONA & BELLE VUE

You can see shadows of the mainland hills across the navy- and turquoise-speckled sea at the quiet beach of Ambondrona. On a small bay just north of Madirokely, it's more tranquil than its southern neighbour, with an almost blissfully lost vibe.

To get here by road, follow the pavement north to the sugar-cane railway then turn left at the first drivable track and follow it down towards the water. It's hard to reach by public transport; your best bet is to take a taxi, or rent a bicycle or car to get around.

Just north of Ambondrona is a beach known as Belle Vue. From here northwards, the beaches and villages on a whole are quieter and more attractive than at Ambatoloaka and Madirokely.

### Sleeping

**Tsara Loky** (☎ 86 610 22; d from Ar20,000, mains Ar5000-15,000) This local place right on the beach has

a good restaurant (order in advance) and a variety of rooms and bungalows – the best have bathrooms and hammocks outside, the cheapest are basic rooms in the main house.

**Domaine de Manga Be** (☎ 86 616 30; urslinder@wanadoo.mg; r Ar48,000-240,000) A rather stylish and original self-catering complex aimed predominantly at families. The beautifully decorated studio apartments, villas, rooms and bungalows come in all shapes and price ranges, but all have kitchens or kitchenettes, nets and fans. If you pay a supplement you can hire an apartment with a cook to prepare your meals.

**Nosy Be Hôtel** (☎ 86 614 06; www.nosybehotel.com; r from €75; ♿) Rooms are colourful and almost eccentric at this luxury eco-conscious hotel – think yellow walls and bright-blue bedspreads. The hotel sits in a lush garden on the edge of the beach; don't miss the fantastic pool facing the ocean. There is an on-site dive centre, and quad-bike and island-hopping trips can be arranged. Readers give it good feedback (it attracts a lot of prebooked European tourists), especially in regards to wheelchair accessibility.

## DJAMANDJARY

Unlike other villages on Nosy Be, Djamandjary (*dza-man-dzar*) does not seem particularly concerned with attracting tourists, and despite being the island's second-largest community it holds little interest to travellers. Hotels are some distance from the centre, and this is OK as the town and the beach in front of it are pretty filthy. Head left from town along the sand, and it gets increasingly nicer.

### Sleeping

The recommended sleeping options here are both upmarket.

**Orangea** (☎ 032 04 200 85, 86 061 98; www.orangea-nosybe.com in French; bungalows from €65; ♿) Sweeping lawns lead down to the brightly coloured restaurant and pool deck at this cheerful, classy place that is very popular with families. The whitewashed and orange-painted bungalows contain cushions made from African fabrics, and have hot water in the bathrooms. The cheapest bungalows have only fans, while more expensive options come with air-con. Breakfast is served for an extra €5. An excellent sleeping choice; it's often full, so reserve in advance.

**Vanila Hôtel** (☎ 86 615 23; vanilahotel@simicro.mg; d incl breakfast €116; ♿) This top-end beach hotel is designed to blend into the environs with a thatched roof and lots of open-air

lounges. At night the lovely garden is lit by flame torches and the entire place emits a warm atmosphere day or night. Rooms are charming and there are two bars and a restaurant. Rent bikes for Ar20,000 per day, or arrange a sailing or diving trip. The hotel caters more to couples and families than tour groups. Low-season rates drop by about €30.

## AMPASIMORONJIA

Ampasimoronjia is the next village up from Djamandjary. There are several hotels between here and Andilana, to the north. Please note the area is quite isolated – be prepared to eat where you sleep or shell out bucks to call a taxi to take you to dinner. If you are looking for a romantic get-away-from-it-all experience, then a few of the places listed below will appeal. If you yearn for company, you'll be happier further south.

### Sleeping & Eating

There are a number of places to stay just off the main road, but they are very spread out.

**Le Relais** (☎ 86 615 10; r Ar15,000-30,000) This is a no-frills but friendly backpacker-style place, about five minutes' walk from the beach. There's a funky bar with a ping-pong table, and meals can be arranged. It also has bikes and boats for hire. The cheapest rooms share bathrooms.

**Corail Noir** (☎ 86 634 47; www.corailnoirhotel.com; s/d from €42/63; ♿) One of Nosy Be's newer luxury resorts, this large place sits right on the beach. The pool overlooks the ocean, as do views from many rooms – although the water here is only average looking. Still, padded sun chairs and drinks served from coconuts in the sand are pretty enticing, as are the plush rooms with safe, minibar, telephone and satellite TV. Check with your travel agent or online for promotions, as it sometimes runs deals.

**Chanty Beach** (☎ 86 614 73; www.chantybeachhotel.com; r & bungalows incl breakfast €55-90) This German-run place is a charming, if slightly staid, white colonial-style guesthouse in a neat garden on the beach. Some of the clean bungalows have their own kitchenette, and there's a small restaurant/bar serving mostly seafood. Half-board is available. Activities include sailing trips and boat rentals. Diving and island excursions can be arranged. There is snorkelling nearby.

**our pick** **Le Grand Bleu** (☎ 86 634 08; www.legrandbleunosybe.com; d with breakfast from Ar150,000; ♿) On a hill overlooking the sea, Le Grand Bleu has spectacular views from its terrace restau-

rant where you can curl up on a pillowed chair and read a book or chow on wood-fired pizza. The bungalows are very pretty, with blue-and-white walls, wood floors, four-poster beds with mosquito net and a minibar. The star attraction is the dazzling infinity pool perched on a hill overlooking the ocean far below. Le Grand Bleu has half- and full-board options. All sorts of excursions and activities are offered, or just grab a sea kayak and hit the ocean. The secluded location makes it popular with honeymooners.

**La Table d' Alexander** (☎ 033 142 4722; mains Ar10,000-25,000; ☺ lunch & dinner) In a fantastic location right on the beach, this place gets good marks for its French and Malagasy-influenced seafood dishes. It is at the extreme northern edge of Ampasimoronjia, and is an inexpensive taxi ride from Andilana.

## ANDILANA

Far and away Nosy Be's best beach, Andilana, at the island's northwest tip, also offers its best sunsets – the big yellow ball seems to sink directly in front of you and the ensuing bleed from orange to pink to purple before a long fade to velvet is mesmerising. The beach itself is a long stretch of pearly white sand, the water true turquoise and clear as gin. Placid and warm, it's perfect for floating under a big, sunny and blue Madagascan sky.

With the exception of one pimped-out new luxury resort, Andilana is nearly void of large-scale development. Tourism infrastructure is limited to a handful of small guesthouses, a few guys selling lobsters on the side of the road, and a strip of stalls on the southern end of the beach, where villagers sell local crafts (check out the exceptional raffia beach bags woven with bright blocky patterns).

Andilana ignites on Sundays when French expats and Malagasy from around Nosy Be come for a lazy day in the sun. Gossiping gaggles of women, dressed in bright sarongs and with sunflowers painted on their faces, lay out picnics for their families on a shaded bit of sand. Young lovers and groups of teenage girls giggle and scream as they splash about in the warm blue sea, and old men sip bottles of THB beer as they lean against the trunks of the coconut palms. Chez Loulou is right on the water and famous for its Sunday brunch, which is always packed. The seafood feast is accompanied by live music, and afterwards everyone lingers for beer, dancing and

seemingly spontaneous Malagasy jam sessions on the drums and guitar.

Andilana is a pretty mellow place, but if you need to release tension go get a **massage**. Given on an open-air terrace just off the beach, the one-hour sessions are wonderfully relaxing and cost just Ar25,000. The massages are an initiative of the village women, so getting one puts money straight into local pockets.

If you just want to spend the afternoon by the pool and eat, then it may be worth forking out the €30 to do so at the swanky new Hotel Andilana Beach, which caters almost exclusively to Italian package tourists. Morning and afternoon packages allow you to spend half a day by the giant, blue pool and eat one free meal – a buffet lunch or dinner. The morning package gives you more sun time (dinner packages don't let you arrive before 3pm, and the sun sets by 6pm). Soft drinks are free all day, but booze is extra.

### Sleeping & Eating

Options for both slumber and chow are skimpy here.

**Chez Eugénie** (☎ 86 92 353; chezeugenie.nosybe.madagascar@gmail.com; r incl breakfast €35, set menu Ar25,000) There are just five rooms at this little hotel and restaurant owned by a French and Malagasy couple. Abodes are small, but impressive, with firm mattresses and high-quality linens. It is a good choice for couples as rooms have one bed and the atmosphere is intimate. The French owner speaks some English, and takes clients on canoe and snorkelling excursions when he has time. The restaurant does three-course set menus that rotate daily. Everything is cooked fresh and no frozen ingredients are used – this also means choices are limited. Chez Eugénie is set a few hundred metres back from the beach in the village just before the turn-off for Au Belvedere.

**our pick Au Belvedere** (☎ 86 928 08; belvedere.andilana@yahoo.fr; r incl breakfast Ar125,000) We couldn't get enough of the sunsets and tranquillity here. Perched on a bluff overlooking the beach, this is a small and simple hotel – there are no TVs, minibars or fridges. But it's the lack of mod amenities that makes Belvedere so damn charming in the first place. The decent-sized rooms each come with a front porch – complete with sun chairs and tables – overlooking the ocean. Big wooden slatted doors and windows offer great ventilation, but don't keep the bugs out (mozzie nets over the four-poster beds do

that job). The front doors swing open wide enough to let you watch the sunset from bed. Keep the doors open a crack at night to let the ocean sounds lull you to sleep. If you stay a week, ask for a 10% discount.

**Hotel Andilana Beach** (www.nosybe.com; full-board per person from €134; ☎ ☎ ☎) Andilana's swankiest, actually its only, all-inclusive resort (including alcohol) is in a quiet cove on the headland from the main beach. Rooms are turned out exactly the way a fashion-conscious Italian crowd would demand, and that's exactly who this hotel caters to. Even though the clientele is nearly exclusively Italian (lots of couples), anyone can stay as long as they book online. There is no booking phone number, and walk-ins aren't welcome. Use the website or a travel agency. The hotel also boasts a few restaurants, poolside bars, a fabulous lobby and a slick disco – guests only.

**Chez Loulou** (set menu Ar25,000, mains Ar15,000; ☎ lunch & dinner) As one of only two restaurants in Andilana, it's a good thing Chez Loulou is so good. Right on the beach, with tables in the sand, this casual restaurant and bar serves sumptuous seafood – we especially liked the shrimp with ginger sauce. You can choose from a set-price three-course meal or order just a main course off the menu. If you want to linger after dessert at lunch, grab a sun chair and an ice-cold THB and kick back with a good book. On Sunday, Chez Loulou organises a delicious seafood buffet lunch (all you can eat for Ar50,000) famous for its lobster.

## ISLANDS OFF NOSY BE

If you're looking for the full barefoot, Robinson Crusoe experience, and can afford more than €50 per night, it is well worth heading out to one of the smaller and less-visited islets surrounding Nosy Be. Some of the resorts are fabulous, offering world-class pampering, and the tranquillity can't be beaten. If you're on a tighter budget take a day-trip by pirogue to check out the palm-fringed white beaches and excellent snorkelling.

### NOSY KOMBA

The most visited (and visible) of the islands around Nosy Be, Nosy Komba rises off the ocean floor midway between the mainland and Nosy Be. Most people visit Nosy Komba on an organised tour from Nosy Be (see p163).

Alternatively you can hire a pirogue or motorboat at the port in Hell-Ville for around Ar10,000 to Ar20,000.

Boats land at **Ampangorina**, where there is an interesting craft market – look for the big multi-coloured raffia bags or striped baobab trees. If you just want to spend time sunbathing ask your pirogue operator to take you straight to **Anjiabe beach**, on the southwest coast.

Resting your head on Nosy Komba's shores is possible, although paradise here is far from free. **Jardin Vanille** (☎ 032 07 127 97; jardinvanille@wanadoo.mg; half/full-board per person €45/54) offers a number of cute and comfortable Malagasy-style bungalows perfectly located on Nosy Komba's best beach, Anjiabe. The restaurant serves a rotating, and very fine, menu and overlooks the sea. Jardin Vanille is popular with French tourists, so book ahead. Numerous excursions can be arranged, including snorkelling, diving and fishing trips, and Nosy Be transfers.

For total luxury, you'll want to visit **Tsara Komba** (☎ 033 14 823 20; www.tsarakomba.com; half/full board per person from €90/104; Anjiabe), which only offers full- or half-board options. With just three rooms and a suite it's about as exclusive, and secluded, as you get. The polished wooden rooms come with king-sized beds and a porch looking out onto the sea. The al fresco restaurant, also facing the water, serves fine food and even better views – at dusk passing pirogues blaze golden from the sun's dying rays. Transfers and all the usual excursions can be arranged.

If you've just popped over for the day and need kibble, try little **Chez Yolande** (☎ 032 04 787 29; mains Ar7000-20,000; ☎ lunch & dinner) in Ampangorina, facing the sea. It serves lots of yummy seafood dishes with local sauces and a selection of light snacks.

### NOSY TANIKELY

Nosy Tanikely is 10km west of Nosy Komba. It is an officially protected marine reserve and one of the better remaining snorkelling and diving sites in the area, with coral, numerous fish and the occasional sea turtle. Snorkelling equipment can be hired near the picnic area for Ar5000.

Camping is possible, but you'll need to bring everything with you. If you're having lunch on the beach, make sure your operator takes all its rubbish away when you leave.

Most organised day tours combine Nosy Tanikely with Nosy Komba, using the beach on Nosy Tanikely for a lunchtime picnic.

### NOSY SAKATIA

At just 3 sq km, Nosy Sakatia, just off the west coast of Nosy Be, is quiet and tiny. It offers the opportunity to wander along forest tracks, see baobabs, fruit bats and chameleons and do some diving.

Stay at **Sakatia Passions** (☎ 86 614 62; www.sakatia-passions.com in French; d incl breakfast from €60; ☎) over a weekend so you can partake in the Sunday seafood buffet (not a bad deal at €14), which is absolutely massive and accompanied by live music. The 12 bungalows, nestled in a coconut plantation just behind the ocean, are done up with dark polished wood and rough-hewn porches; all have sea views. The friendly eco-resort also helps fund a school for poor village children – ask how you can get involved. Sailing, fishing and diving trips can all be arranged. Couples looking for the rustic, yet still romantic, honeymoon, or families wanting to teach their children about giving back to the community, will find this place appealing. Solo travellers and party people may want to steer clear – it's very isolated. Meals cost €14 and usually include a fish, seafood or meat main, appetizer, and desert.

To get to Sakatia Passions, you need to go to Chanty Beach hotel in Ampasimoronjia, and radio across for a boat transfer.

### NOSY MITSIO

Divers, listen up: this one's for you. Nosy Mitsio is a small and beautiful archipelago about 55km northeast of Nosy Be where the main attraction is its excellent and still relatively virgin dive sites. Nosy Mitsio is also home to picture perfect-beaches – you know, the white-sand, bathtub-warm translucent turquoise sea and no-people variety.

Best of all, Nosy Mitsio offers one more hour of sunlight per day than mainland Madagascar! To get here you cross a time zone; Nosy Mitsio is one hour ahead, but not far enough west for it to matter light-wise, meaning it gets dark an hour later here than on Nosy Be.

There is a beach **camp site** on the southwestern side of Grande Mitsio, but you'll need your own supplies.

If you've got the cash, Nosy Mitsio is one of the premier addresses in all of Madagascar to drop your swanky anchor, as the very swish and back-to-basics **Hôtel Tsara Bajina** (☎ 86 612 49; www.tsarabajina.com; full board per person around €150) is here. You won't find TVs, phones or even newspapers, just true Zen relaxation in a posh



but personable environment. You can tell a lot of thought was put into decorating the 21 bungalows, which feature mosquito-net canopies over tasteful wood-frame beds, striped pillows and quality linen. Each has a private terrace overlooking the sea. Snorkelling, sailing and water-skiing are included in the price. Most people come to dive, and the attached PADI-certified club will help you explore Mitsio's famous coral reefs. Boat transfers from Nosy Be cost another €64.

**Tropical Diving** (☎ 032 07 127 90; www.tropical-diving.com) and **Le Marlin Club** (☎ 86 613 15; marlin.club@simicro.mg), both in Madirokely on Nosy Be, can organise multiday camping and diving trips to Nosy Mitsio.

The trip between Nosy Be and Nosy Mitsio takes about four to six hours. Most of the dive and tour operators on p162 can arrange transfers to the islands.

## NOSY IRANJA

Nosy Iranja, southwest of Nosy Be, actually consists of two islands: the larger and inhabited Nosy Iranja Be (about 200 hectares) and the smaller Nosy Iranja Kely (13 hectares). The islands are connected by a 1.5km-long sand bar, negotiable on foot at low tide. Sea turtles regularly lay their eggs on the beaches.

The luxurious **Hôtel Nosy Iranja** (☎ 86 616 90; iranja@simicro.mg; bungalows from €175; 🍷), on Nosy Iranja Kely, has chic hexagonal bungalows with decks, hammocks and easy chairs. Inside a four-poster bed, CD player and a wood-and-stone bathroom await. Naturally, an array of excursions can be arranged. Helicopter transfers and a gym are also at your disposal. There's a three-night minimum stay at the hotel, which needs to be booked in advance – ring or email.

The trip from Nosy Be to Nosy Iranja takes about two hours in a speedboat, and longer in slower vessels. The tour and dive companies on p163 offer trips here.

## SOUTHEAST OF NOSY BE

### AMBANJA

Ambanja is a small, tree-lined town on the Sambirano River, and the junction for overland travel to and from Nosy Be. Madagascar's first vanilla capital is a long way from being a tourist capital, although locals are trying. There are possibilities for biking tours and overnight pirogue float trips (just ask around –

it wasn't very organised when we were there) and the chance to experience rural northern Madagascan life.

If you want to spend the night, try **Chez Patricia** (r from Ar10,000). It's the best place to stay, and has a restaurant.

From Ambanja there is daily transport to Ankify (Ar10,000, from three hours), where you'll find the ferry to Nosy Be. Taxis-brousses also go to Diego Suarez (Ar10,000, from three hours) in the northeast.

The road between Ambanja and Antananarivo is now paved all the way and in relatively good condition. By taxi-brousse the trip takes 24 hours; if you have a vehicle it's about 16 hours.

### ANKIFY

The small town of Ankify is the main port for boats and ferries between the Malagasy coast and Nosy Be. If you do the crossing from Nosy Be too late, and can't find a minibus to Diego Suarez, you will need to spend the night. The last taxi-brousse for Diego leaves around 11am as no one wants to drive after dark.

**Le Baobab** (☎ 033 07 208 87; baobabankify@wanadoo.mg; r Ar60,000), about 500m from the ferry landing, is where you'll want to sleep. It offers quaint round bungalows, views across to Nosy Be and a small restaurant.

### Getting There & Away

The road between Ankify (where ferries depart to Nosy Be) and Diego Suarez to the northeast is well sealed and serviced by dozens of sardine-packed taxis-brousses every day. It is never hard to catch a ride if you need to get across the top of the island, but beware it is an arse-numbing six-hour journey (Ar30,000) even in a 'direct' minibus. In Madagascar, direct doesn't mean the minibus doesn't stop, it just stays stopped only long enough to fill itself beyond bursting every time someone disembarks along the way! Most people only see this area through the smudged glass of their speeding taxi-brousse, and there is little reason to stop. If you do, however, there are a few towns in this largely unpopulated, and very poor, northern central region. Nondirect taxis-brousses often stop for lunch in Ambanja, which can last for hours.

For more transport details to and from Ankify see the Nosy Be transport section on p164.

## DIEGO SUAREZ & AROUND

It's still the country's undug tourism sapphire, but don't expect the Diego Suarez area to stay this way forever. The regional tourism board is working hard to get the place on the world's adventure map, and we guess it won't take long. This region pretty much sells itself. With two bodies of water – the Canal de Mozambique and the Indian Ocean – that sparkle the colour of Madagascar's famous sapphire, swaying coconut palms, white-sand beaches and a lack of sprawling resorts, this region is perfect for those in search of a private beach paradise.

And the region has a lot more than beaches. It's also rich in other natural wonders – from forests of red rock *tsingy* (karst, or limestone pinnacles) to hike, to two national parks so diverse and undiscovered that new lemur species are still identified in them each year.

Beside the town of Diego Suarez, which is the main hub of activity but not necessarily the most beautiful place to stay, there are three gorgeous bays with a scattering of accommodation options for all budgets. You can stay in a honeymoon suite with a round bed and private balcony at a gorgeous hillside resort, or in rough traditional bungalows smack in the poor fishing village of Ramena. Some find the latter a bit too uncomfortable, while others see it as an opportunity to experience local life. The choice is always yours.

Regardless of where you choose to slumber, there's plenty of activities to keep you from getting restless. Try snorkelling in the Emerald Sea, where you can walk out to the fish, then dip your head into the sparkling clean water and have a real look. The Diego Suarez region is also ground zero for Madagascar's burgeoning adventure-sports industry. For now kite-boarding and quad- and dirt-biking on dunes and homemade tracks are the two major activities. In Diego, you can organise tours and excursions to anywhere in northeastern Madagascar, and both the parks and beaches are near enough to be visited on a day trip from town.

### DIEGO SUAREZ (ANTSIRANANA)

pop 74,500

Diego is far from the prettiest spot in the region, but its central location – almost equidistant from the beaches and national parks – makes

it a good place to anchor oneself. Plus its wide streets, old colonial buildings and generally sleepy feel give it a languid, genteel air only experienced in the tropics. This is a slow-moving place where nearly everything shuts for most of the afternoon, and the residents still indulge in long afternoon naps. Recently, however, Diego has picked up a bit of steam – a little too much for the tastes of some locals – as an increasingly popular port of call for cruise ships. On days when the big boats anchor, Diego's usually quiet restaurants and shops become packed with loud crowds jabbering in a dozen different languages.

There are no beaches in Diego itself, but there are plenty of very good ones in the vicinity. The town is cheaper than Nosy Be, and offers sporty travellers lots of opportunities to explore the surf and turf.

### Orientation

Diego is a sprawling place, but relatively easy to get around. Most places of interest for travellers are around Rue Colbert, on or near which most hotels, restaurants and offices are located. South of Place du 14 Octobre are taxi-brousse stations and the market.

### Information

There are banks with ATMs and money-changing facilities up and down Rue Colbert, including Bank of Africa (BOA), BFG-SG, BMOI and BNI-CL.

**Angap** (☎ 82 213 20) Tourist information about 2km south of town on the airport road; can provide limited information on both Parc National de Montagne d'Ambré and the Réserve Spéciale de l'Ankàrana.

**Housseni.com** (☎ 82 22 505; Av Tollendal; per min Ar25) The fastest internet option in town is located in the Ny Havana building opposite the petrol station.

**Post Office** (Place Foch)

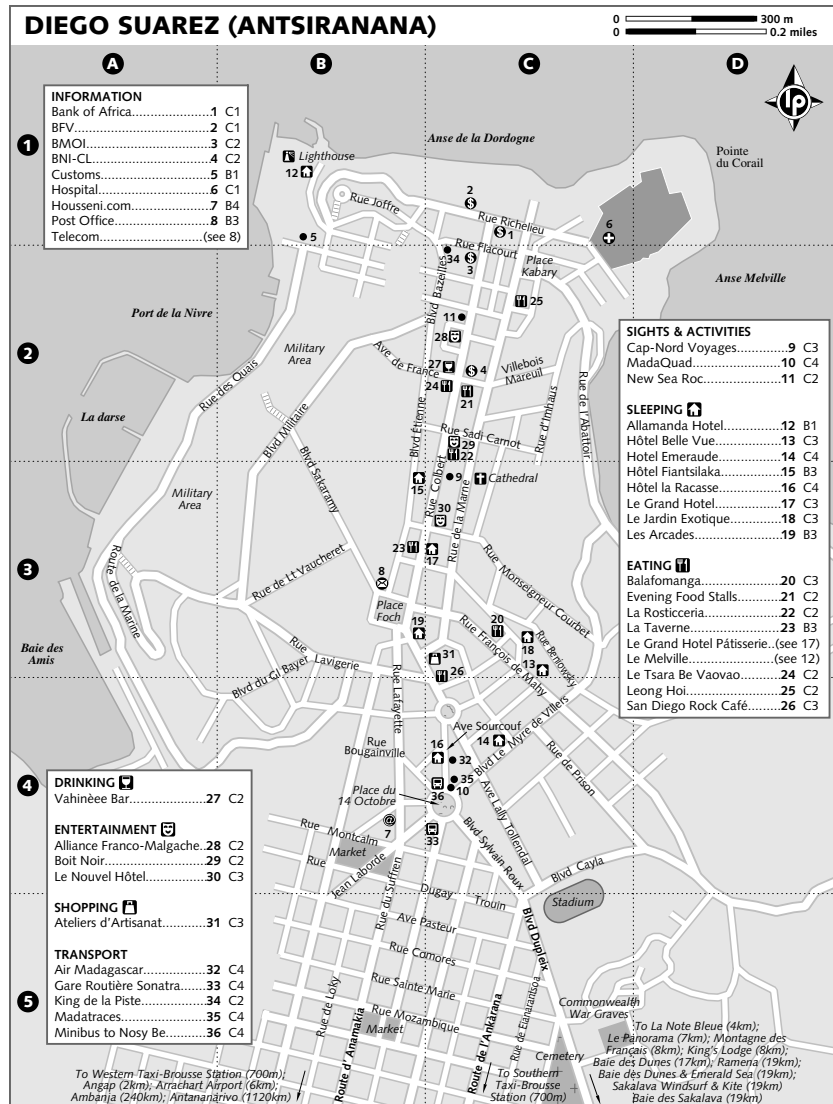
**Telecom Office** (Place Foch) There are also card phones scattered around town.

**Tourism Board** (www.office-tourisme-diego-suarez.com) Check out the new official city tourism board website for regional info.

### Activities & Tours

Jump your quad-bike over a small dune ditch, climb a mountain, visit the national parks or head out to the Baie de Sakalava to try your hand at windsurfing; Diego and the surrounding region offers it all.

If you just want to spend the afternoon by the pool, Le Grand Hotel (see Sleeping) lets



you use its sparkling blue **swimming pool** for an entrance fee of Ar10,000 per day – not a bad deal, especially when it's super-hot out and you just want to relax in a bit of luxury (there's even a swim-up bar).

The following companies, mostly based in Diego town, offer a variety of regional tours or day-long adrenalin-pumping excursions.

**Cap-Nord Voyages** (☎ 82 255 06; cap.nord.voyages@wanadoo.mg; Hôtel Colbert, 51 Rue Colbert) Offers excursions to Montagne d'Ambre and l'Ankàrana, plus car hire. It can do day trips to l'Ankàrana, followed by a drop-off at Ankify for Nosy Be.

**Evasion Sans Frontiers** (☎ 82 230 61; esf.diego@wanadoo.mg) This well-respected company runs day trips to the magnificent Réserve Spéciale de l'Ankàrana

(see p186), about 70km southwest of Diego, home to Madagascar's most famous fiery red *tsingy*. The full-day trip (€50) includes lunch. The walking here is not technical – you can get right up to the *tsingy* in a vehicle, so this trip works well for folks of all ages and fitness levels. Evasion does comfortable transfers (no overpacked minibuses here) between Diego and Ankify (€20), but you need to book in advance. Quad-biking and windsurfing can also be arranged.

**King de la Piste** (☎ 82 225 99; www.kingdelapiste.de) A German-run company based at King's Lodge, 8km south of Diego on the road to Ramena; it organises trips to l'Ankàrana and two hotels on the outskirts of Diego. It also does car hire, including some no-frills budget rentals. It is a good first contact for all activities.

**MadaQuad** (☎ 032 408 8814; www.madaquad.net; 9 Ave Sourcouf) One of Diego's top quad-biking companies, it runs a variety of guided tours that visit the red *tsingy*, three bays, Windsor Castle and surrounding beaches and dunes. Guided trip options for two-person quads include half-day (driver/passenger Ar170,000/45,000), full-day (driver/passenger Ar270,000/100,000) and overnight camping (driver/passenger Ar650,000/250,000). The camping trip includes an Emerald Sea snorkelling stop.

**New Sea Roc** (☎ 82 218 54 or 032 02 32 57; 26 Rue Colbert) Offering rock-climbing expeditions and equipment, New Sea Roc specialises in climbing and camping trips (€40 per person per day) on the Nosy Hara archipelago offshore. Now a protected area, the marine park is three hours from Diego. New Sea Roc also offers fishing, snorkelling and trekking excursions. The eco-friendly company was invaluable in the successful campaign to convince the provincial government to turn Montagne de Français into a protected wilderness area.

**Sakalava Windsurf & Kite** (☎ 032 04 512 39; Baie de Sakalava) Next to the bungalows on the main beach at

Sakalava, this is the place to come for windsurfing. Lessons are offered, and there is equipment rental if you already know what you're doing.

## Sleeping BUDGET

Budget travellers will dig Diego – there are plenty of cheap choices. Reserve in advance if you have your heart set on a particular room.

**Hôtel Belle Vue** (Chez Layec; ☎ 82 210 21; bellevue@blueline.mg; 35 Rue François de Mahy; d Ar12,000-20,000) A lively hotel that's good for linking up with other travellers – there's a noticeboard for tours. Rooms are simple, but all come with fan and net. The cheapest rooms share baths, but these ones have hot water.

**Hôtel Fiantzilaka** (☎ 82 223 48; 13 Blvd Étienne; r Ar15,000-35,000; ☎) The rooms here are fairly old with saggy mattresses, but travellers say it's good value for money. It's clean, central and the owners are friendly. There's an upstairs restaurant with Chinese and Malagasy dishes.

**Les Arcades** (☎ 82 231 04; arcades@blueline.mg; Place Foch; r Ar16,000-42,000, mains Ar6000-11,000; ☎) The eight rooms here have long been popular with French backpackers in the know: they're cheap, you can grub at the attached restaurant and you can check your email. Rooms are all a bit dingy with cheap mattresses that look like an elephant slept on them. The best rooms are numbers 2 and 8. These come with air-con and chaise lounges. The restaurant serves grills, burgers and interesting dishes like Egyptian kofta. At night it doubles as a lively bar. English is spoken.

## LIBERTALIA

The first mention of the Pirate Republic of Libertalia was in a 1726 story by Daniel Defoe. According to Defoe, Libertalia was founded around the Baie des Français by Captain Misson, a French adventurer with a Robin Hood bent who sailed the seas freeing slaves and avoiding bloodshed whenever possible. He teamed up with a defrocked Dominican priest, Father Caracigli, to set up a communist Utopia.

They began building with the help of 300 Comorians (who were a 'gift' from the Sultan of Anjouan) as well as assorted African slaves, and British, French, Dutch and Portuguese pirates. A parliament was formed, a printing press was started, crops were planted, stock was reared and a new international language was established.

All seemed to be going well until the Malagasy people living around the 'International Republic of Libertalia' descended en masse from the hills and massacred the Libertalian population. Caracigli was killed, but Misson escaped. His eventual fate remains a mystery.

As yet, there is no physical evidence of Libertalia, and some historians have relegated it to the realms of fantasy. Sceptics argue that Robinson Crusoe's creator could easily have invented a pirate republic.

**MIDRANGE**

This is only a sampling of the midrange options in town; there are many more – just take a walk down Rue Colbert.

**Hôtel la Racasse** (☎ 82 223 64; Ave Sourcouf; d from Ar45,000; 🍷) Rooms here are good value (although check it out before booking, as some are still a bit shabby), and relatively comfortable, with lots of space. Even the cheapest rooms have private bathrooms, and the best come with safes, TV, air-con and private sitting areas. The restaurant on the 1st floor is convenient – it opens early and closes later than most. Plus it has a ping-pong table.

**our pick** **Le Jardin Exotique** (☎ 82 219 33; r Ar50,000-70,000; 🍷) Check out a few rooms at this quirky, good-value, almost-boutique hotel, before deciding on one. Some are much larger and lighter than others. All come with parquet floors, four-poster beds, mozzie nets and a bold and creative paint job. The cheapest just have fans, but no less character. Mattresses are good and firm, and some rooms are real doubles (that's one bed, boys and girls). The rooftop terrace has picnic tables and the views over the light-green sea are particularly awesome at sunset (bring a few cold beers up with you – there's a fridge in all the rooms). The garden area, with its marble statues and flowers, is wonderful – as erotic as it is exotic.

**TOP END**

Two luxury hotels have opened in Diego in the last three years. Both are recommended.

**Hotel Emeraude** (☎ 82 225 44; www.hotelemeraude-diego.com; cnr Rue Rigult & Rue Gauche; s/d/ste Ar80,000/100,000/150,000; 🍷) Classy, comfortable and centrally located, Emeraude is a relatively new colonial-style hotel with 18 fabulously spacious rooms featuring satellite TV and minibar. Each room is a bit different, but all have lovely bedspreads, polished-wood furniture, elegant curtains and local art on freshly painted walls. The suites are great, with slick bathrooms kitted out with Jacuzzis. Land and sea excursions can be arranged; airport transfers are free. The on-site restaurant, Le Jongue, specialises in Vietnamese. For its price range (you'd be surprised at the number of lesser hotels on Rue Colbert that charge more), it's very good value.

**Le Grand Hotel** (☎ 82 230 63; www.grand-hotel-diego.com; Rue Colbert; r Ar237,500; 🍷 🍷 🍷) This hotel lives up to its moniker. One of Diego's two new luxury establishments, Le Grand is smack in the middle of town and offers 66 rooms

and suites. All are large and posh with satellite TVs, plush chairs and modern polished-wood bed frames. The lobby area, with a TV lounge, shops and a restaurant, opens up to a great terrace. Here you'll find the large sparkling clean pool surrounded by lounge chairs, tables and umbrellas. You can grab a drink from the swim-up bar or sunbathe on a wooden island in the middle of the pool. Nonguests can buy day pool passes for Ar10,000. The checked marble spa and big airy fitness centre are two assets.

**Allamanda Hotel** (☎ 82 210 33; www.hotels-diego.com; Rue Richelieu; d €95; 🍷 🍷 🍷) The other swanky new place is just steps from the sea – the long pool offers great ocean views – and has all the luxuries you would expect from a top-end hotel. The exterior of the building itself is a bit bland and boxy, but the really big rooms are supercomfy and come with mod art and low lighting, and sometimes balconies. The restaurant has a stellar reputation.

**Eating**

Diego has dozens of Western-style snack bars, ice-cream parlours and diners. The following is just a selection of what's on offer. In the early evenings, there are good street-food stands along Rue Colbert. **Leong Hoi** (Rue de la Mame) is a well-stocked supermarket.

**Le Grand Hotel Pâtisserie** (Le Grand Hotel; mains Ar600-Ar2500; ☎ 6.30am-12.30pm & 3.30-9pm) Everyone in Diego comes here in the morning for crispy loaves of fresh-baked French baguettes, but tourists not partaking in a picnic can also enjoy this delightful little patisserie attached to the Grand Hotel. It's a great choice for an economical and light breakfast. Besides a dizzying variety of wonderful gelato and pastries (fancy a real Napoleon?), it also serves espresso drinks and snacks such as baby-sized pizzas.

**San Diego Rock Café** (☎ 82 219 88; Ave Tollendal; mains Ar6000-15,000 ☎ 6am-midnight) This new joint is the funkiest eatery in Diego, and it serves food continuously from open to close. There is a Betty Boop theme and lots of artistic renderings on the walls. Chairs and tables are shiny metal, and an entire menu page is devoted to Western-style breakfasts! There's another page equally loyal to dessert. If you don't want eggs or frozen dairy, there are also pizzas, burgers and fries, Malagasy curries, fish soups and grilled shrimps. The friendly owner had plans to start a small hotel; check in with her if you're looking for a place to slumber.

**La Taverne** (☎ 032 02 212 83; Rue Colbert; mains Ar8000-12,000; ☎ lunch & dinner) Choose from old leather couches inside or sidewalk seating out. The place serves lots of pizzas and fills up at meal times. The décor includes old French beer posters and murals of famous African jazz stars.

**Balafomanga** (☎ 82 228 94; 18 Rue Louis Brunet; mains Ar9000-20,000; ☎ lunch & dinner) We loved how accommodating this place was when it came to making up your own versions of its mains – we enjoyed the grilled calamari appetizer with parsley and garlic paired with spaghetti. The big menu offers a bit of everything, although the delicious food definitely has a big French and Malagasy influence. It's a funky dining environment – Chinese lanterns cast a green glow on the multicoloured walls and tablecloths. A faux flame burns in a dangling cast-iron pot, and rows of home-brewed fruit-flavoured rum sit in big plastic pots on the low-lit bar.

**our pick** **La Rosticceria** (☎ 82 236 22; 47 Rue Colbert; larosticceria@wanadoo.mg; mains Ar12,500-14,000; ☎ noon-10.30pm Mon-Sat) Mmmm, this Italian restaurant has a fantastic selection of risottos, gnocchi, lasagne and fresh-made tagliatelle and spaghettis with pesto, cream, meat or seafood sauces. The ambiance is as delicious as the food. Inside there is a nautical theme, with intricately carved wooden vessels and old maps for decoration. Outside tables sit on the sidewalk. Save room for coffee and dessert – both the real espresso and the creamy gelato are marvellous. There are six rooms for rent upstairs (Ar72,000) per room. These have big beds, Asian lampshades and Malagasy art decorating white walls – they are quite lovely.

**Le Tsara Be Vaovao** (☎ 032 04 940 97; 36 Rue Colbert; mains Ar14,000-22,000; ☎ lunch & dinner) This locally recommended restaurant takes its food seriously. The place specialises in Malagasy and French fusion, and incorporates many local spices and fresh ingredients into its wood-fire cooking. Besides serving all manner of zebu steaks, grilled to order, it does a selection of French favourites like fois gras and grilled duck. There are a few pasta dishes as well, but not much for vegetarians.

**Le Melville** (☎ 82 210 33; www.hotels-diego.com; Allamanda Hotel, Rue Richelieu; mains Ar15,000-40,000; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Even if you can't afford to stay at the Allamanda, it's worth coming to its restaurant for the excellent seafood and fish. We met more than one travelling couple that recommended the place for its romantic

atmosphere – it's right on the water with a fabulous patio that's particularly alluring at sunset. The food is fresh, high quality and infused with regional spices and flavours.

**Drinking & Entertainment**

Diego has a heck of a lot more nightlife than most Madagascan cities – you can actually do a little club crawl of your own now down Rue Colbert!

**Vahinée Bar** (Rue Colbert) A local favourite that's perfect for an après-dinner drink. The food is okay – try the noodle soup – but most people stop by for cocktails. The atmosphere is good, and there's often live music. Look for the bar opposite the BNI-CL bank. It opens early and closes late.

**Boit Noir** (Rue Colbert) This is a very popular disco that attracts a chic crowd and a lot fewer prostitutes than other Diego clubs. There's plenty of dirty dancing, however, and people dress to impress.

**Le Nouvel Hôtel** (Rue Colbert) Diego's most popular seedy nightclub is a real dive; it's dark and dingy and usually packed with an oft-raunchy crowd of sailors and their entourage of lady friends. In the day, it becomes the domain of sad-looking, hard-drinking locals downing a breakfast pint.

**Alliance Franco-Malgache** (☎ 82 210 31; afdiego@wanadoo.mg; Rue Colbert; ☎ 8.30-11.30am & 3-7.30pm Tue-Sat, 3-7.30pm Mon) The Alliance is housed in a magnificently restored Art Deco-style building, which is worth a look on its own. There are regular art exhibitions here, along with film screenings and concerts. The library has French books and magazines. Stop by for the latest programme of events.

**Shopping**

Wander down Rue Colbert as new shops open here each season. Check out **Ateliers d'Artisanat** (☎ 82 293 85; Rue Colbert), which has a huge selection of handicrafts and art-work from all over Madagascar. You will also find women selling Madagascan art at the taxibrousse stations.

**Getting There & Away****AIR**

**Air Madagascar** (☎ 82 211 93; Ave Sourcouf) links Diego with Antananarivo (Ar304,600) daily and has regular flights to Sambava (Ar192,000), Toamasina (Ar525,600) and Mahajanga (Ar288,000).

**BOAT**

There is no scheduled passenger service from Diego. However, cargo boats, which often accept passengers, travel regularly to and from coastal towns, including Mahajanga and Sambava. There are no set schedules, and sometimes these inexplicably stop running for a while, so you will need to inquire at the port.

**TAXI-BROUSSE**

Diego Suarez has three taxi-brousse stations. Most transport departs from the southern taxi-brousse station along Route de l'Ankàrana. Vehicles heading for destinations west and north, including Ramena (Ar2000, one hour) and Joffreville (for Parc National de Montagne d'Ambre; Ar3000, one hour), depart from the western taxi-brousse station along Route de la Pyrotechnie. Vehicles for Ambanja and Nosy Be (Ar30,000, six hours), Mahajanga (Ar60,000, 36 hours) and Antananarivo (Ar70,000, two days) depart from the Gare Routière Sonatra, near the Rex cinema. For Iharana, Sambava and other destinations on the northeast coast, it's quicker to get a taxi-brousse to the junction town of Ambilobe and change to a vehicle heading east. It's possible to travel from Diego to Sambava in one long day, although taxis-brousses usually take longer. In the rainy season this route can take several days.

Most people get to Nosy Be via a direct minibus and boat combo. The entire trip costs only Ar40,000 and you'll find touts in town selling tickets (or you can head directly to the taxi-brousse rack). Your bus should not leave before 5.30am, if the person selling the ticket says it does, it's not legit; we know of one couple that got sold a 'direct' minibus and boat combo, but were picked up from their hotel at 3.30am and were driven around Diego's suburbs hunting for clients for three hours before the bus finally departed.

No matter what type of minibus you end up in, expect it to be filled to capacity times three. If this doesn't appeal to you, and you don't want to fly, pay a bit more and go with **Evasion Sans Frontiers** (☎ 82 230 61; esf.diego@wanadoo.mg), which does the trip in a luxury, air-con minibus. The journey costs €20, including boat transfer to the island, and must be booked in advance by ringing the office.

**Getting Around**

Diego's Arrachart Airport is 6km south of the town centre. Taxis charge Ar10,000 to

get there. Otherwise, you can walk out to the main road and catch a taxi-brousse into town (Ar2000). If you want to get out to the beaches, you can hire a taxi for the trip – make sure the driver waits (don't pay everything up front) or you may be stranded for quite some time. A round trip to either the Baie de Sakalava or Ramena should cost Ar60,000, but you'll have to barter. Around town taxis are Ar1800.

King de la Piste (p177) and Cap-Nord Voyages (p176) can organise 4WD rental for around Ar100,000; the petrol costs extra.

**NOSY LONJA**

The small island of Nosy Lonja in the middle of the Baie des Français is known in French as Pain de Sucre (Sugar Loaf) for its supposed resemblance to the much larger Sugar Loaf Mountain in Rio de Janeiro harbour in Brazil. It's off limits to foreigners and considered sacred by the Malagasy, who use it for *fijoroana* (ceremonies in which they invoke the ancestors).

**ROAD TO RAMENA**

Some of the region's best sleeping options, especially for couples and families, are on the road between Diego Suarez and Ramena beach. There's also plenty to do activities-wise. If you want to take a hike, head to **Montagne des Français** (admission Ar25,000) named in memory of the Malagasy and French forces killed in 1942 in Allied resistance to the pro-German Vichy French forces. It is a small and still relatively attractive wild place about 8km from Diego. Unfortunately it's facing environmental degradation problems that the government has done little to stop despite the park's new status as a protected wilderness area (see boxed text, p182).

The start of the trail is just before King's Lodge (see Sleeping). It is a hot, two hour climb to the summit, but it's worth it. Along the way you'll pass interesting dry forest vegetation, caves, a fort's remains and abundant bird life. There are chances for rock-climbing and great views across the bay.

**Sleeping**

The following places offer their own tours and excursions, and some even run free daytime shuttles into Diego Suarez.

**King's Lodge** (☎ 82 225 99; Rte de Ramena; www.kingdelapiste.de; r€30) The simplest sleeping option in this area, King's attracts lots of hikers who

come to climb Montagne des Français. The German owner also runs the Parc Botanique des Mille Baobabs (see boxed text, p182) and is almost fanatically enthusiastic about ecotourism. He can provide very helpful and detailed info about the region's flora and fauna, as well as climbing and hiking routes up the mountain. The rooms are very clean, with mozzie nets and fans. Most are really breezy, which keeps them cool despite the lack of air-con. You can swim off the beach near the front.

**Le Panorama** (☎ 82 225 99; Rte de Ramena; www.kingdelapiste.de; r€50; 📶 🚰 🚿) This is a true country boutique joint with an absolutely gorgeous pool that has a small waterfall and lovely thick padding on the sun chairs around it. The 12 bungalows have thatched roofs and redbrick-and-stone walls. Inside you'll find a breezy space with white-washed walls and wooden beams on the ceiling; there's more local wood on the dark-polished floors and matching four-poster beds. There is a large open-air restaurant, and the lodge is very eco-friendly. Excursions can be arranged.

**ourpick** **Hôtel La Note Bleue** (☎ 032 07 666 26; www.diego-hotel.com; s/d €98/115, honeymoon suite €238; 📶 🚰 🚿) This is the best splash-out option in the region, a luxury hotel with character. The owner, who speaks excellent English among five other languages, has owned hotels around the world and knows how to run a tidy ship. Rooms are gorgeous. Each is huge and has a giant balcony with a swing and fabulous sea views. Honeymooners should reserve the honeymoon suite. It is absolutely enormous and feels like you are staying in a millionaire's private home – think marble statues in the bathroom and a round bed, a giant living room with a flatscreen TV, a Jacuzzi, and an enormous private patio looking straight out to Nosy Lonja that's breathtaking come sunset. There is a restaurant with fabulous food and house rum, a huge pool with two waterslides (the hotel is very kid-friendly), an open-air gym and a spa offering massage. La Note Bleue has its own dock, and boat, and runs loads of watery excursions as well as land tours. It also rents quad-bikes, motorcycles and bicycles. It's a luxury experience made personable; look for it 3km from town.

**RAMENA**

The beach in front of this poor fishing village is a tiny palm-fringed spot 18km northeast of Diego Suarez. Boats crowd the small stretch of golden sand, and you'll find plenty of women

touting massages and men selling fishing trips on the beach. Chickens and children run free on the sandy, garbage-strewn village streets that front the beach, and if you come looking for a hotel you'll likely have a posse of advisors before you even reach the place. But your posse will be friendly, and sure they want to make a buck off you, but they're not intimidating. In fact, there's something appealing about the whole down-home Malagasy fishing-village vibe this place so strongly emits. Plus the water – a turquoise and cerulean sea flecked with white caps set against a pale baby-blue sky – is freaking gorgeous. And it might not be long before Ramena really cleans up its act; the place is growing quickly, and its hotels are gaining a rep as good alternatives to city sleeping.

**Sleeping & Eating**

Try to book ahead during French school holidays when many places fill ultra-quick.

**Badamera** (☎ 032 07 733 50; r from Ar20,000) A few hundred metres up a hill from the beach, this popular and laid-back budget place has a shabby air, but a stylish terrace and restaurant that gets good reviews for its food. The rooms and bungalows are basic and hot (no fans), but they're clean and come with nets. Though the surrounding area is pretty scruffy, the beach isn't far away.

**Villa Palm Beach** (☎ 032 02 409 04; palmbeach@netcourrier.com; r Ar26,000-56,000; 📶) A clean and homely pension just down the hill from Badamera, it offers well-kept rooms in a family house. Accommodation is very simple, with nets, fans and wood floors, but it still feels nice and there are sea views. There are now a few more expensive rooms with air-con and newer furnishings.

**La Case en Falafy** (Chez Bruno; ☎ 032 02 674 33; bungalows Ar30,000; 📶) It's away from the beach a bit, but this is a convivial place with a bar, good pool and open-air restaurant. The thatched-roof bungalows sit in a nice garden. Try for one at the back of the property – they are a bit more spread out and quiet. Tours and excursions can be arranged here.

**Restaurant L'Émeraude** (☎ 032 07 725 95; set menu Ar40,000; 📶 lunch & dinner Wed-Mon) This rather smart restaurant on the beach has a great reputation for its excellent food and Saturday-night disco. To find it walk down the road to the beach from Fihary Hotel and turn left at the pier. It's the first restaurant you'll see.

### SAVING MADAGASCAR ONE BAOBAB AT A TIME

York Pareik is one of a small, but growing, group of global citizens practicing homegrown ecotourism. The long-time Diego Suarez area resident (Pareik originally hails from Germany) is a local hotelier and a one-man conservation promotion machine. Pareik, through sheer will and stubbornness (and, let's face it, a hell of a lot more money than most Madagascans make in a lifetime) is actually making headway in saving Madagascar's unique northern ecosystem one baobab at a time.

Pareik created the **Parc Botanique des Mille Baobabs** (admission €3) in 2002 in part to help stop baobab poaching on Montagne des Français. Although the mountain is supposedly now an officially protected wilderness area, the government is doing little to stop poor locals from razing baobabs to grow rice or burying and burning garbage in the park's fragile ecosystem. Parc Botanique des Mille Baobabs sits at the front of Montagne des Français, on land Pareik leased from the government using money he raised through German lenders. Since he doubts the government will do anything to stop the poaching, Pareik hopes to change it himself by educating locals about the importance of sustainable living. His goal isn't to keep the locals out of the park, he says, but to educate them on why it's so destructive to cut down the baobab trees. He has signs in both French and the local dialect, and he brings in groups of schoolchildren to teach them about ecotourism. Locals do not pay the same entrance fee as foreigners.

'Really, my purpose in creating the park was only partly to protect the ecosystem here, it was also for education purposes. I want to teach the locals, and the tourists, about the importance of

### Getting There & Away

Taxis-brousses make several runs between Diego Suarez and Ramena (Ar2000) each day – although you may have to wait a while to get back. Chartering a taxi is an easier option, but will cost about Ar60,000 return.

### BAIE DES SAKALAVA

On the eastern side of the peninsula that juts into the bay east of Diego is the up-and-coming Baie des Sakalava, which has a more beautiful beach than Ramena and a more remote atmosphere – it's not smack in the middle of a village.

You'll find a water-sports centre at the **Hôtel-Club de Sakalava** (☎ 032 04 512 39; www.sakalava.com; bungalows Ar25,000), which offers kite-surfing and windsurfing lessons and equipment rental. The place also arranges fishing and excursions, and mountain-bike, 4WD and boat rental. There are seven bungalows here, but unless you're taking lessons with the club, it can be hard to snag one – you'll often be told the place is full even if it's not.

Another larger and much swankier hotel is being planned for this beach. When it's complete – which could be years away – it will likely bring a lot more tourists.

To get here, head to Ankorikakely village, 13km from Diego along the main road, then walk or hitch another 5km from the sign-posted turn-off. It's very easy to hire a taxi

from Diego to get here and back – make sure your driver doesn't abandon you, however – for around Ar60,000.

### BAIE DES DUNES & MER D'Émeraude (EMERALD SEA)

Wild and free, the **Baie des Dunes** is our favourite bay in the area. Located north of the Baie des Sakalava, it offers the most remote beaches of them all. The white sand slopes gently into the brilliant coloured water, and you'll often have the place to yourself. The beach is guarded by a rusting military installation with a long-forgotten gun emplacement. Near its crumbling stone buildings an old lighthouse stands proud and a tapestry of white-flecked waves crash into jagged rocks below. To the left of the beach you'll find a small reef and a number of pools before the ocean floor drops steeply and takes you into excellent snorkelling territory – definitely bring a mask, tube and fins.

More good snorkelling is to be found on the opposite side of the headland in the uber-gorgeous **Mer d'Émeraude** – literally a translucent Emerald Sea. To get to Mer d'Émeraude, you'll have to charter a fishing boat from Ramena or arrange a trip with one of the hotels. Much of the sea sits on a bit of a sandbar, which means you can wade slowly into schools of brightly coloured fish. Just keep your flippers on please, so you don't muck up and touch the relatively virgin coral.

protecting the environment. It is only through education that the nature will be saved,' Pareik says as he sits on a weathered wooden bench staring out over the mangrove swamp to the sea

The mangrove-tree roots, knotted and criss-crossed like the veins on an old man's arthritic hand, rise in curved arches from the sandy swamp. The swamp is part of Pareik's conservation area. So is a circular 3km walking trail with resting points that also offer big signs with detailed information about native plants and creatures – you can find chameleons, geckos and hedgehogs in these dusty hills. The park features flora and fauna native only to northern Madagascar, including five of Madagascar's seven species of baobabs.

When he started the park five years ago, Pareik planted 5000 baobabs on the property. He says he'll never see them grow over 10ft – he won't live that long. Baobabs, which are entirely reliant on water for growth, seem to be the slowest-growing trees on earth. Even though Pareik planted the trees five years ago, some only reached our knees, while others only topped our ankles.

'Baobabs don't flower until they are 100 years old,' Pareik says. 'They grow so slow; that's why it's so harmful if they are cut down because you cut one of those big trees they have out (in western Madagascar) down and you'll have to wait a thousand years for another to grow to its size.'

There are eight species of baobab in the world, and six of these are found only in Madagascar (the seventh is indigenous to eastern African as well, and the eighth species is found only in northern Australia). Northern Madagascar is home to five species of baobab.

The Parc Botanique des Mille Baobabs is adjacent to King's Lodge (see p180).

The Baie des Dunes and Emerald Sea can be reached by vehicle or foot. Both are included on organised tours from Diego; see p175. Or you can charter a taxi from Diego, Ramena or the Baie des Sakalava to take you there. The cost is anywhere from Ar30,000 to Ar100,000 depending on your starting point. Note that to reach the Baie des Dunes you have to pass through a military base, and you will need to purchase a permit (Ar2000) from one of the sentries at the main gate.

You can walk from Baie des Sakalava to Baie des Dunes in about two hours, passing mangroves and interesting rock pools.

### WINDSOR CASTLE

This 391m-high rock formation lies about 2km north of the village of Andramahimba, northwest of Diego Suarez. It served as a French fort and lookout, and was taken by the occupying British in 1942. A decaying stairway leads to the top, with good views over the **Baie du Courrier**.

Windsor Castle can only be accessed by 4WD vehicle. Follow the route west along the bay for 20km and turn north at Antsahampano. At the 32km point from Diego Suarez (which is 12km beyond Antsahampano), turn west down a track and continue for a further 5km.

Organised tours from Diego Suarez cost about Ar50,000 per person with a group of four.

### JOFFREVILLE

Its name evokes images of colonial pomp, and indeed, Joffreville, established in 1902, was once a pleasure resort for the French military. Today it's little more than a small village with battered signs and plenty of small shacks. Still the place manages to retain a relaxing country ambience and there are excellent views of the surrounding bays from all sides. It is also home to several excellent hotels. Most people use the town as a jumping off point to visit the fabulous and adjacent Parc National de Montagne d'Ambre.

### Sleeping & Eating

The village store sells a few basics, but if you plan on camping in the park you'll need to get food and other supplies in Diego. All the hotels do meals of varying standards.

**Auberge Sakay Tany** (☎ 032 04 281 22; www.sakay-tany.com; r from Ar25,000, set dinner Ar20,000) A simple, quaint guesthouse with lots of character. The four rustic rooms in the main house are painted a cheery yellow. Some share baths, but there are now a few private bathrooms. The garden area is particularly nice, with a thatched dining area and a swing.

**Nature Lodge** (☎ 032 07 123 06; www.naturelodge-ambre.com; d €60, dinner €15) Almost as beautiful as Le Domaine de Fontenay, and considerably cheaper, this newer hotel has wooden safari-lodge-style cottages with chic interiors and

amazing views, and a well-decorated thatched dining room and bar. The food is excellent.

**Le Domaine de Fontenay** (☎ 033 11 345 81; www.lefontenay-madagascar.com; r €120) This luxurious and charming hotel is one of Madagascar's best. It has eight very chic bungalows with stone floors, huge wood-and-marble bathrooms and four-poster beds. The restaurant in the old farmhouse features a chimney designed by Gustave Eiffel, of the Tower fame. It also has an orchid garden, giant tortoises and a private nature reserve with lemurs, reptiles, birds and great views over Diego's bay. English is spoken.

### Getting There & Away

It is easy to catch a taxi-brousse to Joffreville (Ar3000, two hours) from Diego. Buses depart frequently from Diego's western taxi-brousse station.

You can also hire a taxi from Diego Suarez for the day from about Ar100,000 round trip, including waiting time or a trip to the Park National de Montagne d'Ambre, 4km away.

## PARC NATIONAL DE MONTAGNE D'AMBRE

Wander blissfully through sun-dappled dry forests and stop at a misty waterfall, where you can return the stares of lemurs laughing at you from high above the treetops, in the 18,200 hectares of Parc National de Montagne d'Ambre. A prominent volcanic massif, it is one of northern Madagascar's most visited natural attractions. A new road through the park means tourist development is no longer limited to the northern area of the park – a small pass through the *tsingy* has been created and it is now popular to do a three-day trek from the park's eastern edge to its western boundary (there are built-in rest spots along the way, and you can rent tents at the eastern entrance). With taxis-brousses delivering you right to the gate, there's really no excuse not to visit – the wildlife is phenomenal. Once at the gate, it is easy to pick up a guide (now required) to lead you around. Let them know how much time you have – three days is the most you really need in this park – and where you'd like to trek. If you can only spare a day, visits are easily arranged from Diego. Note that hiking in the extreme southern reaches is still quite difficult, although it can be arranged.

### Information

**Angap** (🕒 8am-4pm), at the park entrance a few kilometres southwest of Joffreville, can help

with information, permits (per day Ar25,000) and guides (per day €10 to €15), which are compulsory. The office also distributes a leaflet with a map of the self-guided trails and some information about the park.

### Wildlife

Of the nearly a dozen species of lemurs found in the park, the most notable are the crowned lemur and Sanford's lemur. Others include the rufous mouse lemur, the dwarf and northern sportive lemurs, the aye-aye and the local Montagne d'Ambre fork-marked lemur. Among other mammals, the ring-tailed mongoose is probably the most frequently observed.

Reptile and amphibian life here includes frogs, geckos, chameleons and snakes. Some chameleons to watch for are the fairly common blue-nose chameleon (*Chamaeleo boettgeri*) and the stump-tailed chameleon.

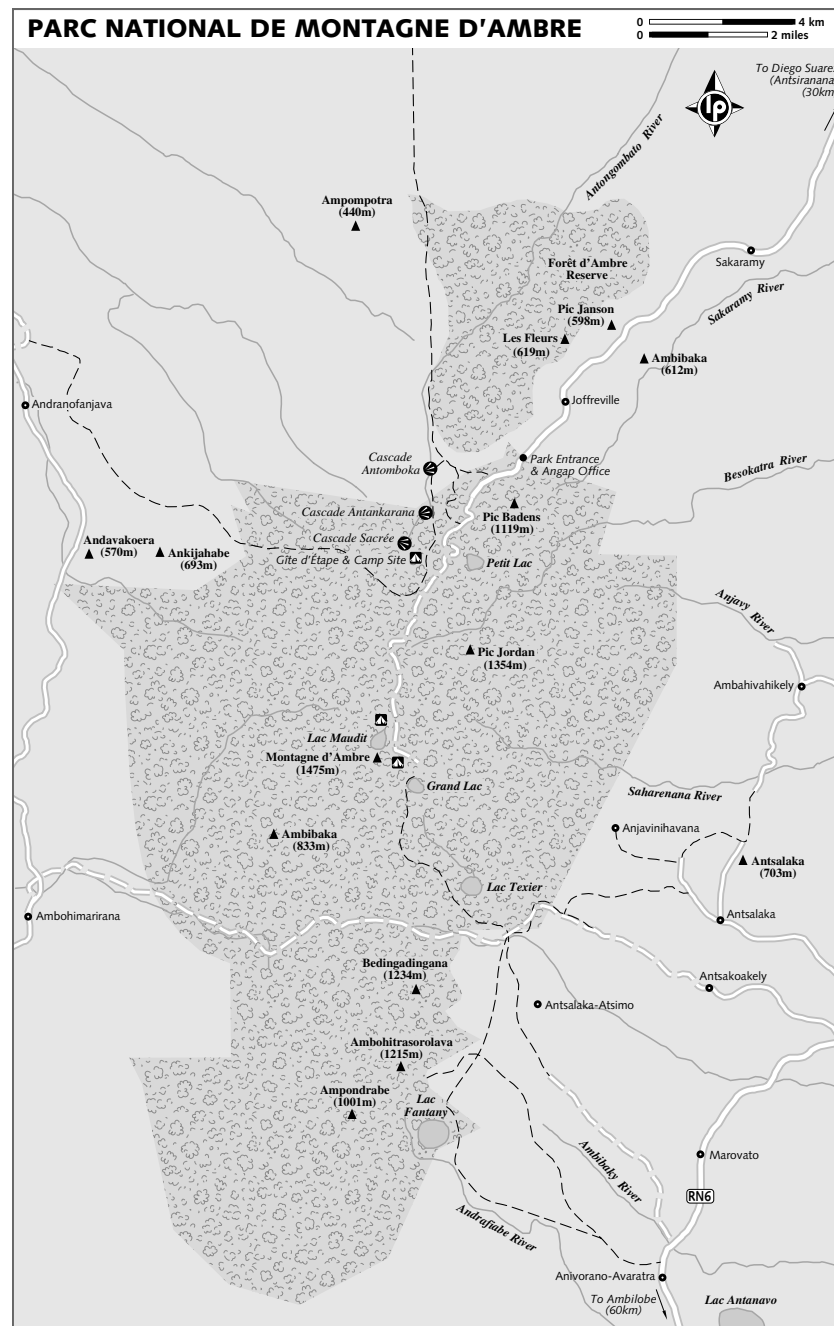
Among the park's more than 70 species of birds are the crested wood ibis (*Lophotibis cristata*) and the malachite kingfisher (*Alcedo vintsioides*).

### Hiking

It takes three days to hike from the eastern to western entrances along the new **cross-park road**, which is about the maximum amount of time you need in Montagne d'Ambre anyway. The hike is mildly strenuous, and passes through some really trippy scenery – mushrooms grow off the edges of trees and ring-tailed mongooses wander freely, and you pass *tsingy* mazes where lemurs leap from rock to rock and chameleons and geckos chill in the dark crevices between.

Other signposted walking trails in the northern part of the park take in the **Petit Lac**, a small crater lake also known as Lac de la Coupe Verte, and **Cascade Antankarana**, a beautiful waterfall flowing into a tranquil pool surrounded by fern-covered cliffs. Nearby is the path known as **Jardin Botanique**, a forest track lined by orchids, palms, lianas and bromeliads. Not far away, another trail leads to the small **Cascade Sacrée**, a sacred waterfall where locals often make offerings.

A longer track leads to the viewpoint over **Cascade Antomboka**, a narrow waterfall, which plunges 80m into a forest grotto. From the viewpoint there is a steep and slippery descent to the base of the cascade where you are likely to see butterflies and, with luck, crowned lemurs.



The summit of **Montagne d'Ambre** (Amber Mountain; 1475m) is reached via an approximately 11km trail heading south from the park entrance. From the camp site it's a relatively easy three- to four-hour hike, and less than an hour from the base to the summit. Just below the summit is **Lac Maudit**, where local *fady* (taboo) prohibits swimming. Below the summit to the southeast is the larger **Grand Lac**, where you are allowed to camp.

### Sleeping & Eating

The park's **gîte d'étape** (dm Ar12,000) and camp site are in an idyllic setting about 3km from the park entrance, at the end of an avenue of towering South American pines. The *gîte* has a kitchen and a sitting area. Camping costs Ar5000 per person under a shelter or Ar1000 outside; tents can be hired at the park entrances. There are picnic tables, showers and water at the site. There are several camp sites in the rest of the park, which have no facilities; get info at the Angap office.

### Getting There & Away

Parc National de Montagne d'Ambre lies about 40km south of Diego Suarez. The park entrance is about 4km southwest of Joffreville along the main road – taxis-brousses will deliver you right to the gate. Taxis in Diego will take you here for around Ar100,000 round trip.

## RÉSERVE SPÉCIALE DE L'ANKÀRANA

Northern Madagascar's most precious reserve comes in the colour of ruby. The 18,225-hectare Réserve Spéciale de l'Ankàrana encompasses the beautiful Ankàrana Massif about 100km southwest of Diego Suarez. It is a striking and undeveloped fantasyland that's home to uniquely Madagascan sights: psychedelic forests of ruby-red *tsingy* sit next to semi-dry forests where nocturnal sportive lemurs pop their heads out of holes by your feet. Running through and under the *tsingy* are hidden forest-filled canyons and subterranean rivers, some containing crocodiles. There are bat-filled grottos and mysterious caves steeped in legend and history, where traditional rites are still held and *fady* is strictly observed. Don't touch anything or make any noise and never have sex in the caves. The massif is considered sacred to the Antakàrana, who took refuge from the Merina among its *tsingy* and caves, where several kings are buried.

### Information

L'Ankàrana is managed by Angap, which has offices at the main entrance in Mahamasina, in Ambilobe and at the western entrance at Matsaborimanga. The **Angap office** (☎ 82 213 20) in Diego Suarez can provide general information. All offices are open from 7.30am to 4pm.

Entry permits cost Ar25,000 for one day or Ar40,000 for three and can be arranged at the reserve entrance, as can guides, which are compulsory. Fees range from Ar15,000 to Ar30,000 per group per circuit. Fees for night walks are about Ar12,000 per hour per group.

You will need to be self-sufficient with food, water and camping supplies (although there are now some camping supplies available for hire), including a good torch.

As most lakes and rivers here are sacred, bathing or swimming in them is generally not permitted.

### Wildlife

On the high dry *tsingy*, succulents such as *Euphorbia* and *Pachypodium* predominate, while the sheltered intervening canyons are filled with leafy cassias, figs, baobabs and other trees typical of dry deciduous forest.

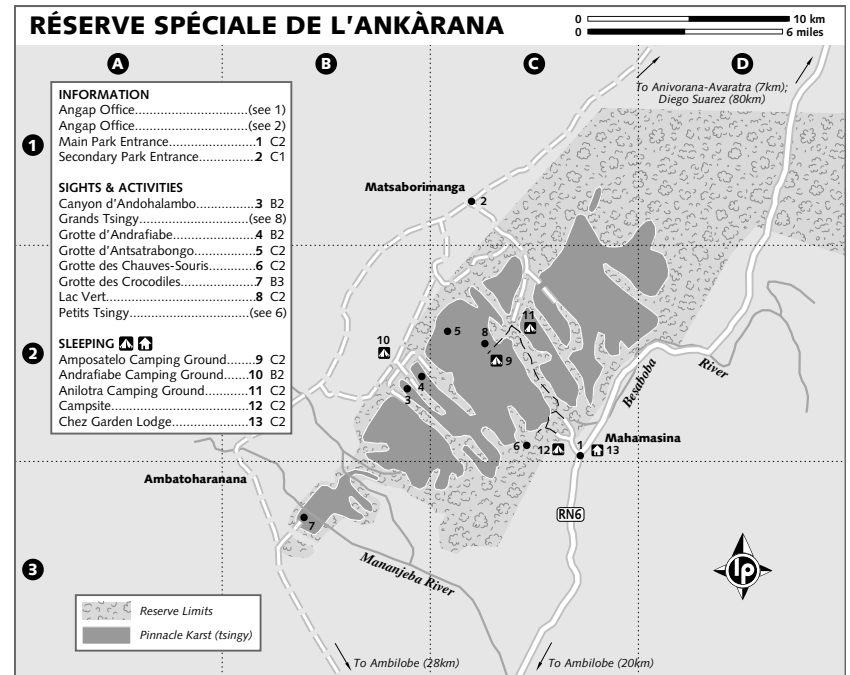
Of the area's more than 10 species of lemurs, the most numerous are crowned, Sanford's and northern sportive lemurs. Other mammals include tenrecs and ring-tailed mongooses. (Mongooses have been known to visit camping grounds at night in search of food – don't try to touch them, as they may be infected with rabies.)

Over 90 species of birds have been identified in the reserve, including the orange-and-white kingfisher, crested coua, Madagascan fish eagle, crested wood ibis and banded kestrel.

Fourteen of Madagascar's 33 species of bats live here, as well as numerous chameleon and gecko species, and some (albeit rarely seen) crocodiles living in rivers in the underground caves.

### Sights & Activities

The route to the **Grands Tsingy** and the pretty **Lac Vert** from Andriafabe camping ground passes through forest, and usually offers the chance to see lemurs, chameleons and some of l'Ankàrana's rich vegetation. From Andriafabe, most groups drive the 16km to Anilotra then walk for about two hours. A sec-



ond circuit from Andriafabe camping ground (around three to four hours) takes in the **Grotte d'Andriafabe** and some canyons.

Easily reached on foot from the main entrance is the impressive **Grotte des Chauves-Souris** (Cave of Bats) with superb stalactites, stalagmites and other interesting formations, and thousands of bats hanging from the walls. Nearby is a small viewpoint from where you can look over the **Petits Tsingy**.

The **Grotte des Crocodiles** (Cave of Crocodiles) is in the far southwestern corner of the reserve and is accessible by 4WD from Ambilobe. To reach the cave, turn off the road before Ambatohararana village. You are far more likely to see lemurs and chameleons here than crocodiles.

In order to really begin to explore l'Ankàrana's attractions, you will need to allow at least three days, including one day each way for transport from Diego Suarez. Bring water and sun protection, as walking in the reserve can get very hot.

### Sleeping & Eating

In the park you have a choice of **camping** (Ar2000) or staying in a **bungalow** (Ar6000). The latter are

very basic but are clean and come with nets. Camping grounds in the reserve include one about 3km from Mahamasina near the Petits Tsingy and Grotte des Chauves-Souris; Andriafabe on the western edge of the reserve near Andriafabe village; and Anilotra in the centre of the reserve near the Grands Tsingy. Anilotra is unpopular with campers, as there's no water source here, but lots of mosquitoes. Watch out for scorpions at all of the camping grounds.

Outside the park, near Mahamasina, **Chez Garden Lodge** (☎ 033 114 5905; bungalows Ar8000) offers basic bungalows in a better setting than those in the park – the garden is really nice, plus there is a bar. Speaking of Mahamasina, the village is very poor and the school is always accepting donations. If you are interested in contributing, ask at the Angap office on your way in.

### Getting There & Away

Mahamasina village is approximately 100km southwest of Diego Suarez and about 40km north of Ambilobe (Ar1000) along Route Nationale 6 (RN6). The main reserve entrance

at Mahamasina is accessible year-round and easily reached by taxi-brousse from Diego Suarez (Ar6000, two hours). It's easy to get a taxi-brousse at the end of your trip to either Diego Suarez or Ambanja (for travelling on to Nosy Be).

To reach Matsaborimanga, turn west off the RN6 road on to a rough track a few kilometres south of Anivorana-Avaratra and continue for about 35km to the reserve entrance.

The park is also well covered by many of Diego's tour companies and hotel excursions; check out p175 for more info.

## AMBILOBE

Ambilobe is the nearest major town to the Réserve Spéciale de l'Ankàrana, and it is an excellent place to stock up on supplies for visiting the reserve if you are coming in from the south on your own. It is also the junction town for transport to and from Iharana and Sambava as well as other towns on Madagascar's eastern coast.

The best accommodation option is the signposted **Hôtel de l'Ankàrana** (rAr20,000).

A few vehicles go early every day between Ambilobe and Diego Suarez, Iharana and south to Ambanja (Ar5000).

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