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ACCOMMODATION

In most Malagasy and Comorian towns, it's usually possible to find a decent, relatively clean room (with bathroom) starting at around Ar25,000. For more amenities – such as air-con, satellite TV and a swimming pool – in a Western-style upper midrange hotel expect to pay between Ar60,000 and Ar75,000 (unless you are staying in tourist resort areas such as Nosy Be and Île Sainte Marie, in which case prices can be double that).

In this guide, 'budget' refers to establishments charging less than Ar25,000; 'midrange' refers to places charging roughly between Ar25,000 and Ar60,000; and 'top end' usually refers to establishments that charge more than Ar60,000 per night. Some top-end places only quote in euros.

PRACTICALITIES

- In Madagascar, check out the French-language newspapers *Midi Madagascarikara*, *Madagascar Tribune* and *L'Express de Madagascar*. In the Comoros, pick up the government-run *Al Watwan*, also in French.
- Madagascar TV stations include Marc Ravalomanana's MBS, as well as the semiprivate MA-TV, RTA, OTV and RTT. In the Comoros, MTV (not the American music channel!) shows local music and some films dubbed into French.
- Voltage in Madagascar and the Comoros (in those places that have electricity) is 220V. Outlets take European-style two-pin round plugs.
- Madagascar and the Comoros both use the metric system.

In tourist areas such as Nosy Be and Île Sainte Marie prices are always higher than in cities such as Fianarantsoa or Diego Suarez, but costs rise even more during the June to August high season and around Christmas, New Year and Easter. Unless otherwise noted, prices quoted in this book are high-season prices. It's better, but not essential, to make advance reservations during the high season.

Camping & Gîtes D'Étape

Camping is possible in most areas of Madagascar and the Comoros. Campsite facilities vary, from hot showers, toilets and well-equipped cooking areas, to nothing more

BOOK ACCOMMODATION ONLINE

For more accommodation reviews and recommendations by Lonely Planet authors, check out the online booking service at www.lonelyplanet.com. You'll find the true, insider lowdown on the best places to stay. Reviews are thorough and independent. Best of all, you can book online.

RESPONSIBLE DIVING

Please consider the following tips when diving, and help preserve the ecology and beauty of reefs.

- Never use anchors on the reef, and take care not to ground boats on coral.
- Avoid touching or standing on living marine organisms or dragging equipment across the reef. Polyps may be damaged by even the gentlest contact. If you must hold onto the reef, only touch exposed rock or dead coral.
- Be conscious of your fins. Even without contact, the surge from fin strokes near the reef can damage delicate organisms. Take care not to kick up clouds of sand, which can smother organisms.
- Practise and maintain proper buoyancy control. Major damage can be done by divers descending too fast and colliding with the reef.
- Take great care in underwater caves. Spend as little time within them as possible as your air bubbles may be caught within the roof and thereby leave organisms high and dry. Take turns to inspect the interior of a small cave.
- Resist the temptation to collect or buy corals or shells or to loot marine archaeological sites (mainly shipwrecks).
- Ensure that you take home all your rubbish and any litter you may find as well. Plastics in particular are a serious threat to marine life.
- Do not feed fish.
- Minimise your disturbance of marine animals. *Never* ride on the backs of turtles.

than a cleared area of bush. Some national parks also have basic hostels known as *gîtes d'étape* (also known as *gîtes*), as well as one or two tents for hire, but the tents are not always very high quality.

Homestays

In rural areas you can sometimes arrange informal homestays by politely asking around a village for a place to sleep in return for payment. Pay a fair fee (about Ar15,000 per room is appropriate) and if possible provide your own food – your hosts may barely have enough to feed themselves.

Hotels & Bungalows

Hotels in Madagascar and the Comoros are also known as *pensions*, *chambres d'hôte*, *residences* or *auberges*. *Pensions* and *chambres d'hôte* are the simplest. Note that the word *hotely* in Madagascar refers not to a hotel, but to a simple restaurant, although often these have basic rooms as well.

Cheaper rooms have their own shower or basin and you share a toilet (WC). Other, more expensive rooms have bathrooms including toilet. Cheapest of all are rooms with a shared toilet and bathroom, known as *salle de bain commune*.

Madagascar is just starting to tap into the luxury market – there are now a few posh 'eco-lodge' resorts scattered about, mainly on Nosy Be and the islands around it, and on Île Sainte Marie in the east. Fly-in resorts are taking off on the remote northwest coast between Nosy Be and Mahajanga.

Hot water and a decent blanket or two are luxuries worth paying for if you're staying in the *hauts plateaux* (highlands) region of central Madagascar, especially in winter, when even the posh Hilton in Antananarivo can feel freezing – hotels don't have central heating, and cheaper places are notorious for draughts. If you're travelling to Antananarivo and central Madagascar in winter, consider investing in a lightweight sleeping bag and silk liner. Also bring a hat and thermal long-johns and undershirt.

ACTIVITIES

Someone has finally lit a torch under Madagascar's untapped adventure industry, and adrenalin-pumping activities are now more readily available than ever.

Climbing

For rock climbing, head to the Diego Suarez area in northern Madagascar. There are some

good technical routes up the Montagne des Français, and even a few companies offering tours and advice. Antananarivo-based adventure specialist **Les Lézards de Tana** (☎ 22 351 01; www.madamax.com), or its subsidiary **New Sea Roc** (www.newsearoc.com) in Diego Suarez, are good places to start.

If trees are more your thing than rocks, check out **Mad'arbres** (www.madarbres.com), an innovative new company with sites at Andasibe and Anjozorobe (in eastern Madagascar) that offers roped climbs and rainforest canopy tours for all levels of fitness.

Cycling

Madagascar is a good country for mountain-biking. Cheap Chinese-made bicycles can be hired in many places. For any long-distance trip you will need to bring your bike from home. For more information on cycling check the website of **Madagascar on Bike** (www.madagascar-on-bike.com).

Diving & Snorkelling

Madagascar and the Comoros are the ideal places to lower oneself over the side of a boat and into another world. Ifaty, Île Sainte Marie, Nosy Be and Mayotte are some of the best sites. There are companies in every dive spot competing to offer internationally recognised diving courses and trips for qualified divers.

Most dive operators insist on checking your general ability, health and qualifications be-

fore you can enrol in a diving course. If you are not sure if diving is for you, many places offer a *baptême*, also known as a 'try dive' or 'first dive'. Some dive instructors speak English, Italian and German as well as French. Many dive centres in Madagascar are closed between February and May, when diving conditions are least favourable.

Please note that there is no hyperbaric chamber anywhere in Madagascar, so should you have a mishap under water, you will have to go to Réunion to be depressurised.

Hiking & Trekking

Madagascar is made for trekking, and many people come for this reason alone. There are literally thousands of kilometres of virgin and varied terrain, chock full of vegetation and animals that may exist nowhere else in the world. In a single week you could easily find yourself marching in single file along a rocky, boiling ridge with acres of yellow grass on all sides, then a few days later slithering downhill through stands of giant bamboo with rainwater trickling down your neck.

The most popular hiking areas in the country include Parc National d'Andringitra, Parc National de l'Isalo, the Réserve Spéciale de l'Ankàrana and the Masoala Peninsula. Hiking highlights in the Comoros islands include the picturesque hills of Anjouan, the rainforests of Mohéli and the ascent of Grande Comore's Mt Karthala, an active volcano.

SAFETY GUIDELINES FOR DIVING

Before embarking on a scuba-diving, skin-diving or snorkelling trip, carefully consider the following points to ensure a safe and enjoyable experience.

- Possess a current diving certification card from a recognised scuba-diving instructional agency (if scuba-diving).
- Be sure you are healthy and feel comfortable diving.
- Obtain reliable information about physical and environmental conditions at the dive site (eg from a reputable local dive operation).
- Be aware of local laws, regulations and etiquette about marine life and the environment.
- Dive only at sites within your realm of experience; if available, engage the services of a competent, professionally trained dive instructor or dive master.
- Be aware that underwater conditions vary significantly from one region, or even site, to another. Seasonal changes can significantly alter any site and dive conditions. These differences influence the way divers dress for a dive and what diving techniques they use.
- Ask about the environmental characteristics that can affect your diving and how local trained divers deal with these considerations.

It's not all hard going, but a reasonable level of fitness is required for most areas. In many places, such as Parc National de Ranomafana or the Masoala Peninsula, trekking involves some mud, stream crossings, leeches and slog-ging through rice paddies – particularly during the rainy season. In the more dry areas of the south and west, such as Parc National de l'Isalo, the main challenge is likely to be the heat.

For most hikes you will need sturdy shoes, a water bottle, first-aid kit and waterproofs. For longer treks, you'll need to be self-sufficient with water, food and camping equipment, and in almost all cases you'll need a guide. Porters are also available in many places. For routes off the beaten track, bring along a topographical map and a compass or GPS device.

Sailing & Kayaking

Madagascar and the Comoros offer miles of coastline to explore and a variety of vessels to sail in, from tiny wooden pirogues to luxury catamarans. Nosy Be and Mayotte are the two most popular take-off points.

The water around the Masoala Peninsula in northeastern Madagascar is ideal for sea kayaking. **Kayak Masoala** (www.kayakafrika.com/madagascar.asp), a company based near Maroantsetra, runs boat-supported sea-kayak trips to beautiful Cap Masoala on the peninsula's southern edge.

Surfing & Water Sports

Surfing and windsurfing are starting to take off in Madagascar, especially around Fort Dauphin and the beaches around Toliara, which have lots of untapped potential – there are numerous rideable breaks with no one riding them. If you have your own board and gear, and know what you're doing, you'll get to surf totally virgin waves. Surfing is best from March through September and you'll need to bring all your own equipment.

Windsurfing and kitesurfing are popular in Diego Suarez' windy bays. The best windsurfing is between August and February.

Quad-Biking

Revvng up the motor and hitting the trail on a quad bike (ATV) is also popular, with multiple companies in the touristy areas (especially the north and east) running guided tours.

Madaventure (☎ 032 04 782 37; www.madaventure.com) is an east coast-based adventure company specialising in quad bike and beach-

buggy tours of Île Sainte Marie and the Canal des Pangalanes; it gets good feedback.

In northern Madagascar, **MadaQuad** (Map p176; ☎ 032 40 888 14; www.madaquad.net; 9 Rue Surcouf, Diego Suarez) is one of Diego Suarez' top quad bike companies, running guided trips to an amazing red *tsingy* forest and three gorgeous bays. The overnight camping trip is unique, and includes a snorkelling stop.

BUSINESS HOURS

Offices, post offices, banks, shops and internet cafés are normally open from 8am to noon and 3pm to 6pm on weekdays. Most places are also open from 8am to noon on Saturday. In hotter areas, such as Toliara, places may stay shut even longer during daylight hours, but then remain open until about 7pm on weekday evenings.

In the Comoros, government offices and banks close around noon on Friday for prayers and don't reopen in the afternoon. During the holy month of Ramadan restaurants are closed and many businesses, shops and government offices open around 7am and close at lunchtime for the rest of the day. The dates of Ramadan change every year – to find them, check out www.holidays.net/ramadan/dates.htm.

Most restaurants are open from about 11am to 2pm for lunch, and in the evenings from about 6pm to 9.30pm.

CHILDREN

With few formal children's attractions or childcare facilities, Madagascar and the Comoros are both reasonably hard places to travel with young children, so junior travellers are a fairly rare sight. Some national parks and zoos (eg the Croq Farm in Antananarivo and the Andasibe-Mantadia, l'Isalo and Ranomafana national parks) have visitors centres with exhibitions geared towards helping children understand issues of biodiversity and conservation.

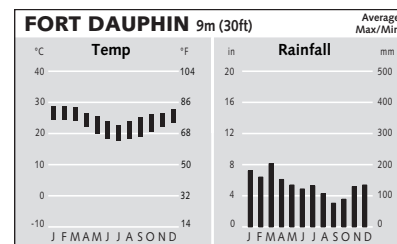
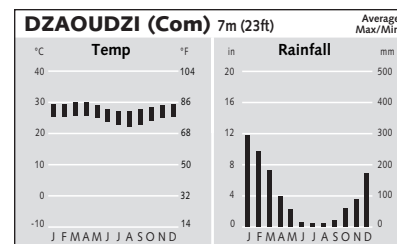
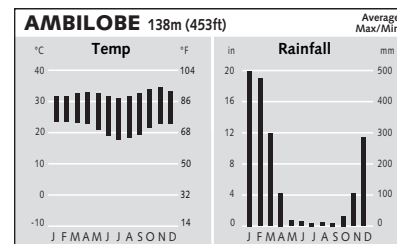
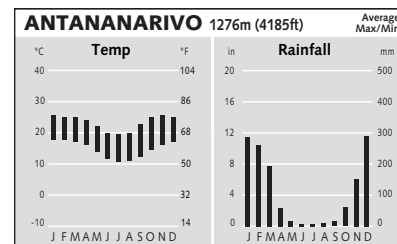
Disposable nappies are available in Antananarivo's supermarkets, but are hard to find elsewhere. Many hotels provide *chambres familiales* or double rooms with an extra single bed geared for use by parents and children. Some of the more upmarket hotels provide a *menu enfant* (children's menu) and high chairs in their restaurants.

For more information, check out Lonely Planet's *Travel with Children* by Cathy Lani-gan and Maureen Wheeler.

CLIMATE CHARTS

Madagascar experiences a variety of climatic conditions. Most rainfall occurs on the east coast and in the far north, while areas south-west of the highlands remain dry for much of the year.

Average maximum temperatures vary from about 30°C in coastal areas (although the mercury has climbed as high as 44°C on occasion) to around 25°C on the *hauts plateaux*. In Antan-



anarivo and other highland areas, temperatures during the winter months can drop to 10°C and even lower during the night. Temperatures at the country's highest elevations may be as low as -10°C during June and July – bring some warm clothing, please. Along the western coast, temperatures are high year-round.

The Comoros have a tropical climate, with a wet season from the months of October to April. The heaviest rainfall occurs between December and April and amounts can reach as high as 390mm in a month.

Temperatures are extremely hot even during the wet season, rarely dropping below 19°C at any time of year. The central, higher parts of the islands (especially Anjouan) remain significantly cooler than the coasts.

For more information on the best time to travel in Madagascar and the Comoros, see p14.

CUSTOMS

It's forbidden to take the following out of Madagascar: live plants (including vanilla), mounted insects, tortoiseshell, fragments of *Aepyornis* (elephant bird) eggshell, precious stones (in export quantities only), antique jewellery, antique coins, fossils, funerary art and antiquities. The export of coral and seashells is forbidden in the Comoros islands and Mayotte. For more detailed information, check the website of **Malagasy customs** (www.madagascar-contacts.com/douanes in French).

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Travelling around Madagascar and the Comoros is not inherently dangerous – there isn't a single venomous snake on any of the islands. There is no reason for you to be overly concerned about your personal safety. However, as when travelling anywhere in the world, some common-sense precautions are always warranted.

One of the most maddening annoyances here is the number of crusty old French men spied at beach resorts with their arms around beautiful Malagasy girls young enough to be their daughters. The government is attempting to fight the sex-tourism industry with signs in shop windows declaring in Malagasy, French and English that 'A child is not a toy'.

Along with underground brothels, where the youngest virgins go for the highest price, Madagascar's tourist areas – Nosy Be is particularly

bad – are filled with young girls who come from the rural villages in hopes of meeting a rich European man to marry and escape with. Sadly, many men prey on this exact desperation, and seduce these girls into having sex (they usually pay for expensive meals and hotel rooms and talk about love and marriage) for a week until they return home to their lives across the planet, leaving the women broken-hearted, or, even worse, pregnant. Of course for all the tears, there are also happy endings. Genuine foreigners do come to Madagascar, fall in love with a local girl and stay forever.

Beaches & Forests

Some areas along the Malagasy and Comorian coastlines are subject to danger from sharks and strong currents. Make sure to seek local advice before heading into the water. To avoid stepping on sea urchins or nibbling crabs always wear shoes when walking on the beach or swimming in the water.

In rainforests watch for leeches in muddy areas or during the rainy season. Wear your socks over your trousers (OK, we know how freaking dorky that sounds, but it does work), apply insect repellent, and carry salt to remove any leeches that do get in. Mosquitoes are also ubiquitous – wear insect repellent, especially at dawn and dusk.

Crimes

If you've travelled in other parts of Africa you will be shocked at how safe Madagascar feels. Armed car-jacking and random violent crime aren't an issue. People are definitely poor, and you will see shack ghettos looking as raggedy as the folks huddled over the cooking fires in front of them, but on the whole the Malagasy are a reserved lot and are likely to leave you alone. Pick-pocketing and snatch-and-grab robberies are the most frequent crimes. You can usually avoid any trouble by dressing down (leave the diamonds at home), walking confidently and carrying as few valuables as possible.

Police checkpoints are random, though most usually occur on the road. We were stopped on numerous occasions but never asked to produce our passports. Supposedly it is the law to carry your passport, and you can be fined for not having it on you, so carry it to be safe.

Road Accidents

A combination of packed and unroadworthy vehicles, reckless drivers and poor-quality

roads makes taxi-brousse (bush taxi) travel in Madagascar, and to a lesser extent the Comoros, fairly hazardous. To minimise the risks, try to avoid night travel if possible.

Annoyances on taxis-brousses come in the form of inadequate legroom, or any sort of personal space for that matter (rows meant to seat three never have less than five, leaving you no room to move at all), and deafening music blasting from tinny speakers. Consider an inflatable cushion and a pair of earplugs (an iPod turned high also works).

Touts & Guides

Be wary of organising trips with someone you met at the airport on arrival in Madagascar. It's always best to wait and get a recommendation from your hotel or other travellers first.

While most official guides are very competent and well trained, some guides are reluctant to do the full circuit they've been paid for, while others ask for higher fees than those set by the park. Check prices before parting with your money. If you aren't satisfied with your guide for any reason, report the matter to the **Association Nationale pour la Gestion des Aires Protégées** (Angap; National Association for the Management of Protected Areas; www.parc-madagascar.com/angap.htm in French) or park office.

When booking an organised tour or car and driver hire, clarify at the outset (ideally in writing) what your agreement is with the tour operator. It's also a good idea to try to meet your guide in advance to gauge their language abilities.

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

Madagascan Embassies & Consulates

Australia (☎ 02 9299 2290; tonyknox@ozemail.com.au; 6th fl, 100 Clarence St, Sydney NSW 2000)

Canada (☎ 613 744 7995; ambmgnet@inexpress.net; 649 Blair Rd, Ottawa, K1J 7M4, Ontario)

Comoros (☎ 73 18 69; consmad@snpt.km; BP 349, Moroni)

France (☎ 01 45 04 62 11; ambamadparis@tiscali.fr; 4 Ave Raphael, Paris 75016)

Germany (☎ 02 28 95 35 90; ambamad@aol.com; Rolandstrasse 53-170, Bonn-Bad Godesberg)

Italy (☎ 3 6 30 77 97; ambamad-rm@flashnet-it.netclub.mg; Viaricardo Zandonai 84, 400 194 Roma)

Japan (☎ 03 3446 72 52; 2-3-23 Moko Azabu, Minako-Ku, Tokyo)

Kenya (☎ 02 218 393; mnbno@africanline.co.ke; 1st fl, Hilton Hotel, BP 41723, Nairobi)

Mauritius (☎ 0686 50 15; Rue Guiot Pasceau, Floreal)

Netherlands (☎ 10 4255212; 97 Heemraadssingel, 3022 CB Rotterdam)

Seychelles (☎ 03 40 30; BP 68 Plaisance, Mahe)

South Africa (☎ 011 442 33 22; PO Box 786098, Sandton 2146)

United Kingdom (☎ 020 8746 0133; 16 Lanark Mansions, Pennard Rd, London, W12 8DT)

United States (☎ 202 265 5522; malagasy@embassy.org; 2374 Massachusetts Ave, NW, Washington, DC 20008)

Comorian Embassies & Consulates

For Mayotte, pay a visit to your nearest French embassy.

France (☎ 01 40 67 90 54; 20 Rue Marbeau, Paris)

Germany (☎ 02 2345 4444)

Kenya (☎ 02 22 29 64)

South Africa (☎ 012 343 9483)

United Kingdom (☎ 020 7460 1162; 16 Lanark Mansions, Pennard Rd, London, W12 8DT)

United States (☎ 212 223 27 11; 420 East 50 St, New York, NY 10022)

Embassies & Consulates in Madagascar

Norway, Denmark and the UK have honorary consulates near the port in Toamasina.

The following embassies and consulates are mostly in Antananarivo.

Canada (off Map pp72-3; ☎ 22 425 59; c.canada@mts.mg; Lot II, 169 Villa 3H, Ivandry)

Comoros Antananarivo (Map p76; ☎ 032 02 404 506; Rue Doktor Villette, Isoraka); Mahajanga (☎ 8am-1pm Mon-Sat) A block behind the Air Austral office in Antananarivo, this embassy can issue Comorian visas.

France (Map p76; ☎ 22 214 88; 3 Rue Jean Jaurès, Ambatomena) Near the Shanghai Hotel.

Germany (off Map pp72-3; ☎ 22 238 02; 101 Rue Pasteur Rabéony, Ambodiroatra)

Italy (Map pp72-3; ☎ 22 284 43; 22 Rue Pasteur Rabary, Ankadivato) East of the centre.

Japan (Map p76; ☎ 22 261 02; Rte Fort Duchesne Ampasanimalo)

Mauritius (off Map pp72-3; ☎ 22 321 57; Rte Circulaire Anjahana) South of the centre.

Netherlands (off Map pp72-3; ☎ 22 224 22; 88 Lotissement Bonnet, Ivandry) North of the centre.

Seychelles (Map p76; ☎ 22 632 02; 18 Rue Jean Jaurès, Ambatomena) Near the Shanghai Hotel.

South Africa (off Map pp72-3; ☎ 22 423 03; Rte d'Ambohimanga, Ambohitraraha)

United Kingdom (Map pp72-3; ☎ 22 273 70; Lot III, 164 Ter Alarobia Amboniloha)

United States (Map p76; ☎ 22 209 56, 22 212 57; 14 Lalana Raintovo, Haute-Ville) East of the UCB bank.

Embassies & Consulates in the Comoros

France (☎ 73 06 15; Ave de Republic Populaire de China, Moroni, Grande Comore)

Madagascar (☎ 73 18 69; consmad@snpt.km; Moroni, Grande Comore)

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Madagascar

Alahamady Be (March) The low-key Malagasy New Year.

Santabary (April/May) The first rice harvest.

Fisemana (June) A ritual purification ceremony of the Antakarana people.

Famadihana (June to September) Literally the 'turning of the bones', these reburial ceremonies are held especially during August and September. See the boxed text on p37 for more information.

Sambatra (June to December) Circumcision festivals held by most tribes between June and September, and in November and December in the southwest.

The Comoros

Comorian festivals are based around the Muslim calendar, which changes from year to year. For more information on holidays, see below.

FOOD

Budget restaurants as listed in this guide are usually food stalls or small Malagasy *hotelys*; they are open only until about 8pm, and serve mainly rice dishes or snacks for under Ar6000. Midrange restaurants serve plain French food and lots of seafood, including staples such as *steack frites* (steak and chips) and calamari, shrimp and lobster dishes, costing between Ar6000 and Ar25,000 for a main course depending on whether you order calamari or lobster. French haute cuisine, which might include lobster profiteroles or goose-liver pâté, usually infused with local spices, can cost as much as Ar30,000 for a main course.

For more information, see p39.

GAY & LESBIAN TRAVELLERS

Homosexual practices are illegal in Madagascar and the Comoros for persons under 21 years of age. Homosexuality is not openly practised, and there are no organisations catering to gay and lesbian travellers. Overt displays of affection – whether the couple is of the same or opposite sex – are considered culturally inappropriate.

HOLIDAYS

In the Comoros, and to a lesser extent in Madagascar, accommodation and flights are

often harder to find during French school holidays, when many expats from Mayotte and Réunion travel in the region. To find out when these holidays are, look up the website www.ac-reunion.fr/academie/calendri.htm, which is in French.

Government offices and private companies close on the following public holidays; banks are generally also closed the afternoon before a public holiday.

Madagascar

New Year's Day 1 January

Insurrection Day 29 March – celebrates the rebellion against the French in 1947.

Easter Monday March/April

Labour Day 1 May

Anniversary Day 8 May

Organisation of African Unity Day 25 May

Ascension Thursday May/June – occurs 40 days after Easter.

Pentecost Monday May/June – occurs 51 days after Easter.

National Day 26 June – Independence Day.

Assumption 15 August

All Saints' Day 1 November

Christmas Day 25 December

Republic Day 30 December

The Comoros

The main holidays for Muslim Comorians are Islamic and based on the lunar calendar, so the dates change yearly. The biggest celebration is Id-ul-Fitr, which marks the end of the Ramadan fast. The other major Islamic holiday is Id-el-Kabir, also known as Id-el-Haj, which marks the beginning of the pilgrimage to Mecca.

These four dates are designated as specific public holidays:

New Year's Day 1 January

Labour Day 1 May

Organisation of African Unity 25 May – Celebration Day.

Independence Day 5 July

In addition to those celebrated above, Mayotte also observes Bastille Day (14 July) and Christmas Day (25 December).

INSURANCE

A travel-insurance policy to cover theft, loss and medical problems is essential. Some policies specifically exclude dangerous activities, which can include scuba-diving, motorcycling or even trekking.

You may prefer a policy that pays doctors or hospitals directly rather than you having to pay on the spot and claim later.

Check that the policy covers an emergency flight home. This is an important consideration for Madagascar, given the cost of air tickets to most destinations.

For more advice about health-insurance policies, see p286.

INTERNET ACCESS

Many internet providers in Madagascar and the Comoros (including some post offices) run fast and reliable services. The cheapest services, mostly available in provincial capitals, cost about Ar50 per minute, while in more remote places the cost might be as high as Ar300 per minute; Ar100 per minute seems to be the norm.

LEGAL MATTERS

The use and possession of marijuana and other recreational drugs is illegal in Madagascar and the Comoros. If you are arrested, ask to see a representative of your country. Madagascar is strict in enforcing immigration laws, so don't overstay your visa. The legal age of consent for heterosexual sex is 15 years.

MAPS

Official maps produced by Foiben Taosarintanin'i Madagasikara (FTM) are available at bookshops in Antananarivo and major towns for about Ar20,000. The maps can be fairly dated but are generally accurate, and more than adequate for visiting the country. FTM also produces street maps of the provincial capitals, although these are increasingly hard to find.

Edicom and Carambole both publish detailed maps of Antananarivo, which are widely available at bookshops and cost about Ar15,000.

A detailed map and compass is essential when hiking without a guide. Topographical maps are hard to find in Madagascar, so buy one before you leave.

In Malagasy, *lalana* means street; *arabe* or *araben* means avenue; and *kianja* or *kianjan* means place or square. In this book, street names are given in either French or Malagasy, depending on local usage. One street often has several names depending on what map you look at, and locals basically don't use street names at all.

MONEY Madagascar

Madagascar changed its currency from the Malagasy franc (FMG) back to the precolonial ariary (Ar) in 2004. Although the old Malagasy franc will remain exchangeable up until 2009 at banks, all the shops use and accept ariary now. One ariary is worth five FMG.

Prices are still quoted in FMGs in more remote areas. More of a problem is unscrupulous taxi drivers and tour guides who quote tourists using the old currency, but fail to tell them so, hence screwing travellers (at least those who don't ask if the high fare is in FMGs) into paying five times what the trip was worth. It's a good scam that the drivers don't even have to feel *too* guilty about – they did quote with legal tender!

Euros are also widely accepted, with the most expensive hotels quoting prices in them. Some want you to pay in euros so badly that they levy a conversion fee for using the ariary! US dollars are sometimes accepted in Antananarivo, major cities and tourist areas.

Taxi drivers and market vendors often cannot change large bills, so keep a selection of small change with you.

Madagascar is still primarily a cash economy – finding a hotel that accepts Visa, let alone one where the machine is actually working, is a real feat!

ATMS

BMOI, BNI-CL and BFV-SG all have ATMs at some branches in Antananarivo and other major towns. However, the amount you can take out is only around €150, and the machines often don't have enough cash to support multiple withdrawals. Many ATMs are only open a couple of hours later than the bank's normal opening hours.

BLACK MARKET & MONEYCHANGERS

There is no black market in Madagascar. Moneychangers may approach you on the street, but they are best avoided.

CREDIT CARDS

Credit cards are accepted at some upmarket hotels, at Air Madagascar, and at some larger travel agencies. Some places levy a commission of about 5% to 8% for credit-card payments. The most useful card is Visa, with MasterCard also accepted in a minority of places. Be aware that although a hotel may advertise that it ac-

cepts credit cards, machines are not reliable and often don't work.

Visa and MasterCard can now also be used at most banks to obtain cash advances (in ariary). Unless you are in a small city with a bad connection, authorisation is quick and easy, taking no longer than a shop transaction. Visa is more readily accepted but many banks also take MasterCard; commission rates go as high as 5%, depending on the bank.

EXCHANGE RATES

Exchange rates fluctuate daily, so it is generally best to only change what you need as you go along – as long as you are paying cash you don't pay commissions at the banks. Hotels usually change euros, and sometimes dollars, for guests free of charge. For exchange rates, see the inside front cover of this guide.

EXCHANGING MONEY

The best foreign currencies to carry are euros, followed by US dollars. Otherwise UK pounds, Swiss francs, Japanese yen and South African rand can be changed in Antananarivo, and sometimes in other major cities.

Travellers cheques are not particularly useful in Madagascar – except in Antananarivo you'll be hard pressed to find anyone who even accepts them. The banks and (few) hotels that do accept them also give a worse exchange rate than with cash, and charge a commission of up to 5% for exchanging them. At the most, take a few hundred dollars for emergencies (in case you get robbed), but otherwise euros (to change) and an ATM card are the way to go.

The major banks in Madagascar, with branches in Antananarivo and all major towns, are the Bank of Africa (BOA), Banky Fampandrosoana'ny Varotra-Société Générale (BFV-SG), Banque Malgache de l'Océan Indien (BMOI) and Bankin'ny Indostria-Crédit Lyonnais (BNI-CL).

The foreign-exchange counter at Ivato airport has exchange rates that are just as good as those at the banks, and is usually open for international flight arrivals. Madagascar's other airports do not have exchange facilities. The *bureau de change* at Ivato airport will change Malagasy currency back into euros or dollars, but requires a minimum of €50.

The Comoros

The currency of the Union des Comores (the official name of the Comoros, excluding

Mayotte) is the Comorian franc (CF), which is tied to the euro.

You can pay for major items such as accommodation, air tickets and boat fares in either Comorian francs or euros. For smaller purchases the local currency is usually preferable.

You can reconvert Comorian francs into euros at the bank if you have the original bank receipt. In Mayotte, the official currency is the euro, and Comorian or Malagasy currency is entirely useless.

For exchange rates, see the inside front cover of this guide.

CREDIT CARDS

Credit cards (Visa and MasterCard) are accepted by many hotels and restaurants in Mayotte, but in the other Comoros islands only the most upmarket establishments accept cards, and all charge high rates of commission.

EXCHANGING MONEY

The best foreign currency to carry in the Union des Comores is the euro, although you can, in theory, also change US dollars, British pounds, Swiss francs and Japanese yen at the Banque pour l'Industrie et le Commerce (BIC), which has branches on the islands of Grande Comore and Anjouan. The BIC, which is the only bank to change foreign cash or travellers cheques, can also do advances on Visa cards, although it charges a hefty commission for this.

In Mayotte, only one bank, Banque Française Commerciale Ocean Indien (BFC-OI), will change cash or travellers cheques. BFC-OI's ATMs should theoretically advance you money on a Visa card.

You cannot change Comorian or Malagasy currency anywhere on Mayotte. There are no moneychanging facilities at the airport.

POST

There are post offices in all major towns of Madagascar and the Comoros. The postal service is generally reliable, although postcards frequently go missing.

To send a letter it costs Ar1000 to Europe, Ar2500 to Australia and Ar2600 to the United States. In the Comoros, prices are CF300 to France, CF350 to Europe and CF400 to the United States and Australia. Postcards are slightly cheaper.

SHOPPING

Madagascar offers a fantastic variety of handicrafts and souvenirs, so most of the visitors queuing in the departure hall of Ivato airport in Antananarivo are laden down with newspaper-wrapped bundles and bulging carrier bags. There is something for everyone – chess and solitaire sets made from semiprecious stones; musical instruments; sandals and belts; leather bags; chic brightly coloured raffia baskets; wood carvings and wood-inlay boxes; embroidered tablecloths; handmade Antaimoro paper; and tin model Citroëns and *pousses-pousses* (rickshaws), perfect down to the most minute detail. You will also see a lot of intricately detailed, handcrafted wooden replicas of ships and beautifully carved wood maps of Madagascar and the world.

Most souvenirs in the Comoros are simply everyday items, and can be bought at markets on all the islands – embroidered skullcaps, carved lecterns for the Koran, brass-inlaid wooden chests, silver and gold jewellery and colourful lengths of cloth known as *chiromani*.

In both countries, locally grown spices – white or black peppercorns, cinnamon sticks, cloves, saffron or vanilla – are widely available, but some countries, such as Australia, may not allow you to bring them in.

If you can cope with carrying your souvenirs until you get back to the airport, Ambositra (p100) in the central highlands is the shopping capital of Madagascar, with dozens of shops selling carvings and *marqueterie* (objects inlaid with coloured woods).

If you want to leave your purchasing until you're a taxi ride away from the airport, the best place for shopping is the Marché Artisanale de La Digue (p87) in Antananarivo. Bargaining hard is expected – start from 50% of the price and work upwards. It makes a good stop if you have time to kill on the way out.

When shopping, bear in mind that embroidery and raffia do far less damage to the environment than wooden products, which are often carved from endangered tropical hardwoods. If you do want to buy wooden products, try to find something made of eucalyptus, which is not endangered. Don't buy anything made from tortoiseshell or seashells, which are both illegal.

SOLO TRAVELLERS

Travelling alone in Madagascar or the Comoros poses few safety problems, provided

you use common sense, such as avoiding unlit streets in bigger cities after dark.

The main disadvantages of travelling solo are financial – single rooms in hotels or guesthouses are uncommon, and you will invariably end up paying for a double room. You can expect to pay very high rates for organised tours if you're on your own, so it's best to find fellow travellers to share costs.

Speaking French will make a huge difference to your travels in Madagascar or the Comoros. If you are travelling independently, a grasp of at least the basics of the French language will enable you to communicate far more effectively. If you don't speak any French, learn some.

English-speaking readers have written to tell us on more than one occasion that more English than you would expect is spoken in the Comoros, and that they got by here without French. The same cannot be said for Mayotte.

TELEPHONE & FAX

Fax

In Madagascar, the Comoros and Mayotte, faxes can be sent from telephone offices, post offices and from upmarket hotels. Some internet cafés also offer fax services.

Madagascar

The country code for Madagascar is ☎ 261, followed by 20 if you are dialling a land line, then the seven-digit number. To call out of Madagascar, dial ☎ 00 before the country code.

International telephone lines are fairly good in Madagascar, and internal telephone service across the country has improved. The best way to dial internationally is with a *telecarte* (phonecard). Cardphones are scattered around all larger towns. Cards are sold at post offices, at Agence d'Accueil Telecom (Agate) offices and at some shops and hotels. For international calls you will need at least 100 units. Calls can also be made from more upmarket hotels (although rates will be much higher). Rates for international calls are Ar2700 per minute to France and the Comoros, and about a very pricey Ar4100 per minute to the rest of Europe, the USA and Canada. Calls are 30% cheaper between 10pm and 6am, all day Sunday and on holidays. The international operator can be reached by dialling ☎ 10.

Numbers in Madagascar consist of a two-digit area prefix followed by a five-digit local number (usually given in the form of a three-digit then a two-digit number). The two-digit prefix must be dialled whether you are calling locally, from elsewhere in Madagascar or from abroad. These prefixes are listed throughout this book as part of each telephone number. If you are quoted a five-digit number, add the two-digit area prefix.

To reach remote areas that do not have direct-dialling facilities (all those telephone numbers that have only two digits), dial ☎ 15 for the local operator, then request the number.

MOBILE PHONES

Cell phone coverage is excellent across all of Madagascar – our tri-band phone got better service in Madagascar than it does in many parts of the USA.

Mobile phone prefixes are 030, 031, 032 and 033. If dialling a mobile phone number from abroad, omit the zero and the 20 prefix, but add the country code.

For calls to mobile numbers from within Madagascar, you will need to dial the zero. When calling landline numbers from a mobile phone, dial ☎ 020 before the seven-digit number.

The Comoros

The country code for the Comoros, including Mayotte, is ☎ 269, followed by the six-digit local number. To call out of the Comoros, dial 00 followed by the country code. If you need any help with international calls, dial the **operator** (☎ 10). To dial from Mayotte to the Comoros or vice versa, dial ☎ 0269 followed by the number.

Calls can be made on all the islands from phone booths and hotels. In the Union des Comores, calls can also be made from Telecom offices (known as SNPT), usually located near the post office. In both the Union des Comores and Mayotte the easiest way to make a call is to buy a phonecard and use it in a phone box. In Mayotte, phonecards are sold in kiosks, shops and supermarkets. In the other Comoros islands, you can get a card from one of the touts hanging around outside phone booths proffering cards. Simply make your call, pay for the units you've used and give the card back. International calls cost CF1325 per minute to Europe and the US, and CF1500 per minute to Australia.

TIME

Madagascar and the Comoros are three hours ahead of GMT/UTC. There is no daylight savings.

TOURIST INFORMATION

The tourist offices in Madagascar, the Union des Comores and Mayotte can all provide lists of hotels and guesthouses; see individual chapters for details. Tourist office contact details for each place:

Comité du Tourisme du Mayotte (☎ 61 09 09; ctm@mayotte.tourisme.com; Rue de la Pompe, Mamoudzou, Mayotte; 🕒 7.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri) Also has a branch at the airport.

Direction Generale du Tourisme (☎ 74 42 43; dg.tourisme@snpt.km; Ave des Ministères, Moroni, Grande Comore, Union des Comores; 🕒 7.30am-2.30pm Mon-Thu, to 11.30am Fri, to noon Sat)

Maison de Tourisme de Madagascar (☎ 22 351 78; www.madagascar-tourisme.com in French; 3 Lalana Elysée Ravelomanantsoa, Antananarivo, Madagascar; 🕒 8.30am-noon & 2-7pm Mon-Fri)

TRAVELLERS WITH DISABILITIES

Madagascar and the Comoros have few, if any, facilities for travellers with disabilities. This, combined with a weak infrastructure in many areas, may make travel here difficult.

Public transport is very crowded and unable to accommodate a wheelchair unless it is folded up. Travelling by rental car is the best option.

The Réserve Privée de Berenty (p136), near Fort Dauphin, and Parc National de l'Isalo (p122) are the most accessible of Madagascar's nature reserves for those with a disability.

In Antananarivo and most of the provincial capitals there are hotels with either elevators or accommodation on the ground floor. While most bungalow accommodation – the most common type of lodging in Madagascar – is generally on the ground floor, there are often steps up to the entrance, and inner doorways are often too narrow for a wheelchair.

There are few bathrooms large enough to manoeuvre a wheelchair in, and almost none with any sort of handles or holds.

Organisations that provide information on world travel for the mobility impaired include the following:

Mobility International USA (☎ 541 343 1284; www.miusa.org; USA)

National Information Communication Awareness

Network (Nican; ☎ 02 6285 3713; www.nican.com.au; Australia)

Royal Association for Disability & Rehabilitation

(☎ 020 7250 3222; www.radar.org.uk; UK)

Society for the Advancement of Travel for the

Handicapped (SATH; ☎ 212 447 7284; www.sath.org; USA)

VISAS**Madagascar**

All visitors must have a visa to enter Madagascar. Thirty-day visas for citizens of most countries can easily be purchased at Ivato airport in Antananarivo upon arrival for €13. The process is very straightforward and requires no photos – but you will need proof of a return flight. Simply hop off the plane and head straight for the visa line. The most annoying bit is waiting in the very long queue. To avoid the line, you could arrange in advance at any Malagasy embassy or consulate, but it is hardly worth the extra effort.

Visas for stays of up to three months from the date of entry do need to be organised in advance through the embassy or consulate. The same is true for multiple entry visas. Both must be used within six months of the date of issue. It's best to request a three-month visa from the start if there is any chance that you may need one, as visa extensions can be time consuming and expensive.

At most Malagasy embassies and consulates, visas cost the equivalent of about €29/34 for single/multiple entry. At most places you will need to provide a copy of your ticket or an itinerary from your travel agency and two to four photos.

As long as you have not exceeded the normal three-month maximum, visas can be extended at the immigration office in Antananarivo or any provincial capital. You will need between two and four passport-size photos and a copy of your return air or boat ticket. A one-month extension costs about €13 and can take several days to process.

The Comoros

All visitors need a visa to enter the Union des Comores. If you're coming from Madagascar you can obtain a visa prior to departure from the Comorian consulate in Antananarivo or Mahajanga.

Visas are available on arrival in Grande Comore, Anjouan and Mohéli. They cost €7

for up to 45 days and €11 for 90 days. Visas must be bought at the immigration offices in Moroni, Mutsamudu or Fomboni. If you arrive after the close of business on Friday and will be leaving before the following Monday, you will be issued with a free two-day weekend visa on arrival.

Only nationals of countries that need a visa to enter France will require a visa for Mayotte. These can be obtained at your nearest French consulate before arrival.

VOLUNTEERING

More people are showing interest in paying for the opportunity to 'volunteer' for community-enhancement and scientific-research projects in Madagascar. Many travellers express a desire to give back to the places they journey to, and the working holiday allows them to do just that.

Schools, orphanages and women's shelters often take on volunteers (without charging them!), but the network is far from organised – show up in the area where you want to work and ask around.

The following organisations all offer different types of experiences; check their websites to see what fits your budget and skills.

Akany Avoko (☎ 22 441 58; www.akanyavoko.com)

An Antananarivo-based children's home that cares for around 150 orphans, street kids and young teenage mums with nowhere else to turn. Akany Avoko has been around for 40 years, and is sustained entirely by charitable donations and income-generating projects devised within the centre. It welcomes volunteers with the right skills.

Blue Ventures (☎ 0208 341 9819; www.blueventures.org) Based in London, with a field site in Andavadoaka, this highly efficient and effective organisation coordinates teams of volunteers to work with local NGOs and biologists. Together they educate communities reliant on marine ecosystems for survival on how best to preserve the ecosystems.

Dodwell Trust (www.dodwell-turst.org) This British charity runs a variety of projects accepting volunteers for one- to six-month stays. Opportunities include helping out with a radio programme broadcast in rural villages that

discusses family health, AIDS prevention and sustainable development issues in an engaging manner. You can also live in a small town or village and assist with teaching English, or volunteer at the zoo in Antananarivo looking after the lemurs. Inexpensive housing is arranged.

Earthwatch (☎ in England 01865 318838; www.earthwatch.org/Europe) This Oxford-based company runs upmarket scientific research trips geared at midcareer professionals that give the opportunity to work with Dr Alison Jolly on lemur research.

WOMEN TRAVELLERS

Most women do not feel threatened or insecure in any way when travelling in either Madagascar or the Comoros. Hospitality and kindness to strangers are firmly entrenched in both cultures and extend in equal measure to female travellers. The most you can expect, especially in the Muslim Comoros, is some mild curiosity about your situation, especially if you are single and/or don't have children. Meeting Malagasy or Comorian women is relatively easy – many are well educated and confident and hold responsible jobs in government-related offices, especially the offices of national parks.

That said, around holiday resorts, where most of the local girls are snapped up by male tourists, you may encounter a low level of verbal pestering from local men. Compared with similar attention in say, North Africa, it's positively lacklustre, and a polite refusal nearly always suffices. Travelling in a group, saying you are married and dressing modestly (essential anyhow in the Comoros) are all ways to minimise problems. Physical harassment and violent crime are very rare, and in fact male travellers face far more pestering from the hordes of prostitutes who frequent almost every disco.

Women shouldn't enter mosques unless specifically told they can do so.

A limited selection of tampons is available in Antananarivo and some of the larger towns, but it's best to bring your own supply, especially in the Comoros.

Transport

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GETTING THERE & AWAY

ENTERING THE COUNTRY

Getting to Madagascar entails nothing more complex than a bit of queuing. Immigration officials generally just check or issue your visa before letting you go on your way. Landing cards are all printed in English as well as French. If you've come from a country where yellow fever is present you may be asked for a yellow-fever certificate (see p291).

Arriving in Mayotte and the Union des Comores is also relatively hassle free. There's a simple form to fill in (printed in English and French) and you're on your way.

If you need a visa on arrival in the Union des Comores, these are not issued at the airport but at the immigration offices in each island's capital.

See p274 for more information about visa requirements.

AIR Airports & Airlines

International and domestic flights come into Ivato airport, just north of Antananarivo. The airports in Mahajanga and Toamasina both

THINGS CHANGE...

The information in this chapter is particularly vulnerable to change. Check directly with the airline or a travel agency to make sure you understand how a fare (and ticket you may buy) works and be aware of the security requirements for international travel. The details given in this chapter should be regarded as pointers and are not a substitute for your own careful, up-to-date research.

handle flights from Réunion, Mauritius and the Comoros. International flights come into Moroni airport on Grande Comore, and Dzaoudzi on Mayotte.

Air Madagascar is the national carrier of Madagascar. While occasional upsets in airline schedules still occur, service is relatively good.

Air Madagascar, Air France and Corsair, all operating flights from France, fly directly to Madagascar. There are now a few flights per week from Milan to Nosy Be or Île Sainte Marie in addition to flights from Munich or Rome to Antananarivo. There are no direct flights from outside the East African and Indian Ocean region to the Comoros. To fly to the Comoros from anywhere else, your best bet is to fly to Réunion, Mauritius, Antananarivo, Nairobi or Dar es Salaam and get an onward flight from there.

The main regional airline linking Madagascar and the Comoros with the Indian Ocean region is Air Austral (working in partnership with Air France and Air Mauritius).

In the Comoros, two airlines are currently operating – Comores Aviation and Comores Air Service. They both fly between the three islands of the Union des Comores. Comores Aviation also flies to Mayotte, while Comores Air Service has flights to Mombasa, Dar es Salaam and Zanzibar in East Africa.

AIRLINES FLYING TO & FROM MADAGASCAR

Air Austral/Air Mauritius (ARIO; Map p76; ☎ 22 359 90; www.airaustral.com; Rue des 77 Parlementaires Français, Antananarivo)

Air France (☎ 23 230 01; www.airfrance.com; Tour Zital, Rte des Hydrocarbures, Ankorondrano)

Air Madagascar (Map p76; ☎ 22 222 22; www.airmadagascar.com; 31 Ave de l'Indépendance, Antananarivo)

Corsair (Map p76; ☎ 22 633 36; www.corsair.fr; 1 Rue Raintovo Antsahavola, Antananarivo)

Interair (Map pp72-3; ☎ 22 224 06; www.interair.co.za; Madagascar Hilton, Rue Pierre Stibbe, Anosy, Antananarivo)

AIRLINES FLYING TO & FROM THE COMOROS

Air Austral/Air Mauritius (ARIO; Map p76; ☎ 22 359 90; www.airaustral.com; Rue des 77 Parlementaires Français, Antananarivo)

Air Madagascar (Map p76; ☎ 22 222 22; www.airmadagascar.com; 31 Ave de l'Indépendance, Antananarivo)

Air Seychelles (HM; ☎ 73 31 44; www.airseychelles.net) Hub: Malé, Seychelles.

Air Tanzania (TC; ☎ 73 54 26; www.airtanzania.com) Hub: Dar es Salaam.

Tickets

Since there is so little competition, there are few specials for travel to Madagascar and the Comoros. Booking online for either destination is rarely possible or cheaper – your best bet is to approach a local tour operator. Even in this case, many tour operators don't deal with either destination and you may have to

approach the airline office (if there is one) in your country directly.

Air Madagascar, Corsair and Air France occasionally offer some good deals to Madagascar, especially during the low season. The high season for air travel to Madagascar and the Comoros is June to August, December to January and around Easter.

Air Madagascar offers 50% discounts on domestic flights to anyone who has arrived in Madagascar on an Air Madagascar flight from Europe.

Air Austral offers an Indian Ocean pass, which allows passengers who have bought long-distance tickets on Air Austral, Air Mauritius and Air Seychelles to receive discounts of up to 10% on routes within the Indian Ocean region on all three airlines.

All ticket prices quoted in this book include international departure tax.

Africa & the Indian Ocean

Both Madagascar and the Comoros are well connected with the Indian Ocean islands of Mauritius and Réunion, and reasonably easy to reach from mainland Africa.

Once you're in Madagascar, **Dodo Travel & Tours** (Map p76; ☎ 22 690 36; www.dodotravel.tour.com; Rue Elysée Ravelomanantsoa), in Antananarivo,

CLIMATE CHANGE & TRAVEL

Climate change is a serious threat to the ecosystems that humans rely upon, and air travel is the fastest-growing contributor to the problem. Lonely Planet regards travel, overall, as a global benefit, but believes we all have a responsibility to limit our personal impact on global warming.

Flying & Climate Change

Pretty much every form of motor travel generates CO₂ (the main cause of human-induced climate change) but planes are far and away the worst offenders, not just because of the sheer distances they allow us to travel, but because they release greenhouse gases high into the atmosphere. The statistics are frightening: two people taking a return flight between Europe and the US will contribute as much to climate change as an average household's gas and electricity consumption over a whole year.

Carbon Offset Schemes

Climatecare.org and other websites use 'carbon calculators' that allow jetsetters to offset the greenhouse gases they are responsible for with contributions to energy-saving projects and other climate-friendly initiatives in the developing world – including projects in India, Honduras, Kazakhstan and Uganda.

Lonely Planet, together with Rough Guides and other concerned partners in the travel industry, supports the carbon offset scheme run by climatecare.org. Lonely Planet offsets all of its staff and author travel.

For more information check out our website: lonelyplanet.com.

is a useful place to seek information about flights within this region.

MADAGASCAR

The main hubs for flights to Madagascar are Johannesburg in South Africa and Nairobi in Kenya. There are several weekly flights between Johannesburg and Antananarivo (about €700 return) on Interair, and twice weekly on Air Madagascar. Travel between Madagascar and Nairobi (about €640 return) generally works better if you purchase your ticket directly from Air Madagascar in Kenya or Madagascar.

Air Austral has regular flights between Réunion and Mauritius and Antananarivo (from €330).

THE COMOROS

Air Austral has regular flights from Réunion and Mauritius to Mayotte and Moroni on Grande Comore. There are also regular flights from Mahajanga in Madagascar to Mayotte (around €350).

Air Tanzania has a weekly flight from Moroni on Grande Comore to Dar es Salaam (about €500 return). Air Mozambique flies weekly between Mayotte and Pemba in northern Mozambique (about €270 return), with connections to Maputo. Comores Air Service has flights to Mombasa in Kenya (about €600 return) and Zanzibar in Tanzania (about €450 return). African Express Airlines, a branch of South African Airways, flies weekly from Mayotte to Nairobi (about €600 return).

Bear in mind that Comores Air Service flights won't show up on travel agency booking systems in the rest of the world, so if you want to use these flights, you'll have to book them yourself when you arrive in **Mombasa** (☎ 00254 41 404265) or **Zanzibar** (☎ 00255 54 2230029). It's definitely best to allow a few days' leeway if you're travelling to the Comoros via this route.

Asia

Air Madagascar flies between Singapore and Antananarivo, with connections in Singapore to other Asian countries. Otherwise the best way to reach Madagascar or the Comoros from Asia is via Mauritius or Johannesburg. Air Mauritius has flights several times a week from Singapore and Hong Kong to Mauritius, and South African Airways flies regularly to Johannesburg from both cities.

It's also easy to get flights on Kenya Airways or Air India from Bombay to Nairobi,

from where you can connect to Madagascar or Mayotte.

Australia & New Zealand

There are no direct flights from Australia to Madagascar or the Comoros. The best routes are generally via Mauritius or Johannesburg. Air Mauritius has weekly flights connecting both Melbourne and Perth with Mauritius from about A\$3000. From Mauritius there are regular connections on Air Austral to Antananarivo, Mayotte and Moroni on Grande Comore.

Alternatively, Qantas and SAA both have flights connecting Sydney with Johannesburg starting from A\$2200 in the low season. From Johannesburg, you can connect with an Air Madagascar or Interair flight to Antananarivo. Try these agencies:

Flight Centre Australia (☎ 133 133; www.flightcentre.com.au); New Zealand (☎ 0800 233 544; www.flightcentre.co.nz)

STA Travel Australia (☎ 1300 733 035; www.statravel.com.au); New Zealand (☎ 0508 782 872; www.statravel.co.nz)

Europe

The main European hub for flights to and from Madagascar or the Comoros is Paris. Air Madagascar and Air France fly three to four times a week between Paris and Antananarivo. Prices from Paris on both airlines usually start from about €1400. There are also some good deals available with the scheduled airline Corsair, although prices are broadly similar on all three airlines.

It's also possible to fly from many European capitals to Johannesburg, Nairobi, St-Denis (Réunion) or Port Louis (Mauritius), and from one of these cities to Antananarivo. The best connections are usually via Réunion or Mauritius, which are linked by Air Austral flights to Antananarivo (from €330), as well as by several flights weekly to other places in Madagascar and to the Comoros. To the Comoros, you can take a flight from Europe to Mombasa in Kenya or Dar es Salaam in Tanzania and connect to Moroni (Grande Comore) from there (p238). Contact one of the following agents to get you started: **Air Fare** (☎ 020 620 5121; www.airfare.nl in Dutch) A well-respected Dutch travel agency.

Nouvelles Frontières (☎ 08 03 33 33 33; www.nouvelles-frontieres.fr) A good French option with group tours to Madagascar.

OTU Voyages (☎ 0825 004 027; www.otu.fr in French) Has branches across France.

STA Travel Germany (☎ 01805-456 422; www.statravel.de in German); UK (☎ 0870 1600 599; www.statravel.co.uk) Also has plenty of other offices across Europe.

Traifinders (☎ 020-7938 3939; www.traifinders.com) Excellent, reliable UK travel agency with huge experience.

The USA & Canada

The cheapest way to fly from North America to Madagascar or the Comoros is generally via Paris. It may work out cheaper to get two separate tickets – one from North America to Europe, and then a second ticket from Europe to Madagascar. During the high season, however, it often ends up being the same price, and it's much less of a hassle to book just one ticket. Expect to pay around US\$3000 return.

Another option is to fly from Atlanta or New York to Johannesburg, with a connection to Antananarivo – although at the time of research this option ended up being more expensive than flying through Europe. In the USA, the main travel agency specialising in Madagascar is Cortez Travel & Expeditions (see right). It has information on good-value airfares and can book Air Madagascar flights. The following companies might also be able to help:

Flight Centre Canada (☎ 1 888 967 5355; www.flightcentre.ca); USA (☎ 1866 WORLD 51; www.flightcentre.us) Contact it directly for fares.

Orbitz (www.orbitz.com) A good source of online fares.

STA Travel (☎ 800 329 9537; www.statravel.com) Good deals to Paris.

SEA

It's possible to travel to and from Madagascar and the Comoros by boat, but for most destinations you will need plenty of time and determination. Travel is likely to be on cargo ships – unless you find a ride on a yacht as a crew member – so sleeping and eating conditions, combined with sometimes turbulent seas, can make for a rough trip. Bring seasickness tablets with you.

Mombasa (Kenya) and the island of Zanzibar (Tanzania) are the main places to look for cargo boats to Madagascar or the Comoros. It's also sometimes possible to find passage on a yacht heading from South Africa, Réunion or Mauritius – or maybe even from France to Nosy Be or Mayotte.

TOURS

For a list of organised tour companies within Madagascar, see p285. Following are a few

companies operating general interest tours to, and around, Madagascar.

AUSTRALIA

Adventure Associates (☎ 02-8916 3000; www.adventureassociates.com) Runs tours to Madagascar, combined with Réunion and Mauritius.

FRANCE

Comptoir de Madagascar (☎ 01 42 60 93 00; www.comptoirdemadagascar.com in French) Tours and air tickets to Madagascar.

Terre Malgache (☎ 01 44 32 12 87; www.terre-malgache.com in French) A wide range of tours to Madagascar, plus one to Mayotte.

GERMANY

Madagaskar Travel (☎ 08233-75341; www.madagaskar-travel.de in German) General and specialist wildlife itineraries.

Trauminsel Reisen (☎ 08152-9319-0; www.trauminselreisen.de in German) Itineraries all over Madagascar.

ITALY

Zig Zag Viaggi (☎ 0341 284154; www.zigzag.it in Italian) Escorted group tours.

THE NETHERLANDS

Baobab Travel (☎ 020-6275129; www.baobab.nl in Dutch) Longer itineraries in Madagascar. Also has a branch in Belgium.

Summum Reisen (☎ 020-4215555; www.summum.nl in Dutch) Group tours.

SWITZERLAND

Priori (☎ in Antananarivo 20 22 625 27; www.priori.ch) Cultural and wildlife tours.

Zingg (☎ 41 44709 2010; www.zingg safaris.com) Canoe, kayak and trekking trips.

UNITED KINGDOM

Rainbow Tours (☎ 020 7226 1004; www.madagascar-travel.net) Specialist and general-interest guided trips to Madagascar.

Reef & Rainforest Tours (☎ 01803 866965; www.reefandrainforest.co.uk) Focuses on wildlife holidays.

Wildlife Worldwide (☎ 44 1962 737649; www.wildlifeworldwide.com) Wildlife viewing tours.

UNITED STATES

Cortez Travel & Expeditions (☎ 800 854 1029, in Antananarivo 20 22 219 74; www.air-mad.com) Well-established operator for Air Madagascar flights and tours.

For the Comoros, the only tour possibilities are the trips to Mayotte organised by the tour operators in France listed here.

GETTING AROUND

AIR Madagascar

Air Madagascar, Madagascar's national carrier, has an impressive network of domestic routes. While fares have leapt dramatically in recent years, tickets on 'Air Mad' flights are still relatively inexpensive, and provide a useful way of covering large distances and avoiding long road journeys. While cancellations, schedule changes and delays occur (especially during the low season, in stormy weather or on flights to more remote destinations) the airline is generally efficient.

A handy free booklet detailing timetables and routes (but not fares) is available from Air Madagascar's head office in Antananarivo and from some travel agencies.

You can pay for tickets in ariary, euros or US dollars at the head office in Antananarivo and Air Madagascar offices in larger towns, but smaller offices may only accept ariary or euros. The office in Antananarivo also accepts travellers cheques and credit cards.

The baggage allowance for most internal flights is 10kg. On Twin Otter (small plane) flights baggage is strictly limited to 5kg.

The Comoros

The Comoros is served by two reasonably efficient internal airlines, Comores Air Service and Comores Aviation. See p238 for information on routes and fares.

The Comores Aviation office in Mayotte may take credit cards (but sometimes it simply can't be bothered). The offices in the Union des Comores generally only accept Comorian francs or, at a pinch, euros, so come prepared with the right currency.

Reservations & Check-in

Air Madagascar flights are frequently full, so it's always worth booking as far in advance as possible.

While it's now officially not necessary to reconfirm your Air Madagascar tickets, it's always best to check with the airline a few days in advance and again on the day of departure, as there are frequent last-minute

schedule changes. The same goes for flights on Comores Aviation and Comores Air Service, although these flights aren't usually full. In fact, the reverse is often true, so it's best to check the day before that your flight hasn't been cancelled due to lack of passengers...

If you have checked in baggage, be sure to keep your baggage-claim ticket until you are reunited with your luggage at your destination.

BICYCLE

It may often be just as fast to travel by bicycle as by taxi-brousse (bush taxi). A mountain bike is normally essential. Carry spare parts, although inner tubes and other basic parts are sometimes available in larger towns. The terrain varies from very sandy to muddy or rough and rocky.

It's usually no problem to transport your bicycle on taxis-brousses or on the train if you want to take a break en route.

Although you are able to hire mountain bikes for around Ar3000 per day in many larger towns, including Toliara, Toamasina, Antsirabe and Ambodifotatra on Île Sainte Marie, these are not normally in good enough condition for longer journeys. The Comoros are also theoretically good for mountain biking, but mountain bikes aren't available for hire, so you will have to bring your own.

BOAT Cargo Boat

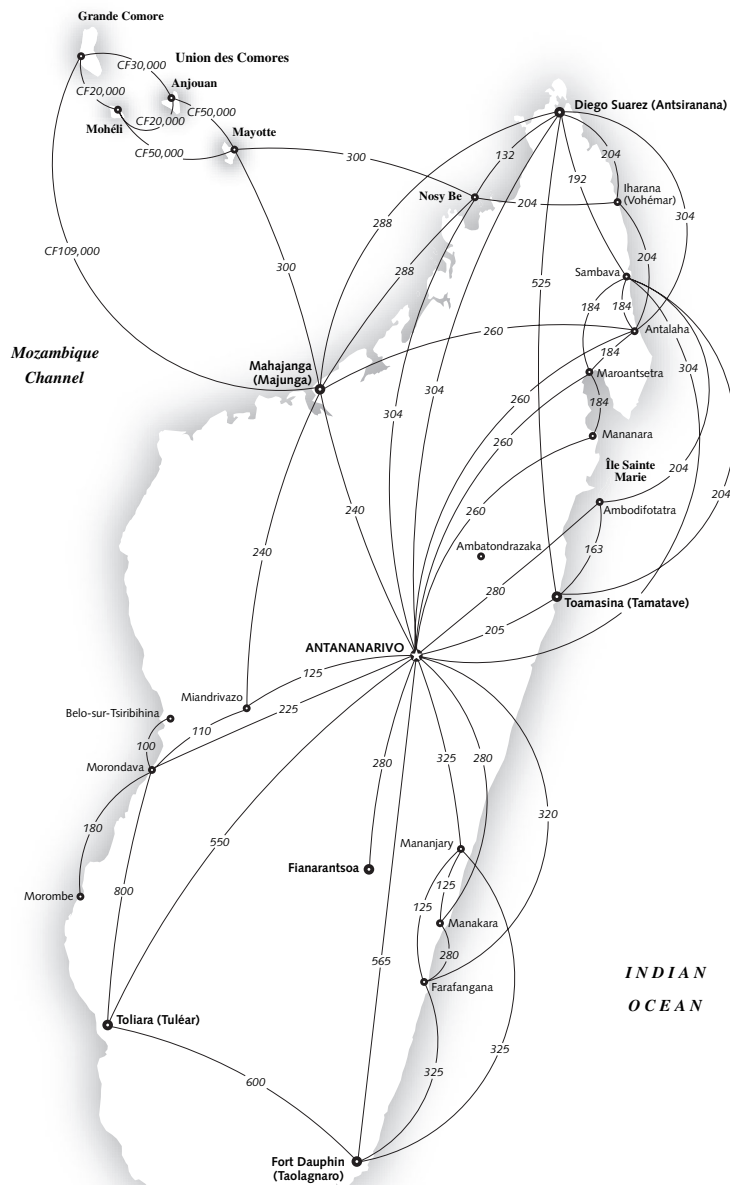
In certain parts of Madagascar, notably the northeast coast and Canal des Pangalanes, cargo boats (sometimes called *boutres*) are the primary means of transport. There are also frequent boats between the four Comoros islands, and between the Comoros and Madagascar.

When choosing a cargo boat, keep in mind that there have been several accidents involving capsized vessels (the ferry *Samsonette*, which used to run scheduled services between Île Sainte Marie and the mainland of Madagascar, sank in 2000, killing over 20 people). Always check for lifejackets and don't get in if the seas are rough or if the boat is overcrowded.

Boat travel on the east coast is generally not safe because of cyclones, especially during the rainy season between May and September.

While some cargo boats in Madagascar and the Comoros have passenger cabins, most have deck space only. Departure delays are

MAJOR DOMESTIC AIR ROUTES



Fares in Madagascar are in Ariary (Ar) in 1000s, eg 300 = Ar300,000.
Fares to and from the Comoros are in Comorian Franc (CF) as stated on map. All fares represent an average between high- and low-season prices. Not all routes shown operate all year round.

common as most boats do not have a motor and departures must correspond with the outgoing tide. Securing a space on a boat from Mahajanga to Morondava will cost around Ar65,000 per person.

Pirogue

Engineless pirogues or *lakanas* (dugout canoes), whether on rivers or the sea, are the primary means of local transport for shorter journeys in many areas of Madagascar and the Comoros (where they are known as *galawas*).

Pirogues can easily be hired, along with a boatman, but bear in mind there are no amenities on board and the ride can be quite rough.

BUS

In a few parts of Madagascar (such as the route between Antananarivo and Toamasina in the east) routes in and around major cities are served by bus. These usually use the same stations as the taxis-brousses and are generally slightly less expensive. However, taxis-brousses remain the main form of public road transport in Madagascar and the Comoros. **MadaBus** (☎ 32 42 089 69; www.madabus.com) has coach lines between the major cities, is a comfortable way to travel, and is less expensive than flying or hiring a private vehicle. Some sample fares are Antananarivo–Antsirabe (Ar25,000), Antsirabe–Fianarantsoa (Ar36,000) and Fianarantsoa–Toliara (Ar75,000).

CAR & MOTORCYCLE Driving Licence

To drive in Madagascar or the Comoros, you will need to have an International Driving Permit. Take note that wearing a seatbelt is now mandatory for the driver of a vehicle in Madagascar.

Fuel & Spare Parts

You'll find petrol stations of some kind in all cities and in most major towns. Not all have pumps – particularly in the Comoros, petrol stations usually consist of a youth stationed at the roadside with an array of old Coke bottles full of opaque fuel. For longer trips, and for travel in remote areas, you will need to carry extra fuel with you.

Spare parts and repairs of varying quality are available in most towns. Make sure to check the spare tyre of any car you rent before setting out.

ROAD VOCABULARY

When inquiring about local road conditions in Madagascar (taxi-brousse stations are a good place to start), the following French terms might come in handy:

Nids-de-poule Potholes.

Piste (or piste de sable) Sand or earth road.

Piste aménagée Sand road with some level of surfacing.

Piste de rocaille Road or track with loose stones.

Route goudronnée Tarmac road.

Route saisonnière Seasonal road.

Hire CAR

To rent a car in Madagascar or the Comoros, you must generally be at least 23 years old and have held a driving licence for at least one year. Rental costs include insurance.

Due to the often difficult driving conditions and road hazards most rental agencies make hiring a driver obligatory with their vehicles. For a listing of car-rental agencies in the capital see p87. See the individual destination chapters for more information. Prices average between Ar100,000 and Ar230,000 per day for a 4WD including fuel. For almost all destinations off the main routes you will need a 4WD.

CHARTER TAXI

As an alternative to high car-rental prices, it's also possible to hire a taxi on the street. Make inquiries first at the taxi-brousse stand or nearby hotels to get an idea of the going rate for your destination. Be sure to clarify such things as petrol and waiting time, and try to check that the vehicle is in decent shape before departing. Also, most taxi drivers do not relish the idea of dodging animals, potholes or drunken drivers at night, so be prepared to find accommodation when the sun sets.

For longer multiday journeys, you'll need to be more careful. In addition to the standard vehicle papers and a valid driving licence, the driver should have a special charter permit (indicated by a diagonal green stripe). It's not a bad idea to have a written contract signed by you and the driver stipulating insurance issues, the agreed-upon fee (including whether or not petrol is included) and your itinerary. An excellent choice for transport, transfers and excursions is a very knowledgeable and

friendly driver named **Roger Felix** (☎ 32 0773 330, 22 328 09; Antananarivo).

MOTORCYCLE

Motorcycles can be hired by the half day or full day at various places in Madagascar, including Toliara, Nosy Be and Île Sainte Marie (for use on the islands only). At most places, they range from a Honda or Yamaha 125cc or 250cc to a tiny Peugeot *mobylette*. Some places also rent motorcycles suitable for longer, rougher journeys, and provide support vehicles as well.

Road Conditions

Of Madagascar's approximately 40,000km of roads, less than 25% are paved, and many of those that are paved are badly deteriorating. Nontarred roads are often exceptionally muddy, sandy or rocky. Roads in the far northeast from Soanierana-Ivongo to Antsiranana, and in a few other areas of the country, are prone to flooding and often have broken bridges. Routes in many areas are impassable or very difficult during the rainy season. Madagascar's government has, however, pledged to improve road conditions and already some routes have been resurfaced, with the promise of more road improvements to come.

The designation *route nationale* (RN) is sadly no guarantee of quality. Most accidents, however, are caused by human failing (especially drunkenness) rather than by dangerous vehicles and roads. Delays are more common than accidents, so always factor in a few extra hours to allow for breakdowns or military checkpoints en route.

Road conditions in the Comoros vary, but are generally good, and distances are so short that it's easy to get around on foot or by bicycle.

Road Rules

Driving in Madagascar and the Comoros is on the right-hand side. The police occasionally stop vehicles and carry out random checks, in the hope of detecting any of the 1001 possible (and probable) infractions of the vehicle code. Occasionally foreigners will be asked for their passport, but as long as your visa is in order there should be no problem.

If you aren't used to local driving conditions, watch out for pedestrians, animals, broken-down cars and slow-moving zebu

carts on the road. It is particularly hazardous to drive at night, as there is no lighting, so try to avoid it.

HITCHING

Hitching is never entirely safe in any country in the world, and we don't recommend it. Travellers who do decide to hitch should understand that they are taking a small but potentially serious risk. People who do choose to hitch will be safer if they travel in pairs and let someone know where they are planning to go.

In Madagascar, traffic between towns and cities is thin, and most passing vehicles are likely to be taxis-brousses or trucks, which are often full. If you do find a ride, you will likely have to pay about the equivalent of the taxi-brousse fare. Along well-travelled routes or around popular tourist destinations, you can often find lifts with privately rented 4WDs or with hotel supply trucks. In the Comoros, hitching may be possible with tourists, but with most other vehicles you'll probably have to pay for a ride.

LOCAL TRANSPORT Charette

In more rural parts of Madagascar and the Comoros, the *charette*, a wooden cart drawn by a pair of zebu cattle, is a common form of local transport. They're most useful for carting your luggage when you're trekking, so that you can forge ahead and leave the *charette* to bring up the rear. Fares are entirely negotiable, and breakdowns are frequent.

Pousse-Pousse

The brightly coloured *pousses-pousses* (rickshaws) seen in hordes in various Malagasy towns supposedly got their name when drivers yelled '*pousse, pousse*' (push, push) at passers-by for aid as they were going uphill.

Many travellers have scruples about using them, perceiving an association with slave labour or finding the prospect of being pulled around by another human offensive. This sympathy may wane after a few days of relentless hounding by *pousse-pousse* drivers, who seem to regard the sight of a tourist on foot as a personal slight. In any case, the *pousse-pousse* people need work, not sympathy, as they rent the rickshaws and have to pay a daily amount to the owners. If you have heavy luggage, it's polite to hire two. In

most places, locals pay between Ar500 and Ar1500 for a ride. Tourist rates are higher, and always negotiable, so agree to a fare before you climb aboard. When it's raining, the price sometimes doubles.

Taxi-brousse

Taxis-brousses are slow, uncomfortable, erratic and sometimes unsafe. But they are as much a part of daily life in Madagascar as the sight of a humped cow or a raffia hat, and you'll find it hard to travel independently around the country without wedging yourself into one at some point. Taxis-brousses are used in the Comoros, too, but distances are mercifully shorter.

COSTS

Fares for all trips are set by the government and are based on distance, duration and route conditions. Prices are the same for locals and foreigners. However, fares vary among vehicle types, with minibuses (which tend to be somewhat quicker) or *taxis-be* (which are more

comfortable, and hold fewer people) being slightly more expensive than larger trucks.

If you can speak French, ask the locals boarding the bus what the fare is before paying – some opportunistic taxi-brousse drivers try to charge foreigners a much higher fare. You can also ask to see a list of official fares, sometimes posted in the ticket office. If you want to keep your backpack with you in the vehicle you'll need to pay for an extra seat.

RESERVATIONS

If you want one of the more comfortable seats on a less frequented route, it's advisable to book a seat the day before you want to travel. This can be done at the transport-company offices located at taxi-brousse stations. Prices are generally fixed and non-negotiable.

TAXI-BROUSSE STATIONS

All towns have one or more *gares routières* or *stationnements des taxis-brousse* (bus or taxi-brousse stations). Despite the general appearance of anarchy, the taxi-brousse system

is a relatively well-organised one once you get the hang of it. Upon arrival in a town, you may well be besieged by pushy but harmless touts, tugging at your luggage and yelling in your ear to try and win your custom.

Vehicles display the destination in white paint on the windscreen, and fares are pinned up in the transport-company offices near the edges of the station. The choice will often come down to simply joining the next vehicle to leave, which will be packed to the roof, or holding out for a decent seat in a later taxi-brousse. If you want to speed up departure, it's sometimes effective to pay for the remaining empty seats, which will also provide more comfort for everyone (although keep in mind that other passengers are often picked up along the way regardless).

TAXI-BROUSSE TIPS

No matter what type of vehicle you are in, the two front seats beside the driver are usually the most comfortable and most sought after. To get these seats you'll need to arrive early at the station, buy a ticket the day before, or do some serious pleading, bribing, hustling or flirting.

Rear seats are designed for the more compact Malagasy physique and can be uncomfortable or simply impossible for long-legged Westerners. In desperate situations, it may be better to pay for an extra seat.

Luggage goes on the roof, so make sure your rucksack is waterproof and not liable to burst open under stress.

If at all possible, avoid travelling on a taxi-brousse after dark. Unlit roads, driver fatigue and less security for your luggage all contribute to making the journey riskier. You'll also miss the scenery en route, which is often spectacular.

TOURS

Madagascar's many tour operators and freelance guides offer mountain-bike excursions, 4WD circuits, walking tours, wildlife-viewing trips and cultural and historic tours.

An organised tour can be particularly valuable if you don't speak much French, as it can otherwise be hard to break the communication barrier with the fairly reserved Malagasy people, who rarely speak English.

The general rule of thumb for organised tours is to check as much as possible beforehand – this includes vehicles, camping equipment and even menu plans. Try to get all the

details, agreed by both parties in advance, in writing.

Following is a list of some of the reliable Antananarivo-based companies that can arrange excursions throughout Madagascar. For details about travel agencies outside Madagascar, see p279.

Boogie Pilgrim (off Map pp72-3; ☎ 22 530 70; www.boogie-pilgrim.net; Ile des Oiseaux, Tsarasaotra, Alarobia) Adventurous ecotours and camps in several places in Madagascar, including the Parc National d'Andringitra and the Canal des Pangalanes. English and German speaking.

Cortez Travel & Expéditions (☎ 22 219 74; cortezmd@dts.mg; 25 Lalana Ny Zafindriandiky, Antanimena) American-based agency offering a wide range of itineraries for individuals and groups.

Espace Mada (☎ 22 262 97; www.madagascar-circuits.com; 50 Ave Ramanantsoa, Isoraka) Vehicles, guides and 4WD excursions, including Tsiribihina River and Parc National des Tsingy de Bemaraha trips.

Mad Cameleon (☎ 22 630 86; madcam@dts.mg; Lot 11-K6, Lalana Rasamoely, Ankadivato-Ambony) Tours focusing on western Madagascar, including the Tsiribihina River descent, Parc National des Tsingy de Bemaraha, and pirogue trips down the Manambolo River.

Malagasy Tours (Map pp72-3; ☎ 22 627 24; www.malagasy-tours.com; Avaradrova) Inside the Grill du Rova restaurant, this is a reliable, upmarket operator offering tours in all areas of the country, with trekking and trips along the Tsiribihina River and the Canal des Pangalanes.

Setam (☎ 22 324 31; www.setam-mg.com; 56 Ave du 26 Juin, Analakely) Bicycle expeditions, orchid tours and visits to *Famadihana* ceremonies, along with the usual circuits.

Transcontinents (Map pp76-7; ☎ 22 223 98; transco@dts.mg; 10 Ave de l'Indépendance) Tours and car hire.

Tropika Touring (☎ 22 222 30, 22 276 80; tropika@dts.mg; 41 Lalana Ratsimilaho, Ambatanakanga) Offers various tours throughout the country, including descents of the Tsiribihina River.

Za Tours (☎ 24 253 07; www.zatours-madagascar.com; Lot II J, 178 AB bis, Ambodivoanjo Ambohijatovo) Well-regarded English-speaking tour company.

TRAIN

The Malagasy rail system, known as the Réseau National des Chemins de Fer Malgaches (RNCFM), is made up of over 1000km of tracks and was built during the colonial period. The only section operating is the Fianarantsoa-Manakara line, which passes through some beautiful forest scenery. For departure and fare information for this line, see p108. There are no trains in the Comoros.

TAXIS-BROUSSE GLOSSARY

The term taxi-brousse (literally 'bush taxi') is used generically in Madagascar and the Comoros to refer to any vehicle providing public transport. When you buy your taxi-brousse ticket, therefore, you could be about to climb into anything from a tiny Renault 4 packed with 10 passengers to a rumbling juggernaut with entire suites of furniture tied to its roof. Most taxis-brousses, however, are 24-seater Japanese minibuses in varying states of dilapidation. Most of the time the term taxi-brousse will suffice to describe any form of motorised public transport, but you might come across some of the following terms in the course of your road adventures. It goes without saying that all the vehicles (described below in order of size) will be carrying at least four times the number of passengers that you thought was anatomically possible, and that they will break down regularly.

The *camion-brousse* is a huge 4WD army-style truck, fitted with a bench or seats down each side, although the majority of passengers wind up sitting on the floor or each other. They are used for particularly long or rough journeys, which you may well wish you had never begun.

A *familiale* or *taxi-be* (literally, 'big taxi') – usually a Peugeot 504 or 505 – is a big jump up in comfort and generally in speed as well. In theory, *taxis-be* accommodate nine passengers – two in the front with the driver, four in the middle and three in the back – although drivers frequently manage to fit in a few more. The price for a *taxi-be* is generally about 25% higher than for the same route in a *bâché* or *camion-brousse*, and they fill up and leave much faster than minibuses.

A *bâché* is a small, converted pick-up, which usually has some sort of covering over the back and a bench down each side. *Bâché* are used on shorter, rural routes and are hideously uncomfortable.

A *taxi-ville* (town taxi) is a small car, usually an old Renault 4 or Citroën 2CV, used for transport within towns on a jump-in-and-ride basis. Fares are per person and fixed according to the distance you go, and the taxi will stop to pick up new passengers along the way. *Taxis-ville* can also be hired to take you to spots further outside the town for a negotiable fee.

A *taxi-spécial* is any kind of taxi-brousse rented by a person or group exclusively.

Health

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As long as you stay up to date with your vaccinations and take some basic preventive measures, you'd have to be pretty unlucky to succumb to most of the health hazards covered in this chapter. Madagascar and the Comoros certainly have an impressive selection of tropical diseases on offer, but you're much more likely to get a bout of diarrhoea (in fact, you should bank on it), a cold or an infected mosquito bite than an exotic disease such as sleeping sickness. When it comes to injuries (as opposed to illness), the most likely reason for needing medical help is as a result of road accidents – vehicles are rarely well maintained, some roads are potholed and poorly lit, and drink-driving is common.

BEFORE YOU GO

A little planning before departure, particularly for pre-existing illnesses, will save you a lot of trouble later on. Before a long trip, get a check-up from your dentist and your doctor if you require any regular medication or have a chronic illness, eg high blood pressure or asthma.

You should also organise spare contact lenses and glasses (and take your optical prescription with you), get a first-aid and

medical kit together, and arrange necessary vaccinations.

Travellers can register online with the **International Association for Medical Assistance to Travellers** (IAMAT; www.iamat.org). Its website can help travellers to find a doctor who has recognised training in the country they are travelling to. You might like to consider doing a first-aid course (contact the Red Cross or St John's Ambulance) or attending a remote medicine first-aid course, such as that offered by the **Royal Geographical Society** (www.wildernessmedicaltraining.co.uk).

If you are bringing medications with you, carry them in their original containers, clearly labelled. A signed and dated letter from your physician (ideally translated into French) describing all medical conditions and medications, including generic names, is also a good idea. If carrying syringes or needles, be sure to have a physician's letter documenting their medical necessity.

INSURANCE

Find out in advance whether your insurance plan will make payments directly to providers or will reimburse you later for overseas health expenditures (doctors expect payment in cash; some hospitals take credit cards, but the machines themselves often don't work, so it's best to carry an emergency supply of cash). Note that doctor's fees are going to be much less than in Western countries. It's vital to ensure that your travel insurance will cover the emergency transport required to get you to a good hospital, or all the way home, by air and with a medical attendant if necessary. Not all insurance covers this, so check the contract carefully. If you need medical help, your insurance company might be able to help locate the nearest hospital or clinic, or you can ask at your hotel. In an emergency, contact your embassy or consulate.

Membership of the **African Medical & Research Foundation** (Amref; www.amref.org) provides an air-evacuation service in medical emergencies in some African countries, sometimes including Madagascar, as well as air-ambulance transfers between medical facilities. Money paid by members for this service goes into providing grassroots medical assistance for local people.

RECOMMENDED VACCINATIONS

The **World Health Organization** (WHO; www.who.int/en/) recommends that all travellers are covered for tetanus, polio, measles, rubella, mumps and diphtheria, as well as for hepatitis B, regardless of the destination they are travelling to.

According to the **Centers for Disease Control & Prevention** (www.cdc.gov), the following vaccinations are recommended for Madagascar and the Comoros: hepatitis A, hepatitis B, rabies and typhoid, and boosters for tetanus, diphtheria and measles. Yellow fever is not a risk in the region, but the certificate of yellow-fever vaccination is an entry requirement if travelling from an infected region (see p291).

MEDICAL CHECKLIST

It is a very good idea to carry a medical and first-aid kit with you, to help yourself in the case of minor illness or injury. Following is a list of items you should consider packing.

- Acetaminophen (paracetamol) or aspirin
- Adhesive or paper tape
- Antibacterial ointment (eg Bactroban) for cuts and abrasions (prescription only)
- Antibiotics (prescription only), eg ciprofloxacin (Ciproxin) or norfloxacin (Utinor)
- Antidiarrhoeal drugs (eg loperamide)
- Antihistamines (for hayfever and allergic reactions)
- Anti-inflammatory drugs (eg ibuprofen)
- Antimalaria pills
- Bandages, gauze and gauze rolls
- DEET-containing insect repellent for the skin
- Fluids (if travelling to remote areas)
- Iodine tablets (for water purification)
- Oral rehydration salts
- Permethrin-containing insect spray for clothing, tents and bed nets
- Pocket knife
- Scissors, safety pins and tweezers
- Steroid cream or hydrocortisone cream (for allergic rashes)
- Sun block
- Syringes and sterile needles
- Thermometer

Given the prevalence of malaria, consider taking a self-diagnostic kit that can identify malaria in the blood from a finger prick.

INTERNET RESOURCES

There is a wealth of travel health advice online. **Lonely Planet** (www.lonelyplanet.com) is a good place to start. The **World Health Organization** (www.who.int/ith/) publishes a superb book called *International Travel and Health*, revised annually and available online at no cost. Other websites of interest are **MD Travel Health** (www.mdtravelhealth.com), the **Centers for Disease Control & Prevention** (www.cdc.gov) and **Fit for Travel** (www.fitfortravel.scot.nhs.uk).

You may also like to consult your government's travel health website, if one is available:

Australia (www.smarttraveller.gov.au)

Canada (www.hc-sc.gc.ca/pphb-dgspsp/tmp-pmv/pub_e.html)

United Kingdom (www.doh.gov.uk/traveladvice/index.htm)

United States (www.cdc.gov/travel/)

FURTHER READING

- *A Comprehensive Guide to Wilderness and Travel Medicine* by Eric A Weiss (1998)
- *Healthy Travel* by Jane Wilson-Howarth (1999)
- *Healthy Travel Africa* by Isabelle Young (2000)
- *How to Stay Healthy Abroad* by Richard Dawood (2002)
- *Travel in Health* by Graham Fry (1994)
- *Travel with Children* by Cathy Lanigan and Maureen Wheeler (2004)

IN TRANSIT

DEEP VEIN THROMBOSIS (DVT)

Blood clots can form in the legs during flights, chiefly because of prolonged immobility. This formation of clots is known as deep vein thrombosis (DVT). Although most blood clots are reabsorbed uneventfully, some might break off and travel through the blood vessels to the lungs, where they could cause life-threatening complications.

The chief symptom of DVT is swelling or pain of the foot, ankle or calf. When a blood clot travels to the lungs, it may cause chest pain and breathing difficulty. Travellers with any of these symptoms should immediately seek medical attention.

To prevent DVT, walk about the cabin, perform isometric compressions of the leg muscles

(ie contract the leg muscles while sitting), drink plenty of fluids and avoid alcohol.

JET LAG & MOTION SICKNESS

If you're crossing more than five time zones you could suffer jet lag, resulting in insomnia, fatigue, malaise or nausea. To avoid jet lag, try drinking plenty of nonalcoholic fluids and eating light meals. Upon arrival, get exposure to natural sunlight and readjust your schedule (for meals, sleep etc) as soon as possible.

Antihistamines such as dimenhydrinate (Dramamine) and meclizine (Antivert, Bonine) are usually the first choice for treating motion sickness. The main side effect of these drugs is drowsiness. A herbal alternative is ginger (ginger tea, biscuits or crystallized ginger).

IN MADAGASCAR & THE COMOROS

AVAILABILITY & COST OF HEALTH CARE

Health care in the area is varied: there are excellent private hospitals in Antananarivo, but health care can be pretty patchy in both countries, although Mayotte – as part of France – has a European standard of health care. The public health system is underfunded and overcrowded. Medicine and even sterile dressings and intravenous fluids might need to be purchased from a local pharmacy by patients or their relatives. The standard of dental care is equally variable, and there is an increased risk of hepatitis B and HIV transmission via poorly sterilised equipment. By and large, public hospitals offer the cheapest service, but will have the least up-to-date equipment and medications; private hospitals and clinics are more expensive but tend to have more advanced drugs and equipment and better-trained medical staff.

Most drugs can be purchased over the counter, without a prescription. Many drugs for sale might be ineffective: they might be counterfeit or not have been stored under the right conditions. It is strongly recommended that all drugs for chronic diseases be brought from home. Also, the availability and efficacy of condoms cannot be relied upon – bring all the contraception you'll need as condoms bought in the region might not have been correctly stored.

There is a high risk of contracting HIV from infected blood if you receive a blood transfu-

sion. The **BloodCare Foundation** (www.bloodcare.org.uk) is a useful source of safe, screened blood, which can be transported to any part of the world within 24 hours.

Unfortunately, adequate – let alone good – health care is available to very few Malagasy.

INFECTIOUS DISEASES

It's a formidable list but, as we say, a few precautions go a long way...

Cholera

Cholera is usually only a problem during natural or artificial disasters, eg cyclones, war, floods or earthquakes, although small outbreaks can also occur at other times. Travellers are rarely affected. It is caused by a bacteria and spread via contaminated drinking water. The main symptom is profuse watery diarrhoea, which causes debilitation if fluids are not replaced quickly. An oral cholera vaccine is available in some countries, but it is not particularly effective. Most cases of cholera can be avoided by seeking out good drinking water and by keeping away from potentially contaminated food. Treatment is by fluid replacement (orally or via a drip), but sometimes antibiotics are needed. Self-treatment is not advised.

Dengue Fever (Breakbone Fever)

Dengue fever is spread through mosquito bites. It causes a feverish illness with headache and muscle pains similar to those experienced with a bad, prolonged attack of influenza. There might be a rash. Mosquito bites should be avoided whenever possible. Self-treatment: paracetamol and rest.

Diphtheria

Diphtheria is spread through close respiratory contact. It usually causes a temperature and a severe sore throat. Sometimes a membrane forms across the throat, and a tracheostomy is needed to prevent suffocation. Vaccination is recommended for those likely to be in close contact with the local population in infected areas, although this is more important for long stays than for short-term trips. The vaccine is given as an injection alone or with tetanus, and lasts 10 years. Self-treatment: none.

Filariasis

Found in most parts of West, Central, East and Southern Africa, and in Sudan in North Africa. Tiny worms migrating in the lym-

phatic system cause filariasis. The bite from an infected mosquito spreads the infection. Symptoms include localised itching and swelling of the legs and/or genitalia. Treatment is available. Self-treatment: none.

Hepatitis A

Hepatitis A is spread through contaminated food (particularly shellfish) and water. It causes jaundice and, although it is rarely fatal, it can cause prolonged lethargy and delayed recovery. If you've had hepatitis A, you shouldn't drink alcohol for up to six months afterwards, but once you've recovered there won't be any long-term problems. The first symptoms include dark urine and a yellow colour to the whites of the eyes. Sometimes a fever and abdominal pain might be present. Hepatitis A vaccine (Avaxim, Vaqta, Havrix) is given as an injection: a single dose will give protection for up to a year, and a booster after a year gives 10-year protection. Hepatitis A and typhoid vaccines can also be given as a single dose vaccine (hepatyrix or viatim). Self-treatment: none.

Hepatitis B

Hepatitis B is spread through infected blood, contaminated needles and sexual intercourse. It can also be spread from an infected mother to the baby during childbirth. It affects the liver, causing jaundice and occasionally liver failure. Most people recover completely, but some people might be chronic carriers of the virus, which could eventually lead to cirrhosis or liver cancer. Those visiting high-risk areas for long periods or those with increased social or occupational risk should be immunised. Many countries now give hepatitis B as part of the routine childhood vaccination. It is given by itself or at the same time as hepatitis A (hepatyrix).

A course will give protection for at least five years. It can be given over four weeks or six months. Self-treatment: none.

HIV

Human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), the virus that causes acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS), is an enormous problem throughout Africa. Infection rates are lower in Madagascar (in 2007 the percentage of people affected was estimated at just under 1%), but the vast majority of the estimated 39,000 people infected have no access to medication that might keep the disease under control. The virus

is spread through infected blood and blood products, by sexual intercourse with an infected partner and from an infected mother to her baby during childbirth and breastfeeding. It can be spread through 'blood-to-blood' contacts, such as with contaminated instruments during medical, dental, acupuncture and other body-piercing procedures, and through sharing used intravenous needles. At present there is no cure. If you think you might have been infected with HIV, a blood test is necessary; a three-month gap after exposure and before testing is required to allow antibodies to appear in the blood. Self-treatment: none.

Leptospirosis

This disease is spread through the excreta of infected rodents, especially rats. It can cause hepatitis and renal failure, which might be fatal. It is unusual for travellers to be affected unless living in poor sanitary conditions. It causes a fever and sometimes jaundice. Self-treatment: none.

Malaria

Malaria is present throughout Madagascar, particularly in the coastal areas; it is less common in the central highlands and Antananarivo, but outbreaks can occur. It is found throughout the Comoros. The disease is caused by a parasite in the bloodstream spread via the bite of the female *Anopheles* mosquito. There are several types of malaria, falciparum malaria being the most dangerous type. Infection rates vary with the seasons and climate, so check out the situation before departure. Several different drugs are used to prevent malaria and new ones are in the pipeline. Up-to-date advice from a travel health clinic is essential as some medication is more suitable for some travellers than others (eg people with epilepsy should avoid mefloquine, and doxycycline should not be taken by pregnant women or children younger than 12).

The early stages of malaria include headaches, fevers, generalised aches and pains, and malaise, which could be mistaken for flu. Other symptoms can include abdominal pain, diarrhoea and a cough. Anyone who develops a fever in a malarial area should assume malarial infection until a blood test proves negative, even if you have been taking antimalarial medication. If not treated, the next stage could develop within 24 hours, particularly if falciparum malaria is the parasite: jaundice, then

reduced consciousness and coma (also known as cerebral malaria), followed by death. Treatment in hospital is essential, and the death rate might still be as high as 10% even in the best intensive-care facilities.

Many travellers are under the impression that malaria is a mild illness, and that taking antimalarial drugs causes more illness through side effects than actually getting malaria. This is unfortunately not true. If you decide that you really do not wish to take antimalarial drugs, you must understand the risks, and be obsessive about avoiding mosquito bites. Use nets and insect repellent, and report any fever or flu-like symptoms to a doctor as soon as possible. Some people advocate homeopathic preparations against malaria, such as Demal200, but as yet there is no conclusive evidence that this is effective, and many homeopaths do not recommend their use.

Adults who have survived childhood malaria have developed immunity and usually only develop mild cases of malaria; most Western travellers have no immunity at all. Immunity wanes after 18 months of nonexposure, so even if you have had malaria in the past and used to live in a malaria-prone area, you might no longer be immune.

Malaria in pregnancy frequently results in miscarriage or premature labour. The risks from malaria to both mother and foetus during pregnancy are considerable. Travel throughout the region when you're pregnant should be carefully considered.

Meningococcal Meningitis

Meningococcal infection is spread through close respiratory contact and is more likely in crowded situations, such as dormitories, buses and clubs. Infection is uncommon in travellers. Vaccination is recommended for long stays and is especially important towards the end of the dry season. Symptoms include a fever, severe headache, neck stiffness and a red rash. Immediate medical treatment is necessary.

The ACWY vaccine is recommended for all travellers to the region. This vaccine is different from the meningococcal meningitis C vaccine given to children and adolescents in some countries; it is safe to be given both types of vaccine. Self-treatment: none.

Polio

Polio is generally spread through contaminated food and water. It is one of the vaccines

given in childhood and should be boosted every 10 years, either orally (a drop on the tongue) or as an injection. Polio can be carried asymptotically (ie showing no symptoms) and could cause a transient fever. In rare cases it causes weakness or paralysis of one or more muscles, which might be permanent. Self-treatment: none.

Rabies

Rabies is spread by being bitten or licked on broken skin by an infected animal. It is always fatal once the clinical symptoms start (which might be up to several months after an infected bite), so post-bite vaccination should be given as soon as possible. Post-bite vaccination (whether or not you've been vaccinated before the bite) prevents the virus from spreading to the central nervous system. Animal handlers should be vaccinated, as should those travelling to remote areas where a reliable source of post-bite vaccine is not available within 24 hours. Three preventive injections are needed over a month. If you have not been vaccinated you will need a course of five injections starting 24 hours or as soon as possible after the injury. If you have been vaccinated, you will need fewer post-bite injections, and have more time to seek medical help. Self-treatment: none.

Schistosomiasis (Bilharzia)

This disease is spread by flukes (minute worms) that are carried by a species of freshwater snail. The flukes are found inside the snail, which then sheds them into slow-moving or still water. The parasites penetrate human skin during paddling or swimming and then migrate to the bladder or bowel. They are passed out via stool or urine and could contaminate fresh water, where the cycle starts again. Paddling or swimming in suspect freshwater lakes or slow-running rivers should be avoided. There might be no symptoms. There might be a transient fever and rash, and advanced cases might have blood in the stool or in the urine. A blood test can detect antibodies if you suspect you have been exposed, and treatment is then possible in specialist travel or infectious-disease clinics. If not treated, the infection can cause kidney failure or permanent bowel damage. It is not possible for you to infect others. Self-treatment: none.

Trypanosomiasis (Sleeping Sickness)

Spread via the bite of the tsetse fly, this disease causes a headache, fever and eventually

coma. There is an effective treatment. Self-treatment: none.

Tuberculosis (TB)

TB is spread via close respiratory contact and occasionally through infected milk or milk products. BCG vaccination is recommended for those mixing closely with the local population, although it gives only moderate protection against TB. It's more important for long stays than for short-term stays. Inoculation with the BCG vaccine is not available in all countries. It is given routinely to many children in developing countries. The vaccination causes a small permanent scar at the site of injection, and is usually given in a specialised chest clinic. It is a live vaccine and shouldn't be given to pregnant women or immunocompromised individuals.

TB can be asymptomatic, only being picked up on a routine chest X-ray. Alternatively, it can cause a cough, weight loss or fever, sometimes months or even years after exposure. Self-treatment: none.

Typhoid

This is spread through food or water contaminated by infected human faeces. The first symptom is usually a fever or a pink rash on the abdomen. Sometimes septicaemia (blood poisoning) can occur. A typhoid vaccine (typhim Vi, typherix) will give protection for three years. In some countries, the oral vaccine Vivotif is also available. Antibiotics are usually given as treatment, and death is rare unless septicaemia occurs. Self-treatment: none.

Yellow Fever

Yellow fever is not a problem in Madagascar or the Comoros, but travellers should still carry a certificate as evidence of vaccination if they've recently been in an infected country, to avoid any possible difficulties with immigration. For a full list of these countries visit the websites of the **World Health Organization** (www.who.int/wer/) or the **Centers for Disease Control & Prevention** (www.cdc.gov/travel/blusheet.htm). A traveller without a legally required, up-to-date certificate may be vaccinated and detained in isolation at the port of arrival for up to 10 days or possibly repatriated.

TRAVELLER'S DIARRHOEA

Although it's not inevitable that you will get diarrhoea while travelling in Madagascar and the Comoros, it's certainly very likely. Diarrhoea

is the most common travel-related illness – figures suggest that at least half of all travellers to Africa will get diarrhoea at some stage. Sometimes dietary changes, such as increased spices or oils, are the cause. To avoid diarrhoea, only eat fresh fruits or vegetables if cooked or peeled, and be wary of dairy products that might contain unpasteurised milk. Although freshly cooked food can often be a safe option, plates or serving utensils might be dirty, so you should be highly selective when eating food from street vendors (make sure that cooked food is piping hot all the way through).

If you develop diarrhoea, be sure to drink plenty of fluids, preferably an oral rehydration solution containing lots of salt and sugar. A few loose stools don't require treatment, but if you start having more than four or five loose stools a day, you should start taking an antibiotic (usually a quinoline drug, such as ciprofloxacin or norfloxacin) and an anti-diarrhoeal agent (such as loperamide) if you are not within easy reach of a toilet. If diarrhoea is bloody, persists for more than 72 hours or is accompanied by fever, shaking chills or severe abdominal pain, you should seek medical attention.

Amoebic Dysentery

Contracted by eating contaminated food and water, amoebic dysentery causes blood and mucus in the faeces. It can be relatively mild and tends to come on gradually, but seek medical advice if you think you have the illness as it won't clear up without treatment (which is with specific antibiotics).

Giardiasis

This illness, like amoebic dysentery, is also caused by ingesting contaminated food or water. The illness usually appears a week or more after you have been exposed to the offending parasite. Giardiasis might cause only a short-lived bout of typical traveller's diarrhoea, but it can also cause persistent diarrhoea. Ideally, seek medical advice if you suspect you have giardiasis, but if you are in a remote area you could start a course of antibiotics.

ENVIRONMENTAL HAZARDS Heat Exhaustion

This condition occurs following heavy sweating and excessive fluid loss with inadequate replacement of fluids and salt, and is particularly common in hot climates when taking unaccustomed exercise before full acclimatisation.

Symptoms include headache, dizziness and tiredness. Dehydration is already happening by the time you feel thirsty – aim to drink sufficient water to produce pale, diluted urine. Self-treatment: fluid replacement with water and/or fruit juice, and cooling by cold water and fans. The treatment of the salt-loss component consists of consuming salty fluids (as in soup) and adding a little more table salt to foods than usual.

Heatstroke

Heat exhaustion is a precursor to the much more serious condition of heatstroke. In this case there is damage to the sweating mechanism, with an excessive rise in body temperature; irrational and hyperactive behaviour; and eventually loss of consciousness and death. Rapid cooling by spraying the body with water and fanning is ideal. Emergency fluid and electrolyte replacement is usually also required by intravenous drip.

Insect Bites & Stings

Mosquitoes might not always carry malaria or dengue fever, but they (and other insects) can cause irritation and infected bites. To avoid these, take the same precautions as you would for avoiding malaria (see p289). Bee and wasp stings cause real problems only to those who have a severe allergy to the stings (anaphylaxis), in which case, carry an adrenaline (epinephrine) injection.

Scorpions are frequently found in arid or dry climates. They can cause a painful bite that is sometimes life-threatening. If bitten by a scorpion, try taking a painkiller. Medical treatment should be sought if collapse occurs.

Bed bugs are often found in hostels and cheap hotels. They lead to very itchy, lumpy bites. Spraying the mattress with crawling insect killer after changing bedding will get rid of them.

Scabies is also frequently found in cheap accommodation. These tiny mites live in the skin, particularly between the fingers. They cause an intensely itchy rash. The itch is easily treated with malathion and permethrin lotion from a pharmacy.

Water

Madagascar's water is not safe to drink from the taps anywhere in the country – including the most expensive hotels. Consequently you should avoid ice in drinks without first asking if it's been made from filtered water.

Bottled water is available throughout Madagascar, but at around €1 per bottle it's expensive. It's better to invest in a water purifier – we really liked the SteriPen (about US\$130). It is small enough to fit in your pocket and uses ultraviolet light (no chlorine taste) to clean 16oz of water in less than a minute. You do need to use a wide-mouthed water bottle to get the pen in deep enough to purify. Drinking from streams also puts you at risk of waterborne diseases unless you filter or purify first.

TRADITIONAL MEDICINE

Although Western medicine is available in larger cities and towns, *fanafody* (traditional medicine or herbal healing) plays an important role in Madagascar. Many urban dwellers prefer traditional methods, visiting market kiosks to procure age-old remedies. *Ombiasy* (healers) hold considerable social status in many parts of the country, particularly in more remote areas where traditional practices are still strong. They are often consulted for a variety of ailments.

It remains unlikely in the short term that even a basic level of conventional Western-style medicine will be made available to all the people of Madagascar and the Comoros. Traditional medicine, on the other hand, will almost certainly continue to be practised widely.

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