TATLER®

February 2026

AN AUDIENCE WITH THE LAST POSH TORY MP

MRS ASTOR'S DISPATCH FROM NEW YORK

WHERE TO GET FIT IN 2026

THE LADY IS A SLEUTH!

MIA McKENNA-BRUCE IN AGATHA CHRISTIE FOR A NEW GENERATION

Super NATURAL

Pirates, plunder, humpback whales… Sainte-Marie, a remote island off the coast of Madagascar, is perfect for castaway fantasists, with a wildly spectacular resort – but is it worth the journey?

By TORI CADOGAN

THE COAST IS CLEAR
Spread over 120 acres of beachfront and jungle, Sainte-Marie's Voaara resort has just seven thatched bungalows and one three-bedroom villa

IF, LIKE ME, YOU GREW UP READING *Robinson Crusoe* and tales of pirates on the high seas, an escape to Voaara on Sainte-Marie, an island just off the coast of Madagascar, is your perfect adventure. Many islands attest to a pirating history, but last summer archaeologists here found a submerged wreck from 1721, sunk in one of history's most infamous pirate raids led by the notorious Olivier 'The Buzzard' Levasseur. As for treasure, divers have discovered $138 million (approximately £105 million) worth of gold and precious artefacts.

Just up the road from this incredible discovery, Philippe and Vi Kjellgren have created Voaara, a true castaways' paradise that also offers a level of discreet luxury that ensures you never want for anything. With 30-plus years in the travel industry, Philippe has visited more than 2,000 five-star hotels in 150 countries, and Vi spent three years travelling with him from resort to resort – so it's fair to say that this pair know exactly what guests want, and crucially, what they don't. All this knowledge is distilled into their beautiful Voaara resort.

Unless you're PJ all the way, getting to Voaara is a mission. A pre-travel trip to the GP for vaccinations and malaria tablets is followed by a complicated flight itinerary (fortunately made seamless thanks to the brilliant Tor at Natural World Safaris). But once you arrive in the land of lemurs, red soil, white sands and some of the most precious and underdeveloped natural habitats remaining on our planet, all that preparation and flight-hopping seems insignificant.

There is so much in Madagascar to see and do; it's only the logistics of getting from one place to another on such a large island that can limit the ambitions of your adventure. This time, I'm only here briefly, with an overnight stay in the main city, Antananarivo (known colloquially as Tana), before heading back to the airport for the tri-weekly flight to Sainte-Marie.

Philippe and Vi's magic formula is a pristine 120 acres of Indian Ocean paradise, combined with a world-class chef, Aleixandre Sarrion, offering six menus across various restaurants and bars, plus stunning beach-front bungalows with understated but sumptuous decor, ever-smiling service and true barefoot living (you don't even need flip-flops here, it's that perfect).

On arrival, there is nothing as inconvenient as a check-in to contend with. Instead, everyone is warmly greeted by the staff (with cold towels and coconuts to hand). Perennially amiable Philippe insists that we go straight to our quarters and enjoy a swim before heading to Franco's Bar for a sunset cocktail.

With Philippe as our guide, we first take a look inside the opulent three-bedroom Beach Pool Villa. A ceiling-height driftwood tree serves as an eye-catching centrepiece around which the kitchen wraps itself. The open-plan living room leads out to a pool and private beach. ▷

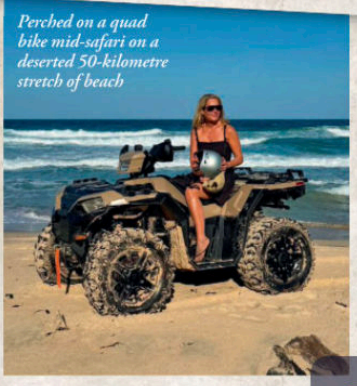
On my return, I'm invited to join Philippe and Vi for a delicious, toes-in-sand lunch at Le Grill. Here, a freshly caught white tuna is grilled with squid, blue prawns and lobster on coconut husks, which imbue the most delicious flavour. The fish is served with crispy salad leaves from the garden and a wonderful array of sauces, from the infamous spicy Malagasy XO to Argentinian chimichurri. It's sublime – exquisite ingredients cooked to perfection. I feel incredibly spoiled and even more so when Philippe shares the plan for the next day: we are setting off on a quad-bike safari and I'm guaranteed to see lemurs.

The next morning, we perch on roaring quad bikes, helmets safely secured, and set off over the wild terrain, through villages, coconut and vanilla plantations and finally to a 50-kilometre stretch of untouched beach. Philippe releases the throttle and we whizz along the dunes, waves crashing next to us. It's exhilarating. A more moving experience is a visit to a local orphanage, which provides housing and schooling to 66 young children, and offers physiotherapy to those with disabilities. As we approach the kitchen, three lemurs jump down, waiting to be fed. The black-and-white primates are so confident and cheeky, they eagerly take the proffered bananas from my hand.

On my last day, Philippe suggests I have one more attempt at spotting the humpback whales. So we set off in search of the Big Gods, as the locals refer to them. Finding them is very auspicious, our jovial guide Elise tells us. And soon enough, I can see the tell-tale spouts of water, followed by the grey fin, and finally the majestic tail. It's the most wonderful finale to a magical week in castaway paradise. I'm now convinced that your childhood dreams really can come true, or at least they can on the fantastical Sainte-Marie. □

Natural World Safaris (naturalworldsafaris.com) can organise bespoke trips all over Madagascar. A week at Voaara costs from £7,780 per person, including flights from the UK, domestic flights and transfers, all meals, and a selection of activities including yoga, paddleboarding, mountain biking, snorkelling, surfing and hiking.

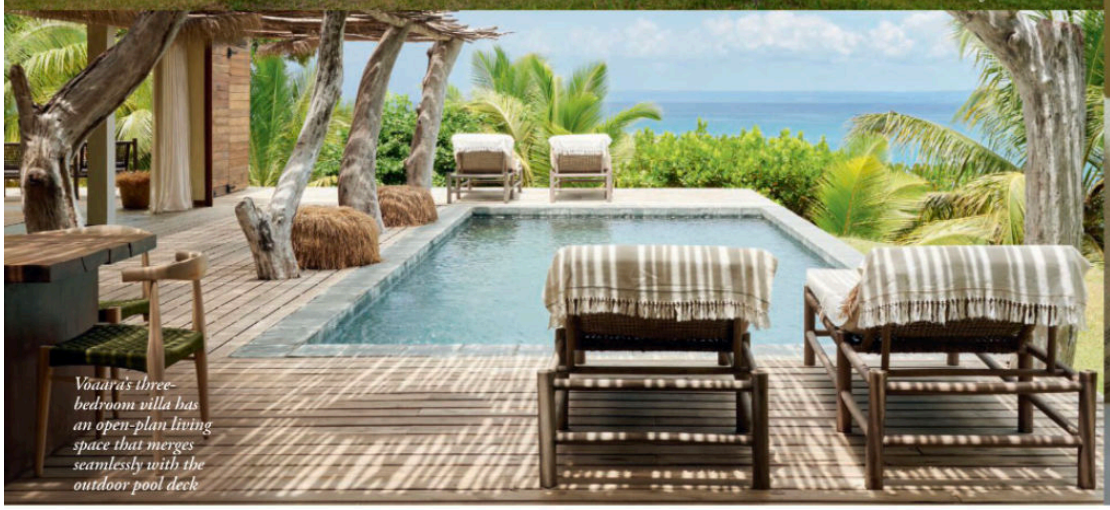
Tori feeding the lemurs at the island's orphanage



Perched on a quad bike mid-safari on a deserted 50-kilometre stretch of beach

PHOTOGRAPHS: MARK WILLIAMS

Two thatched huts serve as massage rooms, which make liberal use of organic oils sourced from the island



Voaara's three-bedroom villa has an open-plan living space that merges seamlessly with the outdoor pool deck

High A-frame ceilings and cream walls are the backdrop for mosquito-net-draped beds, raffia lights and driftwood tables

◁ All three bedrooms have king-size four-poster beds, Polish linen sheets, Naturalmat mattresses (all the way from Devon) and sinks carved out of petrified wood, millions of years old. Every small detail is considered: a Dyson hairdryer, electric sockets fitted with adapter plugs, laundry delivered back exquisitely pressed.

My own two-bedroom Beach Loft Bungalow is no less glorious. We traverse a wooden walkway through a thick raphia forest and arrive at the two-storey dwelling, which overlooks a perfect, castaway beach. The sand is so clean, it squeaks as you pad across it; the sea is crystal blue and irresistible. I jump straight in before a quick outdoor shower (saving the ginormous outdoor bath for later) and meander along the beach to meet Vi and Philippe at Franco's.

The plan this evening is to eat at La Plage by Sarrion, where we dine on fish caught only three hours earlier. A fish carpaccio with ponzu and crispy garlic is served alongside thinly sliced raw fish topped with avocado, coriander and Aji amarillo (Peruvian yellow pepper) sauce. It melts in the mouth. For mains, there's fish of the day (white tuna) with Malagasy XO sauce, and spiny lobster with ginger and spring onion. We finish with chef Vincent's coconut flan and chocolate mousse, all washed down with the most delicious Provençal rosé. As I stroll back to my bungalow, marvelling at the sky sparkling with the Milky Way (enhanced by the absence of any light pollution), I have to pinch myself that I'm witnessing such beauty.

There is so much to do and explore at Voaara that the options seem limitless: diving, surfing the local break, snorkelling, even visits to the pirate cemetery (a fascinating insight into the local history). For those seeking a calmer few days in paradise, the incredible Jean Gerald, a former ballet dancer, offers yoga on the beach in the shade of a Garcinia tree. As he finishes the session with singing bowls, I experience a deep relaxation only surpassed by one of the most restorative massages of my life in the stunning spa. Vi is planning a series of yoga retreats with Jean Gerald and I, for one, can't wait.

However, it's the wildlife I'm really here for – I've especially chosen to visit in Madagascar's winter (June to September) to see the visiting humpback whales. Each year, having migrated up from the Antarctic, they seek out these calm, warm waters between Sainte-Marie and Madagascar to mate, give birth and nurse their calves. An American couple return from a morning whale-watching excursion, exuberant at having seen 15 whales, three of which were breaching and one doing a full 360-degree swivel. There are also sightings from La Plage restaurant. A plan is made with Vi that I join a honeymooning Italian couple setting out the following morning. That evening, as I watch *Madagascar* (what else?) in the open-air cinema under a star-strewn sky, I thrum with excitement at the thought of the next day's adventure.

We set off at 9am, bouncing across the waves. Everyone is optimistically spotting signs here and birds flocking there (they suggest an area of abundant fish, which would attract the feeding whales). After three hours of searching, we sadly don't see any whales, such is the way with nature, but we've still enjoyed a wonderful morning gawping at the rugged coastline.