COUNTRY LIFE
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COUNTRY LIFE

Travel

2026

Madagascar is home to some 100 species of chameleon, including this panther chameleon and a miniature one no bigger than a human fingernail, as well as more than 12,000 endemic plants, reptiles and mammals

Getty

One of a kind

Rupert Uloth travels to Madagascar's north-east to marvel at the extraordinary abundance of flora and fauna—much of which is found nowhere else on Earth

Facing page: **Ooh, hello: 107 species of lemur throng the Madagascan wilds.** *Above:* **With swifts screaming and seas sparkling, Tsara Komba villas are heavenly hideaways**

THE first Englishmen arrived in Madagascar in 1649. The ones who tried to stay were either slaughtered or died of disease. I am happy to report that, more than 375 years later, we enjoyed a significantly improved welcome to this fascinating 'mini-continent', so called because much of its flora and fauna cannot be found anywhere else on Earth.

I was embarrassed about how little I knew about Madagascar before our trip—facilitated by The Ultimate Travel Company—but discovered from informal straw polls that not many others do either. 'Is it the size of the Isle of Wight?' asked one friend. They were amazed when I revealed that if you place the northern tip of Madagascar against London, its southern tip would reach Algiers. It is extraordinary, too, that it is believed there was no human habitation here at the time of Christ. Some time in the early centuries AD, the first settlers did arrive—not from Mozambique 250 miles away, but all the way from Indonesia, 3,500 miles distant. No one is quite sure how that happened; whether they came, island hopping, by dugout canoe or whether traders, working their way north along the coast of India, stumbled upon this untouched isle.

When we flew over by aeroplane or helicopter, it was not African-style herders that we saw so much as acres of brilliant-green paddy fields interspersed with sugar cane. Another conundrum is why there are so many unique species, but none of the larger African predators. Madagascar is home to six native baobab trees; the famous avenue in the south is the image by which most people recognise the country. There are also 107 species of lemur.

A former French colony, its colonial masters effectively invaded in 1896 and the island became fully independent in 1960. Flights can be erratic (and roads are generally terrible), but those with the means charter their own aircraft and the place promises memorable experiences that you cannot find elsewhere.

To give us flexibility, we stayed a couple of nights in the capital, Antananarivo, browsing the markets with their beautiful inlaid wooden boxes, recycled aluminium baobab trees and shell-fringed raffia mats. If you've ever wondered what happened to the once-ubiquitous Renault 4, you'll find they are in plentiful supply here, patched up as jeeps or used as taxis. Driving anywhere is slow through thronged streets, but, occasionally, downtown would open up into a lake fringed by fishermen. It was to the north coast that we were bound, however, where three idyllic, but very different island hideaway paradises welcome you into a magical world.

Voaara

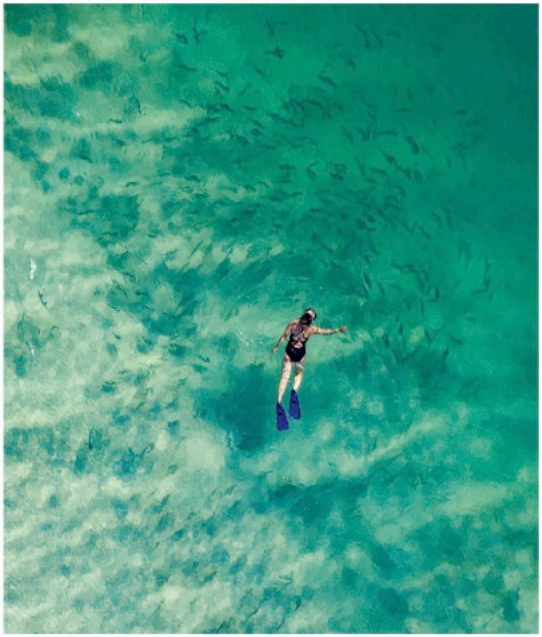
Voaara is a long-held dream gradually coming into focus for Philippe Kjellgren. This is a man who spent three years travelling all around the world, including on 58 safaris, rarely staying more than two nights in each hotel, to research a travel app. He is highly respected for his views in the industry, but, most pertinently, he has more experience than most of hospitality and what works. For his own venture, he has chosen a remote spot in northern Madagascar to put it all into practice.

Sainte Marie is a 31-mile-long, narrow tropical island off Madagascar's north-eastern coast. Once frequented by pirates (we visited the graveyard where many are buried alongside a memorial for Capt Kidd, whose secret treasure is meant to be buried nearby), the island has a sleepier atmosphere now with a population of 30,000 mostly engaged in subsistence farming or fishing. Mr Kjellgren spent many of his teenage years on holiday here. His father, a Swedish Francophile engineer, was working on projects in Madagascar and this became a favourite destination.

> ‘Barefoot luxury is now a well-used phrase, but this is its essence’

Voaara is accessed by a hidden dirt track, nestled discreetly on a sublime beach of white sand bracketed by lumps of volcanic rock, as if some over-sized hand has cast aside handfuls of giant chocolate fudge cake. Barefoot luxury is now a well-used phrase, but this is the essence of the concept. Sharply pitched roofs, a homage to the vernacular of the far-away capital, covered in thatched palm leaves, adorn each of the seven bungalows and the three-bedroom villa. Outdoor showers are shrouded by planting and paths fringed by laden avocado, jack fruit and cashew trees. In the garden, we feast our eyes on aubergine, rocket, banana, papaya and watermelon. During supper, the chef runs down to the beach as torch-bearing fishermen land and offer their catch. Food is taken seriously here.

Mr Kjellgren is a strong believer in the mantra that hospitality is all about design, service and food. He brought in Aleixandre →



Left: **No snorkelling devotee could resist the warm, jewel-toned waters and shifting shoals of fish in the reef-studded seas off Miavana.** *Above:* **Even the chameleons seem studded with gems**

Sarrion, a Spanish chef with Michelin-star experience, who has produced a menu using local ingredients. Zebu steak tartare and fresh fish were hard to resist. Mr Sarrion still visits regularly, sometimes for several weeks, and food is certainly a primary reason to stay.

One morning, we went for a two-hour beach walk, each bay as beguiling as the last, and only met the occasional fisherman. There are plenty more plans in the pipeline: the restoration of the elegant lighthouse—designed by the Eiffel company, of Paris fame—as well as a larger spa area, more villas up the hill and a bigger harbour. Locals are consulted about any developments; a mermaid had to be pacified before any alterations were made to the small landing place. Supremely superstitious, the villagers are in constant fear of upsetting their ancestors, but a ritual ceremony and a big party normally does the trick.
www.voaara.com

Tsara Komba

One morning, we are met by a launch in the alarmingly named town of Hellville, which takes us on a trip to heavenly Nosy Tanikely, a small, palm-fringed island with incomparable snorkelling opportunities and a lighthouse at its highest point. On a gentle climb to the summit, we spy our first lemur. The cocker spaniel-sized brown lemur has been reintroduced to the island and this one swings nonchalantly through the canopy unperturbed by our presence. Back in the water, we enjoy one of the best hour's snorkelling I've ever experienced. We follow sea turtles as they gently cruise by, spot two large groupers having a spat and a stingray minding its own business on the bottom. Swimming through shoals of damselfish feels like parting a curtain of blue-green sequins glittering in the sunlight. The sea is beautifully warm and calm.

The final approach to Tsara Komba itself, nestled on the lush slopes of Nosy Komba, another island, beckons you into its embrace, the villas peeping out from the well-tended gardens. An army of porters is there to greet us, wading out on the sandy flats to pick up our bags. As we sip refreshing fruit cocktails on the deck of our villa, swifts swoop past and way down on the beach we see the local children playing football on a pitch the low tide has temporarily revealed.

In the afternoon, we board our launch once again for Lokobe National Park on Nosy Be. A local guide meets us and we meander through his village where children play and women prepare food for supper. On trails formed in the forest, we spot the dayglo greens and brilliantine crimson of a male chameleon. He is *in flagrante* with a smaller, much less showy female. Already that day, we had come across a ridiculously cute mouse lemur that had made itself at home in a curled-up palm leaf, as snug as a mountaineer in a cocooned sleeping bag. A few steps further on, I think our laconic, but smiling guide has found another furry friend—so it is a surprise when he parts the leaves to reveal a boa constrictor.
www.tsarakomba.com

Miavana

If James Bond is going to meet his next arch villain in an impossibly luxurious hideaway, may I suggest the location manager takes a look at Miavana? The only practical way to get to the private island is by helicopter, the hour's ride taking us at a steady 1,000ft over inaccessible and unspoilt plains and forest. The occasional settlement of palm-thatched huts identifies communities living an entirely subsistence existence, marshalling their few cattle and odd sheep. The largest of five islands in a remote archipelago, it has been a stopover for fishing communities, a haunt of pirates and, more recently, a seaweed farm. The current owners spent four years constructing the 14 villas, each of which has a swimming pool looking over a sweep of sugary white sand to iridescent blues and greens competing to make the sea even more alluring. The guided tour with Muson, our attentive and charming butler, highlights the limestone-clad shower with ceiling open to the sky and, instead of a mini bar, there's a whole kitchen with pastel-coloured SMEG appliances. Even with its cavernous mosquito net, the bedroom, looking out to sea, is big enough for a family.

We spend a happy spell looking for crowned lemurs, translocated from areas where they were endangered to benefit from the planting of 100,000 trees that have restored the jungle, then join a dive team on one of the many reefs. As our helicopter lifts off at the end of our stay, I have one last look for Blofeld and Drax, but decide that 007's adversaries really don't deserve such a peaceful paradise.
www.miavana.com

The Ultimate Travel Company has 12-night itineraries in Madagascar, from £23,815 per person. The price is based on two people in a double room and includes economy flights, transfers, three nights at Voaara, three at Tsara Komba, three at Miavana and two at Hotel Nosy Manga (020–3993 3204; www.theultimatetravelcompany.co.uk)

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