

ACTIVITY

The tourist attractions of the island can be explored by Madagascar safari. Moreover, a safari also brings travellers close to the nature, the people and their culture and offers a better understanding of Madagascar. The wonders of nature on the island concentrate mostly around the varied flora and fauna of Madagascar. The nature reserves and wildlife parks form important units of a safari in Madagascar.



The capital and several other important towns are situated in the central section of the Haut Plateaux, the chain of rugged, ravine-riven mountains that run from north to south down the centre of Madagascar.



Antananarivo, often abbreviated to Tana, has a distinctively French flavour and atmosphere: French is widely spoken and road as well as shop signs are mostly in French. The city is built on three levels: dominating the city is the Queen's Palace and associated Royal Village or Rova. Now a national monument, it was once the residency of the Merina dynasty which, in the 19th century, united all Madagascar for the first time. On the lowest level is the market of Analakely. The Zoma market, claimed to be the second-largest in the world and certainly worth a visit, is held daily. The Tsimbazaza Zoological and Botanical Garden is open Thursday, Sunday and holidays 0800-1100 and 1400-1700. The Tourist Information Office is nearby. It is wise not to wander too far after dark.



Ambohimanga

The birthplace of the Malagasy state, Ambohimanga is 20km (12 miles) from the capital. Known variously as ‘the blue city’, ‘the holy city’ and ‘the forbidden city’, it is surrounded by forests. The citadel was an important Merina stronghold and retains several structures associated with their ceremonies. Its main gate is an enormous stone disc; 40 men were needed to roll it into position.



Elsewhere

Situated 80km (50 miles) from the capital, Mantasoa is a popular spot for picnics. The area was landscaped for the Merina Queens by a shipwrecked Frenchman and includes an artificial lake, pine forests and Madagascar’s first industrial park. Ampefy, 90km (60 miles) from the capital, is a volcanic region with spectacular waterfalls and geysers. Dams are used here to catch eels. Perinet, 140km (90 miles) from the capital, is a nature reserve, home of the *indri* (a tail-less lemur) and many species of orchid. Also known as *Andasibe*, Antsirabe, 170km (110 miles) from the capital, is Madagascar’s main industrial center. The volcanic hills surrounding the town are dotted with crater lakes. Madagascar’s second-highest mountain, Tsiafajovona, may be seen to the west of the road from Antananarivo.



The North

The lush north is dominated by two great mountains. Tsarantanana, the island’s highest at 2880m (9450ft), is covered with the giant ferns and lichens peculiar to high-altitude rainforests. Montagne d’Arbre (1500m/4900ft) is a national park and is famous for its orchids and lemurs. The monsoon falls in the north between December and March.



Mahajanga

A provincial capital, Mahajanga stands at the mouth of Madagascar's largest river, the Betsiboka. Boats depart for Nossi Bé and several other islands. The beach here is said to be free of sharks. The island's finest grottoes are at Anjohibe, 90km (60 miles) inland. There is a nature reserve at Ankarafantsika.



Nosy Be

Nosy Be is Madagascar's most important holiday resort. An island surrounded by smaller islands lying off the northwest coast, it is one hour by air from the capital. Exotic perfume plants such as ylang-ylang, vanilla (Madagascar is the world's largest producer), lemon grass and patchouli are grown here. The main town is Hell-Ville. Nearby, there is a ruined 17th-century Indian village.



Antsiranana

A provincial capital, Antsiranana (formerly Diego Suarez) is a cosmopolitan seaport overlooking a beautiful gulf at the northernmost tip of the island. There are many lakes, waterfalls and grottoes in the rainforests above the port. Wildlife and flora includes lemurs, crocodiles and orchids. Permission to visit the national park at Montagne d'Arbre nearby must be obtained from the Ministère des Eaux et des Forêts, which has an office in the town. Boats may be taken to Nossi Bé. There is a good sandy beach at Ramena, but sharks may be a problem.



St-Marie

St-Marie (Nosy Boraha) lies off the east coast, 150km (90 miles) north of *Toamasina*. Its dense vegetation and the difficulty of navigating the lagoons which surround it made it an ideal base for pirates and, later, a colony for convicts. There are many clove plantations and several historic sites, including Madagascar's oldest catholic church. The island is also known for its beautiful white-sand beaches and coral reefs.



The East Coast

Situated on the northeast coast, Toamasina is the country's main port and a provincial capital. It is an eight-hour drive from Antananarivo and, like the capital; it has several busy markets, including the Bazary. Around 11km (7 miles) north of the town are the Ivolina Zoological Park and Botanical Garden, containing every kind of vegetable species from the eastern forests and many varieties of animal life. Vatomandry, further south, is a very popular beach resort even though the sharks prevent swimming.



The South

The arid south is noted for its many remarkable species of cactus- and baobab-like plants and for the highly developed funerary art of its inhabitants, past and present.



Southern Highlands

Fianarantsoa, a provincial capital, is an important centre for wine and rice production and a good base for exploring the southern highlands. Places to visit in the surrounding mountains

include Amabalavao, said to be the ‘home of the departed’, where *antemore* paper and *lamba aridrano* silk are made; nearby Ambondrome and Ifandana crags, where the revered bones of exhumed ancestors may be seen (the latter was the site of a mass suicide in 1811); Ambositra and the neighboring Zafimaniny villages, where intricate marquetry products (wood inlay) are made; the Isalo National Park, situated in a chain of sandstone mountains (camping is possible but it can only be reached by 4-wheel-drive vehicles or on foot with a guide); it is also the gateway to the Ranomafana National Park

Mananjary is a popular beach resort on the east coast (but not for sea-bathing because of sharks). Taolanaro (formerly Fort Dauphin), in the southeast corner of the island, is the site of the first French settlement. Parts of the 17th-century fort remain. The city and surrounding area are famous for seafood and for orchids and carnivorous pitcher plants, which can be seen at the Mandona Agricultural Center at Sainte-Luce Bay.



The Southwest

Western Madagascar was once covered with deciduous forests, but is now mostly savannah. The economy is based around the *zebu*, a species of ox introduced in the eighth century by settlers from South-East Asia. Toliara, a provincial capital on the southwest coast, has excellent bathing beaches and opportunities for skin-diving, fishing, sailing and other water sports.



National Parks

Spread across 152,000 hectares, the Tsingy de Bemaraha Strict Nature Reserve is located 60 to 80km inland from the west coast in the northern sector of the Anstingy region of the Bemaraha Plateau, north of the Manambolo River Gorge. Undisturbed forests, lakes and mangrove swamps are home to a variety of rare and endangered birds and lemurs. Rocky landscapes and limestone uplands are cut into large peaks with a mass of limestone needles. Rivers flow on the plateau and springs arise on each flank of the Tsingy, making this an important water catchment area. Ancient cemeteries can also be found in the Gorge.