

Western Madagascar



The 'wild west' attracts two types of cowboys – those in search of tough travel in rough country and ones looking to charter a private plane to the ultimate hidden paradise.

Madagascar's hard-to-reach western region – divided in two, with no roads linking the south and north – looks like it fell off another planet. It is pockmarked with trippy natural attractions. You can swim in a bottomless bowl of tomato bisque lapping against a deserted white-sand beach in the south – the ocean along the coast north of Morondava is a brick-red colour highlighted with a range of muddy browns (the odd colouring is, sadly, a direct effect of deforestation and erosion, which cause lateritic soils to leach into the water). Or to really blow your mind, walk the celebrated Avenue du Baobab, just outside Morondava, staring up at a line of giant trees more than one thousand years old.

In the national parks, forests of bizarre looking *tsingy* (karst) rise in spikes and crippled spires and create the kind of landscapes described in sci-fi novels. With thousands of acres of dry, deciduous forests, they are havens for hikers and cyclists. River rats can get their fix with a float trip down the Tsiribihina River, while scuba and sun lovers can spend days exploring uninhabited islands and diving in the coral reefs off the southwest coast near Bel-Sur-Mer.

Western Madagascar is also attracting a growing number of travelling lovebirds who fly in specifically to stay at the romantic, often luxurious, vaguely safari-style hideaways on secluded far-north beaches.

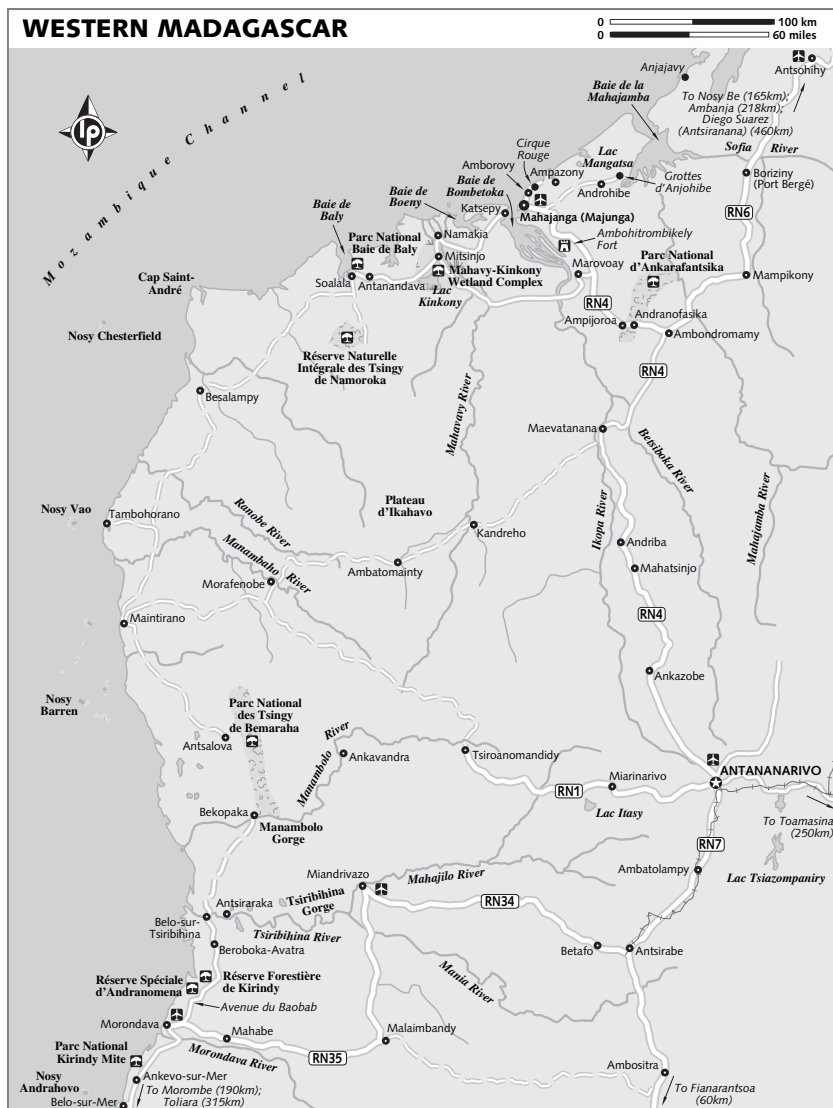
HIGHLIGHTS

- Floating down the **Tsiribihina River** (p149) in wooden pirogue (dugout canoe) and camping on sandbanks at night under a million stars
- Climbing among the soaring stone pinnacles of **Parc National des Tsingy de Bemaraha** (p151)
- Splashing out at Madagascar's exclusive fly-in beach resort, the remote and romantic **Anjajavy** (boxed text, p150), which doubles as a wildlife reserve
- Contemplating creation while spying on copulating tortoises or searching out the jumping rat in the **Réserve Forestière de Kirindy** (p156) and the **Parc National d'Ankarafantsika** (p147)
- Toasting with a cold beer and watching the sunset among the giant trees of **Avenue du Baobab** (p156), outside Morondava



■ HIGHEST POINT: 850m

■ PRINCIPAL TRIBE: Sakalava



Getting There & Away

With the exception of the well-maintained Route Nationale 4 (RN4) between Antananarivo and Mahajanga, the roads in this region are poor (although slowly improving) and transport outside cities can be tough. The only way to get from Morondava in the south and Mahajanga in the north by road is to

backtrack through Antananarivo. The road between Antananarivo and Morondava is in bad condition, especially during the rainy season, and the trip takes at least two days. The road north to Mahajanga is a pleasure to drive. The 560km stretch of pavement is one of Madagascar's easiest road journeys and takes only 10 hours.

Flying is your best option for fast travel. Air Madagascar has regular flights to the large towns, plus twin-engine otters servicing the smaller villages. The fly-in resorts on the north coast use private charters.

MAHAJANGA (MAJUNGA)

pop 162,969

Mahajanga is a sprawling and somnolent port town with a palm-lined seaside promenade, wide avenues, shady arcades and walls draped with gorgeous bougainvillea. It is sometimes also known as Majunga.

With its large Muslim and Indian populations, and historical connections with Africa, Mahajanga is one of the country's more colourful and ethnically diverse places, similar in atmosphere to many places on the East African coast. The women wrap themselves in the brightly coloured cotton wraps seen in the Comoros, Zanzibar and Mombasa, and there are some Swahili-style carved doorways amid the crumbling buildings in the town's older part.

North and south of Mahajanga are white-sand beaches, although some are not suitable for swimming due to sharks and strong currents. It's best to ask at the hotels, tour companies or even bars in Mahajanga to get the scoop on what's safe and what's not (currents change, as do shark patterns) before diving in anywhere around here.

HISTORY

Mahajanga became established in the 18th century as a trade crossroads between Madagascar, the East African coast and the Middle East. Swahili and Indian traders settled in the town, resulting in a thriving commerce in cattle, slaves, arms and spices from the Orient and the Middle East.

When Merina king Radama I overthrew the Sakalava people, Mahajanga's inhabitants rioted and set one section of the town on fire. Because of the capital's strategic location, the French selected it as the base of operations in 1895 for their expeditionary forces, which would turn Madagascar into a French protectorate.

ORIENTATION

Most hotels and restaurants are in the older part of town, as far as Rue du Colonel Barre in

the east, with the port to the south and the bay to the west. Running beside the bay is a palm-lined promenade known as La Corniche.

At the intersection of Ave de France and La Corniche is an enormous baobab tree, thought to be well over 700 years old. It is considered *fady* (taboo) to touch it.

INFORMATION

Bank of Africa (BOA; cnr Rue Georges V & Rue Nicolas II) Changes money, ATM.

BFV-5G (Rue du Maréchal Joffre) Changes money, ATM.

BNI-CL (Rue du Maréchal Joffre) Opposite the Hôtel de France. Changes money, ATM.

Espace Medical (☎ 62 241 75; ☎ 24hr) The best place for medical treatment.

Kaotry Le Baobab (Rue Georges V; per min Ar30) Next to Anjary Hotel, this new cybercafé has fast connections and serves cold drinks. Best of all, it's air-conditioned!

Post Office (Rue du Colonel Barre) Opposite the cathedral. The Telecom office is here too, and there are also card-phones in town.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

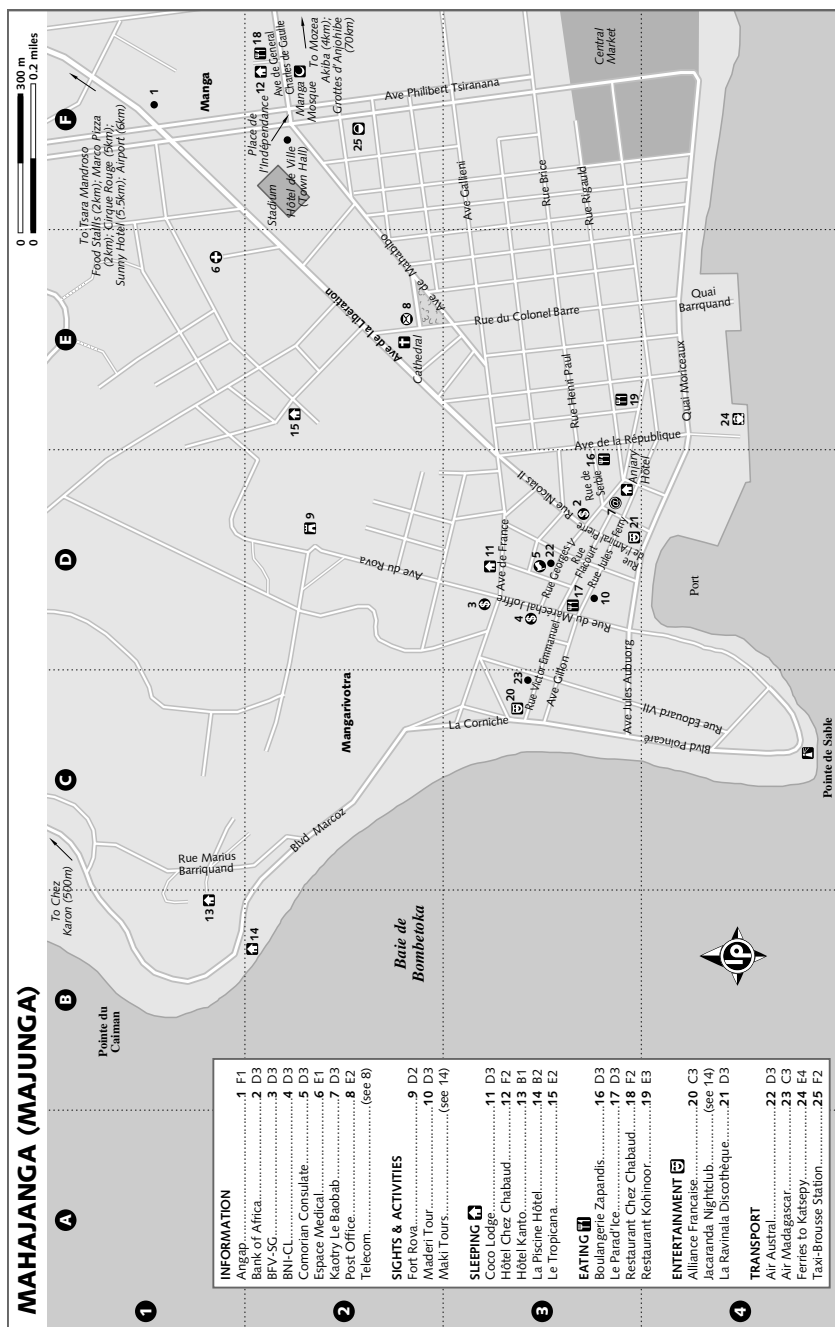
Preserved fish and dinosaur bones are on show at the **Mozea Akiba** (Akiba Museum; ☎ 62 236 85; University of Mahajanga; admission Ar2500; ☎ 9-11am & 3-5pm Tue-Fri, 3-5pm Sat & Sun). It also has a few small displays including photographs and explanations (some are in English) about the Grottes d'Anjohibe, the Parc National d'Ankarafantsika and Cirque Rouge.

Fort Rova (Ave du Rova), at the end of Rue du Maréchal Joffre, was built in 1824 by King Radama I and extensively damaged during the French-Malagasy wars of the late 19th century. The Rova offers good views over the city and bay.

If you want to sunbathe in style, or perhaps train for the next Olympic games, there is no better stop than the absolutely massive 50m **swimming pool** (nonguests per day Ar10,000) at La Piscine Hôtel (p144). The hotel is one of Mahajanga's most swanky, so reading on the sun-loungers, sipping cocktails out of coconuts or floating, arms extended, in the sparkling cold water all feel especially sweet if you've been roughing it for a while.

TOURS

Several hotels and tour operators can assist with organising excursions to nearby attractions such as Cirque Rouge (Ar75,000), Grottes d'Anjohibe (Ar300,000), Ampijoroa (Ar100,000) and Katsepy (Ar280,000). Prices



SAKALAVA EROTICA

The western part of Madagascar has traditionally been the area with the strongest African influence. The language of the dark-skinned western peoples contains many words taken from African languages. The dominant tribe in the area is the Sakalava, who venerate the relics not of their own personal ancestors, but of their ancient royal families. This belief, plus the use of spirit mediums to communicate with dead royalty, also has an African base.

The Sakalava are perhaps best known for covering the tombs of their dead with elaborate, erotic carvings, often depicting oral sex or other acts considered *fady* (taboo) in life. Although Sakalava tombs were once visible throughout the entire western region, today consider yourself very lucky if you're given the chance to see one of the copulating couples carved onto the old wood. Thanks to a group of people – mostly art dealers without morals – who purchased the poached erotica from unscrupulous relic-hunters and sold it, nearly all western Madagascar's sacred tombs had been pillaged to the point of destruction by the 1980s.

Following this desecration, the Sakalava now (understandably) keep the location of burial grounds still containing intact tombs top secret. It's important to respect their privacy. If you are lucky enough to be invited to visit a Sakalava tomb, please keep your hands to yourself and take only photos.

quoted are per person per day for a group of four. Cars can be hired for about Ar120,000 – it's cheaper to charter a taxi. Try the following places if you'd like to organise a tour:

Maderi Tour (☎ 62 032 34; www.maderi-tour.com in French; Rue Jules Ferry) Catamaran sailing trips as far north as Nosy Be, plus 4WD excursions and longer trips around Madagascar. It has just opened the Antsanitia Beach Resort (p149), an hour north of town, that's getting good reviews.

Maki Tours (☎ 032 400 3400; makitours@wanadoo .mg; La Piscine Hôtel) An upmarket company that runs 4WD day trips as well as longer, tailored holidays around the region. It also rents cars.

SLEEPING Budget

Hôtel Kanto (☎ 62 229 78; Rue Marrius Barriquand; r from Ar10,000, mains from Ar2500; ☺) A good-value and peaceful option up a hill behind La Piscine Hôtel about 2km north of town. There's a view of the sea from the garden terrace, and the rooms (no nets) are simple but clean. The restaurant (open Monday to Saturday) serves good Malagasy dishes.

Chez Karon (☎ 62 226 94; r from Ar15,000; ☺) It's on the ocean, but the beach here has been almost entirely eroded. Still, travellers give it good marks for basic, but clean rooms, friendly hosts and good food at the onsite restaurant. Fishing and, more strangely, wild-boar-hunting excursions are arranged.

Hôtel Chez Chabaud (☎ 62 233 27; nico@wanadoo.mg; off Ave de Général Charles de Gaulle; r Ar15,000-30,000, mains Ar8000-22,000; ☺) This hotel opposite the well-regarded restaurant of the same name has 18

rooms of varying size and comfort. Both the hotel and restaurant are run by two friendly French sisters who speak good English.

Midrange & Top End

Coco Lodge (☎ 62 230 23; www.coco-lodge.com in French; Ave de France; r from Ar65,000; ☺) A very chic and well-designed little hotel with pretty pink buildings built around a small pool and bar. There's also a casino on site. It is excellent value for Mahajanga and attracts travellers from all over the world.

Le Tropicana (☎ 62 220 69; www.hotel-majunga.com; Rue Administrateur; r Ar65,000-75,000, mains from Ar10,000; ☺) A set of rustic bungalows in a lush garden that are small, but full of character (and often full of guests – reserve ahead). The restaurant puts an exotic spin on French fare, infusing local spices into classic dishes with great results. The caged lemurs in the garden were a real downer, however, and hopefully will be freed – we're not the first visitors to complain.

Sunny Hotel (☎ 62 235 87; rasseta@dts.mg; r Ar150,000, mains from Ar15,000; ☺) This hotel is back in good graces after releasing its resident lemurs from the cages they were once cruelly confined to – lots of travellers complained. The animals now live free in nearby trees. Outside of town near the airport, Sunny is a good choice if you don't care much about seeing Mahajanga, have arriary to burn and want a classy crash pad while waiting for a flight out. You'll pay for its quiet locale and poshness, but rooms are comfortable and spacious with

satellite TV. Plus there is a big pool, tennis courts and even a fitness centre. The restaurant serves excellent food; excursions and car hire are arranged.

La Piscine Hôtel (☎ 62 241 72/3/4; piscinehotel@dots.mg; Blvd Marcoz; r Ar150,000; 🏠 🚗 🚲) One of Mahajanga's most upmarket hotels is chiefly famous for its fantastic Olympic-sized 50m-long swimming pool. There are also great sea views, a terrace restaurant, a casino and a nightclub at this French-owned place. The rooms are luxurious, with satellite TV and telephone, although without the amenities they would feel quite overpriced. The hotel has its own tour company for excursions.

EATING

Mahajanga has loads of Indian restaurants. The least expensive places to eat are the tiny food stalls set up in the late afternoon along La Corniche. For more cheap eats, head north to the suburb of Tsara Mandroso, on Route de l'Aéroport, where hundreds of brightly coloured shops and cafés are packed together along the side of the road. Besides the places listed here, you'll find many of the hotels we've listed have quality restaurants.

Boulangerie Zapandis (☎ 62 221 36; Rue de Serbie; snacks & coffee Ar1000-5000; 🕒 6am-noon & 4-7pm, closed Tue & Sun) A true French patisserie serving wonderful cakes, pastries, croissants and creamy ice cream. Locals stop in to pick up crispy loaves of French bread in the morning, and usually end up lingering, chatting with friends over juice and real espresso.

Le Parad'Ice (☎ 62 231 34; Rue du Maréchal Joffre; mains Ar2500-10,000; 🕒 7am-2pm & 5-9pm Mon-Sat, 5-9pm Sun) Some say it serves the best ice cream in Madagascar, with lots of fruit flavours – the passionfruit has been recommended. Just down the road from Air Mad's office, it is also known for great breakfasts and a menu of burgers, grills and sandwiches. There's a bar.

Restaurant Kohinoor (Rue Henri Garnier; mains Ar5000-15,000; 🕒 lunch & dinner) Serving great Indian food amid super-kitsch décor, this small place is popular with expats, tourists and vegetarians – it does a veggie special every day. Carnivores will dig the delicious curries, many with a coconut-milk base.

Marco Pizza (☎ 032 40 032 02; pizza from Ar10,000; 🕒 lunch & dinner) American Peace Corps volunteers frequent this pizza joint, where they sure know how to make a delicious pie. The cook and owner is a friendly Frenchman who

personally tends to each guest. You can wash your pizza down with a cocktail or try some homemade ice cream for dessert. It's a few kilometres from the centre.

ENTERTAINMENT

Mahajanga's main socialising spot is the sea-front promenade, La Corniche, which fills up at sunset with people out for a stroll.

Popular nightspots in town include **Jacaranda Nightclub** (admission Ar2500; 🕒 Thu-Sat) at La Piscine Hôtel and **La Ravinala Discothèque** (admission Ar2500) at Hôtel Le Ravinala.

Alliance Francaise (☎ 62 225 52; afmajunga@dots.mg; cnr La Corniche & Rue Victor Emmanuel) has a programme of films, exhibitions and concerts.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

Air Madagascar (☎ 62 224 21; Rue Victor Emmanuel) flies several times weekly to Nosy Be (Ar288,000) and Antananarivo (Ar200,000) and once a week to Diego Suarez (Ar330,000). There are also twice-weekly flights on **Air Austral** (☎ 62 223 91; Rue Georges V) between Mahajanga and Dzaoudzi (Mayotte) for about €350 one way.

Boat

The MSL ferry **Jean Pierre Calloch** (☎ 62 226 86), which leaves weekly for Nosy Be, and takes around 20 hours, is a far better alternative than the cargo ships that also sporadically go there; see p164 for more details. See opposite for details about ferry trips to Katsepy.

Bus & Taxi-Brousse

Transport between Mahajanga and Antananarivo by road is very easy – it's one of the best maintained highways in the country. To travel in luxury book online with **Transport Première Class** (firstclass@mel-wanadoo.mg), which runs comfortable buses between the two cities (Ar69,000, 10 hours). These sit just two people to a row – as opposed to the average five or six in the traditional taxi-brousse – and include a packed lunch in the price.

The taxi-brousse station is east of town along the two-lane Ave Philibert Tsiranana. Vehicles go daily to Antananarivo (Ar15,000, 12 to 15 hours, daily) and to Diego Suarez (from Ar50,000, 36 hours) at least three times per week. The road is rough – particularly the 218km between Antsohihy and Ambanja. Apart from Antsohihy, there are few good places to break the trip. If you do decide to

disembark en route, you may find yourself waiting several days for onward transport. For Nosy Be, you will need to change vehicles in Ambanja.

In the dry season it's possible to go as far south as Soalala, Besalamy and perhaps even Maintirano, but the trip is long and difficult, and transport is scarce. To continue further south towards Morondava, you will need to either take one of Air Madagascar's small twin-engine planes or backtrack via Antsirabe.

GETTING AROUND To/From the Airport

The airport is 6km northeast of town, and taxis cost Ar10,000 per trip, although you may be able to barter the price lower. You can also catch a taxi-brousse from the road outside the airport to the station in town for Ar1000.

Car

As in most places in Madagascar, the least expensive car hire means chartering a taxi (for day trips) or hiring a car from a local who also drives. Any of the upmarket hotels or tour companies in Mahajanga can arrange 4WD rental. Expect to pay around Ar150,000 per day for 4WD rentals and around Ar70,000 for a regular car. Petrol is extra.

Taxi

Shared taxis around town charge Ar800 per ride. The standard rate for charter taxis is Ar1500 per ride (Ar3000 to Mozea Akiba) in town.

AROUND MAHAJANGA

While Mahajanga may not be the most interesting place in the world, the areas to its north, south, east and west do have some fabulous attractions.

Travel outside Mahajanga can be tough. Many roads are in notoriously bad condition, or in the case of the fly-in resort area, totally nonexistent.

WEST OF MAHAJANGA

There are a few places to check out west of town. It is also one of the more easy-to-reach areas.

Katsepy

Katsepy (kah-tsepy) is a small, sleepy fishing village across the estuary from Mahajanga

MASONJOANY

In many areas of western and northern Madagascar, you will see women with their faces painted white. This facial mask, known as *masonjoany*, is supposed to protect skin from the sun, make it softer and suppler and remove blemishes. It's applied during the day and usually removed at night.

Masonjoany is made by grinding a branch from a tree of the same name against a stone with a small amount of water to form a paste. The *masonjoany* tradition persists in the Comoros, where the paste is made from ground sandalwood and coloured a startling canary yellow.

with a couple of swimmable beaches. It's also a good starting point for organising adventures to remote wildlife conservation areas southwest of Mahajanga.

It's worth a day visit solely to dine at **Chez Mme Chabaud** (☎ 62 233 27; r Ar25,000-50,000, mains from Ar7000; 🕒 lunch & dinner). The family-run restaurant and small hotel has been serving tasty dishes for three decades now. Although the original matron has passed away, her two daughters (who also run Mahajanga's respected Restaurant Chez Chabaud) are doing an excellent job of continuing their mother's dining legacy. If you want to spend the night, there are rooms. Tours can be arranged.

A ferry (Ar2250, one hour) runs twice daily from the ferry dock in Mahajanga to Katsepy. It departs at 7.30am and 3pm Monday to Saturday. From Katsepy, the ferry leaves at 9am and 4.30pm.

Mahavy-Kinkony Wetland Complex

The brand new Mahavy-Kinkony Wetland Complex, which only gained government protection status in 2007, is the result of several semiprotected areas merging into one. Now covering 268,236 hectares, it incorporates a diverse and fragile ecosystem consisting of marine bays, river and river delta, and 22 lakes, including Madagascar's second-largest, Lac Kinkony. The preserve is also home to dry deciduous and gallery forest, savannah, marshland, mangrove, caves and lots of wildlife. Decker's sifakas and mongoose lemur are just two of the nine species of lemur identified here. Nine must be Mahavy's lucky number – nine species of bat (one of which has yet to

be fully described and recorded) also call the place home.

The bats and lemurs are cool, but most people come here for the birds. There are 143 species, and the park is the only place where all of western Madagascar's species of waterfowl can be seen in the same location – on the shores of Lac Kinkony. If you're interested in watching birds mate, visit between July and September.

Sleeping options are still quite limited. The gateway town of **Namakia**, about 75km southwest of Mahajanga, and the village of **Mitsinjo**, nearby, both boast a few small hotels.

Kaeloper Jean Cesar (Mitsinjo; rAr10,000) has very basic rooms with shared facilities. Meals (Ar2500 to Ar5000) are available, but must be ordered in advance. Otherwise there are a few nearby *hotelys* serving Malagasy cuisine for cheap. Ask about camping in the fenced garden if you have your own equipment.

To get to the reserve you'll have to drive on a rougher-than-hell road (we're not even sure if you can call it a road) from Katsepy. It's probably easier not to attempt it in your own vehicle – join a tour out of Katsepy (see *Chez Mme Chaubaud*, p145) or Mahajanga (p141). It's a pretty drive at least; the rugged track leads past amazing *tsingy* scenery that keeps you mesmerised for hours.

EAST OF MAHAJANGA

To see the best attractions in this harsh region, you'll need to visit in a 4WD during the dry season. Otherwise access may be impossible.

Grottes d'Anjohibe

Some of the most impressive caverns in Madagascar are the remote Zohin' Andranoboka (Big Caves), which are also referred to as the Grottes d'Anjohibe (Anjohibe Caves), after a nearby village.

A series of subterranean rooms and galleries adorned with stalactites, stalagmites and other cave decorations (although many have been damaged by tourists) wind underneath two small hills. The most extensive section of cave stretches over 5km.

The route to the Grottes d'Anjohibe is passable only between April and October. With a 4WD vehicle, follow the main road southeast from Mahajanga for 10km, then turn northeast on a seasonal track, which leads 63km to the caves.

Sporadic taxis-brousses will go as far as Androhibe, about 15km before the caves, from

where you will need to walk. Guides can be arranged at Androhibe or at Anjohibe.

Cirque Rouge

The Cirque Rouge is one of western Madagascar's famous naturally bizarre sights. This amphitheatre of eroded rock is tinted in a rainbow hue of colours including red, pink, green and grey. A stand of *ravinala* palms surrounding a freshwater spring decorates one end. The best time to visit is from May to November.

A charter taxi will cost between Ar20,000 and Ar50,000 for the return trip from Mahajanga. Otherwise, it is a 45-minute walk from Ambrovy village via a ravine heading inland from the coast. If you want to ask your taxi to drop you off and pick you up later, two hours should be plenty of time.

Lac Mangatsa

The tiny Lac Mangatsa (also known as Lac Sacré) is about 50km northeast of Mahajanga, near the sea. Locals come here to give thanks or to petition the help of the Boina royal ancestors, reincarnated in the form of the immense *tilapia* fish (freshwater perch) that inhabit the lake's clear waters.

Strict *fady* prohibits fishing and bathing, but feeding the fish is allowed. The surrounding green belt harbours wildflowers and interesting lizards, chameleons and spiders, all of which are also protected by *fady*. The best time to visit is from May to October.

There is no public transport to the lake; you will need to walk or charter a taxi. From the Mahajanga airport, go west 1km along the sealed road, then turn right on to a rough track and continue for 11km northeast to the lake. Local *fady* are taken seriously here, and it's best to visit with a guide. Organised tours from Mahajanga cost about Ar100,000/55,000 per person for a day/half-day trip.

SOUTH OF MAHAJANGA

This area is home to Parc National d'Ankarafantsika, one of the more interesting natural attractions in the Mahajanga region.

Ambohitrombikely Fort

Southeast of Mahajanga, in the midst of a very dense forest, are the ruins of the 19th-century Ambohitrombikely fort, built by the Merina. The surrounding area is littered with cannons, cannonballs, cooking utensils and other implements.

To get here, take a taxi-brousse or private vehicle along the road towards Marovoay, and then arrange a guide locally. There is a small display about the fort at the Mozea Akiba in Mahajanga.

Parc National d'Ankarafantsika

Probably the most interesting trip out of Mahajanga is to Parc National d'Ankarafantsika (130,026 hectares), which contains the only fully protected example of dry western deciduous forest in Madagascar. At the park headquarters (in the area known as **Station Forestière d'Ampijoroa**) is a fascinating breeding centre for two threatened tortoise species, the flat-tailed tortoise (*Pyxis planicauda*) and the very rare ploughshare tortoise (*Geochelone yniphora*), as well as the only Malagasy endemic turtle, the *rere* (*Erymnochelys madagascariensis*). This centre is jointly run by the Malagasy government and the Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust.

ORIENTATION & INFORMATION

The reserve is 120km from Mahajanga and straddles the RN4. It takes two hours to reach by private vehicle, a bit longer by taxi-brousse.

SURVIVAL OF THE FITTEST

The ploughshare tortoise is currently being reintroduced to its native habitat around Soalala, southwest of Mahajanga. The tortoise's vulnerability comes in part from its unusual mating habits – in order to mate with the female, the male tortoise must become aroused by fighting with other males. Males fight by locking together the front of their shells, which are shaped like a plough, before trying to tip each other over. If no other males are available to fight with, the male is unable to copulate and thus numbers drop, leading to even fewer males and a further decline in population. More details on the ploughshare's bizarre sexual habits can be found in the book *The Aye-Aye and I* by Gerald Durrell, whose estate runs the Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust.

This trust operates **Project Angonaka** in the Parc National d'Ankarafantsika. It is one of Madagascar's most successful captive tortoise breeding projects. Although it took many years of trial and error in the sex-therapy department, the world's rarest tortoise is now breeding here so successfully that it's being reintroduced in greater numbers each year to the Baie de Baly area – the tortoises' home before the poachers killed them off. Sadly, the poaching problem hasn't been entirely eradicated. Even the breeding project isn't immune to theft – security was visibly strengthened after the theft of a large number of ploughshare tortoises a decade ago. Overall results have been positive, however, with more than 150 captive bred turtles released into lakes around d'Ankarafantsika. The Durrell project has had such success with the ploughshare that it's expanded its breeding programme to other turtles, including the rare, super-endangered big-headed/side-necked turtle living only in Madagascar's western lakes.

Park rangers can point you in the direction of the fenced-off area, but because of the extra security it takes to ensure the safety of these very rare species, the facility is not open to the public at this moment. You can get close enough, however, to glimpse the tortoises through a chain-link fence. Still if you're interested in seeing the Durrell project from afar, ask at the park headquarters.

The headquarters and visitor centre are in the town of **Ampijoroa**.

The driest time to visit d'Ankarafantsika is between May and November, but October and November can get very hot. Wildlife viewing is often better during the early part of the December-to-April wet season, when rainfall is still relatively light.

Park permits cost Ar10,000 for one day and Ar20,000 for three; these can be bought at the **Angap office** (☎ 62 226 56) in Mahajanga or at the Angap office in Ampijoroa. Guides (compulsory) can also be arranged at Ampijoroa. Many speak English, so ask. Guides charge Ar10,000 per group (up to five) for a walking tour. You should tip a little extra at the end if they've impressed you as the guides are usually quite poor and most are very well informed and enjoyable.

To appreciate the park fully you'll need at least two days.

WILDLIFE

Parc National d'Ankarafantsika is home to eight lemur species, many easily seen, including Coquerel's sifaka and the recently

discovered *Microcebus ravelobensis*. You're also likely to see brown lemurs and four nocturnal species: sportive, woolly, grey mouse and fat-tailed dwarf lemurs. More elusive is the rare mongoose lemur, which is observed almost exclusively here. The best chances of seeing one are at the onset of the wet season, when this lemur is active during the day. Other mammals include two species of tenrecs and the grey long-tailed mouse (*Macrotarsomys ingens*), which is found only in d'Ankarafantsika's higher elevations.

D'Ankarafantsika is also one of Madagascar's finest bird-watching venues, with 129 species recorded, including the rare Madagascar fish eagle and the raucous sickle-bill vanga. There are over 70 species of reptiles, including small iguanas, a rare species of leaf-tailed gecko (*Uroplatus guentheri*) and the rhinoceros chameleon (*Chamaeleo rhinoceros*) – the male sports a large bulblike proboscis.

Vegetation consists of low and scrubby deciduous forest with pockets of such dryland plants as aloe and *Pachypodium* (or 'elephant's foot') plus baobabs and orchids.

ACTIVITIES

Hiking is the name of the game here. In the last five years a lot of effort has been put into upgrading the trail system, which now includes six trails. Each offers opportunities to spot different types of animals, plants and birds. The Circuit Coquereli takes between 1½ and three hours and is a good choice for first-time visitors. The walk is easy, so you have plenty of energy to look for sifakas and brown lemurs.

If you're sleeping over, try a **night walk**. These usually depart around 7pm and take 1½ hours. The nocturnal walks cover easy terrain and are an essential highlight of a park visit. This is the only time you will have a chance to spot the mouse lemur. It is also easier to spot chameleons after dark.

SLEEPING & EATING

Options are getting better around here each year.

Gîte d'Ampijoroa (☎ 62 226 56; angampmjg@wanadoo.mg; r from Ar20,000), at the park headquarters, offers fairly small rooms with communal facilities. Mattresses are of good quality and you get a mosquito net. It also has a few slightly more upmarket bungalows, with private bathrooms, on the shores of Lac Ravelobe. Meals and drinks can be arranged with advance notice.

There is a big Angap-run **camp ground** in the park itself. Regular **tent sites** (Ar6000) include access to showers, eating shelters and water points. Tents can be rented for Ar10,000. If you want to camp without cramping your style, try renting a **luxury safari tent** (Ar25,000). It sits on a wooden platform and you can hire a mattress for an extra Ar4000.

The **Ambodimanga camp site** (tent platforms Ar4000, bungalows around Ar30,000), about 700m before the park entrance on your left-hand side coming from Mahajanga, is a community-run project with two bungalows and more than a dozen sheltered tent platforms, but you'll need your own tent.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

The entrance to the park is just off the RN4 about 114km southeast of Mahajanga and 455km from Antananarivo. To get here, catch a taxi-brousse towards Andranofasika. These depart Mahajanga early in the morning. Ask to be dropped off at Ampijoroa, 4km before Andranofasika, where you'll find the park headquarters and visitor centre.

NORTH OF MAHAJANGA

To really taste the 'wild west', you'll want to go north towards Nosy Be. Although the 642km stretch of road is slowly being improved thanks to some EU funding, it's still far from easy in parts.

The road is decent for the first 153km from Mahajanga to **Ambondromamy**, the town just past the Parc National d'Ankarafantsika, but starts to deteriorate rapidly afterwards. It is in bad shape by the time you hit **Boriziny** (Port Bergé), a popular overnight stop, especially with taxi-brousse. From Boriziny, a marginally better road winds north to **Antsohihy**, the main town with an airport, and a large missionary and educational presence. Allow anywhere from 20 to 35 hours between Mahajanga and Antsohihy.

If you've had enough of bumping around in a taxi-brousse, there are a few weekly flights connecting Antsohihy with Nosy Be, Antananarivo and Mahajanga; the Air Madagascar office is at Hôtel Biaina.

From Antsohihy north to **Ambanja** the road is rough and quite impassable in the wet season. It can take 10 to 15 hours or more to do the 218km stretch in the dry. Once in Ambanja, it's easy to find taxi-brousses to Ankify or Antsampano and catch the boats across to Nosy Be. Make sure to ask for a

speedboat; if you've just done this journey by taxi-brousse you'll deserve one.

Luckily you can rest up for the journey before it really even begins. The newest place to sleep in this area is also the coolest. Located just an hour north of Mahajanga on a pretty beach, **Antsanitia Beach Resort** (☎ 62 023 34; www.antsanitia.com; bungalows Ar80,000-120,000; 📍) already has a great reputation. Travellers are raving about the idyllic location and fantastic amenities. Check out the big blue pool surrounded by an open-air polished wood bar and excellent restaurant. The thatched bungalows are spacious with gorgeous wood-planked interiors and huge windows. The eco-responsible hotel also gets our thumbs up for the community enhancement projects it runs in the local village. To get here from Mahajanga, stop by Maderi Tour (p143) and arrange a transfer.

TSIRIBIHINA RIVER REGION

This region, between Antsirabe and Morondava, is home to the beautiful Tsiribihina River and spectacular Parc National des Tsingy de Bemaraha, a Unesco World Heritage site. Tours of the park are often combined with float trips down the Tsiribihina River. Most tour companies are based in Antsirabe; see the list on p97.

TSIRIBIHINA RIVER

Even though it's become Madagascar's favourite organised tour, drifting leisurely down the Tsiribihina (Tsi-ree-been) River in a traditional wooden pirogue remains a Zen experience. The air is silent except for the plunk of the local *piroguier's* paddle splashing against the dark curtain of water. Lemurs hop from treetop to treetop and fish swim alongside your boat. Floating down the 146km stretch of river allows you to experience Madagascar from a new perspective; you have access to areas so remote they can only be reached by boat. The scenery is beautiful and varied, and the route takes you through the striking Tsiribihina Gorge and past stretches of deciduous forest. Lunch is taken in the shade of giant trees on the river banks or next to cascading waterfalls, and camp is made each night on the flat white sandbanks in the shallows.

Bring along a hat and/or umbrella, sun cream, mosquito repellent, rain protection, plenty of drinking water, and a bird book if you're at all interested – the bird-watching along the river is fantastic and not many guides know all the species.

The trip begins in Miandrivazo and ends in the village of Belo-sur-Tsiribihina. The main time for river descents is from April to November. During the rainy season, nights are spent in villages rather than on the sandbanks.

Unfortunately the huge influx of tourists now making this tour means the river is no longer as pristine as it once was. Travellers have noted piles of only half-buried human faeces and trash at campgrounds, and the sheer number of boats running this stretch of river means you'll likely hit a pirogue traffic jam at some point. During peak tourist season (June to August) the whole three-day trip can feel a bit more like a water-park ride than a wilderness adventure. To avoid the bulk of crowds, visit during the shoulder season between wet and dry.

The trash and improper burial of human waste are real issues in this fragile ecosystem. The natural balance is being damaged by too much traffic already, and if travellers and guides don't do more to clean up their waste, the problem will only be exacerbated in the future. Take responsibility for yourself, don't litter and make sure to bury any waste in a hole at least 15cm deep and 30m from the river.

Tours

Miandrivazo and Antsirabe are generally the easiest places to organise river descents. A standard trip includes a guide and *piroguiers*, boats, food and water, tents, transport to and from the river, and the first and last night's hotel accommodation. Bargain hard, discuss your menu in advance and try to examine the camping equipment before you pay. Organised tours cost from €95 to €155 per person for a three-day trip with a group of four people. The price depends on whether your tour departs from Antsirabe (220km away) or Miandrivazo and the type of boat you take.

Many companies, particularly the ones in Antsirabe, combine the river descent with a visit to the Parc National des Tsingy de Bemaraha. These trips cost around €300 and last seven days.

SLEEPING IN STYLE: MADAGASCAR'S HOT NEW FLY-IN CRIBS

When you spend US\$3000 on an airline ticket to get to an exotic sounding island, it's not crazy to want to spend some of your trip staying somewhere that feels as luxurious and paradise-like as the name Madagascar suggests.

Now you can. For those of you tired of the crowded resort scene and looking for something truly off the radar – we're talking big cocktail-party bragging rights here – than Madagascar's fly-in resorts are your answer. The vibe out here is Robinson Crusoe meets the celebrity homes featured on MTV's *Cribs*.

Grab a map of the coast between Mahajanga and Nosy Be and you'll see just how empty the northern part of this indented coastline is. This is a land void of roads, of houses, of anything really ... except for three fly-in resorts. Each is unique, and about as close to paradise as one finds in Madagascar, especially if you are here on honeymoon (or any sort of romantic getaway).

Lodge des Terres Blanches (☎ 261 320 433 820; www.lodge terresblanches.com; r per person all-inclusive €110) This place is so remote only a bush pilot could find it, which is exactly what happened. Owned by former bush pilot Jacky Cauvin, this is the least posh and most reasonably priced of the three resorts. There are six basic, but comfortable, bungalows in a gorgeous location – a white beach backed by lush forests that are home to lemur and geckos. Pampering is kept to the minimum – guests all dine together at a big table in the evening (vegetarians won't like it here), electricity runs off a generator (but it's pretty reliable) and guests can help themselves to snacks and drinks at any time from the fridge. It's a simple place that's popular with sports fishermen and French holidaymakers. Jacky, who speaks perfect English, can arrange drop-offs for picnic hikes or boat trips to hidden coves and baobab-rich islands. He is also full of facts about Sakalava culture and Malagasy animals and plants. Get him talking after a couple of post-sunset tumbler of the delicious house rum. The lodge, about 100km north of Mahajanga, can be reached via plane (€170) or boat (€120) transfers.

Getting There & Away

Tour operators in Morondava or Antananarivo can arrange vehicle transfer to Miandrivazo (about Ar150,000 plus fuel one way from Antananarivo). Alternatively, you can fly or take a taxi-brousse.

MIANDRIVAZO

pop 16,026

Miandrivazo (Mee-an-dree-vaaz), which lies along the main road, Route Nationale 34 (RN34), between Antsirabe and Morondava, enjoys the dubious honour of being the hottest place in Madagascar. It also is the starting point for canoe tours down the Tsiribihina River to Belo-sur-Tsiribihina on the coast. Unless you're looking to join one of the popular pirogue trips, there's really no reason to stop in Miandrivazo.

Even though Miandrivazo is the starting point for the river trips, most tour operators are based in Antsirabe (see p97), 220km away in Central Madagascar along a good road. Tours booked out of Antsirabe include transport to Miandrivazo, which takes about three hours.

If you haven't pre-booked, or you're coming from a direction that makes it easier to go to straight to Miandrivazo, it's not hard to arrange river trips here. It may even work out cheaper – if you deal directly with the local pirogue owners you may be able to score a three-day trip for as little as Ar200,000 per person. The hotel listed here also runs excursions. These include meals and equipment, and usually a night at the hotel afterwards. Three-day trips cost between €90 and €155 per person, depending on the season and what type of boat you choose.

Chez La Reine Rasalimo (☎ 95 924 38; r & bungalows from Ar25,000) is the town's most upmarket sleeping choice, although it's still pretty inexpensive. It has cool and spacious bungalows and a restaurant serving good French and Malagasy food for about Ar10,000. It's on the edge of town with good hill views.

Air Madagascar flies weekly to Miandrivazo from Mahajanga (Ar240,000), Morondava (Ar110,000) and Antananarivo (Ar125,000).

There are daily taxis-brousses to Antananarivo (Ar20,000, 10 hours), Antsirabe (Ar10,000, six hours) and Morondava

La Maison de Marovas-Be (☎ 870 761 291 717; www.marovasabe.com; per person all-inclusive €150; 🚗)

The Moramba Bay location is not quite as pretty as the other two lodges: the surrounding forest has suffered serious slash-and-burn scars and the water isn't quite as clean and clear. The hotel, however, makes up for a lack of gorgeous surrounds with superb architecture and amenities. The resort is tastefully laid out with three suites and six pimped-out rooms, all with balconies. The swimming pool is a stunner. The owners are involved in reforestation projects for local forests, and guests can contribute by planting a tree. Air transfers cost another €300 per person return from Antananarivo or €150 from Mahajanga.

Anjajavy (in Paris ☎ 33 1 44 69 15 03; www.anjajavy.com; per person all-inclusive from €190; 🚗 🚚 🚛)

A world-class Relais Chateau property, Anjajavy is more than just a posh beach resort. It's also an environment saver. The resort leases 450-hectares of native dry deciduous forest (disappearing rapidly throughout Madagascar thanks to rampant clear-cutting by locals too poor to care) adjacent to it, and protects the land as a nature preserve. Take a walk for some amazing wildlife viewing. Coquerel's sifakas, brown lemurs and grey-headed lovebirds are just a few of the strange sounding and looking members of the animal and reptile kingdoms that call this place home. At times the forest grows right up and over the *tsingy* spires poking out of the rich earth.

Back at the resort, the 25 villas, made from polished rosewood, feature fine linens and plenty of space. The hotel is completely eco-friendly and also involved in enrichment projects benefiting the local village. Free activities offered to guests include guided hikes to a cave where you'll see the skulls of extinct lemurs embedded in the walls, and snorkelling trips to surrounding coral reefs. Or take lessons in water-skiing, windsurfing and catamaran sailing. If you'd rather relax, the big square pool sits flush to a strip of flawless white sand beyond which a deep blue ocean beckons. Massages are available for €20 per hour. A three-day minimum is required, but you'd be happier staying for five or seven. The resort is perfect for honeymooners. Anjajavy can only be reached by private plane. Air transfers are pricey at €475 return from Morondava.

(Ar15,000, eight hours). Road conditions are good. Taxis coming from Antananarivo reach Miandrivazo at night.

BELO-SUR-TSIRIBIHINA

pop 16,250

Belo-sur-Tsiribihina, lost in the marshes and mangroves of the Tsiribihina Delta, is a starting point for excursions to Parc National des Tsingy de Bemaraha. It's often referred to as 'Belo', and is not to be confused with the coastal village of Belo-sur-Mer, which lies further south.

In an endearing colonial-style building, **Hôtel du Menabe** (☎ 22 209 20; r Ar15,000) has some rather magnificent rooms with huge double beds – check out a few. Each comes with a fan and mozzie net. Located in the village centre, it also has a restaurant known for good zebu and tilapia filets.

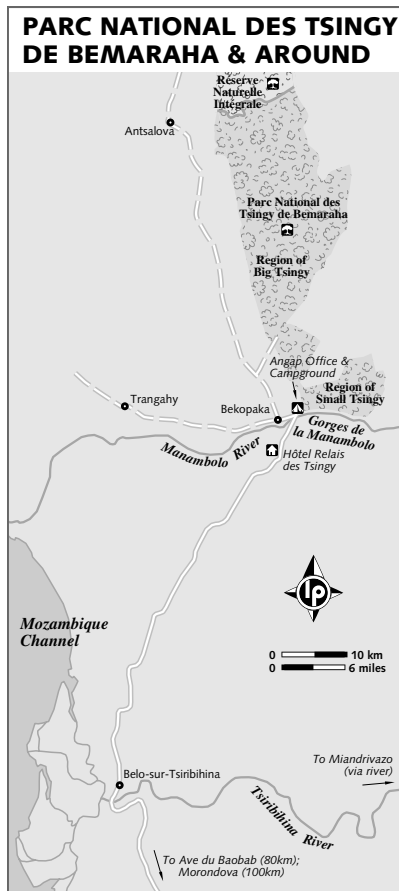
Mad Zebu (☎ 032 40 387 15; mains Ar6000-12,000), on the main road about 250m down from Hôtel du Menabe, is a very clean restaurant serving simple meals. Sit out on the terrace and watch village life sweep by. Air Madagascar has an agent here.

Camions-brousses (large trucks) run at least once daily between Belo-sur-Tsiribihina and Morondava (Ar10,000, four hours). Departures are usually in the morning from the ferry crossing outside Belo. In the wet season, the road gets muddy and the trip can take six hours; hitching a ride with a private 4WD is a better idea. *Camions-brousses* also go to Bekopaka (for Parc National des Tsingy de Bemaraha) daily in the dry season. The trip takes about five hours.

PARC NATIONAL DES TSINGY DE BEMARAHA

Parc National des Tsingy de Bemaraha is a Unesco World Heritage site and, at 66,630 hectares, is one of the largest and most spectacular protected areas in Madagascar.

The highlight is the jagged, limestone pinnacles, known as *tsingy*. Formed over centuries by the movement of wind and water, and often towering several hundred metres into the air, they are quite a sight. Walkways and bridges allow visitors to climb on top of the smaller areas of *tsingy* (known as *Petits Tsingy*), while ropes and climbing equipment are needed to negotiate the larger pinnacles.



The maze-like *tsingy* (known as Grands Tsingy) once gave shelter to the mysterious Vazimba, the first inhabitants of Madagascar, and the deep caves between them served as the venue for their ancient spiritual cults. Fragments of Vazimba pottery can still be found hidden in crevices between the rocks.

The park also has about 90 species of birds, eight species of reptiles, and 11 species of lemurs, including Decken's sifaka.

Information

Entry permits can be arranged at **Angap** (☎ 22 013 96; www.tsingy-madagascar.com; per day Ar25,000) at the park entrance on the north bank of the Manambolo River, near the ferry crossing at Bekopaka. Guides are compulsory and cost

between Ar6000 and Ar30,000 per group of up to five, depending on the length of the hike you choose. Many guides speak English, and can be arranged through Angap.

Activities & Tours

Much of the walking in the *tsingy* area of the park is pretty strenuous – gaps between the rocks are very narrow, bridges are high and the caves under the pinnacles are cramped and dark. Anyone with a low level of fitness or vertigo might find exploring the *tsingy* difficult.

The area can only be visited between April and November; for much of the year rain makes it inaccessible. For both the Petits Tsingy and Grands Tsingy, bring good shoes, plenty of water and a torch for the numerous caves you'll be exploring. When in the park, remember that it's *fady* to smoke, go to the toilet outside designated areas, or point at the *tsingy* with your finger outstretched.

The Petits Tsingy, in the southern end of the park near the village of Bekopaka, is the most accessible section of the park. The much larger Grands Tsingy to the north is more difficult to reach, but more impressive. Near the park office are numerous walks including the Andadoany and Ankeligoa circuits, which both lead to the Petits Tsingy. Visits to Grands Tsingy are generally done partially by way of car. If you don't have a car, one possibility is to walk from Bekopaka north towards Grands Tsingy, set up camp, explore the area (with a guide from Bekopaka), and then walk back to Bekopaka the next day.

Given the difficulties of access, most travelers visit des Tsingy de Bemaraha as part of an organised tour. This way your transport is provided, and tours can be tailored to your interest and fitness level. Organised park tours usually last three days, but can go longer if you want to spend time around Grands Tsingy. Trips cost between €75 and €150 and start and finish in Belo-sur-Tsiribihina or Morondava.

Sleeping & Eating

Angap camping ground (tent pitch Ar2500) This camp site, with showers and toilets, is near the park office.

Hôtel Relais des Tsingy (☎ 95 523 18; bungalows Ar60,000-82,000; ☹ mid-Apr–mid-Nov) The most up-market option around the park, it has big, round bungalows made from natural mate-

rials. The hotel is about 2km from the ferry crossing. Half-board (breakfast and dinner) is compulsory and costs Ar25,000 per person.

Getting There & Away

The park entrance, camp site and Petits Tsingy section are on the north side of the Manambolo River ferry crossing near Bekopaka, about 80km of very rough road north of Belo-sur-Tsiribihina. The Grands Tsingy section lies 20km further north. Reaching the park on your own is possible, but an organised tour is much easier.

In the dry season, there are *camions-brouses* three times a week from Morondava (Ar20,000, two days) to the Manambolo River ferry crossing via Belo-sur-Tsiribihina. Organised tours include 4WD transport to the park entrance. From the park entrance, the main way to reach the Grands Tsingy is by 4WD. It's a hot four-hour walk, so bring enough water if you hike it. Rates for a chartered 4WD from Morondava to the park usually average about Ar150,000 to Ar200,000 per day.

MORONDAVA

pop 31,500

Morondava is a laid-back seaside town with sandy streets and gently decaying clapboard houses. Many people come here just to see the magnificent Avenue du Baobab right outside town. The giant trees, some a thousand years old, stand regal guard in an almost straight line along a rich earthen path that's a joy to walk down. Morondava is also a good place to organise a visit to Parc National des Tsingy de Bemaraha further north.

Tranquil mangrove swamps, which can be explored by pirogue, are found on Morondava's southern edge. There is good birding in here, including opportunities to observe kingfishers, egrets and other birds. There are decent beaches to the south and north, although the city's beachfront has been pretty much eroded away.

The area around Morondava was once the epicentre of the Sakalava kingdom, and home to burial grounds with erotically carved tombs for which the tribe is famous. Sadly, nearly all the sacred tombs have been destroyed. They were pillaged to the point of destruction (see the boxed text on p143 for more) decades ago.

ORIENTATION

The main town, with the market, shops and hotels, stretches along Rue de L'Indépendance and Rue Principale. To the southwest is the peninsula of Nosy Kely, with numerous bungalows and beach resorts. It's bordered to the west by the sea and the east by a mangrove swamp. To reach Nosy Kely, follow Rue de L'Indépendance to its terminus and then go left.

INFORMATION

The Bank of Africa, just south of the main road on the eastern edge of town, and the BFV-SG, at the western edge of town just off the beach road, are just two of many banks that change money and have ATMs.

For internet access check out **Cybercenter** (per min Ar100; ☹ Mon-Sat) on the end of Rue Principale, facing the Mada Bar.

BEACHES

The beach at Nosy Kely is fairly attractive, although it has also suffered severe erosion over the last decade. Check out the southern end for the most sand. Strong currents prevent swimming in many areas, and views are marred by concrete pilings.

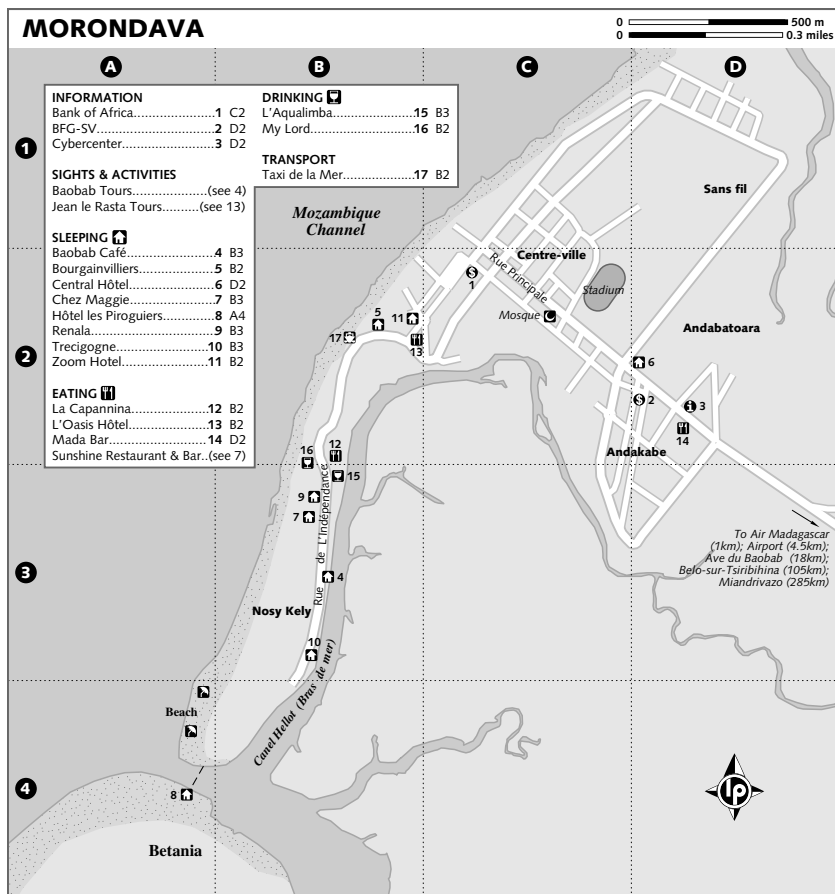
Much better is quiet Betania beach at the southern end of the peninsula. There is now one place to stay, but even if you don't, it makes a good day trip. To get to the beach arrange transport with a pirogue captain (about Ar1500).

TOURS

The following places can organise excursions to Belo-sur-Mer, Parc National des Tsingy de Bemaraha, Tsiribihina River and Réserve Forestière de Kirindy, or through the mangrove swamps, as well as deep-sea fishing trips and diving excursions.

Baobab Tours (☎ 95 520 12; Baobab Café) This respected, upmarket, agency specialises in deep-sea fishing and diving trips; it also organises reliable trips to Parc National des Tsingy de Bemaraha, Belo-sur-Mer and boat trips up and down the coast.

Chez Maggie (La Masandro; ☎ 95 523 47; www.chezmaggie.com) This American-owned hotel doubles as a tour company running excursions to the Avenue du Baobab, Réserve Forestière de Kirindy, *tsingy* and national parks. It also owns a 42ft catamaran for charter, and does sea transfers to Belo and Tolihara. Chez Maggie is an agent for Remote Rivers (www.remoteriver.com), which runs sustainable-travel-focused trips down the little-explored Mangoky, Mahavavy and Manambolo Rivers.



Jean le Rasta Tours (☎ 95 527 81, 032 04 931 60; L'Oasis Hôtel) Charismatic Jean le Rasta, or Rasta Jean, speaks English, is reliable and owns a 4WD. He runs, or organises, a range of tours including to Parc National des Tsingy de Bemaraha and Réserve Forestière de Kirindy, and transfers to Belo-sur-Mer or further south down the coast. Look for him at the grungy backpacker dive, L'Oasis.

SLEEPING

There are several hotels in the centre of town, but most travellers opt for the beach at Nosy Kely. Many places offer discounts in the low season.

Town

Central Hôtel (☎ 95 520 81; r incl breakfast from Ar12,000) An old-school cheapie, Central is right on the

main road. The good-value, clean and cool rooms on the 2nd floor come with fans and hot showers. There is no restaurant.

Zoom Hotel (☎ 95 920 59; r from Ar15,000; 📶) Rooms at this new place are clean, good value and ensuite – two even have air-con. It is near the popular L'Oasis, which is known for its good eating, drinking and tours.

Beach

Almost all the beachfront places have restaurants. The following is just a selection of what's on offer.

Trecigogne (☎ 95 520 69; trecigogne@dts.mg; r Ar10,000-25,000, mains from Ar5000) A very pretty guesthouse right at the end of Nosy Kely peninsula, with a veranda overlooking the mangrove canal. The

newly built wooden rooms have very clean bathrooms. The restaurant serves good food and tours are arranged.

Bougainvilliers (☎ 95 521 63; bol_nd@yahoo.fr; r Ar25,000-65,000) This place has a range of rooms at various prices. The more expensive ones come with ensuites, air-con and hot water. Manager Francois Vahiko is the head of the Morondava Guide Association and provides assistance in arranging tours. The restaurant serves great food.

Hôtel les Piroguiers (☎ 95 526 19; piroguiers@yahoo.fr; bungalows from Ar30,000) Across the river on Betania beach, which is much prettier than Nosy Kely, this is a delightful find. The bungalows are simple but clean, and sit on stilts. The atmosphere is that of a tranquil fishing village with a twist – this village is famous for its very large, sun-loving pigs. To reach the hotel, take a pirogue taxi or motorboat.

Renala (Au Sable d'Or; ☎ 95 520 89; r & bungalows from Ar65,000; 📶) This well-maintained place offers a choice between bungalows and hotel rooms – the latter are the cheapest air-con rooms in the area. The 13 solid-wood bungalows come with tiled floors and telephones. There's an attractive two-storey restaurant. It's on the beach at Nosy Kely.

Chez Maggie (La Masandro; ☎ 95 523 47; www.chezmaggie.com; r Ar75,000-100,000; mains Ar17,000; 📶) The blue-and-white painted two-storey bungalows here are stylishly decorated and have their own sitting area. Owned by a friendly American named Gary, it's well organised and up to Western standards. Gary loves to chat, which makes it a good choice for solo travellers, or anyone starved for English conversation. There is a great restaurant, a small pool and beachfront location. Organised excursions are available.

Baobab Café (☎ 95 520 12; www.baobab.mg; r from Ar80,000, mains Ar12,000-28,000; 📶 📺) Morondava's most upmarket option has very smart and stylish rooms with fridge and TV. Twin rooms have two double beds, and there's a pool, snooker table and game room and a tour agency for excursions and fishing trips. It's on the river on the east side of Nosy Kely – don't get a room overlooking the river, as these can be smelly.

EATING & DRINKING

Apart from the hotel restaurants, there are numerous small Malagasy *hotelys* along the main road and near the beach. Cheap eats and a good atmosphere can be had at Bar le Jamaica on the beach and Drugstore Restaurant in town.

Mada Bar (mains Ar2000-15,000; 🍷 lunch & dinner) Fresh fruit juice, excellent ice creams and pizzas are all the specialities at this little place with a full menu and relaxed ambiance. It's also great at multitasking – kayaks and motorbikes are available for rent.

L'Oasis Hôtel (☎ 95 522 22; Rte de Batalege; mains Ar5000-12,000) Presided over by an affable local guy called Jean le Rasta, or Rasta Jean, the bar and restaurant at this hotel is definitely engaging. There is live music, including drums and reggae performed by Rasta Jean and other local musicians. The food is great.

La Capannina (☎ 95 520 69; mains from Ar8000; 🍷 lunch & dinner Thu-Tue) Run by an Italian and Malagasy couple, this place serves yummy, and consistently reliable, Italian food – think lots of pastas and different sauces. Sit outside on the attractive terrace; look for La Capannini on the beach road.

our pick Sunshine Restaurant & Bar (☎ 95 523 47; Chez Maggie; breakfast Ar9000, mains Ar17,000; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Chez Maggie's thatched-roof restaurant, with fabulous sunset views of the Mozambique Channel, offers a rotating daily menu of fresh-caught fish and seafood, delicious cheese and lots of fresh fruits and veggies. Barbecue jumbo shrimp, and anything with crab, are the house specialities. The bar has a wide selection of scotch, whiskey and delicious homemade coco rum. It's a good place to settle in for a night of drinking.

Other happening spots to imbibe come dark include the bar at L'Oasis Hôtel; **L'Aqualimba**, which is a big open venue that sometimes hosts live shows; and the divey disco with our all-time favourite bar name, **My Lord** (🍷 Tue-Sun).

GETTING THERE & AROUND

Taxis between town and the airport cost Ar10,000, while shared taxis in town cost Ar1500.

Air

Air Madagascar flies several times weekly between Morondava and Antananarivo (Ar225,000), Toliara (Ar200,000) and Morombe (Ar180,000). The Air Madagascar office is on the road to the airport.

Boat

Morondava is connected with the villages to the south by pirogues. Wooden cargo boats (without engines) depart weekly for

Morombe. Facilities on most boats are very basic; bring sun protection and all the food and water you will need.

The Taxi de la Mer (Ar50,000, 2½ hours) is a newish ferry running twice a week between Morondava and Belo-Sur-Mer.

Taxi-Brousse

Morondava is 700km from Antananarivo, but the road is in quite bad condition. Driving takes between 12 and 17 hours.

The tarmac is in fairly good shape until you reach Miandrivazo, when it becomes a tough-as-nails, grating 120km drive to Malaimbandy that can take six hours alone. The final bit to Antananarivo is also in very poor condition, although you won't mind so much as the scenery is so gorgeous. Rice paddies are framed by huge baobabs, and if you arrive in Antananarivo in early morning, the soft light turning the Mediterranean-style hill-town's buildings a glowing golden, is heavenly. You can rent a car and driver in Morondava for the trip – ask around at the hotels and taxi-brousse stands.

Taking a taxi-brousse to Antananarivo (Ar30,000, 18 hours) is a cheaper, although almost unbearably uncomfortable option, due to the length of the trip. Still these are reliable, leaving Morondava around noon and arriving in Antananarivo around 6am the next morning. Taxis-brousses also run to Morondava and Antsirabe (via Miandrivazo); they take about 15 hours and cost Ar20,000. Vehicles depart daily between about noon and 2pm, arriving in Antsirabe early the next morning.

To Toliara (Ar35,000) there are *camions-brousses* three times weekly during the dry season, departing Morondava around noon and taking two days along a rough road. Vehicles to Belo-sur-Tsiribihina depart once or twice every morning (Ar10,000, five hours).

AROUND MORONDAVA

AVENUE DU BAOBAB

One of the most photographed spots in Madagascar is the avenue of *Adansonia grandidieri baobabs* on either side of the road about 15km north of Morondava, along the road to Belo-sur-Tsiribihina. The best times to visit are at sunset and sunrise, when the colours of the trees change and the long shadows are most pronounced. The trees here are as old as one thousand years; it's the kind of awesome sight

that stays planted pleasantly in your memory for a lifetime.

A great way to explore Avenue du Baobab is via a guided quad-bike tour with **Loc' Découverte** (☎ 032 04 70 619; tours Ar150,000), based in Morondava. A taxi from town costs about Ar30,000 return.

RÉSERVE FORESTIÈRE DE KIRINDY

The Réserve Forestière de Kirindy, 60km northeast of Morondava, covers about 12,500 hectares and was established in the late 1970s as an experiment in sustainable logging and forest management. Today it's still mostly visited by researchers, but travellers who spend a few days here could be rewarded with a glimpse of the *fosa* (*Cryptoprocta felix*). Madagascar's largest predator – not to be confused with the fossa – is an elusive puma-like creature. The best time to spot a *fosa* is in October. If you don't get to see the *fosa*, you might be lucky enough to see one of Madagascar's most charming rodents, the giant jumping rat.

Information

Entry permits to the reserve cost Ar25,000, paid at the entrance. There are no official guides, but a few *pisteurs* (untrained guides who mostly speak Malagasy only) are available just to show the way to the best sites for viewing wildlife. A list of the trees you'll see en route is available at the park entrance.

Wildlife

In addition to the *fosa*, the reserve supports six species of lemurs, mainly nocturnal, including the fat-tailed lemur and the tiny mouse lemur (*Microcebus myoxinus*), believed to be the world's smallest primate. There are also 45 bird species and 32 reptile species, including the rare Madagascan flat-tailed tortoise (*Pyxis planicauda*). Other creatures include the giant jumping rat, and several tenrec and mongoose species. Keep in mind that some animals hibernate during the winter months of June to August. For the best chance of seeing the *fosa*, a stay of at least three nights is needed.

Sleeping & Eating

Choose from camping (Ar10,000), dorms (Ar15,000) or bungalows (Ar20,000 to Ar40,000). All are located at the reserve's headquarters, where you'll also find a small restaurant serving simple meals and cold beer.

There are 12 bungalows, but the four new ones are most comfortable, with shared flush toilets (as opposed to long-drops). Dorm beds come with mozzie nets, sheets and blankets. Electricity can be sporadic. Bring a good torch.

Getting There & Away

Kirindy is about 60km northeast of Morondava, signposted off the Belo-sur-Tsiribihina road. The reserve can be easily reached by taxi-brousse; ask drivers on the route between Morondava and Belo-sur-Tsiribihina to let you off at the entrance to the road down to the reserve. From the main road, it's a 5km walk to the entrance.

PARC NATIONAL KIRINDY MITE & RÉSERVE SPÉCIALE D'ANDRANOMENA

Not to be confused with the much more popular Réserve Forestière de Kirindy, the new **Parc National Kirindy Mite** (per day Ar10,000) lets you really get off the beaten track. Even though it's located just 34km south of Morondava, this ultra-wild and isolated park saw only 70 visitors in 2006! One hurdle to visiting is the complete lack of infrastructure – to stay you need to be a totally self-sufficient camper. Keen birders will dig this place. There are numerous opportunities to spot rare birds on a littoral lake and nearby sand dunes.

Réserve Spéciale d'Andranomena is around 30km to the northeast of the Morondava, and also very remote with no visitor facilities. There is excellent bird-watching on a seasonal (wet) lake close to many impressive baobabs, and you can camp.

At the moment both these parks are really only a destination for keen naturalists, but if you're interested in visiting, drop into the very helpful **Angap office** (☎ 95 524 20) in Morondava.

BELO-SUR-MER

Belo-sur-Mer is an attractive seaside village on the edge of a small but picturesque lagoon.

The village is a regional ship-building centre and huge cargo vessels are still constructed on the beach in the same manner they were made two centuries ago.

Belo-Sur-Mer's star attraction is a string of seven gorgeous **coral-fringed islands**, some semi-submerged, off its coast. They're little known and seldom visited; you can live the whole Robinson Crusoe smash-a-coconut-with-your-bare-hands fantasy on a couple of these islands for a day. Diving is particularly good thanks to the proximity of a deep passage through the Canal de Mozambique – you get to see some really big fish, deep-water critters like the octopus and even sea turtles.

To reach the islands, charter a pirogue for a day. Day trips cost around Ar65,000 if you barter, or check out the offerings at L'Écolodge du Menabe's dive school. For certified divers, the two-dive deal for Ar130,000 (as opposed to one dive at Ar100,000) is the best value. Novices can be baptised by sea – introductory dives cost Ar110,000. Those just wishing to snorkel can tag along for about half-price.

In addition to its dive school, **L'Écolodge du Menabe** (☎ 871 763 963 816; www.menabelo.com; r from Ar35,000, set dinner Ar25,000) is also one of the village's best hotels. It is well managed and has eight rooms in a peaceful garden. The restaurant serves good food, but is restrictive with an expensive fixed three-course menu.

Access to Belo-sur-Mer is by 4WD (from May to November) or boat. There are taxis-brousses between Belo-sur-Mer and Morondava, but the route is sometimes blocked. It's also possible to arrange transport with local pirogue captains. Allow plenty of time – the trip often takes more than a day – and bring all the water and food you may need. It is much easier to arrange a motorboat transfer with one of the hotels or tour operators in Morondava (p153). These do the trip in around 2½ hours, which makes it more worthwhile.

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