

dive, cruise, explore, escape

# CUTTING LOOSE



**FISHY BUSINESS**  
Madagascar is home  
to giant schools of  
those marine missiles,  
barracuda

## DECADENT DIVING IN MADAGASCAR

**MADAGASCAR IS RECOGNISED TO BE AN ECOTOURISTS' UTOPIA. LESS WELL KNOWN, HOWEVER, IS WHAT CAN BE FOUND WHEN YOU DIVE A LITTLE DEEPER OFFSHORE**

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VIBRANT MADAGASCAR HAS FLITTED in and out of my thoughts for some time now. Perhaps I've watched too many TV documentaries or the kids' movie once too often. Either way, I suspect I don't fantasise alone. Since bolting from Africa 135 million years ago and later Asia, around 88 million years ago, Madagascar has been left to its own evolutionary devices. In its isolation, a cauldron of biodiversity has simmered, conjuring up such species as the giraffe-necked weevil, leaf-nosed snake, Parson's chameleon and Helmet Vanga. Like 80 percent of the animals found in Madagascar, these creatures exist nowhere else. While the pin-up species of Malagasy tourism, such as cutesy lemurs and colour-shifting chameleons, may grab the headlines, the animals that I was most interested in come out of the blue – the multicoloured fingers of Madagascar's coral reefs have long been beckoning.

A less well-known dive destination than neighbouring Mozambique, these waters rarely drop below 25 degrees and offer good year-round visibility. The opportunity exists to see dolphins, whales, sharks and manta rays, along with a wide array of macro life. In which case, why does Madagascar remain off our nautical radar? In order to answer this question, I was off to Madagascar.

The island of Nosy Be, meaning 'big island' in Malagasy, is the country's most popular tourist haunt. Located eight kilometres off its northwestern coast, this volcanic island is a springboard to Madagascar's best dive sites. Due to their proximity to Nosy Be, the best way of exploring these sites is by dive live-aboard. The normal schedule of a live-aboard goes something like this: wake, eat breakfast, dive, go fishing, dive, have siesta, eat fresh fish, dive, eat more delicious morsels, drink cocktails, sleep happily. They're shamelessly indulgent, but I love them.

I arrived with my girlfriend Gemma Catlin and documentary maker Chris Scarffe in tow, for two live-aboards, one north, the other south. Our first trip was to the **Mitsio Archipelago**, a series of silver basalt islands some 60 kilometres north of Nosy Be. Our vehicle, home and dive centre for the week was *Gecko*, an 11-metre catamaran owned and operated by the impeccable Harriet Joao of MadagasCat Charters and Travel. 'It's a raw experience, diving the Mitsios,' Jacques Viera, our dive guide and dive manager of Sakatia Lodge, explained. 'You'll hardly see any other divers or boats during the trip, so if you like empty seas yet still want to see big fish, we should have a good trip.'

Our first couple of days were spent diving the **Four Brothers**. Nesting seabirds including frigatebirds and gannets were the primary inhabitants of these grand islands. Here we were treated to large schools of game fish: toothy barracuda torpedoed past us, along with some sizeable (delicious looking) kingfish. The walls were dashed with large black coral trees, sea fans and whip coral. Tragically malproportioned puffer fish flapped their little fins in successful attempts to avoid my lens. And as hawksbill turtles nonchalantly chowed the unappetising-looking coral, emperor angelfish lit up the reef. So far, so good.

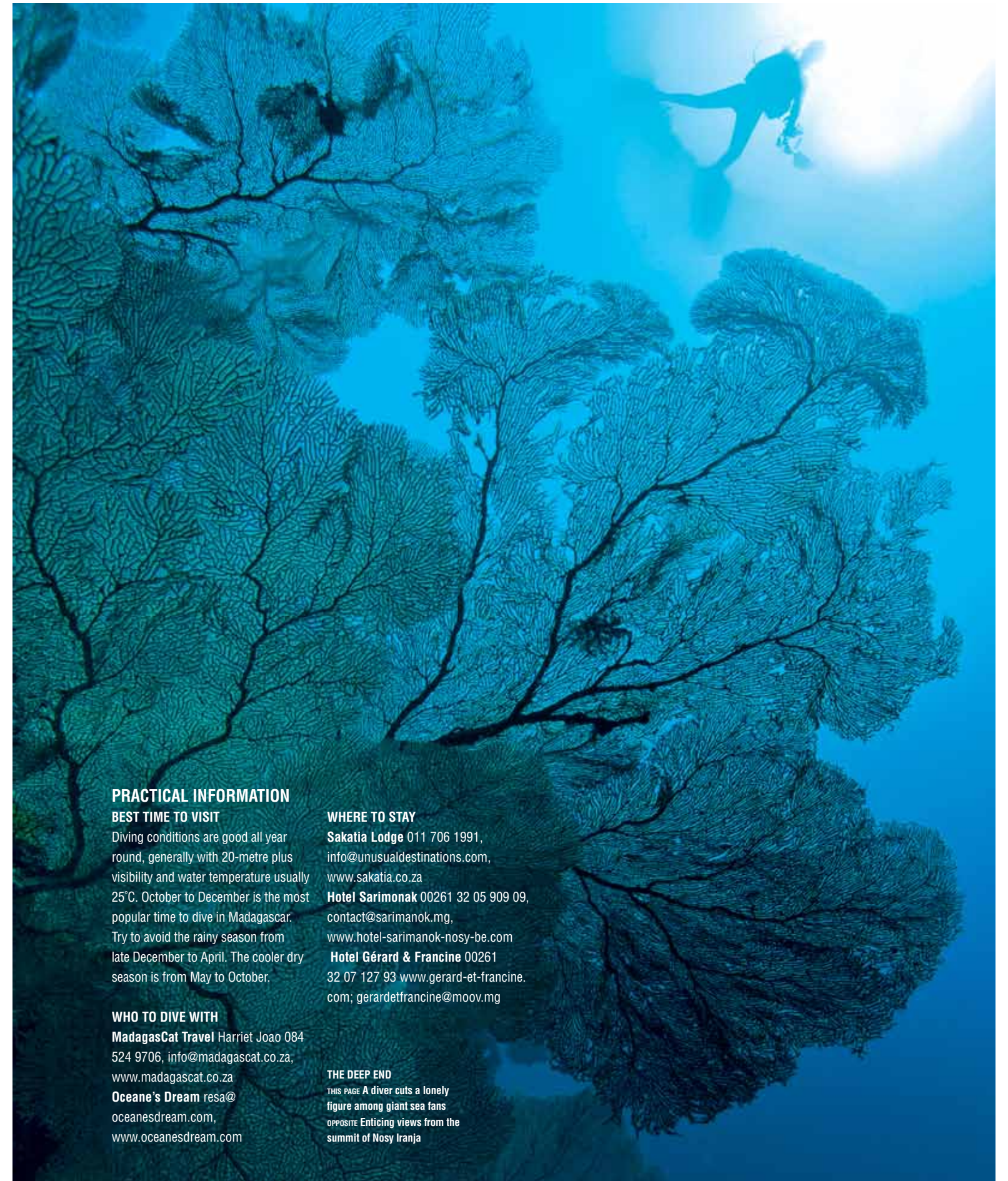
My favourite dive in the Mitsios, however, was at the shallow site, the childishly giggle-inducing **Two Tits**. This abstract painting of a dive site plied us with a veritable fishy feast in crystal-clear conditions. It reminded me of diving in Asia's pregnant waters, as a smorgasbord of tropical fish smeared neon trails over the reef.

Between dives we were treated to some serious humpback whale action, as a succession of mothers and calves breached in front of *Gecko*. When they concluded their show, I slipped into the water while a pod of around 40 bottlenose dolphins powered past, their movements so fluid, so majestic that they could have been generated by special effects experts.

The dive site **Manta Reef** lived up to its name, as a four-metre manta ray, with flaps of her giant wings, circled the cleaning station where obliging fish nibbled parasites off her. And then from beauty to the beast. At the site **Seven Little Sharks**, we bumped into a giant aesthetically challenged humphead parrotfish, which looked like the love child of a parrotfish and John Merrick, the Elephant Man. Finally, the nearby wreck at Mahavelana provided a much-needed breather from all of the animal action.

We departed *Gecko* with bodies sated, eyes gleaming. It was time for a week on land before our next live-aboard to the southerly **Radames Islands**. We made our way to Ambatoloaka village, the main tourist haunt in Nosy Be. Ambatoloaka consists of a dense strip of restaurants and bars, offering decent options for accommodation and dining. An idyllic, palm-fringed beach was peppered with traditional boats, dive vessels and luxury catamarans. While the ubiquitous tourist tat was peddled on the beach, refreshingly, sellers were always polite and never pushy. English is not spoken widely in Nosy Be, but a good deal of gesticulating and 's'il vous plait' or 'non mercis' go a long way.

Our trip to Madagascar's most decorated destination for scuba junkies was with dive centre Oceane's Dream. But before this, manager Paul Bergonier, scuba's Gerard Depardieu, took us to dive at **Tanikely Marine Reserve**. Lying just a few kilometres' boat ride away, Nosy Tanikely is the most popular day trip out of Nosy Be and is lined with a beautiful beach (if you can block out the splattering of



## PRACTICAL INFORMATION

### BEST TIME TO VISIT

Diving conditions are good all year round, generally with 20-metre plus visibility and water temperature usually 25°C. October to December is the most popular time to dive in Madagascar. Try to avoid the rainy season from late December to April. The cooler dry season is from May to October.

### WHO TO DIVE WITH

**MadagasCat Travel** Harriet Joao 084 524 9706, info@madagascat.co.za, www.madagascat.co.za  
**Oceane's Dream** resa@oceansdream.com, www.oceansdream.com

### WHERE TO STAY

**Sakatia Lodge** 011 706 1991, info@unusualdestinations.com, www.sakatia.co.za  
**Hotel Sarimonak** 00261 32 05 909 09, contact@sarimanok.mg, www.hotel-sarimanok-nosy-be.com  
**Hotel Gérard & Francine** 00261 32 07 127 93 www.gerard-et-francine.com; gerardetfrancine@moov.mg

### THE DEEP END

THIS PAGE A diver cuts a lonely figure among giant sea fans  
 OPPOSITE Enticing views from the summit of Nosy Iranja

## MALAGASY MAGIC

THIS PICTURE Locals use outrigger sailing canoes for fishing  
 RIGHT Lionfish, with their bold nature, make for excellent photographic subjects



*The 'eighth continent' had surpassed my expectations. Madagascar is as magical and beguiling a place as you could wish to visit*

silver-haired French men in tight Speedos). Well policed by diligent park rangers, marine life flourishes here, making it a great shallow dive and snorkelling site. Members of this giant marine ecosystem inhabited, ate and darted through a coral buffet of mushrooms, sausages and cauliflower, all served up on giant polyp plates.

Having had our fill of 'nice' diving, we prepared ourselves for our live-aboard on *Lady Corsica*, a 13-metre catamaran. Our dive guide for this trip was Donatien Aubey, an über-chilled and likeable French dude. Much like the Mitsios, The Radames is renowned for hardcore, deep diving. The cutesy marine life of Tanikely would be a distant dream. It is also home to the notorious **Greg's Wall**, perhaps Madagascar's best-known dive site. Devastatingly, a mask mix-up ensured my dive was spent in foggy ignorance. I saw what I believed to be our first lionfish of the trip, dramatically silhouetted among the giant fans. Though for all I knew it could have been Aslan himself. Chris and Gemma's assurances that the site was topographically breathtaking offered scant consolation.

**Three Rocks** was a wall dive similar to Greg's Wall, replete with sea fans. It supplied me with my favourite photo of the trip: a diver silhouetted among the skeletal fans. This image, to me, epitomised the deep diving in Madagascar, the feeling of isolation and insignificance among dramatic coral formations

Our evening was spent at Baramahamay, a small fishing village where traditional boats are produced. Baramahamay is also famous for its mangrove crabs – which, cooked in a rich curry sauce, didn't disappoint – and lemurs. The next morning we dived **South Canyon**. This contained a greater diversity of fish than any other site we'd seen in Madagascar: some big conked unicornfish, a lippy potato bass, sleek mobulas, shimmering scribbled filefish, stealthlike dog-tooth tuna, perma-surprised bigeye trevally, more unidentified groupers, muscular Spanish mackerel, thousands of charming garden eels, a bitey clown trigger fish. I think you get the idea.



Somehow, our day was to get even better: cue **Nosy Iranja**. Cue heaven. Connected by a two-kilometre spit, Nosy Iranja consists of two islands. One is privately owned, the other contains a boutique lodge, small village and some bungalows. Visitors can stay with the locals for around R90 a night; hotel rooms are rather pricier. After hiking to the island's lighthouse, we stopped to take in the magnificent views. Lying before us were multiple hues of green that sprouted out of the deep red earth. Layers of fluffy white cloud, cast over the shimmering turquoise waters, hung in a cobalt blue sky. I could have ditched my bag, speared fish for dinner and gone feral in the village of Nosy Iranja. Sadly our packed schedule meant a couple of hours had to suffice. Anyway, there was more diving to be done.

As we surfaced from our final dive and slipped our fins off, a pod of dolphins surrounded *Lady Corsica*. It must have been a school day: calves, barely two months old, propelled themselves out of the water and performed a few passable flips, before belly flopping back into the water. Their efforts offered a heart-warming finale to a packed and unique dive adventure.

As we sailed back to Nosy Be contentedly slurping Malagasy vanilla rum and coconut milk cocktails, we reflected upon our trip. The 'eighth continent' had surpassed my expectations. Madagascar is as magical and beguiling a place as you could wish to visit. Thankfully, it is still relatively untouched by tourism's marauding fingers. Those who brave the distance, and eye-watering airfares, will be welcomed by wonderfully hospitable people. The service everywhere is exceptional, the food varied and tasty. Madagascar is a breathtaking arena for its original cast of plant and animal life. After all, theatrical wildlife is nothing without the appropriate amphitheatre to parade its vivid scales and vibrant feathers.

Madagascar has long been known as either 'The Red Island' for its red laterite earth or 'The Green Island' for its plant life. Due to the richness of these waters, 'The Blue Island' would be just as fitting.