



ALL PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAVID ROGERS

FLOATING IN PARADISE

David Rogers turns his back on luxurious travel and boards a traditional dhow with his wife, his young sons and two other families for a week of coastal exploration in Madagascar.

A year before the FIFA World Cup even kicked off in our backyard, our family was already making plans to escape the vuvuzelas and the Cape Town winter. After speaking to friends who rated it as 'the best holiday of their lives', we booked our berths on a dhow that would take us to Nosy Be – the largest island of an archipelago off the northwestern tip of Madagascar. The literature told us the trip was not for everyone, and I must confess we had our doubts. Our two boys, aged five and six, are extremely active (read rowdy) and putting them onto a traditional dhow with strangers sounded like the makings for a perfect storm.

My partner, Jen, has done more than her fair share of active things in her time, but how would she cope with bucket showers and pillows that we heard were like lumps of coral rag. Then there were the politics of it all. Madagascar has had 16 coups in 40 years and the new leader – a 34-year-old ex-DJ from Antananarivo – has not been playing happy democratic tunes. The country was in crisis, we were told. And in addition to tummy bugs, sand fleas and malaria, we were warned of pickpockets and crime.

Our fears were washed away, as they so often are, by the first experience on the island. We were bewitched by the beautiful blue waters, the primal forests, the scents of ilang-ilang, the sight of large-humped zebu oxen and the strange sounds of foreign tongues. We were strangers in a strange land, and we were delighted. At Helle-ville, the harbour town of Nosy Be, our taxi (a 40-year-old Renault 4)

deposited us on a grimy wharf where we were met by Ross, the South African co-owner of Madagascar Island Safaris, his Malagassy partner Mohammed, and the three Malagasy men and one woman who would be our guides and crew for the next six days.

Our dhow, the *Salama Tsara*, was a beautiful craft with a wooden hull and deck, a lateen-rigged sail and a comfy chilling-out area on the fore deck that was covered with shade cloth. Mohammed built it, we were told, using wood from the local forest and primitive techniques with just a saw, adze and hand drill. The dhow was equipped with a fridge of cold Three Horses beers and Cokes, a flagon or two of island rum, big bags of unpolished rice and other basic provisions. Two sturdy rods with Rapala lures stuck out from the bow, and these we were told would provide a good supply of fresh fish. My son Liam, a fishing fanatic at age six, had his eyes out on stalks.

As we set off across the unreal pale blue ocean, with *Salama Tsara's* diesel engine thumping in the bowels and massaging away any worries that might have remained, I knew there was nowhere else on earth that I'd rather be. Over fresh coffee, bread and marmalade, we were soon getting along with the rest of the group: a South African family (who, surprise, surprise, had kids at school with our own), fellow journalist and friend David Bristow, and his 10-year-old son Ben.

Main image and opposite: Life changing family vacations to exotic destinations don't need to cost a fortune



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The first day on the boat was about a four-hour sail, but on average we would only spend about two or three hours a day out at sea. The kids watched flying fish and dolphins, chatted to our guide (the only one who spoke much English), made friends with the other kids and soon forgot about their toys and televisions back at home. They took turns pulling in the mackerel that frequently took the lures, and

were lulled into tropical stupor by the views and the incredibly clear Indian Ocean. Whenever there was a whisper of boredom, we simply leaped overboard into the iridescent blue water. The temperature in mid-June was a pleasant 25 degrees Celsius, both in the water and out.

We were on a six-night itinerary, spending two nights each in three different camps: Russian Bay, Mahalina and Kalobe. Each was built by Mohammed, to what he envisaged were what *vazas* (white people) expected. They were all very basic, with bucket showers (except at the last camp where there was a hose shower with cold running mountain water), rudimentary toilets (some had seats, some were just holes), comfy beds, mosquito nets and an A-framed dining room, which had a rough plank as a seat. We all felt very much like Robinson Crusoe. ▷





We were brown, strong, unwashed, unshaven, crusted with salt, and our hair was bleached from the sun. How a week on the dhow had changed us all. We had become a tribe

▷ I thought that the whole thing, warts and all, was just perfectly imperfect in a Madagascan way. After all, we were much more concerned with enjoying the staggering environments. At Russian Bay, the simple wooden A-frame bungalows were on a hill overlooking a bay of mangroves, while Mahalina's versions were on the edge of a quintessential fringe of white sand, complete with gently rolling surf and

rows of coconut palms. We spent our last two nights in stilted tents on a secluded beach on Nosy Be. Amazingly, the camp bordered a forest reserve that was crawling with at least ten species of lemur.

As we went from camp to camp we were thrilled to be able to explore, to collect shells, to play beach football with the local children, and to go fishing or kayaking. In the evenings we lay on mats around a fire, told stories, performed ad-hoc plays and did the sorts of things that folks did before television was invented. We all developed huge appetites and devoured the delicious meals of fresh mackerel, crabs, calamari, chicken and beef that were prepared by our masterful chef. We washed them down with cold drinks, beers and the delicious rum. Ah, the memories we have of going to sleep at night listening to nightjars and frogs and lemurs, then waking at the equatorial torch blast of sunrise for coffee and a swim in the ocean.

Above and opposite: Fishing, lemur antics and beach explorations are just a few of the things children will find extraordinary



Snorkelling was the highlight of the trip for all of us, and we visited one or two great sites each and every day. The coral and smaller fishes were prolific, but you can't help feeling fishermen have depleted most of the original underwater splendour. It was intact at the Nosy Tanikely Marine Reserve – a spectacular garden of colourful soft and hard corals, where we stopped on our penultimate day, joining hawksbill turtles, fusiliers, batfish, moray eels, surgeon fish and dozens of others all floating in a seemingly painted, pale blue ocean.

You can't help bumping into weird creatures on this fascinating island. We were visited by giant chameleons, watched by frigate birds overhead and looked up to by weird snakes and giant tortoises. We also ticked off endemic fish eagles, egrets, bee-eaters, kingfishers and myriad other species that exist nowhere else on earth. We heard the sounds of lemurs in the forest and saw their tiny prints on the beaches, but to see them up close we needed to go to a lemur ▷

Extend your stay

After spending six nights on a dhow, here are some places for looking in a mirror, washing your clothes, and letting someone else catch your fish for dinner.

Amarina Hotel (www.amarainahotel.com) On Nosy Be, this is a really great medium-sized resort with a large swimming pool, air-conditioned rooms, a great beach, excellent facilities and wonderfully friendly staff.

Constance Lodge Tsarabajina (www.tsarabanjina.com) A remote lodge that is situated about 40km from Nosy Be. It offers barefoot luxury, stunning beaches, scuba diving and the incredibly pristine waters.

Sakatia Towers (www.sakatiatowers.com) A smaller and more intimate resort that is owned and run by a South African yachtsman named John 'Cleese' Sheppard. It has wonderful views, great food and is a five-minute walk from some wonderful beaches and snorkelling.





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Plan your trip

Getting there

Kenya Airways (www.kenya-airways.com) connects London Heathrow with Antananarivo via Nairobi. Air Madagascar (www.airmadagascar.com) links the capital with Nosy Be.

When to visit

April to November

Visas

Most visitors will require a visa for visiting Madagascar. These can be purchased on arrival for US\$35.

Safety

The political situation in Madagascar has been unsettled recently, but visitors have been unaffected. The FCO advise to book trips with established travel firms. Visit www.fco.gov.uk for more details.

Find out more

Jenman African Safaris (www.jenmansafaris.com)

▷ sanctuary on Nosy Komba. Our guide attracted these very unmonkey-like primates out of the forest with bits of banana and simple calls of “monkey, monkey, monkey.” The unique Madagascan animals seemed so happy with the deal that they used our delighted kids’ heads as their eating platforms.

As we sailed back into Helle-ville at the end of our trip, I looked round the dhow. We were brown, strong, unwashed, unshaven, crusted with salt, and our hair was bleached from the sun. How a week on the dhow had changed us all. We had become a tribe.

I could make comments about the sand fleas, which bit our legs from time to time, the dangers of stepping on coral without shoes, and the rather onerous long-drop toilets we braved (Ross later assured us he’d be putting seats on the worst offenders), but this was small stuff. The shift out of our comfort zones had been an essential part of the adventure. In retrospect, the only real problem in Madagascar was eventually having to leave it all behind. This island holiday was a highlight of

my life as a travel journalist, and more

lately, as a dad. It should, I think, be a compulsory family experience. 🐾



* With thanks to Jenman African Safaris (www.jenmansafaris.com) for planning David Rogers’ trip to Madagascar.