

BAREFOOT LUXURY

THIS PAGE Tea time means toes in the sand and freshly baked treats
OPPOSITE The bungalows at Constance Tsarabanjina are set just off the beach

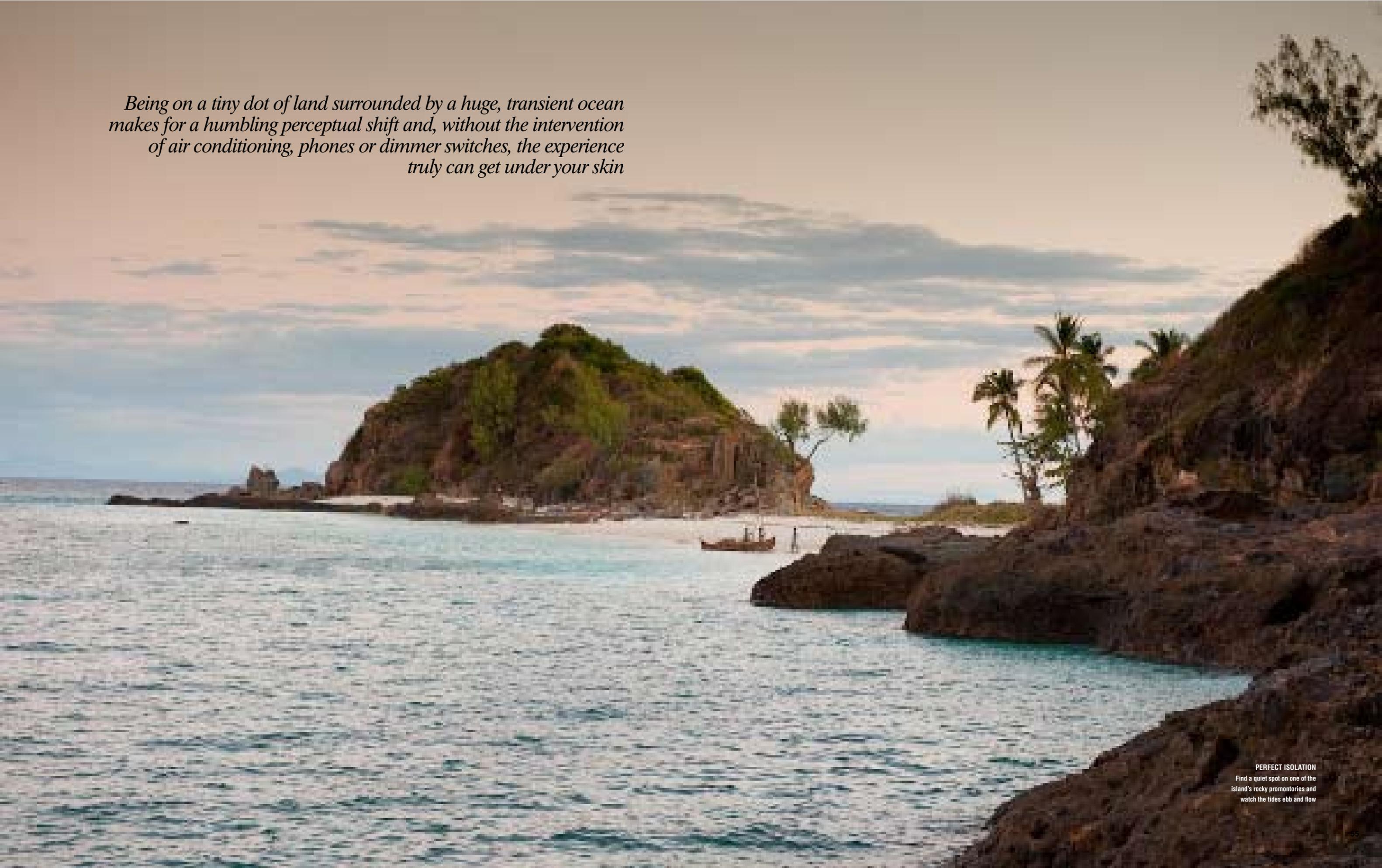


The simple life

EMMA WRIGHT GIVES HERSELF OVER TO A SIMPLER STATE OF BEING AT CONSTANCE TSARABANJINA, WHERE THE WILD BEAUTY OF MADAGASCAR'S MITSIO ARCHIPELAGO RULES

PHOTOGRAPHS JACO JANSE VAN RENSBURG, DAVID ROGERS

Being on a tiny dot of land surrounded by a huge, transient ocean makes for a humbling perceptual shift and, without the intervention of air conditioning, phones or dimmer switches, the experience truly can get under your skin



PERFECT ISOLATION
Find a quiet spot on one of the island's rocky promontories and watch the tides ebb and flow

Andoany on Madagascar's 'big island' Nosy Be – the gateway to Tsarabanjina Island – has that ghostly intrigue quite typical of the tumble-down towns of tropical Africa. Left to the devices of rampant plant life, humidity and limited resources, the once grand colonial buildings are stripped to their refined bones, scarred by graffiti and surrounded by markets where ylang-ylang oil, fresh vanilla and pepper clash in the heavy air. The port bustles with pareo-clad women and sweating, bare-chested men hauling wares up and down gangplanks. Dugout canoes slip between larger boats, their beaten frames holding stories of lives written on wild water, hinting that the old ways have not been forgotten here.

Nothing much other than these lone boats appears through the hypnotic haze of sea and sunlight during the 40-nautical-mile crossing to Tsarabanjina, where a Constance resort of the same name awaits. The island has the feel of the undiscovered; the reserve of explorers who chart little-known territories and happen across coral-fringed anchorages. No quays poke out into the water (you have to wade from the boat to shore), the beaches appear unmarked and it is hard to spot any signs of occupation.

The words 'honest' and 'barefoot' come to mind: welcomes accompanied by shy smiles instead of hotel-school-style bonhomie, comfortable cabins instead of concept dwellings, and sand instead of bleached wood underfoot in the bar. By no means hard core – the cabins boast generous beds and a good bathroom, there are private brollies and loungers on the beach and lovely meals – there is still little padding between body and the elements here. Being on a tiny dot of land surrounded by a huge transient ocean makes for a humbling perceptual shift and, without the intervention of air conditioning, phones or dimmer switches, the experience truly can get under your skin.

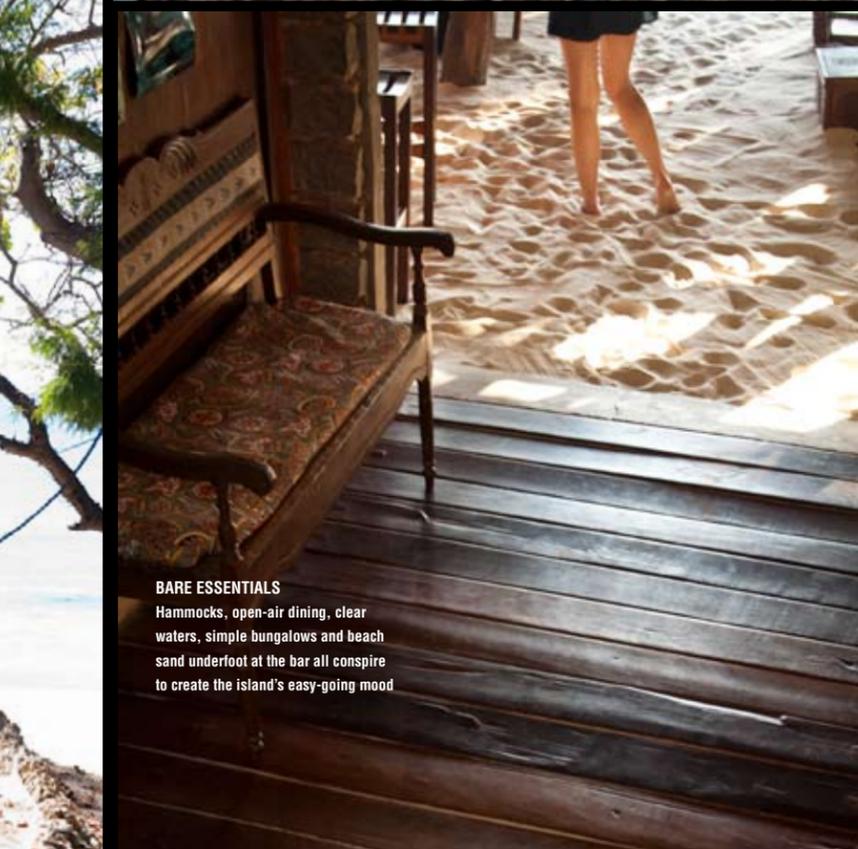
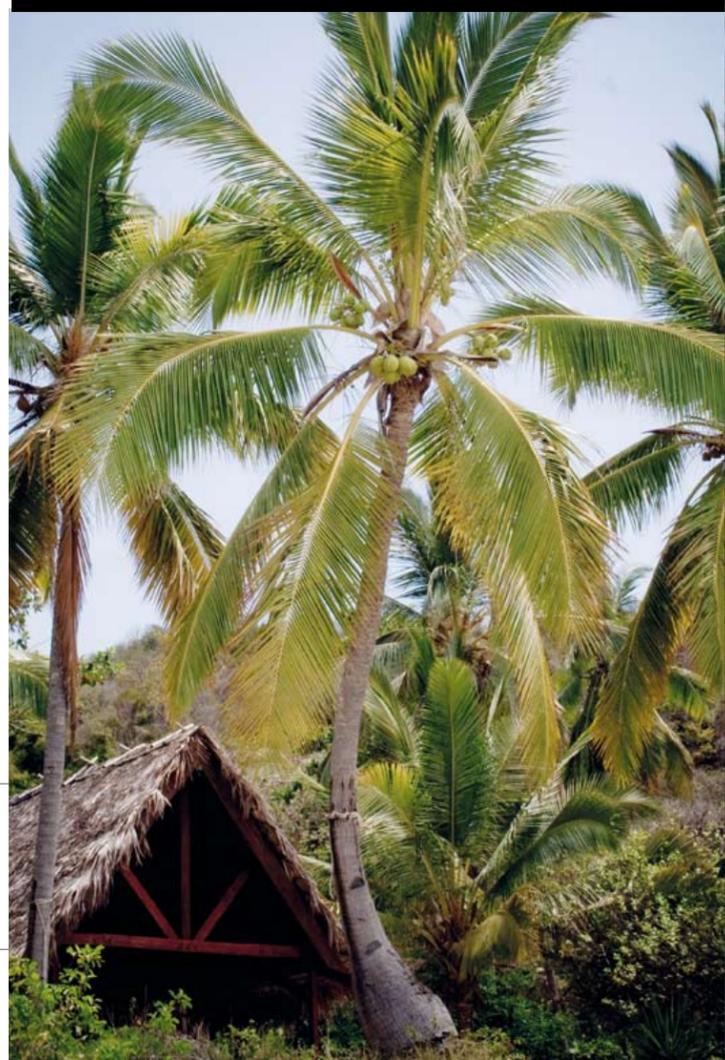
Twenty-five sea-facing bungalows, a beach bar and restaurant, one massage cabin and a dinky reception and dive centre are the sum total of the built environment. There are three occupied beaches – North, South and Bar Beach – an interior of palms and tangled bush alive with birds and chameleons, and the wilder shore to the west. Swimming from South Beach around to Bar Beach for afternoon tea (complete with freshly baked treats) is fun, as is ambling along the walkway over the rocks from North Beach for a rum at the bar before heading up to the mezzanine level, where the sea view and the light filtering through palms make for a lovely mealtime mood.

Activities include fishing, expeditions to other islands in the archipelago, water skiing and kayaking but there's also a call to shell seeking, exploratory walks and swims so long they leave your skin wrinkly. The abundant marine life on the reef surrounding the island is worth a closer look. Moonlit walks are a must, as are skinny dips off a secluded rock at dawn. Eating too many pancakes with honey and juicy limes, delighting in the crack of crustacean shells over lunch, staring at the shifting colours of the sea and pondering a bird call in the night are some of the luxuries this beautiful spot serves up.

Tsarabanjina is for anyone who loved the seaside as a child, relishes the old ways and appreciates that true escape often means simplifying.

Constance Lodge Tsarabanjina Double bungalows from R4 600 including all meals, www.tsarabanjina.com.

GETTING THERE It's best to fly in to Nosy Be, from R5 111 return, Air Madagascar, www.airmadagascar.com. Until 26 March, Air Madagascar flies from Joburg to Tana via Nosy Be on Tuesdays and Saturdays, departing 2.10pm and arriving in Nosy Be at 6.40pm. From 29 March, it will fly direct from Joburg only to Tana on Tuesdays, departing 2.10pm and arriving at 6pm (travellers will need to connect to Nosy Be via another airline); on Saturdays it will continue to fly Joburg to Tana via Nosy Be. Transfer to the hotel is by boat.



BARE ESSENTIALS
Hammocks, open-air dining, clear waters, simple bungalows and beach sand underfoot at the bar all conspire to create the island's easy-going mood