

Bonjour Vahza - Photographing Madagascar's Countryside

There are a few ways to see all that Madagascar has to offer. Each method presents its own unique experiences as well as challenges. The conveyances you use to get around depend strongly on your time constraints, your comfort level in unusual situations, and the overall goal of your trip to Madagascar.

Traveling the Country - The Basics:

The cheapest and most rustic way to see Madagascar would involve hopping on a taxi-brusse and spending hours on the road shoulder-to-shoulder with people, pigs and chickens (and turkeys, ducks, etc). Although you'd get some stories, meet some people (as well as have a character-building opportunity), you will have a hard time getting photos. These bush taxis are on a schedule that doesn't including stopping for grand scenics. If you are seeking to experience Madagascar rather than just photograph it - and you speak French - this is your best option. I look forward to reading your article on traveling through Madagascar on a shoestring while quietly marveling at your self-reliance.



If it is your first time exploring a developing nation, or if your French language skills are non-existent, a guided tour is probably your best choice. Transportation, guides, food, and lodging will all be taken care of which leaves you to focus on photography - and gigantic spiders! A guided tour does mean that you'll miss some opportunities. You are forced to abide by someone else's timetable and this can be problematic if you're the only "serious" photographer on the tour. By doing a little

research and asking pointed questions you can find a guide service that is both flexible and willing to cater to your specific photographic needs.

Do you speak fluent French? Do you laugh at the thought of armed cattle rustlers “sharing” your rice for a strip of zebu pulled from a dirty backpack? If you’ve answered yes then another travel option presents itself. Hiring a dedicated vehicle with a driver/guide is an excellent way to get off the beaten path. The flexibility you’ll gain in having a vehicle all to yourself is hard to beat.

When hiring a vehicle a decent four-wheel drive is a must. Madagascar’s roads turn to vast expanses of red mud during the rainy season – late November to March – and no amount of pushing will set you free once stuck. Costs for a rental with driver run \$50 to \$100 USD a day. You’ll need to pay for diesel, which can be quite expensive, so make sure you’ve got enough money before leaving the city. Larger towns might have banks to exchange money if you run short while on safari. The rates at these establishments are less favorable than in the capital and you’ll need to budget one to two hours for waiting in line.

If you forgo traveling with a tour for the freedom of self-directed exploration you’ll need to plan ahead for accommodation. Many of the travel books (Lonely Planet, Bradt Travel Guides, etc.) have suggestions for lodgings and can be a great help in finding accommodation in a pinch. A mosquito net or travel tent for sleeping indoors is a necessity. Take your malaria medications. Cerebral malaria occurs in Madagascar and getting it isn’t a story you’ll get to share with friends.

Generally your driver will insist on sleeping in or near the car. This is often company policy to prevent theft of the vehicle while other times it is just driver preference. Regardless of where your driver sleeps never, ever, leave anything in the car overnight. If you’ve an overdeveloped sense of decency, most hotels will have driver rooms available at a reduced rate.

Developing a Plan:

Now here comes the big question – “What would you like to photograph?” Exotic animals? Rare flowers? Scenic landscapes of the desert, rainforest, and sandy beaches? Colonial history, pirate history, or a mix of African and Indonesian cultures? Don’t worry – Madagascar has you covered. I’m a plan kind of guy. Even if it is a loosely assembled list of towns or regions, I like to have an idea of where, when and how. Dividing Madagascar into three broad areas with Antananarivo as your base will help you plan your photographic tour. Madagascar is a large island and if you decide to travel by car you’ll be at least a day away from anything. Flying is an option but can be expensive and unreliable, a wonderful combination when you are on a schedule.

The Dry Southwest:

The southwest of Madagascar offers exotic flora, lemurs, wonderful bird watching and the fishing culture of Madagascar’s Sakalava and Vezo people. The large coastal city of Morondava is a good starting place for finding the iconic images from this region. Nearby you’ll find the “Avenue of the Baobabs” and “Les baobabs amoureux” – two large baobabs intertwined in a lovers’ embrace.



Madagascar's southwest is home to the Sakalava and Vezo people. Traditionally these groups have depended on the sea for their survival and at sunrise, villagers take their canoes and outriggers out towards traditional fishing grounds. During the harsh light of mid-day it might be best to focus your photography on the details of island life. Local fish markets, families mending fishing nets and the distinctive and colourful Vezo and Mahafaly tombs present some wonderful opportunities. Later in the day, palm trees with long white sand beaches render classic sunset images.

The East Coast:

With the Indian Ocean lapping at its beaches, the east coast of Madagascar is significantly wetter than the dry and spiny forests of the southwest. Along with this difference in humidity comes a change in topography. The long meandering rivers and large flood plains are replaced by steep escarpments and quickly flowing rivers. The east coast has large areas of forest as many areas are too steep to cultivate. Stands of bamboo and palms are common on the road from Antananarivo to the coast.

A short drive east of Tana is Analamzaotra Special Reserve and the National Park of Andasibe-Mantadia; also known as Perinet to the ex-pats. Lemurs, including the world's largest lemur - the Indri, birds and reptiles present photographic opportunities here. While the wide-open spaces of the southwest provided too much light, the rainforests of the east coast can be thick and dim (much like me). You'll need to be working with a high ISO and fast lenses to capture the wildlife here. Flora and macro enthusiasts will find enough subjects to keep them busy as well. Remember to bring your off camera flash to freeze the action and give your images sufficient depth of field.

If the thoughts of Andasibe-Mantadia and Analamzaotra whet your appetite for wildlife photography, a trip to Ranomafana National Park is a must. A day's drive from Tana, Ranomafana is one of the best known destinations in Madagascar for ecotourism. Lemurs, reptiles, birds, and butterflies can be found amongst sweeping vistas, tumbling rapids and rain - lots of rain.

Madagascar is nothing if not challenging photographically. During your time in Madagascar you'll either be trying to keep your gear free from dust or dry. Although zip-lock bags will work, upgrading

to a dedicated protective cover (Kata Elements Cover or something similar) will give you more piece-of-mind. In relation to replacing a camera body, such covers are relatively cheap. Changing lenses is another matter and there is no foolproof solution. Carrying an extra body is always recommended for long trips. Equip it with your second favorite lens to minimize lens changes and help reduce dust spots. If you need to switch lenses just remember to turn your camera body off first - nothing attracts dust like a fully charged sensor.

The Northern Reaches of Madagascar:

Last but not least, are the northern reaches of Madagascar. If you've been waiting for me to mention underwater photography you're in luck. The northwest is wonderful for diving and snorkeling, especially around the large island of Nosy Be. Whale Sharks, Manta Rays, coral reefs, and if you dive deep enough, Coelacanth can all be seen off this coast of Madagascar.

If undersea adventure isn't really your "cup of tea" don't fear, there are plenty of land-based opportunities. The Masoala (Mawsh-whawl) peninsula on the northeast coast is Madagascar's largest protected area. Lemurs and tropical birds inhabit the rainforest found on this large appendix of land dangling out into the Indian Ocean. During the Austral Winter humpback whales visit the Bay of Antongil to breed and give birth to young. Nearby is Nosy Mangabe, one of the best places to find the nocturnal Aye Aye - certainly one of the strangest looking mammals on the planet.



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After a week or two on the road, it is finally time to reward yourself for stepping outside your comfort zone. Madagascar has some of the best sugar cane rum in the world. Vanilla and lychee flavoured are both very good - but my money is on the good old fashioned Coconut Rum. Be daring one more time and find the homemade concoction sold in old water bottles. It looks cloudy and mysterious and the bottles are always a little sticky, but if you're so inclined it is glorious stuff. Find yourself a beach, put down that camera, and take a little time to watch the world go by. You're no longer a Vahza in Madagascar - you've gone Gasy.

Photos: Author

By Aleksei Saunders

After stints as a whale trainer, mechanical engineer, and fisheries consultant Alex Saunders arrived at the Denver Zoo in the mid 90's. Photography has been a constant thread throughout Alex's many careers; a passion he pursues along many paths and genres.

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