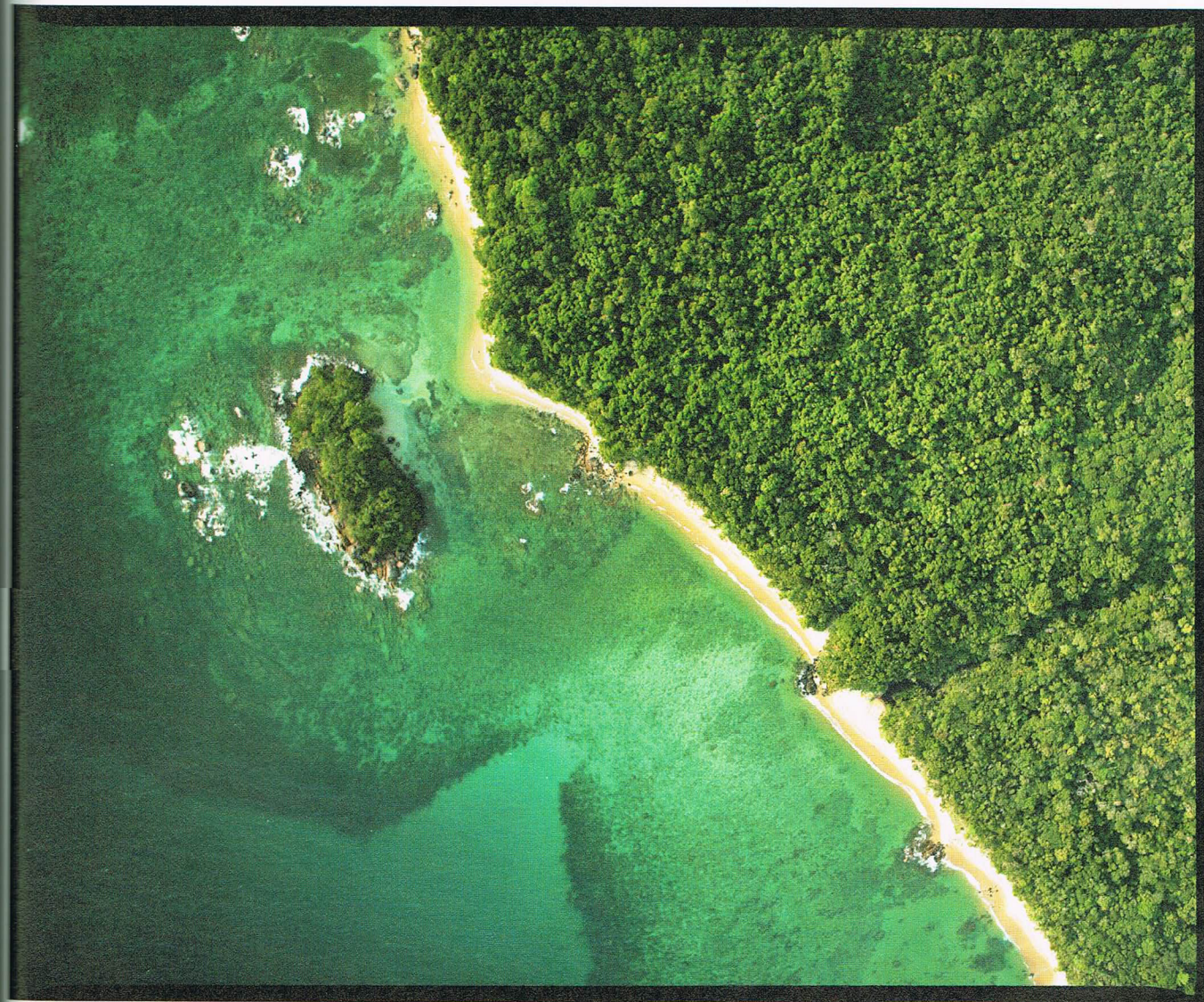


dive, cruise, explore, escape

CUTTING LOOSE



MADAGASCAR BY KAYAK

**EXPLORE THE REMOTE, RAINFOREST-FRINGED COASTLINE OF THE MASOALA PENINSULA
BY SEA KAYAK AND DISCOVER A PRISTINE AND SELF-SUFFICIENT AFRICAN EDEN**

WORDS SANDRA GORDON

MASOALA FOREST LODGE is situated on the lush Masoala peninsula on the northeast coast of Madagascar. Its remote location means that getting there requires some time – and patience. We arrived in the capital Antananarivo in the early hours of the morning. A two-day wait for a connecting domestic flight to the small coastal town of Maroantsetra meant we overnighted at the quaint Hotel Coco Beach before setting off on the final leg of our journey. The lodge itself is located in the heart of the Masoala National Park, on the west coast of the Maosala peninsula. It is accessible only by boat – a 40km trip from Maroantsetra's small, chaotic harbour across the Bay d'Antongil to Tampolo – or a three-day walk through the rainforest.

In a rainforest clearing right on the shores of the Indian Ocean, the remote and intimate lodge can sleep up to 12 guests in six luxurious tents on wooden platforms under a traditional palm-frond roof, each with an en-suite bathroom, or in a more basic campsite. Entirely off the grid, using solar and battery power, and well and rain water, the lodge is based on the principles of



WATER SPORTS

THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Bucket showers are a true luxury in this undeveloped paradise; supper each night really is fresh from the sea; gentle seas make for easy paddling; supper each night really is fresh from the sea

OPPOSITE The waters off the east coast of Madagascar are the most important breeding spot for humpback whales in the eastern hemisphere



sustainability, re-use and the responsible allocation of resources. The delicious organic food is sourced locally, helping to support the local communities.

After the somewhat protracted journey to the starting point of our 10-day kayak expedition – during which we would paddle up to 80 kilometres over sea and river – we were delighted to be allocated large, airy tents nestled under the forest canopy just a few metres from the water's edge, ours for the next two nights. Despite the profuse and exotic nature of Madagascan wildlife, there are no dangerous animal or plant species, so you can wander around the campsite and along the forest paths in slippers or bare feet – even at night. Three quarters of the island's roughly 200 000 known animal and plant species are unique to Madagascar, and forest walks guided by the knowledgeable and patient Felix – who memorably mimicked the call of the nocturnal mouse lemur and lured the miniature creature to within a metre of us – are an incredible experience. At Masoala, you set your own pace. With the outside world a good three days' walk away and communication limited to a satellite phone and intermittent internet connection, it didn't take me long to focus on more pressing issues at hand: would it be a swim, a forest walk, a quick paddle up a nearby river or another ice-cold beer? While we could snorkel on the nearby reef or just relax in a hammock, Felix was always available for guided forest walks or visits to nearby villages, or for a paddle down a mangrove river in a locally built pirogue.

Early the next morning, the wooden support boat was packed with military precision and we were each allocated a kayak to be shared with a staff member to ensure that we'd all keep pace. The entire group consisted of our party of five (including two children), three guides and a small support crew, including Eddie the cook, Paxet the captain and Marco, who provided additional muscle. We set off for a 15km paddle down the coast through the Tampolo Marine Reserve, with a stop on a sacred island for a swim and again later for a splash in the cascades of a river. When we arrived at Sahaleona beach camp, where we would sleep for two nights, the support crew had already set up a large canopy with mats and refreshments while preparations in the camp kitchen were well underway. After a meal we were free to explore the surrounding area, snorkel, swim or just relax.

The simple but delicious food was exceptional (and the beers miraculously cold) as we gradually worked our way down to the southernmost point of the peninsula over the next few days. Meals consisted of locally grown, nutty rice, a limited range of vegetables and zebu meat or fish, with abundant fresh tropical fruit. We feasted each day on sun-ripened bananas, mangos and endless baskets of litchis, and had the good fortune to be travelling with an avid fisherman, who provided dinner more than once. A local fisherman arrived late one afternoon in his pirogue with a fresh haul of calamari and squid for our dinner.

That morning we boarded the MS Masoala and headed for Nosy Behento, a tiny island 40km away, where we spent three magical nights. After setting up camp, we explored the beaches and rocks, ending off with a 3km evening paddle around the island. On Nosy

Behento, the days drifted by in a delightful haze of lagoon and sea kayaking, paddles up mangrove rivers, rests on white sandy beaches and snorkelling in crystal waters. Our second evening brought the indulgence of a camp shower – a large canvas bag strung from a tree. After several days of salt water, intense humidity and just the occasional rinse in a freshwater river, this was sheer luxury. An evening walk through the forest to a derelict lighthouse built during the French occupation offered a spectacular view of the island, the reef and an old wreck, and was just the spot to celebrate our last night on the island with sundowners, followed by a Malagasy singalong around a fire on the beach. All too soon it was time to pack the support boat and climb aboard for the four-hour voyage back up the coast to Masoala Forest Lodge.

Without wanting to seem unduly naïve about the reality of living as a subsistence villager in a rainforest, the trip to Masoala certainly did make me question our modern definitions of progress. Given our urban lives of conspicuous consumption, the simplicity and self-sufficiency of life in the rainforest seemed strangely comforting and appealing. But mostly what the Forest Lodge offered was a unique opportunity to slip unobtrusively into another way of life, to experience living in a primary rainforest while doing almost nothing to disturb the natural environment. I returned home feeling strong, healthy and liberated – and planning my next trip to Madagascar.

Masoala Forest Lodge Ten-day sea kayak expedition R19 950 including guides, permits, all kayaking equipment, camping equipment, meals and soft drinks; masoalaforestlodge@orange.mg, masoalaforestlodge.com



TRIP THERE Air Madagascar flies direct from Joburg to Antananariva, from R5 800 return, and from Antananariva to Maroantsetra, from R4 380 return; www.travelstart.co.za. True Blue Surf & Island Travel can custom-design a Masoala sea-kayak trip – contact 0860 872 835, candice@truebluetravel.co.za, www.truebluetravel.co.za