

Waiting for time & tide

by David Bristow for Getaway Magazine November 2005

Ivøu"rctv"Chtkecp."rctv"Rqn{pgukcp."rctv"Jckvkcp0"Gfkvqt"Fcxf"Dtkuvqy"rcemgf"jku" mask and flippers, kikoi and sunscreen for a pocket-rngcukpi"÷ec o rkp."hkuj kp."kuncpf" jqr rkpø"ucknkpi"uchctk"qhh"Ocfci cuectøu"pqtvj y guv"eqcuv0"

Tide and time supposedly wait for no-one. Yet there is a little nook of the world, a group of tiny coral islets lying off the northern corner of another, slightly larger island, which in turn lies off the northwestern tip of a much larger island, which appears to give - at least on initial impressions - the lie to this conventional wisdom.

The very large island is Madagascar, home to lemurs, tenrecs, chameleons and fady (superstition on a grand secng+0"Kvøu" o ckpnpcpf"vq"vjg"u o cmngt" Pqu{ "Dg."vtcpuncvqf"cu"vjg" ÷dk i "kuncpfø"dwv"cnuq"mpqy p"cu"nøknq"cwz"rcthw o u"hq"vjg" {ncpi-ylang groves which r tqfweg"vjg"guugpvkcn"qkn"hq" o wej"qh"Htcepegøu"rgthw o g"kpfwuvt{0" F j q y u."rktq-gues and rusting cargo boats sail out of the port at Hell-ville. As does the good boat Salama Djema.

The surrounding tiny islands have names such as Sakatia, Nosy Iranja, Tany Kely, Kivinjy and Komba. And it was to these we were headed after a night in what can best be described as a characterful inn in Ambataloaka village: part Zanzibar, part Haiti. I was wishing the rooster outside my shuttered window might be sacrificed in some bloody voodoo ritual; although the fady here is of a more benign kind, as are the Malagasy people (though they do dig their relatives up from time to time to dance with the bones).

I was there at the rather insistent invitation of an old connection, river rafter-turned-sailor Ross Murray, who was somehow connected to a traditional sailing boat based at Hell-ville. He showed me some photos of the building of the boat, and the place in general, and that was persuasion enough: pearly-white strips of beach beneath hip-swaying coconut palms and an ice-blue sea. Sailing, camping, fishing, snorkelling - even scuba diving, Ross promised. And generally goofing off and getting a tan.

K"dgnkgxg"vjg"ewttgpv"rctncpeg"ku" c"÷pq"dtckpgtø0"

The small boat that could

This is an amazing trip for anyone looking for a holiday in a quiet but beautiful place; kvøu"gzqvke"dwv tgs wktgu"uq o g"ngxgn"qh"vqngtcepeg"hq"nqecn"eqpfkvkqpu"cpf" {qw"ujqwnfpøv" be scared to rough it a bit (cold shower suspended from a coral tree behind the tents on the beach, kind of thing). The food is not gourmet, but if freshly caught kingfish served wkvj"eqeqpww"tkeg"kupøv" {qwt" i c o g."vjgpgkvjgt"ku" c"Ocfci cuect"kuncpf"uchctk0" But this story is really about the boat, a pirogue that wanted to be a dhow. Or, pilot Mohamed Bakary who wanted to be captain of a real boat; his boat.

It began some years ago when Capetonian Ross sold his business and, with buddy Alf, fgekfgf"vq"iq"ucknkpi0"Vjg{"mpgy"pqvjki"cdqvw"kv."dwv"vjcv"fkfpøv"rtgxgpv"vjg o "htq o "

building a Roberts 45 monohull and setting off for the Indian Ocean islands with a new crew mate. In Madagascar they met Mohamed, a dental-school hopeful who, for family financial reasons, had to drop out and had, instead, become a yacht pilot. With a great sigh of relief from the two buds, the original skipper was set adrift and Mohamed taken on board. After Alf returned to the daily grind, Ross and Mohamed sailed the Indian Ocean together for another two years.

V j gp"kv" y cu"Tquuøu"vwtp"vq"j gcf"j q o g"vq"j ku"eq o r qwpfki"kpvtguv"kpXguv o gpvu" (a slacker perhaps, but a crafty one that boy). But what would Mohamed do?

They cooked up a scheme whereby Ross would put in the initial capital for Mohamed to have a small sailing pirogue built, the kind with a slim-line hull, outrigger and single lateen sail, and with that he would run tourists out on day trips around the archipelago.

But Mohamed was a well-ucnvgf"ugc"fq i"cpf"Tquu." y gm." j gøu" c"ftgc o gt0" Y kv j"vk o g" cpf"qegcpøu"fkuvpeg"qp"j ku"ukfg." Oqj c o g f øu"ftgc o "rktq i wg"i tg y"kp vq"xkukqpu"qh" c" f j q y 0" And the sailing dhow grew into a Madagascar-style yacht conversion, complete with proper yacht mast flying jib, genoa and mainsail, backed up by an 80 horse-power diesel engine (second-hand, of course). Mohamed commissioned a local dhow builder but when he arrived to collect his dream boat, all that had been done were the ribs, hand-carved from mangrove timbers. Still, he took delivery and spent the next year, living mainly on rice, finishing it himself. His boat had to have a galley, and his clients would need a proper, flushing head and a house, as he calls the covered quarter-deck. The building of the boat involved, apparently, quite a bit of give and take between the v y q" rctvpgtu."dwv"qp"qpg"v j kpi" Oqj c o g f" y qwnf"pqv"pg i qvkcvg."cpf"v j cv" y cu"÷ j kuø"dqcvøu" name. And so it was that our group arrived fresh faced from Antananarivo as the first rc{kpi"i wguvu"cdqctf"v j g"Ucnc o c"Flg o c"*nkvgtcmm{"÷ j gnmq"hkpgø."qt" o c {dg"÷c"hkpg"j gnmqø+" to test the waters.

A fair breeze to sail by

The omens were good - shortly after hitting open sea from Hell-ville we spotted some common dolphins or, rather, they spotted us. We managed to don snorkelling kit just in time to jump overboard and spend a few minutes playing hide and seek with the small pod before they finned off into the blue yonder.

Our first anchorage was in a tiny mangrove cove off Sakatia islet. As we stepped ashore to be met by our host, I expected the trees to part and a chorus of lemurs jiving to the beat qh"Mkp i"Lwnkcpøu"øK"nkmg"vq" o qxg"kv." o qxg"kv." {qw"pcw i j v {"nkvnng" o qpmg {u#ø" We were the guests of South African castaway John Fawlty at the just-varnished guesthouse Sakatia Towers. Actually his surname is Sheppard, but the sign on his bedroom door y jkej"tgcfu"øfqpø"fkuvvtd"v j g"qeewrcpv." j gøu"cntgcf {"fkuvvtdgf"ø"mkp f"qh"ugvu"v j g"uepgp0" After years plying pharmaceuticals to the good burghers of Zastron, John set out in his own pea-green boat with plenty of money and honey-coloured island dreams.

To say he washed up on Sakatia would be to miss the point of this land of lotus eaters. Madagascar is more Indonesian or Polynesian than African. Most of the people may be

poor but they are gracious and industrious, too; nowhere is there the squallor you so often see in outwardly similar African places (although the early morning ablution customs of some villages might shock sensitive souls).

V jku"ku"Lqjpøu"vtqrkecn"Rkvecktp"Kuncpf<" o gvc r j qtkecn {" j gøu"dwtpgf" jku"dtkf i gu"cpf"dwknv" c"pg y" j q o g"cpf"nkhg"hqt" j k o ugnh0"Cpf" {qwøf"qpn {"pggf"vq"xkukv"kv"vq"cum" {qwtugh."ø Y j { f k f p ø v"K" f q"v j ku000Aö" Y jgp"v j g"hwmm" o qqp"tkugu"qxgt" Pqu {"De across the warm channel and a warm, ylang-ylang-heavy breeze wafts up to the deck chez John, you feel like dwtuvkpi"kpqv"uqpi" {qwtugh<"ø V jgtg"ku"pqy jgtg"kp"v j g"y qtnf"v j cv"K"y qwnf"tcv jgt"dg0000ö

That afternoon John ordered 10 more chairs from his resident carpenters, who were working on the finishing touches to his little castle, to seat all his dinner guests. Among them was young, impish dive master Jacques Kieira from the dive centre two coves to the north on the same island. Also his father, the roguish Angolan-South African-Malagasy Lqug."cpf" jku"xlxcckqwu"Kvcnkcp"uvgr o qv jgt."Kucdgmcc0"V j g {øtg"y ckvki"qp"v j gkt"q y p" time and tides to rebuild the fallen-down hotel at the northern, forested end of Sakatia. Next morning our party headed out in two of Lceswguøu"umk"dqcvu"hqt"uq o g"fkxkpi0" Y qtf" j cf"urtgcf"qp"v j g"y cvgt"v j cv"v j g t g ø f" dggp" c"nq"qh"nqqmkpi"kpqv"v j g"dqvvq o"qh" tw o"dqvngu"cv"Lqjpøu"rnceg0"Ecn"kv"tw o"kh" {qw"nkmg<" {qw"ecp"ftguu"y kvdkvu"wr"y kvj"xcpknnc or lime, but it still kicks like a back-firing diesel engine. Just out to sea we spotted a family of humpback whales but they were on the move, blowing and heading swiftly across our bearing.

ø Y j cng"u j ctm#ö"V j g"ecm"ec o g"htq o"qpg"qh" jku"etgy0"Lceswgu"ikxgu"4722"ctkctkgu"*cdqw" T : +" to any one of them who spots a whale shark, so sightings here are commonplace. Over we y gpv"y kvj"upqtmgn"i gct"cpf"v j ku"ugxgtcn" o kpwvguø"uyko"y kvj"v j ku"i gpvng"i kcpv"qh"v j g"ugcu" proved to be the highlight of the trip. The scuba diving was also great, with about 30-metre visibility but a strong current along a coral drop-off. We spotted a white-tipped reef shark, huge Napoleon wrasse and a massive dog-toothed tuna that finned swiftly past and into the big blue, destined no doubt for some Japanese sushi market.

That afternoon we anchored off lovely, lonely Iranja and rowed ashore to set up camp. Chocolate-vcppgf"Ugcp"cpf" Pkeqng."tcurdgtt {"hct o gtu"htq o" J gt o cpwu"y j qøf" dggp"vqwtkpi" Madagascar for a month, sauntered up to our camp fire and Three Horses beers were offered around. We snorkelled, walked and fossicked while Mohamed and his crew - cook Ocvjkgw"Xkpegpv"cpf" :-ecdkp"dq {ø" Oqukpf tc" I cgn" - used the spring low tide to beach our boat and do some running repairs to the hull. A pair of kestrels was tending a nestling on a cliff near our campsite; what looked like bulbuls, finches, a delicate, white-tailed paradise flycatcher, a sunbird and a dainty jewel of a kingfisher (much like a malachite species) flitted about the flowering coral tree and strelizias hovering over the narrow beach. However, here they might well have been greenbulbs, vangas, emutails and the like (evolution has not been kind to bird numbers here).

The best was still to come. We set sail, trusting our hull would hold out the water, past the sugar-loaf formation of Nosy Kivinjy, and a fleet of fishing pirogues (from which we purchased two kingfish), to anchor in the marine reserve off Nosy Tany Kely. Ross

had timed it so we could snorkel there on the low tide. The protected reefs offered as rich a coral garden as anywhere I have snorkelled, with maybe the exception of Ras Mohamed at the tip of the Sinai Peninsula. The difference is, to get to Ras Mohamed takes a virtual dive expedition, while on Salama Djema, we were a bunch of happy drifters, going with the flow and the breezes. No pressure, no worries.

Qp"vjg"ycnm"wr"vq"vjg"qnf"nki"jvj"qwug"*y"jke"j"nqqmgf"nkmg"kv"jcfpøv"dgpp"owe"j"qh"cjgnr to boats since it was erected in 1904) two ring-tailed lemurs were spotted, but they skipped off into the trees. No worries, promised Ross, on Nosy Komba the next day y gøf"dg"nki"jvkpi"vjg"o"qhh"wu0"Wphqtvwpcvgn{"f"wg"vq"qwt"pqdng"xguugn"urtkpi"kp"i"cp"wpvk"ogn{" leak, I had to make a dash for Antananarivo via Diego Suarez and so missed the stop-over on Nosy Komba with its lemur reserve, where the rest of the crew enjoyed a night of relative luxury in rustic timber cabins. So maybe in that respect time and tide did not stop for us. Then again, spending an extra day on Iranja did not seem like waiting at all.

As hqt"vk"og<"hktuv"Lcpkegøu"ycvej"uvqr"rgf"yqtmkpi"qp"vjg"hnki"jv"qxgt"htq"o"Lqjcppgudwti0 Vjgp"o{"f"lxxg"ycvej"."y"jke"j"jcf"f"qpg"32"{"gctuø"jctf"ugtxkeg."urtcpi"cn"ngcm"qp"qwt"hktuv" uewdc"flxxg"qhh"Ucmcvkcl"Pgzv."Fqpcnføu"÷"igpwkpg"hcmgø"tqngz"ygpv"okuukpi0"Kv"ugg"ogf Nosy Be and its crown jewel satellites had indeed put a fady on the keeping of time. The thing about time and tide on a Madagascar Island Safari, on the friendly deck of vjg"Ucnc"oc"Flg"oc"ku."kh"{"qw"fqppøv"nkmg"vjg"qpgu"{"qwøxg"iqv."v"jgtgønn"dg"cpqv"jgt"vkde along at another time. Or another.

Y J CV ø U " V J G " H W U U " C D Q W V " H C F [A

Madagascar is ruled by fady, a local form of superstition-cum-xqqfqq0"Kvøu"cn"o"quv entirely benign - dogs might not be allowed on one island, cats on another, that sort of thing. Vazahas or wazas (white people) are exempt from fady. Most fascinating is the cult of razana, or raising the dead, where the skeletons of ancestors are dug wr"cpf"÷"f"cepgfø"ykvj"*dww"kv"ku"hcff{"vq"flki"wr"ci"itcxg"ykvj"ci"urc"fg"vjcv"fqgu"pqv"jcxg a loose handle, to ensure the connection between living and dead is not too strong).

ADVISER

Madagascar feels more Asian than African, with a strong French flavour. However, Gp inkuj"ku"ykfgn{"urqmgp"cpf"{"qwønn"igv"d{"gcukn{"ykvjqwv"Htgpej"*cnvjqwi"j"kv"jgnru+0"

HOW TO GET THERE

Htq"o"Lqjcppgudwti"kvøu"cv"vj"tgg-and-a-half hour Air Madagascar flight to the capital An-tananarivo, where you catch a connecting flight to Nosy Be (be sure to change some money there - euros or dollars are best - into ariaries: one South African rand eqwenu"cdqvw"522"ctkctkgu+0" [qwønn"rtqdcn{"cttkxg"cv"C"o"dcvcnqcmc"xknnc"ig"pgct"vjg" port of Hell-ville in the late afternoon and so overnight there, boarding the sailing dhow the next morning.

THE BOAT / THE TRIP

Salama Djema has a lot of soul. It was built mostly by its skipper and co-owner Oqjc o gf"Dcmct{."y jq"y km"dg" {qwt"j quv"cpf"i wkfg0"Kvøu"dcukecnn {"c"vtefkvkqpcn" f j qy . converted into a sailing yacht. It takes small to medium-size groups, and is ideal for adventure family holidays (children younger than 12, 10 at the least, are not well suited to this kind of trip). The idea is to sail leisurely around the main Nosy Be archipelago, visiting and camping on beautiful inhabited and uninhabited islets. On Sakatia and Komba you can upgrade your accommodation, as well as do scuba diving from Sakatia dive centre (soon to relocate to the newly rebuilt hotel).

WHAT YOU NEED TO TAKE

Kvøu"cnyc{u"jqv"kp"Pqu{"Dg."cpf"gzvtg o gn {"uq"kp" o kf-summer (November to March). Malaria is said to be rife so take precautions and plenty of insect repellent. The tents are mozzie-proof, but evenings out in the open are where you are most susceptible vq"igvvpki"dkvvgp0"Y j kng"jki j"uvcpfctfu"ctg" o ckpvckpgf"qp"vjg"dqcv."-i { r r q"i wvuø"ku" always a risk when travelling in the Third World. Drink only sealed, bottled water and local beer, and take first-ckf"uwr rnkgu"*fqpøvhqt igv"vjg" o gtvjkqncvg"hqt"ewvu"cpf" wounds which tend to fester in the tropics if left untended).