

# MADAGASCAR

Officially known as the Malagasy Republic, most of Madagascar's population is descended from Malay and Polynesian immigrants. It was first inhabited by Indonesian seafarers from Makassar in Sulawesi around the first century AD, followed by Arab traders. In the 1500s, it was discovered by the Portuguese when searching for a port of call on the spice route to India. Cardinal Richelieu ordered it taken over by France in 1642 and created Fort Dauphin. It was a French colony until 1960. The world's fourth largest island, 90% of its plant and animal life is found nowhere else on earth.

## *Antananarivo*

I was encouraged to visit **Madagascar** by a well-travelled friend who had been there some years previously. He assured me that I should have no trouble with the language (it was French-speaking), advised travelling by train, and recommended three outstanding sights: the Royal Palace, the Zoo, and the Zoma Market, at once. I had difficulty with my minimal French, but the market had burnt down, the market closed some years ago and was in a deplorable state! This is not the complete story. To read further, please either register as a new reader or login now if already registered. Notwithstanding, I enjoyed the capital, **Antananarivo**, also called The City of the Thousand Warriors and known locally as Tana.

On the flight from Johannesburg, which was mainly full of locals, I had been chatting with an American girl; I am always interested in the reasons why people visit remote destinations. She informed me that she was going with the sole purpose of seeing the West Coast, an area that the country had only recently began to promote, and a tour of which she had researched and booked on the internet. It sounded fascinating, but was costing her an incredible price: in the vicinity of US\$7000 for less than two weeks. I decided then that it was not for me!

Each new destination operates differently and it normally takes a couple of days to get the feel of a place. After the usual hassles at the airport, I was approached by a young man who offered me a ride to the city. Usually this is a 'no-no', but on this occasion, because he spoke English, I decided to take the risk, and it turned out to be a very fortunate move. I inquired about the cost of a taxi from the 'help' desk (what a misnomer!) and found his rate reasonable. Because he had a phone card he rang a hotel that I had made a note of from an old edition of Lonely Planet (borrowed on the plane), and also assisted me to change