

TRAVELLER 10 ■

INDIAN OCEAN



IMAGES: CORNERS

In Traveller 10 this issue, we get adventurous in the Indian Ocean. The lesser-known corners of this idyllic region are where you'll find pristine jungle hikes, hands-on conservation experiences, grassroots tours, off-grid islands and low-key lodges, plus some of the world's best underwater wildlife. Words: Sarah Barrell, Emma Gregg, Pól Ó Conghaile, Adrian Phillips, Josephine Price & Heather Richardson





01 | MAURITIUS: BEYOND THE BEACH

It's the moment I realise I probably shouldn't be doing this hike alone.

I'm looking up at the final vertical rock face I have to scale, a thin knotted rope as my only aid. Steep, forested slopes drop off on either side of the narrow ridge on which I'm standing. Since I left Otentic Mountain eco-camp about an hour ago, I haven't seen or heard a single other person, which — while admittedly not great if I fall — has been nothing short of heavenly.

Otentic Mountain isn't the sort of accommodation most people would associate with Mauritius — an island synonymous with polished, beach-side resorts. Set on a lush hillside overlooking the lesser-visited east coast, Otentic has four thatched, spacious tents perched on stilts with en suite bathrooms and glorious views out to the ocean. There's no phone signal or wi-fi here, water is sourced from the mountain stream that gurgles through the camp, meals are vegetarian, and it's fully solar-powered. I'm also thrilled to find seven two-month-old puppies tearing excitedly around the place.

Heading out from Otentic that morning, camp manager Cedric had instructed me to follow the red dashes on the trees and rocks that mark the route to the top of Montagne Bambous, which rises 2,070ft behind the camp. There were other easier and shorter hikes, but I was after a challenge. "There's some exposure at the top," Cedric had said. "If you feel uncomfortable, just turn back."

Having passed the last tent, I follow a single dirt track as the morning humidity sets in, pushing past giant ferns and palm leaves, as plants in the undergrowth brush and scratch my legs. It's cooler under the canopy, sunlight dappling the spongy, leaf-littered ground. I hike to the top of the ridge, turn right and follow it upwards. Dead leaves crunch underfoot, gnarled trees glisten beneath a velvety moss. A slash of scarlet here and there reassures me I'm on the right path. I use the slim, coppery trunks of guava trees to haul myself up, negotiating boulders, low-slung branches and knotted roots, eating countless spider webs as I go.

When I come to the last sheer section, I'm almost at the top. Catching my breath, I look down and wonder if it's worth risking a slip. Throwing caution aside, I decide it is and clamber up, using tree roots as footholds.

Ducking through a thicket, I find myself in a clearing, a sudden gust of air chilling the layer of sweat that now covers me, along with patches of dirt, insect bites and scratches. I'm at the top of Montagne Bambous. The forested ridge along which I've just hiked stretches out to one side. Below me are fields of palm and sugar cane, and beyond, the Indian Ocean. This is a side of Mauritius I've not seen before: heady hikes, blissful solitude, abundant greenery and panoramic views. It's not what most people come here for — but for me, at least, it's a stronger draw than even the most polished beach-side resort. **HR**

PREVIOUS PAGES:

Tsarabanjina Island, Madagascar

FROM LEFT: Hiking Montagne Bambous from Otentic Mountain; Chamarel Waterfall, Mauritius

📍 Tents at Otentic Mountain cost from Rs6,000 (£133) a night, B&B, with some activities included. otentic.mu
Air Mauritius, British Airways, and TUI Airways fly direct from London to Mauritius from around £500 return. airmauritius.com ba.com tui.co.uk
Mauritius Conscious create eco-friendly, tailor-made packages. mauritiusconscious.com





02 | MADAGASCAR: IN THE JUNGLE OF RARITIES

A clattering cough, like a flock of angry pheasants. Strident chirps followed by soft, nasal grunts. A screech like a horse, a wild boar and a teething baby rolled into one. I've been eager to see Masoala National Park's lemurs, but I had no idea that hearing them would be extraordinary, too.

The screech belongs to the white-belted black-and-white-ruffed lemur, a primate that looks magnificent when hurling itself through the rainforest canopy. The chirps and grunts are the call of the white-fronted brown lemur, which sports a cute balaclava of fluffy, white fur. The clattering cough, I discover, belongs to the red-ruffed lemur. It's a Masoala speciality, critically endangered and extremely rare.

"Jumping, jumping, jumping," yells Felix. When it comes to live nature commentary, sometimes simplest is best, and my local guide has just the right touch. Ask him a question and he offers information galore, but when something exciting is happening, he sticks to rapid whispers, urgent gestures and big, toothy smiles.

Right now, there's excitement all around us. A large group of red-ruffed lemurs — impressive creatures with teddy bear fur, dachshund-like faces and enormous black tails — are racing through the trees with extravagant leaps. Sounding the alarm, they disappear before we know it. It's enough to leave me breathless.

Covering most of a sizeable peninsula in northeastern Madagascar, Masoala contains around 900sq miles of rainforest, full of illusions and peculiarities. It can only be explored on foot, but it's so remote that few people ever do. Venturing along its narrow, dappled paths, I get a strong sense that in this jungle of rarities, I'm a rarity too.

The lemurs operate a shift system. The ones staring down at me now like Cheshire Cats will dissolve into the shadows at dusk, just as other species — invisible for now, ensconced in tree-trunk hollows and forks — start to appear, their eyes glowing like tiny lamps in our torch beams.

Many other creatures thrive among Masoala's pallsander trees, orchids and clumps of wild ginger. Tree frogs shine

like tumbled stones on the leaves. Panther chameleons wobble precariously on twigs, and sometimes the dappled markings on the bark of a tree resolve into another oddity: a leaf-tailed gecko.

Felix, who is adept at spotting the seemingly impossible, can find these cryptic reptiles with ease. On an excursion to the island reserve of Nosy Mangabe, he discovers several; each time, my eyes struggle to see what he sees. Leaf-tailed geckos are prized by poachers, but their impeccable camouflage defeats all but the most determined. Equally elusive is the Peyrieras's pygmy chameleon — the colour of leaf litter and unbelievably tiny — but Felix promises to find me one and, to my astonishment, he succeeds.

My base for this wildlife adventure is Masoala Forest Lodge, a laid-back beach lodge with seven palm-thatched treehouses tucked amid the greenery. Scrupulously eco-friendly, it's built from sustainably harvested local materials, is largely solar-powered and the ovens are fuelled by deadwood. I divide my days between forest walks and kayaking forays along the coast on leafy creeks to spot parrots and kingfishers. Then, come nightfall, it's back into the forest to see what animals have emerged — the hairy-eared dwarf lemur, perhaps, or its cousin, the mouse lemur.

"When the day comes to an end, that's when really interesting things start happening," says Felix. Even aye-ayes — long-fingered lemurs that are normally very hard to see — are occasionally spotted near the lodge.

On our final evening, my companions and I feast on local fare, heaping raw papaya and rice onto ravenala palm leaves and eating the mixture with spoons fashioned from folded wild ginger fronds. And as the squeaks and whistles of mouse lemurs ring out from the forest, we add our own clinks to the chorus, toasting the good fortune that brought us to this precious place. **EG**

 Between April and December, Natural World Safaris offers a nine-day tailor-made trip to Madagascar from £3,380 per person. The price includes six nights at Masoala Forest Lodge on a full-board basis, excluding international flights. naturalworldsafaris.com

03 |

MALDIVES: TOP FIVE REASONS
TO VENTURE UNDERWATER**Join a research team**

Channel your inner Jacques Cousteau by joining hosts Dr Guy Stevens and his team of marine biologists on one of Four Seasons' Manta Trust Expeditions. On board luxury catamaran *Four Seasons Explorer* — essentially a floating PADI dive centre that also offers spa treatments and gourmet dining — you'll get to sail between atolls tracking manta rays. If you spot one the crew hasn't already logged, you'll get the chance to name it. Expeditions cater to up to 22 people and take place in September. mantatrust.org fourseasons.com

Dive Fotteyo Kandu

There are around 1,200 islands in the Maldives — enough dive sites for a lifetime (or three), but Fotteyo Kandu should near the top of your list. A narrow channel in Vavuu Atoll, it surprises with swim-throughs, overhangs and sea caves at depths of up to 130ft, (strong currents are possible, so this one is best for advanced divers only). You've got it all here, from soft, kaleidoscopic corals to groupers, reef sharks, eagle rays, triggerfish, and even the possibility of hammerheads. **POC**

Swim with whale sharks

Maamigili Island, at the bottom of South Ari Atoll, offers the opportunity to see the world's largest fish year-round. Lots of resorts in the area offer snorkelling and diving trips to feeding sites, while experienced (and deep-pocketed) divers may prefer to join a liveaboard or head out on a private charter. Sightings peak between August and November. diveworldwide.co.uk

Eat, sleep and spa with the fishes

It's possible to head beneath the waves without getting wet. Book a treatment at Huvafen Fushi, the world's first underwater spa, and look out onto a colourful reef; or sleep with the fishes at The Muraka, a two-level villa at Conrad Maldives Rangali Island with its own undersea bedroom. Elsewhere, SEA at Anantara Kihavah Maldives Villas offers an underwater dining experience amid a coral garden. huvafenfushi.com conradmaldives.com anantara.com

Catch some rays at Hanifaru Bay

Between May and November, during the southwest monsoon, the reef at Hanifaru Bay Marine Protected Area acts like a funnel, filling up with plankton. This attracts hundreds of manta rays and whale sharks, which gather here to feed. Approved guides must accompany visitors and diving isn't allowed, just snorkelling.

FROM LEFT: Diving with manta rays; close-up view of a soft coral at Vaavu Atoll; Aldabra giant tortoise



04 | RODRIGUES: GIANT TORTOISE TRAILS

Africa's easternmost territory, Rodrigues, is a gem: thinly populated and dotted with sandy coves fringed by reefs, yet largely undiscovered by tourism. Part of Mauritius, the tiny island has an African flavour laced with European influences — English and French are spoken here, but the lingua franca is Creole.

Like the Seychelles, around 1,200 miles to the north west, Rodrigues is famous for its giant tortoises. In times past,

they were architects of the landscape, dispersing seeds and keeping vegetation in check. Sadly, the two endemic species have been extinct for over two centuries, but 500 Aldabra giant tortoises were shipped in from the Seychelles in 2007, and they've since multiplied to around 2,000. At the Francois Leguat Giant Tortoise and Cave Reserve, visitors get the chance to wander among them. Offshore, at La Passe St François, the island's best dive site, you can swim with huge tuna, unicorn fish, groupers and jacks. hayesandjarvis.co.uk EG

