

Travel

Get ready **TO EXPLORE** *Australia and the world*

A perfect pairing

WORDS *by* LYNN GAIL

The road less travelled delves into culture, timeless belief systems and rare wildlife in Africa's twin islands: Madagascar and Mauritius.

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From top: Rice paddy fields at Anja Community Reserve, Madagascar; Zebu cattle pull carts through the Reniala Nature Reserve; Isalo National Park. Opposite page: Baobab trees in an ancient landscape.

MADAGASCAR



Can anything be more spellbinding? A cheetah's sudden sprint-to-kill, a baby elephant tucked under its mother's trunk, or the magnificent mane of a lion backlit by a blazing sunset. All are associated with Africa, the continent famed for its safaris and sands. But pencil a straight line through the Indian Ocean from Western Australia, and you'll find other, just as exciting alternatives to the mainland. Africa's very own M&Ms – Madagascar and Mauritius – make the most gracious of unidentical twins. Peppered with coastal playgrounds, eyebrow-raising traditions, rare ecosystems, and landscapes that will make your jaw plunge – you'll be charmed, hook, line and sinker.

World's fourth largest island

Step ashore on Madagascar and you'll likely feel you've slipped back to a time before modern-day technology

dominated our lives. Breaking away from the mainland around 150 million years ago and separated by more than 400km, the teardrop-shaped island is akin to an orchestra – each location plays its own melody. Misty rainforests, lowlands, highlands, vast deserts, dry forests and stone forests are all part of the ensemble. Add Asian influences, and a certain *je ne sais quoi* from the French (who colonised the nation

during the 19th century) and Madagascar awaits discovery.

Lovable lemurs

We've all heard of the blockbuster movie, *Madagascar*, starring the animated ring-tailed lemur, King Julien. Head to Isalo National Park in the southwest to sit among them as they forage, flicking their long ring-marked tails. At the Andasibe National Park rainforest, tick species off your lemur list: Red-bellied, Eastern Lesser Bamboo, Golden





Bamboo, and the impossibly cute Black-and-White Ruffed kind. The haunting dolphin-like call of the Indri, the world's largest lemur, will stop you in your tracks – what a magical moment that is!

Tribal matters

If you're a culture addict, learn about the Malagasy people's multilayered society. Eighteen different tribes each write their own narrative – no two are the same. Wander through villages with Monopoly-shaped mud huts, bustling cities, and townships with timber-clad houses, and learn about their strange rituals. One is Famadihana, where every five-to-seven years tribes dig up their ancestors (protective spirits), down copious quantities of rum (the national tippie) and dance, clutching the bones before rewrapping them in silk. Madagascar's celebrations are joyous. Every Sunday, locals in



Clockwise: Ring-tailed lemurs; the Reniala Spiny Forest boasts a 1200-year-old baobab; a village with mud huts; Soatanana locals head to church.



Soatanana village in the Central Highlands dress in white, congregate in the streets and sing together as they head to church.

A layered land

Madagascar's landscape is as layered as its people. Book a guide and driver and allow time to explore its far-reaching regions. Toliara, a semi-arid area in the south, is lined with golden-hued beaches. See the Vezo fishermen head out in



dugout canoes guided by billowing patchwork sails – the sight is akin to the Spanish Armada. For nature aficionados the nearby Reniala Spiny Forest is home to a 1200-year-old baobab tree, thorny endemic octopus trees, and bizarre-looking spiny plants that take on an alien appearance at dusk. Drive across the stunning Central Highlands, which are topped with gigantic granite formations that look like a backdrop in the documentary series, *Walking with Dinosaurs*. It's so untouched, it feels like the beginning of time.

GETTY IMAGES. LYNN GAIL. SHUTTERSTOCK.

Travel

Africa's pocket rocket

Volcanic, mountainous and paradisaical in every sense, Mauritius, at 65km long and 45km wide, fits into its bigger twin almost 290 times – but it's been said that good things come in small packages. Visit on a stopover or stay a while – the tiny lagoon-edged landscape is lush from the inside out. Pack a holiday read – Mother Nature created white sandy beaches for indulgent downtime. They are postcard lookalikes with palm trees, balmy temperatures, and water so clear and ultra blue all you want to do is float around in it, or under it! Add a snorkel, the coral reefs teem with rainbow-coloured marine life.

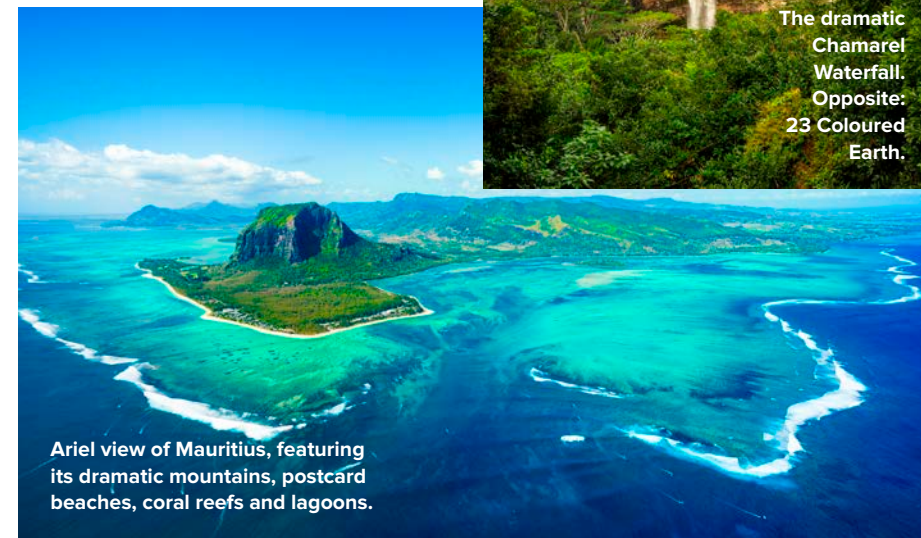
trek to Chamarel Waterfall. The 100-metre-high cascade is surrounded by thick forest alive with the sweet sounds of birds, gushing water and rustling wildlife. Feel the waterfall's cooling spray as you slip into the pool at its base or take to the air in a seaplane and discover the island's toothy peaks and jagged valleys from above. For a quieter experience, visit 23 Coloured Earth, where waves of volcanic matter have morphed into human-like contours. Golfers – tee up! Mauritius boasts the best courses in the Indian Ocean.

International affairs

Are you a history buff? Acting as a stepping stone to mainland Africa, Mauritius is a cultural mosaic. Over time it's been influenced by migrants from China, Britain, France, India and Holland – add Africa's traditions and its multicultural society offer travellers an immersive look into how a globally blended society works. The beautifully maintained Natural History Museum in the city of Port Louis traces history from the 16th century until the late 19th century. **AWW**

Adventurers, take your mark

If you're an adventurer, lace up your hiking boots, and say hello to nature in all its finery on a three-hour



Ariel view of Mauritius, featuring its dramatic mountains, postcard beaches, coral reefs and lagoons.



The dramatic Chamarel Waterfall. Opposite: 23 Coloured Earth.



Reaching the TREASURE ISLES

Mauritius is an eight-hour flight away from Perth, Western Australia, on Air Mauritius; the onward leg to Madagascar takes only two hours. Taxis and public transport are easily accessible in Mauritius, but you'll need a driver and guide to venture further than Antananarivo, Madagascar's capital city.

Kitchen creations

Madagascan and Mauritian culture has been influenced by many international settlers, and the result is a variety of cuisines. Try Madagascar's national dish, Romazava, a nourishing meat stew. Pastry lovers – French bakeries sell delectable treats all over Madagascar. In Mauritius, sample hearty traditional fare, 'table d'hôte', a homemade dinner served around a communal table. Visit the Biscuiterie H. Rault, a biscuit factory which has operated since 1870, and see its inner workings. The end result is delicious.



HISTORIC BISCUIT FACTORY



MADAGASCAR'S ROMAZAVA