

Chasing Light & Culture in Madagascar

Lynn Gail and Seng Mah describe what the exotic island of Madagascar is really like!

MADAGASCAR, THE FOURTH largest island in the world, has recently become a favourite destination for nature and wildlife photographers. It is home to flora and fauna found nowhere else in the world, including the lemurs made famous by the series of animated films by Dreamworks. But this island nation has more than just its animal and plant kingdoms to draw photographers; it's a geographically diverse country boasting landscapes that range from arid savannahs to misty highlands and coastlines fringed by the azure blue waters of the Indian Ocean. The island is home to 18 tribes, each with its own territory and unique cultures and traditions, which makes it

the perfect destination for photographers keen on discovering and embracing new cultures.

Antananarivo is the nation's capital. When you first touch-down in Tana (as it is known by the locals), it's not necessarily love at first sight. On leaving the chaos of the airport you head out on rugged roads where brickworks, zebu cattle, laundry and any kind of work that can make an Ariary or two (Madagascar's currency) is taking place. But like most rambling cities, when you find your way out, it's like turning the page of a long-awaited book where the story immediately draws you in.

The cool Central Highlands stretch far beyond what the eye can see and offer landscapes interspersed with gentle curves and terraced rice paddies. Many people can be seen along the roadside, often carrying tall baskets with their long arms reaching high into the air to hold them steady on their heads. Large family groups work alongside one another in



LEFT TO RIGHT: Octopus tree, Reniale Reserve, Tulear. Portrait of young mother and child, Ambalavao. Portrait of young woman carrying basket on head, Ambositra.



Portrait of young girl in field of long grass, Ambalavao.



Ifaty Fishing Village, Tulear, Madagascar.

the fields, thrashing and cultivating rice. A break in their daily workload is as much a highlight for them as it is for visitors wanting to interact. The women often have their faces painted in thanaka (a yellowish cosmetic paste made from ground bark) to protect their skin from the harsh elements and to maintain a youthful look. These captured roadside moments often make wonderful storytelling images and give viewers a window into how Malagasy people live.

People Photography

Many visitors and tourists are drawn to the exoticness of the people of Madagascar. Swathed in brightly coloured clothing, the Malagasy people are friendly and open to being photographed. With their welcoming smiles, bright eyes and brilliantly coloured costumes, they make great portrait subjects. Remember that while you are interested in them, the Malagasy people are most likely just as interested in you – visitors are a novelty in Madagascar and locals are happy to pose for you.

If you're a keen portrait photographer, then you'll know that the first step to taking a great portrait is by making an emotional connection with the person. The language barrier can pose an issue when you're travelling in Madagascar, where the national language is Malagasy. However, there are ways to connect that transcend languages – eye contact, body language, gestures, a general greeting and a warm and friendly smile can go a long way in helping you engage with the Malagasy people.

Have your camera ready and visible; then, a simple, "May I take your photo?" asked with a smile and a half-raise of your camera can help communicate your intentions very clearly.



Zebu and cart in countryside, Ambalavao.



People in cobbled street, Ambohimahasoia town.

Once you have made the connection, take the time to create portraits. Most of the hard work has already been done, so you can focus on light, composition and exposure. Shoot at eye level as this helps dignify your portrait subject – it asks the viewer to make direct eye contact with the person in the photograph and establishes a connection between viewer and subject.

When you've finished, show them the images you have taken – this helps extend the connection you have made and may open up further photographic opportunities; the people may happily pose a bit longer for you once they have seen the images you have created of them. Often, the best opportunities arise when you have lowered the camera, so always be prepared as your subject relaxes.

We find portraits are best taken at medium to long focal lengths, as these help you create flattering portraits and ensure that you're not impinging into the personal spaces of the people you're photographing. A 24-70mm f2.8 lens or 24-105mm f4.0 lens doubles as both a walkabout lens (at shorter focal lengths) and portrait lens (at longer focal lengths). Lenses that can open wide to f2.8 or f4.0 also let you isolate the portrait subject from background elements that might distract from their gaze, smile or expression!

Wildlife

The rainforests and national parks of Madagascar are home to wildlife and fauna not found anywhere else on the planet. There are over 100 different species of lemur, some of which get so close you'll feel their tails brush against you. The very vocal ring-tailed lemurs – so called for their bushy black and white ringed tails – are not shy of people and go about their

What's in the Bag?

If you're considering a photography trip to Madagascar, then you may want to consider packing the following in your camera bag:

- Wide-angle lens for landscapes.
- Medium telephoto zoom lens to use as a walk around and portrait lens.
- Telephoto lens if you're keen on capturing the wildlife and birdlife of the island.
- A dedicated macro lens for detail photography (it also doubles as a terrific portrait lens as many macro lenses can open up to f2.8).
- Circular polarising filter, especially if you're shooting near water or on blue sky days.
- Lens and camera cleaning kit, as some destinations in Madagascar can be dry and dusty, or warm and humid.
- Good quality travel tripod.

daily chores without a second glance. The average family has around 17 members and it is not uncommon to be able to sit amongst them as they forage for food on the ground. On Lemur Island, semi-tame, black and white ruffed lemurs will eat right from your hand – they have the most incredible piercing green eyes. Look deeper into the trees and you are likely to spot a chameleon in the midst of changing colour. Madagascar is home to around half the world's 150 species of chameleon.

One of the greatest drawcards in a visit to Madagascan forests and national parks is the experience of interacting with its indigenous wildlife. A versatile wide-angle zoom lens can help make sure that you're not missing moments because you've had to change lenses. In these instances, zoom lenses such as the 28-70mm, 24-105mm and 18-200mm (for APS-C sensor cameras) let you shoot flexibly and creatively in response to what you see.

Madagascar is also home to exotic birdlife, including the Madagascar Hoopoe, Crested Drongo and Madagascar Paradise Flycatcher. If you're into birding, a telephoto zoom lens is a must. While these lenses can be bulky and weighty,

they earn their keep when they allow you to hone in on a rare species of brilliantly coloured bird. These lenses tend to cover the 150-600mm focal range and are also great for photographing other animals in their habitat without disturbing their natural behaviour with your presence.

Don't discount the value of a good macro lens in Madagascar. Your travels through the island will put you in contact with flora that may seem beautiful from afar and appear even more alien and exotic when photographed up close with a dedicated macro lens. Macro lenses are prime lenses and, in comparison with telephoto zoom lenses, are a lot less bulky and won't take up much space in your camera bag. Bring one and you won't regret it!

Landscapes

In stark contrast to the highlands, Madagascar's ever-changing landscape in Isalo National Park offers spectacular grassy plains that are scattered with sandstone pillars which have been carved out by the wind and rain. It is rugged, rough and the earth takes on an amazing red glow as the sun rises and sets. The natural stratified rock formations in this vast landscape have even been likened to the beauty of the Grand Canyon.

The Reniala National Park near the town of Ifaty on the South West coast of Madagascar presents the iconic Madagascan landscape of baobab and octopus trees. These trees, with their bizarre and alien morphology, make great subjects when shot against a deep blue sky or a warm sunset. Visitors to Reniala often comment on how its unique landscape and vegetation makes them feel as if they have landed on another planet!

Epic landscapes are best shot with wide-angle lenses, to help you show the breadth of an amazing view within a single frame. We shoot wide-field landscapes with 16-35mm lenses on full-frame cameras and 10-20mm or 12-24mm lenses on smaller sensor cameras. The trick to creating great wide-angle landscapes is to make sure that there is something interesting

near you that you can use as a dominant foreground subject. It may be a baobab tree or a sandstone pillar. Make sure that the light is right (side lighting works best to help mould the shape of the subject), focus on the foreground subject and let the rest of the scene form the beautiful and unique backdrop in your landscape.

Landscapes are also shot for deep depth-of-field, so you'll need to consider how close the foreground subject is to your camera. The closer it is to your camera, the smaller the aperture you'll need to shoot with in order to ensure a depth-of-field that extends far into your scene. It's not uncommon to shoot at f14 or f16 aperture values, particularly if the foreground subject is mere metres from your camera.

On the Coast

Just when you feel you've witnessed a variety of ever-changing landscapes, you come across the sparkling turquoise waters of Southern Madagascar and home to the Vezo Tribe – the people of the sea. You check the calendar, the year, the date – because when you look out over the coast, there's a scene straight out of the history books akin to the Spanish Armada! Wooden boats with tall patchwork sails line the shore one after the other. The water's edge is a hive of activity as the whole family is there from when they learn to walk, until they cannot walk anymore, to help bring in the daily catch.

When you shoot at coastal regions, have a circular polarising filter (CPL filter) with you. The filter works best when you're shooting with the sun roughly 90 degrees to the camera axis and it will bring out the rich blues of the sky and water by removing glare and reflection in the scene.

Close by is the UNESCO school, but sadly not many children attend as the government stopped making schooling compulsory. However, the children who do attend are eager to learn. The sight of visitors is an occasion they relish – their bright eyes soak up every moment; the excitement is palpable and they love to show off their harmonious singing voices. At every turn, there is a story unfolding right in front of you as people carry out their daily routines, so make sure you have your camera ready.

From your first to your last impressions of Madagascar and everything in-between, there will likely be a quaint town or mud village, a rugged landscape, or the pure warmth of its culturally intact people that draws you into this extraordinary land. It is quite possible you'll want to return several times to explore and scratch beneath the surface of an island that's infused with European, Asian and African influences, enhancing its already unique flavour.

Lynn Gail and Seng Mah run cultural photography tours to unique destinations, including Arnhem Land, Madagascar, Cambodia and Christmas Island. Lynn is a professional travel photographer and writer who is published in Australian Traveller Magazine, Get Up and Go Magazine and Get Lost Magazine. She is represented by two of the world's leading photographic agencies: Getty Images and Robert Harding World Imagery. Seng is a photography educator who runs workshops and retreats for photographers of all levels. He runs a studio in Fremantle, Western Australia, and specialises in travel and portrait photography. In 2016 Lynn and Seng will be taking small groups to Madagascar and to the Yolngu homelands of East Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory.



LEFT TO RIGHT: Ring-tailed lemur in Anja National Park, Ambalavao. Cultural women dancers in Ambohimahasoa. Baobab Tree.



Cultural Connections Photography Tours with Lynn Gail and Seng Mah invite you to experience the wonder of travel and the magic that happens when photography puts you in touch with people and cultures in unique parts of our world.

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