

# The Vezo Tribe – People of the Sea

WITH GLOBALISATION RAPIDLY SWEEPING AWAY LIFELONG CULTURES IN A RACE TO KEEP UP WITH AN EVER CHANGING PLANET, MADAGASCAR IS INNOCENTLY TICKING AWAY IN ITS OWN TIMEFRAME. WE VISIT AN AGE OLD CULTURE THAT MAKES UP ONE OF THE ISLAND'S 18 TRIBES – THE VEZO PEOPLE.

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I am trying to focus on the constant stream of changing sights along the ridiculously bumpy road ahead and not this morning's churning scrambled eggs. I want to holler: stop! But I can't decide whether I need to run into the scrub quickly or photograph the line of colourfully dressed Malagasy women walking towards me carrying heavy bundles of straw on their heads. On my left there is a zebu (Malagasy cow) pulling a cart with a long thin dugout canoe on top; two men wrapped in thick woollen blankets are sitting inside. On my right, a bush taxi is bouncing along carrying too many fares – it is barely visible under all the people hanging off.

This is my first visit to Madagascar, the fourth largest island in the world, and I'm hooked! We arrive in Ifaty, home to the Vezo tribe who make up one of Madagascar's 18 unique tribes. The Vezo, meaning people of the sea, rely almost entirely on the lagoon and coral reef system, which stretches over 185km along the south western coast of the island, for their livelihood.

We set sail over the lagoon to visit Mangily fishing village and the UNESCO

school. Due to a change in presidents in recent years, the majority of Vezo people do not send their children to school; only a handful attend lessons where previously, primary school had been made compulsory. In a village where, people live in tiny grass huts that could collapse in a strong breeze, education could make a substantial difference to how they live.

Apart from the engine's low hum and swishing water at the boat's rear, all I can hear is quiet. The silky calm water has lulled us into silence. The water is so clear it looks as though it would shatter if I lean over and run my fingers through its glassy surface.

"Still the engines", shouts our guide, Diary (pronounced dee-r-ee) who never misses an opportunity to show off his amazing country. Diary throws himself in the water and comes up with a smile almost as big as the 20cm starfish in his hand. It is so perfect, it does not look real. This extensive eco-system has more than 6000 species of wildlife living in the reef system.

The quiet quickly changes to excited chatter as we pull up on the chaotic shore of Mangily. Scenes from yesteryear lay in



Sorting the daily catch and rolling up nets.



Malagasy woman has applied thanaka paste as sunscreen.





Local bus known as the 'bush taxi'.



Vezo man toting long grass.



Zebu cattle pull canoes through Mangily Village.





Homemade patchwork sail.



Preparing a dug-out canoe.

front of us as we are greeted by happy, giggling children. Dugout canoes carved from Baobab trees with their patchwork sails are either leaving or returning – nets are being hauled in, live fish are flapping about and children are swallowing them live! In the UNESCO school, the bright-eyed, eager children who fill only a quarter of the basic class room are so excited to see visitors. Like little sponges, I watch as they soak up every English word being taught to them; they almost sing them as they repeat each sound.

It's a humbling moment to witness a community working so closely together. If the richness of village life can be measured by the strength of its community and cultural values, then the Vezo tribe are indeed prosperous people. Maintaining family ties is one of the most important aspects of their lives as the young look after the old. Elders are greatly respected and called upon for important ceremonies and spiritual direction. While they are taught various ways on how to improve

their existence by visiting westerners, I feel we could also learn from their 'back to basics' family values! Their way of life begs the question – Does westernisation suffer from a breakdown of strong family communities? Are we being overtaken by a selfishness that results in nursing homes in their highest numbers ever yet recorded?

To witness a village so materialistically poor yet so rich in humanity, makes you question your own lifestyle and opens

your eyes a little wider to the world around you.

As we enjoy freshly cooked lobster on a balcony overlooking the azure waters of the Indian Ocean, I can't help but think that perhaps the balance of the scales is somewhat askew – maybe they have it right, maybe we have it wrong – or vice versa. Either way, Madagascar is brimming with treasures waiting to be discovered. •

*Lynn travelled courtesy of Travel Directors.*





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