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Only in Madagascar



Robin Hammond for The New York Times

Pirates have left the island of Ste. Marie, but the spectacular beaches remain.

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The hotel we stayed at, the **Princess Bora Lodge**, had a beautiful pool and beach and comfy bungalows. On our last day, the hotel manager gave me a map of the island, marking the old church, the lighthouse and a pirate cemetery.



I set off, taking the turnoff from the main road and then walking past a deserted soccer field and a few ramshackle [fishing](#) huts before crossing a tiny bridge made from an iron beam that led to a narrow path. About 10 minutes later, it opened up into a palm grove, littered with very old-looking graves.

One was carved with a smiling skull and crossbones: Joseph Pierre Le Chartier; Died 1834. There were vines creeping across the blackened gravestones, slowly pulling them back to the jungle.

The American divers had warned me that the graves may not actually be those of pirates. But it didn't really matter. It was like the miles and miles of Madagascar's rain forest being the draw, not just the lemurs. The cemetery was profoundly soothing, positioned on a peninsula, the glassy bay spreading out on three sides, the sound of the tide nibbling at the shore, and a gentle breeze cutting through the trees.

I could see why the pirates, or whoever, had picked this place as an eternal resting spot. It made you never want to leave.

IF YOU GO

Many of the flights to Antananarivo Airport in Madagascar come out of Johannesburg or Nairobi. Peruse an Air Madagascar (airmadagascar.com) timetable before finalizing your itinerary, so you can connect between destinations without burning up unnecessary one-night layovers in the capital.

TOURS

We used a Madagascar-based tour operator, **Boogie Pilgrim** (261-20-22-530-70; boogiepilgrim-madagascar.com). They booked hotels, arranged for drivers to cart us around and handled all internal flights. Another guide option is a young independent operator, **Manitra Andriamialisoa** (261-32-472-4707; manitra.andriamialisoa@fulbrightmail.org), whom we met in the jungle in Andasibe. His English is impeccable and he runs small tours.

WHERE TO STAY

Our favorite hotel in Madagascar was the boutique **La Varangue**, in Antananarivo, the capital (261-20-22-273-97; www.tana-hotel.com). The chef is world-class, the rooms are quite comfy, and it is perched on a hilltop within walking distance of street markets and the main square. A room for one or two starts at 64 euros (or \$84 at \$1.31 to the euro).

Another good option in the capital is **Hôtel Colbert**, a full-service hotel with a [spa](#) (261-20-22-202-02; hotel-luxe-madagascar.com). Standard rooms start at 98 euros. This place has a patisserie that seems straight off the Champs-Élysées.

In Andasibe, we stayed at the **Vakona Forest Lodge** (261-20-22-624-80; hotelvakona.com), which has wonderful grounds to explore and a sense of tranquillity. Rooms start at 55 euros in January and February and at 65 euros the rest of the year.

On Ste. Marie, bungalows at the **Princesse Bora Lodge & Spa**, stretched along a pristine beach (www.princessebora.com; 261-20-57-04-003) start at 130 euros for doubles.

VACCINATIONS AND INFORMATION

A good site for tourist information is wildmadagascar.org.

There is malaria in Madagascar, so you may want to take a prescription malaria prophylaxis like Malarone or Lariam. The [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) has information at <http://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/destinations/madagascar.aspx>.

The State Department suggests that travelers “should maintain security awareness at all times and should avoid political gatherings and street demonstrations.” It warns of crime, but adds that Madagascar is “by and large, safer than many other African countries and even certain U.S. cities.”

Find the whole article and photos on :

<http://travel.nytimes.com/2010/12/19/travel/19madagascar.html?pagewanted=1&hpw>