



Into the unknown

Go to a small island, then take a speedboat to a smaller island: Tsarabanjina

From the harbour of Hell-Ville (named after French admiral Anne-Chrétien Louis de Hell, who was governor of La Reunion from 1838 to 1841), with the older but still more common name of Andoany, the main town of Nosy Be, it's a 90-minute speedboat ride to the Mitsio ('unknown') Islands, an archipelago and marine reserve.

Eugene Yiga was a guest of Airlink (flyairlink.com), MadagasCaT Charters & Travel (madagascats.co.za) and Constance Tsarabanjina (constancehotels.com)

That transfer was like a journey to the edge of the world. One of the Italian passengers had a shirt that said 'Follow Your Dream', while another had a tattoo saying something about love. Perhaps this was a sign that everything would be okay. Indeed, after the 60km trip into the middle of nowhere, we realised that things would be better than we ever imagined.

That's because we could finally see signs of life, slowly growing larger as we approached. On the beach, there was a line of people waving their arms above their

heads. These weren't the frantic waves of people glad to be rescued; they were the calm but enthusiastic waves of people welcoming us to their home. This was Nosy Tsarabanjina, which rightly translates as 'the island that is beautiful to see'.

Isolation and incorporation

In 1990, a South African adventurer 'discovered' the island, fell in love with it, and decided to create a hotel there. The plan was to build in such a way that the property was integrated into the natural environment (less plastic, more wood) and highlighted the features of Malagasy culture. Despite the challenge of construction in such an isolated place, he opened Tsarabanjina L'Hotel in 1998.

After eight years, he passed the torch to Constance Hotels & Resorts. Following a major refurbishment in 2013, the resort is now one of the region's highlights,



with half the staff who took part in the original building still employed.

Each of the 25 luxury villas looks out to the sea. The private terraces are perfect for reading or yoga, while the outdoor hammocks are ideal for delicious afternoon naps. You can also take your own staircase down to a dedicated portion of the white beach, to soak up the sun and embrace the fact that the island's time zone is one hour ahead of the rest of Madagascar, just to give you some extra daylight bliss.

Despite its isolation, there's plenty to enjoy at Constance Tsarabanjina. First, you can explore by air with a half-hour helicopter tour (they also offer helicopter transfers straight from the airport). Back down on the ground, you can explore on foot with a guided walk around the island. While some choose to run this route, it's a bit tricky with sharp rocks. It's far better to take your time (as long as you time the tide).





Nosy Be and its nearby islands offer the same postcard prettiness as more established destinations

A stroll with resort manager Henri Arnulphy gave us a chance to see the aspects of the island we might have missed. These included a beach area that hosts weddings as well the tomb of an ancient Sakalava king. Given that half the country's population practises traditional religion, which emphasises the links between the living and the ancestors, it's not surprising that many still bring offerings to this site.

All the time on your feet is a good way to justify a Tsara massage with semi-precious stones, or to set yourself up for the final way to explore: by sea. From catamarans and kayaks to cruises in a traditional pirogue, there's plenty to do on – and in – the water.

The resort offers scuba diving options for beginners and seasoned pros, but the easiest excursion is to go snorkelling. Despite the fact that I'd only done it a few times in my life, I couldn't pass up on another opportunity after the wonderful experiences I'd already had on the trip. So we skipped the short introduction that they offer to newbies in the lagoon and went straight to marvel at the creatures on the coral reef that's rightly called 'The Garden'.

Eat, drink and be merry

All this activity builds up an appetite. The resort has an all-inclusive package that allows you to eat, drink and be merry without worrying about any extra costs. Breakfast features a full buffet, while lunch is a cold buffet with a daily grill on demand. But dinner (shoes optional) is the real highlight of the day.

From zebu fillet roasted with red wine reduction and sautéed green beans to trevally fillet flavoured with lime zest and ratatouille, each dish is a treat. Don't forget to save room for desserts like white chocolate cheesecake or frozen lemon soufflé! And there are special evenings where starters are served on the beach, accompanied by Malagasy music and a few brave guests dancing with the staff.

There's also plenty to enjoy at the bar, which is open from 7am 'until the last guest' and features a long list of engraved plaques from regular visitors. If you're staying long enough, you can try all the specialty rums and signature cocktails. Or just try them all anyway, happy in the fact that being stranded on a tropical island never felt so good.

Text | **Eugene Yiga** Photography | **Supplied**

How to get there



Airlink connects Nosy Be with Johannesburg. See page 91 for the flight schedule
www.flyairlink.com