NOT YOUR USUAL TROPICAL ISLAND GETAWAY...

by

Maurice Schutgens

Friday, 01 March 2019
The Comoros. It’s a name that conjures up a rich history of mighty sultans who once ruled over a melting pot of different cultures on islands at the end of the world. A volcanic archipelago off Africa’s east coast, the Comoros is made up of three major islands, called by their French names: Grande Comore (Ngazidja), Mohéli (Mwali), and Anjouan (Nzwani). Once an important trading post in the 15th century for Arab, African and European traders, today Comoros lies far off the beaten track, bringing no more than 3,000 tourists per year to its wild shores. And yet here I was.

“What is your purpose for visiting Comoros?” the immigration official asked, bored.

“Tourism” I replied cheerfully.

She raised her eyebrows but didn’t say anything. She handed back my passport, “Bienvenue a Comoros”.

The first thing I did was to try and get my hands on a car to get around. I
approached a booth that claimed to hire out vehicles from a reputable company. The man behind the booth was reluctant.

“Too expensive,” he said, as if by the look of my appearance he could tell that my budget would not suffice.

“My brother has a car however that you could rent… much cheaper,” he suggested hopefully.

And so it was. No paperwork. No hassle. And only €40 cash in hand. The car, however, was an absolute liability. No wing mirror, questionable brakes and generally a poor disposition to roadworthiness. It was perfect.

I spent the next four days exploring Grande Comore, the main island of Comoros, with Moroni as its hustling and bustling capital city. While the main attractions were concentrated in the north of the island I first headed south as storm clouds loomed over the horizon.
Clockwise from top left: 1) The main harbour in Moroni with the Ancienne Mosquee du Vendredi (Old Friday Mosque) in the background; 2) Palms line the blue azure waters of the Comoros; 3) The Zawiyani ya Salmata Hamissi Mosque in Moroni; 4) Dazzling white sandy beaches of Grande Comore. All photos © Maurice Schurgens

Just outside of Moroni I came upon the village of Iconi, home to the impressive 16th century ruins of the Palais de Kaviridjeo where the mighty Sultan of Bambao once ruled. The ruins are overlooked by steep cliffs where it is said women once leapt to their deaths to avoid being sold into slavery by Malagasy pirates.

Further south I explored the village of Sangani, a small village partly destroyed by one of Mount Karthala’s (an active volcano) eruptions in recent times. I continued south on increasingly deteriorating roads to the village of Chindini on the far south of the island. Then I ran out of fuel…

The tropical rain poured down with a vengeance as I negotiated prices with some local vendors for some fuel held in yellow jerrycans. The rain was beautifully warm. Soon I was on my way again and headed up the east coast. The road all but disappeared but I was distracted by the beauty of Mount Karthala’s flanks that dominate the south. A blend of vibrant greens and earthy browns punctuated with the odd hidden cove. It was a truly wild island.

It was then that I started to notice that the roads were littered with the carcasses of countless vehicles, left to the mercy of the elements. The driving was of a frighteningly terrible standard in Comoros but there was more to this story. So I asked a local taxi driver.
“These cars come from France, when they break we cannot get the spare parts to fix them so we just abandon them next to the road,” he told me nonchalantly.

This made a lot of sense. Comoros is a graveyard of vehicles.

To the north I drove along empty roads to the famous Mitsamioula beach. Sadly, like most of Comoros it was covered in plastic and rubbish due to a lack of a proper waste management system. I pushed on to Maloudja, a palm tree-lined beach which was absolutely stunning (read: less plastic). I walked along the three perfect bays that led to the *Trou du Prophe	ext{t}e* (Hole of the Prophet) where the Prophet Muhammad is said to have sought refuge behind some tall rocks in the bay from marauding pirates.

Along the way I took a peek at the abandoned house of former mercenary Bob Denard (who launched four attempted coups in Comoros). Comoros has endured an extremely colourful political history averaging a *coup d'état* – by assassination or otherwise – every two years since 1975. Delightful.

I pushed on to *Lac Salé* (Salt Lake) – a stunning little coastal crater lake – and hiked up the *Dos du Dragon* (Dragon’s Back), the aptly named spine of the sleeping dragon. The views are incredible from the top.
Mount Karthala volcano looms large over the southern part of Grand Comore, its imposing presence a constant reminder of the fury that bubbles just below the surface. I simply could not resist the opportunity to look down from its crater rim, usually lost in the clouds above.

But it would not be easy, it was a 32 km hike. By 3am we were on the trail heading up in the cool of night. Over the next six hours we climbed over 2,000 metres in altitude until we reached the rim. The crater was breathtaking and according to my guide due to erupt soon.
Clockwise from top left: 1) A local walks through a narrow street in Moroni; 2) Mount Karthala is an active volcano and the highest point of the Comoros at 2,361 metres above sea level, this is the view into the crater; 3) Singani village built upon ancient lava flows; 4) The impressive 16th century ruins of the Palais de Kaviridjeo; 5) The ancient crater lake of Lac Salé in northern Grande Comore. All photos © Maurice Schutgens

On my last day on the main island I explored Moroni. The town is gritty and busy, especially in the chaotic Volo Volo Market, but the locals are friendly. I spent several hours aimlessly strolling through the quiet Old Town that leads to the iconic landmark in the harbour: the Ancienne Mosquee du Vendredi (Old Friday Mosque) dating back to 1427. While the streets cannot rival the beauty of Zanzibar there are just enough ancient Zanzibar doors to remind me of it.
The old town is an oasis of calm within the city.

And so, my time on Grande Comoro came to an end, and now it was time to move onto my next adventure: exploring the island of Mohéli, the third island that together with Grande Comore and Anjouan forms the archipelago of Comoros.

Paradise Found

An imposing mountain ridge of impenetrable green jungle bisects the island, isolated beaches lie undiscovered in secluded bays and some of the most incredible coral reefs in the Indian Ocean thrive just below the surface. This is Mohéli. Make no mistake, it is paradise, visited by fewer than 400 tourists a year… but getting to this paradise isn't always so easy.
“What time is your flight?” the check-in lady at Prince Said International Airport enquired, barely looking up.

“1pm” I replied confidently.

A look of confusion spread over her face, “There is no plane at 1pm, wait me here”.

I had been told flying within Comoros could be a bit hit-and-miss, mostly miss. In the past the infrequent traveller had also had the choice of making the crossing to neighbouring islands on rickety, less than sea-worthy motorboats, but due to the poor safety records the government, probably wisely, put a stop to this. As such the plane was the only way. Given my original flight had already been cancelled and rescheduled this was not promising news.

Nevertheless, an hour later a plane with a pilot had been located that could take me across to Mohéli. But I had to hurry. It was leaving in 5 minutes. I grabbed my luggage and ran.
My 10-seater caravan touched down on the tarmac strip in Fomboni after a 20-minute flight and we were directed to an unassuming yellow building with a rusty sign: Mohéli International Airport. I was given the third degree by a policeman who questioned the purpose of my visit, made to fill out a document especially for foreigners and told to learn more French for my next visit.

I promised I would.
A car was waiting to whisk me away. We left Fomboni behind and headed southeast to circumnavigate the island to the diminutive and laid-back village of Nioumachoua (home to Laka Lodge) that looked out across at the islands of Mohéli Marine Park. It was an hour and 30 minutes over a terrible road through a tropical rainstorm. Rain pelted our little car as I caught glimpses of some incredibly remote and wild stretches of coastline.

Laka Lodge was an oasis of calm on the southern part of Mohéli with simple bungalows situated just off the beach. I would manage five days just fine but first I had to attend a local Comorian wedding taking place in the centre of town. It was a colourful affair with much dancing!

The days passed in a heartbeat. Morning runs in the sweltering humidity, followed by snorkelling with turtles in the bay followed by watching magical sunsets from nearby viewpoints as the kids from the village played a game of football on the beach down below.
Clockwise from top left: 1) The main green turtle nesting beach at Itsamia; 2) Crossing over from Mohéli to Leprosy Island for scuba diving; 3) Viewpoint overlooking the lush vegetation of Mohéli during the drive from Fomboni to Nioumachoua; 4) In 2001 Mohéli Marine Park was the first protected area established in Comoros, and is home to a staggering diversity of life including green sea turtles, manta rays and whales; 5) The locals playing a game of football on the beach. All photos © Maurice Schutgens

The highlight of the trip was, however, the diving. Mohéli Marine Park, established in 2001 as the first National Park of Comoros, is home to some of the healthiest coral still left in the Indian Ocean (it is part of the northern Mozambique channel) and frequently visited by humpback whales, green sea turtles and manta rays.

A 15-minute traverse over to Leprosy Island – yes, you read that right: a place where unlucky sufferers were sent to either heal or die… given the graveyard it was mostly the latter. The graveyard is gradually being eroded by the waves, leading to somewhat morbid discoveries every once in a while. The coral just off the island, however, is magical.

On more than one occasion we prepared our gear and rolled back over the edge of the boat into the crystal clear waters, dropping down quickly to coral outcrops beneath that teemed with a staggering variety of fish. The hours spent underwater were over in a flash and it was with some sadness that I kicked for the surface, leaving such beauty behind.

On my final night we travelled to the fishing village of Itsamia, a place where the endangered green sea turtle comes and nests all year round. Under a moonlit night we watched a prehistoric creature haul herself up the beach, lay her precious eggs and exhaustedly return to the depths of the ocean. It was a humbling experience to witness.
Clockwise from left: A green sea turtle lays her eggs on the beach at Itsamia; 2) Stars shine through palm trees on Mohéli; 3) A serene atmosphere on a beach on Mohéli. All photos © Maurice Schutgens

Mohéli is everything you could want from an island getaway: remote, undeveloped, unspoiled and absolutely wild. It is a place that would normally exist only in people’s imaginations. But we are lucky, for it exists.

The Comoros remains undiscovered, for now… but there is incredible beauty to be found and one day people will come in large numbers. I’m certain of it. For now you have the opportunity to have the country almost completely for yourself. One simply has to go, I’m glad I did.
ABOUT THE COMOROS

The Comoros, known officially as the Union of the Comoros, is a little-known archipelago that consists of a group of volcanic islands at the northern end of the Mozambique Channel of the Indian Ocean, between Madagascar and the southeast African mainland, about 290 km off the eastern coast of Africa. The islands from northwest to southeast include Grande Comore (N’gazidja), Mohéli (Mwali), Anjouan (Ndzuwani), and Mayotte (Mahore).

Mayotte, geographically part of the Comoros archipelago, is claimed by Comoros but is administered by France.

Sometimes referred to as the ‘perfumed islands’ due to the fragrant plant life, the Comoros was an important trading post for Arab, Persian, African and European traders from the 15th century onwards. In the 19th century three of the islands were annexed by the French, hence their names – Grande Comore, Mohéli and Anjouan – while their Comorian language names are given in parentheses. In 1975 they gained independence, though Mayotte, the fourth island, remained a French territory.

Created through volcanic activity over the ages, the Comoros is a nature-lover’s paradise. From stunning coral reefs that offer exquisite diving experiences to uninterrupted white sandy beaches, dense forests and active volcanoes. That said, the Comoros does not have a well-developed tourist industry. Less than 3,000 tourists pass through the archipelago each year as visitors looking for an island experience in the region rather choose destinations such as Réunion, Mauritius, the Seychelles, or Madagascar.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR, MAURICE SCHUTGENS

Born in the Netherlands but raised at the end of a tarmac road in a remote Ugandan village, Maurice was always going to end up living in Africa. After a brief stint in Europe he returned to this great continent to pursue a Master’s in Conservation Biology at the University of Cape Town, which was followed by several years of traipsing across the globe in search of adventure and stunning wild places. For the last few years Maurice has been based in Kenya and is working towards securing a future for African elephants and the landscapes on which they depend. He is a passionate conservationist, amateur explorer and his camera is always with him! You can follow more of his adventures on Facebook and on his website.
BEST PHOTOS OF THE WEEK

by
Africa Geographic Editorial
Friday, 01 March 2019
Our Photographer of the Year 2019 competition, brought to you by Airlink, with a stunning prize provided by Klaserie Drift Safari Camps, is now open for submissions!

The competition runs from December 2018 through to the end of April 2019, and there is a great prize up for grabs! The overall winner, first runner-up, and second runner-up (along with their partners), will experience the ultimate private safari at Amani Safari Camp and the soon-to-be-launched Misava Safari Camp, located in the heart of the Klaserie Private Nature Reserve, part of the Greater Kruger National Park in South Africa.

Read about the safari enjoyed by the 2018 winners here.

Get your entries in now and join us in celebrating Africa! Click here for more details about how to enter.
“Brave” – a black-backed jackal sneaks unobtrusively amongst sparring elephant bulls to catch an unsuspecting guineafowl at a waterhole in Savuti, Chobe National Park, Botswana © Jackie Badenhorst

Up close and personal with Boswell, a famous elephant bull of Mana Pools National Park, Zimbabwe © Artur Stankiewicz

“George jumping because it was his favourite time of the day” – Sossusvlei, Namib-Naukluft National Park, Namibia © Caleb Shepard
A Cape buffalo at dawn, Maasai Mara National Reserve, Kenya © Andreas Hemb

A lioness rips off the last scraps from a sable antelope’s rib case in Chobe National Park, Botswana © Fred von Winckelmann

Two grey herons fight over the perfect fishing spot on a hippo in Mana Pools National Park, Zimbabwe © Lennart Hessel
“Up and away over Sossusvlei as the sun rises over this spectacular, glorious, ancient red-dune desert” – Namib-Naukluft National Park, Namibia © Reneé Dodd

An elephant spotted by the river in Lower Zambezi National Park, Zambezi © Kevin Dooley
A juvenile bateleur suns itself in Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park, South Africa © Michael Wessels

Wildebeests run down a very steep riverbank to cross the Mara River in Maasai Mara National Reserve, Kenya © Hesté de Beer

A lone cheetah crosses the vast salt pan in Etosha National Park, Namibia © Schalk Lombard

A majestic lion spotted in Serengeti National Park, Tanzania © Susie Dillon
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her cub in South Luangwa National Park, Zambia © Derryn Nash

“Tasty treats” – elephants snack on water lilies in Okavango Delta, Botswana © Amanda Cotman

“One of the hardest things to watch” – an elephant youngster is taken down by lions in Moremi Game Reserve, Botswana © Fred von Winckelmann

Early morning climbers at Dune 45 in Sossusvlei,
A leopard strolls through a dew-laden grass at sunrise in Maasai Mara National Reserve, Kenya © Artur Stankiewicz

A dancing grey crowned crane in Hwange National Park, Zimbabwe © Derryn Nash

“Blind and deafening” – a rhino about to be dehorned in northern KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa © Caleb Shepard
“Thirsty fellow” in Tsavo West National Park, Kenya © Tim Nicklin

Two painted wolves (African wild dogs) with their kill in Savuti, Chobe National Park, Botswana © Margie Botha

“Surreal sunset with a 360-degree isolation experience” in Makgadikgadi Pans National Park, Botswana © Amanda Cotman
A spotted hyena digs into a carcass after the lions had had their fill in Kruger National Park, South Africa © Cheryl Lawson

Salt caravans begin their westwards journey just before sunset to avoid the intense heat of the day, Danakil Depression, Ethiopia © Hesté de Beer

A male leopard on patrol in Sabi Sands Private Game Reserve, South Africa © Jane Pearce
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frog climbs over an adult of the same species, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa © Ingrid Sellschop

An elephant dusts itself in Lower Zambezi National Park, Zambezi © Kevin Dooley
A flock of red-billed queleas swarm as the sun rises in Zakouma National Park, Chad © Gary Krosin

Young baboons play in a tree in Chobe National Park, Botswana © Christian Spiller (Instagram/spiller.christian)

A clear view of Mount Kilimanjaro from camp on the Northern Circuit route, Tanzania © Curtis Cozier (Instagram/exeteracres)

A painted wolf (African wild dog) stands proud after finishing off its meal in Maseke Balule Game Reserve, South Africa © Fiona Leigh
A lion relaxes amongst the tall grass in Maasai Mara National Reserve, Kenya © Panos Laskarakis

“On the hunt” – a spotted hyena on the hunt for a young wildebeest early in the morning, Ngorongoro Crater, Tanzania © Caleb Shepard

A twig snake clutches its prey as it fights to escape, Kapama Private Game Reserve, South Africa © Fiona Leigh
Elephants and a calf make their way through Maasai Mara National Reserve, Kenya © Patrice Quillard

Wildbeests begin their crossing of the Mara River in Maasai Mara National Reserve, Kenya © Julian Montoya

A female Grauer’s gorilla watches the rest of her family from behind a wild banana leaf in Kahuzi-Biega National Park, DR Congo © Hesté de Beer
A young leopardess looks up at her mother in Sabi Sands Private Game Reserve, South Africa © Francois van der Westhuizen

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