

POSTCARD FROM...

The Comoros: the islands the guidebooks forgot

Witch doctors, demonic jinns and empty beaches (apart from the turtles): the Comoros are amazing — but not for the faint-hearted

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Treasure islands: empty beaches are the main draw ALAMY

By Crusoe, I've discovered an uninhabited island paradise. The sea is warm, pretty fish flit among colourful coral, palm trees sway and the beach is empty of footprints. It's an Indian Ocean Shangri-La, so long as you overlook the rubbish name. As tropical fantasies go, Leprosy Island is a hard sell.

It's one of the surprises of a trip to the Comoros, along with doing the *mgodro* dance and playing midwife to giant turtles. I hadn't come for either. I was there because I'd never even heard of the place. How often do you get the chance to journey not just beyond the postcard, but the map in your head?

If you can locate the Union of the Comoros (pronounced "Com-OR-os"), remind me to avoid your pub quiz. It's composed of three islands in the Mozambique Channel, northwest of Madagascar: Ngazidja, Mwali and Nzwani. That's a bit of a mouthful for outsiders, so locals also use the names from 90 years of French rule, which lasted until 1975: Grande Comore, Mohéli and Anjouan. (A fourth island, Mayotte, voted to remain French, though it is still claimed by the union. "*Mayotte est Comorienne et le restera à jamais,*" reads a billboard in Grande Comore.)

The Comoros are unspoilt by tourism for the simple reason that there's practically none there

As well as baguettes in boulangeries, the French left behind a language — handy, because few people speak English, and Shikomoro, the local Swahili dialect, is tricky to master in a fortnight. About 23,000 people visited the Comoros last year; by way of comparison, Mauritius received 1,275,000. One reason is that the locals used to have a thing for coups. There were 20 in the first 25 years of independence, though, to be fair, one of those involved just five soldiers. Now, after two stable decades, the British travel company Explore has added “Cloud Coup-Coup Land” to its brochure. Last month I joined its recce trip to the islands, a dry run for when it takes its first guests in 2018. I’d recommend you go, though perhaps not for the reasons you’d imagine.

We started on Grande Comore, in the medina of its humid capital, Moroni. The islands were first settled by Arabs, remain part of the Arab League and practise a relaxed form of Islam. Once you’ve wandered through the fruit and veg market, there is, if I’m honest, little to keep you in town.



Explore Mohéli’s jungle interior JAMES STEWART

You could spend seven hours hiking up through banana plantations to the smouldering crater of the Mount Karthala volcano. Or you could, like me, hop aboard a rickety minibus for some sightseeing. Tin-shack villages slip past: shipping containers as makeshift shops; women rainbowed in bright fabrics, their faces masked in sandalwood-paste sunscreen; piles of green bananas at the roadside; the call to prayer crackling through loudspeakers; fruit bats flapping across cobalt skies.

Just north of the village of Mitsamiouli, a side road tracks to the coast. At its end is Galawa Beach. That no one’s heard of it just suggests Mauritius is better at PR, because it is insanely beautiful: palms, white powder sand, sapphire water sparkling between black lava headlands.

You'd expect a small resort; a beach bar at least. Nope: Galawa is empty except for the occasional fisherman in a dugout canoe.

The beaches alone could entice you here; other beltiers are at Bouni, Chomoni and Itsandra. Then you meet the locals, and the fun truly starts.

One evening, we visit Mbeni village, on the northeast coast. First impressions suggest a building site, but that's only because the village is relatively prosperous. The half-finished extension on each breeze-block house will become a starter home for a first-born daughter and her future husband.

I'm introduced to the village witch doctor. Sitting in his vest on a sofa, Fundi Hariri is closed for consultations. Come at other times and the 65-year-old is happy to pore over astral charts and the Koran for auspicious dates, or cook up herbal potions to drive away demonic jinns (payment by results). Jinns are ancient fire spirits, he tells me in a voice like the crackle of dry leaves. "They appear like animal, sometimes like woman. Always at night, then disappear." That only he can see them doesn't stop other villagers getting the jitters every time.



Locals dress for a wedding ALAMY

I meet some musicians practising for a wedding. Singers chant. Drums pound. The room throbs with loping, hypnotic rhythm. A drummer in an ankle-length white robe shows me the accompanying dance. It's called the *mgodro* and, as wedding dances go, it beats the conga. Spread your arms and plant your toes. Now bounce up and down on your heels. If you can wobble your knees at the same time, congratulations, you're a natural.

Dinner is in a candlelit village house. Decor is minimal — breeze-block walls, no furniture except our table — but the food is something else: fish basted with chilli, lime and garlic; *mataba*, a mash of cassava leaves and coconut; fried plantain; and pink guava, which tastes a bit like apple with a hint of black pepper. The bad news is the palm wine. Fermented for two days, the milky sap smells as sour as a teenager's armpit. Hold your nose and you can get mildly tipsy on the stuff. After five days' fermentation, it becomes dangerously potent, but the smell would get you before the booze.

If Grande Comore sounds intrepid, wait until you get to Mohéli. Only 400 holidaymakers a year make it to the smallest, wildest Comoros island, perhaps because the journey there can be pretty rough: 30 miles across open ocean in an oversized dinghy, then two bone-shaking hours on the island's single, potholed road. It's all worth it, however, for a night or two in a palm-thatched beach bungalow at Laka Lodge. With streamlined teak furniture, mosaic bathrooms and a private beach just there, it makes for an extremely special castaway stay.

The American manager told me most of his guests are French expats from Mayotte. They come to dive with humpback whales and manta rays in the marine park just offshore (no rival dive boats guaranteed), to paddle canoes between empty beaches backed by luxuriant rainforest, and to picnic on Chissioua Ouenefou, the local translation of Leprosy Island. I was assured its colony closed a century ago.

Mohéli, while evidently African, feels like Africa for beginners. There's no way round it: people are poor. They live in one-room huts built from corrugated tin or earth and straw. But most seem content. No one begs. The population is low at 38,000 people. The soil is crazily fertile: bananas, manioc, nutmeg, cloves, breadfruit and coffee are literally there for the taking in the rainforest draped across the island.

Life ticks along at a languid pace — unless there's an inter-village football match on. Go if you get the chance. Supporters make a fantastic racket on oil-can drums and players do synchronised warm-ups like tribal dances. They tell me their favourite team is Barcelona, obviously. What do they think of the England team? There's embarrassed laughter. Well, quite.



Rich pickings: wild nutmegGETTY

From Laka Lodge, we explore Mohéli's jungle interior. We hike up a valley like a living wall to watch endangered Livingstone bats chitter in the canopy. The air is perfumed with Chanel No 5 — actually, ylang-ylang blossom, the perfume's base ingredient and one of the Comoros's biggest exports.

We spend a magical night near Itsamia village. Beneath a huge sky striped by the Milky Way, we follow the tracks of what appears to be a small tractor that has trundled out from the sea. They lead up the beach into scrub to a green turtle the size of a kitchen table laying eggs. Lying in a 6ft-wide crater, she's probably between 50 and 130 years old, our guide says. Could've fooled me. Covered in grey scales and plates, she looks prehistoric. Another two females are laying just along the beach. It's haram — forbidden in Islamic law — for villagers to eat them, the guide says, so the turtles come every night — 22,000 last year, up 700% in a decade.

We watch as the eggs, er, emerge, slimy, rubbery ping-pong balls plopping in spurts into a deep hole. It reminded me of a scene from *Alien*. There's a long pause. Then her rear flippers shovel in great scoops of sand. We're so close, we can hear her pant.

I'd hoped to tell you about Anjouan island, too, but tropical storms made the crossing sketchy in a small boat. When we requested a weather forecast at Mohéli airport, a smartly dressed official hung a flag out of the window and guessed the wind speed.

The truth is, "Cloud Coup-Coup Land" isn't quite ready for modern tourism. Transport is poor, most accommodation basic. TripAdvisor lists just 17 sights, most beaches.

It was only after a week that I got the place. People often bang on about authentic travel. Well, here it is. The Comoros Islands are unspoilt by tourism for the simple reason that there's practically none there. Even guidebook publishers ignore them. They exist as a singular reminder that an enjoyable holiday can be about embracing unexpected experiences as much as ticking off sights.

For now, few people have heard of the place. Say Comoros to me and I'll picture a grinning drummer bouncing on his heels. And doing the same beside him is me.

James Stewart was a guest of Explore, which will launch the Comoros Discovery trip in 2018. The 11-day package will cost £2,999pp, including flights, transfers and B&B accommodation (01252 883951, explore.co.uk). For more about Laka Lodge, visit lakalodge.com