



Watching as a wedding procession waltzes through the town of Nioumachoua on Mohéli.

Virgin beaches fringe
the islands of Mohéli
Marine Park.

REMOTE CONTROL

Comoros, an archipelago off Africa's east coast, remains largely UNCHARTED BY TOURISTS. But a rich depth of culture and wildlife reward the intrepid traveller.

text & photography Robert Michael Poole

Above (clockwise from top):
Baie de Bouéni and the
island Chissioua Karoni;
Kids playing on the beach in
Nioumachoua; A lemur

I DIDN'T PLAN on island-hopping when I first touched down in East Africa. But then again, because there was so little information available in advance, my adventure on these Indian Ocean islands ended up being mostly spontaneous. As I would soon discover, what makes the nation of Comoros so great to visit is the very fact that it ranks highly on the unusual holiday list; traversing a remote and spectacular part of Africa is where the real excitement lay.

Situated halfway between Mozambique and Madagascar, from above, the Comorian islands – Grand Comore, Mohéli, Anjouan (and Mayotte, which is administered by France) – look like a sprinkling of stepping stones leading the way to East Africa. Their geographic location has created a blended cultural identity that has been formed over centuries, initially by seafaring Polynesians, Malays and Indonesians, and then by Africans, Arabs and Malagasy. Since it gained independence from France in 1975, the country has struggled to find its feet, which has only increased its allure among adventurous travellers who are seeking raw beauty.

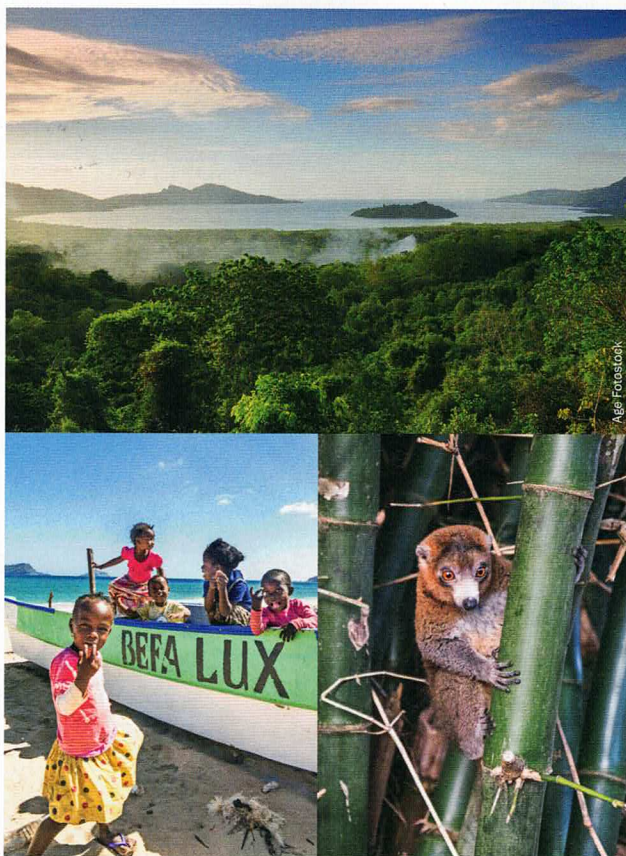
Relative isolation has preserved Comorian culture, landscapes and wildlife. The capital, Moroni, is a small seaside port whose focal point is the Badjanani Mosque. Moroni means “in the heart of the fire”, which is a reference to the immense Mount Karthala volcano that rises 2,361 m above the town. Preferring to get to know the locals here, I base myself at Jardin de la Paix, a hotel that was converted from a homestead. The street-level restaurant recalls travel of yesteryear, when adventurous tourists – lacking guidebooks and, more recently, smartphones – gathered in cafés to exchange travel tips and recommend local travel guides, and I soon have several notes.

FORTUNE FAVOURS THE BRAVE

Hearing about volcano crater lakes and pristine beach coves in remote areas, I go off the beaten track – traversing the only road that crosses the island – to reach the east side of Grand Comore. Thanks to my taxi guide, I'm invited into family homes and old mosques in Sima and Mbéni. If the villages lack a colourful culture (soon to be discovered on Mohéli), they make up for it with an abundance of authenticity and hospitality.

Around the northern tip of Grand Comore, the natural beauty of the islands is first revealed. The surface of the supposedly bottomless Lac Salé crater lake shines like a liquid emerald against the blue ocean background as I look down upon it from the roadside. Lush vegetation adorns its rim, and just below, the white-sand beach of Plage Gountsini lays empty, tempting me to clamber down and wade into its clear waters. It's the first of several unspoiled natural wonders that I encounter in just a few short days.

Driving around the northern end of Grand Comore towards Mitsamiouli – the largest and most famous >



“Relative isolation has preserved Comorian culture, landscapes and wildlife”

Where to eat

Volo Volo Market

Moroni's central market is the place to discover local spices. Small cafés with snacks like *Pilaou* are tucked away both here, and around Vendredi Mosque. **Marché Volo volo, Moroni**

Le New Select

Popular with locals, this place is famed for its chicken curry, but has seafood too. Test your Comorian over lunch with locals on their veranda. **Place de France, Moroni**

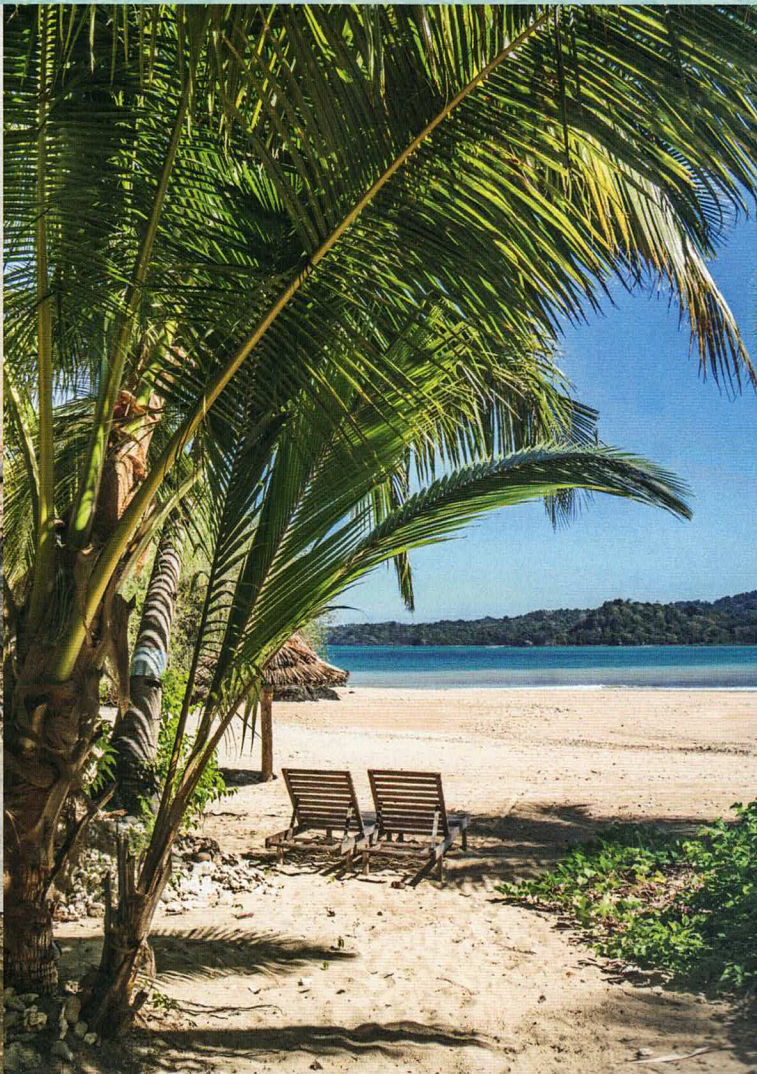
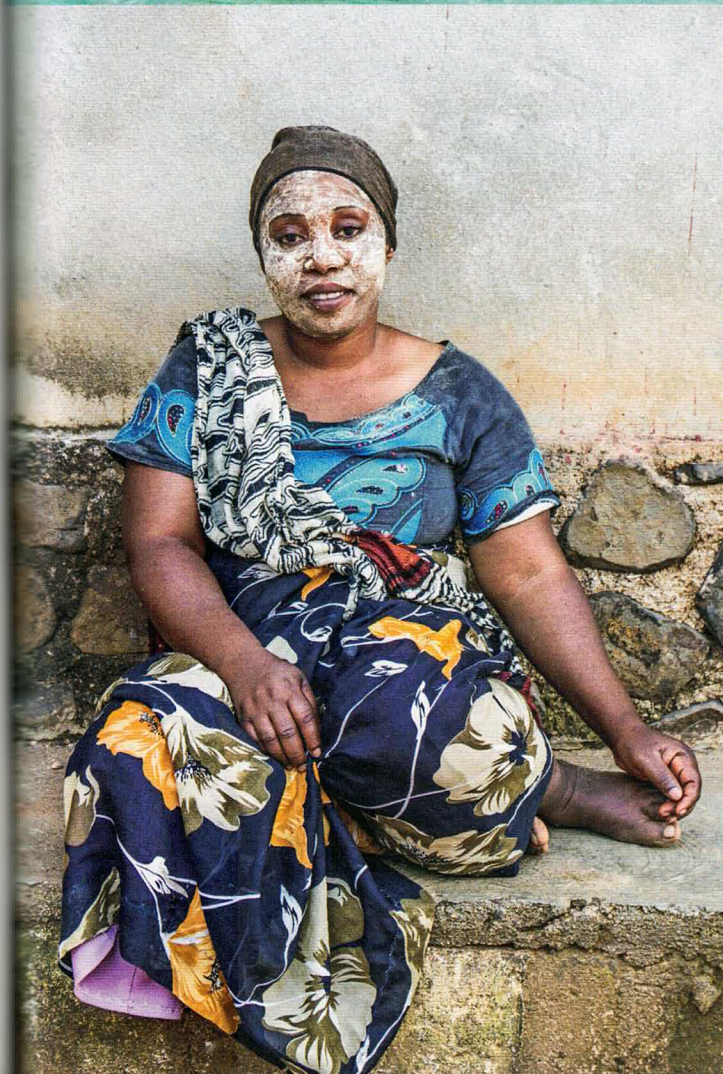
Le Coraya

TripAdvisor's top-rated restaurant for Moroni is the go-to for steak, lobster and other western-friendly food, with indoor and outdoor seating. Ask for the daily catch. **Bandamadji Itsandra, Moroni**

Le Restaurant des Arcades

A hotel more famous for its food, try their *langouste à la vanille*: lobster boiled in a rich vanilla sauce. **Avenue des Ambassadeurs 1, Moroni**

Right page: A fisherman wades through the turquoise waters on the coast north of Mwemboiboini (top); Face painting using sandalwood paste protects the skin from the sun (bottom left); Deckchairs on the beach at Mohéli Laka Lodge (bottom right).



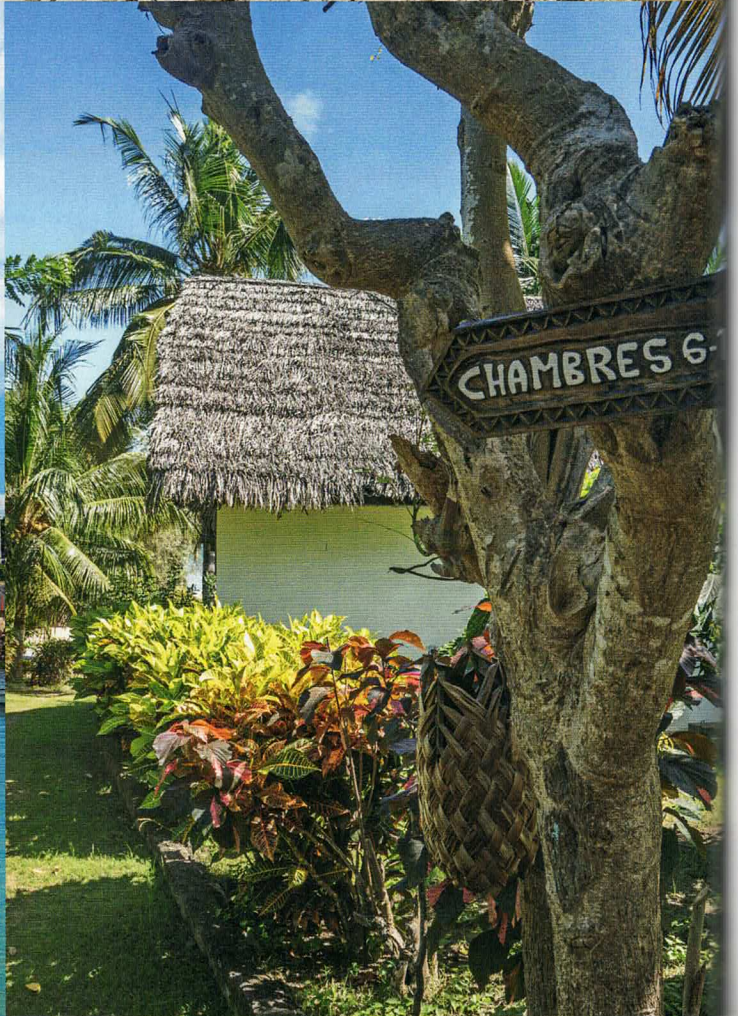
Men playing the board game, Mancala, in the streets of Iconi, Grand Comore.



A waterfall hides
in thick jungle in
central Moheii.

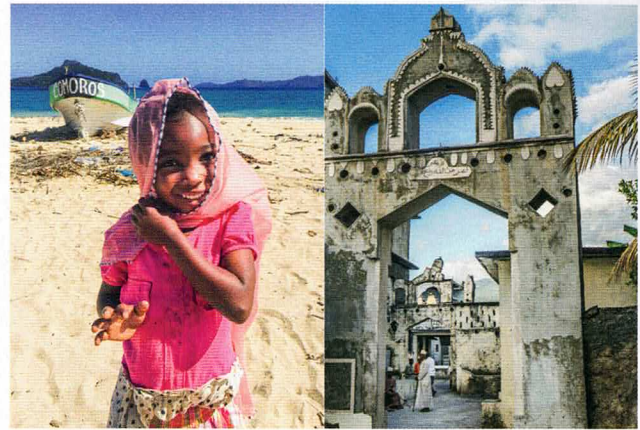
*“Isolated in pristine
wilderness with barely a
sign of human presence”*





Left page: Most Comorians live in small coastal towns (top); The Badjanani Mosque in Moroni sits on the edge of the port. (bottom left); Mohéli Lake Lodge is one of few lodgings on the island of Mohéli.

Left: A curious young girl on the beach in Nioumachoua. Right: The streets of the old city of Iconi



“Narrow streets squeeze between elegant archways, clearly dating from a time of prosperity”

beach – we stop at other stunning inlets, including one just north of Mwemboiboini that Google Maps can't seem to find. The small fishing bay here is surrounded by palms, and has a lookout point that makes Mitsamiouli's turquoise waters and soft sands seem like a lost paradise.

My last stop on the main island is a tiny port town that could be easily renamed “iconic”. South of Moroni, Iconi recalls the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Stone Town in Zanzibar. Comoros' Medina, Iconi is a settlement whose roots were laid in the early days, when Islam first came to these shores. Narrow streets squeeze between elegant archways, clearly dating from a time of prosperity. The intricate design is still apparent today.

JAMES BOND I PRESUME?

With flights between the three islands often infrequent or non-existent, the best way to explore Mohéli and Anjouan is to take to the sea. Hearing of an ecolodge offering whale watching, swimming with dolphins and access to a pristine marine park, I venture south (on Grand Comore) to Chindini. Here, rudimentary fishing boats are used as cargo vessels and people-carriers across the open water to Domoni, the northern tip of Mohéli. Accompanied by a dozen live goats, and having wrapped my luggage in waterproof bin bags, I endure the two-hour rocky crossing in light showers, feeling like a true explorer on a treacherous adventure.

On arrival, I drive through thick jungle all the way to Nioumachoua, a town in southern Mohéli that seems to have climbed out of the sea and up the mountainside; all roads lead to the beaches facing the spectacular small islands just off the coast. By sheer luck, I arrive at a time when the town is preparing for a wedding. The streets are a hive of activity, with sporadic music and dancing, and house doors are wide open as villagers gather to make decorations and flower necklaces. Women carrying bouquets and holding boards of money, their faces adorned with painted masks, perform a parade of Swahili *chakacha* songs as they sway in multi-coloured robes down to the shore.

The ceremony itself sees the community gather – all in traditional Shirazi attire – for a lavish feast in the heart of Nioumachoua. Everyone is welcome to witness the wedding. With food carefully balanced on the women's heads, and smiles all around, children gather to catch a glimpse of elders making speeches at sunset, before returning to the beach to play football. I manage to borrow a Comorian robe so I can blend in and join the festivities.

THE CASTAWAY EXPERIENCE

On the edge of Nioumachoua is Comoros' most immersive and authentic resort, the eco-friendly Laka Lodge. Its >

Activities

The islands of Comoros offer dramatic landscapes, thick jungles and volcanic pools, all home to varied wildlife. The Indian Ocean waters between Mozambique and Madagascar are teeming with life too. To explore, you'll need an open and flexible time schedule to truly immerse yourself, but the rewards are plenty.

Ancient Iconi

Stroll down the narrow streets of this oldest Comorian settlement, where you'll find ancient Arabic stone architecture and a grand mosque facing a dramatic coastline.

Grand Comore Island Tour

The easiest island to circumnavigate, Grand Comore has a mixture of peaks and troughs, from the 2,361-m high Mt Kartala volcano in the centre, to Lac Salé crater lake in the north, and undeveloped beach bays all around.

Mohéli Marine Park

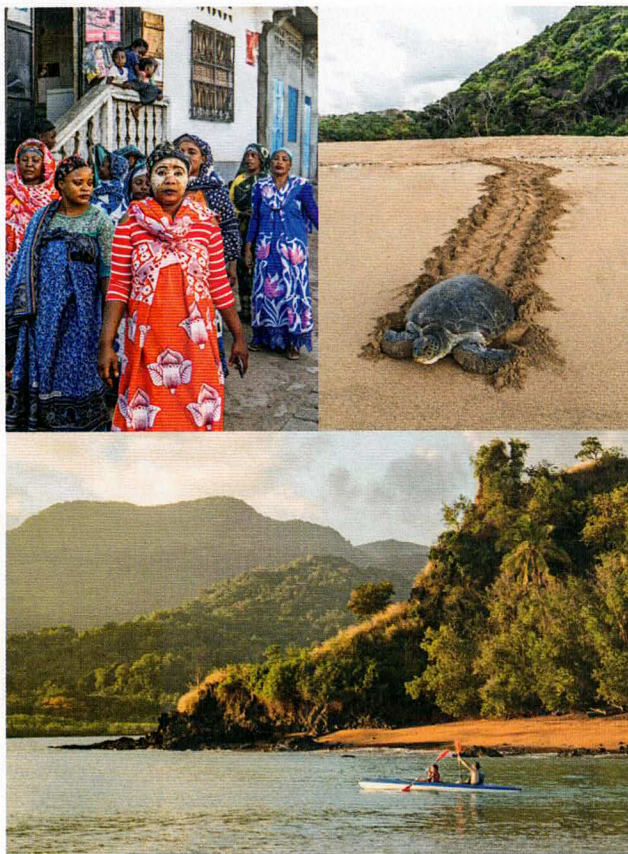
This set of islands look like they landed with a splash in the ocean on the south of Mohéli. They're the best dive and snorkelling spots in the country. Keep an eye out for resident “living fossil” coelacanths and sharks.

Whale Watching

Humpback whales gather to breed in the waters of the southern Indian Ocean in summer, with around 1,000 heading up from Antarctica. Leave from Mohéli to swim with them or watch them breach.

Turtle Beach

Green turtles, hawksbill turtles and even some leatherbacks clamber ashore in Mohéli to lay their eggs, peaking during Austral winter. So as not to disturb them, go with a professional guide, and hopefully witness baby turtles hatch and head for the sea.



“Mohéli feels like a natural hideaway that’s disconnected from the world”

Where to stay

Jardin de la Paix

This family-run hotel and restaurant just north of Moroni’s centre has become a local institution, and is a popular meet-up point for travellers. comores-jardindelapaix.com

Itsandra Beach Hotel

The country’s one true resort offers private bungalows and its own beach, all surrounded by palms on the west coast of Grand Comore. itsandrahotel.com/web

Mohéli Laka Lodge

Comoros’ hidden gem, an ecolodge for adventurers, with access to coral reefs, turtle beaches and whale watching. It has friendly lemurs too! lakalodge.com

Le Papillon

The top choice on Anjouan is small and sleek, with a popular little bar all set on the north coast just two minutes from the beach. comores-online.com

Retaj Moroni

Designed for business travellers with extensive meeting facilities, the Retaj is also the family-friendly option with an outdoor pool and gym too. retajmoroniresort.com

Left (clockwise from top left): Women parade through the streets ahead of a local wedding ceremony; A turtle heads back to the sea after laying eggs on a Comorian beach; Kayaking out to Mohéli Marine Park, a protected site of natural wonder.

bungalows face one of two beaches, separated by a hidden cove that’s only accessible by water. Isolated in pristine wilderness with barely any sign of a human presence, this place is very Robinson Crusoe. Lemurs scurry down from the trees to witness the humans in their midst, creating a sense that I’m the outsider here and Mother Nature is the dominant presence.

Mohéli feels like a natural hideaway that’s disconnected from the world; an example of how many destinations must have felt upon arrival centuries ago. Attempts to venture inland to find hidden rock pools and waterfalls require a hike through the jungle, while just offshore, a series of islets offer shelter to an abundance of sea life such as the humongous humpback whale. This is a place to spend a solid few days. I spend mornings relaxing in Mohéli Marine Park, a collection of rocky islets set in sometimes-choppy waters.

Anjouan, the rightmost Comoros’ island, which has spectacular waterfalls and deep forestation, is the most mountainous and volcanic. It’s famed for its plantations of ylang ylang, a flower that is used to create perfumes at dozens of distilleries on Anjouan. The capital, Mutsamudu, is Comoros’ second-largest city. Founded back in 1482, it’s home to a 15th-century medina and an imposing citadel that was built with British support in the 1860s.

A SIGHT FOR SORE EYES

The highlight of my trip to Comoros requires a 4 a.m. wake-up call and a bumpy road trip to the eastern tip near Aytamy. During the night, dozens of turtles – of various species – come to lay eggs here, a process that can take several hours. Guides with red flashlights (so as not to disturb the turtles) lead us to watch as the turtles use their fins to dig sand pits, and then lay their tiny white eggs before covering it all over and heading back to sea. Three giant specimens remain as the sun rises, and shortly after, birds begin circling expectantly to see if any eggs hatch and provide them with breakfast. Minutes later, I get lucky; from one area of sand, a number of baby turtles scramble out and run for the water. Their dash to the ocean represents the beginning of new life, and a process of regeneration that has continued for millennia right in this very spot.

With careful management, this stunning and largely undiscovered nation will hopefully preserve these incredible sights for millennia to come.



Plan your trip

Book your flight to Comoros on kenya-airways.com

The private natural
cove beach at
Mohéli Laka Lodge.

