

Madagascar

Location

Madagascar lies off the east coast of Africa in the Indian Ocean. The Mozambique channel divides the island with the African continent. It is the largest of the Indian Ocean's many islands, and is the fourth largest island in the world, following Greenland, New Guinea, and Borneo. The land area is about the size of the states of Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and Iowa combined and covers 226,658 square miles. The island is 976 miles long and 335 miles across at its widest point, and is shaped like an irregular oval. It has some smaller islands surrounding it, including Nosy Be, eight miles off of the coast in the Bay of Ampasindava in the northwest. Saint-Marie off the east coast and Nosy Be off the west coast are islands large enough to support inhabitants. There are also several tiny uninhabited islands in the Mozambique Channel: Nosy Mitsio, the Radama Islands, Chesterfield Island, and the Barren Islands.

Geography

This unique country is divided into three regions that run north and south along the length of the island. On the eastern side, along the Indian Ocean, there is a narrow piece of tropical lowlands, consisting mostly of flat plains. It is about 30 miles wide and includes marshes, but is very fertile. The eastern coast is unique in that for almost 1000 miles, it runs in a straight almost uninterrupted line from southwest to northeast. It has many white sand beaches with coral reefs, and the ocean is the roughest on this side of the island, facing out to the Indian Ocean. In the middle of Madagascar, there is a large central plateau. The first large step is a rocky bluff called the Betsimisaraka Escarpment, named for one of the Malagasy ethnic groups. On top of this bluff is another taller one, the Great Cliff of Angavo. Antananarivo, the capital of Madagascar, is located here.

There are three mountain ranges, including Massif du Tsaratanana in the north which has the country's highest point of 9436 ft., Maromokofro peak. In the center of the island, there is a large cluster of now extinct volcanoes called Ankaratra. There is a smaller range, the Andringitra range, in the southern portion of the island near the city of Faradofay. There are many volcanic areas, but they all appear dormant and have not shown any activity since settlement began on the island. There are even lakes forming in the craters. There are many short rivers that flow east from the central plateau. The most important rivers are the Bemarivo, the Mananara, the Mangoro, and the Maningory.

The southern end of the island is mostly dry. The few year round rivers it has are the Mandrare, the Menarandra, and the Linta. These rivers recede during the dry season. There are no lakes in this area. There is the Great Cliff of Angavo that merges into a single wall of rock that hangs out over the sea, which ends at Cape Sainte-Marie, the southernmost tip of Madagascar. To the south, there are over 3,000 miles of empty ocean until Antarctica.

Madagascar's western zone is between 60 and 125 miles wide. It has low hills with wide plains inbetween. The rivers here are the Sofia, the Onilahy, the Mangoky, the Tsiribihina, the Betsiboka, and some others. These rivers are longer, wider, and slower than the steep ones in the East. The largest lakes are Ihotry and Kinkony. The beach is quieter and gently slope down to the Mozambique Channel. There are many small bays, coves, and coral reefs line the coasts.

Climate

Since Madagascar is south of the equator, its seasons are opposite of the U.S. Summer is from November through April and is hot and humid. Their winter is really more of a dry season, from May through October, and it never gets very cold. July is the coldest month, with temperatures ranging from 50 to 78 degrees F, while December is the hottest month, with temps

from 61 to 84 degrees F. Temperatures are usually highest in the northwest portion of the island and along the east coast. In the interior of the island, it is usually a little cooler because there is a higher altitude. The average annual temperature at Antananarivo, on the central plateau, is 63 degrees F.

The weather of Madagascar and its rain are controlled by two wind systems: the trade winds and the monsoon. The trade winds come from the southeast and blow all year long. The winds carry rain mostly to the east coast. Maroantsetra, on the Bay of Antongil, is the wettest place on the island averaging 147 inches of rain every year. The rain dries out over the plateau, so the western side of Madagascar gets little rain from the trade winds. Monsoon wind blows out of the northwest during November to April, and don't bring as much rain as the trade winds.

One downside to the beautiful island is the susceptibility to tropical storms. These storms occasionally form out in the Indian Ocean, and occur between December and March. These tropical cyclones hit Madagascar's east coast, bringing torrential rains, high winds, and flooding conditions. These are very similar to the hurricanes the United States experiences in Florida and along our east coast.

History

In about 400 A.D., Madagascar's first inhabitants migrated from Malaysia and Indonesia. Other settlers from places in Africa and Arabia arrive many hundreds of years later. By 900 A.D., it is mostly inhabited. A Portuguese navigator by the name of Diogo Dias is the first European known to have landed on Madagascar in 1500. He called it the Isle of St. Lawrence. Around the late 1600's and early 1700's, the French had a colony at Fort Dauphin on the southeast coast, later colonizing nearby island groups. Madagascar became a transitional island for many, including many famous pirates like Misson and William Kidd.

Later in the 1700's, the Merina Kingdom rose to power. King Andrianampoinimerina is the first ruler to unite his people. After much revolution, French troops took control of the colony and exiled the people of the Merina kingdom. The island became a French colony in 1896. The people of Madagascar resisted, vying for their own land, and in 1946, became an overseas territory of France. There was more fighting and over 11,000 people were killed in an unsuccessful rebellion against the French in 1947. Finally, in 1958, France's overseas territories voted on the question of independence, and the Malagasy Republic came about, completely independent in 1960.

Important Dates

Important days in Madagascar are limited to only a few national holidays. They have a Festival of Rice, Independence Day, and Festival of Trees.

Population

The estimated 2002 population of Madagascar was 16,811,000 people. It has a population density of 74 persons per sq. mi. Of those many millions of people, they remain 78 percent rural, and only 22 percent urban. The people of Madagascar are called the Malagasy.

Currency

The currency of Madagascar is the franc, a sign of their French rule. They use the Malagasy franc, which is divided into 100 centimes. Inflation is high and prices tend to go up by as much as 25 percent per year. The average yearly family income is about \$279 U.S. Dollars. A pair of men's shoes would cost about \$2. Rural families incomes are generally spent on clothing, material to build or repair the house, and religious feasts or ceremonies. The economy, especially in the rural areas, is based on trade or barter, and many country people grow their own food. Medicine is free, and fuel for heating is unnecessary because of the warm climate.

Education

Almost all children attend primary school, but only about one-fifth go on to secondary school. Some people leave school because they are needed to work in their parents fields, while others live on remote farms and do not want to leave their families to go to school. In 1988, the literacy rate was only about 33 percent being able to read or write in either Malagasy or French, although 2002 shows an increase. Many more women than men are illiterate, because it is customary to encourage boys to stay in school and get jobs. A woman's goal should be to marry and have children. The University of Madagascar is located in Antananarivo and has branches in the capitals of the other five provinces. Most of the University's original professors were French, replaced later with Soviet and now Native professors. There is also a college specifically for training teachers, who are in short supply. The schools averages one teacher for every 55 students.

Language

The official languages are Malagasy and French. Malagasy resembles Malay and Indonesian. Many of the different ethnic groups have their own spin or version of the languages, similar to different dialects in the United States.

Religion

About half the people on the island are Christian, and about one-tenth are Muslims. The rest, especially those that live on the coasts, practice local African religions, worshipping ancestors and spirits. They have also retained the ancestral Malagasy religion. It doesn't really have a name or formal doctrine, but consists of habits and beliefs handed down over the past several thousand years. They have much reverence for ancestors, and believe their dead ancestors can obtain favors from a Creator, or can be punished by illness or bad luck if the living do not show respect for the dead.

Agriculture

Madagascar is mainly still rural. Agriculture employs 80% of the population, mostly rice farming and cattle herding. Rice is the single biggest crop and produces over 2 millions tons each year. Still, that is not enough and the country has had to import rice. The largest export crops are coffee and vanilla. Madagascar is the world's largest supplier of vanilla, as the vanilla tree thrives in the north. Other export crops are pepper, bananas, sugarcane, and tobacco. They also grow many fruits and vegetables for their own use, including apples, avocados, grapefruit, lemons, oranges, plums, pineapples, guavas, corn, beans, peanuts, coconuts, and cassava. They have some livestock export, but the industry has not faired well because the Malagasy tend to keep their cattle until they die of old age. They also sacrifice many cattle each year, and such practices make it unlikely that the people will ever regard their cattle as an economic resource.

Trade

The economy of this country is still developing even to this day. Rice is their chief food crop, and coffee holds its place as the chief export. Bauxite, chromite, coal, and graphite are mined in Madagascar. In 1989, Madagascar's government began a policy of encouraging foreign companies to build industrial plants there, and most foreign trade is with France. The United States buys coffee, cloves, and vanilla from Madagascar.

Food

Most of the food of the country reflects the trade and agriculture. Their primary crop and food source is rice, but local rural farmers also grow a variety of different fruits and vegetables for themselves.

Landmarks

Although most of Madagascar is still rural and does not have the great buildings and structures that some tourists flock to, it is unique in other ways. One way is the distinctly different animal and plant life. The varieties of animals and plants in Madagascar do not exist anywhere else in the world, except possibly on the nearby Comoros Islands. The best-known wild animal in this country is the lemur, a relative of the monkey. There are about 20 species, most of which live in trees. Other native species include mongoose, chameleons, tortoises, moths, and butterflies. The amazing elephant bird, which became extinct about 1000 years ago was native only to Madagascar. They could not fly, but grew up to 10 ft tall and weighed 1000 pounds. Many unique plants also grow on the island. About 1000 orchid species live in the wet forests on the east coast.

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