



*Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.*

## BACKGROUND

**Land and Climate.** Madagascar, situated off the southeast coast of Africa, is the world's fourth largest island. About the same size as Texas, it covers 226,656 square miles (587,040 square kilometers). A large central plateau rises to 4,500 feet (1,370 meters) in elevation. To the south and east lies a narrow coastal strip lined by rain forests. The west is hilly and dry, but the terrain flattens along the western coast. The country's major rivers drain west into the Mozambique Channel. The north features white beaches and the south has a desert-like landscape. The island's highest peak is Mount Maromokotro at 9,436 feet (2,876 meters).

The climate is tropical along the coast, temperate inland, and arid in the south. The hot and rainy season, with inland highs averaging 85°F (29°C), extends from September to April, interspersed with periodic cyclones. The dry and cool weather lasts from May to August. Only inland areas experience cold winters, with lows averaging 48°F (9°C).

Eighty percent of the island's flora and fauna are endemic to Madagascar. Its species include chameleons, tortoises, fossas (a catlike mammal), lemurs (a primate related to monkeys), and thousands of varieties of flowering plants. Medicinal plants such as the rose periwinkle (the source of two anticancer drugs) benefit not only local people but the entire world. Unfortunately, severe erosion and deforestation have endangered many species. International experts are working to learn from and preserve Madagascar's unique ecosystem.

**History.** Madagascar's first settlers arrived from Indonesia and Malaysia almost two thousand years ago. They are the ancestors of the island's highland tribes, primarily the Merina and Betsileo. Many Malayo-Indonesians also mixed with Arabs and Africans who came in later centuries, forming coastal

tribes known collectively as Côtiers. The highland and Côtier peoples developed separately over time, with their respective kings, cultures, and dialects. Together, these peoples are called Malagasy.

After the Portuguese sighted Madagascar in 1500, European sailors and pirates visited often to trade guns and clothing for food and spices. Local hostilities and disease kept Europeans from having any real presence until the late-1800s.

In the 1790s, Merina king Andrianampoinimerina unified the highland tribes, establishing Antananarivo as his capital. His son, Radama I (1810–28), extended Merina domination to most other parts of the island. The Merina desire to unify the entire island collided with British and French colonial ambitions. The two powers had varying degrees of influence on Merina rulers until France finally took control of the island in 1896. The French sent Queen Ranaivalona III into exile and battled nationalist movements into submission. After World War II, the Malagasy revolted against French rule (1947). French troops brutally suppressed the insurrection at a cost of as many as 80,000 lives. In 1958, the Malagasy overwhelmingly supported independence in a referendum. Independence was granted in 1960, though France retained a strong influence over politics and the economy.

Philibert Tsiranana was elected the first president of the Malagasy Republic. His close ties with France and a lack of political reform incited a rebellion in 1972, followed by military rule until 1975. Didier Ratsiraka was elected president; he severed most ties with the West and established a socialist system. Then followed several years of economic decline under relatively harsh rule. Calls for Ratsiraka's resignation mounted in the early 1990s and Albert Zafy defeated him in the 1993

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elections. However, Zafy's administration did not satisfy public demand for economic improvements, allowing Ratsiraka to capitalize on voter discontent and gain reelection in 1997.

Following a December 2001 election, neither Ratsiraka nor his main opponent, Marc Ravalomanana, gained the majority necessary to win the election outright. Ravalomanana accused Ratsiraka of vote rigging, and Ravalomanana supporters held mass protests in Antananarivo. Ravalomanana declared himself president in February, but Ratsiraka refused to relinquish power, establishing a rival government in Toamasina. Widespread political violence threatened to escalate into civil war, but in April 2002, following a vote recount, Madagascar's high court declared Ravalomanana the election's winner. Ratsiraka went into exile. Though this political instability severely damaged Madagascar's economy, Ravalomanana has pledged to reduce the nation's widespread poverty and unemployment during his administration.

### THE PEOPLE

**Population.** Madagascar's population of about 17 million is growing at an annual rate of 3 percent. The 18 Malagasy tribes continue to live in their historical lands. The largest is the Merina, followed by the Betsileo. Other major tribes are the Betsimisaraka (east), Antandroy (south), and Tsimihety (north). Smaller groups include the Sihanaka, Bara, Antaisaka, Sakalava, and others. A small minority of Indo-Pakistani and Chinese merchants, as well as some Comorians, also live in Madagascar. Some tension and resentment exist between coastal and highland groups, as well as between immigrant and native peoples.

**Language.** Malagasy, an official language, is a unique mixture of Indonesian, African languages (mostly Bantu), Arabic, and some Malaysian. Written first in an Arabic-origin script called *Sorabe*, Malagasy was given its Latin script by British missionaries under commission from King Radama I. The alphabet does not contain the letters *c*, *q*, *u*, *w*, or *x*. Malagasy is derived primarily from the Merina dialect. People of other tribes speak their own dialects, although they also understand Malagasy and use it for written communication.

French is also an official language; it was used more than Malagasy in government, education, and business until 1972. Attempts to use Malagasy in school after 1973 were abandoned by 1991, partly because private schools continued to use French, and their graduates received the best jobs. Even today, Malagasy use many French words in daily speech or for science and technology.

Today, people speak a more common form of Malagasy than their ancestors. However, they retain traditional Malagasy oratory (*kabary*) and the use of proverbs. Malagasy proverbs store centuries of wisdom and culture. Nearly every conversation or speech contains a proverb or two. The right proverb can substitute for a more lengthy explanation.

**Religion.** About half of all Malagasy practice indigenous beliefs that acknowledge the existence of a supreme being, called *Andriamanitra* or *Zanahary*. *Razana* (ancestors) are considered intermediaries between the gods and the living. The living report their activities and needs to their ancestors, who provide directives and *fadys* (taboos). Zebras (oxen-like cattle, a traditional symbol of wealth) are sacrificed to *Andriamanitra* and ancestors, and food offerings are also presented in thanks or supplication.

Ancestor veneration is so rooted in the culture that even many Christians still practice it. One ceremony is the

*famadihana* (turning of the bones), in which a family exhumes an ancestor's body to wrap it in a new *lambarena* (red cloth), a burial shroud. This is a joyous celebration with a zebu feast and traditional music; it represents the continuity of life. As one proverb explains: "Without ancestors, the living would not exist; and without the living, ancestors would be forgotten."

About 41 percent of the population is Christian. The London Missionary Society introduced Christianity in the 1800s. With their help, the first Malagasy Bible was printed in 1835. As French influence increased with colonization, Catholics came to outnumber Protestants, which include Adventists, Lutherans, Anglicans, Baptists, and others. About 7 percent of Malagasy (mostly Côtiers) are Muslims.

**General Attitudes.** Malagasy are deeply attached to their heritage. Parents and the elderly are respected and honored. Children rarely move far from their family. Malagasy are prone to share, no matter what little they have, according to the saying "Even one grasshopper is to be shared." Family needs have priority over individual desires. Years of corruption and growing poverty have strained these traditional values, but most people still adhere to them. People smile despite their everyday challenges.

Malagasy believe in *vintana* (destiny), which brings good or bad luck based on the time and date of a person's birth. If bad, it can be altered by an *ombiasy*, a person who heals or divines with charms and magic. People also consult a *mpanandro* (day-maker) for help in choosing the best day to get married, start construction, and so on. For other aspects of life, people accept *lahatra* (fate) as having control. Coastal people tend to prefer a more relaxed pace of life (*mora-mora*) than highland residents.

**Personal Appearance.** Most urban residents wear Western attire, although it may be secondhand or combined with traditional items. Rural people tend to wear traditional outfits more often than Western clothes.

Traditional highland attire includes the *lamba* (long white cotton wrap) for men and women, and *malabar* (long-sleeved striped or plaid shirt reaching to the knees and worn over pants) for men. Women drape the *lamba* over their shoulders; men wrap it at the waist. A red *lamba* is a sign of authority. Women braid or tie their long hair up to neck level.

A *lambaoany* (light, colorful wrap) is more common in coastal areas than the *lamba*, and men and women wrap these items differently according to gender and local tradition. Many men wear shorts under or instead of traditional wraps.

### CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

**Greetings.** Verbal greetings vary, but a common Malagasy greeting is *Manao ahoana tompoko?* (How are you, sir/madam?). One omits *tompoko* for a more informal greeting. Popular greetings in coastal areas are *Akory?* (How are you?), *Salama* (Peace), and *Arahaba* (Hello). In the north, the greeting *Mbalatsara?* (Doing well?) is common.

Courtesy requires one to greet an older or more superior person first, adding an appropriate title. That individual then chooses whether to offer a handshake. Men wait for women to put out their hand. To show respect, one gives a handshake using both hands or with the left hand holding the right elbow. To greet from a distance, people nod and remove hats or hold up the right hand.

After the initial greetings, people ask the question *Inona no vaovao?* (What is new?), to which the usual reply is *Tsy misy* (Nothing), especially if they do not intend to stop and talk.

Except among close friends who use nicknames, people call each other by last or first names preceded by a title. Older relatives are addressed by relationship (grandfather, aunt, etc.) and spoken to with deference.

**Gestures.** “No” is indicated by shaking the head from left to right while saying *ahn-ahn-ahn*; “yes” is given with a nod and *uhn-uhn*. Public displays of affection between members of the opposite sex are not appropriate, but friends of the same sex commonly walk arm in arm. It is impolite to point with the finger, to put feet on furniture, or to step over someone’s belongings. To pass in front of or between people, it is proper to offer apologies and/or bend slightly as if asking permission.

**Visiting.** Malagasy people like to visit each other often. Most visits, especially in rural areas, are unannounced. It is impolite to drop by at mealtime. Visits are prearranged for special occasions, to offer condolences, or to exchange New Year’s wishes and gifts. People returning from a trip or visiting from out of town take *voan-dalana* (gifts from the journey) to their extended family.

In urban homes, guests are received in a *salon* (sitting room) and offered such refreshments as soda, peanuts, crackers, or cookies. Rural hosts set out new mats for guests and serve tea and *hanikotrana* (snacks such as cassava or sweet potatoes). In general, people serve what they have on hand or quickly send someone to a nearby store. One may decline refreshments if not staying long. Otherwise, guests are expected to eat what is served.

**Eating.** Families eat meals together, beginning with breakfast at 7 a.m. Lunch is at noon and dinner around 7 p.m. A snack is often eaten around 4 p.m. Urban highland Malagasy eat at a table. Invitations for lunch are more common than for dinner. When guests are present, children may eat separately. Guests leave a little food on their plate when finished to indicate the hosts have satisfied them. Friends or acquaintances leave shortly after the meal; relatives may stay a few hours. Rural and some urban coastal families eat on floor mats. Throughout the country, people eat with spoons and forks, but some coastal groups eat with the right hand.

Eating at a restaurant is considered a luxury. However, workers who cannot go home for lunch either go to a nearby *hotely* (inexpensive restaurant) or a *vary mitsangana* (outdoor vendor selling hot food to be eaten while standing). In Tana (the short name for the capital, Antananarivo), working mothers may take their own food to a downtown park, where their children can sometimes join them for lunch.

## LIFESTYLE

**Family.** In a typical Malagasy household, the father is the provider and head of the family. The mother is the nurturer and homemaker. Children are to respect and listen to their parents and the elderly. When making important decisions, children are supposed to get their parents’ blessings. Generally, they only leave home when they get married, and they later care for their aging parents. The traditional blessing parents give to newlyweds is for them to have seven boys and seven girls. This wish has somewhat changed with time, but children are still considered the ultimate riches.

*Fihavanana* (a well-maintained relationship) is valued above all else: “Better lose money than lose a relationship.” This starts with the family and extends into community relations. Children are taught family unity with “Those who are united are as stone but those who are separated are sand.” Economic hardships have forced many urban mothers to work out-

side the home, impacting family cohesion. Likewise, rural mothers work hard in the fields and often cannot provide enough care and nourishment to their children.

Urban families live in brick or cement houses. Rural two-story dwellings made of red adobe have mud floors. The first floor is for the kitchen and small farm animals (hens, ducks, geese); the second contains one or two bedrooms. Coastal rural huts are made of bamboo and straw.

**Dating and Marriage.** Traditional parents seek to arrange marriages for their children to spouses with a similar social status. The potential couple is free to decide but does not usually reject their parents’ opinions. Today, many urban youth find their mates in their neighborhood or through school or social activities. When dating, they go to dances and concerts, watch videos, and play sports or other games. Parents expect one-on-one dating to lead to marriage and for marriages to last.

Engagement is a formal affair. The man’s family asks for the woman’s hand at her parents’ home. The two families carefully choose spokesmen well versed in *kabary*, who profusely apologize for their inadequacies before presenting the genealogy and history of the families and praising the bride and her family. After a formal speech of consent is given, the bride’s family receives a *vodiondry* (literally, “lamb’s rump” but meaning bride-price). A lamb is slaughtered for the occasion and a number of live zebu are given as a dowry. In highland areas, cash now takes the place of both zebu and lamb. After the adorned bride is formally given by her father to the groom, the couple must listen to advice by both sets of parents. Finally, the oldest and most respected family members give the couple their blessings.

While the bride’s family pays for the engagement party, the groom’s family finances the wedding. A civil wedding must first be performed at city hall. Religious weddings, usually on Saturdays, are followed by a feast and a dance.

**Diet.** A meal without rice is considered incomplete. Rice is served with *loaka* for lunch and dinner. *Loaka* can be anything from meat, fish, eggs, vegetables, or basic broth. One popular *loaka* is *ravitoto sy henakisoa* (ground manioc leaves with pork). Another is *ro mazava* (zebu stew with green leafy vegetables). *Sakay*, served on the side, is a mixture of jalapeños, ginger, and garlic. Served with the meal is *ranovola* (golden water), a drink made from water boiled in the browned rice that remains stuck to the bottom of the pan after cooking.

Seasonal fruits are served as dessert, including mangoes, litchis, pineapples, papaya, guava, strawberries, peaches, apples, oranges, and grapes. Bananas are found year-round. Manioc, sweet potatoes, and maize (corn) are served for breakfast, snacks, or other meals, especially in the countryside. An urban breakfast can include buttered *baguettes* (French bread) and jam.

**Recreation.** Soccer is the most popular sport among men. The entire family might watch the World Cup on television. Girls enjoy handball, and all Malagasy are fond of dance and music. The *fanorona* is a traditional game played by strategically placing small stones in hollows of a board or the ground. *Solitaire* is both a game and a decoration. It consists of a polished round wooden support laden with lustrous semiprecious stones in carved holes.

**The Arts.** Traditional *mpihira gasy* performers sing, dance, and play music in open-air concerts. An eloquent speech usually serves as introduction to their popular performances. Common instruments include accordions, violins, drums, flutes, and the indigenous *valiha* (a cylindrical harp-like

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instrument). The guitar is a favorite among young people. The popular dance music called *salegy* combines East African guitar rhythms with local beats. Folk artists produce items for burial rituals. Tombs are decorated with tall wooden *aloalo* poles, in which artists carve figurative images and depictions of historical events.

**Holidays.** Madagascar's main holidays include New Year's Day, Martyrs' Day (29 March, honoring those killed in 1947), Labor Day (1 May), Independence Day (26 June), All Saints' Day (1 Nov.), Christmas, and the Anniversary of the Republic (30 Dec.). Schools and businesses observe Easter Monday, Pentecost Monday, and Ascension. Students have a holiday from July to October and around Christmas. New Year's Eve is a night for formal *bals* (dances) at fancy hotels or friends' houses. These parties bear a French influence but are opened with customary *afindrandrao*, Malagasy line dancing: one couple leads off dancing and the other couples follow like a train.

**Commerce.** General business hours extend from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. with a two-hour break for lunch, although banks and more stores are staying open through lunch as well. Small neighborhood stores often are run by non-Malagasy. Individual farmers sell their produce at open-air markets. Bargaining is common. Each market has a special day of the week during which more goods than usual are sold.

## SOCIETY

**Government.** Madagascar is governed by a president (currently Marc Ravalomanana), who is the head of state. The president serves a five-year term and appoints a prime minister. Parliament is made up of a 90-member Senate and a 160-seat National Assembly. Local officials choose 60 senators, and the president selects 30. Members of the National Assembly are directly elected. Religious coalitions act as important pressure groups. The voting age is 18.

**Economy.** The Malagasy economy is based on agriculture, with 80 percent of people engaged in subsistence farming. Many farmers are also employed in an export-oriented agricultural pursuit. Cash crops include coffee, cloves, vanilla, sugar, and tobacco. Food crops include rice, cassava, cereal grains, potatoes, and corn. The primary livestock are zebu, pigs, goats, and sheep. Manufacturing, located mostly in Tana, focuses on textiles, timber, and food processing. The fishing industry has a high potential but is underexploited.

The skilled labor force is underemployed; college graduates have difficulty finding work in their fields. International donors are encouraging privatization and other economic reforms to help boost growth. Political instability, corruption, periodic natural disasters, and slumping world commodity prices have hindered progress. The currency is the *ariary*.

**Transportation and Communications.** Most people walk or ride a bus. Main cities have taxis. Used for hauling goods in Tana, a *pousse-pousse* (pedicab) is a common form of human transport in other areas. For intercity travel, people use *taxi brousse* ("bush-taxis," minivans with luggage racks). Many roads are not paved. A train runs between Tana and the south-east coast. Air Madagascar airlines offers domestic flights.

The postal system works relatively well and the telephone

## DEVELOPMENT DATA

Human Dev. Index* rank	149 of 175 countries
Adjusted for women	121 of 144 countries
Real GDP per capita	\$830
Adult literacy rate	74 percent (male); 61 (female)
Infant mortality rate	80 per 1,000 births
Life expectancy	52 (male); 54 (female)

system in Tana is gradually being upgraded with digital technology. A cellular system is spreading outward from the capital, and internet access is available. Most rural areas lack telephone service. Most families have a radio and many own a television. One government television channel is joined by four private stations and satellite television.

**Education.** Many rural inhabitants lack full access to education. Although seven years of schooling is mandatory beginning at age seven, it is not widely enforced. Poverty has made it difficult for some parents to pay tuition or to allow much-needed labor to leave the family farm in order to attend school. Still, education is very important and parents do whatever they can to give their children an education. The Malagasy say, "Foolish is he who is not better educated than his father." Private schools exist at all levels, and charitable organizations sometimes help pay tuition. Each province has a university; trade schools offer training in various fields. The wealthy can travel abroad for higher education.

**Health.** Madagascar's public health system includes hospitals, regional birthing hospitals, and clinics. Facilities are underfunded and underequipped. Patients must bring their own supplies such as cotton balls and syringes. Family members must take meals to patients. Basic maternal and child care are provided, but the infant mortality rate remains high. Private clinics offer modern care to those who can afford it. Employees of state companies are covered by national insurance; other employees buy private insurance. Malnutrition, diarrhea, cholera, malaria, and other diseases affect the population. Traditional medicines are still very valuable to most people, and medicine men are available in every town or village. Some 2,500 species of plants are used to treat ailments.

## AT A GLANCE

### Events and Trends.

- In August 2003, former president Didier Ratsiraka was convicted in his absence of stealing \$8 million in public funds before leaving Madagascar. Ratsiraka has lived in exile in France since losing the 2002 vote recount.
- The government replaced the Malagasy *franc* with the *ariary* (a precolonial currency) as the national currency in July 2003. The Malagasy *franc* will be exchangeable at banks until 2009. The decision was seen as an attempt to reduce the nation's ties to its French colonial past.

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