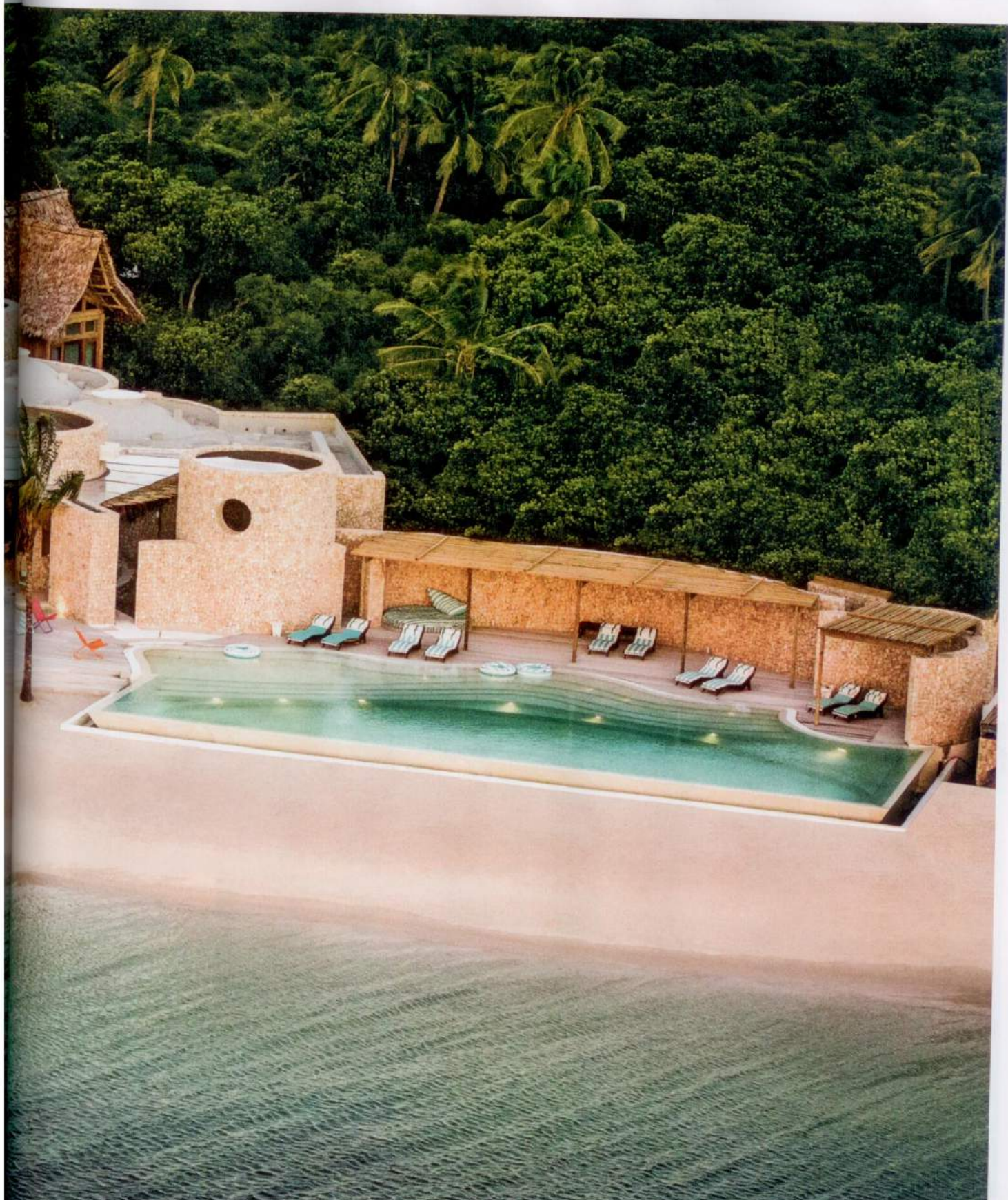


IS THIS THE SMARTEST

AN EXCLUSIVE FIRST REVIEW OF MIAVANA, A TINY SPOT OF LAND THAT

WORDS BY PETER BROWN



ISLAND ESCAPE EVER?
THE BIGGEST OPENING IN THE INDIAN OCEAN FOR ABSOLUTELY AGES
PHOTOGRAPHS BY CROOKES & JACKSON



ON THIS STRANGE AND CAPTIVATING ISLAND there are invisible worlds and disgruntled spirits to appease. Sacrificial ceremonies are practised as they were centuries ago, the rules passed down through generations, along with taboos that govern what is, and is not, acceptable behaviour. In some places there are tribesmen who fear that white men will eat their hearts. In others, the bones of ancestors are regularly exhumed from their tombs to be danced around the village. Madagascar is abundant with intrigue and legend, and tales of terrible storms and churning seas.

Known as The Great Red Island, it lies just 250 miles off the east coast of Africa, but the language spoken here has its roots in south-east Borneo, 3,500 miles away across the Indian Ocean. The interior is home to the Merina tribe, descendants of Indonesian colonisers who arrived sometime in the 16th century. Nobody knows exactly how or why, although there is a huge amount of speculation; oral accounts have created a multitude of slightly differing truths based on similar themes.

Imagine the surprise of the first Europeans to infiltrate the hilly heart of this forest-fringed African nation, only to find light-skinned Asians cultivating terraced rice paddies. The American scientist and writer Jared Diamond, author of *Guns, Germs and Steel*, puts it this way: 'It's as if Columbus, on reaching Cuba, had found it occupied by blue-eyed, blond-haired Scandinavians speaking a language close to Swedish, even

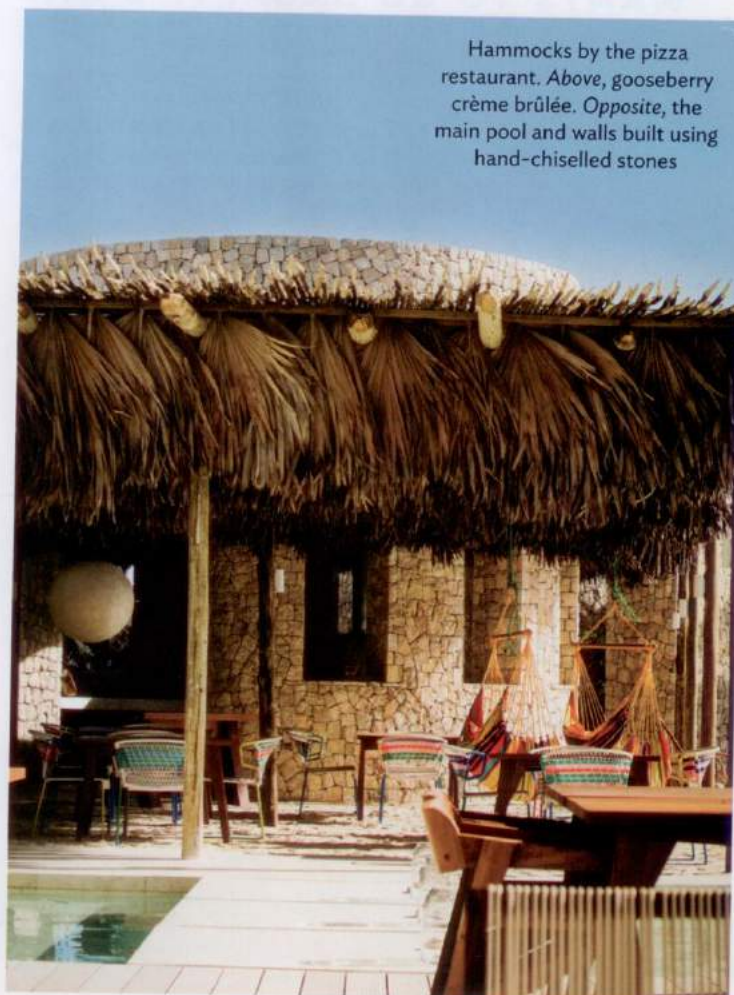
IT CHANNELS BRETON STRIPES, POPPING MISSONI COLOURS AND LE CORBUSIER MODERNISM

though the nearby North American continent was inhabited by Native Americans speaking Amerindian languages.'

The Merina tribe still dominates the highlands, from where they have governed for centuries, first through an all-powerful royal household and latterly in politics. They were enthusiastic participants in the slave trade, buying labour from the African coast and Comoros islands to tend their fields. Even now African and Arab influences are more keenly felt where the slave trade thrived, around the coast, both in the people and customs; the islanders' long-horned humpbacked zebu cattle, for example, so important in all aspects of Malagasy life, most likely originated in East Africa.

In the 17th century, the seas around here swarmed with Portuguese, English and French pirates on the look out for treasure. Madagascar's spectacular coast and satellite islands, encircled by coral reefs and warm, shallow water the colour of robin's eggs, are speckled with the rusty wrecks of long-forgotten merchant ships.

Once part of the supercontinent known as Gondwana, Madagascar broke away from the rest of the world about 160 million years ago. There is nowhere else like it. When David Attenborough first came here in the early 1960s for his television series *Zoo Quest*, he described it as 'a place where antique, outmoded forms of life that have long since disappeared from the rest of the world still survive'. Among these are about 100 species of lemur, ancestors of the world's earliest primates, and the vast majority of its plants, reptiles and amphibians are unique to this country. Previously unknown species continue to be



Hammocks by the pizza restaurant. Above, gooseberry crème brûlée. Opposite, the main pool and walls built using hand-chiselled stones

discovered, and the skeletons of bizarre, now-extinct creatures – huge, flightless elephant birds; diminutive pygmy hippopotamus – lie buried in its fertile soil.

I FIRST VISITED MADAGASCAR EIGHT YEARS AGO. Then as now, the country was a challenging place to get around. The infrastructure is sparse and primitive, and while the national airline is safe and efficient when demands are low, it never operates in the afternoon (because, I am told, this is when it tends to rain) and schedules get shaky on highdays and holidays when the pressure's on.

Back then I spent time in the capital, Anananarivo (Tana), where the royal family ruled from their palace on the city's upper ramparts until 1897, and the French colonial influence of the 20th century is evident everywhere in bistros and guest-houses. I then travelled slowly down to the Spiny Forest in the far south to track wild lemurs with the spear-carrying Tandroy tribe, before ending up at Anjajavy L'Hôtel on the north-west coast, the smartest place to stay on the island at that time.

Everyone I know who has been to Madagascar wants to go back. It's one of those wild, perplexing, difficult, fascinating places that burrow deep into the psyche. Then a couple of years ago I heard about a new private-island project getting underway off the little-known north-east coast. The backer was Thierry Dalais, the original investor in North Island in the Seychelles, one of the world's most exclusive and successful

but they just said it was part of their culture. And then, when I went back a week later everyone on the island was dead, except for one couple who told me the turtle meat had poisoned them. It was devastating.'

By the early 1990s, the now-deserted island had become a battleground between drug lords, keen to take advantage of its remoteness and strategic position – midway between the ports of Vohemar and Diego Suarez – to hide and traffic contraband. The Vohemar police eventually stepped in and cleared the island of criminals, but by the time Peyre returned, the once-immaculate landscape had been hit by deforestation and the surrounding waters were suffering from overfishing.

'The algae farm was simply a way to provide an alternative to fishing and preserve the ecology of the island,' says Peyre. 'And little by little we started to have good results. In the end we were the biggest private company producing red algae, from which the natural food additive carrageenan, is extracted.' But from 2010, the farm went into decline – Peyre says as a result of higher ocean temperatures caused by global warming – and as employment started to dry up, subsistence and small-scale commercial fishing increased, putting the ocean's resources under strain once again.

Which is where Thierry Dalais came back into the frame. Having sold North Island in 2010, and invested in small but respectable Norman Carr Safaris in Zambia, he was in the market for another 'cool place on the beach'. He and Peyre

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tropical-island sanctuaries. Like North, the project would have an intractable ecological backbone. And the architects would be Silvio Rech and Lesley Carstens, the couple responsible for North Island's exquisite handcrafted look. This was going to be good.

Dalais has known Madagascar all his life. A Johannesburg-born financier from an old French-Mauritian family, he spent his childhood holidays either in the South African bush or island hopping in the Indian Ocean. Mauritius was his second home, but his aunt and uncle introduced him to the colossus that is Madagascar, where they had settled, more than 600 miles away.

'Eight years ago, one of my cousins told me about an algae-farming business, run by a man called Jean-Christophe Peyre, on a small Malagasy island I had never heard of,' says Dalais. 'He thought I might be interested in investing in it, and of course I was intrigued. So I went to take a look and when I got there, well, the location – so wild and absolutely pristine – completely blew me away. I wasn't sure about the seaweed farm, but I knew something should be done with it.'

The island was Nosy Ankaou, part of the obscure Levens Archipelago. Peyre, a geologist, explorer and conservationist who has lived on Madagascar for 35 years, had first come across it in the late 1980s.

'An elderly Chinese man in the port of Vohemar told me about it, and after that I used to go every weekend to camp, fish and dive,' says Peyre. 'There were only a few old people living on it, surviving on sea turtles. One day I saw they had caught about 10, flipped them on their backs, and had eaten the fattest one, leaving the rest to slowly die. I confronted them about it,

began to talk about the idea of developing a sustainable hotel to help protect the Levens Archipelago.

'I know, I'm nuts,' says Dalais, acknowledging the difficulties involved in opening a hotel in such a far-flung place. 'But I so loved North Island and I just wanted to do it all again. I have always wanted to have one great place in the bush and one on the beach. I mean, I have a pretty cool house on Mauritius, but it's not the same. I've seen what happened there, where conservation wasn't a priority. And here, as in the Seychelles 15 years ago, I had the opportunity to take control of a beautiful but damaged island and give it some care. I had to do it.'

I FLEW OUT TO SEE THIERRY DALAIS' NEW ISLAND RETREAT, christened Miavana, before it opened for early-bird guests in May, following a six-month delay. Looking back, the postponement was probably inevitable, given the remoteness of the archipelago in particular, and Madagascar's Francophile fascination with paperwork and rubber stamps in general.

But, accessibility and bureaucratic issues aside, what I hadn't quite appreciated before my arrival on Nosy Ankaou was the magnitude and ambition of the project; its audacious grandeur. Nor had I anticipated the team's determination to get things right, having learnt from past mistakes, and to forge ahead and create something utterly unique rather than simply fall back on safe, tried-and-tested techniques.

As the architect, Silvio Rech, says, 'We wanted to free ourselves of the shackles of African and Balinese island design and create something light and fun, to capture some of the spontaneity of our childhoods when holidays were carefree and



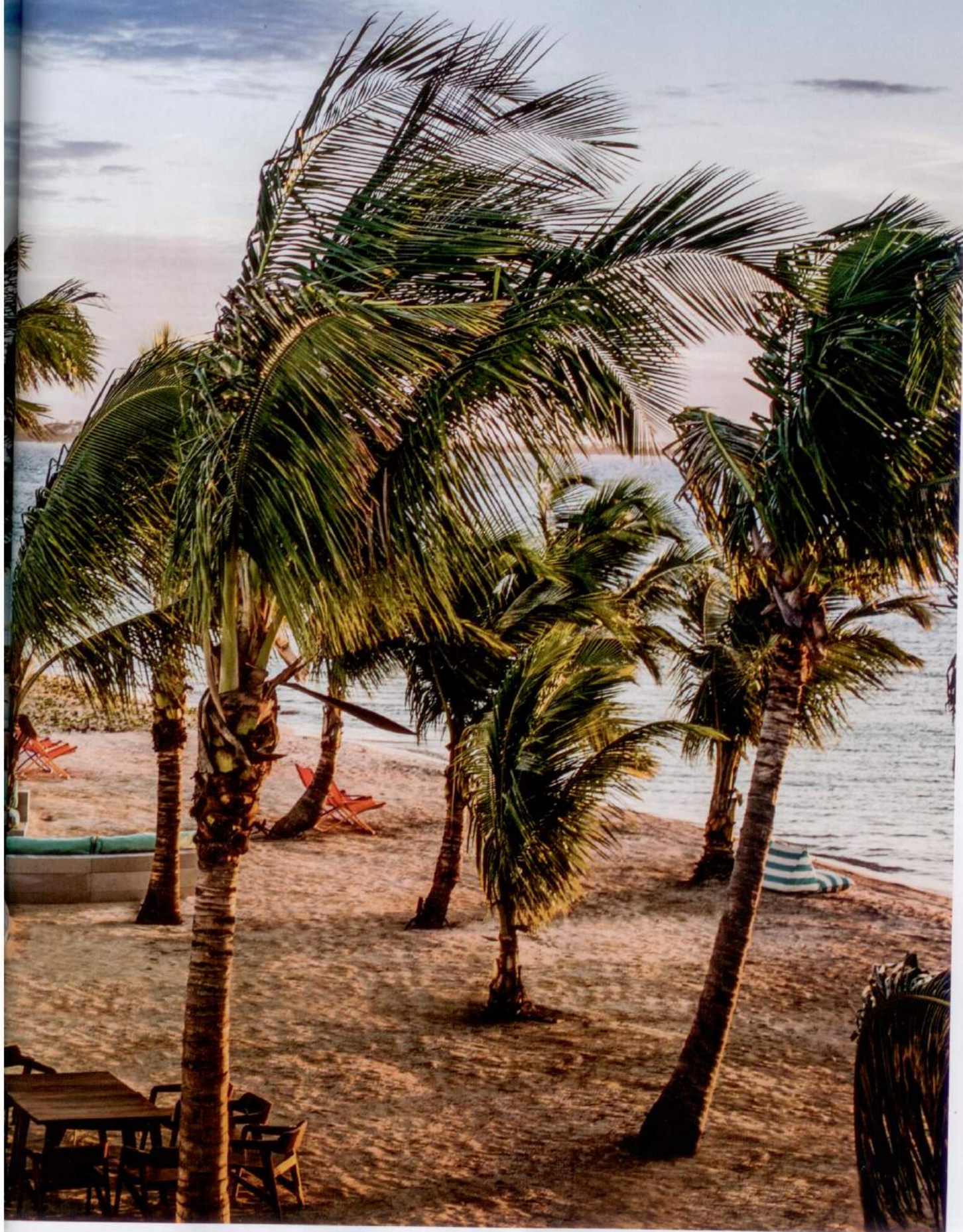
Clockwise from this picture:
inside the stone-clad lounge;
breakfast of homemade muesli
and pain au raisin; Missoni-
style colours on a handwoven
chair; by the pool at Villa Two

IT'S QUITE A JOY RIDE, SOARING BY HELICOPTER OVER THE



View across Miavana to the main island of Madagascar

LARGEST BAY IN THE WORLD AND ACROSS THE EMERALD SEA



The main bedroom of Villa Two, with its suspended mirror sculpture and sunken bath. Opposite, the main pool with its graduations of depth; crab and prawn coconut curry with saffron rice



uncomplicated.' Where North Island is a Robinson Crusoe fantasy of hand-tooled furniture and rough-cut logs lashed together or secured with wooden nails, Miavana channels fairytale stone fortresses, moats, modernism inspired by Le Corbusier, breezy Breton stripes and vibrant, eye-popping Missoni colours to make you smile.

The structures themselves – 14 enormous, mid-century-modern beachfront villas with private pools and an imposing stone-walled central hub for socialising – are an exhilarating mix of different architectural vernaculars: the local, traditional and handmade; the urbane, modern and minimalist.

The steel-framed villas combine the slinky, low-slung silhouette of a Palm Springs residence with discrete conical towers clad in hand-cut stone. There are banks of folding glass doors, curved Seventies-style sofas in aquamarine, cubist cabinets in canary-yellow, wavy Corian-topped tables and sunken baths that wouldn't look out of kilter in *The Spy Who Loved Me*. At night, the master bedroom (there is a second, which doubles as a study, even in the smallest, so-called one-bedroom villas) is enveloped in floor-length curtains hand-dyed a deep aqua, graduating down through lighter shades of blue to white with a cuff of cream. They are inspired, says Rech, by the ocean's depths when illuminated by a light shaft hitting the sandy floor.

But the real architectural and design statement is undoubtedly the magnificent public space with its grand, four-metre-high

THE OWNER WANTED TO CAPTURE THE SPONTANEITY OF HIS CHILDHOOD, WHEN HOLIDAYS WERE CAREFREE

stone walls, pergolas, intricate palm-leaf-woven roofs and a restaurant crowned by four domes, each pierced with a circular glass skylight, allowing celestial beams of light into the space. There is an open-air pavilion surrounded by a clear-blue moat, so that it appears to float like a mirage, and a bar perceived as a ruined fort with thick, wonky walls and shelves made from hand-axed rosewood.

Central to this sizable village is the Cabinet de Curiosities, an air-conditioned museum-library built to display Dalais' and Peyre's considerable haul of natural and man-made artefacts from the islands, including extraordinary butterfly collections, the skeleton of a pygmy hippopotamus, a pair of 17th-century cannons, and headgear once worn by Malagasy royalty. For it, Dalais also commissioned a model replica of the trade ship *Le Tige*, which ran aground on the neighbouring island of Nosy Mahanpana (also leased by Dalais) in 1890.

The pale-cream stone used to clad all the buildings and grand arched walls came from a family-owned quarry on Madagascar and was delivered to Nosy Ankao by boat, piece by heavy piece, then lugged by teams of workers onto the shore and chiselled into rocks by hand. Hundreds of Malagasy were employed in the hotel's construction, and many will be kept on to work here, or help with the continual rehabilitation of the island's fragile ecosystem.

Miavana's South African landscaper, Greg Wepener, is another one of Dalais' trusted North Island connections. He has already been working on the restoration of Nosy Ankao for close on four years, first removing non-endemic trees, such as



IN THE 17TH CENTURY, THE SEAS SWARMED WITH PIRATES ON



THE LOOK OUT FOR TREASURE



The Miavana bar has been designed to resemble a ruined and abandoned colonial fort

casuarinas, from the beachfront where the hotel now stands, then planting around 70,000 various palms, fig trees and Malagasy vanilla specimens to soften the outline of the new buildings as well as fill in bald spots in the island's natural forest destroyed by logging. His nursery holds about 600,000 plants at any one time, assiduously grown from cuttings or seed.

Permission has also been granted to translocate families of endangered crowned lemurs from Malagasy forests under threat from slash-and-burn subsistence farming. The plan, says Dalais, is to provide the lemurs with a sanctuary from which to breed, eventually to repopulate forests where they have all but disappeared.

As on North Island, the desire here is to protect, restore and maintain this 360-hectare haven as best as humanly possible. 'You don't do this for the money,' says Dalais. 'Money just gets in the way, simply because you can count it.'

To this end, Dalais has thrown a sizable chunk of cash at two Robinson R66 helicopters to sidestep the problem of accessibility. All guests are choppered over from the port of Diego Suarez, where a Portuguese sea captain, Diogo Dias, was the first European to land on Madagascar in 1500. It's quite a joy ride, soaring above one of the biggest natural bays in the world – punctured by the distinctive Sugarloaf shape of the sacred island of Nosy Lonja – then swooping over the Emerald Sea and out over the Indian Ocean to Nosy Ankaon. But the helicopters are more than a convenient 30-minute taxi service (the same journey by boat would take about three hours, tides dependant). Dalais describes Miavana as a 'mothership', from which guests can embark on the kind of adventures that first attracted him to this part of Madagascar.

'Up here we've got it all,' he says. 'The biodiversity is astonishing. Within an hour's flight of Miavana there are pockets of rainforest, riverine habitat, mangrove forests, the highest mountain in Madagascar, limestone cliffs and underground caves. It's all here waiting to be discovered.'

In the seas around Miavana itself there is a deep continental-shelf drop-off, healthy coral gardens flush with fusiliers and varieties of angel and trigger fish; bumphead parrot fish are regular visitors. The shallow water nudging the flawless beach in front of the villas is safe for swimming and it is possible – even advisable – to take the three-hour walk along its soft-sand shore to an abandoned lighthouse, built in 1931, from which there are views to the mountains of Madagascar in the east and a limitless ocean stretching all the way to Borneo in the west.

'All of this was born from childhood dreams,' says Dalais, 'from my love of being in beautiful places that showcase nature; the freedom to go up into the mountains and watch birds soar and lemurs play. In Madagascar someone can discover a new species of butterfly in his or her back garden, or a dusty dinosaur bone in a village market. Frankly, it's a great playground but, more importantly, it's also a place where it is still possible to make a difference.'

Africa Travel (+44 845 450 1535; africatravel.com) can arrange trips to Miavana. A five-night stay costs from £11,525 per person sharing, including international and local flights, helicopter transfers, plus an overnight stay in Antananarivo with breakfast at the Relais des Plateaux. Included at Miavana are all meals, drinks, laundry, lemur trekking, scuba diving, snorkelling, boat cruises, fishing and water sports.