



# Idyll Island

Most people would be hard-pressed to put a pin in Mayotte on the map. **Mark Stratton** explores this surprisingly French island in the Indian Ocean

**L**e Relais Forestier's website advertises breakfast for €7 'avec les makis'. I had no clue what that meant and still none when Nadine le Guillou delivered her tangy pineapple confiture to the breakfast table on her hillside terrace. As a chilly mountain mist ebbed away to reveal far-reaching ocean views she added local Arabica coffee and warm home-baked bread for what seemed like a quintessential *petit-déjeuner* in France's 101st department, or at least until the 'makis' arrived.

A dozen-or-so brown furry lemurs with long tails and greedy orange eyes appeared out of the tropical forest near her husband Gyl's vanilla orchids. The locals call them 'maki' and they are found in no other

place in the world other than Madagascar.

"They come every morning around breakfast and demand to be fed," said Gyl as they impolitely snatched chunks of papaya out of my hand. They were still going strong 10 minutes later as other guests took over the feeding frenzy so I wandered back to breakfast hoping some of them hadn't doubled-back and pilfered my croissant.

It's probably apparent from such tropical references and avaricious prosimians that this *département* is further afield than Pas-de-Calais. Mayotte island sits in the Indian Ocean north of Madagascar and is one of five far-flung French *départements* that include: French Guiana, Guadeloupe, Réunion and Martinique. Slightly

**ABOVE:** The stunning Plage N'Gouja in the south of Mayotte

**RIGHT:** The vibrant bustle of the Marché Paysan de Coconi





ingredient of Chanel N°5 - subsequently attracted European interest and although the Portuguese arrived first it was France who bought Mayotte in 1841 from a hard-up sultan.

This status quo remained until 1974 when Mayotte's sister islands, Grande Comore, Anjouan and Mohéli, voted for independence. They collectively founded the Union of Comoros yet the 250,000 stubborn folk of Mayotte knew exactly which side their baguette was buttered and voted to continue with French patronage and citizenship. In 2011 - much to the chagrin of independent Comoros which still claims Mayotte - they reinforced their commitment by voting again to become France's newest *département* with 95 per cent saying 'Oui'. France has subsequently pumped millions of Euros into the island to create a far higher standard of living than neighbouring Comoros but this has in turn sparked a refugee crisis, with thousands of impoverished Comorans attempting each year to enter Mayotte illegally to access better services and jobs. This has caused a great strain on Mayotte's services and economy, and a sense of *déjà-vu* so far from the EU wasn't lost on me.

### Distinctly European

After island-hopping along the Comoros Archipelago I flew into Mayotte's offshore international airport on 'Petite Terre' (Dzaoudzi): the smaller of Mayotte's two islands. Despite experiencing spectacular volcanic scenery along the Comoros Archipelago I had been disheartened by the level of poverty in the neighbouring country so it was a sharp contrast arriving at Mayotte's shiny modern new airport.

I really felt I had arrived in mainland France yet there are few similarities thereafter. Mayotte is rippled by a spine of four volcanoes dating back 7.7 million years and the island is fringed by coral reefs enclosing turquoise lagoons. Many arriving visitors tend to depart the airport island of Dzaoudzi immediately even though its western coastline offers some of the Indian Ocean's most spectacular coastal scenery.

"Come, you must try my homemade vanilla rum," said the genial Laurent welcoming me to his *chambre d'hôte* on Dzaoudzi. Throughout my week-long stay I used local bed-and-breakfasts and Laurent's Les Couleurs is a rambling warren of a property with five rooms decorated with bright island art painted by his partner Alexandra. Both of them quit Paris for the good life on Mayotte in 2006. "We were fed up with big city life and came here on holiday and loved the place," he explained. Laurent said since Mayotte became a *département* there'd been much change. "10 years ago we were listening to Celine Dion, now it's French rap," he joked. "But *département* status has brought extra funding for new schools and hospitals and a modernised society."

Les Couleurs is ideally located to visit Lake Dziani: an ancient volcanic cone housing an eerily green lake the colour of avocado enclosed by coconut palms ➡



smaller than the Isle of Wight, Mayotte is geographically part of the volcanic Comoros Archipelago: a chain of great natural beauty with a fragrant history infused by Arab spice traders and French colonialism.

### From Arabia to France

Mayotte islanders (Mahorans) are ethnic Comorans who speak an African Bantu language known as Shimaore as well as French. By 1500 Arab spice traders had discovered the Comoros Islands and Mayotte emerged as a sultanate called Maore. Arabian influence not only bestowed Arabic words that remain part of today's vocabulary but they also converted the Mahorans to Islam. Spices and fragrances including cloves, vanilla, and ylang-ylang - still exported to French perfumeries as a key





sweet vanilla sauce.

Peak wedding season (July-August) was also in full-swing as part of a huge Mahoran diaspora living in France, particularly Marseille and Bordeaux, return with enough money to marry locally and fund lavish ceremonies lasting for days. I walked past a ceremony one evening on my way to Maison AZ&MA guesthouse in Cavani District and saw male relatives and friends dancing in long traditional white Islamic robes as hundreds of guests watched on.

“You need at least €60,000 for a wedding here plus an extra €5,000 to slaughter a cow for the guests,” laughed Rania Saïd, at Mayotte’s tourist office.

“Guests offer money for the couple but because they announce the gift you tend to give more so to not feel self-conscious.” Rania worked in France for a decade and I wondered if she felt French?

“Hmm,” she pondered. “I feel Mahoran first but welcome the opportunities being part of France has given me.” She is Muslim like the majority of islanders.

“I pray five times each day but religion is not so intense as on the other Comoros Islands. Here we live a very European way.”

and mango trees. A circular hike around it led to magnificent sea-cliffs scalloped by horseshoe-shaped sandy bays while my attention was drawn to swimming green turtles reconnoitring for nesting sights below. I hurried down a steep path hoping to see them up close on Moya Beach but it was too early in the day for them to come ashore to lay eggs, so I contented myself with a warm swim.

### A community of contrasts

The next day, a free 10-minute ferry took me onto Mayotte’s main Grande-Terre island and to the capital, Mamoudzou. This densely populated town is arranged around hills overlooking the coast and has an engaging vibe of Francophone life and Comoran identity. Classical French icons like pâtisserie shops, white table cloth bistros and a familiar looking *gendarmerie* juxtapose with minarets of mosques protruding above largely low-rise buildings while La Pointe Mahabou is a tropical park of mangroves hosting the remains of a former Madagascan ruler, King Andriantsoly.

The best expression of traditional Comoran identity centres around a lively and engaging wharf. As well as several ocean-facing bars fashioned from shipping containers, foodstalls near the ferry point sell cheap Comoran dishes for €4 per plate. I ate a fatty brochette of goat with boiled yam and cassava, a very African experience, surrounded by women in very conservative Comoran clothing featuring long flowery shiromeni dresses, shawls covering heads and facial masks of sandalwood paste used as sun protection. If goat doesn’t appeal, the island’s seafood is superb with langoustine eaten as the national dish served with a

### Outdoor experiences

Thereafter I discovered Mayotte’s true *raison d’être* for visiting is a rich connection with the great outdoors. It was August and whale season so I joined a group tour out onto a translucent royal-blue coral-rich lagoon shielded by the Grand Northeast Barrier Reef. After exiting Mamoudzou past brown tumbled lava cliffs, Captain Jeremy dished out fresh *pain au chocolat* and coffee, and we were soon engulfed by dolphins racing our vessel, spinning acrobatically into the air. “These are pantropical spotted dolphins, the fastest species in the world,” he said as they overtook our speeding vessel at will.

We lost them after passing through a narrow gap in the reef called Passe de M’tsambo and in deeper water it wasn’t long before we sighted two shadowy lumps on the horizon. They were humpback whales and with flicks of crescent-shaped tails, they both dived. Jeremy now had to try and decide where they were likely to resurface? “It’s very difficult as they can stay underwater for 40 minutes so this may be kilometres away,” he said. However over the next hour these great whales announced their reemergence twice with powerful expulsions of seawater from their blowholes within 100 metres of our boat for a truly wonderful spectacle.

Getting around the islands can prove a little challenging as no public transport exists, so it’s definitely worth hiring a car. Yet I decided to travel locally by taxi-brousse: shared private taxis that are hailed from the side of the road with a request where to be dropped-off by the driver. It’s a great way to meet

**LEFT:** Mont Choungui is a popular location for hiking on Mayotte  
**LEFT (INSERT):** Relais Forestiere’s lemurs  
**BELOW:** Les Baobabs Guest House





locals and journeys cost only a few euros.

The whole island is volcanically contorted and always scenic. On any given journey the road twisted and turned so one minute I would face coves of coastal mangroves and the next mountainous volcanic flanks forested with native trees and banana, coconut and mango stands.

On the slopes of Mont Combani (477m) in central Mayotte, Gyl and Nadine Le Guillou run Le Relais Forestier. They too are French exiles, both Bretons from Angers. When I arrived Nadine was taking a yoga class. “We took a holiday here. I was a yoga teacher back in France and he worked in administration. But we dive and love nature so we took a chance to change our lives,” she said.

Besides yoga, guests may hike into the surrounding tropical forests on the lookout for lemurs. I didn’t have to wait long to find them. An hour’s walk into the Réserve Forestière de Sangoro Mili, the bamboo stand rattled above me and I saw a small family of them watching me intently. These brown lemurs hail from Madagascar. “They could be native to Mayotte but it’s more likely they were introduced here,” Gyl said later.

Gyl cooked that evening on their outside terrace,

where guests convivially dine together on a long table. This time he was under some pressure to prepare a fine meal as guests included Madame and Monsieur Trama of the legendary Café Trama on Rue du Cherche-Midi, Paris, a restaurant famed for a modern take on *croque monsieur*. “I grew up in the restaurant and knew we were gaining a reputation when Robert de Niro called by to eat. I also remember Lauren Bacall visiting us,” said Madam Trama. Fortunately Gyl’s homemade green papaya salad and unusual yet delicious cucumber loaf with cumin and turmeric fish had the renowned foodies purring with satisfaction.

Mayotte’s southernmost peninsula curls like a seahorse’s tail and I journeyed onwards to a nondescript little town called Bandrélé. My hostess this time was Lise from Bordeaux who has been resident on the island for eight years. She started Les Baobab a four-room *chambre d’hôte* with her partner Yannis from Réunion. “My parents came here to start a hotel so I followed them and did likewise,” she said, adding with a now familiar refrain: “Mayotte is paradise and I can’t go back”.

Her property faces the shimmering Indian Ocean: a view blocked, quite agreeably, from my nautical-themed room by a huge baobab tree smothered by purple and white bougainvillea. In the evening I took an aperitif by the swimming pool and watched Livingstone fruit-bats. With wingspans of 1.4 metres these ‘flying foxes’ are one of the world’s largest species of megabat. They swirl around at dusk seeking fruit before crashing into the foliage to settle and feed clinging upside down. ➤➤➤

**Black-and-white striped butterflies slalomed between the trees and lemurs watched on as I hauled myself up**





## Reaching the peak

After a local evening meal featuring spicy samosas, popular on Mayotte, Lise drove me next morning to Mont Choungui. This large conical dormant volcano is Mayotte's second highest peak at 594m-high. It's a thrilling scramble up through tangled rainforest literally using the tree's gnarly trailing roots to pull oneself higher through the Réserve Forestière des Crêtes du Sud. Black-and-white striped butterflies slalomed between the trees and lemurs watched on as I hauled myself up sometimes 20° steep slopes drenched in sweat. For my effort I was rewarded with spectacular views across the whole of the southern island with its bays of golden sand.

Close to Mont Choungui is reputedly the finest of Mayotte's beaches, Plage de N'Gouja: a long palm-backed strip of pure sand where I swam in turquoise water. The beach is popular for nesting green turtles who had left tractor tyre-width trails heading up the beach from the previous evening's egg-laying that had yet to be washed away by the warm incoming tide.

It started to rain so I ducked inside the beach restaurant. As a tropical shower thundered off the restaurant's thatched roof, I watched another group of

greedy lemurs raid the contents of a nearby dustbin. They looked hungry so I kept careful watch on my delicious *assiette* of smoked marlin and reflected on just how beautiful Mayotte's nature had been even 'avec les makis'. 🌿



## Francofile *Experience a little bit of France in the Indian Ocean*

### GETTING THERE

**By air:** Mark travelled with Air France. Flights start at around £2,000 return. Fly from Heathrow and get a connecting flight at Paris CDG to Dzaoudzi Airport. The journey takes around 13h25 mins.  
Tel: (UK) 0844 848 5848  
airfrance.co.uk

### Native Eye

Tel: (UK) 01473 328546  
nativeeyetravel.com  
Native Eye Travel offer a nine-day small group trip of Comoros from £1399 (not including international flights) with a £575 three-day extension to Mayotte.

### WHERE TO STAY

**Maison AZ&MA**  
29 Rue des Écoles  
97600 Mamoudzou  
Tel: (Fr) 0269 61 62 68

Family house in downtown Cavani in a compound with a pleasant breakfast terrace.  
Doubles from €50 plus €7 per person for breakfast

### Gîte du Relais Forestier

Mont Comban  
BP287 Kaweni  
97600 Mamoudzou  
Tel: (Fr) 0639 69 25 20  
gitemayotte.com  
Bungalow accommodation on Mount Comban's forested slopes with an oriental-flavoured decor and excellent home cooked food.  
Half-Board doubles from €90 per person

### Les Baobabs

5 Pointe Mougne  
97660 Bandrele  
Tel: (Fr) 0269 60 40 75  
lesbaobabs.fr

Small pension with cosy rooms and a swimming pool with a scrumptious breakfast and great ocean views.  
B&B doubles from €105

### Les Couleurs

34 Rue de la Vigie  
97610 Dzaoudzi-Labattoir  
Tel: (Fr) 0639 20 10 19  
mayotte-les-couleurs.com  
Relaxed Parisian couple run a simple and homely pension in walking distance to Lake Dziani and Moyo Beach  
Doubles from €50 plus €7 per person for breakfast

### WHERE TO EAT

**Lapouz Noz**  
Boulevard des Crabes  
97610 Dzaoudzi

**TOURIST INFORMATION:**  
mayotte-tourisme.com

Tel: (Fr) 0639 69 01 42  
Al-fresco seafood restaurant with grilled tuna €14 and langoustine €20

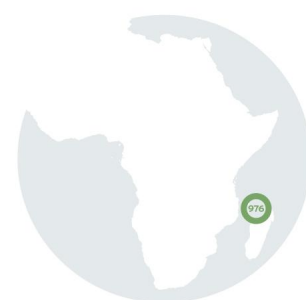
### Auberge du Rond-Point

3 Rue du Commerce  
97600 Mamoudzou  
Tel: (Fr) 0269 61 04 61  
Fine dining smart bistro with mains around €20-30 including signature lobster in vanilla sauce

### WHERE TO VISIT

**Whale Watching with Lagon Adventure**  
Mamoudzou  
Tel: (Fr) 0639 65 42 63  
lagonadventure.fr  
Whale-watching day trip with lunch €60 per head.

**Diving with Nyamba Club**  
Pamandzi



Tel: (Fr) 0269 60 02 56  
nyamba-club.com  
Dive packages from €170

### GETTING AROUND

The ferry from the airport to Mamoudzou is free one-way and €2 for the return. With no official public transport use either shared 'taxi-brousse' or car hire: ADA Car Hire offer 1-4 days rental from €35 per day.  
Tel: (Fr) 0639 66 97 82  
ADA.fr

PHOTOGRAPHS: MARK STRATTON