

A Voyage to the Nosy Hara Archipelago



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In 2003, the president of Madagascar made a dramatic announcement at the Vth World Parks Conference in South Africa. The mission he outlined, called the Durban Vision, seeks to triple the size of Madagascar's protected areas. After the announcement, work began to find the most pristine areas left in Madagascar. 72 areas were identified. Thanks to dedicated teams all over Madagascar, progress is being made to protect each area. Almost 210,000 hectares are already preserved.



In late June, I traveled to the Nosy Hara archipelago to check things out. Here is my story.





As I leave Antananarivo, I am greeted by the more dramatic landscape of the north. From the air, I see steeper mountains, greener pastures, and the slush puppy-blue ocean not far off in the distance. We land in Diego, where I will begin my journey to the Nosy Hara Archipelago. I hop in a rented SUV. The comfort of this luxury vehicle lasts approximately 5 minutes; these are conditions that German and Japanese automakers never dreamed of. Most people drive offroad to avoid the pitted bitumen. The lifestyle here seems just as harsh as our path. Weak wooden fences separate small, dark homes. Out front, the inhabitants sit breaking stones with hammers. Their personal rock quarries comprise their livelihood.

The sights reminds me of the precautionary statement made by most Madagascar travel books, "Madagascar is not for the faint of heart." The women smashing rocks, the sweat-drenched back of a man digging a trench, and the family tackling this swiss cheese road on an ox cart all say, "Life here ain't easy." We are partners in our unique challenges this day. Mine at the moment is not to throw up in the back of the SUV. The bumpy road is taking a toll on my weak stoamch. I take a sip of water and promptly choke as one huge bump sends the liquid hurtling down my wind pipe. I decide to put the water down and gaze at the horizon. A thin, smiling dog trots through the grass nearby grazing cattle.



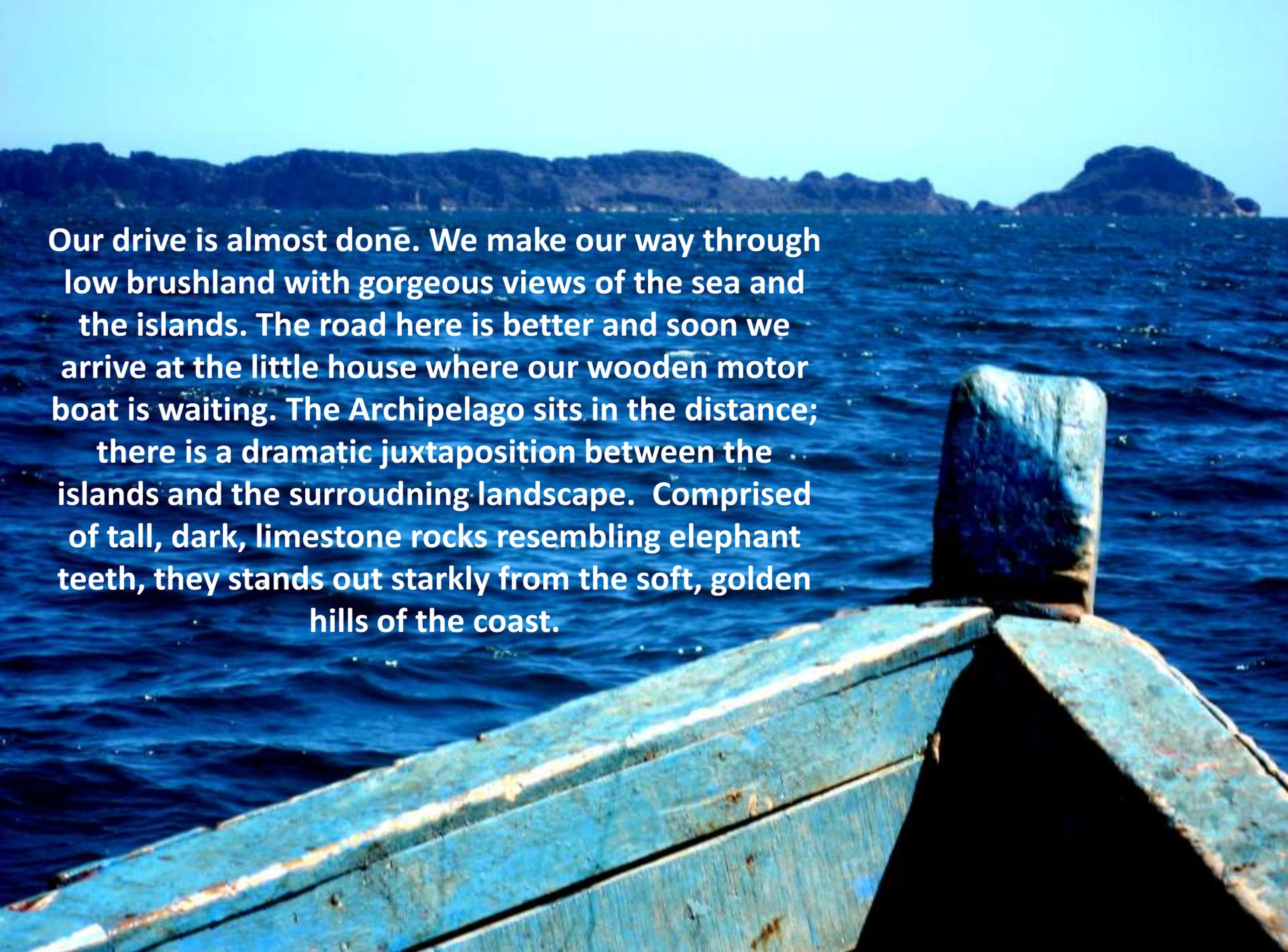


As we travel on, I notice that the women paint their faces. The guide informs me that the mask, made of tree sap, is designed to keep skin beautiful during long hours in the sun. As we cross a small river, the women pause from their laundry; their yellow faces turn to contemplate our passing only for a moment.



Only two more hours will deliver me to the tiny, seaside town where I will take a boat to the archipelago. I look forward to seeing the renowned beauty and tranquility of the archipelago.

Despite its loveliness and large size, I learn that only 100 – 200 tourists visited the archipelago in 2008.

A wooden motorboat is shown from a first-person perspective, moving across a deep blue sea. The boat's wooden planks and a vertical post are visible in the foreground. In the background, there are dark, rugged islands and hills under a clear sky. The text is overlaid on the left side of the image.

Our drive is almost done. We make our way through low brushland with gorgeous views of the sea and the islands. The road here is better and soon we arrive at the little house where our wooden motor boat is waiting. The Archipelago sits in the distance; there is a dramatic juxtaposition between the islands and the surrounding landscape. Comprised of tall, dark, limestone rocks resembling elephant teeth, they stand out starkly from the soft, golden hills of the coast.



With such a dramatic appearance, it is no wonder that the island is considered *fady* – or “a sacred site” -- by the local people. This has allowed the Nosy Hara Archipelago to remain miraculously intact. For many generations certain activities, such as penetrating the interior of the islands or establishing permanent residences, have been prohibited. Due to their beliefs surrounding the islands, as well as the support and enthusiasm of the conservation teams, the surrounding communities are eager for the Archipelago’s initiation into Madagascar’s system of protected areas.

We hop in the boat and begin the last leg of our voyage. As we round the first island, Nosy Hara, an enormous, flat rock face comes into view. It is clear why the area is popular with climbers.





As we sail past Nosy Hara, we are greeted by the other islands of the Archipelago. With their jagged grey and red stones, white beaches, and boulders crowned with blooming baobab trees, the islands resemble an incan wonderland. I try to tell my guide how beautiful it is, but all I can manage in French is “merveilleux...”

I dismount on the first island, Andrantsara, and crunch down onto thousands of corals and shells. The Malagasy woman accompanying me immediately starts collecting them for a necklace.



I begin to wander and notice that others have done something more ecofriendly with the island's endowment. The New Sea Roc team, based in Diego, began a camp for tourists here. Guests stay in natural bungalows built into the rockface and enjoy climbing, fishing, and other activities. The beds are made of sand and drift wood. The walls are decorated with fishing nets and an assortment of seashells. I place one that I collected inside, as my personal contribution to the island paradise. A rock and drift wood staircase leads to another room with a view. Through the open air window, we see the sparkling sea, shore birds trotting along the white sand, and islands off in the distance.

After Andrantsara, we stop shortly on the island of Lakanaava...



...as well as on Nosy Hara. These islands are equally as magnificent.



The seas are smooth in the afternoon and I nap in the sun as we move away from the islands. I am plotting to return again. With only half a day spent in their vicinity, I know the islands have much more to offer. I would like to explore the underwater environment; its clear waters are home to four different species of sea turtles, whale sharks, rays, dugong, and many other marine animals. In few other places can one witness such exceptional biodiversity .



Thanks to the work of NGOs and the Madagascar government, Nosy Hara's beauty and biodiversity will be maintained for its inherent value, as well as the enjoyment of future generations. Teams of local community members, scientists, social scientists and business professionals continue to strive to make the park socially and environmentally sustainable. To find out more about their efforts and successes check out our interview section.

