

Squiz the World goes to... Madagascar

Each fortnight, we give the world globe a spin, and see where we land. Then we take the kids of Australia on an audio excursion to visit that country and its people.

I'm Christie Kijurina, and today on Squiz the World we're flying across the Indian Ocean to a wild and wonderful island where the trees look like they've been planted upside down, the national dish is a rice stew made with zebu, and the animals are like nothing you'll find anywhere else on Earth.

Can you guess? Strap yourselves into the Squiz Kids Super Fast Supersonic Jetliner as we take off and take a squiz at Madagascar.

JUST THE FACTS

"Madagascar is the fourth largest island in the entire world, sitting just off the southeast coast of Africa in the Indian Ocean.

If you look at it sideways, it kind of looks like a giant left foot (I've popped a link to a map in the episode notes... am I wrong?)"

The population is around 30 million people, and the capital city has quite a mouthful of a name - Antananarivo, but locals just call it "Tana" for short. There are diverse landscapes here — from cool highlands to rainforests, deserts, and beaches.

A lot of the roads aren't sealed, but Madagascar has a long coastline with heaps of harbours and ports, which helps with getting around.

Now, here's what makes Madagascar absolutely extraordinary... its wildlife. Around 80 to 90% of its plant and animal species can't be found anywhere else in the world. That's because its been so isolated for so long. These special species including baobab (BAY UH BAB trees — they look like they're planted upside down and can live for over 1,000 years. They store water in their huge trunks, which helps during dry times.

And yep, just like in the movies, Madagascar really is the only place in the world where lemurs live naturally. There are over 100 species of them! But, despite being so close to Africa, there are no lions, zebras, giraffes, or hippos in Madagascar! Those African mainland animals don't naturally live there. The closest thing to a big predator you'll find is the fossa (FOO-SA)- Madagascar's largest hunter that looks like a cross between a cat and a mongoose, but it's only about the size of a small dog. Not sure if that or the hissing cockroach is scarier!!

To learn how Madagascar became the amazing place it is today, we need to look back into its past. So, let's do some....

TIME TRAVEL

Let's go way, way back - 160 million years ago. That's when Madagascar separated from Africa, which explains why it has such unique animals today. It's been like a giant natural laboratory, with creatures evolving completely separately from the rest of the world!

Humans didn't show up until way later. The first settlers didn't come from nearby Africa as you might expect, they sailed thousands of kilometres from Southeast Asia around 2,000 years ago. These Austronesian people brought their own culture and language, which is why Malagasy people today (that's what the people in Madagascar are called) don't look like traditional African peoples and have their own distinct culture.

"Arab traders arrived around 800 or 900 CE, and brought with them new goods, religion and connections to the wider world. In the 1500s, Portuguese explorers began arriving, followed by the French, who set up trading posts.

And, in the 1600s, Madagascar became a hot spot for a very different kind of visitor... pirates! But more on that in just a minute..."

"The Kingdom of Madagascar was unified in the 1800s under King Radama I, bringing together the island's many different groups.

From 1896 to 1960, Madagascar was colonised by the French, which is why French is still an official language today and the countries maintain close ties.

Then, finally, on June 26, 1960, Madagascar gained its independence!"

Today, Madagascar is home to about 20 different ethnic groups, each contributing to the island's rich culture with amazing music, food, and traditions. The official languages are Malagasy and French, reflecting this fascinating history.

Now, speaking of pirates... it's time to dig for treasure and uncover a part of Madagascar's history that might surprise you.

BELIEVE IT OR NOT

"Believe it or not... Madagascar was once the most famous pirate stronghold in the world! That's right - real pirates, with treasure and everything!

From the 1690s to the 1720s, Madagascar was like a pirate paradise. Why? Because it was in the perfect spot — right on the busy sea routes between Europe, India, and Asia. European navies were too far away to control the area,"

and, many local Malagasy rulers actually welcomed the pirates and traded with them. Madagascar had hundreds of hidden bays and inlets where pirates could hide their ships, plus fresh water, food, and materials to repair their vessels. It was basically a no-questions-asked paradise where pirates could spend their stolen treasure!

The pirate capital was a little island off Madagascar's coast called Île Sainte-Marie. At its peak, over 1,000 pirates lived there! They built houses, married local women, and even created their own pirate government. There's still a pirate cemetery you can visit today, with tombstones marked by skull and crossbones.

Famous pirates like Captain William Kidd once called Madagascar home. He even buried treasure somewhere on the island, and it's still never been found....yet!

By the 1720s European navies got stronger and started hunting the pirates down. Many of them decided to give up pirating and settled down in Madagascar permanently, becoming traders. So some Malagasy families today can trace their ancestry back to these famous pirates!

After all that swashbuckling and treasure-hunting, I think it's time for something a bit more everyday. Let's head to the classroom — because it's

TIME FOR SCHOOL

First thing you'd notice is that their school year runs from October to July. Primary school is free and compulsory for kids aged 6 to 11, which is great. But many schools, especially in rural areas, lack basic resources. Students often have to share textbooks, and classrooms can be pretty crowded.

Classes are taught in Malagasy for the first few years, then French is introduced as kids get older. Many children in rural areas help with family farming, which can affect their school attendance - education and helping the family both matter a lot. And, many children have to walk really long distances just to reach their school. Imagine walking for an hour or more just to get to class!

School uniforms are typically required just like in Australian schools but, for lunch, kids might have rice - which is the staple food in Madagascar - with some vegetables or small amounts of meat or fish.

Now, after all that learning and talk of lunchtime rice... I'm getting a little hungry myself. Let's find out what else is on the menu... it's

DINNER TIME

"Food in Madagascar is all about rice. It's eaten at almost every meal. In fact, when you're invited to eat in Madagascar, people say "Manasa hihinam-bary!" — which literally means "Let's eat rice!"

Meals are often eaten with hands or spoons, and family dinner time is really important social time where everyone comes together."

The national dish is called Romazava (RAAMA ZAAVA) - it's a delicious meat and vegetable stew with leafy greens. In Madagascar, the meat would traditionally be zebu,

which is a type of cattle with a distinctive hump think a cow crossed with a camel. Don't worry though, I've put a link in the episode notes for a version you can make at home with regular pork, chicken, or beef, because I'm pretty sure your local butcher won't have any zebu handy!

The variety and flavors of Malagasy food really reflect the island's unique history, blending influences from Southeast Asia, Africa, and France into something completely their own.

THE S'QUIZ

This is the part of the podcast where you get to test how well you've been listening.

Question 1 Madagascar is famous for being the only place in the world where what animals live naturally? And bonus points if you can tell me roughly how many species there are! (Lemurs 100 species)

"Question 2 How many years ago did Madagascar separate from the rest of Africa? Was it:

a) 6 million years

b) 60 million years

c) 160 million years

(c) 160 million years)"

Question 3 When Malagasy people invite you for dinner, they say "Manasa Hihinambary!" What does this literally mean in English? (Let's eat rice)

That's all we have time for today. Thanks for staying curious about the world, and joining me on this incredible trip to Madagascar.

Now get out there, and have a most excellent day. Over and out.