

# DISPATCH

Epic tales from dream  
destinations in Peru, Rome,  
and Madagascar.



# Welcome to Eden

*By* Brandon Presser

Miavana, the exotic new luxury resort in Madagascar, is unlike anything the island nation has ever seen.

In Madagascar, a new species is discovered every six days. It sounds like some kind of passage from the Bible; a nugget of trivia that perfectly encapsulates the country's unexplored spirit.

A hulking rock (about the size of France) set adrift off the African coast, Madagascar is an island unto itself, cut off from the rest of world. It's one of the planet's last frontiers, where evolutionary accidents come alive under a canopy of thousand-year-old baobabs that seem to tickle the clouds with their long, spindly branches.

For further effect, Madagascar is far. Really far. Even by today's standards of air travel it's a multflight commitment from the continental United States. But, as the political turmoil of a fallen government melts away, preservation initiatives are cranking into high gear, and a new wave of tourism is hitting the island's shores. It's latest flag-bearer is Miavana, a private island reserve that swung open its villa doors in June. The brainchild of Time + Tide, a portfolio of properties dedicated to progressive conservation, it's a dramatic innovation—a veritable change in economic gravity—in a nation that rarely peaks above the hundred-dollar mark with the majority of its accommodations.

Miavana's objective is clear: to compete with the private island paradises of the nearby Seychelles. And to lay the foundation for success, Time + Tide brought in Silvio Rech and Lesley Carstens, the same South African architects that designed the villas of North Island, the Seychelles' preferred luxury enclave for celebs on holiday (and the property of choice for Will and Kate's honeymoon).

Their prospects are promising. Fourteen mega-villas sit where a phalanx of exotic trees meets the broad, arcing beach with sand like vanilla sponge cake that dimples under the feet of skittish crabs. Each house, encompassing a minimum of 4,500 square feet, is almost entirely encased in glass, with window panes stretching in and out like an accordion along your private pool deck. Found materials are scattered about—gossamer netting, linen tarps and thick nautical rope—to further break up the interior and exterior spaces.

COURTESY MIAVANA

(OPPOSITE) An aerial view of Miavana.









While some kinks need smoothing out, like uneven service and a menu that leans too heavily on the Capetonian penchant for foams and gels, the construction of the property is a polished iteration of shipwreck-chic. Generally speaking, the design is more of an exercise in African minimalism—a hallmark element of Rech and Carstens’ brand—than anything that reads as particularly Malagasy (save the stonework, the texture of which echoes scaly bark from the island’s indigenous Nanto tree). That said, Miavana’s roster of activities brilliantly harnesses Madagascar’s wonder, adeptly toeing the line between creature comforts and, well, creatures.

“Just imagine, you’re the first human these fish have ever seen,” says Chris Barfoot, the resort’s lead scuba diving instructor, who loves to wax lyrical about Miavana’s remote positioning. He’s spent the better part of a year creating a mental map of the uncharted reefs around the archipelago, combing through cauliflower coral as he expands his register of alien nudibranchs and other underwater anomalies.

In addition to adventures below the blue, Miavana also makes good on the Madagascan promise of exoticism on land, which teems with more tropical life than our Homo Sapien brains could possibly register at any given time. To acclimate guests, the resort offers walking tours through the shadows of the forest, guided by professional wildlife trackers. With an uncanny eye adapted to the dark corners of the jungle, they point out vine-swinging lemurs, well-camouflaged chameleons, and juicy beetles more commonly found pinned to bristol boards at your local museum.

To further heighten the experience, helicopters that shuttle guests to and from the island are redeployed as safari cars in the sky. A short flight on the chopper connects Miavana to a dozen different worlds, from the bloody daggers of the Red Tsingys—haunting stone pinnacles covered in desert sand—to secret beaches and lush, riverine realms that snake towards granite plateaus. Even a short sightseeing flight will ignite a passion for exploration in the most hesitant of Crusoes.

There’s talk of overnight camping and live-aboard boat cruising in the future, too, but right now the property’s general manager, Ella Cuyler (formerly of the Ellerman House, Cape Town’s acclaimed upmarket stay), recommends a visit of no shorter than a week in order to properly embrace Miavana’s striking duality of ultra-luxe amenities and uncharted land. And who knows, maybe on the sixth day you’ll discover a new species yourself. But if one thing is certain, it’s that your heavenly villa should have you feeling rested and restored by the seventh.

