

The Lure of Diving in Less-Traveled Places

Story by Bonnie McKenna

This year, at the 2018 Frisco, Texas dive show, the word Moheli on a booth banner caught my eye. I stopped to investigate. Always looking for the unusual and the lure of diving an area off the beaten track, Moheli caught my interest. Eight months later, my husband, two friends and I landed in one of the least visited areas of the world. Moheli is one of four small islands that make up the nation of Comoros. The islands are nestled in the Indian Ocean, about halfway between Mozambique and Madagascar. French is the national language; English is not commonly spoken. The islands are often referred to as the Perfume Archipelago because this is where the ylang-ylang blossoms are gathered, reduced to essential oil, and purchased by the famous French perfume houses in Paris. Moheli is a true “spice island” aside from ylang-ylang; cloves, cinnamon, black pepper, nutmeg, and vanilla grow everywhere.

Laka Lodge, the only lodge/hotel on the island catering to divers, is located on the western edge of the island in the 100,000-acre Moheli Marine Park, our destination. We were looking forward, not only to dive the local reefs but to snorkel with the Humpback whales, who at this time of the year (August through mid-October) were passing by the islands. Aside from diving, there are other activities available while staying at Laka Lodge. There are very early morning trips to watch nesting Green or Hawksbill turtles and, if lucky, to see hatchlings dashing for the sea, hiking ventures to see the rare Livingstone’s bats, and to see beautiful waterfalls, some that fall on to the beach only accessible by boat.

Laka Lodge is a model ‘eco-lodge.’ The 15 bungalows are made with local materials and all face one of the two beaches. The rooms are large and comfortable. Malaria has been eradicated on the islands, but the use of mosquito nets is still a good idea. The aromatic soaps found in each room are made by the staff from local coconut and ylang-ylang oils. Water is solar heated; enough for a good shower. Electricity, available 24-hours a day is provided by solar energy during the day and, when needed, from the grid at night.

The reception/dining room is a large comfortable area to spend time while using the internet and meeting fellow travelers. The daily menu posted at the door to the dining room is generally European or American cuisine. Laka Lodge maintains a large garden to augment the vegetables purchased from the nearby village. Fish is purchased daily from the local village fishermen. The kitchen must have hundreds of fish recipes because I do not recall, but once, having a dish repeated.

The dive operation is small, managed outside under the trees, but efficient. Divers must bear in mind, diving here is not a luxury on the scale of the Caribbean, Philippines, or Indonesian resorts and liveaboards, but adequate and safe. Three small converted fishing boats are used for diving on the reefs and trips into the bay to snorkel with the whales. The tide fall in the area is quite large, and as a consequence, there can be a lot of current during those times of the day; be prepared for a fast-moving drift dive. The Comoros islands are where you come for the adventure and to discover a new and unfamiliar world.

Much of the fish life was familiar, groupers, anthias, eels, trevally, etc. with noted variations of local species. The most unusual critter seen was a yellow eel. The *Indian Ocean Reef Guide* by Helmut Debulius describes a yellow or golden eel. Our sighting matched the description perfectly. My dive

partner got a photo of it...I was not so lucky. Interestingly, the Comoros Islands is also one of the only two places in the world where the elusive coelacanths are known to reside; the other place is Sulawesi, Indonesia.

For photographers, there is plenty of subject matter above and below the water. The dive operation and dive boats are not set up for photographers, but the dive guides and boat drivers are very protective of camera gear. Your bungalow is the only place to clean and service camera gear; electricity is plentiful for recharging batteries and lights.

Snorkeling with the whales was an interesting adventure. During our visit, the whales were migrating and not always hanging around; we were 'skunked' a couple of days. Although we got close, we did not get any underwater photographs. A Marine Park Ranger is aboard each boat to record whale sightings and locations. On our last day, we saw a couple of, what was later determined to be, Short-fin Pilot Whales. Our ranger was very excited about seeing them; these whales are not common in this area.

Lemurs are usually associated with Madagascar, but much to our delight, a troop of brown lemurs resides near Laka Lodge. In the evening, a pair of lemurs come down to a tree near the lodge, knowing there will be some banana treats readily offered by lodge guests.

Moheli is a place that feels disconnected from the world, a fantastic place to spend days exploring the natural wonder of this island. Although we did not do as much diving as we would have liked, it was no less interesting and exciting because it was an adventure off the beaten track. Was it worth the long plane ride to the other side of the world to follow my love for diving in less-traveled places? Yes!