



Consisting of four major islands and a number of smaller islets, the Comorian archipelago is located strategically at the northern end of the Mozambique channel. The islands are located 10 to 12 degrees south of the equator and halfway between northern Madagascar and eastern Africa. Three of the islands, Grande Comore (Ngazidja), Anjouan (Nzwani), and Moheli (Mwali), are members of an independent country, the Union of the Comoros. The fourth island Mayotte (Maore), is a department of France. The names in parentheses are the Comorian names of the islands. In the following paragraphs, the French names will be used reflecting the common use in English publications.

You may read somewhere a reference to the archipelago as the "Comoros Islands" with each word ending in 's'. In English, the proper way to refer to them is "Comoros" or "Comoro Islands." Referring to them as "Comoros Islands" is incorrect, just as referring to the Philippine Islands as the "Philippines Islands" is incorrect.

Another error is the Comoros being called "the islands of the moon." This is due to a misinterpretation of an Arabic label for the Comoros on a 12th century Indian Ocean map. The label correctly identifies the islands as "*al Qmr*" (the Comoros). However, the Arabic meaning of

'*al Qmr*' is "the moon" and someone unacquainted with the islands transformed the name of the islands from the Arabic map into "the islands of the moon". This mistake has since appeared in a number of publications.

Volcanic in origin, the Islands arose from the seabed of the Indian Ocean over many eons. Today, each island has distinct geological characteristics due to its age. Mayotte, the oldest of the islands, has highly eroded mountains and slow, meandering streams. Grande Comore is the youngest and largest of the islands. It has an active volcano that dominates the southern half of the island, numerous visible lava flows, and no permanent rivers. The other two islands, Anjouan and Moheli, are of intermediate age and have relatively high mountains, tropical forests, no recent volcanic activity, and rivers flowing swiftly to the sea.

Genetic, archaeological, archaeobotanical, and historical evidence have revealed that the Comoros have been populated for over a thousand years by peoples of African, Arabian, Asian, Austronesian, and Polynesian descent. Some originally settled on the island of Madagascar and it is likely that they sailed directly to the islands from S.E. Asia. Strategically located in the western Indian Ocean, the Comoros have played an integral role in the maritime trade of the western Indian Ocean for many centuries. Merchants sailed from the Comoros to numerous ports from Aden to Zanzibar to trade a wide variety of goods. These included gems, rare animals, slaves, exotic woods, cowries, cloth, horses, perfumes, ambergris, and spices.

On the eastern shore of the island of Anjouan, an ancient city, Domoni, was mentioned as an important port in the Indian Ocean trade during the 15th century. The famous Arabian navigator, Ibn Madjid, visited the Comoros on his travels in the 1400s and noted that Domoni was a major stopover for African, Indian, and Persian sailing vessels. Archaeological evidence has revealed that the town had been established by the end of the 12th century and its inhabitants have been involved in maritime trade for centuries. This extensive involvement in the western Indian Ocean system gradually ended with the introduction of the steamship, the opening of the Suez Canal, and the French making the islands one of its Protectorates. The Comoros subsequently became the "Forgotten Islands", especially for Americans (except in the Book of Mormon).

Moroni is the capital city of the current Union of the Comoros, and the two names; 'Moroni' and 'Comoro' have been at the center of an interesting controversy. The "Book of Mormon," the sacred text of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, mentions an angel, "Moroni", and a hill, "Cumorah". The hill is where the founder of the Mormon Church, Joseph Smith, claimed to have found the golden plates that he translated as The Book of Mormon. According to Joseph Smith, the angel, Moroni, led him to the spot on the hill, Cumorah, where the golden plates were buried and then enabled Smith to translate and publish the translation in 1830 as The Book of Mormon. Critics of Smith's claim about having translated plates believe he had heard about the Comoros and Moroni and used their names in The Book. Church members counter this argument by stating it was not possible for Smith to have heard these names since Moroni didn't even exist before its name was published in 1830. I would only point out that the Friday mosque in Moroni has a date of 11 February 1427 and the infamous American pirate, Captain Kidd, had stopped for provisions in the Comoros in 1697. Furthermore, numerous American whalers visited the

Comoro Islands in the 17th and 18th centuries and brought information back home about the islands. It certainly was possible for Smith to have heard about the Comoros and the city of Moroni before the appearance of the Book of Mormon.

Livingstone's Flying Fox

The mountainous islands have diverse microecologies with spectacular scenery, exotic plants and rare animals. Several species are unique to the Comoros. One animal, Livingstone's Flying Fox, is a fruit bat that soars on wings spanning more than four feet (1.2 meters)! It roosts in steep valleys high in the mountainous forests of Anjouan and Moheli. With disappearing forests due to increased human demands for cleared land and timber, the bat's habitat is disappearing and the species is endangered.

The Anjouan-scops owl is one of over a dozen bird species unique to the islands. All are under a threat of extinction due to expanding human populations trying to meet their needs. The islands also have a number of species of insects found nowhere else in the world plus a variety of rare orchids and other plant life on the mountains that have seldom been seen. Some of these have medicinal properties unknown to western science.

A large variety of sea life can be found in the waters around the Comoros. One can find everything from giant whales, large sharks, big manta rays, sailfish, sunfish, to lobsters, crabs, blennies (*Alticus anjouanae*) and tiny shrimp. Deep water close to the islands, coral reefs, miles of both rocky shores and sandy beaches, plus fresh water streams and shoreline springs provide multiple habitats for marine life. In recent years, however, there has been an increase in pollution from human activity that now threatens the coastal life around the islands. The coral reefs and their associated sea life, in particular, are being affected.

One species of fish, the Coelacanth, has a remarkable story. Scientists for a long time thought that the Coelacanth had been extinct for over 60 million years! But, in 1938, one was caught in the waters near South Africa and brought to the attention of a South African ichthyologist, J.B. Smith. The ichthyologist, once he learned that coelacanths were still being caught in the waters of Anjouan offered a reward for one and in 1952 secured a specimen from one of the fishermen who regularly caught the fish for their kitchen tables. Since then, numerous specimens have been caught, preserved, and sent to museums around the world. Coelacanths have also been photographed live in Comorian waters. There are videos of the living fish on YouTube. To learn more about this remarkable story visit the [National Geographic web site](#).

THE UNION OF THE COMOROS

At the Berlin conference of 1884-5, the major European powers divided up their spheres of influence in Africa and the Comoros became a French protectorate. France declared them a colony in 1912 then, in 1946, they became an Overseas Territory of France. They remained under direct French political control until 1975 when the local government declared the Islands' independence. Three years of political turmoil then ensued followed by three of the islands forming the Federal Islamic Republic of the Comoro Islands in 1978. The three islands: Grande Comore, Moheli, and Anjouan, constituted the Republic while Mayotte remained under French administration. French administration of Mayotte was disputed by the new Comorian government and the United Nations General Assembly recognized the island as part of the independent nation of the Comoros. In spite of these actions, the French government remained in control of the island and made it a Department of France in March, 2011. Mayotte remains a part of France today.

In 1997, separatists on the islands of Anjouan and Moheli demanded more independence from the Republic. This led to the breakup of the Federal Islamic Republic and a reformation of the central government under a new constitution in 2001. The country was renamed the Union of the Comoro Islands and the constitution gave each of the three islands considerable autonomy. Besides there being an elected president of the Union, each island would have its own president.

In 2007, the president of Anjouan, who proposed independence of the island from the Union, refused to relinquish his position after losing an election. Subsequently, in March of 2008, he was removed by a combined military force of soldiers from the Comorian Union and the African Union. This led to a newly elected president of Anjouan and a return to a normalized relationship with the central government.

Under the Union's constitution, presidential elections were scheduled to be held every four years with the office rotating between the three islands. In 2002, Colonel Azali Assoumani from Grande Comore was elected President. He was followed in 2006 by Ahmed Abdallah Mohamed Sambi from Anjouan and then, in 2011, by Ikililou Dhoinine from Moheli. Azali Assoumani was elected President again in the Spring of 2016.

Some web sites with information about the Comoro Islands are:

The [Permanent Mission of the Union of the Comoros](#) to the United Nations.

[Seniors Discover the Comoros](#) by Jim Becker.

[Dahari](#) is a Comorian NGO founded in 2013.

The [World Tourism Directory](#) provides addresses and telephone numbers of a range of useful resources.

[Al-watwan](#), daily news about the Comoros. (In French and Arabic) [Radio and](#)

[Television](#) from the Comoros. (In French, Arabic, and Comorian)

World Bank [Country Profile](#).

BBC News [Country Profile](#).

[Comoro Islands Resources Page](#) of Stanford University Libraries.

University of Pennsylvania's [African Studies Program](#).

[Library of Congress](#) Country Studies.

[United States Peace Corps](#) web site.

United States Department of State [Background Notes](#).

United States Central Intelligence Agency [World Factbook](#).

IMF ([International Monetary Fund](#)) publications on the Comoros.

Interested in examples of Comorian money? Go to [Coins of the Comoros](#).

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