

Madagascar September & October 2011



Madagascar is more than a cartoon movie or a David Attenborough documentary. As the world's fourth-largest island (after Greenland, New Guinea & Borneo and counting Australia as a continent) it is twice the size of New Zealand and equally fascinating. I travelled there in September/October 2011 with a tour organised by Australian Museum Members.

Our leader was Owen Griffiths, who is a Zoologist and a Research Associate of the Australian Museum. Owen started going to Madagascar in the 1970s and currently resides on Mauritius; he has watched much of the "development" in the country over the last four decades. His field of expertise is land snails a subset of the study of molluscs (marine and terrestrial). It was his mission to turn us all into raving Malacologists; a mission which approached with passionate enthusiasm. Unfortunately he was completely unsuccessful in this regard.



Wall mural at Antananarivo Museum

Our tour started in Antananarivo, the capital city; which interestingly is not on the coast but roughly in the centre of the island and has been built over a series of hills (like Rome) with palaces on some of the peaks. Urban development is like any Developing Country and is a mixture of tall narrow villas clinging to the hillsides, modern apartment buildings, open-air markets, roadside stalls and shantytowns all serviced by ageing Citroens. The history of Madagascar is amazing; there are layers of settlement from Asia, the Middle East, Africa and Europe over the last 2,000+ years with colonisation by the French in 1892 which ended until 1960. This

makes for a totally unique culture unlike anything in Africa or Asia.

We travelled around Madagascar in a minibus driven by the intrepid Tojo and his valiant assistant Haja, these guys were brilliant. With 21 of us in total including Owen and Lytah, our Malagasy guide, they never once left any of us or our luggage behind. Furthermore Tojo inspired confidence as he navigated us through the mayhem of driving in a Developing Country.



Tojo with freshwater crayfish



Haja with Jewel Chameleon

Firstly we travelled east from Antananarivo to Andasibe National Park (NP); a map of Madagascar with our route outlined is in Appendix 1.

On the way we stopped for one of our many picnic lunches beside the road which comprised the ubiquitous laughing cow cheese¹, baguettes (that French influence), canned fish, peanut butter, Vegemite (obviously not purchased in Madagascar) and bananas². Remembering Land Utilisation 101 and noticing that sugar cane was a popular crop and of course a common by product of sugarcane is a beverage known as rum (spelt Rhum locally), there was a roadside shop near our first picnic spot and I asked Lytah if the range of products included alcoholic beverages. He assured me that they did and like a good cultural attaché advised me which brands were the best; my purchases resulted in clinking noises from my bag for the rest of the trip.



This was not out of the ordinary as the majority of the group were getting a taste for Three Horses Beer, known as THB. Unfortunately we were unable to find any souvenir THB t-shirts or other stuff – which would have been seriously impressive.

Our first real stop was at Pereyras private reserve the see the first of many chameleons. They are everything you have ever heard and more, it took at least a good two weeks before we tired of marvelling at every new one. We were all interested in all kinds of wildlife however around 50% of the

group were very keen birdwatchers; it is amazing how their enthusiasm rubs off on you. A full list of all the birds that I saw is contained in Appendix 2.

The highlight of Andasibe NP are the Indri (*Indri indri*) which are the largest lemurs (about 1metre tall) and are almost tailless. Indris have never been successfully kept in captivity and can only be seen in their natural environment. Unlike other lemurs which make a soft grunting noise Indri have the most amazing howl; they make this noise to exclude from their territory other Indri. We found a group high in the treetops which didn't mind us hanging around so we sat down to wait for them to start their call. We actually made ourselves rather comfortable, a couple of people dozed off and I managed to pick some flowers³.





Then the calls started, they are the most amazing loud, eerie howl, completely unlike anything that I have heard before (try and imagine a banshee in a railway tunnel). It really made your spine tingle and went on for at least 15 minutes; it gave us a natural high for the rest of the day.

We also saw that other creature featured by Attenborough, the Giraffe Beetle. They are quite amazing and very tiny, around the size of my little fingernail; if it wasn't for the bright red colour we would probably never have noticed this little one (Catherine had the eagle eyes). Other animals seen

included a comet moth, brown tree boa, golden lemur, eastern woolly lemur, eastern grey bamboo lemur and a short horned chameleon.

On our way back to our accommodation we went through a local village, Andasibe Perinate, where some of the children were playing pétanque. It was very traditional of a village in this locality, as the situation is close to the National Park and allowed many residents to earn a reasonable income. The houses were dressed timber/brick most with corrugated iron ore shingle roofs. This was in contrast to some of the villages along our route where houses were of wattle and daub construction with thatched roofs. Houses in Madagascar follow Asian architecture, being rectangular with a pitched roof, unlike African houses which are round. We also bought bananas which in complete contrast to Sydney were around 20 cents a kilogram. I have to say that throughout my holiday the bananas were excellent.



Owen is a great one for seeing more than just animals, plants and scenery; he likes to look at all the other interesting activities, so we also visited a decommissioned graphite plant (along with the resident radiata tortoise). It is one of the many industrial activities in the country that have fallen fate of global price movements and changing technology.

We left Andasibe NP and drove east then travelled by boat to Reserve le Palmarium where we stayed the night on the shore of Lake Ampitabe in

delightful bungalows. The reserve is home to six species of lemur, a number which are native to the area and some which are introduced from other parts of Madagascar.

Feeding the lemurs bananas was part of the experience and they were very friendly (there is something about free bananas)⁴. Lemurs have an interesting aroma, musky not too strong or unpleasant but quite distinct. They come down and take pieces of banana from your hand and what amazes you is how gentle they are; their little hands are lovely and soft. If a piece of banana is out of their reach they don't reach over and snatch it like monkeys, they just gently touch your arm or hand as if to say "May I please have that piece of banana?". Lemurs are an animal that says "please". Their charming manners

completely won us over. It was a wonderful experience and I have decided that lemurs are my favourite animals (after marsupials and Perenties of course). The brown lemurs will climb onto your shoulders (not all lemurs will do that), and even when they jump from a tree they are surprisingly light.



Ruffed Lemur



Crowned Lemur

The bungalows face out over the lagoon with individual terraces, I had a very enjoyable time before dinner sitting on my terrace sampling my purchases and listening to Beethoven on my laptop. It was one of those "it doesn't get any better" moments. The evening's entertainment included some local girls doing traditional dances, this involved audience participation so of course I joined in. So by Day 5 I already had managed to get up and "move it move it". They also provided tasting of some of their local rum which had been infused with a selection of local products (vanilla, cinnamon, ginger) and I have to admit that my purchases were considerably more palatable (thanks to my cultural attaché).

I slept very well in my bungalow (no minibar but complementary mosquito coils) until around 5:30 AM when the scrunching sound of a lemur walking over

my thatched roof woke me up. There is something about that sort of "alarm clock" which makes you immediately jump out of bed in case you miss anything.

We also had a bit of drama as Lytah had an unfortunate accident involving a broken toilet seat which gashed his derriere. Luckily one of our group was a surgeon, Dr Bill⁵, who although he was not in a position to stitch it up was able to administer first aid (and advice). This meant for the rest of the trip we would regularly enquire about the state of Lytah's arse (well that's a first for any holiday). Also as there was a predominance of women of a certain age in our group Lytah had the equivalent of at least half a dozen grandmothers being concerned for his well being and comfort.



We then travelled by boat along the Canal des Pangalines which is a series of freshwater lakes which were upgraded by the French to form a navigable waterway. It was lovely to motor along in the fresh air instead of driving, the water was lovely and soft and I even dabbled my toes in it. Along the way we stopped to look at pitcher plants *Madagascar nepenthe*, and a local village. An industry in the local village was oil extraction from *Melaleucas*⁶ which had been planted in the area. We finished up in Toamasina where Lytah's rear was seen to and we flew back to Antananarivo.

That evening there was a talk by Dr Steve Goodman who is a leading world authority on Madagascar's biodiversity and conservation issues. The total number of endemic species (plants, reptiles, mammals) is continually being expanded as Madagascar is more comprehensively studied. For example there are 35 known species of giraffe beetle. However what is sad is that many of the species being identified are then classified as endangered. A lot of the environmental degradation occurs along main roads; unfortunately infrastructure spending in the form of new roads often results in greater levels of degradation. In isolated areas the environment remains relatively untouched.



Somewhere in Madagascar

Rio Tinto has an ilmenite mine in the south of Madagascar and unfortunately I had let slip that I am a shareholder. This meant that for the rest of the tour I was held personally responsible (particularly by Owen) for any accusations about exploitation and environmental degradation by multinationals⁷.



We then drove south on Route Nationale (RN) 7 through the central highlands of Madagascar. Owen showed us a fascinating business in one of the towns that we passed through, table football⁸. The tables are made from locally grown *Pinus radiata* with aluminium players and handles. The business sells approximately three tables a week for \$100 each. They are quite popular in local bars and comprise an additional source of revenue for the landlord.

Owen seems to know every fascinating industry, he reminds me of my father who used to intersperse our family driving/camping/tramping holidays with visits to dredges, refineries and mines. It's amazing how well-informed you can become about the local economy.

Our destination was Antsirabe which was founded by Norwegian missionaries around 1870 (which predates the French colonisation) due to the local thermal hot springs where a thermal resort was established; the chemistry of the hot springs is similar to Vichy and buildings are copied from the Vichy Spa.

The thermal resort was somewhat rundown however our hotel for the evening was the grand La Residence Sociale d'Antsirabe. This is a fabulous building which was built around 1934 to cater for "colonials



Rice Fields⁹



abandoned by fortune and exhausted by climate", in other words it's a care home. I can't believe it I've come all the way to Madagascar to stay in a RACF. Madame Potier showed us round the small history Museum; she is exquisitely dressed and incredibly stylish. Her day job is school teacher but her passion is the local history.

The facility is run for ethnic Malagasy with French nationality, in its heyday it could cater for over 200 residents and was run by the Franciscan Sisters. They also run a scholarship program for children of French

nationality who board at the Maison and receive schooling, etc. Part is currently still used as a care home and part is used as a hotel, with some areas leased out to commercial occupants.

My room was a delight; it was enormous, much larger than my apartment in Sydney with a bedroom, ensuite and living room area. Instead of curtains there were metal shutters and everything was in an off-white/French navy colour scheme. Most hotels are designed for people to crash in however this has been designed for people to live in and it has a wonderful ambience. What else can one do in such a delightful room but enjoy it by fixing a little nightcap before closing the shutters for the night. I've managed to avoid the clinking noise by decanting the white rum into my Madagascar (the movie) plastic drinking bottle; Lytah is most impressed as it has Maurice, his favourite character. It also means that while drinking fruit juice I can add an extra kick without looking like a complete lush.





Malagasy Rhum is superlatively good I had both white and dark; white is excellent for the ubiquitous fruit cocktail which greets us at every new establishment and on fruit salad; whereas the dark is excellent on its own (it would be good on ice cream too) and has a delicious spicy caramelly flavour. One of our group, Boston Bill, insists that Bundaberg rum is superior and has brought a bottle to compare, I have to say I completely disagree with them in this regard¹⁰.

The next day we look around Antsirabe in a pousse pousse (local rickshaw); it is an elegant and sprawling city with fine buildings dating from colonial and pre-colonial times. The highlands also facilitate dairy making and we buy some local cheese to go with our lunch, it is a bit like feta cheese with mixed herbs. Lunch is by an a little man-made lake and while we were repasting a couple of characters (who were completely off their faces) came by selling local hooch from plastic water bottles. As the team's unofficial rum connoisseur I considered it my duty to at least taste the beverage. I got them to pour a small quantity into the cap of my drink bottle and I took a small sip. It was enough to knock your socks off; it is as close to metho as you can get without being petroleum-based. Another tiny sip and I tipped the rest out –any more would probably make me blind (or kill me).

The next day we look around Antsirabe in a pousse pousse (local rickshaw); it is an



We also started to see Tapia trees which are a type of Euphorbia which only grow between 900 metres to 1,800 metres altitude. There is a native caterpillar, *Borocera madagascariensis*, which produces a silk cocoon from which the Malagasy make beautiful silk garments. The fruit is somewhat similar in appearance to a loquat however it contains three seeds and not much flesh, taste wise it is fairly mild too¹¹. The native silk provides business and employment opportunities to local woman through processing, spinning and weaving to make beautiful scarves and garments. Of course we indulged in some much-needed retail therapy.

Our next destination was Ranomafana NP which is situated in the rainforest, while the main attraction in the park is the lemurs there are also orchids, tree ferns, frogs and flowers with the main tree species of Commiphora. The sheer diversity and abundance of the rainforest is marvellous and certainly makes up for the beginnings of the wet season, as the rain started to

settle in earnest.

Unfortunately most of the lemurs are high up in the canopy which means you are limited to misty views of their bums and coupled with photographing against the sky does not make for photographic delights. However I observed a group of higher level primates attempting this. On the left is George who joined our tour a few days in (Andasibe NP) as he had been previously on a specialist photographic tour¹² Catherine is on the right, Libby is in the centre and Robert is the rear centre.



Higher Level Primates observing Prosimian Primates

Ranomafana means hot water in Malagasy as there are thermal springs in the vicinity, resulting in a hot water swimming pool. In the afternoon Catherine and I decided to go for a swim which firstly required finding the swimming pool. Owen gave us extensive instructions "go over the bridge and turn right"; however he neglected to say which bridge. We walked through a small township (actually squelched as was pouring down with rain) and after crossing a road bridge over a river and not seeing any turnoffs to the right just kept walking; until now I had made limited (read bugger all) attempts to learn Malagasy and French had completely passed me by. Catherine however had remembered some of her high school French and had made an attempt to learn Malagasy so after trudging around the kilometre in the rain we attempted to ask for directions. This involved a sort of Esther Williams mime on the part of Catherine¹³ and we were directed back the way we came, after several more requests (and mimes) and going back over the road bridge we found a footbridge over the river. I have to say that the Malagasy are very polite, not one of them burst out laughing at our performance. The swimming pool was lovely, about the temperature of a warm but not too hot bath and well worth the effort. We spent a good hour and a bit dog paddling around and chatting before getting our gear back on and squelching back to the hotel for afternoon tea.



The next day with suitcases full of dripping wet washing we left the still dripping rainforest and headed back to the Central Highlands. Owen showed us another local industry on the way; blacksmithing, here they are using scrap metal (it appeared to be a truck chassis or piece of a bridge) then forging pieces into shovels. There are three teams of around four men in each hut, one mans the bellows (foreground in picture), one looks after the fire and two do most of the hammering. It is amazing to see how quick they are at making each shovel.

At 3,000 Ariary (around AU\$1.50) each a number of the men in our group buy them as souvenirs (it's a bloke thing).

We stopped in Fianarantsoa which has an attractive "old town" originally developed around 1830, a number of the buildings are being restored and feature many traditional designs and materials.



We also passed through the main vineyard locations in Madagascar, with the French heritage it is no surprise to find a winemaking industry. We stopped to buy some wine to go with the evening's meal, Robert is our resident wine expert and I accompanied him for the tasting. The tasting wine comes in the ubiquitous recycled plastic water bottles and is well, rather rough, of the sort of quality vaguely reminiscent of cheap flagon plonk circa 1970 from my student days when we thought drinking the stuff made us look sophisticated. . We are assured that the stuff in real bottles is of a much higher quality (I would hope so) and is such a reasonable AU\$ price that we make a number of purchases. Tojo and Haja bought a local coconut punch, in a plastic water bottle, of course.



Epicurean's delight – Robert & Ken show off their purchases (stray dog optional)

That evening we stayed in Ambalavao which is Lytah's hometown and during a walk in the market in the late afternoon he seemed to know everybody. I don't know if it is Lytah's connections or our exalted tourist status but we were invited to the Ambalavao Mayoral Ball, this is not just any occasion we are assured that it is a salubrious event where there is even likely to be some speeches. Naturally of course the party animals in our group immediately accept and look for their tidiest/cleanest clothes, in my case as it was rather cold I just put everything on at once. Furthermore this is probably the first social function where I have gone out smelling of Eau de insect repellent.

We enjoyed¹⁴ the wines with our dinner then divided into "the party animals" (comprising Owen, Lytah, Boston Bill & his good lady, Margaret, Ken¹⁵ & Roddy, Dr Bill, Graeme¹⁶, Leslie, Libby, Catherine and of course myself (Robert was going to join us but somehow managed to get lost between the dining room and the front gate)) and "the rest" so we headed out for the grand social event. .

The music was solid Malagasy funk¹⁷ and the PYT's of Ambalavao had some seriously hot moves, so we attempted to boogaloo¹⁸ like the best of them. There was a young lady in a red top with a matching hat who was seriously good plus a couple, both in white, who were together fabulous. Lytah didn't seem to be suffering any problems from his bum and danced like the best of them.

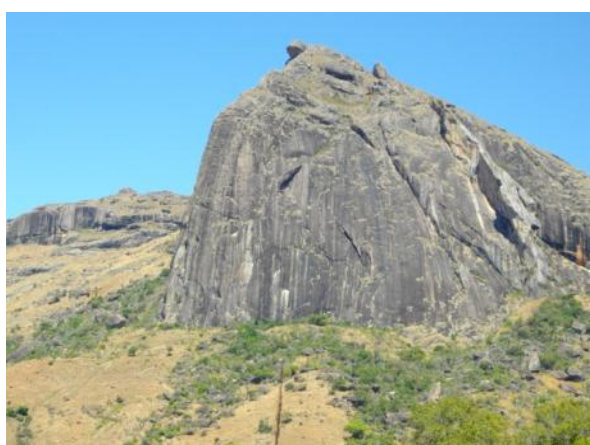
Libby, one of the more senior ladies in our group, put in a seriously good performance jiving with Dr Bill (isn't it funny how the older members always managed to show up the younger ones). So once again I got to "move it move it". Around 11 PM it was starting to heat up however we did have an early mini bus to catch the next morning and piked not soon after.

Ambalavao is noted for paper making from a local plant, and it was the Arabs who introduced the knowledge of paper making as there was no written history before then. A number of our group stocked up on notepaper/Christmas cards along with some lovely Malagasy silk scarves. There are also raffia hats for sale and I picked up a fabulous little purple number.

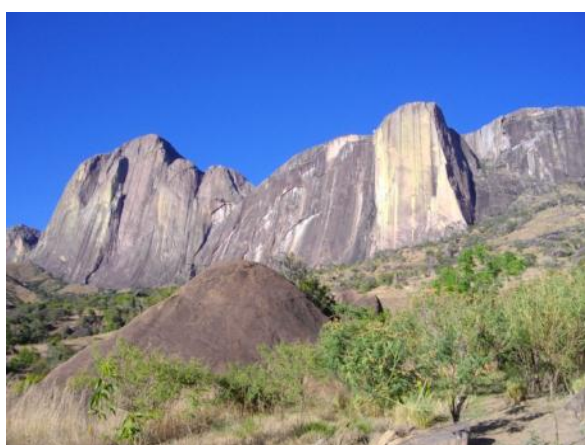
The Malagasy get hats, there is a wide range available at very reasonable prices. Local people incorporate the fashion statement of a hat into their everyday attire and it is amazing how stylish and well coordinated they are.



Decorated paper notes drying in the sun



Chameleon Rock



Tsaranoro

The scenery changed to a high plateau, very similar to the South African Veldt, and our next destination was Camp Catta which is located in a dramatic high valley surrounded by granite cliffs, it is a rock climbers' delight. It is approximately 12 kilometres from the nearest village which takes around one hour in a truck (that is the state of the roads). The next day we have a selection of activities, the birdwatchers leave first followed by the "Chameleon Rockers" and I join the easy walkers at the end. We have a lovely morning where we see ring tailed lemurs, Pachypodiums, a tomb (complete with skulls), a natural dynamite plant¹⁹ and we end up at a local swimming hole.



Owen and his snails

We had passed George a couple of times with his usual assistant staggering under the weight of the equipment; we also passed Owen, and Robert took the opportunity to point out a cave which had not been scarred by floodwaters where Owen might find some interesting snails. While dabbling our toes in the swimming hole Owen reappeared and did a whoopee dance, the cave had indeed contained some (extinct) snails that had not been observed in the area before. The joy of discovering something new is what brings total delight to scientists and Owen is no exception²⁰.

He then stripped down to his underpants and had a swim (sorry no photo). Later that afternoon in the bar/dining room while I was downloading and labelling my photos the Chameleon Rockers reappeared, they had made it to the top and were full of tales of derring-do (mostly about the particularly good lunch that was served).

The ring tailed lemurs are a complete delight; they amuse themselves by playing tag with each other which is captivating to watch. They are surprisingly gentle with each other with no snarling or scratching. Babies are born in September so many mothers have new ones on their backs. The larger babies are starting to move around independently while the younger ones are happy to stay with mum.



As we tootled along in our mini bus I noticed a “donk donk donk” noise coming from the rear passenger side²¹ wheel (I’m not good at spotting birds, but I do know my car noises). While Tojo and Haja determined the problem and we started looking for anything interesting, Ken and some of the other blokes all stood around the minibus and tried to look vaguely useful.



I then realised something that I hadn’t noticed earlier, all the fences are made of natural materials (timber, spiny plants) and there is no fencing wire²² (Ken must have been suffering withdrawal symptoms). Tojo identified the problem as a broken shock absorber which could be fixed in the nearest big town.

Our next destination was Isalo NP and no prizes for guessing what it reminds you of²³. Once again we were given a selection of walks and this time instead of the easy walk I picked the "Valley of Death" walk.

This involved a couple of hours walking along an open valley before descending into a canyon; it wasn't quite circling vultures but did require at least 2 litres of drinking water (many thanks to Dr Bill for helping to carry my water and Lesley for donating her surplus).

Once again the plants are amazing with Pachypodiums (I haven't tired of them). We then descended into the Namaza River Canyon which is much cooler and green. We run into George with his usual intrepid assistant, he is photographing lemurs (he was driven there; he didn't run ahead of us



in the walk). There is an organised campsite there which is mostly full of Germans; they have picnic tables with chintzy tablecloths (think bright gingham check with a vine leaf pattern) and a battalion of Malagasy staff cooking their next meal.



It was rather crowded so we headed upstream for a picnic lunch by the river and then a swim, the water is typical for canyons and is deliciously cold and incredibly refreshing after our walk. We then made our way back to the campsite (and the minibus) and George tells us the best lemur story of the trip. The Malagasy staff were cooking meals for the Germans over campfires some of which are undercover and some which aren't; one of the ring tailed lemurs that was sitting on a branch over the uncovered campfires calmly did a No.2 bang in the middle of a frypan caramelising pineapple (presumably for dessert).

George's advice to the Germans was "don't touch the pineapple". We headed into town and stopped for some refreshing THB's and I stocked up on my rum supplies before heading back to our accommodation.

It was at this point in the trip that Lytah made a confession, he is good friends with all the local tour guides and park rangers (after all they are his professional network) and throughout the tour all of them had been making the same comment about Robert - that he looks like Benny Hill. At this point we all commented "yeah, he does rather" however not having had the Benny Hill show on our TVs for over 20 years this had not been front of our minds. Madagascar however receives many old TV programs dubbed in the local language (think Six Million Dollar Man & Kung Fu) and the locals were now getting their share of the Benny Hill Show. This cracked us up completely and for the next 48 hours we hummed Boots Randolph's Yakety Sax until somebody had the heart to tell Robert what the joke was.





On our way to the West Coast we passed through the township of Ilakaka which has the major sapphire mines. It is regarded as somewhat of a Wild West settlement and some tourist groups are told to avoid it altogether. Owen of course has arranged for a visit to a sapphire mine. It is the first time that I have seen open cut mining being done manually as the overburden is physically shovelled in a series of steps out of the pit. The sapphires are contained in an old riverbed which is approximately 20 to 25 metres below ground level.

Of course like any good tour the end involves a cool drink and a visit to a shop; George on the other hand went shopping on his own and came back with some seriously good weaponry²⁴. I was particularly impressed by the knife in the foreground which is fashioned out of a single piece of reinforcing rod (used in reinforced concrete). Throughout our trip we see a number of uses to which reinforcing rods are put (including ploughs) which was certainly not in the original design specification.



George's purchases



Village children - school teacher on the left

Throughout our trip stopping for photo opportunities usually meant that village children came rushing up ostensibly begging, although generally not too seriously. We had been advised against giving money (it encourages professional begging) or lollies (they do not have access to good dental care) but instead to give items like pencils, pens and writing pads. We have been giving these items away and it had been planned to stop at a particular village where we could give things to the local school. These children are a contrast to many that we had seen previously, completely unmercenary and when requested they form a circle

and sing for us (Frère Jacques of course). We were completely delighted and wished that we had saved more stuff to give to this particular group. The West and South are considerably poorer and village houses are only single-storey wattle and daub buildings with thatched roofs.

We were still on RN7 however it had become considerably more touristy as this is the main drag between the coastal town of Toliara and the national parks where we had just been. We were also starting to see various species of baobab as we drove down to the coast.



Baobabs

We made it into Toliara in time for a fabulous sunset over the Mozambique Channel. The nightlife in Toliara is considerably better than the camps we had been at so once again the hard-core party animals (Owen, Lytah, myself, Catherine, Lesley and George) doused ourselves in Eau de insect repellent and set out to sample the local nightlife. The ZaZa club charges nothing for entrance prior to 11 PM and we scrape in with 10 minutes to spare²⁵, apart from a few male Malagasy staff all the other males are European, one character in particular looks like an overweight, dishevelled version of Jabba the Hut in advanced inebriation (too many THBs). Most of the females are Malagasy and were obviously there with an eye for business opportunities. Unlike the PYT's of Ambalavao none of the dancers had any real "hot moves" so our attempt to do the "funky fossa" made us look vaguely co-ordinated in comparison, especially when they played La Bamba & Rock Around the Clock. As we had a plane to catch the next day we got home soon after midnight.



Morning in Toliara was spent at the arboretum or in town, I chose the in town option and this involved a ride to the airport in a Taxi Brousse; these are minibuses which operate like communal taxis or regular bus services. They are ubiquitous across Madagascar crammed full of people with luggage/livestock on the roof. 12 of us cram into one and the highlight of our trip to the airport was being stopped by a large (in girth) Gendarme who copied down the details in all our passports (sorry no photo).

When driving through Madagascar you notice a lot of plastic bags beside the road, we were told that as car sickness is common with Taxi Brousse passengers the normal procedure is to unload in the plastic bag and then hurl it out the window. I don't normally suffer from motion sickness however by the end of this 15 minute ride I was beginning to feel distinctly queasy and was glad to get out in the open air, I can't imagine doing this for a couple of days straight. Of course while waiting for the flight Owen took us on a snail shell finding mission in the nearby scrub, with minimal success²⁶.

After flying into Taolagnaro (Fort Dauphin) we then drove to Berenty Private Reserve on the Mandrare River, which was one of the tour highlights with the unique spiny forest. Berenty was established in 1936 by sisal planter who felt that the unique forest was worth preserving for its own sake. The forest is one of the most unusual with its open woodland of pachypodiums, spiny plants and baobabs. Of all the places it most reminds me of is Meekatharra in the temperature, humidity, light and style of gardens. The Reserve is approximately 80 kilometres from Taolagnaro, a trip that takes over four hours along RN13, a road on which reaching 30 km/h is considered an achievement. It was built in 1950 and hasn't really been maintained since then.



Ring Tail Lemurs



Sifaka

Berenty is completely infested with masses of lemurs of which the ring tails take centre stage, but they do have competition from the Sifakas (the dancing lemurs), red footed brown lemurs, ordinary brown lemurs, white footed sportive lemurs (the ones that can jump from spiny tree to spiny tree without impaling themselves), grey brown mouse lemurs, etc. Like some reserves it does contain some species of lemur that are not endemic to that particular locality. This results in lemurs hybridising between species so that your inability to identify some lemurs as a particular species isn't anything to do with Lemur Identification 101 but more to do with their breeding habits. It is a bit like some plant species in Australia.

The roofs of our bungalows are corrugated iron so instead of the gentle scrunching on thatch, the march of the lemurs comprises a resounding thud when they land and the sound of galloping paws. I don't think that you can tire of lemurs, I don't mind then waking me up at 5 AM²⁷. Although you can't leave your windows open as the little blighters while not raving kleptomaniacs will help themselves to edible/interesting items.

Even better I get to see the bird that I have been hanging out for, the Madagascar Hoopoe; they are everything that I have heard of and more.



Hoopoe



Of course Owen arranges for a visit to the sisal factory, although sisal has been largely replaced by nylon in rope making, there is still demand for natural ropes. It does provide local employment, although not full-time. It is the end of the dry season and the Mandrare River is essentially only a trickle however its sheer size indicates just how large it is in the wet season. Again it is visually similar to parts of Western Australia. After that we travelled to the local ford of the river where it is shallow enough for the local people go through with their Zebu carts.



That evening we went for a night walk where we saw the nocturnal lemurs including the mouse lemur and this sleeping ringtail²⁸. At the end of our walk there was a group of local musicians next to the minibus playing in the dark, they were completely enchanting and made a wonderful finale.

It was market day in Ranopisa when we left Berenty and many local people were heading off to market wearing their best clothes. This was in complete contrast to what we had seen local people wearing previously. Many of the young women were wearing their best hat and they had a preference for white/cream with a brightly coloured trim coordinated with their outfit. The market was amazing, admittedly as the south is one of the poorer areas in Madagascar many of the items reflect this and there were shoes out of old car tyre inner tubes plus many clothes stalls selling second-hand clothes²⁹.



Mandrare River Bridge



Of course Owen knew of a local business that made ox carts in the traditional manner. They make them entirely using hand tools (the plane looked like it should belong in a museum) they start with undressed timber and make the whole cart complete with the traditional iron rim on the wheels.



Triangle Palm

literally and expected to find a pile of mica with lots of No.2's and visualised having to tippy toe around, when really it was a pile of mica of inferior quality. This had led to a number of discussions (we are lost without Google) as to what mica was and is being used for -- transparent panels in solid fuel heaters and electrical installation & well-drilling, respectively. Again it is another example of an industry affected by changes in technology and world commodity pricing.

Fort Dauphin was originally developed by the French East India Company around 1640 and



The musicians were on a raised stage overlooking a car park and the patrons sat in their cars or congregated around in the open. Some of us sat on a window ledge and I joined the group sitting in the gutter (make whatever jokes you feel appropriate here). The atmosphere was reminiscent of the Port Hedland drive-in, very relaxed and everyone out to enjoy themselves. This time however the Mayor did put in an appearance and give a speech along with a few other dignitaries before the evening started warming up and once again we got to "move it move it" (no Yakety Sax though).

On the road back to Fort Dauphin (that fabulous RN13 again which was just as bad in daylight as it had been in the darkness) we saw the Triangle Palms (*Dypsis decaryi*) which have the smallest natural range of any palm species and are unfortunately threatened in their natural habitat.

Owen also arranged (insisted) that we stop and inspect a local mica mine. On the way to Berenty we had stopped at a mica pile (it certainly was quite distinctive and worth a stop) Owen however had sold it to us as "a shit mica pile"; we took him



The mica miners³⁰ and their haul

remnants of the original Fort remain, however the settlement only lasted around 30 years until poor economics and the tropical climate got the better of them. There are a few signs of this settlement with remnants of a small fort on the main hilltop. Our arrival coincided with a jazz festival that evening. Once again the thought of nocturnal entertainment brought out the party animal in us and we brushed off our groovy gear (last clean outfit) and doused ourselves in Eau de insect repellent and headed out to get funky.





The next day we went to the Lokaro Peninsula through a series of inland waterways to a small fishing village. This was sold to us as a "motorboat excursion" and the day before I had noticed a strong sea breeze which was obviously not diurnal as it was continuing just as strongly that morning. So in a couple of open boats we headed out at high speed into what can only be described as a very strong headwind.

We had been given lifejackets and before embarking had put them on, then as the waves started breaking over the bow we found the spray jackets and donned them although they didn't do much good as they were designed for spray not drenching waves. The waves by now were coming regularly over the bow, where I was sitting in the front the water had risen above my socks and we started getting more than mildly alarmed.

The boatman's assistant produced a bailer (a cut down plastic water bottle) which promptly blew away in the force nine gale so we started improvising, Catherine madly bailed using her hat and George donated his shoes (after sensibly removing the orthotics) on the grounds that he had particularly large feet. The situation started looking quite desperate it wasn't so utterly hilarious³¹ and we started getting the water down to a sensible level. At that point we noticed that a lot of our gear had become wet and unfortunately that included Lytah's camera.



We arrived at the fishing village and rather tersely told our tour guide that we couldn't head out immediately as we needed to dry everything off including George's passport, all our clothes, contents of wallets, plus respective camera equipment. After salvaging the best of the situation we headed off through a fishing village out along the headland. I have to say the views were sensational, despite all the difficulties of the "motorboat excursion" the southern Indian Ocean was particularly superb³² and the views were worth travelling for.

We had a wonderful swim in a lovely secluded cove and Robert did his celebrated toe trick, he had been building up to this trick all tour and told us it was definitely worth the wait. This involves moving the second toe on each foot sideways like a windscreen wiper, I have to admit this is the first time I have seen anybody able to do such an action and it certainly makes you wonder when he first noticed his unique skill. We hummed Yakety Sax on the walk back to the fishing village in his honour. Despite all our concerns the voyage back was considerably less dramatic as the breeze was now a



tailwind and we scarcely got even slightly damp and the highlight of the return voyage was a short excursion to see the local pitcher plants (Madagascar nepenthes).



Unfortunately our plane to Antananarivo the next day was delayed so some of us went for a walk looking at Fort Dauphin, like many ex-colonial settlements it had that wonderful “colonialism rotting in the sun” faded grandeur.

Owen organised group to inspect a midden that he had found; while we were having our "motorboat excursion" he was looking for snail shells in the sand hills, obviously he knew something we didn't. Ken then attempted to play a particularly good trick on Owen as he had earlier picked up a piece of flint and napped some stone tools. By placing these in

Owen's midden he attempted to push back human history in Madagascar to the Stone Age, Owen however was not fooled.

Our final days in Madagascar were spent in Antananarivo with a visit to Ambohimanga Palace, by this stage we were getting somewhat “Palaced out” however it certainly was a case of saving the best until last.

While Malagasy palaces are not extensive this palace has amazing aesthetics, it included the combination of the old fig trees with their roots growing through the rocks plus the intricate detailing of the Victorian era building. I particularly loved the glass meeting room, which was designed for dignitaries to meet with the King (and representatives) it has wonderful views to infinity.



Our final evening was a banquet at the home of Madagascar's leading chef Mariette Andrianjaka who has been renowned as the country's pre-eminent foodie expert. Her restaurant is on the lower level of her home (which used to belong to the country's prime minister) and the dishes are an interpretation of traditional Malagasy cuisine with a modern twist. This is Madagascar's answer to Babette's feast with a number of very interesting and delicious dishes all featuring local ingredients. Madagascar may be a poor country but it is rich in meat, seafood, spices, fruit and vegetables along with the ubiquitous rice. The Creole nature of

modern Madagascar shines through with an amazing finale to such a fascinating experience.

Endnotes

¹ Technically speaking not a cheese at all, best described as a “dairy-based product”. Anything dairy-based that could stay solid and not go rancid in those temperatures had to have some serious chemical additives.

² In a complete contrast to Australia, bananas were around 20 cents a kilo and delicious.

³ "Pick some flowers", polite euphemism used when females wish to relieve themselves in the shrubbery. The male version is "shoot some rabbits".

⁴ You can just imagine the lemurs saying "Here come the people", "They're bringing bananas", "We like bananas".

⁵ There were two Bills in the group, to avoid confusion I have given them different monikers.

⁶ It is most depressing, around 80% of Madagascar has been clear felled mostly through slash and burn methods. In many places eucalyptus trees have been planted for either fuel (charcoal for cooking fires) or for timber. In some places you started to wonder at having come so far just to look at a thicket of bloody gum trees.

The endemic forest finds it difficult to compete with eucalyptus as it is not fire resistant.

⁷ Listen guys, it's a bloody big mine, the biggest project in Madagascar's history and in addition to providing much-needed foreign exchange there are economic empowerment and biodiversity projects being run in conjunction. I suggest you look at their net site

<http://www.riotintomadagascar.com/english/index.asp>. I would also like to point out that one of the best roads that we saw in Madagascar in Fort Dauphin was constructed by Rio Tinto. So if you want to dump on me for putting my retirement income and head of your environmental concerns then guilty as charged.

⁸ Also called baby football.

⁹ The rice fields were ubiquitous – most meals were “do you want rice with that?”

¹⁰ There is no accounting for taste; however Boston Bill is an American.

¹¹ I seemed to be the one person in the group willing to try anything taste wise, there again I have been noted for being willing to put anything into my mouth.

¹² He has an unbelievable amount of camera equipment plus an absent-minded propensity to leave it in inappropriate places. If I had camera equipment that valuable I would have it permanently handcuffed to my wrist. He is usually followed by his own local guide whose job is to carry the tripod, etc and make sure George doesn't kill himself. Actually he is a total sweetie, vaguely reminiscent of Bill Oddie however he is much less fanatical.

¹³ Sorry, no photo.

¹⁴ Enjoy maybe a slightly strong word, others managed to finish their glass and even have seconds. I decided after two mouthfuls to stick with the rum, it is less likely to lead to birdcage mouth and headache the next day. Furthermore I notice that we left one unopened bottle on the table before we headed out to the Mayoral Ball, that bottle was returned to us unopened the next day, I think the staff knew something that we only just learned.

¹⁵ Ken's personality is only surpassed by the giant fiberglass merino in his home town of Goulburn. At least he didn't shout “get in behind” at the lemurs like another Australian sheep farmer that I have travelled with.

¹⁶ There are two Graeme's so they are referred to as, Tall Graeme and Graeme.

¹⁷ A close relative of Afro funk.

¹⁸ Boogaloo might be overstating our ability; the middle aged whitey bop might be a better description. There were no mayoral speeches, the mayor didn't even put on an appearance, it was vaguely reminiscent of a high school social circa 1970 (the coloured mirror ball). However the THB was flowing and a good time was had by all.

¹⁹ I am not making this up; there is a plant with a natural nitro-glycerine component in its latex sap. Malagasy use it to break larger rocks.

²⁰ He was practically skipping around, slapping backs, etc. he nearly kissed Robert, much to Robert's disgust.

²¹ Which of course was on the right hand side of the bus, Madagascar is an ex-French colony so they drive on the right.

²² It is amazing how much self reliance is actually dependence on access to (pilferable) materials.

²³ It was formed by a similar process as Australia's bungle bangles, however I have to say that ours are bigger.

²⁴ Total purchase price <AU\$5.

²⁵ Not that it would have killed us, the cover charge was AU\$ 50 cents.

²⁶ Although we did see a herd of goats.

²⁷ Usually followed at 5:15 AM by the sound of birdwatchers tripping over the shrubbery and muttering to themselves.

²⁸ Called Fluffy, he was originally procured in Antananarivo and spent much of the tour hiding in my luggage for the most opportune moment to be introduced to the rest of the crew. His arrival was greeted with much mirth and "What the" comments. Expect to see more of him in future adventures.

²⁹ I had not realised that when you donate old clothes to commercial clothes collectors they then bundle these up and sell them on to merchants in places like Africa and Madagascar; these local merchants then organise the clothes into smaller bundles and sell them on the local people to sell at markets. If nothing else I hope this makes you feel slightly better about giving away all your old clothes even to commercial operators.

³⁰ From left to right, Boston Bill, me, Owen, Lesley, Jim, Catherine, Roddy & Ken

³¹ There is a television theme song which has the refrain "a three-hour cruise" which was particularly applicable in this case.

³² There again I have always been biased toward the Indian Ocean.

Map of Madagascar Showing Our Route in Red



Birds List - Alphabetical Order

Madagascar

Benson Rock Thrush	Madagascar Green Pigeon
Black Egret (Fishing)	Madagascar Harrier Hawk
Blue Coua	Madagascar Hoopoe
Blue Vanga	Madagascar Kestrel (Newtons Falcon) (with mouse)
Brush Warbler	Madagascar Kingfisher
Cattle Egret	Madagascar Robyn
Common Jerry	Madagascar Turtledove
Common Squacco Herron	Madagascar Wagtail
Common Stonechat	Marsh Sandpiper
Coucal	Namagua Dove
Crested Coua	Night Heron
Dimorphic Egret	Paradise Flycatcher
Drongo	Pied Crow
Forest Fody	Pratincole
Giant Coua	Purple Heron
Green Capped Coua	Red Billed Duck
Green/Striated Heron	Red Nobbed Coot
Grey Faced Lovebird	Sakalava Weaver
Hook Billed Vanga	Soumanga Sunbird
Kelp Gull	Sunbird
Kittles Plover	Vasa Parrot
Large Egret	White Browed Owl
Lesser Vasa Parrot	White Eye
Long Billed Green Sunbird	White Faced Duck
Madagascar Bee Eater	Yellow Billed Kite
Madagascar Bulbul	
Madagascar Cuckoo Shrike	

Reunion

Red Fody
Zebra Dove

