

Madagascar trip report – October 2012

By Peter Williams

Madagascar is a large island lying off the east coast of Southern Africa, opposite Mozambique. It is said to be the fourth largest island in the world, after Greenland, Borneo and New Guinea (Australia doesn't feature in this list for some reason). Its main claim to fame is that it has been isolated from everywhere else for so long – over 50 million years – that virtually all of its animals, and many of its plants and birds, are found nowhere else. That makes it a very interesting place to visit. We joined a tour there in October 2012 organised by our naturalist friend Gerald Broddelez, along with Penny's mother Susan, our friend Liz, and three couples who had previously travelled with Gerald. The group gelled very well. We were also accompanied throughout by a Madagascan guide called Calvin.

Madagascar is a poor country, with little infrastructure such as mains water, electricity and paved roads. It is one of the ten poorest countries in the world, however poverty is measured. It is estimated that 90% of the population live on less than US\$2 per day. In the south, which looked to be the poorest area that we visited, many people lived in villages built of huts made of sticks and palm leaves. And yet all the people whom we saw seemed, with only the occasional exception, to be permanently cheerful. They smiled all the time, even as they gazed at us in wonder as we passed by in our air conditioned bus, or peered at wildlife through our expensive binoculars. At times on this holiday, I felt as if I was royalty, from the attention we received, or occasionally as if I was from Mars. Or both. We certainly did a lot of waving to people whom we passed.

Children are popular in Madagascar. Apparently families of ten or more are not uncommon. The population is 22 million, and half of those are under 14. The political situation is, to put it mildly, fluid. Power tends to change through coups, the last one only three years ago. That resulted in all overseas aid being stopped. Since the economy was not doing well before then, the economy is more or less stagnant. That is bad for people; it is also bad for the countryside and the wildlife.

Madagascar and its wildlife

The best known of Madagascar's wildlife is the lemur – a primate that was around before monkeys. Monkeys are more adaptable than lemurs, and colonised the world, supplanting lemurs – but they never reached Madagascar. It is thought that a few primitive lemurs colonised Madagascar after arriving there from Africa on mats of floating vegetation, where they happily evolved away, safe in their niche, for perhaps 40-50 million years. That one species has now evolved into something like 100 different species, of all shapes and sizes. Most are endangered by habitat loss and hunting, although the Government has designated some reserves where they are (theoretically) protected.

Lemurs come in all shapes and sizes, from mouse size to chimpanzee size. They all live in trees. Only the well-known ring-tailed lemur is partly terrestrial. The smaller lemurs tend to be insectivorous and nocturnal. The larger ones – which we set out to see – tend to be diurnal and munch leaves as they move around the forests. The leaf-eaters need vast areas to survive, like pandas in China. A typical family of leaf-eating lemurs needs five hectares (twelve acres) of forest. On an island where 90% of the native forest has been destroyed, that is not a good survival strategy.

There is other wildlife apart from lemurs of course. While mammals evolved in the rest of the world, their predecessors were marooned on Madagascar, and evolved entirely independently. Until people arrived on Madagascar less than two thousand years ago, there were no cats, dogs, cattle or other large mammals. Their evolutionary niches were

taken by Madagascan specialities like the fosa, a strange puma-like animal that is related to the mongoose, and the tenrec, which has evolved to fill the niche occupied by rodents and hedgehogs. There are also a large number of chameleons, some over a foot long.

Much of the plant life is pretty special as well – including the forest, which has been badly affected by slash-and-burn farming techniques. The island was originally settled a couple of thousand years ago, not by Africans from the west (as one might have expected) but by Polynesians from the east. They created farmland to grow rice and other crops by burning down the forest. The soil remains fertile for only a year or two, after which a new patch of forest is destroyed. And so on. The bare soil blows away in the wind, or is washed into the rivers in the rainy season. This really is an ecological disaster for both the population and the wildlife. We saw dozens of fires while we were there. Some steps are now being taken to try to stop the burning of the forests, but there is little money to provide security, and even the designated national parks are at risk. The lemurs and the other wildlife are now confined to such small areas that the remaining populations may not be sustainable. Some replanting is taking place, to try to link together remaining areas of forest, but it is a very slow process and some of the rarer lemurs may not survive long enough to enjoy the finished results.

The topography of Madagascar is interesting. There is a large chain of mountains running north-south through the middle of the island, with the capital, Antananarivo (which everyone calls Tana), on the top of this plateau at about 5,500 feet (higher than Kathmandu). The land falls away in all directions, gradually towards the south and west, but very sharply to the east. When we travelled east from Tana, we dropped a couple of thousand feet in a few miles on a most impressive road. The mountains have an effect on the weather. The south and the west are effectively in rain shadow and are extremely dry for most of the year. The east gets all the rain as the clouds pass over the mountains. As we were (deliberately) visiting in the dry season, we did not see any rain, other than a couple of showers when we were travelling across the plateau. Many of the areas we visited are apparently not accessible during the rainy season, as the roads (even the paved ones) become impassable.

The holiday

Our holiday was designed to link together various places of interest in the southern part of the island. We flew from London to Paris, and then on to Tana (about a ten-hour flight). After a night in a modern hotel in Tana, we flew to Tulear in the south-west of the island (about an hour's flight). From there we travelled to Ifaty, an area about 20 miles to the north where there is still a fragment of the original spiny forest (in private ownership). We travelled in 4WD vehicles along the unpaved road. It was a slow journey: with a couple of short stops to view some lakes, the trip took a couple of hours.

After two days at Ifaty, we returned to Tulear where we stayed for one night in an elegant hotel and did some local birdwatching. Then, exchanging the 4WD vehicles for a conventional bus, we set off on the one paved road in the area back towards Tana. It took us two days of travelling to reach Ranomafana National Park, where we stayed for three nights. Then we continued our drive northwards, skirting the edge of Tana and turned east, dropping off the plateau into the lowland rain forest. It took us two days of travelling to reach Andasibe National Park, where we stayed for four nights. Then we travelled back to Tana for the final night of the holiday before flying home.

In all we travelled about 600 miles in our bus on paved roads, and about 50 miles in the 4WD cars from Tulear to Ifaty on the unpaved road. It is pretty much the standard tour for visitors like us who want to stick to the paved roads. Anything else involves travelling on unpaved roads, which is extremely tiring. Even travelling on the paved roads is slow and painful. In the mountains, the roads twist around the sides of the valleys, and up and over the passes, and everywhere there are so many potholes that vehicles often

have to slow to a crawl, or use the “wrong” side of the road. There are still plenty of bullock (zebu) carts on the roads, especially (but not exclusively) in the rural areas. Fortunately there is relatively little traffic on the roads at the moment. Traffic largely consists of large modern articulated lorries (in various states of repair), seriously overloaded public minibuses, which for most people are the only means of transport around the island, and a few modern tourist vehicles. Apart from in Tana, there is not much private ownership of cars yet. This will no doubt change, at which point the roads will be unable to cope, as overtaking the slower vehicles will no longer be possible.

Penny and Liz, with one other couple, stayed on for an extra five days to visit a lodge at Kirindy on the west coast, to see some additional animals and birds that frequented the area. This involved flying from Tana to a town called Morondava, and then another 4WD journey to Kirindy, which took a few hours. As Penny’s separate trip report explains, it was not all plain sailing, but extremely rewarding.

The hotels that we used ranged from very modern to pretty ancient. Like the nursery rhyme, when they were good, they were very very good, but when they were bad, they were horrid. One hotel in particular was actually unpleasant to stay in but that was the exception (it was ill-luck that we were staying there for three nights). Another of the hotels was one of the most elegant we have ever stayed in, with beautiful grounds in a delightful setting among sandstone cliffs, and a fantastic pool.

Food was similarly variable – from decidedly ordinary (and occasionally not really worth eating) to really very nice indeed, depending on where we were staying, and how our stomachs were feeling at the time (quite a lot of us were unwell for quite a lot of the time – more than one might have expected, to be honest). The island used to be a French colony so there is apparently some very good food in the smarter restaurants in Tana. We tended to eat more conventional tourist fare based around the Malagasy staple of rice, although we ate far more meat and fish than the local people eat.

Wildlife watching

Most days followed a similar pattern, which will be familiar to people who go on wildlife holidays. We would go into the forest, accompanied by local guides, and look for the wildlife. Mainly it was lemurs, with birds and other wildlife seen at the same time. Lemurs are not easy to find. They live in large areas of forest. Being in the national parks, it was all very organised. Spotters would already have gone out to search for the lemur families, and somehow everyone kept in touch – sometimes by shouting but more often by mobile phone (which has caught on in a big way in Madagascar). We were taken to the nearest spot on a large path, and then suddenly led off between the trees to stand beneath the lemurs, grazing in the trees high above us. They sometimes watched us. They were never frightened of us, although occasionally someone would get too close and they would move away. They tended to move around between 20 feet and 50 feet above the ground but on occasions they came down to our level, and occasionally where we were on a steep hillside they would be next to us or below us. One family of black and white ruffed lemurs came out of the trees to drink at a stream right in front of us, but this was unusual as most lemurs do not need to drink water (getting what they need from their food).

Lemurs live in families of four to six animals, so where you found one lemur, the rest of the family would be nearby. After eating in one spot for a few minutes, they tended to move away, swinging through the forest like monkeys, making it look very easy and indeed great fun. We would follow on the ground, dodging the trees and creepers, sometimes relatively quickly where the land was flat, but finding it much more difficult when we were on a steep slope as sometimes happened. There was relatively little undergrowth in the forests, as the canopy is so dense. A typical sighting would last

15-20 minutes, after which the lemurs would move away too far for us to follow, to find some more food. Perhaps they just got tired of watching us.

The most astonishing lemurs were the indris, which are the largest species at about three feet high – the size of a child. They have songs, not unlike whale songs, which they use to protect their territories – whole families singing at once, like the Von Trapp lemur family. We were nearby on three occasions when they sang, and actually next to them on one occasion. The noise was surprisingly brutal, like being next to a trumpet player. You could feel the noise through the air, as well as hear it. Definitely the highlight of the trip for me.

On most days when we were in the national parks, we went out on walks morning and evening, with a rest during the day when the temperature was at its peak. On days when we were travelling, we stopped where possible for a break in the middle of the day, once in a national park and another time at a reserve created to enable tourists to see ring-tailed lemurs. These were the only ring-tailed lemurs we saw. They are the most familiar lemurs to Brits (apparently Johnny Morris used to have one on Animal Magic but I can't remember that). These animals were completely relaxed about our presence, even though we were only feet away from them.

On a few occasions we would go on a short walk in the dark in the early evening before dinner, along a road. The guides would shine torches into the roadside trees and we saw a few dwarf nocturnal lemurs that way. On one evening we went to a spot where the guide smeared banana on a branch and we saw another dwarf lemur that way, in the dusk. It used to be possible to go into the national parks in the evenings for night walks, but this is no longer possible.

A word about the vegetation. Most of the trees are Madagascan endemics. There are huge areas that have been cleared of forest and planted with eucalyptus, which is used for firewood (cooking is done over charcoal everywhere). It is effectively a crop, like the ubiquitous rice which is grown in the bottom of every valley and sometimes in terraces down the hillsides as well.

The most extraordinary vegetation was in the spiny forests. There is little left now, but this used to cover much of the southern desert areas before they were cleared for farming. Every tree is covered in thorns of one kind or another, and adapted to withstand the heat and lack of rain for much of the year. We saw it in the dry season when all the trees were grey or brown. Apparently they all become green in the wet season. Many of the trees in the spiny forests were baobabs, which have developed massive hollow trunks in which they store water over the dry season. They grow to an enormous size and are extremely photogenic. Apparently they grow on the African mainland as well, but Madagascar is particularly famous for them.

Apart from the national parks, however, little of the original forest has been preserved. In 2,000 years of human settlement, 90% of the original forest has been cleared. Driving for mile after mile over grassy plains or through eucalyptus forests, it was depressing to think that this had all been forested until relatively recently. There is no wildlife at all in such areas now. The lemurs and other special Madagascan wildlife are confined to very small areas and, unless they are given a lot of help, may not survive for another 2,000 years. With Madagascar's growing population, and disastrous political system that seems to engineer instability, it is difficult to be optimistic for the future of Madagascar's unique wildlife.

Peter Williams
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