



Hands Across the Species - Madagascar III

Drama on the way to the airport. Our train was delayed and would leave from track 11 at 9:03. When it arrived we got on and settled in. After 10 minutes Karin glanced at the electronic screen. This train was going somewhere else. We sat there stunned for a moment. Fortunately we could get off at the next station, race to another track and jump on to the right train just as it was about to leave. It seems unfair that when you do everything right and follow all the rules, you are penalized. What is the lesson in that?!! A guide in Madagascar answered that: **Don't follow the rules.**

It is hard to say anything meaningful about Madagascar. There is such a cacophony of themes there is no sense to be made of it. It is as though evolution is just practicing.

Example: one vine hanging across the path was tied in a perfect knot. Although a knot has a certain logic, biologically it is utter nonsense.



Or take the elephant tree - it grows up makes a bow and then grows down again with a few spindly leaves at the end.

It is a joke - a little like the way Jimi Hendrix protested the Star Spangled Banner by turning its "glory" into a musical travesty with a meaningless crescendo -> decrescendo.

Or the tenrec. It has 17 pairs of teats. It needs these because it can have 32 babies. The extra pair of teats is in case you lose count.



It is the unexpected that is Madagascar's greatest attraction - the constant surprise. Either you are awestruck or you say 'that's ridiculous', whatever the case, it is the result of millions of years of trial and error tweaking and adjusting until a niche is exploited, perfection is achieved and it is bozo the clown .. or the paradise flycatcher.

As a warm up we started our trip in Mayotte, an island a little off the north eastern tip of Madagascar. "Kwezi". That is 'hello' in Chimaoré. Sounds a little like Elmer Fudd saying 'crazy'. 'Chi' is bantu for 'language of' so Chimaore is the language of the Maoré. Now I know what you're thinking - Maoré sounds a lot like Maori, i.e. the aboriginal population of New Zealand. And, of course, the Malagasy come from that direction. Soooo, everything hangs together. The only thing lacking is the proof: Well, we don't have any internet and google translate. So instead I'll make some coffee - if I can find a couple of sticks to rub together ...

We are on Combani mountain. Karin and I went for a walk and came to an orchard of ghost-like trees with twisted trunks. The ylang ylang. They have a flower with long thin yellow-green petals which are used for making perfume. We continued till we arrived at a stand of bamboo stalks. These were of large girth and rose to a height of some 15 meters. Their trunks would swing in the wind and create a canonade of sound as they knocked together.



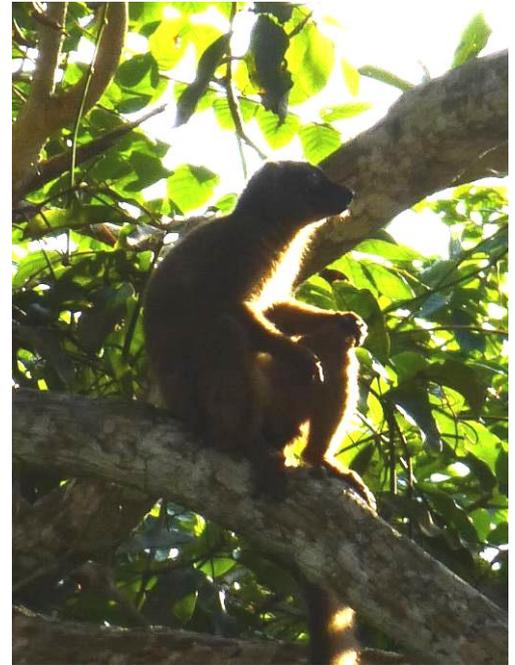
Climbing over bamboo trunks and dodging under a large spider web, we came to a tree with bats called flying foxes. These have a wingspan that can be up to 1.4 meters - 3 of them could carry off a small tourist... Anyway, as we were watching, a large troop of lemurs came to visit in the same tree. The bats were outraged and began squeaking holy hell at the interlopers. The brown lemurs really can't make any sound other than a soft grunt so they gave up and left. The squeaky wheel gets the grease.

We had dinner with a German couple (Wolfgang and Marianne) who told us about the light yellow paste which the Maoré women put on their faces. It is made of ground sandalwood with perfume added (ylang ylang or jasmine). When it is washed off it leaves your skin smooth. It takes some getting used to because it looks like a scary Halloween mask.



There are many lemur troops in the forest. There only seems to be one type here on Mayotte - the brown lemur. Many are carrying babies. In the morning I saw one in a contemplative pose looking out over the valley below. His elbows were on his knees and his tail was hidden which made him almost human. The idea that they are eaten as bush meat is sad.

The lemur agility is astounding. They can jump from a branch several meters down to a vine and land standing up. Or they seem fearless when jumping to another branch 6 meters away where a miss would mean death or serious injury. It does help to have an extended and large big toe on the back legs. They like to cuddle and seem quite caring and gentle. The only time their behaviour seems aggressive is when they are competing for food. Then there is a good deal of pushing, slapping and chasing.



Can bats fish? It certainly looked like it as we sat on a sea wall in the setting sun and watched them swoop down and touch the rosy-hued water.

Actually it seems the answer is 'no'. We were told they rid themselves of parasites by skimming the water as they fly.

We borrowed a kayak and rowed out to where there was a reef. Both the fish and the coral were alive with colour. We've seen many green sea turtles. One day Karin counted 24 before giving up counting. They are quite oblivious to our presence and will continue eating sea grass even though we are only inches away. They are gentle creatures over a meter in length and weigh 300 kg. They can stay under water for hours (or months during hibernation) and can slow their heart rate to once every 9 minutes.

We have a cool walk that we take during the hot sunny days which is beneath the mangroves. There is a large driftwood that provides lots of seating arrangements from which you can take pictures of the birds in the mangrove branches. There are a lot of paradise flycatchers. The females are colourful with reds and browns and a bit of light blue mascara above the eye.



Madagascar Cuckoo Roller



We have gotten news that there are about 100 cases of bubonic plague in Madagascar. There is apparently both an air born and contact variety of the disease. WHO is not warning against travel yet. So we will keep going.

Karin has managed to copy the grunting of the lemurs. She tried this out on a group of them in the trees. They stopped up and stared at her. One of them began grunting back at her. They carried on for quite some time.

Leaving M'Zouzia we caught a ride with a Taxi-brousse. On the dashboard, there was a very worn book. When we made a stop, the driver grabbed the book and showed us a particular page. While he drove he recited from heart what was written there. 'Hello, is this the way to the library?' 'Yes, but the library is closed' etc. We continued in this vein to Mamoudsou while we corrected the occasional mispronunciation. He said it was really too bad that we were leaving the island so soon. Karin promised to send him an English/French book of grammar when we returned to Norway.

Marojejy, Madagascar

Jejy means 6 things: spirits, rocks, plants, mountain, animals, rain. The context tells you which is intended. However if you want to mean all definitions at once you say marojejy (maro = many).

After landing in Sambava we headed for Andapa/Marojejy. We gradually ascended through the foothills. On this part of our trip we planned to spend 5 days climbing a mountain in order to find the silky sifaka. The landscape gradually changed from dry dust to a green vegetation- curious bamboo with soft fronds - a forest of feather dusters.

There was organizing to do. We needed a guide, tracker, cook, 3 porters and food for all of these. There is a natural limit for your entourage as soon you are getting porters just to carry food for porters.

We have met up with a guide who helps us plan the food and route up the mountain. Since we have a couple of days before the trek he suggested walking in the foothills. So we took a couple of bicycle rickshaws and set off. We saw bamboo and mouse lemurs, brookesia and panther chameleons, an owl, lizards, a tree frog hidden in a banana leaf, a snake and a brown moth, but I think what impressed me most was a plant: the rafia palm. It grows for 25 years before flowering and producing fruit.

The fruit takes 7 (!) years to ripen and fall to the ground. Then the plant dies. No retirement. It's a touching story. (The guide says: If you have a baby when the rafia produces a fruit, the child will be able to climb up and pick it itself when the fruit is ripe)





We have gotten as far as Camp 1 where there are primitive cabins wrapped in plastic. On the way here we saw bamboo and white-fronted lemurs, a sunbird building a nest, two leaf-tailed geckos (gigantes and fimbriatus), Madagascar coucal, blue coua, what appears to be white lichen, but if you touch it, it runs away - Phrominia Rosea - it turns yellow then grows wings, turns pink and flies off.



The most unusual, however, was an insect. We don't know the name but we think it may be a 'stealth' bug and cannot be seen with radar.

Next day we climbed further to Camp 2. There are many fern trees along the way. Our guide, Franco, says that that they grow 1 metre every century. We saw a stick insect that looked like moss, a new kind of praying mantis, and a plant with large red leaves (Draciana).



Franco told how when he was small, his father would gather the 10 children in a semi-circle, lay a leaf of the draciana in a shallow bowl and pour water on. He would then dip his hand in the water and flick it on a child and ask the dead ancestors for assistance: 'We hope the ancestors will help Franco work harder on his studies'.

Continuing our climb we saw fledgeling flycatchers in a nest.

Rabe, the cook, always has some quite excellent food waiting for us after our walks. He looks a bit like a tramp with missing teeth, but this belies a surprisingly delicate touch with food.

Karin asked him for his recipe for beans. Franco translated from Malagasy as Rabe gave a serious recitation: 'First I wash the pot ..' (Well, that was a relief).

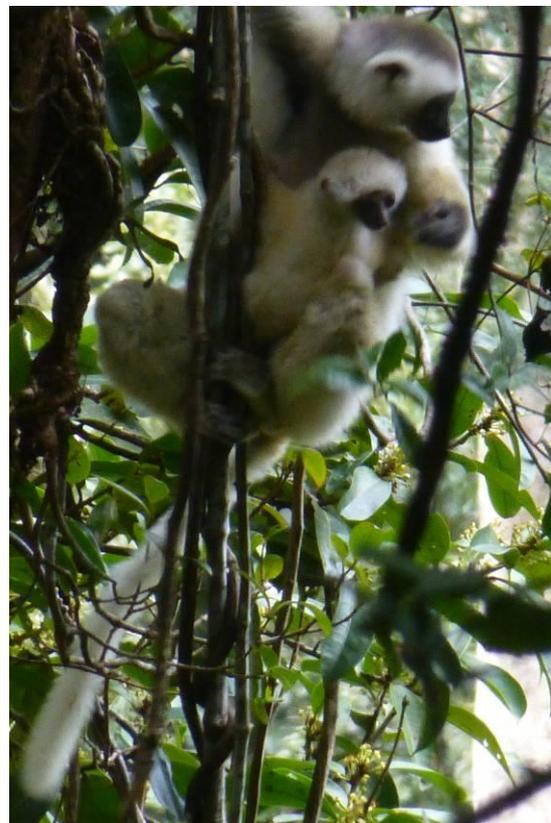


In the afternoon we started up the trail toward camp 3. After half an hour, Franco said he needed to call the tracker. I expected him to take out a mobile phone but instead he made a funnel of his hands and howled like an indri. If the tracker had found the silky sifaka he was to make two howls back - which is what we heard.

At this point we left the trail and began a traverse across a quite steep incline. There was a lot of climbing over logs and roots. Eventually we reached a spot where the silky sifaka was visible. They looked quite large but actually only weigh about 5-6 kgs.

There were two females - each with babies and a male.

They are quite difficult to photograph because of the dense foliage, but in the end we managed some quite good shots. The babies were still breast feeding. The mother lay back on a branch and lazily stretched out her hand for a leaf while the four month old baby practiced little jumps at an altitude of 20 meters. Child care is not a serious concern.



Though the evenings can be quite cool the days can make you drip with sweat. On arriving back in camp Karin took a shower and I bathed in a stream.

We asked Franco if any of the tourists had been hurt on these steep trails. Yes there had been some broken bones, but only one death two years ago when a tourist was taking a picture from the top of a waterfall, and, to get a better shot, stepped forward into empty space and fell 400 meters.

Since then they have written 'STOP' at the top of the falls. That is where I am sitting at the moment. There is a light breeze and a stream trickling by and disappearing over the cliff. Above is a rocky pinnacle which would be a challenge to climb; but I think might be possible (for somebody else).

After an early breakfast (when we saw a ring tailed mongoose), we started off once again. As before we saw some unusual insects and a troop of white fronted lemurs before once again finding the silky sifaka. This time they came quite close and the antics of the babies were amusing to watch.



We just saw a red headed coua by our bungalow and followed it into the woods. It is about 40 cm long with a bright red cap. It doesn't seem to want to fly and spends its time walking on logs or climbing up trees. We thought we had lost it when it suddenly hopped up in front of us. It clearly did not regard us as threatening.



Coming down from Marojejy all of our camera batteries are empty except for Karin who has one bar left. Who would have thought we would have so many photo opportunities on the way home. There were several couas both blue and red breasted. Then a pair of helmet vangas popped up. Shortly after a drongo sat perfectly still on a vine. We returned to a paradise flycatcher nest to see the fledgelings leaving the nest for the first time. The mother and father jumped from bush to bush in an attempt to distract us from their brood.



We then saw a leaf-tailed gecko who had lost his tail to a predator.

This was topped off by a large attractive panther chameleon climbing on a vine.

Karin suddenly said "The vine is moving!!"

On cue the snake began to slither around.

By taking very few pictures we managed to photograph most of these though they deserved much more. The last surprise was a crested ibis that flew up as we rounded a corner.

Otherwise the scenery is beautiful. Mountain streams gradually gave way to rice paddies and zebus and, last, the villagers sitting on their doorsteps in the noonday sun. Three girls walked with us for a kilometer carrying lunch for their parents who were working in the rice fields. The youngest was smaller than Johanna and she had a large bucket of rice water on her head.



Franco says I look like the pope. This was because I lost my hat and needed to fashion a new one from a pair of boxer shorts.

He obviously has a good sense of humor. He will tell you it is taboo to fall down a slippery drop-off or poke your eye out on a stick. At one point he put a water bottle on his head and balanced it while dodging under bamboo and skipping up rocks. It was quite a circus stunt.

Look at the vine we are holding. An elephant could swing on that.



The Malagasy language is full of idiomatic expressions. Nothing is said directly. Our guide will say 'I am not a chicken'. This means 'I need to take a pee.'

When someone dies they become an ancestor and actually go on living in the forest. You can call on your ancestors to help out. Occasionally they take on a physical form, but are only about a foot and a half tall. Franco has only seen an ancestor once. You can gather a family together in the house and the ancestors will come and bang on the roof. What further proof do you need? I told Franco (25) that I was 73 years old and would probably be an ancestor in not so long. So ... we'll stay in touch. I'll be the one that is 2 feet tall.

Camp Tattersalli – Daraina

The road from Vohemar to Ambilobe is 150 km and takes about 14 hours. I would contend that it is one of the 10 worst roads in the world. It consists of deep ruts and rocky outcroppings which you negotiate very slowly in a 4x4. We headed for the gold mining town of Daraina which because of the road is almost inaccessible. What would the people be like here? Should I have brought a codpiece? We saw a zebu so there were signs of civilization.

We arrived near sunset in Daraina where we were to take a turnoff to Camp Tattersalli. This new road quickly became a faint track in the dust. Luckily there was enough sunlight still to see by. We drove for about 5 km and arrived at a clearing. We were met by the staff. They only spoke their own language. The manager was so drunk I don't think he spoke any language.

Although the beginning was not auspicious things picked up. The kitchen ladies were very nice.

The dining area was a roof held up by poles, and they had cleverly tied the four corners of the table cloth to the table legs as the wind was gusting heavily. The billowing table cloth settled down once the table setting was in place. The night sky was beautiful with all the stars.



We decided to retire to our bungalow. This was constructed with woven mats that fluttered in the wind on the hillside. There was a bit of flapping and breeze inside, but the bed was comfy.

Next morning: Karin has just come from the shower. If you stand in the right place the water will blow on to you.

The ground around Tattersalli camp is composed of 2 things - red clay and quartz. Lots of quartz. Oh, and one more thing – gold.



The area around is a lunar landscape of holes made by the miners. Some of them are 5 meters deep or more.

The Tattersall's Sifaka is found here. It is white with an orange cap. They live near the gold miners. It is taboo to harm them so they feel safe.

We saw also an eagle, owl and new chameleon with a ridge of needles down its back. (Oustalets)



Night walk: This is Karin's birthday. Our guide only speaks Malagasy so when he sees something he says "oo, oo, oo" and points.

He has a sharp eye however, and we saw crowned sifaka; a large bluebird, love birds; hoopoes; sportive lemurs; a black and white vanga and a Rufous flycatcher.

So this was no let down for the birthday girl.



Before dinner we had a half bottle of wine by candle light (an electric candle saved from the airplane business class). We toasted Karin's 49th birthday and ate chocolates. We could see lemurs from our balcony so, in a sense, they joined the party.

After dinner we lay on blankets and looked for shooting stars in the night sky. We were about to give up when the sky lit up with a large meteor falling to earth. So ... a dramatic ending for a great birthday.



We left the next day for Ankarana National Park. The road was not as bad as its reputation though you can only travel at 15km/hr. The landscape is dry and dusty with very few trees. It is amazing that people live here.

In Ankarana (people of the rock) there is tsingy. "Tsingy" literally this means 'tiptoe'. It consist of limestone that has been pressed up from a sea bed over 150 million years ago and then eroded to form sharp spikes.

Our guide Jaffar showed us a rocky hole in the ground about 20 meters across. He explained that this fills with water in the rainy season. 'Can one swim then' I asked (it was quite hot).

He explained that you could swim, but it would be your last swim.

The water forms a large maelstrom that sweeps down a hole to an underground river. There are several rivers and caves beneath the tsingy.



The area is quite impressively forbidding though even here the lemurs can be found. The plants growing here have absorbed the calcium carbonate and are as hard as the rock. When you tap them with your knuckle, it is like tapping a stone. We saw bottle trees and the elephant tree.

Diego Suarez

This town has seen its better days. There is the burnt out shell of a once magnificent hotel on a promontory overlooking the sea. Otherwise the town manages on catering to the tourist's desires. Young women flock around old Frenchmen who, with a willing suspension of disbelief, are under the illusion that they are desirable. There is no fool like an old fool.

Montagne d'Ambre National Park

We wonder if the guest house here may have been closed because of robberies in the park. They were willing to let us stay here however, but it clearly had not been used for some time. There were many rooms but no staff or guests, and many window panes were broken. The enameled dinner plates were rusty. When night came, it was *very* quiet. We ate by candlelight which flickered in the breeze. The one sign of life was a clock on the wall which was eerily right on time. There was no guest book though I assume the last two entries were the Marquis de Sade and Quasimodo. As we ate there was much scurrying in the attic and at one point a large bang. Ancestor?

Next day we wandered in the forest and found a forest rock thrush, an amazing leaf-tailed gecko (*uroplatus sikorea*) and an elephant eared chameleon (*calumma amber*).



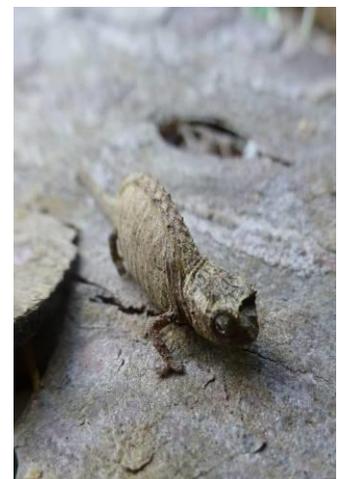
Over the next couple of days we found many creatures – a large yellow moth, a knobby legged beetle (*antrihit*) and a moth caccoon that was over 2 feet long!!



Long Horned Beetle



Leaf-tailed gecko



Tiny Pregnant Chameleon (*minima*)

On the last day we walked out of the park and on the road saw a pair of Madagascar Crested Ibis.



Sakalava

Ablation by constant wind and surging waves forms ragged black statues in the limestone rock on the north eastern tip of Madagascar. Here in hollow cups of stone, the white tailed tropic bird lays its single egg.



Walking on the pure white sand we pass what looks like the last elephant bird. Next three village girls with their decorative masks run up wanting to sell ylang ylang.



We arrive finally at a small bay of turquoise water guarded by an old gun emplacement. We sit looking down on the rough swell coming in off the Indian Ocean. Then we noticed sea turtle heads popping up in the swell.



In Sakalava bay we met Margot and Renee. They have been living quite primitively on the beach. Karin asked Margot where the toilet was and she waved her hand "around". Margot told us we could wade at low tide to a little island to find more tropic birds.



The next day we followed her advice and saw many of these birds with their long tail feathers. Coming home Karin found a small blue-bottle and a live cowrie

Anjozorobe Angavo forest corridor / Saha Forest Camp

From Anjozorobe town to Saha Forest Camp the road is very rough. There was no 4x4 available so we hired 2 motorcycle taxis to drive us there.

After a restful night we awoke to trees sparkling with raindrops. Our guide was Miarintsoa (Mia) a diminutive 18 year old who moves through the forest like an elf because ... she is an elf. She will look up at us and with a sweet smile say 'Wait here please'. Then like a wisp of smoke she's gone to search for indris or sifakas in the forest.

We saw the elusive blue coua which rarely flies and chased it through the underbrush passing a surprised diademed sifaka lounging on a branch. In the end we had to give up the chase.

I am the worst animal spotter and was very pleased when I found this lizard that no one had seen. I proudly display it here.



Mia spotted many things, but we were hoping to see the indri. On the 4th day she said she would try. For this she recruited her grandfather (who was not yet an ancestor). We walked for an hour then she stopped and shouted into a wall of vines. A tiny voice came back. She then turns to us and says, 'Can we go off the trail?' Yeah. Sure. Maybe.

She takes off dodging under branches, running along the tops of fallen trees, balancing on logs crossing streams. I figure we had reached level 3. Level 4 is swinging on vines and howling.

Lo and behold after half an hour we arrived at an old man in a sun hat and bare feet looking up into the overhead canopy. There were the indri.

They are the largest of the lemurs. Sitting on the forest floor we enjoyed their company (and catching our breath). Then Mia made a 'whoop whoop' sound. The indri immediately picked up on this and began howling for dear life. They were answered by other indri maybe a mile away. We are talking about a howl that can be heard 7 miles up-wind on a cloudy day.

Mia was our heroine. We came back to camp dirty and happy.



We hit the road again. We catch a 'taxi-brousse'. There is a boy outside my window swatting flies away on a pile of fresh meat. A bunch of boys come to the taxi window and want to sell sausages. Karin says that we are vegetarians. One of the boys says that these are potato sausages. It was such a blatant lie that all the sellers (and prospective buyer) couldn't help grinning.

We travel a lot by 'taxi brousse'. They will carry anything; chickens, sacks of grain, car engines, letters to be delivered, ladies in large Sunday hats, ragged lumberjacks and us. Their brake shoes are worn and they burn a lot of oil, but the sound system is first class. The music has a lot of glissando. You know glissando? Think greasy where the notes are slipping and sliding. The only punctuation is in the base: Boom boom kaka boom boom.

There is a piercing whistle - somebody wants to get off. Oh it's us.

Thanks for the ride.

Sorry, did I step on your chicken?

Travelling in Madagascar is a bit risky. There is the plague, robbers and the crumbling roads with deep ravines, but, though survival is not guaranteed, the further you go into the jungle the more your mind is opened to an alternative reality. Ask any longhorned beetle or leaftailed gecko. They each have a story to tell but all you get, after millions of years, is the surprise ending.

THE END



The Gold Brick Road