



Welcome to the Indian Ocean

Big Belly Bruce is Back. We had the rather vain hope that swimming 3 times a day, sunshine and salt water would turn our weak flesh into a paradise of surfer muscles. After these first 3 weeks I, personally, thought that some of the Bs in that first sentence would be missing. Instead I have only managed to add another B - for Brown.

Mauritius

At breakfast we are surrounded by brightly coloured birds. One of them has feathers sticking straight up from its head. We call it the 'bad hair day bird'. It eats from our hands.



Bad hair day

In the distance the surf is breaking on to the coral about a kilometre away. We swim out. The water is only 2 meters deep. The coral makes pathways with sand in between. There is a black fish with yellow rimmed eyes which swims up to your face and stares into your eyes. After you swim by, they attack my black swim shoes. I think it is territorial. They ram their snout against the rubber - often several attacking at once. They only attack my shoes, leaving Karin's alone. Maybe she is regarded as female and they hope her feet will stick around.

We are near the Blue Bay. There were sea battles here between the French and English fleets in Napoleonic times - which the English won. However the French won the cultural war because in all of these islands they speak French. There is an English ship that crashed on to the reef in 1902 during a cyclone. The surf has now washed through this wreck for 113 years. They have made a song about this happening. It's quite joyful and is sung to the tune of the Marseillaise. The first line is like this: The English didn't see the reef ha ha ha ha ha haaaaaa.



Wreck after 113 years in the surf

This was in Mauritius, but I will jump ahead to Rodrigues (and drama). We agreed with a boatman to take us where the snorkelling was good. We were surprised that the boatman put us so close to the waves crashing on to the reef. We swam a little while - Karin holds on to my suit so that we don't get separated. The coral was quite spectacular. The current was pulling us toward the thunderous waves and the

boatman began waving and started his motor. I found I could stand on the coral and withstand the current, but Karin let go and was being swept away. The boatman threw her a lifesaver which she grabbed and with great difficulty the boatman kept the boat off the reef and Karin and me into the boat. I think he said 'Sacre Bleu' several times. Frankly I was quite worried as Karin's face drifted toward disaster. We moved further away from the surf. At the new place we saw a moray eel with its rows of teeth smiling at us as it undulated in and out of its den. Inured now to greater danger we just said 'silly boy'.

The coastline here is jagged cliffs that the spent waves from the barrier reef crash against - still with considerable force. There are indentations along the coast where there are picture post card pockets of beach and coral. We have walked many times to our favourite - Trou d'Argent. We never see anyone there and it is unbelievably idyllic. In the beginning it seemed quite challenging to climb up and down the cliffs; but after a few days we did so like monkeys. Correction - goats. There are no monkeys here.

There was a blowhole inland from the cliff where the waves managed to force a geyser up from below.



Trou d'Argent

We saw the strangest lizard - if you have ever seen the paradise bird you will understand our amazement when we saw this animal with its extraordinarily long tail. If one measures the tail from where the back legs attach, the tail is 3 times the length of the body. We shall call it the Lizard of Paradise.

We are only active in the morning and late afternoon as we are too white still, and at mid-day the sun is quite strong. We look from our veranda on to a sluggish stream and patch of mud where crabs stand watch with half of their body in a hole - ready to run for cover: They rarely move. They rarely think. Life is meaningless. One of them chews a bit on a dead leaf - hoping it is a beef steak. It's not. Why go on? It goes back to not moving. Their claws sink downward toward the mud. Deflated. O death, where is thy sting?



I will have to include some of the magnificent sunsets we saw along the way.



Evening sky

This is a perfect area for kite surfing. They start at the beach and can go out to the barrier reef at 2 km distance. I keep wondering what would happen if the kite were to fall into the water way out there. Can you get it to sail up again? It is not too far to swim, but with all that equipment it could be a struggle. I am tempted to try though I may not be agile enough. So remember to put this on your to-do list.

We have gone looking for the blue tailed gecko - without success.

Now in Reunion. We drove up a winding road with 200 bends and curves. This is the wildest drive we have ever taken. The mountains are like the US Rockies but even more extreme. The climb takes an hour and a half. It will suddenly narrow and then you need to hope there is no oncoming traffic on what is now a steep one lane road. At times there are desperate signs that suggest rappelling. I said to Karin that the reason people live up here is that they, once here, would never dare to leave.

There in the bottom of a giant caldera is a flat place and here at 1200 metres is the village of Cilaos: Around it are the steep rocky walls rising to 3000 metres. In the Malagasy language Cilaos means: The Place You Never Leave!! This is interesting because our next stop is Madagascar where they speak Malagasy. The Malagasy people probably came from Micronesia - carried by the cyclones which blow from east to west (my theory)

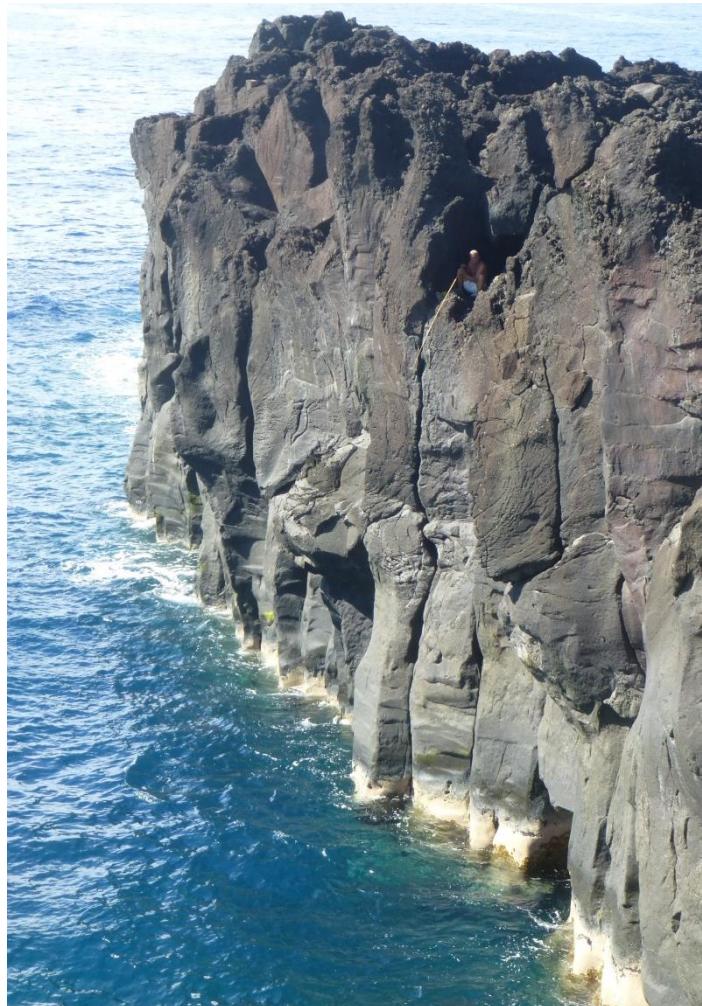
I kept asking Karin to take pictures of the extreme topography, but she didn't want to take her eyes off the road and would only reluctantly take a quick snap now and then. I, on the other hand, was the driver and was tempted to watch the view. So in a way we shared our jobs. Every good marriage should be based on sharing even if it is tragically cut short.



Mountains circling Cilaos

Big news: Manapany Les Bains is on the southern coast; Here they have a very colourful lizard. Several of these joined us for breakfast where they fought over a piece of melon. (**These lizards are blue tailed so perhaps we have found the elusive gecko mentioned earlier.**) Below our veranda is a man-made pool which is really just boulders set in a ring in the sea. Apparently there are sharks in these waters so you need a protected area to swim. The surfers ignore such trivia and are out weaving in amongst the rocks and sharks. They can do this with indemnity because they are the immortal ones. The others have been weeded out.





Fishing from a lava pier

We drove up the coast to St.Rose to see the famous church where the lava flow parted on either side - sparing the building: This is given a lot of significance by the local population:



St. Rose

We have now climbed up Piton de Fournaise which erupts quite frequently. There is lots of very short vegetation and lunar landscapes barren of any vegetation at all. We stay at the Gite du Volcan which is a few kilometres from the caldera and at about 2300 meters. As far as we know nothing is happening, but it is active every 2 to 3 years - last time in 2010.

On arrival rain was falling sideways. The wind took our tiny umbrella; crumpled it up and spit it out: The air was chilly and we were dressed in shorts and T-shirts. We ran back and forth to a little cabin with our luggage and wishing the volcano would erupt to provide some heat.



Piton de la Fournaise

Next morning we woke to more rain and mist. we went up to the edge of the caldera where one could barely see the volcano through the mist and rain. A water logged

dog came and stared at us with pleading eyes. Suddenly a spot of blue appeared and soon the sky opened up. There was a visitors' center nearby. Things were looking up. At any time I expected someone to come out and shout: "C'mon - coffee in here!"

Then the visitor center actually did open up. We asked them to show us some routes. 'All the routes are closed. There was an eruption two weeks ago and there is still activity in the volcano. It is too dangerous and actually illegal to enter the caldera'. I told them that I actually counted 12 people down there. They took this very seriously and locked the gate which gives access to the 527 steps leading into the caldera. Problem solved. If you ignore the sign, so be it, you are lava. These people don't fool around.



There are people down there

We walked along the rim taking lots of pictures of the lava flows. The volcano is really very impressive. It is like looking down into a huge pot of soup containing swirls of solidified rock.

Next stop: Hell-Bourg is known as the prettiest town in all of France (there must be a joke in there somewhere). We decided to climb to the Trois Cascades. The mountains here are steep with narrow gorges. We made it halfway up before it started raining. That is one of the reasons Hell-Bourg is a pretty place - it has the world's record for rainfall in one year - over six metres. We decided that if anyone asked us which waterfall we liked the best; we would say the 5th one - 'Oh; We

thought there were only 3?! No, no. The fifth one has the deep pool for swimming and all the colourful singing birds. It's heaven to listen as you paddle around the splashing water.'

Ah, but then the next day we actually did make it. Huffing and puffing up a 45° grade with no respite, we got there. There was no swimming as the water was flowing straight down. This was luckily in the morning, as in the afternoon some of the 6 metres fell.

Our entertainment in the evenings is math puzzles. For example what is the area of a triangle with sides 17, 52 and 35? Answer at bottom. Most of them are tricky.



Viva America - Madagascar

Madagascar: We started off from Antananarivo. This city is almost entirely slum. There are some buildings in the center which were built at the beginning of the century, but it seems that civilization gave up at this point. Now it is a vast landscape

of shacks and crumbling masonry; intersected with crawling traffic belching exhaust. Not exactly post card material. The people continue to somehow survive. I see a 10 year-old splitting sticks with a knife to make a small bundle for sale. Two skeletal zebu about the size of my friend Bob and me are pulling a two wheeled cart loaded with rock. A woman with groceries is wading to her front door. An NGO has set up 5 tents on the side of the road for emergency aid. Now in the heavy rains it is particularly disastrous, and yet in this swirl of mud and misery, people seem to be going about their business and with a ready smile.

When we look at picture postcards from the 1900's Antananarivo seems idyllic. It had wide spacious boulevards and nicely dressed people. Something went wrong and you wonder how bad it can get before desperation turns to destruction.

There is a fortress-like American embassy surrounded by a protective barrier on the edge of town.



The countryside is another story. People live in brick houses and grow rice. Muddy rivers with torrents of red clay feed the rice fields. It is my impression that Madagascar has a granite base covered with several meters of red clay. You see piles of square cut granite blocks on the side of the road, but all around is only this red clay. However where the rivers have cut gullies, you find there is a granite layer about six meters down.

The further one gets away from the capital, the poorer the condition of the roads. They become narrower and potholes begin to appear. The driving is very risky and depends on both drivers swerving at the last instant. School children walk along the side of the road and zebu carts trudge along. In the meantime the drivers think of themselves as formula one contestants.

We take off from Antsirabe to Ambositra in a Taxi-brousse at 5:30 am with Malagasy rap at full volume. The country side is lush green rolling hills speckled with boulders. There are



Water water everywhere. Oh happy day.

landslides of clay and rock on the road. Then we come on a larger landslide that covered the road. They've been working on this with a digger for a while so we are able to creep by. We look back afterward and see that the road is eaten away from underneath.

There are very few main roads in Madagascar. I wonder what life must be like just 10 miles on either side of these major arteries. Although the countryside is verdant, there are no roads. No Tupperware parties. Karin says, 'We must be at the remotest place on earth.' I say, 'No, that's about 10 miles over there.'

Ambositra: Sitting on the veranda in the evening we look at a cluster of bamboo where the mynah birds come to roost - hundreds of them with new flocks arriving all the time. They all seem to have news to share.

We walk several kilometres into the countryside and up a mountain to see the palace of the queen - two cabins of sun bleached wood. The approach is by a rutted road. There is a sense of the past vanishing.

We catch a ride with a broken down taxi which needed a push to get going. Karin tears her pants on a piece of rough metal on the door.

We visit a cloister and a nun shows us around. The buildings are from 1934. The original nuns are buried all in a row with graves covered with flowers. The nuns make cheese which we bought - very tasty. In this fairly small poor town there are five large churches.



Queen's palace



I go back alone to the cloister and by chance meet the same nun again. We walk over to the church.

Inside there is a preacher giving a very enthusiastic talk to a group of 150 teenagers. This ends after about 10 minutes. The nun takes me to the front of the church where the novices are sitting and I take a seat too.

Other nuns start to file in a side door, bow to the alter, cross themselves and take a seat in two pews that face one another. They then start to sing in very quiet voices in 3 or 4 part harmony. Some of the nuns are older and bent and some are young. It is a beautiful sound done perfectly. They do this five times a day, all their lives and have in time adjusted their tones so that they meld perfectly together.

I wish I had a recording to play later.

Karin and I went to have lunch. Here was a guitarist - quite old and shrivelled that sang Mexican, South American and songs from the American West - all in Malagasy. As I write this the tunes are still going through my head. There is so much music in this town. On Sundays there was singing by the congregations and a guitarist showed up for dinner together with a guy playing a bamboo pole with strings; All of it good quality.

We keep on our route south; stopping at a private reserve - Lalatsara. The owner has single-handedly built a log cabin the Norwegian style with 10 bungalows. It's a little primitive - cold showers, one choice at dinner; homemade bread. It seems that all the meal making and cleaning is done by one Malagasy girl (definitely big tip due here). The owner asked us what we would like for dinner. I said we had some emotional



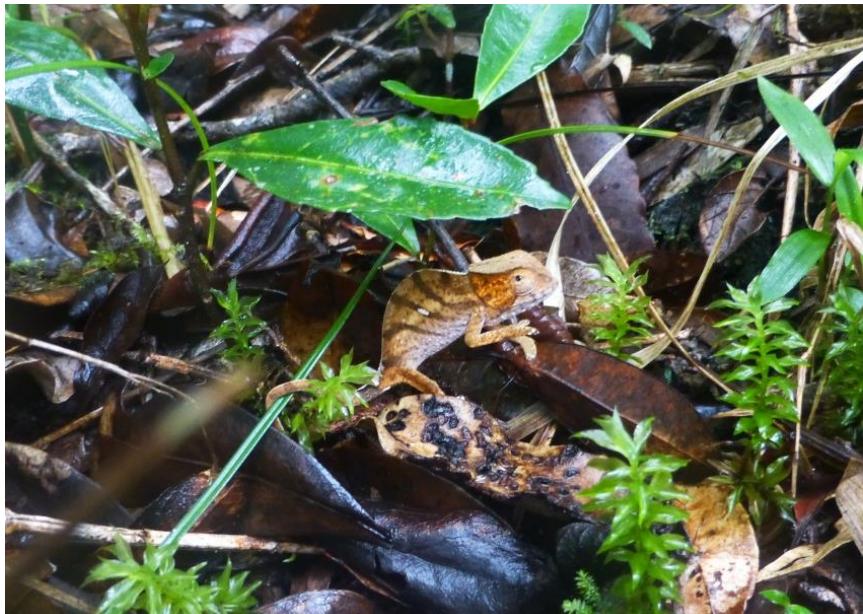
issues. Karin won't eat rabbit because they're bunnies and I felt sorry for the zebus because they pull rocks all their lives and then appear on the menu. So I guess it's chicken and rice for us. We sat up chatting till about 10. The conversation

(in French) is a struggle but quite enjoyable. We were served a dessert of applesauce, pepper and goat's cheese - an invention by the owner. It was pretty hefty stuff. He should probably keep the recipe secret.

We love the dog here who is called Jambé (drum in Malagasy). He follows us around and sleeps under our bungalow. Reminds of a dog I once had named 'Butch'. Not a mean bone in his body.



We went for a four hour hike in the forest and saw some black and white sifakas and grey bamboo lemurs. Also chameleons of different shapes and sizes. The terrain is quite steep requiring holding onto vegetation and carefully planting one foot after another. It is also raining most of the time. The animals make it all worthwhile and as long as you are walking you keep up your heat in these high altitudes.



In the evening we go out at night and smear banana on the trees. The little mouse lemurs are quick to smell this and come scurrying down to eat. There are lots of chameleons - many are babies only a few centimetres in length and then there are the big guys that can reach 65 centimetres

We take showers in the morning by pouring cold water onto our heads. The air is chilly so this takes a lot of will power. We have decided to move up a notch in our next place that has warm water, electricity and some way of drying our clothes. It might also be nice to not eat goat and some kind of bamboo-like vegetable.

After all, we wanted to see lemurs not be lemurs.

I make this sound primitive, and it is, but now I have a bad conscience. The cheese is made by hand from the goats' milk. The jams are homemade. The bread is baked in a wood-fired oven as is all the food. The water for the showers is rain water that is carried to our rooms. The bungalows are made from wood chopped in the forest. The eggs are from the local chickens. All we have to do is bask in the luxury.



Kitchen - Lalatsara

Volana (on the right above) is the Malagasy girl who does all the work.



Uroplatus phantasticus



Serious weaver bird

Ranomafana:

The road here looked like it had been churned by a tank battalion. We kept thinking 'Oh no, this isn't possible.' as we looked at a field of glistening deep rutted mud. Then our car, without wipers and a cracked windshield, would slither and slide its way to dry ground. This went on for mile after mile. Finally beside a torrential river we reached the little town of Ranomafana. It rains here virtually night and day. People just go about their chores - wet. The little shops and restaurants have awnings that shed their sheets of water.

There is a payback. The forest is full of every kind of plant, chameleon, insect, lizard, snake, lemur and frog. Some of the more spectacular were the mating walking sticks and the leaf tailed gecko called *Uroplatus phantasticus*. I mentioned to the guide how much we would like to see this last one. He spread the word around to the other guides. Sure enough it was found. Just a baby, but it represented a rare find. We tramped through the jungle looking behind rotting bark and poking in piles of dead leaves.

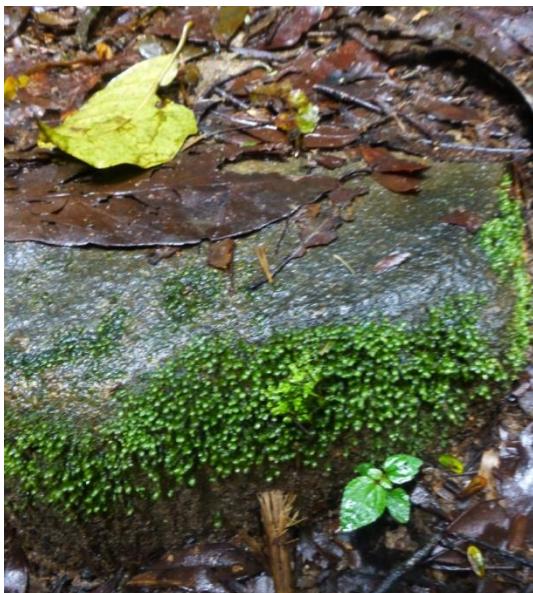


Mushroom – the veiled lady

The rain is OK, but the leeches are not. I told the girl at the entrance to the park that I had a suggestion - they should leave out the leeches. They didn't really enhance the experience. She asked if we were the couple who came the day before. I told her that 'no' that wasn't us. That was a couple of guys - and we were male and female.

You will eventually be able to tell the tourists apart, but it takes practice. I will explain the difference when you are older. Giggle Giggle.

Below – where is the animal?



I am most fascinated by the chameleons. I had a theory as to why they move so slowly and jerkily - that they would look like a moving leaf, and in this way fool a predator - this is especially important when seen from the sky. Our guide, Jose, confirmed this theory almost word for word. This pleased me very much.



There is a cricket here which is 10 cm in length. It jumped onto the arm of the guide. He did not like it being there, but suffered me taking photos.

Conversations with our guide:

Jose, what do you call that lemur with the white bushy eyebrows?

We call that the White Bushy Eye-Browed Lemur.

That's bullshit right?

Yeah. You wear a tie sometimes?

Yes.

In the Malagasy language the sound 'tie' means 'shit'.

What about Thailand?

They've got a problem.



We have met some charming couples - Estelle and Michael and Manuel and Stefan. We all waded to a local restaurant where we had dinner and beers for 18 kroner for all six.

Karin and I tried to speak French, but gradually we slipped into English which Michael did not speak. Fortunately Stefan was amazingly good at simultaneous translation.



Goodbye Ranomafana

Fianarantsoa: On the way here we listened to what sounded like Honolulu music at a large number of decibels. We have watched the singers on TV, singing as they and their leis swing back and forth. After an hour or so one wished that the singer had been born without vocal chords - WANILAGANOUAPANIWANNABANANI or something like that.



Karin and I usually rent a row of seats for ourselves and baggage. Sometimes when the van is full, I feel conspicuously wealthy and the conductor must explain to people sitting on top of one another why we have so much space. I hope if there is a revolution, I am not here because then, at best, I will be condemned to poop and wash my clothes in the same stream while listening to loud Honolulu music. I will try to explain that it was Karin's idea to have so much luggage, but she is a *vehivavy* and afforded respect and I am just a *lehilahy* and am like the male walking stick - a spindly creature of little consequence.

We went for a walk through the broad streets of this town. The beggars - some tiny children - accosted us. I pulled my pants pockets out and spun around. They lost their pleading looks and laughed. I have considered walking like that permanently. The kids are beautiful though. They come up to you with their hands out and they have barely learned to walk. I don't think they can even talk yet. You have a feeling that if you gave some ariary to one child you would be besieged by the entire town -



A 1952 Peugeot 203.

as one Malagasy said - it is a rich country but the people are poor.

Churches of every denomination are everywhere - even the Mormons can be seen in their ties and suits. To be fair the religious groups seem to try to improve the human suffering and are found where conditions are worst; Where are the humane society people? Well ... we are distressed by the condition of the world ... another lattè please.

We walked up to the highest point in the city - cobblestone streets and houses with gables and crenellations - very much a feeling of the 1800's. Near the top we turned and started down. Then out of an alley a man stepped and humbly invited us into his house. Then I noticed further back from the road a sign saying 'gallerie'. He is an artist who does studies of Malagasy in their daily life. His colours are subdued and with much movement in his style – far, far better than the usual stuff that is displayed on the street. He introduced us to his son who was a university student and very adept in English. We bought as much as we could carry. I told him the Norwegian artists were almost all modern and that we had become resigned to the non-figurative art world. He should visit and give us some respite.



Coming down from this high part of town; we noticed a parade of people in colourful outfits. It dawned on us that it was the 8th of March and these were mostly women marching. We rushed down the hill to take some pictures - thinking that it would soon be over. It went on for an hour as group after group of chanting and cheering women went passed. Many had painted faces and costumes. One party had brought their husbands who wore blankets over their shoulders.



Then there was a group who wanted us to join and pulled us in. Then to top it off they had me holding one side of a banner. Karin took pictures of me determinedly fighting for Malagasy women's rights. When we finally left them they were still filing past where we first saw them. I would estimate 10000 and counting.



In case you didn't know: vehivavy= wahine=woman



Karin noticed a poster for a basketball tournament which was going on at just that moment. We enquired and discovered they were playing in a nearby gymnasium. I, of course, was very keen and left Karin in a cyber cafe. On arriving a girls team was just finishing and a mens game was beginning. It started poorly for the Fianar boys and the home crowd was somewhat subdued. Then as we reached the half the Fianar boys began a comeback. This happy turn of events continued and the crowd went wild which, of course, gave the Fianar boys another six inches in height and they ended winning 95 - 82. Both teams played well and intensely throughout. Very impressive talent. The country may be struggling but they know basketball. University teams looking for talent should check out the Madagascar guys - and do a good turn for educating the country.



Coming back to the hotel, a little girl ran up and rubbed the back of my hand. This has happened before. They want to see if the white will rub off.

My big toe was hurting but the very charming Malagasy doctor said it was arthritis and prescribed some pills. This confirmed that my youth was lost - I was considering cancelling it anyway as it was requiring too much energy.

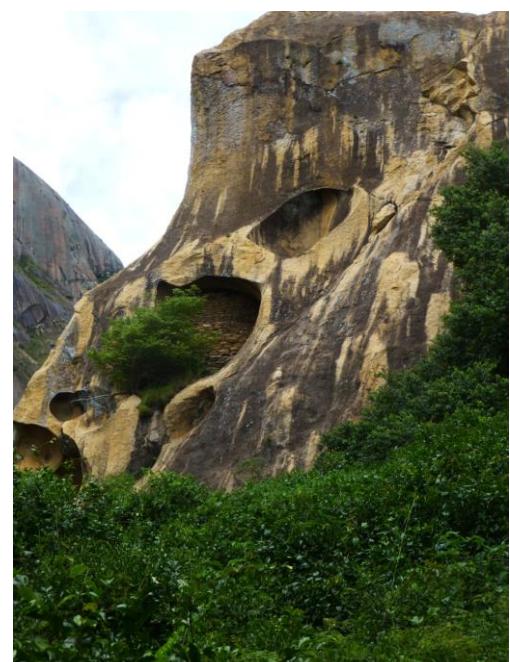
Ambalavao:

The countryside has even bigger boulders. It looks as though giants have been playing dice. We stayed at a place in the country which was built by a retired French couple - an impressive act of will - very modern in primitive surroundings and encircled by lakes, granite masses and delicate rice fields.



They said that when lightning strikes the iron laden rock in the mountains will glow. Apparently lightning strikes often with a number of lives lost. We went hiking in the rocky mountains and found a cave where the lemurs sleep at night, but in the old days humans slept. We had to use ropes up the steeper parts.

We came across a bricked-in tomb. We were told bandits break into the tombs to steal clothes from the dead. I felt sorry for the bandits. But then we heard it was to get the silk which was valuable and could be sold or used on their own dead. Kind of like a second-hand store for bandits.



Bricked-in tomb (behind bush)

After our mountain excursion, we walked about 5 km home. On the way we saw two kids herding some 30 ducklings.

It is common to steal cattle. The gardener had three cows stolen. He alerted the neighbours by blowing on a flute and the village was able to capture the bandits. It is a sign of manhood to steal a cow for your prospective bride. If you get caught you're just a klutz.

On the road again: The countryside has changed to steppes with vast grassy fields stretching to the horizon. Beautiful sandstone formations stick up. it is like New Mexico with water.



Ranohira:

This area was once part of the rift valley when connected to the African continent. Sand filled the ravine and was compacted. After Madagascar broke away completely, there are islands of sandstone which stick up in a sea of grass. These towers of sandstone have all kinds of shapes and protrusions. One looks like Jabba the Hutt from Star Wars. It will swallow anyone who walks by. Then there are two statues with their backs to one another:

"I'm not going to talk to you for 10 million years!"
"Fine by me."

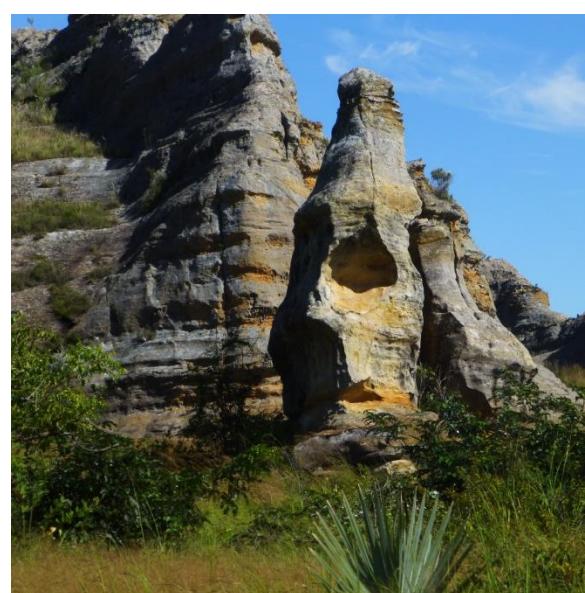
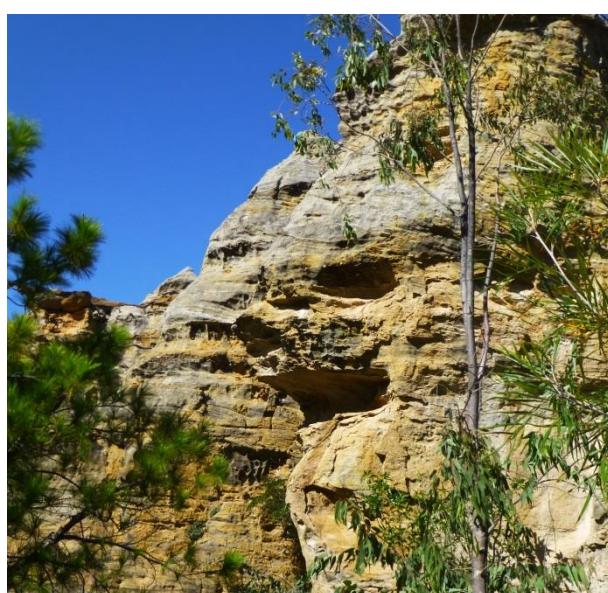
Each day we spend time looking at the birds, butterflies and plants. In dry desert like surroundings there is a spot of jungle with a stream that has a Gauguin like feel.

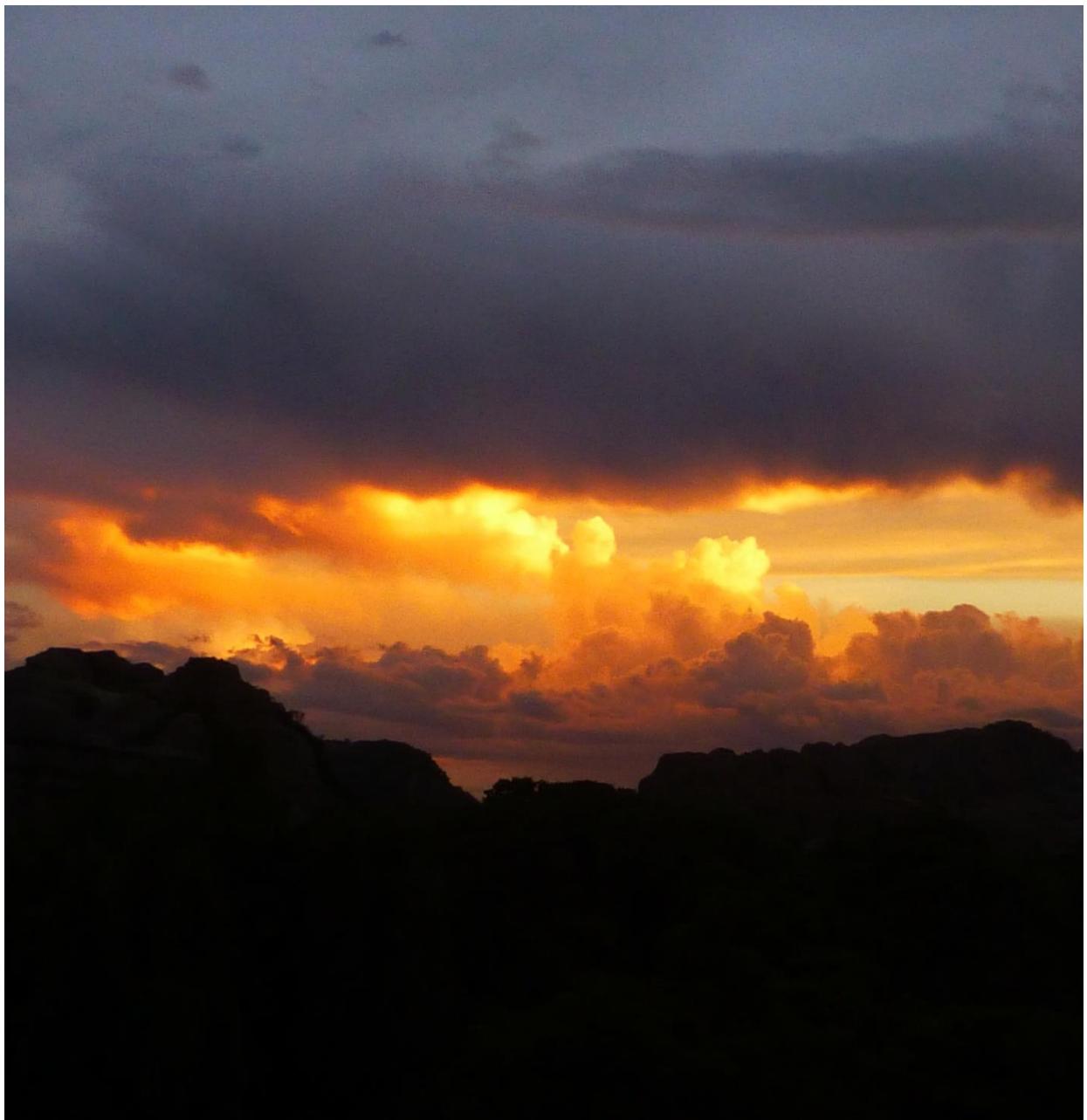
I played some basketball with the staff, but it doesn't feel quite right. When we are finished, they go back to serving the guests and I go back to lying by the pool.

There is a strange succulent that looks like a miniature baobab and grows straight out of the sandstone.



Pachypodia





Tulear: We stayed a day here, but were eager to go south. We spent our time planning the future and getting 'plane and boat tickets. We travelled around town in bicycle rickshaws. The drivers were eager for us to know their names. These were obviously not Malagasy names. So instead of a typical name like Ramahotomaka, it would be Mario or Alex. Next morning we went to the dock to catch a motor boat - being transported by the afore-mentioned Mario and Alex. Their bicycle chains slip a bit but it's mostly downhill and with a little luck we made it. The problem these guys have is that a car taxi costs about 15 kroner and two rickshaws cost about 20 and take much longer. The only reason I use them is its romantic/historic appeal. To base a business on such a concept is fragile at best.

Down at the dock our next mode of transport was zebu cart. It trundled off across a broad tidal plane to water in the distance. When it got to the water it kept going, the water gradually rose on the cart wheels. The zebras don't care - life is miserable anyway. (On the way Karin spotted a huge butterfly flitting across the barren sand.) We eventually arrived at the boat and were loaded aboard.



Forgot to mention that I'd picked up a bug and was in poor condition. Taking this boat trip was a highly risky venture and could end with great humiliation of the explosive variety - I guess I could pretend to fall into the ocean. Fortunately it was an uneventful trip though it was nip and tuck. We eventually landed on the beach at a place called Anakao. I jumped off the boat and hurried up the beach in search of a gentleman's convenience while Karin was left to transport the luggage which she easily did with a Sherpa like train of native bearers.

The next few days were spent recovering. A Malagasy doctor came by and said that it was a 'banal' digestive tract infection. So I put aside my ceremonial funeral plans.

When he prescribed the medicine he pointed to the sky and said 'take one of these pills when the sun is there.' He was obviously used to a different clientele.

I rested a few days with cool bucket showers, good nights sleep and vegetable soup. Gradually life was returning. Speaking of returning: I hope the hoopoes do - they are such colourful birds. There is a couple that have visited us several times. They just arrived now as I was writing. One of them will fly down and prance in front of our bedroom window. Then he will notice his reflection in the glass and rush over and make jabbing motions with his beak, then turn and walk away; glance back, look surprised (raise the feathers on his head), rush back, more twisting and turning and staring down his opponent, fly away, fly back, prance on the window ledge. His mate will wait patiently on the thatch roof. This display will go on for 10 minutes. There is vanity in us all, but the hoopoe takes it to a whole new level.

Next door to us is a less upmarket place for half the price of the swanky place we are at. They also have a young lemur which immediately clung to Karin like his long lost mama. We visited again today and after he got his fill of cuddle he went around inspecting things. He found an octopus in the kitchen and began eating the head. When one of the girls tried to take it away he went bananas and began screaming and jumping. He ended up with a bit of octopus and settled down. So Karin's baby was more wild than we thought. The lemurs name is Kiki!! Lesson: if Kiki ever goes bananas, give her some octopus and she will settle right down.





Kiki



Admit it. You have to use the 'adorable' word.

I have now decided to begin the arduous task of building up my surfer muscles. I use as my model Nono at the surfer shop - to get proper muscle placement. After discussing things with Nono, I decided on a body board which seemed less daunting than an actual surfer board. This was a big mistake! A body board gradually scrapes the skin off your chin, you need to use flippers which are jerky, and you are perilously perched on a slippery surface - think jellyfish. I am having these thoughts when I hear, 'BRUCE BIG ONE COMING IN' from Nono. My board slips out from under me, one flipper comes off and there is a thunderous crash which jerks my swimsuit down to my knees. Then as I cling to my flotsam and jetsam, I watch the wave disappear with Nono's head popping up and down as he does his flips and twirls for 100 meters. I remind you all this is happening 3 kilometers out in the ocean. You can't just swim to the side of the pool to catch a breather.

I try to swim to our boat (a traditional outrigger). I want to get rid of the damn flippers which are one complication too many. After 20 minutes I realize I'm not getting any closer. In fact when I take a breather, I am soon right back in the breakers. After about three double whammies, I ask Nono about the currents. He says - you catch a wave, then the current will pull you back to the boat, turn and effortlessly place you back out to the waves again - surfer paradise - like downhill skiing with a ski lift. I was trying to go down the ski lift. Anyway I tried for 2 hours. The best waves were about 3 metres. Never caught a single one. Nono helped drag my tired carcass over the high sides of the outrigger. I'm not sure how he got in - was it a backflip or forward salto? Which reminds me who we should send here to redeem the family's reputation. Let's say it all together - AKSEL!

Karin and I went snorkelling near an island. On this island is a rare sea bird which is plump, white and has a long red quill sticking out past its tail feathers (the female has two quills - a quill being a feather without the plumage) We saw an eel and some sea urchins the size of basketballs, but I am sorry to say the coral was dying.

I have found a way of getting into the outrigger without assistance by throwing my legs over the gunwales and pulling the rest of me up after - keep this in mind all of you who one day plan to be old. We met a French volunteer who is teaching at an orphanage in Tuléar. She is 65 and quite a lot of fun. During the 70s she was part of the street protesters in Paris. She was too small to throw a cobblestone so she just shook her cobblestone at the police. She kept her cobblestone for many years, but it got lost somewhere along the way. Its symbolism had lost much of its power too I would guess. Now she throws education at the children – it's lighter.

I have had a week of tummy troubles and only manage a tiny bit of swimming each day. If this was a school for athletics, I am in spec. ed. Today though I think I am OK, so I will go look for Nono later.

This is later. Have talked to Nono and he says the only place with waves is outside the barrier reef. The waves are small and should suit a learner. Great. Another Malagasy joins us and we head out in the outrigger. It is about 5 miles out. When we get there Nono points me in one direction while he goes in another where the waves are bigger. I paddle off on my learner board - but real surf board this time. I get in

what I think is the right spot and look behind me. There stretching as far as the eye can see in both directions is a wall of water about 4 meters high. This slams into me like a tsunami. Then come two more just like it.

Too be fair this was not what Nono had intended. These ocean rollers come in a set about once every hour.



Anyway, I am now actually standing on the barrier reef far from boats or waves or anything remotely appealing. The waves are hitting the reef at an angle and there is a current pushing me away. I paddle for half an hour making little progress. Finally I give up and aim for the boat which is about half a kilometre away. I was very thankful I practiced getting into the outrigger. I barely manage to scrape my way on. I watch the two young men easily catch wave after wave, paddling back with great ease. It occurs to me that surfers do not get their muscles from bobbing up and down on their boards in the salt water (as they always seem to be doing) To get to the place where they will actually surf, you have to work tremendously hard.

After an hour the guys were satisfied and we headed back. I humbly joined Karin and she put bandages on my coral cut feet. My arthritis began to blossom up and I limped to dinner.

Nono came by this morning to tell me the surf was up. I quickly wolfed down some pineapple and toast and we set off in the outrigger. We continued out to the barrier reef and the waves looked good. Nono anchored the boat far off, but I decided to put

out my best effort even though my paddling technique was excruciatingly slow. I flailed away, but this time Nono came from behind giving me push after push. We got out to the waves. He said, 'Rest, grab on to the board, don't let go.' Then with the right wave he gave a push. The board took off. You don't realize how fast a wave goes. The wind was sailing through my hair and the water pulled at my grip on the board. For 50 meters it raced at a hellish pace. Victory.

I paddled happily back, but it was taking time. Nono swam over and crawled onto my legs and with his powerful arms paddled me and the board back in no time. He gave me another push on the next wave and again I was sailing. I got to my knees, the board wobbling like crazy.

Same procedure on the next wave. After 50 meters, I was on my knees. Then another wave came from behind, and I got to my hands and feet - looking like what? - a dog? Another 50 meters along and I stood up. I was surfing. For 1 second.

The road back to the waves was long and just as I reached our starting point a series of deep sea rollers came in, grabbed me and the board and threw us. The keel of the surfboard hit the back of my arm. Big OW! End of surfing.
It was a triumph. A big triumph for me - a small triumph for mankind.

I look at my arm as I write this. It is swollen and black and blue, but it was worth it.

I realize now that to manage the surfing requires strong arms – both to paddle and get a start.

On the way back to Tulear, we were at one point parallel to the motion of the waves. We were traveling at about 30 km/hr and we were only going a little faster than the waves. This gives an idea of the speed when surfing.

Once in Tulear we planned to visit the orphanage where our French friend (Beatrice) worked. One of the boys had a bad infection on his penis. He had an angelic face and no pants. The children often have unusual names like Excellence, Turbo and Bonhomme. We had brought with us



rope for jump ropes, a football and a basketball. When we got there I joined the kids and we did layups and then free throws. Immediately there were lots of participants. Then I got together with the janitor and made jump ropes from the 100 meters I had brought. Afterwards the kids sang for us. The school is very good quality. Maybe this is a destination for the future.

In the evening we joined Beatrice at an Italian restaurant. She is very amusing to be with and obviously enjoyed our company. It can be a bit lonely in a hot dusty outpost.

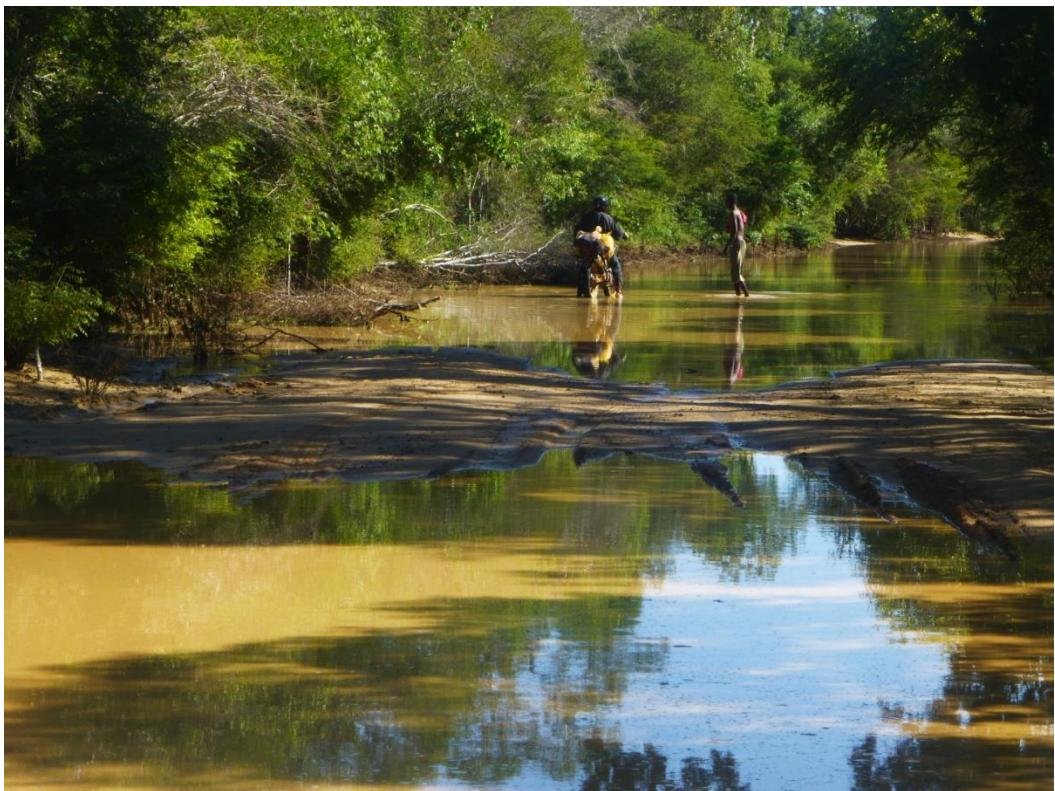
We fly Air Madagascar tomorrow to a town called Morondava. The plane is traveling all over the country. It is actually traveling 6 times the distance we want to go.

At the airport we met an English surgeon, Ian McCall, and Swiss Rebecca who both work on a Mercy ship (travelling hospital ship). Ian told us we can get in touch with him at the 'house' – House of Lords. Many years ago, Ian had been in Malawi and treated Hastings Banda. He also supplied him with a hearing aid. This unfortunately allowed Banda to hear all the bad things people said about him. Not the best idea.



At 5 am we set off for Kirindy which is north of Morondava. The road is good, then dirt, then bad. Very bad. The water at times is running over the top of the hood of our 4x4. At one point the driver gets out and wades around trying to find the most shallow route. At other times we have nice dry sand. It was on one of the sandy stretches that we saw the Giant Madagascar Hognose Snake. We reversed for about 20 yards, and

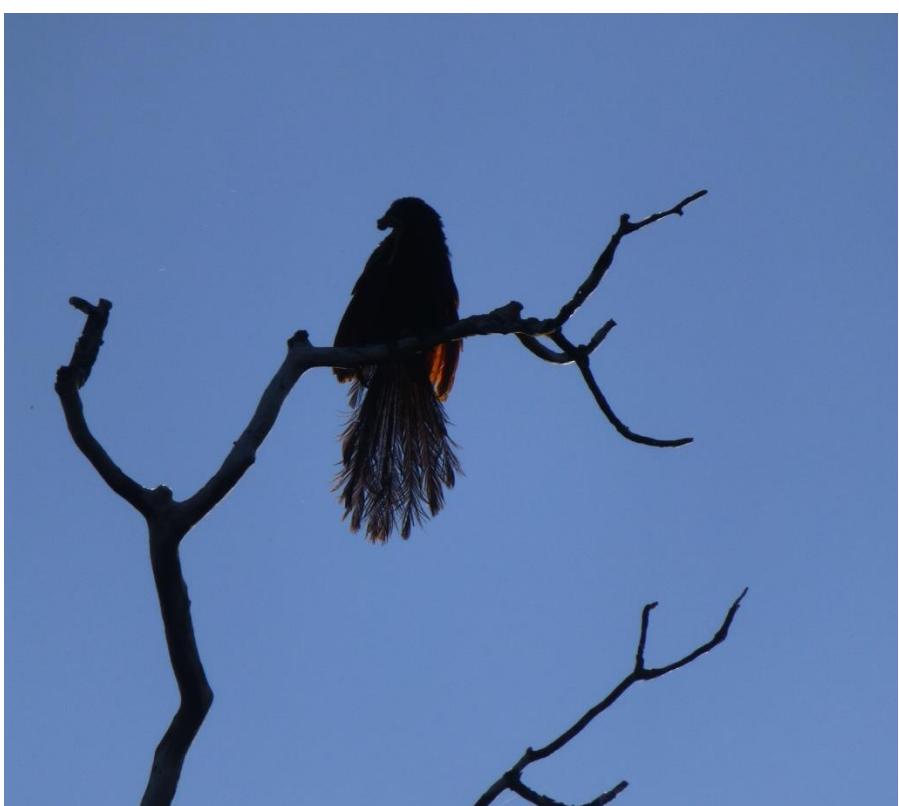
I ran around with the camera. It had by this time wriggled part way into the bush. It is slate grey on the upper side and checkerboard patterned on the side – fat as a baseball bat and 1½ meters long.



The road to Kirindy

Then we continued for a while, but the engine began smoking and screeching. So the driver got out his wrenches. Just then a coucal, the size of a rooster, flew to a tree nearby and spread out its tail feathers.

Car fixed we moved on.



I should have mentioned the Allée de Baobabs – a story that can only be told with pictures. They don't look real, but that's the way they are.





Eventually we made it to Kirindy and Karin and I immediately began looking around. We walked down a narrow dirt road. Here we saw a sunbird getting nectar from a baobab flower (which looks a little like a yellow shaving brush), then a blue coua, blue water lilies and last the black parrot which is one of the few birds with a penis (most birds have cloacal openings that are pressed together during intercourse).





Iguana

On returning we met David, a Canadian from Toronto, of Chinese extraction. Cool guy who told us lots of things about the Chinese which are not in any tourist brochure: They never talk about sex, no Chinese male is circumcised, the word for Africa is the same as the word for 'wrong', the word for foreigner is 'barbarian', Chinese will eat anything – including leeches. A very pleasant, soft-spoken guy who everyone liked.

Red fronted brown lemurs visited our bungalow. Everywhere are skinks and iguanas.



On the night walk with our guide Silvio we saw a fat tailed dwarf lemur, a forked lemur which emitted great shrieks of pleasure after we left them – ‘they’re mating’ said the guide, also a sweet little mouse lemur which obligingly posed for pictures. More spectacularly we saw a scorpion gecko (*Paroedura maingoka*). It curls its tail to resemble a scorpion. Karin spotted what appeared to be the drawing of a large spider on the trunk of a tree. It, of course, turned out to be a very, very flat spider.

We’ve spoken with a German researcher (Falk) who studies chameleons. He demonstrated how they turn black when angry and green when content. At night they suck in all their melanin to the inside and turn very pale. It is apparently a hard life being a chameleon. They are deaf, have a poor immune system, are easily infected by nematodes and other parasites. They have a difficult time getting enough nutrition and when dissected don’t seem to have any fat stores. The males are very aggressive and have violent battles that end in death. Falk measures the stress hormones (testosterone, corticosterone) in the blood and finds these quite high. The leukocyte ratios are also used as an indication of stress.

All of this came as an eye opener because one thinks that chameleons in the wild have adapted to their environment



and are quite happily eating the occasional fly, but actually they have a lot to deal with.

On the plus side they have pantograph-like ribs that allow them to increase their height. They also have lungs along the length of their bodies which will soften the blow when they fall out of the trees. They produce enormous quantities of eggs which can weigh as much as half their body weight.



At night chameleons turn pale

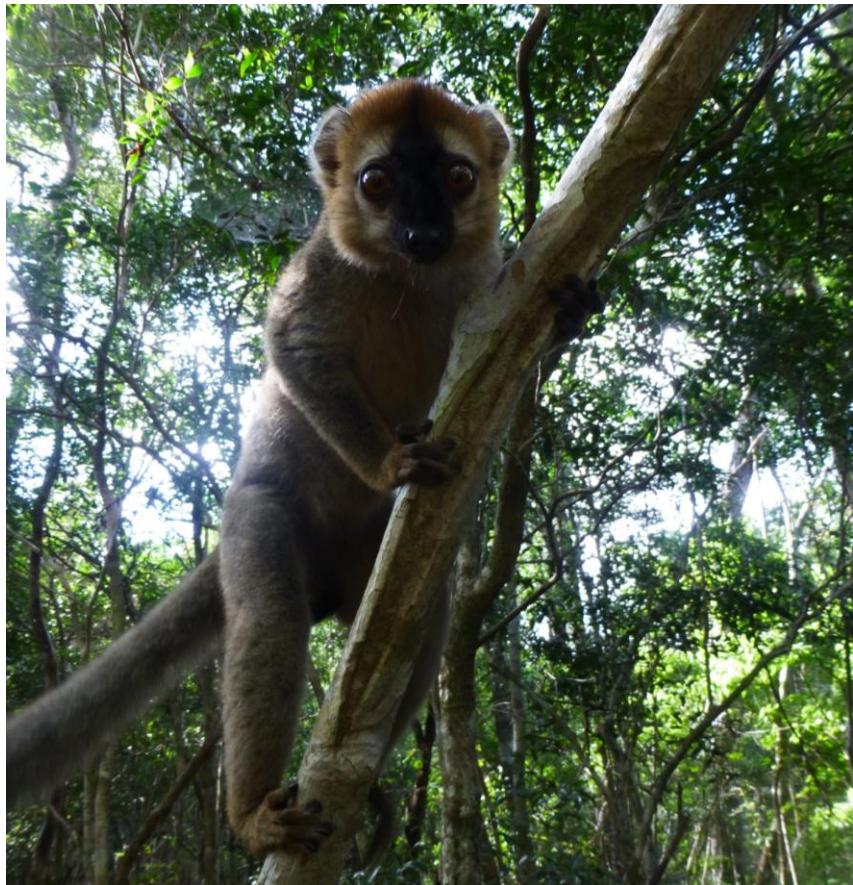


A French couple with two small children have arrived by oxcart (Alexandre, Sonia Poussin with Ulysse and Philaé). Alexandre built the cart himself. They have been traveling for 5 months cross country from Antananarivo to here. They all look very healthy and the children are two happy kids. It is hard to imagine how they manage –

crossing swollen rivers in the rainy season, finding food and finding paths across undeveloped territory, keeping up schooling and taking care of the oxen - bâbord and tribord (port and starboard).

Today: sparrow hawk, giant coua, red tailed sportive lemur, paradise flycatcher, red fronted brown lemur (picture) that came very close to stare at us from only a few feet, strange beetle, strange caterpillar, strange leafy plant that grows flat on the ground.

Our guide tells us that he has never seen lemur bones. The local people say that they bury their dead. He says that the sifaka can live 25 years, but that they gradually go blind and will eventually die by falling short of a limb they are leaping to.



Last night we went looking for Madame Berthe's mouse lemur – the smallest primate in the world and discovered, of course, by Madame Berthe. We saw some very small mouse lemurs but not the smallest which weighs only 25 grams. Their habitat is the area of forest that is thick with vines. After several hours of looking, we had to give up. It is impressive that we humans and these tiny creatures are both primates with so many similarities.

We have been itching at night and not getting a sound sleep. We thought that there might be some chemical in the mattress. We added several sheets and this solved the problem. One of the staff explained that it is caused by the caterpillar of a moth that drops tiny hairs on the bed and induces itching.

Kirindy is a lively place with interesting and affable guests. Unfortunately the staff enjoy watching a loud flashing television in the evening which makes conversation difficult. This is often the case in Madagascar and is never welcomed by foreign guests.



Walking through the forest today we talked about the culture of Madagascar. Our guide thinks that 80% of the Malagasy do not like the French. They learn French in school, but they are resentful because the French are disdainful of the Malagasy culture.



The guide also told us that when a new president is elected the old one often refuses to leave. The population then goes on strike to force him out.

We left Kirindy Park and headed back toward Monrondava. The roads were still muddy, but the lakes we had to cross were not as deep this time. We caught up with the Poussin family and their covered wagon. After chatting some, we took some photos. They plan to continue traveling for three years – eventually writing of their adventures in book form.

We continued along and passed a dark and ancient baobab that the driver told us was 750 years old. Then suddenly there was a cracking sound underneath the car. The driver reached under and pulled out the drive shaft. That seemed a bit serious. He then put the car in 4 wheel drive so that the chain to the front wheels could still move the car. We passed through the Allée des Baobabs again, this time at sunset, and continued on to Morondava. The car was making greater rattling sounds. We reached the town going about 20 km/hr. We switched to a taxi and left the poor driver to deal with his dying vehicle.

At 6 am we get into an outrigger and head out to sea on our way to Belo Sur Mer. We've cut our baggage down to a minimum because everything may get wet. The sea is not rough. Pretty soon we are actually in a daze as the boat rocks gently. I don't think much at all except for occasional words like 'there's a boat' or 'there's a seagull'.

I see on the pontoon of the outrigger the words 'Dieu nous a tout donné' written in pink. That's not entirely true, I paid for the gas. So to be fair – 'Bruce and Dieu'. I won't belabour the point.

We made good time. We passed an old boat with a very ragged sail. Only about 2/3 of the cloth remained and the rest was ragged holes. On the back was a big motor that was chugging along rhythmically. Gas is very expensive. Given the condition of



the sail it was clear they had no money. Therefore it must be an engine running on woodchips or fish bones or chicken feathers.

Belo sur Mer is a gathering of thatched huts. The livelihood of the town is the building of wooden boats which are roughly the size of a bus (gaff

rigged ketch called a Boutre) Walking along the beach in the evening we heard someone playing a homemade banjo in the workmen's huts.

At low tide the shore increases by several hundred meters. High tide is some 4 meters higher. If you anchor up at this time you may find your boat lying on its side in the morning.

The owner of our place is Laurence. She has been in operation for a couple of years. The food she makes is terrific. It cannot be easy managing financially because the transportation costs are more than the cost of staying there. She says that the Poussin family will be coming there to take a break from their zebu cart.



Boutre



We went about 10 km out in the outrigger to an island passing dolphins on the way. There is a lot of fish as the gulls are diving in swarms. The boatman cut the motor

and coasted through the swarm and the water around us boiled with big fish. We continued out to the island where we snorkelled while one of the helpers spear fished for our evening meal. The coral was nice but you must choose the spot and tide right to get a good experience. We brought back a lot of beautifully coloured fish for dinner.

Laurence is a published author of Novels (Laurence Ink) We bought one of her novels, 'Chant de Corail et d'Argent'. It is in French. I read some in the evening. Next day I asked her how it is a person can have two shadows as mentioned in the book. She said that in Malagasy folklore the soul can become disconnected from the body and will run behind trying to catch up – casting a shadow.

We took a sailing pirogue down the coast to the mouth of a river and then up the river to where there were many 'boutre' boats. It all seemed quite festive with pennants flying from their masts. About 3 km inland there are salt flats and the harvested salt is collected and transported to the boats. The sailors seemed a bit surly and rough and were lounging about – some with just underpants on.

I went to the loading dock and took some pictures of two sailors who were whittling model boats. Some women were rowed ashore who were coming from the salt boats. I believe they had been sweeping salt off the deck and other part time employment.

I have been practicing French. In French you can ask someone if you should use the informal 'you' form. It is probably getting old fashioned just like in Norway. For fun I asked Laurence's husband, if we should use the informal 'you'. – only I mixed up



tutoyer with netoyer. So I ended up asking if we should wash one another. It seemed in the progression of intimacy – going from formal ‘you’ to informal ‘you’ to washing one another, I had been too precipitous and leapt over one step. Alain seemed perplexed ‘Je ne comprends rien’. Laurence straightened it out and we hurriedly poured another rhum arrangé and studied the peanuts.

Later when we were staying in Morondava on the banks of a river, a parade of the salt boats came by in the evening being poled up river for unloading.

Back in Morondava we saw the Poussins once again. They will be crossing the river with plastic fuel containers filled with air on the oxcart and continuing to Belo sur Mer. They will then load the oxcart on to a boat named the Nofy Be (The big dream) and owned by a Laetitia – a sprightly Italian woman. They will sail south to Andavadoaka – it will add another experience to their wild Madagascar trip. Tribord and Bâbord will be transported in a boat with one of those Chinese engines running on, what was it again, peanut shells and zebu dung?



Laetitia's boat

We are now awaiting to hear from a driver who may be heading back to Tana with an empty car – this happens when tourists decide to fly back and leave their car behind. That opens the door for others who would like a plush ride back. The other option is the taxi-brousse with 20 other people and pee stops in the bushes and a much longer journey. It ended up being the taxi-brousse, but we simply bought all 14 seats. We started off at 5 in the morning and arrived at 7:30 pm in Tana – 14 ½ hours.

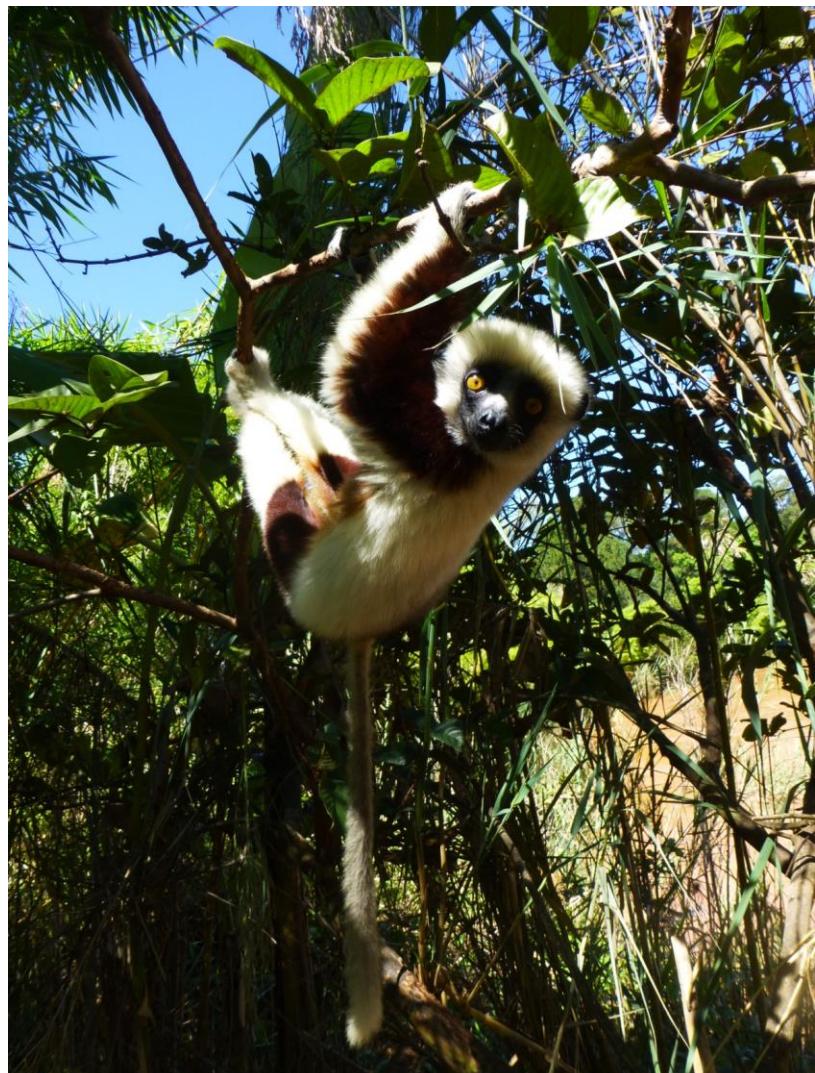
We were driving through a market in Tana when a boy stuck his hand in the window as if begging, but instead grabbed one of our raincoats. An old woman immediately stuck her hand in the window blocking our pursuit – an obvious accomplice. We didn't mind too much since our jungle trips are over, but the driver (Harvet) was quite upset because he feels responsible.

In Tana we live with a Malagasy family Harifidy (Harif) and Fanoa. They have a verdant oasis in the middle of Tana with 3 daughters. They also have a swimming pool with ice cold water. Just now I am sitting in the living room. Everyone appears busy – including Karin. I am hoping for a rhum arrangé as an aperitif. On the living room wall are many carved and empty frames. Curious. I think the philosophy must be – why ruin a good frame by stuffing art inside. I begin to think that artists are a bit like zebus – they spend their whole life trying to please people, but in the end one is on the menu and the other faces an empty frame – ‘...sound and fury signifying nothing’. The sound and fury can be quite exhilarating though.

Back in Mauritius: Just one week left of our little adventure.

My short history of Mauritius needs an addendum. It was the Dutch who first colonized the island. They killed off the dodo, cut down all the trees, got malaria and left. Then the French came with some

excellent governors. I mentioned the idea that the French won the war with the English even though losing the naval battles because today the island speaks French and eats runny omelettes. But actually the French didn't win either. 70% of the island is Indian. They were transported here to manage the English sugar cane plantations. Today they are the rulers and they never fired a shot. Mauritius does drive on the left



Sifaka in park near Antananarivo

side of the road, but that is a fairly hollow victory for Her Majesty. Sugar cane was harvested by the African slaves who represent a little over 20% of the population. Apparently Indians make very poor slaves. When commanded to cut sugar cane, an

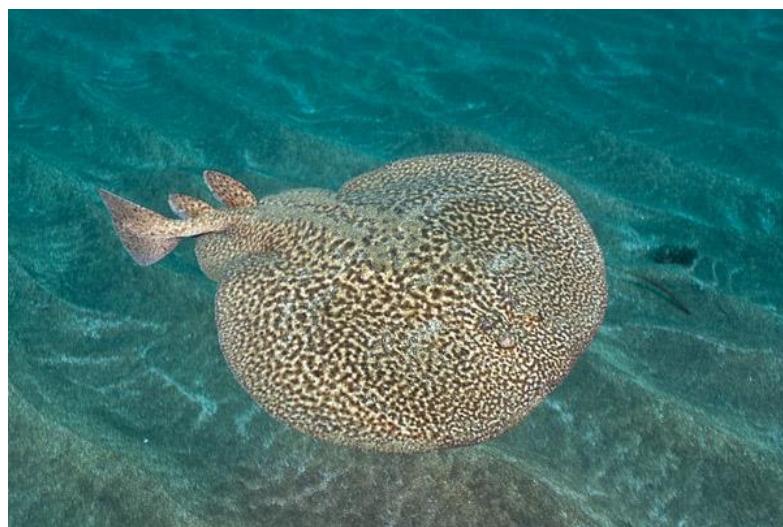
Indian would say – I'm sorry, sir, the sun is quite hot and it is Shiva's birthday and, by the way, your whip seems a bit frayed and I know an excellent place to get it mended.

So at the end of the day it seems the Indians have the more evolutionarily successful strategy. Besides their rather affable nature they are very helpful to one another.

Last day: getting in one more swim in the ocean. As a special treat I saw a big black Moray eel with white dots. It was the biggest fish I've seen here – about a meter long and about six inches in height. In addition I stepped on a marbled electric ray which swam elegantly away. A great goodbye.



Mauritius - Observe boulder on top!



And with that,

Goodbye from B&K