

MADAGASCAR

Officially known as the Malagasy Republic, most of Madagascar's population is descended from Malay and Polynesian immigrants. It was first inhabited by Indonesian seafarers from Makassar in Sulawesi around the first century AD, followed by Arab traders. In the 1500s, it was discovered by the Portuguese when searching for a port of call on the spice route to India. Cardinal Richelieu ordered it taken over by France in 1642 and created Fort Dauphin. It was a French colony until 1960. The world's fourth largest island, 90% of its plant and animal life is found nowhere else on earth.

Antananarivo

I was encouraged to visit **Madagascar** by a well-travelled friend who had been there some years previously. He assured me that I should have no trouble with the language (it was French-speaking), advised travelling by train, and recommended three outstanding sights: the Royal Palace, the Zoo, and the Zoma Market, at one time the world's second largest. On arrival, I not only had difficulty with my minimal French, but learned that the rail system no longer existed, the Royal Palace had burnt down, the market closed some years previously, and whilst it still existed, I found the zoo to be in a deplorable state! Notwithstanding, I enjoyed the capital, **Antananarivo**, also called The City of the Thousand Warriors and known locally as Tana.

On the flight from Johannesburg, which was mainly full of locals, I had been chatting with an American girl; I am always interested in the reasons why people visit remote destinations. She informed me that she was going with the sole purpose of seeing the West Coast, an area that the country had only recently began to promote, and a tour of which she had researched and booked on the internet. It sounded fascinating, but was costing her an incredible price: in the vicinity of US\$7000 for less than two weeks. I decided then that it was not for me!

Each new destination operates differently and it normally takes a couple of days to get the feel of a place. After the usual hassles at the airport, I was approached by a young man who offered me a ride to the city. Usually this is a 'no-no', but on this occasion, because he spoke English, I decided to take the risk, and it turned out to be a very fortunate move. I inquired about the cost of a taxi from the 'help' desk (what a misnomer!) and found his rate reasonable. Because he had a phone card he rang a hotel that I had made a note of from an old edition of Lonely Planet (borrowed on the plane), and also assisted me to change

money at a favourable rate. He transferred me to my accommodation, and thereafter, whenever we met on the street, there was always a friendly greeting and helpful advice if requested. He even came to meet me at the hotel on two or three occasions, with never a hint at payment.

The hotel was not central, but then nothing was far in Tana. It was about a ten-minute walk to the downtown area and close to a market, which I was told to avoid. However, at no time did I feel really threatened in Madagascar; in fact, the one outstanding impression was the friendliness of the people in that still untouched tourist destination. Sadly, I fear this will have changed. I was also agreeably surprised by the willingness (even joy) they showed in having photographs taken, even breastfeeding mothers, who were proud of their infants. At the bottom of my street, near the market, I came across an old woman asleep amid a pyramid of used paint cans, multihued with the various colours of paint which had run down the sides. It made a fascinating picture, but as I took a photograph, she was awakened by onlookers. I anticipated an angry response; however, she beamed from ear to ear and laughed with me. It was delightful! The market was the usual clutter of people and produce: a man trundled a cart full of wooden furniture, and sausages hung near stacked loaves of bread, clothing, vegetables, and cane baskets holding hens, geese and turkeys.

That evening, in the bar, I met up with a young Belgian backpacker who was enquiring from a local guide about the same trip to the West Coast mentioned earlier. The asking price was considerably less than I had heard on the aircraft, but still very expensive: Fmg3,000,000 (about AUD1,600) for nine days. This time I expressed interest because I realized that I was not going to achieve my original goals travelling by road, most being amongst the worst that I had ever encountered. I told her that if she managed to negotiate a more realistic price I would consider it.

There is very little to add about my time in the capital; I did a great deal on foot, which is my usual mode of transport! Walking distance from the centre, the ruins of the **Royal Palace** overlooked lovely **Lake Anosy** (favoured by many birds) and a large imposing WW1 memorial erected by the French on an islet in the middle. The lake was ringed by an avenue of gorgeous Jacaranda trees, which were in full bloom. Between vacant symmetrical towers of the ancient palace, an enormous metal bird, its wings outstretched, crowned remains of a parapet. I found an impressive cathedral, and although there was no longer a rail system, there was still a huge commanding central railway station!

One interesting feature of the **Zoological and Botanical Garden of Tsimbazaza** was the display of reconstructed tombs from an area of the island that I did not have time to visit. These were topped with animal horns, totems, and carved wooden effigies of people – including women with excessively large breasts – birds and animals. This was part of the **Musée d'Académie Malgache** located in the zoological grounds, and there was also a comprehensive collection of reproduced thatched wooden housing from

various parts of the island, some with intricately carved decoration like that created using a spirograph. It was also the only place that I saw ringtail lemurs, which along with the black-faced white sifaka and tiny mouse lemur, their large bulging round eyes dominating their small faces, were my favourite. A black and white variety made a raucous noise. On a grassy bank equipped with climbing apparatus and surrounded by a lily-covered pond, the lemur enclosure appeared quite reasonable. I photographed a couple of exotic birds: one like a goose with a large protuberance on its bill, the second rust-coloured with brilliant iridescent feathers on its head and a long curved beak. The only other creature that I filmed was a large tortoise. An exceedingly spiky plant was deceptively covered with beautiful deep pink blossom, banana plants lined a small lake covered with blue water lilies, and there was a view of the palace from here.

Isolated large stone gateways were another interesting feature that I encountered in different locations around the city. Huge boulders once used to roll across the entrance still stood at the side, although in one case covered with graffiti – seemingly a universal problem. Chickens roamed a flagged street; I photographed an imposing edifice with four corner towers and a central dome, and came across small local markets selling items such as bread, fruits and grains from ramshackle tin-roofed wooden stalls. Other goods were displayed on tables, and a man was washing the feet of a child in a street well. A colourful group was having an enjoyable time energetically gyrating to a fiddle, accordions, guitar and drums; they executed some *very* sexy dance movements! I came to a large church with a very plain interior but obtained a wonderful overview of the city from nearby.

When finally ready to set off on my tour of the island, I took a taxi with my ‘friend’ to where he found me the appropriate vehicle for my destination; I would never have managed alone because the hustle and bustle of the huge, noisy and chaotic bus station was totally intimidating! As is usual with this type of conveyance, it was always necessary to wait, sometimes up to an hour or more, until they enticed enough passengers to depart; this was achieved by much bellowing of the destination, thus contributing to the general cacophony. Here, I think it timely to mention the transport in Madagascar. Around the capital, making an interesting collection of pictures, were many small cars similar to a fiat in all colours of the rainbow, one even with a comical duck painted on the side. For long distances, the most convenient form of travel was the *taxi brousse* or share taxi. These came in various stages of disrepair, mostly without door handles, windows which opened (or closed), or even solid flooring! In most cases I was ‘privileged’ to have the front bucket seat, which was only sold to *two* passengers at a time. On one occasion, I was obliged to sit with an obese woman who effectively squashed me for the entire journey. On another, as we were negotiating a precipitous winding mountain road, the accelerator pedal fell off. The driver attempted, to no avail, to tie it back on with a piece of string! I have no knowledge of the mechanics of a car, but following that unsuccessful exercise he connected the string to something appropriate within the engine

and proceeded to drive with one hand on the steering wheel and the other pulling the string. When the motor attained enough revolutions, he dropped the string, quickly changed gear, and grabbed the string again before the revs dropped! We proceeded for some kilometres in this fashion until reaching a comparatively flat straight stretch where all the passengers (numbering 24 in a 12-seater vehicle) disembarked to sit on the road verge. Nobody complained because it was such a frequent occurrence. In fact, when I tried to indicate that I would hitch a ride, I was assured by the only English words amongst the group 'No big problem'. Eventually, a colleague stopped to assist (they all helped each other), and together they managed to secure the pedal to the steering column (and elsewhere) with wire. It worked, and I suppose the car travelled another 100,000 kilometres like that!

Another form of conveyance was the ubiquitous *pousse-pousse* or rickshaw. Together with my considerable luggage – 30kg, which included a tent, sleeping bag and mattress – I engaged one of these to a bus station. The 'boy' ran all the way, a considerable distance and some uphill, all the time turning his head in an attempt to converse with me in fragmentary English. I was exhausted just from watching his efforts, but on reaching our destination his breathing was not even laboured!

The lowest form of transport was the *zebu* (cattle) cart; diabolically uncomfortable, it was an experience to be described later.

Antsirabe and Betafo

*M*y first stop was the town of **Antsirabe**. Here, having limited time, I decided to hire a car and driver to visit the village of Betafo. Scenically, it was a beautiful drive: forested mountains, valleys carpeted with the green of cereal crops, and water. As always, there were the usual scenes of pounding grain and washing in rivers, the clothes draped over embankments to dry. People were squatting with goods, which included eggs, placed on trays for sale, and two bemused children stood beside a cart loaded with burnt wood for the purpose of making charcoal. The car climbed some distance up a hillside affording lovely views of a village nestled in the valley below, eventually arriving at a brilliant blue crater lake almost encompassed by sheer white cliffs. We passed many colourfully decorated bullock carts and a small red brick church. Houses in this area were two-storey whitewashed adobe structures with thatched roofs, the upper floors accessed by rustic ladders. I filmed a mother and child waving from their doorway atop one of these ladders, and cattle in a rough log corral. I stopped to watch the thatching process a couple of times and photographed a family group seated on the ground, with chickens scratching in the dirt, a cow under a crude shelter, and a cart nearby. A major industry in the countryside, and also an interesting diversion to

watch, was the making of bricks and tiles by hand, which were fired in large smoking mounds of earth or stone. We passed several stone structures with crosses on top, which were probably mausoleums. One family living under a makeshift shelter had several piglets, and the woman was cooking in a blackened pot over an open fire. I saw a number of cows, and people walked along the roadside with loads upon their heads.

Whilst not outstanding, the village of **Betafo** had some interesting stones with carved inscriptions, and I managed to film some wonderful market scenes. I watched women laboriously shredding carrots and stacking the strips in piles for sale, a vendor measuring some dried product into a customer's bag with a tin can, and women peeling potatoes, slicing beans, and chopping sugarcane into pieces with a cleaver. A butcher sharpened his knife on a steel rod, one family sat on the pavement to eat their meal, and everyone smiled happily for the camera. There were many items that I did not recognize, but charcoal was a common commodity, and rush baskets and brooms were on offer amongst the usual vegetables, sacks of grain and breads. Women were cooking delicious-looking snacks over braziers (charcoal fires in tins), but I did not have the confidence that I once had in my constitution, so declined to try any! Unfortunately, I was ill more often in Madagascar than on any previous trip. Twice it was entirely my own fault, because although eating in recommended 'good' restaurants, I forgot that the steak I consumed came from the same street market as that bought in any other establishment. Madagascar produced extremely tender succulent meat and it was a temptation to enjoy it prepared as I usually order it: very, very rare or 'blue'. Here also was a huge church with symmetrical towers, and in the vicinity we came to a lovely wide waterfall, terraced fields with a solitary cow, and naked children playing excitedly in the river. Standing in the water, women were scooping with baskets – possibly a method of fishing. Large black-and-white butterflies flitted over a mass of purple blossom, and rows of colourful *pousse-pousse* made a good picture. We were forced to make a detour around an area where the road had collapsed into a gaping hole, but I have forgotten the cause. On the return journey, shortly after sunset, we walked through a town where various hot foods were being prepared and sold in the street.

It was on this trip that, fortuitously, I met up again with the young backpacker that I had spoken to in Tana. On inquiring if she had found a suitable tour to the west coast, I was informed that they (a group of six) were leaving at three o'clock that very afternoon – in less than two hours time! I was given a card and told of their departure point where, on my return to Antsirabe, I contacted the guide. Because they were then leaving almost immediately, he offered me an exceptional deal cost-wise: approximately \$200 plus a pair of jeans! The others were still paying around Fmg2,000,000 (over \$1,000), so this was too good to turn down. I ran back to my accommodation, packed, and hastily checked out. I had left my own tent and

camping gear at the hotel in Tana but was assured that they had enough. And so we set out on what was to involve the most terrifying experience of my entire life!

River trip

The trip included three days navigating a chocolate-brown river in *piroques* (dugout canoes) poled by two boatmen and camping at night on sandbanks. One of the boat boys, whose age we ascertained to be about 14, had a mouth full of very large, very white teeth and a most infectious smile. He insisted on calling me 'mama' and was very solicitous of my welfare. We passed a lot of cattle on the riverbanks, local craft being poled or paddled, one brightly coloured motorised ferry, and many small communities with small plots of maize, where we occasionally stopped for a visit. At one such village, an infant with large wistful brown eyes was cradled in a shawl on its mother's back, and a lad was playing a tinny flute as we floated by. Mostly just drifting in good weather conditions, it was wonderfully serene, except for one stage when we walked a short distance whilst our guides shot the rapids. This was very exciting to watch, but I was glad to be out of the *piroque* – although concerned for my luggage!

It was here that we saw the pure white sifaka climbing and leaping from tree to tree; it was truly amazing to watch them in their natural habitat. Initially, the banks displayed lush greenery that included bamboo and palm trees; water hyacinth made a show, and there was prolific birdlife – I recognised egrets, blue heron and brilliant blue kingfishers. Others included a beautiful crimson-coloured variety. There was also a profusion of bats clinging high on a cliff face, scrambling over each other, flapping wings, and making a diabolical noise, and of course we saw crocodiles. We did not find many chameleons but had a thrill when we observed one swimming near our canoe and the boatman scooped it in on his paddle. I am sure it was against the rules, but it did not seem distressed, and it was a great surprise to touch; whilst they were spiny, scaly and rough-looking, it proved to be extremely soft – almost like silk! That first evening we were ferried lazily into the rosy glow of a subtle sunset lighting and colouring the surface of the water.

On the second day, we negotiated our way past rocky cliffs with stepped shelves and hiked up a small canyon, where we encountered brown lemurs, to a picturesque waterfall. It was narrow but quite high and cascaded into a shallow pool. Although not deep enough for swimming, the volume of water was sufficient to provide ablutions for people who had not bathed for a few days! Some of our party returned to the gorge entrance to organize lunch, leaving myself, the Belgian girl (whose name was Heidi), a Belgian boy, a Kiwi lad (Tom), our guide and his young helper.

Shortly after, it began to rain: a heavy tropical downpour. Fortunately, Heidi had a waterproof bag in which she was able to fit my video camera. Because it was quite warm we were enjoying the moment and, paying little heed to our surroundings, were unaware of imminent danger. Prancing around and repeating the refrain of *Singing in the Rain*, none of us heard anything out of the ordinary, but something must have prompted Heidi to look up and she let out a very expressive expletive! I glanced around just in time to glimpse a veritable wall or mountain of water suddenly looming over the top of the fall. There was immediate panic and the cry ‘Run, run’, which I knew was impossible because I had required assistance to climb up the rocks in the first place! Then came the command to ‘Climb, quickly’, which was equally impossible for me, so the two boys between them, one from above and one behind, managed to literally haul and shove me onto a ledge just large enough to hold the three of us. Two stayed just below, and we remained that way for a considerable length of time, the thunderous roar of millions of litres of water crashing onto the rocks around us and tumbling and churning through the chasm as we periodically debated whether the level was receding at all. I do not think I have ever been more terrified and could not control the shaking throughout my body. I kept imagining the worst scenarios: the leaf mould floor of my niche would collapse, or the surging water rise even higher – we were not very far above it. I was literally too petrified to move even a little finger and remained rigid in a most uncomfortable position for the entire time. In truth, your whole life does not flash before your eyes when confronted with death; all I could think of was that my daughter would never know what had happened to me!

Suddenly, Tom let out an exclamation and pointed to another volume of water coming from an adjacent direction! He was concerned that it might divert to where we were sheltering and climbed, like a veritable mountain goat, to survey the situation. It was then that the two boys decided to scale the mountain above our location and see if it was feasible to make our way back over the top. When I saw the extreme difficulty they encountered endeavouring to do this, I considered it even more precarious than the situation I was already in, and stated that I would rather remain there, all night if necessary, waiting for the water to eventually subside. Our guide informed me that I would die of exposure in any case because we were all thoroughly soaked and the nights were cold.

Throughout the ordeal we had been concerned for the others back at base and the fate of the canoes with all our gear. In a surprisingly short space of time, the boys appeared below us and said that everything was OK at the entrance, the boats were secure, and with care, we should be able to make it back through the water. Those left behind had been very concerned and watching expectantly for bodies to be washed down in the flash flood!

Apparently, at the lower level, where the canyon was not so sheer and widened out a little, the water did likewise and lost a lot of its intensity. I was instructed to put on my boots, and with the four men all aiding

my progress over unseen incredibly slippery rocks below the surface, we slowly made our way to shore – and a resounding ovation! Needless to say, all ideas of lunch were abandoned, and a very subdued group, we hastily set off again in the *piroques*. At this section of the river, now swollen and floating with debris, we beheld the most stunning scenery of precipices composed of layered jagged rock with a beautiful rainbow overhead, but I was too traumatized to use my video! We happened upon more sifaka clinging to the impossibly thin topmost branches of a tree, two chameleons well camouflaged on grey stems, blooming water hyacinth, tiny delicately hued birds, and a large white bird with chicks peeping from a nest built in a tree growing against the perpendicular cliff face. We stopped at another village, where the children sat quietly without the usual clamouring but still with happy smiles. A lady was pounding grain, another sorting strange leaves, and a third, near a cooking fire, scoured a basin on a crude table created with saplings; cows stood in the background. Cloth formed the door to a dwelling made from strips of bamboo. After one more night of camping, with provision of surprisingly good meals, we arrived at where we were to disembark – without regret!

There were no more dramas, but it was not the last of our hardships. We were met by some local people and, after a great deal of confusion, were finally loaded, with the luggage, onto very rustic bullock carts – most opted to walk! Travelling in a wagon pulled by an enormous lumbering bull is something that defies description; I do not ever remember being jolted quite so much and, in deference to old back problems, assumed a semi-reclining position. The ‘road’ was little more than a track used by cattle herds and the very occasional cart. It wound up some very steep, very muddy hills and over river crossings where the water actually seeped through the floor and into the luggage! However, even in this there were compensations: the camaraderie and utter tranquillity of the surroundings. From my reclining position, I observed a shooting star amongst the galaxy glittering in a wonderfully clear sky. Because there was almost total darkness, it was a luminous display, like diamonds on black velvet.

We spent that night in a village where, seated on the floor in front of their merchandise for sale, I managed to photograph girls creating many interesting and attractive hairstyles. This fulfilled an ambition because in other African countries they were always reluctant to allow this. I also managed to capture a shy girl whose face was painted with a white paste made from manioc, which they considered very attractive! Long-horned cattle and chickens roamed the streets, and I noticed fried fish arranged on an enamel platter. Next morning, passing a woman winnowing grain, the eternal bullock carts, and many people walking, we set out to see another highlight of our adventure, the **Tsingy**; full name: **Réserve Naturelle Intégrale des Tsingy de Bemaraha**! This UNESCO World Heritage Site was a vast area of eroded karst (limestone) pinnacles. Inaccessible at certain times of the year, even with good boots these rugged formations of fluted rock with incredibly sharp spiky ridges were extremely difficult to cross, and I did not venture very far

beyond the first vantage point where, nevertheless, I had an excellent view over a wide area. Growing amongst the rocks, strange vegetation included an attractive plant with a bulbous base and fern-like fronds, which looked like a miniature baobab tree. It was not permitted to walk here without a guide, but I did wander to a narrow chasm, barely the width of a man, by which the others would be returning and ventured part of the way down via a perilous ladder – I did not have the courage to reach the bottom! We remained here long enough to appreciate a superb vermilion sunset over the park. The diversity of geological features throughout the world never ceases to amaze me, and the Tsingy was no exception.

En route, we had encountered the inevitable disastrous muddy roads, and on one occasion assisted the occupants of a firmly mired vehicle. Some of the numerous river crossings were achieved by way of very ancient pontoons hardly bigger than our conveyance, the boarding of which required quite a feat of driving skill. At others, it was necessary to disembark whilst our trusty 4 × 4 and capable driver mounted, sometimes after a couple of attempts, inclines seemingly impossible to negotiate, slipping and sliding in thick mud churned more and more by succeeding vehicles. This day, we also came across many termite mounds and our first baobab trees.

The next night, we suffered some *very* basic accommodation but in a pleasant location. It was by a river where a *piroque* lay anchored to rocks in a sheltered mooring, and I spent a most enjoyable evening watching and filming various tableaux of village life: women pounding grain, one rolling up matting, a second sweeping her compound with a twig broom, and another chopping wood. Smoke curled from open outdoor cooking fires, roosters crowed, and boys herded cattle; this responsible duty was often left to small children in African countries. Two boys played with a block of wood attached to string, and amongst all this activity wandered the poultry and pigs. One amusing scene I witnessed was a piglet attempting to suckle from a mother continuously on the move – the definition of ‘fast food’ or ‘eating on the run’? I also photographed a large black, grey and white lizard.

The following day, we began the long return journey to Antsirabe, and I filmed bullock carts making the same river crossings with considerably more ease than our modern-day transport. Our first stop was to see some very interesting local graves. Quite large brick structures, these were colourfully painted with geometric designs and/or decorated with crude pictures (*aloalo*) portraying the life of the person interred, usually mosques, houses, cattle and figures with guns. One bore a sorrowful-looking effigy on top. In addition to the above, a stop at another gravesite produced an aeroplane, indicating that the man or woman had travelled. This particular group also featured buses and bicycles, birds and flowers, an object like a portable radio, a couple cooking and depictions of children. There was even one showing a confrontation between a crocodile and a snake, but I could not ascertain its significance. Horns of cattle adorned the top of another. These appeared older, the somewhat faded colours reducing a couple to black-and-white, but

one pictured a bird like a quail next to a vase of flowers in vivid red. Building of tombs was prohibited when rice was sprouting because, contrary to death, the shoots meant birth. The Turning of the Dead ceremony was celebrated to clean the tomb and replace the ancestors' shrouds. It was a day of rejoicing and feasting, and the dead were laid on the ground to attend. At the conclusion, they were carried in procession seven times around the tomb before being re-laid on their beds of stone. Our lunch break was taken under a rustic shelter in a village where women were frying foods over the charcoal burners. Cooked fish were displayed on a tray, their mouths gaping in soundless screams as if plunged into boiling fat whilst alive.

Our last stop for the day was at the **Allée des Baobabs**, an avenue of these majestic trees near a stretch of still water ringed by white flowers, where we stayed to watch a superb sunset and I took many photographs of trees silhouetted against a vermilion sky.

This was such a stunning location that it featured in much promotional material for Madagascar. It was a remote area with only one small community nearby. As evening descended, cattle and ducks wended their way home through the grain fields, and there were the usual scenes of activity, which I never tired of observing.

Also utilised by large trucks, the road back was notoriously bad; some potholes were so deep that we had to drive into them and up the other side if it was not possible to go around. By public transport it was a 17-hour journey, but the group having disbanded by then, I was fortunate to get a lift back with our guide and it took only 13 hours! I would never have survived the longer trip; meeting up at a later date with the Belgian lad, he told me that it had been horrendous. Early in the morning, we passed a cattle market where, at my request, we stopped for a few minutes. Innumerable times we were held up, even at night, by big herds on the roads. There were many interesting sights along the way, such as produce spread to dry, tied bundles of kindling, a lady using a long stick to shepherd a team of ducks, and a line of shops all selling the same thing! Towards evening, I asked to stop at a village where produce and freshly cooked food was being sold along the roadside. Much to the delight of a multitude of curious children with beaming faces, I wandered down a couple of narrow dirt side streets. Here, I watched a lady winnowing grain and a young girl milking a cow in a corral made of rough boughs.

Ambositra

Next morning, it was back in a *taxi brousse* and on to Ambositra, a delightful town at a higher altitude and with a real mountain resort atmosphere. It was a simple matter to find suitable accommodation, and again due to lack of time, I hired a vehicle to visit the traditional village of **Antoetra**. Although not very far, it took four hours because in places we could hardly exceed five kilometres per hour! From the car, I observed people stooping to plant rice, two cows standing on a narrow dyke between waterlogged fields and, from an elevated position, paddies showing up startling green against bare uncultivated fields. A large group of people, sacks or baskets on their heads, waved and rushed along the centre of the road to greet us.

The woven bamboo, tin-roofed wood or adobe homes of the people of Antoetra had shutters carved with fancy geometric and flower designs, and at least one roof was embellished with wooden birds, which had some superstitious significance. The insides were dark and full of smoke from fires that had no ventilation; in just a few seconds my eyes were stinging, but I suppose they were used to it. Woven matting covering the floor also served for sleeping. Many had corn or chillies hanging from the ceiling to dry. People carried loads of wood on their heads, and one tiny tot toted a basin. Another child was asleep on the back of a sibling not much older. Several wore a type of woven raffia cap. There were the usual sights of free-range chickens and ducks, women pounding grain, and cattle in small enclosures. Unfortunately, I think that tourism had caught up with this place; the people were not so friendly, and there was even an entrance fee to the village! Apparently, there were a lot of *fady* (taboos) in this sensitive area, but the overall impression was one of disappointment; it was generally dirty, untidy and fostered a sense of hostility.

On the return journey, my driver wanted to purchase charcoal, so we stopped at the home of a family who created it as their livelihood. These unkempt impoverished people were the poorest amongst the population and lived in appalling conditions; even the babies were black with coal dust. They made their meagre living by burning trees to produce the charcoal. I expressed concern at the denuding of the forests, not only because they seemed so sadly depleted, but I wondered what they would do when the timber had eventually all disappeared. I was assured that they were now replacing the trees with eucalypts, which they only cut to a certain height – about two feet above the ground – and they readily regrew.

Interspersed amongst the native housing back in **Ambositra**, I found many beautiful old two- and three-storey buildings from the French era, featuring carved façades, wooden balconies, and attics overhead. In the street, women were cooking a type of cake or biscuit, the batter poured into patty trays placed directly over a fire. Clothes were arrayed on a rack on the footpath, and I took delightful video of a very patient dog waiting expectantly outside a butcher shop, even barking to warn away another dog that dared to

intrude! It was a neat town, with a red brick church and a big lively market displaying vegetables that included the julienne strips of carrot, huge piles of garlic, and the familiar sacks of grains and lentils. I obtained excellent pictures of the various transactions taking place. There seemed to be a surfeit of meat outlets: one young lad was hacking at a carcass with a saw, another used a cleaver, and a barrow vendor was doing a roaring trade in offal; a boy on a pair of stilts stood in the background. Butchers the world over seem to have a sense of humour, and these were no exception, enjoying acting for the camera. Always, the conditions were unhygienic, some just more so than others! Freshly cooked food was also prepared, but as usual, there was much with which I was unfamiliar, including mounds of peculiar dried products. I noticed chickens in baskets, homemade confectionary (some in sickly looking colours!), a lady with a large stack of wood, one with what appeared to be a bag of eucalyptus leaves, and others with charcoal in jute sacks, all being carried on their heads. In the time-honoured tradition, mothers carried babies on their backs. I saw another fine church, and *pousse-pousse* drivers, their bells ringing a warning, running downhill – but making hard work of going up! Here, they used large carts (like flatcars) to transport goods, and often the boys would jump on whilst propelling them down slopes like an enormous go-cart!

Fianarantsoa

The next stop on my journey was Fianarantsoa (Place Where Good Is Learned), where I was anxious to arrive on Friday evening. I had heard on my travels that there was a possibility the train from ‘Fianar’ to Manakara would run the following morning. This section, begun in 1926 and completed ten years later at a cost of between five and ten thousand lives, had no fewer than 67 bridges and 48 tunnels (the longest 1,072m) on the 163km line, and dropped from 1,100m to sea level. Once the best ride on Madagascar’s now-defunct rail system, it had recently been restored and I was informed that, depending on numerous conditions, it ‘may or may not run’. In fact, a pamphlet on the service stated ‘Travellers requiring on-time departure or guaranteed arrival time are recommended to find an alternative means of transport’! The line was destroyed by a series of 280 landslides following cyclones in February and March of 2000, after which 54 tons of bananas were left to rot on Andrambovato station. Because the train, used to transport bananas, was a lifeline for people living along the route, the United States, Switzerland, and even the King of Thailand, stepped in with aid and expertise for the reconstruction effort. There was no alternative method of getting this major source of income to market and many were hungry. The poorest families ate their entire crop; the slightly more affluent bought rice with proceeds from sale. Men carried up to 60kg as

far as ten kilometres for a wage of about 50 US cents, which they used to purchase the grain. If there was no train, there was no market. Interestingly, the steepest grade could pose a problem when tracks were wet, so a barrel of sand was carried in the cabin to be poured onto the line to ensure the necessary traction! Also fascinating was the fact that many of the rails came from France, having been seized from Germany in reparation after WWII.

En route to Fianarantsoa, we passed healthy-looking crops with a mountainous backdrop, and evidence of a recent accident in the wreckage of an upside-down semi-trailer. We stopped briefly at a town where oranges and pineapples made a bright display under makeshift shelters, and two boys were wielding sticks to herd ducks. Dirty ragged children attempting to sell small bundles of wood made a pitiful sight.

Fianarantsoa lacked the big buildings of Ambositra, although there was still the French influence (elegant but dilapidated), including a house with two white-columned porticos. In the main thoroughfare, I found cooking fires, strings of sausages hanging in a butcher's shop, and stalls selling vegetables and breads. An incongruous sight was provided by large elaborate churches with their associated wealth, which seemed almost sinful amid such poverty.

Côte Est Railway

Lonely Planet called the train a 'rollicking' ride, which was an apt description. I was perhaps fortunate inasmuch as some of the overseas aid volunteers and local dignitaries, including the mayor, were to ride the train, which was indeed running that day. The main disadvantage was that the one first-class carriage had been reserved solely for their benefit, and I was relegated to second class. Because there was a large contingent of officials, we were consequently also very late departing, but the trip more than made up for any inconvenience. We stopped at a few unscheduled places, and for a considerable length of time, so that the visitors could assess the result of their good works. Three kilometres beyond **Andrambovata**, we stopped at stunning **Mandriampotsy** waterfall, where I was able to climb down and take pictures of the stationary green train and its two bright red engines on a bridge spanning the water, with the fall in the background. I also captured (on film) a beautiful blue and black butterfly. I spent almost the entire ride standing, very precariously, by the huge open doors on carriages like cattle cars, rushing from side to side to photograph the incredible scenery of picture book houses alongside the river, which wound and gurgled through valleys filled with lush paddies, those newly planted reflecting the surroundings. People washed, swam and fished with vibrant green jungle-dressed mountains as a backdrop.

The train was a magnet which drew large crowds of colourful people at most stops, also chickens and once even a turkey running loose. At every station, vendors descended en masse, selling everything from unknown snacks, which I was reluctant to try, to tiny cooked crayfish (marron) and the inevitable bananas! We began to climb, and I observed stepped paddies amidst dense greenery. There seemed little in the way of traditional dress; again, the ubiquitous T-shirt was the most common form of attire. It always amazes me how games are the same the world over, even if developed in isolation. In a remote area of Papua New Guinea, I remember seeing a wizened old woman playing ‘cat’s cradle’ with string, and I recollect children in Asia blowing bubbles with lengths of bamboo. On Madagascar, I watched boys spinning tops wound with lengths of rope. A girl with an elaborate plaited hairstyle sold T-shirts, and a piglet roamed with geese in a yard containing stacked timber; washing hung on a line overhead. At the next station, a vegetable plot was located behind a sapling fence right beside the track. At one stage, much to the delight of onlookers who peered from their windows, the train shunted back and forth past a village with many wooden huts on tall stilts, elevated above levels made uneven by erosion. Here, I also filmed exotic flowers and more geese. We came to a part of the brown river where it widened and people were bathing.

At **Mahabako**, where they also produced lychees, mangoes, avocados, oranges and mandarins, I noticed a couple of people moving forward to the cab, where I assumed that they were going to travel with the driver for the view, so because I had a video, I asked if I could do likewise. Imagine my complete surprise when I finished up standing on the footplate out front, wind blowing through my hair, the shrill whistle accompanied by the usual clickety-clack sounding behind, and the metal wheels screeching on the track – I certainly got some authentic action shots! Where else in the world would this be permitted? The wide river, now very blue, was full of rocks, and banana plants were much in evidence, encroaching close to the track on both sides. Traversing hilly terrain, the paddies were lush and green, people cheered and waved, washing was spread on the ground beside the line, and I saw small isolated cabins. Before entering one of the many tunnels, I was obliged to descend from the footplate and make my way back to the carriage – because the mayor wanted a turn! What was normally an eight-hour trip was made considerably longer by all the additional stops, but who was going to complain?! On the final approach to Manakara (at sunset) we passed a lighthouse, and my first pictures here were of a lady cooking drop scones by lamplight.

Manakara

*M*anakara was an interesting town, its neat small wooden houses thatched with what appeared to be strips from leaves of the banana plant. The area was resplendent with brightly coloured tropical flowers, and many gardens had pineapples and trees bearing the large jackfruit. Several different foodstuffs were spread to dry on rush mats in yards, and women were using long pestles with square wooden mortars to pound various types of vegetables, whilst one was doing her washing in a basin. Others sat cross-legged on road verges selling portions of fresh pineapple that looked delicious, but I could not trust the water in which they were washed. This vital commodity was obtained from communal wells surrounded by a log fence, presumably to keep animals out. Water also flowed across the road, to the delight of a gaggle of geese that, honking and flapping their wings, paraded through it.

Always vitally interesting, there was yet another big market, this one with surprisingly good-looking produce: tomatoes, spring onions, snow white cauliflower, cabbage, green beans, potatoes, garlic and onions. Meat and offal (trotters, entrails, liver, tripe and so on) were covered in flies, although at least one stallholder was taking the trouble to ‘shoo’ insects with a whisk. Meat was never wrapped but, after the exchange of germ-ridden money, placed directly into the hand of the customer who (sometimes) provided their own plastic bag. Also on offer at this market were straw brooms, colourful raffia bags, grains and dried beans, long French bread sticks and freshly cooked foods; I came across a turkey wandering around but did not fancy its chances of survival! Chickens were held in large baskets, and buyers carried as many as a dozen upside down by the legs. Another interesting aspect was the very smelly fresh fish market, but they also sold enormous quantities of dried fish of many varieties and sizes. One such stand displayed those as seen on the river trip, their wide gaping mouths making it appear that they died in terror. For some reason a woman was wiping dried fish with a piece of cloth dipped in a small basin of what appeared to be water. Installed amongst the usual items, I saw elegant hats and elaborate satin and net dresses for little girls! In fact, I took a photograph of three such charming ‘little maids’: all in white, bearing delightful smiles, and one sporting a pair of gaudy pink sunglasses! Later, I encountered two small girls wearing pink frocks with copious frills. A vendor with a kettle moved amongst stalls selling hot coffee (Madagascar was a major producer) to other retailers, and in the midst of all the hustle and bustle, a small contented infant slept soundly on a mat between baskets of dried sardines and beans for sale! They toted all manner of things on their heads, which developed the very upright posture that I envied. In this way, I saw men carrying heavy loads of straw brooms, and it was a method even employed by small children selling charcoal. A tiny rustic ‘shop’, where beaming customers posed for pictures, was called Good Look Antsika, people were preparing food and cooking in the open, and I saw a large tortoise on the ground.

Manakara being situated on the coast, I saw flimsy canoes with tattered makeshift-looking sails, plunging into troughs and appearing as if sinking as they battled the rough conditions, only to rise again. There was also a picturesque narrow estuary with *piroques*, people swimming, cattle crossing and ducks.

Ranomafana National Park

I left for my return journey on a Sunday, but unfortunately there was no scheduled service so I was obliged to wait some hours until enough people requested transport. It was my intention to only go as far as **Ranomafana National Park**, but the opportunistic *taxi brousse* driver demanded that I still pay the full fare to Fianar – almost double! Luckily, I travelled with a couple of French tourists because it was well and truly dark by the time we reached our destination, and one of them just happened to spot the hotel at which they intended staying as we whizzed past. Not knowing the location of the place that I had chosen, and the driver being most un-obliging, I decided to stay with them. It was no mean feat to clamber over a large ditch and up a very stony pathway with my luggage. However, all turned out well because they had rooms and a hot meal ready.

Investigating this rural community next morning, I watched a kitten playing in the gutter, totally disinterested in tiny chickens on the footpath. A shop glorying in the name Hotel Sitraka had brooms leaning against the front and fresh produce on a hatch supported by a length of timber; another sold the same selection with the addition of hats and baskets, and meat was sold from a similar ‘establishment’. People queued with buckets to get water from a well, and I photographed an amazing shiny red beetle with an extraordinarily long stick-like neck.

This morning also saw me at my first lemur sanctuary. It was nothing like I had envisaged, being pristine forest and rough hilly terrain. I required assistance to negotiate the tangled vines and steep slopes whenever the guide deviated from the path, which it was necessary to do often in order to see the animals. It was mandatory to have a guide in all national parks, ostensibly to protect the environment, and yet they all seemed to damage considerable areas in the quest for finding lemurs; it was a great pity and I am sure not really allowed. We saw three or four varieties, including the golden bamboo lemur (munching, of course, bamboo), which was extremely lucky because they were rare and only discovered in 1986! As the name implies, they were a rich golden-brown in colour. All the animals had the distinctive large round eyes and exceedingly long bushy tails. Related to the monkey, they were quite humanlike in some respects – for instance, scratching under the armpit! Their hands, like those of a monkey, were used to part their fur when grooming. Also in this reserve were birds of many kinds, which proved very elusive, especially to

photograph, and were often just a melodic sound issuing from the treetops. We saw a black and white lizard, a large striped spider-like insect, some brilliant green geckos with bright blue tails (a wonderful display of colour), and one tiny chameleon – not at all colourful. Apparently, it is a fallacy that they camouflage themselves by changing their hue. There were also snakes, but I was assured that they were harmless! An unusual feature was a group of ancient moss-covered headstones, and I found white fungi on fallen tree trunks.

It was an extremely long walk (all uphill) to the park, but the road followed a river and passed many lovely viewpoints, a couple of small waterfalls, and a lady washing clothes in the swiftly flowing water. Houses in this area were constructed of mud but with the same thatched roof. In the morning, I had managed to procure a lift to the park with the ranger and walked back, taking photographs en route; in one lovely scene, sunlight turned the river to molten gold. Returning for a ‘night’ hike by the same method, the car broke down, so I had to walk both ways. This time, I was thrilled by close encounters with a civet cat and two quaint mouse lemurs. This tiny captivating creature, appearing all eyes, lived up to its name in size and very rapid movements, hopping along branches that it constantly licked, presumably ingesting insects.

When I came to leave next morning, I waited by the roadside for hours, taking inevitable pictures of the street activity, whilst a local lad tried to organize a lift. Only one *taxi brousse* came through this isolated place and it was full to overflowing (even for Madagascar!), so as a last resort, I finished up in the cab of a banana truck. One other young male tourist rode in the back with the bananas, which we had to stop and unload before reaching Fianar where, on this occasion, I saw a lady busy stuffing protesting hens into her basket in the roadway. Around her, goods for sale included hair whisks, patterned rugs – and toilets!

Perinet Reserve

From Fianar, I retraced my steps to Tana, past a patchwork of fields in green, rich browns and red. After an overnight stay, I headed for **Andasibe** and the **Perinet Reserve**. This park was idyllically located: surrounded by jungle and approached along a road near the banks of a lily-covered pool. I found accommodation in the village two kilometres further on, actually in the old railway station with ducks beside the disused track. The building was dilapidated and the only room available for rent had an old iron bed, a bare light bulb (which didn’t work) hanging from the ceiling, no floor covering, a stained sink, and a door that wouldn’t lock, but for all that it had plenty of atmosphere, the management was obliging, and it was cheap!

The first thing I did was join a night walk, on which I experienced another close encounter with a mouse lemur, blinking its big round eyes in the light of the torch. We also saw frogs, a large spider spinning its web, birds roosting in trees for the night and chameleons, which were a lot smaller than I had imagined, with their tails curled.

Next morning, I went on a four-hour walking trail; again, it was compulsory to hire a guide. Perinet was noted for its indri, and we heard their raucous cry long before sighting them. These, the largest of the lemurs, were black-and-white and, unlike all others of the species that I saw, had only a stubby tail. Here also, we managed to get very close, and it was amazing to witness them make giant leaps from one tree to another and reach to pull small branches close in order to eat the leaves at the tip. This forest area had abundant bird's nest ferns and strangler vines. As in all Madagascar, there were many varieties of birds (one grey with a rust-coloured head and blue tinges), and we saw industrious termites and two very large, highly iridescent, beautifully patterned (predominantly blue) snakes, which gleamed like patches of oil when struck by the sun.

After that it was back to the capital, where the glorious display of Jacarandas was even more impressive than previously.

And so ended my sojourn in Madagascar. I would love to return one day because there was so much in this island that I did not experience; it was a land lost in time.