

I arrived in Antananarivo, Madagascar's capitol, at the beginning of October for a 3-week tour with friends of some natural areas across the central sector of this island country. The architecture and vibe of Antananarivo felt more Asian than African (the continent to which Madagascar is closest geographically, and from which it began to separate some 155 million years ago). After a day in the city we drove out of the highlands to Miandrivazo to meet our guide and the pirogues (dugouts) in which we would float westward down the sluggish Tsiribihina River under the hot sun for two full days. At night we slept on sandy beaches and enjoyed delicious meals prepared for us by our knowledgeable guide who goes by the name of Daddy!



The stately chicken would end up as a pet for Daddy's children. (We ate other chickens purchased en route.)

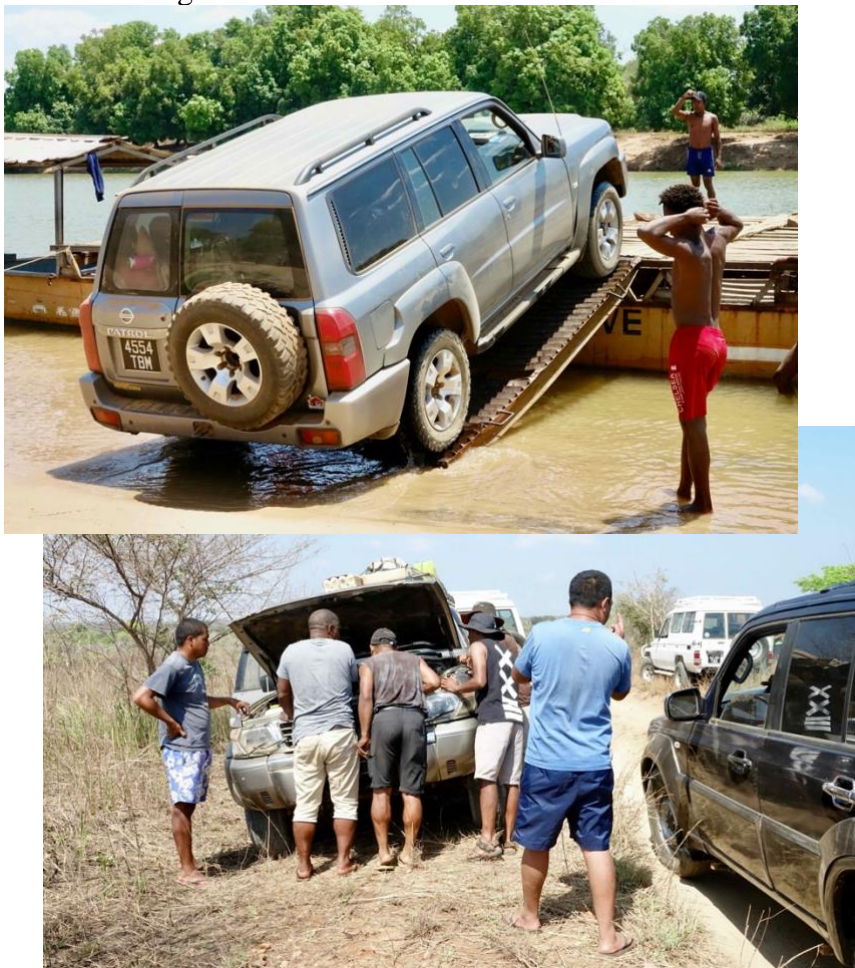
Massive and continuing deforestation characterizes much of the landscape along the river and everywhere we traveled over the next 3 weeks.





We'd been told that crocodiles did not occur in the Tsiribihina, so we dangled our feet and hands in the water to cool off. That pleasure ended in the late afternoon of our first day when one of the crew spotted the first of three crocs we encountered in the river!

After leaving the pirogues, we continued west in 4x4s. A vehicle breakdown far from town was inevitable, as was the appearance of men from out of the bush to join the palaver about how to fix the problem. (At this point Madagascar was feeling more like Africa than like Asia.) The problem was mostly sorted out, though we never had A/C again. A few days later, returning east, we joined a daily convoy led by hired gendarmes who provide protection against robbers along the route.



One of our vehicles boards a ferry for the river crossing.

At Tsingis de Bemaraha National Park, a World Heritage Site, we hiked amidst a strangely beautiful landscape. Over millions of years, wind and rain have sculpted towers with razor sharp spines out of an ancient, massive limestone deposit. These towers rise high above the surrounding dry forest, which is full of wildlife. Groundwater has created caves near the bottom of these structures. When the cave ceilings collapse they leave deep, narrow canyons between the towers. Humans could not easily penetrate the Tsingis, until a French team, in the 1990s, installed cables and bolted rocks, one by one, to the canyon walls to serve as stepping stones leading to the summit. We wore harnesses equipped with carabiners to attach ourselves to the cables. I was eager to see the Tsingis from within, but also fearful of the heights and had never done a technical climb.

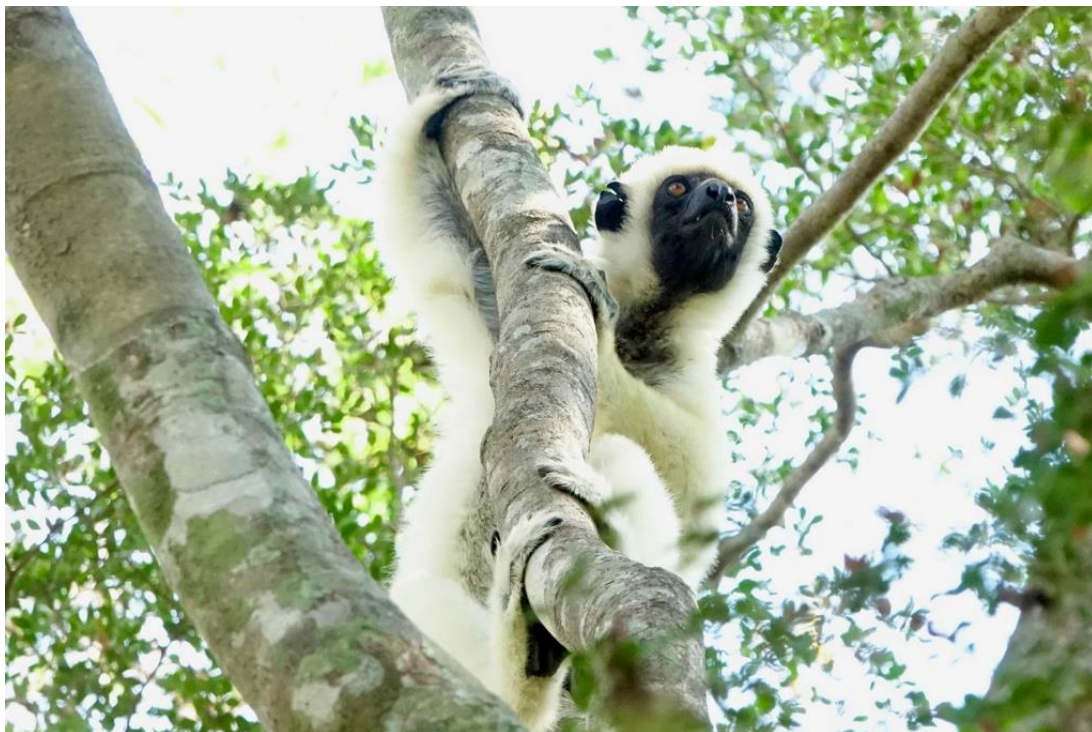


The guide carried my backpack and camera (thus few photos of this area) and offered a hand whenever I admitted I was afraid (often) or when two steps were so widely spaced that I could not pull myself up (they were apparently installed by very tall Frenchmen.) I wondered whether falling even the two-foot length of the rope that attached us to the cable might result in severe cuts, perhaps evisceration... Two of our Swiss companions were completely at ease in this terrain, having grown up hiking the Alps. The third suffers from vertigo but managed to negotiate the climb without incident.



From the platform at the summit of the Tsingis. It was a good feeling to have completed the hike, my first technical climb, but it will likely be my last!

The dry forest surrounding the Tsingis supports eleven species of lemurs, which are primates that evolved in, and are endemic to, Madagascar. Verreaux's Sifaka, seen below, are members of one genus of the lemur family. (I think this is the species that was photographed



bouncing off the walls of these Tsingi towers in a Netflix documentary, Our Great National Parks, narrated by President Obama .)



Swift lizard, probably the Collared



Unidentified lizard

From the Tsingis we drove to Kirindy dry forest, close to the west coast. The forest is divided into two sectors, one for tourists and one for research.



Our guide for the forest walk. The birds were amazing. I was introduced to families of birds I'd never heard of – like Vangas and Couas.



Rufous Vanga



Great Coua,
a member of
the cuckoo
family

The Vangas
and the
Couas are
endemic to
Madagascar.



Madagascar
Paradise
Flycatcher



Red-fronted Brown Lemur

From Madagascar's west coast, it was a long drive back to the central highlands. "Long drive" is relative: distances are not great by our standards, but driving 200 miles on Madagascar's roads, often pot-holed and crowded with slow-moving large trucks, can take six hours. Drivers develop incredible, sometimes hair-raising, skills in tailgating and passing safely. Once when a careless signal from the truck ahead of us caused a near miss, our driver let out a stream of words in Malagasy that could only have been a powerful profanity. He declined to translate, but under questioning admitted it involved the truck driver's mother!

We stopped for the night in the large city of Antsirabe and walked to a French restaurant recommended by our guide. The streets were teeming with pedestrians, and no one paid us any attention. Two hours later, after a delicious dinner and great service, we headed back to the hotel through unnervingly empty streets until we reached the main road, where we were suddenly approached by children and their mothers. Kids often ask for bonbon (candy), our earrings, pens, notebooks, or money. It is always an uncomfortable situation for me. Next morning, two of us, both out of our rooms earlier than the others, set off on foot looking for

coffee and ended up drinking espresso in a petrol station convenience store. Had we turned in another direction we would have discovered the French patisserie that served excellent croissants, which, fortunately, we had time to enjoy before leaving the city.

Now we would explore mostly the eastern and central highlands. The drive to Ranomafana National led us through terraced hillsides planted with manioc, sweet potatoes and hill rice. The first glimpse of forest with native species was a joyful sight after miles of deforested slopes. At the Park we took a guided night walk along the road and saw a few chameleons and frogs. Next morning, we hiked in the forest and saw several species of lemur as well as more chameleons.



Grey Bamboo Lemur

Next we drove south to Isalo National Park, a dry, starkly beautiful landscape of seemingly infinite plains and mountains with fantastic sandstone formations. Four of our group went backpacking for two nights in the mountains, and two remained behind. Overnight I came down with a cold that turned out to be Covid, and I, too, stayed at our lodge, Chez Alice, which was a beautiful place to recover.



After a couple of days Paxlovid was doing its job and my symptoms were almost gone. I joined my friends on a guided day hike into the mountains.

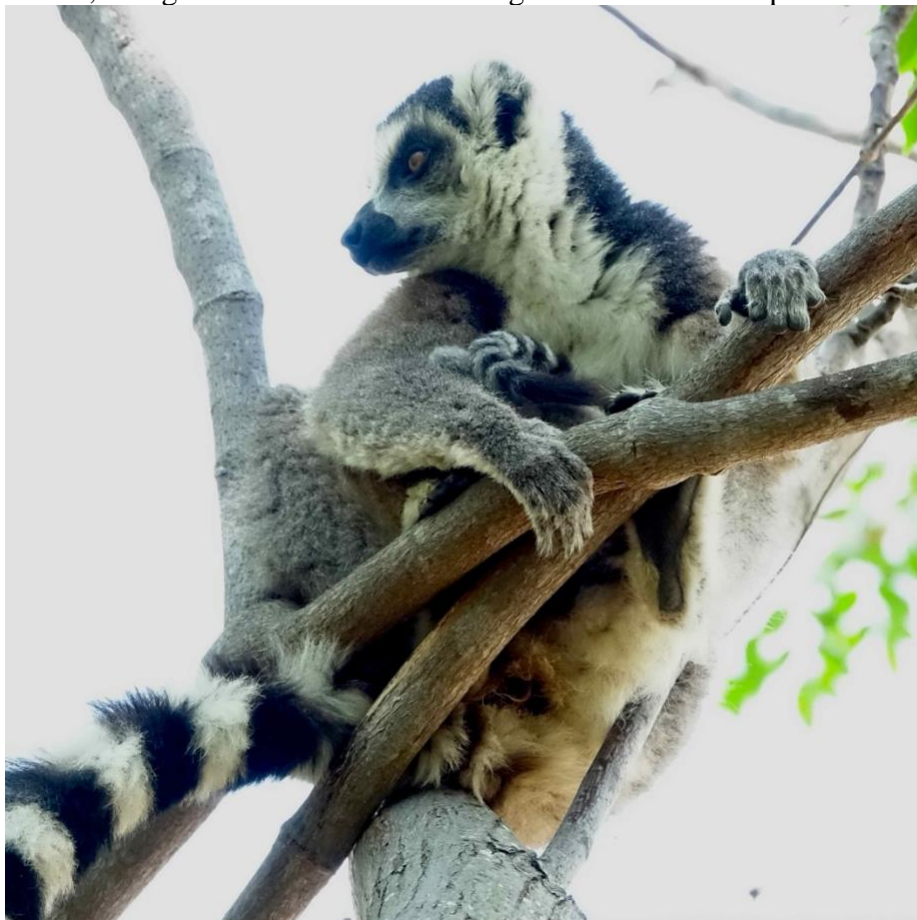


Grey-headed Love Bird



Madagascar Hoopoe

After leaving Isalo we stopped for a picnic lunch at the Community Conservancy D'Anja. Below, a ring-tailed lemur and what might be one of the elephant-eared chameleons.







Next, we headed for the small community of Antoetra, the starting point for a 10 mile hike to one of the many villages of the Zafimaniry people. The communities have been designated a World Heritage site for their woodworking skills. Walls, furniture, wood were traditionally decorated with intricate carvings. This is an example of their work on the façade of a “chalet” that we stayed in the night before, in town. Every square inch of wood has been carved.

Without the help of porters, like the one on the left, some of us would not have been able to make the journey. The paths eventually became steeper and we walked alongside precipices,



but the paths were wide enough to avoid walking along the edge.



The entire area is deforested. Much of it had recently burned in a fire that, we were told, was purposely started but soon got out of control. These school-aged girls were carrying buckets of water to extinguish small remaining patches of active burning. We walked through one such patch. School children are participating in a reforestation program.

We reached the village after a 6-hour hike, with many stops along the way. The village and



the rice paddies take on a magical quality early the next morning in the mist.



A beautiful traditional house



Deforestation is forcing the Zafimaniry community to use concrete rather than wood to build new structures. The major causes of forest destruction are slash-and-burn agriculture, timber operations (many of them illegal) and charcoal production (for cooking). Our guides were outspoken about the failure of the government to help people find alternative ways to grow their food, make a living and to provide fuel for cooking. They told us that while the

government calls for deforestation to end, many within the government profit from granting Asian timber companies the rights to harvest valued timber species in protected forests.

We enjoyed meeting some of the residents, including the Chief, who invited us to his home, where we sat on his bed and on the floor. He told us that only parents are allowed on the beds. Children sleep on mats on the floor. Some of us bought small, beautifully carved items, from a woodworker, but I did not actually see intricate carvings on these houses. Our tasty, well-seasoned meals were prepared by locals, who always cooked enough to ensure leftovers for themselves!

After two nights we started our hike back at 4:30 a.m. to the town where we'd left the vehicles. We walked steadily but slowly – it took us half the time as it did to hike in – then drove to a small community-run park that breeds chameleons - extraordinary and unimaginable creatures almost all of which I have yet to identify.





Parson's chameleon (male)





One of the leaf-tailed geckoes

Our last major stop was Andasibe, a rain forest national park in the eastern highlands. As in Ranomafana we were in second-growth forest (access to primary forest in both places is more complicated), but Andasibe was my favorite site of all we visited.



A group of common brown lemurs were feeding near the lodge.



The main purpose of this visit was to hear the spectacularly beautiful songs of the Indris, the largest lemur. To stand in the forest underneath a group of singing Indris was the highlight of the trip. Their calls surround you and take you into another world...unforgettable!

To hear this video recording please open the attached mov. file.



Indris are territorial, and their singing may serve to keep neighboring groups separate to avoid physical conflict. It may also help members of a group maintain contact when dispersed, for example while feeding. It is thought that information about an individual's sex and age might be embedded in his/her song's acoustic structure, thus announcing readiness to

leave the natal group and form a bond with a potential mate from another group. (A familiar strategy, with a few tweaks!)

[These hypotheses about the function of singing among Indris were published in V. Torti, M. Gamba, Z.H. Rabemananjara and C. Giacoma, *The songs of the indris (Mammalia: Primates: Indridae): contextual variation in the long-distance calls of a lemur*, Italian Journal of Zoology, Vol. 80, 2013, Issue 4.]



This infant Indri may have recently started exploring the big world. He/she would move just a few feet away from mom (dad?), have a quick look around, and almost immediately return to the adult as though for reassurance. The infant continued bouncing back and forth for some time.

Indris live in family groups of up to six individuals – a monogamous pair and their offspring, who eventually leave their natal group to find a mate.



They are the cutest!



Diademed Sifakas also reside in this forest. The two species feed on different parts of many of the same plants (mostly immature leaves for the Indris, flowers and fruits for the Sifakas) and their feeding heights within the forest differ slightly. As a poster in the Park's museum points out, this niche separation allows them to "share the wealth".

We returned to Antananarivo for our last night. The abundance of wildlife that I have yet to see may call me back next year!

