

Excerpts from *Antipode: Seasons with the Extraordinary Wildlife and Culture of Madagascar* (Heather Heying. 2002. St. Martin's Press: New York.)

## Excerpts from Chapter 1: You Are Here

Madagascar is an immense island. It is the fourth largest in the world, after Greenland, New Guinea, and Borneo. All told, it is slightly smaller than Texas. This great red island lies off the east coast of Africa in the Indian Ocean, not 200 miles from Mozambique, but has less in common with Africa than one might expect, given its close proximity. Madagascar has been separated from all other landmasses for at least 80 million years, and in that time, the biota has become extraordinarily unique. Ninety percent of its plant and animal species are endemic—found nowhere else on the planet. There are neon spotted frogs, and fully grown chameleons the size of pocket change. Enormous baobab trees looking as if they've been planted upside down. Bats with built-in suction cups on their wrists and ankles. Carnivorous pitcher plants. Leaf-tailed geckos which flatten against and blend in so perfectly with tree trunks that you can look one in the eye at six inches and think you're admiring bark. Every time you take a step in what remains of the wilderness of Madagascar, new surprises meet your eyes. And then there are the lemurs.

More monkey than ape in character, but not actually either, prosimians are among the most primitive primates. All Madagascan prosimians are commonly called lemurs, although some, technically, are not. Living species include the black and white indri, which look like giant teddy bears, and sing duets with their mates at first light, and again as the sun sets. Their mournful song carries miles across the forest, and often across deforested land where they can no longer live, evoking haunting memories of their bygone presence. The island is also still home to the tiniest of primates, the mouse lemur, a big-eyed furball that scurries about in the trees with the aid of its opposable thumbs, the whole package smaller than a human fist. And there's the aye-aye, a scruffy, mangy looking beast with bat ears and a long wispy tail. This otherworldly creature uses an elongate middle finger to pull sap and insect larvae out of trees, filling the woodpecker niche in a place with no woodpeckers. Local legend suggests that if you see an aye-aye, you must kill it, else bad luck will fall upon your village. Aye-ayes are, understandably, a bit shy of people nowadays.

Aside from the aye-aye, the Malagasy myths that have risen up around the lemurs are mostly ones of exaltation. The indri is believed to have saved a man who, having broken a critical branch, was stranded high up in a tree. It is *fady* to hurt an indri. Other lemurs are hunted for food, but are admired for their dexterity and skill in the trees. Tales are told of their social habits—one Malagasy friend told me that female lemurs seek out and eat the leaves of a toxic plant when they want abortions. And they are even, sometimes, valued for their beauty in this country at the bottom of the world's economic ladder, where aesthetic concerns are rarely a priority.

It is still a matter of some debate how both the landmass of Madagascar, and the people living on it, came to be there. Madagascar probably split from Africa early in the break-up of Gondwanaland, but remained attached to what would become the Indian subcontinent to the north, Australia and the southeast Asian islands to the east, and Antarctica to the south and west. The last landmass with which Madagascar rifted was

India, which ultimately broke away and moved north towards a collision with Asia that would raise the Himalayas.

Were the first Malagasy people African, Indian, south east Asians (present day Indonesians), or south Pacific Islanders? Perhaps Polynesians, with a bit of southeast Asian, and some Arab, picked up during what must have been a long journey by boat. Few anthropologists agree on when people began arriving on Madagascar. But it is clear that neither the people nor the wildlife bear much resemblance to those on the African continent, and a sure way to insult a Malagasy is to refer to him as African. Although Africa and Madagascar are physically quite close, strong water currents in the Strait of Mozambique make it difficult for anything to cross between the two.

Madagascar was a stopping point on trade routes throughout the age of colonial Europe—indeed, the oldest map of the region where I work was made by Dutch pirates. There are more than 20 distinct tribal groups, several variations on a theme of animist religion, and very little industrial or technological development. The French colonized Madagascar in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, but were ousted in a democratic vote in 1959. Lingering French influence explains both the prevalence of the French language across the country, and the surreal appearance of fresh baguettes in even rural markets every morning. Due to widespread corruption, the new government gradually began provoking protests, and in 1975 they were replaced by the socialists. From then until 1992, during the socialist era in Madagascar, outsiders were particularly distrusted, and foreigners who hadn't managed to stay behind when the French left were not often let in during this period. The socialists had come in with grand ideals and plans, but soon fell into disrepute. In 1992, after years of increasingly vocal protests from the people, a multi-party democracy was formed, and Dr. Albert Zafy was elected president. His administration, too, soon lost popularity, and in 1997, in a democratic vote, Didier Ratsiraka, the former socialist head of state, became the president of Madagascar.



Were I telling stories about modern American suburbanites, it might be safe to assume that the time not chronicled is spent watching television, talking on the telephone, shopping, commuting between home and work. At night, our neighbors retreat to their walled off homes, turn on the lights and make themselves comfortable among their things.

In Madagascar, except in the capital Antananarivo, there are essentially no televisions or phones in anyone's private home. Even in Tana—the more manageable name for Antananarivo—these luxuries are rare. When present, phones seldom work. In northeastern Madagascar, where I work, people commute, but it is not a commute most Americans would recognize. The locals walk daily between their palm-roofed homes and the outdoor market—the *zoma*—which reliably has baskets and rice for sale. Communal pit toilets and open charcoal fires are the bathrooms and kitchens, respectively. Electricity exists but spordically in the one sizeable town in the region. Twice a week a prop jet lands on the local runway, there being no reliable roads that connect this part of the island to the rest, and all children and some adults within a certain radius come to watch the spectacular event. There are no print media, no books available. A single radio station exists, though few private homes—which are primarily open air shacks—have radios. There is no privacy, and few precious things.

In Madagascar, time is so abundant as to be unmeasured, such that a request for a boat or a meal or a person to show up at a particular time, even on a particular day,

makes no sense. If something else comes up, maybe that gets priority. Maybe not. Who can predict these things, and why would anyone want to? If it doesn't come today, maybe it will come tomorrow. Maybe tomorrow. *Peut-être demain. Ongomba rapitso*. In English, French or Malagasy, it is perhaps the most often used phrase in Madagascar. Meanwhile, in the U.S., services are advertised based on their ability to get things *there*, wherever *there* may be, more quickly than anyone else. "When it absolutely, positively has to be there overnight," you would do well to be in the developed world. In the States, time is measured constantly: time is slipping away, time is of the essence, time is money. In Madagascar, no amount of coercion can cause things to move more quickly.

At the sites where I actually live and work for the majority of the time, there is no commerce, nothing to buy but an occasional fish from a fisherman pulled up on shore. A boat ride away is Maroantsetra, a town of flat, hazy tropical scenes, coconut palms on plains of sandy grasses, a town where you can sometimes buy vegetables, but where there are no appliances, no good shoes, no sunglasses for sale. This town is a flight away from Tana, where for a price you can obtain hydrochloric acid (as advertised in the local newspaper), a television, a Land Rover (only on the black market), a *Herald Tribune* from a week ago, a good Indonesian or French meal, even potted plants.

Tana is itself a long series of flights away from machine washed-and-dried clothes, new hiking boots, delis, flourless chocolate cake with raspberry sauce, the *New York Times*, *Harper's* magazine, Thorlo socks, alkaline batteries, duct tape, crazy glue, contact lenses, a blood transfusion, skiing, Snicker's bars, maple trees and rhododendrons, box springs and mattresses, sulfa-free antibiotics, or anything new and improved. My most remote field site is five miles by foot from a village, which is a few hours by boat from a town, which is several hours by plane from Tana, which itself is several flights away from box springs, or transfusions. At this most remote site, all you can get is emergent trees thrust from the canopy, robed in flowers; lemurs clucking, peering; a parade of both colorful and cryptic frogs; cool breezes with a stunning view from a tent platform; a vast forest rich with unknown life; and clean, clean air.

## Chapter 2: Waiting for Brousse

During my first trip to Madagascar, my college graduation trip, very little went smoothly. Smooth, in my Western opinion, suggested efficiency, timeliness, and a world that bore some resemblance to that promised. Smooth was not part of the culture that we found.

In the decrepit coastal town of Manakara, where it seemed it would rain forever, we befriended several young men who talked excitedly about crocodiles that lived nearby. I had never seen a crocodile in the wild, but not for lack of desire. The men said heartily that the crocodiles were easy to get to, and they would take us there, by canoe, tomorrow. With promises of an adventure the following day, they slipped away, leaving us standing on a tropical beach, coconut palms overhead, the Indian ocean slate and emerald, by turns, in the wind.

"We could swim," I suggested, as it had finally stopped raining. A woman with a basket on her head walked by. I stopped her.

"Is it safe to swim here?" I asked, in French. She appeared to understand perfectly, and nodded yes, it is safe. She was off, a smile playing at her lips. I stopped another

woman, and received the same answer. She walked away, balancing an improbable basket full of ducks on her head. Still, we sat, not quite certain, waiting for something to develop. A gaggle of schoolchildren arrived, boisterous and loud, leading two teachers, pulling them towards the water. The children were reprimanded in rapid Malagasy, which I didn't understand. They immediately quieted down, and sat on the sand.

"Is it safe to swim here?" I asked one of the teachers. She, too, laughed.

"Oh no," she said, "not at all. Last year, a woman was in only to her ankles, and a shark came up and dragged her out to sea. She never came back." My eyes bugged out.

"Her ankles?" I repeated, gesturing low on my legs to make sure I had understood.

"Yes, her ankles." This I did not find smooth at all.

The following day we set off with the three young men to find crocodiles. The five of us sat low in the unstable canoe, while they took turns paddling down a wide freshwater canal.

"It is very important that we stay in the middle," they said, over and over again, as we hugged the shore, where tall grasses obscured undefined dangers.

"But..." I began, then stopped, resigned. We were, after all, looking for crocodiles, from a little rickety boat. Tasty morsels, easily capsized. What risks from the reeds could possibly outweigh the ones we had designed ourselves?

In the end, we found no crocodiles. The fierce reptiles were too far away, the men admitted, arms exhausted from rowing. We had been on the water since shortly after dawn, and the sun was now past its peak. We pulled up instead on a small beach, with the promise of a shark skull awaiting us there. Bleached in the sun, its teeth in razor rows along the inside of its massive jaw, here were the remains of an immense shark. Soon locals from an invisible village appeared, and stood with us as we admired the shark.

"Do you want to eat?" they asked us, and when we agreed, they led us to a few small dwellings, the yards immaculately taken care of, with glossy-leaved plants growing in small clumps. They were grilling a large fish on an open fire. We were to sit around the fire, and to make us comfortable, they began tearing apart their plants, to give us leaves to sit on.

"No, no, that's not necessary," we objected, startled to see them destroying their beautiful foliage. "We don't need leaves. We can sit on the sand." They looked at us, then at the leaves, artfully arrayed, and nodded.

"Bad leaves!" they said, kicking them away. "Our guests do not want leaves!" They smiled at us, pleased that they had understood our intense dislike of leaves.

We had a delicious meal of fish and rice, and afterwards broke out an object that quickly provoked giggles all around—a frisbee. Nobody had ever seen one before, so we demonstrated, and shortly all the little boys of the village were trying their hands at it. The girls hung around the edges, curious and shy. We threw to them persistently, and when the girls grew bold enough to try, the boys, now ten minutes into their careers as frisbee throwers, laughed at them mockingly.

When the fire died down and the breeze off the ocean began to feel cool, we got in the canoe and headed back to Manakara.

"It is very important that we stay in the middle," the men echoed, a mantra destined to be disobeyed. The sharp edge grasses glanced against our faces as the moon came up, and we began seeing the predatory eye shine of crocodiles, if only in our imaginations.



Back in Manakara, we became mired in a waiting game that was not of our own devising. We wanted so to escape, to explore other parts of the great red island, but we were not in control of our destiny. Waiting is an art form unknown in the developed world, though its many mundane shapes are familiar. In Madagascar, one waits for the official bearing the appropriate stamp. One waits for food while children are sent to find eggs. One waits for rivers to recede. For any task at all worth accomplishing, to wait is imperative. If it is possible to perform a task without waiting, it is either a banal task not worth mentioning, or so critical to the everyday functioning of the vast majority of people that the laws of supply and demand have actually become evident, even in a place where demand cannot always be followed by payment.

To buy the uncooked rice that keeps the Malagasy people alive, there is no need to wait. For everything else, one waits. The people do not raise their voices or weapons in anger. When faced with increasingly humiliating reasons to wait, and delays which stretch interminably, they do not threaten to abandon the system. There are no other options. The vast majority of the population have never been more than 20 miles from their birthplace, and for them, the system that exists is the only one conceivable. To abandon it would be a lonely and purely symbolic act.



Having finally escaped Manakara by train, Bret and I needed, on several more occasions, to get places. Madagascar is a large country, and we hoped to see a lot of it. Over the next several years, I began to realize that the rate of life in Madagascar *could* be beautiful and *is* strangely effective. On that first trip, I merely engaged in banging my head against the bars of Malagasy life. The act of trying to get elsewhere, overland, was a particular quagmire.

Taxi-brousse means bush taxi, but I came to regard it as a constant, willful adversary. In my mind, ground transportation in Madagascar is overseen by the minor deity (Taxi) Bruce. Bruce is a god of many things, among them prolonged discomfort and fictitious departure and arrival times. Though he makes sporadic appearances in airports throughout the world, his expertise lies on the roads of Madagascar.

Taxi-brousse is the blanket term for public ground transportation between towns in Madagascar. Taxi-brousses come in many forms. There are putt-putt Renaults, vehicles designed for private transport, perhaps for a cozy family of four, into which Bruce will cram nine or so passengers and their baggage. At the other size extreme are *Elephants de la Piste* (elephants of the trail), large trucks designed to port cattle long distance, which have been fitted with wooden benches. Probably the most common morph of taxi-brousse is an old Peugeot pickup truck, with a wooden frame on the back, covered in thick green canvas. In the bed of the truck are deposited upwards of twenty-five people, sitting on the wheel wells if lucky, on the floor if slightly less lucky, or on another person if utterly luckless. Regardless, there is never enough room to move in any way when the taxi-brousse is properly packed. Whole portions of your body are covered in other people, limbs fall asleep from being twisted into positions they were never designed to be in, and it is possible to forget that you even have a lower half. We have all experienced the discomfort of having a leg fall asleep, but having one remain asleep for an hour or more is an entirely different experience. It takes the issue of waiting from the realm of the philosophical and emotional and catapults it to the physiological. Waiting for something to start is nothing like waiting for something to end.

There are usually at least a third as many children as adults on taxi-brousse, and though extraordinarily well-behaved, given the circumstances, one of them will generally be excreting fluids from some orifice. The children who are not suffering thusly from stomach flu or a mere runny nose are frequently treated by their satisfied parents to a whole fried fish, available from roadside vendors. Children everywhere play with their food rather than eat it, and in a space crammed with bodies, playing with whole fried fish usually involves gripping its body tightly in one's little palm, while the combination of an unpaved road and poor shocks does the rest. The head of the fish inevitably ends up being thrust into the other travelers' faces, causing much merriment to the little keeper of the fish. After an hour or so has passed, in which the child is in possession of an increasingly grimy fish, Mom or another relative will unarm the child, take a few bites, and finally toss the thing out one of many holes in the canvas tarp. Soon the cycle begins anew, when the next fish is bought.

As gasoline is hard to come by in Madagascar, some taxi-brousses carry their own supply. When the hose is threaded above the heads of the passengers, residual fuel often leaks onto their heads. To make a few extra Malagasy francs, taxi-brousse often doubles as cargo transport, so the travelers may find themselves sitting on bags of tire irons, cement or rice, and taken several hours off the "direct" route in order to make a delivery. As in much of the developing world, the baggage of many Malagasy travelers includes at least one live animal, most often a chicken or a goose, and it is the rare animal that has been secured inside a basket for the journey. Quick stops produce a flurry of squawks and feathers from the avian passengers, who quickly find that flight is beyond their capabilities, so settle down on whatever is near.

There is the theoretical ability to control the climate on taxi-brousse, but Bruce prevents this. When the world is hot and dustless, in the usually arid south after a rain, the windows are whole, but inoperable. Then the heat of everyone's bodies, the exudate of sick children and the disintegrating fried fish wielded jubilantly by healthy children, combine in a thick fog which can almost be seen. When, on the other hand, the world is cold, dusty, wet or dark, the windows are typically broken, absent, or intact but permanently open. This is true on the high plateau, when the air is cold; it is true in the dry south when it has not rained, and copious amounts of dust blow in and stick to all surfaces; it is true on the east coast, where it is usually raining; and it is true at night when, despite extreme physical discomfort, you are exhausted from the inaction of the day, and from attempts to avoid unidentified fluids and foods and to wrench your foot from between a bag of rice and the (flat) spare tire. It is then that the windows are down, or the green canvas develops a mortal wound, causing air to rush in with a high-pitched squeal, making sleep ever more distant. At night, too, the "dome light"—a naked bulb hanging from a wire—is turned on. The drivers are often in possession of a single tape of bad American music, which is played at high volume over and over and over again.

The final defining character of taxi-brousse is the rate of progress. The Western mind strains against the endless delays and false starts, but the Western body, finding itself on taxi-brousse in the middle of a vast wasteland, has no choice but to succumb. Succumbing gracefully to the sorts of insults Bruce offers is a strength of the Malagasy people. It was not, during my first trip to Madagascar, a trait I yet had in my arsenal.



Huddled on a rickety wooden bench, our backpacks lying in the dirt, we were waiting for a ride across the southern half of Madagascar. At two in the morning, flimsy tickets for our journey grasped in our cold hands, we were ready to leave.

“What on earth is that noise?” Bret asked, referring to the chattering, gurgling sounds emanating from a nearby tree. *Ackity grackity prack!* Slowly, he reached his hand up through the tangled branches, looking for he knew not what. Then—an explosion of wings and screams. Flying foxes sprayed out of the tree, filling the sky, fox faces masking their bat heritage. Malagasy in the vicinity looked at the two white people in disbelief, laughing at us as we cringed.

We were trying to go across the southern half of Madagascar, by taxi-brousse. While chasing mudskippers in a mangrove swamp outside of Tulear, Bret had cut himself open, requiring stitches from the local nuns. We took this as a sign to move on. The resultant taxi-brousse ride, between Tulear and Fort Dauphin, a distance of less than 400 miles, took 61 hours. We were told, before heading out, to expect two days of solid travel, with one night of sleep in some unspecified village in between. About 36 hours from start to finish. Estimates of time, in a country with deadlines not marked in hours or days, but in seasons, should never be taken seriously.

We had by this time become well acquainted with taxi-brousse, having already traveled several hundred miles in its various guises. In this case, we were told the day before to arrive at the station at 2:00 am, and we did so. The brousse was packed and moving by seven—a very auspicious start. Three hours later we stopped for a large plate of rice, breakfast, in a small town. Later, we would reminisce about that first morning. Oh, those three hours, how blissful and uninterrupted—the longest stretch of time on the entire trip during which we were actually moving, during which time we made such rapid and unceasing progress that it was startling, truly, to discover that we had gone but 50 miles.

Within an hour of leaving the town of our breakfast, we stopped again. The taxi-brousse had run into what appeared to be a totally unprecedented situation: a flat tire. The road was deeply rutted dirt, mostly dry because of the season, with occasional sharply spined plants growing unexpectedly in the middle. A flat tire had everyone stumped. We had neither a jack nor a full spare tire. The only useful tool we had on board was a cross-shaped lugnut wrench. That, and the ingenuity of a lot of Malagasy men.

I sat in a nearby field that was dotted with cactus and cattle, the latter bearing the single large hump identifying them as zebu. Children nearby made music with found objects—pieces of bone and horn, dried cactus, or simply their palms on the ground. Zebu with rope through their noses nibbled at corn husks. Bleating goats were dragged past by local villagers. Nearby, there was a walled tomb with several wooden stellae—carved totems celebrating the dead—and zebu skulls placed around it, proclaiming the wealth of the dead man it marked.

Twenty-five hours into the journey, I had accepted that we would not be stopping anywhere to sleep. I was numb from the waist down. The brousse stopped often, at the whim of the driver—to greet old friends, new women, pigs by the side of the road. We had several breakdowns, during which local men appeared out of nowhere to help fiddle the engine back into working condition. Sometimes the stops were brief—barely long enough to crawl out the windows and stand on tingling feet with numb brains while the locals pooled around the foreigners, whispering among themselves. Sometimes they lasted an hour, long enough to find a *hotely*, where we could buy a plate of rice.

In a town called Betsioky, people began spilling from the windows of the brousse as soon as it stopped, which suggested to us that we would have at least a few minutes here, and that it might be a good town in which to find a place to pee. Peeing in a land without holes dug in the ground for that purpose, much less toilets, is hard enough without being white, and thus the object of endless fascination. There is no place to hide. The stealth pee is not possible. The sexes are roughly segregated for this activity—one side of the road for each. All of the locals, who swarm out to meet the brousse selling fried fish and brightly colored liquids in plastic bags, are immediately drawn to the foreigner. The Malagasy women, not themselves desirous of an audience, try to escape from the lumbering white woman who follows them, looking only for an appropriate place to drop her pants, not wishing for the crowd that surrounds her. The only solution is to focus on the task at hand—squat with my pants around my ankles and pee, and not give the locals more reason to laugh by losing my balance or peeing on my shoes. Make no eye contact. Gales of laughter will erupt from the Malagasy in attendance, and concentration will be broken. Let them see you piss, but never let them see you piss on yourself.

The trip continued. I became ill, and vomited out the taxi-brousse, afterwards realizing that a gaping hole in its side meant I had thrown up on my own leg. The gas line running overhead began leaking, which eventually burned holes in our synthetic jackets. Someone's chicken landed on my shoulder, and decided to stay. We stopped in a landscape with a single shack. The driver hurried away. Forty-five minutes later he emerged, zipping up his pants, a pert young woman waving good-bye from the open doorway. Leaning against the brousse, he paused for a cigarette before resuming our trip.

The many bags of concrete were unloaded, and we were able to position ourselves such that our ankles were not bent back at odd angles. Fifteen minutes later, bags of rice replaced those of concrete, and we were back to starting position. Throughout this journey, the Malagasy around us chatted among themselves. Nothing that happened surprised them. I schemed constantly, through my helpless, hopeless anger. The poorest in Madagascar cannot afford to go anywhere beyond the village in which they were born, even by taxi-brousse, so we were surrounded by middle-class folk. I wanted to yell at someone that this must be changed. But this is what is, what is known.



Finally we reached Ambovombe, the last town before the dirt road became paved for the final forty miles. It was evening, and as we came into town, I grew increasingly excited at the almost palpable proximity of Fort Dauphin, town of my dreams, renowned in my own head for its comfortable beds and cooling showers. The taxi-brousse stopped in an empty field. Fires glowed through the open doorways of shacks. Most of the passengers crawled out the windows and drifted away. I stayed near the brousse, waiting for us to be on our way, in the same way a child waits until dawn before waking her parents on Christmas morning. This is not waiting, but an irrational attempt to force time forward.

Then, the driver and his assistant began unloading our bags from the roof of the brousse. I panicked.

"What are you doing?" I demanded in French, verging on tears.

"Tonight we stay here. Tomorrow, we go." He had lost two passengers, and would force the remaining fifty of us to wait until morning, when he might pick up

replacements. If I had offered to pay the extra fares, he would have accepted the money, but forced us to wait anyway. As long as there was space that could conceivably be filled with more people, more money could be made.

I snapped. My French was poor, but my meaning clear. How can you be doing this to me, to us? I realized, in my furious, exhausted, miserable daze, that I was speaking with the voice of someone accustomed to privilege. I was here, a new college graduate, believing myself an explorer, a sympathizer with the poor and down-trodden of the world, demanding something different for myself than most of the world even knows exists. I needed a shower, a change of clothes, a bed. Ambovombe offered none of this. It seemed, in that moment, that the man responsible for bringing these things to me was the driver of the taxi-brousse. I couldn't tolerate his selfishness, but I was demanding that he tolerate mine. Of course, he refused.

His rejection of my first-world demands brought us experience we never could have had otherwise. Two young Malagasy insisted that we accompany them to their grandmother's house. It was well past midnight by now, but the entire household was awakened for the coming of the foreigners. A bucket of rainwater—precious in the scorched south of Madagascar—was brought for us to shower with. A twin-sized hay lined bed was, despite our protests, taken from Uncle Edward and provided to us. Edward proved a fascinating man, well versed in the dangers of over-population, and the particular concerns of conservation in Madagascar. Grandma—always referred to only as such—was a cultured, southern rural Malagasy, and insisted that we sit and have *ranon' ampàngo* (pronounced *ranopango*), which is effectively the national drink of Madagascar. After the rice is cooked for every meal, and is burned to the bottom of the pot, water is thrown in the pot and heated, unsticking the burnt bits of rice on the bottom. The liquid is infused with the taste of burnt rice, and little bits of rice often sink to the bottom of glasses of *ranon' ampàngo*.

While we sipped *ranon' ampàngo*, all the members of the family filed through, shook our hands and introduced themselves to us, explaining their relationships to everyone else. Cousin Hadj wanted to know about life in America—do we live in towns or on farms? Do we, like them, eat rice three times a day? Is it a very big place, like Madagascar?

Soon we went to bed, so comfortable sharing that tiny hay bed after days in a taxi-brousse that it seemed just moments later that Jean-Claude, one of our rescuers, woke us. We must have breakfast, then go. We were included in the morning meal as honored guests, and it was arranged that, when we got to Fort Dauphin, we would dine with the rest of the family there. In this way we met a female judge and her family, and learned one Malagasy family's take on the place of their country in the world and the role of religion in changing times. On Western time, with the success of my Western demands and expectations, we would have rushed through, unseeing, missing life as it was lived.

### Excerpts from Chapter 3: Inescapably *Vazaha*

Madagascar, it is true, is more isolated than most countries. Being an island, people do not flow over its borders, introducing food, custom, dress, or language. As a place that is historically difficult to access, people in the west have not spent great amounts of money or long periods of time fighting over it. The people of Madagascar have thus had few prolonged periods of contact with cultures beyond their own, though Madagascar itself has several distinct tribes, which have fought among themselves sporadically. All of which is an attempt to justify the unique feeling that the foreigner gets when attempting to do anything, including simply exist, in Madagascar. Eyes are constantly watching. Hands stray, too, but less often, as some of the tribes believe that monsters who steal children's hearts come disguised as white people. It's better not to touch such monsters. It would be best, of course, to avoid them altogether, but such a rarity, such a thing of strange make and color, how can one avoid staring? So they do stare, usually from within a group—for there is safety in numbers—and watch as the foreigners do whatever it is that we do.

Today, in Madagascar, there are still few enough foreigners—*vazaha*, in Malagasy, pronounced *vaza*—that the appearance of one inevitably prompts cries of “*vazaha!*” from all children and many of the adults in the vicinity. Why the urge to vocalize what we all know to be true—that the white person in our midst is a *vazaha*, by definition, a foreigner? Why point, and yell *vazaha*? Usually, it is tempered with “*salama*” before it, making the phrase, yelled from the street and shops, from windows and moving vehicles, “hello foreigner.” If any response by the *vazaha* is made, the Malagasy who provoked it will often fall apart in laughter.

There is a guide at Perinet, the first developed and easiest to access nature reserve in Madagascar, who was forever taking tourists, and occasional researchers, through the forest. This was most definitely his home. He felt comfortable in this forest, and knew the people who lived around it. Seeing all the tourists come and, inevitably, go back to their homes, he had to wonder what the rest of the world was about. He began asking people about their countries of origin, which is not a common practice among the Malagasy, who are generally very insular, almost as if they don't really believe there is another world out there. One tourist asked him if he wouldn't like to go to France, or somewhere else in Europe, to see how other people live. His response was quick, direct, and unflinching.

“Oh no, I never want to leave Madagascar.”

“But why? Not even for a visit?”

“No, no” he repeated, then gave his reason. “I do not want to be followed around everywhere I go, while people yell ‘Malagasy Malagasy’ at me.”

This guide had two misconceptions, both of which I find telling. First, he imagined that the rest of the world is just as insular as Madagascar, and thus responds to all foreigners the way the Malagasy do. Second, he thought the rest of the world would identify him as specifically Malagasy, rather than doing what is done in Madagascar, calling all foreigners simply foreigners. The implication is that Madagascar is so well-known a place that people from the rest of the world will surely recognize a Malagasy as such, even if people in Madagascar cannot tell a Swede from an Italian.



Tana may once have been a beautiful city. Set on the *haut plateau*, its elevation makes it cool, its hills keep one neighborhood hidden from the next, and the rice paddies in the middle of the capital hardly seem incongruous, so focused is the culture on rice. There are stalls selling food along most streets, as well as children in nothing but tattered shorts playing in the black swill that runs through them. Electric reds, oranges and purples greet visitors to the “lower town” during the flower market; adjacent are stalls selling small pieces of twine, lengths of rubber, and men offering to repair and refill bic lighters which were designed, in the developed world, to be discarded when empty. Everything is recycled, used in all possible ways, yet the trash in the streets grows, trash already sifted through infinite times. Plastics, paper, string—no such things are thrown out, so what mounts in the streets are banana peels, chicken bones, the sludge from engines, human and animal waste, dead rats. The lake in the middle of town, still retaining a superficial air of peace and beauty, is reputed to be the receptacle into which the hospital dumps medical waste.

There are few *vazaha* in Madagascar, but the highest density is in Tana. The most obvious and pervasive *vazaha* is the aging French male expat. He comes in many shapes, sizes, and reasons for being there, but almost without exception, he will have acquired, usually through payment, a beautiful young Malagasy. Sometimes the slinky young things are girls, sometimes women, but what is always true is that, once they have been rented by their parents, or sold by themselves, to a white man, they will never fully reenter normal Malagasy social life. It is difficult to go into a restaurant in Tana without observing yet another odious white man with his slinky young thing.

Walking through Tana, snapshots of a city simultaneously rotting and proud present themselves. In the lower town, near *Avenue de l'Indépendance*, a long, broad avenue with the train station at one end and the showy outdoor flower market at the other, is the shell of the Rex. It was once the only movie theatre in Madagascar. Now there are none. A thin man with an intact shirt but no shoes carries a large wooden crate on his head. It is stuffed to overflowing with fresh baguettes. He weaves his way through the crowds, through sidewalk vegetable vendors, piles of trash far higher than he, and cars with relative ease. He has carried hundreds of baguettes on his head before.

In the upper town, land of the *vazaha*, where Embassies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) vie for space on the steep narrow streets, men with flat open baskets of orange mushrooms or startlingly red strawberries approach cars, especially those containing *vazahas*, calling out their wares in French. Women vendors sell roses, lilies, lemons, and larger fruit back on the sidewalk. Just steps away, suddenly, the items for sale are no longer edible, or aesthetic, but seem as if they represent a stolen delivery. One man offers pruning shears and car mats. Several men proffer shiny new scissors. Another peers into a car with fingers full of sunglasses, sure that the white faces inside need dark glasses to hide their eyes.

Descending from the upper town towards the once majestic lake, a form, genderless behind swaths of rags, back turned to the road, has made a home of a cliff overhang beside a road on the lake. A fence, perhaps one foot high, two long, has been erected, as if to say, “this is mine, and none shall tread here but me.” I wonder—does the fence attract people who otherwise would never think to crawl into that cold and muddy place?

Throughout Tana, old women, toothless, wander the streets, perhaps knowing where they go, perhaps not. Their hands are always out when *vazaha* or well dressed Malagasy pass by, but fewer people give coins to them than to the children. What has been their life? Always begging on the streets? Recent ill fortune? What do they think to

themselves as a *vazaha* in Western clothes passes? What do they think when their pleading is met with a steely gaze in another direction, no eye contact, no recognition of their presence, or even their humanity?



We stayed in a dank, cramped hotel in Tana at first, then moved to a communal house established for researchers by some American universities, when it became clear that we would be stuck in Tana for a while. There was no escaping the suffocating masses of people. I almost pepper-sprayed a gang of little boys who were attempting to steal my wallet. Their tactic was clever: most of the children surrounded me with their hands outstretched, covering the myriad of little hands below who were unzipping the bag I had secured at my waist and neck. There seemed no end to the misery and fumes that Tana offered, and very little to be at peace with. The poverty was unmatched by what I had seen previously in Central America. Even in the interior of Guatemala and Honduras, people usually seemed to have enough food to eat, and families seemed to take care of each other.

We relied on taxis to get us where we needed to go—to the government ministries for resident visas, to administration buildings for research permits. The Tana taxis are tiny, tinny little cars, usually French, mostly rusted out, engines barely able to mount the hilly streets of Tana with two passengers inside. The taxi-drivers are so close to poverty that one time in three, when we got in a taxi, the driver promptly maneuvered to a gas station, requesting payment from us in advance so he could put a quarter's worth of gas in his car.

Acquiring research permits usually takes a tremendous amount of time. A frustrated *vazaha* researcher such as myself, who saw nothing but corruption and inefficiency in the system, was exactly what the bureaucrats expected. As such, they treated me the way they treated everyone else. "Come back tomorrow, with four copies of your research proposal, two in French. No we don't have any copy machines." Upon returning the next day: "We need two more copies in French. Come back in two days, between three and five in the afternoon." Attempts at reasoning with the bureaucrats were perceived as argument only, and treated as games. "You want to come back sooner? How about in two weeks? Yes, by then we might have your permits ready for you." I would back-pedal, then gain a slight feeling of triumph when I was able to win back the original proposition: return in two days.

All of this made me desperately unhappy, only exacerbated by the fact that I didn't yet have a research plan. I knew the kinds of questions I wanted to ask, and what group of species I intended to work on, but the whole point of this trip was to find a research site, and hopefully make some preliminary observations on animals so that I could return the following year with more carefully crafted hypotheses about the system. Now the bureaucrats demanded details from me.

"Exactly how long will you be in Ankarana? Why are you going? What will you learn?" What will I learn? If I knew that, I could have stayed home. My disgust with the system annoyed them further, and they kept me a while longer, seeming to toy with me like a cat does with a battered mouse, ripping into the prey more fiercely at weak signs of life.

As time wore on, our planned departure date from Tana repeatedly moved back, and I became dark and bitter. I was transported back to a conversation I had had with two friends, also graduate students in biology, just before leaving the States. Neither of

them work in the tropics, and wondered aloud to me what my motivations were. At this point, I had to wonder myself if there was any good, solid, constant reason to be attempting whatever it was I was attempting. If only I could be back home, with the long summer days and the predictable and unhungry people and the accessibility of everything and the comfort. Instead I found myself in a land so foreign it brought me to tears many nights. The people would smile, but there was a feeling of underlying hostility—they were so unknown to my world, and my world wholly unknown to them. Most of the other *vazaha* I saw separated themselves completely from the scenes around them, not taking in the hostile stares, the pleading eyes, the depth of poverty of people who regard us as potential saviors, even as we are acting only callous.

Walking through the streets, children beg money off *vazaha*, as do women with babies. The poorest on the street, with black grit for teeth and holes for eyes, deep expanses which perhaps see, perhaps do not, hold their hands out, hoping. Sometimes I try to communicate, but am left alone, empty, without recourse. Walking up a street, biding our time, waiting for the current permit deadline established by the bureaucrats to elapse, two women with children demanded money from us. Usually such women fade into the background after we pass, erased. These women spat at us, called us dogs—*chiens*. Later we walked back the same route, and these same women demanded money again. They didn't recognize us. We were anonymous in their country, but never invisible.

On an empty street, little girls with big heads carry woven handbaskets, and look startlingly like old grizzled women. Their siblings have already grown to lankiness, all legs and arms, scarcely covered in torn skirts and t-shirts. Pre-pubescent boys eye the *vazaha* languidly. The eyes of adults flit rapidly, from the engine of a broken vehicle, to the street garbage and the women and old men picking through it, to the *vazaha* and their jeans. Some children smile broadly at the *vazaha* and shout "*salama!*" Others are wary and scurry off, hiding behind trash or their siblings as we approach. Oh, to be gone from Tana, land of trash and anonymity.

## Chapter 9: Cute, Furry, Desperate and Alone

People the world over find comfort in cute and furry animals. Throughout the developing world people take animals from the forest as pets. Then, when the animal grows too large, or too difficult, it is returned, sometimes to a different forest entirely. People think they are doing the animal a favor. In truth, that animal, all other individuals of its own species that it may encounter, and often any humans that it meets, are worse off for its existence after being an ill-treated pet.

The term pet may be misleading for those in the developed world, who conjure up images of a well-groomed dog, lovingly taken for walks, played with, and given food designed for the well-being of the animal. Pets in the developing world are a different phenomenon, and exotic pets, such as primates from the forest, are yet one more step removed. Some of the omnipresent dogs in developing world villages are pets, inasmuch as someone would notice if they died. Similarly, the rarer cats are tolerated in people's doorways, more occasionally inside a shack, as they keep the rodent population down. They are pets, as cats on a farm are pets—acknowledged, but not enjoyed.

Exotic pets are unique, as the owners of these animals have recognized in their surroundings some element of the local biota that fascinates. You do not find marmosets as pets in Africa, nor lemurs in Central America, nor scarlet macaws in Madagascar. Exotic pets in these locales are taken directly from local habitats. Many middle class families in Tana have had a lemur as a pet. It is chic, and suggests a sophisticated recognition of the animal's unparalleled persona. Many of those people have later discarded their animals. It is no great loss for the families, for these animals were never loved, or treated as one of the family. Primate pets are often kept in cages, sometimes outside on a dead tree, tied with a short lead, unable to climb, obtain fruit, or escape from their own excrement.

A spider monkey I once met in the Osa peninsula of Costa Rica, a frugivore, was being fed bread and milk by his master. The man objected to my giving the monkey bananas and mangoes from the local market, which the animal ate with a voracious appetite, having knocked over the unwanted plate of bread and milk in his eagerness for the fruit. The man explained to me that fruit is bad for monkeys, and that he was doing it a service by generously giving it expensive milk. In truth, milk can't be digested by most adult mammals, as we often stop producing the enzyme that breaks down milk sugar when we mature, and the milk that monkey was being fed probably caused him painful stomach cramps, besides lacking the fruit pulp his anatomy demanded.

In Tana, the most obvious place to abandon lemurs is at Tsimbazaza, the underfunded zoo in the middle of a poverty-choked city. Already swamped with more animals than it can handle, Tsimbazaza receives these pets, born wild, taken into captivity and treated badly, now loved and wanted by no one. When Tsimbazaza can truly take no more, people do what must seem like the right thing to do, the kind and generous thing to do—they put their pets back into the forest. There is, however, especially among the urban middle class of the developing world, an utter lack of recognition that one wilderness differs from another. Thus, an animal that came originally from the spiny desert of the south might be replaced in high elevation cloud forest, or in the lowland rainforest of the east coast.

People who do not know America, and do not recognize its vastness, assume we all know one another. "Ah, an American. I have an uncle who moved to America, to Norfolk, Virginia. He is a mechanic, balding—do you know him?" All Americans look alike to those without practice discerning our features, and a country of this size is too large to believe. We make the same error, of course, when we assign to people a nationality—Chinese, for instance—which speaks hardly at all to the experience they have had in the specific region of China from which they come. Even Madagascar, a comparatively small country, has more than twenty distinct tribal affiliations, and the plateau people, the Merina, are offended at any suggestion that they look similar to people from the coasts, or the south. Within our own worlds, we recognize subtle differences between communities, based on neighborhoods that may be but a few blocks long. But still we have the impulse to assign character traits to whole continents worth of other people.

Similarly, most people assume that one lemur is like another, and can live anywhere that lemurs exist. Recognition of an animal's need for certain trees, or a particular kind of terrain, is understandably beyond most people. When a lemur of a lowland rainforest species is placed in a forest on the cold plateau, it will not fare well, and will never find any others of its kind. Its existence will be solitary and short. Even when care is taken to provide an animal its native habitat, no individual—human or other—without

experience in that habitat can be expected to assimilate and survive. Imagine a Los Angeles native being yanked from his comfortable urban existence, washed up on the southern shores of the Mediterranean, and told to thrive.



At dusk on our first day on Nosy Mangabe, as I returned barefoot from showering at the waterfall, Lebon called to me from the steps of the conservation agents' cabin. He was picking through rice, culling the stones from it.

"Close the lab," he suggested. "At this time of night, the lemurs sometimes try to steal things." As he said this, a female brown lemur, *Lemur fulvus*, the most widespread of the non-human primates on Madagascar, scampered by on the ground. She made what I took to be a playful swipe in the general direction of my leg. I laughed, made noises at the animal to discourage her from getting any friendlier, and continued on toward the lab. There is a troop of brown lemurs resident in the camp area at Nosy Mangabe, and I took this animal to be one of them.

The next evening, as I again returned from the waterfall at dusk, the same lemur ran by my feet, grabbing at them but missing. The lemur also made a swipe at Jessica as she left the lab, and she responded as I had, shouting at the animal, unconcernedly, but to dissuade, so as not to get her in the habit of such behavior. We never saw the lemur approach Lebon or Fortune this way, and they said nothing further to us about her. We were not even certain that it was a single lemur who was so playful, but perhaps several females in the resident troop who were a bit aggressive.

On the third day, I rose at five, dressed for the field on my tent platform, and took my toothbrush and paste to the place where the small stream pools, where we wash dishes and clean our faces and teeth. I sat on a rock and bent down, splashing water onto my face. Dawn is a meditative time on Nosy Mangabe, still cool and subdued. The nighttime frog song is dissipating, the squabbles of diurnal lemurs and insects have not yet begun, and the understory is tinged a deep blue. My mind floated easily in this place so far from home, as I casually planned the day's work.

Searing pain suddenly enveloped my left arm. The female lemur raced by me, not two feet from my face, up to my right, where she perched in bamboo, eight feet away. I stood abruptly, uncomprehending. She made another movement in my direction, and as I picked up a rock to throw at the beast who bit me, I felt the blood flowing down my arm. Twisting to look at my wound, I was horrified to find a deep open gash, looking more like a knife wound than an animal bite. The muscle, my triceps, was exposed, bubbling out of the wound, and bleeding profusely. Before I could internalize this, the lemur was coming at me again, on the ground, across the rocks. I kicked at her, and yelled, and she retreated. Hurriedly, confused, I splashed my arm with cold, clean water, and picked up my things. Walking slowly back to the lab, I couldn't think, didn't grasp how this fit into any bigger picture, refused to comprehend how bad it might be. I called to Jessica, told her I'd been bitten by a lemur, and showed her my arm. She was horrified by the wound. My fears were validated. I had indeed been ripped open by a wild animal, unprovoked. The wound would surely demand stitches; the behavior, an explanation.

I was dazed. The wound was open to the air, attracting the biting flies which pervade the forest during daylight hours. I slathered it in iodine and Neosporin, but this didn't provide much of a barrier to the outside world.

"Can you stitch me?" I asked Jessica. She was pallid. She had never had stitches herself, had never even seen them. Despite this, I believed, naively, that she could sew me up without much trauma to either of us. Before proceeding, we got Lebon's attention. He was just waking up, preparing to rake the camp, the one job that was done every day. He was suitably appalled with the situation.

"Do you know how to give stitches?" I asked him.

"Ah, stitches are very difficult, I think." This was his polite way of saying "I can't do that." I had failed to include sutures in my medical kit, but I did have a set of sewing needles, including a thick, curved mattress needle. I appointed myself on a wobbly bamboo bench, held my arm over my head so Jessica could access the bite, asked Lebon to hold my wound closed as best he could, and told Jessica to puncture my arm with the mattress needle. After about two minutes of this, the needle was halfway embedded in my arm, no stitch was yet apparent, and all three of us were shaking. I suggested, much to the relief of Jessica and Lebon, that we abandon the plan.

"I'll need to see a doctor," I told Lebon. He would have to radio Maroantsetra to arrange for a boat to come pick me up. He looked alarmed.

"No need for that. Earlier someone was bit on the foot by the same lemur, but it was not bad, so you will also be better soon." I was feeling unsure of my judgment, but did think I needed to get to a doctor. I waited for him to expand on his position.

"Perhaps," he continued, "you should just sit here, wait for a few days, and see what happens." He and Fortune were already demonstrating expertise at sitting around and waiting to see what happened, but I was not of a mind to follow suit. I did, after all, have a gaping hole in my arm, possibly inflicted by a sick animal. By this time my thoughts had turned to rabies, then to other infections, like gangrene, and all the possible nasty things that can happen as a result of a deep animal bite in a persistently hot, wet place.

"No, I must see a doctor. Now." My mind was growing more confused, but I could repeat myself with some success.

"But it's only six in the morning, and I cannot use the radio until eight, because nobody is on the other end until then," Lebon argued. Even then, there was a chance that the communication wouldn't be possible, as the radio was frequently low on batteries or shorting out.

"Okay, I'll come back in two hours." I started myself on a course of antibiotics, and retreated to the dock to lie down and consider my fate. My arm throbbed, and my thoughts raced, then flitted, from one incoherence to the next. Why would a wild animal attack a person, unless it was rabid? How did Lebon know that this was the same lemur that previously bit someone else? Could I go home now?

After two hours of this, I stood up, light headed, already imagining every ache as the beginning of the end. I staggered the thirty feet back to camp, and asked Lebon to radio Maroantsetra.

"Why?" He looked genuinely confused. I repeated my plan to go see a doctor.

"But," he warned, "the park boat is not in town, so you will have to hire a private boat, which will be expensive." The Projet Masoala motorboat was on the other side of the peninsula. There are only two other boats for hire in the area, and they are, as he said, quite expensive. For Madagascar. Even if they had been expensive by American standards, it hardly seemed relevant. I wasn't going to risk my arm, perhaps my life, to save a few dollars. Finally I persuaded him that I was going to town, with his help or not. He radioed, and arranged for a private boat to come out and get me immediately. He was outraged at the price they would charge me for the three mile trip—the

equivalent of \$25 in Malagasy francs—and tried, again, to dissuade me. He knew I was being robbed. But he had no idea how little that mattered. The economies we live in are too different for Lebon to comprehend. I spent on a single boat ride what he and his family might spend on life in a month.

Jessica and I got to town as it was turning into a steamy, swooning day. Nosy Mangabe is always cooler than town. The forest, long gone from Maroantsetra, helps insulate against heat on Nosy Mangabe, water surrounds the small land mass, and the waterfall is always there, beckoning. Maroantsetra, by comparison, is hot and dusty, cramped with people.

In town, Clarice's compassionate nature came through, and she took us to a man I came to refer to as the good doctor. The good doctor's French was easily understandable, even by me, but it was a relief to have Jessica there for translation help just in case. He worked in a small, cool building with bamboo walls and a thatched roof, and his manner was professional but amused. I watched carefully as he poured alcohol over all the tools he would use on me, then set them on fire to sterilize them. I carry my own sterile syringes in the field, but not a complete doctor's kit, and there is always the fear of disease. AIDS is not formally recognized as a problem by the Malagasy government, but it is surely there.

Once the good doctor anesthetized my arm and had me lying helpless on his examining table, he began extolling the virtues of lemurs.

"Lemurs, you know, are smart and funny, quite clever, and beautiful, too." I gaped at him, asked Jessica for a translation just in case I had got it wrong. I hadn't. He continued, "They don't usually do this sort of thing. You mustn't hate lemurs because of this."

"I love animals, that's why I'm here in Madagascar," I paused. This was true, but incomplete. "But I'd like to have this particular lemur for lunch." He laughed.

"Oh no, we can't eat lemurs. Some people do, of course, but it's not right..." he trailed off.

"I don't want to make a *habit* of it, you understand, just this particular one." I wasn't making myself clear. Having a lemur for lunch may have been the wrong way to convey that thought. I asked Jessica to step in and help me. The doctor seemed relieved with her explanation.

"Oh, yes, that particular lemur. What were you doing to provoke her? Did you try to pet her?" The good doctor was beginning to get to me. Did I try to pet her? A wild animal? Did I look mad? Was the rabies manifesting already?

"No, I was only sitting at the stream, brushing my teeth."

"Ah, they love toothpaste. She probably wanted your toothpaste." I cast a glance at Jessica, who is expert at looking simultaneously bemused with and removed from a situation. She was doing it now.

"Lemurs like toothpaste?" I repeated back to him.

"Yes," the doctor nodded again, his needle in my arm. "Really, they like anything that's sweet. They eat fruit, you know." I was beginning to understand. This good doctor did know something of lemurs, and couldn't put my story together in a way that made sense to him. It was possible that the lemur liked toothpaste, but I doubted it, as mint has a very particular aroma, and besides, she didn't make a grab for my toothpaste, just me.

"Voilà, we are done." I twisted to look at my arm, and was surprised how quickly he had put in several large stitches. "Come back in three days—I'll check for infection again then. And don't have the lemur for lunch." He chuckled. We had come to an

understanding. As long as I wasn't living out on Nosy Mangabe with a yen to eat all lemurs, he could accept my ire at one of them.

Jessica and I walked back through town, and ran into Felix, perhaps the best of the local naturalist guides, along the way. Felix is the happiest person I have ever met, with the possible exception of his young son Alpha, who shares his father's exuberance at all that comes his way. Felix is a young, smart, almost trilingual, forest-loving Malagasy man with no chance of ever living a life outside of Maroantsetra. He is just Felix, with no last name, and when I've asked him about it, his eyes grow distant, and he says his mother just called him Felix, that's all. He is enchanting, with deep soulful eyes, a wide smile, and a laugh like wind-chimes. The story of the lemur attack on one of the two *vazaha* women living on Nosy Mangabe was already circulating through town, and he had come to find us and hear the story firsthand. I recounted it. He looked as serious as I've ever seen him, then announced,

"The lemur must have wanted your toothpaste." My mouth hung open.

"You think so?"

"Why else would a lemur do something like that?" I had to admit he had a point. He continued. "You weren't trying to pet her were you?" I almost yelled at Felix, even though he is the last person who could deserve my anger. NO I didn't pet the lemur, NO I didn't bring this on myself, NO I'm not the one acting unpredictably here.

"It's the lemur!" I wanted to scream, "I'm the victim, not her!" Instead, I said, "No, I didn't try to pet her. She's rather mad, you know." Maybe if I started saying that, it would catch on and circulate through town. The lemur's toothpaste alibi would disappear into her madness.

The truth eventually did come out, emergin slowly from many sources. A woman in town had been keeping this lemur as a pet for a few years. The lemur was never socialized, never even allowed to climb trees. She didn't know any of her own kind. Over time, she did seem to grow mad, and began lunging at the neighborhood children who had tormented her with sticks and taunts. The lemur's human owner wouldn't tolerate such behavior, so looked for someplace to discard the animal. The woman was a member of Lebon's extended family, and when she approached him, he was all too eager to help. This, he was sure, was a clear example of what conservation agents should be doing—saving poor lemurs, and putting them back in the forest. He had done this the day before I arrived on Nosy Mangabe.

Though I now recognized that the lemur was probably just crazy from having been chained up alone for years, she was still a threat. When we returned to the island that night, we went with instructions from Projet Masoala for the conservation agents: trap the lemur, and bring it to town. For the next two days, nothing happened. I was jumpy, scared at forest noises when I'd always been comfortable before. And the lemur continued making advances on Jessica and me. Raised among people, perhaps she mistook us for females of her own kind, encroaching on territory where before there had been only males.

Finally we gave Lebon and Fortune an ultimatum: trap that lemur, or we'll find a way to do so, and it may not be pretty. The next day, a lobster trap showed up in a tree by the lab. I've never caught lobster myself, but I have a feeling that they are, well, different from lemurs. I laughed at the trap, and wondered how long it would be before I went into town again to find—what? Twine? Lumber? How would I trap a lemur? I had no idea. But it seemed clear that I would have to.

When Jessica and I returned to camp that evening, the lemur was sitting in the lobster trap, eating fruit Lebon had given her. She and Lebon had a relationship, it was

clear, but nobody else could get close. I congratulated him on having caught a lemur with a lobster trap. He thought nothing of it.

After the lemur had been caught and caged, Lebon radioed for a boat to come get us. It was time for me to go in for my follow-up with the good doctor anyway. On the short, choppy ride across the bay to Maroantsetra, the lemur looked stricken in her lobster trap. She threaded her hand through the wire mesh towards Lebon, and he took her hand in his. They sat, hand in hand, for the ride to town.

Later that day, Lebon asked me if I knew why the lemur had to be taken away. I boggled at him, and, rather than sharing the rather obvious answer, I asked, "No, Lebon, tell me—why did this animal have to be removed?"

"Because," he answered, speaking with authority, "if she stays here, she will get sick and die. As a conservation agent, it is my job to keep all lemurs healthy." This concept of conservation—to simply keep all that is charismatic alive—had never before occurred to me. It scared me. The conservation agent charged with protecting a fragile nature reserve had failed to internalize the difference between protecting whole ecosystems, and protecting individual animals. Of course, many Americans make exactly the same mistake. One reason the cause of environmentalism is at risk in the States is because people erroneously think it pits spotted owls against working men and women. But spotted owls, charismatic as they may be, are only a proxy for the entire, threatened ecosystem that we hope to save.

Lebon's vision of the lemur's future was also sadly ironic. Information travels slowly, and with much mutation, in Madagascar, like a massive game of telephone. Early rumors that the animal was headed to a retirement home for old and disturbed lemurs in southern Madagascar were probably false, possibly started to soothe Lebon. It is far more likely, as later reports suggested, that the animal was put down. Tsimbazaza, the zoo in Tana, already had far more unsocialized lemurs than it could handle. And this animal would never successfully reenter lemur society. Killing it was the most humane thing to do.



I have repeatedly entered the lands and cultures of the developing world and started making value judgments. Don't tear down trees for crops that are pure luxury. Don't hunt bats if you have other things to eat. Don't take wild animals out of the forest and keep them as pets. Don't tell me about conservation and saving mad lemurs, for I know better. Where do I get off?

Left to their own devices, pre-industrial people don't tend to destroy the land they live on. The fisherpeople of Nosy Mangabe disobey the letter of the law regarding coming on to the island, but that law shouldn't be enforced on them anyway. They smoke fish with dead wood they have collected, and spend the night camped on the beach, but they use this land well, as their ancestors have been for hundreds of years. They respect the land, and use it sustainably. Most importantly, this island was taken from the local people and made into a reserve some years ago—some of these fisherpeople were using this land as a base for their fishing, their livelihood, before it was ever designated a reserve. The land belongs to them. It does not belong to the Malagasy sailors who come off spice boats for fresh water and lemur meat, nor to the Western conservation NGOs who administer it with the best intentions, and certainly not to me, a white researcher who comes to look at frogs.

But the Western NGOs come in and declare, with the tacit approval of the Malagasy government, that this land is theirs to protect. Wisely, they hire local people like Lebon and Fortune to act as guardians. The guardians get the fancy title of conservation agent, so their friends and family in town don't so easily see them for what they really are—policemen keeping local people off their ancestral lands. The problem is, these particular conservation agents don't understand conservation. They, like so many in the Western world, make the mistake of believing that only those things that are big and cute and engaging should be protected, and they fail to protect all that doesn't so easily grip their imagination. Lebon's mistake in understanding is not so different from the one we make when giant pandas and lions and whales are paraded in front of us to evoke a visceral reaction of guardianship and compassion, and we respond with our pocketbooks. How much of our grassroots money-from-the-gut goes to protect eels, after all?

The customs of the local people usually make a lot of sense in context, even when the *vazaha* who effectively parachutes in from outer space can't make sense of them. Problems tend to arise at the junction between native and Western culture, and Westerners shouldn't point to these, nod sagely, and say "what would they do without us." I desperately want vanishing Malagasy ecosystems to be protected before they are entirely lost, and I don't know how best to help the cause. I do know, though, that going halfway is not the answer. Putting local people on the payroll and telling them that they are conservation agents, without insuring that they know what that means, is irresponsible. If these men don't understand why we might want to protect a whole forest, rather than a single lemur—and why should they, at first?—it is our job, if we are already intervening, to insure that they learn.



As my wound healed, so too did that part of my brain which had, in an instant, searing flash, turned on me and warned me repeatedly that lemurs were dangerous. On full moons when the water apple trees in camp were fruiting, the resident troop of brown lemurs spent all night awake in a long fruit fest, dropping the cores and bad fruit down onto the roof of my tent platform. Sometimes a lemur would scamper by on the ground, going after a piece of good fruit, and if I was in my tent trying to sleep, I would wake and tense in that moment, fearing, irrationally, that it would come for me too.

By the time I was again able to sweat during field work without wincing from the salt in my wound, and shower in the waterfall without constantly trying to keep one arm out of the spray, I enjoyed the lemurs fully again. The comic ruffed lemurs make such a production of a human going by, it's almost impossible not to hoot back at them, egging them on with cackles as they peer out of the trees at the strange being on the ground. The brown lemurs did show a noticeable interest in the lab whenever we returned from town with bananas, and their spirit was contagious. Lemurs were again wonderful co-inhabitants of my small world, rather than unpredictable and treacherous foes. And it turns out that rabies isn't known in lemurs, so I probably was never at risk of turning up rabid. All the same, I'd rather not put my arm to the lemur test again.

## Excerpts from Chapter 22: But They Are Wild

On my first trip to Madagascar, when we were in the dry south, Bret and I wanted to see nature untamed. We had heard about a “private reserve” that promised snakes and forest and sifakas, so we signed up to go. Our guide, who had no ecological knowledge, was a glorified driver, and he took the two of us along an interminable stretch of road. We were watching the clock, thinking the road might be the extent of what we saw on this all-day “nature tour.”

Spotting a troop of ring-tail lemurs playing in the spindly, spiny native plants—reminiscent of Dr. Seuss, like so much in Madagascar—we grew excited, and asked the driver to stop.

“You don’t want to get out here. This is forest!” he exclaimed.

“Yes,” we agreed, confused at the implication. “And there are lemurs here. We want to see them.” The driver shook his head.

“Not these lemurs. These are no good.”

“Why?” we persisted. “There’s a whole troop—look, a baby on its mother’s stomach, and juveniles chasing each other. These are wonderful lemurs!”

“But they are wild,” he said. We were silent. “I’m taking you to better lemurs, lemurs that know people, and approach when you give them bananas.”

So this, like other reserves we had been to and were now avoiding, was to be a small plot of disturbed forest where friendly lemurs approached banana-toting tourists. As we were to find over and over again, few people trying their hand at ecotourism in Madagascar understand that some of us want to be immersed in nature, not carefully shielded from its betrayals and surprises.

Conservation is a tricky issue, especially in the developing world. White outsiders want to preserve the environment they view as precious, often without regard for the equally native and natural people who live in it. Ecologists and other trained scientists gain personally by convincing themselves and granting agencies that their work will benefit conservation efforts. Native peoples cannot fathom why the welfare of animals they might eat, or of trees, is more important than their own survival and traditions.

Why do we want to save the forests? Some would say because they are valuable, as potential harbourers of undiscovered compounds, which might do humanity a public health service if found. But if we need justify all scientific inquiry on the basis of what specific, practical, benefit it will serve, we are lost. Our culture cannot claim foresight, nor intelligence, nor even a grasp of history, if we pursue only that which can be currently justified as useful.

If not for practical reasons, then, why do we want to save the forests? In part, because humans do not have the right to destroy them, though we have already destroyed so many in the developed world. We did not make them—indeed, they preexisted us, helped shape us into our current form. The emotional argument is perhaps the strongest: do we really want a planet without natural places? Are we content to lose all space that is free of human nattering and influence? As human culture homogenizes to a lowest-common-denominator across the globe, do we want to also eradicate what advertising and big business cannot get to? Nosy Mangabe has never been touched by Adidas or Nabisco or McDonalds. Even Madagascar is too small a market for them to be there yet. Coca Cola is there, in drinks with names we don’t have at home, but their influence is relatively small. In 1999, the theme song from

*Titanic* blared from every speaker in Maroantsetra. Luckily, Maroantsetra has very few speakers. There are a few huts in town where you can go watch a video on a certain night every week, the name of the film written on a chalkboard in front of the house. There is no television in Maroantsetra yet. Still, our Western influence is coming, albeit under a different guise.

The new hotel, the grand hotel, the Relais, opened in Maroantsetra in 1997. At the time, Maroantsetra had one wheelbarrow to its name, and when Jessica and I tried to commission it to aid us in porting our baggage and provisions to the boat, it had no wheel. Maroantsetra had, as its sole attractant for the *vazahas*, the proximity of Nosy Mangabe and the more isolated Masoala peninsula. And yet the hotel came to Maroantsetra.

It is debatable whether conservation should encourage tourism at all. It may be helpful to conservation efforts to spread the word about the beauty and diversity of ecosystems in the world, through interested laypeople with a fascination for nature. But should it be a stated goal to attract Westerners to preserved areas in the developing world? I believe so, for the following reasons: naturalist guides are required to show *vazaha* tourists the forest. In general, naturalist guides are locals, and these people will, if they are good at what they do, have an interest in the forest, even a passion for it. Furthermore, if their welfare depends on being hired by *vazaha* to be shown the forest, they will come to respect and help to protect the forest. They will speak of the forest with fondness and care, to their families and friends. It will become clear to the community that protecting the forest brings money into town, and not just for the naturalist guides. The food vendors in the marketplace benefit, and the hotels, and the restaurants. The weavers who make baskets and hats benefit from our presence, for we buy their products. And the charcoal sellers, who sit at the bottom of the economic ladder among the vendors in the Maroantsetra *zoma*, they too benefit from us, for we must buy charcoal to cook our rice. Even the *vazaha* must eat. With tourists come an infusion of money into the local economy. In all of these ways, ecotourists, who come to see the forest, bring an economic bloom to the town of Maroantsetra. The townspeople can see, even if they do not understand why, that the attraction is the forest, and that without the forest, the *vazaha* would stop flowing, and so would the money.

But the introduction of a hotel such as the Relais de Masoala changes all of this. The Relais charges rates that are an order of magnitude higher than the other hotels in town—\$70 per night, while the Maroa charges \$7.50. If you stay at the Relais, their vehicle picks you up at the airport and ferries you through town without stopping—Maroantsetra passes by the window. You are delivered to their little haven, which has very little to do with Madagascar. All of the workers are dressed in odd, but specifically non-Malagasy costumes. No other villagers are allowed on the grounds.

Patrons of the Relais are discouraged from going into town. Why make that long, hot, dusty walk, where you might be obliged to interact with townspeople who share no piece of life experience with you, and may not even share a language. It will probably be frustrating, and perhaps even a little frightening, to have interactions so foreign to your expectations. The Relais successfully protects its patrons from ever realizing that Maroantsetra is filled with smiling, life-loving people. The Relais provides European meals, a full bar, hot showers, laundry service. And, for an additional fee, it offers day trips to Nosy Mangabe.

The Relais did not want to advertise Nosy Mangabe to its patrons. Access to Nosy Mangabe requires acquiring permits from government agencies, and hiring naturalist guides from their Association at Projet Masoala. The Relais is otherwise free from such

restrictions. Monique wanted to take tourists to her flat little deforested island, where the Metcalfs and I had spent Easter two years earlier, rather than the lush rainforested island of Nosy Mangabe. But her tourists were having none of it. So she made a bid to take over Nosy Mangabe. The Wildlife Conservation Society has the interests of the forest, and the local people, in mind. Were the new hotel to take over Nosy Mangabe, however, those interests would be turned on their head. It would, I am certain, be the end of the reserve. Monique, and her Relais, are not mega-corporations. Because the new hotel is relatively small, it seems less dangerous. I believe it may be more so.

Before the Relais, the few tourists who came to northeastern Madagascar were ecotourists. People engaged with nature, wanting to see the results of millions of years of evolution in weird and fantastic forms, and willing to be somewhat uncomfortable to do so. The people Monique is attracting are wealthy tourists, adventurous enough to go off the beaten path to Madagascar, but unwilling to endure hardship to experience Madagascar as it really is. These people are probably aware that one of Madagascar's claims to fame is the extraordinary diversity and endemism of its biota. But these are not people awed by nature. They are tourists, not ecotourists, and by ensuring their comforts, and protecting them from interacting with the real people who live just outside the gates of the Relais, it is ensured that their preconceptions about the developing world will remain.

The Relais would turn Nosy Mangabe into a beach resort for wealthy *vazaha*. I have seen this before, in Central America. A façade is erected to look like home. Tourists hand over large amounts of cash for the pleasure of visiting the façade, and little of the money ever trickles into the local economy. Money would probably be poured into a more functional and beautiful plumbing system; into a kitchen that could prepare meals without charcoal smoke or rice; into easy walking trails. The Relais would probably begin feeding lemurs, to ensure close encounters for the tourists, so that nobody went home feeling they had not gotten their money's worth.

Money would not be expended for the exquisite naturalist guides who have trained themselves so well in the ways of the forest, in languages, and in how to interact with *vazaha*. Already there were arguments over pay—the hotel did not want to pay the minimal rate the guides had agreed upon among themselves. Little of the money spent by tourists at the Relais went to the local economy. What value, then, does this new hotel have to local people?

If the new hotel administered Nosy Mangabe, the people of Maroantsetra would come to dislike the island, too. There would be no incentive to protect forest, once economic incentive vanished. Even the guides, even Felix, with the most naturalist in him of all, he who loves to go into the forest even when his tourists do not, would have to find other work, or he and his young son Alpha would starve. Knowledge of the forest and its intricacies would die out in Maroantsetra. Ecotourists would no longer be attracted here, because the prices asked by the Relais are too high for most. Having one or two researchers hanging about to explain some curious natural history revelations to the fellow *vazaha* might be handy, and surely there are enough out of work Ph.D.s to take that job, demoralizing and, indeed, destructive, as it is. For that job would take food and knowledge out of the mouths and heads of the local people.

Northeastern Madagascar, including the newly minted Masoala National Park, has more species endemic to itself than most countries. It is the largest remaining piece of lowland rainforest in Madagascar, and is incomparable, and irreplaceable. It is at risk, because decisions are being made that put greater emphasis on impressing the wealthy than on protecting the environment. It is a deal made with the devil. The devil: money

hunger from the west. Bring rich *vazaha* here while exploiting their desires for comfort, and there will be no returning. Pirates, a Dutch hospital, a Malagasy cemetery, Malagasy fisherpeople—all of these are part of this island's history, and all have left a mark, but none is indelible. The mark of Western money would never be erased.

Once the mark of Western comfort-driven consumption comes to a place, everyone believes that their lives, too, would be better if only. If only I had a tarp like hers. If only I had hiking boots like his. If only I had as much money as they do. With their longings, and an increasing availability of consumer goods, we will turn them into us, with our lost communities, our clans spread thin. They will forget to value what they have, and care only for what they do not. And in all of that cultural change, while the generous and real people of Maroantsetra turning to Western wannabes like the rest of the world, the forest will disappear. It will go quietly. A few people will notice. Nobody will heed the cries of despair. And then, it will be gone.



There is one trash can on Nosy Mangabe, half an old oil drum. It is not particularly large—about twice the size of an under-sink kitchen garbage can. A *programme* exists for its regular pickup and emptying in town and return, but it is not adhered to. Probably, when there are no *vazaha* on the island, the trash can fills so slowly that it seems ludicrous to those who would be doing the work to cart a quarter- or third- full trash can into town twice a month.

When Bret, Glenn and I arrived, the situation quickly became dire. We almost doubled the population of the island. But it was not our numbers that made the difference. Had three Malagasy researchers arrived—as, indeed, the two pig researchers did shortly before us—trash accumulation would have accelerated, but not by much. The Malagasy eat rice, smoke fish and cigarettes, and reuse every made or found object. As Westerners, we are consumers. This despite our personal environmentalism which translates, in the U.S., to buying in bulk, thus reducing consumption of packaging; recycling papers and glass and most plastics; reusing boxes and shopping with baskets or cloth bags. But these efforts are, by comparison with a simpler way of life, trivial.

We arrived on Nosy Mangabe with many baskets of rice, which would have comprised most of our purchases for the next four months had we been Malagasy. But the increased options in Maroantsetra meant that there was pasta to be had, imported “Marie 22” crackers, tomato paste, soy sauce, mustard. There was even soy oil, prepackaged in plastic bottles. Previously, the only cooking oil available was coconut oil in dirty oil drums, with flies resting on the surface. An old ladle was used to dip into the drum and deposit some of the opaque oil, sediment and all, into a container you brought. We preferred the stuff that came with its own clean plastic skin, easily tossed when the contents were used.

We bought clothes-cleaning soap, which came in individual plastic packets, to augment the biodegradable CampSuds we had brought from home. We also found person-cleaning soap, a new kind that didn't stick to your skin for days after each use, as was true of the only soap you used to be able to buy in Madagascar—*Nosy* soap. It means “island soap.” *Nosy* soap is still used by the locals for cleaning their dishes and clothes and selves. It is sold as bars without wrapping, open to the air, and is cheap. The new soap, which our Western sensibilities prefer, because it comes off when we rinse, has a nicely comforting name—*Lux*—and comes well-packaged, in several layers of paper, with plastic on the outside, and a picture of a beautiful, smiling, and immaculate

white woman. We believe that we prefer it only because it does not leave the sticky residue that *Nosy* soap always does, but perhaps the name and packaging also attract some deep-seated consumer in us. Perhaps it is precisely when I am sure that I am not the target audience for an advertisement that they have gotten into my head.

We buy more of these products every time we go into town. The Malagasy don't tend to—both because they cannot afford it, and because it is not what they are used to. Rice comes without packaging in Madagascar. The diversity we expect in our diets requires that a great deal of food be moved around the planet, and with that food, its packaging. Our desires brought packaging to Nosy Mangabe. Packaging is just trash, an earlier life stage. We filled the trash can quickly.

To alleviate some of the trash problem, and to satisfy our composting urges, we suggested that a pit be dug, for organic trash. At first glance, it seemed extremely odd that this had not been done before—wasn't composting a natural outgrowth of farming on poor soils such as these, a way to recycle what nutrients you could? Our suggestion was taken, and we watched with interest as the pit began to fill with uneaten rice, fruit peels, fish bones and heads. The trash can, now devoted to non-organic material, remained empty. The Malagasy generated essentially no inorganic trash.

We drank perhaps a bottle of wine a week, and the empty bottles were of value to the Malagasy. They do not typically drink wine. The *Lazan'i Betsileo* vintage, made in the Fianar region of Madagascar, is not a fine wine, but drinkable, and a bargain at \$3/bottle. Who here can afford a \$3 bottle of wine, when they can get *toka gasy*—the local, extremely strong rotgut—for pennies? They understand neither our penchant for wine, nor our willful indifference to the glass bottles that hold the wine. To contain the coconut oil they buy in bulk, a wine bottle does nicely.

The trash can never remained empty for long, as we dumped our inorganic trash into the trash can, and filled it. We generated plastic bottles with soy oil residue in them. And tomato paste cans. And the plastic wrappings from pasta, candles, malaria pills.

When you buy prepared food from street vendors in town—samosas, or macaroons—it is handed to you on a piece of old paper. The paper tends to be from a long-since irrelevant bureaucratic document in French, delineating the hierarchy of now-extinct personages in a particular government ministry. Everything is reused until it is gone. We take those greasy pieces of paper and throw them away.

When we bought bouillon cubes in one store, they gave us a plastic bag to hold them. The bag was printed in Chinese, advertising tea strainers from a remote province in China. How many hands must it have passed through before reaching ours? Its journey ended with us. Once emptied of jumbo cubes, we threw it away. In a land of practically nothing, we still managed to generate trash—a tiny amount by American standards, but huge by those of the rest of the world.

The trash can on Nosy Mangabe overflowed with *vazaha* trash. I left our friends anything they found useful, but still the trash can overflowed. Ten years from now, one may still be able to find a plastic bag from K-Mart or REI in Maroantsetra. As I happily roam farmer's markets in the States with my Maroantsetra-bought baskets, feeling virtuous, the rest of the world is sorting through my trash, making it valuable.