

An Amateur's Guide to the Planet

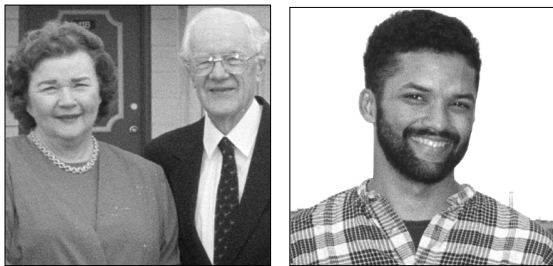
TWELVE ADVENTURE JOURNEYS AND LESSONS
FOR THE CONTEMPORARY UNITED STATES



BY JEANNETTE BELLIVEAU

THE AGE OF ADVENTURE TRAVEL

We roam the globe yet lack insight into what we see



Mary G. and Louis J. Belliveau, left, and Lamont Weston Harvey.

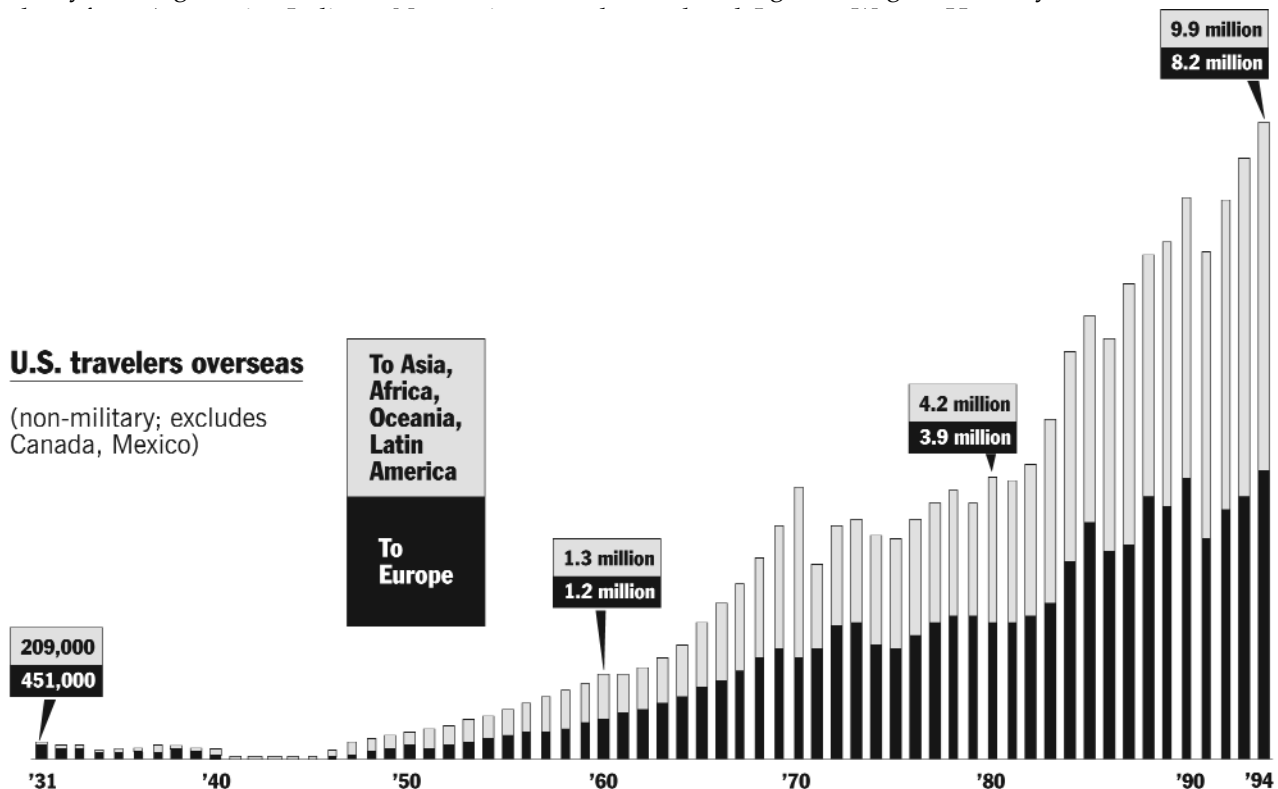
A fascinating phenomenon began with the commercial introduction of the jet engine in 1958 and accelerated with the coming to affluence of the Baby Boomers in the 1980s. Exotic travel, once the province of explorers, traders, scholars and pilgrims, became a pastime for average people as well. Frankly written guidebooks detailing how to go places on your own and the opening of China to the West contributed to the trend. Nearly 10 million Americans a year, for example, now visit non-European foreign destinations.

People from Santa Barbara, California, touch the Great Wall of China. Folks from Rockville, Maryland, encounter each other in remote Madagascar. Honeymooning New Yorkers learn about medicinal

erage mean that fewer of us have the background to grasp much of the significance of what we are viewing.

Regular people with typical, provincial U.S. schooling may find that travel stimulates lingering questions about the way the world fits together.

In this book, I attempt to resolve a decade's worth of riddles resulting from my adventure travels and to apply lessons from these journeys, where possible, to understanding the United States. To do so, I consulted top scholars and foreign correspondents in each subject area, and 600 book and periodical references. Two people in particular patiently provided historical and economic perspective useful to understanding the foreign world: my hus-



Based on data from the U.S. Travel and Tourism Administration as reported in the *Statistical Abstract of the United States*; the International Trade Administration, Tourism Industries; and from the Census Bureau's *Historical Statistics of the United States*

Travel makes events in vaguely imagined faraway places as tangible as a pebble caught in your shoe. And nations in the developing world shed enormous light back on Western issues, including poverty, nuclear power, national greatness and decline, immigration and even etiquette. Yet these lessons take ideologically unpredictable directions. The adventure traveler may begin to feel a gap between his or her outlook and others' views. Experiences gleaned around the globe may make one wildly pro-environment, thunderously conservative on the traditional family, and cautiously optimistic about U.S. race relations.

My hope is that anyone who has visited any of these regions in the way I have, as an amateur traveler, will find that this book sheds light on his or her own explorations.

If you have not yet been to the places mentioned, by

all means consider going. Many world treasures appear to be more impermanent than you would wish. These include the Maya pyramids, the lemurs of Madagascar, the Buddhist culture of Burma, the pyrotechnic corals of Thailand and the elephants of East Africa.

Please take great care in selecting local transportation and try to avoid ramshackle domestic air connections or bus lines. Make certain that your money gets into the hands of local families who run small lodgings, eateries and guide services. Then your travel will be of most benefit to all concerned.



Jeannette Belliveau
Baltimore, Maryland,
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•••

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EDEN UNDER SIEGE

Madagascar ... and lessons on the Earth's fragility



Two black lemurs beg from Jim.

Getting to Madagascar has been difficult for, oh, 165 million years. Way back then the island, about the size of California and Oregon, split off and drifted east from the giant parent continent that also calved Africa.

Remoteness made the island one of the last sizable places to be settled by humans and virtually the only place left (aside from the nearby Comoro Islands) where lemurs, an ancient ancestor of humans, still live.

SUNDAY, JULY 16, 1989

The middle of the African night

Even in the 20th century, our shaky air tickets attested to the continuing isolation and lack of flights to the Big Red Island. Our cheap digital watches, selected to be unattractive to thieves, blinked 3:45 a.m. as we stood in deserted Jomo Kenyatta International Airport in Nairobi. Empty darkness surrounded the check-in booth for Air Madagascar. We'd come 7,500 miles from Washington, D.C., without any assurance that we could complete the final 1,400 miles to our goal: the rare creatures of this mysterious island off southern Africa.

We wanted to see lemurs.

Anyone who has happened across a documentary on lemurs, or seen them in a zoo, will perhaps understand the impulse to travel halfway around the world to engage them in the wild. While riotously colored birds soar in Brazil, and Africa displays the most magnificent big creatures anywhere, nothing quite beats lemurs for quirky, almost alien charm. If you crossed a monkey from outer space with a basket of puppies, you might approximate their big bright eyes, foxlike muzzles and gregariousness. No other creature seems so peculiar yet winsome.

Getting to the lemurs' homeland proved especially tricky for us as budget travelers making our own arrangements. Our cut-rate air tickets meant that our names appeared on a waiting list, rather than con-

firmed, to board the three-hour flight from Nairobi to Antananarivo, Madagascar's capital.

Innocent as lambs, with inexplicable optimism, we stood first in our imaginary line, lacking any agents to talk to or other passengers to be in front of. At moments like this, you question everything: Is this the place? Is this the day? Is this the time? Is there even a remote possibility that we're going to Madagascar?

Our intrepid group consisted of my brother, Jim, 28 at the time of our trip, our friend, Stephany, 25, and me, the senior of the group at 35. We all grew up and lived in Maryland, where Jim ran his own company, Steph worked in computer sales, and I at the time edited financial articles at the *Baltimore Sun*. We seemed to have similar tastes in travel and had sailed the storm-tossed seas of Greece, of which more later.

Internal group chemistry worked well. Jim is generous, Steph tends toward frugality, I'm cheap. We found a middle ground. I would read up on a place; they would conveniently agree to go. Physically imposing and personable, Jim would find himself hugely popular with similarly big and friendly Africans in local bars. Observant and cheerful, Steph could out-track most wildlife guides. The two of them tended to be invariably easygoing, I less reliably so. I suspect I have the flaky journalist's talent at being self-centered, judgmental, and prone to episodes of withdrawing and observing the surroundings. Still, I could handle logistics, read between the lines of travel guides to find the hidden gems and learn the first 30 essential words of the local language.

As American budget travelers, we presented a bit of an unusual sight in Africa, more than we anticipated. As backpackers, we differed from package tourists. We tried—successfully, according to several Kenyans—to look like U.S. Peace Corps volunteers: khakis, T-shirts and not a scrap of jewelry. We occupied an unusual niche in the tourist economy, less well off than those circuiting the safari lodges but far better

Reasons to roam the world

Trips such as this one to Africa provide the best and most complete way for us to learn about the world. Our grade school textbooks did discuss foreign countries. But the texts focused on topics that seemed lifeless to me, such as iron ore mining and grapefruit crops. Several patronizing photographs in one showed Africans being supervised by whites in textile mills and health clinics.

Later in our lives, the U.S. evening news slighted foreign countries—to an extent only apparent when I moved to England in the 1980s and watched BBC reports.

And Jim and I, not the best candidates for learning things in a classroom, take to the road as our teacher. When we learn about a place like Belize or Burma, the education takes

place through our eyes, the soles of our feet and the words of our boulevard professors: wildlife guides and riverboat mates, market sellers and taverna owners, dhow captains and fellow travelers.

Possibly Acadians operate this way. Our untutored Nova Scotia ancestors seemed to just know, somehow, how to build boats, trap lobster, raise mink and harvest rhubarb. Acadians seem rarely inclined to sit in Georgetown University's foreign relations classes when they could be fixing a tractor or playing hockey. Rather than consult Kissinger's tomes, which we would find both unforgivably amoral and sinfully ponderous, we peruse the "Facts About the Country" chapter in our guidebook, usually one in the Lonely

Planet series of Sydney-based backpackers' bibles. Thus we rely heavily on a vagabond writer in the employ of an Australian publisher to place our street observations into a historical framework. We pray that our guidebook has its facts more or less right.

We roam so far partly out of simple curiosity, partly because adventure travel provides us with magic and ritual, commodities lacking in our upbringing in the 1950s and early '60s. Growing up in suburban Washington, D.C., we never experienced the kind of dramatic pageantry that many cultures find essential: Papuans in war paint, Indonesians in demon masks, dancing Masai or weaving Chinese dragons.

funded than many fellow backpackers, especially Australians, who usually had to stretch their budget over a year rather than a month.

As to our fitness to be true citizens of the world, we knew our qualifications to be suspect. Our language abilities lagged those of Europeans, who generally spoke several tongues. So-so at current events and truly feeble at world history, we didn't have the patience to wade through most foreign reportage, with its buzzwords such as—

military deployment
bilateral agreement
a round of talks in Geneva.

Our preferred reading before a trip takes a lighter touch and relies more on street-level experience and unofficial sources of information. We like Dave Barry ("I don't do research") and P.J. O'Rourke ("No interviews with heads of state or major figures on the international scene"). A content analysis of O'Rourke's *Holidays in Hell* finds such reader-friendly phrases as:

free drinks
a parrot in the bar
25 gin and tonics in a row.

Though more alcohol saturated than ours, his worldview exhibits roughly the same spirit as our blithe, lowbrow excursions in search of good weather, local color and a bit of adventure.

Collectively, we'd seen much of Europe and Asia by the late 1980s. As we grew older, we acquired the time, money and inclination to visit Africa. Jim, Steph

and I each arranged a month's vacation. As the core of our trip, we picked the famous game parks of Kenya and Tanzania, allotting 20 days there. Our remaining time permitted one additional destination. We wanted something exotic, with even rarer wildlife than East Africa's rhinos and cheetahs. We debated whether to add Rwanda (gorillas) or Madagascar (lemurs).

"Madagascar is Eden under siege," I said. "I read an article in *The [Washington] Post* saying that it's now or never to see the lemurs."

Of all Madagascar wildlife, the most celebrated are the 40 kinds of lemurs. ... They vary from the mouse lemur, several of which will fit in a teacup when young, to the relatively giant indri, a spectacular animal in thick white-and-black fur, 40 inches tall. It leaps backward, turning in the air to land on another tree 30 feet distant, and its cry, or 'song' as it is always called, can be heard by human ears for a mile and a half.

Henry Mitchell in "180 Million Years Not Enough for Madagascar," *The Washington Post*

In his article, Henry Mitchell had described petting a brown lemur "with fur of softest velvet," letting ring-tailed lemurs jump on him and viewing ermine-white sifaka lemurs. Mitchell made it clear that the Big Red Island should be considered a wonder of the planet, and a disappearing one, like the pyramids in the Yucatan. His unwritten message: Go now or you'll never see it.

We took heed. We would attempt to be among the tiny number of Americans ever to visit Madagascar. Beyond lemur sightings, we also sought stories,

adventure and good photos. And Madagascar would deliver a full range of road lessons, graduate-level exercises in Adventure Travel 701.

Without telling Jim and Steph, I watched them with pride throughout this trip, especially as we stood patiently in our metaphysical line that morning at Jomo Kenyatta International Airport. I'd gotten to Africa at the age of 35 as part of an orderly progression: first driving around the United States, then living in and bicycle touring through Europe, and later backpacking through Asia. Jim and Steph were learning on a curve far steeper than mine. They had jumped right into the deep end from the high diving board. Remarkably, with any luck from Air Mad, they would see Madagascar before they laid eyes on San Francisco, London or Paris.

LESSON NUMBER 1: IN THE LATTER 20TH CENTURY, KIDS FROM THE MOST ORDINARY AMERICAN SUBURBS WOULD OUTWANDER MARCO POLO.

When the ticket agents eventually showed up, we clung to our positions, first in a (by now) real line. An agent assigned us the only three seats remaining—high fives! Behind us, two unhappy doctors trying to get to the Seychelles via Madagascar argued strenuously for seats. With so few air routes in this part of the world, to miss a flight was to be stranded.

Perhaps they had to rush home to save lives, perhaps they just felt like pulling rank. In either event, no one challenged us to cede our seats, and we didn't dream of offering. We wanted to see lemurs. And we'd done one smart thing, with our precarious tickets, that the doctors had not: gotten there first.

By the slimmest of margins, with a casual confidence that seemed barely warranted in hindsight, we took to the air, on our way to Madagascar. Hundreds of Malagasy (generally pronounced Mal-GASH by those we encountered), some darkly beautiful, some average, also were aboard.

The lone 747 of the Air Madagascar fleet would convey us to the land of lemurs. Air Madagascar had sacrificed a herd of zebu—hardy humpbacked oxen of Asiatic origin—in an offering to the air safety god when the plane entered service. We'd take any edge we could, including superstition, when flying these Third World carriers.

Violá—the stunning sight of Kilimanjaro could be viewed from the right-hand windows. The world's highest freestanding mountain rises straight up out of the plain. Its solo bulk in the middle of the gradually curving Earth made the sight of it from the air much more impressive than the jumbled Alps. After camping at its base for two days earlier, we finally saw it free of clouds.

The attendants served us magnificent croissants,



From our airplane window, we could finally see Mount Kilimanjaro, the world's highest freestanding mountain.

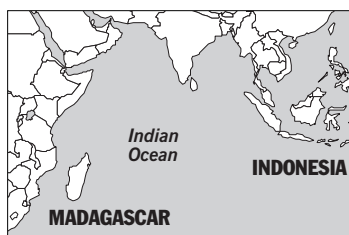
jam and French roast coffee, confirmation that we had joined a flight originating in Paris. At this time, I knew only four people who had traveled or lived in Africa. Their stories focused on how crummy or nonexistent the food had been during hard times in Tanzania and Zimbabwe. Disposed to believe the worst, I had imagined we would be eking out meals of Spam and ground cornmeal broken out of relief agency packages—not buttery, flaky croissants.

8:30 A.M.

Stonewashed jackets in the middle of nowhere

The 747 crossed the Mozambique Channel and flew over the Big Red Island. What a mess it was: nude rust-colored earth, a few lonely trees clinging by muddy rivers. We found it easy to believe that the nation, the most eroded in the world, verged on being nine-tenths deforested. Its level of treelessness was more common to Europe, after millennia of settlement, than a young Third World country.

At 9:30 a.m., we stepped onto the tarmac of the airport outside Antananarivo. Inside, we picked up our bags and cleared with the informally dressed customs agents: two tallish Malagasy youths with long black Indonesian hair, handsome in their stonewashed jean jackets.



LESSON NUMBER 2: SOMETIMES MADAGASCAR SEEMS CLOSER TO INDONESIA THAN THE AFRICAN MAINLAND.

The trendy jean jackets telegraphed the first dislocating inkling of modernity in this Third World nation. The raven hair offered the first hint of Asia in Africa. One of several competing theories holds that seafaring Indonesians hopscotched along the coasts of India, Arabia and Africa, and 1,500 years ago finally settled in Madagascar.

In the airport proper, we bought tickets from the domestic Air Mad counter to go straight on to the tropical island of Nosy Be, "Big Island" in Malagasy. The agent, unnecessarily mysterious and abrupt, angrily refused my Visa card and demanded Jim's American Express. Ah, the perils of modern travel—where the

Our guide on Nosy Be, Monsieur Abdul, a master of pantomime.



early explorers feared unknown fevers and hostile locals, we confront the unacceptability of certain credit cards.

Finally we boarded the 2:20 p.m. flight. I stretched out and slept, and then forced myself to look out the window at more tortured, gullied red earth 10,000 feet below. The extent of erosion damage was striking even from an airplane's height.

Outside the airport at Nosy Be, a Monsieur Abdul, though we'd never seen him before, picked us up smoothly as if representing a previously booked five-star hotel. A delightful Arab-blooded Malagasy (Nosy Be lies on the northwest side of Madagascar, closest to the Islamic world), he had several points in his favor: energy, hustle and the ability to make himself understood, via carefully enunciated French combined with body English and telepathy.

M. Abdul took us for a tour combined with a reconnaissance for lodgings. As we departed the airport, Nosy Be unrolled beneath our hired wheels: a classical tropical paradise, with palms and balmy scented air and a vibrant quality to the light. Women rolled their hips as they strolled at roadside with baskets on their heads. Steph spotted long-tailed drongo birds and chameleons.

During our hour-long drive, whim inspired Abdul to stop often. He snapped off sweet-smelling ylang-ylang blossoms, used to make perfume, and bought mangoes at a simple wooden stand. He pulled his open, wind-bathed Peugeot to the side of the road to light cigarettes. Baling wire and spit seem to keep the



Skyscapes floated above the main island of Madagascar.

French vehicle together. Ken Kesey's Merry Pranksters would have loved its trippy, neon green color. The car's lack of operating window handles and glass actually proved to be a boon on this perfumed isle.

Abdul took us to the island's main town, the inaptly named Hell-Ville, population 6,000. It takes its name from one Admiral de Hell, of whom we, history impaired as always, knew nothing.

A stunning view of the coast of mainland Madagascar greeted us on the balcony of our room in Hell-Ville's Hotel de la Mer.

Across the riffle of a marine-blue channel, 20 miles of pale slate-blue mountains rose on the mainland, under armadas of pink and cerise clouds. Square-rigged dhows, freighters and yachts plied the waters.

Untended poinsettias worthy of a botanical garden flourished just below our balcony, along with banana palms spreading magnificent 10-foot fronds. The foliage supported a spider the size of my hand resting in a six-foot web.

Madagascar seemed incredibly exotic and far lush-er than Lamu on Kenya's coast (our previous R&R stop). Beautiful vistas that defied belief formed our first impression. Strange Indian Ocean light bathed the tropical landscape: not the gold of Florence or the yellow of Greece, but violets and reds of startling hue in the sky, clouds and roadside trees.

Meanwhile, back inside our room we enjoyed a less scenic view of ugly burnt-orange walls. In the bathroom, the toilet didn't flush, requiring us to throw buckets of water down it. The light bulb lay on a mirror, and its cord needed to be plugged in for every use. Our room cost \$18 a night (\$6 each), and we couldn't figure out if that made it a bargain or a ripoff.

MONDAY, JULY 17

Insights into videos and child-rearing

Even on the most exotic trip, on some days you see lemurs and some days you wash out your socks in the sink. The latter occurs especially when you're on a budget tour and making your own arrangements, a time-consuming process. We got a lot done on this logistics and errands day, and experienced some intriguing interactions with the local people as well.

Our first order of business involved walking to the bank to cash \$300 of traveler's checks. (I wondered: How did the bank clerk view this? For many Malagasy, \$300 represented more than a year's income.)

Next we visited the offices of the Bureau d'Eaux et Forets, the government agency in charge of permits to visit lemur parks. The officials there could not help us with permits for Montagne d'Ambre, a national park we planned to visit in a few days on the main island of

Madagascar. They said we must arrange this later, when we reach Diego.

LESSON NUMBER 3: THE ONLY THING RARER IN MADAGASCAR THAN LEMURS ARE THE GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS WHO CONTROL ACCESS TO THEM.

With our errands complete or at least attempted, we ventured to take the pulse of Hell-Ville. At the market, a place of groundcloths and little wooden stands, vendors sold their wares: large bananas, small finger bananas, fish, Chinese buttons and padlocks, tomatoes, cloves, cinnamon, okra, peppercorns and meat. Dark brown vanilla pods, shaped like string beans, lay displayed on white cloths. The smell permeated the place and brought forth a Proustian memory: my 1950s childhood in Rockville, Maryland, when my mother took us to get then-trendy vanilla Cokes at a local soda fountain.

A poster advertised the movie *Action Jackson* at 6 p.m. My previous trip to China, where audiences spat and talked nonstop through awful black-and-white Soviet movies, had taught me the anthropological value of film outings. I decided to ask the others later if they wanted to catch the film—a video version, actually—mainly to watch the audience.

In the afternoon, we took a taxi to Ambatoloaka beach to swim. On the sand lay two triangular masses the size of chair cushions, which looked like oddly shaped fish. When we kicked them over, however, we saw the flat staring eyes of sharks' heads, presumably discarded by fishermen who sold only the flesh.

We'd settle for a stroll instead of a swim.

Back in Hell-Ville at twilight, we were directed by a young woman named Chariffa Rachidi to the show-

ing of *Action Jackson*. A 20-cent admission gave us entry to the "theater," a plain one-room building. Rows of folding chairs faced a television set mounted high in the right corner, where Carl Weathers, dubbed in French, shot 'em up.

Everyone quietly watched the violence unfold. We understood "Ak-shawn Jack-sawn" and precious little else of the dubbing. What the gentle Malagasy gleaned from movies such as this, I could only wonder.

Afterward we walked to dinner. Hell-Ville struck me as a pleasant place. Wide wooden steps wrapped around its warmly lit restaurants. The tables overlooked little-trafficked streets where people strolled in the tropical evening. At the Venus Restaurant, we ordered shrimp in tomato sauce and fried rice. Improbably enough, we enjoyed yet more delicious food. While Jim and Steph enjoyed a beer, Chariffa, apparently my unofficial guide for the night, led me to her house in a nearby shantytown of rattan and metal structures connected by flimsy wooden sidewalks.

Chariffa's family crowded into her room, lit by a bare bulb. Dozens of whitish dots of paint makeup marked the faces of Chariffa's mother and sisters, giving them a spooky appearance.

A poster of President Didier Ratsiraka, the man associated with isolating Madagascar from the West and thus worsening its poverty and environmental catastrophe, stared down from the wall. This Orwellian trend in decoration had cropped up throughout Africa. From what we had seen, Kenya especially embraced it, with President Daniel arap Moi gazing over most hotels, shops and buildings.

Chariffa, 22, introduced her son, Claudio, 11½, and a little brother, Ismael, age 2.

Downside of the video revolution

Pico Iyer wrote in his 1988 book, *Video Night in Kathmandu*, of the impact of hole-in-the-wall theaters such as the one in Hell-Ville. Given the portability of videos, cassettes and computer disks, Iyer wrote:

America could be found uncensored in the world's most closed societies. Remote villagers in rural Burma could now applaud Rambo's larger-than-life heroics only days after they hit the screens of Wisconsin.

Iyer correctly identified the apparent initial good of glimpses of

the Western world arriving in remote villages. Later a more negative aspect of the information revolution became apparent: Violent American-made shows travel better than humorous ones. American producers know how to churn out exportable action programs, University of Pennsylvania professor George Gerbner found in 1993, but jokes in U.S. shows may not translate so easily. Gerbner pointed out that action programs, cheap and in need of little translation, could export Western mayhem to the world's children.

Anecdotal evidence of the damage done by videos to traditional ways has crept into a disturbingly

wide range of travel literature. One can be reading a richly detailed account of a visit to a village in Ghana, Kenya, the Cook islands or Nepal, and the writer would note parenthetically that the elders there could almost circle their calendars: Between 1984 and 1989, the video came, exposing young people to violence as a means of gaining material goods.

LESSON NUMBER 4: AMERICA DOMINATES WORLDWIDE ENTERTAINMENT WITH VIOLENT MOVIES AND TV SHOWS.

LESSON NUMBER 5: THE OVERLAPPING AGES OF CHARIFFA'S SON AND HER BROTHER ILLUSTRATED HOW WOMEN BEGAN CHILD-BEARING EARLY AND CONTINUED (AS DID CHARIFFA'S MOTHER) FOR YEARS, CONTRIBUTING TO MADAGASCAR'S POPULATION GROWTH.

Little Ismael frolicked with a puckish expression and, despite the coaching of his family, refused to greet me with “*Bon soir*.”

“Ismael,” said Chariffa’s mother with fond exasperation. She reached for his private parts and, to my astonishment, fondled them with a milking motion. Years of reading the guidelines of “Miss Manners” on when to remain poker-faced gave me the presence of mind to suppress displaying my shock. Still, I didn’t know what to make of this stroking, more appropriate to extremely skilled adult lovers in private than to a mother and her son in public with a virtual stranger. Maybe in this Eden, people again felt no shame—maybe this constituted extreme behavior even by Malagasy standards.

Andro Linklater wrote in *Wild People: Travels with Borneo’s Head-Hunters* that he encountered similar behavior among the Iban people:

Until they were about five, the children were treated much the same regardless of sex. It was true that the women loved to fondle the penises of baby boys, either nuzzling the little commas of flesh or caressing them gently between thumb and forefinger, but with that exception, boys and girls were left more or less to their own devices.

LESSON NUMBER 6, FROM MISS MANNERS: “WHEN TRAVELING ABROAD, ONE IS GIVEN LEEWAY IN RETAINING AMERICAN HABITS IN NON-CRUCIAL MATTERS. INDEED, IT IS SOMETIMES MORE POLITE TO APPEAR AS A BEWILDERED AMERICAN THAN TO RISK BOTCHING COURTESIES BECAUSE ONE DOESN’T UNDERSTAND IMPORTANT NUANCES.”

Only much later did I find a brief mention in an anthropology text about a tribe in Borneo that fondled children to pacify them. This may explain both what Linklater saw in Borneo and what I saw in Madagascar.

The fondling of children, along with similarities in language and rice-growing practices, adds another cultural link in the chain between Madagascar and Indonesia, particularly Borneo. Two years later in Borneo, I would photograph still another connection: elaborate wooden gravesite markers, similar to those in Madagascar. All these similarities suggest that restless seafarers from the world’s third-biggest island (Borneo) had circled the globe and did not settle until finding

the fourth largest (Madagascar), which sufficiently reminded them of home. In fact, Professor Jérôme Rousseau of McGill University pinpoints the Borneo hinterland near Banjarmasin as the source of the ancestors of the Malagasy.

As Chariffa and I returned to the restaurant, she told me Malagasy women marry at 14 and live to be 50. When I asked what religion she practiced, she named her parents’ tribes.

Chariffa and Abdul, friendly yet not subservient, seemed to be more outgoing than many Malagasy, probably because of their roles as our local “fixers,” the people who frequently come out of the non-Western woodwork to help you and to make a bit of money.

We did not expect the instant camaraderie of the United States, with confessionals between strangers in supermarket checkout lines. The Malagasy, like 99 percent of the world’s people, behave more formally than that. Still, as we walked through Hell-Ville and other Malagasy towns, some local people wouldn’t talk to us. None initiated a greeting. Perhaps half responded to “*bonjour*” and a smile with a radiant smile themselves. No one seemed to have heard of Americans, so conversations with the hotel keeper and market sellers ground to a baffled halt whenever we said we hailed from *les États-Unis* or America.

In all my travels, Chariffa was the only person who had ever asked me, with a curiosity that suggested utter lack of knowledge, “*America, c’est bon?*”

TUESDAY, JULY 18

Our first small lemurs

Abdul took us on a tour of the island. During our tour, all of Nosy Be—the markets, the roadsides, the air—smelled like vanilla. Or so I thought until Abdul showed me the side of his dashboard, where he had inserted the local version of Glade air freshener for taxis: a vanilla pod.

At a little village called Lokobe, he steered us to a man named Remy. For 5,000 Malagasy francs, or FMG, each (the equivalent of \$3.30), Remy led us on a nature tour of sorts in a wood V-hulled canoe, which he called by its French name, *pirogue*.

As we slopped through acres of gooey mud flats hot from the sun, the canoe functioned less as a vessel and more as a platform to hang on to. After extensive mud hiking and a fleeting moment of actual canoeing, we beached under a promontory. A path carried us up past coffee plants, pepper, breadfruit, papaya, orchids and ferns that closed at the touch.

And finally, we saw our first lemurs.

Probably the grey-backed sportive lemur, they resembled eight-inch-tall koala bears. As wild creatures go, the pair lacked the dynamism of, say, galloping zebra. In fact, their acrobatic repertoire consisted of clinging to the cleft of a tree, as stationary as rocks and the same dull gray color.

If we weren't such goofy, amateur travelers, we'd have been disappointed with the little guys. But when one is telling adventure travel tales, the worse the experience, the better.

For another reason, we did well not to feel disappointed. *Madagascar Wildlife: A Visitor's Guide* states that this lemur, while admittedly not very sportive, is related to giant megalemurs, now extinct.

On Day 3 in Madagascar, we not only saw our first lemurs, we also encountered another distinguishing characteristic of this country: the *fady*, or taboo. *Fadys* govern what the Malagasy—perhaps the world's most superstitious people outside of U.S. professional baseball players—can eat, where they can walk and what farm animals they can raise.

LESSON NUMBER 7: THE ELABORATE BLEND OF ANIMISM, ISLAM AND HINDUISM OF MADAGASCAR'S CULTURAL PARENT, INDONESIA, HAD SOMEHOW TAKEN A DARKER, EVEN MORE SUPERSTITIOUS TURN HERE.

A village displayed a sign reading, *Les chausseurs interdit* (shoes forbidden). This particular *fady* might be inconvenient, yet it was relatively innocent compared with others that keep the Malagasy peasant from adopting any innovations. Some villages prohibit the use of modern wells for water. A widespread *fady* against plowing, based on a belief that it turns the earth's back on God, maintains a reliance on slash-and-burn agriculture.

Abdul left us at a restaurant for lunch and repaired to his home nearby. He returned with a cassette tape of music from diverse sources: Madagascar; its somewhat distant Indian Ocean neighbor, Réunion; and continental Africa. I had admired the music, having enjoyed African pop first at a wonderful dive in rural Kenya and then on the stereo in Abdul's taxi. Many features ensured its allure: rolling guitars, joyous call-and-response harmonies, evolving percussion so rich it sounded like horn sections, a music of pure joy.

"Abdul," I said, asking in French, "I want to buy this music, is there a store with these cassettes?"

"It's not possible to buy this music," he responded, followed by a lengthy and baffling footnote in French. What did he mean? Then where did he get it?

A standard line from junior high school language-class French proved useful. "Repeat if you please."

Abdul held up his thumb and index fingers about four inches apart—the distance apart of the two cassette ports of a dubbing deck. He fiercely enunciated: If I would buy a blank cassette, he would "en-reg-ee-stray" the music for me. Eureka! "*Enregistrer*," I repeated delightedly, the light bulb finally switched on, "that means to say 'dubbing' in English."

Now I realize the naïveté of expecting to find a music store in Hell-Ville. Africans and Brazilians and

Thais buy counterfeits or tape their own umpteenth-generation cassettes.

LESSON NUMBER 8: SOMETIMES YOU CAN FIND PRERECORDED WORLD MUSIC FROM STREET VENDORS AND LITTLE SHOPS, BUT AT OTHER TIMES IT MAY BE EASIER GO TO A WELL-STOCKED MUSIC STORE STATESIDE.

That tape sparked my long-running love affair with the ebullience of African music. Superb distribution systems, a hallmark of the United States, meant that upon my return Stateside I could purchase dozens of compact discs featuring African-influenced pop. The rapid, melodic guitar on Abdul's cassette, a signature of Zaire's *soukous* style, led to the haunting melodies of Mali, the metamorphosed reggae of Nigeria, and the slyly revolutionary pop that offers hope and fights repression in Algeria (*rai*) and Haiti (*rara*) and Brazil (*tropicalismo*). It's a mystery why more Americans don't love world music; maybe they lack the evocative memories we have of discovering it while driving through Africa itself.

After our return to the Hotel de la Mer, Chariffa showed up, and I exchanged a pair of Reeboks, two T-shirts and 28,000 FMG (\$19) for a homemade tablecloth and a pareu (printed cloth) showing a village scene. I told her I would love an embroidered blouse, but we were probably leaving too early the next morning to effect a transaction. She would see if she could bring one at dawn.

WEDNESDAY, JULY 19

Off to a hidden paradise

At 6:45 a.m., Chariffa brought me a handmade embroidered blouse for 17,000 FMG (\$11). Each of its 38 inch-square panels showed a scene of peasants farming, canoeing or spinning wooden hoops on their arms. With perseverance and entrepreneurial zeal, she had canvassed poky Hell-Ville's boutiques overnight and managed to obtain what I wanted at a good price.

LESSON NUMBER 9: PARADOXICALLY, MARKET ECONOMICS OFTEN WORKS BETTER IN THE THIRD WORLD, WHERE SELLERS BRING ENORMOUS FLEXIBILITY TO SUCH MATTERS AS PRICE, SHOP HOURS AND DELIVERY TIMES.

The whole exchange brought to mind David Lamb's assertion in *The Africans* of a natural affinity for some aspects of capitalism, that "given an economic incentive and an obtainable goal, [the African] is a tireless worker willing to accept great hardships."

Down at the harbor a half-hour later, we met a tourist boat. The Pirate would motor us to nearby Nosy Tanikely and Nosy Komba.

We anchored off Nosy Tanikely, known for its fine

reef. The crew had managed to bring one set of fins for three people. I got irritated. Why? Why one set of fins for three people, on surely the only visit we would pay in our lives to Nosy Tanikely. We survived; we took turns snorkeling. Nosy Tanikely's waters revealed huge sergeant majors, barracuda, a school of 1,000 silvery fish moving slowly as one, sea slugs, healthy and colorful coral and lots of shells.

Escorted by dolphins, we proceeded to Nosy Komba, a simple tropical island without cars. At first we wandered around confused. We had encountered a traveler who recommended an establishment run by a Madame Madio. The lone village, Ampangorinana, showed no sign of her.

We walked 10 minutes south out of the village. A tidy footpath through waterside palms led through a hamlet of tin-roofed bungalows to three picnic tables, covered with bright red tablecloths showing peacocks. There stood Madame Madio, a thin woman with braided hair and *café au lait* skin.

She offered us accommodation, single-room bungalows on stilts, at \$3 and \$2. These featured thatched roofs, mosquito nets, no light but a candle and creaky wood-slat floors with a bit of trampoline-style play. The bungalows had a communal rattan shower but no

bathroom. "Toilet natur," Madame explained in two words—the world is your toilet.

Parrots gnawed sugar cane on her picnic tables, set on a floor of beach sand. A goat stole Jim's towel. Kids in the hamlet stayed outdoors all day: running after each other, tossing a ball, grinding coconut. Older sisters washed little brothers under a hand pump.

After showers, we walked a few steps to a clearing, to see what we had journeyed so far to see.

Incredible! About 30 black lemurs, about the size of raccoons, grunted in the trees. The all-black males scarcely resembled the larger, tawny females with white-fringed muttonchops in a halo around their faces. These lemurs fluffed their halo of fur in curiosity or fear, as Yoda perked his ears in *Return of the Jedi*. Both sexes stared with huge, unearthly amber eyes, like creatures from a UFO. They seemed to have brightest eyes in the animal kingdom, and oddly reptilian, like David Bowie's lizard eyes in *The Man Who Fell to Earth*.

In the pose of Russian folk dancers, the lemurs made eight-foot leaps, from tree to tree and from tree to tourist. When a male leapt on my shoulder, my knees buckled. His velvety soft fur brushed my neck and face. He smelled like a dog with a wet coat from the rain—musky but natural.

'Like the Third World'

We almost never had any cause to flare up in our Third World travels due to incidents like the forgotten equipment at Nosy Tanikely. I am usually impressed by how well things go despite language barriers and the difficulties of transportation and infrastructure.

LESSON NUMBER 10: THE PHRASE "LIKE THE THIRD WORLD" MUST BE ONE OF THE MOST MISUSED IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE.

War, riots and natural disasters, to my eye, look like pure chaos. Yet reporters apply the Third World metaphor. Why? Shabby Third World villages almost always have water, food, transportation and local order and leadership in greater abundance than, for example, South Florida after Hurricane Andrew—which of course had the Third World label slapped on it.

Meanwhile some First World institutions, such as the some of

America's subway systems, seem rife with malfunctioning equipment, fetid platforms, surly service and rule-bound bureaucracy.

A decade's worth of news articles in *The Washington Post's* electronic library shows that, with considerable hyperbole, quite a few phenomena have been described as "like the Third World:"

School budget cuts in Montgomery County, Maryland, Motown Records' treatment by MCA, an effort to recall the District's mayor, some shacks in Maryland's Charles County, the economy of West Virginia, sidewalk vendors on the District's Columbia Road and trash in Dupont Circle, roads in Queens, the flies outside a barn at a Florida racing stable, and Moscow itself.

For good measure, Ukraine rated as "worse than Third World; it is like Fourth World."

Yet places such as Brazil and Thailand, at the highest end of the "Third World" category, boast impressive numbers of educated, healthy people with jobs and prospects, making the simile even more dubious. Economist Thomas Sowell noted in *The Economics and Politics of Race* that

poverty is supposed to be the defining characteristic of the Third World, but substantial geographic regions and social classes in the Third World are far from poor, and some whole countries in the Third World are closer to the living standards of Western Europe than to those of other Third World nations.

Even the poorest of nations, such as Madagascar and Burma, possess surpassing beauty, clean yards, friendly, patient and aware people and surprising efficiencies (such as, for example, Chariffa and her initiative).



Above, Jim meets a male black lemur living in a grove near Madame Madio's inexpensive huts, right, which offer a look at village life.



The creature made a throaty noise that could best be transcribed as “Umfr umfr umfr.” Jim and Steph instantly mastered Lemurtalk, which comes from low in the throat, almost in the chest, and eventually all three of us uninhibitedly executed the odd noise.

The lemurs sought more than just idle chatter. They focused their extraterrestrial eyes on us with the intensity of a dog waiting for a treat. When we offered a banana, the well-mannered creatures gently unpeeled our fingers to take it. We observed that, in addition to sharing the human characteristic of opposable thumbs, lemurs also had opposable big toes, which must be doubly useful.

The grove of black lemurs gave Madame Madio location, location and location, the equivalent of having the Ahwanee Lodge concession in Yosemite National Park.

LESSON NUMBER 11: WITHOUT A BIT OF INTERVENTION FROM WESTERN WILDLIFE AGENCIES, SHE SEEMED THE EMBODIMENT OF A LOCAL PERSON WHOSE LIVELIHOOD NOW DEPENDED ON THE SURVIVAL OF A RARE SPECIES.

Her culinary arts certainly found favor with us, beginning with our first dinner: chicken in coconut sauce with sticky rice and bread, and split bananas for dessert. We demolished it all, even mopping up the sauce in the serving dishes. Afterward Madame lit kerosene lamps for us to read and play cards by.

Americans who had stayed at Madame Madio's, according to her guestbook: two women in 1986; in 1988, four people, including a scientist (specializing in malarial diseases) and his wife; and our group in 1989. That's all.

More Americans (12) had walked on the moon than had stayed at her guesthouse (9). When doing my pre-trip research, I had read a *Newsday* article saying that fewer than 100 Americans visited all of Madagascar in 1988.

The average American has an equal chance of

serving as a member of the U.S. Senate or getting hit by lightning as going to Madagascar. Looked at another way, 99.99999999 percent of all Americans do not visit Madagascar each year; one in 2.5 million do go there. We knew we had picked an unusual destination—but not unusual to that degree. Few of the 800,000 *Washington Post* subscribers who may have read Henry Mitchell's article—enthraling as it was—could be expected to book immediate passage to Madagascar. But even Antarctica gets more than 7,000 visitors annually.

Though Madagascar was not at the time a hotbed for American tourists, by the 1993 tourism arrivals had trebled from the level of 1985. Europeans, particularly French and Germans, represented three-quarters of the 55,000 visitors in 1993, while only 5,300 visitors arrived from the whole of the Americas.

At this stage of our African trip, we performed some fluid revisionism. We downgraded the Kenyan coastal resort of Lamu,



Stephany discovers that black lemurs are not shy creatures.

previously our favorite beautiful hideaway. Nosy Komba moved into the No. 1 attraction spot. We had all the essentials of comfort, none of the extras, rock-bottom prices, a window on the ongoing lives of the people, and peaceable, exotic and entertaining animals. In sum, we enjoyed a Utopian

idyll. Wish we had a week here, I thought, instead of just two days.

One night, Madame Madio told us her story. After a divorce she had started selling Cokes out of crates to visitors to the nearby lemur grove. A classic entrepreneur, she scrimped and saved and built the restaurant ... then one bungalow, two and three. We wished her all success.



Beau and a lemur: similar ruffs and muzzles.

Combining cuteness and clues to our past

Years after our trip, as I looked at photographs of the black lemurs, a sudden realization explained why I found them so precious. Their little muttonchops and begging eyes recalled our various family Shetland sheepdogs: Rogue, Conan, Beau and Skipper.

Let's play analyst: A 1950s childhood spent watching Lassie led to picking out a string of shelties for pets. Still later we visited Madagascar's lemurs, not for high-minded scientific reasons but because they resemble a "cute" television dog.

At least we do not stand alone in an almost visceral fondness for lemurs. My friend Rose called me after seeing a documentary on these whimsical innocents under threat to exclaim, "Now I understand why you went to Madagascar." The creatures also enjoy cult status among some college students, including a group of Virginia Tech students and others who operate an Internet chat page (at <http://www.wam.umd.edu/~ixian/frink7>, or search for Usenet alt.fan.lemurs) describing their support of Leonidas, Nigel, Bebop, Nosferatu and others in the Duke University Primate Center's Adopt-A-Lemur program.

The Latin phrase *res ipsit loquitur*—"the thing speaks for itself"—offers a preliminary explanation for why we wanted to see lemurs and why we desperately want them to survive. Yet lemurs offer more: insight to researchers seeking to understand human nature.

For example, lemurs, even more adaptable and diverse creatures than monkeys or apes, live in every Malagasy habitat from rain forest to desert. Some are active in daytime, others at night, and some at either time. This flexibility may be the most crucial lemur heritage to humans, according to Ian Tattersall in "Madagascar's Lemurs."

Despite having smaller brains than higher primates, some lemurs display "complex sociality," according to Tattersall:

By studying the lives of lemurs we can glimpse something of the Eocene behavioral potential from which our vaunted human capacities ultimately arose. ... It is tragic to see any part of the world's biodiversity disappear, but the tragedy is particularly acute in the case of Madagascar's lemurs, which still have so much to teach us about our own past.

THURSDAY, JULY 20

Just another day playing with lemurs

In this hamlet without electricity, we lived with the sun. In our cots at 8:30 p.m., we awakened at 6 a.m. as the place came to life. Our ears became our alarm clocks. On the other side of the bungalow wall, kids banged around. The noise joined the sounds of surf and chickens. Observing everyday routines in Madagascar required no art or stealth. Village life found us.

I read John Cheever's *The Wapshot Chronicle*, breaking for our lunch of fish. We played with the lemurs some more. Just before dinnertime, we watched Madame Madio unsentimentally carry a squawking duck earmarked for our repast to its slaughter.

Afterward she arranged for a man named Joseph to sail us to the mainland next day. I imagined a nice motorboat, such as that which took us snorkeling the previous day, to zip us across.

FRIDAY, JULY 21

Local means of travel

Up at 5 a.m., I lay on my back on the beach to photograph the dark palms against a lightening metallic gold sky. A man dragged a little V-sided dugout canoe up the beach and scooped water out of it. I photographed the moment, then returned to scanning the horizon for our motor cruiser to the mainland.

A suspicion nagged at me, but I pushed it out of my mind. Gradually it became impossible to dismiss the truth. The man that I'd been photographing must be none other than Joseph, our captain. That leaky and unstable dugout somehow had to cross more than five miles of water to the mainland.



I had no idea how significant the canoe would become to our travel plans.

The vessel barely contained room for the four of us plus our backpacks, stacked high amidships. The wind blew steadily, straight on our nose. Jim and Steph stroked with almost bladeless implements, more sticks than paddles. "This is a toothpick," Jim said, accurately. The travesty, which would have disgusted a less laid-back traveler, merely amused him. From the tiny prow, I constantly bailed out water using the omnipresent margarine can. We had seen such cans—adaptable as a kid's toy, storage container, water bowl or a thousand other things—everywhere in Africa.

For the privilege of paddling ourselves for three hours, we had each paid 5,000 FMG (\$3.30, the apparent price of almost everything in Madagascar). At a crawl, we approached the mainland and eventually reached the shore, where we found a deserted roadhead.

We had only one course of action: to sit by the side of the road and wait, like Vladimir and Estragon, in absurd hopefulness to see if anyone arrived.

Within a half-hour a Mercedes bus showed up. (Question in retrospect: Why did it stop there? To find the occasional group of canoeing backpackers from Maryland?)

We clambered aboard, enjoying Western levels of personal space: a big vehicle bearing just five people, including the driver and his assistant, who wore a fez, another reminder of our proximity to Islam. A burst of optimism and good cheer suffused our ride. It lasted for one mile. Around a point from our canoe's landing spot, giant ferries from Nosy Be disembarked. At the dock, Mr. Fez stage-managed the loading of 50 people in the bus's space for 20.

Everyone's personal space shrank from the Western notion (unlimited) to the Third World definition (less space than your body physically occupies). Three women sat against the windshield facing the back of the bus. Despite there seeming to be no space for him, a boy sat between the driver and his door. My knees dug into the row of seats in front of me. My legs became numb, so I stood hunched under the roof.

Out the windows, we saw our first carts pulled by zebu, the type of humpbacked oxen that had given its life for our airplane's safety. Children in the villages smiled delightedly to see the faces of *vazaha* (foreigners) as we rolled past.

Instead of taking a leaky canoe and a crowded bus, we could have flown to our destination, Diego Suarez. But I had suggested that at least once, Jim and Steph should sample local means of travel. In China and other countries, I had taken train and boat rides that, while arduous, provided an indelible picture of how the people lived.

By 11:30 a.m., we rolled into a weathered little crossroads town, Ambanja. A crew of young touts frantically loaded us on a *taxi-brousse* for Diego as though it were pulling out at any second.

The driver drove off promptly and at speed,



but not for Diego. He whizzed around the undistinguished shacks of Ambanja itself. As though gas prices, air pollution, time and productivity mattered not a whit, for 90 minutes we jounced around town. As if in some slow-motion banana republic version of the middle laps of the Indy 500, the *taxi-brousse* circuted a gas station, a market and a blackboard for the video *Conan Le Destructeur* a mind-numbing 15 times. The driver crushed a duck and passed a shack, apparently an official building, bearing a cryptic sign: Hall of Information.

Every woman that we drove past in Ambanja appeared to be pregnant. One could see how the Malagasy population was projected to double in size every 22 years. World population grows more slowly, projected to double every 45 years. (After our trip, the birthrate in Madagascar and the rest of Africa fell slightly.)

Finally, the requisite number of passengers needed to really depart, 23, packed the Toyota pickup's cab and the benches in the back, some sitting atop each other. We headed out Route National 6.

In the cab, we sat four across: the driver, me, Steph and Jim. There was no room for my left arm to hang at its usual place at the side of my torso. Instead it was wrapped around the driver as though we were great chums, and it quickly became numb. Steph's left elbow dented my ribs, my shoulder crushed her back, my feet crowded the accelerator (!) and Jim barely wedged in his shoulders.

And we occupied the place of honor. The 19 other passengers squashed themselves into the back of the *taxi-brousse*, where wooden benches and stools ran the length of the covered truckbed.

The bush taxi functioned as a stop-and-go discothèque. It appeared incapable of moving more than three kilometers at a stretch without the fuel pump or gas filter malfunctioning. Yet no expense had been spared for a top-of-the-line cassette player with equalizer, and disco lights blinked brightly around the windshield.

Remarkably, the music playing on the



A jammed Mercedes bus held 50 passengers.

sound system happened to be one of my favorite Caribbean groups, Kassav'. How curious it seemed to be riding through Madagascar to a lively Caribbean sound, with its muscular horns, strong melodies and pretty French Creole singing. Although it first seemed unlikely that an obscure recording by artists from Guadeloupe and Martinique would find its way to rural Madagascar, a simple explanation became apparent. Musicians from the Caribbean and Africa record in Paris, the capital of world music, and the recordings must stream right out again to the former French possessions, even in the remote Indian Ocean.

The Toyota's ailments forced the driver and his aide at each sputtering stop to remove one fuel pump and replace it with its equally shot alternate, without really repairing the units themselves. Whichever pump was not in use lay under Jim's feet, rolling around the footwell along with a wrench, screwdriver and an abrasive cloth.

At one breakdown the ad hoc pit crew actually retimed the engine, using the cloth to clean the point and drawing a little line in the dirt to create a timing stripe. All the men rocked the *taxi-brousse* forward to make the adjustment. The pervasiveness of advertising also became apparent, reaching even the remote Malagasy bush. One of the ad hoc mechanics muttered philosophically as he tinkered, "*Choses fait plus bon avec Coke*" ("Things go better with Coke").

These Malagasy breakdowns, like others in Africa, presented a guy-bonding opportunity. Jim and a cluster of dark men peered under the hood. The women read or talked or stared off in infinite patience.

The repairs also allowed us to visit little roadside "food" stands. We envisioned goodies like the divine homemade samosas we had devoured on the beach at Lamu. But we could buy only stale peanut brittle and tasteless biscuits as hard as rocks. Disappointment and hunger began to gnaw at us.

After four hours we reached our halfway point, Ambilobe, a thriving transit area of 9,000. Once again the taxi touts fought over our bags, though their empty vehicles would not be racing out anytime soon.

In no hurry to endlessly circle wherever it was we waited now (Ambilobe), a sort of more decrepit version of the unpainted market stalls and beaten earth of wherever it was we just left (Ambanja, whose name we had already forgotten), I took a stroll. My comrades waved for me to hurry back.

Jim had reached the outer limits of his endurance. For 55,000 FMG (\$38), he'd essentially bought all the empty seats on a *taxi-brousse* so that we could leave immediately. Four lucky Malagasy, winners of the Jim Belliveau Lottery, had already boarded. They lounged around the back of the taxi with more personal transportation space than they'd known in their lives.

The driver bought gas for The Taxi that Jim Bought and rolled out. As usual in Mad, we couldn't really win.



The taxi Jim 'bought' fuels up for Route National 6.

Road tales

Two years after experiencing Route National 6, I drove to a wedding in North Dakota with acquaintance. Construction on a section of Interstate 90 slowed us to 50 mph, a rate of speed probably unheard of on any thoroughfare in Madagascar. My passenger complained. I thought, if only you knew.

LESSON NUMBER 12: MADAGASCAR ILLUMINATES THE UNSUNG MIRACLES OF U.S. LIFE, SUCH AS INTERSTATE HIGHWAYS.

Even Africa hands find Madagascar's roads shocking. "Worse than Zambia," said one in a tone that suggested Malagasy roads surpassed the unspeakable. More than even Guatemala, the Big Red Island left us with a keen appreciation for decent roads. Though these insights and others we sometimes keep to ourselves, as they could be conversation killers with some our Stateside friends and neighbors who don't share our interest in exotic travel.

At times adventure travelers cannot help reminiscing, and family and friends listen patiently. Yet what would the 99.99-plus percent of Americans who haven't visited Madagascar ("where?") and face no familial duty to listen to us ever make of our tales of the horrid roads, the spring-loaded lemurs, the giant plants? Did Marco Polo face the same disbelieving, heavy-lidded looks when he dictated his stories to his scrivener in Genoa ... "Did I mention the giant gryphon bird of Madagascar, the roc, which could carry elephants in its talons?"

Route National 6 worsened markedly outside of town. To avoid smaller potholes, the driver scraped the vehicle against the thick underbrush edging the road. In low gear, he drove down into the biggest craters and clambered out again, the taxi rocking from side to side as its wheels clawed over the lip of each crater. Any idea of making great time on this leg dissolved.

Competence in speaking Malagasy

A book called *Languages and Their Speakers* indicates a possible reason for the halts and hitches in our conversations with the Malagasy.

In a chapter called "Becoming a Competent Speaker of Malagasy," Edward Louis Keenan and Elinor Ochs describe a typical sentence:

Manasa ny lamba amin'ity savony ity Rasoa

This translates word by word to:

Wash the clothes with this soap this Rasoa

And the everyday English translation:

Rasoa is washing the clothes with this soap.

"This is already unusual," the authors state. "Probably not more than 10 percent of the world's languages place the verb in the initial position in simple (unemphatic) sentences."

Apparently, as we suspected, the Malagasy language was quite different from French. Also, the authors describe Malagasy villages as being about as opposite as one can get from the information-drenched American existence. With village life centered on the rice harvest, and no great specialization of labor, everyone more or less does the same thing as everyone else year in and year out. Any deviation makes the bearer of news the center of great attention.

To remain the center of interest, one imparts information only a bit at a time. Thus information, generally spread by word of mouth, can be described as a "scarce good." Maybe this further explained our drawn-out arrangements for hotels and transportation. Information did not clatter back and forth, tickety-boom, as it does in many Western transactions.

The sun set at 6. Jim and I sat in the windowless cab as the air turned chill, while Steph actively shivered on a bench in the back. Being uncrowded meant less body warmth. One of the Malagasy women gave Steph an Indian-style kerchief. That the filmy cloth was utterly ineffectual did not detract from the thoughtfulness of the gesture.

At 10:30 p.m., after several eternities on Route National 6, we reached Diego (pronounced Dee-aye-GO). For budgetary reasons, we looked for rooms at the Hotel Fiadanana, with its *chambres de passage*, a French euphemism for a hot-sheets, hourly rate room.

A brothel had to meet certain exacting criteria for us to stay there: It had to be the cheapest place in town that would also admit travelers not seeking paid sex.

LESSON NUMBER 13: IN MUCH OF THE WORLD, DEMAND FOR QUICKIE RENTED ROOMS OUTSTRIPS THAT FOR HOTEL ROOMS, SO AN OVERLAPPING STRUCTURE HANDLES BOTH.

Because this dual function exists widely, the Hotel

Fiadanana would not be the last whorehouse I would stay in.

In the United States, the utilitarian lines of the Hotel Fiadanana would probably be found at tire discounter in a town with lax zoning. In the Third World, the hotel's low-slung, cinder-block exterior proclaimed it as one of the anonymous, no-frills structures that could be anything: university, hospital, ruin, bus station, expatriate housing or government ministry.

Our brothel in Diego did not fulfill any fantasy notions of a cathouse from the American West. No saloon doors à la *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* swung onto a red-velour parlor. No big-haired women in teddies lounged about.

Instead of Julie Christie as the heart-of-gold madam, two men, dark-skinned with fluffy Afros, staffed the brothel from behind an oddly proper wooden schoolteachers' desk in a bare hallway. They avoided meeting my eyes, staring slightly down and to my left as they puzzled: *Who are these people and why do they want to stay here?*

I told them we wanted rooms. The statement met with a profound silence. I waited. For all, French took second place—to Malagasy for the staff and English for us. My French, learned in Maryland schools rather than at home as my father had learned his, could it not be understood? But Abdul on Nosy Be seemed to *me comprendre*. And somehow when I traveled in France itself and Francophone Tahiti, communication had proceeded smoothly.

In Madagascar, we got the impression that Malagasy sentence construction differed from European languages so much that the French overlay hadn't taken too well.

Our stalled room arrangements became further fraught with uncertainty when Jim and Steph yelled and galloped inexplicably out of the lobby. What the problem was, I knew not. But to avoid permanent derailment of the room check-in, I tried to bluff unconcern before the brothel-keepers at this insignificance—the hysterical departure of my entire traveling party, including a blood relative, 9,000 miles from home.

Trusting that time would return Jim and Steph intact and with an explanation, I checked into my room, a floor with thick marine-grade paint the color of livid molten lava, puce walls with holes, tile bathroom, battered gray metal table and metal clothes locker. The appointments, however worn, appeared to be clean.

Seeking food, I wandered out on my own. Down the dark road on the right stood a tiny wooden shack with a cloth curtain serving as a doorway, lit by a naked bulb. Famished, I bought what few items lay on the ill-stocked shelves: a stale baguette stranded from the day before, a dusty bottle of Coca-Cola and a can of sardines.

The shopkeeper wrapped the bread in a page torn



The Cascade Grande tumbles at Montagne d'Ambre National Park.

Trying to help Madagascar: The World Wildlife Fund

The World Wildlife Fund has targeted Madagascar as a "priority country" in Africa, along with Cameroon, Gabon, Tanzania, Zaire and Zambia.

In Madagascar, the fund sponsors an educational center at Tsimbazaza Park in Antananarivo, the capital, and two integrated conservation projects, at Montagne d'Ambre and Andohahela in the south. The Montagne d'Ambre project, which receives \$1 million a year, educates people in four nearby villages about conservation and guards against illegal cultivation in the park.

Park officials have opened a simple campsite at the park and created a basic map for visitors. It may not sound like much. But it's a significant step forward for Madagascar, whose parks provided nothing along the lines of the standard pamphlets and ranger talks that make a visit to national parks in the United States such as Yellowstone so educational.

The World Wildlife Fund also has planned a nationwide conservation program for all primary and secondary schools in Madagascar.

from a math text in Malagasy. Somehow it didn't augur well for the nation's technological development that math texts doubled as grocery wrap. Back in my room, I made an unwelcome discovery. Sardine tins in Madagascar lacked a turnkey. In the despair of my fatigue and hunger, I dragged out my Swiss Army knife, too tired to do much but poke a hole in the tin and shake oil and a few pitiful fish fragments on the stale bread.

My compatriots returned from their abrupt foray, explaining that Jim had left his fancy new camera on our *taxi-brousse*. They had commandeered a regular taxi, whose driver apparently thought that they wanted to go to Ambilobe (hardly). Shouting and ridiculous pantomime had gotten them turned around to the town's central *taxi-brousse* stand, and they returned triumphant, camera in hand.

Jim and Steph then conducted a quest for open restaurants, apparently an unknown in midnight Diego, and ended up unfed even by sardine oil. They drifted into fantasy. In a Third World brothel, they visualized food rather than sex. First, they imagined eating at the Chart House in Annapolis. Then Phillip's Seafood, Pizza Hut and even Wendy's.

I found our day of hard travel arduous and tiresome. With the benefit of being four years younger, I had done this stuff in Burma. There I would crank up a personal stereo, parachute out of the here and now and recuperate after a night's rest. In Madagascar, I couldn't blame Jim for finding a day of local travel sufficient.

SATURDAY, JULY 22

Bribes and banquets

The morning after our experience with local travel, I awoke with puffy eyes and a headache, feeling fairly wiped out. Trips have cadences of many colors: days of logistics, days of local travel, days of results, days of difficulty or ease. Maybe our rough roads would be smoothed. We would welcome a day of reward.

We wandered into sunny Diego, population 80,000. At Restaurant Yachy on Rue Lally, breakfast provided the first upbeat note of the day. After scarfing down five croissants, bread, sweet butter, coffee and tea, I began to feel human again.

Diego lately rates as a stop on Madagascar's modest tourist circuit because of a nearby lemur park, Montagne d'Ambre. A permit for the park, a travel agent told us, would cost the equivalent of \$33, and a tour \$20. That looks cheap to me now but it seemed like a fortune to us then.

The agent added that the source of permits, the Forest Bureau, would (big surprise) not be open on Saturdays. However, she gave us an idea. We could proceed without a permit if we offered a *cadeau* (gift) to the guardian.

"We have to give the park officials a 'gift,'" I translated to my compadres. "That means a bribe."

Jim and Steph adored the connotation of a *cadeau*. The word suggested that we could cruise by the nearest mall and pick up some crystal and china for the park officials. In fact, the word actually means something closer to "tip" and reflects a Malagasy attitude that the cash constitutes more of a nice gesture than a purchased service, for which they would reciprocate with a proud tour of the reserve.

A taxi driver agreed to take us to the park. He headed southwest past Joffreville to the park entrance, where stood the guardian's wife. As the woman walked away from us, her face a cipher, our driver augmented an earnest conversation with subtle body language. He

Tips, park permits and benefitting conservation

To see lemurs in our few days in Madagascar, we set aside our scruples and subscribed to the religion of Whatever Works. With great reluctance, we embraced situation ethics, which holds that one cannot apply universal laws or principles to a situation. Tips to park personnel helped us unravel logistical snags stemming from our low budget and limited time and, most of all, the fact that permits were not available at park gates and had to be obtained at offices in cities some distance from the parks.

We tried repeatedly to get lemur park permits and found ourselves thwarted mostly by the simple fact that the Forest Bureau was closed on weekends.

We had every national park and reserve we visited completely to ourselves, further indicating a troubling snag in access for both the Malagasy and tourists. Although in a way, we enjoyed our aloneness, feeling like Teddy Roosevelt on safari.

Princeton University Professor Alison Jolly—author of a book and pivotal articles in *National Geographic* in the 1980s that shocked numerous world bodies into addressing the ecological collapse in Madagascar—wrote to me in 1996 pointing out that only recently had the Malagasy government begun to charge entrance fees at the national parks.

Before that, tourism enriched airlines and modern hotels but not the

parks or the small hotels in nearby countryside. She wrote that

There was absolutely nothing from tourism directed to the conservation itself. In other words, people who had spent between \$2,000 and \$5,000 to reach Madagascar would balk as you did at \$33 to preserve the treasures they had come to see.

Later I attempted to repent for our lapse via donations to the World Wildlife Fund's Africa and Madagascar Program.

touched his hand gently to her back, apparently the right move. The guardian's wife, he returned to say, would require a *cadeau* of 10,000 FMG (\$6.60), quite a discount from the official price.

We paid up and entered Amber Mountain park. The air smelled of the pine trees. In this exaggerated version of an Eastern U.S. forest, plants climbed trees and Tarzan vines dropped to a floor of ferns. Birds and butterflies flitted about. After we walked two miles, the pretty Cascade Grande came into view. As we made our way back, shy gray Sanford's lemurs played along the branches arching above. Steph wrote in her notes, "They were adorable but not tame like those of Nosy Komba so it was hard to get a good look at them."

She also spotted a chestnut-brown creature, a bit lemurish, a bit ferrety, with a striped tail—most likely the Madagascar ring-tailed mongoose. *Grzimek's Animal Encyclopedia* says these creatures belong to the family "viverrids" and calls them "a very primitive species that forms a bridge between civets and true mongooses."

Our driver dropped us all back in Diego. We walked past the town center's heroic statuary and monolithic buildings—relics of the nation's brief flirtation in the 1970s with the aesthetically deprived Eastern bloc. We continued to a street of shops, turning our attention to fulfilling the request of a sweet, true, utterly loyal but breathtakingly naïve friend from Michigan. She had packed us a food basket for our drive to Kennedy airport in New York to kick off our trip. She asked one thing in return:

A refrigerator magnet from Africa.

"Kathleen," I had said, "I don't think they have many refrigerators in rural Africa, let alone refrigerator

magnets. I mean, I don't think they even go for refrigerator magnets in Europe. It's sort of an American thing."

Whereas we had harbored paranoid fears of widespread famine and disease in Africa, her misreading ran in the opposite direction, to imagining a virtual American suburbia. But perversely we decided to throw ourselves into the pursuit of the rare African refrigerator magnet. Like Matthiessen seeking the snow leopard, like O'Hanlon tracking the Borneo rhinoceros, we would catapult our trip into the realm of a true expedition.

The impossibility of our task only increased our determination to magnet reflecting the island's footprint shape, perhaps labeled, "Madagascar: Last of the Lemurs." Purposefully we entered Diego's lone appliance shop, with its stock of rebuilt, outdated, tiny washing machines and refrigerators. The Sri Lankan proprietor, his mouth blazing red from chewing betel nuts, gave away nothing whatsoever in his expression when I asked, "*Avez-vous quelque chose de magnétique pour le frigidaire?*" He wordlessly shook his head no.

The escapade felt like a prank for *Spy* magazine: "Our Third World Village Shopping Survey: Do you have any oven mitts? Any coffee mugs with 'World's Greatest Golfer' in Malagasy?"

So much for our impossible Holy Grail. We wandered along to dinner at Yachy, our breakfast place, a few blocks gently uphill. We sat at our by-now usual table, beside lacquered Chinese doors and a vibrant red painting of swirling six-foot-tall peacocks and dragons with talons. Two terriers and one cat wandered around under our chairs.

We harbored hopes of being fed well after our croissant binge earlier. Yet nothing prepared us for

one of the best meals of our lives. In the far back country of the Malagasy republic, we feasted on nouvelle world cuisine, a blend of French, Chinese and Italian. Our menu in Diego, Madagascar, consisted of:

Rice with caramelized pork, spinach linguine with fish, shrimp on romaine with mint, fish deep-fried with apricot (a sweet-and-sour effect), profiteroles (eclairs with whipped cream centers and chocolate sauce) and coffee ice cream. The tab, with a 20 percent tip, totaled \$7.20 each.

LESSON NUMBER 14: THE DELIGHTS OF TRAVEL CAN BE AS UNEXPECTED AS THE TRAVAILS.

Later I found a CIA publication noting that the high development of small-scale agriculture on Madagascar had led to a surprising lack of hunger for such a poor nation. We noticed more: a real talent for cooking in this economic basket case.

SUNDAY, JULY 23

Viewing the dusty coelacanth

We flew back to the capital, Antananarivo, nickname Tana. This time we taxied into the city of 2 million, getting our first proper look. In some respects, with its horse carts and political posters plastered everywhere, it felt like Naples, Athens or Iraklion in Crete. But between the standard piles of cinder blocks impersonating buildings, Tana tolerated an exuberant grab-bag of land uses: rice paddies, hilltop Gothic-style churches, tumbledown red brick houses with New Orleans-style balconies and spanking new Renault dealerships.

Piteous beggar children abounded. One boy failed utterly in an unsolicited attempt to translate for a cab driver and then requested a *cadeau*. Others looked like extras from *Les Misérables* or *Great Expectations*. They wore far more ragged clothes than any truly poor children we had seen in our travels, and adults nearby watched them closely. One ostensible waif held out his hand for a *cadeau*. “*Étudiez et travaillez dur à l’école et vous serez riches, vous réussirez dans la vie,*” I lectured the children in my stern, politically incorrect Margaret Thatcher style. Study and work hard and you will do well.

They stared back in utter bafflement, probably at everything: my shaky pronunciation, brisk tone and possibly even the content of my suggestion.

We visited Parc Tsimbazaza, where ringtailed lemurs, as perky as Mary Tyler Moore, played around a lake. Because we were perceived as well-off *vazaha*, several caretakers soon came to spring us from a long line for the reptile house. For yet another *cadeau*, they

took us backstage of the cages—while the locals continued to wait.

The rare aye-aye, a lemur filling the niche occupied elsewhere by woodpeckers, displayed a skeletal middle finger designed to fish ants out of their hiding places. A handsome sifaka peered bright-eyed from its cage.

A museum on the grounds exhibited the skeleton of *Aepyornis*, the extinct elephant bird that resembled a monstrous ostrich, and the coelacanth, a dinosaur-age fish once believed to be extinct.

Covered with dust, the four-foot-long coelacanth looked like a neglected and poorly freeze-dried angler’s trophy of a trash fish. The decrepit exhibit took me back to a memory of being about 10 years old in a Catholic elementary school. A story in our *Weekly Reader* told of the 1938 discovery of a coelacanth by fishermen in the seas between Madagascar and the Comoros, probably a promising area to hide if you are an overlooked fish. As a child I never dreamed that one day I’d be looking at a coelacanth in a museum in Madagascar.

We ventured along to the train station for tickets to the reserve at Perinet the next day.

There we planned to track the giant indri. We had to pay for our train tickets in hard currency, that is, U.S. dollars, which at the time irked me to no end. Jim happened to have some tens and fives. What if he hadn’t? Why couldn’t Madagascar take its own money for its own trains? In hindsight, however, I’ve decided that it’s convenient for Americans that U.S. dollars, rather than, say, pesos, are welcome in surprising places (such as smuggling zones like Burma and economic basket cases like Madagascar).

LESSON NUMBER 15: TAKE EXTRA DOLLARS ON TRIPS. AMERICANS MIGHT JUST AS WELL BE FLATTERED AT THE GREENBACK’S WORLD-WIDE ACCEPTANCE.

Tickets in hand, we headed to dinner at the Muraille de Chine, deliberately picking Tana’s most expensive Chinese restaurant. Our goal: to burn off excess Malagasy francs. We had discovered too late a fact buried almost unnoticed in our guidebook: We could not convert back our remaining FMGs to hard currency. And we had large stacks of the soon-to-be-useless currency. Nothing cost much, except for the air and train tickets, which required Amex cards and U.S. dollars, not FMGs.

So we ordered lobster, giant tiger prawns, duck, wine and beer, and for dessert, crêpes in Grand Marnier sauce. That lightened our cash mountain by \$7 each. What to do next: Buy up all the mahogany



A sifaka studies the humans visiting Parc Tsimbazaza.

Trying to help Madagascar: The Madagascar Fauna Group

During our visit to Parc Tsimbazaza, the caretakers removed scarce boas, chameleons, owls, dwarf lemurs and a roundish gray animal resembling a hedgehog from their aged cages and—without a bit of the ceremony the unusualness of these animals merited—tossed them casually on tables for us to view.

Such treatment of these rare creatures would be quite unlikely today, due to the efforts of the Madagascar Fauna Group, a U.S.-based international consortium of zoos that is working with the Malagasy staff to improve conditions and professionalism at Parc Tsimbazaza.

David Anderson, chairman of the group, wrote to me that in the years since my visit, the zoo

has been evolving from an old-fashioned menagerie into a center for conservation and public education. Such incidents have been greatly reduced or stopped as the staff has become more attuned to their role as stewards of Malagasy fauna, rather than providers of recreation.

Nonetheless, I would advise readers not be a party to this type of impromptu “special viewing” at any zoo or protected area they are visiting, as it can be very stressful to the animals involved.

The Madagascar Fauna Group has also funded training in modern animal management and found the park staff keenly interested to learn. In addition the group targeted greater bamboo lemurs in southeastern Madagascar and ruffed lemurs in northeastern Madagascar for conservation.

furniture available? Endow a natural park? Make a poor Malagasy temporarily wealthy? Still rich in a soft currency, we headed off to bed.

MONDAY, JULY 24

In search of the great indri lemur

Our last day in this Dr. Seuss-designed country—with its gold and lilac sunsets, idiosyncratic animals, mildly sinister people and pervasive oddity—began at 4:20 a.m. At 5:15 we arrived at the train station after a fare disagreement, not our first, with a Tana cab driver. My notes indicate, to my chagrin, that we wrangled over preposterously low fares like \$3 to \$5 with local hackers, not exactly rich men. Mea culpa.

An odd hunch had come to me the second I awoke. I felt compelled to examine our tickets and the guidebook map. Sure enough, my subconscious had suspected a problem and worked on it as I slept. The problem: Our tickets read “Antsirabe.” I had carefully asked for “Andasibe,” the station adjacent to Perinet, the night before at the station. It figured that

Madagascar would have two place names that resembled anagrams of each other, equidistant from the capital and with similar fares, despite just 660 miles of rail trackage.

Furthermore, Andasibe serves as the post-colonial, politically correct, but unused name for Perinet, home of the indri lemurs. I felt convinced that if I had been retro and used the colonial name, I would have gotten the correct tickets right off the bat.

I felt mentally gone. The country that everyone deliberately nicknamed “Mad” had drained me physically and mentally. Many things defied easy explanation. WHAT AM I LOOKING AT: An airport? The president’s palace? A kid dressed up as Fagin to beg? Soviet-style monoliths? Asian oxen? A monkey cousin that sings like a whale?

We all concluded that a group in which no one spoke French of at least high school level, would never get out of the airport. Translating usually wore me out mentally, except in Tahiti, where languid Kiddiefrench did nicely. Not many people miss English as keenly as a professional journalist, used to reasonable command of expression via its nuance and shadings. And Madagascar required translating on two tiers: language and culture.

At the station, the clerk, alert despite the predawn hour, straightened out our immediate source of confusion. She sold us the last three first-class tickets for the 6 a.m. train, the only one that day to Perinet (echoes of our flight to Madagascar).

As we viewed the scenery, the oddity of Madagascar reasserted itself. Like most writers on the Great Red Island, Alex Shoumatoff, in *African Madness*, described its “pantropical” appearance, with clues of French influence and disorienting echoes of many other places.

All these elements could be seen from our window as our train wound through a brilliant green valley. A red farmhouse sat amid fields. If we pretended that we didn’t know where we were, the lushness would suggest Asia, while the color intensity—the red of the farmhouse approached a riotous shade of burgundy—would hint specifically at Indonesia. The home’s pitched roof called to mind a building in a market town in Normandy. The people working the fields and riding the train looked neither purely African nor Asian, though they had Picasso-like high foreheads and the slender frames of the Balinese.

When the train stopped at stations in the valley, women sold bananas, pineapple and corn fritters from baskets on their heads. Signs read Ambolampy and Andasibe. The very place names reflected chaotic aspects of the evolution of a written language on Madagascar. What would happen if a land were settled by speakers of a simple proto-Malay tongue, but their colonial overlords were French, their workaday names for cattle and the like came from Africa and the

missionaries who wrote their first dictionaries were English? And the ship bringing over boxes of type for printing the language lost several letters, including “c”?

Welcome to the Malagasy language. It’s probably learnable eventually for a foreigner who can break the Germanically endless words down into their Indonesian components, thought it’s daunting at first glance. I was non-

plused that my smattering of Indonesian proved of no use in puzzling out the words, until I later learned that Malagasy descends more from a south Borneo dialect called Ma’anyan than from modern Indonesian.

Welcome to Madagascar, a place where airports painted lime green, humpbacked oxen and backward-leaping prosimians seems like a book by Dr. Seuss recalled in an unsettled dream devoid of logic. In another sense, though, Madagascar illustrates the wonder of a world where the fantastic exists, where the imagined can be real, on an island in the Indian Ocean.

Pick any Seussian invention, and nature will equal it. ... What about the Moth-Watching Sneth? Well the extinct elephant bird of Madagascar stood eight feet tall and weighed a thousand pounds. In its heyday ... the elephant bird, or Aepyornis, probably scared many a Madagascan half to death.

Physics professor Chet Raymo in “Dr. Seuss and Dr. Einstein: Children’s Books and Scientific Imagination”

Many travelers rave about the friendly people and exotica of Madagascar. We found something odd about the place. In my case, a previous trip to Java and Bali overshadowed my perceptions. The people of Madagascar struck me as substantially warier, even more superstitious and less friendly than their Indonesian forebears.

LESSON NUMBER 16: THE ORDER IN WHICH YOU VISIT COUNTRIES WILL BEAR ON YOUR IMPRESSIONS. SEQUENCE MAY DETERMINE PERCEPTION.

On the train, two tourists chatted in seats behind ours. Their language sounded like a blend of Italian, French and German. In English, they told me they were Swiss and would be staying for another month.

Eureka! Jim and Steph, staring out the window at the scenery, came over to strike a deal. We wanted



A vendor, above, sells food at a station. The train to Perinet winds through scenery, right, that echoes rural France, Asia and Africa.



only the black market rate for our remaining Malagasy francs, but the Swiss, bankers to the bone, insisted that they give us the much higher official rate. They carefully calculated the precise amount of the exchange to two decimal places, rounded to the nearest whole note and handed over 70 or so Swiss francs.

At 10:45 a.m., we arrived at Andasibe with, as was our wont, no exact plan to handle several pressing logistical problems. No trains returned to Tana later that day. No other public transport existed. Once again, we hadn’t been able to obtain a lemur reserve permit over the weekend.

Situation normal. Things worked out.

The moment we left the station and walked up the hill to the nature reserve, the wail of the indris carried to our ears, sounding like the forest equivalent of a humpback whale: low and modulated, with immense carrying power. (The sound features in “Lemur Rap,” a track on the recording *A World Out of Time*, Vol. 2, by Henry Kaiser and David Lindley.)

An observant man on a motorbike stopped to ask if we tourists, obviously walking to the reserve, needed a guide. Yes, I said simply.

“We don’t have a permit,” I said in French. I tried to exhibit my lost waif look, innocent and pleading, which had been so effective in China at getting taxis and riverboats and help from English translators.

“We wonder,” I added, “if ... something can be arranged.” There. The most magic words in all the Third World. (In Brazil, the phrase is “*Tem jeito?*” The answer: “*Sempre tem jeito.*” There’s always a way. Most languages have an equivalent.)

LESSON NUMBER 17: PEOPLE LOVE TO MAKE ARRANGEMENTS, TO SERVE AS FIXERS AND GO-BETWEENS, WITH LITTLE SPELLED OUT EXPLICITLY AND MUCH LEFT IN A GRAY AREA TO PERMIT WORKING ROOM.

The motorbike man thought it over and nodded.

There's always a way. He said he would go ahead to the guardian.

At the reserve gate, the motorbiker and the guardian awaited us. The guardian lectured us on how we should have gotten a permit in Tana. On one level, he could fairly berate us. With about 4,000 visitors a year now showing up at Perinet, some management of tourists would be required to prevent them from trampling the vegetation and disturbing the wildlife.

Our entire 9,000-mile journey to see indri lemurs hung in the balance. I knew that our lack of foresight made us unworthy of seeing the magical creatures.

I listened with knitted brow and especially hypocritical delivery of the Waif Expression, but no sympathy. Why didn't these reserves just write admission tickets at the gate? Aided by another *cadeau*, we eventually arrived at a little *entre nous* understanding.

Off we strolled expectantly into a hilly forest. A little boy showed us his chameleon, and the guardian gave us a tour of aquaculture ponds in which fish were raised for human consumption. The sight reassured me. Shoumatoff wrote an alarming passage in *African Madness* about indri being shot for protein by locals, indicating that population pressure had weakened the local *fady* against killing them. Pond-raised fish providing protein for human stomachs could only help the giant lemurs.

An eerie cry rose from a distant group of indri. The guardian and an assistant led us up a muddy hill and told us to wait. They searched for the one group, of the 62 in the reserve, that was accustomed to visitors.

After they departed, Stephany found the indris right beside the muddy path where we stood (and not off where our guides tramped about). We looked up. Clinging 20 feet up the tree trunks, five indris stared at us as fixedly as we gazed at them. There they must have been all along, slightly off the trail.

For 20 minutes, as the guardian chased around elsewhere, we photographed the family of five. The group we saw comprised two pairs and a five-month-old male infant. They displayed no desire to leave or, after they initially looked us over, any additional indication that our arrival had disrupted their activities. They ate leaves in the treetops, bounding effortlessly backward from trunk to trunk in the weightless manner of a shuttle crew.

The biggest non-extinct lemurs, they stood about 3½ feet tall and resembled black-and-white dog-faced pandas. The biggest indri's huge back legs seemed longer than his torso and head combined. The flanks of the males bore cinnamon markings.



The rare indri lemur poses agreeably in the treetops at Perinet.

They gazed at us with apparent curiosity. They made fluid floating jumps—ricocheting forward or backward from tree to tree like steel balls in a pinball machine—and rolled their heads as though on a spring. They finally thrust their muzzles forward to lock their gaze on us. The routine looked like something from a jazz dancing exercise emphasizing head rotation.

Our guardian returned and proved little more adept at reciting lemur facts than in locating the animals. He said they live to be 75 to 80 years old, a figure Professor Jolly of Princeton later revised down to a ballpark of 15 to 20 years, though no one knows exactly.

Indris form monogamous pairs, the guardian said. This may well be true. Yet many of the assumptions about primate behavior seem in dispute in the wake of a 1994 *Time* magazine cover story, "Infidelity: It May Be in Our Genes." The article related how often supposedly monogamous female primates (human and otherwise) sneak off and secretly manage to have offspring not their mate's.

The word *indri* might actually mean "look at that" in Malagasy. Shoumatoff wrote that a French explorer in the 1700s mistook the exhortation to be the creature's name. Professor Jolly says, however, the term may derive from a local word, *endrina*. The true name for the indri in Malagasy is the more reverent address *babakoto*, or grandfather.

An indri encounter somehow manages to be both magical and surprisingly ordinary, as Henry Mitchell wrote in *The Washington Post*:

The only place you can reasonably hope to see [indri] is at Perinet, and the best we hoped for was a black-



A boy at Perinet shows us a Parson's chameleon.

Trying to help Madagascar: The Duke University Primate Center

In October 1993, Dr. Kenneth Glander, administrative director of the Duke University Primate Center, visited the indris.

"Things have not improved since you went there," he said. "In fact, it's gotten worse—more habitat has been destroyed. If you remember at Perinet, the large chunk of forest across the road is being cleared. The indri and other lemurs are being eliminated, essentially. They can't share the forest."

Glander's words echo *Grzimek's Animal Encyclopedia*:

The indris is not able to cope with conditions that were created by the settlement of people and the resulting deforestation. The number of indris decreased rapidly and is still on the decline.

The cheerful little ringtailed lemur finds itself in the same boat. Human settlers are chewing up its habitat in southern Madagascar.

Glander's focus is saving the golden-crowned sifaka. The 5,000 in Madagascar are expected to be extinct by the year 2000.

"Gold has been discovered in the area where they live," Glander said. "The miners have moved in and are destroying their habitat."

The Duke center, which solicits contributions via an Adopt-a-Lemur program (its Internet address: <http://www.duke.edu/web/primate/adopt.html>) cares for three of these creatures, who may form a nucleus of captively bred lemurs.

The lemur expert's words came a week after I had returned from viewing an identical predicament in Brazil, where mercury from open-air gold mining threatened the wildlife of a vast area called the Pantanal.

The Malagasy continue not only to take over lemur habitat but to hunt and eat the creatures outright, given a lack of ready alternative sources of protein. In some respects the lemur, poached for its meat, may be worse off than the elephant, poached for its tusks and thus susceptible to pressure against ivory sales.

Not all the news is bad. "Some of the changes in the past five years you'd like," Glander said. "It's easier to get in the country. There are more flights. They've modernized the airport. This allows more people to see the country and will help the animals." Indeed, American visitors had climbed to about 1,000 a year by 1994, according to an official at the Madagascar Embassy.

and-white blur as they raced and leaped through the branches high above. But the rain forest here is nothing like that of Brazil or New Guinea. It is much like a nice woods in Virginia, except that virtually every plant is unique to the island. ... They are as easily seen (once you locate them in the vast forest) as a mockingbird in a Washington garden.

We took our leave of our distant grandfathers, not over-staying a 30-minute encounter.

Mission accomplished, we reached the point of a trip where all travel begins to take one homeward. After taking a taxi-brousse to Moromanga, we found ourselves more or less stuck. Walking along on a country road west of town with a vague idea to hitchhike, we endured lengthy stares. We must have appeared about as remarkable to the locals as three barefoot Malagasy in print wraps would be herding zebu down Interstate 95 outside Baltimore.

A couple with a utility vehicle stopped to pick us up. Despite there being little traffic, finding transportation did not pose a problem for us; surviving the ongoing construction on Route National 2 did. We jounced for hours. My neck felt like I'd gotten vertebrae damage from the crumbling road. (Reports indicate that the road has since been upgraded.) But a beautiful sunset lit up the valleys.

After arriving in Tana after dark, we gave our rescuers 10,000 FMG (\$6.60). They appeared angry. Apparently, not knowing the going rate for a lift, we had made a grave miscalculation. But following our swap of spare FMG with the Bank of Switzerland, we had reset our dials from "money to burn" to "careful cash management."

Later I thought about our encounter with the indris. North American Indians apologized to their prey before killing them. Our pilgrimage to stand looking upward at the little indri family felt like a helpless parallel. Sorry chaps, but 5.7 billion humans aren't enough; we need your patch of forest too.

TUESDAY, JULY 26

Where are you from?

Our time had come to leave Madagascar, but not without one last unanticipated development. At the airport lounge for international departures, we met a young woman, one of the few Westerners in the country.

"Where are you from?" I asked.

"America."

"What area?"

"Washington."

"We're from there. What part?"

"Rockville."

"We're from Twinbrook! What neighborhood are you from?"

"Cinnamon Woods."

So much for the 100 Americans per year who then visited Madagascar. Four from Maryland sat in the airport simultaneously. Three of us hailed from Rockville, an All-American city and probably not the first place you'd think of as a hotbed of globe-trotters.

LESSON NUMBER 18: EITHER THE WORLD TRULY IS A SMALL PLACE, OR PEOPLE FROM ROCKVILLE LURK EVERYWHERE.

For whatever reason, our neighbor did not seem too delighted to encounter more Rockvillians. Mood of the moment? Was it the way meeting others from Rockville undercuts the conspicuous leisure, the travelers' one-upmanship, of going to Madagascar in the first place? Maybe she worked with grave seriousness on an international aid project, and we struck her, with some justification, as particularly naïve and frivolous tourists, bopping around difficult Madagascar on our own.

Nevertheless she informed us of the latest news: an attempted coup involving a takeover of the Tana radio station. This standard revolutionary tactic conjured up an image of a Third World Howard Stern with especially rabid fans. Oh, she added, airline workers had threatened to strike.

Once airborne, feeling as lucky to depart the threatened political and labor unrest of Madagascar as to have arrived despite the scarcity of air connections, we viewed one last time the erosion that human agriculture had set in motion. As we headed away from the island over Mahajanga, red earth appeared horribly visible below, as rivers carried the rust-colored ribbons for miles out to sea.

The flight crossed the straits where the coelacanth still lurks. According to a *National Geographic* article, these living fossils do odd things as they prowl the sea bottom, such as perform headstands. Our jet landed on a volcanic black rock island, set under an overcast sky with dark gold light escaping. We didn't have the foggiest notion where we had landed. The flight attendant clued us in. We sat on the Comoros, northwest of Madagascar in the Indian Ocean. The Comoros looked too remote to attract even the swarms of adventure travelers from Rockville that roam the globe.

Madagascar and the big lesson: the Earth's fragility

We traveled in Madagascar as pure amateurs, kids from Rockville with spare time who wanted to see something different. Home years later, I worked at *The Washington Post*, doing graphics at the newspaper that had inspired our trip. Every day I filled out spreadsheets to chart the graft in Congress, the numbers games in the White House budget and size of the Pentagon arsenal.

My trips to 30 foreign countries also seemed to have facets that could be roughly compared. I began to mentally plot these on an imaginary giant grid, comparing each country in terms of its people, scenery, wildlife, adventure and costs. Certain patterns seemed to emerge. Some widely separated nations epitomize tropical sensuality (Brazil, Thailand) or formal manners

(Britain, Japan), navigational prowess (Britain, Polynesia) or shipping talents (Greece, Norway).

The places to which I'd traveled, unburdened by extensive knowledge, attracted me back for return visits, this time via research and data analysis. The moment came to read beyond the Lonely Planet guidebook's chapter containing "Facts About the Country" and to look at weightier tomes. Then the world could be examined in my father's Jesuit-trained fashion, by asking: What is the central lesson of every place I've been?

For Madagascar, the central lesson seemed to be how extinctions on islands, our most fragile ecosystems, provide an early warning of what can happen on continents when wilderness becomes fragmented. Ever since Charles Darwin's 1835 visit to the Galápagos, a discipline called island biogeography has focused on the knowledge to be gained from isolated areas.

By the 1960s, scientists had begun to study the links between habitat size and numbers of species. Preserving species on continents, they found, may require giant reserves, far bigger than previously thought and connected to each other by land bridges. Congress heeded this lesson with the California Desert Protection Act of 1994, which protected additional giant tracts of wilderness to connect existing national parks and monuments east of San Diego. British Columbia in 1993 similarly moved toward protecting the Tatshenshini and Alsek river valleys, creating the world's largest protected wilderness area, adjacent to Wrangel-St. Elias and Glacier Bay national parks in Alaska and the Yukon's Kluane National Park Reserve.

Habitats, threatened species compared

	MADAGASCAR	UNITED STATES
Protected areas	1.9%	13.3%
Threatened mammals	33	22
Threatened birds	28	46
Threatened plants	189	1,845

Based on data in *World Resources 1995-96*

Madagascar seemed to illustrate the worst case of what can happen when contiguous forests are eliminated, leaving only tiny parcels. Habitat loss began to threaten human life as well as the indri, the golden-crowned sifaka and the ring-tailed lemur. A wave of negative publicity beginning in the mid-1980s apparently shocked the government of Madagascar into attempts to help peasants realize that burning the forest, now 90 percent gone, and shooting lemurs translates into cutting their own throats.

A *National Geographic* article by Professor Jolly entitled "Madagascar: A World Apart" quoted a Malagasy minister, Joseph Randrianasolo, addressing villagers at the dedication of a nature reserve: "If there is no more forest, then no more water, and no more rice!"

Jolly wrote that “Madagascar’s first wave of extinction eliminated a relative handful of species. Today’s extinctions are far more drastic, undercutting the survival of the Malagasy themselves.”

The skeleton of *Aepyornis* standing in the Antananarivo zoo attests to how, over the past 2,000 years, birds on islands have been the creatures most vulnerable to extinction. *Aepyornis* links Madagascar to the moa on New Zealand, the dodo of Mauritius and 35 types of birds now lost on Hawaii—all of which disappeared after the arrival of man, as did many lemurs.

Peter Ward notes in *The End of Evolution* a “tremendous lesson” taught by Hawaii, which also applies to Madagascar: “People arrived, and species died. . . . It shows that many species on the Earth cannot tolerate the least human disturbance, so delicately are they balanced on the precarious tightrope of nature.”

Madagascar’s lessons on the environment provided a framework for many of my later travels. In Tibet and Burma, totalitarian dictatorships like Madagascar’s spelled catastrophe for forests, which have been extracted at a fierce pace. A struggle to survive in habitat diminished by logging, agriculture and human population pressures link the lemurs of Madagascar to the hornbills of Borneo, the lions and elephants of Africa (see page 92), the tigers of Asia, and owls, condors, panthers and jaguars of the Americas. Soil problems link Madagascar to Borneo and Central America.

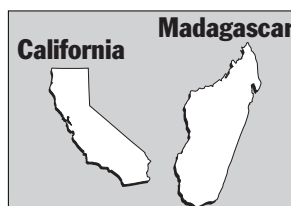
Several factors make the island of Madagascar one of the most dramatic examples of the Earth’s fragility.

LESSON NUMBER 19: OF THE 20 PLACES DISCOVERED AFTER CHRIST, MADAGASCAR IS:

- THE LARGEST GEOGRAPHICALLY AND MOST POPULATED.
- THE PLACE WITH THE MOST FRAGILE SOIL.
- ONE OF THE MOST UNIQUE IN ITS ANIMAL AND PLANT FORMS.
- THE POOREST.

Twenty places in the world, all islands except Antarctica, did not experience any human settlement until after the birth of Christ. Undisturbed by humans for eons, these island ecosystems have the world’s most unusual and fragile wildlife and plants. Island ecologies can tailspin rapidly, as the first extinctions destabilize relationships and lead to further extinctions.

On paper, Madagascar, a huge island, should be able to support its 10,000

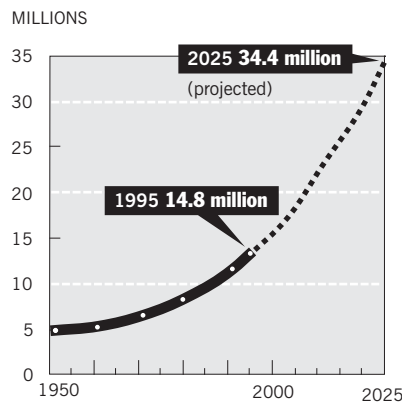


unique life forms and humans as well. California supports 30 million people, while Madagascar, which is more than a third larger in land area, has only 15 million people. The problem is that tropical soils make magnificent incubators of genetic diversity—and terrible areas for human agriculture. Soils such as those in Madagascar, unlike fertile California’s San Joaquin Valley, bake to brick after only a handful of crop-growing seasons. On the most eroded place on earth, cliffs of treeless red dirt crumble into streams and rivers.

Now 80 percent of the island lies sterile and barren. From the air, the central highlands look like one big series of basement excavation pits for midtown construction projects—an aerial advertisement of the ugliness of habitat loss.

LESSON NUMBER 20: FRAGILE MADAGASCAR TEACHES US, MOST OF ALL, CAUTION IN ESTIMATING EARTH’S CARRYING CAPACITY FOR HUMANS AND RARE CREATURES.

Population in Madagascar



Based on data from the 1995 World Population Data Sheet

Given its soil problems, Madagascar is one of the world’s places least able to cope with a growing population. Yet in the six years following our trip in 1989, an amazing 3.4 million more Malagasy had been born, bringing the 1995 population to 14.8 million. That’s more than 10,000 babies daily, or roughly two towns the size of Hell-Ville.

Somehow the island must support a staggering 34 million souls by the year 2025, if current birthrates hold. That’s 24 million more people needing living space on an island dissolving into the sea than the number living there when Henry Mitchell visited in 1986. One wonders, where can they go?

Yet numbers of people may not be the entire problem. The Malagasy, even in booming numbers, are so poor that they use comparatively few resources, perhaps 1/70 as much as an American. Still, poor people, in rocketing numbers, need land. Poverty gives them few alternatives to chopping down a tree to get wood for fuel and land for rice growing. This means less habitat for the lemurs, an odd and defenseless life form that has already flunked out in head-to-head competition with monkeys, let alone humans, in the Americas, Europe and mainland Africa. The lemurs make their last stand on Madagascar.

Madagascar reveals flaws in universally applying arguments presented by advocates of continuing human population growth. Even in prehistoric times, Madagascar’s disintegrating soils could not support

Madagascar's triple whammy

The map shows the 20 places first settled by human beings after the birth of Christ.

With millions of years for animals to develop without human threat, these places have some of the **most unique wildlife** on earth.

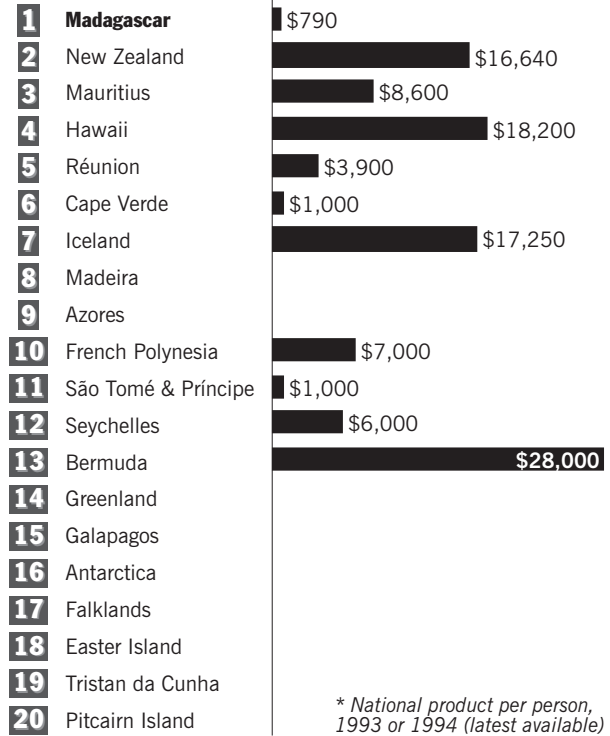
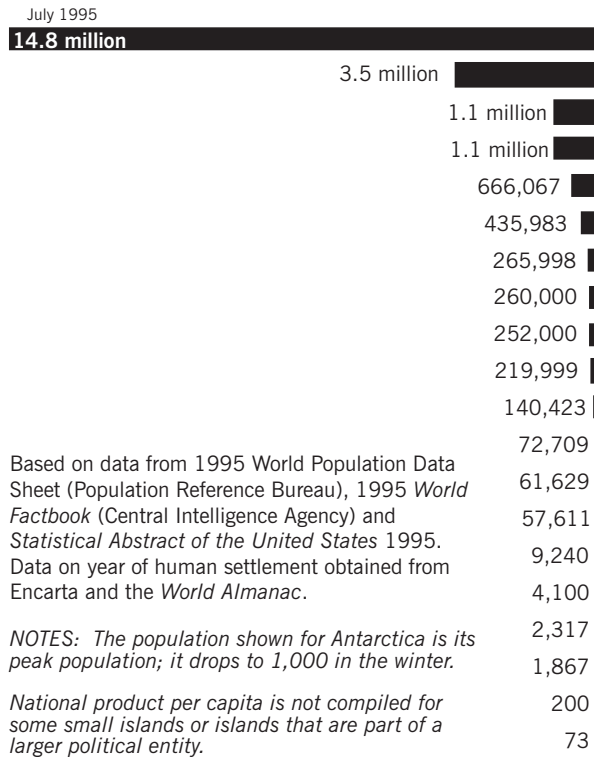


Population

Of these places settled since the birth of Christ, Madagascar by far has the **greatest population** ...

Production *

... and is the **poorest**, putting its lemurs at risk.



both a tiny number of settlers and certain creatures. Fifteen species of lemurs, all larger than surviving species, as well as tortoises, crocodiles, eagles, pygmy hippos and monstrous ostriches became extinct within 500 years of human settlement, a situation echoed on a smaller scale as species vanished following the Polynesian settlements of New Zealand and Hawaii. The biggest animals became extinct with a swiftness that announced the precarious ecology of Madagascar and foretold the struggle of its modern population to feed itself.

Critics of environmentalism cling to a view that humans hold a right to manage nature, to exploit it to provide people with better lives. At its most extreme, this argument runs that if the spotted owl or indri lemur isn't tough enough to adapt to a habitat altered by human activity, tough luck.

Alarmed scientists and naturalists have pointed out that we may end up needing a wide variety of creatures, even the less hardy ones. Mass exterminations may destabilize the planet. Biodiversity exists for a good reason: Earth needs a vast gene pool to permit

the evolution and survival of species that will provide oxygen, medicine, food, stable soil and clean water on which humankind depends. Scientists believe it is quite possible that a cure for AIDS will be found in an obscure plant growing in a tropical forest.

Environmental concerns may eventually split conservatism into factions pro- and anti-. Like many Baby Boomers, I find myself rejecting most tenets of the Sixties canon—drug experimentation, the welfare state, high taxes and alternatives to traditional families. Yet more than ever, I support environmentalism. Conservative guru Margaret Thatcher, the former British prime minister who once viewed pollution controls as economic barriers, typifies the ecologically conscious Tory.

Reflecting her background as a chemist, she espouses a hardheaded environmentalism based on science rather than emotion. She concluded in a landmark speech to the Royal Society (the United Kingdom's academy of science) in September 1988 that protecting "the balance of nature" is "one of the great challenges of the late 20th century." She could have been describing Madagascar when she observed that

the health of the economy and the health of our environment are totally dependent upon each other. ... But it is possible that with all these enormous changes (population, agricultural, use of fossil fuels) concentrated into such a short period of time, we have unwittingly begun a massive experiment with the system of this planet itself.

Humans benefit profoundly from biodiversity, noted Thomas J. Lovejoy of the Smithsonian Institution in a 1994 speech, "Biodiversity: The Most Fundamental Issue." Strep throat diagnosis has been speeded by the discovery of a useful micro-organism in the slime of Yellowstone National Park's hot springs. Oysters in the Chesapeake Bay clean the water of pollutants, as do the soils of the Pantanal of Brazil.

People with high blood pressure benefit from biological processes discovered in the venom of the Amazon's bushmaster snake. "So it is literally possible to say that millions of people are living longer and healthier lives because of the biology of some nasty snake in a faraway rainforest," Lovejoy noted. "These kinds of connections are very real and are rarely appreciated by people going about their daily lives."

The fragile soil of Madagascar illustrates that in the long term, land managed at the expense of animals also imposes a cost on humans. Though elsewhere, humans have survived so far despite exploiting animals and sometimes exterminating species, Madagascar may be the planet's starkest warning of a need to manage farms and forests for humans and animals alike.



An indri peers about the forest.

LESSON NUMBER 21: HUMANS AND ALL THE WORLD'S CREATURES ARE IN THIS TOGETHER.

Malagasy peasants need to plow, enrich the soil and rotate crops, not take the last remnants of forest. Political isolation during the Ratsiraka dictatorship kept the Green Revolution in agriculture from reaching them. Now United Nations experts have begun to teach new farming methods to the super-

stitious Malagasy.

Thatcher neatly wrapped up the crucial triangle needed to nurture the environment: science, wealth and political freedom. All are lacking in superstitious, poor and (until recently) dictator-saddled Madagascar. She wrote in *The Downing Street Years* that

For me, the economic progress, scientific advance and public debate which occur in free societies themselves offered the means to overcome threats to individual and collective wellbeing. The scarred landscape, dying forests, poisoned rivers and sick children of the former communist states bear tragic testimony to which system worked better, both for people and the environment.

Fortunately the international community, including the United Nations, the World Wildlife Fund, the MacArthur Foundation, National Geographic, the National Science Foundation, the Fulbright Fellowship and others now fund programs in Madagascar providing education, conservation and agricultural assistance.

LESSON NUMBER 22: MADAGASCAR TEACHES US THAT GETTING INVOLVED MAKES A DIFFERENCE.

Wherever an endangered species has begun to make a comeback, one finds a person like Alison Jolly, Kenneth Glander or David Anderson who has fought energetically to change matters. Madagascans such as Madame Madio and the staff of Parc Tsimbazaza also play a growing role. Americans can help as well on the home front, by recycling and supporting land use that invests in existing infrastructure in cities and other forms of dense developments and avoids chopping our open land into tiny, Madagascar-like parcels.

Meanwhile the lemurs struggle on. And Henry Mitchell himself departed this Earth in November 1993, leaving us his words in the newspaper morgue:

Time has almost run out, after 180 million years of evolution, for the unique life of this Indian Ocean island. ... Almost every native thing seen here is found nowhere else.

And let us hope Madagascar's native creatures somehow avoid a fate of being found nowhere at all.