



A Giant Madagascar Chameleon (*Furcifer oustaleti*).

CREDIT

TRAVELOGUE

Madagascar

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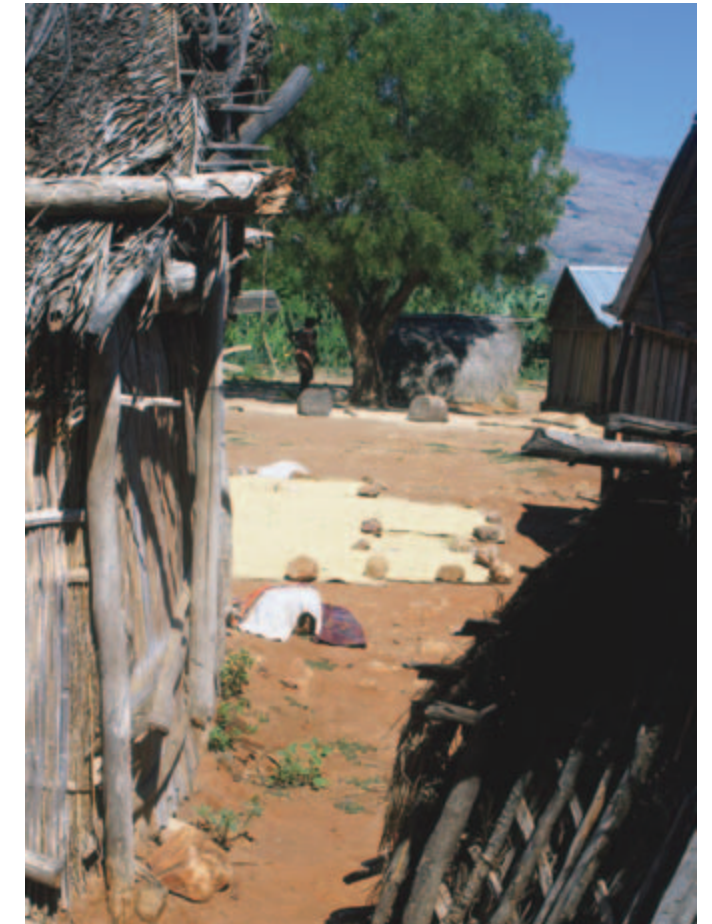
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Photographs by the author.

I was handed a glass of clear liquid and knew immediately I was in trouble. The village chief looked at me expectantly, waiting for me to imbibe the strong-smelling fluid. I had already been in Africa for nearly four months and had become somewhat accustomed to the local offerings. I took a small sip and felt the burn of extremely strong homebrewed rum. The chief seemed pleased and I handed the cup back; he promptly drained it.

I had been called to meet with the chief when I had entered his small and seldom-visited village on the edge of Andohahela National Park. They hadn't had any *vazaha* (Malagasy for white foreigners) in quite a while. So, when I entered the village, I instantly became the prime attraction. At first, many were taken aback by my appearance and small children directed frightened and questioning looks at the elders. Reassured, the young children crowded around and stared in amazement at my white skin and strange clothes. They slowly grew bolder and many endeavored to touch my skin, much to the chagrin of their mothers standing nearby. This village is similar to countless others in Madagascar, a small conglomeration of houses built from local trees and grasses. Electricity and running water are luxuries of the far-off cities, while the village people rely heavily on the available natural resources to survive. Villagers sustain themselves by farming rice where water is available and corn and other vegetables where it isn't. The people are unwaveringly friendly and greet strangers with broad smiles. They humble any traveler with their ability to thrive in conditions we would view as extremely impoverished.

For anyone wishing to get out into the true wilds of Madagascar (and why else make the journey?) the local people are vital. My father, fresh off the plane from the U.S., and I learned this quickly. We had met in Antananarivo (Tana), the bustling capital city full of old taxis and large crowded markets. I had come from spending a semester



Rice drying in a small village. The abject poverty in many Malagasy villages is an eye-opener to a "vazaha" from the United States.



Trying to figure out what to make of the strange "vazaha."

abroad studying in the national park system in South Africa and considered myself prepared to rough it and do whatever was necessary to see the "real" Madagascar. My father had slightly different plans, but we were both ready for an adventure. We promptly flew north to Antsiranana (Diégo-Suarez to the French) eager to begin viewing some of the storied fauna and to escape the buzz of the Malagasy capital.

Our first national park was Montagne d'Ambre, just 27 km south of Antsiranana, and resplendent with rainforest and beautiful waterfalls. Our local guide, Zeze, immediately demonstrated his incredible eye for the local fauna. A few hundred meters into the park, he stopped and proclaimed that he had spotted a Leaf-tailed Gecko (*Uroplatus*) and he pointed just off the trail. I scanned the trees eager to see what I knew would be an incredible animal. My efforts proved fruitless until Zeze finally took pity and revealed the exact



An old French hotel in Antsiranana is a bit worn from cyclones.

location. When we finally saw the gecko, my father, not previously herpetologically inclined, and I were equally dumbfounded. The form and behavior of this animal served as perfect camouflage. As we approached, it pressed itself closer to the tree, using dermal fringes to blend seamlessly with the bark and to eliminate any noticeable edge between its body and the trunk. We continued our walk through Montagne d'Ambre, buzzing with enthusiasm.

Zeze continued to impress as he spotted a Dwarf Chameleon (*Brookesia tuberculata*), one of the world's smallest reptiles. The tiny chameleon was amusing to watch and, once captured, it feigned death, providing an excellent chance to examine it closely. It was toy-like, with small frail limbs and hard spines down its back. Despite its petite size, its form was strikingly familiar — but on an unbelievably miniature scale. With its wealth of unique, endemic biodiversity, Madagascar revealed new and exceptional things to us on each day of our trip.

Our next stop, Ankarana Special Reserve, certainly had many treasures to offer. The reserve has *tsingy*, beautiful limestone karst pinnacles, and caves filled with brilliant crystallized formations. A walk through *tsingy* is like walking lonely corridors of another planet. The limestone rises up on either side forming high walls that come to sharp points above. As we exited the *tsingy* and walked back into the forest, we came upon a group of Crowned Lemurs (*Eulemur coronatus*) close to the ground. They made some characteristic lemur grunts, similar to that of a pig, and some climbed down to investigate us (fueling our insatiable photographic appetites). After a few moments,



A Leaf-tailed Gecko (*Uroplatus henkeli*) roused from its camouflaged position.

they decided that we weren't all that interesting and departed, leaping from tree to tree away from the path and out of our sight.

The agility and speed of lemurs was something we were lucky enough to see several times. In the Perinet National Park, we came upon a group of Babakotos (*Indri indri*), the largest extant lemur. Perinet is the most heavily trafficked of all Malagasy parks due to its proximity to Tana, but its boundaries recently have been expanded to include Mantadia National Park, which is less developed. Both



A tiny Dwarf Chameleon (*Brookesia tuberculata*) exploring an unfamiliar habitat.



A Crowned Lemur (*Eulemur coronatus*) coming down for a closer look at some strange visitors.

parks revealed excellent creatures of herpetological interest, including a Painted Mantella (*Mantella madagascariensis*), a Parson's Chameleon (*Calumma parsonii cristifer*), a chameleon with more familiar dimensions, and a large sleeping Madagascan Ground Boa (*Sanzinia madagascariensis*). Mantadia is a fantastic dense primary forest, commonly used for research studies and definitely worth a visit. After our brief stay in the area, the time had come for my father to return to the U.S.

As he flew back to the comforts of home with a newfound enthusiasm (love still isn't the right word) for herpetology, I headed south alone to spend time in the Isalo and Andohahela national parks. After a long day of traveling with several delays (definitely the norm in Madagascar), I finally arrived at my hotel during a rainy night. To my surprise, music and laughter emanated from the dining area. I ventured inside and came upon a large Malagasy party. I was promptly given a room and asked to come back and participate in the festivities. My best effort to bridge the language barrier (my French is decidedly poor) led to many laughs. However, I thoroughly enjoyed watching traditional Malagasy dances and feasted on a delicious dinner of Zebu (local cattle) before heading off to sleep.

The Isalo Park is a far cry from the moist rainforest of the northern and central parks. I had planned four days of hiking to examine several of the park's beautiful canyons and the *piscine naturelle* (natural swimming pool). Each canyon proved beautiful, and the many waterfalls and pools provided excellent reprieves from the summer heat. Blue-legged Mantellas (*Mantella expectata*) were prevalent in the area and were a site to behold with their yellow heads fading to orange on the back and their metallic blue arms. Madagascar Swifts (*Oplurus cyclurus*) greeted us from perches on sandstone ledges and rock piles. The sandstone has yielded to erosion and over time has been crafted into beautiful sculptures and shallow caverns, which are used by local peoples for burials. Local customs dictate that they bury their dead in a coffin inside of a cavern for two years. The bones are then removed, washed, and then reburied in a different cavern. Madagascar has many different regional tribes, each with their own unique beliefs. These beliefs, called *fady*, extend to most facets of life and should be observed by visitors once they are known. Asking your local guide about regional *fady* is an excellent way to avoid offending any local people and also a chance for exposure to some Malagasy culture.

Unfortunately, one of the common *fady* is a belief that Malagasy snakes are dangerous. Although some mildly venomous



The fringes on the heads of Leaf-tailed Geckos (*Uroplatus henkeli*) serve to blend with the substrate.

colubrids have been reported, no native snakes pose any real danger to humans. While driving, we often stopped to examine chameleons or boas visible from the road. My driver recognized my interest in reptiles and took me to a particular village where a small snake had settled into a massive pile of cassava (the starchy roots of which are a Malagasy staple). The villagers led me to the pile hoping that I could somehow charm out the snake. With the help of my driver I tried to explain that the snake was not harmful, but I doubt that I was sufficiently convincing to overturn a long held belief. The locals were clearly disappointed at my unsuccessful snake removal efforts.

The final stop on my journey was to the far south in the Andohahela National Park. This park is one of the few areas with spiny forests, a unique biome resulting from extremely sparse rainfall and exceptionally poor soil. Nevertheless, the area features many beautiful endemic plants (some of which are spiny, hence the name). Traveling to Andohahela did prove somewhat difficult. The extremely dry spiny forest area of the park has no water and is not often visited. The cuisine pushed my limits as a traveler (since when do egg and cheese sandwiches contain all the organs of a chicken?) and the weather was exceedingly hot. Yet the scenery was certainly worth the struggle. I was able to see Verreaux's Sifakas (*Propithecus verreauxi*), another species of lemur, leap apparently unfazed onto trees covered in sharp spines. The ability of the local people to live in the arid environment with so little



A beautifully colored Panther Chameleon (*Furcifer pardalis*).



A massive Parson's Chameleon (*Calumma parsonii cristifer*), a chameleon with more traditional dimensions than the tiny *Brookesia*.



A Comet Moth (*Argema mittrei*) from Madagascar Exotique (a private park).



Diademed Sifaka (*Propithecus diadema*) in Perinet Reserve.



Large millipede in the moist Mantadia forest.



The beautifully colored Painted Mantella (*Mantella madagascariensis*).

water was inconceivable. They sustained their Zebu (cattle) with invasive cactus leaves and survived with water brought in occasionally on a Zebu-drawn cart from a river 20 km away.

Madagascar is still a wild place, a place of wonder and mystery. It may make news for the rapid decline in its biodiversity and for its degraded habitats, but many areas still support relatively unspoiled wilderness. The Malagasy people will astound any visitor with their

friendliness and can easily shift the worldview of the most ardent "ugly American." As I waited in the airport (my flight was again canceled) for my flight back to Johannesburg, I realized how accustomed I had become to Malagasy living and to seeing astounding novelties each and every day. I knew then that I would never forget the terrific people and beautiful country that is Madagascar. I began planning a return trip while still on my way home.



Holding a Dumeril's Boa (*Acrantophis dumerili*) outside of Isalo National Park, I encountered the only Malagasy I met on the trip who was truly unafraid of snakes.



Verreaux's Sifakas (*Propithecus verreauxi*) leap unfazed onto trees covered in sharp spines.



Blue-legged Mantella (*Mantella expectata*) in Isalo National Park.



The strange vegetation in Isalo National Park included this "Elephant's Foot."