



Cinda Hunter

Madagascar 2014



This was my first trip to Madagascar. I went with my sister Penny and her husband Digby who are seasoned Madagascar travellers (this was their fifth trip). We chose to go to northern Madagascar as we were looking for a warm respite from the Johannesburg winter so opted for the area around Diego Suarez (now known as Antsiranana). The idea was to have a holiday with a bit of beach followed by two of the national parks and then a few days in Antananarivo so I could find some different things for the shop.



The area around Diego Suarez is fairly arid with some pockets of deciduous forest. This was their winter and the dry season so it didn't look terribly appealing. We were staying at Sakalava Bay about half an hour's drive from Diego and our accommodation comprised really simple rondavels right on the beach shaded by casuarinas. Sakalava Bay is THE kite surfing mecca of Madagascar and attracts surfers of all ages from all over the world, attracted by strong winds and a sheltered bay. Not ideal for a beach holiday, but we did lots of walking, bird-watching, took paddle-boards into the adjacent mangroves and on one particularly windy day checked out the shops in Diego (dismal!).





One real highlight was a day trip to La Mer Emeraude. We went by dhow accompanied by Madam Caroline (the chef). We resisted her invitation to decorate our faces with various ochre-coloured pigments! We sailed past the cannons guarding the entrance to the harbour (remnants of WW2) and then through a channel into the Emerald Sea – the most amazing, translucent, aquamarine colour from the relatively shallow water and the white coral sands. We dropped Caroline with all her cooking regalia on a small island and set off for some lovely snorkelling among big heads of coral. While we did this one crew member set off with a spear gun and returned with fish which was grilled back on shore for our lunch. It was sublime but didn't assuage our guilt at eating reef fish (like a unicorn fish and a parrot fish that would be prohibited in most places) and there is no doubt that this contributed to how few fish we saw while diving and suggests that it will become more and more difficult to catch fresh fish for tourists lunches in future.





The other highlight was a family of six Crowned Lemurs which came to visit. They were wild lemurs but habituated to people (and bananas!). We actually bought a big bunch when we were in Diego so we could feed them. They would come down the tree one after the other to, oh so gently, take a piece of banana. At one point I became the tree and have to admit that it was a battle to get the smell (particularly of the male) off me and my clothes! After this experience we recognised the proximity of lemurs through the smell. We saw the family several times and it was such a privilege to be able to interact this closely with them – we saw other lemurs in the national parks but they were usually high up in the canopy and difficult to see clearly.



For years I have collected 'grey balls' on beaches in South Africa. They are somehow porcelain-like in their hardness and feel and are commonly used as counters in Bao, a game played all over Africa (including Madagascar). We have always wondered where they originated from and what plant they come from. Well, we finally solved the mystery while walking in the plains behind Sakalava Bay. I was looking at a leafy-green shrub with bright red prickly pods all over it when I noticed to my amazement that one pod that was half opened contained the grey balls (the photo below shows the balls in a vetiver bird's nest basket which I had made in Tana). A subsequent Google search identified the plant as *Cesalpinia Bonduc* which occurs throughout equatorial Africa.



Tsingys (the Malagasy word for "walking on tiptoes") are unique to Madagascar and comprise a nearly impenetrable labyrinth of limestone needles – although the resident lemurs casually leap from spike to spike. We visited the Tsingys in the Ankarana National Park which are much more accessible than the more famous Tsingy de Bemaraha (a gruelling seven hour trip by 4x4 from Morandava on the west coast). The Tsingys de Ankarana are located about 100 km from Diego off the main road to Nosy Be. This road carries a lot of traffic but is in such disrepair and so full of potholes that it took almost 3 hours to travel this distance. We stopped at the beautiful Red Tsingys on the way which are also protected in a national park and as they are really hard to describe, I suggest you look at the photograph. We spent 3 nights at Ankarana, staying at the Ankarana Lodge (which had a swimming pool which would be a necessity in summer when the temperatures are in the mid-forties) and walked into the tsingys on two occasions. It is hard to describe the tsingys which are a 'sea' of jagged rock pinnacles with deep channels and caverns between them so again I suggest you look at the photos.

The park has constructed paths through and on the tsingys as well as a rope bridge so that you are able to get a decent view of them. Many of the plants have developed huge 'bulbs' to store water to enable them to survive prolonged periods of dry heat and there are several varieties of baobab (Madagascar is home to six of the world's eight species of baobabs) as well as huge baobab-like pachypodiums that were crowned with big, white frangipani-like flowers. One of the most interesting sites in the park occurs where three rivers converge and disappear into a huge 'pothole' around 30 metres across which leads into an underground series of tunnels which eventually emerge in the Mozambique channel about 20km offshore.





We were lucky enough to have a brilliant, English-speaking guide Fhurisco who had worked with many researchers in Madagascar and was hugely knowledgeable about fauna, flora, geology... he found us this leaf-tailed gecko which we battled to see even when it was pointed out to us – these are REAL masters of camouflage. (Yes the gekco is there...)

We also visited the Montagne d’Ambre National Park which overlooks Diego but because of its relative height is a dense, tropical rain-forest. It is a lush, cool contrast to the dry and dusty plains below. We stayed at Nature Lodge which was beautifully run and managed and has lovely views of the forest and the Diego Bay. Our guide found us a smallish Brookeisia chameleon in the leaf litter. There are 4 different Brookeisia, with the smallest (B Micra which we did not see) being small enough to fit on the top of a match head. We saw lots of these fat, green, red-spotted geckos but they were notoriously camera-shy as were most other chameleons we saw.



Our last few days were spent in Tana where I hoped to add to our purchases for the shop. Penny and Digby had brought some things from a previous trip so we had an idea of what to buy and where. We visited a small workshop where the traditional Madagascan lambas are woven from various wild silks. The lamba consists of a rectangular length of cloth which is worn by both men and women and also used to wrap around the body for burial. We bought two beautiful raw silk lambas in natural shades but they come in a variety of colours and stripes. Madagascar has extensive cotton plantations and we bought a number of hand-embroidered table cloths featuring scenes of Madagascan life.

Madagascar is also famous for its fossils and we managed to find a lovely selection of ammonites, nautilus and urchins/pansies. Unfortunately there are restrictions on exporting the larger unpolished ammonites so we were only able to buy two – we would have loved to buy more of these!

I also bought a number of vetiver baskets (nest like ones as well as lidded baskets) which I managed to source and order before we left South Africa. Baskets are woven from the roots of the vetiver plant by a local women's co-operative, providing important employment and income generating opportunities. Vetiver is a grass which originated in India whose long root structure and non-invasive growth patterns make it ideal for stabilising soil and protecting it against erosion while also purifying polluted water. It also protects crops against pests and weeds. It has a lovely aromatic smell and the oil is widely used in perfumes, creams and soaps. The roots are used to weave baskets and mats and it retains its wonderful fragrance. We found that bracelets and jewellery left overnight in one of the baskets were imbued with the vetiver perfume and it is a great insect repellent if they are used in amongst jerseys.



We stayed at Sakamanga, a lovely quirky, maze-like hotel in the Haute-Ville area of Tana. The French owner has a superb old collection of Malagasy artefacts and has used them to decorate the hotel giving it a unique character. The collection included many Sakalava posts which are placed around tombs and which are now difficult to find, very expensive and require expensive export permits if you manage to find any to buy. Tana is built on and between a series of hills and as in the rest of Madagascar, there are rice fields wherever possible. The streets are lined with shacks, shopping booths selling everything you can think of (including lots of butcheries with strings of sausages and chunks of zebu – the delicious local beef – on display, with no refrigeration or covering) and interspersed with beautiful old houses in varying states of disrepair! The streets teem with people and activity and although Madagascar is classified as the world's 13th poorest country, the people have a sense of energy, purpose and cheerfulness despite what we would interpret as pretty difficult living circumstances. Because of the strong French influence French is spoken more than English, especially in the north where it was difficult to find English-speaking drivers, guides or hotel staff forcing Penny to produce her rarely used and very rusty French!

But, it did mean that there was often very good food and wonderful French bread. On our last night we treated ourselves to dinner at La Varangue, a highly acclaimed restaurant where we had a really good (but pricey) meal ending with a pudding simply called Explosion: a ball of chocolate arrived on a platter (looking like an orange-sized Easter egg) and we were instructed to wait. Shortly afterwards the waiter returned with a jug of simmering chocolate and proceeded to pour it over the ball which then imploded revealing a ball of vanilla ice cream, and some sliced poached pears resting on a caramel mousse-like base. Amazing! Madagascar is justifiably famous for its chocolate and its vanilla.

Air Madagascar departed on schedule at 6 am meaning we got up at 3am and we were back in Joburg three hours later – yet another reason to visit Madagascar!



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