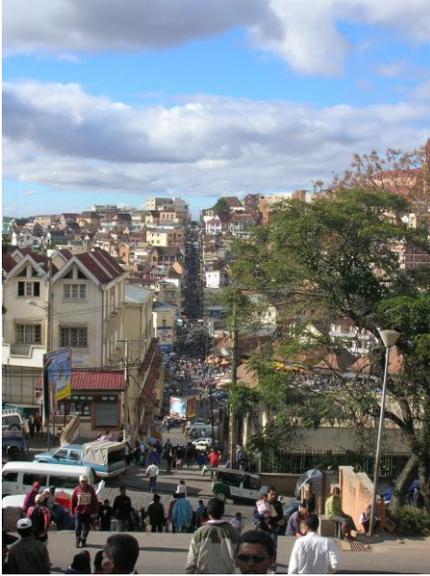


## Lemur Country

Madagascar is different. It is an island, separated from mainland Africa, with a unique culture as well as unique flora and fauna. Due to the culture, Madagascar has an Asian feel despite being in Africa. It was a French colony and, at times, has the feel of France despite not having anything resembling the Arc de Triumph or Eiffel Tower



The capital of Madagascar, Antananarivo (Tana), is a fairly attractive capital in comparison to other developing world capitals. It is a good place to organize money, make e-mails and arrange travel plans. The city contains a lower town and upper town, due to the hills the city is located on. Several grueling stairs connect the upper and lower city. Lake Anosy is in the middle of the city and is pleasant to walk around except on the north side of the lake where there is a military complex with armed soldiers staring down at pedestrians. The Independence Plaza is in the heart of the city and at the southern end is a large market. Near the market is an open area where there are often concerts. Many nightclubs in Tana are located by the plaza. The women at the clubs are extremely aggressive and most males simply making

their way to the bathroom will probably be groped repeatedly.

I traveled in Tana with a couple Austrian women and an American who was in the Peace Corps in Benin. He had just finished his two year commitment and was considering spending two years in Madagascar. We visited the Peace Corps headquarters in Madagascar, which gave insight into the organization. It was interesting to hear the stories of the other people who were working in the Peace Corps, most in agricultural or educational capacities.

Despite a fairly relaxed feeling, the police presence in Tana was significant. I was stopped returning from a bar and the police asked to see my passport. There are rolling blackouts in Tana and some areas of the city are naturally dark, so the sight of police was reassuring. The police also check to see that car drivers don't take passengers to ensure that people take the government-run buses or minibuses (taxi-brousse). Getting public transport took patience as there was no real departure schedule.

Boarding a bus, I traveled east of Tana to the Andasibe National Park with its main attraction, the indri lemurs. Lemurs are one of the distinctive animals of Madagascar and are a



major tourist attraction. The black and white indri lemur is one of the biggest lemurs as it can grow to three feet and jump 30 feet. Also of interest is the haunting, as well as loud, territorial call of the indri. Our tour guides played a cassette which had the indri mating call and this triggered the indri to call to each other. Although it was a bit superficial, hearing the indri mating call was fascinating.

There are other attractions at Andasibe National Park. Other types of lemurs can be seen including the brown lemur. There are several types of chameleons, including ones that are smaller than my pinky. There are larger, bright green and yellow chameleons as well. A night trek is an option and mouse lemurs, spiders and strange looking insects can be seen. Just walking around at night in the park is mysterious even if no animals are seen.

The actual village of Andasibe is also intriguing. It has just dirt roads, or actually muddy roads, and limited electricity. Most of the buildings are just shacks with a tin roof. The people spend a large amount of time farming, taking care of pigs and pounding the shaft off of rice. There are a couple of churches and a railroad, but rail service is rare. There is lush vegetation surrounding the small village and walking just a few feet out of the village is the jungle. As the sun sets and the darkness arrives, the candles appear and it feels as the whole village comes together until the light of the next morning. It is a good place to see how rural people in Madagascar live.

The road east of Andasibe leads to the attractive coastal city of Tamatave. Due to delayed traffic from rainy weather, our bus stopped at a small village to eat. It was noteworthy to see all the different types of food, including the numerous types of fruit. Jack fruit, lychee, mango and dried banana are on the menu and one could easily have a meal of just fruit. The size and variety of spiders are also impressive as exemplified by the spider in the bathroom of the restaurant I ate at.

Tamatave has numerous things to see in the city center. There is a nice boulevard that runs along the Indian Ocean. There are several restaurants and bars here as well as several beautiful flowers such as huge hibiscuses. Another main street, Boulevard de L'Independence runs between the ocean and the train station, passing the town hall. Tamatave also has several colonial buildings and thus it has an elegant feeling. Port



Fluvial is less elegant but illustrates life at the port. Getting around Tamatave can be done by push push, which is like a horse and carriage except there is a human pulling the carriage. The push push drivers need to steer clear of the deep potholes. One pothole had a large palm tree in it to indicate people should stay clear and it also illustrated the size of the potholes.

One of the major day trips from Tamatave is Parc Ivoloïna, which is a botanical

garden, conservation center and zoo. The walk there is peaceful as the entrance is beyond some rice paddies and unique plants. There are thirteen types of lemurs at the park, but most of them are caged which is not as exciting as seeing them in the wild. However, the physical differences between the lemurs and the distinctiveness of lemurs in general, make a visit worthwhile. There are also tortoises and large snakes but the lemurs are the main attraction. Away from the zoo is an interpretive trail which labels the various palms and trees. Perhaps the most famous is the traveler's tree, which stores water that travelers can use and looks somewhat like banana leaves as it is spread out in the shape of a fan. Air Madagascar's logo includes the traveler's tree.

The other main day trip from Tamatave is taking a boat up the Pangalanes Canal. One can see what life on the canal is like and the importance of fishing in the area. The guides make a couple of stops at villages to see what village life is like. It's strange to hear '80's heavy metal music in the middle of a small village in Africa. Other than that, life is as expected; fishing, making nets and preparing food. What is intriguing is the sound of hammers. People are tapping big rocks and making them into small rocks, which are then made into smaller rocks and eventually into pebbles. These pebbles are then used for the construction of roads. It's an extremely labor intensive way of making roads.

There are several elements that make Madagascar unusual. Lemurs are cute and there are a variety of different types. There are different types of bushes, palms and trees that can only be seen in Madagascar. The rice paddies scream Asia, the street names are French but it is still Africa. This uniqueness is what defines Madagascar.