

Madagascar

Situated off the east coast of Africa, Madagascar is known to the western world primarily for its exotic flora and fauna. It is also a country of desperate and inspirational extremes.

The world's fourth largest island, Madagascar is slightly larger than the Yukon and home to 15 million people—45% are under 14 years of age and the annual population growth rate is a disconcerting 3%. One of the world's poorest nations, the Malagasy people suffer chronic malnutrition, low life expectancies, disease and surface water contamination. Per capita income is \$240 U.S. a year, and about 80% of the population are subsistence farmers who do not participate in the cash economy.

Sadly, much of Madagascar has been destroyed by the gradual, collective small actions of farmers and herdsman who have practiced destructive slash and burn agriculture for centuries. This method is rooted in their culture and is the only way they know how to survive. An estimated 10% of the island's forests remain, and 1 – 2% of its remaining forests are believed to be disappearing each year. The result of overgrazing and deforestation has been widespread soil erosion and desertification, earning Madagascar the name 'the red island' for its bleeding rivers and parched red hillsides.

Though independent since 1960, Madagascar remains chained to the developed world through its dependence on foreign aid and to foreign control of many of its cash crops such as spices, sugarcane, 'French' vanilla, coffee, cocoa and essential oils. Ecotourism may be a growth industry, but it too comes with serious complications and compromises.

While many Malagasy understand the rationale behind conservation, understandably they are preoccupied with far more pressing matters: famine, disease, poverty. International conservation groups provide some impetus for protecting the country's precious remaining jungles and threatened species. Conservation efforts are increasingly tied to human welfare. More and more Malagasy are earning a living from activities that depend on protected areas: guides, wardens, drivers, innkeepers, researchers, artists, market gardeners.

There is a side to Madagascar rich with extraordinary biological diversity and life. Breaking off from Africa 65 million years ago, Madagascar became an isolated island home to a high proportion of endemic flora and fauna. In its dense jungles grow plants treasured for their medicinal and curative properties. Some of the world's most rare and unusual creatures are found on Madagascar. And here live a people who are vivacious and generous.

Teresa Earle

passages from the red island

...Nearing camp we thought we heard a truck rumbling up behind us and moved aside to let it pass. But we were mistaken—it was the spontaneous roar of the tropical rains as they swept across the forest. The road became a quagmire of red mud, and runoff gushed down the hill toward us. Audibly, frogs are the happiest creatures in this torrent. Their raucous sound filled the air and would continue virtually unbroken throughout our entire stay. We had arrived at the beginning of the *mauvaise saison*—each day began glorious and clear, but was always followed by a downpour in the afternoon, marking a happy, productive and active time for most wildlife.

...Jungles, chameleons and many creatures are often considered 'fady'—a cultural taboo. One doesn't point at a chameleon for fear of suffering bad luck; for many Malagasy, the chameleon represents evil. The Malagasy revere their dead and consult with them about decisions through medicine men. When land is to be cleared the medicine man will communicate with spirits and dead family to ask whether or not that tract of forest is evil or sacred.

...The practice of 'tavy' (slash and burn) is widespread—inconstant burning of the jungle to log, produce charcoal and introduce agriculture. Wherever we flew we saw it from the air—smoke billowing from pockets of forest, often encroaching on protected areas. Along the roadside people sell large sacks of charcoal—ebony and fruit trees reduced to charred blocks and sold for a pittance.

...In the middle of a destitute town, gorgeous singing voices wafted into the courtyard where we stayed. Around the corner I came upon a church choir practicing in the yard of a church. Following their conductor intently, they sang in Malagasy with no accompaniment, their *a cappella* voices in unison and perfect harmony. I stood against the brick wall listening with tears running down my cheeks. A young man from the choir approached cautiously and asked me to join them. I sat among the choir on a tippy wooden bench, totally enraptured. Children played nearby and the pastor smiled and waved as he passed through the courtyard. We moved inside the bare church. Sunbeams streamed through cracks in the shutters—the place emanated holy energy.

...The cacophony of moth-like cicadas make a noise like an orchestra of buzzsaws. Because of the heat we sleep without the tent fly, and through our screen tent we are treated to a night sky crammed with southern stars. However, we are also treated to early morning showers—a fine mist of cicada urine.

...Toward the end of our dusty four-day hike I contemplated aloud to Laurent, our Ankarana park guide, that I looked forward to buying some water and mangoes at the park gate. He assured us that bottled water could be purchased there and laughed at the notion of paying for a fruit that most Malagasy could barely give away in its seasonal peak. With a broad smile he said that his family's mango tree could provide us with armfuls of ripe, juicy fruit. I told Laurent that in Canada we would end a hike drinking water that was free, but that ripe mangos could be expensive. He politely chuckled at the irony, then his expression became less transparent and I wondered: is that a laugh that mangoes could actually cost so much, or disbelief that potable water could be free?

...Less than two years old, Andohahela Park Reserve is one of World Wildlife Fund's great achievements in Madagascar, preserving broad stretches of rainforest, transitional forest and the perplexing desert spiny forest. In such a parched landscape, one does not expect the amazing array of flowers and odd plants found there: spindly cactus-like trees, spiny bushes draped with orchid vines, and explosions of colour in the most unlikely places.

...The jungle on Nosy Mangabe is tangled with lianas and buttress roots, travellers palm, fruit trees and ebony. The island was settled by the Dutch around 1600, and at various times was home to slaves, pirates and Malagasy tribes. The small island's frog diversity is impressive—on our first afternoon hike we spotted no less than eight species. The strange aye-aye also resides here, introduced to the protected island in 1966 as a conservation measure.

...The colours, sights and sounds of Madagascar are haunting. Our ears still ring from the high-pitched drone of cicadas, and we dream of lime-green chameleons and aging Renaults on red earth roads. Our noses twitch with the stench of rotting mangoes and our eyes still sting from smoke as the forests burn. Though rains pounded down on us and leeches affixed themselves to our skin, instead we remember stepping carefully through a swamp of sexed up frogs—yellow males and orange females mating by the hundreds around our feet, their happy reproduction deafening our ears. We recall being humbled by gestures of such generosity—a bowl of warm beans in coconut milk set on our porch by an impoverished camp caretaker who saw that our supplies had dwindled.

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