

MADAGASCAR: Rainforest in central island full of life

Continued from 1C

The world's fourth largest island, located east of Africa and roughly the size of Texas, is home to approximately 26.4 million residents. The country ranks as the 10th poorest in the world. Most first-time visitors opt to hire a driver/guide or travel with a group instead of braving the crowded, chaotic roads alone.

Our guide, Nick, demonstrated his mad driving skills, avoiding potholes, head-on collisions, rickshaws, chickens and zebu. The affable 28-year-old spoke impeccable English, the byproduct of a graduate degree in linguistics. He wore a Chicago White Sox cap and enlightened us about all things Malagasy while maneuvering a Renault Duster on narrow roadways.

We started our journey in the capitol city of Antananarivo. Smoky air shrouded the teeming city as we drove past colorful markets, dilapidated housing, grazing zebu and a man standing knee-deep in a pond collecting hyacinth roots to feed his pigs. A woman washed clothes in muddy river water next to an Audi dealership. We observed people on bicycles, rickshaws and scooters and noticed a family of four aboard a motorcycle. We asked Nick why there didn't seem to be traffic lights, which might help unspool the traffic.

"We used to have traffic lights," he said, "but people kept stealing the bulbs and wires."

Driving east from the city, the air cleared. We passed flooded rice paddies and mosaics of agricultural fields. Men stood in the muddy fields churning up the soil with shovels. Women planted or weeded. A young man cultivated a field with a rustic plow pulled by two zebu. A boy sold wild honey in Johnny Walker bottles from a roadside stand.

The weather turned wet as we neared the rainforest in east central Madagascar and the terrain changed from agricultural land to pines, eucalyptus, remnants of native forest, ferns and banana trees.

Here we came face to face with lemurs and instantly fell in love. Lemurs look equal parts primate and Teddy bear, cute and engaging. You find them wild only in Madagascar. We viewed them first at the Vakona private reserve where we got a close-up look at six different species. I focused my camera on their huge, round eyes and grinned like a maniac. These weren't the wildest of lemurs — a brown bamboo lemur jumped onto Bill's shoulder and grabbed his hat — but we later saw them in the wild when we hiked through the rainforest of the Andasibe Mantadia National Park and other parts of the country.



Staff photo by Kathy Aney

Most residents of Madagascar don't own cars and ride in densely packed mini-vans, pickups or other vehicles that function as buses or taxis.



Staff photo by Kathy Aney

A man pulls a rickshaw in the Madagascar city of Antsarahe.

In Madagascar, lemurs fill almost every niche. They range in size from a tiny mouse lemur to the indri, the largest of the lemurs whose piercing call sounds like a kid blowing a party horn. Some lemurs are nocturnal, while others stay active during the day. Some survive on insects, while others eat fruit and vegetation. We were mesmerized watching a couple sifaka lemurs leap from tree to tree, jump to the ground and move quickly using a two-legged sideways hop like ballet dancers of the forest. Bill and I exchanged looks of wonder.

In the rainforest, we observed more lemurs, bug-eyed chameleons, orchids and birds. My husband, an avid birder, eagerly identified dozens of birds includ-

ing purple heron, Madagascar red fody, blue coua, spectacled tetraka, velvet asity, hoopoe and the soumanga sunbird.

In southwestern Madagascar we spotted baobab trees, which can live for 5,000 years. With their barrel trunks and gnarled, root-like branches, baobabs look like upside down trees.

One afternoon in the south-central highland region, Nick stopped the Duster in front of a typical highland house with cement walls and a thatched roof. The 15-foot-by-15-foot two-story abode had three windows and an open doorway. Friends of Nick's, the family of four invited us inside. The bottom story served as storage and a shelter for white rabbits that hopped freely

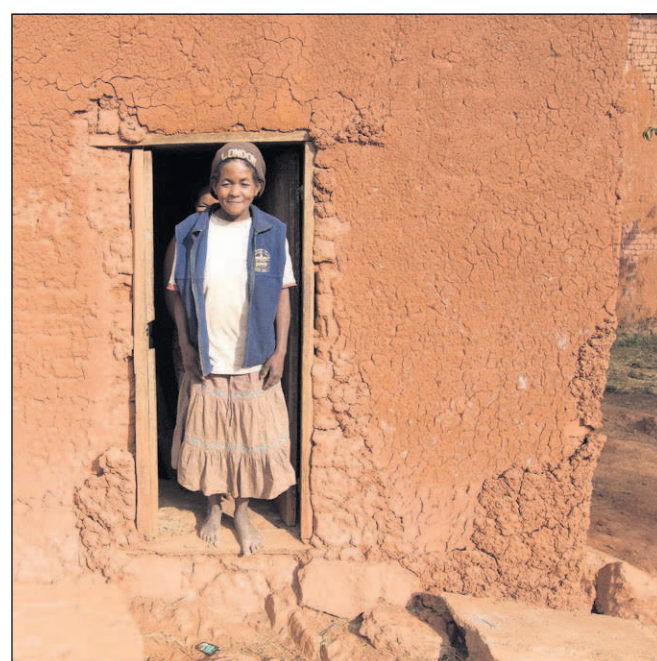
there. We climbed a wooden ladder to the top floor. One of the two rooms served as a kitchen where they cook over a charcoal fire. Smoke had turned the ceiling black. A full-size bed took up the other room. A thirty-something couple and their two children share the space, which has no electricity or running water. Nick interpreted as they graciously showed us around.

At night, Bill and I stayed in lodges booked by an ecotourism agency. Most were uber-luxurious with well-appointed quarters, delicious French-Malagasy fusion dinners on white linen tablecloths, pools and showers with a view. After confronting incredible poverty during the day, spending our nights in such opulence seemed



Staff photo by Kathy Aney

A bamboo lemur and her baby hang out in a tree in the rainforest of Andasibe National Park.



Staff photo by Kathy Aney

A woman stands in the doorway of her home in the highlands of Madagascar.

somewhat embarrassing and uncomfortable. At dinner, we often reflected on ecotourism, poverty and how we should behave.

In Bill's journal, he wrote, "No doubt tourists are helping people economically and we come into contact daily with guides, hotel staff, waiters, etc. who rely on this income. Still we feel like we need to maintain humility and gratitude toward these people. It's complicated and I'm still wrestling with it all." Ditto, my dear.

There's so much more to Madagascar. I haven't even mentioned the country's efforts to save the rainforest or the current presidential election with 36 contenders. Then there are cultural practices such as exhumations where family and friends of someone who died several years earlier dig up their bones and have a multi-day party, then rebury the bones.

We ended our journey at a coastal resort near Ifaty, then flew back to Antananarivo to fly out. There, we stayed with Zane and Vanessa Dickey.

Vanessa serves as director of the Peace Corps in Madagascar and Zane teaches at the American School. At breakfast, Zane and his friend, Michael Kresko, gave some advice to Americans considering coming to Madagascar.

"It's a place for adventure seekers who love the outdoors and who love diverse places," Zane said. "People here are kind and beautiful."

Michael warned that Madagascar isn't for everyone.

"If you're not flexible and you're expecting a very well planned out fluid itinerary with timely events unfolding, this is not your place," said Michael, an American teacher whose wife is a Peace Corps medical director. "Patience is a necessity. It's for the intrepid traveler."

Those intrepid travelers will be rewarded.

"For biologists and people interested in exploring nature, this is Mecca," Michael said.

We agree. It's not easy to travel in Madagascar.

But for those who make the journey, a surprising adventure awaits.

KITCHENWISE

Turn smoked turkey and melty cheddar into inspired lunch

Associated Press

Panini, sandwiches traditionally cooked in a ridged press, are hard to get wrong but also surprisingly hard to get just right.

To turn a crowd-pleasing combination of smoked turkey and melty cheddar cheese into an inspired lunch, we needed a condiment with some big personality. To that end, we turned to our Simple Cranberry Sauce, spreading it onto both slices of bread for maximum tart, fruity impact. For a fresh finishing touch, we added some baby arugula.

To achieve the signature ridged grill marks without a press, we used a grill pan as the base and a Dutch oven as a weight on top.

A hearty rustic bread with a crusty exterior and substantial, slightly chewy crumb worked best. Tasters found that softer sandwich breads flattened out too much.

For easy cleanup, cover the bottom of the Dutch oven with aluminum foil. If you don't have a nonstick grill pan you can use a nonstick skillet. Buy a rustic 8-inch loaf (often called a boule) with a good crust and cut it into 1/2-inch slices.

SMOKED TURKEY PANINI WITH SIMPLE CRANBERRY SAUCE

Start to finish: 30 minutes
 Servings: 4
 2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
 8 (1/2-inch-thick) slices rustic white bread
 1/4 cup Simple Cranberry Sauce (recipe below)



Steve Klise/America's Test Kitchen via AP

Smoked turkey panini with simple cranberry sauce as it appears in the cookbook "Just Add Sauce."

8 ounces thinly sliced cheddar cheese
 8 ounces thinly sliced smoked turkey
 2 ounces (2 cups) baby arugula

Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to

200 F. Brush oil evenly over 1 side of each slice of bread. Flip bread over and spread cranberry sauce evenly over each second side. Assemble 4 sandwiches by layering ingredients as follows between prepared bread (with cranberry sauce inside sandwich): half of cheddar, turkey, arugula, and remaining cheddar.

Heat 12-inch nonstick grill pan or nonstick skillet over medium heat until hot, about 1 minute. Place 2 sandwiches in pan, set Dutch oven on top, and cook until bread is golden and crisp, about 4 minutes per side. Transfer sandwiches to wire rack set in rimmed baking sheet and keep warm in oven. Wipe out skillet with paper towels and repeat with remaining 2 sandwiches. Serve.

CRANBERRY SAUCE

Makes about 2 1/4 cups

This sauce also makes a great accompaniment to cheese and meat platters. If using frozen cranberries, do not defrost them; just add about 2 minutes to the simmering time.

1 cup sugar
 3/4 cup water
 1/4 teaspoon salt
 1 (12-ounce) bag fresh or frozen cranberries

Bring sugar, water, and salt to boil in medium saucepan, stirring occasionally to dissolve sugar. Stir in cranberries and return to boil. Reduce to simmer and cook until slightly thickened and about two-thirds of berries have popped open, about 5 minutes. Transfer to bowl and let cool to room temperature, about 2 hours. (Cranberry sauce can be refrigerated for up to 1 week; bring to room temperature before serving.)