

On Horseback Through the Land of Zebus

A trail ride in the central highland of Madagascar

Travelogue
By
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Riding through a Madagascan village

It all started with a newsletter from Unicorn travels that they planned an exploratory trail ride in Madagascar. Since I had only very shadowy ideas about what it might be like to travel in Madagascar, the announcement immediately roused my curiosity. Previously I had met several people who had travelled in Madagascar and had come back with fascinating stories, but none of them had ever tried to move across the country on horseback. Moreover, none of the specialized horse travel agencies offered any trail destinations in Madagascar. It took some time until I finally made up my mind to book this adventure and that was almost too late. All places had already been taken and I could slip in only because there was a last minute cancellation.

In due course I received various documentations cautioning against all kinds of catastrophes that might occur on such uncharted territory. Since it was also mentioned that our luggage would be transported on oxcarts, I imagined that the oxen might well like to get rid of our belongings by overthrowing the cart in the middle of a wild river. Fortunately I was also informed that the trail would be accompanied by Wendy Hofstee, a prominent and experienced representative of Unicorn as well as by the famous woman traveller Christina Dodwell. Unfortunately, I did not know either of them but I trusted they would be able to handle such problems. In addition, I also booked a post-trail extension on Ste. Marie, a small tropical island off the east coast of Madagascar in order to at least partially recover from all the promised stress.

My curiosity was boosted when I checked the home pages of the Dodwell trust, the charity run by Christina Dodwell in Madagascar and the one of the hotel that had been chosen for our stay on the island. The former one appeared surprisingly modest: no starved children crying in front of the camera, no celebrities announcing their support for the foundation, no prominently placed bank account for donations, only down-to earth details of relatively modest projects. Clicking on the 'Newsletter' icon brought up the description of an event in 2006! By contrast, the hotel page simply announced that their URL was for sale. Ok, nobody is perfect. I topped my preparations not only by procuring the recommended guide book for Madagascar (Bradt) but also by purchasing one of Christina's travel books ('Travels with Fortune') the title of which promised adequate reading matter for this journey.

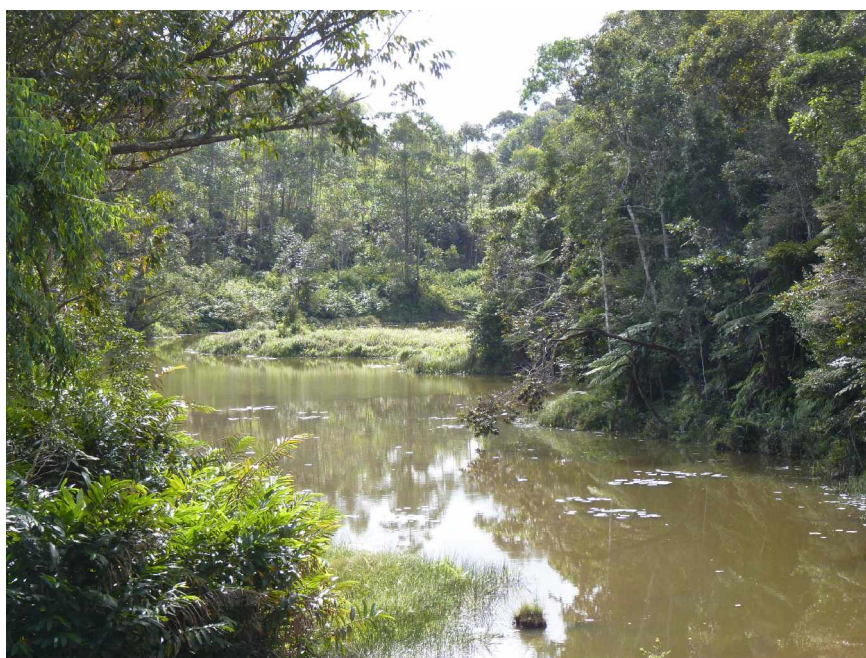
In a next step I tried to book a flight to Antananarivo only to discover that nobody but Air France offered non-stop flights from Europe but that, of course, none was available on the day of my departure. After I discarded some tremendously expensive alternatives by roundabout routes, I settled with Air Mauritius that promised to reach Tana via a 6h stopover in beautiful Mauritius Airport.

When I actually started travelling all went surprisingly well even though the airport in Mauritius was a disappointment. I arrived in Tana on time, the airline had not lost my luggage and I was picked up in the entrance hall by a very friendly lady and a young man from the Dodwell Trust. After a while we were joined by a second travel companion who had used the same plane. They delivered us at the doorsteps of a hotel that looked somewhat dubious from the outside but proved to be clean and spacious inside. In the hallway I met two of my other travel companions who had arrived already on the previous day because today's flight had been cancelled by Air France.

Unfortunately, I could not get more than a glimpse of Tana on my first afternoon. The town extends over a number of hills with a central valley in between where our hotel was located. The eye is not caught by a romantic historical town centre or by impressive architecture but by a somewhat chaotic assembly of smaller and larger buildings that climb up the hillsides.

There is a lot of poverty, of begging children and endless street markets for used stuff with much more sellers than buyers.

Breakfast on the next morning was scheduled for 7 o'clock but when I arrived at the terrace to meet the group the place was completely deserted. Merely a lonely employee seemed to start the kitchen. Slightly confused I asked for the time only to find out that my watch was an hour early. I remembered to have it adjusted at Mauritius airport but, apparently, Madagascar belonged to a different time zone. When I returned an hour later the place looked much more inviting and I had a first chance to meet all six of my companions. As it turned out, I was the only male in a group of adventurous ladies all in their forties, among them Wendy Hofstee the co-manager of Unicorn travels. Nationalities were mixed yet all but one lived in England. A little later we were joined by Christina Dodwell a rather slim but energetic and charming lady in her fifties. Her Dodwell trust played the role of the local organizer of our trip in an attempt to stimulate tourism in the Madagascan central highlands. We were to profit from the experiences with a first group of riders in the previous week who, according to Christina, had met with somewhat bumpy travelling conditions.



In the rain forest reserve

An hour later we were already on our way to the Andasibe rain forest reserve, the first leg of our trip. Nashua, our driver was also to be the head of the support staff for the trail ride. He looked a little wild and uncombed but proved to be quite kind and supportive, even though forward looking planning was not his strongest point. To a large extent the central highlands have been deforested for cultivation. Moreover, in this densely populated area much wood is also converted into charcoal for cooking. The remaining trees are now mostly fast growing Eucalyptus which has largely replaced the endogenous species. While the valleys are fit for intensive agricultural use, the mountain slopes are often heavily eroded. Consequently, the unique fauna of Madagascar, including the famous lemurs, appears essentially restricted to natural parks and forest reserves. Characteristic features everywhere in the highlands are isolated solid stone structures, usually away from villages in the middle of the fields. They represent family graves where the bones of many generations of ancestors are collected. This happens in a special ceremony several years after the first funeral and after the soft tissue has decayed.

We settled in a fairly comfortable lodge set at the edge of the rain forest reserve in the middle of a beautiful garden. Close by, a French-Malagasy family that also runs a luxury lodge in the woods, a riding stable and a crocodile pond administers a Lemur Sanctuary called 'Lemur Island'.



An inhabitant of
Lemur Island

This wooded island in the middle of a small lake surrounded by rain forest hosted quite a number of lemurs from various species which had formerly been kept in captivity and hence, were accustomed to contact with humans. They move freely on the island but since lemurs apparently hate swimming they are protected from unfriendly interactions with their wild living relatives. After being ferried across the water to the island in small canoes we were met by a ranger who distributed bananas meant to attract the lemurs. Initially nothing happened but animals of various shapes and colours materialized out of thin air as soon as he produced a special whistle. Varying between cat- and dog-sized the lemurs were beautiful creatures with thick silky furs, long bushy tails and fascinating faces with oversized eyes. Their hands and feet gave a pleasant cool touch on the skin when they climbed as expertly on people as they moved on trees. Motivated by the bananas they even showed some daring tree jumping feats for free.

On the way back we visited one of Christinas project partners in a neighbouring village. A Malagasy informatics and journalism graduate had established a small radio station that broadcasts local news and educational programs to almost 30'000 people in the near surroundings. The Dodwell trust had helped to buy a computer and a more powerful radio transmitter. We met a kind and enthusiastic young man who composed his programs on a mixing desk in the sleeping room of his parent's modest hut. Most urgently he now hoped for support for building a new protective shelter for his emitter station. Since he generates very little income from his station he has to earn his living by part-time work in a nearby internet shop and any larger investment exceeds his financial limits.

After dinner in the lodge a ranger from a Dodwell-supported NGO took us to a night game walk into the forest. We met various species of surprisingly small chameleons, a pygmy king fisher and even a tiny mouse lemur, only detected by the torch light reflected from his eyes.

The rain forest essentially lacked old big trees, perhaps because the protection program is of fairly recent origin, and because the endogenous species have to fight against the eucalyptus that is penetrating from the edges.



Preparing for the rain forest ride

Early the next morning we assembled on the premises of the 'Ecuries du Domaine de Falirana', the rather stylish riding stables of the French Lemur Island family for a half-day horseback excursion into the rain forest. The beautiful and well kept thoroughbreds were said to be the hobby of the estate owner who lived nearby in a magnificent mansion. Judging from the Swiss-level price tag of this ride, the horses must be incredibly good. I ended up on a pretty and lively brown gelding which the groom claimed to be riding on tournaments. After half an hour riding in modest speed through the hilly terrain my poor pony was already completely drenched in sweat. In spite of the early hour the forest appeared completely devoid of wildlife, except for a few butterflies and a tiny chameleon. Not even birds were to be heard. Yet, I liked the varied ride through the mountainous landscape and the narrow paths in the forest. Therefore, I remained slightly disappointed when our 4h ride ended after barely 3 h. Back in the stable we met the landlord himself, a middle-aged stout Frenchman who had apparently lived in this place since his birth. Presently his family resided elsewhere and he seemed to be the only occupant of the stately house that he had built. Nevertheless, he missed the opportunity to take us in for a drink.

On the way back to the lodge we visited another one of the Dodwell trust-supported initiatives, a small local Malagasy NGO engaged in the conservational management of the Andasibe forest reserve and in educational programs for local schools. Christina's foundation also sponsored some volunteers from Cardiff University working on a scientific project in the context of this NGO's activities.

In the afternoon we were driven back to Tana for another night in the hotel prior to heading for Ampefy, the starting point of the trail ride. The next morning we had another lesson on typical local traditions with the topic: Early departures are no Malagasy specialty. Everybody gets up fairly early but then all kinds of delays arise and the start has to be postponed. This time we sat nearly 1 h in the minibus waiting for the driver and beleaguered by begging children and a host of hawkers trying to sell us all kinds of goods from fully rigged up sail boat models fitting into a captain's chest to bundles of vanilla pods and semi-precious stones.

After waiting that long it came as a surprise when the car finally moved. The road wound through a hilly landscape with many villages featuring the typical Malagasy style two storeyed houses. The families live in the first floor while the ground floor is used as storage room. About halfway to Ampefy we visited one more of Christina's projects: A rice farmer who had founded a kind of cooperative to try to revive the old practice of fostering wild silk worms and collecting the cocoons in the woods for silk production hoping to generate an additional income for the members of the cooperative. Unfortunately, only small remnants of the Tapia woods, the natural habitat of the silk worms, have survived deforestation. Therefore a program of reforestation had been initiated. To this end the farmer was running a tree nursery that distributes tree seedlings to the members of the cooperative. Of course prior to any earnings investments have to be made and that is where Christina's charity tries to help. The farmer and his wife, both taken by surprise in view of the sudden invasion of so many people, invited us into their house and he walked with us through his nursery. Although everything appeared very low-tech, it seemed to work quite successfully. I could not help but feel very impressed by these down-to-earth developmental projects that all tried with modest means to empower local people to achieve something useful for their local community.



View from the terrace of our hotel in Ampefy onto a bay of Lake Itasy

Ampefy our final destination turned out to be a little town beautifully situated in a valley with lush vegetation bordering Lake Itasy a large scenic body of water in the middle of volcanic hills with many isles, peninsulas and fjord-like bays. We ended up in a nice little hotel on a terrace above the lake and surrounded by a tropical garden where we seemed to be the only guests. After a late lunch – lunches had a tendency always to be late – we finally went to see the horses our companions for the next week. The meeting took part in an overgrown pasture in the backyard of the Ampefy learning centre, still another one of the Dodwell trust projects. The horses looked like crosses between thoroughbreds and local or South African breeds, not terribly large but well groomed and fit. Most of them were the property of the grooms who cared for them and would also accompany the ride. Most of the latter ones made a friendly and upbeat impression but none spoke English to any measurable extent, while they had a fair command of French. The tack, especially the saddles, came from English donations since Christina apparently distrusted the suitability of the local material for a trail ride. In addition Unicorn, in wise foresight, had reminded us to bring girths and stirrups. Thus, in the end the outfit of the horses looked almost perfectly professional, except for the lack of saddle bags.

After trying to fit horses to riders and after a short trial hack under the observation of many enthusiastic children, we were set to begin the adventure on the next morning. It was dark when we returned to the hotel and realized that nobody had cared to alert the staff to prepare something for dinner. Hence the restaurant lay deserted and the only food that we retrieved after a prolonged search was chips from an obscure fast food outlet at the other end of the town.

The trail was planned as a circular tour through the mountainous landscape of old volcanoes around Lake Itasy. Christina had explained on the map what each stage would be like. However, since neither the conditions of the country roads nor the riding times required to cover a given distance were known precisely, we were up for some surprises. It was clear that the support car would be able to meet us only at selected spots along the route. Therefore, the ride would be accompanied by a guide on a motor cycle. This proved to be an excellent idea. The cyclist transported a few essential supplies; explored roads, provided messenger services and, last not least, had to alert oncoming zebu carts. The previous group had had an accident where the zebras, in spite of their quiet and peaceful appearance, panicked upon viewing horses for the first time in their lives. Actually Zebras are everywhere: on coins, on paper money on the fields and particularly on the dirt roads drawing their painted two-wheeled cars.



The Ampefy children's farewell chorus



On the trail, Christina as a motor cycle passenger

In the morning we were seen off – after the usual delays – by the children of the learning centre. Under the guidance of a teacher they tried their best to produce a chorus with their favourite songs.

In some distance from the lake we rode through a beautiful hilly landscape on partly dusty partly stony tracks that countless years of two-wheeled zebu cart traffic and torrential rains had transformed into something that looked more like a dry riverbed than a road. This was no problem for the horses but required artistic skills from the motor cycle driver. There was no getting through for any type of car. Although the area was remote and utterly non-touristy it was certainly not lonesome. Population density appeared high and farmers were busy to cultivate any bit of arable land. This also explained the almost total lack of wildlife, even birds seemed rare. Our party attracted the attention of an incredible amount of children who seemed to represent at least eighty percent of the total population. A group of extraterrestrials could not have made a stronger impression than we foreigners on horseback. In general our public was quite cheerful and greeted friendly with 'bonjour' or 'salami'. When we had a break in the shadow of a big tree, it did not last more than five minutes before we were surrounded by almost hundred children and a few adults that emerged from all directions.



Children trying to be part of the picture

Fortunately they kept a certain distance because they were afraid from the horses. Deb and Patricia seized the only chance to bring some order in the chaos in that they convinced a fair number of the spectators jointly to sing something for us. The children did not stop singing for quite some time and even though the music was far more enthusiastic than beautiful it kept their (and our) spirits high. It took almost an hour before we could continue our way through the landscape spotted with old small volcanoes and basaltic rocks. Finally we arrived in a river valley where we found our support vehicle already established on a small sandy plain extending along the river underneath Ankarana village the inhabitants of which already formed a curious crowd in some distance from the cooking fire. Unfortunately, nobody of the crew had cared to pick up the bags with the tents prior to the start in Tana. Somebody had been sent to fetch them but that would take hours and we had ample time to visit neighbouring attractions, one of them a river which was said to cascade into a volcanic vent. The remaining car could take only four of us but, no problem, it would be only a 20 minutes walk. Not yet

accustomed to Malagasy precision in indicating times and directions I volunteered for the walk. After one and a half hour of strong walking there was still no sign of a river, leave alone of volcanic vents. Yet, in a distance we finally spotted our support car returning from the famous sight. We sent our companions on their hike, mounted the car and arrived at the famous spot after a further 20 min driving. It was really impressive and even a little scary. The water dropped almost 20 m into the vent which looked like a huge diabolic cooking pot where the water whirled around prior to escaping on the other side. We could not stay long though because the night fell quickly on the scene and it was pitch dark when we returned to the campsite.



Close to Ankarana village

The tents had not yet arrived but that did not remain the only challenge. Christina was very concerned because Elaine one of the female riders had collapsed with terrible diarrhoea and vomiting. She had looked somewhat fragile anyway but now she suffered, unable to sit, weak and freezing under a heap of sleeping bags and sometimes awkwardly exposed to the smoke of the nearby cooking fire that was supposed to provide additional warmth. The symptoms looked like food intoxication but why was nobody else affected? While we tried to comfort her, more or less unsuccessfully, fortunately the tents showed up. Pitching them for the first time in the light of our headlights proved kind of a challenge. The patient was moved with some difficulty in one of them, well cared for by her friend. Shortly after midnight I awoke with the same symptoms, except that I was still able to run to the nearest group of shrubs. While I stood there rather miserably and without trousers I was suddenly in the focus of several torches carried by the night-watch grooms who had mistaken me for an unwelcome guest from the neighbouring village. Back in my tent I was, nevertheless, somewhat relieved because now I could be reasonably sure that a food poisoning was indeed the most likely diagnosis and that this would go away without much treatment. Perhaps the chips from the previous night had not been so innocuous after all.

On the next day it was decided to skip one night of camping in favour of staying in a modest hotel in Soavinadraiana, a small town close to the designated camp site for that evening. This would give the sick a chance to recover in a real bed. Elaine would be able to travel to this place as passenger in one of the cars. It was fitting that the ride of this day proved much less exhausting than the previous day and the horses were really friendly and easy to handle. The town, situated on top of a broad hill appeared rather unimpressive but it indeed possessed a

freshly painted hotel with clean rooms and beds and even a bathroom with a shower. After a grandiose night Elaine had definitely improved and I had almost fully recovered.

Anyway, I was eager to join part of the group that was about to visit a coffee plantation close to Soavinadraiana run by another of Christina's many friends a Madagascar-born Greek. Within about 10 years this gentleman had converted a bare hilltop with a few trees into a veritable tropical paradise where all kinds of flowering trees and shrubs shadowed his coffee plants. In the middle stood a handsome mansion, not yet fully finished where he, freshly divorced, actually lived alone. In the future he was planning to accommodate tourists in this place and thus had already remodelled some of the space into attractive guestrooms. He seemed well willing to receive the next group of riders on his premises. We were served his truly excellent self-grown coffee and a snack and listened to his incredible stories about the difficulties to market his high quality coffee even though it had won high prize by experts in coffee tasting events. He claimed that kind of a powerful mafia was trying everything, including assaults on his plantation, to keep newcomers off the market.



Eroded mountain slopes close to Soavinadraiana

Back in the town the grooms had brought in our horses and a huge crowd had assembled to watch us mounting and leaving on top of these crazy animals. We rode partially on mountain paths, partially on small causeways separating rice paddies past many small villages full of children and past innumerable picturesque two-wheeled Zebu carts. We crossed rivers the bridges across which had long since collapsed. Even though the pace was not particularly slow with intermittent trots and canters, it took almost 7 h before we reached this day's stage finish at Manazary, another small town in the middle of nowhere. A loose horseshoe and a motor cycle mishap had slowed down our progress even further. Thus, it was close to dusk when we finally pitched our tents in the courtyard of a church where the friendly minister welcomed us. While the kitchen crew prepared a dinner in the light of their torches, the usual crowd assembled to watch each of our steps. Christina and the priest succeeded in convincing them to retire temporarily until we had finished our meal, but promised that we would sing together afterwards. A camp fire was then started and the priest with part of his community reappeared for an extended concert with alternating Malagasy and English songs. The whole thing ended with the only song that everybody could participate in, a multi-language version of 'Holy Night'!

The departure on the next morning was again somewhat delayed but for good reasons. The priest had offered that we could have a shower one by one in his private 'bathhouse'. But this was much more complicated and less comfortable than anticipated. We had to carry our own warm water across several streets into his courtyard where we found a little walled hut, inside completely empty. It proved just to act as a shelter for pouring hot water over naked bodies. Only the children of the family watched attentively our activities. One of the daughters explained that she worked as a teacher at a small private school and implored us to visit her institute.



Campsite in Manazary

Back in the camp Christina had organised a little ceremony where presents were handed to the priest and some of his helpers for their hospitality and then everybody went visiting the school. It consisted of a house with three small class rooms where children of different grades were instructed. By contrast to the state schools which had switched to Malagasy after reaching independency from France, all topics were still taught in French. Since schoolbooks were a scarce commodity, all contents of the actual lessons appeared in detailed careful handwriting on the blackboard. They hoped that we would find ways to provide some dictionaries which they missed badly. Christina promised some help from the foundation.



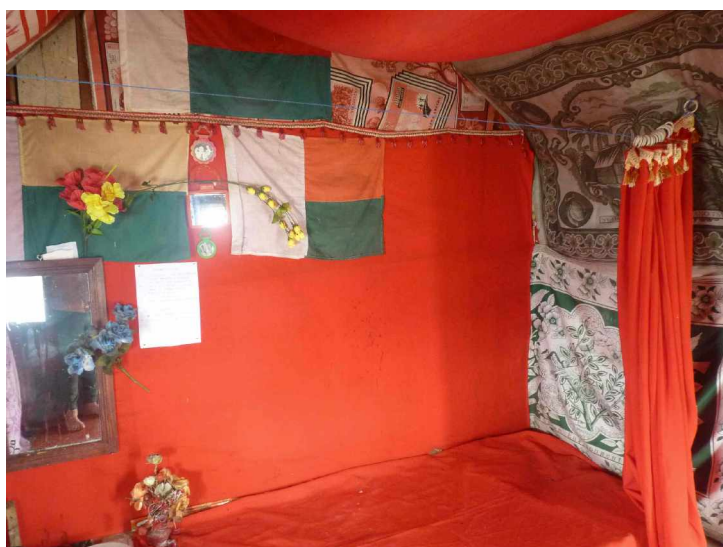
On the way to lake Itasy and the holy island

At some distance from Manazary on a rocky island close to the Itasy Lake shore a sanctuary with the grave of one of the old Malagasy kings is held in high esteem by the local population. Since it was not quite clear whether the site would be worth a visit, I had the privilege to be sent there as a scout together with Jean de Dieu, one of the grooms, on the motor cycle. This trip really proved an adventure. On the horse I had not realized how bad the roads really were. The local village people seemed not particularly keen to keep their roads or bridges in good order but contented themselves with some emergency measures. Every few hundred meters we had to descend so that Jean could push the motorcycle through some deep ravine or a stretch of deep mud. Moreover, we stopped at each pedestrian to ask for directions. Since their descriptions were not really congruent one had to take a majority vote. After we reached the lakeshore the road ended definitely.



The shrine of the king with soldier's graves in the foreground

The sanctuary was located on a tall rock in the middle of swampy land that was said to be completely inundated during the rainy season. Now it could be reached on a small path over small and shaky bridges. A staircase hewn out of the rock led to the top with an incredible view over the lake, two flat stone monuments and a hut the door of which was decorated with - modern times – the phone number of the guardian. While we were still deciphering the phone number, a sub-guardian appeared who advised us to take off our shoes but who was not in charge of the key. Nevertheless, he was willing to phone his boss with the key who indeed showed up after some time.



In the king's grave

The hut sheltered the grave of the king, a flat sarcophagus that was covered with bright red sheets, the royal colour. Red Sheets and pictures also covered the walls and on one end of the grave I discovered plates and eating utensils destined for food donations. I did not fully understand whether this was for a symbolic meal of the dead king or for the guardian. The flat monuments on the outside turned out to be the graves of a soldier and of a councillor or fortune teller. Two other soldiers had similar graves in the back part of the hut. I would have loved to hear the story of this king and his men and why he was buried here and not in the royal burial place close to Tana, but there was no explanation. After placing a small donation for the maintenance of the grave into the respective box, the two friendly men explained through Jean that there was still another sacred grave on the opposite side of the bay. They even offered to accompany us in a 'pirogue' boat to visit this place but we did not have enough time for an additional side trip over the lake that would have lasted for at least 3 hours.



The chief guardian
of the holy island

Our next task was to catch up with the horses without knowing exactly which way they had taken. Jean managed to find the way back to Manazary without much further asking. After about two thirds of the distance he suddenly detected traces of horse hoofs. Since ours were certainly the only ones in this part of the Malagasy highlands we followed the traces albeit not without difficulties. On stony ground with the path bifurcating in various directions we had to start searching expeditions until we could proceed. After a surprisingly long time and after asking people in each village about the riders, we finally reached the group who had just finished a lunch break observed by the usual youthful crowd even though no village seemed very close. Unfortunately our companions had already eaten up all supplies except for a few chips and peanuts. I did not mind because I almost had gotten sea sick crossing Malagasy roads on a motor cycle back seat.

A few hours later we set up camp on the shore of an idyllic crater lake in the middle of rich vegetation. In a small reedy bay a woman stood in the water doing her family's wash surrounded by a couple of geese trying to help her by picking into the sheets. The tents were pitched in the middle of peppermint bushes and the cooking crew struggled to prepare the dinner. It did not last long before a backdrop of patient spectators had again assembled to watch our activities. It was only by organizing another concert after dinner to keep them from

overrunning our camp. Especially the children proved very persevering singers and it lasted till late at night until they finally run out of songs. In the meantime we also run out of soft drinks. The kitchen crew always felt much more responsible for the beer drinkers than for those whose enthusiasm for the 'Three Horses' brew was limited. Finally somebody found a last bottle of 'English Bonbon' a terrible type of sweet lemonade. No sooner had I gulped down a little when it almost knocked me over. It tasted like pure slightly lemonade-flavoured alcohol. Everybody laughed at me until Patricia poured a little into the camp fire only to produce an impressive flash. It was immediately decided to produce bananas flambé with it which worked beautifully. Apparently one of the grooms had used the empty bottle to hide his supply of strong rum and was now quite furious to see it burning in our banana dish.



Leaving the crater lake camp site

Relatively early the next morning we sat again on the horses except for Patricia who had fallen victim to gastrointestinal problems and had switched into the support car. After two hours through a lovely hilly landscape with various small crater lakes we reached a tarmac road that we followed for many kilometres. Christina cursed the poor reconnaissance of her scouts who had not cared to explore any alternatives.



Crossing a steep slope

Finally, after another two hours on a dirt road we arrived in the deeply cut valley of a small river. On a terrace overlooking the river a number of sources and small geysers gushed with warm water rich in minerals which had formed various picturesque sinter terraces. Some of the water was collected into small basins suitable for whole body immersion. The whole area was apparently meant to attract tourists because some modest infrastructure like roofed over tables, toilets and cabins for changing clothes existed. Yet, we were the only visitors and had all space in the world to bathe our tired bones in temperate water. Moreover it seemed to be the only place on our whole journey where we could sit and camp without being surrounded by curious crowds because the neighbouring village charged a modest entrance fee for the site. The luxury of sitting on benches in the front of a table to take our dinner was topped by a delicious starter salad composed from grated verdant papayas. It reconciled me somewhat with the fact that I had not been able to convince Nashua, our cook to prepare fresh tomato salad in spite of the fact that beautiful tomatoes were offered in each and every village that we had passed.

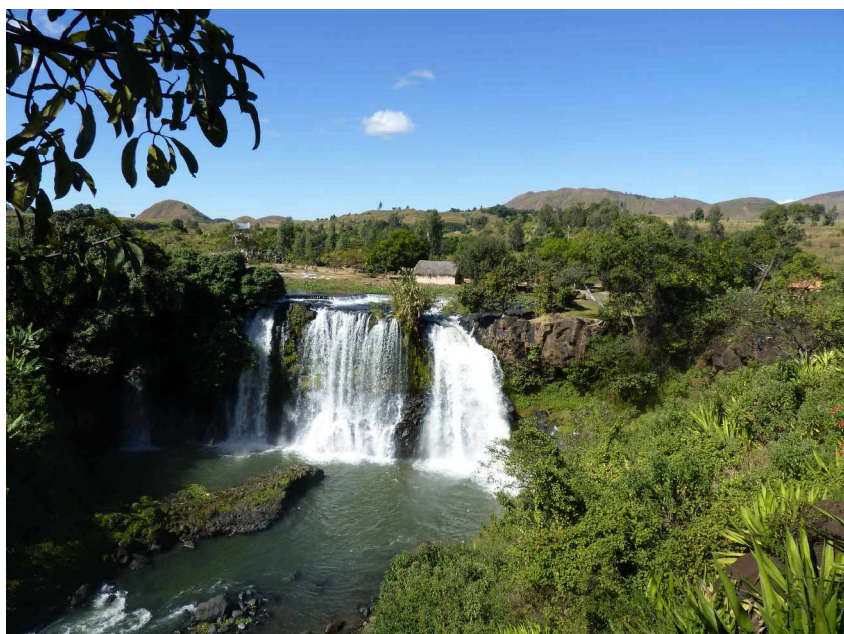


The hot spring pools

The next morning we got a free demonstration of what happens when peaceful zebras are confronted unexpectedly with a group of horses. On their way to the bridge over the river beneath the hot spring area some farmers had to pass by the horses that were just made ready by the grooms. All of a sudden the peaceful zebras panicked and started to gallop at maximal speed down the steep road that led to the bridge, their carriages behind them on the verge of toppling over and losing part of their load. The frightened drivers could only save themselves by jumping off as fast as possible. Fortunately nothing serious happened and the animals calmed down in front of the river. The horses, on the other hand, remained remarkably unimpressed by their crazy black distant relatives.

The ride led through innumerable papaya plantations where most of the fruits had been labelled, perhaps to deter thieves. After crossing the tarmac road to Ampefy we meandered through a mountain ridge until we arrived at a small village, the site of an impressive waterfall called 'Chute de la Lilly'. Situated not more than seven km from Ampefy, it used to be a touristy site prior to the recent decline in tourist numbers. Right now as the only visitors, we were immediately surrounded by children that all wanted to sell souvenirs of remarkable ugliness. A rocky platform close to the village offered a beautiful view onto the cascades and

for us the perfect resting place in the company of all the little souvenir girls. I really felt sorry for them but I could not bring myself to buying any of the useless things all made from black pumice stone.



The cascades of the lily



Farmers returning from the market

In the early afternoon we were all back at the horse station close to the Dodwell learning centre. It was a melancholy moment to part with our friendly and easy going horses. Overall they had served us very well. Of course, the ride had been neither very difficult nor very exhausting. Still, there had been long hours of ups and downs on variable terrain at a good pace that the horses had endured without problems. A little later Christina had scheduled a more formal farewell ceremony for the grooms and the other support staff. Each of them individually was given a tip, carefully matched to their relative contributions, and some personal presents from members of the group. Deb gave away almost all of her clothes and her tremendously useful 'Letherman' tool/knife. Riding chaps proved a highly valued commodity but there were not enough for all the hopeful applicants. Most other equipment

could not be given away because it should be available for the next groups of prospective riders. Yet, at the end of all speeches everybody seemed more or less satisfied. As for the rest of us, we all enjoyed a common dinner at Jacky's, probably one of the best restaurants in the Central Madagascan highlands and certainly the best in Ampefy.



Riders and grooms

On the next morning a lift for Deb to Tana airport had to be hastily arranged because she had discovered that her plane was supposed to leave around midday time this same day. We others had a more relaxed time even though some of us were hard pressed to attract the attention of the waitress to the correct physical state of fried eggs in the context of an English breakfast. It had been market day in Ampefy and thus on the way back to Tana we had to pass a long row of brightly painted zebu carts with farmers on their return trip, a fitting farewell to rural Madagascar. Back in Tana we had ample time for an extended visit to the 'Marché des Dignes' a huge assembly of booths with all kinds of folkloristic handicraft for sale. They make beautiful woven handbags, silk tissues, woodworks, musical instruments and cutlery from zebu horns. Patricia even managed to buy a huge fur-coated zebu skull with removable horns. Then, in the evening we had to part after a last farewell dinner with Christina who had spent the afternoon with the Madagascan minister for tourism explaining her plans for organizing trail rides.

Yes, it had been a remarkable experience to travel through the Madagascan highland where children and zebras are so plentiful while tourists, leave alone riders, seem to represent an endangered species. Nowhere on my travels, except perhaps in Malawi, I experienced such intense contact to the local population and realized so directly the many aspects and problems of developmental aid programs. The school system seems hopelessly swamped with the task to provide a decent education to all these children and the economy appears far from being able to provide jobs for the grown-ups. Maybe sustainable tourism could contribute a little bit to improve living conditions in this beautiful country.

Not everybody flew back immediately. Prior to returning home, three of us, Wendy, Sylvia and me, spent three more incredibly relaxing days on the Ile St. Marie, a former pirate's island

off the east coast of Madagascar. We enjoyed its perfect South Sea flair, sandy beaches, coral reefs, crystal clear temperate water and, last not least, the very moderately priced services of a nice and comfortable hotel at the very rim of the ocean. Between July and September it would even be possible to do whale watching while sitting in front of one's hotel bungalow at the beach. So don't go there if you ever have a chance to travel in Madagascar, its addicting!



Ile Ste. Marie
Hotel Atafana

The end