Men's Journal EXPEDITION

EXPLORING THE UNTAMED RIVERS AND REMOTE BAOBAB FORESTS OF MADAGASCAR

In search of the real Madagascar, the author rafts into a vanishing wilderness, where lemurs are dinner and giant bats rule the skies. By Tom Downey

THE LANDSCAPE RIPPLES FROM A THERMAL WAVE RISING UP from the fires. The hills tremble, the forests convulse, and the horizon shudders. Grass and shrubs sizzle and pop, emitting clouds of sweet smoke that waft over the water to our four rafts. We're paddling down the Mangoky River in southwestern Madagascar, and on both banks and stretching into the distance, subsistence farmers are slashing and burning. It's a practice that clears the forests and fields and fertilizes the soil. The raging fires offer these farmers hope, but they're devastating to the region's biodiversity. Still, there is beauty in this inferno: orange tongues of flame that leap up toward patches of bright blue sky; flocks of ducks that streak across the towering gray plumes of smoke. "I can't believe how many people are living on these riverbanks now," says Gary Lemmer, the American guide leading our expedition. "It's changed since we were here a few years ago. We barely saw anyone that trip." The heat pulsating from the fields and the billowing smoke usher us into the middle of the river, and we drift downstream, silent. I'd already learned that the fastest course on this river is not a straight line (sandbanks often block the way). Navigating the Mangoky is a tricky, twisted business. »

Making camp on day one, halfway between Sakaraha and the put-in for the Mangoky River at Bororeha

Photographs by STEPHEN DUPONT

Setting off for another day on the Mangoky River. During the expedition the team usually paddled from 9 AM to 3 PM, stopping for lunch and hikes along the way.

There are journeys we make to see for ourselves places that we already know from books, television, and popular travel mythology: rafting down the Grand Canyon, biking through the South of France, trekking to Machu Picchu. And then there are trips we take to discover a reality that we know little or nothing about, where creatures that look like something out of prehistory leap from branch to branch, where giant jumping rats bound past baobabs, and where we discover that there is indeed somewhere left in the world that is stranger than we can imagine.

Madagascar broke off from the continental mass called Gondwanaland about a hundred million years ago, creating unusual conditions that support legions of endemic fauna and flora (biologists call the island "Africa's Galápagos"), including 53 kinds of lemurs. Classed as prosimians, lemurs occupy a branch of the same evolutionary tree as both monkeys and humans. Lemurs once roamed the entire earth, but as monkeys evolved, lemurs died out everywhere, save Madagascar.

Seeking the truly exotic, I'd been to the island once before. On that trip, to Andasibe Mantadia National Park, I watched brown lemurs check travelers out with studied nonchalance and heard the eerie humanlike call of the indri, a tree-dwelling lemur. Though these animals roamed free across an expanse of protected land, they seemed habituated, almost tame. Turn up at the park, hire a guide, voilà, indri. It was an airbrushed version of Madagascar. I didn't have the time or money back then to venture out to search for wild lemurs in their natural state; that was what drew me back now.

Less than 10 percent of Madagascar's natural forest remains, according to Conservation International, and it's being cut and burned down at a rate of 1 percent a year. All 53 species of lemur are threatened, but 11 are endangered. Sixteen species have already become extinct, including one the size of a gorilla. I signed up with Remote River Expeditions, an outfitter that specializes in trips to seldom-explored regions, for its eight-day, 75-mile trip down the Mangoky. The river winds through a frontier region known for its intact river forests, majestic baobabs, and cattle rustlers. People are moving here fast, as the fires on day five demonstrated, and I didn't know what I would see in this vanishing wilderness. But I was hoping that observing the desperate, delicate dance between man and nature would yield a greater understanding of the country — and at least a few wild lemurs.

TOM DOWNEY *is the author of* The Last Men Out, *the true story of life in a Brooklyn firehouse.*

PLAN YOUR TRIP

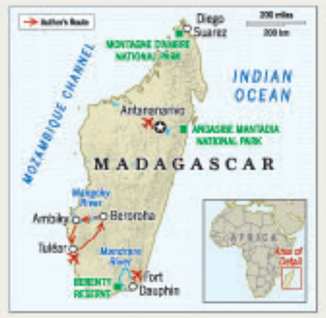
MADAGASCAR

WHEN TO GO Madagascar has a tropical climate. Avoid the rainy season, January to March. Lemurs are born in September and October.

FLIGHTS The easiest way to get to Madagascar is to fly through Paris — Air France (airfrance.com) flies to Antananarivo five times a week (*from $2,200 round-trip from New York City*).

TOUR THE PARKS For a comprehensive overland trip that visits all of Madagascar's top national parks, take Cortez Travel's 16-day tour ($5,495; cortez-usa.com).

FLOAT THE MANGOKY Remote River Expeditions runs different rivers in Madagascar every year but will offer a 23-day trip similar to the author's in 2007 ($3,175, *not including international flights*; remoterivers.com, departs May 9).



Malagasy legend has it that the baobab had too much pride so the gods decided to plant it upside down (left); bare-knuckle boxing near Ambalavenoka.

The river widens and the water becomes shallower, with a sandbar slicing down the middle. Lemmer chooses a side and hopes that we've opted for the deeper passage. Skinny, about 5-foot-9, with a ponytail flopping behind his head, he's the archetypal river rat. He started chasing whitewater all over Africa and the Americas at 17, wandering the world and guiding trips everywhere from the Omo River in Ethiopia to the Bío Bío in Chile. Now 50, he has finally made a home in Madagascar, partly because he's trying to earn protected status for the Mangoky River. Lemmer shifted his focus from finding the wildest whitewater to searching for rivers that present human and cultural inspiration, not just technical puzzles. "Adrenaline can only take you so far," he told me before we set out on our journey. "Floating down rivers like the Mangoky challenges your senses in greater ways."

Soon the jungle and cliffs close in around us, the river squeezes into a rocky gorge, and the water flows faster and deeper. Tall trees hang over the shore. It's late afternoon, so Lemmer and Gerard scout for a campsite. Lemmer directs our flotilla to a wide expanse of beach backed by rocks and jungle. A flock of guinea fowl busily flees the sand as we land. Gerard takes up a paddle, swings it overhead, and slams it down into the water with a crash that echoes off the cliffs. "That'll scare away the crocs," he says, cigarette dangling from his grinning mouth. "Now we can go swimming." The river is slightly cooler than the air but warm enough to feel like bathwater.

After we pitch our tents Stephen Dupont, our photographer, initiates what will become our daily ritual: in Beroroha, villagers gather around and watch as we off-load all our stuff: boxes of food, containers of water, self-bailing inflatable rafts, GPS units, and an emergency satellite phone. Lemmer tells me that our gear for these eight days is more than these villagers have owned in a lifetime. There are 12 travelers in our group including three guides, including Gerard Ravoajanahary (pronounced rah-fow-tsa-na-arh, so we'd call him Gerard), one of Madagascar's most respected naturalists. We lash everything to our floating crafts and push off.

Immediately the birds of the river come to life. Gerard sits in the back of the boat, carefully steering, watching for swells that might signal sandbanks and scanning the treetops for life. "That's a Malagasy kingfisher. That cormorant is drying its wings." Then hundreds of birds fly noisily overhead. "White-faced whistling ducks," Gerard intones. The 48-year-old can identify obscure birds from hundreds of yards away, discern the faint calls of a lemur, and can even summon lemurs by mimicking their calls. His only moment of panic so far was when he realized we'd forgotten to pack *sakay*, the blindingly hot pepper sauce that Malagasy people sprinkle liberally over everything they eat. Luckily, he found some homemade sakay in a nearby village and bought a water bottle filled with an alarming amalgam of green, red, and black bits to add to our foodstuff. "Please, don't touch it with your bare hands," he warned. "And use very little on your food or you'll be in great pain."

DO YOUR PART

SAVE PARADISE

Home to 180,000 animal and 12,000 plant species, most of which are endemic, Madagascar is considered a living laboratory of evolution by biologists. Consider this: 98 percent of its land mammals, 92 percent of its reptiles, 68 percent of its plants, and 41 percent of its breeding bird species exist nowhere else on earth.

Although the lemurs — at least 53 different species roam the island — are the most renowned, other wildlife is equally intriguing. About half the world's chameleons live here, plus thousands of different kinds of insects, including net-throwing spiders and comet moths the size of sparrows. At the top of the food chain sit fosas, fodlike predators that hunt lemurs.

While rapid deforestation threatens various habitats, the island's president, Marc Ravalomanana, working with the World Wildlife Fund, Conservation International, and Earthwatch to broker debt-for-nature swaps and sustainable-tourism initiatives, has vowed to expand the protected lands from 3 to 10 percent by 2008. To learn how you can help, visit worldwildlife.org/wildplaces/mad/projects.cfm, conservation.org/madagascar, or earthwatch.org.

Animal island (clockwise from top left): a flying-fox bat; a spider; a Verreaux's sifaka; a chameleon

BAT: BARUD/ISTOCKPHOTO.COM (2); SPIDER: KEN PRESTON/MAPTHUMP/ISTOCKPHOTO

The fertile yet unstable flood-zone soils along the Mangoky attract migrants from other parts of Madagascar (left); photographer Stephen Dupont (left) and the author.

a nip of Malagasy whiskey with a few squares of rich, dark Malagasy chocolate, which we savor as the blazing red sun dips below the treetops, leaving the land glowing pink for a few precious minutes. Both our guides are skilled cooks, and over the week we'll experience Lemmer's continental concoctions and Gerard's fiery Malagasy standards. After gorging on a dinner of curried prawns I climb into my tent and switch on my headlamp. Suddenly there's a rat-tat-tat-tat on the fly sheet: the sound of hundreds of insects smashing into the tent, seeking the light, and maybe the flesh, inside.

The next morning Gerard spies a dry streambed at the side of the river and suggests we hike up it to find lemurs. Giant leafy green trees arch over the stream, shading us from the hot rays of the sun, and a short way in he spots a clue: lemur scat on the trail. He motions for us to be quiet. I can just barely make out a clicking sound in the distance. "Brown lemurs," Gerard confirms. We search for them, stopping every once in a while to listen to their chatter, but it gets fainter and fainter. Eventually there is only silence. Disappointed we head back to the rafts and set off. Later that day we approach a tall tree at the riverbank, big black fruit hanging below every branch. All at once the fruit comes to life. Hundreds of translucent-winged flying fox bats screech from the tree, circling and swarming the sky. We drift right up to the horde: enormous, hairy beasts that make you want to forget your mammalian heritage.

As we set up camp that night a middle-aged woman and a young girl gingerly approach us. The woman carries a live chicken upside down by its legs. The girl's arms are wrapped around mysterious cargo. When they approach the campfire I get my first lemur sighting. The little girl, Ataktak, has a small ring-tailed lemur as a pet, and she and her mother Pauline have come to our camp to sell the lemur and the chicken. The lemur goes for $12, they say, the chicken $15: significant amounts in a country rife with extreme rural poverty, where 80 percent of the population live on less than a dollar a day. The young girl's father had trapped a family of lemurs for food, even though it's technically illegal. They "killed them, burned their fur, washed it, cut it up, and cooked it just like any other meat," Pauline explains, but they saved this lemur, then a baby too tiny to eat. That was to the south, where they're from. "We moved here because it's too dry down there," she says. "We can't live."

The young girl's father had trapped a family of lemurs for food, even though it's technically illegal. They "killed them, burned their fur, washed it, cut it up, and cooked it just like any other meat."

"Some Malagasy believe that lemurs are our ancestors, so for many groups it's *fady* to kill or eat lemurs," Gerard tells me, using the Malagasy word for taboo. "But this woman's husband is from another tribe. It's not fady for him. Anyway, when you're starving you tend to forget your taboos." As we row away from our campsite Lemmer and Gerard are alarmed at the number of people we're seeing on the riverbanks. The question is, How long will this land, gallery forest bordering a wild river, survive as more people migrate to the area? As the river starts to widen we see a group of birds picking at a rotting carcass on the bank. Closer we can make out that it was once a crocodile, now skinned by fishermen who troll the Mangoky. Gerard tells me that the skin of a croc can sell for $16.

The width of the river has increased so the water level is very low. We're jumping out of the boats, wading and pulling more than paddling. In the distance we spot clouds of smoke and soon see slash-and-burn tactics up close. This is where my story began, a charred landscape that leaves our group irritable that night around the campfire. Normally the hour before dinner is when everyone quietly unwinds, but tonight an argument erupts. Tempers flare as we discuss why it is that even though these people have been farming like this for centuries, it seems that right now, in this generation, this way of life is ripping apart the ecosystem. Traditional slash-and-burn agriculture had well-defined terms and limits (certain areas were left fallow for years), but as population density increases (Madagascar's population of 18 million is set to double by 2025), every inch of land is being farmed. Lemmer thinks the forest along the Mangoky has 10 years; Gerard is more pessimistic: five.

We drag the rafts across the shallows for another whole day and then find an idyllic place to camp, a sandy beach at a bend in the river, backed by a pristine jungle teeming with birds. Finally I feel far away from the world. There's no one else camping nearby and no settlements visible. While I chop garlic for a sauce, I see Gerard's attention focus on a distant clump of trees. "I see sifaka, Verraux's sifaka," he announces. "They're a kind of lemur. Look at those white spots." I peer at the tiny dots in the distance, and then I'm off on the chase, first climbing a steep sand ravine, then a tree-covered hill. But as I sprint into the forest I realize that this sighting has come too late. The sun is dipping over the horizon.

Sulking about this missed opportunity, I plod back to the beach. Then I hear something. It's the same communicative clicking sound I heard three days ago when we chased the brown lemurs. And there they are, filling a tall tree that hangs over the sand: dozens of brown lemurs. They're ferret-size, but with the moves and dexterity of monkeys. With manic intensity they chase one another from branch to branch, then jump impossibly far to neighboring trees. Their clicks rise to a clamor as they sense my presence below. They don't approach or stare down at me, but they also don't retreat into the jungle. As I ponder their connection to our species' prehistory, the sun sets behind the tree. All I can see are a few patches of black springing from dark branches.

We're far from any villages, and the river narrows again, and we float for two days [continued on page 220]

through a forest decorated with giant baobabs that rise up steeply from each bank. Gerard spots a group of three sifaka, motionless, standing out from the forest because of their bright white coats. Soon they're close enough that I can see the dark rings around their bright round eyes. "They're diurnal," Gerard tells us. "But they don't move nearly as much as brown lemurs because they have to use most of their energy just to eat enough to survive. They have to consume about 20 percent of their body weight each day."

As we approach Ambiky, the take-out point, the river widens again, and I start to see signs of civilization: huts, villages, then a road. On the final morning a dense fog has moved in and we can't see ahead of us, so we hit sandbanks again and again. A lone figure appears behind us out of the fog, a bare-chested fisherman using a pole to dig into the river bottom, then thrusting his tiny pirogue forward with all his weight. Gerard shouts a greeting to him and he tells us to follow, zigzagging expertly around sandbars we can't see. We have GPS, finely detailed maps, the best guides in the country, but it's a half-naked man in a pirogue who has known this river from birth who finally guides us home.

AFTER 10 DAYS IN THE WILD, I'VE EARNED A COUPLE of days in Madagascar's most famous lemur sanctuary, the French-run private reserve of Berenty. It's a plane ride back to Fort Dauphin and then a three-hour drive. We arrive late at night, and the next morning I awake to strange sounds outside. I open my cabin door to a family of ring-tailed lemurs playfully hopping across the tin roof. I decide to take a jog along the trails that crisscross the reserve. At first everything is quiet, still waking up to the dawn. Then I see a white spot out of the corner of my eye. I hear a squeak from the bushes, and then I see whole trees filled with perky sifaka, staring down at me. Next to the sifaka is a tree full of brown lemurs. Up ahead some ring-taileds are crossing the trail. Berenty is bursting with lemurs.

Some people deride Berenty as a glorified zoo (and I worried that it would be too manicured), but I have a new appreciation for it and other parks and reserves. Our river trip was the wide shot: Madagascar, warts and all. What I see before me now is only the glamorous close-up, but it's still inspiring. And it's sustainable. Berenty isn't just a sanctuary for lemurs, it's also a working sisal factory that employs hundreds of people in the area. The French-Malagasy family that runs the factory and the sanctuary have vowed to protect these lemurs, and to try and ensure that local people can make a living here.

After my run I sip a café au lait on the patio and watch a family of ring-taileds warming in the rising sun, staring blankly at me with paws on their thighs as if they're meditating before another hard day of trapezing through the treetops. Then a rival gang of ring-taileds emerges out of the jungle, and the tranquillity is shattered. As they battle it out on the grassland before me, I can't help but think this seemingly playful skirmish represents, in its own way, the conflict for Madagascar's future.