

Dear Friends and Family

It is with mixed emotions that I write about Madagascar where I spent three weeks in October and touched only a small portion of this complex island similar in size to France. Known for its abundance of indigenous and unique flora and fauna it is depressing to observe the percentage of species which are already extinct and the ongoing destruction of habitat that threatens even more species. Although there are some efforts at conservation underway (national parks plus private reserves) as well as some projects to reestablish native habitat, the battle seems to be losing ground!

Population pressure (annual growth rate of 3% with 10-12 children per woman the norm in rural areas) and traditional slash and burn agricultural practices plus natural losses due to cyclones accelerate the degradation. Having said this, the Malagasy are truly friendly people, the tourism industry is well developed with travelers' facilities available at all levels (backpackers to luxe) and the island has amazingly varied terrain.

The granite mountain areas of Isalo are justifiably a major visitor attraction (and source of construction materials when crushed to various sizes by the hand labor of men, women and



children)

as are the more than 105 known varieties of lemurs visible in more or less natural habitat. Rice



cultivation (wet and dry)

predominates throughout the island, although they no longer are net exporters but need to import rice to meet the population's needs. Labor-intensive rice cultivation probably contributes to the preponderance of large families.



A typical local meal is a large plate of rice plus broth with some leaves and a small portion of either local chicken or zebu (beef) or



beans, costing one Euro. One sees very few private vehicles outside the capital but, rather, taxi brousses (vans) between towns or within large towns plus pousse pousse (rickshaws either pulled by a human or aided by a bicycle) within



towns. Fuel trucks are prevalent on the roads as currently all petrol products enter through only one port at Tamatave on the east coast. In the south where herds of zebu are present you will see carts pulled by animals,



pushed by humans.

whereas elsewhere they are



We were fortunate to visit the huge zebu market at Ambalavao and then for the next several days passed

huge herds of them walking to their next



destinations.

Charcoal is the predominant cooking fuel and its manufacture contributes greatly to the deforestation and to planting quick-growing (Australian) eucalyptus in lieu of native



species.

It occurred to us that a government subsidy of butane gas (as Morocco does) might be a worthwhile investment for environmental protection. On the other hand, for the vast swath of the country that has no water wells outside the rainy season they exchange their charcoal production for the water that tank trucks bring to fill their jerry cans. Dwellings are often constructed of local brick varying in color by the local soil –

reddish or yellow, with thatched roofs from an assortment of local palm types - elephant ear (looks like giant taro), travelers' palm (looks like fan palm) and pandanus. The construction styles, however, are very different from area to area.



In addition to unique plant and animal species a significant cultural phenomenon is the importance of ancestors and the accompanying burial rites, tombs and festivals accorded to them. Even though most of the population is either Christian (Roman Catholic plus a wide variety of local protestant sects) or Muslim, the traditional ancestor rites remain very active. We were able to see burial tombs (caves in granite mountains) of the Bara



plus large colorfully decorated walled enclosures depicting the departed's life, interests and wealth (measured by zebras sacrificed at death) of the Mahafaly and Masikoro



tribes).

Water features are another major visitor attraction as well as means of transport (local freight)



on the Pangalanes Canal on the east coast, and source of protein – local fresh and salt water fishing is



extensive.
canal vary from camping to luxe and are generally

Resorts along the



peaceful
by local and sports fishing activity and wildlife viewing.

and accompanied



By contrast, there are also tourist resorts on the various offshore islands to which many visitors return year after year.

I really did not expect to be interested in one of the major attractions, the lemurs.



Known for their big eyes, their heads are somewhat rat-like and their movements (i.e. leaping, climbing, eating) reminiscent of monkeys (whom they pre-date in evolution). However, their variety of size (from nocturnal mouse lemur, mouse-sized, to the 3' tall Indri Indri) and family habits from monogamous to polygamous, nocturnal vs diurnal, carrying baby on back or below on stomach, matriarchal hierarchy or not, quickly became a fascination for me. Although often an incidental accompaniment on many walks where my

objective was natural features/vegetation, they certainly augmented the local



interest.

Another interesting coincidence is that the grandfather of the current King of Morocco (i.e. Mohamed V) spent his years in exile (1954-1956) living at the Hotel des Thermes in Antsirabe, Madagascar. We were able to visit the suite (modest) where he lived and enjoy another well-known attraction, Madagascar chocolates!

In short, one can create a vacation from cultural tourism to serious adventure sport to sun and surf.



The national parks receive a

lot of visitors and nearby accommodations fill up during peak periods.



Air Madagascar serves most

areas of the country so a visit can take in a wide variety of regions if so desired. But, of course, you already know that!

Now, onwards to South Africa where most of my perceptions were turned upside down from the minute I stepped off the plane. This visit was made especially meaningful by the extensive planning assistance and accompaniment received from friends who are long-time South Africa residents, both for the Johannesburg (Josy) portion as well as Cape Town. Arriving in Josy felt like Los Angeles with its freeways, high rise buildings, private vehicles – total culture shock, especially arriving from the poverty of Madagascar where our ancient 4 chevaux taxi barely made it up the hill to get us to the airport on departure. We were based in a marvelous guesthouse in Melville where we could safely walk to excellent restaurants and the staff took a personal interest in assuring our visit to Josy was successful. We had a Zulu driver/guide who took us to all the neighborhoods and sights we wanted to see and honestly answered all our questions about current conditions on all subjects in South Africa. Whereas Madagascar was mostly about the environment, South Africa was mostly about political and economic history with some magnificent environment thrown in (no wildlife safari here, been there done that elsewhere). Some highlights included meeting the Ndebele ladies (our age) who do the magnificent bead work and decorate the houses inside and out.



The entire Ndebele ethnic group was relocated here (approximately 50 kms north of Pretoria) in 1954 living initially in tents, then gradually building traditional rondavels from vertical bamboo poles cemented with cow dung and then decorated in bold colors with either geometric designs or symbols of daily life. During this period most black South Africans were relocated to new designated living areas and their daily movements severely restricted.

Visiting the prisons, both at Constitution Hall and Robben Island, as well as the apartheid Museum totally brought to life the humiliation and degradation suffered by black South Africans who even in prison received inferior clothing, food and hygiene compared to colored prisoners. Although there are huge building programs for affordable housing, and Soweto was not the shanty town I expected – rather modest brick housing begun as early as the 1930's and similar to American early post WWII suburbs, there still exist vast swaths of the country where housing is corrugated metal and cardboard and electricity and hygiene facilities are sorely lacking. Even in these areas, though, you see fewer of the tiny hanut-type stores and open air souks than elsewhere in Africa, with more commerce occurring in modern shopping districts. I was told that much of the electricity and hygiene facilities currently in Soweto occurred due to private rather than public initiative. An unexpected pleasant experience was the large African Crafts Market in Josy. The stall owners were very polite and didn't badger you to buy at all. They simply expected that you give every stall a look-see and exchange pleasantries – a sharply pleasant contrast for example to Marrakesh Souk.

Another good experience was the Shosholoza Meyl overnight train from Josy to Cape Town. Pleasant, mostly local passengers, good food, clean and plenty of security at each station stop. Inexpensive. A good way to pass through the equivalent of, say, Nebraska, Montana and Utah. In Cape Town, other than the first and last nights we were based at Simon's Town on the Cape Peninsula in a cottage overlooking False Bay and a ten minute walk to the African penguin colony at Boulder Beach. From here

we could visit all Cape Town destinations in our rental car in 40 minutes or less. We eventually covered every route with incredibly dramatic mountain to sea views and flora unique to South Africa, especially the seemingly endless varieties of protea, the largest of which – larger than a human head – is the national flower. Simon’s Town has a very interesting history having served variously as naval headquarters under the British, Dutch and now South Africa and played a pivotal role in keeping shipping lanes open during WWII. We were fortunate to be able to join some local walkers on their day hike in the hills/cliffs above False Bay.

South African cuisine is highly developed and eating out is not expensive by U.S. or European standards. The local small winery wines that don’t get exported are excellent and not expensive. We had great fresh fish options with creative preparations. I disagree with the guide books, however. DO NOT do high tea at the Mount Nelson hotel in Cape Town. It is a buffet, not high tea at all, very little service, and except for the pastries, among the least interesting food we had in the entire country! And the “government gardens” nearby are much more beautiful and varied than the hotel grounds.

South Africa, like Madagascar, left a profound effect on me. The current leadership, unfortunately, is not modeled after Nelson Mandela. People are pessimistic about the economic future and racial divisions still run deep. However, the country has a brilliant bill of rights and some solid economic advantages not enjoyed by their neighbors. Having emerged without a revolution they have the chance to be the visionary leaders of Africa, but for the present seem unable to rise above corruption, AIDS and greed.

The year closed out back in north Africa where I celebrated my birthday



under the stars at Erg Chebbi in the Sahara at Merzouga, Morocco.

The photos attached, other than two from the Sahara in Morocco



and one of the Ndebele bead makers in South Africa, are all from Madagascar. I did not feel I had anything to offer photographically from South Africa, despite the magnificent scenery, gardens and profound messages from the important historical sites visited.

I wish each and every one of you and your loved ones a happy, healthy and peaceful 2013.

Love, Marilee