

# Madagascar offers rare experience

BY HOLMES  
ROLSTON III

For the Coloradoan

"Wow. Did you see that lemur jump?"

We had watched an indri leap from one tree trunk to another 20 feet away, clinging on with all four feet. Then, we saw a baby lemur clinging tightly to its mother's fur, carried along in the jump. That's how hugging must have started in our evolutionary history.

I was in the jungle rainforest of Madagascar still puffing from an uphill climb through the brush. I came to see these wide-eyed lemurs, which our guide called funky monkeys, with their treetop acrobatics. Lemurs are prosimians, not really monkeys at all, but a lineage distinct to Madagascar.

Madagascar has more than 80 lemur species. The simplest, such as the mouse lemur we saw spotlighted one night, are thought to preserve features like those of our earliest primate ancestors. They already had started hugging — both trees and mamma.

About the size of a small squirrel, nocturnal and something like bush babies in Africa, the beady-eyed mouse lemur is said to be the cutest animal and the smallest primate on Earth.

California-sized and similarly shaped, Madagascar separated anciently first from Africa and later from India. Evolution produced another world where nearly every species is unique. Today, most are on the brink of extinction. Eighty-five percent of

Malagasy species are found nowhere else, or as biologists say, endemic. There are no hoofed animals, which is in stark contrast with Africa's impala, gazelles, wildebeest and buffalo. There is a pygmy hippo. There are no lions, elephants, hyenas or jackals so lemurs filled up the island with myriads of species from the tiny mouse lemur to the indri, almost the size of a baboon. Bigger ones, once gorilla-sized, have become extinct.

The indri jumped out of sight, the youngster hanging on. "Le's go," the guide said. "We need to take a shortcut." More steep climbing on an obscure trail, we were chasing another lemur he hearing call.

We found the diademed sifaka high in the treetops

with a youngster clutched to her back as well. "You're lucky," the guide said. "This species is hard to find."

"Great," I said. "That makes it worth this bushwhacking."

Adjusting my hat, knocked sideways from the brush, I brushed my ear. I saw blood dripping off my hand. I reached back to pull off a leech. "Don't worry," the



Courtesy of Holmes Rolston III

**A ringtail lemur** carries its young in the jungles of Madagascar.

guide said. "They don't carry diseases." At least I had taken my malaria pill that morning.

## Land of diversity

Madagascar has diverse environments, from rainforests to spiny deserts, often only a few miles apart. There are rapid elevation changes and severe wet-dry seasons. Ecologists call this steep environmental gradients. The result is many species found only in small areas of 10 to 20 square miles.

We endured several long and bruising rides, as touring Madagascar is off the beaten path. We took pirogues, outrigger canoes to an island. The villagers said they see Americans maybe once a year. Outside our group, I heard English spoken only once, by a guide talking to some Norwegians.

In three weeks of exploring, we saw 14 lemur species and several hundred individual lemurs.

One great show was Verreaux's lemurs dancing. They are superb at clasping trees, but this makes them awkward on the ground. They cross ground with a kind of sideways dancing, which is an agile but also weird way of walking.



Verreaux's sifaka

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## Lemurs

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High in the treetops, we found flying foxes. A few hundred fruit-eating bats were hanging downward, roosting and fussy over perches. This huge bat has a long narrow muzzle, giving it a fox-like appearance.

We found a tenrec, a small hedgehog-like animal with coarse reddish-gray fur and long, sharp spines along its body. It hunts insects at night with sensitive whiskers.

We spotted more than 50 bird species. We saw an elephant bird egg that measured 16 inches long. The elephant bird was the heaviest bird ever, taller than an ostrich. About 1,000 years ago, it went extinct, like the dodo, having been killed and eaten by Malagasy hunters.

Madagascar grows half of the world's supply of vanilla, which is a vine orchid with long pods that grow wrapped around tree limbs. Looking more closely, one of the thicker limbs moved. It was a boa constrictor more than 6 feet long.

In Isalo Park in the southwest, we hiked into two spectacularly narrow canyons. One took us past a village of wood huts on the edge of the park before crossing rice paddies. Farmers were driving their zebu (native cows) around in circles to pulverize the soil before planting.

In the mouth of Canyon des Makis, or Canyon of the Monkeys, we found ringtail lemurs, which are the icon of Madagascar much like the bald eagle in the United States. There were some tombs on a high cliff. We were reminded that it is disrespectful to the dead, or taboo, to point at them with outstretched finger.

We hiked around to the Canyon des Rats where we found Verreaux's sifakas, a black and white lemur. High on a horizontal limb, we spotted a mother with a baby clutched to its back.



Courtesy of Holmes Rolston III

**A young Malagasy girl, whose face is slathered in lotion,** brought lunch to Holmes Rolston III and the group with which he was traveling in the jungles of Madagascar. The tour company paid her to carry lunches into the jungle. In a country where three-quarters of the population is undernourished, she did the job as much for the leftover food as for the money.

### Land in peril

By now, I was tired and hungry. We reached a pleasant spot by the creek running through the canyon. A young girl appeared carrying rather gracefully balanced on her head a big cardboard box filled with a few dozen lunches. I thought to myself that I found it tough hiking in here and she comes in gracefully with that load. Her face was painted with the tan-colored ointment we often saw on women, a salve they get somewhere in the forest.

The picnic lunch was good, but with a sad note. There was too much for us to eat so we gave the uneaten food to the two local guides and the young woman. She picked up the scraps and put them in the cardboard box. Talking to her through our translating guides, she said she was 15 years old, had a baby and no husband. They paid her to carry the box in, but I think

she as much wanted the leftover food to take home. Three-quarters of the Malagasy are undernourished, below the minimum international standards for caloric intake. Madagascar is one of the poorest nations on Earth.

One of our guides half-joked that Madagascar peo-

ple are so poor because "the main product of Madagascar is more people." Madagascar had a population of just more than 5 million when it became independent in 1960. Today, the population is more than 20 million. The growth rate is 3 percent per year, which if unchecked will double the population to 40

million in a little more than 20 years. That does not bode well for the Malagasy people or for the lemurs.

Only 10 percent of its natural habitat is left. Madagascar is an old and fragile landscape. Nature has produced rich life here, but the land does not farm well. We saw farmers burning their grasslands, producing some new growth when rains come, but losing much soil.

On the desert landscapes, often the most prominent human-built feature is their tombs, a 30-square-foot sepulcher. They are decorated with horned zebu skulls that symbolize the wealth they hope for in the next life. They venerate their ancestors in a ceremony they call "turning the bones." Opening up these graves, they dance with their ancestors' bones.

The driest part is the Androy region in the far south. Androy means "and of thorns." One of the Tandroy people there said: "Our people are always thirsty and hungry, but we survive, strong and proud."

They should also be proud of the exotic landscape they inhabit.

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Holmes Rolston III, is a Fort Collins resident and University Distinguished Professor of Philosophy Emeritus at Colorado State University.