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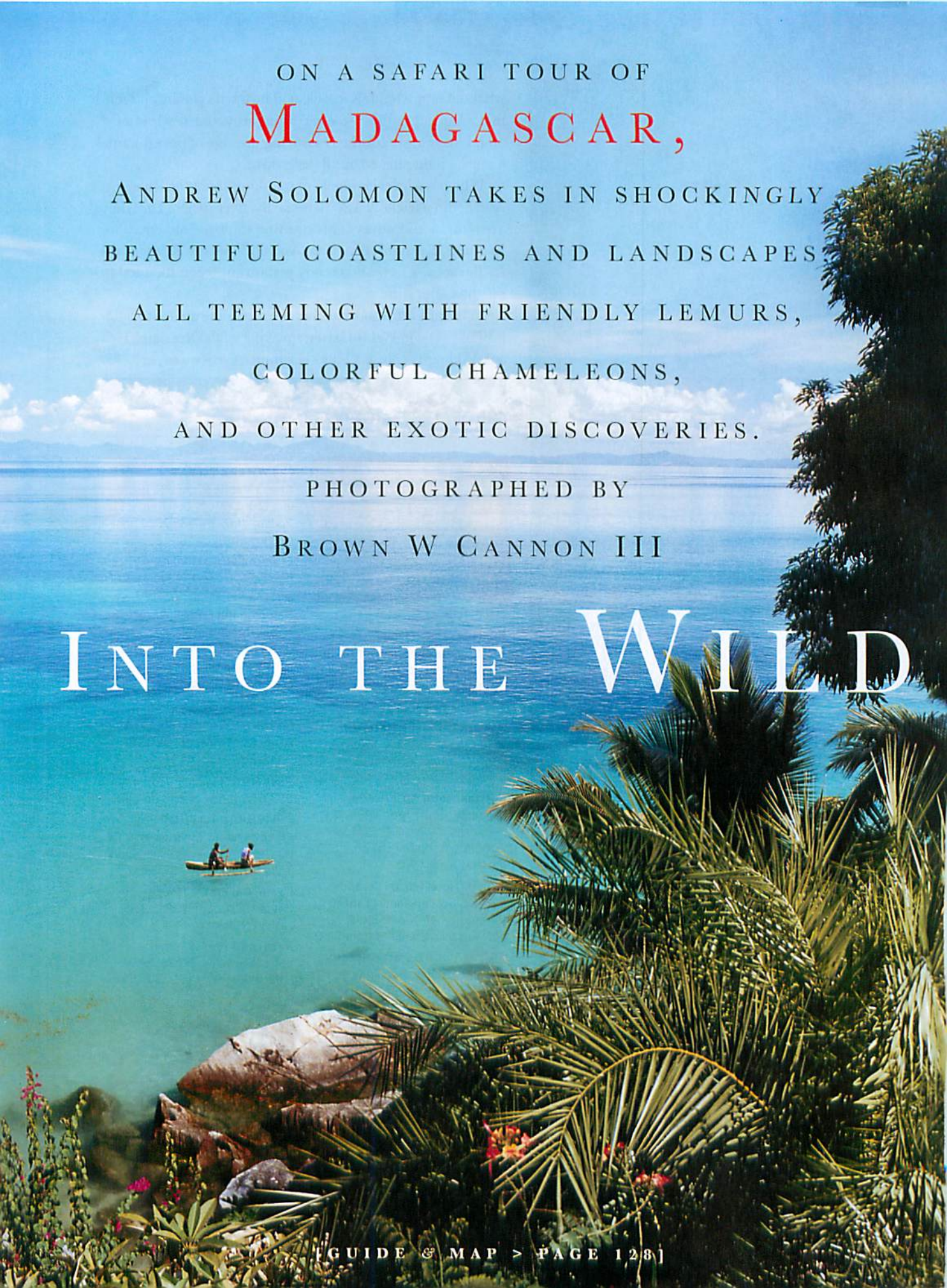


ON A SAFARI TOUR OF

MADAGASCAR,

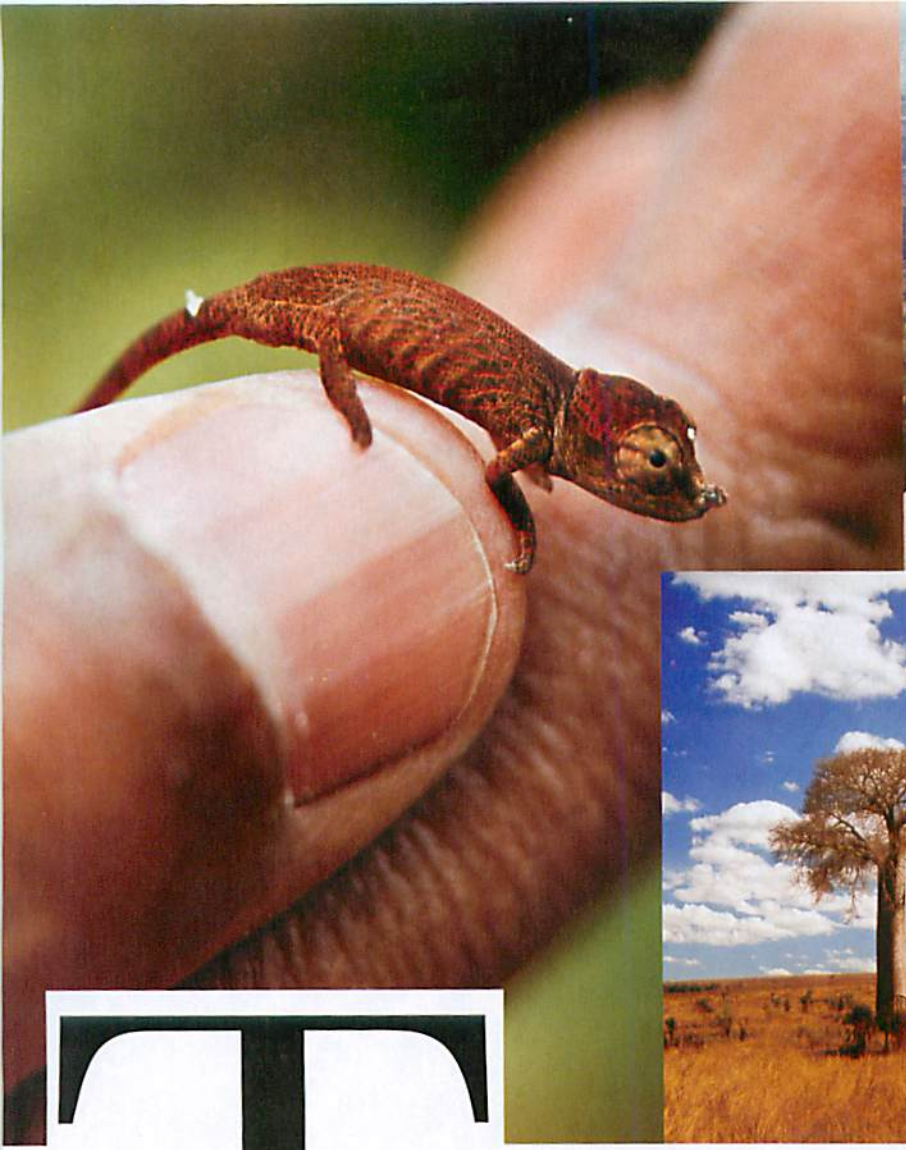
ANDREW SOLOMON TAKES IN SHOCKINGLY BEAUTIFUL COASTLINES AND LANDSCAPES ALL TEEMING WITH FRIENDLY LEMURS, COLORFUL CHAMELEONS, AND OTHER EXOTIC DISCOVERIES.

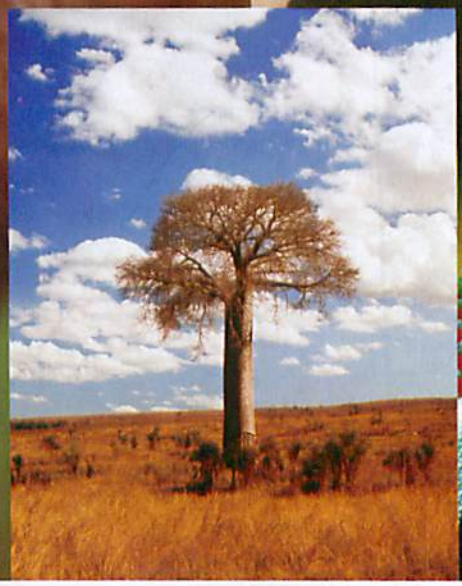
PHOTOGRAPHED BY

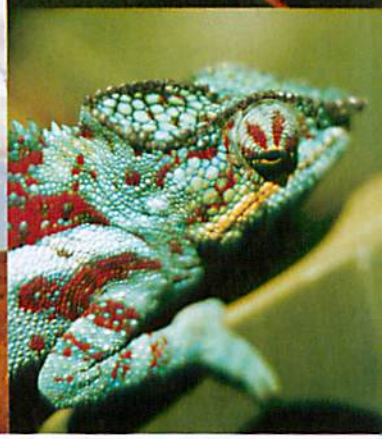
BROWN W CANNON III

INTO THE WILD

[GUIDE & MAP > PAGE 128]





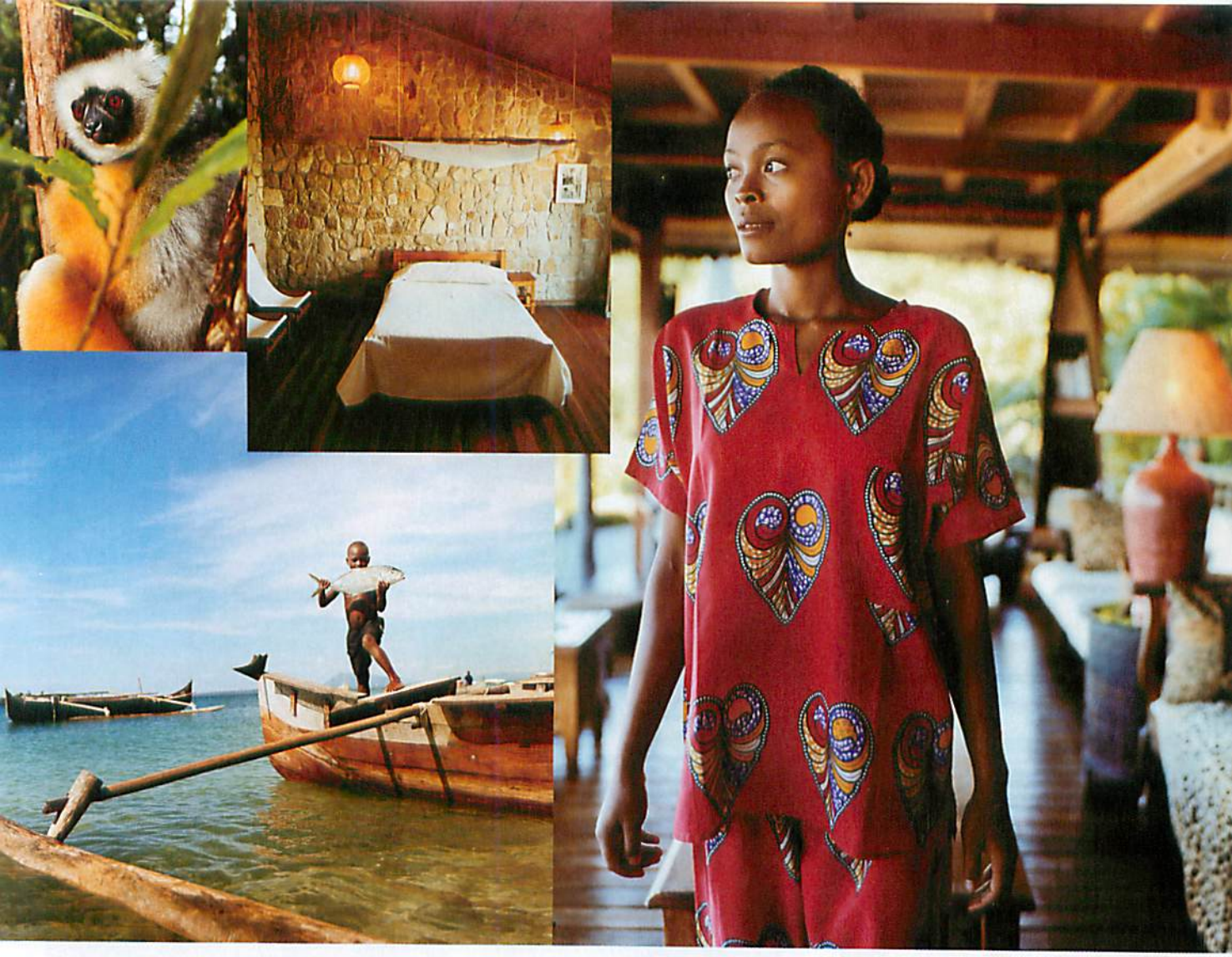


THERE IS NOTHING dangerous or threatening in Madagascar. On mainland African safaris you have to stay in a vehicle, because lions will eat you and hippos will trample you and rhinos and buffalo will charge. In Madagascar, the animals will only look at you with wide-eyed wonder. In most of Africa there are poisonous snakes and frightening scorpions, but in Madagascar there is nothing venomous. The Malagasy are the nicest people in the world, thrilled that you have come so far to visit. You go there for the lemurs, the island's odd primates, who are shy and mild but untroubled by your visit, and the people are the same. There's something miniature and unspoiled about life in Madagascar.

The world's fourth-largest island is another Galápagos, called by some ecologists "the eighth continent." It broke off from Africa's eastern coast some 160 million years ago and developed in isolation; 80 percent of Malagasy plants and animals are endemic, and it rivals Brazil in its biodiversity. The bizarre flora and fauna seem to be the result of a mad collaboration among Dr. Seuss, Jim Henson, and God. Humans have been here for only 2,000 years, and though they have eliminated some species, they haven't dominated nature; there's simply too much of it and too few of them. The biologists who work in Madagascar are passionately devoted. Alison Richard, vice chancellor of the University of Cambridge (the de facto university president; Prince Philip is chancellor), goes every year to sustain her lemur research despite being the busiest person in England. Russ Mittermeier, the president of Conservation International, found time when not administering one of the world's largest conservation organizations to write *Lemurs of Madagascar*, and he visits every few months.

A friend with whom I was traveling had been in touch with Russ, and he escorted us our first day, supplementing the excellent advice from the staff at Explore, Inc., the friendly and very capable Colorado-based safari company that arranged our trip. We flew from Antananarivo, the capital—known for short as Tana—to Diégo-Suarez, at the northern tip of the island, and checked into the nearby Domaine de Fontenay, a simple but lovely hotel run by a couple who do the superb cooking themselves. Russ took us

A Betsimisaraka tribeswoman on her way to market in the Analamazaotra Special Reserve, Madagascar. Opposite: The view from Nosy Komba, a small island off Madagascar.



ISLAND LIFE
Clockwise from above left: A diademed sifaka at the Vakôna reserve, near Andasibe; one of the rooms at Relais de la Reine, in Isalo; a staff member on the terrace at the Tsara Komba hotel; a boy with his catch off Nosy Komba. Opposite, clockwise from top left: A baby Calumma nasuta chameleon; the jungle near Anjajavy; a panther chameleon; a baobab tree in Beza-Mahafaly.

for a walk in Montagne d'Ambre National Park, and we saw a number of Sanford's lemurs. Russ has introduced the bird-watching idea of making a primate life list, and got us interested in cataloguing the species we saw; by the end of the trip, we were up to 22 kinds of lemurs. I had not expected to get excited about lizards, but Russ helped find a Brookesia minima chameleon, one of the smallest vertebrates on earth, which lives only on Madagascar and does not survive well in captivity. It was perfectly formed and less than an inch long, including its tail. It could (and did) perch on the tip of my thumb very comfortably, with room to strut up and down. Then we saw other chameleons of various shapes and sizes and colors, and Russ was very game about picking them up; they wandered up and down our arms and legs—the biggest was 16 inches long. They were amazing colors, with tails that rolled up like fiddlehead ferns.

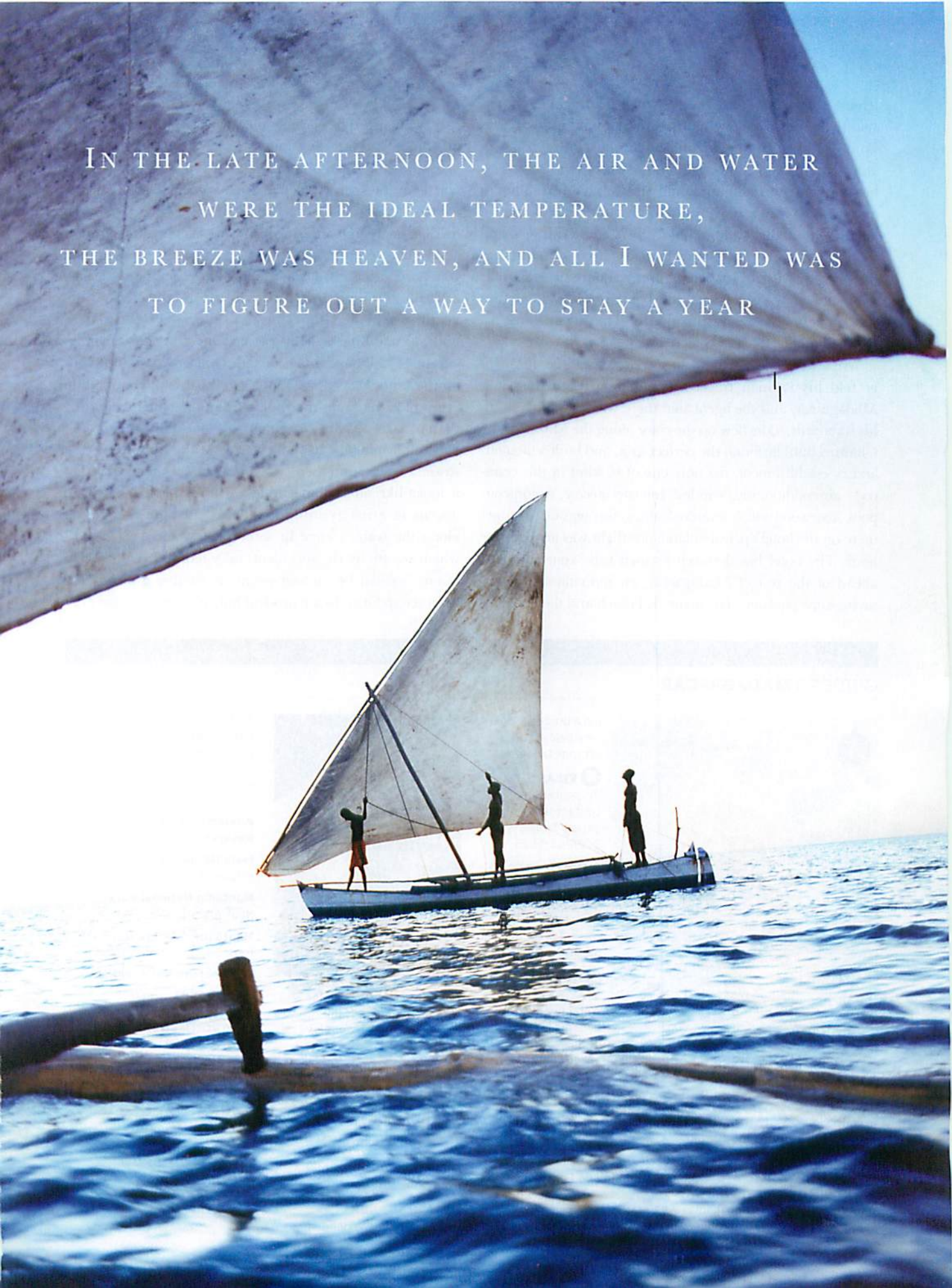
That night, using flashlights, we went for a walk through a private reserve attached to the hotel. We saw nocturnal sportive and mouse and dwarf lemurs whose eyes glow back when you shine a beam at them, like reflective strips at the edges of roads, and we saw all kinds of geckos and chameleons, including the leaf-tailed gecko, whose huge tail resembles a mottled brown frond. We saw a moth that looked like a sample of Florentine paper, and another that seemed to be made of translucent moiré. The area had not been explored much by night, and there were astonishing variants of known lizards. Russ showed us what made them distinct and proposed that one was a new species and that we were the first to record it. I felt like Darwin.

Madagascar has so many creatures that don't exist elsewhere that it's hard to keep track, especially because parts of the island are only semi-explored. New species are found regularly, and some that were supposed extinct have been rediscovered. "The taxonomy of dwarf lemurs is a disgraceful mess," Russ said.

We set off for Ankarana the following day, with our guide Philippe, the son of the queen of Antakarana. We lucked out in seeing some crowned lemurs up close. We also saw a gecko tinged a green that I thought had been invented by people who dropped acid, with a few crimson dots on

Chameleons in the Analamazaotra Special Reserve. Opposite: One of the guides in Nosy Komba's Ampangoriana village.

THE BIZARRE FLORA AND FAUNA SEEM TO BE THE RESULT OF A


IN THE LATE AFTERNOON, THE AIR AND WATER
WERE THE IDEAL TEMPERATURE,
THE BREEZE WAS HEAVEN, AND ALL I WANTED WAS
TO FIGURE OUT A WAY TO STAY A YEAR

NATURAL ELEMENTS
The Vakôna Forest Lodge, above left. Above right: A black-and-white ruffed lemur, at Vakôna. Opposite: Sailors off Anjajavy.

his back, as though outfitted by Anna Sui. Then we saw the *tsingys*, great needles and undulating waves of limestone, carved by the sea and then brought up by the shifting of tectonic plates. Was it not enough for Madagascar to have such weird plants and animals? Did it have to have weird geology too? Then we came, with Philippe, to an enormous cave in which the spirits of his royal ancestors are said to live.

The next day saw us through our first Third World–ish experience: our flight, for which we had tickets, did not exist, but with an unanticipated connection we ultimately made our way to Tsara Komba, our paradisiacal hotel. It's owned by a Frenchman and completely casual but just that touch chic in a very Continental kind of way, with an elegant central area where meals are served, and only three rooms, each a private bungalow with a big terrace overlooking the water.

Our guide fetched us by boat the next morning, as there are no roads, cars, or even bicycles on Nosy Komba, the island where we were staying. Madagascar is a big island; and Nosy Be is a smaller island off northern Madagascar; and Nosy Komba is a smaller island off Nosy Be; and we went to Nosy Tanikely, a smaller island off Nosy Komba. Nosy Tanikely was a few palms, white beaches, a hill in the middle with an abandoned lighthouse, and the lighthouse keeper's cottage, in which the lighthouse keeper still lives, the sole resident of the isle. We snorkeled along the reef and saw beautiful corals, one like a forest of cream-colored asparagus with blue tips, and many fish, including a plump pale one with brilliant turquoise eyelids that resembled an Aeroflot flight attendant. The sea turtles were ponderous, with huge flippers they moved like wings, flapping steadily, occasionally angling to negotiate corners.

I loved what our guide said about the Islamic minority in Madagascar. "We are not fundamentalist. Fundamentalists drink no alcohol. But we say, drink alcohol, but try not to get drunk. Islamic law says not to eat fruit bats and crabs. But we like crabmeat, so we just skip the fruit bats. Fundamentalists say a woman should cover her hair, but we say a woman doesn't need to do that unless she is chilly."

After lunch, we walked to the park where people feed the black lemurs, who leap out of the trees and sit on your shoulder if you are holding a banana. There were mother

lemurs with babies tucked under their bellies, and the sensual delight of intimacy with these half-wild animals was immeasurable. In the late afternoon, the air and water in Nosy Komba were the ideal temperature, the breeze was heaven, there were no bugs, and all I wanted was to figure out a way to stay a year, sitting on my bungalow's terrace looking at another little island in the middle distance and the big shadow forms of the Madagascar coast beyond, as little dugout pirogues sailed by under square or triangular sails, and a few sail-less ones just being rowed, and not another soul in sight in any direction, and the air smelling like the sea and like flowers.

We next went to Anjajavy L'Hôtel. In the 1990's, the owner told his Parisian travel agent that he wanted to visit Madagascar, and the agent said there were no hotels up to his standards, so he flew up the coast along the Mozambique Channel until he found the perfect spot, and built a fabulous luxury establishment, the only one of its kind in this country—air-conditioning, wireless Internet access, a gorgeous pool, rosewood villas scattered along the seaside. You get there on the hotel's private plane; our flight was an exquisite hour. The hotel has declared its own time zone, an hour ahead of the rest of Madagascar, an individual daylight-saving-time package. The owner is French and the management South African, so everything is stylish and everyone speaks English. The place sits on 1,100 parkland acres. There are motorboats for waterskiing and deep-sea fishing and private expeditions. Afternoon tea is served on a grassy knoll where several species of lemur scope out the tourists, including Coquerel's sifakas, graceful lemurs with brown and white fur. There are also amazing birds who come for the crumbs.

We chartered a boat to see sunrise birds in Moromba Bay, a smooth body of water full of little round islands, like a flotilla of pillbox hats, many of them eroded from beneath so that they taper in above the water. There was nothing man-made along the ensuing coast for 20 miles except occasional fishing villages built of wood and reeds on the sand. We stopped at a sacred baobab, about 1,600 years old, the scale more of a small apartment building than of a tree. Nearby was another—one of the six kinds of endemic Malagasy baobabs—wide at the bottom, with a straight trunk, and then crazy branches at the top, so that it looks like an Indian goddess with a splayed skirt and dozens of arms gyrating madly. There were mangroves along the water's edge in some places, and "sea salad," which we ate by the succulent, salty handful. We stopped at one isolated beach and swam; at another a picnic had been set up for us in a palm-leaf hut. *(Continued on page 172)*

GUIDE TO **MADAGASCAR**

WHEN TO GO
Daytime temperatures range from the low 50's to the mid 80's throughout the year; avoid the rainy season, which lasts from January through March.

HOW TO GET THERE
Air France has connecting flights via Paris. T+L recommends hiring a guide service (see below) to arrange land travel.

VISAS
Visas are required; contact the Madagascar Embassy. *202/265-5525.*

TOUR OPERATOR
Explore, Inc. *888/596-6377; exploreafrica.net; two-week tours from $5,000 per person.*

WHERE TO STAY AND EAT
Anjajavy L'Hôtel Located in the heart of the Menabe Sakalava territory, 90 miles north of Majunga. *33-1/44-69-15-00 (Paris reservations office); anjajavy.com; doubles for three nights from $1,661, including private plane transfer.*

Le Domaine de Fontenay *202 Antsiranana, Joffreville; 261-33/113-4581; lefontenay-madagascar.com; doubles from $238.*


Anjajavy L'Hôtel.

GREAT VALUE **Relais de la Reine** *Ranohira, Isalo; 261-20/223-3623; doubles from $100.*

Tsara Komba *Southern Nosy Komba; 261-33/148-2320; tsara komba.com; doubles from $238.*

GREAT VALUE **Vakôna Forest Lodge** Panoramic views. *Near Andasibe; 261-20/222-1394; hotel-vakona.com; doubles from $154.*

NATIONAL PARKS
Exact directions to national parks are best provided by tourism offices in Madagascar. English-speaking guide services are available in all parks, and strongly recommended for first-time visitors.

Analamazaotra Special Reserve Near Andasibe

Isalo National Park Near the village of Ranohira.

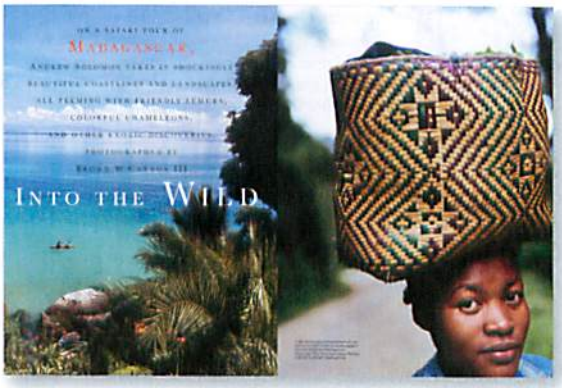
Mantadia National Park Near Andasibe.

Montagne d'Ambre National Park Southwest of Joffreville.

Ranomafana National Park Outside Ambodiamontana, a town west of Ranomafana.

ENVIRONMENTAL FOUNDATION
Tany Meva A national, community-based nonprofit that works to protect Madagascar's wilderness. *tanymeva.org.mg.*

SLIDE SHOW
For more of Brown W Cannon III's Madagascar photographs, go to travelandleisure.com.



(Continued from page 128)

Back at the hotel, a troop of sifakas were in the trees right outside our villa, and we took a thousand photos of them; then we had massages on our terrace while the sun set.

We next headed to Andasibe. The colors of the green, green rice paddies and the red, red earth were like a child's drawing in crayon. We strode into the Analamazaotra Special Reserve to see the three-foot-tall indri, the largest living species of lemur (fossils show extinct, gorilla-size giant lemurs). Our very energetic guide took us deep into the forest, and then we heard our first indris, like humpback whales crossed with air-raid sirens, a strange, high waffling tone that seems inconceivable coming from a land mammal, much less a primate. You have to know how to follow the sounds: though they can be heard for two miles, the way the sound echoes means amateurs can't tell how near or far they are. We went running through thick undergrowth, and just as I was losing hope we found ourselves right beneath them. Their ululations were deafening, these great huge things with inquisitive black furry faces, sitting up in the trees and eating leaves, then leaping, with unlikely grace, to other trees when they'd finished.

The next day, we got up early and headed off to the Mantadia National Park, quickly climbing up a mountain and down and up and down, and we were all feeling a little abused when we hadn't found anything after two hours. Then we came upon a great troop of diademed sifakas, athletic and whimsical. We saw tree ferns and an endemic bamboo that grows as a huge arch, kind of like an outsize croquet wicket. We made our way out of the forest and onto a magical road covered with graphite dust from the nearby mine. It looked silver in the bright sunlight, right out of *The Wizard of Oz*, and if you touched it, your finger looked like you'd swiped a tray of eye shadow.

Then we went to an island reserve where the lemurs are completely habituated to humans. We saw common brown lemurs, who jumped onto our shoulders and sat on our heads and made us laugh and laugh; and black-and-white ruffed lemurs; and another diademed sifaka, the sweetest creature imaginable. While the brown lemurs pushed and grabbed and gulped, the sifaka looked with its head on one side, and if you held up a piece of banana, would reach out his hand, lift it carefully, and then eat it in several bites. He had the most beautiful fur, bright orange and white and incredibly soft. When he wanted to leap, you realized how strong he was, but he had an air of impossible gentleness about him, as though he were very shy but did want to be friendly. The brown lemurs stayed for an hour, but the sifaka seemed to say at a certain point that he had taken enough of our time, and swung off into the bush.

On the way back to Tana, we stopped at a reptile park, where I was particularly taken with the large, blushing tomato frog.

FOR OUR FINAL WEEK, we headed to the wilds of southern Madagascar. We flew to Tuléar, where a minivan full of food waited for us with a guide. We drove out on a lovely paved road for an hour, then headed into the deep countryside. I had assumed we were in a four-wheel-drive vehicle, but we weren't. Further, it turned out that the driver had never been to Beza-Mahafaly before, so he had little sense of what was involved in getting there. Because our luggage was on the roof, we had a high center of gravity, but our low undercarriage prevented easy passage on a road with patches of huge rocks, potholes, »

washed-out areas, and stretches of powdery sand, like a dry riverbed. We had a live chicken (dinner) in the vehicle, who kept squawking. We had to keep the windows open or suffocate, but the vehicle kicked up dust that caked our faces and hair at once. We reached the last real town at about 5:30 p.m., and when we pulled into a gas station, the attendant mentioned that someone needed a ride and could we take an extra passenger? The someone turned out, thrillingly, to be Andry, the manager of the camp to which we were headed. Before long, the vehicle began to sink in the sand, and so we all got out and pushed and heaved and we got past that and about three minutes later we sank again. It took us almost three more hours, and the final part of the trip was by moonlight.

When we reached the camp, I was ready to kiss the ground. Dinner was whipped up by two quiet women bent over a big fire, and then we went to our tents and collapsed.

At seven o'clock sharp the next morning, a troop of ring-tailed lemurs showed up in camp. There must have been 30 of them, including some mothers with young tucked up under their bellies, and though they were treated by the camp staff as familiar nuisances, for us it was completely hilarious, and I didn't mind the fact that they snatched and ate my breakfast of bananas with condensed milk. We were enchanted, and they seemed happy enough to preen in our enchantedness and strike comic poses. They were rascals and bandits, raccoon-like personalities, and they jumped endlessly, sometimes onto the table where we were eating, and then went climbing in and out of the plastic buckets at the well and rushing after scraps near where the cooking ladies were still at work (had they been tending that fire all night?) and swinging in and out of trees.

We found one Verreaux's sifaka, who was enjoying the sun atop a tamarind tree at the camp entrance, gazing down on all this as though it were as strange to him as to us, and perhaps slightly embarrassing.

The reserve at Beza-Mahafaly is divided into two sections. Parcel 1 is "gallery forest," dry and oriented toward a

river that runs in the rainy season, and Parcel 2 is "spiny forest," parched and desert-like. It was Alison Richard who had sent us here, where she has been monitoring lemur populations for three decades. The team documents the location and situation of every ring-tailed lemur and sifaka in Parcel 1 with monthly census data and charts of troop movements. It was great to understand the science after weeks of safari voyeurism.

THE LEMURS WERE RASCALS AND BANDITS, RACCOON-LIKE PERSONALITIES, AND THEY JUMPED ENDLESSLY, SOMETIMES ONTO THE TABLE WHERE WE WERE EATING

After we finished what we could salvage of breakfast, we set off through Parcel 1 with Jacky, the chief of research for Beza. We soon found ring-tailed lemurs in the trees and tried to capture their leaps on film, two dozen photos in which a moving foot occupies the top of the frame, the rest of the animal having bounced entirely out of the picture. A bit farther on, we found a family of sifakas, and really I could spend my life watching sifakas, as elegant as Audrey Hepburn. They cast their tender glances our way and struck dancerish poses in the trees, and their manner was somehow polite, as though they were touched and surprised by our kind attention; in fact, they were so courteous I thought they might send thank-you notes after our visit. We finally tore ourselves away and walked toward the riverbed, finding several nocturnal sportive lemurs asleep, though one woke up when we took its picture. We also saw reptiles and birds. There was intimate magic to it: the lemurs were neither tame, as at Nosy Komba—really a private zoo—nor so wild that they remained obscurely far away.

After lunch we set off for a village funeral in Mahazoarivo. Among the peoples of southern Madagascar, a funeral is a great send-off, an expensive affair that lasts several days and involves the consumption of many zebu (oxen) and much alcohol. The family has to save up enough money for it, so the dead are embalmed and put in mortuary huts built just for them. One of my travel companions relayed information from Jacky that corpses were once preserved in chunks of cheese, which masked and contained the odor of putrefaction. A further conversation with Jacky revealed that they were actually preserved in "trunks of trees" (he had a bit of an accent): encased in a hollowed-out log. The funeral that day in Mahazoarivo was for two people who had both been dead about a year; at its end, the deceased would be removed to tombs in the hills, and their mortuary huts burned.

There is feasting for the whole village, and the men carry spears or guns, and the women wear their brightest colors. These are also nights of love; any girl who gets pregnant during the funeral process is thought to have good luck, and her husband can never ask her who the father is, but must take the infant as his own child. Unmarried girls try to get pregnant so they can demonstrate their fertility, which improves their chances of subsequent marriage. The village owns a generator for these occasions, and the village musicians hook up to scratchy amplification and play funky traditional-ish music. Whoever feels like dancing just gathers in front of them and dances. The big zebu carts stop all around the village. The family of the deceased sit outside their house and receive visitors, giving presents to everyone (we got a bottle of lemon soda). The men shoot homemade blank cartridges whenever anyone arrives, which is about once every five minutes. Newcomers parade up the center of the village; it's all extremely dramatic. The music was good and the people were beautiful and there was much pleasure all around. We were greeted as dignitaries, for being foreigners and for having come with Jacky and Andry; we had a hundred best friends and a wake of children wherever we went. I felt like a talisman of good luck.

Then we went to Parcel 2, the spiny forest. One endemic tree has no leaves and photosynthesizes through chlorophyll in its bark, which is always peeling like a bad sunburn; octopus trees are strange thorn-covered things »

with multiple branches twisted up in the air; and euphorbias have geometric green branches that describe complex cubelike spaces and look like models of the crystal structure of phosphorus. We got the rare sight of a sifaka dancing across the road; they walk on their hind legs with a sideways leap when on open ground. Then we watched a family of them in the spiny trees, and it was that gorgeous hyper-golden light that occurs in the late afternoon in Madagascar, and it lit up the sifakas so that they seemed to be furry angels glowing with their own private radiance.

We returned to camp just as a researcher arrived in a four-wheel-drive vehicle, and we negotiated with the driver to take us out the next day. That morning we zipped along and got to Isalo in time for a late lunch. The hotel there, Relais de la Reine, is owned by a Frenchman, who built into the stone landscape so that you can only half tell there are buildings there; the food was excellent, and the room fresh and attractive and a lovely change from the tents at Beza. Isalo is famous for a landscape reminiscent of the mesas of the American Southwest. Great canyons give way to steep stone mountains full of caves, in which the locals bury their dead. Though the landscape is mostly dry and barren, there are occasional rice fields clinging to the moisture of stream banks. The most famous endemic plants are the "elephant's foot," a pachypodium that is short and bulbous with a yellow flower, and the pink Madagascar periwinkle.

The next day we rose early so we could ride—the hotel had beautiful horses—and trotted across plains and saw shapes in the huge stones that dot the landscape: a king, a lion, a woolly lemur. Then we trekked to the *piscine naturelle*. You slog across barren stretches and climb through rocky formations and then suddenly you descend into a crevasse and there it is, the fantasy of some brilliant landscaper from the sky, too exquisite to be believed: a lush plenty of swaying palm trees and thick vegetation, and at its center an impossibly pretty waterfall dropping into a deep, clear pool with a sandy bottom. We rolled up our trousers and bathed our tired feet in the cool water. Only a few times have I seen something so completely pleasing to the eye.

We then drove on to Ranomafana, the most popular rain forest park, where we hit a day of sunshine. The park is extremely mountainous, so you spend the whole time climbing up and down muddy trails, but it's well worth it if you are a lemur enthusiast. In one day, we saw red-fronted brown lemurs, red-bellied lemurs, Milne-Edwards sifakas, a brown mouse lemur, and a troop of greater bamboo lemurs, as well as a ring-tailed mongoose and a civet. We got very muddy, and my legs and back ached, but the density of species was beyond any we'd seen yet, as though this were the prosperous end of the ecosystem—the animals' preferred foods are all in ready supply in this moist domain.

After two nights in Ranomafana, we drove through sublime countryside, a sort of protracted stay in a postcard, and stopped at Ambositra, famous for its woodcarvers. Back in Tana, we attended a glamorous dinner party and ate amazing food under a Winterhalter portrait of Napoleon III. The linens had been embroidered to match our host's Empire Limoges porcelain, and we met an Englishman who has revived the Malagasy textile tradition and has sold a piece to the Metropolitan Museum; a Malagasy woman who has worked for the UN all over the world; an Australian conservationist; and a few industrial magnates. I thought of Alison Richard and Russ Mittermeier, returning so often against steep odds, and asked one of the guests whether he had chosen to stay in Madagascar for the business opportunities. He spread wide his hands and said, "At home, I thanked God for things all the time. Here I have learned to thank God for each day itself." His eyes twinkled. "This time, you have fallen in love with the lemurs and the landscape. This is the first step. Every time you return, this island will shed another veil in its dance of seduction. Once you fall in love, you cannot bear to think of leaving. You see—and I have traveled—everything here tells you: this is the kindest place in the world." ✚

Andrew Solomon is a T+L contributing editor.