

2001 MAURITIUS, MADAGASCAR, LA REUNION

Wednesday, May 16, 2001. Met Betty Baxter at the Atlanta Airport and at 10:30 AM we left on South African Airways for Johannesburg. My seatmate, a youngish man from Detroit, announced that he is on his way to South Africa to hunt for big game. I was instantly repelled even after he explained that a lot of private parks are being created and the animals bred just so people like him can go and shoot game! I decided we had little in common and decided to stay off the subjects of politics and religion as well!

Thursday, May 17. We have been taking some "No Jet Lag" pills every 2-3 hours, an herbal medication, and hope it works. It's a 15-hour flight to Johannesburg and I slept in fits and starts. Betty is back in economy and says she never slept at all. The plane arrived in Johannesburg about a half hour late and we literally walked off one plane and onto the four-hour flight for Mauritius. The plane had two classes, business and economy. I'm glad I didn't waste my money on business since the seats were the same three on each side of the aisle in both sections. The difference being that no one got a middle seat in business. We didn't have anyone in our middle seat anyway. Our section was quite lively with the South African Judo team on their way to Mauritius to meet the Japanese team. Mauritius time is nine hours ahead of Atlanta. I took my last No Jet Lag pill, although so far see no effect. It was no surprise to find the baggage hadn't made the connection, so we boarded the shuttle bus to the Villas Caroline unburdened. Mauritius drives on the left, which always takes a little getting used to.

MAURITIUS

Mauritius or Ile Maurice is a tropical island republic, 1250 miles off the coast of Africa in the South Indian Ocean. It was first settled in the late 1500's by the Dutch and was under French and then English domination before getting its independence in 1968. Sixty-eight percent of the population is Indian and there are African and Creole as well. 3% is oriental, primarily Chinese. 51% of the country is Hindu and 25% is Muslim, their ancestors having been brought to Mauritius to work on the English sugar plantations. It is a popular destination for Europeans, and particularly for honeymooners, since Europe isn't blessed with the Caribbean as we are for a winter getaway. Americans don't come in many numbers because of its distance from the United States, and I suspect many Americans have never even heard of it.

We drove for a half an hour across the island through acres and acres of sugar cane, which were as high as the bus windows. In the distance we could see jagged mountains, all extinct volcanoes, the origin of the lush earth. At Port Louis, the capitol, we turned south to Flic-en-Flac a small community where our hotel is located. The Villas Caroline is a series of motel style rooms each with a secluded balcony and a view of the ocean. The reception and dining room is all open-air overlooking a white sandy beach, a reef and the ocean beyond. Since we had no luggage we made a hasty stop at the hotel boutique and I bought a lovely long t-shirt to sleep in with Le Dodo on it, the symbol of Mauritius. I also purchased a pair of shorts, a t-shirt, and some sunscreen lotion. Betty also bought some shorts and a t-shirt. You can imagine how it feels to be wearing the same clothes for 24 hours and have nothing to change into. For dinner the hotel had a buffet, which we washed down with a lovely bottle of Pinot Gris, fighting sleep, and came back to the room to wash out our underwear and fall into bed by 9:00 PM.

Friday, May 18. Slept soundly and woke up at 6:30 feeling great so I think the pills really worked. The jury is still out for Betty. Air Mauritius, which is handling our arrangements here, had set us up for a tour of the southern part of the island. Mauri Tours picked us up at 8:30 and took us to a central meeting place for all the tourists from the different hotels. Here we were separated by language groups. Our group consists of two English couples, one on their honeymoon. It is clouding over and starting to rain and I yearn for my sweater and umbrella (which is in Johannesburg) but at least everything I have on is wash and wear. Our first stop is a 40-minute stop to shop! It's in Curepipe (pronounced something like Cupip). We looked at the jewelry, which I thought rather heavy styles and expensive, and took a cursory glance at the Ralph Lauren store before going back to sit on the bus and read my book. Our second stop was a Kashmir rug store where we were given the usual high-pressure sales job. Then it was on to a wooden boat model factory, which is unique to Mauritius. They were

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making copies of everything from America's cup yachts to boats that looked like pirate's corsairs. Then it was on to Floreal where there was more shopping. I didn't even get off the bus, but Betty found a small dodo to take back to Gene. I had no idea we were signed on for a shopping trip. At last the sight seeing began and the rain started coming down harder than ever. Trou-en-Cerfs is a lovely round extinct volcano crater with greenery all the way down to the bottom. We had seen it from the air when we arrived where it was even more impressive because you could see its perfectly round shape.

Then it was on to Grand Bassin and the Ganga Talad temple, a small temple overlooking the sacred lake of the Hindus. To Mauritius' huge Hindu population, the lake represents the Ganges. Once a year in February or March they make pilgrimages to pay homage to Shiva whose large statue is on the shore. Even today, and even though it was raining, there were people bathing in the lake. Then we drove up on the Black River highlands where the scenery became more and more wild and there were views of other mountains in the mist. The Black River Gorge was impressive with a waterfall cascading off the cliff. A bird sanctuary was pointed out but there was nothing we could see.

We finally came to the Varangue Sur Merne Restaurant, an open-air restaurant with lovely views down to the ocean. Had a nice lunch of fish bisque and lightly spiced chicken and vegetables with ice cream, before setting out to see another waterfall. Then it was on to Chamarel, the Earths of the Seven Colors, which was up an imposing hill. I was glad to plead I didn't do hills. Betty and I waited in the bus in the rain but the others reported that there were a series of mounds, pushed up by volcanic vapors, which were in the seven colors of the rainbow.

Finally it was back to a rendezvous point where we were again sorted and taken back to our hotels. The tour was somewhat of a bummer, not just the shopping and the rain, but our guide was also not the best in the world, leaving us to our own devices much of the time. I certainly hope tomorrow's trip is better.

Betty called the airline and with profuse apologies they said our bags would be here within the hour. At 7:00 the porter carried them into our room and we were like kids on Christmas morning pulling out clean clothes with joy. A shower and clean clothes later I really knew I had arrived in Mauritius, time zone and all. We went to dinner and found an elegant wedding reception taking place around the pool, with a ravishing bride, pretty bridesmaids and so forth. It was lovely to watch it all as we ate our buffet dinner.

Saturday, May 19. Awoke to a beautiful day and we are told it will be that way all day long. Nevertheless I packed a large bag of raincoats, umbrellas, jackets and so forth and we used not a one. A courier picked us up in a new Mercedes and since we had heard that car imports are taxed 200% I felt like it was a coach of gold! We drove north about a half hour to the Domaine les Pailles to spend the day. This is huge area, an estate developed by a prime minister of the country and occupied by his descendants until two years ago, when all but the game park was taken over by the state to run as a recreational park.

We were greeted by dancing girls and then put on a miniature train for a ten minute or so ride around the center of the park. There is an equestrian park and they are building a racetrack. We saw playgrounds, pools, casino and so forth.

Then we were put into a Land Rover and started off on a two-hour ride on a rough stony road up a nearby mountain. The driver stopped frequently to point out to us the great variety of things that grow here. Eucalyptus were brought here to control the water and hence the mosquitoes. Malaria has been now stamped out but the trees remain with no practical use except to be used as scaffolding. Bees also make a eucalyptus honey, which is used in cough remedies. We saw pepper, tamarind, and coffee trees and many huge aloes. There was a rare 350 year-old ebony tree, for the Dutch cut almost all the ebony trees years ago and exported them. It takes 1000 years to produce furniture quality ebony. There were termite mounds in some of the trees, which the deer eat as a delicacy. The only wildlife was a flock of weaverbirds and some partridge. Much of the mountain is a deer park and there are stands where the hunters can stand and gates to separate the various ages of deer. There is also a restaurant for hikers and horseback riders. At the top of the mountain we found wild strawberries, which were so much sweeter and nicer than the ones we have at home, and also a great view.

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And then we started down and the driver really opened up the car giving us a vigorous four-wheel drive massage as the car rock and rolled down the rocky road. Then we were put in carriages to drive a few hundred yards to see the historical part of the complex.

Here they have tried to create what life was like in a colonial town. First stop a sugar mill where a huge bullock walked in endless circles pressing the juice from the sugar cane. It ran down into a series of vats until it was turned to molasses. After the molasses is dried out it becomes brown sugar, which can be bleached to make white sugar. Next-door was the distillery where they made a potent rum. There was an herb garden, and several restaurants and a banquet hall housed in colonial style buildings.

Our lunch was reserved in the Clos Saint Louis and they served us fish salad followed by chicken vindaloo. After lunch we went to the Eureka House, which was built in 1836 by a Mr. Carr whose descendants lived here until 1980. Jacques de Maroussen has bought it and is trying to restore it. He has a long way to go. But the house is very interesting for it has no halls. All the rooms interconnect with 109 doors and the outside galleries are used for hallways to get around. The docent who showed us through went to great pains to tell us what each piece of period furniture was made of. Mr. & Mrs. Carr had 17 children, who slept in a loft, now occupied by a Kashmir rug merchant but fortunately he is not as persistent as the one yesterday.

Back to the Villas Caroline to have a last dinner and to pack. Mauritius is a great place for a honeymoon or a family vacation on the beach but we really weren't there long enough to know if there was anything else to see.

MADAGASCAR

Sunday, May 20, 2001. Left Mauritius on a Mauritius Airways flight to Madagascar, and we were so impressed. The comfortable seats in coach had footrests and television monitors! Lunch was Russian eggs followed by guinea hen. Just delicious. Three hours later we arrived at Antananarivo (more popularly called "Tana") the capitol of Madagascar.

I had a mild attack of diverticulosis on the plane and was the last off so we ended up the end of a long slow line at immigration, even though we already had our visas. They kept bringing people up from behind and putting them at the front of the line. I finally told the guard I had to sit down and he found a white uniformed man who took our passports and had them processed. I don't know why we were in such a hurry. The bags didn't get off the plane until sometime later and then there was a stampede as everyone tried to get their trolleys through the bag check at once. What a hassle. We were glad to finally meet Journeys International's representative for the ride into the center of Tana.

Madagascar lies like a giant footprint about 300 miles off the Mozambique Coast. It is the fourth largest island in the world. The primary languages are Malagasy and French. Hardly anyone speaks English so my high school French will get a workout. The time is seven hours ahead of Atlanta. The Malagasy people are divided into 18 tribes whose boundaries are based on ancient kingdoms. Ethnically they are Indonesian, African and Arab. The Portuguese were the first Europeans to come in 1500, but neither they, nor the Dutch and British who followed, really established themselves. Pirates also frequented the island. In 1896 the French came into power here. They established repressive taxes and foreign companies were allowed to expropriate the land for coffee plantations. In 1947 there was a major rebellion against the French, the bloodiest battle in Malagasy history. But it wasn't until 1960 when Madagascar achieved independence although it still was within the French community of overseas nations. The economy failed and for the first time Madagascar had to import rice. By 1972 they finally broke off all ties with France but the economic decline continued. There was civil unrest in the early nineties. Now the Malagasy are working on their third republic, each as corrupt as the one before.

It is such a contrast to Mauritius. The drive from the airport into Tana took us through a poor section with small shops lining the highway selling everything from sundries to foodstuff. There were ladies drying their laundry on the ground, rice paddies, ox carts pulled by the Zebu cattle so important to the Malagasy people, and many people were out walking this Sunday, many bare footed. The ladies often walked with bundles balanced on top of their heads.

Since we are at a fairly high altitude the temperature is in the high sixties and the skies are overcast. Tana is on a top of a small mountain and the Tana Plaza Hotel is in the center of town

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right across from the old Railway station. Our room is small but has all the essentials and we rested awhile until the rep from Journeys came with some bad news. Our extension is going to have to be revised or we have to give up a day in La Reunion. Apparently the air schedules have changed so we can't connect out to La Reunion. But the real problem is that there has been a big misunderstanding about our extension at the end of the tour. Betty is interested in the mineralogy of the country and hopes to be able to buy some rocks to take home where she will make them into jewelry. The mining area we had requested we now find would not be possible since most of the mines are private and will not accept visitors. Journeys decided we meant geology and they were going to take us to a geological park in the south that had lots of hiking through canyons and so on. Canyons are not our thing at all! We decided to sleep on it and make a decision tomorrow.

We went out for a walk. Since it is Sunday all the shops are closed but a bazaar is going on in front of the station with people selling used clothing. The station looks like your typical 100-year old station with a decorative row of tile below the roof. There are only a few trains a week. Our first impression is that Tana is a dirty city, with trash on the streets. We walked through a residential area and finally found a small park with a lake and rose garden. Some men were having a spirited game of petanque, a form of lawn bowling. They were really taking the game seriously as not one but several would go out with tapes to measure the distance from the target, no one trusting the other. The adjoining small rose garden was the only bright spot of a dreary city. It started to rain and we went back toward the hotel and walked a short distance on the central square. We found a man trying to sell a local stringed musical instrument and some beggars and went back to the hotel. That night was a lovely surprise to find a full service restaurant with white tablecloths and fresh flowers on the table.

Monday, May 21. Our escort Lalatiana Rakotoarimanana "Tiana" met us and we tell him that we wish to go to La Reunion as planned and during the two or three days extension, we would like to see the countryside around Tana and look for mineral samples. He assures us he can arrange it. We fought our way through some beggars to get into the car and at last were off to the airport and the flight to Fort Dauphin with a stop at Tulear on Air Madagascar. Two hours later we stepped off into tropical heat and sunshine and it cheered us up a lot. We have a driver Jean, and a guide Mbola, who turns out to be very knowledgeable. Since Tiana also seems to know a lot we feel well taken care of. Tiana took us to the Miramar restaurant, which as the name implies hangs above the ocean, and we had a delicious lunch of shrimp.

It is a 2 1/2 hour drive to Berenty National Park but it takes us an hour longer as Mbola stops frequently to point things out, such as the Madagascar Nepenthe pitcher plant, a young varicosis chameleon, and a fruit stand. As we drive the vegetation changes, for the south of Madagascar is very dry, some of it desert. Since the road is badly potholed, it is good to get out of the car periodically. It is also quite hot with the sun beating down on us. Mbola told us about the zebu cattle, which are very important to the natives. When a man comes of age he gets a zebu. Many people do not eat the zebu except at ceremonial times such as at funerals and weddings. When a man marries it costs him two zebus, one for the bride's parents and one for the wedding feast. In one tribe in the south it is customary to go out and poach the zebu but Mbola says he doesn't consider himself a poacher and would not marry a girl from that tribe! Wealthy people might have more than one zebu, as the zebu is also a status symbol. We are shown big elephant ear plants, part of which can be eaten, and the triangle palm where the fronds spread in three directions. The tall skinny Alluaudia Procera is interesting. It looks like a spiny bamboo, sometimes 20 or 30 feet high with skinny branches, which also reach up to the sky, and it is used to build houses. Its wood does not burn well. We stopped at a souvenir stand and I bought a wooden chameleon, for which I have no use, but it is important that we support the local economy and the people will realize there is money to be made in eco-tourism and stop trying to destroy the lemur's habitat. And Betty found her first rock! It was a piece of petrified wood.

Then we drove through acres and acres of sisal plantation until we reached Berenty (which means many eels). It is a private Preserve. We were greeted at the entrance by a troop of ring-tailed lemurs, beguiling creatures with distinctive striped tails. We did not know at the time we would see them everywhere and be awakened in the middle of the night by their screaming. Most Lemurs live in troops of 25 or 30 and it is a matriarchal society.

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Our cabin is lovely having all the essentials, even mosquito netting draped like a canopy over the bunks. We have electricity until 10:00 PM and it is recommended we take our shower before we go to bed since there may not be hot water first thing in the morning. We took an hour's nap to recover from the exhausting journey and then met Tiana to walk to the restaurant where dinner was an enormous cold boiled crab with claws the size of a Maine lobster. This was followed by zebu steak (which is quite tender) and desert was bananas flamed in brandy. Bananas flambé is a popular Malagasy dish. All washed down with a bottle of the local wine. It is hard to believe we are in the jungle. Tiana walked us back to the cabin afterwards and I found myself asleep under my mosquito net long before 10:00 PM. During the night I realized that not to bring a flashlight was a big mistake but after the third try stumbling around to find the bathroom I finally figured it out in the pitch darkness. Our windows are tightly shuttered to further discourage the mosquitoes.

Tuesday, May 22. Woke at dawn and went down to the cafeteria for a continental breakfast and enjoyed watching a lemur casing the place in case someone dropped a morsel. Lemurs are prosimians, a sub order of primates, and most of the lemurs in the world are unique to Madagascar. There are over thirty varieties. We are asked not to feed them, of course, for it makes them aggressive and the diet might make them sick.

The weather is pleasant and cool. We met our two guides for a walk through the preserve, without a doubt the easiest nature walk I have ever taken. The thick gallery forest borders the Mandrere River. At the start was our first sight of the Sifaka lemur, a strange white animal that walks with a series of sideways jumps. He is not as sociable as the ringtails but we managed to see quite a number of this curious lemur. The walk was along a level road through the forest of tamarind, mimosa and baobab trees. Lemurs greeted us at every turn of the road and since they have no fear of us we saw them up close. Most were the ringtail but we saw a number of Sifaka and several troops of brown lemurs. The Preserve supplies them with watering places because Lemurs don't swim and are afraid to go to the river to drink. However they don't feed them. We found one sportive lemur asleep in a tree. He is a nocturnal animal, who finds a solitary place to sleep joining his troop only at night. The men found birds for us to see and at one guard post they showed us a chamaeleo chameleon much larger than the one we had seen yesterday. The forest is guarded so that poachers won't come in and steal the trees. Madagascar's forests are being destroyed at an alarming rate as the natives not only need the wood for fuel and building but also to clear the land for planting. The tragedy is that after they have slashed and burned, the land becomes fallow again after only a couple of years, since they do not know how to maintain its fertility, and meanwhile the lemur's habitat is destroyed.

In one area, in a sort of zoo, they were preserving rare common ground tortoises and the Radiated tortoises, which are breeding here. There were two tanks with the Nile Crocodile, and signs warning you not to stick your finger through the wire since they are "fast and dangerous".

Our last stop was to see a large colony of fruit bats. Occasionally one would break off from the tree and fly, showing off his lovely pale brown translucent wings. In all it was a delightful morning and we came back to the cabin to rest before lunch.

Lunch was a delicious grapefruit and seafood salad and it would have satisfied me to just have that but it was followed by pork and rice.

After lunch they took us off the Preserve to show us an ostrich farm and the sisal factory. There was also a small museum, which showed the traditional way of life. A windowless one-room hut is on display, made of boards fitted together, not nailed. Inside the family slept on mats, and even did their cooking. A quick look around shows that many of the Malagasy still live this way.

We went on an evening walk through the thorny part of the forest to find the two resident varieties of night lemurs. The men did find several of the sporting lemurs and even the mouse lemur, which is about the size of a rat. None of the lemurs thought much of the flashlights shining in their eyes. We also found a large chameleon, but basically the trip was a disappointment after stumbling around in the dark. This was followed by another delicious but too large dinner.

Wednesday, May 24. Woke early to a misty world for it rained during the night. We had an early morning walk to the river but saw very little as every self-respecting lemur doesn't like to be cold and was still snug in his bed, and the birds hadn't woken up either. Two Sifaka lemurs were

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spotted in the fork of a tree nestled up against each other, their tails wrapped around themselves like they were tied up in a package. Two women in their lambdas came by on their way to the river to get water. Mbolu tells us they have walked four kilometers from their village and will probably do it again during the day, as they cannot carry a lot of water in the buckets on their heads. For a little baksheesh they posed while Betty snapped a picture. Apparently they often meet tourists early in the morning and so it is a profitable business!

We drove back to Fort Dauphin, passed the picturesque shipwrecks on the beach, to the Le Dauphin Hotel where we said goodbye to Jean and Mbola and after lunch caught the plane back to Tana. At the Plaza Hotel we have a room on the back, which is much quieter, and a large veranda toward the street. We enjoyed dinner in the a la carte restaurant before turning in.

Thursday, May 24. On the way back to the airport we stopped at a very modern and complete super market so I could buy a flashlight. Then we flew to Nosy Be in the northern part of the country. Nosy Be means big island. It is 40 kilometers long and has a population of 60,000. It is ninety-one degrees and very humid when we arrive and then we have a half hour or more drive in an un-airconditioned bus to get to the Vanilla Hotel. This is an attractive 23-room oasis built by a Frenchman two years ago. Open air reception, dining room and bar overlooking a lovely pool, which like the one in Mauritius seems to have no far side as the water goes off like a small waterfall to be recirculated. Through the palm trees we can see the water. Michaela, a pretty girl from the home office, who is here on vacation, has joined us.

After a brief rest we have our afternoon excursion to see the sunset at Mont Passot, the island's highest spot. Tiana is so knowledgeable and points out the various trees, like the Ylang Ylang or perfume tree, which has a lovely fragrance. The flowers are sent to France to be made into perfume. The Teck tree, which if you pick the young leaves and crush them turns to red and "can be used to paint your floors". We passed a crater lake, one of seven thought to be sacred. This one has crocodiles thought to be the ancestors. Other than the fact we are besieged with children trying to sell us vanilla or oil of the Ylang Ylang, we had an uneventful ride to the summit, where there was a panoramic view. Here the lovely embroidered tablecloths, which we see everywhere, are hung on display but the adults are not aggressive about selling them, thank goodness.

Back at the hotel I had a massage. She rubbed me all over (except the neck and face) with Ylang Ylang essence and did the whole thing in perhaps 20 minutes. It felt great. However she did not believe in even a token covering and I was embarrassed and will not have another. It cost about \$6.

Friday, May 25. African Unity Day and a National holiday. Our excursion took us first to Hell Port the port town where some yachts find harborage and the overcrowded ferries take the locals to and from the mainland with their parcels, zebu cattle and cars. Tiana says this is an accident waiting to happen and I concur with him. The port bustled with activity and we were loaded onto a twin outboard-motored catamaran with about 20 other people. As we got into the Bay we found it to be very beautiful with volcanic formed islands all around and dotted with the occasional small pirogues (a small square-sailed vessel) carrying freight. One was loaded with bananas. The only other vessels seemed to be the lateen rigged, narrow out boarder canoes made from dugout trees. Some were so narrow you wondered how a man could sit in them. Not a breath of air was stirring so there were lovely cloud reflections and porpoises came to play alongside.

After about an hour we came to Nosy Kornba, the island of lemurs. We walked through the village; the street lined with embroidered tablecloths, and came to a tree full of black lemurs (the females are brown). It was interesting to see them, but this troop was so domesticated it was almost like seeing them in a zoo. We held out bananas and sometimes they would come down on your shoulder to snatch the fruit. Sometimes they were so quick they could lean out from the tree and grab it without even touching you.

Back on the boat, we continued to Nosy Tanikely, the small island, for our day of swimming and snorkeling. The reef was one of the most beautiful I have ever snorkeled over, with many different coral formations. It was a pleasure to see it all alive and uncontaminated unlike so many of the other reefs in the world. There were many fish as well. We were served a lovely

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barbecue lunch on the beach: fish cooked in banana leaves, skewered prawns and zebu meat, huge crabs, with saffron rice, carrot and cabbage salad and fruit for desert.

After lunch there was time for another swim. We found a huge school of a medium size white fish, more than a hundred, but after that we got into the oncoming tide and I found the current too much and had to quit. It was a memorable day, but I was very tired from all the heat and fell asleep right after washing my hair and could not stay awake through dinner!

Saturday, May 26. A morning at leisure! We packed and read, said goodbye to the small gecko who lives in our shower, and after lunch went to the airport for the flight to Tana. A car and driver met us there and we set out for Perinet, about 100 miles east of Tana. A short way out of town, a small truck with an unlicensed driver crossed the center lane and broadsided us. We were both shook up and Betty bumped her head but at least we were all right. The police were called and, as ever, took an hour and a half in getting there. Then there were lengthy forms to fill out and even photographs were taken! Meanwhile Tiana caught a ride back to Tana to get another car. We set out again, with Tiana driving, and started up into the mountains, a twisting road of convoluted switchbacks. Tiana was trying to make up time and all of a sudden the car left the road and finding no shoulder skidded in a wide turn and ended up against a large boulder, where the car settled at a 45-degree angle. We were really shaken up this time and to make matters worse had to get out of the car into the cold rain. It was so cold we could see our breath. A friendly truck stopped to help us and the men palavered for a while before finally getting a rope on the car and pulling her back. It took two tries and probably close to an hour, but at last the car was free and fortunately drivable. So we set out again at a slower pace. Fog had settled in at this point and the ride seemed endless.

We got to our hotel, the Pfoen'nyala, at Perinet at 1:45 AM. They showed us to a dreadful bungalow but we were too tired to protest. Tiana suggested a nature walk at 7:00 and we did protest that! Burlap covered walls, thatched roof, three bare light bulbs and the bath separated by only a flimsy curtain. Three single beds covered most of the floor. It was very cold. The sheet on my bed was damp and I don't do wet beds so I curled up in three blankets like a cocoon. We both fell asleep immediately.

Sunday, May 27. Madagascar Mother's Day. Both of us were awake at dawn, the light comes right through the walls, and the noise from all the other guests is readily apparent. I ached in every bone and Betty has a raging cold but by 7:30 we had rallied enough to go up for breakfast. Two hot chocolates tasted wonderful. The sun is trying to break through and the rain has stopped.

Tiana appeared about 8:30 and we started out for the Analamazaotra Preserve nearby. We started in near an old fish breeding operation. A small boy came out with a Parsomi chameleon on a stick. It is big and green and yellow. They tried to get him to go for a grasshopper but I guess he wasn't hungry. We then spotted some brown lemurs in the trees, a slightly different species from the ones at Berenty. The guide took us on a three-kilometer walk, which started with a steep staircase of stone to get to the top of the small mountain. Fortunately I could take my time. Once on top the trail was easier. However lemurs don't like to stay near trails. The sounds of the forest are lovely, cuckoos singing, and lemurs calling to each other. The guide led us off the trail and then we spotted the Indri lemurs high above us in the canopy of the trees. These animals are the largest of the lemurs and are black and white with a short tail and so cuddly you want to hug them. We watched a long time hoping they would come down to lower levels but were not in luck. The guide did point out the interesting plants, for instance, a couple of kinds of orchids. And we found a big gecko.

I was ready to get back to the hotel where we moved into a better room with only two beds and dry sheets. Huge red poinsettias border the driveway. It is so much better! We had a lunch of granola bars in the room and slept until 4:00 when Tiana came by and asked if we wanted to take the tour of the village. What do you think our answer was? Later one of the hotel help knocked on our door to tell us to come out and watch the bamboo lemurs playing near the pond across the driveway and we did get up to see them! After a pleasant dinner we went back to bed and slept all night.

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Monday, May 28. Woke to the sounds of the Indri calling from the forest. We set out for the town of Peranet with its graphite factory, and went on to the private Preserve beyond. Our guide, Saholy, and Tiana have decided it would be too much for the old ladies to climb a steep trail up into the Preserve so instead we walked along the road. They tried to make it interesting but there was little to see. We did see the tall flexible bamboo, which arches over the road quite unlike the stiff variety we have at home, and we saw yellow wagtails, a blue Coua bird and a crab spider. There are epiphytes clinging to the trees, one is even a cactus. Then it was back to Perinet, a town of 10,000. Tin roofed buildings, up on stilts to get them out of the way of flooding, a large railroad station, even though the track was washed out in a cyclone two years ago and has not been repaired, a long road of shops and schoolchildren hurrying home to lunch. It was such a pleasure to have no one trying to sell us souvenirs (In fact I doubt there were any table cloths in town). We stopped at the Catholic Mission and visited the church of St Peter and St Paul.

Had lunch on the deck overlooking the river with a cute cat begging food beside me. Then we left for the drive back to Tana. The mountain road is not as fearful by daylight as it is in the rain and there are some lovely views. Unfortunately many of the mountains have been stripped of their forests. Slash and burn agriculture and trees logged off for fuel and building materials are causing all this deforestation. We stopped at an interesting reptile farm where they had some snakes and then an incredible number of varieties of chameleons. One looked exactly like a dead leaf, he was so well disguised and others clung to a tree branch blending in perfectly. There were geckos and frogs and then a few cages of larger animals. A civet and the Madagascar fox were followed by a cage with a Sifaka probiticus (a relative of the Sifaka diademata that we saw at Berenty). I felt so sorry for him as his white and black cuddly body was huddled in a corner of the cage and he seemed to be whimpering. I just wanted to open his cage and send him back to his forest. At the same time the two bamboo lemurs in the next cage seemed contented and it was nice to see them close up. This was not a modern zoo where they have created a natural habitat, but even those are no substitute for seeing animals in the wild.

Tiana pointed out the two spots where we had accidents and soon we were back in the traffic jam of Tana. It was good to get back to the Tana Plaza, which is beginning to feel like home.

Tuesday, May 29. Our extension has been changed from the canyon country to going to Antsirabe. This is a large commercial city about 130 miles south of Tana. It is the heart to the mineral and gem trading in the country. We also got some money back, about one million Malagasy francs each (about \$200) since we did not have to fly. We feel like we have found money!

Shortly out of town we saw the elaborate palace, which the President built. The money should have been spent on improving the roads! The countryside is lovely and rolling and obviously more prosperous than what we have seen. Brick and stucco houses are even painted! The farms are lush with rice and vegetables. The lovely valleys make me think of Europe although Malagasy style is uniquely its own. We stopped to see the Sisaony Waterfall which in an area where raffia is grown and there was a stand selling the various raffia products. Occasionally we saw badly eroded land caused by the lack of trees.

In Ambatolampy we stopped to see a museum of insects from all over the world. Beautiful butterflies and beetles and other crawly things, but Betty and I were most interested in the mineral display. Betty found some beautiful celestine, which she had never seen before. A small botanical garden surrounded the museum. We passed a large carrot growing area. Every fruit and vegetable grows in this volcanic soil. Tiana stopped at a stand to show us the fruit of the kaki tree, which looks a bit, like a tomato. Then we came to a more industrial section where the Teko milk factory is located and a rice flourmill.

And so we came to Antserabe and pulled up to the Therm Hotel. Built in 1897, she was a Grand Hotel in her day but she is now a shell of her former self. We had lunch on the terrace overlooking the pool. I ordered pizza and it was a delicious change, although I took some ribbing from Betty. I am so tired of table d'hote dining which all tastes alike. We washed it down with some Antserabe wine.

After a short rest Tiana took us out of town to Andraikiba Lake, a lovely crater lake, and he told us the legend of the lake. A prince had two girl friends and could not decide which one to marry. He

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said he would marry the first one who could swim across the lake. One of the girls was pregnant and she drowned and it is said her ghost still comes and haunts the lake each morning. On the shore of the lake was a bazaar of gem stalls. We went from stall to stall dickering over the stones. I got two lovely dark amethysts and Betty got a number of stones, most to take home as gifts for her friends.

Wednesday, May 30. After breakfast we found two of the gem merchants had come to the hotel with more stones for Betty's approval! Then Tiana took us into the town to more up-scale gem merchants. The first was in a shuttered building and after knocking and waiting awhile, it was finally opened by the jovial merchant who gave us a tour of the lapidary factory and presented us each with an amazonite and we knew we had the pressure on us. His stones were much more expensive than our friends by the lake and he was also selling carved ashtrays and the like which did not interest us a bit. I did find a small tourmaline ring I liked and even though Betty disapproved struck a deal and bought it. Betty thinks we should buy stones and wrap them ourselves, but I needed instant gratification. And besides I had all that found money burning a hole in my pocket. We went on to another dealer housed in an old hotel but their stones did not interest us at all. Stopped at a souvenir place where I bought some salad sets made of palisander wood and then we headed back out to the lake. We were greeted enthusiastically. I think we have probably spent more money here than they see in a week! Betty bought some more things and found some white beryl, which I had not seen before. A lovely shiny stone and I knew I had to have it. And then Tiana suggested lunch and a tour of the city in the afternoon. We tried hamburgers for lunch but declined the city tour in favor of napping and reading all afternoon.

Thursday, May 31. Drove back to Tana and had lunch at the Palanquin Chinese restaurant near the airport. I couldn't believe that leaving the country was almost as much a problem as entering it, but Betty bribed the customs officials and they passed us through without opening our bags. And so we flew to La Reunion.

I have really loved seeing Madagascar. It is so interesting but so different from what we had expected. Our literature warned us that bottled water wasn't widely available so I even was carrying water-purifying equipment. The food was not recommended, but aside from the monotony of table d'hote meals it was generally quite tasty. We had been warned not to eat uncooked vegetables but near the end I even tried a piece of raw tomato one day with no ill effect. We never saw a sign of the malaria mosquito, which is supposed to infest the island. And we were lucky enough to see four widely different areas, even though this meant we spent a disproportionate time traveling from place to place. The lemurs, of course, are the reason to come and you fall in love with them. Tiana was an extraordinary guide, so knowledgeable about his country.

But Madagascar is a very poor country, which is somewhat depressing as the people are all so nice. The corrupt government siphons off the revenue and not much gets down to improve the lot of the people. Over 30% are unemployed. The mineral resources are privately owned so the people can't benefit much from that. Also the large sisal plantation we saw is privately owned. The tragedy is that I don't see any immediate prospects of improving their economy. More tourists would help and they in turn might publicize this interesting country and bring it some aid.

LA REUNION

Thursday, May 31. La Reunion is a volcanic island between Madagascar and Mauritius. It was a French colony until 1946 when it became a department of France. Everything they have in France, they have here in La Reunion. It is truly a tropical island paradise and few but the French people even know about it.

We flew Air Austral from Madagascar to La Reunion, about an hour and twenty minutes. Air Austral is part of Air France and we knew we had left Madagascar as soon as we stepped aboard. In La Reunion we cleared immigration and went to baggage claim to find our first problem. The trolleys required ten French francs to rent and we had not been able to change money before we left Madagascar, or here, so there we were with six pieces of luggage not knowing what to do. I asked a somewhat official looking man if we could find a porter or change money, and, nice man

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that he was, he gave me ten French francs (about \$1.25) so I could rent a cart! This got us through customs but then we could not find Papangue Tours who were supposed to meet us. We waited awhile and then I asked help from the information booth who called them for us. They arrived an hour late! We were driven to the lovely Hotel L'Archipel near Saint-Gilles-Les-Bains and had a late dinner before turning in. Our itinerary reads we will be picked up at 7:10 a.m. since it is important we get to the crater before the fog sets in. It was after ten before we got to bed!

Friday, June 1. At 7:10, as advertised, a bus pulled up and we were told to board. Ten minutes of French later, Betty asked when he was going to speak English and he informed us he didn't speak English, and then promptly lost all interest in us. It was going to be a long day! He had a mike right next to his mouth so amplified French, punctuated by loud snuffles, was all we heard. If he ran out of things to say, he sang songs to us. Must have thought he was Maurice Chevalier! We were on the Mystic South Tour, which took us to the Le Piton Maito, an extinct volcanic 2200 meters high. The mountain last erupted 2000 years ago. The three craters are magnificent. In the lush green interior there are several towns. Since there are no roads into the crater, people obviously live here by choice, but they have electricity and other conveniences. I would have liked to ask some questions but knew the only answer our guide knew was, "I don't speak English". He could have at least tried some simple slow French, which I might have understood. I was so frustrated that I found myself crying. This got some attention from an English couple that introduced us to their English-speaking guide, Valerie. They had been told not to book Papangue since Papangue never has English-speaking guides! Valerie doesn't work for Papangue but she promised she would get hold of them and see what she could do. Later she told us she had called and Papangue would contact us back at the hotel.

On the way down the mountain we stopped at La Petit France where there was a perfume distillery. Then it was on to the Domaine de Lillele, an old plantation once owned by Mme Debassyns a prominent slave owner. The slave quarters were interesting with lists and lists of names of slaves displayed, and there was a slide show depicting the horrible way the slaves were treated. The old manor house was there and the property was alive with children making me wonder if it was some sort of school, but I couldn't ask, of course, since the miserable bus driver had just let us out and was waiting on the bus.

The next stop was Le Cemetiere Marin, where we were shown the graves of various prominent people we had never heard of, but at least the grave of La Buse the pirate was clear with skull and crossbones on the grave marker. He was executed in 1730. Another grave was for the victims of a shipwreck in 1894.

And then we went on to lunch at Chez Loulou, where it felt fairly cool under the ceiling fans. A four-course meal began with Samosas and the other foods seemed to have an Indian flavor to them. I left in the middle of the meal to go find a bank, and am so pleased to finally have francs in my pocket. But Betty and I have decided not to tip Jean Paul or whatever his name is. The other people on the bus, all French, were pleasant enough, but their English was even more limited than my French so conversation was difficult. I finally told Jean Paul that we were very tired and would he please call a taxi so we could return to the hotel. And then he did the only friendly thing he had done all day; he drove us back to the hotel!

We washed our hair and relaxed and about 4:30 Claire from Papangue Tours came. She said our agent in the US had been told they could not guarantee an English-speaking guide, but Dee had never mentioned this to us. She also said that Jean Paul was just being French in his attitude. No matter, tomorrow we are going with Valerie to see the volcano, which is what we really wanted to do, not the tour Papangue had assigned us. Had a pleasant dinner by the pool and went early to bed.

Saturday, June 2. A wonderful day. Valerie picked us up and, with a French family of three, we headed for the volcano. The west coast has the best weather and we went through Saint Leu, a beach resort town with world quality surf where the world surfing championships were held. Saint Leu was once the port where they imported coffee. The old coffee warehouse is now the town hall.

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Valerie told us about the sugar cane and how the best rum is made directly from the juice of the cane while industrial rum is made from the molasses. They cut cane for six months of the year and the other six months use the stalks to make a charcoal for fuel. At Saint Pierre, a town of 70,000, the largest town in the south, we took the Plains road across the island.

We started to climb immediately through a flowered tropical landscape. Valerie tells us there are 120 microclimates on the island. The east coast, for instance, gets the most rain. Obviously the higher altitudes have even different weather and vegetation. On the Plain of Kafres, formed from the lava from the two large volcanoes, we saw that the people were more Negroid in appearance. When the slaves were able to escape they headed up into the hills and started their own towns. Tamarind and Cryptomeria trees lined our road and poinsettias (some double ones looked like roses), begonias as big as bushes, bougainvillea were everywhere. The Creole houses are interesting, each having a decorative tin border along the eaves that looks somewhat like a series of hearts.

At 2070 meters we had a stop and could see across the plain the Piton des Neiges (which occasionally does get snow on its peak). This was the volcano that started the creation of La Reunion but its last eruption was 1200 years ago. As we watched the clouds started to come in and we offered a little prayer that we would be able to see the volcano. Our prayers were answered and at 2260 we stopped to see the Piton de Fournaise, 2631 meters high, the last active volcano on the island.

Below us stretched the Plain of Sables, a moonscape with nothing but lava. Occasionally the grey lava was relieved by outcroppings of red, iron, which has oxidized. Until now the road had been nicely paved but from here on it was a potholed dirt road. At last we reached the crater and looked down into a huge caldera. This is a red volcano, which is not considered dangerous as it only puts out lava. The gray volcanoes are the dangerous ones because they put out toxic gases when they erupt. Inside the caldera are a number of smaller caldera. The east side of the volcano is the dangerous side and in 1977 the lava left the crater and hit a small town. The last eruption took place in 1998 and lasted for 6 months. We walked along the ridge and I envied the people strong enough to follow the trail down into the crater for a close-up view of the smaller farencaho crater. A sign showed distances to various cities of the world and New York is 17310 kilometers away.

Back in the van we started down and Valerie pointed out the east coast, which you usually cannot see because of the rain. We stopped to see the Commerson Crater, which was created in 50 AD. It's a small but deep crater, overgrown with greenery and is named for a famous French naturalist who came here in the seventeen hundreds.

Lunch was at Chez Cacotier (coconuts) and we were treated to rum punch and a lovely Creole lunch. A delicious salad followed by lightly spiced pieces of goat and chicken, rice, vegetables, and a desert which was made from a fruit I could not name.

Then it was on to the Maison de la Volcan, a small museum devoted to volcanology and exhibits describing most of the volcanoes around the world. We went to the Pointe Diable and looked down into a crater where we could see the town of Grand Bassin. Only eleven people live here now since the school has been closed. They either are pensioners or rent their homes out as bed and breakfasts to the hikers. There are no roads into the crater. Food is dropped from a helicopter when the small cable car is not running. They have electricity and if a medical emergency happens a helicopter lifts them out. It was all very picturesque.

Our last stop was at Le Gouffre de l'Etang-Sale, a narrow cleavage through the lava shore through which the surf pours and meets itself pouring out in a dramatic thick foam of suds. Two blowholes are nearby.

I really enjoyed La Reunion, which is everything a tropical island should be. Clean, no apparent poverty, no one trying to sell you souvenirs, perfect weather, and of course everything French. I would come back if it wasn't so far away!

Sunday, June 3. So we started the long trip home. Forty minutes on a plane from La Reunion to Mauritius, four hours in the transit lounge and four hours on a plane from Mauritius to Johannesburg. The Atlanta flight doesn't leave for two more hours but it isn't a legal connection and we must spend the night. A helpful porter insisted on helping us and waited while we changed money and then he took our trolleys and escorted us to the Holiday Inn van before he

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demanded a hundred rand tip (about \$15). The airport Holiday Inn is very nice, big comfortable room with bright enough lights so you can read or put on makeup! We had almost forgotten how nice this could be!

Monday, June 4. We hired a car and driver, Henry, to take us to the DeWildt Cheetah Research Center, which I remembered from my last visit to South Africa. It's an hour and a half drive and when we got there we found they only give tours on Tuesday and Thursday. However they allowed us to wander around and see the close-in pens of cheetah. Such magnificent animals. The king cheetah with his prominent black striped coloring and the more common cheetah in brown. In one pen six adorable cubs were nestled against one another purring loudly. Nearby their mother was nesting in a tree. This center has managed to breed the cheetah back from extinction and they are now repopulating the various game parks. The center also deals with other endangered species, wild dogs and vultures that we did not see, but there were cages of mongoose and honey badgers and tortoises, which were interesting. Henry tried to make it more interesting leading us a bit further into the park than we had been told we could go. He also suggested going to see a rhino and lion park on the other side of Johannesburg but it would have been an hour more each way, and more money, and so we decided to come to the airport instead. Henry lives in a province in the north but there are no jobs there so he spends two weeks out of three in Johannesburg driving a cab on a commission basis trying to make enough money to feed his family and pay the tuition and buy the books his five children use in school, We checked in and went to the first class lounge to leave our carry-ons. Then we window-shopped the tax-free shops but found nothing to buy. Did change my krugerands back into dollars. The airport was over air-conditioned and we ended up back at the lounge where we were given blankets to wrap around us. Betty has never been able to shake her cold and I am getting one. The plane left for Atlanta at 8:30 pm.