

Madagascar Report September 2016 - Freddie Brookes-Smith  
and Theo Featherstone

Arriving at Camp was a very surreal experience, after three planes and over 24 hours of travelling we were put on a boat from Nosy Be, an Island off the North West of Madagascar, to Nosy Komba, an island off Nosy Be, where we would be spending the next two weeks. It was pitch black, there was large swell and the boat was at full capacity. When we arrived at the beach by moonlight we walked up the steps from to the Camp and into the kitchen area where we were given rice and zebu, which was eaten very quickly by everyone before bed. The camp consisted of about eight huts each with three bunk beds, a kitchen and eating area and the main communal area called Main House. Chickens and cats roamed around along with many lizards, spiders, snakes and I even saw a tiny scorpion.

The first day was an induction to house rules and a walk to the nearest village Ampangorina, (Ampang for short) where we were shown the two restaurants that had WIFI and electricity as there was none on camp. It was a twenty five minute walk across rocks, three separate beaches and through a busy village. The most popular restaurant was called Ilo's due to its owner Jean as he was very friendly and hospitable.

On the second day our work begun, the first activity we did was mark out a new bird transect above a village called Banana on the East of the island. This gave us a taste of the amount of walking we would have to do during our stay – a lot. The next two days Theo and I were given the opportunity to go to Lokobe National Park with a small group of volunteers and Staff members Doug and Catlin. This required a boat over to Hellville and a ten-minute tuktuk to the Park Office. It was on Nosy Be and when we got there we paid a reduced rate because we were with the camp and then picked up our tents. We then walked in to the heart of the national park and saw a huge range of wildlife including paradise flycatchers which are easily the most beautiful birds I have seen. We saw three or four different snakes but the highlight of the day was seeing the incredibly well camouflaged henkeli, which is a screaming gecko. Catlin picked one off the tree to demonstrate this and it is tradition to scream back! After lunch on a forest table in the middle of the park, we walked up to a high point with a fantastic view over forest, mountains and beaches below. After resting up there for a while we made our way to the campsite which was a very sweaty 3km hike up forest steps cut into dry red soil. Once at the camp we put up the tents and decided to go for a swim. I didn't realise quite how large the swell was around the rocks on the beach and sliced my

thigh with razor sharp barnacles. Fortunately it did not need stitches and healed over in a few days rather than getting infected. Dinner was pasta and shortly afterwards we went on the night walk. This was an incredible experience, walking through the forest in the dark with head torches meant that lemurs were easy to spot because of their eye shine. We saw mouse lemurs, which look like very cute squirrels, sportive lemurs and brown lemurs all in the space of about five minutes. The spiders that come at our night were much larger than my hand and we also saw another henkeli, hunting rather than hiding this time, and a number of other lizards. The next morning we had a modest breakfast of bread and mango then made our way back to Camp. The rest of the day was used for sleeping, as the sand we pitched our tents on was even less comfortable than it sounds.

The next day I started my first proper conservation work. Each weekday from now on, Theo and I would be assigned a different form of forest conservation work. My first was 'Transect 2 Reptiles and Amphibians' or T2, which meant walking to a predetermined route and doing a survey. It was west of the camp and a long way up! Once at the transect the group of five people walk through a 250m path one behind the other and stop to record anything they see. Some times there would be multiple lizards on single tree or you could walk 100m without seeing anything.

On the first weekend we spent the evening at Ilo's and got the boat back to camp late at night. My phone, which was sensibly in my dry bag, got wet. This is because ironically, my water bottle which was in the dry bag leaked. Even two full days in rice did nothing to resurrect it.

On Saturday we got the boat to Hell Ville and were very excited as a large attraction to the area we decided to go in Madagascar was the promise of quad-biking around sacred lakes waterfalls on Nosy Be. When we arrived Theo, John (a boy our age from California) and I got into the first taxi we found and asked the driver to take us to 'quad-bikes' which we repeated over and over. His English was very limited but he eventually understood and rang one of his friends while driving and took us to a less than official looking shack with three quad-bikes underneath. We were then suitably ripped offed having to pay 170,000 Ariary (about £45) when other people from the Camp only paid 100,000Ar (£25) from a different rental place. We weren't even given a map. John and I stuck together and headed into the unknown looking for the promised waterfall and Theo went back into Hellville to look for other people. After a few miles we decided to pull into a road with a sign pointing to a beach. The beach was amazing and we walked along it and went for a swim in the warm water. As we were drying off, two ladies came up to us and asked if we wanted a massage, we looked at each other and said, 'why not?' At the same

time a man asked if we wanted lunch when we had finished our massage. It seemed too easy but we said yes and managed to agree on a price before the meal, which prevented another ripping off. After some small but fantastic portions of captain fish we went to back to the quad bikes only to find mine wouldn't start. After two locals tried to help us I decided to move the quad onto flatter ground and got it to start first time. John and I carried on round the island and got to a 'police checkpoint' where we were robbed of 40,000 Ariary for not having the correct driving licence for a quad-bike (we both had full drivers licences from the US and UK). From then on we sped past every policeman and managed not to get robbed again. We drove all the way up along the coast looking for the waterfall. At the top of the island we were denied entry to Andilana Beach, which is very smart resort with a beautiful white sand beach...so we heard. However, we had to turn back and after taking a few lucky turns we realised we were on the way to the sacred lakes and miraculously bumped into Theo. Fortunately he had already been along the tracks to one of the lakes so we followed him along one of these paths which were perfect for quad-biking, with lots of ruts and roots and I drove along them one handed as I filmed with my GoPro. After having a quick break next to one of the deep blue sacred lakes and ate what small food we had left, we continued on our mission to find the waterfall.

Late in the day after John had peeled off, Theo and I took a promising turn in the direction of the waterfall and after asking 'Ou est La Cascade?' to several confused local farmers, we eventually found a path to the waterfall and when we arrived we were escorted down the steps by local children who sweetly held our hands. Although there were some other tourists there and it was more of a murky plunge pool than cascading waterfall, it was such a relief that that rinsing our dust caked skin in the pool felt amazing.

After arriving back to the edge of Hell-Ville we left the quads with they keys still in by the side of the road where we got them as there was no one around. We then got the most rundown taxi you could imagine and went back to the hotel we had booked into earlier.

On Sunday we got the boat to Ampang after a long lie-in and then slept even more at Ilo's. I had a nice chorizo pizza then got the five o'clock boat back to camp.

On the Monday we were back to the conservation, it was Zone 1 Bird survey. This means we walked to a certain area on the island, Zone 1 was in the middle, and stop at four locations in the zone, each for half an hour, and record what birds we see and hear. We often saw up to ten different species many of them native to the region of Madagascar we were in.

The next day I was assigned to Ampang Lemurs, this is when you walk to Ampang village then up into the forest slightly where there is a lemur park. There are no cages just an open area where tourists are able to feed lemurs bananas. When the Camp does surveys there, we monitor the behaviour of the lemurs in two ways. The first is by picking an individual from the group and noting down its behaviour every minute for half an hour. This could be anything from grooming itself, grunting, traveling, resting, eating, etc. The second way is to monitor the whole group of lemurs and take notes every minutes for one hour. This is more difficult because often smaller groups form and leave the survey area.

On Wednesday I was given the most relaxing activity which was Top Rock birds. A three minute walk from the camp and with a beautiful view, it lasts one hour and you see how many birds you can identify and record. However, that evening a group of just four of us, including me and Theo, went on a T4 night survey. T4 is a reptiles and amphibians transect in the centre of the island near the Church. It was a successful survey and a highlight was seeing a roosting souimanga sunbird in a bush just off the path. We also saw two species of chameleon and a hunting henkeli along with other lizards and frogs. Then for the next two days I was back on Ampang Lemurs and on both days got see two females who were both carrying babies less than two weeks old.

The second weekend involved a unique opportunity of party organised by Jean, the owner of Ilo's, on an old burial island, so small it wasn't marked on many of the maps in camp. There was rum punch and THB (Three Horses Beer, a beer brewed in Madagascar which the Malagasy are very proud of). At the end of the party there were ferries back to camp and Theo's phone suffered a similar fate as mine when it sunk to the bottom the sea.

Earlier in the week, John had convinced me to sign up for 'Whale Watching' and as there were only a few other campmates who had signed up we were sceptical and almost crossed off our names. By the end of the day we were incredibly glad we hadn't. It turned out to be the most spectacular day of my trip! For the first few hours were watching two humpback males displaying to a female with fin slaps on the water and breaching every few minutes. Just before we left one of the males very nearly swan under our boat! Next we looked for whale sharks. After a few phone calls made by our guide and a change of direction in the boat, we could see a large group of fish jumping from the surface of the water and sea birds circling nearby, this apparently, was a sign the whales sharks were close. We put on our masks and flippers and then we caught a glimpse of a fin breaking the surface and the guide shouted to jump in. When I first jumped in I was closest to the whale shark and it turned towards me and swam to my left less than 10 meters way. I have

never seen anything so breath-taking and I froze in awe as it swam past me. After a few more jumps and a couple more incredible glimpses of other whale sharks we headed to a small island West of Nosy Be for lunch. It was delicious with tender octopus, captain fish and coconut rice. After a quick sunbath we were back on the boat and went to find turtles just off the shore. It was shallow enough for you to dive down and swim right next to them as they were feeding on sea grass. On one dive the turtle surfaced for air just as I was running out of breath and we broke the surface at the same time right next to each other.

When we got back everyone from camp had already left to go to Hellville for the rest of the weekend. So John and I had to make a very stressful walk to Ampang in the dark and it was high tide. When we got there we managed to book a boat and after a very long ferry journey also got the last room in Sakalava the hotel most of the camp stay in. We met up with everyone else and took a very full tuktuk all the way to a place called Beach Bar where had a great evening despite being exhausted from a long day at sea.

Went back to Ampang on the 12:00 boat and spent most of the day there with a pizza and crêpe for lunch at Ilo's.

Conservation activities this week included the first survey of the newly set up transect T6 and Zone 2 lemurs where it *is* possible to see the wild lemurs that live on Nosy Komba, however, we could not find any and our guide was very apologetic.

For the last weekend we decided to go to Chez Yolande for supper, the other restaurant in Ampang, which serves zebu stakes. We waited one hour and three quarters for our stake then another half an hour for the crêpes. I also ordered banana flambé which was a fried banana inside a crêpe with sugar on the outside. Tequila was then poured liberally all over the dish and then set on fire. The sugar crystallised and the crêpe was soaked in tequila - it was amazing. Hard to say it was worth the nearly 3 hours we ended up staying in the restaurant though. We then walked back Camp with three torches between four of us, I was the one without the torch which was slightly tricky as the tide was coming so the rocks were slippery.

On Saturday about twenty five people got on two ferries to Tanikeli, a tiny island with two beaches and an old lighthouse, one hour away from the camp. It is a beautiful island which is a national park and has brown lemurs close to in the middle of the island but some ventured onto the beach! It also has an amazing reef, I saw three green turtles, a very well camouflaged octopus and countless tropical fish swimming above the coral. I managed to film some with Theo's camera in a waterproof case he got especially for the trip.

When we got back Theo and I had to pack up all our belongings and leave camp for the last time when we got on the ferry to Hellville. Everyone had another fun night at Beach Bar but it was sad to say goodbye to everyone, as we had to leave for the mainland early the next morning for our trip to Ankarana, a National Park in the North of Madagascar. We had originally planned to travel north earlier in the trip but the opportunity to stay at camp for another week arose and we were very happy to take it.

So on Sunday morning and we set off on our trip to the Ankarana. It started with very quick speedboat to Ankifi, the nearest port on the mainland, then a taxi brousse (normally a minibus but in our case it was someone in a 4x4 traveling in the same direction) up to the north. The driver very speedy and we got to Ankarana in three hours and in one piece despite some of the largest potholes I have ever seen and some stomach churning driving.

Once we got to Ankarana we were shown the bungalow we had booked just next to the reserve. Meals were included and we had a huge supper with the nicest chicken drumsticks I have ever eaten! Pudding was fried banana, this time with flaming rum instead of tequila. After a long days traveling we went to bed fairly early only after removing the frog that was hopping around in my bed.

After a satisfying breakfast of toast with honey, apricot jam, butter and banana we unfortunately discovered the cost of guide was much more than we had anticipated and we should have taken much more money out in Hellville as we were told the nearest cash machine was about 20 miles away! This meant we were not allowed into the main reserve but explored the area around it and the local villages instead. We picked a prominent hill in the distance and hiked to the top of it. It gave us an incredible uninterrupted view of the surrounding area. I have never felt more like I was 'in the middle of nowhere' and I will struggle to again. In the evening we saw some lemurs that were hanging around in the trees just next to our bungalow just before another large and delicious meal which this time was captain fish.

Miraculously the taxi brousse arrived at exactly 5am the next day, which is when it was supposed to arrive, even after leaving Deigo-Suarez on the North tip of Madagascar at 1am. This was very different to the 'mora mora' (slowly slowly) lifestyle we had become used to. It was minibus this time and it was very full. We didn't stop for lunch so it took a similar time to the way there. I sat next to some Americans who were on a Peace Cops program most of them would be spending one or two years out in Madagascar and the people I spoke to were already fluent in Malagasy.

After getting the speed boat from Ankify we arrived back in Hellville with most of the day ahead of us so we decided to take the midday boat back to camp for a final goodbye. When we got there it was nice to hear we had been missed already!

We left for Ampang just before camp supper as we no longer had a bed in the camp, and booked a room in a very small hotel in Ampang. We then had our final meal at Ilo's. We both had the Catalana pizza with chips and the pineapple Fanta we had come to love (why don't they have it in the UK?!). We then saw Jean and after explaining it was our last night and thanking him for looking after us he gave us each two Ilo Village rum shots on the house! Floating in the bottle were vanilla pods, cinnamon sticks, passion fruit seeds and oranges and it tasted amazing. We then went to our room at the 'hotel' which was only 25000Ar for the night. In the morning I could see why as I had a pretty terrible sleep and was bitten all over despite the dusty mosquito net.

We got the 6am boat from Ampang which stops at camp and picked up two campmates who were heading to Hellville for the day. We went to our familiar bar with WIFI called Oasis and after spending the last of my money on pastries and a T-shirt we got in the taxi to the Nosy Be airport and had to say goodbye to Madagascar.

The main purpose of our trip had been to see as much wildlife as possible, and we were not disappointed. We saw four species of lemur and four species of chameleon and countless other lizards along with an amazing variety of birds and fish. The somewhat unexpected part of the trip was meeting some lovely people, mostly our age, from all over the world which made the experience even more enjoyable than we had hoped.