

Madagascar – lemurs, rice fields, geysers and red earth

Madagascar is the second largest island nation in the world after Indonesia and is largely undeveloped for tourism – experiencing the nature, culture and hospitality of the locals on horseback is a wonderful adventure!

After landing safely in Antananarivo, we had to understand the entry formalities. First, after paying, we received a stamp and a visa for Madagascar. Then we moved on to the next step – the police station. There, our passports were collected. Four people were busy adding further stamps and notes before we got our passports back after a few minutes' wait. We collected our suitcases and then we were finally ready to go. We were picked up and taken to the Hotel Riviera Garden. A beautiful hotel with a great view and very friendly staff.

At breakfast, after a peaceful and pleasant first night, it was already clear who might be joining the riding group. Four Englishmen sat at a table wearing T-shirts printed with "Madagascar 2017" and a horse motif – what kind of trip were they planning? ;) Our bus arrived punctually at 9 a.m. for the transfer and everyone was gathered – three Germans, one Frenchman and four Englishmen. A colourful group! On the way, we stopped at a shopping centre that was quite impressive. Electronics, a supermarket, various shops for cosmetics, clothing and children's items. In a poor country like Madagascar, we hadn't expected such a modern shopping centre. The next stop on our way was a lemur park. There we were able to see different species and were given the most important information about them. They are really cute and comical animals that only occur in Madagascar.



Back on the bus, we drove a little further before stopping at a restaurant. There were various types of meat, vegetables and, of course, rice – as with every Madagascan meal. After the meal, we slowly left the good roads behind. Potholes and uneven roads repeatedly slowed us down. But that didn't bother us – the English had brought music with them and we enjoyed the increasingly beautiful landscape until we finally reached the ranch owned by André and his wife Silviana. The ranch consists of several small log cabins and a kitchen with a lovely dining area.

The stable is only a few minutes' walk away. Of course, that's where we all wanted to go first, and we were warmly welcomed by the owner, André. We were given a tour of the stable and got to see all the horses. They live in stalls, but are often allowed to roam freely on the grounds during the day under supervision. There are two riding arenas right next to the stable. Madagascar is not a horse-riding country – there are only about 350 horses on the entire island. Around 30 of these are kept in André's stable. The equipment has to be imported, and much of it is mended and repaired by hand. André lovingly cares for his horses and worries about them. Despite the lack of everything, every horse here is well cared for. Saddles and bridles are older, but they are maintained and replaced regularly. The horseshoes are made in-house – there are no farriers, vets or dentists here. This is a big responsibility for the owner, who must ensure the health of his horses.

All the horses were well fed and in good condition. We were to choose a horse we liked for the next day – difficult, of course, when you had to judge the horse by its appearance, a little joke from André. The next day, the horses were assigned and everyone did a lap of the arena and a shorter ride in the countryside. At first, it was

enjoy the landscape that awaited us on the right and left. The horses were rested and lively, and everyone had to get used to their horse first. The group was very diverse, so it took a good hour for everyone to find a suitable horse. I had a lively, friendly mare named Kallin – she was very forward-going, and I got to know and love her more and more over the next few days. She was absolutely sure-footed and a lifesaver in every situation. If the lead horse didn't want to cross a small ditch or a deeper waterhole, my horse was sent ahead. Kallin first tested the terrain carefully by sniffing and taking small steps before deciding to make a small jump or step through – an absolutely brilliant cross-country horse! After the horses had got to know each other, we explored the terrain for a half-day ride. The first fields opened up before us, as well as rolling hills, fields and red earth as far as the eye could see. We passed through the first villages.



Although the people here do not own much and are very poor, they seemed content. They waved, laughed, shouted and greeted us. They live off agriculture and what they grow. They do not go hungry; there is a wide selection of rice, vegetables, fruit and occasionally meat, but otherwise they do not have much. Chickens run through the villages, and some villagers keep one or more pigs in their front gardens or take them for walks in the fields. During the tour, we kept asking ourselves whether today's consumer society really makes us happier... In the villages, we quickly learned the Madagascan greeting "Salam, Salame, Salamo, Salama" – the ending depends on the village and has to be tried out and adapted again and again

tried out and adapted. Once you have greeted the first people in the village, you know which ending applies until the end of the village.
After another night at the ranch, we set off on horseback the next day for a day's ride. We passed rice fields again. We were surrounded by gentle, rolling countryside, with small rivers and the occasional village with curious inhabitants.



People waved to us everywhere, stopping at the side of the road to watch the horse column, laughing and shouting greetings to us. The villagers loved it and cheered when the whole troop of riders trotted past them – unimaginable back home in Germany! We were also invited to coffee and pastries in the village once – the locals showed us hospitality and were delighted by our visit.



The main means of transport for the people here is the ox cart. It is used to transport vegetables, fruit and other items. We tried to keep a safe distance from the oxen with our horses. If one of the locals wasn't paying attention, the oxen could panic at the sight of our horses and try to break out at the edge of the path, which usually didn't end well for the passengers and the items in the cart.



We crossed smaller rivers without any problems, rode along the edge of rice fields, and negotiated small ditches and bumps with ease – the horses were absolutely sure-footed and reliable.

We saw very few trees and forests during our trip. André told us that wood is slowly becoming scarce in many regions of Madagascar. From time to time, there are also fires, which do not contribute to tree growth either.

During a lunch break in one of the larger villages, we visited the market there. Everything was available for purchase – clothing, electronics, fruit, vegetables, rice and fresh meat. André guided us through the streets and we were able to take our time looking at everything. There was also a school, a police station and a town hall – one of the more modern villages in Madagascar!

After the horses had been well cared for in the late afternoon, we headed to a beautiful accommodation. The guesthouse was idyllically located by a lake, with a pool, fantastic views and beautiful rooms. We enjoyed our hot showers and electricity and ended the day on the terrace with a delicious dinner.

The next day, we started our morning with a delicious breakfast on the terrace before heading to the horses. Today's terrain was a little more mountainous. Once again, we crossed small rivers, rode along narrow paths through fields and enjoyed the calm and peaceful atmosphere. We trotted along or tried our hand at short gallops. Every now and then, we encountered

women washing their laundry in the rivers and then hanging it on a hill over bushes and small shrubs.

We kept coming across long sandy paths that encouraged us to ride faster. To enjoy the other horses, I had swapped my horse for a large gelding called Solar Captain. A large but very calm gelding, he carried me safely over all types of terrain and was easy to handle even at a brisk gallop. We enjoyed the beautiful landscape around us and couldn't get enough of the fields, red sand, hills and mountains. We led our horses along part of the route, which was slightly more downhill. We finally reached our tent camp for the day by a lake. It wasn't too cold, so we enjoyed a slightly different kind of shower today and watched the fishing boats on the lake. A meal was cooked for us over the campfire and we ate fresh fish with rice and vegetables – very tasty!



The next morning, we swung ourselves back onto our horses and looked forward to a longer day of riding. We rode along the lake, passed villages and rode through extensive banana plantations. The sandy paths that followed were a joy for both horses and riders. This allowed us to ride a little faster again. We passed a small crater lake and then reached our accommodation for the night: a nice, charming little guesthouse. Our horses stayed right next to the guesthouse, where they had grass to eat and were well looked after.

Today, a half-day ride awaited us. We rode along the lake for a while before the landscape gradually changed. Our ride now took us through the volcanic landscape. We took a break on the banks of the Lily River and

We climbed up to a small viewpoint from where we could admire the waterfalls.



Women offered us souvenirs made of pumice stone. There were some beautiful souvenirs among them. However, if you showed interest, you were besieged from all sides and had to quickly decide on something and negotiate.

Afterwards, we rode on through the varied landscape until we reached our lunch spot. A new restaurant – run by a Belgian man who manages the restaurant together with his Madagascan wife. Delicious fish, vegetables and dessert awaited us. Afterwards, we were taken to our tent camp for the next two days. We had arrived at the geysers. There we were able to spend the afternoon relaxing in the geysers and smaller, warm pools of water and later enjoy our time around the campfire – what more could you want?

The next day, another highlight awaited us – we passed huge fields of rice paddies until we reached a large lake. There we had the opportunity to gallop individually along the lake for a while. Now my horse Kallin, who loves to walk, could finally show what she was capable of, and we enjoyed the long and beautiful gallops.



We rode along the lake and up the hill. We had a beautiful and breathtaking view of the lake and the hilly, volcanic and crater-like landscape in the background. On the way back, we were able to enjoy the gallop route alone once again before we reached the tent camp with the geysers.

Those who wanted to could wash their horses in the river and then relax by the geysers.

The time had come to say goodbye to most of our horses. We still had a short two-hour ride ahead of us and stopped at the Devil's Cauldron (La Mermite du Diable), which stretched out below us. Here, the river winds its way through the rocks before disappearing into a lake, which is also surrounded by rocks.



After a final gallop, we had to say goodbye to our horses. They were loaded up and taken back to the ranch, while we set off on the long, arduous and rough road to Antananarivo by car. Due to traffic jams and potholes on the road, it took a good 4-5 hours before we reached the capital, tired and exhausted, with a short stop for lunch. In the evening, we drove into town again with our group to end the day at a delicious restaurant.

The next day awaited us again in our little bus. We made a short stop at the well-known shopping centre before heading east for 4-5 hours. The route was winding and we kept encountering tanker trucks driving from the coast to the capital. The roads became more impassable and we were glad when we arrived at our lodge in the early afternoon. The climate had changed significantly. It was tropically humid and drizzled repeatedly. It was the rainy season on the coast. We had apparently ended up in a tourist spot – the lodge was teeming with white tourists. We longed for our horses and riding. We spent a quiet afternoon and set out to find one or two lemurs hiding in the forest reserve.

After breakfast with a few other tourists, we took the bus to a lemur park. We were taken across to the other side in a canoe and discovered various species of lemur. Armed with carrots and bananas, our guide set off with us in search of the lemurs, and it didn't take long to find them. They jumped onto our shoulders and let us feed and stroke them. What an experience!

Afterwards, we continued on to a reptile park. There were crocodiles, fossas, chameleons and turtles.



After another two hours' drive through the changing, beautiful landscape, we reached our destination for the day – Brickaville. We had lunch and then finally saw the horses again. Some horses had been brought from the ranch. Others live right on the coast in a smaller stable. We had to get used to new horses – there were one or two swaps until everyone had found a suitable horse. After a while, my companion was Zipit, an excitable but great to ride gelding! He was super easy to handle and a real dressage horse. I would have loved to take him home with me. We trotted and galloped again and again, enjoying the tropical weather, the palm trees and bushes along the way, and arrived at our camp at dusk. Our tents for the next three nights were waiting for us right on the beach. We made ourselves comfortable around the campfire while we ate our dinner and looked forward to the next day.

We woke up to beautiful weather and enjoyed the sound of the sea right in front of our tent. What a great atmosphere! We set off on a day's ride. First we rode through a deep lake and then on sandy paths over flat terrain. To our right and left were bushes, scattered trees and palm trees. We took advantage of the great trails to gallop again and again. At the end of the path, we caught our first glimpse of the beach. White sandy beach as far as the eye could see! We had been looking forward to this the whole trip!



It was a dream and we enjoyed the mood and atmosphere. At lunchtime, we took a break in an idyllic spot under palm trees, overlooking the sea. On the way back, we passed the lake from the morning and were allowed to try swimming with the horses. It turned out to be not so easy. You didn't want to hinder the horse while swimming, but at the same time you had to indicate the direction and, in the end, you had to watch out for the sandbank. It wasn't easy for the horses to get out again. Nevertheless, it was fun and a special experience. The lake was warm and we used the break to go swimming. It was a great, eventful day and everyone was in good spirits around the campfire in the evening.

Unfortunately, it started to rain at night and the next day was also rainy. Nevertheless, we set off – who wanted to miss a day of riding? Today we rode north. We rode along forest paths and enjoyed some brisk gallops – despite the wet weather, we had fun. When we arrived at the fishing village, we took a break, explored the village and were given fresh coconuts to drink and eat. Very tasty! On the way back, we decided to ride directly along the beach. We trotted or galloped shorter distances from time to time. The horses quickly lost momentum due to the sand and it was very tiring for them. Back at the camp, we took off our wet clothes, dried them over the fire and enjoyed the freshly prepared food before going on a one-hour boat trip. The weather was now on our side and it stopped raining.

The next and last day of riding brought us good weather. We rode for about two hours back to our starting point on the coast and enjoyed a few more trotting and galloping stretches.



Then it was time to say goodbye to our faithful companions. We had grown very fond of our horses and guides and had become accustomed to the cheerful atmosphere during the rides. It was difficult for us to leave everyone behind... We now had a long five-hour drive ahead of us with a stop for lunch, arriving in Antananarivo in the evening. The next morning, our smaller group set off to visit a craft market and buy some souvenirs. The market was huge, but with a little haggling we quickly found what we were looking for. We saw André and his family again for our last lunch. It was a great end to the tour! In the afternoon, we set off for the airport and had to say goodbye to this beautiful, eventful and unforgettable island. We will miss our horses, our wonderful hosts and the whole country very much and hope that we can return one day!

August 2017, Angelika Kaiser