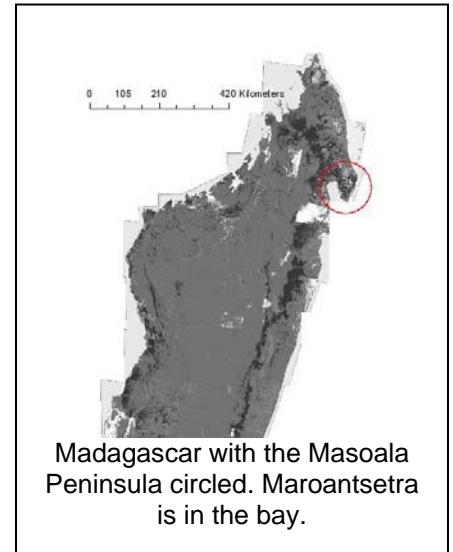


Maroantsetra part I:

I arrived in Maroantsetra on February 2, 2006. I hung out in this little port town for almost a week of my 2 week stay waiting for the responsible of Masoala National Park who was in the forest. Not that he was expecting me, I could not get a hold of him before I left for Maroantsetra. So, I am sorry to report that this is not about research because it has not started yet! If you are interested in my little blog-ish report, go ahead and read on.



My bike in front of my bungalow.

While in Maroantsetra I bought a relatively nice Italian mountain bike for about \$30. The “streets” are sandy with some patches that were paved about 20 years ago. It is excruciatingly hot here, so getting around by bike cuts travel time in half and I sweat just as much as if I were to walk. I got sunburned after having my arm out a car window for 15 minutes. I also have been buying the baskets here. Many of them are made in this area and they are very cheap and irresistible. I also bought two used tank tops today. I only brought one to town plus all of my field clothes. All of my field shirts are long sleeved to avoid biting things in the forest.

I also went to Nosy Mangabe, the easiest tourist destination. It’s about a 15 min boat ride from Maroantsetra. I went with another American woman who was in town for a health festival organized by the local peace corps folks. She had no interest in stopping for the animals, so the guide and I just let her go walk ahead. Actually, she was trying to keep moving because the mosquitoes were really bad and neither of us had the foresight to wear appropriate long pants or long sleeved shirts. I wrapped her lamba (like a sarong) around my legs and was ok.



Nosy Mangabe.



We saw *Varecia variegata variegata*, ie. the black and white ruffed lemur,

An old black and white ruffed lemur. He has a radio collar on and a balding head. People haven't put radio collars on these guys I think since the late 1980s.

a leaf-tailed gecko,



many little green and black frogs (the guide gave me its scientific name, but I can't remember it),

a chameleon laying her eggs in a hole she dug along the trail,



and two very pretty snakes. I touched one of them (pictured below) and he did not really like it. His reaction was not to bite me, though. Even if it was, they aren't poisonous as far as we know.



The guide who took us to Nosy Mangabe (he goes by Claudio or Ramiandrisoa) worked with me 3 years ago. I apparently was his first tourist, even though I told him I was supposed to be a researcher and not a tourist. Same difference he said. I felt so bad because last time he was acting as a porter since he was a guide-in-training, thus he carried my giant and very uncomfortable pack. He developed a sore on his shoulder and refused to go on the second expedition I took. Now he is an official guide and can speak English pretty well. He even carried my bag around, which was much smaller for the half-day hike than the 8-day trek across rural Madagascar last time.

I am quite a spectacle here. Even though there are 3 Peace Corps volunteers in the region and a few other vazaha (foreigners), I get the feeling that I am still really funny looking to most people. All my actions seem novel, like the fact that I bought laundry soap and mosquito coils. I attracted the attention of some kids who narrated my actions in Malagasy during this particular purchase. Yes, I am buying soap and mosquito coils. Yes, I am getting back on my bike. Yes, now I am going back to Cocoa Beach, where my little bungalow awaits me (and for the most part is spider-less).



I went to the beach the other day with a couple of other vazaha in town. It's about a 15 minute walk from where I am. I didn't have a suit so I just went in up to my knees in my pants. Two little boys became my "friends" and splashed around me. When I was ready to get out, they followed. The girl who sells cold juice and yogurt in plastic baggies came by, so I bought some for myself and the boys and the two other vazaha. This kept the girl who sells the cold juice hanging around for some time. I sat on the sand and my audience of the two boys and the juice girl while they spoke to me in Malagasy. They were trying to teach me words. It was cute. It became un-cute when adults came over and just hovered and stared. I didn't know what to say to them really, except the local version of "hello." A toothless man came by and repeated everything I tried to say, a young couple hung out smiling and laughing at me, a teen-age boy sat down and said a few things in English, then his English teacher happened to walk by so he came over, too. We chatted for a while. He wants a pen-pal in the US. I told him I would ask around because I don't count since I am in the same country as he is. Any takers??? He's a nice kid, 25, teaches junior high-aged kids. It sounds miserable; he has about 70 students per class and I think he said he teaches 4 classes.