

So why did we choose to go to Malawi & Madagascar?

Malawi – Habitat for Humanity, an organization we are part of, has a program known as Global Village. These volunteer trips offer more than just the opportunity to swing a hammer. When you travel and volunteer with Global Village, you experience the country like a local, with the locals where you meet people from around the world with all different kinds of backgrounds, races and religions. Spending time with other cultures doesn't mean just exploring the differences, but also discovering the commonalities. It's a very rewarding experience – not financially, but in every other way. Our El Paso Habitat team included Dave & Debbie Driscoll, Doug Borrett, Joann Navar and us, Carey & Donna Beamesderfer.

Madagascar - Lemurs, baobabs, rainforest, and more of the friendliest people we've ever met. Madagascar is a dream destination for nature lovers, and half the fun is getting to all these incredible attractions, traveling over some of the worst roads on the planet. Doug, Joann, Carey & Donna extended our trip to Africa on this tour of Madagascar. Dave & Debbie chose to visit some close friends of theirs in South Africa. As such, the scope of this report does not include the time Dave & Debbie spent with their friends in South Africa.

Malawi & Madagascar are only a few hundred miles apart, separated by the country of Mozambique and the Mozambique Channel, but to get there you need to fly 8,000 to 9000 miles and spend 20+ hours in airplanes (one way) from El Paso to New York (JFK) to South Africa (Johannesburg), to Lilongwe, then back to Johannesburg, then to Antananarivo, then to Ft. Dauphin, then back to Antananarivo, then to Johannesburg, then back to New York and back to El Paso. Whew!!



Our journey began on an 8:53am flight from El Paso to JFK in New York, via DFW. Four of us, Doug, Joann, Carey & Donna were taken to the JFK Inn for the night before our flight to Johannesburg. (Dave & Debbie left a few days earlier to visit Dave's brother in New York.)

After we got settled at the JFK Inn, we decided to take a walk around the town near our inn. After walking the streets for an hour we stopped at the Tropical Grill – Nigerian Restaurant for dinner. It was an experience that enlightened our senses!

Early the next morning we were shuttled to the airport where we met Dave & Debbie and our Global Village host, Rebecca Bitner. Together we shared a 14 hour flight from JFK to Johannesburg, then within a couple hours were on the next flight to Lilongwe, Malawi. Clearing customs in Malawi was a bit of a challenge but we made it through without incident. Within an hour we had boarded our rented van and began our drive to the Airbnb home that we rented for a couple days prior to the start of the Habitat mission.



Kamuzu Airport, Lilongwe, Malawi Our 15 Passenger Van Our Airbnb home for a couple days – inside one bedroom & the kitchen

We had some trouble finding the Airbnb home, due to heavy rain, limited directions and Carey learning to drive on the wrong side of the road with a stick shift van. Eventually the Airbnb owner, Steve, met us on the road and escorted us back to the home. Later that day we visited a local store for some needed supplies, had dinner at the Mediterraneo restaurant (great food), then got a chance to finally relax and chill out at the Airbnb after our long journey which afforded us very little sleep.

Day 2 in Lilongwe found us at a van repair shop, where we learned that Carey was driving with the emergency brake partially on. Luckily the La Dolce Vita restaurant was at the same place for us to have breakfast before beginning our tour of the Lilongwe Nature Sanctuary.



Mediterraneo Italian Restaurant La Dolce Vita Breakfast Entrance to the Nature Sanctuary Velvet Monkeys On the trail



A view of the river Thick rainforest trail Local school-kids enjoying a field trip at the Nature Sanctuary

Later that day we drove to a local craft & produce market to get a “feel” of the culture & life in the city. →

That night we ate dinner at the Mediterraneo restaurant, again, by unanimous consent. Great place to eat.



On day 3 we returned the van to the airport and then taken by our Malawi hosts to the Golden Peacock hotel in Lilongwe for breakfast and relaxation (swimming, siteseeing, etc) for the rest of the day. This is where we met the rest of the Habitat team.



We all (the entire team, including our Malawi hosts) went to dinner at the Blue Ginger restaurant in Lilongwe and were treated to an excellent Indian/Chinese meal. (See team photo below.)



Our team – Craig Lewis (in front), back row – Reine Nyirenda, Debbie Driscoll, Dave Driscoll, Rebecca Bitner, John Van Zanten, Ian Boros. Middle row – 3 Malawi hosts, Michaela Morantz, Donna Beamesderfer, Carey Beamesderfer. Front row – Malawi host, Heather Yeager, Autumn Aguilera, Joann Navar & Doug Borrett.

Other than the Malawi hosts, the entire team was American except Michaela who was Canadian. Our stay at the Golden Peacock was short because the next morning we were on our way to Salima, about 70 miles from Lilongwe. After a couple brief stops we arrived at the Blue Waters hotel, our home for the next week.



Arrival at the Blue Waters resort in Salima

Beach view at Lake Malawi

The place where we ate breakfast & dinner

The food at the resort was excellent as was the service. There were a few issues typical of those experienced in many 3rd world countries (ie. loss of electricity and A/C at times, leaky faucets, etc.) but overall it was a nice place to be, especially during “happy hours.”

Team Build – Day 1: The greeting we received can best be described as unbelievably warm and friendly. The village people met us at the entrance to the area and walked, sang and danced their way in front of our van, for about a mile to the build site. Words can not describe how welcomed they must us feel. The entire village sang and danced in a hugh circle while our team gazed in amazement at the celebration that was taking place in front of us. We had finally arrived at the build site (Kumano), and they let us know how happy and blessed they were that we were there. Only then did we realize how blessed we were to be there for them.



After a safety briefing by the lead Malawi construction coordinator, and putting on our safety vests, gloves, etc. we began the work of laying the foundation using concrete block (CMU). We then filled the interior of the foundation with dirt from around the area. Water, lunch and cold drinks were provided for us everyday.



By the end of the day we knew we had all worked very hard. We were happy to tolerate the heat, humidity and heavy lifting as we observed the happy, smiling faces of the 50-60 native boys and girls who were always present at the site cheering us on. They made it fun.



Most of these boys and girls were from 2-8 years old. They were always smiling and laughing at the simplest things, such as seeing their face in our cameras, or even on the shiny surface of the car bumper. They were truly amazing kids. We all slept well that night.

Team Build – Day 2: Today began with filling up the balance of the foundation with dirt, moving bricks from the main pile to each specific location around the foundation. Our team formed a line and passed each brick down the line, one at a time – a human assembly line. The home began to take shape as we laid each brick in place following the string level and calls for mortar. During our break we had an opportunity to visit the existing home of the family we were building the new home for. Their current home could best be described as a glorified outhouse with a leaky roof. The family we were building the home for consisted of one young woman, her 3 natural born children and one orphaned child who she was raising with the family. The husband had died earlier and this small, frail woman was the sole support for these 4 kids. Later that day we toured the village with the 50-60 boys and girls who were proudly holding our hands for the entire 45 minute walk. We stopped at the village well and took turns pumping water to fill buckets they had ready for the event.



Brickwork beginning. Bricks piled high.



Donna at entrance to existing home.



Inside family's home



All of us at the well, pumping water

We all did stretching exercising at the end of each day and looked forward to “happy hour” upon our return to the hotel. Each day at 6:30pm we would have a debriefing session, led by our team leader, Rebecca and host coordinator Tao. We would talk about all the positive and negative things of the day and suggest ideas for the next day's work or the next team build. Note: We are one of many teams who have worked with Habitat Malawi throughout the country. Their ultimate goal is to build 50,000 homes for families in need. To-date they have completed close to 44,000 homes and will continue building for the next few years. Habitat for Humanity teams from all over the world have been working hard to complete this ambitious goal which many would describe as miraculous.



Touring the village with the boys and girls. They loved holding our hands as we walked down the roads and paths, weaving in and out of their homes and yards.



Team Build – Day 3: This was a day of hard work for everyone. Spent lots of time moving bricks, laying bricks and installing scaffolding. Some of the team was sent to another site to help build a latrine for the next team coming to the site. Each home also includes a stand-alone latrine made of the same brick that is used for the house. The result is a solid latrine facility with a hole in the middle for their use. *(See photos on the next page.)*



A "work-in-progress" latrine



The inside of the latrine – Yes that's it!



The finished latrine



Work continuing on the home – installation of scaffolding.



Working from the scaffolding

Team Build – Day 4: Window and doors frames are installed, and the balance of the brick work is completed. Most of the afternoon was spent leveling the dirt in each room of the house in preparation for the concrete overlay. After each floor was leveled we positioned all of the remaining broken bricks on the floor to serve as filler (like rebar). We had some free time in the afternoon, so several of the ladies from our team conducted a crayon coloring class with the boys & girls in the area. That evening, for happy hour, our Malawi hosts prepared a special treat for us. They took us on a ferry boat cruise on Lake Malawi.



Completing the brick and window and door frame installation



Coloring book class with the kids in the area



Team Picture with the family – Almost done!



Happy hour cruise on Lake Malawi



Our team – on board

Team Build – Day 5: Light construction activity today. Helped unload the roofing materials and painted the beams prior to installation. After lunch we were on our way to a local craft market for some souvenir shopping. Relaxed at the pool for the balance of the afternoon, had some laundry done, then happy hour and dinner.



Preparing to unload the roofing timbers



Stacking the roofing galvanized metal sheets



Preparing for the roofing installation



Souvenir shopping at a local craft market

Team Build – Day 6: Today was a day of celebration. Our Habitat team was taken to a special meeting place in the village where we were honored by everyone in the community. The entire population of the village was here for the dedication ceremony, including all the village chiefs and elders. The ceremony included speeches by our Malawi Habitat hosts and our team leader; introductions and presentations of award certificates to each member of the team, followed by special tribal costume singing & dancing by the people of the village. This was a very special time for all of us, particularly with the family present – lots of fun.



Getting ready for the dedication ceremony



Preparing the children for the ceremony



Ladies from our team in their new dresses



The tribal chiefs



Award presentation to Joann Navar



Award presentation to Doug Borrett



Award presentation to the Driscoll's



← The family

Tasiyana Lackson – Age 32, and her 5 children (1 missing in this photo)

Mpatuluana -12, Mayesco – 9, Misheck – 7, Deborah – 5 and Harold – 3

Tasiyana lost her husband in November 2017.



Award presentation to Carey & Donna



Team photo with the family after the dedication

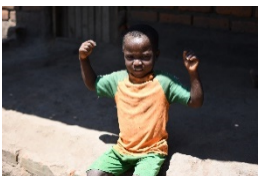


Our team serving lunch to the family & friends



Enjoying our time with the family

This is the end of phase 1 of our journey. Before we go to Madagascar I would like you to meet some of the people of this village. (Photos below are courtesy of Craig Lewis, one of the members of our team.)



Some of the people of Kumano Village – Traditional Authority Kalonga in Salima District – Malawi, Africa

Part 2 – Madagascar

Our trip to Madagascar involved an overnight stay in Johannesburg at the Garden Court Inn hotel. Six of us, Carey – Donna, Dave – Debbie, Doug & Joann had dinner that night in the hotel at Rosie O’Grady’s Pub. The next morning Dave & Debbie flew to their friend’s home in South Africa while the other four of us were on our way to Antananarivo – the capital city of Madagascar. We cleared customs quickly and found our driver – Eddie waiting for us at the exit. Traffic was horrendous and the roads were not well maintained so it took us 5 hours to reach our first destination – the Verona Lodge in Andasibe National Park, an incredibly beautiful rainforest lodge.



Driving from the airport through the city and the surrounding countryside to reach the Verona Lodge

We drove over this bridge to get to the lodge



Photos from around and inside the lodge and bungalows

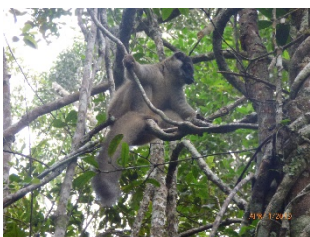
Since we were on a whirlwind tour of Madagascar we only stayed here one night. The next morning we were taken on a walking tour of Andasibe National Park – our first opportunity to see lemurs in the wild. Enroute we stopped at an abandoned train station, which inspired Doug to question Eddie why the station and the track we’ve seen all the way from the city, are not being used. During our hike we spotted the following lemur species: bamboo, brown, indri and sifaka.



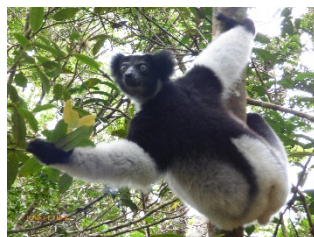
The railroad station near the entrance to the park

Welcome to Andasibe National Park

Doug, Joann, Carey & Donna on the trail



Bamboo Lemur



Indri Lemur



Brown Lemur



Large snail on our path

After the hike we were on the road again, this time heading fro the Palmarium Lodge. To get there we had to drive on a dirt road that can barely be described as a road – more like a creek bed after an earthquake. Potholes would be considered a minor inconvenience compared to what we drove across. We arrived at the Orania Lodge where us and our luggage was loaded into a river boat headed for the lodge about 10 miles upstream.



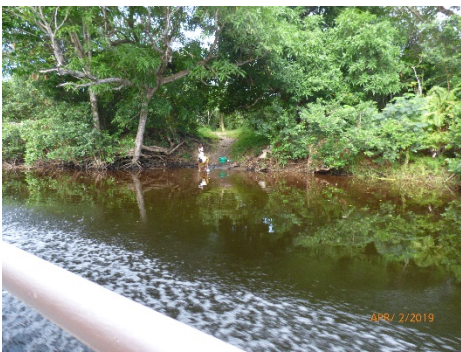
Arrival at the Orania Lodge



Loading our luggage on the river boat



On board heading for the Palmarium Lodge



Views from the river boat as we cruised along



Kids swimming in the river

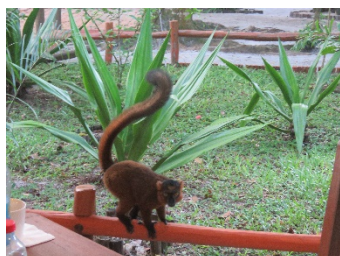


Arrival at the dock at the Palmarium Lodge

Accessible only by boat the Palmarium Lodge offered a clean and spacious room but without A/C. Within the nearby forests there are 10 different lemur species that can be found and, although wild, some are very confident, so it was a great opportunity to get close to these creatures for some fantastic photos. We had lunch when we arrived, complete with lemurs – one even stole some bread off our table.



Lunch with the lemurs



Lemur looking for a snack

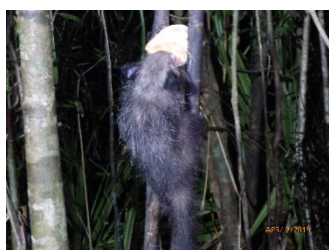


Entrance to the bar and reception area



Donna relaxing at our room

That night we went looking for the nocturnal aye-aye lemur and found them and a small snake.



After a brief happy hour we went to our room and retired for the night. The next morning, after breakfast, we were taken on a guided tour of the reserve where we got to meet the lemurs up close and personal.



Later that day we were back on the boat to return to Antananarivo, stopping for a late lunch at the Varona Lodge restaurant – we had chicken and an appropriate beverage. Beer for everyone and a Fanta Orange for Carey. :>) We arrived at the Belvedere Hotel in the center of Antananarivo around 8:00pm and had to leave the next morning at 3:00am to catch our flight to Ft. Dauphin.

We met our guide Mbola and a driver at the airport and proceeded to drive 3-1/2 hours to the Berenty Reserve. The Berenty Reserve, a private wildlife reserve in Southern Madagascar. It has been the focus of scientific research on lemurs for over 40 years. ***It is also one of Madagascar's premier tourist destinations.*** Most television programs about Madagascar show Berenty's ringtailed lemur troops sauntering with tails in the air, and Berenty's white sifaka dancing over the ground or ricocheting between thorn-studded trees.

The de Heaulme family, owners of Berenty Estate, founded a sisal plantation in 1936 beside the Mandrare river in agreement with local clans of the Tandroy tribe. There they conserved 2500 acres of natural forests maintained as reserves to the present. The largest fragment, the 500 acre Berenty Reserve proper, includes closed canopy gallery forest of ancient tamarind trees, drier open scrub, and the surreal "spiny forest" of southern Madagascar. It is home to six species of lemur, the south's largest colony of Madagascar fruit bats, and 103 bird species, 56 of whom breed in the reserve.

Diverse cultures and societies intersect at Berenty. There are scientists and their students of many nations, tourists, TV crews, Tandroy employees in sisal and tourism, and different forms of lemur society. The gallery forest was formed between the present Mandrare River and one of its ancient arms: rich, well-watered soil in a dry land. It holds extremely dense natural lemur populations with several hundred of each species per square kilometer. At the "Tourist Front" even denser populations feed on introduced trees and tourist food. The gradient from human-enriched to wet to dry means that startlingly different habitats are here, offering many opportunities for research.

This was our home for two nights. The road trip that we thought would take 3-1/2 hours, actually took 8 hours. Our comfortable 2-wheel drive van made it about half way, over the worst roads on the planet, until we encountered a narrow bridge that was blocked by a large truck pulling a cargo carrier behind it. The cargo carrier wheel on the right side had dropped off the narrow road surface of the bridge and was stuck. Trucks, cars, motorcycles and everything else had to wait until the problem was resolved. Our guide made a quick call to get a 4-wheel drive vehicle for us to detour around the problem bridge, however, after waiting 2 hours for that to arrive and transferring our luggage to it, the transmission went out only two blocks from where we started. So, once again, we were stuck until the bridge issue was resolved.



The road trip from Ft. Dauphin to the Berenty Reserve – lousy roads but incredible scenery with a unique cultural experience.



----- Following the road, learning more about life in Madagascar -----

A local cemetery



----- The truck stuck on the bridge -----

People walking through the creek around the bridge

So what do we do? No food and no way around for hours. We made the best of the situation by going to school for orphans in the village. We were marooned in the village of Ranopiso and jumped at the opportunity to meet the headmaster, teacher and students of the school. We could not contain their excitement – we were some of the first American’s (white people) to spend time with them. Other tourists drive through the village without stopping to meet anyone. This was a special event for them, and a very interesting & challenging diversion from our planned itinerary. It was great fun watching the boys & girls react to our requests for songs & photos.



The students in front of their school

Inside one classroom. It doubles as a home for these orphans. -- Teacher --

The students wanting their photo



The School Headmaster

----- Donna teaching the kids English -----

Two hours later we were on the road again, headed for the Berenty Reserve. We stopped for some pictures in the spiny forest and purchased a wooden lemur souvenir along the way. The spiny thicket or spiny forest of southern Madagascar is a globally distinctive ecoregion. While the island of Madagascar itself is famous for exceptional levels of endemic plants and animals, the spiny thicket is particularly outstanding with 95 percent of the plant species endemic to this region.



The spiny thicket – unique in the world

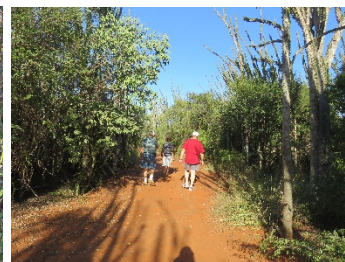
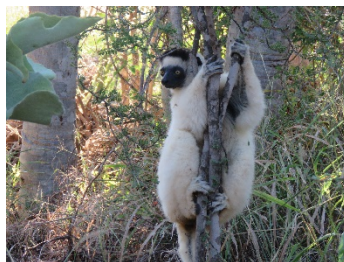


A stop for a souvenir along the way – handcarved



We are greeted by a ringtail lemur upon entering Berenty

We arrived at the resort late in the afternoon, had a meal then followed our guide on a night walk to see the nocturnal mouse lemur. We saw some but they were difficult to photograph in the dark. The next day we tried again. Ringtail and sifika lemurs were everywhere at the resort.



← The most iconic tree of the spiny forest is the baobab. There are six species native to Madagascar: at Berenty, *Adansonia za* is the most common, its leaves, seeds and fruit whose exterior looks like a velvety-green coconut can all be eaten by lemurs and humans. (There was a turtle nursery in the reserve.) -->



The reserve had its own museum, so we spend an hour or so reviewing the exhibits, then were treated to a show by the jumping sikafa lemurs. Happy hour found us hanging out at the campfire. We were the only ones there to enjoy it.



The Berenty Museum



A jumping sikafa lemurs (the video is better)



Carey & Doug at happy hour by the campfire

After breakfast the next morning we were packed up and ready for the long drive back to Ft. Dauphin. Our lead host – Dodi – met us halfway in case we had any more roadblocks on the return trip. He escorted us to Ft. Dauphin and arranged a tour of the city for us. This was a welcomed break from the lemur safari’s over the last few days and we loved seeing views of the Indian ocean. A ideal way to end our trip.



View of the Indian Ocean



Donna with Doug and or guide Mbola



Ruins of the French fort at Ft. Dauphin (back middle)

We boarded our flight from Ft. Dauphin back to Antananarivo then were taken back to the Belvedere hotel for the night. The next morning began our 40 hour journey on flights and in airports to get home. We flew from Antananarivo to Johnnesburg to JFK in New York, then on to DFW (Dallas) and finally to El Paso. We were exhausted, but agreed this was one of the most rewarding and adventurous trips we’ve ever undertaken. Throughout this 21 day experience we had met and worked with an incredible team of Habitat volunteers, built a home for a family that we didn’t know anything about; discovered a culture in Salima, Malawi of happy, native people who’s hospitality well exceeded our expectations, and we had a chance to explore the 4th largest island on Earth. Madagascar split from the Indian subcontinent around 88 million years ago, allowing native plants and animals to evolve in relative isolation. Consequently, Madagascar is a biodiversity hotspot; over 90% of its plants and wildlife are found nowhere else on Earth.

We want to thank our El Paso team-mates – Doug, Joann, Dave & Debbie for being wonderful traveling companions; Rebecca and the entire Malawi Global Village team for successfully completing our task, and to the watchful eye of heaven above for keeping us all safe. On page 15 below are a few more extraordinary photos of the trip that I couldn’t work into this report. The Malawi word for thank you is: **Zikomo**.

Safe Travels – Carey & Donna Beamesderfer - Visit our travel website at: <https://careystravelsite.shutterstock.com/>

