Madagascar: Antananarivo

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Love me, Love Me Not

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The sun is setting over Antananarivo's eastern ridge, lighting up its red-brick houses and nineteenth-century churches with a deep golden glow. In the market vendors offer fruit and flowers with an easy smile. Love me.

An old Renault taxi swerves to avoid a child, splashes into a puddle and soaks my dry-clean drills. Noxious fumes belch from its rotten exhaust. Love me not.

A horse-drawn carriage, rare these days, clip-clops by, its yellow paintwork brilliant in the sunshine. Giggling schoolchildren sit in the back on their regular run home. Love me.

A street urchin almost gets away with my wallet. Others taunt the vazaha and badger me for money. Love me not.

Around Lake Anosy the jacaranda trees are in dazzling violet bloom. Love me, please. I do.

Antananarivo is not for the faint hearted. On good days she can seduce and entice as well as any femme fatale. On bad days, she's like a lover spurned. Capricious and contradictory, Antananarivo is rarely an easy place for first time visitors.

To begin with there's the name. Even the Malagasy find Antananarivo a bit of a mouthful, so they shorten it to the much snappier Tana, the city of a thousand warriors, a reference to the soldiers that supposedly protected the early city during the reign of the revered King Andrianjaka.

Tana has difficulty making the most of its charms, but charms it has aplenty. Its trump card is its unspoilt architecture, much of it built in the pre-colonial and early colonial period. Like its unique fauna and flora, or the complex Afro-Asian origins of the Malagasy, the island's architecture is an unusual hybrid, influenced by tradition, missionary zeal and the country's brief colonial past.

Tana's historic skyline has hardly changed in a hundred years. Its streets and paths are a warren of irrationality which evolved in another age. And its higgledy-piggledy houses lie strewn over the hillsides as if they were tipped from a box of children's wooden toys.

Away from the cluttered downtown area, along the city's ridges and atop its hills, one could be in a provincial town decades ago. The city skyline, however, has survived by default rather than design. Over the last twenty-five years, a flagging economy and a series of ineffective administrations has meant that there has been little significant building activity. Should Madagascar ever get its dire financial circumstances sorted out, will that skyline be protected or sacrificed in the name of progress?

I'd like to think Antananarivo's unique townscape could be protected. Several urbanisation projects are currently underway. Independence Avenue has recently been refurbished using Japanese finance, the massive Friday market has been relocated and architects and planners are looking at ways of conserving the old city. I hope they succeed. Just in case they don't, get there soon.

Tana was founded in the sixteenth century by the Merina tribe, the most populous and dominant of Madagascar's eighteen officially recognised ethnic groups. It was not until the 1790s, however, that Antananarivo became the formal capital from where the Merina kings conquered and took control of most of the island during the nineteenth century.

European contact with Madagascar came relatively late compared with elsewhere in Africa. From 1818 onwards the London Missionary Society was instrumental in introducing Christianity to the island. But under the xenophobic Queen Ranavalona I, who reigned from 1828 until 1861, Christianity was outlawed and most Europeans forced to leave.

Soon after the Queen's death, however, Christianity became the official religion of the Merina kingdom and foreigners were admitted once more. Churches, including four memorial churches built in memory of Malagasy martyrs, sprung up throughout the city and are still an important characteristic of Tana today.

During the height of the Merina monarchy, Queen Ranavalona I ordered the construction of a royal palace of wood on the highest point of the rock of Antananarivo. A Scotsman, James Cameron, later enclosed the structure in stone, and

the palace came to symbolise the city and Merina domination.

Today, however, the Queen's Palace is little more than a shell since it was ravaged by fire in November 1995. Restoration plans are in hand although one can still wander in the grounds and admire the stone detailing and, above all, the magnificent views that the monarchs once enjoyed.

If the Queen's Palace comes as a disappointment, a shadow of its former self, the Prime Minister's residence nearby is a complete surprise. Here, the missionary architect, William Poole, threw restraint to the winds to produce a pink and white fantasy palace, a baroque composite of brick and stone and glass. Four mushroom-capped towers frame a large central room lit by a towering glass dome. Sometimes known as the Andafiavaratra Palace, the residence now houses the city's main museum displaying artifacts rescued from the disastrous palace fire.

Most visitors walk past both palaces on their trips to the picturesque upper town. Few, however, venture down the cobbled side streets and narrow lanes that wind their way down the hillsides. To discover surprises in Tana, however, one must wander, though preferably not alone.

Behind the Andafiavaratra Palace, down a narrow cobbled footpath, lies the most complete entrance gate of the old city. Known as "the roofed gateway" on account of its thatched roof (or Anhadibevava - "large opening"), it probably dates back to the late eighteenth century. Its original stone disc, almost two-and-a-half metres in diameter, is still in place and it was here that the first European ambassadors, traders and missionaries would have passed before being received by the reigning monarch.

Better-known, and well worth the trip, is the former summer retreat of the Malagasy royalty at Ambohimanga, literally the "blue hill", twenty-one kilometres north of the capital. At its summit, within a mammoth stone enclosure pierced by seven gates, stands another palace built by - wait for it - Andrianampoinimerina (1787-1810). His full name was actually

Andrianampoinimerinandriantsimitoviaminandriampanjaka, but perhaps it should be further shortened to Andrian! The palace is probably the oldest extant dwelling in Madagascar and gives some idea of the lifestyle of the Merina aristocracy two hundred years ago.

Climbing up to the palace can work up a bit of a thirst, but relief is at hand. Nearby stands one of the best sited restaurants in the area, Le Restaurant d'Ambohimanga Rova, with magnificent views across the countryside back to Tana. The proprietor organises art exhibitions, with music and dancing most Sundays.

For city wanderers Tana has many well placed restaurants. A morning or afternoon walk can be planned to end at a well-known haunt. Indeed, things have been looking up in the gastronomy stakes of late. Since Madagascar opted for democracy in the early 1990s latent buds have begun to bloom. Where eating was once limited to top hotels or pavement shacks, the choice of restaurants has mushroomed.

Residents and visitors can now choose from Japanese and Indonesian restaurants, Chinese and Italian, as well as the traditional French-influenced cooking and Malagasy dishes. Some of the best restaurants operate from restored historic houses. Tana's new breed of restaurant owner, however, often seems to lack inspiration when it comes to names. Two of the best of the new are Le Restaurant and La Maison ("The House"). No prizes for originality there, though the food is good and the setting memorable. Another well-sited and popular place is the Rova Grill, a trendy cafe in the upper town, with its incomparable views over Tana and the rice paddies beyond.

Leave the main thoroughfares, wander the back paths of Faravohitra, explore the upper town, or walk to and beyond the Queen's Palace, and one gets glimpses of the country in the city: grass green and brick red, graceful columns and painted balconies, far from the downtown clutter of the railway lines.

Since I moved to Madagascar in 1993, Tana has changed considerably. There are more cars, inevitably, and therefore more congestion. Crime shows little sign of slowing down. A consumer economy has begun to take hold. There are more shops and craft galleries than before. But Tana is still a handful of urban villages mixed and mingled along its famous ridges.

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