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MADAGASCAR

This issue of Upton Voice begins by featuring a superb report from Sixth Form Student Anna Potticary who was one of the participants in an incredible school visit to Madagascar last summer.

Madagascar There and back again, a trip of a lifetime

Back in 2011, Year 11 and 12 Biology students were told about Operation Wallacea, a non profit conservation organization that runs projects all over the world. We were given the opportunity to go on one of the expeditions and there was an incredible surge of interest with well over 80 students attending the first meeting. Over a year later, there we were, at Manchester Airport at 2 in the morning, bags packed and bleary eyed, but buzzing with excitement and raring to go. In the time that had passed our numbers had dwindled to a dedicated 30 and we had fundraised events from our Halloween Ball to bag packs, having lots of fun along the way.

We flew to Paris and then onto Antananarivo (or Tana) the Capitol of Madagascar. We arrived in the dead of night and got some sleep before making the journey by car. Even though it was early when we set off, Tana was alive and bustling with people everywhere selling everything imaginable from chickens to electronics. It took two days of driving through spectacular landscapes to reach the first camp, unfortunately we also saw sections of rainforest be burnt and deforested, damage which will take decades to recover. I went to Madagascar thinking the people did this maliciously, but it is often the only option they have to survive, and if we want to stop the damage and illegal logging, alternatives need to be offered.

The first camp was called Mahajanga and once we'd arrived we ate a lunch of rice and beans, and were thrown straight into the routine with a quick guide to the camp and surrounding village, and then a lecture after dinner- more rice!



Breakfast each day would be either an odd (and not very tasty) rice pudding, or buki-buki, which were like crispy doughnut balls and were amazing when sprinkled with sugar.

Each day our groups would be assigned to different projects, which were run by dissertation students. We each did two per day with the option of a third at night, one of which included a frog hunt where we went to a rice paddy field and all got very muddy trying to catch frogs. We found 94, all of which had to be measured and weighed. Projects were split into different categories; lemurs, herps (reptiles), bird counts, wetland birds, small mammals and forest structure plots. Any interesting finds we would take back to the camps to get measurements which were then put into ongoing surveys. Amongst other things, they are looking to measure the biodiversity of the area, so conservation measures can be put in place. The second camp was about 4 hours away from the first one, but the walk was very enjoyable- especially wading through nice cool streams- even if it was quite hard going. It was situated in a valley next to a breathtaking lake, which was covered in purple lilies and was home to some very elusive crocodiles. The camp had a great atmosphere and was very informal, some activities being relaxing like ultimate makutra- a team sport using a hard Madagascan fruit the mukutra as a ball- and stargazing. Also we mixed a lot more with the Madagascan staff; it was great to talk to them and really gave us a sense of the vast differences between our lives.

The food was great (still lots of rice), but there were some home comforts like chips every now and then. Because the camp was out in the middle of nowhere,

there was a lot more wildlife. On one of the walks we were really quiet and had 6 brown lemurs all around us, which was a truly incredible moment. On our last night in Matserdroy, we had a campfire, some music and dancing, and samples of local delicacies. This was a great way to round off our time there. Nose Be was our third camp and was where we all learned to dive, as well as having lectures on reef ecology. It was really interesting learning about how the coral, the sea grass and the mangroves are all so intrinsically linked together. The reefs there were recovering and so unable to support any top predators like sharks, but still had a surreal beauty, and we saw some turtles and lots of smaller fish. It was a great place to learn how to dive and even for the more experienced divers, there was still a lot to learn. We went on a trip to the local soft coral farm and to see the condition of the mangroves for ourselves, which had been deforested causing sedimentation and damaging the reefs.

The trip was incredible, a real once in a life time opportunity. We were all treated like adults and were trusted which meant we all had a lot of fun and got to know each other really well. I think we all made some life time friends and certainly all took something from the trip that will stay with us for the rest of our lives.

On our very first day we were told that the most important skill we would learn on that trip would be learning how to see, but I didn't just come away being able to spot lizards and chameleons on trees, I think I now see my whole life in a different way, how much we take for granted, and how little we really need to be happy in this world.



Left to right: Rhino-horned beetle, Luke the snake-handler, laundry time.



Many thanks to Anna for sharing her experience of this wonderful trip with us. The students and staff who went on this expedition felt privileged to be involved. If anyone ever doubted the potential of educational visits to make a profound and lasting impact on the participants, Anna's article should convince you to have no further doubt.

