

City of Thousands

by Sherry Olson

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Cet article est une description impressionniste d'un séjour à Tananarive, capitale de Madagascar: des effluves, des images, des couleurs et surtout l'utopie d'une "ville de milliers".



Layout by: Angus Cheng and Marie Claude Lambert

Our personal space is a shell of personality and culture. Our personal spaces "meet" in the public places of the city—the markets and streets. Like snails, we explore and retreat.

It was our hunch that by exploring Antananarivo we might learn something about city living. "City of thousands," Antananarivo, is the highland capital of the Malagasy Republic, the "Great Red Island" in the Indian Ocean. The houses, brick-red, climb the slopes, brick red, from the rice paddies and brick kilns at 1 130 m elevation, to the palace two centuries old at 1 450 m. The city is laced together by two tunnels, some serpentine streets and a hundred kilometers of stairways, built in granite by *corvée* labour.

There were four of us, the so-called standard North American family, with a command of the Malagasy language little more than *Please*, *Thank you*, and *Excuse me*, *Sir*. As dumb as snails, we had suddenly to rely on our "feelers", our senses, the silent languages of face and gesture to relate to people, and on the cues of space and place to make sense of society.

September 20

The search for a place to live gives our exploration of the city a curious intensity. I look into each window thinking how it feels to look out.

September 23

Already we are meeting in the streets people we know. Is it a small town? 700,000. Is it because we are all on foot? Finding a dwelling is a great relief. But it closes the doors on so many other possibilities. I haven't satisfied my thirst to possess the whole town. At the Friday market, which expands and spills up the stairways, we acquire in 2 hours our entire furnishings (\$65).

Truckloads of young soldiers go by singing. There are no policemen.

The babies are wearing wool caps and leggings before noon, by afternoon little square straw hats. Every woman has a baby.

September 25

A still night at the end of the dry season. Bush fires. A thin line of orange jagged along the hillside above the Pasteur Institute.

Alleys of colour in the market: the tables of herbs, bright wooden and glass beads, aloe leaves, roots, magic twists of wood. Garden seeds: a pinch of carrot, a pinch of lettuce. 5 p.m. in the market: watch out for the man with the hose. His is a job I covet.

The sidewalks and curbs open up; the pipes are so shallow that the water is warm at midday.

From the rice paddies we hear frogs at night, crickets, a chorus of dogs. Piano hymns. A tenor sax.

Here at the end of the world, apparently beyond the reach of the post office, we find water hyacinth, the weeds from our front lawn, Coca-Cola, Bata, and Nestlé.

October 26

Friday. Bought a large blue umbrella. The sky is covered a little earlier each day.

Up the last stairway, always in a sweat. This time we have an eight-foot pole, a basket of eggs, and the schoolbag. Discovered a Saturday market: live turkeys, sewing machines at work, raw manioc, cooked manioc, and fourteen barbers eager to get Eric into their clutches for a 1928 haircut.

Sunday morning: 42 out of 100 vehicles coming down the hill are taxis. On a weekday morning, of 100 vehicles passing the post office, 16 are driven or occupied by foreigners. There are perhaps a thousand foreigners in the

city.

Friday at dawn 350 people per hour are moving down our street on foot toward the tunnel and market. By 8 a.m. 900 per hour. About a tenth are coming down our stairway.

On the way to school we meet a small truck pushed by ten or eleven men. As Julian says it is quiet and non-polluting. Behind them three or four others are pushing a jeep.

Friday again. A truckload of furniture is being pushed up the hill. Taxi fares depend on the grade to destination. "Carry, madame? 10 francs? Carry to the car?" I am supposed to have a car. Waiting for Julian, I have a ringside seat on the cement apron of the creamery, to watch pepper-pounding. I am instantly registered in that small neighbourhood of the market. Families serving coffee, making change, minding the babies. Two young women sitting amicably back to back on a wood crate. Little brothers riding in cardboard boxes. An adorable baby in a bright yellow bunting parked under a table of avocados. What will he unpack from a round basket covered with straw? Today we discovered the *mibas* fruits, like mini-apricots.

October 30

Rain began just as we left the house. Our indignation at gutters which spout overhead. We are compensated by a double-decker rainbow.

On the way to Ingrid's school (35 minutes) we meet each morning head on, on one side of the street, 380 people. 380 Malagasy faces. But Ingrid has them all catalogued by their fingernails. I just cannot focus on fingernails. This morning in the tunnel a column of motorcycle police whizzes by, a sharp whistle, and a black limousine. Why do the young, including ours, always whistle, sing, holler, or honk in the tunnel? I manage to get around a fellow carrying on his head a bale of straw as wide as the sidewalk, about 5 feet.

November 15

A band of school girls in navy and white uniforms, very smart, take off their shoes to wade home. In Analakely at evening we are wading up to the knee. By dark the rice paddies are overflowing.

Downpours. How shall I manoeuvre between the light poles and the walls with my huge umbrella? A boy Eric's age invites me to share my umbrella as far as the post office.

Commiseration and giggles of strangers in the rain. The automobile is the re-entry of the primitive. It splashes red mud on the white *lambas*.

Four men are carrying a refrigerator up the stairway. Is there a social stairway? The palace is at the top.

December 12

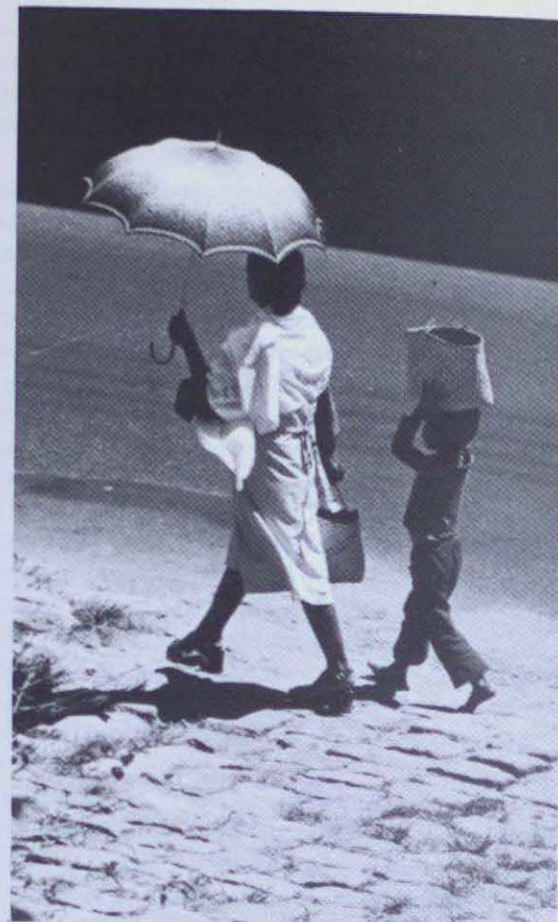
There is no shade on either side of the street. Above the Cenacle, a hidden neighbourhood of courts, a stairway of people from the Coast. Springs. A backroom of little boys singing *Gloria in Excelsis Deo*.

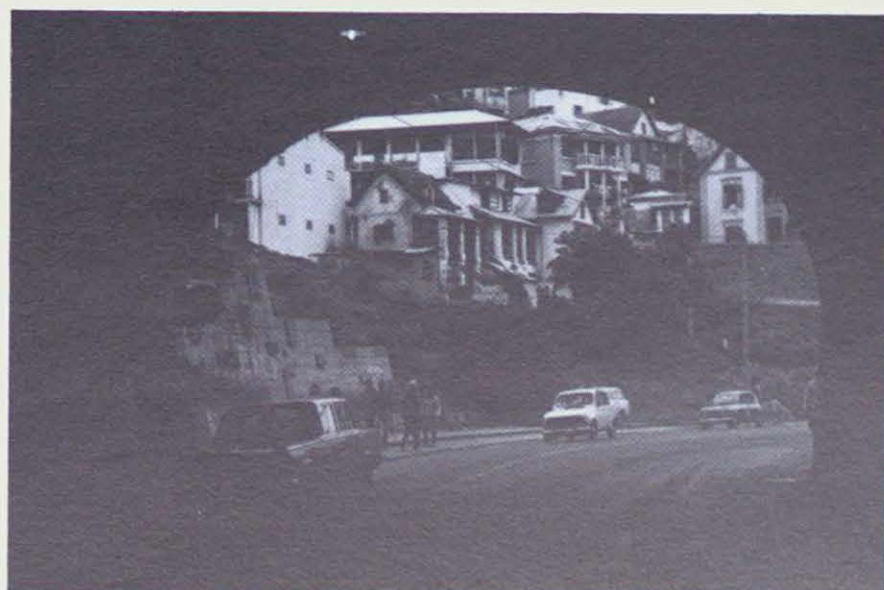
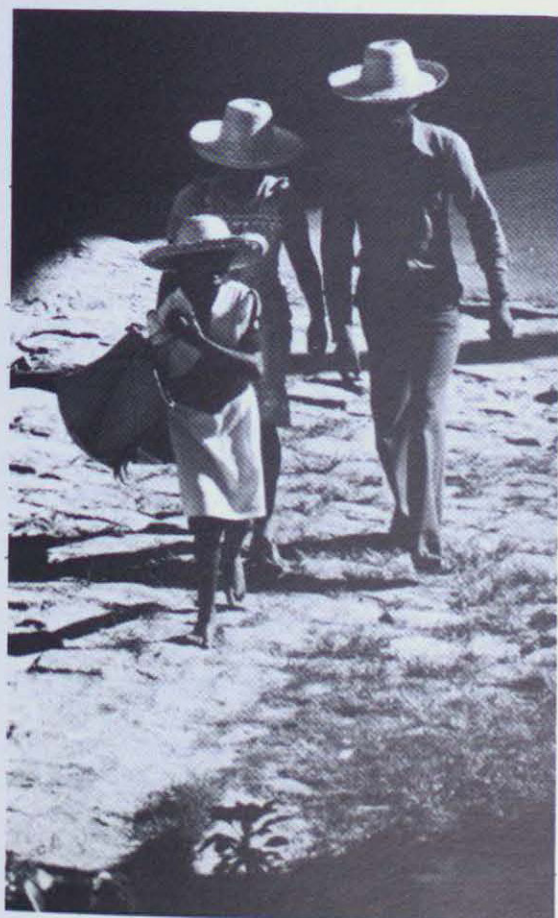
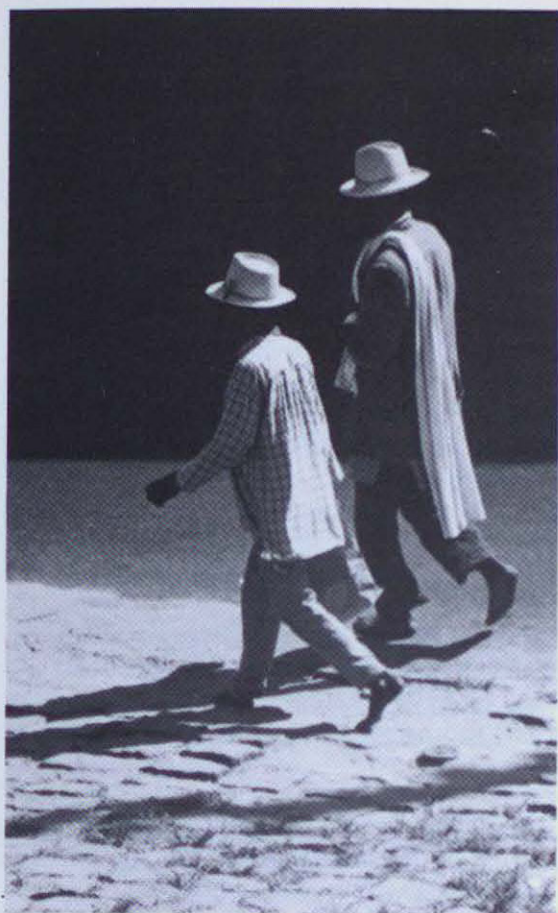
December 16

If our first impression was one of filth, we gradually discover the miracle of sun and people's energies. Laundry spread on bushes, on grass, on fences. Washlines festoon all the verandas and lanes. Torrents of rain wash the streets. The occasional fecal whiff of dog, chicken, or human being in some stairway. The chickens in the gutters lay such delicious eggs.

Dawn. Mists in the valley. A few people, well wrapped in









yards of cotton, pad quietly through the streets. No cars. The cool grey garden below the window recovers first its white blossoms, then its touches of pink and red. The brick walls grow warm. As the sun comes up, the church bell clangs at Ambanidia, a drum beats at the prison, the army bugler blows (off key), and the roosters go into a frenzy. Shutters open, water runs, men come out to pee, sunlight blazes.

Civilization is a crowded street. Men gauge accurately where they spit. A lady carries a large parasol, without grazing anyone or seeming to move aside.

December 17

A brilliant blue day. Huge cumulus towers at evening. More stars than I have ever seen. (This coincided with the Berenice cyclone alert.)

All the world is a sundial. The sunrise is moving around the horizon on the waves of hills. One hour line-up to get peanut oil. There has been a line of 200 steadily for two days.

Exorbitant shiny paper balls and cut-outs are for sale in the market, and tiny Christmas trees of pink, blue, and orange plastic loops. A grand and hideous Père Noel in red robes with red revolutionary banners is installed at Ambohijatovo.

December 24

When Eric carried home a two-foot silver pine, the market boys began to sing, "*Mon vert sapin...*" Is it possible to be more conspicuous?

At 5 a.m. musical auto horns zigzag through the switch-back streets across the valley, recreating a space. The bus drivers share the whistle of the *fitatra* (bird).

In our stairway is a store as big as a closet. It is occupied by a boy, a mother, a baby, a next-to-least one who sits on the loaves of bread, and a cat.

January 30

In the pencils-and-scissors stalls near the flower market a young shoeshine fellow, dull-witted, is being teased to desperation.

7:30 a.m. A scatter of broken glass in the street. Doubtless a windshield. I have not seen broken glass for weeks. The whole city is like a private yard, because we can go barefoot in it. The women who sweep the streets so fiercely every morning seem always to have brand new brooms.

There is room in Antananarivo for all that is countryside—wild fruit trees, soup greens off the slope, chameleons, cattle. There is room for the beggars. Each has his own spot. The old man in white with a long Chinese beard and wounded eyes begs outside the Swiss pastry shop. A small immobile boy (or girl?) at the top of the glasses-and-newspapers stairway greets each passerby with delight.

Everyday now we meet bands of National Service teenagers in their green overalls, jogging with their soldier-trainers or taking the stairs two at a time.

Rumour runs of plague among the rats in Analakely. To combat them, a gang is cutting weeds above Ambohijatovo. The slopes are so steep, the men have roped themselves to trees.

The eternal Triangle inhabits our stairway: a woman with her leg in a plaster cast, the man who hit her, and the sympathetic young fellow. And the bottle.

March 8

Three Malagasy students coming up the stairway address me politely in Russian.

March 10

Ingrid and I watch a young fellow from the bar across the street toss an old raggedy man, dead drunk, into the tall weeds of the stairway.

Saturday. A troop of Jeanettes (Girl Guides) are climbing the stairs to Ambatovinaky, single file. Each carries a stick of kindling. In the hedge, I admire a moth with tiny gold flecks on his wings, a white belly, a sharp black water line, and chrome yellow portholes.

March 29

On the Post Office steps, one old man shaves another while the news vendors *kibitz*.

April 3

I wait 30 or 40 minutes for the milk to arrive at the creamery in Analakely. Analakely is a living-room. We all make ourselves at home. A chain of paper dolls—seven husky young men hefting bright red crates of milk—come dashing and giggling through the lane of vegetables.

April 7

Delicious smells, weedy and flowery in the stairway. A mounting chorus of crickets and cicadas.

The world is so wet it smells of mildew. Lightning.

Two men carrying five-meter beams disappear down a narrow stairway.

April 14

Ingrid and I again notice horse manure on the sidewalk in Ambohitatovo, and wonder. Suddenly down the street from Antananirenana comes a young and terrified horse, saddled, riderless, straight into the morning traffic. As we keep climbing the hill, a young soldier follows on the run, stick in hand and a sheepish smile.

April 15

Scarlet poincianas have come into bloom, overwhelming the stairway. The hills are dotted with yellow sunflowers and purple morning-glory.

8 a.m. At the top of the grand stairway in Antananirenana, where the sweepers are dusting off the street for market, a raggedy man emerges from a taxi and unloads a trunkful of roses.

Sunday morning we met in our stairway two young ladies elegantly attired in black, each carrying a huge funeral wreath. An impeccable matron in black silk pinstripe. Later in the other direction a dozen people in white togas and *lambas*, with parasols. A notice on the neighbour's gatepost.

May 22

As I crossed the square newly dedicated to Ho Chi Minh, I heard a thunk. A taxi-*brousse* has lost a wheel. The passengers seem to have rolled down to the rear and are sticking their heads out.

May 23

The babies are wearing their woolies again. Met a very chic young man in a winter coat, sophisticated fur collar rolled up, barefoot. In the tunnel a man is carrying on his shoulder a small wood coffin covered with a white cloth. In our stairway two men are removing each other's lice.

May 27

Ingrid and I were riding a bus, wedged in by a rural crowd. When we stopped opposite the prison, the lot got off, including a soldier and his two barefoot prisoners, all handcuffed together.

Eric showed me the stairway where you can always see a fat rat. He has had the sense to say no to a puppy. He attended the *accouchement* in our stairway. How would we take home a puppy?

