

DOUGLAS ADAMS AND MARK CARWARDINE



LAST CHANCE TO SEE

Douglas Adams

and Mark Carwardine

Last Chance to See ...

For Alain le Garsmeur

With special thanks to
Sue Freestone and Lisa Glass
for editing, research and being there

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Twig Technology

This isn't at all what I expected. In 1985, by some sort of journalistic accident I was sent to Madagascar with Mark Carwardine to look for an almost extinct form of lemur called the aye-aye. None of the three of us had met before. I had never met Mark, Mark had never met me, and no one,

apparently, had seen an aye-aye in years.

This was the idea of the Observer Colour Magazine, to throw us all in at the deep end. Mark is an extremely experienced and knowledgeable zoologist, working at that time for the World Wildlife Fund, and his role, essentially, was to be the one who knew what he was talking about. My role, and one for which L was entirely qualified, was to be an extremely ignorant non-zoologist to whom everything that happened would come as a complete surprise. All the aye-aye had to do was do what aye-ayes have been doing for millions of years - sit in a tree and hide.

The aye-aye is a nocturnal lemur. It is a very strange-looking creature that seems to have been assembled from bits of other animals. It looks a little like a large cat with a bat's ears, a beaver's teeth, a tail like a large ostrich feather, a middle finger like a long dead twig and enormous eyes that seem to peer past you into a totally different world which exists just over your left shoulder.

Like virtually everything that lives on Madagascar, it does not exist anywhere else on earth. Its origins date back to a period in earth's history when Madagascar was still part of mainland Africa (which itself had been part of the gigantic supercontinent of Gondwanaland), at which time the ancestors of the Madagascan lemurs were the dominant primate in all the world. When Madagascar sheered off into the Indian Ocean it became entirely isolated from all the evolutionary changes that took place in the rest of the world. It is a life-raft from a different time. It is now almost like a tiny, fragile, separate planet.

The major evolutionary change which passed Madagascar by was the arrival of the monkeys. These were descended from the same ancestors as the lemurs, but they had bigger brains, and were aggressive competitors for the same habitat. Where the lemurs had been content to hang around in trees having a good time, the monkeys were ambitious, and interested in all sorts of things, especially twigs, with which they found they could do all kinds of things that they couldn't do by themselves - digging for things, probing things, hitting things. The monkeys took over the world and the lemur branch of the primate family died out everywhere - other than Madagascar, which for millions of years the monkeys never reached. Then fifteen hundred years ago, the monkeys finally arrived, or at least, the monkey's descendants - us. Thanks to astounding advances in twig technology we arrived in canoes, then boats and finally aeroplanes, and

once again started to compete for use of the same habitat, only this time with fire and machetes and domesticated animals, with asphalt and concrete. The lemurs are once again fighting for survival.

My aeroplane full of monkey descendants arrived at Antananarivo airport. Mark, who had gone out ahead to make the arrangements for the expedition, met me for the first time there and explained the set-up.

'Everything's gone wrong,' he said.

He was tall, dark and laconic and had a slight nervous tic. He explained that he used to be just tall, dark and laconic, but that the events of the last few days had rather got to him. At least he tried to explain this. He had also lost his voice, he croaked, due to a lot of recent shouting.

'I nearly telexed you not to come,' he said. 'The whole thing's a nightmare. I've been here for five days and I'm still waiting for something to go right. The Ambassador in Brussels promised me that the Ministry of Agriculture would be able to provide us with two Landrovers and a helicopter. Turns out all they've got is a moped and it doesn't work.'

'The Ambassador in Brussels also assured me that we could drive right to the north, but the road suddenly turns out to be impassable because it's being rebuilt by the Chinese, only we're not supposed to know that. And exactly what is meant by 'suddenly' I don't know because they've apparently been at it for ten years.'

'Anyway, I think I've managed to sort something out, but we have to hurry,' he added 'The plane to the jungle leaves in two hours and we have to be on it. We've just got time to dump your surplus baggage at the hotel if we're quick. Er, some of it is surplus, isn't it? He looked anxiously at the pile of bags that I was lugging, and then with increasing alarm at the cases of Nikon camera bodies, lenses and tripods that our photographer, Alain le Garsmeur, who had been with me on the plane, was busy loading into the minibus.'

'Oh, that reminds me,' he said, 'I've just found out that we probably won't be allowed to take any film out of the country.'

I climbed rather numbly into the minibus. After thirteen hours on the plane from Paris I was tired and disoriented and had been looking forward to a shower, a shave, a good night's sleep and then maybe a gentle morning trying gradually to find Madagascar on the map over a pot of tea. I tried to pull myself together and get a grip. I suddenly had not the faintest idea what I, a writer of humorous science fiction adventures, was doing here. I sat

blinking in the glare of the tropical sun and wondered what on earth Mark was expecting of me. He was hurrying around, tipping one porter, patiently explaining to another porter that he hadn't actually carried any of our bags, conducting profound negotiations with the driver and gradually pulling some sort of order out of the chaos.

Madagascar, I thought. Aye-aye, I thought. A nearly extinct lemur. Heading out to the jungle in two hours' time. I desperately needed to sound bright and intelligent.

'Er, do you think we're actually going to get to see this animal? I asked Mark as he climbed in and slammed the door. He grinned at me.

'Well, the Ambassador to Brussels said we hadn't got a hope in hell,' he said, 'so we may just be in with a chance. Welcome,' he added as we started the slow pothole slalom into town, 'to Madagascar.'

Antananarivo is pronounced Tananarive, and for much of this century has been spelt that way as well. When the French took over Madagascar at the end of the last century (colonised is probably too kind a word for moving in on a country that was doing perfectly well for itself but which the French simply took a fancy to), they were impatient with the curious Malagasy habit of not bothering to pronounce the first and last syllables of place names. They decided, in their rational Gallic way, that if that was how the names were pronounced then they could damn well be spelt that way too. It would be rather as if someone had taken over England and told us that from now on we would be spelling Leicester 'Lester' and liking it. We might be forced to spell it that way, but we wouldn't like it, and neither did the Malagasy. As soon as they managed to divest themselves of French rule, in 1960, they promptly reinstated all the old spellings and just kept the cooking and the bureaucracy.

One of the more peculiar things that has happened to me is that as a result of an idea I had as a penniless hitch-hiker sleeping in fields and telephone boxes, publishers now send me round the world on expensive author tours and put me up in the sort of hotel room where you have to open several doors before you find the bed. In fact I had just arrived directly from a US author tour which was exactly like that, and so my first reaction to finding myself sleeping on concrete floors in spider-infested huts in the middle of the jungle was, oddly enough, one of fantastic relief. Weeks of mind-numbing American Expressness dropped away like mud in the shower and I was able to lie back and enjoy being wonderfully, serenely, hideously

uncomfortable. I could tell that Mark didn't realise this and was at first rather anxious showing me to my patch of floor -'Er, will this be all right? I was told there would be mattresses ... um, can we fluff' up the concrete a little for you?' and I had to keep on saying, 'You don't understand. This is great, this is wonderful, I've been looking forward to this for weeks.' In fact we were not able to lie back at all. The aye-aye is a nocturnal animal and does not make daytime appointments. The few aye-eyes that were known to exist in 1985 were to be found (or more usually not found) on a tiny, idyllic, rainforest island called Nosy Mangabe, just off the north-east coast of Madagascar to which they had been removed twenty years earlier. This was their last refuge on earth and no one was allowed to visit the island without special government permission, which Mark had managed to arrange for us. This was where our but was, and this was where we spent night after night thrashing through the rain forest in torrential rain carrying tiny feeble torches (the big powerful ones we'd brought on the plane stayed with the 'surplus' baggage we'd dumped in the Antananarivo Hilton) until . . . we found the aye-aye.

That was the extraordinary thing. We actually did find the creature. We only caught a glimpse of it for a few seconds, slowly edging its way along a branch a couple of feet above our heads and looking down at us through the rain with a sort of serene incomprehension as to what kind of things we might possibly be, but it was the kind of moment about which it is hard not to feel completely dizzy.

Why?

Because, I realised later, I was a monkey looking at a lemur.

By flying from New York and Paris to Antananarivo by 747 jet, up to Diego-Suarez in an old prop plane, driving to the port of Maroantsetra in an even older truck, crossing to Nosy Mangabe in a boat that was so old and dilapidated that it was almost indistinguishable from driftwood, and finally walking by night into the ancient rain forest, we were almost making a time journey back through all the stages of our experiments in twig technology to the environment from which we had originally ousted the lemurs. And here was one of the very last of them, looking at me with, as I say, serene incomprehension.

The following day Mark and I sat on the steps of the but in the morning sunshine making notes and discussing ideas for the article I would write for the Observer about the expedition. He had explained to me in detail the

history of the lemurs and I said that I thought there was an irony to it. Madagascar had been a monkey-free refuge for the lemurs off the coast of mainland Africa, and now Nosy Mangabe had to be a monkey-free refuge off the coast of mainland Madagascar. The refuges were getting smaller and smaller, and the monkeys were already here on this one, sitting making notes about it.

'The difference,' said Mark, 'is that the first monkey-free refuge was set up by chance. The second was actually set up by the monkeys.'

'So I suppose it's fair to say that as our intelligence has increased it has given us not only greater power, but also an understanding of the consequences of using that power. It has given us the ability to control our environment, but also the ability to control ourselves.'

'Well, up to a point,' said Mark, 'up to a point. There are twenty one species of lemur on Madagascar now, of which the aye-aye is thought to be the rarest, which just means that it's the one that's currently closest to the edge. At one time there were over forty. Nearly half of them have been pushed over the edge already. And that's just the lemurs. Virtually everything that lives in the Madagascan rain forest doesn't live anywhere else at all, and there's only about ten per cent of that left. And that's just Madagascar. Have you ever been to mainland Africa?

No.

'One species after another is on the way out. And they're really major animals. There are less than twenty northern white rhino left, and there's a desperate battle going on to save them from the poachers. They're in Zaire. And the mountain gorillas, too -they're one of man's closest living relatives, but we've almost killed them off' this century. But it's happening throughout the rest of the world as well. Do you know about the kakapo?'

'The what?'

'The kakapo. It's the world's largest, fattest and least-able-to-fly parrot. It lives in New Zealand. It's the strangest bird I know of and will probably be as famous as the dodo if it goes extinct.'

'How many of them are there??'

'Forty and falling. Do you know about the Yangtze river dolphin?'

No.

'The Komodo dragon? The Rodrigues fruitbat?'

'Wait a minute, wait a minute,' I said. I went into the but and rummaged around in the ants for one of the monkey's most prized achievements. It

consisted of a lot of twigs mashed up to a pulp and flattened out into sheets and then held together with something that had previously held a cow together. I took my Filofax outside and flipped through it while the sun streamed through the trees behind me from which some ruffed lemurs were calling to each other.

`Well,' I said, sitting down on the step again, 'I've just got a couple of novels to write, but, er, what are you doing in 1988?'

Here Be Chickens

The first animal we went to look for, three years later, was the Komodo dragon lizard. This was an animal, like most of the animals we were going to see, about which I knew very little. What little I did know was hard to like.

They are man-eaters. That is not so bad in itself. Lions and tigers are man-eaters, and though we may be intensely wary of them and treat them with respectful fear we nevertheless have an instinctive admiration for them. We don't actually like to be eaten by them, but we don't resent the very idea. The reason, probably, is that we are mammals and so are they. There's a kind of unreconstructed species prejudice at work: a lion is one of us but a lizard is not. And neither, for that matter is a fish, which is why we have such an unholy terror of sharks.

The Komodo lizards are also big. Very big. There's one on Komodo at the moment which is over twelve feet long and stands about a yard high, which you can't help but feel is entirely the wrong size for a lizard to be, particularly if it's a man-eater and you're about to go and share an island with it.

Though they are man-eaters they don't get to eat man very often, and more generally their diet consists of goats, pigs and deer and such like, but they will only kill these animals if they can't find something that's dead already, because they are, at heart, scavengers. They like their meat bad and smelly. We don't like our meat like that and tend to be leery of things that do. I was

definitely leery of these lizards.

Mark had spent part of the intervening three years planning and researching the expeditions we were to make, writing letters, telephoning, but most often telexing to naturalists working in the field in remote parts of the world, organising schedules, letters of introduction and maps. He also arranged all the visas, flights and boats and accommodation, and then had to arrange them all over again when it turned out that I hadn't quite finished the novels yet.

At last they were done. I left my house in the hands of the builders, who claimed they only had three more weeks' work to do, and set off to fulfil my one last commitment - an author tour of Australia. I'm always very sympathetic when I hear people complaining that all they ever get on television or radio chat shows is authors honking on about their latest book. It does, on the other hand, get us out of the house and spare our families the trial of hearing us honking on about our latest book.

Finally that, too, was over and we could start looking for giant lizards.

We met up in a hotel room in Melbourne and examined our array of expeditionary equipment. 'We' were Mark, myself and Gaynor Shutte, a radio producer who was going to be recording our exploits for the BBC. Our equipment was a vast array of cameras, tape recorders, tents, sleeping bags, medical supplies, mosquito coils, unidentifiable things made of canvas and nylon with metal eyelets and plastic hooks, cagoules, boots, penknives, torches and a cricket bat.

None of us would admit to having brought the cricket bat. We couldn't understand what it was doing there. We phoned room service to bring us up some beers and also to take the cricket bat away but they didn't want it. The guy from room service said that _if we were really going to look for man-eating lizards maybe the cricket bat would be a handy thing to have.

'If you find you've got a dragon charging towards you at thirty miles an hour snapping its teeth you can always drive it defensively through the covers,' he said, deposited the beers and left:

We hid the cricket bat under the bed, opened the beers, and let Mark explain something of what we were in for.

'For centuries,' he said, 'the Chinese told stories of great scaly man-eating monsters with fiery breath, but they were thought to be nothing more than myths and fanciful imaginings. Old sailors would tell of them, and would write 'Here be dragons' on their maps when they saw a land they didn't at all

like the look of.

'And then, at the beginning of this century, a pioneering Dutch aviator was attempting to island hop his way along the Indonesian archipelago to Australia when he had engine trouble and had to crash land his plane on the tiny island of Komodo. He survived the crash but his plane didn't.

'He went to search for water. As he was searching he found a strange wide track on the sandy shore, followed the track, and suddenly found himself confronted with something that he, also, didn't at all like the look of. It appeared to be a great scaly man-eating monster, fully ten feet long. What he was looking at was the thing we are going to look for - the Komodo dragon lizard.'

'Did he survive? I asked, going straight for the point.

'Yes, he did, though his reputation didn't. He stayed alive for three months, and then was rescued. But when he went home, everyone thought he was mad and nobody believed a word of it.'

'So were the Komodo dragons the origin of the Chinese dragon myths?

'Well, nobody really knows, of course. At least, I don't. But it certainly seems like a possibility. It's a large creature with scales, it's a man-eater, and though it doesn't actually breathe fire, it does have the worst breath of any creature known to man. But there's something else you should know about the island as well.'

'What?'

'Have another beer first.'

I did.

There are,' said Mark, 'more poisonous snakes per square metre of ground on Komodo than on any equivalent area on earth.'

There is in Melbourne a man who probably knows more about poisonous snakes than anyone else on earth. His name is Dr Struan Sutherland, and he has devoted his entire life to a study of venom.

'And I'm bored with talking about it,' he said when we went along to see him the next morning, laden with tape recorders and note books. 'Can't stand all these poisonous creatures, all these snakes and insects and fish and things. Wretched things, biting everybody. And then people expect me to tell them what to do about it. I'll tell them what to do. Don't get bitten in the first place. That's the answer. I've had enough of telling people all the time. Hydroponics, now, that's interesting. Talk to you all you like about hydroponics. Fascinating stuff, growing plants artificially in water, very