

“Madagascar, Land of the Giants”

By Wendell S. (Woody) Minnich 2013

Madagascar, an amazing island off the southeast coast of Africa! There are three very special islands where plant and animal endemism is most incredible. The Galapagos, Socotra and Madagascar are these islands. We could include Australia, but it being a continent precludes it from island status. On each of these islands the succulent plants we love so much are very well represented. Of these three islands, Madagascar has by far the greatest representation of succulent genera, as well as their gigantism is most pronounced.

In July-August 2013, I had the pleasure of traveling with some very special friends to the “Red Island,” Madagascar. We spent over three weeks traversing the dry western portions of this large island, roughly the same size as Texas, to see as much as possible of its special plants and animals. Madagascar is an economically poor country and thus, since the French left in the 50’s and 60’s, the conditions of the roads, environments and accommodations leave a great deal to be desired. It is often said, “You had better go to Madagascar now, as it may all be gone tomorrow.” Sadly enough, this statement appears to be true, definitely in respect to the wild natural places where we find oneness with our prized plants and animals.

Madagascar is well known for its famous Baobab trees. The great majority of the Baobabs, *Adansonia*, are found in Madagascar, but there are a few other species from Africa and Australia. These giants are accompanied by a few other genera that can also become extremely large. These include: *Alluaudia*, *Aloe*, *Chyphostemma*, *Delonix*, *Didieria*, *Euphorbia*, *Moringa* and *Pachypodium*. Only one giant animal, an extinct ostrich like bird, *Aepyornis maximus* once inhabited this unique island. Some of the Chameleons and tortoises get relatively large, but none can compete with the Galapagos tortoises. The one group of animals, not giants, that seem to generate the most attention from nature lovers are the endemic, wide-eyed and cuddly Lemurs. All in all, the plants and animals of Madagascar are considered a real curiosity for the botanical, zoological and tourist worlds.

Due to Madagascar being such a large and amazing island, this presentation will be just one of three programs I will give to address its overwhelming charm. Madagascar’s people, places and overall plants and animals are so special that the over 7000 photo frames I took can only barely touch its immense uniqueness. To show and tell the story of Madagascar requires that I also tell the stories of: **“Madagascar, the Plants, People and Places”** and **“Madagascar, the Disappearing Island.”** If you are a succulent lover, many of the plants from this island are probably well represented in your collection. In these three presentations, I hope you might find some of the answers or secrets for better cultivating many of these iconic plants.