Tim Morely – Madagascar Blog

When undertaking my MSc in Marine Environment Management I signed up for a summer placement in Madagascar expecting an excellent dataset and a great experience; I got just that and more working with C3.

After a few days of logistical stuff (health and safety and scientific research tests) I was briefed in the field work that was to be collected by the team over the course of a month along Madagascar’s northeast coast. I can’t think of a better way to experience a country than to travel through it by foot or zebu cart visiting small villages and coastal communities along the way and passing through some fantastic habitat. Of course for some of the longer parts of the journey we had to use local transportation known as a ‘taxi brousse’, not the most comfortable way to travel but it has to be experienced and is always funny to look back on.

My research required surveying of coastal village residents on how they use their natural resources. Despite not speaking French, or more importantly Malagasy, the villagers could not have been more helpful and friendly (surveys were translated by Malagasy staff along the way); it was amazing to see them so keen to talk and learn about marine issues such as fishing.

My first day of field data collection set the tone for the rest of the excursion; a walk through farmland and good quality forest to get to Ampasimadera before pirogue (small canoes) travel across the river, a long walk along a pristine beach to Ambonihara and another short pirogue journey into the village – which the Malagasy fell out of at one stage, to the amusement of everyone. I enjoyed every minute of it and couldn’t wait to get to see and do more.

As expected with field research amenities were a bucket of water for a shower and the woods for a toilet, plus a fire for cooking; which the other interns will vouch actually vastly improved my cooking skills!

After the first day the experience continued to be once-in-a-lifetime. Whether it is watching fishermen make a net, living on a tropical island, walking through a very muddy mangrove or mapping out land use I can’t imagine my trip
being as good without any of them; although I could have done without the rat running over my face in the middle of the night once!

Of course the experience isn’t just about the work and scenery. There were plenty of opportunities to see Madagascar’s famous wildlife, not just on the field trip but also when travelling on weekends off whilst back at the office. The northeast region has a number of places well worth visiting for different reasons: the beaches at Ramena and la Mer d’Emeraude, the Montagne d’Ambre rainforest national park and the Montagne des Français baobab reserve. Whether it was snorkelling on coral patches, impersonating David Attenborough’s pygmy chameleon speech, searching for lemurs and leaf-tailed geckos or exploring bat caves each one of these areas offered something unique and truly memorable.

Half of my placement was spent in the C3 headquarters in Diego where accommodation was in the offices. The town of Diego is very friendly and full of restaurants and bars to relax in; more importantly the supply of traditional street food is excellent and very inexpensive. Whilst writing my report C3 were very accommodating allowing me to work solely on my report for university, after typing up all the field data for both myself and their reports. The staff provided excellent guidance, and were always happy to help with any problems or requests I had. I was very appreciative of this, although I did at times wish I had been an intern so that I could go back into the field – but that will have to be next time.

I thoroughly enjoyed doing my MSc placement in Madagascar and would entirely recommend it to anyone else studying in the field of wildlife conservation and marine management who has a particular interest in the socioeconomic impacts of conservation efforts; provided they have the patience to work in a country where a short walk means a 2 hour trek and a bus departure time of 10am means when the bus is full at 1pm!