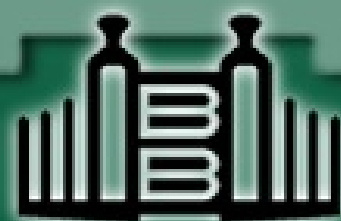


LAST CHANCE TO SEE

DOUGLAS ADAMS AND
MARK CARWARDINE



BALLANTINE BOOKS

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THE ANIMAL ATLAS BIRDS IN FOCUS

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**DOUGLAS ADAMS
AND
MARK CARWARDINE**

**BALLANTINE BOOKS
NEW YORK**

A Ballantine Book

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Komodo dragon, White rhinoceros, Tropic bird

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ONE MORE CHANCE ...

Preface

This book is about a series of journeys that Mark Carwardine and I went on to look for some of the world's rarest and most endangered animals, and one or two that aren't quite so endangered but will be pretty soon if we don't watch out. The trip to Madagascar was in 1985, and the others were made over a period of about ten months in 1988 and 1989.

The photographer Alain le Garsmeur came with us to Madagascar, but we were unable to persuade him to give up the best part of a year to come with us on the other trips, so Mark and I took all the photographs in this book. Any of them that are any good are so as a result of Alain's advice, help, and enthusiasm. Any that aren't as good as they should be would have been better if he'd been there to take them himself.

All the trips, other than the one to Madagascar, were recorded for BBC Radio. The producer of the series was Gaynor Shutte. She came with us to Indonesia and New Zealand to record us in the field and make sure that we basically knew what we were doing. Chris Muir was the sound recordist in Zaïre and China, and Stephen Faux recorded us in Mauritius.

Mark did the tough bits. He did all the preparation and organisation and research involved in mounting the trips, and also taught me most of the small amount I now know about zoology, ecology, and conservation work. All I had to do was turn up with a suitcase and try to remember what happened for long enough afterward to write it down.

Douglas Adams

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 who was 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 I 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-eyes 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 that passed Madagascar by was the arrival of the monkey. 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—dig for things, probe things, hit things. The monkeys took over the world and the lemur branch of the primate family died out everywhere—other than on Madagascar, which for millions of years the monkeys never reached.

Then fifteen hundred years ago, the monkeys finally arrived, or at least the monkey descendants—us. Thanks to astounding advances in twig technology, we arrived in canoes, then boats, and finally airplanes, 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 airplane 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 the

and explained the setup.

“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 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 Land Rovers 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,” Mark 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 in Brussels said we haven’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 in 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” 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 about a penniless hitchhiker sleeping in fields and telephone boxes, publishers now send me around 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 was arriving in Antananarivo directly from a U.S. 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, rain-forest island called Nosy Mangabé just off the northeast 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 hut 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 Diégo-Suarez in an old prop plane, driving to the port of Maroantsetra in an even older truck, crossing to Nosy Mangabé in a boat that was so old and dilapidated 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 hut 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 lemurs and I said that I thought there was a irony to it. Madagascar had been a monkey-free refuge for the lemurs off the coast of mainland Africa, and now Nosy Mangabé 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 percent 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 Zaïre. And the mountain gorillas too—they’re one of man’s closest living relatives, but we’ve almost killed them off this century. And 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 when 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 fruit bat?”

“Wait a minute, wait a minute,” I said. I went into the hut 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, 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 one another.

“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, 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 expedition 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 fulfill my one last commitment—an author's 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. I do, on the other hand, get us out of the house and spare our families the trial of hearing me 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 BBC producer who was going to be recording our exploits for a radio documentary series. 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, windbreakers, boots, penknives, torches, and a cricket bat.

None of us would admit to having brought the cricket bat. We couldn't understand what 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 toward you at thirty miles an hour snapping its teeth, you can always drive it defensively through the covers," he said, deposited the beer and left.

We hid the cricket bat under the bed, opened the beers, and let Mark explain something about 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 visitor 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 notebooks. "Can't stand all these poisonous creatures, all these snakes and insects and fish and things. Wretched things, biting everybody. And the

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 interesting technique. We'll need to know a lot about it if we're going to go to Mars and places. Where did you say you were going?"

"Komodo."

"Well, don't get bitten, that's all I can say. And don't come running to me if you do because you won't get here in time and anyway I've got enough on my plate. Look at this office. Full of poisonous animals all over the place. See this tank? It's full of fire ants. Venomous little creatures, what are we going to do about them? Anyway, I got some little cakes in case you were hungry. Would you like some little cakes? I can't remember where I put them. There's some tea but it's not very good. Sit down for heaven's sake.

"So, you're going to Komodo. Well, I don't know why you want to do that, but I suppose you have your reasons. There are fifteen different types of snake on Komodo, and half of them are poisonous. The only potentially deadly ones are the Russell's viper, the bamboo viper, and the Indian cobra.

"The Indian cobra is the fifteenth deadliest snake in the world, and all the other fourteen are here in Australia. That's why it's so hard for me to find time to get on with my hydroponics, with all these snakes all over the place.

"And spiders. The most poisonous spider is the Sydney funnel web. We get about five hundred people a year bitten by spiders. A lot of them used to die, so we had to develop an antidote to stop people bothering me with it all the time. Took us years. Then we developed this snake-bite detector kit. Not that you need a kit to tell you when you've been bitten by a snake, you usually know, but the kit is something that will detect what type you've been bitten by so you can treat it properly.

"Would you like to see a kit? I've got a couple in the venom fridge. Let's have a look. A look, the cakes are in here too. Quick, have one while they're still fresh. Fairy cakes, I baked 'em myself."

He handed round the snake venom detection kits and his home-baked fairy cakes and retreated back to his desk, where he beamed at us cheerfully from behind his curly beard and bow tie. We admired the kits, which were small, efficient boxes neatly packed with tiny bottles, a pipette, a syringe, and a complicated set of instructions that I wouldn't want to have to read for the first time in a panic, and then we asked him how many of the snakes he had been bitten by himself.

"None of 'em," he said. "Another area of expertise I've developed is that of getting other people to handle the dangerous animals. Won't do it myself. Don't want to get bitten, do you? You know what it says on my book jackets? 'Hobbies: gardening—with gloves; fishing—with boots; traveling—with care.' That's the answer. What else? Well, in addition to the books, wear thick, baggy trousers, and preferably have half a dozen people tramping along in front of you making as much noise as possible. The snakes pick up the vibrations and get out of your way, unless it's a death adder, otherwise known as the deaf adder, which just lies there. People can walk right past it and over it and nothing happens. I've heard of twelve people in a line walking over a death adder and the twelfth person accidentally trod on it and got bitten. Normally you're quite safe if you're twelfth in line. You're not eating your cake

Come on, get them down you, there's plenty more in the venom fridge."

We asked, tentatively, if we could perhaps take a snake bite detector kit with us to Komodo.

"'Course you can, 'course you can. Take as many as you like. Won't do you a blind bit of good because they're only for Australian snakes."

"So what do we do if we get bitten by something deadly, then?" I asked.

He blinked at me as if I were stupid.

"Well, what do you think you do?" he said. "You die of course. That's what deadly means."

"But what about cutting open the wound and sucking out the poison?" I asked.

"Rather you than me," he said. "I wouldn't want a mouthful of poison. Shouldn't do you any harm, though. Snake toxins have a high molecular weight, so they won't penetrate the blood vessels in the mouth the way that alcohol or some drugs do, and then the poison gets destroyed by the acids in your stomach. But it's not necessarily going to do much good either. You're not likely to be able to get much of the poison out, but you're probably going to make the wound a lot worse trying. And in a place like Komodo it means you'd quickly have a seriously infected wound to contend with as well as a leg full of poison. Septicemia, gangrene, you name it. It'll kill you."

"What about a tourniquet?"

"Fine if you don't mind having your leg off afterwards. You'd have to because if you cut off the blood supply to it completely it'll just die. And if you can find anyone in that part of Indonesia who you'd trust to take your leg off then you're a braver man than me. No, I'll tell you: the only thing you can do is apply a pressure bandage direct to the wound and wrap the whole leg up tightly, but not too tightly. Slow the blood flow but don't cut it off or you'll lose the leg. Hold your leg, or whatever bit you've been bitten in, lower than your heart and your head. Keep very, very still, breathe slowly and get to a doctor *immediately*. If you're on Komodo that means a couple of days, by which time you'll be well dead."

"The only answer, and I mean this quite seriously, is *don't get bitten*. There's no reason why you should. Any of the snakes there will get out of your way well before you even see them. You don't really need to worry about the snakes if you're careful. No, the things you really need to worry about are the marine creatures."

"What?"

"Scorpion fish, stonefish, sea snakes. Much more poisonous than anything on land. Get stung by a stonefish and the pain alone can kill you. People drown themselves just to stop the pain."

"Where are all these things?"

"Oh, just in the sea. Tons of them. I wouldn't go near it if I were you. Full of poisonous animals. Hate them."

"Is there anything you do like?"

"Yes," he said. "Hydroponics."

We flew to Bali.

David Attenborough has said that Bali is the most beautiful place in the world, but he must have been there longer than we were, and seen different bits, because most of what we saw

in the couple of days we were there sorting out our travel arrangements was awful. It was just the tourist area, i.e., that part of Bali which has been made almost exactly the same everywhere else in the world for the sake of people who have come all this way to see Bali.

The narrow, muddy streets of Kuta were lined with gift shops and hamburger bars and populated with crowds of drunken, shouting tourists, Kamikaze motorcyclists, counterfeit watch sellers, and small dogs. The kamikaze motorcyclists tried to pick off the tourists and the small dogs, while the tiny minibus, which we spent most of the evening in shuttling our bags from one full hotel to another, hurtled through the motorcyclists and counterfeit-watch sellers at video-game speeds. Somewhere not too far from here, toward the middle of the island, there may have been heaven on earth, but hell had certainly set up business on its porch.

The tourists with their cans of lager and their FUCK OFF T-shirts were particularly familiar to anyone who has seen the English at play in Spain or Greece, but I suddenly realised as I watched this that for once I didn't need to hide myself away in embarrassment. They weren't English. They were Australian.

But they were otherwise so nearly identical that it started me thinking about convergent evolution, which I had better explain before I go on to say why they made me think of it.

In different parts of the world, strikingly similar but completely unrelated forms of life will emerge in response to similar conditions and habitats. For instance, the aye-aye, the lemur that Mark and I originally tracked down in Madagascar, has one particularly remarkable feature. Its third finger is much longer than its other fingers and is skeletally thin, almost like a twig. It uses this finger for poking around under the bark of the trees it lives in to dig out the grubs which it feeds on.

There is one other creature in the world which does this, and that is the long-fingered possum, which is found in New Guinea. It has a long and skeletally thin fourth finger, which it uses for precisely the same purpose. There is no family relationship between these two animals at all, and the only common factor between them is this: an absence of woodpeckers.

There are no woodpeckers in Madagascar, and no woodpeckers in Papua New Guinea. This means that there is a food source—the grubs under the bark—going free, and in these two cases it is a mammal that has developed a mechanism for getting at it. And the mechanism they both use is the same—different finger, same idea. But it is purely the selection process of evolution that has created this similarity, because the animals themselves are not related.

Exactly the same behaviour pattern had emerged entirely independently on the other side of the world. As in the gift shop habitats of Spain or Greece, or indeed Hawaii, the local people cheerfully offer themselves up for insult and abuse in return for money which they then spend on further despoiling their habitat to attract more money-bearing predators.



“Right,” said Mark, when the three of us found some dinner that night in a tourist restaurant with plastic flowers and Muzak and paper umbrellas in the drinks, “here’s the picture. We have to get a goat.”

“Here?” asked Gaynor.

“No. In Labuan Bajo. Labuan Bajo is on the island of Flores and is the nearest port to Komodo. It’s a crossing of about twenty-two miles across some of the most treacherous sea

in the East. This is where the South China Sea meets the Indian Ocean, and it's riddled with crosscurrents, riptides, and whirlpools. It's very dangerous and could take anything up to twenty hours."

"With a *goat*?" I asked.

"A dead goat."

I toyed with my food.

"It's best," continued Mark, "if the goat has been dead for about three days, so it's got a good smell going. That's more likely to attract the dragons."

"You're proposing twenty hours on a boat—"

"A small boat," added Mark.

"On violently heaving seas—"

"Probably."

"With a three-day-old dead goat."

"Yes."

"I hardly know what to say."

"There's one other thing that I should probably say, which is that I've no idea if any of this is true. There are wildly conflicting stories, and some are probably just out of date, or even completely made up. I hope we'll have a better idea of the situation when we get to Labuan Bajo tomorrow. We're flying tomorrow, via Bima, and we should be at Denpasar airport early. It was a nightmare getting these tickets and the connecting flight, and we *mustn't* miss the plane."



We did. Fresh eruptions of hell awaited us at Denpasar airport, which was a turmoil of crowds and shouting, with a sense of incipient violence simmering just beneath the surface. The airline check-in man said that our flight from Bima to Labuan Bajo had not been confirmed by the travel agent and as a result we had no seats. He shrugged and gave us back our tickets.

We had been told that serenity was the best frame of mind with which to tackle Indonesia, and we decided to try it. We tried serenely to point out that it actually said "Confirmed" on our tickets, but he explained that "Confirmed" didn't actually mean *confirmed*, as such, it was merely something that they wrote on tickets when people asked them to because it saved a lot of bother and made them go away.

He went away.

We stood wagging our tickets serenely at thin air. Behind the check-in desk was a window and behind this a thin airline official with a thin moustache, a thin tie, and a white shirt with thin epaulets sat smoking cigarettes and staring at us impassively through narrow wreaths of smoke. We waved our tickets at him, but he just shook his head very, very slightly.

We marched serenely over to the ticket office, where they said it was nothing to do with them, we should talk to the travel agent. A number of decreasingly serene phone calls to the travel agent in Bali simply told us that the tickets were definitely confirmed, and that's all there was to it. The ticket office told us that they definitely weren't, and that's all there was to it.

"What about another flight?" we asked. Maybe, they said. Maybe in a week or two.

“A week or two?” exclaimed Gaynor, who had a proper job at the BBC to get back to.

“Moment,” said one of the men, took our tickets and went away with them. About ten minutes later he returned and gave them to a second man who said, “Moment,” and went away with them in turn. He returned fifteen minutes later, looked at us, and said, “Yes? What do you want to know?” We explained the situation all over again, whereupon he nodded and said, “Moment,” and disappeared again. When, after a longish while had passed, we asked where he was, we were told that he had gone to visit his mother in Jakarta because he hadn't seen her in three years.

Had he taken our tickets with him? we enquired.

No, they were here somewhere, we were told. Did we want them?

Yes, we did, we explained. We were trying to get to Labuan Bajo.

This news seemed to cause considerable consternation, and within minutes everyone in the office had gone to lunch.

It became clear that the plane was going to leave without us. We had the option of doing the first part of the flight, as far as Bima and then being stranded there, but decided instead to stay in Bali and go and deal with the travel agent. No more Mr. Serene Guys.

A minibus took us back to the travel agency, where we stormed slowly up the stairs with all our baggage and angrily refused to sit and have coffee and listen to a machine which played “Greensleeves” whenever the phone rang. There was a sense of muted horror in the air as one of us had died, but no one actually paid any attention to us for nearly an hour, so in the end we started to get angry again and were immediately shown into the office of the director of the agency, who sat us down and told us that the Indonesians were a proud race and that furthermore it was all the fault of the airline.

He then soothed at us a great deal, told us that he was a very powerful man in Bali, and explained that it did not help the situation that we got angry about it.

This was a point of view with which I had some natural sympathy, being something of a smiler and nodder myself, who generally registers anger and frustration by frowning a lot and going to sleep.

On the other hand, I couldn't help noticing that all the time we had merely smiled and nodded and laughed pleasantly when we had been laughed pleasantly at, nothing had happened and people had merely said “Moment, moment” a lot and gone to Jakarta. They peered at us impassively through narrow wreaths of smoke. As soon as we had geared ourselves up to get angry and stamp our feet a bit, we had been instantly whisked to the office of the director of the travel agency, who was busy telling us that there was no point in us getting angry, and that he would arrange an extra flight specially for us to Labuan Bajo.

He tried to demonstrate the uselessness of stamping our feet to us with maps. “In these areas,” he said, pointing to a large wall map of half of Asia, “it works. East of this line here doesn't work.”

He explained that if you are traveling in Indonesia, you should allow four or five days for anything urgent to happen. As far as our missing plane seats were concerned, he said that that sort of thing happened all the time. Often some government official or other important person would decide that he needed a seat, and, of course, someone else would then lose theirs. We asked if this was what had happened to us. He said, no, it wasn't the reason, but

was the sort of reason we should bear in mind when thinking about these problems.

At this point we agreed to have the coffee.

He organised hotel rooms for us for the night, and a minibus tour of the island for the afternoon.

There is a good living to be made in Bali, we discovered, from pointing at animals. First find your animal, and then point at it.

If you set yourself up properly, you can even make a living from pointing at the person who is pointing at the animal. We found a very good example of this enterprise on the beach near the famous temple of Tanah Lot, and apparently it was a long-established and thriving business. Up on the beach there was a very low, wide cave, inside which, in a small cranny in the wall, a couple of yellow snakes had made their home.

Outside on the beach was a man who sat on a box and collected the money, and pointed at the man in the cave. Once you had paid your money, you crept into the cave, and the man in the cave pointed at the snakes.

Apart from this highlight, the guided tour was profoundly depressing. When we told our guide that we didn't want to go to all the tourist places, he took us instead to the places where they take tourists who say that they don't want to go to tourist places. These places are, of course, full of tourists. Which is not to say that we weren't tourists every bit as much as the others, but it does highlight the irony that everything you go to see is changed by the very action of going to see it, which is the sort of problem which physicists have been wrestling with for most of this century. I'm not going to bang on about Bali being turned into a Bali Theme Park, in which Bali itself is gradually destroyed to make way for a tatty artificial version of what used to be there, because it is too familiar a process to come as any news to anybody. I just want to let out a squeak of frustrated rage. I'm afraid I couldn't wait to leave the most beautiful place on earth.

The following day we finally succeeded in leaving Denpasar airport for Bima. Everyone knew us from the ructions of the day before, and this time the narrow man who had peered at us through wreaths of smoke was wreathed in smiles and terribly helpful.

This, though, was only softening us up.

At Bima we were told that there was no flight at all to Labuan Bajo till the following morning. Perhaps we would like to come back then? At that point we started to get into a bit of a frenzy, and then suddenly we were unexpectedly seized and pushed through the crowd and shoved on to a dilapidated little plane that was sitting fully loaded on the tarmac, waiting to take off for Labuan Bajo.

On the way to the plane, we couldn't help noticing that we passed our pile of intrepid baggage sitting on a small unregarded baggage cart out in the middle of the tarmac. Once we were on the plane, we sat and debated nervously with each other about whether we thought they might be thinking of loading it.

Eventually my nerve broke and I got off the plane and started running back across the tarmac. I was quickly intercepted by airline staff who demanded to know what I thought I was doing. I said "Baggage" a lot and pointed. They insisted that everything was okay, there was no problem, and that everything was under control. I persuaded them at last to come with me to the baggage cart standing in the middle of the tarmac. With hardly a change of beat, they moved smoothly from assuring me that all our luggage was on board the plane

helping me actually get it on board.

That done, we could finally relax about the baggage and start seriously to worry about the state of the plane, which was terrifying.

The door to the cockpit remained open for the duration of the flight and might actually have been missing entirely. Mark told me that Air Merpati bought their planes second-hand from Air Uganda, but I think he was joking.

I have a cheerfully reckless view of this kind of air travel. It rarely bothers me at all. I don't think this is bravery, because I am frequently scared stiff in cars, particularly if I'm driving. But once you're in an airplane, everything is completely out of your hands, so you may as well just sit back and grin manically about the grinding and rattling noises the wreckage of a plane makes as the turbulence throws it around the sky. There's nothing you can do.

Mark was watching the instruments in the cockpit with curious intensity, and after a while said that half of them simply weren't working. I laughed, a little hectically, I admit, and said that it was probably just as well. If the instruments were working, they would probably distract and worry the pilots, and I'd rather they just got on with what they were doing. Mark thought that this was not at all an amusing observation, and he was clearly right, but nevertheless I laughed again, really rather a lot, and carried on laughing wildly for most of the rest of the flight. Mark turned and asked a passenger behind us if these planes ever crashed. Oh yes, he was told, but not to worry—there hadn't been a serious crash now for months.

Landing at Labuan Bajo was interesting, because the pilots couldn't get the flaps down. We were quite interested to know, for instance, as the trees at the end of the runway loomed closer and closer, and the two pilots were tugging with all their combined weight on the ceiling-mounted lever, whether we were all going to live or not. At the last moment the lever suddenly gave way and we banged down onto the runway in a subdued and reflective frame of mind.

We climbed off the plane and after lengthy negotiations persuaded the airline staff to take our baggage off as well, since we thought we'd probably like to have it with us.

Two people met us at the airport "terminal," or hut. Their names were Kiri and Moose, and, like most Indonesians we met, they were small, willowy-slim, and healthy looking, and we had no idea who they were.

Kiri was a charming man with a squarish face, a shock of wavy black hair, and a thick black moustache that sat on his lip like a bar of chocolate. He had a voice that was very deep but also very thin, with no substance behind it at all, so that he spoke in a sort of supercooled croak. Most of the remarks he made consisted of a slow, lazy, streetwise smile and a couple of strangled rattles from the back of his throat. He always seemed to have something other on his mind. If he smiled at you, the smile never settled on you but ended up somewhere in the middle distance. Moose was much more straightforward, though it quickly turned out that Moose was not "Moose" but "Mus" and was short for Hieronymus. I felt a little stupid for having heard it as "Moose." It was unlikely that an Indonesian islander would be named after a large Canadian deer. Almost as unlikely, I suppose, as him being called Hieronymus with the silent "Hierony."

The person we had been expecting was a Mr. Condo (pronounced *Chondo*), who was to be

our guide. I was puzzled as to why he alone among all the Indonesians we had met so far was called "Mr." It lent him an air of mystery and glamour which he wasn't there to dispense because he had, apparently, gone diving. He would, Kiri and Moose explained to us, be along shortly, and they had come along to tell us that.

We thanked them, loaded all of our baggage into the back of their pickup truck, and sat on the top of it as we bumped away from the arrivals hut toward the town of Labuan Bajo. We had been told by someone on the plane that there were only three trucks on the whole of the island of Flores, and we passed six of them on the way in. Virtually everything we were told in Indonesia turned out not to be true, sometimes almost immediately. The only exception to this was when we were told that something would happen immediately, in which case it usually turned out not to be true over an extended period of time.

Because of our experiences of the day before, we made a point of stopping at the Merpati Airlines hut on the way and reconfirming our seats on the return flight. The office was manned by a man with flip-flops and a field radio, with which he made all the flight arrangements. He didn't have a pen, so he simply had to remember them as best he could. He said he wished we had bought single tickets rather than returns, so that we could have bought our return tickets from them. No one, he said, ever bought tickets from them and they could use the money.

We asked him how many people were on the flight back. He looked at a list and said eight. I noticed, looking over his shoulder, that there was only one person on the list other than the three of us, and I asked him how he had arrived at the figure of eight. That was simple, he explained. There were always eight people on the flight.

As it turned out, a few days later, he was exactly right. There may be some principle lying hidden in this fact which British Airways and TWA and Lufthansa, etc., could profit from enormously, if only they could work out what it is.

The road into town was dusty. The air was far hotter and more humid than in Bali, and thick with the heady smells from the trees and shrubs. I asked Mark if he recognised the smells of any of the trees, and he said that he didn't, he was a zoologist. He thought he could detect the smell of sulphur-crested cockatoos in amongst it all, but that was all he would commit himself to.

Soon these minor evanescent odours were replaced by the magisterial pong of Labuan Bajo's drains. The truck, as we clattered into town, was surrounded by scampering, smiling children, who were delighted to see us, and keen to show off a new thing they had found to play with, which was a chicken with only one leg. The long main street was lined with several more of Flores's three trucks, noisy with the sounds of the children and the scratchy gargling of the tape-recorded muezzin blaring from the minaret which was perched precariously on top of the corrugated iron mosque. The gutters seemed inexplicably to be full of cheerfully bright green slime.

A guest house or small hotel in Indonesia is called a *losmen*, and we went to wait in the main one in town for Mr. Condo to turn up. We didn't check in because we were meant to be setting off for Komodo directly that afternoon, and anyway, the losmen was practically empty, so there didn't seem to be any urgency. Mark, Gaynor, and I whiled away the time in the covered courtyard which served as a dining room, drinking a few beers and chatting with the odd extra guests who arrived from time to time. By the time we finally twigged, as the

afternoon wore on with no Mr. Condo, that we were not going to be getting to Komodo the day after all, the losmen had filled up nicely and there was a sudden panic about getting ourselves somewhere to sleep.

A small boy came out and said they still had a bedroom if we would like it, and took us up some rickety steps. The corridor we walked along to get to the bedroom turned out itself to be the bedroom. We were misled by the fact that it didn't have any beds in it, but we agreed that it would be fine and returned to the courtyard, to be greeted at last by Mr. Condo, a small charismatic man, who said that everything was organised and we would be leaving for Komodo in a boat at seven in the morning.

What about the goat? we asked anxiously.

He shrugged. What goat? he asked.

Won't we need a goat?

There were plenty of goats on Komodo, he assured us. Unless we wanted one for the voyage?

We said that we didn't feel that we particularly did, and he said that he only mentioned it as it seemed to be the only thing we weren't intending to take with us. We took this to be a satirical reference to the pile of intrepid baggage with which we were surrounded and laughed politely, so he wished us good night and told us to get some good sleep.

Sleeping in Labuan Bajo, however, is something of an endurance test.

Being woken at dawn by the cockerels is not in itself a problem. The problem arises when the cockerels get confused as to when dawn actually is. They suddenly explode into life with squawking and screaming at about one o'clock in the morning. At about one-thirty they eventually realise their mistake and shut up, just as the major dogfights of the evening are getting under way. These usually start with a few minor bouts between the more enthusiastic youngsters, and then the full chorus of heavyweights weighs in with a fine impression of what it might be like to fall into the pit of hell with the London Symphony Orchestra.

It is then quite an education to learn that two cats fighting can make easily as much noise as forty dogs. It is a pity to have to learn this at two-fifteen in the morning, but then the cats have a lot to complain about in Labuan Bajo. They all have their tails docked at birth, which is supposed to bring good luck, though presumably not to the cats.

Once the cats have concluded their reflections on this, the cockerels suddenly get the idea that it's dawn again and let rip. It isn't, of course. Dawn is still two hours away, and you still have the delivery-van horn-blowing competition to get through to the accompaniment of the major divorce proceedings that have suddenly erupted in the room next door.

At last things calm down and your eyelids begin to slide thankfully together in the blessed predawn hush, and then, about five minutes later, the cockerels finally get it right.

An hour or two later, bleary and rattled, we stood on the waterfront surrounded by our pile of expeditionary baggage and gazed as intrepidly as we could across twenty miles of the roughest, most turbulent seas in the East—the wild and dangerous meeting point of two immense opposing bodies of water, a roiling turmoil of vortices and riptides.

It was like a millpond.

Ripples from distant fishing boats spread out across the wide sea toward the shore. The early sun shone across it like a sheet. Lesser frigate birds and white-bellied sea eagles

wheeled serenely above us, according to Mark. They looked like black specks to me.

We were there but Mr. Condo was not. After about an hour, however, Kiri turned up to fulfill his regular role of explaining that Mr. Condo was not coming, but that he, Kiri, was coming instead, and so was his guitar. And the captain wasn't the actual captain, but was the captain's father. And we were going in a different boat. The good news was that it was definitely Komodo we would be going to and the trip should only take about four hours.

The boat was quite a smart twenty-three-foot fishing vessel called the *Raodah*, and the entire complement, once we were all loaded and under way, consisted of the three of us, Kiri, the captain's father, two small boys aged about twelve who ran the boat, and four chickens.

The day was calm and delightful. The two boys scampered about the boat like cats, rapidly unfurling and raising the sails whenever there was a whisper of wind, then lowering them again, starting the engine, and falling asleep whenever the wind died. For once there was nothing we had to do and nothing we could do, so we lounged around on the deck watching the sea go by, watching the crested terns and sea eagles that flew over us, and watching the flying fish that swarmed occasionally around the boat.

The four chickens sat in the boat's prow and watched us.

One of the more disturbing aspects of travel in remote areas is the necessity of taking your food with you in nonperishable form. For Westerners who are used to getting their chicken wrapped in polythene from the supermarket, it is an uncomfortable experience to share a long ride on a small boat with four live chickens who are eyeing you with a deep and dreadful suspicion which you are in no position to allay.

Despite the fact that an Indonesian island chicken has probably had a much more natural and pleasant life than one raised on a battery farm in England, people who wouldn't think twice about buying something oven-ready become much more upset about a chicken that they've been on a boat with, so there is probably buried in the Western psyche a deep taboo about eating anything you've been introduced to socially.

As it happened, we would not be eating all four of them ourselves. Whichever god it is in the complicated Hindu pantheon who has the lowly task of determining the fate of chickens was obviously in a rumbustious mood that day and was planning a little havoc of his own.

And then at last the island of Komodo was ahead of us, creeping slowly toward us from the horizon. The colour of the sea around the boat was changing from the heavy, inky black it had been for the last few hours to a much lighter, translucent blue, but the island itself seemed, perhaps to our impressionable senses, to be a dark and sombre mass looming over the water.

As it approached, its gloomy form gradually resolved into great serrated heaps of rock and, behind them, heavy undulating hills. Closer still we could begin to make out the details of the vegetation. There were palm trees, but in meagre numbers. They were straggled sporadically across the brows of the hills, as if the island had spines, or as if someone had chucked little darts into the hills. It reminded me of the illustration from *Gulliver's Travels*, in which Gulliver has been tethered to the ground by the Lilliputians, and has dozens of tiny Lilliputian spears sticking into him.

The images that the island presented to the imagination were very hard to avoid. The rocky outcrops took on the shape of massive triangular teeth, and the dark and moody grey-brown hills undulated like the heavy folds of a lizard's skin. I knew that if I were a mariner

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