

FOLLOW THE READER

Last meals in Madagascar

BERNARD APPASSAMY

NEWTOWN, NSW

TOWARDS the end of the annual cyclone season, my Madagascan great-aunt Maryse would travel from the capital, Antananarivo, to visit my family in Mauritius. She was rumoured to be distantly related to Ranavalona III, Madagascar's last monarch, who was exiled to Algeria by the colonising French.

The humidity was suffocating as we sat under the veranda, sheltered from the sun by bamboo curtains. Maryse always carried a woven raffia fan that she shook theatrically from below her face, to mark an affirmation or question, or blow away a fly. My mother was mindful of attending to Maryse's sweet tooth, and served vanilla tea with condensed milk, banana tartlets and hot-pink coconut macaroons.

Maryse enjoyed telling tales about her country and culture. She conjured up a world of legends with white pygmies, myths steeped in blood, voodoo dolls, rituals around the dead and sacred giant baobab trees. I was intimidated by her bronze skin and yellow-tinted eyes,

and sat at a distance pretending to be absorbed in a comic book, while not missing a word she was saying.

I still wonder whether my favourite story of hers was no more than folklore. It was set in the time before Madagascar became independent in 1960. French navy ships often dropped anchor in the main port of Toamasina. Many sailors moved in with local women for several weeks, and then left with their promises of marriage, never to be seen again. Eventually, the women got tired of the abuse and sought revenge.

Successive crew members were lured with the usual warm welcome. The women prepared wonderful meals for their lovers but when the ships' departures got close, only then did they break the news of their real doings. From their first meal, the seamen had been poisoned, only to be given the antidote in the following meal, and so on. The women told the mariners the whole story if not for one detail — what stage of the cycle they were at.

The equation was simple: if the men left, they had a 50 per cent chance of surviving. Most of the sailors shrugged their shoulders in disbelief, walked out and boarded their ships with contempt. Back at sea, when some died in agony, it was too late.

RANT
OR RAVE

Send your 400-word contribution to Follow the Reader: travel@theaustralian.com.au. Columnists receive a Moleskine Passions Box Set with a Moleskine Passions Travel Journal; adhesive stickers and labels; two luggage tags; and a Moleskine roller pen that clips to Moleskine notebook covers; \$84.90. More: notemaker.com.au.

