It is often said that university life is meant to push you out of your comfort zone and stretch your horizon. Thanks to the college travel grant, I was able to visit Madagascar after the Tripos exams.

The three-week journey was roughly divided into two parts. For the first two weeks, I stayed in research camps organised by the Operation Wallacea team in the temperate forest of Mariarano, and carried out wildlife surveys for a wide array of species. In the relatively undisturbed reign of nature, we spotted golden mouse lemurs and sportive lemurs on the first night out. Shortly, most of us were able to see through the camouflage of snakes, chameleons, and geckos. We were also getting better at catching butterflies and spiders. There were often "visiting" animals passing by across the camp as well.

For the last week, we managed to hire a car and driver to go up to Morondava. Other than the famous sunset at "Baobab Avenue", we also saw the city life of Madagascar, which nicely complemented the forest experience to get a fuller picture of the country.

The first and foremost reason of visiting Madagascar, is its rich endemism. Like Australia, the island of Madagascar has its own collection of unique flora and fauna. The relatively wide range of climate conditions across the island also enables the flourishment of all kinds of species in their respective ecological niches. One of the most famous examples is the lemurs, which are often seen as a "substitute" for monkeys. Fossa, the largest carnivore on the island, is also unique to this ecosystem.

Personally, my initial interest in biology started from the wildlife documentaries that I chanced upon. It was thus an almost unmissable opportunity to see them in their natural habitats. At the same time, observing field biologists at work and talking with them helped me a lot in deciding if zoology is the direction that I hope to go into.

In the three-week stay, we also visited another relatively more permanent biology research camp in Kirindy and the lemur park in Antananarivo. With different level of human intervention, there is variation in the behaviour of the animals. For the collection of research data, the least disturbed place would seem to be the best choice. At the same time, the accessibility of habitats and the economic feasibility of setting up a camp (e.g. sources of funding other than research grants and impact on the life of local people).

It was my first trip to Africa. There was no direct flight, English is not a common language there (but French and Malagasy), and there is a rather long list of infectious diseases to look out for. To be frank, I was a bit nervous when making the travel plan. I am very grateful to all my friends, supervisors, and our dear college nurse Jan for the valuable advice and encouragement.