

Tree of travelers

I assume that almost nobody recognizes at first sight what this Madegassian stamp is supposed to represent (Fig. 1). A first impression is of an abstract structure that could have come from the Art Nouveau period, or simply a work of art by a talented draftsman who is very good at scribbling figures on a sheet of paper. We also find this signet on Madegassian stamps dedicated to the airline of Madagascar (Fig. 2). An older representation on a stamp when the French were still the masters on Madagascar offers us a solution.



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We recognize on it a zebu, also known as humpback cattle (*Bos taurus indicus*) and a monkey (fig. 3). However, we know that Madagascar is an island where - and only where - lemurs are found, they are a suborder of primates (to be honest, two species are also found on the neighboring islands, the Comoros). One of these lemur species is the Black and White Lemur (Fig. 4) (*Lemur varius*). Animals and plants with a restricted range are called endemics.

Now it is time to reveal the secret: our tree is the traveler's tree (*Ravenala madagascariensis* SONNERAT). It belongs to the *Strelitzia* family (Fig. 5) and is thus related to the Bird of Paradise (*Strelitzia reginae*). The Tree of Travelers got its German name for two reasons: its almost one-dimensional growth habit is always oriented from west to east, so one can orient oneself by the tree; and rainwater collects at the base of its palm-like leaves, allowing thirsty travelers to feast on stagnant water contaminated with leaves and dead insects. However, birds and the aforementioned black and white lemur also use this water. But there is another connection between the tree and the lemurs: Besides birds, the lemurs also enjoy the nectar in the flowers - as soon as the animals touch the flowers, they open explosively and hurl their pollen at the pollinator, which, laden with it, visits other flowers and thus practices a pollination that occurs very rarely in the plant kingdom: mammalophilia, i.e. pollination by mammals. Now we could also call those people mammaliophilists who use fine vibrating brushes to pollinate plants in greenhouses because the occurrence of insects is becoming more and more restricted. Herewith we have come to the end of our little excursion and in addition to the aforementioned it should be mentioned that of the original forests on Madagascar only 10 % are left.

Further reading: Michael Allaby 2018: Blümchensex, Goldmann; www.madamagazine.com