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THE TALE OF FINDING THE OLDEST DINOSAUR FOSSILS

A young man named Mena, from the island of Madagascar, lead researchers to their blockbuster finding of the oldest known dinosaurs -- and the beautifully preserved mammal relatives that accompanied them -- described in the October 22 issue of Science.

Scientists will name one of the fossils "Mena," in his honor, a name which translates to "Red." "Mena" also resonates for the locals since the island of Madagascar is often referred to as the red island, due to the color of its soil.

To find these fossil remains which scientists are referring to as "spectacular," the research team reached a remote village on the island and inquired whether anyone knew of old, buried animal bones, according to Andrew Wyss, co-investigator and associate professor of geology at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

"A boy said that his older brother had found some bones," said Wyss. "So we waited around a half day for the brother, Mena, and sure enough, he showed us a hill with a mound of them."

That was in 1996. The research team spent a month carefully digging out the fossils, while camped out in tents at the edge of the village. Each year they returned with a team of ten to 20 researchers and assistants for another month of digging.

"The villagers have been extremely helpful," said Wyss. "They allow us use of their water, access to their land, and are very interested in what we we're doing."

"Plus, they have a great eye for fossils," he said. "They are incredibly familiar with their environment, since they walk it regularly. It sometimes takes months for a graduate student to develop the same sensitivity for the difference between a fossil and a rock."

The fossils now reside at the Field Museum of Chicago, but once the study of them is complete many will be returned to Madagascar.

The lack of roads and health concerns were obstacles that the researchers coped with. Still, Wyss describes the work as a great experience. "We waded into geographical territory that was unknown. Then to find something that surpassed one's most hopeful dreams is incredible."

Editors and producers: photographs of Mena, the researchers and the fossils are available. Video footage is also available. See main story for description of the findings.

About UC Santa Barbara

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