



The Priceless Forest

Driving up the driveway to the house of Dr. Mardy Darian transported me to the far off lands of Africa, Asia and South America combined. Greeting me at the end of the driveway was Dr. Mardy Darian. It was like a movie that takes place in Africa, with me as the driver of an old beat-up jeep coming to a house in the middle of nowhere with the host waving at me. In reality, I was in Vista, Calif., surrounded by all sorts of palms and evergreens, breathing in as much oxygen as I could before returning to smoggy Los Angeles.

Text Ani Garibyan | Photo Tigran Tovmasyan

Dr. Mardy Darian's adventure in forestry began decades ago when he flew over the Amazon for the first time and witnessed the deforestation taking place there. "When I flew over the Amazon and saw the deforestation, I was shocked," exclaimed Darian. He decided to give up his profession as a veterinarian and began preserving bits and pieces of important plants. These bits and pieces grew to be the forest that now surrounds his home. This is a "good 50 years of work, very intelligently and very knowingly implemented," explained Darian. When he first purchased the property, it was full of large boulders and concrete. Even D9 tractors were unable to remove or destroy the rock and concrete. He spent months dynamiting the area in order to have soil on his property. His journey in preserving these trees that are the life source of all living things began at the most remote point from his home in San Diego County. "On a globe, I went to the farthest point in the same latitude, which took me just off the coast of Madagascar." Darian has flown around the world 10 times and Madagascar is the country he has visited the most. Madagascar is not some dry barren place as one would imagine; the country is actually full of lush palms and evergreens. Every seedling he brought



Dr. Darian's forest is a good 50 years of work, intelligently and very knowingly implemented.

back from Madagascar has survived on his property in San Diego County.

It was in Madagascar where Darian discovered the world's biggest leafed palm. This palm that has leaves reaching six feet wide and 30 feet long is now named after Darian, called *Marojejya darianii*. He often wonders, "how in the world did the French and the English in their centuries of occupation of Madagascar not discover this plant? It was so enormous it seemed impossible not to see it!"

As I followed him around his property on a tour of the forest he created, I kept thinking to myself, what if all of us had such forests on our properties, how much we would be helping this world we call home. Our tour started off with the rainforest area. Dr. Darian explained that having a rainforest in Southern California is not easy, but it is possible with the correct techniques. The sprinklers on this side of the property go on several times a day. Bromeliad plants that naturally hold water in the center of their cups also help this section stay damp even when the sprinklers are off. Tree ferns allow water to flow down to the soil. Pacific ferns, which help water flow downward, can be seen everywhere. His favorite plant, the staghorn, is everywhere. This fern grows above ground wherever you place it, even on walls, but mostly as an epiphyte on tree trunks. ▶

A few years back, Darian had his property appraised by experts. All three appraisals came back with a number and all three said, "Priceless."

Some of the plants growing on his property include: the *Dypsis mananjarensis* plant named by Darian but also known as the Mealy bug plant, which is one of the grandest plants to be found on Madagascar; Red Crape Myrtles; Oak; Avocado; Birds Nest Ferns; Spiny Palm; South American Climber; Litchi; Mango; Macadamia; and Guava trees, which he was introduced to when lost in Madagascar. "We were starving. We saw this tree, ate as much of the fruit as we could and put some in our pockets," recalled Darian. "It stains your pockets." On his property you can also find: African Cycads; Cherimoya; Aloe Vera; Australian Grass trees; Oranges; and Timber Bamboo, which he explained that most Asian countries prefer to use as



Marojejya Darianii

Dr. Mardy Darian discovered the world's biggest leafed palm on one of his trips to Madagascar. This palm has leaves that are 30 feet long and six feet wide, and is called, *Marojejya darianii*, which is named after Dr. Darian himself.

scaffolding because it has a unit pressure of 28000 psi making it stronger than most Western scaffolding.

As we continued the tour, Dr. Darian pointed to a set of trees that we should stay away from. "These trees are from the Thorn Forest of Madagascar. I know how thorny they are because I had to run through this forest as hornets were chasing me. Pointing to another spiny tree, Dr. Darian joked, "If our government wanted to save money on aerospace exploration, they can just drop an astronaut onto it and watch them fly up." Dr. Darian led me on a moss-covered path, showcasing a pair of unique seeds that look more like large pieces of stone that had fallen off an ancient statue. These seeds are the largest seeds in the world and are on average one to one-and-a-half feet wide. They are so unusual and scarce, that a dead one costs \$450.



One of our tour stops was at a two-trunked tree. The story behind this tree is not what I had expected. "I was looking for this tree for the entire trip and could not find one. It was turning out to be a sad trip as I sat on the plane to return home. I always sit on the window side to see the world below. When we made our stopover, I noticed a bunch of these trees lining the runway. I asked the mechanic if I could go and pick a few of the seeds. The mechanic gave me 30 minutes, so I left the plane and was able to collect 11 seeds, which had to be both male and female seeds. As I was heading back to the plane, I could see the mechanic waving frantically and screaming his head off to come back but it had only been 10 minutes. I didn't have time to go back around so I ran across, and in doing so, stumbled upon a man in his underwear sitting behind a four-barrel machine-gun. I shocked him and he shocked me. I rushed into the plane and sat down. Everyone on the plane spoke only French except for the two women next to me. They asked what I had found so I showed them the seeds. Then I heard them gasp. I looked up and saw two men with machine-guns pointing at me. The captain was pleading with the soldiers and trying to explain that I was not a criminal, but they wouldn't listen. They put me in a jeep and drove me away. Two women were in the jeep as well, one from Bangladesh and the other from Madagascar. The girl from Madagascar told me not to speak with the officials but asked what I was doing here. She found out that I was here with a guide; the guide was a childhood friend of hers. She said, 'don't worry, I will figure out the truth.'" Dr. Darian sat in a cell for 11 days with little food. He had planned to visit his wife's cousin in Frankfurt, Germany prior to his return to the States. Of course, he did not make it. His wife called the guide to see what had happened after not hearing back from him for almost two weeks. "I finally got home," said Darian. Best of all, he saved this palm from extinction.

It was the first time I heard someone speak of plants in such a beautiful way. We walked by the tallest palms in the world that came from Columbia. Dr. Darian explained what they look like in their natural habitat. "When you go to their forest, all you see are

Dr. Darian's journey in preserving the precious flora began in Madagascar – the most remote place from his home.



The Forest

Darian has over 3.2 acres of forest with an assortment of trees, palms, flowers and orchids. This rainforest of his houses four types of plants that now only exist on his property.



Naming Plants

A plant can be named when it flowers and produces seeds. Dr. Mardy Darian has a beautiful, unnamed plant that he is currently nurturing. He said that if he were to find an Armenian benefactor, he would name this plant after him.

the black trunks with white stripes. As you climb farther up, through the clouds, you see the tips of these palms and they look like parachutes floating atop the clouds." As we walked through the shady part of the forest, tree bridges loomed above my head along the tree canopies. The bridges are dreamy. They're something you would see in wild forests. One bridge has no railing but is protected by the trees surrounding it, a total length of 250 feet. Dr. Darian planted over 200 eucalyptus trees in order to build the bridges on them. "As I was building one bridge, I was standing on a board cutting away with a chainsaw, when a strong gust of wind caused the board to catapult me up in the air. I had a running chainsaw in my hand. When I opened my eyes, I saw the blue sky and my feet in the air and realized that I was in the air, upside down. I immediately threw the chainsaw to one side. Because I had cut the trees prior to building the bridge, there was a pile of leaves and branches beneath me. I fell on that pile and lived," said Darian. Below that pile were large boulders that were originally a part of the property.

The last stop on this rainforest tour was Dr. Darian's pool house — now a large greenhouse. You feel the humidity when you walk in. It's calm and serene as the rest of the forest, but more tropical. This is where Darian starts off his plants. Once they are ready to be planted outside, he relocates them to the outdoors. When I thought I had seen everything I could see in this enchanting rainforest, I encountered another palm with a large green leaf defined by a purple strip and surprisingly the opposite was a purple leaf with a green strip. The Panama Hat Palm, Coconut trees, Black-leaf Palms, and palms that the natives use for roof shingles inhabited the pool house. Also adorning the pool house were Dr. Darian's favorite plant, one of the biggest staghorns in the world, and an 18-foot Royal Palm, which was the staghorn's companion. His wife, Cherie accompanies Dr. Darian on many of his adventures, including his longest voyage, a trip around the world. An animal lover herself, Cherie fell in love with Darian's spirit, and his profession as a veterinarian sealed the deal. She was and is his main companion, supporter and biggest fan. ■