

**the place:****THE PRETZEL**

MASOALA NATIONAL PARK, MADAGASCAR

Last fall, a multidisciplinary team of scientists embarked on a two-month expedition to the Madagascar rain forest, which is threatened by logging and forest fires. With the help of a new treetop raft known as the Pretzel, they researched endangered canopy-dwelling species.

**the people:****GILLES EBERSOLT**, 44

PARIS, FRANCE (ARCHITECT, ON RAFT)

**DANY CLEYET-MARREL**, 53

LYON, FRANCE (PILOT, IN GONDOLA, FRONT SEAT, FOREGROUND)

**the time:****6:30 a.m., DECEMBER 2, 2001.**

“ We used the new raft for the first time in Madagascar. Dany’s blimp links to it like a spinnaker to a sailboat. The forest is very hilly; we have to find a place that is flat, where the trees are close together—what we call canopy-able. When I disconnect the ropes, the blimp leaves the raft there. On this day, the raft had been in place for five weeks. I linked the blimp to the raft with ten ropes, and we left the canopy behind.

Up to four scientists can live on the raft at a time, taking samples of leaves or flowers, or studying lemurs, for example. There is a door in the raft floor. We cut some of the branches underneath to make a vertical trail down a tree to the ground. This way, scientists can climb up and down by rope and walk to base camp. On the raft, you sleep on plastic, in a sleeping bag, or, if it’s raining, in a tent. It’s absolutely magnificent—60 feet up, close to the stars. When there is wind in the trees, the entire raft moves. But the most curious sensation is the sounds. It’s so unusual to hear the monkeys and the leaves and the insects below you. Sleeping on top of all that agitation makes for a very noisy night.

My specialization is not science but architecture. While the scientists are involved with the forest in a rational and intellectual way, I am really interested in the raft as a poetical idea. I first thought of making a raft for the treetops when I was a student, in 1980. I was thinking that you should be able to put a boat on the forest as if it’s the ocean. In 1985, I met Dany and Frances Halle, who had been surveying forest canopies by balloon. We linked my model to their balloon—and it worked. —Gilles Ebersolt ”

