Madagascar's Lemurs

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1/2	Depart London / Arrive Tana.
Day 3	Antsirabe.
Day 4/6	Ranomafana.
Day 7/8	Isalo.
Day 9/10	Ifaty.
Day 11/13	Andasibe & Mantadia.
Day 14	Drive Tana & overnight
Day 15/16	Depart Tana / Arrive London.

Departs
August / September / October

Focus
Lemurs, other mammals, and birds

Grading
B/C. Moderate to difficult day and night walks

Dates and Prices
See website (tour code MDG04) or current brochure

Highlights:

- Encounter Madagascar's lemurs (ca. 20 species usually recorded!) and hear the plaintive dawn chorus of the Indris
- Spotlight for tiny mouse lemurs in the spiny desert
- Experience day and night walks in pristine rainforests and bizarre spiny desert
- Enjoy endemic birds, chameleons, Leaf-tailed Geckos and other reptiles







Images from top: Diademed Sifaka, Grey-brown Mouse Lemurs, Indri

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Introduction


Ring-tailed Lemurs

The island of Madagascar is truly a lost world, an experiment in evolution that pushed forward in complete isolation from the rest of the natural world for 165 million years. Today, over 80% of all life here is endemic, occurring nowhere else on Earth, and its uniqueness and ecological importance cannot be overstated. Although these unique ecosystems have suffered badly from the march of humankind, Madagascar still retains a wonderful network of national parks and other protected areas home to a wealth of birds, reptiles and, of course, lemurs. This 14-day in country dedicated lemur-watching holiday visits some of Madagascar's very best wildlife reserves, from the rainforests of the east coast, over the high plateau and down to the spiny desert on the south west coastline. There is also an astonishing variety of birds to be found, with species from the six endemic or near-endemic families – the mesites, ground-rollers, cuckoo-rollers, asities, vangas and the Bernieridae 'warblers'– amongst the most sought-after. A large number of colourful chameleons, wonderfully camouflaged geckos, and an untold number of insects and plants all contribute as well to make this a wildlife destination like no other.

Itinerary

Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather & other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Days 1 – 2 Antananarivo

We depart London Heathrow this evening on an overnight flight to Tana via Addis Ababa (please see section below regarding flight connections). We then connect with a mid-morning flight to Antananarivo, the capital of Madagascar, arriving in the early afternoon. On arriving at Madagascar's international airport we will purchase our visas, clear immigration and customs and transfer to a comfortable hotel, our base for the first night of the tour. This afternoon, depending on our flight arrival time, there should be the opportunity to enjoy an excursion to a nearby wildlife spot in Tana, or, for those that wish, to simply to catch up on some sleep!

Day 3 Antsirabe

Following breakfast we will leave Tana and start our holiday with a drive south to the town of Antsirabe, our stepping stone for Ranomafana National Park. It is a 4-5 hour drive along Route Nationale 7 through the Central Highlands of the Hauts Plateaux to Antsirabe (approximately 170

kilometres). Though little endemic vegetation remains, we can enjoy watching the scenery and pace of local life, stopping from time to time along the way, whilst being on the lookout for waterbirds such as the Hamerkop, Dimorphic Egret, Green-backed Heron and the beautiful Madagascar Malachite Kingfisher. Though the word Antsirabe actually means 'the place of much salt', the town was originally founded here due to the appealing cool climate and the presence of a hot spring. We overnight at a comfortable hotel.

Day 4 Ranomafana National Park

Today we complete the long drive to the Ranomafana National Park. Today's drive is longer (around 8-9 hours), but rewarding nevertheless, as we continue our journey through the Hauts Plateau and then start to enter the East Coast region and our first native rainforest. The areas immediately south of Antsirabe are very fertile and the steep slopes are neatly terraced and irrigated and with rice shoots at different stages of maturation, provide an intricate patchwork of vivid greens. During the journey we can enjoy getting to know the birds that we will be meeting throughout our tour, such as Yellow-billed Kite, Madagascar Fody, Madagascar Wagtail, and Madagascar White-eye.

Further along we will pass through the attractive town of Ambositra (pronounced 'Amb-oost') and then, shortly after the village of Ambohimahasoa, we turn west along the Route Nationale 25. A spectacular view south over the Namorona waterfalls signals our arrival at the Ranomafana National Park where we have three nights at a basic, but comfortable, ecolodge.

Days 5 – 6 Ranomafana National Park

We have two full days to explore the Ranomafana National Park and discover the bewildering diversity of endemic plant and animal life it protects. During our stay we will take day walks into the forest where we hope to see a wide variety of lemur species including the attractive Milne-Edwards Sifaka, plus Red-bellied Lemur, Red-fronted Brown Lemur, Eastern Grey Bamboo Lemur, and the very rare Golden Bamboo Lemur and Greater Bamboo Lemur.


Parson's Chameleon (by Cathy Harlow)

Ranomafana is also one of Madagascar's birdwatching hotspots and in the forest we will look out for rare and elusive species such as Brown Mesite, Madagascar Wood Rail, Red-fronted Coua, Pitta-like Ground Roller, Velvet Asity and many other endemics. The forests here are dense, the trails are steep and narrow and many of the birds are extremely elusive so a great deal of patience is required when searching out these avian specialties. We will be accompanied by one of the park's top wildlife guides, however, so such effort and patience rarely goes unrewarded!

During our walks we will also be on the lookout for a wealth of other spectacular and bizarre wildlife to be found in these lush forests. With luck these may include the beautiful Comet Moth, one of the largest in the world, *Phelsuma* Day Geckos, the bizarre Giraffe-necked Weevil, or perhaps the wonderfully named Satanic Leaf-tailed Gecko, *Uroplatus phantasticus.*

Although night walks are no longer permitted inside the national park, we can still walk the forest-lined roads after dark in search of some of the nocturnal inhabitants of Ranomafana. On these walks we hope to find Brown (Rufous) Mouse Lemurs, one of the smallest of all the lemurs, along with a variety of frogs and roosting chameleons.

Day 7 Isalo National Park

We have another long journey today of 9-10 hours. From Ranomafana we drive back along the Route Nationale 25 onto the Route Nationale 7 and then head south once more through the highlands. We hope to make a brief stop at the regional capital of Fianarantsoa, Madagascar's second city and centre of education (Fianarantsoa means "place of good learning"). From there our journey takes us through some of Madagascar's most beautiful scenery, although since very little natural vegetation remains the wildlife interest along this stretch is limited. The scenery changes from the green rice fields of the highlands to vast grass savannah of the western region.

En route we will stop a small community reserve known as Anja, set in magnificent scenery of granitic mountains known as 'inselbergs'. Anja was protected, and is now run, by the local community and is a wonderful example of local people helping to protect their local wildlife. The reserve protects several troops of very confiding Ring-tailed Lemurs and provides a wonderful opportunity for close views and photographs of these endearing primates; one of the most terrestrial of lemur species. There is also plenty of other wildlife to look for and our first opportunity to look for another bizarre Malagasy inhabitant, the wonderful pink Flatid Leaf-Bug.


Madagascar Paradise Flycatcher (by Stephen Woodham)


Ring-tailed Lemurs (by Paul Stanbury)

South of Ambalavao the scenery becomes even more imposing as the road passes through vast grassy plains flanked by more huge domes of granite, the most striking of which has twin towers of rock called the 'Door to the South' (Varavarana Ny Atsimo). Past Ihosy (pronounced "Ee-oosh") we climb onto the Horombe Plateau, a barren treeless area dominated by coarse grasses and dotted with hundreds of red termite hills. The endless grasslands here are home to Madagascar Bush Larks,

Pied Crows, Yellow-billed Kites, but little else, although they are the best place to scan the horizons for the localised Reunion Harrier. We aim to arrive at Isalo National Park around dusk where we check into a luxurious lodge, our base for the next two nights.

Day 8 Isalo National Park

The Isalo massif is a huge area of Jurassic sandstone that has been carved by the wind and rain into spectacular gorges and gullies. We will start our day with an early morning bird walk around the lodge grounds in search of such species as Benson's Rock Thrush (now considered the same species as Forest Rock Thrush), Madagascar Bee-eater, Madagascar Hoopoe, Madagascar Paradise Flycatcher and Grey-headed Lovebird. We will then collect our park guide and drive into the park itself. We are likely to undertake two walks today, one in the morning and one in the afternoon. There are a variety of interesting walks to choose from, such as the Piscine Naturelle, which leads to a refreshing dip in a natural freshwater spring, and the Canyon des Makis, at the entrance of which there is often a troop of Verreaux's Sifaka. The grasslands bordering the massif are full of Madagascar Larks and Madagascar Cisticolas and we will also look out for some of the plant life endemic to this special biotype including the strange Elephant's Foot (*Pachypodium roselatum*) and the Isalo Aloe. It is likely to be very hot here so we will return to the lodge for a drink and siesta in the heat of the early afternoon.

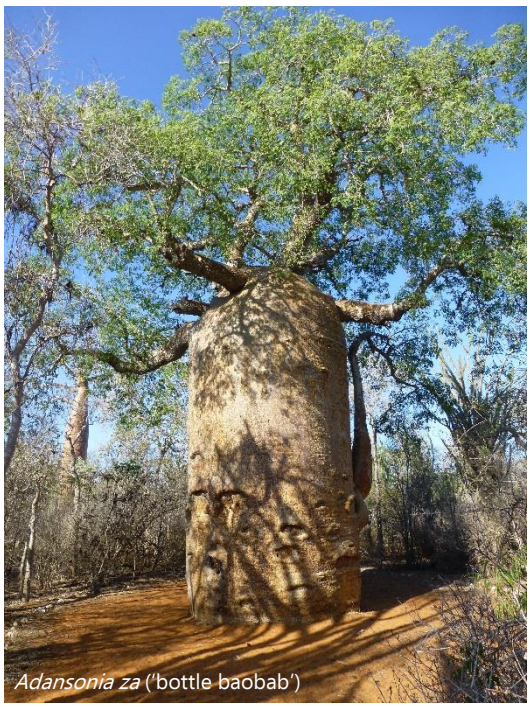

Verreaux's Sifaka (by Paul Stanbury)

Days 9 – 10 Ifaty

Today we set off early to complete our drive to the coast. Initially, our journey takes us past more spectacular rock formations at the southern edge of the Isalo massif before emerging into a flat grassy plateau once dominated by fire resistant palms. However, this area has been quite recently deforested with the discovery of sapphires. Almost overnight the small village of Ilakaka swelled from a population of only 200 people to over 20,000 people. Crime is rife and with no provision for fuel, the miners have all but cleared-felled the trees. It is an interesting but disturbing sight!

Out of the reach of Ilakaka lies an area of dry western transition forest called Zombitse. After years of uncontrolled deforestation the forest has now been declared a National Park and is closely monitored by the Worldwide Fund for Nature. The park protects several lemur species including Verreaux's Sifaka, Ring-tailed Lemur and Hubbard's (Zombitse) Sportive Lemur. Groups are occasionally fortunate enough to see a pair of Fosa (Madagascar's largest carnivore) mating in a

tree; a very privileged sight indeed. We are also assured of some interesting bird life including the very localised Appert's Tetraka, which is only found in this forest fragment.


Adansonia za ('bottle baobab')

From Zombitse it is another five hours drive before we arrive at the regional capital of Toliara from where we head north for 28 kilometres to the beach and spiny forest of Ifaty, where we spend the next two nights at a comfortable beachfront hotel. Ifaty lies on the edge of the 'Spiny Forest', Madagascar's most unique and bizarre habitat. We will enjoy an early morning exploration of this fascinating desert forest and then head out after dark for a night walk. The forest here is a botanical treasure house with 92% of spiny desert species endemic to Madagascar. The most striking of these are the strange spiny *Didieraceae* (Octopus Trees) whose trunks can grow to up to 10 metres tall and curve to grow into the prevailing southerly wind. The forest also holds many fine examples of the *Adansonia za* 'bottle' Baobab, aloes, kalanchoe and *Pachypodium lanerii*.

The spiny forest is also home to two of Madagascar's most attractive and localised birds, the stunning Long-tailed Ground Roller and the Sub-desert Mesite whose defence mechanism is to freeze motionless on a branch. After dark, nocturnal Grey-Brown Mouse Lemurs venture out of their day time 'roosting' holes and if we're lucky we may be able to spotlight a tenrec or two.

The spiny forest gets very hot during the middle of the day so we will return to the hotel for a few hours where you may choose to relax on the beach or swim in the sea. As the tide retreats the sandy beach attracts various wading birds including Whimbrel, White-fronted Plover and occasionally the rare and endemic Madagascar Plover. The hotel can also arrange snorkelling or diving excursions to the nearby reef (not included in the tour cost).


Long-tailed Ground-roller (by Tony Williams)

Please note: Depending on flight schedules we may have to fly to Tana in the afternoon of Day 10 and spend the night in Tana.

Day 11 Andasibe

This morning we must return to Toliara to catch a flight back to Tana. On arrival we will continue our journey to the rainforest reserves of Andasibe (Périnet) and Mantadia, which will take approximately 5 hours. Our route heads east through a relatively productive agricultural region with highland scenery of terraced slopes and flooded rice paddies in the valley bottoms. Eventually, the road begins its winding descent to the East Coast, when we will start to see patches of rainforest on the steeper slopes. We will pass through a variety of small colourful villages, all thronging with life and many with wonderful names such as Ambohimanagekely, Ambohimahandry and Manjakandriana. We aim to arrive at Andasibe mid to late afternoon, and if time permits will make arrangements for a night walk to search for Goodman's Mouse Lemur, Crossley's (Furry-eared) Dwarf Lemur, Lowland Streaked Tenrec and a variety of reptiles and amphibians. For our 3 nights at Andasibe we will stay at a comfortable forest lodge.

Days 12 – 13 Andasibe

The Andasibe reserves complex includes two distinct protected areas. The special reserve of Analamazaotra (Périnet) is the most well know of the two and protects the Indri, whilst the lesser known Mantadia National Park, a much larger area of primary rainforest (10,000 hectares), is also hugely rewarding.

On our first morning in Andasibe we rise early to visit the special reserve of Analamazaotra (Périnet) in order to see the Indri (*Indri indri*), Madagascar's largest and most vocal lemur whose eerie cries, once heard, are never forgotten. They are also one of the world's most attractive primates and are frequently likened to large black and white teddy bears! Each year presents a different aspect of the life of this large primate. Some years we have been treated to spectacular family singing contests, whereas in other years the Indri were silent but came to the ground within a few feet to eat soil. Incidentally, the word Indri is actually Malagasy for "look!" The early French explorer and naturalist, Pierre Sonnerat, heard his local Malagasy guide point at a lemur in a tree and took the word to be the animal's name. The Malagasy name for the Indri is 'Babakoto'.


Indri (by Paul Stanbury)

After watching the Indri we will have time to take the reserve trails at a relaxed pace, watching birds and possibly catching a sight of other lemurs such the beautiful Diademed Sifaka, widely regarded as the most beautiful of all lemur species, as well as Common Brown Lemur, Eastern Grey Bamboo Lemur, and perhaps a daytime roost of Eastern Woolly Lemurs. Amongst the birdlife we will look out for are Red-fronted Coua, Red-breasted Coua, Maladagascar Pygmy Kingfisher, Blue Vanga, Nuthatch Vanga, Velvet Asity, Madagascar Starling, and the Pitta-like Ground Roller. The rainforest

here is also a good site for reptiles such as the Madagascar Tree Boa, Parson's Chameleon and Short-horned Chameleon.

On our second day in Andasibe, we drive an hour north to Mantadia, which was declared a national park in 1991 and has some of the most diverse forests in all of Madagascar. Although the wildlife can be difficult to see on occasion and the terrain is tougher, visits here are to be treasured. There are few relatively accessible places in Madagascar that offer such a fantastic pristine rainforest experience. Eastern Grey Bamboo Lemurs are frequently seen and with a little patience we hope to find the Diademed Sifaka and perhaps the beautiful, rare, Black-and-White Ruffed Lemur.

Mantadia also holds a wonderful variety of rare and endemic birds. This is the best area in which to look for two of the most elusive ground-rollers, Short-legged Ground Roller and Scaly Ground Roller along with other species such as White-throated Rail, Madagascar Crested Ibis, Pitta-like Ground Roller, Common Sunbird-Asity and the rare Collared Nightjar whose call is still unknown. In the evening we will try to organise another night walk either along the road or within one of the small community reserves, looking for Madagascar Long-eared Owl and once more for nocturnal lemurs. We spend our final night at the forest lodge.

Day 14 Andasibe, Drive Tana

After a leisurely morning in the Andasibe reserves, after lunch today we will make the return journey of about 5 hours back to our hotel in Tana, where we enjoy a final evening meal together.

Day 15 – 16 In Flight

We will transfer to Ivato International Airport in the late morning, ahead of our early afternoon flight back to London, via Addis Ababa. Please note that lunch is not included today (though snacks can be purchased at the airport, and a meal will be provided on board the flight home).

Holiday Inclusions / Extra Expenses

The following costs are included in the price of the holiday:

- International and domestic flights in economy class
- Full board accommodation throughout (i.e. breakfast, lunch and dinner)
- All transport and guiding
- Park fees and reserve entry fees
- Tips to reserve / national park guides and trackers, drivers, waiters, porters and other locals

The following are not included and should be budgeted for:

- Visa (e-visa or purchased on arrival in Tana)
- Drinks (though your guides will keep a supply of bottled water on the bus for you to help yourself to during the day)

- Tip for Local Guide (who will be with you the whole time)
- Any other personal spending e.g. souvenirs, laundry

Tour Grading

This tour has been graded B/C, and a good level of fitness and stamina is required. We will be covering considerable distances on this holiday on poor quality roads. The journey south-west from Tana to the coast will involve 3 days of about 11-12 hours of driving. There is no other way around this, but these are some of the country's best wildlife habitats remaining, so will be well worth the drives, which will also provide an insight into the rural Malagasy way of life.

There will be plenty of daytime walks in a variety of Malagasy habitat types and in some of the major forest reserves of Madagascar we will organise night-walks to see nocturnal lemurs, reptiles and sometimes roosting birds. All walks are optional and taken at a leisurely pace, but they will often be over hilly, rocky or forested terrain, and in hot, humid conditions. Since animal activity dies away quite quickly after the first few hours of daylight, we will need to make full use of the early hours and so dawn starts will be encouraged.


Ranomafana National Park

Please note that the trails at Ranomafana and Mantadia are steep, narrow, covered in roots and slippery after rain. Walking here is in single file and can be tough and tiring. Walking boots are a must and some people may find a trekking pole useful. We may also opt to leave the main trails and clamber over rough terrain or through dense vegetation in order to find wildlife that has been spotted deeper into the forest. Some of the trails at Isalo can also be steep and rocky although it is the heat here that tends to be more of a problem.

The months of August to November precede the wet season so the air is heavy with impending rain and rising temperatures, but they are the best months in which to see wildlife. The locations that we visit on the western side of the island in particular will be hot. Many birds are nesting, reptiles are emerging from their winter rest and mating, and the lemurs and birds are most easily seen at this time as many deciduous forest trees are still without their leaves. As such, the long travelling on some days (with stops as required), and walking in the tropical climate demand at the very least a good level of general fitness.

When travelling in Madagascar it is necessary to accept that the roads will be poor and the internal airlines may not always leave exactly on time! Likewise, whilst we will provide comfortable lodge and hotel accommodation throughout, it must be stressed that Madagascar is a very poor country

and has yet to establish the same high standard of tourist facilities found in many other African destinations. Several of the hotels/lodges are basic in nature and lacking in many of the comforts found in western hotels. What is needed more than anything, therefore, is a good sense of adventure, and if you come equipped with this you are sure to enjoy the fascinating animals, birds, plants, culture and landscapes of this unique African island.

Accommodation

As outlined above, Madagascar has yet to develop the same standard of tourist infrastructure as some other mainland Africa countries. All of the hotels and lodges we use are comfortable and have private facilities, though the rooms can be a little spartan in nature and the food quite simple.

It is also worth noting that hotels and lodges in Madagascar are notorious for overbooking their rooms. Although we always strive to keep our groups in the same lodge whilst exploring a park, on rare occasions it may be necessary to split the stay, or group, between two. The names of the hotels and lodges will be confirmed a little closer to the departure date but if you require any additional information on accommodation please do not hesitate to call.

International Flights

We usually fly to Tana with Ethiopian Airlines via Addis Ababa (there are no direct flights from the UK to Madagascar), and quite often there is an Ethiopian flight from Manchester and a handful of other European cities that links up with the flight from Addis to Tana. Please ask the office for more details about this if of interest. Flight routes and timings will be confirmed on your invoice once these have been booked. You do not need a visa for either route. Flights are usually overnight in both directions.

Air France does provide a viable alternative, flying via Paris, but we have found this route unreliable in recent years, with difficult connection times in Paris and an extremely late arrival into Tana. Should you wish to instead fly with Air France, we would strongly recommend flying to Paris and staying overnight at an airport hotel ahead of your flight to Tana the next morning. This flight arrives in very late the same day as the Ethiopian Airlines arrival, meaning that you would meet up with the rest of the group at breakfast on your first morning in Madagascar.

Flying with Ethiopian Airlines means that we arrive on a much smaller aircraft at a more civilised time of day, making the (somewhat chaotic!) process of purchasing a visa on arrival a little easier. It also allows the afternoon to recover from the long journey. The downside is that there is a fairly long transfer in Addis Ababa on the way home. They do not offer premium economy, but do offer upgrades to business class; please contact the Naturetrek office for a quote.

Your Safety & Security

Risks to your safety and security are an unavoidable aspect of all travel and the best current advice on such risks is provided for you by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. In order to assess and protect against any risks in your chosen destination, it is essential that you refer to the Foreign Office website – https://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/madagascar regularly prior to travel.

How to Book Your Place

In order to book your place on this holiday, please give us a call on 01962 733051 with a credit or debit card, book online at www.naturetrek.co.uk, or alternatively complete and post the booking form at the back of our main Naturetrek brochure, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost and any room supplements if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, please call us on 01962 733051 or request one via our website.