Northern Madagascar

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1/2	Depart London, arrive Tana
Day 3/5	Montagne d'Ambre National Park
Day 6/7	Analamerana (Andrafiamena Protected Area)
Day 8/10	Ankarana Special Reserve
Day 11/12	Daraina
Day 13/14	Ambanja and Ankify
Day 15/16	Depart Nosy Be, arrive London







Images from top: Ankarana Special Reserve. Aye-aye (Ben Chapple), Panther Chameleon

Departs
October/November

Focus
Lemurs, birds and other Malagasy wildlife

Grading
Grade A/B

Dates and Prices
See website (tour code MDG05) or current brochure

Highlights:

- Unique and endemic wildlife found nowhere else
- Beautiful Perrier's Sifakas at Analamerana Reserve
- Limestone tsingy of Ankarana Special Reserve
- Aye-aye and Golden-crowned Sifaka at Daraina
- Leaf-tailed Geckos and tiny Brookesia Chameleons
- Optional extension on Nosy Be – beach, snorkelling and boat trips

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Introduction

One hundred and sixty-five million years ago, the island of Madagascar was cast adrift. As the huge continent of Gondwanaland split apart this large chunk of Africa began its slow, inexorable drift out into the Indian Ocean. And so began a unique experiment in evolution. Isolated from the rest of the natural world, the Malagasy fauna and flora took their own distinctive path and today over 80% of all life here is endemic, occurring nowhere else on Earth. Last refuge of the prosimians, better known as the lemurs, this huge island is also home to endemic bird families such as the vangas, ground-rollers and sunbird-asitys, a wonderful diversity of striking reptiles and unique habitats such as the strange spiny forest. Madagascar is truly a land of the weird and the wonderful.

Here in the far north of the country our journey will take us to the northern reserves of Montagne d'Ambre National Park, Analamerana Reserve (Andrafiamena Protected Area), Ankarana Protected Area and Daraina in the Loky-Manambato Protected Area, looking for a wealth of exciting wildlife including mammals such as Aye-aye, Crowned Lemur, Golden-Crowned and Perrier's Sifakas, and birds such as Sickle-billed and Blue Vangas, Pitta-like Ground-roller and White-breasted Mesite, plus a host of fascinating chameleons and geckos.


Pitta-like Ground-roller

The trip will finish on the mainland in the small town of Ankify, from where we take the ferry across to Nosy Be for our flight home. There is the option to extend your holiday on Nosy Be, where Black Lemur can be seen in Lokobe National Park, also home to some of the smallest frog and chameleon species in the world. A boat trip can be organised to look for both Whale Sharks and Humpback Whales, which are in the surrounding waters at this time of year, plus there is the opportunity to snorkel in these pristine waters or simply relax on the tranquil white sands. The majority of the lodges chosen for this tour are of a high standard for Madagascar.

N.B. Night walks are not permitted within national parks in Madagascar but are allowed outside of national park boundaries and within private reserves. We will do night walks during the tour should conditions allow.

Itinerary

Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather and other local considerations, such as Air Madagascar's scheduling, 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 Fly London to Tana

We depart 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 (Tana), the capital of Madagascar, arriving in the early afternoon. On arriving at Madagascar's international airport, we will clear passport control and customs and transfer to our comfortable hotel nearby.

Day 3 Fly Antsiranana

Today we will fly due north to the city of Antsiranana (Diego Suarez) on Madagascar's northernmost tip. There is only one flight a day and timings are not known until closer to the time. Should it be an afternoon flight, we will have time this morning to travel the short distance to Parc Tsarasaotra, an oasis for birdlife in the urban sprawl. It is a RAMSAR site, the smallest in the world, in fact, but it is often overlooked by tourists and locals alike, meaning we are likely to have the place to ourselves. The lake here is filled with hundreds of Red-billed Teal and White-faced Whistling Duck paddling across the surface, and the vegetation of the island in the middle bends under the large numbers of various heron and egret species that seek refuge here. Butterflies abound and geckos and chameleons can be found in the foliage of the surrounding shrubs and trees.

On arrival in Antsiranana, we will make the short drive to our lodge in the delightful village of Joffreville, just outside of Montagne d'Ambre National Park, and our base for the next three nights. Should the flight be in the morning, we will have time to settle into our accommodation and make an initial visit to the national park.

Days 4 – 5 Montagne d'Ambre National Park

Montagne d'Ambre (or Amber Mountain) is an isolated volcano massif clothed in montane tropical moist forest and covering approximately 18,200 hectares. The park's name is derived from the resin that oozes from some of the trees; it is not a reference to the colour of the mountain itself. Many of the trees tower to 40 metres in height and are festooned with a myriad of lianas, bird's-nest ferns, orchids and other epiphytes. These lush, sun-dappled forests are cut by several beautiful waterfalls and home to another wonderful array of mammals, birds and other wildlife, many of which are found only in this area.


Madagascar Crested Ibis

Seven species of lemur live in the park, the most notable being the localised Crowned Lemur and Sanford's Brown Lemur, and the Amber Mountain Fork-marked Lemur, a species found nowhere else in the world! Amber Mountain Mouse Lemur, Brown Mouse Lemur, Northern Sportive Lemur and Fossa also occur here, along with the Ring-tailed Vontsira.

Birdlife is equally diverse and the highlights include Madagascar Crested Ibis, the endemic Amber Mountain Rock Thrush, Madagascar Cuckoo-roller, Pitta-like Ground-roller, Broad-billed Roller, Souimanga Sunbird, Forest Fody, Hook-billed Vanga and Dark Newtonia, all of which are hard to see elsewhere in the country.

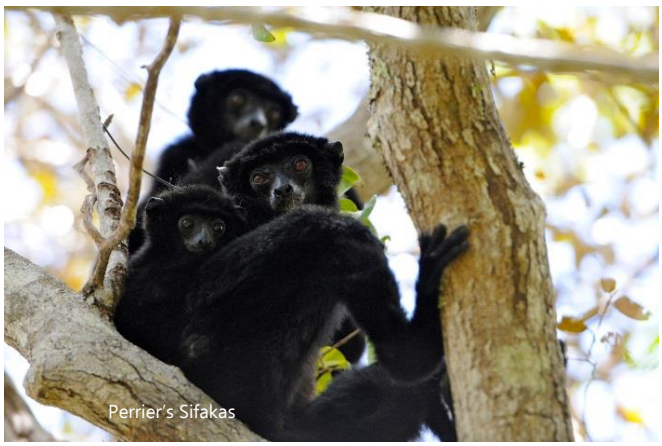

Mossy Leaf-tailed Gecko, Stephen Woodham

Reptiles are also common, with numerous species of superbly camouflaged Leaf-tailed Gecko, and Stump-tailed Chameleon, Blue-nosed Chameleon, Amber Mountain Chameleon and Amber Mountain Leaf Chameleon being four of the more common chameleon species to look out for, although the latter will need a keen eye especially, as they are one of the smallest.

Days 6 – 7 Analamerana (Andrafiamena Protected Area)

After breakfast today we leave Joffreville and Montagne d'Ambre behind and begin our journey south. Descending out of the hills, we drive through a varied agricultural landscape dotted with small villages, passing through busy and colourful street markets along the way. We are also likely to see plenty of birdlife en route, such as Madagascar Bush Lark, Madagascar Bee-eater and Madagascar Cisticola amongst others. After a couple of hours, we turn off the road onto dirt tracks which lead to the village of Anjahakely and the local reserve of Analamerana, part of the wider Andrafiamena Protected Area.

Here, a large patch of dry forest has been set up as a local nature reserve to protect a small population of the localised and extremely rare Perrier's Sifaka. We will spend one and a half days here to maximise our chances of finding these beautiful animals. Birdlife is again abundant, and we will be keeping our eyes peeled for Madagascar Harrier-hawk, Madagascar Buzzard, Long-billed Green Sunbird, Blue Vanga, Grey-headed Lovebird and Madagascar Buttonquail.


Perrier's Sifakas

Our two nights here are at a remote yet impressive lodge in Anjahakely, where sometimes Madagascar Nightjar come to the dining area to hawk for moths under the lights. A night walk here is also likely to yield sightings of Tavaratra Mouse Lemur, which is quite localised, but fairly common within its range.

Days 8 – 10 Ankarana Special Reserve

Today we continue our journey south, leaving behind the moist tropical forests for the dry forests and limestone 'tsingy' of Ankarana Special Reserve. The journey should take us no more than a couple of hours and on arrival we will stay at a camp close to the reserve's entrance for three nights.

The Ankarana massif is a limestone plateau which rises abruptly from the surrounding grassy plains. It has been eroded over aeons into a dramatic landscape of limestone pinnacles known as 'tsingy' (Malagasy for "walking on one's tiptoes"), numerous caves and other karst landforms, all edged by dry deciduous forest. Lemurs to look out for include Crowned Lemur, Sanford's Brown Lemur, Ankarana Sportive Lemur, Northern Sportive Lemur, Avahis (Woolly Lemur), Fat-tailed Dwarf Lemur and Grey Mouse Lemur, whilst other mammals include the inquisitive Ring-tailed Vontsira, and the caves are home to various species of bat.





Left: Madagascar Pygmy Kingfisher (by David Tattersfield). Right: Ankarana Sportive Lemurs (by Stephen Woodham)

Birdlife is rich and varied with around 85 species recorded, such as White-breasted Mesite, Banded Kestrel, Madagascar Crested Ibis, Crested Coua, Hook-billed, Red-tailed and Blue Vangas, Long-billed Tetraka, Madagascar Paradise Flycatcher, Madagascar Scops Owl, Madagascar Cuckoo and Madagascar Pygmy Kingfisher.

Numerous reptiles and interesting plants, such as the *Pachypodium* (or Elephant's Foot), also add to the region's varied wildlife attractions. Ankarana is hot and the paths are steep and tiring. It is, however, a wonderful park and your effort is sure to be rewarded!

Days 11 – 12 Daraina

This morning we head south and then east, into the Loky-Manambato Protected Area, and specifically the small town of Daraina, a journey that will take a few hours. The nearby forest is arguably the best place in the whole country to see truly wild Aye-aye, as well as the very localised and rare Golden-crowned Sifaka. During the day we will venture into this special area, where we should see a few small family groups of the latter, an exquisite species of sifaka, which is mostly white save for the gold cap and endearing tufted ears. Realistically this is the only place to see them, as well as Daraina Sportive Lemur, and there are other lemur species found here also.


Golden-crowned Sifakas (Stephen Woodham)

However, the headline species here is, of course, the Aye-aye, one of the world's most bizarre and enigmatic animals. It forms its own family (one of five lemur families) and actually is the most widely distributed across Madagascar, present all over save for the Spiny Forest region of the south-west. However, being nocturnal and remarkably shy, it is incredibly difficult to see and requires some effort. Even though Daraina offers the best opportunity, it is still a challenge, as it involves a walk of about an hour each way (in the dark walking back) and sitting under a nest site at dusk, waiting for the creature to emerge. The reward, though, is one of the most incredible wildlife experiences.

We spend two nights in Daraina, at the only accommodation in town, which is extremely basic.

Day 13 Ambanja

The whole of this morning we partially retrace our footsteps, heading west and then south-west to the town of Ambanja on the River Sambirano, where we will spend the night. We will explore some community forests and an abandoned cashew plantation to the south-west of town, where on a night walk we have a very good chance of adding some final lemur species to our list, including Northern Giant Mouse Lemur and Sambirano Fork-marked Lemur, plus Greater Hedgehog Tenrec.

We spent one night here in comfortable lodgings in the centre of Ambanja.

Day 14 Ankify

After another morning walk in the area, we will make the short journey to the coast, and our accommodation for the last night of the tour. Set in an idyllic location on the coast, near to Ankify, we have the afternoon to relax in the grounds of the lodge, laze on the beach or take a dip in the inviting blue sea.

Days 15 – 16 Depart Nosy Be/arrive London

This morning we leave our little paradise and head to the port at Ankify to take a boat over to Nosy Be, all the while keeping our eyes peeled on the sea for signs of cetaceans and in the skies for seabirds. On arrival on Nosy Be, we will head to the airport for our mid-afternoon flight to Addis Ababa. We are in connection there for a few hours before taking the flight to London Heathrow, arriving in the morning.

EXTENSION

Nosy Be and its surrounding islands are surrounded by pristine waters and blessed with golden sands. There is a variety of properties that can be booked (subject to availability) and a tailored quote provided on request, but below is our suggestion.

Day 14 Travel to Nosy Sakatia

On arrival in Nosy Be, say goodbye to the rest of the group that are heading to the airport, and travel up the west coast to take another short boat trip across to the idyllic Sakatia Lodge on the island of Nosy Sakatia. Known as 'Orchid Island', this is arguably one of Madagascar's most beautiful islands, blessed with several excellent white sandy beaches, pristine waters which are feeding ground for Green Turtles, and away from the busier beach resorts of Nosy Be.

Sakatia Lodge is a small resort on the south coast, with simple lodges set in the densely vegetated grounds and on the beach, next to a small peninsula called Sacred Mountain. Arriving around lunchtime, you can relax and unwind on the beach or snorkel in the inviting water.


Sakatia Lodge

Days 15 – 16 Nosy Sakatia

On one day you can do a boat trip looking for Whale Sharks and Humpback Whales in the surrounding seas. The former come to these tropical waters from September to December to surface feed on plankton and krill, and there is a wonderful opportunity to get up close to these gentle giants, which, although primarily juveniles, can still be between 5 and 10 metres in length. Also be on the lookout for Humpback Whales which have been here since July and will soon be leaving. They are attracted to the tropical, shallow waters to breed and give birth, as these waters are the perfect nursery. Mothers and their calves will tend to be near the surface in the shallower waters close to land, whilst males will be further out in deeper waters where, if lucky, you might see a breach. Stop for lunch on an island beach and return back to Sakatia in the mid- to late afternoon.

On another day it would be possible to head over to Nosy Be and visit Lokobe Nature Special Reserve on the south coast of the island. Nosy Be boasts immense biodiversity, including a host of endemic species, much of which is concentrated in Lokobe. These include *Stumpffia pygmaea*, one of the world's smallest frogs, and the endangered Dwarf Chameleon, which was regarded as the smallest species of chameleon in the world until the discovery of the Nano Chameleon on the mainland in 2021. Lokobe is particularly well known for its resident Black Lemurs and the stunning Nosy Be Panther Chameleon. Hawk's Sportive Lemur and Bemanasy Mouse Lemur are the other two lemur species found here, as well as Madagascar Tree Boa and several other species of chameleons, geckos and frogs. Return to Sakatia in the early afternoon and there will be the opportunity to relax or snorkel. The Ambohibe Turtle Reserve is located just off the beach, where there is a vast area of sea grass, which attracts Green Turtles to feed, in addition to a plethora of other marine-life.


Dwarf Chameleon

Days 17 – 18 Depart Nosy Be/Arrive London

One last morning on this paradise island before regrettably saying goodbye, making your way over to Nosy Be, and driving to the airport. The flight departs this afternoon to Addis Ababa, for a change of planes and an overnight flight back to London, arriving in the early morning.

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

Pre-tour Extension

In addition to some extra nights at the end of the tour, a pre-tour extension to Masoala National Park is an option. This is in a remote area of north-east Madagascar, which involves flights there and back from Tana, a boat trip and simple accommodation, but the reward is a large tract of virgin rainforest with a huge diversity of animals and plants not found elsewhere including Red-ruffed Lemur and Helmet Vanga.

Tour Grading

This tour has been graded A/B. There is no major trekking on tour, but 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 (where permitted) 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. Some of the trails are steep, narrow, covered in roots and slippery after rain. Walking is sometimes in single file and can be very tiring! Walking boots or shoes are a must and some people may find a trekking pole useful. 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 (plus there will be optional night walks).

The month of November immediately precedes 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. 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. In the case of marine-life, this is the month when both Whale Sharks and Humpbacks overlap in the seas of the north-west. When travelling in Madagascar, it is necessary to accept that the roads may be poor on occasion and the internal airlines may not always leave exactly on time!

It must be stressed that Madagascar is a very poor country and has yet to establish the same standard of tourist facilities found in many other African destinations. Travelling in northern Madagascar is never straightforward and 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 African countries. However, in the north there are a handful of very good hotels and lodges and we have deliberately chosen these. They are comfortable, have private facilities and welcoming staff, though the rooms can be a little spartan in nature and the food quite simple. The notable exception to this is the accommodation at Daraina, which is very basic.

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 reconfirmed a little closer to the departure date but if you require any additional information on accommodation please do not hesitate to call.

International Flights

On this tour we will be flying with Ethiopian Airlines via Addis Ababa (there are no direct flights from the UK to Madagascar), arriving into Tana on the outbound journey, and flying back from Nosy Be at the end. 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/Nosy Be. Flights between Nosy Be and Tana are either three or four times a week and so extending your holiday by a few days is entirely possible. Ethiopian Airlines do not offer premium economy but do offer upgrades to business class. Please ask the office if you would like a quote for any of these options.

Flights are usually overnight in both directions, and timings will be confirmed on your invoice once these have been booked.

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.