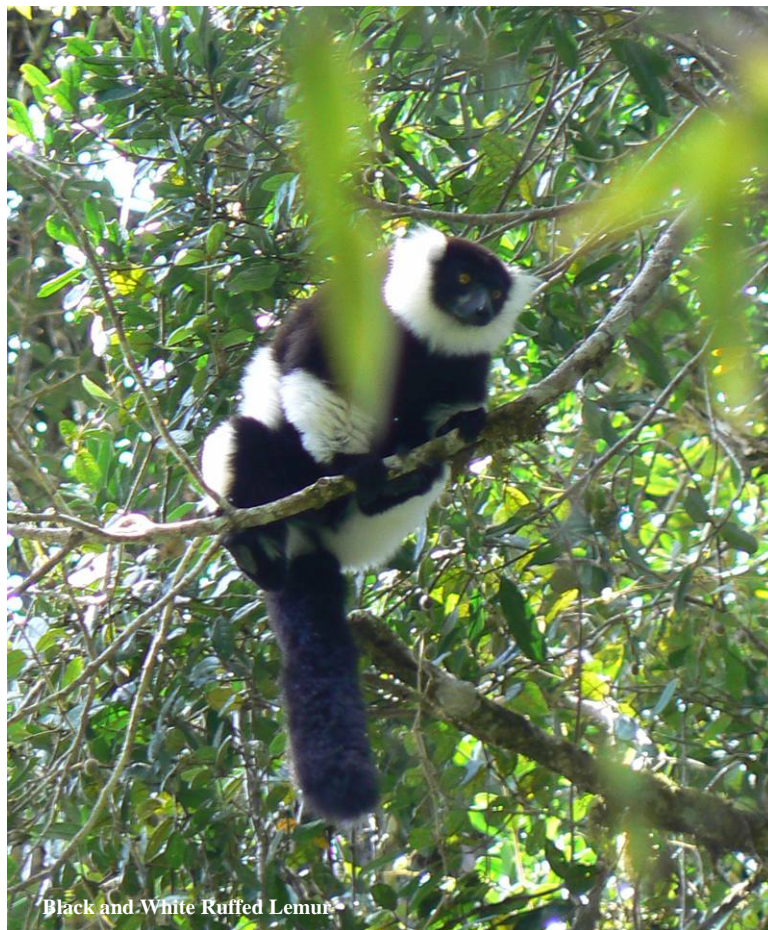


Madagascar's Lemurs

Naturetrek Tour Report

6 - 22 October 2007



Report compiled by Tom McJannet



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Day 1

Saturday 6th October

Most of us assembled in Heathrow Airport to catch our Airbus A320 to Paris which eventually took off around 40 minutes late but the flight only took around 45 minutes and the plane was virtually empty making for a very comfortable short journey. I managed to spot Steve and Julie from Jersey as we were going through passport control in Paris, so the full contingent boarded the underground train which ferried us to the Ibis hotel where we are to spend the night. Apart from sorting out some single rooms for father and daughter team Mike and Sarah everything progressed smoothly and after a bite to eat and a chat we turned in so as to be bright eyed for our 7 o'clock flight in the morning.

Day 2

Sunday 7th October

We were all keen to get started after an early breakfast so we left the hotel just after 7.00 am and arrived at the airport with plenty of time to check in and get through security. Unfortunately, for some reason, the departure was delayed by about 75 minutes but the pilot managed to make up a bit of time and we landed in Antananarivo, the capital of Madagascar, just about 40 minutes behind schedule. The Air France flight served us some excellent food and the 11 hour trip was largely uneventful touching down at eleven thirty.

After retrieving our baggage, we queued at the bureau de change to exchange our Euros for Malagasy Ariary, ending up with great wadges of cash with 1 Euro equalling nearly 4,000 Ariary!

The temperature at this midnight hour was 15° C and it was rather humid but we were all glad to have arrived and our local guide Desi met us and with very little traffic on the streets guided us safely to the Tana Plaza Hotel where we gratefully turned in full of expectation for our first real taste of Madagascar tomorrow.

Day 3

Monday 8th October

We awoke fully refreshed to a bright sunny day but by the time we'd eaten breakfast and left the hotel at around 8.30 it had begun to cloud over somewhat. I was pleasantly surprised at the high standard of driving as we travelled to the airport, it certainly wasn't the usual horn blasting hubbub that is so typical of many African countries, in fact courtesy seemed very high on everyone's agenda.

We boarded the plane and scrambled for our places as it was non-allocation of seats but everyone found a place and the hour flight south east to Fort Dauphin passed in no time at all.

We disembarked from the aircraft in bright sunshine once more and after the peculiar performance of collecting our bags we made our way to our very comfortable hotel on the coast which was only a matter of twenty minutes away. Once settled into our rooms we relaxed for a while until meeting up for lunch at 1 o'clock. It was then the general consensus that we met up at 3.30 when it would be a bit cooler and walk out to the point on the peninsular in the hope of spotting a Humpback Whale or two.

It was the best part of a mile out to the point and quite strenuous but everyone managed very well indeed. The biggest hazard was the sand that was being whipped up by the wind and as we were all liberally doused in sun factor we found that we were being, literally, pebble dashed.

Once out on the point some of us did manage to spot the blows of some rather distant Humpback Whales but closer to shore were plenty of Crested Terns to observe. During our walk we came across Great White Egret, African Spoonbill, Striated Heron, Madagascar Fody and numerous Mascarene Martins and Palm Swifts.

As the day was drawing to an end we witnessed the most spectacular sunset across the bay and were feeling pretty darn good as we gently eased our way into our Madagascan adventure.

Day 4

Tuesday 9th October

We left Fort Dauphin just after 8 o'clock travelling in an excellent air-conditioned bus which would take us to Berenty which is a tiny reserve situated 80 km west of Taolagnaro and 6 km north of the village of Ambasary. Berenty is an active sisal estate, a part of which has been conserved in its original state by the de Heaulme family. The habitat comprises spiny forest, frontage onto the Mandrare River, and most importantly, a 100 hectare patch of deciduous gallery forest that contains excellent walking tracks.

The first part of our journey took us through acres and acres of land where sadly the native forest had been stripped bare to provide grazing for the rather poor looking cattle. This gave way to pockets of paddy fields and banana plantation and then eventually to the vast acres of commercially grown sisal which is a spiteful looking sword leaved plant grown for its strong fibres. One of the highlights during our journey was the sighting of a Spiny Chameleon which was avidly snapped by the photographers of the group.

Finally we left the, so called, tarmac road and turned down a dirt road until we came to Berenty Camp where we were almost immediately greeted by Ring-tailed Lemurs.

Our three-course lunch was served at 1 o'clock and once again we thought it prudent to postpone any exploring until a little later in the afternoon when it should have cooled down just a bit. However, at 3.30 the temperature was still in the high nineties but we were keen to see what the reserve had to offer and I must say we were not disappointed. Our guide was extremely knowledgeable and found a White-footed Sportive Lemur which usually only emerges at night and one particular Verraux's Sifaka posed very nicely for us so hopefully we should have some excellent pictures. The third species of lemur to show itself was the Red-fronted Brown Lemur which along with the Ring-tailed and Sifaka is a relatively common species on the reserve. The habitat was very dry and this small piece of gallery forest is just like an oasis in a desert and a lifeline to the creatures that dwell here.

Bird highlights today were the Crested and the Ground Coua a pheasant like bird that actually belongs to the cuckoo family, Madagascan Coucal, Green Sunbird, Yellow-billed Kites, Crested Drongo, lots of Namaqua Doves, Madagascan Kingfisher, a lovely white phased Paradise Flycatcher and a small Green Jery which we spotted in the Spiny Forest. However, I think pride of place today was the superb White-browed Owl that was pointed out to us in its roosting place and then a second bird spotted by sharp-eyed Steve was the cherry on the cake. The time passed quickly and it was soon time to head back to camp where we had an hours rest before having a short pre-dinner night-time walk in the forest.

We were lucky enough to come across the tiny Reddish-grey Mouse Lemur which only grows up to 15cm and a tail that is as long as its body. Also we caught sight of another White-footed Sportive Lemur as it made its way out for a night of foraging.

After dinner we were all pretty much bushed so welcomed an early night and drifted off to sleep listening to the 'barking' call of the Madagascar Scops Owl.

Day 5

Wednesday 10th October

The alarm woke us up at 4.45 this morning and we were up and ready for our pre-breakfast walk at 5.30am and an excellent bird watching morning it was. We walked through the forest and totted up a very respectable bird list including Common Jery, Squacco Herons, Madagascar Cuckoo Hawk, a fabulous pair of Frances Sparrowhawks, 4 – 5 Madagascar Kestrels, Madagascar Turtle Doves, Madagascar Cuckoo Shrike, Madagascar White-eye etc. etc. the list goes on. However, my favourite of the morning was the beautiful pair of Sickle-billed Vanga, the white head and underparts and black mantle make for a stunning looking bird.

We also had good views of the three diurnal Lemurs that we saw yesterday and they were as enchanting as ever.

The morning quickly warmed up and by the time we got back for breakfast at 7.30 the men were perspiring and the women were glowing – but all having enjoyed a super morning and ready to retreat into the shade of the open air breakfast restaurant.

The rest of the morning was spent at our own leisure with some of the group trying to capture more of the lemurs on camera, others doing a bit of bug hunting and some just taking it easy.

As the afternoon cooled slightly we took a trip to the sisal factory to view the antiquated machinery processing the sisal leaves into tough fibres. Sisal is a cactus fibre used for rope and packaging. Workers harvest sisal leaves

from the plantation and bring them to the factory for processing. Barefoot workers dressed in rags feed raw sisal leaves into a processing machine which grinds the sisal into greenish fibres. The process generates bright green wastewater that is toxic. This effuse is dried and then burned to produce a fertilizer used for vegetable crops. We saw the various production stages from the fibre drying racks to the final packaging before shipping (usually in 150 kg pallets shipped to Spain or France but nowadays mostly China).

The day ended with an excellent dinner and a few welcome cold beers and a bonus for me was catching sight of a Madagascar Nightjar as it hawked for insects in the darkness.

Day 6

Thursday 11th October

It was an early start on a rather overcast day and we were on the road back to Fort Dauphin by 6.30 driving through the endless fields of sisal. At one point we had to stop at a bridge which, in the rainy season, spans a very sizeable river but is reduced to a mere trickle at this time of year but, as I say we had to stop to make way for a funeral procession which was being led by an ox cart with the mourners following on.

We also drove through large tracts of Spiny Forest which defies description. Not quite a desert and not quite a forest but a seeming wilderness of tall strange thorny cactus plants and home to four ethnic groups which each has an intimate relationship with the land: it is their hardware store, their pharmacy and, in times of drought and famine, their vital source of food. The forest serves as pasture for precious cattle and refuge from rural cattle thieves. Most important, the forest is where they bury their dead. Huge, above-ground, earthen tombs are built to give sanctuary to the spirits of ancestors, creating sacred places. Together with the unique wildlife and plant life, the customs and traditions of the local people make this a truly extraordinary place.

In one small town we passed through, market day was being held and a big Zebu sale was taking place. Zebu being the precious humped cattle that featured, in some guise or other, on every menu that we'd come across. Locals who had bought a beast would tie a rope to the hind leg and use it as a leash so as to stop the animal running back to its previous home. The market was a real colourful and exciting diversion to our bumpy journey.

Several birds were spotted en route including Madagascar Cisticola, the first of the Bush Larks, Hamerkops, Madagascar Wagtail and Green-backed Heron. We eventually reached Fort Dauphin airport around 9.40 with plenty of time to spare to catch our 11.20 flight. When it appeared that the plane was a little behind schedule we were offered sandwiches and drinks on production of our boarding passes. Little did we know that this food was actually the 'in flight' meal, so the people who chose not have the snack, unfortunately, missed out!

The plane eventually took off at midday and the hour flight passed quickly and in no time we were on the road again with our driver La La and his oppo Eric (I kid you not) calling in at a nearby hotel to pick up our packed lunches. Interestingly, the hotel was called 'Le Paille' which is the local name for the Red-tailed Tropicbird which frequents the coast nearby. However, we were not heading for the coast but to Isalo which is about 245 km from Tulear and ended up taking over four hours albeit on one of the best roads in Madagascar. Along the way we passed through many small villages and on the roadside people were selling bundles of sticks, wooden poles, straw/dried reeds, charcoal, and gravel or rocks arranged in neat little piles.

We passed through Zombitse-Vohibasia National Park which is a section of forest that suddenly appears out of the grassy plain but after just a few miles the scenery is again savannah.

As we approached Isalo we entered sapphire country. This area has experienced a sapphire rush over the past few years and many Malagasy have come to seek their fortune in the frontier town of Ilakaka. Just prior to reaching the town, which now has roughly 60,000 people as opposed to the original 250 inhabitants, we see the shantytowns where poor families camp in tiny wooden lean-tos. A family of four may live in a dwelling no more than a couple of feet high. They come with the intention of striking it rich and heading back to their home villages.

We had several exciting birds along the way including a superb Frances Sparrowhawk and Madagascar Bee-eater.

It was getting dark as we reached our hotel and, I must say it was certainly worth the trip. The hotel blended in beautifully with surrounding rocky sandstone outcrops and really offered every comfort that our tired bodies required. After a superb dinner we returned to our exceedingly 'well appointed suites' and enjoyed the comfort of the beautiful four poster beds... Bliss.

Day 7

Friday 12th October

Most of the group took the opportunity of a 'lie in' this morning and there were a few delicate tummies which needed care so it was just four of us with our guide Roland, that attempted the after breakfast walk to the Cascades de Nemeza. We picked up Roland in the nearby town of Ranohira and also got our National Park permits. Isalo's stunning rock formations are colourful with layered sandstone and bright yellow green to orange lichens set against an intensely blue sky. Roland told us all about the burial rituals of the local tribes and certain tombs have been set up at the base of cliffs (for recently dead) and high up in crevices (for the bones of people dead longer than two years). It was a fascinating insight into the lives of the people who work and live in this part of the country.

The walk was around 3½ km and fairly strenuous but we took our time enjoying the rocky surroundings, which put me in mind of certain areas of Arizona, and eventually reached the pool which, to our dismay, had been reached before us and commandeered by a party of French tourists. However, we all enjoyed our morning amusing ourselves finding such things as a colourful chameleon, a stick insect and several species of bird. We eventually returned to the hotel in time for lunch thanking Roland for his company and expertise.

The rest of the day was left to one's own devices with many of the group enjoying the lovely surroundings of this smashing hotel and generally recharging batteries ready for our next move tomorrow. The only couple who decided to venture out again were Steve and Julie who went on an afternoon walk with Roland and did extremely well finding a few more chameleon species and some more birds to add to our ever growing list.

Most of the group turned up for another excellent dinner and all remarked what a wonderful surprise it was to find a hotel of such high standards situated virtually in the middle of nowhere.

Day 8

Saturday 13th October

Today being predominantly a travelling day a few of us thought we'd make the most of the day by taking an early walk so Marty, Liz, Steve, Julie and myself were up and about at 6.30 and enjoying our last look around the rocky outcrops around the hotel. Marty and Liz had found the localized endemic Benson's Rock Thrush so we were pleased to be able to add that one to our list. Namaqua Dove, Grey-headed Lovebirds, Madagascar Bulbul, Little Green Sunbird, Madagascar Wagtail and Common Fody were all showing well on this early morning walk.

We left the hotel after breakfast and our first comfort stop was about 9.20 where we picked some eucalyptus citronella leaves which, when crushed, give off a pungent strong lemon scent and clear the tubes out wonderfully. Other stops we made along the way included the small outback town of Ihosy which is the capital of the Bara Tribe where we filled up with petrol then another stop was made to take pictures of a rock formation called the Bishop's Hat aka Ifandana Rock. It was a strange cross between Ayres Rock and the mountain out of the film 'Close encounters of the Third Kind'.

As the miles passed by the habitat began to change and the arid landscape gave way to more agricultural fields growing cassava and some mango trees scattered about giving a more varied countryside. Cobs of corn were seen hanging from verandas and trees which would eventually be ground up to make maize flour.

Our lunch stop was at the Bougainvillea Hotel where a couple of chameleon species were found and photographed. After lunch there was a tour of the 'Antaimoro' paper factory. This in itself doesn't sound particularly exciting but, in fact, the visit was really interesting and informative. The bark of the 'Avoha' bush is dried for a long time and then cooked for 4hrs to soften it. After draining, it is pulverised into a 400g ball before being soaked again and broken up into a paste. This is then thrown into mesh frames and the water drained off to form the rough paper sheets. Before they dry too much, flower decorations are added and then the whole piece put out in the sun to dry. The garden from which the flowers are taken is a stunning array of colour.

A stop was taken at the regional capital of Fianarantsoa so as to call in at the local pharmacy to stock up a few medicinal items shortly after which were turned off the RN7 on to the paved road that led eventually to Ranomafana National Park.

After our long journey we thankfully reached our hotel which was pleasingly positioned among the rocks in a terraced situation surrounded by rain forest. Birds noted along the way today included Purple Heron, Madagascar Cisticola, Madagascar Kingfisher, Bush Larks, Diamorphic Herons, Stonechat and Madagascar, Kestrel. After making ourselves comfortable and freshening up we enjoyed a very nice dinner after which we turned in to get a good nights' sleep. I hadn't been in my room long when a knock on the door revealed Wilf and Julia who had been on a moth prowl and had found a couple of beauties which we promptly photographed.

Day 9

Sunday 14th October

The day started with most of the group admiring the wonderful collection of moths that had accumulated overnight. There really were some smashing specimens to admire and record especially some of the Hawkmoth variety, a real treat indeed.

After breakfast we boarded our bus with our guide Fidy (and most of his family to lend a hand) and made the short trip to the park. As we alighted from the bus yet another moth was spotted in the form of the very impressive Comet Moth. This is one of the world's largest moths with the tail streamers sometimes measuring seven inches. Another strange fact about this moth is that it does all its eating at the larval stage and doesn't have a mouth as a full adult so cannot eat. What luck that we should come across such a fantastic creature.

Ranomafana supports several species of Lemur and with the help of the guides and boys which scout ahead we did extremely well and sighted the common and the rarer species with varying amounts of difficulty, some being easy to see while others preferred to tease us in the forest canopy. Three Woolly Lemurs (Eastern Avahi) were seen, the rare Golden Bamboo Lemur was high up in the trees, four Milne-Edwards Sifakas gave very good views and the Red-fronted Brown and Great Bamboo Lemurs were particularly accommodating.

Some super birds were spotted with the expertise of Fidy and Stripe-throated Jery, Cryptic Warbler, Souimanga Sunbird, Madagascar Blue Pigeon, Blue Coua, Common Newtonia and a single Nelicourvi Weaver were all very welcome new additions to our list. We could hear the calls of Madagascar Cuckoo Roller overhead but they were determined to stay hidden from view.

Tired but extremely satisfied with our mornings efforts we returned to the hotel for lunch and a relaxing afternoon. Come 4.30 we headed off back into the forest where we were assured of seeing the Fanaloka which is the Striped Civet, along with the Band-tailed Mongoose and Mouse Lemur. Sure enough, with the temptation of some easy food the said creatures appeared affording everyone with the opportunity of taking some super photographs. The Mouse Lemur was the last to appear as it was getting quite dark by now but this lovely little bush baby like creature was obviously programmed to be cute with a capital C.

Day 10

Monday 15th October

We awoke to a rather overcast morning with cloud hanging low over the forest but after breakfast we decided to split the group up to cater for both the keen birders and the mammal lovers alike. The birders went up to the higher altitude rainforest at Vohiparara while the rest of the group opted to go back into the reserve.

Fidy accompanied the birding group and along with his trusty tape recorder managed to summon up a very respectable number of birds. This old tape recorder, which has definitely seen better days, whirrs, squeaks and splutters and you can just about make out a bird call amongst all the noise but somehow it works and the birds perform beautifully. The first birds of note were a small feeding party of vangas that were moving through the forest and they included Tyler's Vanga, Blue Vanga and the much rarer Pollen's Vanga. Brown Emu Wren, Coucal, Kingfisher, Bulbul and Fody (all of the Madagascar kind) were all quickly spotted as we picked our way through the forest.

At one point, Fidy stopped and got hold of a very thin branch beside the track and bent it over to reveal the nest of a Spectacled Greenbul and the biggest surprise was that the bird was actually sitting on the nest not batting an eyelid. Amazing! Other species that featured were the Velvet Asity, Blue Coua, Souimanga Sunbird, Common Sunbird-Asity, Purple Heron, Lesser Vasa Parrots and Cuckoo Rollers performing overhead.

We also had a nice view of a handsome Milne-Edwards Sifaka that was being dreadfully tormented by insects but he was very confiding and showed himself to us very well indeed. The real highlight as far as I was concerned was finding one of the weirdest insects that I have ever come across – the Giraffe-necked Weevil. The male of this little red and black insect has such a long neck (hence the name) that it almost looks unreal. The female lays her eggs on a leaf then proceeds to roll it up in a tube so to give the eggs full protection - a really fascinating little creature. On the reptile front we had a Short-nosed Chameleon and a beautiful colourful Painted Mantilla Frog. There were even some lovely Ladies Dancing Orchids alongside the road. So even though the walk was very damp and drizzly we had a great time and were more than pleased with the things we'd seen.

The other half of the group that went back into the reserve enjoyed excellent views of Milne-Edwards Sifaka, Red-bellied Lemur, Golden Bamboo Lemur and Small-toothed Sportive Lemur, so they were all equally pleased with their morning.

The usual siesta was had after lunch and we all met up again at 3.30 where, again, we split into two parties as some of the group wanted to visit the local village whilst the others wanted another walk in the forest.

The forest was a lot quieter this afternoon although we did have smashing views of a Golden Bamboo Lemur and managed to get some great photos of an Orb Web Spider.

There was a power cut when we were getting ourselves ready for the evening meal but it only lasted about forty minutes so no real inconvenience was caused. We enjoyed a last meal at the Setam Lodge as tomorrow we shall be moving on to our next venue.

Day 11

Tuesday 16th October

After yesterday's grey damp day we were relieved to wake up to a bright sunny morning albeit a bit sticky and humid. Several of the group were out and about and there was much excitement when Marty and Liz had located a Pygmy Kingfisher which, luckily, most of us managed to see.

We were on the road by 8 o'clock to begin our long haul to Antsirabe which is situated almost slap bang in the middle of the island and will be our overnight staging post before we head north east to Andasibe. We travelled through the cool highlands noting the terraced hillsides and valleys cultivated by the Merina people. The roadside vendors selling everything from Honey and Cape Gooseberries to charcoal and hay whizzed by as did the many eucalyptus trees. Herds of Zebu were seen being taken to the markets which are sometimes many miles away and can take the herdsman several weeks to actually reach them.

We made a stop for lunch at Ambositra which is well known for its wood carving and ate our packed lunch. We noticed many rickshaws in the town and apparently their local name is push - push owing to the fact that the area is so hilly that the man pulling the rickshaw would often need some help from someone pushing from behind. That's the story anyway!

I must make a special mention about Eric at this point. It's his job to keep our bus clean and he does the job to perfection. As well as making sure the outside is clean he also clears up after us every time we get off and when we return every bit of muck has gone and it's like a new pin. So thank you, Eric.

A couple of hours later we arrived at our lodging for the night and enjoyed a wash and brush up to get rid of the grime of the days travelling. It was an early night for most people so after dinner and a drink or two at the bar we said our goodnights.

Day 12

Wednesday 17th October

It was another driving day today as we headed for our last venue of the trip. We drove in a northerly direction and had to drive through the busy streets of the island's capital, Tana. There was only one stop this morning just south of Tana where the only new bird we got was a familiar bird to us all – a Common Sandpiper.

Lunch was had at an Indonesian Restaurant which made a very nice change and then we spend a little time at the zoo which, I must say, was very good and much nicer than I'd anticipated. There was an excellent selection of Lemurs to be seen and a good variety of birds of the island and on the lake were some wild White-faced Whistling Duck.

We eventually arrived at Perinet and drove through the rainforest with great anticipation, looking forward to the next few days we are to spend here in Vakona Lodge.

Day 13

Thursday 18th October

We were up bright and early and after breakfast we set out with Desi and our local guide Maurice for a mornings walk in the reserve. Our main target today was to be the charismatic Indris so we were full of anticipation as we set out on our trek through the rainforest. The day was bright and sunny which showed the forest to perfection. We crossed rickety wooden bridges that spanned slow running clear streams and enjoyed the wealth of bird life that we encountered. Henst's Goshawk, Rand's Warbler, Madagascar Spinetail and Paradise Flycatcher were just a few goodies among many along with a bright green Linear Gecko.

We were lucky enough to get some good sightings of the Indris even though we had to crane our necks somewhat. This, the largest of the lemurs has a most appealing 'teddy bear' face. One of the charming facts about the Indris is that they practice long-term monogamy, seeking a new partner only after the death of a mate. They live in small groups consisting of the mated male and female and their maturing offspring, however, their voices are said to be amongst the loudest within the animal kingdom and we are all hoping that we'll experience this at some time during our stay.

Maurice turned out to be an excellent guide and made a pretty colourful character with his bright blue and yellow jacket and pink trousers all set off to perfection by his jaunty straw pointed hat. As well as being extremely knowledgeable he was particularly conscious of not pushing the group too hard and gave everyone ample time to catch their breath when needed.

Desi told us the story of his first house which had been washed away during the cyclone of February '94 and showed us some water marks on the old railway station showing how high the water had risen. It was something that the likes of us just couldn't imagine happening but an enthralling story none the less.

Other highlights of the morning were our first Red-tailed Vanga, one of the introduced Diadem Sifakas, three Eastern Woolly Lemurs huddled up in a tree and a largish Tree Boa.

The afternoon was spent at leisure until we met up for our late afternoon walk at four o'clock when we went to an area that is famed for its orchids. A really pleasant couple of hours were spent exploring the area and we exchanged pleasantries with a group of Americans who were patiently waiting for the Madagascar Crested Ibis to appear. We didn't hang around and continued our walk and as luck would have it some time later, I spotted a large white bird land in a tree across the river and lo and behold there it was, the coveted Madagascar Crested Ibis. That was definitely a matter of being in the right place at the right time.

Another highlight of the day was when Maurice pointed to a branch and said to us 'Can you see the gecko?' We all peered closely but nobody could see it. He then placed two fingers about six inches apart on the branch and said 'The gecko is somewhere between my two fingers, can you see it now?' Try as we might we still couldn't see the creature. Maurice then showed us precisely where the gecko was and we were absolutely amazed that we'd been looking at it all the time. So perfect was the camouflage of this Mossy Leaf-tailed Gecko that I'd defy anyone to spot it. It makes you wonder how they found it in the first place!

Our next port of call was at a nearby hotel where we were assured of seeing a small lemur that regularly appeared and we were not disappointed. Almost on cue two Hairy-eared Mouse Lemurs came along and were perfectly happy to let us take pictures, the flashlights not bothering them one little bit.

When it was dark we took a walk along the road near the hotel and the boys found several chameleon species for us to observe and photograph and so absorbed were we that we ended up being late for dinner.

Day 14

Friday 19th October

We were woken this morning to the eerie haunting calls of the Indris, what an alarm clock they make! It was a noise you certainly couldn't ignore and it went on for quite a while and definitely added a little frisson to the atmosphere of the surrounding forest.

There is always something to watch around this lodge, even as we eat breakfast in the morning there are Mascarene Martins swooping over the water and White-eyes flitting around in the vegetation not to mention the many Fodys and always on the lookout for a dropped crumb here or there.

After breakfast we headed off for Mantadia National Park which was just under an hours drive from the lodge and our quest today was the Diadem Sifaka and Black and White Ruffed Lemur. Although the day started overcast and misty by the time we got to the park the sun had burned through and it promised to be a beautiful day.

It was quite a stiff climb up the slopes of this high altitude forest but the lush vegetation including tree ferns, bromeliads and giant trees gave it an almost prehistoric feel. Luckily it wasn't too long before we came across a troupe of Diadem Lemurs which are arguably the most handsome of the lemur family with the attractive ginger wash on the white fur. We counted at least six individuals and spent a considerable time watching and photographing them.

When we returned to the vehicle we were asked if we wanted to continue and try and find the Black and White Ruffed Lemur which would mean another strenuous hike. The answer was a resounding 'Yes', so off we went again scrambling up yet another slope. It seemed that we were going to be unsuccessful in our quest but one of the boys had managed to locate the animals and if we could just press on a bit further then perhaps we would see them. It was worth the effort when we eventually found four lemurs which really looked smart in the startling black and white finery.

Birds of the morning were many and varied with a few new species thrown in including Madagascar Starling, White-throated Rail, and Broad-billed Roller. Even some of the smaller inhabitants of the forest allowed some good photos including a magnificent giant centipede.

We returned to hotel for lunch having thoroughly enjoyed our morning at Mantadia. After relaxing for a few hours we went back to the forest for our late afternoon walk and were lucky enough to find an Eastern Lesser Bamboo Lemur in almost the same spot as we had seen the Madagascar Crested Ibis yesterday evening. We could only see one lemur but knew there had to be more about as they like to live in small family groups. It was a smashing walk even though the forest was quiet and later on it took on an almost magical feel as the setting sun cast a rich red glow through the trees.

Day 15

Saturday 20th October

Most of the group took the morning walk with Maurice which turned out to be very productive indeed. There were signs of a Lowland Streaked Tenrec that had been digging around and as we got to the far end of the bridge there was a very nice Eastern Lesser Bamboo Lemur posing for us. We walked along the edge of the forest in the open area and came across a Furry-eared Mouse Lemur, a Gregarious Short-tailed Rat (yes, that really is its name), a Preying Mantis, a strange looking crab spider and another fascinating Leaf-tailed Gecko. To top it all the boys found two super Indris which performed beautifully for us, a Diadem Sifaka, more geckos and chameleons and the icing on the cake was a roosting Eastern Scops Owl. What a morning, it was great.

The late afternoon was really more of the same with the addition of a Parson's Chameleon which is perhaps the largest of the chameleons and as dusk began to fall we returned to the Hotel Feon Ny Ala to enjoy, once more, the very photogenic Mouse Lemurs.

As we travelled back to our hotel in the bus big spots of rain began to fall and by the time we arrived a full blown tropical storm had begun with thunder, rain, lightning in fact the full works with added bonus of the electricity finally being cut off. It was some time before the power was eventually restored and we really thought that we would either be eating our dinner by candlelight or maybe not eating at all, but then just as we were sitting in the darkened dining room the lights came on and all was well.

Day 16

Sunday 21st October

It was an early start for five of the group who got up early to do a last birding walk and we saw most of the birds that we had become so familiar with in the last couple of weeks but in no way blasé and still enjoyed every one of them. We even managed to pick up one new species in the shape of a Ward's Flycatcher.

We didn't go into the park but stuck to the road as everything was so wet we didn't want to risk attracting the leeches that might want to become close up and personal! However, we were lucky enough to spot a beautiful copper coloured baby Tree Boa wrapped tightly around a small shrub about three foot off the ground – it was a real delight. After a couple of hours we returned to the vehicle and said our farewells and thanks to Maurice and his friend Lalanina who has looked after us so well in the last few days.

It was time to get back for breakfast and finish our packing as we reluctantly got ready to leave Vakona Lodge.

We had a bite of lunch in the Hotel Feon Ny Ala and then we set off on our journey back to Tana. The weather was very changeable ranging from bright sunshine at one moment and then dark angry clouds and some rain at another. However, apart from a few comfort stops along the way the journey passed uneventfully and we were all in reflective mood as we remembered all the great things we'd seen over the last two weeks.

We arrived back at the hotel in Tena where there were some day rooms reserved for us and we rested until it was time for our last goodbye dinner together.

It was then off to the airport where we had to change our Malagasy Francs back to Euros which was a bit of a performance as they seemed to be very short of the latter and we had to make do with American Dollars but that done we moved through the strange rigours of Malagasy security. However, the plane was on time and we took off on schedule making the ten hour flight to Paris and landing bang on time.

Day 17

Monday 22nd October

After collecting our bags from the carousel at Heathrow airport we all said our goodbyes as everyone went their separate ways and all of us, no doubt, having our own special memories of the wonders of Madagascar, 'The Big Red Isle'.

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Species Lists

Lemurs

	LEMUR SPECIES	SCIENTIFIC NAME	October													
			8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21
1	Indri	<i>Indri indri</i>											4	h	6	h
2	Diademed Sifaka	<i>Propithecus diadema diadema</i>											2	4	3	
3	Milne-Edwards Diademed Sifaka	<i>Propithecus diadema edwardsi</i>							4	6						
4	Verreaux's Sifaka	<i>Propithecus verreauxi verreauxi</i>		12	8	6										
5	Woolly Lemur (Avahi)	<i>Avahi laniger</i>							3				3			
6	Ring-tailed Lemur	<i>Lemur catta</i>		30+	25+	11	10									
7	Black and White Ruffed Lemur	<i>Varecia variegata variegata</i>												4		
8	Common Brown Lemur	<i>Eulemur fulvus fulvus</i>											4		2	
9	Red-fronted Brown Lemur	<i>Eulemur fulvus rufus</i>		8	6	7	5		2	2						
10	Eastern Grey Bamboo Lemur	<i>Haplemur griseus griseus</i>												1	3	
11	Golden Bamboo Lemur	<i>Haplemur aureus</i>							1	3						
12	Grey Mouse Lemur	<i>Microcebus murinus</i>		1												
13	Brown Mouse Lemur	<i>Microcebus rufus</i>							1							
14	Greater Dwarf Lemur	<i>Cheirogalus major</i>											2		1	
15	White-footed Sportive Lemur	<i>Lepilemur leucopus</i>		4	1											
16	Small-tooth Sportive Lemur	<i>Lepilemur microdon</i>								1						
17	Redish-grey Mouse Lemur	<i>Microcebus griseorufus</i>		2												
18	Fury-eared Dwarf Lemur	<i>Cheirogaleus crossleyi</i>											2		2	
19	Goodman's mouse Lemur	<i>Microcebus lehilahytsara</i>													1	

Other Mammals

	Hump-backed Whale	<i>Megaptera novaeangliae</i>	6			1										
	Gregarious Short-tailed Rat	<i>Brachyuromys ramirohitra</i>													1	

Birds

	BIRD SPECIES	SCIENTIFIC NAME	October													
			8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21
1	Wedge-tailed Shearwater	<i>Puffinus pacificus</i>	8													
2	African Spoonbill	<i>Platalea alba</i>	1													
3	Black-crowned Night Heron	<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>										6				
4	Common Squacco Heron	<i>Ardeola ralloides</i>			6							4				
5	Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	1	50	30	50+	10	60			75	200+				15
6	Green-backed Heron	<i>Butorides striatus</i>				2					2					
7	Dimorphic Heron	<i>Egretta dimorpha</i>						8			2					
8	Great White Egret	<i>Egretta alba</i>	19	2												12
9	Purple Heron	<i>Ardea purpurea</i>						1		1			1			1
10	Hamerkop	<i>Scopus umbretta</i>				3						2				
11	Madagascar Crested Ibis	<i>Lophotibis cristata</i>											1			
12	White-faced Duck	<i>Dendrocygna viduata</i>										22				
13	Knob-billed Duck	<i>Sarkidiornis melanotos</i>			1											
14	Madagascar Cuckoo Hawk	<i>Aviceda madagascariensis</i>			1											
15	Yellow-billed Kite	<i>Milvus aegyptus</i>	11	30+	25+	30+	15	50								
16	Madagascar Harrier- Hawk	<i>Polyboroides radiatus</i>									1LO			1		
17	Henst's Goshawk	<i>Accipiter henstii</i>											1			
18	Frances's Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter francesiae</i>			2	2	1							1		
19	Madagascar Buzzard	<i>Buteo brachypterus</i>							1				1	1		
20	Madagascar Kestrel	<i>Falco newtoni</i>	2	6	4	3	3	4	3		2	2				1
21	Madagascar Partridge	<i>Margaroperdix madagascariensis</i>			6											
22	Helmeted Guineafowl	<i>Numida meleagris</i>			3	11										
23	White-throated Rail	<i>Dryolimnas cuvieri</i>					1						2	1	1	1
24	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>												1		4
25	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>				1						3				2

	BIRD SPECIES	SCIENTIFIC NAME	October														
			8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	
26	Kelp Gull	<i>Larus dominicanus</i>	2														
27	Caspian Tern	<i>Sterna caspia</i>	c80														
28	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columbalivia</i>	40	20+		8			c100			50	30	15	25	20	60+
29	Madagascar Turtle Dove	<i>Streptopelia picturata</i>			4				3						1		
30	Namaqua Dove	<i>Oena capensis</i>		16	2	14	8	10									
31	Madagascar Green Pigeon	<i>Treron australis</i>			2												
32	Madagascar Blue Pigeon	<i>Alectroenas madagascariensis</i>								1					2	1	
33	Greater Vasa Parrot	<i>Coracopsis vasa</i>				1								2	h		
34	Lesser Vasa Parrot	<i>Coracopsis nigra</i>			10		1		2	3	2			2	2	6	4
35	Grey-headed Lovebird	<i>Agapornis canus</i>			20+	2	6	5									
36	Madagascar Lesser Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus rochii</i>							1h	h				h	h	h	h
37	Giant Coua	<i>Coua gigas</i>		2	4												
38	Red-breasted Coua	<i>Coua serriana</i>													1LO		
39	Crested Coua	<i>Coua cristata</i>		10	8												
40	Blue Coua	<i>Coua caerulea</i>							1	2				1	2	2	2
41	Madagascar Coucal	<i>Centropus toulou</i>			2	2		2	h	1					1	h	2
42	Rainforest Scops Owl	<i>Otus rutilus</i>														1	
43	White-browed Owl	<i>Ninox supercilii</i>		2													
44	Madagascar Nightjar	<i>Caprimulgus madagascariensis</i>			1		h										2
45	Madagascar Spinetail	<i>Zoonavena grandidieri</i>												4	3		
46	African Palm Swift	<i>Cypsiurus parvus</i>	20	15		30+	15+	5								6	30
47	African Black Swift	<i>Apus barbatus</i>					1	1									20
48	Madagascar Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo vintsioides</i>		1				1		1	1	1	1	1	1	1	
49	Madagascar Pygmy Kingfisher	<i>Ceyx madagascariensis</i>									2		1			1	1
50	Madagascar Bee-eater	<i>Merops superciliosus</i>	2	3	2	6	14	6			4				3		1
51	Broad-billed Roller	<i>Eurystomus glaucurus</i>													4		
52	Pitta-like Ground Roller	<i>Atelornis pittoides</i>								1							

	BIRD SPECIES	SCIENTIFIC NAME	October													
			8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21
53	Rufous-headed Ground Roller	<i>Atelornis crossleyi</i>									h					
54	Madagascar Cuckoo-Roller	<i>Leptosomus discolor</i>							2		2		2	2	4	
55	Madagascar Hoopoe	<i>Upupa marginata</i>			2	1	1									
56	Velvet Asity	<i>Philepitta castanea</i>									1					
57	Common Sunbird-Asity	<i>Neodrepanis coruscans</i>									2					
58	Yellow-bellied Sunbird-Asity	<i>Neodrepanis hypoxantha</i>									1					
59	Madagascar Bush Lark	<i>Mirafra hova</i>				12	3	6					6			
60	Mascarene Martin	<i>Phedina borbonica</i>	100+			4			6	4	30	15	6	30	30+	30+
61	Madagascar Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flaviventris</i>				1	3	3	3	4	2	4	3	6	3	4
62	Ashy Cuckoo-shrike	<i>Coracina cinerea</i>			1						1		2	1		
63	Madagascar Bulbul	<i>Hypsipetes madagascariensis</i>			1		12	15	8	6	6	4	8	12	8	12
64	Littoral Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola imerinus</i>					1	1								
65	Madagascar Magpie-robin	<i>Copsychus albospecularis</i>		1	3	1	1	2		2	1	1	2	1	1	2
66	Stonechat	<i>Saxicola torquata</i>					2	2		1	1	2	3	4	3	3
67	Brown Emu-tail	<i>Dromaeocercus brunneus</i>								1			1	1		
68	Madagascar Brush Warbler	<i>Nesillas typica</i>								h			1	1	2	
69	Subdesert Brush Warbler	<i>Nesillas lantzii</i>		1												
70	Rand's Warbler	<i>Randia pseudozosterops</i>											1	1	1	1
71	Common Newtonia	<i>Newtonia brunneicauda</i>		2			3		4	2			3	2	6	
72	Dark Newtonia	<i>Newtonia amphichroa</i>								h						2
73	Madagascar Cisticola	<i>Cisticola cherina</i>				4	4	3							2	
74	Ward's Flycatcher	<i>Pseudobias wardi</i>														2
75	Madagascar Paradise Flycatcher	<i>Terpsiphone mutata</i>		3	5		2	2	2	4			4	3	8	6
76	Common Jery	<i>Neomixis tenella</i>		1	2		2						2	3	4	
77	Green Jery	<i>Neomixis viridis</i>		2	4		1		3	2	2					1
78	Stripe-throated Jery	<i>Neomixis striatigula</i>							1							
79	Cryptic Warbler	<i>Cryptosylvicola randrianasoloi</i>							1							

	BIRD SPECIES	SCIENTIFIC NAME	October													
			8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21
80	White-throated Oxylabes	<i>Oxylabes madagascariensis</i>								1						
81	Long-billed Greenbul	<i>Bernieria madagascariensis</i>													1	
82	Spectacled Greenbul	<i>Bernieria zosterops</i>									1			1		
83	Souimanga Sunbird	<i>Nectarinia sovimanga</i>					1		2	2	2			3	2	4
84	Madagascar Green Sunbird	<i>Nectarinia notata</i>		2			2	2	4	2	1	2	1	2	2	4
85	Madagascar White-eye	<i>Zosterops maderaspatanus</i>		5	6				8	6	4		6	8	6	8
86	Red-tailed Vanga	<i>Calicalicus madagascariensis</i>											2			3
87	Hook-billed Vanga	<i>Vanga curvirostris</i>							1							
88	Pollen's Vanga	<i>Xenopirostris polleni</i>									2					
89	Sickle-billed Vanga	<i>Falcula palliata</i>			2											
90	White-headed Vanga	<i>Artamella viridis</i>						2								2
91	Madagascar Blue Vanga	<i>Cyanolanius madagascarinus</i>									2					4
92	Tylas Vanga	<i>Tylas eduardi</i>									2					
93	Crested Drongo	<i>Dicrurus forficatus</i>		6	8	6	3	10	4	3		2	3	25	4	6
94	Pied Crow	<i>Corvus albus</i>	2	25+	15	20+	50+	50+				1				
95	Common Myna	<i>Acridotheres tristis</i>	12	10	4	20	20	15			5	20	2	2	2	6
96	Madagascar Starling	<i>Saroglossa aurata</i>												2		1
97	Nelicourvi Weaver	<i>Ploceus nelicourvi</i>							1LO		1			2	4	2
98	Madagascar Fody	<i>Foudia madagascariensis</i>	20	6		5	8	6					10	20	6	4
99	Madagascar Mannikin	<i>Lonchura nana</i>	4						2	1			1			2

Reptiles

	SPECIES	SCIENTIFIC NAME	October														
			8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	
1	Short-nosed Chameleon	<i>Calumma gastrotaenia</i>									1			3		4	
2	Short-horned Chameleon	<i>Calumma brevicornis</i>												1		2	
3	Parson's Chameleon	<i>Calumma parsonii</i>														2	
4	Nose-horned Chameleon	<i>Calumma nasuta</i>									1			3		2	
5	Malthe Chameleon	<i>Calumma malthe</i>															1
6	Spiny-backed Chameleon	<i>Furcifer verrucosus</i>	1														
7	Stump-tailed Chameleon	<i>Brookesia therezieni</i>															1
8	Jewel (Carpet) Chameleon	<i>Furcifer lateralis</i>					1										
9	Lined Day Gecko	<i>Phelsuma lineata bifasciata</i>												5			
10	Satanic Leaf-tailed Gecko	<i>Uroplatus phantasticus</i>								1							
11	Big-headed Gecko	<i>Paroedura picta</i>					1										
12	Leaf-tailed Gecko	<i>Uroplatus sikorea</i>												1		1	
13	Gecko	<i>Uroplatus madagascariensis</i>														1	
14	Spiny-tailed Iguanid	<i>Oplurus cyclurus</i>					1										
15	Three-eyed Lizard	<i>Chalerodon madagascariensis</i>			3												
16	Madagascar tree Boa	<i>Sanzinia madagascariensis</i>												1		1	1
17	Madagascar radiated tortoise	<i>Geochelone radiata</i>				1	1										
	Amphibians																
	Painted Mantella tree frog	<i>Mantella madagascariensis</i>									1						
	Tree frog	<i>Boophis madagascariensis</i>															1
	Arachnids																
	Golden Orb-webbed spider	<i>Nephila madagascariensis</i>		15													
	Thorn Spider	<i>Gasteracanthinae sub-family</i>					1			1			2	2	1		

SPECIES	SCIENTIFIC NAME	October													
		8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21
Insects & other fauna															
Giraffe-necked weevil	<i>Trachelophorus giraffa</i>							1	3						
Jewel beetle	<i>Buprestida family</i>													1	
Lubber grasshopper	<i>Phymateus saxosus</i>					1									
Pill's centipede												1			