

Madagascar: The 8th Continent

with Naturalist Journeys



November 4 – 18, 2023

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Isolated from any continental landmass since the Cretaceous period, Madagascar has drifted through the Indian Ocean, following its own evolutionary course, having only five major terrestrial animal colonization events since the time of the dinosaurs.

The result is an island where *every* land mammal is endemic, as are nearly half the bird species. Reptiles are well represented as well, like chameleons, and day and leaf-tailed geckos. The uniqueness of this island's fauna makes it one of the world's great destinations for the birdwatcher and naturalist, alike.

Our tour features both birds and mammals. We focus on Madagascar's most iconic and charismatic bird species (we hope to see over 95% of the endemics), as well as the Island's other oddities, like endearing lemurs and strikingly bizarre chameleons.

We also focus on the Island's geology and geography with resulting various habitats — from the spiny forests of Ifaty with its towering baobabs and other-worldly *Didierea* octopus trees, to the verdant rainforests of Andasibe-Mantadia National Park.

Tour Highlights

- Explore Andasibe-Mantadia National Park in search of the world's largest lemur, the Indri, along with a long list of avian jewels, from Rufous-headed Ground-Roller to Madagascar Blue Pigeon
- Visit Ranomafana to search for the rare Yellow-bellied Sunbird-Asity and quirky Brown Mesite, and up to 12 lemur species, including Milne-Edwards' Sifaka
- Travel to Zombitse National Park and La Table for two very range-restricted, recently discovered bird species: Appert's Tetraka (Greenbul) and Rufous-shouldered Vanga (the late Phoebe Snetsinger's last bird)
- Walk through the "spiny desert" of Ifaty, with its bizarre baobabs and euphorbias, in search of Long-tailed Ground-Roller and Subdesert Mesite
- Journey to the unspoiled islet of Nosy Ve to experience a breeding colony of Red-tailed Tropicbird, protected by generations of locals

Tour Summary

15-Day / 14-Night Madagascar Wildlife Tour

\$TBD* from Antananarivo

Airport is Ivato International (TNR)

**Price subject to currency exchange rate.*

Day-to-Day Itinerary

The exact sequence of events and locations on our itinerary may vary with Air Madagascar's flight schedules. Sometimes we run this tour in reverse order, but the main areas we visit remain the same.

Sat., Nov. 4 Arrival in Antananarivo

Welcome to Madagascar! Our journey begins in Antananarivo, the capital city of Madagascar. Lying at almost 4,200 feet above sea level in the middle of the country, the city sits atop a 2-mile long rocky ridge that overlooks extensive terraced rice paddies just west of the city.

“Tana,” as it is colloquially known, originally served as the capital for the indigenous people of the island until its occupation by the French in the first half of the 20th Century. Years of colonization and immigration from other parts of the world have created a city with an eclectic mix of indigenous Malagasy, South Asian, and French elements.

When you arrive in the airport's arrival hall after picking up your luggage and passing through customs, look for someone to meet you with a sign showing your name. This is a driver from the hotel who handles the transfer. On the tour start day, your guide meets you to answer any questions and let you know the next morning's breakfast and departure time. (D)

Sun., Nov. 5 Tana to Andasibe-Mantadia National Park

On this first morning, we meet for a briefing over breakfast. We then head about 150 kilometers east of Tana to the famous Andasibe-Mantadia National Park, our base for the next three nights. This park, established in 1989, protects a spectacular 155-square kilometer rainforest that is home to 11 species of lemurs, including the child-sized Indri. If we are lucky, we are greeted by the Indri's calls long before we see them — they can be heard from up to a mile away! The journey takes three hours, with a stop for a meal along the way.

Accommodations in Andasibe-Mantadia National Park (B,L,D)

Mon., Nov. 6 & Tues., Nov. 7 Andasibe & Mantadia National Parks

Today we explore this incredible wilderness, an incredibly lush region that records over 200 days of rain a year and home of the iconic Indri Lemur. Also known as Anamalazaotra Special Reserve, or by the French name Perinet, Andasibe was formerly part of a tract of contiguous forest with the larger Mantadia National Park. Deforestation has since fragmented these protected areas. Today we visit the two now divided preserves that protect one of Madagascar's most important primary rainforest areas.

We explore the area's various trails with local guides, walking along streamsides and in ridge forest, as well as a small lake. This rainforest is Madagascar's most biodiverse ecosystem. As a result, the list of birds we can see is long; highlights may include Madagascar Flufftail, Madagascar Blue Pigeon, Dark Newtonia, Nuthatch Vanga, and Madagascar Pygmy-Kingfisher. We may also be fortunate enough to encounter Collared Nightjar roosting almost imperceptibly on the forest floor, a species so poorly known that its vocalizations are still unknown. Another nocturnal species that we may see is Madagascar Long-eared Owl, the largest owl species on the island.

Mantadia is also the best place in the world for Ground-Rollers. With patience, visitors may find four secretive rainforest species in a single morning: Pitta-like, Scaly, Rufous-headed, and Short-legged Ground-Roller. We may also find Lesser Vasa Parrot and three species of Coua: Red-breasted, Blue, and Red-fronted.

Despite a long list of incredible birds, one of the top experiences here is the Indri's morning calls as they echo through the misty forests. These plaintive wails from the world's largest lemur are reminiscent of whale sounds! We listen and hopefully observe them at Andasibe, along with the iconic Diademed Sifaka and Black-and-White Ruffed, Greater Dwarf, Brown, and Gray Bamboo Lemurs.

The eastern rainforest is also an excellent place to sample some of Madagascar's varied and colorful chameleons, day geckos, and leaf-tailed geckos. We search for these while birding during the day and we will have another opportunity to spot some of Madagascar's unusual reptiles and amphibians on a night walk.
Accommodations in Andasibe-Mantadia National Park (B,L,D)

Wed., Nov. 8 Andasibe to Antsirabe

After some final morning birding around Andasibe, we head southwards for approximately 300 kilometers to our next birding area, Ranomafana National Park. We pass colorful rice paddies on winding roads through the countryside until we arrive at the picturesque city of Antsirabe, the third largest city in Madagascar, known for its cool climate, thermal bath center, and plentiful rickshaw taxis.

Accommodations at Antsirabe (B,L,D)

Thurs., Nov. 9 Antsirabe to Ranomafana

This morning, we embark from Antsirabe on the second leg of our journey to Ranomafana, traveling south for just over 220 kilometers. After a long drive through rolling green mountains and past small villages, we arrive just before dark, settle in, and prepare for tomorrow's early start. We know that these days of travel are long, and strive to make them as interesting as possible!

Accommodations at Ranomafana (B,L,D)

Fri., Nov. 10 – Sun., Nov. 12 Ranomafana National Park

Madagascar's government established Ranomafana National Park in 1991 to protect one of the largest remaining rainforest patches in eastern Madagascar. In 2007, the park became a UNESCO World Heritage Site. This superb tract of forest, situated at a slightly higher elevation than Mantadia National Park, boasts 161-square miles of mid-altitude rainforest and higher altitude montane forest. Small streams cascade through the eternally green park, draining into the Namorana River. This river divides the park and serves as a source of electricity for the area.

This park is of special interest to primatologists: a new species of lemur, the Golden Bamboo, was discovered here in 1986. It is also one of the best places to find one of the world's rarest primate species, the Greater Bamboo Lemur. A hotspot for lemur diversity, Ranomafana boasts 12 species, including the superb Milne-Edwards' Sifaka. We explore the excellent network of paths through the forests and dense stands of giant bamboo for these and other mammal species. If we are lucky, we may see Malagasy Striped Civet and Ring-tailed Mongoose.

We also find a host of new bird species in these foothill and montane rainforests — home to most of Madagascar's avian endemics, including: Pitta-like Ground Roller, White-throated Oxylabes, Crossley's Vanga, and Pollen's Vanga. We also search for the more retiring Madagascar Wood-Rail, Brown Mesite, and Henst's Goshawk.

Vohiparara, a nearby cloud forest site, is our focus one morning. This emerald forest of mist and moss is the best site in the world to find the brilliantly colored Yellow-bellied Sunbird-Asity. Other excellent species here include

Rufous-headed Ground-Roller, Brown Emutail, and Velvet Asity. Small patches of marsh may hold Gray Emutail and Madagascar Snipe. A nearby river holds possible Madagascar Pratincole.

Accommodations at Ranomafana (B,L,D)

Mon., Nov. 13 Ranomafana | Anjaha & Isalo's Palm Savanna

This morning, we continue south to Anjaha and Isalo. The sacred forest of Anjaha protects a population of Ring-tailed Lemur. These social, iconic, and charismatic lemurs may offer splendid photo opportunities. We continue our way south towards Isalo on a spectacularly scenic drive. We search for the elegant Madagascar Harrier along the way on a beautiful grassland plateau, where we might also spot a few species of endemic ground orchid. The Isalo Massif itself is a landscape covered in golden grasslands with rugged sandstone outcrops with hints of silver and green. Set against the deep blue sky, this magnificent landscape is reminiscent of a John Wayne Western.

Fascinating birds here include Madagascar Partridge, Torotoroka Scops-Owl, and Benson's Rock-Thrush.

Accommodations surrounded by the spectacular mountains of the Isalo Massif (B,L,D)

Tues., Nov. 14 & Wed., Nov. 15 Isalo to Zombitse to Ifaty

We head off on an early start, heading southwest to explore Zombitse National Park, which protects tall deciduous forests and savannas, and their wildlife. Cuckoo-Roller, more closely related to falcons than either cuckoos or rollers, regularly displays over the canopy here. Males engage in flapping displays and loops accompanied by shrieking whistles.

These forests are also home to Appert's Tetraka (Greenbul), a highly endangered species restricted to just a handful of forest patches. Giant Coua, Coquerel's Coua, and Rufous Vanga are a few of the other species we may encounter here in this special transition zone between the south's flora and the western deciduous forest.

After lunch, we continue along the coast to the southern part of the country, where we spend four days exploring the "Spiny Desert," mudflats, and coastal "coral-rag" scrub.

On the drive to Ifaty, scanning the mudflats we look for the distinctive Crab-Plover and vulnerable Madagascar Plover. The beach resort town of Ifaty is a popular place for beach-goers and naturalists, alike.

White sandy beaches and turquoise water offer a shocking juxtaposition to the famous "Spiny Desert," a landscape of interwoven baobabs with bulbous trunks, Ocotillo-like *Didierea*, and euphorbias so weird and wonderful that you might as well be on a different planet. This area is loaded with extravagant semi-desert endemics. We explore this fascinating ecosystem this afternoon and tomorrow. *Accommodations at Ifaty (B,L,D)*

Thurs., Nov. 16 Ifaty | Toliara | St. Augustin Bay

The "Spiny Desert," an ecologically diverse wonderland, is dominated by a completely foreign association of plant species. We carefully wind our way among the *Didierea*, avoiding the sharp spines, while trying to find various specialized, endemic species. The stars of this ecosystem are Long-tailed Ground-Roller and Subdesert Mesite, charismatic members of two different endemic bird families. Four species of vangas, including the spectacular Sickle-billed can also be found. The elusive Banded Kestrel is a good bonus!

Mid-day, when temperatures soar, we take a welcome break (and perhaps a refreshing dip in the ocean!). In the afternoon, we drive half an hour down the coast to the seaside town of Toliara and settle in at our lodge. Arid hillsides surrounding the Bay of Augustin are home to Madagascar's most recently described endemic, Red-

shouldered Vanga, as well as the scarce and range-restricted Verreaux's Coua. Madagascar Sandgrouse often frequent area drinking holes.

Accommodations at Toliara (B,L,D)

Fri., Nov. 17 Toliara | Anakao and Nosy Ve

If we have time this morning, we search again for Madagascar Sandgrouse. Afterwards, we board a boat across the Bay of Augustin to Anakao and Nosy Ve. Please note that this excursion cannot be guaranteed, as it is subject to weather conditions and Air Madagascar flight times.

In the coastal vegetation near Anakao, our target is Littoral Rock-Thrush. We then make the very short boat trip to the uninhabited islet of Nosy Ve where we enjoy splendidly close views of Red-tailed Tropicbird as they hover overhead. This unspoiled islet with long white beaches and aquamarine waters, also hosts roosts of resting seabirds. We scan for Lesser Crested Tern, White-fronted Plover, and Crab-Plover. Optional snorkeling can be arranged in advance.

We return by mid-afternoon, depending on wind conditions, then head to the airport in Toliara to board our flight back to Antananarivo.

Accommodations at Tana (B,L,D)

Sat., Nov. 18 Departures from Tana

Catch your international flights home today, or we can help you make arrangements to stay on and explore on your own. Just ask! Please note, flights out today should be made in the evening.

Items of Note

Accommodations

Our hotels are good by African standards! This isn't a budget trip and we make an extra effort to stay in comfortable hand-picked accommodations, upmarket where possible, and as close as possible to the best birding areas. Rooms have private facilities with hot showers, although the supply of hot water in Madagascar can be intermittent!

Meals

Meals are Western-style, with a hint of French and Malagasy influence. Zebu, the local beef, features predominantly on the menu. Seafood is popular at the coast. Please advise if you are vegetarian and what foods you enjoy, so that we can accommodate you. Water is not safe to drink, so we supply free bottled water in the vehicle, which you can take to your room in the evening for drinking and brushing teeth.

Pace of the Tour, Transport & Timing

The tour is timed to coincide with the breeding season. The days are cool to warm in the highlands and hot in the dry forest. To find birds and lemurs and cope with heat, we need to have early starts and a lot of time in the field. Transport for short distances is by minibus or four-wheel-drive vehicles, and for longer drives by a larger coaster bus, which regularly allows for approximately one and a half seats per person.

This tour requires a moderate to good degree of fitness. Most walks start at the coolest times of the day at a slow to fair pace. Most walks are generally relatively flat, with small ups and downs on many trails. There are

two exceptions: at Ranomafana and Andasibe where the trails can be steep and the pace faster. These walks can either be skipped or taken slowly with a private trail guide.

Tour Details

Plan Ahead!

Protect yourself with [Allianz Travel Insurance](#). Their website will show a grid of tour cost and your age category for you to make selections. As of January 2017, Naturalist Journeys pays 100% of your flight carbon offset.

Cost of the Journey

Cost of the journey is \$TBD DBL per person / \$TBD SGL, from Antananarivo.

The price includes accommodations for 14 nights, all meals as indicated in the itinerary, a Naturalist Journeys host (with at least 8 participants) and a Birding Africa tour-leader. It includes local guides, bottled water in the bus, entry fees at parks and reserves and activities as indicated on the itinerary. A bird checklist is provided on arrival.

Travel Information

To make sure your flight syncs well with the tour start and end times, please discuss your flight details with us, *before* you confirm your flight booking. Once we know your flight details, we will book your airport transfer and any extra accommodation you may need before or after the tour. These are not included in the tour cost and you can pay them directly at the hotel's reception. Please plan to **arrive on the first day of the tour at any time** (November 4, 2023) at Ivato International Airport (TNR). The tour starts with a briefing at the hotel near the airport at **7:00 PM**. If you arrive somewhat later, the tour-leader will leave a note for you at reception stating breakfast time. Please plan to departures for the **EVENING of November 18** to allow for unpredictable flight changes back to Tana the night before.

For those who have some time before the tour starts or after the tour ends, we can book optional day-rooms, overnight rooms, and airport transfers upon request. You can relax at the hotel or explore Tana's Lac Alarobia, which may offer Madagascar Pond Heron, Comb Duck, Hottentot Teal, Little Grebe, Madagascar Kingfisher, dragonflies, butterflies, and the skulking day geckos.

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