

Madagascar

A Greentours Itinerary

Day 1 & 2

To Antananarivo (Tana)

We will arrive late afternoon or evening of Day 2, depending on the international flight schedule. We'll spend our first night in Madagascar in Tana near the airport. Air Madagascar's fluid flight schedule is subject to last minute changes and this might affect the running order of the trip. However, the current plan is as follows:

Day 3 & 4

Toliara & Ifaty's Spiny Forest

In the morning of Day 3 we will have a short drive to the airport before checking in for our flight to Toliara, where we'll spend three days exploring Madagascar's bizarre "spiny desert".

With splendid aerial views over the southern coast, we will land at Toliara Airport and drive northwards up the beach to Ifaty. Once we leave Toliara, the bizarre Octopus Trees *Didiera madagascariensis* will start to dominate the skyline reminding us that we have arrived in a very unique area. Madagascar Giant Swallowtail butterflies *Pharmacophaga antenor* glide lazily overhead and the orange blooms of *Chadsia grevei* might catch our eye. Scanning the mudflats could deliver the scarce Crab Plover but a highlight would be the endemic, highly endangered, Madagascar Plover and Humblot's Heron.

The beach resort town of Ifaty is a popular place for birders and botanists alike, and we'll spend two nights here exploring the spiny desert that lies just inland. A number of botanical reserves have been set up here to protect the famous spiny dry-forest, a landscape of interwoven Baobabs, Octopus Trees and Euphorbias so weird and wonderful that you might as well be on a different planet. This area is loaded with extravagant endemic bird too! We'll carefully wind our way among these *Didierea* and baobabs, immersing ourselves in the botany, and looking out for birds including Madagascar Green Pigeon, Green-capped Coua, Running Coua, Archbold's Newtonia, Thamnornis Warbler, Sub-desert Brush Warbler and Sakalava Weaver. This is a great area for Vangas, strikingly marked birds unique to Madagascar, and here represented by White-headed, Sickle-billed, Lafresnaye's and Hook-billed Vangas. The real stars of the show are the highly localised and spectacular Sub-desert Mesite and Long-tailed Ground Roller and we'll make a special effort to find them. Bizarre reptiles include the Three-eyed Lizard. The middle of the day will be very hot, and we'll retreat to our accommodation for a welcome break and perhaps even a refreshing dip in the ocean!

Day 5

Toliara area

This morning we'll head back along the coast to Toliara, where we will stay for 1 night. In the afternoon, we'll explore the famous Arboretum d'Ansokay, a botanical garden with a fabulous collection of Madagascar succulents and spiny forest flora.

Day 6

Toliara to Zombitse National Park and to Isalo

We'll make a very early start to Zombitse National Park which protects a unique patch of dry deciduous forest. We'll depart early in order to arrive before it gets too hot. Madagascar Cuckoo Rollers displaying maniacally over the canopy is one of the highlights here. Males of this huge forest endemic engage in flapping displays and loops accompanied by shrieking whistles. The forest is a very special transition zone between the southern flora and the western deciduous forest. Similar in appearance to the latter, it contains the baobab species of the former. Here we will find our first *Angraecum* orchids and see *Rhopalocarpus*, a large tree and a member of a family unique to Madagascar. We might also find the giant green *Phelsuma standingi* gecko, a roosting White-browed Owl and perhaps even Oustalet's Chameleon, the largest chameleon in the world! This forest's bird speciality, Appert's Greenbul, is one of Madagascar's rarest endemics. The large white Verreaux's Sifakas bound from tree to tree and often allow close views and the small Zombitse Sportive Lemur may be peering out from its treehole.

In the afternoon we will continue on the drive to Isalo's remarkable landscapes, eroded 'ruiniforme' sandstone outcrops, with hints of silver and green reflections of sunlight and interspersed with endless palm savanna of the endemic *Bismarkia* palms.

Day 7

Isalo

Surrounded by the spectacular mountains of the Isalo massif, we will stay at one of Madagascar's most scenic places and will explore the grasslands and cliffs for a host of unique flora including the bizarre bottle succulent *Pachypodium rosulatum*, *Eulophia* orchids, *Pandanus pulcher* and more. Endemic iguanid lizards sunbath on the rocks. Benson's Rock-Thrush is an endemic bird, yet although noticeably different in plumage and structure, this species is now often considered to be conspecific with the Forest Rock-Thrush from further east.

Day 8

Anjaha's Ring-tailed Lemurs and to Ranomafana

We'll head northwards on the long drive to Ranomafana, and will have a picnic lunch at Anjaha, where a protected and sacred forest may offer us splendid

photographic opportunities of the very social and charismatic Ring-tailed Lemurs. During the late afternoon, the habitat we'll drive through will become more and more forested until we'll reach our first rainforest destination, Ranomafana National Park.

Days 9 &10

Ranomafana National Park

We'll have two full days plus a morning in this very important rainforest area. Ranomafana was set aside to protect one of the largest remaining rainforest patches of eastern Madagascar. It is a superb area, holding 39200 hectares of mid-altitude rainforest and higher-altitude mountain cloud forest. A new species of lemur, the Golden Bamboo Lemur, was discovered here as recently as 1986, and this is the best place to seek one of the world's rarest primate species, the Greater Bamboo Lemur! We'll explore the excellent network of paths through the forests and dense stands of giant bamboo.

Birding is excellent, and we'll see a lot of new species as this is the first time that we'll be exploring this rich habitat, home to most of Madagascar's endemics. Good birds that we may well encounter include, Pitta-like Ground Roller, White-throated Oxylabes, Crossley's Babbler, Green Jery, Wedge-tailed Jery and Tyla's Vanga. *Saribia* butterflies perch on leaves on the forest paths, and the bright pink blooms of *Dichaetantherea* trees are impressive! We will also explore Vohiparara, a nearby high altitude site of mossy cloud forest that includes forest trails and a small marsh. This is the best site in the world to get to grips with Asitys, a brightly-coloured family of birds related to the broadbills and, of course, endemic to Madagascar. The undisputed special here is the threatened Yellow-bellied Sunbird-Asity, which will be a major focus of the walk. We'll prick our ears for sign of its soft call, and search special places along the trail where its favoured flowers will be in bloom. We'll also look out for Common Sunbird Asity and fruit-eating Velvet Asity with its bright green head wattles. Rufous-headed Ground-Rollers occur here too, as well as Cryptic Warbler, the latter only discovered in 1996! Other excellent birds are Pollen's Vanga, Grey-crowned Greenbul and Forest Rock-Thrush. Madagascar Yellowbrow and Brown Emutail are highly secretive and we'll have to work hard to get a good view of these mega-skulkers. Wonderful Pandanus frogs can be found in the watery axils of the giant Pandanus plants here.

A global hotspot for lemur diversity, Ranomafana sports 12 species, including the spectacular Milne-Edwards's Sifaka and the endangered Golden and Greater Bamboo Lemurs mentioned previously. During our night walk, we'll likely get very close views of Brown Mouse Lemur and a host of chameleon species. We often see Ring-tailed Mongoose during the day.

Day 11

Ranomafana to Antsirabe

After our last morning in search of any specials that may have eluded us, we'll head northwards for a necessary transit to our next area. We'll overnight at Antsirabe, a very picturesque and interesting town historically known as the "place of much salt". It is renowned for its warm springs and thermal bath, its cool climate (at about 1500m altitude) and having hundreds of registered rickshaw taxis.

Day 12

Antsirabe to Tana and to Andasibe-Mantadia National Park

After a good night's rest, we will head northwards, via Antananarivo (Tana), to the Andasibe-Mantadia National Park. The journey will take much of the day. We will arrive in the afternoon at our accommodation nearby the park's entrance and may do a short stroll in search of nocturnal lemurs and chameleons.

Day 13 & 14

Andasibe-Mantadia National Park, eastern mid-altitude rainforest

We will have one and a half days to days to explore this spectacular wilderness. The protected area consists of the Anamalazaotra Special Reserve (also named Andasibe or the colonial name Perinet) and the larger Mantadia National Park. Together, these protect one of Madagascar's most important primary rainforest areas.

There are few natural history experiences that can compare to the Indri's morning calls echoing through the misty forests. More than anything else, these echoing calls from the world's largest lemur sound like whales! The park also forms the ideal habitat for the iconic Black-and-White Ruffed Lemur and Diademed Sifaka. The list of birds we can see is very long, but some highlights may include Pitta-like and Scaly Ground-Rollers, White-throated Rail, Madagascar Flufftail, Madagascar Blue Pigeon, Lesser Vasa Parrot, Blue and Red-fronted Couas, Madagascar Spine-tailed Swift, Madagascar Kingfisher, Ward's Flycatcher, Rand's Warbler, Nuthatch Vanga, Madagascar Blue Vanga, Madagascar Starling, Forest Fody and Nelicourvi Weaver. We may also be fortunate enough to encounter Collared Nightjar roosting almost imperceptibly on the forest floor. We might also find the brightly coloured Mantella Frogs, and *Bulbophyllum* and *Angraecum* orchids - and even more species of lemurs, chameleons and geckos.

During the afternoon of Day 14 we'll make the two hour drive back to the capital Antananarivo for our late evening departure.

Day 15

Arrive UK/Europe

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