Madagascar: A World Apart Photography Tour Report 2023

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For more than a few moments – during our morning tour walk in a tangle of primary rainforest in eastern Madagascar – I wondered if we had stumbled into a primaeval world. Amid the dense vegetation: singing Indri, vivid chameleons, and enigmatic birds – some of the weirdest and rarest wildlife on Earth.

At its confounding best, Madagascar is a wonderful, strange and beautiful petri dish of an island; a lost piece of the continental jigsaw, stuffed away for millennia down the back of the evolutionary sofa.

Descriptions of Madagascar, a hefty island bigger than France, veer frequently towards superlatives. And no wonder. Approximately 95% of Madagascar's reptiles, 89% of its plant life and 92% of its mammals exist nowhere else on Earth.

And that's the thing about Madagascar. Sure, other countries 'do' biodiverse – but few do it with such oversized and eccentric parameters.

It can also be hot, humid and heavily demanding of a sense of humour. Travelling around this special island – set adrift in the middle of the Indian Ocean – in particular, can be testing. Some of its roads contain more holes than road.

The 2023 Wild Images *'Madagascar: A World Apart*' tour – our fourth to the 'Eighth Continent' – had some genuinely sparkling highlights.

For some, it was the very accommodating Ring-tailed Lemurs playing in the canyons of Isalo National Park or the gorgeous Verreaux's Sifaka in Kirindy. For others, the hauntingly strange Aye-ayes emerging silently from the trees to feed, before melting away again into the night.

For me, it was the otherworldly sound of the Indris singing – like humpback whales mixed with foghorns – reverberating through the rainforest. Not to mention many other enchanting encounters: the pair of Fosa above us in the trees in Zombitse National Park; tiny Grey Mouse Lemurs staring saucer-eyed from tree hollows; and scores of geckos, frogs, and endemic birds – such as the elusive Long-tailed Ground Roller, Giant Coua and White-browed Owl.

Yet compared to the 'big beast' safaris of eastern and southern Africa, Madagascar's wildlife has sometimes been described more as a vast repository of unique 'small things.' And, as such, set to go the way of all small things: superseded by more bullish plans.

Undoubtedly, to visit this extraordinary island is to fully understand that this is a race against the extinction clock; more than 120 of its 219 mammal species alone are threatened with extinction; a third of its lemurs – in particular – are critically endangered.

Eco-tourism serves as an important bulwark against the zero-sum activities of slash and burn agriculture and habitat destroying charcoal burning, bringing much needed money into the poorest regions. To this end, Madagascar has protected national parks and special wildlife reserves, precious ecosystems and wildlife havens amid the island's astonishingly varied geography.

For a one-off visit to Madagascar, the Wild Images tour continually endeavours to offer one of the best hand-picked 'wildlife highlights' itineraries. This year, we again took in the dry deciduous forest of Kirindy, the unique Spiny Forest in the island's southwest, and the rocky canyon-lands of Isalo (via the iconic 'Avenue of the Baobabs').

Lastly, we headed up to the lemur-stacked Le Palmarium Reserve, before hitting the eastern rainforests of Andisabe.

For each of the wildlife reserves and parks we had a dedicated local guide – and often a team of three. Without exception, the warmth and humour of the Malagasy (as the people of Madagascar are known) that we came into contact with was a tour highlight in its own right.

As a wildlife photographic experience, there are more than enough captivatingly beautiful – and forever memorable – encounters, to make it rewarding and worthwhile.

ANTANANARIVO: FORMER STRONGHOLD OF THE KINGDOM OF IMERINA

Our tour began in Madagascar's sprawling capital Antananarivo (notable for being the world's second longest capital city name, following only the official Thai name for Bangkok); henceforth nearly always referred to by its nickname 'Tana'.

Meaning 'City of the Thousand' in Malagasy – after the number of soldiers used to guard the city during 17th century skirmishes – the capital is bookended by two large forts and 12 sacred hills.

Flight schedules meant that almost all clients arrived early – so we joined Fabrice, our brilliant co-guide and fixer, for dinner at the charming French-owned Hotel Le Chat'o, ahead of our morning flight to Kirindy close to the island's western coast.

Fabrice and I had already collected the wheelbarrow of Malagasy bank notes needed for the tour. Far be it for me to comment on the unnecessary complexities of low denomination, but very high numerical-numbered, currency – other than it made Fabrice laugh as my maths improved. I have never before been such a multi-millionaire.

Many of the group spent the afternoon at the nearby Lake Alarobia – a birder's treat with hundreds of White-faced Whistling Ducks, Black and Squacco Herons. There was also a Malagasy Coucal sighting and some endemic Meller's Ducks. And in the grounds of our hotel during breakfast – before our first flight – our first Madagascar Wagtails and Hoopoes.

Internal flight schedules can be one of the challenges of travel in Madagascar. Flights are frequently overbooked and there is no guarantee that luggage will arrive with the traveller. There is no doubt that Fabrice's undeniable charm and skill at navigating the vagaries and personalities involved in Madagascan airline travel got us through all our internal flights with remarkable coherence. Which is no mean feat in itself!

INTO KIRINDY FOREST: LEMURS, FOSA, OWLS, COUAS AND CHAMELEONS!

Our first destination was the Kirindy Forest Reserve, located within the Menabe-Antimena Protected Area, and the largest remaining tract of this vital ecosystem in the whole region. As well as being home to a wide variety of species – some of which are found nowhere else in the world – Kirindy Forest holds a spiritual importance, and resonance, for local people.

After flying into the coastal town of Morondava, we stopped for a mouth-watering lunch at Blue Soleil, a seafood specialty restaurant overlooking one of the largest golden sand beaches of the Mozambique Channel.

From there, our trio of friendly 4×4 drivers transported us the two hours to our Kirindy lodge, via a sandy, bumpy road, as Yellow Kites (the Afrotropic counterpart of the Black Kite) swooped overhead.

Dropping our bags in our individual forest chalets, we headed straight out to the Forest Station, joined by our first local guide, the hugely knowledgeable and gentle-natured Jean Baptiste.

From that very first night walk, when Jean Baptiste showed us Grey Mouse Lemurs licking the sap from tree bark, a Madagascar Scops Owl sleeping in a tree hollow, and a curious Pale Fork-marked Lemur, the immersive qualities of this kind of 'in nature' wildlife viewing were apparent.

Our walks (for much of the entire tour) largely followed the same pattern: An early morning walk at first light, usually after a quick breakfast; a mid-morning walk (until the heat made this untenable – which it often did); followed by a return to camp and lunch. Then out again for a later afternoon walk that carried on into the night.

However, we quickly realised quite how hot and sweaty it can be here in the deciduous forests of Madagascar, even in the shade. And it wasn't until I was home, weeks later, that news reports began telling of the record-breaking heatwave that had enveloped Madagascar, for the whole time we were there.

Additionally, most clients had never used flash photography for wildlife before – needed for the nightwalks. We did some practice runs and, before long, pretty much everyone had got to grips with their speedlights – although sometimes the light from Jean Baptiste's torch (or some of ours) was enough to get a good image, albeit one with a high ISO.

These challenges aside, the two full days and two half days at Kirindy, spent both in the Forest Reserve and in the forest around the nearby Akiba Lodge, provided some fantastic wildlife encounters.

In Kirindy Forest, our walks centred around 'The Grid' – a network of trails through the trees that tend to reveal all manner of creatures. Here, we had good sightings of five lemurs: the Grey Mouse Lemur, Red-tailed Sportive, Pale Fork-marked, the Red-Fronted Brown and some silky-furred Verreaux's Sifaka.

Endemic bird species started to notch up. For bird lovers, the Vangas are perhaps Madagascar's most celebrated endemic family: we tried to follow Fabrice and Jean Baptiste's patient tracking in an endeavour to photograph the Blue, Sickle-billed, Red-tailed, Rufous, and Common species.

Even more than Darwin's Finches, Vangas provide an excellent example of adaptive radiation: the process whereby a small stock of founder birds becomes isolated and are then driven, by evolution, to diversify in a spectacular fashion.

We also had a Giant Coua – in late evening light – as it stepped from the shade of the leaf-litter into the sun. On another occasion, four White-breasted Mesites running scattered through the undergrowth. Further on, several Madagascar Paradise Flycatchers and a succession of Scops Owls. Among many other avian sightings, a standout was the ground-roosting Madagascar Nightjar, camouflaged well in the leaf litter, except for its particularly large 'wise-looking' eyes.

For many of us, the photographic jewels were at the nearby Akiba Lodge, both at the lemur feeding station and in the surrounding forest walk. My first 'pinch me' moment was the morning we arrived in this part of the reserve. Weaving through the trees, past the lodge's famous 'twisted baobab', more than a dozen Verreaux's Sifaka – including several infants – jumped around and above us, against a blue sky.

Later that morning, many Sifaka came within a few feet, hopping along the ground with their strange 'dancing' gait. A few had a playful infant clinging to their backs, as they fed from Jujube berries, piled in a forest glade. The same berries also drew in the charismatic – but frequently squabbling – Red-Fronted Brown lemurs, their long tails bent like question marks in the air above them.

Our loveliest White-browed Owl, Oustalet's Chameleon, Collared Iguana, and Grey Mouse Lemur photographic opportunities came at Akiba too, the tiny mouse lemur peeking out, adorably, from its elongated tree hollow, with saucer-like eyes.

Kirindy has long been regarded as ***the*** best place to see the Fosa – Madagascar's carnivore-in-chief. Previous Wild Images tours have produced superb images of this puma-like endangered mammal.

Although we had three sightings of Fosa at Kirindy – including a close-up of a female Fosa raiding fruit scraps from around the Forest Station at night – these weren't images that many of us were hoping for. The clamour to see the Fosa at Kirindy by a large visiting group, on one particular evening, almost certainly contributed to a no-show the following day. (Thankfully, we had a much better Fosa sighting later in the tour.)

On a different note, an emerging wildlife experience that may bear fruit for later tours was Jean Baptiste's recent finding of several new nesting burrows of Madagascar Giant Jumping Rat. To say that attempting to photograph this highly unusual and endangered animal is an 'experience' is perhaps underselling it.

We hiked to the hole by moonlight, sitting patiently in the dark, in the hope the rat – a rabbit-like rodent – would emerge before midnight and bounce, wallaby-like, towards the group. Whereby Jean Baptiste would shine his torch so we could focus on the rat and capture it using camera flash.

However, after almost two hours of meditating to the sounds of the forest by night, we came to the conclusion that the rat was already out for the evening, unlikely to return before dawn. A shame because this mammal is actually a very beautiful creature.

SUNSET AND SUNRISE AT THE AVENUE OF THE BAOBABS

Following a full morning and lunch at Akiba and Kirindy Forest, we began our journey back to Morondava, stopping at the famous 'Allee Des Baobabs' (Avenue of the Baobabs) for a sunset photography session.

It's not often that UNESCO recognises a grove of trees. But walking the sandy road that weaves through a chorus of giant Grandidier's Baobabs – the largest and most famous of Madagascar's six baobab species – you soon understand why.

Unfortunately, lots of other people think the Avenue of the Baobabs is beautiful too. It's status as a 'bucket list' destination drawing in a sizeable crowd to watch the sun set behind these magnificent, cylindrical-trunked trees.

That said, the experience can still be undeniably lovely – especially if you arrive early, as we did, with time to watch Madagascan children somersault and play in the shallow pools of water in front of the grove, and the goat-herder usher his animals between adjacent meadows.

The nearby patioed cafe selling baobab (and other flavoured) ice cream isn't exactly a hardship either.

Choosing a composition here can take time. Fabrice spotted a striking jewel-headed Madagascar kingfisher for us in the reeds, as we watched the sky turn from blue, to purple, to pink and red.

That night, our hotel was the opulent-feeling Palissandre Cote Ouest Resort and Spa, with beach chalets, delicious food, and the sound of crashing waves along the Nosy Kely Peninsula.

Unusually, this year's tour flight schedule allowed for a sunrise session at the Avenue of the Baobabs too – so most of us braved the early morning wake-up call to have another shot at photographing the grove.

The feeling of the avenue at dawn is very different from the touristic draw of the evening: far more laid-back and serene. The air smelt fresh and calm; the grove mostly empty other than local Malagasy people walking through carrying pots, pans and infants. Again, choosing a composition that works for you is the challenge, but all of us who ventured out were glad that they did.

That afternoon, we flew back into 'Tana. Repeated Wild Images tours to Madagascar has taught us that using the capital as a hub gives us the best chance that internal flights will arrive, and leave (more or less) as planned.

Fabrice and I seized the opportunity to take the group to a small Madagascar Vanilla 'museum' and shop in town. After a short audio-visual presentation and question and answer session on the complexities of hand-pollination, but also the dedication and expertise required, many of us left with jars of vanilla pods – and a better understanding of why Madagascar Vanilla is so special.

After a night back at Hotel Le Chat'o, we were set for the morning flight to our next wildlife destination: The Spiny Forest.

TULEAR AND THE SPINY FOREST: TENRECS, GROUND ROLLERS AND MESITES AMID THE SPIKY OCTOPUS TREES

The Spiny Forest is a bizarre woodland of spiky Octopus trees and swollen Baobabs, cited by scientists as one of the world's most important eco-regions. It is also disappearing fast. Once, gorilla-sized lemurs and ten-foot tall elephant birds roamed this terrain. Now only precious fragments remain.

The Spiny forest is a mix of sub-arid thorn scrub and deciduous woodland, that only receives an average of 500 mm of water a year and is covered in sandy soil. It is home to some incredibly endangered species – and some elusive ones. To get there, we first flew into Tulear, meeting our new trio of drivers, before heading to the Ifalty region, dropping our bags at the welcoming – and charming – Hotel Nautilus.

One of the remaining tracts of Spiny Forest is named 'Mosa's Forest' after the family who both work as guardians and help train guides in the region. As we pulled up to the woodland, we were met by a gathering of villagers, who we quickly learned had assembled for the funeral of Mosa's father – a (reportedly) 120-year-old patriarch whose son and grandsons are current Spiny Forest guides.

After our afternoon and nightwalk, we sat with Mosa and his family to pay our respects and speak to villagers. But the three-day long funeral event meant that our evening visits to the Spiny Forest were frequently soundtracked by guitar music played by the mourners, the noise carrying over the trees. It serves to remind that even these most fragile ecosystems have a human component; a clash of culture and wildlife, frequently living side-by-side.

For our two days in this region, we split our time between Mosa's Forest and the private Spiny Forest Reserve of Reinala. Highlights included a Petter's Sportive Lemur and Grey Mouse Lemur, some good time spent with a gorgeously patterned Dumeril's Boa – the Spiny Forest's apex predator-in-chief – a Lesser Hedgehog Tenrec, Warty Chameleon and baby (giant) Madagascar Hissing Cockroach.

Our morning's walk in Reinala was – singularly – the most species-rich of any of our tour walks: a veritable cornucopia of rare birds and reptiles.

Photographic highlights on this morning were the highly elusive Long-tailed Ground Roller, expertly shepherded into a glade by Reinala's three great guides, Bebe, Olivier and Janga. Also, the Subdesert Mesite (an endemic ground-dwelling bird that roosts communally). Then there were sightings of the Running and Green-capped Coua, Stripe-throated Jery, Madagascar Fody, Thamnornis, Malagasy and Souimanga Sunbirds, together with endemic Buttonquail, Nightjar and Scops Owl.

Raptors were also a great feature of this particular morning – with lovely photo opportunities of a Madagascar Kestrel, Harrier Hawk and Yellow-billed Kite. Reptile highlights included the Three-eyed Lizard and Madagascar Skink.

But it was in the Spiny Forest that the heatwave and difficulty of walking in heat, on sand, really began to bite. In one particular late afternoon walk in Mosa's Forest, the heat combined with a notable atmospheric pressure change, made for a frustrating and draining hike.

We curtailed our search for the Subdesert Mesite, instead taking a wonderful zebu cart ride back to Reinala for a cooler (and far more species productive) experience. Zebus are hardy humped cows, originating in Asia, but imported from mainland Africa, and now the dominant cattle in Madagascar.

Riding a cart pulled by these animals is both a popular way for locals to get around – and, as clients Torsten and Lynn can attest – can provide a surprisingly speedy form of transport!

During our time in this region we had, undoubtedly, the stand-out lunch of the tour. A late morning excursion had taken us to local Mangily Saltpans where, despite the shimmering heat, we still managed to see Black-winged Stilt, Kittlitz's and Madagascar Plover, and a variety of Egrets and Herons – thanks to an impassioned search for photographical birds by local guide Freddy. At a nearby lake, Curlew Sandpipers and a flock of Flamingos gave us a small show.

But our lunch at Chez Freddy's – a wonderful neighbourhood restaurant along the local Ifalty Beach – joined by our friendly drivers, was a real treat.

Seafood platters so stacked with fresh crab, shrimp and fish, that they needed to be shared – washed down with gifted shots of the owner's homemade rum (all while Marvin Gaye records played in the background) couldn't fail to fill many of us with a huge amount of cheer.

In the same vein, the wonderful French owners of Hotel Nautilus, with their ageing Labrador dog and warm hospitality, looked after us so kindly. The hotel's waiter, Robinson, an elderly, elegant man who seems to carry a bit of civilisation wherever he goes, charmed us with his gentleness and homemade Baobab rum and honey.

ZOMBITSE NATIONAL PARK AND ONTO ISALO: THE CANYON-LAND HOME OF RING-TAILED LEMURS

The drive from the Spiny Forest to Isalo is a long one; a good seven or eight hour slog past Sapphire mining towns, and villages full of market stalls, rickshaws, and dusty potholed roads.

Madagascan society is a mixed-up one. The island, part African, part Indonesian, part French, was unpopulated until 2000 years ago, when anthropologists believe some brave souls from southeast Asia sailed – and canoed -thousands of miles across open ocean and settled here.

The island is now home to more than 29 million people, with a wide array of faiths and customs. The Malagasy are descendants of settlers from Borneo and East Africa, drawing their cultural heritage from Southeast Asia, India, Africa, and the Middle East. Much of the ingenuity – but also poverty – of Malagasy life could be seen on these drives.

Our lunch point for the drive was deliberately timed to coincide with a forest walk at Zombitse National Park, a rare habitat that serves as a transition zone between dry deciduous and spiny forest ecosystems – and uniquely home to a species of lemur (the 'Hubbards' or 'Zombitse' Sportive Lemur) and an endemic bird (the Appert's Tetraka, formerly Greenbul, that only exists in Zombitse and on a nearby mountain.)

Anxious to avoid the heat, but my plans curtailed slightly by an unavoidable driver and vehicle change en route, we set off early from Ifalty, hitting Zombitse at around 11am. Our walk – unexpectedly for many – turned into one of the most rewarding of the tour.

Along with a selection of Couas, geckos, Oustalet's Chameleon, parrots, Verreaux's Sifaka and a confiding White-browed Owl, pretty much everyone managed to get a shot of the rare Appert's Tetraka, despite the degree of bush-whacking, and going off trail, that this entailed. Many also saw the Long-billed Tetraka.

But the real knock-out sighting was the pair of Fosa, spotted by one of our guides. We quickly followed his calls and were able to spend more than half an hour with these magnificent mammals, who had retired to the trees above to sleep, following a bout of mating. The female remained asleep, her tongue sometimes lolling out as she lay completely sparked out, long tail hanging like a vine.

But the male was alert and watchful, occasionally shifting his position and enabling us to get a variety of environmental and close-up telephoto lens shots.

Pressing on from Zombitse after lunch, the landscape changed from scrub to rocky canyons – in a dramatic, sweeping terrain described by some clients as being like the Badlands of South Dakota.

Our hotel for the night – the stunning Isalo Rock Lodge, set into the sandstone mountains and overlooking the Isalo National Park – was the most luxurious of the trip. We enjoyed a fantastic sundowner on a lofty plateau, as the light faded over the crags.

Frustratingly, our hopes of a Milky Way photography shoot this evening was thwarted by clouds, But, for many clients, the following morning's shoot was a highlight of the tour.

Our very-knowledgeable Isalo guide, Nirina, started our early morning's visit with a canyon hike and guided naturalist walk – with the hope of both getting some superb summit views of the park and possibly catching the Ring-tailed Lemurs as they climbed down the rock-face of some of the adjoining cliffs.

However, some steeper steps in the climb meant I made the call to instead head into the forested section of the park. On the way down, we were lucky to catch a troop of cheeky Ring-tailed Lemurs raiding fruit trees. Our fun with the Ring-tailed Lemurs then continued all morning.

In the forested glades, we all got some superb images of Ring-tailed Lemurs playing – tumbling over each other, sometimes with infants attached, and often close enough to almost reach out and touch.

A few of us hiked further along the river in search of owls and the endemic Benson's Rock Thrush (which we found); trekking along a beautiful ravine with Lost World-style trees rising up either side.

Other species in Isalo included the fascinating Net-throwing (or Ogre-faced) Spider; an unusual arachnid that tucks itself flat into tree crevices, before hurling its net over prey. Isalo also gave sightings of some gorgeous butterfly and dragonfly species, together with a comical Snout Bug and a pair of wonderful Madagascar Hoopoe, who passed tree bark pieces to each other, while building a nest.

Following the long drive back from Isalo, we overnighted in Tulear. An early morning birding excursion to Le Table Bushlands, before our lunchtime flight back to 'Tana, was a frustrating affair for most. Although eight endemic species were seen; the Red-shouldered, Chabert's and Lafresnaye's Vanga, a Verreaux's Coua, Madagascar Cisticola and Bee-eater among them, the thorny bushes and undergrowth made it difficult to get genuinely good photographs. As a birding experience, it would have been a good one; but testing for others.

Following our flight back to 'Tana, we enjoyed a night out at a wonderful pizzeria, with our new driver, looking forward to the last third of our tour.

LE PALMARIUM FOR AYE-AYES AND A WEALTH OF WONDERFUL LEMURS

Le Palmarium – meaning 'Nest of Dreams' in Malagasy – is a photographer's dream, but it takes a long time to get there from pretty much anywhere.

This private nature reserve is only accessible by boat, in an hour's cruise from the village of Manambato, on the golden sand shores of the vast Lake Ampitabe.

Guests stay in private wooden rainforest bungalows, complete with verandas and hammocks, amid the lowland moist evergreen forest. The forest was rescued from logging and turned into a reserve and haven for wild (some native, some reintroduced) lemur species.

As a result of its logging past, the reserve has morphed into a mosaic of remnants of natural forest, combined with epiphytes, secondary forest, thickets and grassland.

This gorgeously verdant setting – complete with a huge diversity of orchids, palms and some pitcher plants – was the backdrop to some of the group's most cherished and artistic lemur portrait shots.

Getting there, however, takes effort. It's a nine-hour private bus drive from 'Tana (necessitating a 4am start and breakfast stop); then a bumpy 4×4 ride down to the lakeside boats.

Nearing the reserve, the boats traverse a stretch of water along the Pangalanes Canal (dug expressly as a better waterway for trading goods, rather than the perilously rough stretch of Indian Ocean that lies parallel to the lakes). We got some nice shots of a family of Madagascar Pratincole, an elegant bird halfway between a tern and shorebird in shape, that nests on a tiny island in the canal.

As we lunched at Le Palmarium, the screeches of Black-and-white Ruffed Lemur rang out overhead – as Red-bellied and Black Lemurs (all new species for us) played nearby. It was a promising start to this next phase of the tour!

For our two nights in this reserve, we had another special target: the Aye-aye. A small, forested islet, off the coast of Le Palmarium, is the best place in Madagascar to photograph these incredibly strange – but undeniably fascinating – lemurs.

A group of (currently) nine Aye-ayes live wild on the island, after a few were introduced to the haven, following devastating levels of poaching. The Aye-ayes forage naturally, but are also offered coconuts by the local rangers, while a number of small gladed areas facilitate the viewing of these mesmerisingly elusive and nocturnal lemurs at eye level.

The Wild Images tour offers two chances to go to Aye-aye island, in case heavy monsoon-style rains render one trip less viable. We were lucky to photograph Aye-ayes – two adults and one juvenile – on both successive nights, and the experience really is nothing short of magical.

With the viewing area lit by eye-sensitive lamps, just to be near these magnetic mammals – the world's largest nocturnal primate – at such close range (and sometimes even touching distance) feels an exceptional privilege.

Aye-ayes are so unusual that they have their own taxonomic family. With 'face of possum, tooth of mouse, ear of bat' – to even offer a description sounds more of a line from Shakespeare's Macbeth than any real animal.

Compounding this odd appearance, Aye -ayes have a very long middle finger, which they use for percussion foraging. The technique goes like this: Aye-ayes first drum on a tree to listen for the hidden larvae inside, before scooping up any at-home grubs.

Unfortunately, this lemur's unique look has also been its downfall. According to local superstitions, Aye-ayes bring bad luck and must be killed on sight. Their conservation status is now endangered, possibly critically so.

Aye-ayes aside, the rest of our stay at Le Palmarium was equally stellar. For me, one of the wildlife experiences that will stay with me to the end of my days is the entrancing call of the Indri. These awesome animals, the largest of all living lemurs, sing duets to each other, in a serenade that sounds like a cross between humpback whales and a whooping fog horn.

The critically endangered Indri mate for life and – if their partner dies – never seek out another. They are so intelligent, and so wedded to the forest, that they cannot survive in captivity. Only one captive Indri ever survived a year before finally going on hunger strike, pining for its canopy home.

At Le Palmarium we were all woken at dawn by both the Indri, and the less concordant shrieking of the Black-and-White Ruffed Lemur. Both alarm calls make for a memorable start to the day.

Guided by the reserve's upbeat and brilliantly-named ranger 'Romeo', we were able to photograph a sizeable number of wild lemurs and hybrids.

These included close-ups of Indri with infants, Black Lemurs and the Common Brown – one with twin infants clutched to either side of her body. Then there were the flat-nosed Red-bellied Lemurs and the critically endangered Black-and-white Ruffed Lemurs, hanging from branches with every possible limb.

However, my favourite were the Crowned Lemurs – wonderfully cute and photogenic animals, with a huge amount of playfulness and charisma. The Le Palmarium reserve also boasts a number of hybrid lemurs.

In addition to primates, our day and night walks revealed some real treasures. Among them, two orange and white Panther Chameleons, a Madagascar Hognose Snake, the tiniest chameleon of the tour (a Brookesia species: barely the size of a small leaf) and some standout geckos, spiders and frogs.

Some of us could have stayed at Le Palmarium for days, but we had some more wildlife experiences ahead. Early on our second morning we made the boat trip back along the canal and lake, and back into the 4WD vehicles, to again jump in the bus – and head for the last portion of our Madagascar journey: the eastern rainforests of Andasibe-Mantadia National Park.

ANDASIBE-MANTADIA: WILD MADAGASCAR'S PRISTINE RAINFOREST

Andasibe-Mantadia National Park is arguably Madagascar's premier rainforest reserve, combining Analamazoatra Reserve with the forests of Mantadia.

If you were to imagine a rainforest, this is what it would look like: a tangled green jungle of ferns and hardwood trees, looped with vines and an affluence of wildlife.

After arriving at our accommodation 'Feon'ny Ala' for lunch, we dropped our bags as lemurs played in the trees behind our chalet balconies. During this afternoon's walk in the region's excellent VOIMMA Community Reserve, we split into two groups – one for fast walkers and another for clients who wanted to take more time (the latter group, inevitably, being lucky to see the only Eastern Bamboo Lemur of the trip.)

Our three guides, Laurent, Julien and Remi, quickly found us all a Parson's Chameleon to photograph Watching the Parson's – considered the world's largest chameleon by weight – shoot its tongue out in hopes of snaring a tiny insect, quick as a flash of lightning – was a real highlight.

A rain shower swept us into a tiny locals' cafe in a nearby village, where the coffee drinkers among us experienced the best brew of the tour. We'd had sightings of a Barn Owl, Scops Owl, Mossy Leaf-tailed Gecko, Elephant-eared and Short-horned Chameleon, together with a number of beautiful frogs. Lemur sightings included Common Brown and Dwarf Lemur, as the afternoon walk turned into a torchlit night walk on the quiet road alongside the reserve.

(On this point, walks are forbidden inside Madagascar's large National Parks at night, to give wildlife a chance to be undisturbed.)

For me, the best species of our first Andisabe night walk was the Tarantula-like Huntsman Spider – as big as my hand – that I almost stepped on along the road. Most of us managed some shots before it scampered – and it scampered – into the bushes.

The following morning provided the biggest wilderness experience of the entire tour: a hike into Mantadia, Madagascar's vast tract of protected primary rainforest.

Getting into this wilderness forest takes effort. A two-hour bumpy 4WD ride, via several searches for Madagascar Crested Ibis and White-throated Rail, is the starting point, before we were able to start our hike.

Mantadia necessitates undoubtedly the toughest trekking of the tour. Not only is its terrain more undulating but there are fewer established trails through its undeniably impressive rainforest – leading to the sensation (at times) that we were off-trail and bush-whacking our way through the foliage.

Several members of the group, including me, experienced a leech 'incident': totally harmless, but momentarily a bit icky. That said, for at least one client, the Mantadia experience was an absolute favourite: exploration and wildlife at its rawest and most unrestrained.

As well as some wild Indris, high in the trees, there were sightings of the Pitta-like Ground Roller, Blue Pigeon, Pygmy Kingfisher, Red Forest Rat and a number of colourful frogs. Together with some seriously impressively coloured caterpillars and outsized millipedes.

Our guides also found a very strange Giraffe-necked Weevil for us to photograph; a bizarre-looking invertebrate with a long articulated neck, used for feeding and fighting.

Following reports of nearby Diademed Sifaka in the trees at VOIMMA Community Reserve, we headed there after Mantadia. Sure enough, most of us were lucky enough to see these colourful lemurs – considered by many to be the most beautiful of all lemurs – at close range. Other sightings included the very rare Black-and-white Ruffed Lemur and a Madagascar Tree Boa.

That night we had two group members' birthdays. Fabrice and I had arranged for a local cook to make an impressive and large chocolate ganache birthday cake (which – despite being delicious – was fashionably late.) Fabrice raced to have this treat back before everyone went to bed, while I used delaying tactics and went in search for whatever could possibly be described as candles.

Our final morning in the national park was spent in an area of the Anamalazoatra reserve, seeking Indri. Sure enough, after trekking for a few hours, we were rewarded with Indri high in the trees above, along with birds such as the Nelicourvi Weaver, Madagascar White-eye, Hammerkop and Forest Fody. We also notched up sightings of the most bizarre Mossy Leaf-tailed Gecko, incredibly well camouflaged on tree bark.

Our last treat: some beautiful Diademed Sifaka – including one with an infant – sleeping in the canopy just above us.

To see wild Indri and Diademed Sifaka in such a wilderness forest was a good end to the tour. Camera cards full of images, we began the long drive back to 'Tana and our last night at the now very familiar Hotel Le Chat'o.

Our wildlife odyssey in the 'Eighth Continent' – in all its mad and fragile beauty – had come to an end.