

Madagascar: A World Apart Photography Tour Report 2023

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by Virginia Wilde

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 And, as such, set to go the way of all small things: superseded by more bullish plans.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.



The dawn photographers after our sunset morning shoot at Madagascar's famous Avenue of the Baobabs (image by Virginia Wilde)

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!



Tour clients enjoy a fast-paced Zebu truck ride between tracts of the Spiny Forest (image by Virginia Wilde)

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.



Some of the delicious seafood at Chez Freddy's restautant, in Ifaty (image by Virginia Wilde)

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.



Lynn doubles as a tree for this cheeky wild lemur at Le Palmarium (image by Virginia Wilde)

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.



Torsten gives up trying to take pictures as a wild lemur sits on him (image by Virginia Wilde)

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.



Some group members and our driving team after an amazing sundowner at Isalo Rock Lodge (image by Virginia Wilde)



A White-browed Owl in the shade of a tree in Kirindy Forest, Madagascar (image by Virginia Wilde)



'Ok baby, hold on tight!' Verreaux's Sifaka are one of the primate world's best long jumpers - with incredible strength in their lower limbs (image by Virginia Wilde)



With branches somehow looking more comfortable than any desk chair, this Verreaux's Sifaka enjoys its arboreal vantage point (image by Virginia Wilde)



A ground dwelling White-breasted Mesite (one of only three Mesite species in this endemic family) picks its way through the leaves in Kirindy Forest (image by Virginia Wilde)



'Oh my goodness, that's the best thing I've heard all day!' A Verreaux's Sifaka with a surprised expression eats a jujube berry in Kirindy (image by Virginia Wilde)



Using both arms to balance, a Verreaux's Sifaka 'hops' along the ground. While amazing jumpers and climbers, sifaka are ungainly on the ground, using a huge amount of energy in a sideways 'hopping' or 'dancing' gait (image by Virginia Wilde)



'So you hold the branch like this - and then abseil down!' A Verreaux's Sifaka shows her infant what expert tree climbing looks like (image by Virginia Wilde)



The youngest infants of Verreaux's Sifakas sleep tucked around their mother's waists. Once their grip improves, infants sleep and travel piggy-back style on their mother's backs (image by Virginia Wilde)



'When it's so beautiful up here in the trees - with the best forest views - what animal would ever want to go down on the ground!' (image by Virginia Wilde)



With her infant appearing like a perfect 'mini me', this Verreaux's Sifaka mother climbs high into the trees, with her youngster holding tightly on (image by Virginia Wilde)



How many Verreaux's Sifaka can you twist around the same tree trunk? More than you think, is the answer! (image by Virginia Wilde)



Few lemurs are such impressive leapers as the Verreaux's Sifaka - a mammal so perfectly at home in the trees (image by Virginia Wilde)



'I'm your mother, not a piece of gym equipment for you to stretch your legs.' A Verreaux's Sifaka infant enjoys hanging from its mum's neck (image by Virginia Wilde)



One of the twisted baobab trees in the Kirindy region - this one known as 'The Lovers' (image by Virginia Wilde)



Its mouth full of leaves, this Ring-tailed Lemur enjoys lunch in the canyon-lands of Isalo National Park (image by Virginia Wilde)



Sunlight bounces off the nose of a Madagascar Reed Frog, spotted hopping in the lakeside trees of the Le Palmarium Reserve (image by Virginia Wilde)



The deep orange of a sunset sky behind Madagascar's iconic Avenue of the Baobabs - as the Grandidier's baobab trunks are reflected in flooded fields (image by Virginia Wilde)



Sunset at the 'Avenue of the Boababs' - Madagascar's iconic Road No.8 - lined with Grandidier's baobab trees (image by Virginia Wilde)



'Would you look at that?!' One of the many expressions of the intelligent Indri, complete with infant, as the troop whoops and sings around them (image by Virginia Wilde)



An impressive sized Megaloremmis Leo Spider - one of Madagascar's largest spiders, which resembles a Tarantula, but in fact belongs to the Huntsman family (image by Virginia Wilde)



Displaying the third 'eye' in the middle of its forehead, the aptly-named 'Three Eyed Lizard' is a common sight in Madagascar (image by Virginia Wilde)



A Ring-tailed Lemur raids the fruit trees in Isalo National Park, as the troop moves down into the forested canyon for afternoon foraging (image by Virginia Wilde)



'A spot of lunch? Why yes! Leaves? Don't mind if I do!' A Ring-tailed Lemur tucks into lunch, in Isalo National Park (image by Virginia Wilde)



The wide eyes of a normally nocturnal Red-tailed Sportive Lemur, found in Madagascar's dry deciduous forests (image by Virginia Wilde)



The luxuriant chestnut-brown coat of a curious Red-bellied Lemur, at Le Palmarium (image by Virginia Wilde)



The beautiful jewel colours of a Pitta-like Ground Roller can be seen on this individual in a forest glade in Mantadia (image by Virginia Wilde)



Madagascar is a powerhouse of endemic plant species. This is one of two species of Madagascar Pitcher Plant, showing the 'pitcher' to catch insect prey, to be found at Le Palmarium (image by Virginia Wilde)



Its tongue just about to dart out - in a failed attempt to catch a small insect - this Parson's Chameleon looks as if it is about to burst out laughing (image by Virginia Wilde)



The full body of an impressive Oustalet's Chameleon - showing the species 45 large spikes along its spine - is on show here in this chameleon in Kirindy Forest (image by Virginia Wilde)



Wrapped around a branch in Kirindy, an Oustalet's Chameleon - the world's largest chameleon by weight - gets some rest (image by Virginia Wilde)



Pale Fork-marked Lemurs are the lightest-coloured of the fork-marked lemur species (which get their name from the black forked stripes that extend from their nose down their backs) (image by Virginia Wilde)



A Panther Chameleon emerges through the foliage, pulling itself slowly through the leaves in the Le Palmarium Reserve. Madagascar is home to around half the world's chameleon species (image by Virginia Wilde)



The vivid orange and white colours of a Panther Chameleon as it inches its way along a branch at Le Palmarium Reserve (image by Virginia Wilde)



The vivid colours of a Parson's Chameleon - the largest of all chameleons - on a favoured branch in Madagascar's VOIMMA Community Reserve (image by Virginia Wilde)



One claw carefully in front of another, this stunning Parson's Chameleon inches along a branch in the VOIMMA Community Reserve (image by Virginia Wilde)



The almost Day-Glo colours of an O'Shaughnessy Chameleon at night in Andisabe-Mantadia National Park (image by Virginia Wilde)



A male Red Fronted Brown Lemur, his long tail held in his species' characteristic 'question mark' in the air position (image by Virginia Wilde)



Resting up a tree after mating, an alert male Fosa - Madagascar's biggest predator. These beautiful carnivores (with their incredibly long tails) are suffering heavily from habitat destruction (image by Virginia Wilde)



An Aye Aye tucks into a coconut, showing its bat-like ears, saucer-like eyes and long-clawed hands. Aye Ayes have the largest hands relative to body size of all primates (image by Virginia Wilde)



Mossy Leaf-tailed Geckos rely on their natural camouflage to blend perfectly into their arboreal environment (image by Virginia Wilde)



Eye-to-eye with a stunning Fosa: Madagascar's mammalian carnivore in chief. Fosa are solitary, except during the breeding season. This male was found beside his female mate, at Zombitse National Park (image by Virginia Wilde)



Resting in the perfect tree hole roost, a Madagascar Scops Owl (western variant) (image by Virginia Wilde)



'We're related. You and me. Just so you know.' A male Red-Fronted Brown Lemur contemplates life in Kirindy (image by Virginia Wilde)



Portrait of a Red-Fronted Lemur, that sat unusually still and contemplative, for a normally rascally and playful species (image by Virginia Wilde)



Roosting inside the hollow of a tree trunk in the Kirindy Forest - a Madagascar Scops Owl (western variant) (image by Virginia Wilde)



This Madagascar Reed Frog almost shimmers at dusk, sat on a leaf in the Andisabe-Mantadia National Park (image by Virginia Wilde)



'This high position is better for playfighting!' 'No, I can grab you better from down here!' Two Red-fronted Brown Lemurs lark around in Kirindy (image by Virginia Wilde)



More playfulness from the ever-mischievous Red-Fronted Brown lemurs. These two took it in turns to put each other in lemur headlocks (image by Virginia Wilde)



Portrait of a Madagascar Pratincole - an elegant bird looking like a cross between a tern and a shorebird (image by Virginia Wilde)



The impressive crest of a Madagascar Hoopoe, as it hops in the leaf litter. The Madagascar Hoopoe was previously considered a subspecies of the hoopoe, but split due to its vocalisations and small differences in plumage (image by Virginia Wilde)



Portrait of a Madagascar Kestrel, perfectly at home in the Spiny Forest (image by Virginia Wilde)



Perfectly camouflaged with its tree hideout, this Madagascar Net-throwing Spider is an expert at throwing its net over prey, like a fisherman drawing in his catch (image by Virginia Wilde)



Well camouflaged in the leaf-litter, a Madagascar Nightjar settles into its day roost. Its large eyes - set wide to the side of their head - help ensure better vision in the dark (image by Virginia Wilde)



The rufous morph of a Madagascar Paradise Flycatcher, displaying the long tail steamer of the male (image by Virginia Wilde)



The white morph of a Madagascar Paradise Flycatcher in Kirindy Forest (image by Virginia Wilde)



What beautiful colours! But this 'Baron's Mantella, also known as Madagascar Poison Frog', can secrete enough toxins to make a predator sick. This one was seen in the Andisabe-Mantadia National Park (image by Virginia Wilde)



Portrait of a Madagascar Bright Eyed Frog. Madagascar has the world's highest frog density, per square mile (image by Virginia Wilde)



Showing the full size of an Indri, the largest of all living lemurs. To hear Indri sing duets to each other - sounding like a cross between a humpback whale and a foghorn - is one of Madagascar's wonders (image by Virginia Wilde)



Of all the lemurs, the Indri bear the most resemblance to apes. Local Malagasy call them 'babakoto' after a myth telling how an Indri saved the life of a dying boy named Koto (image by Virginia Wilde)



Considered to be one of the world's most elusive birds, the Long-tailed Ground Roller is a prize sighting in Madagascar's Spiny Forest (image by Virginia Wilde)



Just after the sunrise, local Malagasy people make their way along the sandy 'Road No. 8' that winds through the Avenue of the Baobabs (image by Virginia Wilde)



Some lemur species hybridise. This lemur - a cross between a Common Brown and Black Lemur species - seems captivated by another lemur to its side (image by Virginia Wilde)



Hybridisation does happen in some lemur species. This hybrid Common Brown and Black Lemur shows its magnificent long tail (image by Virginia Wilde)



Not a hedgehog (or any relation to a hedgehog). But a 'Lesser Hedgehog Tenrec' - a completely different order of mammals that evolved independently. Seen here in the sandy ground of the Spiny Forest (image by Virginia Wilde)



'What hypnotic eyes!' A Leaf-tailed Gecko makes eye contact in the forest of Analamazoatra (image by Virginia Wilde)



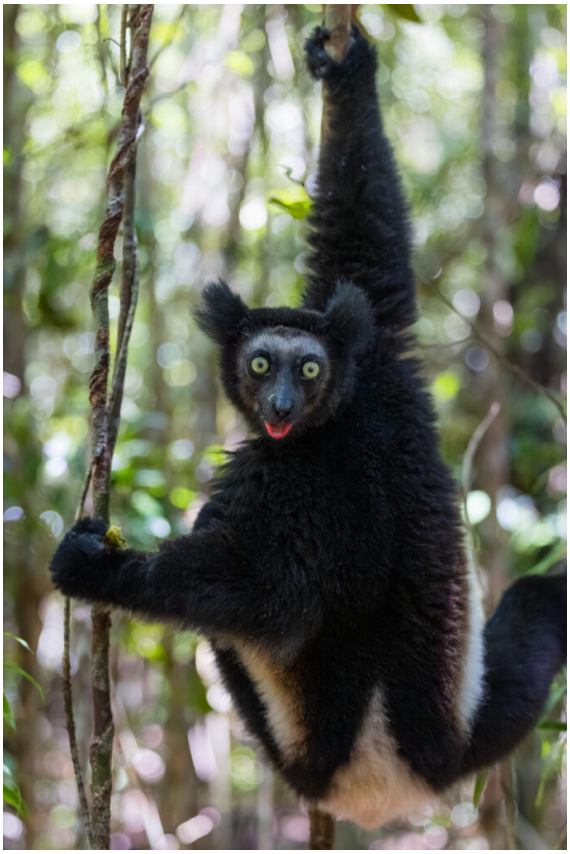
Hybrid lemurs make lemur classification and identification of species and sub-species even trickier. Here at Madagascar's Le Palmarium Reserve - a hybrid of a Common Brown and Crowned Lemur (image by Virginia Wilde)



An adorable Grey Mouse Lemur peeks out of its elongated tear-drop shaped tree hollow in Kirindy (image by Virginia Wilde)



'I'm so confident of my incredible camouflage, that I'm going to stick my tongue out and taunt you', said the Leaf-tailed Gecko (image by Virginia Wilde)



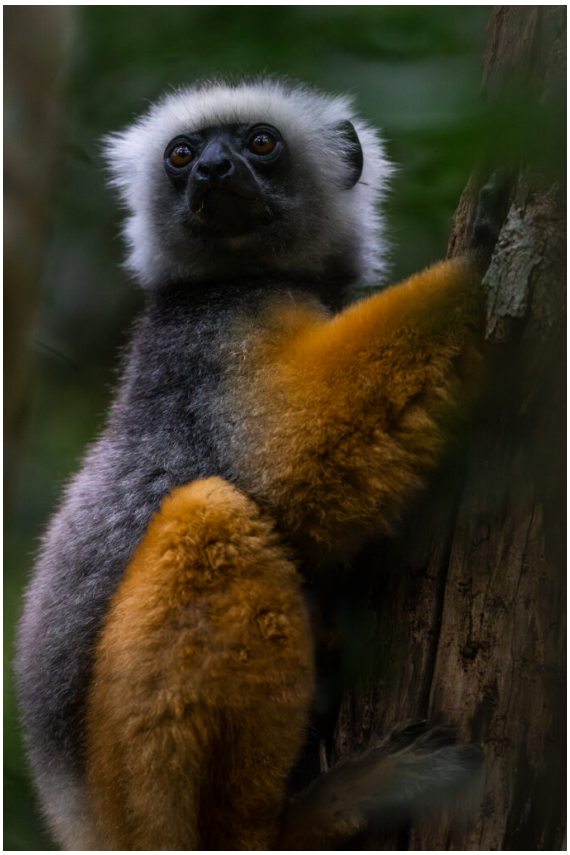
'Could I look any happier! Oh, the life of an Indri. Here in the trees, just hanging around.' (image by Virginia Wilde)



Peeking out from its tree hole nest, a tiny Grey Mouse Lemur in Kirindy. Sometimes as many as 15 of these lemurs share the same hollow (image by Virginia Wilde)



Tree hollow nests offer protection for Grey Mouse Lemur families, for whom the most significant predators are owls (image by Virginia Wilde)



Portrait of a Diademed Sifaka, considered by many to be the most beautiful of all lemurs. This endangered Sifaka is endemic to certain rainforests in eastern Madagascar (image by Virginia Wilde)



With its distinctive tricolour orange, black and white colouration, and wide expressive eyes, the Diademed Sifaka is a truly beautiful animal (image by Virginia Wilde)



Part Lemur, part stuntwoman for Mission Impossible, this female Verreaux's Sifaka shows the athleticism for which the species is renowned (image by Virginia Wilde)



The bizarre Giraffe-Necked Weevil, whose long, articulated neck helps both in nest-building and fighting (image by Virginia Wilde)



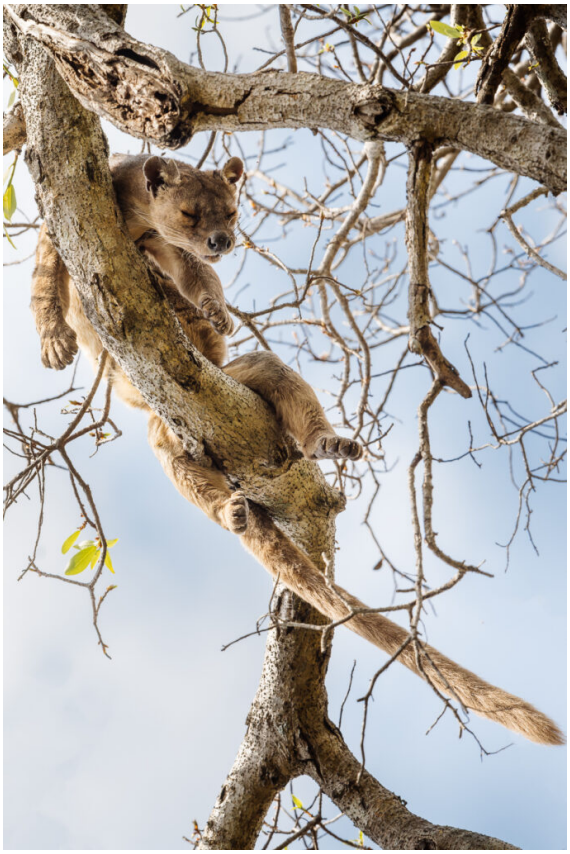
A Giant Coua moves into the sunlight in Kirindy. The Coua genus forms part of the Cuckoo family. Giant Couas are endemic to the dry forests of western and southern Madagascar (image by Virginia Wilde)



A Madagascan tree frog lives up to its name - living in a tree! (image by Virginia Wilde)



'I saw you first!' This female Red-Fronted Brown Lemur plays peekaboo in the trees, in Kirindy Forest (image by Virginia Wilde)



With her long tail, head slumped and paws hanging, this female Fosa shows what a good sleep looks like. Seen in Zombitse National Park, taking a nap after mating (image by Virginia Wilde)



The beautiful Dumeril's Ground Boa is an apex predator in Madagascar's Spiny Forest (image by Virginia Wilde)



'Twins on board - check; problems of weight distribution sorted - check; no appreciation for the hard work of being a female Common Brown Lemur mother - check, check, check.' (image by Virginia Wilde)



'Hey you, brother. Stay on your side of the mum buggy please!' A mother Common Brown Lemur handles twin infants as she moves around Le Palmarium (image by Virginia Wilde)



With its skin appearing almost translucent in places, this Ampijoroa Tree Snake slithered through the trees in Kirindy (image by Virginia Wilde)



The very localised Benson's Rock Thrush, this one seen in the canyons of Isalo National Park (image by Virginia Wilde)



The ever charismatic Ring-tailed Lemur - this one taking mouthfuls of fruit as its troop raided fruit trees in Isalo National Park (image by Virginia Wilde)



The wonderful Aye Aye - surely one of the mammal world's most truly bizarre species. Here showing its long-fingered hands, busy tail and bat-like ears (image by Virginia Wilde)



A tiny Verreaux's Sifaka nurses from its mother in Madagascar's Kirindy region (image by Virginia Wilde)



The otherworldly-looking Aye Aye - a gentle and curious lemur that belongs not only to its own genus, but also its own family. But superstition over the Aye Aye's appearance has led to high levels of poaching (image by Virginia Wilde)



The very human-like hand of a Diademed Sifaka, asleep in the trees above in the Andisabe-Mantadia National Park (image by Virginia Wilde)



Shy, gentle, misunderstood and persecuted - a beautifully strange Aye Aye climbs head-first down a tree (image by Virginia Wilde)



Black-and-white portrait of a male Fosa in a tree at Zombitse National Park. His ear is clearly notched, possibly from fighting (image by Virginia Wilde)



Indri are among the most facially expressive of lemurs. This animated mother and her infant are both wide-eyed among a troop at Le Palmarium (image by Virginia Wilde)



There's fast asleep and there's absolutely comatose. This female Fosa shows how deep sleep SHOULD be done, at Zombitse National Park (image by Virginia Wilde)



That's a whole new level of cosy! An infant Verreaux's Sifaka tucked up and warm in its mother's beautiful cream coloured fur (image by Virginia Wilde)



Black and white landscape shot of the Avenue of the Baobabs, with flowers in the foreground (image by Virginia Wilde)



An infant Red-fronted Brown Lemur looks comfy and safe while wrapped around its mother, in Le Palmarium Reserve (image by Virginia Wilde)



Scurrying through the leaf litter at night in Kirindy Forest, this Big headed Gecko was quick to vanish into the undergrowth (image by Virginia Wilde)



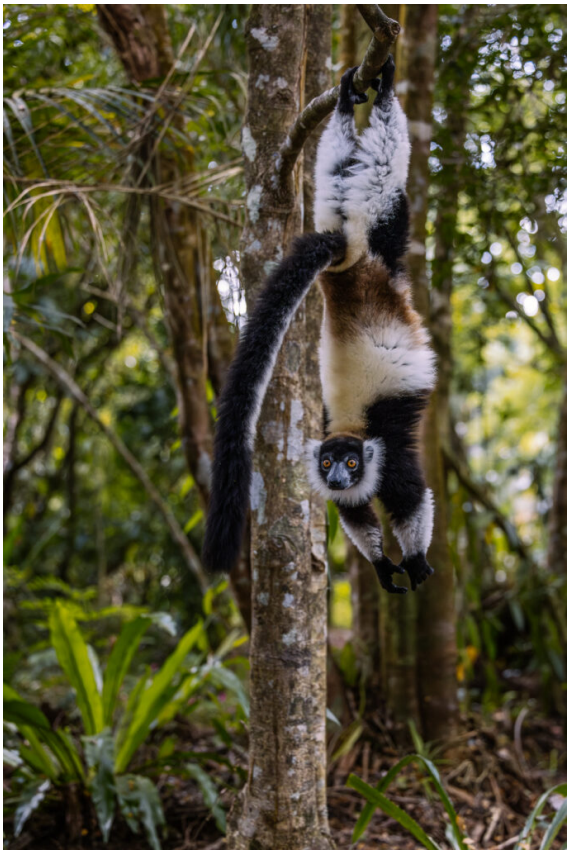
'If I just reach a tiny bit further..I'll get that fruit!' A Ring-tailed Lemur - a species known as 'Maky' in Madagascar - balances on the thinner branches as it raids a fruit tree (image by Virginia Wilde)



The bright eyes, bat-like ears and ever-growing incisors (like those of rodents) of the nocturnal Aye Aye - undoubtedly one of Madagascar's weirdest animals (image by Virginia Wilde)



One of the loudest lemurs in the reserve of Le Palmarium, the screams of the Black-and-white Ruffed Lemurs can be heard at night (image by Virginia Wilde)



One of the loudest lemurs in the reserve of Le Palmarium, a Black-and-white Ruffed Lemur hangs from a tree (image by Virginia Wilde)



Perfectly suited to life in the trees, this Common Brown Lemur poses beautifully amid the colours of the forest (image by Virginia Wilde)



How many pairs of eyes is it possible to get in a row on the back of one lemur? A female Common Brown lemur, carrying her twin infants with panache (image by Virginia Wilde)



Black-and-white Ruffed Lemurs are one of Madagascar's more critically endangered lemur species, due to hunting and habitat loss. They are also iconic and distinctive, with the large white ruff of fur around their name giving their name (image by Virginia Wilde)



Black and white portrait of an infant Verreaux's Sifaka, wrapped up in its mother's fur (image by Virginia Wilde)



Portrait of a Coquerel's Coua, one of Madagascar's endemic bird wonders, in Kirindy (image by Virginia Wilde)



'I'm the King of the Castle, you're the dirty Rascal!' Crowned Lemurs are among the most playful of all lemurs (image by Virginia Wilde)



The kaleidoscope eyes of a Botts's Bright-eyed Frog (Boophis bottae). Madagasacar is a frog lovers' paradise, with more than 300 species (99 per cent of which are endemic.) (image by Virginia Wilde)



Even Madagascar's caterpillars go to town with their colouration. This butterfly caterpillar's strips are a startling fluorescent yellow (image by Virginia Wilde)



The expressive and playful Crowned Lemur - here showing the rufous 'crown' of its name - is a favourite in Madagascar's Le Palmarium Reserve (image by Virginia Wilde)



A Cuvier's Madagascar Swift (commonly known as the 'Collared Iguana') scampers up a tree in Kirindy Forest (image by Virginia Wilde)



Madagascar's Swifts are closely related to iguanids and probably originate from an ancient time when Madagascar was connected to South America via Antarctica. This Cuvier's Madagascar Swift is still commonly called a 'Collared Iguana.' (image by Virginia Wilde)



Showing the perfect tree trunk holding position for weight distribution, this alert Crowned Lemur clearly displays the distinctive red 'crown-shaped' forehead fur that gives its species its name (image by Virginia Wilde)



Stretching its left limb forward, this Crowned Lemur, gets into position before embarking on an athletic leap onto a nearby tree(image by Virginia Wilde)



Baobabs, spiky trees and orange sand are a feature of Madagascar's Spiny Forest (image by Virginia Wilde)