

Madagascar: A World Apart Photography Tour Report 2024

24 January 2025

by Virginia Wilde

“It took David Attenborough three weeks to find an Indri on his first Madagascar trip”, I tell our group, as we pull up outside the rainforest lodge. Within seconds, my words puncture, drowned out by the deafening calls of singing Indris – their chorusing an otherworldly mix of humpback whale-song, foghorn and helium-infused bagpipe – as they echo around us.

Later on, we would find ourselves barely a few metres from these critically-endangered animals – the largest of all living lemurs. Serenaded, in a glade, by a trio of almost teddy-bear looking primates; the only mammals on Earth known to possess a human-style sense of musical rhythm. As wildlife encounters go, unquestionably one both charming and distinctive, in equal parts.

And that’s the thing about Madagascar. Spend a few weeks exploring here, and one overriding characteristic rings out: that this unique island, in all its confounding – and sometimes confronting – contradictions, ‘does’ surreal and enchanting in a way that few other places in the world can match.

For it’s easy to read the statistics about the evolutionary anomaly that is the ‘Eighth Continent’ in an almost detached, academic way. You can intellectually absorb all the theories of life on this – the world’s oldest and most ecologically isolated island – and register that approximately 95% of its reptiles, 89% of its plant life and 92% of its mammals exist nowhere else on Earth.

But it’s another thing entirely to know how it feels to watch a hauntingly strange Aye-aye emerge from the shadows, its appearance an assemblage of both imagined and fantastical body parts: part bat, part rodent, part Dr Seuss creation, part Jabberwocky (with bulbous eyes and teeth sharp enough to tear through concrete.) And lament how such a misunderstood, gentle and shy lemur has been

persecuted to near-oblivion.

Or gaze at a Fosa or Tenrec and try and describe them without referring to all of the animals that they are definitely not.

Various attempts to express the uniqueness of its landscapes also flounder. From the spiky Octopus Trees and swollen baobabs of the Spiny Forest – 'Nature's Botanical Lunatic Asylum', as it was called, in the less progressive mists of the 1990s – to the sandstone canyon-lands of Isalo and 'Lost World' rainforests of the north, Madagascar defies pithy encapsulation.

Indeed, to visit Madagascar is to leave the human realm – with its normal conventions about how wildlife should look and behave – behind, and get up close and personal with a rapidly vanishing world. And one all the more vital (the UN have urged the importance of ecotourism here) and precious for it.

This year's Wild Images Madagascar tour was particularly strong in lemur sightings, not only the high species number – 19 – but in the quality of interaction and abundance of infants.

Highlights included our lovely encounters with the critically-endangered Diademed Sifaka, 'dancing' Verreaux's Sifaka, the saucer-eyed Grey Mouse Lemurs, playful Ring-tailed, and the troop of Red-fronted Brown Lemurs capering around us in the trees.

Chameleons, geckos, frogs, Tenrec and Fosa were all admired and photographed – along with prized bird sightings of an assortment of Coua, Vanga, Mesite, Button Quail, Paradise Flycatcher and Pygmy Kingfisher.

And so captivated by the baobabs – Madagascar's iconic 'upside-down trees' – were this year's tour group, that we even found a second 'Avenue of the Baobabs' to photograph.

Yet, for all its magic, there's no doubt that Madagascar can also be challenging. Most of the best wildlife sightings are to be found inside the forests, requiring a walk, sometimes in undulating and hot conditions.

The roads are notoriously among the world's least developed, the urgent need for more protected reserves – in the scramble against the extinction clock – is evident. And levels of poverty, particularly in the south and in the wake of 2021-2023's severe drought, can be sobering.

That all said, a visit to this extraordinary island – bigger than France and set adrift in the middle of the Indian Ocean – is both unforgettable and, genuinely, can make a difference.

Still now, if I close my eyes, I'm back in the rainforest, Indri singing all around.

THE TOUR BEGINS: ANTANANARIVO, MADAGASCAR'S FORTRESS CAPITAL

A series of unconnected muscle spasms in the world's flight schedules meant that many of our group had tough journeys to get to Antananarivo, Madagascar's lively – but sprawling – capital.

I took some of the clients, who had arrived early, to the city's gated Lake Alarobia, a birder's hotspot with hundreds of White-faced Whistling Ducks and an array of different heron and egret species.

We clocked a sighting of an endemic Meller's Duck, and stopped, on our way back, to marvel at the Black Herons using their 'umbrella' shading approach to catch fish in the surrounding paddy fields.

Like any city constructed in the hills, Antananarivo's space for expansion – amid a rapidly spiralling population – is restricted; the city a story that has outgrown its original concept.

The capital was founded as a fortress town during the 17th century, when Madagascar was a beloved hub for the world's pirates.

Named 'City of the Thousand' in Malagasy, after the number of soldiers used to guard its boundaries during a century of skirmishes, Antananarivo (hereafter called by its affectionate nickname 'Tana') is flanked by 12 sacred hills and has strong echoes of both its history as centre of the Merina Kingdom and of its French colonial occupation.

During our first dinner at the French-owned Hotel Le Chat'o – when all of the group had arrived and were mostly rested – we were joined by Fabrice, our brilliant co-guide and fixer.

Learning that our lunchtime internal flight had moved to 6am (necessitating an early start) we retired to bed. But it was a reminder that navigating internal flights – their ever-changing changing schedules and notable officiousness of check-in staff – is one of the biggest challenges of travel in Madagascar. And one that, thankfully, Fabrice is incredibly adept.



There's so much to see on the road journeys in Madagascar – from villages and sapphire mining 'boomtowns' to stunning landscapes (image by Virginia Wilde)

INTO THE SPINY FOREST: BAOBABS, BIRDS AND LEMUR IN ONE OF THE WORLD'S STRANGEST ECOSYSTEMS

Arriving early on our short flight into the coastal city of Tulear, in Madagascar's south-west, we grabbed coffee and a makeshift breakfast before meeting our trio of 4×4 drivers, who would stay with us for the next five days.

Our main focus: to explore the bizarre natural world of Madagascar's famous Spiny Forest (one of the world's most important eco-regions) before heading to the canyonlands of Isalo for Ring-tailed lemurs.

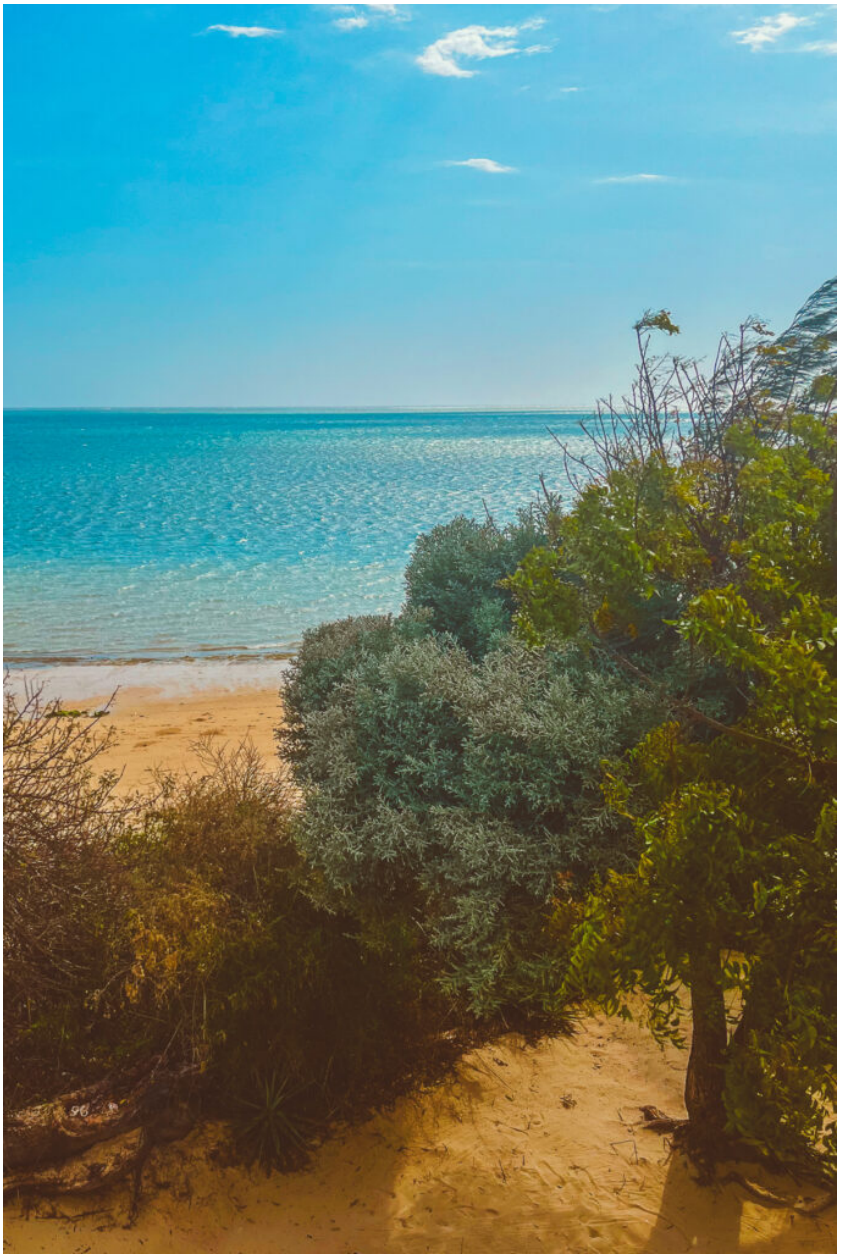
Due to our unexpected early arrival, we embarked on a short morning birding excursion at La Table Bushlands – an area of thorny vegetation near the region's flat-topped Table Mountain, known for its frequent sightings of several of Madagascar's endemic Vanga

species.

We did get our first brief sightings of the glistening metallic feathers of the male Souimanga Sunbird and Red-shouldered Vanga, but the rising heat and terrain made it difficult to get good photographs.

Heading back into Tulear for a fresh fish or Zebu beef lunch, we pushed on past the picturesque coastal fishing huts to the French-owned – and very charming Hotel Nautilus – our home for the next few days.

Here, small beach chalet rooms look out to a stretch of the Indian Ocean known as a favoured spot for passing Humpback whales.



The view from our beach chalets at the lovely Hotel Nautilus. We looked out at the Indian Ocean, at a spot favoured by passing Humpback whales (image by Virginia Wilde)

After a short rest, we drove towards one of our two main Spiny Forest reserves – Mosa's Forest – before jumping into a convoy of Zebu-pulled carts, travelling the final mile and a half using this surprisingly speedy traditional method of transport.

The Spiny Forest is a mix of peculiar-looking (and 95% endemic) sub-arid thorn scrub and deciduous woodland, growing out of sandy soil. Once, ten-foot tall Elephant birds and Gorilla-sized lemurs roamed these woods – but now, only precious fragments remain, along with a raft of elusive wildlife species that call this ecosystem home; similarly clinging on to survival.

Mosa's Forest – named for the patriarch who both guarded this tract of forest on his land. and helped train guides in the region – is a calming oasis, which we had to ourselves as we explored its interior.

Among the eye-catching vegetation here is the spiny Octopus tree – a towering upside-down brush of a succulent. And then there is the Silver Thicket (a spiky plant that looks like a torture device but the preferred dinner choice of Zebu); the silvery Elephant's Foot, and the brawny-looking Fony Baobab.



Baobab and Octopus Trees – Madagsacar's Spiny Forest is one of the world's most unique – and bizarre – ecosystems (image by Virginia Wilde)

Many of the group were so taken with the botanical oddities of Mosa's Forest, that the wildlife almost took second fiddle. Nevertheless, as our afternoon walk turned into a night-walk with torches, we notched up our first sightings of the strange Lesser Hedgehog Tenrec, the gorgeous Dumeril's Boa, Kung Fu Cricket and – as the light faded – a Red-tailed Sportive Lemur.

Bird sightings included the Running and Crested Coua, Subdesert Bush Warbler and further endemic Button Quail, Bee-eater and Lark.

The following day, we switched to a series of wildlife walks in the larger reserve of Reniala. Here, we were able to photograph an incredible 30 species – with normally-elusive birds such as the Long-tailed Ground Roller expertly shepherded into a glade by Reniala's experienced guides Bebe, Olivier and Janga.

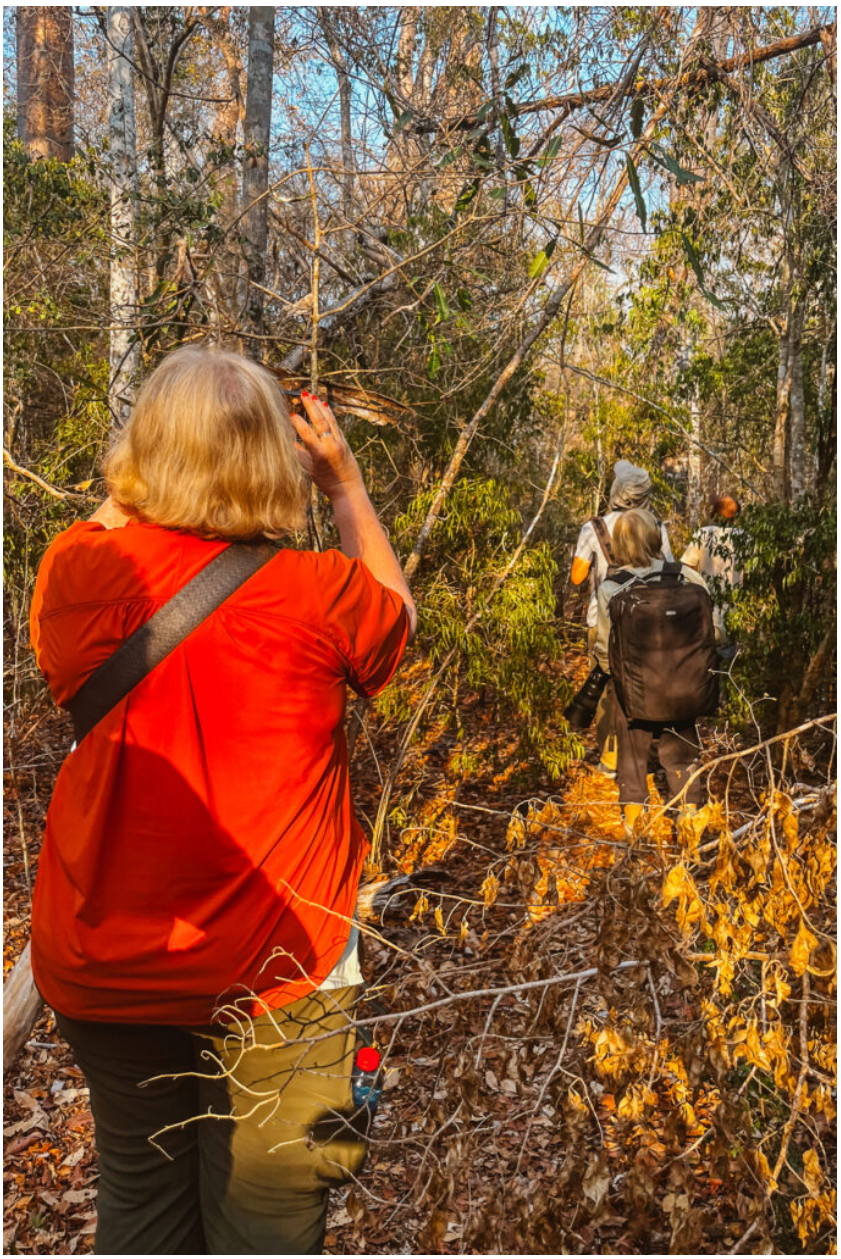
Other bird highlights included the Green-capped Coua, Hook-billed Vanga, and the communally-roosting Subdesert Mesite. Later on, we photographed a pair of critically-endangered Radiated Tortoises – often referred to as the world's most beautiful tortoise.

Not to mention along our first chameleon and colourful Standing Day Gecko sightings, and a ridiculously-cute Grey Mouse Lemur, in the early evening, just as the Milky Way became visible in the darkening sky.

Raptors also made our day, with sightings of endemic mating Kestrels, hunting Harrier-Hawk and Sparrowhawk along the reserve's boundary. (Note to Wild Images leader Gin for future: Do not touch the electric fence. It is working, despite giving the appearance it is not.)

A few group members opted to skip the late morning rest, and instead come with Fabrice and I for a small excursion to the local Mangily Saltpans for shots of Kilitz Plover, Three-banded Plover and Blackwing Stilt.

Our time in the Spiny Forest area was elevated even further by perhaps the best lunch of the tour: a seafood feast at Chez Freddy's – a neighbourhood restaurant serving platters of crab, shrimp and fish, to the sounds of soul music.



This year's Madagascar tour group enjoying the baobabs and strange botanical landscape of the unique Spiny Forest (image by Virginia Wilde)

And, of course, the warmth of the staff at Hotel Nautilus, especially the elegant elderly waiter Robinson, who sells bottles of his incredible baobab honey to guests.

ONWARDS TO ZOMBITSE NATIONAL PARK AND ISALO: IN SEARCH OF THE RING-TAILED LEMUR

It's a hefty drive to the rocky canyon-lands of Isalo, and one through one of the poorest regions in all of Madagascar. The journey – often on baking, pot-holed roads – passes through villages full of thronging market stalls and rickshaws, various police check-points and occasionally sketchy-looking Sapphire mining 'boomtowns.'

It also weaves by the Zombitse National Park, a rare habitat area that serves as a transition zone between Spiny Forest and dry deciduous ecosystems – and uniquely home to several rare species.

Anxious to avoid as much of the heat as possible – but understanding that, on this particular day, it is nigh impossible – we nevertheless hit the shady park just before 11am for a short forest walk.

Barely 100 metres from the road were our first small troop of Verreaux's Sifaka (complete with infants). These lovely cream-furred medium-sized primates are known for their bipedal leaping 'dance' – and are undoubtedly one of the most charismatic lemurs of our tour.

A short walk further on, our first Oustalet's Chameleon – the world's biggest chameleon species – together with Madagascar Scops Owl. And I became very excited about the sighting of the pale-eyed Zombitse Sportive Lemur (a first for me) peering from the hollow of a very wizened tree.

After lunch at a nearby forest lodge, we pressed onto Isalo – the landscape changing again into a succession of dramatic plateaus with sweeping sandstone mountains and outcrops of granite.

Our hotel for the night: the impressive Isalo Rock Lodge; our rooms with sunken bathtubs and wide balconies overlooking the Isalo National Park. Many of us were able to enjoy a sundowner on a nearby plateau, as the light faded over the crags.

The next morning, Fabrice was able to hire a separate guide for two of our group who needed a break from any walking – instead enjoying a landscape tour of this region's incredible geological forms.

For the rest of us, it was into the Isalo National Park for the 30-minute hike up to a wooded glade, home to several troops of Ring-tailed Lemurs.

Guided by our Isalo naturalist expert, Feeny – who pointed out a series of unusual bugs, skinks and birds (such as a glimpse at a White-throated Rail) – we also had good sightings of a White-browed Owl before settling in the small clearing for several hours, to photograph lemurs.

Ring-tailed lemurs – known as 'Maky' in Malagasy – are probably Madagascar's best known lemur species. Playful and matriarchal, they are endlessly watchable, wrapping their iconic black and white tails around their infants.

We happily spent time photographing Ring-tailed, as well as a family of Verreaux's Sifaka, before a BBQ lunch, in which we were visited by the endemic Benson's Rock Thrush, who flitted about the trees.

A few of us hiked further along the river into a remarkable 'Lost World'-style ravine, with neon-green trees studding either side of the canyon. Here, we photographed some particularly stunning Dragonflies, together with more Ring-tailed lemurs.

Back at the lodge, we opted for an early dinner, with the hope of photographing the Milky Way. Sadly, the waxing moon was just high enough above the horizon to put paid to these plans.

Driving from Isalo back to Tulear (and a late evening flight) the next day, we stopped for a longer forest walk in Zombitse, this time notching up 16 different species. These included a succession of geckos, owls and endemic birds, notably the Giant Coua, Madagascar Cuckoo-roller, the lovely Madagascar Green Pigeon and the prized Appert's Tetraka – that only exists in Zombitse National Park and on a nearby mountain.

Pulling into Tulear, we visited a craft market and local coastal park, before taking dinner at a nearby hotel. Arriving back in 'Tana after our late-night flight, a kitchen fire problem with our normal 'Le Chat'o accommodation meant we had to stay in a new hotel, in the centre of Antananarivo.

ON TO KIRINDY FOREST: DANCING LEMURS AND ON THE TRAIL OF THE FOSA!

Kirindy Forest Reserve has long featured in any 'must-see' Madagascar wildlife itineraries. It's packed with one of the greatest densities of primates in the world (eight species of lemur) and is a particular stronghold for the elusive Fosa.

Located within the Menabe-Antimena Protected Area, this private dry deciduous sanctuary is also one of the remaining tracts of this vital ecosystem in Madagascar.

The gateway to this whole region is the coastal resort town of Morondava, in the centre of a prosperous rice-growing area. Given that our flight here from 'Tana didn't leave 'til early afternoon, we enjoyed a slightly more leisurely morning in the capital – many of us returning to Lake Alarobia for more waterbird sightings, before stocking up on Madagascar Vanilla pods, spices, rum and chocolate at a specialist trading post.

Fabrice somehow managed to get pizzas delivered to the airport for lunch, whisked through the security scanners – leaving some of us giggling at the ridiculousness of it.

From Morondava, our new trio of friendly 4×4 drivers transported us along the sandy bumpy road – and through the iconic Avenue of the Baobabs – towards Kirindy, as Yellow-billed Kites soared overhead.

This year's tour excursion to Kirindy was – without doubt – a transformative one, due to our new accommodation in the region: the newly-refurbished and opened Akiba Eco-Lodge. Staying in a small number of private bungalows – set in their own mini glades, and with a deck and hammock – meant the wildlife was literally on our doorstep.

I brushed my teeth, one morning, watched by a curious Grey Mouse Lemur; others had Verreaux's Sifaka leaping over their roof, or found Red-fronted Brown Lemur and chameleon right outside when they opened their door.

The lodge's elevated open-sided restaurant, which served some of the best locally-produced food of the tour, looked out to a canopy of trees – including a pair of entwined baobabs called 'the lovers'. Many group members took the opportunity to relax here, going for their own mini wildlife walks in the environs of the lodge to photograph some of the wealth of flora and fauna.

Over the next few days, we enjoyed a series of forest walks both inside the reserve – leaving from the Kirindy Forest Station and led by our hugely knowledgeable local guide, Jean Baptiste – and in the part of the forest accessed by trails around our lodge.



Almost everywhere you look, on forest walks in Madagascar, there's something remarkable to see. In Kirindy, we loved the incredible bark on some trees (image by Virginia Wilde)

Night walks in the reserve – lit either by the guides' flashlights (using high ISO) or using our own camera speedlights – revealed Grey Mouse Lemur, Red-fronted Brown, Red-tailed Sportive, and a brief sighting of the lightning-striped Pale Fork-marked Lemur.

Our first morning hike from the Kirindy Forest Station was a dynamic one. We'd barely climbed out of our 4x4s before Jean-Baptiste led us to a patch of trees by the forest station village and – wham – there was a female Fosa!

She padded around the trees – with her distinctive long tail (that doubles her length) and is utilised as an anchoring point for rapid directional changes – before approaching the villagers' outdoor camp, hoping to steal some food scraps.

With fewer than 2,500 Fosa left in the whole of Madagascar, seeing one at all is no mean feat.

The following two days in the Kirindy reserve continued to bring new species. Bird highlights included a host of new Vanga species: Sickle-billed, Rufous, Chabert's, Madagascar Blue and Red-tailed, while Madagascar Hoopoe, Lesser Vasa Parrot and Madagascar Nightjar were added to our sightings list.

Some of the group were lucky enough to clock a pair of Northern Bokiboky – formerly called Narrow-striped Mongoose until the delineation of them as mongoose at all became a knotty issue – scampering across the road. While others were later captivated by a

slow-moving Mahafaly Sand Snake hunting a Skink.

A photographic highlight for many, in this region, was the two late-morning sessions at the Akiba Lodge lemur feeding station. Here, silky Verreaux's Sifaka – many carrying adorable infants – leapt from the trees and hopped over, using their idiosyncratic 'dancing lemur gait' to feast on a pile of jujube berries.

When the Verreaux's Sifaka retreated, in came the Red-fronted Browns; smaller but infinitely noisier, their grunts sounding like domestic pigs, their squabbles as frequent as human toddlers, and their tails held aloft in a seemingly permanent question mark.

For this year's particular tour group – noting their love of baobabs – Fabrice and I endeavoured to add two early evening sessions at a local Grandidier's Baobab grove, which most of us later confessed to preferring to the iconic Avenue.

But before shooting here after dark – in another attempt for some night photography – we first drove with Fabrice to ask permission from the local village leader. A small gesture of respect, which he readily accepted.

MORONDAVA AND SUNSET AT THE AVENUE OF THE BAOBABS

A final morning wildlife walk around our lodgings gave sightings of White-browed Owl, Oustalet Chameleon and a roll-call of more birds. We waved goodbye to

the Kirindy Forest region and began our journey back to Morondava for lunch.

Our accommodation here: the lovely Palissandre Cote Oust Resort and Spa, where guests stay in thatched-roof beach chalets and sleep to the sound of waves crashing along the Nosy Kely Peninsula.

Client Tony and I both took advantage of some downtime to photograph the fishermen heading back to shore in their dug-out outrigger canoes, and any seabirds along the sands.

In mid-afternoon, we duly headed out to the famous 'Allee Des Baobabs' (Avenue of the Baobabs) for our much-anticipated sunset photography session.

It's not often that UNESCO recognises a grove of trees. But watching the local Malagasy villagers walking, or riding a Zebu cart, along the sandy road that weaves through this towering congregation – figurines dwarfed by trees from the Land of Giants – you soon understand why.

The A-list stars here – Grandidier's Baobabs (the largest and most venerable of Madagascar's six baobab species). Yet the grove's status as a 'bucket-list' destination has led to overcrowding, making it more challenging to find a truly innovative shot of the sun setting behind these magnificent trees.

That said, the experience can still be a rewarding one. Even if – on growing fatigued of trying to pick one of many potential compositions – you retreat to the nearby patioed cafe selling baobab honey flavoured ice-cream.

INTO WILD MADAGASCAR'S PRISTINE RAINFOREST: ANDASIBE-MANTADIA

The final sections of our Madagascar wildlife odyssey – comprising the eastern rainforest of the Andasibe-Mantadia National Park followed by the private lemur-stacked reserve of Le Palmarium – are unashamedly my personal favourite.

For me, there's few more intimate wildlife experiences than being immersed in Madagascar's rainforest worlds; primaeval tangles of jungle with giant ferns and trees laced with vines, hoping for an indri to call.

But before embarking on this new adventure, we left Morondava and the baobabs behind, flying back into 'Tana in time for a lunchtime feast at one of my and Fabrice's favourite spots: Aero Pizza.

We then hopped into our new vehicle – a spacious and comfortable private bus, complete with helpful conductor and one of the most accomplished drivers many of us had seen in years – for the three-hour drive west.

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

The renowned naturalist David Attenborough spent a large amount of time here to write his 1961 book 'Zoo Quest to Madagascar', in which he details his three-week search before finally encountering an Indri.

Thankfully, our experience was far more fruitful. No sooner had we arrived at our rainforest chalet accommodation 'Feon'ny Ala', the singing of Indris' reverberated through the trees.

Meeting our gentle-natured local guide Julien, we had time for a torchlit night-walk along the road beside the reserve. Here, many group members got to grips with their camera flashes for some lovely images of four species of Bright Eyed or Tree frogs, chameleons and geckos, together with some sightings of new lemurs; Fat-tailed Dwarf and Goodman's Mouse Lemur.

Admittedly, these roadside night-walks – while still productive – have become slightly less inviting than in previous years, due to an increase in passing cars.

It's also sometimes the case that fatigue can set in at this stage of the tour. So half of the group opted for an enjoyable day visiting Vakona Island; a lemur-stacked private reserve for primates rescued from poachers. Meanwhile, the rest of us embarked on the rainforest hike in Analamazoatra National Park.

Here, we were incredibly fortunate to have one of the best encounters with a troop of Diademed Sifaka that even local guide Julien had seen in a long time. Renowned as one of the world's most beautiful lemurs – with their tricolour colouration and golden limbs – Diademed Sifaka are normally seen high in the trees. But we were able to gently approach, and silently follow, these critically-endangered primates; many with infants on their backs.

This encounter was a reward for the occasionally challenging off-trail hiking that day. And it topped off other impressive sightings: Indri above us in the trees, Common Brown Lemurs, and a normally-elusive Eastern Bamboo.

Other highlights included a Malagasy Pygmy Kingfisher with its gecko prey, Madagascar Tree Boa and the wonderfully-camouflaged Mossy Leaf-tailed Gecko: a favourite among Wild Images clients due to its unbelievable ability to mimic tree bark.

We were able to organise a similar 'gentler option' for the following day, with Fabrice taking most of the group to a Chameleon Reserve. Here, many got phenomenal images of all manner of chameleon, gecko, snake, moth and frog species; such as the not-usually spotted Christifer and Globifer Chameleon and the Golden Mantella Frog.

Meanwhile, client Tony opted for the original program – and the biggest wilderness experience of the tour – a hike into Mantadia, Madagascar's largest tract of protected primary rainforest.

Getting to Mantadia takes a bit of effort. First, a 90-minute bumpy 4WD ride through verdant hills, before hiking to search for wildlife, with a degree of bushwhacking occasionally needed, due to fewer established trails.

We spent some time trying to get an image of a Pitta-like Ground Roller; almost Houdini-like in its evasive abilities. Other sightings included a seriously impressively coloured Fire Millipede, and the Giraffe-necked Weevil – a bizarre looking insect with a long, articulated neck, used for feeding and fighting.

That evening, most of us opted for a nigh-twalk in the excellent Voi Community Reserve, buying some handicrafts from a group of local women first in a further endeavour to support this initiative.

Here, we had a great evening in the wider forest trails, with good sightings of Goodman's Mouse Lemur, Eastern Woolly, and a variety of chameleon, gecko and frog species.

However, our walk was cut short after some claps of thunder warned of an impending rainstorm. Sure enough, we'd just reached our bus before the Heavens opened; torrents of rain so heavy that, before long, streams of water were cascading down the roads.

INDRI AND AYE-AYE – THE LEMUR HAVEN OF 'LE PALMARIUM'

Leaving the Andisabe region early the next morning, we hopped back on the bus for the very last stage of our tour: Le Palmarium.

Meaning 'Nest of Dreams' in Malagasy, this private nature reserve on the golden shores of Lake Ampitabe, can be a photographer's dream. But it is only accessible by boat and, frankly, takes a long time to get to from anywhere.

For us, this meant a six hour drive – including time waiting for a toppled truck to be moved off the road (a common occurrence on Madagascar's winding highways) – then an hour's boat trip from the village of Manambato.



The only way to Le Palmarium private reserve is by boat, along the Pangalanes Canal system (image by Virginia Wilde)

The ferry trip is a beautiful one; life unfolds along this stretch of water that makes up the Pangalanes Canal system – dug specifically as a more convenient waterway for trading goods (infinitely preferable to the perilously rough stretch of Indian Ocean that was previously serviced this area) – before opening up into the lake.



A local boy paddles his way through the Pangalanes Canal system using a dug-out canoe (image by Virginia Wilde)

We all took some shots of the (very reliable) family of Madagascar Pratincole, that nest on a tiny island in the canal.

The forest island of Le Palmarium was rescued from logging, instead turned into a conservation reserve and haven for wild – some native, some introduced – lemur species.

As a consequence of its logging past, the vegetation on the reserve has morphed into a mosaic of remnants of natural lowland evergreen rainforest, combined with secondary forest, epiphytes, thickets and grassland.

An array of orchids, pitcher plants and palms complete this gorgeously verdant setting, which was the backdrop to many of the group's most artistic lemur portrait shots.

Guests stay in private wooden rainforest bungalows with verandas and hammocks and sometimes keeping the lemurs off your porch is a task in itself!

After a late lunch, we enjoyed our first wildlife walk with our eternally-upbeat new guide 'Romeo'.

Over our two days here, we were able to capture some wonderful lemur shots on these mini hikes: close-ups of Black Lemurs, Common Brown, the cute Red-Bellied, and critically-endangered mid-sized Black-and-white Ruffed.

One of my favourite species here are the Crowned Lemurs; such curious, photogenic and charismatic primates, with a rufous 'crown' atop their heads.

But it was our encounter with the singing Indri that was a tour highlight for many. Following Romeo down a series of quiet forest trails – almost to the village on the other side of the island – there they were, at eye-level in a glade: a trio of gorgeous Indri.

To stand so close to such entrancing animals – the largest of all living lemurs with such expressive faces and long limbs – as they sang duets to each other, was an awesome experience.

The critically endangered (and highly intelligent) Indri mate for life. If their partner dies, they never seek out another.

In fact, Indri are so sensitive and so wedded to the forest, that they cannot survive in captivity. Only one captive Indri ever made it to almost a year, in a sanctuary, before finally going on hunger strike; pining for its treetop home.

But Wild Images mostly stay at Le Palmarium for one particular reason: it is the best place in Madagascar to photograph Aye-ayes.

A small troop of these incredibly strange – but undeniably fascinating – lemurs, live on a forested island about a 30 minute boat-ride from the shores of Le Palmarium.

Introduced to the island after devastating levels of poaching, the Aye-ayes here breed, live and forage naturally, but are also offered coconuts by the local rangers; armed guards who sleep by the island's main landing beach to deter hunters.

A number of small gladed areas facilitate the viewing of these mesmerisingly elusive and nocturnal lemurs at eye level.

Such is the appeal of these primates, that the Wild Images itinerary allows for two evening night-time photography sessions with them (in case sudden monsoon rains render one session less viable.)

We were lucky to photograph Aye-ayes – two adults– on both successive nights, and the experience really is nothing short of magical.

With the viewing area lit by eye-sensitive lamps, just to spend time near these magnetic mammals at such close range feels an exceptional privilege.

Placed in their own taxonomic family, Aye-ayes have an appearance that defies any logical description. With 'ear of bat, tooth of rodent, face of possum', they sound more 'witches brew" from Shakespeare's Macbeth than animal.

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, the Aye-ayes' unique look has also been its downfall. According to local superstitions, these lemurs bring bad luck and must be killed on sight. Conservation outlooks have been bleak.

The rangers here in Le Palmarium have always really looked after Wild Images clients, helping us to get the best photographs and spend as much time with the Aye-ayes as possible. Our final boat ride back from the Aye-aye session was a riot; speeding James Bond style over the lake to get back for dinner.

In addition to the primates, our day and night walks offered some other treasures: Panther Chameleon, Collared Iguana, Eastern Woolly Lemur and the tiniest chameleon of the tour (a Brooksia species, barely the size of a small leaf.)

Although many of us could have stayed longer at Le Palmarium, it was time for the boat ride and long drive back to 'Tana and the end of our tour. Camera cards full of images, impressions and unique wildlife encounters; our journey across the 'Eighth Continent' – Wild Madagascar – had come to an end.



This year's group fell in love with the otherworldly Spiny Forest, during a wildlife-rich morning walk (image by Virginia Wilde)



A Three-banded Plover darts across the salt marshes near Tulear. Salt is still harvested here from evaporated pools using Zebu carts for transport (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)



A Silver Widow Dragonfly pauses - wings out - by a river-bed in Madagascar's Isalo National Park (image by Virginia Wilde)



Awww! A tiny Red-fronted Brown Lemur, not more than a few weeks old, clutches its mother, staring out at the world with saucer-shaped eyes (image by Virginia Wilde)



We watched this Mahafaly Sand Snake inch closer to its Skink prey for more than 30 minutes. After a brief scuffle, it claimed its prize (image by Virginia Wilde)



A Madagascar Harrier Hawk - one of the country's most proliflic airborne predators - takes to the sky. This hawk is not a picky eater, with small lemurs, bats, chameleons, other birds and snakes all part of its menu (image by Virginia Wilde)



Not a moth but a butterfly that stays active at parts of the night, the Madagascar Mocker Swallowtail Butterfly is often referred to as the 'Flying Handkerchief' (image by Virginia Wilde)



The shimmering metallic head, back and throat of a male Souimanga Sunbird dazzle in the sunlight, making this one of Madagascar's prettiest small birds (image by Virginia Wilde)



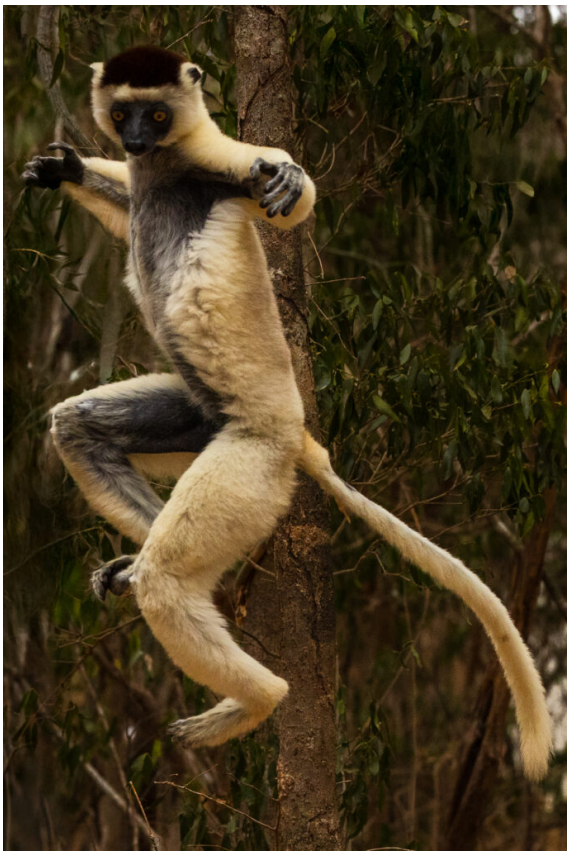
'This fruit is tasty, and I'm not sharing!' A Red-fronted Brown Lemur enjoys its snack in the forests of Kirindy (image by Virginia Wilde)



A Spectacled Tetraka? Or unbelivably rare Dusky Tetraka? Our guides and a local bird expert insisted it was the Dusky - listed as one of the world's ten most endangered bird species - due to its duller eye-ring. But the main diagnostic feature - its underbelly - was impossible to see in the nest (image by Virginia Wilde)



A Verreaux's Sifaka and her infant enjoy their arboreal vantage point - perfectly adapted to their forest home (image by Virginia Wilde)



The endangered Verreaux's Sifaka are capable of making remarkable leaps through trees - with distances of 10 metres not uncommon. On the ground, they hop bipedally, making it look as if they are dancing (image by Virginia Wilde)



A Subdesert Mesite - endemic to southwest Madagascar - shows its long curved bill that it uses to probe the soil for food (image by Virginia Wilde)



A Red-tailed Sportive Lemur looks down from its tree hollow home. Red-tailed Sportives are critically endangered, heavily hunted for food during times of famine (image by Virginia Wilde)



'The Art of Camouflage, Mossy Leaf-tailed Gecko style'. Two angles on the same gecko - which one stands out more? (image by Virginia Wilde)



Brilliantly camouflaged to its environment, a Madagascar nightjar settles into its day roost. Nightjar's large eyes - set wide to the side of their head - help ensure better vision in the dark (image by Virginia Wilde)



The beautiful colouration of the Madagascar Paradise Flycatcher (rufous morph) as it flits around the undergrowth in the forests of Kirindy (image by Virginia Wilde)



The nano-chameleon 'Brooksia nana' has an expression that brings a whole new meaning to 'angry resting face'. Adult males measure only 22mm, and they survive on tiny mites (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)



Only found in Madagascar's last remnants of Spiny Forest, the Subdesert Mesite roosts communally - with it sometimes hard to determine where one bird ends and another begins (image by Virginia Wilde)



A Warty Chameleon - distinguished mostly from Oustalet's by the number of spikes on its spine - changes direction on its branch perch (image by Virginia Wilde)



A White-breasted Mesite scurries about on the forest floor in Kirindy Forest, Madagascar (image by Virginia Wilde)



Their trunks lit by moonlight, three baobabs beneath a scattering of stars in the Madagascar evening sky (image by Virginia Wilde)



A Red-fronted Coua - displaying the rufous 'crown' that gives it its name - in dense vegetation in the Andisabe-Mantadia National Park (image by Virginia Wilde)



An Olive-capped Coua hops around the leaf litter in Madagascar's Spiny Forest. Formerly treated as a subspecies of the Red-capped Coua, it was elevated to species status based on differences in plumage and vocalisation (image by Virginia Wilde)



A Madagascar Paradise Flycatcher (rufous morph) sits on a reed in undergrowth in Kirindy. These beautiful birds regularly join mixed-species flocks, following other birds to hunt down any insects they flush (image by Virginia Wilde)



Nepenthes madagascariensis is one of two tropical pitcher plant species native to Madagascar. Pitcher plants have lids that secrete nectar to attract insect prey (image by Virginia Wilde)



A Panther Chameleon gulps down its insect prey as it stalks the vegetation in Madagascar's Andisabe-Mantadia National Park (image by Virginia Wilde)



It takes a village to raise a child! An energetic infant Ring-tailed Lemur jumps between members of its troop (image by Virginia Wilde)



A tiny Leaf Chameleon even has 'veins' that match those on the underside of leaves, as it clings to stems in the Madagascar rainforest (image by Virginia Wilde)



A Madagascar White-browed Owl surveys its forest realm from a particularly owl-shaped roosting hollow, in Madagascar's Zombitse National Park (image by Virginia Wilde)



Portrait of a Madagascan White-browed Owl, with its handsome brown barred underparts (image by Virginia Wilde)



'So you hold the branch like this with this hand - and then pester the other with this one!' Two Verreaux's Sifaka demonstrate the art of tree play (image by Virginia Wilde)



'Hold on there, little guy!' 'An infant Ring-tailed Lemur - a species known as 'Maky' in Madagascar - looks slightly unsteady as it clings to its mother (image by Virginia Wilde)



'Just hanging out here, having a nosy around!' A Red-fronted Brown Lemur checks out what's going on below, in Madagascar's Kirindy Forest (image by Virginia Wilde)



A handsome Madagascar Pygmy Kingfisher - with its gecko dinner - spotted in the undergrowth of the eastern rainforests (image by Virginia Wilde)



The striking mint colouration and orange eyes of a Madagascar Reed Frog. Madagascar is a frog lovers' paradise, with more than 300 species (99 per cent of which are endemic.) (image by Virginia Wilde)



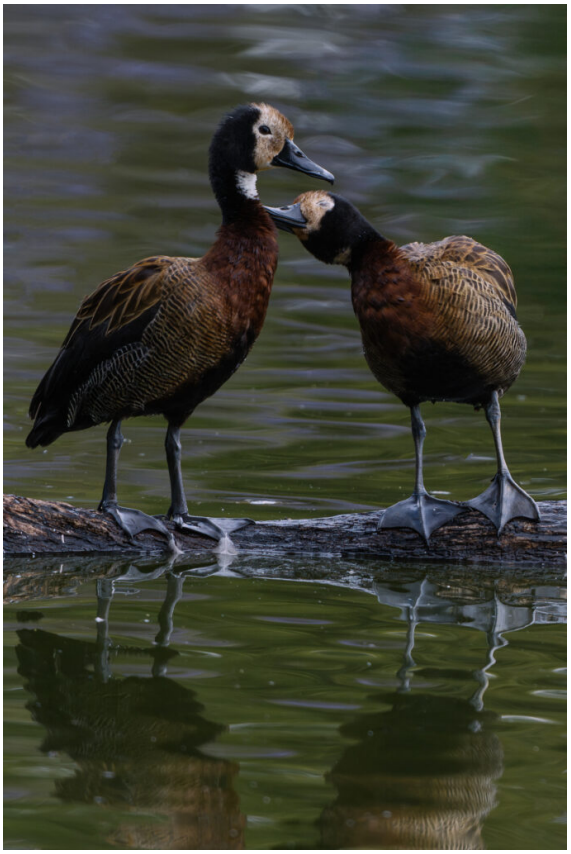
Portrait of a Black and White Ruffed Lemur - normally one of the loudest lemurs in the reserve of Le Palmarium - in a moment of calm. The screeches of the Black-and-white Ruffed Lemurs can often be heard at night (image by Virginia Wilde)



A Ring-tailed Lemur infant shows why mums body makes for the best pillow. No matter what species you are (image by Virginia Wilde)



Two Verreaux's Sifaka lark about in the trees of the Kirindy Forest. Well, if you were so adept at leaping, and had such incredible tails, you would lark about too (image by Virginia Wilde)



Two White-faced Whistling Ducks preen each other in capital Antananarivo's lovely Lake Alarobia (image by Virginia Wilde)



Found almost entirely in the Zombitse National Park in south-west Madagascar, the Zombitse (or 'Hubbard's) Sportive Lemur remain alert in their sleeping holes throughout the day, because of the threat from Fosa and Madagascar Boa (image by Virginia Wilde)



Verreaux's Sifaka often have the most animated facial expressions, making them look eternally surprised. This mother and infant look animated as they feast on Jujube berries (image by Virginia Wilde)



'Go on, little one, have some courage'. Ring-tailed Lemurs in Isalo National Park look on lovingly at one of their infants (image by Virginia Wilde)



Renowned for being gentle, curious lemurs, the Red-bellied are known for their luxuriant chestnut brown coats (image by Virginia Wilde)



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



Around 70 of the estimated 80 plus gecko species in Madagascar are endemic, and often brightly coloured, like this Standing Day Gecko with the striking turquise tail (image by Virginia Wilde)



A Red-bellied Lemur - showcasing its magnificent bushy tail - enjoys life in the trees at Madagascar's Le Palmarium Reserve (image by Virginia Wilde)



A Running Coua - renowned for being tricksy to photograph - pictured in the Spiny Forest (image by Virginia Wilde)



'Hold on, baby lemur!' A Verreaux's Sifaka, just about to leap, shows her infant what expert tree climbing looks like (image by Virginia Wilde)



A male Parson's Chameleon - showcasing its distinctive warty 'horn' - inches its way along a branch in Madagascar's rainforest (image by Virginia Wilde)



Portrait of a Leaf-tailed Gecko, showcasing its hypnotic eyes in the forest of Madagascar's Analamazaotra National Park (image by Virginia Wilde)





The playful Crowned Lemur - here showing the rufous 'crown' of its name - hangs out in Madagascar's Le Palmarium Reserve (image by Virginia Wilde)



Eye to eye with an Aye Aye! Shy, gentle, misunderstood and persecuted - Aye Ayes have bright eyes, bat-like ears and ever-growing incisors (like those of rodents) (image by Virginia Wilde)



Verreaux's Sifaka have such expressive faces - often looking like they are wide-eyed in surprise! (image by Virginia Wilde)



The infant of a critically-endangered Diademed Sifaka hangs on tightly to its mother, in Madagascar's Andisabe-Mantadia National Park (image by Virginia Wilde)



A Hook-billed Vanga among the trees - one of 40 species of Vanga that are solely endemic to Madagascar, and perhaps a better example of adaptive radiation than Darwin's Finches (image by Virginia Wilde)



Black and white image of a leaping juvenile Verreaux's Sifaka, showing its disproportionately large rear feet that help propel it through the trees (image by Virginia Wilde)



Not a hedgehog (nor any relation to a hedgehog). But a 'Lesser Hedgehog Tenrec' - a completely different order of mammals that evolved independently. Seen here in the leafy ground of the Spiny Forest (image by Virginia Wilde)



Portrait of an Indri: the largest of all living lemurs. To hear a troop of Indri singing together - their voices a cross between a foghorn and the vocalisations of humpback whales - is one of Madagascar's wonders (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)



Posing as if for a tasteful life-drawing art class, this Black and White Ruffed Lemur takes a moment out from leaping, playing and eating (image by Virginia Wilde)



The twisted branches and trunks of Madagascar rainforest trees make for an ideal climbing frame for Black and White Ruffed Lemurs - or even to rest upon (image by Virginia Wilde)



An Eastern Bamboo Lemur - with a dense grey coat, cinammon-coloured backsand scalloped ears - spotted in the canopy in eastern Madagascar (image by Virginia Wilde)



Indris are the largest of all living lemurs - with males growing up to 72cm and weighing as much as 10kg. It is believed there are only between 1,000 and 10,000 Indri left in the world (image by Virginia Wilde)



A Little Egret ruffles its feathers on its perch in Antananarivo's Lake Alarobia (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)



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)



A nocturnal Eastern Woolly Lemur and her infant look down from the branches in Madagascar's Voi Community Reserve. Named for their curly, dense fur, this infant displays a hair-style that would make many envious (image by Virginia Wilde)



In a moment of rainforest calm, a Black and White Ruffed Lemur in its arboreal home (image by Virginia Wilde)



'Shhh, don't tell anyone this, but...' A Black-and-white Ruffed Lemurs appears to be whispering in another's ear as they hang out in Madagascar's Le Palmarium Reserve. These lemurs are iconic and distinctive, with the large white ruff of fur around their name giving their name (image by Virginia Wilde)



A female Black Lemur - with sunlight picking out the colours of its incredibly beautiful tail - scampers around the forest floor at Le Palmarium Reserve (image by Virginia Wilde)



An animated Indri - with an almost teddy-bear look - wraps around a tree in Madagascar's rainforest. Indri are the only other mammal known to sing with a human-style sense of rhythm (image by Virginia Wilde)



A fairly large Madagascar Bright Eyed Frog splays its round toe pads that enable it to cling to vertical tree trunks (image by Virginia Wilde)



A Madagascar Butterfly Caterpillar inches its way up a shrub, by the lakeside at the island's Le Palmarium Reserve (image by Virginia Wilde)



An infant Red-fronted Brown Lemur sleeps soundly wrapped in its mother's fur; so cosy in there that it's hard to make out where infant begins and mother 's fur stops (image by Virginia Wilde)



A female Nelicourvi Weaver hangs from a leaf stem in Madagascar's Mantadia National Park (image by Virginia Wilde)



A Black-crowned Night Heron - native to Madagascar but fairly widespread throughout the world - rests on a branch at Antananarivo's Lake Alarobia (image by Virginia Wilde)



'What's captured your attention, Fosa?' A female Fosa looks fascinated by the goings-on in Kirindy Forest, Madagascar (image by Virginia Wilde)



A female Fosa slinks across the forest floor in Kirindy. These beautiful carnivores (with their incredibly long tails) are heavily threatened by habitat destruction (image by Virginia Wilde)



'Put your hands up, oh put your hands up!' An infant Red-fronted Brown Lemur raises its tiny hand to meet that of its mother, in the Akiba area of Kirindy Forest (image by Virginia Wilde)



A Madagascar Cricket glows almost neon green at night, its proboscis so long that it measured at least five times the length of this insect (image by Virginia Wilde)



The startling scarlet colouration of a Madagascar Fire Millipede - renowned as one of the world's most beautiful - scuttles across the ground in the eastern lowland rainforest (image by Virginia Wilde)



A pretty Madagascar Green Pigeon rests on a berry bush, tucking into the fruit in the morning light (image by Virginia Wilde)



An infant Verreaux's Sifaka peers down from a tree, still keeping a watchful eye on its mother. Around 30% of sifaka infants are lost to predation by the Fosa or raptors like the Madagascar Harrier Hawk (image by Virginia Wilde)



A juvenile Oustalet's Chameleon - fully grown, generally considered to be the world's largest chameleon species - inches along a branch in Madagascar's Le Palmarium Reserve (image by Virginia Wilde)



A female Fosa sprawls on the ground in Madagascar's Kirindy Forest. Fierce Fosa prey on birds, wild pigs, frogs, rodents and lizards and is the nation's only predator that can kill large lemurs due to its speed and camouflage (image by Virginia Wilde)



A cute Grey Mouse Lemur - thankfully one of Madagascar's most abundant small endemic mammals - peers down from branches (image by Virginia Wilde)



Common Brown Lemurs are one of Madagascar's longest living primates - notching up as much as 30 years of age. They are playful with adult female dominance, believed to bring the stress levels in troops down considerably (image by Virginia Wilde)



A female Common Brown Lemur - her infant just about visible nestled in her fur - rests on a toppled tree trunk in Madagascar's Le Palmarium Reserve (image by Virginia Wilde)



'What big eyes you have!' "All the better to dazzle you with,"said the Aye Aye, as it chewed on a coconut (image by Virginia Wilde)



The fascinating Aye Aye - undoubtedly one of the world's most bizarre mammals - lifts one of its long-fingered hands. The middle finger on each hand capable of rotating 360 degrees through a special ball and socket joint (image by Virginia Wilde)



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



Fony Baobabs can be incredibly brawny-looking. Some of the baobabs in the Spiny Forest are up to 1,200 years old (image by Virginia Wilde)