Madagascar: A World Apart Photography Tour Report 2017

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by Mike Watson

The inaugural Wild Images photo tour of Madagascar was a great success, resulting in some memorable photographic encounters with some of the 'Eighth Continent's' most enigmatic wildlife. From the outrageously confiding Long-tailed Ground Roller and Subdesert Mesite of the Spiny Forest of southwest Madagascar, both found nowhere else in the world, to the equally tame Ring-tailed and Red-fronted Brown Lemurs of Isalo National Park. We also filled our cards with images of the impressive Fosa – a lemur hunter and Madagascar's largest carnivore in the dry deciduous Kirindy Forest of the west coast. Also here Verreaux's Sifaka was another star attraction allowing point blank approach. The nearby Avenue of Baobabs also got a lot of attention. In the eastern rainforest at Andasibe we marveled at Indri, the largest extant lemur. This was a sound as well as sight experience, their far-carrying eerie singing calls ringing through the forest. Other terrific lemur encounters in the east included the naturally occurring and critically endangered Diademed Sifaka and Black-and-white Ruffed Lemur in Mantadia National Park. Night walks in the rainforest were popular and productive and added to our eventual total of seven different species of chameleons, which included Oustalet's, Parson's, Warty, Panther and Petter's. We were even treated to a great look at the weird Lowland Streaked Tenrec, a convergent-evolved hedgehog-like creature.

And this is what serenaded the group in Andasibe.

Our post-tour Northern Madagascar extension took us to the remote forested region of Daraina where we had some stunning encounters with family groups of the critically endangered and incredibly beautiful Golden-crowned Sifaka as well as the endangered Crowned Lemur. Sadly there was no Aye-aye here, except for the remains of a dead one. Local people have been killing them at Daraina owing to strange superstitions that Aye-ayes are evil spirits and the harbingers of death. As if this was not enough, the forest area around Daraina is unprotected and is subject to an influx of illegal gold miners. Our final destination was Montagne D'Ambre, where we ended the tour with an amazing night walk, tallying no fewer than 13 chameleons of three species as well as bizarre Mossy Leaf-tailed Geckos. After almost three weeks in country we felt we had seen a lot of Madagascar and had photographed a very good representation of its special fauna and flora. We will be back again in 2018!

Once we had all negotiated the very time-consuming immigration at Antanarivo (or simply 'Tana') airport, we made our way to our comfortable little airport hotel, a place we would return to three times later on our tour as we used the capital as a hub to fly to other destinations rather than risk the infrequent and notoriously changeable flights between the provincial towns we needed to reach. Air Madagascar (affectionately known as '*Air Mad*') lived up to its nickname and presented a five hours delay to us on the first full day of the tour. No matter, we could visit a nearby lake in the city, where there was a throng of waterbirds. OK the midday light was really horrible but it was better than nothing and we saw a few interesting birds that take refuge here from the rampant hunting pressure elsewhere. Madagascan ducks all end up in the pot, especially free wild ones. Amongst the waterbirds we noted many herons and egrets, including Black Heron and Dimorphic Egret. Ducks included Hottentot Teal and Meller's Duck, the latter a much sought after Madagascar endemic but certainly one of the least inspiring! A roosting Barn Owl spotted by Armel had unfortunate ly been subject to some kind of facial injury or disease and was therefore of less photographic interest.

Madagascar is not known for its cuisine and meals were generally quite plain but there were a few good ones along the way. This included the Pizza Gastronomie Restaurant, which became a regular favourite. Tana is a bustling and sprawling city whose infrastructure was not intended to serve almost two million people and this is apparent when travelling by road, which takes an eternity to cover even a short distance. This goes for most road travel in Madagascar. Even when traffic is light, progress is hindered by the dreadful condition of the roads. Travel here is not for the faint hearted or easily bored but the rewards waiting in the wonderful national parks make the efforts to reach them well worthwhile.

Another thing you notice while travelling in Madagascar is that there seem to be hardly any old people. It is one of the world's poorest countries and life expectancy for men is only early sixties. Also, over 40% of the population is under the age of 15 so no wonder you get

this impression. The population is also growing rapidly (although there are no official census figures).

Eventually our flight to the southwestern town of Tulear (or Toliara) took off and we watched the sun setting in the west, dipping into a deep layer of dust, as we descended towards our destination. We reached our lovely beach hotel long after dark and settled down a very tasty meal. A brief walk around the hotel grounds later produced some great views of Madagascar Nightjars, a ubiquitous bird that we would see at almost every other place we visited. Their stuttering call became a familiar sound at dawn and dusk over the next couple of weeks. Next morning we set off full of anticipation of our visit to the legendary Spiny Forest near the coastal village of Ifaty and our first proper photo session. Walking into the Spiny Forest is to enter a completely different and unique habitat, dominated by large squat and bottle-shaped Fony Baobab trees between which grow a sea of thorns in the form of Didierea Octopus Trees. At this time of year, still winter, the forest is bare and dusty with only a few splashes of green. Madagascar Magpie Robins and pretty Souimanga Sunbirds were singing and Madagascar Turtle Doves whizzed past as we were quickly ushered off trail to a roosting group of Subdesert Mesites, which our guides had located. They will be difficult to photograph in their dense thorny home they said! Thanks to our superb local help they were not and they sat for ages on the same branch, even long enough for the first early morning sunlight to appear. Subdesert Mesites are restricted to the spiny forest of southwest Madagascar and are found nowhere else in the world. The same is true of our next target, Long-tailed Ground Roller. Although it is the easiest to see of the five Madagascan ground rollers it is still a challenge to photograph with a nice backdrop free of distracting twigs and branches. Our guides managed this as well, even in a spot where we could lie down for a lower aspect. Simply jaw-dropping superb and one of the best examples of local guiding I've seen.

Next up was Running Coua and we knew what to expect now, another grandstand performance! Again they said this one would be difficult to capture as it lives up to its name, scuttling along the floor of the spiny forest. Again no problem though. The 500 was ideal for the birds this morning but also the wide angle in my pocket was needed for the trees. The Spiny Forest also produced a day roosting Madagascar Nightjar, Green-capped Coua, Warty Chameleon and the fantastic Standing's Day Gecko as well as lots of nice treescape opportunities before it was time to move on. Folks in this area plant the *didierea* trees as fencing here. We passed some limestone workings, where guys breaking rocks in the hot sun. The new hard top coast road, funded by the Chinese, has made access to Ifaty much easier now but that has also brought an influx of people and development to the spiny forest. Quite simply more people = less forest. We made a quick stop at some saltpans near Ifaty where the hoped-for Madagascar Plover was eventually tracked down amongst the commoner Kittlitz's and White-fronted Plovers and longer lenses managed some record shots. What a fabulous start to the tour!

We also managed an early morning visit to La Table, a higher altitude (just) spiny forest above Tulear. It is quite different to that near Ifaty with fewer Baobabs. It was cloaked in mist at dawn but gradually the sun broke through, as did we in our attempts to track down the two special birds of this particular forest, the beautiful Verreaux's Coua and Red-shouldered Vanga. Another two birds found nowhere else in the world away from southwest Madagascar. Sadly we could see more evidence of habitat destruction here in the form of charcoal making and worse still the people cutting the trees target the same trees as the couas do for their nests. The birds are apparently moving further and further away from the road. How long until they have nowhere else to go I wonder?

We passed insanely over-laden taxi brousses *('country taxis'*), sometimes with two or three people sitting in the half closed trunk! There were also numerous zebu carts laden with firewood. The lovely forest was being carried away before our eyes. Barren knackered grasslands were formerly crop fields, abandoned and left to slowly go back to nature although we did see the occasional cotton crop along the journey. Children played in the shade of mango trees and one village we passed through had a large rum distillery, the produce of which is for sale at the roadside in plastic water bottles. Goodness knows what ABV it was, Armel thought maybe more than 50%. A small covey of Madagascar Partridges and a flyby flock of Madagascar Sandgrouse livened up the journey as we started to see impressive Western Baobab trees (*Adansonia za*). We also passed through Madagascar's main sapphire mining area. Wild west type, one street towns, full of young men with rather grand Asian sapphire dealers' shops here and there. Our hotel at Isalo is definitely worthy of a mention! A fabulous French-owned property built very tastefully amongst the fascinating weathered sandstone landscape. After evening meal we did a spot of night-birding, quickly finding an obliging Torotoroka Scops Owl that posed for photos.

There is no need to arrive too early at Isalo NP as the lemurs do not descend to the bottom of the canyons, where they can be seen at close quarters, until late morning. Instead we spent some time in the area of woodland and sandstone cliffs by the hotel, seeing Madagascar Harrier Hawk as well as the localized Benson's Rock Thrush. The lovely yellow-flowered Elephant's Foot plants (*Pachypodium rosulatum*) were in bloom on the rocky outcrops. After a short hike in the lemurs appeared right on cue, first a family group of gorgeous Ring-tailed Lemurs, followed soon afterwards by a single female Verreaux's Sifaka and finally a group of feisty Red-brown Lemurs, which

were intent on raiding some of the picnic tables. This is another reason why the lemurs come to this particular spot in the canyon!

The ringtails were a little tricky to photograph, rarely in un-obscured or attractive positions but with a little patience… Ditto re the Verreaux's Sifaka, one of only a mere handful in the national park here. The lemurs were more focused on feeding than lounging around and it was amazing to see the gentle interaction between the species, I had no idea that they would be so affectionate towards each other! In contrast the Red-fronted Brown Lemurs sat in easy-to-shoot places. We also saw a nice Western Girdled Lizard here and by the way, this morning 70-200 or 100-400 were ideal lenses. We even had time for a siesta in the heat of the day during which some folks had a Madagascar Hoopoe outside their room and others had a Duméril's Madagascar Swift on the wall of their building. The afternoon was a rather short sunset session, taking some photos of the Elephant's Foot trees and some other landscape scenes in a race against time against the rising evening shadows. Another owling session was unproductive, as the scops owl had obviously got wise to our tricks.

The following morning we retraced our steps west stopping off at the roadside in Zombitse National Park, where we took a few scenic shots of the stark divide between the barren grassland and the forest remnant lit up by the morning sun. A sad sight indeed. Once we had met our local guides the forest itself was quite productive, starting with a pair of roosting White-browed Owls sat together. Unfortunately one of the birds had a lot of twigs in front of its face though. A colony of bizarre Flatid Leaf Bugs followed and then an Oustalet's Chameleon, the world's largest! Deeper into the forest an endangered Hubbard's Sportive Lemur peered out of its roosting hole in the trunk of a tree and we eventually tracked down a group of Appert's Greenbuls, a bird found nowhere else in the world but Zombitse! A neat bird but always deep in a tangle of twigs and branches! Soon it was time to continue on our way back to Tulear, where we arrived at lunchtime. It was already hot again so time for another siesta. In the afternoon we ventured out to a nearby wetland. This was a fairly quiet session as most waterbirds did not allow close approach.

Our next flight, back to Tana was more or less on time today and we were back in our airport hotel there soon. The next move was an early flight to Morondava on Madagascar's west coast. After a nice meal at a lovely beach restaurant we hit the dirt road north. We paused briefly at the Avenue of Baobabs, which was already infested with other vahaza, before continuing north to Kirindy. Our new lodge there was a welcome nice surprise. We made our first visit to the forest late this afternoon and bingo! Fosa by the *fako* (rubbish). A gnarly old male with a damaged left eye that had become infected was resting not far from the main entrance track and we got some quite nice low angle photos of his good side.

Fosa is a unique carnivore, sharing traits with cats, dogs and mongeese and the only predator in Madagascar capable of preying on adults of any of the lemurs. It is thought to have evolved from a single mammalian ancestor (along with the other Madagascan carnivore members of the family *Eupleridae*), which made the crossing of the Mozambique Channel on floating vegetation, long after Madagascar had split from the mainland c.150 million years ago, at a time before mammals had evolved of course. Such an event is thought to have produced all of the lemurs, tenrecs and Madagascar rodents, each family deriving from a single refugee. This might sound an unlikely way to have produced the present set of mammals in Madagascar but even one million years is a long time for something like this to happen! Remember that a primate has now managed to reach the moon (probably). Faced with a vast unexploited area of habitat the colonists radiated into an array of specialists, each finding their own niche.

The Fosa is a hunter of the other mammal groups, particularly lemurs. Imagine an animal so sleek and fast that it can hunt down an agile primate, which is capable of making 10 metre leaps between trees in its efforts to evade capture. It has flexible ankles, which allow it to jump from tree to tree and descend them headfirst, semi-retractable claws like a cat, a super long tail to aid balance during chases and a fearsome set of teeth. It is certainly the lemurs' nemesis. Although it is the most widely distributed of Madagascar's carnivores, the Fosa is very thinly spread and usually very elusive. However, they are more or less habituated at Kirindy, in fact, they are so at home around the Forest Research Station here that it is a challenge to photograph them with natural-looking backgrounds away from the *fako*, where they scavenge leftovers. I spent hours following them around and enjoyed a few superb encounters when they simply sat down in the forest and allowed me to do the same only a couple of metres away. We saw at least four different animals, two gnarly males, both with damaged left eyes but also a perfect young male and female. We even saw one at night hunting along one of the forest tracks. It almost bounded right up to us before realizing its mistake.

The other two very special mammals of Kirindy – Giant Jumping Rat and Madame Berthe's Mouse Lemur (the world's smallest primate) proved more difficult to photograph with only record shots to show for our efforts. The rat even ran right through the main square next to the restaurant long after dark and Madame Berthe's was not too far from here as well! Sadly our attempts to photograph the rat were scuppered. Sigh!

Easier to shoot in the forest were Red-tailed Sportive Lemurs at their roosting trees as well as a few birds including Crested Coua, Torotoroka Scops Owl and Rufous Vanga. Some of us also managed to connect with Narrow-striped Mongoose visiting a feeding station by the transfer drivers' rest area. Night walks produced some interesting subjects like Pale Fork-marked Lemur and Grey-brown Mouse Lemur as well as Madagascar Ground Gecko, the snake (*Heteroliodon occipitalis*, it doesn't have an English name) and a Large-clawed Scorpion. We very much enjoyed our time at Kirindy. It was wonderful to see so much lowland deciduous forest still remains here. The ideal lenses at Kirindy were again 70-200 and 100-400.

Returning south to Morondava we paused to admire the magnificent baobabs along the way. First of all we visited the Baobabs Amoreux, two Western Baobabs (*Adansonia za*), which have become intertwined, like lovers, hence their name. The trees have become a natural monument and are now included on most list-ticking tours of the area. They are very impressive nevertheless.A little further south lies the Avenue of Baobabs or L'allée des Baobabs. A group of around 25 impressive Grandidier's Baobabs, some around 900 years old and 30m tall. The dirt road through the trees is unfortunately totally infested with vahaza and it is difficult to get any kind of photo without someone you don't want in the frame. However, there are another 20 or so Grandidier's Baobabs in the surrounding fields, which are just as impressive. A group of boys was playing football here, in an open area, which later becomes the sunset viewpoint for the trees along the road. The avenue is not protected nor has any formal entry or viewing arrangements being along a public road but the trees have been preserved out of reverence for them. Their soft, water storing centre mean that they are of little use for building material, which obviously helped their survival.

A brief stay in the seaside town of Morondava was very enjoyable and a walk on the beach here produced a few shorebirds, particularly Sanderlings and whimbrels. A flotilla of make-shift sailing craft set out to sea here every day to fish the offshore waters. Again our flight back to Tana was uneventful and we were able to set off east from the capital in good time to reach Perinet by early evening. Frighteningly little original forest remains along route two until you get to Perinet, any substantial woodland until this point is eucalyptus and of little use to native wildlife.

The next very special animal on our agenda lives in the eastern rainforest and there is no better place to see it than the national parks and community reserves around Perinet – the spectacular and critically endangered Indri, the largest extant lemur. It is also unique in not having a tail but this does not seem to hinder its amazing ability to make massive 10m+ leaps through the trees. They mate for life and live in small family groups in the forest, where they are exclusively herbivorous. Although their appearance is as endearing as a furry black-and-white teddy bear probably the most amazing thing about them is their voice. As we hiked through the forest we could hear the sound of their mournful off-key voices, ringing through the trees long before we got anywhere near them. The family groups usually sing to each other, each chorus lasting only a few minutes, after which they fall silent again. We saw and heard them in several places but it was away from the Indri tourist vahaza that we had our best encounters.

Even here, with them more or less to ourselves, it was not that straightforward to shoot them in nice light in an unobscured situation. However, their large green glassy eyes are particularly attractive.Also in the forests immediately around Perinet were a couple of families of Diademed Sifakas, a candidate for best looking lemur for sure [but purists should note that they are re-introduced around Perinet and some of them carry neck collars]. Other interesting photographic encounters included a gorgeous Lowland Streaked Tenrec, a convergent-evolved yellow and black hedgehog lookalike.

Many fascinating creatures come out at night at Perinet and we did a couple of night walks here that produced some interesting results. Chameleons included Short-horned and Parson's as well as out first Mossy Leaf-tailed Geckos and nocturnal frogs. We only saw a couple of drops of rain during our whole stay in the rain forest (it is not rainy season until later in the autumn) and for that reason we only saw half a dozen mosquitoes on the entire tour as well, which was a more welcome outcome. Another plus factor is that the eco-tourism destinations are not as busy as later in the autumn. Yikes, they were busy enough for me!

Our adventures in the east came to an end and it was time to head north. After a bumpy flight to Antsiranana (formerly Diego Suarez) we embarked on our longest road (if you can call it that) journey of the tour. The adverts for kite surfing holidays all over the airport terminal were a clue. This was windy season and there were some clouds in the sky at last too! However, for almost an hour we did not see a single bird of any species on our journey south, probably owing to the wind, until a Cattle Egret relieved the boredom. The journey itself was rather long, nine hours driving to cover c.235km, often at a snail's pace on dusty, deeply rutted tracks. Unfortunately there had not been any road repairs since the last rainy season. The northeast corner of Madagascar has been subject to a gold rush in recent years

and we passed by numerous small villages, which have sprung up along the road to Vohemar, each surrounded hillsides pock-marked by tiny individual mines and their spoil heaps. Fortunately the gold here is of very poor quality or the destruction would be far worse. The reason we made such an effort to reach this remote area was to see the beautiful and critically endangered Golden-crowned Sifaka.

Picking our way through a maze of abandoned gold diggings, we embarked on our first excursion in the hope of getting close to these wonderful lemurs. The most beautiful of all! They were rather easy to find and pretty confiding too. For some reason they have survived the low tech gold digging, which does not affect their food source (tree fruit and leaves) too much and we saw five or six family groups in a fairly short space of time along the course of a dry stream bed.

However, the sound of mechanical equipment in the distance was a bad sign. Apparently Chinese business interests in the area have stepped up the mining process. This area does not have any official protection yet but with the establishment of the NGO Fanamby's eco-tourism '*Tattersalli Camp*' (named after the lemurs) there is hope that something will be done to protect the lemurs. We explored the forest around the camp during our stay there and it proved to be much more productive and pleasant than the gold digging area. It was also almost pristine, with little evidence of tree cutting. Also our encounters with Golden-crowned Sifakas here were simply stunning. They seemed to follow a pattern of coming down to the ground to feed in the late afternoon sun, just as the last rays shone through the woodland. Beautiful! There were probably a couple of families in this area and we also caught up with the (merely) endangered Crowned Lemur, including up to eight animals together, feeding in trees around the camp.

Night walks were productive here too with Daraina Mouse Lemur, Giant Dwarf Lemur and fork-marked Lemur, which is thought to be probably a separate new species. Sadly we were not successful in our quest for the Aye-aye, although we did find the remains of one killed by locals owing to their superstition that Aye-ayes are evil spirits and harbingers of death. A tragic end for such a gentle creature. Our local guides told us they had found three dead Aye-ayes lately. Maybe someone can try to teach something in the schools here that We explored the forest around the camp during our stay there and it proved to be much more productive and pleasant than the gold digging area. It was also almost pristine, with little evidence of tree cutting. Also our encounters with Golden-crowned Sifakas here were simply stunning.

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Bird life was also more obvious in such nice forest here, with noisy flocks of Greater Vasa Parrots roosting in the forest, which were spooked occasionally by a Madagascar Buzzard. Madagascar Nightjars flew around the camp in the twilight and Madagascar Harrier Hawks were nesting high in a large tree on the hillside. We also saw a couple of interesting Vangas here – the outrageous Sickle-billed as well as the more modest Hook-billed. The camp itself is very simple but is clean and delightfully located right on the edge of the forest. I hope that some of you reading this will be inspired to visit it and in doing so help preserve the forest surrounding it. The effort to reach Daraina is well worthwhile.

Retracing our journey back to Diego Suarez we stopped off for a couple of roadside Panther Chameleons, somehow spotted by our amazing drivers! Montagne D'Ambre, an attractive former French hill station overlooking the coast. The mountain itself is named after the resin of the trees found there. Our accommodation here was really delightful, probably the best of our time in Madagascar, as was the food! Very welcome after the simple country life in Daraina. Our night walk here was also the best of the tour by far. Our expert local guide showed us some great new chameleons – Petter's (with its crazy 'false teeth') and Boettger's as well as numerous Panthers. We tallied 13 chameleons in only a couple of hundred metres! Mossy Leaf-tailed Gecko was common here and some of us caught up with Mount Amber Mouse Lemur too. It was a fabulous way to finish our photo tour and we were all sad we could not spend more time here (although it was better than an overnight stay in a Diego Suarez hotel, which was the alternative before our flight next morning). Finally I must thank all of our guides in Madagascar, without whose help we would not have seen nearly as much of its wonderful wildlife!