Madagascar

Highlights



Ring-tailed Lemurs by Keith Valentine

Madagascar is often referred to as the 'Eighth Continent' and its exceptional fauna and flora have evolved over millions of years of isolation. This legendary uniqueness is nowhere better reflected than in its birds, and the island hosts no fewer than five endemic families (the ground rollers, cuckoo roller, mesites, Malagasy warblers and asities), plus the near endemic vangas! But the wonder of Madagascar extends well beyond its avifauna, and we do not neglect the amazing lemurs, colourful chameleons, and fascinating flora of this appropriately named "laboratory of evolution." For our Madagascar Highlights tour we have cherry-picked the best of Madagascar and offered it in a shorter package, and as a result, this expedition provides a more relaxed pace and less demanding Madagascar experience than our Comprehensive tours. We target all five endemic Malagasy bird families as well as good numbers of lemurs and other representative wildlife, making this ideal for travellers with limited time or less interest in targeting every single endemic bird.

Itinerary & Map

Day 1	**Arrival in Antananarivo (Tana)**
Day 2	**Antananarivo to Andasibe (Perinet)**
Days 3 to 6	**Andasibe-Mantadia National Park & Analamazaotra National Park**
Day 7	**Andasibe to Antananarivo**
Day 8	**Antananarivo; flight to Tulear & drive to Ifaty**
Day 9	**Ifaty**
Day 10	**Ifaty to Tulear, Nosy Ve & Anakao (San Augustin), excursion to La Table**
Day 11	**Tulear, flight to Antananarivo**
Day 12	**Antananarivo; flight to Fort Dauphin, transfer to Berenty**
Day 13	**Berenty Lemur Reserve**
Day 14	**Berenty Lemur Reserve to Fort Dauphin, flight to Antananarivo**
Day 15	**Final departure**



Birding sites in detail

This itinerary covers different seasons. Please note the below notations:

* **Summer migrants occurring between late October and early April.**
^ **Species that whilst resident, are most easily found between October and March.**



Meller's Duck by David Hoddinott

Lac Alarobia. This private sanctuary set within the city of Antananarivo protects large numbers of ducks and herons. As evening sets, the small lake literally teems with waterfowl. Large numbers of White-faced Whistling Duck and Red-billed Teal should be seen, usually accompanied by small numbers of Blue-billed Teal, Knob-billed Duck and sometimes Fulvous Whistling Duck, as well as the very rare and endangered Meller's Duck. The Lake also supports a fantastic assortment of heron's egrets that roost or breed in the sanctuary, including a few splendidly adorned Malagasy Pond Herons* and Dimorphic Egrets. African Openbill, a very scarce bird in Madagascar, is sometimes also recorded here. Mascarene Martins are common overhead and are sometimes joined by Malagasy Black and Little Swifts. We will also be watching in adjacent areas for more Madagascar endemics and near endemics, which may include Malagasy Kestrel, Malagasy Coucal, Malagasy Kingfisher, handsome White-throated Rail, Madagascar Wagtail, Malagasy White-eye, Madagascar Mannikin and Red Fody.

Analamazaotra National Park. The moist rainforest cloaking Madagascar's eastern escarpment protects the richest assemblage of birds on the island, including many that are rare or poorly known. Over 100 of these have been recorded from within the small reserve of Analamazaotra National Park and we will search for such specials as Madagascar Flufftail, the elusive Madagascar Wood Rail, Madagascar Blue Pigeon, scarce Greater Vasa Parrot, vociferous but retiring Madagascar Cuckoo*, Madagascar Spinetail, brilliant Madagascar Pygmy Kingfisher, Malagasy Paradise Flycatcher, Madagascar Cuckooshrike, Ward's Flycatcher, Tylas Vanga, Madagascar Starling, Long-billed Bernieria, Spectacled Tetraka, furtive White-throated Oxylabes, Nelicourvi Weaver and Souimanga Sunbird.



Cuckoo Roller by Glen Valentine

Amongst the most sought-after of Madagascar's birds are those of the five families endemic to the Malagasy region: the peculiar mesites, exquisite ground rollers, Cuckoo-roller, tetrakas and allies, and the near endemic vangas. Some of these, such as the magnificent Cuckoo Roller, sensational Pitta-like Ground Roller^ and a number of the Malagasy warblers and vangas are reasonably common and regularly encountered, whilst most of the others

remain rare, local or elusive. We will make a special effort to locate as many representatives of these charismatic families as possible, as well as those of the endemic sub-families, the couas and asities.



Rufous-headed Ground Roller by Glen Valentine

In the forested hills around Andasibe, we hope to find the localised Red-fronted and Blue Couas, Rufous-headed Ground Cuckoo, Velvet Asity, and flocks of vangas that may include White-headed, Chabert's, Madagascar Blue, Red-tailed and the bizarre Nuthatch Vanga.

Whilst in the Andasibe area, we will make a special effort to see the reserve's most famous residents: the huge, singing lemurs known as the Indri. A journey in search of these magnificent creatures is an incredible experience, and if we are fortunate we will be treated to a close encounter with a family group; their eerie, whale-like howling echoing through the forest. Other lemurs we hope to see include Brown and Eastern Grey Bamboo Lemurs, while we will also search known roosting sites for the nocturnal but inquisitive Common Sportive Lemur. Another 'must see' member of the island's fauna is the Giraffe-necked Weevil, a tiny red and black insect named for its unusually proportioned neck!

In the evenings, we will embark on night walks. Nocturnal outings are a thrilling and indeed, essential part of any trip to Madagascar and Andasibe is one of the best sites to search for the island's night birds. Specialities here include Madagascar Owl, Rainforest Scops Owl and both Madagascar and the rare and little-known Collared Nightjar. Whilst seeing these birds will be the focus of our walks, we will not neglect the immense variety of non-avian life that also emerges after dark. Although Madagascar is famous for the spectacular lemurs that have adapted to a daytime existence, a number of species of these primitive primates remain, like their African cousins the galagos, denizens of the night.



Black-and-white Ruffed Lemur by Daniel Danckwerts

We will search for and should find Crossley's Dwarf^ and the diminutive Goodman's Mouse Lemurs^, and may also encounter some of Madagascar's other evolutionary masterpieces such as the bizarre Lowland Streaked Tenrec^. The island's reptile and amphibian ('herp') fauna is equally fascinating and even the most hardened birder would not fail to be impressed by the plethora of colourful and bizarre frogs, chameleons and geckos to be seen on an evening's stroll through the rainforest. In particular, we will search for the giant Parson's Chameleon and three species of eccentric leaf-tailed geckos:

the huge Common Flat-tail Gecko, the aptly named Satanic Leaf-tailed Gecko and the Southern Flat-tail Gecko, which looks as though its body has been adorned with moss.



Verreaux's Sifaka by David Hoddinott

Andasibe-Mantadia National Park. Andasibe-Mantadia National Park lies a short distance from Andasibe, protecting a larger expanse of primary forest at a somewhat higher altitude. Though it has only recently been opened to the public, Andasibe-Mantadia is now an essential destination on any birding trip to Madagascar, having rapidly gained a reputation as an excellent site for a handful of highly prized forest birds. Not least amongst these are several species formerly considered to be restricted to the poorly accessible rainforests of the far north-east, such as Red-breasted Coua^ and Scaly Ground Roller^. We will concentrate on finding these specials, while also watching for more widespread yet no less desirable forest birds including Madagascar Ibis, Henst's Goshawk, Pitta-like^ and Short-legged Ground Rollers^, Crossley's Vanga, Common Sunbird-Asity, Common and Dark Newtonias, Wedge-tailed, Green, Stripe-throated and Common Jeries, Rand's Warbler, the newly described Cryptic Warbler and Forest Fody.

We will also scan across a small forest pond that often holds a pair of Meller's Duck and Madagascar Grebe, two highly threatened and declining endemics. Other attractions in this scenically beautiful park include the vocal Black-and-white Ruffed Lemur, the elusive Diademed Sifaka (considered by many to be the world's most beautiful lemur) and Baron's Mantella, a spectacularly coloured forest frog. Much of the birding in Andasibe-Mantadia National Park can be enjoyed from the wide road that runs up into the reserve, although seeing the skulkers of the forest understory will require that we take to some of the steep and at times slippery trails into the rainforest.



Archbold's Newtonia by Keith Valentine

Berenty Lemur Reserve. Berenty is justly famous for its lemurs, not only because its deciduous woodland is home to no less than six species of these primitive primates, but also for the ease with which they may be seen and appreciated in the wild. Red-fronted Lemur occurs in large numbers during the day, while White-footed Sportive Lemur and Red-and-grey^ and Grey Mouse Lemurs^ are regularly encountered on night walks through the reserve, though the undoubted favourites are the delightful diurnal Ring-tailed Lemurs and Verreaux's Sifakas.

Whilst the bands of cat-like, quizzical ringtails are often the first to steal visitors' hearts, their appeal is easily matched by the strikingly patterned sifakas, with their soulful expressions and bizarre, bipedal dancing locomotion. To spend time with groups of these gentle creatures will certainly be one of the highlights of our Madagascar adventure. A further mammalian highlight of Berenty is visiting the Madagascar Flying Fox roost, where about 300 of these impressive animals sporting 1.25-metre wingspans spend their day squabbling and presumably sleeping.



Littoral Rock Thrush by Daniel Danckwerts

Here we will also be on the look-out for the numerous Giant Couas that stroll along the well-cleared paths through the woodland, and we may be lucky enough to find dimunutive Madagascar Buttonquail as they scurry through the leaf litter. Potential new species we may also find here include Grey-headed Lovebird, Hook-billed Vanga, Frances's Sparrowhawk, Madagascar Cuckoo-Hawk^, Helmeted Guineafowl and Madagascar Sandgrouse.

Berenty Reserve. The reserve belongs to the De Haulme family who have set aside sections of gallery forest along the Mandrare River to conserve its population of lemurs and other wildlife. We'll venture out in the evening to search for Torotoroka Scops Owl and the impressive White-browed Owl but may also encounter a host of other nocturnal creatures such as the strange Lesser^ and Greater Hedgehog Tenrecs^, the huge Madagascar Hissing Cockroach and several species of attractive geckos.

Ifaty. Much has been written about the strange Didierea woodland, or 'Spiny Forest' around Ifaty, but this in no way lessens the feeling of awe that overcomes one as we set foot in this botanical wonderland. Venturing out at dawn, before the day's heat, we will stroll amongst the myriad of multi-stemmed succulents, squat baobab trees and thorny scrub in search of such spectacular endemics as the ultra-low-density Madagascar Sparrowhawk, Madagascar Harrier-Hawk, Crested, Running and Red-capped Couas (represented here by the distinctive green-capped race), Madagascar Hoopoe, Lafresnaye's Vanga, Archbold's Newtonia, unique and melodious Thamnornis, Subdesert Brush Warbler and Sakalava Waver.



Red-shouldered Vanga by Glen Valentine

Two very special birds that occur here are the strange Subdesert Mesite, which we may find adopting its cryptic posture on a thorny branch, and Long-tailed Ground Roller, an elusive ground dweller best located by its low, hooting call. Flocks of noisy Sickle-billed Vanga

are another feature of this bizarre, Tolkienesque landscape. We should also see the numerous Three-eyed Lizards as the day heats up in the mid-morning, while we may be lucky enough to find a beautiful Southern Spider Tortoise or rare Dumeril's Boa.



Hook-billed Vanga with prey by David Hoddinott

In addition, the tropical ocean off Ifaty is alive with marine life and we will have some time to don masks and snorkels and appreciate the multiple colours of a coral reef or relax in the warm shallows in front of our hotel.
We'll also spend a little time birding the surrounding fields for the uncommon and range-restricted Madagascar Plover, while wetlands and salt pans may hold numbers of Greater and Lesser Flamingos, Black-winged Stilt, Kittlitz's and Three-banded Plovers, assorted migratory waders, Humblot's Heron and Malagasy Harrier if we are very fortunate. White-throated Rail and Baillon's Crake also occur here on occasion and are worth looking out for in the vast wetlands.

Nosy Ve. From Tulear, we will board a speedboat for an excursion to the small uninhabited islet of Nosy Ve to the south. The main attraction of Nosy Ve is its colony of Red-tailed Tropicbirds, which allow close approach as they are left unmolested by local people due to a taboo, or fady. We may also find Crab-plovers* roosting on the sandbars here and White-fronted Plovers on the shoreline. Depending on time and weather conditions, we may have an opportunity to snorkel on the beautiful coral reef encircling the island.



Madagascar Ibis by David Hoddinott

Near Anakao (San Augustin), we'll enjoy lunch and search for another target species - the localised Littoral Rock Thrush.

La Table. Named after the flat-topped mountain at the edge of town - the habitat of La Table is desolate, commonly known as coral rag scrub, and consists of dense thorny bushes, euphorbias, and twisted baobabs. Our target birds here include two species with highly restricted ranges: Verreaux's Coua and the recently discovered Red-shouldered Vanga. Reptile life is also particularly rich, and we should find large, sleek Zonosaurus plated lizards as well as more Madagascar Iguanas and, if very lucky, the endangered Radiated Tortoise.

Seasonal Considerations

Madagascar is well-known as being one of the toughest birding tours due to its very hot summer temperatures. Most days of the tour are long and cover difficult terrain at the rainforest sites. The addition of numerous night walks and lengthy travel days means this tour is very tiring.

Summer - Temperatures often reach the high 30°C's (>100°F) daily in late October through March, particularly in the southern and western parts.

Winter – Temperatures average around 10°C cooler. Days are shorter, which also means that night walks start and end earlier. We don't lose birding time in winter because the cooler temperatures allow both ourselves and birds to remain active for longer in the mornings. The cooler temperatures and shorter days make the winter tours far less tiring.

As noted in the text above, there are seasonal variations to the bird list. The Palaearctic and Intra-African migrants that we would normally find in spring are not around during the winter (most shorebirds, including Crab-plover and Madagascar Pratincole. Raptors, Sooty and Eleonora's Falcon). Ground rollers are particularly tricky in winter - of the 5 species endemic to the island, only Long-tailed Ground Roller in the dry south-west would be likely; any of the rainforest species would be unexpected.

Larger mammals are all active throughout the year and can be found with the same likelihood during either season. Some of the smaller mammals, however, are totally inactive in the dry winter, when they estivate and are highly unlikely to be found - these include tenrecs, dwarf, and mouse lemur species - which are never easy to find even under optimal conditions. Reptiles and frogs are better represented in the spring when it warms up and is more likely to rain. Chameleons are around throughout the year, as are the amazing leaf-tailed geckos, while a few snakes and other lizards can be seen in winter.

It is crucial to be aware that Madagascar has been on a long path of ecological and environmental destruction, and this regression has accelerated dramatically on many fronts since late 2019. Most primary arterial roads are beyond the point of repair, either through a lack of any maintenance, or destruction caused by increasingly powerful and more frequent cyclones. Typical drives that used to take 6 hours are now taking double that time or more.

The southern third of the country is experiencing a severe famine due to drought, exacerbated by the total obliteration of any vegetation cover due to slash and burn agriculture, charcoal production, and logging. The area amounts to little more than a heavily eroded desert with many abandoned rice paddies and ghost towns.

Areas such as Ifaty have seen significant human encroachment into the remnant spiny forest patches, causing an evident decrease in species density and diversity.

Internal flight delays and last-minute schedule alterations are to be expected and we may have to re-arrange the tour itinerary due flight schedule changes. We will take all reasonable action to ensure the tour follows the advertised itinerary as closely as possible. Where flights get cancelled or rescheduled, we will need to embark on long road journeys, or use charter flights if available (these are very expensive). Chartered flights present extra costs to the tour, so it is imperative that you consult with your travel insurance company to ascertain what amount they may cover should the situation arise.

Tour Grading & Key

Overall Ease		Moderate to brisk paced tour suited for those in good health with good level of fitness. Not suited for anyone with mobility challenges or serious medical conditions.
Birding Ease		Mostly unchallenging, several difficult rainforest skulkers that may require repeat efforts.
Accommodation		Generally comfortable standard of hotels and resorts. Some more basic lodges are clean & comfortable.
Walking / Trails		Some trails in the rainforest can be steep and slippery, especially after rain.
Vehicles / Roads		Road conditions are poor. Very long and rough drives are to be expected, more so if flights are delayed/cancelled. Vehicles don't always have functioning air conditioners. Seas during the boat trip to Nosy Ve Island can be rough.
Photography		Excellent to incredible.
Annoyances		Can be hot to very hot at some sites. Several very long & demanding days. Generally dire & poor state of the Madagascar environment can be very depressing. Electricity supply is variable & cannot be relied on.

Financial Arrangements and Important Notes

Tour dates, prices, single supplement, approximate flight costs and tour spaces are displayed on our website.

Tour inclusions:

- All meals from dinner on day 1 to breakfast on day 15;
- Bottled drinking water;
- All lodgings;
- All ground transportation during the tour;
- All reserve entrance fees;
- All guiding services;
- Tips for local guides, drivers and services.

Tour exclusions:

- Visa fees;
- ANY flights;
- Any beverages (including mini-bar charges at hotels);
- Optional excursions & activities;
- Special gratuities;
- Telephone calls, laundry and other items of a personal nature.

Single Supplement: The single supplement cost for this tour will be charged if you wish to have single accommodation. If RBL cannot provide you with a rooming partner for these nights although you choose to share, the single supplement will become applicable. We will make all reasonable efforts to ensure that a rooming partner is found if you do wish to share.

Tipping: As noted above, gratuities (drivers, hotel staff, restaurants etc.) are included on this tour. However, this does NOT include your Rockjumper leader/s. If you feel that they have given you excellent service, it is entirely appropriate to tip them at your discretion.

- **Due to constantly fluctuating exchange rates, we quote our tours in 4 currencies. The tour price is fixed only in the currency printed in bold, and the actual cost in the other currencies listed will be adjusted according to prevailing exchange rates at the time of final invoicing. The same applies to approximate flight and single supplement rates.**
- **Rates are based upon group tariffs; if the tour does not have sufficient registrations, a small group supplement will be offered to confirm the tour.**
- **Tour prices are subject to unforeseen increases in tour related costs and may have to be adjusted as a result.**
- **The designated tour leader/s may be changed at short due to unforeseen circumstances.**
- **The itinerary is indicative only. Changes may need to be made to the order in which the tour is conducted, or some of the venues we visit closer to departure. We will attempt to adhere as close to the original program as possible.**

- This Madagascar Highlights tour does require a good level of fitness and general health as most of the birding will be done on foot, and may require walking for several hours at a time. Generally, walking will be easy and on flat ground, however, some trails in the rainforest can be quite steep and slippery, especially after rain. Should you have any physical limitations, please notify us in advance of departure.
- Accommodation throughout the trip is of a generally comfortable standard and the hotels, lodges and resorts are clean and comfortable. Some of the accommodations, are basic and less comfortable from what you have come to expect in the developed world; we will, however, make efforts to make this tour as comfortable as possible. There is no camping on this trip.
- The seas during the boat trip to Nosy Ve Island can be rough, and it is advised that you carry a suitable rain jacket and protection for photographic/electronic gear aboard the boat (a thick waterproof plastic bag is very useful in this regard). Tidal variation may require us to walk (in water) across sharp substrate when accessing and/or leaving Nosy Ve. It is advised that you carry a pair of shoes that you do not mind getting wet (plastic sandals are very useful).
- In some areas, it can be hot to very hot, especially at midday. We will thus make several early starts to maximise the most pleasurable time in the field. Many days are long and demanding.

Arrival and Departure Details

The tour starts on day 1 in Antananarivo with an afternoon visit to Lac Alarobia. If you arrive in the evening or afternoon on this day, then you will not be able to join this activity. The tour concludes after breakfast on day 15 in Antananarivo.

The above information in respect of arrivals and departures is a guide only. Precise arrival and departure information will be sent to you in your Tour Confirmation package once the tour has been officially confirmed. If you wish to arrive early and/or depart late and would like assistance in this regard, kindly contact the Rockjumper office.

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For international flights the main port of entry is Ivato International Airport, Antananarivo (IATA: TNR).

Visa requirements differ by country, nationality of the traveller and duration and purpose of your intended stay. It may be necessary to obtain a visa or an electronic travel authorization in advance of your travel. It is therefore vitally important that you check with your travel agent/consulate/embassy for exact visa requirements.

DO NOT book any flights until the Rockjumper Team have officially confirmed the tour.