Wild Globe Travel Consultancy
Tailored Wildlife, Wilderness and Adventure Travel Across the Globe.
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MADAGASCAR

Date - June 2017

Duration - 35 Days

Destinations
Antananarivo - Maroantsetra - Antongil Bay - Farankaraina Tropical Park - Masoala National Park - Nosy Mangabe Special Reserve - Makira Natural Park - Antsiranana - Amber Mountain National Park - Ankarana - Special Reserve - Tsingy Rouge - Andasibe-Mantadia National Park - Ankarafantsika National Park - Lake Ravelobe - Mahajanga - Katsepy - Fort Dauphin - Berenty Reserve - Toliara - Ifaty - Reniala Private Reserve - Zombitse-Vohibasia National Park - Isalo National Park - Anja Community Reserve - Ranomafana National Park - Antsirabe - Morondava - Kirindy Private Reserve

Trip Overview

Having experienced a severely underwhelming exploratory expedition in northeast India earlier in the year, it was heartening to return to such a familiar and treasured land, as Madagascar is delightfully unique and is unquestionably one of the greatest wildlife destinations on earth. Home to an array of magnificent animals found nowhere else, the fourth largest island in the world is also renowned for its spectacularly beautiful landscapes and the authentic hospitality of its friendly people, as well as a plethora of place names that I cannot spell, let alone pronounce. Anyone who has met me will confirm that names are not my strength and in the land of multiple vowels and excruciatingly convoluted family names, I am completely lost, metaphorically at least. That I am not so geographically is almost entirely down to my excellent local guides and for this tour I utilised two of the best in the business, one on an initial nine-day section incorporating the wild areas around Maroantsetra and Antongil Bay and the second for the remainder of the country. Both were superb, although the conditions were so poor on the first section that we struggled at times to find anything and in truth our main guide is more of an authority on birds than mammals. Whilst he has an almost encyclopaedic knowledge of his country and is of course familiar with all of the routinely observed wildlife, in some ways his outstanding reputation has been built upon who he knows as much as what he knows, as he has established a massive network of highly reliable contacts, all of whom appear to know the very best locations for each species in each area. Several times we arrived at a new destination to discover that the local guides had already spent the previous few days searching for our target mammals and on more occasions than not, were able to take us directly to view at least a few of them. This applied in particular to a number of nocturnal lemurs that rather obligingly choose to roost in plain sight during the day. Although the tree hollows that many favour can still be difficult to locate, they are much easier to find if skilled and experienced locals are searching reliable territories on a regular basis. Certainly observing these lemurs is a far more straightforward process than is generally the case with nocturnal mammals, the vast majority of which go to great lengths to avoid being seen during the day, and the ease with which some lemurs can be encountered undoubtedly contributed to the fact that I was able to photograph every single mammal species on this tour, which is almost unheard of. Not all of the photographs are of the highest calibre of course and some are not even of sufficient quality to appear in this report, but most could be used for identification purposes and I cannot remember ever managing a 100% photographic record on a major tour involving multiple species. Sadly, as I will cover in more detail later in this report, one of the main reasons for this unparalleled success is the extensive and largely unchecked deforestation that has devastated so much of Madagascar, as numerous species now cling to existence in tiny fragmented forests and have consequently become habituated to our presence, which in turn makes them much easier to observe and photograph. Whilst certain animals remain elusive in more remote regions, others are regularly encountered and on several occasions we were able to watch groups of lemurs at extremely close quarters. Fortunately, apart from a piece of banana that a forest guide threw to a decidedly grateful rat at Ranomafana National Park, feeding wild animals is not a major issue with the guides that I use and the only mammals that we saw being fed were the rufous mouse lemurs at that same destination. Even this is done in moderation and the practice is officially authorised by the park officials to enable visitors a brief glimpse of these diminutive nocturnal lemurs, as no spotlighting is allowed within most national parks or protected areas and it can therefore be difficult for the majority of tourists to view animals at night. Obviously the decent guides know areas beyond the reserves where spotlighting is permitted and can be productive, but these are often degraded patches of forest on the edge of busy villages or towns and it can be challenging to spend as much time in the field at night as I would personally like or generally recommend, certainly not within the more undisturbed ecosystems that I would dearly love to explore as the sun falls. Having said that, our guides were familiar with the best possible locations and we still achieved highly impressive results given the fact that we rarely ever spent more than two hours spotlighting, at least on the second, longer section of the trip. On the first, we battled appalling conditions as long as we were

able each night, as the private land that we were free to access generally adjoined national parks and was indistinguishable from them in terms of the intact habitat and the species that occurred there. A superb example of evolution in isolation, Madagascar split from mainland India 88 million years ago and over eons the ensuing dynamic evolutionary cauldron has produced an astounding collection of unique plant and animal species. More than 11,000 plants are endemic to what can be justifiably described as an incomparable land and around 90% of its flora and fauna can be found nowhere else, including 95% of all reptiles, 92% of mammals and an astonishing 100% of almost 300 amphibian species. Six of the world's nine baobabs, for which Madagascar is famous, exist only here and between 1999 and 2010 an astonishing 615 new species were discovered, including 41 mammals and over 60 reptiles. There are

unquestionably more waiting to be found and tragically there can be little doubt that we will have already lost species that were never even observed, let alone named and classified. It is not only Madagascar's flora and fauna that is so unique, as the island itself has evolved as an intoxicating blend of African, Arabian and European influences, which somehow scorns the limitations of any one people or culture and instead rejoices in the eclectic and highly evocative mix of all three. Although Europeans had visited Madagascar intermittently since the early 16th century, increasingly those involved in the slave trade, it was not colonised by the French until 1897, during a tumultuous and shameful period in history that was to become known as the 'Scramble for Africa'. For those who are not aware, even by the mid 1870's much of Africa was virtually unexplored and no white man had reached what was commonly called the 'interior'. However, by the time that RMS Titanic left its mooring at Southampton docks for its ill-fated maiden voyage in 1912, only Ethiopia and Liberia remained independent African nations. All of the remainder were under the control of Britain, France, Germany, Belgium, Spain, Italy and Portugal, as Europe played out the longstanding rivalries and petty disputes that would come to a head just two years later at the outbreak of the Great War. Africa was being used as an insignificant pawn in a territorial arms race, a godless, primitive land full of murderous tribes where niggling squabbles could be settled and imperial riches

made, regardless of the cost to the indigenous people, millions of whom were slaughtered because, as is so often the case throughout history, the 'ends' of the conquerors justified the 'means' by which they conquered. Perhaps surprisingly given Belgium's rather benign reputation in recent times, Belgian rule was particularly brutal and in little more than twenty years somewhere between two and fifteen million people were killed in the Congo Free State, which was personally ruled by the Belgian king Leopold II. Promising to bring civilisation to the 'dark continent' that is now the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Leopold instead administered a ruthless regime of murder, mutilation and rape in the pursuit of the riches generated by the rubber industry. Entire villages were wiped out and men, women and children were indiscriminately killed for even the merest perceived infraction or failing to meet the stringent rubber

quotas imposed by Belgian officials. Kidnap and rape occurred routinely, both as a punishment and a form of intimidation, and the 'Force Publique' soldiers, a motley collection of miscreants from various countries and tribes under the command of Belgian soldiers and European mercenaries, were notorious for cutting the hands off innocent villagers, either dead or alive, simply to account for the ammunition they had used. Whilst none of the occupying colonial powers escaped the entire wretched episode without blood on their hands, including the country of my own birth, the crimes of Leopold II were particularly heinous and it can only be hoped that his adoring subjects were unaware that their celebrated 'Builder King' had financed many of his great buildings and public works with the blood and tears of millions of defenceless Africans. We should all look to the past of course and as a citizen of a nation that ruled the largest empire the world has ever seen, at one stage in the early 20th century the British Empire covered almost 25% of the globe, I am acutely aware of the profound long-term effects of colonialism and how these consequences resonate across the ages and can never truly be escaped. During my lifetime many innocent people have died for the sins of their forebears and I often repeat the following short tale as a small part of a much wider discussion regarding British involvement in Africa from an African perspective:

When the missionaries first came to Africa they held the Bibles and we owned the land and we prayed with our eyes open. They told us to pray with our eyes closed and when we opened them again, we were holding the Bibles and they owned the land.

I have seen a version of this parable attributed to the human rights activist and Noble Peace Prize winner Desmond Tutu among others and although I have always relayed it with a certain grim sense of humour, the reality in so many cases was far more shocking and obscene, as the 'Scramble for Africa' was accomplished more at the point of a gun and a bayonet than to the prosaic babble of a forcibly convened bible class or any number of evangelical hymns. For further reading on this turbulent and harrowing period of African history, I would recommend the utterly brilliant 'The Scramble for Africa 1876–1912' by Thomas Pakenham, as well as the novella 'Heart of Darkness' by the Polish born writer Joseph Conrad, who captained a steamer on the Congo River during the height of Belgian occupation in 1890. Hired for three years, Conrad lasted only one round trip between Kinshasa and Kisangani and in 1899

published ‘Heart of Darkness’, a scathing indictment of the worst excesses of Belgian imperialism. Although Conrad’s seminal work has in turn been criticised for what some maintain is an insensitive and unsympathetic depiction of indigenous Africans, it is still widely considered to be an important and faithful account of the barely conceivable suffering inflicted during colonial rule and in 1979 it was filmed by the American director Francis Ford Coppola as ‘Apocalypse Now’. In addition to changing the setting from the Congo to Vietnam, Coppola, who had already written and directed ‘Patton’, ‘The Conversation’ and the first two ‘Godfather’ movies, concentrated more on the psychological aspects of ‘Heart of Darkness’, with Marlon Brando playing the deranged and murderous Colonel Kurtz and Martin Sheen taking the role of Captain Willard, the man sent to kill him. As Coppola has himself commented, the metaphysical descent into madness that is ‘Apocalypse Now’, was heavily influenced by Werner Herzog’s masterful ‘Aguirre, the Wrath of God’, which was released seven years earlier and was one of five films made in collaboration with the ominously eccentric but always compelling German actor Klaus Kinski. Despite a horrifically volatile relationship, due largely to Kinski’s erratic nature and tyrannical temper, the pair forged an exceptionally creative partnership that produced some truly outstanding cinematic works. ‘Woyzeck’ and ‘Cobra Verde’ aside, which are both powerful and challenging films in their own right, ‘Nosferatu the Vampyre’ is a worthy successor to the equally atmospheric 1922 version directed by F.W.Murnau and ‘Fitzcarraldo’ is a breathtaking vision of one

man's obsession and the lengths that he will go to fulfil his dreams at any price. As Herzog reveals in his 1999 documentary 'My Best Friend', which explores, in often uncomfortable detail, the tortured relationship between the two men, Kinski's behaviour was so bad whilst making 'Fitzcarraldo' that one of the Amazonian tribal chiefs on set offered to kill Kinski for him. Herzog himself openly admits that he attempted to kill his disturbed leading man at least once and David Schmoeller, who directed Kinski in the 1986 horror

film 'Crawlspace', went on to release a short film entitled: 'Please Kill Mr. Kinski', which had apparently been a recurring refrain of several crew members. Interestingly, it was another extreme character who provided me with a first insight into Madagascar's somewhat colourful pre-colonial history, but this time a fictional one. Harry Flashman first appeared in 'Tom Brown's School Days', a novel by Thomas Hughes based on his time at Rugby, one of the oldest public schools in England and, as the name suggests, the birthplace of rugby union or rugby football as it was then known. A self-proclaimed bully and coward, Flashman was expelled for drunkenness and that the world supposed was the last we should hear of that particular ruffian. Indeed, for over a century Flashman languished in a literary abyss until in the mid 1960s George MacDonald Fraser decided to give him a chance of redemption and 'The Flashman Papers' were suddenly discovered in a saleroom in Ashby-de-la Zouche. Sadly Flashman, who by his own admission possessed just three skills, languages, horsemanship and a third that could not be openly discussed in polite society, was already beyond salvation and he spent the twelve outings that Fraser devoted to him lying and cheating his way through a succession of famous historical events. Dedicated almost exclusively to womanising and self preservation, although not necessarily in that order, 'Old Flashie' would always find a way to save his own skin, usually at the expense of others, and somehow manage to emerge as a patriotic hero when the dust had finally settled. As he was heard to exult on more than one occasion, 'that's what counts' and in his first public appearance since the ignominy of Rugby, Flashman, now serving

as a cavalry officer in the British Army, survives the infamous retreat from Kabul during the First Anglo-Afghan War and finds himself celebrated as the last man standing at an outpost of Jalalabad when the only witness to his cowardice and the real hero of the hour is killed, much to Flashman's undisguised joy and relief. Although some of the language and most of the beliefs that Fraser attributes to Flashman would be considered woefully politically incorrect by today's standards, the fact is that Fraser was an outstanding historian, with a tremendous eye for historical detail. He had served as an infantryman in the savage Burma campaign during the Second World War at just nineteen and his later memoir 'Quartered Safe Out Here', is a graphic and compelling account of real men at war. His Flashman novels represent the same honest approach, as Flashman is an unapologetic scoundrel of the highest order and the language that he uses is accurate to his personality and the period in which he lived and breathed. It is not always nice and it is not always comfortable, but it is virtually impossible to judge the morality of the past by modern social values, fairly at least, and the truth is that George MacDonald Fraser taught me the evils of slavery as an impressionable young boy, when no one else was even discussing the issue. It was in 'Flash for Freedom!' that I first learned of the truly horrific conditions aboard a slave ship and it

was in 'Flashman's Lady' that I discovered Queen Ranavalona I, an altogether different horror who ruled Madagascar with an iron fist from 1828 until her death in 1861. A tyrant queen who wrestled the throne from the doomed rightful heir following the death of her husband Radama I, Ranavalona was known in Europe as the 'Female Caligula' and although it is impossible to quantify the number of deaths that she was responsible for, it has been estimated that perhaps half the population were executed or worked to death under her rule. Some Madagascans have argued that these so called facts are a biased western interpretation of her reign and it is certainly true that Ranavalona was no lover of either the British or French and that she hated Christianity, which she ultimately outlawed in 1835. However, enough reliable accounts have survived the passage of time to confirm that at least hundreds of thousands died violent deaths at her sadistic hand, many in the most gruesome ways imaginable. Not satisfied with the usual prosaic execution methods favoured by so many lacklustre and unmotivated despots throughout history, Ranavalona certainly did not lack imagination and conjured dozens of new and interesting ways to kill people. Unfortunate victims would be hung over the edge of a cliff until their ropes frayed and broke, whilst others were sawn in half lengthways and tens of thousands succumbed to the Tangena trial by ordeal. The accused would be forced to swallow a poison extracted from the nut of the Tangena plant, as well as three pieces of chicken skin. If they died they were instantly guilty, but if they were sick and managed to expel all three lumps of skin, they were found innocent and supposedly released. The catch was if they survived the poison, but were only able to return one or two pieces of chicken, as this would indicate they were indeed guilty and would result in them being killed in some equally horrific manner. In fairness, Ranavalona did not actually invent this charming practice, which dates back until at least the early 17th century and closely resembles the trials by

ordeal that took place all over Europe during the Middle Ages, particularly to determine cases of witchcraft and sorcery. It was ultimately banned by her son Radama II, but he apparently had none of his mother's guile or survival instincts and was assassinated within two years of succeeding Ranavalona to the throne in 1861. There would be only four more regents before the French took control of the country and abolished the monarchy in February 1897 and Madagascar remained under French rule until Nazi tanks rolled unopposed into Paris in June 1940. Just over two years later in October 1942, British forces liberated the island from the 'Vichy France' government, a puppet administration that collaborated with the Nazis to such an extent that their officials were personally responsible for arresting and transporting over 75,000 Jewish refugees and French citizens to death camps. One shipment of 13,000 Jews to Auschwitz included 4,000 children and when queried about this the French Prime Minister Pierre Laval responded that there would be no one to care for the children if they had remained behind. These events are a long time ago, but it is perhaps still gratifying to know that Laval was arrested for his role in the persecution and murder of European Jews following the Allied liberation of Paris in August 1944 and was shot by firing squad just hours after attempting to take his own life with poison. What is less well known is that for a number of years before Hitler's Wehrmacht unleashed their 'Blitzkrieg' or 'Lightning War' on a largely unsuspecting and almost entirely ill prepared Europe, plans were being made to forcibly banish the Jews of Europe to Madagascar under SS rule. Known simply as the 'Madagascar Plan', the strategy was only dropped when fewer than 3,000 resolute RAF pilots defeated the might of the Luftwaffe in the Battle of Britain, as Germany stood poised to invade. After months of defeat and disaster, it was one of the turning points of the Second World War and as the British Prime Minister Winston Churchill accurately and memorably stated in his speech to the House of Commons *'Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few'*. Recognised thereafter and eternally as 'The Few', the pilots who stood firm in our 'Darkest Hour' volunteered from all over the world and in all the RAF were

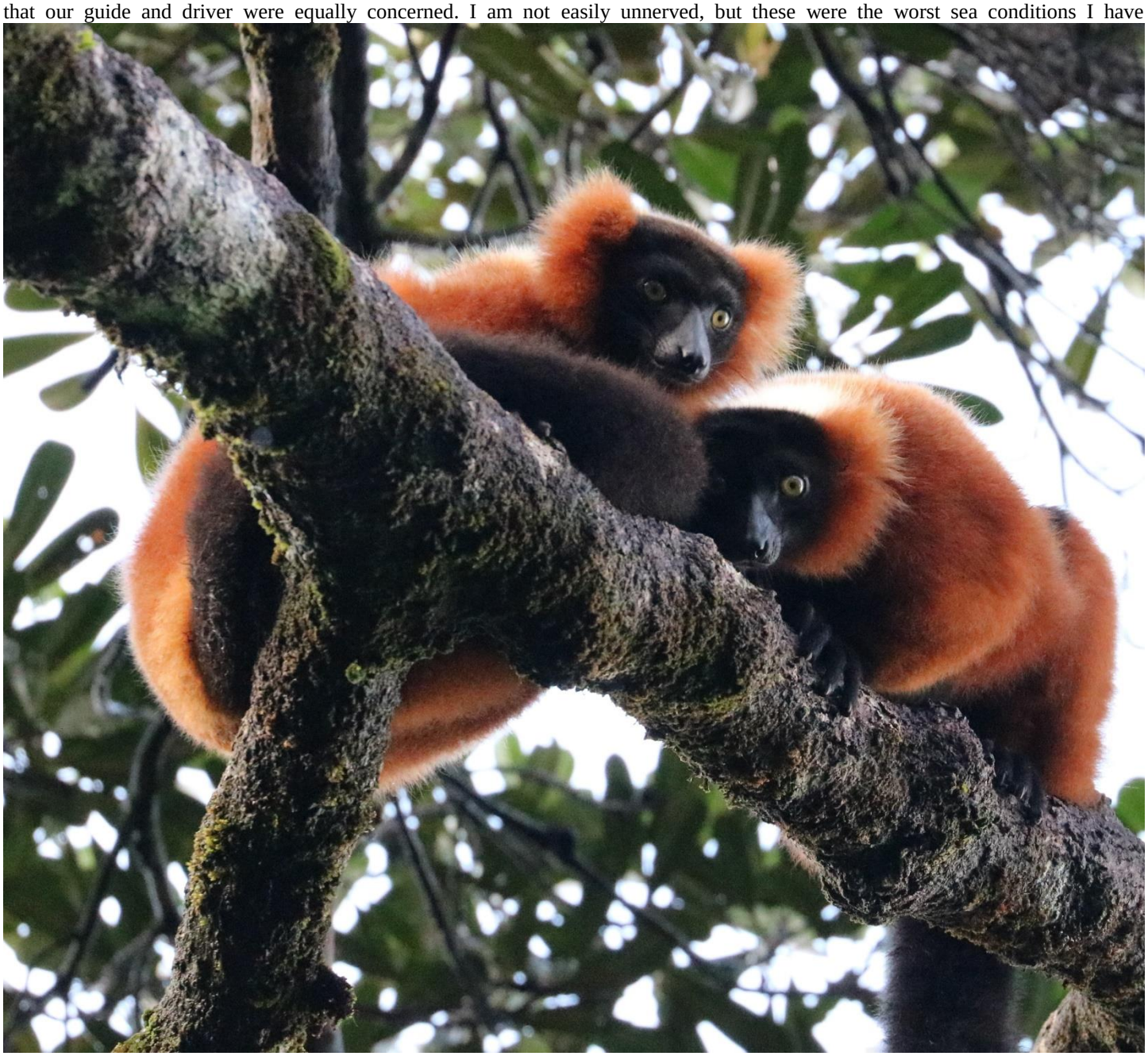
represented by fourteen different nations. Although the Battle of Britain was a hugely important victory, perhaps even the most significant of the entire conflict, the ‘Madagascar Plan’ was ultimately replaced by the ‘Final Solution’ or, to give it its full chilling title, the ‘Final Solution of the Jewish Question’. Those six words, and the ideology of unadulterated hate behind them, unleashed a systematic genocide on an entire people and was ultimately responsible for the murder of two thirds of the Jewish population of Europe. The bloodiest of all conflicts claimed the lives of at least seventy million people, the majority of whom were civilians, and affected almost everyone else in some way. The map of the world changed overnight and a series of events were unleashed that would see it continue to change for decades to come, perhaps even forever. A wave of independence swept across colonial Africa and Asia and although the French authorities responded to the ‘Malagasy Uprising’ of 1947 by killing up to 100,000 largely innocent Madagascans, as the British discovered in India, the tide could not be stemmed and Madagascar gained full independence on the 26th of June 1960. As elsewhere in Africa, regrettably independence did nothing to reverse the ecological devastation wreaked on this unique and critically important island and today more than 80% of the original forest cover has been lost. An already desperate situation has deteriorated substantially since the coup d'état of 2009, as Madagascar was already one of the poorest countries on earth and relied on foreign aid for approximately 70% of its annual national budget. This was immediately suspended following the coup and a recent United Nations report revealed that 77% of the population were living on less than $1.25 per day, although existing would probably be a more truthful assessment. Within days of seizing power the new president Andry Rajoelina lifted the ban on the logging of various species of hardwood trees, including rosewood and ebony, and this calamitous decision, coupled with unchecked and widespread illegal logging, has resulted in the loss of tens of thousands of trees. The extreme poverty has witnessed a surge in the slaughter of lemurs and other species for bushmeat and around half of all children under five suffer chronic malnutrition and stunted growth. The uncontrolled exploitation of natural resources is intensified by a burgeoning population, from five million in 1960 to over 26 million today, as slash and burn agricultural vandalism continues to obliterate vast tracts of forest to provide land for the cultivation of rice and to graze cattle. Habitat is being lost at an unsustainable rate and illegal sapphire mining is threatening some of the most vulnerable species, including the critically endangered indri. More than 40,000 miners descended on the island in the first few months of 2017 and once again precious forests are being levelled to make way for the mines, even in areas that are supposedly protected. As a direct result of the intense farming practices and widespread deforestation, soil erosion is also occurring on a catastrophic scale and as the soil becomes irrevocably degraded and useless to future generations, literally millions of tonnes of red earth are swept down the rivers and into the sea, where they further damage coral reefs and the fishing industry. It has been remarked, that from aerial photographs, it looks as if Madagascar is bleeding to death, which of course in a way it is and globally a staggering 75 billion tonnes of fertile soil are lost each year. Thankfully some humanitarian aid has now been restored following the parliamentary and presidential elections of late 2013 and visitor numbers are once again approaching the pre coup figures. However, a great deal of damage has already occurred and Madagascar remains a cripplingly poor nation, teetering on the brink of both economic and ecological disaster. It is going to take years of dedication and sustained conservation to even begin to reverse decades of relentless destruction and although environmental tourism alone will not be sufficient to ensure the continued survival of thousands of species, it can play a significant role and I would encourage anyone interested in wildlife and Africa and her indigenous people, to visit Madagascar at least once. The rewards are spectacular and whilst the money that you spend will undoubtedly support the communities that you visit, particularly if you use local guides and not international travel agents, your mere presence will in turn help to safeguard the extraordinary biodiversity that this

jewel of an island protects. As I do not want all of my trip reports to follow exactly the same format, and partly because I have also provided a comprehensive list of which mammals were seen where, I will not be describing each destination in detail on this report and indeed some locations will barely get mentioned at all. I will instead concentrate on the animals, places and issues that really interested me for whatever reason, including our first few days on the Masoala Peninsula, which is probably my favourite spot in all of Madagascar, largely because much of it remains pristine and can be explored at night. This does not mean that our time was not productive elsewhere or that we disliked any of the areas that I have not depicted in great depth, as the opposite was actually the case and this was one of the most enjoyable and successful expeditions I have been involved with. Once again my son was at my side and this was going to be a big trip for James, as he had not been to Madagascar before and would be turning eighteen on our spare day between the two main sections of the tour, when we were due to fly from Maroantsetra to the capital Antananarivo or Tana as it is helpfully known for people like me who cannot pronounce six vowels in a twelve-letter word. Whilst I always take time to research every area as thoroughly as possible for all animals, there are generally one or two species that you are hoping to locate for future guests at each destination and on this first section the main targets were the incongruously distinctive aye-aye and the critically endangered silky sifaka, which is one of the rarest primates on earth. There are thought to be less than 250 breeding adults remaining, the majority within Marojejy National Park in the northeast and a tiny isolated population in Makira Natural Park, where I hoped we would see them. Reached by the Antainambalana River, Makira lies just north of the town of Maroantsetra, gateway to Antongil Bay and the Masoala Peninsula, which supports the largest remaining tract of pristine rainforest in Madagascar. The first part of the trip would be spent on or within reach of this magnificent peninsula with a first stop at Farankaraina Tropical Park, predominantly to

search for wild aye-ayes. I use the word ‘wild’ deliberately, as I am aware of unethical locals taking aye-ayes from their natural habitat and passing them off as genuinely wild animals to unsuspecting tourists. Cheating visitors is one thing, but taking an endangered species from the wild, where it can no longer breed, is far more serious and I would stress that when you book a tour in Madagascar that includes the opportunity to view or photograph an aye-aye, you need to be certain that you do so with a reputable operator involved in sustainable tourism. This should of course be the case with any trip, but it is particularly important when even reputable guidebooks and their websites are passing some of these encounters off as genuine. ‘Aye-aye Island’ on the Mananara River is a case in point, as the aye-ayes on this island have been taken from the wild and when they die additional animals are taken to replace them. Although you are guaranteed to see an aye-aye by visiting here, the island is tiny and these are clearly captive animals that are attracted by food and so habituated to visitors that they climb down the trees to be fed. Unfortunately, most general tourists will not understand that this is by no means an authentic experience and that they are not witnessing natural behaviour. Visitors should know in advance that sightings of these rare and elusive animals can never be guaranteed, but it is certainly worth making the extra effort to try to find a truly wild one, as aye-ayes are fascinating creatures and sightings are always a memorable highlight of any Madagascan adventure. Sadly they are far less popular with some of the more superstitious islanders, many of whom believe them to be an ill omen and kill them on sight. Part of the problem involves their elongated and skeletal middle fingers, which foreshadow certain death if they are ever pointed at someone. Even today they are butchered out of pure ignorance, but at one stage they were persecuted to such a degree, they were thought to be extinct until two populations were discovered in the 1950s and nine individuals were moved to the island of Nosy Mangabe in 1966, where they flourished. We would be visiting Nosy Mangabe, which sits in Antongil Bay to the south of Maroantsetra, but unfortunately nocturnal activities are not permitted there now and our best chance of seeing an aye-aye would consequently be at Farankaraina, although they do occur at all of the sites I had selected to explore on this first section of the tour and it was possible that we would get lucky elsewhere. Good fortune, however, was not something we were to be blessed with on the Masoala Peninsula, for although the boat ride in was a delight in wonderful weather, within 30 minutes of us beginning to spotlight on that first evening, it started to rain and it barely stopped for the next nine days. We encountered several mouse lemurs during that initial half an hour, but were not to see another until we moved on, as the rain was unrelenting and the conditions, both in terms of attempting to look for animals and even remaining upright, were as bad as I have ever known. I would like to have been able to explain that the steep uphill trails were extremely treacherous, but the reality was that every path was hazardous, uphill or not, and photography was more or less impossible much of the time. For what it is worth, most of my wildlife photographs are based on instinct and reactions, but I could not freely carry a camera when we were spending almost as much time crawling in the mud as walking and instead had to unpack equipment whenever we encountered an animal, which was fairly impractical unless the poor hapless lemur also happened to be too waterlogged to move, which actually did occur on a couple of occasions. It was the type of seemingly never-ending nightmare during which you would seriously consider murdering your best friend for their dry towel and if one more guide had cheerfully exclaimed that ‘it’s called a rainforest for a reason’, it would have undoubtedly been their towel that I was aiming for. I took the few pictures that I was able during the infrequent bright intervals between downpours and having used five sets of clothes in just over two days, we

eventually gave up trying to stay dry and just wore the same sodden clothes whenever we ventured out, which was always for at least sixteen hours or so each day. That said, in the only way that matters we were lucky at least, as we did see an aye-aye on our very first night at Farankaraina and although it was fairly high in the canopy and it was of course pouring with rain, our rather bedraggled nocturnal lemur appeared to take pity on us and was kind enough to remain in view for the best part of ten minutes. The rain was so heavy that I only snapped a couple of quick shots, one of which I have reproduced here for reference purposes, but we did enjoy excellent views with our binoculars and James was thrilled to encounter this fabulous and iconic animal for the first time. Having seen one so quickly, we both thought that we were likely to find at least one more despite the rain, but conditions deteriorated further on an almost daily basis and this would be our only aye-aye sighting of the entire trip. Not that it was a concern of mine because I know my guides, but at least this proved that ours was a genuine encounter and not a staged one, as a contrived experience with a habituated animal would have been closer and would have been repeated on several occasions to ensure that we got the views and the photographs that we were hoping for. If you know what to look for, this type of deception is easy to spot, but the problem is that most tourists do not and I can only repeat that to avoid more of these endangered animals being snatched from the forest and suffering a generally abbreviated life of captivity, please ensure that you only travel with a reputable local agent, even if it means checking references and asking a great number of searching questions. A principled operator will always be happy to put your mind at rest and even disregarding the obviously vital conservation issues, I guarantee that encounters with truly wild animals are far more spectacular and rewarding. It would have been wonderful to see an aye-aye at close quarters of course, as they are hugely captivating animals and I had hoped that James would have the opportunity to watch one using its uniquely adapted middle digit to search for food. The only primate that uses a form of echolocation to detect its prey, the aye-aye will tap on trees and branches up to eleven times per second in much the same way as a woodpecker and the resulting sound will reveal hollow chambers where insect larvae may be hiding or the barely perceptible vibrations of the larvae itself. Their middle feeding finger can move in any direction and is ideally suited to removing these grubs and the teeth that are used to such remarkable effect to gnaw through trees to expose food never stop growing in much the same way as rodents. In fact, aye-ayes were considered to be a type of rodent when first discovered and remains of a second now extinct species have been unearthed in southwestern Madagascar. The evidence suggests that this much larger primate, possibly five times the size of the extant species we are so familiar with, was hunted to extinction, as its teeth have been found with perforations that indicate they were worn as decoration. Despite their admittedly unconventional appearance, I once described them as resembling mad arboreal goblins, aye-ayes are actually enormously sweet creatures and it was an immense privilege to spend time with another one, regardless of the poor weather. At one stage the elements deteriorated to such a degree, that it looked as if we would not be able to make the

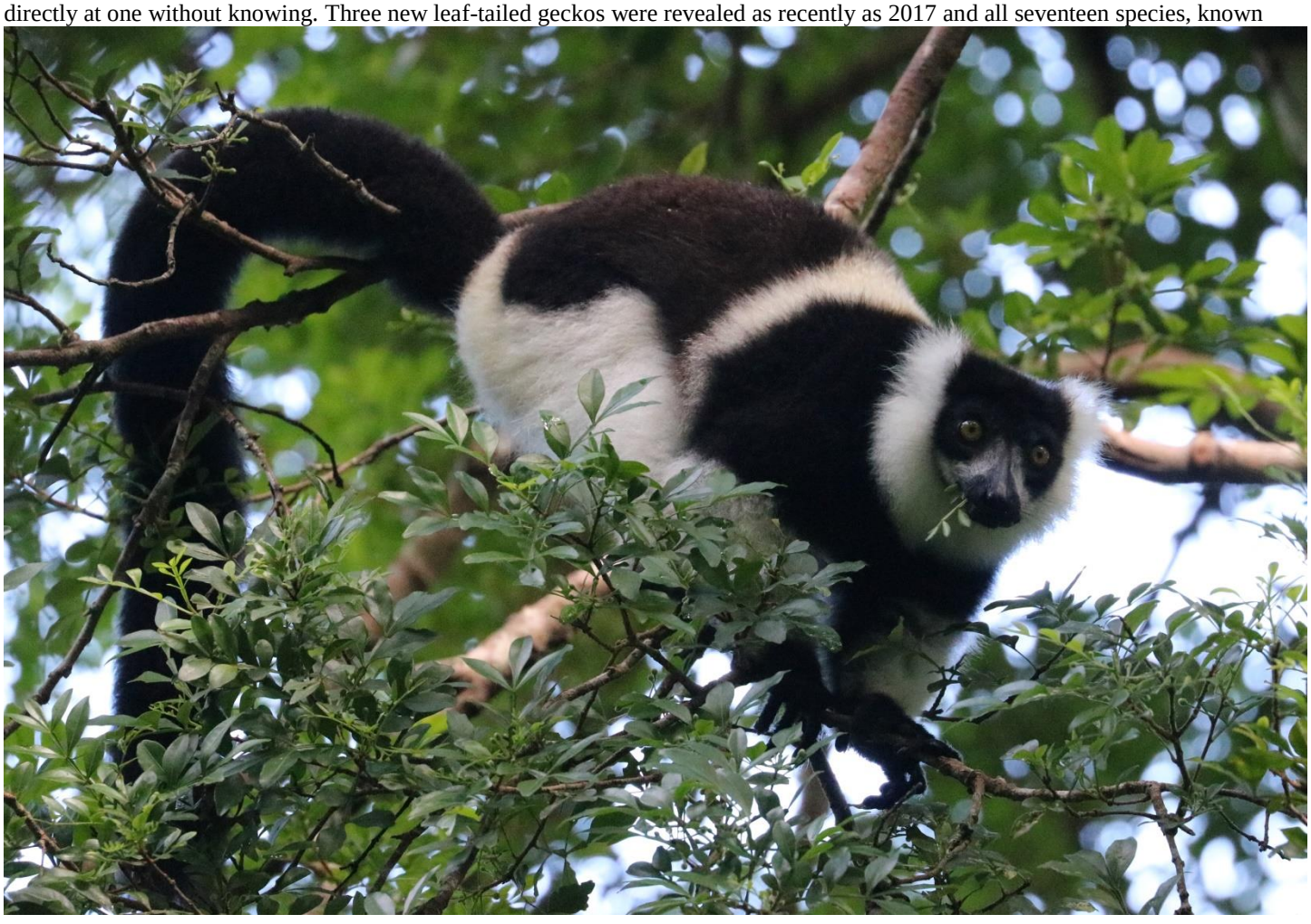
scheduled speedboat journey from Farankaraina to Masoala National Park, but a break in the weather briefly lifted our spirits and they positively soared when our driver decided that it was safe to make the crossing. To be fair, it did not appear to be a bad decision at the time, as the sky had cleared significantly and although the water was still fairly choppy, it was not excessively so and none of us were unduly concerned. This all changed after less than half an hour, when the storm returned out of nowhere and began lashing the bay and our tiny open boat. The combination of fierce driving rain and gale-force winds were unpleasant enough, but the real problem was the sea, as the waves were now several metres high and we were being tossed about like the proverbial cork. I think that I probably chose that particular idiom because corks float, when in reality I was not at all confident that we were going to and could clearly see that our guide and driver were equally concerned. I am not easily unnerved, but these were the worst sea conditions I have



experienced in a vessel of that size and I must admit that it is slightly alarming when your own guide asks you 'what shall we do, shall we turn back?' Although not best pleased at having to make the decision, I chose to go on, given that we had reached halfway and it would take just as long to return. I also did not relish attempting the journey again in a day or two and we therefore spent another hour defying Poseidon's fury and somehow climbing over the top of each menacing wave that appeared to have all of our names on it. I cannot recall ever being quite as happy to reach dry land and although James and I had barely exchanged an anxious glance throughout the entire dramatic voyage, I knew that we were as relieved as each other. As with each of the three main destinations that I had chosen on or near the Masoala Peninsula, I wanted to visit Masoala National Park because of the unrestricted opportunities it provided for us to explore a virtually intact area of rainforest at night, rather than to search for one specific animal. However, I was also aware that the critically endangered red ruffed lemur occurred only here and that extensive areas of its home had been badly damaged by the illegal logging that I have already described following the 2009 coup. Although we still tried, obviously the unyielding climatic conditions seriously impacted our efforts at night, as it is extremely difficult to even use a spotlight when the rain is that torrential and the majority of mammals are more or less impossible to find when the elements are so severe. You would generally expect to encounter maybe twenty or so mouse lemurs each night, but we did not see a single animal after those initial sightings before the heavens opened at Farankaraina and our nocturnal romps in the mud mainly produced snakes, geckos and of course chameleons, as Madagascar is almost as famous for its chameleons as its lemurs and is home to nearly half of the 202 chameleon species that have been classified across the world. Approximately 60 of these are endemic to this one incomparable African island, including *brookesia micra*, which is the scientific name of the smallest chameleon in existence. Growing to a maximum length of less than 30 millimetres, this miniscule reptile is thought to occur only on the island of Nosy Hara off northern Madagascar and was one of four new species described by science in 2012. We encountered other leaf chameleons in the Brookesia

genus, one of which was clearly immature and could not have measured more than fifteen millimetres, as well as an outstanding variety of more substantial and characteristic chameleon species. They all appeared to be totally indifferent to the biblical weather, as were the similarly idiosyncratic lowland streaked tenrecs, which were commonly observed both in the forest and around the lodge at Masoala, but nowhere else. I was thrilled that we had encountered this first tenrec species, as tenrecs are fascinating insectivores that have evolved to fill various ecological niches that are elsewhere occupied by a variety of small mammals, all of which are absent from Madagascar. As this would suggest, they come in all shapes and sizes and different variations resemble hedgehogs, shrews and even otters. Some, quite frankly, look like nothing else on earth and the lowland streaked tenrec very much falls within this category. With a long snout, black and garish yellow stripes, a body covered in spines that can be rubbed together to communicate with other tenrecs and a crest of quills that can be erected to deter predators, it would be difficult to describe the lowland streaked tenrec as anything other than unique and of the 30 plus tenrec species, all but the otter shrews are endemic to Madagascar. Despite our best intentions, the weather inevitably restricted what we were able to achieve at night and we consequently tried to spend most of the daylight hours in the field, regardless of the appalling conditions. Our perseverance was ultimately rewarded with fantastic and somewhat unexpected views of several western lesser bamboo lemurs and, after three days of searching tirelessly for them, a wonderfully intimate encounter with a small family group of red ruffed lemurs. We had heard them calling intermittently since our arrival, but had never quite been able to determine their location or keep up with them as they foraged through the trees and we trudged slowly behind in the mud. The key was to find them early in the morning, as, like so many primates, red ruffed lemurs spend a great deal of time grooming each other to build and strengthen social bonds within their group. They were engaged in exactly this behaviour when we finally caught up with them and we were able to spend a superb morning watching them interact and feed. They really are fabulously attractive animals and when we moved on to the small island of Nosy Mangabe the next day, we would be searching for the only other ruffed lemur species, the black-and-white ruffed lemur. Another critically endangered lemur, there are three subspecies of black-and-white ruffed lemur and the one on Mangabe is considered to be the northern variety. All inhabit severely fragmented forest and they are now completely absent from the vast majority of their former range. As all nocturnal activities are now prohibited, we only had one day on Nosy Mangabe and spent some of it watching a typically messy aye-aye nest, just in case the sleepy resident decided to

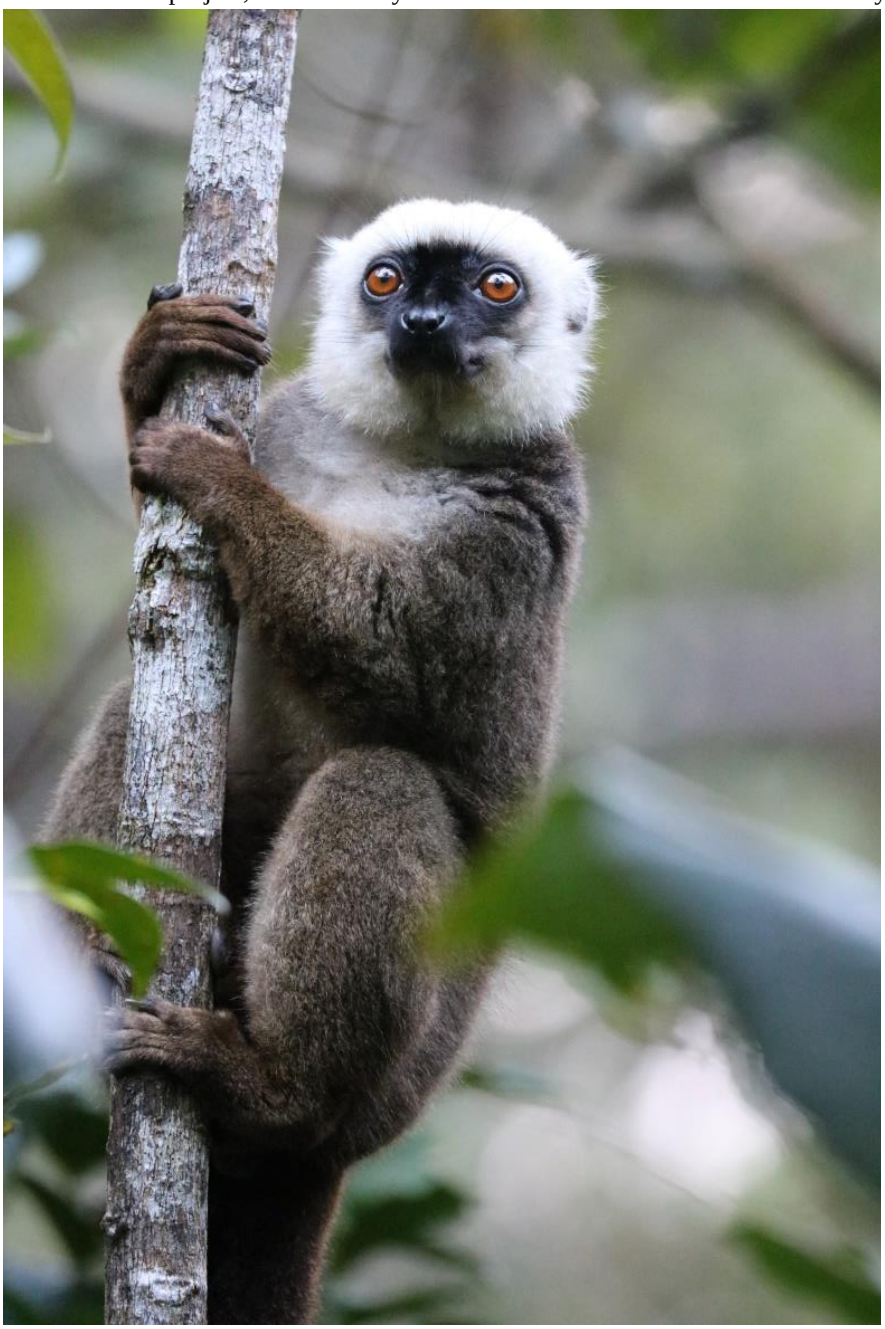
make a daylight appearance. It was not to be, but I hope one day to have the opportunity to explore Mangabe at night, as we discovered clear evidence of more than one aye-aye and the island also protects two additional nocturnal lemurs, the greater dwarf lemur and a type of mouse lemur that I understand has not yet been identified to full species level. The black-and-white ruffed lemurs were not that difficult to locate and to our immense relief the rain relented for a few minutes to enable me to take a few photographs in almost reasonable light, although I once again spent much of my time waiting for the condensation to clear from each lens. We had now searched for and found the only two ruffed lemur species in the world on successive days and, as is generally the case, the achievement was even more satisfying given the adversity faced. At times it would have been justifiable, if perhaps not forgivable, to abandon this leg of the trip, but we kept going and were eventually able to savour at least reasonable sightings of several magnificent animals, which was something we would have to keep reminding ourselves when we moved on to Makira Natural Park and encountered the really rough conditions. For now, we were happy to enjoy our time with the delightful black-and-white ruffed lemurs, as well as a troop of mischievous white-fronted lemurs that made an appearance at lunchtime and only departed when it became abundantly clear that we did not intend to feed them. The rest of our brief visit to Mangabe was devoted to chameleons and geckos, as the rangers who live on the island are usually aware of good locations for both and we spent much of the afternoon marvelling at the amazing leaf-tailed geckos, which are so well camouflaged you can be looking directly at one without knowing. Three new leaf-tailed geckos were revealed as recently as 2017 and all seventeen species, known



species that is, as you suspect there are probably many more, are again endemic to Madagascar. To reach Makira, our final destination on this opening sortie, we would have to say farewell to the splendour of Antongil Bay and journey inland up the Antainambalana River. Although Makira is thought to have the highest diversity of lemurs among all of the protected areas of Madagascar and is apparently home to seventeen species, our only target would be the small and totally isolated population of silky sifaka, which exist here at unusually low elevations. Ordinarily this critically endangered primate occurs between about 700 and 1,900 metres, but at

Makira they can be observed as low as 300 metres in what is also the most southerly extreme of their range. I am not certain of the exact elevation of our forest camp, but the hike in was pretty steep and involved several river crossings as the trail crisscrossed its way up the densely forested slopes. The river was surging after the prolonged bad weather and although we were saturated more than once as we attempted to get the equipment across safely, mercifully, the entire walk was completed without rain and we arrived at a truly glorious setting, bathed in the most welcoming sunshine imaginable. Favourable conditions were always going to be significant looking for such a rare animal in a vast area of often impenetrable forest and as we sat down in the best of spirits to discuss options with the local guides, the sun vanished behind a seemingly infinite black cloud and did not appear again until we arrived at Maroantsetra airport three days later. If it stopped raining at all during the intervening period, it was while I was asleep and the rain was so torrential and so relentless, that it became increasingly difficult to cover any sort of distance on the already treacherous forest trails, at least not in reasonable time. Whilst the weather was no worse than we had experienced previously, the mountainous terrain was and we spent most of our treks falling up steep slopes or sliding down them. Even our guides were struggling to maintain their footing and on a couple of occasions one of us slipped and took everyone in front with them. The walks were as mentally demanding, as physically, as we knew that our guides were trying desperately hard to locate the sifakas on our behalf and that when they did, we probably only had a limited time to reach them. On one four-hour walk we missed them by a matter of minutes and at this point we all realised that there was a real possibility that we were not going to be successful. Ultimately it was only sheer bloody minded perseverance, on all sides to be fair, that finally prevailed, as we simply refused to give up and just kept searching until we eventually caught up with a family group of seven sifakas that, ironically enough, were sheltering from the rain. It was initially difficult to really enjoy the encounter through a continuous veil of tears, figuratively speaking, but the rain eased appreciably and eventually we spent more than an hour with these striking lemurs, albeit perched precariously on a sheer slope and propped up against a tree to stop us toppling off. I cannot pretend that it was one of my finest sightings in the classical sense, but it was unquestionably one of the most rewarding and a really memorable highlight of our time in Madagascar and the way in which James and I have learned to work together. I should not forget the guides either, as they were trekking twice as far as us in the same terrible conditions and without their considerable efforts, I know for certain that we would not have seen these rare and special primates. The sad reality is that most sifakas are rare now and the fact that all nine sifaka species are endangered, four critically so, pretty much tells you all you need to know about the importance placed on conservation in Madagascar and the lack of genuine protection most of the island receives. Thankfully that is changing to some degree and Makira Natural Park is at the forefront of that change. Managed by the Wildlife Conservation Society in partnership with the Madagascar Ministry of Environment and Forests, Makira protects over 370,000 hectares of low and mid altitude rainforest, a considerably larger expanse than Yosemite National Park in California, and is the only ecosystem in Madagascar where all five lemur families occur. This astounding biodiversity has been severely threatened in recent years by illegal logging and the slash and burn deforestation that I have already touched upon, but the WCS are acutely aware that conservation in isolation is no longer a practical solution and have sensibly ensured that the local population benefits from the continued protection of Makira. Indigenous communities receive 50% of the

income generated by a carbon offset scheme that will ultimately prevent millions of tonnes of carbon dioxide being released into the atmosphere. These funds can be spent on education, healthcare and other community programmes and the WCS have encouraged the development of sustainable farming and forestry practices, as well as further autonomy for local people in terms of the ethical and ecological management of their own forest. Tourism can play a part as well, both in the creation of jobs, as per the wonderful trackers who worked so tirelessly for us and the superb staff at our camp, and with regards to the international recognition that initiatives of this kind so desperately rely upon. The more people who visit this project, the less likely Makira is to suffer the same fate as so many lost habitats in Madagascar and I would not hesitate to recommend a stay of several days, weather permitting of course. Having said that, the rain can at least be useful if you are interested in snakes, as we experienced a great deal of snake activity, including an unusually high number of Malagasy ground boa sightings. For those who are not aware, the large constrictors in Madagascar are actually boas and not pythons and the ground boa is one of three varieties in a country that has over 100 species of snake, none of which are venomous or at least not significantly so. That is not exactly the case regarding spiders, as there are a couple of poisonous spiders in Madagascar, but of more than 45,000 different types worldwide, only 30 are thought to be capable of killing people and there were only 100 or so known human deaths as a result of spider bites in the entire 20th century. The one that we discovered outside our room, however, was so large that we were more concerned about being dragged into its web than actually poisoned. Whenever we went out we would automatically look over a shoulder to see if Shelob had appeared and on one particularly harrowing morning I left our cabin to discover a bat struggling for its life in her web. I released it carefully and watched the relieved creature fly safely away, but when the spiders start catching the mammals, you really know that it is time to move on. We had visions of her stalking us down the mountain as we attempted to escape, but considering that it continued to pour throughout the entire hike, and during the equally miserable boat journey back to Maroantsetra in an open canoe, she was probably more worried about drowning than replacing the bat that I had deprived her of. The rain only stopped the next morning and by the time that we reached the airport to fly back to Tana, the sun was shining and it was gloriously hot. It would have been easy to feel slightly bitter, but we were just happy to embrace the sun on our backs and were looking forward to returning to the capital to celebrate James' eighteenth birthday. Six hours later Air Madagascar, or 'Air Mad' as they are appropriately known, had struck again and we were still waiting for our plane and suddenly wishing that the sun was not quite as fierce. I am not entirely sure where waiting with dozens of other agitated people in a confined space in sweltering heat, ranks in terms of an ideal 18th birthday, but I suspect that it is not high. I actually warn people before they visit, that they are likely to experience problems with Air Madagascar, as their unreliable service is legendary and delayed and cancelled flights are an accepted feature of travelling with them. That said and although their inefficiency has driven me to distraction on more occasions than I can remember, including on this trip, I do actually have some sympathy with what is basically a government operated airline trying to service a large number of domestic destinations with a very limited fleet. The roads are so bad in places in Madagascar that the only real option is to fly and Air Mad is the only operator keeping these destinations accessible for millions of people. I have to admit that I was less reasonable and conciliatory on that particular day at Maroantsetra airport, but fortunately we did get into Tana in time to celebrate James' birthday at a fabulous restaurant with our team for the second part of the tour. As I have already mentioned, I do not intend to produce a detailed destination guide regarding this longer section of the trip, as I am keen to avoid my reports becoming too repetitive, which is difficult to achieve when more or less every research expedition follows the same basic format, and I have also provided a comprehensive list of the mammals encountered at each specific location. This is another departure for me and was necessary because much remains unknown about lemurs and in many areas the resident species are still to be identified, particularly in terms of the comparatively poorly studied mouse lemurs. In some cases distinct species can only be recognised by genetic testing and nowadays taxonomy is less about shared characteristics and more an incontrovertible biological assessment. I have therefore listed the mammals that I believe we were able to identify at each individual site, with the help of our numerous local guides and multiple reference sources, including the superb 'Lemurs of Madagascar Third Edition', which is part of the 'Conservation International Tropical Field Guide Series'. I am satisfied with the vast majority of our assessments, but there are certainly one or two debatable



classifications and I suspect that we encountered additional species that we were not and probably never will be aware of. All known anomalies have been clearly highlighted and I can confirm that although they have been listed here for reference purposes, the eastern lesser bamboo lemurs observed at the Vakona Forest Lodge are not truly wild, as they live on an island and whilst it is a misconception that lemurs cannot swim, most do not choose to. I have also included what is believed to be a new species of sportive lemur from the Ifaty region, more to make future guests aware of the possibility of this previously unknown creature than for any other reason, as of course it is possible that it will ultimately prove to be a variation of an existing species. For now it is tentatively being called a red-shouldered sportive lemur and the scientists that I have spoken to are confident that it has not been recorded previously and are keenly awaiting the genetic results. It would not be a great surprise, as there are huge gaps in our knowledge concerning these segregated primates and additional species are being identified more or less each year. In fact, the number of described and classified lemurs has increased from 101 to 113 in recent times and in January 2018 the latest lemur was presented to the world as the groves' dwarf lemur, which was named after the biological anthropologist Colin Groves, who died just a month or so earlier in November 2017. I would also add that although you would generally expect to see more dwarf lemurs on a list of this kind, these animals are not typically active during the winter months when they enter an extended period of semi-hibernation known as torpor. This process allows the lemur to dramatically reduce its heartbeat and body temperature and studies have shown that dwarf lemurs live two or even three times longer than other lemurs and mammals of a similar size, that do not deploy this survival strategy. We were therefore extremely fortunate to observe a pair of greater dwarf lemurs at Amber Mountain National Park and I would suggest that if these small nocturnal lemurs are of particular interest, you visit Madagascar between October and December, when they are active and there is traditionally less rain.

Farankaraina Tropical Park (5)

1. MacArthur's Mouse Lemur (1)	Microcebus macarthurii
2. Eastern Woolly Lemur or Eastern Avahi (2)	Avahi laniger
3. Aye-aye (3)	Daubentonia madagascariensis
4. White-fronted Lemur or White-fronted Brown Lemur (4)	Eulemur albifrons
5. Webb's Tuft-tailed Rat (5)	Eliurus webbi

Masoala National Park (5)

1. Scott's Sportive Lemur or Masoala Sportive Lemu r (6)	Lepilemur scottorum
2. Lowland Streaked Tenrec (7)	Hemicentetes semispinosus
3. Western Lesser Bamboo Lemur (8)	Hapalemur occidentalis
4. Red Ruffed Lemur (9)	Varecia rubra
5. Masoala Woolly Lemur or Moore's Woolly Lemur (10)	Avahi mooreorum

Nosy Mangabe Special Reserve (2)

1. Black-and-white Ruffed Lemur (11)	Varecia variegata
2. White-fronted Lemur or White-fronted Brown Lemur	Eulemur albifrons

Makira Natural Park (3)

1. Eastern Woolly Lemur or Eastern Avahi	Avahi laniger
2. Silky Sifaka (12)	Propithecus candidus
3. White-fronted Lemur or White-fronted Brown Lemur	Eulemur albifrons

Amber Mountain National Park (6)

1. Ring-tailed Mongoose or Vontsira (13)	Galidia elegans
2. Sanford's Brown Lemur (14)	Eulemur sanfordi
3. Crowned Lemur (15)	Eulemur coronatus
4. Tavaratra Mouse Lemur (16)	Microcebus tavaratra
5. Greater Dwarf Lemur (17)	Cheirogaleus major
6. Lesser Tufted-tailed Rat (18)	Eliurus minor

Ankarana Special Reserve (4)

1. Ankarana Sportive Lemur (19)	Lepilemur ankaranensis
2. Sanford's Brown Lemur	Eulemur sanfordi
3. Crowned Lemur	Eulemur coronatus
4. Tavaratra Mouse Lemur	Microcebus tavaratra

Andasibe-Mantadia National Park (7)

1. Brown Lemur or Common Brown Lemur (20)	Eulemur fulvus
2. Goodman's Mouse Lemur (21)	Microcebus lehilahytsara
3. Eastern Woolly Lemur or Eastern Avahi	Avahi laniger
4. Weasel Sportive Lemur or Greater Sportiv Lemur (22)	Lepilemur mustelinus
5. Indri (23)	Indri indri
6. Diademed Sifaka (24)	Propithecus diadema
7. Eastern Lesser Bamboo Lemur or Grey Bamboo Lemur (25)	Hapalemur griseus (habituated individuals at Vakona Forest Lodge)

Ankarafantsika National Park (7)

1. Coquerel's Sifaka (26)	Propithecus coquereli
2. Mongoose Lemur (27)	Eulemur mongoz
3. Golden-brown Mouse Lemur (28)	Microcebus ravelobensis
4. Grey Mouse Lemur (29)	Microcebus murinus
5. Brown Lemur or Common Brown Lemur	Eulemur fulvus
6. Milne-Edwards's Sportiv Lemur (30)	Lepilemur edwardsi
7. Western Woolly Lemur or Western Avahi (31)	Avahi occidentalis

Katsepy (3)

1. Crowned Sifaka (32)	Propithecus coronatus
2. Mongoose Lemur	Eulemur mongoz
3. Brown Lemur or Common Brown Lemur	Eulemur fulvus

Berenty Reserve (6)

1. Ring-tailed Lemur (33)	Lemur catta
2. White-footed Sportive Lemur (34)	Lepilemur leucopus
3. Grey-brown Mouse Lemur (35)	Microcebus griseorufus
4. Verreaux's Sifaka (36)	Propithecus verreauxi
5. Red-collared Brown Lemur (37)	Eulemur collaris (apparently hybridised with Eulemur rufifrons)
6. Madagascan Flying Fox (38)	Pteropus rufus

Reniala Private Reserve (3)

1. Red-shouldered Sportive Lemur (39)	New and unclassified species.
2. Lesser Hedgehog Tenrec (40)	Echinops telfairi
3. Petter's Sportive Lemur (41)	Lepilemur petteri

Zombitse-Vohibasia National Park (3)

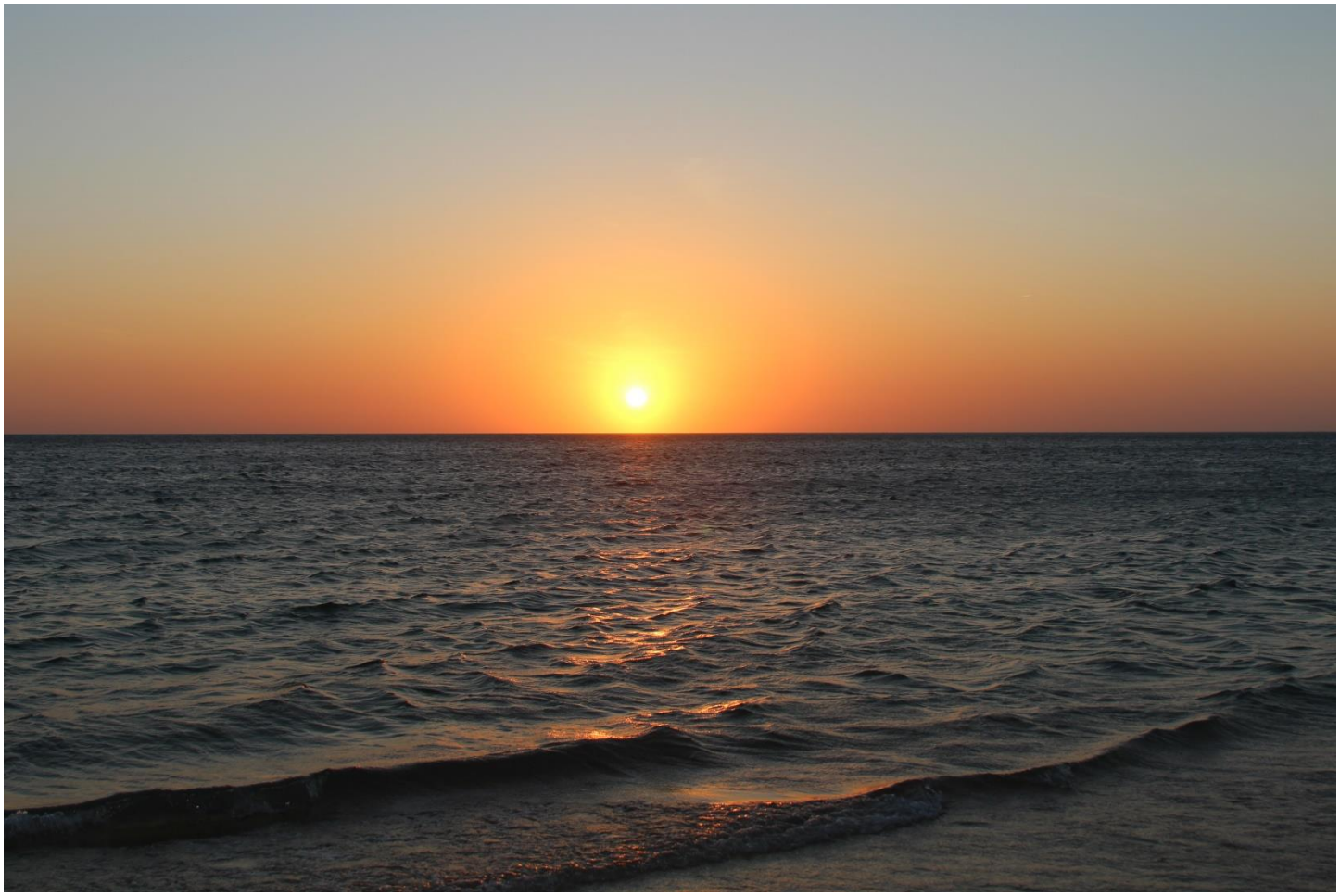
1. Zombitse Sportive Lemur or Hubbard's Sportive Lemur (42)	Lepilemur hubbardorum
2. Verreaux's Sifaka	Propithecus verreauxi
3. Red-tailed Sportive Lemur (43)	Lepilemur ruficaudatus (confirmed by local guides, but well beyond its accepted range)

Isalo National Park (0)
Microbats only

Anja Community Reserve (1)
1. Ring-tailed Lemur — Lemur catta

Ranomafana National Park (9)
1. Greater Bamboo Lemur (44) — Prolemur simus
2. Golden Bamboo Lemur (45) — Hapalemur aureus
3. Brown Mouse Lemur or Rufous Mouse Lemur (46) — Microcebus rufus
4. Eastern Red Forest Rat (47) — Nesomys rufus
5. Red-fronted Brown Lemur (48) — Eulemur rufifrons
6. Red-bellied Lemur (49) — Eulemur rubriventer
7. Milne-Edward's Sifaka (50) — Propithecus edwardsi
8. Lowland Red Forest Rat (51) — Nesomys audeberti
9. Spotted Fanaloka or Malagasy Civet (52) — Fossa fossana

Kirindy Private Reserve (11)
1. Red-fronted Brown Lemur — Eulemur rufifrons
2. Fossa (53) — Cryptoprocta ferox
3. Red-tailed Sportive Lemur — Lepilemur ruficaudatus
4. Pale Fork-marked Lemur or Western Fork-marked Lemur (54) — Phaner pallescens
5. Grey Mouse Lemur — Microcebus murinus
6. Malagasy Giant Jumping Rat (55) — Hypogeomys antimena
7. Narrow-striped Mongoose or Bokiboky (56) — Mungotictis decemlineata
8. Verreaux's Sifaka — Propithecus verreauxi
9. Madame Berthe's Mouse Lemur (57) — Microcebus berthae
10. Coquerel's Giant Mouse Lemur (58) — Mirza coquereli
11. Western Tuft-tailed Rat (59) — Eliurus myoxinus



As per this chronological list, there were twelve wildlife destinations on the second section of the tour and the first, the beautiful Amber Mountain National Park, produced six new species. In addition to the only dwarf lemur sighting during the entire five weeks, we enjoyed a marvellous prolonged encounter with a ring-tailed mongoose, our first carnivore. Known by the common local name vontsira in some journals, this exceptionally attractive mongoose is a member of the eupleridae family, which includes all of the nine or ten Malagasy carnivores, depending on which source you refer to. I have always been aware of nine distinct species, but in 2004 a tenth was apparently discovered by members of the Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust, the charitable organisation founded by and eventually named after the celebrated conservationist and writer Gerald Durrell. I first learned of Gerald Durrell when I borrowed probably his most famous book 'My Family and Other Animals' from my sister at age ten or so and over the succeeding years, I began to understand just what a visionary he was and how his own personal beliefs changed the very concept of conservation. Although he was initially part of that awful animal collecting wave for British zoos in the 1940s and 1950s, which incidentally also included David Attenborough, Durrell took an entirely different approach to the selection and welfare of these animals and soon came to realise that the only possible justification for removing animals from their natural habitat was to protect them. In 1959 he established Durrell Wildlife Park on Jersey, the largest of the Channel Islands, which was the first zoological collection to concentrate on the protection of endangered species, as opposed to the entertainment of visitors. In this respect Durrell was years ahead of his time and his views, which were refuted and even derided by the owners and administrators of more or less every serious animal collection across the globe, are today widely adopted by all reputable zoos involved in the conservation of the species they exhibit. Whilst it made him unpopular in some quarters at the time, particularly within the British zoological community, Durrell reasoned that the only acceptable primary purpose of a zoo was to

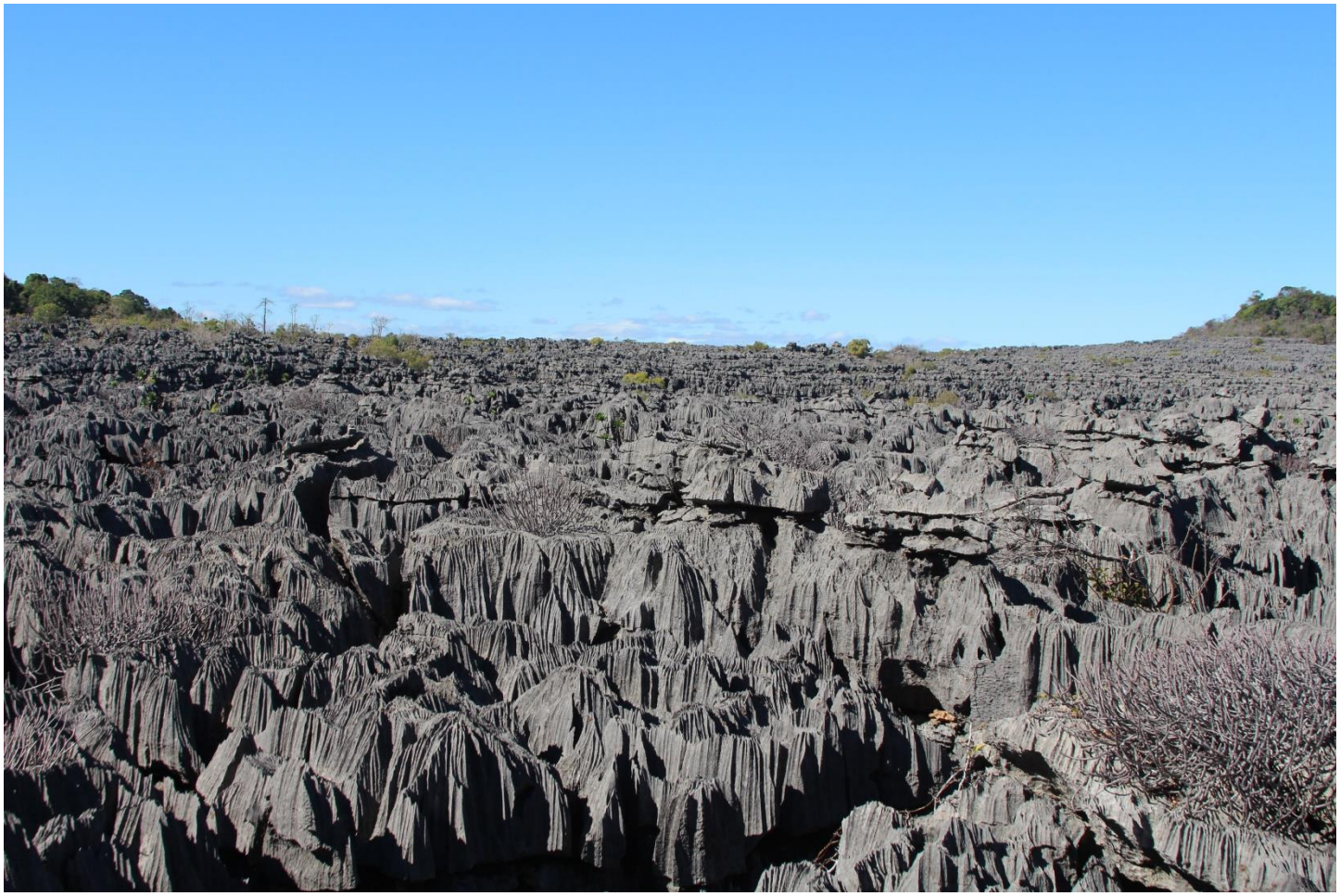
preserve and breed critically endangered species that were not guaranteed to survive in the wild. In his 1976 book ‘The Stationary Ark’, he maintained that the welfare of the animal should always come first and that enclosures should be directly related to the size of the animal’s territory and resemble its natural habitat. His insistence that enclosures were to be constructed for the comfort of the occupants and not for the benefit of the viewing public, was in stark contrast to the popular opinion that the captive animals were on show merely to entertain and amuse, in much the same way that ‘freak shows’ so delighted Victorian and even 20th century audiences. London Zoo was very much a case in point, as even as a young child I was acutely aware that animals did not belong in the

disgraceful concrete monstrosities that many were housed in and clearly remember the sight of basically a mentally ill bear incessantly pacing up and down a concrete cell without a single leaf or blade of grass in sight. Thankfully this type of shocking offhand cruelty is less common, certainly in more enlightened regions, and the environmental and behavioural enrichment theories practiced in most zoos today, all date back to the views espoused by Gerald Durrell almost sixty years ago. Durrell had strong links to Madagascar following his expedition to remove indris for breeding purposes in 1982 and his zoo, which is now known as Jersey Zoo, is home to a number of endangered lemurs and the Kirindy Forest exhibition. This relatively new enclosure showcases several rare endemic species and the conservation initiatives currently undertaken by the Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust, many of which are based upon funding rural communities to enable them to protect their own local environments and the vulnerable species that occur there. For those further interested in their work, both in Jersey and at various ecologically sensitive locations across the globe, the Durrell Index includes a great deal of additional information and the corresponding Red List Index of Species Survival, provides an ingenious and quantifiable way of measuring their success, which has been hugely impressive by whatever method it is judged. Although Gerald Durrell died in January 1995, his ground breaking views regarding the care of captive animals and the importance of zoos for breeding purposes, live on in every serious and ethical animal collection throughout the world. A giant among mortals, Durrell was attempting to repair his precious planet before most people even understood that it was broken and I will leave you with his own words on what he called, completely justifiably in my opinion *'the rape of the world'*.

'The world is as delicate and as complicated as a spider's web, and like a spider's web, if you touch one thread, you send shudders running through all the other threads that make up the web. But we're not just touching the web, we're tearing great holes in it'.

Sadly, the biologists working for Durrell's trust did not display quite the same empathy when they discovered this possible new carnivore swimming in the marshes at Lake Alaotra, as they promptly killed it, for no other reason than to assist the identification process. It is obviously not necessary to execute an animal to study it genetically and this was yet another example of scientists operating without a moral compass and arguing that in the cold light of day, the scientific end will always justify the means, certainly where animals are concerned. Although not every source currently agrees, primarily because the classification has been based on just

that one unfortunate sample, a new species was indeed proclaimed in 2010 and this tenth Malagasy carnivore was named *salanoia durrelli* or durrell's mongoose. I am not quite sure what Gerald Durrell would have made of an animal being killed in his name, particularly if this does turn out to be a new species, as Lake Alaotra may be the largest wetland in Madagascar, but it does not encompass a vast area and this mongoose would consequently become one of the most endangered carnivores on the planet with probably the smallest home range. As is too often the case, the scientists only care whether they can and not whether they should, and whilst so many of them appear to function without a shred of compassion or ethical responsibility, it would be tragically ironic if the very charity that was created to ensure that species did not continue to disappear, was partially responsible for pushing an animal named after its founder towards the brink of extinction. At least one carnivore has already been lost on Madagascar, the giant fossa, which was just one of dozens of animals hunted to extinction following the arrival of the first humans approximately 2,000 years ago. Most of the animals killed were massive variations of existing species and today nothing survives weighing more than 22lbs, at least not in terms of native creatures. The extraordinary array of megafauna included huge monkey, koala and sloth lemurs, the largest of which weighed approximately 350lbs, as well as three distinct species of hippopotamus and a horned crocodile that could grow to five metres in length and would have been a fearsome predator on what must have been the most astounding of islands before our ancestors intervened, comparatively recently in terms of other major extinctions. Some of the lemurs were the size of male gorillas and the elephant birds, flightless birds similar to the moa on New Zealand, were even larger at more than three metres tall and weighing up to half a tonne. Their eggs are the largest ever discovered and are heavier than all the surviving endemic animals on Madagascar, which almost certainly played a part in their demise, given that a single egg could feed multiple families. Both the elephant bird and the moa suffered much the same fate, eradicated by the native people who colonised the respective islands that had sheltered them for so long. As the fossil records have established beyond any doubt, elephant birds were killed and butchered for their meat and the fact that every giant lemur met the same sorry end has had unexpected consequences that were only revealed perhaps a millennium after the event. As with most complex ecosystems, the myriad trees and plants of Madagascar depend on a wide variety of animals as their primary source of propagation. However, many of these animals are now extinct and the ability of lemurs to disperse seeds via their droppings has been reduced by about a third since the last of the giant lemurs disappeared, as they were the only animals robust enough to tackle certain large fruits and the seeds contained within. With their principal means of propagation gone, much of this 'orphan' flora is already doomed and the more lemur species we lose, the more plants will correspondingly vanish. As Gerald Durrell so astutely observed, a spider's web indeed and we can only guess at what other catastrophic ripples our thoughtless blundering has caused. Formerly known as Diego Suarez, the coastal town of Antsiranana was the furthest north that this tour would reach and before we returned to fly back to Tana, we made the short journey south from Amber Mountain to Ankarana Special Reserve. Although it is home to a number of lemur species, as well as a great deal of other wildlife, Ankarana is probably more famous for its remarkable forest of eroded limestone peaks or 'tsingy' as it is known, which translates roughly as the 'place where one cannot walk barefoot'. Similar to the renowned 'Stone Forest' in Kumming, China, at least in its creation, Ankarana is a typical example of a karst landscape, which basically means an area of land consisting of limestone or another soluble rock that has dissolved to form various geological features. Extensive caves, underground rivers, sinkholes and razor sharp spires are all characteristics of a karst topography and Ankarana encompasses all of these elements, including subterranean tunnels that stretch for well over 100 kilometres and are considered to be part of the longest cave system in



Africa. We enjoyed a couple of excellent hikes among the formidable tsingy spears and neighbouring deciduous forest and we dropped in on ‘Tsingy Rouge’ on the way back to Antsiranana, for an opportunity to compare and photograph the contrasting red laterite tsingy formations. On a good day Andasibe-Mantadia National Park lies just a three-hour drive to the east of Tana and is one of the few destinations in Madagascar that you do not need to fly to. It is also home to two of the most captivating lemur species, the

indri and the diademed sifaka, both of which, it will come as no surprise by this stage, are critically endangered. Although the weather had improved in general and was largely splendid for the final three weeks, we were back in the rainforest at Andasibe and of course it poured on us for more or less the duration of our stay. Given that this was to be the only destination at which we would observe both primates, it was difficult to pretend that the return of the rain was not slightly discouraging, but whilst the elements undoubtedly hampered our movements and restricted our photographic opportunities, they could not ruin a number of exceptional sightings, almost all of which were at extremely close quarters. The one thing you can usually guarantee when searching for indri, is that you are almost certainly going to hear them before you see them and there can be few as evocative calls in the wild as indris singing to each other. Of course the indri are communicating, but the sound is joyous and it is thrilling to hear different groups respond to each other and take up the song. We stopped to listen to several family groups as we searched in the early morning mizzle and by the time that you begin to hear individuals moving in the trees around you, you realise just how much you are anticipating that initial magical view. We were not to be disappointed, as a first indri came crashing out of the trees as we walked along the riverbank, followed by seven or eight more leaping from tree to tree within a few metres of where we stood watching in a combination of exhilaration and awe. All but the youngest stopped in turn to look down at us inquisitively, before springing away in a

single fluid movement and disappearing into a canopy that swayed to each graceful touch and swallowed them as effortlessly as they had appeared. Having watched the thrilling athleticism and freedom with which they move, you instantly understand why the largest of all lemurs cannot survive in captivity and why they have traditionally been treated with such reverence in Madagascar, at least in certain areas. Much of the island's mythology is based around these beguiling creatures, which are considered by many to be the ancestors of man. One such story tells of two brothers who lived together in the heart of the forest until one of them explained that he was tired of the forest and would leave to cultivate the land. As that brother departed, he became the first human and the brother who remained was transformed into the first indri. Until this day, the indri cries each morning for the brother that he lost. Whereas creation myths of this kind have protected the indri in some regions, the erosion of local cultures and immigration have diluted these traditional taboos and the people who once held the indri sacred are being replaced by a younger generation who are happy to slaughter them for their meat and to clear their forests to farm. We were able to savour several outstanding encounters during our stay at Andasibe and the most memorable involved a pair of indri that emerged out of nowhere at presumably full speed and began bounding towards us through the trees like irresistible predators from a cheap horror film. Given that we were standing in a narrow clearing, I had thought that the indri would veer off at the last moment and take the long way round, but instead, and without breaking stride, they just leapt from the final trunk directly over our heads, clearing us by a matter of centimetres. It was a breathtaking moment and although the poor weather severely affected the quality of my photographs, our sightings were of the highest order and at one stage we had the very special privilege of watching indris and diademed sifakas simultaneously. Both species are members of the indriidae family and the sifakas, if anything, are even more resplendent than their close relatives, which have short stubby tails and a uniform black and white coat. In contrast, diademed sifakas have long luxuriant tails that measure approximately half of their body length and their silky coats are a vibrant blend of golden browns, silvery greys and a striking crown, or diadem, of stark white. I did manage to take some reasonable photographs, but the best do not appear here, as they were all of animals that had been collared with radio tracking devices, supposedly for research purposes. For a number of years I have been opposed to the unregulated practice of tracking animals with radio telemetry, as I have personally witnessed the immense stress that an animal suffers during the process of

trapping and fitting a radio collar and I am aware of more horror stories than I can recall, where animals have died as either a direct or associated result of this invasive and usually entirely unnecessary procedure. Some have been so badly injured by their collars, which can be extremely heavy and cumbersome, they have had to be destroyed and one baby gorilla, which was born and raised in captivity in the United Kingdom before being released into the wild in Africa, was found hanging dead where his collar had become entangled in some vines and strangled him. When you consider the terrible risks involved in catching and anaesthetising wild animals, the potential dangers invariably outweigh the negligible benefits and in most cases the animals are simply being exploited by pseudo scientists and researchers attempting to secure another grant or by PhD students with even less common sense than knowledge, playing science in the field entirely unsupervised. Whilst I have been involved in crucial conservation initiatives that have involved an element of radio tracking, I would estimate that in excess of 90% produce absolutely no tangible or lasting benefits for the animals involved, which are all too often forgotten when the degrees have been handed out and the recipients have moved on to dabble in their next ecological playground. A good case in point is a research project that I visited several years ago at Emas National Park in Brazil, where the biologists had been studying maned wolves for several years and had collared an almost unbelievable 76 animals, which must have been more or less every wolf in both the park and the surrounding area. Their research had no specified end date and they basically stopped when they got bored and had an opportunity to work with jaguars instead. The vast quantity of data collected was never used, as apparently no one was interested in it, and when I asked if they had removed the collars at the end of the study period I was informed *'Yes, on the few that we could still find'.* These horrific tales are repeated across the globe and in 2017 Richard Webb, an experienced and well respected colleague who has led wildlife tours all over the world, published an article that precisely echoes my own thoughts on the gratuitous use of these collars. In it he describes an horrific incident involving a screaming and clearly terrified primate being dragged out of its day roost after researchers had used axes to cut holes into the tree trunk in order to forcibly remove it. Later in the same article he employed the term 'lazy science', explaining that the use of radio collars is being abused and that in most cases we are learning nothing new about animals that have been studied for years and in some cases generations. He went

on to cite a puma research project in Torres del Paine, Chile, where two of the five pumas fitted with collars had died for no apparent reason within fifteen months of being captured. As Richard correctly observed, the pumas at Torres del Paine are probably the most studied on the planet and I can only join him in wondering why an American university would devote their valuable resources to such a pointless exercise, particularly when there are so many species that genuinely require our very real assistance. One of the main issues is that regulations vary markedly across territories regarding this type of activity, from reasonably strict to basically non-existent, and if scientists and researchers are not capable of acting responsibly and policing themselves, individual governments will need to introduce legislation to make it much more difficult to not only collar wild animals, but to trap them in the first place. I believe that this latter addition is essential, as a large variety of animals are now being trapped simply for recreational purposes and by tour operators for profit. This should only be permitted under licence, after individuals have been trained to an adequate standard to ensure the welfare of the wildife involved. Licences should have to be renewed on a periodic basis, at which point applicants would be expected to update their knowledge and field skills, and all proceeds above the actual running costs, would be donated to important conservation projects across the globe. From the indris and sifakas at Andasibe-Mantadia in the east, we took to the road and crossed the entire width of the country in a northerly direction to visit Ankarafantsika National Park and then Katsepy on the west coast, a pleasant boat ride across the bay from the popular little seaport town of Mahajanga. Both destinations produced new sifaka species in the form of coquerel's sifaka at Ankarafantsika and crowned sifaka at Katsepy and the former is also the home of Lake Ravelobe, where apparently zebu, the distinctive domestic cattle, are sacrificed to the resident Nile crocodiles. Fortunately this did not occur during our visit and we enjoyed a delightfully peaceful afternoon on the lake photographing crocodiles, fish eagles and a nice variety of waterbirds. Our forest hikes were similarly pleasant and productive, particularly at night, and all but one of the seven mammals observed at Ankarafantsika were new for the trip, including the mongoose lemur and two distinct mouse lemurs, the grey mouse lemur and the golden-brown mouse lemur. We stayed at Mahajanga in order to visit Katsepy and it is easy to see why this colourful and atmospheric seaside town is so popular with both Madagascans and international travellers. The standard of hotels is excellent, the view over the Indian Ocean from ours I believe would be described as idyllic, the beaches are gorgeous and the weather is simply glorious, well certainly for the eight months of the year when it barely rains and even when it does, it remains fairly warm. It was as hot as you like when we set out for Katsepy and although our crossing was a little choppy, these things are all relative following the voyage from hell to Masoala and we were more than willing to take a refreshing dip when we jumped from the side of the boat to disembark. The forest borders a grand old lighthouse at Katsepy and the lemurs, including the crowned sifakas, are obviously very used to visitors and are easy to find. We spent the morning with several relaxed groups at close quarters and after exploring the lighthouse, made our way back to Mahajanga to prepare to move on. To save time on our return journey we flew back to Tana, but we need not have bothered, as Air Mad struck again and cancelled our ensuing flight to Fort Dauphin, which meant that we were stranded in Tana for a day and would only have two days at Berenty Reserve in the extreme south of the country. Fortunately, this was not as serious as it could have been elsewhere, as Berenty is a tiny reserve and does not require a great deal of time to explore. Of course, in all significant respects, a wildlife sanctuary being so small is more of a problem than a blessing and I have to admit that I have mixed feelings regarding Berenty and the way in which it operates. Ironically, the principal issue is highlighted by an animal that attracts visitors here from all over the world, verreaux's sifaka or the ‘dancing sifaka’ as it is also known. As most people are aware, particularly after they appeared in the BBC ‘The Life of Mammals’ documentary with David Attenborough in 2002, these particular sifakas are famous as the lemur that dances sideways across the ground in a graceful, almost ballet-like manner. However, far fewer people realise that actually most, if not all, sifakas move this way on the ground and I have personally witnessed several species displaying exactly the same behaviour, although not as regularly or over such a lengthy distance. This is the key, as sifakas will always travel through the trees if they have the option, as will all arboreal mammals, but the BBC documentary was filmed at Berenty, where the sifakas have no trees between the area where they sleep and the forest in which they feed, which basically means that each morning and evening, they have no choice but to ‘dance’ across the open ground in this unusual

and admittedly entertaining manner. As beguiling as their ‘dance’ appears, arboreal animals would simply never choose to travel in this way, as they are far more vulnerable on the ground and can move at a fraction of the speed they are capable of among the trees. You are basically watching them attempting to mimic their conventional means of propulsion in an alien environment and whereas they would use a tree trunk or branches to push off powerfully from, on the ground they have to generate their own velocity and can consequently only hop a comparatively short distance. Whilst I certainly understand why people find this behaviour captivating, to me the real beauty is watching a lemur flying through the trees as nature intended and on the ground they more remind me of a bird with a broken wing. As my succeeding photographs clearly betray, the issue at Berenty is the sisal, which was introduced to the area by the de Heaulme family, French colonists who still own and operate the reserve. Sisal is a Mexican plant grown to produce the fibre from

which twine, rope and a variety of other products are manufactured and in 1936 Henry and Alain de Heaulme seized and destroyed 5,000 hectares of primary forest to create what turned out to be a highly profitable sisal plantation. Apparently a further 1,000 hectares was set aside purely for aesthetic reasons, but I am not certain how much of this remains intact, as Berenty itself comprises just 200 hectares of gallery and spiny forest. To illustrate exactly how small an area this is, 200 hectares equates to considerably less than one square mile and is approximately 60% the size of Central Park in New York and only slightly larger than Hyde Park in central London. Bealoka Reserve, which is also on the Berenty estate, does add an additional 100 hectares, but basically the two reserves are

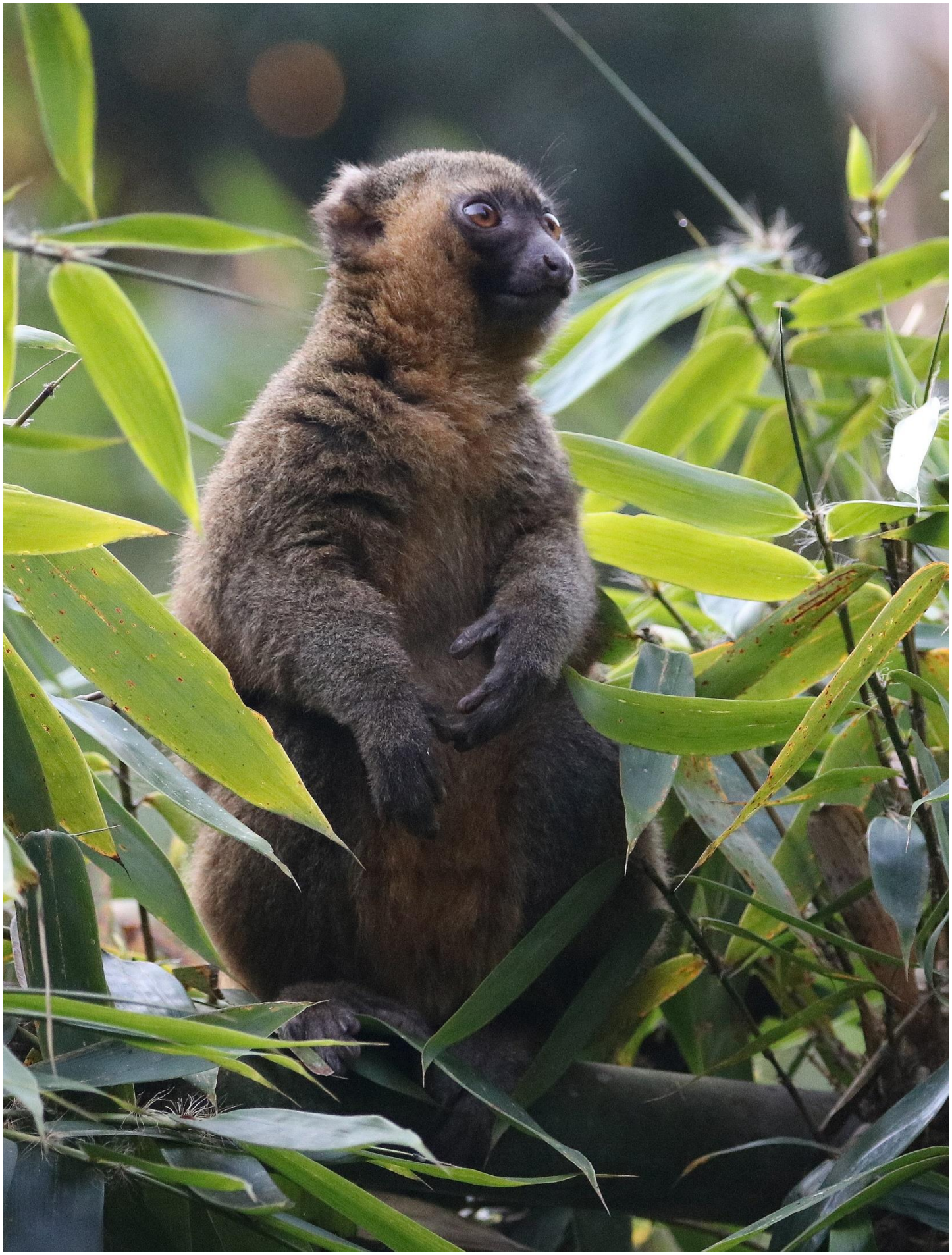
almost entirely isolated in an endless sea of sisal. Whilst at its peak the plantation employed a large number of local people, the value of sisal dropped dramatically in the late 1970s and Berenty as a wildlife reserve was opened to the public in 1981, principally, it seems, to exploit a different and more promising long term source of revenue. Scientists have been made welcome since the arrival of the famous Primatologist Alison Jolly in 1963, who studied the ring-tailed lemurs at Berenty on and off for the rest of her life, and the reserve is currently so popular that additional tourist accommodation is being built to meet the demand. If a lot of this detail appears deeply contradictory, that is simply because it is and I still find certain aspects of Berenty disturbing, both in a historical and contemporary sense. Firstly, although they had a mandate from the colonial French government legitimising their actions, the land that the de Heaulmes grew rich on was basically stolen from the local inhabitants. I have read an account of one elder who states that when Henry de Heaulme requested land from his grandfather, it was assumed that he just wanted a small plot like everyone else and was told to take what he needed. No one considered that he intended to take the entire forest and although his plantation eventually employed up to 2,000 locals, I have again read, as well as being told on a first-hand basis, that they were paid a very poor wage and lived in terrible conditions. Of course the de Heaulmes were not the first western family to make a fortune on the backs of their exploited indigenous workers and, for whatever reason, there does appear to be some genuine warmth between these French colonialists and the native Tandroy people. Certainly the de Heaulmes supported Madagascan independence and joined the inaugural government, but it is still hard to reconcile the fact that one of the later owners Jean de Heaulme would fly his own private plane into Berenty, with the poverty that has been described to me within the local community. In terms of conservation, the de Heaulmes destroyed far more than they ever conserved, but it is equally true that other capitalists would have obliterated everything to maximise profits and that they did at least show some foresight at a time when serious conservation barely existed. Given that I do not generally believe in blaming later generations for the sins of their fathers, my main issue with the current regime is that I cannot see any of the considerable profit being reinvested in either improving the reserve or in assisting the local communities that have served this one family for so long. The area is still incredibly poor with terrible infrastructure and, as far as I am aware, there are no plans to increase the size of the sanctuary and restore any of the degraded habitat. It is better than nothing of course and does still protect a great deal of wildlife, but given its severe size restrictions, not all of the resident lemurs are living an entirely natural existence, as per the sifakas that have no choice but to literally dance for their dinner. Whether this is a destination that I could recommend would probably depend on the type of travellers involved and guests should certainly be aware of these issues before they travel, as well as the various positive aspects of a visit. Given the conditions, it goes without saying that you can get extremely close to a number of iconic lemur species and it is often possible to photograph them in the open and in superb light. Verreaux's sifaka and the ring-tailed lemur are always the two main attractions, but the last of the three diurnal lemurs is actually an interesting hybrid species that researchers at Berenty have previously stated is a cross between *eulemur collaris* and e*ulemur fulvus*. However, as all of the other sources that I have consulted agree that hybridisation has occurred between *eulemur collaris* and *eulemur rufifrons*, including the renowned primatologist Russell Mittermeier, that is the variation that I have accepted for this report. Berenty is also home to a colony of Madagascan flying foxes, which I was delighted to see is being well protected and that visitors are not allowed to approach. As elsewhere, all of the guides and staff were genuinely friendly and I certainly did not have any issues with the various locals that I discussed my concerns with, despite my reservations regarding the reserve itself. I would also add that the guest accommodation is immaculate and the estate includes a substantial and informative museum, although that is not in a good state of repair and requires some remedial work. Each of our next two destinations, Reniala Reserve on the west coast near Ifaty and Zombitse-Vohibasia National Park about 150 kilometres inland, produced sightings that I did not expect and am not entirely convinced are correct. As I have already mentioned, at Reniala we were shown what a small team of researchers believe is a new sportive lemur and at Zombitse we encountered what the local guide

insisted was a red-tailed sportive lemur, a species that I did not anticipate seeing until the very end of our tour when we were due to visit Kirindy. The fate of this likely new species, figuratively and hopefully not literally, as I was assured that no lemurs would be killed during the testing and identification process, will ultimately depend on the DNA results. However, I am not certain whether it will be as easy to solve the second and more perplexing anomaly, as we had already seen the Zombitse sportive lemur, which, as the name suggests, is the familiar variety at this reserve and the two animals were clearly distinct species. When you consider just how far Zombitse is beyond the accepted range of the red-tailed sportive lemur, the possibility exists that we are discussing yet another previously undiscovered species and I look forward to exploring this further with my contacts on the ground in Madagascar. The two reserves also produced one or two more conventional highlights and we were thrilled to hear that our guides at Reniala knew where we could look for a lesser hedgehog tenrec. Nothing was guaranteed of course, but we were happy to persevere and after trying the site a few times, were rewarded with wonderful views of this unbelievably cute creature in the most remarkable light. Although we did not fully appreciate it at the time, we had been astoundingly lucky, as this would prove to be our only lesser hedgehog tenrec

encounter and our second and final tenrec sighting of the tour, having observed several lowland streaked tenrecs at Masoala National Park. I was ultimately somewhat disappointed not to find one or two more tenrecs, particularly for James who I knew wanted to see the tailless or common tenrec, as well as a greater hedgehog tenrec, but in general we found the vast majority of our target species and can have few complaints in terms of our overall success. Reniala is not an official government reserve and is instead run by the local community, who have protected a small area of spiny forest, an incredibly rich and unique habitat, both in terms of its appearance and

the diverse life that it protects, and are trying to establish an ecotourism business. Full of majestic swollen baobabs and towering thorny bushes, approximately 95% of the flora is endemic to this ecoregion and I would heartily encourage anyone who visits Madagascar to try to make it to Reniala, partly for the actual experience and to also support such a worthy cause. The birdlife is excellent with around 65 species visiting the reserve, including several rare endemics, and night walks usually produce grey-brown mouse lemur sightings, although we saw ours at Berenty. If you do include Reniala in your itinerary, it makes sense to also include Zombitse, as this would be the second destination on a natural five-stage trip across the country, taking you from Ifaty and Reniala on the west coast all the way northeast to Ranomafana National Park. Zombitse also has the added attraction of being home to another population of verreaux's sifaka and at this location you will watch them displaying their natural behaviour and leaping through the trees instead of across the ground. Although we had noticed plenty of young hanging on for dear life as their mothers traversed the open ground at Berenty, we had not really observed any at close quarters and were therefore delighted to find a mother resting just above us with a very young baby clinging tightly to her fur. The baby was clearly sound asleep and we were careful not to disturb such a tender moment. It was a beautiful way to end our stay and the third

destination on that aforementioned five-stage journey would be Isalo National Park, which is one of my favourite places in the entire country. Sadly, this was one of the destinations that suffered as a result of an exceedingly busy itinerary and we only had time to take one invigorating hike through what is an immense and awe-inspiring landscape. We did not even have sufficient time to reach the main section of the national park to search for animals and the only mammal observed at Isalo was an unidentified micro bat that was flying over the swimming pool of one of the most spectacular lodges I have ever had the pleasure to stay at. Featuring a sea of eroded sandstone monoliths that dominate the horizon like a scene out of the old American west, Isalo is an enchanting mix of luxuriant savannah, deep forested canyons and inviting natural pools. The imposing rock formations take on a variety of mellow sympathetic hues and are a sight to behold when bathed in the glorious late afternoon sunlight, although tourists generally spend this time of the day flocking towards 'The Window of Isalo', a natural arch that visitors attempt to photograph each other through at sunset. Whilst brief, we had a most agreeable stay at Isalo and if you choose to follow in my footsteps, the fourth and final cross country stage before you reach Ranomafana would be Anja Community Reserve, a small reserve administered by the local people and said to support the highest concentration of ring-tailed lemurs in Madagascar. Situated at the base of three imposing granite cliffs known as the 'three sisters', where villagers have entombed their dead for more than two centuries, Anja covers a 30-hectare area of dry forest that locals took upon themselves to begin protecting back in 1996. With financial help from the government and a number of international organisations, Anja has evolved into a glowing example of what can be achieved at a local level and all proceeds from your visit will support the preservation of the forest and an impressive list of communal projects involving education, healthcare and sustainable tourism. Fish farms and tree nurseries have been created in order to conserve natural resources and habitat and in 2012 the outstanding work that has taken place here was recognised when the reserve was awarded the 'Equator Prize', a sustainable development and environmental prize bestowed by the United Nations Equator Initiative. As with Reniala on this leg of the trip, a stop at Anja is essential, not only to support this ground breaking work, but for great views of the ring-tailed lemurs, which are plentiful and easy to find. As we departed Anja for the drive north towards Ranomafana, we were acutely aware that our time in Madagascar was drawing to a close and that there were only two more reserves to visit, the final one being Kirindy. Spirits, however, were still extremely high, as, in some respects at least, we had saved the best until last and knew that the completely contrasting habitats of Ranomafana and Kirindy were likely to be highly productive. Ultimately this did indeed prove to be the case, as all nine of the mammals encountered at Ranomafana were new for the trip and in total we discovered twenty different mammals across the two destinations, sixteen for the only time on tour. By way of comparison, at over 41,000 hectares, Ranomafana is more than 200 times larger than the reserve at Berenty, but is approximately a sixth of the size of Masoala National Park. It predominantly encompasses dense fertile rainforest, both primary and secondary, and was established in 1991 principally to protect the golden bamboo lemur that was discovered here in the 1980s and is one of three bamboo lemurs that occur at Ranomafana. The other two are the greater bamboo lemur and the eastern lesser bamboo lemur and both the golden and greater varieties are critically endangered. Quite incredibly and again entirely due to the magnificent efforts of our local guides over the previous few days, within an hour of our arrival we had spent time with each of the critically endangered species, observing the golden bamboo lemurs whilst balanced precariously on the edge of a very steep slope and the greater bamboo lemurs in slightly more comfort on the forest floor. Having found the two difficult animals so effortlessly, we all assumed that it was just a question of time before we encountered the third, but it was not to be and we were to spend three days searching for this more common lemur without success. Such are the vagaries of wildlife viewing and although I had hoped to chance upon this bamboo lemur at Ranomafana, mainly because the ones that we had seen near Andasibe-Mantadia were not truly wild, our other sightings more than compensated for this one minor setback. Ranging in altitude from between 800 and 1,200 metres, Ranomafana is known for its steep trails and the mountainous terrain made for a number of vigorous hikes and a chance to



search for the milne-edward's sifaka, which is normally located at the higher elevations of the park. This proved to be the case for us and we encountered our sixth and final sifaka species on two early morning treks to the very top of the park. We were also fairly near one of the highest viewing platforms when we had an incredible slice of good fortune, as predators had been almost impossible to find to date and the spotted fanaloka that we almost walked straight into, was only our second carnivore of the tour. We were actually about to head down after a long day in the field and only delayed because I wanted to take a few shots of the forest canopy whilst some reasonable light remained. This delay made all the difference, as the other groups of tourists had already begun to descend and it was consequently very quiet when we set off and almost immediately caught sight of the fanaloka in a small clearing. It did not appear

to notice us, or at least it did not appear overly disturbed by our presence, and we were able to watch this delightful creature for two or three heavenly minutes. A fanaloka, or Malagasy civet as they are also known, had been one of our primary targets and although I would have also desperately loved to see one of the two falanouc species, similar carnivores in the same euplieridae family, I had never encountered either before and was therefore aware that a fanaloka was a far more realistic possibility for James' first trip. I am currently researching a specific expedition to look for the more elusive Madagascan predators, but for now we were simply thrilled to have finally glimpsed a second carnivore and we would eventually double that number before it was time to return home. I have known for a long time that fanalokas are particularly susceptible to deforestation and are not found at all in fragmented forest, just as they struggle in areas with a high density of feral dogs or cats or the introduced small Indian civet. Conversely, I was not aware until recently that they are routinely consumed as a delicacy in some parts and was astounded to be informed that one 2009 survey confirmed that more than 30% of villagers from an entire region had eaten fanaloka in the preceding year. Of course in such deprived areas desperate people are going to do what they need to in order to survive and I know that in some regions children can be seen selling tailless tenrecs at the side of the road for bushmeat. The bushmeat trade, which was once confined more to poor rural areas, is now spreading into urban environments and is an ever increasing problem. Endangered lemurs, fruit bats and even fossa, the largest of the island's carnivores, are all killed for their meat and in some places illegal hunting is a more serious threat to wildlife than the destruction of habitat. As the population continues to grow exponentially, the issue can only worsen and, as I have advocated for more than two decades, the only satisfactory solution is ecotourism and to actively demonstrate to local people that they will have a better standard of living if they conserve the animals and habitat within their care. This is why I always try to ensure that I visit and support as many genuine community projects as possible, as they represent the future of conservation and the survival of thousands of species currently sliding inexorably towards extinction. At Ranomafana, the only bush dining was being done by the rats and the mouse lemurs, as our guide threw a small piece of banana to one appreciative and rather rotund rodent, actually an eastern red forest rat, and the park officials smear the same fruit on a couple of trees beyond the reserve at dusk to enable visitors to see the brown mouse lemurs, as again no nocturnal activities are allowed here. They are actually fairly easy to see along the road without the bait,

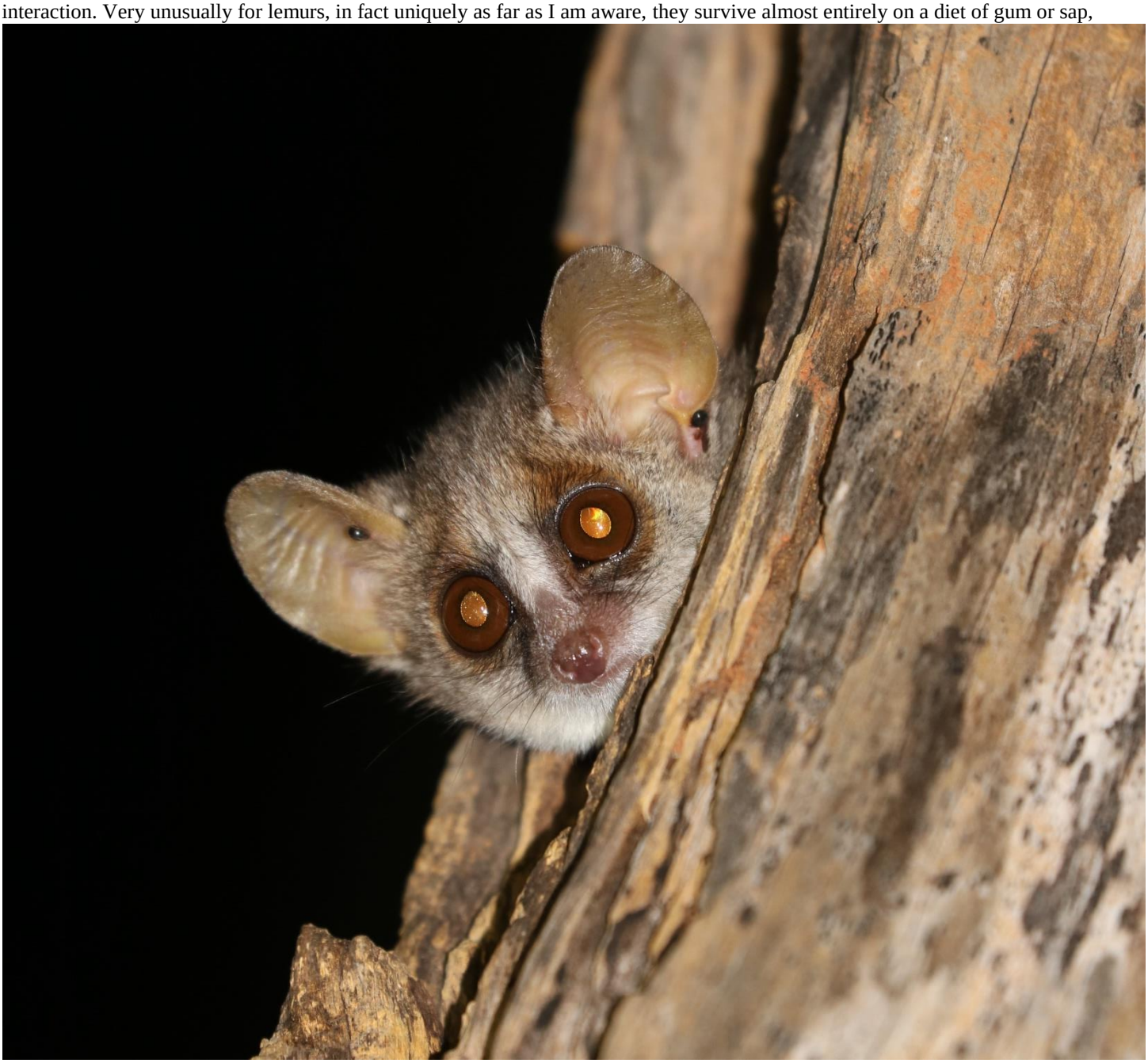
but I would dearly love to spotlight at Ranomafana and would like to think that both the aye-aye and the eastern falanouc would be real possibilities at this enormously diverse national park. It remains a great shame that night walks are not currently an option, but that was not a problem that we were going to face at our final destination Kirindy Private Reserve, where spotlighting is one of the major attractions. Excluding the western fat-tailed dwarf lemur and the greater hedgehog tenrec, neither of which would be active at this time of year and were unlikely to be seen, we had six main targets at Kirindy, four of which would only be observed at night. The two diurnal species were both carnivores, as this relatively compact reserve of around 10,000 hectares has an excellent record of narrow-striped mongoose sightings and is undoubtedly the best place in Madagascar to view the iconic fossa. The largest predator on the island, for almost two centuries these handsome and distinctive animals have defied all scientific attempts to classify them and at various stages they have been assessed as civets in the viverridae family, as mongooses in the family herpestidae and even as cats within the felidae family. With characteristics of all three, the fossa has been shuffled backwards and forwards between the various taxonomies and it is only within the last couple of decades that any consensus has been reached and they have been placed in the eupleridae family, along with all of the Madagascan carnivores. The most widespread of these carnivores, fossas are as adaptable as

they are unique, much like pumas in the Americas, to which they are sometimes compared in terms of their appearance. Whereas Kirindy is a dry deciduous forest, the fossa can thrive in a variety of diverse habitats and can be found within almost every landscape and at a variety of elevations across the country. They are as at home in the dense moist rainforest as they are in the arid sparse spiny forest and can even flourish in both fragmented and highly degraded habitat. Their adaptability and resourcefulness can be viewed as a blessing and a curse at Kirindy, as a few individuals have taken to foraging for scraps around the open rubbish tip at the forest rest camp, which has made them easier to see, but not always in a natural setting. We encountered the same three, two males and a female, on several occasions, as well as another animal of indeterminate sex that sprinted across a forest trail just ahead of us and a fairly long way from that main camp. This may have been a totally random encounter with a fourth fossa and although I have no way of knowing for sure, that fleeting glimpse provided the adrenalin rush and sense of excitement that was slightly missing whilst watching the fossas around buildings and vehicles. Of course it was still an immense privilege to see these absorbing creatures at such close quarters and generally we would follow one or more into the forest to spend quality time observing their behaviour at a respectful distance in a far more harmonious environment. I should also add that whilst these few animals are clearly habituated to the presence of humans, they remain wild in the basic sense and sightings are not always guaranteed. I personally know several people who have visited between December and April, after the mating season when the females disappear deep into the forest to give birth, and have not seen a single fossa during stays of several days. Our second carnivorous objective at Kirindy was the narrow-striped mongoose and we were certainly aware that sightings were again not guaranteed and that this endangered species was likely to prove far more elusive than the fossa. As it was, there would be just a single mongoose encounter over three full days, but it was a great one and fortuitously took place on our first morning walk, which always helps. The narrow-striped mongoose lives in family units and there were eight in the group that we chanced upon, some of which were juveniles. Like many of the social mongoose species, they would forage independently, but within a reasonably small communal area and we were able to watch as they exposed and fed upon insects

among the leaf litter or excavated the doomed bugs in a whirlwind of sharp scratching claws and crunching teeth. They will clear an area of any obvious food in a matter of minutes before collectively moving on and this is precisely what occurred with the family that we had been fortunate enough to observe, all of which gradually drifted away into the forest. All except one that is, as just as we too were about to depart, we noticed a small head peering hesitantly out from the hollow trunk at the base of a tree and realised that one

young mongoose had managed to isolate himself from the rest of the group. One by one the rest of the family reappeared, looking for and calling to the missing juvenile, but it simply did not have the confidence to leave the perceived safety of its hiding place. Instead, it kept frantically running up the inside of the hollow tree and suddenly appearing at different openings at various heights, a bit like the 'Whac-A-Mole' arcade game, where you have to bash a mole at whatever hole it unexpectedly appears, except that on this occasion I was using a camera instead of a large rubber hammer. Eventually there were several adults more or less running over our feet to encourage it to leave, but even though we had taken a seat on the forest floor and were enjoying the entertainment at distance, it could not bring itself to make that one dash for freedom. As reluctant as I was to leave, it was obviously not going to move until we did and we therefore dropped back another ten metres and watched it scamper to join the rest of its family with obvious relief. With the fossas popping up at regular intervals and family groups of verreaux's sifaka relaxing overhead, we still had more than enough to interest us during the day, but all of our remaining targets were nocturnal and our real focus would now switch to our night walks, which were conducted in specific areas according to the animal that we were searching for. This is where the guide's local knowledge and experience is so vital and on our very first spotlighting session, he delivered the first of half a dozen Malagasy giant jumping rats and several pale fork-marked lemurs, which, as I believe I have commented on previously, closely resembles the Australian striped possum. We were equally thrilled with both animals and did not have to wait long to see the jumping rat live up to its name and launch itself into a brief series of frenetic spasmodic hops when we were momentarily disturbed by another group. They

actually do not jump that often and this was the only time that we would witness behaviour that appears bizarre until you remember that they share a forest with the deadliest predator in the country. Instead, they spend most of their time walking normally on all fours or sitting up on their oversized hind legs like rabbits, an animal to which they are often compared. The largest of Madagascar's rodents, unlike most, giant jumping rats are monogamous and mate until the death of either partner. They also have an unusually low reproductive rate, again for rodents, and females will only give birth to one or occasionally two offspring per litter. The fork-marked lemur is similarly fascinating, as this is one of the few nocturnal mammals that we always hear before we see and they utilise a series of complex vocalisations regarding a wide range of behaviour involving alarm signals, territorial disputes, mating and general social interaction. Very unusually for lemurs, in fact uniquely as far as I am aware, they survive almost entirely on a diet of gum or sap,



which is supplemented with a variety of insects. Some new world primates exhibit similar dietary habits, and certain galagos to a lesser extent, but I had no idea until recently that the animals that display these feeding characteristics are known, perhaps slightly ludicrously as 'gummivores'. It brings to mind a shark with no teeth for some reason, 'Gummy Jaws' perhaps, but whatever the silly name, we would ultimately hear more of these animals than we would see, which actually saved a fair amount of time whilst spotlighting, as it was not necessary to identify the eyeshine, if that particular head was also making a great deal of noise. Of the three mouse lemurs that occur at Kirindy, two were main targets and the one that was not, the grey mouse lemur, was found easily on that first night walk. Our excellent local guide informed us that we would have to look for the remaining two, madame berthe's mouse lemur and coquerel's giant mouse lemur, in divergent sections of forest the following night, but that both species could be tricky and that finding the giant mouse lemur was just a question of perseverance and luck, only one of which I could guarantee. At less than 10cm long excluding the tail and weighing around 30 grams, which is less than the weight of a thin slice of wholemeal bread, madame berthe's mouse lemur is the smallest primate in the world and was discovered in 1992 here at Kirindy. When you consider that at the other end of the primate scale wild gorillas can weigh more than 250 kilograms, an enormous silverback would be around 8,300 times heavier than its minuscule cousin. Initially confused with peter's mouse lemur, it was not classified as a distinct species until 2000 and was named after the primatologist Berthe Rakotosamimanana, who, believe it or not, actually had one of the shortest Madagascan family names that I have ever avoided attempting to pronounce. Currently assessed as endangered, this barely conspicuous lemur now only occurs in a relatively small area and Kirindy is probably the one location where it can be searched for with anything approaching confidence. Our guide was unquestionably more hopeful of encountering this species than the giant mouse lemur and it took us less than an hour to justify his faith and find the first of four of these tiny primates. As is often the case with susceptible nocturnal animals, we did not spend long with the light on each and I only photographed the first in order to minimise any disruption. We actually

relinquished the opportunity to see more of these incredibly cute little mammals in order to dedicate more time to our final objective, coquerel's giant mouse lemur. Ultimately, the additional time did prove to be helpful, not so much in terms of finding this rare and endangered lemur, but more because they are extremely nervous and for some time it proved impossible to manage even a reasonable

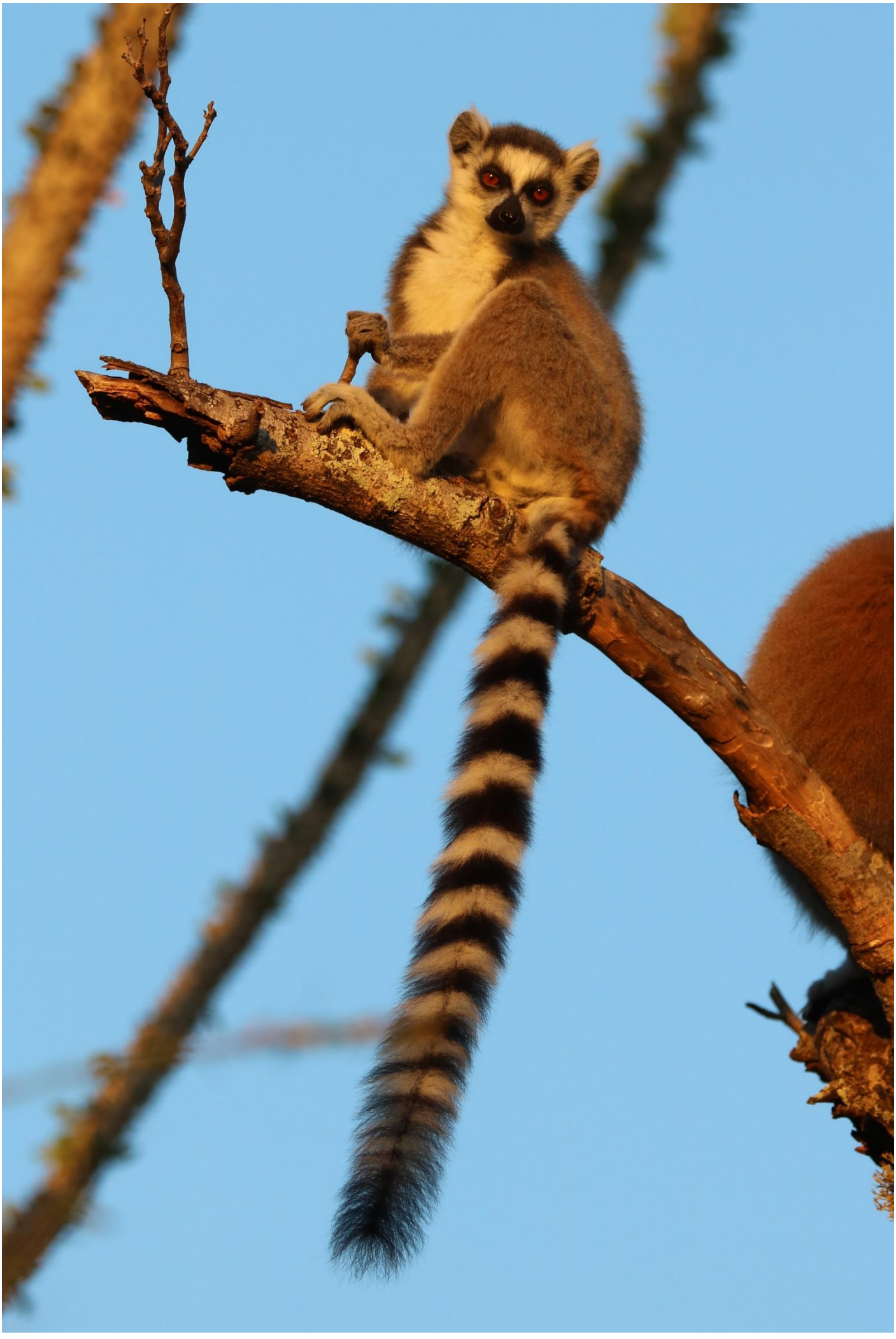
view. The problem was our spotlight, which they evidently hated and would disappear high into the canopy to avoid. They were also fairly nippy and it looked as if I was going to fall at the final hurdle in terms of having photographed every mammal encountered. I cannot remember this having occurred on a major trip previously and we eventually only preserved my 100% record by completely changing our approach and standing in total darkness until it sounded as if one may be fairly close. After several false alarms this finally worked and although my resulting picture was little more than an adequate identification shot, we did enjoy one excellent view and Kirindy had provided the type of magnificent climax that we had all been anticipating. By whatever criteria you choose to judge, our tour had been a spectacular triumph and an unforgettable way to celebrate my son's 18th birthday, which I really hope that James will look back upon as a very special adventure. Not only was it one of the most successful and enjoyable tours I have had the pleasure to be involved with, but it was brilliantly organised and the itinerary worked as well as any I have known. The horrendous weather at the beginning and a couple of Air Mad calamities ensured that it was not entirely seamless, but it was close and, apart from adding perhaps an additional five weeks and another ten magical destinations, I would change very little. A large part of our success was of course due to the efforts of others and a great deal of thanks is owed to my local operators, guides and drivers, all of whom were superb. I made great friends and refamiliarised myself with destinations that I had not visited for far too long and animals that I had simply forgotten how much I missed. As far as I am concerned, Madagascar is a paradise, but it is not just the exquisite Indian Ocean island paradise that you see on the websites, it is a paradise of evolution, living breathing testament to millions of years of isolation and endemism. Most of the flora and fauna that occurs here, simply does not exist anywhere

else in the world and that was also the case with lemurs the size of gorillas and elephant birds that weighed half a tonne. It was all lost and not in the 12,000 years since the last ice age, but in just the previous 2,000 years, considerably less than the blink of an eye in terms of life on earth. I occasionally use the rather lazy term ‘lost world’ to quickly and easily explain the way I feel about this unique island, but others have described Madagascar as a modern day Noah’s Ark and I would not argue with that description. Whilst I do not want to make too many dreadful analogies comparing Madagascar to the Titanic or suggesting that perhaps Noah should not have agreed to save the bloody woodpeckers, the ark is certainly struggling to stay afloat and we simply cannot afford to lose her. One of the most ecologically significant regions on the planet is being devastated as the world stands by and does nothing and in the absence of collective will, I would challenge anyone passionate about wildlife conservation to visit Madagascar before it is too late. Every visit will make a difference, not just in terms of the projects that you support now, but to the local people who need to understand that their futures and those of their children, are inexorably linked to the fate of the lemurs, because tourists are not going to pay to visit empty forests and once the lemurs are gone the entire world will be poorer.

No.	Species	Scientific Name	Notes
1	Fossa	Cryptoprocta ferox	Three or possibly four animals across several sightings at Kirindy.
2	Spotted Fanaloka	Fossa fossana	Individual at Ranomafana.
3	Ring-tailed Mongoose	Galidia elegans	One for an extended period at Amber Mountain.
4	Narrow-striped Mongoose	Mungotictis decemlineata	One sighting of a family of eight at Kirindy.
5	Aye-aye	Daubentonia madagascariensis	Individual on a night walk at Farankaraina.
6	Indri	Indri indri	Several groups at Andasibe-Mantadia.
7	White-fronted Lemur	Eulemur albifrons	Commonly observed at Farankaraina, Nosy Mangabe and Makira.
8	Red-collared Brown Lemur	Eulemur collaris	Introduced population at Berenty hybridised with Eulemur rufifrons.
9	Crowned Lemur	Eulemur coronatus	Routinely observed at Amber Mountain and Ankarana Special Reserve.

10	Brown Lemur	Eulemur fulvus	Healthy numbers at Andasibe-Mantadia and Ankarafantsika and a small group at Katsepy.
11	Mongoose Lemur	Eulemur mongoz	Encountered at night and during the day at Ankarafantsika and during the day at Katsepy.
12	Red-bellied Lemur	Eulemur rubriventer	Two small groups for extended periods at Ranomafana.
13	Red-fronted Brown Lemur	Eulemur rufifrons	Easily observed at Ranomafana and Kirindy and a hybridised population at Berenty.
14	Sanford's Brown Lemur	Eulemur sanfordi	Multiple groups at Amber Mountain and Ankarana.
15	Red Ruffed Lemur	Varecia rubra	A group of between six and eight at Masoala.
16	Black-and-white Ruffed Lemur	Varecia variegata	Small group on the island of Nosy Mangabe.
17	Ring-tailed Lemur	Lemur catta	Common at Berenty and abundant at the Anja Community Reserve.
18	Eastern Woolly Lemur	Avahi laniger	Observed at Farankaraina, Makira and Andasibe-Mantadia National Park.
19	Masoala Woolly Lemur	Avahi mooreorum	Low numbers at Masoala National Park.
20	Western Woolly Lemur	Avahi occidentalis	Several sightings at Ankarafantsika.
21	Golden Bamboo Lemur	Hapalemur aureus	Small groups encountered three days in succession at Ranomafana.
22	Eastern Lesser Bamboo Lemur	Hapalemur griseus	Habituated individuals at a lodge near Andasibe-Mantadia National Park.
23	Western Lesser Bamboo Lemur	Hapalemur occidentalis	Group of six to eight animals at Masoala.
24	Greater Bamboo Lemur	Prolemur simus	One small group of five or six animals at Ranomafana.
25	Ankarana Sportive Lemur	Lepilemur ankaranensis	Daylight and nocturnal views at Ankarana.
26	Milne-Edwards's Sportive Lemur	Lepilemur edwardsi	Several sightings during the day and at night.
27	Zombitse Sportive Lemur	Lepilemur hubbardorum	Daylight views of two individuals.
28	White-footed Sportive Lemur	Lepilemur leucopus	Both diurnal and nocturnal views.
29	Weasel Sportive Lemur	Lepilemur mustelinus	Easily observed at night at Andasibe-Mantadia.
30	Petter’s Sportive Lemur	Lepilemur petteri	Several daylight sightings at Reniala Reserve.
31	Red-tailed Sportive Lemur	Lepilemur ruficaudatus	Low numbers at Kirindy and also identified by guides at Zombitse.
32	Scott's Sportive Lemur	Lepilemur scottorum	Several sightings at Masoala.
33	Red-shouldered Sportive Lemur	Awaiting Classification	Possible new species at Reniala Reserve.
34	Silky Sifaka	Propithecus candidus	Small family group at Makira Natural Park.
35	Coquerel's Sifaka	Propithecus coquereli	Common at Ankarafantsika National Park.
36	Crowned Sifaka	Propithecus coronatus	Easily encountered at Katsepy.
37	Diademed Sifaka	Propithecus diadema	Five groups of between three and nine animals at Andasibe-Mantadia.
38	Milne-Edward's Sifaka	Propithecus edwardsi	Two sightings at Ranomafana.
39	Verreaux's Sifaka	Propithecus verreauxi	Routinely encountered at Berenty, Zombitse and Kirindy.
40	Greater Dwarf Lemur	Cheirogaleus major	A pair at night in a tree at Amber Mountain.
41	Coquerel's Giant Mouse Lemur	Mirza coquereli	Three individuals at night at Kirindy.
42	Pale Fork-marked Lemur	Phaner pallescens	Several sightings at night at Kirindy.
43	Madame Berthe's Mouse Lemur	Microcebus berthae	Encountered in low numbers at one specific location at Kirindy.
44	Grey-brown Mouse Lemur	Microcebus griseorufus	Viewed at night and during the day at Berenty.
45	Goodman's Mouse Lemur	Microcebus lehilahytsara	At least two per night at Andasibe-Mantadia.
46	MacArthur's Mouse Lemur	Microcebus macarthurii	Five or six individuals at Farankaraina.
47	Grey Mouse Lemur	Microcebus murinus	Common at Ankarafantsika and Kirindy.
48	Golden-brown Mouse Lemur	Microcebus ravelobensis	Low numbers at Ankarafantsika.
49	Brown Mouse Lemur	Microcebus rufus	Three fed animals and several wild encounters at Ranomafana.
50	Northern Rufous Mouse Lemur	Microcebus tavaratra	Common at Amber Mountain and Ankarana.

51	Lesser Hedgehog Tenrec	Echinops telfairi	One for an extended period at Reniala Reserve.
52	Lowland Streaked Tenrec	Hemicentetes semispinosus	Six at Masoala National Park.
53	Lesser Tufted-tailed Rat	Eliurus minor	Two encounters in close proximity in the Amber Mountain area.
54	Western Tuft-tailed Rat	Eliurus myoxinus	Several sightings in one area of Kirindy at night.
55	Webb's Tuft-tailed Rat	Eliurus webbi	One good encounter and several brief sightings at Farankaraina.
56	Lowland Red Forest Rat	Nesomys audeberti	Two confirmed sightings at Ranomafana.
57	Eastern Red Forest Rat	Nesomys rufus	Abundant and regularly observed at Ranomafana.
58	Malagasy Giant Jumping Rat	Hypogeomys antimena	Six individuals at Kirindy.
59	Madagascan Flying Fox	Pteropus rufus	Small colony of roosting bats at Berenty.



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