

On the lemur trail

To see lemurs in the wild, you have to go to Madagascar. Stanley Johnson fulfils a lifelong dream

FOR as long as I can remember, I've wanted to see lemurs in the wild. Although I've been to Africa many times in the course of a long career as a writer and conservationist, I have somehow never managed to stop off in Madagascar en route. And if you want to see lemurs in the wild, Madagascar is where you have to go. Lemurs are endemic to the island—that is, they're to be found there and nowhere else.

Lemurs were once widely distributed throughout Madagascar, particularly in the island's eastern rainforests. Today's forests, where the lemurs tend to reside, account for probably less than 10% of the original forested area, but, although relatively small in extent, they're widely distributed. As different lemur species favour different habitats, you should be ready to journey to at least two, if not three, of the country's main regions.

I shall never forget our first morning in the Andasibe-Mantadia National Park, about four hours' drive to the east of the capital, Antananarivo or 'Tana'. It was about 9am and we'd already been trekking for an hour up and down steep leaf-strewn paths. Our guide, Miakatara, a charming young Madagascan, explained during a brief pause while we reached for our water bottles: 'The indri has three types of call—the morning call, the alarm call and the love call.' He held up a finger. 'Listen—there's the morning call. You can hear the indri two miles or more across the forest.'

It was such a weird feeling, listening to the indri greeting a new day. The sheer volume of sound took us totally by surprise. If the indri's love call, as Miakatara explained, is a *chuck-chuck* noise, the morning call was an eerie full-throated wail. The good news is that an indri in full cry is easy to locate. Twenty minutes later, we were gazing up into the trees to see not one, but three leaping from branch to branch, pausing from time to time to take a swipe at some passing fruit.

The indri is the largest of the lemurs. It stands 3½ft tall. It's unique among

lemurs in that its tail is a mere vestigial stump, but the sheer strength of its hindquarters more than compensates for the absence. Although a fully grown indri can weigh up to 27lb, it can cover more than 30ft in a single bound.

Andasibe-Mantadia National Park was a great place to begin the 'lemur trail'. If the indri is the largest lemur, the golden-diademed sifaka, which we also saw here, runs it a close second. We must have seen half a dozen that day. In terms of sheer cuteness, the sifakas (there are nine sifaka species all together) make for wonderful viewing.

“The good news is that an indri in full cry is easy to locate”

You won't see indri at Ranomafana National Park, a day's drive to the south from Tana, but you may well see—as we did—the Milne-Edwards's sifaka, the red-bellied lemur and the greater bamboo lemur, possibly the most endangered of all.

If you're planning your own lemur safari, don't forget the 'nocturnal' lemurs. One night, not long after sunset, we saw a fat-tailed dwarf lemur crossing the road ahead of us as we were driving on the public highway. We also made several night walks in the forest with a guide and head-torches. At Andosibe-Mantadia, we saw a brown mouse lemur and, at Ranomafana, we saw two Goodman mouse lemurs, darting about among the roadside foliage, barely bigger than the leaves they frequented.

Everyone who plans a trip to Madagascar should be ready to spend time exploring and understanding Madagascar's unique wildlife. And it's not just the lemurs—more than 70 species ➤

A black-and-white ruffed lemur lounges in the Alaotra-Maggoro region





all together—that make the island’s wildlife so remarkable. Towards the end of our trip, we visited the Spiny Forest near the south-western coastal village of Ifaty and spent the morning bird-watching among the great baobab trees. That day, we were lucky enough to see two species of birds, the sub-desert mesite and the long-tailed ground roller, which are not only unique to Madagascar, but are actually unique to this particular sub-arid thorn-scrub strip of coastal land.

Charles Darwin had a field day in the Galápagos—what might he have discovered if only the *Beagle* had put in at Madagascar?

If there is more to Madagascan wildlife than lemurs, of course there is more to Madagascar than wildlife. The ‘lemur trail’ just happens to be a brilliant way of seeing the country while looking for, and at, animals.

The island is unique in so many respects. Africa may be the nearest continent, but there is a very Asian flavour about it. Indeed, it’s thought that Malay boatmen colonised Madagascar 2,000 years ago. During our first days, as we drove first east, then south, we passed an endless succession of terraced rice-fields. And the people themselves looked as if they could have come from Jogjakarta.

Only after we had left Ranomafana on the long drive south and east through Bara country did we have a full sense of Madagascar’s African identity. We found ourselves driving for hours through great open country, reminiscent of the East African savannahs. From time to time, we saw vast herds of zebu cows and Masai-type nomads. This is a land in which cattle are king and the people follow the cows as the cows follow the grass.

Miakatara told us: ‘A young man who wants to get married has to prove himself first by stealing some cows!’ He’s full of insights. From time to time, we stopped by roadside tombs. These are often large and costly affairs, prominently decorated with cattle skulls. ‘When a man dies,’ Miakatara explains, ‘all his cows are killed so that they can keep him company in the next world.’

You can learn a lot from the guides on these trips. One day, I walked a few miles to a natural ice-cold swimming pool in the desert in Isalo National Park in the heart of Bara country. Roxy, my guide on that occasion, told me that a local Bara man could have as many wives as he wanted. He knew



Red alert: blue-eyed black, or Sclater’s, lemur—females are red, not black—up a tree in the Sahamalaza national park



A golden-crowned sifaka in Daraina—it’s one of the rarest species and not first scientifically described until 1988



Ring-tailed lemurs at play at the Nahampoana Reserve, a former botanical garde in the south of the island

a man who had five wives, many sons and more than 1,000 zebu cattle.

‘When a man’s son is circumcised,’ Roxy explained, ‘the father eats the foreskin with bananas. Or sometimes, he loads his gun and fires the foreskin into the sky!’

On the way back from the pool, we passed some graves, cut into the hillside, with a pile of small stones to mark the entrance. Roxy explained that, down south, in desert country, it was the practice to leave the dead undisturbed. ‘After his death, a man is able to enjoy his cattle in peace.’

In other parts of the country, the tradition is different. When, a few days earlier, we had passed a roadside procession, Miakatara had explained that a ‘reshrouding’ ceremony was about to take place. ‘They knock on the door of the tomb,’ he had told us, ‘then, they enter and bring out the body and wash it and give it a new shroud before putting it back until it’s time for the next reshrouding.’

There are plenty of pit stops along the ‘lemur trail’ and many shopping opportunities. Local artefacts include wood carvings, model cars, hand-made paper and exquisite wire-framed toy bicycles. My wife and I thought of taking home a shroud, but we bought a cotton tablecloth, embroidered with some tribal patterns.

We also added two beautifully carved ring-tailed lemurs to our little collection of carved wooden animals. I wish we’d bought an indri, too—perhaps next time.

Stanley Johnson was a guest of Reef & Rainforest Tours (01803 866965; www.reefandrainforest.co.uk). The second volume of his memoirs, ‘Stanley I Resume’, is now out in paperback, from the Robson Press

NEED TO KNOW

Earlier this year, Prof Jonah Ratsimbazafy, director of GERP, a centre for primate research on Madagascar, warned that the island’s lemurs face such severe threats to their survival that none of them may be left in the wild in 25 years. Nearly all of the 106 species identified so far are at risk, with many being critically endangered. A 2013 report concluded that 94% of species were at risk—an increase for 66% only seven years previously—and highlighted the need to engage local people, foster eco-tourism and continue research.