

Lake Alaotra - Madagascar October 2023

In 2020 the BBC aired a series program called Primates, highlighting some of the well known and lesser known species of primates on the planet. One of the species they highlighted was the Lac Alaotra Bamboo Lemur (*Haplemur alaotrensis*), also known as the gentle lemur or the “Bandro” by locals. Deb Bradley, my good friend and host of the Let’s Go Wild Podcast, immediately called me after watching the episode and told me we should add a few days to visit this lemur on a trip to Madagascar that we were planning.

While there is some debate that the Bamboo lemur (*Haplemur griseus*) is oversplit, and there are several subspecies, it is not up for debate that this is the only primate that spends its entire life on reed beds above the water. Unlike other bamboo lemurs they also do not eat bamboo, but leaves and shoots from papyrus and some other grasses above the lake. Like many other lemurs females rule and they are cathemeral, being active both day and night. They usually live in small family groups and females carry their young in their mouths until they are strong enough to hold onto their mothers jumping around the reeds. Families also use latrine areas as a common place to urinate and defecate. In my opinion a very special primate indeed!

Lake Alaotra is the largest lake in Madagascar and is in one of the richest areas for rice production, which is a huge staple for the human population. It also has a large (declining) fish population. Both these things make the lake a huge draw point for people to live in. However, this is also a downfall for the lake as increasing human populations are rapidly destroying the lake for rice production, burning for fishing access and grazing areas for cattle, and the lemurs themselves are hunted as a protein source.

There are some groups that are trying to work in the area for conservation, one of them, Madagascar Wildlife Conservation, works with NGO’s, education in local schools and universities and local initiatives to try to ensure the survival of the Bandro.

One of the things the MWC did was help set up Camp Bandro, close to the village of Andreba, which is a community based program for tourism that helps provide income for villagers and for projects such as wells for water supplies. I have always felt that tourism is a vital tool with conservation. This is my experience in the lake area.

Prior to coming to Madagascar I contacted Brilland Andriamirindra, who runs Madacartours. After talking to Brilland about the possibility of seeing the Bandro, he went to the area and figured out the logistics for us. So in October of 2023, Brilland along with my friends Deb Bradley and Angiolo Laviziano traveled north from the capital city of Antananarivo along the RN2 and RN 44 highways to the town of Ambatondrazaka. These two highways were in excellent condition and the travel time was roughly 5 hours. We did stop along the way in the town of Moramanga for lunch at a local restaurant. In Ambatondrazaka we met our local guide Jonathan Randrianjanaka who is working in the area to help promote Bandro tourism. It then took about 40 minutes to drive to Camp Bandro along flat and for the most part smooth, dirt roads.



Sign in Ambatondrazaka about Camp Bandro (CA)

Camp Bandro is in the zone known as Park Bandro along the south east part of the lake. The camp has five comfortable rooms created in the local Sihanaka style, the local ethnic group around the lake. They also have a kitchen area, a bathroom with one western toilet and one eastern with a bucket shower area and a house for the guardians of the camp. The two rooms closest to the kitchen have some electricity. The guardians can also cook all meals for you. People on a strict budget are also able to camp in the grounds by the rooms. At the time our group were the only people staying there. We are told currently that they receive about 1 tourist group a month.



Entrance sign to Camp Bandro (CA)



Drone Footage of Camp Bandro (AL)







Buildings in Camp Bandro (CA)

Kitchen area, bedroom and bathrooms in Camp Bandro (CA)

After spending the night in the camp, we woke up before dawn and traveled about 5 minutes to the edge of the lake to meet some of the locals who would be taking us out on pirogues to see the Bandros. There were already a very large number of people walking to this area and setting off in other pirogues to either fish or start working in the rice fields.



Lake edge at dawn (CA) Locals traveling to the rice fields and drone footage of the lake (AL)



In October the water was low which meant at some points the local guides had to pull us through the water. The guides knew of several areas to see families of Bandro and opted that day to take us to the closest family. After being on a main waterway we were taken into an area of denser reed beds. Two of the local guides then got out of the boat to walk on the reeds, then within 5 minutes found the family and were able to get us all on them. With the water being low, the Bandro's were also very close at the base of the reeds, so we all got views as the family of three navigated



in and out of the reed beds. Going earlier in the year when the water is higher, the Bandro's are easier to see.

After spending some time with them, we were taken back to the lake edge with some bird watching along the way. After breakfast Jonathan suggested that we go to Parc Etal about 25 minutes from Camp Bandro to wildlife watch. The Parc has a variety of bird life, but was also set up to protect a healthy population of the Madagascar Flying Fox.

We spend over an hour with them, then Jonathan got a call that a farmer had found a Madagascar Ground Boa and wanted to know if we wanted to see it. Jonathan had put the word out with the locals that if they find any interesting wildlife to let us know. After seeing the boa, the farmer then proceeded to take us to different areas to look for chameleons and birds. After this we went back to Camp Bandro for lunch and to relax for a bit. Deb and I decided to go back to Parc Etal with Jonathan to wildlife watch. We spent more time with the bats, and walked along some of the various trails in the park. We also found several vacant buildings. One of them close to the flying fox colony had the smell of bats coming from it. Deb



Flying Fox and sign photo (CA)



and I went in and found a small colony of Malagasy White - Bellied Free -Tailed bats in the roof.

Madagascar ground boa and Malagasy White-bellied Free-Tail Bat (CA)

The next day we went back in search for another family off Bandros in a more distant part of the lake. This family proved more a challenge for the locals to find, but just as we were leaving the area, the family of four was found. One of the members was also slightly higher in the reeds providing better views.





All Bandro photos and searching the reed beds (AL). Local guide walking on reed beds (CA)



In the afternoon Jonathan suggested that we go to the outskirts of Zahemena National Park to see Indris. We drove back to the town of Ambatondrazaka and left our belongings at the very basic Zama Meca hotel in town. Jonathan had organized several locals to take us on the back of motorbikes (as the roads would have been impossible even with our four wheel drive vehicle) to an area where we could start hiking. The first part was a VERY large hill straight up.



The hill up (AL)

This was at mid day with no shade in oppressive heat. After this it was another 2.5 hours on trails straight up to the base of the forest again with no shade. The destruction of the local forest from logging, slash and burning, and rice fields was astounding.



The trees in the distance was what was left of the surrounding forest of the National Park (AL)



Forest edge (AL)

There were also multiple people walking down the trail carrying logs from the forest. The heat and hike up proved to much for me and I stopped at the base of the forest. Angiolo was the only member of our group that made it deep enough in the forest to see the Indri, but reported back that most of the forest was being actively cut around him and them. After walking down from the trails we did get a witness a Famadihana ceremony, also known as “turning of the bones” This involves every 5-7 years villagers exhuming family members from tombs to wrap them in fresh cloths and bring them to the village for a celebration before returning them to their tombs.

The Bandro is in dire need of help. Listed as critically endangered, there are probably less than 1000 left according to the locals. Tourism dollars can definitely help, especially as Camp Bandro is a community run program with money going back into the area. Plus it gives extra job opportunities to the locals who help find the Bandro and for the family that takes care of the camp. There is also Durrell's Vontsira in the area and an undescribed mouse lemur (however both are difficult to see). If you are planning a trip to Madagascar in the future, add a night or two to see this amazing primate!

Special thanks to Angiolo Laviziano (AL) for his photos. Other photos by myself Cheryl Antonucci (CA).