

Madagascar September-October 2019

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As an introduction, we want to mention that our trip was fully self-organized. We always dreamed to travel to Madagascar but the prices which travel agencies in Europe and even in Madagascar want you to pay for even short (two-three weeks long) tours are absolutely not affordable at least for those who get their salary in Russian rubles ;). Now when we are back home after our long-awaited and nevertheless a little spontaneous 37-days trip we can surely advise self-organized travel in Madagascar as a much more affordable alternative of agency-organized tours. Moreover, organizing everything by yourself you can maximize your mammal-watching opportunities by focusing on the places and species you are most interested in. Yes, self-planning is time-consuming but you will be rewarded by the enjoyable travel adapted to your individual needs. Even the tours which are organized specifically for mammal watching will not give you the same level of satisfaction because we all have different ideas about perfect mammal-watching holidays. For us, for example, the quality (time, distance, etc.) of the encounters with wild mammals is a key. To have better and longer observations of interesting species we are ready to sacrifice the number of species we see during the trip.

While we found organizing the trip by ourselves was worth the effort, we did not try to go without a local driver. Our research showed that this by no means possible. There are several rental companies in Tana which are ready to give you a car without a driver. However, it would be likely more expensive than to take a car with a driver (it is because of insurance formalities). During our travel, we met several (mostly very young) travellers driving around by themselves. They all looked excited and exhausted at the same time. Our trip included several really long

drives, we had not so much time and we do not speak French. For all these reasons, we decided to skip a self-driving option. After the trip, we still believe this can be an option for those who have plenty of time (to have some days just for rest after the long drives) and who enjoy driving in very different conditions (some roads are really bad, while others are fine, sometimes there are plenty of chaotic transport on the road, sometimes it is just you and a road). If you do not speak any French, however, travelling without a driver may be more problematic (but still possible).

Our trip was divided into two parts: Antongil bay (Part 1) and areas accessible by car from Antananarivo (Part 2).

The first part of the trip we organized with a great help of a local guide - **Emile Rafaralahy** <emilesrafara@gmail.com> . Do not be surprised with his letters inside a word document - this is a result of using an internet cafe in Maroantsetra. Emile has organized various tours in the north-east Madagascar and it seems he knows everyone in the region :) thanks to his 15-years experience of guiding. Not a common thing among guides – he is ready for almost any duration of a walk (both day and night) - all depend on your wishes and, of course, park/forest rules and within the price agreed upon (!). He has deep knowledge about where and when to look for a particular species of frogs, birds and mammals. We really enjoyed his style of walking through the forest quietly and slowly. Many younger guide of the tourist groups we met were too loud or too fast (or both) for full immerse in the nature and high-quality wildlife watching.

In the second part of our trip we, following Romain Bocquier 2018 trip report, travelled with Brilland Andriamirindra. Brilland – is a super nice and friendly owner of MadaCarTour, a small Tana company providing you with a well-maintained car and English-speaking driver, who can help you organize things before and during the trip. Since Brilland as a driver was booked for a nearly half of our trip, he organized another driver, Michael aka Mike, who was very helpful, gentle and quiet, which is crucial during 7-8 hours drives from park to park. The trip was smooth and safe. Thank you guys so much!

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Our species list (53 species)

PART 1

Maroantsetra town is not only a gateway to reserves in the area but also a home to a Madagascar tomato frog - well, not a mammal, but a terrific species inhabiting the town trashy streams (local guides can show the best places to look for).

Masoala National Park - **greater dwarf lemur, Seal's (aka Masoala) sportive lemur, white-fronted brown lemur, red ruffed lemur, ring-tailed mongoose, lowland streaked tenrec** (near the village).

Nosy Mangabe - **Peter's sheath-tailed bat, black-and-white ruffed lemur**, white-fronted brown lemur, **brown (?) mouse lemur**. Madagascar flying foxes were also possible on the way to the island but this was canceled because of rough weather. We were able to have a night walk at Nosy Mangabe because the authorities of Masoala NP and Nosy Mangabe seem to permit night walks soon (at least rangers believe they will). Unfortunately, despite the intense searching and spotlighting, no aye-aye were seen – only freshly opened fruits of the *Canarium* tree.

Farankaraina Forest (aka tropical park, aka reserve) - **aye-aye, western grey bamboo lemur, white-fronted brown lemur, greater dwarf lemur, eastern woolly lemur (avahi), MacArthur's mouse lemur.** Farankaraina actually exceed our expectations: with quite a small territory it has impressive number of mammals (all of which, with may be an exception of eastern woolly lemur, are guaranteed to see in two-three days of stay). The forest is undoubtedly great place to see truly wild aye-ayes. In two nights we were lucky to see four (!) aye-ayes at the same tree at the same time and observed them for about four hours (two hours each night). Albeit high in a *Canarium* tree these fantastic nocturnal lemurs were fully at open at some moments, cracking and throwing down *Canarium* fruits and do not pay much attention to our torch. Farankaraina seems to be reliable place to see aye-ayes at least when *Canarium* trees are fruiting there. Brief inspection of the guest book in the Forest office revealed that recent visitors saw one to four aye-ayes at almost every night visit! Moreover some lodges in Masoala organize an exclusive (and expensive) aye-aye search tour with a boat drive "to some place", which is actually here. The bout trip from Maroantsetra town is actually very affordable. Non-expensive camping shelters and old but nice bungalows facing the sea are available. And the beach is beautiful for swimming what is much appreciated after jungle walks.

PART 2

Ankarafantsika National Park: Coquerel's sifaka, **common brown lemur, western woolly lemur (avahi), mongoose lemur, Milne-Edwards' sportive lemur, fat-tailed dwarf lemur, grey mouse lemur, golden-brown mouse lemur, western tuft-tailed rat.** Sportive lemurs can be easily seen and heard at the campground (Ampijoroa) near visitor center (**not** on the guided night walk near the park border). Nice camping with lemurs, birds and reptiles day and night, but can be noisy at times.

Antrema Forest near Katsepy village: **crowned sifaka, mongoose lemur, red lemur** (aka rufous brown lemur, aka northern red-fronted lemur). All of them are habituated to humans, because some of them are fed by rangers. To reach Antrema (which begins just behind the lighthouse) you should find a boat in Mahajanga (aka Majunga). Basicly no overnight stay is needed, but just in case - Chez Chabaud is the only accommodation at Katsepy, but camping near Antrema office seems to be possible also (need to bring your own tent).

Maromizaha Reserve: **Indri, diademed sifaka, eastern grey bamboo lemur, weasel sportive lemur, Madagascan rousette** (outside the reserve, inside so-called **Maromizaha cave**). The cave is actually outside the reserve, it can be visited if you park your car at the upper entrance of Maromizaha Reserve. Just follow a narrow backward path leading directly to the cave. Madagascan rousettes are high in the cave roof, so a good binocular is essential. Maromizaha Reserve is not an easy place to visit because of rather steep terrain and an obligatory and noisy Maromizaha guide (not as good as elsewhere in the area). Note that tourist campground there is about 6 km from the cave (up-and-down walk through the forest) and about 3 km from the office (easier walk through plantations). Another "research camping" is very noisy.

Andasibe National Park (Analamazotra section): Indri, diademed sifaka, common brown lemur, eastern grey bamboo lemur, **eastern woolly lemur (avahi)**, greater dwarf lemur, **Goodman's mouse lemur**.

Mantadia National Park: Indri, **red-bellied lemur**

Mitsinjo Reserve (aka Mitsinjo Park Analamazaotra Forest Station): Indri, common brown lemur, **hairy-eared dwarf lemur**, Goodman's mouse lemur, eastern woolly lemur (avahi), greater dwarf lemur, tufted-tailed rat possibly **Webb's tufted-tailed rat**. Mitsinjo Reserve has a beautiful camping visited by wild lemurs day and night.

V.O.I.M.M.A. Community Reserve: Indri (with an infant!), Goodman's mouse lemur, eastern woolly lemur (avahi).

Reserve Villageoise D'Ankazomivady (between Ambositra and Ambohimahasoia): **red-fronted brown lemur**. Nice place to have lunch and short forest walk on the way to Ranomafana and also seems to be a promising place for a night walk. Great birding even in the middle of the day.

Ranomafana National Park: **greater bamboo lemur** (*well known father and daughter*), **golden bamboo lemur**, **eastern forest rat**, tuft-tailed rat (maybe **Tanala tuft-tailed rat**) in a hollow, red-bellied lemur, red-fronted brown lemur, greater dwarf lemur, brown mouse lemur, **Milne-Edward's sifaka**, lowland streaked tenrec (daytime). We also heard a group of black and white ruffed lemurs. **Cave** near waterfall in Ranomafana: **Malagasy mouse-eared bat, long-fingered bats** (at least two species).

Anja Community Reserve: **ringtail lemur**. Anja has a lovely small camping in the forest edge which is visited by ringtails almost every day. Very much recommended if want to observe these beautiful creatures longer than during a short day walk which most of the visitors take.

Kirindy Forest (NB! *Kirindy Mitea National Park - is another place*) - **fossa, narrow-striped mongoose, red-tailed sportive lemur, pale fork-marked lemur, grey mouse lemur, Verreaux's sifaka, red-fronted brown lemur, Malagasy giant jumping rat, western (bastard) big-footed mouse**; introduced: **brown rat (aka Norway rat)**.

It should be noted here that guides in Kirindy seem to convincingly mislead visitors about hibernation of several lemur species (Coquerel's giant and Madame Berthe's mouse lemurs). They say that both species hibernate in autumn, but they don't! One of the possible reasons for that may be a recent change of the area for the night walk with no other places possible, but some field research impact can also be a reason and see also Jon Hall 2010 report. Since 2019 the rubbish dump in the base is no longer in use because of visitors complaints, and a new one is far away with no chance to visit. So the fossas and mongooses are not so regular now and more days-nights of stay is required for more or less guaranteed encounters.

Also our quick research of trip reports indicate that most recent sightings of Coquerel's giant mouse lemur were at Kirindy in April-May 2017, so do not put much expectations for this species!

To have a full mammal watching experience we recommend having at least one sleepless night there. Fossas, owls, giant jumping rats, big-footed mice can show up late at night. Just walk around the camp area as often as you can at different parts of the night and you will be rewarded with close-up intimate encounters with beautiful animals. You can walk a little bit along the main road. This is not officially allowed but we did it three nights and nobody stopped us. Don't go too far as local criminals are believed to be visit the remote parts of the road from time to time (no idea if this is true or just a scary story to prevent people to walk at night).

Camp Amoureux (near Kirindy): Verreaux's sifaka, red-fronted brown lemur, red-tailed sportive lemur, pale fork-marked lemur, grey mouse lemur, **Madame Berthe's mouse lemur.**

Be careful – the guides here think that they have also grey-brown mouse lemur in the area, but it is just a colour morph of grey mouse lemur. Camp Amoureux is an ideal stay in Kirindy area - tents there are much cooler than bungalows in Kirindy and it is much quieter in Amoureux. However there is almost no chance to see a mongoose, fossa or jumping rat.

For mammal ID we largely used Nick Garbutt's Mammals of Madagascar - A Complete Guide. *Where to see* sections in the guide are still good for organizing the trip.

Please feel free to contact us (zoology.gilev@gmail.com) if you have any questions!



Seal's sportive lemur, fossa, western big-footed mouse, lowland streaked tenrec.