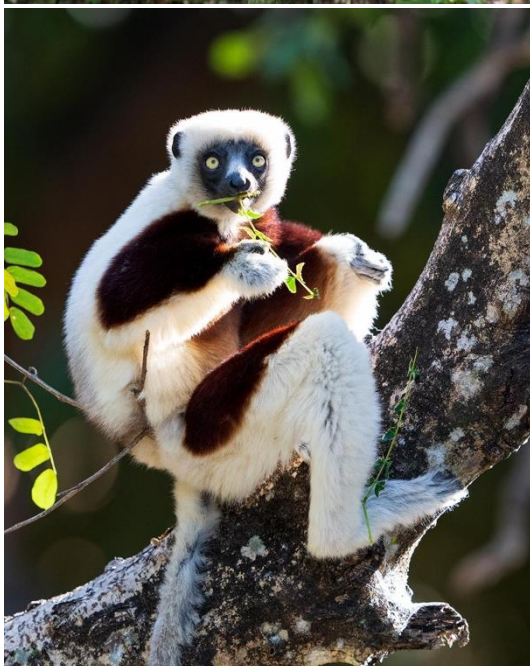


Madagascar lemur photography tour

MOGENS TROLLE

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14 July – 5 August 2022



Main places visited

- Andasibe (Mitsinjo Reserve + Analamazaotra National Park)
- Ankarafantsika National Park
- Katsepy lighthouse forest
- Sahamalaza region (along the RN6 main road)
- Nosy Komba (small island just south of Nosy Be)

Route résumé

Antananarivo – Andasibe – Antananarivo (night en route) – Ankarafantsika – Mahajanga (night en route to catch the ferry early next morning) – Katsepy (ferry across the Bombetoka Bay) – Antsohihy (night en route) – Sahamalaza region – Katsepy (end of road trip, private boat to end destination) – Nosy Komba

PS: We flew from Nosy Be to Tana to catch our international flight but notice that there are also international flights out of Nosy Be (e.g., Ethiopian Airlines and Air Italia).

Mammal species observed

CHEIROGALEIDAE		
Grey mouse lemur	<i>Microcebus murinus</i>	Katsepy
Golden-brown mouse lemur	<i>Microcebus ravelobensis</i>	Ankarafantsika
Goodman's mouse lemur	<i>Microcebus lehilahytsara</i>	Andasibe
Northern giant mouse lemur	<i>Mirza zaza</i>	Sahamalaza region
LEPILEMURIDAE		
Weasel sportive lemur	<i>Lepilemur mustelinus</i>	Andasibe
Milne-Edwards's sportive lemur	<i>Lepilemur edwardsi</i>	Ankarafantsika
LEMURIDAE		
Grey bamboo lemur	<i>Hapalemur griseus</i>	Andasibe
Brown lemur	<i>Eulemur fulvus</i>	Andasibe + Ankarafantsika
Rufous brown lemur	<i>Eulemur rufus</i>	Katsepy
Black lemur	<i>Eulemur macaco</i>	Nosy Komba
Blue-eyed black lemur	<i>Eulemur flavifrons</i>	Sahamalaza region
Mongoose lemur	<i>Eulemur mongoz</i>	Katsepy
INDRIIDAE		
Eastern woolly lemur	<i>Avahi laniger</i>	Andasibe
Western woolly lemur	<i>Avahi occidentalis</i>	Ankarafantsika
Crowned sifaka	<i>Propithecus coronatus</i>	Katsepy
Coquerel's sifaka	<i>Propithecus coquereli</i>	Ankarafantsika
Diademed sifaka	<i>Propithecus diadema</i>	Analamazaotra
Indri	<i>Indri indri</i>	Andasibe
TENRECIDAE		
Hova mole tenrec	<i>Oryzorictes hova</i>	Andasibe

References for taxonomy and distributions: Mittermeier et al. (2021) *Mammals of Madagascar* + the online resource www.lemursofmadagascar.com by Mittermeier *et al.* which has detailed distribution maps for the lemurs.

INTRODUCTION

The main goal of this trip was to photograph four of the most charismatic lemur species as part of my ongoing primate photography project and the route was planned accordingly: **indri** (Andasibe), **Coquerel's sifaka** (Ankarafantsika), **crowned sifaka** (Katsepy), and **blue-eyed black lemur** (Sahamalaza region), the three latter in NW Madagascar in parts of the country that I had not visited before. I dedicated most days in the mentioned areas to trailing and photographing the target species, but along the way we also had time to look for other wildlife, both day and night (we had a total of 7 night walks).

Our Madagascar trip, that we had had to postpone two years due to the COVID-19 lockdown, got off to a bumpy start. Rather than the 18 hours the trip from Copenhagen to the Malagasy capital of Antananarivo (aka Tana) was supposed to take, we ended up spending six days getting there, with three involuntary

nights in Cairo and two likewise in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia – all due to a delayed Lufthansa flight out of Copenhagen and a subsequent string of unbelievably bad luck and incompetent airlines that we will surely laugh about one day. This meant that we unfortunately had to cancel our visit to the Lokobe Reserve on Nosy Be at the end of our journey, but thankfully it was still possible to go through with the three-week road trip that was the core of the voyage.

Madagascar had reopened after the lockdown shortly before our trip and in several of the places we visited we were some of the first or indeed the very first international tourists they had had since COVID-19 shot down the world. Local guides have suffered immensely economically during the two-year hiatus without tourism and were eager to get back to work and show us the wild treasures of Madagascar.

I had visited Madagascar twice before as a tour leader for Danish groups, in 2004 and 2005, and based on these experiences I expected a certain number of things not to go quite according to plan. That was indeed the case, but our excellent tour organizer **Brilland Andriamirindra (Madacartour)**, who also drove us to the first three locations, worked logistical wonders and made things run smooth despite challenges along the way (see additional information about Brilland below).

In the Sahamalaza region, however, we ran into the worst road conditions I've ever encountered, a result of the latest round of cyclones, which prompted a change of plans to allow me to optimize my time photographing the blue-eyed black lemur. Thus, instead of going all the way into the tented camp in the Sahamalaza National Park, we focused on the population of the species along the main road through the region, more precisely the **Antanambao–Antontorona** area, in sites administered by local conservation organizations and conservationists. Sahamalaza NP is always difficult to access, and this offers an easier alternative to see the “manga masos”, blue eyes, as they are called locally.

In the planning phase, I had great use of previous Madagascar reports on Mammalwatching, in particular Ian Loyd's 2019 *Rare Mammals of Madagascar* and the 2019 report by The Travelling Zoologists, Andrey and Karina. The latter also supplied much appreciated additional advice on where best to photograph my target species. Good information about when and where to see lemur species is also to be found on the online resource www.lemursofmadagascar.com by Mittermeier *et al.*

Although our species list is not nearly as impressive as those found in many other Madagascar reports on Mammalwatching (we saw 18 out of the now 108 recognized lemur species), I thought it would be worthwhile to share some of my experiences, especially from the less-visited areas on the trip.

On this trip, Mia Lindegaard Pedersen and Marie Rubæk Holm accompanied me.

ANDASIBE

4 nights, 2 night walks

The Andasibe area east of and not far from Tana is one of the most popular east-coast rainforest areas in Madagascar, and for good reason. It has much to offer, including the largest and best singer of the lemurs, the **indri**, a total of 8 lemur species that it should be possible to see in a couple of days (except during the dry season when the *Cheirogaleus* species is hibernating) plus several chameleons (incl. Parson's chameleon, the largest of all chameleons) and leaf-tailed geckos (*Uroplatus*).

The most visited place in the area is the **Analamazaotra National Park**. However, we opted for camping at the **Mitsinjo Reserve** (photo to the right) run by an association of local guides which is located just across the road from Analamazaotra. Due to its ruggedness and steep, sometimes slippery trails, Mitsinjo is not nearly as visited as Analamazaotra, and for that reason alone it is worthwhile including it. It is equally as good for indris as Analamazaotra and unlike in the



The dense forest and steep trails of the Mitsinjo Reserve in prime indri habitat.

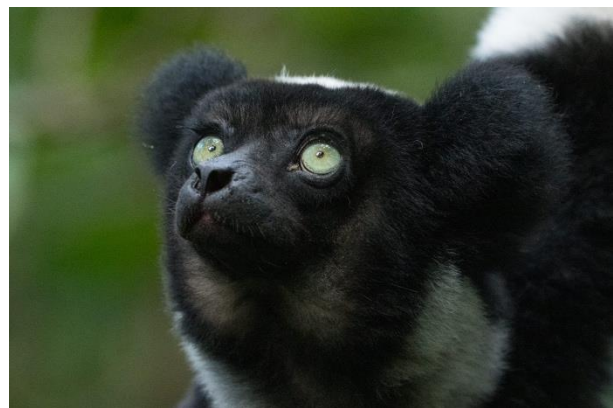
latter place where many tourists often gather around the indris, you are likely to get the indris to yourself (at least that was our experience).

Diademed sifaka has recently been reintroduced to Analamazaotra and should be possible to find if you ask your guide to look for it, although it may take more walking than to find the indris. We saw two different groups of this attractive species.

Brown lemur is also commonly seen, and we had a single observation of **grey bamboo lemur**.

A great place for **night walks**, too. If you want to go into the protected areas you will have to organize a local guide (and thus support the local economy), but you are also allowed to nightspot yourself along the main road through the forest passing in front of the main entrance to both Mitsinjo and Analamazaotra. On our two night walks we saw many **Goodman's mouse lemur** plus **weasel sportive lemur** and **eastern woolly lemur**.

Be aware that nights can be surprisingly chilly here since you are still up in the altitudes.



ANKARAFANTSIKA NATIONAL PARK

4 nights, 2 night walks

This important national park is located a full day's drive along a pothole-riddled main road from Tana, across the central highlands that run like a spine from north to south. It consists of dry deciduous forest home to, among others, the exquisite **Coquerel's sifaka**.

The best place to see and photograph the sifakas is actually around the main headquarters where you also find the restaurant, the camping grounds, and the relatively new (although not particularly charming) bungalows placed next to a big lake (the view to which is sparse due to trees along the water). If possible, choose cabin 4 that seems to be placed in a sweet spot. Sifakas slept in a tree just next to it and we saw an additional three lemur species from the balcony of the bungalow,

including **brown lemur**. The sifakas often sleep in the giant mango trees around the headquarters. In the cool morning they move to more open trees where they sunbathe in the top. Later in the day, however, they may come close to the ground to feed and move about.

Day walks in the national park dry forest gave a **Milne-Edwards's sportive lemur** peeking out from its tree hole. However, we missed the **mongoose lemur**, which is also present in the park. During the dry season when we were there, we were told it is nocturnal.

Night walks gave plenty of **mouse lemurs** (the park has both *Microcebus murinus* and *M. ravelobensis*) and **western woolly lemur**. The park also has **fat-tailed dwarf lemur** (*Cheirogaleus medius*), however, that was hibernating when we were there. At Ankarafantsika you can also organize a boat trip on the lake with good chances of seeing Nile crocodile and Madagascar fish eagle.





KATSEPY

4 nights, 1 night walk

From Ankarafantsika it is a couple of hours to the major port city of Mahajanga (Majunga) on the west coast. We had to spend the night there in order to catch an early ferry across the Bombetoka Bay into which the Betsiboka River runs (the ferry schedule is influenced by the tide). We were surprised to see how small the ferry is, but they still managed to squeeze our 4x4 and another one on board along with 70+ passenger, their live chicken and a dead body in a casket. The sailing trip takes about half an hour and ends at the village of Katsepy on a sandy coconut-palm beach with no dock or the like, so you back the car down a flimsy ramp right onto the sand.

From the Katsepy beach it is about half an hour's drive along a bumpy dirt road to where you can see crowned sifaka. The scant research on this species has been conducted at Site Bioculturel d'**Antrema** and it may be possible to organize a visit to Antrema. However, I opted for going to **the Katsepy lighthouse** that is surrounded by a small forest with large baobabs where it is quite easy to find three diurnal lemur species: **crowned sifaka**, **rufous brown lemur** and a few **mongoose lemur**. This forest and its lemurs are not officially protected, although the lighthouse keeper and his wife are keen on taking care of the sifakas (and prevent tourists from feeding the sifakas that are considered sacred by the locals).



View from the Katsepy lighthouse of the surrounding forest.

It should be possible to tick off the three diurnal lemurs in one morning, so in theory you could make it a day excursion from Mahajanga and come back with the ferry in the afternoon. However, you can also do like us and stay in the relatively new **Andafirô Lodge** right on the beach and a 20-30 minutes' drive from the lighthouse. It is a nice place with a great location and quite good food (the isolation considered). This

would allow you to do night spotting with the lighthouse keeper which we did. We saw the **grey mouse lemur** and according to the lighthouse keeper there is also **sportive lemur** which should be the *Antafia sportive lemur (Lepilemur aeeclis)* based on the distributional maps on www.lemursofmadagascar.com.

From Andafirôï Lodge you can organize a speed boat to take you to Mahajanga, which is a much easier, more flexible and quicker alternative to the ferry, taking about 10 minutes. From the lodge you can also organize a boat trip into the bay to see flamingos and it may also be possible to do a whale excursion during the right season.

Another place to see the crowned sifaka is described at www.lemursofmadagascar.com:

- Nearby, Fanamby is currently working to achieve protected area status for the **Belemboka-**

Bombetoka Forests, another site for *Propithecus coronatus* and *Eulemur mongoz*. The area can be reached via Boanamary, 27 km to the west of RN4, and has basic, community-managed tourism facilities in Mataitromby. A visit to the Belemboka Forests and the Bombetoky mangroves (using a patrol boat) can be arranged by Fanamby. The Belemboka Forest is much more accessible than the Anjamena forests for several reasons. First is the availability of a boat to cross the Betsiboka River, second the presence of local guides, and third the ease with which one can see the sifakas. Reaching the forest requires a 30-minute walk, as opposed to a 1–3-hour drive from Katsepy to Anjamena. Fanamby is currently developing community-based ecotourism in the area.



Above: Female rufous brown lemur. Below: Mongoose lemur with its characteristic white muzzle.

SAHAMALAZA REGION

The last destination on our road trip, the Sahamalaza National Park, was too many hours of driving from Mahajanga to do in one day, so we had a stopover in Antsohihy where we stayed at the good Hotel Belle Vue which has an excellent restaurant. From there it is another half a day to the entrance to the park along the seriously potholed main road RN6.

As mentioned above we were supposed to go deep into the exciting and wild Sahamalaza National Park where the place to stay is a tented camp at Ankarafa (the canvas tents are large enough to stand up in so are not the little cramped camping type). For much of the year, the way to get here involves three hours of sailing along the coast to a village, two hours of walking and an hour in 4WD. However, in the dry season there is a window where it is normally possible to access the park by 4WD from the other side, the RN6, via a dirt road maintained by the national parks service. According to our local driver, the excellent, experienced, and highly recommendable **Naivo** (Andrianjatovo Rasoanaivo) who has been a driver in Northern Madagascar for 20 years and knows the region like his own back pocket, this drive should take about 4 hours. And that was the way we were supposed to go. But, alas, in the last cyclone season some of the bridges along this road had been





destroyed so instead we took an alternative dirt track into Sahamalaza across a rugged mountainous landscape that turned out to be absolutely horrendous. Even Naivo who is used to tougher roads than most had to admit that he had never tried anything quite like it. This route would probably have taken at least 8-9 hours to the tented camp which in turn would cost me two days of potential blue-eyed black lemur photography. So as much as I wanted to stay in the tented camp and experience that part of Sahamalaza, halfway we decided to turn around and instead focus on the population of blue-eyed black lemurs along the main road.

Thus, we ended up spending three nights and two full days in the **Antanambao–Antontorona** area (along the RN6) where we had many close and lovely encounters with the amazing manga masos. This is definitely an easier alternative to seeing the species compared to going to Sahamalaza. There are various local conservation organizations and conservationists that offer blue-eyed lemur spotting in the Antanambao–Antontorona area.

I spent the two days with an inspirational local gentleman, **Tsivery Victor** (phone 03309 59120), who has dedicated his life to protecting the manga masos in a forested valley where he himself owns a patch of forest. The species is protected locally by a taboo that forbids hunting and eating them. But outside people who don't abide to that rule killed almost all the blue-eyed lemurs in the valley not so many years ago. Luckily, partly due to new legislation protecting the species, they have returned to the valley since the slaughter, and now Tsivery is monitoring nine groups. Tsivery has himself encountered severe resistance in his admirable effort to save the blue-eyed lemurs and after two years of lockdown he is thinking about giving up and selling his patch of forest. Therefore, I wholeheartedly recommend that



Tsivery to the left and Naivo to the right overlooking the valley of the blue-eyed black lemurs.

mammal watchers passing through the region support him by going on a walk with him into the valley and meeting “his” lemurs. Several of the groups are habituated and will get very close to you.

On the second evening we walked to the bottom of the valley and waited there until sunset and then returned **night spotting** along the beautiful little stream running through the valley. Here, twice I spotted **northern giant mouse lemur**.

While in the Antanambao–Antontorona region we stayed in the rustic bungalows at **Auberge La Cascade** run by the charming **Madam Soatody**, apparently the only place to stay and eat in the area (Lacascade_maromandia@yahoo.com; Facebook: Lacascade Maromandia Andrymbato). From here you can also do a guided walk to see blue-eyed lemurs which enter the plantations of the local villagers during the day (and one day even passed by the bungalows). By the end of the afternoon, they return to their sleeping trees in the neighboring forest on the edge of the mangrove. (I would however prioritize going with Tsivery where you get to see the lemurs inside proper forest habitat.)



Female blue-eyed black lemur.

NOSY KOMBA

We left La Cascade after an early breakfast which gave us time enough to do a stopover in the vanilla-and-cocoa city of Ambanja to buy vanilla and still make it in time to the harbor of Ankify. If you are sailing from here to Nosy Be or, as in our case, Nosy Komba, you are recommended to do so at the latest around lunch, since it often gets windier and wavier in the afternoon. Brilland had booked a private boat for us taking us straight to our lodge on Nosy Komba (a 20-minute trip).

Nosy Komba is a small, forested island off the eastern tip of Nosy Be with no traffic and much more peaceful than busy Nosy Be that has become quite the party-place for Europeans. It was a perfect place to end our itinerary. After three weeks of dusty, bumpy roadtripping, we sincerely enjoyed staying for two nights at the fantastic **Coco Komba**, a relatively small lodge run by a French couple. A great location right on the beach and the best food we had on the whole trip. On the lodge we organized a boat trip to the even smaller, nearby island Nosy Tanikely, surrounded by a marine reserve with coral reef where you can snorkle. At the right seasons, from the lodge you can also organize whale shark and humpback whale excursions.



Nosy Tanikely, a tiny island off Nosy Komba surrounded by a marine reserve with coral reef where we went snorkeling with colorful fish and sea turtles.

ANTANANARIVO

I must admit that I’m not a big fan of Tana. But if you find yourself here, the zoological garden is worth a visit. When I was there in 2005 it was also possible to organize a visit to the zoo in the evening to experience the nocturnal aye-aye active.

Accommodation: On this trip we stayed at both the Niaoly Hotel and Sakamanga Hotel, both fine places with good restaurants.

Organizing a trip to Madagascar

In my experience it is worth gold having a good, knowledgeable, and trustworthy local tour organizer when you do a trip to Madagascar, both in the planning phase and while on the actual tour. Some things will almost inevitably not go according to plan and having someone who can quickly and efficiently sort out the problems makes all the difference. I can sincerely recommend our tour organizer for this trip.

Brilland has a vast knowledge of national parks and reserves in Madagascar and how to visit them, he speaks good English (having lived in the US) and is pleasant company on the road, and he is an organizational and logistical wizard (he used to do logistics for big companies and run a hotel). We appreciated immensely how flexible and understanding he was when we on our arduous 6-day trip to Madagascar almost on a daily basis had to change the dates for our roadtrip, and, yet, he managed to make everything work.

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Parson's chameleon (Andasibe), mossy leaf-tailed gecko (Andasibe), crested coua (Katsepy), and a male rufous brown lemur (Katsepy).