Full Detailed Itinerary - Madagascar: Birding the Eighth Continent

Day 1: Antananarivo

We arrive in Antananarivo (often known simply as “Tana”), the island’s capital, and spend a night in a city hotel. As soon as we land in this city, it’s obvious that we are in a very different part of the world. Quaint two-story red brick houses rise from a landscape of endless rice fields. Despite being in the mountains, Tana almost feels like an island floating in a sea of rice!

Day 2: Antananarivo to Ifaty

A morning flight takes us to Tulear. After landing, we transfer to Ifaty, surrounded by the strange spiny desert, Madagascar’s most striking and unique natural landscape. Here, the spiny-tentacled octopus trees, cactus-like euphorbias, and towering baobabs combine to create an eerie scene. Our first birds should include Olive Bee-eater, Madagascar Lark, and Madagascar Cisticola. En route we encounter several marshes and wetlands, where we should find many waterbirds, ranging from shorebirds like “Malagasy” Three-banded Plover and Black-winged Stilt, to marsh denizens like the shy Baillon’s Crake or Greater Painted-Snipe.

Day 3: Ifaty

This morning we seek out spectacular semi-desert endemics such as Running Coua, Thamnornis, Archbold’s Newtonia, and the recently split Olive-capped Coua. The hulking Sickle-billed Vangas give themselves away by their odd wails, that sounds more like a human baby than a bird! There are two very rare endemics here: the cryptic Subdesert Mesite and the elegant Long tailed Ground-Roller, an elusive bird resembling a colorful roadrunner. We sometimes find these birds by following their tracks in the red sand. A night walk will give us the opportunity to see a whole new cast of non-avian specialties here, such as Grey and Grey-brown Mouse Lemurs, Petter’s Sportive Lemur, Madagascar Ground Gecko and the outstanding Lesser Hedgehog Tenrec, a member of an endemic mammal family with an uncanny resemblance to hedgehogs despite little relation.

Day 4: Ifaty to Tulear

After another morning birding around Ifaty we head to Tulear to overnight. We may stop for more wetland birding along the way, focusing on the endemic Madagascar Plover if we have not yet found one. In the afternoon, we head for the strange coral-rag scrub habitat around the plateau of La Table to search for Verreaux’s Coua, Lafresnaye’s Vanga and Red-shouldered Vanga, a species only discovered in the 1990’s.

Day 5: Tulear Area

Today, we board a boat to visit Nosy Ve, a small, enchanting offshore islet, whose star attraction is a colony of Red-tailed Tropicbirds, but also often hosts Crab Plovers. If time allows we will have the chance to enter the water for some snorkeling, so be sure to pack a swimsuit if you’re keen. The local reefs are home to plenty of dazzling fish like butterflyfish, wrasse, Moorish Idol, and the strange Pacific Trumpetfish. After, we

return to the lodge with a stop at Anakao to search for the very local Littoral Rock-Thrush.

Day 6: Zombitse and Isalo

We will wake up very early and drive about 3 hours inland to Zombitse-Vohibasia National Park, where we spend a few hours birding. This park is a forest haven in the dry and mainly de-forested southwest. Our main target is one of the world's most range-restricted birds: Appert's Tetraka that is only found in this forest. Other residents in this dry, deciduous forest include Giant Coua, Cuckoo-Roller, and Rufous Vanga. We often get lucky with day roosting Zombitse Sportive Lemurs, Madagascar (Torotoroka) Scops-Owls, and sometimes even White-browed Owl. Our time in the forest may also produce some memorable encounters with the local Verreaux's Sifaka troops. By mid-day, we arrive at Isalo, whose sandstone massifs and lush riparian forests rank among the most striking of Malagasy landscapes. When the day begins to cool, we search for the 'Benson's' Forest Rock-Thrush that frequents the hotel grounds. We may also search for any owls that we failed to find on day roosts earlier in the day.

Day 7: Isalo to Ranomafana

Today is a long driving day, but is not without rewards, as we stop to search for the local Madagascar Partridge, and hope to encounter the rare Malagasy Harrier along the way. Along the drive we will make a quick but memorable stop at Anja Community Reserve to see Madagascar's most famous animal, the iconic Ring-tailed Lemur. These habituated yet wild lemurs provide photographers and wildlife watchers an incomparable experience, often accompanied by a few mothers and their young at close range. We will certainly leave this reserve feeling spoiled. We will then complete our drive through grasslands of the central plateau which are all that separates us from the beckoning eastern rainforests, which we reach this evening at Ranomafana.

Days 8-10: Ranomafana

This is Madagascar's premier mid-altitude rainforest reserve. We'll search for a variety of endemics like Brown Mesite, Henst's Goshawk, Pollen's Vanga, and Ward's Vanga. Higher up we bird Vohiparara, where we look for birds like Madagascan Yellowbrow, Rufous-headed Ground-Roller, Wedge-tailed Jery, and Common Sunbird-Asity. The ridge is also home to the well-named Cryptic Warbler which remained undiscovered until the 1990s! Wetlands in the area give us a chance of locating Meller's Duck, Madagascar Snipe, and Gray Emutail. Throughout our time here we will search for the local lemurs. Twelve species of lemur, Madagascar's weird and enchanting primates, are found at Ranomafana, and one night we'll have the unforgettable experience of Rufous Mouse Lemurs coming to within inches of our faces. Our daytime hikes may produce sightings of Milne-Edwards' Sifaka, Red-fronted Brown Lemur, Golden Bamboo Lemur, or the almost extinct Greater Bamboo Lemur.

Day 11: Ranomafana to Antsirabe

After a final morning here we drive to Antsirabe for the night. This highland town is in Madagascar's agricultural heartland, and retains a strong colonial feel from the days of French rule. We usually enjoy an excellent dinner here due to the bounty of fresh, high-quality local produce. Post-morning birding, the drive will take up the entirety of the day, giving everyone a chance to rest and enjoy the passing landscapes.

Day 12: Antsirabe to Andasibe-Mantadia

We continue on to Andasibe-Mantadia, crossing the Horombe Plateau, where roadside markets display a variety of handicrafts, fruit, and meat. We sometimes see Madagascar Pratincole en route along the

Mangoro River. Like the previous day, the drive will take up the entirety of the day, giving everyone a chance to rest and begin the next day with “full batteries”.

Days 13-16: Andasibe-Mantadia and Perinet Reserve

These two areas offer the best chance to see some of the country’s finest rainforest birds. Mantadia is the best ground-roller reserve in Madagascar, and we might see Pitta-like, Rufous-headed, Short-legged, and Scaly Ground-Rollers here. We’ll also search for easier quarry such as Madagascar Blue-Pigeon, Forest Fody, Madagascar Pygmy-Kingfisher, and Madagascar Starling. We will also keep our ears and eyes open for the secretive Madagascar Flufftail and Madagascar Rail. In the forested hills around Perinet, we will try to locate the very local Red-breasted, Red-fronted, and Blue Couas, the glowing Velvet Asity, and the bizarre tree-creeping Nuthatch Vanga. The experience of birding in Perinet would not be complete without being serenaded by the planet’s largest lemur, the Indri. Their spine-chilling hoots and wails will stay with you forever. Other diurnal lemur gems include the colorful Diademed Sifaka, the adorable Eastern Lesser Bamboo Lemur and the entertaining Common Brown Lemur. Night walks should reveal other mammals including Eastern Woolly, Crossley’s Dwarf, and diminutive Goodman’s Mouse Lemurs. The reserve’s herpetofauna is also impressive, with brightly patterned and bizarre frogs, geckos, and chameleons, including the giant Parson’s Chameleon and Mossy leaf-tailed Gecko.

Day 17: Andasibe to Tana

After a final morning of birding, we return to Antananarivo where we spend the night.

Day 18: Antananarivo

Transfer to the airport for departure.

Western Endemics Extension

Day 1: Antananarivo to Ampijoroa

Today we will either fly or drive to Mahajanga on the north-west coast of Madagascar. In the case that we drive to Mahajanga, we will fly on our return to Tana, or vise-versa if we are to fly here. The drive can take upwards of 12 hours, but en route to the reserve we will scan roadside water bodies for African Openbill, Purple, Striated, Common Squacco, and Madagascar Pond Herons, and flocks of Black Egret, which we will watch as they perform their bizarre “umbrella-feeding” routine. After arriving in this sleepy town, we will drive to Ampijoroa, a forest station situated in the extensive deciduous forests of Ankarafantsika National Park. On arrival at the forestry station we should encounter numerous “campsite residents” such as Broad-billed Roller, screeching Lesser Vasa Parrots, Crested Drongo, Madagascar Magpie Robin, Sakalava Weaver, Madagascar Hoopoe, Madagascar Paradise Flycatcher, Madagascar Green Pigeon, and Madagascar Turtle Dove. If we arrive early enough, we will spend the afternoon birding along the edge of the adjacent Lac Ravelobe, where we hope to find the threatened Madagascar Fish-Eagle, a pair of which is resident here. Striking Madagascar Jacanas also strut through the dense hyacinth. White-throated Rails favor the waterside vegetation, and we may find noisy groups of Sickle-billed and Madagascar Blue Vangas moving along the forest fringe. For the first two nights of the extension we will stay in either Ankarafantsika or Mahajanga.

Day 2: Ampijoroa

We have a full day to explore the network of trails through the dry forest around Ampijoroa, in search of the many birds restricted to this region. Foremost amongst these are the secretive White-breasted Mesite and the jewel-like Schlegel's Asity, which gives one the impression of a miniature bird-of-paradise. We will also concentrate on finding the highly localized Van Dam's Vanga and both Red-capped and Coquerel's Couas. Other birds we hope to see whilst searching for these specials include Madagascar Crested Ibis, Madagascar Buttonquail, Frances's and Madagascar Sparrowhawks, Madagascar Pygmy Kingfisher, and Hook-billed, Rufous, White-headed, Chabert's, and Red-tailed Vangas. No less than eight species of lemur occur in the near vicinity of the camp and we will search for the comical Coquerel's Sifaka and Common Brown Lemur during the day, and the rare Mongoose Lemur, Western Woolly Lemur (or Avahi), Milne-Edward's Sportive, Fat-tailed Dwarf, and Gray Mouse lemurs after dark. If we are lucky, we may also find the recently described Golden-brown Mouse Lemur, one of the world's smallest primates. Reptiles are also plentiful along the trails and we hope to see the impressive Madagascar Ground Boa, as well as several smaller species of snake (all harmless – amazingly, there are no venomous snakes in Madagascar), Oustalet's Chameleon (the world's largest species), and the aptly named Rhinoceros Chameleon, with its enlarged nasal protuberance.

Day 3: Ampijoroa to Mahajanga

After some final birding around Ampijoroa, we return to Mahajanga for an overnight stay in a comfortable hotel.

Day 4: Betsiboka Estuary

Today we will embark on a great boat trip up the Betsiboka River Delta, south of town, in search of Madagascar Sacred Ibis and, if we are lucky, the elusive Bernier's Teal. Later in the day we return to Mahajanga, but if the tides and currents permit we may first stop off at Katsepy and search for the superb Crowned Sifaka, a very seldom seen lemur. We overnight at Mahajanga.

Day 5: Mahajanga to Antananarivo

Today, we make our way back to "Tana". We will be either driving or flying, depending on what our mode of transportation was on our initial journey from Tana to Mahajanga. This is due to low frequencies in available flights between the two cities. This is the arrival day for the main tour.

Helmet Vanga Extension

Extension Information

Note that this extension uses charter flights to access Masoala. In our view, this is the only reasonable option given the notorious unreliability of scheduled flights to this destination. When comparing our price with that of our competitors, check whether or not they are using charter flights.

Due to the size of the plane on these charter flights, there are very strict weight and size restrictions for passengers issued by the local airline; (e.g. waist measurements below 55 inches/140cm are required to take this flight; and persons with an overall body weight exceeding 200 pounds/90 Kilograms may be charged an additional fee by the airline in Madagascar).

Day 1: Tana – Maroansetra – Masoala Peninsula

From Antananarivo we take a charter flight north to the town of Maroantsetra, where shortly after arrival (weather permitting) we transfer across the Bay of Antongil, to the stunning Masoala Peninsula, where we will have the next two days to explore the pristine lowland rainforest that blankets the peninsula.

Days 2-3: Masoala Peninsula

Masoala is endowed with Madagascar's largest tract of protected rainforest. It is a haven for many bird species and a hideout to a select few that are too bizarre to ignore. Chief among these is the Helmet Vanga, an enormous vanga with an enormous blue bill. Some years we are even lucky enough to see a nest of this marvelous bird. Some of the more commonly sought-after specialties include loquacious Red-breasted Coua, and handsome Scaly and Short-legged Ground-Rollers. However, our ramblings will set off with higher hopes, as we also stand a good chance of finding the elusive Bernier's Vanga, which prefers pandanus palm swamps. Just like most locations we visit in Madagascar, Masoala is home to a whole new cast of exciting lemur species. As we search for our avian targets we will look out for the stunning and range-restricted Red Ruffed Lemur and the sharp looking White-fronted Brown Lemur. Night walks may present us with nocturnal lemurs like Moore's Woolly, Scott's Sportive, and an undescribed species of Mouse Lemur.

Day 4: Masoala – Maroansentra

After a final delicious breakfast on the seaside terrace, we sail back to Maroansetra, and catch our charter flight back to Tana, where the tour ends.

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