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DREAMTRIPS

MADAGASCAR





Andasibe-Mantadia National Park is home to several species of lemurs.



A curious resident getting to know the writer on Lemur Island.

THE DREAM?

Amazingly diverse and fantastically beautiful, Madagascar is home to five percent of all known animal and plant species on the planet. Hit the trails and you may spy colourful camouflaged chameleons, a mind-blowing selection of exotic orchids and, of course, the cutest of lemurs.

THE REALITY?

Read on, beautiful dreamer...

ADVENTUROUS TRAVEL often involves a search for the unique on journeys to far-flung destinations that promise authentic, exotic experiences. The more different from our *own* world a place is, the more alluring it becomes in our minds.

Few destinations match this profile more than Madagascar, the world's fourth-largest island after Greenland, New Guinea and Borneo.

Considered by some scientists to be the eighth continent because of its unique ecology, it offers travellers willing to journey far off the beaten path opportunities to come face to face with plants and animals found nowhere else on earth.

Take lemurs, for example. As curious as the cartoon George, a group of habituated ones nimbly scamper up and down my body, investigating my hair, nose and cap, before leaping off into the trees of Lemur Island, a tiny sanctuary set aside for them in Andasibe-Mantadia National Park in the central highlands of Madagascar.

Top contenders for the title of World's Cutest Critter, lemurs are as synonymous with Madagascar as beavers are with Canada. Equal parts dog, cat, monkey and comedian, they range in size from the world's smallest primate—the Madame Berthe's Mouse lemur that fits into the palm of your hand—to the Singing Indri and black-faced Sifaka lemurs, which can weigh up to 10 kilos.

ECOLOGIST'S DREAM

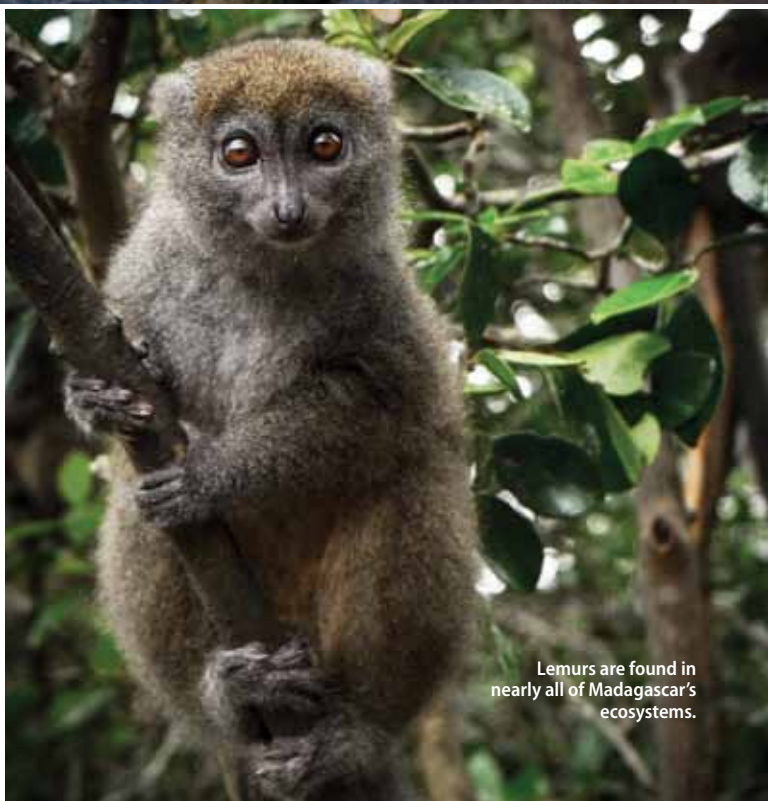
If you want to see these adorable acrobats in the wild, go sooner rather than later, because lemurs—along with much of Madagascar's unique flora and fauna—face eventual extinction from ➤



Isalo National Park covers over 800 square kilometres of sandstone massif.



Approximately two-thirds of the world's chameleons exist only in Madagascar.



Lemurs are found in nearly all of Madagascar's ecosystems.

habitat loss.

Encroaching human settlements and traditional slash-and-burn agriculture have destroyed nearly 90 percent of the forests that once covered most of this island that naturalist David Attenborough once described as “a place where antique outmoded forms of life that have long since disappeared from the rest of the world still survive in isolation”.

Geographically isolated since it broke off from the supercontinent Gondwana between 120 and 165 million years ago, Madagascar—often called the ‘Great Red Island’ because of its scarlet clay soil—has been on its own evolutionary trajectory ever since. In a land where you can go from scorching desert to humid rainforest in just 300 kilometres, over 70 percent of its wildlife species and 90 percent of its plants exist only in Madagascar.

Among them are two-thirds of the world’s chameleons, dozens of types of snakes, six of the world’s baobab tree species, hundreds of varieties of orchids and, of course, those lovable lemurs. As renowned lemur researcher, Dr Alison Jolly, wrote in her book, *A World Like Our Own*, it’s as if in Madagascar “time had once broken its banks and flowed to the present down a very different channel”.

A PLACE APART

To reach Madagascar I board a 12-hour flight south from Paris, a service that was, until fairly recently, Madagascar’s only regular air link with the outside world. Amazingly, this country lying just 400 kilometres off Africa’s southeast coast across from Mozambique had few connections with the rest of the African continent a decade ago.

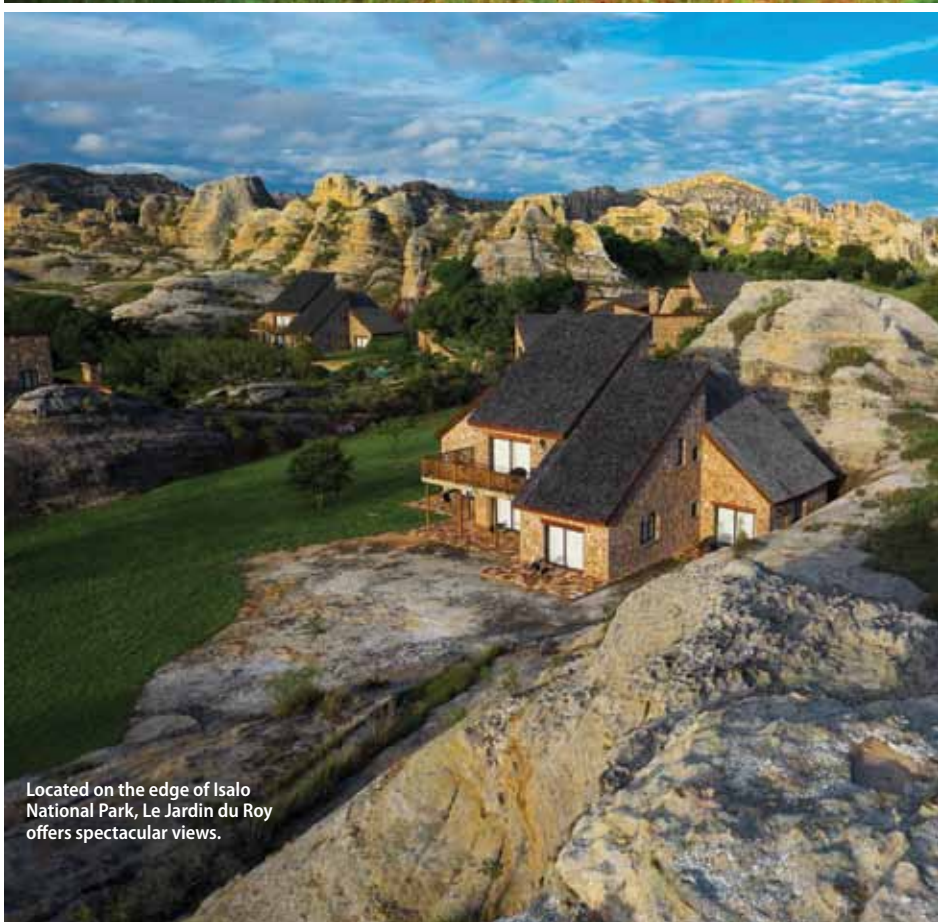
Exploring Antananarivo (or Tana, as everyone likes to call it here) on my first morning, I encounter more Asian faces than African ones. It feels more like a Jakarta-with-French-influences than any African city I’ve ever visited.

There’s a reason for Madagascar’s singular ethnic makeup. Humans are only thought to have arrived on its shores about 2,000 years ago: Austronesians from Borneo who paddled dugout outrigger canoes across thousands of miles of open ocean. A millennium later, Africans first crossed the Mozambique Channel, bringing with them a talent for cattle herding that remains crucial to Madagascar’s economy to this day.

Arabic and south Asian migrants arrived later, followed by Europeans in the 15th century. Today, although it’s considered to



Madagascar’s terraced central highlands resemble Southeast Asia more than Africa.



Located on the edge of Isalo National Park, Le Jardin du Roy offers spectacular views.



be part of Africa, much of Madagascar feels more like Southeast Asia—from its people's appearance and the Malagasy language's similarities to Bahasa Indonesia, to its terraced rice paddies and penchant for ancestor worship.

NATURE'S LUNATIC ASYLUM

From cool, rainy Antananarivo I fly across Madagascar's mountainous central core to the dusty southwestern port town of Tuléar, which is a world away in terms of terrain and vegetation.

Surrounded by semi-arid desert scrubland pocked with thorny didiera trees and other drought-resistant plants—including numerous species of cactus, spiny octopus trees and enormous engorged baobabs—Tuléar is just a few hours drive from one of Madagascar's natural treasures: Isalo National Park.

Rising from a grassy plain to cover more than 800-square-kilometres of sandstone massif eroded by wind and water to form fantastic ridges, gorges, canyons and stalagmite pinnacles, Isalo resembles a surreal cross between New

Mexico's high desert and *Jurassic Park*. As travel writer Dervla Murphy once described this region's bizarre mix of exotic flora and fauna: "nature's lunatic asylum". Isalo's protected zone is also home to approximately 80 species of birds, 35 types of reptiles and several endemic frogs, along with ringtail, brown and Sifaka lemurs.

I spend an afternoon hiking through the park's Canyon Namaza beneath sacred Bara tribal burial sites hidden high on the surrounding cliffs to reach a pristine waterfall called Cascade des Nymphes. Its waters plunge into an emerald-green pool surrounded by overhanging pandanus trees.

The next morning I'm invited to witness a healing ritual held at a nearby Bara tribe village. Amid much frenzied dancing the attending shaman—who bears an uncanny resemblance to rapper Snoop Dogg—asks an ancestor's spirit to guide him as he administers herbal remedies to a distraught village woman with a mysterious illness.

CALL OF THE WILD

After a few days at a secluded lodge surrounded by traditional fishing villages on the coast near Tuléar, I return to Tana and then drive for four hours to Andasibe-Mantadia National Park for my rendezvous with the lemurs.

In Andasibe-Mantadia's lush rainforest I await a very special experience: the opportunity to follow the call of the Indri lemur into the jungle.

Growing up to a metre tall and covered in a dense coat of black and white fur, Indris are the largest of all living lemurs, and they are still considered the most sacred animal in Madagascar. Highly endangered, they survive in small family groups high up in the trees, leaping up to 10 metres from branch to branch.

One morning a local tracker escorts me deep into the park in search of a platoon of Indris that are habituated enough to humans to allow us to get relatively close to them. Tramping through dense eucalyptus forest, we listen intently for their telltale sonic serenade coming from somewhere in the sun-splintered emerald canopy high above.

Soon, we hear a spine-tingling wail and follow it until we locate a family of Indris urgently alerting one another to our presence. Slinking through the undergrowth, I crouch to snap photos as a pair of them observe me intently

with their saucer-like eyes. Famously described as resembling 'a four-year old child in a panda suit', Indris are most active just after daybreak, when they effortlessly fling themselves from branch to branch.

On this morning, as the rays of the rising sun begin to pierce through their ever-shrinking forest haven, these natural acrobats don't disappoint, and they put on a show worthy of a Cirque du Soleil matinee—all the while flooding the forest with their primal cries. The call of the Indri is perhaps Madagascar's signature sound.

In this exotic island outpost that offers ecological wonders found nowhere else on earth, it's also a call of the wild rendered especially poignant because all too soon it may be silenced forever. ☹



WHEN YOU GO

- Madagascar is best visited during the dry season between April and December. During the cyclone season from January to March, overland transport can be difficult due to poor road conditions and some accommodation and attractions are closed. July and August are especially busy, as that's when most European travellers take their vacations.
- French is widely spoken in the larger cities and towns. Air France offers several flights per week from Paris's Charles de Gaulle airport to Antananarivo.
- Although Madagascar's roads are in chronically poor condition, multi-day 4WD overland trips are still popular.
- Conveniently situated in the centre of Antananarivo, the Hotel du Louvre offers comfortable business class accommodation, plus an excellent restaurant and spa. Located on the edge of Isalo National Park, Le Jardin du Roy is a collection of spacious granite bungalows set amid sandstone kopjes with spectacular park views. The tranquil Les Dunes Ifaty has comfortable beachfront villas set within a park an hour up the coast from Tuléar. Surrounding a gorgeous lagoon on the edge of Andasibe-Mantadia National Park, Vakona Forest Lodge's Malagasy-style bungalows are set within lush gardens of palm trees and bougainvilleas.