



Camera chameleon



Main picture A female snub nosed chameleon in aggressive posture, taken at Kirandy National Park

Right The appropriately named pygmy stump-tailed chameleon at Nosy Mangabe, an island paradise off the northeast coast

For the wildlife photographer, Madagascar is an island of plenty. **Nick Garbutt**, who has been making regular visits for the last 10 years, says you should expect the unexpected

IT'S A COLD, damp and dreary winter's evening and you're flicking through the travel supplements dreaming of exotic locations and wildlife photography – but where to go? Friends may have sung the praises of African safaris, but you want to be different. Well here's my suggestion – look at that rather insignificant look-



ing island off Africa's southeast coast, the one you can never quite remember the name of, and have probably assumed to be a mini version of its continental neighbour. Its name is Madagascar and it has about as much in common with Africa as it does with Pluto!

Madagascar and Africa were last joined together around 160 million years ago. The island's wildlife has been in splendid isolation ever since and moulded by the endlessly inventive tampering of natural selection, virtually all its species are found nowhere else on earth. Most familiar are the lemurs, an endearing group of primates that never fail to captivate those who see them. There are also inquisitive mongooses, crazy chameleons, cryptically camouflaged geckos and a myriad of multicoloured frogs. In Malagasy forests, there is always something to point your camera at.

At one time (before man arrived), Madagascar was almost completely covered in tropical forest. Today this has been severely fragmented, but enough remains to



support this rich diversity of amazing wildlife. Of course, photographing forest wildlife presents two major obstacles – there are invariably branches and leaves between camera and subject with the result that light levels are often low.

To overcome the first, it pays to get close to the subject and in most national parks on the island this is possible. Many groups of lemurs have become habituated to people and can be approached with relative ease, as can some birds and most reptiles and frogs. But of course it still takes time and patience to achieve a telling shot. The problem of low light is solved with a sturdy tripod (always) and fill-in flash (sometimes).



Far left A red ruffed lemur photographed while calling to other lemurs in the Masoala National Park

Left The ring tailed lemur is most common in the southern Madagascar where it has become well habituated to humans and frequently wanders along the forest floor

Parks and reserves

There is an extensive network of national parks in Madagascar where photographic opportunities abound, but all excursions are on foot, so think carefully about what kit to pack to save weight. I generally carry two bodies and the following lenses: 20-35mm wideangle, 80-200mm zoom, 300mm and 500mm telephotos and a 105mm macro, together with TTL flashes and polarising and neutral density filters. The medium-long lenses are good for lemurs and some of the other mammals, while the wideangle zoom is terrific for forest habitat and in situ shots. However, if you want to get

Fact File

When to Visit For wildlife photography, September to December is the best time to visit as there are lemurs with young and birds are beginning to the breed. Most other wildlife is also active. January through to April is best avoided because of very heavy rains.

Getting There Only Air Madagascar and Air France go (via Paris). Flights cost between £750 and £900 depending on season. Travelling with Air Madagascar is beneficial as domestic flights can then be bought at a reduced rate. Air Madagascar Tel: 01293 596665

Getting Around There is an extensive domestic flight service in and out of the capital Antananarivo to all regional centres. From here local buses and taxis will take you to the reserves. This can be arduous and time consuming for the first time visitor. Here an organised wildlife or photography tour is by far the best option. These typically last two to three weeks and visit four or five key wildlife areas.

All wildlife watching in the parks is done on foot. In eastern rainforest areas the terrain can be tough: hills are often steep and trails slippery. In the drier western and southern regions the terrain is generally flatter, but it can get very hot.

Where to stay In the cities and larger towns, hotels vary in standard from very good (up to £75 per night) to very cheap and seedy (less than £5 per

night). In the rural areas (including around the parks and reserves), allowances have to be made as the hotels and lodges are sometimes more rustic but generally adequate. Expect to pay £8 -15 per night. In the more remote parks, self-sufficient camping is necessary. Food in Madagascar is always very good and cheap. Many places offer traditional Malagasy cuisine, but there is also strong French and Chinese influence.

Guides When visiting a park, it is compulsory to employ the services of a local guide. In the more popular reserves, most guides can now speak some English and have a very good knowledge of the wildlife.

Visas and Further Information Republic of Madagascar Honorary Consulate Tel: 0208 746 0133. Open 9.30am - 1pm. Visas currently cost £40

Further Reading Madagascar: the Bradt Travel Guide, Hilary Bradt (1999, sixth edition) Bradt Publications; Madagascar - A Visitors Guide, Hilary Bradt, Nick Garbutt and Derek Schuurman (1996), Bradt Publications; Mammals of Madagascar, Nick Garbutt (1999), Pica Press; The Birds of Madagascar — A Photographic Fieldguide, Peter Morris and Frank Hawkins (1998), Pica Press; Birds of the Indian Ocean Islands: Madagascar, Mauritius, Reunion, Rodrigues, Seychelles and the Comoros, Ian Sinclair and Olivier Langrand (1998), New Holland. A Fieldguide to the Amphibians and Reptiles of Madagascar, Frank Glaw and Miguel (1994), Vences.

Right Verreaux's sifaka rarely leaves the tree tops, but makes a distinctive balletic dance as it skips across the ground. Berenty Reserve is one of their population strongholds.



good frame-filling pictures of birds you may need to move up to a 500mm lens.

Parks in the south of the country are home to the cheeky ring-tailed lemur and if really close encounters are what you're seeking, nowhere beats Berenty Reserve. This private sanctuary is a wildlife oasis where groups of ring-tails swagger along the wide forest paths, with their tails held erect in provocative question marks. This is also the place to see elegant Verreaux's sifakas, languishing in the boughs of large tamarind trees. Unlike the ring-tails, these snowy-white lemurs rarely come down to the ground, but when they do be ready for action and their balletic skipping dance across the forest floor.

The eastern side of the island is dominated by rainforest; a habitat that poses some awkward photographic problems, high rain fall and humidity, rampant fungus and very low light. In the rain forests of northeast Madagascar lives my favourite lemur, the spectacular piebald Indri. Andasibe-Mantadia National Park is the place to see them. Each morning groups of Indris call to one another, like arboreal opera singers, claiming the rights to their particular patch of forest.

Despite their tolerance, these black and white 'teddy bears' with their big round eyes can be frustratingly difficult to photograph. I prefer to wait until the crowds disappear and then try to follow the group quietly. When they come down low in the canopy (or even on to the ground) the chance of a good picture increases.

Right A leaf-tailed gecko in threat posture at Nosy Mangabe. By day they usually sleep, lying flat on tree branches where their camouflage makes them almost impossible to see



Night patrols

Chameleons are Madagascar's other speciality – over half the world's species are residents. Contrary to popular belief, a chameleon's colour is not for camouflage but for communication and advertisement. However, most species are green and live in trees so they are difficult to find during the day. But at night they sleep on low branches and become much paler – armed with a torch you can pick them out against the darker foliage. Getting close is no problem either, just be careful not to disturb the branch they're sleeping on or they'll let go and drop to the forest floor before scurrying away. Here a good macro system comes into its' own. I use two small flash units mounted on a home made bracket.

This set-up also will serve you well for insects, frogs and other reptiles and is particularly good during night time forays into the forest. This is the time to look for the bizarre leaf-tailed gecko as they are active after dark. During the day they lie flattened against a tree trunk and blend imperceptibly into the bark.

I've been travelling to Madagascar for a decade and no other country I know offers such variety and uniqueness. So if Africa is not for you, look closely next door. But beware, it's addictive. ❖

Nick Garbutt leads tours to Madagascar for the following operators: Papyrus Tours Tel: 01302 530 778; Worldwide Journeys & Expeditions Tel: 0207 386 4646; Reef & Rainforest Tours Tel: 01803 866965.

Six top parks in Madagascar

Ranomafana National Park

Excellent rainforest reserve, with good guides and forest trails. A number of different lemurs are regularly seen and approachable so photo opportunities are good. Also good at night, so have a flash handy.

Andasibe-Mantadia National Park

The most accessible rainforest reserve, most famous for its very tolerant indri. Other lemurs, such as the stunning diademed sifaka are also seen. An excellent place for bird watching, especially for rainforest species like ground rollers. Also many chameleons and frogs. All round good photo stop and remember a flashgun.

Berenty Reserve

Perhaps the island's best known reserve. Lots of totally tame ring-tailed lemurs and Verreaux's sifakas, plus chameleons and birds offering great photo opportunities in a pleasant easy-going environment.

Nosy Mangabe

An island off the northeast coast. This paradise is the best place to photograph the leaf-tailed gecko, both by day and night. Also good for white-fronted brown lemurs and black and white ruffed lemurs. If you very lucky after dark, you might also see an aye-aye.

Isalo National Park

Renowned for its amazing photogenic scenery, the light around dawn and dusk has to be seen to be believed. Wonderful landscape opportunities.

Ampijoroa Forest Station

An excellent place for Coquerel's sifakas and common brown lemurs. Reptiles and birds are also very good. The walking is flat, but it can get hot. There's good night viewing so take a flash too.