

POISON *or* PANACEA?

Ecotourism in Madagascar

Photographs by Nick Garbutt

The first half of 2002 was a torrid time for Madagascar. Political violence wreaked havoc with the country's security and economy, and completely derailed its fast-growing tourism industry. Once the all clear sounded, however, an apprehensive Nick Garbutt headed back to his favourite island – and what he found there prompted a long, hard look at what had been billed as Madagascar's lifeline: ecotourism. ▶



In November 2002 I returned to Madagascar for the 12th consecutive year. Prior to departure in previous years, excitement and enthusiasm had always been my overriding emotions, but this time these were tempered by worry and uncertainty. During the first half of 2002, the country suffered one of the most serious bouts of political unrest in its history (see page 21 of the August 2002 issue of *Africa Geographic*) and although things had returned to something like normal by the time of my trip, there was no way of knowing what lasting damage had been done to its priceless national parks and reserves.

I was leading a group from the UK and our first port of call was Ranomafana National Park, towards the south-east of the island. Coincidentally, this had also been the first park I visited during my first Madagascar adventure in 1991 and in the intervening years I had returned

This was not the Ranomafana I remembered, the one normally alive with troops of bright-eyed lemurs and other wildlife. Where was it all?

numerous times. After a long, dusty and limb-numbing journey over a hopelessly potholed road (still no better than in 1991) we arrived in the village of Ranomafana which nestles at the foot of the island's eastern escarpment and is a stone's throw from the eponymous national park.

I immediately sought out top local guide and old friend, Jean Emilien Rafidison and found him in his house sifting through a basket of rice as he prepared the evening meal. 'Ah Nick!' exclaimed 'Fidi' (as he is less formally known). 'You've come back again.' His characteristic enthusiasm was undiminished, but another emotion was clear – sheer relief. The reason soon became apparent – he'd had no work as a guide all year. The political unrest had caused all tourists to cancel their trips and he had been forced to fall back on farming and other precarious ways of making ends meet. We sat and chatted, catching up on news and lamenting the pickle the nation's politicians had caused, then set about planning the next three days.

The following morning we descended into the rocky gorge by the park entrance, crossed the footbridge over the Namorona River and entered the rainforest. Early morning mist still

swirled and periodically enveloped the canopy, and the constant percussion of water dripping on leaves accompanied an occasional bout of bird song. While Fidi and I looked and listened for signs of lemur activity, his brother Jean-Cry (also an excellent guide) disappeared to search further afield. An hour later we still had not found any lemurs – Madagascar's flagship animals and what the group most hoped to see. This was not the Ranomafana I remembered, the one normally alive with troops of bright-eyed lemurs and other wildlife. Where was it all? With growing unease, I recalled the unnerving reports I'd read of parks being illegally exploited during the breakdown of government.

Concerned that the group might be getting restless, I asked Fidi if there were any other things he could show us. Normally he had numerous 'gems up his sleeve' – nocturnal lemur sleep sites, birds' nests, resting leaf-tailed geckos or hiding chameleons – but this time he had nothing to offer. 'Sorry, Nick. This is only the second time I've been in the forest this year. I don't know where things are now.'

Just as embarrassed frustration was turning to distinct nervousness, Jean-Cry called out from the ridge and we all clambered up the slippery trail, trying our best to keep pace with Fidi. A little out of breath, hot and sweaty, we eventually found Jean-Cry standing close to some giant bamboo, grinning broadly. He pointed to the branches 10 metres away – there were two greater bamboo lemurs, one of the most endangered species, ripping at the tough outer pith of a bamboo stalk. For 30 magical minutes we crouched on the sodden leaf-litter, close enough to hear the crack and tear of splintering bamboo as the lemurs' sharp teeth and powerful jaws went to work.

As we continued our search along the trail, it crossed my mind again how eerily peaceful the forest seemed – there were few noises and little movement of any kind. Then the obvious occurred to me; there were no other tourist groups looking for lemurs and no other guides scouring the forest. This explained why we'd had such difficulty finding the animals – the normal network of guides passing information and leading us from one hotspot to another was not there. The bush telegraph had been silenced.

Over the next three days we wandered Ranomafana's many trails and hardly saw another soul. There were long ►

PREVIOUS SPREAD A juvenile Madagascar tree boa rests on a tree fern. As it matures, its fiery red coloration will turn to olive green.

RIGHT Of the three subspecies of grey bamboo lemur, the eastern bamboo lemur is the most common. Ranomafana National Park is the only place where all three subspecies are found and, with hard work and luck, visitors stand a chance of hitting the 'bamboo lemur jackpot'.





periods when lemurs and other wildlife proved difficult to find, but by the end of our stay we had managed to see no fewer than nine of the park's 12 resident lemur species, including the golden bamboo lemur, grey bamboo lemur, red-bellied lemur, greater dwarf lemur and the stunningly beautiful Milne-Edward's sifaka. We had also been treated to an excellent array of birds, such as the pitta-like ground-roller and Pollen's vanga, plus lots of reptiles and frogs. Far more importantly, we had seen these species by happening across them or by following the signs and finding them ourselves. They had not been found in advance and then served up on a plate, one after another, to satiate an unquenchable appetite. Yes, we had to work much harder, immerse ourselves in the forest and cover more ground, but in the end our experience was infinitely more rewarding and memorable.

It reminded me of how Ranomafana used to be (in 1991 I had camped in the forest for five days and come across two other people) and underlined how much the village and the park had changed in the past decade. But was this change for the better?

Madagascar has become synonymous with, and a byword for, environmental destruction and degradation – the felling of forests, inefficient land use and unchecked population growth. Across the island, vast tracts of land have been ravaged and perhaps 85 per cent of its forest cleared and burned. Bare soil bakes to a barren red crust and erodes with the annual onset of rains, staining the country's rivers like blood. It is the environmental equivalent of Ground Zero. But for those of us in the affluent West, it is rather too easy to forget that this is largely the result of people doing what they've done for centuries – putting a roof over their heads and food on their plates. Nothing more than basic survival.

With the establishment of national parks like Ranomafana, it was hoped that destructive traditional practices would be replaced with alternatives more in harmony with the environment. The theory was simple: 50 per cent of the entrance fees were earmarked for development in communities around the park; and the park would provide many employment opportunities –



hotels and lodges require staff, campsites require maintenance and all visitors require guides. Tourists would also buy food and crafts, further bolstering the local economy. Residents around the park would thus be 'compensated' for losing access to traditional forest resources. Ranomafana was intended as a model for such integrated conservation and development, ultimately benefiting both wildlife and people.

So has it worked? At one level the answer is yes – the profile of lemurs and other wildlife has been raised and the park is now firmly established on the tourist map, resulting in better protection for 44 000 hectares of forest. At another level the answer is no, because the pay-offs have failed to live up to the expectations created in many communities. ►

OPPOSITE An ecotourist lodge in Ranomafana. Tourism benefits those who work at lodges like this and are involved directly in tourism in various other ways, but how much money filters down to and benefits the broader community?

ABOVE TOP Tourists crossing the old bridge over the Namorona River in Ranomafana. This was later washed away by a cyclone and has been replaced by a far more substantial structure – partially funded by tourist money.

ABOVE Many rural villages like this one border national parks. If properly channelled, money derived from tourism should benefit their development.



GERALD CUBITT

Ranomafana itself used to be a very poor, but charming little town. Today it is still poor, but much of the charm has been lost. It is evident that a few guides, hotel owners and hotel staff make money from tourists, but potential economic benefits appear to pass everyone else by. It has created a social fabric of 'haves' and 'have nots', resulting in begging amongst some children and tourist-fleeing by a number of adults.

This has been exacerbated by the infiltration of 'Westernism', particularly Americana. Much of the initial expertise and funding that created the park came from the United States and other foreign sources. Since then there has been a constant stream of scientists and students from international institutions. While the benefits to local and national education are immeasurable (there is also a constant stream of Malagasy scientists and students working together with their foreign counterparts) and the resulting advancement of knowledge is invaluable, the side effects are much less palatable. Research guides, for instance, often inherit departing students' belongings – tape recorders, Nike trainers, etc. – trappings of Western culture that broaden the divide between the 'haves' and 'have nots' to a chasm. Add to this their accidental acquisition of foreign accents, and the cultural identity of Ranomafana is further eroded.

When I tentatively broached the subject with Fidi it uncorked a wave of vehement rhetoric. 'The park hasn't benefited the community at all,' he began. 'Where does all the money go? We don't see any of it; it's obvious there is so much corruption.' He cited the example of a recent park director who, prior to leaving his job, arranged for one of the largest, oldest trees in the forest to be felled to make furniture for his new house. Fidi continued, 'When people in the community hear of such things it makes them angry and they think, why should we protect the park?'

The raw figures appear to add weight to Fidi's arguments. In an average year, Ranomafana gets around 18 000 visitors, each paying 50 000 Malagasy Francs (FMG) for a park permit issued by the Association Nationale pour la Gestion des Aires Protégées (ANGAP), the agency that oversees the parks and protected areas. That is an annual income of

900-million FMG or around US\$150 000, half of which should be going to local communities. In a country as poor as Madagascar, US\$75 000 goes a very long way and yet community development remains stagnant while ANGAP builds plush new offices in the capital Antananarivo and its senior staff drive around in Land Cruisers.

Problems have also developed within the forest. At Place Nocturne there is a feeding area where bait – banana smeared on branches and morsels of meat scattered on the floor – is put out to attract nocturnal lemurs and small carnivores. During my early visits to Ranomafana I took full advantage. It was marvellous to see and photograph tiny brown mouse lemurs and the normally extremely shy Malagasy striped civet, or fanaloka, at such close quarters. But today tourist numbers have swelled,

The fanaloka's appearance was accompanied by an eruption of 'ohs', 'ahs' and shrieks, and a barrage of flashguns reminiscent of a bank of paparazzi at a film premiere

there are no controls and the event has deteriorated into a circus. On one occasion I remember, I witnessed a gathering of over 50 tourists jostling for position like a football crowd. The fanaloka's appearance was accompanied by an eruption of inappropriate 'ohs', 'ahs' and shrieks, and a barrage of flashguns reminiscent of a bank of paparazzi at a film premiere.

I usually have no objection to such feeding sites – they are nothing more than glorified 'bird tables' for the creatures of the night and are a great idea, provided that they are regulated and that, crucially, the human/animal interface is not breached. Sadly, at Ranomafana this is not the case.

The wagging finger isn't just reserved for tourists – scientists are also far from blameless. Lemurs in study groups are fitted with unsightly identification collars and these are not always removed when the study concludes. There should be a code dictating that (as much as possible) subjects and their environment are left as they were found. Recently a Ranomafana guide told me that the nest of a rare raptor was deserted by the parent birds after researchers had ►

Red-bellied lemurs are readily seen at Ranomafana. Some individuals have become reliant on banana hand-outs at feeding sites where, unfortunately, the human/animal interface is too easily breached.



continually encroached beyond an acceptable distance in their quest for data. In such cases lessons need to be learned to guard against making similar mistakes in future.

I am also well aware that I have contributed to the problem. Each year I lead several tour groups to Madagascar and when I'm not doing that, I write features for magazines encouraging people to go there. In my own small way, I am partly responsible for the increased pressure tourists have caused. But just because I'm pro-tourism does not mean I agree with and condone all that takes place.

So can ecotourism ultimately save Madagascar? The answers I come up with are something of a fudge: 'It can be positive, but...' or 'The potential is there, but...' and ultimately, 'Yes, but not in isolation'. There is always a 'but'.

Field conservationists – people who deal with the reality of saving dwindling habitats and simultaneously engendering local trust and support – reckon it will take many years for ecotourism projects to bear fruit. The key, in fact, is to go slowly, adopting a 'hand in glove' approach so that inevitable cultural change is not out of kilter with intended development. Communities should enjoy benefits from visitors without unevenly distributed tourist income destabilising local economies and breeding resentment. Madagascar's wildlife treasures should be championed and protected from rampant overuse, which has an adverse impact in more popular areas. And the spending of the millions of foreign-aid dollars that are ploughed into the system annually should be planned adequately to avoid waste and corruption. It is a process that inescapably requires time – a commodity that Madagascar has little of.

Since Ranomafana opened in 1991, numerous other areas of outstanding biodiversity in Madagascar have been protected. The country now boasts no fewer than 15 national parks – Andasibe-Mantadia, Masoala, Marojejy, Andohahelo and Zombitse are amongst the most exciting – all of which incorporate ecotourism as a major part of their overall conservation and development strategy. And while other projects have not copied the template laid down by Ranomafana, they have noted its many successes and looked at alternatives to the failures. It is clear the decision-makers in the conservation community are still pinning their hopes on the



overall benefits that tourism can offer.

Further encouragement comes from the highest level. Madagascar's new and forward-looking president, Marc Ravelomanana, has made it known that tourism is at the forefront of his agenda to get the country back on its economic feet. Now that normality has returned, there has perhaps never been a better time to visit Madagascar – tourist numbers in 2003 will still be down on previous years and parks and reserves will be relatively quiet. And while I am not naïve enough to think ecotourism is a cure for all Madagascar's environmental ills, I firmly believe it has a vital role to play. That coupled with the incredible biodiversity and welcoming people will continue to draw me – and, I hope, the tourists I encourage – back year after year. ►

OPPOSITE A leaf-tailed gecko lies camouflaged on a tree trunk. Without the help of expert local guides, tourists would have little chance of finding such cryptic treasures.

ABOVE TOP Madagascar is a Mecca for birdwatchers, with no fewer than 36 endemic genera. The pitta-like ground roller is one of the jewels of the island's rainforests.

ABOVE Bait and feeding sites are the only way most visitors will have a chance to see shy animals such as the fanaloka.



Satanic leaf-tailed gecko

Madagascar's Hotspots

These are the parks and reserves I believe to be Madagascar's very best, not only for their wildlife-watching opportunities, but for the overall experience they offer.



EASTERN RAINFORESTS

Andasibe-Mantadia National Park

This is Madagascar's most accessible – and now arguably its best – rainforest reserve. There is good accommodation on its doorstep and indris – and, increasingly, diademed sifakas – are easily seen. It is a top-notch place for bird-watching, especially for rainforest specials like ground-rollers. Snakes, chameleons and frogs are also much in evidence.

Ranomafana National Park

Ranomafana may have its problems, but many of these are being addressed. It is still a very rewarding place to visit: there are good guides, well laid-out forest trails, an unmatched array of lemurs (12 species in all), diverse birdlife which includes many endemics (vangas, ground-rollers, mesites, asities), and varied and abundant reptile and frog populations.

Nosy Mangabe

This island off the north-east coast offers the best chance of glimpsing a wild aye-aye and great opportunities for seeing leaf-tailed geckos (by day and night) and green-backed mantella frogs.

Marojejy National Park

Recently created and not for the faint-hearted, this fantastically

rugged area offers trekking in pristine forest with stunning views. It is the best place to see silky sifaka and, if you can put in the time and effort to find them, there is a dizzying abundance of birds (including helmet vangas), reptiles and frogs.

Masoala National Park

The largest remaining expanse of lowland rainforest on the island is fabulous for red ruffed lemurs and offers good birding, including a number of the rare endemics such as helmet and Bernier's vangas and Madagascar serpent eagle. Reptiles and frogs are also plentiful. The walking can be tough and it is often very wet. There is good snorkelling off the beach.

WESTERN DRY FORESTS

Ampijoroa Forest

This is the best piece of accessible western forest left. Beautiful Coquerel's sifakas are easily seen and the birding is first rate – the park protects white-breasted mesite, Schlegel's asity and Madagascar fish eagle. Reptiles are abundant, especially after rain. The walking trails are flat and the campsite is reasonable, but it can get hot here.

Ankarana Reserve

A wide variety of lemurs, birds and reptiles are easily seen in this wonderful combination of forest

and incredible rocky scenery. Camping is the only option, and it does get very hot.

SOUTHERN REGION

Zombitse National Park

This unique and isolated patch of transition forest straddles a main road and is home to the shy ring-tailed lemurs, red-fronted brown lemurs and Verreaux's sifakas, plus an excellent selection of birds that includes the local endemic, Appert's greenbul.

Ifaty Forest

This spiny forest offers good birding for regional endemics such as long-tailed ground-roller and sub-desert mesite. The snorkelling is good and the beach accommodation is top-notch.

Andohahela National Park

A park divided into three distinct parcels – rainforest, spiny forest and transitional forest. The last two are particularly interesting as they encompass fascinating vegetation and numerous birds and reptiles.

Berenty Reserve

Madagascar's best-known reserve is rather artificial, but still excellent for ring-tailed lemurs and Verreaux's sifakas, chameleons and birds. The park offers great photo opportunities in a pleasant, easy-going environment. ■

FURTHER READING

Madagascar Wildlife – A Visitor's Guide by Hilary Bradt, Derek Schuurman and Nick Garbutt. Mammals of Madagascar by Nick Garbutt.

Madagascar: the Bradt Travel Guide by Hilary Bradt.

The Birds of Madagascar: A Photographic Guide by Pete Morris and Frank Hawkins.

Birds of the Indian Ocean Islands: Madagascar, Mauritius, Réunion, Rodrigues, Seychelles and the Comoros by Ian Sinclair and Olivier Langrand.

A Field Guide to the Amphibians and Reptiles of Madagascar by Frank Glaw and Miguel Vences.

Nick Garbutt is a wildlife author, photographer, artist and lecturer, and a tour leader with considerable experience in Madagascar and southern and East Africa, as well as Borneo, India and Nepal.

Garbutt says of Madagascar, 'My first visit was over a decade ago and I was instantly captivated, firstly by its unusual wildlife, secondly by the charming people and thirdly by the extreme fragility of the relationship between the two.' While he believes that the increase in tourism and its associated development have brought many benefits, he cautions that 'Madagascar, as it begins a new chapter with a new president, faces ever-increasing environmental challenges. To meet these successfully and to harness the potential benefits from tourism, the lessons from the

AFRICA

Geographic online

Africa Geographic Online
Read more about Madagascar in Africa – Environment & Wildlife Vol.4 No.6, Vol.6 No.2, Vol.7 No.1, Vol.7 No.6, Vol.8 No.4 and Vol.9 No.5; and in Africa Geographic Vol.10 No.11 (December 2002)
Visit www.africa-geographic.com