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PHOTOGRAPHS BY NICK GARBUTT

# take a hike IN MADAGASCAR

Contemplating a trekking holiday – in Peru, Nepal, New Zealand...? Or Madagascar? This paradise island famed for its bizarre wildlife is perhaps not one of the first places to spring to mind, but Hilary Bradt has found out that it deserves to be. ▶

The Namorona River hurtles over a cliff in Ranomafana, creating a waterfall that is the focus for one of the best treks in this national park.





**ABOVE** The dramatic Andringitra escarpment forms the backdrop for all the hikes in the region. The most challenging trail is to the 2 658-metre summit of Pic d'Imarivolanitra, whose Malagasy name means 'close to the sky'.

**OPPOSITE, ABOVE** The golden bamboo lemur is one of the rarest of Madagascar's endangered species. It is found only in Ranomafana and nearby areas in the south-east where bamboo is plentiful.

**THE SKY IS PEWTER-DARK** behind the sunlit, pleated walls of granite that form the Andringitra escarpment. In the mid-distance splashes of yellow flowers brighten the sage-green shrubs and at our feet is a rock garden so perfect it could win a prize at Chelsea Flower Show. Bursts of white daisies grow from the crevices in the rock and lichen forms blobs of bright orange or circles of frilly greenish white on the solid slabs of grey. I experience one of those moments of pure exaltation which a perfect landscape can bring. I also know that the trekking holiday will be a success.

Few people would think of Madagascar when asked to organise a hiking trip, and indeed this tour is probably the first of its kind. It grew from the success of a trekking holiday in Peru which I'd organised three years earlier. Where to go next? Madagascar, of course, because it's my thing. But there were challenges. Whereas Peru is famous for the Andes and Inca ruins, which are conveniently concentrated in one area, no one should visit Madagascar without spending some time observing the wildlife. I needed to cater for all interests, so the itinerary I put together focused on three national parks, Ranomafana, Andringitra and Isalo. All would provide the opportunity to see lemurs, all would present a variety of challenging trails, but each

is completely different: Ranomafana is a mid-altitude rainforest best known for its 12 species of lemur; newly-established Andringitra is the country's only area set aside for mountain walking; and the semi-desert park of Isalo was created by the French colonial government in the 1920s and has attracted a steady trickle of hikers over the decades.

**WE TURN OFF THE TARRED ROAD** and head east for Ranomafana on a rutted dirt track. As we lose altitude the rice-paddies and bare, eroded hillsides of the highlands give way to stands of introduced eucalyptus with a scattering of indigenous trees. We stop to look at the Malagasy version of a sawmill. A broad, roughly-hewn plank of wood is supported on two trestles positioned at each end of a long trench. One man stands on the plank and another in the trench. Their brown bodies glisten with sweat as they move rhythmically up and down, letting the weight of the long, two-handled saw make the cut. Pull up, push down; push up, pull down. They move in unison like dancing partners. Around them lies the debris of a once great tree, perhaps one of the endemic hardwood species that the government is trying to protect. But their muscle-operated handsaw is no weapon of mass destruction. Before the appearance of the

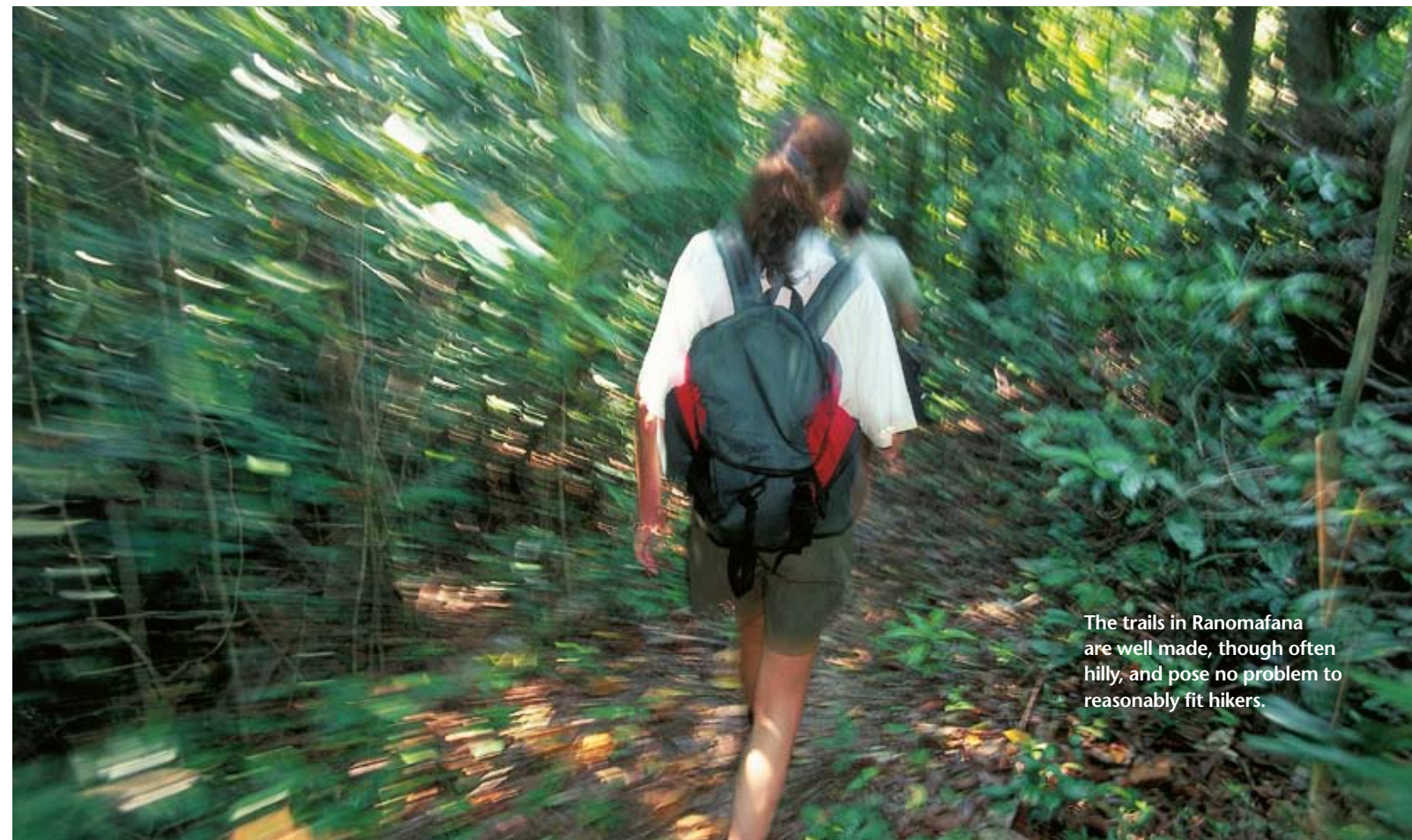
chain saw Madagascar could sustain this sort of loss, but modern technology and corruption have allowed whole forests to be turned into posh flooring for luxury hotels.

Ranomafana is one of Madagascar's most popular tourist destinations but the road leading to it is so potholed that we make faster progress on foot. The September air is cool, and clouds flit across the sun. Ahead is the lovely knobbly expanse of green which heralds the start of the protected area of Ranomafana. The burning season begins in a few months' time and plumes of smoke will mar the view. The new president has outlawed this practice but old habits die hard, especially when decreed by the Ancestors.

The next day we meet our local guide and within a few minutes of crossing the bridge over the tumbling Namorona River we have encountered our first endemic Malagasy animal. Not a lemur but the giraffe-necked weevil, my favourite in the island's bewildering array of invertebrates. It's a ridiculous insect which looks more like a red and black mechanical digger than a sensible product of evolution. Its long neck supposedly enables it to roll up leaves to provide a safe hiding place for the female's eggs. But couldn't the leaf-rolling job be done just as easily with a short neck? Or at least a gazelle neck? It reminds me of the quote by Joseph-Philibert ►



There, calmly munching on a breakfast of cyanide, is a family of golden bamboo lemurs



The trails in Ranomafana are well made, though often hilly, and pose no problem to reasonably fit hikers.



Modern technology and corruption have allowed whole forests to be turned into posh flooring for luxury hotels

A Milne-Edwards's sifaka gazes back at its visitors from a tree fern in Ranomafana. One of four subspecies of diademed sifaka, this lemur is frequently seen in groups in the national park.

Commerson, a young French naturalist who visited Madagascar in 1766: 'Nature seems to have retreated into a private sanctuary, to work on models unlike any she has created elsewhere. At every step one encounters the most strange and marvellous forms.' Surely he saw the giraffe-necked weevil and, like me, wondered what on earth Nature was thinking about.

An excited shout from our guide brings us to a grove of bamboo. There, calmly munching on a breakfast of cyanide, is a family of golden bamboo lemurs. I am ecstatic! In about a dozen visits to Ranomafana this is the first time I have seen it, yet the park owes its existence to this animal, and it owes its existence to the park. The golden bamboo lemur was discovered here in 1986, and Ranomafana National Park was established shortly afterwards to ensure its survival. As you might guess, bamboo lemurs eat only bamboo, but the golden bamboo lemur takes this specialisation to extremes by preferring the leaves and new shoots, which are laced with enough cyanide to kill other animals. Nature, working in its Malagasy private sanctuary, has somehow enabled this species to process the poison without harming itself, thus avoiding competition with its cousin the greater bamboo lemur, which feeds on the pith in the centre of the stems.

'Let's go!' Fair enough, this is a trekking trip, and we have a three-hour walk ahead of us. The route we take to the Namorona Falls is easy to follow but rugged, involving some stepping-stone river crossings and a final knee-crunching descent to the river. We are glad of our hiking poles for extra balance and support. We sit on the rocks enjoying the cool spray and watching a malachite kingfisher flitting from its perch over a pool. Poking around in the shallows, I find a beautiful royal-blue frog, improbably covered in orange spots: *Heterixalus alboguttatus*.

The path back to Ranomafana village lies outside the park boundary. This gives us a chance to catch glimpses of rural life: women husking maize before hanging it up to dry or pounding rice to make flour. They smile shyly or wave from their doorways. We walk past their tiny cultivated fields and realise how tough it must be to survive when it is forbidden to clear more land for agriculture. The forest provided their ancestors with all of their needs. Now they must change their ways. Part of the proceeds from national park fees is given to village communities to help finance projects such as bee-keeping and poultry-raising as well as schools and health centres.

AS THE PIED CROW FLIES, Andringitra is only about 120 kilometres south of Ranomafana but it is at least a thousand metres higher, and that makes all the difference. We are in for a totally new experience.

'How long will it take to reach the campsite?' we ask Rija, our guide. 'Two hours. I think' ►



NIGEL OSBORNE

ABOVE Ranomafana is one of the best places to see the giraffe-necked weevil, a bizarre insect now so popular with visitors that the gift shop has started selling hand-carved wooden ones!

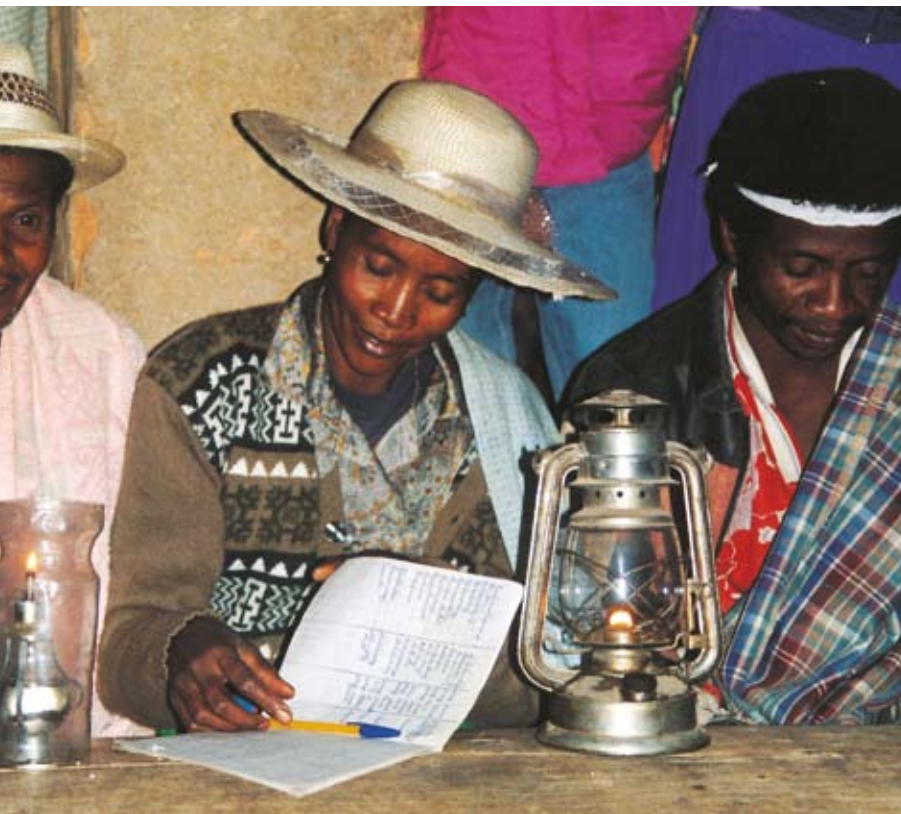
BELOW A Malagasy sawmill. This labour-intensive method of reducing a felled tree to sellable planks of wood is giving way to the far more efficient, and damaging, chain saw.



HILARY BRADY



## We risk the imminent danger of becoming pregnant by bathing in the icy pool that feeds the queen's waterfall



SUSANNE HÄRTEL

ABOVE Our gift of money at the *famadihana* (exhumation) is counted and noted in an exercise book.

BELOW In Andringitra our highland streaked tenrec makes its escape, bristling with indignation at its recent capture. There are at least 27 species of tenrec, and all are endemic to Madagascar.



PETER HAVELOCK

two hours. We leave at three o'clock.' The trouble is, the Hotel Bougainvilliers serves rather good meals and has ice-cold Three Horses beer. At half past three the group has ordered more beer and chips, and shows no sign of wanting to head for the mountains. It is evening when we reach the park's administration office, and while Rija collects our permits we watch the orange sunset turn to maroon behind the spiky outline of the Andringitra peaks. The minibus bumps on for another hour before stopping in pitch darkness. 'We walk now,' says Rija. 'Twenty minutes.' Ten *vazaha* (white foreigners) need a lot of stuff to survive three nights' camping, so although we have a team of porters and cooks, we all carry sacks of food, sleeping bags, tents and so on. Fortunately we have torches. Well, most of us. It's a very long 20 minutes before we reach the campsite and struggle to set up our tents in the darkness.

Our air-mattresses turn out to have no bungs, and sleep does not come easily when the ground is hard and the air is cold. We are a crotchety group that sets out with a local guide the next morning to make the acquaintance of the king and queen. After a steep climb we reach the two sacred waterfalls, Riandahy (the king) and Riambavy (the queen), which tumble 250 metres down the escarpment. Back in the mists of time, so they say, a royal couple could not conceive a child. They climbed up to the falls with an *ombiasy* (spiritual healer) and under his guidance sacrificed a white-faced zebu to the Ancestors. This did the trick, the queen conceived, and everyone lived happily ever after.

Ellen sits at the entrance to her tent like a queen dispensing largesse to her subjects. We are queuing for sleeping pills. The next day is going to be tough, with a full day's hike and an altitude gain of a thousand metres on the Diavolana circuit. We need some rest. We have given up on the air-mattresses – and on the weather. Claps of thunder warn of an impending storm and we'll be sleeping on the hard ground in our clothes.

It's amazing what a good night's sleep and a hearty breakfast can do. We are positively chirping with happiness as we climb up the muddy trail, trees dripping, frogs croaking, the sun breaking intermittently through the clouds to turn raindrops into diamonds. We even risk the imminent danger of becoming pregnant by bathing in the icy waters of the pool that feeds the queen's waterfall. We are now above the tree-line and in another world. It looks like a fake *Brigadoon* moor with waist-high heather, except that these are not *Erica* plants but closely related *Philippia*. Higher still are alpine meadows which, at the end of the wet season, are carpeted with



orchids; there are over 30 species in the park, so our guide tells us.

At the highest point we find a convenient slab of rock which serves as a perfect picnic spot as well as providing the best-in-house seats for the ballet performed by the ring-tailed lemurs on the cliffs opposite. I don't know if it's the bright sunshine and clear air, or just the thick coats to keep out the cold, but these animals look more strongly coloured than the others we've seen at lower altitudes. Warm chestnut-brown instead of greyish, jet-black and Persil-white. There are no trees here, so they bound around the rocks with sure-footed grace.

The steep descent follows such a well-made trail that even our tired legs can cope. For me the crowning pleasure of the whole walk comes when Chris calls out, 'He's caught a small porcupine!' And there's our guide dangling one of Madagascar's most enchanting animals, a streaked tenrec, by the back leg. The little thing is the size of a hamster, with a long whiffly nose and a formidable clump of cream-coloured spines on its head and back. When released it bustles off into the undergrowth, seeming only slightly annoyed at this interruption to its daily routine.

It is time to leave Andringitra but Rija has one more treat up her sleeve. Hardly able to contain her excitement, she calls me over to her tent. 'One of the porters is having a *famadihana*. Do you want to see?' Do we ever! The ceremony of exhuming the bones of the Ancestors is one of Madagascar's cultural oddities, and one that few tourists see. And, this being Madagascar, it turns out a little different to expectations. The corpse is late, held up by bad weather, but the party takes place anyway, and in the dark. White teeth and the white robes of mourning are all that are visible, but we are greeted enthusiastically ►

ABOVE At the end of the dry season the paddy fields of the highlands are irrigated in preparation for the first planting of rice. By December the rains will have turned the distant brown hills green.

BELOW Verreaux's sifakas are commonly found in Isalo National Park and other southern reserves.



NIGEL OSBORNE



## The corpse is late, held up by bad weather, but the party takes place anyway, and in the dark



ABOVE La Piscine Naturelle, in Isalo National Park. This natural swimming pool brings cool relief after a hot day's hike.

OPPOSITE The yellow-flowered elephant's foot *Pachypodium rosulatum* is endemic to Isalo.

with a long speech, led to rickety benches and plied with alcohol. The Senior Man among us offers our gift, an envelope of Malagasy francs which are carefully and publicly counted, then entered in a large exercise book. Andrew makes a short speech in French, and we all smile and bow self-consciously. Dancers wearing striped skirts materialise and bounce around to the beat of drums and the discordant shrieks of whistles. More beer is produced and we agree that it's time to take our leave. We have a long drive tomorrow.

THE SUN BURNS DOWN from a flat blue sky, golden grass grows shoulder-high from red-orange soil and the rocks are all shades of yellow, ranging from mustard (both English and French) to ochre and sandy grey. This is Isalo National Park and we walk briskly, the sweat evaporating on our bare, sunscreen-slathered arms. My swimsuit, hanging out of my daypack, is already bone-dry but our thoughts and conversation are still in the canyon. In the cool of the morning we had followed a narrow path along a stream to a natural swimming pool, scrambling over the boulders and admiring the green play of sunlight in the trees. 'You know, I just couldn't bear to look!' says Ellen. 'I thought I would see a little broken body in the water.' We are talking about the lemurs. Near the mouth of the canyon we had watched a family of Verreaux's sifakas feeding in the upper branches. One mischievous youngster had moved away from its mother to practise little jumps along a horizontal limb. 'Oh God, supposing...?' Then it happened. I saw the small white shape drop like a carelessly thrown ball of paper into the stream. I was the nearest and made my way over, dreading what I would see. The little lemur was sitting in a shallow pool of water, mewling pathetically. It looked unharmed. We drew back and watched the adults descend in a group to the ground, the mother calling her baby. Moments later she was leaping through the branches with her errant youngster safely on her back.

We'd had it all: drama, lemurs, landscape and lots of exercise. And I'd learned something new about Madagascar – it's the perfect place for a trekking holiday. ■

### AFRICA Geographic online

Read more about Madagascar's unusual wildlife in Vol.4 No.6, Vol.6 No.2 and Vol.7 No.6; about other hiking destinations in Vol.7 No.1 (Ankarana) and Vol.9 No.5 (Marojejy); and about ecotourism in Madagascar and its future in Vol.11 No.6 and Vol.12 No.8.

[www.africageographic.com](http://www.africageographic.com)

## infotravel

Madagascar is the world's fourth largest island and lies south of the equator; the Tropic of Capricorn passes through the southern town of Toliara. Malagasy is the name given to the people of the island and to their language. French is the most widely-spoken European language, followed by English. The capital is Antananarivo (Tana for short).

### Trekking in Madagascar

It is obligatory to hire a guide for all national parks in Madagascar. Independent travellers can make their own arrangements for Ranomafana and Isalo, using the local bush taxis (*taxi-brousse*), but for Andringitra they will need to hire a taxi or private car.

### Other trekking areas

We decided to stick to the southern half of the island. There is equally good hiking in Montagne d'Ambre National Park and in Ankarana in the far north. In the east the Masoala Peninsula offers lots of choice. If you are truly adventurous, all you need to do is set out along one of the tracks which are shown as roads on the map but which are often little more than overgrown footpaths.

### When to go

The dry season is from May to November. Temperatures in June and July can be unpleasantly cold in Andringitra, and at night



in Isalo. May, September and October are ideal months for trekking.

### What to bring

Prepare as for a walking holiday at home. Boots are not essential – all the trails described here can be done in trainers. It can rain at any time of the year and will be cold at night in

Andringitra. On an organised tour the tents, sleeping bags, etc. will be provided, but check their quality before leaving Tana.

### Hotel or camping?

All three national parks have campsites. Ranomafana has a selection of good hotels and it is not necessary to camp. Isalo has good hotels but camping in the park and a stay of at least three days is recommended for serious trekking. It is best to camp in Andringitra to get the most out of the glorious hiking, and to stay for a minimum of three days.

### Tour operators

Many tour operators run trips to Madagascar but not all provide the good-quality camping equipment necessary for a trekking trip.

Rainbow Tours ([www.rainbowtours.co.uk](http://www.rainbowtours.co.uk)) is recommended, as is Unusual Destinations ([www.unusualdestinations.com](http://www.unusualdestinations.com)). In Madagascar, Za Tour ([www.3dmadagascar/zatour](http://www.3dmadagascar/zatour)) is experienced at organising trekking holidays.



### Recommended reading

Madagascar as a trekking destination is covered extensively in the eighth edition of Hilary Bradt's *Madagascar: The Bradt Travel Guide*. For insight into the island's amazing wildlife, *Madagascar Wildlife: A Visitor's Guide*, by

Hilary Bradt, Derek Schuurman & Nick Garbutt, is indispensable.

