

## Madagascar

It may be just off the coast of Africa but when you're in Madagascar you feel light years away from anywhere else on Earth. **Nick Garbutt** welcomes you to a truly topsy-turvy world

### BRANCHING OUT

Charles Darwin never visited Madagascar, but had he done so its fantastic biodiversity would surely have helped to inspire his work on evolution. Take the chameleon. Today, more than 80 species – half the world's total – are found here, including this panther chameleon, whose coloration varies depending on in which area of the island it is found. Many chameleons sport horns and armoured 'shields' behind their heads. Legend has it that chameleons change hue to blend into their background, but it is now recognised that their riotous colours convey emotions and reproductive state as well as providing camouflage.



SUNBATHING

▲ Nights in Southern Madagascar are often chilly and, as the first rays of sunshine hit the forest floor at dawn, ring-tailed lemurs (*Lemur catta*) often seek out warmth in which to bask. This group descended from the tree where they had slept and sat in a pool of early sunlight like miniature Buddhas. With no competition from higher primates on Madagascar, lemurs have diversified into more than 100 species, encompassing a wonderful variety of shapes, sizes and behaviour.

DAWN CHORUS

◀ My favourite lemur is the largest living species – the indri (*Indri indri*). In looks it recalls a gangly teddy bear and it can leap up to 10m (33ft) between trees. But its plangent, haunting cries are more extraordinary still and have the emotional power of whale song. In the early morning, waves of this hackle-raising sound travel far and wide through the indris' rainforest home in the humid east of the island, as each family declares its territory.

FINGER BUFFET

▲ The aye-aye (*Daubentonia madagascariensis*) encapsulates all that is outrageous and wonderful about Malagasy wildlife. It is one of the most difficult species to see in the wild – hardly surprising given that it is rare, nocturnal and black. In 20 years, I have seen aye-ayes just six times. Uniquely amongst primates, they have incisors that grow permanently, which they use to gnaw rotten wood and extract insect grubs using a skeletal middle finger.

## LAST IN A LONG LINE?

The Avenue des Baobabs is one of Madagascar's most enduring and iconic views. Soaring to 30m (100ft) high, these Grandidier's baobab trees (*Adansonia grandidieri*) are the last survivors of a forest clearance last century. However, they themselves are now in danger. With tourism a key source of income, the government is keen to discover why they have begun to fall down in recent years. It is thought that irrigation of the paddy fields in which they now find themselves may be to blame for the collapse of these spectacular trees, which are believed by the locals to have spiritual importance.





### BLUE IN THE FACE

▲ The helmet vanga (*Euryceros prevostii*) is the most spectacular member of the endemic vanga family. This thrush-sized bird is found only in undisturbed rainforests in the east and north east and is a consummate predator, watching and waiting before swooping to pick off small reptiles, amphibians and large invertebrates.

Vangas display such a variety and diversity of body sizes and beak shapes that it can be hard to accept that they are related.

### WARNING SIGNS

► The Madagascan or painted mantella (*Mantella madagascariensis*) seems uncannily similar in both appearance and behaviour to the poison-dart frogs of Central and South America (*Dendrobatidae* sp.). It's an exquisite example of convergent evolution, whereby similar biological traits are acquired by unrelated species. In fact, the Malagasy versions are not nearly as toxic as their New World counterparts, though their bright warning coloration is every bit as striking.



### DEVILISH CUNNING

Leaf-tailed geckos are Madagascar's undisputed kings of camouflage. The large species mimic tree bark, while the smaller ones such as this Satanic leaf-tailed gecko (*Uroplatus phantasticus*) resemble dead, shrivelled leaves. During the day they lie motionless amongst desiccated foliage and are virtually impossible to find. At night, when they hunt actively, the chances of an encounter improve significantly.



STICKING YOUR NECK OUT

◀ If one creature epitomises all that is weird, wacky and wonderful about Madagascar's wildlife, it is the giraffe-necked weevil (*Trachelophorus giraffa*). Males' necks are twice the length of females' and they use them for jousting with each other. This picture shows a male. Females use their necks to help roll the leaves of their host tree into a neat cylinder, into which they lay a single, pinhead-sized, lemon-coloured egg. Resembling a glacé cherry with a mini anglepoise lamp attached at one end, this baked bean-sized beetle is like nothing else on Earth.

THE PHOTOGRAPHER



**Nick Garbutt** has been visiting Madagascar for 20 years and has travelled to just about every corner of the island. He has baby-sat an infant ring-tailed lemur (pictured), eaten roasted locusts, been infested by numerous parasites, caught malaria three times and become addicted to Malagasy chocolate. He frequently travels all over the world photographing wildlife. He has twice been a winner in the Wildlife Photographer of the Year competition and is the author of several critically acclaimed books about Madagascar and its wildlife. He was an adviser on the recent BBC TV series *Madagascar* (2011).

FIND OUT MORE

► [www.nickgarbutt.com](http://www.nickgarbutt.com)  
Nick Garbutt's official website

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