

# Madagascar Journal

## Day 1



This will be the first photo shoot with my new Nikon D4! Of course it came 2 days before the trip so I was scrambling to get the right software updates and programs so I could actually see and convert the photo on the trip. After an easy set of flights and an overnight in South Africa I flew into Antananarivo, Madagascar. The next morning was our first chance to photograph the wild life of Madagascar. Our first stop was a reptile habitat where we could



practice or macro and flash techniques with lots of different species in a controlled environment. Some highlights were the chameleon habitat, the fruit bats and the comet moths. We talked a lot about flash, exposure, depth of field getting ready for shooting in the rain forest.



Following the drive to Andasibe and our check in at the Vakona Lodge we took a “long lens” excursion to Lemur Island. Once again we were able to shoot amazing subjects in a rain forest environment with long lenses and flash in a controlled, high reward location. Highlights from the afternoon included bamboo lemurs, black and white ruffed lemurs hanging upside down and red fronted brown lemurs jumping on photographer’s shoulders for a free ride.



Tonight was our first night walk in the rain forest. Armed with flashlights, macro lenses and flashes we photographed tiny chameleons, a walking stick with raspberry colored spines and a young Madagascar tree

boa. The scales were dark orange and black with white highlights and an iridescent rainbow colored sheen. Following our practice at the reptile farm everyone got great photographic results in very difficult situations.

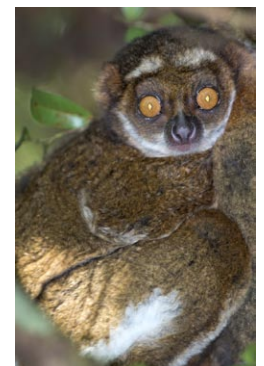
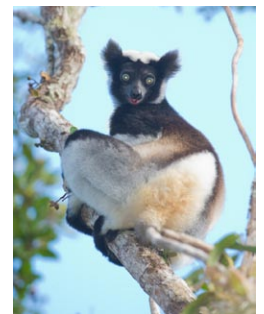


## Day 2

This morning we took our first rainforest photo trek. Parts of Analamazautre Park were damaged in a cyclone in August, including one of the main bridges so we had to enter the park from a side service road. As it happened we first heard and then found a troop of 5 Indri Indri lemurs. They are a highlight of the park and can only be found in this area. They are the biggest lemurs and look a little like a tall black and white bear with brilliant



aquamarine colored eyes. I have photographed them before from a distance and they are usually high in the forest canopy feeding on leaves. This was no different. Our group was excited to see and photograph them even from a distance. Soon one of our trackers told us they had found a group of 4 diadem sifaka lemurs no far away. They are the most beautiful lemurs with a black face, golden and cream colored fur and burnt maroon eyes. They posed, played and fed around us for 20 amazing minutes before our tracker told us he had just found a family of 3 wooly lemurs. They were huddled together in the crook of a tree and allowed us to get some nice shots before we returned to the Indri Indri troop. This time they were feeding 5 to 10 feet off the ground. It was a





dream come true as we all got into position to photograph them feeding on giant leaf and relaxing in the tree branches. After lunch we went to a different part of the rain forest for a macro trek. It began to rain as we approached the entrance shelter. While we waited for the rain to quit we photographed a tiny caterpillar. There were 3 boys just hanging out watching what we were doing. They ran off into the woods and returned with chameleons, frogs, a leaf gecko and an amazing larva that used deception as a defense. It raised its hind legs and buried its head in a tight arching movement. The brightly colored hind legs looked like the head while the drab head mimicked the back end. Predators will be more likely to attack the back end that masquerades as the head!

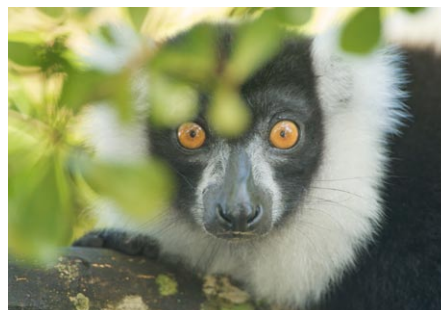
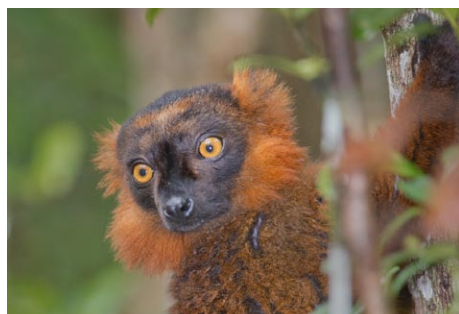
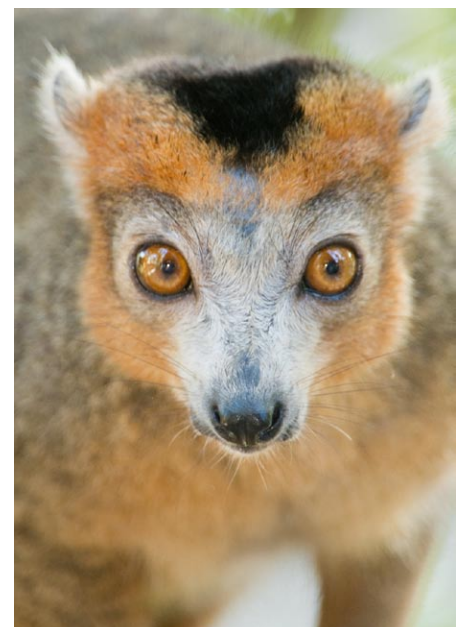


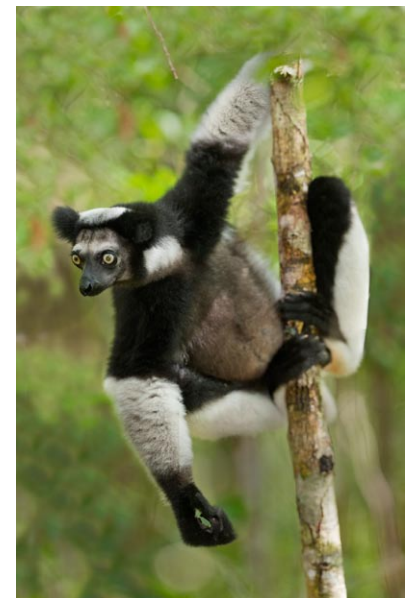
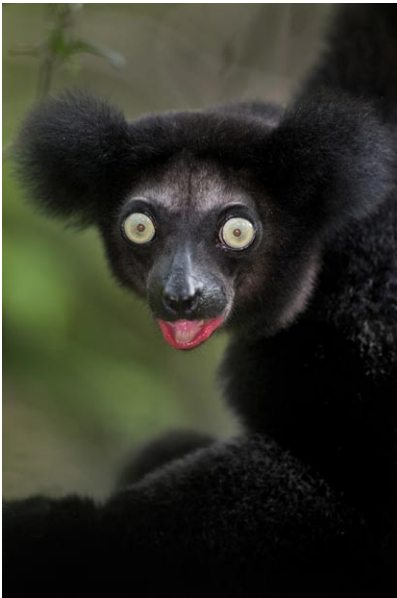
### Day 3

It's a pack up shoot a little travel day so we had breakfast, packed all of our gear and headed to the rain forest to search for Indri Indri. It started to drizzle as soon as we entered the park so the trails were slippery. When we found the Indri Indri they were high in the trees so shooting up was next to impossible. You could get 3 or 4 shots in before the mist obscured the lens. They don't call it the rain forest for nothin'. Yesterday's Indri Indri photos were so good that we soon turned around and tramped back to the bus. On our drive we stopped in a small roadside town and were serenaded by a fine musician playing a valeha, a traditional Malagase stringed instrument. Our destination is a peninsula between 2 large lakes. We took a 90 minute boat ride that crossed one lake, waved at fishermen paddling dugout canoes, navigated a long reedy channel and to the shore of the second lake where our beautiful resort is located. Tomorrow we hope to photograph lemurs, lemurs and more lemurs. I'm going to relax the night away in my sweet bungalow that sits on a bluff overlooking the lake.

### Day 4

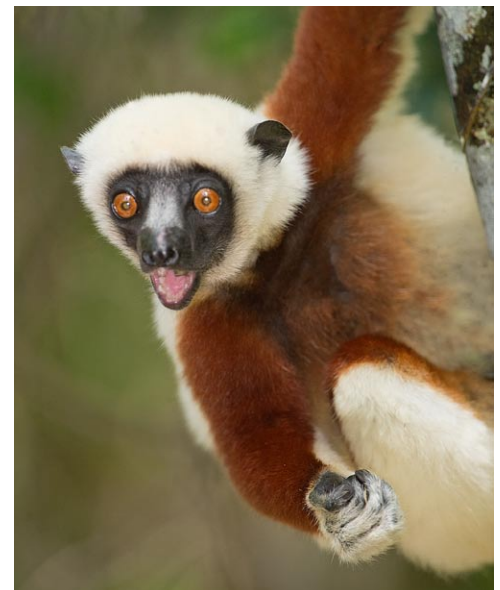
I love waking up in Paradise! Palmarium Lodge has smooth sand walkways leading through lush tropical gardens on the way to the dining area. Everyone brought camera gear and we found lots to shoot on the grounds. Land snail, tropical flowers, brilliant green and red geckos and lots of lemurs! Brown lemurs, hybrid lemurs, black and white ruffed lemurs and the rare (this is what I came for) black lemur. This was all before Breakfast!!!





Next event was a forest walk that gave us the uncommon black Indri Indri. We were eye to eye with a family of 4 for an hour! These are wild animals that are not shy of people so we photographed from very close range. It was the most amazing feeling when a young black

Indri Indri reached out and held my hand. Soft filtered forest light and a fill flash made for wonderful portraits. My favorite shots were when I could find a tunnel in the forest leaves and shoot from long distance with the 600mm lens. Next there was a troop of 6 hybrid lemurs with their Irish setter colored fur. They followed us down the trail and then disappeared into the forest. Another path led us to a family of Coquerel's sifaka lemurs that leaped through the trees and danced along the forest trail. This was a morning not to be forgotten.



First up for the afternoon shoot was “Lemur Flight Photography.” The first step is to find 2 trees about 25 feet apart with a clear background. Next step have some bananas and call the lemurs in from the forest. Once they know there is a free meal available they are perfectly willing to jump from tree to tree for a small reward. My favorite technique is to focus on the lemur as he perches on a tree. Don't refocus on him as he jumps to the next tree. Keep your focus in manual. Also, don't pan with the flight path. If you have a fast enough shutter speed both the forest and the flying lemur will be in focus at 10 frames per second. The last step in this process is to combine the shots from a well captured leap into a single frame to illustrate the lemur's flight path.





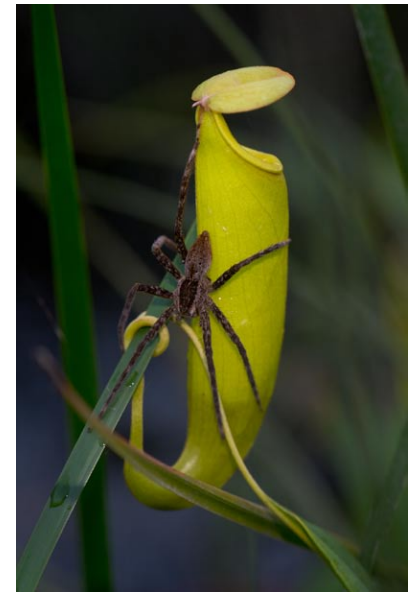
From there we hiked 20 minutes to a bog along the lake shore where there were carnivorous plants whose brilliant yellow flowers had trap doors set to capture unwary insects. After an afternoon of macro photography we made our way back to the lodge in the dark with time for dinner and packing for tomorrow's trip to Tana.

**Day 5**

Transfer day Palmarium to Tana by boat, 4 wheel drive vehicles, 20 seat bus and airplane,

**Day 6**

We had an easy morning transfer to the airport and a 50 minute flight to ....where we hopped into our 20 seat bus and drove to Citrus Town



(yes, they grow oranges and lemons here) located on the south west coast of Madagascar. We moved into our bungalows, had lunch and split into two groups. One group of 5 went on a boat trip to see the crocs and birds on the lake while the other group headed into the dry deciduous forest.

Afternoons are typically quieter than mornings but we still saw green geckos, lizards, paradise fly catcher, pied robin and Coqurel's sifaka. By a large forest pond there was a bush with lots of small frogs sitting on the leaves while malachite kingfishers perched on stumps near the water's edge.

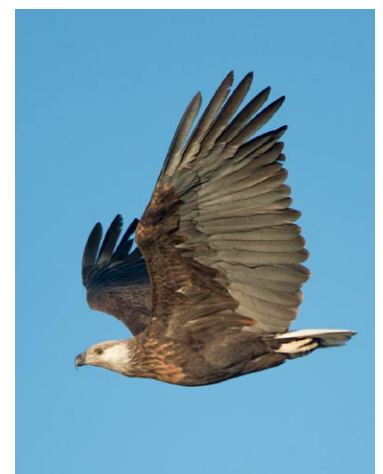
Folks in the boat said they had a difficult time. I think communication and movement on the boat can make for a frustrating trip. They did see a lot of good subjects, but we need to

figure out how to get in position and shoot smoothly and efficiently. I'll go on the boat and see if we can't make it work. Again, typically the morning should have more activity on the lake and in the forest.



**Day 7**

I took the second group for the morning boat while the others went to the forest pond. The boat is AMAZING! It's flat bottomed with a roof and rails all around to support cameras. It can get close to the birds; right up into the reed beds along the shore. I've shot from boats a lot and this set up is one of the best I've ever been on. The lake is a rookery for Black capped night herons, intermediate egrets, purple heron, glossy ibis, and the amazing black egret. One of the last 90 pairs of Madagascar fish eagles is nesting here and the are loads of malachite king fishers. I've done malachites before but the access, setting and calmness of the birds is unparalleled.





The black egrets are in full mating plumage and the whole colony is alive with activity. I've seen exactly 2 black egrets in Tanzania and here we have 300!!! Flight photography is great, too. The early morning fly in has squadrons of black egrets and glossy ibis but the flying continues all day. We even got some chances at the fish eagles. The big surprise for me was a huge purple heron hanging out in the reeds at the water's edge. Again, his calmness allowed us a close approach for beautiful portraits in golden light.



After the boat ride we walked the grounds waiting for the Coquerel's sifakas to come out of the forest and dance. They never did come down but we were able to photograph them in the trees. This afternoon our second group took the boat trip while the first group went to the forest. Again, the birds were spectacular!

The boatman understood what we needed for photography and continually put us in great position to make the shot. The fish eagles were perched on low branches and in the clear as we drifted by. So many great chances!!! After the boat ride we asked our guide if there were any sickle-billed vanga birds around. (We had heard they were in the area and hoped to see one). Our guide pointed at the tree right next to us. There were 20 of the vangas there feeding on low branches. Success!!



### Day 8

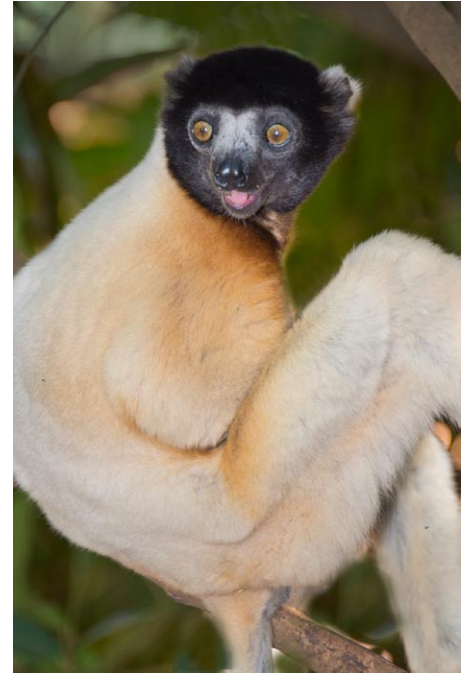
Last chance at a morning boat ride, pack up and transfer to town and our afternoon flight to Tana. The birds tried to out do everything they had given us on the previous boat rides. We nailed bird after bird on great perches, displaying, flying and just being beautiful! Right now we are in Tana at our hotel shopping for Madagascar sapphires before dinner.



## Day 9

Today we fly to Fort Dophine on an afternoon flight and drive to Berenty . We had time for a visit to Lemurs Park out side of Tana. The have a large natural reserve with 9 different kinds of lemurs to see and for us to photograph. Most of the species we have seen or will see in the wild but our goal was to get some photos of two rare species that we won't see on this itinerary; the crowned sifaka and the mongoose lemur. We saw them both but wile the crowned sifaka was in a great place to photograph and gave us wonderful chances for portraits the mongoose lemur stayed in bamboo thickets and wouldn't come out for us. One other lemur that was easy to photograph was the black lemur that we had shot in the wild at Palmerium. All in all it was a lovely way to spend the morning on a travel day.

Our flight to Fort Dophin got in at around 6:00. Our bus took us on a 90 kilometer drive through forest, villages, sisal plantations and spiny forest to Berenty Reserve where we checked into our bungalows and dream of dancing sifaka lemurs.

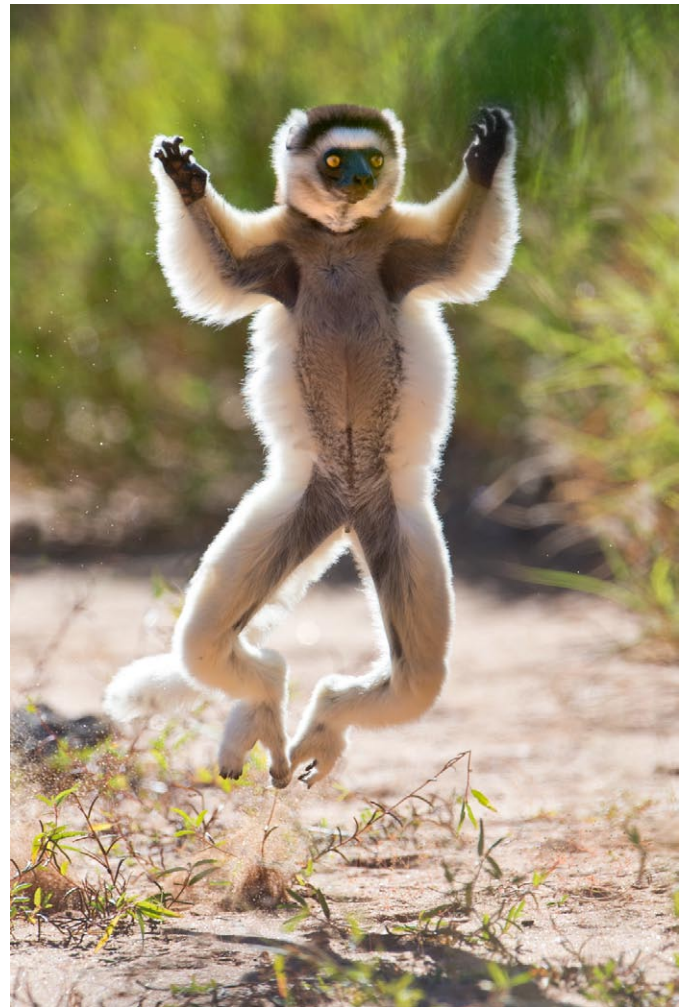


## Day 10



The day started bright and early with a 6:00 breakfast so we would be ready when the Veroux's sifakas started to feed. They leave the forest and cross to the fruit trees to feed. When they cross open ground they get up on their hind legs and move with a series of leaps that make it look like they are dancing. Our job is to find a group and figure out where they are heading and get there before them. The

challenge is to find the place that will show the behavior in good light, with an open background and offers us enough room for everyone to get the shots they want. That's not too much to ask, is it? We had chances to photograph lemurs in the trees before they came down to the ground. The first lemur to dance headed across an open area and leapt into a fruit tree. We were able to get to the side of the fruit tree while the rest of the family gathered in the first tree. Just as we got ready the next lemur dropped to the ground and danced right at us. The sun was behind him and made for a perfectly back lit subject. Each one of 7 lemurs followed the exact rout allowing for lots of chances and time to make any camera adjustments we needed. SPECTACULAR for everyone!





As it got hotter out we went to the gallery forest for brown lemurs, white-footed sportive lemurs and hissing cockroaches (They are 4 inches long and they really do hiss!!) The sportive lemur lives in the hollow of a tree and just watched us as we photographed him. His perfect hollow, smooth grey coat and maroon eyes made it a perfect photo shoot! But wait, there's more...after lunch we explored the spiny forest; an amazing place where every plant has spines and thorns but none of them



are cactus plants. They are hardwood trees that are actually used for lumber. We found another sportive lemur and we are now two for two because this one was just as cute as the other, just in a different and equally cool setting. Oh, my God, this photo day will never end!!! We took a night hike in the spiny forest where we photographed sportive lemurs, mouse lemur, nightjar, and chameleons. We stood in a forest glad and turned off the flashlights just to see the stars....breathtaking.



### Day 11

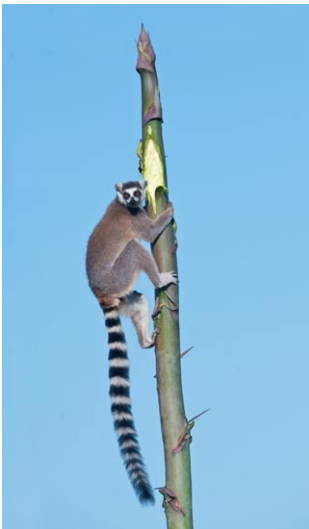
Our goal of shooting dancing lemurs was foiled by a cold morning. The sifakas stayed up in the tree tops trying to stay warm in the sun. We followed them through groves of fruit trees as they fed, played and leapt from tree to tree. We found an open space where the lemurs had to jump 20 feet of clear space to the next tree. Here we used some of the skills we had used earlier in the trip when we shot the flying lemurs. This was more challenging because it was difficult to judge when a lemur would launch into space. We did get some shots of airborne sifakas.

From there we went to the gallery forest where huge Madagascar fruit bats roost. Hundreds of these flying mammals hung in a colony and flew through the forest canopy making a deafening racket the whole time. The toughest thing was to find an awake bat in a fully shaded area. Any sunlight filtering through created awful white spots in the background and on the bat. The best shots had bats stretching wings or yawning.





We took a ride to a different area of the spiny forest for our afternoon shoot. The overlook view of the forest in the afternoon light gave us a chance to take photos that can later be assembled into large panoramics. We struck out finding mouse lemurs and owls but when we got back to the bus where it was parked at the edge of a sisal field we saw 6 or 7 ring-tailed lemurs



eating the 20 foot tall flower stalks. They clung to the stalks and chewed through the stalk until it toppled over. The scene was perfect. A beautiful subject in a great setting, engaged in an intriguing behavior, in late afternoon light...AMAZING! After supper our local guide, Bdenoit, brought us out behind the bungalows to show us a white-browed owl waiting by a path light waiting for insects. We had nice chances to use flash to make night shots. I thought I would try some of the high ISO setting on the D4. Using the H2 (2 stops past the 16,000 ISO stop) and hand holding the 600mm lens I was able to make a photo using only the glow of the path light. The clarity, sharpness, color and lack of noise was astounding. BTW I didn't have to get rid of any red eye either.



## Day 12

Air Madagascar changed out afternoon flight to a morning flight so we had a 5 AM breakfast and started our 4 hour drive to Fort Dauphin. Along the way we stopped to shoot baobab trees, some cool giant orange ladybugs and bought some carvings from local people along the road. We flew to Tana, had lunch and transferred to a bird park for an afternoon shoot. Set right in the middle of Tana the bird park is a series of lagoons and islands filled with nesting dimorphic egrets, black egrets, whistling, red-billed and fulvous ducks and night herons. The flight shooting was spectacular with birds circling in front of us in low afternoon light.

For a change of pace we walked to the other side of the main lagoon and shot the white dimorphic egrets against the setting sun. The light shining through the white wings makes the photo look like a painting. This was a perfect way to end our photo journey to Madagascar.





