BEST OF MADAGASCAR BIRDING TOUR

TOUR-SPECIFIC INFORMATION



*The rainforests of eastern Madagascar hold such beauties as **Pitta-like Ground Roller**.*

TOUR OUTLINE

Our *Best of Madagascar: Birds and Wildlife* tour offers an excellent introduction to the island's extraordinary endemic birdlife and unique wildlife, taking in a remarkable variety of habitats across this fascinating island. Madagascar is home to more than 100 endemic bird species, four endemic bird families, and an equally impressive diversity of mammals, reptiles, and plants. The tour begins in the lush eastern rainforests of Andasibe and Mantadia, where we search for an array of sought-after birds, including several ground rollers, vangas, couas, and asities, while also enjoying some superb lemur encounters, including the unmistakable Indri. We continue south to Ranomafana, another outstanding rainforest destination, before crossing the central highlands and moving into increasingly arid landscapes.

Along the way, we explore dry deciduous woodland, sandstone formations, and the distinctive spiny forests of the southwest, each supporting a very different collection of endemic species. Highlights include the highly prized **Subdesert Mesite**, **Long-tailed Ground Roller**, **Giant Coua**, **Red-shouldered Vanga**, and several other localized birds. The mammal encounters are equally rewarding, with opportunities to see a variety of lemurs, including sifakas, bamboo lemurs, and the iconic Ring-tailed Lemur, as well as an assortment of chameleons, geckos, and other fascinating reptiles. We also include a boat trip to Nosy Ve for **Red-tailed Tropicbirds** and other coastal specialties. Overall, this is a comprehensive birding and wildlife experience that showcases the remarkable diversity, unusual landscapes, and extraordinary endemism that make Madagascar such a special destination.

PACE OF TOUR

This Madagascar birding tour is a lengthy tour which may be tiring at times. One of the particularly tiring elements of this tour is the need for some very early starts, to ensure that we can get our birding in early before it heats up too much (this is especially the case while birding in the spiny forest of the southwest). The tour includes a lot of time on your feet walking in the hilly rainforests of eastern Madagascar and birding in the sandy, dry spiny forest of the southwest.

To make the most of the early morning peak in bird activity, we will sometimes leave our accommodation with simple but adequate breakfast packs, although we will still enjoy some sit-down breakfasts during the tour. Lunches will also often be picnic-style, with packed lunches, sandwiches, or wraps eaten in the field rather than lengthy sit-down meals. On some days, brunch may be a more practical option. These arrangements allow us to maximize our time birding rather than spending too much time on meals. While breakfasts and lunches may sometimes be relatively simple, we will ensure that everyone is well fed. Occasionally, we may have little choice but to purchase lunch at basic fuel stations with limited food options, although we will do our best to avoid this where possible. Snacks can also usually be purchased at fuel stations along the way.

Dinner will generally be the main meal of the day, enjoyed as a sit-down meal, and will usually be of a good standard.

Another demanding aspect of this tour is the several long travel days on extremely poor, heavily potholed roads. These journeys often take up almost the entire day, with only occasional birding and bathroom stops along the way.

It is possible to opt out of some activities, such as various morning and afternoon excursions. On some days, however, this won't be possible (if we're moving between accommodations), although you can always wait in/near the vehicle while the rest of the group heads out (please do ask your tour leader for specifics).

There will be the option for night birding excursions on this birding tour, however, (as with most of our birding excursions) these trips are not mandatory, and we strongly recommend sitting out if you are finding the tour too tiring.

We generally ensure that we do have some meaningful down-time on the tour, particularly on our non-travel days, while on the days when we travel between accommodation, there is less time for down-time (as this is otherwise spent traveling between destinations).

The guide discusses the daily plan with the group in detail each evening. Note that we do retain a sense of flexibility within reason, to allow for us to better maximize your birding and wildlife experience.

WALKING AND STYLE OF BIRDING

The tour is generally considered 'moderate to tough' in terms of physical exertion. Most of the birding on this tour is done on foot along trails with little roadside or vehicle-based birding. The tour involves several longer walks through rainforests which can be very hilly for which we may be out for the whole morning. Furthermore, walking through the spiny forests of the southwest can be challenging, with deep, sandy terrain and potentially intense heat. For this reason, we start our days here very early. Walking sticks or hiking poles are a great idea as they provide added stability to help with balance and are compulsory for anyone who is not steady at walking. The guide will discuss the day's itinerary beforehand and will explain in greater detail what the day will entail and if you feel you'd prefer to sit out an activity we can likely make alternative plans.

LENGTH OF DRIVES

There are a few days in which there are long drives, made even longer with lunch/birding/fuel stops, however most drives, when not moving between accommodations, involve far less travel. Some of the longer transfers of this trip include:

a. Andasibe to Antsirabe,
b. Antsirabe to Ranomafana,
c. Ranomafana to Isalo,
d. Isalo to Ifaty,

These are all essentially full-day drives. While the distances covered are not necessarily vast, the very poor road conditions mean that journeys often take an entire day. We'll generally depart in the early morning and spend the day travelling and birding along the way, typically arriving at our overnight accommodation in the late afternoon.

SAFETY

This tour does not spend much time in large cities (besides starting/ending in Antananarivo (Tana) and spending a night in Antsirabe) and we generally stay in tourist areas which are considered safe. While out birding, we suggest rather not leaving personal items of value in the vehicle if it is unattended, if you are ever in doubt, please just check with the tour leader.

We will not be visiting any areas of extreme altitude where altitude sickness will be an issue, with the highest elevation visited on this trip likely to be in the highlands of around 4,900 feet (1,500 meters) above sea level.

HEALTH, PESTS AND DANGEROUS ANIMALS

As with any trip to Madagascar, particular care should be taken when choosing what food you eat as 'travelers' diarrhea' is unfortunately very common, even when eating at restaurants of a high standard. This is mostly due to the water used to wash food and it is best to avoid any unpeeled/uncooked vegetables/salads. If in doubt, please check with the local guide or tour leader before ordering your meal. Only drink bottled water and ensure you use bottled water when brushing your teeth.

While out birding on foot there could be ticks around, and so it is mostly recommended to wear long trousers and check yourself for ticks after the day out in the field. Additionally, it is a good idea to spray your legs/trousers and particularly boots/socks with anti-tick spray. Leeches may be encountered in rainforests, however, as this tour takes place during the dry season, they are likely to be less of an issue.

Rabies (although rare) does still exist in Madagascar and although the chances of you encountering rabid animals is very low on this trip, we strongly advise against touching/petting domestic animals, particularly while out in rural areas. Please consult with your tour leader if you are ever unsure though.

Even though none of Madagascar's terrestrial snake species are highly venomous, some are considered mildly venomous and should not be touched. Please be vigilant while we are out walking.

In southwest Madagascar, while staying at Ifaty, it is possible to enjoy swimming and snorkeling in the sea. Venomous sea snakes occur in the seas surrounding Madagascar, and if any of these snakes are encountered while swimming or snorkeling, you should stay well away.

Malaria

We strongly recommend taking antimalarial medication throughout this Madagascar tour, as we will be visiting areas of moderate to high malaria risk for much of the trip. Fortunately, the tour takes place during the dry season, before the summer rains arrive, which generally reduces malaria risk. Nevertheless, we strongly advise consulting a medical professional before departure to discuss suitable preventative medication. The following three medications are commonly used for

malaria prevention and are effective, although no prophylactic offers 100% protection, particularly in areas where drug-resistant strains occur:

- **Malarone** (atovaquone/proguanil)
- **Doxycycline**
- **Lariam** (mefloquine)

In addition to taking antimalarial medication, we recommend using mosquito repellent and wearing long trousers and long-sleeved shirts, particularly in the evenings. Malaria is transmitted by infected female *Anopheles* mosquitoes, which are generally most active from dusk until dawn.

Although the risk is greatly reduced by taking appropriate precautions, malaria can still occur despite using preventative medication. It is therefore important to seek medical attention promptly if you develop flu-like symptoms during or in the weeks and months following your visit to Madagascar. Make sure to mention your recent travel history, as malaria should be considered even if you have taken antimalarial medication. If diagnosed, malaria can generally be treated effectively using medication different from the prophylactic drug you took.

TRANSPORTATION

Depending on the final group size, we will likely use a medium-sized bus on this Madagascar birding tour, ensuring everybody has a window seat. We will split up the group into smaller vehicles when visiting areas with rougher or tighter roads, such as the Andasibe area. As with our other birding tours, we will use a seat rotation policy within the vehicle which will be explained to you by your tour leader at the start of the tour.

DOMESTIC FLIGHTS

There is one domestic flight on this birding tour on the penultimate day of the tour as we fly from Toliara back to Tana which is of around two hours flight time. We generally try book this flight for the late morning but cannot always guarantee this flight option. This day's itinerary will depend on our scheduled flight time. Air Madagascar flights are, unfortunately, completely unreliable, and scheduled flight times can change on the day of the flight until as late as one hour before departure, so we will bear this in mind when deciding on the day's itinerary.

ACCOMMODATION

The accommodation on this tour is of a good quality. It is worth noting that buildings in Madagascar are often not heated like they are in North America and Europe, etc., and so for colder evenings (such as potentially while on the central plateau) it may be worth packing warmer sleeping clothes.

Should you wish to arrive a day or two before the start of the tour, we strongly suggest staying at Relais des Plateaux in Antananarivo, where we are staying for our first night on tour. Please contact the Birding Ecotours office to help organize this for you.

It is possible to get laundry washed at most of the establishments used on this tour, with many establishments only accepting laundry if we have a minimum of two nights, and the laundry is provided on the first day/arrival day.

ELECTRICITY

Lighting in rooms tends to be low wattage, so you might like to bring a good quality torch/flashlight if you like reading in bed!

Electrical sockets are the same as in Europe (except the UK) – two-prong and 220 Volts ITA Type C. It is good practice to bring international adapters, as many establishments are changing their plug outlets to better align with international clients.

WEATHER

This tour takes place during the cool and dry season when temperatures on the central plateau (days 1–9) may be cool at night but hot and humid during the daytime, with an average maximum of 79–83°F (26–28°C). During our time in the dry southwest (days 9–13) temperatures can get very hot during the daytime with average maximum temperatures of around 82–86°F (28–30°C).

Although this tour takes place in October, during the dry season, rain is still a possibility while on the central plateau, especially towards the end of the month. Because of the possibility of rain, we suggest bringing light preventative gear (like a poncho or light rain jacket).

WHAT TO BRING: CLOTHING AND OTHER ITEMS

Please see our blog on 'What to bring on a birding tour' which will help you pack for this Madagascar birding tour.