


NATURAL WONDERS OF THE RED ISLAND

MAGICAL MADAGASCAR

PART TWO

The second chapter of our herpetological expedition to the legendary land of endemisms in search of colorful chameleons - not to mention rare lemurs, amazing insects and spectacular landscapes



Short-horned Chameleon 
Calumma brevicorne, male,
Andasibe-Matadia National Park.

*Ambalabongo Canyon,
landscape sculpted by erosion,
Ankarafantsika National Park.*





■ Giant Leaf-tailed Gecko *Uroplatus giganteus*, Montagne d'Ambre National Park.

TEXT BY ANDREA FERRARI
PHOTOS BY ANDREA & ANTONELLA FERRARI

After having attempted in our previous issue to give a broad idea of what to expect during a wildlife photography trip to Madagascar, it is now time to get down to the details. When gathering information, we soon found out that the island of Madagascar is home to a stupefying number of species, but mostly of them are either seasonal or ranging throughout relatively small areas often separated by great distances, so one has to decide what will be the "target" subject before leaving. We opted for chameleons, so our itinerary was built around them - frogs, lemurs, birds and

landscapes would be incidental (as you probably have realized by now, in Madagascar that means one would see a lot of them anyway!). One fact which actually surprised us in the course of our research is that most chameleons are apparently seasonal, and quite difficult to encounter during most of the year, when they retire to the forest canopy and wear a relatively modest livery in greens and browns. The trick to get truly impressive portraits of these amazing animals is visiting Madagascar at the peak of their breeding season – between March and April, under normal conditions –

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Madagascan Tree Boa *Sanzinia* ■
madagascariensis, Andasibe-
Mantadia National Park.

*A veritable wonderland
of a thousand wondrous
colors and shapes*



■ Long-winged kite or Thorn Spider
Gasteracantha versicolor,
Ankarafantsika National Park.

and planning a very specific itinerary aimed at chameleon encounters. This is exactly what we did, relying on the experienced advice and faultless organization of our friend Thorsten Negro of [TanalaHorizon](#) - and what follows is a description of our itinerary.

FROM ANDASIBE TO VOIMANA

After arriving in the capital Antananarivo, we were driven east to the mountain cloud forests of Andasibe and Voimana. Andasibe-Mantadia National Park is a 155 square kilometre protected area consisting principally of primary growth forest in the Alaotra-Mangoro region in eastern Madagascar. The park's elevation ranges from 900-1250 meters, with a humid climate. Average annual precipitation is 1700 mm, with rainfall on 210 days of each year. This rainforest is habitat to a vast species biodiversity, including many endemic rare and endangered species, including eleven lemur species. The Park's two component parts are

Mantadia National Park and Analamazoatra Reserve, which is best known for its population of Madagascar's largest lemur, the Indri. This is one of the easiest Parks in Madagascar to visit from the capital city, Antananarivo, with a 3-hour drive east on a paved road, Route Nacional 2 (RN 2). While Analamazoatra and park headquarters are short walks from Antsapanana on the RN 2, special transport must be arranged or hired from local hotels to reach Mantadia. Hikes ranging from 1-6 hours are typically available in both parts of the Park. A local guide is required for visitors entering both parts.

The main threat to this Park comes from the disappearance of adjoining habitat outside it, caused primarily by logging and replacement of rainforest with commercial Australian eucalyptus and Chinese pine forests, and to a lesser extent by slash-and-burn cultivation for rice agriculture, which is exacerbated by the extremely high population growth rate and poverty in rural Madagascar. To address the disappearing habitat threat, reserves have been created in the vicinity of Andasibe-Mantadia that balance resource extraction with environmental protection, and attempt to create economic and environmentally preferable alternatives to replacing native forests with eucalyptus and pine. There are many interesting chameleon species here, such as *Calumma parsonii*, *Calumma parsoni cristiferum* and many more. We also stopped on the way at the reptile and amphibian breeding farm in Mandraka. In

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■ Panther
Chameleon
*Furcifer
pardalis*, adult
male, Djangoa
color morph,
Ankaramy-
Ambanja route.



Andasibe our group was divided into smaller groups (one of which was composed by the two of us!), so it was not too crowded during the excursions and everybody got a chance to see the animals well. While one group went to Analamazaotra National Park looking for chameleons and lemurs, the other group visited the nearby Voimana Nature Reserve looking for more chameleons, in particular the tiny but stunning *Calumma gallus*. After three nights in Andasibe we went back to the capital and then continued to the north, in direction of Ankarafantsika.

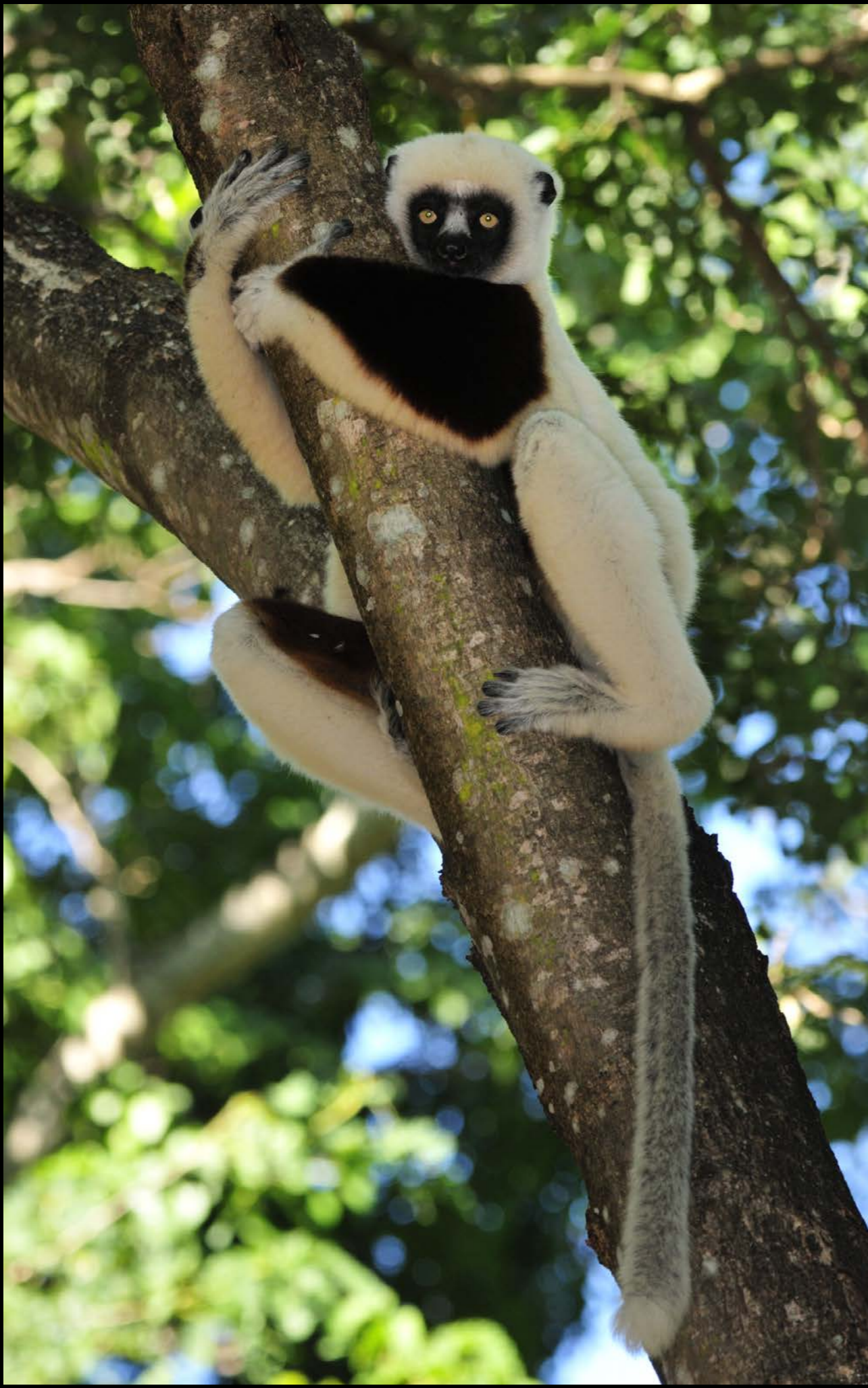
NORTH TO ANKARAFANTSIKA

Driving through the beautiful northern highlands, we then reached the National Park of Ankarafantsika. Ankarafantsika National Park lies in the Boeny Region of Madagascar. The closest city is Majunga, 115 km north of the Park. The area is mostly tropical in climate type. The Sakalava people are the predominant ethnic group living and farming in the Park. The greater big-footed mouse *Macrotarsomys ingens* occurs in the Park and is not known from anywhere else. The Park is located between the Betsiboka river to the west and the Mahajamba river to the east. Originally there were two Parks on either side of the Route 4 national road but these were combined in 2002. The Park occupies about 135,000 hectares and consists of patches of thick dry tropical forest interspersed with less dense areas. Other habitats include savannah, scrub and sandy eroded rock

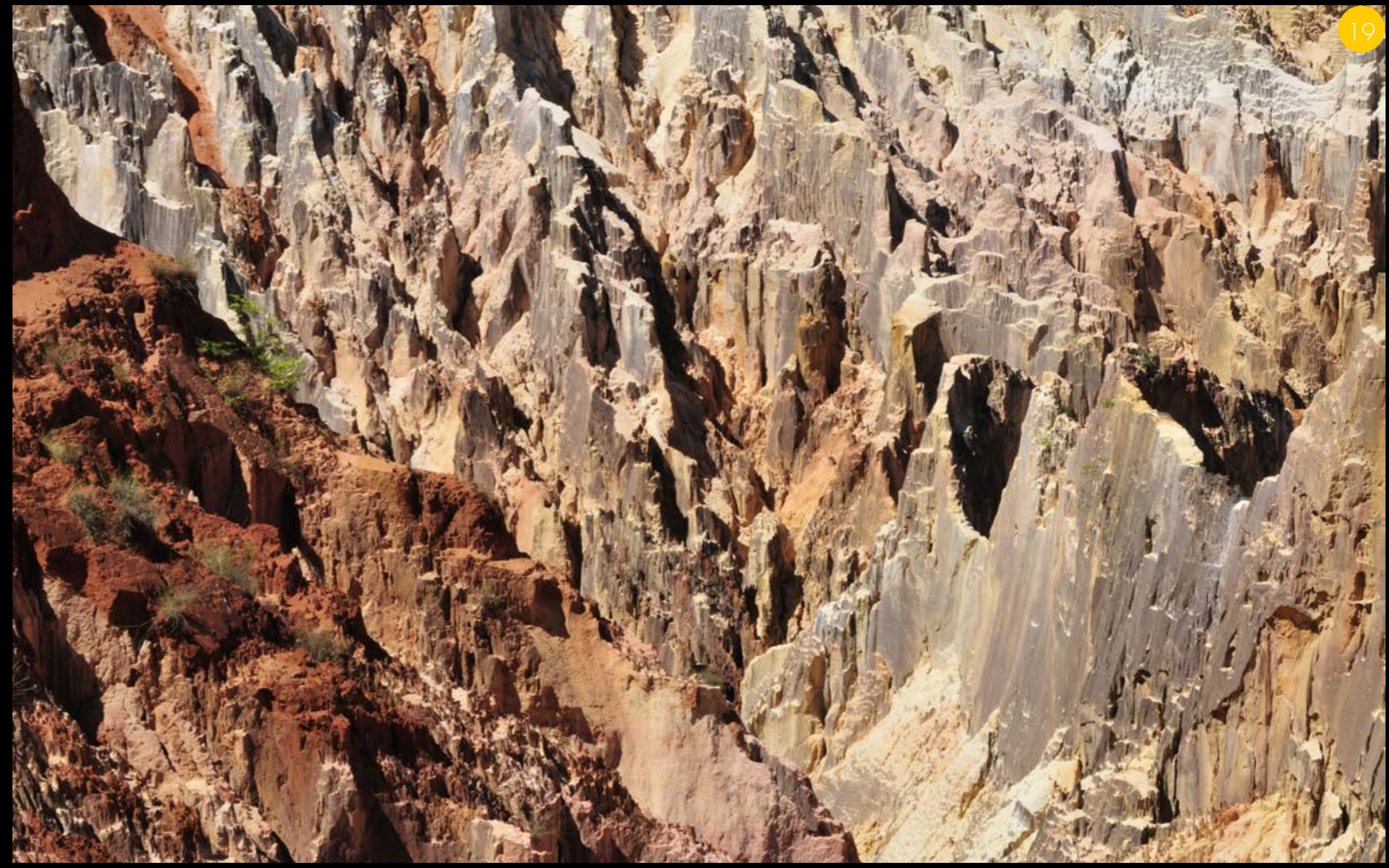
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Ground frog *Mantella madagascariensis*, Ranomafana National Park.





Left, Coquerel's sifaka *Propithecus coquereli*, Ankarafantsika National Park; top right, Ambalabongo Canyon, landscape sculpted by erosion, Ankarafantsika National Park; bottom right, Malagasy landscape showing effects of deforestation, near Ankarana National Park.



Antonella shooting the eroded landscape of Ambalabongo Canyon, Ankarafantsika National Park.





■ *Petter's Chameleon*
Furcifer petteri,
female,
Montagne
d'Ambre
National Park.

areas, while some land is farmed by the indigenous Sakalava people. There are a number of lakes and the Park is criss-crossed by excellent tracks and paths. We had our own tents and food here; guides are available (and mandatory). The Park is mostly woodland and the tree species are typical of dry tropical forest. Over eight hundred species are present, many of them endemic to Madagascar. Notable examples include the flowering bush mpanjakabenitany *Baudouinia fluggeiformis*, the katrafay *Cedrelopsis grevei* used in traditional medicine, the small tree lohavato *Hymenodictyon occidental* and the sakoanala *Poupartia silvatica*, a large tree with conspicuous flowers. Native fauna is exceptionally well represented here. Ten species of amphibian and forty-four reptile species are present. These include the rare Madagascan big-headed turtle *Erymnochelys madagascariensis*, the Rhinoceros chameleon *Furcifer rhinocerotus* and the Dwarf chameleon *Brookesia decaryi*. Also present are two ground-dwelling boas, *Acrantophis madagascariensis* and *Sanzinia madagascariensis*, and the rare terrestrial snake *Liophidium therezieni*. Mammals found in the Park include eight species of lemur, two of which are mouse lemurs *Microcebus* spp., the world's smallest primates. The greater big-footed mouse *Macrotarsomys ingens* is a recently described small rodent known only from the Park and its vicinity. One hundred and twenty-nine species of birds have been recorded in the Park, more than half of them endemic to Madagascar. These include

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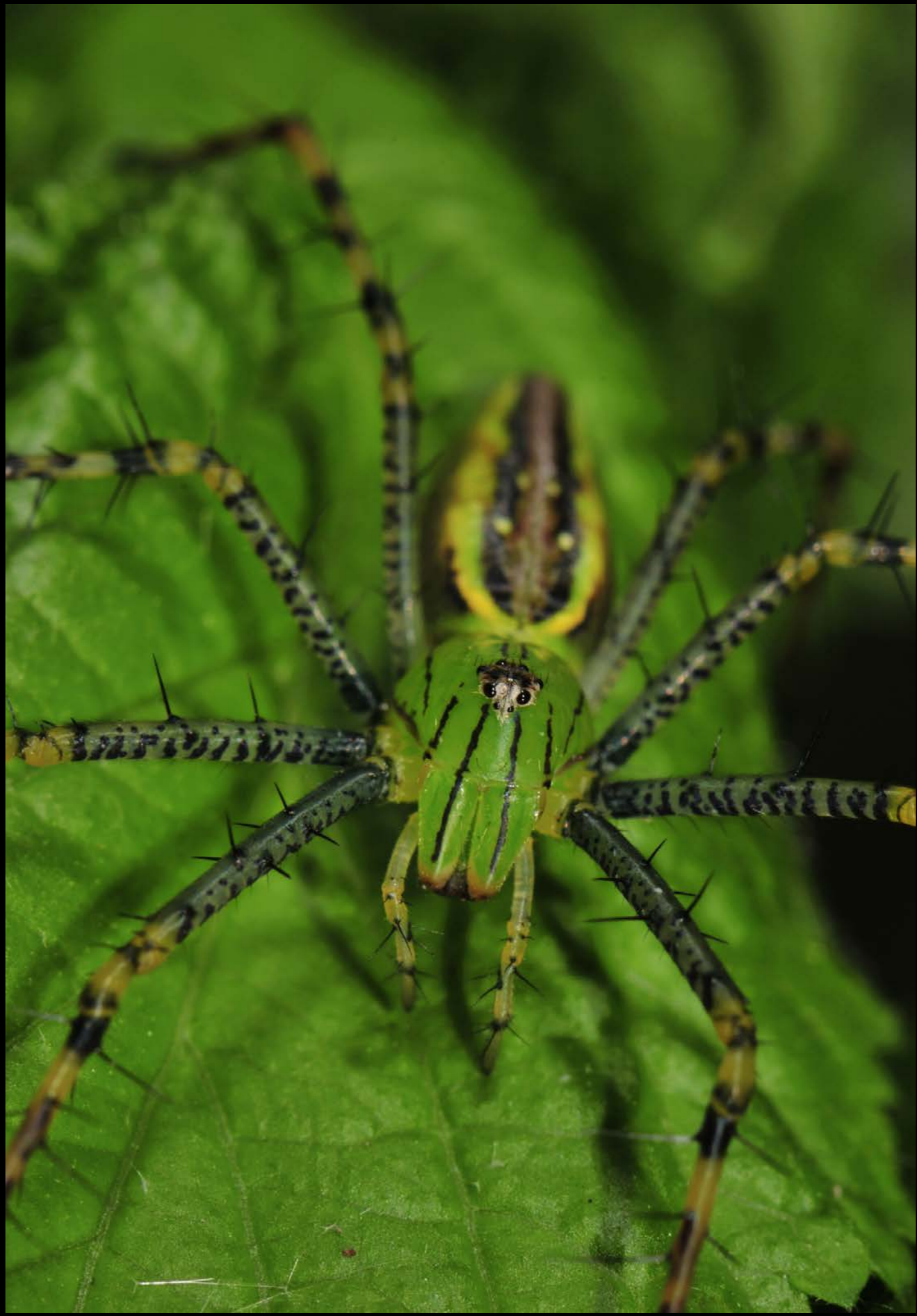
Left, Domergue's leaf chameleon *Brookesia thieli*, Andasibe National Park; right, Panther Chameleon *Furcifer pardalis*, adult male, Ambilobe color morph, near Ambilobe village.



*An incredibly variable
but always colorful species*



■ Panther
Chameleon
Furcifer
pardalis, adult
male, Ambilobe
color morph,
near Ambilobe
village.



Far left, Boehm's Day Gecko *Phelsuma magascariensis boehmei*, Andasibe-Mantadia National Park; left, Malagasy Green Lynx Spider *Peucetia madagascariensis*, Ankify.

the Van Dam's vanga *Xenopirostris damii*, the Rufous vanga *Schetba rufa*, the elusive Banded kestrel *Falco zoniventris* and the more easily observed Madagascar Fish eagle *Haliaeetus vociferoides*, which can often be seen at Ravelobe lake. The endangered Madagascar heron *Ardea humbloti* can also be seen at Lake Ravelobe. In this dry forest the rare *Furcifer rhinocerotus* can be found. The females of this species are purple in color and therefore highly attractive, but it is the bizarre nasal appendage of the male which has inspired the name of the species. Even the rare Pygmy chameleon *Brookesia decaryi* can be found with some luck in the foliage of the forest floor. The lake is home to a population of sizeable Crocodiles *Crocodilus niloticus madagascariensis*. The landscape here is extremely attractive and the truly stunning Ambalabongo canyon is a highlight of this tour which is not to be missed, even if the trek there – mostly under the equatorial sun and often in extreme heat - can be exhausting to the less fit.

TO ANKARANA AND MONTAGNE D'AMBRE

After our exceptionally fruitful stay on the west coast of Madagascar, we continued our journey north. A long drive of approximately eight hours took us to Antsohihy. This is prime habitat for the highly variable but always incredibly colorful Panther chameleon *Furcifer pardalis*. The villages of Ankaramybe, Djangoa and Ambanja are well known among reptile enthusiasts depending on the

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Panther Chameleon
Furcifer pardalis, Andasibe
color morph, male in breeding
livery, Andasibe-Mantadia
National Park.

*A living
and breathing
rainbow
of colors*



■ Panther
Chameleon
Furcifer
pardalis, adult
male, Ambanja
color morph,
Ambanja.



Giraffe or Giraffe-necked weevil *Trachelophorus giraffa*, male, Andasibe-Mantadia National Park.
 Top right, Thorn Spider *Gasteracantha versicolor*, Andasibe-Mantadia National Park; bottom right, Scorpion *Grosphus ankarana*, Ankarana National Park.





■ Coastline landscape with fishermen near Ankify.



Crowned Lemur *Eulemur coronatus*, Montagne d'Ambre National Park.

different colour variations in *Furcifer pardalis* found there. The photo opportunities here are endless! We then continued north, to the idyllic seaside village of Ankify. Here, very large specimens of Panther chameleons can be found, and we also undertook a speedboat trip to explore the nearby island of Nosy Faly to look for the uniquely colorful morph of this species found there. Ankify offered one of the very few comfortable – one could almost say luxurious – accommodations of our trip, and we took advantage of it to relax a little on the beach before continuing our expedition to the north.

From Ankify we then drove to Ambilobe, another area which is home to one of the most popular color variations of the Panther chameleon. Along the road to Sirama we got to see many different colored specimens – we just had to keep looking at the bushes and ask our driver to stop when we spotted one! After this pleasant excursion, we finally reached the prehistoric-looking rock massif of Ankarana, home to several rare reptiles, including the stunningly camouflaged leaf tailed gecko *Uroplatus henkeli*. Ankarana Special Reserve was created in 1956. It is a small, partially vegetated plateau composed of 150-million-year-old middle Jurassic limestone. With an average annual rainfall of about 2,000 millimetres (79 in) the underlying rocks are susceptible to erosion, thereby producing caves and underground rivers - a karst topography. The rugged relief and the dense vegetation have helped protect

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Top, Lynx Spider *Oxyopes* sp., near Ankify; bottom, Bell's Hinge-back Tortoise *Kinixys belliana*, Nosy Faly; right, Panther Chameleon *Furcifer pardalis*, adult male, Ankify color morph, near Ankify.



Panther Chameleon
Furcifer pardalis, Nosy Faly
color morph, male in breeding
livery, Nosy Faly.

the region from human intrusion in the past. The plateau slopes gently to the east, but on the west it ends abruptly in the "Wall of Ankarana", a sheer cliff that extends 25 kilometres (16 mi) north to south, and rises as high as 280 metres (920 ft). To the south, the limestone mass breaks up into separate spires known as tower karst. In the center of the plateau, seismic activity and eons of rainfall have dissolved the limestone away in deep gorges, and sometimes redeposited it in ribbons of flowstone. In places where the calcific upper layers have been completely eroded, the harder base rock has been etched into channels and ridges known as *tsingy*. Beginning in the 1960s, an expatriate Frenchman named Jean Duflos (who later married locally and changed his name to Jean Radofilao) did a huge amount of exploration of the cave

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The beautiful seaside landscape at Antsiranana Bay, Diego Suarez.



Left, Montagne
d'Ambre Leaf-Tailed Gecko
Uroplatus fiavana,
shedding old skin,
Montagne d'Ambre
National Park; center,
Henkel's Leaf-tailed Gecko
Uroplatus henkeli
camouflaged on tree trunk,
Ankarana National Park;
right, Mossy Leaf-tailed
Gecko *Uroplatus sikorae*
camouflaged on tree trunk,
Montagne d'Ambre
National Park.





 *Petter's Chameleon*
Furcifer petteri, male,
Montagne d'Ambre
National Park.



Left, the last two Malagasy Baobab *Adansonia madagascariensis* left standing in the whole world, Ankarafantsika National Park; right, Ambalabongo Canyon, landscape sculpted by erosion, Ankarafantsika National Park.



systems and subterranean rivers of the Massif, much of it on his own or with visiting speleologists. A total of about 100 kilometres (62 mi) of cave passages within the massif have been mapped. One of the most accessible caves, La Grotte d'Andrafiabe, alone comprises at least 8.035 kilometres (4.993 mi) of horizontal passages. Indeed the Massif contains the longest cave systems in Madagascar, and probably in the whole of Africa. During their 1986 expedition, Phil Chapman and Jean-Elie Randriamasy collated a bird list for the reserve and recorded 65 species from 32 families representing nearly a third of all bird species that breed in Madagascar. The Ankarana Reserve is an important refuge for significant populations of the crowned lemur *Eulemur coronatus*, Sanford's brown lemur *Eulemur sanfordi* and other mammal species. The following lemurs are also recorded from the area: Northern sportive lemur *Lepilemur septentrionalis*, Brown mouse lemur *Microcebus rufus*, Fat-tailed dwarf lemur *Cheirogalus medius*, Fork-marked lemur *Phaner furcifer*, Eastern woolly lemur *Avahi laniger*, Perrier's sifaka *Propithecus diadema perrieri*, the rare Aye-aye *Daubentonia madagascariensis* and the Western lesser bamboo lemur *Hapalemur griseus occidentalis*.

After staying in Ankarana, we continued north and took a short trip

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Spearpoint Leaf-tail Gecko ■
Uroplatus eburnei, Nosy Be.



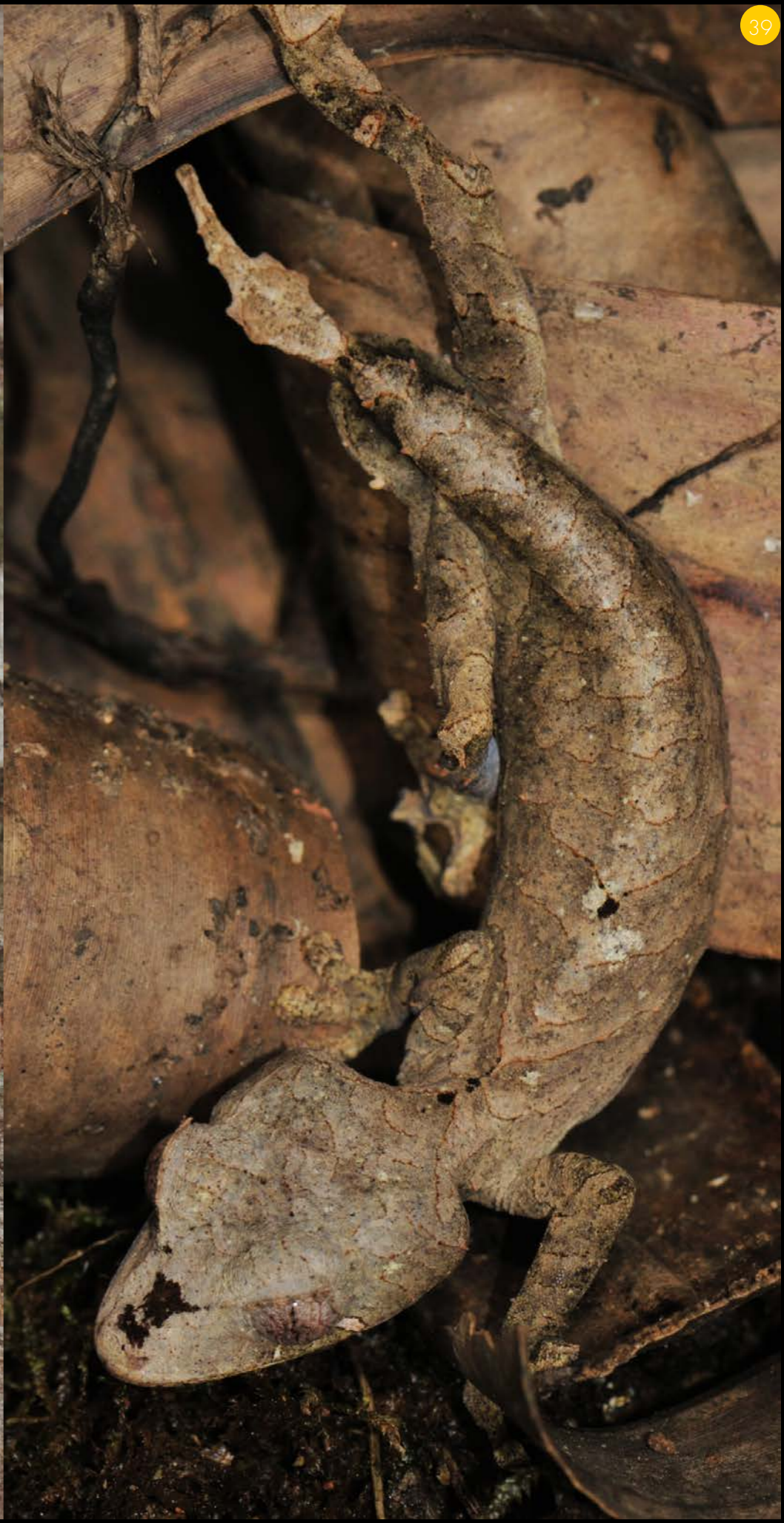
Left, ■
 Carpet Chameleon
Furcifer lateralis,
 female, Mandraka;
 top right,
 Malagasy Leaf-
 nosed Twig Snake
Langaha
madagascariensis,
 male,
 Ankarafantsika
 National Park,
 Madagascar;
 bottom right,
 Malagasy Leaf-
 nosed Twig Snake
Langaha
madagascariensis,
 female,
 Ankarafantsika
 National Park.





The Red Tsingy or Tsingy Rouge, a spectacular limestone landscape shaped by erosion, Ankarana National Park.

■ Left, Plated lizard *Zonosaurus laticaudatus* feeding on insect prey, Ankarafantsika National Park; center, Koch's Giant Day Gecko *Phelsuma kochi*, Ankarafantsika National Park; right, Spearpoint Leaf-tail Gecko *Uroplatus ebenau*, Nosy Be.





Montagne d'Ambre Chameleon ■
Furcifer sp. "Montagne d'Ambre",
female, Montagne d'Ambre
National Park.



to visit the bizarre looking gorge of the Red *Tsingy*. The landscape here is absolutely unique and offers, again, a lot of photo opportunities. Our final destination was then the cloud forest of Amber Mountains. Montagne d'Ambre National Park is a National Park in the Diana Region of northern Madagascar. The park is known for its waterfalls and crater lakes, and is located 1000 km north of the capital, Antananarivo. It is also one of the most biologically diverse places in all of Madagascar; 75 species of birds, 25 species of mammals, and 59 species of reptiles are known to inhabit the protected area. Once again, we relied on our tents and food – temperatures here can be rather chilly during the night and early morning, and it rains often. Montagne d'Ambre is very well known for its rich amphibians and reptile wildlife. We observed several fascinating chameleon species, including the newly discovered *Furcifer timoni* and *Furcifer petteri*, besides several more common but equally attractive ones such as *Calumma amber*, *Calumma ambreensis*, *Calumma boettgeri*, *Brookesia tuberculata* and *Brookesia antakarana*, and the largest of all leaf-tailed geckos, *Uroplatus giganteus*. After spending a few days there, we then drove past Diego Suarez (Antsiranana) to the town of Ramena. Here we relaxed for a couple of days before returning to the capital and then continuing - this time alone - to Ranomafana National Park in the south-east, which will be the subject of a future, separate article. ●

■ Left, the raging Betsiboka river rapids; right, a fishing sailboat along the coastline landscape near Ankify.





■ Left, close-up of Henkel's Leaf-tailed Gecko *Uroplatus henkeli* camouflaged on tree trunk, Ankarana National Park; right, the Red Tsingy or Tsingy Rouge, a spectacular river gorge shaped by erosion, Ankarana National Park.



*A land forgotten by time
where endemisms
reign supreme*



■ Montagne
d'Ambre
Chameleon
Calumma amber,
female, Montagne
d'Ambre
National Park.



Top left, caterpillars of Madagascar Emperor Moth *Bunaea aslauga*, near Ankaramy; top right, Longhorn Beetle, family Cerambycidae, Ankarana National Park; bottom left, Plated lizard *Zonosaurus laticaudatus*, Ankarafantsika National Park; bottom right, Malagasy Common Big-eyed Snake *Mimophis mahfalensis*, Ankarafantsika National Park.



■ Suarez Baobab *Adansonia suarezensis*, Diego Suarez.



■ Dwarf Chameleon
Brookesia superciliaris,
Andasibe-Mantadia
National Park.





■ Left, Short-horned chameleon *Calumma brevicorne*, female in defensive threat display, Andasibe-Mantadia National Park; center, Lantern bug *Zanna pauliani*, first image in the wild, Andasibe-Mantadia National Park; right, Thorn Spider *Gasteracantha versicolor*, Andasibe-Mantadia National Park





False Tomato Frog
Dyscophus guineti, Sambava.



■ Left, Ground frog
Mantella ebenai,
near Ankify;
right, Malagasy
Red Tree Frog
Boophis pyrrius,
Andasibe-
Mantadia
National Park.





Panther Chameleon ■
Furcifer pardalis, adult male,
Ankify color morph, near Ankify.



■ Left, the muddy rapids of the Betsiboka river; right, a serene coastline landscape with fishermen near Ankify.





Canopy Chameleon ■
Furcifer willsii, female, Andasibe-
Mantadia National Park.



■ Left, Ylang-Ylang *Cananga odorata* flowers, Ankify; right, a close-up of the flower of the aptly named *Clitoria* sp., family Fabaceae.





■ Carpet Chameleon *Furcifer lateralis*, pregnant female, encountered along the Ambanja-Ankarana route.