

NATURAL WONDERS OF THE RED ISLAND

MAGICAL MADAGASCAR

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

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

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





Malagasy Tree Frog ■
Boophis madagascariensis,
Andasibe-Mantadia National Park.

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*A*s a rule, we always travel alone - never in groups - and we organize our own expeditions, never joining trips offered by travel agencies. However, there are always exceptions to the rule - and Madagascar is one of these. Exploring by one's own means the Red Island is perfectly feasible of course - if one has plenty of time to spare for the inevitable delays, is willing to face frequent discomfort and the occasional petty crime, and can travel light. In Madagascar roads are mostly in bad shape, travel schedules by public transport are unreliable or non-existent, accomodation can be

severely uncomfortable by Western standards, safety of food and drinks is dubious at best and health can occasionally be at risk. Renting a private vehicle and a personal guide is again perfectly feasible, but can be exceedingly expensive - and there are no guarantees of being happy and safe if one doesn't use a reputable, experienced, specialized operator - of which in Madagascar there are few. So - once we had thrown the dice and finally decided to visit Madagascar, lured by its unmatched reputation as a true (and severely endangered) paradise for endemic wildlife, we had

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

A land where the outrageous and the amazing are the norm



to opt for an organized tour and join a small group. We are happy to say that our worries were completely unfounded - in fact, travelling to the Red Island together with a small group of German dedicated herpetologists and chameleon specialists presented us with the opportunity of making several new friends. The trip we joined - plus several others - is expressly tailored for dedicated herpetologists and wildlife photographers by **TanalaHorizon** - a highly specialized German tour operator and a small, high-quality company which in 20 years' experience in Madagascar has been able to build a reliable network of drivers and guides there. Groups of like-minded, highly motivated travellers are kept deliberately small to

guarantee full satisfaction in sightings and photography to all, and a very reasonable standard of comfort and cleanliness in lodging and food is offered wherever possible. Above all, the exceptional experience of Thorsten Negro, TanalaHorizon's owner, guarantees success in finding, observing and photographing most species on one's list - depending on the itinerary chosen, as we shall see.

SPECIALIZED TRIPS FOR WILDLIFE ENTHUSIASTS

Such is the rate of endemism in Madagascar, in fact, that several species can only be found in very small isolated patches of forest, or even single locations, often very remote and

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■ Nile Crocodile *Crocodylus niloticus sub.madagascariensis*, lake Ravelobe, Ankarafantsika National Park.

■ Malagasy or Rainforest Scops Owl *Otus rutilus*, Ankarafantsika National Park.



Ankarana
Sportive Lemur
Lepilemur ankaranensis,
Ankarana National Park.

far from each other; other species - such as the ubiquitous Panther Chameleon, are present in color morphs and local variations of such dizzying quantity and variety that a single customized itinerary may be necessary to see them all; some species - such as most chameleons, for instance - can only be found and observed in all their colorful glory during their brief mating season, remaining mostly invisible, hidden in the forest canopy, for the rest of the year. Add to this perplexing puzzle that Madagascar enjoys a tremendous variety of environments, several climate zones, two distinct seasons (depending on which coast -Western or Eastern - we are talking about) and a huge number of protected or semi-protected National Parks and Nature Reserves, several of which offer the possibility of sighting single species which are nowhere else to be found, and you'll soon realize

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Left, Indri lemur *Indri indri*, Andasibe-Mantadia National Park; top right, Golden-brown Mouse Lemur *Microcebus ravelobensis*, Ankarafantsika National Park; bottom right, Mongoose Lemur *Eulemur mongoz*, Ankarafantsika National Park.



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



■ Parson's chameleon
Calumma parsonii, female,
Andasibe-Mantadia National Park.



why motivated wildlife photographers need to sort out their priorities first of all and then rely on some experienced tour operator to avoid disaster and bitter disappointment. Being this our first visit to Madagascar, and loving reptiles, we then opted for a specialized itinerary entirely created for chameleon lovers: other creatures uniquely Malagasy - such as lemurs, which would require a different itinerary and a different time of the year to visit to guarantee optimal results - would have to play second fiddle on this occasion.

SPECIES TARGETING IS THE KEY TO SUCCESS

For one unfamiliar with Madagascar the following list may mean little, but herpetologists will readily recognize many familiar Northern and Western locations in the following itinerary. During a three-week overland trip, we visited chameleon and gecko heavens such as Andasibe, Voimana,

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Left, Coquerel's sifaka *Propithecus coquereli*, Ankarafantsika National Park; right, Diademed Sifaka *Propithecus diadema*, Andasibe-Mantadia National Park.





*Wearing a colorful livery
to find a willing mate*

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



Far left, Malagasy Red Tree Frog *Boophis pyrrius*, Andasibe-Mantadia National Park; left, Malagasy Hognose Snake *Leioheterodon madagascariensis*, searching for gecko eggs in Ankarafantsika National Park.

Analamazaotra, Ankarafantsika and Montagne d'Ambre National Parks, exploring along the way spectacular landscapes such as the Ambalabongo canyon, les Tsingys rouge, the Tsingys d'Ankarana and the island of Nosy Faly. Since we were already there, we also decided to lengthen our stay and spend one more week by ourselves exploring Ranomafana National Park, which is located more in the South and which is so exceptionally rich and diverse to warrant it an extensive, separate feature on a future issue of *ANIMA MUNDI - Adventures in Wildlife Photography*. We hasten to add that - while the main focus of our expedition was clearly on chameleon species and their local morphs - we had abundant opportunities to observe and photograph many more species: frogs, snakes, birds, insects and above all lemurs. In brief, all those amazing creatures which contribute in making Madagascar such a unique ecosystem.

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Andasibe Parson's
 Chameleon *Calumma parsonii*
 sub.cristifer, adult male,
 Andasibe-Mantadia
 National Park.

*The gentle
yellow giant
of the Malagasy
rainforest*



Antonella with Parson's
Chameleon *Calumma parsonii*,
male in breeding livery,
Andasibe-Mantadia
National Park.



■ Top left, Comet moth
Argema mittrei caterpillar,
 near Mandraka; top right,
 Madagascar Emperor Moth
Bunaea aslauga, near
 Mandraka; bottom left,
 Malagasy Freshwater Crab
Madagapotamon humberti,
 Ankarana National Park;
 bottom right, Scorpion
Grosphus ankarana,
 Ankarana National Park.



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

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



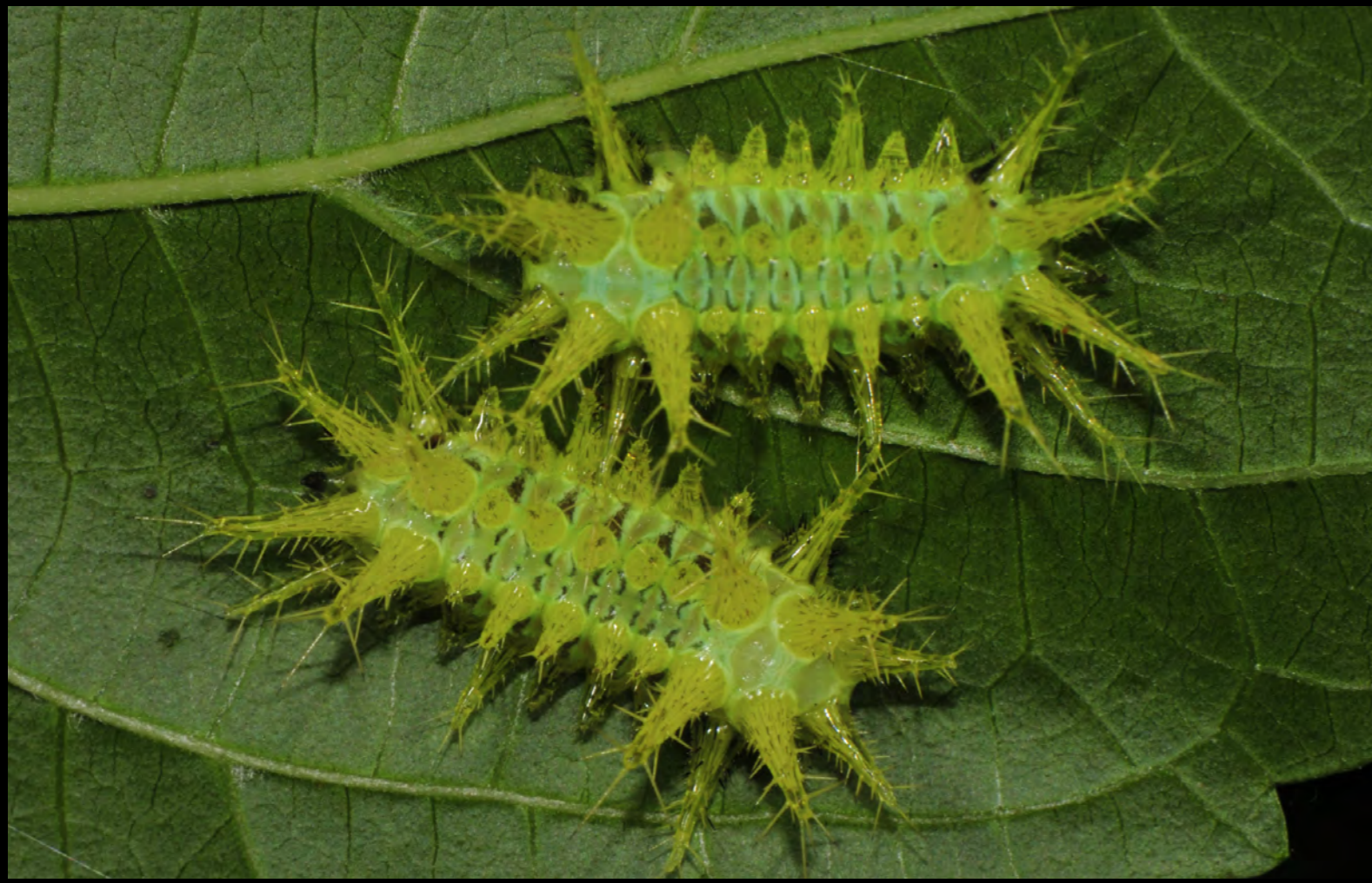
A TRULY UNIQUE DESTINATION

Before examining in detail the humungous number of species we found and the locations we visited, let us reply to the most obvious of questions - was Madagascar worth visiting? The reply is obviously "yes, absolutely". This enormous island is so rich in endemic and strange species to leave even seasoned travellers like us speechless. Its fauna is often disconcertingly easy to find and fearless of humans, most often totally unique in aspect and behavior; what you see here - chameleons, geckoes, frogs, snakes, lemurs - you won't see anywhere else. And - possibly - you won't see anymore soon, because Madagascar is desperately poor, with a booming and largely illiterate population, a high degree of corruption in the government and extremely severe environmental damage in the making everywhere, including large-scale mining, large-scale logging and large-scale slash-and-burn agriculture, not to mention smaller scale threats such as poaching by locals and endangered wildlife

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■ Top left, Malagasy Green Lynx Spider *Peucetia madagascariensis*, Ankify; top right, Admiral butterfly *Antanartia* sp., Ankarafantsika National Park. Bottom left, Nettle/Slug Caterpillars of Limacodidae Moth, near Ankify; bottom right, Scorpion *Opisthacanthus madagascariensis*, Ankarana National Park.



trafficking. Some Malagasy species - particularly several species of lemurs - survive in desperately small numbers and/or in increasingly threatened, isolated pockets of forest; and most of the forest habitat itself is under immediate threat everywhere, as illegal logging for exotic wood goes on unabated day and night under the eyes of complacent authorities, finding its way by container ship to insatiable mainland China. As it is often the case, wildlife tourism might play a role in saving Madagascar - bringing in much-needed hard currency, creating jobs in the local communities and above all generating motivation in the younger generations, in whose hands lies the future fate of the Red Island. The question is - is there any time left for hope? People who have visited Madagascar in the recent past are often appalled by the rate of destruction going on, and aerial

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Giraffe or Giraffe-necked weevil Trachelophorus giraffa, male, Andasibe-Mantadia National Park.



Rhinoceros Chameleon ■
Furcifer rhinocerotus, female,
Ankarafantsika National Park.




Left, Malagasy
 Day Gecko *Phelsuma*
madagascariensis,
 Ankarana National Park;
 center, Tree frog
Heterixalus variabilis,
 near Ambilobe;
 right, Montagne d'Ambre
 Leaf-Tailed Gecko
Uroplatus fiavana,
 Montagne d'Ambre
 National Park.



Antonella with
Giant Leaf-tailed Gecko
Uroplatus giganteus,
Montagne d'Ambre
National Park.



Left,  Montagne d'Ambre Chameleon *Furcifer* sp. "Montagne d'Ambre", female, Montagne d'Ambre National Park; right, Panther Chameleon *Furcifer pardalis*, adult male, Ambilobe color morph, near Ambilobe village.



■ Montagne d'Ambre
Leaf-Tailed Gecko
Uroplatus fiavana,
Montagne d'Ambre
National Park.




photography documentation shows in depressing detail the amount of rainforest being lost on a monthly basis. Wildlife photographers remember with delight the times when lemurs would be sighted in numbers, crossing the trails and sitting by the camps: now one has to look for them, often hard. Chameleons, luckily, aren't actively hunted or persecuted as locals tend to consider them harbingers of bad luck (village kids will occasionally kill them with slingshots), but - together with many geckoes, frogs and tortoises - are often illegally exported in great numbers for the exotic pet trade, especially to the USA and Japan. In any case, the main threat - as usual - comes from the continuing destruction and degradation of the local environment. Madagascar, with its unique treasure trove of endemic, strange and rare species, needs more protected areas and a severe enforcement of the existing laws defending its fauna and flora. It has already done so in the past, and it has worked - in the 70's and 80's of the

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■ Top left, *Plated lizard*
Zonosaurus laticaudatus,
 Ankarafantsika; top
 right, *Collared iguanid*
 lizard *Oplurus cuvieri*,
 Ankarafantsika; bottom
 left, *Malagasy Hognose*
 Snake *Leioheterodon*
madagascariensis,
 Ankarafantsika; bottom
 right, *Bell's Hinge-back*
 Tortoise *Kinixys belliana*,
 Nosy Faly.

*Glimpses of a lost
Eden hidden in
a forgotten forest*

La Petite Cascade,  Montagne d'Ambre National Park.



Left, Short-horned Chameleon ■
Calumma brevicorne,
 camouflaged juvenile,
 Andasibe-Mantadia
 National Park; center,
 Henkel's Leaf-tailed
 Gecko *Uroplatus*
henkeli camouflaged on
 tree trunk, Ankarana
 National Park; right,
 Lined Leaf-tail Gecko
Uroplatus lineatus.





■ Panther Chameleon
Furcifer pardalis, adult
male, Ankaramy "Pink
Panther" color morph,
encountered near
Ankaramy village.

*Carpet
Chameleon
Furcifer lateralis,
male, found along
the Ambanja-
Ankarana route;
right, the Red Tsingy
or Tsingy Rouge,
a spectacular
limestone landscape
shaped by erosion,
Ankarana
National Park.*



20th century the Red Island was a beacon for conservationists and ecotourists worldwide, with excellent infrastructures and internationally-funded field research going on. Then, sadly, something went wrong. We can only hope for the best, but in the meantime our suggestion is to visit Madagascar as soon as possible. Contributing to the economy of the National Parks system, to the local guides' and drivers' daily survival, to the environmental education of the younger Malagasy generations is our moral duty and the only feasible, tangible thing we can do. The Red Island desperately needs wildlife tourism to survive, and in a few years it might be too late. Go there, now - Madagascar needs all of us. ●

**DON'T MISS THE SECOND
INSTALLMENT OF OUR
MADAGASCAR STORY –
COMING IN OCTOBER 2014
ON ISSUE 16 OF ANIMA
MUNDI – ADVENTURES IN
WILDLIFE PHOTOGRAPHY!**





■ Left, Panther Chameleon *Furcifer pardalis*, adult male, Ambanja color morph, Ambanja; right, Oustalet's or Giant Chameleon *Furcifer oustaleti*, adult male, near Ankify.





■ Left, Panther Chameleon *Furcifer pardalis*, adult male, Ambilobe color morph, near Ambilobe village; right, Panther Chameleon *Furcifer pardalis*, adult male, in a variation of the Ambilobe color morph, near Ambilobe village.



*The same species in
an apparently endless
variety of morphs*



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



Top left, Malagasy Paradise Flycatcher *Terpsiphone mutata*, Ankarafantsika; top right, Northern Ring-tailed Mongoose *Galidia elegans dambrensis*, Montagne d'Ambre. Bottom left, Crowned Lemur *Eulemur coronatus*, female, Ankarana; bottom right, Madagascar Crested Drongo *Dicrurus forficatus*.





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

The spectacular
landscape of Antsiranana
Bay, in Diego Suarez.





■ Left, Cuckoo-roller
Leptosomus discolor,
female, Montagne
d'Ambre National Park;
center, Northern Ring-
tailed Mongoose
Galidia elegans
dambrensis, Montagne
d'Ambre National Park;
right, Madagascar or
Olive Bee-eater *Merops*
superciliosus, Ankarana.



An infinite catalogue of casques, crests, horns and various protuberances



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



■ Left, Short-horned Chameleon *Calumma brevicorne*, female in defensive threat display, Andasibe-Mantadia National Park; right, Malagasy Common Big-eyed Snake *Mimophis mahfalensis*, Ankarafantsika National Park.





■ Left, Madagascar Golden Orb Weaver *Nephila inaurata madagascariensis*, Ankarafantsika National Park; center, Jumping Spider with cockroach prey, Salticidae, Ankarana National Park; right, Orb spider *Neoscona* sp, Araneidae, Ankarafantsika.



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



■ Left, Mongoose Lemur *Eulemur mongoz*, Ankarafantsika National Park; right, The Red Tsingy or Tsingy Rouge, landscape shaped by erosion, Ankarana National Park.




Underground river mouth,
Ankarana National Park.



■ Malagasy Red Eyed
Tree Frog *Boophis boehmei*,
Andasibe-Mantadia National Park.





Left,  caterpillar of Madagascar Emperor Moth *Bunaea aslauga*, near Ankaramy; center, Giant millipede, *Aphistogoniulus* sp, near Ankify; right, Leafhoppers, Cicadellidae, Andasibe-Mantadia National Park.



A giant island inhabited by countless species found nowhere else

■ Collared iguanid lizard *Oplurus cuvieri*, Ankarafantsika National Park.





Left, Oustalet's or ■
Malagasy Giant
Chameleon
Furcifer oustaleti,
Ankarafantsika
National Park.
Right, Madagascar
Tree Boa *Sanzinia*
madagascariensis,
juvenile,
Andasibe-Mantadia
National Park.

