

*Aye-Aye
Daubentonia
madagascariensis
are very shy,
quite rare and
somewhat
endangered -
besides, they are
very active, agile
and seen only at
night. Getting this
close to one is
almost unheard of.*

Meet the legendary Aye-Aye
**THE GENTLE GHOST
OF MADAGASCAR**

AN EXCEPTIONAL CLOSE ENCOUNTER IN THE WILD
WITH ONE OF THE WORLD'S MOST DIFFICULT
(AND WEIRDEST!) CAMERA SUBJECTS

The Aye-Aye's salient features are clearly seen in this close-up portrait - the grizzled hair, large eyes, big ears and skeletal middle finger all contribute to the less-than-flattering image of this species.



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It was very hot in Masoala and the rain wouldn't stop. Perhaps it was not the best time to visit the wettest place in Madagascar - at the end of the rainy season. What can you do if it's raining in a place where all excursions depend upon the weather? Ok, let's go for breakfast and think about it...while we were drinking a coffee I glimpsed a man I knew from my Madagascar

expedition in 1995. He recognized me, sat down with us and began to relate about a conservation project of his brother-in-law about the most bizarre lemur of Madagascar, the Aye-Aye. I asked him how close it would be possible to come to this lemur. He thought for a moment about my question and asked: "How close do you have to be for a good picture? Are two meters close enough?" Wow! Yes! That's perfect! I couldn't believe what he said to me! Two meters! I had never seen this lemur so close, and I never had the opportunity to take a picture so close.

Almost nobody has, in fact! We fixed an appointment on the plantation of his brother-in-law that same night. It had been my biggest dream for a long time to see this rare, amazing, mysterious and for some - perhaps - rather ugly animal. The rarest of all the lemurs of Madagascar - the Aye-Aye! A nocturnal primate, it is characterized by a typically elongated, skeletal middle finger. With its help the Aye-Aye knocks on tree trunks, listens to the echo produced and finds food in the hollow chambers inside. Because of this unusual method of finding food, one could call him a



The Aye-Aye was thought to be extinct in 1933, but was rediscovered in 1957. Nine individuals were then transported to Nosy Mangabe, an island in eastern Madagascar, in 1966.


“woodpecker”. But the Aye-Aye is not only eating with the help of its middle finger, it also drinks with it. It takes a coconut, makes an hole in it and sticks the middle finger inside. Then he flicks it very quickly (3-4 times a second) to its snout and drinks. The scientific binomial name of the Aye-Aye is *Daubentonia madagascariensis* - the Malagasy named him “hay-hay” for a vocalization it is claimed to make, and the common name stuck. By day it hides and sleeps in a nest up in the tree crowns - one individual can have seven different nests. It eats

animal matter, nuts, insect larvae, fruits, nectar, seeds and fungi. Like in many other lemur species, the female Aye-Aye is dominant over the male - they are not typically monogamous, and will often change partners to mate. Unfortunately some Malagasy believe the Aye-Aye to be a symbol of death, and kill each and every one they see. Others consider it a symbol of magic and good luck, and set them free when they see a captive one. I prefer the second version of the myth, obviously, and my favorite Malagasy folk tale tells that the Aye Aye makes a grass pillow for every person who sleeps in the forest. When

you wake up in the morning, if you find the pillow under your head, than you will get very, very rich. If you find it under your feet, you will instead soon be the victim of a magician...So, I hope I’ll have my pillow under my head tomorrow morning!

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Thorsten Negro is the founder and leader of [TanalaHorizon](#), a leading and highly specialized company with 20 years experience for wildlife and photography trips to Madagascar. ANIMA MUNDI has successfully travelled to Madagascar with this company and can safely recommend it to all our readers.



Recent research has shown that the Aye-Aye is more widespread than was previously thought, but this species is still categorized as Near Threatened by IUCN.

■ The main threats to the Aye-Aye's survival in the wild are superstition, as the Aye-Aye is considered evil; habitat destruction, as the forests of Madagascar are being destroyed; active persecution, as the farmers will kill Aye-Ayes to protect their crops; and poaching.

