

Preparing for Madagascar: What to expect

(in spring/early summer, i.e. the September-December period)

Despite the fact that Madagascar is only 400 kilometers (250 miles) from the African mainland, it is absolutely nothing like Africa. Some of its birds have more affinity to Asia than to Africa, but the most striking thing about Madagascar is how different its bird, animal, and plant life is from ANYWHERE else in the world. With five endemic bird families, and about half the bird species endemic, and with every single native mammal species being endemic (!), including endemic families such as lemurs and the hedgehog-like tenrecs, Madagascar is the ideal place to see unique wildlife!

It's a fabulous wildlife country, but there are also a few items that you need to mentally prepare for, so that you can gain maximum enjoyment from your trip. Here are some points to help you prepare for your tour:

- 1) Madagascar is about quality and not about quantity. Some birders are disappointed by the small numbers of individuals and species seen – it's one of the countries with the fewest number of species relative to its size, but birders need to realize that the relatively few birds that one does see are incredibly special. Don't expect lots of species or big numbers of any one species. Also, much of the country is covered in rice paddies, and most of the natural habitat has been destroyed, so be prepared to drive through a lot of relatively sterile (from a wildlife point of view) monoculture. In no ways does this make Madagascar any less amazing. It has all the endemic bird, mammal, and plant families and contains some of the planet's most unique wildlife!
- 2) If Africa is the third world, then Madagascar is the fourth world. You'll see extreme poverty.
- 3) Please visit your doctor or a travel clinic before your trip to get precautions against possible "hotely belly," as this is horribly common in Madagascar, even when eating at good restaurants, staying at comfortable accommodations and even when being careful about drinking only bottled water and avoiding unpeeled/uncooked vegetables/salads. Imodium, Valoid, and an antibiotic such as Cipro in bad cases should be carried (but please consult your doctor for proper advice before the trip). Please visit your travel clinic or doctor for antimalarial medications and possible vaccinations, and please also take a close look at the CDC's (Centers for Disease Control) <http://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/destinations/traveler/none/madagascar> for comprehensive health information about Madagascar. Some people also opt for leech socks, since leeches do occur in Madagascar, although we don't usually encounter many of them.
- 4) It's good to have an idea of what the climate in Madagascar is like. Rain is possible but usually not a big problem in the "dry" season when we run our tours. It can be very hot and humid, but it can also be surprisingly cold in the highlands, where we spend a fair amount of time. So bring layers expecting cold to very hot weather and possibly rain. The desert areas

such as Ifaty can be extremely hot and dry, and in fact we are sometimes forced to cram birding activity into the first hour or so of daylight because of the sweltering heat there in Ifaty.

5) There are some reasonably strenuous walks in Madagascar, so please bring hiking boots as well as comfortable shoes to change into during the evenings if your boots get wet or you get blisters. There might be opportunities for swimming and snorkeling (especially when it is too hot for birding). Sun protection such as sunblock, sunglasses, etc., is advised.

6) On days in which we're doing forest birding please kindly be considerate of the other tour participants, since it can get frustrating when only the front people see the birds. Please do not be offended when the tour leaders enforce the "rules for group tours", such as not spending all your time at the front with the tour leader on the trails but staying only five minutes at the front before dropping to the back again to give everyone a fair chance. The tour leaders work hard to get everyone onto every bird species, and with patience everyone should see everything. The practice of rotating seats on the vehicle(s) is also something that the tour leaders will oversee.

7) Accommodation is in general fair and quite comfortable but not luxurious. Generally there is warm to hot water for baths or showers and there is electricity for charging camera gear. But not everything works 100 percent of the time here in the "fourth world", so expect the worst and be pleasantly surprised if it's better than expected. Sometimes there is power for charging only in the lodge restaurants and not in the rooms, or only when the generator is on. Electrical sockets are the same as in Europe (except the UK) – 2-prong and 220 Volts ITA Type C (please note that a lot of South African equipment can be plugged directly into these – it's the same socket as the common 2-prong adapters South Africans use in their homes).

8) Air Madagascar has the monopoly as far as domestic flights within the country go (and, since it's a massive island with bad roads, one has to fly between some of the sites). Air Madagascar flights are, unfortunately, completely unreliable, and scheduled flight times can change on the day of the flight until even one hour before the scheduled departure. On our usual two-week circuit ("The Best of Madagascar") we only have one flight at the end of the trip, back to Tana (the commonly-used abbreviation for the capital Antananarivo), but on comprehensive trips (when you do all the extensions/pre-trips shown on our website, basically) we can have six to eight local flights, and one has to be philosophical about the fact that, because of Air Madagascar, the itinerary is never set in stone and changes invariably happen!

9) We often do night walks in Madagascar to see nocturnal lemurs, reptiles, and birds – so bring a flashlight/torch/headlamp!

10) As of January 2018 visitors to Madagascar have been using the e-visa system, either getting an e-visa in advance online or on arrival in Tana. Please carefully check the latest visa requirements for your nationality, though. Madagascar does give free visas to certain nationalities from time to time (e.g. for South Africans); otherwise they usually cost around 30-60 euros. Visas are payable in major currencies or the local currency (ariary, MGA) and usually

also by card if the system is working. But even if you arrange your visa in advance expect some chaos when you arrive in Tana.

11) You may wish to draw local currency (ariary) for tips, souvenirs, etc. at the airport ATM just after arrival, and you can also speak to your guide when your money starts running short, so you can stop in the next few days when you drive through the next town with an ATM. You can also change most major currencies, but in general euros will give you the best rate in Madagascar. When you do change money ask for more small bills that you think you will need; these will come in handy for tips. (You can also use one-euro coins and one-dollar bills for tips if you have these.)

12) In Madagascar it's a legal requirement to employ park guides, a local guide and driver. These highly competent people are, of course, extremely useful, e.g. the park guides keep track almost daily of the whereabouts of some of the more difficult species, thus minimizing the chance we'll dip on anything important. But some people are thus understandably surprised that these trips seem a bit "over-staffed" (including also our full-time international tour leader) with so many people to potentially tip. Tipping is not compulsory, but most trip participants do like to tip staff who have worked hard to provide them with a great experience on their tour – our tipping guidelines and advice are shown at <https://www.birdingecotours.com/tipping-guidelines/>.

Please don't let any of these concerns dissuade you from visiting Madagascar; it's an essential destination for any serious world birder and a "must-visit" place for those wanting to see the world's most bizarre wildlife.

Useful books for Madagascar

Bird guide – please see our recommended field guides to the seven continents and islands web resource – <https://www.birdingecotours.com/field-guides-to-africa-and-madagascar-what-to-take-into-the-field/>.

Mammal guide – [Mammals of Madagascar: A Complete Guide](#) by Nick Garbutt.

We suggest you look for plant, chameleon (Madagascar has over half the world's chameleons!), and other guides, too! [Wildlife of Madagascar \(Wildlife Explorer Guides\)](#) is a guide to all of Madagascan wildlife, including birds and even some plants, with excellent text and pictures.