



# Safari TELEGRAPH

**ROB DISCOVERS**

## MADAGASCAR

**Rob explores the land of the lemur**

I am not sure why I had waited this long to visit Madagascar – for some reason I hadn't been totally convinced of the relative 'hype' that often surrounds a lesser known destination. However, 2012 was the year to 'take the plunge' and go and see for myself whether Madagascar was genuinely an incredible experience or just 'somewhere a bit different'.

If you are looking for a total wilderness experience, you will find limited options in Madagascar, which is surprising considering how huge the island is. Compared to what I am used to on mainland Africa, extensive natural environments in Madagascar are few and far

between, and wildlife reserves are often 'pockets' of protected land rather than great tracts of wilderness. Where the popular parks are fairly extensive (Ranomafana, Andasibe/Mantadia), tourism is often focused around one very small area where accommodation exists and lemur sightings can be guaranteed. The one area that does offer a true wilderness feel is the Masoala Peninsula in the north-east, though typically this region is slightly more complicated to access!

However, in all other facets, Madagascar is an amazing island that delivers a varied, intriguing, slightly adventurous and richly rewarding experience. The lemur viewing is obviously of key interest to anyone keen on the natural world. The lemurs are often habituated to the presence of humans (in a similar fashion to gorillas and chimps in mainland Africa), which makes it easy to get a really good look and take good photographs. Lemurs are unique and beautiful, very photogenic and quite charismatic! Ring-tailed lemurs and the dancing Verreaux's sifaka prefer drier habitats and therefore tend to be seen in the south and west of the country, whilst the rainforests of the central and eastern regions are home to a wider variety including the rare golden bamboo lemur, the stunning black and white ruffed lemur and the largest of them all, the Indri, whose haunting cries

echo through the forests each morning.

My trip took me down the 'spine' of the country from Andasibe-Mantadia National Park in the eastern rainforests to the parched coastal village of Ifaty in the south-west. We visited all the national parks and community reserves en route – Ranomafana, Anja, Andringitra, Isalo and Zombitse and in total viewed 12 species of lemur. At Lemur Island, in the eastern rainforests of Andasibe, we had remarkable photographic opportunities as black and white ruffed lemurs, common brown lemurs and Eastern grey bamboo lemurs posed and paraded for us – even jumping from human shoulder to shoulder to introduce themselves. Whilst this experience did not provide that genuinely 'wild encounter', it was great fun! Throughout the trip, walks in the rainforest were not too strenuous or long, though occasionally there were steep or muddy sections. Night walks were good for seeing the diminutive mouse lemurs and chameleons, but varied in quality and were more rewarding in Andasibe/Mantadia than along the main road at Ranomafana!

In addition to lemurs, we saw a wide variety of reptiles and birds. There is nowhere better to look for chameleons of all shapes, colours and sizes, particularly on night walks. Our trip was a little busy to concentrate too much on >>>



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birding, but keen birders will be enthralled, not just by the variety of birdlife but also the number of endemics that Madagascar offers. The country seems to have its own version of many species – Madagascar kingfisher, Madagascar bee-eater, Madagascar buzzard, Madagascar lovebird – the list goes on. Then there are the rainforest specialties, such as the beautiful blue coua, and the drier scrub specialties such as Benson's rock thrush and sickle-billed vanga. The variety of terrain and habitat across Madagascar make it a fascinating birding destination.

I do feel that Madagascar is a country to 'experience' above and beyond wildlife or beaches (of which there are many, offering relaxation, whale-watching, snorkeling and scuba diving). Madagascar is one of those countries which are simply worth exploring for the sake of it. Ever-changing scenery, friendly and relaxed local people (with varied ethnicity and history), wonderful walking and non-stop photographic opportunities all add greatly to your holiday experience. It is a very poor country which has not become too commercialized. For the most part you can walk through villages and markets without that unwarranted attention that tourists often attract. Local people are friendly and are usually happy for you to photograph them, and children in particular love seeing the images on your display screen.

Overall, I think Madagascar is a fascinating place to visit. Tourism infrastructure is limited, road journeys are often long, and as a wilderness destination, I did find it a little lacking at times (I didn't however have time to visit Masoala Peninsula which arguably offers the greatest wilderness experience). However, as a wildlife destination I found it unique and rewarding, culturally I found it refreshingly relaxed, scenically it was hugely diverse and often stunningly beautiful, photographic opportunities were constant and amazing, and it was a joy to get out on foot so much.



## OFF THE BEATEN TRACK

# Katavi National Park, western Tanzania



A long way from Zanzibar, Kilimanjaro, Ngorongoro Crater, Serengeti and the Selous (to name just a few of Tanzania's enviable list of star attractions) is a lesser known gem – Katavi National Park. Famous (within the industry) for huge herds of elephant and buffalo in the late dry season (August to October), gigantic hippo pods confined to receding water pools and crocodiles that escape the scorching October sun by digging earth 'caves' along the river's edge when water levels are low – Katavi is raw, uncompromising Africa, tsetse flies and all.

Yet amidst this obvious harshness there is also a softer, more subtle and tranquil bush experience to be had. Whilst much of the park is miombo woodland, the core regions of the park are dominated by the vast Katisunga, Chada and Paradise Plains which are linked by the Katuma and Kapapa Rivers. The scenery along these river courses is picturesque with riverine forests, palm groves and open flood plains, and with the general lack of visitors, you can have these scenes pretty much to yourself. The game-viewing is superb in the dry season, with impressive leopard and lion sightings as well as spotted hyaena, wild dog, zebra, giraffe, defasa waterbuck and impala. The Miombo woodland is home to the rarer species such as Sable and Roan antelope, Lesser Kudu and Eland. The birding is also fantastic with many interesting species to be seen, including green wood hoopoe, saddle billed stork, martial eagle,

grey-headed kingfisher, pearl-spotted owl, giant eagle owl, yellow-throated sandgrouse, speckled pigeon, rufous-bellied heron, brown parrot, Lizard buzzard and many more. For birding specialists, the summer season from December to February will be best.

Katavi is also a superb walking destination either for short nature walks or more dedicated multi-day trails. Chada Camp, a beautiful tented camp overlooking the Chada Plains and run by Nomad Tanzania, offers multi-day walking safaris using basic, but comfortable, fly-camps for overnight accommodation. Two nights along the Paradise Plains, as part of a longer stay at Chada Camp, would be normal but longer safaris can easily be catered for.

Access to Katavi is understandably not as straight forward as the better known safari areas. However, there are internal flight schedules two or three times per week and it is possible to combine Katavi with other regions such as Ruaha and Selous in the south, or the Serengeti and Ngorongoro Crater in the north. More commonly, Katavi is combined with the spectacular Mahale Mountains on Lake Tanganyika (where you can undertake arguably the best chimpanzee viewing in Africa), and it is easy to combine the two regions over a week long period.

Katavi may not be the obvious choice for a first-time visitor to Africa, but for anyone looking for an authentic bush experience, far from the 'madding crowd', Katavi could be ideal.

# Magnificent Majete is bouncing back

**M**ajete Wildlife Reserve is located on the lower Shire River in southern Malawi. As little as ten years ago you would have enjoyed a wilderness experience there with very little game-viewing. Poaching was rife and the animals that did exist were skittish and low in numbers. That began to change in 2003 when a private non-profit organisation called African Parks took over management and pledged to re-stock and protect the reserve. African Parks specialise in re-generating and managing some of the most damaged and remote game reserves and parks in Africa (Chad, Rwanda, both Congo's, and Zambia) and evidence suggests that their work in Majete has been hugely successful.

The 70,000 hectare reserve falls almost entirely to the west of the Shire River which meanders southwards from Lake Malawi to eventually flow into the Zambezi. Whilst the Shire is predominantly a wide, slow flowing river, its passage through the reserve is fast flowing with several rapids as it cuts through the Kapichila

Hills and is eventually dammed for hydroelectric power just above the impressive Kapichila Falls. These falls were visited by David Livingstone (the grave of one of the expedition members is close by) and the rock formations eroded over thousands of years reveal beautiful sedimentary and metamorphic patterns. The habitat is predominantly one of mixed savannah woodland, riverine forest and miombo woodland, with limited open grassland areas. There are a couple of smaller river courses, most notably the beautiful Mkulumadzi River which cuts through the northern section of the reserve to join the Shire.

Since 2003, twelve species (and over 2500 individuals) have been re-introduced including 7 black rhino (there are now 10 in the park), 228 elephant, and over 450 buffalo. Others include eland, waterbuck, sable, nyala, zebra, Liechtenstein's hartebeest, impala, and warthog. Since 2008 the whole perimeter fence has been electrified, enhancing security and enabling four leopards to be introduced over the last year or so. This month will see four lions make the reserve their home. The plan is that more predator numbers will follow, but it is a delicate process so it will be some years before there are thriving, self-sustaining populations. Other animals which were already resident prior to African Parks taking over include greater kudu, reedbuck, Suni antelope, bushbuck, Sharpe's grysbok, duiker, bushpig, hippo, crocodile, spotted hyaena, porcupine, civet, genet, serval, vervet monkey, yellow baboon and a variety of smaller creatures.

Birding is also superb, with year round residents including Bohms bee-eater, green



and scimitar billed wood hoopoe, dark chanting goshawk, red-throated twinspot, lizard buzzard, palmnut vulture, white-headed vulture, osprey, African hoopoe, cordon bleu, little bee-eater, Pel's fishing owl, rock pratincole, spotted eagle owl, green-backed heron, black-crowned night heron, Egyptian geese, African darter, great white egret, brown-hooded kingfisher, malachite kingfisher, white faced duck, African jacana, brown crowned tchagra, western banded snake eagle, pied kingfisher, brown snake eagle and martial eagle.

It is possible to self-drive in the park, though guided game drives are available through African Parks (they have a small tented lodge called Thawale, inside the park) or through Mkulumadzi Lodge run by Robin Pope Safaris who have a private concession along the Mkulumadzi River in the north-east of the park. Mkulumadzi is a lovely lodge offering high levels of comfort in combination with an extremely exclusive and tranquil bush experience. Walking, night drives and boating are also available, and there is a hide overlooking a waterhole often frequented by black rhino.

Majete will take a few more years to offer genuine predator viewing, but by then it will be better known and will attract more visitors. However, the next few years will be ideal for anyone looking for an all-round magical bush experience, and not just 'big five' sightings!



## OLD TIME KAFUE

### Bill re-visits

Landing into Lusaka recently reminded me of my first visit to Zambia in the mid-1980's. The Kenneth Kaunda International Airport is a simple 70's building, accessed by a walk along the apron from the stairs of the aircraft in the still, slightly chilly, air of a glorious mid-winters day. Despite a coffee vendor selling more than a 'half decent' cup of latte, and a cosmetic change to the access to the international check-in area, little has changed and so it should not have been surprising that when I landed on an airstrip in the Kafue National Park, I felt as if I were travelling to a new, unexplored part of rural Africa.

Kafue is huge, until recently the largest National Park on the continent. In the south and central areas, it is dominated by

miombo woodland which stretches out from the banks of the impressive Kafue River and its tributaries. In the north-west, the miombo gives way to the Busanga floodplains, inundated by waters of the Lufupa River and largely inaccessible for much of the year. The terrain, as you can imagine, is rather flat and it has its fair share of tsetse fly, the saviour of wilderness Africa but menace to many a safari traveller. Not much going for it then?

Not in the slightest. I travelled extensively through the park staying at six different properties, none with more than 24 beds and each with its own old-style safari character. Game-viewing, although a bit challenging in late June (a bit too early to visit), was certainly exclusive — the great thing is that most of the lodges are really spread out — but over the week I did see a good number of elephant, lion, hippo, and buffalo, and a wide range of antelope species including sizeable herds of both sable and roan. The birdlife was as usual superb, and even in mid-winter I managed 138 species including at least seven African finfoot. The Kafue

River itself is beautiful and alluring — you don't get the immensity of the Zambezi or Rufiji, but it's more than large enough to be captivating as you travel along by boat, pontoon, or canoe.

Kafue will not rival the Luangwa Valley or Lower Zambezi for sheer numbers of animals, but it does offer the safari enthusiast the chance to see an area of Africa reminiscent of the 70's and 80's, something quite difficult to find in these modern times.



**SAFARI SNIPPETS**

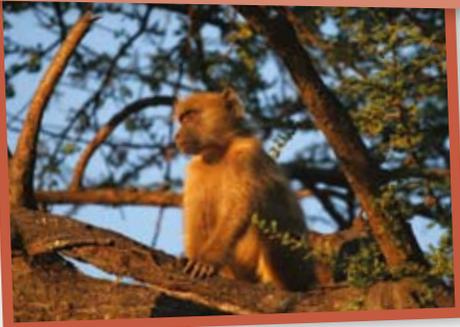
# BOOK EARLY for Zambia 2013

Due to its relatively short safari season, we are finding that Zambia experiences very high demand during the peak season months from August to October. This is especially true for the smaller camps in the Luangwa Valley and Lower Zambezi, such as regular favourite Old Mondoro (Lower Zambezi). So, if you are thinking of a Zambia safari in 2013, we would urge you to talk to us as early as possible!



## Photoboats on the Chobe

The last couple of seasons have seen the launch of a couple of specially designed 'photo' boats on the Chobe River. The boats look similar and cater for up to eight photographers on 'swivel' chairs with camera mounts – a perfect configuration for photographing from the water. Pangolin Safaris offer the chance to buy a morning or afternoon excursion under the guidance of a professional photographer.



## 2013 A YEAR OF CELEBRATION

We're celebrating our 30th birthday next year. Do you have any celebration plans? Give us a call to discuss how Africa can make your year extra special!

With best wishes as always and many thanks for your continued support.....Bill, Rob, Michele, Mary, Michaela, Josie and Jane.

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## SKELETON COAST NEWS

Following a fire earlier in the year, Wilderness Safaris have ceased operating their Skeleton Coast Camp in the heart of the restricted northern zone of the park. There are no plans to re-develop the camp and we're unsure as to whether the current concessionaire will be seeking another partner but we'll let you know of any development. This means that the Schoeman family's incredible fly-in safaris are the only way to experience this remote and remarkable corner of Namibia (see Rob's report from September 2010).