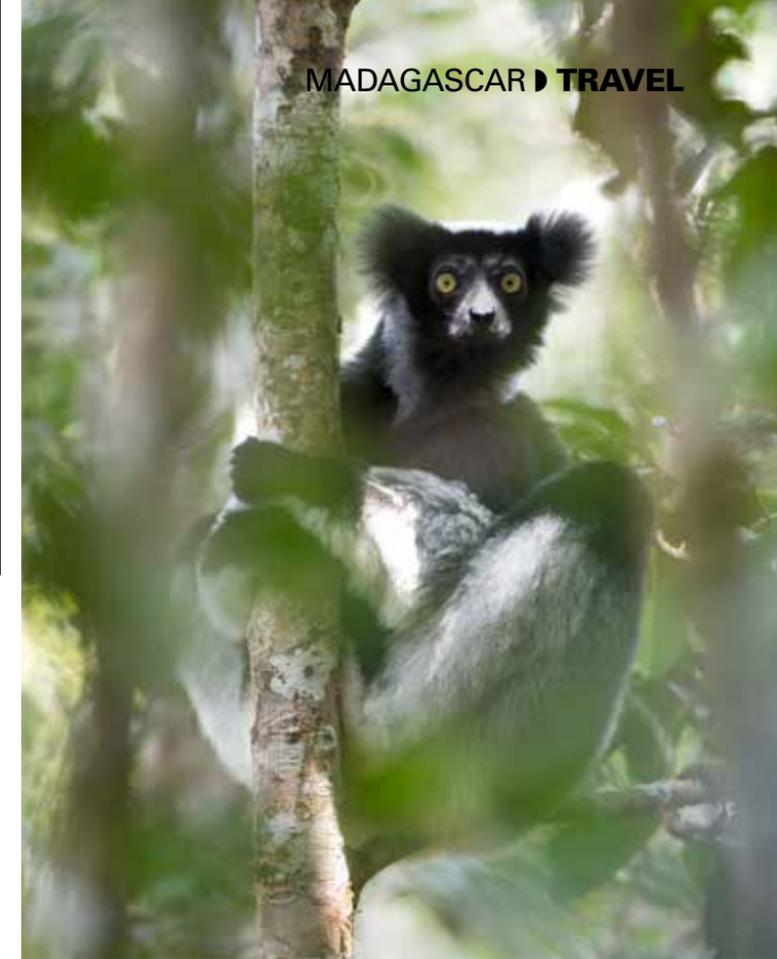


LAST CHANCE TO SEE

DALE MORRIS sets off to Madagascar in search of the dwindling sifaka, tenrec and indri. And the fossa as first prize



The book, *Last Chance to See* by the late Douglas Adams seemed an appropriate read while flying from Johannesburg to Madagascar.

It's all about one man's odyssey to track down a variety of rare and endangered animals, many of which, or so the author surmises, will soon go the way of the Dodo.

Sadly, much the same can be said of the unique fauna of Madagascar. The lemurs (of which there are some 100 species), the chameleons (more than a 100), the birds and the weird things like fossas and tenrecs, all hang on to existence by the skin of their teeth. Humanity's progress is nature's loss.

Inspired by Douglas' tales of travel and engaging encounters, I set about making a list of some of Madagascar's dwindling stars. My Last Chance to See List. First up would

be the lemurs, those adorable, perpetually surprised looking primates, with their wide eyes and acrobatic antics. They are found on Madagascar, and nowhere else.

Next, the equally odd chameleons with their swivelling eyes and ponderous movements. Did you know they have spring-loaded tongues that are more than twice the length of their bodies?

Last but not least would be the infrequently encountered oddities. The giant leaf-tailed geckos, the spiny tenrecs, and the amazing dog-like fossa, Madagascar's answer to the leopard and the only predator of significant size on the island. They specialise in eating lemurs. Crunch!

I certainly didn't expect to see them all. The singing indris, the dancing sifakas, the ring-tailed lemurs and the chameleons were all pretty much guaranteed. But the fossa?

Well, nobody sees a fossa, so rare, secretive and mysterious are they.

And so, upon landing in the capital, Antananarivo, I handed my extensive list to Nono (Nonorinah Tinamalala), the man who was to guide me though the various habitats and regions of Africa's largest island. He glanced at it, puffed out his cheeks and sighed the sigh of the exasperated. "You're not making life easy for anyone are you," he said, looking pensive. "But why don't we start with the dancing sifakas. I know just the place"

Berenty Reserve is a small slice of protected forest in the arid south-east. It took two days of bumpy flights and bumpier roads to get there, but the subsequent wildlife sightings made every jolt and pothole worth it.

My first ticks off the list were a mouse



be playing air guitar, doing the splits, or performing a graceful ballet.

The mouse lemur, the chameleons and the shimmying sifakas were fantastic sightings (as were the other spiny forest denizens such as brown lemurs, nocturnal sporty lemurs, pretty birds and unusual insects) but Berenty's crème de la crème of animal interaction came courtesy of a mass mugging, of which I was the victim.

Berenty's open-air restaurant is, understandably, a favoured hangout for the park's troops of ring-tailed lemurs. They moved in on my banana crêpes with all the silent stealth of ninjas but, unlike South

Africa's overtly aggressive and impolite monkeys, an ambush by a gang of lemurs is a comparatively mild affair.

These fluffy wisps floated as light as dandelion seeds around the table, looking at me sweetly with gentle eyes as they stole with nimble fingers. There was no smashed crockery, no spilt glasses, grabbing hands or tooth-baring grimaces. Just a gentle change of breeze, the half-seen waft of a stripy tail and, all of a sudden, a table bereft of food. I had to order lunch again. But I didn't mind.

The next of call for my already diminishing list of must-sees, was the steaming jungles of Mantadia National Park,

a rainforest more or less in the middle of the eastern seaboard. It's here that I witnessed the indri, the largest of all the lemurs and one resembling something akin to a panda/koala hybrid. "If they start to sing now," said Nono, as we sat beneath a gigantic tree in which sat a family of them, "you'll be blown away"

We had spent the better part of a day slogging up and down steep, slippery hills, being assailed by leeches, and tripping over vines and fallen logs but, finally, exhausted and drenched with sweat, we found them. Problem was, they were staying *schtum*.

As the evening drew in and the mosquitoes rose from their crypts, I started



lemur and a giant chameleon, both encountered at night in the region's aptly named spiny forests. "I wouldn't go off the path if I were you," Nono tried warning me, when I spotted a glowing set of eyes in the beam of my headlamp.

Too late. Camera in hand, I'd already raced off into the darkness in pursuit of the mouse lemur, and found myself entangled in a web of thorny vegetation. Struggling only made things worse. In a spiny forest, every plant, and I mean *every* plant, is covered in spikes, thorns, spears, prickles, needles, barbs and hooks.

That first glimpse of a mouse lemur, the world's most diminutive primate, and

an adorable creature with eyes almost as big as its body, was tainted somewhat by the disfigurements, grazes and perforations suffered as a result of my enthusiasm.

Nono diligently came to my rescue, and expertly unpicked my twitching form from a snare of pain. "Look up there," he exclaimed, as the last vicious barb was removed from my earlobe. "It's a parson's chameleon." Indeed it was.

Almost impossible to see in the daytime, due to their ability to change colour and blend in with their surroundings, chameleons are relatively easy to find at night. They turn pale when they sleep and are easily revealed by torchlight beams. And this one was huge,

easily as big as a sewer rat and, thanks to its slow gait, I had ample photo opportunities.

The following morning, chafed and 'band-aided', I was taken by Nono to see the famous dancing Verreaux's sifakas, a variety of lemur so adapted to jumping from trunk to trunk it is unable to walk on all fours. "When they come down to the ground," Nono told me, as I set up my tripod at a well known sifaka trail, "they must literally bounce on their hind legs. It looks like they're dancing."

The description is accurate, and I was beguiled by the waif-like creatures pirouetting, leaping, hopping, prancing and doing the tango. Frozen in the high shutter speeds of my camera, they appeared to



to lose hope that I would hear their legendary song, but then Nono pulled out his phone and played a prerecorded indri call. At first, the animals seemed confused by the sound, looking this way and that, but then they reacted and the air was split asunder by a forlorn and soulful howling.

I could scarcely believe such sound could come from a small animal. Mix a wolf, a whale and a gibbon and you have an approximation of what an indri sounds like. “What did you say to them?” I asked Nono, as we made our way, in semi-darkness, out of the forest. “I’m not entirely sure,” he replied “I probably insulted their mothers and sisters and threatened to eat all the fruit in their territory.”

The following days saw us tracking down

black and white ruffed lemurs (they look like tree-dwelling border collies) diademed sifakas (fluff balls with doe eyes) and the rarely seen and very fast tenrec.

This scruffy looking, long-nosed, hedgehoggy thing is so seldomly encountered that Nono had never seen one. He leapt upon it and restrained it so that we could get a better look and, for his efforts, received several painful spines to his fingers. I later read that tenrecs can carry bubonic plague, and that evening taught him the *Ring a Ring o’ Roses* nursery rhyme. I do so love cultural exchanges like these.

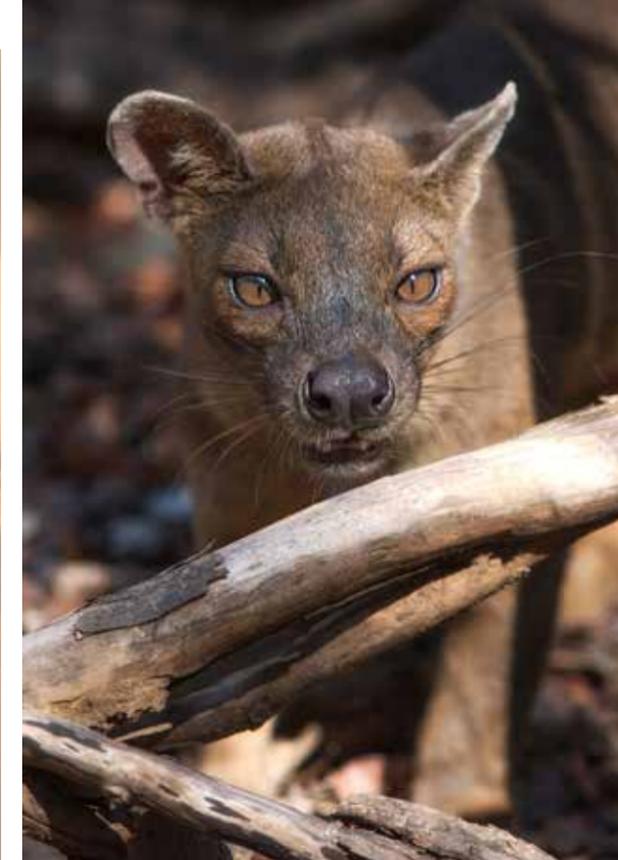
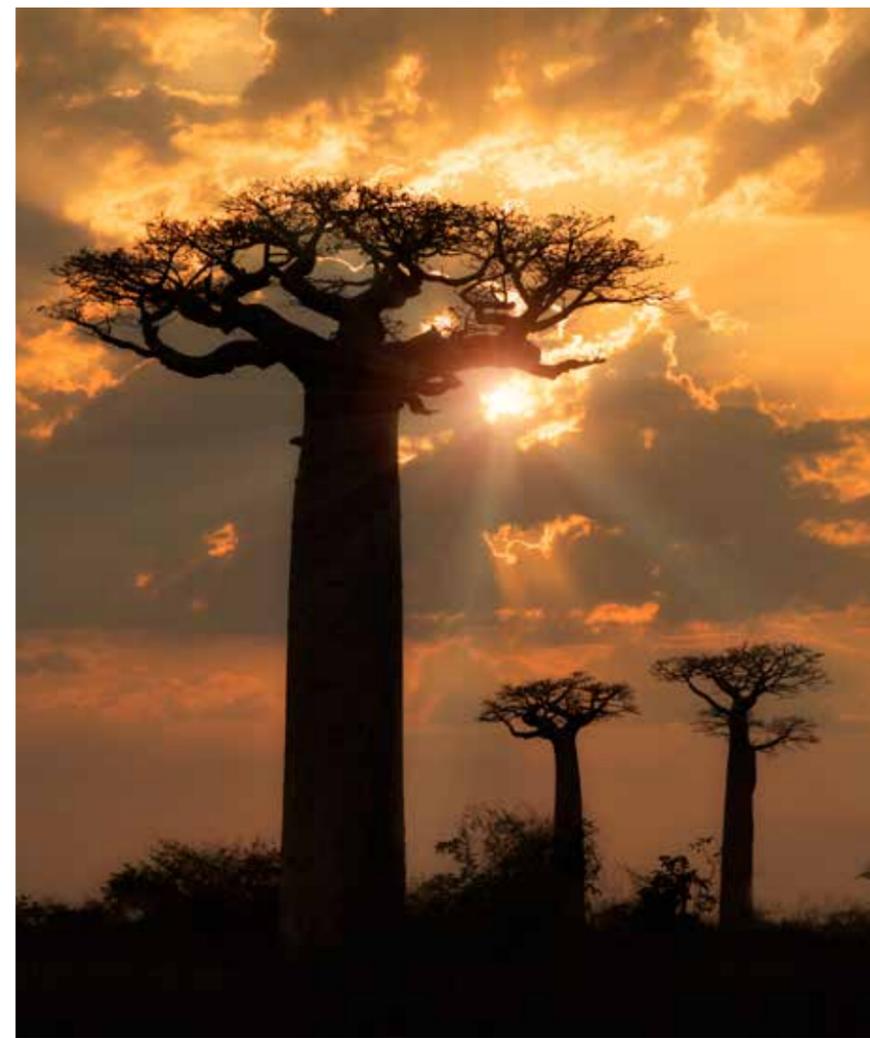
While we still had some days left in Madagascar, and while Nono was still strong enough to lead me, we travelled to our final destination, the Kirindy Mitea National

Park, and the Avenue of the Giants, so-called because, well, it’s an avenue of giants.

On each side of a dusty back road is a row of massive baobabs. Sunset is the time to see them because they glow orange and silver and ochre in the fading light, but alas, its also a popular time for tourists.

There were German, French, American and Japanese sightseers by the dozen, all doing a sterling job of photobombing every single one of, what should have been, magnificent shots. I was most displeased. But, come sundown, they all disappeared, leaving just Nono and myself, the trees and a million twinkling stars.

Kirindy, just an hour or so up the road, is a dry, tropical forest, home to many species of lemur, chameleon and birds. It’s also where



In awe, I observed no less than four males arrive at the base of the tree and start a brawl. Blood was spilt, faces were ripped and russet hair filled the air like confetti.

you might glimpse the almost never-seen Fossa, and my fingers were so tightly crossed in hope of seeing one, that they lost all sensation.

Unfortunately, we arrived during a major refurbishment to the park’s infrastructure. There was hammering and sawing, noisome machinery, and more workmen than one could expect to see at an open-cast mine.

To my astonishment, in among all this hubbub and racket, we spotted a fossa slinking past with confidence. We followed it past mechanical diggers and half-built buildings, to an open trash heap and past a series of fly-ridden longdrops. Finally, it visited an organic waste pit where piles of rotting vegetables steamed aromatically alongside a mound of fragrantly scented chicken carcasses. Not the nicest of setting in which to have my ultimate animal encounter.

But the following day was better. Much, much better.

Nono took me to a ‘special’ tree, far from the mayhem and construction, where two female fossas sat, high in the tree. They were giving it stick, ‘singing’ at full tilt, calling like tortured cats across the forest. “This is the mating call,” Nono told me. “An irresistible song to nearby males. It’ll likely draw them in.” And that it did.

In awe, I observed no less than four males arrive at the base of the tree and start a brawl. Blood was spilt, faces were ripped and russet hair filled the air like confetti. So engaged in their battles were these males that they scarcely paid attention to me as I snapped away, managing to get perhaps a little too close to them.

One of them used me as a rubbing post and scent-marked my legs. Another leapt

right over my head, brushing his svelte testicles across my face in the process.

Finally, after much aggro, a clear victor rose above the melee and climbed up to where his prize awaited. He mated there, noisily, while the routed males gazed up from the forest floor, jaws agape, dribbling the drool of the unsatiated.

My tick list was complete. Hopefully, I will return to Madagascar and tick off more species from my list. If I’m lucky, they will still be there, clinging to existence against a burgeoning tide of humanity.

P.S. Nono didn’t contract the bubonic plague and is alive and well. He sings *Ring a Ring o’ Roses* to his two children to get them to sleep at night. ■

Dale Morris leads photographic expeditions to Madagascar annually.