

Willis' Walkabouts

2020 Madagascar

4 weeks: September 2020

We have long wanted to go to Madagascar. In October 2014 we were finally able to visit this amazing island on a month-long trip led by one of our newest guides, Merel Dalebout. That trip was based on the reconnaissance Merel did when she visited Madagascar on a private exploratory trip in August-September 2013. Based on the success of our 2014 trip, we ran an improved version in September 2015, which was also very popular. Russell led the 2016 trip. Based on our experience in 2016, we hope to be able to have a French-speaking guide to lead this one. The itinerary and notes below were originally written by Merel, and amended by Russell and Merel following the 2016 trip.

Why use a Darwin-based firm for a tour in Madagascar?

This will be our fourth trip to Madagascar with its unique fauna and flora, and incredible landscapes. Madagascar is well known for its many lemur species, a group of ancient primates found no where else in the world. This place is also a centre of diversity for chameleons (over 80 species) and baobab trees (aka 'boabs' in Australia – we have only one species). No one else offers tours like ours. Transport during the trip will be primarily by chartered minivan, but will also include trucks, a motor barge, and of course, your own feet while carrying a day or overnight pack.

The Itinerary & other things

The following itinerary is based on flying to the capital of Madagascar, Antananarivo (Tana) from Australia. We have elected to do this trip in September which will give us generally fine weather but a little less heat than later in the year. Some of the lemur species will have babies, and the chameleons will be starting to come out of their winter hibernation. Importantly, the European summer holidays finish around the end of August so we will avoid most of the crowds. At this stage, we are planning to start our adventure in early September (Day 1, arrive in Tana) and end back in Tana (Day 29 ish) – dates to be confirmed when we know we can run the trip. The languages of Madagascar are Malagasy (various regional dialects) and French. English is not spoken much outside tourist regions. If you are white, locals will assume you speak French. The currency is the ariary ("aree-ee-aree" AR). Current exchange rate (April 2019) is approx. \$1 AUD = AR 2550. Malaria is rife in many parts of Madagascar and a good prophylactic is essential (e.g. Malarone, Larium, or Doxycycline). While on multi-day walks, we will be camping so bring your tent. More details in our Equipment Checklist.

Note that entry into all national parks and reserve areas in Madagascar requires that you be accompanied by a local guide. You can never just wander around by yourself. The local guides we will be using are very knowledgeable, work hard to point out all fauna and flora of interest, and really enhance the experience. We will have English-speaking local guides wherever possible. If only French-speaking local guides are available, your Willis' Walkabouts guide will endeavour to translate for you.

Travel around Madagascar by public transport is extremely challenging and driving our own hire vehicles to move between locations is not an option. As such, we have obtained **assistance from a local Madagascar company**. They will be providing transport, arranging for our entry into national parks and reserves, and organising local guides. The **additional fee** for this will need to be paid up front (see further details below). **Domestic flights** are also not included and you will need to book and pay for these in advance.

When not camping, accommodation will be in local hotels and guesthouses. Based on previous experience, we know the good places to stay most of the towns we visit. These are generally mid-range hotels which cost approx. Ar30,000 – 50,000 per person per night for a twin share or double room (i.e. less than AUD\$25/night per person). Once the trip numbers are confirmed, and everyone is happy with this arrangement, we will book these hotels/guesthouses in advance to ensure there are rooms available for us after a long day on the road or trail. Payment for hotel accommodation is not included in the price and will need to be made on arrival at each hotel.

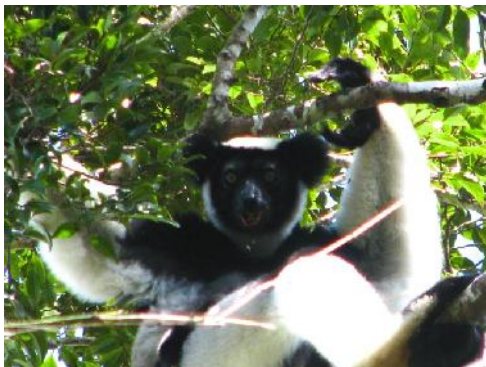
Strongly recommended hotel for start of the trip in Tana = Sakamanga Hotel

On-line booking available: <http://sakamanga.com/>

For ease of reference, we have divided the trip into several sections. A draft day-by-day itinerary can be found at the end of this document.

Section 1: Andasibe National Park area (2 days)

To give us a good introduction to Madagascar's wildlife, we will start the trip with two days in the Andasibe NP area. Lying approx. 4-6 hours east of Tana, this NP and associated reserves encompass what are perhaps Madagascar's premier mid-altitude rainforests, and offer opportunities for close encounters with several lemur species. The region, sometimes referred to as 'Perinet' (a reference to the logging camp that used to exist here), is one of the



last refuges of the largest of Madagascar's lemurs, the *indri*. Groups of these distinctive black and white tail-less lemurs call to each other every morning to mark out their territories and the loud eerie wails echo through the forest. See for example

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TnaxOfbkwNs>.

Diademed sifakas and brown lemurs may also be seen, and there is good birdwatching. We will do a full day walk in

Andasibe NP, and as well as a shorter walk in Mitsinjo Reserve and possibly V.O.I.M.M.A Reserve (both established by the local community to augment the indri habitat protected by Andasibe NP). On our way from Tana to Andasibe NP, we will stop at the Peyreiras Private Reserve to see chameleons and amazing leaf-tailed geckos (*Uroplatus* spp.). NP and Peyreiras Reserve entry fees & guide fees are included in the price. TBA – cost of walks in Mitsinjo and VOIMMA Reserves – at own cost.



One night in hotel accommodation at own cost.

Recommended Hotel = Feon'ny Ala ("Sound of the Forest") at Andasibe NP.

After a second morning at Andasibe, we will drive back towards Tana's Ivato Airport that afternoon, stay the night at a hotel close to the airport, and fly to Toliara (TLE) the following morning. There are flights most days, but departure time differs by day of the week, as does the route (direct or indirect); cost was approx. AUD\$400 in 2016) . Be warned! Air

Madagascar is renowned for last minute flight changes and cancellations, and we may need to modify our plans.

One night at hotel near Ivato Airport at own cost.
Recommended Hotel = Le Cheval Blanc.

Section 2: Isalo National Park (5 days – 4 nights)

While in Toliara, we will be visiting to a local supermarket to stock up on last essential items. We will also visit the Arboretum d’Antsokay, a short drive out of town. Exact timings TBA - based on time of arrival in Toliara (morning/afternoon etc). This wonderful arboretum was established in 1980 as a labour of love by a Swiss botanist, Hermann Petignat, and features a huge range of rare plants from Madagascar’s unique, dry ‘spiny forest’ area in the southwest (Toliara is near the northern limit of this region). There is also a cultural trail showcasing the customs of some of the local tribes, and a small museum with an eclectic collection of fossils, gemstones, shells, and musical instruments. A small restaurant (“The Dry Forest”) on-site offers refreshments. See <http://www.antsokayarboretum.org/en/>



From Toliara, we will drive northeast along the RN7 (Madagascar’s best road!) to Ranohira, the access village for Isalo NP. Note again that this is the best road in the country! All other roads are worse than this one! Even though distances can at times appear short in terms of km, travel speed is often very slow.

Depending on interest and timing, we may stop *en route* at the town of Ilakaka to visit a low-tech, open-cut sapphire mine. This is one of the areas in Madagascar experiencing a gemstone mining boom. See recent BBC news article on this subject. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-32962318>



Isalo NP is known for its remarkable landscape of eroded sandstone outcrops and lush green canyons with swimming holes. It is one of Madagascar’s oldest and most popular national parks. Somewhat reminiscent of the Kimberley or



Purnululu (Bungle Bungles), this area has to be seen to be believed! We will spend 5 days exploring this



amazing landscape. Possible wildlife viewing includes birds (always!) and lemurs. All park entry fees & guide fees, as well as camping fees (4 nights) are included in the price. We will hire one porter to carry the group gear and split the cost among the group. If you want a porter for your things, they are available – at own cost (Ar40,000/day in 2016). On previous trips, some have chosen to use porters while others carried their own packs.

Hotel accommodation at own cost in Ranohira before and after the Isalo NP trek.
Recommended Hotel = Orchidée Hotel.

Section 3: Andringitra National Park (5 days – 4 nights)

From Isalo NP, we will continue along the RN7 to the town of Ambalavao. Here we will have lunch and leave our excess baggage at the Bougainvillees Hotel before continuing by 4WD vehicle to the small village of Namoly, one of the access points for Andringitra NP.

Night at Tranogasy Bungalows at Namoly (or option to camp in the bungalow grounds) before we start our trek – at own cost.



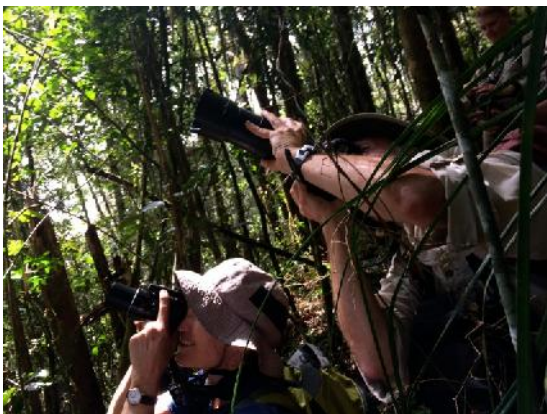
Andringitra NP lies on the mountainous spine of the island and features spectacular granite domes, rugged gneiss formations, and endemic sub-alpine plants. There are also dense forests (a green corridor links Andringitra with Ranomafana to the northeast), rivers with bathing holes, and the possibility of lemurs. We will spend 5 days walking this incredible area. This will include an ascent of Pic d'Imarivolanitra (Pic Boby, 2658 m), as well as the Diavolana Circuit, which is considered one of the top mountain walks anywhere. It can get cold up there so make sure you have warm clothes and a good sleeping bag. Although this is the dry season,

it is a mountain environment so it can always rain. Be prepared! Our highest campsite (Andriampotsy – see image below) is at 2050 m. Again, all park entry fees and guide fees, as well as camping fees (4 nights) are included in the price.

Porters are available if required – at own cost (Ar10,000/day in 2016).



Section 4: Ranomafana National Park



After spending a night in Ambalavao to recover from the challenges of Andringitra, we will continue north along the RN7. We pass through the town of Fianaratsua, where we will turn off to Ranomafana National Park. This brings us back onto the eastern wet side of the island, with its low montane rainforests. This is a total hot spot for lemurs, including the rare golden bamboo lemur, as well as for herpetofauna (reptiles and amphibians). We will do a full day walk here with an emphasis on spotting wildlife. Ranomafana means “hot water” and there is a small hot thermal bath facility near

the village. Again, all park entry fees & guide fees are included in the price.

Two nights in hotel accommodation at own cost. Recommended Hotel = Chez Gaspard.

Section 5: Journey down the Tsiribihina River (2½ days on the water)



From Ranomafana NP, we return to the RN7 and drive north to the town of Antsirabe. After a night at a local hotel (Green Park Hotel – at own cost), we continue to the small town of Miandrivazo on the dry west side of the island. This will be our starting point for our descent of the Tsiribihina River the following day. Night at local hotel (Chez La Reine Rasalimo – at own cost). We will take 2 1/2 days to travel down the Tsiribihina River from a small village near Miandrivazo to the town of Belo-Sur-Tsiribihina.

Based on our experience in 2016, we will do the river descent via motor barge (as shown on previous page). A motor barge is a substantially more comfortable way to travel than the pirogue canoes which we used in 2014 and 2015. We will all be in the same boat (problems with pirogues becoming separated in previous years), and there is room to stand and walk about a bit while the boat is underway. The seating area is covered by a shade awning. The barge will stop regularly for breaks. Travelling by barge will also allow us to get to our campsites a little earlier. The downsides of the motor barge include the constant thudding sound of the motor and likely occasional groundings on mud banks as the river is quite shallow at this time of year (the bargemen will push us free).

The Tsiribihina River is highly regarded for its scenery, animals (mainly birds), and glimpses of rural life. It will be relatively dry at this time of year, so we will be able to camp along the sandy banks of the river. From June – August, this trip is very popular. By coming later in the season, we will avoid seeing a lot of other tourists on the river. All meals during the descent of the Tsiribihina River (“full board”), including the services of the bargemen, are included in the price. There is not a lot to do on the barge except enjoy the scenery, so be prepared to relax. One of our 2016 clients said, "I really enjoyed the barge trip. Was nice to have some downtime and I spent the entire cruise watching the people, wildlife and landscape. Camping each night was nice and the crew were great."

There may be an opportunity to make a donation (eg books and supplies) to a local school at the village of Beguido where we will stop for a visit on day 2 of our river trip. However, this is school holiday time in Madagascar, and we would need to find the head teacher to present such a donation.

Camping for 2 nights, then onwards by 4WD to the Tsingy.

Section 6: Tsingy de Bemeraha (2 days), Kirindy + Avenue of Baobabs



explore the ‘Little Tsingy’ and ‘Big Tsingy’ areas – both full day walks. The beautiful Big Tsingy walk features some easy rock scrambling, several swing bridges, and an long, extensive cave section. You will be wearing a climbing harness in order to clip into a *via ferrata*-type cable system for safety on this walk. There are great views and there is

We should arrive at the town of Belo-sur-Tsiribihina in time for lunch. From there, we will travel by 4WD to the incredible [Tsingy de Bemeraha](#), crossing the river by local ferry along the way. This region is renowned for its eroded limestone-pinnacle landscape and wildlife. We will spend two days here to



nothing too exposed, but you do need to be okay with heights & narrow squeeze caves (short sections only). A good head torch is a must for the underground cave section. Again, all park entry fees & guide fees are included in the price.



Three nights in hotel accommodation at the Tsingy at own cost. Recommended Hotel = Tanankoay.

We will then retrace our steps to Belo-sur-Tsiribihina, cross the river, and head to Kirindy Reserve where we will spend the night. One night accommodation at own cost. The basic Kirindy Lodge is the only accommodation available here and is very overpriced but breakfast is included. We will attempt to book into the bungalows here. If these are not available, we may have to make do with group dormitory accommodation.

Kirindy Reserve is *the* place to see fossa. This is Madagascar's unique, top predator which looks like a strange mix of a puma and a thylacine! Usually very shy and rarely seen outside of this region. Fossa, which are the size of a small cougar, regularly come into the lodge area. This dry forest reserve also has a lot of lemurs and is home to the rare giant jumping rat. We will do a night walk as well as a morning walk here to give ourselves the best opportunity possible to see the local wildlife. Again, all park entry fees & guide fees are included in the price.



The next day we'll drive to the town of Morondava via the famous Avenue of Baobabs. The Avenue of Baobabs is one of Madagascar's top attractions, with giant Grandidier's Baobabs lining both sides of the road. It's only about 20 km from Morondava so many people come here (be warned!) and quite rightly so. It's beautiful!



Morondava is a relaxed beach town on the Mozambique Channel with good swimming. A great 'beach resort' ending to our trip! We will spend a night (or two) here before travelling back to Tana.

If you choose to fly from Morondava to Tana, you **SHOULD NOT** plan to fly on from Tana to Australia or elsewhere on that same day! The Air Madagascar schedule is notoriously unreliable & can change at a moments notice – as we learned on our previous visits. We continue to be amazed at the craziness

of Air "Mad" and their seemingly random rescheduling and cancelling of flights. Be prepared!

Unless people wish to fly, we plan to use a cheaper and far more reliable option, chartering our own vehicle to take us back to Tana. It's a very long drive, so will take two days and spend a night in Antsirabe on the way. Besides breaking the journey (which took us 13 hours including a half hour lunch break in 2016), this will give us a chance to explore a bit more of one of the more interesting towns in the country.

Morondava and Antsirabe hotel accommodation at own cost.
Recommended Hotel in Morondava = Morondava Beach Resort (mid-range)
or Chez Maggie (higher end – treat yourself to a bit of well-deserved luxury!)

The above should give you an idea of what to expect.

What do you need to bring?

We will be running this trip in September, towards the end of the winter and end of the dry season. The western side of the island is always quite dry (spiny forest areas) while the eastern side of the island is wetter (rainforest areas). A small amount of rain may fall at this time such that it is actually greener now in September, than it is a month or so later. Average midday temperatures in the dry season are approx. 25° C in the highlands and 30° C on the coast. The central mountainous spine area can get cold at night throughout the year. In Andringitra National Park, the temperature may drop to less than 5° C at night.

As noted earlier, malaria is a problem in many parts of Madagascar, especially the wetter rainforest areas. Be prepared and take a good anti-malarial prophylactic. Mosquito repellent is also recommended, though again there are fewer insects around in the dry season. Make an appointment with your local Travel Doctor and discuss your options for this, as well as vaccination requirements, and anti-travellers' diarrhoea antibiotics. You should take a small personal first aid kit including bandaids, basic pain relief medication, anti-inflammatories, anti-histamines, and anti-gastro antibiotics.

You will definitely need a head torch. Good walking boots or shoes are a must. Light runners or sandals can be useful for evenings and travel days. A tent, sleeping mat, and mid range sleeping bag. Trekking pack and day pack. Walking poles. Sun hat & beanie. See Equipment List for full details.

In some cases our meals will be cooked for us by local guides (Tsiribihina River descent). In other circumstances, we will have the opportunity to try local restaurants, or cook for ourselves. The Malagasy are the largest rice consumers in the world, eating huge plates of rice ('vary') for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, garnished with a bit of meat or a bit of greenery. Restaurants at hotels offer good basic meals generally consisting of chicken or beef (zebu) accompanied by rice, sauteed vegetables, or french fries (pommes frites). French influence in cuisine! You might want to bring some of your own snacks for our multiday walks. Village market stalls and shops may offer fruit (in season, depending on location), tinned sardines, sweet biscuits, La Vache Qui Ri long-life cheese, and baguettes, as well as coffee, tea, and 'mufu' (deep fried dough balls, sweet or savoury).

What does it cost?

Madagascar is one of the countries where the Australian dollar can still go a long way. **Our fee for the full 4 week itinerary would be \$2195**, which covers our liability insurance. Our

public liability insurance requires you to have your own travel insurance. It may sound like overkill, but I have heard of a case where the Travel Insurer sued a tour operator for something that happened that they had to cover. This fee covers the guide who also acts as organiser and cook, plus the evening meals on the walks where we do the catering. In addition, you will have to pay your share of all the expenses for food, accommodation, and tips (see information in Equipment List). The guide will pay the same fees and fares as everyone else and will keep these as low as reasonable comfort, reliability and availability will allow.

As noted earlier, we have negotiated with a local Madagascar tour company to provide us with transport, and arrange park entrance fees and local guides. This **additional cost** will cover the following: minivan and 4WD transport with local driver between sections (as well as transfers to/from the airport); entrance fees and local guides at parks and reserves (Peyreiras Private Reserve, Andasibe NP, Isalo NP, Andringitra NP, Ranomafana NP, Tsingy of Bemeraha NP, and Kirindy Reserve) including camping fees when we are doing multi-day walks in the national parks; as well as the barge, barge-men and all meals ("full board" = Day 1 Lunch and Dinner; Day 2 Breakfast, Lunch, and Dinner; Day 3 Breakfast and Lunch) during the descent of the Tsiribihina River. From 1 November 2015, National Park entrance fees in Madagascar underwent a substantial increase. As such, our local operator costs from 2016 onwards have also increased. We will take a maximum of 9 people plus Willis' guide = group of 10 total.

Additional costs:

Local operator costs - transport, park entry fees, park camping and guides fees

The following prices are from 2017. We will negotiate new ones when we know we can run the trip. It may be possible to run it for as few as four.

Base 5 pp + 1 tour leader	€1755	(approx. AUD \$2467)
Base 6 pp + 1 tour leader	€1579	(approx. AUD \$2220)
Base 7 pp + 1 tour leader	€1382	(approx. AUD \$1943)
Base 8 pp + 1 tour leader	€1445	(approx. AUD \$2031)
Base 9 pp + 1 tour leader	€1332	(approx. AUD \$1873)

Note that there are only so many people you can fit comfortably into one minivan or 4WD car before you need to get another one. This is why the price doesn't just get less the more people we have on the trip. Also, our quote is in Euros. The Australian \$ prices currently quoted are based on the exchange rate in early February 2016. They may go up or down from here. We will get new prices as soon as it looks likely that we will have the bookings we need to run it.

If unable to commit for the full 4 weeks, there may be the option to leave us at Antsirabe (after Ranomafana NP visit). Let us know and we can provide you with more details.

Domestic Flights - you must book and pay in advance

Tana Ivato Airport to Toliara (Tulear, TLE) - exact date to be advised
€138 or so.... (approx. AUD\$220)

Madagascar Tourist VISA (up to 30 days) = approx. AUD\$45
These can be purchased on arrival at the airport in Tana.

Costs summary – approximate, just to give you an idea....

Return international airfare (eg flying from Sydney return)	AUD \$2800
Walkabouts fee	\$2195
Madagascar local operator costs	\$1900 -- \$2450
Domestic airfares	<u>\$ 402 -- \$768</u>
	\$7297 -- \$8213

Plus accommodation, restaurant meals, trekking breakfasts and lunches, travel insurance...
I am working to provide an estimate of these latter costs also. Please let me know if you would like this information urgently.

What do you get for the fee?

You get expert advice on the things to bring, the probable weather, etc. You get someone who will handle the mundane details of making the travel arrangements, doing the food shopping for the walks, organising accommodation etc. You get someone who will provide all the group equipment (billies, stoves, etc) and who will cook the evening meals on the walks (if not done by local guides) allowing you to relax and enjoy yourself. You will get someone with Wilderness First Aid qualifications. You also get a small, like-minded group of people with whom you can share your experiences and expenses.

Note 1. Some of what you get for your money is not very visible. As in South Africa, walking in national parks in Madagascar is tightly regulated. Local guides and permits have to be arranged well in advance or we won't be able to do the walks as planned. As another example, prior to one of the longer walks, you might spend a day relaxing or sightseeing while the guide goes out and hits the local shops or market, then spends an hour (or two or three) doing the final organising for the meals on the walk. If you can't see the value in services like these, you are unlikely to feel that you are getting real value for your fee.

Note 2. Prices are subject to change. We will work out a more accurate figure when we know we have at least four people interested.

Note 3. A large majority of those who have taken part in our overseas tours are Australian so all prices are quoted in Australian dollars.

Note 4. All bushwalks are subject to change due to weather conditions. If we get really foul weather at the start of a walk, we may wish to abort it, at least temporarily. If we get really foul weather later on, we may have to cut a route short.

Note 5. The Australian Government's "Smart Traveller" website urges visitors to exercise a high degree of caution, especially around Tana. They say, that in 2019, "Madagascar is experiencing a measles outbreak, with 114 districts out of 116 affected by the outbreak and 91 declared an epidemic situation. WHO estimates the overall risk for Madagascar from the current outbreak to be very high. Make sure your vaccinations are up-to-date before you travel (See Health). We haven't changed our level of our advice - 'Exercise a high degree of caution' in Madagascar."

If the measles outbreak continues, we will require proof of a measles vaccination before we can accept your booking. Before booking, please visit the Smart Traveller website, <https://smartraveller.gov.au/Search/Pages/default.aspx?k=madagascar>

What you don't get?

You do not get a guide who will hold your hand and make every decision for you. You must be prepared to take on a much greater degree of responsibility than on most other tours. All members of the group, including the guide, are expected to work together in establishing how the group will function, who will lead on the walks, who will look after the stragglers, etc. A trip such as this cannot work unless everyone helps out. There is no way that any one person, no matter how experienced, can look after an entire group 100% of the time. No matter how careful the guide may be, there is always a possibility that he or she will be the one to get injured or otherwise incapacitated. Accepting the responsibility that goes with a trip like this is part of the experience we offer. It is one of the things that sets our trips apart from the vast majority of "adventure" trips on the market. For those prepared to accept this responsibility, it makes the experience doubly rewarding. Those who are not prepared to accept such responsibility would be better off going on a "normal" tour.

Is it for you?

This trip is not for the average tourist. We can neither control nor predict the weather, only accept it as it comes. If you do not want to take the necessary responsibility and/or you cannot obtain the necessary equipment, it is not for you. Good physical fitness and a good mental attitude are both necessary. If you have never carried a pack on an overnight walk or have never walked off, it will be harder for you to cope with the likely conditions than for a person who has had the relevant experience. Beyond a basic level of fitness, mental fitness becomes more important than physical fitness. Past experience has shown us that a fit, experienced 70 year old may cope better than a fitter 25 year old who does not have experience in coping with adverse conditions.

A Final Caution and a suggestion

Do not expect everything to run like clockwork. Such things often fail to happen in Africa. If you want to get maximum value for your money, you can go off and go sightseeing or simply relax while the guide does the food shopping or tries to organise or reconfirm hiking permits, etc. Or, if you wish, you are welcome to join him or her while (s)he does these things. There may be occasional day between sections where you will be left to your own devices while the guide slows down and relaxes a bit and catches up on the organising. Based on past experience, things will run more smoothly if the guide does this.

Conditions

- 1. Willis's Walkabouts Fees** A deposit of \$200 is payable on booking. This will be refunded in full if five people have not booked by end June. Final payment is due by 17 July (see below) or within a week after we confirm the departure, whichever is later.
- 2.** Cancellation fees are \$200 before 1 June, \$400 before 1 July, \$800 before 1 August and the full \$2195 after that.
- 3.** A 30% deposit of our local Madagascar operators fees are due by end June (2 months before departure). The remainder of this payment will be due by 17 July (45 days before departure).
- 3.** All participants are responsible for obtaining the necessary passport and visas and must have some form of travel insurance. We need to see proof of your travel insurance before departure. We need this because of our own insurance.

Merel Dalebout & Russell Willis
Madagascar Day-by-Day Itinerary to follow shortly