Ten go to Madagascar

CLARE and JOHAN HERMANS describe some jolly adventures on an Orchid Conservation Alliance trip to the Great Red Island

Above The Andringitra Massif (desert of rocks), part of the Andringitra National Park, at sunrise.
Right Mass flowering of the tiny Bulbophyllum leptostachyum in Ranomafana National Park.
Far left The intrepid Orchid Conservation Alliance group at the entrance of the orchid ‘garden’ at Andasibe-Mantadia National Park.
Left Aerangis fastuosa was encountered in full bloom at Ranomafana National Park.
WHY DO THE WRONG people travel, when the right people stay back home?” So wrote Noël Coward in Sail Away and the same question crossed my mind during thirty or so years of tour leading, particularly in Madagascar. I am not thinking of the irritating arguers and complainers, they just want there money’s worth. It’s the ones that can be classed as, well, unusual in any environment …

So wrote Hilary Bradt, travel writer and friend, in the Sunday Telegraph in 2020. It was an amusing read but also triggered a few memories of our September 2019 Orchid Conservation Alliance (OCA) trip to Madagascar.

Unlike the sociable Hilary Bradt we are unaccustomed to accompanying tour groups, preferring the company of ourselves or just a few friends. Following a chance encounter with Mary Gerritsen, stalwart of the OCA, in Ecuador in 2017 the idea of guiding a trip to Madagascar came up. She made it sound quite easy and we felt ready to share some of our experience of Madagascar and its orchids.

Based in the United States, OCA is an admirable organization; one of their aims is to promote trips to see orchids in their native habitat and thereby raise awareness and funding for conservation projects.

The best laid plans
The next year was spent meticulously planning and costing an itinerary, based on almost 20 previous trips. In partnership with Mary and our friends at Malagasy Tours in Madagascar it was decided to go for the ‘comfortable but flexible’ option with several small vehicles, taking in a good cross section of this very large and diverse country. Mid-September to early October were fixed as dates, and diverse country. Mid-September to early October were fixed as dates, and therefore he and Steve had to drop out of the trip. The rest of the group had become inaccessible because of a severe landslide. Back to the drawing board and eventually an announcement was circulated to the OCA membership.

Much to our astonishment all twelve places were snapped up within days with a long waiting list of other potential participants.

Just a few days before departure, news came from Madagascar that one of our lodges had become inaccessible because of a severe landslide. Back to the drawing board and eventually an alternative was found, not an easy task during the peak tourist season, but more of that later. With bookings confirmed, dietary requirements established and sleeping arrangements decided, we were finally ready to go!

An inauspicious start
On the 14th of September we set off for Heathrow, with some trepidation but comforted by the thought that we knew at least some of the participants, including Mary, an indefatigable colleague called Gary and, most of all, our old friends Harold and Steve.

But, ‘the best laid plans of mice and men’ depended on KLM getting us to Amsterdam, Nairobi and then Antananarivo, Madagascar. We had allowed many hours for transit but a much delayed flight coming into Heathrow from Amsterdam meant that the whole journey suddenly vanished into mid-air. Flights to Madagascar are not frequent and ground staff at Heathrow looked blankly on how to re-schedule us, until we met Dimitri who turned out to be the only Malagasy working at the airport: he promptly re-arranged our flight, departing 6.30am the next day, via Paris and Nairobi. This meant an unexpected night at the Heathrow Hilton where we received the sad news that Harold had had a serious car accident before departure and therefore he and Steve had to drop out of the trip. The rest of the evening was spent on the phone to Madagascar altering arrangements.

The new route involved a stop on the Comoro Islands, a place we always wanted to visit but perhaps not at midnight staring at an ugly concrete airport building. The only amusement was trying to retrieve a group of Chinese tourists heading for the airport exit convinced that they had reached Madagascar. We finally reached our destination at 2am, just 12 hours late. We have never been so pleased to find Niry, our friend, waiting patiently for us.

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After a few hours sleep we headed off for an appointment at the Herbarium of the Botanical and Zoological Gardens in Antananarivo.

A daytrip to Angavokely
We had built in a few days’ us time to relax and do herbarium work before the US contingent arrived. However, most of the group had come early and
lesson two of group travel was learned: everything takes longer than anticipated but that more eyes means more orchids. This is offset by lesson three that many cameras mean that photography can be a lengthy affair.

**Ranomafana National Park**

After an overnight stop we reached the first orchid-rich area near Ranomafana National Park, in the eastern rainforest where we were greeted by roadside banks covered in *Cynorkis lowiana*. The next two days were spent on different trails in the area; although the park was busy and it rained every day (the only time on the trip) there was ample opportunity to lose the crowd and discover orchids. The highlights were the terrestrials *Cheirostylis nuda*, *Cynorkis nutans* at its peak and *Cynorkis peyrotii*. As usual the *bulbophyllums* performed, they are one of the few genera with species in flower most of the year and included *Bulbophyllum leptostachyum* and *B. francoisii*. Even some *angracoids* were out, pretty *Aerangis fastuosa* and *Angraecum dryadum*. However, the find of the trip was a diminutive but unusual *Gastrodia*. Later it was matched with old herbarium material, beautifully drawn by Deborah Lambkin, declared new to science and became famous in the press as ‘the world’s ugliest orchid’ or *Gastrodia agnicellus*. This was a remarkable discovery, given that it has no leaves and its flowers are hidden beneath leaf litter. It did not take long for the group to become totally engaged by the many strange creatures of the Madagascan rainforest and especially enthralled by the tiniest of orchids.

**Isalo and return to Antananarivo**

The next main stop was Isalo, two days’ drive further south. It was becoming warmer and drier...
they should ‘then just eat their
vegetables and leave the rest’. A
supervising teacher soon rectified the
situation and produced an omelette,
the ubiquitous vegetarian standby.

**East to Andasibe**

After passing the traffic jams of the
capital we headed east to the rich
rainforest around Andasibe. Apart
from orchids, the main attractions
were the indri and diademated sifaka.

‘At Andasibe, apart from orchids, the
main attractions were the indri and
diademated sifaka’

from orchids, the main attractions
here were the indri, a lemur with a
whale like call and the rare diademated
sifaka. Three full days in the area
meant the group had plenty of
opportunity to lemur-watch and get
away from marauding tourists.

A whole day was dedicated to an
arduous trek in a local community
reserve scrambling down to a
*Pandanus* bog to see one of the few
surviving *Eulophias rosmalensis*
plants. We hoped that they would
be in flower (they were in seed pod
on a previous visit in December and
the local guide had assured us that it
flowered in mid-September to early
October) but weather conditions had
been unfavourable and we had just
tennis ball-sized buds to admire
instead of the huge pink blooms.

Many other orchids in bloom nearby
did make up for this disappointment;
there were massive clumps of
*Jumellea punctata*, *Lemurella pallidiflora*,
*Angraecum lecomtei*, a mysterious
*Angraecum close to A. implicatum*, the
rare, elf-like *Aeranthes schlechteri*, giant
*Bulbophyllum coriophorum*, *B. auritum*,
*B. divercatum*, *B. pandurella*,
*B. platypodum* and many others.

**The unexpected pleasures of Lake Ampitabe**

The final stop was a leap into the
water and the singing of
dramatic scenery of eroded sandstone
mountains and a vegetation of palms
and many succulents, including
*Pandanus* in full bloom. It was an
opportunity to rest for some and for
others to admire the sole orchid,
*Eulophia ramosa*, growing in the baked
grassland. A day trip to Zombitse
Reserve further south revealed many
non-flowering angracoids growing in
the hot, dry forest, including
*Aerangis*, the rare, elf-like
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**Dramatic scenery of the Andringitra Massif**

One of the more memorable
overnight stops was at Fianarantsoa
in a hotel and catering college. One
or two on the tour were vegetarian,
but it was not a common thing in Madagascar.

**Going home**

After a gruelling nine-hour drive back
to the capital for a magnificent
farewell dinner it was now time to say
goodbye to the group; we had learnt
to appreciate all those ‘unusual in any
environment’, and had made some
great friends with a common
passion for orchids. As always
Madagascar did not disappoint and
provided a total of 81 different orchid
species or almost 10% of the entire
orchid flora, with numerous lemurs,
chameleons, insects and birds thrown
in (but sadly no penguins).

Due to Covid-19, the 2020 OCA
trip to Madagascar was cancelled. We
hope that Madagascar can open to
tourism again in 2021 and we can see
that Eulophias in flower after all.

**Clare Hermans** is an orchid
grower, author and Chairman of the
RHS Orchid Committee. **Johan Hermans** is an orchid
grower, photographer, author
and Vice Chairman of the RHS Orchid Committee.