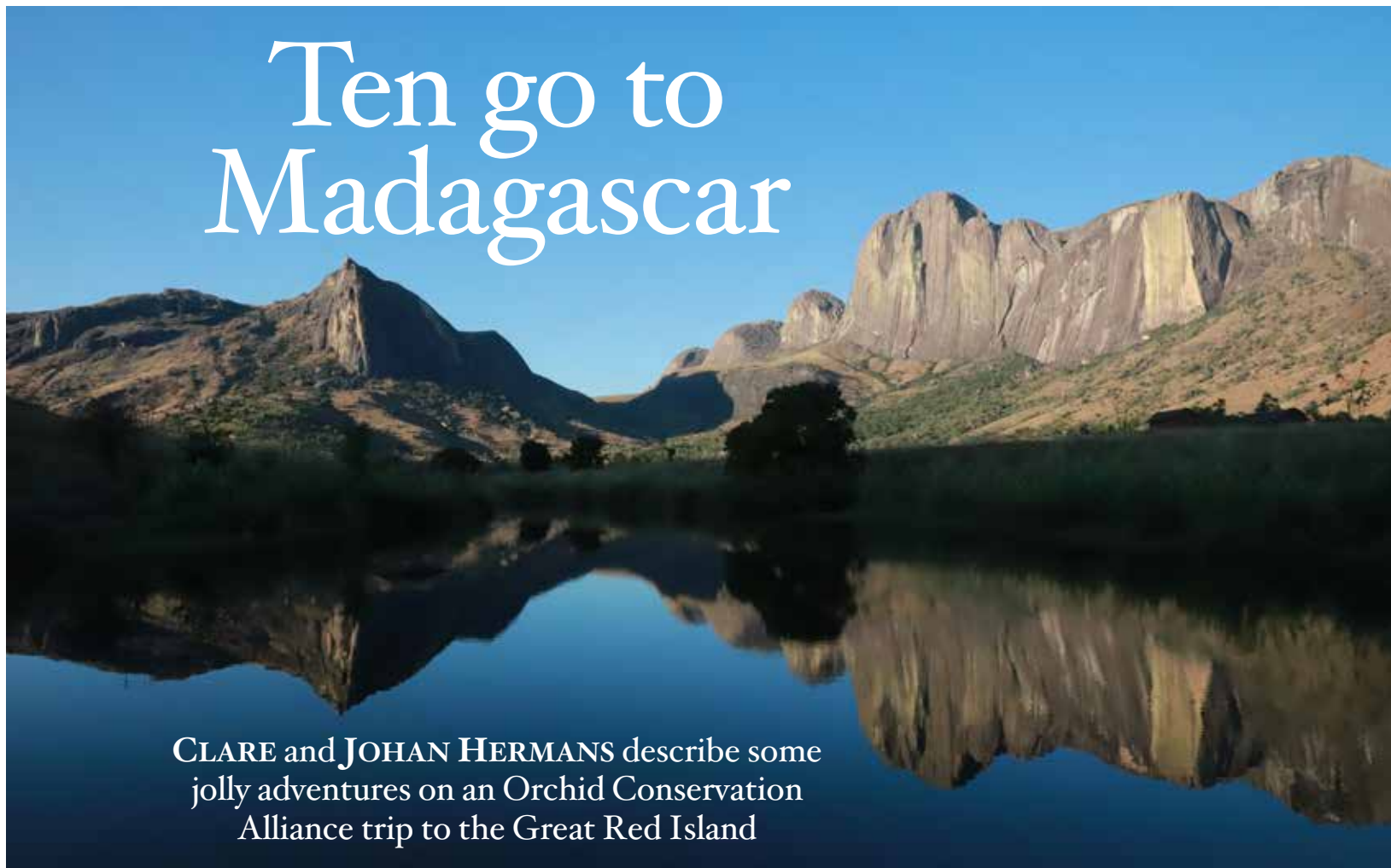


Ten go to Madagascar



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.



Photograph by Johan Hermans

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, perhaps not the peak orchid flowering season but less likely to be affected by cyclones, leeches and



Eulophia ibityensis is locally common in Madagascar in woodland of highland areas.

floods. Hotels and lodges were reserved well in advance, good local guides were booked 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 Madagascan 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 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, guide and driver waiting patiently for us.

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

'We reached our destination at 2am, just 12 hours late, to find Niry, our friend, waiting patiently for us'



Left *Cynorkis lowiana* flowers in profusion on wet roadside banks near Ranomafana National Park.

Above Variable *Cynorkis nutans* grows as a terrestrial or semi-epiphyte in the eastern forest.

Below Tiny *Cynorkis peyrotii* is made distinctive by its marked leaves.





Angraecum dryadum flowering profusely at the roadside near Ranomafana.



Lemurella pallidiflora is a small twig epiphyte in Mantadia National Park.



Aeranthes schlechteri flowers suspended from a long inflorescence at Mantadia National Park.

had the same idea of some pre-trip relaxation; not surprising as most were travelling the very long haul from the west coast of America.

Antananarivo is not one of the world's most exciting cities, so an impromptu daytrip was organized to Angavokely Forest Station, about 60km from the capital. Though few orchids were in flower, it provided a pre-taste of travelling in Madagascar, with its varying road conditions and unforeseen obstacles, such as live, pendulous power cables and large felled trees, barring the route. *Cynorkis ridleyi* growing in clumps at the base of pine trees was the star of the day.

On the way

Early the next day we met up with the rest of the expedition team: four drivers / guides and a matching number of sturdy four-wheel drive vehicles laden with spare car parts, a large supply of bottled water, and ample picnic supplies. We soon learnt lesson one of group travel: that speed depends on the efficiency of the hotel check-out clerk and on the time management of the slowest participant. A long journey south lay ahead, traversing spectacular scenery, with a chance to see the country's unique fauna and flora, and even some orchids. The programme allowed for one to two full days' drive followed by two nights in an orchid-rich area.

The main stop that day was Col Tapia, a well-known orchid locality but now somewhat depleted by fire. It was the first opportunity for group bonding; comparing varying extremes of protective clothing, footwear, camera gear and fitness. After a thorough search among the granite boulders and under the tapia trees (*Uapaca bojeri*) just one flowering orchid was found: *Eulophia ibityensis*, a pretty terrestrial endemic to this area. A lengthy hunt for two pairs of lost spectacles was less successful. Here

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 angraecoids 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 with



Eulophia ramosa was one of the few orchids flowering in the Isalo Massif.

‘The find of the trip was a diminutive *Gastrodia*. New to science, it became famous as ‘the world’s ugliest orchid’

dramatic scenery of eroded sandstone mountains and a vegetation of palms and many succulents, including *Pachypodium* 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 angraecoids growing in the hot, dry forest, including *Aerangis spiculata*, tantalizingly just a few days from opening its blooms.

It was now time to retrace our steps and head back north via the 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, not a common thing in Madagascar. It was not a concept fully understood by the young student waiter at the hotel school who arrived with plates of chicken, gravy, vegetables and rice for everyone; for the vegetarians he suggested, somewhat assertively, that 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

'At Andasibe, apart from orchids, the main attractions were the indri and diademmed sifaka'

from orchids, the main attractions here were the indri, a lemur with a whale like call and the rare diademmed 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 *Eulophiella roempleriana* 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. auriflorum*, *B. divaricatum*, *B. pandurella*, *B. platypodium* and many others.

The unexpected pleasures of Lake Ampitabe

The final stop was a leap into the unknown. It was a last-minute rearrangement after one of the hotels

became inaccessible due to a landslide and quick substitutions had to be made. Our new location was Lake Ampitabe on the east coast, where the group had to be split between hotels. The lake is part of the Pangalanes canal system with some remnants of littoral forest. Getting there was an adventure in itself; three hours' drive including half an hour on a dirt track travelling at a 45° angle, followed by an hour by speedboat to the lake.

The first afternoon was spent fruitlessly searching for *Cymbidiella flabellata* seen on an earlier trip. Fortunately, one of the group was more successful, he met a group of schoolchildren carrying a bunch of its flowers, and they showed him the plants close to a football pitch.

Besides the cymbidiellas, growing at the base of ericaceous scrub was the gorgeous *Angraecum elephantinum*. To add to the tally were *Aerangis citrata* and *Oeoniella polystachys* growing on trees beside the lake, plus some large colonies of pitcher plants (*Nepenthes*). By now most of the group had relaxed and settled into a Malagasy, laissez-faire lifestyle. This was fortunate as our last night was spent in the remnants of some beach-side bungalows earmarked for refurbishment with rice-straw for a mattress, various creepy crawlies on the walls and much rodent-rustling during the night. But there was cold running water and the singing of villagers walking along the shore woke us at 4.45am, just in time for a dramatic sunrise.

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 new friends with a common



A large colony of *Oeoniella polystachys* seen at Lake Ampitabe.



Detail of the strange flowers of the giant *Bulbophyllum coriophorum*.



Bulbophyllum pandurella forms small clumps on the main trunk of trees.



Cymbidiella flabellata was found in coastal scrub near to a football pitch by Lake Ampitabe.

passion for orchids. As always Madagascar did not disappoint and provided a total of 81 different orchid species or almost 10% of the entire

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 *Eulophiella* in flower after all. ■

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