



Journey to Madagascar

Visit Centre ValBio and embark on a cross-country trip.

In October 2024, a group of scientists and professors, nonprofit leaders and advocates, and an international attorney traveled to Madagascar on a trip organized by Centre ValBio (CVB), a state-of-the-art research station in Madagascar. Of the nine people who took the journey, two in the group were 13 years old and younger. They learned they all had much in common, but the first common denominator was their shared passion for adventure, exploration, and the environment. The travelers left from across the United States, ranging from the East Coast to the West Coast, for their journey to Madagascar.



Left to right: Dr. KC Huang, Jory Huang, Kyra Tirana Barry, Elizabeth Novogratz, Dr. Mark Krasnow, Dylan Ludington, Jim Brumm, Dr. Pat Brown, Dr. Beatriz Otero Jiménez, Dr. Will Ludington, and Melanie Formosa at the Ivohiboro Protected Area campsite. Photo credit: Melanie Formosa

Upon arriving in Antananarivo, the group stayed in the capital city for a day or two before flying down to Fianarantsoa and driving to CVB in Ranomafana. They were met with welcome baskets and lunch, and Dr. Patricia Wright, founder and executive director of CVB, gave a lecture about the center and her work in Madagascar.

"To see Madagascar through the eyes of first-time visitors, from our youngest travelers to our most experienced researchers, is always a powerful reminder of why we do this work: to inspire, to protect, and to connect people to Madagascar's beauty, its remarkable biodiversity, and the importance of conserving it for future generations," said Dr. Wright.

Once the sun set, the group went on a night walk to spot mouse lemurs, chameleons, and other wildlife. Mouse lemurs are of particular interest to Dr. Mark Krasnow. In addition to serving as chair of the CVB Advisory Board, Mark leads the Krasnow Lab at Stanford University School of Medicine with current mouse lemur genetics projects being conducted at CVB. Mark was one of the travelers on the trip and, after the group had finished with dinner, explained the research, along with details shared by the researchers who were working in the lab.



O'Shaughnessy's chameleon (*Calumma oshaughnessyi*). Photo credit: Dr. Patrick O. Brown

"What makes doing research at CVB so exciting is the rare combination of world-class science and immediate, real-world impact," said Dr. Krasnow. "We are working in one of the most biodiverse ecosystems on the planet, surrounded by species and systems that are still largely unexplored — and at the same time, embedded in a community where that research can directly inform conservation, education, and health. This trip was valuable because it allowed us to see the people, the environment, and the urgency all coming together in a way that deepens our commitment to our work."

The group spent the next two days in Ranomafana. They visited Ranomafana National Park on guided tours through the rainforest to see lemurs, including the golden bamboo lemur, scientifically discovered by Dr. Wright; and Simone, the last known greater bamboo lemur in Ranomafana National Park, among other animals, insects, and plants.

“You’re in a country where there is immense beauty, immense poverty, and immense destruction and deforestation — and yet, there are also stunning rainforests and beautiful people living incredibly hard lives,” said Elizabeth Novogratz, founder and president of Species Unite. “You could say that about many countries, but Madagascar felt that way to me more intensely than most. I think partly because it’s so far away and so isolated, and partly because so many different things make up a single day. And I’d say the same about CVB — you don’t really get it until you get there.”



Golden bamboo lemur (*Haplemur aureus*) in Ranomafana National Park. Photo credit: Dr. Patrick O. Brown

The group listened to a lecture by Lovasoa RAZAFINDRAVONY, the head of the environmental education department, and Dr. Fleurah ZAFINDRABIBISOA, the head of the health department, on the efforts and accomplishments of each team. Then they spent the afternoon in town. They visited a reforestation site and were able to see firsthand the efforts of the restoration ecology department. Afterwards, they went for drinks and dinner at Hotel Thermal, a deluxe hotel in the village of Ranomafana.

The second day in Ranomafana began with early morning birding in Ranomafana National Park. Jean Theodore FARAFIDISON, or "Theo the Bird Nerd," as he describes himself, is a longtime park tour guide and is able to voice 116 bird calls.

“It is important for me to share knowledge with visitors about my forest,” said Theo. “There are so many things they have never seen — and are only found here on the whole planet! I became one of the first people to understand we need to change our perspective and not destroy the forest. I am an example for people.”



Jean Theodore FARAFIDISON, or "Theo the Bird Nerd," voices one of 116 bird calls. Photo credit: Dr. Patrick O. Brown

Happy hour was in the early evening with cocktails on the balcony of NamanaBe, which is home to a beautiful view overlooking the Namorona River — complete with the sound rush of the water flowing over the rocks — and the Ranomafana National Park rainforest on the other side of the river. After dinner was a showing of the 40-minute nature documentary, [*Island of Lemurs: Madagascar*](#), the 2014 film narrated by Morgan Freeman featuring Dr. Wright and CVB.



Centre ValBio, a state-of-the-art research station in Ranomafana, Madagascar. Photo credit: Melanie Formosa

On the next day, everyone packed their bags for the cross-country trip to Ivohiboro. They made stops along the way to break up the long drive and experience more of Madagascar, and arrived the day after.

Ivohiboro is a pristine tropical forest embedded in a dry and bare landscape. The forest sits atop Crystal Mountain, at 1,500 meters high (4,921 feet). It is one of the last primary forests on the planet and reigns over the rugged plains of Southeast Madagascar. Dyan Machan wrote about [Ivohiboro in Smithsonian Magazine](#).

[Ivohiboro Protected Area](#) was established in 2023 and comprises approximately 3,700 hectares. It is managed by MICET, a Malagasy NGO, in collaboration with CVB, the Madagascar Ministry for the Environment and Sustainable Development, and a committee of representatives from surrounding villages.



Ivohiboro Protected Area. Photo credit: Dr. Patrick O. Brown

“What gave me hope on this trip was seeing that shared understanding grow — not just among our local partners, MICET, and the local community — but among the CVB Advisory Board and scientific tourists,” said Dr. Benjamin ANDRIAMIHAJA, founder and director of Madagascar Institut pour la Conservation des Écosystèmes Tropicaux (MICET). “They made the long, difficult journey; experienced basic infrastructure; and reaffirmed their deep interest and commitment in conservation.”

Biodiversity surveys of this forest have revealed a biodiverse ecosystem, including roughly 800 hectares of humid forest, and vulnerable species such as the ring-tailed lemur (*Lemur catta*), Lavasoa dwarf lemur (*Cheirogaleus lavasoensis*), and blue-nosed chameleon (*Calumma* sp. aff. *boettgeri*, *linotum*).

Aside from the locals, the scientists who go on expeditions in the forest, and the film crew who produced the recent documentary, [*Ivohiboro: The Lost Forest*](#), not many people have stood in this untouched place. These were the first scientific tourists to see “The Lost Forest.”



Zebu in the High Plateau. Photo credit: Dr. Patrick O. Brown

“You can read about what 90% deforestation means, but when you actually see and experience the expanse of it... it hits differently. And then it’s almost thrown into even starker relief when you come back to your own community,” said Kyra Tirana Barry, Team Leader for the 2016 USA Women’s Wrestling Olympic Team and a passionate leader dedicated to youth development for underserved communities.



Campsite at Ivohiboro Protected Area. Photo credit: Elizabeth Novogratz

Once the group arrived at the headquarters after the rough terrain ride through the High Plateau, they went through their belongings to take only the essentials and then trekked through the grass, up and down hills to the campsite. They saw the remarkable sunset from a view only few have seen, and ate dinner, which was cooked over an open fire by a cook from CVB.

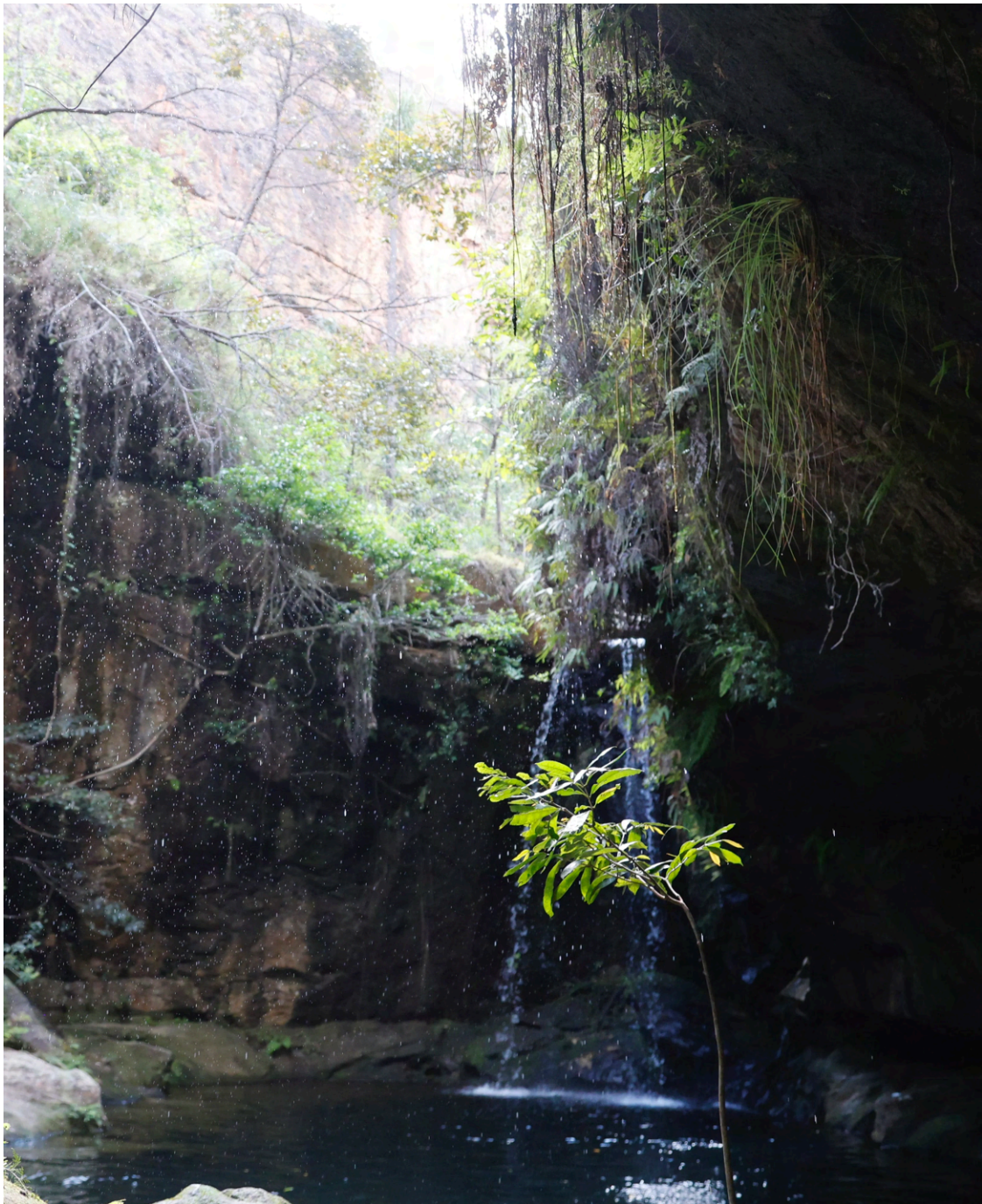
“I think the two things that really stood out for me with CVB and Ivohiboro were how well integrated the science and local community are and how the existing infrastructure makes it easy to start doing research,” said Dr. Will Ludington, Professor and Scientist in Biosphere Sciences & Engineering Embryology at Carnegie Science.



Coffee at Ivohiboro Protected Area campsite. Photo credit: Dr. Patrick O. Brown

Once the camping days came to end, everyone packed up and hiked back to the headquarters. There was a ceremony to express gratitude for everyone who made the camping experience possible: all of the locals who transported the equipment needed for the campsite, the gendarme, the cooks, and the guides. After that, the group hopped back in the car to drive to Isalo. On the way, they stopped at Nirina Annex Hotel in Ihosy for lunch, and then arrived at Isalo Rock Lodge in the late afternoon.

The contrast was striking: the remoteness and mysticalness of Ivohiboro compared to that of a luxurious hotel. One wasn't necessarily better than the other; it was just curious to experience both extremes as an intriguing perspective-changer. After dinner at Isalo, the group went on a day-long hike in Isalo National Park. Some people in the group even stopped for a dip in a natural swimming pool.



Natural swimming pool at Isalo National Park. Photo credit: Dr. Patrick O. Brown

“I experienced magnificent landscapes far beyond what I imagined but at the same time saw extreme poverty and heavy environmental degradation,” said James “Jim” Brumm, international attorney, retired Executive Vice President and General Counsel of Mitsubishi, and environmental advocate. “With such an important world environmental hotspot with its unique fauna and flora, much of which is critically endangered with species facing extinction, I realized how important is the mission of CVB for research necessary to preserve the environment. I also saw the important role that CVB plays for the community through its employment of 130 local staff, its community support activities in health, education and reforestation.”



Dr. KC Huang and Jory Huang participate in the traditional Antemoro papermaking process in Ambalavao. Photo credit: Melanie Formosa

After two nights in Isalo, the group traveled to Ambalavao where they were given a tour of a papermaking factory. Some went back to their hotels for a rest, and others walked around the village of Ambalavao. There was time for some card games, and then it was dinner at Aux Bougainvillées and a good night's sleep.

“Our trip to Madagascar was both scientifically and personally eye-opening: when I think about our efforts to understand how humans and other animals interact with their environment, I can’t imagine a more ideal place to explore both the successes and challenges of ecological engineering,” said Dr. Kerwyn “KC” Huang, Professor and Scientist in Bioengineering and of Microbiology and Immunology at Stanford University.



Dr. Pat Brown photographs ring-tailed lemurs (*Lemur catta*) at Anja Reserve. Photo credit: Melanie Formosa

In the morning, everyone departed for Anja Reserve to see ring-tailed lemurs (*Lemur catta*). There was no shortage; ring-tailed lemurs were walking nearby, in trees, and all around. The group took a hike and went to one of the high rocks to take in the mountainous scene. Afterwards, it was time to get lunch at Betsileo Country Lodge, and then back to CVB for dinner. It felt like so much had happened upon arriving full circle.

“The CVB team had, and shared, deep knowledge of the distinct ecosystems and regions we visited, including amazing familiarity with the wildlife which made the hikes far more

revealing (and probably safer) than they would have been had I been on my own,” said Dr. Patrick “Pat” O. Brown, CEO of Impossible Foods and Professor Emeritus, Department of Biochemistry at Stanford University. “Equally important, their familiarity with the people and culture and geography (including where to stay and eat and what to see in each city and region we visited) enabled us to see and appreciate far more, and with far less hassle, than would have been possible on my own.”



The group takes a guided hike through Ivohiboro Protected Area. Photo credit: Melanie Formosa

It was time to leave Ranomafana and go back to the capital city of Antananarivo. But on the way, the group stopped at Antsirabe where they ate lunch at L'Artisan and after that, shopping. The next day, they had lunch at Café du Musée, a beautiful photography museum with a lavish menu. Then it was shopping at Lisy Art Gallery and dinner at Nosy Manga. In the morning, there was time for sightseeing and then everyone was on their way back home — carrying memories and a new outlook on the world.

Centre ValBio will be organizing additional opportunities for visits to Madagascar. If you are interested in learning more or would like to be considered for a future experience, we welcome you to reach out — we would be glad to speak with you.

[Contact Us About Future Visits](#)

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