

Dragon Trees & The Haggier Mountains of Socotra

A Greentours Itinerary

Day 1

To Socotra and Homhil

After an early morning arrival on the island we'll start familiarising ourselves with common species such as bottle trees, *Dendrosicyos socotrana*, which dot the landscapes around Haribu. This strange apparition is actually an amazing arborescent member of the cucumber family and has massive swollen pale trunks and a tiny crown of leaves. Also here we'll see the spreading crowns of *Euphorbia arbuscula* and as everywhere on the island the swollen trunks of *Adenium obesum* subspecies *sokotranum*.

A late breakfast in the town will give us a picture of the bustling life of Socotra's only significant town. Egyptian Vultures seem to be everywhere, like chickens! They are the local bin-men. Then we'll travel east past tumbling masses of greyish *Cissus subaphylla* along the dry coastal belt and thence into the mountains at Homhil.

Second only to Dixiam for its' spectacular dragon trees this floral sanctuary is well worth the walk if only to jump in the deep swimming hole at the top! By the watercourse are good examples of many of the swollen-trunked trees of the island. Pretty little purple-flowered *Exacum affine* lines cracks along the riverbed and on the slopes are deep red-orange *Kalanchoe farinacea* and lots of lighter orange *Aloe perryi*.

The old man whose land we camp on remembers when he was a child the Dragon Trees here were so close together he could clamber from the top of one to the top of another. Not anymore! But these beautiful trees are still impressive. Scattered amongst them are Frankincense Trees, *Boswellia dioscoridis* with rounded greyish leaves and a few *Boswellia elongata* too. The impressive red and orange marked skipper *Coeliades anchioses* flies amongst pretty little *Acanthaceae* such as *Dicliptera effusa* and *Hyopestes pubescens*. Little palest blue mounds of *Oldenlandia pulvinata* are a delight.

Day 2

Homhil & Irsel Beach

Our camp lies by the same river that feeds the 'infinity pool' and on the far bank is a steep ridge. This has all sorts of wonders. Socotra Sunbirds attend the abundant Aloes as we walk up. On the cliffs is another Frankincense tree, the extraordinary 'rock' that is *Boswellia nana*. It resembles a chunky little rock that a child has decorated with leaves. Its squat little trunk is squeezed into cracks in the low cliffs never deigning to emerge more than a few centimetres. And here is *Boswellia socotrana* too with tiny leaflets. The long-tubed white blooms of *Tamridea capsulifera* cascade from the bluffs as does lilac *Barleria aculeata*. On the top of the ridge is a low scrub of the lovely 'daphne' *Gnidia socotrana* with nice bright

yellow flowers, orange *Ballochia amoena*, yellow *Barleria tetraacantha* and the blue pea *Zygocarpum caeruleum*. Socotra Buzzards fly overhead.

Leaving Homhil we'll stop and take a look at a fine grove of Frankincense Trees, these the most widespread species – *Boswellia elongata*. *Boswellias* are a very important genus on the island, not least for the commercial worth which in former times was considerable. They are still harvested for the 'frankincense' even today. The essential oils have a strong and very pleasant perfume. We'll see how the Frankincense is harvested.

Down on the coast we'll visit a little museum in a village that houses a range of intriguing local artefacts such as water carriers and a boat. The bones of a large *Balaenoptera* whale are in the courtyard. Inland of the coastal strip an escarpment rises higher and higher with huge white sand dunes blown up against the cliff. We'll camp almost at the farthest tip of the island at remote Irasel beach where the views back across the bay to the dunes and cliffs of Arher are amazing. This is a marvellous beach for shells. Tiger Cowries and False Arabian Cowries are common and there's some vast conches. Small flocks of Greater Sandplovers roam low dunes where we'll meet both *Limonium paulayanum* and *Limonium sokotranum*. In rock pools are cute little Banded Moray Eels and offshore Bottlenose Dolphins.

Day 3

Hoq Cave & Dhamry Marine Reserve

The gaping entrance to Hoq Cave lays high on the cliffs above the north coast via a well-worn path through extensive *Jatropha unicosta* scrub where Socotra Sunbird and Socotra Warbler are common. Huge specimens of *Sterculia africana* can be seen with stunning peeling purple and cream bark. The woody vegetation here is diverse with *Commiphora parvifolia*, *Commiphora ornifolia*, *Acacia pennivenia*, *Dirichletia obovata*, pendulous *Muhaea angolensis*, and a large *Lannaea transulta* that stands overlooking the blue and turquoise sea below.

The cave entrance is huge and cascades of *Adiantum balfouri* hang there with blue-flowered *Exacums*. Once inside the cave we are transported into a different world. Stalactites and stalagmites vie for our attention, mostly keeping a discreet distance from each other but occasionally un-covid-like proximity is noted, two fine examples actually almost touch. There are sheets and drapes on the walls, minarets and organs on the floor. We can wander deep into the cave (with a guide of course!) - at the farthest point there are pools which reflect the speleological architecture to wonderful affect.

Cliffs by the cave entrance hold *Aerva microphylla*, the strange umbellifer *Rughidia milleri*, and a highlight – the twisted *Boswellia popoviana*. The vine *Dioscorea lanata* trails through various bushes and trees including the pea *Paracalyx balfourii*, the shrub *Ballochia atrovirgata*, and the fig *Ficus vasta* with improbably large bright green leaves.

We'll head along the coast to Dhamry's marine reserve for lunch and our next campsite. After some relaxation there will be a chance to don our masks and snorkels and explore the rich underwater world of Socotra. The density and diversity of the fish life is remarkable. Even within a couple of metres of the shore we'll be amongst shoals of stunning yellow and blue Tangs. Around coral heads are swarms of Sweepers. We'll see large groups of Sohail Surgeonfish and Lined Surgeonfish. Butterflyfishes are always a delight and here are many species – Madagascar Butterflyfish, Red-tailed Butterflyfish, the widespread Raccoon Butterflyfish, Rip Butterflyfish, Lined Butterflyfish, and the little African Butterflyfish. Longbarbel Goatfish fossick on the sandy bottoms with occasional Picasso Triggerfish. Gorgeous Crowned Tobies hover about coral heads and Starry Pufferfish float past. In places the water is thick with mixed shoals of Indian Triggerfish, Convict Surgeonfish and Circled Spine Surgeonfish. There are some impressively large and improbably brightly-coloured parrotfishes nibbling away at the reef. Bicolor Parrotfish and Ember Parrotfish chief among them and some impressive Bullethead Parrotfish too. There seem endless variety of wrasse species – Zigzag Wrasse, Goldbar Wrasse, Moon Wrasse, and the brilliant Queen Coris. Pairs of Moorish Idols sail serenely around and we will see Yellowtail Triggerfish, Orangespine Unicornfish, Cube Boxfish and Yellowfin Emperor. Green Turtles come into the little bay often enough and offshore are pods of dolphins.

Day 4

Dhamry Marine Reserve & across the island to Omeq Beach

We'll have the morning available to snorkel and swim in the marine reserve. Every visit into these waters reveals new wonders – the diversity is exceptional. Perhaps this morning we'll see our first impressively large Honeycomb Morays or maybe a large shoal of Silver Batfish. Clown Triggerfish are well-named. We can also see Solander's Toby, Scribbled Filefish, Blackspotted Sweetlips, Silver Sweetlips, Trapeze Angelfish and perhaps improbably chunky Smooth Groupers.

Local fisherman may well stop off to sell us lunch, perhaps a King Fish or some Scalloped Spiny Lobsters...

In the afternoon we'll head across vast Croton plains to a wadi that descends to the southern coast of the island passing rockier terrain dominated by impressive specimens of *Adenium obesum*. The pools in the wadi will give us the chance for a cool dip before we emerge into a landscape of arid flatlands interrupted by the occasional village and date palms. Soon we'll find ourselves in an amazing dune scape. Pure white sand stretching to the coast. Then we'll head on to our campsite on the beach at Omeq, a long sweeping stretch of sand.

Days 5 & 6

Dixiam & Rokeb di Firmihin

Inland of Omeq is Dagub Cave. The cave entrance has stalactites hanging down like a curtain, these dripping with water. These seepages are home to some of Socotra's rarest plants such *Exacum socotranum* and *Erythroxyton socotranum*. Inside the cave Lesser Mouse-tailed Bats hang from the roof.

High above the coastal plain the extensive Dixiam Plateau is one the most diverse and interesting areas on the island and foremost are the amazing Dragon Trees which in places dominate the landscape with their broad-crowned silhouettes. At Rokeb di Firmihin they are at their best and we'll actually spend one night camping here to witness the wonderful sunrise. We'll also have the chance to walk among this amazing forest, an unforgettable experience – our camp fantastically situated right in amongst the Dragon Trees themselves. Tucked among the limestone pavement are gems like *Edithcolea grandis* (flowering though is not guaranteed!), *Kalanchoe farinacea* and *Caralluma socotrana*. There are some huge *Adenium obesum*. Scattered amongst the Dragon Trees are Frankincense Trees; *Boswellia dioscorides* and *Boswellia ameero*. There are small trees such as *Trichocalyx orbicularis* and *Carphalea obovata*. Rocky knolls hold an interesting assemblage of species including *Vernonia cockburniana*, a tree in the daisy family, and the weird woody *Reseda viridis*!

After breakfast on Day 6 our 4wds will take us down into the Dirhor Canyon. This has water in it much of the year and there are plenty of pools for us to take a dip in. Bruce's Green Pigeons enjoy the spot too and we'll see parties of Socotra White-eyes and the Socotra Golden-winged Grosbeak, a distinctive and chunky bird. There's also the endemic Socotra Starling. The lovely lilac cushion plant *Campylanthus spinosus* blooms on the wadi walls aside small trees of *Cryptolepis socotrana*. Amongst shrubs of pink *Commicarpus simonyi* we'll spot *Aloe squarrosa*, deep blue *Trichodesma microcalyx*, yellow *Hibiscus diffiran*, and the strange mignonette relative *Ochradenus socotranus*.

Late morning on Day 5 we'll descend from the highlands to the north coast and Socotra's second largest settlement, Qalansiyah. Second largest it may be but it is just a big-ish village. Out of sight from the village behind a big hill is one of Socotra's most picturesque spots, and that in an island full of them. Here is a stunning landscape of white sands, lagoon and cliffs. Our camp is placed at the back of the kilometre-wide lagoon. Great expanses of white sand spread around and behind it, the eastern edge a high cliff/mountain. After a late lunch we'll spend the afternoon pottering about the area, swimming in the sea, visiting the village, or even exploring ridges inland where we can find *Aloe jawiyon*. The lagoon hosts plenty of Western Reef Egrets as well as migrant waders. Offshore are Great Crested and Caspian Terns, Brown Boobies and Socotra Cormorants. The lagoon itself has lots of cuttlefish and Sting-Rays!

Day 7

Shoab and Wadi Ayaff

A chaotic crowd of fishermen and children will welcome us to Qalansiyah's beach even though it is early in the morning! But soon we'll be out on the calm waters of the bay enjoying a happy hour or so among large pods of Spinner Dolphins. There are many hundreds of them. They course through the water right by the boat and sometimes launch themselves into their trademark aerial spins. All played out we'll head west along a truly spectacular stretch of coast. The mountains plunge into the azure seas in a series of impressive cliffs. Red-tailed Tropicbirds will be inspecting nesting ledges high above us and nearer to the water sit Socotra Cormorants and Brown Boobies. Abundant Lesser Crested Terns and Sooty Gulls populate tiny islets, one of which has a fine *Boswellia bullata* perched atop. Fishermen are hauling all sorts of large fish out of the water and we've another chance to stock our lobster larder. Whale Sharks are spotted from time to time in these waters.

Shoab is a lovely beach backed by a little mangrove and behind that mountains and more mountains. Shoab lies right at the western tip of Socotra. Low dunes have an interesting flora with lots of *Atriplex griffithii* and the local endemic *Heliotropium shoabense* and this is a lovely spot for a swim. Then we'll head back for lunch at the lagoon.

Late in the afternoon we'll visit Wadi Ayaff, a site that contains many of the island's unique plants with many *Caralluma socotrana* and the unusual succulent *Sarcostemma viminale*. The wooded valley hosts many superb old *Sterculia africana* trees, Frankincense, and gnarled old Tamarinds. We'll encounter the attractive mauve-flowered shrub *Ruellia insignis* and tubular red flowered *Ballochia amoena*. Along the riverbed are some lovely little trees of *Acridotheres socotranus* covered in yellow blooms, and on the rocky wadi sides there are some fine bottle-figs *Dorsteinia gigas* with bizarre inside-out fig flowers.

Day 8

Wadi Ayaff

The deeper we enter Wadi Ayaff's canyon-like valley which drains the Central Haggier Mountains, the greener it will get. The first endemic frankincense trees will greet us with *Boswellia elongata*, and the Myrrhs with *Commiphora ornifolia* and *parvifolia*. Larger and sometimes impressive trees include *Sterculia africana* with an impressive flaky bark, *Lannea transulta*, *Cordia obtusa* and *Ziziphus spina-christii*. A shady rock wall is home to the strange succulent and very rare Bottle fig *Dorstenia gigas*. On Rocky ground the first bizarre succulent Socotran Desert Roses *Adenium obesum* subspecies *socotranum* will greet us and may offer their first pink flowers. In the open forests we can observe endemic birds such as the yellow and green Bruce's Pigeon, Socotra Golden winged Grosbeak and Socotra Bunting. At our campsite well shaded by large Indian Tamarind trees *Tamarindus indicus* exist a good opportunity to spot the endemic Socotran Chameleon *Chamaeleo*

monachus with torchlight in the dark, finding the animal again maybe on the same spot the next morning in daylight.

After the first delicious dinner prepared by our local staff, a long stroll will lead us higher in the valley passing some small farms with lush gardens and passing fine stands of *Boswellia elongata* with many shrubs such as red flowered *Anisotes diversifolius* and *Ballochia rotundifolia*, the often dominant small-leaved *Croton socotranus* and large leaved *Jatropha unicostata*. Often present is the succulent, grey leaved vine *Cissus hamaderoensis*. Another impressive succulent shrub is the only tree-like Cucumber in the world, the famous Socotran Cucumber Tree *Dendrosycios socotrana*. On the ridgetops the first Socotran Dragon trees *Dracaena cinnabari* will greet us from high above and we can see the highest granite pinnacles of the Central Haggier for the first time.

There is a possibility of a refreshing swim in a freshwater pool. Time will decide if we can continue our stroll further into the valley or if its already time to respect the quickly falling dusk to return to camp.

Day 9

Hadibu town to Adoho Dema'alah

The next morning, we will leave Wadi Ayheft and drive a little along the coast to the small capital of Hadibu. The Haggier Mountains impressively tower above the town. Our cars will climb a bumpy dirt road zigzagging steeply uphill. Maybe we will meet for the first time our small camel caravan with their guides, maybe they will have already proceeded uphill with our luggage, tents and food.

Climbing steadily uphill the plant-life becomes lush and greener. Even if the cars are still able to climb further, the vegetation becomes so interesting we will just have to get out and walk. The evergreen Socotran Boxtree *Buxanthus pedicelatus* is gaining dominance, and more and more tree and shrub species endemic to the middle altitude of Haggier may be present such as the blue-flowered *Barleria popovii*, *Rhus thyriflora*, *Cryptolepis arbuscula*, *Euclea divinorum*, *Euphorbia socotrana*, *Flueggea virosa*, *Crotalaria socotrana*, *Indigofera marmorata*, *Tephrosia socotrana*, *Hypericum balfourii*, *Spiniluma discolor*, *Orthosiphon ferrugineus*, large yellow flowered *Hibiscus dioscorides* and *Hibiscus scottii*, *Turrea socotrana* and *Cocculus balfourii*. *Pyrostria socotrana* forms impressive and unique stands. *Dirachma socotrana*, with its large white flowers, is part of its own small family *Dirachmaceae* having only one other species in Somalia. Here too the perennials unfold their show with attractively flowered endemics such as *Begonia socotrana*, *Kalanchoe socotrana*, *Crassula schimperi*, *Chamaecrista absus*, *Zornia glochidiata*, *Exacum caeruleum*, *Graderia fruticosa* and *Thamnosoma socotrana*.

Finally, we reach the saddle of Adoho Dema'alah nearly a thousand meters above Hadibu town and the sea, time to enjoy the light spectacle of our first evening in the mystic highland of Socotra.

Day 10

Exploring the Haggier Highland based at Di-Azqualoh

During the day our camp will be moved towards Di-Azqualoh. Though only three or four kilometers from Adoho Dema'alah there is a confusing array of peaks, pinnacles, valleys and gullies to cross, often covered with dense greenery. So, progress is always up and down and slow but we have time to enjoy the numerous meanderings along our path. Here we are on the rooftop of Socotra, an island of lush greenery in the mostly desert-like island. It is much greener because of uprising warm air from the ocean, often condensing into clouds, mist and even some rain, mainly during the main monsoon time. But it can happen that we will be suddenly surrounded by dense mist, miraculously fading away in other moments. It isn't only virgin forest here because small pastures use the richer fodder at this altitude, so grass rich, cleared patches are found amidst with shrubland, small forests and rocks.

The highest parts of Haggier Highland above 1200m show remnants of true evergreen Afromontane Forest, far away from its evolutionary centres in Ethiopia, Northern Kenya and Western Somalia. Endemics as *Rhus thyrsiflora*, *Chapmannia tinireana*, *Sideroxylon fimbriatum* *Leucas haggierensis*, *Clerodendron galeatum* and Afromontane species as *Myrsine africana*, *Olea capensis* ssp. *macrocarpa*, *Pittosporum viridiflorum* form impressive stands and thickets, mostly topped by single Dragon trees *Dracaena cinnabari*. Unlike the drier areas below the woodland is quite rich in various Afromontane ferns, many of them discovered only in the past few years, accompanied by the two small peppers *Peperomia blanda* and *tetraphylla* and the hyacinthine *Drimia porphrostachys*. Evening light may give us fantastic views into the surrounding mountains and the sea far below us.

Day 11

Exploring the Haggier Highland based at Di-Azqualoh

The rising sun will provide us again marvelous views in all directions and this day allows us to continue our exploration around the high peaks and pinnacles with all the time we need because we will return to the same campsite before dusk.

The impressive granite rock walls with their cracks provide other interesting habitats, home to a number of unusual endemic plants such as the three endemic genera of the umbel family *Nirarathamnos asarifolius*, *Oreofraga morrisiana* and *Rughidia cordata*. The asteraceous, often white woolly, white or pink flowered and often aromatic dwarf shrubs of *Helichrysum* have evolved into no less than eight different endemics, a very characteristic element of this rock walls. Yellow flowered, aromatic *Pulicaria* and purple *Pluchea* add to this distinct world of dwarf shrubby endemics of the daisy family. Shrubs are extremely rare in the mustard family, but the endemic *Hemicrambe fruticosa* is just such a creation on the Socotran rock walls. *Kalanchoe rotundifolia* impresses with its bright red flowers, the yellow flowering shrub *Hypericum fieriense* marks disturbed sites. The cushions of *Teucrium socotranum* hang down from rock walls and the endemic shrub *Coleocarpum haggierensis* decorates cliffs with pink flowers.

But not only plants are attracting our attention... as with the plants there's a number of reptiles, particularly geckoes, that have their distributions limited to the higher ground in the Haggier Mountains. *Hemidactylus grantii* is known from only a few square kilometres at the highest altitudes here, and amongst various species of *Pristurus* lizards found amongst these granite pinnacles, *Pristurus insignoides* is found only here. At night we will hear and hopefully see the endemic Socotra Scops Owl around the campsite and instead of the usual Somali Starlings we might well find the endemic Socotra Starling.

Day 12

Downhill to the Dragon Tree Forest of Firmihin

Today we are leaving the Haggier highlands moving slowly south down towards the warmer and drier Diksaim plateau. The lush green we have enjoyed the last days will slowly disappear as we are losing height. Time to watch for rare beauties such as *Rhus tenuinervis*, *Commiphora planifrons* or the bright yellow flowering *Hibiscus diriffan*. With luck we will find emerging from sunny rockeries famous succulents as *Echidnopsis bentii*, the bright red star-shaped blooms of *Caralluma socotrana* and the rarely flowering *Edithcolea grandis* with large, deep maroon flowers. Finally, we will reach the small village on the plateau of Diksaim, where the mayor owns a small nursery with young Dragon Trees, which hopefully we can visit.

Soon after the village we reach our campsite at the edge of the Diksaim Dragon trees, forming the largest Dragon Tree forest in the world. Sunrise the next morning will likely create a fantastic photographs of this unique biome. Meanwhile we can search for the endemic geckos *Haemodracon riebeckii* and *Haemodracon trachyrhinus*, which as their names suggest, have an ecology intimately linked to the Dragon Tree forests.

Day 13

Quataryah Limestone ridge camping on Quabahen beach

Today we change our small camel caravan for some cars and will climb down on a narrow winding road into the 400m deep Dirhor Canyon. There's a chance to take a refreshing bath in a freshwater pool deep in the canyon and discover the large bulbs of the orchid *Eulophia petersii* on a rocky balcony. We will drive over a pass to the North coast and then southwest into the Zahr Bassin. This is a very dry and hot lowland surrounded by low mountains containing some mainly African and Arabian plants not occurring otherwise in Socotra such as *Commiphora kua*, *Cadaba insularis*, *Hibiscus scindicus*, *Citrullus colocynthis* and *Grewia erythraea*.

Finally, we reach the far southwest of the island where the 700 metre high limestone ridge of Quataryah rises steeply out of the ocean. A road takes us steeply up to the summit plateau which receives with sea mist some moisture, allowing some trees and shrubs to grow in an otherwise very arid landscape. It's a kind of adventure to seek for very special plants in an area usually not visited by tourists and enjoying the rough scenery. We'll seek the shrubby *Boswellia hesperia*, recently discovered on this ridge, accompanied by the more frequent *Boswellia*

popoviana and *Commiphora planifrons*. Also, a new *Maytenus* species, not yet named, was recently found on this ridge, so too the bright yellow-flowered *Hibiscus socotranus*. The candelabra like succulent *Euphorbia marie-cladieae*, discovered here in 2013, seems to have no close relatives as is the case with the small endemic mustard *Nesocrambe socotrana*. In the evening we will camp at Quabahen beach, enjoying a fine swim in turquoise water after a day on the dry ridge.

Day 14

Quataryah Ridge to Wadi Ayheft

This day will definitely begin with a swim in the clear ocean at our camp. According to impressions we have got the day before and the wishes of the group, we will decide to visit the more western, lower part of Quataryah Limestone ridge or the move to some other interesting hills somewhere in the west of Socotra.

Towards the evening we will return to our first campsite in the green Wadi Ayheft and enjoying our last night under the mighty Tamarind trees, the huge towers and pinnacles of Haggier Mountains we have passed through will be in our view.

Day 15

Back to the airport

The closeness of Wadi Ayheft to the airport allows us a moderate relaxed start back to the airport.

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