

# Socotra

## The Haggier Mountains

### A Greentours Itinerary

#### Day 1 to Socotra and Wadi Ayaff

After a morning arrival on the island, we will drive into the Mountains to the nearby Wadi Ayaff. The deeper we enter this canyon-like valley draining 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 from 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 2 Hadibu town to Adoho Dema'alah

The next morning, we will leave Wadi Ayaff 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 Habibu town and the sea, time to enjoy the light spectacle of our first evening in the mystic highland of Socotra.

### Day 3

#### 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 thyriflora*, *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 4

### 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 5

### 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 6

### 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 7

### 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 8

### 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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