

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 *socotranum*.

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 & Dihamry 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 penninervis*, *Dirichletia obovata*, pendulous *Muhalea angolensis*, and a large *Lannaea transulta* that stands overlooking the blue and turquoise sea below.

The cave entrance is huge and cascades of *Adiantum balfourii* hang there with blue-flowered *Exacum*s. 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 Dihamry'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

Dihamry 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 *Erythroxylon 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 Ayaft, 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

Departure

An early morning departure from this most unique of desert islands.

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