

Socotra Land & Sea

Dragon Trees & Frankincense & Socotra's Marine Paradise

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 & Irasel 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 tetracantha* 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 pennivenia*, *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 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 *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 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 *Ballochhia 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.

Days 8, 9 & 10

Dihamry Marine Reserve

After a relaxing morning at Wadi Ayaff we'll stop for lunch in the island's tiny capital (great fish restaurant, full of local colour!) before heading along the coast an hour to Dihamry. I am sure we'll be keen to don our masks and snorkels and explore the rich underwater world of Socotra without further delay!

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. There are large groups of Sohail Surgeonfish and Lined Surgeonfish, sometimes the two species together – hybrids are apparently known from Socotran waters. Butterflyfishes are always a delight and here are many species – Arabian Butterflyfish, Threadfin Butterflyfish, Red-tailed Butterflyfish, the widespread Raccoon Butterflyfish, Lined Butterflyfish, and the regional endemic Horseshoe Butterflyfish. A large shoal of Silver Moonyfish are in the same spot every year – they don't like to be separated. You cannot see through them so tight together do they

swim, which makes it all the more wonderful when a huge Bluefin Trevally noses through them. Longbarbel Goatfish fossick on the sandy bottoms with occasional Picasso Triggerfish and its cousin the Arabian Picassofish. Gorgeous Crowned Tobies hover above coral heads and Guineafowl Pufferfish float past. In places the water is thick with mixed shoals of black and white Indian Triggerfish, Convict Surgeonfish and Circle-Spine Surgeonfish. This is a great place to see Large Blue Octopus. Blue they sometimes are, but they'll show you their full colour-and-shape shifting abilities if you hang around. General camo mode is quite popular, and they'll offer star-shine white, boulder-green, a rather fetching opalescent blue, and probably a deeply offended brick-red. We hope to see White-spotted Octopus and there are groups of Big-fin Squid watching our every move, moving away as we approach and then approaching us if we ignore them! There are some impressively large and improbably brightly-coloured parrotfishes nibbling away at the reef. Bicolor Parrotfish, Heavybeak Parrotfish, Purple-Brown Parrotfish, Bullethead Parrotfish and Rusty Parrotfish among them. Pairs of Moorish Idols sail serenely around and we also saw Yellowtail Triggerfish and Yellowfin Emperor. Peacock Groupers and Blacktip Groupers sit on rocky perches. Scrawled Filefish hover in the water looking at us. Every snorkel will likely feature two or three black-spotted Honeycomb Morays, some of them impressively large, the largest maybe close to a metre and half long and solid too. We can also see Laced Moray and perhaps the fabulous almost white Geometric Moray. There are even Giant Morays here too.

On every snorkel we'll see turtles, usually several. Green Turtles come into the little bay often though Hawksbills are just as common. There are even Olive Ridley Turtles and occasional Loggerheads. The fish show continues - Eyestripe Surgeonfish, Bird Wrasse and often numbers of blue-edged Bluefin Trevally. Brilliant blue and yellow Cerulean Damsels held court on coral heads and Yellowfin Goatfish hang in the water. We'll find Solander's Toby, the gorgeous orange Lyretail Anthias, and shoals of the quite literally see-through Schooling Cardinalfish often with swarms of Sweepers. Broadbarred Firefish came out as the afternoon wanes, and occasional Devil Firefish too – both are a spectacular sight.

Local fisherman may well stop off to sell us dinner, perhaps a King Fish or some Scalloped Spiny Lobsters... indeed the lunches and dinners served in a rather neat little coral shelter usually features some variation on truly delicious fish or lobster with persian-style rice and beans with vegetables in a tasty sauce.

Every visit into these waters reveals new wonders – the diversity is exceptional. Clown Triggerfish are well-named. We can also see Blackspotted Sweetlips, Silver Sweetlips, Trapeze Angelfish and perhaps improbably chunky Smooth Groupers. There's Pale-lipped Surgeonfish, Red Sea Sailfin Tang, Coral Hind, Gudgeon Silverside and Valentin's Toby and Cube Boxfish. Tasselled Flatheads (a kind of guitarfish) lay on the sandy bottom and occasional Blacktip Reef Sharks visit.

A red rock outcrop by our camp offers a great overlook of the reserve and is a good spot to watch for pods of dolphins, every day a large group of Spinner Dolphins comes by, often close inshore.

The fabulous deepest blue-purple Red-toothed Triggerfish is truly the Dracula of the seas! We'll see swarms of blue and yellow Bengal Snappers, and large mixed shoals of Striated Fusiliers, Lunar Fusiliers and Multi-lined Fusiliers. Unicorn Fish are diverse – Sleek, Bluespine, Humpback, Horseface and Orangespine Unicornfish all present. Yellowbar and Emperor Angelfish are seriously impressive fish and they are joined by Red Sea Damsels and Lemon Angelfish. The local form of this species appears to be what is known in the aquarium trade as Armitage's Angelfish. There seems endless variety of wrasse species –Barred Thicklip Wrasse, Blackeye Thicklip Wrasse, Brokenline Wrasse, Zigzag Wrasse, Sixbar Wrasse, Goldbar Wrasse, Moon Wrasse, and the distinctive juvenile forms of Queen Coris.

Day 11

To Qalansiyah Lagoon

After a last snorkel in Dihamry's little paradise we'll head west through the capital Hadibu and thence to 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 lunch we'll spend the afternoon pottering about the area, swimming in the sea, visiting the village, or exploring the lagoon and coast. 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! It's a great place to wander the shore by torch light and see the nocturnal goings on under the lagoon's calm waters.

Day 12

Boat Trip to Shoab, Camping Shoab Beach

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 two 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. Bottle-nose Dolphins cruise close to the shore and we'll spend time out in the little bay to see what kind of encounters we can enjoy with the various dolphin, shark and ray species that congregate here.

Either end of the sandy bay there are lots of rocky islets and interestingly the fish here are almost universally different from Dihamry. There are lots of Sergeant Majors and Dusky Sergeant Majors and there are many baby ones so tiny yet so perfect. In fact there are huge numbers of baby fish generally. Baby Emperor Angelfish are a mass of white swirls and patterns on a blue background. There are lots of Masked Pufferfish and we'll find Golden-striped Cardinalfish and swarms of blue and yellow Blue-striped Snappers. Large shoals of mixed Fusiliers are made up of Multi-lined, Striated and Gold-banded Fusiliers. There's also Black-tailed Snapper, blennies, sweepers, Small-spotted Dart, Black-tail Emperor. Cryptic Nebulous Wrasse are harder to spot than the striking purple, pink and green Surge Wrasse! There are also some lovely little demoiselles – notably the bright yellow Sulphur Damsel, as well as Arabian Spinecheek and the very cute Cube Boxfish.

A little offshore of the sandy beach in a couple of metres of water is a large area of flat reef. Here we might encounter squadrons of Rainbow Runners. Like a Barracuda in general shape but altogether more sporty and elegant these two foot long missiles are fabulous to watch underwater. Amongst the large silvery fish out here are Great Barracuda, Obtuse (or Yellowtail) Barracuda and Yellowfin Tuna.

Day 13

The Quataryah Peninsula, Camping Shoab Beach

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. This is a lovely spot for a swim. During the day we'll take our boats to the very western tip of the island, where the Quataryah Peninsula drops seven hundred metres to the ocean and explore little coves and rocky coastlines. We'll be looking again for dolphins, rays, turtles and Whale Sharks from the boats and will also visit some little sheltered coves for more snorkelling. This area is supposed to be good for the Ocellated Eagle Ray, a fantastic creatures with two metre wide 'wings', and should also offer a richly diverse selection of fish and other marine life.

Day 14

Sabuniya and to Qadub for snorkelling

Fifteen kilometres northwest of the Shoab Beach lies the almost unexplored sea stacks of Sabuniya. These few islets were surveyed briefly for seabirds twenty years ago when breeding Red-billed Tropicbirds, Masked Boobies and Brown Noddies were noted. However Sabuniya's underwater riches are known to be exceptional. Indeed it is Sabuniya that adds the diversity of species that makes the coral reefs off of Socotra the most diverse in the Central and Western Indian Ocean. And this includes the Seychelles and the Maldives. Quite some accolade. And this is based on just the one survey visit! So we look forward very much to seeing what it is that makes Sabuniya special!

Our boat trip will return to Qalansiyah where we'll then travel back to the airport and a little beyond to the little settlement of Qadub which is where the Haggier

Mountains descend into the sea. This afternoon will see our last snorkelling of the trip where the mountain drops steeply into the sea, before our final night's camping right on the beach.

Day 15

Departure

A mid-morning departure from this most unique of desert islands.

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