

Socotra

A Marine Paradise

A Greentours Itinerary

Day 1 to Socotra & Dihamry Marine Reserve

After a morning arrival on the island 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.

Days 1(pm) - 3 Dihamry Marine Reserve

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 Guinea fowl 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 4

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 5

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 6

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 7

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 Hagghier 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 8

Departure

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

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