

Aldabra / Cosmoledo Expedition 2017

Aldabra has inspired ancient explorers, some of the world's most famous scientists and now the modern travellers of today.

The name itself is a mystery, believed to be a word of Arabic origin but with any number of theories about its actual meaning, which could be 'green' or 'door-knocker' or possibly the navigational star Aldebaran.

Indeed, it seems there has always been a mythical aura attached to the name of the most far-flung and isolated of all the islands of the Seychelles archipelago.

Aldabra, the world's largest raised coral atoll, is the finest surviving tropical atoll ecosystem on earth. The giant tortoises on the island form by far the world's largest population and the marine life is prolific. The last surviving flightless bird of the Indian Ocean, the Aldabra Rail, is found only here as are many other unique land birds and it is a vital breeding ground for turtles and seabirds.

The atoll was known for centuries by Arab navigators and was first charted by the Portuguese in 1511. The French were the first recorded visitors when Captain Lazare Picault, sent to chart Seychelles in 1742, came upon Aldabra.

In more recent times, Aldabra has been the centrepiece of numerous conservation initiatives on account of its unspoilt environment. The unique species that have evolved over time in complete isolation on the atoll have prompted some to call Aldabra the "Galapagos of the Indian Ocean".

In fact, Charles Darwin himself, whose work in the Galapagos is largely responsible for that archipelago's esteemed status as naturalist's paradise, recognised Aldabra's unique natural properties, as well as being the only other place in the world aside from the Galapagos where giant tortoises could be found naturally, and recommended to British authorities that they ensure the atoll would be protected from exploitation or development.

Soon after Seychelles' independence, the government granted Aldabra protected status as a nature reserve, and in 1982 Aldabra became a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Today, only a small team of rangers and scientists inhabit the island, with the limited funding but wholehearted support of the Seychelles Islands Foundation, which manages the atoll for conservation and research purposes.

Despite its status as one of the world's most strictly protected natural wonders, travel to Aldabra is still – and will likely always be - incredibly difficult due to its extreme isolation.

With the MV Maya's Dugong, a 43-metre expeditionary vessel, a handful of visitors will be able to experience the atoll of Aldabra and its fascinating sights and treasures as part of an in-depth eco-tourism and diving expedition.

This is your opportunity to be one of them

14-nights trip aboard MV Maya's Dugong from Feb 25 to March 11, 2017:

- Day 1. Embarkation aboard the Maya's Dugong at Mahé
- Day 2. Amirantes / Visit to Desroches Island
- Day 3. Alphonse Group/ Visit to Alphonse
- Day 4. At sea – on the way to the Aldabra group
- Day 5. Aldabra Group/Visit to Cosmoledo
- Day 6-7-8. Aldabra Group/Visit to Aldabra.
- Day 9. Aldabra Group/Visit to Assumption
- Day 10. Aldabra Group/Visit to Astove.
- Day 11. Aldabra Group/ Visit to Cosmoledo - North Island
- Day 12. At sea – Crossing towards Alphonse Group/Bijoutier
- Day 13. Alphonse Group/ Diving & Snorkelling at Bijoutier
- Day 14. Amirantes/ Diving & Snorkelling at St Francois
- Day 15. Disembarkation at Mahe, at approx. 15:00PM

Assumption

Assumption was laid waste by guano mining around the turn of the 20 century. This was the fate Aldabra escaped, wiping out seabird colonies including Abbott's Booby, now restricted to Christmas Island.

However, the vegetation is now slowly recovering and there are plans for the rehabilitation of the island. One day it could become a mini-Aldabra. There is a small human population, connected by air to Mahé, though flights are few and far between. There is a long, beautiful arc of coral sand on one side of the island, beyond which the marine life is very rich and diving is excellent. Shoals of snappers, butterfly fish and angelfish flit between the corals in one of the most colourful and diverse reefs of Seychelles.

Aldabra

Often called the jewel in the crown of Seychelles, Aldabra is the world's latest raised coral atoll and a UNESCO World Heritage Site. With an area of approximately 150sq km it comprises about one-third of the landmass of Seychelles, but has no human population other than the Warden and staff of the Research Station on the island of Picard. It is a tropical island wilderness, seen by only a few privileged visitors each year. It has the world's largest population of Giant Tortoise, with around 100,000 of these prehistoric survivors.

Birds include the Aldabra Rail, the last surviving flightless bird of the Indian Ocean and frigate birds. There are many plants and birds not found elsewhere and one of the world's most important breeding populations of the endangered Green Turtle. Drift diving is exceptional in the channels that fill and empty the lagoon with the tides. Shoals of fish stand sentry at these entrances to the lagoon, where sharks and other predators sweep by as they commute between the open ocean and the lagoon. In recent years, dugongs have been seen, a sign that this rare mammal may one day return to breed in Seychelles.

We visit the Aldabra Research station, the mangroves forests, the booby colony at Johnny Channel and the world's second largest colony of frigatebirds (10,000 pairs of two species, Great Frigatebird and Lesser Frigatebird). Many of the endemic land birds can be seen ashore, including Aldabra Drongo, Aldabra Fody and Madagascar Sacred Ibis and Aldabra Rail, together with the world's largest population of giant tortoises.

We will dive and snorkel the main channel, the West Channel and Johnny Channel, experiencing the exhilaration of being swept along by the shoals, observing both pelagic and reef fish in the shallow waters of the lagoon, and it is possible to snorkel at the mangroves forest and the channel in high tide.

Cosmoledo

A visit to Cosmoledo is comparable to one to Aldabra but in some ways, Cosmoledo even surpasses this famous atoll in its extreme atmosphere of remoteness.

The island is uninhabited and very rarely visited by the outside world. There are some bird species on Cosmoledo not found on Aldabra, including enormous seabird colonies with Seychelles largest populations of Red-footed Booby, Masked Booby and Sooty Tern. A race of Madagascar White-eye (named *menaiensis*) is unique to the island. It is the last breeding site for Brown Booby, extinct everywhere else in the islands. The diving is also excellent and the marine life is very rich. The corals have survived here more intact than elsewhere in the western Indian Ocean. Many turtles can be seen, including very young ones, in the shallow waters of the lagoon, close to the main island of Menai. Cosmoledo has also gained a reputation as one of the world's best flyfishing sites, yet it has remained off limits to all but a few determined enthusiasts because of the difficulties of reaching this lonely outpost.

We visit the deserted settlement and dive the West Island of Cosmoledo (*Menai*) where turtles abound.

Astove

Astove is surrounded by deep waters where many a ship has come to grief on its treacherous reefs. The fringing reef averages about 250 meters from the shoreline and beyond this, the floor plummets steeply. This wall of corals is probably the best dive site in the Indian Ocean and indeed has been rated by diving experts as one of the finest dive sites in the world. Hundreds of species of fish, Green

Turtles and even the anchors of wrecked ships are to be seen. Snorkeling is also excellent on the edge of the drop-off.

Ashore there are graves of shipwrecked sailors, bleached turtle bones and abandoned buildings including the residence of a former manager. Laid out around a courtyard in the style of a Moorish palace, it must once have been an impressive if somewhat incongruous sight on a remote Indian Ocean island. A short walk across the island leads to the shallow lagoon where Caspian Terns, rarely encountered in an ocean setting, dive for fish.

We visit the old manager's house including the incongruous Veevers-Carter house and old chapel, then cross the island to the lagoon. We dive the West walls.

***Note: All above itinerary may change due to weather conditions and the captain's discretion**

ABOUT THE EXPEDITION CRUISE

There's cruising, and then there's expedition cruising. For travellers who consider themselves adventurers and not just tourists, who seek fulfilment from a holiday and not just leisure, and who appreciate the excitement and unpredictable nature of travelling to isolated locales in a unique way, there may be no better way to make use of a holiday than on an expedition cruise.

Our portfolio of expedition cruises has been specifically designed for this small niche of travel pioneers. The travel programmes are hosted aboard the oceanographic vessel MV Maya's Dugong, an ideal hybrid vessel sturdy enough to autonomously reach the far corners of the globe, while backed by more than a decade of experience in the tourism and hospitality industry.

Travelling on an Expedition

One of the most exciting aspects of an expedition cruise is the fact that natural events and sightings can help shape our journey. For this reason, the expedition plan featured in this document should only be used as a general guide instead of being treated as an exact scheduled itinerary.

It is expected that no two expeditions will be exactly alike, because weather, tides and chance nature encounters will influence the day-to-day activities that are possible throughout a given week. Therefore, we kindly ask for the patience and understanding of all of our guests if there are certain adjustments to the expedition plan to cater for these events.

Rest assured our crew will do their utmost to ensure the proposed activities for each day are in the spirit of the expedition plan and aimed at providing the maximum possible level of enjoyment for all our guests.

Excursions & Tides

Aldabra's massive lagoon is subject to unique tidal currents which require all excursions into the lagoon to follow strict timelines. The speed at which water travels in and out of the channels means that certain areas of the atoll can be experiencing high tide at the same time as other areas in the lagoon are impassable at low tide. Especially in a place as remote as Aldabra, ensuring the safety of our passengers is the number one priority of our crew, so the timings for some excursions may have to be modified according to the tide movements of a given day.

About the Vessel

The M.V. Maya's Dugong boasts the space and comfort of a modern yacht, combined with the durability and functionality required for scientific and long-distance expeditions. Originally built as a research vessel by the Canadian Government in 1966, the Maya's Dugong was completely retro-fitted in the early 2000s as a private yacht, before being overhauled once again in 2009 to accommodate

charters and cabin cruise voyages. It now serves as an oceanographic and expedition cruising vessel throughout the Indian Ocean.

Satellite communication and e-mails are available onboard for a surcharge.

Facilities and cabin accommodation

Large public areas and facilities allow for maximum enjoyment of guests' time onboard Maya's Dugong. A spacious dining salon and lounge hosts guests in air-conditioned comfort for meals and entertainment, and the outdoor leisure deck provides opportunities for al fresco dining and also serves as a comfortable lounge area.

There is also plenty of open deck space onboard for sun bathing and relaxing, and a spacious bridge and observation deck allow guests to take in the adventure with a captain's eye view of all the surroundings.

Also available onboard:

- Flat-screen TV in the Dining Salon/Lounge
- DVD player & Stereo
- Games, cards, small library
- Ice Machine
- Laundry Service (at extra charge)

All cabins are equipped with air conditioning, reading lights and a storage cupboard. Accommodation is offered across two categories:

COMMANDER CABINS

These 3 well-appointed cabins are the largest and most comfortable that Maya's Dugong has to offer. Situated on the top two decks of the vessel, these cabins boast en-suite bathrooms/showers as well as windows from which to view the beautiful coastal surrounds. Two of the Commander Cabins feature a double-bed plus an extra single bed, while one Commander Cabin offers two single beds in the cabin.

EXPLORER CABINS

Classic and comfortable, these 4 cabins are situated below the main public-area decks. Complete with en-suite bathrooms/showers, there is one Explorer Cabin offering a double-bed plus a single bed, and three Explorer Cabins with two single beds and extra fold-out bunks.

Crew

Maya's Dugong boasts a high staff-to-guest ratio to ensure all of our passengers are well looked-after throughout the expedition. In addition to the captain, engineer, and two deckhands, all expedition

cruises are staffed with two stewardesses, a dive instructor and a dedicated chef who serves excellent, mouthwatering dishes.

Dining & Cuisine

Cruises are full board (breakfast, lunch and dinner) and also include afternoon tea/coffee and cake or cookies. Our dedicated chef prepares an enticing blend of authentic Indian Ocean cuisine and traditional European fare.

Beverages

Free table water and tea & coffee are served with all meals, while free juice is served with breakfast. At extra charge, a full range of beverages is also available on board, including mineral water, soft drinks, beer, wine, spirits and champagne. A price list is available on request.

Water-sports & Activities

Throughout the cruise there will be opportunities for snorkelling, equipment for which is included in the cost of the cruise. It is recommended that only strong swimmers should take part in such activities near the channels of the lagoon.

Please note that Aldabra is a 'no-take' nature reserve, meaning that fishing is prohibited on this cruise, and visitors are not allowed to collect shells or to damage or interfere with the plants and animals. No biological or geological specimen can be collected, and visitors are also required to abide to sanitary measures to avoid introducing alien plant seeds. All visitors to Aldabra must at all times be accompanied by an Aldabra staff member and it is not permitted to wander about unsupervised.

Diving

Maya's Dugong is a certified PADI dive resort, with a full range of equipment onboard as well as a dedicated dive instructor with vast Indian Ocean experience. A variety of interesting dive sites will be accessible throughout the expedition, and may vary on each voyage depending on sea conditions, visibility and itinerary timings.

Drift dives in the channels are possible and are recommended for strong swimmers.

Maya's Dugong features a convenient rear deck platform allowing divers to easily access the water directly from the vessel. Most dives and snorkelling trips however will utilise the vessel's tender boats (dinghies) for dives sites which are further afield or inaccessible by Maya's Dugong.

Available onboard: 18 dive tanks (with yoke/Aclamp valves), full dive sets for rent, 2 dive compressors.

Travel Insurance

Aldabra is one of the most remote and pristine places on earth for a reason: the atoll is completely isolated from civilisation in every sense and is, to a certain degree, inhospitable for humans. We have operated many expeditions safely to Aldabra over the past decade, but due to the remoteness and nature of this expedition, as a precaution we require all of our guests to show proof of adequate travel insurance which would cover the cost of any emergencies that could possibly arise during the cruise.

Important Information

Your safety and comfort are our highest priority. In the event of adverse conditions, all itineraries are subject to change at the captain's discretion.

Be sure to bring plenty of sun-screen, a cap or hat and sunglasses - Seychelles is generally warm and sunny throughout the year and the sun's rays can be especially impactful onboard the vessel, due to the reflection from the sea.

Bring suitable footwear for walking on deck and on the beach/shore. Some areas of Aldabra can be quite rugged, so good walking shoes are recommended.

Other items to consider bringing along include: binoculars, notebooks/logbooks for birding and diving finds, and any personal medicinal supplies, such as mosquito repellent (please note that there is NO malaria in Seychelles, however).

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aldabra@seychelles-info.com

... because we have the experience!

