

E X P E D I T I O N T O

Aldabra

An ocean^{odysseys} expedition aboard the Maya's Dugong

The name alone 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 a 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.

But with the MV Maya's Dugong, a 40-metre expeditionary vessel owned and operated by Silhouette Cruises, one of the most recognised names in live-aboard cruising in the Seychelles, 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 7-night eco-tourism and diving expedition.

This is your opportunity to be one of them.



Expedition Plan

Day 1 - Arrival to Aldabra

A two-hour flight from the main island of Mahé brings guests to Assumption Island, where passengers will embark aboard the Maya's Dugong for the 4-hour crossing to Aldabra. Depending on sea conditions there may be an opportunity to observe whales near either island along the way. Upon arrival at Aldabra, the vessel will anchor outside of the atoll near Picard Island for clearance formalities, while guests will be briefed about the week's programme by the naturalist guide, before enjoying a welcome BBQ onboard in the evening.

Day 2- Visiting Picard

A visit to Picard Island in the morning. Here we'll meet the rangers from the Seychelles Islands Foundation (SIF) who manage Aldabra's lone science and monitoring station, some of whom will be accompanying us on our journeys to the various regions of the atoll. Once ashore, a walk along the island's coast will lead guests to the West Channels, to see Aldabra's inauguration stone, which commemorates its declaration as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. En route we will encounter unique flora and fauna including several of the endemic birds of the atoll such as the Aldabra fody and Souimanga sunbird. After returning onboard, the afternoon offers a first glimpse below the sea, with a dive outside of the lagoon along the atoll's steep ocean walls. If tides allow, a night excursion may also be organised back to the beach near the settlement, in the hopes of encountering nesting sea turtles laying eggs.

Day 3 - The Main Channel

The main channel leading into Aldabra's massive lagoon is famous for its drift dive possibilities, where currents propel guests effortlessly along its pristine underwater world, with an assortment of massive tropical fish and an interesting array of marine life. Guests may indulge in this diving experience or alternatively snorkel in Passe Nicois, which branches out from the main channel. Later during a mangrove safari we will discover a unique assemblage of coral reef fishes in a fully mature mangrove forest, where we'll also easily sight rays, sharks and turtles from the surface. We will also encounter many seabirds commuting to and from the vast breeding colonies that fringe the lagoon. Humpback whales often frequent the waters outside the main channel, so if time (and luck) allows, we might have an opportunity for an up-close encounter, with a whale song and a swim before dinner.

Day 4- In Search of the Dugong

An exploration of Aldabra's giant lagoon awaits. We will travel by dinghy to see Ile Esprit and Ile Moustiques, two small islands located in the lagoon's southwest corner. To and from these islands, we'll look out for the elusive dugong, our vessel's namesake. These gentle creatures are incredibly rare and thought to be extinct in most parts of the world, but recent sightings over the past few years in Aldabra's protected lagoon offer a glimmer of hope for future generations of the dugong. Here too is the world's only oceanic breeding site for Caspian tern, the world's largest tern and a large high tide roost for migratory wading birds. We may also have time to journey along the creeks of Grand Terre, the atoll's largest body of land. Back onboard the Maya's Dugong, we'll take advantage of an opportunity for night diving along the drop-off.

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Day 5 - Johnny Channel

A trip by dinghy just inside the lagoon at Johnny Channel will provide excellent diving or snorkelling opportunities, as well as to explore the amazing frigate bird and booby colony that resides along this passage. Aldabra has the world's second largest frigatebird population with two breeding species, greater frigatebird and lesser frigatebird. Males compete for partners by inflating bright red throat pouches to display to passing females. Outside the channel, we'll keep an eye out for humpbacks and dolphins in the hopes of an encounter. In the evening, enjoy a presentation about whales in the Indian Ocean and the work being done by the conservation group Megaptera to protect these precious mammals.

Day 6 - Polymnie

The Maya's Dugong cruises eastward along Malabar Island, which comprises most of Aldabra's northern coast. Along the way, we'll search for whale and dolphin pods, and take a closer look in the event of an encounter. On the way back a visit will also be organised to the island of Polymnie, where we should have an opportunity to observe the Aldabra rail, the last surviving flightless bird of the Indian Ocean - a region once famous for flightless forms including the dodo, the solitaire and the elephant bird. We will also have the opportunity to take a closer look at a few of the world's largest population of giant land tortoises - up to 100,000 of them according to the latest estimate - that inhabit Aldabra.

Day 7 - The Jellyfish Ponds

Re-positioning back near Picard, guests will have an opportunity to visit the island once more, this time to visit the unique jellyfish ponds found inland, where these curious creatures have evolved without the need for venomous stinging power. The walk crosses areas featuring both of the main limestone rock types of Aldabra - champignon (deeply dissected) and platin (smooth-surfaced). Endemic birds to be seen include the Comoro blue pigeon, Madagascar coucal and Aldabra drongo. There may also be another opportunity to witness turtles nesting along the beach as well as seeing Madagascar nightjars and giant robber crabs emerging at dusk. We'll then bid farewell to the SIF rangers at the settlement as we enjoy our last night off Aldabra.

Day 8 - Return to Assumption

Before first light, the vessel begins cruising back toward Assumption, and hopefully one last encounter with a humpback whale or dolphins, before boarding the plane on Assumption for the return flight to Mahé.

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Expedition Information

About Ocean Odysseys

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.

The Ocean Odysseys portfolio of expedition cruises has been specifically designed for this small niche of travel pioneers. Operated by Silhouette Cruises, the leading live-aboard cruise operator in the Seychelles Islands, Ocean Odysseys 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.

Other programmes offered as part of the Ocean Odysseys portfolio include a 10-night eco-tourism based expedition across Seychelles' granitic isles, a whale shark-focused expedition of 7 nights, as well as an expedition tour along the northwest coast of Madagascar.

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 like, 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 (such as waiting to see the outcome of a battle between a coconut crab and an eel - see right). 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.



Onboard the Maya's Dugong

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.

Facilities

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 (extra charge)

Accommodation

Maya's Dugong provides a rare blend of size, freedom and open space across its cabins and public areas, with the stylistic finishings, ambience and personalised service of a private yacht.

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

COMMANDER CABINS x3

These 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 x4

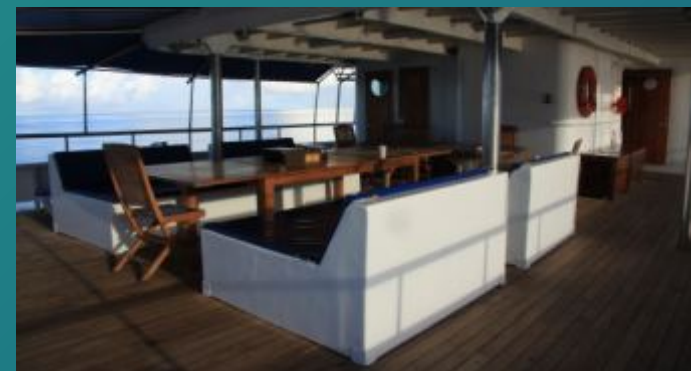
Classic and comfortable, these cabins are situated below the main public-area decks. Complete with en-suite bathrooms/showers, there is one Explorer Cabin offering a double-bed plus a single bed, and three Explorer Cabins with two single beds and an extra fold-out bunk.

MARINER CABINS x3

Maya's Dugong also offers smaller cabins, typically reserved for scientists and naturalists, with 3 single bunks per cabin, with shared bathroom facilities between the two cabins.

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Onboard the Maya's Dugong

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, as well as the naturalist tour leader.

Dining & Cuisine

Cruises aboard Maya's Dugong are full board (breakfast, lunch and dinner) and also include afternoon tea/coffee and cake. A dedicated chef prepares an enticing blend of authentic Indian Ocean cuisine and traditional European fare.

Beverages

Table water and tea & coffee are served with all meals. A full range of beverages are also available onboard at extra charge, including mineral water, soft drinks, beer, wine, spirits and champagne. Price list available on request.

Lectures & Presentations

In addition to the excursions led by the naturalist tour leader, throughout the cruise there will be several lectures and film presentations on a variety of subjects relating to the expedition.

Timings may vary depending on the arrivals to various islands and destinations, but will often be held onboard in the evenings, prior to dinner.

Attendance of these presentations is highly encouraged in order for guests to gain a better appreciation and understanding of their surrounding environment and the species they may encounter, but they remain completely voluntary for guests.

Water-sports & Activities

Throughout the cruise there will be opportunities for snorkelling and kayaking, equipment for which is included in the cost of the cruise. It is recommended that only strong swimmers and paddlers 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 but are recommended only for experienced divers and strong swimmers.

Maya's Dugong features a convenient rear deck platform allowing divers to easily access the water directly from the vessel. Other dives will utilise the vessel's tender boat for dives sites which are further afield or inaccessible by Maya's Dugong.

Available onboard: 18 dive tanks, 7 full diving sets for rent and 2 dive compressors.

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Useful Info & Contacts

Getting to Seychelles

Commercial flights into Seychelles' main island of Mahé are operated from Europe, Africa and Asia by Air Seychelles and several of the world's major airlines, on a scheduled basis every week. Contact your tour operator or your preferred airline to book international flights into Seychelles.

Flights to Assumption

All of the Aldabra expeditions aboard Maya's Dugong embark and disembark from the island of Assumption, which is the closest "launching point" from which to get to Aldabra. This coral atoll is one of just a few islands of Seychelles to feature an airstrip. Special charter flights from Mahé to Assumption are operated by the Island Development Company, which are chartered by Silhouette Cruises in order for guests to embark on the Maya's Dugong from Assumption. Please note that most departures to Assumption are conducted in the pre-dawn hours of the morning, so it's imperative that all guests arrive into Mahé at least the day before the start date of the cruise.

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/boots 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).

Supporting Aldabra & the SIF

The Seychelles Islands Foundation is a not-for-profit organisation entrusted with the management and protection of Aldabra. The SIF has implemented and maintained a wide range of scientific research and conservation initiatives on the island, including one of the longest running monitoring programmes for turtles and tortoises in the Western Indian Ocean, with over 40 years worth of data. If you would like to support the SIF with contributions toward these research and conservation initiatives to ensure the sustained protection of Aldabra, please contact the SIF by e-mail on sif@seychelles.net. A variety of SIF sundries and souvenirs will be available for purchase onboard, and will also go towards the SIF.

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