



Silhouette Cruises

Birdwatching Expedition

A Unique Expedition to explore the archipelagos of
Seychelles,

and the “The Indian Ocean’s Galapagos” –

Aldabra Island

Introduction

In 2014, our tour leaders conducted the first ever chumming expedition over the Seychelles Bank, making remarkable discoveries of pelagic species. Chumming is the practice of throwing into the water large frozen blocks of bait or "chum", comprising of fish offal and freshwater, to attract pelagic birds. We aim to be the first expedition to replicate the success of this voyage of discovery using the same innovative chumming technique to locate these little-known seabirds. We will visit sites where it is possible to see every one of the endemic land birds of the region. We will also visit the most important seabird colonies, notably Aride, which hosts the largest variety of seabird species.

In addition to birding, you can snorkel or dive underwater, to see an abundance of tropical fish, sea turtles, rays and sharks (small and friendly) living amongst the granite rocks and corals. Enjoy the comfort of the Maya's Dugong while discovering Creole culture and cuisine.

***The expedition is a rare opportunity to experience a scientific voyage of discovery
and for bird photography***

Birds of Seychelles

Seychelles is home to some of the rarest birds in the world, found nowhere else. The granitic islands are the world's oldest oceanic islands, where twelve endemic species have evolved, some found on only one island or just a few islands, making it an exceptional destination for bird-lovers.

Many of the smaller rat-free islands are breeding grounds for huge numbers of seabirds. Waders and migrant seabirds include some largely confined in distribution to the western Indian Ocean region, or else species very rarely encountered in Europe. The majority of the 285 species recorded in Seychelles are migrants from as far afield as the Arctic and the Antarctic. The least known of these are oceanic pelagic bird species, rarely seen without a marine expedition, reaching beyond the islands and into the depths of the Indian Ocean – and these are exactly what we seek in this unique birdwatching expedition.

We aim to see every breeding seabird species of Seychelles, including three boobies, two frigatebirds, two tropicbirds, two noddies and seven terns, together with Lesser Crested Tern and Saunders's Tern. On shorelines we will see many shorebird species including Crab Plover and Terek Sandpiper.

Endemics we search for in the granitic islands will include Seychelles Magpie-robin, Seychelles Warbler, Seychelles Swiftlet, Seychelles Kestrel and Seychelles Blue Pigeon. In the Aldabra Group we aim to see Aldabra Drongo, Aldabra White-eye and Aldabra Fody together with Madagascar Cisticola and a host of endemic subspecies of Malagasy origin including three subspecies of Souimanga Sunbird.

At Aldabra we will also look for the Aldabra (or Thick-billed) Shearwater, first described in 1996 as a subspecies of Tropical Shearwater. It is one of the smallest shearwaters of the Indian ocean region with a relatively thick bulbous bill. A significant colony has been discovered recently and it may soon be elevated to full species status as Aldabra Shearwater *Puffinus colstoni*. We will strive to learn more about this little-known species.

At sea, we will conduct research into the presence of petrel species, very likely leading to a new scientific publication, by the use of chumming techniques. We will endeavour to discover more about the wintering grounds of Matsudaira's Storm-petrel *Hydrobates matsudairae*, a visitor from the Pacific, and we may encounter several subantarctic species including Wilson's Storm-petrel *Oceanites oceanicus*, Black-bellied Storm Petrel *Fregetta tropica* and White-faced Storm-petrel *Pelagodroma marina*.

There is a possibility to see Barau's Petrel *Pterodroma barau*, 'Round Island Petrel' *P. arminjoniana* and Mascarene Petrel *Pseudobulweria aterrima*, little-known endemic breeding species from the Mascarenes, mainly recorded by satellite tracking entering Seychelles waters at this time of year.

Another mystery we will attempt to unravel is that of a possible undescribed *Bulweria* petrel, identified from photographs in recent years. It is an unidentified type of dark petrel, present off the nearby Comoros Islands in quite numbers. We hope to learn more about this potential undescribed species and its closest relative, the Jouanin's Petrel *Bulweria fallax*.

Ashore, we will encounter the Aldabra Flightless Rail *Dryolimnas [cuvieri] aldabranus* : Although superficially similar to the White-throated Rail of Madagascar, it is distinctively smaller and paler (with almost plain upperparts) and crucially is flightless. We will contemplate why this so bird lost its ability to fly and why some taxonomists recognise the Aldabra Rail as a full species.

The Aldabra Brush-warbler *Nesillas aldabrana* : The species is already listed as extinct (last seen in 1983), but as we are not giving up on this species, we will aim to find it, and with checking some potential sites, subject to safe landings when around Aldabra Island.

Birds of Seychelles



The Seychelles (Tropical) Shearwater, photo: Tubenoses Project © H. Shirihi



The Barau's Petrel, photo: Tubenoses Project © H. Shirihi



The possible undescribed *Bulweria* Petrel, photo: Tubenoses Project © H. Shirihi

Other Species

Marine Mammals encounters: We will record any whales and dolphin, with most frequent species in the area. Likely species include Blue Whale, Orca (Killer Whale), Sperm Whale, Spinner Dolphin and more. Dugongs have also recently returned to breed in the Aldabra Group after an absence of perhaps 100 years:

Aldabra Tortoises *Aldabrachelys gigantea*: one of the biggest thrills of the expedition will be watching the world's largest land tortoises, a native to Aldabra Island. The animals can grow up to 250 kilos and live more than 150 years.

Turtle encounters: We will encounter two species of turtles, Green Turtle and Hawksbill. After decades of exploitation these marine reptiles are making a comeback in the outer islands of Seychelles thanks to strict protection laws.



Other Species



Expedition Leaders (Ornithologists) Introduction

Hadoram Shirihi is an Israeli ornithologist and author, who has discovered many new species for the Western Palearctic and Israel. He is an author of many books including *Birds of Israel*, *Sylvia Warblers* and *A Complete Guide to Antarctic Wildlife* and he is co-author of *Handbook of Western Palearctic Birds*. Hadoram is renowned for his work on tubenoses and has led expeditions to rediscover species once thought to be extinct. He has written many bird identification papers including *The first-ever mass chumming operation over the Seychelles Bank*, co-authored with Adrian Skerrett. The scientific name of the Desert Tawny Owl (*Strix hadoram*) is a tribute to his immense contribution to ornithology.

Adrian Skerrett was born in UK and has been resident in Seychelles since 1980. He has authored a number of books including the field guide, *Birds of Seychelles*. He founded Seychelles Bird Records Committee and is Seychelles country representative for the African Bird Club and Royal Navy Birdwatching Society. He is Chairman of Island Conservation Society, an NGO that owns Aride and has centres on five other islands.

Hadoram Shirihi



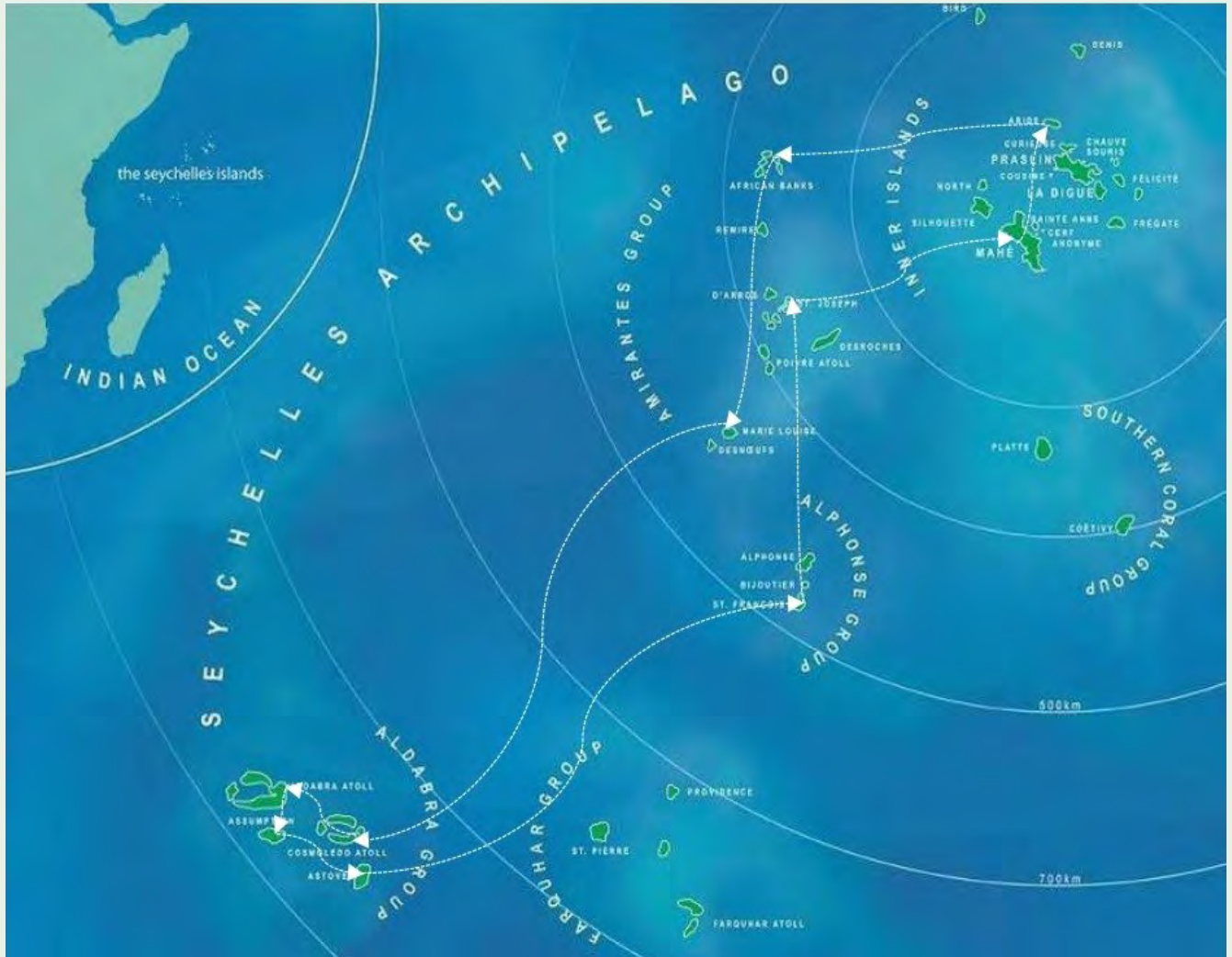
Adrian Skerrett



Expedition Program

10 May 25	Day 1.	Embarkation aboard the Maya's Dugong at Mahé
11 May 25	Day 2.	Aride Island followed by crossing to Amirantes group
12 May 25	Day 3.	Amirantes group – African Banks
13 May 25	Day 4.	Amirantes group – Marie Louise
14 May 25	Day 5.	At sea, crossing towards Cosmoledo
15 May 25	Day 6.	Aldabra Group/Visit Cosmoledo
16 May 25	Day 7.	Aldabra Group/Visit Cosmoledo
17 May 25	Day 8.	Sailing during the day to Aldabra
18 May 25	Day 9.	Aldabra Group/Visit Aldabra
19 May 25	Day 10.	Aldabra Group/Visit to Aldabra
20 May 25	Day 11.	Aldabra Group/Visit to Aldabra
21 May 25	Day 12.	Aldabra Group/Visit to Aldabra
22 May 25	Day 13.	Aldabra Group/Visit Assumption
23 May 25	Day 14.	Aldabra Group/Visit to Astove
24 May 25	Day 15.	At sea, crossing towards Alphonse group
25 May 25	Day 16.	Alphonse Group – St Francois
26 May 25	Day 17.	Alphonse Group – St Joseph
27 May 25	Day 18.	Disembarkation on Mahe

Expedition Map



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

Day 1 - Embarkation

Mahé is the largest granite island of Seychelles, covering about 150 sq km. This mountainous island, filled with tropical vegetation, has an exceptional natural environment and well-preserved tropical flora, hosting a variety of birds; fourteen breeding land birds – half of which are endemic, six breeding water birds, and many migratory species are to be seen. We settle onboard MV Maya's Dugong and receive a briefing from the captain. After lunch, there is a lecture about the expedition and the birds of Seychelles. In the afternoon, we drive along Sans Souci Road, towards Morne Seychellois National Park. We search for the rarely seen Seychelles Scops Owl, unique to Mahé and mainly found in its highland forests.

This owl's Creole name is 'Syer', which refers to the sound that the saw makes whilst rasping on the wood – similar to the call of the owl. Other endemics likely to be encountered en route include Seychelles Kestrel, Seychelles Swiftlet, Seychelles Sunbird, Seychelles Blue Pigeon and Seychelles Bulbul. In the evening, an introduction to Creole cuisine with a welcome barbecue dinner. Evening sail towards Aride.



Day 2 - Aride

Aride is a nature reserve owned by the Island Conservation Society, where the focus is on scientific research, with few outside visitors to this magical island. It is home to more species of breeding seabirds than the other granitic islands of Seychelles combined, including the world's largest colonies of Lesser Noddy and Tropical Shearwater. Beautiful Fairy Terns hover above our heads and we encounter graceful White-tailed Tropicbirds nesting on the ground. There are also five endemic land birds including Seychelles Magpie-Robin, Seychelles Fody and Seychelles Warbler, with about 2,000 individuals, the world's largest population. Here, as in the Galapagos Islands, birds are not afraid of humans, giving a unique opportunity to closely observe them nesting amongst the tree branches, in burrows or beside tree trunks, and feeding their chicks.

We climb the nature trail to the northern cliffs where two species of frigatebird soar above the Indian Ocean in the largest roost in the granitic islands. This seabird has an impressive wingspan of two meters while weighing only 1.5 kg – a unique combination that allows it to perform aerobatic stunts, including piratical attacks on other seabirds to force them to regurgitate recently captured food, which the frigatebird snatches in midair – a spectacle that will take place right before our eyes! Aride is also the only natural location in the world for the Critically Endangered Wright's Gardenia, a tree with beautiful white and very fragrant flowers.



After returning ashore, we'll enjoy a BBQ lunch on the beach, before heading to an afternoon snorkeling or diving around Aride. The island's coral reef boasts 400 species of fish.

Day 3 - Amirantes Group – African Banks



Day 4 - Amirantes Group – Marie Louise



Day 5 - at sea

Day 6 to 7 - Aldabra Group - 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 fly-fishing sites, yet it has remained off limits to all but a few determined enthusiasts because of the difficulties of reaching this lonely outpost. Expected arrival in the afternoon. We visit the deserted settlement and dive the West Island of Cosmoledo (Menai) where turtles abound.



Day 8 - Sailing during the day to Aldabra, for bird observation



Day 9 to 12 - Aldabra Group – Aldabra

Often called the Crown Jewel 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 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. There are many plants and birds not found elsewhere and one of the world's most important breeding populations of the endangered Green Turtle. Birds include the Aldabra Rail, the last surviving flightless bird of the Indian Ocean and frigatebirds. Many other endemic land birds can be seen ashore, including Aldabra Drongo, Aldabra Fody and Madagascar Sacred Ibis, together with the world's largest population of giant tortoises. We visit the Aldabra Research station and the old settlement, cruise through the West and Main Channel and dive/snorkel at Passe Dubois, Polymnie, Anse Var, settlement reef, Anse Mais and Main Channel, experiencing the exhilaration of being swept along by the shoals of various fish, observing both pelagic and reef fish in the shallow waters of the lagoon. 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, and are now believed to be breeding.



Day 13 - Aldabra Group – Assumption

Assumption was laid waste by guano mining around the turn of the 20th 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 colorful and diverse reefs of Seychelles.



Day 14 - Aldabra Group - 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 not somewhat bizarre sight on a remote 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 an old chapel, then cross the island to the lagoon. We dive the West walls.



Day 15 - At sea

Day 16 - Alphonse Group – St. Francois

Day 17 - Amirantes Group – St. Joseph

St Joseph Atoll and D'Arros island are owned and managed by the ***Save Our Seas Foundation***, this unique location includes the St Joseph channel, is home to aggregation of manta rays and at least 514 fish species. St Joseph Atoll is the most important nursery area on the Amirantes Bank and a critical breeding ground for sharks, rays and turtles.



Day 18 - Disembarkation on Mahe

Expedition Gallery

White-tailed Tropicbird, photo: Tubenoses Project © H. Shirihai



White Tern, photo: Tubenoses Project © H. Shirihai



Expedition Gallery

