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aldabracadabra!

INDIAN OCEAN ODYSSEY

> WHAT MAKES AN EXOTIC DIVING LOCATION? IS IT THE INTENSITY OR DIVERSITY OF MARINE LIFE? IS IT A MIX OF MARINE, SCENERY AND CULTURE? OR SOMETHING EXTRA?

Whatever it is, the Seychelles seems to fit the bill – 115 islands; the only mid-oceanic granite islands on the globe, prolific Indian Ocean fish and corals, giant groupers and potato cods, green turtles and humpback whales. There's giant land tortoises of Aldabra Atoll - the only place on the globe, other than the Galapagos Islands, where you can see giant land tortoises living in the wild.

Then there's the cultural side with the easygoing Seychelloise – largely descendents of African slaves from the French colonies and the release of hundreds of African slaves from slave ships by the British Navy. Others came from Mauritius, India and China.

This is just the tip of the iceberg. It is no wonder that the Seychelles is booming with honeymoon couples. The Seychelles are exactly what the tourist brochures describe – snow white beaches, Coco-de-mer palms – at the Vallee De Mai, turquoise seas and spicy Creole (African) food.

Mahe is the main inner island, followed by Praslin, Silhouette and La Digue with its famous beachside granite formations. Surrounding these islands is a sprinkling of tropicals – Felicite, Aride, Frigate, Denis, Bird and North Island. The distant islands are divided into two groups: the Amirantes – 24 islands surrounding a central group including Saint Joseph, African Banks, Poivre and Alphonse. The Aldabra Archipelago has 22 islands around Providence, Farquhar, Cosmoledo Atoll and Aldabra Atoll.

Aldabra Atoll is one of the largest coral atolls on the globe, and is a World Heritage Area – largely to protect its remaining

Main: The granite formations at La Digue Island, whose remote beaches like Grand Anse, Petite Anse and Anse Cocos, are simply stunning.

Clockwise from far left: Snorkeling with the blacktip reef sharks at Aldabra Atoll, we prayed they weren't ankle biters; Schooling five-lined snappers are common on Aldabra reefs; Charles Darwin was the first person to champion the cause for protection of the giant land tortoises of Aldabra Atoll. There are some 150,000 giant land tortoises living there today; Red-footed boobies inside Aldabra Atoll, which also has breeding colonies of greater frigatebird; Angelfish at Aldabra Atoll, a World Heritage Site, protected by the Seychelles Islands Foundation.



population of giant land tortoises and breeding colonies of frigate birds. The lagoon is so vast that you can't see its land mass at the other end, and if you look at the sky directly over the lagoon it appears green, reflecting the green of Aldabra's lagoon. With luck I booked on a 12 day diving safari on the Indian *Ocean Explorer* and

“ THE FISH LIFE AND VISIBILITY GOT BIGGER AND BETTER AS WE APPROACHED ALDABRA ATOLL... ”

flew Singapore/Mahe – 14 hours from Sydney. After cooling off snorkeling in the Saint Anne Marine Park, around Cerf, Moyenne, Round and St Anne Islands near Mahe, we left port. We were nervous, as the tuna fleet was in and anchored off Victoria due to Somali pirates. Rife in the 1600s and 1700s, it had reappeared in a modern high-tech form. Luckily for us, it was occurring off the Somali coast north of Mauritius - the same region looted by the pirates of old.

Our onboard companions included two Austrians, two Swiss, one German, one American, and an Italian. The first dive was at Illot, reputed for its whale sharks; they weren't sighted, but the reef fish kept us entertained. Next came dives at Desroches and Alphonse as we worked

our way through the Amirantes before moving onto the Aldabra Group. Our dives at Desroches – except for some sharks in the shallows – were fairly ordinary due to low viz, but dives at Alphonse – the Abyss, Eagles Nest and North Wall – were spectacular. A typical dive brought seafan gardens at 30-40 metres with great fish life – cod, trevally,

groupers, fusiliers, snappers and sweetlips. It was refreshing to see a reef and seafans in pristine condition.

The fish life and visibility got bigger and better as we approached Aldabra Atoll; dives at Astove and Cosmoledo Atoll were awesome. There were huge groupers, giant trevally, barracuda, green turtles and, to our surprise, humpback whales at every atoll and dive site. We didn't encounter whales underwater, but often saw them on the surface and heard them singing while diving. Pods of spinner dolphins too.

We saw few sharks, other than a pack of 30 juvenile blacktips at Aldabra, two bull sharks, one small silvertip, and two hammerheads. Tragically, the sharks in

the Seychelles, apart from one or two sites, have been decimated by shark-finning, like Indonesia and many other parts of the world. A Hong Kong sharkfin buyer visiting Senegal was asked by a reporter 'What will you do when there are no sharks left here?' 'We just go somewhere else' he replied.

The Aldabra Group consists of Aldabra, Assumption, Cosmoledo and Astove. Aldabra Atoll is a jewel, and brings the chance to get close to giant land tortoises. The trick is to go ashore early morning or late afternoon, as the tortoises are active at these times. At dawn we found them feeding on grasses and leaves on low bushes.

Aldabra Atoll is full of surprises. We went snorkeling on low tide in one of the reef passes; the channel was alive with green turtles and big fish. We relished a raging drift dive through one of the passes, being picked up by the RIB inside the atoll. The current was so strong that when I grabbed onto a rock on the bottom I nearly lost my facemask! What an adrenaline pumping dive! We wanted to do again and again. On the way in we spotted bumphead parrotfish, turtles and many reef fish.

Snorkeling in the reef passes brought schools of parrotfish, surgeonfish and potato cod sheltering in the lee of the small undercut coral isles punctuating the atoll. These passages give a great sense of the dynamics of the coral atoll.

Inside are frigate bird colonies; at Passehoareau Pass and Qiannet Pass, you can view nesting frigate birds. Amazingly, while watching the birds, you can see spotty potato cod and gaudy parrotfish beneath the RIB!

We spent four days diving Aldabra Atoll. I was really impressed by the sheer quantity and quality of fish, including huge groupers and potato cods. The turtles were remarkably friendly and even approached us. It just goes to show how trusting marine animals are in places where they are protected.

The pack of juvenile blacktip reef sharks at Aldabra Atoll were a surprise and an encouraging sign in the Seychelles.



Pirates found the Seychelles a perfect refuge after being chased from the West Indies by European man-o-war. They began sailing Indian Ocean waters north of Madagascar. From 1685 onwards, there were raids by Read, Williams, John Avery (Long Ben), White, Bowen, Tew and Howard. French pirates were Mission, La Vaseur or La Buse. American pirates were Burgess, Halsey, North and Captain Kid. They all terrorised shipping on the Great Mongol, Arabia and African coasts. Protests by the Great Mongol forced English and French warships into hunting their pirates.

DIVING

- Silhouette Cruises (liveboards) www.seychelles-cruises.com
- Indian Ocean Explorer (currently out of action) www.ioexpl.com
- White-Tip Divers, Praslin www.whitetipdivers.com
- Blue Sea Divers, Beau Vallon www.blueseadivers.com
- Seychelles Underwater Centre, Beau Vallon www.diveseychelles.com.sc

WHERE TO STAY

- Coco D'or Hotel, Beau Vallon cocoadmin@seychelles.sc cocodor@seychelles.sc
- Northolme Resort & Spa, Hilton Seychelles, Beau Vallon www.hiltonworldwide.com
- Le Meridien Fishermans Cove, Beau Vallon www.lemeridien.com
- Paradise Sun Resort, Praslin www.paradisun.com

- Palm Beach Hotel, Praslin www.palmbeach.sc
- There are also many small guesthouses priced at E\$100/night

BEST TIME

The best time to dive Aldabra is in February/March, as the southeast monsoons start mid April. The best time for whale sharks around Mahe is July/August – but November, December, and January are good too.

HOW TO GET THERE

Fly with Air Seychelles from Singapore, South Africa, Mauritius, Rome, Paris or London. www.airseychelles.com

HEALTH/SAFETY

The Seychelles are free of malaria and yellow fever.

CURRENCY

Seychelles Rupees, but foreign currency laws say visitors must pay in international currency.

Left top to bottom: Fusiliers schooling en-masse at Aldabra Atoll; Beach crab in the Amirantes Group; Green turtles were once almost totally wiped out at Aldabra Atoll but today it has a healthy population; Aldabra Atoll is a good place to get photos of blacktip reef sharks as they approach very closely; Honeymooners about to splash into the warm waters at La Digue Is.

Right top to bottom: Moray eel at St Pierre Island, which has suffered cyclone damage; Seeing blacktip reef sharks at Aldabra Atoll indicates there is some hope for sharks in the Seychelles; Oceanic coral trout, known locally as grouper. This one was snapped at Aldabra.





Imagine standing in knee-deep water surrounded by 30 blacktip reef sharks praying they weren't ankle-biters!

Our liveaboard trip ended; flying out on a light aircraft from Assumption, I was well aware we'd dived some of the best sites in the Seychelles, but there was so much more to do. The 15-20 grey reef sharks at Marianne Island (best dive in the inner isles), the crystal clear sea caves of Desroches Drop, and the whale sharks of Ilot and Conception Islands are still to be done. See you there!



Clockwise from left: Bullock carts at La Digue Island, where the best way to get around is by pushbike or on foot; A family of Seychelloise collecting pipis on the beach at Beau Vallon, Mahe; The waterfront at La Digue; The Indian Ocean Explorer, our liveaboard for 12 days; The extraordinary granite formations of La Digue Island. The Nid D' Aigle or Eagles Nest rises to 300 metres, taking up most of the island's interior.