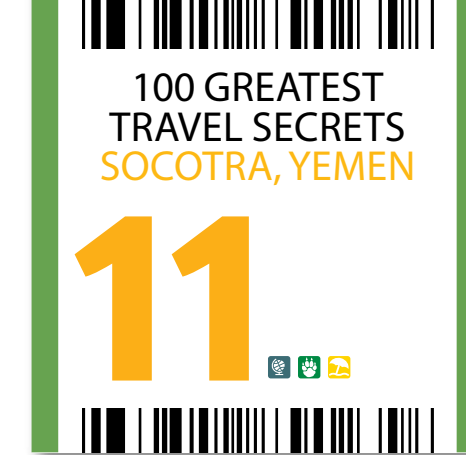




The caves, trees and lagoons near Qualansiyah create a strange, otherworldly landscape



Stranger than fiction

A land of dragon's blood trees, pirates and species unknown to science, that only adopted money in the 1990s – this Yemeni island is as secret, and surreal, as it gets. Nick Redmayne braves unknown Arabia

At Halla, the village's shark fishermen invited me to share their lunch. I rubbed noses with the dignified elder headman and took a place on the floor beside communal platters of shark meat, rice and dates. For all their efforts battling surging offshore currents, the day's catch had been modest.

"Five sharks just, it's hard," bemoaned deputy headman Matar Abdullah. "Last year three people, they were lost. They ended up in Oman."

So it seems not only is Socotra a difficult place to get to, it's a difficult place to stay. Outside, the sea was witnessing another more successful fish hunt; a pod of 100 dolphins coursed eagerly beyond the surf – they were having no problems.

Phoenicians claimed Socotra as domain of the Phoenix; for Arabs it was where Sinbad met the giant *roc* (a huge mythological bird). Ennobled by Unesco in July 2008, Yemen's boast that the Socotra archipelago is the 'Galápagos of the Indian Ocean' is about to be taken seriously.

Cast adrift from the mainland at least six million years ago, Socotra's plants and animals exhibit an extraordinarily high degree of endemism. Almost 35% of its flora is unique (the Galápagos boasts 42%), along with a significant percentage of its bird life and almost all its few reptiles. Classification of insect species has barely begun, while it appears that mammals missed the geological boat completely. For contemporary travellers interested in the natural, rather than supernatural history, the reality is more fabulous than the myth.

In ancient times Socotra's incense and aloe attracted Indian and Greek colonists. Christianity arrived in the shipwrecked vessel of apostle

Thomas in the mid 1st century AD and lasted 1,500 years. By the 16th century the island had become a haven for pirates before a transitory Portuguese, and much later British occupation.

Today, marooned at the mouth of the Gulf of Aden, 340km from the Arabian Peninsula, among the strong currents and shark-rich waters of the Indian Ocean, Socotra is part of Yemen but lies closer to Africa than Arabia. Monsoon storms have historically isolated the islands from June to September, and during the last Cold War a Soviet military presence kept the curious at bay. Latter-day Somali pirates further ensured isolation until the opening of a civilian airstrip in 1999.

The main island of Socotra is about the size of Majorca, though attracts 99.99% fewer tourists. From pristine reefs and brilliant white-sand beaches a narrow coastal plain rises abruptly inland towards a rock-strewn limestone plateau. Dominating the east, treeless jagged peaks of the 1,500m Haghier massif strike keenly skywards in unforgiving ranks. A gentle landscape it is not.

The flyblown capital of Hadibu gives blown flies a bad name. However, this fragmentary shambles – a town held together by sticks, string and goat dust – is Socotra's tourism hub. No matter how much cash you have to flash, accommodation is very simple – this is a poor island. Save for hard-core hikers, visitors base themselves in Hadibu. It's the only sizeable town and the best place to source provisions, transport and guides. Elsewhere the island's settlements consist of tiny fishing villages, remote hamlets and clusters of cave-dwelling mountain folk. Most explorations are achievable in a day, with overnight camping an excellent option for the longest circuits. >



‘The trees do an impression of fat men in tight suits and floral swimming caps’

◀ *My pied à terre* was Hadibu’s luxurious (in name only!) Taj Socotra Hotel. Here, among a few dusty plastic chairs, goats fidgeted in the narrow shade of the eaves while Egyptian vultures eyed each new arrival, gargoyle-like, from the hotel’s roof. Taking the room key I couldn’t help humming ‘Hotel California’...

Socotra has zero public transport and no self-drive car hire. Turn off your GSM mobile – unless you’ve got a sat phone, forget it. Credit cards and ATMs? You must be joking – the island only adopted money in the 1990s. Internet may be available if the Summerland Hotel has paid its bill. And finally, there’s no alcohol. But if you’ve developed a habit for chewing privet hedge clippings in Yemen, don’t worry: *qat*, the mainland’s socially lubricating leaf, may be missing from Socotra’s list of endemic flora but the army flies in a new stash twice a week, allegedly...

Apart from a few brutal stretches of new tarmac, getting around requires a 4WD, so it’s time to put eco-cred to one side and go off road.

“Music? No music, sleep,” was my jeep-jockey Mohammed’s cautionary mantra; in fact, his only English. Weighing up the need to be alert on Socotra’s rocky and vertiginous tracks against Abu Baker Salim’s painfully earnest songs of Yemen, I chose music.

Pidgin Arabic will only get you so far, and precisely nowhere outside Hadibu and the smaller town of Qalansiya. Rural islanders and mountain folk often exclusively speak the ancient unwritten language of Socotri. In the absence of a guide, touring Socotra might be compared to watching a BBC natural history documentary dubbed in Cornish.

Evening at the Taj Socotra’s goat-infested restaurant in Hadibu is a good time to search out English-speaking guides. I hooked up with the diminutive smiling form of Mahdi Nasseep, one of 16 young naturalists trained by the nascent Socotra Eco Tourism Society. The society works hard to interpret the local environment for foreign visitors, but importantly guides Socotris in ways to benefit from sustainable tourism.

Perversely, Hadibu does a great job in promoting exploration – it makes you want to get out and explore, and you don’t have to go far. A little way east, Dilisha Beach is marked by an avalanche of brilliant-white sand tumbling from the mountainous escarpment straight into the sea.

It’s an absurdly beautiful bay. While the refreshingly cool waves are a delight it’s worth remembering that shark remains Socotra’s only enduring export. It’s rumoured that monsoon season brings perfect waves, and though to

date the distraction of sacrificial surfers as shark bait is a rarity, you should still swim with caution.

Venturing inland towards the Haghier Mountains by 4WD, the rocky tracks do their best to detach internal organs – remove false teeth and adopt the brace position – but it’s worth it.

On my first such foray it wasn’t long before an extraterrestrial forest erupted outside – Socotran desert rose (*Adenium obesum sokotranum*) to be exact. The trees do a surreal impression of fat men in tight suits and floral swimming caps – an appearance they’ve evolved over millennia to conserve water. Over their shoulders I could see the mountains of a Socotran Middle Earth: the Haghier massif. The ridges bristled with sharp peaks, hiding unknowns beyond seemingly unassailable summits. A map indicating ‘Here be Dragons’ would not have surprised – in fact, any map at all would have been welcome.

Which brings me to the dragon’s blood tree (*Dracaena cinnabari*), the iconic everted tree of Socotra, arguably the island’s most striking unique flora. Legend describes a Socotran dragon – probably an endemic – attacking an elephant. The elephant is killed but in dying collapses and crushes the dragon, the attacker’s blood spilling into the ground, thus propagating the eponymous tree.

Inwards and upwards from Hadibu, towards Haghier, I smelled blood on the island’s Diksam Plateau. Here, hundreds of trees formed an otherworldly arboretum pointing to an ancient, near apocalyptic dragon-squashing event.

The oozing red resin has been collected for centuries, used by Rome’s gladiators to treat wounds, as a pigment and incense by Greeks and Arabs, and in some quarters as a cure for syphilis. This trade, along with that of frankincense and myrrh, established Socotra as the place to draw breath >

Above: Socotra was once an important stop on the Incense Route
Below: Like the Galápagos, endemic reptiles are found on the island



Footnotes

VITAL STATISTICS

Island capital: Hadibu
(Country capital: Sana'a)

Population: 50,000

Language: Arabic and Socotri

Time: GMT+3

International dialling code: +967

Visas: Required by UK nationals;

contact the Yemen Embassy

(57 Cromwell Road, London, SW7 2ED; 0207 584 6607,

www.yemenembassy.org.uk). A 30-day, single-entry tourist visa costs £25 and requires a form, one picture and takes three working days. Yemeni tourist visas may also be issued on arrival at Sana'a airport.

Money: Yemeni rial (YER), currently around YER350 to the UK£. Take cash (dollars, sterling or euros). There's a currency exchange in Hadibu but no ATMs; credit cards are useless.



Chill out beneath a dragon's blood tree

Le Figaro Magazine/Alf Camera Press

◀ on the Incense Road. Today the majority of trees are ancient, some approaching 700 years, new saplings failing to find a foothold away from over-nibbling goats.

Descending from Diksam into the chasm of Wadi Dirhur, we passed groves of desert rose punctuated by the flowery red spikes of endemic Socotran aloe (*Aloe perryi*). The gorge floor runs cool with clear water spilling over smooth pebbles. Along the wadi, limpid pools are patrolled by scores of purple freshwater crabs (*Potamon socotrensis*), another unique species.

Here too, a goatherd tortured a tin whistle in the shade of a stand of date palms. He promised a mere 3,000 rials would secure one of his small fat kids, agreed an exceptional deal on some dragon's blood and, for a ballpoint pen, he'd even play another tune.

Another bone-shaking excursion, 30km east from Hadibu, took in the dry inland plateau of Homhill. Here, the bizarre botanical manifestation of a 'bad hair day' was revealed in the cucumber tree (*Dendrosicyos socotrana*).

Across the plateau spread a forest of frankincense trees; Socotra has seven endemic varieties. Among these fragrant branches I spotted a butcherbird, the Socotran grey shrike (*Lanius meridionalis*) and nearby Socotra sunbird (*Nectarine balfouri*).

Walking through a sparse village, colourful unveiled girls offered

dried-grass parcels of frankincense and dragon's blood, the latter still valued locally to staunch bleeding after childbirth. A feisty old woman worked in her goat-proof garden tending succulent papaya, tomato, aubergine, sweet potato and chilli. Drawing water from her well she laughed, uncomprehending of my rudimentary Arabic, but accepted my mimed offer of help in hauling a few buckets. Who says tourism never benefits local people?

It's over 150 years since Darwin documented the Galápagos, yet on Socotra plants, animals and birds still await discovery by science. The allure of the island's remarkable but fragile ecology is growing. However, an almost non-existent infrastructure and necessary journey via Yemen, a country regularly topping the FCO travel advisory hit parade, means there are no accidental visitors just yet.

Socotra will remain an idiosyncratic and unspoilt island for many years to come; neither Arabia nor Africa, it's an ancient raft of fantasy species encapsulating a lost world of evolutionary adaptation. ■

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www.wanderlust.co.uk/destinations



The trip: The author travelled with Sana'a-based Universal Touring Company (+967 1 272861, www.utcyemen.com). UTC offers seven nights on Socotra including hotel, jeep with driver, naturalist guide and all meals from £500; flights extra.

When to go: Avoid the late May to September monsoon.

Getting there: Yemenia (020 732 33213, www.yemenia.com) offers the only direct flights to Yemen (Sana'a airport). Emirates (0844 800 2777, www.emirates.com) flies from London to Sana'a via Dubai. Flight time varies from eight to 14 hours; return tickets cost from around £300. Yemenia also flies from Sana'a via Al-Mukalla to Socotra twice a week; flights cost about US\$180 (£100) return.

Getting around: You've got three options: hire a jeep with driver and guide, walk or hitch-hike. A driver and jeep costs around YER 10,000 (£30) per day, and a guide an extra YER 4,000 (£10).

Cost of travel: Cheap. It's all about seeing and not buying.

Accommodation: Hotels cost from £10 to £25 per room per night including breakfast. The Taj Socotra Hotel (+967 660 627) is basic but has a lively outdoor restaurant. Camping is a good option. There are a few designated sites with limited facilities plus endless bush-camping opportunities for hardcore hikers.

Food & drink: There's no alcohol on the island but bottled water, soft drinks and Islamic beer are sold in Hadibu. The island's few restaurants serve up pretty much the same menu – rice with fresh fish, chicken or goat, or *ful* (beans). The best food is homecooked, if you're lucky to be invited.

Cultural considerations: Islanders are Muslim and although Socotra feels more liberal than the mainland, you should dress and behave conservatively. Don't photograph women without permission, eat with your right hand and remove shoes before entering a home or mosque.

Health & safety: In order to get to Socotra you'll need to fly via Sana'a; the FCO currently advises against all but essential travel to Sana'a – check www.fco.gov.uk for updates. Socotra is malaria-free.

Further info: *Yemen* (Bradt, 2007).

www.yementourism.org; www.socotraisland.org