

INDIAN OCEAN ISLANDS

Seychelles, Mauritius, Reunion, Madagascar, Comoros & Mayotte

22 days

Created on: 2 Jul, 2024

Day 1 Arrival in Seychelles

Arrival into Mahe, Seychelles (airport code SEZ).

Seemingly forgotten out in the middle of the Indian Ocean, a thousand miles from Africa, more than 115 islands comprise the Seychelles Archipelago. Swaying palms and deep, clear lagoons fringe this group of isles, where wildlife untouched for centuries abounds.

Seychelles is a comparatively young nation that can trace its first settlement back to 1770 when the French first arrived on the islands. These islands achieved independence from Britain in 1976 and became a republic within the Commonwealth. Today, the 86,000 strong Seychelles population continues to reflect its multi-ethnic roots. Traditionally, the islands have attracted a broad diversity of peoples, including freed slaves, European settlers, adventurers, traders of Arab and Persian origin as well as Chinese and Indians.

Mahe is the largest island and is dominated by a mountain range that forms the backbone of the island. Morne Seychellois, the highest summit, offers a good backdrop to Victoria -- the capital city. The second largest island, Praslin, is famous for white sandy beaches, especially Anse Lazio, which has consistently been voted one of the world's best beaches. Of these islands, many of them constitute the oldest mid-oceanic granite islands on earth while others form the low-lying coral atolls and reef islands of the 'Outer Islands'.

NOTE: ** Some itinerary modifications may occur closer to the departure date due to flight routing and schedule changes. Access to all of the islands we visit is restricted by flight schedules. Any schedule change or adjustment may of course impact the itinerary. The order of islands visited may change, and the number of nights on each island may have to be adjusted. We may lose one night on one island and gain a night on another. Please pack light as some of the flights within this tour have a strict 15kg per person weight limit for checked luggage.

Overnight in Mahe, Seychelles.

Included Meal(s): Dinner, if required.

Day 2 Seychelles: Victoria & Mahe Island Tour

Our day of discovery on Mahe Island provides us with an ideal introduction to the Seychelles' way of life. Before touring around the island we will start with a tour of Victoria -- 'the world's smallest capital'. A focal point of the town is its colourful market where stalls of fresh fish, tropical fruits and vegetables, herbs and spices, are displayed in abundance. We will also visit the small National Museum dedicated to island history, nature and folklore.

After leaving the center we come to the Botanical Gardens, one of Seychelles' oldest national monuments. These gardens date back more than a century, and house a wide collection of mature, exotic and endemic plants within five acres of landscaped and beautifully maintained tropical gardens.

As we travel around Mahe you will take in the lush vegetation, plantations of coconut palms and cinnamon, and forested peaks. We will witness some unparalleled views of neighbouring islands. The Northern region of Mahe has towering granite peaks with lush vegetation, enchanting villages and splendid beaches. This area is renowned for the greatest contrast in scenery in the archipelago.

We will drive along the spectacular Sans Soucis road to the ruins of the historical Mission Lodge and discover plantations of the wild cinnamon, coffee and tea along the way. Known as Venn's town, this place is home to the ruins of the schools for the children of the freed slaves. Not far from here is the Bel Air cemetery; the final resting place of the early settlers. The splendid Morne Seychellois National Park encompasses an impressive 20% of the land area of Mahe and contains a wide variety of habitats, from coastal mangrove forests up to the country's highest peak, the Morne Seychellois (905m).

Further along our route the mountain slopes adorned by tea shrubs provide a wonderful scenic drive right through to the coast of Mahe. Situated high in the rainforest valley of south Mahe, working plantations grow a splendid variety of spices, tropical fruit trees, essential oil plants and endemic palms.

Overnight in Mahe, Seychelles.

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Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 3 Seychelles: Full Day Praslin Island & La Digue Island Tour

After an early breakfast we will travel by boat to explore two of the most beautiful islands of the Seychelles -- Praslin and La Digue. Our fast ferry for Praslin departs from the Inter Island Quay.

Praslin, (pronounced "Prah-lin"), is the second largest island in Seychelles (located approximately 1.5 hours by boat from Mahe). Here we will visit the Vallee de Mai Nature Reserve, the only place on earth where the Coco-de-Mer palm grows in its natural state. This palm has some of the longest leaves and the largest and heaviest seeds of any plant in the world. We will listen for the call of the rare Black Parrot as we walk along the tended paths of the unique high-canopied primeval forest. This UNESCO World Heritage Site is often referred to as the original 'Garden of Eden'. Several endemic palm species, as well as the Seychelles flying fox, populate this magical valley. We will drive along the coastal road past quaint coves and fishing villages to reach the famous Anse Lazio beach, with its huge granite boulders. Here we will have ample time to view the impressive granite rock formations.

While Praslin is the second largest of the Seychelles islands after Mahe, it remains a tiny outpost of tranquility where life is slow-paced and relaxed. After our morning here we will take a 30-minute ferry crossing to La Digue. La Digue is a place with impressive perfect beaches sheltered by sculptured boulders and surrounded by lush vegetation. The Seychelles were once described as akin to Hawaii and Tahiti in the 1700s, an untouched Garden of Eden, and no island could be more deserving of this description than La Digue. Small enough to explore on foot, bicycles and ox-carts ply the narrow roads. At L'Union Estate we will see the majestic plantation house. From here we will head to L'Anse Source D'Argent, one of the world's prettiest beaches!! La Digue offers a real insight into the life of the Seychellois people, and today's pace is leisurely (islanders would have it no other way!).

Overnight in Mahe, Seychelles.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 4 Seychelles: Day Cruise of Mahe Island's Coast

After breakfast we will proceed to the harbour and board our boat for a day of cruising from Victoria along the northeast coast of Mahe. Our catamaran will skirt the reef edge providing us with some of the best views that the coast has to offer. This is a landscape that has remained unchanged for centuries. We will sail along beaches once frequented by pirates who would careen their ship and stock up on food and water. We pass by majestic boulders, unspoiled coves, and the last nesting beaches on Mahe of the Hawksbill turtles, a species threatened with extinction.

Our catamaran will anchor while we enjoy a mouthwatering barbecue lunch onboard. After lunch you can stretch out and relax on deck as we cruise past the picturesque Sainte Anne Marine National Park, set amid dazzling turquoise waters. This was the first marine park to be established in the Indian Ocean (1973). If the wind is fair, the captain will raise the sails and take us further from the coast.

Overnight in Mahe, Seychelles.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Lunch

Day 5 Seychelles - Fly to Mauritius

Today we fly from the Seychelles to Mauritius. Surrounded by a tropical sea, covered with swaying fields of sugar cane, and fringed with exotic coconut palms and casuarinas -- Mauritius is truly a garden paradise.

Here the population is vibrant and multicultural. Mauritius was first named Dina Arobi by Arab sailors during the Middle Ages who were also the first people to visit the island. Its location on the trading route to India and Asia brought the Dutch, the French and finally the English to the island. The first Portuguese explorers found no indigenous people living on the island when they came by in the early 1500's. The Dutch settled on the island in 1598 and then later abandoned it in the early 1700's. Mauritius later became a French colony in 1715, and the British took control in 1810 during the Napoleonic Wars. The country became an independent state as a Commonwealth realm in 1968 and a

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republic within the Commonwealth in 1992.

Due to its volcanic origin, age, isolation and its unique terrain, Mauritius is home to a diversity of flora and fauna not usually found in such a small area. Before its discovery by the Portuguese there were no terrestrial mammals on the island, which allowed the evolution of a number of flightless birds and large reptile species.

Overnight in Port-Louis, Mauritius.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 6 Mauritius: Port Louis & Pamplemousses City Tour

The capital city and main port of Mauritius, Port-Louis was constructed in 1735 by the noted French governor, Mahe de Labourdonnais. Today we embark upon a tour of Port Louis, taking in many of the city's landmarks and highlights, as this is a city rich in history and bursting with life. The city blends the island's past and present, and is a rainbow of cultures, religions and traditions. Surrounded by the Port Louis Moka Range, here one finds many well-preserved historic and colonial buildings. This is the economic and administrative center of the island.

We will visit both the Blue Penny Museum and the Mauritius Natural History Museum. The Blue Penny Museum takes in the history of the island's exploration, settlement and colonial period. Here one finds a fantastic selection of antique maps, photographs and engravings from different periods in history. A highlight of the museum collection is the 1847 Blue Penny and Red Penny stamps. These stamps were bought in 1993 for \$2,000,000 by a consortium of Mauritian enterprises headed by the Mauritius Commercial Bank and brought back to Mauritius after almost 150 years abroad.

We will also visit the harbour, as well as one of the busiest places in the capital - the Port Louis market! During our city touring we will also see include the Caudan Waterfront, the Mauritian Chinatown and the old Port Louis theatre.

We will also be sure not to miss the Aapravasi Ghat -- a UNESCO World Heritage site. Aapravasi Ghat is the Immigration Depot where indentured laborers disembarked and were processed before being sent to work on the sugar estates of Mauritius. It is the most important surviving manifestation of the indentured labour system from the 19th and 20th centuries, and only 3 structures of the original site remain. This historical site is an important symbol of Mauritian identity since the ancestors of more than 70% of the present day Mauritian population arrived on the island through this immigrant depot. Aapravasi Ghat means the "Landing place of Immigrants" in Hindi.

Fort Adelaide (also known as La Citadelle), situated in a strategic location, offers a vast panorama of Port-Louis and its harbour. The British built this fortress in fear of a civil war from the remaining French settlers on the island, and also for the purpose of guarding the harbour against enemy attacks. Today we will also visit Pamplemousses Gardens -- known throughout the world for its large collection of exotic plants. These world famous gardens were renamed Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam Botanical Gardens in 1988 in honour of the late Prime Minister. These are the oldest botanical gardens in the Southern Hemisphere, and home to an international collection of plants including many indigenous, endemic and exotic plants. The garden is most famous for its giant water lilies, spice garden and unique collection of 85 varieties of palms from Central America, Asia, Africa and the islands around the Indian Ocean.

Our last stop, the Château de Labourdonnais, built in 1856, was inhabited by a Mauritian family for over 150 years. The beauty and historical character of this unique colonial monument, which has long aroused visitors' interest, has led to a reflection on its cultural and historic value as well as that of the superb estate on which it was located.

Overnight in Port-Louis, Mauritius.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 7 Mauritius: Full Day Island Tour

Today we will enjoy a full day of island exploration. Mauritius is relatively young geologically, having been created by volcanic activity some 8 million years ago. Together with Saint Brandon, Reunion and Rodrigues, the island is part of the Mascarene Islands.

We first head to Grand Bassin, a lake situated in a secluded mountain area deep in the heart of Mauritius. With its Hindu temple this is a holy lake for Mauritians of Hindu faith. The lake rests in the crater of an extinct volcano and it is said that the water inside the lake communicates with the waters of the holy Ganges of India.

We will drive through the Black River Gorges National Park, which encompasses more than 6500 hectares of the remaining native forests of Mauritius. Located in the hilly southwestern part of Mauritius, a visit here provides us with a look at the spectacular natural scenery and some of the unique endemic plant species. This is the sole national park in Mauritius. A twisting road leads to the "seven-coloured earth" of Chamarel, a geological curiosity and one of the oldest sites on the island. This is a mound of undulating land stretching in contrasting layers of colour, and it is believed to be the result from the weathering of volcanic rocks. The landscape here is truly unique!

Our day conclude with a visit to Le Morne Brabant -- a UNESCO World Heritage site. Jutting into the Indian Ocean, Le Morne Brabant is a rugged peninsula at the extreme southwestern tip of Mauritius on the windward side of the island. Le Morne Cultural Landscape was used as a shelter by runaway slaves through the 18th and early years of the 19th centuries. Protected by the mountain's isolated, wooded and almost inaccessible cliffs, the escaped slaves formed small settlements in the caves and on the summit of Le Morne.

Overnight in Port-Louis, Mauritius.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Lunch

Day 8 Mauritius - Fly to Saint-Denis, Reunion: Afternoon Walking Tour

Today we fly from Mauritius to the French territory of Reunion.

Reunion is a ruggedly beautiful island of contrasts, a place with wild and dramatic landscapes. Sandwiched between Mauritius and Madagascar in the Indian Ocean, Reunion has a resolutely French identity, but remains a melting pot of cultures. Before the arrival of the Portuguese in the early sixteenth century, there is little to Reunion's recorded history. The first European discovery of the area was made around 1507 by Portuguese explorers, though it is possible that Swahili or Malay sailors may have visited the island earlier.

Reunion offers mountain scenery, walking trails, and one of the world's most active volcanoes, the highest mountain in the Indian Ocean. Three cirques (steep bowl-shaped amphitheatres) dominate the topography, and Reunion is similar to the island of Hawaii in that both are located above hotspots in the Earth's crust.

This afternoon we will enjoy a walking tour of Saint-Denis, the capital of this French overseas departement. Situated in a basin at the mouth of the Saint-Denis River, the population here is wedged between the ocean and the mountains. This was originally the main port of Reunion, but an artificial harbour on the northwest coast replaced it in the 1880s.

We will start at the Botanical Gardens where we learn about Reunion's exquisite tropical flowers and plants. The Jardin de l'Etat are historic botanical gardens that originally served as zoological gardens at their foundation in 1773 by the East India Company.

We then continue with a walk along Rue de Paris where will see the main points of interest. The Hotel de Ville (Town Hall) is considered by many to be the city's most beautiful building. We will be sure to see the Cathedrale de Saint-Denis, and the Prefecture, which was begun in 1735 and served as the East India Company headquarters. The Grand Marche is one of the main market areas featuring a variety of items for sale such as Malagasy wooden handicrafts, spices, baskets and furniture. Saint-Denis has some splendid Creole houses, often with big open varangues (verandas) and delicate lambrequins (carved wood cornices) on their eaves and window frames.

Overnight in Saint-Denis, Reunion.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 9 Reunion: Saint-Denis - Piton Maito - Cilaos

Reunion Island can best be described as a combination of French, African, Indian, and Chinese cultures. The inhabitants of the island speak mostly French or Creole, and about three-quarters of the island's residents are Roman Catholic, though both Buddhism and Islam are represented. This is largely a society respectful of each other's diverse cultures.

We start our day by driving west along the coastal highway and then inland towards the mountain towns and heart of the island. Today is a day of ever-changing scenery: charming villages, acacia and tamarind forest, steep cliffs and dramatic views. The land encompassed by the National Park of Reunion Island has been proclaimed a UNESCO World Heritage site. Covering more than 40% of the island, the site was recognized for its exceptional biodiversity as well as for its stunning beauty. The area of Pitons, cirques and remparts of Reunion Island coincides with the core zone of La Reunion National Park. Dominated by two towering volcanic peaks, massive walls and three cliff-rimmed cirques, the property includes a great variety of rugged terrain and impressive escarpments, forested gorges and basins creating a visually

striking landscape.

Soon we come to Piton Maido, with its incredible viewpoint looking down on the cirque Mafate: Here one is witness to thousands of hectares of almost untouched wilderness. The entire cirque counts only 700 citizens in 15 small villages, and is a paradise for hikers and nature lovers! From here we have a magnificent view of the highest mountain in the Indian Ocean: the Piton des Neiges, the "Peak of the Snows." (Weather permitting, of course).

We then continue back towards the coast and then onward to Cirque de Cilaos, located in the geographic heart of the island. Cilaos is the largest of the 3 cirques, and the name Cilaos comes from the Malagasy word, Tsilaosa, which means 'the place one never leaves'. This is a spectacular landscape, and the journey to get here is simply stunning! The bottom of the 1200-meter deep volcano measures 100 square kilometers, and offers a unique outline not found elsewhere on the island. The setting couldn't be more grandiose, with its volcanic peaks, deep ravines and forests that are straight out of a fairy tale.

Overnight in Cilaos, Reunion.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 10 Cilaos & the "Wild South"

Today we depart from Cilaos and head to the south coast of Reunion where we will spend our day. Reunion's 'Wild South' is full of lush vegetation, dark green forests contrasting with the azure blue of the ocean. This is a region where the unhurried way of life is complemented by the splendid scenery of volcanic slopes, stunning beaches, and country roads. For many, the south coast is where the real wilderness of Réunion begins to unfold.

We will explore the entire south region, from the white sand beaches of Grand Anse to the southeastern slopes of Piton de la Fournaise. St Joseph, located on the extreme south end of the island of Réunion, is the southernmost point of the European Union. The village of Manapany Les Bains is a quiet holiday spot with a natural swimming pool made from basaltic rock.

The coastal village of Cap Mechant provides stunning views of the wild seas. This is an exceptional place where lava flows have formed a black cliff that plunges into the sea. Along our route we will witness the evidence of the most recent eruptions and lava flows on the island.

Overnight in Saint-Pierre.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 11 South Coast - Piton de la Fournaise - Saint-Denis

Today we head to the Piton de la Fournaise -- "Peak of the Furnace." Along our route we will cross an array of contrasting landscapes as we approach the island's still-active volcano.

The jewel of the island is Piton de la Fournaise, one of the most active volcanoes in the world. This is a typical example of a hot-spot volcano, and it is about 530,000 years old. Three calderas have formed over time, and numerous pyroclastic cones dot the floor of the calderas and their outer flanks. On our route we will make several stops, including a break at the Nez de Boeuf (ox's nose) to enjoy the beautiful view of the Riviere des Remparts, 1000m (3,000 ft) below. The permanent exhibition at the Maison du Volcan (Volcano House) provides visitors with information on the geological formation of the island. At the upper viewing area we will have plenty of time to walk along the rim and enjoy the spectacular views.

We later continue back towards the north coast and we travel across the heart of the island. This is another stunning region of volcanic valleys surrounded by mountains.

Overnight in Saint-Denis.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 12 Reunion - Fly to Mayotte

This morning we fly from Reunion to Dzaoudzi, the capital of the French island of Mayotte.

Arabs invaded the island in the 15th century, and converted its inhabitants, who were probably descendants of earlier Bantu and Malayo-Indonesian peoples, to Islam. In the 16th century the Portuguese and French visited Mayotte. At the end of the 18th century, the Sakalava, a Malagasy tribe from Madagascar, invaded and populated the island, bringing a Malagasy dialect. The French gained colonial control over Mayotte in 1843, and, together with the other islands of the Comoros archipelago and Madagascar, Mayotte became part of a single French overseas territory in the early 20th century.

Mayotte consists of two main islands (Grande-Terre or Mahore, and Petite-Terre or Pamandzi) and several islets. The territory has been politically separate from the rest of the Comoros since the 1970s. Mayotte has inherited a very diverse culture, a richly textured fabric of African, Persian, Malagasy, European and Arab origins. Over the centuries an indigenous form of Islam has developed on the island. Passed down from the early Arab arrivals, the religion is omnipresent in daily life. Between tradition and modernity, the society of Mayotte maintains the customary rules under the guidance of cadis, judges with the role of civil servants. Based on oral tradition, the heritage of Mayotte is not displayed visibly. The history, tales, beliefs and know-how of Mayotte culture are transmitted by the fundis, teachers who possess and pass on knowledge. Thus, fishing, animal husbandry and crop-growing make use of techniques and know-how transmitted from generation to generation.

Our time today is dedicated to exploring this island known for its stunning scenery and friendly population. One of the most interesting aspects of Mahorese culture are the bangas - quaint and colourful little houses built by adolescent men when they move out of their parents' house. This cultural process helps them to mature as they find their status in society without interference from their parents. Later, when these men find a woman to marry, they move to their spouse's home. Just a small number of these houses can be seen today.

We will travel around the coast and through the heart of the island. We continue to Sada with its minaret and small islet. In the islands center one finds many plantations and dense tropical forest. At the Chirongui Pass we will have a wonderful overview of the bay of Boueni and Choungui peak.

At Musical Plage we will stop to see the largest baobab tree in Mayotte. Baobab trees are endemic to Mayotte, Madagascar and parts of the African continent. These are interesting looking trees with thick trunks, large fruit shaped gourds, and remarkable branches that look like the roots are on the top of the tree instead of underground. Many Baobabs are estimated to be more than 1,000 years old.

Overnight on Mayotte.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 13 Mayotte - Fly to Nosy Be, Madagascar

This afternoon we say "see you later" to Mayotte as we fly to the island of Nosy Be at the northern tip of Madagascar. This is the largest of Madagascar's offshore islands; the name Nosy Be simply means 'Big Island', also often referred to as "the Perfumed Isle". The whole island is a volcanic region characterized by basaltic lava flows that have given rise to fertile soils.

Officially known as the Republic of Madagascar, this island nation comprises the island of Madagascar (the fourth-largest island in the world), as well as numerous smaller peripheral islands including Nosy Be. Following the prehistoric breakup of the supercontinent Gondwana, Madagascar split from India around 88 million years ago, allowing native plants and animals to evolve in relative isolation. Consequently, Madagascar is a biodiversity hotspot; over 90 percent of its wildlife is found nowhere else on Earth. Home to friendly, traditional peoples with traditional cultures, Madagascar has all the right ingredients for an unforgettable destination.

During our time here we will tour much of the island. We will explore the coast, the central market, and enjoy the traditional scenery and local villages. There is just one busy town, Hell-Ville, where the roads are packed with ancient Renault taxis, zebu-carts, bicycles, tuk-tuks and pedestrians. Local shops jostle for space with local stalls that sell everything from chili peppers to mangrove crabs caked in mud. This decaying colonial town is the administrative centre of the island, as well as its main port. Beautiful restored colonial buildings along the sea promenade, some of which were built early in this century, characterize the city. In the upper part of the port, old cannons watch over the harbour.

Overnight in Nosy Be.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

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Day 14 Nosy Be: Excursion to Nosy Komba

Today we drive to Hell-Ville from where we take a boat trip out to the nearby island of Nosy Komba -- "Lemur Island". Nosy Komba, a beautiful island located just a few kilometres away from Nosy Be, is 'on the map' for its population of habituated black lemurs. There are numerous coves for us to explore as well as paths that lead through local farms and into the hills where one finds a variety of birds and chameleons.

Here we take a pleasant walk along the beach and visit a local village before heading to the forest to see the local black lemur population. You will notice how the hills fold dramatically into the water, creating sandy coves and sheltered harbours for fishing villages.

Overnight in Nosy Be.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 15 Nosy Be: Lokobe Reserve

This morning will travel to Ambatozavavy on the east coast, where we transfer to traditional pirogues (wooden dugout canoes) in order to journey to Ampasipohy, a little village on the edge of the Lokobe Reserve. The 40-50 minute pirogue trip offers an excellent way to experience local life and transport.

Lokobe Reserve is only accessible by sea and is a haven of peace. Here we will take a guided walk through the forest zone bordering the reserve to look for, among other species, the grey-backed sportive lemur. The jungle walk with our guide enables us to take in the beautiful sounds of nature in this primitive forest. The famous Nosy Be panther chameleon is present in this lowland rainforest. The 740-hectare reserve is biologically significant for plants and animals found either nowhere else.

Overnight in Nosy Be.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 16 Nosy Be, Madagascar - Fly to Mayotte

Today we journey back to Mayotte (via Reunion).

Though French is the official language, most people speak Comorian (closely allied to Swahili). There are some villages along the Mayotte coast in which a Malagasy dialect is the main language. Agriculture is the principal occupation on Mayotte and is confined to the central and northeastern plains; cash crops include vanilla, ylang-ylang, coffee, and coconuts. Cassava (manioc), bananas, corn (maize), and rice are grown for subsistence.

Overnight on Mayotte.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 17 Mayotte: Lagoon Tour

After breakfast we will depart by private zodiacs* in order to discover one of the largest closed lagoons in the world. Mayotte and its 1500 km² lagoon is considered a world-class hotspot of biodiversity. With some luck we will enjoy seeing dolphins playing close to our boats. During our journey we will discover the many smaller nearby islets, including the famous 'white sand island'. Depending on the tide, it may also be possible to discover the mysterious world of the mangrove swamp.

We will enjoy lunch along a baobab-lined beach before returning back to our hotel in the afternoon.

* NOTE: some of our stops will involve "wet landings," meaning that you must board/disembark by walking in shallow water (knee depth) to and from the beach/boat.

Overnight on Mayotte.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 18 Mayotte - Fly to Grande Comore

Today we fly to Grande Comore (Ngazidja), the main island of the Comoros. We will arrive in Moroni, the capital of the Islands. Depending on the flight time, we may have extra time on Mayotte or begin our Comoros sightseeing on arrival.

Moroni is located in the southwest of the island, and is a delightful little town. The settlement sits alongside a harbour full of small fishing boats, and the old quarter of the town is a maze of narrow streets that are fantastic to explore. This is a peaceful place, with a few broad squares and modern government buildings. Once an important trading town, today Moroni has slipped quietly into a forgotten existence where tourists are rare and visitors are treated as a curious novelty. Though small, this is the nation's largest settlement and chief port. Largely Arabic in atmosphere, the town contains a number of beautiful mosques. Moroni prospered before the 16th century as a port of call for Arab merchants. It came under the French in the 19th century, serving as the capital of a French overseas territory from 1947 to 1975 when Comoros achieved independence. In Moroni we will visit the Arab Quarter, the neighborhood around the port and the old Friday mosque. This convoluted medina with narrow streets dates back to Swahili times. Today the island's inhabitants are predominantly descended from Arab and African ancestors. We will discover the small local museum, and the colorful market with its wide array of fruit, spices, and handicrafts. The local market is a great place to wander around to observe scenes of daily life.

Overnight on Grande Comore.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 19 Grande Comore - Fly to Moheli (Mwali)

This morning we fly to the island of Moheli (Mwali), the smallest, wildest, and least visited of all the Comoran Islands. Time-permitting, we may begin our sightseeing upon arrival.

With a population of approximately 38,000, Mwali is the least densely populated of the four islands. In 1997, a group of secessionists declared the island independent of the Comoro Republic but this claim was rejected and Mwali agreed to join the Union of the Comoro Islands.

Referred to by the French as Moheli, it has an area of 290 square km. The island has rich soil, magnificent forests and fine pasture lands. The valleys and slopes of the island are covered with coconut trees, coffee trees, cacao and ylang-ylang trees, as well as a wide variety of crops. Three small islets on the south side of the island near the harbour of Nioumachoua provide a natural sheltering place for sailing ships during inclement weather. Here the inhabitants mainly live off the land and sea, as there are no industries on these islands.

You will undoubtedly be charmed by the authenticity of the villagers, the untamed nature and the remoteness of the destination. Its few inhabitants, who live in harmony with nature, have preserved it untouched until this day. This is an environment where noise, pollution and stress are something unheard of -- "Mwali, the one that quietly sleeps."

(Our excursion to Moheli is entirely dependent upon local flight schedules. Additional sightseeing may be added to our time on Grand Comore if we are unable to make it to Moheli).

Overnight on Moheli.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 20 Moheli Island Exploration

Today will be spent exploring the real beauty of the island of Moheli. Moheli offers plenty of opportunities to discover the treasures of biodiversity. Bird watchers may observe many endemic species, such as the Blue Vanga, Moheli Scops Owl, and Benson's Brush Warbler.

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There is a good chance that we will see the Comorian lemur, and the Livingstone bat -- a giant fruit-eating bat with a wingspan of up to 1.5m.

We will take an exploratory hike through the primary forest. Here we will see many typical fruit trees and plants, such as vanilla, pepper, cloves, cinnamon and pineapple. As well, we will learn about the many medicinal uses of the local vegetation. Today we will also enjoy a short boat journey to a nearby cove in order to view a lovely waterfall.

Friendly villagers will greet us as we enjoy a quiet walk in the village of Nioumachoua. Here we will witness local village life as people go about their daily business. The pace of life is slow, as everything here functions on 'island time'. A highlight today will be our evening excursion to a marine reserve in order to witness turtles laying eggs at night on the beach. The island of Moheli is one of the only places in the world where the turtles come ashore to lay eggs every night of the year.

There is no question about Moheli's backwater status: this island hasn't caught up with the 20th century yet, let alone the 21st.

Overnight on Moheli.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 21 Moheli - Fly to Grande Comore

Depending on the scheduling of our flight, we may have some time for further exploration of Moheli this morning. If our schedule requires an early departure then we will continue with some sightseeing on Grande Comore upon our arrival.

This island nation is located around the northern end of the Mozambique Channel, between northern Madagascar and northeastern Mozambique. This is the southernmost member state of the Arab League and the third-smallest African nation by area. The name Comoros is believed to derive from the Arabic word qamar or "moon". The people of these islands place great strength in the community, and the local culture is nourished and nurtured through the various customs and traditions that have been passed on from generation to generation. Customary ceremonies are a fundamental element of the life of the people. Dialects vary from one island to another, and the Arabic influence is evident in all aspects of the life of the islanders.

Located in a strategic position, these islands once played a major role in a thriving world economy of the western Indian Ocean. Several communities on the islands were once major trading centers in the 15th century. The Comoros had trade contacts with Africa and Asia, and we know from archaeological evidence that trade reached as far away as Japan. After the Portuguese entered the Indian Ocean many European and American sailors visited the islands.

Overnight on Grande Comore.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 22 Departure

Departure from Moroni (airport HAH), Grande Comore.

BON VOYAGE!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast