

Natural History Tour to the Seychelles

The Seychelles are often immediately associated with golden beaches, azure waters, a tropical climate and romantic hideaways for the rich and famous. However, the islands have far more to offer than just a tropical paradise. The 115 islands that comprise the archipelago of the Seychelles teem with wildlife and acts as a sanctuary for some of the rarest species of flora and fauna on Earth. What's more, they are protected within the boundaries of national parks and nature reserves that comprise almost 50% of islands' landmass.

The Seychelles host an amazing array of rich and unique flora which earned the islands two UNESCO World Heritage Sites: Aldabra, the world's largest raised coral atoll, and the legendary Vallée de Mai, once believed to be the original site of the Garden of Eden. There are 250 native plants of which 75 are endemic, including the critically endangered Jellyfish Tree, the carnivorous Seychelles Pitcher Plant, the beautiful Seychelles Vanilla Orchid and the famous Coco de Mer Palm, which produces the largest seed in the world.

The islands are of great interest to birdwatchers, with almost 240 species recorded. Thirty-five species breed here, including 11 endemics, some of which are very rare. Of those, the Seychelles Magpie Robin and Seychelles' Warbler were rescued from the brink of extinction, whereas Seychelles Paradise Flycatcher, Seychelles White-eye and Seychelles Scops-owl are still confined to small natural populations on only one island each. Also, the critically endangered Seychelles Black Parrot is found only in the remains of the primeval palm forest on two islands. The Seychelles host some of the most spectacular seabird colonies in the world, including White-tailed Tropicbird, Fairy Tern, Greater Noddy, Sooty Tern and Great Frigatebird. The colonies of Audubon's Shearwater and Lesser Noddy rank as the largest in the world. The golden beaches of the Seychelles also host many interesting migrant species, including the stunning Crab Plover.

Endemism is high on the islands, with 33 endemic species of reptiles and amphibians, numerous insects and molluscs. Of those, perhaps most striking are the Giant Millipede, the intriguing Tiger Chameleon, Gardiener's Frog, one of the smallest in the world and the magnificent King of Seychelles butterfly, restricted only to a forest on one island.

To embrace the richness, uniqueness and splendour of the Seychelles, this tour includes visits to six islands: **Mahé, Praslin, Cousin, Curieuse, La Digue and Bird Island**, all distinctive in their own right.



This tour is designed to show you all the endemic bird species, spectacular seabird colonies and other highlights of the unique flora and fauna. While there, it will be difficult to ignore the islands' beauty and charm, so the tour is taken at a slow and relaxed pace with plenty of time to accommodate individual needs and desires. Since wildlife is very tame on the islands, photographic opportunities are endless and you will leave the Seychelles not only with treasured memories of a great holiday but many spectacular pictures too.

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Day 1 You will be collected from the airport in Mahé and transferred to our hotel. In the afternoon, we will undertake our first trip with a gentle introduction to the island's unique flora and fauna.

Days 2-3 We will spend two full days exploring Mahé, the largest island in the archipelago, and its diverse habitats, ranging from the coastal mangrove forests to the country's highest mountains. A major attraction of our stay will be a visit to the **Morne Seychellois National Park**, the largest terrestrial national park in the Seychelles and covering more than 20% of the area of Mahé. The park encompasses the highest peak in the Seychelles at 905m. We will take a slow walk up one of the lower peaks, where in the thickets of the mosses, ferns, liverworts, shrubs and trees, we will search for the Seychelles Pitcher Plant, endemic orchids and many other native plants. There is a good chance to see here all three endemic species of frogs, including the Gardiner's Frog, which at 11 mm in length, is one of the smallest frogs in the world. We will also be entertained here by the endemic Seychelles Bulbul, Seychelles Blue Pigeon, the Tiger Chameleon, restricted only to three islands of the Seychelles, and if we are lucky, the highly endangered King of Seychelles butterfly. A walk offers breathtaking panoramic views of the island and surrounding ocean.



The very small Seychelles Kestrel is fairly common and widespread in Mahé and no doubt we will see this species during our stay here. Our efforts though will concentrate on finding the critically endangered Seychelles White-eye, which is represented on Mahé by a small population of less than 50 individuals. In the vicinity of the mountain tops we will look for the Seychelles Swiftlet and, in the evening, we will admire endemic Seychelles Fruit Bats flying to their roosts. Later at night, we will search for an endangered Seychelles Scops-owl, confined only to mid-elevation forests on Mahé.

We will end one of the evenings in the ambience of a spice garden, which boasts rows of vanilla vines, citronelle, cinnamon, nutmeg and other spices. The garden is in keeping with the original French tradition of the 18th century spice trade and serves the most delicate Creole dishes, with views over the hills and across the surrounding valleys.

Days 4-8 On Day 4 of our tour, we will take a ferry to the island of Praslin, the second largest island of the archipelago. We will be based here for five nights and make daily trips to neighbouring Cousin, Curieuse and La Digue islands.



The highlight of our stay on Praslin will be a visit to the **Vallee de Mai**, a remarkable living remnant of the prehistoric forest which existed when the Seychelles granitic islands were still part of Gondwanaland. The forest is dominated by



palms and screwpines (*Pandanus* species). All six of Seychelles' endemic palms are found in Vallee de Mai, including the world's largest population of the famous Coco de Mer. The male inflorescences of Coco de Mer attain gigantic sizes of up to one and a half metre, whereas the seeds hold the record of being the largest in the plant kingdom, having weight of up to an unbelievable 20 kg. This species alone ensured that Vallee de Mai was awarded World Heritage status. The site is also a refuge for some rare animals. Apart from another five endemic bird species present here, this is the best place to see the national bird of Seychelles, the critically endangered Seychelles Black Parrot, whose highly pitched whistles echo across the forest. There are a number of endemic reptiles, amphibians and molluscs, including the Seychelles Tree frog, Tiger Cameleon, Giant Bonze Gecko, Seychelles Skink, Praslin Snail, White Slug and many others, some of which may play a significant role in pollination of the Coco de Mer. We will undertake a walk through the narrow trails of the forest in the company of a qualified guide, who will introduce us to the ecology and endemism of this unique habitat.



Pigeon. This small island also boasts a healthy population of 300,000 seabirds of seven species: Fairy Tern, White-tailed Tropicbird, Lesser Noddy, Brown Noddy, Bridled Tern, Audubon's Shearwater and Wedge-tailed Shearwater. The island is recognised as one of the most important nesting sites for Hawksbill Turtle in the western Indian Ocean. Reptiles found here include the Aldabra Giant Tortoise, four species of endemic skinks, as well as native Green Gecko, giving Cousin one of the highest lizard densities in the world.

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Curieuse Island and the surrounding waters are part of the **Curieuse Marine National Park** and we will spend half a day visiting the site. A walk across the island, through forests, viewpoints, swamps and beaches will be a good way to explore the island. A boardwalk through the thick mangrove forest will be a

particular delight. Besides Praslin, Curieuse is the only other site where the Coco de Mer Palm grows, so we will have the second chance to view it here. One of the island's attractions is a population of about 500 Aldabra Giant Tortoises and our encounters with them will be particularly close here.

One morning will be devoted to visiting **Cousin Island**, a tiny island only 2 km from Praslin. The island is most famous for its conservation efforts to save the last remaining population of the Seychelles Warbler. This is one of the big success stories in Seychelles leading to an increase of the warbler population to 3,500 across the Seychelles. In addition, four other endemic species can be seen here: Seychelles Magpie Robin, Seychelles Sunbird, Seychelles Fody and Seychelles Blue



A stunning 30-minute boat ride from Praslin will take us to another beautiful island, **La Digue**, the fourth largest island in the archipelago. Transport on the island depends mainly on bicycles and ox carts, which gives the island its unique character

and a relaxed pace of life. The main reason for our visit to the island is the Seychelles Paradise Flycatcher, the only Seychelles' endemic bird still listed as critically endangered. We will take a walk through the **Veuve Reserve**, the best place

to watch these birds flitting between the trees in pursuit of their insect prey. The island is also famed for its beautiful beaches and the coral reefs that fringe the island and teem with a myriad of marine life. We will visit one of those beaches, where long stretches of soft ivory sand are bordered by spectacular granite boulders and lush mountain forest, giving it the reputation of one of the most photographed beaches in the world.



than twenty species of birds at any one time throughout the year. Perhaps most important though is the thriving population of Sooty Terns, which, thanks to the island's management practice, increased their numbers from 18,000 pairs in the 1960s to 300,000 pairs today. Although, we will visit the island at the end of their breeding season, there will still be significant numbers with fully grown young. The island is known for rare vagrants, but more common migratory species include Turnstones, Grey Plovers, Whimbrels, Sanderlings, Greater Sandplovers and Crab Plovers. Both species of Frigatebird and Masked Boobies roost here. Virtually, the whole island is a true bird and photographer's paradise.

Day 9 After four full days on Praslin, a morning ferry will take us back to Mahé. Later that day, we will undertake a 35 minute flight to reach **Bird Island**, the most northerly island in the Seychelles archipelago.

Days 10-11 As the name rightly depicts, Bird Island is all about birds and an absolute must-visit for any respected nature lover. It is an amazing privately owned nature reserve and eco-tourism island where you will find yourself as close to nature as it is virtually possible. The Casuarina trees, just outside your

Another attraction here is the Aldabra Giant Tortoises, which roam freely around the chalets. More interestingly, the island hosts Esmeralda, considered to be the oldest Aldabra Giant Tortoise in the world. These are just a few highlights which will make your stay here a memorable experience.



Day 12 We will take a return flight to Mahé in the afternoon and conclude our holiday with a lovely evening dinner before departing for the airport to take the overnight flight home.

chalets, are filled with nests of Lesser and Brown Noddies, whereas the crevices at the bottom are occupied by the beautiful White-tailed Tropicbirds. Fairy Terns breed here in good numbers and can be seen balancing eggs on the smallest of branches. Altogether, there are more

