

YEMEN: SOCOTRA



Cut off from mainland Africa by the Guardafui Channel, with Yemen to the north-west and Somalia to the south-west, the island chain of Socotra is as unique as it is mysterious. Constituting 95% of the archipelago's landmass, the mountainous terrain of the main island is a zoological and botanical treasure trove and a sanctuary for species which have long since become extinct elsewhere – earning its rightful nickname as the 'Galapagos of the Indian Ocean'. Discover this unique, UNESCO-listed island for yourself on Secret Compass's trekking expedition to cross Socotra.

Aim

The aim of this expedition is to complete a camel-supported trekking traverse of Socotra's main island. Described as 'the most alien place on Earth' and isolated for years due to its extreme location and then civil war, few travellers have reached the archipelago. As a result, major developments have largely bypassed the 'Galapagos of the Indian Ocean', and so preserving the unique flora, fauna and terrain which is now recognised as a UNESCO World Heritage site. This varied route bisects Socotra, encompassing the Hajhir Massif mountain range, dramatic gorges and rolling plateaus, bracketed by the azure blue of the Indian Ocean with its expanse of sandy beaches, allowing the intrepid trekking team to experience first hand the wild beauty of this remote island.

Highlights

- Trek 120km with camel support across Yemen's isolated Socotra island
- Discover the UNESCO World Heritage listed flora and fauna
- Cross the island on foot over a variety of challenging terrains

- Explore gorges, plateaus and high peaks before descending to untouched beaches
- Summit the highest non-technical peaks in the Hajhir Massif
- Keep an eye out for dragon blood trees and blue baboon spiders
- Swim in natural rock pools before camping for the night
- Meet the vibrant communities who call Socotra home

Why Go

Endemic wildlife

For such a small landmass, Socotra is home to a dazzling array of wildlife with only a few other islands on Earth boasting greater diversity. More than 37% of Socotra's plant species are found in no other place on earth, including the famous Dragon Blood Tree – whose bright red resin is still prized today – giant succulent trees and desert roses. The unique nature of Socotra's plants and animals add to the alien feel of the dramatic landscape with the huge numbers of endemic animals being equally striking, from blue baboon spiders to the IUCN red-listed Socotran Bunting. Heading out into the interior of the island on foot, supported only by camels, our team will reach many areas where these delicate ecosystems still thrive, supporting local ecotourism initiatives to encourage the protection of Socotra island's unique populations.

Isolated Island

Socotra has had an undeniably tumultuous past – long buffeted by issues surrounding geopolitics, rapid development and climate change. Years of civil war restricted access to the archipelago and drove inhabitants to desperate measures including extensive deforestation due to the lack of cooking fuel. Whilst the remote nature of the islands, on the cusp of the African and Asian worlds, has contributed to the diversity of life across the archipelago and its surrounding coral reefs, the complex and unreliable logistics required to access the island have, until now, prevented wider development or damage. As the islands are starting to open up to intrepid travellers, this is an opportunity to develop sustainable, eco-tourism without the drive for extensive infrastructure which may damage the fragile island ecosystems.

Challenging Trek

Although dwarfed by the surrounding landmasses of Yemen and Somalia, what Socotra lacks in size, it makes up for in diversity. The transect trekking route devised by Secret Compass will see the team travel from the beaches and marine preserves of the coast, into the heart of the Hajhir Massif. In the shadow of Socotra's highest peak – Mashanig (1503m) – the team will trek to the summit of the highest, non-technical mountains on the island before dropping into expansive wadi gorge systems. The rest of the trek encompasses broad plateaus, river valleys and forested hills before returning to the coast, home to sand dunes towering hundreds of metres high. With shorter trekking days planned to avoid the worst of the heat, and support from camels and local herders, this trek will be challenging but ultimately rewarding.

Unique Traditions

Socotra is a living museum of languages with its mother tongue – Socatri – a pre-islamic, unwritten language, still used today in everything from traditional medicine to poetry competitions. Outside of the capital, Hadibu, many Socotran's remain semi-nomadic pastoralists, a lifestyle little changed from that depicted in the centuries of rock art hidden in caves across the island but now increasingly under threat due to foreign investment interests, globalisation and a changing climate. By travelling on foot, with the support of a local camel team, the expedition group will have the opportunity to visit more remote villages, staying with communities and learning about the evolving challenges they face on this isolated island.

The Plan

Secret Compass runs expeditions with framework itineraries, rather than guided tours with set daily plans – you can read more about our approach [here](#). The following is the outline plan for this epic expedition – the 'substance'

rather than the specifics. A fuller itinerary is provided in the Expedition Handbook, available on request or upon [application to join the team](#).

Teammates arrive

Flights to Socotra are the team members' responsibility, however there is currently only 1 flight a week running from Cairo (via Seiyun) to Socotra. The expedition leader will be at Cairo International Airport on the evening of 14 April ready for onward travel in the early hours of the 15 April. The Yemenia Air flight lands into Socotra at 0900, offering those with a window seat their first view of the enigmatic island isolated in the Indian Ocean. From the airport, the team will transfer to a beach camp for lunch, followed by an expedition briefing, exploratory walk and kit check.

On expedition

Refreshed after a night at the coast, the expedition begins with a transfer to the foothills of the Hagher Mountains where the team will meet the camels and their handlers who will support the trek. From here, the team will trek into the heart of Socotra tackling the highest non-technical (trekking) peaks, exploring gorges and crossing plateaus en route. Throughout the trek, the team will stay with local communities or wild camp, experiencing first-hand the warmth and hospitality of the island's residents, as well as learning some of their traditional ways of safeguarding the previous natural environments, such as the dragon blood trees. Over 100km later, the team will reach the coastline, having successfully bisected Socotra to reach the sandy beaches and blue waters of the ocean.

Goal achieved

Once at the coast, the team will be met by vehicles for the transfer back to a beach camp, with the drive itself completing a loop of the Eastern half of the island to display more of the diverse scenery on offer, including the towering sand dunes at Arher. The evening will be spent relaxing, swimming and celebrating the team's achievements before the morning transfer to the airport for onward flights, arriving into Cairo on the afternoon of 22 April.

Fitness

Secret Compass expeditions are achievable by anyone with a healthy lifestyle and a good level of general fitness. Team members should be willing to be part of a team working together to achieve the goal of the expedition. As a team member, you should have an adventurous and robust spirit. The biggest challenge on this expedition will be trekking on steep terrain.

Teammates who arrive without meeting the agreed minimum fitness requirements can jeopardise themselves and the team's expedition goal so take training seriously. Prepare as appropriate and arrive fit and ready to go. Applicants will receive a Handbook with further expedition information and Secret Compass are on-hand to answer any fitness, health, training or kit questions that remain.

Minimum fitness requirements

- Trek: up to 25km per day
- Daily activity: from four to ten hours' trekking
- Carry: up to 8kg per person in a rucksack (daysacks only with camel support)
- Terrain: rugged, exposed, mountainous terrain including steep slopes, soft wadis and rocky surfaces
- Elevation: from sea level to a maximum altitude of 1500m.
- Climate: tropical desert with temperatures averaging 30C
- Swim: beneficial but not required – the expedition starts/ends at the coast and natural pools are available en route
- Age: 21+

Included

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- Secret Compass leader with full communications and medical kit
- Local support team and camels
- Accommodation throughout in tents
- All food (snacks and meals) and soft drinks
- All transport once on Socotra island as outlined in itinerary
- All permits and permissions required
- Visa support documents, Visa fee and processing
- 24 hour UK-based Operations Room

Not included

- International [flights](#)/travel to and from Socotra Airport (Hadibu)
- [Travel insurance](#) (obligatory)
- Tips for the local team – discretionary but appreciated
- Alcohol
- Personal equipment (full kit list is provided in the Handbook)
- Any activities, accommodation or arrangements outside of the Secret Compass itinerary

Exped FAQ

On application to join this epic expedition to Socotra, potential teammates will receive a detailed Expedition Handbook. Here are some expedition-specific questions and our general [FAQ](#) will answer many other questions. [Get in touch](#) with the team at SCHQ if your question remains unanswered.

Can you help with flights?

Secret Compass have researched various flight options to and from Socotra – whilst we can't book those for you, we have prepared in-depth guidance which is available to team members on booking.

Can I check I'm bringing the right kit?

The Expedition Handbook provides more detail on this epic trekking expedition to Socotra, including our full recommended kit list. Apply to join the team to get hold of your copy, then SCHQ will be on hand if you have any outstanding questions.

Will there be phone signal on Socotra?

This is highly unlikely for the majority of the expedition so our advice is to unplug, switch off, and enjoy the challenge. Your Secret Compass leader will be equipped with several satellite devices in case of emergencies and our 24 hour Operations Room in the UK will be the point of contact for your friends or relatives throughout your expedition.

Can I charge my gadgets?

You should be prepared to be self-sufficient (power wise!) during this expedition so bringing a power bank is a good idea if you have any essential electronics.

Can you cater for vegetarians?

This expedition can accept people with some dietary requirements. Please outline your specific needs on the Application Form and we will respond with further details.

Could local activity affect us?

Secret Compass has operated successfully in this challenging region for many years including our successful Socotra expedition all the way back in 2013. Due to the remote nature of the archipelago, there are limited transport options and this itinerary is tightly constrained by air access – should this no longer be available, or travel through the Yemen mainland considered outside of our risk tolerance, the SCHQ team have developed in-depth contingency plans to extract the team via other means. Please read our [approach](#) and terms and conditions to understand more about our position.