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**Expedition aboard  
MV Maya's Dugong**





# ALDABRA

Expedition aboard the MV Maya's Dugong

Aldabra, also called the jewel in the crown of Seychelles, or "Galapagos of the Indian Ocean", is the world's latest raised coral atoll, the finest surviving tropical atoll ecosystem on earth. It is a tropical island wilderness, seen by only a few privileged visitors each year.

Aldabra has inspired ancient explorers, some of the world's most famous scientists and the modern travellers of today.

The name itself is a mystery, believed to be a word of Arabic origin but with any number of theories about its actual meaning, which could be 'green' or 'door-knocker' or possibly the navigational star Aldebaran.

Indeed, it seems there has always been a mythical aura attached to the name of the most far-flung and isolated of all the islands of the Seychelles archipelago.

The giant tortoises on the island form by far the world's largest population and the marine life is prolific. The last surviving flightless bird of the Indian Ocean, the Aldabra Rail, is found only here as are many other unique land birds and it is a vital breeding ground for turtles and seabirds.

Charles Darwin himself, whose work in the Galapagos is largely responsible for the archipelago's esteemed status as naturalist's

paradise, recognised Aldabra's unique natural properties, as well as being the only other place in the world aside from the Galapagos where giant tortoises could be found naturally. He also recommended to British authorities that they ensure the atoll would be protected from exploitation or development.

Despite its status as one of the world's most strictly protected natural wonders, travel to Aldabra is still – and will likely always be – incredibly difficult due to its extreme isolation.

With expedition vessel MV Maya's Dugong, operated by Silhouette Cruises, one of the most recognized names in live-aboard cruising in the Seychelles, a handful of visitors will be able to experience the atoll of Aldabra and its fascinating sights and treasures as part of an in-depth eco-tourism and diving expedition.

*This is your opportunity to be one of them.*



## Highlights of the Eco expedition

### Aldabra

Aldabra is the world's second largest, and latest raised coral atoll. With an area of approximately 150 sq km it comprises about one-third of the landmass of Seychelles, but has no human population other than the Warden and staff of the Research Station on the island of Picard.

The atoll was known for centuries by Arab navigators and was first charted by the Portuguese in 1511. The French were the first recorded visitors when Captain Lazare Picault, sent to chart Seychelles in 1742, came upon Aldabra.

Soon after Seychelles' independence, the government granted Aldabra protected status as a nature reserve, and in 1982 Aldabra became a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Today, only a small team of rangers and scientists inhabit the island, managed by the Seychelles Islands Foundation, which operates the conservation and research projects on Aldabra.

It has the world's largest population of Giant Tortoise, with around 100,000 of these prehistoric survivors. There are many plants and birds not found elsewhere and one of the world's most important breeding populations of the endangered Green Turtle.

Birds include the Aldabra Rail, the last surviving flightless bird of the Indian Ocean and frigate birds.

Drift diving is exceptional in the channels that fill and empty the lagoon with the tides. Shoals of fish stand sentry at these entrances to the lagoon, where sharks and other predators sweep by as they commute between the open ocean and the lagoon. In recent years, dugongs have been seen, a sign that this rare mammal may one day return to breed in Seychelles.

We visit the Aldabra Research station, the mangroves forests, the booby colony at Johnny Channel and the world's second largest colony of frigatebirds (10,000 pairs of two species, Great Frigatebird and Lesser Frigatebird). Many of the endemic land birds can be seen ashore, including Aldabra Drongo, Aldabra Fody and Madagascar Sacred Ibis and Aldabra Rail, together with the world's largest population of giant tortoises.

We will dive and snorkel the main channel, the West Channel and Johnny Channel, experiencing the exhilaration of being swept along by the shoals, observing both pelagic and reef fish in the shallow waters of the lagoon, and it is possible to snorkel at the mangroves forest and the channel in high tide.

### Astove - Aldabra Group

Astove is surrounded by deep waters where many a ship has come to grief on its treacherous reefs. The fringing reef averages about 250 meters from the shoreline and beyond this, the floor plunges steeply.

This wall of corals is probably the best dive site in the Indian Ocean and indeed has been rated by diving experts as one of the finest dive sites in the world. Hundreds of species of fish, Green Turtles and even the anchors of wrecked ships are to be seen.

Snorkeling is also excellent on the edge of the drop off. Ashore there are graves of shipwrecked sailors, bleached turtle bones and buildings including the residence of a former Manager. Laid out around a courtyard in the style of a Moorish palace, it has recently been renovated by Islands Development Company, managers of the island, to provide accommodation. A short walk across the island leads to the shallow lagoon where Caspian Terns, rarely encountered in an ocean setting, dive for fish. We return to the atoll coast via the old settlement., we visit the old manager's house, including the Veevers-Carter house and old chapel, then cross the island to the lagoon. We dive the West walls.



## Highlights of the Eco expedition

### **Assumption - Aldabra Group**

Assumption was laid waste by guano mining around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This was the fate Aldabra escaped, wiping out seabird colonies including Abbott's Booby, now restricted to Christmas Island. However, the vegetation is now slowly recovering and there are plans for the rehabilitation of the island. One day it could become a mini-Aldabra.

There is a small human population, connected by air to Mahé, though flights are few and far between. There is a long, beautiful arc of coral sand on one side of the island, beyond which the marine life is very rich and diving is excellent. Shoals of snappers, butterfly fish and angelfish flit between the corals in one of the most colorful and diverse reefs of Seychelles.

### **Cosmoledo - Aldabra Group**

A visit to Cosmoledo is comparable to one to Aldabra but in some ways, Cosmoledo even surpasses this famous atoll in its extreme atmosphere of remoteness. The island is uninhabited and very rarely visited by the outside world. There are some bird species on Cosmoledo not found on Aldabra, including enormous seabird colonies with Seychelles largest populations of Red-footed Booby, Masked Booby and Sooty Tern. A race of Madagascar White-eye (named *menaiensis*) is unique to the island. It is the last breeding site for Brown Booby, extinct everywhere else in the islands. The diving is also excellent and the marine life is very rich. The corals have survived here more in tact than elsewhere in the western Indian Ocean.

Many turtles can be seen, including very young ones, in the shallow waters of the lagoon, close to the main island of Menai. We visit the deserted settlement and dive the West Island of Cosmoledo (Menai) where turtles abound.

### **Alphonse & Bijoutier - Alphonse Group**

The Alphonse Group consists of two neighboring atolls, Alphonse Atoll and St Francois Atoll, the latter comprising of two islands St Francois and Bijoutier. These are some of the most beautiful islands of Seychelles. Alphonse is shaped like an arrowhead, with trails of white foam flying out behind it as though it was skimming through the water. It was once a productive plantation, generating 100,000 coconuts a month. If you were looking for a dream island, the tiny, uninhabited Bijoutier is it. A circle of white sand capped with bright green vegetation, fringed by purple reefs and turquoise sea. The diving around these islands is excellent, though currents can be strong. Features include forests of tall Gorgonian fan corals, shoals of barracuda and other predators together with the occasional Hawksbill Turtle that drifts by.

### **Desroches & St Joseph - Amirantes**

The Amirantes is a linear chain of coral islands and atolls west of the granitics. Desroches, the largest and nearest to Mahe, measures 6 km long and up to 1.5 km wide. Its coast is lined with shady coconut palms and other native vegetation. Many turtles nest on the 14km of immaculate white sandy beaches that wrap around Desroches and crystal clear blue water laps at the shore.





## Expedition aboard MV Maya's Dugong

There's cruising, and then there's expedition cruising. For travellers who consider themselves adventurers and not just tourists, who seek fulfilment from a holiday and not just leisure, and who appreciate the excitement and unpredictable nature of travelling to isolated locales in a unique way, there may be no better way to make use of a holiday than on an expedition cruise.

Operated by Silhouette Cruises, the leading live-aboard cruise operator in the Seychelles Islands, the expedition programmes are hosted aboard the oceanographic vessel MV Maya's Dugong and sailing yacht SY Sea Bird. Both vessels are ideal to reach the far corners of the globe in comfortable and pleasant way, backed by more than a decade of experience in the tourism and hospitality industry.

### Travelling on an Expedition

One of the most exciting aspects of an expedition is the fact that natural events and sightings can help shape our journey. For this reason, the expedition plan featured in this document should only be used as a general guide instead of being treated as an exact scheduled itinerary.

It is expected that no two expeditions will be exactly alike, because weather, tides and chance nature encounters will influence the day-to-day activities that are possible throughout a given week. Therefore, we kindly ask for the patience and understanding of all of our guests if there are certain adjustments to the expedition plan to cater for these events.

Rest assured our crew will do their utmost to ensure the proposed activities for each day are in the spirit of the expedition plan and aimed at providing the maximum possible level of enjoyment for all our guests.

### Excursions & Tides

Aldabra's massive lagoon is subject to powerful tidal currents which require all excursions into the lagoon to follow strict timelines. The speed at which water travels in and out of the channels means that certain areas of the atoll can be experiencing high tide at the same time as other areas in the lagoon are impassable at low tide. Ensuring the safety of our passengers is the number one priority of our crew, so the timings for some excursions may have to be modified according to the tide movements of a given day.





# MV Maya's Dugong - Facilities & Cabins

## About the Vessel

Originally built as a research vessel by the Canadian Government in 1966, the Maya's Dugong was completely retro-fitted in the early 2000s as a private yacht, before being overhauled once again in 2009 to accommodate charters and cabin cruise voyages. It now serves as an oceanographic and expedition cruising vessel throughout the Indian Ocean.

It serves as ideal platform for discovering the islands' most exclusive and hard-to-reach places.

## Facilities

A number of different areas onboard, from the two-tiered sundeck toward the bow, to the covered back deck and leisure area, ensure ample space for passengers to unwind.

Meals can be enjoyed in the air-conditioned dining salon, or al fresco on the back deck's dining table.

Air conditioning in all interiors (cabins, dining salon & lounge/bar).

## Also available onboard:

- Flat-screen TV, DVD stereo in the Dining Salon/Lounge
- DVD player & Stereo
- Games, cards, small library
- Ice Machine
- Laundry Service (extra charge)
- Deck showers
- Bottled water, soft drinks, beer, wine and spirits are all available for purchase.

## Cabins

MV Maya's Dugong boasts 7 spacious airconditioned guest cabins:

- 2 Commander cabins on the upper deck
- 1 Commander cabin on the mid-deck and
- 4 Explorer cabins on the lower deck.

Each cabin features an en-suite bathroom, and are cleaned by the hostesses on daily base.

## Crew

We offer a high staff-to-guest ratio to ensure all of our passengers are well looked-after throughout the expedition. In addition to the captain, engineer, and two deckhands, all expedition cruises are staffed with 2 stewardesses, a dive instructor and a dedicated chef.

## Dining & Cuisine

The cruises are full board (breakfast, lunch and dinner) and also include afternoon tea/coffee and cake. A dedicated chef prepares an enticing blend of authentic Indian Ocean cuisine and traditional European fare.

## Beverages

Table water and tea & coffee are served with all meals. A full range of beverages are also available onboard at extra charge. Price list available on request.





## Activities

### Island visits

Each day onboard presents a new opportunity to explore the remote atolls, protected nature reserves, uninhabited islands and colourful underwater life.

Please note that Aldabra is a 'no-take' nature reserve, meaning that fishing is prohibited on this cruise, and visitors are not allowed to collect shells or to damage or interfere with the plants and animals. No biological or geological specimen can be collected, and visitors are also required to abide to sanitary measures to avoid introducing alien plant seeds. All visitors to Aldabra must at all times be accompanied by an Aldabra staff member and it is not permitted to wander about unsupervised.

### Snorkelling

Throughout the expedition there will be opportunities for snorkelling, the use of the is free of charge. It is recommended that only strong swimmers should take part in the activity near the channels of the lagoon.

### Diving

MV Maya's Dugong is a certified PADI dive resort, with a full range of equipment onboard as well as a dedicated dive instructor with vast Indian Ocean experience. A variety of interesting dive sites will be accessible throughout the expedition, and may vary on each voyage depending on sea conditions, visibility and itinerary timings.

Drift dives in the channels are possible but are recommended only for experienced divers and strong swimmers.

The boat features a convenient swimming platform allowing divers to easily access the water directly from the vessel. Other dives will utilise the vessel's tender boat for dives sites which are further afield or inaccessible by the yacht.





## Useful Information

### Travel Insurance

Aldabra is one of the most remote and pristine places on earth for a reason: the atoll is completely isolated from civilisation in every sense and is, to a certain degree, inhospitable for humans. We have operated many expeditions safely to Aldabra over the past decade, but due to the remoteness and nature of this expedition, as a precaution we require all of our guests to show proof of adequate travel insurance which would cover the cost of any emergencies that could possibly arise during the cruise.

### Important Information

Your safety and comfort are our highest priority. In the event of adverse conditions, all itineraries are subject to change at the captain's discretion. Be sure to bring plenty of reef-friendly sunscreen, a cap or hat and sunglasses - Seychelles is generally warm and sunny throughout the year and the sun's rays can be especially impactful onboard the vessel, due to the reflection from the sea. Bring suitable footwear for walking on deck and on the beach/shore. Some areas of Aldabra can be quite rugged so good walking shoes/boots are recommended.

Other items to consider bringing along include: binoculars, notebooks/logbooks for birding and diving finds, and any personal medicinal supplies, such as mosquito repellent (please note that there is NO malaria in Seychelles, however).

### Supporting Aldabra & the SIF

The Seychelles Islands Foundation is a not-for-profit organisation entrusted with the management and protection of Aldabra. The SIF has implemented and maintained a wide range of scientific research and conservation initiatives on the island, including one of the longest running monitoring programmes for turtles and tortoises in the Western Indian Ocean, with over 40 years worth of data. If you would like to support the SIF with contributions toward these research and conservation initiatives to ensure the sustained protection of Aldabra, please contact the SIF by e-mail on [sif@seychelles.net](mailto:sif@seychelles.net). A variety of SIF sundries and souvenirs are available for purchase, and will also go towards the SIF.

Photo Credit:

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[www.aldabraexpeditions.com](http://www.aldabraexpeditions.com)