Indian Ocean Stepping Stones

A voyage from South Africa to the Seychelles including magnificent Aldabra aboard the MS Island Sky
30th January to 13th February 2016
Join us aboard the MS Island Sky for an expedition cruise through the bountiful islands of the Indian Ocean. Our small ship allows us access to wonderful places denied to larger ships and with our onboard experts you can learn about and enjoy encounters with fabulous endemic wildlife in this immensely rich and timeless corner of the Indian Ocean. With our purpose built Zodiacs we will land on otherwise inaccessible beaches, explore vast lagoons and coral reefs and encounter some of the most extraordinarily beautiful tropical scenery to be found anywhere in the world.

One of the many highlights of our voyage will be our call into Aldabra, the world’s largest coral atoll and a World Heritage site. Totally untouched by the modern world, Aldabra has been described by Jacques Cousteau as ‘the last unprofaned sanctuary on this planet’. Being one of the most difficult places in the world to access and a lack of freshwater has saved Aldabra from any tourism development. There is no landing strip and the only viable means of reaching this untouched region is by ship. Be one of the few who have explored this ‘Galapagos of the Indian Ocean’, the last breeding ground of the giant tortoise and in addition to seeing some of these endearing creatures we should encounter dolphins, turtles and whales as well as countless birds including the flightless rail, the last flightless bird in the Indian Ocean.

The Itinerary

Day 1 London to Richards Bay, South Africa. Fly by scheduled flight via Johannesburg.

Day 2 Richards Bay, South Africa. Arrive this afternoon and transfer to the MS Island Sky. Enjoy welcome drinks and dinner as we sail this evening.

Day 3 Inhaca Island, Mozambique. Situated in Maputo Bay, we visit subtropical Inhaca Island which is home to hundreds of coral species, fish, dolphins and up to three hundred bird species. Today you can choose to either snorkel over the coral reefs where we hope to find scorpion fish, butterfly fish and parrotfish or alternatively join our naturalists as we search for greater sand plovers, lesser crested tern and kingfisher.

Day 4 Inhambane, Mozambique. Inhambane is accessed through a deep waterway. It was an important trading post for Arab merchants and sailors as early as the 11th century. Vasco de Gama called here in the late 15th century, paving the way for the Portuguese traders and in the 18th century they were joined by Indian traders. The mixture of African, Arab, European, and Indian influences are still present today. We will enjoy an afternoon to exploring the town including the 200 year old Cathedral of our Lady of Conception and Governor’s Palace.

Day 5 Bazaruto Archipelago, Mozambique. Spend the morning exploring the spectacular Bazaruto Archipelago, a tropical paradise of five main islands that are protected as a national park under the auspices of the World Wildlife Fund. These pristine islands feature tranquil beaches, translucent turquoise waterways, a varied population of birds and a rich marine life. Dolphins and over 2000 types of fish are found in the placid waters including parrot, angel and butterfly fish. Return to the ship for lunch and enjoy an afternoon at sea.

Day 6 At sea. Enjoy a relaxing day as we cruise the Mozambique Channel.

Day 7 Mozambique Island, Mozambique. Undoubtedly one of the country’s highlights, Mozambique Island, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, was the Portuguese capital in east Africa from the 16th to the 19th centuries. The town’s narrow alleyways are lined with evocative colonial buildings, some of which have survived from the earliest days of the Portuguese occupation. Spend the morning exploring this atmospheric island and visit several of its landmark buildings including the Fort of Sao Sebastiao. Return to the ship for lunch before we sail this afternoon.

Day 8 Quirimbas Archipelago, Mozambique. Our last call in Mozambique is the Quirimbas National Park, one of the country’s most biologically diverse regions. We hope to make an expedition stop to view extensive reef and islet complexes offering outstanding snorkelling amidst 400 species of fish whilst the coastline of spectacular dunes provides nesting and feeding grounds for turtles and migratory birds. Or we may also visit Ibo, a former Portuguese island of once-elegant palatial mansions.
The colony owed its wealth to 18th-century slave and ivory trading. The battles of the pentagonal main fortress house renowned silversmiths today.

Day 9 Anjouan, Comores.
Awake this morning in Nzawi, better known by its French name of Anjouan. It is an incredibly picturesque island with forested hillsides and rivers tumbling down to the sea. A morning island drive will include some of the beauty spots including Mount Ntingi with its wild orchids. Return to the ship for lunch and enjoy an afternoon cruising.

Days 10 & 11 Assumption Island and Aldabra, Seychelles. Our first call in the Seychelles will be the tiny coral island of Assumption. Early in the 20th century the island was ruthlessly plundered for its vast deposits of guano. Happily, peace has returned to the islands and the wildlife of rare birds, the endemic Assumption island day gecko and green turtles are once again in abundance. We will have a chance to walk on the white sand beaches, swim in the crystal clear waters or join our naturalists as we search for wildlife. We will then sail the short distance to Aldabra where we have a day and a half to explore. We will include as much as possible with our time on Aldabra hoping to land on South Island or into the lagoon, a vast 17 mile stretch of shallow clear water. From our Zoocats we can watch the ever-changing underwater world and snorkel in colourful coral waters teeming with marine life. On Picard Island we will enjoy a short walk to see some of the thousands of tortoises and numerous robber crabs. Our programme ashore will be determined by weather conditions but one thing is for sure, you will not be disappointed by these extraordinary islands and atolls, which are arguably the most pristine and untouched in the Indian Ocean.

Day 12 Providence Atoll, Seychelles.
After a morning at sea we arrive at the Farquhar Group of islands. Providence Atoll consists of three islands Providence, St Pierre and Ile Cerf. These islands are well off the tourist route as a lack of fresh water has prevented any development of hotels whilst access is only possible by sea in calm conditions. We hope to use the Zoocats to land on one of the islands where we may snorkel on the reefs or enjoy beachcombing and nature walks through the coconut palms with our on board naturalists.

Day 13 Alphonse. There are three islands in the Alphonse group which is located directly south of the Amirantes. As we approach the islands at first light you will understand why they are regarded by many to be the most beautiful of the 115 islands in the Seychelles archipelago. Beautiful white sand beaches line the edges of the forests whilst the circular lagoon offers perfect snorkelling. On an island walk we hope to spot the extremely rare magpie robin, ambling tortoises and scurrying crabs.

Day 14 Amirantes Islands. Reaching the Amirantes in the morning we will make a call at Poivre, a wonderfully lush island which is split in two and joined by a natural causeway at low tide. The coral reefs here are spectacular whilst the coconut palms and indigenous vegetation is home to a population of blue heron, greater frigate birds, lesser noddies and fairy terns. We will enjoy either snorkelling or nature walks and if conditions permit we hope also to sail to St Joseph. This is an ideal spot for some beachcombing, nature walks and bird watching. In the islands lagoon there is a huge population of stingrays, healthy numbers of turtles and giant blue mud crabs. There is also a large colony of frigate birds, blue heron and crested terns.

Day 15 Mahe to London.
Disembark after breakfast and transfer to the airport for our scheduled indirect flight to London.

The Prices Per Person Table:

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Price Includes: Economy class scheduled air travel, 13 nights aboard the MS Island Sky on a full board basis including wine, beer and soft drinks with lunch and dinner onboard, shore excursions, Noble Caledonia Expedition Team, transfers, port taxes, gratuities onboard the ship and whilst on excursions.

Not Included: Travel Insurance, visas.

NB: Flights schedules are yet to be released at the time of going to print and the itinerary may change on their release. All special offers are subject to availability. Ports and itinerary subject to change. Zodiac landing craft will be used daily to transport passengers ashore.
Aldabra is magnificent, the clear blue seas abound with colourful life, the skies are alive with varied birdlife and ashore giant land tortoises forage as they have done for millions of years.

Log Extracts
We have operated many successful voyages in the Indian Ocean and below are extracts from past ship logs to provide you with an idea of what a typical day on such a voyage involves:

Aldabra Atoll, 15 March
We were able to cross to the island in the Zoelcis as the sun was rising above the sandy beach. The sea was extremely calm and the morning was still and beautiful as we made the crossing of the reef. We landed on one of the four main islands of the atolls, called Picard Island, which is the base of the small settlement of fourteen permanent inhabitants and the research station. Aldabra Atoll is 400 kilometres from the nearest mainland, and is the only ecosystem in the world today where the dominant herbivore is a reptile – the giant tortoise. It is also one of the world's largest atoll, and has survived relatively unscathed by human activity because of its isolation, its inhospitable environment and the dedicated efforts of research scientists over the past few decades; it has indeed achieved World Heritage Site status in 1982. We had a reception committee on the beach, in the form of a couple of tortoises – so we were immediately able to make their acquaintance! Once everyone was ashore, we were organised into groups to go on longer and shorter walks, while a few of us opted to remain in the vicinity of the research station and the landing spot, which in itself offered good wildlife viewing besides the tortoises: we could watch large rock crabs, as well as various species of bird, including the rail, plovers, coucal and heron, without moving too far at all. The swimming and snorkelling proved very popular, particularly as the morning was warming up rapidly. Various smaller species of fish could be seen, but what proved most exciting was numbers of black-finned sharks, as well as one or two lemon sharks (larger than their black-finned cousins). Towards the end of the morning, some rays also made their appearance. What a privileged introduction to Aldabra Atoll we had had!

We enjoyed an early lunch before preparing for the next activity, a drift snorkel for guests who felt comfortable in deep water and were confident with snorkelling activities. The snorkellers climbed out of the Zoelcis into the lagoon and discovered that there was no need to kick, unless someone wanted a closer look at some special fish or coral underwater: the current of the water draining from the lagoon as low tide approached meant that it was only necessary to float and look at the underwater world passing by. Once at the mouth of the lagoon, Zoelcis picked us up and brought us back into the lagoon, so that we could repeat the exercise. We discovered unbelievable fish-life: a huge variety of fish, of many different sizes and colours, were to be seen, as well as more immediately arresting sightings of turtles, black-tipped sharks, various rays and even a barracuda were sighted. Not only was the underwater life spectacular, but when we took a moment to raise our heads and look around us, views within the lagoon were breath-taking, with the well-vegetated limestone cliffs overhanging the water, and various species of bird, particularly egrets and herons, standing still on the banks or in trees nearby. This proved a marvellous two-three hours for all who participated, with many people agreeing that the experiences at Aldabra Atoll thus far were among the best nature experiences ever enjoyed, without doubt of the sort that would be remembered forever.

Mozambique Island – March 10th
Ilha Mozambique was another highlight of our journey amongst the jewels of the Indian Ocean. Full of history, set in magnificent scenery, UNESCO World Heritage Site, Mozambique Island offered us a voyage back in time. Three kilometre long by half a kilometre wide, the island developed thanks to its superb natural harbour and in spite of the absence of fresh water. Mozambique Island was a boat building centre, trading with Persia, Arabia and Madagascar long before the Europeans arrived in the area.

We were driven ashore in Zoelcis, a long ride around the Portuguese fort and we landed on the lee side of the island, not far from the bridge that now links it to the mainland. We spent the afternoon on the island, exploring its museum and narrow streets, enjoying a cold drink in one of the cafés and talking to the kids playing around. The faded, crumbling buildings with their clear Portuguese style of architecture create a charming centre to stroll around and explore, and the whole island is like a time capsule where life seemed to have halted and everything left in state over a quarter of a century ago. The most determined of us walked to the north end of the island where the fort stands majestically; others chose the south side of the island towards the church and cemetery. Most ventured in the little shops too. As we returned to the ship, humpback dolphins were playing in the water and followed the wakes of the zoelcis. Lots of little dhows were around, fishing, trading and ferrying people to and from the island. We felt we had plunged in history this afternoon, at the crossroads of many influences and interests.
The much loved MS Island Sky is one of the finest small ships in the world. With a maximum passenger capacity of only 114, a vessel of her size is capable of carrying many more but instead the MS Island Sky has the benefit of unusually large suites, luxuriously appointed public areas and spacious outside decks.

Onboard there is a high ratio of crew to passengers. Our friendly crew of 75 are mainly Filipino and Eastern European and our Scandinavian captains are experienced mariners, having been in service aboard large 2000 plus passenger vessels and who now prefer a less frantic life aboard a small ship. If, like them and us, you prefer a more peaceful life at sea, you will find the MS Island Sky the perfect ship. When choosing the vessel for your next voyage of discovery, you can select a ship with endless entertainment and impersonal service or come with us where peace, high quality service and attention to detail are the order of the day.

There will be no organised entertainment, fancy dress, deck games or any of the usual big ship experiences. The atmosphere onboard is more akin to a private yacht or country hotel. A little music in the lounge or bar after dinner, informative port briefings and presentations from our expedition team and of course good food which may be enjoyed leisurely in the attractive dining room, all contribute to making any voyage aboard the MS Island Sky a memorable experience. After a day ashore you will return to the comfort and peace of a well run and exceedingly comfortable ship.

Your Space
The spacious and finely decorated public rooms include a large lounge where daily briefings and talks will be provided throughout the voyage and an elegant bar where a pianist plays periodically throughout the day. The onboard library is the perfect place to relax with a book. Daily newspapers and magazines are placed in the library depending on local availability. Outside there is a rear sun deck, a bar and comfortable deck furniture for sun bathing or relaxing with a book. On the top deck there is a forward looking observation platform and sun deck.
Your Dining
Another benefit of a small ship is the quality of the cuisine. With only one sitting and a maximum of just over 100 passengers, the galley is able to provide delicious meals. Where possible and when it meets his high standards, the chef will obtain local produce in markets or buy the catch of the day from a passing fishing boat. In the main elegant dining room, breakfast is served buffet-style, with certain items cooked to order and lunch and dinner is à la carte. When weather permits, breakfast and a buffet-style lunch are also served on deck. To enhance your dining experience even further a selection of wines are included with lunch and dinner. Afternoon tea is served in the lounge and tea and coffee are available 24 hours.

Your Suite
Onboard there are 57 exceptionally spacious and well designed suites. All feature a sitting room area and some have private balconies. The feeling of luxury is enhanced by the wood paneling and brass, which predominates throughout the vessel conveying the atmosphere of a private yacht. The passenger accommodation is arranged over five decks and all suites have outside views. Each affords considerable comfort with en-suite bathroom featuring marble-topped vanity unit with sink and walk-in shower, large wardrobes, dressing table with large mirror and stool and excellent storage. There is a mini-fridge, flat screen television with inbuilt DVD/CD player and a telephone in each suite. Bottled water, Molton Brown toiletries, towelling dressing gowns and slippers are also provided for your comfort. Other facilities include a programmable electronic safe, hairdryer, assorted toiletries and air-conditioning and heating.

This cruise visits out of the way destinations. You will be accompanied by an expedition team and landings ashore will often be made by Zodiac landing craft. Cruises such as this will appeal to the more adventurous and those who enjoy the natural world.

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All special offers are subject to availability. Our current booking conditions apply to all reservations and are available on request. Cover image: Giant Tortoise