



## INDIAN OCEAN STEPPING STONES - MADAGASCAR & SEYCHELLES CRUISE

Escape to warmer climes over the winter with a voyage aboard the MS Hebridean Sky in the wonderful Indian Ocean, discovering some of the most beautiful tropical islands on earth in the company of just over 100 fellow guests. Our journey includes some fascinating and exotic calls combining the stunning islands of the Seychelles including the magnificent Aldabra group of islands with the natural wonders of Madagascar. The first part of our adventure is dedicated to the Seychelles and some of the most captivating islands in the world. Amongst the highlights of our time in the Seychelles will be the Aldabra Islands, the last breeding ground of the giant tortoise and in addition to seeing some of these endearing creatures we should also encounter dolphins, turtles and whales as well as countless birds including the flightless rail, the last flightless bird in the Indian Ocean. To explore the abundant crystal-clear waters of the vast lagoon and to set foot on atolls which have never been exploited by the hand of man is a rare experience. Our voyage continues to Madagascar, the world's 'eighth continent', where we have a week to explore this extraordinary country that is still relatively unknown amongst even the most serious of travellers. The term 'unique' is often an overused description in the travel world but certainly applies to the island of Madagascar where the animals, plants, landscapes and people that make up this thousand-mile-long island are unlike anywhere else in the world. There is minimal infrastructure in many parts of the island and for those wishing to explore in some depth, doing so by small ship is far more preferable than by any other means. This itinerary is a veritable feast of beauty and the natural world and with the vessel's fleet of Zodiac

landing craft we can reach the unreachable, landing on remote beaches, walking through verdant rainforest and national parks and getting close to some unique flora and fauna. Your experience will be made all the more memorable by our expert crew and officers who, along with our expedition team of marine biologists, ornithologists and botanists have many years of experience in the



Indian Ocean.

### ITINERARY



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**Day 1 London to Mahe, Seychelles.**  
Fly by scheduled indirect flight.

**Day 2 Mahe.**

Arrive this afternoon and transfer to the MS Hebridean Sky in Port Victoria. Enjoy welcome drinks and dinner as we sail tonight.

**Days 3 & 4 Inner Seychelles.**

We have two days to explore the islands of the Inner Seychelles and hope to include a call at Praslin to explore the 'Vallee de Mai', the last remnant of the original high canopied Seychelles palm forest and home to the coco de mer. We will walk its paths looking out for the rare black parrot and enjoying its natural beauty. See Grande Soeur, an idyllic uninhabited island. Spend time walking the island trails which link the island's white sand beaches and maybe catch sight of some of the giant Aldabra tortoises or enjoy a snorkelling opportunity in the turquoise waters. We hope to anchor off Aride, one of the finest and most important seabird islands in the Indian Ocean. Over one million seabirds breed on the island including tropical shearwater, lesser noddy, frigatebirds and roseate tern and five of the species are unique to the Seychelles such as the Seychelles warbler and Seychelles magpie robin. The island is largely covered in native woodland including the endemic wright's gardenia, a shrub with beautifully scented flowers found nowhere else in the world. Sail to Curieuse, a rugged island which was once home to a leper colony and now houses an eco-museum and visitor centre. The island is an important nesting site for hawksbill turtles and boasts endemic vine and mangroves which we explore on an island walk.

**Day 5 Alphonse Islands.**

There are three islands in the Alphonse group which is located directly south of the Amirantes. As we approach the islands over lunch, you will understand why they are regarded by many to be the most beautiful of the 115 islands in the Seychelles archipelago. On the main island the circular lagoon offers good snorkelling and there are several tracks across the island for us to enjoy an afternoon of island walks.

**Day 6 At Sea.**

Enjoy a relaxing day at sea as we head to the Outer Seychelles islands. Our lecture programme will continue or maybe find a spot on deck to watch for wildlife.

**Days 7 & 8 Aldabra Islands.**

We have two days at the Aldabra group of islands and our itinerary will be in the hands of our Expedition Leader and Captain who will monitor the local conditions to ensure we maximise our time here. Whilst our itinerary is flexible we will plan to call at the island of Assumption. The island was ruthlessly plundered for its vast deposits of guano in the early 20th century but peace has returned and the wildlife of rare birds and green turtles are once again in abundance. Our time here will be spent beachcombing, on a nature walk or snorkelling. We also plan time on Aldabra, the island referred to by Sir Julian Huxley as "One of nature's treasures and should belong to the whole world". Aldabra is unique and every time we call at what is believed to be the world's largest atoll we find something new of interest. Sightings have been made of the extremely rare white-throated rail and the atoll is also home to the world's second largest colony of frigate birds and the largest crab, the coconut crab. Whilst exploring by Zodiac it is difficult to know in which direction to look. The clear blue seas abound with colourful life, the skies are alive with varied birdlife and





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ashore giant land tortoises forage as they have done for millions of years. We will explore Picard Island with a short walk to see some of the thousands of tortoises and numerous robber crabs. We will include as much as possible during our time on Aldabra making landings on South Island and trips into the lagoon, a vast 17 mile stretch of shallow clear water. From our Zodiacs we can watch the everchanging undersea world and snorkel in colourful coral waters teeming with marine life.

### Day 9 Diego Suarez, Madagascar.

After a morning at sea we arrive in Madagascar and enter dramatic Diego Suarez, a stunning natural harbour with a cosmopolitan mix of inhabitants including Creoles, Indians, Chinese, Comorans and Arabs. This afternoon choose from a city tour visiting the Commonwealth Cemetery and Place Joffre, or the Malagasy rainforest at the Mount Amber National Park. Dividing into short and long walk parties we will go in search of lemurs, chameleons and endemic birds as we explore the rainforest.

### Day 10 Nosy Hara.

As we cruise around the northern coast of Madagascar we will find a number of strangely shaped limestone islets that dot the aquamarinecoloured sea. The expedition team will decide on the most suitable island for landing, such as Nosy Hara with its abundant birdlife and great places to swim off the beach. We will spend the day exploring the island on foot, walking through dense woodland and observing the unusual vegetation. Alternatively, join a Zodiac cruise around the islands and a chance to snorkel over the coral.

### Day 11 Nosy Tanikely.

Spend the morning at the Nosy Tanikely Island Marine Reserve, an uninhabited island which offers snorkelling opportunities and wonderful beaches. We will take the chance to either swim in the clear waters or snorkel over the corals keeping an eye out for reef fish, turtles and morays. Alternatively, our naturalists will lead guided walks on the island where we may see the resident lemurs, fruit bats and hermit crabs and enjoy fantastic views from the lighthouse on the island's highest point. We will sail in the early afternoon.

### Day 12 Mahajanga.

Mahajanga is a major port in northwest Madagascar situated on the Betsiboka River and is our base for a full day excursion to the Ankarafantsika National Park. This deciduous forest is a haven for birds, lemurs and reptiles and on a choice of walks, we will explore with our guides. Eight species of lemur have been observed here including the famous Microcebus, the smallest primate in the world. Meanwhile over 120 species of birds nest here and we will keep an eye out for the Madagascan fish eagle and banded kestrel whilst the 44 species of reptile include chameleon, turtles and crocodiles that live in Lake Ravelobe. We will enjoy lunch in the park and in the afternoon there will be options to join further walks or watch for birdlife at the nearby lake before returning to the MS Hebridean Sky.

### Day 13 At Sea.

Our lecture programme resumes as we continue our journey around the Madagascan coast.

### Day 14 Morondava.

From our anchorage off the town of Morondava, we will use the Zodiacs to land on the local beach and from here there will be a choice of excursions to explore the local region. On a half day



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morning tour we will visit the Avenue des Baobabs. Of the eight baobab species in the world, six are endemic to Madagascar and here we will see the *Adansonia grandidieri* species with a row of 20 to 25 trees which border the gravel road. We will learn about the trees and their spiritual significance before returning to Morondava and exploring the local market. Alternatively, join a full day excursion to Kirindy Forest. Situated approximately a two hour drive from Morondava, we will pass the Avenue des Baobabs as we travel north. Kirindy is a 10,000 hectare, dry deciduous forest, one of the most endangered in the world where the flora and fauna includes many endemic species. Here we find three species of baobab, many birds and reptiles including snakes, tortoises and lizards. Eight species of lemur reside here including the pale form marked lemur.

#### Day 15 Tulear.

We arrive in Tulear at lunchtime. This afternoon choose to visit the Antsokay Arboretum which is entirely devoted to the conservation of the plants from the south west of Madagascar and, after more than 30 years of hard work, offers a densely kept selection of flora presenting a typical sub-arid thicket with baobab trees towering over the smaller plants. We will see the four hectare botanical garden which comprises over 900 species of plants of which 90% are endemic to the region. Alternatively, visit the Reniala Private Reserve, a small area of just 60 hectares but containing a spiny forest which is unique to south eastern Madagascar. The park is home to 200 plant species including baobabs as well as being a haven for birders with sightings of paradise flycatchers, Madagascar hoopoe and Madagascar crested drongo.

#### Day 16 Tulear to London.

Disembark this morning and transfer to the airport for our specially chartered flight to Johannesburg. Connect here with our onward scheduled flight to London.

#### Day 17 London.

Arrive this morning.

#### Please Note:

Itineraries are subject to change.



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**IMPECCABLE SMALL-SHIP AMENITIES** Returning from excursions, passengers enjoy complimentary refreshments, afternoon tea and all-day coffee in The Club, a gracious space for relaxation, surrounded by panoramic windows. Other Sea Explorer features include: Library with Internet access Lounge with audiovisual facilities Dining room Wraparound sun deck with Jacuzzi Exercise room

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plan may vary.

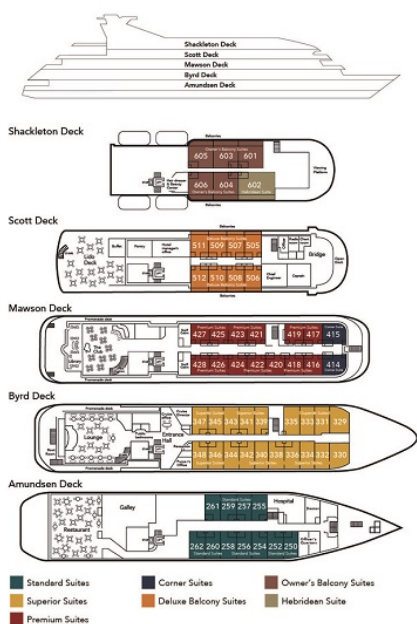
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