

Socotra

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Socotra is one of the three most exciting islands in world. Along with the Galapagos and Madagascar, Socotra offers some of the most unique and endemic plant and animal life to be found anywhere. This island, about an eighth the size of California, is almost directly south of Yemen and the greater Arabian Peninsula. It is from this special relationship with the Arabian Peninsula and the northeastern coast of Africa, that Socotra gets its amazing environment. At the confluence of the Indian Ocean, the Arabian Sea and the Red Sea, in the Gulf of Aden, Socotra gains its special meteorological conditions. The seasons vary from extremely hot and wet to warm and dry, and often the dense fogs dominate most of the island. The island is primarily calcareous uplifts and limestone plateaus with only one mountain range blending the Hamaderoh-massiv to the highest peaks of the Haghir mountains.

Socotra's history is also unique in its human habitation. Its primarily Arabic descendants have been living off the sparse landscape for hundreds of years. Most of these people have been goat herders, fishermen and minimal farmers. Due to the basics of living off the land, many of the plant populations have been pushed back to inaccessible regions where people or herbivores can not go. Socotra is also very unique in that its endemic mammals are less than a hand full. There are no major predators and no major native mammals, but lots of cattle, burros, goats and some horses. The insect, bird and reptile populations are reasonably represented. Most of them are fairly safe, as there appears to be minimal feral cat population. And where the feral cats exist, in the cities, they seem to be happy feeding on the introduced rats and mice.

The succulents of Socotra are most represented by their famous *Dracaena cinnabari* and the magnificent *Adenium socotranum*. There are a fair number of other succulents ranging from the giant *Euphorbia arbuscula* to the great caudiciform *Dendrosicyos socotrana*, not to mention the wonderfully tortured Boswellias. The Boswellias are the legendary source of Frankincense. Many other smaller genera occur which include: Aloe, Caralluma, Cissus, Dorstenia, Echidnopsis, Edithcolia, Euphorbia, Jatropha, Kalanchoe and Plectranthus. Along with these interesting succulents, one will often find a variety other beautiful plants, such as Begonias, Hibiscus, Ledebouria, palms and Sarcostemma.

We'll travel from Socotra's one airport near Hadibu, the capital city, up through the Diksam plateau and all around the entire island. Camping out on this island is a real treat, and hiking in the canyons and up to the mountains, is really exciting. Almost everywhere one travels you're sure to see the Dragons Blood trees and the fantastic sculptured *Adenium socotranum*. Today, visiting Socotra is almost impossible for Americans, as Socotra is considered to be part of the country of Yemen. We were some of the last Americans to visit this region, as we just followed the bombing of the USS Cole in the port of Aden. Since then, things have only become worse, so come vicariously travel with me to Socotra, a place that many of us may never be able to visit again.