



# SOCOTRA

An otherworldly, Arabian oasis

LOCATION	Arabian Sea
COORDINATES	12.46° N, 53.82° E
AREA	1,465 sq. miles (3,796 sq. km)
POPULATION	70,000
MAIN TOWN	Hadibu

Socotra doesn't do standard-issue sunsets. It seems to deal exclusively in extravagantly dramatic skies: colossal clouds painted a thousand mauves, an eerie bloodred moon and a dome of stars so full that it's hard to identify familiar constellations.

But then not much about Socotra is standard issue. It boasts exceptional biodiversity across an area the size of Rhode Island, with much of its flora found nowhere else on earth. The island's landscape feels untouched, witnessed only by its seventy thousand inhabitants and a handful of visitors each year. There are so few tourists because the journey to the island, which is technically part of Yemen but lies 220 miles (350 km) to the south in the Indian Ocean, closer to the coast of Somalia, can be prohibitively complex to organize.

While mainland Yemen contends with civil war and famine, Socotra remains peaceful. Still, tourists will likely come up against the vagaries of Gulf politics; charter flights from Abu Dhabi, which are infrequent, can be canceled at short notice according to developments in Yemen's political situation. And a Socotri visa can be obtained only when booking a guided tour from travel agencies operating on the island. Despite the many

obstacles getting to the island presents, most visitors unanimously agree it's worth the effort.

Travelers accustomed to freedom and spontaneity might chafe against set itineraries and the near-constant presence of a tour guide, but once you arrive on the island, it's clear that it would be hard to explore any other way. There is little public transport, roads are unmarked and often perilous and there is no internet access or hotels outside the capital, Hadibu.

For most of the few-dozen tourists who visit Socotra each week, this is all part of the allure. The friendly local guides set up camp and handle cooking, coordinating itineraries with one another so that visitors feel they have the island's vast wilderness entirely to themselves. Most tourists choose to visit in the warm, dry months between January and May, avoiding the monsoons and cyclones that can dominate the rest of the year.

While itineraries can be adjusted according to a penchant for, say, camel trekking, hiking or snorkeling, the sites on the default tour packages are consistently sublime, with each day bringing a new surprise: the natural infinity pool on a cliff overlooking the Indian Ocean at Homhil Plateau; the towering dunes







#### GETTING THERE

Socotra can currently be reached only via charter flight from Abu Dhabi. This can be arranged through your chosen tour guide company, with options including ISHKAR and Socotra Eco-Tours. The main city, Hadibu, has few tourist sites, so it will serve most visitors only as an occasional lunch or overnight spot while exploring the island via four-wheel-drive vehicle.

#### SEE & TOUR

Learn about the extraction of resin from dragon's blood trees at Firmihin Forest. Climb the island's highest peak, Mount Skand, for impressive views of the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Gulf. Swim in the milky turquoise waters of the unspoiled Shoab Beach, accessible only by boat. While you will regularly be served fresh fish, seek out the delicious rainbow-colored lobster.

#### STAY

Most visitors to Socotra will camp, with tents and meals prepared by their guide and driver. There are hotel options in Hadibu, though most are basic aside from Summerland Hotel, one of the only places on the island to offer Wi-Fi. There are no banks or ATMs on the island; visitors must bring all money they need in cash—American dollars are accepted, alongside Yemeni rials.

#### WORTH KNOWING

Yemenis are known across the Arab world for their use of qat, a plant whose leaves, when chewed or infused, produce the effect of a mild stimulant. Though the plant doesn't grow in Socotra, it is exported daily from mainland Yemen via boat. All echelons of Yemeni society chew the plant, and they can be identified by the telltale bulge of plant mulch in the chewer's cheek.



set against ominous black cliffs at Arher Beach; the mysterious depths of Hoq Cave, a cathedral of stalagmites hiding pictograms inscribed by travelers in the first century BCE.

For all its wind-sculpted rock and dramatic vistas, Socotra's primary draw is its unearthly flora. Many of its eight hundred species of plant, of which 37 percent are endemic, look as if they've come out of a science fiction movie. The specimens with the most personality are bottle trees, which have squat and bulbous trunks, just a few frail branches and, in February and March, bright pink flowers. They often squeeze out from boulders and cliffs and grow in such varied and eccentric shapes that it's hard to resist anthropomorphizing them.

But the symbol of Socotra is the endemic dragon's blood tree, with its distinctive mushroom-shaped crown of spiny leaves. Its name comes from the crimson resin that is extracted from it and used for dyes, lacquers and local medicine. Folklore tells that its Arabic name, *dam al akhawain*, which translates as "blood of the two brothers," references a murderous local tale similar to Cain and Abel, the first tree growing from the blood spilled on the earth.

These trees grow most profusely at Firmihin Forest in Diksam Plateau, where visitors will learn that the species is threatened both by escalating cyclones and by the island's huge population of goats, which eat saplings before they can mature. The species

may be further endangered by the United Arab Emirates, which has recently been vying for political dominance in Socotra and allegedly exporting the trees to furnish private homes in Abu Dhabi. There are grassroots efforts to grow saplings in protected areas, but these young trees will take centuries to mature.

Beyond the goats, there are few mammals on the island to rival the botanical life (supposedly not even a single dog), but visitors are almost certain to see endangered Egyptian vultures, which turn up looking for scraps at every campsite, and a profusion of unusual aquatic creatures that can be spotted at Detwah Lagoon, where local self-proclaimed "cave man" Ellai will point out stingrays, squid, sea potatoes and his friend Mumduh the octopus.

Outside of the wilderness, Socotra is a blissfully sleepy place, with scattered villages and two tiny cities, Hadibu and Qalansiyah. Locals speak Yemeni Arabic and Socotri, a language that exists only orally. They have a rich poetic tradition, particularly during celebrations when men and women once competed in challenges of oratory. One local lullaby, translated by Miranda Morris, articulates the poetic beauty of Socotra's landscape and gestures to the symbiotic relationship its people have with the natural world to this day. "Wherever she goes may her goats be of the most lucky and blessed kind . . . for her eyes are huge rain clouds clustering around the peaks of the high Haghier mountains in the morning."



PREVIOUS PAGES, LEFT

Mohammed, pictured, is originally from Taiz—a city in southwest Yemen that was once known as the country's capital of culture but that has been all but destroyed over the course of the country's brutal eight-year civil war. (Mainland Yemen is currently in crisis and not safe for any form of tourism.) Mohammed moved to Socotra in 2021 and now works in a restaurant making juice.

BELOW & OPPOSITE

Bottle trees survive in very dry regions by storing water in their bulbous trunks. While other botanical species have been ravaged by the island's huge population of goats, bottle trees have been largely spared thanks to their poisonous sap. The graffiti carving (below) reads "God is above" in Arabic; most inhabitants of Socotra are Sunni Muslim.











#### OPPOSITE

Dragon's blood trees are unique to Socotra and have expertly adapted to the climate. During the monsoon season, the island experiences cloud cover, light drizzle and mist, and the dense tree canopy captures and channels this moisture down toward its roots (which are also shaded by the canopy during periods of scorching heat). The island is sometimes referred to as the "Galápagos of the Indian Ocean" for its biodiversity.





