

The Seychelles

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1 Depart London.

Days 2/3 Mahe.

Days 4/8 Praslin; island visits.

Days 9/11 Bird Island.

Day 12/13 Mahe.

Day 14 Fly London.



Departs

September / October

Focus

Birds and other wildlife

Grading

A. Easy day walks only.

Dates and Prices

See website (tour code SYC01) or current brochure

Highlights:

- Sandy beaches, palm trees & turquoise seas in an Indian Ocean tropical paradise
- Endemic birds, flora, insects and reptiles galore
- Seychelles Magpie-robin, Scops Owl, Fody, Seychelles Paradise Flycatcher, etc.
- Spectacular seabird colonies – terns, noddys, frigatebirds, et al.
- Migrant & resident waders, including the impressive Crab Plover
- Unique flora including giant Coco de Mer palms
- Seychelles Giant Tortoise
- Fabulous swimming and snorkeling



Images from top: Fairy Tern, Seychelles beach, Seychelles Paradise Flycatcher (by Andrew Lapworth)



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Introduction

The Seychelles comprises 115 islands, with a collective landmass of just 455 square kilometres scattered across 1.3 million square kilometres of Indian Ocean. Well known for beautiful beaches and rich underwater life, the Seychelles also boasts a captivating land flora and fauna – more than 110 endemic species of plant, including the legendary Coco de Mer palm, and 75 endemic animal species! As well as having some extremely large reptiles – the Giant Tortoise is an iconic species of the Seychelles – and some rather smaller, though very attractive ones such as the particularly vivid Green Gecko, the islands are of great interest to birdwatchers, being home to scores of species, many of which are very rare. Just under half of the Seychelles' total land area is given over to national parks and reserves, and the high priority afforded to conservation is evident in reintroduction programmes such as the ones focusing on saving populations of the Magpie-robin and Seychelles Warbler.

This tour offers a wonderful taste of the Seychelles' most interesting flora and fauna. Our trip begins on Mahe, the main and largest island in the Seychelles. Mahe is granitic, about 27 kilometres long, and between three and eight kilometres wide. It has an astonishing 65 sandy beaches and a verdant, hilly interior and we will explore a variety of the island's habitats from the higher inland areas to coastal sites; an array of orchids, birds and insects are among Mahe's other natural delights. We will then transfer to the picturesque island of Praslin, the second largest of the Seychelles group, which will serve as a base from which we will make excursions to the neighbouring islands of Cousin, Curieuse and La Digue before flying north to Bird Island – which is a perfect setting for a combination of wildlife-watching and relaxation time. This tour is ideal for anyone who loves tropical flora and fauna, as well as idyllic islands, beaches and optional swimming and snorkelling.

Itinerary

Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather & other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Day 1

Depart UK

We depart this afternoon from London (or regional airport) on an Emirates flight to Mahe, via Dubai.

Days 2 – 3

Mahe

Following a change of aircraft in Dubai, we arrive into Mahe early this morning where we will be met by our tour leader and transfer to our first hotel. There should be ample time in the afternoon to begin familiarising ourselves with some of the common birds and insects of the granitic Seychelles.

Our stay on Mahe will be split between two nights at the start of the tour and two at the end. We will plan our daily activities carefully, according to subtle changes in tidal and weather conditions

during our visits, and will incorporate an investigation into as many aspects of the natural history of the island as possible.

Birds and botany will be the main natural history focus during our time on Mahe and we will likely begin by taking a tour along the winding Sans Soucis road, situated at a height of about 300 metres. We will follow this remarkably scenic route until we reach the base of Trois Freres, a mountain with a summit of nearly 700 metres. Here we will have an introduction to some of the island's endemic flora such as the Seychelles Pitcher Plant and beautiful Seychelles Wild Vanilla Orchid. Mahe's mountainous regions are the most likely place for us to spot the attractive Seychelles Blue Pigeon.

A variety of tidal shorebird and waterfowl inhabit Mahe, and we will visit mangrove woodland and beaches on the east coast, especially in the vicinity of Victoria. Here we should see Cattle Egrets, Grey and Green-backed Herons, several other species of familiar wading bird, together with unfamiliar ones such as the extraordinarily delicate Crab Plover, Greater and Lesser Sand Plovers, Pacific Golden Plover, Red-necked Stint, the delightful Terek Sandpiper, wintering Saunder's Little Terns plus Crested and White-winged Black Terns. In the luxuriant gardens and plantations of Mahe, we will look for a very small endemic falcon, the Seychelles Kestrel, plenty of Malagasy Turtle Doves and the curious Barred Ground Doves – originally introduced from Indonesia. The noisy Seychelles Bulbul, Seychelles Sunbird, Common Mynas and Madagascar Fody are all species we'll be hoping to see on Mahe as well.

Overhead, especially in the vicinity of the mountain caves and crags on Mahe and – later in the tour – La Digue, we should frequently encounter small parties of the Seychelles Cave Swiftlet; these sometimes flutter like insects in comparison with those lumbering giants, the Seychelles Fruit Bats. In complete contrast, the supremely graceful White-tailed Tropicbirds can be seen gliding overhead almost anywhere in small numbers.

At some point during our stay on Mahe, we will also visit the Saint Anne Marine National Park for leisurely exploration by catamaran and the opportunity to enjoy some fabulous snorkelling over the reefs. Although always optional, snorkelling is usually a real highlight for many during their stay in the Seychelles, and the reefs support a host of spectacular fish species and many other beautiful marine creatures, including Hawksbill Turtles, though we'd be very lucky to see one.

We may also make a couple of early morning starts and an optional evening excursion to search out two elusive endemic Seychelles birds which can be seen nowhere else in the world: the Bare-legged Scops Owl and the Grey White-eye.

Days 4 – 8

Praslin – Island Visits

We will be based on Praslin for next five nights, enabling us to make relaxed visits to the world-famous bird reserves on Aride, Cousin and Curieuse Islands. We'll also visit the fantastic Vallee de Mai forest, plus the Takamaka and Badamier woodland of the Paradise Flycatcher Reserve on the island of La Digue. As on Mahe, we will plan our daily trips around Praslin and out to neighbouring

islands according to the prevailing weather, tidal conditions, and the opening days of Aride and Cousin nature reserves.

On Praslin we will thoroughly explore the almost prehistoric palm forests within the secluded Vallee de Mai, allowing plenty of time to admire the six endemic palm species that constitute this forest including, of course, the stupendous *Lodoicea maldivica*, the Coco de Mer. This species alone ensured that the site was awarded World Heritage status. The Vallee de Mai is a tiny, but magnificent forest in the middle of Praslin and the Coco de Mer is a relict from the age when Madagascar, Africa and India were still joined together as part of the huge landmass called Gondwanaland. The forest is administered by the Seychelles Island Foundation and forms a refuge for not only the giant Coco de Mer but for a whole community of plants and animals, some of which are unique to the Coco de Mer forest! There are four endemic species of Pandanus (Screwpine) in the reserve and this is also a good place to see the owner of some incongruously loud whistles – the Seychelles Black Parrot, though we will need to stretch our necks to see it, as it tends to remain up in the canopy! The Seychelles Sunbird and Seychelles Blue Pigeon are often seen in the Vallee de Mai, too. There are endemic reptiles and amphibians here, including seven species of gecko, one species of skink, a chameleon and a tree frog, plus two species of endemic snail, though some of these species are largely crepuscular.

We will aim to find time during our stay on Praslin to investigate the Glacis Noir Nature Trail. A variety of endemic birds can be seen along this trail, such as sunbirds, Blue Pigeon, bulbuls and Black Parrots. Swiftlets and Kestrels can also sometimes be seen.

There are some exquisite beaches on Praslin and bathing in the clear, warm waters of the island is a real joy; by contrast some of the shallow muddy creeks and sand flats are popular at low tide with migrant shorebirds and we should see a good selection of these. We will spend half a day visiting the reserve of Curieuse, where we can stroll along a raised boardwalk through the mangroves.

From Praslin we will also visit Cousin and Aride. Together these two tiny, forested islands hold the greatest concentration of breeding seabirds in the granitic Seychelles. Although their total area amounts to less than one square kilometre combined, they support huge colonies of Brown and Lesser Noddy, Fairy Tern and White-tailed Tropicbird; at night they are thronged with Wedge-tailed and Audubon's Shearwaters which we will be able to observe when they assemble a few hundred metres offshore as dusk falls. Bridled and Sooty Terns also breed in very large numbers.

Cousin is owned by the conservation organisation Nature Seychelles, and is the scene of a conservation success story – that of saving the Seychelles Warbler from extinction. Until 1988 Cousin was the only place where Seychelles Warblers survived. Now, thanks to the focused and dedicated actions of the International Council for Bird Preservation (now Bird Life International), Seychelles Warbler populations are established on three small islands. Cousin is justly famous for its endemic land birds and is the best place to find true red-headed Seychelles Turtle Doves, as well as the Seychelles Fody. Cousin also holds an introduced population of the Seychelles Magpie-robin.

Arde rises impressively from the sea and is cloaked in natural woodland with a fertile coastal plateau on the south side. A palm-fringed beach, beautifully clear waters and a rich coral reef complete the picture of an idyllic tropical island. For centuries the wildlife here remained undisturbed. After the island was colonised in 1851, the forests were felled, coconuts were planted and seabirds and their eggs taken in their thousands. Despite all this, due largely to the absence of rats on the island, the seabird colonies have survived. Nowadays, all the animals and plants on Arde enjoy full protection, including the turtles which come ashore here to lay their eggs.

Arde is, arguably, the most important bird reserve in the Seychelles. It hosts more than 750,000 pairs of 10 breeding seabird species, several thousand frigatebirds and five species of landbird endemic to the Seychelles, including the very rare Seychelles Magpie-robin. Among the highlights of our visit to Arde will be a barbeque lunch and a chance to swim and snorkel in the lovely waters surrounding the island.

The partially restored woodland covering Arde and Cousin reveals how the islands must have looked to those first humans that came to settle here in the Seychelles just two centuries ago. Seabirds abound in the trees and overhead, and the lumbering Giant Tortoises add to the impression of being in a time and landscape that mammals have yet to discover. Arde no longer has Tortoises but an October roost of up to 2,000 frigatebirds on the precipitous North Slope invokes similar sensations of timelessness as they wheel around the cliffs. The northern side of Arde is a good place to see turtles in the afternoon, and we will keep a sharp look-out for White-tipped Sharks, giant Whale Sharks, courting pairs of Spotted Eagle Rays, Bottlenose Dolphins and other ocean delights.

From Praslin we will also take a trip to the fourth largest of the granitic islands, La Digue. La Digue is most famous for its Black Paradise Flycatcher population, which can be seen among the cool green woods of the La Veuve Special Reserve. This is one of the few reserves in the world designed specially to preserve a single species. La Digue is a wonderfully old-fashioned and serenely peaceful island of great aesthetic interest. It has breathtakingly beautiful beaches and a pace of life which has remained unchanged over the centuries, giving the island a unique charm. Soaring Fruit Bats, skulking Chinese Yellow Bitterns and of course the gorgeous Black Paradise Flycatchers will be the main attractions here, although a visit to see the traditional and very colourful painted wooden Creole houses or the boat-building sheds is a pleasurable distraction even for the most avid naturalists.

Days 9 – 11

Bird Island

Finally, we must bid farewell to Praslin in order to spend three nights at the lodge on Bird Island, an idyllic island paradise surrounded by sparkling white beaches and crystal blue waters. Lying 100 kilometres north of Mahe, Bird is a coral island more akin to those other island groups in the Seychelles (Amirantes and Aldabra) which lie to the south of the granitics. The trip from Mahe by Twin Otter takes just over half an hour and one can already see some of the half a million Sooty Terns swirling like a cloud of midges over the far end of this tiny islet well before landing on the

grassy airstrip. Deeper waters lie only a short distance north of Bird, which is on the edge of the Seychelles Bank. Consequently there is the chance of seeing some of the oceanic seabirds such as boobies, now a rare sight in the granitics, coming to roost here. Birds are totally protected on this island, and therefore extremely tame, which means there are wonderful opportunities for photography. Other birds we can expect to see on the island are: Fairy Terns, tropicbirds, Common Noddy, Cattle Egret, Lesser Noddy, Green-backed Heron and Whimbrel as well as many other shorebirds.

The Sooty Terns arrive to nest on Bird Island in April and May each year, and laying begins in June; at its peak, the colony is home to 700,000 pairs of terns, plus young! Though many will have fledged by the time we visit (the last of the juveniles will have fledged by the end of October), there are typically still huge numbers and visiting the colony is a real sight to behold. Bird is also a very good place to see wintering northern European shorebirds, which will just be starting to return in October, and, being on the north-west edge of the entire Seychelles archipelago, it regularly plays host to lost migrant birds that have wandered beyond their traditional routes into north-eastern Africa.

Esmeralda is another star attraction of Bird Island. He is currently the heaviest tortoise in the world and it is claimed that he is the survivor from a French ship, wrecked offshore in 1808. Coconut palms, coral reefs which offer easy snorkelling during the heat of the afternoon, and nesting turtles (Green Turtles nest from June to September, and Hawksbill Turtles nest from mid-October to February) are among the other delights to be found here and it is an ideal place in which to spend a relaxing few days!

Days 12 – 13

Mahe

Today we will fly back to Mahe where we will return to the same hotel for the final two days of our holiday, continuing our exploration of the island and perhaps enjoying some more snorkelling to finish off our holiday.

Day 14

Fly UK

We will need to transfer back to the airport late on Day 13, after our final dinner together, in order to check in for the midnight departure of our Emirates flight to Dubai, and onward connection to the UK. We are due to arrive back into London at around midday today.

Tour grading

We have graded this tour as A (easy) in terms of the walking content; the tour is suitable for anyone of any age, with no need for a high level of fitness. All walks are optional, and short, along gentle terrain. There may be a few steeper inclines involved in some of the inland walks on Mahe, but

these will not be strenuous and are always optional. There will be plenty of opportunities for snorkelling and swimming in the sea throughout the holiday, which is again, all optional. Please just note that the tour does involve a number of boat excursions, some of which involve wet landings on the smaller islands. Although a helping hand will always be available, having the agility to get in and out of small motorboats from shallow water is required.

Food & accommodation included in the price

Comfortable tourist hotels and lodges will be used for this tour, all of good quality, and generally not far from a beach! All meals and accommodation are included in the cost of this holiday. Items such as drinks, laundry, souvenirs and tips are not included.

Departures from regional airports

We usually fly to Mahé from London Gatwick with Emirates airlines, via a change of aircraft in Dubai (final flight details will be confirmed on your invoice). Departures are normally also available from Manchester, Newcastle, Birmingham, London Heathrow and Glasgow. Flight times vary and these options may incur a small flight supplement, so please contact the Naturetrek office for further information. Upgrades to Business Class and First Class are available.

Your safety & security

Risks to your safety and security are an unavoidable aspect of all travel and the best current advice on such risks is provided for you by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. In order to assess and protect against any risks in your chosen destination, it is essential that you refer to the Foreign Office website – <https://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/seychelles> or telephone 0870 6060290 prior to travel.

How to book your place

In order to book your place on this holiday, please give us a call on 01962 733051 with a credit or debit card, book online at www.naturetrek.co.uk, or alternatively complete and post the booking form at the back of our main Naturetrek brochure, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost plus any room supplements if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, please call us on 01962 733051 or request one via our website.