

SEYCHELES

TREASURED TERRITORY

Aldabra's untouched paradise

text seychelles island foundation (SIF)

photos imran ahmad

Purple Haze: Favia stelligera blend in with giant clams along the West Channel of the Aldabra Atoll; a tribute to the architecture of our oceans



PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES/ALAMY; PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES/ALAMY

» **THE REMOTE WILDERNESS**

of Aldabra atoll, one of the Seychelles' southernmost islands, is approximately 1,066 kilometres southwest of the main island of Mahé. The Aldabra group comprises a distinct and isolated group of coral islands. Aldabra itself is the world's largest raised coral atoll some 35 kilometres long by 14 kilometres wide, with a total land area of around 140 square kilometres. Its geographical isolation, rough terrain and scarcity of fresh water have deterred large human populations from settling. As a result, Aldabra is significantly less disturbed than other atolls worldwide. It remains as an outstanding example of a coral atoll and, in 1982, gained World Heritage Status from UNESCO.

The atoll is a refuge for many endangered and unique species and is considered to be a biodiversity hotspot and one of the world's remaining natural wonders. Few people have ever been there, and even fewer have spent more than a couple of hours at this wild and beautiful atoll.

Aldabra's extraordinary terrain is rugged and extremely harsh. It consists mainly of fossilised coral reefs and mushroom shaped rocks called "champignon", eroded to form a brittle and dangerously sharp rock. Pavé, a rough limestone, and platin, a flatter limestone, are also found on Aldabra and together, they form a rough ring around the central lagoon. The average height above sea level is only eight metres, which is very low considering Aldabra's vast size. This ring is formed of four main islands (Picard, Grande Terre, Polymnie, Malabar) and many smaller islets. The only permanent human settlement is on Picard Island.



▲ Chasing Tails: Possibly *Porites cf. lobata* here along Anse Var, Aldabra Atoll



PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES/ALAMY; PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES/ALAMY

» **Aldabra's 100,000 endemic giant tortoises make up the world's largest remaining population of this ancient group of species... «**

Aldabra's enormous lagoon is fed and drained by four narrow channels to the ocean, which together provide the tidal heartbeat of the atoll, dominating all activity. The lagoon and coral reefs are largely unspoiled and teeming with colourful, diverse and abundant sea life. They are home to hundreds of tropical fish species and, in recent years, the only population in Seychelles of the rare dugong.

The coral reef at Aldabra is also an important global example of a stunning intact marine ecosystem with some of the highest abundance of marine predators in the world. Aldabra's waters also act as a corridor for large

migratory marine species, including varieties of whale and dolphin, marine turtles, whale sharks and several other large shark species.

Being on Aldabra is such a surreal experience that it is often likened to going back in time. Giant tortoises of many species used to occur all over the world, roaming islands large and small. Of these, there are now only two species left; Aldabra's 100,000 endemic giant tortoises make up the world's largest remaining population of this ancient and iconic group of species, and it is three times larger than the better known Galapagos population.

Similarly, flightless land birds, such as rails, used to be common on islands across the world, but have been wiped out by colonising humans and invasive species. Aldabra now hosts a growing population of the last remaining flightless rail population in the Indian Ocean.

Aldabra's list of other natural attributes is lengthy and impressive. The atoll has been colonised by breeding seabirds in their tens of thousands: greater and lesser frigatebirds, boobies, five species of tern, including the large caspian tern, tropic birds and even an oceanic

▲ Lagoon Walk: A bed covered with corals at Middle Camp, Aldabra Atoll

» **The atoll also hosts one of the largest populations of the world's biggest terrestrial arthropod, the coconut crab.** «

breeding colony of greater flamingos. Aldabra is also a turtle mecca, with an increasing number of turtles laying eggs on the beaches annually. The atoll also hosts one of the largest populations of the world's biggest terrestrial arthropod, the coconut crab. Other animals and birds found on Aldabra include colourful geckos, fruitbats, land birds, shorebirds and insects, many of which are endemic to the atoll.

The only human inhabitants on Aldabra are the small group of Seychelles Islands Foundation

(SIF) staff and researchers based at the research station on Picard Island. Noisy diesel generators supplied the energy requirements of this station. Then in 2012, a landmark project was completed on Aldabra, which saw energy-efficient equipment replace inefficient appliances, and a photovoltaic-diesel hybrid system replacing diesel generators. The resulting 57-percent decrease in the energy demand of the Aldabra research station has enabled the solar system to generate 94 percent of the new demand, reduced the station's dependency on diesel fuel by 97 percent, and has significantly lowered the carbon footprint of the station.

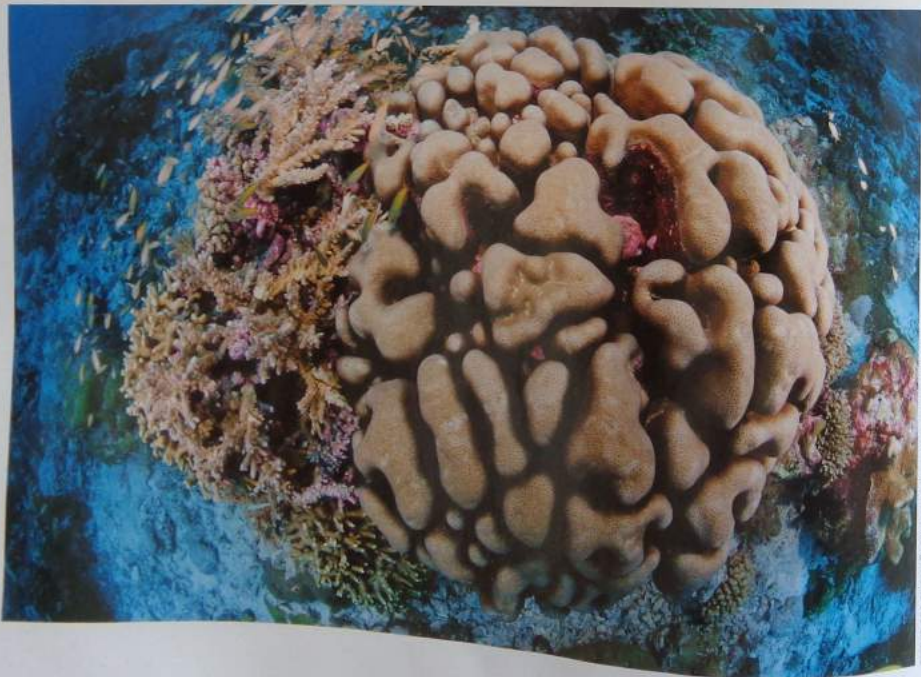
The management of this site has an interesting history. Aldabra is now under the management and protection of the SIF, a public trust established in 1979. SIF's initial mandate was to conserve and continue ecological research at Aldabra. This came about following a narrowly averted ecological disaster in the 1960s when plans were revealed, amidst great controversy, for Aldabra to be developed as a British/American

►

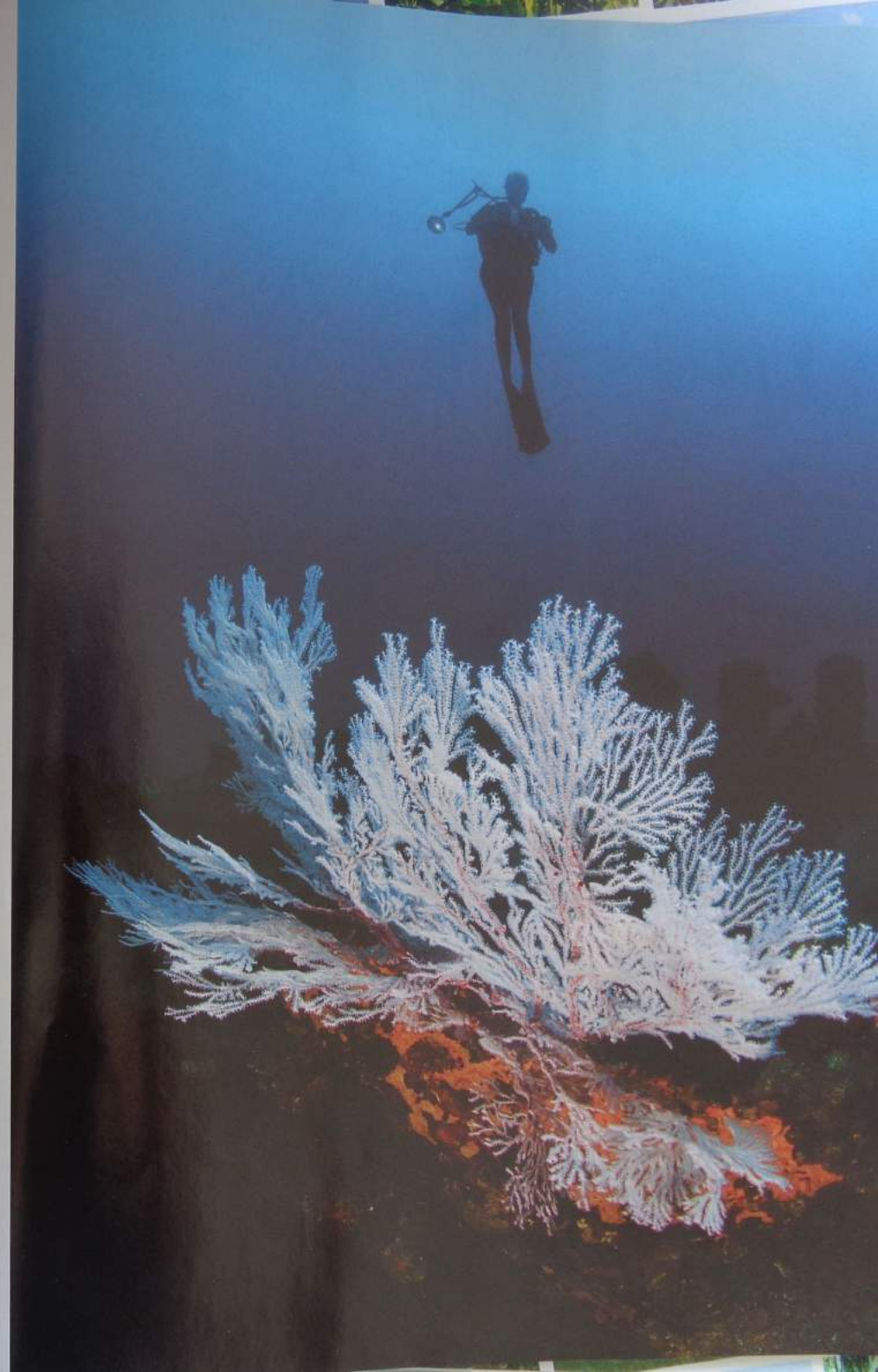
Aquamarine Twin: Barges, Seychelles, featuring a tall planar sea fan (Acabaria sp.)

▼

Brain Freeze: A stunning Montastraea annularis (stony coral) at Aldabra's Grand Passe



Nathan Oda | iStock | 12/8/11 12:28:11 | 150 200 | SEACORA Museum, Seychelles, 101, Seychelles





[A]
» In 1976, Aldabra was returned to Seychelles and immediately granted the highest level of protection... «

MAZE: A mix of *Seriatopora hystrix*, and possibly a *Sarcophyton* sp., at Anse Vue, Aldabra Atoll

military base. An international outcry ensued, led by British scientist Professor David Stoddart. Finally, after five years of efforts, the military base plans were aborted and the stewardship of the atoll was passed to the Royal Society of London, who initiated a long-term research programme. It was Diego Garcia that ultimately took Aldabra's place as the site for the Western Indian Ocean military base.

In 1976, Aldabra was returned to Seychelles and immediately granted the highest level of protection by the Seychelles government, which also soon established SIF as the responsible management authority. In 1982, Aldabra was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage list. Inscription of the Vallée de Mai on Praslin Island onto the UNESCO list quickly followed

in 1983. It wasn't until 1989 that a new and unique twinning arrangement began, when SIF was also granted management of the Vallée de Mai. Aldabra, at over 1,000 kilometres away from Mahé with no infrastructure or permanent human population, had always been a challenge to run and finance. The Vallée de Mai, which soon became the most popular visitor attraction in Seychelles, was in a position to supply the finances to keep both sites operating. This management and financial arrangement has worked for nearly 25 years and continues to provide the foundation for all of SIF's operational work at the two sites.

Aldabra is a refuge for many species and its extraordinary ecosystem is a place unlike any other. Thankfully, it has received the protection it deserves. This fragile island is indeed a land beyond imagination and a privilege for all who visit. **AD**

IMRAN AHMAD Nikon Professional Photographer and Ocean Artist Society member, Imran Ahmad captures images different from anything seen before. As an internationally published and award-winning photographer, he is always pushing the boundaries of conventional photography, his style is creatively complex and unpredictable.



The 22nd annual Marine Diving Fair 2014

Tokyo, Japan

Produced by the leading publisher of the best-selling diving magazine in Japan for 45 years.

The annual diving fair in Tokyo, Japan with the 22-year history.

Join us for your business in Japan

April 4 ~ April 6, 2014
 Sunshine City Convention Center Hall C,D Ikebukuro, TOKYO JAPAN
 Marine Diving Fair Organization & MARINE ART CENTER CO., LTD.

Produced by Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transport and Tourism, Ministry of the Environment, Japan Tourism Agency, Okinawa prefecture, JATA (Japan Association of Travel Agents), Japan Marine Recreation Association, Japan Recreational Diving Industry Association, Japan Marine Photography Association, Community Sports Center Foundation, Japan Marine Photography Association, Leisure Diving Certification Promotion Council, Sunshine Aquarium, Sunshine City

Sponsored by **Marine Diving**, **Travel Diver**, **Marine photo**, **Diving Schools**, **laSCUBA**, **Marine Art Center Co.**

For more information
MARINE ART CENTER Co., Ltd.
 E-mail: www@marinediving.co.jp
 Web: http://www.marinediving.co.jp/index_e.html

Photography by Masaaki Hara