

Aldabra & its Extended Family

visits the remote Aldabra group of islands.

There is only one Aldabra – well, at least for now there is only one, but to the east of Aldabra there are two atolls of similar structure, Astove and Cassinède are even more remote, even less visited than Aldabra. They have been uninhabited for decades and have tremendous potential to be future 'Aldabras'. In November 2013, I joined an excursion to all three of these atolls, organised by Islands Development Company (IDC) who administer those far-flung corners of Seychelles on behalf of the Government of Seychelles.

Visiting Aldabra is a lifetime's ambition for some, but it is not everyone's cup of tea. Captain Wharton, who visited in August 1878, was not a fan. He wrote to Dr. Albert Günther, Assistant Keeper of the zoological department of the British Museum: "...the surface of the island, which is an up-heaved atoll, is coral rock, jagged and rough to a degree that makes it most laborious to get about even were it not for a most stubborn and tangled brushwood which covers it and tears one's clothes and person to pieces".

Mushroom islets of raised coral
within the vast lagoon of Aldabra.

Poor old Wharton had been sent to the atoll to find giant tortoises and he was not having much luck. The animals were a source of meat and had been hugely reduced in number. Wharton was unhappy and frustrated as he thrashed about on Aldabra ruing his footwear. "Beyond a land rail there is nothing except mosquitoes" he grumbles. "I am sure I am safe in saying that Aldabra will never be inhabited regularly..." He was obviously confident that nobody in their right mind would ever settle on Aldabra.

Now imagine we have a time machine and bring the good captain forward to our time. Wharton sits at his laptop in his air-conditioned office at Aldabra Research Station. He idly chinks ice cubes against the sides of his glass of cold water and presses the 'Send' button. Instantly, his email bounces off a satellite and travels halfway around the world to arrive in Dr. Günther's inbox complete with attachments showing large numbers of tortoises, rails galore and much more. Günther reads the email with interest and cannot help but envy Wharton, who signs off: "Having barbecued tuna tonight, washed down with a nice cool Seybrew. Aldabra is great. Think I might apply for the manager's job when it comes up next".

Time machines being sadly unavailable at present, this is an unlikely scenario and Captain Wharton can never know how other advances in technology, equally unimaginable to him, have made life on Aldabra not just possible but rather pleasant. He knew nothing of refrigerators, satellite communications and solar panels. He just knew he was glad to see the back of Aldabra. "A more un-inviting place I never saw", he declared as he sailed over the horizon, vowing never to return.

We can't really blame Captain Wharton for his negative view of Aldabra. It is a harsh landscape: a jagged desert of fossilised coral intolerant of human frailties, a dry punishing wilderness devoid of fresh water or fertile soil. Yet it is also one of the most wonderful places on earth – to some an inspiration, a tantalising mystery. Pearson Philips called it "a place reminiscent of those stories in schoolboy annuals about miraculous territories beyond inaccessible mountain ranges peopled by dinosaurs." Sir David Attenborough reflected, "if you wanted to find the loneliest island in the world...you might well choose Aldabra".

Loneliness is part of the allure of Aldabra, but its remoteness makes management of this vitally

important UNESCO World Heritage Site a huge logistical challenge. For example, using diesel generators for electricity resulted in high fuel and transport costs and was environmentally unsustainable. In 2008, Seychelles Islands Foundation, the custodians of Aldabra, investigated ways to increase energy efficiency, develop a renewable energy system and reduce costs. Renewable energy options were assessed, alongside energy efficient measures. Findings were subsequently implemented, and a hybrid photovoltaic-diesel energy system was set up. Energy efficient measures reduced electricity demand by 57 per cent. In the first year, solar electricity provided 94 per cent of the Research Station's demand. This avoids almost 100 tonnes of CO₂ emissions per year. Since implementation of the photovoltaic system, diesel demand has decreased by 97 per cent and operational savings of up to €68,000 have been achieved.



Opposite page inset: Brown Boobies have disappeared from all Seychelles islands except Cosmoledo.

Bottom left: Aldabra Research Station on the atoll's main island of Picard.

Bottom middle: Solar energy now supplies practically all the needs of Aldabra.

Bottom right: The harsh terrain of all the islands in the group can make walking difficult.



Right: A monument at La Cigie commemorates the inscription of Aldabra as a World Heritage Site.

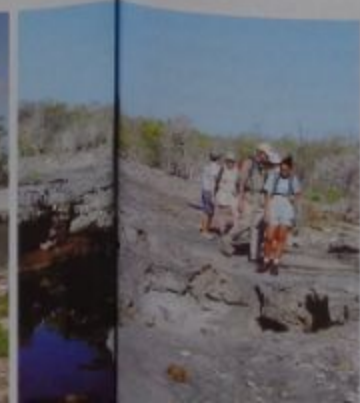
Below inset: Aldabra Rats have become so common that they may be reintroduced to Cosmoledo and Picard in the future.



Aldabra has an excellent team on the ground, comprising young Seychellois, expatriate scientists and volunteers with a variety of skills working under the cool, calm authority of manager Joel Soutyave. I took a bird walk with Senior Ranger Catherina Onnezia, described on the Seychelles Bird Records Committee website as the number one contributor of bird sightings in the country. "People think I'm crazy," says Catherina, "spending hours looking for birds but when I find a new vagrant I am so excited." Her enthusiasm is infectious.

The next morning, I accompanied Scientific Coordinator Heather Richards and new recruit Sheril de Commareend on a routine patrol to check for fresh turtle tracks in the sand. Returning to the Research Station Heather spotted a newly hatched tortoise and Sheril's sharp eyes quickly located the nest where another baby tortoise slowly emerges, the newest resident of an ancient landscape, the world stronghold of this ancient race.

Soon it is time to sail for new horizons. Cosmoledo, an overnight sail from Aldabra, is undoubtedly the most important unprotected site in Seychelles. It has spectacular seabird colonies: the largest Red-footed Booby colony in the western Indian Ocean and the only breeding population of Brown Booby in Seychelles. There is also a race of white-eye so rare it is entirely confined



to Menai, the largest of the 19 islands of this roughly circular atoll. On the second largest island, Grand Ile, we find seven active nests of Masked Booby, some with eggs, some with chicks. This is the first known breeding record since 1968, subsequent to which they had disappeared, probably due to the presence of rats. In 2007, the Island Conservation Society (ICS) eradicated rats from Grande Ile. This was a major logistical exercise funded under a Fonds Français pour l'Environnement Mondial project with support from IBC. Getting a helicopter, all the materials and personnel to Cosmoledo took many months of planning and so this latest news is extremely rewarding, the crowning glory for an ambitious and ultimately successful project. During this visit, time and tide permitted only a limited search over a small area of the island and it is probable the actual population is much higher. On Grand Polyte, where rats were also eradicated by ICS, Masked Boobies were found to be doing well with 50-100 pairs present. No Masked Boobies were found on Grand Polyte during thorough searches in 1996 and 2002, but the species was breeding when the eradication process began, despite the presence of rats. Even so, it is beyond question that rats have a serious impact on the species. The world's largest colony of Masked Booby breeds at Clipperton Island in the Pacific Ocean, where 112,000 pairs were counted in 2003; in 1958, before rats were eradicated, there were just 150 pairs.

Sadly, not all the news from Cosmoledo is good. Sea cucumbers were once very common in the waters of the lagoon but today they are rare. Sharks, too, appear to be uncommon. Clearly poachers have been busy; despite the threat from pirates operating in the area. Due to the absence of a regular human presence on the atoll, we can only speculate on the scale of poaching and the origin of the poachers, though there is certainly evidence of incursion from Madagascar. Hopefully in the not too distant future, Cosmoledo will receive the attention it merits and there will be full-time conservation staff based here, as on Aldabra. There are several unique races of land bird which were wiped out from Cosmoledo but still survive on Aldabra. Hopefully one day they will be reintroduced to their former home.

We travelled on to Astove, which was abandoned in the 1980s and is uncompromisingly remote. This is a most peculiar raised coral atoll. It consists of a single ring of land which almost entirely encloses a very shallow

lagoon, interrupted by just one narrow, winding passage. In the southwest corner, the Gustave Brin Channel. The coral wall at the reef edge is said to be one of the finest in the world, at the deserted settlement the calls of seabirds and white-eyes broke the eerie silence, though even they seemed subdued as they fitted through the bushes between the ruins where once a small community struggled to survive on this remote outpost. The survival of the buildings testifies to the seriousness of their endeavour; a church and a remarkable house, with archways and clusters surrounding a courtyard, reminiscent of a Spanish hacienda, still stand.

A short distance north of the settlement, there is a cemetery. Most of the graves are unmarked, but that of Otto Olsen has an inscription which is still legible. Olsen was a Norwegian mariner who drowned at Astove in 1925 and it is noted that he was "sadly missed" by his companions. His ship was not the first to meet an untimely end on reefs of Astove. In 1760, the Portuguese ship Le Dom Royal, bound from the coast of Africa for America with 300 slaves on board, was wrecked on Astove. The crew and slaves got ashore in safety but the European crew sailed off in the long-boat in search of help. According to some accounts they were never heard of again; others say they were picked up by an English vessel. Whatever the truth, word

reached Ile de France (now Mauritius) and Bourbon (Reunion) that a rich cargo of slaves was there on Astove for the taking. The *Jardinier* sailed to try to bring them away but having succeeded in taking a great many of the slaves on board they drifted onto the reef in the night and the ship was wrecked; everyone perished. In due course another ship was fitted out to go in search of the *Jardinier* and met a similar fate. On her arrival at Astove she drifted onto the reef and was wrecked. Some 20 years later another small vessel touched at Astove and to their surprise the crew found it inhabited by five slaves who, on their approach to the shore, set up wild shouts of defiance and placed themselves in an attitude of defiance. Intimidated, the crew gave up on the enterprise, sailing away empty-handed. Arriving at Bourbon they reported what they had seen and yet another vessel was sent to try and capture the slaves. History repeated itself: upon her arrival at Astove she ran onto the reef and was lost.

In the meantime the former slaves were creating what might arguably be the first black republic, but sadly they

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Under the guidance of Seychelles Islands Foundation (SIF), Aldabra has gone from strength to strength on all fronts.”



were not left in peace. In 1796, a Mr Savy sailed from Seychelles to try and bring the slaves off. He sent a black man called Paul ashore in the hope he could reassure the slaves, but meanwhile the ship was swept away by currents, leaving Paul stranded. Before Mr. Savy could get back to Astove, two more ships had arrived one from Mauritius and one from Mahé. They did, finally, succeed in recapturing the slaves, but only by the use of extreme force and there was considerable loss of life on both sides. Paul was killed by the slaves who believed that he was in league with the Europeans and had betrayed them.

In 1799, a vessel sailing from Mauritius to Mozambique reported that they had found Astove uninhabited. It was assumed the remaining inhabitants had been taken away by a Portuguese ship leaving Astove, once again, desolate and silent.

The silence did not last for long. "On 5th May 1836," wrote Major William Stirling, "the beautiful new Ship, Tiger, of 375 tonnes, carrying, including the Captain, in all 21 souls, sailed from Liverpool, for Bombay". They never made it. The Tiger was wrecked at Astove three months later. Major Stirling, found the island "strewed with pieces of vessels, of different countries and materials and a cannon and two anchors of ancient manufacture... on the reef... There were the remains of about a dozen huts and benches, and many marks of the saw and axe on the trees. Several hundreds of turtle shells were piled and arranged in regular order, at small distances from the encampment, which, with the path cut in the neighbourhood through the jungle, looked as if the people who had been there were in good discipline, or much at their ease".

The major kept a diary which gives us a wonderful insight into what the island was like at this time.



Above: The abandoned settlement on Astove may seem like new life.

Below: Graves of founders and sailors on Cosmoledo.

He found "...many tropic birds under the bushes; they are of a satiny white, with one long red feather in the tail, some of the other feathers being also slightly tinged with red, sometimes with black", clearly these were Red-tailed Tropicbirds now long gone. Stirling gives an excellent description of a flightless rail and mentions pigeons and doves, also now extinct, though they survive on Aldabra. Ominously he mentions rats on the shore of the island, possibly recent arrivals and no doubt responsible for much of the devastation of Astove which was to follow.

Today, Astove no longer has great seabird colonies. The rich guano has been mostly removed and a hollow shell was left behind. Most of the land birds have vanished too. But all is not lost. The lesson of Aldabra is that with the right vision and management and given room to breathe, nature will respond. To that end, Seychelles Islands Foundation and Island Conservation Society and Islands Development Company are working closely together and also collaborating for example to remove two invasive bird species from Assumption, the islands through which all three atolls are accessed. Fruka Dogfry (CEO of SIF), Glenn Savy (CEO of IDC) and myself as Chairman of ICS – all participants in this recent voyage – are in agreement that with joint efforts the Aldabra success story can one day in not too distant future be a universal one extended to the boundaries of the whole Aldabra Group.

Perhaps one day the success that Aldabra has enjoyed will be repeated on Cosmoledo and Astove. Alien predators might be removed, endemic birds might be transferred, tortoises and turtles may multiply and the island will be restored to something Major Stirling would recognise: if only we had that time machine...

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Flying the Creole Spirit



Years

On the occasion of our 35th anniversary
we wish to thank the people of Seychelles and all our
esteemed guests for their loyalty and continued support.