

Aldabra, an amazing sanctuary



The Aldabra atoll

On March 10, a group of 12 students, accompanied by four teachers left Mahe for a five-day discovery trip to Aldabra.

The trip is a star prize for the Eco-School competition organised by the Ministry of Education in partnership with other organisations to reward primary and secondary schools which are making an effort to promote education for sustainable development.

Teachers and students came from eight different schools on Mahe and another two came from the 'Friends of Vallée de Mai' club from Praslin.

The trip is one which is full of hands on, discovery learning which starts as early as 6am on some days, due to the tide, to late in the evening when students and teachers accompany the rangers on turtle tracking or crab monitoring.

It is fully sponsored by the Seychelles Islands Foundations, the organisation which manages Seychelles' two world heritage sites - Aldabra and Vallée de Mai.

Learn more about the trip through the diary of Aldabra written by Sonam Tsultrim, a 16-year-old student of Anse Boileau secondary, and some views of the other students.



Children and teachers admiring the co-existence of the Aldabra species

Day 3: The Fregate colony

My morning had me dipping my feet in the chilling waters of Aldabra. Getting on the boat was always a wake-up call for me. We then set off for the Fregate Colony. Again we were surrounded by the crystal waters but this time we were greeted by a cacophony of Fregate calls. They flapped their wings in an attempt to fly away from us even if they couldn't but, honestly I would say they were posing for us. It was simply a beautiful and colorful artistic tableau.

Later during the afternoon we were testing out tortoise trackers with the help of Wilfredo's (a researcher on the island) PowerPoint presentation. However, I must say there was a word which I absolutely enjoyed saying in particular that afternoon and that would be the 'Flacoutia Indica' which is a small tasty fruit on the island. Although I might have said the word one too many times that it slips my mind sometimes. After the presentation, we had the opportunity to learn how to track tortoises by using sensor aerials. The best part of the day was at night when we went coconut crab monitoring, ironic given my fear of crustaceans. I actually ended up surprising myself by holding most of them. Heather and Phil (two other researchers on the island) made it really exciting and fun for us, they were the cure to my phobia. The crab monitoring went up until 10pm and it was completely pitch black outside even if we had our bright torches. I found that there was an upside to the darkness and discovered that its true beauty was what lied above us. Aldabra's mesmerising night sky was as though I was staring at a cave filled with glow worms.

I retired for the night by stargazing at the night sky for one last time with my coconut crabs still plaguing my thoughts but, it was the good kind of plague. Never in my wildest dreams would I have imagined myself holding the huge crustaceans.

Day 4: The lost city of Aldabra

My last day was reserved for mainly snorkeling. I can proudly say that I got to experience and witness Aldabra's underwater city. The moment I was submerged into this azure crystal water everything just blossomed to life. Schools of multicoloured parrot fish just glided past me and into these gigantic rustic mushroom shaped corals. Many more stood by like mini skyscrapers creating this deep sea trench that seemed to go on forever. Every moment I spent under the water felt so surreal! I was actually here, these sorts of things happen only once in a blue moon. I felt so at peace, so relaxed, it's as if I was one with nature. You forget about time, day and date. I couldn't imagine what Aldabra would be like without its diverse marine life. I would fight tooth and nail for this beauty. Another group went turtle tracking on Grande Terre and later joined us snorkeling.

Later on we had a friendly match of volleyball. The Eco-school versus the Aldabra team and might I say that things got quite com-



The children getting ready to snorkel

petitive. As it was our last day on Aldabra our group also decided to organise a little activity as a way of saying thank you to them. We had dinner with the staff and that was followed by a cultural night. All in all they were very impressed by our little performance.

Life on Aldabra was so exciting for us also because the staff were mainly young people, we could easily communicate with. But it was a group of young people devoted and committed to research and protect our natural kingdom. Like all the people on the trip, they were so passionate about all the living creatures of the atoll and to our amazement, even if you have come to work on Aldabra as a skipper, mechanic or even a cook, the opportunity for you to develop your professional skills further in scientific research such as diving, data collection and monitoring skills are also available. The opportunity to work alongside qualified scientists, sometimes from visiting renowned ones, the opportunity is there and the young people of the atoll are making the best of it. They were an inspiration for all us, and they shared their experiences with so much pride. I will conclude that Aldabra is being well cared for and proudly said in capable hands of young Seychellois.

Although I spent a limited amount of time on Aldabra there's one thing I can say for sure and it's that it was an experience beyond my imagination. It really took me to a new level of trying to understand how nature works in the most magnificent of ways and truly just how to be one with it. For that Aldabra has truly been etched in my heart and yes I'm proud to say I've been there and what a world of wonder it is that jewel of the Indian Ocean.



Ready to go down under



Noah at the bottom of the lagoon



Group photo with some of the staff

Shark encounters

Sharks have always been portrayed as dangerous beasts which will tear any human flesh which appears before them. Many scientists all over the world are working hard to erase this perception among people and try to show their importance in the ocean food chain and ecosystem.

Aldabra is one of the best spots to show how these feared creatures can come so close to people without biting them.

For the group of students and teachers who went to Aldabra, every little free time they had at the settlement, was spent among the wonderful black tips sharks, about 40 of them for most of the



Most of the kids' free time was spent with the sharks

time. Though there were two or three who were a bit resistant to get in the 'sharky' waters, in less than an hour on their first day, they were all excitedly swimming among these beautiful friendly creatures. Read their views:

My encounter with sharks was not what I expected. The black tip kept swimming around me when I entered the water, and I got so excited. I couldn't believe I touched the tail of one of the black tips.

Name: Adrian Noel, English River school

When the first time I saw them swimming near I was scared but then I got used to it. I went to swim with them. I touched a lot of sharks. They were really friendly. When I am around them I am so happy, but sad to leave them. I know that I was going to miss them. I love you black tips!

Name: Pearl Faure, Anse Royale school

I encountered sharks up close at the settlement beach when I was swimming. At first I was afraid of them, but the teacher told us the sharks were friendly.

The black tip reef sharks swam calmly past me. I even got to touch their tails. Their tails felt very smooth and they are very beautiful creatures.

Name: Monik Choppy, English River school

I really wanted to swim with the sharks on Aldabra. So when the teacher said we could swim with shark I rushed to the sea. It was scary at first but then I got used to them. The sharks are very friendly. It was very fun, exciting and very cool.

Name: Neil Commantant, Bel Ombre school

Never would I have ever imagined such an apex predator to turn out so friendly. Such an experience has changed my whole perception about these creatures and it makes me want to really understand them better.

Name: Sonam Tsultrim, Anse Boileau school

The shark on Aldabra is not always like I have heard people talking about. On Aldabra I have swam with them, I was scared at first but then I did it every day that I was there.

Name: Jessica Farabeau Praslin school

I noticed a couple of black tips, going through the surf. I put my feet in the water, soon enough a couple of others joined me after about 15 minutes a group of over 30 sharks had gathered around us. I got my camera and snapped a few photos.

Name: Noah Jean-Louis, Beau Vallon school



Snorkeling in the lagoon at low tide

A poem by one of the students, Monik Choppy of English River school

Memory of Aldabra

Aldabra,
A golden sanctuary
A coral empire
A bird paradise
A natural laboratory

Aldabra
A place where birds are free
A place where turtles are safe
A place where marine life is in abundance

Aldabra
I promise to preserve you
I vow to defend you
I guarantee to be your ambassador



Learning how data is collected for coconut crab monitoring

At the end of the trip this is what some students had to say:

My best spot on Aldabra was the lagoon. It was just eye-opening and unbelievable, the water was so clear and it reflected the sunlight and the sky that we could see all of the creatures that was beneath it. It was filled with majestic amazing coral which support different kinds of plants and birds. There were mangroves everywhere with different kinds of birds nesting such as cormorants, terns, boobies, and the red-footed-booby birds. They all live like a big community. The lagoon is also the habitat of many animals such as different kinds of fish, sea turtles and rays. I have never seen so many turtles and rays before!



Nature trail encounter

For me Aldabra is like a precious jewel, its breathtaking, beautiful seas creatures capture your heart forever. Not enough words can describe the precious beauty that Aldabra offers. I think it must be described as heaven on earth.

Name: Kelly Inard, Praslin secondary school

Aldabra is truly the epitome of the environment still perfectly intact. It really takes your breath away. It's everything of what I expected but to see it up so close is just mesmerising and incredible. Aldabra the jewel of the Seychelles still pure and untouched, so precious and lush, a place where animals seek refuge, a place they can call home. Aldabra their mother land, a place like no other.

Name: Sonam Tsultrim, Anse Boileau secondary school

Aldabra you are so beautiful. You are unique. Some of your species are found nowhere else in the world. I hope you will always stay as beautiful as you are. You are a dream come true. You are Aldabra, my little unforgettable paradise.

Name: Neil Commantant, Bel Ombre school

Aldabra is an amazing place, an amazing sanctuary that just shows what nature can do when it is allowed to thrive.

Name: Noah Jean-Louis, Beau Vallon secondary school

My diary of Aldabra by Sonam Tsultrim:

Day 1: The barren stretch

Everywhere and anywhere I looked there was this barren glistening stretch of intense aquamarine blue. So mystifying yet strangely terrifying. My eyes scanned beyond the horizon but still we saw no sign of Aldabra. I felt distraught without the sight of land nearby and the constant and violent humping of the boat just made it worse. The waves crashed against its front splashing salt water all over us and in time it evaporated, leaving us covered in salt. My eyes squinted so hard and finally there it was flat and almost sinking back into the horizon.

The closer we got the clearer the magnificent atoll appeared, yet it felt like we were still so far out of reach. After a long while of battling opposing waves and getting to witness majestic bottle nose dolphins which swam acrobatically and danced in synchrony by our boat we finally reached the lagoon. Inside the water was calm and transparent with that special hint of azure. It's as though I was being compelled to jump in. Below the water all seemed so serene and above was this coral stretch which was untouched and pure but one should never be fooled. It was capable of shredding flesh without any mercy. The moment I got on land the soft, fine, ivory coloured sand gently massaged my feet, I took one deep breath and in my mind my first thought was "finally I'm here". Our way to civilisation was guided by the island's rangers or as they also called themselves 'visitors' on Aldabra.

There was so much to see, but as the sun was already setting, we had to leave the longing discovery desire for the next day. I must note that I was surprised to see so many young, devoted and enthusiastic people working on a far away island. Through the introduction that evening, I learned that they were mainly graduates from our post secondary schools and even from the University of Seychelles. Sounds like Aldabra have so much to offer them in terms of professional development, especially in the scientific field. We settled in for the night with another day already planned ahead of us. Our weary heads would finally be able to rest.

Day 2: The coral empire

My alarm went off at 6:10am but for Aldabra that's still 5:10am given its one hour difference compared to that of Mahe. The rhythmic crashing of waves against the shore was the soundtrack to our mornings. I awoke to the dawned beaches of Aldabra. Our morning consisted of a boat trip which along with it had as taking an infinite amount of photos, but to me the best pictures I took were with my eyes. It's those ones that actually last you a lifetime. Mangroves cov-



Exploring the lagoon at low tide is as much fun as exploring it at high tide



Exploring inland



Learning to track down tortoises



Learning that all the fish caught for island's consumption has to be identified, labelled and weighed

ered most of the island chains as well as it sprouted from the azure-crystal like waters. Amidst its roots was another world - an underwater city.

The island itself was made up of four main islands being: Picard (where we were living), Polymnie, Malabar and Grande Terre or as I called it the 'tortoise paradise'. The atoll has four main channels and the largest being Grand Passe however, there was one channel which was separated

into eight smaller channels and within that the largest was Passe Dubois.

The rest of the day had us swimming with the friendly black tips sharks. It was an experience which can never be forgotten. For the afternoon we did mainly snorkeling and with our masks tightly fitted to the point that I thought I had an octopus stuck to my face - we discovered the coral city of Aldabra. The shoals of fishes paraded with pride and their movements all synchronised. There were those such as sweet lips (a type of fish) which sought refuge under the massive corals in hopes of not being found but in vain.

Our night later on consisted of us having to track turtles in the pitch black night which was filled with whispers, but nevertheless above us laid a carpet of shimmering stars which only seemed to illuminate our paths. In about two hours, we spotted about 13 turtles coming up the beach to nest and for the first time I learned to identify where a turtle was digging its nest just by smelling the wet sand which they throw away as they dig deep in the sand.

After a long weary day the younger ones still had enough energy to rival that of a puppy but as for me and the rest of the group all we craved for was our bed.