



*From afar, these otherworldly trees resemble perfect umbrellas or mushrooms. Up close reveals a complex muscular skeleton of branches supporting a canopy of greenery perfectly groomed by nature.* **Timm Chapman**

# A QUEST FOR THE



Dragon's blood trees are found on Socotra, the largest of an archipelago of islands off the African continent. The trunks of these trees secrete a deep red sap. **TIMM CHAPMAN**

# DRAGON'S BLOOD TREE

Unique flora found only on Socotra island, known as 'Galapagos of the Indian Ocean'

**TIMM CHAPMAN**

Socotra is not the destination for a resort holiday as the few hotels provide only basic accommodation. It's also not a destination for those who love to tour cities. Socotra's treasures lie outside the towns, up in the mountains: Dragon's blood trees.

The trunk of the dragon's blood tree secretes a deep red sap, like blood, that has been coveted as far back as Roman times, used in everything from magic potions to medicines to violin varnish. Today it is harvested (by the local children mainly) and sold in small balls to tourists; claiming that it makes for a nice blush. But the trees' true esthetic comes from their stately appearance; they are like no other tree on the planet, and they only grow on this tiny island.

It is these trees, along with more than 300 vascular plant species that are endemic, that were key to why Socotra was declared a world heritage site by UNESCO in 2008.

Socotra, sometimes called the Galapagos of the Indian Ocean, is the largest of an archipelago of islands fragmented from the African continent just below the Arabian Peninsula. Politically part of Yemen, yet located 350 kilometres away, Socotra avoids the civil war-torn mainland, quietly going about its existence as an intriguing jewel of the Middle East. After landing, I



This is one of numerous species in Socotra all termed bottle trees, which are known for their unique trunks and sparse, spindly branches.

met Ali, my guide and translator — essential as hardly anyone speaks English. (Soqotri, an Afro-Asiatic language, native to the archipelago, is what is widely spoken.) I also met Abdul Asis, my cook and driver.

After loading my gear into the truck, we headed into the main town of Hadiboh, population about 10,000. The town is a ramshackle collection of stone or cinder block

buildings, bland in their appearance except for brightly painted metal doors.

Hadiboh's streets bristle with the energy of its people, their transport and their goats, as they go about their daily activities. Mostly 4x4 trucks and SUVs rumble down the vertebrae-rattling rocky roadways. Small motorbikes also have a notable presence; riders helmetless and usually ac-

companied by multiple passengers. There are no traffic signals or road markings to slow or order the chaos of movement; this is a place where one just goes with the flow, giving the occasional "hello" via a toot of the horn.

Since the war erupted on the mainland, little money has been injected into the island's infrastructure. Many buildings were in mid-construction; now temporar-

## GETTING THERE

I booked a week-long private tour with Socotra Specialist Tours, an agency based on the island. The agency then arranged for a Yemeni visa and booked me on a charter flight to the island via Abu Dhabi in the UAE; this way I could avoid travelling to the Yemen mainland.

Tourists here are mainly comprised of organized groups, often biology or geology based, who come to study Socotra's unique flora and fauna.

The various agencies that operate in Socotra work together to plan itineraries to avoid traffic jams of tourism at the more popular spots.

ily abandoned. Outside assistance from Saudi Arabia and the UAE is seen everywhere: Sparkling new ochre-coloured schools and police stations courtesy of Saudi Arabia; and the UAE providing fuelling stations, medical care (including free flights to the UAE for major procedures) and some housing. My driver would joyfully point out the new construction along the way as either "Saudi" or "No Saudi."

As I entered town, locals made eye contact and often gave a wave my way. Warm smiles bridged the language barrier.

Winding up 600 metres towards the clouds, we finally reached the Diksam Plateau, a limestone table that provides the right mix of altitude, ground composition and sea mist for the dragon's blood trees to grow. From afar, these otherworldly trees resemble perfect umbrellas or mushrooms. Up close reveals a complex muscular skeleton of branches supporting a canopy of greenery perfectly groomed by nature.

The landscape of the plateau is carved in half by a large canyon called the Wadi Dirhur. Standing on the canyon's windy edge and looking eastward, you can see the Firmihin Forest, a large woodland comprised mainly of these trees, each a seemingly perfect specimen, surely sculpted rather than naturally grown.

SEE **DRAGON** ON **D2**





Dagub Cave looks over the south coast of Socotra and the Indian Ocean. Socotra is home to many unique varieties of flora and fauna, as well as canyons and caves.



A group of kids plays on a sand dune on the island of Socotra.

# BOTTLE TREES THRIVE IN ROCKS

DRAGON FROM *DI*

We camped among them under a canopy of stars twinkling brightly in an impossibly black sky. Although a tent was packed, I opted to choose a rug and sleeping bag and drifted off under the cover of stars.

The next day we began the slow, suspension-twisting descent into the Wadi; the sharp rocks threatened to penetrate the side walls of our tires. As we reached the canyon floor, I looked up to see a number of

bulbous trees growing seemingly out of the rock walls. These were the “bottle trees,” a distant member of the gourd family, resembling Dr. Seuss characters more than living flora.

The trees have a bloated trunk with gangly little branches protruding near the top, like spindly little arms and fingers. In late winter, they begin to leaf out and produce flowers, mostly pinkish red, giving them their alternate name: the “desert rose.” They defy logic and gravity as if they were merely

velcroed to the steep rocky walls.

For a few days, we continued our journey rock-hopping up and down canyons in the central highlands, passing the occasional small settlement of stone buildings of those who call this rugged area home. We eventually came upon the Homhil Nature Sanctuary, a mountaintop hideaway where a high concentration of bottle trees, dragon’s blood trees and frankincense trees all naturally share space alongside a slick rock basin of freshwater.

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Goats abound on the island. So much so, that overgrazing has become a serious problem.

The dragon's blood trees are slow growing and often need decades to reach maturity. The goats often graze on the young seedlings, ending the tree's life before it truly begins.

This coupled with the continued drying of the North African region due to climate change has led to stresses on the mature trees that require sea mist to thrive. These factors have put these rare trees into a vulnerable status.

Descending from the highlands to the north coast, a large dark gash in the limestone cliffside appeared: Hoq Cave, one of several hidden antres that are naturally borne into the Socotran landscape.

With a mouthful of jagged stalactites at its entrance, Hoq Cave has preserved paintings on its walls several kilometres in that date back to the 1st century AD.

Along the northeast coastline, white sand pushed high against the cliffs, stretched out to the Arabian Sea; its crystal-clear turquoise-green water slowly melted into a cobalt blue before meeting the horizon.

The waters surrounding Socotra are teeming with marine life. Fishermen ply the seas daily for its bounty, one of the island's key exports. This particular week



Hoq Cave features jagged stalactites at its entrance and preserved pictograms on its walls.

was open season for lobster, so nets wrapped almost the entire coastline.

Mornings were busy with fishermen discovering what profit they netted the night before. Abdul Asis nabbed a few from the day's catch to boil for dinner; the freshest of the fresh melted on the tongue. With a full belly and the sound of waves slowly caressing the sands,

the stars returned once again.

Climbing into my sleeping bag, I tried to keep one eye open just in case the bottle trees sprang to life or the dragon's blood trees were able to touch the night sky, but the sound of the waves made my eyelids heavy and my effort futile.

Socotra prefers to keep many of its treasures a secret, and that's not a bad thing.



The *Dracaena cinnabari*, or dragon's blood tree, is found in large densities of woodland only on the island of Socotra. *TIMM CHAPMAN*



A fisherman pushes his boat out to sea on Socotra. *GETTY IMAGES*



The Homhil Nature Sanctuary is home to an abundance of dragon's blood and bottle trees. *TIMM CHAPMAN*



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