THE SEYCHELLES, MAURITIUS & RÉUNION
An Earthly Paradise

Tour Duration: 12 days
Group Size Limit: 10
Tour Category: Easy for the most part, occasionally Moderate

At one time or another most of us experience the desire to get away from the stresses of modern life and escape to some idyllic tropical island where white sandy beaches are fringed by coconut palms, their fronds swaying gently in the breeze, where warm blue waters lap softly on the shoreline and nearby coral reefs teem with brilliantly coloured fish. To complete the scene (for the birdwatcher at least), there should be tropicbirds floating gently overhead and Common White (or Fairy) Terns, surely the most delicately beautiful of all the seabirds, tame enough to nest on a branch not far above one’s head!

This picture of paradise is not a fantasy but reality amongst the string of islands that dot the Indian Ocean to the east of the African continent. With good to excellent accommodations, some superb food and mostly easy birding, this tour counts as a real ‘holiday’. We will not only have enough time to look for all 31 of the endemic landbirds and the seabirds of the islands, but will also have a bit of time left over to swim, snorkel or soak up the atmosphere of these pearls of the Indian Ocean. As a consequence, this is also a trip a non-birding partner would enjoy.

The remote island of Rodrigues is rarely visited by birdwatchers, despite having two endemic landbirds (Rodrigues Warbler and Rodrigues Fody), so our visit here is something out of the ordinary.

We will finish our journey with an exploration of the island of Réunion, which lacks sandy beaches but makes up for this by the grandeur of the scenery. Dramatic volcanic mountains with forest-clad slopes rise steeply from the surrounding waters whilst inland are vast craters that tell the story of the island’s turbulent geological past more eloquently than any words. Barau’s and Réunion Petrels swoop overhead in dashing aerial displays.

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Moving on to Mauritius, a verdant volcanic island which is home to some more of the world’s rarest birds, we will explore the remaining areas of tropical forest in search of Mauritius Kestrel, Pink Pigeon, Mauritius Parakeet, Mauritius Cuckoo-Shrike, Mauritius Bulbul, Mascarene Paradise Flycatcher, Mauritius Grey White-eye, Mauritius Olive White-eye and Mauritius Fody. We will also make a boat trip to uninhabited Round Island where breeding Red-tailed and White-tailed Tropicbirds circle and Trinidade Petrels swoop overhead in dashing aerial displays.

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We begin our tour in the Seychelles, a group of ancient granitic islands with
From Praslin we pass on to the island of Mahé, which is the largest of the Seychelles group and boasts the world’s smallest capital city, Victoria. The friendly Creole population have a carefree manner characteristic of these gentle islands. This happy-go-lucky attitude is infectious and visitors soon become accustomed to the rhythm of island life. The Creole influence on local food has produced a wonderfully varied and exciting cuisine, much of it based on fresh seafood. Mahé has beautiful beaches, mangrove swamps and extensive areas of mountain forest on the central ridge which rises to 1000m. Some of the peaks are covered in cloudforest which harbours endemic tree frogs and chameleons. The main avian prizes of Mahé are the endangered endemic Seychelles Scops Owl, which currently appears to have a stable population of 80-160 pairs, and the endangered endemic Seychelles White-eye. The population of the white-eye on Mahé is thought to be only around 30-40 individuals and may still be decreasing, although fortunately a population of about 300 birds has now been found on the uninhabited islet of Conception. The majority of the other nine bird species endemic to the Seychelles occur on Mahé and as we explore the mountain forests we will easily find Seychelles Kestrel, Seychelles Blue Pigeon (a spectacular deep blue pigeon with a white head and neck and a brilliant scarlet wattle on its crown), Seychelles Bulbul and Seychelles Sunbird. The white-eye and the scops owl will probably require a bit of effort to locate. Among the introduced species that occur here are Madagascar Turtle Dove, Zebra Dove, Indian Myna and Madagascar Fody. Western Cattle Egrets are found commonly in the lowlands and at the coast we should see a selection of shorebirds, including Grey (or Black-bellied) Plover, Eurasian Whimbrel, Common Greenshank, Common Sandpiper and Ruddy Turnstone.

**Day 1** The tour begins this morning on Mahé, where we will stay overnight. The island of Mahé is the largest of the Seychelles group and

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**Seychelles Paradise Flycatchers**

*Michael Hodgson*

wreathed peaks and endemic landbirds include Réunion Harrier, Réunion Cuckoo-Shrike, Réunion Bulbul, Réunion Stonechat, Réunion Paradise Flycatcher and Réunion Grey White-eye.

**Birdquest has operated tours to the Seychelles, Mauritius and Réunion since 1987.**

**Itinerary**

**Day 1** The tour begins this morning on Mahé, where we will stay overnight. The island of Mahé is the largest of the Seychelles group and

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- Madagascar Turtle Dove
- Zebra Dove
- Indian Myna
- Madagascar Fody
- Western Cattle Egrets

Of these, the Madagascar Turtle Dove is particularly common here and introduced Common Waxbills are frequently encountered. We shall visit a small marsh where Yellow Bitterns, a species that probably colonized the Seychelles naturally, can be found, and we may also find the Seychelles race of the Common Moorhen. The coast of La Digue often has a few migrant Crab-Plovers, a remarkable wader which is placed in its own family. We

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**Days 3-4** From Praslin we will take a short boat trip to the low-lying, mainly wooded island of Cousin. This tiny uninhabited isle is only a kilometre across and is a BirdLife International reserve which safeguards one of only four populations of the Seychelles Warbler. Once considered to be critically endangered with a world population of only 30 individuals, the species has now increased to a stable population of around 2500 birds. We will also be looking for the Seychelles Magpie-Robin, the most endangered of the Seychelles endemics with a total population of only about 170 individuals. The magpie-robins are currently the subject of a BirdLife International conservation project to try to ensure their future. The Toq-Toq or Seychelles Fody is quite numerous here and its catholic diet not only includes fruit, seeds and insects but seabirds eggs as well! Some of the Madagascar Turtle Doves here may be pure-bred Seychelles race, untainted by hybridization with the introduced Madagascar race (something which has occurred on most of the other islands). Seabirds will be a feature of the day and we can expect to see White-tailed Tropicbirds, Brown and Lesser Noddies, and Bridled and Common White (or Fairy) Terns. Wedge-tailed Shearwaters nest in cracks in the granite boulders and although they only fly into the colonies at night we may be fortunate enough to see a few individuals even in the daytime. The island is also home to some introduced Giant Aldabra Tortoises, which we should find leisurely chewing on some vegetation, or lumbering slowly through the more open areas of forest.

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The small island of La Digue, which we will also visit, is likewise only a short boat trip from Praslin. This quiet island with its scattered settlement is the home of the most beautiful of the endemic birds of the Seychelles, the Seychelles (or Black) Paradise Flycatcher. The males are a rich, velvety blue-black and have improbably long tail plumes which stream out behind as they flit amongst the shady takamaka trees. La Digue also has one of the few known Seychelles breeding colonies of Seychelles Swiftlet and we may be able to climb up to their cave to inspect the diminutive nests that cling to the bare granitic rock. Seychelles Sunbirds are particularly common here and introduced Common Waxbills are frequently encountered. We shall visit a small marsh where Yellow Bitterns, a species that probably colonized the Seychelles naturally, can be found, and we may also find the Seychelles race of the Common Moorhen. The coast of La Digue often has a few migrant Crab-Plovers, a remarkable wader which is placed in its own family. We
Terns, Brown Noddies and is found here as well as Noddies in the Seychelles. The largest colony of Lesser White-tailed Tropicbirds, followed by twenty thousand nesting Sooty Terns, closely. Pride of place must go to for Nature Conservation owned by the Royal Society of seabirds. The island is nesting sites for a variety in woodland which provides this small island are covered crossing. The rocky hills of Shearwaters during the (split from Audubon’s) for Nature Conservation looking out for may see these unusual birds sitting on their haunches with their legs folded beneath them. We will also make a boat trip to the seabird island of Aride, looking out for Wedge-tailed and Tropical (split from Audubon’s) Shearwaters during the crossing. The rocky hills of this small island are covered in woodland which provides nesting sites for a variety of seabirds. The island is owned by the Royal Society for Nature Conservation and has some of the largest colonies of tropical seabirds in the Indian Ocean. Pride of place must go to the quarter of a million nesting Sooty Terns, closely followed by twenty thousand White-tailed Tropicbirds. The largest colony of Lesser Noddies in the Seychelles is found here as well as smaller numbers of Bridled Terns, Brown Noddies and delightful Common White Terns. There is a spectacular roost of both Greater and Lesser Frigatebirds on the island. We may be fortunate enough to find one or two vagrant seabirds such as Brown Booby or Red-footed Booby. The experience of the sight, sound and smell of such vast numbers of seabirds at such close range is quite overwhelming and will provide a host of unforgettable memories.

Day 5 After a last morning in the outer islands we will return to Mahé for an overnight stay and will have another chance to look for Seychelles Scops Owl or Seychelles White-eye if we failed to find either during our previous visit, or anything else of interest.

Day 6 Today we will catch a flight to Mauritius for an overnight stay. On the way to our hotel we shall drive through the coastal lowlands passing fields of sugar cane dotted with the strange black pyramids of volcanic rocks that have been painstakingly cleared from the soil over the centuries. The journey provides us with our first real chance to take a look at the colourful Mauritians, an attractive blend of Asian, African and European peoples with a similarly mixed culture. Our hotel is beautifully situated on the beach and provides an ideal place for relaxation after exploring the forest trails. We may arrive in time for some initial exploration.

Day 7 This morning we will catch a flight to the remote island of Rodrigues for an overnight stay. Rodrigues is a rather barren island surrounded by coral reefs and has several tiny outlying islets which provide a safe haven for breeding seabirds. The island has suffered at the hands of man as well as from cyclones and much of the island’s natural vegetation has been destroyed. The lowlands, like those on Mauritius, are heavily cultivated but the slopes above are dotted with pandanus palms and scrub with a few remnant native trees. In some of the higher valleys tiny patches of native forest occur, albeit mixed with mangoes and other exotics. Here two endemic landbirds, the Rodrigues Fody and the Rodrigues Warbler, still cling to a precarious existence. Few birdwatchers have ever seen these rare species, both of which have very small populations (the fody numbering around 1000 pairs, the warbler only about 80 pairs). We should also find a roost of the endangered Rodrigues Fruit Bat, which was the subject of successful captive breeding programmes in Mauritius and Jersey.

Day 8 This morning we will take a flight back to Mauritius for a two nights stay. Later today we will have a first chance to explore the remaining areas of native forest in search of some of the world’s rarest birds.

Day 9 The forests on Mauritius are confined to the mountains of the southwest of the island, where the scenery is spectacular. The volcanic ridges and peaks are dissected by deep valleys cloaked in lush forest where White-tailed Tropicbirds float over the green canopy and the white plumes of waterfalls cascade over cliffs to the valley floor far below. Since the island was discovered by man in 1598 the natural vegetation has suffered greatly with the result that many of the native island birds have dwindled almost to the point of extinction through a combination of habitat destruction and some unfortunate introductions of both birds and mammals. Some species became extinct, notably the Dodo which has since become a symbol of man’s failure to live in harmony with nature. Nowadays the surviving but endangered birds of Mauritius are subject to intense conservation efforts in an apparently successful effort to save the species concerned. Amongst the birds we will be searching for are the lovely Pink Pigeon, the beautiful Mauritius Parakeet and the extraordinary, short-winged Mauritius Kestrel. We will need plenty of time hiking the forest trails to search out these specialities, but with just a little luck we will see all three. The Mauritius Parakeet is the rarest of these three species. Ousted from many areas by the very similar introduced Ring-necked Parakeet, it was for many years thought to be only a subspecies of the latter and its plight consequently ignored. The Mauritius Kestrel has made a remarkable comeback in recent years, having also reached the brink of extinction. This remarkable falcon is a forest dweller and has evolved short wings and a long, manoeuvrable tail more typical of an accipiter than a falcon to cope with its woodland environment. Its main prey are the tiny green geckos that live on the leaves of the Traveller’s Palm and some other trees. As we explore the remaining forest, Mascarene Swiftlets flutter over the canopy and Mauritius Grey Swiftlet flit from tree to tree, but we will have to work quite hard to get to grips with Mauritius Cuckoo-Shrike, Mauritius Bulbul, Mauritius Paradise Flycatcher (sometimes treated as a single-island endemic, sometimes lumped with its cousin on Réunion under the name Mascarene Paradise Flycatcher), Mauritius Olive White-eye and Mauritius Fody as all five are still declining. The white-eye in particular has suffered more than any other passerine from predation
Day 9

The dramatically mountainous, volcanic island of Réunion has the status of a department of France, rather curiously misplaced in the middle of the Indian Ocean. The way of life is very French with pavement cafés and a distinctly French cuisine. The red-tiled houses that dot the slopes would not look out of place in Provence and even some of the scenery could have come straight from the south of France.

The natural forest cover on Réunion is much more extensive than on Mauritius and it is a delight to walk along the peaceful trails through the luxuriant vegetation rich in tree ferns and epiphytic orchids. Here we will look for the endemic birds of the island. The Réunion Cuckoo-Shrike or Tuit-Tuit gets its local name from the characteristic calls which draw attention to this otherwise rather secretive bird which cocks its head in the moss encrusted branches. The Réunion Bulbul is very similar to its Mauritius counterpart but is smaller and has a white eye. The delightful Réunion Stonechat with the Mauritius form and has a white eye. The delightful Réunion Stonechat or Tek-Tek is common along the more open parts of the trails, usually nesting in the mossy banks or among tree roots, whilst the Réunion Grey White-eye is a delight to walk in the leafy canopy in noisy bands. The Coq de Bois or Réunion Paradise Flycatcher (now either treated as a distinct species or lumped with the Mauritius form and called Mascarene Paradise Flycatcher) is much easier to find here than on Mauritius, the form here having a grey rather than black head in the male. In the open country above the forest we may well delight to watch.

Day 10

After spending much of the day on Mauritius we will take a short flight across to the island of Réunion for a two nights stay.

Day 11

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Later in the day we shall make a visit to the coastline to look for seabirds. During our seawatch we will look out for Audubon’s and Wedge-tailed Shearwaters and in particular the beautiful Barau’s Petrel or Taille Vent as it is called locally. In the late afternoon the first Barau’s Petrels begin to approach the land. At first they shear over the waves and then, once over the land, they gradually begin to wheel and circle ever higher until they disappear from view as they head for their nesting sites (discovered only recently) high up among the rugged volcanic peaks of the island’s centre. If we are really in luck we will see the rare Réunion Petrel as well.

Day 12

This morning, provided we have seen all the endemic landbirds well, we will drive up a winding road of hairpin bends that will take us slowly from sea level to a spectacular viewpoint on the rim of one of the three huge volcanic cirques that form the heart of the island. The scenery is quite breathtaking, with stupendous views of the highest peaks on Réunion (which reach 2896m) as well as down into the crater floor over a thousand metres below. Once inhabited by escaped slaves, the tiny settlements we can see far below are still almost totally isolated from the outside world as no road reaches into the crater. During the afternoon there will be the chance for another seawatch in the hope of seeing Réunion Petrel. The tour ends this evening at Réunion.

Accommodation & Road Transport: The hotels are of good or very good standard throughout. Road transport is by small coach or minibus and roads are good.

Walking: The walking effort is mostly easy, but there are two harder walks in Mauritius and Réunion.

Climate: It will be generally hot and sunny, although overcast weather can occur at times. At higher altitudes on Mauritius and Réunion the temperature ranges from cool to warm. There is likely to be some rain and it will be fairly humid.

Bird Photography: Opportunities are good.