

# **BIRDING IN PARADISE**

## **SEYCHELLES, MAURITIUS, RODRIGUES & REUNION**

### **SEPTEMBER 11-27, 2023**

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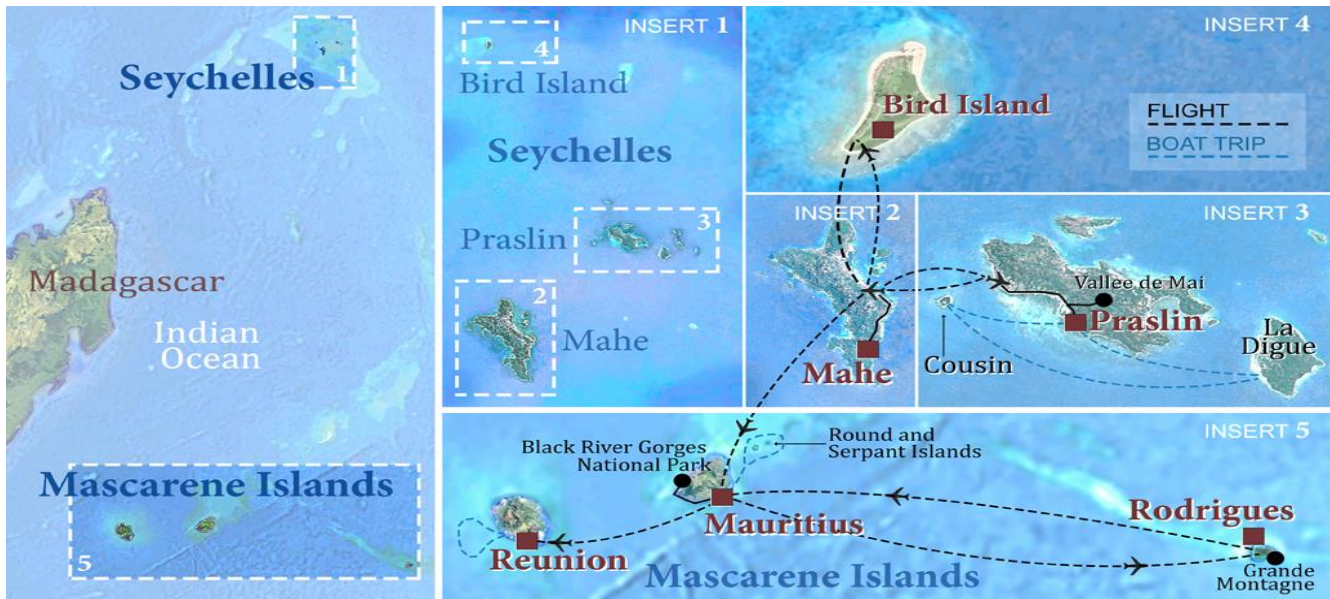


The tropical scenery of Mahe Island © M. Valkenburg

*This very first venture of VENT to Seychelles and the Mascarene Islands in the Indian Ocean promises to bring the very best these tiny Indian Ocean islands have to offer. Birding in this earthly paradise is nothing but spectacular and mind-boggling. We visit four different countries, each of them holding a treasure full of avifaunal and mammalian delights. These islands have been isolated for millions of years since breaking away from the African and Indian continents, developing a unique flora and fauna, bountiful with endemism wherever we go.*

*Seychelles is an archipelago island country consisting of 155 different islands, only discovered by Europeans in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and under British rule until independence a half-century ago. We will stroll along paradisiacal white beaches, dotted with palm trees and flocks of seabirds overhead numbering in the hundreds of thousands. We aim to find all the endemic species that are scattered over these gorgeous islands.*

*We start on Mahe, the largest island in the Seychelles, where we work our way up into the spectacular cloud forests located in the center of the isle. Here we search for the rare Seychelles Scops-Owl. Most of the tropical birds we find are more than spectacular. Still, the ubiquitous Seychelles Blue Pigeon might be the most beautiful, sharing his position with the outstanding Seychelles or Black Paradise-Flycatcher.*



*We then relocate to Praslin by a small airplane which is another enjoyable experience, flying low over these tropical bright blue waters. We relish a walk in a well-preserved forest with Seychelles Black Parrots and endemic palms. The Coco de Mer palm has the most giant seeds of any plant in the world, a pure spectacle.*

*Many of us will enjoy the sights of the prehistoric-looking Aldabra Giant Tortoises found here leisurely enjoying their days. We end our visit to Seychelles with a stay on Bird Island. The name alone already gives away the reason for our visit. Here we explore the enormous colony of roughly 700 thousand seabirds. The majority consists of Sooty Terns, Brown, and Lesser Noddy while White or Fairy terns are breeding together with White-tailed Tropicbirds in the nearby trees. Overhead the Greater and Lesser frigatebird patrol the skies, and we keep an eye on the shores for possible vagrants. Alongside the yearly wintering waders such as Crab Plover, Greater Sand Plover, and Pacific Golden Plover, vagrants like Caspian Plover are sometimes found by the few naturalists visiting these regions yearly.*

*We continue our travels south to the Mascarene Islands. When we arrive at Mauritius, we immediately notice the differences in demography in the Mauritian population, which is dominated by people with roots from India and Mauritian creoles, descendants of Afro-Malagasy slaves. Traffic is like in India, chaotic and lots of honking. A whole other world filled with charm and attraction and a whole new bunch of endemic birds waiting for us. We search for once almost extinct species like the adorable Pink Pigeon, lovely Echo Parakeet, and the cute Mascarene Paradise-Flycatcher. An overnight visit to Rodrigues will secure the two endemics living here: the exquisite Rodrigues Fody and Rodrigues Warbler.*

*The trip ends with a multiple-day visit to Reunion. Again, a whole different society awaits us! The island is still part of France with its distinctive cuisine, picturesque little villages, and well-organized life. It feels like driving down the coast in the Mediterranean regions of France. We stroll the well-maintained trails in search of the many new Reunion endemics. The Cuckooshrike will need the most work while the charming Reunion Stonechat and two species of White-eye are found swiftly. The only resident raptor on the isle is the spectacular Reunion Harrier, naturally an endemic. Finally, a privately chartered cruise will help us locate the interesting Barau's Petrel and Mascarene Shearwater before flying home.*

*This very first tour to Seychelles and the Mascarene Islands promises to be a real birding and wildlife spectacle. We look forward to having you join us on this exceptional venture into paradise!*



**September 11-12, Days 1-2: Travel to Mahe, Seychelles.** Participants can take any of a number of connections that depart the USA on September 11 and arrive into Seychelles International Airport or Aéroport de la Pointe Larue in French (airport code SEZ) on September 12. Upon arrival and after clearing customs, participants will be met at the airport and transferred to our hotel. On September 12 at 6:30 p.m., we will meet in the hotel lobby for a brief orientation followed by dinner.

Participants wanting to avoid the risk of misconnecting with the group or missing the orientation dinner should consider arriving into Mahe on or before September 11. Upon request, VENT will be happy to assist with any additional lodging arrangements at additional charges.

NIGHTS: September 11, En route  
September 12, Doubletree by Hilton Seychelles Allamanda Resort & Spa, Mahe

**September 13, Day 3: Full day birding Mahe Island.** We start our endeavor on Mahe's granite island, the largest island in the archipelagic island country of Seychelles. This morning we'll drive up the mountain, in the center of the island, where we target several rare endemics, the Seychelles Gray White-eye, Seychelles Sunbird, and the dazzling Seychelles Blue Pigeon. The Blue Pigeon is a real gem with a dark blue body, grayish head, and an attractive scarlet wattle making it a charming pigeon. A drive close to the airport will render the endemic Seychelles Kestrel, hopefully with another endemic overhead in the Seychelles Swiftlet form. They are attracted by the open character of the landscape near the airport. While groups of the noisy Seychelles Bulbuls are found ubiquitously all over the island, we will enjoy them nonetheless on every rendezvous we have with these intelligent birds.

We will have lunch in the best Creole restaurant on the island: *Marie Antoinette*. The restaurant was named after the last Queen of France, who presumably visited the restaurant centuries ago. The restaurant building is now a national monument.



The Seychelles Scops Owl © B. Stephenson, Eco-vista

In the afternoon, we visit several wetlands hoping to find Crab Plover and Pacific Golden Plovers. Followed in the late afternoon by a small break to savor the tropical white beach at our luxurious and lavish hotel. An evening excursion is entirely focused on finding, most probably the hardest of all Mahe endemics, the Seychelles Scops Owl. This little owl is located on higher grounds in the moss-clad cloud forests. We will spend most part of the evening searching for this very rare owl with a population of only 200 mature individuals.

NIGHT: Doubletree by Hilton Seychelles Allamanda Resort & Spa, Mahe

**September 14, Day 4: Morning flight to Praslin: afternoon exploring Vallee de Mai.** In the coming four days, we tour a few smaller islands around Praslin, the latter being our base. We board our first flight of the trip, which will bring us to Praslin. The flight itself is already exhilarating, flying over the tropical turquoise seas dotted with small isles where there exists a lifetime experience on its own. We start the birding immediately with an invigorating walk in the Vallee de Mai Nature Reserve. This UNESCO World Heritage site consists of a well-preserved palm forest with the island endemic Coco de Mer being its flagship. This palm tree is unique, having the most giant seeds of any plant in the world. In the course of our walk, we hope to come across the endemic Seychelles Black Parrot that feeds on the palm's fruits, they are akin with the Vasa Parrot from Madagascar. Along with the parrot, we will find more

Seychelles Bulbuls and Seychelles Blue Pigeons. Other exciting wildlife we may come across could be the handsome Tiger Chameleon, Seychelles Wolf Snakes, and Seychelles Treefrogs might be found hugging the tree leaves. We end this superb day with a lovely dinner near the beach at our, again, lavish hotel.

NIGHT: Villa de Mer

**September 15, Day 5: Boat trip to Cousin and La Digue.** We depart Praslin for an exciting day trip by private charter boat to the islands of Cousin and La Digue. The island of Cousin is owned by Birdlife International and a nature reserve with legal protection for the past fifty years. On this mainly wooded island of Cousin, we will find the once almost extinct Seychelles Warbler. In 1959 the population of the species counted only 29 individuals. After some serious conservation efforts, the population was boosted to a current 2500 individuals. The current most endangered endemic of Seychelles is as well found here. The attractive Seychelles Magpie-Robin has this unfavorable honor. Seychelles Fody, another Seychelles endemic, is quite numerous here. The species has an eclectic diet with not only bugs or seeds but also seabird eggs! Another highlight for many is the mighty Aldabra Giant Tortoises, albeit some introduced individuals, they are a spectacular and a naturalist's dream come true.

Throughout the day, we will have the pleasure to be among several species of seabirds. On the island, no less than 300,000 seabirds have their nest. The colony is dominated by Lesser Noddies, with around 1300 pairs of Brown Noddy, and year-round breeders like White Tern, Bridled Tern, White-tailed Tropicbird, and Audubon's Shearwater. On the top of the hill, we search for the breeding Wedge-tailed Shearwaters. Although they only fly into the colony at night, we might be fortunate to come across a few individuals during the day.

In the afternoon, we board our small boat for a short trip to bring us to the inhabited granite island of La Digue. The island is one of the few with a population of arguably the most attractive of all the Seychelles endemics, Seychelles (or Black) Paradise-Flycatcher. This all-black species, showing a deep purple shine in the sunlight, has very long tail-streamers and will be found flitting between trees. The Seychelles Paradise-Flycatcher is a pure avifaunal delight. Other birds here might include Yellow Bittern in the nearby marshes, a breeding colony of Seychelles Swift, and a few lonely Crab Plovers that are wintering in these paradisiacal circumstances. We return in the evening to Praslin, where we will enjoy a tasty dinner and have a toast on a beautiful day.

NIGHT: Villa de Mer

**September 16-17, Days 6-7: Two full days birding at Bird Island.** A private charter airplane will bring us via Mahe to the famous Bird Island. Here we will spend two nights on the island in awe of the many natural wonders this small stretch has to offer. The main spectacle will be the 700,000 breeding seabirds, with the majority being Sooty Terns, Brown Noddy, and Lesser Noddy.

In the evening, the Sooty terns return from foraging on the sea, and we will be standing between thousands of attractive black-and-white terns that pass us closely. On the beach, we search for Lesser and Greater Sand Plovers, Whimbrel, Great Crested Tern, and, if lucky, a few Saunders's Tern. In the air, Greater and Lesser Frigatebirds are patrolling. In the forest, we will find the nests of White Tern and White-tailed Tropicbirds, a spectacular sight.



**Small group of migrating Crab Plovers are found on Bird Island © B. Stenhenson. Eco-vista**

NIGHTS: Bird Island lodge

**September 18, Day 8: Morning flight back to Mahe; afternoon birding Mahe.** We spend our last morning exploring Bird Island before flying back to Mahe. In the afternoon, we plan to focus on any species that we might have missed on our previous visit. This will most likely be the Seychelles Gray White-eye or Seychelles Scops Owl. In the evening, we enjoy our final meal in Seychelles before moving on to Mauritius.

NIGHT: Doubletree by Hilton Seychelles Allamanda Resort & Spa, Mahe

**September 19, Day 9: Flight to Mauritius and afternoon birding.** We leave Seychelles behind us and fly south to the island of Mauritius. The isle is part of the Mascarene Islands together with Rodrigues and Reunion, which we will visit in the coming days. When we arrive in Mauritius, we will immediately notice the differences in demography in the Mauritian population, which is dominated by people with roots from India and Mauritian creoles, descendants of Afro-Malagasy slaves. Traffic is like you would find in India, chaotic and lots of honking. We drive to our hotel, positioned close to the airport, but located at a great spot right on the beach. If time permits, we will start our avifaunal exploration from our hotel with Mascarene Martin and Madagascar Fody. Ship-assisted birds like Zebra Dove, Village Weaver, and Red-whiskered Bulbul occur. On the shore, Greater Sand-Plovers, Curlew Sandpipers, and Whimbrels are found.

NIGHT: Villa Caroline, Flic en Flac, Mauritius



One of the world's rarest pigeons, the Pink Pigeon © B. Stephenson, Eco-vista

**September 20, Day 10: Flight to Rodrigues: afternoon excursion to roost Rodrigues Flying Fox.** In the early morning, we drive back to the airport, where we board our flight taking us to Rodrigues for a one-night stay. Rodrigues is part of Mauritius, a volcanic island surrounded by a coral reef. The landscape is mostly ruined by man and the many cyclones that hit the island yearly. After settling into our hotel, we take a small drive taking us to a viewpoint where we will enjoy the thousands of endemic Rodrigues Fruit Bats flying out from their day roost.

NIGHT: Hotel Cocotier Anses

**September 21, Day 11: Morning birding for Rodrigues endemics: Afternoon flight to Mauritius.** We visit in the morning the Grande Montagne Nature Reserve. Today is all about two somewhat elusive endemics; Rodrigues Fody and Rodrigues Warbler! Both species were once, as well, almost extinct, but again help from conservationists was their rescue. The male Fody has a lovely deep-yellow body and neck with an attractive orange-red face and significant black eye-patch, a really striking bird! The Warbler is rarer, but like most birds in the reed-warbler family, not very impressive. Very few birders have seen these rare species with its very limited range and populations. In the afternoon, we return to Mauritius by airplane.

NIGHT: Villa Caroline, Flic en Flac, Mauritius





**The Mascarene Paradise-Flycatcher**  
© B. Stephenson, Eco-vista

**September 22-23, Days 12-13: Black River Gorges National Park.** Our next two full days on Mauritius prove to be spectacular with a fresh bunch of endemics waiting for us. We are after the elusive Pink Pigeon, Echo Parakeet, and Mauritius Kestrel. They are mostly quickly found, albeit they are amongst the rarest birds on the globe. All three are pleasingly looking, but the Pink Pigeon is probably the most attractive one with a pale pinkish head, neck, and breast plus a broad russet tail to finish it off. The remaining set of endemics will need some work. We are after Mauritius Cuckooshrike, Mauritius Bulbul, Mascarene Paradise-Flycatcher, Mauritius Gray White-eye, Mauritius Olive White-eye, and Mauritius Fody. Most of them are still declining, especially the Olive White-eye is struck by the

introduced rats and monkeys. We will make walks in several different locations in the hope of tracking down these wanted birds.

NIGHTS: Villa Caroline, Flic en Flac, Mauritius

**September 24, Days 14: Round Island boat excursion; afternoon flight to Reunion.** In the morning, we board our private charter to set sails for Round Island and Serpent Island. These two small tropical islands off the coast of Mauritius have an enigmatic population of *Pterodroma* petrels, known as 'Round Island Petrels.' These petrels have been a source of much taxonomic confusion, with several different color morphs first identified as Trindade Petrels. Still, current studies show that the population is a mixed hybridizing group with at least two additional species, the interesting Kermadec and Herald Petrels. We will spend most of the day studying the birds before returning to our hotel then transfer to the airport where we will take a short flight to Reunion.



**Reunion Gray White-eye © B Stephenson, Eco-vista**

NIGHT: Hotel Iloha, Saint Leu

**September 25-26, Days 15-16: Exploring Reunion, including a boat trip for Mascarene Petrel.**

The last of the Mascarene islands is Reunion, and we have two days to explore their beautiful island. We will move around again in a very different atmosphere of life. Reunion is still part of France, and when driving their excellent roads, it feels like driving down the south of France. Their cuisine is distinctly French with picturesque little bars and well-organized life. During our days, we will explore the island mostly on foot, with one distinctly larger uphill walk. It is a real pleasure to walk over the well-maintained trails that bring us through the lush valleys, rich in tree ferns and epiphytic orchids. The Reunion Bulbul is somewhat similar to its Mauritian counterpart; however, it has a distinct white eye and is a little smaller. The Reunion Cuckoo-Shrike is probably the most significant prize waiting for us as it lives higher up onto the cloud-forests and therefore needs a longer walk. The other passerine endemics we are on the lookout for are the cute Reunion Stonechat, Mascarene Paradise-Flycatcher, and we add hopefully also two species of White-eye to our list, Reunion Gray and Reunion Olive white-eye. Finally, the Reunion Harrier is the only endemic raptor living on this island.

On our final day, we explore the seas surrounding us searching for the interesting Barau's Petrel and Mascarene Shearwater, both being endemic to the islands and breeding only here. We will enjoy our final dinner in a lovely picturesque restaurant in the center of the city, where we will raise our glasses to a fantastic venture to some little-traveled places in the birding world.

NIGHTS: Hotel Iloha, Saint Leu

**September 27, Day 17: Departures for Home.** Transfers today will be provided to Pierrefonds International Airport (airport code ZSE) for flights to Mauritius, connecting to international flights home. Flights can depart at any time today.

**EXTRA ARRANGEMENTS:** Should you wish to make arrangements to arrive early or extend your stay, please contact the VENT office at least two months prior to your departure date. We can very easily make hotel arrangements and often at our group rate, if we receive your request with enough advance time.

**TOUR SIZE:** This tour will be limited to 10 participants.

**TOUR LEADER:** Machiel Valkenburg and a local leader



**Machiel Valkenburg** was born in 1982 in a southern province in the Netherlands where, encouraged by his parents, he began birding at an early age. During his teens he studied landscape ecology and began performing bird surveys with the Dutch Centre for Field Ornithology. During this period, he started traveling outside of Holland, first to Greece, Hungary, Romania, Scotland, and Morocco. Later, his birding travels took him extensively outside of Europe into Western Africa and further east to Russia and Kazakhstan. The nature and birds of Central Asia fascinated him so much that he stayed, resulting in the founding of his own bird tour company, Rubythroat Birding Tours. He lived in Kazakhstan for over 10 years but moved back to Europe several years ago with his wife, Bonny. They now reside in Valencia on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. From Central Asia he ventured further, with Southeast Asia and India becoming favorite destinations. Machiel has developed an expertise in

the natural history of Asia. Along with birds, a good part of his attention is also given to butterflies, dragonflies, and mammals. Machiel speaks four languages, has good people and logistical skills, and is a natural-born bird guide. He loves to explore new destinations and show birds to his fellow birders. He has a keen eye and an excellent ear for bird sounds. Machiel is noted for his calm and respectful social approach, providing a good atmosphere during time in the field.

**FINANCIAL ARRANGEMENTS:** The fee for the tour is **TBA** (\$9095 in 2021) per person in double occupancy from Mahe, Seychelles. This includes all meals from dinner on Day 2 to breakfast on Day 17, accommodations as stated in the itinerary, ground transportation during the tour, gratuities, internal flights as mentioned, and guide services provided by the tour leaders. It does not include airfare from your home to Mahe and return from Reunion, airport departure taxes, alcoholic beverages, special gratuities, phone calls, laundry, or items of a personal nature. Rates are based upon group tariffs; if the tour does not have sufficient registration, a small-party supplement may have to be charged.

The single supplement for this tour is **TBA**.

**REGISTRATION & DEPOSIT:** To register for this tour, please contact the VENT office. The deposit for this tour is **\$1,000** per person. If you prefer to pay your deposit using a credit card, the deposit must be made with MasterCard or Visa at the time of registration. If you would like to pay your deposit by check, money order, or bank transfer, your tour space will be held for 10 days to allow time for the VENT office to receive your deposit and the completed registration form. The VENT registration form (available from the VENT office or by download at [www.ventbird.com](http://www.ventbird.com)) should be completed, signed, and returned to the VENT office.

**PAYMENTS:** All tour payments may be made by credit card (MasterCard or Visa), check, money order, or bank transfer (contact the VENT office for bank transfer information). These include initial deposits, second deposits, interim payments, final balances, special arrangements, etc. Full payment of the tour fee is due 150 days (April 14, 2023) prior to the tour departure date.

**EXCHANGE RATE SURCHARGES:** In the erratic global financial markets of today, it is difficult to predict foreign currency exchange rates over the long term or at the time of operation of a tour or cruise departure. Tour prices are based upon the rate of exchange at the time of itinerary publication. If exchange rates change drastically, it may be necessary to implement a surcharge. If a surcharge is necessary, every effort will be made to minimize the amount. In many cases, these additional foreign exchange rate surcharges are passed to VENT by its vendors and suppliers.

**CANCELLATION & REFUNDS:**

**Cancellation by Participant:**

Refunds, if any, for any cancellation by a participant are made according to the following schedule: If participant cancels 180 days or more before the tour departure date, a cancellation fee of **\$500** per person will be charged unless the deposit is transferred to a new registration for another VENT tour that will operate within the next 12 months, in which case the cancellation fee will be **\$100** per person. If cancellation is made between 179 and 151 days before departure date, the deposit is not refundable, but any payments covering the balance of the tour fee will be refunded. If cancellation is made fewer than 150 days before departure date, no refund is available. This policy and fee schedule also applies to pre- and post-tour extensions. **For participants' protection, we strongly recommend the purchase of travel insurance that covers trip cancellation/interruption.**

If participant cancels:

180 days or more before departure date

179 to 151 days before departure date

150 days or less before departure date

Participant's refund will be:

Participant's deposit minus \$500\*

No refund of the deposit, but any payments on the balance of the tour fee will be refunded

No refund available

\*Unless the deposit is transferred to a new registration for another VENT tour that will operate within the next 12 months, in which case the cancellation fee will be \$100 per person. To qualify, cancellation must occur 180 days or more before departure date; deposit transfers must be made at the time of cancellation; and one transfer per deposit.

**Cancellation by VENT:**

If VENT cancels a tour prior to departure without cause or good reason, VENT will provide the participant a full refund, which will constitute full settlement to the participant.

If VENT cancels or delays a tour or any portion of a tour as a result of any Force Majeure event, VENT will use its reasonable best efforts to refund any payments on the balance of the tour fee to participant; provided that, VENT will have no obligation to provide a participant with a refund and will not be liable or responsible to a participant, nor be deemed to have defaulted under or breached any applicable agreement, for any failure or delay in fulfilling or performing any term of such agreement. A "**Force Majeure**" event means any act beyond VENT's control, including, without limitation, the following: (a) acts of God; (b) flood, fire, earthquake, hurricane, epidemic, pandemic or explosion; (c) war, invasion, hostilities (whether war is declared or not), terrorist threats or acts, riot or other civil unrest; (d) government order, law or actions; (e) embargoes or blockades; (f) national or regional emergency; (g) strikes, labor stoppages, labor slowdowns or other industrial disturbances; (h) shortage of adequate power or transportation facilities; and (i) any other similar events or circumstances beyond the control of VENT.

This VENT Cancellation & Refunds policy does not apply to air tickets purchased through VENT or to any special arrangements, such as additional hotel nights, that fall outside of the services described in the tour itinerary.

**Victor Emanuel Nature Tours is not a participant in the California Travel Consumer Restitution Fund. California law requires certain sellers of travel to have a trust account or bond. This business has a bond issued by Travelers in the amount of \$50,000. CST #2014998-50.**



**FUEL AND FUEL SURCHARGES:** In the uncertain, often volatile oil market of late, it is difficult – if not impossible – to predict fuel costs over the long term, and more specifically, at the time of operation of this departure. Our prices are based upon the prevailing fuel rates at the time of itinerary publication. While we will do everything possible to maintain our prices, if the fuel rates increase significantly, it may be necessary to institute a fuel surcharge.

**TRAVEL INSURANCE:** To safeguard against losses due to illness, accident, or other unforeseen circumstances, we strongly recommend the purchase of travel insurance as soon as possible after making a deposit. VENT has partnered with Redpoint Travel Protection as our preferred travel insurance provider. Through Redpoint, we recommend their **Ripcord** plan. Designed for all types of travelers, Ripcord is among the most comprehensive travel protection programs available.

Critical benefits of Ripcord include a completely integrated program with a single contact for emergency services, travel assistance, and insurance claims; **medical evacuation and rescue services** from your point of injury or illness to your **hospital of choice**; comprehensive travel insurance for **trip cancellation/interruption**, primary medical expense coverage, and much more. Optional expanded insurance coverage is available and includes items such as security evacuation coverage in case of a natural disaster or other security events, **waiver for pre-existing medical conditions exclusion**, and a “**Cancel for Any Reason**” benefit. Ripcord is available to U.S. and non-U.S. residents.\*

For a price quote, or to purchase travel insurance, please visit: <https://ripcordtravelprotection.com/ventbird>; or click the **Ripcord** logo on our website (click Help and Trip Insurance); or call +1-415-481-0600. Pricing is based on age, trip cost, trip length, and level of coverage.

\*To be eligible for the pre-existing medical condition exclusion waiver and the optional Cancel for Any Reason (CFAR) upgrade, you must purchase your policy within 14 days of making your tour deposit. The CFAR benefit provides reimbursement for 75% of covered costs, and increases the policy premium by approximately 50%. Policies may be purchased either for the full value of the tour fee at the time of deposit or in segments as individual tour payments are made (deposit, mid-payment, final balance, additional arrangements, etc.). The “pay as you go” approach reduces up-front expense and ensures that the amount paid toward your full policy premium is in proportion to the amount paid toward the full tour fee. If you choose to “pay as you go,” you must cover each deposit or payment within 14 days in order to maintain the CFAR benefit. The primary medical expense benefit is available to U.S. residents only. For this reason, non-U.S. residents will pay an adjusted premium when purchasing a comprehensive policy, which includes all of the other benefits available to U.S. residents. Please refer to the policy for a full description of coverage.

#### **Coronavirus (COVID-19):**

The coronavirus pandemic has brought uncertainty for many people currently holding travel insurance policies or who are considering future travel and purchasing such insurance. Redpoint has added a **Coronavirus FAQ page** to its website that addresses questions and concerns regarding its travel insurance and the impact of COVID-19. We strongly recommend that you visit the page for an overview of topics such as policy coverage and limitations, policy modifications, cancellation, refunds, and more. Among the most important points: 1) Trip cancellation solely for concern or fear of travel associated with COVID-19 is not covered; 2) Should you request cancellation of your policy, a full refund of your premium is available only under a limited set of conditions; and 3) Should you request cancellation, you may be eligible to receive a pro-rated refund of the unused portion of your premium or a travel insurance credit. Travel insurance credit (“Premium Credit”) is for the value of the policy purchased and may be applied to future policies. Premium Credits have no expiration dates. Rules and regulations apply.

Please visit the **Coronavirus FAQ** page at the following link:

[https://redpointtravelprotection.com/covid\\_19\\_faq/](https://redpointtravelprotection.com/covid_19_faq/)

Additionally, as countries begin opening up for travel, many are instituting an array of COVID-19 entry requirements, including mandates to purchase travel insurance covering medical expenses due to COVID-19 illness and accommodation in case of quarantine. Ripcord's comprehensive travel insurance plans are designed to satisfy the various country-specific travel insurance entry requirements. Those who purchase a Ripcord policy will receive a "letter of confirmation" that affirms that the policy satisfies such requirements.

**AIR INFORMATION:** Victor Emanuel Travel is a full-service travel agency and wholly owned subsidiary of Victor Emanuel Nature Tours (VENT). Victor Emanuel Travel will be happy to make any domestic or international air travel arrangements from your home and return. Please feel free to call the VENT office to confirm your air arrangements. ***Please be sure to check with the VENT office prior to purchasing your air ticket to confirm that the tour is sufficiently subscribed to operate. VENT cannot be responsible for any air ticket penalties.***

**BAGGAGE:** The airlines now strictly enforce baggage regulations. Excess baggage charges, which can be substantial, are the personal responsibility of each participant. Please consult your airline to find out specific weight restrictions. Due to ever-changing circumstances in the government's attempts to improve airport security we recommend that you check the website of the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) for the most updated information: <http://www.tsa.gov/>.

**CLIMATE:** On Seychelles and the Mascarene Islands, the weather can be a little hot and humid but generally pleasant. It may even be cold for the first few hours around dawn on some of our early morning excursions in Mauritius and Reunion. We may encounter some rain, but this might be more of an occasional tropical down pour rather than prolonged heavy rainstorms.

**CLOTHING:** Please bring lightweight long-sleeved shirts and pants in natural fabric such as cotton and man-made fiber blends, or even better the new loose-fitting nylon field shirts and pants produced in ideal colors, such as those by Columbia, Craghoppers, and ExOfficio. These offer protection against the sun and insects (very few) while remaining comfortable, fresh, and easy to launder. A warm sweater or jacket is essential for the chilly dawns and evenings. People who feel the cold quickly may require additional protection.

Sturdy walking boots with good lug soles are essential; lightweight sports sneakers are generally insufficient. Thick socks help absorb perspiration and cushion one's feet, especially when always walking on a hard surface. A sturdy rainproof jacket and pants are also recommended.

**SPECIAL NOTE:** Please absolutely **NO BRIGHT COLORS**. Although the birds and other wildlife are relatively approachable, we will be trying to see several very elusive species. Muted colors are essential to enhance our chances. Please do not wear brightly colored clothes, hats, gloves, bags, or other paraphernalia. Furthermore, please avoid crackling nylon/plastic jackets and pants. This will significantly enhance everyone's enjoyment of the trip and enable the leader to hear those critical but so easily overlooked subtle call-notes of the birds you want to see!

On several occasions, smart-casual attire is appropriate. For women, this includes casual dresses or slacks/blouses ensembles; for men, khakis/slacks, and open-collared shirts. Men may choose to wear a sports jacket for such occasions.

**DOCUMENTS:** A passport valid for at least six months at the time of entry with at least three blank pages is required for United States and Canadian citizens to enter the Seychelles. Visas are not required. Citizens of other countries should check with their consulate/embassy for instructions. **It is very important that your passport be on your body at all times. We caution against carrying your passport in your backpack or purse.** Proof of yellow fever vaccination is required if travelling from an endemic country.

**EQUIPMENT:** You should pack a pair of binoculars that are in good repair. Some participants carry a second pair in case of an emergency. The same advice applies to people who wear eyeglasses or contact lenses to protect against accidents or theft. You should also bring along a belt pack or day pack (for carrying books, sunscreen, extra film, etc.). As a precaution, it is a good idea to pack your binoculars, a change of clothing, toiletry items, medications and travel documents in your airline carry-on bag. Your leader will have a spotting scope, but if you have one and wish to bring it, please feel free to do so.

Participants are strongly advised to check that all their equipment is in good working order, that they have new and plenty of spare batteries for all their flash units, etc. Please carry more than enough digital storage media. Other items of use include a flashlight or headlamp, water bottle, a small daypack, plastic bags to protect your equipment, handy wipes, paper tissues, and industrial masks (very useful in dusty, sandy locations such as the dry habitats).

**HEALTH:** VENT follows Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommendations for standard travel precautions, which includes vaccination against a variety of preventable diseases. Among these so-called Routine Vaccinations are measles/mumps/rubella (MMR) vaccine, diphtheria/pertussis/tetanus (DPT) vaccine, poliovirus vaccine (boosters for adult travelers), and Varicella (Chickenpox). You should also be up-to-date with Hepatitis A and Hepatitis B vaccinations.

If you are taking personal medication, prescription or over-the-counter, be sure to bring an ample supply that will allow you to get through the tour safely. Please consult your physician as necessary. Remember to pack all medication in your carry-on baggage, preferably in original containers or packaging. As airline baggage restrictions can change without warning, please check with your airline for procedures for packing medication.

**COVID-19:** We continually emphasize that our number one priority is the health and safety of our customers and employees. **With this in mind, VENT maintains a COVID-19 vaccination requirement.** All tour participants and tour leaders must receive the primary series vaccinations in order to travel with us while we are still in a declared public health emergency. Proof of vaccination must be provided to our office at least one week before the start of the tour. More recently, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has updated its guidance to recommend people be Up to Date with COVID-19 vaccinations. Although the CDC website defines “Up to Date” as the primary series vaccinations and all recommended boosters, for those eligible, VENT requires the primary series and strongly recommends boosters. While VENT no longer requires a booster shot for participation on its tours, the high transmissibility of certain variants and subvariants should encourage everyone who is eligible to receive boosters to please do so. VENT has determined this approach to be the best one for keeping our tour leaders and tour participants safe during this time. Our decision and policy anchor a regime of protocols firmly rooted in the latest CDC guidance regarding recommendations for avoiding COVID-19. Please visit the **Coronavirus Travel Update** page of our website <https://ventbird.com/covid-19>, where you may view our **COVID-19 Protocols for VENT Tours** document, which details the guidance VENT will follow in the operation of its tours in the time of pandemic. Please visit the CDC website for the most up to date information about COVID-19 and associated guidance for proper health and hygiene: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-nCoV/index.html>.

In addition to your physician, a good source of general health information for travelers is the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in Atlanta, which operates a 24-hour recorded Travelers’ Information Line (800) CDC-INFO (800-232-4636). You can check the CDC website at <https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel>. Canadian citizens should check the website of the Public Health Agency of Canada: [www.canada.ca/en/public-health.html](http://www.canada.ca/en/public-health.html) (click on Travel Health).

**INTERNET ACCESS:** Expect Wi-Fi to be available at most lodges and hotels.

**LANGUAGE:** The official language is French. In addition, some English is spoken with the majority of the region's population speaking Creole.



**PHYSICAL CONDITION:** Due to some long days in the field, participants should be in good physical condition. Be prepared to be on foot in heat and humidity on some days; we will have afternoon breaks on these days. Several species, including the Reunion Cuckooshrike, require some hiking through the hillside to reach the best viewing location.

**TRANSPORTATION:** Throughout the tour, we will travel between islands, using either small airplanes or private chartered ships. However, much of the birding within each park will be on foot, or on a few occasions, we will be using bikes (La Digue) to move from the harbor to the birding areas. In the Mascarene islands, we will be using spacious busses, with enough space for backpacks and scopes, to move around.

**SUGGESTED READING:** A number of traditional booksellers and online stores list excellent inventories of field guides and other natural history resources that will help prepare you for this tour. We recommend [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com), which has a wide selection; [www.buteobooks.com](http://www.buteobooks.com) and [www.nhbs.com](http://www.nhbs.com), which specialize in ornithology and natural history books; and [www.abebooks.com](http://www.abebooks.com) for out-of-print and hard-to-find titles.

**This is the most essential book to have on this trip:**

Frank Hawkins, Roger Safford and Adrian Skerret. *Birds of Madagascar and the Indian Ocean Islands*. Helm Identification Guides. Christopher Helm & A.C. Black. London. 2015. This book illustrates and documents in detail every species we are likely to encounter during our trip to Seychelles and the Mascarene Islands. It is wholly focused on the small islands' avifauna and offers some excellent details on the country's best birding grounds.

**Other useful guides to the birds of Seychelles and the Mascarene Islands include:**

Ian Sinclair, Olivier Langrand. *Birds of the Indian Ocean Islands*. New Holland Publishers. 2013. This is a lovely alternative to the *Birds of Madagascar and the Indian Ocean Islands*.

**For general background books on Sri Lanka, we recommend:**

Adrian Skerrett and Tony Disley, *Birds of Seychelles*. Helm Identification Guides. Christopher Helm & A.C. Black. London. 2011.

TE Leuteritz, J Gerlach and RA Mittermeier, *Turtles and Tortoises of Madagascar and Adjacent Indian Ocean Islands*. Conservation International. 2008.

Ameenah Gurib-Fakim, *An Illustrated Guide to the Flora of Mauritius and the Indian Ocean Islands*. Centre de Phytothérapie et de Recherche. 2009.

Steve NG Howell, Kirk Zufelt. *Oceanic Birds of the World A Photo Guide*. Princeton University Press. 2019.

**TIPPING:** Tipping (restaurant staff, porters, drivers, local guides) is included on VENT tours. However, if you feel one or both of your VENT leaders or any local guides have given you exceptional service, it is entirely appropriate to tip. We emphasize that tips are not expected and are entirely optional. Tips should be given directly to your tour leader; they should not be sent to the VENT office.

**RESPONSIBILITY STATEMENT:** Victor Emanuel Nature Tours, Inc., a Texas corporation, and/or its agents (together, “**VENT**”) act only as agents for the participant in regard to travel, whether by railroad, motorcar, motorcoach, boat, or airplane and assume no liability for injury, damage, loss, accident, delay, or irregularity which may be occasioned either by reason of defect in any vehicle or for any reason whatsoever, or through the acts or default of any company or person engaged in conveying the participant or in carrying out the arrangements of the tour. VENT accepts no responsibility for losses or additional expenses due to delay or changes in airfare or other services, sickness, weather, strike, war, quarantine, terrorism, or other causes. All such losses or expenses will be borne by the participant, as tour rates only provide for arrangements for the time stated.

VENT reserves the right (i) to substitute hotels of similar category, or the best reasonable substitution available under the circumstances, for those indicated and (ii) to make any changes in the itinerary that are deemed necessary by VENT or which are caused by third party transportation schedules (i.e. railroad, motorcar, motorcoach, boat, airplane, etc.).

VENT reserves the right to substitute leaders or guides on any tour. Where VENT, in its sole discretion, determines such substitution is necessary, it will notify tour participants.

VENT reserves the right to cancel any tour prior to departure with or without cause or good reason. See the VENT Cancellation & Refunds policy set forth above.

Tour prices are based on tariffs and exchange rates in effect at the time of publication and are subject to adjustment in the event of any change thereto.

VENT reserves the right to decline any participant's Registration Form and/or refuse to allow any participant to participate in a tour as VENT deems reasonably necessary, in its sole discretion. VENT also reserves the right to remove any tour participant from any portion of a tour as VENT deems necessary, in its sole discretion, reasons for such removal include but are not limited to, medical needs, injury, illness, inability to meet physical demands of a tour, personality conflict or situations in which such removal is otherwise in the best interest of the tour, the tour group and/or such participant. A participant may also voluntarily depart from a tour. If a participant is removed from a tour or voluntarily departs from a tour, such participant will be responsible for any expenses associated with such removal or departure, including but not limited to, transportation, lodging, airfare and meals, and VENT will have no obligation to refund or reimburse any such removed or departed participant for any tour payments or deposits previously paid by such participant.

Baggage is carried at the participant's risk entirely. No airline company, its employees, agents and/or affiliates (the "*Airline*") is to be held responsible for any act, omission, or event during the time participants are not on board the Airline's aircraft. The participant ticket in use by any Airline, when issued, will constitute the sole contract between the Airline and the purchaser of the tickets and/or the participant. The services of any I.A.T.A.N. carrier may be used for VENT tours, and transportation within the United States may be provided by any member carrier of the Airlines Reporting Corporation.

SYL:20230911

Rev: 08/04/20 – MV

PNP: 10/18/22 – GL

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