

# New Adventures in Socotra



Joël Lodé (Spain)

**The arrival at Cairo augurs what waited me in the Yemen: the start of the political disruption in the Arabic countries were visible there though an unreasonable passion for a future presidential candidate who lands with me on the plane. The crowd were frightening, all seemingly supporters, but this bustle, this hubbub, the flashes of the photographers, all made for a most untranquil arrival.**

I obtained my visa thanks to his Excellence the Ambassador of Yemen in Madrid, Mr. Mustapha Ahmed Noman; for my work on Socotran Flora and would be at this time the only «tourist» in Yemen, which is rather impressive.

The airport of Sanaa was deserted, apart from customs employees and military forces. For my own safety, I had under no circumstances to leave the airport, and I waited for my flight expected at 7:30 pm to Aden to spend the night. In Aden, no taxi wanted to make the route towards the town centre, and a young Russian lady working there for an oil company, took me in her vehicle with a driver, and we looked then for a hotel, a difficult task, because most were closed because of lack of tourists.

The next day I met the same problem. It was necessary to wait until the last minute to pick up a taxi and join the airport in a whirlwind at the last moment. There were, seemingly, snipers along the road which leads to the airport. With reassurance, I was on the CRJ700 of Yemenia Airways when it finally took off, with only eight passengers aboard.



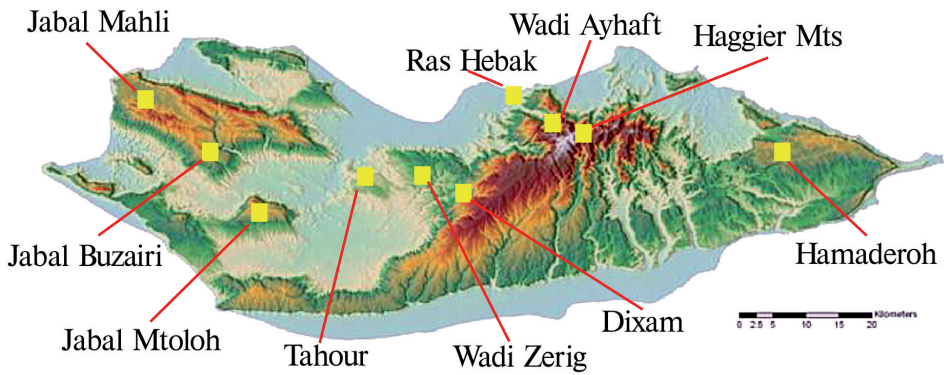
*Adenium socotranum* in flower, Ras Hebak (photo : JL).

I arrived in Socotra and was going to be able to begin my work on the flora of Socotra to complete my flora documentation, but also fauna of this extraordinary island and carry out my fifth mission for the University of Murcia on the genus ***Phoenix***.

With great emotion, I met again Ahmed, my guide, and Abdulwahid, my driver, who is also policeman. Socotris which I came across said to me, «Welcome to Socotra!», «You are brave!». But it was me who found them brave to withstand all their problems with so much philosophy.

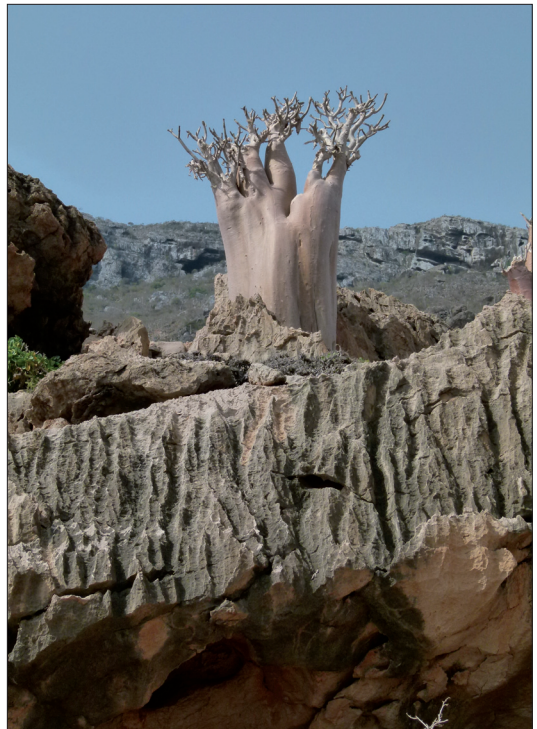
Out of the airport, ***Adenium socotranum***, ***Dendrosicyos socotranum*** and ***Croton socotranum*** appeared by the hundreds on the surrounding hills.

I brought a new box of books on Socotra to offer to the Socotra Women's Association, but which was derisory for a country with no tourists; at Hadibo, the only souvenir shop is closed and most of the hotels (three of the five existing) had to close for a while. The one where I was always based was still working, but no more than the counter, all the furniture was removed! - no electricity either, until the falling night. The island was



hardly touched by the world crisis, but was suffering because of the internal events, and its resources were so decreasing. Furthermore, at this time of the year, we were end of June, the wind blew storms to the island, with an incredible violence. Reduced fishing as a result limited the other important resource of Socotra. Finally, temporarily, there were no phone connection with foreign countries. It was total isolation.

One of the places, probably the most fabulous of Socotra for succulentophiles is also the least known, outside the tourist circuits:



*Croton socotranum*, Laskah. On right, *Adenium socotranum*, Ras Hebak (photos: JL).



Jabal Buzairi. I found there during my previous missions, many species, previously only recorded east of the island, such as ***Edithcolea grandis*** or ***Euphorbia hadramautica***, and the new discovery ***Aloe buzairiensis***, a natural hybrid between ***Aloe squarrosa*** and ***Aloe perryi***, and which grows between hills, in bushes of ***Buxus hildebrandtii***.

We drove to the impressive Jabal Mtoloh, a place of memorable ascent and discoveries. On the path towards Jabal Mahli, which is very extended, I was able to observe the rare ***Echidnopsis inconspicua*** in flowers, rather unexpected in this area of the island and at this altitude. Bruyns indicated Wadi Eyek, 190m in alt., while we were very far from that and at 570m in alt., much further west... I found more plants in the immediate surroundings, small ones although very healthy colonies, which grow there thanks to the low walls built with surrounding stones by Socotris, to bound their land plots. If their goats destroy the rare colonies which they can find here and there, those plants hidden in the low walls survive, outside the greedy glance of the caprine fauna. I took advantage to complete the documentation on Socotra, that I gathered for the future work of Darrel Plowes on Asclepiads.

The track was very bad, but during stops, I tempted the impossible, trying to find ***Echidnopsis milleri***, lost since its discovery in 1993 by the indefatigable John Lavranos.

On Jabal Buzairi, we found in crotons tormented by the wind, ***Socotrella dolichonecma***, a recent discovery, betraying its presence with its admirable flowers, but the edible stems are fortunately inaccessible to goats. ***Euphorbia spiralis*** was also there, with an atypical specimen, because almost all the plants of this species are not exactly spiralled.

Another recent and very interesting discovery is ***Aloe jawiyon*** which grows in a sympatric way with ***Aloe perryi*** and ***A. squarrosa***, but for which I didn't notice any hybridization. This is a magnificent, very desirable *Aloe*, so I am at the beginning of propagation, because it seems to be still unknown in collection.

On the way back, as we had on the way to Jabal Buzairi, we lifted Socotris, until they wanted to stop and go to places which looked rather like the middle of nowhere.

Naturally, it was not a good period to visit Socotra, the stormy wind blew day and night, and had been like that from June till August, three months





1: *Echidnopsis inconspicua*, Jabal Mahli. 2: *Aloe jawiya*, Jabal Buzairi. 3: *Citrullus colocynthis*, Ras Hebak. 4: *Cucumis prophetarum* ssp. *dissectum*, Wadi Zerig. 5: *Euphorbia spiralis*, Jabal Mahli. 6: *Socotrella dolichonecma* protected under a bush, Jabal Mahli. (photos : JL).





*Commiphora kua*, Laskah (left) et les Hagghier Mts (right) (photos : JL).

of big problems including landing planes! The wind doesn't stop during this period and I dare to say that we would become almost used to it! This obliged ***Commiphora kua*** to grow at ground level, very compact, tiny and magnificent in their smallness and their robustness. Frankincense trees like ***Boswellia bullata*** - there are 6 or 7 species in Socotra - were squatted due to the greediness of goats: the cracks of rocks were their ultimate survival strategy! Droppings of goats at the bottom of the photo gives the scale!

At Dixam, the landscape was surrealist: thousands of ***Dracaena cinnabari*** defying the elements since the beginning of time. A few dragon trees were lying on the ground, as deprived giants.

Wadi Zerig is magic, we found three species of kalanchoes (***K. farinacea***, ***rotundifolia*** and ***robusta***), but also the tiny ***Sarcostemma socotrana*** in the cavities of rocks. The rare ***Echidnopsis bentii*** was also in the same cryptic situation to escape goats. Omnipresent and exuberant ***Caralluma socotrana*** was not in flowers at this time, but it raised - regrettably - immature follicles. Also, it gets a rather short life cycle and dies after some years. Some interesting Cucurbitaceae can be found in Socotra: the endemic ***Eureiandra balfouri*** presented last year in *Cact.-Adv. Int.*, the common ***Citrullus colocynthis***, ***Momordica charantia***, but also ***Zehneria scabra*** and ***Cucumis prophetarum*** ssp ***dissectum*** here, at Wadi Zerig.

I hoped to see an extremely rare event: ***Kalanchoe robusta*** in flower. Already rare as an endemic plant, this species needed more than two 2 months in the greenhouse from the release of the inflorescences up to the flowering time. So, logically it should be in flower at this time in habitat. Very curious and not frightened, an Egyptian vulture (***Neophron***

***percnopterus***) observed me while I took photos. Finally, I was lucky enough to admire the so looked-after plant on location, in flower, and took more pictures than needed!

In the evening, back to Hadibo, I gave the books to the President of the Association: their small souvenir shop was closed because lack of tourists, but at least, they will have a small stock when the tourist activity

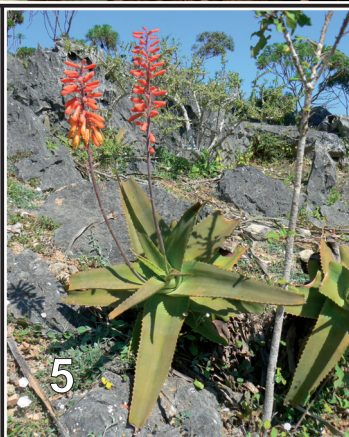


***Dracaena cinnabari***, the deprived giant, Dixam (photo : JL).



***Dracaena cinnabari***, fruit eaten by a caterpillar ***Boswellia bullata***, Dixam (photo : JL).  
(photo : JL).





1: *Aloe perryi*, Jabal Buzairi. 2: *Aloe perryi* ('*haggeherensis*'), Mts Haggier. 3: *Aloe perryi*, Jabal Mahli. 4: *Aloe perryi*, Tahour. 5: *Aloe perryi*, Dixam. 6: *Aloe perryi*, Wadi Ayhaft. 7: *Aloe perryi*, Ras Hebak. The species is extremely variable in its different habitats. (Photos : JL).

starts again, although the immediate future seems uncertain.

Finally I took a trek towards Mts Haggier, a massif of granitic origin. It was rather hard, to go there and back in the same day for normally, we camped in the pass and returned the next day. Furthermore, the violence of the wind was insane and I tired a lot. By chance, I found ***Crassula lanceolata***, which I had not seen during the last trips.

Also, I saw the rare ***Hemerophis socotrae***, a harmless, endemic grass-snake which normally does not live at this height. Thus, what was it doing there? At this altitude, we are approximately at 950m, we discover more demanding plants: ***Peperomia blanda***, and ***Portulaca quadrifida*** in full flowering. ***Kalanchoe rotundifolia*** was also found, and ***Cissus rotundifolia*** this last one growing in trees, at the edge of the cliffs. Even the horrible and cosmopolitan ***Oxalis corniculata***, terror of the collectors, was there, nevertheless wiser than in our pots (see Ray Stephenson's article on this very special genus). And then, high prairies, cows and mushrooms, not really the idea that we had of Socotra!

But I was in the Mts Haggier to verify the identity of ***Aloe haggeherensis***, which is a species which was described recently, although known for a long time. I was able to observe every plant I found, but I saw mostly only a mere form of ***Aloe perryi***, a very variable taxon, according to habitats, and would suggest synonymy with the variable ***Aloe perryi***, it being as extreme as the number of different habitats it colonizes and the quantity of rain it receives according to the locations and altitude. The only small difference which I was able to note were the number of flowers, which apparently were more important and on what seemed a more compact inflorescence in ***A. haggeherensis*** than in ***A. perryi***, but we also found this phenomenon at Jabal Buzairi, in particular the colour of the skin is only a variation within the species depending upon the local weather conditions. I was able to appreciate these changes according to the seasons as I was there at all of them.

But I have to admit that I fell in love with Socotra and his so kind people. On every journey, I feel diving into another world, in other times, with other values, more basic necessities, other pleasures, more modest.

The journey back to Spain was very difficult and even improbable: no more planes, because no more tourists, Yemenia Airways was not flying anymore; I found myself blocked and alone at the Sanaa airport for two days. Worse, I had to go out of the airport, all against the rules of safety





*Echidnopsis bentii*, Wadi Zerig. Right, *Crassula lanceolata*, Haggiars Mts (photos: JL).



*Kalanchoe robusta* in flower, Wadi Zerig ; right *Hemerophis socotrae*, Haghier Mts (photos : JL).



*Peperomia blanda*, Haghier Mts (photo : JL).

*Portulaca quadrifida*, Haghier Mts (photo : JL).



although accompanied, in the evening, passing between blinded vehicles, to go to sleep just in front of the airport: nights of sleeplessness with tanks near the capital, artillery fire, without electricity and with a curfew. Except for the director of Yemenia Airways, the Yemenite employees as well as the soldiers at the airport all behaved to me as gentlemen. It was a relief that Egyptair took care of me, I arrived finally at Cairo, finding the next day a new flight for Madrid... I have another mission to complete in Socotra. « Welcome back Yemen! « As it was said to me at the airport of Sanaa! Maybe we are going to have to wait a little bit more...

Text and photos: J.L.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I thank his Excellence the Ambassador of Yemen in Madrid, Mr. Mustapha Ahmed Noman, for the help brought to get the exceptional visa, Egyptair who pulled out all the stops to get me out of Yemen, as well as my friends Ahmed and Abdulwahid who allowed me to realize this journey.



Joël Lodé in 2010 and *Aloe buzairiensis* in a bush of *Buxus hildebrandtii* (photo : M. Canales).

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