

Flyfishing the Seychelles

by Michael Myers

"If you can mortgage your house and go now, do it because it will change your life." These were the words of the late Tony Vincent when I called him last year after I had read the first article on Seychelles flyfishing. I sadly never met Tony who was tragically killed earlier this year in an accident, but he got me so fired up with his description of their trip that I was determined to get there sooner rather than later.

The trip and people involved changed a number of times during the build-up to the March 20th departure date, but thanks to Pat Womersley at Indian Ocean Angling Adventures, the team finally came together. Six of us left for the Seychelles with a few swimming costumes and a ton of fishing tackle. Andy Coetzee from Rocktail Bay was to be our guide and guru and he spent the time leading up to the trip tying flies for every eventuality. The rest of the team consisted of Pat Goss, Peter Rutherford and Neil Bowles, all rock and surf anglers from Natal, and Guy Pauling and myself from Johannesburg.

Bonefish was the drawcard for all of us, especially on the classic coral flats of the Seychelles. There was a palpable sense of anticipation on the flight over and talk was of tackle and tactics learnt from everything we had seen on video and read collectively. None of us knew exactly what we were really in for, but the planning was over and we were on our way at last.

We spent our first night on Mahe and then caught the Cat Coco ferry to Praslin and the Coco der Mer resort where skipper Matt La Buschayne and his superb catamaran Charming Lady are based. Matt had just got in from a previous charter and was going straight out again with us although it takes 48 hours to get the yacht cleaned, re-supplied and loaded. In our case an adequate liquor supply was a priority but weight was a problem. Matt was somewhat taken aback with our needs in this department, yet in spite of all our planning we still ran out of supplies on the last day.

We relaxed at the resort but were all champing at the bit and impatient to get going. Matt had briefed us comprehensively the previous evening and we loaded up and got underway by mid-afternoon. The sailing was wonderful and we went up Praslin, past Cousin and Cousine and set course for the gap between North Island and Sillhouette en route for St Joseph's Atoll over thirty hours away. We motored into wind most of the way sorting out tackle and pulled feathers and lures behind the yacht catching a variety of different fish. Everything was released, as is Matt's policy, except when we needed something to eat and then we could afford to be choosy, as the abundance of fish was just phenomenal. We caught bonito, tuna, dog tooth tuna and jobfish among others on the way down and went to sleep that second night knowing that in the morning we were going to get our first sight of the atoll and the flats. By that stage fishing fever was running high and we were desperate for action.

Andy Coetzee and I were up at dawn and my first hazy view of the island and flats had my heart racing. The tide was wrong but we had to have a line in the water, so we both rigged



Charming Lady at St Francois in the Seychelles.

12 #'s and set off in one of the inflatables for the drop-off a few hundred metres away. Shortly after we had started Andy noticed a fin coming slowly towards us on the surface of the beautiful tropical sea. We both had a good look for some time as it got closer and closer, till it dawned on us that this was a sailfish gently finning on the surface. Andy put a fly perfectly ahead of it, but it showed no interest. As a land-based guide I can only liken the experience of seeing this magnificent fish for the first time to seeing my first leopard. It finned past us without acknowledging our presence and disappeared beneath the surface as stealthily as it had arrived. We caught a few bonito after this awesome start but the tide was coming in and the flats were calling. We headed back to Charming Lady for a quick breakfast, rigged rods with floating lines and Crazy Charlies and headed off in the two tenders for the flats.

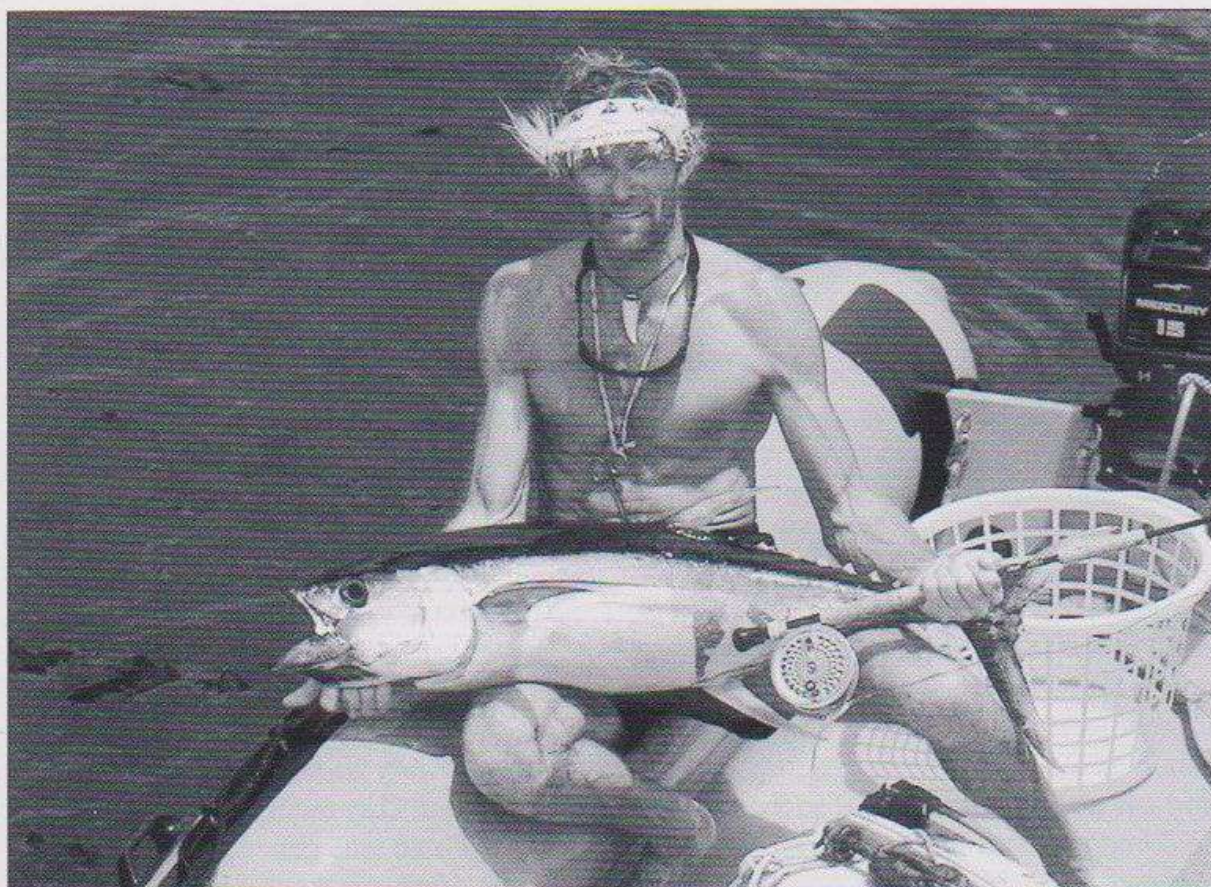
We hit it just right that first day, perfect tide, perfect windless conditions and gin clear water on the stunning St Joseph's flats. We anchored the tenders and set off and Matt soon saw some bones. These fish are like ghosts and often all you see are the shadows on the glistening coralline bottom. Guy Pauling was on my right, and although an excellent trout fisherman, he had little experience with anything in salt water. I will always remember the look on his face as he caught his first bonefish. He popped the fly just where Matt told him and hooked up a moment later with line screaming off his reel. His face was a picture of delight and horror at the same time during the bone's first powerful run. This was like a shot of adrenalin for the rest of us who fanned out and were all soon into fish. This was what we had come for; wave upon wave of feeding bonefish and it was a wonderfully satisfying moment for me when reality surpassed my wildest dreams.

For the next few hours not a moment passed without one of us being into a fish. I had read all I could about the fishing off America and Mexico but this had to be something unique. Between the seven of us we must have caught and released upwards of sixty fish all around the five to six pound mark. What a rush! We were exhilarated and all trying to talk at the same time as we related our experiences. As I waded back to the tenders I just kept wanting one more, one more, but the bones eventually moved off the flats as the tide ran out and we had no choice but to stop and head back to the cat.

I was boiling as we got back and needed to swim. I put on a mask and fins for a quick snorkel and dived into the clear tropical water. I could hardly believe my eyes as, just below the cat, in the shadow cast by the boat, was a school of Ferdy's kingfish (*Carangoides Ferdau*) and there was pandemonium as we all frantically grabbed whatever rod came first to hand and cast to them. Everyone was soon into kingfish, or jacks as the Americans call them. We released them all and finally collapsed after all the excitement to a delicious Creole brunch made for us by Neddy, our chef and deck hand on Charming Lady. Energy returned with the food and fishing fever was high. Rest was out of the question and it was time to fish the drop-off. The team split up on the two inflatables and headed out. The Natal boys had surf sticks, Penns and big plugs with them while the flyfishing fanatics among us were only interested in waving the long wand. Andy and Guy were fishing the drop-off when a dorado came to the surface close to the boat. Guy made a perfect cast and the dorado sucked in the fly with no inhibitions at all. There was general shrieking and screamed instructions from Andy but as Guy tried to set the hook the dorado simply spat out the fly and the mood on the boat crashed - one to the fish.



Andy Coetzee checks a Bonefish run in the Seychelles.



Andy Coetzee with a big eye tuna.

Next morning we again fished the drop-off early and got into a few bonito before once again having a go at the flats. As we started wading I saw some movement which I thought were bonefish and put a Crazy Charlie close to it. I was into fish straight away, which suddenly took off like lightning, and then my line went slack. I reeled in the head of a thumbprint emperor, which had just been snacked by a reef shark. I could hardly believe it, as I remembered Matt warning us that in the Seychelles big fish eat little fish. He had related the story of Rich Schuman from IOAA releasing a bonefish and nearly losing his hand to a barracuda, which appeared from nowhere and took the bone. Around a bar, one dismisses these stories as liquor talk but it bears thinking about in the euphoria of the flats.

We moved on to Desroches to pick up some supplies, beer mainly, and caught our first sailfish on the way. Prior to the trip I had been desperate to catch a sailie on fly and was equipped with a 12# Sage RPLX and Tibor Gulfstream Reel with 500 meters of 50 lb Gelspun backing. When fishing the deep water Andy has a saying "Go big or go home," and for me this applies to flyfishing tackle and sailfish. Sure, you can do it and numerous magnificent sailies have been taken on the fly. I wonder, though, how many sailfish tagged in Kenya for example are ever caught again. Both our sailfish were taken on deep-sea tackle, brought in quickly and released but unless the fish were chased I fear it would be a long fight on a fly. I pose the question "Is it really flyfishing?" You tease the fish and bring it closer to the boat, pop a fly in front of it and chase it to bring it in quickly if you are to have any hope of releasing it with a chance of survival. All this to be able to boast that you have caught a sailie on fly. This goes against the flyfishing ethic for me and in terms of skill I feel a wild river trout would be far more challenging quarry.

From Desroches we fished the area around Poivre, named after one of the early governors of the Seychelles and caught some nice bonefish and kingfish but the mission of the trip was to fish the Alphonse group in the Southern Amirantes and so we motored out on a perfect windless evening hoping to make Alphonse by mid-morning the following day. The wind had not been kind to us at all and blew strongly from the south east during the night and the ETA for Alphonse got later and later. The sea was rough but the cat handled things perfectly and we finally got to the atoll by about mid-afternoon. We went on to the Alphonse flats to have a look for bonefish but we had learnt that the best time for bones was in the morning when the water was cool - in the afternoon it was usually bath temperature warm. Some of the guys started fishing the edge of the flats towards the drop-off and were immediately into kingfish so we changed our modus operandi and headed back for a change of tackle. It was quicker for me to rig my 9# Sage as I had been using it on the flats and this was to prove a big mistake.

The current was pushing and Guy and Neil were fishing from the shore while Pat and Pete were throwing plugs from the deck of the cat. Everyone was into fish with a variety of different kingfish being caught as Andy and I got into one inflatable each and got Matt to drift us back on a long rope tied to the cat to fish the drop-off with fast sinking line. We were both soon into fish and for me this was, without doubt, the best deep-water flyfishing I had ever experienced. Andy and I were no further than ten metres apart and I had caught a couple of fish on a chartreuse and white Lefty's Deceiver. I was feeling pretty smug. I seemed to be doing better than the guru Coetzee as I gave a big last haul and let the shooting head take the fly out. A few moments to let it sink, rod under my arm and I began stripping in with two hands as fast as I could. Almost immediately I had a big take and line

was soon screaming off my trusty Hardy Sovereign accompanied by my adrenalised yelps of delight. I was using 20 lb fluorocarbon tippet and at least a 150 metres of backing was out before the fish slowed down. I breathed a sigh of relief and started recovering line as fast as I could when it ran for the second time with me using every trick I knew to turn it. It turned briefly once more and then it pulled till the line drag broke the tippet. There is nothing worse in fishing than feeling that line go slack when you know you have a demon on the other end. I thought lovingly of my 12# Sage which may have given me a chance but all I could hear was Andy repeating like a stuck record "go big or go home, go home, go home!"

We moved into the St Francois lagoon next morning and Andy and Pat went to fish the drop-off while the rest of us fished a small flat close to the cat. We caught a few bones but they were difficult to see and as we were getting closer to spring tide were soon in water up to our waists. Neil Bowles was throwing a plug and had little success till suddenly the water exploded and a big barracuda took it. I was quite a long way off and when he had finally brought it in there was the problem of releasing it. He roped Guy in to help who took the rod from him and told Bowles firmly that it was his fish and he could take it off and release it. This was done expertly while Guy kept the inflatable between himself and the action.

We really got into the bonefish the following morning on the St Francois flats and had another excellent experience. Time was running out though and we wanted to break the journey back to Mahe and the dreaded flight home. We set sail with a decent wind for one last look at the beautiful St Joseph's flats. We got there about midday and all went out to have a look at the flats and found them too warm to fish.

Andy and I set out with our 12#'s to have a look at the drop-off. Andy is left-handed and I am right and we had got used to fishing off the same boat. We saw some birds and took off after them but decided after one or two tries that it would be better to stop some distance away from the feeding bonito and hope they would come close to us as they tended to sound when they heard the motor. It was quite late when the plan worked perfectly and we were both into big bonito at the same time. For those who have never caught one of these bullet shaped fish on fly, they are awesome. Pound for pound they pull much harder than a kingfish and the one I caught of around eight to ten pounds had my big Tibor Gulfstream singing. A lot of fun and we called it quits straight afterwards and went back to the cat for a well-earned drink.

Once again the flats produced plenty of bonefish and I soaked up every second of the wonderful fishing as this was the last time on the trip when we were going to have a chance to catch them. We drifted back to the cat as Pat and Pete wanted to have a last dive with Matt. Needless to say, Andy wanted to go out again to the drop-off but the rest of us begged off and chose to snorkel and relax before the journey back. This was the mood we were in when about an hour later I saw Coetzee rushing back to the cat at speed. I had been aware of the duck moving around on the drop-off but there was definitely some action now and we all moved to the dive platform to see what had happened.

Andy had been following birds and seen some big splashes. He was using his big 12# Orvis and Penn reel with fast sinking line and a 5/0 Yellow Deceiver when in his words he

had a take "from a fish that wanted to emigrate to Australia!" A battle royal ensued and he finally landed a 17kg big eye tuna - without doubt the fish of the trip. The 12# rod and 45lb tippet, as far as he was concerned, was the only reason he had a chance. This was one fish we had to keep as it had given its all during the fight even though Andy did what he could to revive it.

We began our sail back to Mahe that evening and got there at five the following day. We had run out of beer and headed straight for the pub when we got into the harbour and had an excellent dinner at the Pirate's Arms.

It had been a tremendous trip, superb fishing beyond everyone's expectations, plenty of humour - the flying fish that went through the porthole into Neil's bed was a winner - excellent yacht and crew and the whole thing arranged to the last detail by Pat at Indian Ocean Angling. Only thing left is to go and do it all again.