

ASTONISHING ALPHONSE

The Seychelles had always been on Marcus Janssen's bucket list, but despite the superlatives and hyperbole with which he'd heard them described, nothing could have prepared him for what was to come.

Every time I speak to Matt Harris, *Fieldsports'* roving fly fishing correspondent, I am often left cursing his name. "Sorry, Marcus, I must dash, I am about to catch a flight to Vancouver," he'll inevitably say. "I'm heading back to the Dean to catch monster steelhead." He always seems to be either heading to some incredible fly fishing destination or on his way back from one, full of tales of outrageously large fish. It's hard to take when you're ploughing through a mountain of emails on a drizzly Monday morning.

So it was with great joy that I had to cut short a conversation with Matt last year. "Sorry, Matt, I really have to go, I'm about to board my flight to Mahe, I'm heading out to Alphonse." After a hugely satisfying pause, Matt's response left me rubbing my hands together with glee. "Oh you lucky, lucky son of a shedog," he said. "You'll have the time of your life." Coming from the man who has fished pretty much

everywhere at least twice, I knew I was onto something good.

But to be fair, I didn't need Matt's assurance, the Seychelles had been on my bucket list for as long as I could remember – everyone knows that this archipelago in the middle of the Indian Ocean is a veritable fly fisher's paradise. So when Peter Rippin from Fly Fisher Group contacted me to say that a spot had become available at a really good rate, I took the plunge and immediately set about making a chanterelle and truffle risotto – Mrs J's favourite. Accompanied by a chilled bottle of Marlborough Sauvignon Blanc, it did the trick nicely. "Sounds to me like an opportunity you can't miss," she said, as I topped up her glass. Our marriage has never been better.

I had heard all sorts of tall tales about Alphonse, particularly with regards to the mind-boggling numbers of bonefish. 'Rivers of bones' was a term I had heard bandied about

willy nilly. And a good friend of mine had told me that it would be impossible to exaggerate the numbers of bonefish I would encounter. "When I say you will see thousands every day," he told me, "I mean it. You will."

Well, by about 11am on my first day in the glorious Seychellois sunshine, I knew that the hyperbole, the superlatives and the dubious tales had all actually been true. Having just landed an 85cm GT which I had hooked on my very first cast of the trip – no, honestly, I did – I then found myself knee-deep in tepid Bombay Sapphire surrounded by seemingly endless shoals of bonefish. Quite literally, everywhere I looked, there were bones in astounding, astonishing numbers. Within a couple of hours, I had landed at least a dozen up to 6lb and I was in seventh heaven. "This is ridiculous!" I laughed. "It surely doesn't get any better than this?" I exclaimed to my guide as another 5lb silver missile stripped 80 yards of flyline and

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backing from my 8wt reel in two blistering runs. “Nah man,” replied Alex nonchalantly in his cool Creole accent, “wait for dis aftanoon, I’m gonna take you to meet Mr. Treega.”

Indeed, later that day, after lunching on a skiff anchored in Cosmic Lagoon – the most idyllic, picture postcard spot you can possibly imagine – Alex did take me to a shallow coral ridge at low tide to meet ‘Mr. Trigger’. And within half an hour, I could feel the thrilling first flushes of a new love affair taking hold.

Triggerfish – both the giant and yellowmargin varieties – are, in my book, the saltwater equivalent of New Zealand brown trout, the crack cocaine of the piscatorial world. Neurotic, spooky and unpredictable, they test you in every possible way, leaving you infuriated, frustrated and flummoxed, but completely infatuated. As fishing pal Oliver Cox (who landed the biggest triggerfish of the week) put it, they piss you off and please you in equal measure.

Despite being fairly easy to spot in knee-deep water (their tails often flap about above the surface like big orange and black flags as they dip downwards to forage for crustacea – the piscine equivalent of giving you the V-sign), your presentation must be pin-point accurate and feathered down as delicately as a spent spinner or, as I quickly discovered, they will bolt off the coral ridge and into the depths, never to be seen again. But they’re fickle too – even an apparently perfect cast will sometimes inexplicably send Mr. Trigger heading for cover.

And then, when, in spite of the gusting northeasterly and the lump of lead in your Velcro Crab, you do manage to pull off a perfect cast, you must be in Lady Luck’s good books for your fly may yet snag-up on the coral or turtle grass and bring proceedings to a grinding halt.

But getting a trigger to commit to your fly

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The author with a hard-fighting bluefin trevally, taken in the surf zone



Another strong bonefish puts a good bend into the author’s 8wt. Note the huge shoal of bones in the background

is just the start of it. If you don’t get the timing of your strip-strike just right, you are likely to miss your chance. And rod-striking a trigger only ends in heartbreak or shattered carbon, as Oliver Cox discovered. Even when you do get the timing spot-on, there are no guarantees that your fly will hold. They have hard, bony mouths full of coral-crunching teeth which, I am told, have been known to bite straight through the shank of a Gamakatsu Bonefish hook. But when you do somehow get it all together and hook one, that’s when the real fun begins. They like to fight dirty and the first thing they do is find a hole in the coral where they can break you off. My first trigger took off with such unexpected speed and power that I was left, as George Dubya would put it, in shock and awe.

That first afternoon saw a further four fish spooked and three hooked and lost, one of which straightened the hook as I tried to

prevent it from disappearing over the edge of the razor-sharp coral reef. But despite the frustration, I was besotted and couldn’t wait to have another crack at them. Over dinner that night, I discovered that trigger addiction is a fairly common affliction. Cameron Musgrave, another of Alphonse’s excellent guides, also suffers from the apparently incurable illness. “They are hands-down my favourite target species here at Alphonse,” he said.

But what makes Alphonse such an incredible fishery is the sheer diversity of premier fly rod species on offer. If blue water is your thing, there are a million dog-tooth and yellowfin tuna, dorado, wahoo, grouper, trevally, sailfish and god knows what else to do battle with out on the high seas. Indeed, a sailfish was hooked and lost by a fellow angler during our week. But I simply couldn’t get enough of the endless pristine flats surrounding St. Francois lagoon or the crashing surf of the outer reef at Bagdad where Oli Cox and I spent a thrilling morning chasing GTs and bluefin trevally on the incoming tide. And even when the GTs, triggers and bones aren’t playing ball, there was always a marauding barracuda or a million milkfish to have a wishful crack at.

Alphonse’s milkfish deserve a feature all of their own, for there is nowhere on earth where you stand a better chance of tangling with one of these indescribably powerful torpedoes. Speak to any of the Alphonse guides and they will furnish you with their own tales of eye-wateringly epic battles with milkies, many of which have disastrous endings. Alex told me the first one he ever hooked, a fish of only 20lb (milkies of over 50lb have been landed at Alphonse), took him over an hour and a half



A typical Alphonse bonefish of about 4.5lb

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to land on a 10wt. “After that,” he said with a theatrical shake of his head, “I needed a day off man. Nah, I rather catch big geets – they easy compared to milkies.”

According to legendary head guide Serge Sampson, in order to really crack the milkfish code, you need to fish for them when they are daisy chaining in open water, actively feeding on algae near the surface. Although Serge reported seeing good numbers of milkies feeding outside the reef one afternoon, by the time we got there the following morning, the conditions had changed and they were long gone.

Unquestionably, one of the highlights of the week for me was my first shot at the holy grail of the flats, the enigmatic Indo-Pacific permit or pompano. I was fishing with guide Scoty De Bruin, a fellow South African with an infectious enthusiasm for all things piscatorial. Although he must have seen a more bonefish in his time than he cares to remember, each one I hooked solicited an excited yell of “inside!”, Saffa speak for “get in”, or “back of the net”.

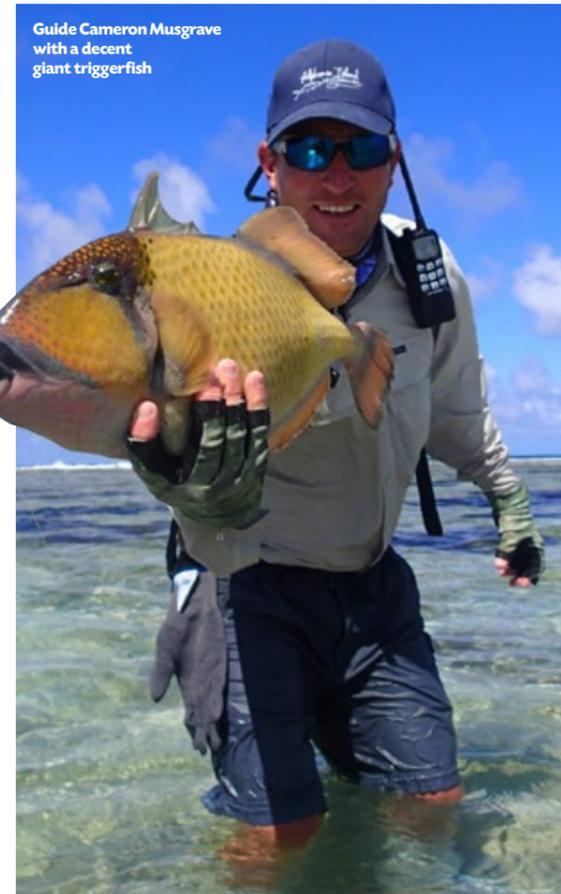
We had a fantastic morning targeting the bigger individual bones that tend to cruise along the outside edge of the big shoals. But suddenly Scoty cranked things up a notch. “Permit, permit, permit!” he yelled frantically as I stripped my Pillowtalk – my go-to bonefish pattern – in as quickly as I could. “Right, give me your leader,

let’s change your fly,” he said excitedly as we back-peddled up the flat in order to stay within casting distance of the three fish that were now cruising up a shallow channel to our right.

“Make sure you don’t spook the bones between us and the permit,” added Scoty as he released my freshly tied-on olive Flexocrab. “If the bones bolt, those permit will be tickets.”

The permit is often referred to as the fish of a thousand casts, and for good reason. In theory, you can make 999 perfect casts to a cruising permit to no avail, and then, for no apparent reason, on the thousandth cast with the same fly, the fish will suddenly dip and inhale your fly with gusto.

Well, suffice to say that, after a lot of what appeared to me to be perfect casts, I was caught off-guard when my next strip was suddenly met with solid resistance. “Shit, I think a bonefish has taken it,” said Scoty. We could still see all three permit, none of which had moved to the fly, so I decided to hold tight in the hope that the flexocrab would either pop free or break off, leaving the permit undisturbed. Trouble is, it wasn’t a bonefish that had devoured my fly but a fourth permit which had just entered the channel from the far side. Alas, it was too late – with the rod tip lowered, the 16lb Seaguar gave way in an instant and my first permit was soon on its way off the flat. A duet of choice South



Guide Cameron Musgrave with a decent giant triggerfish

African expletives followed suit.

On the plus side, the plan worked; the remaining three permit didn’t spook. After another hundred and something casts, miraculously, one of the three remaining permit suddenly peeled off to the right without warning and dipped down onto my fly, its big scythe tail suddenly clearly visible just beneath the surface. “Strip! Strip! Strip!” shrieked Scoty hysterically. But to no avail – this time there was



Alex with the GT the author hooked on his very first cast of the trip

just the briefest moment of resistance before it went slack and all three permit headed for open water. I had either been too quick, too slow or not firm enough. Who knows? That’s permit fishing for you.

When we returned to Alphonse later that afternoon, Devan, the lodge manager, couldn’t believe it. “You got TWO permit to eat your fly?! That’s crazy talk man!” he said in mock horror. “If you had landed one, I would have bought you a drink, maybe even two. If you had landed both, I would probably have kissed you. But as you dropped the holy grail, not once, but twice, I think you should be severely penalised!”

It really is quite difficult to describe just how incredible Alphonse is. Sure, there are places like Cosmoledo or Astove where you can catch GTs in bigger numbers, or Cuba or the Bahamas where the bones will stretch the scales a bit further, but there is surely no destination on earth where you are so utterly spoiled for choice.

And if you are yet to experience the unequivocal thrill of saltwater fly fishing, I can not think of a better place to start than Alphonse. It is the perfect fly fishing classroom with something to test and challenge everyone from complete novices to the Matt Harris of the fly fishing world. Even Matt can’t wait to get back out there to have another crack at the milkfish. And that’s saying something.



FACT FILE

It is difficult to find fault in any aspect of the fly fishing operation on Alphonse – it is incredibly well-run by a team of highly experienced and professional guides and lodge staff. The individual air-conditioned, en suite A-frame villas are comfortable and exceedingly luxurious by fly fishing lodge standards, and the food is truly excellent.

Although you are advised to take all of your own fly fishing gear with you (plus spares), there is a well stocked tackle shop on the island which carries clothing, sunglasses, rods, reels, leader material and a good selection of flies. Your booking agent will provide you with a comprehensive packing list including clothing, tackle and fly patterns, but if you do break a rod or obliterate a reel (as I did) on a big GT, there are back-up Sage rods and Shilton reels available to hire.

WHEN TO GO

The main fishing season runs from the second week in October to the first few weeks in May, but they tend to get booked-up well in advance, so it is advisable to plan as far ahead as possible.

CONTACT

For more information about fishing at Alphonse or to book a trip, contact Peter Rippin at Fly Fisher Group. Tel. +44 (0)1367 850429 e. enquiries@flyfishergroup.com www.flyfishergroup.com



The view from the bar and dining area



Although the fly fishing is unquestionably the major drawcard, the evenings spent at Alphonse are also special