

## WHY THE SEYCHELLES – A Short History Of The Fishery

When people talk about saltwater fly fishing, one place stands head and shoulders above the rest. The Seychelles. For thousands of fly anglers, the 115 islands that make up the Seychelles archipelago - and more specifically the fabled outer islands and atolls of Alphonse, Astove, Cosmoledo, Farquhar, Poivre, Providence and St Francois, - are *the* ultimate bucket list destination.

Literally, these are 'trip of a lifetime' places that visitors plan and work for months and years to get to. From forums to club rooms, Whatsapp groups to individual 'To Do' lists, all over the world stories are shared, pacts are made, flies are tied and plans are set in motion to visit these flats, fish for the abundant species on offer and experience the pure, untouched wildness of these waters. From New York to Moscow, Johannesburg to London, images of these pristine atolls and flats sit as the home screen wallpapers on computers, a constant reminder of a "one day" destination.

But hang on, there are many tropical flat fishing destinations all over the world, so what is it about the Seychelles that makes it so special?

A good place to start would be the location.

Take a small country, far enough from its oceanic and African neighbours to avoid excessive marine traffic and major industry, but close enough to be accessible by plane from most major hubs within a few hours. From there, take another plane or a boat to its outer islands and atolls, leaving what already looks like paradise (the bigger islands of Mahe, Praslin and La Digue) for the even more remote and untouched islands in the middle of nowhere. When you find yourself on what feels like the ends of the earth, you will have arrived at what is known as the best saltwater fly fishing destinations on the planet.

There's more to it than just the remote location of these atolls and islands. Add in the terrain, the techniques, the season and the species diversity and you have an incredible mix, custom-made for fly fishing.

On the terrain front, fly fishing in the Seychelles sets itself apart due to the largely land-based approach it offers. While blue water, boat-based fishing is available to anglers (and extremely good), the main draw these atolls hold is for the angler to be able to target challenging species on foot. Whereas saltwater fly fishing destinations in many parts of the world are boat-based, the Seychelles stands apart because of the opportunities it gives anglers to wade in shallow, warm water on hard white sand, turtle grass or on coral flats for a plethora of exciting new species. Sure, it takes a bit of hard work, but getting the opportunity to cast at behemoth giant trevally or schools of bonefish in the same knee-deep water you are standing in is not something many fly anglers accustomed to boat-based fishing will ever forget. It's not that Seychelles guides and anglers are against boats in any way, but there is something more tactile, connected and satisfying about wet wading and catching a 120cm GT in the surf or 20 plus bonefish in ankle deep water.

The Seychelles is also blessed with one of the longest seasons in the international fly fishing calendar; running traditionally from late September until the end of May. The season's length varies from atoll to atoll and is dictated by how far south the atoll lies. The most southerly atolls experience a shorter season due to the south-easterly monsoon winds that blow insistently from May to September.

Undoubtedly the biggest drawcard these destinations have to offer is the myriad angling species on offer. From common flats fishing targets like the massive shoals of big bonefish, Indo-Pacific permit and giant trevally to other trevally species, triggerfish species, snapper and numerous other denizens of the flats. Then there are the off-shore targets like marlin, dogtooth tuna, yellowfin tuna, wahoo and sailfish.

Many of these species, like the milkfish (a vegetarian powerhouse) or Indo-Pacific permit (a snub-nosed tease that haunts the dreams of anglers worldwide), used to be thought of as uncatchable, but, through the perseverance and pioneering techniques of Seychelles-based guides, they are now a viable target species on fly. Off the back of the work done by these innovative guides and the diverse species they were able to target with their clients, the possibilities around what is or isn't possible with saltwater fly fishing has been rewritten. Specifically, the decade between 1995 and 2005 saw a new era of guides and unique techniques evolve out of the Seychelles. Today, many of the techniques these pioneers figured out through trial and error have subsequently been spread around the world by guides and anglers targeting the same or similar types of species.

Not only are the species unique, but so is each atoll in the way that that structure varies from one other and attracts a different variety of species. The tides associated with the atolls play a major role in which species are suited to that atoll. Some atolls fish better on spring tides and others on neaps, which means that guests can experience something so diverse that you will not find anywhere else in the world.

The Seychelles fly fishing story began in the mid 1990's with trips to the Amirantes archipelago situated 230km south-west of Mahe and extending 152km, from 4°52'S, African Banks, to 6°14'S, Desnoeuvs Atoll. The most popular fly fishing destinations at that time were St Josephs, Poivre, African Banks, Remire Atolls and Desroches. Back then, fly fishing in the Seychelles was totally unexplored and in its infancy. These destinations and the fishing were purely bonefishing-oriented, because bonefish were seen worldwide as the ultimate saltwater target. As years passed and techniques evolved, new species were opened up to fly anglers and these atolls soon became known as the best Indo-Pacific permit destinations in the Indian Ocean.

As interest slowly grew in this new frontier, exploration of Alphonse Atoll situated 400km south-west of Mahe began in 1998. The magnificent island threesome comprising of Alphonse, St Francois and Bijoutier fast established a reputation for holding one of the healthiest populations of bonefish on the planet. The luxury resort of Alphonse Island opened in 2000, generating a considerable amount of hype throughout the fly fishing industry and soon cemented itself as one of the most famed saltwater fly fishing destinations in the world. Nearby St Francois is approximately seven miles long and four miles wide, consisting of firm white sand bottoms interlaced with channels and cuts. The uniqueness that sets St Francois apart from many of the other Seychelles

destinations is the endless white sand flats. In addition to the abundant bonefish flats, the lagoon envelopes coral finger flats and coral heads allowing anglers to catch several of the now 60 species targeted on fly in the Seychelles. Alphonse island is credited with deciphering how to catch the first milkfish, pink parrotfish, yellow margin and moustache triggerfish on fly as well as refining techniques for catching numerous other species like giant trevally and Indo-Pacific permit. To date this fishery still accounts for more than 90% of the world's milkfish caught and released on an annual basis.

2001 saw the first professionally guided trips to the most southerly situated atoll, Farquhar. Situated 770km south-west of Mahe (10°10'S 51°08'E), this remote atoll has a total area, including the large lagoon, of 170.5 km<sup>2</sup> which is 18 km north to south and 9 km east to west. The main group of islands form a long curve which describes the eastern side of the atoll. Largest of these are Ile du Nord and Ile du Sud, with the smaller Manaha gaps and islands between them. Further south is Goelette which is credited with bird eating giant trevally. Yes, fish big enough to eat birds... Farquhar quickly became known for its impressive variety of species which include a healthy population of bonefish and giant trevally, Indo-Pacific permit, triggerfish, barracuda and bumphead parrotfish.

In 2004 Cosmoledo Atoll and Astove Atoll started being fished after initial exploratory fly fishing trips. Located 1 030km south-west of Mahé, Cosmoledo Atoll is situated a stone's throw away from the world heritage site of Aldabra (home to the famous giant tortoises) and comprises of a larger white sand lagoon surrounded by 18 islands, numerous flats and two main channels. It's a huge atoll measuring 17km from north to south. Menai and Wizard Islands occupy the eastern and western points of the atoll. South Island stands near the main entrance to the inner lagoon, while the second, smaller entrance is just south of Menai. The perimeter of the atoll is covered with vast, wadeable sand flats dotted with islands of various shapes and sizes, all of which is the perfect habitat for its fish population.

Known as the giant trevally capital of the world, Cosmoledo is unparalleled, if targeting these fearsome predators is your thing. These fish are however not the only species that can be found here in impressive numbers. Large bonefish, milkfish, barracuda, Indo-Pacific permit, triggerfish, bluefin trevally and bohar snapper are all regulars to the atoll and fly anglers. The tides at Cosmoledo are stronger than those experienced anywhere else in the Seychelles and are often thought to be the reason why it attracts so many GTs – it's easier to sneak up on smaller fish when as a large toothy critter you can use the tide to your advantage. No matter how experienced the angler and where they have fished in the world before coming to Cosmoledo, the sheer numbers and variety of fish species you are likely to catch leaves even experienced fly anglers slack-jawed with awe. The result is that anglers from across the globe queue up to sample this ultimate fishing playground.

A three-hour sail (18 nautical miles) from Cosmoledo, Astove Atoll is situated 1055km south-west of Mahé and forms part of the remote Aldabra group of atolls. It's a small and unique atoll that spans six kilometers from north to south and just under four kilometers from east to west at the widest points. The shallow lagoon has one small entrance, and due to its elevation a phenomenon occurs whereby the tide falls like a river for ten hours of the 12-hour tidal cycle and then turns to flood the entire lagoon in

only two hours. Astove atoll has a rich, but dark history and has been the cause of countless shipwrecks dating back to 1500 AC. It has been said that ships used to pass by in the hope of “rescuing” and then subsequently enslaving souls abandoned on the island. It’s also a famous atoll because Jacques Cousteau filmed the acclaimed underwater documentary “*The Silent World*” along the edge of the “Wall”. The “Wall” of Astove is breathtakingly beautiful natural structure, known as one of the best dive sights on this planet. Best described as looking down into the Grand Canyon, it consists of the flat and reef dropping a vertical 90 degrees from ankle deep water to over 1000 metres over a short distance. The terrain on Astove varies from hostile shore breaks on the windward side, to flat calm coral flats on the outside and snow-white sand flats inside the lagoon. Astove has become synonymous with the largest flats-caught GT’s in the Indian Ocean. Its shallow lagoon and small entrance, surrounded by sheer drop-offs makes the experience truly unique. This lagoon is a sanctuary for both juvenile and trophy-size fish that feed on the shallow white sand flats that line the inside of the lagoon. Astove is small and is surrounded by coral flats with deep drop-offs on the flats edge allowing predators easy access to their lunch. Not only does Astove have large GTs but it also has an equally impressive bonefish, permit, bluefin trevally, triggerfish, barracuda and milkfish population. The number of permit caught from season to season at Astove continues to increase, backing up the unified approach to the fishery and the conservation ethic of the guides and anglers.

Providence Atoll was the last to be marketed to the international fly fishing market in 2007. The second most southerly atoll in the Seychelles it contains two major land masses, namely Providence North and Cerf Island, with 40km of predominately turtle grass flats in between. The enormous lagoon system is mostly shallow with numerous channels linked to the ocean. Providence Atoll is credited with the breakthrough in deciphering one of the last species to be figured out on fly the massive, almost bovine, bump head parrotfish. It’s also home to a healthy population of bonefish, milkfish, giant trevally, triggerfish and barracuda.

Remote, pristine locations, incredible species diversity and an amenable climate all combine to make these destinations truly exceptional. But, there’s a lot at stake. With such a precious resource comes great responsibility on the guides, the anglers and the companies involved. Long gone are the days when anglers expected to keep fish. The Seychelles fly fishing industry has evolved to become leaders in the conservation aspect of the sport. Today, with experienced guides leading the way, the vast majority of anglers understand and are sensitive to the changing world and how we effect it with our presence. In these islands and atolls, the fly fishing code of conduct is strictly catch and release, with skilled guides ensuring as little impact as possible is placed on the fish. After all, a live fish is far more valuable than a dead one. For those stuck in the past, we have the hard science to back up these claims. Studies at Alphonse Island have shown the average size bonefish would earn in excess of \$140 when it was caught and released whereas in the fish markets that same bonefish would have no value as it is not a sought after eating fish. And GTs, the bad boy gangsters of the flats? On average a giant trevally earns \$1 232 when caught and released whereas that same fish would only earn \$48 once dead in the market. These fish might not be caught multiple times, but they remain amongst the population that ensures the environment stays healthy. Many of the Seychelles atolls have set up foundations that work in conjunction with ICS (Island Conservation Society) to monitor the fisheries in a responsible manner. These

foundations are funded by conservation donations from anglers who visit the atolls. Once they have experienced how special these places are, visiting anglers come to understand the difference they can make in conserving these fisheries for future generations.

Every catch brings a thrill, a lifelong memory and a story told time and again.

Every release contributes to the health of the fishery and ensures the Seychelles' status as *the* ultimate bucket list destination stays intact.

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