

The Alphonse Group

A tale of two atolls

by Christophe Mason-Parker

One hour and 250 miles after leaving Mahé, the largest and most populated island within the Seychelles archipelago, the Beechcraft 1900 began its descent towards the twin oceanic atolls of Alphonse and St. François. Out of the right side of the aircraft's windows, a tiny green spec surrounded by turquoise blue water slowly came into view. The arrowhead-shaped island of Alphonse covers an area of 1.71km² and is bisected down the middle by a narrow runway. Extensive reef flats and a vast lagoon, which give the atoll a total area of 19km², surround it. Home to the Alphonse Island Resort, the island, which is covered in thick forest and coconut palms, is the archetypal tropical paradise.

The Alphonse Island Resort has built a reputation as one of the world's premiere fly-fishing destinations. However, in recent years the management has added diving to its growing list of activities with the opening of a fully equipped PADI dive centre. I was visiting Alphonse to shoot images for an upcoming book and had one week to cram in as much diving as possible. Luckily with over thirty dive sites identified so far, and more being discovered all the time, I would have plenty to choose from.

I stepped onto the runway and into a waiting golf buggy, and made the short journey to one of the 21 beach bungalows that overlook one of the most perfect palm fringed beaches I have ever seen. I quickly proceeded to set up my camera equipment before accompanying a group of guests on a boat trip



Alphonse atoll supports a huge diversity of reef fish species.

*Canon 7D, Tokina 10-17mm Fisheye
Ikelite Housing, 2 x DS160 Ikelite Strobes
1/200th, f/8, ISO 200*

Guests take time out for lunch on the reef flats of St. François atoll.

*Canon 7D, Canon 10-18mm lens
1/100th, f/16, ISO 200*





Large schools of snapper, fusiliers and trevally all come together at the 'Arcade'. Canon 7D, Tokina 10-17mm Fisheye. Ikelite Housing, 2 x DS160 Ikelite Strobes 1/125th, f/8, ISO 160

to Bijoutier Island, a tiny spec of sand within the St. François atoll. Though I was predominantly here for the diving, I did not want to miss out on the opportunity to see some of the atolls' other wildlife. Bijoutier is a picture postcard sandy cay, covered in a few coconut palms and home to numerous grey herons. The herons share this tiny spec of sand with greater crested terns, which frequently gather on the island's beaches.

The next morning I arrived at the dive centre early, keen to see what Alphonse's coral reefs had to offer.

Aside from the house reef, which is predominantly used for training dives, all diving is undertaken by boat. Dive sites are located both within the lagoons and on the outer reefs of the Alphonse and St. François atolls, and conditions fluctuate depending on the tides. Distance to the dive sites varies between 5 and 30 minutes. For the first dive we headed to a site called Hotel, located on the east coast of Alphonse Island. As we skimmed along the surface of the lagoon and through the pass in the reef, the turbid shallow water changed to a brilliant



A pair of young scalloped hammerhead sharks cruise above a coral reef. Canon 7D, Tokina 10-17mm Fisheye. Ikelite Housing, 2 x DS160 Ikelite Strobes 1/160th, f/8, ISO 160

blue. Confident that he had found the correct location, the boat captain brought the catamaran to a halt and we back rolled into the warm, clear Indian Ocean.

Seychelles was badly affected by the global coral bleaching event of 2016, but Alphonse was spared the worst of the bleaching and many of the island's reefs remain healthy and vibrant. The top of the reef wall at Hotel is spectacular and is covered in a variety of hard corals. The first thing that strikes me is the number of green turtles resting amongst the coral

bommies. I stop counting when I reach double figures and we slowly begin to make our way down the reef slope.

The walls on the outer reefs of Alphonse and St. François are dominated by huge gorgonians up to 3m in height. They are surrounded by thousands of brightly coloured anthias, which provide a spectacle of colour against the endless blue. We navigated our way through the forest of gorgonians as a pair of spotted eagle rays glided along the top of the wall. Later in the dive, a school of redtooth triggerfish streamed up



*A diver approaches one of the many sea fans near the entrance to the Alphonse atoll.
Canon 7D, Tokina 10-17mm Fisheye. Ikelite Housing,
2 x DS160 Ikelite Strobes
1/160th, f/8, ISO 200*

Green turtles are common around the atolls and are encountered on most dives.

*Canon 7D, Tokina 10-17mm Fisheye. Ikelite Housing,
2 x DS160 Ikelite Strobes
1/250th, f/8, ISO 160*



from below, while a large grouper cautiously eyed our movements from his lair. As first dives go, this was up there with some of the best, and while there were plenty of subjects to photograph, I had been so preoccupied with all that was going on around me, that by the time we surfaced after 65 minutes, I had only fired off a couple of shots.

That afternoon I resisted the temptation to dive again, in favour of joining another nature tour, this time to nearby St. François Island. The island, together with Bijoutier, is one of two found within

the St. François atoll. It is an important stopping off point for migratory birds, including crab plovers and Saunders terns. The island's beaches are home to thousands of hermit crabs, which spend much of their time climbing the coastal vegetation, while a colony of frigate birds have taken up residence within the abundant casuarina trees.

The next day we were back in the water early, with a three-dive day planned ahead of us. The first of which was Galawa, on the northern tip of Alphonse Island. The visibility again stretched

beyond 30m, as it did for the duration of my stay. Highlights of this dive included large schools of bluelined and paddletail snappers forming tight balls on the reef, more green turtles and a whitetip reef shark. Our second dive took us to the St. François atoll and a wall dive off Bijoutier Island. A nurse shark swam lazily amongst the sea fans as we slowly drifted along the top of the wall in the gentle current. Every crevice in the wall appeared to be home to a moray eel, the majority of which had accompanying cleaner shrimp. Other macro subjects



*A school of bluefin trevally hunt juvenile fusiliers.
Canon 7D, Tokina 10-17mm Fisheye. Ikelite Housing, 2 x DS160 Ikelite Strobes
1/160th, f/9, ISO 200*

included a male ribbon eel and several species of scorpionfish. For the final dive it was back to Alphonse Island and the dive site Bluewater Stop, where we were treated to the sight of hunting bluefin trevally and a school of barracuda hanging motionless in the blue.

On day three we visited a dive site known as Arcade, situated to the northeast of Alphonse Island. The coral cover was incredible and thousands of yellow snapper schooled just above the reef. Green turtles were again plentiful, while giant

sweetlips and black grouper appeared to completely ignore our presence. Twenty minutes into the dive, as we were making our way along the top of the reef wall, a pair of young scalloped hammerheads swam directly towards us before switching direction and disappearing from view. Although sharks were not a particularly common sight on this trip, Alphonse does offer the opportunity to see a number of species and in one week we encountered whitetips, nurse sharks, silvertips, lemon sharks and the pair of hammerheads. There is also



*Sabre squirrelfish (Sargocentron spiniferum) are easily approached and make great photographic subjects.
Canon 7D, Tokina 10-17mm Fisheye. Ikelite Housing, 2 x DS160 Ikelite Strobes
1/200th, f/8, ISO 160*

the opportunity to see reef mantas, and while I was there at the wrong time of year, during certain months encounters are fairly reliable.

Without a doubt the highlight of the entire week took place on day six, when we made a high-speed drift dive across three dive sites on the outer wall of the St. François atoll. The current was pumping as we descended quickly to 25m and approached the wall, surrounded by tens of thousands of juvenile fusiliers. An endless stream of bluefin trevally

accompanied by rainbow runners and bohar snapper appeared out of the blue, before joining our group, which was being propelled along by the current above the reef. Then responding to some invisible cue, our companions split in every direction attacking the fusiliers in a scene of complete chaos. The hunt lasted a few minutes and then almost as quickly as it had started it was over and the mixed school of hunters disappeared.

Over the entire week I completed a dozen dives, without visiting the



*All of the resort's bungalows and suites face onto a perfect white sand beach.
Canon 7D, Canon 10-18mm lens
1/100th, f/14, ISO 250*

same dive site twice. As the Alphonse Island Resort boasts the only dive centre for hundreds of kilometres, we always had the reef to ourselves and our dive group was never larger than four guests.

The dive centre is currently in the process of upgrading its facilities to cater for underwater photographers. Images from the day's dives can be shown on a large screen in the dive centre and plans are in place to create a set-up area for camera equipment.

Alphonse Island Resort is the

perfect location for those looking for frontier diving accessed from a luxury base. New dive sites are continuously being added to their roster and there is even talk of organizing future trips to the legendary Astove atoll. For those divers wanting a remote getaway with incredible diving, all within easy reach of Europe, Alphonse Island has got it covered.

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