

HERE COME THE SAINTS!

ST. BRANDON'S ATOLL

EVEN IN THIS MODERN AGE THERE ARE STILL CORAL ATOLLS LOADED WITH BIG BONEFISH AND GIANT TREVALLY WAITING TO BE DISCOVERED BY INTREPID TRAVELLING ANGLERS. HENRY GILBEY REPORTS ON A NEW FISHERY AT A FAR-FLUNG GROUP OF ISLANDS NORTH OF MAURITIUS.



Main picture: Casting at a bunch of permit at the northern end of St. Brandon's.

Top: Home for the trip, the Mauritius based MY Gryphon. Middle: Jako Lucas with an 8lb bonefish. Bottom: Tim Babich heads off to bring the tender boat back around before the tide drops too much.



YOU KNOW you've got a serious problem when photographing the fishing arguably becomes more of a kick than actually fishing and catching fish. Granted, this is not always the case, and of course some fishing is always going to look more impressive through the lens than others. When those tropical saltwater flats literally light up under a high midday sun, I can't see how my job and obsession could possibly get any more addictive. I am a fishing junkie first and foremost, but more and more these days I simply can't bring myself to pick up a rod when I have such awesome fishing and conditions in front of me to photograph, and a multitude of photo ideas bouncing around in my head. My life is a constant dilemma.....

Like most anglers I suppose, I am naturally an early out of bed person, and the 'rules' of photography for the most part dictate that first and last light are the best times. But not on the flats. Not even remotely so. Every single morning I would wake up very early on that mothership, make myself a cup of coffee, and then wander out on deck. To be perfectly honest, first and last light out at the remote St. Brandon's atoll was nearly always a huge let down. It is to be expected, but that's the dilemma I keep playing around in my head. I know how good it looked for a few hours around midday yesterday, but this early in the morning it just looks so flat and ordinary. Shallow water needs a high and bright sun to light all that glorious detail and colour up, but the bad little

voice in my head keeps nagging at me : "Henry, yesterday was a mere illusion. The flats are never going to look nearly as that good again. Fish away. Don't shoot. Go on, you know you want to". So I start worrying. Only a bit, but it's enough to make me go for a coffee refill. Waking up really early means that it's a long time to wait until that sun climbs high in the sky and once again those shallow flats, channels and depressions come to life in their myriad of colours, textures and shades. But then this is a fishing trip after all, and photography aside, St. Brandon's is one hell of a special place whatever the height of the sun.



James Topham keeps a close eye out for coral bommies as we move from flat to flat.

The twenty four hour plus, two hundred and forty mile crossing from Mauritius to the remote atoll of St. Brandon's is going to rock and roll whatever way you look at, so you might as well take it like a man and give in to it. And to think that I once thought that the whole Indian Ocean surely had to be a flat calm mass of warm water, mainly because I had seen the odd postcard of little tropical islands surrounded by innocent looking seas. We left Mauritius around 8am in the morning and then turned northwest out of the bustling Port Louis. The

first hour or so was essentially flat calm with the shelter afforded in the lee of the mainland, and I am pretty sure that all of us were wondering what on earth all the talk had been about. But the sea state picked up steadily as we began to leave Mauritius far behind us, until there was nothing but open ocean and the up and down of the 100' long mothership. I had all these plans to clear lots of work on my laptop as we made the crossing, but that went right out of the window soon after I powered up and settled down to work on a sofa inside. I don't get seasick, but it was pretty obvious almost immediately that rocking boats and little laptop screens simply do not mix. Make no bones about it, it was a long crossing, and by halfway the size of most of the fish we all chatted about had grown at least another fifty percent.

But then you get there and all that rolling around simply fades from memory as fast as the excitement levels rise. The boat slows to a stop and the crew picks the four tenders up from the southern end of the atoll. All us anglers now go into overdrive as we set up rods, reels, lines and flies now the boat has quit moving around so much. The MY Gryphon steams for perhaps another hour or so further north up the atoll until the anchor goes down in a channel tucked behind a tiny tropical island. These kinds of trip build in the mind for months and months before you go, so the physical act of actually now being in the exact location you have dreamed about is something very special indeed. When we step onboard the little tender boats and our guides



As we move slowly from one flat to another, John Travis keeps a close eye out for GTs.

take us out across the calm waters, I can assure you that I was not the only one shaking with adrenaline.

I think it would be fair to say that the South African based FlyCastaway first looked at opening up St. Brandon's atoll to their clients principally because their fantastic remote atoll operations in the Seychelles sadly became inoperable due to ongoing and worsening piracy issues. I know that the managing director Gerhard Laubscher had already quietly fished on an exploratory trip out at St. Brandon's, and reports were outstanding. These South Africans don't hang around, and almost as the Seychelles shut down, they were soon offering St. Brandon's as a more

than viable destination for Indian Ocean saltwater fly fishing. A place like Cosmoledo in the Seychelles might well be completely unique with regards to mad numbers of giant trevally rampaging around on the flats,

THE TWENTY FOUR HOUR PLUS TWO HUNDRED AND FORTY MILE CROSSING FROM MAURITIUS TO THE REMOTE ATOLL OF ST. BRANDON'S IS GOING TO ROCK AND ROLL WHATEVER WAY YOU LOOK AT IT, SO YOU MIGHT AS WELL TAKE IT LIKE A MAN AND GIVE IN TO IT.

but St. Brandon's is fast turning out to be something serious in its own right. No, there are not the numbers of GTs around, and to be fair to FlyCastaway, they are not promoting

the place as a "GT destination", but the place offers arguably some of the finest bonefishing on this earth, and St. Brandon's might well turn out to be the most consistent Indo-Pacific permit fishery in the Indian Ocean. As for the GTs themselves? The FlyCastaway guides I know tell me that they have never seen them so big, and you need to bear in mind here how much time these guys have collectively spent on the remote Seychelles atolls. Hence the excitement levels.

I could watch bones almost sneak onto the flats for ever and be happy. The fact that these fish do literally creep onto the flats is what makes them such an outstanding sight fishing species. Their love for skinny



Casting to a school of bones as a tropical rainstorm passes by.
 Opposite top: Jim McHugh plays a bonefish while his guide, Gerhard Laubscher, stays close to help land the fish. Opposite bottom: Jako Lucas and Annoosh Rooplal measure a nice bonefish.

water comes principally because they know they are far safer feeding out on the flats when the water is theoretically too shallow for the sharks. I am sure that some bonefish areas are different, but in general these shallow flats are full of food such as shrimps and little crabs, and the bonefish know that. They want to get onto the flats to feed. But the bonefish are a prey species for sharks and GTs etc, so they need to time it right so that they can move around and feed, whilst the predators struggle in such shallow water. Hence you can stand on a flat and wonder what on earth somebody like me is waffling on about. Believe me, I've done it. The first time I was on a bonefish trip I wondered for an

hour or so if they were indeed some mythical ghost that had been created in Photoshop. The flats can seem like a desert when there are no fish. But keep your eyes peeled, and when that water really starts to drop, that's when you will start to see bonefish moving

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up onto the flats. Perhaps only a few fish will begin to creep along the flats, but sometimes you can end up seeing waves and waves of them. Patience is called for, but these ghosts do exist,

and when they feed, they feed hard. Sight fishing in water that might be a little more than ankle deep is what it's all about.

But where are the bonefish when they are not on the flats? I am told that they tend to hang around in large shoals in the deeper water. Safety in numbers perhaps, and I can think of a few times when I have seen really big but very skittish shoals of them packed tightly together in say waist-deep water. It also ties in with an area like Kosi Bay up near the Mozambique border in South Africa, where some of the rock and surf anglers actually target big bonefish in the deeper water on bait. Some of these fish are then rather





unceremoniously put on a slider for some particularly large GTs!

In truth I am a fairly 'average at best' fly fisherman, hence me being on a trip like this principally as a photographer, but I just delight in the way these fish are, in my mind, almost purpose-designed as the ultimate flats quarry for the saltwater fly guy. Everything about them makes them perfect to fly fish for. They might well say that all the bones and permit in the Florida Keys have university degrees when it comes to being picky about flies, but the beauty about a remote and virtually untouched place like St. Brandon's is the willingness of the bonefish population to literally pounce upon your fly if you do things right. Sure, get too overexcited and drop your fly line right across the back of the fish like I did first off and it's going to spook like crazy (cue one of those 'don't need to say anything' silences from my guide), but more often than not these Indian Ocean bones will turn on your fly and chase it down if you fish well. Sometimes you will see huge shoals of bonefish moving around, but the most fun is to fish around the low tides for singles and doubles, and I reckon the average size of fish that week had to have been around the 6lb mark, with a good spread of fish around 8lb. There are 10lb plus bones at St. Brandon's, and they are catchable. I saw a number of single bonefish in particular that I am not sure quite how large they might have been, but suffice to say they were not being caught.

But I bet you want to hear about the GTs? I have a real thing for photographing and indeed fishing for bonefish, as you might have guessed

Top: Jako Lucas pulls hard on a nice bone.

Middle: Jako Lucas with another St. Brandon's bonefish.

Bottom: Dave Moffett casts a long line in very skinny water.



Watching intently from an elevated position for signs of fish as the client moves slowly over the flat.

by now, but nobody can help but be overawed when a GT or two comes a hunting on the flats. We saw lots and lots of sharks of all sizes around, but you simply can't mistake the body shape of a sizeable giant trevally marauding around with intention. It's amazing how the intensity just goes up a huge step when one of them is spotted. "The GTs are few and far between, but the average size of them is just huge. Really, really big. Quality always wins" (Tim Babich, FlyCastaway guide).

I was with our guide Jako Lucas who happened to be working with John Travis on a really nice permit that was tailing, but was also resolutely refusing to take the fly. Swine fish, but then permit are what they are. "We have a love/hate

relationship with permit. We love to hate them", as Gerhard Laubscher says. Still, it was a big fish in front of John, and we were not about to give up. As in the Seychelles, the guys tend to walk around at St. Brandon's with a more

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regular 9 weight set up for the bones and permit, together with a rigged 12 weight outfit that is strapped out of the way. But it's always ready to be armed if a GT comes calling. The other

client Dave Moffett is slowly walking the other edge of this narrow, broken coral flat, and out of the corner of my eye I can see him suddenly throw the 9 weight rod into the water to his left, unclip the 12, and then very quickly pull line off to make a long cast at about two o'clock to his position. I can't tell you the number of times I have had to carefully dodge a number of 9 weight outfits lying in the shallow water, having been hurriedly cast aside because some GTs have been spotted. You can understand, I am sure, why these South African fly fishermen are so into sealed drag units on their reels.

Dave very quickly rips a load of line from his reel, makes a decent cast, and puts the fly down hard. The moment



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that fly lands in the warm water, he's stripping the living daylights out of it, and even from that range we can see that dark back of the GT come out of the water as it physically and almost alarmingly rapidly launches itself at the fly. If a fly could, I bet it would be crying for its mother right at the moment those jaws from hell open up and engulf it. I have seen this happen so many times now, but never for one second has the sheer impact of such stunning savagery lessened in any way. Honestly, it gets me every single time.

The moment that Dave rapidly strip strikes that 6/0 Brush fly home, the GT turns and just rips off. Bonefish might well be the speedsters of the flats, but GTs just run heavy and fast in a perfect combination, and if they want to go then there ain't that much you can do, even with a 12 weight clutched like a toothpick in your paws. John's permit is having a personality crisis and has legged it off the flat (swine fish), and Jako instantly turns and charges off in Dave's direction to sort out potentially landing his fish. I flick two fingers at what might have been John's permit and head off in the direction of the GT action.

Most South Africans I meet know exactly what it takes to play or fight

Top: The most perfectly designed flats fish on earth?

Middle: Releasing a nice bonefish.

Bottom: A few bonefish and permit patterns. This fishing is a great excuse to carry very minimal amounts of gear.



IF I WAS EVER ALLOWED ANY INPUT INTO THE WRITING OF AN ENGLISH LANGUAGE DICTIONARY, THEN I WOULD LIKE TO SEE THE DEFINITION OF THE WORD "AGGRESSION" TO READ SIMPLY "GIANT TREVALLY".

big fish, indeed it seems to me that they grew up on a diet of having no choice but to give fish some proper gears. Dave is bracing himself with that tell-tale flattened fly rod that immediately says big fish to me, and Jako is now some distance down the fly line and doing his best to make sure the GT does not go and wrap around some coral bommie. Worrying times, but then Jako suddenly dips down and grabs the fish before it can do any more searing runs. Relief all round. If I was ever allowed any input into the writing of an English language dictionary

Opposite top: Dave Moffett hangs on as a big GT smokes off across the flat.

Opposite bottom: Jako Lucas cradles a GT around the 70lb mark. Doesn't the GT's head look menacing? This page top: You can see why these fish are so good at taking crabs and shrimps on shallow sand flats.

Middle: The last bonefish of the day as the sun begins to dip and thwart the ability to spot fish.

Bottom: This lemon shark was in a serious feeding mood, and John Travis put a big orange fly down hard in front of its nose.



"GTS ARE LIKE THE BOUNCERS OF THE FLAT.

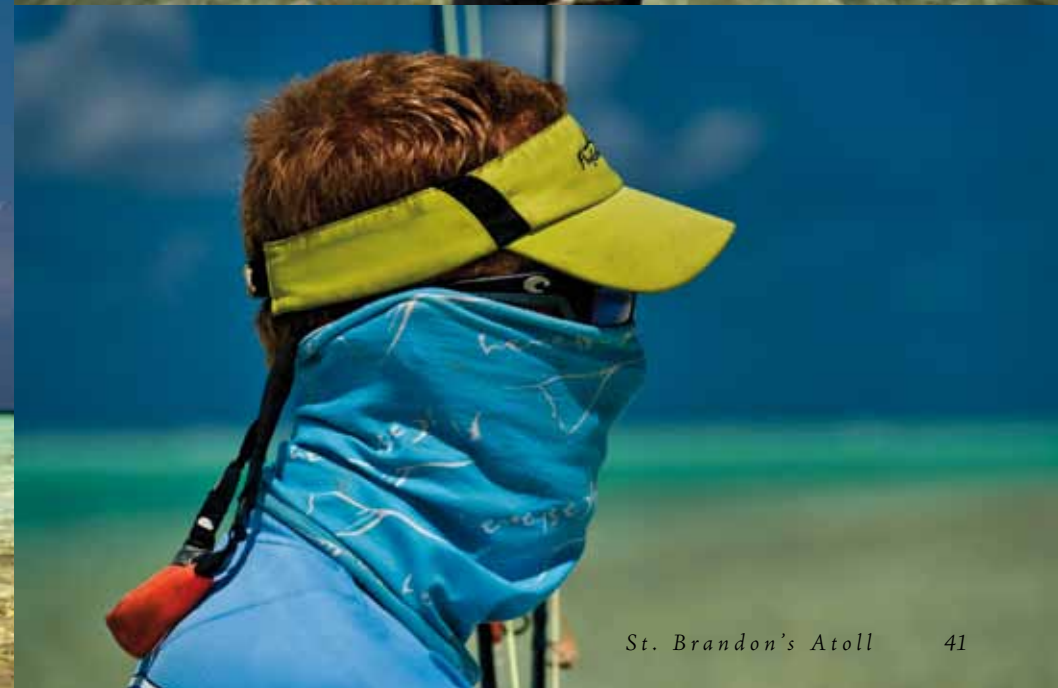
IF WE DON'T LIKE YOU, WE WILL EAT YOU.

THEY ARE THE STEPHEN SEAGAL OF FISH".

Main picture: John Travis scouts for permit as a load of terns fly overhead.

Top: Rob Muntz hangs on to a GT of around 45lb that he took on a flat the guides have somewhat mundanely dubbed "District 9".

Middle: We saw a fair few yellow dot trevally on the flats, plus a few tailing golden trevally. Bottom: Essential gear for flats fishing – a Buff and some Costa del Mar 580 polarised sunglasses.



Series: Dave Moffett has spotted a GT close to the sandbank and quickly moves into position to cast. He strips his fly like mad as a GT charges and hooks up and then hangs on for dear life as the fish charges off to deep water.



The end result, Dave Moffett and Tim Babich with a GT of around 45lb.



(not very likely I grant you), then I would like to see the definition of the word “aggression” to read simply “giant trevally”. What could be more succinct than that? The actual fish measured out at 114cm forklength (and with one hell of a girth), and to me I would have put it around the 65-70lb mark. Whatever the true weight, it was one hell of a fish to take on the flats, and let me assure you that we saw some much, much bigger GTs swimming around out there.

The day that Dave caught his fish, one of the groups lost two perfectly healthy fly lines to a couple of monster giant trevally that they hooked up on the open ocean side of the atoll. When a guide is almost left speechless by the size of a hooked fish, you tend to get an idea of how serious a beast it actually was, but the clients were unceremoniously smoked on the coral. St. Brandon’s may well be a bonefishing heaven, and the permit fishing is becoming something really special as they learn more and more about it, but once again it’s those bad boy GTs that end up leaving the most lasting impression. How could I possibly better this from Jako : “GTs are like the bouncers of the flat. If we don’t like you, we will eat you. They are the Stephen Seagal of fish”. Bearing in mind of course that a good way to pass that crossing time is to watch some good old action films. Talk about getting in the mood.

Top: Frans Brewis holds on as a bonefish begins to tire.

Middle: The holy grail of saltwater flats species, the Indo-Pacific permit.

Bottom: Always the hard part.

Bonefish are not an easy fish to subdue and grab, but hold them upside down and they calm right down.

FACT FILE FACT FILE FACT FILE



showers I have come across so far. The boat is very comfortable, with a large inside area for relaxing, reading, tying flies, watching films etc, as well as plenty of outside deck space. We ate all our meals outside. The food was pretty good. Excellent breakfasts, and we stayed out all day and therefore had basic but perfectly adequate packed lunches on the flats. Dinner was fine, but nothing hugely special. There was always plenty of food though, and cold water, soft drinks and beer are always available both on the boat and in cool boxes on the tenders.

WEATHER

From what I was told, we experienced very typical weather out at St. Brandon's. Mostly warm to hot, plenty of sunshine and good light for spotting fish, but none of that extreme humidity that you get in the Seychelles. They do get the odd rain storm that is usually violent but brief, as per usual on the flats. The one thing you can't get away from on the flats is the breeze, and it seemed to be a pretty constant 20-25 mph from the east to south east. The ruffled surface of the water certainly aids in fishing the flats for spooky fish, but you need to be confident in your casting abilities to take full advantage of the fishing opportunities. The mothership anchors within the shallow lagoon, and therefore it remains essentially flat calm.

LANGUAGE

The main language is Creole, but most people in Mauritius learn and speak French from a young age. Creole's roots are based in the French language anyway. But in all honesty, English is also widely used and understood, so there should be no problems at all.

CURRENCY

The Mauritian rupee (MUR). One MUR equalled 0.033.AUD at the time of writing. Change them in Mauritius.

CLOTHING

Typical flats stuff — tropical shirt, hat/visor, BUFF, shorts or flats pants, sun-gloves if you use them. Flats boots such as the ones from Simms or Patagonia are absolutely essential as this is all wade fishing, plus gravel guards help against too much sand etc. ending up in your boots. You will end up with a particularly silly tan line from wearing flats boots and gravel guards, but you won't get far without them out there. We were not walking as far as I was used to in the Seychelles, but they are long days out on the flats, and it pays to be as comfortable as possible. It is vital to take a pair or two of those tight, Lycra-type running shorts to wear under your regular shorts or flats pants. Wading on the flats without these is horribly painful. Remember the sunscreen of course.

VISA AND TRAVEL DOCUMENTS

No Visa required for travellers from Australia or New Zealand. If you have been to yellow fever areas in the past, make sure to carry your vaccination certificate. They say they will

check up on this, but it did not happen to me, but you can guarantee that if I had not had with it with me, they would have checked up.

FISHING EQUIPMENT

FlyCastaway run a barbless, single hook fly fishing operation out at St. Brandon's.

- 9 weight fly outfit for bonefish, permit etc.
- 12 weight outfit for the GTs and sharks — make sure to take a spare 9 and 12 weight rod. Breakages can and do occur on trips like these.
- Tropical grade floating lines on both reels, plus spare lines — and especially for the GTs.
- 17lb fluoro leaders for the bonefish and permit.
- 130lb mono leaders for the GTs (Sufix Zippy always works well).
- Take some wire for shark and barracuda leaders if you want to have a go for them.
- Best bonefish flies (size 2 to 8 hooks) — Fleeing Crab, Spawning Shrimp, Tan Clouser — nice and simple, no point overcomplicating it out there.
- Best permit flies (size 2) — Fleeing Crab, Merkin.
- Best GT flies (size 6/0) — Brush flies, Flashy Profiles.
- By all means take your own flies, but make sure to use the best hooks possible. GTs in particular will ruthlessly expose any weaknesses. FlyCastaway can sell you all the flies you need if required, and they carry plenty on the boat as well.
- Travel really light on the flats — most of us carry some kind of small backpack that has a hydration bladder system inside it.

STAR RATING (OUT OF FIVE)

Accommodation	★★★★
Food	★★★
Ease to get to	★★★
Guides	★★★★★
<i>(FlyCastaway guides are consistently some of the best guides I am ever lucky enough to work with and around)</i>	
Boats	
- mothership	★★★★
- tenders	★★★
Weather	★★★★
Suitability for non-fishing partners	★
<i>(but ★★★★★ if you organise a holiday before or after the trip at Mauritius)</i>	



OPERATOR

The South African based FlyCastaway is the only company I am aware of that is doing trips to St. Brandon's. I have worked a lot with these guys, and I can't speak highly enough of them. Check out www.flycastaway.com

FISH SPECIES

Bonefish, Indo-Pacific permit, and some GTs are the principal species. There are also other trevally species such as bluefin, yellow dot, golden (highly prized on the flats), big eye, green spot etc, plus some big barracuda. I saw a lemon shark taken on the fly, and I know of a bunch more taken. If they are in a feeding mood then they seem to jump on the fly more than happily. Orange flies slay.

SEASON

FlyCastaway run their St. Brandon's trips from late September through to mid-December, and then again from late March to early June. These "seasons" are designed to avoid the cyclones that rip through this area in the early part of the year. These guys do their research, and these timings are based on historical data.

HOW TO GET THERE

The mothership MY Gryphon is based in Port Louis on the Indian Ocean island of Mauritius, which is of course a hugely popular holiday destination. Plenty of international flights come into Mauritius, including direct from Perth, London, Paris, Dubai, Johannesburg etc. There are lots of hotels, restaurants and shops very close to where the boat moors, so jump in a cab at the airport and head down to Port Louis. It is strongly advised that you get there at least one night before the boat is due to sail, and then stay one night after you get back from St. Brandon's — this is to allow for any airline hassles on the way down (baggage, delays etc.) and for any potential delays in getting back from the atoll on the way home. FlyCastaway and the crew of the MY Gryphon take over once you get to the boat. It's a 24-30 hour crossing to St. Brandon's, depending on the weather.

ACCOMMODATION/FOOD

The MY Gryphon is a 100' long mothership that has been perfectly kitted out for these kinds of trips. There are four air-conditioned cabins that sleep two clients each, and they all have ensuite showers/toilets. I have stayed on various motherships before, but these were the largest cabins and