



Antics in the
Archipelago
- a fishing story

by Graeme Field

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANTONY DIPLOCK & GRAEME FIELD



Above left: Dougie Taylor cradling a prize couta. Above right: Neil Ford and a good kawakawa.

“Gimme a drink, ya bastarrds, me mooth’s as drry as a badger’s arrse,” Dougie the Scotsman muttered, sending everyone on the boat into hysterics for the umpteenth time that day. Dougie doesn’t talk much, but when he does his dry sense of humour generally results in the rest of us collapsing in fits of laughter. When “the rest of us” includes Ant Diplock, who is literally a barrel of laughs, a large part of the day is spent clutching one’s sides in a vain attempt to keep them from splitting with mirth. On this particular occasion, we were a mile out to sea off the lighthouse on Bazaruto Island, and poor Dougie had been connected to a large Zambezi shark for the better part of an hour when he politely asked for a drink as only a Scotsman can. Diplock was too busy laughing uncontrollably to get the poor chap a cold Coke, but when Dougie, who had been turning progressively greener as the fight wore on, suddenly collapsed from heat exhaustion and overexertion (still harnessed to the shark), things happened swiftly. Dougie’s prostrate form was stripped of the harness and he was quickly revived with a cold one. Ant took the reins on the shark and Doug’s cousin Neil took the wheel, collectively saving the day, and in so doing completing a rather amusing picture that would be relived over a beer on more than one occasion in the bar during the long, balmy evenings that followed.

Ant and I recently had the pleasure of guiding together at two lodges in Mozambique, where we met up with long-standing British clients and friends Dougie Taylor, Neil Ford, and Lance and Nick Jeans for three weeks of fishing, camaraderie and fun. And did the magnificent archipelago deliver the goods! Starting with a relaxed week with our European friends Thierry Mosti and Anna-Marie Kerkhoffs at their new fishing camp on the mainland, we moved on to Pestana Bazaruto Island Lodge on the northern tip of the beautiful Bazaruto Island. With Ant and I skippering separate boats and our guests rotating between us, we explored the reefs and drop-offs that surround Bazaruto, Benguerra and Margaruque islands, consistently finding a huge variety of species that were willing

to come to the fly. Weeks of near perfect weather, excellent water conditions and superb fishing resulted in a highly successful and enjoyable trip for all involved. For me personally, it was a delight to be guiding alongside a good friend and one of the best guides I have ever had the pleasure of working with. Incredibly knowledgeable, an excellent skipper and fisherman, Ant Diplock is truly a joy to fish with. He knows the fickle Mozambican waters like the back of his hand and he can find you a fish in a mud puddle. Fishing the archipelago requires an intimate knowledge of reefs, currents, water conditions, tides and fishing techniques. Being able to adapt as easily as Ant does to the ever-changing conditions, is the single most important difference between success and bobbing around aimlessly in a seemingly desolate ocean.

The waters around Bazaruto offer a wide array of reefs at varying depths that hold a myriad reef and shoaling species, long and well-defined ridges perfect for sailfish and baby marlin, and channels and rips that produce huge schools of kawakawa, bonito and skipjack tuna. When the fishing is really on, find your own little oasis of floating debris or flotsam, and you are almost guaranteed a dorado, wahoo or prodigal son; or stumble upon a shark in shallow water and you are very likely to find a GT or two hanging around behind it. Although much of the fishing is done for the numerous species that frequent the deep reefs, it is the chance of casting a fly to hot and lit-up sailfish that really gets Ant’s juices going, and a lot of time was dedicated to targeting these magnificent gamefish. And Ant doesn’t mess around either when the sailies are about – he seems to find hungry sails with ease. Coming up to his boat at 25 Mile Reef early one morning, I could see that one of the Jeanses was into a sailfish off the bow of the boat, so I headed around towards the stern, only to be shoed and waved away in no uncertain terms by a frantic Ant. When I got closer I realised both Nick and Lance were into sailies – the fish running in completely opposite directions off the bow and stern of the boat. Unfortunately Lance lost his at the boat and, although Nick managed to land his, the missed chance of a sailfish double was a bitter pill for Ant to swallow.



Above, from left to right: Bludger kingfish, giant kingfish and wahoo are some of the species to be caught in the waters around Bazaruto.

On my boat one morning we had the teasers out for sails as we followed an underwater ridge near the south point of the island. Neil was in the pound seats with fly rod in hand, Dougie fully briefed on retrieving the daisy chain up the starboard side of the boat and yours truly managing the teasing stick, facing backwards and steering the boat with one hand behind my back. Recipe for disaster? Well, having done this before I was pretty confident that I would have things under control if we raised a sail. What I hadn't bargained for was the searing hot, enraged and completely berserk black marlin that attacked the teaser after a long period of inactivity which had lulled all of us into a relaxed and mesmerised state. Somehow I managed, amidst some truly colourful language, to keep that crazed fish on the teaser for a period of absolute chaos, before finally enticing it into the wake close behind the stern. Amazingly, after behaving as if the hookless pink skirt on my teasing rod was the last meal in the entire Indian Ocean, the marlin lost interest at the crucial moment that the teaser was whipped from the water and immediately replaced with a very similar pink sailfish fly. With a disdainful flick of its tail it was gone, leaving us trembling and wondering what had just hit us.

Another incident that left us shaking our heads in disbelief took place when we were fishing a particularly sharky inshore reef that same afternoon and got stuck into a big school of bludger kingfish. We managed to land a handful of these hard-fighting kingies before the big Zambezis moved in and ruined the day. Once these sharks got wind of an easy meal, the scenario was pretty predictable. We had just lost a couple of fish in this manner and were about to move off the reef when Dougie hooked into another decent fish on the fly.

Instead of heading for the reef as the fish mostly do, this particular one turned and shot straight up towards the boat at an incredible speed. Thinking we must have hooked a dorado or big queenfish, or even, by pure chance, a free-swimming sailfish, we expected a jump but weren't really prepared for the bludger that broke the surface – and the 300lb Zambezi shark that exploded out of the water behind it only metres from the boat. The huge shark cartwheeled clean out of the water with the bludger clamped firmly in its menacing jaws, landed upside down, drenched us with a huge flick of its tail and disappeared into the depths – leaving us for the second time that day wondering what on earth had just happened. Dougie's colourful and enlightening expletives that followed are probably not suitable for publication in this upstanding magazine – but let's just say that this Scottish salmon fisherman, who is at home in his waders on the banks of the River Tweed, "ain't never seen nothing like that before..."

And so it went, for a full two weeks. From vicious marlin attacks, shark acrobatics, dorado feasts under floating debris and even tangling with prodigal sons and big GTs behind whale sharks in shallow water, the Bazaruto Archipelago threw everything at us and showed what a fantastic salt water fly fishing destination it still is.

FISHING THE ARCHIPELAGO

Fishing out of Bazaruto, Benguerra, Paradise or Margaruque islands, one has access to a large and productive fishing area incorporating reefs, channels, drop-offs and underwater contours that produce a wide variety of fish, and often big fish. Twelve- to 14-wt rods, fast sinking depth charge lines, chartreuse Clouser Minnows (in summer) and a





Above: An elated Nick Jeans about to release a Bazaruto sailfish.

Left: Bragging rights – in season dorado make for exciting fly rod targets, but getting them to the boat is another story!

good GPS are essential tools for tackling the offshore fishing around the islands. The main method of fishing the deeper reefs is to locate an underwater reef, mark it on the GPS and then do a number of drifts over the strike area, casting upcurrent and letting the lines and heavy flies drop down into the strike zone as the boat drifts over the reef. Timing, boat positioning and accurately interpreting the GPS readings are crucial to success. Knowledge of water temperatures, currents and tides of the area, and understanding which areas, what reefs and even which side of the reef will be most productive are the difference between success and failure.

A typical day fishing out of Bazaruto Island would normally entail some shots at schooling kawakawa or bonito in the channels between the islands, followed by a few hours' fishing deep on different reefs, as well as trolling some sailfish teasers along the drop-offs as the boat moves between reefs. As the afternoon tide pushes in, fish rise up from the reefs and one can often enjoy some frantic surface activity. A late afternoon shot at schooling kawakawa on the way in completes the day. All that is left now is to relax at the hotel bar sipping a cold one as you watch the blood red sun across the water sink slowly behind the low hills of the distant mainland. And the next day, more antics in the archipelago!

Graeme Field guides professionally and can be contacted at Upstream Africa on Tel: (021) 797-3003, or e-mail: info@upstreamafrica.co.za, or visit www.upstreamafrica.co.za