

# Shipwrecked on BASSAS

Field Editor **Andy Coetzee** is known for his sense of adventure. Fulfilling a lifelong dream, he and a few friends return to Bassas da India for a walk on the wild side.



There are certain places on this wonderful planet that resonate deeply within your soul. For me, one such place is Bassas da India (simply known as Bassas to those who have been lucky enough to go there), a remote, submerged atoll situated halfway between Mozambique and Madagascar. It was five years ago that I undertook my maiden voyage and last month I had the opportunity to return there. This trip was for two TV series we were filming for SuperSport – one for the *Wildfly* series hosted by my fishing friend Mark Yelland, and the other for *Inside Angling* which I co-host with Craig Thomassen. Using two 45ft catamarans, *Ingwe* and *Maxmillien*, we set sail like a mini-armada of pirates, and swilling copious amounts of rum and whisky, this motley crew of TV producers, cameramen, presenters and fishermen headed due east towards Madagascar.

It is normally a 48 - 52 hour sail to get to Bassas, so the crew and I took turns at helm duty to keep a sharp lookout for any ships passing at night. I love doing the early morning shift – that eerily quiet time from 2am until dawn. During these hours I get the opportunity to ponder my life, think about my dreams and visions, and express gratitude for all the wonderful adventures I've had the privilege of experiencing. On my previous trip to Bassas, I had attempted to stay on the only wreck visible above the high tide level, but things didn't work out that way. I chose to follow my heart to America in pursuit of a beautiful woman, and the irony is that I got properly wrecked there! I returned home a much wiser and more tolerant person. (I'm still not sure if I learnt my lesson though, since I will probably always follow my heart.)

I was very excited to be returning to Bassas – a place which I find immensely spiritual, wild and haunted. Early on the

third morning of sailing, I glimpsed the distant speck on the horizon. I could hardly contain myself, so I woke Craig who was sleeping on the deck. We both acknowledged the significance of our return to this wonderful place, and promptly pulled matches to see who would get to cast first (the first cast is always the one that counts, especially when targeting big GTs). It was with much pent-up anticipation that I watched Craig have the first throw. The real pleasure, however, was just being there to absorb everything. We fished all day, catching and releasing many fish.

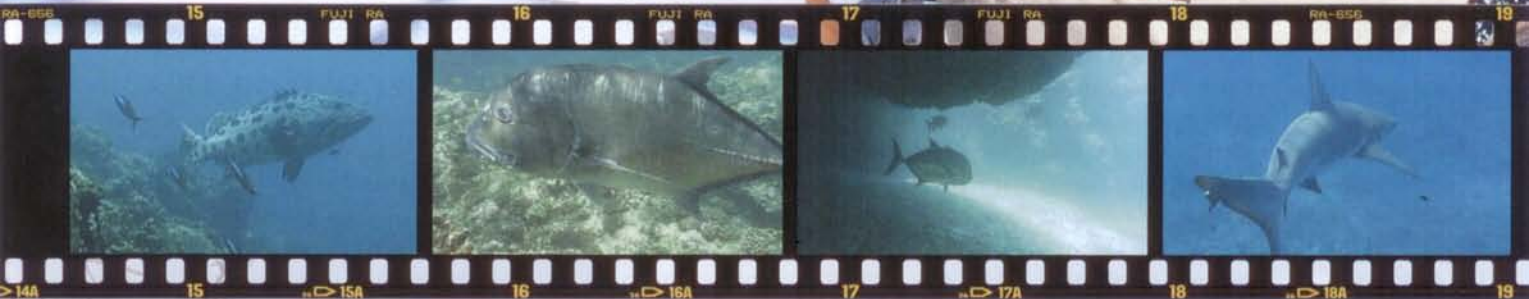
## A DREAM COME TRUE

As the day's shadows lengthened, I asked the skipper Paul to take me to the wreck so that I could overnight on it. With only a kikoi (sarong-type towel), a bottle of water, my fishing pack, the inevitable tin of condensed milk and two pieces of fudge that my daughter had made for my journey, I headed for my



overnight accommodation. Since it was spring high tide, there was plenty of water surrounding the wreck. Jumping lightly onto the rusting stern, I clambered up beyond the wave break and perched on the side surveying my abode.

Now let me describe my vista – nothing broke the horizon except for the two catamarans moored about three nautical miles away. Peering down from their lofty perch were numerous black and white frigate birds, as well as two lonely lesser egrets. The latter have black legs and yellow feet and, unlike the frigates, are not known for their flying or soaring abilities. I pondered on how on earth those two birds got there. One normally sees them wading in the shallows of fresh water marshes and pans, but the closest land mass was Mozambique or Madagascar – 400km away! I suspected that they may have been blown off Europa Island, about 100km distant, but who will ever know?



Top left: Craig Thomassen struggles to lift a trophy GT. Above right: The author with a good specimen. Above: Barret's underwater video footage revealed the waters around Bassas teeming with a wide variety of fish.

As the tender (an inflatable dinghy) returned to *Maxmillien*, I started looking for a place to sleep. Halfway up the side (canted at an oblique angle) I found a small opening into which I put my backpack and provisions. As the sun finally dipped below the horizon, I peered into the water swirling around my new home. There were many big GTs, bohar snappers and other reef-dwelling species swimming around the wreck. I grabbed my rod, and on my first cast was into a 12kg GT.

for this wonderful opportunity. I had finally fulfilled one of my life's dreams – overnighting on the wreck at Bassas – and I fully intend to sleep there again on my next visit! At that moment, I knew that my sojourn to America had been worth it, as I had learnt a valuable life lesson. I have also been blessed with wonderful children, great friends, passionate loves – and superb fishing in some of the most isolated areas on this planet. Overcome with emotion, I waited for the tender to collect me.

to return to the mother ship. In these wild waters, safety is paramount and it's always best to err on the side of caution as anything can go wrong in these conditions and especially in diminishing light. The next morning, Mark returned to the flats and got some really superb fish, with experienced underwater cameraman Barret Harvey filming all his catches.

Ideally, we would've liked to have more time on Bassas to explore the flats' fishing potential, as I am convinced that



Balancing precariously, I pulled as hard as I dared to quickly subdue the fish and was absolutely delighted with my catch. I realised I was going to have a wonderful evening. Eventually I settled down with my kikoi as a blanket, with chunks of rusting metal falling on me as the wreck shook with the action of the waves. I slept fitfully, waking every few hours as the tide changed and the wreck shuddered and groaned as waves pounded onto the bulkheads.

By very early morning I was wide awake. I sat quietly observing the roosting frigates, and gave thanks to the universe

### EXPLORING THE FLATS

Mark had decided to explore the very limited flats areas of the coral edge. With cameraman and crew in tow, he spent the morning wading and casting to numerous ember parrots and emperors. Being a talented and experienced fly angler, he quickly figured out what he needed to do to entice some of the ember parrots to gobble his crab imitation. The substrate is fraught with all manner of obstacles which snag and snap leaders in a second, and it was numerous breakoffs later that Mark began to hook and land fish. As the tide started to push, Mark and crew clambered aboard their tender

there are areas that will produce huge GTs, ember parrots, as well as bonefish. I haven't actually seen any bonefish there, but then again I haven't really explored enough to verify whether they occur there or not. I cannot, however, see why they wouldn't. The plethora of other flats and reef fish that roamed around completely unperturbed by our presence merits further exploration, and my next visit will be to explore the vast inner lagoon and see what treasures Bassas will yield up to me.

### HAVING EYES UNDERWATER

It was most interesting for Craig and



Top left and right: One of the attractions of Bassas is the diversity of species that inhabit the atoll – you never know what you will find at the end of your line. Above strip: Exploring the flats inside the atoll, Mark Yelland managed to land some nice parrotfish.

me to have eyes underwater – Barret would freedive down and see all manner of fish in the crevasses and gullies. Upon resurfacing, he would have stories and footage of huge GTs, wahoo, tuna and shark species. The abundance of the latter was encouraging, as lots of sharks mean lots of fish! We saw hammerheads simply cruising under the yacht, silvertip reef sharks, huge Zambezis and plenty of grey reef sharks. Barret spent many hours shouting encouragement to Craig and me while we were fishing onboard, and it certainly does make a difference to your fishing confidence when you know the fish are there. Fishermen often blame the environment and proclaim that there are no fish left, when actually they are around but just not feeding.

### RESPECTING MOTHER NATURE

Bassas is not a place in which to take risks, and it is with this in mind that we kept listening to the evening weather reports via HF radio from Durban. Worsening conditions were making their way up the coast from the south and we realised that the weather was going to impact on our stay at Bassas. With our

Right: The author leaving the safety of the mother ship to spend the night on the rusting wreck at Bassas (bottom).

imminent departure spurring Craig and me on to fish even harder, we sweated in the hot sun of our last afternoon at Bassas. Glancing over at each other, moisture pouring off us, we acknowledged that it was time to go home. As the wreck slowly dipped out of sight, I thought about all the souls who had met their deaths on this treacherous atoll. Imagine sailing along and not hearing any roaring breakers or pounding surf to warn of the impending danger, suddenly feeling the keel jarring on the reef...

We were forced to leave after only three days' fishing due to the approaching adverse weather conditions, but the 40-knot winds still caught up with us 15 miles from Bazaruto. I was humbled with gratitude at the opportunity I was once again given to visit such a wild and dangerous place, and vowed to fill my every day with as much energy, enthusiasm and passion as I can muster.

See you on the wreck at Bassas sometime. Blondes welcome!



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