

Artist **Chris Bladen** goes in search of the elusive Indo/Pacific permit, and learns that there is more to flats fishing than finding and catching the fish.

When we touched down at Victoria Airport on Mahé in the late afternoon, six fishermen emerged from the plane to collect only five sets of luggage. I'll leave the sharing that ensued to your imagination...

Tip No. 1:

Pack one set of fishing essentials in your hand luggage. Cap; sunglasses; buff; gloves; quick-drying, long-sleeved shirt; long pants; swimming trunks/ski pants; socks; gravel guards and sun protection can all fit into your carry-on bag. Take all your rods and reels (fully loaded with backing), line and leaders with you into the cabin.

After being transported to the marina, we boarded a 47ft catamaran which would be our home for the duration of the trip. We set sail from the main island, heading out to St Joseph Atoll southwest of Mahé. It was the right time of year, in the right moon phase, and we had 12 days to target the most elusive member of the Carangidae family – permit. We sailed throughout the night and dropped anchor late the next afternoon in the calm off the northern side of St Joseph.

Tip No. 2:

Take sufficient motion sickness medication. Whether spending a long or short time on the water, you never know when this may come in handy.

Tip No. 3:

Find the channels and the cool water - and you will find the fish.

After a sunrise breakfast, we headed for the flats to assess the waterways. We would have time for explo-

PERMIT TIME





ration during the first few days as the moon waxed. We caught a few bonefish, one small permit, and rats and mice on our first outing. That evening, we moved the boat to the channel between St Joseph and D'arros, where the water is calm and conducive to a good night's rest. The next morning, we approached the atoll from the west. New terrain brought new challenges. I hooked a good-sized bluefin kingfish on my 9-wt - and broke the rod just as I was bringing it in.

Tip No. 4:

Make sure you have at least two 9-wt rods and two 12-wts on the trip.

Tip No. 5:

While waiting for the tidal movement to increase, use the time for a spot of blue-water fishing.

Comparing notes over supper, we had to admit that it hadn't been the most successful day. We decided to split the group, with three remaining on the boat to try for sailfish and the others out on the flats. Day five saw us raise at least nine sailfish, hooking four but landing none!

On day six, I was fortunate enough to find a school of bones feeding at the edge of the lagoon. My pal Barry caught his first bonefish, while three sailfish were landed by the others. Things were improving as spring tide drew near.

Tip No. 6:

Don't try to do your first trip on your own. The old rule applies here - book (or go with) the best guide you can afford. Pair up the less-experienced fishermen with those who have been before.

"Sleek, spooky, power" and downright gorgeous, it fully earned its title as the most stable of magnificent flats of the outer Seychelles are. PTs are quickly forgotten when a sizeable permit comes sn onto the flats to feed, presenting what is for many anglers the of a lifetime. Fly anglers are now all but forced to head hallowed waters of the Seychelles for the opportunity to sig to permit on the flats. They can be found cruising on the ing white sand, tailing around the edges of turtle gra and sneaking up the deeper channels and cuts that cr and exit points to and from the main flats. They are f about on atolls such as St Joseph and Astove

SALT WATER



...get back fever when c the fish tunity is r es of you a ocky fish, m - they u ey stay spoo at a freighter The secon ey feed with direction t To inste

Tip No. 7:

If you damage your feet your trip is over, so wear the best flats boots or shoes you can find. Shoes must have a thick rubber sole and a sewn-in tongue to prevent sand from getting inside.

Organised trips to the Seychelles are usually for one week only, so we were grateful when day seven arrived and we still had four days of fishing to look forward to. We trekked all the way to the southeastern part of the atoll where our hunt for permit started in earnest. Stunning as well as harsh, this is the wild side where the storm ridges are pounded by heavy seas. I caught a 1m barracuda, some bluefin kingfish, and spotted some GTs, but they were out of reach beyond the breakers. Among others, the rest of the team caught good-sized bonefish. It was a hard day which included walking for miles on throbbing feet, but our resolve to target the elusive permit strengthened anew. At least we saw them clearly on numerous occasions.

The next day, we set off early to tackle the storm ridges for the second time and again saw permit. However, it turned out to be a day of bonefish and sharks. Taking things a little easier, we exploited the positive push of the tide and hitched a ride on the tender boat. We had been at it for more than a week and still had only one small permit to show for it.

Tip No. 8:

When you hook a fish, bring it in as quickly as possible so as to not lose it to an opportunistic shark. This way, the fish will also revive quicker and have a better chance of survival once released.

Tip No. 9:

Be cool - stay calm and collected.

Day nine saw us a bit desperate and running out of fishing time. We were back on the northern flats, hunting bonefish in the channels and hoping to find permit there. This was spring tide on a new moon. We fished hard, but the permit lived up to their reputation. Positioning ourselves along the inside of the reef on the incoming tide, we waited for them to appear over the ridge with the rising water. Suddenly, there they were - a school of ten or more permit almost swimming right into me. By the time I realised what was going on, they had spooked and were off. I hadn't managed a single cast...





With the last two fishing sessions upon us, we needed some last-ditch tricks. The schools of permit we had seen the previous day convinced us that we were at last on the right track. Again we positioned ourselves on the incoming tide along a patch of light gravel where the fish would be more visible. We stood waiting for the water to come in. I caught a bluefin kingfish and then saw two magnificent permit. I cast, hooked one, but lost it again. My namesake friend and I closed the gap between us to about 30m. We stood side by side, scanning the water for those shapes. Suddenly Chris called, "Permit!". I followed the direction of his cast and saw a school of about 20. I managed to get in a cast, but they were gone as quickly as they'd appeared. This was becoming too much for me.

The next moment Chris yelled out again. This time I saw them approaching – another sizeable school. I picked my spot and my fly landed a metre or two in front of the lead fish. The fly dropped down and on the second strip – fish on! A quick line strike ensured that the permit wouldn't throw the fly. The line snaked and jumped dangerously as the slack was taken up by the fish speeding away. It took only seconds to get onto the reel, and it was already on another hard run as I tightened the drag. I changed the angle of the rod to turn it, but this creature would have nothing of the sort. At one point a shark butted in and I abandoned all caution, running towards it in an attempt to scare it off. I just had to land this fish! For a moment I even thought that I had the shark on the line. Confusion reigned for a while and then, wonder of wonders, there it was – ready to be brought in. Chris helped me land my permit, and he was almost as excited as I was. I posed for a quick photo, and released the majestic specimen when it had revived from the fight.

Tip No. 10:

Always keep safety in mind. Watch out for sharks and barracudas. Don't wear anything shiny as barracudas are attracted to flashy objects and may mistake your hand or arm for something tasty!



Chris and I had been focussed on this fish for quite some time, neglecting to keep a lookout for any danger. As we recovered, we saw the shark. The tide had come in and we were chest-deep in the water. This cruiser must have been around 4m in length – the large dorsal fin rode high out of the water – and it was heading steadily in our direction. Standing on dark turtle grass with little visibility, we edged back to the gravel patch and the clearer water behind us. The shark kept coming closer to investigate. The situation turned decidedly tense, but we stood our ground. Just then the tender boat appeared some distance to our left. We waved frantically, gesticulating for the skipper to hurry up. It would be Murphy's Law that we had asked him earlier to specifically come in slowly when collecting us, so as not to spook the fish. So, in our moment of dire need, he thought we were urging him to slow down even further – which he did. This prompted more frantic waving and signalling. Luckily, he spotted the shark and sped in to rescue us. Phew, close call!

The return trip was uneventful, with the advantage of a good wind to shorten it. Delighted with our awesome adventure, we vowed to return again. Next time we will be much better equipped – in every sense of the word.