

## **2018 Providence Travel Journal**

Michael Caranci

### **Saturday, December 1, 2018**

I left the house at a few minutes after 8 am, picked Allan up at his house in Redding, and we drove down to the San Francisco International Airport. It was a smooth drive until we hit Berkeley then bumper to bumper all the way to the airport, even on a Saturday morning. Still, we arrived in time and checked in for the Emirates flight to Dubai.

Emirates now only allows one carry-on bag in Economy, not even a “personal” item. I had two small bags, so I had to consolidate some of my stuff into my checked bag so I could squeeze the rest into one bag. Not a big problem, but good to know, although it’s not an issue for Business or First Class tickets who are allowed multiple carryon bags.

We got through security no problem, grabbed a quick bite to eat, then found our gate just in time for boarding. The last time we flew Emirates to Dubai there was an army of wheelchairs lined up at the gate...a different story this time, only a few wheelchairs but rather lots of families with small children. Which we would hear throughout the 15+ hour flight.

We got settled in for the flight, which was long but not all bad considering how long it was. Food was good, lots of movies to choose from, I slept for about half and watched movies or read for the rest. I still think that long flight to Dubai is easier than the sardine-can commuter flights in the US.

### **Sunday, December 2, 2018**

It was Sunday evening when we finally landed in Dubai. We had to walk a long ways from where we de-planed to a security checkpoint, which we breezed right through. Just outside the checkpoint we asked an airport helper guy how to get to the Dubai International Airport Hotel, and he walked us the rest of the way there. It couldn’t have been much more than 10 or 15 minutes from the time we walked off the plane to the time we were checking in at the hotel, located conveniently inside the transit area within the airport.

They offered us an upgrade for only \$66 dollars which got us a better room and included a dinner buffet, plus a breakfast buffet, plus unlimited drinks. That was cheaper than getting dinner and breakfast in the terminal so we went for it. We didn’t drink much, but we enjoyed a good dinner and soon were asleep in our cozy room - after relaxing in the in-room massage chair!

After a decent night’s sleep, we felt well rested, showered, and ready for the next leg of our journey. Scheduling that extra-long layover in Dubai was a real winner; I would recommend it for anyone making the long aerial trek to the Seychelles.

### **Monday, December 3, 2018**

We woke up before our alarms, showered and enjoyed a tasty breakfast in the hotel lounge, then relaxed in our room for a bit before checking out and heading to our gate. The Dubai Airport is

massive, we really only saw a small part of Terminal B (all Emirates), filled with shops like a high-end mall and lots of Duty Free Stores.

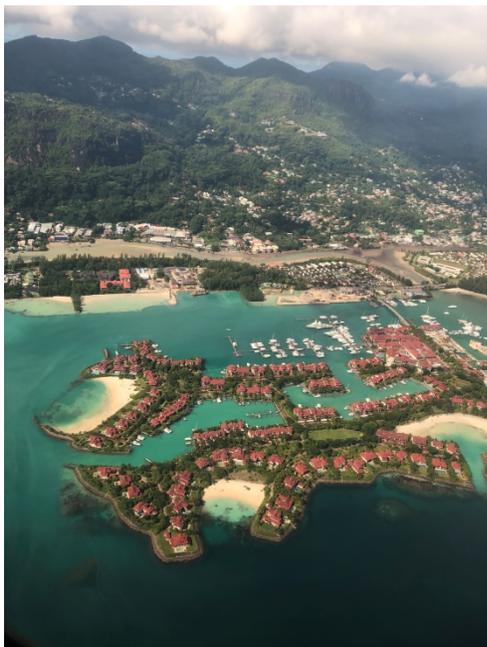
When we got to our gate, we only had to wait for about 45 minutes before they called us to board. We walked through to another sitting area, waited there for about 5 minutes, then were called again to “board”, where we walked down a set of escalators, then boarded a bus which drove for nearly 15 minutes all around the massive airport system before finally pulling up in front of our plane.

This flight was almost empty, so everyone moved around so each person had their own row, and still it was pretty empty. The flight was smooth, we flew out over the city of Dubai, arched around Oman flying over miles of desert and rugged barren mountain range, then south across the Indian Ocean. 4 hours later we were touching down on the island of Mahe, in the Seychelles.



There was no other plane in front of us, and our plane was mostly empty, so we breezed right through Immigration. They did ask to see proof of a return flight and documents for where we were staying. It wasn't a problem that we didn't have the documents for the fishing portion of the trip, although they did ask for that as well. That said, it is a good idea to be sure and bring your actual, printed documentation with you, don't rely on digital confirmations that you may not be able to pull up on your phone.

We were quite pleased when our bags arrived. We walked through Customs, changed a few dollars into Rupies (which ended up not necessary as they accepted US\$ everywhere), then grabbed a taxi to our hotel. It was a bit shocking that the taxi was \$50 for a 10 minute ride, but that's the expensive Seychelles for you.



We checked into the Eden Bleu hotel, settled into our room, then went for a walk to see the area. Eden Bleu is a newer development; it was still under construction when we were here 5 years ago, but is the best spot for those just coming in for a night before going on to fishing destinations; it's close to the airport and has several restaurants within walking distance, plus a small grocery store, even a fishing tackle store in the mall next door. If you were going to spend more time here, go to one of the beach resorts on the other side of the island. But for a night it's perfect, close to the airport, several restaurants to choose from, a beautiful marina full of fancy boats. We sat by the pool area for a bit, then found one of the nearby restaurants to eat, then were full and tired and ready for a good night's sleep.

## Tuesday, December 4, 2018

I had no trouble falling asleep and slept great for the first few hours, then woke at 1:30 am and couldn't get back to sleep. Finally, I conked out again about 4, only to have the alarm go off at 5:30. Still, I felt fairly well rested. The internal clock's not quite set, but no significant jet lag at least. We got our stuff packed and ready, then walked down for breakfast a bit before 6:30.

As we walked into the hotel restaurant, we noticed another man walking in who looked like an angler and introduced ourselves to Jim from Atlanta, another of our Providence-bound companions. We all had breakfast together, sharing stories of bad luck on past trips and hopes for better weather and better fortunes this time.

After breakfast we collected our things, checked out, and soon were met by our cab driver, Felix, from the night before. He loaded our bags and drove us to the IDC (Island Development Company) hangar just past the main airport. We checked in for the charter flight, they weighed our checked luggage, then weighed us with our carry on bags together. No weight issues, which was nice as the weight limit is supposed to be 44 lbs TOTAL baggage and I was way over that (though my checked bag was only 35 lbs so it was okay).

We waited in the small one-room terminal while the other anglers rolled in, including Jim who we'd met that morning, a Brit named Dale, 4 South Africans (Patrick, Patty, Saul, and Mark), and a father-son from New Zealand (Rob and Judah). We were quite disappointed to learn that our other friend Jim – who was supposed to be joining Allan and me – had cancelled that morning because he was sick, stuck at the hotel with a terrible fever!

Everyone was super nice, most had been to Providence before, some several times. No big egos, bravado, or loud talkers, a pretty mellow group.

At 9:00, they called us and we were led out of the small room, out to the runway where we boarded the plane, a twin-prop Beechcraft that could seat at least 20 people, much larger than needed for our small group. The pilot said the weather was good and it should be an easy flight.

It was. 90 minutes later we saw Farquhar Atoll below us, and touched down with hardly a bump.



We disembarked the plane, and spent a few moments chatting with the departing group while they unloaded and refueled the plane. They had enjoyed a great trip, another good omen for our forthcoming adventure.

Soon they were on board, the plane back in the air heading towards Mahe. We loaded onto the back of a trailer, hooked up

to a tractor, which chugged slowly across the island to the main “lodge” and dock at Farquhar.



It was interesting to see Farquhar again. I had last been there in 2013, and it was devastated by a cyclone in 2015. Where once there had been beautiful mature palm trees, there now remained only skeleton husks. Fortunately, 3 years later you could see the palms starting to come back already, and in a few more years it will surely be quite beautiful again.

The new lodge buildings are quite an improvement, though, with separate bungalows and a nice main lodge building, much better than the old bunker-like facility.



We loaded into a pair of skiffs, with the famous “pet” GTs of Farquhar milling around the harbor, 20+ huge GTs swimming in circles around the boats.

We motored slowly around the island to where the Maya’s Dugong was moored just a few hundred yards from the idyllic white beach, which remained beautiful post-cyclone. We boarded the boat, then settled into the main lounge cabin while the guides went back for our luggage.

The head guide for the week was Wesley, who had guided us back on Farquhar years ago. He was joined by Brendan who we also remembered from our earlier trip, Tim Babich who I've never met but corresponded with for years through FlyCastaway, and two other experienced South African FlyCastaway guides, Justin and Nick. A great crew.

Wesley gave us a detailed orientation, starting with a daily itinerary, protocol for drinks and the Honor tab, and a safety talk for the boat including emergency protocol both for fire, flood, and piracy. There was also a safety talk for on the flats, how to be careful around aggressive sharks and stingrays, to stay away from dangerous mantis shrimp, and most importantly don't try to pick up any deadly cone shells. We're not in Kansas anymore!



Following the orientation, we were shown to our rooms. Allan and I were in room 2, on the second floor of the multi-level ship.



The Maya's Dugong is an older vessel, not much to look at and definitely not a luxury cruiser. It's a maze of levels, hallways, stairs, staterooms, and lounges, overall quite utilitarian and functional. The main deck has a large crane for hoisting the tender boats up, and a broad covered area rigged with rod holders for staging fishing gear and crates for storing wet wading boots. Inside is a hallway with the lounge to one side, consisting of a long narrow room with an L shaped leather couch, two long tables for dining, and some refrigerators for storing cold beverages. At the far end there is a door to the kitchen, and a door to one of the staterooms (#3). The narrow hallway has a set of stairs going down with several more staterooms, and a set of narrow stairs leading up to the second deck where there are two more staterooms (including our room, #2), as well as a portal leading out to another outside deck area which was also covered and features more tables and lounge chairs. Stairs also lead up to a third story which has an open sun deck as well as the captain's cockpit.



Once we were settled into our rooms, we gathered out on the main rigging deck and started putting rods together. The guides were all there to help, checking knots, retying leaders, and prepping all the gear for the first day of fishing.

We would start our week with a neap tide, building up to a new moon and spring tides towards the end of

the week. The plan would be to anchor the Dugong first towards the north end of the island for the first half of the week, focusing the neap tides on finding tailing bonefish, triggerfish, and bumpies. Later in the week we'd change the anchorage to the southern part of that atoll, looking for GTs coming in on the pushing spring tides.

Providence is a vast atoll, 44 km long by 14 km wide. Much of the eastern flats hardly ever get fished because they need the right tides to get over there with a morning high, midday low, and evening high...which they anticipated having this week so the guides were excited to explore that side. There are only two land masses, Cerf Island in the South and Providence Island in the north. There are 4 white sand flats total, all located near these various land masses. The entire rest of the atoll is turtle grass or coral.

I rigged up a 9 wt, 10 wt and a 12 wt to start, a crab (weed guards are a must here because of all the turtle grass) on the 9 wt, a Puglisi spawning shrimp on the 10 wt because it's quite versatile, and a tan Bad Attitude Baitfish for GTs on the 12. 20 lb Fluorocarbon leader is fine for permit and triggerfish, while they like 30# leaders for Bumpies. Straight 130# for the GT rig.



Once we were rigged up, they loaded the tender boats onto the back deck, fired up the big diesel motors, and pulled anchor. At 2:30 we were slowly pulling away from Farquhar.

For the next 4 hours we motored across the vastness of the Indian Ocean. We did spot a few flying fish, some birds crashing bait, one pod of tuna slashing at bait on the surface, and one dolphin playing briefly alongside the boat.

As the sun began to set, we all gathered on the main deck and saw our first sight of land at Providence.

A couple of the crew threw out some trolling rods as we neared the atoll, and the lures were never in the water long before they had a fish on. Some came off, but we did watch them land a couple of large dogtooth Tuna and a jobfish.

The sun was glowing low on the horizon when Wesley announced that dinner was served, so we made our way downstairs and enjoyed a tasty meal, buffet style, with grilled fish, pork, rice, vegetables, and potatoes. A good spread and tasty food. The cook made a birthday cake for Tim, one of the guides.

After dinner, Wesley announced the guide assignments, Allan and I fishing with Justin. Normally it's 3 anglers to a guide, but since our 3rd was Jim who cancelled last minute because he was sick, we would get a 2:1 guide ratio.

After dinner we relaxed a bit up on deck while the boat continued motoring in the dark to wherever it was going to anchor for the first part of the trip. All told, it was 8 hours from the time we left Farquhar till they dropped anchor at the leeward side of Providence Island in the northernmost part of the atoll.

### **Wednesday, December 5, 2018**

The boat rocked and rolled all night. I slept great until about 1:30, then wide awake, still not quite time-adjusted. By 6 am we were out of bed, and as the light grew grey we realized it really was grey. Dark grey, drizzly, overcast, and very rainy. Dang.

The high spirits from the night before were fairly well dampened for everyone with the lousy weather. We slurped coffee in silence, glaring out at the grey and rain. Eventually breakfast was served, a great spread with fried eggs, bacon, sausage, meat, cheese and more.

After breakfast, we slowly gathered our gear and made our way down to the main deck. The plans from the night before had shifted slightly with the rain, and the guides were planning on trying for sailfish in the morning in the hopes that the weather would clear through and they could hit the flats on the rising tide, with the low at around 10.

Allan and I were fishing with Justin. We hopped into the boat following a detailed safety talk in which Justin showed us how to work the sat phone if something happened to him, the GPS, the radio, as well as run the motor.

We changed out the GT flies for sailfish flies and started trolling with a hookless teaser, fly rods ready to cast if we raised a fish and teased it in. It didn't take long before we saw the first bill slashing at the teaser. Justin teased it in, Allan put a cast on point just behind the fish and it turned but didn't eat.

We trolled for another hour or more without another fish. It was still raining, the light was still bad, but we decided to give the flats a shot anyway.

Justin motored us in towards the home flat, just south of North Island. It was a massive turtle grass flat, literally as far as you could see in any direction. Since it was low tide, there was a huge dry area stretching seemingly forever. We started as far in as we could. Allan and Justin were wading a bit deeper, and I instantly spotted some tailing fish right up on the edge of the dry ground. I waded towards them thinking they were bonefish, but with the terrible light couldn't see anything unless they were tailing. I spooked a couple of small schools, then hooked up to a fish which turned out to be a Pearly Bream. I later learned that these were all likely a variety of emperor fish tailing, not bonefish, but still fun to chase some tails!

After landing that, the fish were all gone. There were rays everywhere and a few small sharks, All could spot were wakes from fish so I cast towards them and hooked up again...this time a nice Spangled Emperor fish.

The next fish I saw was a big wake so I thought it might be a GT. I cast the big rod and stripped fast and instantly was hooked up to something, not too big but crazy fast, and soon realized it was a medium sized barracuda.

We kept walking the flat towards the island. The light was terrible and we couldn't see much of anything. We would see wakes from big GTs from time to time, but never in time to get a good cast in on one. Allan started blind casting into some of the holes and landed a handful of various-sized emperors, snappers, etc.

I spotted a couple of tailing triggerfish and gave chase, but they disappeared before I could get a shot at them. Next thing I knew, however, Allan was hooked up to a nice big Titan Triggerfish, which he landed.

While he was landing that, I spotted a GT and got a cast in on it; the fish charged and chased but refused the fly about a few feet in front of me.

We kept walking, and Justin spotted a big GT tailing in really shallow water, heading towards a deeper channel. Literally tailing, like a massive bonefish. We hustled to try to get ahead of it, and after a quarter mile chase finally got in front of it. It was amazing to see, about a 40 lb GT tailing in shallow water like a bonefish. I got a good shot on it, landed the fly about 2 feet away, a perfect cast...if it had been a permit. Which it wasn't. It spooked with the fly hitting so close, but after stripping fast it turned anyway and charged the fly, but didn't eat, turning away at the last second and disappearing in the low light.

We turned around, and right behind was another GT tailing! This one was slowly following a ray. I made the cast well in front of the ray, started stripping fast, the GT charged and ate and I was hooked up. This fish I landed, my first good GT, about 25 lbs. Not huge but after a decade of trying my first significant GT!



While I was landing that fish, however, we spotted another fish tailing between me and Allan. Then we realized it was two fish, and not GTs but big permit tailing. There was nothing we

could do since we were landing the GT and Allan was too far away, but it was so cool to see those big black tails dancing right where we were releasing a GT.

Also while we were fighting the GT we spotted a school of bumphead parrotfish tailing. We gave chase, but the tide was coming in super fast now and by the time we got to where the bumpies were the water was too deep and they were gone.

We hopped in the boat and motored further up to try to get to shallower water. We hopped out and started wading towards the island but didn't spot any more fish, so we stopped and had a tasty lunch of egg and beet salad, pasta, and chicken.

While we had lunch near the island, turtles started showing up everywhere. They stayed with us for the next hour, literally a hundred turtles of all shapes and sizes.

After lunch we walked the beach on the inside of the island. I started off checking out the point, and did spot a nice GT there along with a pair of really big bonefish, but also about a half dozen sharks in a feeding frenzy so I left them alone and joined Allan and Justin.

They waded just off the beach while I walked the beach ahead. I did spot a pair of GTs but they disappeared in the low light before Allan could get a cast out. Before long I looked back, though, and he was hooked up...to a turtle! They landed and released it, while I cast to a couple of small bluefin trevally but couldn't get them to eat.

The tide was in high now and we weren't spotting a lot of fish, so we hopped back in the boat to try some Bommie Bashing. We motored about 10 minutes to the south, then started casting along the edges of a couple of coral heads. Allan quickly hooked up to a big spangled emperor, while he was landing that I hooked a nice bluefin trevally and landed that. We kept working it, the fish would follow but often didn't want to eat. We could see a variety of snapper, grouper, and bluefin trevally giving chase but not eating. Eventually Allan did hook a couple of big marble grouper, and a toothy Bohar snapper. I hooked a couple as well that came off. We saw a huge nurse shark. A lot of action and excitement overall!

The sun was getting low on the horizon, still gray but light getting low, so we headed back to the boat.

Everyone else had equally good days given the tough conditions, though every one's experience was quite different. There were a few sailfish landed, some tuna, a milkfish, and a handful of GTs. Amazing that with such challenging conditions, everyone found a varied and memorable fishing experience for the day. This is a real testament to the wilderness of Providence.

It was a beautiful sunset, where we enjoyed cocktails, fresh sashimi and appetizers, and stories from the day's fishing. Eventually dinner was served, another healthy spread with chicken wings, tuna steaks, scalloped potatoes, vegetables. After dinner we returned topside to share more stories, and one by one folks wandered off to bed.



**Thursday, December 6, 2018**

I'm slowly getting my sleep cycles caught up. Last night I slept straight through till 3 am (instead of 1:30), then was able to sleep off and on till just before 6.

By the time the sun came up, it was certainly better than what we'd woken up to the day before, but not great. While it wasn't pouring down rain, there were still a lot of clouds scattered throughout. Another grey day.

Breakfast of course was delicious: scrambled eggs, meats and cheese, tasty rolls, sausage, bacon, fruit. After breakfast we rigged up and headed to the boats.

Allan and I were fishing with Wesley today, as well as Nick, one of the Farquhar guides who was training on Providence for the week. We motored out past the Dugong to see if there were any milkfish feeding like they saw yesterday. We puttered around for a few minutes, didn't see any feeding fish, so continued on and motored north to the far end of Providence Island.

The waves were crashing there against a broad sandbar about 50 meters off from the beach. We anchored the boat, and Wesley said to leave all our bags in the boat and just take the GT rods. Sounds serious!

We hopped out of the boat into waist deep water, and walked out to where the waves were crashing. We walked towards the edge of the sandbar, and started wading away from the boat. We were searching for GTs coming in cruising on the waves. Wading waist deep, with 2-3 foot swells crashing in on us so that a couple of times a minute we'd have to literally turn our backs to a big wave and jump to avoid it going over our head. Still, we were completely soaked, constantly.

We hadn't gone far, however, before I saw Wesley point, Allan cast, and I could almost hear Allan's reel screaming as a GT scorched out toward deeper water. He landed the fish, about 20 pounds, a good start to the day. While he was landing that fish Nick and I gave chase on a couple of other fish but never could catch up.

We kept walking, dodging waves and getting soaked, spotting the occasional fish and giving chase but without any good shots. We would also see some small bluefin trevally, but opted not to cast to them in the hopes of waiting for a bigger GT. Then Nick spotted a good GT coming towards us across the white sand. I made a cast, it charged, I started stripping fast, the fish followed and as a big wave formed we could see the fish perfectly silhouetted in the wave about 20 feet away, the fly inches from its open mouth...but it turned away and refused at the last second, just as the wave crashed, simultaneously crushing our momentary dreams.

We kept walking and searching, spotted a few fish but in the tough light didn't get any more good shots. The tide went slack, so the waves weren't so bad which was good, but the fish also weren't feeding – less good. We turned and started walking the other direction, back towards the boat and beyond, and at last the sun was out for a moment so we could see. We could feel the tide turning and starting to come in.

About then we spotted a fish coming at us, a good fish. I lead the fish by about 20 feet, started stripping and it charged, kept stripping and it attacked, I set the hook and was hooked up! We fought it



hard, chasing it to keep it away from some coral, and after a good battle had landed it. Nick taped it at 88 cm, estimated about 35-40 pounds!

We'd spotted a bunch of big triggerfish feeding as we'd been chasing GTs, so Nick ran back to the boat to grab our 9 weights. While we dodged the crashing waves (they were picking up again as the tide came in), we looked for Triggers and soon saw one tailing. I plopped a Flex-o-Crab in front of it, and the fish charged like a hungry GT and clobbered the crab. This was totally different from my last Triggerfish experience on Christmas Island with the finicky, spooky, heavily-pressured triggers there. It was a hard fight but I kept it away from coral and we landed it, a beautifully colored Titan Triggerfish.



We kept braving the waves and searching for GTs and triggers, hooked a couple more triggers but the hook slipped out. I did land a small bluefin trevally, and saw Allan land a decent bluefin as well. We eventually worked our way back to the boat, glad to be out of the crashing waves. It was a really cool, amazing experience, exhausting and physically demanding dodging waves and wading such deep water, but cool to have some good shots at GTs and triggers and experience the whole thing.

We motored out past the breaking waves and ate a tasty lunch of pasta salad and pizza, then motored out around the island and back through some channels into the inside lagoon to look for tailing bonefish and triggers on the incoming pushing tide.

We came to a long white sand flat bordered by turquoise blue channels, and spotted a big school of bones moving away. We never did catch up to them, but did spot a pair of big bones cruising. I made a long cast from the boat, the fish turned, charged, and ate, and I was hooked up. After a good fight, I landed the fish, which turned out to be a huge bonefish, 27 inches and 9 pounds. A Providence Grand Slam!

We also saw a huge milkfish cruising that flat, but never had a chance to cast to it.

From there we motored through another channel and got out to wade another white sand flat. Unfortunately, the light left us then entirely as dark clouds moved in. It was tough to see, but we did spot a few more huge bonefish on the flat. Allan landed a big bone about 9 pounds. I landed another good fish about 7 lbs, then spotted a huge fish just a few feet from Wesley, made a cast, and was hooked up. I landed this one, we taped it at 30 inches, well over 10 pounds and Wesley estimated at closer to 11 lbs, easily the largest bonefish of my life!



At this point the light was impossible, we couldn't see 3 feet in front of us, so we decided to leave the flats and try for some sailfish.

We motored off the flats and started trolling the teaser, and within a couple of minutes we'd raised our first sail. Allan got a cast in but the fish had disappeared. We kept going, and had another fish up on the teaser. We both cast out, the fish turned and ate my fly. He was on and started pulling off line, I went to set the hook and thought I had him...but then the hook came loose.

From there we kept trolling, but never raised another sail. We did have a big dogtooth tuna attack the teaser but couldn't get him on the fly. Then we saw a small Wahoo jump 5 feet in the air with the teaser in its mouth. We threw the flies out, and a few seconds later the fish came up in the air again on Allan's fly, but spit it before he could set the hook.

We kept trolling, but the weather was getting really bad. Waves were crashing, the seas were rough, we were totally soaked. And then we could see rain all around us and thunder and lightning started crashing, so we opted to call it a day.

We headed back to the Dugong, tried to dry our gear, showered and cleaned up and all regaled each other with tales from the day. A few GTs were landed, some triggers, one big bumphead parrotfish. Overall tough conditions but decent fishing for the day.

Dinner was another good spread with some grouper, chicken cordon bleu, scalloped potatoes, stir fry. After dinner we headed top deck, laughed and told stories, and one by one people drifted off to sleep.



**Friday, December 7, 2018**

The internal clock seems to be about re-set, as I slept through most of the night finally. Woke up with the alarm at 6, prepped for the day, enjoyed another tasty breakfast of fried eggs, sausage, bacon, fruit, meats and cheese, and more. Then we gathered our gear, and soon were loading into the boats.

Allan and I were fishing with Brendan today. The Dugong was going to move while we were out fishing, south to Cerf Island at the other end of the atoll. We started the day with a long boat run, north up and around Providence Island, then back south for a long ways before finally cutting in to fish the rarely accessed flats on the east side. You have to have just the right tides to fish that side, with an afternoon high to get back across to the leeward side.

Finally we pulled in to where a massive flat was rapidly draining out and began wading the edge of the flat, searching a series of channels almost like small creeks



coming in. There were bluefin trevally everywhere, every current flow and a few of them milling about, with more cruising the edge. Quite a few small sharks as well. We walked along, leapfrogging each other, hooked up almost constantly to one bluefin after another. I quickly lost count.

Eventually the tide was low and we stopped seeing the bluefin, so we took a long walk across the massive flat to fish the lagoon edge on the inside. We were hoping to see some big GTs along the edge, but never did see one there. We did, however, get lots of shots at a broad variety of fish, from more bluefin to big Bohar snapper, to a bunch of substantial groupers. At one point I had about an 8 lb bluefin on, and a honeycomb grouper that was not much bigger than the trevally came right up onto the inches deep water to swallow the entire bluefin! Allan landed a few Bohar and emperors, I managed to land a couple of huge honeycomb grouper. Very cool fish, super strong and you had to really fight them hard to keep them out of their holes.



As much fun as the snappers and grouper were, we weren't seeing GTs so we walked back across the huge flat and hopped back in the boat. Brendan motored us back out and around and then back in to search another huge turtle grass flat.

We were planning to have lunch there, but as soon as we pulled up we started spotting GTs along the edge. Allan made a few casts from the boat and hooked a nice GT, which came unbuttoned. We saw a few bumphead parrotfish as well but they weren't feeding, just milling around.

Then we noticed that the flat behind us was loaded with huge stingrays, and every ray had a GT or two on it, many of them tailing. We gave up on the lunch idea and gave chase, casting time and time again to ray after ray with GTs, but the GTs were acting funny, they didn't want to leave the rays or eat. Probably they were focused on crabs being kicked up by the rays so weren't into chasing the bigger baitfish. After about 15 refusals between the two of us, however, we finally found some eaters. Allan was hooked up, and a minute later so was I!



We both landed our fish, a GT double! We snapped a few photos, released the fish, and looked up to see more rays and GTs surrounding us. We stripped off line as quick as we could, Allan hooked up again right away. I saw another fish, made a cast, and hooked up. A back to back GT double, incredible!

We landed these fish, took some more photos, and released the fish. As we stood up, I noticed a big (8 ft) Tiger Shark cruising the flat heading our way, dorsal and tail fin out of the water. We hurried back to the boat and hopped in. There were still rays and GTs around, but we were beat and didn't want to mess with that shark so we took a quick lunch break.



After lunch, the GTs had gone. We looked for a while, but the tide had come in a bunch and they weren't anymore feeding fish. We motored across the lagoon slowly looking for fish, but didn't see any.

Brendan then turned and motored outside again to try teasing up some big GTs, but we didn't move anything there so we motored back inside to search the myriad finger flats and lagoons. We cast into some Bommie's, Allan landed a few more toothy Bohar snapper.

We kept motoring across, slowly looking for fish along the way. We did spot some bumpies and some huge turtles, but no more GTs. Eventually we made it all the way across, and started motoring south toward the new mooring for the Dugong.

Eventually we stopped and setup to start teasing for sailfish. It didn't take long before we'd raised a sail. Brendan killed the motor and teased it in, Allan and I both cast. The fish went for Allan's fly first, swatted at it with its bill but didn't eat, then turned and clobbered my fly. I never even had a chance to set the hook and it was in the air, jumping over and over and over and over. Then it went for a long run, jumped a few more times, and sounded. From there it turned into an epic battle. I pulled and pulled but could barely move the fish. I lost all track of time, pain setting in as I reared and pulled and strained to gain inch by inch of backing on this fish. I was really putting that 12 weight Scott Meridian to the test, bent to the cork. After a long time I just couldn't budge it, and had Brendan use the boat while I held on tight, rod pointed at the fish and slowly dragged it up to the top, finally reeling it in. When it finally came up to the boat, we noticed it was hooked in the side, no wonder it was so impossible to move! We could perfectly see the hook in its mouth on the first few jumps, so it must have wrapped itself during the fight. We spent some time reviving it and it eventually swam away...I was beat!

From there we motored back to the ship, showered and cleaned up and joined the rest of the group to regale stories from the day. A mixed day from everyone, a few GTs landed, some more sails, and a host of other fish.

We enjoyed another delicious dinner with grilled fish, lasagna, vegetables, rice, salad, followed with a tasty tiramisu desert. I was hurting all over, legs from all the long walks, arms from fighting all sorts of powerful fish, back from trying to wrench up that massive sailfish. More stories, but an early bed tonight!

## **Saturday, December 8, 2018**

The weather was lousy when we woke this morning, dark skies and massive cumulus clouds building up all through the horizon. Just before breakfast the winds picked up and it started to rain. Fortunately, after breakfast the squall had pushed through and it looked like it may clear after all.

Allan and I were fishing with Tim today. We loaded into the boat, and motored south. The plan was to fish the very southern tip of the atoll, in search of monsters: trophy trevally and/or goliath napoleon wrasse.

We motored south to Cerf Island, and continued along a channel just off the white sand beach. I spotted a small school of trevally cruising up the shore, made a quick cast and hooked up to the first fish of the day, a small GT. While I was landing it, Allan cast out and hooked into a big Bohar snapper.

We continued the journey south, searching for fish along the way. At the bottom end of the island was a narrow sand spit. I spotted another, really big GT, well over the meter mark, cruising the edge there, so I hopped out of the boat and gave chase. I got a good cast in front of it, but the fish spooked.

Back in the boat, we continued south. Soon the white sand flats gave way to a seemingly endless array of coral flats, channels, and holes. We could see the surf crashing on all three sides of us, marking the bottom end of Providence.

We searched for fish as Tim slowly maneuvered the boat around the myriad coral heads and channels. We caught a bunch of bluefin trevally, snappers, and a couple of small groupers before we figured out it was time to wait for big fish to cast. About then I spotted a huge shape moving over a white sand bottom about 120 meters away. We gave chase, eventually getting a cast into a huge Napoleon wrasse. Which was not at all interested.

We kept bouncing around the coral flats and had a few more shots at decent GTs, a few more shots at big napoleons, but didn't land anything significant (except of course a few more bluefin trevally and Bohar), which would often sneak in and steal your fly before the bigger GTs could get to it.

I hopped out and tried wading the edges for a while, but only had a close encounter with a tiger shark to show for it. It wasn't a huge shark, about 5-6 ft long, but came right at me (slowly, fortunately) to the point I had to bop it in the nose with the butt of my 12 weight to get it to finally turn away.

The tide was dropping fast now, so Tim motored us back out of the channels so we didn't get stuck. We barely made it in time, then headed back up towards a sand flat near the island. When we got there we started slowly motoring and searching for fish. Suddenly there were fish all around us, a school of about 40 permit! We made a few casts with our GT flies but not surprisingly no takers.

Just after the permit swam past, I spotted a nice GT cruising the edge of the white sand near the shallower turtle grass flat. I hopped out, gave chase, made a cast, and hooked up: my biggest GT yet, a bit over 90 cm.

Tim then took Allan wading further along the white sand, where soon I looked up and saw Allan hooked up and then landing a nice GT. I spotted a ray with a GT and a bluefin on it, made a cast and the bluefin beat the GT to my Semper Fly. While landing it a big lemon shark got into the fray, but I was able to get the bluefin landed without casualty.

I started wading my way back over to meet the others. En route, I spotted a tailing triggerfish, cast to it with the GT fly, the trigger ate and I hooked him! For just a few seconds, then the hook came out. I kept walking, and surprisingly spotted a huge bonefish. With only GT rod and fly in hand, I made a cast, let the fly sink to the bottom, made a slow strip, and the bonefish actually charged and ate the fly! I set, hooked up, but after only a few seconds the giant 6/0 hook came out. Crazy.

I met up with Allan and Tim. Tim said nobody had ever fished that spot before, and since I caught the first GT there I got to name it. Thinking of all the “magic” I just experienced there with permit, trevally, triggers, bones, sharks, rays, and more, and always missing my son Mitchell who is obsessed with Harry Potter, I dubbed the spot “Hogwarts.”

We loaded back into the boat as the tide was low and just starting to turn and Tim wanted to get into position on a flat where he expected some big GTs to come in on the pushing tide.

Unfortunately, as we were motoring over there, a huge bank of clouds moved in, and it started to rain. For the rest of the afternoon we tried spot after spot. Allan did manage to hook and land a nice GT, his second of the day, but outside of that we spent a lot of time looking and not a lot of time seeing much of anything. It was a tough afternoon, but another great day overall.

It was a mixed report from the group tonight, too. One boat was fully skunked, one boat landed a nice GT and had shots at a few really big ones, the fourth boat was mostly fishing offshore.

Dinner buffet tonight was fish, steak, rice, vegetables, another great meal. After dinner, everyone spent a lot of time fixing and re-rigging gear that had been destroyed by the savagery of really powerful fish.



### **Sunday, December 9, 2018**

It's getting harder and harder to wake up every morning. This is a very physically demanding fishery. I crawled out of bed, got prepped and ready for the day, enjoyed another hearty breakfast, and soon was in the boat ready to go. The guides were antsy to get going early, as the tides were just right to make a run across the atoll on the high morning tide to spend all day fishing the remote, seldom-fished east side, then make the run back on the afternoon high tide.

Allan and I were fishing with Justin and Nick today. We motored across the island, but before we could reach the far side we spotted shoals of milkfish feeding in the scrub line. We stopped, changed flies to milkfish flies, and spent the next hour trying to hook a milkfish.

Allan did somehow hook a big bluefin trevally on his algae fly...

We cast to hundreds of the buggers, but the challenge is getting one to eat your piece of algae amidst all the rest of it. I did get one to take, set the hook. Saw the fish with the hook in its mouth, the guides said to set again, so I set again. I could still see the fish there swimming with the fly in its mouth, I set again, and it finally decided it felt the hook and turned to run but instantly broke the knot. I'm pretty sure it was a bad knot (tied by the guide, whoopsie, we've all done it!).

We kept trying, but were unable to connect again. Eventually the fish stopped feeding, so we continued on to the flats.

Though it had been clear this morning, the clouds had already set in again, making for poor visibility. We started wading some turtle grass flats searching the white sand channels for GTs. I did manage to hook a small GT, but the hook came out. A bit later I had another shot, hooked up again, and this time had another medium-sized GT on the line. The hook slipped out just as we were reaching for the leader, so no photo but close enough to count.

We kept searching while the tide fell out, but without any more shots. We then spent the next few hours looking and searching...but with a smattering of dark clouds interspersed with rain we couldn't see anything.

I suggested we take a break for lunch, which we did. After a brief respite, Allan went back out while I stayed in the boat to search from a higher vantage. Just then, the light came out, and I spotted a big GT cruising directly towards Allan. Justin saw it at the same time, we yelled and Allan made the cast spot on, a perfect shot just in front of the fish. One strip and the fish exploded on the fly. This fish was ripping out, and there was a lot of coral, so we grabbed the boat and got Allan in the boat to give chase. It was a good thing, since it wrapped up on a coral, but Nick was able to get the line free and eventually we landed the fish, a beautiful beast of a GT (The largest of the trip for the group), taped at 98 cm, easily over 50 lbs!



We snapped some photos, and the light was gone again. We kept searching, then spent some time casting at some bommies and hooked a few nice Bohar, then the flats were prime for GTs to come up. The light was flat and tough, but the tides were good and we could spot bow wakes from GTs moving around the flat.

We gave chase when we could, and overall it was total mayhem for about 30 minutes. At times we walked, at times we ran, at times we cast. We had fish show up behind us, in front of us, to the side. I was casting a crab to a pod of tailing bumpies, perfect shot right through the middle but no eats...when we spotted some GTs moving around and I ran up to get a shot. We missed a few shots, then finally I connected and was hooked up. As I fought the fish, a nice GT, there were more GTs everywhere. I landed it, a decent fish, but since there were more around we released it quickly and gave chase.

Though we saw some GTs, we also spotted a big shoal of aggressively feeding Golden Trevally! We gave chase, I got a good cast in and started stripping and could see a pair of fish charging, but they refused. We got several more shots, but couldn't get them to eat, even after sprinting up the flats in chase.

By the time we were done, we searched for GTs for a bit longer, but the tide had pushed up too high and we weren't seeing any more fish. So we slowly started working our way back towards the Dugong. Along the way we did spot another shoal of feeding Milkies, chased them around for a bit without luck, then continued working our way back to the boat.

We cleaned up and heard stories from the day. There were some big GTs hooked and some gear destroyed, a modest napoleon brought to hand by Dale, a few more GTs, sailies, myriad snappers and groupers, a few shots at permit, and overall a decent day, especially given the tough light and conditions.

Dinner was another full spread, then more stories and eventually off to bed.

### **Monday, December 10, 2018**

The last day. The body is tired, a bit harder to wake this morning. Yet excitement filled the air as well. The last day, the last chance. The sun was out, we should finally have good light today!

After breakfast, we loaded back up in the boat with Brendan and started motoring off across the vastness of Providence. The tides were high so we were able to cross over to the east side. We rigged up, and started motoring slowly as the tide started dropping, searching for GTs coming out of the lagoon on the dropping tide.

Eventually the tide was right, so I got out of the boat and started wading, with Brendan walking the boat with Allan in it. Right away I spotted a pair of rays swimming fast with 3 GTs right on them. I made a cast, the fish charged and ate, but kept coming right at me so I never had a chance to set the hook. I could literally see the fly in the fish's mouth as it swam right at me. Then they were gone, the fly spit and the line slack.

We kept wading the flat, but didn't see any more fish. As the tide kept dropping the flat got too shallow, so I climbed back in the boat and Brendan motored out to a series of bommies, casting into the bommies and catching bluefin and massive Bohar snapper. The Bohar would scream down to the coral and you had to fight them with every ounce of the heavy tackle to stop them. If they got in, they broke the 130# or severed your fly line. I started wrapping the line around my arm as soon as hooked, which I soon regretted as one almost pulled me overboard. I stayed on board and landed the fish, but noticed it has almost straightened a heavy gauge 8/0 hook! Those fish are strong!

Every once in a while he'd throw the teaser out there to see if we could tease in a GT. Then he did! Allan put a cast out there and boom was hooked up to a nice fish. We chased it around in the boat and soon landed it, a nice GT taped at 80 cm.

We kept searching, catching more Bohar but no more GTs. The tide was fully out, so we pulled over in a small sandy bay to have lunch. Allan was smart enough to leave his rod stripped and ready, as no sooner had we started getting lunches out of the cooler did Brendan spot a few GTs cruising in. Allan made a cast and boom, hooked up again! I got ready and made a bunch of casts at the two other GTs that were with that fish, they chased but wouldn't eat. Allan landed his fish, a bit smaller than the one this morning but another solid fish.

Then we finished lunch and started searching again. I spotted several big napoleons and even got casts at a couple of them, but were unable to get them to eat. We also landed a few beautiful peacock groupers while wading one flat, and saw a few small pods of Milkfish feeding. I did manage to hook one briefly, but it went straight past a coral head and broke me off.

As the tide started to push back in, Brendan took us to the edge of a flat. We started walking, searching for GTs cruising the drop off. Right away I spotted one, gave chase, made a cast, and three more GTs came out of nowhere to clobber my fly. I landed it in short order, a decent GT around 80 cm, and totally black in color. Very cool.



We kept walking the edge, and I spotted another GT cruising fast along the edge, made a cast and boom, hooked up again. This was a smaller fish, but great nonetheless, my 10th GT landed for the trip. Amazing!

Soon after I also caught a really big bluefin, while Allan got some shots at a tailing Triggerfish. I spotted a school of feeding Milkies, and spent a while casting into them without any luck. Then Brendan spotted a pair of tailing permit, Allan got a shot in there but the fish spooked. A couple more GTs cruised by but we had the wrong rods out. Then we started seeing bumpies everywhere. Allan hooked up, but after a blinding run the hook came out. I had one eat, but wasn't able to get the hook tight. Eventually Allan hooked up again, and the fight was on as the fish cruised way into the backing. Allan stopped it just before it got to the drop off. Brendan grabbed the net, gave chase, and was getting near when he realized it wasn't a bumpie after all...but another turtle! Hard to believe.

By then the light was getting low and we had to start heading back. The tide wasn't fully in so it was a long haul pulling the boat over the skinny flats, but eventually we made it back to the boat.

Dinner was chicken and fish, joined with good stories all around. On the whole we landed 37 GTs for the group (18 between me and Allan)! Plus a broad variety of other fish. A slow week overall for Providence, no doubt due to the tough weather and consistently bad light. But still amazing and everyone is happy.

Overnight the boat departed Providence and motored across to Farquhar.

## **Tuesday, December 11, 2018**

Awake at 6:30, we packed up the bags. We had breakfast, loaded the bags on the back deck to take over to the island to wait for the flight, then hung around to wait for the plane. At around 9:00, they let us know it was time and we loaded up into two of the tender boats for the short right into the harbor at Farquhar.

From there it was back into the tractor and trailer, chug across the atoll, wait some more for the plane. By 11:30 the plane had arrived, re-fueled, and we were back up in the air over the Indian Ocean. 90 minutes later we touched down on Mahe.

Felix, our loyal taxi driver, was there waiting for us. He also runs a small Guest House on his property, which he books out on Booking.com (called Lover's Nest). He offered us to stay there for the day for only \$100, so we could relax and shower. Since our flight wasn't until midnight, this was very appealing and worked out great. He even drove us to a nearby restaurant for dinner, which was quite good.

Around 9:00 pm Felix drove us back to the airport, where we checked in for the flight to Dubai. It left on time just before midnight, and 4.5 hours later we were back in the megalopolis airport at Dubai. We only had about a 4 hour layover there, so we grabbed some coffee, relaxed, and soon were back on the massive double-decker Emirates Airbus taking off over the desert of the UAE. There was a screaming baby in the row right in front of us, which somehow managed to scream for the entire 15.5 hour flight. Insane.

We landed on time in SFO, but had to wait for almost 2 hours for our luggage to come through. By that time, commute traffic had kicked in. It was horrible, literally bumper to bumper for hours. What had taken us 3.5 hours on the way down, took 6.5 hours on the way home, a rough way to end a great trip.