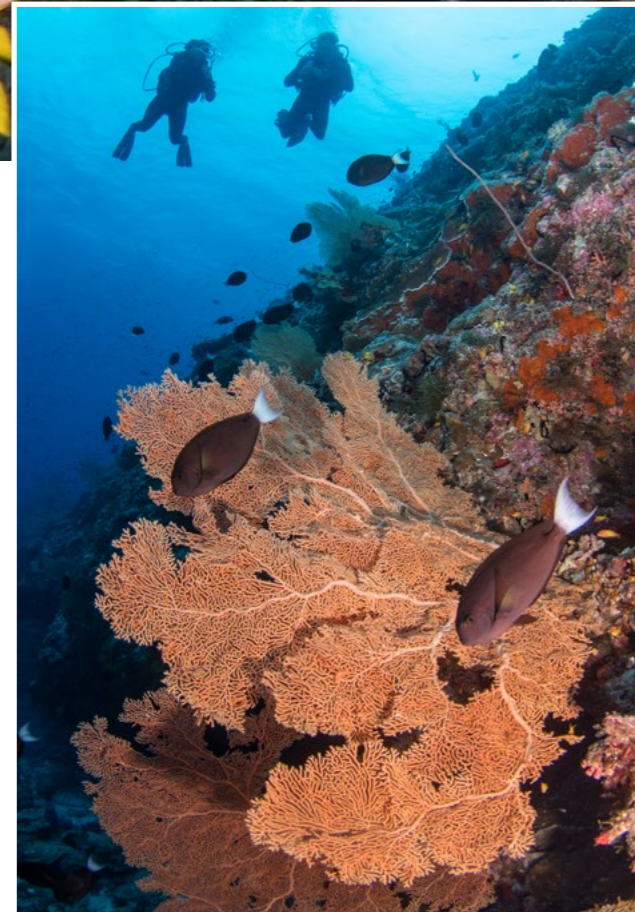




Alphonse Atoll

Text and photos
by Brandi Mueller

— *Pristine Diving in the Seychelles' Outer Islands*



There is just something that always feels right about getting on a small airplane for the final leg of travel to begin a dive trip. In my mind, it almost guarantees the destination is somewhere amazing—a place that is so special that the large jets used in mass transit cannot even get to it. I departed the island of Mahé, the largest and most-populated island in the Seychelles, for the tiny island of Alphonse, with that giddy, childlike feeling in which I could not stop grinning. I looked around at my fellow passengers also destined for Alphonse, and I could see them smiling too.

As we flew away from Mahé, a beautiful granitic island in its own right, it took about an hour to fly 400km (250 miles) southwest over blue seas before we began to descend on a small coral atoll, just a speck of palm trees and sand that steadily got larger as we approached. I watched out the open cockpit windows as the pilots took us straight in, onto a clear-cut runway in the center of the island. My spontaneous grinning continued.

Below was a small section of the Seychelles' outer islands, the Alphonse group. It consisted of Alphonse and St. François atolls. The deep water surrounding the atolls was a shadowy, dark navy, but the green and ivory specks of the islands were encircled by what I would like to call Seychelles' blue—an abstract watercolor painting of every shade of blue imaginable, from the lightest pale blue to sapphire and indigo, with brush strokes of jade and light brown. The real-

Grouper, lionfish and anthias on coral reef

life painting showed the shallow depths of the lagoons lightening to turquoise and surrounded by white sand and green palm trees. I could not help but think, "Our planet is so gorgeous."

Arrival

I was still smiling like a kid on Christmas when our plane landed on the island, which was just 1.8km long by 1.4km wide (1.12mi by 0.87mi), and out the window was a line of resort staff waving to us. We disembarked and were greeted with

Alphonse Atoll had an incredible number of sea turtles on all the dives.



My charming bungalow home for the week (top); The bungalow's airy interior (middle) and cozy deck (bottom), overlooking palm trees and the sea just beyond

The resort's pool (above) and bar area (left), which was a meeting place to discuss diving and fishing tales before dinner each night

is known to have some of the best fly-fishing flats on earth. Obsessive fishermen (whom I found to be comparable to obsessive



introductions and smiles (big smiles, but probably not as big as mine.) I was about to spend a week on an isolated island in the middle of the Indian Ocean visited by only a small number of people each year. And honestly, most visitors come to fish, not dive. (Crazy, I know!)

The Alphonse group of islands

divers) travel halfway around the world to throw a fly at tarpon, bonefish, milkfish and giant trevally, among others (it's catch-and-release only here). The Alphonse Resort was initially just a fishing lodge, but now has a full range of activities, including diving, snorkeling, kayaking, stand-up paddle boarding, nature walks

and bike tours, a lovely spa, and plenty of other activities to keep anyone busy.

Getting around

Taken in a golf cart to my luxury bungalow with beachfront access, I learned that this was one of the fastest modes of transportation on the island. Sitting in front of my adorable A-frame bungalow was my personal transportation for the week—a beach cruiser bike with a basket (in lime green) with my name on it. I do not know if it was possible for my smile to get any bigger, but it did. I loved this place already.

Biking over to the restaurant and main bar area (also oceanfront), I joined the rest of the guests who had arrived for a fresh

coconut and some information about the island. Other guests included a lovely family with two small girls from Botswana and a South African fishing TV show crew. (Well, I guess the fishing really is *that* good.)

I ventured over to the activity and dive center where my gear had already been delivered and made plans for the next day. I would be diving, of course... and the only one. (Seriously? I thought, who goes to pristine islands in the middle of the Indian Ocean and does not dive?!?! Answer: fishermen). I would find myself revisiting this question in my mind throughout the week, only to discover it was exactly what the fishermen (and fishermen) were saying about me.



Trevally swim over sea fans (far left); Endemic Seychelles anemonefish (top center); Bumphead parrotfish at Car Wash (above); Cleaner wrasse give a fish a cleaning (right); The resort's dive boat (left)



a golf cart to pick up my (large) camera while I was at breakfast (it was too big to manage on my bike), and it also magically appeared on the boat waiting for me. Once I was ready, the boat headed out to a site called Car Wash. The fishermen had all left much earlier and the boat ride felt like we were heading out on an adventure into the unknown, with no other boats or people around.

It was not unknown to the crew though, who gave an impressively accurate dive briefing of the site, even down to where we would see schools of certain fish.

Once underwater, it felt just as adventurous—there would be no hordes of other divers here, and no risk of another boat dropping a dozen tourists on top of us. It was just me and my guide, Rose, for hundreds of miles. How incredibly cool was that? And—the diving was excel-

lent. As briefed, groups of bluefin trevally swam past us. As we passed a school of bluestripe snapper, Rose pointed out endemic Seychelles anemonefish, and there were massive pink gorgonian sea fans everywhere. The big surprise (not in the briefing) was a group of about eight massive bumphead parrotfish. Not bad

Morning bliss

After waking up naturally by the golden light of dawn streaming through my curtains, I made a cup of coffee in my room and strolled out to the beach in front of my bungalow. While the other bungalows were not too far away, the gardening and landscaping made it feel as if I was the only person on a private island. Looking out at the water, I saw several turtles pop their heads above the surface for a breath and then disappear back underwater, but I could still make out their silhouettes in the clear, shallow water in front of me.

I leisurely made my way to breakfast,

having ridden my bike only a few minutes before arriving, and enjoyed more coffee, along with yogurt with fresh fruit and a croissant and muffin. More hardy options were available as well, such as eggs made to order and other hot items.

Diving

Over at the dive center, my gear was already on the boat and my wetsuit folded and waiting for me. They had also sent



Endemic Seychelles anemonefish

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for the check-out dive.

Currents and visibility are influenced by the tides, so to get the best conditions, the dive team suggested we dive once in the morning, take a long break, and then two dives later in the day. I was traveling alone, and somewhere along the line prior to arriving, I had mentioned it would be great to have a dive model. Just to start to describe how accommodating the staff was, they provided me with a dive model. On my next two dives, I had a dive guide and a dive model (and a quite good model at that).

We visited the dive sites known as Abyss and Arcade, and my model posed with more schools of bluestripe snapper and yellowspot emperors. We swam over an old anchor that probably belonged to a ship that long ago hit the reef. A large school of barracuda passed by and friendly batfish followed us around like curious puppies, particularly on our safety stops where they seemed to hover right along with us until we returned to the surface.

After diving and a warm shower (in my

Divers swim through a school of yellowspot emperors; Batfish (top center); School of bluestripe snapper (top right)



Hammock on the beach (above); One of the baby tortoises (right) born on the island and raised in tortoise pens. When they grow bigger and their shells harden, they are released and can roam free.



Aldabra giant tortoise (above); Sunrise at Alphonse (top left); Pesto pasta for lunch—many of the ingredients were grown on the island—and an ice cream sundae for dessert (top center)

lovely outdoor shower), I headed to the communal meeting point (the oceanfront bar) where the fishermen were telling tales of their bonefish and giant trevally catches. Soon after, I enjoyed a fantastic dinner under the stars before heading to sleep, with the sound of waves playing a natural soundtrack off in the distance.

Island life

I very quickly fell into a rhythm of waking up, making coffee to be sipped on the beach or on my patio, slowly making my way to breakfast and then riding my bike to the dive center. I was riding along, feeling ever so relaxed, when I rode past a

rock and I did a double take. Backpedaling on the brakes of my cruiser bike, I stopped, slowly backed up, and to my right, was a giant Aldabra tortoise—on the side of the bike path!

Thinking nothing of the tourist gaping at it, the tortoise continued to munch on grass. The Aldabra giant tortoise (*Aldabrachelys gigantea*) is one of only two giant tortoise species left in existence, the other being the Galapagos giant tortoise. While these two species are the last giant tortoise species on earth, they are not directly related. The Galapagos are most closely related to a tortoise species hailing from South America. The

Aldabra are related to a species from Madagascar. Giant tortoises can live longer than 150 years, with some in captivity confirmed to be living over 200. Over 152,000 tortoises are thought to live in the Aldabra Atoll, which is a protected World Heritage Site.

While other islands' tortoise populations were decimated long ago by sailors who brought them on ships to be kept for food and by habitat loss and destruction, some Aldabra tortoises survived on Aldabra Atoll. Today, they

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While riding down the road, there was a giant tortoise!



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A nalolo blenny smiles out from its tiny hole (left); Anthias pile into a hole with a moray eel (far left); Moray eel being cleaned by a cleaner shrimp (right)



Porcelain crab in an anemone (left); Yaeyama blenny (above left); Bluestriped fangblenny (above right)

are being reintroduced to several outer islands, including Alphonse, which now has around 60 tortoises roaming the island.

Also on the island was a "tortoise pen," in which little baby tortoises of different sizes were kept. I passed the pen daily on my way to the dive center. Adorable toy-sized giant tortoises could be seen chomping on leaves and slowly wan-

dering about their enclosure. I learned later that all the babies in the pen were born on Alphonse and were usually found by the gardeners around the island. Keeping them in the pen offered protection because their shells are quite soft when they are very small, making them easy prey for birds, which are returning to the island, as well as invasive rats and cats, which island staff are actively trying to eradicate. Once the tortoises get larger

and their shells harden, they are set free to roam the island.

Still in awe of my first giant-tortoise sighting, I excitedly told my story to the dive team who clearly were used to such tales, and one even replied that there was a tortoise that liked to live near her house on the island and was usually sitting right where she liked to park her bike. (Can I make a hashtag—*#AlphonseIslandProblems?*)

Back on the dive boat

After all my excitement, we were soon back on the boat (with my camera mysteriously picked up from my patio once again and appearing on the boat when I got there). The staff had suggested visibility might be a little low due to the tide, so I had my macro lens on my camera, ready to capture some of the small stuff around Alphonse. Needless to say, I was not disappointed. Hardly moving at all underwater, I saw eels being

cleaned, porcelain crabs in anemones along with the endemic Seychelles anemonefish, and blennies, blennies and more blennies.

I also tried to get a few shots of a behavior I had noticed the day before. Swarms of anthias buzzed around the reefs, and as I got close, they would (as usual) hide in the crevasses of the reef... but I noticed they were going into holes occupied by moray eels. I had never before seen this symbiotic rela-





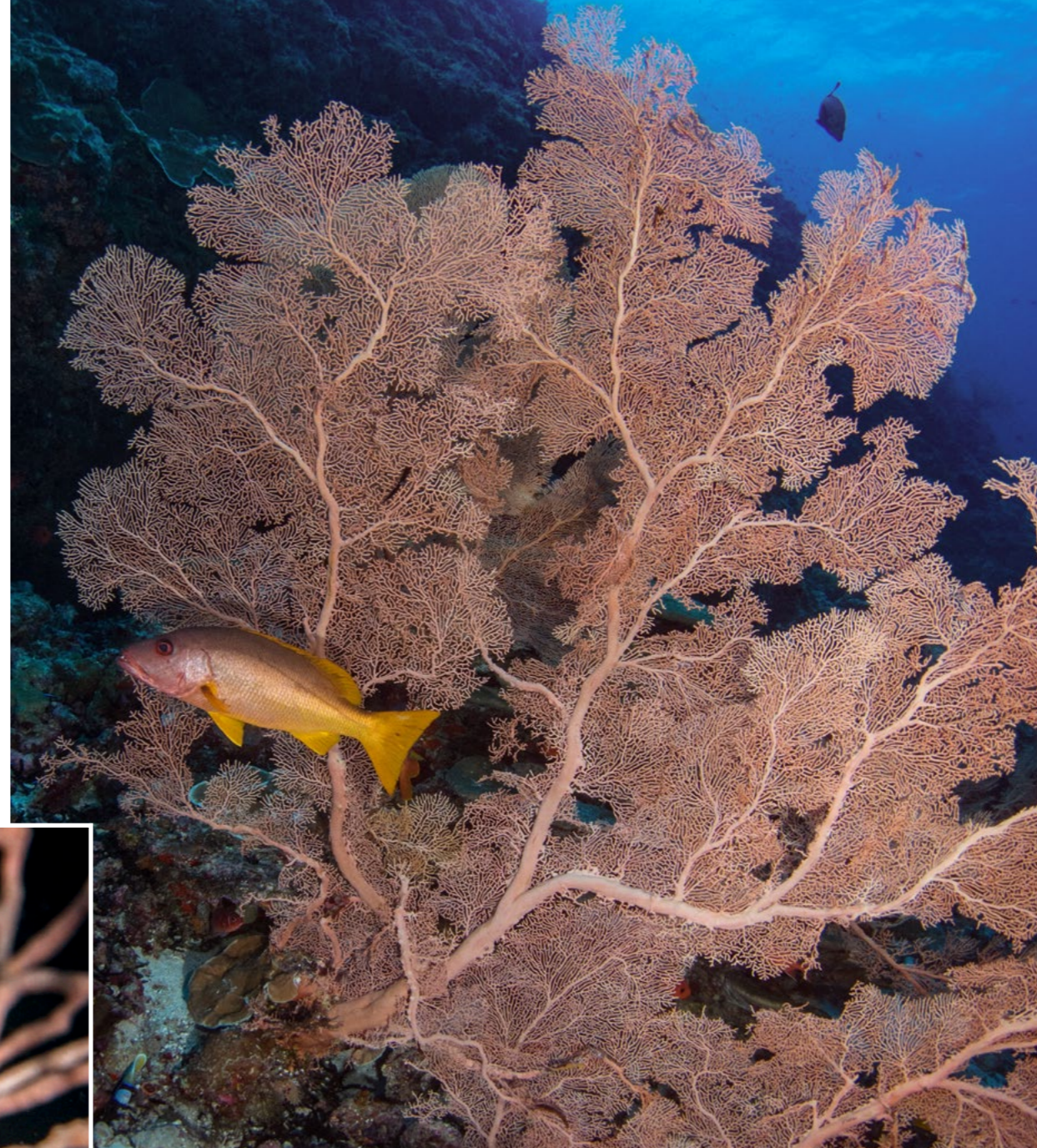
tionship in which dozens of pink, purple and orange anthias would crowd into a hole, sometimes even touching an eel which seemed to stand guard. The eels seemed to get upset with me and would quickly charge out and back into the hole when I came too close while taking a photo, as if they were protecting their anthias.

In the afternoon, we dived Boiler and Eagle Nest, and I had not one, but two amazing dive models: Chris, who worked at the activities and dive center, and his partner, Jenn, the absolutely phenomenal pastry chef on island (for real, I am still daydreaming about her beetroot panna cotta). Boiler was a forest of giant sea fans. They grew so tightly packed together that their shapes were altered by the other sea fans growing into them. Schools of fusiliers would whirl by, and on close inspection, the sea fans had long-nose hawkfish and gobies living within.

In the evening, there was a presentation given by the resident staff of the Island Conservation Society (ICS), a Seychelles non-governmental organization. Several staff members live on the island year-round and conduct research



on and around the island. They monitor the island's seabird populations, and green and hawksbill turtle nesting; they also conduct coral reef surveys and have many other projects. It was amazing to hear about their conservation projects on Alphonse and several other outer islands. The Seychelles has over 50 percent of its land under nature conservation, and this



is one of the groups helping to protect and restore the natural environments and advise on new projects taking place on the outer islands.

The perfect day

As the sun set on my third day at Alphonse, I sipped a perfect gin and tonic while watching the sky turn pink and reflected on what makes diving "good" at a certain location. There are some places and specific times where we go to see a certain animal or behavior: sharks, manta rays or coral spawning,



Goby on a gorgonian sea fan (above); Snapper with gorgeous sea fans on a wall (top right); Longnose hawkfish (left); Unlikely roommates: anthias and eels (top left)

OUTER ISLANDS CONSERVATION

When Alphonse Island was still a plantation, in an effort to improve the working conditions and overall state of the outer islands, the Islands Development Company (IDC) took charge of Alphonse and most of the outer islands in the early 1980s. They worked to improve conditions and production, and began to build hotels and resorts for tourism on the outer islands.

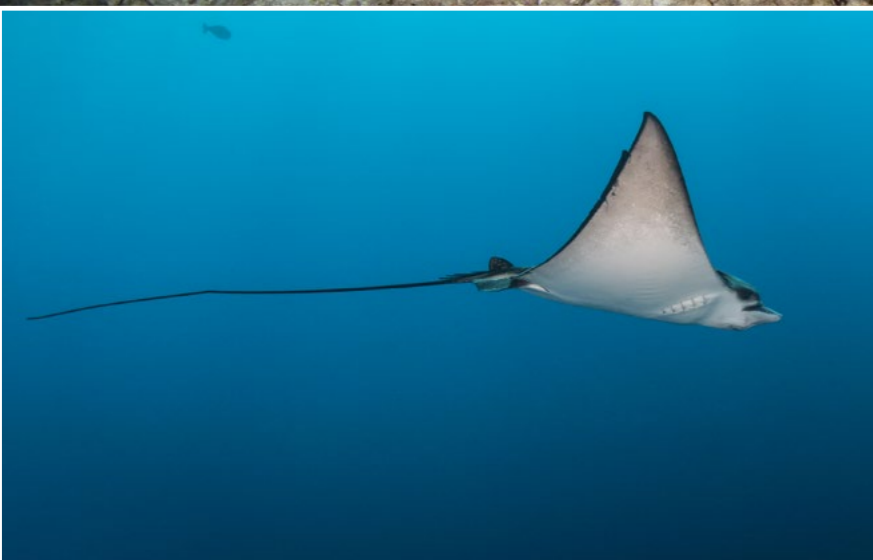
Currently, the IDC aims to make the outer islands profitable in an environmentally-sustainable manner. They own and operate planes to provide charters to the outer islands and manage electricity, water treatment facilities and infrastructure. They also provide many jobs for the people of the Seychelles and beyond.

The IDC recognized early on that the outer islands and their natural environments were special and should have an economic value, such as ecotourism. The IDC has an agreement to be advised by the Island Conservation Society (ICS) in the best ways to protect the environments of the outer islands. The ICS has conservation centers on Alphonse and several other islands, and they monitor the rest of the IDC islands.

The amount of conservation projects in which the ICS participates is really incredible. I heard stories about baited remote underwater cameras monitoring shark and ray presence and movement. They have a doctoral student from the University of Massachusetts studying giant trevallies and helping to implement catch-and-release fishing practices that cause the least amount of harm to the fish. They monitor the corals and sea turtles, tortoises, birds and so much more. They also advise on future changes to the island, including how to add buildings with the least impact. ■



Lucy poses with a trevally (above); Nurse sharks sleep under a ledge with blackbar soldierfish (left); Eagle ray in the blue (lower left)



Pinnacles, which several staff had mentioned as their favorite.

Pinnacles

The boat dropped us off at the edge of the island where the current was flowing directly towards land and wrapping around it in both directions. As we descended into clear water, the amount

of marine life below was stunning. A huge school of chubs lingered just below the surface, and closer to the sandy bottom were massive schools of bluestripe snappers and yellowspot emperors, filling the gaps between several rock pinnacles.

As we got closer to the coral-covered pinnacles, a few sea turtles swam from their sitting positions on the coral up to the sur-

face, passing right by us. As one returned from taking a breath of air, it swam back down, passing right between Lucy and me. Under rock overhangs, there were numerous tawny nurse sharks.

It was nonstop action, with a turtle here and a shark there. Lucy had lined up behind a school of blackbar soldierfish for a photo when right behind her emerged an eagle ray. At another point in the dive, she swam through a space between two pinnacles and several bluefin trevallies swam right in



Lucy takes a look at a sleeping nurse shark (above); Curious hawksbill sea turtle (left)

etc. But there are so many places we visit just because the diving is "good," having pretty reefs, lots of fish, maybe a turtle or an eagle ray sighting. I thought back on dive trips that were "good" in which I only saw maybe a turtle or two, or one ray, and a few sharks.

This day felt like it was all of the "good" diving most people experience in a lifetime—but jam-packed into one day. I took another sip and tried to remember what we had all seen. I was, for the third day in a row, the only diver. My guide was Lucy, one of the dive center's managers, and she also agreed to be my model for the day. Our first dive was at a site called

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to snap photos, I started to wonder how many photos of giant pink sea fans was too many.

Lunch was a bit different on this day; all of the resort guests met on an area of shallow sandflats at low tide for a BBQ-style lunch. Chairs and umbrellas for shade were set out as we ate together

on this remote, isolated island, upon which so few people ever step foot, devouring BBQ chicken pitas and some of the best brownies I have ever tasted.

Soon, we were back on the boat, about to dive a site called Hacksaw. Lucy back rolled into the water first, and she came back up and yelled "Silvertip!" I looked at our boat captain and wondered if that was a "get-in-the-water-right-now" sort of silvertip call or a "stay-on-the-boat,

front of her. A sweetlips, posing perfectly for the camera, seemed to get closer and closer, and we even had a giant trevally swim very close at the end of the dive.

Back on the boat, we motored over to the next dive site, but did not get far before we were surrounded by spinner dolphins. I asked if I could jump in and moments later, I was encircled by dolphins only for a moment before they swam off. Back on the boat, we started moving again and they were back. Once again I jumped in, only to see them for a few seconds before they took off again.

Napoleon and Hacksaw

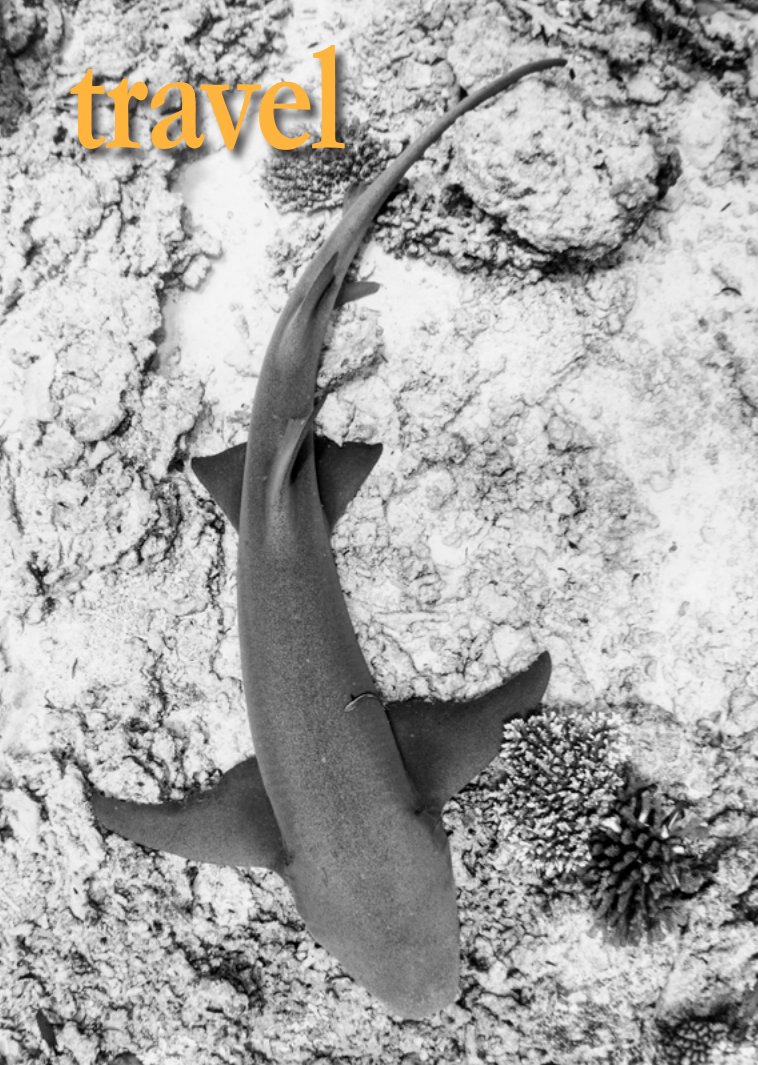
Our next dive site, Napoleon, was a swirl of sea fans and fish, and as I continued

discussing the diving (and the fishing). One boat of guests had gone snorkeling, including the two youngest guests, Megan and Taylor. They told me about the dolphins they saw on the way (I had seen them too), the turtles they swam with, and how they spent the morning collecting trash on the beach for an art project. I was very excited to see this art project when it was finished.

It was pretty fantastic to be on an exposed bit of sand, which is usually covered with water, and having lunch. Once again, I was surrounded by that jaw-dropping "Seychelles' blue," with the water changing shades of blue from dark to light, concluding its spectrum with the white sand. It reminded me that we were



All the guests at Alphonse met on a sand flat at low tide and had a fantastic BBQ lunch as the tide started to rise (above); Spinner dolphins encountered while snorkeling (top left); Silvertip shark (top right); Lucy with sweetlips (center) and giant sea fan (bottom right)



there-is-a-silvertip-shark-charging-me" sort of call. But I did not ask or wait for more explanation, I back rolled into the water and headed straight down—there was a silvertip to photograph!

I did not expect the shark to stick around, but it did, for about five minutes, and was joined by two others. Continuing the dive, we headed into another patch of sea fans, and the silvertip sharks seemed to follow us for a bit. I thought maybe I would get the perfect shot of a silvertip shark with pink sea fans behind, but they did not cooperate and soon left us. During the dive, we spotted an octopus, a peacock mantis shrimp and many schools of fish.

At the end of the day, we had seen two species of sea turtles, three species of shark, eagle rays, dolphins, giant trevally, huge schools of snapper, octopus, mantis shrimp, sweetlips and batfish, and enjoyed a lunch on an isolated sandflat in the middle of the Indian Ocean. Not a bad day... not a bad day at all.

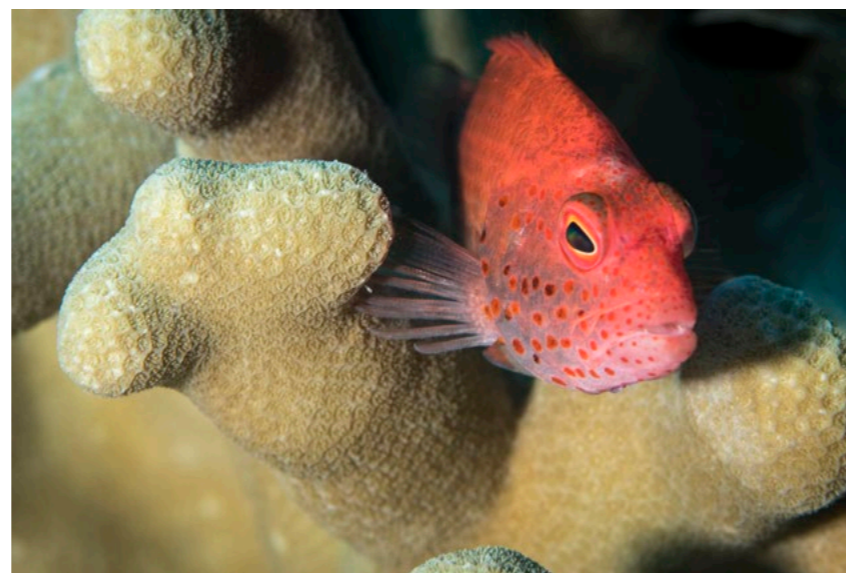
Spoiled

It was around this point that I started to get spoiled. Underwater, I had passed up photos of turtles, batfish and nurse sharks just because I already had so many. Our first dive at a site called Arcade was indeed a turtle city. Every few feet, there was another green or hawksbill turtle—some under ledges scratching their shells, some at cleaning stations getting a bath, others in the water column going up for air, others coming back down, and one even seemed to slowly lead me to a school of batfish, so it could have its photo taken with them.

My guide, Rose, had the cutest batfish follow her the whole dive, which made me smile; it just stayed a few feet behind her, continuously looking like it was about

to nip at her fins. I pointed it out to her, and she gave a heart hand signal underwater. As our dive ended, we ascended to our safety stop, and her batfish buddy seemed to have called all its friends. We had maybe two dozen circling us.

Pinnacles was so good the day before that we went back, and it did not disappoint. Once again there were plenty



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: A nurse shark lying on the sand is cleaned by wrasse; Following a sea turtle, it took me to a school of batfish; Octopus hiding in reef; Dive guide Rose surrounded by batfish; Hawkfish



of nurse sharks, schools of snapper, several Napoleon wrasse, which would not get close enough for a good photo, and at the end of the dive, a fever of marbled stingrays. Just another day of diving around Alphonse Atoll...

Change of scene

A few other divers joined the boat doing an advanced open water

class, and we dived Arina, a site in the lagoon of St. François Atoll. There were schools of humpback snapper, two eagle rays, which snuck up behind me, a school of bigeye trevally and lots of fish.

Our second dive was back at East Side Wall. This time, I used my wide-angle lens. A cold thermocline crept in early in the dive and would not go away. I found myself shivering and was just about to call off the dive around 40 minutes in, when a school of bumphead parrotfish came straight for us. I took one shot and they turned around to swim away, but one turned back around towards me. It found a piece of coral to bite, and while it was eating, it let me get quite close. When it was finished, it looked right at me, and then, swam away. We also had a glimpse of a lemon shark.

Our day finished with sunset drinks at the beach bar, a short bike ride

through the jungle, ending near the western corner of the island. Mingling with other guests, we sipped drinks and nibbled on fresh fish tacos and dried plantains, discussing our daily adventures and how beautiful and unique this place was. After the sun set, we rode our bikes back for dinner, and I found myself on my beach looking up at a million stars before calling it a night.

Macro life

On my last day of diving, I decided to shoot macro because the weather looked dark and stormy. At a site called Theater, I found a large pufferfish, with bite marks on its face, being cleaned by several wrasse. The cleaner wrasse moved around the red, exposed, fleshy areas near the eye and mouth of the fish. I also found several longnose hawkfish in



the sea fans. An octopus came out to inspect us, and at the very end, of course, a manta swam overhead (these things always happen when shooting macro).

FADs

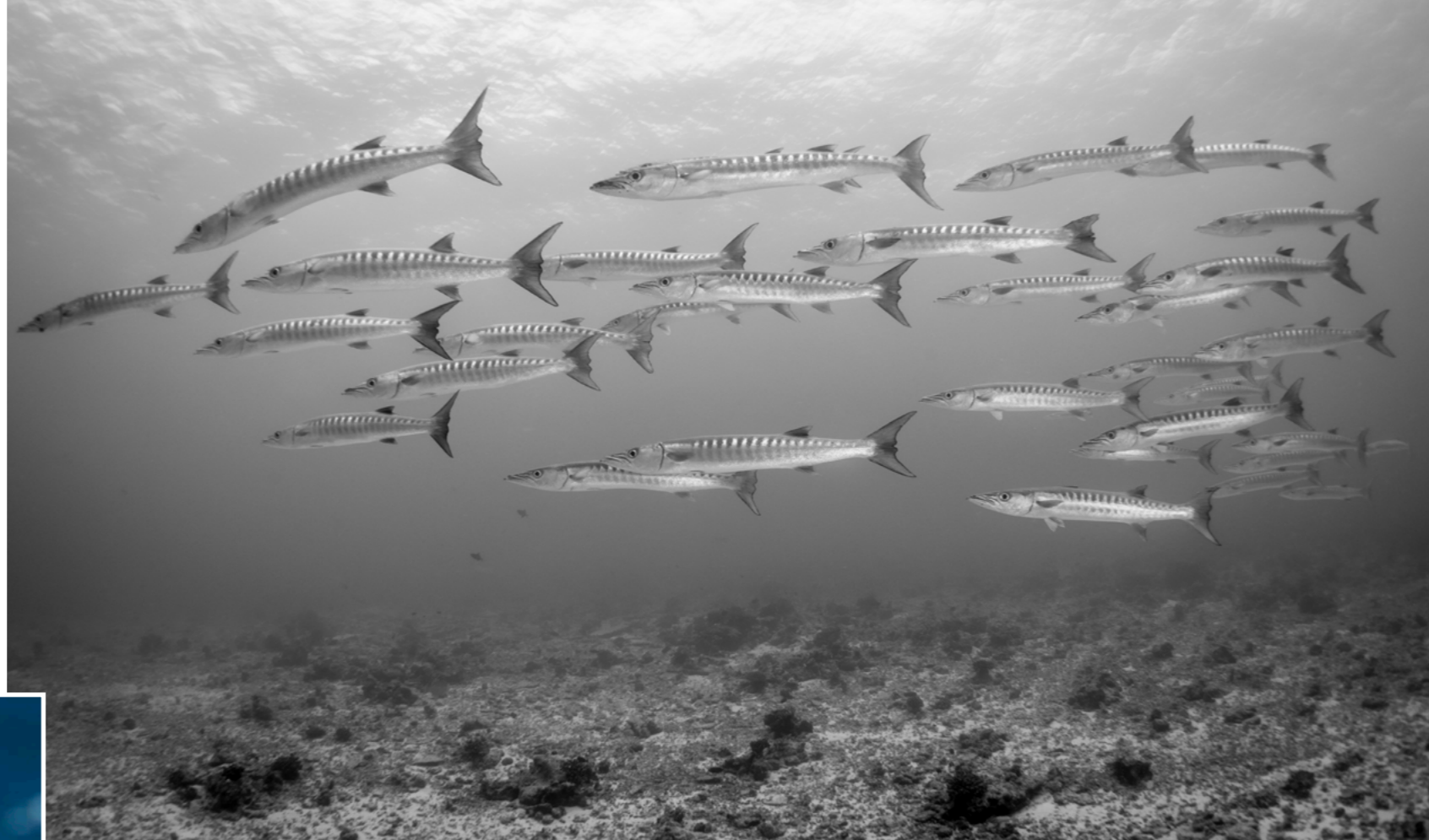
The last dive was a special dive. The students were doing a Dive Against Debris, and the plan was to try and remove a FAD (fishing aggregation device). Large commercial fishing boats in the Indian Ocean are known to send out these floating platforms with lines or nets hanging from them to

Bumphead parrotfish (left); A fever of rays on the reef (above); A pufferfish's wounds are cleaned by a wrasse (lower left)



Scorpionfish (above); Healthy reefs with diverse marine life can be found at Alphonse (top right); Fire dartfish (center inset)





Giant barracuda (above); Blacktip grouper (top left); Life under a FAD (left)—barnacles were growing on the lines and there were dozens of golden trevallies; Wall art made by guests after beach clean-ups included this palm tree by Alphonse's youngest guests Megan and Taylor (right)

one, I also thought that involved looking for one, as in, we know they are out there, maybe we will come across one and be able to remove it.

I was wrong. This was not a “maybe-we-will-find-one” mission, the FADs were apparently so numerous around Alphonse that we saw three within a few hundred feet of each other. We managed to remove two in just under an hour, with a group of about eight people. I was shocked at how severe the FAD problem was here, yet it seemed unknown to the rest of the world.

Turning beach debris into art
Back at the dive center, the amazing staff cleaned my gear and hung it to dry (and my camera disappeared and reappeared at my bungalow).

I also noticed a new piece of artwork on the walls. Made from plastic and garbage found on the beach. Megan and Taylor, the youngest guests of Alphonse, had turned discarded flip-flops, bottle caps, a yoga mat, cigarette lighters and toothbrushes into a palm tree collage. Their artwork was hung with a humpback whale, a turtle, and other designs made by other guests—such a cool project, and their palm tree turned out so well!

Everyone met at the oceanfront bar for drinks and storytelling from the final fishing day. I found myself again contemplating how remote we were, the amazing service of the resort, and the variety of things you can do on the island. Over 100 staff reside on the island, and the resort can house around 70 guests—although often, it is much less. The staff paid attention to so many little details, such as the lights at night on the bungalows



and around the island. They were green and red, so that newly hatched turtles would not get confused and crawl inland towards white lights instead of out to sea.

WHO YOU DIVE WITH

As I continue to travel for diving the same realization keeps occurring to me: as consumers, we need to make educated decisions as to what companies we patronize.

- Choose to dive only with operations that care about the state of the ocean. Those that do all they can to minimize their impact by making efforts to better the waters they dive such as beach clean-ups or teach educational programs and policies that help divers to be environmentally-friendly.
- Choose to stay at resorts and hotels that make efforts to conserve water and energy (such as rainwater catchment and solar power).
- Find out what happens to the waste. Does sewage get dumped on the very reefs you will dive the next day or is it treated?
- Are the restaurants importing foreign foods with a huge carbon footprint and at the expense of the environment when they could be using local produce?

If we only patronize eco-friendly businesses, it will force the rest to convert to more sustainable practices. We have the power to change dive travel for the better. We also need to realize that being environmentally-friendly will likely cost business owners more. We need to be willing to absorb that cost during our stay, not opting to use the cheapest option just to save a few bucks. For example, it costs nothing to dump sewage directly into the ocean, but having waste water treatment plants costs money, we need to be willing to absorb the costs of our dive vacations not doing harm the very environment we desired to see. So maybe the Alphonse model is an answer. We sacrifice part of an island to tourism, but in the most environmentally-sustainable way possible, and support the rest of the island in its return to a healthy ecosystem. Visitors get to stay on a pristine island and dive untouched, unspoiled reefs. ■



African pygmy angelfish (above); An octopus with twotone chromis and sea fan (left)

It seemed like the staff anticipated what I needed (sometimes even before I realized I needed it) and nothing was too much to ask.

The resort also offered fishing and diving trips to other outer islands, including Astove, Cosmoledo and Poivre Atolls. The same thought kept crossing my mind, "What an amazing place." Also, "How do I get back here again? How can I get to the other outer islands? I wonder if they need a dishwasher?"

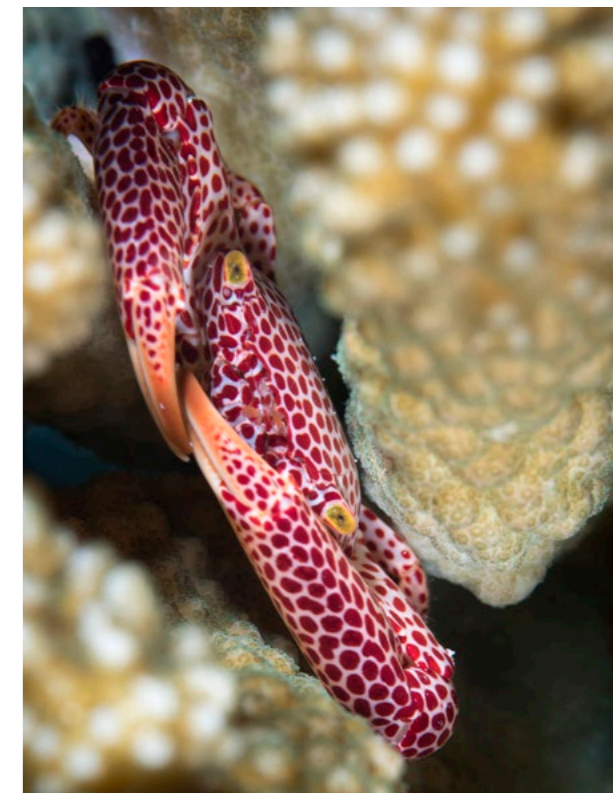
**The last day:
Island exploration**

On the previous night at dinner, Sam and Lucy had suggested a guided island bike tour—something most guests did the first few days they were on island, but my diving sched-

ule did not allow time for it. I eagerly said yes, but woke up to stormy skies, and I wondered if anyone would want to ride around in the rain with me.

After breakfast, I headed to the dive center in a light drizzle, passing three tortoises munching on grass in the rain. I gave them each a wave and a silent goodbye. I figured that if my tour was cancelled, I would say goodbye to the dive team as well, but Sam was there and ready to show me the island, so off we went.

Before my trip, I had read up on some of the history of the island, and Sam reiterated that it was originally a coconut plantation, with only a few people living on the island. They had cut down most of the natural vegetation to make way for coco-



Red-spotted coral crab on hard coral



Grouper and anthias on healthy reef (left) and palm trees on beach (above) at Alphonse Island; A green sea turtle scratches its shell under a coral head (right)



nut palms, and they had mined the island for guano, which was used to fertilize the palms, to the detriment of the topsoil. As a result, many birds stopped breeding on the island because the vegetation in which they nested was gone. In addition, turtle eggs (and bird eggs) were harvested, causing a decrease in populations.

Sam also showed me the gardens where much of the food consumed on the island was grown. Several gardeners worked full time to grow fruits and vegetables. He also took me to the island's solar plant where almost all of the power needed to operate the island was harvested from the sun.

Alphonse Resort really seemed to be the epitome of ecotourism. It felt like the resort had done it right and this would be an excellent model for other companies in the tourism industry to follow. Admittedly, it is not a budget destination, but one is paying for an island that is being rehabilitated. While visitors get luxury and adventure in a pristine environment, the island is being cared for and given a chance to return to its natural

state, as evidenced by the return of the birds and turtles.

The isolation of the outer islands of Seychelles makes them easy places for illegal fishing and poaching. One way to deter turtle and seabird egg poachers is to have people on the island year-round (like tourists). Of course, this may mean that the poachers just go to another island, but at least some islands will be safe havens for the birds and turtles.

And on Alphonse, it is apparent that this approach is working, as I have never seen so many turtles. In the mornings, when I walked out to the beach, at any given moment, two or three sea turtle heads would be peeking out of the water to grab a breath of air. The dark shadows of sea turtles diving and gliding past the shoreline were everywhere. Birds were constantly seen circling the island and also nesting.

As the days passed, full of activities, but still at the relaxing pace of the island, one could almost feel the collective sadness among the guests as we realized we would soon have to leave this wonder-

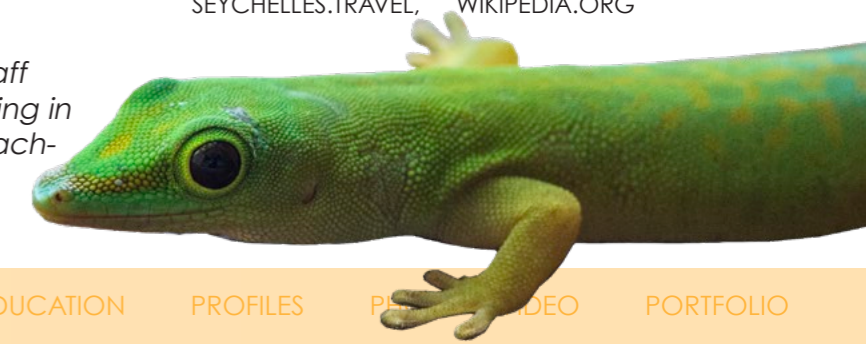
ful island. We were gathered up on Saturday afternoon, leaving our bikes behind and returning to the runway in golf carts. I suppose my bike soon had another name on it and someone else was riding it in paradise. The IDC plane came, and we hugged the staff on our way out (in my head, I was already plotting how and when I could return to visit Alphonse and the other outer islands). I got on the plane, craned my neck to see out the window and watched the island disappear into the blue. Still smiling, I thought, "What an amazing place." ■

Special thanks go to Alphonse Island Resort (alphonse-island.com).

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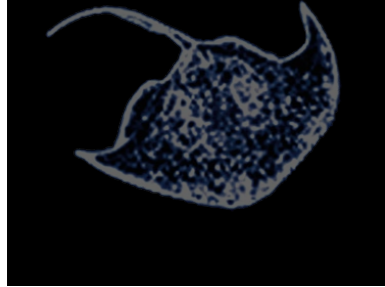
SOURCES: ALPHONSE-ISLAND.COM, BLUESAFARI.COM, IDCSEYCHELLES.COM, ISLANDCONSERVATIONSEYCHELLES.COM, SEYCHELLES.TRAVEL, WIKIPEDIA.ORG



Bicycling along the scenic paths of Alphonse (above); Seychelles day gecko (right)

fact file

Seychelles Islands



SOURCES: ALPHONSE-ISLAND.COM, US CDC, BLUESAFARI.COM, IDCSEYCHELLES.COM, ISLANDCONSERVATIONSEYCHELLES.COM, SEYCHELLES.TRAVEL, STATE.TRAVEL.US, US CIA WORLD FACTBOOK, WIKIPEDIA.ORG, XE.COM

History The islands of the Seychelles were initially settled by the French in the late 1700s and then ceded to the British in 1814. Estates were established throughout the islands growing coconut, cotton, sugar cane, cinnamon and vanilla. The Seychelles gained independence in 1976.

The Alphonse group (Alphonse, St. François and Bijoutier) as well as many other outer islands were developed into coconut plantations by the late 1800s. On Alphonse and many other islands,

the native flora was destroyed to make way for coconut palms and the turtle nests ransacked for their eggs, meat and shells. The birds were either killed or they stopped returning because their habitats were lost. The island was mined for guano, further damaging the island, but helping to grow plenty of coconuts.

In 1977, the government took control of the outer islands with means to improve working conditions. In 1983, the Island Development Company (IDC) began managing the Alphonse group (and the outer islands). In 1999, the Alphonse Island Resort and the Island Conservation Society (ICS) has had a center on the island since 2007. Currently, the IDC, ICS, resort and fishing company work together to preserve Alphonse (and several other islands) and rehabilitate the islands as best as possible to restore them to their natural state. The partnership allows people to visit these unique islands. Government: presidential republic. Capital: Victoria

Geography The Seychelles is located in the Indian Ocean, just south of the Equator, east of Kenya and northeast of Madagascar. It includes 155 (plus seven reclaimed) islands, which are divided up into the inland islands and the outer islands. The inland islands contain 42 granitic and two coralline islands, which is where 98% of the population lives. The outer islands consist of the Amirantes group (29 coral islands), the Farquhar group (13 coral islands), and the Aldabra group (67 raised coral islands). Alphonse is part of the Amirantes group and is 400km (250 miles) from Mahé. Coastline: 491km.

Climate The Seychelles has an equatorial climate with high humidity and a temperature that changes little throughout the year. The northwest trade winds blow from October to March, bringing more precipitation and lower winds. The southeast trade winds blow from May to September, which tend to be higher winds with dry, cooler temperatures. Water temperatures are generally 26-27°C (78-82°F), although chillier thermoclines are

Location of Seychelles Islands on global map (right); Location of Alphonse Atoll on map of Seychelles Islands (below); Sergeant damselfish on reef (bottom left)



US CIA WORLD FACTBOOK / PUBLIC DOMAIN

common; these can be as cold as 18°C (66°F). Alphonse offers diving from November to May for the best water conditions.

Environment Many of the outer islands were used as plantations in the past, wiping out native vegetation and destroying seabird and turtle nesting areas. Major efforts are being made to attempt to restore many islands, and bird and turtle populations are returning. Extensive fishing, both legal and illegal, continue to decimate fish populations. Fishing trawlers deploy thousands of FADs (fishing aggregation devices) that float freely and often entangle marine mammals, turtles, sharks and rays. They also wash up on beaches, getting tangled up on coral reefs and become marine debris. Climate change and sea level rise are also problems as the outer islands are low-lying. The Seychelles is working

to solve environmental issues and embraces ecotourism as a means to both increase the economy and preserve the beautiful islands. There are many protected and managed conservation areas, working to restore previously damaged habitats to more natural states.

Economy In the past, major exports of the Seychelles came from plantations growing copra, cinnamon and vanilla. Farming and fishing continue today but at a much smaller scale, mostly for local use. Current exports include processed and frozen fish, copra, cinnamon and vanilla. Tourism is a large part of the economy.

Population 94,633 (July 2018 est). Ethnic groups: primarily creole (East African and Malagasy); plus French,

Indian, Chinese and Arab populations. Religions: Roman Catholic 76.2%, Protestant 10.5%, other Christian 2.4%, Hindu 2.4%, Muslim 1.6% (2010 est). Internet users: 52,664 (July 2016 est.)

Currency Seychellois rupee (SCR). US dollar, Euro and British Pounds are sometimes accepted in tourist areas. ATMs are common throughout Mahé, but there are none on Alphonse. Credit cards are commonly accepted, although sometimes with fees. Exchanges rates: 1USD=13.32SCR, 1EUR=15.03SCR, 1GBP=16.03SCR, 1AUD=9.03SCR, 1SGD=9.04SCR.

Language English, French and Seychellois Creole.

Phone/Internet Mahé has reliable cellphone networks with data plans available. Most hotels and some restaurants have Wi-Fi. On

Alphonse, there is no cell service. The resort provides free Wi-Fi in the reception and bar areas. It is possible to call out of Alphonse, but only by costly satellite service.

Voltage 220-240 volts AC 50 Hz; British standard square three-pin. Alphonse has multipin adapters in the rooms.

Travel/Visa The Seychelles is a visa-free country, but visitors must provide on arrival a departure ticket, confirmation of accommodation and proof of sufficient funds. Visitors can stay up to three months, with extensions up to 12 months. Proof of yellow fever vaccination may be required if coming from countries with yellow fever.

Transportation In Mahé, taxis are common, there are plenty of rental car agencies, and the island has an extensive public bus system.

Health & Security In Mahé, tap water meets WHO safe drinking standards. That being said, it is advisable to drink bottled water. Alphonse makes its own water, so it is safe to drink from taps. There is no malaria or yellow fever in the Seychelles, but outbreaks of mosquito-borne diseases such as dengue and Zika occur occasionally, so avoid mosquito bites. Routine vaccinations are suggested, including measles.

In Mahé, crime rates are low, but like anywhere, take sensible precautions. Secure valuables in safes, do not leave valuables in plain view inside cars or on beaches, and be aware of your surroundings. On Alphonse, there is little chance of issues.

Decompression Chambers Mahé Victoria Hospital in Victoria Silhouette Island (45-minute boat ride from Mahé). ■

