



WHAT IT FEELS LIKE

Expeditioning Through Aldabra

A team traversed the remote territories of the Seychelles in 1993 and rediscovered a hidden paradise – one with untouched reefs and unusual endemic species

Text and Images by Al Hornsby

A large school of cardinalfish in Cosmoleda, an atoll of the Aldabra Group

If you are like most divers, you've probably dreamed of that once-in-a-lifetime dive trip – exploring some far-off, exotic ocean on reefs that have never been dived before; walking on deserted, white sand beaches where there is no sign of another human being; and sailing, day after day, never seeing another vessel. In 1993, a small group of us had the rare opportunity to live out such a dream. Aboard Howard Rosenstein's 37-metre-long dive boat *Fantasea II*, chartered by David Doubilet of National Geographic, we explored and dived a remote, virtually untouched area of the western Indian Ocean. In what was thought to be the first large-scale diving expedition in this area since Jacques-Yves Cousteau's famous discovery-voyage in 1954, we visited the exotic places he chronicled in his book, *The Living Sea*.

Our group was international, with Doubilet and his support crew, John Boyle and Robin Kewell of Shark Bay Films, producing a film about the voyage; and several underwater photographers, writers, and crew from all over the world.

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Our trip began in Mahé, Seychelles and in a 1,200-kilometre outbound run over 21 days, we would visit the coral atolls of Alphonse, Bijoutier, Cosmoledo, Astove, Assumption, and Aldabra. Besides diving virgin, untouched reefs that often had more concentrated marine life than we had ever seen before, we explored pristine islands that bore no mark of human presence and were home to birds, turtles, and other creatures that often showed no concern for our intrusion.

What follows is a collection of excerpts from my journal of the remarkable journey that we will always remember as “Expedition: Aldabra”.

DAY 1 APPROACHING THE SEYCHELLES

Sunrise over the Indian Ocean; it's a quickly-brightening dawn. The sea stretches away far below us in all directions, a pale, medium blue. Ahead, a string of lush, green islands comes into view; each surrounded by bright turquoise water; each fringed with brilliant, white sand; each a small jewel awaiting us on the morning – and where *Fantasea II* is awaiting our arrival.

DAY 2 OPEN OCEAN

We had moved onto the boat with a huge mass of equipment. By rough count, we have some 29 housed cameras, 15 Nikonos V's, seven Nikonos RS's (David and I had some of the first ones recently introduced into the US), four housed video systems, and 70 strobes and movie lights, all of which virtually cover *Fantasea's* rear deck.

We are now heading southwesterly on a 24-hour run to Alphonse and Bijoutier. After two days of diving, we'll continue for another 40 hours to dive the lonely Cosmoledo Atoll. Next, we'll run southeast for several hours to Astove. Then, it will be an overnight, northwesterly-run to our goal: the mysterious Aldabra Lagoon, and nearby Assumption Island. Due to the lack of detailed charts for this remote region, the crew will rely on general maps and a collection of aerial images for this complex navigation.

Consisting of 12 fringing islands around a huge lagoon, Aldabra is a World Heritage Site, occupied only by the scientific team of its small research station. Its birdlife is incredibly rich, and it is one of the two places in the world (the other is the Galápagos Islands, Ecuador) where land tortoises exist in the wild (some 150,000 of them, compared to the Galápagos' 400).

DAY 4 BIJOUTIER ISLAND

Several of us are transported by Zodiac to this tiny, postcard-perfect sand islet; its interior thick with coconut palms. We walk in across the shallow reef-flat through a foot of water. The bio-system is pristine and unusual, with a heavy, deep-green seagrass covering everything, with small corals growing underneath and in-between. Large, spotted tiger cowries lie about, nestled in the grass by the hundreds.



Top: *Fantasea II* docked at Mahé Seychelles

Middle: Aldabra Lagoon, southwest of the Seychelles

Above: Rose-branched murex along the coral beds of the Seychelles

Underwater photography pioneer David Doubilet and our camera gear





DAY 7 COSMOLEDO

We have arrived at desolate Cosmoledo – hundreds of miles from anywhere. It is a large lagoon surrounded by thin, duned islands. The vegetation is mainly low, rough scrub.

We dive just north of its pass into the lagoon. John, Robin, and I move down the reef and see potato cod, groupers, and schooling jacks. At the drop-off edge, we encounter a strong, cold-water upwelling.

Then, magic happens. I see a gigantic school of at least a thousand blacktailed snappers moving over the reef edge below me. As I near them, at just over 30 metres, I find a large star coral mound covered with swaying white and purple soft corals. The milling snappers move in to form a solid, swaying backdrop, a living curtain. A school of oriental sweetlips hovers over the coral, and more potato cods drift in and out of the panorama. I shoot picture after picture, nearly mesmerised by the scene before me. Finally, film gone, out of air, and visually blown away, I must reluctantly ascend.

“The milling snappers move in to form a solid, swaying backdrop, a living curtain”

DAY 9 ASTOVE

We have anchored off Astove, a low, sandy spit of land with low, dry bushes and grass surrounding a shallow inner lagoon. We enter the water just at the channel-mouth. The spot is lovely; bright, clear water on a steep slope of intermittent coral and sand valleys. Huge schools of snappers, large giant sweetlips, groupers, and other fish abound, as do green turtles, which seem to be everywhere. A school of circular spadefish joins us and stays for the rest of the dive, nipping at our fins and exhaust bubbles.

As I move away from the boat, I reach an area massed with schooling humpback snappers squeezed closely together; from underneath, they are a solid two-to-three-foot thick mat, packed so tightly side-to-side that I can't see through them to the surface. I glance below me and discover I'm hovering over two large black-blotched stingrays, nestled closely together in the sand.



“A fresh set of tracks leads up over the sand; in her deep crater, a green turtle remains”

DAY 11 ALDABRA LAGOON

After an all-night, rolling, stormy run from Astove, we arrive at Aldabra, the largest, most remote, coral atoll in the world, with thin, fringing islands of sand and iron shore strung around a gigantic, central lagoon.

As we cruise near shore looking for a potential dive site, we see mantas breaking the surface. We grab cameras and skin diving gear, and jump in. The mantas, two of them, large with dark backs and brilliant white undersides, move away slowly and we follow. I notice that one manta is leading crew-members Betty, Ruth, and Tally in a large circle. I swim hard and position myself in its expected path, then free dive down to about 10 metres and wait. It's not long until he comes into view and then swims directly to me – stopping about two metres away, claspers curled. I shoot. A moment more and he swims closer and directly over my head; my second image is manta overhead, full-frame.

DAY 13 ASSUMPTION ISLAND

We make the two-hour run to Assumption – a long, sandy island with dune hills and low trees, and anchor off a curving, white sand beach. The water is brilliant cobalt, turquoise in the shallows. We jump in to find a sandy bottom sloping away to deep water, interspersed with large coral bommies. Life is amazingly prolific; each bommie is a small community, with anemones, small schooling fish, morays, groupers, coneys, hawkfish, lionfish, and angelfish.

As Robin stretches out on the bottom filming a close-up of a curious lionfish and me, he jumps and gives a muffled yelp. As he turns over, we see a small moray has emerged from a crevice under him and latched on to his inner thigh – right through his wetsuit! I laugh enough to flood my mask; the little morays in this area are ferocious – I've been bitten three different times so far, myself.

A green turtle gliding over the reefs of the Seychelles

Cosmoledo and the other islands we visited were home to massive schools of fish, like these blacktailed snappers

DAY 15 OFF ALDABRA

Late night; after a day of diving Aldabra's lush outer reefs, we now drift in the open sea. Lionel and I slip into the blood-warm water on snorkel to photograph whatever may be attracted to the huge spotlight David has lowered beneath the boat. It is a mysterious, moonless night on the rolling surface of the deep, dark ocean. We sweep our lights around and are met with a parade of small creatures flowing by in the current, including thousands of minuscule, squirming, jetting, golden octopi, smaller than a fingernail, that latch onto anything they encounter, be it camera, strobe or us; and, something marvellous I had never seen before – several, small jellyfish with slightly larger fish living, unharmed, inside their bells.

A Spanish dancer with imperial shrimp

“We sweep our lights around and are met with a parade of small creatures flowing by in the current”

DAY 18 INSIDE ALDABRA LAGOON

Robin, Chris, and I go to a quiet beach to photograph tortoises and birds. There are several large tortoises under the trees, and they gaze at us with wrinkled, ancient faces as we move close to shoot. Unconcerned, they browse as they move slowly about, seeming to eat anything and everything – leaves, pine needles, grass.

That evening, under a steady rain, we stand at *Fantasea's* rail looking down at the dark water; a horde of baby turtles swims slowly by. The terns know this is a night of hatching; by the hundreds, they are everywhere, hovering just over the surface, searching for baby turtles. One rain-battered tern approaches us, and Tally extends her arm. The fearless bird lands, shakes his feathers dry, and then flies off into the deep night.



Unharmed, this open-ocean fish dwelled within a jellyfish's bell



One of the thousands of tiny octopi we encountered in the open ocean off Aldabra

DAY 20 ASSUMPTION

We move the boat back to Assumption for a last day of diving. Afterwards, we head out for a final, late afternoon snorkel. I swim as a glowing, setting sun breaks from under the clouds at the horizon. As I surface from a free dive, the sun's rays suddenly pierce the surface of the water, showering down a brilliant cascade of sparkling, golden light. I rise through it, mesmerised by this scene of such breathtaking beauty. I rest on the surface, immersed now, not simply in the sea, but in a moment shared with a magical universe.

EPILOGUE

Now, months later, I still reminisce about what has truly been my dive trip of a lifetime. We saw more concentrated and varied marine life than we had ever seen, anywhere. We dived places that had never before been dived, indeed, seeing reefs, fish, and sights likely never witnessed by another human being.

“I rest on the surface, immersed now, not simply in the sea, but in a moment shared with a magical universe”

And throughout the trip, I remember being struck with a recurring thought: Here were the Earth, the sea, much as they must have existed since the beginnings of time. This huge area, thousands upon thousands of square miles, had the appearance of being virtually untouched by man, and, seemingly, was so vast that it would be impossible to imagine that we could ever affect it, or bring it to ruin.

But then, there was the realisation, we were seeing things as they once were everywhere – the Earth in its own full state, balanced, unimaginably rich, with every niche filled with teeming life. And, tragically, we are affecting this vastness, bit by sad bit. [SDAA](#)

The reefs of Cosmoledo and Aldabra were spectacularly lush and rich with life



Robin Kewell
at Aldabra,
Seychelles, 1993

SEYCHELLES
MAHÉ

- My final thoughts from the trip were left in *Fantasea's* guest book:

*The touch of the sea was close at hand;
As we walked her fringing sands, she whispered.
As we rode her mighty swell, she roared.
As we delved into her heart, she sang.
She touched us, and we shall remember.*

Al Hornsby, 1993

BIJOUTIER ISLAND



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Al Hornsby is a well-known dive professional, diving and wildlife photographer, author, and environmentalist. With four books to his credit, Al is a regular contributor to international dive magazines. Al is a longtime executive (currently Senior Vice President, Legal Affairs) for PADI; former Editor/Publisher of *Skin Diver* magazine; former President of the Dive Equipment and Marketing Association; and a founder of Project AWARE, an environmental organisation.

ALDABRA ISLANDS



ASSUMPTION
ISLAND

COSMOLEDO ATOLL

ASTOVE ISLAND