

Cuba 2001



As we step off the plane, I'm blasted by the first hit of humidity and feel myself start to unwind. I've been anticipating this trip back to Cuba - its people and its waters - for months.

Our hour-long bus ride to the resort takes us past pineapple and tobacco plantations, a Dutch-style village, and apartments full of resort employees. We cross the 26-kilometer causeway that connects the mainland to the string of Cayos where we'll live for the next two weeks. On the way we see dolphins playing in the water and a solid line of pink flamingoes in the distance.

Before I know it we're pulling into the resort. It feels almost like coming home. We recognize the chief luggage handler, the folks behind the front desk, the churro man, the bartender. It's better yet that they remember us.

Day one on the water - David and Aaron are in fishing mode. They've lasted two full days without venturing to the flats. Today, they're in search of bonefish.

Amy and I on the other hand are in search of sun, sleep, and solitude.

We all find what we're looking for.

The guys return with tales of bonefish that they share verbally and with gestures -- much like they had to communicate with their Spanish-speaking guides....



They share stories about the ones that broke off in the mangroves after making the reel sing like only bonefish can. There's the bonefish that measured longer than Dave's arm. And don't forget about the school that spooked just outside of casting range.

Together they landed seven fish and lost at least that many more. The ones in-hand measured from 24" to more than 30".

Day one whetted their appetites for the "shadows on the flats" despite the inexperience of Aaron's guide, which certainly affected his day.



Day two on the water - David and I are hunting bonefish. Today, David's with another rookie guide. (Aaron's guide from day one's been sent home at David and Aaron's suggestion.) I'm with the resident expert who's been guiding these waters for four years and fishing them for many more.

I haven't been on the water since October, 2000 when I fished to stacked chum salmon in a narrow stretch of river on the lower mainland. There, I could see the fish, cast to them, set the hook, and reel them in.

Fishing to bonefish on a windy Cuban flat is considerably more challenging.

I spend the morning relearning my cast, learning how to spot elusive bonefish, and frustrating myself and Florian, my guide.

Around 10:30 Florian, who is always on the alert and has eyes like a hawk, exclaims "Palometa, Palometa," and points to a spot on the horizon. It takes me a minute, but I eventually see the tell-tale black tail of the permit. David hears our calls and spots the school of six fish headed his way.

He quickly ties on a white epoxy crab pattern, casts it about forty feet, and lets it sink. All four of us watch as the lead permit tips its head down toward the ocean floor and waves its beautiful forked tale in a happy salute. Dave feels his fly move. He sets the hook with an extra tug for good measure. The fish doesn't realize it's hooked initially - perhaps it's used to being pinched by its prey. Then, the rest of the school seems to realize what's happening and takes off toward the channel. Dave's fish takes a screaming run and tries to keep up with its friends. Its strength is amazing, but even this sea-faring creature can't maintain a steady run towing a fly line, rod, David, and a mustard-colored boat complete with a soaking wet guide who's so excited by the action he fell overboard.



David plays the fish for about 10 minutes before it's netted, photographed, and released. That's one more species to add to his list....

I have at least 10 chances at bonefish even though the wind blows the water off the flats and we don't see as many fish as other days on that same water.

By the end of the day Dave lands a few more bonefish and I begin to hear my guide's whispers of "ah, Maria!"

My sentiments exactly.

The wind is more than I can handle. Frustrated? Yes. But despite myself it's been a fantastic day!

Day three on the water - Today, we decide to use the rented Sidekick to explore some unpaved roads and nearby waters. We start the 45-minute journey by car with our thermal mugs filled with ice water, a ziploc bag full of toasted ham and cheese sandwiches, some sun screen, cameras, and (of course) fishing gear.

We drive the now familiar road to the end of the island and then turn right and continue as far up the unpaved path as possible. We're not alone. Another small group of tourists beat us to the only shade on the beach. This is a new area for us and we explore a small stretch of sand before getting organized for the next adventure.

Amy settles in for an afternoon of solitude on the near deserted beach. The rest of us rig up our gear and begin wading on the hard-packed white sand that extends the length of the island. Before long we spot a large barracuda hunting the flats in search of lunch. We figure that's a sure sign of more fish to come. Dave and I are rigged up for bonefish, but Aaron decides to cast to the barracuda on one of its close in-shore sweeps. It's interested in the fly. In fact, it attacks it with vigor and stays hooked for one long run before breaking free of the line.

We continue our walk. Aaron picks up a conch shell for a look at its inhabitant who turns out to be very much alive. I discover I'm good at spotting needle fish.

About two hours into the walk, David spots the familiar black tail of a permit. Aaron is further out and spots another saluting tail. Both of them have excellent casting opportunities for permit in the 20 pound range, but are unable to entice the fish to their flies.

At this point we realize we've just spent at least two hours walking through thigh-high water without seeing a lot of fish. We trek still further up the beach. It seems we've just entered the prime fishing area, which is about a five-kilometer hike from the end of the road, and although the evidence of bonefish is overwhelmingly inviting, we head back up the beach. We're a bit disappointed, but know where to begin the "hunt" next time.

Day four on the water - It's bright and windy as we start the 25-minute commute to the "tarpon hole." David, Aaron, and I are up with the sun and dying to test our luck with 10-weights.

Florian is waiting for us at the put-in location and as soon as we're rigged up he pushes the boat away from the small dock. The constant wind makes it a bit difficult to get deep enough to start the motor, but Florian's an expert at poling and before long we're en route to the hole.

Despite the wind I'm excited by the prospect of spotting a porpoising tarpon. Florian slows the boat as we approach the patch of dark blue water and we all begin the watch.

The chop on the water makes sight-fishing difficult. Before long, however, we spot something feeding just out of casting range. Florian starts the motor and moves in closer. The feeding stops for a moment and then begins in earnest. Aaron casts out to the school of feeding fish, but his fly puts them down. Florian tells us they're pargo (snapper) and jackfish. We each make a few casts toward the school before we decide they're eating tiny shrimp off the surface and have no interest in our larger flies.

We don't see any evidence of tarpon and decide it's time to move to the second tarpon hole, which is about a 10-minute boat ride away. The window of opportunity for this quarry is short and depends partly on tides, weather, and timing.

It seems calmer as we approach the other hole and before long we spot the flash of a dorsal fin. Then we see two torpedo-shaped fish dart toward the boat. David and Aaron are both in casting position and cast their flies in the direction of the tarpon. David's fly lands just in front of one of the fish and suddenly the fight is on. He sets the hook to the side at least three times before the giant fish jumps for the first time. He tips the rod to give way to the fish and the rest of us scramble to get out of the way.

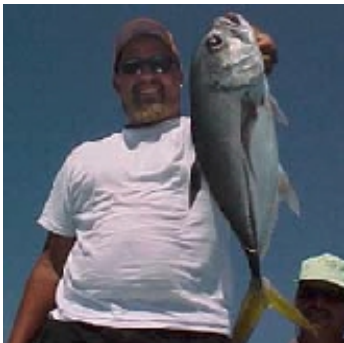


This is what David has hoped for on this trip to Cuba.... Now it's a matter of playing the fish, anticipating its jumps, and a few photographs to make his goal a reality.

The 55 to 60 pound fish displays its aerial acrobatics at least four times during the 25-minute fight. Finally, David pulls it alongside the boat and he and Florian pull it over the edge for pictures.

The flash of its silver scales is almost as bright as the smile on Dave's face as he holds it for photographs before releasing it back into the sea.

Day five on the water - Aaron and David are up early and headed back for another day of tarpon fishing. They spend the first part of their day at the tarpon hole, but don't see any signs of the great fish.



By mid-morning they decide to head out to a nearby reef and try their luck. The beauty of reef fishing is you never know what you might catch. Today's catch is intended for dinner. By day's-end Aaron's caught several barracuda, a horse-eyed jack, and a couple of snapper. Plus, the boat had a near head-on collision with a shark that was chasing somebody's fly.

As the trio heads back toward the lighthouse Aaron notices a body lying face down near the shore. The individual is enjoying an afternoon siesta on Cuba's version of the "waterbed" and seems impervious to the incoming tide.



Day six on the water - David and I are up before sunrise and ready for another day of fishing. We're taken by taxi to the small dock where Florian waits for us with the boat. The three of us head toward the tarpon hole to begin the watch.

After a slightly disappointing hour, we head toward the clusters of mangroves and away from the constant wind.

This is a new experience.

We're poled through the flats in the larger boat complete with a 40-horsepower motor. I'm comfortable amongst the mangroves. It feels familiar. Perhaps it's the "brush" on either side of me and the fact that I can clearly see the different water depths. We're sheltered from the constant wind and I'm able to easily place the fly where I want it to go. Admittedly, it's not quite like presenting a dry fly to a rising brown trout on the Bow, but somehow it feels more like fishing on home waters.... At least until I spot a large barracuda roaming the pool and a small school of needle fish off to my right.

Although the exploration of new water is rewarding, today is a day of fishing and not catching. Perhaps it's because of the wind. It might be because the water temperature dropped after last night's rain. Whatever the reason, the fish aren't biting.

Day seven on the water - Today is our last full day in Cuba and we set out early for the nearby flats. We know the tide is in our favor this morning and hope the winds will level out as the sun gets higher. Our cab driver takes us directly to the lighthouse where we're greeted by Florian and Octario. They show us around their "home away from home" and present each of us with a hand-carved wooden hanging. It's a gesture of Thanks from these proud Cuban men.

We head back up the road to string up our rods and are ready to go when they pull up in their white Suzuki Sidekick pulling two small skiffs. They haven't been able to locate a third guide for the day - one "rookie" is currently in hospital recovering from surgery, the other was sent home after day one with Aaron. So, Dave and I are asked to share the small bench seat in Florian's skiff and Aaron heads out with Octario.



The wind is still blowing as we leave the shelter of the island and head out toward the tidal flats. Florian poles us through the soft inland stretches but once we're on hard sand flats he jumps out to pull us quietly through the water.

David starts wading as well and we soon spot a small school of bonefish. They scatter as we approach, but I have a good shot at one of them. We continue patrolling this flat and take refuge from the wind in areas sheltered by mangroves.

I turn to my left and notice David's in stealth mode. He's stalking a fish that he's spotted. He casts toward it, hooks it, and lands it without any interruption or assistance from Florian. He says that catch is his most rewarding bonefish yet because he did it under difficult conditions entirely on his own.



Florian is a man on a mission. He wants me to get a bonefish even more badly than I want to land one. We continue our patrol and spot many fish, but once again the wind overpowers me. I'm frustrated with my inability to place the fly where it needs to be and vow to improve my casting before our next saltwater trip.

On the last stop before heading in, we spot the largest bonefish of the trip. Two of them are scouring the flats for a meal. Our flies spook them and they're gone with the flash of a tail.

The wind is constant today. At about noon we ask Florian and Octario to start poling us back to shore. Before long they trade their poles for tow ropes and thigh-high water. The hard-packed sand makes towing us easier than poling the boat straight into the wind.

It takes more than an hour to tow us in. Florian and Octario spend that time deep in conversation. But despite the wind and fellowship, these consummate guides never stop watching for a hint of movement on the flats they know so well.

Now that I'm back in Calgary I can't help but relive the details of our recent trip. I remember the sweetness of the rum punch, the richness of the freshly cooked lobster, and the strong pleasant smell of the cigars. I remember the simplicity of our "typical" Cuban day filled with dominoes, laughter, and friends who speak a different language. I remember the pride in their homes, and concern about what might be in store for their country.

Of course, I remember the bonefish on the flats and the fact that they outsmarted me.

My feelings about Cuba are simple...

Its music is made for dancing. Its people are genuinely happy. Its flats are made for fishing.

We will go back.

And on one of these trips I will catch a bonefish.... NJS



Photos by Aaron Campbell and Nancy Storwick