

Bonefishing in the British West Indies

Story and Photos
by
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While there are many positive aspects to staying at a secluded fishing lodge for the male of the species, often these “clubby camps” are not a big hit for the non-fishing spouse. And the trip I was planning was to be first and foremost a vacation to celebrate our 20th anniversary. Of course, after 20 years of marriage, my wife knows that, if it can be done, I will find a way of slipping a little fishing into our vacation plans.

There are many beautiful islands in the Caribbean, but the number that include both a little night life and high quality bonefishing is a tad more limited. My fairly extensive Internet and call-around research led me to several possible choices, but the one that struck me as the most interesting was the Turks and Caicos Islands, a country made up of eight islands and numerous uninhabited cays, located approximately 575 miles south of Miami. The islands, part of the British West Indies, are known for their beautiful turquoise waters, fun and friendly island atmosphere, and large hungry bonefish.

The capital of the Turks and Caicos Islands is Grand Turk, but the most



developed and most populated island, as well as the home of the premier (the leader of TCI) is Providenciales. Provo, as it is known, is 38 square miles in size and can be driven from end to end in about half an hour. The local currency is the U.S. dollar, and the local language is English. The local food is typical Caribbean with an emphasis on seafood, especially locally caught lobster and conch. The beverage of choice is Turks Head beer.

The bonefish is considered by many to be the king of the saltwater fly-fishing game fish. With their legendary strength and speed, they can easily take out a hundred yards of backing in a single blazing run. They are an elusive prey, and

their pursuit feels more like hunting than fishing. At its best, bonefishing is pure sight fishing — stalking tailing fish just as you would fish to rising trout on a spring creek.

The rod of choice for the bonefish is a 9-foot, 8- or 9-weight and a saltwater reel with a good drag system loaded with a couple hundred yards of backing. The winds on Provo were always strong during my visit, so I favored my 9-weight over my 8. The flies of choice are Crazy Charlies in pink, translucent pearl, white and orange. While placement of the fly is usually more important than the color to these aggressive feeding fish, they do occasionally favor one color over another.



(above) Grace Bay beach

One of the island's seaweed-eating iguanas

When fishing a new stretch of water, a guide is always helpful. When fishing for bones on over 60 miles of unfamiliar flats, it is a must. The Internet provides many advantages for the modern traveling fly fisherman, but it also creates a few pitfalls. One of the biggest problems is that you may find a guide with a great Web site who really has no idea how to guide a fly angler. Or a company that has one or two good guides but will gladly use inexperienced subcontractors rather than turn away business.

I was fortunate that my Web search led me to Darin Bain. Darin was as professional as any guide I have encountered from the Bighorn in Montana to the Snake in Jackson Hole (and far better than the hit-and-miss guiding I encountered on the island of Exuma a couple of years ago on my first bonefishing trip). A quiet and patient man, Darin was excited to share his fishing and island knowledge with me. He told me a little about what life was like growing up without electricity on Middle Caicos in the 1980s. In fact, Provo did not

get electricity until the 1970s, and the first car was not brought to the island until 1968, when the population was less than 1,000. Darin's affinity for conservation of the flats and the numerous barrier islands was refreshing because on Provo, with all its new hotel and condo development, you get the sense that in 10 years you might not recognize the quaint island of today with its 20 or so hotels and about as many restaurants.

My first day on the flats was

delayed due to a troubled engine, and we did not get out until almost noon. I was of course anxious and spoke to my guide on his cell phone several times that morning trying to gauge whether we would be able to get things fixed or be forced to cancel for the day. During my last call, Darin informed me that he would "be there in 10 minutes." I was greeted at my hotel by a pleasant man with very large dreadlocks in a tricked-out Ford F250 pickup truck. He took my gear as I introduced myself. We

The author with a fine bonefish



You can fish the flats with a spinning rod or fly rod.



got in the truck and as we began to drive off he asked me, “You know I am not Darin?” I inquired innocently, “You’re not?” And then I began to wonder just what I had gotten myself into. He quickly informed me that he was Darin’s twin brother and had been sent to pick me up. We rode the few minutes to the dock where I was pleased to see that Darin had the boat in the water and was ready to roll. Within five minutes his Action Craft boat had transported us at about 50 miles per hour to our first flat.

The basic bonefishing strategy is for both guide and fisherman to keep their eyes peeled for the image or shadow of either single or schooled bonefish while walking the flats or polling in the boat. Even with the aid of polarized sunglasses, it takes a while for the eyes to become accustomed to the glare. Once I got used to it, I could begin to see the fish as far away as 100 feet. Remarkably, Darin could spot fish at twice that distance. And, more importantly, he could differentiate small sharks and barracuda from bonefish at that distance as well. While bonefish have strong mouths, they have no teeth, so 8-12 pound test monofilament leaders are fine. Sharks and barracudas would cut those leaders effortlessly. On more than one occasion we had to cast around sharks or ‘cudas when fishing for bonefish.

As I missed my first couple of bonefish, casting a few feet behind the moving fish or a foot to the left or right, I was reminded of a guide I had fished with for redfish some years ago on Laguna Madre on the Texas coast. “Partner,” he said in his slow Texas drawl, “if you want me to keep finding you these fish, you better start catching ‘em.” My next cast was on the money, and with a quick couple of strips, it was “fish on!” My first Turks and Caicos bonefish was a nice 3½-pounder. He ran off about a hundred yards of backing before I could blink an eye. I brought him in only to have him take me right back to the backing. The power of these bullet-shaped fish is nothing short of

**Bonefishing guide
Darin Bain**



Da Conch Shack

phenomenal. We caught a couple more the same size that day before the approaching darkness forced us off the water.

One of the nicest aspects of fishing on the island is the proximity of where you fish to where you stay. The main strip of hotels on Grace Bay Beach is less than 10 minutes by car from the boat dock. You can be off the water, showered up, and at one of the island’s great restaurants in less than an hour. Your choices range from the four-star meals of Grace’s Cottage or Coco Bistro to the fun expat bar and restaurant known as the Shark Bite, featuring 1970s rock and roll, grilled Caribbean lobster and cold beer. The Shark Bite is built partially on an old pier overhanging the water in Turtle Cove, where schools of red snapper feed on French fries and chunks of carrots tossed by

patrons over the rail. Other favorite restaurants include Da Conch Shack, where they keep the conch alive and fresh right out in the ocean, and Horse-Eyed Jacks in Blue Hills that has a huge deck right on the beach.

The second day of bonefishing brought tough conditions with heavy winds and cloud cover that made spotting the fish difficult. We fished more from the poled boat than by wading because a falling tide made it possible to reach most of the flats from the boat. While fishing from the boat I caught my largest bonefish of the trip. Darin caught a glimpse of a large fish about 75 feet off the port side. “Nine o’clock,” he whispered as I stripped out line and back-casted. “Longer, man, quick!” I let my line fly. “Strip! Strip!” he whispered, and



The author and his wife of 20 years — Jennifer

wham! I knew I had a big one. The power and speed of this fish was like nothing I have ever experienced. After 20 minutes of give and take, we were both exhausted from the fight. We took a quick picture and Darin revived the six-pound fish by running water through its gills while I grabbed a bottle of water for myself. We caught a couple more fish wading on the flats but nothing as large as the first monster of the day. Our final treat was spotting a pair of iguanas eating seaweed at the edge of the flat. To call these flats an unspoiled oasis really does not do them justice — the white sand and the beautiful blue green water are truly breathtaking.

Our last night on the island was filled with live island music at Calico Jacks, a bar popular with the many scuba divers that frequent the island. You just can't beat the sea breeze, island music and all the stars that fill the island sky. The next morning we spent a few hours on the beach and then headed to the airport. Turks and Caicos was a wonderful destination for our 20th anniversary. In fact, it seems like a perfect place to celebrate our 21st.

Douglas Dear is the owner of Rose River Farm, a popular trophy trout fly fishing destination located on the Rose River in Madison County. He also serves as chairman of the board of Project Healing Waters, a nonprofit organization dedicated to healing our wounded veterans through fly fishing. www.roseriverfarm.com.

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