



A stretch of flats around Ambergris Caye

Belize Bonefishing

Story and Photos
by
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Victoria House grounds



When we stepped onto his 23-foot flats boat from the Victoria House dock, the first question our guide, Roberto, asked was, “Have you ever fly-fished for bonefish?” We responded that we hadn’t, and after an awkward pause, our guide fired up the outboard and said softly, “Well, it is the hardest fly-fishing of



Roberto (R) and the author with an acceptable bonefish



Scanning the flats

Christie battling with a bonefish



all.” Then, without another word, he gunned the engine and sped off over blue water towards the shallows of Ambergris Caye. My wife Christie and I were suddenly not sure what we’d gotten ourselves into.

Ambergris Caye is an island off the northeast coast of Belize just south of Mexico. It is bounded by the Bahia de

Chetumal to the west and the Caribbean Sea to the east. Like most of the islands off the Belize coast, it is surrounded by miles and miles of flats that are home to large numbers of bonefish, permit and tarpon. We regularly fly-fish for trout and rockfish, but we’d never tried our hand at bonefish, and we wanted to give it a shot. After doing considerable research on where to go in Belize, we settled on San Pedro, the main town on Ambergris Caye.

Our flight from Richmond to Belize City on the mainland took about seven hours, including a layover in Houston. From Belize City, the town of San Pedro was only a 20-minute flight on a small 15-passenger shuttle plane. While flying over the turquoise water, we could see manatees bobbing in the shallows below and watercraft zipping around the flats. From the tiny San Pedro airport, it is only a five- or 10-minute golf cart ride on streets of sand to most waterfront hotels. We had booked our stay at the Victoria House, a nice waterfront resort on the island. Victoria House appealed to us because it caters to both vacationers and fly

fishermen alike. A number of activities can be arranged through the resort – snorkeling, diving, tours of Mayan ruins, cave kayaking, you name it. And of course, all types of fishing — flats, reef and deep sea. The hotel had arranged for Roberto to pick us up at the hotel dock at 8:00 each morning for a few half-days of flats fishing. Door-to-door service.

Although we are no fly-fishing experts, we do enjoy the sport, and we’ve been at it for several years. We’ve caught delicate Virginia mountain brook trout, heavy Bighorn rainbows and browns and hard-running New England stripers. Thus we were hopeful that our skills would be at least adequate to catch a bonefish or two. To prepare for the challenge, we read Lefty Kreh’s *Fly Fishing in Salt Water*, bought fancy new saltwater rods and reels, attended a casting class taught by the famous Bob Clouser at the Virginia Fly Fishing Festival in Waynesboro and practiced long-distance casting in our backyard with heavy streamers. We thought we had everything buttoned up, but shooting line to 60 feet in a 30-knot gale to skittish bonefish on open water was just



San Pedro town on Ambergris Caye

not something we could prepare for.

Our guide told us that the flats around Ambergris Caye hold large numbers of bonefish averaging about two to four pounds, though bigger fish are often encountered. In the Florida Keys and the Bahamas, bonefish can grow significantly larger, though they are fewer in number. Bonefish in most places generally tend to swim in schools, though larger ones often cruise the flats solo or in pairs. In search of shrimp, crabs and worms that live on the sea bottom in the mud and turtle grass, bonefish can be found muddling, tailing or just plain cruising fast.

The typical scenario that unfolded each day on the flats was as follows: Roberto would pick us up from the hotel dock in the morning, motor the boat to a promising stretch of flats, cut the motor and pole through the shallows scouring the

water for fish. “There, 10 o’clock” he’d say in a soft voice, and point in the direction of the fish. “Here dey come, do you see dem?” If by some miracle we did see them, (spotting these fish at a distance from the boat can be a real challenge to the untrained eye), we were expected to point the rod tip at them to confirm, and get ready to cast. As we stabbed the rod excitedly in the direction of the tailing or muddling bonefish, Roberto would calmly say, “Okay, start going,” which meant *start casting*. Once enough line was out of the guides and the “shoot” command was given, we’d let fly the line and pray for a soft presentation. That part invariably triggered either a stream of expletives or a sigh of relief, depending on how softly we were able to drop the fly.

If we managed not to spook the bones, then we were told to strip line in the

typical strip-strip-pause fashion – heavy on the pause. Oftentimes, the fish wouldn’t fall for it, but other times it would, and in those cases, we’d set the hook with a long strip and hold on white-knuckled to our rods and wait for the fight. Two of the eight bonefish we caught took us into our backing, and we had dialed up the drag on our reels considerably. The largest bonefish we caught was in the three-pound range, and while it was no trophy, it was a beautiful fish for a couple of first-timers on the bonefish flats.

Roberto, throughout all the excitement, remained cool, calm and collected, making our first bonefish trip pressure-free. He landed our fish, changed flies, sorted out knots, and didn’t laugh when we made mistakes. His friendly, laid-back attitude was characteristic of almost all of the Belizeans we met during our stay in San Pedro. Most locals speak English, and U.S. currency is accepted everywhere (the exchange rate is simply one U.S. dollar per two Belize dollars), so getting around and exploring is easy. The clocks are on Central Time so there’s no real time lag to adjust to from the Eastern seaboard.

For the non-fisherman there is also plenty to do. The Belize Barrier Reef – the second largest coral reef in the world after Australia’s Great Barrier Reef – was within view of our hotel room, so the island understandably attracts all manner of divers and snorkelers. Most of the resorts on Ambergris Caye offer activities for the whole family, but at least one hotel targets the serious fly-fishing crowd – El Pescador. El Pescador is somewhat on the outskirts of San Pedro, but it is still an easy golf cart ride from the center of town, and it too offers other activities. El Pescador has the closest thing to a flyshop in San Pedro.

There’s more to Belize than the coast, of course, and prior to arriving on Ambergris Caye we’d spent a few days on the mainland in the Mountain Pine Ridge region exploring Mayan ruins. This is wild and woolly jungle, home to jaguars, pumas,



Mayan ruins at Caracol

tarantulas and howler monkeys. We stayed at Blancaneaux Lodge, one of several resorts owned by Francis Ford Coppola, quite a popular honeymoon destination judging from the people we met. Coppola apparently discovered the place while searching for the right piece of jungle in which to film *Apocalypse Now*.



Although we enjoyed the jungle, we loved the islands. It just doesn't get much better than standing on the bow of a flats boat sight-casting to cruising bonefish in Belize. It's an experience that won't be soon forgotten.

Christopher J. Hagert and his wife live in the Charlottesville, Virginia area. They enjoy flyfishing and bird hunting with their English setter Belle, and look forward to sharing these interests with their new daughter, Harris.

View of the rainforest from cottage at Blancaneaux



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