





Opposite page: A lone bonefish moves across the soft mud bottom of a flat looking for a meal and living up to its nickname “gray ghost.” Above: The author spent his honeymoon on Providenciales as a man on a mission.

If You Love Me, Let Me Fish

A newlywed's quest for Provo bonefish.

Story & Photos By Joe Cermele

It's dawn and my wife of two days is fast asleep. I'm not with her. She is alone on the first morning of our honeymoon. Instead of waking together to palms rustling outside our villa's bedroom window, I rose in the tropical November darkness to the same obnoxious cell phone alarm I set for work back home in New Jersey. Christen stirred for a moment, opened her eyes as I kissed her forehead,

and drifted off again. My wife of two days is fast asleep and I am standing calf-deep in the warm muck of Flamingo Lake on the south side of Providenciales, holding a fly rod and straining to spot rippled water in the early gray light. I have ten days to catch a bonefish on this island. You might think I could spend the first morning with my bride. But I am a very sick man.

To put my disease in perspective, at our wedding reception, our beautifully decorated cake was shoved to the corner so a giant ice sculpture of a striped bass could be prominently displayed near the dance floor. Our tables were named after various gamefish. My most cherished gift was a custom-made fishing lure inscribed with our names and wedding date. Christen took this all in stride, having known me for seven years and being fully aware that fishing is my heroin. If I go a weekend without it, I curl up in a ball, shake, and whine. It's in no small way the reason I pursued a career in outdoor journalism, and in no small way why we overlooked the palace resorts of Grace Bay for Barry and Marta Morton's secluded Harbour Club Villas for our Providenciales honeymoon. A coworker told me I could walk out the door and onto the bonefish flats of the adjacent salt lakes at Harbour Club. It was all I needed to hear.

Ghost hunting

Bonefish are nicknamed "gray ghosts" because their soft silver and white hues blend with the sand and mud on the flats so well, they are practically invisible, especially to the untrained eye. It is a good time to mention that though I had traveled the globe on assignment to fish, bones had never been on the docket. By 10 AM, I'm pouring sweat and haven't seen anything. Christen is surely awake by now and wondering why her honeymoon adventures had yet to begin. And when I greet her, defeated by Flamingo Lake, I suggest we spend the rest of our day at Bonefish Point on the island's east end. She smiles, rolls her eyes a little, and starts making sandwiches to pack for lunch.

With a name like Bonefish Point, one might be led to believe bonefish schools are so thick, they bounce off your legs as you wade. Perhaps at times they do, but after a long trek over rough dirt roads to this uninhabited part of Provo, I'm more lost than ever. The expanses of unspoiled aqua flats are so vast, I feel like I'm looking for a snowball in the Arctic. On the beach I find a sun-dried, rotting bonefish head. I assume by the remnants of a fire and fishing line strewn about, the locals hooked it on a piece of conch and ate the rest of the catch. I'm trying to fool one of the most elusive gamefish with a bit of feather and deer hair. Maybe I'm asking too much.

Between bouts of snorkeling and collecting shells, I keep a watchful eye on the water thinking bonefish will magically appear or some secret will unfold that proves they've been in front of me the whole time. No such thing occurs. I see a big shark cruise in close to the beach and spook back to sea when I cast in front of it. "Don't worry,"

Christen says. "You've got plenty of time. You'll catch a bonefish."

Oh, brother

I told Christen before we came to Turks & Caicos that I wasn't going to spend any money on a guided bonefish trip. I was going to catch them on my own. I also wasn't going to let bonefishing interfere with our time together. It is a fine plan, but one I realize might not secure me a catch as I walk the road along Flamingo Lake the next morning, once again not seeing anything worth casting towards. That's when the little white rental Jeep pulls up. Tim Hill, clad in the same style quick-dry shorts and breathable fishing shirt I'm wearing, jumps out.

"You catch anything?," he asks.

"Nope. I thought this was going to be easier," I say.

"Dude, I know. So did I."

As it turns out, he and his wife Kristi are from Maryland and also on their honeymoon. They opted for Harbour Club because Tim has the sickness as bad as I do, and like me, he has never caught a bonefish. Over the next few days I would find out that the similarities between Tim and I, and Kristi and Christen, bordered on something from a Twilight Zone episode. We may all have been siblings separated at birth.

Tim and I spend the rest of the morning slogging through Turtle Lake next to Flamingo Lake, waste-deep in mud that makes moving feel like there are 50-pound weights strapped to my legs. We split up, Tim following one shoreline and I the other. I see schools of tiny tropical fish milling around in the silt clouds I kick up with every arduous step. I cast blindly at mangroves. Nothing. This is hopeless. That's when I hear Tim scream, "Dude!" I swing around to see him 80 yards across the lake, his rod bent over in a fierce arc. "Oh my God! I got one!"

Learning curves

The two fishing widows, Christen and Kristi, are getting acquainted by the pool when Tim and I return three hours later. I walk by my wife without saying much, kick off my dirty wading boots, and plunge into the water. My heart rate begins to fall instantly and my burning skin cools. Trudging across Turtle Lake has exhausted me.

"So? How'd you do?," Christen asks, smiling from a lounge chair wearing big, round sunglasses.

"We each hooked and lost a bonefish," I tell her as I dunk my hat into the pool and put it back on dripping. "But we learned a lot. It's the tide. We're spending too much energy walking and looking for them. You have to



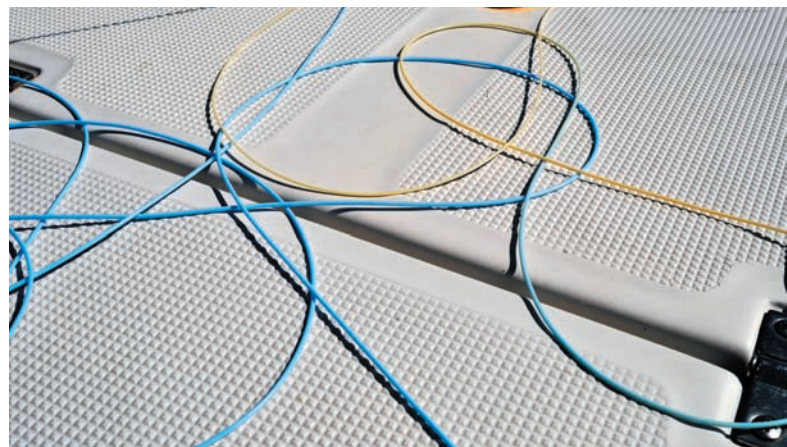
Above: This is the view from the center of Turtle Lake, where the author hunted bonefish almost every morning during his honeymoon. Right from top: The tools of the trade. Bonefish flies mimic shrimp, crabs, and small baitfish. Fly line piled on the front casting deck of guide Darin Bain's skiff.

get in position while the tide's moving out and stay put. They move from the flats into the deep canal, grubbing the bottom for food as the water recedes. You have to let them come to you."

All she says is, "Cool, man." Kristi laughs. I have a habit of going off on rants about scientific fishing details without remembering Christen cares about and understands very little of them. Saying I lost a bonefish would have sufficed. And I'm not even lying about it. Tim's fish broke off before I was halfway over to him, but when I reached the part of the lake where he connected, the lessons began.

The mud was lighter and pocked with small mounds and crevices. Nothing I had fished in Flamingo Lake or the other side of Turtle looked like this. The water came up just above my ankle; shallower than most other spots I had been traversing. You could actually feel the water draining off the flat as the tide fell. Tim and I stood 20 feet apart in silence. Somewhere around us I heard a gurgle.

"Right there," Tim whispered, pointing with his fly rod. A shimmering silver bonefish tail stuck straight out of the water, gently waving as the fish swam nose-down,



Fishing guide Darin Bain points to a bonefish tailing in the distance.



digging through the mud looking for a meal. It was too far to reach with a cast, and the bottom was too thick for quick movements. If I tried to rush closer, it would have surely scared the fish. Instead we crept backwards along the shoreline, hearing more splashing bones and spotting distant tails. The tide was dropping so quickly, the tops of the mud mounds were getting exposed to the air. Then by some stroke of luck, I spied four bonefish moving in my direction and managed to cast my shrimp fly in their path. One grabbed it instantly, bolted away at lightning speed, and broke the line before I could blink. It was my one and only shot of the day, but such is fishing.

That afternoon Christen and I are at Coral Gardens on Grace Bay. I chuckle at the “No Fishing” signs posted on the beach around this haven for snorkelers. As we swim together over the reef, Christen points every time she spots a fish species we’ve yet to encounter. I’m struck by the beauty of the big yellowtail snappers investigating me, though I find this particular species prettier when it dons rich charcoal grill lines and a slathering of fresh mango salsa. We are there almost until dark and Christen couldn’t be happier, spending almost every minute in the water. I’m happy, too. I’ve figured out the bonefish mystery and tomorrow, by day’s end, I’m sure I’ll have a snapshot of me holding a gray ghost I caught on my own.

The breakdown

“Let’s split the cost and hire a guide tomorrow,” I propose to Tim, who is once again 20 feet away, stuck in the mud in the middle of Turtle Lake on morning three of this quest. He managed to catch his bonefish earlier, casting at a random flash under the surface. I’ve seen two tails, neither within my reach, and we’ve been standing in one spot, roasting in the sun for two hours.

“Dude, I’m in. Let’s just do it,” he replies cheerfully. Of course, he got his prize. I’m still mired in frustration. If I fish on my own all week, I’ll keep my no-guide promise and my pride, but it could mean leaving Turks & Caicos without ever landing a bonefish. I decide that’s a risk I’m not willing to take. First I ask Christen if she would mind me spending the money.

“Splurge. We’re on our honeymoon,” she says. “Go for it.”

Then I cave in and ask Marta at Harbour Club to recommend a guide. She doesn’t have to think hard. At sun-up the next morning, Tim and I are motoring to remote flats aboard Darin Bain’s skiff.

Darin is quiet but focused as he slowly maneuvers through mangrove canals less than a foot deep with pre-

cise strokes of the push pole. Perched high on the boat’s raised poling platform, Darin has a better view of what’s ahead. He’s been doing this for years. Bonefish stand out to him like big red Xs. On a boat this small, and when presentations need to be this spot-on and delicate, two anglers cannot fish at the same time. Tim has first crack at any fish Darin spots. His line is stripped out and piled on the forward deck, ready to be whipped straight in a long cast.

“One o’clock,” Darin coolly calls out, never changing his rhythm with the push pole. “Thirty feet.”

“I don’t see it,” Tim says, squinting to home in on a flash or tail.

“Just cast,” Darin replies with a hint more urgency in his voice. “Fish is moving fast.”

Tim starts slicing the air with his rod. Line shoots out and unrolls beautifully.

“Now strip,” Darin says flatly.

Tim tugs the line to hop the little shrimp fly forward over the soft mud. He strips again. This time the bonefish eats, and Tim’s line jerks tight, slicing through the water like a knife blade as the silver bullet on the other end rockets away towards Haiti. We break our silence and begin to hoot and holler. Darin lands the fish in short order. Now it’s my turn to take the casting deck.

Only a few minutes go by before Darin spots the next bone. Right side. Three o’clock. This one, he claims, is bigger than average. My hands are shaking and I’m worried that the line piled at my feet is going to wrap around my ankle and botch my cast. I see the fish’s wake and line it up. The fly plops gently in front of it and gets charged before I ever strip. I strike and line comes sizzling off the reel. This is one massive bonefish.

For five minutes we tussle, then as Darin reaches over to grab my line, it snaps and I watch the eight-pound bonefish bolt back into the mangrove roots. I’m crushed. Darin ties on a new fly, makes a blind cast to straighten my line and manages to hook another behemoth bonefish without really trying.

“Do you want to fight this fish?,” he asks with a smile.

“No,” I say dully. “I’ll hook my own.” Darin boats the huge specimen, mugs it up for my camera, and climbs back atop the poling platform. It’s Tim’s turn to cast once again.

Silver lining

That evening, on pitcher three of homemade piña coladas, Tim and I finally change the subject from our bonefish trip to . . . well, I don’t actually remember,



Above: The author finally brings in a Provo bonefish – mission accomplished!
Bottom left: Newlywed Christen Cermele is all smiles after landing her first bonefish.

though I'm sure Christen and Kristi were tired of hearing about fishing by then. I may have lost a giant bonefish on Darin's boat, but I did not end the day empty-handed. Tim and I caught plenty of bonefish, just none as worthy of a framed photo as my first line-snapping monster. I go to



bed feeling great, both because of the rum and coconut sleep medication, and because I had finally caught some bonefish. Still, in the back of my mind, I wanted my self-guided trophy.

In the morning, Christen and I are packing bags to take on a snorkeling trip when Marta knocks on the villa door.

"I was talking to Darin," she tells me, "and he needs some new photos for his website. I'd like some new bonefish pictures for our site as well. You make a good model. He's willing to take you, me, and Christen out again tomorrow if you're interested."

It's a proposition I'd be a fool to pass up, but it would mean sacrificing my last chance to hook a bonefish in Turtle or Flamingo Lake. It would be our last day on the island, but I emphatically accept, and even get a sense of excitement from Christen, who seems eager to join me.

When Tim and I were out with Darin, we caught seven fish between us. We were pleased with that, and I would have been just as content with a repeat performance the following day. Only this time I am the lone angler. Every shot is mine. Darin poles us quietly into an open, shallow lagoon as Marta fires frame after frame with her camera.

Christen sits on the bow holding my camera, ready to shoot when I connect. There is not a breath of wind. The surface is a sheet of glass, except for a wide, nervous patch of moving water.

"Are those all bonefish?," I ask Darin in disbelief of what I'm seeing. He grins and tells me I'm not going crazy. I cast directly into the center of what must be 200 gray ghosts swimming in unison like choreographed jets in an air show. I hook one instantly and the entire school follows its struggling brother. Cameras flash as I land the fish and quickly return it to the turquoise water. The school hasn't moved far. For the next 40 minutes, bone after bone attacks my fly in what I can only describe as the antithesis of everything I know about the species. Bonefish are sly, wary, and cunning fighters. These fish would strike a hotdog if I presented it to them, and they have no qualms about swimming right up to the boat. Christen even lands a few after I hook them up. The day is perfect.

It is our last night in Provo, and to kill some time before dinner, I ask Marta to borrow her kayaks for a paddle in the marina channel. Christen comes along for one last sit on the beach, one last dip in the warm ocean. Naturally, I bring a fly rod, though I am more interested in relaxing than seriously fishing. We paddle to the pretty little beach behind Harbour Club and Christen lays out her towel to take in the late day rays. I shove off again for the boat channel drifting and casting in the deep, clear water. I'm thinking about the long day of travel ahead, of Tim and Kristi who I hope we stay in contact with, and of how getting back to the routine of life will be depressing. That's when my fly gets bumped. I expect a jackfish or grunt in this deep water, but what flops into my lap after the short fight is a small, glistening bonefish. I laugh to myself as it jumps around the kayak, pops off the hook and wriggles back into the water. Then I paddle back to the beach and watch the sunset with my wife. 🌸

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Going solo for Provo bonefish

These tips from the author will help you tackle the flats without a guide.

Where to go: Many beaches on Provo's north side, including Grace Bay, have fishing restrictions. Opt for the small, more secluded beaches on the south side, such as those at Sapodilla Bay and Taylor Bay, or head east to Bonefish Point. Turtle and Flamingo Lakes are also prime bonefish locations.

When to go: Though you can certainly hook bonefish all day, the early morning hours are best, provided they coincide with a good moving tide. As the sun rises, your shadow grows longer and the water lights up, making it more likely that your movements will spook the fish.



Bonefish are an elusive species that blend well with their surroundings and often feed among mangrove roots and snarls.

What to look for: Bonefish roam the flats, so walking and chasing them is difficult. Instead, look for bottlenecks or narrow areas the fish will have to move through as the tide falls. Get in position during a rising or falling tide and let the bones come to you. Flats adjacent to deeper water are excellent ambush points as well.

What to bring: Polarized sunglasses are an absolute must for spotting cruising bonefish and tails sticking out of the water. An 8-weight fly rod with floating line is perfect for Provo, and basic shrimp-, crab-, and baitfish-imitating flies in tan, white or pink work well. A pair of light flats boots will save your feet from shells and coral bits. Don't wade barefoot. 🌸