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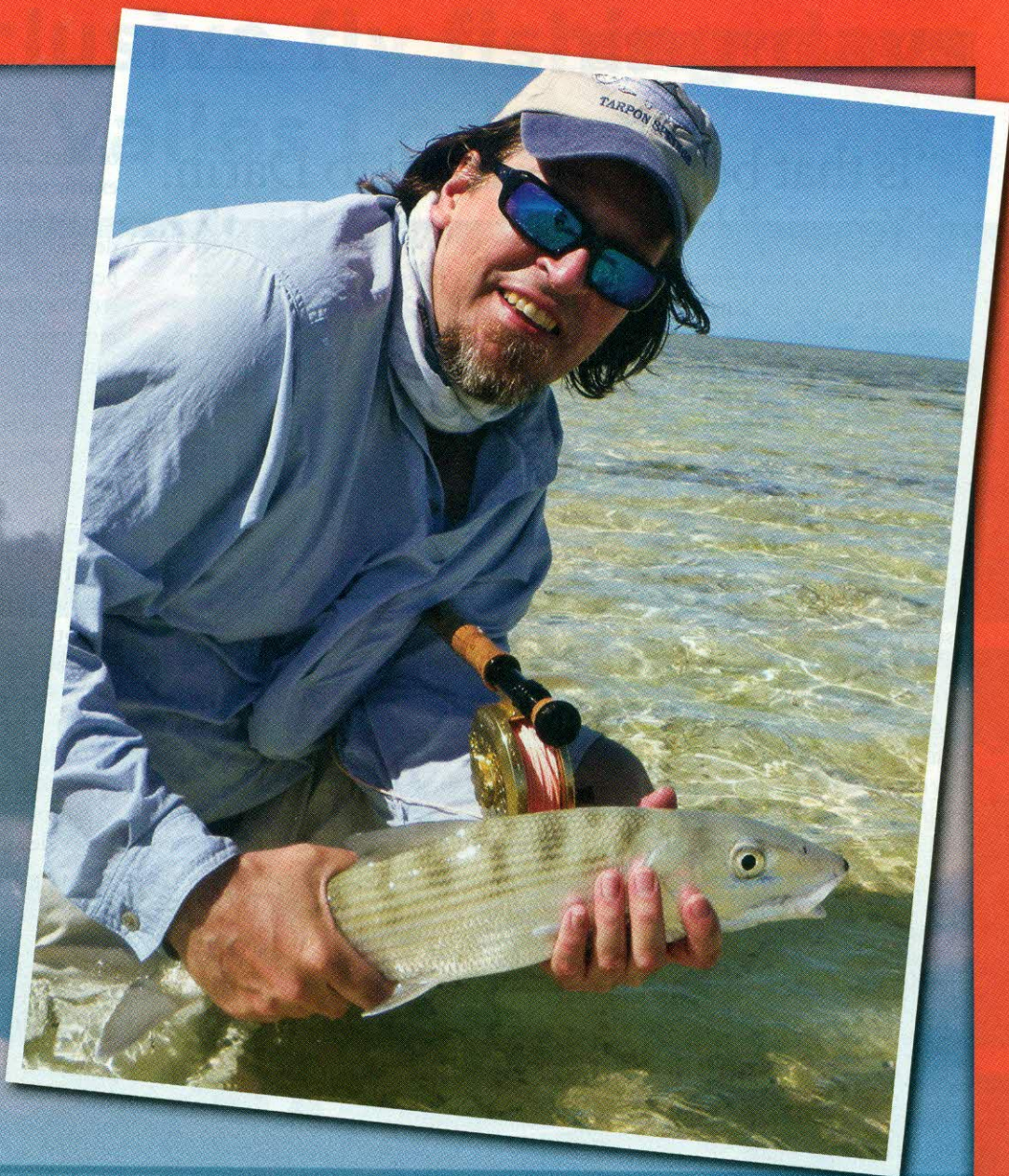
Bonefish Heaven

The Turks and Caicos Islands offer exceptional do-it-yourself flats fishing for big bones.

Story & Photography by Paul Smith

???????CARROLL





A view of Jim Hill Bight on the southern side of Providenciales. (Inset) The author sets to release one of the many nice bonefish he caught in Turks and Caicos.



DAVID WILLIAMS

“Is that bonefish?” I said to Darin. “Yes, sir,” he replied nonchalantly.

I suppose he’s accustomed to encountering a thousand bonefish at once. For my part, I couldn’t believe what I was seeing. The bottom was covered with fine, light brown sand; Darin was barefoot, and with the tide low, no more than 10 inches of Caribbean water covered our feet. The fish were obvious even to my untrained eyes. We were gazing toward a small sandbar that broke the surface about 200 feet away. American oystercatchers skittered about on dry sand, silhouetted against a vast and turquoise expanse of water.

From the sandbar’s edge to within my casting range, there were ghostly fish shadows everywhere, almost covering the bottom. Bonefish, more than I could possibly count, more than I had ever imagined congregating in one place. There were plenty of fish in range, but I stood like an

Irish setter frozen on the barrens over a covey of ptarmigan.

Embarrassment of Riches

Darin broke the silence and got back to the business of catching fish: “Cast to that big one over there.” I snapped my focus to the task at hand and targeted a large torpedo-shaped shadow within casting range. My Crazy Charlie plopped in the water near enough to the fish, and I let it sink to the bottom before giving it a few twitches. The phantom of the flats turned and ate the fly in an instant. A brisk strip strike and an explosion of energy set my reel spinning at breakneck speed. Like dominoes, one startled bonefish set all the others in motion. Salt spray flew in the air all around us as bones lit up their afterburners to flee the alien intruders. On such an isolated piece

of water, so far from land, I imagine that’s exactly what we were.

The fish’s first blistering run went deep into the backing, the fly line disappearing across the flat. I cranked my reel until the pale blue fly line was back inside my rod tip, but the relentless fish summoned new fuel stores. Across the flat the line cut through the water, but the leader’s integrity held up to the assault. The adrenaline finally subsided on both ends of the rod, and I held a most beautiful creature in the air, out of its element for just a few seconds—just long enough to admire its iridescent body. A bonefish looks like everything around it, the ultimate camouflage. I lowered the fish back into the water, felt its strength return, and set it free. Sand kicked up from its powerful tail as it disappeared, none the worse for its brief encounter.

I asked Darin, “How big was that one?” “Around eight or nine pounds,” he responded. “I think maybe we should walk

Bonefish run big in the Turks and Caicos. The author’s average catch totaled about seven pounds, and he caught several that approached ten pounds.



EXPEDITIONS

back to the boat and get some lunch." We had been connected to powerful and determined bonefish all morning, so there was no need to chase the thousand fleeing fish that I had just spooked. Besides, the tide was building, the game would change, and it was time for new tactics on a full belly.

Our morning with Darin had been beyond our wildest expectations. We ate lunch at about 1 p.m. after catching at least 50 bonefish between us. And it wasn't just the numbers that were stellar.

Caicos citizens call themselves. The rest are people who love the place so much that they buy property and return year after year. Providenciales, or Provo for short, is the most developed and populated of the islands with around 16,000 people. Although a very popular tourist destination, this place is most definitely off the trodden path for anglers. In 1964, there were no motorized wheeled vehicles on the island. The big hotels along Grace Bay were constructed in the 1980s and set

go shopping while you spend a few hours wading the flats at Bonefish Point. And the kicker of all kickers is that if you stay at Harbor Club Villas, you can pop across the road to Flamingo Lake and cast for bones any time of the day. You could be having your morning coffee and see bonefish tailing in the lake, run down with rod in hand, and cast. So, keep a rod rigged.

Today there's a fairly decent road network on Provo. The main drag is the Leeward Highway, a four-lane blacktop

Bonefish guide Darin Bain crouches to reduce his profile from the many eyes in a school of bonefish.



These were big, burly bones, nothing like the three- to four-pounders I had experienced in Belize. Our catch averaged about seven pounds, with several fish pushing double digits. The action had been so intense that Robert's reel fell apart in mid-battle. Luckily, he had a spare.

After lunch, we fished from Darin's skiff among myriad mangrove islands. Although the action wasn't as furious as the morning bonanza, we did land a fair number of robust bones.

Off the Trodden Path

The Turks and Caicos Islands is a British territory consisting of two groups of tropical islands; the larger is Caicos and the smaller, Turks. The islands are 575 miles southeast of Miami and 30 miles from the Bahamas. There are a total of 166 square miles of land between eight islands and 40 small cays, the whole of which is encircled by one of the larger coral reefs in the world. The total population is 33,000, about a third of whom are "belongers," which is what Turks and

off a development boom. But even today much of the island is undeveloped and in a pristine state. There are rugged hills and ridges, carpeted with prickly pear cactus and scrub, interspersed by saltwater tidal lakes, many of which are home to bonefish.

My wife, Goldie, and I stayed at Harbour Club Villas on beautiful Providenciales, the most populated island in the Turks and Caicos, where we met Robert and his wife, Elizabeth. Robert is from New Brunswick, and I'm from Newfoundland—practically neighbors in eastern Canada, at least from the perspective of the Caribbean islands. We both cut our teeth on salmon and trout, and here we were on the very same mission, in neighboring villas on a tropical island 2,000 miles from the snow and cold winter winds of home. The plan was to spend some time sightseeing with our wives and squeeze in some bonefishing.

On Provo you can do some self-guided bonefishing in the afternoon and have an evening meal with your spouse at a fine restaurant. Nonangling companions can

that runs east to west. European-style roundabouts are used to control traffic instead of lights, and driving is in the British tradition, on the left side. It takes a little getting used to, but I had the hang of it in a half hour. For fishing, it's best to rent a Jeep or some sort of SUV. In addition to the paved highway, there are lots of dirt side roads to explore, many leading to excellent fishing flats. What's nice about Provo is that all the commercialization, hotels, and vacation homes are concentrated in one small section of the island around Grace Bay. The rest of the island is waiting to be explored. You can turn off onto a dirt road and end up at an absolutely pristine and totally isolated beach—paradise for DIY bonefishing.

On Your Own

Bonefish Point juts into the Caribbean Sea on the southwestern corner of the island. It is appropriately named. In addition to a mile-long beach and spectacular scenery, there are burly bones waiting for a well-presented fly. I enjoyed a lovely afternoon

If You Go



Travel: Most flights land in Providenciales, and travel between islands is by Air Turks and Caicos. Car rentals are available through major players, such as Hertz, or smaller locally owned companies such as Scooter Bob's (scooterbobs@gmail.com). The best value is local, especially for an SUV.

Lodging: There are big hotels—Point Grace Hotel, Oceans Club West, and the Windsong, just to name a few—along the beach in Grace Bay, if that's your style. I recommend a self-catered villa located a bit off the beaten path. Check out Harbour Club Villas (www.harbourclubvillas.com). It's comfortable, conveniently located, with gracious hosts. There's a supermarket nearby, as well as a drugstore, liquor store, and some very nice restaurants. And most important of all, lots of nearby bonefish flats.

License: A license is required for DIY fishing in Turks and Caicos. Pick one up at the Turtle Cove Marina office. The cost is \$10 for a day and \$30 for a full month.

Gear: Any 9-foot saltwater rod from a 7-weight to 9-weight will do, and make sure you've got a reel that can handle blistering runs. I managed with only a floating line, but it would be wise to bring along an intermediate and a slow sinking-tip because, in warmer water, the fish tend to run a little deeper. Standard bonefish flies, such as Crazy Charlies, Gotchas, and Bonefish Bitters, are all you need. Tan and pink with plenty of flash worked best for me. Be sure to carry flies of varying weight. A good pair of polarized shades is a necessity for sight-fishing. Other than that, just bring plenty of sunscreen and proper tropical clothing.

Guiding Services: As far as I know there are only two guiding services for bonefish on Providenciales: Darin Bain (www.turksandcaicosbonefishing.com) and Silver Deep (www.silverdeep.com). Darin is a one-man show, while Silver Deep is a bigger operation that also provides deep-sea fishing.

Cost: Harbour Club Villas offers an all-inclusive lodging-and-fishing package—which includes villa rental for two for one week, all tax and service fees, plus two half days of guided fishing with Darin Bain—for \$2,300 (2011 rates).

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