



The
BEST
of



BELIZE

A visit to a permit paradise

By JP Piccin

BELIZE is a small Central American country that most people have difficulty finding on the map. Bordered by Mexico and Guatemala, this peaceful, English speaking country has a lot to offer including mountains, rivers, Mayan

ruins and 386km of Caribbean coast with hundreds of small islands, atolls, cayos and coral reefs.

It is also a permit flyfishing mecca.

Belize is surprisingly easy to get to via the USA, and we have travelled there several times to fish some of the atolls in the north. During our last trip we travelled south to the small town of

Placencia where we discovered our own version of paradise — a white sandy beach along the Caribbean, small hotels and bungalows, just enough restaurants and bars to give it a “buzz” but still laid back and quiet. We also discovered Tarpon Caye!

After a few days relaxing on the beach, lazing in a hammock on the bal-



The author with one of the many permit he landed on fly at Tarpon Caye.



JP and Kathleen Piccin celebrate landing another permit on fly.



cony of our bungalow, visiting Mayan ruins in the jungle, buying chocolate directly from farmers, sipping chilled beers and cocktails as the sun set over the Caribbean and eating delicious fresh fish at beachside restaurants, we were relaxed, eager and ready to go fishing.

The boat ride from Placencia to Tarpon Caye is short and easy — unless there's a cold front coming in and its wild and choppy, but thanks to our skipper's expert knowledge and experience we got there safely. Soon after our arrival we were sitting around the table enjoying a cool beer while Charlie Leslie, the owner of the lodge, shared tales of his many years guiding in the area and how, with little means and lots of hard work, he built Tarpon Caye Lodge.

Simplicity and enthusiasm are the best words to describe this permit fishing pioneer. Charlie is a permit fishing "guru" who, as early as the 1970s, had already observed and studied permit and began to understand how to catch them on a fly. Donning a mask and snorkel he studied how permit positioned themselves vertically before sucking in crabs and crushing them. He also noticed how they occasionally spat them back out when something was not to their taste.

During this time Charlie and some of the world's saltwater flyfishing experts met and pooled their observations, knowledge and experience to try to solve the mystery of how to catch a permit on a fly

We could have sat listening to Charlie for hours, but there was still an hour before the sun set and we figured that just a few yards away in the lagoon the tarpon were probably on the lookout for food.

At the end of the day the small bait-fish come out from the protection of the mangroves in great numbers and the tarpon wait greedily for this "fast food" treat. As we approached the jetty we could already hear the noisy, violent attacks and see the flashes of silver as gangs of tarpon leapt out the water, feasting aggressively.

Excited by all this activity we cast our flies haphazardly into the pack at every flash of silver, completely ignoring the discreet advice from our guide. Finally, after a couple of strips, I felt that unbelievable tug on the line. I tried to set the hook but I'd raised the rod too soon!

"Keep the tip of the rod in the water when you set," said Charlie, gently, quietly...

After a crazy hour of tarpon madness the sun set in a flamboyant display of colour and the tarpon headed off into the sea following their supper.

After that "appetiser" we settled down for a short night's rest although we were woken regularly by the worrying sound of the wind and thunder of an approaching storm. Thankfully when the sun came up the bleakness disappeared and we were greeted by blue sky and sunshine.

The plan for the day was simple: A quick cup of coffee and then we'd be off to say *Bonjour* to the tarpon, followed by a good breakfast, time to prepare tackle and then we would head off to track down some permit on the flats.

By 10 am we started slowly cruising along a long flat and spotted the first disturbed waters caused by some tailing permit. The rest of the day was non-stop fishing. We took turns, never spending more than 15 minutes not casting to permit on the flats in excellent conditions.

We overdosed on adrenalin when the crab hit the head of the fish, when the cast was too long or too short, when the water was so low that the splash of the heavy fly scared the fish, or when the permit saw the fly and followed it right up to our feet before catching on to the trick and dashing off noisily.

Kathleen had the trickiest fish — it took the fly and spat it out so quickly that it was only when we retrieved the fly that we saw the crab had been crushed and rotated 180° on the hook. The next fish Kathleen targeted followed the fly, but she lost sight of it in the waves and lifted the fly to recast to another permit but the first fish was still following the fly and leapt out of the water as the fly was whipped away ...

I remember many years ago, at the end of a fishing day I met a trout fisherman on a creek in Montana who, when asked how his day had gone, answered that it had been an excellent day's fishing, but on further questioning admitted that he had not caught a single fish.

It's curious, but I knew even then that flyfishing had nothing to do with accountancy and a good day's fishing couldn't be measured by the number of fish caught, but to be satisfied with an "empty bag" was a step too far!

I hadn't really been convinced that that was possible until this day of fishing in Belize. After such an intense day when we had learned so much about permit fishing, experienced so many emotions and rushes of adrenalin, softened only by the serenity of the surroundings and the gentle, enthusiastic words of encouragement and advice from our guide Marlon, not one fish was landed, but what a fantastic day we had shared.



FLIES TO USE

For permit most crab or shrimp patterns work, but they must not be too heavy. For tarpon sardine imitations work best. Gummy Minnows and Clouser Minnows are good, but make sure they're always tied on excellent hooks like Gamakatsu for example.

Marlon and Carlito, the assistant guide, created such a great team spirit that we attacked day two full of enthusiasm and excitement. Unfortunately things don't look too promising because there was a fair bit of wind and cloud. However, the bad weather conditions did not seem to dampen the enthusiasm of this team.

Most of the flats we fished were narrow, edged by deeper channels which the boat could navigate, making it easy for a trained eye to spot fish and approach them quietly.

The second morning was filled with the same dose of excitement and emotion as the day before. Whatever the tide or conditions Marlon somehow always managed to find a flat with the right level of water where he spotted tailing or moving permit and once again there was plenty of action.

At the beginning of the afternoon Marlon spotted three permit heading from the deeper water onto the flat. Always ready, I immediately cast my crab in front of them, but the fish kept changing direction and my casts were imprecise. Despite that I carried on casting and stripping and suddenly I strip-struck — Bingo! I'd hooked one!

I raised the rod, applied medium drag and let the permit go for his first run. As soon as I felt he might be pausing for breath I slightly tightened the drag and began to try to wind in some line. That didn't please him and off he rushed again, in a typical Usain Bolt sprint. After a ten minute fight the permit was close to the boat; too close perhaps because he dashed under it. I immediately put the tip of the rod into the water, hoping not to break it, and let the fish run again. To my surprise I noticed Carlito putting on his mask, diving into the water and swimming under the boat. Confused I turned to ask Marlon what was happening. "No problem," he said, "the line was caught up on a metal part of the boat and Carlito has unhooked it. Lift the rod up so the line doesn't get caught in the coral now."

I quickly reeled in the loose line and continued the fight. Five minutes later the permit was in the net. From the excitement on the boat you would've thought we'd just won the European handball championship. We were a winning team and the next day we confirmed this by losing one permit and netting another which leapt on the crab at the first cast!

And what about the tarpon you are probably wondering. After all, isn't the lodge called Tarpon Caye?

We don't have much to tell on that aspect because we were very busy stalking and catching permit. After the excitement of the first day the tarpon were very scarce during the day, but we were there over the full moon period, so they were active at night. Although we didn't focus much on the tarpon we did catch one and lost three. They better watch out though because we'll be back soon!

TACKLE

Permit — Take along two 9ft 9/10-wt rods both set up with a crab pattern. If the crab on the first rod gets caught on a bit weed or coral you can carry on fishing with the second rod without missing out on the action.

Tarpon — You'll need a 9ft 12-wt rod; tarpon are powerful and they can be big.

Tarpon feed like bullies on the schools of small baitfish. First they rush into the school and knock the baitfish about with their tails, then they come straight back to eat the fish they have

TECHNICAL TIPS

It's important to be able to cast far and with precision even in windy conditions, to master the double haul, low parallel casting and casting with the minimum of false casts because permit are top of the menu for sharks, so they're always on the move and spook very easily.

The fly, usually a crab pattern, has to move in a very life-like way. In order to get the right animation try a couple of very short strips followed by a short pause. If you feel the slightest pull on the line you have to immediately strip strike, but keep the rod tip down. Just a slightly faster and longer strip than usual is enough. If the permit hasn't taken the fly it won't be spooked and you can carry on moving the crab.

This is probably the secret to catching permit, because often you don't feel the fish taking the fly and he spits it out without you even realising. Don't expect to feel a definite tug, it's more like the feeling of the fly catching on a bit of elastic.



knocked out. As a result, it's a good idea to get your fly to imitate a dying or injured fish and to move the fly with one or two short strips with short pauses in between.

One evening while waiting for some tarpon to appear I had left my fly in the water and it was slowly sinking to the bottom when a very big tarpon appeared from nowhere and attacked the fly. He completely took me by surprise!

Tarpon fishing is not too difficult technically, but the strike and the fight need endurance, and you need to stay calm and in control of the line tension during the leaps and runs.

Other species — It's a good idea to have a 9ft 7/8-wt rod for targeting bonefish which are plentiful on the flats, and keep the permit rod and reel handy for targeting trevally and triggerfish near the reef.

WHERE TO GO

Tarpon Caye Lodge is by far the best place we have ever travelled to for permit fishing. We have been there at the wrong time, with the wrong tide and moon and the number of permit we



Tarpon Caye is situated close to Placencia in southern Belize.

saw and fished for was unbelievable! Knowing that the fishing is better in the spring and that the big tarpon are there too, we cannot wait to go back.

The lodge is right in the middle of the best areas for tarpon and permit which means you do not waste time on long boat journeys. It also means the fishing day can easily be adapted to the right tide and conditions. A typical day can involve having a cup of coffee before setting off to check for tarpon in the island's lagoon as the sun comes up, followed by a good breakfast and then a morning of fishing for permit. During the quieter parts of the day it is easy to stop back at the lodge to rest or enjoy some snorkelling in front of your cabana before heading back out to catch the right tide...

All the contact we had with the guides and lodge staff was spontaneous, warm, welcoming and genuine — a far cry from the impersonal courtesy you experience in most other top class fishing lodges. Watch out, tarpon, we'll be back!

• For further information visit www.tarponcaye.com or email info@tarponcaye.com.