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San Antonio, TX
Cayo Largo, Cuba Trip Report
June 24-29, 2017

Overview

We are a married fly fishing couple, experienced with fly fishing travel, both about 50. Our fishing days in Cayo Largo were June 24-29. With travel days and some extra time in Havana, our total trip was June 22 to July 3.

The Gear

Fly Rods & Reels - We share equipment and don't double up similar rigs on the boat. The skiffs hold 6 rods and we had 5 or 6 different combinations rigged and ready always. For us this included, most of the time, an 8 wt for bonefish, a 9 wt for permit, a 10 wt (floating) for cuda/jack/etc., a 10 wt (intermediate) for baby tarpon, and an 11 wt (floating) for larger tarpon and also for challenging casting situations where the bigger rod/heavier line was helpful. The 12 wt we took never made it out of the case. We would recommend at least one intermediate sink line in a heavier line weight – most of the situations are classic flats or mangroves, but there are all variety of water depths, cuts, channels, etc, and you want to be able to capitalize on the best opportunity allowed by the weather, tides, etc.

Flies - We took a healthy selection of flies for bonefish, permit, tarpon, and "other species." Also, upon arrival, Avalon provided each of us with five Avalon Permit flies and five Avalon Bonefish flies.

For bones, we found that Gotchas of various weights/eyes worked perfectly well. All our bonefish were caught on our Gotchas or the Avalon Bonefish flies we were furnished.

For permit, our box was comprised primarily of crab patterns of all manner and weight, but at Cayo Largo there is a very strong preference for the Avalon Permit fly, and we think justifiably so based on our results. Five of these per person may be enough, but maybe not. If you spend a lot of time chasing permit you may lose a few to wear and tear, cudas, etc. (we even lost one to a tarpon!). Apparently tying supplies in Cuba are limited like everything else so you cannot get more from Avalon while you're there, even though it's their signature pattern. Best to bring some with you, tied yourself or store-bought. We brought some store-bought versions and were glad we had them – they weren't perfect and we modified them on the boat to get the proper action, but it was better than running completely out.

For tarpon, we had a variety of standard flies but the guides liked the Enrico Puglisi patterns – particularly the purple/black tarpon streamer fly and the purple/black peanut butter, as well as the black/yellow dorado, and we had good success with these.

We did not catch any snook and really only spent a couple of hours trying. Tides seemed to be wrong when we were in the right territory, resulting in snook being way to far back in the mangroves and uninterested in our casts. As a result we don't have a lot of input on success/failure of snook fly patterns.

We like catching "other species" to mix things up. There were lots of opportunities for jacks, snapper and cudas. We targeted cudas for a while one day and our success came on a large popper fly that made a great, satisfying splash when stripped. Our cuda flies that imitated tube

lures/needlefish did not seem to capture their attention, but we just switched flies several times until we found success.

Leaders and tippet - We used 12 lb tapered leaders for bones. For permit, we used tapered 20lb mono leaders and tied 20lb flouro onto those when necessary, but our guide did not seem overly concerned with having flouro on the end and was much more focused on the fly and the presentation. We also took spools of 25, 40, 60 and 80 lb flouro for building leaders for tarpon, snook, etc, and were glad we had them. I would add a spool of 100 lb flouro for the next trip, just in case. Knottable wire leader material is necessary if you want to cast at cudas, and there are sharks everywhere so be prepared if you want to give them a shot (we didn't mess with them).

Other – We took wading boots but they were largely unnecessary. Unless you specifically want to wade, this is a way to save space/weight in your bags if you need it. There were several days when we didn't even put them on the boat. We did, however, use them a couple of times to stalk some tailing bonefish and to take some photos from off the boat.

The Staff

The Avalon coordinator on location was Yosvani, and he was very attentive. He met us at the airport upon arrival, greeted us every day at the “fishing club” at the Marina, and ensured that we were taken care of at the hotel.

Our guide was Keinlert and he was excellent. We would rate him in the top tier of the guides we've had in our saltwater destinations. Great instincts, fish sighting skills, and work ethic. English was very good – as a couple, one of us is fluent in Spanish and the other passable, but Keinlert would communicate well to a non-Spanish-speaker. We hope to return to fish with him again in the future.

The Fishing

General – Our instructions to our guide were generally as follows: We like variety, seeing the whole fishery, shots at multiple species, etc. If there are good opportunities to look for permit we don't want to pass those up, but we don't want to target permit exclusively. And we want you (the guide) to use your judgment; if we are in the vicinity of something we should try based on the weather, tides, etc., let's talk about it. Our results seemed to reflect this guidance.

Permit – We caught two permit on the trip, so very successful on that front. We had maybe two dozen sightings, a dozen shots, six or seven high quality shots, four or five presentations where it seemed there was some attempt to eat, and two caught. Both of the caught permit were in small groups (four to six fish) cruising/feeding on the flat, and both on the Avalon Permit fly. Every time we saw a ray the guide would look for a permit in the vicinity, as this is a source of frequent success in the area, but we never saw a permit on a ray. The only other general observation, which will be no surprise to anyone, is that none of these permit were easy. All the eats were the result of long casts where the fly was placed right where it needed to be and the permit hadn't sensed us yet. The shorter casts, second-chance casts, difficult casts (backhand into the wind going away, etc.) were universal failures. The Cayo Largo permit are no more forgiving than the permit we've seen elsewhere.

In both instances that we caught permit we ended up with a grand slam for the day. In the first case, day 2, we caught the permit around 10:00 am so we had plenty of time to

opportunistically pick up tarpon and bones in the remainder of the day (easy way). In the second instance, day 5, we had already caught a tarpon and bones over the course of the day, and we were simply in a good permit spot at the end of the day when we cast to and caught the permit very close to quitting time (hard way).

Tarpon – We caught five tarpon out of ten that we jumped. All would be considered “baby” tarpon but the two largest ones were in the 40 lb range which is obviously different than the 15 lb fish at the lower end of our range. Our tarpon experience was a pleasant surprise. We didn’t come to target tarpon, nor did we spend a great deal of time looking for them. But we ran across them in several different settings. We jumped two on flats while fishing for permit: one we recognized early enough to switch rods and cast a proper tarpon fly and leader (caught it); the other surprised us, so we cast the permit fly which was broken off on the first jump. We caught two in mangrove lagoons while targeting tarpon and snook – these were real “babies” in the 12-15 lb range – and jumped several others. We

landed our two larger tarpon just inside the outer reef along the island chain. This was more challenging fishing, sighting and casting while fighting the swells coming across the reef, but rewarding with bigger, energetic fish. When we encountered tarpon and could make a good presentation we often got an eat.

Bonefish – We caught about 30 bonefish over the course of our six days, average size probably 3-4 pounds with the largest probably 5-6 pounds. We caught the bonefish in several different settings. We caught several nice tailing bonefish off a shallow flat with multiple active feeders that we cast to individually. We caught a number of bones out of small to medium groups of feeding fish. We also caught a few off the edges of muds, which requires some explanation. We observed many active muds during our stay, primarily on the extensive flats on the inshore side of the archipelago. The muds we saw were the result of bonefish schools, or rays, or permit, or some combination. There is always some kind of action at the muds so it is natural for the guides to want to check them out when passing by. We told our guide that we did not want to blind cast in muds, so we didn’t, but there were times when groups of bones emerged from a mud and we cast to them.

Snook – We only tried for snook on one of our six days. On that day we saw good habitat but the snook were not cooperating. This was not a big disappointment, I consider snook a bonus in a fishery like Cayo Largo, but if you are specifically targeting snook this may not be your destination.

Other Species – We caught one nice cuda, which was a lot of fun, cast to others without success. We also picked up our share of jacks, snapper, etc. We saw as many sharks as we’ve ever seen on the flats in one trip. We never got around to trying to catch one, but if sightcasting to sharks is your thing then this could be your spot.

The Weather

Of our six days, four were excellent weather with abundant sun and light winds, and the fifth was good, plenty of sun but more than ideal wind. The sixth day (actually our first day) was challenging with clouds and breeze, tough but fishable. Otherwise weather was typical for late June, high temps in the upper 80s and humid, so hot when winds were light, but a trade we’d happily make. The windier days were the result of an early season tropical depression moving through the area, an unusually early tropical system. This seemed like bad luck and we would

return in late June again and take our chances – hotter part of the season but the more “typical” conditions we experienced were excellent for fishing.

Cayo Largo Lodging

We stayed at the “Sol Club Cayo Largo.” The facility is appropriately compared to a dated Club Med. BUT – we set our expectations low and actually had a lot of fun with it. The staff of the resort were very friendly and eager to please. Our room was comfortable and AC worked great. We upgraded to the “Ocean View” room and enjoyed relaxing on our balcony before dinner. The WiFi worked fine for email and basic browsing, checking news, etc. It was easy to build this check-in into our routine. We had the hotel do laundry for us once during the stay and that worked out fine.

The all-inclusive food buffet is extensive. A lot of the vegetables are not fresh (canned), but they make the most of it. We settled into a routine that included daily use of the fresh, made-to-order omelet bar for breakfast, black beans and rice on the side of most meals, and the tabasco sauce that was one of the few American-made items we saw on the island. For dinner there is a spiny lobster available for an upcharge which we did several times. You can make reservations at the “a la carte” restaurant – ordering off the menu with waiters in air conditioning – and we did this for half our dinners.

As for lunch, you make your own lunch during breakfast, put into Tupperware containers furnished by Avalon. This worked fine. Ham & Cheese sandwiches were the norm for the carnivore, PB&J for the vegetarian. Fresh mango and pineapple were available most of the time, though on a couple of days only canned fruit was available.

Travel

We flew Delta San Antonio to Atlanta to Havana (and back). Smooth and uneventful.

Luggage collection and transfer to Hotel Parque Central was fine.

Pickup the next morning was set for 3:30 am in the hotel lobby – early!

As expected, internal travel (Havana to Cayo Largo and back) was the most unpredictable and challenging. Be prepared for a time-consuming transfer in Havana and unpredictable flight times. We set our expectations appropriately low, which helped.

Parque Central was a fine hotel and a great, central location. The “scene” in the atrium dining area is entertaining, good people watching.

On the return trip we stayed three nights/two days in Havana and tried the Kimpinski Gran Hotel Manzana. Brand new (open all of five weeks when we arrived) and still working out some kinks. Adjacent to Parque Central and same excellent location. Outstanding breakfast buffet which was a treat - try to ensure this is included in your room rate because it is outrageously expensive otherwise. Also a great rooftop pool/restaurant/bar which is a great place to spend the evening, watch the sunset, etc. The Manzana is not cheap.

The only other travel item worth noting is that on the return flight we almost lost our rod carrier (and ~10 fly rods) while passing through Cuban security. They pulled our bag at the x-ray machine and said it was “forbidden”. Of course we had traveled with this bag at each leg of the trip without incident. The big problem on the way out, however, was that we had already been through customs and immigration control, surrendered our tourist cards, had our passports stamped, etc., so going back to check this bag did not seem like a viable option. After

much haggling, we determined that the offending items were not the rods but three spools of heavy leader material that we had put in the rod case. Somehow our backpack with ten fly reels had not garnered attention (thank god), but these spools of leader material in the rod case did! We gladly forfeited the spools so that we could move on with our rods. My advice would be to put spools of leader, fly lines, etc. in checked bags, and it would probably be safest to put fly reels in checked bags on the return trip (Havana to US) as well. If you want to carry the reels on the way in it should not be a problem as you are dealing with more predictable US security and US airlines, but the safe bet on return trip would be to check them.