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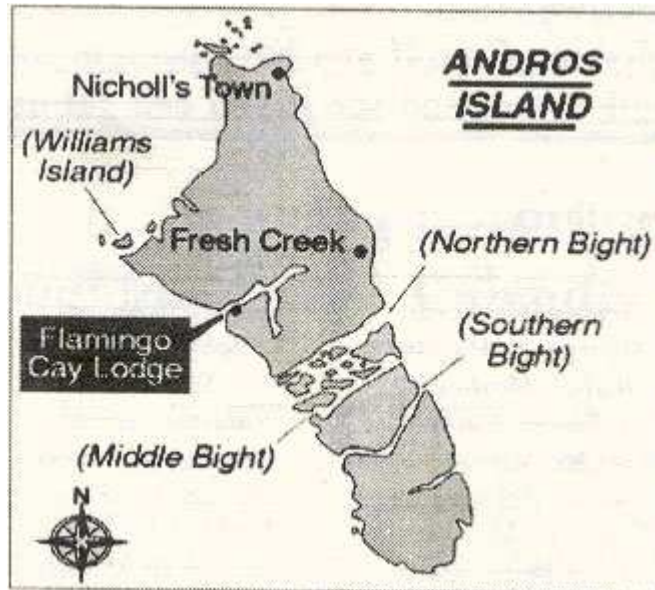
**This Andros Lodge Is
Just Plain Wonderful**

(Editor Note: Angling Report President/ Publisher Don Causey made a quick visit last month to Flamingo Cay Lodge on the West Coast of Andros Island and came away mightily impressed. Here's his assessment..)

Anyone who knows the Bahamas very well has heard at least vague stories about a private island somewhere on the west coast of Andros Island where friends of the owner have been privileged over the years to enjoy some of the most pristine fishing left in this hemisphere, along with duck shooting if they were so inclined. Well, those stories are not just "stories."

The very real, 20,000-plus-acre island is called Flamingo Cay, and the owner of it is a third-generation white Bahamian by the name of Charles Bethell, whose ancestors were influential in the pre-independence government of the Bahamas. Old Man Bethell, as Charles' grandfather is affectionately remembered, bought Flamingo Cay in the 1920s and used it as a family retreat and a place to entertain friends and acquaintances, some of whom happened to be members of royal families in Europe.

The island camp is, literally, in the middle of nowhere. Unless you have lots of time for an ocean journey, the only way to reach it is by floatplane. Out front, is the west coast of Andros - miles and miles of it yawning away in both directions. In the other direction, there are hundreds of square miles of saltwater marsh. The nearest neighbor in that direction is over 30 miles away.



(Flamingo Cay Lodge is 10 minutes from the West coast of Andros. Note also how close it is to famed Williams Island.)

The immediate appeal of Flamingo Cay is the easy access it provides to the famed west coast of Andros. Yes, other lodges access the west coast, but they do so by running upwards of an hour and a half in each direction. The run is so long and arduous (e.g., butt-busting) that most of the lodges charge an extra \$150 a day for accessing the west coast. Guests at Flamingo Cay can fish the west coast within 10 minutes of leaving the lodge. They can also fish remote ponds and rivers in the interior, reachable only by airboat when conditions make coastal fishing impossible. Even more important, week-long guests can even arrange to fish the ultimate Bahamas "honey hole" - namely, the remote Williams Island flats, where all three of the top flats fish (bone fish, tarpon and permit) occur in great number.

The deeper appeal of Flamingo Cay is the ineffable "feel" of the place. This past month, I had the privilege of spending a night there as a guest of Charles Bethell. We flew down both coasts a ways on arrival, took an airboat tour of the marshes and made a few casts at bonefish the next morning. Yes, I caught a few of the many dozens I saw in spite of spending most of my time tangled in my own line.

There were just the two of us in camp, along with his assistant, Cindy Rimstad, and a skeleton crew of Bahamian workers. A new building is going up, so there was a bit of back-ground noise of saws and hammers. It being late July, it was hot. Breathlessly so at times. The saving grace was a strong breeze that blew sonorously through the Australian pines planted long ago by Old Man Bethell.

The trees and some of the older structures of Flamingo Cay have been there so long they have molded themselves around one another the way trees and shrubs in England have shaped themselves around stone fences. One of the

original duck-shooting punts Old Man Bethell used back in the 1920s hangs in the dining area, along with pictures of the patriarch draped with teal.

The summertime doldrums notwithstanding, you could sense the contours of a totally different kind of experience than that provided by most fishing lodges. Charles Bethell loves Flamingo Cay. Maybe a better word is, he reveres it. Some of his earliest childhood memories are of coming to Flamingo Cay with his father. The trips were old-fashioned, male-bonding rituals that pulled the family together. If you have ever read *The Bear* by William Faulkner and felt the mythic power of those trips he describes into the endless woods of Mississippi, then you know what those family trips to Flamingo Cay meant to Charles Bethell.

At this point, Bethell has closed some other businesses and begun to devote almost all of his energy to operating Flamingo Cay, so he is serious about running it as a commercial enterprise. But that does not mean he is going to operate it as a take-all-comers fishing and shooting lodge. As much as possible, he wants to screen would-be clients to keep out those who don't appreciate the gentleman's sporting lodge environment he wants to maintain. In conversation, he made it clear that he is not above canceling a client's trip mid-week if he begins to spoil everyone's good time.

Bethell's concern for the long-term health of the resource is almost palpable. He insists that clients release bonefish at the boat without touching them, even to take photographs. He's even more protective of the resident tarpon in the area, which he insists clients break off after a few jumps and/or after they have touched the leader. "I am absolutely adamant about that," Bethell said. "No one should come here expecting to lift a tarpon out of the water," he said. "And I don't make exceptions just because a client hooks his (or her) first-ever tarpon here."

What Bethell is apparently trying to do is generate the necessary revenue to preserve Flamingo Cay without sacrificing the relaxed bonhomie of the place he recalls as a child. Ultimately, that may mean turning the island into a private club, he says. Right now, though, Flamingo Cay is quietly gaining a following as a straight-up fishing and shooting lodge. Last year, Bethell says he hosted around 100 clients, and he wants to boost that considerably this coming year, especially by finding additional cast-and-blast clients in the late fall/early winter months of October, November and December. That's when good fishing coincides with the migration through the area of tens of thousands of teal, mostly bluewings and green wings, along with a few American widgeons and pintails. The teal land in saltwater ponds, right amidst bonefish. It's not the standard way to hunt and fish these ponds, but in years past Bethell says he has left anglers on ponds with both a shotgun and a fly rod and come back later to find frustrated clients complaining about bonefish running through the decoy spread and becoming tangled in the lines. Now, that's a cast-and-blast experience, no?

All of this talk about gentlemanliness and shooting should not be allowed to obscure the quality of the fishing at Flamingo Cay. If you can cast a fly, you'll catch a satisfying number of bonefish there and even a tarpon or two. On visits to Williams Island one even has a reasonable chance at certain times of year of taking a grand slam.

Just don't consider this place if you are what *Angling Report* subscriber Robert E. Gieringer calls "faint of wallet." Gieringer fished Flamingo Cay this past spring, and it was his report that drew my attention to Flamingo Cay and inspired my visit out that way. Gieringer had the misfortune to visit Flamingo Cay in the middle of a storm that delayed his arrival and milked-up the water, which is a well-known problem with the west coast of Andros. He still hooked a number of bone fish and enjoyed his stay,



"Charles Bethell is a gracious host, offering wines, Cuban rum and cigars for those of that pursuit, and his assistant, Cindy Rimstad, works up a tasty kitchen fare," Gieringer writes. "Charles has the appearance of Peter Falk in his younger years, and he has the conversational personality of Jason Alexander. His stories of 19th and 20th Century events in the Bahamas were fascinating."

Gieringer goes on to compare the costs of Flamingo Cay to the costs of a fly-out lodge in Alaska. And he is right. The daily rate is \$450 for meals and accommodations. Fishing is another \$200 per person per day, if two people fish together. Duck hunting (and a limited amount of pig hunting) is \$350 a day. Anyone opting for a day of hunting can hunt and/or fish for the same price, perhaps combining a morning of bone fishing with an afternoon of duck hunting. The float- plane ride to and from Nassau is another \$350 per person.

The capacity of the lodge this coming year is being expanded to eight, but the typical group consists of six people. That is not a lot of people to cover the cost of outfitting trips in such a remote location. And that is why the place is so expensive, Bethell says, noting that his infrastructure includes generators big enough to support air conditioning in all cabins, a float plane, a reverse-osmosis water system, four flats boats and an airboat with a power plant large enough to whisk six clients through a mangrove swamp. A trip through the marsh in Bethell's airboat is a must, incidentally, if you go to Flamingo Cay. You sit up high above the marsh watching ducks, egrets, and other birds scatter in all directions. Some parts of the marsh are absolutely filled with bone fish, and the water back there is clear as a swimming pool.



To haul all of the heavier supplies necessary to operate a lodge, Bethell has bought a functioning World War II landing craft big enough to put a tractor trailer inside. He uses it to run all the way to Miami and/or Nassau for supplies. During my visit, an exceptionally high tide provided an opportunity to bring the craft right up the small river in front of the lodge. It was a hoot, maneuvering that giant craft up the creek.

So, who is this lodge right for? Not for the "faint of wallet," of course. And not for the fish-counter either, who divides the daily fee by the number of fish he catches to see if he has gotten his money's worth. Flamingo Cay is a gentleman's club cum lodge that is unlike anything I have seen in the organized world of international fly fishing. It is an absolute gem for the mature angler who has caught enough fish and now savors the overall experience of being on the water and in a congenial environment.

A final anecdote may bring the Flamingo Cay experience into focus. Last year, Bethell says a group of clients decided it would be nice to have a suckling pig slow-roasted in the camp's barbecue-cooker. Seems everyone had seen some of the

many feral pigs that live on Flamingo Cay, and had been treated to the full story of how they are all descendants of a boar named Horace that Old Man Bethell released many years ago. The effort to kill a pig and then prepare it on the cooker became the whole focus of the day. Eating it and telling stories around the fire became the focus of the evening.

You get the picture. Flamingo Cay is one of a kind. - *Don Causey*.

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