

REPORT: FIRST PERSONAL CUBA EXPERIENCE – by Don Muelrath

Cuba offers a well protected, rich marine environment with an integral part being the shallow flats fish and sea life. The “secret” to this spectacular saltwater world are typified by the two uniformed gentlemen at right. In the early 90’s, Cuba/Castro realized that their reef systems and shallow, saltwater environments were special and an important asset of the country. Castro was an avid scuba diver. They established five giant national marine parks where killing any marine life (the exception being an annual lobster season) was made illegal. For the critical element in enforcing laws designed to protect fish and marine life (i.e., enforcement) each of the marine parks has two full time guards that are constantly on patrol. The two gentlemen at right were the ones in charge of the area we fished. From my personal experiences, the richness of the marine life in Cuba is only rivaled by the protected waters of the spectacular Alphonse and St. Francois atolls in the Seychelles.



The first aspect of the fishery that struck me was the bonefishing. The numbers and average size of the bones is rivaled only by those found in the Seychelles atolls referenced above. This is a great spot for newcomers to the salt water flats to gain their first experience. We met Luis Nieves, below left with one of his first bones, was joined by three friends for their Cuba adventure. Only one of the four had any previous saltwater flyfishing experience, but all enjoyed some success with the bones.

That’s me below releasing my first Cuban bone. At right, two delightful Canadian anglers who were with us most of our week, Martin Lefrancois and Eric Denis (holding the bone). Martin and Eric are both experienced fly rod anglers, but this was their first salt water flats trip.....and they had some outstanding results.



On his last day, Martin was determined to try and catch his first permit. He did that.....and a lot more, achieving a Super Grand Slam (bone, permit, tarpon, and snook). At left below, Martin holds the permit and tarpon from his special day. A snook occupies the slot second from the right. At right, the guide brings to the boat my 35th permit, a beautiful unweighed 15+ pound fish. This was my lone permit of the trip, although I did have several more decent shots at fish.



There were certain mangrove areas that held baby tarpon (below, left) and snook. There were a few limited areas where you could blind cast for larger tarpon, but I was only able to get a hook in a few of the babies. However, the large tarpon fishery changes dramatically when migrating fish are present in late April, May, and early June. Second from left below, a nice snook charges out from the mangrove edge and attacks my fly. Next, tailing bones on very shallow mangrove flats were not uncommon.

Avalon is the outfitter that handles a variety of fly fishing options in Cuba. They have several different comfortable mothership operations to access offshore environments and a few land based lodges. Generally, we

have found their options to be “user friendly” with good Cuban based cuisine and guides that ranged from average to great.



A few other notes on the overall experience:

- **The old American autos (mostly from the 1950's).....these are still rolling due to dedication, creative engineering, and a lot of love. While I can respect the determination displayed by the owners to keep them running, for the most part when compared to the original autos, they are held together with bailing wire, modified parts, and bubble gum.**
- **Logistics – when arriving from the USA, there can be some travel hassles. I've heard that logistical issues have greatly improved and if it has always been on your “wish list” to go to Cuba, you can deal with the logistics.....but there might still be hassles.**
- **Price – expensive.....generally, prices run between \$5000 pp for the low season and up to \$9000 pp for the peak season.**
- **This is still a communist country. Cuba is in a state of transition and the best word I know of to describe the general state is “confused.” A visit is an education on communism.**