

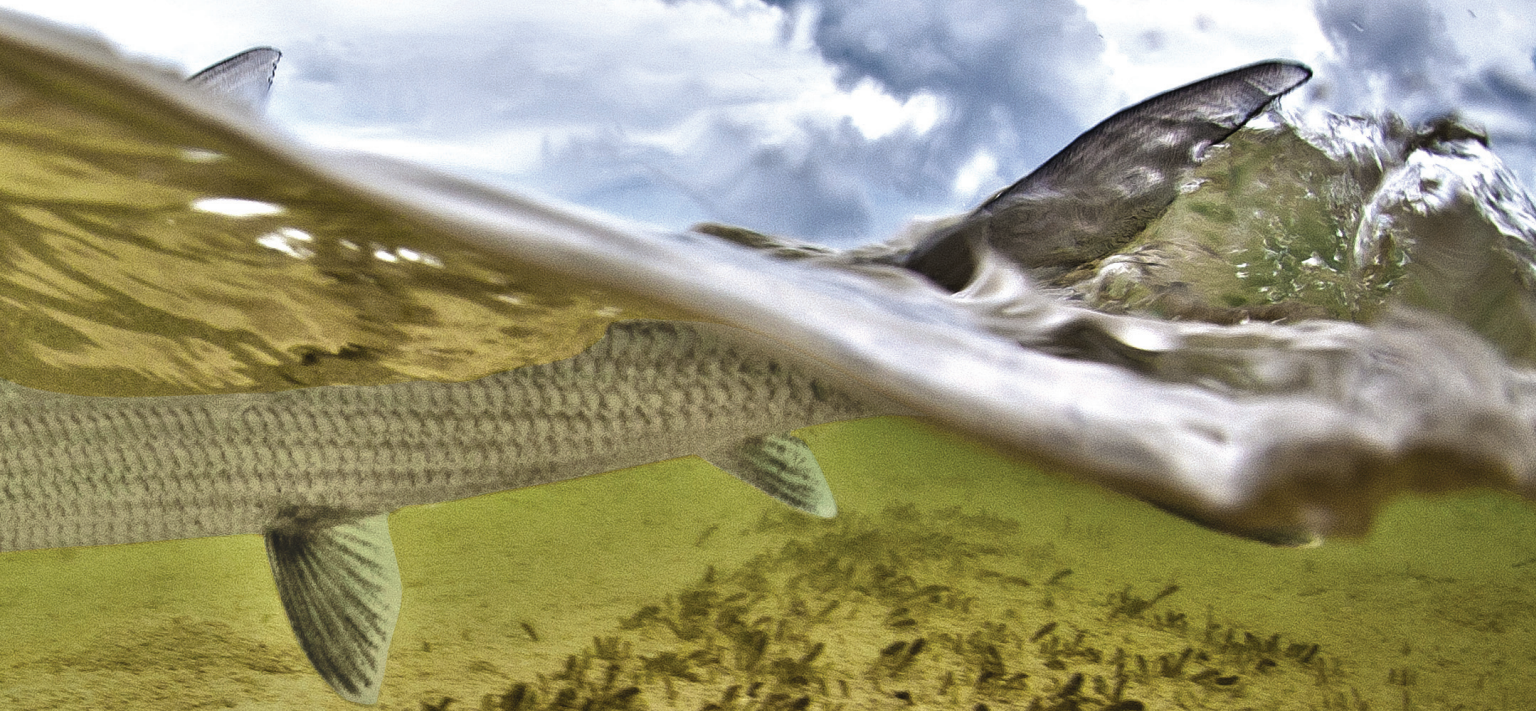
Fly Fish America®

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This Magazine

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ISLANDS

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ISLAND





Everything in the Bahamas moves at the speed of slow—except the vaunted **gray ghost** of the flats: the beautiful and powerful bonafish. The Commonwealth of the Bahamas, with a population just over 300,000, is comprised of a chain of 3,000 islands and cays (keys) off the southeast coast of the United States and north of Cuba. Only 30 of the islands are inhabited, and almost 85% of the population lives in the larger cities. **This is truly fly fishing paradise.** In addition to numerous and large bones, the waters of this vast region host permit, tarpon, various jacks and snappers, barracuda, and sharks—and all of them **readily take well-presented flies.**





LONG ISLAND BY BRIAN IRWIN

CAPT. DELBERT SMITH >> STELLA MARIS RESORT

DELBERT SMITH has a crackling, almost nervous voice. He greeted me at the dock with a well-honed “Good day, Sir.” The fifty year-old bonefish guide has been fishing since he was a little boy. He grew up here on Long Island, a remote strip of paradise in the Bahamas Out Islands that sits 165 miles southeast of Nassau.

A visit to Long Island is like stepping back in time. Over eighty miles long, but only 3.7 miles wide at its broadest point, this sparsely populated island is bordered on one side by the turbulent waters of the Atlantic, pockmarked by one of nature’s most interesting phenomena: blue holes where the ocean’s shallows drop to depths of over 600 feet. These shafts dot the rocky coast, where steep cliffs comprise much of the eastern shoreline, but it is Dean’s blue hole, the deepest in the world, which draws the most attention, as it is the home of the World Free Dive Championships.

On the leeward side of Long Island the topography is decisively different. Gentle sandy flats taper into the Bahamas Bank. Mangroves ring the numerous bays, holding a wide variety of shorebirds, and providing habitat for the healthy population of bonefish that slide in and out of the flats with the tide. It was this species that brought us to Long Island.

Smith fired up the outboard on his 17-foot skiff and dropped the gear shift lever into reverse, gurgling us away from the dock. I asked him about his background, and about Long Island, as we eased our way out of the inlet. He’s never lived anywhere but Long Island and his roots go back to the days of slavery. He pointed up the shoreline and turned to us. “That’s where it all started, just up-island.”

He was referring to the site where Christopher Columbus made his second landing in the New World, the first being on the Bahamian Island of San Salvador. Smith’s ancestors were enslaved by the Europeans after the

settlement, being forced to support the lucrative cotton farming industry. They never left.

We found bonefish almost immediately after motoring up. Grey shadows dashed in the green water, leaving turtle grass waving in their wakes. A few singles and pairs circled around a sandy patch, stirring up muddy sand as they pecked the bottom mining for food. Smith’s voice spilled a forced whisper: “smoke.” Referring to the turbid water where a few bones dined, he pointed and advised me, “One-o’clock. Forty feet.”

I fired a Crazy Charlie just in front of the muddy water. It sank slowly; I retrieved in a rhythmic fashion. Strip, pause, strip, strip, pause, strip. Repeat. A jolt of energy coursed through my fly line and into my sweating hand. Line vanished from my fingers as I applied light pressure, hoping to get the fish onto the reel. As the last of my slack fired its way through my hand, there was a light pop and instantly my line went limp. It was my second cast.



We worked our way up the shoreline and into broad creeks that drained soft sandy flats that stretched miles in all directions. Veins of sapphire water threaded through the ivory fields which, very slowly, were emptying with the falling tide. Smith explained that the fish typically move with the tide. As water drains from the mangroves, leaving their arcing roots and trunks exposed to the salty air, the fish move toward the ocean. When the water on the flats drops to a few inches or less, bones seek the protection of deeper water as they move offshore. They often stay there until the tide brings the water back into the flats, allowing them passage to these feeding grounds and eventually the safety of the mangrove roots. This pattern is often strongest with a full moon, under which we casted in the bright sun.

Slowly and silently we glided across the flats, Smith poling his skiff in a foot of water, scanning for the shadows, mud or tails of

elusive bonefish. We were able to get a few shots at some singles and pairs, but the larger schools were nowhere to be found. We fished the expansive area known as Joe's Sound for hours, threading our way in and out of falling flats via a twisted system of braided creeks. As the sun climbed high into the sky the flats emptied, leaving us in a position where we'd need to wait until later in the afternoon for the sea to return, bringing the fish with it.

There is not much to do on Long Island other than fish and dive. It's a wild place, undeveloped and rustic with a relaxed, friendly feel and a tradition of simplicity. There wasn't island-wide power until 1994. The island had its first bank robbery in 1993, performed by three Nassau teens who took a taxi to the bank to perform the felony. Half-finished homes, pink cabanas and friendly, smiling locals line the only road that runs the island's length.

We were staying at Stella Maris Resort (www.stellamarisresort.com), a pleasant,

airy cluster of cabanas and glowing pools that sits on a hill overlooking the ocean. Most of the visitors to Stella Maris come to fish, hence their procurement of a local as their resident bonefishing guide (Delbert Smith can be reached at 242-338-6001; captaindelbert@hotmail.com; www.captaindelbert.com). After a long day of fishing, guests enjoy the tinkling music of a steel drum band as foamy rum punch flows beside an adobe oven filled with searing steaks and fresh mahi mahi. Damp hammocks swing under thatched roof shelters, the ocean crashing just below a tiki bar.

By late afternoon we grew frustrated with the lack of fish. The flats were once again filling with gin clear water, and although we expected to be seeing the huge schools of bones that make Long Island a worthwhile destination, these were absent. We moved up and down the shoreline, exploring various flats, hoping to find fish. Each flat was >>>



A SLICE OF ORVIS-ENDORSED PARADISE

EASY ACCESS TO THE MARLS



GREAT ABACO ISLAND BY MACKENZIE BATTLES

ABACO LODGE

>>> slightly different. Hard sand bottoms embedded with occasional starfish or conch comprised some flats, while others were softer, with potholes generated by nesting crabs and feeding fish. The deeper in the flats we cruised, the more we found turtle grass. Doormat sized rays floated in the shallow water, waving their wings and stirring up the chalky sand in the process.

As the mangroves once again enjoyed the flooding of their roots, we started to find bones. Smith poled quietly up against waterlogged stands of the plants, screening for the grey bodies of these “ghosts of the flats.” The fish were feeding actively, stirring up the water into a milky, cloudy solution. Hungry lemon sharks swam in and out of the area, looking for weak or vulnerable prey. While the sharks would spook the bones into dashing from one side of the flat to the other, a new school would float in to take their place. We were surrounded by fish.

It was early evening and the sun was falling toward the horizon. Harsh glare cast on the water, making visibility difficult. I was at Smith’s mercy, as his eyes were trained at seeking fish in conditions where, by all rights, you shouldn’t be able to. Again he directed me. “Ten-o-clock, 30 feet.” I drew up my line and fired the fly where Smith pointed. Strip, pause, strip, strip . . . bump. Line again peeled through my fingers, disappearing into the skinny water as it flossed a line through the shiny bay. Five minutes later we released the best fish of the day, a chunky six pounder that took me into my backing three times before throwing in the towel.

It was almost dark when we got off the water for the day. We pulled Smith’s boat onto his trailer; water dripped down its sides and off of the decals that read “No Stress.” Smith wiped his forehead and turned to us. “It was a grand day. Quite grand.” The sun dropped into the ocean, its rays spiking our eyes, forcing us to squint. In the distance, the glare on the water was pierced by a flash of light. Smith and I turned, straining to see the sparkling, broad arc of a tailing bonefish waving in the amber light of the setting sun.

I hardly slept at all that night. The anticipation of getting back out on the flats in the morning kept me awake until the wee hours. The next several days were repeats of the first, but the number of bones boated increased steadily each day. If flats fishing is your passion—and bonefish your intended quarry—the Bahamas is where you need to be.

ABACO LODGE SITS ON THE ROCKY SHORELINE of the Marls, on the west side of Great Abaco Island, just north of Marsh Harbour on the way to Treasure Cay. It is the first of its kind, combining an upscale fly-fishing lodge with easy access to the Marls’ expansive system of flats and tidal creeks. Guided fishing is primarily wading for bonefish on the Marls or Oceanside flats, but barracuda and permit are also available.

The lodge consists of ten air conditioned private rooms with private baths, pool, sitting room, outside fire pit and patio space. The main bar is fully stocked with spirits, cold beer, soft drinks, plenty of ice, a blender, and mixers for cocktails. An open bar is included in every package, and you are free to help yourself or ask a staff members to mix your favorite drink. The lodge features one of the best fly shops in The Bahamas, with everything an angler might need, including rods, reels, lines, terminal tackle and sunblock. Wireless Internet is available, as is phone service. Gourmet dining is provided by a trained executive chef, with emphasis on locally caught seafood, including ahi tuna, grouper, and hog snapper. Complimentary house wines are served with dinner.

The lodge is open year round, except for August and September. Rates for the period October through March run from \$2,250 for 3 nights/2 fishing days to \$4,995 for 7 night/6 fishing days. High-season rates (April through July) are slightly higher: from \$2,330 for 3 nights/2 fishing days to \$5,150 for 7 nights/6 fishing days. Rates are per person based on one angler per room/two anglers per guide. Make sure to bring a friend, because single anglers pay a private-boat surcharge of 60% of the package price. For more information, or to book a trip, contact Orvis International Travel, Dept. FFA; Tel.: (800) 547-4322; Web: www.orvis.com



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