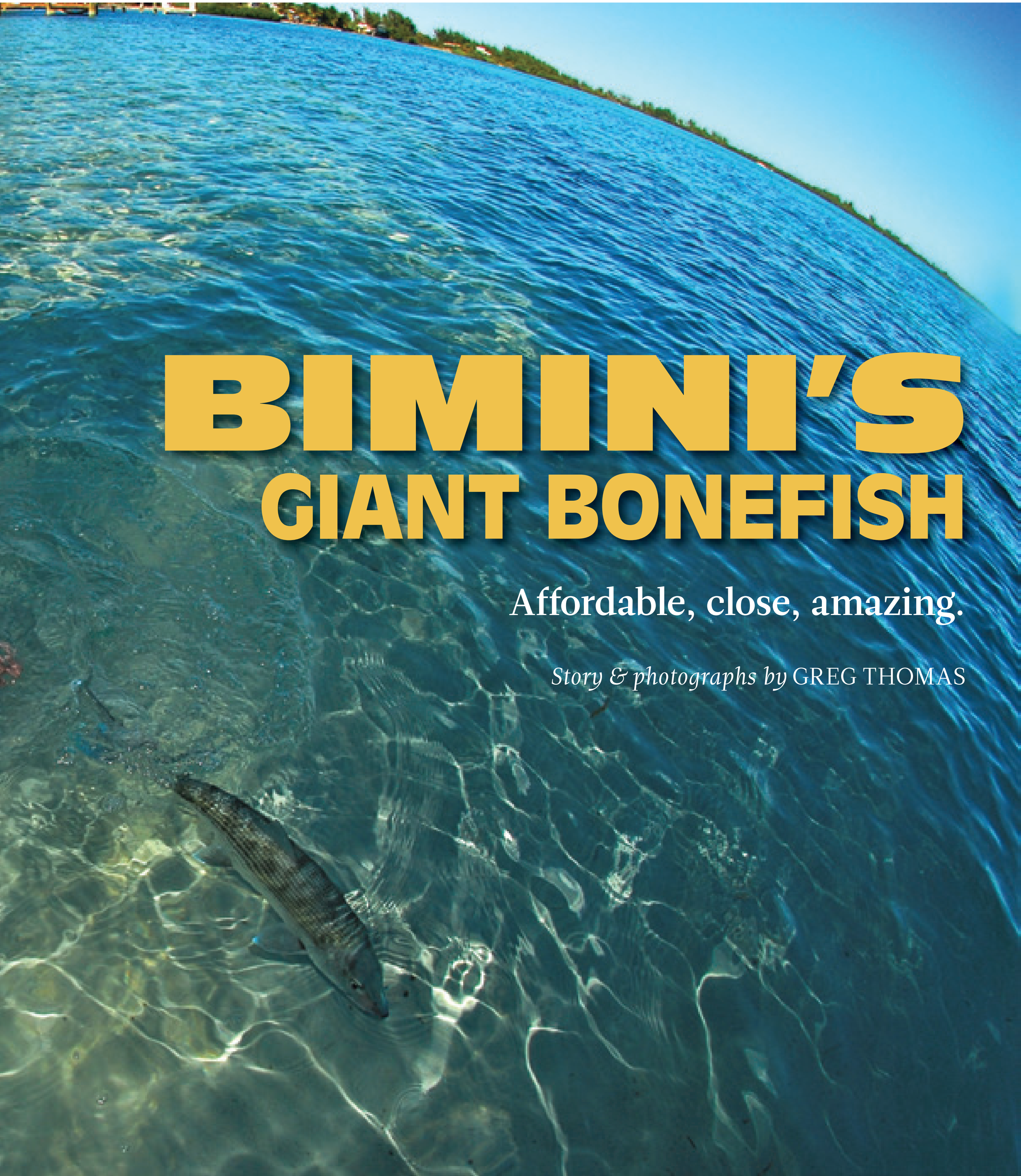


BIMINI'S GIANT BONEFISH

Affordable, close, amazing.

Story & photographs by GREG THOMAS

I DON'T THINK HEMINGWAY REALLY CARED ABOUT A QUIET place to write when he spent consecutive years on Bimini, back in 1935 and 1936, although he did pen *To Have and Have Not* during that time. Instead, I think he moved to Bimini for the same reason the rest of us would—for an excuse to do nothing but fish.

I formed that opinion over four short days in February 2013, when I joined writer Chris Santella, and editors Kirk Deeter (*Trout* Magazine) and Chuck Smock (Cabela's *Outfitter Journal*), and tested a lodging and fishing operation called Bimini Sands Resort.

Bimini Sands rests just 55 miles from Miami, but it might as well be 5,000 miles away when comparing the laid-back and modest island to blingsville. Bimini is not luxe, that's for sure, which is part of the reason why I immediately fell in love with it. Not that I should have been surprised. Deeter arrived two days prior to my visit to scuba-dive. When I shook his hand at the resort he looked me in the eyes and said, "You're not going to believe what's here."

What was there were the biggest bonefish I've ever seen. I'm not a worldly bonefish traveler, but I have chased them in the Keys and Belize, and on other Bahamian islands, and these were an entirely different fish. For instance, during our first full day at the Sands, Santella and I climbed onto a flats skiff with local guide Eagle Eye Fred, while Deeter and Smock teamed up with another well known guide, Bonefish Ebbie. Literally, in five minutes we were poling across a giant, rectangular flat that divides North Bimini Island from South Bimini Island and it wasn't long before we were throwing at bones. After Santella and I each landed four-pound bonefish Eagle Eye said, "Big bone, right there, back out of the water, tailing."

Santella stepped to the bow and launched a half-dozen casts at that fish, which was practically beaching itself, its nose buried in the mud, the upper half of its body completely out of the water. Unfortunately, one of Santella's casts nearly whacked the fish on the head and it departed quickly, leaving a big wake and a broken dream behind. After a few seconds of silence Santella chuckled and said, "Well, I messed that up."

No worries. After landing a couple more bones and blowing a couple more shots at six- to seven-pounders—yes, six- to seven-pounders—we raced through a cut in the north island and arrived on an outside flat swarming with bonefish. These weren't the giants we'd found on the inside flat, but schoolboys running in a pack of 30 that seemed too nervous to give us any solid shots. We cast repeatedly at the fish but they just weren't in the taking mood, and they finally disappeared in the mangroves.

Soon we headed back to the inside flat and as we were running I said, "Any permit around here?" Eagle Eye cut the engine and said, "Right here, on this deeper flat, on the right stage of the tide, they always here. Keep your eyes open."

The permit never showed, but more big tailing bones did. Unfortunately, Santella and I were still working out our kinks when the fishing ended and we hit the resort.

The following day we climbed aboard a larger boat and headed to the bluewater fishing grounds, which begin just a couple hundred yards in front of the Sands, and trolled for wahoo and whatever else might bite. We also dropped lighter lines to the bottom and caught a variety of snapper and other reef fish. When we hit the dock late that afternoon we offloaded three big wahoo, all in the 25- to 35-pound range. They were delivered quickly to the Bimini Twist restaurant and sushi bar, which rests just a couple miles away from the Sands, reachable over dirt road by the island's preferred vehicle, the golf cart. We enjoyed a great meal of wahoo, octopus and conch, and then returned to the resort and turned in, ready for our final day on the water.

THE FOLLOWING MORNING WE MANNED A SMALL skiff and headed to the flats on our own, where we wade-fished and stalked numerous tailing bones, just across the channel from Alice Town, the north island's only settlement and, again, just five minutes from the Sands. Santella hooked and landed a solid bone, but I failed miserably, blowing one great opportunity after the next, including a shot at a fish that might have weighed eight pounds. An hour later, when a big lemon shark slowly swam across the flat, its dorsal carving the surface, I turned to Santella and said, "We should probably go."

Next up was a flat on the southeast side of South Bimini, where Santella, Deeter and I talked Smock into dropping us off for a two-mile wadefish. We didn't find many fish on that flat, but the ones we saw were big. I continued pulling flies away from good fish, but Deeter, who has plenty of bonefish experience under his belt, put the metal into a good one and then hung on, hoping his fish wouldn't peel all the backing from his reel. A few minutes later he and Santella were admiring a seven-pounder.

That evening we took in a couple of rum drinks at Mackey's Sand Bar before Deeter and Smock headed back to their condo. Santella and I decided to take one more crack at South Bimini's bonefish. Shortly after, we found a place to access a beach and had just started wading a flat when Santella spotted a half-dozen fish headed our way. I couldn't pick them out, so he cast and a moment later all his line was headed for the deep Atlantic. A few minutes later he brought a nice four- or five-pound bonefish to hand and then gently released it over the white sand.

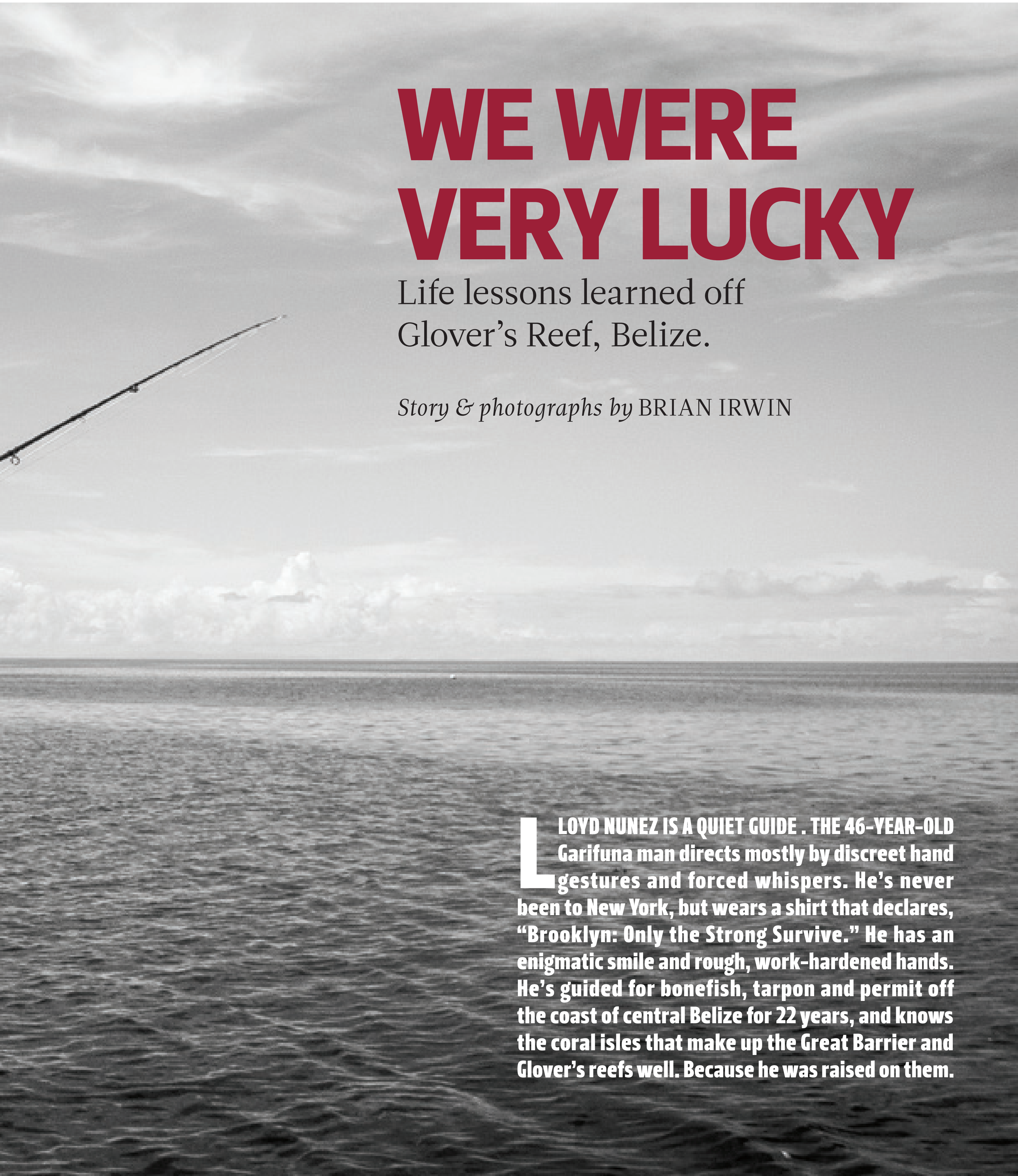
Santella said, "It's pretty amazing to have a drink and then just wade out on a flat, at some random spot, and find bonefish right there." I agreed, but was becoming less surprised each time we did so—on the first night of our trip I'd jumped in at an access, spotted a tailing bone in the mangroves, and five minutes later had that five-pounder at my feet.

Probably there are other places that offer this style of bonefishing, with equally large fish wound into the equation, but maybe I'm wrong. I can say this: Bimini is a special place for the bonefisherman, even 80 years after Hemingway "discovered" it, and it changed me a little. Now, whenever I hear the phrase, "When I die I want to go to heaven," my train of thought stops and I say to myself, "I don't want to die and go anywhere. I want to keep living for a long time and move to Bimini."

Bonefish Packages at Bimini Sands

In 2013, Bimini Sands started a fly-fishing program that provides anglers lodging, fully guided fly-fishing (plus all the gear and flies), three full meals a day, plus free drinks (yes, that means cocktails) at the resort and at Mackey's Sand Bar, all for as little as $430 a day, with a minimum three-night stay. Anglers can fly to Bimini from a variety of locations, including Miami and Fort Lauderdale. From Fort Lauderdale, Bimini is a short 20- to 25-minute flight.

For reservations contact Bimini Sands at viveca@biminisands.com; call 800-737-1007; visit their Web site at www.biminisands.com



WE WERE VERY LUCKY

Life lessons learned off Glover's Reef, Belize.

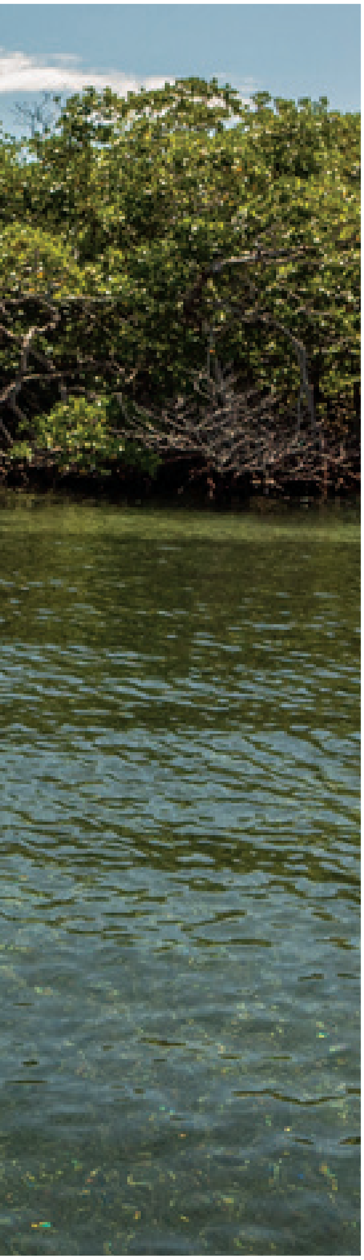
Story & photographs by BRIAN IRWIN

LLOYD NUNEZ IS A QUIET GUIDE . THE 46-YEAR-OLD Garifuna man directs mostly by discreet hand gestures and forced whispers. He's never been to New York, but wears a shirt that declares, "Brooklyn: Only the Strong Survive." He has an enigmatic smile and rough, work-hardened hands. He's guided for bonefish, tarpon and permit off the coast of central Belize for 22 years, and knows the coral isles that make up the Great Barrier and Glover's reefs well. Because he was raised on them.

Nunez spent most of his youth on South Water Cay, 15 acres of coral with no running water or power (even today). South Water Cay is part of Belize's Great Barrier Reef, the second largest in the world. The cay and its surrounding isles are skirted with shallow flats, often carpeted with turtle grass. Some have deep coves that hold pods of resident tarpon. And between them, in nondescript patches of ocean water, the reef rises to just under the surface. Here permit sometimes tail in world-class concentrations. This stretch of ocean offers one of the world's best shots at a grand slam. And this past October, Nunez and his son, Alvin, guided me in search of one.

To the east of the barrier reef, 30 miles out, rests Glover's Reef. By stringing together angling days on both reefs Nunez promised a bounty of chrome. A true atoll, Glover's is a ring of coral that surrounds more than 160 square miles of shallow turquoise water. The water thins to skinny as it approaches the eastern edge of the reef, where a fin of jagged coral runs the length of the reef. It's only exposed above water for a few miles, allowing it to generate four idyllic, remote islands that are decidedly Tahitian in character. Adjacent there are vast expanses of perfect flats teeming with tailing bones.

I stayed on the coast in Hopkins at a comfortable resort, which allowed early starts and plenty of rum punch. Lodging is scarce offshore, but the ride to the first reef takes a mere half hour (at least it does at the Nunez' breakneck speed). The two own a panga, a rustic, 23-foot open boat with a shovel nose and a 60-horse outboard. Throttle wide open, my teeth chattered until we pulled onto the permit flats just as the tide was falling.



I spent the majority of the first morning trying to figure out what I was looking for. I've only fished permit twice; I've seen a total of two in my life. This day offered no more than a single blade slicing the surface as the fish that drove it fed on crabs. I dropped a crab pattern onto its plate. He sucked it up, got pricked and was off in a torrent. When the tide fell, the flats became vacant, and in a light drizzle we eased into a shallow cove where I came tight to a 50-pound tarpon. After several great jumps the fish came to hand and my skunk washed away with the rain.

South Water Cay's flats provided a few bones during the afternoon and the following days, but the permit haunted my mind. I only had two more shots at permit that week, one of which I spiked on the head. A decisive pit sat in my stomach because of unfinished business on the flats. Of course I was fortunate to be fishing, yet I felt a bit unfulfilled—the permit hunter's and grand slam seeker's dilemma. I looked at my pricey reels and cameras, pondering the irony, when Nunez spoke a rare word.

"That house," he said, pointing to a pastel cabana in one of South Water Cay's diving resorts, "was my home." For once, he elaborated. "I spent 16 years there. All we had were kerosene lamps and fish. My father was a fisherman. For lobster. He had 200 traps. We were very lucky."

On the last day of our trip, we awoke to rain. The Doppler pattern showed low pressure and moisture east of us all the way to Cuba. When Nunez and Nunez showed up on the beach with their panga, Lloyd stated, "That's all OK. Weather will turn. We go."

It takes almost two hours to run from Hopkins to Glover's, but as promised the weather cleared, leaving blue skies and a dying wind. Once there, we glided around Southwest, Middle, Long and Northeast cays. Bucolic shacks idled unoccupied; palms dropped coconuts on the beach, where they rolled to the edge of schools of bonefish. We exhausted the schools around two cays, casting from the boat into deeper water. Then, Alvin poled us slowly away from the sparsely inhabited island and onto the broad flats that abut the reef. The fish were, in a sense, pinned against this obstruction, piling up in thick numbers, schools so abundant that they ran into each other.

The flat that comprises the eastern part of Glover's atoll extended to the horizon. Originally my plan was to come to Glover's and explore without a guide. In the planning process, however, I realized that I was biting off a chunk of reef too big to chew. The atoll is massive, so that even with a kayak, for example, access would be limited to a small part of the reef. It's a humbling place, one where it's hard to wrap your head around the enormity. We waded in and out of bays and around mangrove sprigs, following the tails and the tremulous water that revealed schools on the move. As the day wore on I remained empty of a larger bone, or any bone for that matter, from this idyllic flat. I pecked at the edges of one tailing school for a half-hour before sending them off toward deeper water.

But they didn't really flee. Instead they moved far into the flat and then back into a blind-ending cove, flanked by island on one side, reef ridge on the other. Nunez smiled and said, "They're cornered."

The tails shimmered toward us slowly. A few casts later and one blunt tug on the line, and my spool shrieked as line peeled toward the horizon.

It took me a solid 10 minutes to land the three-pounder. I shot a few photos—maybe too many. When I released the fish, after aerating its gills it swam with an unhealthy tilt. Nausea hit me as I realized I might have killed this animal. I retrieved it by its tail, nursed it a bit more and allowed it to snap free of my grip. I glanced at Nunez. He may have sensed my disappointment in not getting a grand slam and quietly said, "Even though you didn't catch a permit, you're lucky. He was strong. He'll survive."

Travel Details

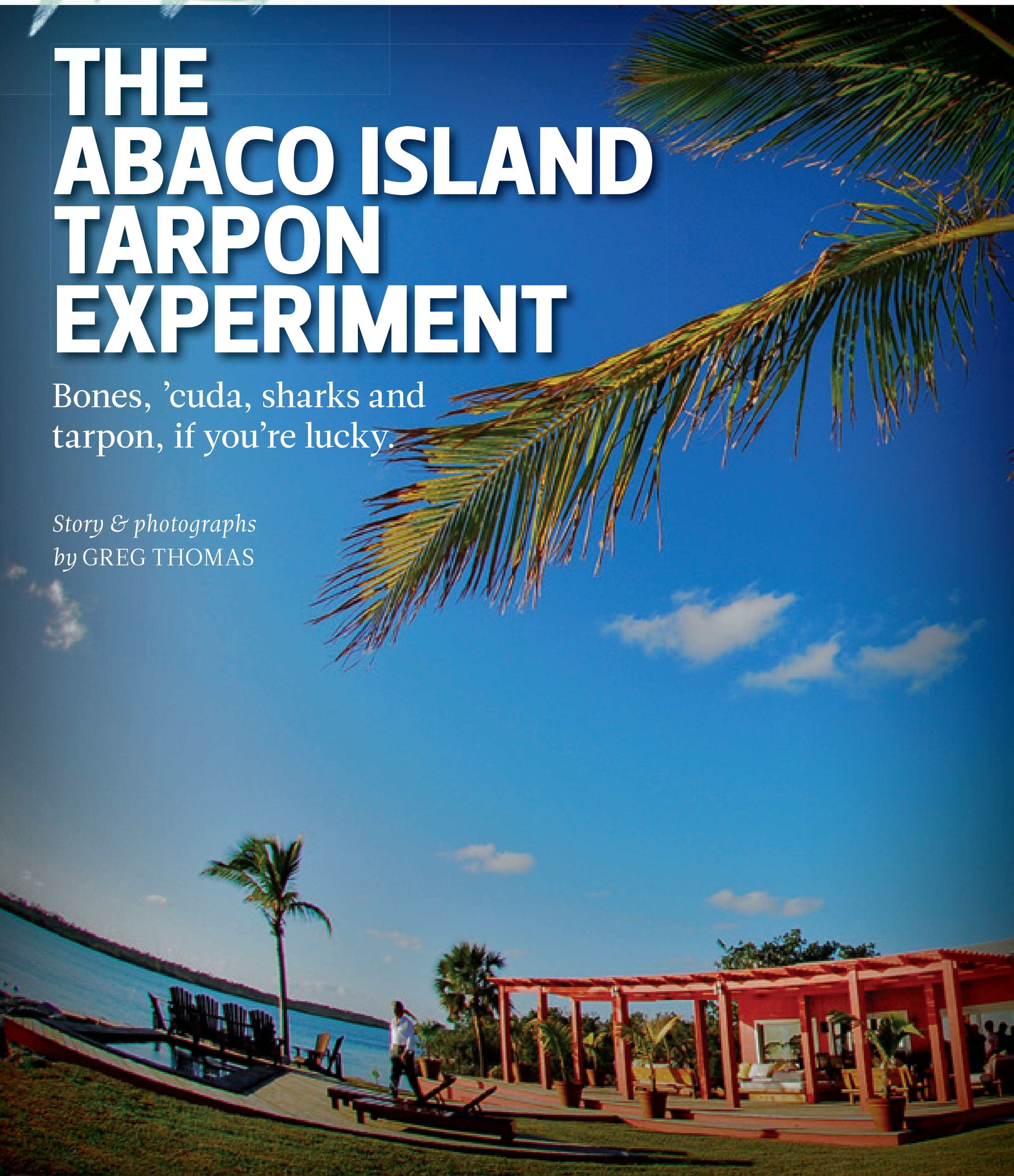
Guides for Glover's are hard to come by, especially those who grew up near the reef and can find their way there without getting lost. Call Lloyd Nunez at 501-662-0873; hopkins_flats@yahoo.com

Staying in the authentic town of Hopkins is the best option. The lodging is comfortable, but more important this position puts you close to permit, tarpon and bonefish flats, which are not an option if you stay on Glover's. The perfect fit is Belizean Dreams, 800-456-7150; www.belizeandreams.com

THE ABACO ISLAND TARPON EXPERIMENT

Bones, ’cuda, sharks and tarpon, if you’re lucky.

Story & photographs by GREG THOMAS



ARMANDO PAGLIARI LIKES TO GET UNDER PEOPLE'S SKIN. In Quebec, I've heard him shout at his favorite salmon guide, Rodney Gallon, "Hey Rodney, you are the worst effin' guide in the world." But then, to compensate for his evil entertainment, Pagliari spoils Gallon with lavish tips.

you might find him in Vegas whipping up on the pro poker tour. But what he likes more than anything is fishing.

In fact, he's firmly planted in that can't-get-enough stage, including buying every rod and reel that arrives on the market. Due to that zeal he once got a call from Orvis asking if he had opened a fly shop and wanted to pursue volume discounts. Teasing his excitement, I pointed down the flat and said, "Armando, if you hook one of these tarpon it's going to burn that reel right off your rod and you'll have to land it by hand." Pagliari took a big drag off his Player's, stretched his shoulders, peered at the man on the poling platform and said, "I tell you what, Marty. If you hook me up on one of these fish I'll pay your regular tip today, plus another five hundred bucks cash. I don't even have to land a tarpon. You just hook me up, Marty, and it's an extra five hundred. How you feeling now?"

Sawyer was already off the platform, clearly a little frazzled, feverishly digging for his go-to tarpon fly. He looked up and answered, "I feel like Columbus with a speedboat!" And with that, we were off on what I now call the Abaco Island Tarpon Experiment.

So last winter, I wasn't surprised when Pagliari and I met in the Bahamas and he immediately started in on our Bahamian guide, Marty Sawyer. Sawyer was just sparking his second Black and Mild of the day, and waiting patiently for his dude to tie on a bonefish fly, when that dude, Pagliari, said, "Hey Marty, how you feeling today?" To which the refreshingly laidback Sawyer replied with a laugh, "My feet hit the ground when I got out of bed this morning. So, I'm feeling good."

Just then I spotted a big push of water breaking a mirror-flat surface 100 yards away and said, "Marty, what's that, a tarpon?" Sawyer, who grew up in Cherokee Sound on Abaco Island's east shore and has seen everything there is to see on the water said, "Wow, that be a dolphin on ah' bonefish flat in maybe two feet o' water! Don' see that every day."

As the dolphin pushed for deeper water I suddenly recognized this flat and said, "Marty, there are tarpon at the end of this flat. We saw them yesterday. We're rigging a rod for tarpon, too."

I've caught a few tarpon in my life, but this was Pagliari's first saltwater trip. I turned and said, "If we see these tarpon, Armando, you're throwing for them."

Pagliari is an executive of the Toronto, Canada-based Martinrea Inc., which produces steel and aluminum parts, mostly for the automotive sector. He heads the human resources division and oversees 13,000 employees. He wears fancy shirts, stylish jeans and designer shoes, straps magnum-size watches to his wrist, smokes Player's cigarettes at a reckless rate, and rubs elbows with the beautiful people. When he's not fishing

I DIDN'T ARRIVE ON ABACO ISLAND TO FISH TARPON. Instead, I accepted an invite from Oliver White to chase bonefish. White is part owner of Abaco Lodge, which sits on the island's west side. It occupies a point of land that juts into the heart of the Marls, a 200-square-mile expanse comprised of tiny islands, lengthy flats and numerous creeks. Some say there are more bonefish per square mile here than anywhere else on earth.

White bought the place in 2008 when it was a modest, if not dilapidated, motel. He put a lot of sweat equity into the project and then, with a partner, threw a couple million dollars into it. Abaco opened in March 2009. Shortly after, White sold an interest in the lodge to Nervous Waters, a fly-fishing travel company that owns nine prime lodges sprinkled around the Bahamas and South America.

Today, the lodge runs a tight ship, catering to a dozen anglers at a time, offering private or double-occupancy rooms and a fleet of fine Hell's Bay flats skiffs, manned by some of the best guides you'll find anywhere in the world. Fishing drew me to Abaco, but I can't deny that just ambling around the property—whether chatting with fellow guests on the expansive lanai, sipping cocktails in the main lodge or kicking my feet up around a firepit while watching that massive sun dip below the horizon each evening—wasn't a big part of the draw. Most of us consider the Caribbean to be paradise, and I thought no differently while cruising around in my shorts and sandals at Abaco.

While the Marls hosts a plethora of bonefish, the big bones, meaning four- to eight-pounders, are rare. Some people call the Marls "Dinksville," and others shy away from it because that muddy bottom forces anglers to fish almost exclusively from the bow of a skiff instead of wading in the warm water with the fish. However, nobody denies that the Marls is a really great place for beginners and anyone else who wants shot after bonefish shot. In addition, because there is so much turf to cover (and so many fish on the flats) most of these bones haven't seen many—if any—flies, so they suck them up more readily than they might in other places. Another bonus is this: Even if the wind is onshore, you can find protected places to fish. In addition, the Marls isn't as dependent on tides as many other bonefish locales. Put all of these together and you have a predictable and consistent fishery. Twenty-fish days are possible here, and even when things are "off" you still might land a half-dozen in a day. If you can see them.

Ah, spotting bonefish, one of the world's great angling challenges. Bones are typically small, and their olive backs and silver sides mesh perfectly with the bottom and those angled surface reflections, making them nearly invisible. This is especially true if you chase bonefish only occasionally, the point being that even during a five-day trip you'll see these fish much better on days three, four and five, than you did on day one or two. That was our experience during the first couple days at Abaco, with bonefish shooting right past our boat before Pagliari and I ever saw them. We'd let out a sigh of real frustration when either Sawyer or guide David Tate said, "Ah, moving away now, fast," which meant we'd blown our chances. But those guides were good and they picked Pagliari and me up by always saying, "Hey man, no worries. It's just a fish. We'll see more."

And we did see more, more and more by the day, and I felt a certain pride when, on occasion, I'd pick out a fish before the guides saw it, an event that always drew this affirmation, "Good spot," a catchphrase that Pagliari and I adopted for almost anything, whether that was the butter or wine at the dinner table, a lighter for some magnum-size Cohibas, and even the cute and outgoing barmaid we'd meet later at Da Hang Over bar at the Nassau airport. That sense of pride at seeing a fish before the guide locked eyes on it, that sense of teamwork and contribution, was enhanced one day when Sawyer said that the clients he'd guided a week before us "couldn't have spotted a whale on the flats," adding, "they had more bad opinions than good casts."

The "spot" I remember best happened on the outside of the Marls, near where the ocean breaks into the islands. Sawyer was poling in a shallow bay, in the lee of the wind, when four bones moved into view. Just as I locked onto those fish Sawyer said, "Four moving right to left, 10 o'clock. Quick. You'll get one shot." When a guide spots bonefish he or she describes their location as if the bow of the boat represents the 12 on a clock. A day earlier, possibly as a result of the number of Kalik beers that Pagliari and I took on the boat for, um, hydration purposes, and just after Sawyer said, "Nine o'clock, Greg, a big one," I cast directly opposite of the fish, to the


Sawyer handling the big 'cuda, moments before The Bite.

ABACO LOGISTICS

Where: Abaco Lodge, on Great Abaco Island, just about 10 minutes west of Marsh Harbor.

When: Peak season runs from March 15 through June.

Why: Abaco Lodge sits right on the Marls, an area that's considered one of the best places in the world for bonefish. In addition, anglers get plenty of shots at sharks and barracuda.

Expectations: The Marls doesn't produce the largest bonefish on average, but it offers numbers galore. A good angler on a great day may land a dozen or more fish. Beginners get plenty of opportunities to hone their skills.

Logistics: Anglers fly into Marsh Harbor. Various flights connect daily from Miami, Fort Lauderdale, Palm Beach and Daytona Beach.

Bookings: Contact Nervous Waters at 917-338-7186; e-mail info@nervouswaters.com; www. nervouswaters.com

3 o'clock zone. Sawyer said, "Yea, Greg, he was at 9 o'clock." Pagliari squinted at me, shook his head and said, "What kind of clocks do you have in the states?"

That's why it was so cool to spot those four bones, including the biggest I'd seen on the trip, moving toward the ocean, but not fast enough that I couldn't sneak a quick 60-foot cast, directly at the 10 o'clock instruction. The lead fish was the biggest, perhaps four or five pounds, and he saw the fly first, which allowed him to dart quickly to my shrimp imitation, pause momentarily, and then suck it in. I strip-set, that boy took off for the ocean, and then I methodically worked him back to the boat. Sawyer has seen his fair share of big bonefish, many much larger than the one on the end of my line, but he leaped off the poling platform, helped me land that fish, and shouted, "Oh yeah, Greg, that is a nice Marls bonefish! There are bigger, but this is a nice fish."

THE NEXT DAY WE WERE SCANNING a flat when Sawyer emphatically planted his pole in the marl and said, "There's a big barracuda at the end of this flat. Really big. One of you grab that spin rod or I'm going to catch him."

Pagliari and I had repeatedly ignored opportunities to throw flies or lures to these fish and Sawyer had finally seen enough. So I picked up a spin rod that sported a foot-long, bright-green tube and, when the time was right, sailed the tube just past that 'cuda's snout. Sawyer implored, "Now get it moving, get it moving." I did so and a four- or five-foot-long missile, moving 30 miles an hour, smashed the lure, then took off on a 200-yard run that made me think, *And people say bonefish are fast?* A while later, Sawyer hoisted that toothy creature for a photo. When Sawyer asked if I wanted to hold it I answered, "No," and at that very moment the fish flexed, our guide lost partial grip, and those teeth slashed into a meaty portion of Sawyer's hand. He placed the fish, at least a 30-pounder, in the water and as that monster slowly swam away it had a look in its eye that said, *Anyone else want a piece of me?* Prior to that day I had no interest in barracuda, but now I doubt I'll ever pass another big one without launching a long, skinny, green needlefish fly its way. As Sawyer cleaned his cut he shook his head and said, "Nothing going to top that barracuda on this trip. I tell you that is a fish of remembrance, man."

We caught more good bones and another big 'cuda during our stay, and we even took our shots at a variety of sharks, but what I remember most vividly from Abaco was that day-long quest for tarpon. Oh, those tarpon. After Sawyer rigged his aforementioned "sure bet" tarpon fly and we'd drifted to the end of that bonefish flat, he said, "Armando, you get up there on the bow and strip off enough line to make a good cast. Usually there are three or four tarpon here. If they aren't here we will go to another hole. And if we don't find them there we will come back here. I don't know for sure where they will be, but we will find some tarpon today." And you probably know how this story winds up—we looked here, we looked there, we looked everywhere. When the fish didn't appear we looked some more. And then things got real quiet. In fact, at one location, after a healthy dose of silence, I said, loud enough for Sawyer to hear, "Hey Armando, Marty sure is quiet back there. I think he's praying but I can't hear anything."

Sawyer chuckled and, without taking his eyes off the water, said, "You can't hear me because I'm praying in my head." He added, "I'm sending these tarpon a message: Come here, you assholes."

Those tarpon never appeared and Sawyer realized that a big tip—the largest he'd ever been offered—was slipping away. And I wondered, *What lengths would a guy go to for a thousand dollars cash, especially in a country lacking personal income taxes, where a thousand bucks really is a thousand bucks?*

Sawyer said we'd make one final run to a place where the tarpon were sure to be, and pointed the bow of that Hell's Bay toward nothing more pronounced than a sharp, blue line on the horizon. I turned to Pagliari and said, "You really did it this time. I came here for bonefish, but Marty wants that tip and he's desperate."

Pagliari pulled the zipper a little higher on his jacket, looked out to the horizon and said, "He's still looking for those tarpon, isn't he? He wants that bonus bad. Where do you think we're headed now?"

I frowned, pulled two Kaliks from the cooler, put my feet up on the casting deck, settled into the bench seat and said, "Get comfortable, because we're leaving bonefish heaven and headed to tarpon Shangri-La."

Pagliari asked, "Where's that?"

"Oh," I answered, "just round the corner there about 200 miles away in the Florida Keys."

Pagliari sighed and said, "I hope it's a full moon."

PILGRIMS IN INAGUA

Eighty-plus years after the wreck of the *Basilisk*, Great Inagua remains a "damned queer little island." With leaping tarpon, giant bonefish and more.

Story & photographs by JERRY GIBBS

THE WARNINGS WERE CANDID:

"I'm only recommending this trip for capable, experienced, do-it-yourself anglers," Captain Vince Tobia, who runs Cattaraugus Creek Outfitters, told me. I'd expected that kind of description about fly-fishing on the Bahamas' Great Inagua Island after reading *The Bahamas Fly Fishing Guide*, which suggested ". . . [it's] the ultimate, and most rugged DIY fishing in the Bahamas," adding ". . . [it's] awesome but you have to earn it." Rod Hamilton, who pens diyflatsfishing.com, wrote ". . . [Inagua offers] some of the most unique fishing opportunities . . . [but] I would not recommend it for any spouse or non-fishing partner other than the most adventuresome." Even Gilbert Klingel, who in 1930 wrecked his yawl on Inagua, and changed from a puerile snob into a touchy-feely naturalist, recognized the unique nature of the place, calling it a "damned queer little island." And as I would find out soon enough, in many ways it still is.

Despite those warnings, we were signing on for the island's rugged, end-of-the-road aura and varied fishing opportunities. And, despite Tobia's pause, we told him that women were coming, too. His answer: "You sure they'll be all right? There's really nothing there."

We were fishing-travel tested, all of us, and the women, immutably independent, included: The Little Dictator, from Colombia, and General Lighthouse, of bedrock New England stock. There was also Señor Exigente (a.k.a. Mr. Picky-Picky), and myself, your faithful correspondent.

Once we arrived, last spring, the predicted kaleidoscopic and diversified fishing opps were immediately evident and sometimes pretty strange. Here, as on other islands, you can wade classic bonefish flats 100 percent of the time. But then there is this: Morton Salt—the primary island employer—has re-mapped Great Inagua's interior into a sometimes otherworldly lowcountry of interconnecting canals, in-use or abandoned salt evaporation ponds and, to feed them, sprawling, manmade Lake Rosa (a.k.a. Windsor), with its maze of dead and living mangroves, flats and hidden lagoons. This shallow lake is a self-perpetuating nursery and marine pasture for landlocked tarpon, bonefish, snook, barracuda and possibly permit. No sharks. Daily, ocean-pumped water carries plankton, krill and a potpourri of other delectable comestibles, including fish eggs, into the lake (eggs of gamefish as well as forage fish). Hatchlings begin noshing away in this aquarium. This is what I am told. What I *know* is that there are snook in here upward of 30 pounds, and baby tarpon typically ranging between 15 to 20 pounds, with some weighing near 60. Rather than lunar-orchestrated events, "tides" here consist of current generated by pumped outside water, not only in the central lake but in the canals and channels throughout the island. And they do affect the fishing in assorted spots. Think of it as a kind of marine tailwater, flows varying at key fishing spots. Along the coasts are sprinkled natural "creeks" of varying sizes that access lagoons and their flats. Some of these arteries require boats to reach, others offer foot access to the fishing.

The whole business of bashing about on Inagua's Afghanistan-like roads, trying to nail down meals, lodging and places to fish afoot, has been a non-starter until spring of 2013. After numerous recon missions (read, "hard fishing") with pals, the earlier mentioned Vince Tobia teamed with Inagua native Henry Hugh, and also tapped the well of fish-and-wildlife information gleaned from two generations of forebears and now the privy intelligence of Henry Nixon, superintendent of Inagua's national park. Tobia developed a program that offers lodging at Henry Hugh's Inagua Outback Lodge, an end-of-road Hobbitland of umbrellas, gazebos and docks, plus a bar/dining hut, wind power, WiFi (unbelievably) and a fully equipped cottage for two. A second cottage is slated for use this year. From the lodge you can fish the beach, walk to flats, drive to others, and alternately hire Hugh and either his G3 aluminum skiff or flats skiff to reach still more flats or to ply the secrets of his nearby creek that opens into a lagoon maze for wading or boat fishing. The creek gives up tarpon, big jacks and 'cuda. A bonus to fishing with Hugh is his "world's best" conch salad.

Because we were four, our crew stayed in Matthew Town at Enrica's guest house (Tobia arranged meals cooked and served by two great Inagua ladies). The place is centrally located for probing the hot island fishing spots reachable, in our case, via a circa O.J. Simpson, off-road-rubber-equipped Bronco owned by Hugh and included as part of Tobia's packages. The other vital element of these trips includes a fantastically detailed list of fishing spots keyed to laminated satellite maps, again included in Tobia's DIY offering.

Urged on by the frequent traveling cry of *"Arrear burros!"* from El Señor, we barreled the Bronco over the island, smashing through wild donkey dung, trying to remember to keep the 4x4's rear window up after coating tackle and the two women—choking between road jolts—with a patina of white coral dust. We'd stop to pound flats, catch fish, and find the most bizarre fishing at current-pulling culverts. Here you cast upstream for tarpon that lazily slurped your flies, or swung down-current for maybe a tarpon, sometimes barracuda and, amazingly, bonefish that find their way in and stack there. It's crazy.

Several times we followed a secondary canal, its water achingly clear as a spring creek. In it were bonefish, mullet, small 'cuda and a confetti of baitfish and snappers. The little water gave to a wide lagoon where truly huge barracuda torpedoed away into deep water. With them gone we entertained larger bonefish while wading the near-shore flat. While General Lighthouse and The Little Dictator did not fish as much as usual, they delighted in exploring afoot and luxuriating in the low surf along many beaches. Señor Exigente and I once returned along an ocean beach for lunch to find them abubble with excitement.

"We were just sitting in the water," said the General, "and this bonefish school swam in right beside us. And then it went up along the beach. Close!"

"And snook! A group of snook passed between us, and all of them went up along the beach, too!" said The Little Dictator.

The Señor and I exchanged looks.

What developed then and after was a strange pattern of surf slopping, which is not so strange for snook, perhaps, but wacky for bonefish. Primarily on higher tides the fish came into low breaking surf, grubbing in the sand and often still digging like pigs at slop, bodies totally exposed, as a wave receded. Sometimes the surge spun them like whirligigs along their lengths. Once righted, they'd feed again. Even the snook would come in this close. You had to slap a fly near their heads because in moments your fly and leader would harvest weed. When it worked, they ate. El Señor, hot for snook, switched to a tarpon fly that seemed to attract a bit less weed cling.

DIY IS FAR FROM INAGUA'S only game. In the 1970s, Ezzard Cartwright began gleaning the experience that would establish him as Iguana's reigning—and only—guide. As would any professional, he views recent DIY activity in his bailiwick with something less than enthusiasm. He needn't worry. Over the years Ezzard has built an international reputation and popularity that recommend booking dates with the man a year in advance. He runs a fleet of Alumicraft skiffs and is building up a Lowes jonboat sporting, of all things, a Louisiana-built Go-Devil outboard that'll run in spit. "Get me back where fish never saw a fly," he says. Over the years Ezzard has carved through the mangroves a scattering of launch spots where he accesses both the interior lake and coastal flats. At times he'll drag his aluminum vessels nearly an hour behind his Ram pickup, then run you an hour on the water. Of course you'll catch bonefish just shy of double digits. He runs his operation with an iron fist, advancing a somewhat intimidating demeanor until engaged in conversation.

I met Ezzard early one morning as I chatted with his assistant, Austin, while the lad donned reeking underboot flats socks

then suddenly looked up and nodded. Ezzard had materialized like Ahab's first apparitional appearance on the *Pequod*'s quarterdeck, glowering. At me. But we talked and I learned of mutual acquaintances, living and dead, and how, unlike many flats guides, Ezzard begins his days at dawn in hot weather when his fish seem far more responsive. I also learned the man offers another island lodging option: two cottages with two bedrooms each, full kitchens and maid service. A group of anglers from British Columbia were fishing nine days with Ezzard. Their trip coordinator, Bruce, informed us he's been fishing with the man for nine years now, despite owning a house on Eleuthera. And they were catching fish like crazy, including Bruce's 30-pound snook.

Our group of stalwarts, though, delighted in achieving successes on our own. Really, there was only one mishap. Once, having stopped to assess the Bronco's chances of getting through a particularly deep, soft and sandy stretch of road, one of The Little Dictator's favorite Crocs was inadvertently kicked out, the loss only discovered later. Incredibly, returning days later from somewhere, El Señor and I spied the lost shoe in the road, anointed with feral donkey ca-ca. There was a formal presentation to LD that evening at dinner.

Though DIY anglers before us had consistently caught remarkable numbers of larger fish, we continued to release the typical average Bahamas bonefish until a final visit to Inagua Outback Lodge. The "flowing" tide, as the incomer is called here, had yet to fully cover the white sand flat where Hugh had me start as he drifted back, wading with the skiff. "Few fish here," he said, "but they're big." And so they were.

The three coming to me now, jinking like lions before a full charge, were too big for bonefish; but they were. It took two casts before the lead fish ravished my spawning shrimp fly. It took several of my heartbeats while holding the not-yet-moving weight before the old fish, surely in disbelief, then knowing, fled for the deep water. The line was gone, the backing going fast, Henry hollering behind me, and then nothing until I hollered, too, some awful things. There was no curly, failed-knot pigtail at the tippet's end. It was a clean break, and running my fingers above it, I felt roughness in the fluorocarbon. A simple nick in the compromised leader likely finished things. "How big?" I asked Henry.

"Big. Nine. Could've been 10."

Later, after a jack crevalle in Henry's creek mouth charged my tarpon fly (its head, then eyes, above water—really), a rare downpour blasted us into returning to the lodge, where the chilled Señor Exigente donned one of The Little Dictator's shirts for warmth, suffering a rechristening from Picky-Picky to Señor Bonito, and grumbling that the buttons were on the wrong side. By then, there was time for just one more ocean flat.

After clanging and rocking down the potholed tracks, there came near-visceral relief in the sudden quiet while walking onto the beach, seeing the expanse of flats. The dappled bottom was cut by white sand, the water color deepening out toward the surf-curled reef, and I remembered McGuane's observation: "What is emphatic in angling is made so by the long silence . . . ." And so we pushed into this dimension, where, save for the soughing of a light wind, we found our own places of stillness.

Jerry Gibbs was the fishing editor of *Outdoor Life*, and is now a member of the Fresh Water Fishing Hall of Fame.

Fishing Great Inagua

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The DIY Option
Cattaraugus Creek Outfitters
www.ccoflyfishing.com
716-479-2327

Henry Hugh
hmhugh@hotmail.com
242-453-1392

Guided Fishing
Tailing Bones
Ezzard Cartwright
242-339-1362

Angling Destinations
www.anglingdestinations.com
800-211-8530