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Born and Bred to Fish

A tale of two fishing experiences

by Brian Irwin

OUR GAFF: Gaffing a dorado or dolphin as it is commonly known; not Flipper the mammal, but the kind that shows up as mahi-mahi on a menu.

Dave is 22 years old. He's eighth-generation Bahamian and is one of three brothers who, along with their father Mike, operate their family business: charter fishing for marlin. These trophy fish of the sea are scarce, and although the crew and their four-boat fleet have an impressive track record, a marlin would be a boon.

Yet any day of fishing which yields a haul of fish is considered a good day, regardless of the type.

The towers of Atlantis stood in the background as the 48' *Chubasco III* gargled its way up to the dock behind Nassau's colorful straw market. Here, hardworking locals sell handcrafts, stories, memories. Mike slowly

gyrated the boat's wheel, backing the 48-footer to the seawall. In a moment, we were off into the azure waters of the Atlantic Ocean, towing lines rigged with six-inch bait fish within minutes of departure.

The ocean is broad and virtually featureless from the surface. Finding game fish in a vast expanse of



Within an hour, the reels in the boat started screaming, their gears, capable of landing fish of over 1,000 pounds with luck and skill, spinning salty water under the pull of the fish.

FISHING ON THE FLY: To catch the right fish, you need the right bait.

water seems improbable; however Mike and his family know where to find the Pisces. Flotsam strings of weeds 10 miles out in the ocean, clusters of birds flocking over schools of bait fish, even a trundled 2x4 in the ocean provide the hints that have kept the Chubasco fleet motoring with tight lines for over 26 years.

Our day was no different. Within an hour, the reels in the boat started screaming, their gears, capable of landing fish of over 1,000 pounds with luck and skill, spinning salty water under the pull of the fish. One and even two at a time, our party pulled in skipjack tuna and blackfin tuna, some the size of footballs, some twice that size. We were catching what, in my hometown in New England, goes for \$20 for a slice the size of a

cell phone. Sushi. By the wheelbarrowful.

No marlin yet. Dave explained that we were fortunate to get out past the reef, passage through which had thwarted all fishing boats for the prior week due to high winds and waves. And although you can find marlin when you least expect it, they are the grand prize of offshore fishing and are hard to come by. So when the reel, snug in its holster, shouted a shrill that meant a fish was on hook, the hope was that it was the most prized billfish in the world. And although it was not, the line peeled out in a fashion unlike that which a small tuna could yank. The strip was brisk. It was a mahi mahi.

Commonly mistaken in name due to their other title "dolphin," this fish (not mammal) is

not brethren to Flipper, the American iconic domesticated porpoise. Rather, these amber, sapphire and emerald fish are not only a prized game fish, charged with a fervor to jump when hooked, but are among the most beautiful in the sea. Also known as dorado, the first one was brought to the boat's hull by Kelly McKinnon, a slight, yet





GUIDE ON Bonefish guide Delbert Smith atop the flats boat scouts Long Island waters for a sign of movement that would indicate bonefish below.

tough former women's lacrosse player and amateur underrated hip hop singer. Within 10 minutes of reeling,

Within minutes of leaving the dock, Delbert spotted a few bonefish holing up in knee deep water near the dock.

the fish met the gaff (a hook mounted to a pole, used by mates to land fish into their boats) of young David. And the day had just begun.

Six hours later we eased into Nassau harbor with what would amount to a heap of tuna and mahi. Dreams of marlin faded into the creamy green water along with the fishes' scales as locals, hands heavily calloused from years of manual labor cleaned our fish for us. That night, we would eat our own catch at Goldie's Conch House, a humble stand with colorful paneling and weatherbeaten, autographed 8x10 photos of visiting celebrities. Blackened mahi and a bed of vegetables adorned with fresh tuna followed a course of idyllic conch fritters and conch salad, a true *ceviche* made from conch cracked out of the shell on the dock just 20 feet away.

One-hundred and sixty-five miles to the southeast is a different fishery, a different Bahamas. Long Island, slim and lengthy stretches 80 miles from north to south, yet is only 3.7 miles wide at its broadest point. It's a remote land through which the Tropic of Cancer passes, with a rich tradition of self-sufficiency and a focus on what is practical for survival. Long Island had its first bank robbery in 1993. It did not have island-wide power until 1994. There's only one major road running the length of the island. Along its course lie pink shacks, simple local shops and roads to various attractions, almost all of which you'll have to find yourself. One such attraction is the site of Christopher Columbus' second landing in "The New World," (the first was on San Salvador, a Bahamian Island to the east, though folks in

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Cat Island continue to make a strong argument that the first landfall was actually there). Another is Dean's Blue Hole, a geological, submarine hole where the shallow ocean drops to a depth of 666 feet. The Bahamas has over 300 blue holes, and Dean's, the site of the World Free Dive Championships, is the deepest.

But most do not venture to Long Island to dive to lethal depths. Nor do they come to see the site where Columbus landed. They come here to fish for bonefish, the "ghost of the flats." These stealthy fish, rarely exceeding eight pounds are fast, terrified of noise or shadows and provide the ultimate challenge for fly fishermen. We were in good hands, with local guide (law dictates that only native Bahamians can be bonefish guides) Delbert Smith.

Smith, a 50-year-old Long Island native, is a soft-spoken man. His voice is almost nervous with kindness, carrying a soft ripple as he introduced



SHHHH The bonefish is known as the ghost of the flats.

himself. "Sir," he said, "today we will have a good day." His sunglasses hid his sharp eyes, honed after years of stalking bonefish on the flats. His boat, a 17' craft was impeccable, his manners more professional than the concierge at the Marriott in Boston

where I stayed just last week. All day, he worked, standing high on his elevated platform on the back of his boat, doing four things with simultaneous perfection. He moved the boat silently under the power of his chiseled arms. He screened the



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shiny, shallow water looking for fish. He advised us where and when to cast. And he made sure we were happy.

But like marlin, bonefish aren't always around, and if they are, they're not always hungry. Within minutes of leaving the dock, Delbert spotted a few holing up in knee deep water near the dock. Upon his command, I fired a fly six feet ahead of the roaming fish. It's sleek, silver body coasted in toward my fly, knocked it with enough

strength to bend my tip, and then it was gone.

The day wore on and like the bonefish, we followed the tide. The water drained out of the broad expanse of powdery sand that makes up Long Island's west shore. The shallow deep water, clear as gin, gradually eased back into the sea and along with it, the bonefish. Fishing was slow as we waited for the water to submit to the pull of the moon and flood the



On land, she may be genteel, but put a rod and reel in Lori's hands and she'll fight for the big one. Fishing aboard *Chubasco III* off Nassau in The Bahamas was all thrills and action, the antithesis of the silent stealthy approach to nabbing a bonefish 120 miles south in Long Island

sandy flats once again. Around two in the afternoon, the sea once again began to fill up the basin in which we were fishing. Sea grass once again flowed in the water; doormat-sized rays glided into the shallows and crabs bubbled their way out of their holes to drink the cool ocean.

We waded, under the strict direction of Delbert, scanning for tails or shadows of bonefish. With a "psst!" of his chapped lips, our guide pointing into the sparkling water, whispered: "fish." I stripped fly line from my reel and began to cast, swinging the cord into the air. I whipped my fly toward the school of roaming fish, laid it down, and with a flash the school, terrified from the shadow of my cast, evaporated in a whirl of frothy water.

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GOOD GRILL A cool and constant breeze makes the open pit fireplace at Stella Maris, Long Island, a resort favorite.

As the sun fell toward the horizon we worked our way into twisted mangrove trees and shallow water, hungry lemon sharks cruising among the weeds looking for their dinner. We worked our way into the weeds and trees; shorebirds floated into their nests bringing food for their kin; bonefish stacked up against the mangroves waiting for enough water to enable passage into this safe habitat.

Again Delbert whistled softly. I followed his finger, cast a line and began to strip my fly, a one-inch long rendition of a shrimp that was passed on to me by a friend in New Hampshire. I retrieved my line, felt a tug, and instantly, cord peeled from my reel. I had a bonefish on.

Sunset brought us back to the coral colored cabanas of the Stella Maris Resort, where a steel drum band tinkled tunes to the crackle of a fire busy grilling fresh steaks. Scores of salads, crocks of spicy conch chowder and baskets of bread lay out for the guests as rum punch flowed and the sea breeze cooled the rooms. Talk of big fish and those lost filled the dinner table and then the bar, as we dined

with James "Docky" Smith, Stella's resident bonefish guide.

Over a crisp Kalik lager, I probed Docky for what it was like to guide here. To live here. Miles from so many of the world's "comforts," but perfectly situated among a hundred miles of sandy paradise. I asked him if he ever sees himself leaving Long Island. The 40-year-old native took a sip of the bubbly drink and replied. "Why would I? Everything I need is right here." ☉

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