

MAINTAINING AND PROTECTING  
BELIZE'S MOST DIVERSE AND  
SENSITIVE ISLAND PARADISE

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SCOTT TREROTOLA, & TURNEFFE FLATS

TURNEFFE  
SLAM





“THERE’S ONE ROLLING OVER THERE!” ANNOUNCED OUR GUIDE, MARK HYDE, A 48-YEAR-OLD FATHER OF THREE WHO’S BEEN GUIDING FOR 20 YEARS, MOST OF THAT TIME AT TURNEFFE ATOLL. As we drew closer, another fish abruptly rolled just in front of the boat. I shot a cast toward it.

During my retrieve, my line came tight. I gave it a yank, thinking it was snagged in floating weeds. Like a sea-to-air missile, a 40-pound platinum fish launched from the water, tail-dancing as it drew my line tight. Tarpon were not our primary targets at Turneffe. But a thrilling ’poon is nonetheless the aerial portion of a flats grand slam: a bonefish, tarpon, and permit in a single day. I remained optimistic that we were on our way.

## CARIBBEAN ATOLL

Turneffe Atoll is a 30x10-mile ring of coral reef enveloping numerous mangrove islands and back reef flats. Located 28 miles east of Belize City, it’s arguably the best place in the world to score a flats grand slam.

Its atmosphere and breadth of habitat set it apart from any other destination. It’s the largest coral atoll in the entire Atlantic Ocean, and with expansive bonefish flats in all directions, plus deep, tarpon-holding coves and sand-bottomed bays, it’s an ecosystem without parallel.

We were fishing with the premier lodge in this region: Turneffe Flats, the lifelong work of Craig Hayes, who came up with the idea in the late 1970s with some friends. He is still the primary stakeholder and operator. At the time, Hayes and his group of buddies stayed at Cay Caulker in a \$5-a-night motel and hatched the idea of opening a fishing lodge. By 1981 they had opened a simple fishing camp. What evolved in the decades afterward became one of the world’s best angling resort destinations.

## LIFER PASSION

Hayes is humble. He’s a retired family physician from South Dakota. He has a quiet, polite manner. He was a high school state champion wrestler and later attended South Dakota State University on a wrestling scholarship. A scarred right ear remains the mark of his achievements. As a lousy former wrestler myself, I know that it’s only the committed who make huge changes, as it’s

very difficult. Hayes has made changes and improvements to this resource in Belize, and it has become his life’s mission.

Hayes graduated from Tufts University School of Medicine, and through his late 20s and early 30s, he helped start and run the first full-time emergency room in Rapid City, South Dakota. He spent his spare time organizing and building what would grow into one of the best fly-fishing and diving operations in the Caribbean.

The lodge started out as a fishing retreat just for Hayes and a few guests, and Turneffe Flats formally opened to paying guests by 1985. What these guests found was unparalleled habitat. There are countless back reef flats, deep holes, channels, and of course a massive inner lagoon to provide varied environments for both juvenile and adult tarpon, permit, and bonefish. To maintain its nearly perfect ecosystem requires a powerful advocate. Hayes is such a man.

Turneffe Flats has been recognized as the number one Green Globe Certified resort in Central America. While this certification is notable, his behind-the-scenes efforts are what sets his operation apart from any other. Our shore lunches while out on the boat were completely without plastic bottles or bags. All the sewer water on the island where the lodge is located—Blackbird Cay—is double-processed so as to make the water nearly potable. The processed water is used to irrigate gardens and trees. A large solar farm provides power for the operation, and the solar panels are backed up by three energy-efficient diesel generators. The generators are used infrequently, but they ensure the lodge is always capable of being operational.

All the fresh water used at the lodge is collected from rain and held in tanks holding 250,000 gallons. In case of excessive drought, the lodge has desalinization backups. From garbage incineration to composting, Hayes’s resort is fully without waste.

Hayes is more than a lodge owner—he’s an advocate for the atoll, pushing through legislation to protect this area and founding numerous nonprofits that protect this resource. Recognizing that this area is vulnerable to development, climate change, and other stressors, he and others founded the 501(c)(3) Turneffe Atoll Trust (TAT) in an effort to thwart irresponsible development of the atoll. In 2009 they were part of a successful lobby for strict catch-and-release regulations on bonefish for the entire country.

In 2010, Hayes began pushing for all of Turneffe Atoll to become a marine reserve. Following a two-year effort and several hundred thousand dollars, Turneffe Atoll Marine Reserve became the largest marine reserve in Belize, at 325,000 acres. A new NGO, Turneffe Atoll Sustainability Association, was formed to co-manage the reserve along with the Belize Fisheries Department.

A new study entitled “2022 Economic Impact of Flats Fishing in Belize” by Anthony J. Fedler, Ph.D.—completely funded by TAT—shows that flats fishing now generates more than \$246 million (BZD) annually for Belize, which is nearly 7 percent of Belize’s GDP. Hayes recently presented this new information to the minister of tourism, and he offered his support for protecting all of Belize’s key flats areas.

Turneffe Flats is a crown gem in that \$246 million fiscal and environmental framework. Perhaps the most promising place on Earth to complete a flats grand slam, it draws anglers from around the world to this island paradise. Some spend their year’s savings just

to get a shot at the Big Three, and there’s no better bet than Turneffe.

Eight cabanas and three villas comprise the property, corralling a central lodge where libations and meals are served. Whether it’s a hearty omelet or conch ceviche paired with spiny lobster tail, the meals are outstanding. The rooms are comfortable—way above and beyond the level of a fish camp—and the staff members are friendly, energetic, and inviting. Perhaps because that’s how they’re treated.

In 2019 the Covid-19 pandemic shut down most tourism in Belize. Although Turneffe Flats reopened at the earliest possible opportunity, there was still some downtime. Unlike some operators, Hayes didn’t lay off a single employee. Rather, he paid them to work on island projects, including his solar farm, rainwater collection, and myriad other improvements. I’ve had many jobs in my life, and if I were employed by a man like Hayes, I’d be a lifer.

The staff members here are family to Hayes and his wife Karen, and they are often family to each other. My guide Mark Hyde is the son of retired guide Eddie Hyde, who worked at Turneffe for 20 years. His wife Eleanor was the head cook at Turneffe Flats during that time. Dubs Young and Dion Young are brothers who guide at Turneffe Flats, and Daniel Bennet, John Gongorga, Kimbral Williams, Willie Dyer, Alton Jeffords, Chris Encalada, and Erwin Fuller have centuries of collective experience among them.

Winston “Pops” Cabral, for instance, has been guiding at Turneffe since 1987, and he was an experienced Belize guide before that. If you’ve fished with a Pops Bonefish Bitters, you’ve used his fly. Staff members don’t come and go at Turneffe, and that not only raises the level of your experience here, but also shows what goes on behind the scenes, and how Hayes runs his business.

## CHASING TAILS

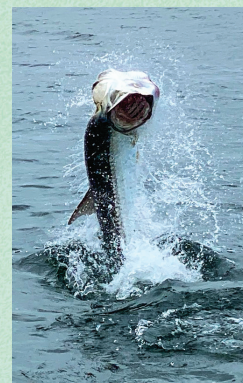
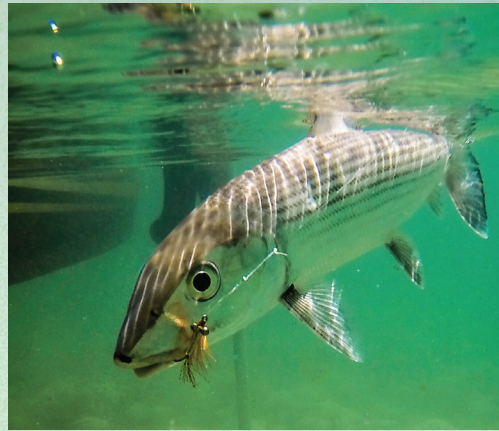
On the first day of fishing, my girlfriend Darcie Reed and I caught many bonefish. Most of them were tailing in the skinny water, on shallow back reef flats, making the whole process both visually appealing and productive. The flats just minutes from the lodge are incredible natural spectacles. They create mixed emotions. Everyone should see and experience them to understand how our oceans work. However, these types of places are so sensitive, and they are threatened by irresponsible overdevelopment around the world. Perhaps they should be kept secret? Or better yet, protected by those who love them.

After honing our skills on bonefish, we moved on to targeting permit. We found a group of the tailing black devils, but they scattered rapidly upon my less-than-perfect fly presentation. Day one had us looking forward to a fruitful week.

On day two we fished the windward, eastern side of the atoll. Casting on flats with names like Grassy Cay and Big Flat, we landed many bones, a barracuda, and Darcie caught a palmetto. A palmetto looks like a small permit, but it isn’t. The real permit evaded us . . . but we were there for six days so time was on our side.

Each day we chased permit, we left a bountiful bycatch of bonefish





in our wake. The creamy turquoise water spread before us on each flat as we approached. Rays kicked up mud. Rose-colored starfish studded the ocean floor. Beds of sea grass interspersed with chalk-white, hard-bottomed sandy stretches splayed out. The water was clear, murky only from mudding bonefish augering for crustaceans. In my mind I revered this fishery as, without hyperbole, perfect.

With such varied habitat and so many different fish species—from triggerfish to parrotfish—it's important to have at least three rods rigged up and ready at all times. You need a 7- or 8-weight with a floating line for bonefish. Your fly selection should include sizes 6-10 with both weighted and unweighted patterns—the waters where the bonefish feed can be just inches deep with a coral bottom. You cannot always just drag a fly along the sand without snagging, so unweighted patterns like a completely unweighted Turneffe Micro Shrimp or Bonefish Micro Puff with beadchain eyes are important.

A 9-weight rod is ideal for permit and other species like triggerfish, as the crab flies are not excessively large. A size 6 Rag Head, size 6 Mathews Turneffe Crab, size 8 EP Micro Crab, or size 8 Cathy's Fleeing Crab are patterns that guides commonly reach for. There's no need to cast large crabs the size of a silver dollar here, as crab imitations about the size of a nickel or a dime work perfectly fine.

For tarpon, you'll need an 11-weight rod, and a top-notch reel to tangle with these giants. While you'll use exclusively floating lines for bonefish and permit, the guides here often prefer intermediate lines for tarpon. They not only help you sink into deeper holes more effectively, they cut through the wind better, and clear intermediate lines can be more stealthy. Bring baitfish imitations, as these fish are actively feeding, and not merely migrating as you often find in Florida. An Enrico Puglisi 3/0 Tarpon Streamer in tan or black and purple, 1/0 Tarpon Toad in black or chartreuse, or 3/0 Tuscan Bunny will all elicit heart-stopping strikes.

A 10-weight is also perfect for barracudas, but you'll need a whole different setup with a floating line, wire tippet, and preferably a long needlefish imitation. Umpqua's 2/0 Cuda Fly is about as good as it gets for a specialty fly, but barracudas will also eat other baitfish imitations if you can present them properly and strip fast with two hands. If you haven't had a thrilling ride on a barracuda rocket, you should. They may not be part of a grand slam but they deliver an adrenaline rush that can provide a change of pace during a day of challenging permit fishing.

## DAILY OBJECTIVES

There's light pressure on this fishery. There are only three lodges on the atoll. One is purely a dive resort, taking advantage of the nearby reef. The other resort is primarily a diving resort. As Hayes says, "They're a dive resort that offers fishing. We're a fishing resort that offers diving."

Turneffe Atoll is rated as one of the world's best diving destinations, and the lodge is located to take advantage of it, offering not only three daily dives at Turneffe but weekly dives at the

world-famous Blue Hole and Lighthouse Reef. PADI diving instruction is available at Turneffe Flats with courses that include Open Water Referrals, Advanced Scuba Diver Certification, Discover Scuba Diving, and various specialty courses.

Darcie had no dive experience, but in 90 minutes was able to complete a reef dive that stirred her so much that certification is now on the bucket list. It inspired a whole new passion. There are also lower-commitment snorkeling and ecotour options for nonfishing visitors, making this a well-rounded resort suitable for couples with mixed objectives. If your partner would enjoy looking for manatees, saltwater crocodiles, exotic birds, porpoises, sharks, and sea turtles, this is certainly the place.

We spent many of our nondiving days cruising across the central lagoon—it's 8 miles wide—searching the flats in pursuit of the most prized catch, a permit. In the wake of this effort we caught many bonefish, and jumped two tarpon. At times, tarpon travel across flats—and across oceans—searching for new feeding grounds or more favorable water temperatures. At Turneffe they are often happy right where they are—in deeper holes and creeks where they can stay out of sight and ambush prey.

Landing a tarpon requires everything to go perfectly in the first second. Strip-set hard, bow to the jumping fish—just to decrease line tension on the leaping king—set the hook again, and then if you're lucky, you're into a 30-minute sweaty battle to bring a big tarpon to the boat. This is why people ask not "How many tarpon did you catch?" but rather "How many tarpon did you jump?"

The tarpon at Turneffe Flats come in all sizes, from 10- to 30-pound "babies" to Florida-size fish of 80 pounds and larger. Tarpon prefer warm water, so the best time to connect with them is in summer (May to September) when ocean currents are warm. You sometimes see the tarpon rolling—particularly in the early morning—so you know the fish are around. Hooking them is mostly a matter of approaching quietly and fanning the water with long casts and careful retrieves. When a fish eats, all hell breaks loose.

Permit fishing here is another universe: It is all visual and highly technical, and you can see how the fish react to every mistake you commit. Sometimes you do everything right, and the result is exactly the same. You spot the black tails of a permit or group of them feeding face down in shallow water, the guide poles the 16-foot Dolphin Superskiff into casting position, and you attempt to land your fly either well ahead of a fish so the permit comes upon it as it would a chance encounter with a crab, or else you cast right on top of the fish, forcing a snap decision to either eat the prey or flee.

Crabs often scuttle to the bottom and use their camouflage to avoid predation, so the fly shouldn't move much—or at all. The guides will coach you on a long, slow retrieve that removes slack from the line so you can feel when the fish picks up the fly and you can set the hook.

Of course, with wind and tidal direction, and the shifting moods of the fish, no two opportunities are exactly the same. That's why you depend on the knowledge and expertise of the guides, who have watched these fish for years and possess encyclopedic knowledge of which type of presentation might work best in each situation.

Permit are both the most frustrating and the most addictive



flats species, but thankfully Darcie and I found Turneffe Flats was a place where we could spend half the day reaching for the loftiest fly-fishing goals, and still come back to the lodge covered in bonefish slime, sunscreen, line burns from barracuda, and memories of tarpon and permit that got away, one way or another.

## WEATHER PATTERNS

The last two days of our trip brought a low-pressure system. We could see sheets of rain and wind on the horizon, and they were blasting us a mere 30 minutes later. We still managed to catch bonefish and tarpon, but it was more difficult without the sun. The permit, in the end, would elude us, but not before we enjoyed many opportunities to try for them. Never at any other destination have I had so many chances. And I blame that one that I pricked but didn't land, and the others, only on the weather and myself.

We'd head south each rainy day, sometimes inside the lagoon, with Hyde navigating the dangerous waves with aplomb. When we did have to exit the lagoon, the sea was somewhat calmer, being shrouded by the protective coral reef. Beyond that reef, the waves crashed in thunderous chaos. Like an expert, which he is, at variable speeds, he literally surfed the waves, navigating us back to safety and a hot dinner. The seas were churned

up at that point—our last day—and there would be no permit. Sometimes permit are unpredictable, as is the weather, but the number of shots I had has definitively drawn me back. And under Hayes's watchful eye, it stands a good chance to stay that way in perpetuity.

On the morning of our departure, I felt a sense of sadness. This doesn't often happen on trips, but something about this was different. Maybe it was the diversity of the fishery and what it offers. Maybe it was the way Hayes treats his staff, and the environment. Whatever it was, it brought a certain craving to return. Darcie turned to me and proclaimed that she felt there was something almost indescribable about this place. "It's beautiful. And genuine." As the best judge of character I know, be it people or places, she affirmed what I sensed.

As we headed away from the atoll on the boat to the mainland, a storm cell developed on the island to our north. Under it a rainbow appeared. And at its end, in the jade-colored channel, a silver flash erupted from the shine of one last rolling tarpon. —

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## RECOMMENDED GEAR

When you are chasing a grand slam in Belize you need to have at least two rods ready, strung up, and ready to cast at any time. Most people bring three setups on the boat—one for bonefish, one for permit, one for tarpon. Bring rugged flats boots as the jagged coral on the back reef flats is dangerous and will cut through lightweight wet-wading shoes.

**SAGE** / SALT R8 II-WEIGHT / \$1,100

**SAGE** / ENFORCER II-12 REEL / \$575

**SA** / SONAR SINK 30 CLEAR INTERMEDIATE LINE / \$100

**SIMMS** / FREESALT WADING BOOT / \$200

**SIMMS** / SUPERLIGHT PANTS / \$90

**COSTA** / KING TIDE 6 WITH COPPER SILVER MIRROR LENSES / \$329

**PATAGONIA** / TROPIC COMFORT NATURAL UPF HOODY / \$100

**PATAGONIA** / UPF SUN GLOVES / \$40



## BOOK YOUR DESTINATION

When you arrive in Belize City, you will be met at the airport and transported to the Radisson Marina, where you depart for Turneffe Atoll by boat. There is no need to overnight—you will arrive at the lodge the same day you depart from most U.S. cities.

**TFLATS.COM**