



LOCO IN CAYO

Saltwater Goals From A Cuban Paradise

AFTER A WEEK PITTING HIS WITS AGAINST BONEFISH, PERMIT AND TARPON IN CRYSTAL CLEAR SEAS, IT'S EASY TO SEE WHY TOP GUIDE **ANDY SMITH** BELIEVES CAYO LARGO IS THE JEWEL IN CUBA'S FLY FISHING CROWN...



Rum, cocktails and amazing American cars await you after the long-haul flight to Havana.

If you've never been to Cuba on holiday, let alone gone there to fish, reading about it doesn't even half prepare you for what's in store. I mean, let's face it, when do you get the chance to experience some of the best saltwater fly fishing there is, and, with the right trip planning, sample one of the most fascinating cities in the world: Havana?

As the song goes: "Havana ooh na-na!"...

RUM AND CUBAN COCKTAILS

For me, it had been five years since my last trip to Cuba and I couldn't wait to lead our group on what I knew would be a real adventure. First stop after the long-haul flight was Havana, arriving early evening. While you can connect straight through to Cayo Largo for fishing early the very next day, I like to advise staying over for an additional night to take in Havana and all its wonder for a further 24 hours. There are super friendly staff in all the hotels, an array of bars and restaurants, amazing vintage American cars, and culture and history by the bucketload – what's not to like? Oh, and there's rum, which means cocktails, cocktails and even more cocktails.







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DOWN TO BUSINESS

Having indulged ourselves in Havana for a day and night it was off on an early morning domestic flight to Cayo Largo – a beautiful island situated 100 miles south of Havana – about 35 minutes flying time off the coast of the mainland. Upon arrival in Cayo Largo while waiting around in one of the simplest of baggage halls, we were serenaded by a live band playing Salsa music and everyone had smiles from ear to ear; the magical feel of this trip was setting its stall out. After collecting our bags, we were whisked off to the hotel to unpack and settle in. Then, most importantly, onto the fishing lodge about a 10-minute drive away to meet with the guides, set up everyone's tackle and talk tactics ready for the six exciting days of fishing ahead. The briefing by the head guide, Yosvani, gave us a pretty informative yet relaxed overview of what was to come, what was going to be possible given any weather issues, and also gave us a chance to say what we'd prefer to be fishing for during the trip. My stock answer was, and always is, everything!

The scenery in Cayo Largo is reward enough for making the trip – the exhilarating fishing makes it even better.

BRUTAL BONEFISH

Principally, as with so many saltwater fishing trips, it's all about catching bonefish – and Cayo Largo is no exception. However, while the various sectors we fished each day would have bonefish in good numbers, there was an insistence by the guides that we set up our 10-wt rods ready for anything – tarpon, big barracudas and the illusive permit are all very real possibilities. It's worth noting that fishing at Cayo Largo, as with much of the offshore fishing around Cuba, is done within protected nature reserves. Part of that policy means that it's fly fishing only, no spinning or bait, and it's 100 per cent catch and release on all species.

With skiffs full of gear to cover every eventuality – that's multiple 8-wt and 10-wt setups – the next six days looked set to become a blast. We were in a party of six, and therefore split into pairs across three flats boats with truly excellent guides.

From the very first drift we were onto bonefish and while my first impression was that the fish were not as plentiful as I had experienced previously on trips to places such Venezuela (some say I've been

spoilt), I have to say these bonefish were bigger and brutally powerful. Very few bonefish were caught during the week under the 5lb mark, which actually seemed to be the average. There were many in the 6 to 7lb bracket, with a fair few at 8 to 10lb. Screaming reels quickly became the soundtrack of the trip, with anyone not having a firm grip on their gear being at serious risk of having it snatched out of their hand, and believe me, that happens!

VISUAL FISHING

Catching a bonefish is on every keen fly angler's bucketlist, and why not? They're fantastic sport. It's true to say that once you've cut your teeth on bonefish the taste for saltwater fly fishing truly escalates. Some will argue that catching 'bones' can be simple at times; almost like finding a small UK stillwater that's just been stocked with hungry rainbow trout. Yes, there are areas that can be found where large numbers of small bonefish can be held up together in the shallows, but more often it's the deeper water where feeding fish can be found and with basic blind casting it can be a fish every



Bonefish are the headline act for this part of Cuba, but there are also a range of other species such as permit, barracuda, tarpon, jacks and yellow tailed snapper.

time. But if you ignore those spots and stay in the shallows, it becomes the best sight fishing there is. The whole visual element comes into its own as your guide helps you stalk small groups or even large single fish feeding in shallows among the roots of mangrove trees; it's like the best big rising trout experience you've ever encountered – on steroids!



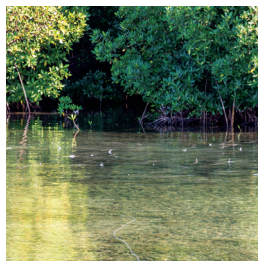


It's hard to truly explain how these fish explode with power, but if you imagine a running trout taking line off a reel at less than 10mph, a bonefish will often reach 30mph and they don't stop at 25 yards either!

DOWN TO YOUR BACKING

Virtually all the fishing is done from the boat and with your partner you share position right at the front, taking it in turns to fish. The guide puts you onto the spot, and then it's all about anticipating the fish's next move, accurately casting to drop your fly as delicately as possible just a yard in front of it. Let the fly sink, a quick strip to get the fish's attention, followed by a series of additional stripping actions to simulate a fleeing shrimp or crab and it then it locks solid. It's often like someone's hit the pause button. With a couple of seconds of slow-motion anticipation and nothing happening until that fish suddenly realizes it has

Getting down to your backing is the norm.



Targeting feeding bonefish among the roots of mangrove trees.

become hooked with your last strip and it sets off like a rocket. It's hard to truly explain how these fish explode with power, but if you imagine a running trout taking line off a reel at less than 10mph, a bonefish will often reach 30mph and they don't stop at 25 yards either! If you are on open water, expect every bonefish to take you out onto the backing line, with many taking 50 to 60 yards off the reel in a matter of seconds. A point to note is that I would always recommend wearing finger guards or gloves here, as when that line strips up and off the floor to the reel, fingers can and will sustain nasty friction burns if not protected.

PERMIT OBSESSION

During a day's fishing the usual presence of jacks and snapper are a welcome distraction, unless they appear just at the wrong point to snatch the fly from out of the mouth of a huge bonefish, or worse still a permit.

I don't think that anyone in our group failed to see and have a chance to cast to a permit on each day. At times there were permit showing up every hour, however they are not the easiest of fish to catch. But if permit is your thing – and it can become somewhat of an obsession – you can concentrate on them 100 per cent of the time quite easily at Cayo Largo, providing you have a likeminded partner in the boat. If not, there's nothing to stop you taking a boat and guide out just to yourself. While permit do seem to turn up out of the blue they can also disappear in a flash. The best opportunities for catching them are in group feeding spots directly behind a number of other feeding fish such as a shoal of bones, but most often, in this part of the world at least, they hang out behind large stingrays. If you imagine the seabed being really stirred up by a couple or more feeding rays moving up tide, bonefish and permit will look to feed in the same area a metre or two behind the rays at the edges of the mud cloud, looking for escaping crustaceans. As with stalking bonefish, accurately dropping a weighted shrimp pattern in front of moving permit is essential and,



What better way to relive the day's fishing than over delicious Cuban food and a glass of wine?

Preparing for the day ahead – the guides ensure everything is ready to target the mix of species at Cayo Largo.

who knows, it could be the fish of a lifetime.

As to be expected on this trip, which took place at the end of November (essentially low season), the tarpon that were there were all the smaller resident fish around the 10lb to 40lb mark; great fun, nonetheless. You can catch double that size from April to July. There is also an endless opportunity to track down and try for 5-foot-long barracudas on a typical pike set up; the mix of fishing is brilliant. Even if you are not one of those that have ever been into pike on the fly, barracuda on the fly takes it to a whole new level.





MEMORIES TO LAST A LIFETIME

We were back to the lodge every day at about 5.00pm for beers and pizza snacks. Here we had the chance to relive the day's catches with fellow anglers and go through the next day's plan. This is also the time to rethink tackle setups and, if needed, change things around. There is no problem swapping over your fishing partner or even your guide if it's something that will enhance your next day's fishing. You leave all your gear at the lodge each day and the guides take care to wash it all down so it's ready and waiting in the boat when you arrive the next morning.

Most days we would all meet up for lunch

Another hard-fighting bonefish is tamed.

together on some secluded island often accompanied by Cuba's rock iguanas that would gather around for anyone's lunch scraps. There was even the opportunity to have lunch at a beachfront restaurant for freshly grilled fish, shrimp and lobster. These daily events just continue to build a tremendous feeling of camaraderie between everyone and make the whole experience of Cuba a true adventure. Sure, this is a serious fishing trip, but it's also a fantastic holiday.

Our six days fishing in Cayo Largo produced everything: tarpon, permit, bonefish, jacks, yellow tailed snapper and great friendship within the group.

We left Cayo Largo and had a second bite at the cherry in Havana due to indifferent flight scheduling from the island. This resulted in another overnight stay in Havana before the transatlantic flight home the following evening. This gave us plenty of time to relax, recuperate, sleep and chillout around the hotel pool with a cocktail or two.

Whatever your level of competence, whether you're seriously experienced or totally new to saltwater fly fishing, a Cuban destination such as Cayo Largo won't fail to impress, and you won't be left disappointed.



Keep it simple – shrimps and a purple baitfish pattern were the best flies.



TACKLE AND TIPS FOR CUBA

GEAR

As a destination, Cuba will offer you many fish species to target. Given the size of fish available I'd take both 8-wt and 10-wt setups. Don't scrimp on the reel choice, as it's vitally important to have something with real stopping power. If you were going in high season, the addition of a 12-wt would be good if you intend to have a go for the migratory tarpon that will average at more than 50lb. Rods made by Scott, Lamson and Hardy work for me, and with reels it definitely has to be Lamson and Hardy.

LINES

I prefer to use the tropical/saltwater lines made by Scientific Anglers, but you won't go wrong with Rio as a brand either. If you need to try lines out as you build your setup, do it during our summer months when it's over 25 degrees. At this point the tropical fly line will work as it was meant to, as opposed to winter testing here when the fly line will handle like a coiled wire.

FLIES

There's a multitude of flies that you can find recommended for Cuba and I took most of them with me for the trip, but for Cayo Largo it seemed that there were three patterns that we always used. The Cuban Shrimp & Avalon Shrimp (Fulling Mill Flies) were the only patterns our guides ever wanted to use for both bonefish and permit. For tarpon they only wanted a black and purple baitfish pattern, which I get from fly fishing specialists Walkers of Trowell. As for barracuda, it was one of my six-inch plus sized pike flies that they found irresistible.

EYEWEAR

Take the very best polarizing sunglasses you can afford. You will need these to stand any chance of seeing the fish that you will be expected to cast to, and believe me, if you can't see the fish, there's almost no point in you being there. Your normal bronze lenses work great, but take yellow as well if you have them, for dull conditions.

CASTING

You don't need to be able to cast over 30 yards to have great action. The further you can cast however will mean you can get to the more wary and generally bigger specimen fish. I would insist that casting accuracy is more important than distance. Cast in the wrong place, cast too short, or cast too long and it's all over. It's rare to get more than one cast at some of these fish so practice your accuracy and do it into the wind. You will be on open water, so there will always be a breeze to contend with – that goes for any saltwater destination.



For more comprehensive information and ideas on destination fly fishing contact aardvarkmcleod.com or Andy Smith direct at reelflyfishing.co.uk