

BUSTED TRIP TO KEY WEST

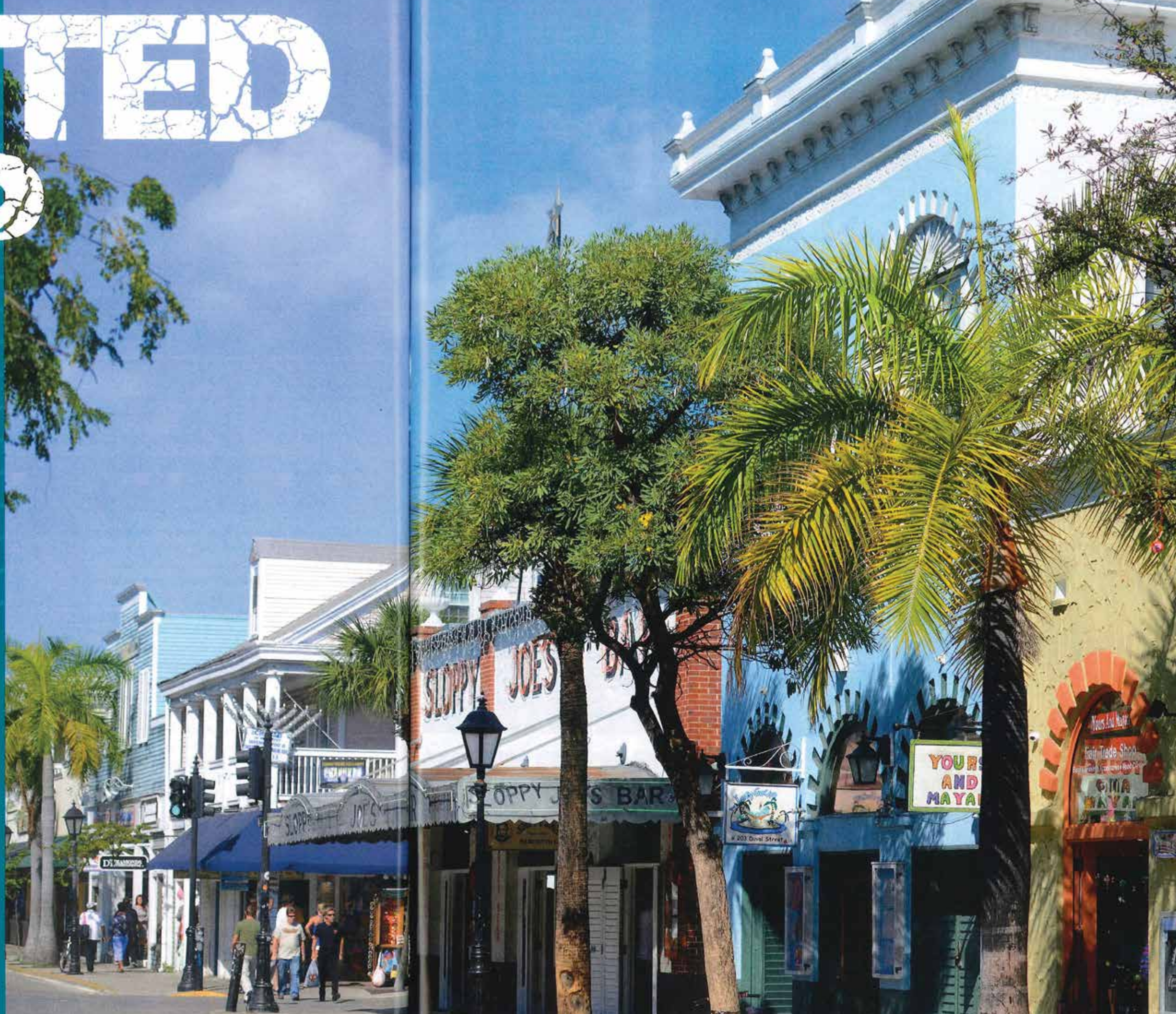
by Dr. Riley Lova, MD

It was a Key West kind of joint; you know the style. Canvas for a roof and slowly turning fans above. The lights in the swimming pool behind us were more than what the barroom had, so the potted palm trees swaying at the edge of darkness were enough to keep you suspicious.

There were four of us standing there at the bar, each in a mood more foul than the next. We had come a long way to be marking time in the night.

"The Brain" Narramore grunted and tossed his iPhone down on the slab. NOAA's website page on the screen was dark blue, which seemed about right. Three zones offshore predicted 22 knot winds and seas to 12 feet. We had planned a 30-mile run to 300 fathoms off the edge of the continental shelf at morning light for our quarry: the swordfish. Not even an 80-foot Viking could cover this bad bet; we were busted.

Across the room a cheap stereo fired up. Three red and three green horizontal lights blinked on in a row and the long dead voice of Janis Joplin waltzed beneath the fans.





"HERE IN THE KEYS, WE HAVE SO MANY OVERLAPPING FISHERIES. WE HAVE THE GULFSTREAM CURRENT OFFSHORE, THE THIRD LARGEST BARRIER REEF IN THE WORLD, THE FLATS AND BAYS AND THEN JUST TO THE WEST IS THE GULF OF MEXICO."



"Busted flat in Baton Rouge, waitin' for the train,

And I's near as faded as my jeans..."
Narramore started shaking; you could feel it more than see it. This was the bad mojo coming, real real bad. Suddenly he squinted his right eye closed and the left orb bugged out... right out of its socket. It beamed a ray of malignant misanthropic madness at the stereo and Janis let out a gasp like she had been stuck in the butt with an icepick. The room fell dead silent. A small plume of white smoke curled above the punked black box and the green and red lights flickered out.

On the wall, the hands on an electronic clock moved noiselessly. The ominous Edgar Allen Poe grade ticking in a dark room, was starkly missing. This staple of detective pulp, cold war spy thrillers and film noir was another casualty of the newer, less human age. Progress had again kicked out the cat of literary metaphor [a cheap shot.]

He inhaled and the eyeball sucked back into its socket with a dull "pop," and a single tear of blood trickled down his sunburned cheek. The most terrible and dreaded stink eye on the planet was over. But he was rollin'. The waiter poured four more El Patrons and the crackling of ice was the quarter's only sound as he wound it up.

"Hunter Thompson said it best, "When the going gets weird, the weird turn pro."

Four glasses elevated and then slammed back down on the bar in unison. It would be time to head to the boats soon. Narramore grunted and lifted four fingers at the barkeep to refill. There was a sound like a duck call from somewhere behind him and the smell of sulphur and methane filled the room. It was the only time all evening I'd seen him smile.

The rented van toiled against the early wind making for Cudjoe Key. The palms along the water's edge bent at their spines. No matter the weather, the sky here is never the iron gray of the north. The humid air touches the skin like fingertips and the dark blue patches and pastel lined grays of storm clouds are more passionate. The wind is muscular. In the backseat Narramore expounded on the concept of "a victim of circumstance." Mick Jagger started into Sympathy for the Devil on the radio and I cranked the volume to drown him out. I could feel a great wave of weirdness creeping closer.

Way down a backstreet, the sight of Cudjoe Gardens Marina was the first good vibe. No 25-foot plastic great white sharks hanging from a chain or giant billboards, just a business-like marina office and dockage with

a cooler full of barley pops... old school lower keys. We stopped at the cooler on the way to the dock to fortify ourselves against the elements.

Capt. Beau Woods, of Double O Charters, was my go-to guy. Remembering our first telephone conversation:

"Man, I've caught dozens of marlin, every species, and hundreds upon hundreds of sails... who knows how many thousands of dolphin and tuna. But never a swordfish."

"You don't know how many times someone has called me with that same story in those exact words."

He'd packed a box of "secret baits" last week. The northeast wind whistled through trees along the protected marina as we shook hands next to his 30-foot center console. The secret baits were stowed away with our dreams of a swordfish on the first drop.

Beau is a lit up personality with the energy level of a big kid. He had just retired from the Coast Guard to spend more time with his young children and give himself over entirely to his obsession for fishing. He was the perfect captain for a family who start the day with their spinning reels positioned vertically. Guys like me also require an extra measure of patience. He had a light in his eye that never dimmed.

"As long as the wind comes somewhat from the north, we have some leeway to fish the islands." He smiled, "I've got some spots for us... good ones."

Capt. Andrew Tipler, of Last Cast Charters, was our other pro and would unsuspectingly skipper Narramore and my brother, Mike. He was a thinking man's captain, a student of every aspect of the marine environment and the behavior of his prey.

"Here in the Keys, we have so many overlapping fisheries. We have the Gulfstream current offshore, the third largest barrier reef in the world, the flats and bays and then just to the west is the Gulf of Mexico. There is action all the time, all year round. For example, some locations, such as Central America, may have a better billfish fishery than we do, but on a day too windy you'd be stuck on the dock. Here, we always have other targets of choice."

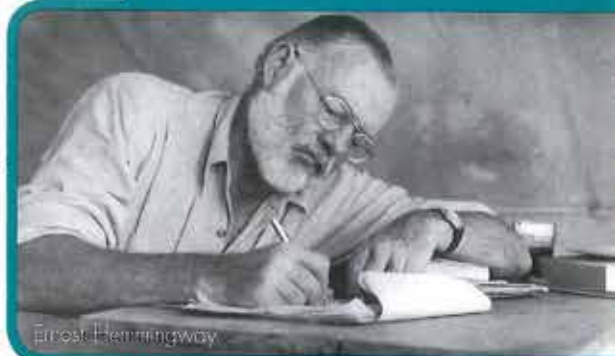
Capt. Tipler maintains a bevy of three boats: first a broad-beamed center console for offshore trips, then a flats skiff like a pro golfer with a driver and a putter. Today he fired up the mashie niblick, a bay cruiser for multi-tasking.

(Continued on page 77)

key west: did you know...

The southern tip of America is the metaphorical end of the rainbow for fishermen, divers, artists, writers, and those whose last hook the pole of the pub crawl.

Originally discovered by Prince de Leon in 1521, its earlier settlers battled pirates, Indians, and terrible disease to establish their purchase upon the island (later its magnetism would attract smugglers, gamblers, and sponge divers, all bent on brooding new territory. From here Jose Martí would ignite thunder in the hearts of Cuban immigrants that would carry across the Gulfstream to lead the revolt of Cuba against Spain in 1895).



"Key West unfortunately is becoming rather literary and artistic," wrote eminent poet Wallace Stevens in 1935. He collaborated and drank heartily with Robert Frost and the many literary notables of the day in Key West. He reputedly broke his hand on Ernest Hemingway's jaw (who then knocked him into the street). Among the famous writers who found their way to their home here includes Ernest Hemingway, Tennessee Williams, Philip Capote, Thornton Wilder, James Audubon, Jane Hillyar, Conan McCullers, William Hellman, James Kirkwood, and fly fishing Hall of Fame member Thomas McGuane.

Today the island is renowned for its bohemian culture. In 1982 it proclaimed itself "independent" in protest against a U.S. Border Patrol roadblock. It still celebrates April 23rd as its Independence Day. Arriving at the airport, you are saluted by the big "Welcome to the Conch Republic" signage on the terminal. Even when Fantasy Fest has unmeasured down, Key West still rocks with a multicultural rhythm. So whether you're a Jimmy Buffet Panthead or possess the heart of a fisherman or the soul of a poet, perhaps some of both, Key West is among the best destinations in America.



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 57

Okay, I thought to myself, I hope the fishing is good enough to warrant the wet beating we'll probably take as we race across an unprotected expanse of the Little Bahama Bank. And the wind most likely would freshen considerably by the time we headed back to the lodge in the afternoon. My lower back gave an anticipatory twinge at the thought. The back spoke again remembering times past on Andros and on Grand Bahama Island when flats skiffs literally kicked my butt on long runs.

I need not have worried I found out later as I walked out the side door of Blackfly to meet my guide Nick Roberts who was leaning against a gorgeous trailered East Cape Vantage skiff, my trusty marine steed for the day. The boats and the guides—in addition to Nick, I fished with Paul Pinder and Ashron Williams—both proved to be top of the line.

Heretofore I'd become partial to several models of another manufacturer's flats skiff and I still like them very much. But, this boat proved to be something else—a sturdy, steady, incredibly maneuverable craft that could handle the open water with ease and still float gracefully across the shallow flats as the tide moved out taking water with it. And it was pretty too, with all four Blackfly boats finished and highlighted in a different pastel hue. I rode in the beige, green, and blue boats, but missed the best looking one: It was almost purple, but more of a violet and very stunning in the warm Bahamian sunlight.

AMOROUS BONES & RETICENT PERMIT

Thanks to a custom-designed combination leaning bar and padded seat, I was comfortably ensconced on the bow of the East Cape skiff scanning the clean, clear flats. At times bonefish were everywhere, some big ones, too. They were in small

groups and in large schools, sometimes tails tipped up while feeding, and other times moving from here to there with a purpose.

The four of us—joining me were Pennsylvania's Mike Roth, Jim Nix from Virginia, and Gary Vasquez of Wisconsin—all caught bonefish by sight casting flies, but much of the time our offerings were spurned on closer inspection of the bait, and even worse, completely ignored, particularly by the larger fish.

It appears many of the bonefish were either preparing to move off the flats or actually were moving out to deep water and some already had made the journey out to deep water, often over 1,000 feet deep, to spawn. It seems these fish procreate in the fall at the new moon, and who can blame them for not eating our flies when there are more important things to do. I'm all for more bonefish in the future.

In short, what should have been incredibly bountiful catching—double-digit bonefish days—were not. But we still caught fish, enough to make the visit to Abaco more than worthwhile. I would go back again to these productive waters in a New Jersey minute, and the lodge and environs are worth it even if you don't fish.

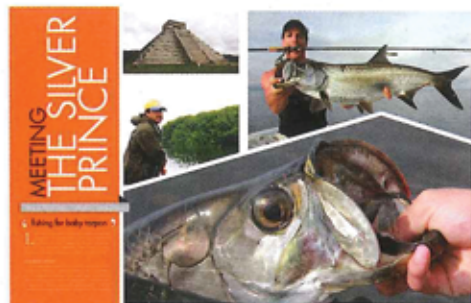
On the first day out, Gary landed an 18- to 20-pound permit that gave him quite the tussle. It was his first fly-caught permit and he was as proud as could be. He spends a lot of time in summer fishing out of Alaska's Goodnews River Lodge, where he is the marketing director, and has caught a ton of huge salmon, rainbow trout, Arctic char, grayling, and others, but he was pleased as punch with this beautiful permit. It was quietly released back into the waters of Moores Island. (Goodnews River Lodge, Alaska; www.goodnewsriverlodge.com, 800-274-8371.)

Permit, like bonefish, were everywhere and they weren't distracted with mating stuff; they were just being permit and doing what permit often do when they see your fly or lure: they spit on it, give the angler the fin, and continue with what they were doing or flee quickly and contemptuously away leaving puffs of sand where your dreams were a few seconds ago. I hope to return to Blackfly Lodge to concentrate on catching permit. Not only were they plentiful, they were good size.

In addition to bonefish and permit, there are occasional tarpon and plenty of sharks, barracuda, jacks, snappers, and others ready to bend your rod. I managed several chunky and attractively colored rainbow runners mixed in with a bunch of bonefish. These babies fight long and hard.

Blackfly is not "fly fishing only" and all fishers are welcome. The tackle shop in the lodge has conventional gear in addition to fly stuff, and fresh bait is available, too. Clint can arrange for near shore and offshore bottom fishing or trolling. This is one of those rare places where the wishes of the customer are favorably considered, and with a smile. ☺

MEETING THE SILVER PRINCE



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 61

Fortunately, tarpon don't carry any commercial value and the catches are all released. At Tarpon town, a strict catch-and-release rule is respected. They are normally unhooked in the water and anglers have to wet their hands before posing with their catch for the camera. Guides will revive the fish prior to release.

RECOMMENDED EQUIPMENT

Fly fishing works well for tarpon and flies such as seaducers, minnows, and gurglers on 1/0 or 2/0 hooks produce best. It is always good to have a range of colors such as red/white, black/white, green/white or chartreuse, with sizes not exceeding 3 inches in length. Use a weight-forward floating line in the shallows and a sinking line for deeper use, with 100 yards of backing. A 20-pound leader, 6 to 9 feet long, with 40-pound tippet on an 8- to 9-weight fly rod (moderate fast or fast action) is preferred.

For lure fishing, you need a setup that is powerful, yet enables you to cast small lures with ease, such as a medium-heavy or heavy spinning outfit with 12- to 20-pound braid and 40- to 50-pound fluorocarbon leader. Lures we found effective were SPRO Bucktail jigs of 1/8- to 1/4-ounce in white, red/white, green/white, and chartreuse, and topwater lures between 2.5 and 4 inches. Amazingly, we did not lose many lures. However, you need to change and retie new leaders frequently. With the tarpon's rough jaws, about 20 yards of leader per person is required if the fishing is good.

Polarized sunglasses and sunscreen with high Sun Protection Factor (SPF) is necessary, along with a raincoat.

The primary method is sight fishing. Tarpon are not discreet and they tend to create commotion when feeding on the surface. This makes them visible from great distances and the guides are good at detecting them. All one has to do is cast near the fish, but not directly on them, work the lure slowly and wait for the bite.

Simple and straightforward presentations work best. For surface lures, the "walk the dog" technique with a very slow cadence is really effective. Jigs should be worked to mimic a shrimp backing near the surface in short twitches of 2-foot bursts.

The best way to fight a jumping tarpon is to keep your rod tip low. If a fish decides to head for the mangroves, no amount of drag on a light spinning reel can stop it. This is where you have to take a risk and palm the spool, and hope that the line remains intact.

TARPONTOWN ANGLERS

Tarpon town is a creation of Raul Castaneda. It offers customers the baby tarpon fishing experience with either fly or lures (light tackle) in the biosphere reserve of Los Petenes. Despite the easy fishing, one would still need good angling skills and equipment knowledge, especially fishing in the narrow mangrove channels. You will mainly target baby tarpon, but some big ones can venture near the mangrove. The largest tarpon ever caught in Tarpon town was more than 50 pounds, on the fly.

Raul is a former guide himself and trained five local fishermen to work alongside him. They know the area very well, have excellent boating skills and are also avid fly an-

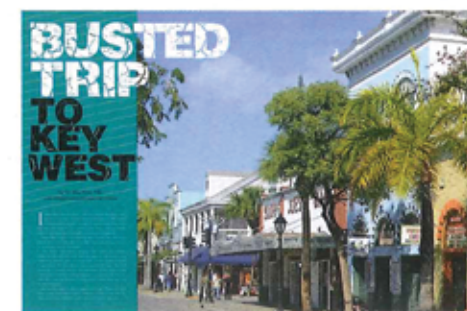
glers. In addition to that, they take good pictures, change your leaders in mere seconds, and even keep track of your day's fish count. They will also give useful advice on lure selection and techniques. They have a fleet of five well-equipped boats between 21 and 23 feet. Onboard drinks and all safety equipment is included, which is rarely the case in Mexico.

CONCLUSION

All in all, it was a fun-filled trip. We enjoyed the high bite rate and the outstanding fights. The quality of the hotel and its meals were excellent. The service included daily transfer from the hotel to the marina by Tarpon town's guides. We recommend you fish for at least three days, with a rest day in between, to fully appreciate the qualities of the baby tarpon. You must also reserve time to visit Yucatan and some of Mexico's more renowned archaeological sites, such as Edzná, which is only 18 miles from Campeche, or the ancient 10th-century Mayan city of Chichen Itza in the state of Yucatan.

In our opinion, compared to other destinations we've recently fished, we give Tarpon town a rate of 9 out of 10. This has been our best fishing trip so far, after the Amazons. The services offered by Tarpon town are really hard to beat, plus the unforgettable memories you stand to gain after spending days going after these beautiful, yet combative, game fish on fly or light tackle. ☺

BUSTED TRIP TO KEY WEST



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 69

The sun came out as we ran leeward of a couple of big keys and then the bright green of sandy bottom contrasted with dap-

pling of turtle grass. I was, as always, instantly enchanted. We filled our wells with live pilchard and the thing was on.

So there was no long run to the continental shelf, but after all the sun was shining. Then the rods bent u-shaped and the reels sang. The wind did its thing and so did we. Handfuls of pilchards volunteered for a rain of live chum. Brutish jacks ran, ladyfish leapt, multiple species of fish ate us up and we all filled our boxes with a limit of mangrove snapper. Scores of fish were landed to each boat by midday. It was the same Keys magic we felt as kids at Christmas. It is amazing how much less fishing pressure there is in the lower Keys compared to the upper ones. We had the whole place to ourselves, as far as the eye could see.

Gliding back into the marina I was still watching every piece of bottom, watching for the shadows to move and take a familiar form. I'm so hooked that I'll never change... at least I hope not. On the dock, Mike and The Brain were in familiar form, giving life to the old adage: If you give a man a fish you'll feed him for a day, but if you teach a man to fish, well then... he'll sit in a boat and drink beer all day. Capt. Tipler looked a little dazed but manned up.

Key West is among the best for dining and pub crawling I ever saw and a touchstone here is Captain Tony's. I'm old enough to remember Capt. Tony Tarracino, having first wandered into his dive back in the 70s. Meeting Capt. Tony in the 70s was easy enough to do if you let the gravity flux of the saloon plant your backside on a barstool. That's what it tended to do to his. He had an earthy Jack Kerouac cool, always ready with a story, never really into politics. The karma lost its grip on the night however as my alma mater blew a 17-point fourth quarter lead and lost to South Carolina in double overtime on the big screen. The bar had gotten bigger but still smelled the same.

For Broadway plays you head to the Big Apple, for fashion: Milan, and for romance: Paris. But if you're seeking a little pro-grade weirdness you need travel no further than our nation's southernmost city during the week-end of Fantasy Fest. 100,000 partiers invaded the island bent on celebration, and some just bent. They seemed divided into the half who wore fantastic costumes and the demi group adorned with body paint only. It was a hoot and one helluva parade. I love Key West.

It's always good to get out there, open up

some more possibilities, but not to make a move offshore. Our strategy was to divide and conquer some of these possibilities. Mike and The Brain went with Capt. Andrew to one of his favorite haunts... a secluded back-bay area for lemon shark. My partner, Guthrie Allen and I were hitting some cut-through channel structure and patch reefs, which Capt. Beau kept like aces up his sleeve.

The shark expedition involved some of the best of what you go for. The environment in the lower keys is still breath taking. The water is shallow and clear; you can spot the big boys a long ways out. Sharks can smell bait like women can smell money. On a bright sunny day you miss nothing. Obeying their character, initially wary, then warming to their hunt... the electrical excitement building... their button finally is pushed and then it's murder incorporated. You see why they live so long and get so big... the grace, the power, the speed... they're the wild's wonderful assassins. It's a synopsis of the law of nature in a single volume. They hooked sharks to eight feet

in length and landed seven. The catch was ponderous and toothy, possessing characteristics much in common with the guys who caught them. Narramore made it all day without anyone getting hurt.

The patch reef option worked like a dream. Only hooking up at two places, we stayed hot with a short lull for a slack tide bagging at least 20 species of fish. Extended lengths of fluorocarbon leaders, joined by 40-wrap Bimini twists to braided main line insured plenty of attention to our live pilchards. Mutton snapper, grouper, yellowtail, cobia, cero mackerel, nurse shark, and duskies... who knew what might come from beneath the mystery of the surface, that division of universes, next? One after another, they were all beauties. Some proved too strong for our gear to lift from their world into ours. Most were released but some volunteered for the cooler and the trip home. All the fun, all the wonder of those first fishing trips of youth; it was all right there. Nobody was missing the swordfish out off the distant shelf. We had so much fun we almost broke our faces laughing. How weird

would it be to want to be anywhere else?

Tooling down the road we almost missed the turn Beau Woods gave us on Stock Island. Screeching tires, a spray of gravel and when the cloud of rubbery smoke cleared we were at the Hogfish Bar and Grill. The cero, just swimming a couple of hours prior, headed for the kitchen to enter its new circumstance on the food chain. The room was open air with a young combo slickly laying down some classic R&B hits. The Margaritas were the size of goldfish bowls. Narramore made it to the table without anyone calling security. The universe turned correctly on its axis.

Whatever your mission in these parts, Key West and the lower Keys are jewels in the crown of North America fishing environments. It would be a life well spent attempting to exhaust all the fishing opportunities that exist here, as well as, all the culture, nightlife, and fun. The swordfish beckon and if the next trip gets busted like this one... well, I can't wait. As "The Brain" Narramore summed things up: "Good things come to those who bait." **G**

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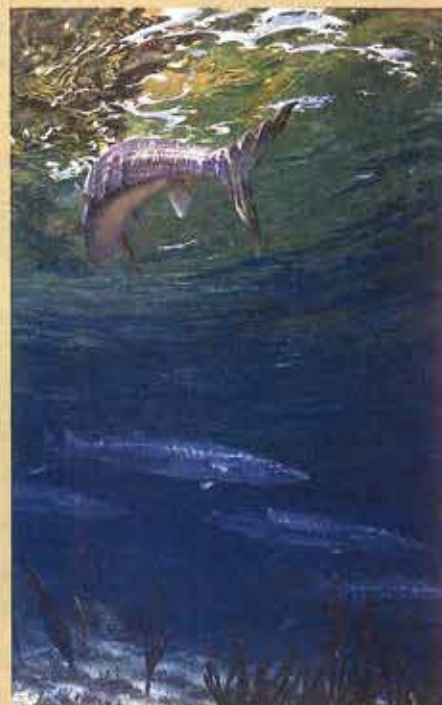
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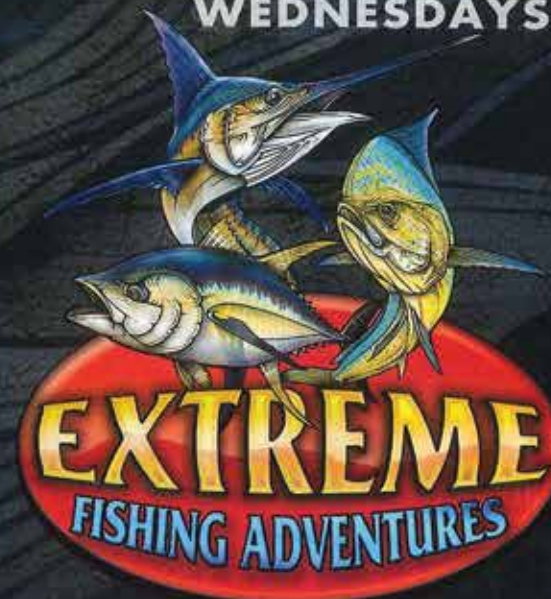
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