

The Flats of Belize... a Travel Through Time

by Riley Love, M.D.

"Come gather 'round people

Wherever you roam

And admit that the waters

Around you have grown"

It was 1963. Bob Dylan recorded his anthem of social change and a 10-year-old boy discovered fishing in the Florida Keys. Truly, the world changed, and a lifelong love affair with the Keys began. What boy's heart could be left untouched by emerald patches of flats, secreted bays hidden between mangrove islands and blue water falling deep from the edge of the reef? Only a boy's imagination could limit what his line might encounter beneath

those waves, immeasurable, fantastic. They called it fishing, but it was so much more; always more, and still is more.

"And accept it that soon

You'll be drenched to the bone

If your time to you is worth savin'"

The blue and green waters are still there, but the bracelet of islands are covered now by metal roofs of condominiums and time share resorts, concepts nonexistent in 1963. There were only two motels then between Largo and Key West, and scant were boats for charter. How old are you when you see things only as they were and what has changed? That is the age I have become.

"Then you better start swimmin'

Or you'll sink like a stone,

For the times they are a-changin'"

There's time for contemplation, and the long view of barrier reef islands fuel the unlocking of memory along with Dylan's lyrics. The Cessna Caravan gently dips its wing as if bowing to a beautiful woman. It's a short flight from Belize City out to Ambergris Caye, but the view is a knockout. Of all the fishing destinations in the Northern Hemisphere, the country of Belize, formerly British Honduras, is the most like the Keys. This is particularly true of its outer islands, which are protected by the second-longest barrier

reef in the world. There are mangrove-covered islands and the same greens and blues of the water. From the Yucatan Peninsula to the north, the "Mayan Riviera" is a seascape of flats. But here the barrier reef begins. While the other tourists on the plane point at the boats and islands, like all fishermen, I focus on the water, not the elements of scenery, scanning for the movement of shadows beneath the surface.

The Mayan's time here must have been spectacular. Builders of pyramids for astronomer's study of the heavens, worship of time gods and spirits shaped like plumed serpents. They launched 4,000 trade canoes on an average day along this coast. The 25 miles of Ambergris Caye was a commerce center then. The Mayans had dug canals into it for shipping their boats into the markets. They held forth almost 3,000 years, rowing their craft to the cadence of their own songs of change.

The British still garrisoned soldiers here when last I came to fish. The soldiers were young, brash and hard drinking. It was wise to steer around them in the pubs on Saturday night. Guatemala wanted to exercise its claim to the fledgling nation, until finally giving up after 30 years of stubbornness in 1992. The soldiers are gone hence. British Honduras is now Belize, a Mayan word for muddy water. This was probably derived from the Belize River. It's a great place for snook fishing.

There are over 200 islands off the coast, ranging from tiny mangrove postage stamps Gilligan couldn't have hung on to, to the complete destination of Ambergris Caye in the North. From the air, it's striking how much the environment resembles the Keys. Although the reef varies from 10 to 40 miles from the mainland, its line of breakers is only one half mile from the coast of Ambergris. This is a perfect corridor for water taxis—the best way to get around San Pedro town and the local establishments. It seems like the best places I've visited, I've gotten to by water.

There are over 400 square miles of



Sight fishing on the flats is an awesome experience.

flats here. Although the reef provides the opportunity to pursue many species of fish and the rapid drop off to 4,000 feet of blue Atlantic beckons the large game angler, it is the flats that are world class. Many come for the chance of a "Grand Slam"—catching a bonefish, permit and tarpon on a single trip. In its season, a snook can be added to this Triple Crown for a "Super Slam."

All are great game fish, but the flats

fisherman knows well what waits to reward his venture. For all days on the ocean, there is always the sea and sky, but nowhere else in the saltwater environment does the angler become more at one with his natural setting. The flats are alive with life and death drama in the waving turtle grass and mangrove-lined channels. Each region of the flats is its own world. In the sunlight, it becomes a visual wonderland.



El Pescador Lodge on Ambergris Caye.

Like the Florida Keys of a generation ago, you can stand on the prow of your boat and see miles of flats fished only by you. When you are there stalking, one becomes part of the day's three-act theater in gin-clear water. The sky is bluer and the turquoise water suddenly changes to luminescent green above white sand bottom. It is like looking at a white light through an emerald. You couldn't dream up anything more spectacular; it's wilder than a 70s flashback. Only at some later point do you begin to recall that there was another world somewhere. There are some things present when a man is alone with nature that are not there at other times.

Maybe I'm just a sucker for the classics. But just like the flats of Belize remind me of the old days in the Keys, the lodge we anchored up on was an angler's daydream; an enduring masterpiece of colonial style, rich mahogany and wind-blown palms. This is El Pescador, Spanish for "The Fisherman." It has added eight luxury villas to the original 13 rooms of the main lodge.

I've fished over more than half of the globe. Accommodations have ranged from sleeping on the bare decks of boats on oceans so deep a stone would

never find its bottom to thatched huts up rivers I couldn't find on a map. They have also included five-star hotels; but there's something about El Pescador. They seem to have gotten it just right, like a tuning fork that reverberates at a perfect pitch.

Three generations of family continue to manage the lodge. The staff and guides mainly live there with them and are related themselves to the lodge through generations. The others come from a nearby village known as the "Valley of Peace." They pride themselves on attention to intimate details. By the time you have lingered in this place for a few days you begin to feel like a part of the extended family yourself.

Fishing expeditions of this caliber require properly equipping the angler. Some of the most important tackle intrinsic to maintaining the correct rhythm for fishing as well as possible is found at the bar. No lodge can be considered adequately outfitted without a good one. Your fingers can stay on the pulse of the situation at the bar, which has a good feel to it. This is especially important when you fish with the sort of hombres I travel with. They catch a lot of big fish. But these are much like

UFO landings. Everyone gets to hear about them, but only one guy seems to have seen it.

This is thirsty work like most fishing endeavors, and plenty of tipples assist in washing down what gets passed along as new legend. Even the beer down there has a picture of a Mayan pyramid on it—a symbol of a pathway to enlightenment. It suits the purpose well. As a side note, they also have a heck of a fly shop.

Their guides are first-rate pros. They won't make a fishing reservation for you without one of these guys at the ready. The guide my son and I fished with was named Sinoe, a 23-year veteran. I asked him why a fisherman would select El Pescador instead of some of the other lodges proliferating along the coast. "You can catch fish at all of them," he said. "But if you want a chance at a grand slam, we're way ahead of everyone else up here, no question about it."

El Pescador retains a resident professional fly fishing instructor on site. They want to establish themselves as a world-class fly fishing destination, and their instructor is at that level. Lori-Ann Murphy, originator of the Orvis Fishing School for Women, is the first woman to become an Orvis-endorsed fly fishing guide. She became addicted to fly fishing 25 years ago when she first hooked a steelhead on the fly in a northwest river. She has an extensive résumé including co-founding Reel-Women and consulting for Meryl Streep and Kevin Bacon in the movie, "The River Wild." Surpassing other instructors in terms of personal grace, Lori-Ann is a veritable Athena of fly fishing.

The Belizeans are enlightened people, recognizing the value of their natural resources. Sixty-percent of the land and water in Belize is under national protection. They have legislated protection of their game fish as well, stating: "No person or establishment shall be in possession of any bonefish, permit or tarpon, or any product from, save and except in the act of catch and release."

As one advances in age, some things become imminently clear, such as which of us were descended from certain forebears. There were always ones like us, the guys who would sneak down the creek for some fishing, even when the tribe didn't need the meat. It fuels the heart as well as the mind to fish in beautiful places. We simply call it fishing.

If you become tired of too many boats just off your elbows and the sound of everyone else's outboards in your ears, then you can step back in time and fish out on the flats alone as it was done a generation ago. The time machine is made by Boeing Aircraft and it waits at your airport; The destination is Belize. Well...

"The line is drawn

The curse is cast

The slow one now

Will later be fast

As the present now

Will later be past

The order is rapidly fading"

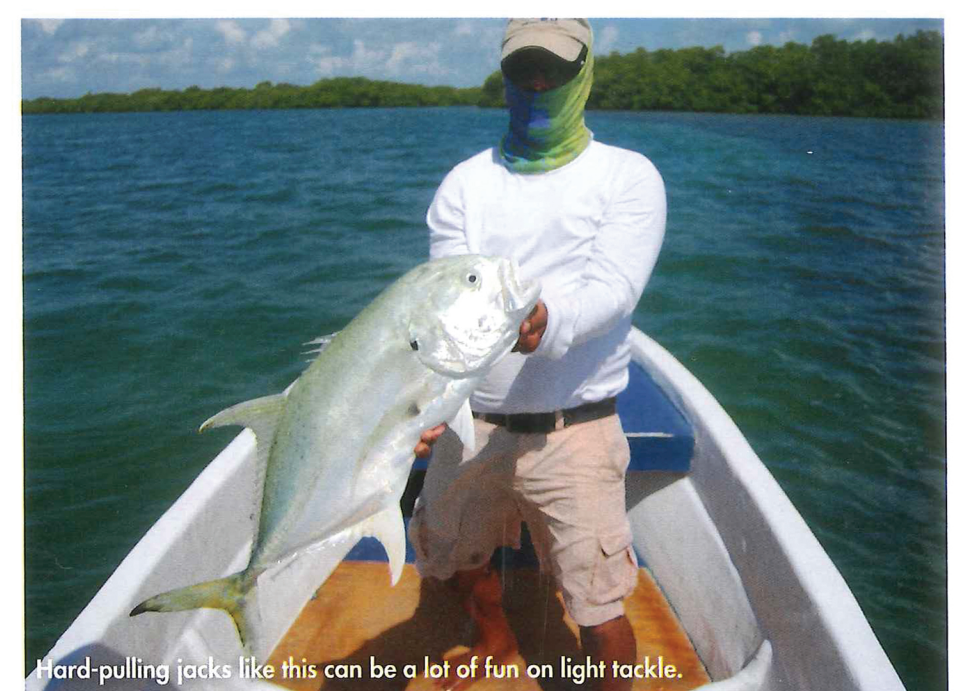
Henry David Thoreau once wrote that, "Many men go fishing all of their lives without knowing that it is not the fish they are after." For those of us who really like fish, this may seem like a hand somewhat overplayed. Yet when I'm able to focus on what is truly important, I find myself out on the water once again.

If true as Wilde said that life imitates art, then let us give it a full measure of opportunity; and, fishing the flats is a perfect brush for the canvas. Such are the lessons we learn from a long life.

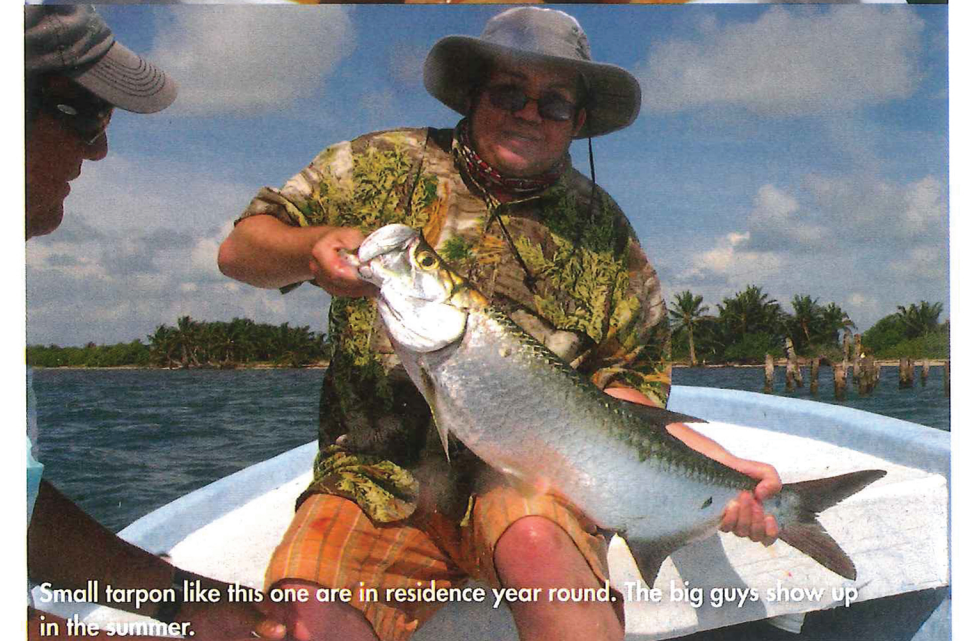
"And the first one now

Will later be last

For the times they are a-changing"



Hard-pulling jacks like this can be a lot of fun on light tackle.



Small tarpon like this one are in residence year round. The big guys show up in the summer.



Bonefish range from 1 to 5 pounds in these waters.