



Bonefish Capital of the World

Article & Photos by King Montgomery

The only thing that moves fast in the Bahamas is the gray ghost of the flats - the beautiful and powerful bonefish. Bonefish thrive in the thousands of square miles of pristine saltwater flats of the Bahamas archipelago, and most of these wary, mysterious fish have never seen a fly. This is truly bonefishing paradise.

When I asked Lefty Kreh, the godfather of all things fly fishing, where I should go for the best bonefishing, he quickly replied:

“Andros Island, Bahamas.” When I inquired about a comfortable place to stay that provides excellent guides, he replied with equal rapidity: “Captain Rupert Leadon’s Andros Island Bonefish Club.” In all the years I’ve known him, Lefty has never steered me wrong, and he was sure right about this as well.

The Commonwealth

The Commonwealth of the Bahamas, with a population just over 300,000, is

comprised of a chain of 3,000 islands and cays (keys) off the southeast coast of the United States and north of Cuba. Only 30 of the islands are inhabited, and almost 85% of the population lives in the larger cities such as Nassau and Freeport-Lucaya. The name, Bahamas, is taken from the Spanish *Baha Mar* or “shallow sea.”

The climate is subtropical and mild - the average annual air temperature is 76-77 degrees F with a usual daily fluctuation of



10-12 degrees. Skies above the islands are often azure and cloudless, two conditions essential for good bonefishing. From June to October rain can be heavy but doesn't last long; August to November sees the Caribbean on hurricane alert. Their good early-warning system makes surprise storms a thing of the past.

You will need a passport to visit, but visas are not required by US citizens for



Wellington Mackey has been guiding anglers for decades. He is an excellent guide, fisherman, and a real gentleman.

stays up to eight months, and by Canadians for up to three months. The US dollar is equal to the Bahamian dollar, and both currencies are used interchangeably throughout the islands. Since the Bahamas are a former British colony, English is the language of the courteous, friendly, and fun-loving people of this sunny paradise.

I take a non-stop US Airways (1-800-428-4322, www.usairways.com) flight from Washington, DC to Nassau, about a 2 hour and 20 minute flight. I either stay overnight in Nassau at the pleasant Nassau Beach Hotel (1-888-627-7282, www.nassaubeachhotel.com) and take a next morning flight, or I take the afternoon flight on

the day of my arrival. The only regular airline that flies between Nassau and Andros Island - a 15-minute flight - is Western Air (2 4 2 - 3 7 7 - 2 2 2 2 , www.westernairbahamas.com).

Andros Island is the largest and one of the least populated of the islands. It is known as the “bonefish capital of the world,” and its yet-unexplored rugged “West Side” is called “the land of the giants” referring to the huge bonefish, many over 12 pounds, that live there. The Andros Island Bonefish Club (AIBC) on North Andros is comprised of the original lodge and the adjacent Cargill Creek Club, recently acquired by Rupert Leadon. AIBC



Most fishing on North Andros Island is from flats boats, but there are places where anglers wade for tailing bones.

is managed by Donna Teeny, a well-known American fly angler. She works so hard making sure your trip is perfect that she rarely has time for any fishing of her own.

Accommodations are spacious, air-conditioned cabins with private baths, two queen beds, small refrigerators, ceiling fans, and plenty of room for stowing gear. Daily housekeeping is efficient, and laundry is available on request.

Two dining rooms, two bars, a pool, and other amenities serve all your needs on this beautiful property on Cargill Creek. The food is homemade and features the fresh, tasty local seafood. You could spend all your time lounging in elegance at the lodge, but then there are all those zillions of bonefish that keep calling you to the clear, warm emerald waters under the azure skies.

The Fishery

There are two major sportfishing venues in the Bahamas: one is offshore and

Guide Wellington Mackey poses with the author's 6-pound plus bonefish. Note the Boga Grip; it is great for gently handling the fragile and slippery bones.



deep sea, and the other concentrates on the shallow reefs and flats. Although some fly fishing is possible in the former, the latter draws the preponderance of fly anglers. And bonefish reign supreme. Most lodges, including AIBC, allow spin fishing too. AIBC practices catch-and-release fishing.

The best time of the year to fly fish in the Bahamas is whenever you can; it's that good. The best time for size and numbers is around mid-April into September, but earlier or later are fine too. My last trip to Andros Island was in early November, and the fishing was excellent. My next trip is in May of this year. Fish are also available during the peak hurricane seasons of August through October, but trip insurance would be advisable. The sleeper time is winter, and bonefish, some very large, are available December through January. Many AIBC and other Bahamian guides do their own bonefishing in the winter months, so take a cue from them. Plus it's a great time to take a break from cold and snow in much of the US.

In addition to bones, the flats can hold some permit, tarpon, several sharks including black tip and lemon who try to steal a hooked bonefish, and barracuda - some very large. The flats near the reefs and over the reef are home to snappers, groupers, jacks of various types, and mackerels.

Bonefish roam in large schools, smaller pods, or just a few here and a few there. Sometimes a solitary bonefish cruises by, and those are usually quite large. Fishing for bones is more like hunting since you need to see and stalk the quarry. An accurate presentation with the right fly usually results in a hook-up. When schools and pods are moving, cast ahead of their line of advance, and wait until the lead fish approach before stripping the fly. Listen to your guide; he will tell you when to strip and how fast, and often when to set the



Grounds of the AIBC. All rooms have private bathrooms and air conditioning.



Some Bahamas Information

Captain Rupert Leadon's [Andros Island Bonefish Club](http://www.androsbonefishing.com) (242-368-5167, www.androsbonefishing.com).

[Bahamas Ministry of Tourism](http://www.bahamas.com). 1-800-327-7678, www.bahamas.com. A wealth of information including about the fishing.

[The Out Islands of the Bahamas](http://www.bahama-out-islands.com). 1-800- OUT ISLANDS, www.bahama-out-islands.com. Excellent guide to the out islands.

[Bahamas Vacation Guide](http://www.bahama-islands.com) (on-line). www.bahama-islands.com.

[The International Bonefishing Society](http://www.intlbonefishingsociety.com). 252-353-4440, www.intlbonefishingsociety.com. Superb data base and resources directory where members may input info.



The author assumes the “there’s a bonefish following my fly” position prior to setting the hook on a big bone.

hook even when you don’t see the fish (which is much of the time).

Tackle, Tips, and Techniques

I usually carry four travel fly rods in my Rafters rod case: two 8-weights, and a 9 and 10-weight. All rods are nine feet long, but 8 ½ or 9 ½ would be fine too. The 8, 9, and 10-weights are rigged for bonefish, permit, and tarpon or barracuda, respectively. The crab pattern on the 9 also works for bonefish. The other 8-weight is a backup in case a rod breaks. I’ve been using Temple Fork Outfitters’ Lefty Kreh signature TiCr fly rods (1-800-638-9052, www.templeforkflyrods.com), and they are fine rods at a low price.

A good reel - one with a smooth, adjustable drag and carrying at least 150 yards of 20 or 30 pound test backing - is absolutely essential. A small bone will take you into the backing at least once, and

maybe more. You can imagine what a bone over 10 pounds could do, and they are not uncommon in the Bahamas.

Use a weight forward floating line on all rods, and get the special bonefish or tropical lines offered by most manufacturers. I use the Airflo, Scientific Anglers, and Orvis bonefish lines with success. I like a weight forward floating tarpon line for the 10-weight “grab” rod (I grab it when a tarpon or big ‘cуда swims into range). I’m sure other lines work well too, but I haven’t tried all of them yet.

Keep leaders simple. Many manufacturers offer knotless tapered leaders designed for bonefish and tarpon, and these are all you really need on the flats. I start with a nine foot leader tapering to 12 pounds, and add two feet of 10 or 12 pound test tippet. Or begin with a longer leader and add tippet as desired. I carry knotless leaders by Cabela’s, Orvis, Airflo, and Frog



Guide Wellington Mackey releases one of the author’s bonefish.

Hair and recommend them. Use a wire bite tippet on the ‘cуда rod.

Any flats fly works for Bahamas bonefish as long as it’s a Gotcha. The McVay Gotcha, a variation on the Crazy Charlie theme, was tied in the mid-1980s by Jim McVay, Sr. and Jr. at the Andros Town airport while the two were waiting for a cab to the Andros Island Bonefish Club. The Crazy Charlie, crab patterns, and small Clousers in tan/white and chartreuse/white also work very well.

Carry flies tied on sizes 2, 4, and 6 with various eye weights (lead and bead-chain) for fishing various water depths. Have a few large poppers and shallow-running barracuda flies when one of these denizens happens by. Both permit and bonefish like the crab patterns. Check out the flats flies supplied to fly shops and catalogs by Brookside Flies of Denver (1-800-258-6336, www.brooksideflies.com). All of these patterns will interest bones and other species of flats fishes.

Some other stuff you’ll need while fishing the Bahamas flats include a Boga

Grip or similar device for handling and weighing fish, a portable stripping basket - I love my Charlie's Total Control Stripping Basket (that folds into its own pouch of about 4 x 4 x 2 inches), a light rainsuit because you *will* get wet when running in a flats boat, a small, collapsible waterproof bag for your equipment and camera - I use a Rafters bag (1-866-303-6043, www.fishing-luggage.com), which also serves as one of my airline carry-on pieces of luggage, a small Bass Pro Shops bag that folds flat in my checked luggage, a fanny pack with water bottles for wading flats and carrying stuff, 30 SPF sunscreen; and an insect spray or lotion for the mosquitoes and doctor flies.

A good pair of polarized sunglasses is as essential as your fly rod; without them you'll never see the fish through the glare on the water. Get the best you can afford. I find that the amber tones work best on the flats. Try the new H3O

Tsunami glasses that come with three separate colored lenses, a snap-in prescription insert for the Rx model, and a padded case (1 - 8 0 0 - 7 5 0 - 7 0 6 0 , www.H3Opolarized.com). Your local optometrist can add your prescription to the insert.

The *very best* source for fly angling in the islands is *The Bahamas Fly Fishing Guide* by Stephen and Kim Vletas, revised in 2002, and published by Lyons Press. If you only get one reference on the Bahamas, this is it. The authors add history, culture, and fly fishing anecdotes to this finely researched and crafted book. There is also a superb website to accompany the book: www.bahamasflyfishingguide.com.

If it's numerous and large bonefish near to home you're looking for, the Bahamas should end your search. Factor in the convenience of English, the dollar, friendly people, lots to do, excellent food,

fine accommodations, and superb weather; and you have more than enough good reasons to visit this little touch of paradise. As if the bonefish weren't enough!

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