

# abroad



by Michael Hamilton  
photos by Joe Rotter and Steve Joyce

# THE LAND WHERE THE SKY IS BORN

## Mexico, Mayans and multitudes of fish

**I**N the ancient Mayan language, *Sian Ka'an* means "Where the sky is born". The Mayan civilization that ruled the Yucatan Peninsula in 200 AD developed a highly sophisticated calendar dependent on the sun, stars, wind and sky. It's easy to see why they chose that phrase to describe their homeland which was designated a UNESCO World heritage site in 1986.

Travelling through the 1.3 million-acre Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve of grass savannahs, mangrove islands, lagoons and white sandflats in the southeastern Mexican state of Quintana Roo, an army of misshapen cloud formations, cumulonimbus, altostratus, cumulus and stratus, many taller than the Teton mountains, marched across a troubled sky above Ascension Bay, a body of water so vast as to defy description.

The Biosphere Reserve is home to rare and spectacular creatures including ocelots, jaguars, manatees, saltwater crocodiles and hundreds of species of exotic birds. Deep within the tangled mangroves and narrow lagoons, the mark of the ancient Mayans can still be seen. Crumbling temples and hidden tollhouses still guard aquatic passageways, but today only iguanas rule these long abandoned ruins.

### THE BAY OF PLENTY

Stretching over 300 square miles, Ascension Bay is a virtual fish factory for bonefish, permit, tarpon, and snook. The seemingly endless flats, mangroves and lagoons are legendary for the number of fish, remarkably diverse bird life and natural beauty. Schools of bonefish in the millions as well as

unbelievable numbers of permit, tarpon and snook, have been swimming untouched for millennia, offering anglers some of the most productive saltwater flats fishing on the planet.

It's the perfect destination to catch your first bonefish or your one thousandth, and its azure, clear waters are a permit incubator. Widely regarded as the toughest flats fish to take on a fly, permit thrive in Ascension Bay's protected habitat. It is one of the rare places where an angler can target permit everyday, weather permitting, and have a realistic chance of success. Anglers also have a better than average chance to score a Grand Slam, catching a bonefish, permit and tarpon in one day. Add a snook to the mix and you would have achieved the holy grail of saltwater flyfishing, the Super Slam.

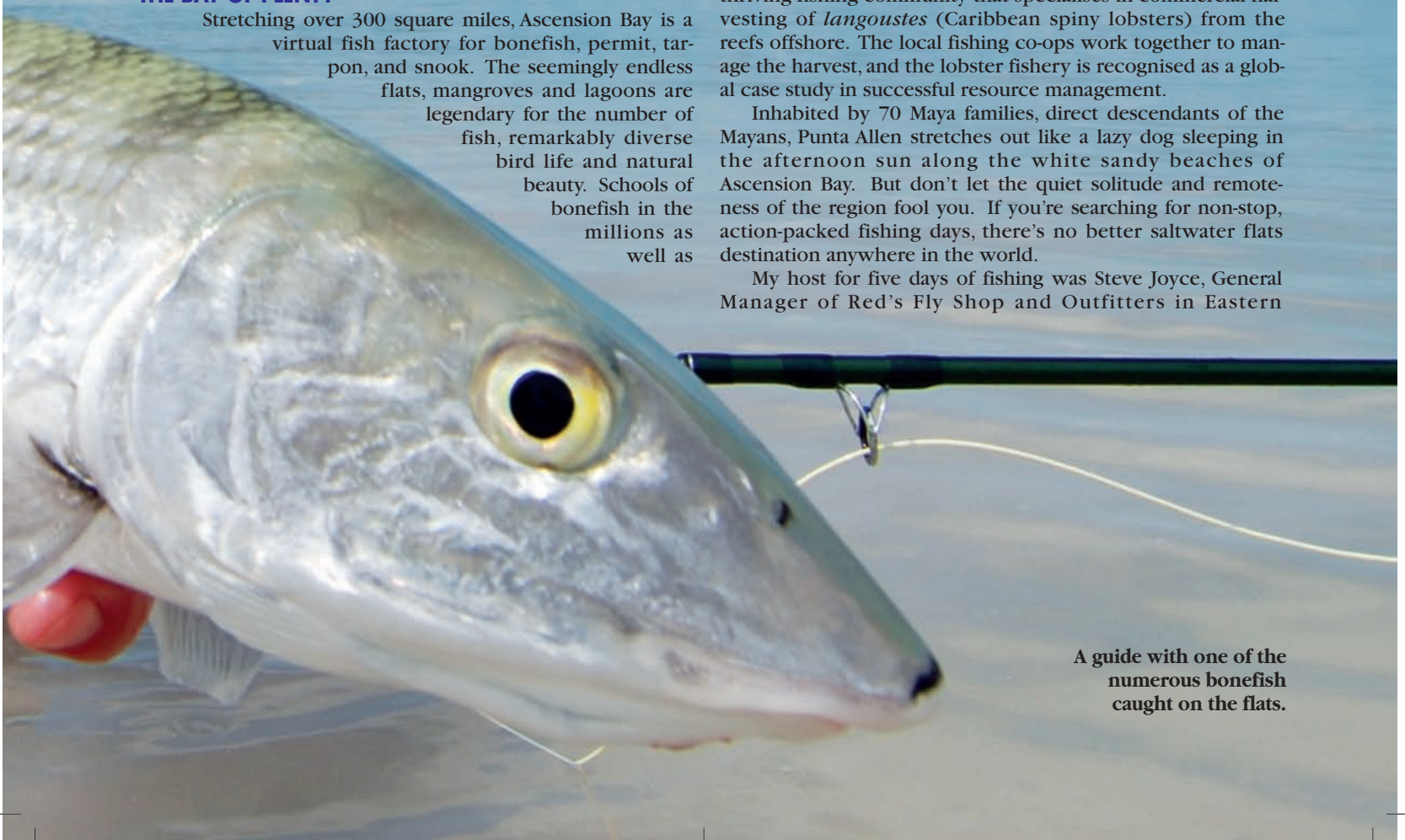
It was the latter part of January. I'd said farewell to the cold, wet climate of Seattle, Washington, and booked a flight to the warmth of the tropics. I was headed to stalk bonefish, permit and tarpon on a long overdue second visit to Ascension Bay on the Caribbean coast of eastern Mexico.

My final destination was a tiny, remote Mayan lobster fishing village at the end of a dusty, teeth-shattering, pot-holed dirt road. The locals call it "La Colonia", named after a former state Governor, Colonia de Pescadores Javier Rojo. Gringos know it by another moniker — Punta Allen. This small pueblo boasts a thriving fishing community that specialises in commercial harvesting of *langoustes* (Caribbean spiny lobsters) from the reefs offshore. The local fishing co-ops work together to manage the harvest, and the lobster fishery is recognised as a global case study in successful resource management.

Inhabited by 70 Maya families, direct descendants of the Mayans, Punta Allen stretches out like a lazy dog sleeping in the afternoon sun along the white sandy beaches of Ascension Bay. But don't let the quiet solitude and remoteness of the region fool you. If you're searching for non-stop, action-packed fishing days, there's no better saltwater flats destination anywhere in the world.

My host for five days of fishing was Steve Joyce, General Manager of Red's Fly Shop and Outfitters in Eastern

A guide with one of the numerous bonefish caught on the flats.





Ascension Bay, in Mexico, boasts “incredible bird watching and fishing” for a multitude of species including permit.

Washington State. Red’s has built an exceptional reputation in the flyfishing travel industry for trust and experience. During the winter months of January through March, Red’s schedules weekly trips, bringing eight to ten anglers at a time to Casa Viejo Chac, an all-inclusive lodge in Punta Allen.

Manuel Chac, a direct Mayan descendant, has owned Casa Viejo for eight years. He has earned a well-deserved reputation as operating one of the best-managed and most affordable lodges in the Caribbean. Five-day fishing packages are priced at \$2 150. Six days costs \$2 450. Included are all meals, guiding and non-alcoholic beverages. The lodge also features broadband wireless internet and excellent personalised service — all just a few steps away from the beachfront.

### THE GAME PLAN

The fishing days start early at Casa Viejo Chac. Wake up at 6:30am, eat breakfast at 7am, meet your guides, then take a short walk to the boats that are moored in a protective cay. The Mexican *pangas* measure about 22 feet in length — they’re longer and narrower than the flats boats of the Florida Keys and Bahamas. Equipped with a polling platform atop the stern and a spacious casting deck in the bow, the boats are incredibly seaworthy and comfortable. That’s a good thing too, because it’s often a 45 minute ride to prime fishing spots over sometimes choppy open water.

Most anglers choose to target bonefish on their first day of fishing in Ascension Bay. It’s a good plan if you are new to saltwater flats fishing because there are so many bonefish and, weather permitting, you will get multiple casts to big schools. Of course, catching bones is also the perfect tune-up for rod-tip-raising trout and steel headers.

Catching bones is a riot, but it can get boring, so always tell your guides what species you want to fish for before you head out.

On my first day I wanted to walk the flats looking for bonefish. It had been three years since I last caught a bonefish and I needed to get the kinks out of my casting and get back in touch with the subtleties of flats fishing. One of the distinct advantages of fishing with Casa Viejo Chac is having two guides per boat. The one-to-one ratio is non-existent at other saltwater destinations, unless you pay extra. Whether you’re walking the flats searching for schools of bonefish or working from the boat as a team to spot cruising permit, tarpon and snook, having two guides is absolutely invaluable. They see fish that we could never see.

“Strip-strike, strip-strike, strip-strike,” I murmured to myself like a yogi chanting *Om*. Two simple words so easy to say, yet so hard to do for a devout trout fisherman. Probably the hardest thing to remember in saltwater fishing is to keep the rod tip low or in the water and strip the line back hard when setting the hook. In the salt you should not raise the rod tip to set the hook.

However, it seems regular trout and steelhead fishermen are programmed to raise the rod tip to set instead of strip-striking. You quickly get it — or you don’t — as I can attest to during midweek when I spooked ten tarpon and missed every one!

### WHO CARES WHAT DAY IT IS

Walking ankle-deep in 21°C water along a starkly white, hard sandy bottom flat, surrounded by thousands of miles of open ocean, time stopped. I wondered to myself, “Is it Monday or Tuesday?” The fact that I didn’t care was exhilarating. There’s not another human anywhere in sight, except for my Mayan guide, Alexandro who walked silently beside me, holding my 8-wt rod in case we chanced upon a permit or two.

Ascension Bay flats are almost exclusively hard, white sand. Rather than go barefoot, I wore my flats boots. You probably could forgo the boots, but cutting your foot on coral could ruin the rest of your trip. Better be safe than sorry.

As the sun slid from behind a passing cloud, illuminating the flat before us, Alexandro stopped, pointed ahead and whispered, “Bonefish one o’clock, 40 feet. Do you see them?”

“Where”, I asked, straining to see what he saw. “Cast, cast!” he urged. I made one double haul and I saw the school of bonefish coming right at us. I stopped the rod at 10 o’clock and my fly-line floated to the surface thirty feet ahead of me.

“Wait. Wait. Okay strip, slow, slow, set!” My fly-line came tight and the bonefish raced across the flats faster than any fish I have ever hooked. How fast is fast? Bonefish can move at up to 64km/hour. Sometimes they’re called “Phantom of the Flats” — it’s a name that’s well deserved.

Over the next three hours, when the clouds parted and the sun showed the way, the action was best described as fast and furious. I would sight cast to schools of bonefish on the move or tailing bonefish, heads buried in the sand, tails sticking straight up, foraging for tiny crabs. I lost count at 20. Lunch was a welcome break.

In the afternoon, a front moved in from the north and brought with it a heavy band of clouds. Without the sun, it’s

tough to see fish either on the flats or in deeper water. When skies clear, the sun illuminates the flats and you can see dark shapes of fish moving over the white bottom.

Bonefish often “push” water when they move around the flats, with their tails up and snouts in the sand, feeding. Permit usually swim in small schools, constantly moving and feeding together for security from sharks and other predators.

Unfortunately, from January through to April the weather can be unpredictable. One day you’ll have bright sun, the next three, clouds, wind and partly sunny. I figure if you get four good days out of five you are doing well. May and June offer more sunny days, with light tropical breezes as the season winds down, but it’s hotter and there are more bugs to contend with, although there’s less fishing pressure.

### EACH DAY A NEW ADVENTURE

Each day I fished with different guides and a different angler. One of the most memorable outings was an “African Queen” type journey through very narrow channels overgrown with tangled mangrove roots. Mike Watt, an orthopedic surgeon from Seattle, joined me as we were specifically targeting tarpon in the 15- to 50 lb range that inhabit remote, backwater lagoons. Passing through endless channels, we kept wondering aloud how in the world anyone would find us if the engine failed!

A rolling tarpon at one o’clock quickly changed the subject. After several missed strikes when I raised the rod tip instead of strip-striking, Mike took the bridge and quickly hooked into a tail-slapping, head-shaking, high-jumping 20 lb tarpon! After I snapped the trophy photo, he said casually, “That’s the way it’s done.”

Over the course of my week at Casa Viejo Chac, our group of anglers caught five permit, scored one grand slam, released more bonefish than anyone wanted to count and even jumped and landed several tarpon. We fished multiple areas of Ascension Bay — from the east, to the north and to the far south — and rarely saw another boat.

There are other fishing and eco tour lodges at the north and south ends of the bay, but the landscape is so vast that visiting anglers seldom cross paths.

### FISH AND TACKLE: BONEFISH, AKA “BONI-MARONI”

This is the fish that’s caught in the greatest numbers, and it’s probably what you will spend most of your time pursuing. They average 3 lb in size and they run like crazy. Bonefish eat shrimps, small crabs and other crustaceans.

They travel in very shallow water and the juveniles (12-18 inches) will run in schools, while the larger fish (3-7 lb) will usually travel in pairs or groups of three.

To target them you’ll need 7/8-wt rods, 2X tippet and small flies — #6s and #8s — such as Crazy Charlies, Blind Charlies, McVay Gotcha, Raghead Crab and Nasty Gilbert.

### PERMIT AKA “PALOMETA!”

This is the most coveted gamefish on earth — or so says anybody who has ever stalked the flats searching for them. Anglers make many trips without landing a permit — they’re spooky, fast, and selective. They eat primarily crabs, so you should have at least a dozen various crab patterns with you.

Long, delicate casts, longer strips, and quiet “tip toe” feet are required. The guides in Mexico like to say “Bonefish are fun, but permit are our drugs!”

Try to time your cast for when they are tailing. You’ll need 8/9-wt rods, 16 lb shock leaders and large arbor reels with 130 feet of backing. Good flies to try include Bauer’s Fur Crab #6, Turneffe Crab (Olive) #6, Raghead Crab #6 and #8, Del’s Permit Crab #4 and Bauer’s Mantis Shrimp #4.

### BARRACUDA AKA “BARRACCA!”

This is the predator fish of the flats and perhaps the most underrated of all flats gamefish. Average ‘cudas are two to three feet long, and big ones are about five feet long! They attack poppers, needlefish, gurglers and other large baitfish. Sometimes it takes several casts with super fast stripping to entice them, but once they attack, *bang on!* They run, jump and slash like you wouldn’t believe.

Ten-weight rods, wire leaders and big flies like needlefish are the trick. Always have the “on deck” angler ready with a ‘cuda rod close at hand because they seem to pop up regularly.

### TARPON AKA “SABALO!” OR THE SILVER KINGS

The tarpon in Ascension Bay are found most abundantly in the mangroves and will be juveniles weighing 10- to 40 lb. Not bad, eh? In the more open water there are occasions when fish up to 100 lb can be caught. They are famous for jumping like crazy and, of course, the routine is you should “bow” your rod to the fish as they jump.

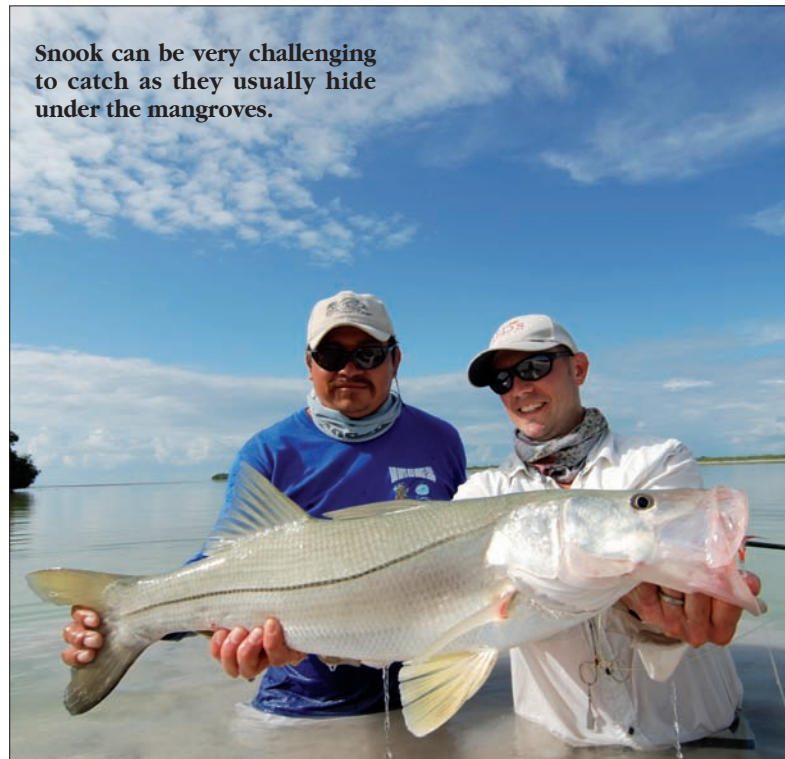
Tarpon eat baitfish primarily, but will eat crustaceans at times. An 8- to 10-wt rod with a 60 lb shock tippet to protect against their sharp mouths is required.

Mayan tarpon flies should be tied on 1/0 & 2/0 size hooks. Patterns include Paradise Sunset in orange, yellow and grizzly, Paradise Purple in purple and black, Prince of Tides, Paradise Cockroach, Grim Reaper, Red & white Tarpon and Lefty’s Deceivers in various contrasting colours.





Bonefish are the most prolific fish at Ascension Bay.



Snook can be very challenging to catch as they usually hide under the mangroves.

### SNOOK AKA "ROBALO!"

Creatures of the mangroves, snook tend to hide under the mangroves, only wandering out one fin at a time. It is a fun casting game trying to get your fly up under the mangroves in just the right position. Most snook weigh about 5-10 lb, but the world record is 53 lb, and you will see photos at the lodge of snook over 30 lb!

The right setup for snook is an 8/10-wt rod with a 60 lb shock tippet. Snook eat baitfish, and the primary flies used are unweighted Deceivers and other flies that you might use to target tarpon.

### JACK CREVALLE AKA "JACKS — CAST QUICK!"

Jacks roam the flats, wandering in from the shoal once in a while. They are fast cruisers and very aggressive feeders. They take most flies willingly, and when the conditions are windy and the water visibility is poor, some guides will take you to the shoal where you can blind cast for jacks with Clouser Minnows and/or poppers.

Jacks fight well and average 5-10 lb, but fish in the 20 lb+ range are also possible. Use the same set up as for bonefish or tarpon.

### OTHER ATTRACTIONS

The region between Cancun and the entrance to the Sian Ka'an Reserve on the road to Punta Allen is known as the Mayan Riviera. It offers numerous all-inclusive resorts, boutique hotels, restaurants and a wide choice of activities. Archeological tours of the Mayan ruins at Tulum, Chichen Itza and Palenque are worth adding to the fishing adventure.

Eco tours can be arranged in Punta Allen and there is snorkelling available at the nearby Palancar Reef. This reef, the second largest barrier reef in the world, stretches for 70 miles in Ascension Bay.

Thankfully, however, there is little else in Punta Allen terms of organised activities. The hordes of Cancun tourists are completely unaware that just three hours south of the loud cacophony of nightly partying sit the remote and pristine beaches of Ascension Bay. No worries — it's not on their radar and never will be.

### GETTING THERE

Most travellers fly into the modern and secure Cancun international airport and then journey three hours south by pri-

vate van shuttle. It's worth noting that Mexico's much-publicised drug wars, centered in the border towns of northern Mexico, are far removed from the Yucatan Peninsula and specifically Ascension Bay.

On the road to Punta Allen, the tar ends at the southern end of the city of Tulum, the site of an ancient Mayan walled city that was used as a trading centre and fortification. You can't sugarcoat anything about the "road" from there to the bamboo fences that signal the entrance to Punta Allen, 40km to the south. Narrow, deep-rutted and unpaved, it's the closest most of us will ever come to riding an angry bull. When it rains, potholes and ruts fill up with goeey mud. When it's dry, clouds of dust choke the air.

If Herencia Punta Allen, a non-profit foundation, has its way, the only road that links Punta Allen to the outside world will remain rutted and unpaved. They contend that their village is a remote paradise, untouched by the outside world, and, as such, should be hard to get to. However, pressure has been building from the Mexican government to improve the road, paving the way for tourist development. During my stay I sensed unease in the village that in the not too distant future their uninterrupted way of life could be altered.

Ascension Bay is a very special place, offering anglers some of the best saltwater flats flyfishing for bonefish, permit, tarpon and snook on the planet. Descending into this ancestral Mayan world is a trip of a lifetime and a unique opportunity to discover the land where the sky is born.

#### • BOOKING A TRIP

For further information contact Steve Joyce, General Manager at Red's Fly Shop via their website <[www.redsflyshop.com](http://www.redsflyshop.com)>.

#### ACCOMMODATION OPTIONS

- Casa Viejo Chac <[www.mexicofishingadventures.com](http://www.mexicofishingadventures.com)>
- Palometa Club <[www.palometaclub.com](http://www.palometaclub.com)>
- Ascension Bay Bonefish Club <[www.ascensionbay.com](http://www.ascensionbay.com)>
- Club Grand Slam <[www.clubgrandslam.com](http://www.clubgrandslam.com)>
- Pesca Maya <[www.pescamaya.com](http://www.pescamaya.com)>
- Casa Blanca <[www.casablancafishing.com](http://www.casablancafishing.com)>

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