

Mike Mercer's Trip to Thatch Caye Resort/Blue Horizon Guides, Belize



Late in the summer of 2015 we were visited by a gentleman representing an operation called Thatch Caye Resort in Belize. Most interesting to us was that they had locked up the services of legendary permit guide Lincoln Westby and his crew of guides to fish any and all anglers visiting their place. After some back and forth it was determined that we should check the place out, and I was the only one free to make the trip. I'd fished with Lincoln before, and knew I was in for a treat...

So on the 22nd of September I left Sacramento, California, at midnight (because the flights were made almost literally at the last minute there were no better itineraries available), flying clear across the country to Atlanta and eating breakfast there, then doubling back all the way to Belize City. Normally, West Coast clients will want to fly to Houston, and then on to Belize City, which makes for a much shorter trip. The flights were uneventful, and at 10 am on the 23rd I walked into the Belize City PSW Goldson Airport, where I was met immediately by the smiling faces of Brian O'Keefe – the photographer who would spend the week with me – and a gal who works for Lil's Adventure Travel Service in the airport, the agent who made the Maya Air flight arrangements between Belize City and Dangriga. She already had our Maya Air travel documents in order, helped us to check our luggage, and walked us to the gate where we'd be

catching our flight ...she was very helpful and deserved her tip. After thirty minutes of catching up with my friend Brian, our Cessna Caravan pulled up to the gate, we boarded, and took the 20-minute flight to the smallish town of Dangriga. At the modest, essentially one-room airport we were met by the lodge's mainland transfer driver, Darrington – Big D, a character – as well as resort representative Pat Timmins, who helped load all our gear into the van. From here we drove through town, then out to a dock on a small river – on the way seeing a big alligator cross the road in front of us – where the covered transfer boat was waiting. There were already eight to ten locals (from the islands crew of over thirty) on board; loading in all our gear beside the supplies, we sat down and enjoyed the 20-minute drive out to the Island.



Arriving, the first impression was favorable, with an extensive and new dock and boardwalk in place to accept boats. The island was beautifully manicured with little undergrowth, allowing one to see through the largely cypress tree-studded land mass to water on the far side, about 100 yards away. The island was probably over a quarter mile in length, in total. Coming off the boat, there was a beautiful raised boardwalk that wound its way out over the water to the large Starfish Bar, where guests could sit at the circular bar and watch snappers and other fish swim

around beneath their feet through an open hole...pretty cool. The entire island is surrounded by a seawall made of large posts driven into the sand just off the land's edge, and they were actively working on building more of it while we were there. They have a crew of seventeen who did nothing but take care of the grounds, all day, every day, raking the white sand (both on the wide walking trails and everywhere else), disposing of the relentless onslaught of sargassum grass, pruning, working on the decks surrounding all the cabanas, and who knows what else. Apparently when they took it over in February it was an overgrown mess, with howler monkeys and all kinds of bizarre exotic animals brought out by the previous owner/managers, and really showing years' worth of wear and tear. The amount of upgrades they had accomplished in six months was impressive, and their vision to finish it off even nicer was also encouraging.

Lincoln was waiting for us on the dock on arrival, and after introductions and catching up he suggested we drop our bags and run out for an afternoon of fishing. We grabbed the needed gear from our bags, wolfed down a quick lunch, and hit the flats under a brooding sky with strong winds blowing. We took our rain jackets, figuring we'd need them (and we did, for a short period). As it turns out, we had a tough weather week overall, with only one sunny, calm day...the rest of the time it was thunderheads, threatening skies, waterspouts, strong winds and occasional rain. Despite the weather it was a great introduction to the area, with Lincoln putting us (Pat Timmins, Brian O'Keefe and myself) onto a half dozen or more flats that afternoon, all with tailing permit. I managed to make every rookie permit mistake possible that afternoon, but it wasn't all bad as it allowed me to re-learn the important facets of the game and get into the game mentally for the remainder of the week. Fishless but excited for the week ahead, we headed back to the dock sharing celebratory beers. The boat Lincoln had was the first of three of a prototype they had made just for he and his guides, and it was perfect. A panga, it was comfortable cutting through rough water that would have been a nightmare in a flats boat, yet it poled effortlessly through inches of water. As well, they had designed it with a huge casting deck, clean of any line-grabbing projections, and with a raised gunnel that kept stripped-out line from being blown off the deck. Console-driven, they had plenty of power – a big outboard – and comfortable padded bench seats. All in all, I can't imagine a much better boat for that area.



That night we had dinner with some of the other non-fishing guests staying at the resort – a wide diversity of people from all walks of life. They had been there a few days and were very happy with their trip, having spent time touring around the various islands, snorkeling, diving (on the reef), paddle-boarding, sailing little Hobies, fishing with spinning gear and hand-lines, and even trying a little bit of fly fishing. There are some mainland tourist options, as well, though these people had all opted to stay out in the islands, away from people. The food was consistently good, and intermittently great (depending on the chef, I believe), a combination of the usual suspects plus some really interesting local dishes I’ve never experienced before. The resort calls themselves “cashless”, meaning everything including tips is included in the package rate, so you can have all the drinks and sodas you would like, all the time. The guide service – Blue Horizon – is a separate entity from the resort, though, so while it is a part of guests package rate, you should still tip the fishing guides. As well, if you want to purchase any of the trinkets at the gift shop you’ll need cash, and will need about \$100 US if you decide to go out and fish at Glovers Atoll (for an access fee to the scientific community living out there).

Each fishing day was similar to the previous in that we always started early – 5 am in the boat, with both breakfasts and lunches in the well-stocked coolers – in order to catch the best tides and fishing/visibility conditions, and normally returned around 4 pm...these guides are not clock watchers. We always, even with the lousy weather, had plenty of shots at tailing permit each day. Brian and Pat and myself split fishing time, and for about half the day – when the tides

were right – we had consistent shots at permit, rarely ever going for more than 30 minutes between shots. And because there are so many small pancake flats so close to each other, with easily seventy percent of them showing fish daily, I have to believe there is a strong argument for this being the finest fly fishing permit destination on the planet. There were always a few hours of slack tide in the late morning to early afternoon, and we would normally use this time to mix things up. One day we fished for some of the small populations of bonefish located scattered here and there, a short run from the lodge, nice bones averaging 3-4 pounds, with a few up to 6 pounds.



Another day we jumped from one permit flat to another all the way south to Ranguana Caye, a tiny little atoll a little south of Placencia. There is a wonderfully “Belizean Rustic” little lodge on the heavily vegetated tropical isle, which the operators of Thatch Caye are modestly improving so that guests can go and spend a comfortable night or two during their stay, if they want, for an additional fee. It’s kind of a tiny little Gilligan’s Island that you can walk/wade the perimeter of in about ten minutes, and is surrounded by alternately white sand and coral and grass flats that offer a small but dependable bonefish population. This is all wading, and there were numerous fish in the 4-6 pound category mixed in with the 2 and 3 pounders, which very much surprised me – I’m not used to seeing that size of bonefish in Belize. There were also triggerfish and other species tailing here on the rocky flats, and Lincoln says there is great reef fishing nearby, as well as some tarpon spots. Two anglers would use up the bonefishing here in just a few hours, so having other options close by is a big plus. There were just two people staying on the island

to service the occasional passing sailboat or mainland guest - a 30-ish woman and 20-ish young man, both natives of Placencia. They served meals for those who wanted them, and had a fully-stocked, outside-beneath-the-palm-trees bar of beers and sodas. I really liked the place, and would jump at the chance to spend a night or two there, even with the limited bonefishing; it's a bit of a step back in time to another era, and you're a long ways from anywhere. Not a place for the frantically hard-core angler, but perfect for a relaxed one.

Yet another day we went out to the main barrier reef during slack tide and caught a bunch of fascinating and beautifully-colored reef species and a few nice barracuda around the endless maze of coral heads. The snorkeling was also world-class, and experienced divers at the lodge assured us the reef there is among the most pristine left in the world. On the way back to the permit grounds we stopped for an hour or so at Thatch Caye's other nearby private island resort – Royal Belize – to tour the grounds and see what it is like. It's even smaller than Thatch Caye, a beautifully-kept property with three single-story, upscale villas that can accommodate up to 10 guests. It is an impressive, luxurious little hideaway, and the Blue Horizon guides also service anglers for this program, as well as Thatch Caye.



Nearing the end of the week Lincoln had a wonderful treat for us. Departing the lodge on a windless pale dawn, we motored for almost an hour on glassy seas, passing through thirty minutes of blue water to Glovers Atoll, a remote and special place. A true atoll, it has its own surrounding coral reef complete with all the reef species, bonefish, and good numbers of permit,

including some of the largest we saw on the trip (I assume because we were so close to blue water). On arriving to the atoll we stopped at a science station to pay a national park fee before utilizing the local area - apparently the lion's share of it goes to scientific reef research on Glovers. That island was full of large iguanas and smaller lizards, and from their dock we watched as enormous nurse sharks prowled the flats, shadowed by opportunistic bonefish. There are a few different resorts on the handful of other small islands that make up the atoll – all rustic and old-timey looking - though none were operating while we were there...and most seemed set up primarily for diving, snorkeling and trolling in blue water. On our way back through the deep, we tried to catch some big tuna that were busting bait, but they were simply moving too fast for us, so no luck. I was almost glad, to be honest, as I'm not sure I really wanted to hook a 30-pound tuna in mile-deep water, on a fly rod! The weather has to be reasonably nice for the fishing pangas to make it out to Glovers, but I highly recommend it where possible...it is a bit like stepping back into a past era. As we made our way back to Thatch Caye that afternoon we anchored up in a reef cut and hooked a couple of 50-70 pound tarpon on sinking lines – a blast for a couple of hours between prime permit tides. For those interested in targeting tarpon near Thatch Caye, the guides utilize either the various reef cuts; Tarpon Caye; or a few other cayes that can harbor both resident and migratory tarpon. There tend to always be large tarpon in the reef cuts during certain tides, while the other destinations are more dependent on the presence of seasonal bait.



My impression of Blue Horizon/Thatch Caye Resort was wonderful. Lincoln and his guides are among the best permit guides in Belize, guides who have the luxury of fishing an amazing concentration of permit-filled flats – all with a superb resort located right in the middle of them. For serious anglers wanting the most shots possible at tailing permit, this is probably as good as they're going to find. The property at the resort was very well-kept, with the white sand grounds raked clean every morning before guests get up. A nice rock-and-conch-lined trail runs the length of the island, connecting the main palapa with guest quarters, the fishing dock area, a little groomed sand beach, several other docks out over the water with shade palapas and hammocks, and to an undeveloped end of the island. The accommodations are quite nice and comfortable, clean and spacious, each with tiled floors, great beds, roomy bathrooms with hot and cold running water, outdoor areas to sit and enjoy a drink while looking out over the water or enjoying the night sky, and brand new air conditioning units that work quite well. Two people share a cabana, either over-the-water cabanas or over-land versions. Non-anglers can read a book in the air-conditioned rooms or in the main palapa, or in the many hammocks in the shade of scattered small thatched palapas; take one of several island-based tours; go snorkeling around the island or out on the reef, using the snorkeling gear provided by the lodge as part of their package; go scuba diving; try out the lodge's paddleboards or small Hobies; or take one of the mainland tours the lodge can arrange. Except for the snorkeling and paddle boarding to be done in DIY fashion around the island, the other activities are mostly ala carte charges that can be chosen and paid for with a credit card or cash on the island. Several of the guests at the resort when I was there also tried fishing – both with conventional gear and handlines – and they had a blast.

For fly fishermen the Blue Horizon guides provide flies, but I would suggest all clients bring a small handful of patterns, in case they're out down there. We used tan or olive Will Bauer's Flats Crabs 90% of the time – catching all our permit on them – only occasionally trying shrimp patterns (mostly when we were getting lots of shots on a fish that just wouldn't eat the crab). I've caught most of my permit in the past on shrimp patterns, but when Lincoln suggested I use my old friend Will's crab pattern the first morning out, I acquiesced to his knowledge, and soon caught my first fish... in of all places, the flat that bears Will's name. Pretty cool.

Mike Mercer