

Tarpon Caye Lodge Travel Journal – June 2017

Friday, June 16, 2017

We left our house in Redding to drive to the Sacramento Airport at 1:30 pm. We hit some heavy traffic the last few miles to the airport, finally pulling in about 4:00, still with plenty of time for our 5:30 departure. We got checked in, cleared security, and didn't have long to wait before the flight boarded. We sat on the tarmac for an extra hour waiting for some reason, grateful to have a long layover in Los Angeles. Finally, the plane took off, and an hour later we were touching down in LA.

LAX was packed with people, but after a 30-minute wait we were able to get a table at a restaurant and enjoyed a nice meal of beef sliders and pizza. We still had a long time to wait so didn't rush it at all, and by 9:00 Mitchell had fallen asleep at the table.

We headed to our gate and catnapped while we waited for the 11:55 pm departure, which finally came. We boarded the plane, then sat and waited for an extra hour and a half while the pilot got his seatbelt fixed, finally taking off at almost 2:00 am. Fortunately, Mitchell slept the whole time, and soon after takeoff I, too, drifted off to sleep.

Saturday, June 17, 2017

It's never comfortable sleeping on a plane, but all things considered I got a few hours of decent sleep, waking up about 5:30 am. An hour later we were descending over the Belize River and the Belize River Lodge before touching down at Philip Goldstein International Airport in Belize City.

By the time we taxied we were getting off the airplane right at 7:00 am, not leaving much time before our scheduled 9:00 am departure on Tropic Air to Placencia. We were the only plane to have landed this morning, so the line wasn't too long at Immigration and Customs. Too, we've learned that lines 1-2 at the far left usually are the fastest, so we hurried there and even though we were literally the last people off the plane, we were some of the first through Immigration.

We collected our bags, waltzed through Customs, and a helpful porter grabbed our bags (for the minimum \$2 fee) and helped us to the Tropic Air Counter. He smoothed us right to the check in, and within minutes we were checked in. Another Tropic Air porter grabbed all our bags, including our rod cases which he explained were too big to carry on since there are no overhead compartments. Tickets in hand, we quickly made it through security, and by 7:30 we were back in the terminal and ordering breakfast and coffee at the small café kiosk.

We waited for the Tropic Air flight to board, finally getting called at 9:07, not too late for the 9:00 am departure. There were only 4 other people, so there was a lot of room on the 14 passenger Cessna Grand Caravan. The flight from Belize City to Placencia lasted for exactly 30 minutes, heading south and paralleling the coastline with the green jungle mountains to the

west leading up to Guatemala and the Caribbean expanding out to the east as far as the eye could see. There was a fair amount of big cumulous clouds, but surprisingly it was still a very smooth ride.

We touched down in Placencia, taxied to the small one-room airport terminal, and walked out to the “baggage claim,” a small outside area adjacent to the terminal where a handful of taxi drivers waited in the shade. One of them asked if we were heading to Tarpon Caye. When we said yes, he introduced himself as “Sam” and helped us load our luggage into his green van.

Sam drove us through Placencia, about a 10-minute drive down a narrow street lined with small homes, medium sized bed and breakfast sort of hotels, and a few larger, fancy homes and resorts as well. Placencia hasn’t changed much since I came through here in 2014. It still has that sleepy feel to it, a touristy place for sure but not overly so and still with its laid back, Belizean charm.

We pulled into the boat dock, the same place I’d first met Julian Cabral 3 years before. There at the dock we were met by Marlon Leslie, along with a couple of the Tarpon Caye staff, Carlos (aka, Carlitos, one of the helpers on the island) and Marley (she helped in the kitchen). They loaded our luggage into a large boat, probably about 24 feet with comfortable seats, shade provided by a Bimini top, a big dry storage space in the bow for luggage, and a quiet, four stroke 225 Yamaha to get her where she needed to go.

We motored slowly through the narrow canals that parallel the backside of Placencia, past some fancy houses for sale, some moderate hotels (compared to the high-end options right on the beach), and some private residences. Frigate birds and pelicans danced above us, and iguanas of all shapes and sizes lined the banks.

Soon we cleared the narrow channel, and Carlos fired up the big, quiet engine to motor out past the point and the beach area, and out into the open water headed northeast towards the Barrier Reef.

It was about a 30-minute boat ride overall. It was a smooth ride, as the weather was relatively calm and there wasn’t much chop to the water. In all directions we could see massive, dark



thunderheads booming, but where we were the sun shone bright and intense. It felt good. You could smell the humidity and the fresh salty air of the sea.

Soon we pulled up to the leeward side of Tarpon Caye, a small island in the middle of the ocean inside the reef. Tarpon Caye is aptly named, as this leeward side is home to millions of tiny glass minnows that both tarpon and pelicans love to eat. The pelicans were there in force as we pulled up, dive-bombing the tiny baitfish from the mangrove-lined shores. We didn't spot any tarpon, but you could see why they're known to be there all the time.

We were greeted at the dock by Chris and Bird, two more of Tarpon Caye's staff. They grabbed our luggage, and we got off the boat and strolled down the short dock to where we met Merari and Doris. Merari was the cook, Doris the housekeeper. They gave us a quick tour of the "lodge" and showed us to our rooms.

Tarpon Caye Lodge consists of a series of rustic cabanas built on stilts facing the windward side of the private island. There are a couple of buildings set back from the shoreline that house the staff, while the main lodge buildings for guests are perched right at the water's edge; or, in several cases, literally out over the water.

First we checked out the main lodge and dining room, called the "Pesky Permit," which is a small pink-colored building featuring the kitchen, dining room, and a wonderful back deck overlooking a beautiful flat where we observed countless snapper, barracuda, bonefish, and even tarpon rolling in the distance.

To the left of the Pesky Permit is the first of the guest cabins: "Permit". To the right is the second, called "Tarpon". Both are similar, small cabanas built on stilts jutting out onto the flat. Just a bit further down the beach is the third building, "Tiburon", which houses two rooms and a central social area. This was our abode for the week. There was a big deck out front, shaded, with rod racks and lines for hanging and drying clothes, plus several chairs and a table. The view was spectacular,





looking right out onto an emerald colored flat where we were certain we'd spot permit and tarpon at some point during our stay. The main door opened onto a central room with a big hardwood table and two chairs, a big open faux hardwood floor with a small couch, two more comfy chairs and a glass coffee table at one end. Two bedrooms extended from either end, both with two queen beds, a small desk with a chair, several shelves, and a PVC rack with coat hangers. Also off the main room were two more doors, each leading to a separate bathroom and shower.



There is no Air Conditioning, so it is pretty hot and sticky. There are two oscillating fans in each room which do provide some good airflow in the rooms, but nothing in the main room which is very hot. Some simple ceiling fans, or more oscillating floor fans, would be good.

Obviously, they're remote, so everything runs of solar power. They have big rain catch basins attached to each house to use for water for the sinks and showers. It's probably okay to drink and brush teeth, but they recommend you use the ample bottled water provided, just in case.



We got settled in, then headed down to the Pesky Permit for lunch. Merari made us some delicious sandwiches with fresh-baked bread, tasty ham and salami. We also enjoyed a couple of Belikins to start the trip off! Bottled water and soda is included, along with rum drinks, while beer is extra, so you keep a tab of beer purchases to settle-up before departure.

After we'd eaten a bit, Mitchell was antsy to go fishing since we were spotting all sorts of snappers and needlefish off the back deck of the Pesky Permit. I ran up and grabbed his little travel spinning rod with a Clouser tied to it, and we tried fishing off the elevated back deck. There were a bunch of snapper all around, and before long we'd

landed several yellow tail snappers, plus another fish we identified as a small Nassau Grouper, so Mitchell was super excited.

We decided to walk around and see some more of the island, so first we walked past our cabana down a narrow trail paralleling the shoreline. As soon as we got away from the well-manicured parts of the island (raked sand, etc), we caught another snapper, and saw more needlefish plus a baby nurse shark before we decided to turn back.

We continued our stroll past our cabana, past the Pesky Permit, and down the trail to the dock where we came in a couple of hours ago. From that dock, looking out into the tarpon lagoon, we could see about a million or more baitfish everywhere. Then we noticed some other fish, a school of small jacks with 3 or 4 little bonefish swimming with them. We cast Mitchell's fly out there and soon he was hooked up to a little jack. He almost hooked a bonefish, too, which followed and tried to eat the fly. It was fun. While we were casting in close to the jacks and bonefish, we spotted a bigger fish moving towards us and soon were face to face with about a 25-pound tarpon slowly cruising the back corner of the lagoon.

Just a few meters away on the other side of the island – the ocean side – was another dock and a fish cleaning station. We checked out that dock, and my Dad spotted a school of bonefish, about 6 or 8 of them, milling about just a few feet away. We cast Mitchell's rod and line out there, and soon he was hooked up with a little baby bonefish. We landed the bonefish, but it flopped out of my hand before we could get a picture with it. Mitchell was super excited, having a great afternoon of fishing with the snappers, grouper, jack, and a bonefish.

While we were fishing out on this dock, Chris showed up with a handful of fresh-picked mangoes. We snacked on the fresh fruit, which was juicy and delicious but also stringy and the fibers got stuck in our teeth as we sucked the juice and bit into the tasty fruit. As we munched on mangoes, we spotted a big tarpon, about 40 pounds, cruise right past us within easy casting distance. This is an exciting place! We are literally immersed in the life of the sea, surrounded by it on all sides. And there are definitely tarpon here! Let's hope we see some permit tomorrow, too.



We were all pretty tired from the long travel day and fun afternoon, so we returned to our rooms to finish rigging our gear for the fishing day tomorrow, followed by a good 2-hour nap

for everyone. We woke up around 5. The beds are really good here, and even though it's warm and sticky, we slept great in the sweltering afternoon heat.

As we emerged from our rest, Merari appeared with a plateful of fish empanadas and some tasty sweet onion sauce. They were so good Mitchell ate almost the entire plate! We soon made our way back to the lodge for dinner. We made ourselves some rum and cokes there, and soon we were sitting at the table surrounded with family style portions of garlic grilled shrimp, creamy mashed potatoes, and lightly grilled cauliflower and carrots. It was delicious. Dessert was soon to follow, with bread pudding and mango ice cream. Yum.

Even though we'd had a good nap, we were still exhausted from the long travel, so after dinner we returned to the cabin where we got organized for the day tomorrow and tucked in for an early bedtime.

Sunday, June 18, 2017

It was still dark out when my alarm went off this morning. We got up, got dressed and ready, put on our sunscreen, and finally realized that I had set the time incorrectly on my clock and we'd woken up at 3:00 am instead of 5:00 am. So we went back to bed and slept for one more hour, and when we woke again – this time at the correct 5:00 am – we were all dressed and ready to go.

The sun was up, low on the horizon, but it was a flat, low gray as a blanket of clouds mixed with drizzly rain had settled in early in the morning. It was calm with almost no wind.

Coffee was ready, and a plate of tasty muffins was set out for us. We slurped coffee and munched on muffins until the guides were ready about 6:00. I went out to talk to Marlon and Ernest. They were a little bummed about the drizzly weather, but thought that the tides would still be okay for a bit of permit fishing early, then chasing tarpon on the slack tide until around 9:00.

We grabbed our gear and went fishing. Kerry, Mitchell and I climbed aboard Marlon's boat; my parents went with Ernest. The light was still low as we pulled out of the dock.

We motored north for about fifteen minutes before pulling up to our first flat of the day. The skies were dark and foreboding and the wind



was starting to pick up. We poled a long ways along a flat called Permit Alley. We did spot one tailing fish, but it was super spooky and although Kerry did get a shot in towards it the fish spooked before we could capitalize.

The tide was dropping fast and we didn't see any more permit up on the flat, so we motored a few minutes away to the leeward side of a mangrove caye and started looking for tarpon. They were everywhere! Fish from 25-60 pounds were rolling all over the place, along with baitballs of tiny glass minnows. We drifted around and cast for a couple of hours trying to get some of these fish to eat, but to no avail. The fish were everywhere, literally rolling all around us, but no matter how many flies we tried, how many different depths or retrieves we experimented with, they just didn't want to eat. Still, it was fun to see so many of them.



Eventually the tide went slack and the rolling subsided as the fish moved out of the lagoon. We motored back to the lodge, about 10 minutes away.

Upon arrival, Merari made up a wonderful, full Belizean breakfast for us, with black refried beans, sopapillas, scrambled eggs, bacon, and fresh sliced mango and papaya. We chowed down, then grabbed Mitchell's little spinning rod and tried to catch some more snapper but with the tide all the way out even the snapper didn't want to eat. So we returned to our room and took a nap.

A little past noon we emerged from our cabana. Merari made us some sandwiches to go, and a bit before 1:00 we were back in the boats with the guides and heading out for the afternoon fishing.

We motored back to the north for about 10 minutes, then started poling some of the pancake flats that pop up everywhere in this part of southern Belize. To the north and west, over mainland Belize, the skies were dark and foreboding, with lightning crashing down and signs of heavy downpour. Out in the cayes, however, the sun shone and the wind had died to nothing, leaving glass calm water all around us.

The rest of the afternoon was spent bouncing from one flat to the next. On almost every flat, we found permit tailing, and had good shots at most of them. Still there was something not quite right about their behavior. Even for permit, they were exceptionally spooky, no doubt related to the changing weather. We would go from perfect calm to big westerly winds and back to calm again. You could literally feel the barometer going up and down. At times we sweated in intense heat, at times reveling in the comfortable temperature.

Kerry in all had numerous shots, with 3 perfect casts into tailing fish, each of which should have eaten. None of those three spooked from the cast, but all three spooked anyway for no good reason at all. One fish did charge the fly but refused it. One fish may have eaten but Kerry didn't get feel it on, and a second later she hooked a snapper in the middle of the 3 tailing permit. The other was a perfect shot and the fish just stuck its nose up at it. Aside from those 3 perfect opportunities, there were countless others where we had tailing fish in front of us and good shots in close. They were just finicky from the weather and didn't want to eat. But it was loads of fun to see so many tailing fish and get so close and have so many shots at them.



Throughout the day we would also see schools of small jacks splashing about on the surface. Whenever they'd get close enough, we'd cast Mitchell's little rod out and try to catch one. We did hook and land a needlefish which was exciting, and hooked one strong little jack that ended up taking Mitchell into some coral and breaking him off.

On one flat, we spotted some triggerfish tailing. We chased them around for a while, and Kerry put countless casts right in front of them. The fish did follow and look at the fly closely a few times, but just didn't want to eat.

As evening set in, the winds died down again and we continued to chase tailing permit into the dwindling light, with a spectacular sunset framed amidst the cumulous storm clouds still building over the mainland. As we pulled off one flat, Marlon spotted a school of tarpon swimming past. We quickly switched rods and gave chase. We saw them roll several times, and at one point a huge school of tarpon swam right under the boat, but we never got a really good cast in front of them.

It was starting to get dark, but we tried one more flat, and had one more shot at a tailing fish. Finally, it was time to head in for the night.

We pulled up to the dock right about dark. Chris came down to help with the rods. We met the two new guests, Dave from Southern California and Sheldon, one of the new owners of the lodge, from Toronto.

We chatted briefly, then returned to our rooms to shower and clean up, and have a cocktail before heading down for dinner. Merira brought up a plate of some of the most delicious chicken wings I've ever sampled, and we mixed a couple of rum drinks in our room while we showered up, then at a bit past 7 we strolled back down to the Pesky Permit for dinner.

We met up again with Dave and Sheldon, sitting on the back deck and telling stories from our day of fishing and their day of travel. Soon dinner was served, another great meal with steamed rice, salad, roasted snapper in a red sauce, and grilled plantains. It was followed with a different version of bread pudding and more mango ice cream. We were planning on meeting the guides at 5:30 in the morning, so it was early to bed for us.

Monday, June 19, 2017

My clock was properly set this time, and it went off at the correct 4:45 am. By 5:30 we were dressed, ready, sun-screened up, and slurping coffee and eating more of Merari's tasty muffins. We were set to go out at 5:30, but at exactly that moment the skies opened up and it started pouring down rain. So we waited and drank more coffee.

By around 6 the rain had settled in to a mere drizzle, and we hopped into the boats to head out for the morning fishing session. The skies were very dark and stormy, and the winds were blowing hard out of the Southwest. These were not the normal, prevailing winds, which come

from the northeast. It made for a choppy, rough boat ride, and we were glad we were only going a few minutes from the lodge (still within sight). The Thatch Caye guides would have had a brutal ride this morning.

We poled along a few flats, but didn't see any fish tailing. We headed into the tarpon lagoon to see if those fish were still there. The winds today, coming in from the opposite direction, made the lagoon rough and though we did spot a few rolling tarpon it was nothing like the day before. We blind cast for about a half hour with the Intermediate line, no luck, and decided to head in for breakfast.

Everyone else fared about the same, rough weather and no real shots at fish. Breakfast was great, however, omelets, plus Johnny Cakes, fresh fruit, bacon, and refried black beans.

After breakfast we had a couple of hours to relax as Marlon wanted to wait and go out again at 1:00. Dave and my parents both went back out about 11 to fish until around 1.

We had a nice afternoon. Kerry took a nap, Mitchell and I walked around the island trying to fish with his rod but the tide was so low, and the water so mucked-up from the wind, that it wasn't any good. We played cards instead.

At 1:00 we headed back down to meet Marlon and go out for the afternoon, at the same time the other two boats were coming back in. They'd had a few shots at rolling tarpon, but the fish just didn't want to eat with the crazy weather.

We motored west towards the mainland, where the skies were apocalyptic dark and you could see sheets of torrential rain pounding the coast. We started poling a flat right at the edge of the weather, clear skies to our right, dark skies to our left. Soon, the weather crept in on us, and just as it started to drizzle Marlon fired up the boat and took off headed to the east, trying to keep ahead of the storm.

We hit a few raindrops, but not bad as the storm mostly pushed to the north. By the time we hit the eastern cayes near Rendezvous Caye, we could just see the Barrier Reef breaking in the distance and the storms were still sitting on the mainland but the sun was shining where we were. We started poling a series of small pancake flats in search of tailing permit. It was still choppy with wind, and the fish just didn't seem to want to play as we got very few shots. Those shots we did get, however, were good ones.

Kerry spotted a fish tailing, and Marlon put the boat into position. She put a perfect cast 40 feet and about 2 feet to the right of the tailing fish. Twitch, twitch, twitch, strip, and she felt the fish hit but wasn't able to connect to it before it spit and turned. Unlike the fish yesterday, however, these fish didn't go far before they started tailing again and she got another shot at them, and another before they finally wandered off.

On the next flat, we got a good shot at a pair of fish tailing right as we pulled up onto the flat. We got two good looks at them before they spooked. A few minutes later, a different pair of fish came up on the flat and started feeding, tails waving high in the air. Marlon waded and walked the boat back against the wind to get into position, and Kerry put a good cast right in front of them. Twitch, twitch, twitch, strip...and she was hooked up. Finally! The fish pulled and started to rip out line. For a moment, the line hung up on a piece of coral and Marlon ran out and loosened it. The fish was still on. Then something just didn't seem right, and the fish got close before pulling out too much line and we discovered that Kerry had, in fact, hooked a barred jack instead of a permit. The jack had been swimming with the permit, and ate the fly before the permit could! Demoralizing.

We continued searching for tails on a few more flats without any good shots, then Marlon motored 10 minutes back to the "home flat", adjacent to the lodge there at Tarpon Caye. We didn't see any fish on this flat either, although we did spot a pair of manatees doing a mating dance in the deeper water just off the edge of the flat.

From Home Flat we motored just a few hundred yards away to try one last flat as the light got low on the horizon. The wind had just changed direction to the prevailing northeast, and had calmed down to manageable levels. The light was getting low on the horizon. Kerry let me have a shot on the bow, and I stripped up line and got ready. About halfway down the flat I spotted some nervous water. Marlon got us into position, and I made a long cast about 70 feet putting the fly just in front of the lead fish. I started a long slow strip and could see the nervous water following the fly. I felt something tapping the end, but thought it was just coral. Still I strip-stripped once, twice, a third time; every time I felt the bump, finally concluding it was coral. The fish turned off and I led them with another cast. Another follow, more bumps that felt like coral. Then they were gone. I brought the fly in and found that at least one of the "bumps" had indeed been a fish, as the fly was crushed flat.

We tried one more flat to no avail, then motored 2 minutes back into the lodge.



My parents had a similar afternoon, not a lot of shots but a few good ones. Still no permit landed. Dave the new guy did land a tarpon, although we learned he's fishing with conventional gear and live bait.

We rushed back to our room to shower up while Merari brought an appetizer of un-Belizeable conch fritters. Man were they good, so tender you didn't even need to chew them.

We met up back at the Pesky Permit Clubhouse a bit after 7:00 for dinner, a tasty fare of fresh grilled lobster, baked potatoes, and grilled vegetables. Delicious! Dessert was lemon merengue pie.

After dinner Mitchell was so tired he was about falling asleep at the table, so we said goodnight and returned to our rooms. Along the way we found a few hermit crabs on a midnight stroll, which we harassed into a hermit crab race. Then it was surely bed time for all.

Tuesday, June 20, 2017

We woke up early again today, and were ready to go by 5:30 am. The wind had shifted again and was blowing out of the west, not what we wanted to see. On top of that the skies were dark and cloudy. By the time we started fishing it was drizzling rain. The rain didn't let up for most of the day.

In the drizzly, cool, windy morning we motored out to the east and started searching the pancake flats for tailing permit. It was so windy and choppy that it was hard to stand in the bow, even on the shallow flats, so Kerry let me take the shots. Marlon was getting bounced around, too, so instead of poling he got out and walked the boat down the flats.

The first few flats had a bunch of rays on them, but no permit. Finally, we started seeing some tailing fish. I had about 4 good shots on fish, three of which looked or followed the fly but none went so far as to eat.

By late morning the tide was dropping fast and we stopped seeing permit up on the flats. Marlon motored to the north about 20 minutes to South Water Caye, a small island adjacent to the reef. There were three small resorts on the island, although with the cool, rainy weather they were pretty quiet as everyone seemed to be hiding inside their rooms.

Between the island and the reef was a small, shallow turtle grass flat. Marlon anchored the boat at the opening to the flat and we got out and started wading down it in search of tailing bonefish. We found a lot of tailing bonefish, hardly going more than 5 minutes without finding either a school or large single with its back out of the water. These were good sized fish, too, looking to be 3-5 pounds on average. But they really didn't want to eat. We chased them all over the flat, cast after cast right on the money and they'd just swim around the fly. We went to a 16-foot leader, which worked in not spooking the fish...but they still didn't want to eat so

we just got more shots and more refusals. We tried a bunch of different flies, nothing seemed to matter.

Fed up with these crazy fish, we went looking for a big school that Marlon says hangs around the front side of the island. Lincoln Westby was there fishing the school, so we went outside the reef and tried casting Mitchell's little spinning rod with flies on it for some snapper or jacks. We did land one small bar jack, but even out there on the reef at the slack tide the fish really didn't want to eat. You know something's wrong with the weather when even snapper don't want to bite!

We went back to try the bonefish flat again with the incoming tide. The fish were still there, tailing away, but we failed in getting any of them to eat. Finally we were ready to concede that the fish won. Just outside the mouth of the flat though, I spotted a bunch of snapper and we cast Mitchell's rod out and boom, he hooked up to a decent little dogtooth snapper. It was big enough to eat, so we brought it into the boat to take back to the lodge for the cooks to fry up for Mitchell for dinner.

The weather there at the reef was finally starting to improve. The wind calmed down and the rain stopped. But for us it was time to head back to the lodge. The first 30 minutes of the boat ride was nice and smooth, then we ran into a wall of weather, the seas got choppy, it started to rain again, and the wind picked up. It was like that all the way back to the lodge.

It was 3 o'clock, and since we'd fished straight from 5:30 on it was a full day of fishing. Marlon had planned to go back out in the afternoon, but with the weather we all decided to call it a day.

Kerry relaxed at the Pesky Permit, while Mitchell and I grabbed one of the lodge's kayak's and went for a tour of Tarpon Caye. It was a blast puttering around the outside of the island, taking about an hour (if that) to slowly paddle all the way around. The windward side (which today was leeward with the weird westerly winds) was full of beautiful coral and would make for some amazing snorkeling. The western side of the island, today beseeched by winds, was milked up and choppy so there wasn't much to see – except for pelicans dive-bombing bait and the occasional rolling tarpon.



We turned the final corner around the cabins at the lodge, and there was Kerry shin-deep in the water with her rod in her hand. Apparently she'd spotted a pair of tailing permit, ran up and grabbed her gear, then waded out to try and get them. She wasn't successful (such is permit fishing), but how cool is it that she literally had one of the best shots of the day while sitting on the back deck of the lodge dining room?

Mitchell and I fished for snappers from the kayak for a bit, then pulled into the shore and helped Chris and Carlos put everything away. We then went up and showered before heading down to the lodge again to chat with Sheldon and Dave.

It was past dark when my parents finally made it back in. They'd had a tough day overall with a few shots at permit, but like us plagued by the tough weather. In the evening, however, Ernest showed them the tarpon lagoon, and at dusk literally hundreds of pelicans descend on the lagoon dive-bombing baitfish. They said it was quite the spectacle. Ordinarily there are tarpon rolling and feeding right in the midst of the pelicans...but like everything else in the ocean today the fish were just off.

They cleaned up quickly and joined us for dinner, which was a delicious conch chowder, plus rice and grilled plantains. As a bonus, they fried up Mitchell's snapper, which he ate most of and shared the rest. Everything was delicious.

After dinner, we returned to our rooms to crash for the night.



Wednesday, June 21, 2017

We met Marlon at 6:00 this morning, a bit later since he had to run into town the night before and wasn't sure how the weather would be for the crossing back over to the lodge in the morning. It turned out it was dead calm, as calm as I've ever seen it here in Belize. The water was like glass as far as you could see. There was a hazy gray sky overhead with a

high ceiling, and the flat light combined with the dead calm made for an eerie feel.

Before we left Tarpon Caye, Mitchell wanted to fish and Marlon spotted some mackerel smacking baitfish in the lagoon. He stood up on the bow and made his casts, and soon was hooked up to a powerful little cero mackerel. It put up a good fight on his little spinning rod,



and soon it was in the boat. Mitchell is top rod so far on this trip, with 8 different species of fish landed already!

We motored north about 10 minutes then started poling the myriad pancake flats. As Marlon killed the motor and we drifted onto the first flat, we spotted our first tail of the morning. With the smooth water, you could spot the permit tails from a few hundred feet away. That was the good part. The bad part was that the fish could spot us, too, and were super spooky.

We spent the morning with this amazing weather chasing tail after tail after tail. Kerry got some great shots on a few, but they were so jittery with the calm water they almost all spooked as soon as the fly hit the water even remotely near them. There were a couple of fish though that turned and looked at the fly, and one even ate it. We could see its tail raise right where her fly was and she felt



a tug on the end, but it came right as she was finishing her strip and she wasn't able to set the hook with a strip strike before the fish had already spit the fly, spooked, and headed for deeper water. All told, we had at least 20 good shots at tailing fish, a great morning.

It was well past breakfast time, but Marlon wanted to check out the tarpon lagoon before heading back to the lodge. We pulled in, and the tarpon were rolling everywhere. I cast with the intermediate line and a gummy minnow, and actually did get two hard pulls, but wasn't able to connect. I had some other hits that may have been tarpon, but were more likely small jacks. One such tug resulted in a small needlefish on the end of the line.

As the tide went slack the tarpon disappeared and we returned to the lodge. We ate a nice, late breakfast (more brunch as it was almost noon) of huevos rancheros. Marlon wanted to go back out at 2:00, so we had a couple of hours to relax. I decided to try and get caught up on emails, but it started pouring down rain so Dave came into the Pesky Permit and started talking to me since he had to wait out the storm. The rain continued until about 1:30, when Dave and my parents all went back out. We got our gear ready, too, and by 2:00 we were heading back out to the flats.

We started off at the tarpon lagoon. Both of the other boats were already in there, but we saw some nice tarpon rolling on the edge of the flat outside the lagoon, so we stayed out there casting for them for a while, to no avail. Finally the tide started to come in, and we headed to the permit grounds.

When we first pulled up we spotted a school of permit making nervous water and tailing occasionally. We approached them, and Kerry got a good shot right in front. When it looked like they were eating she strip struck but came up with nothing. But when we looked at her fly, it had been smashed, a sure sign that the fish had in fact taken the fly into its crushers before promptly spitting it out so quickly Kerry never even knew the fish had the fly in its mouth.



We got one more shot at a tailing fish, which spooked way too easily. Then the rest of the afternoon we bounced from flat to flat, all within sight of the lodge. But something was off and the fish just weren't coming up on the flats. Finally Marlon gave up and we returned to the lodge at 6:00.

We showered, and soon after my parents arrived with similar stories from the afternoon, a couple of shots at permit but mostly a lot of looking. This afternoon the wind started to come up pretty big, but finally it was the prevailing, northeast wind. Which hopefully means the weather will be more "normal" tomorrow.

Dinner was baked chicken, Cole slaw, grilled plantains, and saffron rice. All great. Followed up with Flan. Exhausted from another long day, we said goodnight for another early bed time.

Thursday, June 22, 2017

We were up at 4:45 again this morning, and after a quick breakfast of coffee and fresh-made donuts we were in the boat with Marlon and motoring out to the flats. It was not quite as calm as yesterday, but still barely a ripple on the water. There was a gray haze to the day again as well.

We motored north about 10 minutes before pulling up to the first flat to start chasing tails. Kerry took the bow, and was into tailing permit almost immediately. She had two perfect shots on two different pairs of fish, both of which spooked in the calm weather.

We kept hunting, and she had one more shot, which also spooked even though the fly landed about 8 feet from the fish. These fish were crazy spooky, understandable given the calm conditions. We needed just a bit of a breeze to help.

Kerry wanted me to take the next few shots, and I was happy to oblige. The first fish we spotted was tailing in really skinny water. Marlon couldn't get too close without hitting bottom, but I was able to track the fish's direction as it moved between two chunks of fan coral, so I lead it by about 10 feet. I let the small tan crab sit there until the fish was a foot away



then gave it a little twitch. The fish sped up, looked at the fly, then spooked off the flat. It made no sense. But that's permit fishing.

On the next flat we spotted another trio of tailing fish. When we got in range, I put this shot in the perfect spot, about 3 feet away from the lead fish. We had changed to a long, 12 foot leader and a very light fly. It didn't matter, the fish still spooked.

We moved on, and soon were looking at another black tail dancing in the morning haze. This fish started tailing just off the bow of the boat, about 40 feet away. He was happily engrossed in nosing down in the coral, so I plopped this fly right on his head, hoping he'd just inhale the fly. He didn't, and spooked a second later heading off the flat. These fish are impossible...which is surely why we love them!

We got a few more shots this morning, but in every situation the fish were already skittish and we were mostly chasing them a long way and flailing casts as they were moving away, tough shots and unlikely eats. Eventually the tide was getting low and we were seeing few fish, so we ran over to check out the tarpon lagoon one more time.

It was flat calm in there, and there were tarpon rolling everywhere. We cast and strip, cast and strip, over and over and once again the fish didn't want to come out to play. So we returned to the lodge, a bit after 11:00 for a very late breakfast of stuffed sopapillas with scrambled eggs and black beans.

We were scheduled to meet Marlon again at 2:30, so we had a few hours to kill. The sun was finally out for the first time since we'd arrived on the island, and it remained relatively calm. Perfect conditions for snorkeling. Mitchell grabbed his gear and I borrowed some of the great loaner equipment from the lodge (mask and fins), and we walked out on the low tide right in front of our cabana.



It was incredible snorkeling. There were hundreds of fish of all shapes, sizes, and colors, from snappers to wrasse to parrotfish to angelfish to jacks to dozens of others I couldn't begin to recognize. And the fish weren't the only thing, as they lived in a colorful environment with countless types of corals, round geometric brain coral, waving purple fan coral, big mounds of reddish colored round-shaped coral, and more. It was Mitchell's first snorkeling experience and he wanted to go more he loved it so much!

We came in in time to rest up for a bit before going out for our afternoon fishing session. At 2:30 we met Marlon, and we motored first across the blue water to the infamous King Lewey's, a sight we'd heard about and seen all week popping up just a short way away from Tarpon

Caye. It's a small island, with a bar and restaurant and a few cabanas built up over the water. We'd heard about the place from some of Pat's clients who stopped by there a few weeks before, and seen it every day as we'd motored past on our back to the lodge, so we just had to stop by and see what it was all about.

We pulled up to the dock and King Lewey himself came to greet us, along with another guy named Adam who apparently was one of the founders of the island. King Lewey is a jovial guy, an American (from Sacramento via Olympia) wearing nothing but neon green board shorts and a huge lock of curly golden hair, accentuated by gold chains, gold rings, a few tattoos, and a deep tan. He smiled and welcomed us, and as soon as we stepped up to the dock he took Marlon on a tour of the island while another guy named Adam took the rest of us. He later told us he was Lincoln Westby's son-in-law, married to Pearline who I believe was the daughter who ran Blue Horizon into the ground.

King Lewey's is an experience in its own right. It is a neat place, having taken them 17 months to build. They poured tons of concrete to build up the foundation, laid a lot of decking, built some cool rooms and bar, restaurant, lounge, even a crow's nest to look out on the surrounding flats. There are pirate mannequins everywhere, keeping with the pirate motif. It's a cool place. The common theme is heavy drinking, and we did enjoy one sampling of their house-made cocktails – a mango mojito for Kerry and a jalapeno margarita for me. Mitchell had a giant grape-flavored Fanta. We laughed a lot, enjoyed some stories from King Lewey himself, then as the tides started to come in we headed back out to the flats.

The tides were still super low. The wind had picked up to high wind conditions, creating a big chop everywhere and making it hard to stand in the bow of the panga, while also preventing the tide from coming in much at all. Still, we gave it a go. On the first flat we came to we did spot a trio of permit cruising along the edge. I made a cast right in front of them, and though the two larger fish ignored it completely the smaller of the three charged the fly. And charged it. And charged it. Again and again, as I twitched and stripped and tried everything I could think of to get the fish to commit and eat the fly. But all it did was dance around it, finally spooking about 10 feet off the boat without ever having eaten the fly. Marlon was besides himself, "that fish shoulda ate, mon!"

We continued searching the flats but never spotted another fish. The tides just weren't right. So we motored back to the lodge and let Mitchell fish in the lagoon for a bit where he caught another nice little mackerel. Then we called it a day.

My parents came in not long after us, and we learned that they'd headed out to the reef and where they'd found some great permit action! My dad hooked three, landing two of them. One was brought all the way into the boat for photos, about a 10 pound fish; the other ended up breaking off right at the boat, after Ernest had touched the leader so it counts! He's been trying for years to catch a permit, and all of his efforts finally paid off. Yes!

Apparently, they'd found some areas where huge stingrays were digging in the sand, and the permit were hanging around the rays looking for displaced crabs.

We celebrated my dad's fish, and enjoyed a tasty dinner of fresh lobster curry – which Ernest had caught that morning while fishing with my parents, having spotted their feelers sticking out of a piece of coral and diving for them right then and there.

We were planning on meeting Marlon at 5 am tomorrow morning to fish hard on the good morning tides, so we said goodnight early and headed off to bed.



Friday, June 23, 2017

We had worked it out with Marlon to meet a bit early and start fishing at 5:00 am, to capitalize on the morning incoming and dropping tides, fishing straight through till the slack tide in the early afternoon. We were pulling away from the dock at 5:05 into the grayness of dawn. It had been super windy when we woke up, plus clouds, but the wind was slowly receding and the clouds were starting to break up, so we had high hopes for the day.

We started poling the first flat with Kerry in the bow. We did spot a couple of tailing fish and gave chase, but they spooked before we could even get a cast to them. On the next flat we found another pair of tailing fish, but they were tailing only infrequently which made it hard to

track them. Kerry did get one good cast in at them, but they spooked even though the cast was spot on. The fish were acting funny, they just didn't seem like happy permit.

The sun was starting to try to break out, popping in and out of the clouds giving us good light, then bad light. On the next flat Marlon spotted a school of about 6 permit tailing. They weren't tailing often so he had to chase them around for a long time before we finally were able to get into position on them. Kerry made a perfect cast, leading the fish and setting the fly up in front of them so that they'd swim right into it as she stripped it back. But the sun popped out from behind a cloud right as she was letting go the cast, and the fish spooked from the shadow of the line before the fly even hit the water.

We moved on from there and at the next flat I took the bow for a few shots. We spotted a trio of big permit cruising fast from the far side of the flat, headed right for us. Marlon got the boat into position. I laid a cast out in front of the fish, landing the fly perfectly 3 feet in front of them. They swam right at it, paused for a second and looked at the fly, then turned away and kept going. It was a perfect shot, they simply didn't eat.

We continued-on and a few seconds later I saw a fish tailing just 30 feet in front of the boat along the edge of the flat. I plopped a cast in there, landing the crab about a foot away from the fish while he was tailing. A perfect shot. It was close enough I could see the fly sinking while the fish turned, swam over to it, then tilted down to eat the fly. As its tail started dancing I strip struck...and there was nothing there and the fish spooked. Marlon was beside himself, he simply couldn't believe we didn't hook that fish. Me neither. I practically saw him eat the fly, and still no luck connecting to the monster. These fish hate us.

For the rest of the morning Kerry and I took turns in the bow. We did come across a fish here and there, but they simply weren't coming up on the flats in good numbers, and those that were weren't feeding aggressively so we didn't have any more good shots.

Since my parents had such good luck the afternoon before out at the reef, we decided to head there and try it. It was only about a twenty-minute run out there, and soon we could see the waves crashing against the Belize Great Barrier Reef. Leading up to the crashing waves was a white sand and turtle grass flat that stretched forever in every direction. It was about 4-5 feet deep, and we were searching for mudding giant sting rays. When the rays churn up the bottom, the permit come hunting.



As we neared the flats we spotted a family of dolphins porpoising. We took this for a good sign!

We motored along for a long ways, slowly puttering parallel to the reef while searching for the telltale signs of sting rays digging in the sand. Finally, we spotted one, then another, big gray circular rays the size of coffee tables. They were slowly moving along the

bottom. Some had just started digging. We anchored up in the middle of about 4 of them and waited, but no permit showed up. So we moved some more until we found another pod of mudding rays, then anchored again to wait and watch.

About then Ernest showed up with my parents. They pulled up and we chatted for a bit, they had also seen a few rays but no permit. It didn't look like it was going to happen out at the reef today, so they headed back out to the flats. We looked a bit longer, and did spot the splashing of a school of jacks so Mitchell stood up and started casting. Soon he was hooked up to a powerful little fish, putting quite the bend in his small spinning rod and screaming the drag. He cranked hard, and landed a little Blue runner. Another species for Mitchell!

It was apparent that the fish gods were not smiling on us, so we said farewell to the flats and headed back to the lodge. We said goodbye to Marlon and thanked him for a fun week. It was only 2:00, but since we'd started so early and fished hard all day, we still had a 9-hour fishing day, and had all afternoon to relax, pack, and hang out.

Mitchell and I went snorkeling again, but the wind had picked up and clouds moved back in so the visibility wasn't great and the waves and chop kept splashing water down our snorkels, so we didn't last too long. I cleaned and put all my gear away, packed up, and we were ready to relax for the rest of the evening.

My parents came back about then, and we learned that right after we saw them my dad had cast to a permit and landed his third of the trip, a nice fish a bit over 10 pounds. My mom got several good shots that afternoon, too, including having two fish eat the fly (but no hookup as they spit it too quickly each time).

It had been a great trip. Lots of fun, an incredible amount of opportunities at fish, and a few landed for the group.

We enjoyed a spectacular sunset, followed by dinner of steamed rice, conch, and grilled vegetables.



Saturday, June 24, 2017

We didn't have to wake up early this morning, but we were so accustomed to it that even without our alarms we were up at 5 am. We enjoyed a beautiful sunrise and finished packing up our gear.

A bit before 7 we were at the Pesky Permit for fresh coffee, and Merari brought out a breakfast of French Toast, scrambled eggs, and bacon. We didn't have to leave the island until around 8:30, so we settled in at our cabin to wait it out and enjoy the last hour of life in paradise.

At 8:30 we joined Charlie, Sheldon, and the girls from the lodge staff on the big lodge boat and motored the 40 minutes into Placencia. We said goodbye to Charlie and the girls, and piled back into Sam's taxi van for the 5-minute ride to the airport. We checked in for our Tropic Air Flight, which ended up taking off about 10 minutes early. We were touching down in Belize City at 11:00.

We grabbed a pair of taxis to take us to the Radisson Ft George Hotel, where we'd arranged to stay for the night since our departing flight left at 8:00 am the following morning. Our room wasn't ready at the hotel, and we were hungry, so we had a leisurely lunch on the patio of the hotel tavern/restaurant, then went for a walk until the room was ready. We'd planned on swimming in the hotel pool, but clouds and wind moved in making it a bit chilly for swimming. So we just relaxed in the room.

Sunday, June 24, 2017

Our flight was scheduled to depart BZE at 8:00, so we were up early and in the hotel lobby by 5:15. A taxi we'd arranged the night before was there waiting for us, and 30 minutes later we were at the airport and checking in for our flight.

The flight from Belize to LAX was smooth, landing right on time. LAX was a total mess, we had to wait in line for a half hour just to get on a bus to take us to the Immigration and Customs area. With Global Entry we waltzed right through that, then had to wait in another long line to clear Security and get back into the terminal. Then we had to walk a long ways. There's hardly any places to eat, and those that are there are packed, but we managed to find the last table at a restaurant that was hidden behind a coffee shop. Very weird, and not traveler friendly at all. We ate, then had to go get on a different bus to take us to the terminal we were flying out of. Eventually we boarded our flight to Sacramento, and an hour and a half later we were touching down. All of our bags made it, and two hours later driving up I-5 and we were home.