

Fanning Island Exploratory Trip Report: April 2017

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Introduction

The development of a fishing program on Fanning Island in the Equatorial Pacific has taken a lot of time and hard work from a lot of people. Starting with some of the people behind the scenes like Chuck Corbett and Tim Welch, and off course Ryder Thomas, Juliette Budge, and Alexander Budge with Pegasus Lodges. Jeff Jong in Tarawa. Naitiniwa on Christmas and Fanning. And our first two groups of intrepid anglers: Gary, Ed, Matt, Christiaan, David, David, Jed, Jeff, and Alex. Through the efforts of these people and more, and what we've learned over the course of the past year and especially the past few months...are what made this trip a true success on many levels.

And, of course, a thank you to the 5 other anglers who accompanied me on this grand adventure, every one of them taking a leap of faith to go about as remote as you can get in the Pacific Ocean and hope to find a memorable fishing experience: Allan, Jim, Dave, Ted, and Doug.



With this in mind, we entered into this trip with moderate expectations. The reports from the first two groups of anglers were not great. But they weren't horrible either and there was hope on the horizon. So we were all cautiously optimistic, embracing the opportunity to wade in untested waters, and experience a place very few outsiders have ever seen.

By the time we were back in the air heading home, we all had big smiles on our faces and memories that we not only would never forget, but that had far surpassed our expectations.

Fanning Island is spectacularly beautiful, populated (sparsely) by some of the most welcoming, friendly people I've ever met. After only a week, you felt connected to the island in a way beyond description; it was like saying goodbye to a new family.

The fishing overall was outstanding. Yet there remains much to learn and much to improve. It's not the right place – yet – for everyone. Experienced saltwater anglers, with a grand sense of adventure and patience, will appreciate it. Those who expect everything to go smooth and easy, should wait until the destination is more defined.

Travel Logistics



One of the most tenuous, potentially challenging and frustrating components of this trip is the logistics around just getting there. Christmas Island is hard enough to get to with the once a week flight from either Fiji and Hawaii. Add to that a separate charter on a small Chinese-made Harbin-Y-12 turbo prop, and there's going to be inevitable delays and complications at some point

in time. It's a fact that is un-avoidable, like weather delays in Alaska or Kamchatka, and anyone traveling to Fanning needs to be mentally prepared for these possibilities.

Fortunately, the Pegasus team – with help from The Fly Shop – is diligently preparing multiple-scenario back-up plans in case things like this happen.

The main challenge will be delays on the Fiji Airways flight. The flight from Honolulu lands late in the afternoon, around 3:30. This allows a narrow window of opportunity for guests to de-plane, clear customs, and re-board the Air Kiribati Charter flight with enough time for the plane to make the 1 hour and 15 minute flight to Fanning, and return with enough daylight as there are no runway lights in either place. All told there's only about a 45 minute cushion of time, so if the Fiji Airways flight is delayed at all...the flight to Fanning won't go that night. In most cases guests should be able to make it to Fanning on time that night and start fishing the next morning; but everyone has to be prepared for the possibility of a delay and morning arrival.

In our case, we spent that first night at the Captain Cook. Naitiniwa arranged for the flight to go out first thing in the morning, a 6:30 am departure as soon as the sun came up. Which would have been great, getting us to Fanning with plenty of time for a mostly full day of fishing. We were there at the airport ready to go...but the fuel truck broke down. This caused us another 2 hours of delays, and by the time the problem was fixed we didn't end up taking off until about 10:15. We were on Fanning at 11:30. Pulling into Bruno's at 12:00 on the dot after unloading the plane, 15 minutes in the truck, 5 minutes on the barge, and a short walk to Bruno's.

Supply Logistics

Given the super-remote nature of Fanning, the logistics of just getting supplies there is another monumental task. There's only two ways to get anything there. The main source is on the

Kwai, the sailing freighter that supplies the island 3-4 times a year from Honolulu. Or by guests and Pegasus staff flying over with groups and checking luggage on Fiji Airways and then the Air Kiribati Charter. Meaning we can get just about anything there one way or another, but nothing can get there quickly and perishable items are a real challenge.

Accommodations

Bruno's *A La Belle Etoile*:

The current accommodations on Fanning are at a local homestay, affectionately called *A La Belle Etoile*. But most people just call it Bruno's. Bruno is an expat Frenchman who has lived on Fanning for 30 years, married to a local and with a family. The homestay is his house and surrounding complex, a true marvel in its own right of island ingenuity and vision. There is nothing else like it in the world.

The grounds in total are probably an acre and a half or more, although it is hard to gauge because it's a maze of vegetation, stone walkways, outdoor showers, and sleeping huts. Smooth flat stones and coral compose a flat and manicured drive and walkway throughout.

A series of small thatch-roofed wooden huts are tucked into niches around high trees and coconut palms everywhere. It was hot but everything was shaded. There are 6 huts in all, for single accommodations for each in our group. Each is a small low building with a full bed encompassed in bug netting. All open air except, with ample space to spread out gear and settle in. The roofs are low and while there is solar-powered light a





flashlight is a must as it is fairly dark at night even with the low lights. Each hut is isolated and overall very private.

At the back of the complex is the main house and kitchen, adjacent to a covered outdoor dining area with two picnic tables. In the center is an open air freshwater shower. Behind the main building was a second two story building, the first floor containing a storage area with refrigeration units and a workshop, and upstairs another room which was my abode for the week.

Also behind the main house and next to my “room” was a small greenhouse, then another outbuilding which contained one of the two toilets and showers. There is a second toilet and shower inside the main house. There is also an open-air shower in the center of the grounds, somewhat private with foliage around and was very popular for most of the guests.



Solar power creates 24-hour power, totally off the grid yet self-sufficient. It’s possible to charge things on 110 AC inside the main house. The power also supplies the pumps that run the toilet and shower. The water for toilets and shower is from a well so an unlimited supply, while Bruno has a 7,000 gallon catch basin for fresh rainwater for the drinking water supply. Very efficient and safe, without the waste of plastic water bottles. It’s his home, and his wife and kids are all over the place, adding to the overall ambience, especially when combined with the chickens, chicks, roosters, cats, and the sounds of pigs from the neighbors. It is at the same time homey and comfortable, like camping but way more comfortable and with a unique and distinctly island feel.



At Bruno’s you are literally immersed in the

island life. Villagers stop by, kids are running around, and you don't want to expect a quiet night as roosters are making a ruckus all the time. With all of that, it is a memorable part of the trip. In fact, it's a big part of what made the entire experience so amazing and truly special. It's not for everyone...but for the right people it's an experience you'll never forget and will surely long to return to.

Sample of proposed Lodge (based on Pegasus' Aganoa Lodge in Samoa):

Fanning Island Eco Resort:

Pegasus Lodges has designs in place and all of the building materials on the island and ready to start building their new Eco Resort. As soon as they get the final permission from the government, they anticipate the lodge being built and ready to go within about 2 months' time. In many ways it will be sad to not be staying at Bruno's slice of tropical heaven, but a definite, vast upgrade in overall level of comfort and services.

Pegasus already has the lease in agreement with the Island Council for the 25 acres of land that encompasses the entire point from the harbor to the channel and both the lagoon and ocean sides. It's a big parcel overall and quite beautiful with a high canopy of mature trees and lots of room to build the main lodge and 8 separate individual bungalows, 4 with views looking out onto the lagoon and 4 others looking out on to the ocean side and surf break. There on the point it was considerably cooler with the breeze blowing in across the lagoon. It was also considerably quieter, with no dogs or roosters or people, just the sound of the surf outside and rustling of leaves in the canopy. It will indeed be a great location.



Captain Cook Hotel:



The Captain Cook Hotel was also acceptable. They've done a lot of work on the place in the year since I was there last. Lots of paint, fixed up fixtures. The setting is quite beautiful overall looking out on the ocean and breaking surf. The bungalows we stayed in were all clean and serviceable. There is still work to be done for continued improvement, but I met with the Board of Directors and they are committed to reinvesting and continuing to revitalize the property. Add to that the plans to partner with a US-based fishing management company for a Joint Venture project, and the potential for this place to readily improve is high.

All of our anglers have been to Christmas Island before and stayed at several of the other lodges on the island. Universally they were not only satisfied with the Captain Cook, but appreciated the setting as compared to the hustle and bustle

of staying at a hotel in London or Tabwakea with all the noise and commotion on the bigger towns.

Food

Bruno's:

The food overall at Bruno's was outstanding. There is still some room for improvement, especially with breakfasts and lunch.

Breakfasts were okay. Since the Kwai had just been there, we were fortunate that they actually had fresh eggs, so we did get scrambled eggs a couple of days. Alex had brought a bunch of oatmeal with him, so we also had oatmeal every morning which the group in general enjoyed, especially when combined with dried blueberries. One day they also made pancakes, and there was always toast. Too, there were fresh bananas hanging nearby at all times, another favorite picked fresh from the bunch. Long term, they will want a bit more diversity in the breakfast menu.

Lunches were the weakest part of the daily meal program. Actually, the two lunches we ate at Bruno's were spectacular. But the packed lunches on the fishing days were not great. Essentially, you had the option of PBJ sandwich or salami sandwich. And that was about it.

They need to send something more, be it chips or crackers or cookies or fruit. Something to add to the plain sandwich.

Dinners were amazing, far better than any meal ever served on Christmas Island. Every dinner was unique and different, and there was an over-abundance of food. We had everything from stuffed land crabs to mantis shrimp, chicken curry, fresh sashimi, a variety of fish dishes including fresh wahoo and barracuda, even steak one night. They also made fresh cake every day, using a homegrown pumpkin as the base. Delicious.

CCH:



We'd heard criticism from past groups about the food at the CCH, which was surprising because it had been very good when I was there a year ago. I had passed those complaints on to the management, however, and they had worked hard to improve. Every meal we had there was very good. The first night we ordered off the menu and had such things as lobster, grilled fish, chicken curry, and lobster salad. On our last night, they made a special buffet for us with rice, potatoes, steamed vegetables, chicken curry, a delicious fish dish, grilled lamb chops, and salad. The lamb was overdone, but everything else was quite good.

The Island

Fanning Island is as pretty as it gets. Although it lies only 173 miles north of Christmas Island, it gets considerably more rainfall. As such, it is a lush island oasis. Massive, ancient trees abound providing a high canopy and lots of shade. And the ubiquitous coconut palms abound by the tens of thousands all around. Flowers are in bloom everywhere, so the colors are intense with the different shades of green and all the brilliantly colored flowers.



While a look around the landscape shows the tropical paradise it is...it is the people and the village life that gives Fanning such a special feel. The daily stroll from Bruno's to the harbor is a highlight of every day, walking down the narrow, well-worn path through the thick vegetation, welcomed by the smiling faces of the people you meet along the way. You walk past a few local huts, a school, a large maneaba (local meeting place), and the government building adjacent to a soccer field and basketball court. The people all say Mauri or hello, and smile. The kids all



waive and say hello. There are people on bicycles, people walking barefoot, people on motorcycles. Chickens run around, as do dogs. There are pigs everywhere munching in the grasses. You are immersed in island life, in a timeless way.

And coming back from fishing at the end of every day, you pull up to the marina and there are kids swimming in the shallows. There is always a few people sitting in the shade of a huge tree. Some are sitting on the boats pulled up onto the narrow beach. Kids are playing basketball, and soccer. Women are singing and dancing in the maneaba. This is a huge part of the Fanning experience.



The one downside to the new lodge, once completed, is that you won't get as much of this, simply because you won't be walking the trail back and forth to Bruno's. But the lodge

property is right there, adjacent to the communal village center. So it's just far enough to be quieter (a definite plus), but still close enough that anyone can walk over and partake in village life at any time. And you'll still come off the water every day to the sights and sounds of island life.

Indeed, the cultural component of experiencing life in the village on Fanning is one of the truly special parts of this trip. In fact, several of the guests on our trip took time off from fishing to walk around the village said the most memorable part of their trip was the experience of staying at Bruno's and getting to see the life on the island.

The Fishing

We came into this trip with high hopes, and realistically moderate expectations. Fanning is an unknown, unexplored fishery, and the advance reports we had from our first two small

exploratory groups were not exemplary. By the time we left, however, we realized this remote Pacific Island holds a remarkable fishery with incredible potential to get even better.

The first group in January did not have great fishing overall. They spent a lot of time hiking the outside of the lagoon looking for trevally, and exploring both the Irapa area and NE Pass inside the lagoon. They found a lot of locals netting bonefish. They did not find a lot of bonefish, but the ones they found were a good size. They did have some fairly good GT fishing, with good numbers of small GTs and a few shots at bigger fish as well. In addition, they caught a huge triggerfish, and had a lot of shots and landed a handful of Napoleon Wrasse.

The second group in February had a better overall fishing experience. They didn't catch a ton of bonefish, but did fare decently well averaging 6-8 fish a day. They were all big fish. They said the smallest fish they landed was bigger than anything they'd caught before on Christmas Island, and they each landed fish in the 6-8 pound range and one landed a 10 pounder. They also had a few shots at big GTs, and did land a big, very rare Golden Trevally. They had a lot of fun chasing parrotfish around and did manage to hook and land a few of these persnickety fish. They had their best fishing, like the first group, around the NE Pass, and suggested the long trek out to Irapa wasn't even worth it as they, too, didn't do well out there. Though they didn't see any nets, they thought the slow fishing in certain areas was the result of the netting from before.

These were the reports we had to work with when we arrived. Full of hints of promise and possibility, but not overwhelmingly positive. Still, we were heading to uncharted waters, a place that really hasn't been explored fully. And we were excited to see what we might find.





What we found was outstanding overall. We found good numbers of bonefish, with a good average size of around 3-5 pounds. Very few fish were landed smaller than 3 pounds. We also saw bigger fish every day, from 6-8 pounds. And more than a few fish were hooked over the course of the week that would likely have weighed in the double digits. These monster bonefish readily took our flies, but frequently broke 20# leaders or straightened #2 hooks. The fish are all fat and very healthy.

There are also outstanding numbers of Trevally here, including Bluefin Trevally, Golden Trevally, Striped/Banded Trevally, and plenty of Giant Trevally. Most are smaller size from 3-15 pounds. We did see and have shots at bigger from from 25-60 pounds on a daily basis as well. The fish are there, and hyper aggressive like a GT should be.

There's also some good variety in other species. There are lots of schools of

parrotfish. They are very hard to catch, a combination of their finicky nature and the fact that they're almost always around coral, so you break off a lot of the fish you hook and often your fly hangs up on coral before you can coerce a tailing fish to eat.

Despite the overall excellent fishing, we did have a few windows of slow fishing. Hours of walking without seeing a fish. Some of this is easily attributed to the very tough conditions we had with clouds and rain and poor visibility; the fish may have been there and we just couldn't see them. Too, the guides are still learning the area, and don't always have the best feel for which part of the flat to be on at the right time in the tide cycle, or possibly even which flat to be on at the right time of day. There remains much to learn, and as the guides gain experience I would continue to recommend this destination only for experienced saltwater anglers that are comfortable fishing and spotting fish on their own. As we gain more and more experience, I expect the fishing to continue to improve and get more consistent overall.

Tides seemed to play a very important role, and possibly moon phases, although with just this week with overall challenging weather conditions it's hard to gauge these with any certainty. It did seem that the better fishing came during the middle of the tide cycles as water moved

across the flats. Extreme highs and extreme low tides were typically fairly slow. We had a bigger moon (almost full) to start the week, and smaller neap tides later in the week...with more consistent fishing later in the week corresponding to the smaller tides. That said, we also had better weather and light later in the week, which could have been the factor instead of the tides. It will take more groups and more experience over different tides and light conditions to get a better feel for this.

The lagoon itself is an exceptional habitat. It's not a huge lagoon overall (about 13 miles long by 5 miles wide), but the volume of the flats is expansive. The flats are simply huge, and there are a lot of them. We only fished a couple of small areas twice during the course of the week, and left miles of flats unexplored. There remains much to discover.

Here is a detailed breakdown of the fishing by day:

Day One

The first afternoon of fishing started off slow. With the delay in getting to the island, we only had a half day to fish. The skies were dark and it was drizzling rain, horrible conditions.

We motored most of the way across the lagoon directly across from the main channel, about a 30 minute ride at a very slow pace. Christmas directed Ram to take our boat around to the far side of the flat, while his boat started there at the near side and we'd work towards each other. It was a massive flat, bigger than any I've seen on Christmas and the other anglers were small specks in the distance when we got out of the boat and started wading.

Visibility was horrible with the wind and rain, the toughest conditions you can ever find on the flats. Still, we gave it our best. Jim and I spread out and walked down the flat in search of fish. At first we saw nothing, then I looked up and saw Jim waving his arms wide in the universal sign of big fish. He'd just seen, cast to, hooked and lost a huge bonefish. We kept walking, and a few minutes later he was hooked up again, tied into what was obviously a big bonefish. I reeled up and hurried over in time to see him land a legitimate 6-7 pound bonefish, long and supremely fat, one of the nicest bonefish I've ever seen. The fish had totally inhaled his fly. I snapped a few pictures during a brief reprieve from the rain, and he released the fish back into the water.



We continued wading down the extensive flat. A few minutes later, I looked up and Jim was hooked up again. He said this one wasn't as big so I didn't run over for another photo, although later he confirmed it wasn't as big as the other but still a nice fish and bigger than any he'd seen the week prior at Christmas Island.

I still hadn't seen a fish, but given the poor visibility I wasn't too surprised. Jim was also wading closer to the edge of the flat, while I was further inside and the tide was starting to come in fast. It was still pouring down rain.

Then suddenly I saw a nice fish, probably 4 pounds, but right at my feet and nearly invisible on the white sand. The fish saw me before I saw it, however, and it was heading away fast. Over the next 30 minutes I saw 3 more similar fish, but all too late to get a cast in to them.

Soon we were miserable from the rain and wind, and we could see the other anglers heading back to their boat so we piled back into our zodiac to motor back to the harbor. There we chatted with the others, who'd had less success than us overall but not horrible given the conditions. Allan had seen a big triggerfish but no bones, Camo hadn't seen much at all, while Christmas had spotted several big bonefish that Ted had shot but they, like the fish I'd seen too late, had already spooked. Doug saw a couple of big fish, but also swimming away. Not great fishing...but given the incredibly challenging conditions not bad at all either and actually very exciting to know that there are indeed some huge bonefish here. Everyone was soaking wet, but enthusiastic for the continued potential of what the week may show us.

Day Two

When we got to the harbor Christmas, Benny and Ram (the guides) along with Alex started prepping the boats and getting them started. About the time we should have been piling into the boats to head out for the day, another monstrous rainstorm hit the island. It hit hard.

We huddled under the aluminum canopy of the boatshed while the rain pounded and pounded and pounded, amidst a howling wind. Nasty conditions. We were grateful to not have been stuck out in the open. After a bit more than an hour, we could finally start to see the far side of the atoll, a sign that the weather was finally beginning to let up.



The skies lightened a bit and the rain dropped off from buckets to a light drizzle, and we decided to go for it. We climbed into the boats, and motored slowly out across the lagoon. We pattered across the lagoon, past the flat we'd fished the night before, then worked our way through the maze of coral heads towards the Northeast Pass.

We pulled up to the edge of an expansive flat that stretched in both directions as far as you could see, limited only by the deeper water on our side, thick walls of coconut palms on either end about a mile or more apart, and a thinner line of palms with breaking surf another mile

past at the far end. It was a massive system of flats, a group of 6 anglers could easily spend a full day here.

Ram, with Allan and Dave, started off fishing the near side of the flat, while Christmas and Benny took Doug, Jim and I and we started wading towards the western part of the corner of the lagoon. We didn't see much at first as the tide was midway down already from our weather-related morning delay, and going out fast.

Jim walked towards the edge to fish on his own near the dropoff. Doug and Christmas took off over the now-dried section of the flat to find the channel on the other side of a small island, and Benny and I followed them further in towards the reef. We walked over tide-dried flats for a long ways, then gradually the water started to get up to our ankles, then our shins. With all the rain and tidal movement, the water was comfortably cool.

Benny and I started walking with the outgoing tide, searching for fish. As we did so a few locals who were working a copra project started wading the far side of the flat, towing by hand a 100 foot long chain of coconuts along the flat.

It didn't seem to matter, as soon we started spotting fish. The first good spot was a big fish tailing in the very shallow water. Given the distance from tail to dorsal, it had to have been at least a 6-8 pound fish. We chased it, then it disappeared never to be seen again. About the time we reached the area that fish had been tailing in, however, Benny spotted another fish about 30 feet away. It was still drizzling rain and overcast so visibility was very poor, but sure enough after he pointed it out I saw the shape of the fish and cast towards it. The fly landed about 3 feet away, and I made one strip and instantly the fish charged it and ate the fly. I missed the first strike and kept the tip down and kept stripping. Missed the second strike. Missed the third strike. Kept stripping. Finally on the fourth eat the fish was on tight and I was hooked up.



The fish ran hard and fast like a bonefish should, well into my backing. Soon I had my first Fanning Island bonefish in hand, a decent fish about 3 pounds. Not big, but big enough.

We released the fish and continued on. It didn't take long before we spotted another fish tailing. I waded into position, made a cast, and the fish swam right over and ate. It was another decent bonefish about 3 pounds. We continued working down

the shallow channel, and fish after fish appeared in the flat low light, mostly close to us and moving very slowly, and every one happy to eat as soon as they saw the fly. I landed two more

fish, one after the other. Then I totally screwed up a hookset on a fish, which I usually do on my first fish of a trip but on this trip it was my fifth. I trout set like the best of them and ripped the fly out of its mouth. It was close enough, however, that I could see as soon as I pulled the fly out of the water that it was still looking for the fly, so I recast and landed the fly two feet away. The fish swam right over and ate it again, and soon I was releasing another 3 pound bonefish.



The next fish I saw was smaller and moving much faster, and I instantly recognized it as a small Giant Trevally. I cast well in front and started stripping the bonefish fly as fast as I could, and the fish charged and ate. It wasn't big, but after years of trying I'd finally landed my first GT!

We marched on down the flat. In the distance I'd seen Doug hooked up several times, so I knew he was having good success as well. The light was horrible with all the clouds, but the wind had died down completely and the flat all around us was dead calm.

We started spotting fish again. The first fish was close, maybe twenty feet away and tailing. I made the cast and it swam right over and ate the fly. It made a good run well into the backing, and soon we were releasing another nice bonefish, still in that 3-4 pound range. The fish was a single when we hooked it, but after it ran a hundred yards off and returned to us, it had collected several other bonefish and by the time we released it there was a handful of fish milling all around us, totally unperturbed by our presence. I unhooked the fish, then without even stripping off any line rolled a cast out to my right towards another fish and was hooked up. I landed and release that fish, and Benny pointed me to another fish on the left side about 10 feet away. Again I flipped out an ugly roll cast with no fly line whatsoever outside the tip, and was hooked up to my third bonefish in mere minutes, all within a rod's length away. I've never seen so many dumb, happy, hungry bonefish.

The flat all around us now was dead calm, and I could see at least 6 different fish tailing in the calm water. I chased them down, but they managed to stay outside of casting range while tailing. Another fish would appear within casting range, however, a green-backed torpedo on the mottled sand bottom. Cast, strip, set, and bent rod. Again and again. This was quickly becoming one of the best bonefishing session I've had anywhere in the world. No monster fish yet, although I'd seen two big ones swim by while landing the moderately sized 3-4 pound fish.

Finally I asked Benny to go check on Jim as he was a long ways away and I wanted to make sure he was having as much luck as I was. Doug and Christmas were a long ways ahead of us but everytime I looked up they were hooked up so I knew they were also having great fishing.

The next fish I saw was actually a pair of fish, moving fast and I instantly knew they were a pair of small GTs. I lead them by about 30 feet and started stripping as fast as I could, and they changed trajectory and charged my fly right away. Hitting hard and fast. I hooked the bigger of the two, probably about 3 pounds. It pulled harder than the bonefish the same size, but not for as long of a run. It's partner stayed right by its side all the way in to my hands as I unhooked and released it. Fish here just don't seem to be alarmed by human presence.

Fish were still tailing in the calm shallows, but by now I was maybe 300 feet away from Christmas and Doug and I could see Doug hooked up to a nice fish and heard Christmas calling me to join them so I reeled up and waded over just in time to see them release a really nice bonefish, at least 8 pounds. They'd been chasing a big school of huge fish and landed several. On the edge of the flat where they were a narrow flat stuck out into the deeper channel, so I



waded out into it with my 12 weight hoping to find a bigger GT cruising the edges. But instead I found a whole bunch of big bonefish cruising the edges. So I switched back to the 8 weight, made a cast, and hooked up again. This fish took me way into my backing and wrapped it up on a half dozen different chunks of weeds and coral so I had to run and chase it down, but eventually I landed it just at Christmas and Doug caught up. It was one of my biggest bonefish to hand, a nice fish Christmas estimated at about 8 pounds. A

really nice, very heavy fish. We snapped a few photos, then began hiking back the mile or more to where the boats were mere specks in the distance.

After a long walk we met up with the rest of the groups at the boats for a quick lunch, a mixture of PBJ and salami sandwiches on fresh homemade bread. I was hoping that everyone had as much luck as Doug and I had. Doug had been chasing a school of big bones around the whole time, and landed about as many as me with a bigger overall average size, mostly 5-8 pound fish. Jim and landed a couple of nice fish on his own. But Allan and Dave fishing the further side of the flat had not had much luck, only seeing a few fish each and those gone before they could make a cast.

After lunch we swapped areas, Christmas taking Dave and Allan to the channel where Doug and I had had so much success, while the rest of us fished the other area. It was a total role reversal. Jim and I, with Benny, waded nonstop for 2 hours, covering nearly a square mile of some of the most beautiful white sand flats I've ever seen, without seeing a single fish. The first hour was an obvious waste of time, it was the dead low tide and there simply wasn't much happening. But the second hour was ideal conditions with the tide pushing in, and still no fish.

We had walked countless miles today, covering lots of flats. Allan and Dave had a good afternoon fishing further down the channel where we'd also had a great morning. They each

hooked, landed, and in some cases lost some nice bonefish and they also had some great shots at big tailing parrotfish, each hooking and losing a few. All in all a pretty darned good day of fishing in an amazingly beautiful place.

Day Three

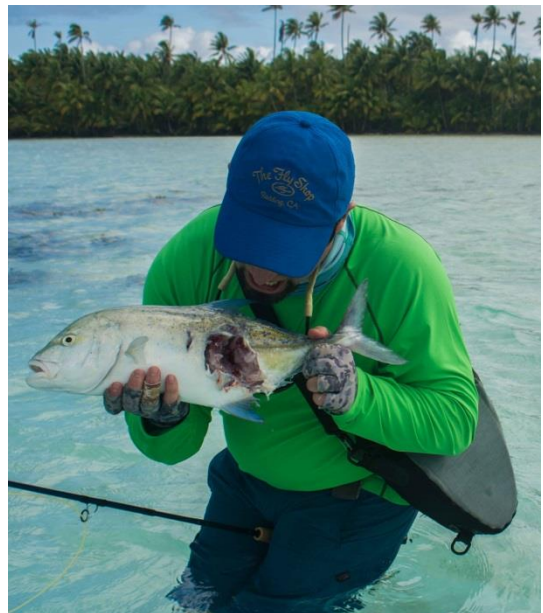
Christmas wanted to start at the NE Pass again this morning, so we maneuvered our way there past several massive beautiful flats and around dozens of dangerous coral heads. We hit the edge of the flat where we'd started fishing the day before, and they carefully maneuvered the boats along the edge of the flat towards where we stopped fishing yesterday.

Along the way there was a monstrous explosion in the water where a huge GT attacked some helpless baitfish. It was only 50 feet from the boats, but happened too fast to react to. We spotted a big bonefish running away in front of the boats, and another smaller GT as well. All a good sign for things to come.

When we reached the area where we'd left off yesterday, we climbed out of the boats, spread out, and started wading along the flat heading parallel to the shore.

The tide was high and dropping. We walked fast in search of bonefish, but didn't see much. Along the edge, however, Christmas spotted a school of parrotfish so we gave chase. I got a cast in front of them, and two fish peeled off to chase my bonefish fly but they didn't eat. As I was stripping the fly back in, I spotted a Bluefin Travelly zipping around. I flopped a cast towards it and started stripping fast, and the fish charged and ate. It turned out to be a decent sized Bluefin, maybe 10 pounds. It put up a good fight, pulling hard and running into my backing.

As I got it close, all hell broke loose. A big GT, at least 60 pounds and probably more, started attacking my smaller trevally in the shallows just 40 feet away. I could feel the bigger fish hammering my fish while the water erupted in huge aquatic explosions. I quickly passed the rod with the smaller GT already hooked up to Christmas and tried to strip out line on my 12 weight to put the big streamer in front of the marauding GT. I managed to get one cast in there and the fish turned and looked at my fly, but it was more interested in the larger fish it had already attacked and killed. Suddenly the mayhem was over and the waters grew calm. Christmas reeled in what was left of the smaller Trevally (about 10 pounds, so not really all that small!), dead and chewed up from the bigger fish.



We continued wading down the flat. I could see the others in the distance wading the edge in a different area. It was another massive flat, miles in several directions. Over the radio Christmas learned that Dave had spotted a big Napoleon Wrasse and was casting to it. Behind us we heard a whoop and looked up to see Jim hooked up with a humongous bonefish, which eventually broke him off in the coral. It is a fish that will haunt him for many years, one of the biggest bonefish he's ever seen, well over 10 pounds.

After that initial chaos it was pretty quiet. We walked a long way without seeing much. Eventually Christmas did spot a bonefish, I cast towards it and not long after was releasing a nice 3 pound fish, my first of the day. Not much was happening here, so we loaded back into the boats and motored a short distance across the lagoon to another flat. This was maybe the biggest single flat I've ever seen, stretching seemingly forever in a series of fingers with deep blue tantalizing edges all around. We could spend hours here!

We ate a quick lunch, then split up and started walking. I noticed the water temperature was quite a bit warmer here. At the same time the sun popped out. Jim and I were supposed to turn right down one edge of the flat to wade towards where the boat was waiting in the distance, but it looked better on the left finger so we decided to go for it, figuring they'd come find us eventually. It was the right decision.

Not long into the flat I spotted a tailing bonefish in the shallows. I gave chase, found the fish, cast to it, and it swam right over and ate like it was supposed to. As I was fighting this fish another showed itself. I called over to Jim to make sure he was seeing fish. He said he was into fish there, and sure enough just as I released my fish he was hooked up into another nice bonefish on the edge.



We continued working down the flat, each of us hooking and either landing or losing a handful of fish. He was finding bigger fish on the edge, while most of mine were in that 3-4 pound range. Nice fish overall, every one taking me well into my backing.

We finally hit the far end of the flat, and the boat came to pick us up. We motored just a short ways across a deeper channel, then Jim and I got back out to wade another humongous flat. The flats here are indescribably big. The tide was all the way out and just starting to come in, and for a change we had great light.

Almost instantly I started spotting fish. I spooked one and actually had a refusal from a nice fish at least 5 pounds. So I finally took off the big lead eye #2 Christmas Island Special I'd been fishing, which was way too big and heavy for the shallow water I was in but hadn't mattered

until now. With a slightly smaller, lighter fly, I was soon hooked up to a big fish. This one took me out across the flat, then found a piece of coral and broke me off. I retied, then promptly hooked two more nice fish, both of which simply came unhooked after a good run each into my backing. This flat was bonefishing at its finest, good sized fish showing themselves every few minutes and readily eating as soon as they saw the fly. These fish were all bigger, at least 5 pounds on average.

We hit the lowest point on the flat which was dry ground, walked across and continued wading the far side. I spotted another big fish, hooked it and again the fly came out. Bad luck. Then I spotted another nice fish and cast too close, spooking him. Then the clouds moved in and we couldn't see anything. We tried to wait it out, but the light wasn't coming back so we waded back across the flat to meet the boat and move on.

It was getting late in the afternoon and we were all exhausted having walked miles already. Christmas asked if we wanted to hit one more flat though, and Allan said why not so we did.

We motored slowly back towards the main channel near the harbor, and got out to fish another long flat near the shore on the airport side of the channel. I instantly spotted a fish, and landed two more bonefish on two casts. These were smaller fish, but still fun. Jim had a big GT crash some mullet right at his feet, and soon I looked up and saw Dave and Christmas taking pictures on a nice 5-6 pound bonefish. By now it was getting dark, so we waded to the edge of the flat for the boats to come pick us up and motor us across the channel back to the harbor.

All in all, it was another very eventful day. We saw decent numbers of bonefish, a handful of big GTs, and some big bonefish. Plus some random shots at parrotfish, triggerfish, and small GTs.





Day Four

We pulled out into dark skies and a drizzly rain headed to Irapa Pass, the wilderness in the farthest corner of the atoll. The first 30 minutes was uneventful, motoring across the atoll then turning left towards the pass. Then it all changed, and we had to maneuver a maze of coral heads and coral lined flats. We crossed over 5 different narrow channels, often dragging the boats through the narrow lanes between the coral. All told it was almost 2 hours before we pulled up to Irapa. And worth every second.

The tide was dropping fast as we finally made it. Christmas was worried that the boats would get stranded if we got any closer to the pass, so he, along with the other guides, Ted, and Dave, started a long ways out from where we could see the surf crashing on the far side of the pass. Pristine white flats surrounded us on all sides as far as we could see, with gorges of aqua blue indicating the deeper channels that punctuated the massive expanse of shallow flats. Allan, Jim, and I decided to walk the extra half mile to get closer into the pass and see what it was all about.

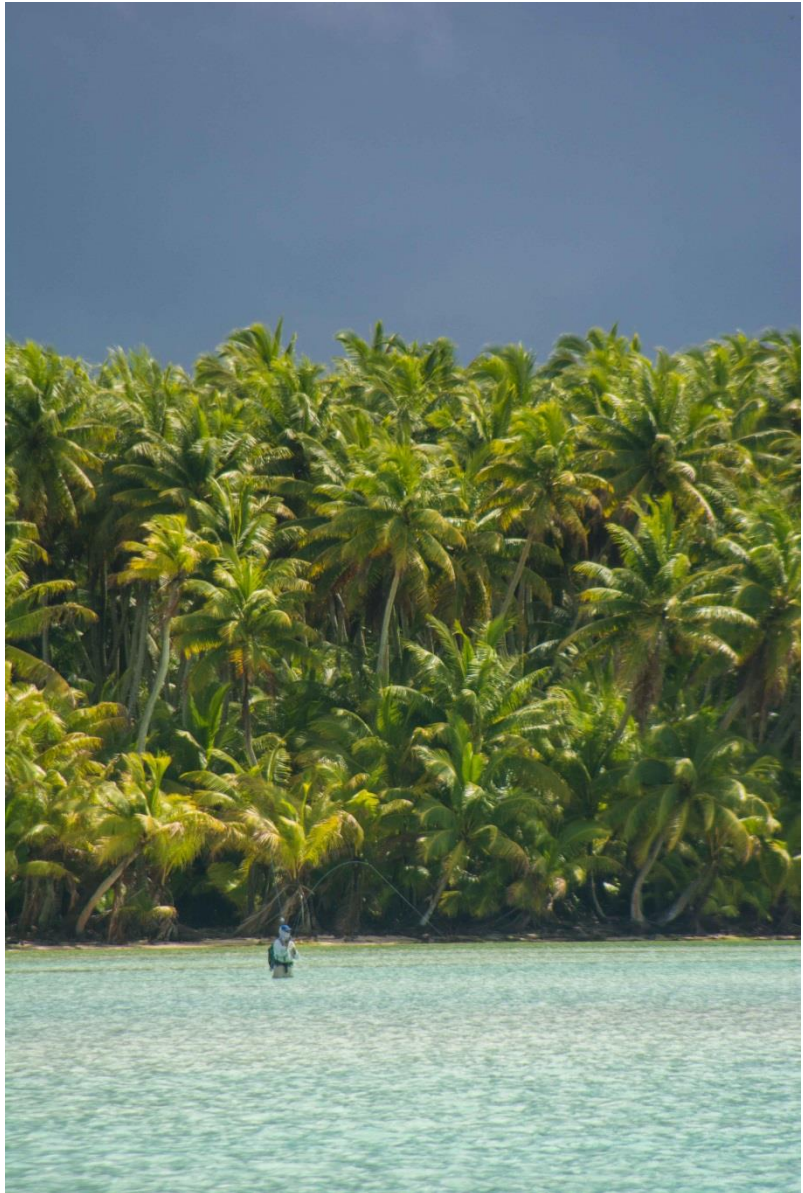
We started walking, scanning the shallow flat for fish all the while. As we got near the channel, I spotted a huge shape 200 feet away. I stopped and tracked it, realized it was indeed moving. It was a big GT, seemingly 4 feet long. I stated wading after it as fast as I could, slowly narrowing the distance as it gradually moved away from me down the channel. Eventually I got close as it

milled about at the edge of a coral head in the middle of the channel. I made one cast, but it turned and headed the other way before it could see the fly. No luck.

I made a blind cast into the deeper turquoise –colored water in the channel with the big streamer and started stripping fast, and instantly saw 4 fish charge the fly and chase it. I stripped it all the way in and while they attacked it I never got a full take. I figured they were small GTs, so I cast out again and stripped back in. This time one of them managed to eat the fly and I strip set. I stripped the fish in, and was surprised to see that it was actually a small bonefish, about 2 pounds. Yet it had eaten a 6 inch long streamer on 130lb test!

From there I waded across the channel to a broad sand flat. There I could see another channel to my left, eventually coming together with the channel I'd spotted the GT, so that I was in a narrow sand flat triangle surrounded by the two channels. I switched to my bonefish rod, and instantly was surrounded with bonefish. They seemed to be coming from all directions. Literally wherever I turned there was a bonefish, and I would cast towards them, they would swim over and eat the fly. I would fight them with the drag cranked tight since I was fishing 20 lb a Fluorocarbon leader. Land the fish, turn around, flop the line out and hook another. And another. And another.

These fish don't behave like any bonefish I've ever seen. I literally would aim 10 feet away and direct the cast so that it would make a big splash when it hit the water. I was fishing a #2 Christmas Island Special with big gold lead eyes, so it made a big splash in the shin-deep water. And as soon as it splashed down, the fish would charge over and eat it. I literally hooked and landed 6 fish on 6 casts, one after another. I quickly lost count. If I had to guess, I landed 15+ bonefish. Incredible. Most were smaller fish from 2-3 pounds, but a couple were larger (4-5



pounds) and while landing fish I did see several even larger fish swim past that I would estimate at 6-8 pounds.

The bonefish behavior here is uncanny. You would hook a fish, and rather than spook the other fish that fish would gather a school around it while you fought it, so that by the time you brought it in you were surrounded with other bonefish that were curious and apparently hungry.

Every time I looked up I could see Allan, or Jim, or often both hooked up. We had at least one triple hookup that I saw, possibly more. And Allan was fishing 30# leaders!



As I was landing yet another bonefish, I saw the telltale signs of another decent GT in the channel. I couldn't release my fish in time to chase it, but it convinced me that it was time to hunt for GTs. I put the bonefish rod away and started patrolling the channels looking for GTs, walking back and forth and looking, but the tide was dropping fast and I guess I missed the GT window.

Eventually I made my way to Ram with the boat, and he confirmed that Dave had a great morning session on GTs. Later I learned he'd hooked and broken off 3 fish, all in coral on 100# test. Dave said there were GTs everywhere, milling around. He saw at least 20 of them. They also caught a few nice bonefish.

The tide was going out so fast. We'd spent too much time having fun, so now were stuck with the low tide. We ate a quick lunch, then started walking the boat along the flat on the north side of the island. In places it was barely deep enough to motor, though for the most part we had to walk the boat for a couple of miles in the super shallow flats.

Finally we hit a spot where the boat was out of the worst of the extreme shallows, and we got out to wade a flat. It was low tide, so not the manic fishing we'd had that morning. Still, I managed to land a nice bonefish, as did Jim.

We continued on across a channel to another long flat, paralleling the shoreline. This flat was a narrow spit of white sand surrounded by coral. Allan and Jim started wading there, and we motored across to where we met up with Christmas and Dave wading another flat. From there

we went back and forth on a series of smaller flats. I hooked and lost a big bonefish (5-6 pounds) to a chunk of coral.

The next flat was another long flat, extending across most of the lagoon from one side to the other. Jim and I started wading the inside, Allan was with Ram on the other. Dave and Christmas headed off to a different area. I landed a nice bonefish, about 4 pounds, and saw Jim hooked up to two other good fish. Then the light which had been our constant friend and companion through most of the day left us. In the flat light, it was impossible to see. So we headed back to the boats. We wanted to try one more flat, but with no light it was futile so we headed back in for the day. It was almost 6 o'clock, still a long day of fishing. And a great day.

In addition to all the bonefish, we'd pulled a few random species casting towards chunks of coral. Allan landed a small brilliantly colored Picasso triggerfish. Collectively we also landed some snappers, a few small marble grouper, and a couple of weird flounder-type bottom fish.

All in all, it was an amazing day of fishing. What was truly remarkable was the behavior of the bonefish. They were not only not spooky...they were inquisitive and aggressive. You didn't have to worry about spooking them. In fact it was quite the opposite. You wanted to get their attention, because if they saw the fly they swam over and ate it. Incredible.

Day Five

We piled into the two bigger boats, and started heading out across the lagoon to return to Irapa Pass. Although it's a long way out there, the fishing the day before was so outstanding we simply had to go back. It was slow going again, but quicker today since the tide was a bit higher and the guides were more familiar with the route through the coral maze. We hit the 3 main passes, then made our way through the maze. It was almost exactly an hour and a half to get close, 2 hours till we had lines in the water. And again worth every second.

As soon as we got out of the boats, mayhem ensued. Allan hooked up to a massive Bluefin Trevally (about 20 pounds) right next to the boats. While he was fighting that, Doug hooked up to a decent GT about 20 pounds. While they were both fighting fish, Jim and I had a half dozen GTs going crazy in front of us. He watched, I cast and stripped and they attacked my fly but kept missing it. I missed at least 6 fish from 10-30 pounds.





We spread out and searching for more fish. And the fish were there. One after another after another, GTs appearing in the channels around the coral. I would cast and strip as fast as I could, and the fish would charge and attack over and over but they kept missing the fly. Frustrating, and exhilarating at the same time.

Soon we were fairly spread out. I saw Doug hooked up with a big GT which broke him off on the coral. I had a few more smaller fish chase and miss.

Then I saw a pair of bigger GTs coming towards me from a long ways off. I got ready, and when they were in range I made a cast in front of them. I barely had time to strip and they were on the fly. They crushed it, missed the first time, then came back and clobbered it. I kept the tip down and strip set hard, then a freight train took off attached to the end of my line. I had the drag cranked down tight and fought him hard. It looked to be about a 40 pound GT. He screamed out pulling off line like no other fish I've ever hooked. I steered him away from the many coral heads, stopping his run eventually and gaining line while I ran down the flat towards him to get a better angle. He tore out more line, I continued to gain. Soon he was thrashing in the middle of a white sand flat and I was back into the fly line. I thought I had the battle won...when all of a sudden I felt the fly simply come loose. Devastating.

I checked all my connections and everything looked good. The fly simply came out. Bad luck on an amazing fish. I kept walking and searching, but right then the sun went away and the clouds came over. Visibility was lost. I waded around all over the place searching for more fish. One decent sized GT appeared behind me, but I saw it too late to get a cast to it. Then it was an hour of walking and searching with bad light and no more opportunities. It was an amazing, frustrating start.

While hunting GTs I did see at least a dozen really big bonefish, all in the 8-10 pound range. But I was committed to hunting GTs so I didn't switch rods and chase them. In the distance I could see Dave casting to bonefish, Jim doing the same in the opposite direction. Doug was also casting to bonefish, and Allan chasing parrotfish all over the place.

Eventually we made our way back to the boats. Everyone was ecstatic with the morning's fishing. Lots of opportunities, and a handful of great fish were landed. We ate a quick lunch, then slowly motored out of the Irapa area before the tide stranded us.

We made it out of the many cuts and channels, and Christmas dropped Jim and I off on a long flat. Jim started walking up towards the far side of the lagoon, I waded the other side towards the middle of the lagoon. To my left was a lot of coral and a very skinny flat, to the right was a narrow sand flat then the dropoff. I started walking, and soon spotted a pair of tails from nice-sized bonefish, right up in the shallow s along the edge of the coral. I gave chase, carefully, and when in range cast to and hooked the lead fish. It was about a 4 pound bonefish. I continued down the flat for the next hour or so, wading in ankle deep water over mostly white sand punctuated with small chunks of coral. The light was bad, but in the super shallow water I found a lot of success, landing 4 fish all in the 3-5 pound range and breaking off 5 others on the coral.

At the bottom end of the flat there was a deep hole and I switched back to the GT rod and blind cast along the edge for a while, raising one small GT that tried to attack the fly but never sealed the deal. I switched back to the bonefish rod, and right at the end of the deeper channel a big fish materialize in the low flat light. I couldn't tell if it was a small GT or a really big bonefish. Whatever it was it was 10-15 pounds and it clobbered my bonefish fly and took off screaming through a maze of coral. I lost the fish, and brought back a straightened hook and a chewed up fly line.

Right about then I saw Christmas pull up with the boat so I waded over and climbed aboard. Jim showed up soon after, and we motored across the lagoon. It was 4:30, so too soon to head back so we decided to try one more flat.

Christmas dropped us off and we started wading a deeper flat he promised had big bonefish. But the light was horrible and we couldn't see anything. I did see a big GT explode on the far side of the flat and gave chase but I got there too late and the fish was gone. We searched for Bones in the meantime, but couldn't see anything. Christmas came to pick us up, and we opted to head in for the day. All in all, another great day of fishing.

Day Six

The plan was to fish a ¾ day, packing up in the morning and fishing right up to the airport to take the charter flight home at 5 pm. But everyone had had such a great week, they opted to stay back at Bruno's, relax, dry gear, and prepare for the journey home.

I had a meeting with the Island Council that morning which went great, then decided to go ahead and fish a couple of hours that late morning. I still hadn't landed a decent GT, and was hoping to find a double-digit bonefish. Lofty goals, but why not!

We didn't go far, about 15 minutes at the standard slow pace to the same flat that Jim and I had tried to fish in the failing night before. Christmas and I got out and started wading down the flat.

Today the sun was high and the light was perfect. And almost instantly we started seeing fish. My first bonefish to hand was a nice fish, about 3 pounds. The second was smaller, but the third was a good fish about 5 pounds. We missed a few besides. It was steady action.

Soon I spotted a huge fish coming up from the channel and onto the flat. The only place I've ever seen bigger bonefish was at the Land of Giants on Andros. This fish was well over 10 pounds. I made a long cast, leading the fish by about 10 feet. It



slowly swam over to the fly. I started stripping and pausing, and felt the take as the fish ate the fly. But when I went to set the fly came right out, a missed opportunity on one of the biggest bonefish I've ever seen.

We kept walking and landed a couple more 3 pound bonefish. By now we were towards the bottom of the flat so we stayed in one spot and just waited while fish after fish came to us. The first was a trevally, moving fast, and it came and clobbered the bonefish fly. It wasn't huge, but soon I was taking photos of a nice 10 pound Trevally. It looked like a GT to me, but Christmas said it was a Golden because it had some yellow on the tail.

Then another small bonefish, and a couple more missed shots at more bonefish including a school of 3 monsters that were all over 8 pounds easily. Then another fast moving streak and hooked into a small GT. We landed it, about 12 pounds a bit bigger than the Golden. I wanted a photo, but as we were landing the GT Christmas spotted another huge bone, well over 10 pounds, swimming towards us. We released the GT and stripped out line and I made a 60 foot cast to the left of the cruising fish. He charged the fly and hit it hard...so hard he straightened the #2 hook!

We stayed there and cast to a handful more fish, and I landed two small Striped Trevally and another bonefish. I checked the time and it was 11:30. We'd only been fishing for about 2 hours, and it was amazing. Christmas suggested going to another flat, but I was good. What an exceptional way to end a fantastic trip. We waded back to the boat, and motored back in to the harbor.

The Guides

The guides are learning and gaining rapid experience, but they still have a long way to go.

Kiritimati (aka, Christmas): Christmas is outstanding. He was trained by his brother, Teannaki, one of the most famous Christmas Island guides of all time. He has great eyes, and all the skills. Moreover, he's a natural leader and did a good job of organizing the fishing days and working with the anglers and the other guides.

He tried to rotate himself through and did a pretty good job overall, although there is still room for improvement there as he spent more time with a few of the guys, and not enough with others. He's a big asset to the program, and as he continues to train the other guys it will make his job easier.



Bennie: Bennie is young and charismatic and speaks great English. He is very hard working, and has pretty good eyes. He walks a little too fast, but is learning to slow down.

Baram ("Ram"): Ram's English was the worst of the 3, but he communicated effectively overall. He is also young and enthusiastic and eager to learn. He struggled to spot fish at first, but continued to improve throughout the week.

Both Bennie and Baram are eager to learn more about fly fishing and guiding. They are very service oriented, hard-working, and want to improve. With more time on the flats, they will both become good guides.

Matt: Matt was unable to join us, but he did meet us at the airport on Christmas. He's from Fanning, but currently living and guiding on Christmas where he's been for quite a few years now. He really wants to come home to Fanning, and once we have more consistent angling groups he'll come back and really bolster the guide team. He's one of the better guides on Christmas, and the group on Fanning that did fish with him back in February said he was great.

We are working on getting some rods to Fanning for the guides, and Pegasus is discussing hiring them to go out once a week to continue to learn and improve their level of overall experience. With that sort of a training program, they will improve quickly and could even turn into an outstanding team of guides.

The Boats



There were three boats, though we mostly only used two of them. The "big boat" is an 18 foot zodiac with a 50 hp motor and a center console. Although it's bigger, with the center console it's heavy and doesn't have much room for gear. There's some sort of issue with the motor, and it can't get the RPMs up so it's constantly motoring slowly and can't get up on plane.

The 16 foot zodiac is a better boat for the flats. It's a 25 hp motor with a tiller, leaving a lighter boat with more room. It could go much shallower. The motor doesn't have a hydraulic tilt, so it's really challenging to get the prop up when entering the shallows that are everywhere. That boat with a hydraulic tilt would work great. The motor is also slightly underpowered when it's full of anglers and gear.

The third boat is a small, 14 ft zodiac. It can go in the shallowest of water which is nice and has the best functioning motor. It's also a center console, however, and small, so really only room for a boat driver and one, maybe two anglers.

The boats in general are functional for now. They're all easy to get in and out of which is nice, and since the fishing is all wading they just need to get people from point a to point b. Long term for the fishing I'd recommend slightly higher powered motors, with power tilts on them, and the open design over the center console. It would be good to get one more of the bigger boats to accommodate groups of 6 or more anglers. The little boat is simply too small to help much.

Netting in the Lagoon

Perhaps the biggest concern of all coming into this trip were the reports from earlier groups of extensive gillnetting in the lagoon for bonefish. The first group in January in particular had poor bonefishing, attributed largely to the presence of nets and observation of many dead bonefish being taken by the locals.

Subsistence fishing in the lagoon has been a staple for the local population for many years. And realistically with a small population (around 2,000 on the island, many of them children) and an extensive lagoon, some netting could be sustainable. But the rumor was they were netting beyond subsistence and selling dried bonefish to their neighboring island to the north, Washington. That level of harvest would not be sustainable and would quickly degrade the resource and eliminate the viability of a successful fishing program.

Following the January report about the netting, Pegasus addressed these concerns directly with the Island Council. One of the many benefits of a true community-based project is that everyone benefits. The Island Council, representing the people of Fanning, is 100% in support of this project. They are very happy to have us here, and very excited about the future and the ways the project and incoming tourists can help improve the lives of everyone on the island. As a result, they acted quickly and have already banned the netting of bonefish in the lagoon.

We did spot one net during the trip, which had two dead bonefish in it. It was way out in the most remote corner of the Northeast Pass. That was the only sign we saw of bonefish nets. I spoke with all of the guides about it, and they say the entire community is receptive to the idea and because they know how successful Christmas Island has been in promoting angling tourism after stopping the bonefish harvest, they are receptive to it and going to try. There are still some individuals in the remote villages that haven't learned yet of the closure, hence the one net we did find, but in time – especially with more angling groups on the flats and the guides spending more times out around the lagoon educating the rest of the populace – the netting should go away altogether.

As we saw, there are plenty of bonefish left on Fanning. And with netting officially banned...these populations will only grow. There are already big fish here...and the numbers of big fish should also continue to increase.

The future of Fanning Island as a fly fishing destination is very bright.

Conclusions

Fanning is a new and growing destination, but the potential here is every bit as good as we'd hoped for. There are good numbers of bonefish, plenty of big fish, trevally, as well as other fun and interesting species to pursue.

The island itself is spectacularly beautiful, much more scenic than Christmas Island. Too, the locals have a wonderful community; very clean and organized, and the people are excited to have us there so they are very warm and inviting. The smiles of the kids you see will stick with you forever.

There is still a lot to learn, and continued infrastructure development that needs to happen. But the pieces are all in place for all of these things, and with time and experience the destination will consistently improve.

For now, it is a place best reserved for experienced, physically fit, adventure-minded anglers. Those with an open mind and interest in exploring a remote, unique, beautiful, culturally incredible place with huge fly fishing potential, will not be disappointed. Those who expect everything to go right with First or even Second World standards, should not go on this trip. Be prepared with an open mind, patience and flexibility. Give Fanning Island a chance, and it will amaze you.

