

Travel Journal – Robby's Place, North Andros
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Sunday, March 10, 2019

I left my house around 5:00 pm for the 2+ hour drive to the Sacramento Airport. The airport was pretty quiet. I checked in, grabbed a quick bite of dinner, and before long was boarding the slightly delayed redeye flight to Charlotte. It proved one of those miserable overnight flights. I can usually sleep on planes just fine, but my seat-mate had other intentions, as he jammed his elbow deep into my ribs and promptly fell into an un-budging sleep, until the point when he shifted and nestled his head on my shoulder. I begrudgingly watched a movie, elbowing him every few minutes but he was not moving. Finally he flopped over to the other side and I was able to squeeze in about an hour of sleep before the plane descended into Charlotte.

Monday, March 11, 2019

I had a few hours before my next flight and was exhausted, so I found a quiet place upstairs, curled up on the floor with my backpack as a pillow and grabbed another hour of sleep. Fortunately I had set my alarm, which woke me just in time to grab a quick breakfast snack and head to the gate.

This flight, too, was delayed, finally taking off about 10:30, an hour after scheduled departure. I was still lacking in sleep, so promptly conked out and didn't wake till we were touching down in Nassau 2 hours later.

I felt a bit more alive now as I strolled through Lyndon Pindling International Airport. The line at Immigration wasn't long, maybe a 10 minute wait. My bag was on the carousel in Customs; I walked right through without slowing down. I walked over to the domestic terminal, checked in for the Western Air flight to San Andros, then cleared security and stepped up to the bar next to the local departures gates.

I joined a couple from Colorado heading to Small Hope Bay Lodge for their first Bahamas bonefishing adventure and chatted with them for a while. Soon we were joined by another pair of anglers, one from New York and one from Chicago, heading down to fish with Alvin at Swain's Cay. Both groups had booked direct, but were familiar with The Fly Shop and ordered from our catalog.

I also bumped into Cheryl Bastain there in the waiting area, an old friend and the owner of Swain's Cay Lodge.

Eventually my flight was called, and I lined up with mostly locals, definitely the only fisherman or tourist on this flight. The flight from Nassau to San Andros was a quick one, cruising at 4500 feet for only about 15 minutes before a smooth touchdown on the northern end of Andros Island.

I climbed out of the plane into the warm, humid Bahamas afternoon. It was a short stroll across the tarmac to the narrow terminal, and an even shorter stroll through the dark corridor to the front of the building and outside. Soon I was approached by a short, smiling Bahamian woman who introduced herself as Evie. I loaded my bag into the back of a black Lincoln Towncar, just as a pickup truck pulled up with all of the flight's luggage piled high in the back. I grabbed my checked bag, tossed it in the trunk of the Towncar, and hopped up front next to Evie.

We drove the paved road along a corridor of towering Caribbean pine, a thick forest much different from the low scrub that I'd experienced previously elsewhere on Andros. I noted few houses or buildings, giving the impression of a remote area. It was only 14 minutes to the turnoff to Robby's Place, but Evie took me on a quick detour to Morgan's Bluff, a small community and harbor where the guides launch their skiffs (before driving them around the protected bay in front of Robby's Place).

We circled past the harbor and back to the main road, and just a few minutes later we were pulling up to Robby's Place.

Robby's Place is a beautiful vacation home perched on a semi-private white sand beach looking out upon a sand and turtle grass bonefish flat that opened up into a narrow bay with a short reef beyond. The beach is perfect soft white sand. The waters are calm. The flat is inviting. And beyond is a reef for those who want to snorkel. And the view is incredible, a true piece of paradise.



The lodge itself features a full, 360 degrees wraparound covered porch. The front looks out on the bay and has a small table and chairs, along with a series of colorful lounge chairs. Non-anglers and families could easily spend a lot of time here in comfort. There is also a small shed/boat house nearby, home to the washer and dryer, extra refrigerator and freezers, as well as a pair of standup paddleboards, two kayaks, and a selection of snorkels and fins in varying sizes.





Inside, the front door opens up into the kitchen and great room. The kitchen is small, but features a commercial range for the chef, along with refrigerator for the guests, sink, coffee pot, and everything you need to feel right at home. Adjacent to the kitchen is the small dining table, just enough room for a comfortable meal for a group of 6. Beyond the dining table is a comfortable lounge area, complete with two sofas and a coffee table. There's even an extra half bathroom at the end of the room.



The lodge also features three spacious guest rooms, each with two queen beds. Each room has a private full bathroom. All in all, it's a small yet cozy, very comfortable space. It can easily and comfortably accommodate a group of 6 anglers.

There are also televisions (with Satellite TV) in each of the rooms. They are on the grid with 24 hour power, plus a backup generator if the main power line goes out. They have a big 5 gallon jug of bottled water for drinking water, the water for bathing, etc, is captured rainwater from the cistern (so probably okay to drink but best to use the bottled water for drinking and brushing teeth to be safe). There is good WiFi as well, and cell coverage for those requiring connectivity. There's also a ceiling fan in every room, along with an A/C unit in every room. Everything is totally dialed.



Evie gave me the tour and orientation. They had another staff person, Leonardo ("Nardo") raking the beach, and he grabbed a pair of fins for me (I brought my own snorkel just in case). I said goodbye to Evie and "Nardo" as they headed out for a bit, then waded across the bonefish flat to slightly

deeper water (never so deep I couldn't stand) and snorkeled my way out to the reef. The snorkeling wouldn't compare with Belize, but was pretty good overall, there's a lot of pretty shells, some coral, and a variety of reef fish including many different varieties of snappers, some angelfish, wrasse, plenty of urchins. I didn't spot any lobsters, but all the people here tell me that reef is loaded with them as well.

I came back in, showered up, and soon a car pulled up and the two guides, Ron and Drexel, came up the steps to introduce themselves. We went over the fishing agenda. They would both go out with me so I could get to know them both, and I told them to bring their rods, we'd fish together. I suggested they teach me how to pole and they looked at me like I was crazy. "We pretty much wade all the time here." Great!

They gave me the lay of the land, it's only 10-15 minutes to the flats, 45 minutes at the most if they run all the way to the North Josie Cay at the northern end of the Joulters. Lots of hard white sand flats, lots of schools of tailing bonefish. Because of the shallow water they like slightly smaller, lighter flies (no lead eyes). Gotchas and Crazy Charlies. When the water's really shallow they also light weightless flies, so good to have some of those, too. They launch the boats at either Morgan's Bluff or Low Sound, then run them here to the beach to meet guests in the morning around 8:00.

Evie called Ron and asked if I was ready to go, so I hopped in the car with Ron and he drove me in towards town. Apparently all of the restaurants in Nichols Town were either closed on Monday or closing early, but Evie found a restaurant attached to a small hotel near the airport that was open and dropped me off there. The waitress was nice, helped me order a fried snapper with white rice, macaroni, and plantains.

There was only one other table with guests, but two of them left and the final guest, another non-local came over and said hello and asked if he could join me. It turns out he works for the UNFAO, the same organization my friend Mark works for. Austin is based in Barbados, and working on an aquaculture project here on North Andros, where they raise tilapia in pens to sell commercially, using the fish waste as fertilizer for agriculture. It's a perfect model for implementation on Fanning, so I got his contact info to see if we can use the connection to benefit that island as well!

Evie showed up about as I was finishing, so I bid farewell to Austin and we drove back to Robby's Place. I said goodnight to Evie, and settled in for a much needed night of wonderful sleep.

Tuesday, March 12

I slept wonderfully, waking only with my alarm at 6:15. I made coffee and started getting ready for the day. A bit before 7 a car pulled up, and the chef, Lennie, strolled in. A jovial man, we chatted while he made an incredible, over-the-top breakfast for me of French toast with grilled bananas, omelet with grilled onion and peppers, and apple smoked bacon. It was way too much food, but I did my best to eat as much as I could.

Lennie's the real deal, he grew up cooking and then worked for years as a chef at a handful of different high-end hotels and resorts around the Bahamas (Four Seasons, Sandals, etc), before coming home to North Andros. He's hunting and fishing pals with the owner, Doctor Nigel Lewis, so also a passionate outdoorsmen and easily able to converse and relate with our clientele.

About the time I was finishing up breakfast, Ron pulled up in his flats skiff. Unfortunately, he was having engine problems, so Drexel hopped in his truck to go get his boat. It made for about an hour delay to start the day.



Finally Drexel pulled up, we loaded rods and gear into his skiff, and headed out. He, too, was having minor engine trouble to start the day, so he could only go about half throttle. It still only took about 15 minutes to get to the flats though, they're that close!

We pulled up to the first flat, tossed out the anchor, and started walking across a dry white sand flat to the other side to wade another flat where the tide was just coming in. Drexel hung back to fix his motor, which he did quickly (and ran perfectly the rest of the day), then he caught up with us. We waded across the flat in search of tailing fish, but they were scarce. Ron did spot a pair of large tailing bonefish; he was in a better position than I so I told him to take the shot, he made a good one but they spooked. We didn't see anything else, so we trudged back to the boat to head to another spot.



The boat was running fine now, so five minutes later we pulled up to another flat. There are flats everywhere here, all idyllic white sand, shallow and perfect for wading, interspersed with emerald green channels. It almost looks more like Christmas Island than the Bahamas!



On this next flat we didn't have to wade far before we spotted a handful of small schools of tailing bonefish. We chased these schools around for a while without luck, until they merged to form one massive school, milling about and tailing frequently. Ron hooked up first, and not long after I was tied into my first North Andros bonefish, about 3 pounds. We chased that school around for a while, with many more shots, but couldn't get another eat, they were just too agitated. Eventually they spooked off the flat, so we returned to the boat in search of the next flat.



The next flat was also just a few minutes away, and in no time at all we were again calf deep in search of tailing fish. This time the tails showed quickly, and again we chased massive schools of tailing bonefish around.



These fish are very spooky, no doubt because of all the sharks (small ones, lemons mostly), so it takes a longer cast to get to them, but they also settle down and go back to tailing fairly quickly once spooked so you get repeated shots at each school. I landed another bonefish here, and both Ron and Drexel also had some bent rods.

We fished our way back to the boat, motored another 5 minutes to yet another flat. We did see a couple of other boats, both motoring somewhere else. We never did see another fisherman outside of that.

At the next flat we scarfed a quick lunch of tuna sandwiches, very tasty. They also provided a bunch of snacks, chips and cookies, but we were there to fish so we swallowed our sandwiches in minutes and were right back to wading the flats.

There was a nice school of tailing fish that came within range right off the bat. I spooked the school with my first cast, but as they spooked from me they came across a shark and really spooked, high-tailing it off the flat. We walked for a ways in search of more fish, but Drexel was seeing a bunch of small sharks so he suggested we get out of there. He's pretty spooked by sharks, and you can tell the fish are spooky as well because of them so it was the right call.



We pulled up to another flat, but before we even got out of the boat Ron spotted a shark, so Drexel wanted nothing to do with it. We motored around a pine-shrouded cay to the other side, and pulled up to an expansive white sand flat.

The light was starting to get low, so this was our last shot for the day. We waded across the ankle deep white sand to where it started dropping off (just a few inches more, still only calf deep). Almost instantly we were

surrounded by multiple schools of tailing fish. All three of us were almost constantly casting to one school or another, and there were many bent rods. These fish were not nearly as anxious as those we'd encountered earlier, and we frequently got multiple shots into each school, until we hooked up! I landed at least 4 in this session, all healthy fish from 2-4 pounds. We could see larger fish milling about in the midst of these schools, but weren't able to draw those bigger fish out before one of the smaller ones would eat the fly. Eventually the light was getting low and we'd teased these fish enough, so we worked our way back to the boat to call it a day.

Overall, a decent day of bonefishing, all on foot, all to tailing fish. It's mostly schools, which in many ways is great as they're easy to spot, huge arrows of nervous water interspersed with dancing crystalline tails. Occasionally we would spot larger singles, though I only got one good shot in at an individual fish. Most of the schoolies were in that healthy 2-4 lb range, though I could spot larger fish in the groups as well. I did have one really big fish charging my fly at one point, though a smaller fish beat him to it! All in all, a good day.

I had noticed that somehow we were constantly fishing an incoming tide, all day long. I asked Ron and Drexel how that's possible, and they explained that different flats get the tides at different times, so you can bounce around and literally fish a pushing tide all day long. Perfect!

We motored back to Robby's Place, which didn't take long. I said farewell to the guides, and headed in to clean up.

In my mental notes, I'd planned on making a recommendation to Dr. Lewis to build some rod racks, as I hadn't noticed any. But apparently I didn't need to say anything, as while I'd been out fishing they'd built them already, with a brand new rack outside near the fresh water shower, plus more racks in each of the 3 bedrooms. These people are really on top of it!

I showered up, and by the time I was done Evie pulled up with a cooler full of fresh conch, lobster, and grouper. I sat on the deck and enjoyed the amazing view, and soon Lennie pulled up to start prepping another amazing dinner.

Lennie is a true master of the culinary arts. I'm pretty sure my dinner tonight was the best I've ever had at a saltwater lodge anywhere in the world. First course was a lobster salad over a bed of pan-fried broccoli, cauliflower, and pumpkin seeds. If that wasn't enough, the main course was a whole lobster, served over a monstrous, impeccable broiled grouper filet, accompanied by grilled plantains and roasted potatoes.



Ron stopped by for a bit before dinner, we chatted about the day and made plans for tomorrow, and I was able to talk him into staying for dinner. After dinner, Ron, Evie, and Lennie all took off, assuring me I'd see them bright and early in the morning. I sparked up a special Bahamian hand-rolled stogie that Dr. Lewis had procured for me, and settled in to work on photos and then off to bed.

Wednesday, March 13

The weather changed drastically overnight, and when I awoke this morning the skies were dark and the wind was howling. It would be a very different day today.

Soon Lennie showed up to make breakfast. Evie had asked the night before if I would like to try a traditional Bahamian breakfast: boiled fish with potatoes and homemade bread. I'm always open to experience the local

culture so I happily obliged. Of course, anything prepared by Chef Lennie is going to be exceptional anyway, and it was. It was basically a soup, with boiled grouper, potatoes, and grilled onions, accompanied by homemade bread. While not my standard breakfast fare, it was delicious and definitely filled me up to start the day!

Ron pulled up around 8:00, and we waited a bit for Drexel to show up in his boat. By 8:30 we were loaded up and heading out to the flats. The guides aren't in a huge rush in the morning, in part because of the short run times, and in part because of the long fishing days. The afternoons are better, so they prefer to hit the afternoons than rush out in the morning.

Although our plan the night before was to run up to the northern tip of the Joulters up to North Josie Cay, the sea was rough with the big winds so it wasn't going to be possible. There's no shortage of flats here, so we just stayed closer to the lodge and fished the flats to the leeward side of the various cays.

The sun also left us as we pulled up to the first flat, making for really challenging conditions. We spotted a small school of fish and I gave chase, but they were moving away too fast and I never could get in position for a good shot. Meanwhile, Drexel found another small pod of fish and was soon hooked up, a good start to the day, especially given the conditions.

We continued on, and soon I spotted a pair of fish, not far away because of the low light, and flopped a cast out there in front of them. One quickly swam up and ate, my first bonefish of the day.

We continued along this flat for a while, but just weren't seeing many fish, so we turned around and headed back to the boat to try a new flat. As we started motoring off, we could see a wall of darkness moving towards us. We donned our rain jackets just in time. We debated heading back to the lodge to wait it out, chowing down our delicious ham and cheese sandwiches to kill time, but it looked like the rain might not last long so Drexel instead motored to the next flat.

We walked a long way, it looked ideal and I'm sure the fish were there and we just couldn't see them with the rough chop and heavy clouds. Every once in a while we'd spot one, but it was always at our feet, seeing the fish too late and they were already spooked. As we gradually waded back over to the edge of the flat, I spotted a large single fish tailing just a few feet away. I dropped to my knees, flicked out a short roll cast, too far. Strip, strip, the fish turned, coming even closer. I only had the leader outside the tip of the rod, ducking down as low as I could I flopped the leader and fly in front of the fish, so close I could almost touch it. But it didn't see me, and rather sucked in my Gotcha and commenced to scream out across the flat.



From there we motored around a couple of channels to a new flat. As always, the tide was just starting to come in. These guys really know the area, understand which flats will be starting to push at the right times. We started walking, and the sun actually was trying to push through the clouds, still spotty but more sun than not.



I came to a tiny island with a single scrubby pine, and a narrow white sand spit extending out from it. Walking parallel to this spit, I spotted a pair of tailing bonefish. I made a cast into the wind, fortunately not far, and the two fish charged it instantly, fighting over the fly. The winner was a seasoned veteran of the flats, about 4 lbs, scarred all over with shark bites.



We continued walking on, and every so often would bump into singles or pairs of bonefish, usually tailing. Even with the sun trying to break through the light was still fairly flat, so we often didn't spot them till they were close. Still, they were quite willing and if we spotted them before they spotted us the result was typically a hookup. I landed several, and noticed both Ron and Drexel keeping pace.



Then all hell broke loose. Suddenly the sun came out in full glory. We were in a shallow part in the middle of this massive flat, easily over a square mile broad. And there were tailing bonefish literally everywhere. All singles, all decent fish seeming in that generic Bahamian 2-4 pound class. They were everywhere. For at least the next hour, we were casting constantly to tailing fish, at least one of us, often two, and sometimes all three hooked up to screaming bonefish. I quickly lost count. Incredible.

Eventually the flurry of action waned, though we continued patrolling the flat and gradually worked our way back towards the boat which by now was a long ways off. Although it wasn't a fish every cast as it had been for a while, we still spotted pairs, singles, and small pods of tailing bonefish and landed several more by the time we made it back to the boat.

The light was getting low now, and we were both exhausted and elated from an outstanding day on the flats.



Two very different days. One with calm skies and lots of sun casting to huge schools of fish, very spooky. One with big winds and bad light, casting to singles and pairs that were not spooky at all and happy to eat. I asked the guides about this, and they said the fish just behave differently on different flats.

We pounded our way back to the lodge through rough seas. While a bone-jarring boat ride, it was nonetheless a short one, and soon we were pulling up to the beach. I said goodbye to the guides for the night, and headed up to clean up.

Soon after I'd showered and freshened up with clean clothes, Evie arrived accompanied by the man himself, Dr. Nigel Lewis: "The Doc". Doc instantly gave off the vibe of a jovial yet serious man. We sat on the veranda, enjoying the cool breeze and spectacular views. Doc is an avid outdoorsman, loves to hunt and fish. He was born and grew up in Red Bay, just west of Robby's Place. He came to the US for school, both graduate and finally post-graduate at Yorba Linda in Southern California. He's a dentist in Nassau by trade...although he "dabbles" in all sorts of additional business ventures throughout the Bahamas. He's even friends with the Prime Minister, who stays at Robby's Place when he comes to Andros! I soon found that Doc knows EVERYONE on this part of the island.

Doc gave me the history of Robby's Place, which is named after his grandson. He was down in South Andros hunting pigeons and a friend of his told him about the property. He flew up the next day, saw it, instantly fell in love, and with a rock he traced out that day what has since become the house there on the beach. It began simply as a personal vacation home for he and his family, built only about 3 years ago (and so well built that it survived Hurricane Matthew which hit it dead center and caused massive destruction all over that part of the island).

He already has an amazing staff in place, including Ron, who is the head guide and who I'd fished with, but also takes care of the place and all of the boats. Evie, the housekeeper and general fixer. And Lennie, the amazing chef and one of Doc's longtime friends and hunting partners.

As we talked, he constantly joked and laughed and told stories, jumping on phone calls every few minutes with hardly a break in the conversation. He had his contractor, Parris, come out to discuss additions such as tweaking the rod racks, and building a rack for hanging wet wading boats. Just tell him what is needed and he'll do it.

Eventually darkness took over, and Lennie was ready with another incredible meal. We enjoyed crack conch, locally grown free range chicken, Bahamian Peas and Rice, and grilled plantains. He insisted I sit at the head of the table, at the Prime Minister's seat.

After another fulfilling dinner, we chatted a bit further then crashed for the night.



Thursday, March 14

What a whirlwind day! Doc and I awoke around 7 and drank coffee while enjoying the beautiful views. It was a windy, stormy day, a good day to not be fighting the flats.

Doc started to cook breakfast, but the propane ran out in one tank and the other tank was leaking, so we hopped in the Towncar and drove into town to pick up some Teflon Tape to wrap it. Of course, a trip anywhere with Doc entails multiple stops and talking to everyone, who all know him and want to shake his hand and tell stories.

Included in this tour was a stop by the boutique hotel he's building in Nichols Town, just 10 minutes away from Robby's Place. Parris was there with his crew (all his brothers), and they gave us the tour. It'll be a beautiful facility, with 11 rooms each with en suite bath, and a large backyard area where they'll put in a pool for guests' leisure, even though the beach is only a 3 minute walk away. Everything is top notch and first rate.

An hour later, we were back at the lodge. About that time the propane guy showed up to fill the tanks anyway, and fixed the problem while we ate free range scrambled eggs and more of that delicious apple smoked bacon that Doc brings back from the US every time he goes.

While not quite fully Farm to Table, Robby's Place is pretty close. They have an expansive garden behind the boat shed and grow a lot of their own produce, and source out local chicken and eggs and seafood.

I did the dishes, then we hopped back in the car for a tour of the island. We drove around Nichols Town, saw the beach resort near The Manor, Ron's place where they store their boats. We stopped at a roadside bar for a couple of Kaliks before continuing the drive south to Conch Sound. There Doc introduced me to his friend Boxer, who coordinates the commercial fishermen there and gets Doc the pick of the best seafood they get there, be it conch, lobster, or fish.

Back in Nichols Town, we stopped by the Manor again to chat with Parris for a bit. Ron showed up, and the three of us started our drive south to Fresh Creek. We stopped at a roadside bar/liquor store, where again Doc knew everyone, and after a half hour of laughs, jokes, and stories, we'd filled the trunk up with booze for the party tonight and were back on the road.

We made it to Fresh Creek, and in a small community called Love Hill we stopped at another resort owned by another of Doc's friends, where we grabbed another beer and some snacks of lobster bites and conch fritters. Then back on the road heading north to Robby's Place.

We finally got back to the lodge about 6, and I had a few minutes to pack up for my travel home tomorrow before the "party" started.

Doc had invited a few of his friends and all of the local guides that they would be working with. The next few hours, while Evie and Lennie prepared a buffet of burgers, hot docs, conch fritters, and lobster, we sat around on the deck and shared fishing stories. It was great to meet all of the guides, nice guys and a good mix, some older, some younger, all experienced, some vocal and others quiet. It'll be a good crew to work with. There were 8 of them: Ron and Drexel who I already knew, plus Henson, Carlton, Keith, Elias, Skimmer, and Saulomon.

As the night grew late, one by one the guides trickled out. Some didn't drink at all, most only had a beer or two, even though only a few were working the next day. They're good people, all of them serious hunters, seamen, and fishermen.

Eventually, the house was quiet, and it was almost midnight so I instantly fell asleep.

Friday, March 15

A few hours later, my alarm was going off at 5:30 for the early and long travel day. Doc drove me to the airport. The flight on Western Air lasted 12 minutes to Nassau. I checked in for my afternoon flight, and settled in to have breakfast before the rest of the long journey home.