

Caranci Trip Report: Zapata, Cuba May 27-June 3, 2017

Travel and Logistics

Travel is relatively smooth. Getting in and out of Cuba is daunting at first, but is way easier than one would think given the politics of it all. While it is still technically illegal for US Citizens to travel to Cuba for purposes of tourism, all tour packages (including fishing trips) are designed to cover the legal allowances for travel.

We were able to purchase our flights directly on-line. Because of the embargo, most travel agents (such as Alicia Regueiro from Holdy Tours) cannot actually book flights into Cuba. But a handful of US-based airlines now fly directly into Havana (as well as other airports in Cuba). So purchasing flights was easy. I flew on American Airlines via Charlotte. Several others in our group traveled via Houston, Atlanta, and Miami. There are some agencies, such as CubaTravel.com, that can book flights, as well as hotels and tours.



Once you have your flights booked, travel is basically like going to any other destination, with a couple of minor differences. When you check in for your flight, they will ask you at the check-in counter your purpose of travel for Cuba. We had been prompted to tell them we were going for a public performance, one of the 12 legal purposes to travel there. They knew we were going fishing, but it didn't matter and all we had to do was tell them, verbally, one of the 12 reasons.

There is also some discrepancy here in how each airline handles it. Some airlines still require a signed affidavit, which is just a form you can print out in advance, or that they give you at the airport, where you check a box next to your reason for travel and sign the paper. On American Airlines, it was purely verbal.

The other step is to obtain your Cuban Visa, or Tourist Card. Again, there is quite a bit of discrepancy here, and every airline handles it differently. We learned a week before our departure that you can order the Tourist Card in advance, which cost us \$85 and it was Fedexed to us a few days later. Most people just get the Tourist Card at the departure gate en route to Cuba. The price there at the gate also varied, with some paying as much as \$100, and others as little as \$50. They will not let you on the plane without this card in your possession. At every departing gate, before boarding the plane, regardless of airline, there is a small desk or kiosk where you need to check in. If you have your Tourist Card, they ask to see it and stamp your boarding pass, indicating you are all set to travel. If you don't have your card yet, they'll sell it to you (credit cards are accepted). Once your boarding pass has been stamped, you're ready to board. The flight from Charlotte to Havana is short and easy, a little over 2 hours in the air.

Upon arrival in Havana, we disembarked the plane, then had a relatively long walk down a series of tiled corridors until we came to the immigrations and customs area. We landed just after a Delta flight, so there was a horde of two big planes' worth of people all arriving at the same time. The corridors opened-up to an expansive room with literally dozens of immigration booths, each with a person there checking people in. Even with all the people, there were no lines and we walked right up. They asked to see our passport and visa, stamped both, and welcomed us to Cuba. It was that simple.

From there we walked through to another big room which contained a whole bunch of stations with X-Ray machines and metal detectors. We had to run our carryon bags through the machines and walk through the detectors. Then we walked through to the carousel and waited for a couple of minutes only before all of our bags came down the line. In departing the Customs area we had a choice of two paths: one if we had something to declare, another if we didn't. We didn't, so we turned left, walked down a long corridor, then gave our Customs declaration sheet to another uniformed lady who waived us through. That was it. All told, it took maybe 15 minutes.

The others in our group arriving on different flights on different days had varying experiences. It was smooth and painless for all, but while about half of us had the easy, 15 minute and done experience, some of the others arrived with multiple flights and it took them almost 2 hours to get through it all. Still no issues, just longer lines and longer delays.



As soon as we walked out we faced the barrage of sign-holding agents and taxi drivers. One woman in a red shirt had a sign with my name on it. She introduced us to our driver, nicknamed "Caballito", and he led us outside the terminal and asked us to wait there at the curb. There was a row there of about a hundred yellow taxi cabs. So obviously getting an official taxi from the airport is an easy affair. In fact, one of our group who arrived the day after and got stuck in long delays in the baggage area missed the agent, so he simply grabbed a taxi and was easily transported to the hotel.

A minute later a long black limousine style sedan pulled up to the curb and Caballito got out and helped load our luggage into the expansive trunk. We piled into the back of the car and took off, while Caballito explained that it was a 1986 Russian made limousine, one of only 10 in the entire country. It was one of Fidel Castro's security limousines, now in government service as an airport taxi company. We were literally riding in the same car that Fidel used to ride in!

The drive from the airport into the Vedado area of Habana where our hotel was located took about 20 minutes. It was an interesting drive, down a decent highway that sped through first the rural, agricultural outskirts of town, then into the "suburbs" with lots of communist style

track apartment complexes, then into the more classic, varied architectural styles and hectic traffic of downtown Havana. Sharing the road with us was a broad variety of vehicles, from the ubiquitous 1950s era US classic cars (of note was a pristine 1957 Ford Fairlane and a 1951 Mercury, among many others), juxtaposed against a lot of 1980s era Russian made vehicles, plus some more recent European models and a surprising number of old motorcycles with attached side carts. Billboards boasting of Cuban pride, baseball, and signs in Spanish that read Fidel lives with us forever decorated the roadside as we passed hospitals, schools, businesses, and homes. Some were clean and obviously refurbished, while others were in varying states of decay.

The closer we got to Vedado and Habana Vieja the more classic cars we saw, and the better condition the cars were in. It seems most of the nicest cars, with the shiniest paint jobs, are now in the employment of taxi service.

Soon we pulled up in front of our hotel, the NH Capri. The Capri was famous as one the main mafia hotel in the 1950s, and has recently been entirely renovated to a 4 star hotel status. We paid our driver \$30 CUCS (Richard had some left over from his last trip, you can also get them exchanged at the airport, an taxi drivers are known to widely accept Euros as payment as well).

Havana itself is a really amazing place. It is dirty in terms of air pollution and the numbers of crumbling buildings, but also very clean in that there's very little trash anywhere. The streets are busy with cars and pedestrians, but very safe. Locals simply smile and say hello, and we were never once hassled on the street.

The hotel is in a great location, a block away from the famous Hotel Nacional, two blocks from





the famous Malecon (boulevard that parallels the coastline), and within walking distance of a handful of great restaurants. The hotel staff is outstanding, very helpful, and quick to recommend places to see and eat, as well as make reservations for us. There are also several hotels and bars inside the hotel. It's a short walk to some great sights, and an easy taxi ride in a classic car into Habana Vieja, the historic city center.



For those wanting to extend their stay on the front end, there is a lot to see and do, both in and around Havana and outside in the country and other cities and beach resort areas. A word of note, arranging tours is not easy, as the tour companies are all controlled by the government. CubaTravel.Com is one we ended up using, and although it took a lot of time and back and forth, they did a good job in arranging several tours, including a full day tour to the Valley of Viñales, famous for its scenic beauty and one of the best areas for growing tobacco for the famous Cuban Cigars, and also a City Tour that

focused on the places Hemingway lived and roamed during his many years in Havana. Since the average salary for most Cubans is only around \$20 per month, jobs in the tourism industry are literally some of the best paying jobs in the country because of tipping, so the tour guides in general are very good, well educated, and happy to be doing their job.

The day of travel to the fishing grounds starts very early. We met in the hotel lobby at 4:00 am. Erica from Fly Fishing the Run showed up a few minutes later, and by 4:30 am the bus was there ready to go. We boarded the bus, a full sized Cuban tour bus, and took off into the early Havana morning. As we rode down the Malecon, it was packed with hundreds of Cubans enjoying the last few hours of their Saturday night festivities. The bus made its way to the highway leading south towards Playa Larga, and soon most of us were asleep. The bus stopped once midway at a rest stop for a bathroom break. Then we continued on.

The grayness of dawn was upon us as we rolled through the resort of Playa Larga, just over 2.5 hours since we'd left Havana. The bus found its way to a two-lane dirt track, and soon we were disembarking into a narrow harbor. The harbor was lined with rusted-out buildings, and a collection of even more rusty boats, at least half of which were partially sunk in the shallow bay. The others had lobster pots stacked on the top. The harbor itself was probably 400 meters long and 100 meters wide at its widest stretch. At the far end was a wall of granite, topped with towering trees. Birds were everywhere, the most wildlife we'd seen since being in Cuba.



We met the crew of the ship, including our hostess Dany (pronounced "dah-nai"), as well as the captain and crew. We would meet the guides later when we arrived to the fishing grounds. A couple of people started snapping photos, and Dany quickly and politely informed us that photos were not allowed in the harbor, apparently because it is government owned and operated. We couldn't fathom why as it wasn't much to look at, but respected their wishes and turned our cameras off. We boarded the liveaboard ship the Georgiana.

We settled into our rooms and Dany gave each person an individual orientation to their stateroom. Everyone settle in quickly, then we met upstairs to wait until the ship was ready to depart the harbor.

The harbor is very narrow, and the Georgiana seems massive in the small channel. The captain was outstanding in manuevering the tight space, turning the boat and motoring out through the mouth with only a few feet to spare on either side. Once we cleared the opening, we found ourselves in the historic Bay of Pigs.



The boat motored along the long Bay, then turned right and continued motoring for several hours around the point until it made its mooring in the middle of the fishing grounds. All told, it was about a 4 hour ride, and it was about noon when we finally set anchor.

We all met upstairs for the pre-trip briefing, where Dany gave us the information on the boat, don't but TP in the toilet, 24 hour power, how the

beverage tab works, and to let her know whatever we need and she'll make it happen. Then we were introduced to all of the guides, and the head guide Marco explained the fishing program. Then it was time to go fishing for the afternoon!

The return voyage was equally long, but relatively smooth. The Georgiana's motors fired up at 6:00 am, and by 6:30 the anchor had been pulled in and the boat was chugging off out into open water.

Breakfast was served at 8:00, after which we all settled in to wait out the 4 hour ride across Zapata, down the length of the Bay of Pigs, to the harbor. We pulled in promptly at 10:00 am. They had arranged a private taxi for Ed since he had a super early, 2:30 departing flight. We said our goodbyes and he was gone. The rest of us said lengthier farewells to Dany before loading up into the bus.

It should be noted, that the boat normally doesn't leave so early, and guests should NOT book flights before 5:30 pm. They made an allowance for Ed, and were able to get him to the airport in time. Normally the boat would depart Zapata at 8, back at the harbor at 12:00, to the airport about 3:00 or 3:30.

The bus departed about 10:30 for the long ride back to Havana. We stopped once about 12:00 for a brief bathroom break at a roadside rest area, which also had some decent souvenir shops. By 12:30 we were back in the bus, pulling into the Jose Marti International Airport at 1:00. 3 hours total drive time to the airport.

We had done most of the drive in the dark on the way in, so it was great to have a chance to see more of the Cuban countryside. We passed through the small resort area of Playa Larga, then most of the rest of the drive was through the rural Cuban countryside, scattered with a lot of agricultural land and small farms.

At the airport we dropped off Gregg, Lloyd, and Rob. Then the bus continued on 30 minutes more into Vadero and to the Hotel Capri. The rest of us weren't able to get flights out until the following morning, so we had another night in Havana before continuing on.

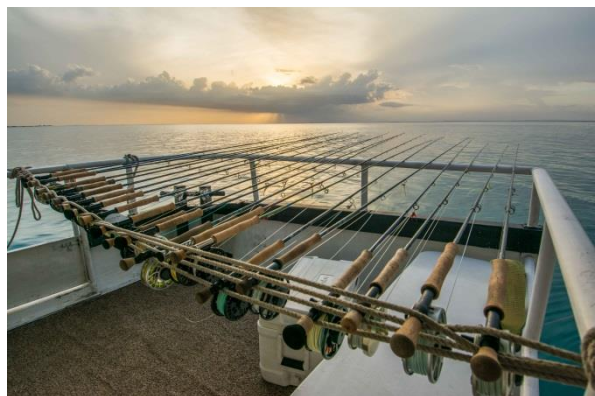
Accommodations

The Georgiana is a very comfortable boat. It's not fancy, but very cozy and more than adequate for a group of anglers. There are a total of 6 staterooms for the maximum of 8 guests, so 4 people end up with doubles and the other 4 have single rooms. Each room is the same, a small but comfortable space with a set of bunk beds on one side and an open twin bed on the other, plus a small closet area, and a spacious en suite bathroom. There is reliable hot water, and 24 hour power plus very good air conditioning.

The downstairs aboard the ship features the staterooms for guests plus a large room for the guides and crew. The back deck is open with space for storing and rigging rods, plus a stairwell that leads to the top deck. The top deck has a wonderful open air feel to it, with wraparound seating, a collection of comfortable chairs, and a long central dining table. At the far end is the bar, a large fridge with an assortment of drinks, then the Captains cockpit. Each person gets an allotment of 8 drinks a day included in the package, which includes water, beer, and soda. In addition, there's a welcome cocktail every night when you return from the fishing, 2 bottles of wine a night for the group, plus a bottle of rum for the group per day. Any additional drinks are charged to your tab to settle up at the end of the week. We found that the allotment of 8 drinks a day was about perfect, and very few of us had to add any drinks by the end of the week. For those who do drink more, the prices are very reasonable at around \$2-\$2.50 a drink for soda, water, and beer, \$10-15 for a bottle of wine.

Food

The food was amazing. Breakfast every morning was good with a full spread of meats, cheese, fruit, fresh squeezed juice, yogurt, toast, and more, plus eggs made to order. Coffee was





always available and hot. Some of the guests were tea drinkers and said the tea was very weak, so they switched to coffee.

Lunches were the only weak area. It was a good lunch in terms of quantity, way too much to eat it all. Just bland and boring, especially after a whole week. Every day a variation of the same thing: a tupperware of fresh fruit (pineapple and papaya), and a Tupperware full of steamed white rice, some cucumbers and tomatoes, and some sort of meat and starch (chicken and plantains, fish and potatoes, grilled pork and potatoes, etc). It was all good, but a bit boring and while nobody complained about the lunches they definitely weren't a highlight.

Dinners, on the other hand, were not so much dinner as a nightly feast. The spread on the table was out of the world there was so much food, and all of it delicious. Each night there were multiple options from lobster to fish to

lamb to chicken to rice to pastas to soup, always accompanied with trays of tomatoes and cucumbers (salad) and fresh fruit. Tons of food, all of it outstanding. Desserts were well acclaimed as well.

Guides and Staff

The guides were very good. About half of the guides spoke very good English; the others could communicate effectively for the fishing, just weren't fluent enough to have long conversations. The guides genuinely wanted you to have a good day, and they worked really hard to try to make it happen. We had really challenging conditions with big winds every day, so they had to work even harder to try to find fish.

They were able to help if you asked for help, while they didn't go out of their way to offer assistance. They would get frustrated if you blew a shot, but the frustration was very short-

lived and never directed at you. They would simply take a deep breathe, then go on. They really knew the water and were excellent at handling the boats, both running the motors and poling.

The captain and crew of the Georgiana were also great. The Captain helped out every day, and was always smiling. The sailors were equally helpful and friendly.

Easily the most valuable person in the entire operation is the hostess, Dany (pronounced “Dah-nai”). She was one of the best hostesses I’ve ever seen. She was warm and friendly, and always went out of her way to provide exceptional service. Whatever someone wanted, she made it happen. She was the first one up in the morning with hot coffee ready, and the last one to bed at night. She spoke great English and had a wonderful personality, always smiling and laughing and really making everyone on board feel like they were at home.

Boats

The skiffs and motors were all brand new, purchased just 2 months before and with less than 300 hours on them at the start of the week. There are 6 boats total. 2 are standard dolphin skiffs, with room for two anglers plus the guide, with 70 hp Yamaha 4 Stroke motors. The other 4 boats are slightly smaller dolphin skiffs, perfect and vary



spacious for single fishing, just one angler and the guide. They had 40 hp Yamaha 4 stroke motors. The boats were new ,clean, well maintained, and the motors ran perfectly. There was one day when Ed’s boat ran out of gas, and it took them some time to get the motor started after switching fuel tanks. But they did, and the guide fished him till almost dark to make up for the lost time.

These boats are perfect for the super shallow flats of Zapata, frequently running in mere inches of water. They do not handle the bigger waves associated with the big winds that were pounding the windward side of the outside flats, however. These are some of the guides’ favorite areas to fish and some of the best spots for tarpon and big permit. Normally, there is little wind there and they fish these areas a lot. For our week, there was a lot of wind and they were not able to fish here much. We did try a couple of times (and were very successful), but waves were literally coming up over the side and into the boat. But since these conditions are rare and there are so many of the super shallow areas, these really are great boats for fishing in this region.

Fishing

I would love to come back someday and see Zapata at its best. We were challenged with big winds, and the guides explained that there had been a high pressure system sitting over the area for 4 weeks straight, non-stop heavy winds, and the fish weren't happy about it. Supposedly, this time of year (April/May/June) is the "rainy season", which means it's common to get 25 minutes to an hour of rain a day, often in the morning or late afternoon, and the rest of the time the weather is ideal with very light wind. In these conditions, the flats stay cooler, the chop is less, the guides can fish everywhere, and the fish are happy.

We had big winds every day, the "lightest" days around 15-20 mph, the windier days in the 30+ sustained winds all day. Challenging conditions to say the least.

Still, it is a testament to the fishery that overall we didn't have bad fishing. I wouldn't call it great, but we had opportunities every day, most everyone had at least one really good day, a few decent days and a tough day or two.

There are two real advantages this fishery has: first, it is huge; second, it has an incredible array of diverse habitats (and therefore species). The area is quite vast, and with only 6 boats spread out all over the countless miles upon miles of flats, lagoons, and channels, there is simply a ton of area to hold fish. Within these areas, there are nearly limitless super shallow bonefish flats, many of which can be poled and fished from the boat while there are also miles of hard sand, easily





waded flats to search for tailing bonefish; there are dozens of miles of shallow lagoons where they regularly find permit (and bonefish); there are scores of narrow mangrove channels and lagoons for hunting baby tarpon from 10-40 pounds; there are pancake flats popping up out of deeper water, perfect for permit; there are miles of beaches with expansive turtle grass and white sand flats along the edges where they find bigger tarpon from 40-80 pounds, plus big permit; there are some sandy and mangrove lined flats that snook call home; and there are a series of blue holes and coralheads where massive Cubera Snapper, jack crevalle, and countless other species lurk to attack poppers on the surface. There is literally a bit of everything here, and I've never fished anywhere with so many different types of habitat in the same geographic sphere.

As a bonus, this area was a popular commercial fishing zone for many years. Until 2 years ago, when it was designate a protected marine reserve, with Fly Fishing the Run the only boats now allowed to fish (fly fishing only, catch and release) within the reserve. With only 2 years of protections in place, the fishing will only continue to improve.

The fishing days start with breakfast at 7:30, and at 8:30 everyone loads into the guide boats off the back deck to head out for the day. Each day we would go out in 6 boats, with 2 skiffs fishing double, and 4 skiffs fishing single. We would rotate each day. There are two main "zones" at Zapata, with the 4 single skiffs splitting up to fish to the East, an area well populated with bonefish and permit, plus a few special areas with tarpon and snook they reserve to try to fill a grand slam. The 2 double skiffs go west, which has more tarpon and permit. Barracuda, snapper, and the occasional snook can be found throughout.

Each day you rotate, so you end up with 3 days fishing in the double skiffs in the western zone, and 3 days fishing as a single in the eastern area.

You have the option to fish all day and return to the Georgiana about 4:00. Or you can return for lunch and a siesta and go back out to fish until 6:30. We opted to stay out and fish all day, and although we were initially disappointed to hear of the 4 pm scheduled return, we were rarely actually back at the boat before 5 pm, and some days boats wouldn't return until nearly

7. The guides work hard, and especially since we had challenging conditions they really put in the extra effort for us.

Even with the challenging conditions, we had opportunities every day. Everyone in the group landed tarpon and bonefish, those who tried for permit had good shots and 3 permit were hooked in the week though none landed. We saw snook, and landed some big cubera snapper plus a few barracudas. Fish sizes on all species had a broad range, indicating a healthy ecosystem: tarpon went from 10-40 pounds landed, and some bigger fish were spotted. Permit ranged from 5-25 pounds. Bonefish averaged 2-3 pounds but several fish from 5-6 pounds were landed and the guides say they get them up to 8+ pounds on the outside flats we weren't able to fish. Snook ranged from 3-20 pounds. It's a great resource, with a great potential for a broad variety of flats fishing scenarios.

The fish are not spooky, either. They were in a weird mood because of the high pressure system, and some days they were there and didn't want to eat. But they weren't spooky, and even when they had lockjaw we got numerous shots at the fish, they would just follow and turn away without eating.



Conclusions

We've spent years doing our homework and researching the various outfitters and locations in Cuba. I think we've found the right place to focus our efforts on this saltwater destination. The Fly Fishing the Run team did an outstanding job, and everything they could control was first rate. They can't control the weather, and even with tough conditions we fared okay overall with decent enough fishing. All of the guests were happy.

The logistics are smooth and simple, not a lot of room for big problems like we've heard with some of the other destinations.

And the fishing grounds are really dynamic. There's something here for everyone, and a fishing program with the flexibility to make serious flats anglers happy. With it being a new area only recently set aside to be protected, the fishing will only continue to improve.

It is not an area I would recommend for novice anglers. The fishing is not easy, and since so much of the area is really shallow, those anglers with better casting skills are going to fare better. The guides are great for finding fish and getting into position, but don't have the overall communication skills to help beginner fly fishers. Experienced and intermediate flats fishermen, however, will be rewarded with a great overall experience and opportunities to target all of the main flats species in a variety of different habitats and situations.

Key Points

- Zapata is a huge, protected marine reserve with only 6 boats a day for a maximum of 8 anglers fishing a seemingly endless supply of flats
- It is an incredibly diverse ecosystem, with many different species and types of flats to fish.
- The guides, staff, and equipment are all first rate.
- Travel logistics are smooth and simple.

