

2018 Fanning Island Journal  
Michael Caranci

**Monday, January 08, 2018**

Our group of intrepid adventurers all arrived in Honolulu on various flights from the US throughout the day. We planned to meet up around 5:30 at the hotel lobby to enjoy a dinner together. Maurizio was already in Waikiki with his wife and said he'd just meet us at the airport in the morning. The rest of us — Don, David and Matt — would still do dinner and start our pre-trip excitement.

Unfortunately, just before I was to head down to the lobby, I learned from Juliette at Pegasus that there was a problem with the fuel on Christmas Island, rendering it unlikely that we would be able to make it to Fanning as planned upon arrival on Christmas. I broke the news to the guys, who were obviously disappointed but understanding that things in Kiribati are fluid and often don't work out as planned.

We took a taxi out to Waikiki since the hotel restaurant was closed and there aren't many good options to eat there near the airport. I wanted to take everyone to Duke's, one of my favorite spots there in Waikiki. Duke's was packed, the busiest I've ever seen it. Still, we were able to snag a small table in the bar area without too long of a wait, and soon were scarfing down some fish tacos and Maui burgers.

We returned to the hotel to crash, and I started working on figuring out a backup plan for the Christmas Island Arrival.

**Tuesday, January 09, 2018 / Wednesday, January 10, 2018**

We met for breakfast in the hotel restaurant. Before heading down to meet the group, I was able to talk to Juliette again and learned that we had guides arranged for fishing on Christmas, and the fuel issue should be sorted out Thursday so we (hopefully would) be able to make it to Fanning with only a day's delay. Everyone seemed okay with it, excited to at least be fishing.

We took the 9 am shuttle to the airport, where we met Maurizio in the check in line for the Fiji Airways flight. We also learned that the fuel issue was bigger than we'd thought and was impacting the Fiji Airways flight to Christmas Island. Since they couldn't use the fuel on the island, they were going to have to carry enough fuel to fly there and back should they need to, which meant they were very strict on limiting luggage. They would accept no extra bags, and no overweight bags.

My bag was 10 pounds overweight because of all the extra clothes, gifts, and sports equipment I was bringing to Fanning for the community and children, but luckily Don had a lot of extra room so I swapped stuff into his bag and we were still both underweight now and okay.

There were a lot of anglers heading to Christmas, at least 50 people with a big group hosted by Mike Hennessey heading to Ikari, a bunch going to Crystal Beach, and a group going into Villages. After a computer glitch caused a minor delay, we were soon checked into our flight and ticketed without further issues. They breezed us through security which was nice, and we only had about an hour to wait in the terminal before the flight was scheduled to depart. Since almost everyone was going fishing, there was a lot of fun conversation amongst the many anglers.

Soon we boarded the flight. Once everyone was in their seats, the pilot announced that the plane was overweight, so they would be taking some of the luggage out of the hold randomly. There was nothing we could do about it, they just let us know that if our bag didn't make it we had to file a claim with the airline.

It's a big reminder that transportation in this super remote part of the Pacific Ocean is always going to be tenuous. Too many people take Christmas Island for granted, it seems such a "common" destination, but it's definitely not a guarantee just getting there sometimes. Then there's the additional complication getting to Fanning, even more remote and with more hurdles to overcome. This is one of the many challenges operating here.

Otherwise, the flight was smooth as can be. No turbulence, a decent meal and a glass of wine, and 3.5 hours later we were touching down in Kiribati. Everyone filed off the plane, waited in line and cleared immigration, then purchased our \$50 fishing license, then grabbed our bags and cleared customs. Fortunately, everyone in our group had our bags arrive without an issue. Not everyone was so lucky, as a few of the people going to Crystal Beach were missing their bags.

Once we exited the terminal, we were greeted with the smiling faces of Naitiniwa (Pegasus team member), and Otea (head guide at Captain Cook and a friend). Naitiniwa gave me the full scoop on the fuel issue: it seems the tanker arrived on the island earlier in the week, so there was ample fuel on the island; however, they could not use the fuel until it had been properly tested to make sure it wasn't contaminated en route. Poor planning, and they didn't have enough extra fuel left on the island for the Fiji and Air Kiribati flights. They had to send a sample of the fuel on the Fiji Air Flight, to go on to New Zealand for testing, which would happen tomorrow (Thursday), in which case we should be clear to fly to Fanning on Friday morning. That said, there was a slight chance that if the Fiji Flight didn't take too much of the final remaining fuel, we may have enough to make it over in the morning after all. Naitiniwa would get us all to the Captain Cook then go back to the airport to find out.

We loaded the bags into the bag of a truck, then piled into a pair of cars for the short, 5 minute ride to the Captain Cook.

The place looked pretty good overall as we pulled up. Very quiet, but also clean, no garbage anywhere, everything raked and picked up. The check-in was quick, and we were all given keys to private bungalows on the beach. We unloaded into the rooms, which were all clean and ready for us. There was no power on at the moment, but everything else seemed to be working.



Of the group, Maurizio has been to Christmas at least 10 times and stayed at all the places, and likes the CCH. David had been to Christmas once, years ago, and stayed at CCH. Matt has been twice in recent years, stayed at both Villages and Ikari. Don is new to the island. Everyone is very pleased with the location there at CCH. Matt even went so far as to say it is “exponentially better” than any of the other places.

We walked down to the bar to get a few beers and some bottled water, and they turned the generator on then so by the time we returned to the rooms the power was on and the A/C was cranking, though it was a moderately cool day today and with the consistent trade winds blowing off the roaring surf it was fairly comfortable even without the AC, which most of the guys turned off anyway. The only real criticism was that there was no hot water.

The bungalows are in okay shape, and it’s such a lovely setting here on the private beach, outside of town, simply beautiful. It’s a lovely evening as well.



Naitiniwa returned and confirmed that we would not fly tomorrow, but should be okay to fly first thing Friday morning. Otea arranged for guides and a skiff, so we were all set to fish on Christmas Island in the morning. Although everyone is a bit bummed to not be heading to Fanning, they are equally excited to be fishing on Christmas. It’s actually really cool to be able to fish both places, and spirits are high.

At 7 we headed down to dinner, which was a small family style serving of chicken curry, rice, vegetables, and fresh ahi sashimi. Pretty good, everyone’s happy. We met a young Australian

carpenter who just arrived today to start working on the construction on the new airport terminal, which we'd noticed was well under way with foundations starting to go up already.

I arranged with the kitchen staff to pre-order our breakfast for the morning, at 6:30, so it would be ready and quick and we could head out for fishing. We returned to the beachside bungalows, rigged up for fishing, and all were really pumped for a great night's sleep with the roaring of the ocean to sing them off to bed.

### **Thursday, January 11, 2018**

My alarm woke me at 5:45 am. We were all down at the restaurant for breakfast at 6:30. Since we'd pre-ordered the night before, our breakfast rolled out right as we walked in, eggs to order plus toast and "sausage", which was really a cooked hot dog. A good breakfast overall, especially combined with hot coffee.

Soon we were back at the bungalows, and the truck rolled up at 7:00 on the dot with our three guides, Otea, Zoboo, and Tolga, the same three guides I'd fished with a couple of years ago when on my "diplomatic" mission here at the CCH meeting with the government officials. We loaded our rods and gear into the back of the truck, then started out down the bumpy, partially paved road towards London. The road was slightly better than when I'd been here last, but it still was about a 30 minute drive into town.

We pulled into the small moorage near the entrance to the harbor, unloaded the truck, piled into the skiff, and were soon motoring off across the lagoon. The group wanted to target triggerfish as much as possible, knowing that in doing so we'd also get ample opportunities at bonefish.

We motored for about another 30 minutes, but of course there were other boats and anglers already on the flats we were heading towards so it took a bit more motoring around to find some open flats.

Maurizio didn't want to fish with a guide, so Don, David, and Matt each had their own guide while Maurizio and I headed off on our own. The boat dropped each group of 2 off, and soon we were wading the wonderful white sand flats of Christmas Island.

Within seconds of the boat pulling away, Maurizio and I were surrounded by schools of bonefish and small milkfish. There seemed to be fish everywhere. I hooked a bonefish on my first cast, but wasn't really mentally prepared and broke the fish off. I re-tied, kept walking the flat, and before long was landing my first bonefish of the trip, a feisty little guy. We waded this long flat for the next couple of hours, and for a long time the fish just kept coming, one after



another. Most were small bonefish, and soon I'd lost count of how many I'd hooked, landed, and released. I could see Maurizio hooked up frequently as well. No matter how many people want to say Christmas Island isn't what it used to be, it remains one of the most prolific bone fisheries in the world.

I was pleased to spot and have some good shots at several large single bonefish as well. I did hook and lose one, but otherwise these larger fish were very wary. Still, it was good to see them on the flats and have decent shots at them.

At one point I looked behind me and spotted a nice Giant Trevally, probably about 20 pounds, slowly cruising up the flat. I didn't have time to change rods before it had disappeared, but good to see one. I also saw several large surgeonfish feeding on coral, and a school of 3-4 decent bluefin trevally on the flat.

After a great start with the bonefish, I decided to move towards deeper water along the edge of the flat where there was more coral in the hopes of spotting some triggerfish. I was soon rewarded, and over the course of the next hour or so had numerous shots at these spooky, colorful creatures. Some of them were quite large. All of them were spooky, and though I had lots of shots I was unable to get a fly in front of one without spooking it.

Eventually the boat came over and we joined the rest of the group. Everyone had had a good morning, with numerous bonefish landed. Both Maurizio and Matt had also hooked triggerfish, but were unsuccessful in landing them with one broken line and one broken hook to show.

We ate a quick lunch of tuna salad sandwiches (quite tasty) while we motored back towards London to find some new flats. The area the guides wanted to fish was quite milky when we got there, no doubt a result of the heavy winds pounding the flats on this otherwise nice, sunny day. Clouds were also starting to roll in, and while the morning had been ideal light conditions the rest of the day was a mixture of sun and clouds.

We finally found some other flats that weren't too milked up or had other people on them, and we one by one piled out of the boat and spread out to start fishing. I ended up on a huge flat with Otea and Matt walking the far edge, with me a few hundred feet away on the inside as the tide started coming in.

At first there wasn't much happening, then I started to spot a few small schools of small bonefish cruising quickly up the flat. I missed my first few shots then landed a couple of fish. Then I spotted a big single cruising towards me from a long ways out, at least 5-6 pounds. I got a good shot in front of it, the fish followed, eventually refusing my Teannaki Special.

I kept walking, hooked a couple more smallish bones, then got a similar shot in at another big bone. This time I cast too long with the wind at my back and spooked the fish. Bummer. As I continued walking the flat I would see a single or pair of decent bones every so often, spooking most of them but managing to hook another one here and there.

Not long after the boat pulled up and I waded over. Matt had seen a few fish including some good shots at triggers, but Maurizio, Don, and David hadn't seen much. The guides kind of seemed like they wanted to head back, but it was only 3:30 so we asked to hit one more flat.

The light was getting bad now with a lot of clouds and the low late afternoon angle of the sun. Still, as soon as Maurizio and I started walking the next flat I started seeing bonefish cruising the edge and landed a couple more small fish, missing a handful of other opportunities. I saw a couple more triggerfish, too, but only managed to spook them. Finally, I got a good shot up-current of a small tailing triggerfish, and as I twitched the fly as it drifted in front of the fish it turned and ate the fly. I had it hooked, a nice little colorful trigger. But when it decided to head for its hole I tried to horse it away and the leader broke.

We boarded the boat for the short right back to the harbor. Everyone had a good last session with a few more bonefish landed, a few shots at triggers, and Don also landed a small bluefin trevally. All in all, a pretty good day and everyone had fun.

We left the boat at the harbor and piled back into the truck, but there was some issue with the brakes and they couldn't get it into gear. After about a half hour of pumping the brakes and pouring in brake fluid, they managed to get it into gear and we started rumbling in low gear through town. It made for a longer drive back to the Captain Cook, but we finally pulled in right as the skies were getting dark at 7:00.

Naitiniwa was there to meet us, with some bad news. The test for the fuel had not made it to New Zealand, so we were going to have to wait yet another day before heading over to Fanning. We made plans with the guides to meet them again in the morning for another day of fishing at Christmas Island. Of course, everyone is bummed to be missing another day on Fanning, but happy to be fishing and making the most of the adventure.

We showered up quickly, then headed down to the restaurant for a delicious dinner of lobster, rice, mashed potatoes, vegetables, and sashimi. A very good meal. Everyone was tired, so we headed back to the bungalows to hit the sack.

### **Friday, January 12, 2018**

I slept with the windows open and no A/C, and it was a solid, great night's sleep, broken only by the alarm at 5:45. By 6:30 we were all eating breakfast, and the truck rumbled in at 7 to pick us up for another day of fishing on Christmas Island.

We drove the 30 minutes into London, boarded the boat, and soon were puttering out across the lagoon. Who knows where all the rest of the boats and people were, but we found the massive Nine Mile flat totally open, so we took advantage of that and started wading just as the tide started to come in.

I was with Maurizio again, as he didn't want to fish with a guide. He started off wading along the edge of the flat looking for triggerfish, while I waded up to the shallow edge and hunted for shallow water bonefish. They weren't quite everywhere...but close. As the tide started pushing in, I found singles of fish and a few small schools all heading right towards me in perfect light, and soon had already lost count of how many fish I'd hooked, lost, and/or landed. It's a good thing I can't count very high...but still, steady action. And I could see Maurizio hooked up frequently as well.

As the tide continued rolling in, I kept staying on the upper edge, focusing on ankle deep water and the fresh bonefish moving in. Most were small — 1-2 pounds — but I did hook a couple of larger fish as well.

As the tide got higher, I started seeing more and more triggerfish. I switched from the Bone Kohlector which had been so good on bones all morning to a crab and started focusing on triggers. There were a lot of triggers on the flat, many of them quite large. I chased them, cast to them, waited for them...without success. These fish are as spooky as anything I've ever chased, including triggerfish both here and elsewhere! I tried landing the fly a long ways away so the current would drift into the fish, but even a splash 10 feet away would spook the fish. My best luck was waiting for a fish to nose down in a feeding frenzy and drop it right on their head. Doing this I managed to get a few fish to follow the fly, but never could quite elicit a strike.



At one point I looked up and Maurizio had a good bend in his rod and was chasing after the fish, so I knew he had a good trigger on. I ran over and got there just in time to take a few quick photos. It was a big trigger, though not that photogenic with a lot of scarring and dark colors. Still, a great catch and Maurizio said he'd chased that one trigger for most of the morning before finally getting it to eat.

We chased triggers for a while longer, but eventually the tide was too high and the fish all disappeared. About then the boat pulled up, perfect timing. We grabbed a quick tuna fish sandwich as we motored to the next flat.

Everyone else had a good morning also, with lots of bonefish, some bluefin trevally landed as well, plus more than a few shots at Triggers. Matt in particular lost several big triggerfish to broken hooks! Don had a shot at a small GT as well.

Actually, since there was still nobody else around, the guides decided to just fish a different part of the same flat; since Nine Mile Flat is so big there was plenty of room.

With the high tide, however, there weren't a lot of fish around. We covered a lot of ground, and there were thousands of milkfish everywhere. When I did spot bonefish, they were good sized fish, and I landed a few that were larger than any I'd landed so far, mostly 2-3 pounds. It was a slower session overall than the morning, but still decent and nice to have some shots at slightly larger fish.

It was now late in the afternoon, after 3:00, and the light was getting tough but we tried one more flat anyway. I took my 10 weight to hunt for GT's along the edge, but rather than seeing GT's I saw

more triggers so changed up and chased them with no such luck. I saw Matt hooked up to a decent GT off the edge, but it came unhooked just before he could land it.

The light was getting low and it was time to go. We trudged across the flat to the boat, loaded everyone up, then motored in towards London. While the afternoon was certainly slower than the morning, it was a great day overall and everyone was happy with the fishing.

Matt decided to troll on the way in, in the hopes of hooking a random GT. No luck, except as we pulled into the harbor he started reeling in and wham-o! A GT clobbered his fly. The fish took most of his backing, but he was able to stop it and right in front of the mooring landed a nice GT about 15 pounds or slightly bigger. A good, solid fish. We snapped a few quick photos, then idled into the beach to disembark.



The truck started this time without a problem. We loaded everything on board, then started bumping our way through London and Tabwakea and back towards the CCH. On the outskirts of town we passed the Mormon Church and a man in dressy clothes flagged us down. It turned out to be Naitiniwa, who let us know that we were all set to fly to Fanning in the morning. Great news!

We drove the rest of the way to the CCH with a spectacular sunset on the horizon, a good omen for things to come.

Back at the lodge we cleaned and broke down our gear, showered up quickly, then headed down for dinner. Dinner was pretty good, ribeye steaks, plus chicken drumsticks, tuna sashimi, rice, and vegetables. A good spread and everyone is excited for the next leg of the adventure.

We returned to the bungalows to pack up and get some rest.

### **Saturday, January 13, 2018**

This morning we woke excited to finally be making the journey to Fanning Island. We were supposed to check in for the Charter flight at 7 am, so we were up early and met at breakfast at 6 am. We had pre-ordered the night before, so it was ready as soon as we got there.

We were back at the bungalows, packed up and ready to go long before the truck pulled up at 7:00 on the dot. We loaded our luggage, and ourselves, into the back of the truck, then started pattering off as the sun was rising towards the airport. When we arrived, there was nobody there. We waited, and waited, and eventually some of the airport staff showed up to check us in for the flight. They weighed all of our bags, and all of us, then we settled in to wait.

The pilots showed up. And still we waited. We were supposed to depart at 8:00, but as 8:30 rolled around and nothing was happening my patience ran thin and I started asking what the delay was all about. Apparently, we were waiting on the fuel truck. They forgot to fill it with fuel the night before like they were supposed to, so we had to wait while they filled the fuel truck, in London, which then had to drive the 40 minutes to the airport. We bunkered down to wait, and finally the truck rumbled up at a bit before 9:30.

Once the fuel arrived, it didn't take long and at 9:35 we were called to board the flight. We walked through a semblance of security...they didn't bother turning the X-ray machine on and hand searched some of the bags...but I walked right through without looking at them and they didn't bother to even look at my bags. We boarded the plane, and soon were taxiing down the runway.

The plane took off, curved out and turned north over Christmas Island, then lifted up and motored out across the vast Pacific Ocean. One hour and 15 minutes later, it began to descend and we saw the emerald waters of the Fanning Island lagoon beneath us.

It was a smooth flight, and smooth touchdown. We disembarked the plane and unloaded our luggage. There were a few locals hanging out in the shade at the small "terminal," basically just a metal-roofed hut with av-gas piled up nearby and that was about it. A couple of locals pulled up on motorbikes, one with a squealing pig tied up and slung over his back.

Naitiniwa said we had to wait for the truck. Nobody on the island knew we were coming. They were prepared for



us to arrive on Thursday, two days ago. But when that plane never arrived, they assumed we weren't coming and went back to life as normal on Fanning. Fortunately, Willie, the guy Pegasus hires to take care of the boats, heard the plane and motored over to the airport in one of the boats to help.

We only had to wait about 10 minutes or so before a truck pulled up. We loaded all of our gear and ourselves into the back, and started slowly bouncing our way down the bumpy sand track paralleling the lagoon shore towards the English Channel. Willie took the skiff and motored over to meet us at the dock. We slowed briefly at a thatch roof hut en-route and honked the horn to let the barge driver know we were there, but he must not have been around because when we reached the dock there was no one there. Which meant we weren't going to be able to take the barge across the channel.

We loaded a few of the bags into the small Zodiac, and Matt, David, and myself piled in to take the first trip across the channel to the village. We pulled up to the narrow sandy beach and unloaded our bags. Willie grabbed a bicycle and rode out to go get Bruno and let him know we had arrived.

As we waited, it began to drizzle rain. But not much and we barely got wet. Soon we noticed another boat coming across the channel. It seemed another boat had stopped by and picked up the rest of our luggage and our group and offered to take them across the channel. By the time they'd arrived, Willie was back and said Bruno was on his way. Nobody was prepared for us, because nobody knew we were coming since they hadn't flown as scheduled. Naitiniwa tried multiple times to contact the island, but communication on Fanning is so scarce that nobody got the message.

Eventually Bruno pulled up in his miniature truck. I sent Willie on his bike to go find Christmas, the guide, so he could start getting things ready to fish. Bruno took our luggage back to his place, while I led the group on the short walk through the village to A La Belle E'Toile.

When we got to Bruno's, they weren't prepared because they didn't know we were coming. So it took them a bit over an hour to one by one clean, sweep, and prepare all the kiakias (the local style thatch-roof huts that constitute the "guest rooms" at A La Belle E'Toile. Eventually all the "rooms" were ready, and everyone settled in. Bruno's wife, Tabitha, started to make lunch, a "quick" meal of grilled fish, rice, and vegetables.



Emotions in the group were mixed. On one side, we were all frustrated at missing most of a full day of fishing. On the other, after a couple of days on Christmas Island everyone was intrigued and

quickly falling in love with the innocence of Fanning Island. There was nobody to blame, it was what it was. They took it in stride.

We ate a wonderful lunch, and everyone commented on how great the food was. Just before we sat down to eat Christmas showed up, a good sign. I sent him on to get the guides and boats ready telling him we'd meet him at the harbor as soon as possible.

After eating, we donned our wading boots and grabbed our rods, and Bruno gave us a ride to the harbor. We pulled up, and Christmas had 3 boats ready to go — two of the inflatables plus a big wooden local skiff — and 5 guides.

David had forgotten his sunglasses back at Bruno's, so I opted to wait while Bruno ran him back to get his glasses. The other 2 boats with Don, Matt, and Maurizio took off across the lagoon. It didn't take too long for Bruno and David to return, and soon we were also motoring away from the harbor. We were with Christmas and Ram, who I had fished with last time I was here.

We motored slowly across the channel to Allan's Last Chance flat, which started just on the other side of the channel and continued on paralleling the island side of the lagoon all the way to the airport.

We anchored the boat, Christmas and David started walking to the left, while Ram and I went right. We waded in knee-deep water, and I was instantly reminded of how different the fishery here is from Christmas Island.

We walked for quite a ways without seeing anything, then I spotted a huge bonefish about 100 feet away. The fish was big, at least 10-12 pounds, but heading away from us. We gave chase, but were not able to catch up to it. Soon it disappeared.

We kept walking, and before long I spotted a second fish, another nice fish though not quite as big as the first one. We got into position and I made a long cast, quartering across the wind, and landed the fly, a #2 lead eye Christmas Island Special, about 5 feet from the fish. I could see the fish turn and head towards the fly as it sank, then gave it a strip and the fish charged and ate the fly. I strip struck, but missed the fish. I kept stripping, and it charged again and ate again, and this time I connected. The fish was hooked, and took off across the flat, well into my backing. After fishing for two days on Christmas, it was the first time I'd seen my backing...and I was seeing a lot of it! Eventually I got the fish in, after a couple more good runs. It was a big, fat, healthy Fanning Island Bonefish, at least 6 pounds. We snapped a quick photo then released it back.



We kept walking, and before long spotted another fish. Ram saw this one before me, a testament to his vast improvement from a year ago. I got a good cast in, the fish chased and ate, and soon I was landing another nice Fanning fish, this one a bit smaller at about 4 pounds.

We kept walking, and though we didn't see a lot of fish, we did get a shots at good, big bonefish every 5-10 minutes or so. I hooked and lost two other fish, and saw several others we never got a good cast too because they were too far or directly into the wind. In all, we saw about a dozen fish, all of them good-sized, and got good shots at about half of them. A great way to start the trip!

We walked back to the boat and soon were met by Christmas and David. They'd seen 2-3 bonefish and landed one nice fish, plus a decent 8 pound trevally. We motored a bit further down the flat and tried one more spot, but the light was getting low and it was very windy, so we didn't try for long before calling it a day and motoring back to the harbor.

When we made it back to Bruno's everyone else was back already. They hadn't fared as well as we had, although everyone had seen a few fish and had some shots. The high evening tide was likely the cause for the slow fishing for most, which everyone understood since we'd had the same thing for two days on Christmas Island in the afternoon.

We enjoyed a delicious dinner of grilled chicken, grilled barracuda, vegetables, rice, and steamed pumpkin. Everyone is raving about how good the food is. We discussed our plan for tomorrow, hoping to head out to Irapa Wilderness.

After dinner everyone wandered off to bed. I stayed up for a while and talked at length with Bruno about the island, the future, the people, and the direction for future tourism here. It was a good chat, he has a surprisingly open mindset, with a benefactor vision of helping the whole island which is what we need to make this project work.

Eventually it was almost 10 o'clock, so I said good night and headed back up to my room to organize gear and get some sleep.

### **Sunday, January 14, 2018**

It was a surprisingly cool and comfortable night. The breeze made its way through the trees and the temperature wasn't too bad. I slept pretty well, woken only by a midnight squall that blew hard and dumped rain for about 10 minutes. Then, of course, the roosters started crowing about 3 am and didn't stop, but they were in the background so not too bad. I talked to everyone else in the morning, and everyone concurred that they had slept well.

Tabitha served us a nice breakfast of toast, scrambled eggs, and bacon, much more than we needed but very tasty and a good start to the day. We got our fishing stuff ready while they packed the lunches and coolers, and by 7:15 we were walking through the village to the harbor. The plan was for 7, so we were in pretty good shape.

At the harbor Christmas and the guides were all ready to go. We would have 3 boats, the two zodiacs plus a big wooden local boat. I broke down the guide and boat assignments for the day: Matt would fish solo with Bennie; Don went with Christmas while David was with Ram in one boat,

while Maurizio and I went in the wood boat with Ra and Etu. Since Maurizio didn't want a guide, Etu was just a boat driver today and Ra would guide with me.

Ra was new to me, but it turns out he's Christmas' older brother (which means he's also Teannaki's younger brother). So he knows his stuff, has great eyes, and was also trained by Teannaki. He did guide the first Fanning group with Christiaan, Gary, and Ed, but wasn't with my group in April last year.

The plan was to make the long voyage out to Irapa Wilderness. It is a long haul out there, almost 2 hours, much of it slow going as the boats weave in and around myriad shallow flats and coral heads. Eventually we made it, though, and the boats by then were all spread out. This is a big difference from a year ago, when the guides were all new and Christmas tried to help everyone. Now the guides are more experienced and able to go out on their own. A big improvement. And they all seem capable now, which is great.

When we got to Irapa, Christmas was already in the dream spot where I'd had two amazing days a year ago, and as we pulled in I could see Don was already hooked up to a nice bonefish. We motored further up the channel towards the inlet, which was exciting to see some new water in the area. We went about halfway up the channel, then anchored the boat and started walking.

The fishing for me wasn't light's out, but it was pretty darned good. I hadn't walked 100 feet when we spotted a small bluefin trevally. I cast in front of it, stripped fast, and was soon hooked up. It was a good fish on the 8 weight, about 5 pounds. Not long after we landed another small bluefin trevally. For the next hour or so, we saw bonefish swimming in singles and pairs, not everywhere



but enough to keep busy. Pretty much every fish I saw charged and ate the fly, but I was for some reason having a hard time setting the hooked and many came unbuttoned. By the time we'd made it about a half-mile from the boat, I'd landed 5 or 6 bonefish, missed at least as many, most of them about 3-4 pounds, a good average size. I saw Maurizio land several fish on his own as well.

We trudged back to the boat, and as the tide was coming in we wanted to go look for GTs. We slowly motored even further up the channel, about as far as the boat would go. We could see Bennie's smaller, lighter Zodiac even further up the channel, the silhouette of Bennie and Matt fishing in the channel just inside the breakers.

Ra took us from there on a long hike, trekking up a shallow sandy channel, through a rocky cut, over some sandy beaches, to where it opened up again to an incredibly beautiful inshore lagoon area just inside of the breaking surfline. The expansive lagoon flat looked to stretch about a mile long, and averaged about 400 feet across. There was a nice sandy beach on the inside, and the flat was about 3-4 feet deep all the way across. Shoals upon shoals of baitfish (mostly mullet) could be seen cruising along the edges. In other words, it was the perfect GT hangout.



Maurizio wanted to fish alone, so we left him at the near side of the channel and we started walking the beach in search of GTs. We hadn't gone far when Ra spotted a couple of big shapes about 100 feet out. They were moving slow, and we figured out they were a pod of 3 massive bumphead parrotfish, each one at least 40-50 pounds. We waded out to thigh deep, changed my GT fly to a big crab, and started making casts. My first couple of casts were wide and the fish never saw the fly. We maneuvered into a new position, and I got a perfect cast leading the fish by about 10 feet, which allowed the fly to sink down to the bottom at the ideal time so I was just starting to slowly move it along the bottom right in front of the fish. About the time when the lead fish had to have the fly just moving into its feeding lane, a frigate bird zoomed in low over the water and spooked the fish. Damn!

I changed back to the bigger GT fly, a tan Bad Attitude Baitfish, and we keep walking the beach. It was so beautiful, and so perfect, I just couldn't believe we weren't seeing the shapes of monster GTs cruising the shoreline hunting the hundreds of mullet milling about. But the fish just weren't there. We made it to the far end, a long ways away...nothing. There was a collection of rocks in the middle of the channel, and Ra said Napoleon Wrasse liked to hang out there, so we waded out to it, the water about stomach deep. We saw no fish, but wandering about the rocks and coral Ra found a

hole and said he saw a Napoleon in there, hunkered down. They were there, they just didn't want to come out and play.

We kept wading around looking for fish, and at one point Etu spotted a big fish cruising our way. I cast towards it, then realized it was a massive great barracuda, at least 4 feet long. Knowing we couldn't land it on the mono leader, I pulled the fly away and we kept wading in search of GTs.

Finally we waded chest-deep back across the big flat to the beach, then trudged back along the shoreline to catch up with Maurizio, who had also not seen anything. It was disappointing because the place had so much potential and we'd spent so much time and energy to give it our best, but to no avail. That's fishing, sometimes the fish cooperate, and sometimes they don't. The place was spectacular, and I have every confidence that if you were there at the right time, big GTs call it home.

We trudged the mile or so back to the boat. By the time we made it, we were exhausted. We slowly pattered back out the channel, and it took probably another hour to maneuver back through the myriad of flats and coral heads to the main body of the lagoon.

Finally, we hit one last flat. Maurizio waded to the east where the light was better, while Ra and I waded westward into the setting sun. The light was tough, but we still saw a good number of bonefish. I landed one small fish about 2 pounds, missed about 6 others, saw another 12 or more that spooked before we could cast to them (because we didn't see them with the bad light until they were 15 feet away). And I did hook one big bonefish that instantly shattered my 20 pound fluorocarbon leader. There are big fish that live here!

The light was getting low, and finally Etu and Maurizio came and picked us up to start slowly motoring back to the village. All in all, it was a decent day for us. I had a gut feeling we were just unlucky and the others crushed them.

This proved to be true. When we returned to Bruno's, Matt, Don, and David were absolutely giddy with excitement. They each had an epic day of fishing, a testament to the potential for this unique fishery. Don and David, fishing the lower end of Irapa, said one or the other of them had a bonefish on nonstop all morning. They lost count. One after another after another. Don was super excited as he caught his fist bonefish entirely on his own when Christmas went back to get the boat. David, who's fished all over from French Polynesia to the Bahamas to St Brandons, said the day compared most closely to St. Brandon's, which may be the best bone fishing destination on the planet.

Matt, fishing with Bennie, went way up into the head of the channel near where the surf broke through, and had an epic day with Trevally. They saw a lot of fish, mostly bluefin and smaller Gts from 5-15 pounds, and hooked, landed, and lost more than a few. They also saw at least one big GT, at least 40 pounds. Matt said it was the most amazing day of saltwater fishing he'd ever had, and was the day that made the whole trip worthwhile. All our frustrating efforts to get here, were more than worth it for today, he said.

It's a reminder of the vast potential of this place. The fish are here, and while it's not always easy...it can be a truly amazing fishery at times.

Once everyone had shared their elated fishing stories from the day, we cleaned up and sat around in the relatively cool, comfortable evening. Soon the dinner bell rang, and we enjoyed a fantastic meal of rice, chicken, fresh-picked and fried breadfruit, fresh steamed vegetables, fresh Wahoo Sashimi, followed up with a zesty lime cake. Everyone keeps commenting about how great the dinners are, so much better than anything on Christmas. Even the Italian in the group can't stop raving about how great the food is!

We were exhausted from a long day. One by one, we disappeared to our kakis to settle in for the night. With the cooler evening, the bugs weren't so bad, and we were looking forward to another restful sleep before our last full day on the water.

### **Monday, January 15, 2018**

The roosters woke me up at 4 this morning, like always. But then they quieted down for a bit and let me get another hour or so of sleep before my alarm went off at 5:30. Bruno and his wife had breakfast ready early this morning, toast and scrambled eggs. We were all fed, boots on, and ready to roll by 7 am.

It was overcast this morning, not a good omen. We walked down to the harbor, where the guides were just arriving. We loaded up into the boats and headed out for the day, aiming to see some different flats in the lagoon.

Today I was fishing with Bennie, and Maurizio was with us as well as he still prefers fishing by himself, no guide. We motored out to Valhalla first, and started walking the flat. But with the flat light in the overhead sky, and the deep flat as the tide was still high and just dropping, it was going to be really challenging to spot fish. I told Bennie we needed to move, find somewhere with shallower water where we might have a chance at spotting something in the low light.

We climbed back in the Zodiac, then motored out to the NE Pass. We started wading towards the northern point of the island, walking fast at first as the tide was dropping and the sun finally breaking out to light up the flats. As we made the far channel, what I call Home Brew Channel, we slowed and I started spotting a few bonefish. I missed the first couple, and we kept walking and searching. Finally I connected to my first bone of the day.

We continued walking, and though we weren't seeing a lot of fish, we would see one every so often, just enough to keep us interested and hook the occasion fish. If we saw one, we usually hooked it. One fish I literally hit him in the head. I thought for sure the game was over, and indeed it did spook, but quickly it turned around and swam back and ate the fly anyway. Amazing.

We didn't see any locals netting, but there were quite a few sticks in the flat, signs that they had been netting here recently.

We were in an area where I had a banner morning last year, but we were there too soon in the tide. The water was still too high, and while we saw a fish here and there, it wasn't gangbusters like I think it probably could have been an hour later into the dropping tide. Oh well.

We kept walking around the edge of the island inside the lagoon, still finding the occasional fish here and there. I missed a couple of bigger fish, but most were in the 3-4 pound range.



Eventually we came to the area where the flat was joined by an area with a lot of coral flats and bommies sticking out into the deeper water like fingers. I waded out on one such finger flat, GT rod ready to go just in case. Instead of GTs, however, I started spotted schools of tailing bumphead parrotfish. I put a crab on my 8 weight and gave chase. I did get a couple of bumpies to give chase and follow the crab, but the tide now was low and I kept hanging up on coral and vegetation before I could get the parrotfish to eat. Watching them turn and follow the crab fly, however, I am convinced that with enough patience and persistence they can be caught. They were definitely interested.

While stripping in my crab at one point I incidentally hooked and landed a small triggerfish! Tiny, but beautiful!

Bennie had walked back to get the boat, and he picked us up and we motored down a ways to try a new flat. It was more of the same for me, a fish here and there, nothing crazy but certainly consistent action. I also landed a small striped trevally, and hooked one really big bonefish that broke me off on coral on the edge.

We bounced around a couple more flats as the clouds moved in and the light got really bad. It became nearly impossible to spot fish, though I did manage to land a couple more. On one of these flats I also landed a nice Bluefin trevally, about 5 or 6 pounds. Great fight.

Dark clouds continued to build and it was obvious the conditions weren't getting any better, so we opted to return to the village.

All in all, I'd had a decent day, landing a decent number of bonefish, plus a couple of small trevally. I had fairly steady action throughout the day. I wouldn't call it a great day of fishing, but pretty good.

We got back to Bruno's just before it started to rain. I showered, and soon the other anglers came rolling in. Once the rain let up I went down to hear about their days.

David had a day similar to mine, not exceptional fishing like he'd experienced the day before, but pretty good and he said he never went for more than an hour without landing a bonefish, most were 3-5 pounds, and all in all a good day.

Both Don and Matt, however, were super excited about another amazing day of fishing. They didn't end up doing a lot of bonefishing, instead chasing trevally around the coralheads. Both hooked and landed several small to medium trevally, some really big bluefin trevally, Matt hooked a big 40+ pound GT on a popper that broke his fly line, and they basically were in trevally action all day long, super exciting and they can't say enough good things about their two days of fishing on Fanning Island.

Once the rain let up, we were treated to another amazing dinner. Mantis shrimp, my personal favorite, accompanied by fresh tuna sashimi, rice, mashed potatoes, steamed vegetables, and grilled steaks. Way too much delicious food. Topped off with a delectable fruit salad for dessert.

We are planning on going fishing in the morning and meeting Christmas and the guides at 7. The hope is for Naitiniwa to take our bags to the airport and check us in for the flight, and the guides will take us to the airport straight from the flats. We don't know, however, if the plane is leaving at 10, or 12, or 2...so we're planning on 12 and hoping for the best.

## **Tuesday, January 16, 2018**

It rained off and on all night, which made for a high humidity and very sticky overall. The rain finally let up right about the time the roosters start crowing. By 5:30 am I was up and finishing packing my bags, and Bruno had breakfast ready early, scrambled eggs, bacon, and toast.

Naitiniwa showed up early to let us know that the flight was scheduled and everything set for the trip back to Christmas. The plane would arrive on Fanning about 10 am, then head over to Washington, then return at 12 to pick us up and return to Christmas. Which meant we had time for a few hours of fishing in the morning.

David and Maurizio opted to stay back at Bruno's, but Don, Matt and I wanted one last go at the flats of Fanning. We motored out with all 5 guides, because the guides wanted to go and they're always excited to be on the flats!

We motored across the English Channel to Allan's Last Chance flat. Unfortunately, the light was terrible. The rain had stopped, but a thick blanket of clouds persisted. We waded the flat anyway, hoping for a bit of luck.

I was fishing with Christmas, which gave me a chance to talk with him at length. At one point he paused as we spotted a big GT, at least 30 pounds, slowly cruising towards us. This, of course, was the one day I hadn't brought my GT rod. We would have had plenty of time to switch rods and put a cast in front of the fish...but could do nothing but watch it swim by as it was way too big to even attempt a cast with an 8 weight.

We kept wading the flat, but with the low light simply couldn't see anything. For a brief moment the sun popped out, and instantly we saw a bonefish cruising towards us. I cast towards the fish, stripped twice and the fish was on. It was a decent fish, about 3-4 pounds, and soon we had it landed.



We kept wading, but the clouds moved back in, no light, no way to see the fish. At one point the sun broke through again, and again within a few seconds we spotted a fish, this time a really big one. I cast in front, the fish charged and ate, and I was hooked to a monster. I've never had a bonefish rip line like that, it threw a rooster tale of a wake from the ripping line at least 3 feet high. The fish charge a hundred feet into my backing, then found a piece of coral and wrapped me up. We gave chase and Christmas untangled the line from 5 different pieces of coral before the line finally broke and we lost the fish. Christmas thought it was at least 8 pounds, maybe bigger. I've caught a lot of bonefish in a lot of places, and never had one kick my ass like that! Awesome.

From there we walked and walked and walked. The light was bad and we couldn't see anything. We spotted a big puffer fish, so I caught it just because I could. More walking, more bad light. I spotted a couple of bonefish, but they were a long ways away and going the wrong direction. Finally we gave up and called the boat over. Matt and Don had similar luck, tough light and no real good shots at fish. We knew they were there, somewhere, we just couldn't see them with the dark skies.

It was 10:00, and we thought we'd try another flat real quick but as we slowly motored across the shallows we spotted the plane cruising low across the island before it circled to land. Since the light sucked and we were close, we decided to just head straight to the runway. We pulled up to the beach, and I walked down the road to the plane to check with the pilot, who confirmed that the plane would go to Washington Island, then return to pick us up at 12.

The plane had dropped off a few passengers, including the doctor, Dr. Larry Faulk, I had talked to prior to the trip. He was there to look at people's eyes and treat cataracts on Christmas, Fanning,

and Washington. I walked him down and introduced him to Christmas so he could do some fishing when they came back to Fanning after spending a couple of days on Washington.

We gathered our gear from the boats, said good bye to the guides, then walked over to the one-room shack constituting the Fanning “Airport”. About that time the truck pulled up with the other members of our group and the rest of our luggage. We put our fishing gear away, re-packed our bags, then settled in to wait just as the plane took off. About an hour and a half later, the plane returned. We loaded everything on, including a bunch of locals for a full flight back to Christmas. It was an uneventful flight, and soon we were back on Christmas Island.



Otea was there to meet us, and we loaded our luggage into the back of a truck, while we piled into two cars for the short, 10 minute drive to the Captain Cook. We pulled up to the front and there was a bunch of cars parked there, and Otea said there was the big meeting there with the Minister of Linnix, people from Fanning and Washington, and politicians from Tarawa, meeting to organize their 20 year plan for the Line and Phoenix Islands.

We checked in to our same rooms, then headed down to settle in for the afternoon, dry things out, and repack for the next leg of the journey. Since it was not quite 2:00, there was still plenty of time to fish a half a day, too, so we arranged for Otea to drive Don and Matt to the Swimming Lagoon site so they could fish some more in the afternoon.

I headed down to the main CCH area to see which important I-Kiribati politicians I could bump into. Soon I saw Bwereti, the “CEO” of the Captain Cook, who quickly introduced me to a lady who was the Secretary to the Cabinet in Tarawa. The purpose of their meetings this week was to develop a plan to develop tourism in the Linnix. Which was ironic, since I’ve spent the past 3 years trying to develop tourism in the Linnix, and only the government in Tarawa gets in the way. I told her so, and we spoke for about an hour about many things. She was familiar with our projects and The Fly Shop. She introduced me to Loataake, the Permanent Secretary, who is the guy that’s supposed to be doing everything. I was pretty blunt in saying that it was great to meet him, but although I’ve emailed him a hundred times he never responds. He blushed and lied and said it wasn’t true. Still, it was good information and good to plead our case with her, she’s definitely an important person with the government.

I really wanted to meet the Minister, Mikarite. There was a man sitting by himself on the other side of the courtyard, and I guessed it was him, so I walked over and introduced myself. It was indeed the minister, and we sat and talked for the next hour or more, at length, about both Fanning and Christmas Island.

Exhausted from a couple of hours of meeting with prominent I-Kiribati politicians, I returned to the room just in time to meet Don and Matt returning from fishing. They both had an awesome afternoon, lots of bonefish, still smaller than on Fanning, but more willing and less spooky than the fish we’d seen earlier in the week on Christmas. It’s another testament to the strength of the Christmas Island fishery that can be accessed by truck close to the CCH, that isn’t pounded on by the 3 other lodges on the island.

They cleaned up quickly and we all headed down for dinner. Tonight there wasn’t a fixed menu, so they gave out the full menu for options. But of course, they only had chicken, lamb, and lobster. Four of us ordered lobster, one Chicken curry. All were delicious, served with rice. They were all out of beer, so we ordered a bottle of red wine to share, which actually was okay (confirmed by the Italian in the group). They were also all out of ice cream, so no dessert. But a good dinner otherwise.

We settled up our bar tab for the trip, then returned to the rooms to finish packing and prepare for the final leg of the journey home in the morning.

### **Wednesday, January 17, 2018**

I slept great until about 2:00 am, when I was woken by a grumbling stomach. I spent the rest of the night sleeping in fits, interrupted every hour or so with another bout of diarrhea. I was also intermittently burning hot and freezing cold, a sure sign of fever. It was not going to be a pleasant travel day!

At 4 I finished packing my bags, and by 4:45 walked down to the restaurant to have a piece of toast to see if that would hopefully help settle my stomach. At 5:15 the truck pulled up, we loaded our

luggage, and piled into two cars driven by Otea and Naitiniwa. 10 minutes later we arrived at the airport. We were the last to arrive, which is great because it was actually a nice cool morning and we waited outside in the very long line, enjoying the cool breeze rather than sweating in the one room terminal. Eventually we made it inside, checked in for the flight, and sat down to wait for the plane to arrive.

All the other anglers from Christmas Island were talking about their week...though most were complaining that the fishing wasn't that great. The people at Crystal Beach ran out of food. Some were more upbeat than others, but all in all it didn't sound like a great week of fishing on Christmas Island. Ironic, since we actually had a couple of decent days there while waiting for the fuel test to allow our flight to Fanning! And it was great to hear our group telling everyone how great Fanning was.

The plane arrived, and after they refueled (now that there was approved fuel on the island), we cleared security and walked onto the plane. I instantly fell asleep and didn't wake up until we touched down in Honolulu.

We got off the plane cleared immigrations and customs (quick and easy, especially with Global Entry). I said goodbye to the group as we each headed our different ways from there. We promised to keep in touch and share photos, they all thanked me for a fun and amazing trip.

I made my way outside the terminal, and since I had 12 hours before my redeye flight home, I called the Airport Hotel and arranged for a day room. The shuttle arrived, took me to the hotel, I checked in and made it to my room. I slept in spurts again, but felt a little better after a few more hours of sleep. I showered, grabbed my bags and headed back to the airport. I checked in for the flight to SFO, eventually made it to SFO, and the flight to Redding was on time. I still felt terrible, tried to eat a half a croissant. Finally, I was on the plane in the air, and 35 minutes later touching down in Redding. Home at last.