

Memories of catching bonefish in the Yucatan 1998

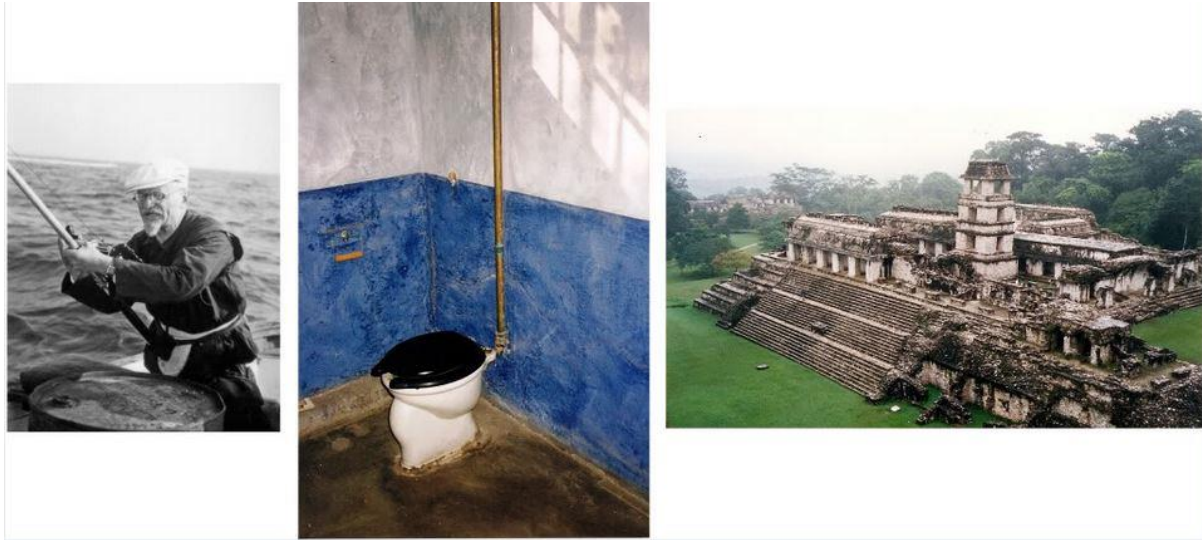
A serious amount of planning went into travelling to Mexico on the cheap with my wife and our twins who were 15 years at the time. Hours of going through travel guides and speaking to those who had been there before drove me up the wall because there was nothing I could find about fishing there. In 1998 there was no internet as we know it now. I knew that there were the east and south coasts to consider – but had to make sure that the locations we were to visit would also have to satisfy my wife's passion for antiquity. I was disheartened! Eventually I stumbled on to an article on bonefish in some obscure travel publication – and my Sage 8wt perked up in its tube! Researching further I found a book by Dick Brown called Flyfishing for Bonefish and the Sage stiffened when I found a small reference to Ascension Bay on the Yucatan Peninsula!

Well, finally the itinerary was settled on and our trip in Mexico was going to be for 6 weeks and would take us to waterless places on the Mayan temple route; Mexico City to Oaxaca to Palenque to Merida finally ending in Half Moon Bay at Akumal on the beach not far from Ascension Bay where we would stay for two weeks.

We were doing the trip as cheaply as possible so opted for taking only backpacks because we would be taking buses and walking around looking for low budget posadas, the Mexican version of a B&B. Now, travelling with the family in the past we have needed at least two pack horses to carry our stuff. I remember once travelling from Washington DC to Harare with 14 pieces of luggage and a double pushchair – challenging stuff. So we bought two 90 litre backpacks; one to share with me and my son – and the other for my wife and my daughter. After lots of pruning and chucking out unnecessary stuff – we managed to keep the backpacks at 15kg each. How I managed to convince my wife about this I still don't know (we did come back home with a LOT more which included a suitcase full of craft).

The challenge for me was what fishing gear to take. I decided that I would only fly-fish only and took my 8wt Sage with a Lamson reel and a floating and sinking line. I researched what flies and eventually took an assortment of 50 for anything that I might encounter. I had consulted with the Urban Angler in NY and they sent me 10 bonefish flies. Of course there was also all the small things like leaders and tippet material, a pair of neoprene booties for wading the flats – and a stripping basket which was a plastic supermarket basket cut down to 3 inches from the base and attached a wide Velcro belt to it. It fitted perfectly in the backpack like a tray in which I could pack clothes and really took up no space at all (I still have that basket). The Sage was in its original aluminium holder that I slid into a PVC pipe with a screw on end piece with a bolt through it that I could put a small lock on. I have learned from previous trips that the aluminium holder was susceptible to damage in the hold of planes and busses.

We started our trip in Mexico City, a stunning city with so much to see and do – and the same with the other places we visited. Even though there was no fishing on the way, the trip was enjoyable with great food and stunning tours of the temples and learning about Mexican history and culture. We even visited the House of Leon Trotsky in Coyoacán a suburb of Mexico City; saw his desk where he was assassinated - and even the ice-pick that did the job. I was even allowed to take a picture of his toilet! My opinion of Trotsky was drastically altered by the visit to his house when I saw the photographs of him fishing. Suddenly he became a great man in my eyes!



After 4 weeks of travelling through Mexico with my Sage clutched in my sweaty hands, the last leg of the trip arrived. It started with a long bus ride from Merida to Akumal - water at last! Akumal is south of Cancun and has a beautiful bay with a wide white sand beach, wonderfully warm blue-green water and great snorkelling. Akumal means "place of the turtles" in the Mayan language. On arrival, I was disappointed to find that fishing (from the shore) was not a prime activity here, the long shallow shore was fine for snorkelling and lazing around – but no real fishing (unless you hired a boat and go deep sea). I wanted to fly-fish for bonefish specifically.



I started investigating the fishing opportunities at Ascension bay which is in the Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve which occupies 1.3 Million acres along the Caribbean Coast and includes the Boca Paila Peninsula. The reserve was created in 1986 as a protected wildlife area and designated a World Heritage Site in 1987 by UNESCO. The reserve, like others on the Yucatan Peninsula, was established to preserve the native environment. Sian Ka'an (Mayan for "where the sky is born") encompasses tropical rain forest, drier areas of tree speckled savannah, coastal mangrove flats and some 70 miles of offshore coral reefs all protected from encroachment or commercial development. This vast wilderness is a haven for a variety of wildlife including some endangered species such as jaguars, ocelots, tapirs, peccaries (wild pig), howler monkeys, crocodiles, manatees, and sea turtles. Bird life is equally rich and diverse and the 350 species inhabiting the reserve range from cormorants, storks, egrets and herons to neon coloured toucan parrots and frigate birds. Areas of virgin jungle contain about 1200 varieties of plants and sea life is equally as abundant.

My first foray into Ascension Bay was done blind. From my reading I found out that it was one of the finest saltwater flats' fisheries in the world. Ascension Bay has a rare mixture of environmental

ingredients which create the ideal foundations for an abundance of wildlife. The Bay covers about 20 square kilometres and its shallow flats and tangled mangrove islands teem with bonefish, tarpon, and huge permit—apparently some of the biggest ever caught. It is in the heart of the Sian Ka'an Biosphere where fishing takes place by wading in ankle deep crystal clear water that covers a firm, white sand base in the shallow flats – sometimes muddy too especially around the mangroves.

Map in hand, and with my wife in the passenger seat (she always thinks that she is the driver, no matter where she sits) we drove down the coast on the one lane potholed tarred road – very treacherous with the Mexican drivers. Clearly they know how to drive these roads – and you quickly have to learn the conventions about when to get out of their way and go onto the verge.

We turned off towards the Sian Ka'an biosphere reserve and on to the small jungle track on the Boca Paila peninsula, a narrow spit of land that separates the lagoons of the reserve from the Caribbean Sea. At times it was only about 20 metres of wide. We stopped occasionally to look at the fishing prospects – but, not knowing much about the area, I could not make a choice. The beach was stunning however.

Eventually, half way down the peninsula we came across a fishing lodge and went in to see what was possible. I spoke to the manager and asked him what it would cost to fish; his curt reply was “We only service our guests here. But if you really want to fish, it will cost you 275”. A quick mental calculation from peso to dollars it worked out at about \$80 (or so I thought – but more about that later). I agreed and he directed me to the boat jetty on the bay side where “captain” Jose was waiting for me on a small flat bottomed skiff with a flat casting deck and an extra seat that was perfect for my wife.

Jose started the motor and sped out into the lagoon. The water was very shallow as we approached some mangrove swamps. He stopped the motor and quietly poled the skiff while staring into the water. “Senor, you see bone fish?” he asked as he pointed towards the mangroves. “Where?” I responded. “There, plenty” he said. I strained my eyes to try and see the fish – but even through my Polaroid's I saw nothing. “Look for the shadows” he said – then I noticed the long grey shadows on the sandy bottom shadows in the two foot deep water.



My Sage was already assembled and ready with a fly chosen by Jose. I false cast a few times over the shadows – and they immediately darted off. “No Senor, you spook the fish – too much false cast!” said Jose. He quietly poled the skiff towards another spot close by. “You see fish?” he said pointing to the

left "20 meters 10 o'clock". I saw the shadows easily this time, they were moving to the right. "Cast 25 meters 1 o'clock he said – no too much false please". I did as I was told and the fly dropped into the water. "Now wait" he said. The fish were moving in the direction of the fly that had settled on the bottom at this stage. "Now strip fly, slowly, slowly...now fast, don't stop!" he directed. As the fly darted, I saw a fish speed towards it and take the fly. All of a sudden my line tightened and began to peel out of my stripping basket. The fish took off at great speed. I had read that they take off at 40kph, but scoffed at that – now I really understood!

Suddenly I was way into my backing. The fish was still running strong, but continually moved from one direction to the next as it tried to keep up with the now spooked shoal. The shoal, seeing that my fish was in danger, was trying to get away from it – but the fish was following them instinctively. As the shoal sped from side to side to get away from the hooked fish, the fish would follow them. I tried to break the run by palming my reel – but the handles hit my fingers with such force that I cringed in pain and said some things that should not be printed here. Eventually the drag of the line slowed the fish down and I began bringing it in on the reel. It took a while to gain any line – the thin backing on the reel (not a wide arbour reel) allowed for a few centimetres at a time – and the fish was pulling hard and still darting from side to side. Eventually I was on the fly line, and it became a bit easier and faster to bring it in as I stripped the line by hand. After what seemed like an hours but really only about 10 minutes, the bone fish arrived at the boat and Jose scooped it in with a net. The fish weighed 4 ½ pounds. It was stunningly beautiful, mirror silver with large eyes – it looked like glass. The fish was released and I was happy with my first bonefish. I fished for about 4 hours and caught another 6 – and lost about 5 more. My learning curve was steep but Jose was a good tutor.

At the end of the session, we got back to the jetty and I disembarked and went back to pay for the trip. The manager was sitting in his cool office sipping an ice cold beer when I came in. He was smiling and not surly like before – especially when I told him how great the fishing was and how great Jose was. I asked what I should tip Jose. "275 pesos" he said. By my calculation that was another \$80. "But that's 100% of the cost of the trip" I replied. "No, the boat and guide is 275 dollars" he said. Now I was in a dilemma! I would never have accepted that if I knew it cost so much – and I only had \$100 in my pocket. I explained to him that when he had said 275 for the trip – I had assumed it was peso. I had been in Mexico for four weeks already and had rarely been given a price for anything in dollars – not even in Mexico City. It was then that I realised that the Yucatan (especially Cancun area) is actually the playground of the rich gringos – and everything is pegged in dollars. After a lot of arguing, he eventually accepted 80 dollars– what else could he or I do really? That left me with an embarrassing \$20 tip for Jose.

We left back on the jungle road and arrived in Akumal later in the afternoon. I realised now that I was in rich gringo territory and my fishing was going to be severely limited. To console myself, I went to a pub nearby and ordered a tequila – with a beer chaser hoping that, while I was drowning my sorrows, a miracle solution would emerge. I knew that access to the bonefish required some form of water craft – even just to get to the flats where the fish were. I chatted with the barman about this. He was a grizzled older Mayan who was born in Ascension Bay. "No problem to fish cheap there," he said" you just drive down the peninsula and there are many fishing lodges – maybe you find something cheaper. Last stop is the town of Punta Allen – lots of lobster fishermen there and it's not lobster season now, maybe you can hire one of their boats". Suddenly I felt better – but I was not sure if it was the tequila!

Two days later, my wife and I drove down the peninsula again, this time stopping at all the fishing lodges along the way – especially those that looked simple. No Luck at all. Eventually we arrived at Punta Allen which is a tiny village of lobster fishermen who seemed to be spending their time hanging

around in hammocks on the verandas. The village is part of the Sian Ka'an reserve, and most of the people living in town are Mayan descendants of residents from thousands of years ago. One side of the village borders the Caribbean, the other Ascension Bay. Streets are lined with white sand, palm trees, and small charming homes. The coastline is pristine, scattered with fishing boats. Life in the village is pretty slow, in part because the roads are made of sand thus precluding fast moving vehicles. The village of 400 subsists mainly on fishing and lobster catching. It's surreally tranquil and felt completely separate from the rest of the world. The people of the town were incredibly friendly and down to earth, unexposed to the madness that is the rest of the Mayan Riviera.

After asking around in my very poor Spanish, someone directed me to an expat called "La Sirena", who apparently was able to assist. I found her place – a shack full of beach driftwood, shells and hammocks. La Sirena turned out to be an American woman who was shipwrecked here years ago and never left. She runs a kind of "hotel" there. I was later told that she is apparently fond of her tittle and has been shipwrecked multiple times. I thought that she may in fact fancy herself an actual mermaid.

After regaling us with all sorts of tales (some of which made me think she was not shipwrecked, but a CIA agent that was thrown off a ship because she talked too much) La Sirena said that it was no problem to organise a boat at \$80 per day from a local fisherman. I agreed and within a few minutes Hector arrived – a tiny Mayan. He led us to his lobster boat – first my wife needed to check if there were lifebelts and fortunately there were.

We boarded and he directed it the boat to an area in the inland lagoons behind the village. After, about a 30 minute ride south of the peninsula we entered the Northern part of the Bay. These areas were huge, with one small lagoon after the other, broken up into smaller areas by islands, strips of mangrove and the mainland creating a myriad of narrow peninsulas. We arrived at a small bay and the water got shallow – too shallow for the lobster boat. We hopped off and began wading in about a foot of water. Wading was easy, even though the bottom was quite muddy most places, and spotting fish was quite easy. Hector was not a guide, but had clearly taken people here before. He had little advice to offer (nothing like Jose). But he could spot bonefish well – even without Polaroid's. I caught about 6 fish and then the area went dead. We waded back to the boat where my wife was sunning herself and reading a book.

Hector then took us further into the lagoon, past small islands with trees full of Frigate birds - they are sometimes known as Man of War birds or Pirate birds. They are a sight to see especially the males with their large bright red bulbous throats called gular pouches that inflate in the breeding season. They have iridescent black feathers (the females have a white underbelly), with long wings (male wingspan can reach 2.3 metres) and deeply-forked tails. These birds do not swim and cannot walk well, and cannot take off from a flat surface. Having the largest wingspan to body weight ratio of any bird, they are essentially aerial, able to stay aloft for more than a week, landing only to roost or breed on trees or cliffs.

On the way the water got deeper and we were accompanied by large schools of dolphins and saw many turtles. We soon arrived in an area with long flats and small sandy shelled islands – it was a dream place where I caught a few more bonefish. The afternoon wore on and we eventually made our way back to Punta Allen and then back up the peninsula to Akumal in the dark – which was very scary with the Mexican drivers and driving on the right hand side of the road.

I took another trip down to Punta Allen a few days later with my son – a disastrous trip. As we boarded Hector's boat, I realised that I had left my flies behind in Akumal – and to go back to fetch them would take over 2 hours. Hector had no flies – but La Sirena came to the rescue. She directed me to another

American castaway who lived in a tiny shack on the beach. He was quite grumpy when he answered my knock on the door – but as soon as he heard my plight, he beamed with satisfaction. “Oh yes” he said, “I have perfect flies for you”. He went back in, and fetched a box of flies. “How many do you want?” he asked. The flies looked fine, but not very well tied and with some inferior looking materials – and none of the pinkish ones that had been doing well for me. Give me ten” I said. He selected out ten which he thought would be the right ones for the waters. Then came the crunch – and it also explained why he beamed with satisfaction earlier on - \$10 per fly! “Are you crazy? I got better flies than this flies from the Urban Angler in NY for \$1.50 each!” I exclaimed. “Yes” he said, “but what will you do today with no flies?” Eventually I took 3 – fuming a bit and hoping that they would see me through the day.

The day was a bit windy – and the fish, although there, were difficult to see, and I think it is no use casting blind for bone fish in the shallows. I caught two small ones and of course I blamed the flies. Somehow, the flies were not generating the attention that they should have. In desperation, I took some red thread from my Kenyan Kikoi that always goes with me fishing – and tied them on to the flies – not the greatest solution, but I caught a 3 ½ fish on my first cast with itand that was the last bone fish that I caught.

Back Home in Durban, I looked at the photos when they were developed (yes, no digital those days) and decided that I need to get back there – or somewhere in the vicinity, hopefully with more money in my pocket to hire a “Jose” again. I recently looked on the internet at current prices, and realised that this (like most destination type fishing) is for the rich – not me! I also saw that La Sirena now calls herself a hotel and that the gringos have finally invaded Punta Allen.

A trip to some remote part of Guatemala or Belize has to be on my agenda of things to do before I go to the big blue fishing ground in the sky – but only if it is affordable and there are no gringos around to spoil things. And if I can’t afford it, then my only other option is to get shipwrecked in a place like Punta Allen – and stay there selling crappy flies until I have caught my very last fish.