

Welcome to permit country



KATHLEEN & JEAN-PIERRE PICCIN travel to the small central American country of Belize for a non-stop tropical saltwater adrenaline buzz

Belize is one Central American country that most people have difficulty finding on the map. Bordered by Mexico and Guatemala, this peaceful, English-speaking country has a lot to offer: mountains, rivers, Mayan ruins and 386 km of Caribbean coastline littered with hundreds of small islands, atolls, cayos and coral reefs.

Oh, and it is also a permit fly-fishing mecca.

Surprisingly easy to get to via the USA, we have travelled to Belize several times to fish the atolls in the north, but for our last trip we travelled south to the small town of Placencia, where we discovered our own version of paradise. A white sandy beach along the Caribbean, small hotels and bungalows, just enough restaurants and bars to give it a “buzz”, but still laid back and quiet. What more could we want? And then we discovered Tarpon Caye!

After a few days relaxing on the beach, lazing in a hammock on the balcony of our bungalow, visiting Mayan ruins in the jungle, buying chocolate directly from farmers, sipping chilled beers and cocktails as the sun set over the Caribbean and eating delicious fresh fish at the beachside restaurants we were fully relaxed, and eager to go fishing!

The boat ride from Placencia to Tarpon Caye is short and easy – unless there’s a cold front coming in and then it’s wild and choppy, but thanks to Marlon’s expert knowledge and experience we get there and are soon sitting around a table enjoying a cool beer listening to Charlie Leslie, the owner of the lodge, telling us the tales of his many years’ guiding in the area and how, with little means and lots of hard work, he built Tarpon Caye Lodge.

Simplicity and enthusiasm are the best words to describe this permit fishing pioneer, because we are sitting opposite a permit fishing ‘guru’ who, as early as the 1970’s, had already observed and studied permit and begun to understand how to catch them on a fly. Donning a mask and snorkel he studied how permit positioned themselves vertically before sucking in crabs and crushing them, but also how they occasionally spat them back out when something was not to their taste. During this time, Charlie Leslie and some of the world’s saltwater fly fishing experts met together like a group of scientific researchers and pooled together their observations, knowledge and experience to try and solve the mystery of how to catch a permit on a fly. ➔

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◀ We could sit and listen to Charlie for hours, but it is getting late and there is still an hour before the sun goes down and, just a few yards away in the lagoon, the tarpon will be on the look-out for food. Now, at the end of the day, small baitfish emerge from the protection of the mangroves in large numbers, and the tarpon wait greedily for this fast food treat!

As we approach the boat dock we can already hear noisy, violent attacks and see flashes of silver as gangs of tarpon leap out the water feasting aggressively on the 'dish of the day'.

Excited by all this activity we enthusiastically cast our flies haphazardly into the pack at every flash of silver, completely ignoring the discrete advice from our guide... until, finally, after a couple of strips I felt that unbelievable tug on the lineand I set the hook by raising the rod too soon!

"Keep the tip of the rod in the water when you set", said Charlie, gently, quietly...

After a crazy hour of tarpon madness, the sun goes down in a flamboyant display of colour and the tarpon set off to the sea following their supper.

After this 'appetiser' we settle down for a short night's rest only to be woken regularly by the worrying sound of the rushing wind and thunder of an approaching storm.

But in a flash, as the sun came up, the bleakness disappears and we are greeted by blue sky and sunshine.

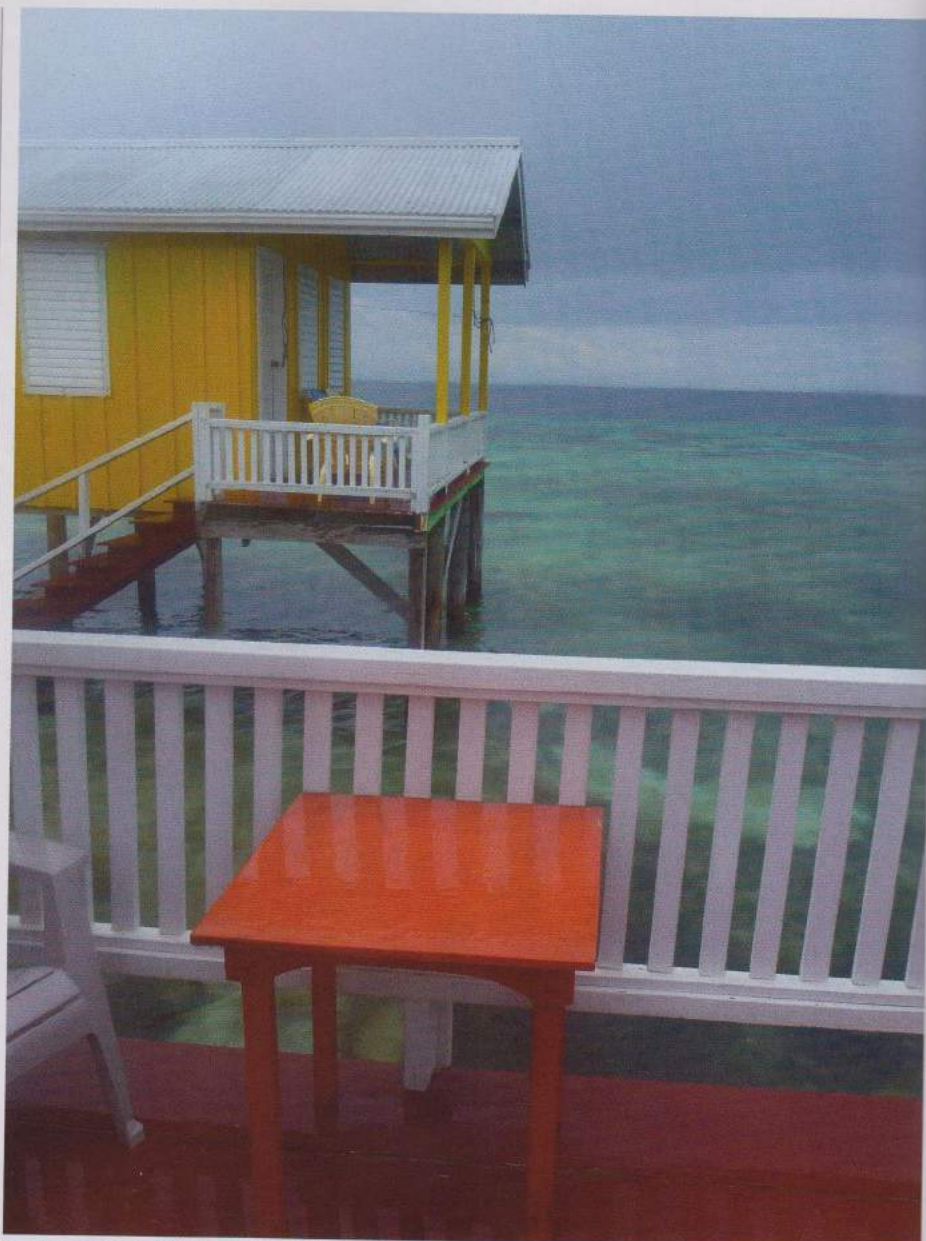
The order of the day is simple. A coffee and off to say 'bonjour' to the tarpon, followed by a good breakfast, time to prepare tackle and head off to track down some permit on the flats.

Nervous waters

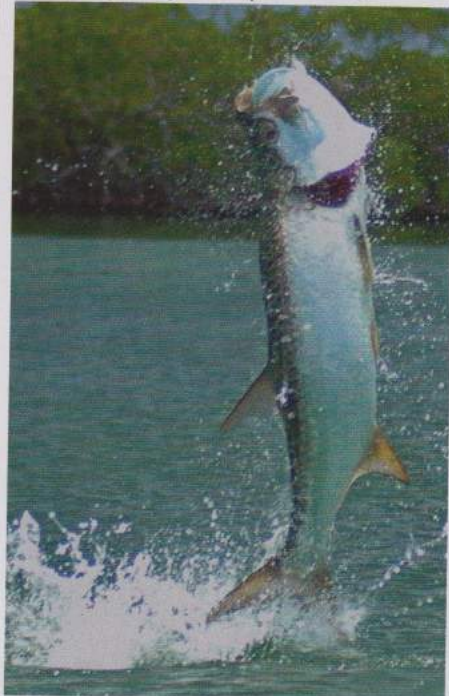
It is only 10 am when we start slowly cruising along a long flat and spot the first 'nervous waters' caused by some tailing permit. The rest of the day is non-stop fishing. Taking turns about, we never spend more than 15 minutes not casting to permit on the flats in excellent conditions. Overdosing on adrenalin when the Crab hits the head of the fish, when the cast is too long or too short, when the water is so low that the splash of the too-heavy fly scares the fish, or, one that really got the heart-rate up, when the permit sees the fly and follows it right up to our feet before catching on to the trick, and dashing off noisily. Kathleen had the trickiest one which took the fly, and spat it out so quickly that it was only when we retrieved it that we saw the imitation had been crushed and rotated 180° on the hook. This was followed by another one that followed the fly, then she lost sight of it in the waves, so she lifted the fly to recast to another permit, but the fish was still following the fly and leapt out of the water as the fly was whipped away...

I remember many years ago, at the end of a fishing day I met a trout fishermen on a creek in Montana who, when asked how his day had gone, answered that it had been an excellent day's fishing but on further questioning admitted that he had not caught one, single fish.

It's curious, but I knew even then that fly fishing had nothing to do with accountancy,



The lodge was built right on top of the good tarpon and permit fishing. Below: Tarpon Caye lives up to its name.



and a good day's fishing couldn't be measured on the number of fish caught... but to be satisfied with an 'empty bag'? I hadn't really been convinced until today. After such an intense day when we had learned so much about permit fishing, experienced so many emotions and rushes of adrenaline, softened only by the serenity of the surroundings and the gentle enthusiastic words of encouragement and advice from our guide Marlon. Not one fish landed, but what a fantastic day we had shared.

Marlon and Carlito, the assistant guide, create such a great team spirit that we attack day two full of enthusiasm and excitement, but things don't look too promising. Wind and cloud have decided to join us today.

However, bad weather conditions do not seem to dampen the enthusiasm of this team. Most of the flats we fish are narrow, edged by deeper channels which we can go up in the boat, making it easy for a trained eye to spot fish and approach them quietly.

The second morning is filled with the same dose of excitement and emotion as the day before with Marlon always managing to



Winning team: JP, permit and Marlon (left).

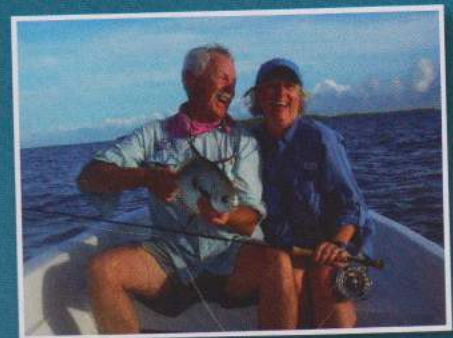
find a flat with the right level of water, whatever the tide or the conditions, where he spots tailing or moving permit and, once again, we have very little waiting time before we are fishing for permit.

At the beginning of the afternoon Marlon spots three permit heading from the deeper water onto the flat. Always ready, I immediately cast my Crab in front of them, but they keep changing direction. My casts are imprecise, but I carry on casting, stripping, casting frenetically. I do not know why exactly, but suddenly I strip strike and Bingo! I've hooked him!

I raise the rod, medium drag and let the permit go for his first, seemingly never-ending rush. As soon as I feel he may be pausing for breath I tighten the drag slightly, and begin to try and wind in some line. This doesn't please him, and off he rushes again, in the permit's imitation of a Usain Bolt sprint. After a ten-minute fight the permit is close to the boat, but too close, and he rushes under it. I immediately put the tip of the rod into the water hoping not to break it, and let the fish rush off. To my surprise, out of the corner of my eye, I see Car- ➤➤

Casting at, and hooking, permit

It is important to be able to cast far and with precision even in windy conditions, to master the double-haul, low parallel casting, and casting with the minimum of false-casts, because permit are top of the menu for sharks and for this reason are always on the move. They move fast, change direction, and spook very easily. The fly, usually a Crab pattern, has to move in a lifelike way. In order to get the right animation, try a couple of very short strips, followed by a short pause. If you feel the slightest pull on the line you have to immediately strip-strike but keep the rod tip down, just a slightly faster and longer strip is enough to hook it. If the permit hasn't taken the fly it won't be spooked and you can carry on moving the Crab. This is probably the secret of catching permit, as often you don't feel the fish taking the fly and he spits it out in a flash without you even realising. Don't expect to feel a definite tug. It's more like the feeling of the fly catching on a bit of elastic!





No fly box required.



Blue crab imitation amongst the stones.

lito put on his mask, dive into the water and swim under the boat. Surprised, confused I turn and see Marlon, unperplexed, “No problem”, he says to my surprised look, “the line was caught up on a metal part of the hull and Carlito has freed it!”

“Lift the rod up so the line doesn’t get caught in the coral now!”

I quickly get more line back in and carry on the fight for a further five minutes before the permit is in the net. The joy on the boat sounds like we’ve just won the Champions League. We are now a winning team, and next day we confirm this by losing one permit and netting another which leapt on the Crab at the first cast!

And what about the tarpon you are prob-

ably wondering, isn’t the lodge called “Tarpon Caye”?

We don’t have much to tell about tarpon, because we were too busy stalking and fishing for permit, but after the excitement of that first day they were very discrete, probably due to the full moon which meant they were active all night but quiet during the day. But we did catch one and lost another three. But they better watch out because we’ll be back soon!

Kathleen and Jean-Pierre Piccin are a husband and wife travel fishing team from France who have been globe-trotting with their fishing rods for almost 20 years.

Information

TACKLE

Permit: We carried two rods, both 9’ #9/10, each set up with a Crab pattern. If the Crab on the first rod gets caught on weed or coral you can carry on fishing with the second rod.

Tarpon: 9’ rod #12 (tarpon are powerful). Tarpon feed on schools of small baitfish. First by rushing in and knocking them about with their tails, then they come straight back to eat the fish they have knocked out, so it’s a good idea to imitate a dying, injured fish and to move the fly with 1 or 2 short strips with short pauses.

One evening while waiting for tarpon to appear I had left my fly in the water and it was slowly sinking to the bottom when a very big tarpon appeared from nowhere and attacked the fly! Tarpon fishing is technically not too difficult, but the strike and the fight need endurance, a calm approach, and control of the tension of the line during the leaps and rushes.

Other species: A 9’ rod #7/8 for bonefish, which are plentiful on the flats. Use the permit rod and reel for fishing near the reef for trevally, triggerfish, etc.

Flies: For permit most Crab or shrimp patterns work, but they must not be too heavy. For tarpon sardine imitations; Gummy Minnows, Clouser Minnows on high quality hooks.

PLACE & TIME

The lodge is the best place we have ever travelled to for permit. We have been there at the ‘wrong’ time, with the wrong tide and moon, but the amount of permit we saw and fished for was unbelievable! Knowing that in spring the fishing is better and big tarpon are there, we cannot wait to go back!

Positioned in the middle of good fishing for tarpon and for permit, you do not waste time on long boat journeys. The fishing day can easily be adapted to the tide and conditions. A typical day can be a coffee and off to check for tarpon in the lagoon as the sun comes up, followed by breakfast before heading off in search of permit. During quieter parts of the day it is easy to stop back at the lodge to rest or enjoy snorkelling in front of your cabana before heading back out to catch the right tide...

Above all the contact with the guides and lodge staff is spontaneous, warm, welcoming and genuine a far cry from the impersonal courtesy you sometimes experience in other top-class fishing lodges.

Website: www.tarponcaye.com

Email: info@tarponcaye.com