

AQUARIUS

Cozumel's Premier Fishing Guide

Cozumel, Mexico

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Published in Eastern Fly Fishing Magazine in the September – October 2013 Edition.

Cozumel, the touristy island destination in the Mexican Caribbean, is well known for world—class blue-water fishing. The docks are full of offshore fishing boats, but because the island was on the itinerary for the cruise ship tour my wife and I wanted to take, I was curious about the potential for flats fishing. When I first started searching for inshore flats guides on Cozumel, one name kept coming up: Carlos Vega, owner of Aquarius Travel Fishing Representatives. www.cozumelflatsfishing.com and a 35 - year veteran guiding Cozumel waters.

When I first e-mailed Vega about bonefishing, he was eager to talk about the fishery in Cozumel, as well as the beautiful waters that surround the island. He gave me detailed information about his guided trips, which cost less than \$400 for six hours for two anglers. The only real problem from my end was that I would need to get back to the ship before it left port. Vega left no stone unturned, and when the day finally arrived in late April, my wife, Audrey, and I left the ship, caught a cab, and met Vega at his office. He took us to the marina, Puerto de Abrigo, where we met his guide Enrique. We boarded a 22-foot Panga for the trip to the north side of the island, where we would enter Rio de la Plata, one of the four lagoons (the others are Isla de la Pasión, Monte Cristo, and Paso de Balem) that make up the bonefish flats in Cozumel. Rio de la Plata (River of the Silver) is Vega's bonefish flat and also the farthest from the marina.

The boat ride was a little bumpy, covering 14 miles in open water. When we arrived at the lagoon, Enrique poled the boat some 20 minutes through pristine flats, and then we began wading. Almost immediately we saw packs of bones, usually two to four fish together. At first my light-colored Gotchas and Crazy Charlies were not producing, so Enrique gave me a darker brown, size 8 Crazy Charlie and *bam*, fish on. Audrey decided to stay in the boat and was poled by another guide who had accompanied us out to the lagoon. She caught two barracuda and missed some bonefish opportunities. I caught several more bonefish that day, having waded a couple of miles through the lagoon; the numbers of bonefish there would rival most areas I've fished in the Bahamas and Florida Keys. Most of the fish ranged from 1 to 3 pounds, though I saw a few 5-pounders. Back at the dock later that day, I thanked Vega for a great trip, and he drove us back to the ship, on time. We vowed that we would return in the near future.



The near future was just seven months later, when we returned to Cozumel on another cruise ship. This time we booked Vega's mid-November trip early and were well prepared (I had neglected to bring wading boots the first time). The cab picked us up at the terminal and dropped us off at the marina, where we were again met by Carlos and Enrique. Again, we headed to Rio de la Plata.

Enrique poled the boat north in the lagoon, farther than we had fished on our previous trip. We anchored, and Audrey and I waded the flat together. Thirty minutes passed before Enrique spotted fish—a big school of bones perhaps 100 yards ahead that we did not see. We moved to the left of the school so as not to disturb their feeding. Once in range, I tried several different flies with no success. So I lengthened to 15 feet of leader, and Enrique gave me one of his little crablike patterns, which did the trick. For two hours, I caught fish after fish while the school barely moved. Even Audrey got in on the act, catching her first bonefish. Again the fish were small, 1 to 3 pounds, but when you're catching lots of bones, who's complaining?



The lagoon called River of the Silver lived up to its name, and Vega is a wonderful host, supplying the boat with his wife's delicious sandwiches, as well as water, sodas, and some Mexican beer. He also supplies tackle and flies if you happen to forget yours. Although Cozumel has not been hit by the same violence that has befallen the mainland, sadly, the poor economy and fear of violence have caused it to experience its own recession. However, the cruise ship stops are keeping it afloat (no pun intended).

Cruise ships are a wonderful way to get to great fly-fishing destinations while at the same time saving money. For example, I was able to get a seven-day western Caribbean cruise for less than \$400 per person on Carnival and have lots of fun along the way. Next time, I may take a more conventional route and fly in for seven days, not worrying about getting back to the ship when the fish are biting. Either way you go, contact Carlos Vega for information on fishing, lodging, dining, and more. Don't forget your wading boots—and a camera.