

AQUARIUS

Cozumel's Premier Fishing Guide

Fishing Is Where You Find It

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As I stalked through the calm waters, my eyes searched for something. Something, that looked like a bonefish. Finally, next to a mangrove 50 feet away I saw a few fins moving above the surface and gestured to my guide Enrique, “bonefish?” He replied with the classic one-word sentences our day would consist of, “Si. Cast.”

As I pulled line from the reel, I glanced at my watch. 7:45 a.m. People at the office were just heading into work. My wife was back at the resort, already poolside under a thatched palapa. But, today was all mine. Two thousand miles from home, I was alone in the tranquil lagoon, getting ready to make my first cast to a bonefish.

Beaches, Beverages and Bonefish?

It was not Andros, Ascension or even Belize. I was in a locale not known for flats fishing, surrounded by schools of bonefish and even a few permit and tarpon. Besides its magnificent diving and offshore fishing, Cozumel, Mexico also boasts some not-so-well-known flats fishing opportunities.



Fishing Mexico's famed Ascension Bay originally piqued my interest, with the dream of catching my first bonefish on a fly. But, when I learned of a possible two-hour cab ride through rough terrain, my interest waned. Instead, Travis Baker from Cabela's Outdoor Adventures put me in touch with Carlos Vega of Cozumel Flats Fishing, in Cozumel. Ascension Bay is famous for flats fishing, Cancun for partying, and Cozumel for diving. But, hidden right in there is a great fishing opportunity.

To make my dream day-trip happen, all I had to do was catch the 6:00 a.m. ferry from Playa Del Carmen to Cozumel where Carlos met me for a quick trip to the marina, and then a 35-minute panga ride to the north end of the island. Eight hours with just bonefish, a fly rod, and me. I'd be back at the resort in time for pre-dinner cocktails.

Fishing – Horseshoes and Hand Grenades

In a perfect world, my first cast would land the Crazy Charlie fly next to the tailing bonefish, the guide would instruct, "strip," a bonefish would follow and take. In reality, my fly landed in a pile of leader 10 feet short. Enrique replied, "Farther." All I could say was "Si" since I didn't know the correct Spanish for what I was really thinking.

We continued our stalk, looking for just a glint of dorsal fin or tail. Enrique suddenly pointed, "bonefish." This time they were less than 40 feet, well within my crude casting skills. I saw several fish feeding and knew my chances were high, if I could just place the fly in the pocket. I false-casted a few times, loaded the rod and shot a cast straight at the fish. It looked perfect...until the leader turned over and my fly ended up two feet too far, hooked on a mangrove. Enrique's head went down following mine. As he went to retrieve the fly, no less than a dozen bonefish rocketed out of the tiny pocket past my legs. My confidence of achieving my goal of a fly-caught bonefish was receding with every cast that was too short, too long, too left or too right. I had a few exciting follows but had yet to hook up.

After four hours of wading, increasing winds drove us to the panga. Enrique poled through the shallow water to the middle of a lagoon and said, "Cast." Cast where? Finally, I saw the clear water and a line where it became sandy. Having fished for tailing/mudding redfish off the North Carolina coast, I pointed, "Fish?" "Si" was Enrique's reply. The pressure was off; no longer was I trying to cast to a precise target, but instead a general area. The old horseshoes vs. hand grenades analogy came to mind as I brought the rod forward, sending the fly toward the unseen feeding fish.

Stripping the fly, I suddenly felt a hit. Fighting the natural urge to set the hook with the rod, I instead kept the tip down as instructed and pulled back with the line. This motion was answered quickly with the extra line shooting through my fingertips, the singing drag announcing my first bonefish! The fight with the little scrapper gained my respect for these ghosts of the flats as this two- to three-pound fish bowed my eight-weight rod. Releasing the fish back to the water, it felt like a weight had been lifted.

Re-energized, I quickly loaded the rod and fought the wind for another cast. Soon, my efforts were rewarded with a solid strike that had the drag screaming. This fish is what I had come for. The four-pound bone went where he wanted and screamed around the lagoon, putting up a fight much larger than his size. After a long day of disappointment in my own abilities, a smile crossed my lips. The rod doubled as the fish made another run. I now understood why many fly anglers seek out the bonefish.

The wind soon made casting near impossible, but instead of getting frustrated, I remembered I was on vacation. Sitting the rod down, I asked Enrique for another of Mexico's specialties, "Corona." Sitting on the gunwale, conquering the heat of the day with an ice-cold cerveza, I again glanced at my watch and thought of people back at work...but only for a second.

Hidden Fishing Gems

In this area, there are not the "double-digit" 10-plus pound bonefish of Bahamas fame, but a double-digit tally of scrappy two- to four-pound bones is highly possible, if you can place the fly in the right spot. On the right days, a partial grand slam with permit or baby tarpon is also a possibility, but Carlos recommends extra days to target each species.



For major saltwater action and better chances for success, booking a 3- 5- to 7-day fishing trip with Cozumel Flats Fishing is your best bet and you can contact Carlos at: info@cozumelflatsfishing.com. Toll Free: 1-800-371-2924, or 1-954-317-3743. However, great fishing is where you find it. As I downed yet another celebratory Corona in the hot sun, the only question in my mind was where are we going next?