

Paradise Waits

Tarponville, Costa Rica By Brett Wedeking

My legs creaked as I crawled out of the van after a long, bumpy ride from San José. My toes hit soft sand and I immediately found a straw-equipped coconut in my hand. I turned around and my buddy, Mark Hatter, was already sipping the delicious water.

“Welcome to Tarponville!” exclaimed Mark Martin, the lodge owner.

fishing grounds. Along the way, the rain forest meets the ocean, with deserted crescents of sand separating rugged cliff heads. The Gandoca-Manzanillo National Wildlife Refuge occupies all of the land from Manzanillo to the Panama border. Few people venture beyond the periphery, and the tarpon fishery is a lonely one, which suited us fine.

The Sixaola River's freshwater injection provides a vast baitfish nursery with color and temperature lines affecting

the water a mile in every direction. Combined with the swell and the ocean breeze, it makes for constantly changing conditions and ever-moving bait on which the tarpon feed. The tarpon generally just follow the baitfish around, gobbling them up. Considering that 100-pound fish are common, these tarpon are well fed.

Typical Tarponville fishing days are split into morning and evening sessions, playing off the tides and weather. Water depths range from 5 to 20 feet, making intermediate lines the best choice. Floating lines are useful too, as surface activity is common. That is exactly what the eagle-eyed guides look for while slowly cruising the area.

All of the Tarponville guides are local fishermen, and they are excellent at their craft. Most important, they know how to handle 150 pounds of fish at the boat, allowing for a photo while keeping anglers and fish safe.

The tarpon of the Sixaola often roll and feed right on top, which makes for some seriously heart-pounding action. The first time I saw this spectacle I chucked a seemingly minuscule size 4/0 streamer into a school of 6-foot-long tarpon and instantly hooked up. The raw power of a jumping tarpon was frightening. I thought of *Jaws*, and suddenly our sturdy panga seemed far too small a platform for battling such a leviathan. That action is what makes the Sixaola so special. A pod of happy, feeding tarpon commonly leads to double, even triple hookups and full-tilt mayhem. Despite fishing 100-pound shock



PHOTO BY ADAM FEUERMAN

End of the trail: Tarponville, Gandoca-Manzanillo National Wildlife Refuge, Costa Rica (above). Paradise waits some five hours by car southeast of San Jose, near the southernmost extent of Costa Rica's Caribbean coast, where adventurous anglers find superb fishing for tarpon, bonefish, permit, snook, and more. Non-angling companions can snorkel, kayak, watch wildlife, take dolphin tours, and even arrange hikes within the Gandoca-Manzanillo refuge (right). Photos by Adam Feuerman, Mark Hatter, Mark Martin.

We were in far southern Costa Rica, at the end of the road, in tiny Manzanillo, less than 10 miles from the border with Panama. A beautiful palm-backed beach and the warm Caribbean Sea lay at our feet. Immediately I thought, it's going to be difficult to leave in a week.

The lodge sat hidden in the noisy, rustling jungle ahead. A small creek crossing and a stroll through the lush forest led us to our home for the week. We settled in our rooms quickly and set to tackle tinkering. We traveled to Tarponville to pursue the silver king and did not want to waste any time.

Sixaola River

Spring and fall provide the most consistent weather and the smoothest water, and a mellow boat ride south of the lodge leads to the Sixaola River and the main tarpon





PHOTO BY MARK HATTER

Thirty minutes into the fight, this fish—well over 100 pounds—surfaces for a moment, only to rip another 100 yards of backing off a screaming reel (above). This permit vacuumed up a Bauer Crab on Tarponville's exclusive flat full of black tails (below).

tippets, broken leaders are common. Jumping a big tarpon, catching the sun flashing off its scales, and hearing the rattle of gill rakers is enough for most anglers.

Landing a triple-digit-weight bruiser is another story, as our friend Jordan Romney found out his first morning. He joined our group the second day and quickly hit his stride. After a fruitless search for active fish, our guides set us up on blind drifts that morning. While not as exciting as casting into rolling pods, blind-casting is part of the program, and deadly effective. Turns out, Romney was sandbagging. Noticing the turbid water that morning, he tied on a Thalken's Cruiser, which contained a rattle. We quickly discovered the fly's effectiveness when on the first drift he struck silver. I remember catching a sharp reflection in my peripheral vision. I turned my head to see Jordan's line tight to a huge fish, twisted up, 6 feet in the air. It landed with a titanic splash and commenced a 75-minute episode of line burns, sweating, aching, and finally elation for Jordan, when his guide, Deli Hansell, slid the fish alongside the boat. As soon as line tension released, the Cruiser fell right out of the fish's top lip.

Grab Bag

Tarpon are the headliners, but the venue hosts a variety of other fish and activities. Bycatch is common at the tarpon grounds, and includes jacks, barracuda, mackerel, and more. Snook patrol the surf and the river mouth, and the reefs carry an abundance of species. If you're not interested

PHOTO BY MARK HATTER



in a siesta in the middle of the day, triggerfish are a great diversion. The lodge is 150 feet off the beach, and triggers tail just feet from shore munching on coral and crabs. A 7-weight, a cold Imperial beer, and an accurate cast are requirements for these bucktoothed gamesters.

The Gandoca Lagoon is a beautiful and wild place to spend an afternoon fishing quietly by kayak, which the lodge provides. The lagoon reminded me of a wild jungle location in an *Indiana Jones* movie: dense foliage hangs over the dark water, creating eerie cuts and coves begging for a fly. Baby tarpon and snook, as well as caimans, thrive in the lagoon. The forest above is noisy and alive. Several monkey species swing through the trees. Parrots, herons, and toucans highlight an endless stream of

birds darting overhead. Sloths and iguanas lounge in the trees, and innumerable other creatures are heard but unseen.

In fact, the lodge is a fantastic place for nature lovers, regardless of whether they fly fish. Snorkeling and hiking start right out the door, and the staff can arrange surfing lessons, kayak and snorkel tours, horseback rides, and jungle tours,

among other activities. There is no danger of boredom at Tarponville. The lodge is currently exploring blue-water fishing opportunities, looking to add that option in the near future. "Dorado, tuna, and billfish all swim off the coast here, and nobody fishes for them," says Martin. "Our guides know the water, and we're getting dialed into catching these fish on flies."

Palometa Felices (Happy Permit)

The world's happiest permit live on a flat near Tarponville. During the two morning sessions when we targeted permit, black sicklelike tails and fins shimmered and shook all around us as the fish feverishly chased crabs and shrimp below the surface. We dropped numerous casts right on their heads, and though they didn't always eat, they never entirely spooked. Our group of four hooked several fish in just a few remarkable hours. Last fall, one of Martin's clients hooked six permit in one morning.

Watching the sun rise over the jungle, seeing it glint off the tipped-up tails of feeding permit, and hearing the waves roar over the reef overwhelmed my senses. I knew I was lucky to fish in this special place.

The catch is that Tarponville has exclusive access to this flat. Do-it-yourself anglers are nonexistent, and the lodge only fishes the flat here and there, a few short hours at a time. The locals don't fish for permit, explained our guide, Roberto Smikle. "When we started fishing them on a fly, everyone said we would never catch one because permit only eat coral," he told us. While this isn't the place to travel to fish permit all week, it is a great sidebar for permit addicts. Other small coral flats in the area are worth a stop as well, so keep a crab-equipped 9-weight outfit at hand at all times. As if you need more to ponder, bonefish prowl the same flats and will readily vacuum up a crab pattern.

Logistics

Tarponville is a rustic and comfortable open-air house. The food, excellent and filling, is local fare, and Dolfi Goodman, the lodge manager, makes the best mojitos this side of Mars. But Tarponville is literally in the jungle. The din of the night wilds, and the cool ocean breeze, will lull you to a well-earned sleep. Leaf-cutter ants work all night long building underground tunnel networks. Bring a headlamp, because the fireflies and click beetles don't light up the paths enough for you to avoid the skittering land crabs. If you're a Swedish death metal fan you'll enjoy the guttural

Tarponville NOTEBOOK

When: March–May and September–October during the dry seasons. Fall sees the calmest winds and lowest swells.

Where: Manzanillo, on the southern Caribbean coast of Costa Rica.

Headquarters: Tarponville, (619) 886-0547, www.tarponville.com.

Appropriate gear: *Tarpon:* 12- to 13-wt. rods, floating and intermediate lines, 80- to 100-lb. shock leaders. *Permit:* 8- to 10-wt. rods, floating lines. *Reef/lagoon species:* 7- to 8-wt. rods, floating lines.

Useful fly patterns: *Tarpon:* Tarpon Bunnies, Cockroach, Black Death, Thalken's Cruiser, Deceivers, Big Eye Tarpon, Tarpon Toad, EP Peanut Butter (black/purple), Tarpon Mouse. *Permit:* Bauer Crab, Kung Fu Crab, Raghead Crab, Ragin' Cravin'. *Reef/lagoon species:* Small crabs and shrimp patterns in tan and olive, Clouser Minnows.

Necessary accessories: Two pairs of polarized sunglasses, sunscreen and SPF protective clothing, Buff or similar head/face cover, headlamp,



PHOTO BY MARK HATTER

strong pliers, flats boots, bug spray.

Nonresident license: Included in the lodge package.

Fly shops/guides: *Napa, CA:* Off the Hook Fly Fishing, (877) 228-2477, www.offthehookflyfishing.com.



PHOTO BY MARK HATTER

morning screams of howler monkeys for an alarm clock.

The fishery is among the most diverse and surprising saltwater destinations anywhere. Pack a wide range of gear, including 7- to 12-weight rods, for a variety of species. A spare 12-weight and spare fly lines are good ideas—these big tarpon can be hard on fly tackle. Only large-capacity reels with sturdy drags need apply, and 80- to 100-pound shock leaders are a must. Bring plenty of size 1/0 through 4/0 baitfish patterns; the fish are not terribly selective, but when the bite is on you may break off a half-dozen fish in a morning.

Travel-wise, it's pretty simple. Get to San José, Costa Rica, and lodge staff will pick you up. Ground shuttles and overnight accommodations are part of the package. Manzanillo is literally at the end of the road, and Tarponville feels like it's at the end of the earth. Silver kings swim through my dreams and permit tail through my thoughts as I scheme to get back to the golden Caribbean sunrises peeking through the palms at Tarponville. 🐟

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