

ROXTONS

FIELD SPORTS

“This is far too much fun to be legal” - a Cuban fishing report

When Christopher Robinson and the first Roxtons team set foot ashore Jardines De La Reina in 1994 to explore the potential fishing opportunity of this extraordinary fishery, they could never have envisaged that 20 years later the fishing would still be so good. Similarly they would never have believed that it was now possible to fish here in such comfort.

A week on Avalon Fleet 1 offers arguably the best way to spend a week's fishing anywhere in the world. Combine 7 friends (one other very sadly missed), superb tarpon fishing, knee-knocking permit fishing, fabulous food, service and what felt like 3,000 Cuba Libres each and it is hard to think of anywhere that I would rather have been.

Cuba remains a fascinating country to visit, regardless of whether fishing is the main draw or not. Havana has an energy and strangely a smell (not unpleasant) all of its own. Genuinely unthreatening, upbeat, full of life and full of fun it is probably the one city I would like to preserve in its present state forever.

Naturally, there are huge improvements that could be made in its infrastructure and it seems inevitable that before long, there will be a lifting of US sanctions and no doubt money will come flooding in. It is impossible to say whether that will lead to good change or bad change but it certainly will change. I feel very fortunate to have seen it before that happens.

Getting to Jucaro, the starting point on your fishing journey remains a time-consuming exercise. An early start in the morning and a 5-6 hour bus ride. There is no better way to do it and all you can do is sit back and drink in the Cuban countryside. Once there you step straight onto your boat before motoring out to the amazing archipelago of JDR.

A huge advantage of being on Fleet 1 as opposed to the mothership is that you are immediately into your own cabins and can unpack and tackle up during the journey out to the fishing grounds – once there everyone had been fed, watered (in a Cuban fashion) and was raring to go.

The first session was gentle enough with all of us getting our eyes back in and we landed some bones and tarpon. After that we hardly looked at the bonefish, which in hindsight was a bit of a shame - they offer such fantastic sport. But the tarpon fishing and the permit opportunities were so good that none of us could really bring ourselves to focus on anything else. It was mentioned many times that other destinations in the world would give their eye teeth to be able to offer the bonefishing that Cuba does and yet we hardly bothered with them.

The days came and went too quickly. Some were full of



action, some were packed full of action – we fished hard and sometimes we fished well - sometimes we didn't... We jumped over 50 tarpon in the week and boated just over 30 of them which was a very good ratio when you consider that the average ratio is 1 in 7 to the boat.

A few incidents stand out in my mind: one morning being woken at 5am by the guides to say that it was a still morning and that we should all get going. In pitch black we jumped on to the skiffs and set off at a breakneck pace across a flat calm sea. Thirty minutes later, still in pitch black, the guide told my fishing partner to cast 30 feet at 11 o'clock. He duly did but was corrected and told no, a bit to the left which he did and immediately jumped a 30lbs tarpon which he expertly boated.

This caused a lot of laughs as we fell over each other in the darkness but it then led to some searching questions. How did the guide know that the fish was there, how did he see where John was casting and how on earth did he see the fish change direction as we were casting to it? A feat of exceptional guiding.

An hour after that, the sun came up properly and that session was over but seeing hundreds of rolling tarpon against the dawn light is a sight that will stay with me for a very long time.

Amongst many permit shots there were two that should be highlighted but before I do that, it is worth considering the standout lesson of the trip. Every permit is different, every situation is different and as a result every time you think you are getting a handle on exactly what to do next, you are promptly told to do something completely different – truly the more you learn the less you know.

However, there are just a few times when everything works perfectly, bar the luck. Two permit, 30 minutes apart, each following the fly for 15-20 metres before inhaling it and setting off - the ideal result, surely? Sadly each of them got off so my partner did not get the money shot he was craving for but as the guide pointed out in perfect English “for me, the tension is unbearable”. It was one of the most exhausting and exhilarating fishing mornings of my life and I was not even holding the rod.

The joy of being aboard Fleet 1 is that we were moored in the middle of the most productive fishing grounds so whilst we had some longish skiff rides, it was still easy and practical to come back to lunch each day. The chance to catch up with everyone, have a proper break in the heat of the day and have a delicious lunch was not one that any of us wanted to pass up, regardless of how good the fishing was.

We were treated like kings and the staff on board could not have been more charming, polite or helpful but even they were upstaged by the guides. Truly top class, eyes like hawks, fun and excellent instructors, they were the saltwater guides that we all dream of and worked incredibly hard to make sure we all got into fish.

It is hard to see how the week could have been bettered, bar more cooperative permit but they are the fish that keep you awake at night and that is surely how it should be.

If you can get a team of 6 to 10 together then I urge you to try the new charter yacht experience in Cuba – it really shouldn't be legal to have that much fun. **Charlie White, April 2014.**

