



A LODGE WITH NO NAME

Tarpon Training Camp in Puerto Rico

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PHOTOS BY IVAN ORSIC



THE PERFECT-SIZED FISH FOR A BEGINNER TARPON-CHASER: IT'S NOT FIVE POUNDS, AND IT'S NOT A-HUNDRED-AND-FIVE POUNDS.

RIGHT: A TARPON THAT PROBABLY HAD A BIT MORE JUICE TO IT.

7:30 a.m. May 9. La Parguera.

THE MORNING'S FIFTEEN-MINUTE drive to the boat ramp rolls over hills studded with cacti, then past cattle ranches reminiscent of Montana, before dropping us beneath palm trees scattered along the coast. Our skiff hadn't been in the water five minutes before we spot some rollers.

While I've fished flats before, this is my first proper tarpon trip and I am a saltwater captain's nightmare: a Western Trout Guy; handy with a rod but holding a deep-seated trout-set and high-stick fighting technique, both sins in the salt. A stiff breeze is blowing across the Caribbean, and despite years throwing streamers into howling Wyoming winds on the North Platte, I'm feeling woefully unprepared. I pull my nine-iron from the gunnel and nervously step to the tee.

No Name's head guide, Melanie Gannon, quickly recognizes my edginess and instinctively repositions the skiff so I can double haul toward a patch of sargassum without burying a hook into anyone's skull or shoulder. My cast puts the fly close to where I want it. "Let it sit for a second to get beneath the weeds," Gannon says. "Remember, these are just the little guys," she adds, doing her best to sooth my nerves.

A tarpon eats before I even start to strip, and the thirty-pound fish quickly finds its wings. Within a couple of minutes, and with a bit of luck, a silver prince is boatside and Mel reaches in to make the grab. With shaky hands—now from excitement instead of anxiety—I grab a Medalla Light from the cooler. (Not *Modelo*, Medalla.)

NO NAME LODGE sits in the far southwestern corner of Puerto Rico—a U.S. Territory laying way out there in the Caribbean, with the U.S. and British Virgin Islands to the east and the Dominican Republic to the west. While objectively far away at more than a thousand miles from Miami, there's a lot about the island that feels like home. Landing in the capital of San Juan this past May, photographer Ivan Orsic and I rented a car and drove two hours across the island to the fishing village of Boquerón. On our way out, the bustling city had familiar upscale stores and restaurants lining its well-kept streets.

Lodge co-founder Matt Pourbaix moved to San Juan a decade ago with his then girlfriend, Heather. While she attended medical school, he explored the island with a fly rod and paddle board, discovering a relatively untouched tarpon fishery that left a lasting impression on the Miami





GUIDE JARRETT BOTTJER ON THE PLATFORM, WITH NO NAME LODGE OWNER MATT POURBAIX HOOKED-UP AND HOLDING ON.

“THESE TARPON, ALL OF THEM, ARE HERE EVERY DAY OF THE YEAR.”

native. And it wasn't just the fish. “It's the vibe, the people, the landscape—mountains, deserts, rainforests, waterfalls, beaches—everything about it is incredible,” says Pourbaix. “It's a big island with a lot to offer.”

In the years following his time in Puerto Rico, Pourbaix guided and fished his way throughout several Central American hotspots, traveling around the Yucatan Peninsula in Mexico and Belize. Near the start of the pandemic, he had an opportunity to run Cayo Frances, a flyfishing camp on the relatively remote and unpopulated west side of Belize's Ambergris Caye. Pourbaix and his business partner, Cooper Beckett, wanted to create something that would stand out in what has become a very crowded destination-fishing market. They settled on an approachable model involving DIY fishing that prioritized experience over luxury. It was here that No Name's “anti-lodge” lodge philosophy was born.

By 2022, Pourbaix and Beckett were looking for a place to set up a new operation. Pourbaix's previous experiences launched them on an exploratory, month-long trip to Puerto Rico, fishing everywhere from Isla de Culebra—off the island's east coast—to Rincón, on its westernmost tip, before settling their home base on the territory's southwest corner. “We found no better fishing elsewhere,” says Pourbaix.

The pair then entered development mode, buying a truck, shipping skiffs from the mainland, and, of course, starting an Instagram account. Pourbaix was booking trips before they even had boats in the water. “We started with a four-month ‘soft opening’ for friends, industry folks, and a few brands,” says Pourbaix. “We told them, ‘Hey, we're just figuring out this whole program and want you to be part of it.’”

While the island has world-class permit fishing that guests may pursue, and though Pourbaix added a thirty-two-foot Contender for fishing offshore, No Name's primary focus is tarpon. I could see why. On our first day, with Mel, we caught forty or more ranging from ten to forty pounds. When guests are ready to up the stakes, their guide can take them to flats with fish topping a hundred. No Name's finest

asset, according to Pourbaix, is the consistency of its tarpon. “You can go to Mexico and catch little tarpon until you're bored, or you can go to the Keys in May or June to chase big ones,” he says. “These tarpon, *all* of them, are here every day of the year.”

8 a.m. May 10. Boquerón.

WE'RE WITH POURBAIX today and the vibe is a little different, partly because Matt is considerably more intense than “mellow” Mel, but also because we're heading to a big-fish zone. After a short run we enter a bay with calm, shallow water the color of turquoise. There's no wind, and visibility is good, which raises my confidence.

We were into them almost immediately, again, with Pourbaix spotting a fish before I'd even unhooked my fly from the guide. “Fish, eleven o'clock, up near the mangroves. Do you see it?”

I did not, which I made clear by my silence. “Seriously?” Matt asks, incredulously. “He's *right* there, twelve o'clock now, cruising left to right. Sixty feet. He's right there!”

Finally, I spot it. The shadow dwarfs anything I'd ever cast to. Before my burgeoning nerves can take hold, I make a good shot with the eleven-weight.

Well, I think it's a good shot. The fly lands with only a tiny splash but the shallow water erupts as the tarpon torpedoes off the edge of the flat.

“Dude, you hit him right on the head!” Matt shouts from the platform, thankfully followed by laughter. The next fish come more quickly than I imagined, their number matched only by the variety of ways I manage to screw them up. I line one, hit a second one on the head, then get one to eat only to yank the fly out of its mouth with an overzealous strip set. Another follows for a while, but I fumble the line, so it loses interest and swims off. Self-doubt creeps in to suffocate what little confidence I'd built.

We round a small mangrove peninsula and spot a new pair of tarpon circling. They seem happy. Matt carefully positions the skiff, as he's done all morning. I take a deep breath and cast. “You lined him,” Matt says. “Again.” Patience on the back of the boat is waning, and my sense of defeat on the bow is waxing.

With the mood rapidly deteriorating, Pourbaix suggests we break for lunch. I agree, as I needed a reset. Over tasty Cuban sandwiches from a little shop in town, Pourbaix talks me through my mistakes, tactfully coaching me on what I can do better.

THE DEFINITION OF A “BABY” OR “JUVENILE” OR “MANGROVE” TARPON CAN VARY BY LOCATION. IN SOME PARTS OF MEXICO OR BELIZE, A BABY MIGHT BE A FISH FROM FIVE TO FIFTEEN POUNDS. IN OTHER AREAS, BABIES MIGHT RANGE FROM FIVE TO THIRTY. AND WITHIN CERTAIN FLORIDA OLD-SCHOOL CIRCLES, A BABY IS ANY TARPON WEIGHING LESS THAN EIGHTY POUNDS.

“WE’RE NOT GOING TO LET YOU GET INTO TOO MUCH TROUBLE, BUT YOU MIGHT BE OUT TILL TWO IN THE MORNING AND WAKE UP WITH A NEW TATTOO.”



THE AUTHOR, ABOVE, SENDS A GOOD-LOOKING CAST TOWARD A GOOD-LOOKING TARPON. HE PROBABLY LINED IT.

POURBAIX AND BECKETT’s philosophy is simple: Build an operation that they and their friends would want to visit. “We’re trying to build a place for both new and experienced anglers who may not really know where they fit in,” says Pourbaix, adding that he wants to make a home for the angler who’s in it for both the fishing and the cultural opportunities. “At some lodges, you might spend nine-thousand bucks and be stuck there the entire time, with the lodge controlling every minute of your experience. Here, we’re sharing our lives with you—our favorite restaurants, bars, hangouts, everything. As soon as you show up, you’re fully immersing yourself until you leave.”

That’s not to say that a visit to No Name is without structure. They provide professional guides, real skiffs, and an incredible knowledge of the location, yet still aim to capture some of the feel of an exploratory DIY trip. On most nights, you’ll join the guides for dinner and drinks in town, just a handful of steps away. From there, the direction of the night is largely up to you. “We’re not going to let you get into too much trouble,” says Pourbaix, “but you might be out till two in the morning and wake up with a new tattoo.”

1:30 p.m. May 10. Boquerón.

AFTER LUNCH and a pep talk from Matt, I’m back on the bow. We don’t find tarpon quite as easily as we did in the morning but before long, we both spot one just beyond mortal casting range. I take a moment to compose myself and finally make a cast like I’ve held a rod before. The fly lands where it’s supposed to, I strip, he eats, and I’m officially fighting the biggest fish I’ve ever hooked.

I hear its gill plates rattle when it jumps right in front of me. Then it runs. Pourbaix jumps off the platform, stows the push pole, and grabs the steering wheel as my backing knot disappears across the Caribbean. The train has left the station.

Eventually, momentum shifts, and I begin regaining line. Seconds feel like hours until the tarpon is boatside and I think we just might land it. Then, Ol’ Silverside makes one more pull and the tippet gives.

Pourbaix looks at me. “See? They’re honest fish. Most of the time, if you do what you’re supposed to do—put the fly in front of them, then move it away—they’re going to eat.”

Getting them to the boat is another matter.

HEAD GUIDE MEL GANNON PREPARES FOR TAKEOFF IN BOQUERÓN, ALONG PUERTO RICO’S SOUTHWEST COAST,





THE NO NAME CREW DESCENDS UPON BOQUERÓN, A TOWN OF ABOUT 5,000 PEOPLE, SITTING ON THE EDGE OF BOQUERÓN BAY.



THE CABO BEACH HOUSE BAR AT BOQUERÓN BEACH, WHERE THIRSTY ANGLERS MAY ACQUIRE A TEQUILA SODA OR THREE.

4 p.m. May 10th. Boquerón Beach.

AS THE DAY wears on, tarpon become fewer and farther between. Further complicating matters, a strong wind has picked up, turning the water. Sighting fish becomes next to impossible, and I feel I've squandered my chances.

Matt poles the skiff close to shore and begins creeping up the beach, approaching a small dock in front of a badly damaged beachfront home with foliage covering all but the sea-facing side. "You'll see this kind of thing all over the island," Matt says. "This isn't Florida. It takes a long time for anything to get fixed around here."

A moment later I spot a roller just beyond the dock and fire a quick cast. It inhales my fly the moment it hits the surface, then tailwalks across the water. I again fail to manage my line, which is now wrapped around the bow as the fish races away.

"Get in the water!" Matt yells. I jump in and promptly sink to my knees in mud, then

frantically stumble toward the stern, my right hand holding the rod while the left reaches beneath the boat to free the fly line, which I somehow work around the prop with my face barely above the surface. The tarpon, miraculously, is still on, jumping in the distance, backlit by the brilliant, late-afternoon sun. Every time it jumps my heart skips.

I get the fish boatside, toeing that fine line between gaining ground and breaking off. This time, Matt grabs it. Though not quite as impressive as the one earlier, I'm still staring at my first real tarpon, a shiny ninety-pounder glowing in the Caribbean.

On the way back, Matt stops at Boquerón Beach, where the town spills into the sea. He slides the skiff onto the sand, walks a few yards to the technicolor Cabo Beach House bar, and orders three tequila sodas. "You have to be clear that you mean 'soda water' or they'll give you tequila and coke," he says, handing Ivan and me our cocktails. No drink ever tasted better. 🍹