



Beto Avila with the rarest of rare bonefish found by anglers fishing out of Puerto Rico's No Name Lodge.

ONE SHOT MORE

*Casting for photo ops out of
Puerto Rico's No Name Lodge*

BY SCOTT SADIL

I have a habit of showing up blind. I never watch the trailer, nor read anyone else's reviews. I prefer not to have my preconceptions shaded by YouTube videos. Opinions are cheap, the airwaves flooded with hucksters, rivalries and vested or conflicting interests.



Like the rest of the young energetic crew working out of No Name Lodge, guide — and photographer — Casey Ponton found us plenty of shots along Puerto Rico's southern shores.



At my age the best answer is a prompt and simple *Yes*. You get invited to go fishing, you sort of assume your hosts intend to show you a good time. Chances are they've got a hell of a lot more to lose than I do.

All I really knew about Puerto Rico was that a couple of guys, Cooper Beckett and Matt Pourbaix, had recently opened an operation, No Name Lodge, somewhere on the island—and that clients there were finding a wealth of tarpon and permit.

I don't need a lot more to go on than that.

*F*inding permit, of course, can be a long way from *catching* them. And at the risk of abandoning narrative tension, and losing readers right here at the start, I feel compelled to disclose that in five days of fishing out of No Name Lodge, I failed to touch a single permit. Not one. Three other anglers, as well, all of us rotating between separate guides and separate boats, shared such somber results. Not a strike, not a touch—although every one of us was absolutely certain we had come...*that* close.

Permit, you think. *What do you expect?*

But it wasn't for lack of sightings, shots and, in my case at least, the occasional adequately executed cast. Or so the cast seems as the fly lands, sinks, strips unfold, the permit nods and approaches until—*Abh!*

I've told you already how it ends.

What was different, from my experience, was finding permit in surf. Yet in many ways it was like coming home. We would anchor inside a line of breaking waves, the whitewater from the small daily wind swell tumbling over a shallow, crumbling, barrier reef. Tricky wading: holes and coral heads and surging wash, the sort of dynamic transitional habitat that has inspired my saltwater angling for the past 40 years.

And then a tail pops up.

I still can't get over how many permit I saw. And how vulnerable they seemed, tails up, noses down, single fish or pairs feeding in clear narrow troughs all but invisible between the rolling waves sweeping in over the leeward hollows.

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And how *big* they were. Those tails and even dorsal fins—dark scimitars silhouetted against the swirling wash—rose as if the limbs of uprooted trees poking skyward in a river's back eddy, as if the devilish periscopes of underwater drones surveilling you, the enemy. Twenty- to 25-pound permit. The chance, in fact, for a 30-pounder seemed real enough, if you refused to consider, as I did, the inevitable shit-show that would follow should you come tight, the fish bolted for the reef, and you and your guide scrambled like crazed barking retrievers to recover line and some sense of order as chaos detonated somewhere far beyond your rod tip.

Sadly, it never came to that.

Instead, we caught tarpon.

Lots of tarpon.

And a bonefish—the first bonefish ever caught out of the lodge since it opened four years ago.

I was fishing with a photographer, Beto Avila, a hot stick, it turned out,



Gray's Angling Editor Scott Sadil with a tarpon he and guide Casey Ponton can both handle and admire.

An advertisement for Broomsedge Rod & Gun. The background is a photograph of a man in a brown jacket and a light-colored cap, holding a shotgun, standing in a field of tall, dry grass. In the upper left corner, there is a circular logo with the text "BROOMSEDGE" at the top and "ROD & GUN" at the bottom. Inside the circle, there are illustrations of a deer head, a bird, and a rifle. At the bottom of the advertisement, there is a text box with the following text:

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Beto Avila and guide August Bryan easing home another playful, mid-size Puerto Rican tarpon.

from Campeche, Mexico, where he's starting an operation targeting what he calls "baby" tarpon. I hate seeing a good angler trapped behind a camera all day while I hack away trying to do *something* that might turn into an inviting photo. So, after more than my share of missed permit opportunities, and then the subsequent action on smaller tarpon, ones ranging from five to 25 pounds, Beto and I were taking turns on the bow.

And today we had asked our guide to try to find us something bigger.

Word was, not surprisingly, they were lurking. Days earlier, in fact, I had stuck a heavy fish along the edge of the sargassum mat lining a wall of mangrove, a fish we never saw as it got on the reel and took off and finally vanished somewhere beyond the aft end of the skiff, leaving us wondering what had happened until the fly came back, the hook point broken off at the bend. (For the record: a black and red Andino Deceiver I bought from an Argentine fellow in Itá Ibaté while fishing for golden dorado.) Poling us this

"Picture it: The point of view is from behind the skiff, the camera lens raised just high enough that features in the foreground leave the center of the frame free of clutter."

morning past a cluster of docks, a scene of typical tropical languor including the requisite backdrop of coral trees in full flame-red bloom, Casey, our guide, told me to grab my permit rod and tie on a bonefish fly.

"Just in case," he said.

He had been spotting bonefish along the beach up ahead, a claim none of the other guides fully believed. Better to give him a rash of you know what. Matt and Cooper, however, had put up a substantial cash reward for the lodge's first bonefish. With Beto up front, Casey had an angler he felt he could count on.

Sure enough, a bonefish appeared in a patch of sand surrounded by dead sargassum. I passed my 9-weight to

Beto. He made the cast, delivering the little Gotcha as if he had been using the rod all week. The fish saw the fly, lined up on it, approached, and ate—exactly as bonefish often will.

Beto had caught just one other bonefish in his entire life. As the line sliced through the water, the reel singing, the leaping spray sparkling in the morning sun, we were all pretty excited.

Casey secured the skiff to the pole and the three of us hopped out so Beto could beach the fish. After slipping a wet towel under it, Casey cradled the fish, keeping it in the water until we were deep enough again that Beto, down on one knee, could hold the fish at the surface for photos.

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By the time we finished shooting, the fish was dead.

We tried for at least a half hour to revive it, taking turns rocking it back and forth, then leading it headfirst through the water until one of us, then the other, grew weary of walking bent over through the shallows.

Nothing made a difference. It was dead—and, as they say, it kept getting deader.

“Something was already wrong with it,” said Casey. “You notice it didn’t have any slime on it? Like other bonefish?”

We continued trying out excuses. Finally, we motored away, only to return after Casey talked on the phone with Matt, who told us to go back and measure the fish, length and girth, and check its stomach contents.

Then another offense: three anglers onboard and not one of us had a knife.

Sheesh: What’s the world coming to?

It wasn’t pretty but Casey managed to tear open the silvery corpse with his pliers and eventually pull out the partially digested remains of a blue crab, bigger than you would think a three-pound bonefish could eat.

Can a fish choke?

Later that morning, in tight to a quiet stretch of mangrove, I landed a beautiful tarpon, 50-plus pounds, at least—the biggest tarpon any one of us in the lodge caught that week. Again, we all jumped out of the skiff to indulge the requisite photo op. I stood shoulder to shoulder with Casey while we both cradled the fish, the two of us delighting in our luck. Beto, to his credit, made short work of the hero pose.

When I released the tarpon, seemingly no worse for wear, we were all no doubt relieved.

Ego, of course, is a fiendish thing. Yet is there any other reason, really, why we want photos of ourselves holding a fish? I wish I were bigger than that. But as the week wore down, Beto and I entertained notions of capturing the image of an even larger tarpon, a fish that might stir the imaginations, however

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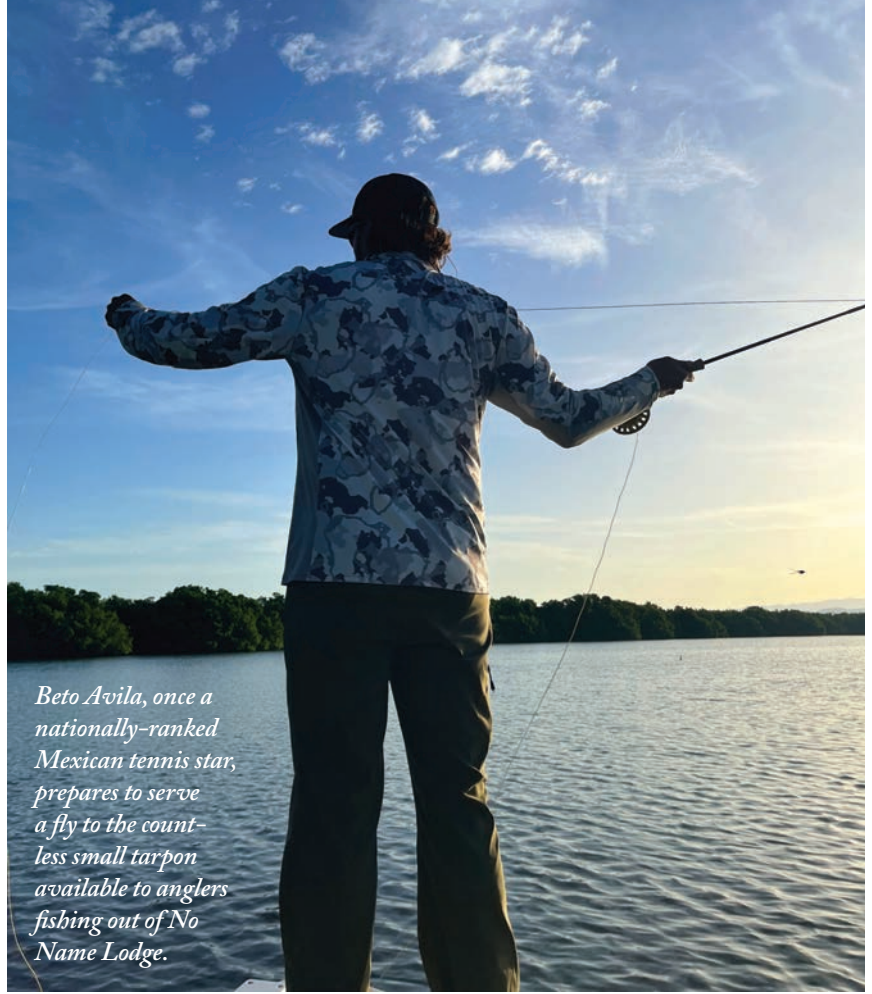
briefly, of fly anglers not yet aware of the sport available in Puerto Rico and, by extension, to potential clients of No Name Lodge.

We had been hired, we tried telling ourselves, to do a job.

Still, come our last day, I thought maybe, just maybe, we were getting carried away.

During the week we kept hearing from others at the lodge about bunches of big tarpon, laid up under and around certain docks - restaurants, a fish-processing plant, that sort of thing. The terms "dirty" and "greasy" were generally used to describe the sport. I was partial to one of my own, carried forward throughout my career for just this sort of scene: "cheap, back-alley tactics."

Still, the lure was compelling enough: One, maybe two casts was all you got before all hell broke loose, an explosion of tarpon blowing out of their so-called lie, one of these brutes very possibly attached to the end of your line. That, of course, is when the trouble begins: Your chances of hauling a 40- or 50- or



Beto Avila, once a nationally-ranked Mexican tennis star, prepares to serve a fly to the countless small tarpon available to anglers fishing out of No Name Lodge.

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IF YOU GO

No Name Lodge (Info@nonamelodge.com) is reached by a short Cape Air flight from San Juan to Mayaguez, where you'll be picked up and driven to the small town of Boquerón on the southwest corner, more or less, of the island. Accommodations are clean and simple, a modern condominium with a deck directly on the water of the upscale marina, where you can watch for manatees swimming between the neighbors' ritzy offshore fishing boats. If the lodge fills, you'll be put up in the nearby Boho Hotel, a five-minute stroll past the pool, pickle ball courts and sunbathing iguanas.

Breakfast is serve-yourself, grab-and-go: coffee, bagels, cereal, yogurt, fresh fruit. (Please, consider the chances you take with bananas.) For lunch the guides pack hearty sandwiches or substantial wraps; you make sure you've added water, sodas, beer or whatever else you might need from the kitchen to get through the day. Dinners, not included in your lodge and fishing tab, find you walking to town, where each night a different guide has secured a table at a friendly, mid-scale restaurant. English was spoken every place we visited. Whatever language you use, make sure to order a serving or two of mofongos, usually fried, mashed plantains mixed with garlic and other seasonings from animal parts best left to the imagination.

Gear? Matt and Cooper recommend bringing 9-weight rods for permit, 10-weights for tarpon. Beto, an experienced tarpon angler, felt his 9-weight was adequate for any of the tarpon we saw. Expect wind. We fished nothing but tropical floating lines strung ahead of plenty of good backing. Carry backups. If you do hook one of those big permit in the snaggy surf, I'd guess you have an even chance of destroying a line.

Nobody worried much about their tarpon flies. Dark and light, big and small, they all worked at one time or another. For permit, the guides favored a small olive Flexo crab, a pattern that looked identical to the crabs we found while turning over rocks. That said, nobody our week got an eat. Like many newish or under-exploited permit fisheries, this one seems as though it's still in the R&D stages.

Which is just as much of a plus, as far as I'm concerned, as the lodge's lineup of sleek new skiffs, the shiny Toyota Tacomas, the young energetic gringo guides with their Turtleboxes blasting old school '70s and '80s rock. Everything about No Name Lodge feels fresh, new, in tune with the here and now. By the time it's a tried-and-true Puerto Rico tradition, which seems likely to happen, I suspect I'll be casting somewhere far beyond the dark side of the moon.



even 75-pound tarpon out of such tight quarters, a parking-space-sized refuge surrounded by docks, pilings, and the like, were slim at best.

Despite all connotations of sliminess, Beto and I kind of liked those odds—if only for one last photo op.

Beto faced off with the first bunch. And with textbook skills—the likes of which you master, I assume, when tarpon have been the primary target for your entire fly fishing career—plus a little luck *and* the vigorous poling and other skiff-handling antics of our guide, August Bryan, Beto was able to stick a fish, wrestle it free of a tangle of barnacled pilings, and finally subdue the beast with the skiff backed out into deeper, safer waters, away from all manmade dangers.

Big? If size, as I often claim, is measured in increments of fear, the fish was big enough. To say things were dicey for a while is an understatement. Still, it certainly wasn't a 50-pounder. Worse, with yours truly manning an iPhone, I was pretty sure we hadn't made the most of any photo ops.

Which set the stage for my shot. I wish I could report I performed as well as Beto. Ask anyone who's fished with me, however, and he or she will say I still fail, nine times out of 10, to strip set properly when a good fish eats. It's embarrassing. Yet the truth is, I did capture, in my mind's eye, the image I was after, a single, one-frame cinematic moment, as vivid now as the actual moment it took place.

Picture it: The point of view is from behind the skiff, the camera lens raised just high enough that features in the foreground leave the center of the frame free of clutter. The skiff, far down stage, if you like, includes only enough detail to suggest August, with pole up on the poling platform; Beto, with his own camera, near the center console; and this same writer on the bow, rod lowered, tip still touching the water. Now, see a sharp straight horizontal line bisecting the frame; that's the edge of a restaurant deck or patio resting atop a row of evenly spaced pilings, white PVC sleeves rising from the surface of the water some six or eight feet below. There's also a handrail,

the edge of a roofline above that. Finally, pressed against the handrail, a crowd of people standing, looking out at the water...Because, in front of them, filling the middle half of the frame, half above the center line, half below, a tarpon, twisted in anger or ecstasy, it's impossible to tell which, is standing on its tail, fly spilled from its gaping mouth. Better yet, much better, are the faces of the restaurant clientele, an audience that all shares the expression made famous in Edvard Munch's painting "The Scream."

Fish in the air; audience, astonished, behind.

A picture, we recall, is worth a thousand words.

Too bad I can't share the image on social media.

Or post it on the website of No Name Lodge. ●

Scott Sadil is our angling editor here at Gray's Sporting Journal. His latest book, A Matter of Style: Fly Fishing Into the Winds of Change, has yet to crack the NY Times best sellers list.

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