



# AUSTIN FLY FISHERS

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Gordon McHaney with permit caught at  
No Name Lodge in Puerto Rico  
*Photo by Casey Ponton*

**From Old San Juan to  
Untouched Flats:  
A Puerto Rico  
Fly-Fishing Adventure**  
*by Nils Pearson*

# From Old San Juan to Untouched Flats: A Puerto Rico Fly-Fishing Adventure

By *Nils Pearson*

In my years of traveling to foreign fishing destinations, I've found that taking time to experience a new city, rather than heading straight from the airport to the fly-fishing destination, adds a richer, more memorable dimension to the trip. On a recent fly-fishing adventure to No Name Lodge in Boquerón, Puerto Rico, Brandon Rabke and I spent a day exploring San Juan before continuing on to the lodge. As we walked through the city, I was struck by how strongly it reminded me of my visits to Havana and yet how different the two cities are now.

Both cities were established by Spain in the 1700s as fortified harbors supporting its empire. With deep ports, they served as key transatlantic resupply points for long journeys between the Americas and Europe. The massive stone fortresses guarding their entrances, Castillo San Felipe del Morro in Puerto Rico and Castillo de los Tres Reyes del Morro in Cuba, stand as testaments to Spain's determination to repel rival maritime powers.

Over time, these defensive strongholds grew into cities. Narrow, winding streets emerged, lined with tightly packed two- and three-story buildings featuring balconies, courtyards, and heavy wooden doors. Fortunately, San Juan has prospered, preserving its colonial past while adding modern conveniences.



Castillo San Felipe del Morro in Puerto Rico

Puerto Rico is an unincorporated U.S. territory and thrives with its vibrant Spanish-Caribbean culture and cuisine. Havana, however, has not fared as well. In stark contrast to San Juan's restored, brightly colored buildings and well-maintained cobblestone streets, many of Havana's structures show decades of wear, with limited restoration since the 1950s. One can't help but reflect on how political and economic conditions have shaped the divergent paths for these two historic Caribbean cities, influencing everything from urban preservation to daily life and economic opportunity.

On the day after our city tour, Brandon and I took an Uber to the airport to meet our companions, who had just landed. Gordon McHaney organized the trip and invited his friends John Thomas and Dean Kilgore. We boarded a van arranged by the lodge and drove from the northeast corner of the island to the southwest corner for our fishing site. Our friend Gary Geddes's flight from Austin was delayed, so the lodge co-founder Cooper Beckett arranged for a driver to bring him to the lodge later that day.

During our three-hour drive to the lodge, we stopped at Lechonera El Mojito for whole roasted hog cooked over coals. We queued up cafeteria-style, choosing from a variety of local dishes displayed behind the counter. In the kitchen a young man wielded a machete, chopping the whole hog into portions on his cutting block. We seated ourselves at picnic tables and watched as workers ferried whole hogs from the fire pit to the cutting block.



No Name Lodge fishermen are housed in a beautiful private residence just outside the town of Boquerón, complete with five bedrooms, four bathrooms, and all the modern conveniences. Each morning Su arrived early to prepare breakfast and pack our lunches and water for the day ahead. Our guides Andrew Spangler, Brian Scribner, and Casey Ponton pulled in at 6 a.m. to take us to the guide house where we hitched up trailers with modern skiffs and set off for different stretches of the coastline.

After leaving the house and hitching up the trailer, we'd drive anywhere from 10 minutes to an hour to reach different boat ramps, each offering access to prime tarpon and permit water. A day might begin in small marina teeming with massive tarpon, then move on to a channel beneath a bridge, a reef in an open bay, and wind up on a mangrove-lined shoreline. By mixing sight-casting with blind-casting, we found ourselves with plenty of shots at tarpon every day.

For whatever reason, the largest tarpon often seemed most at ease in both shallow, turbid water or pristine, clear water around mangroves. Once hooked, they launched into a series of acrobatic jumps just a short distance from the skiffs. They rarely made long runs but pulling them out of the mangroves was no easy task. Landing even a 20–30 lb tarpon typically meant a hard-fought battle lasting 10 to 15 minutes.



Brandon Rabke jumps a tarpon in the marina



Gary Geddes with tarpon

By far the most entertaining fishing spot was in Guánica. Brian launched our skiff and we made our way through a canal leading to a marina housing local fishermen preparing for the morning catch. As we approached the inlet, massive tarpon cruised around the boat in the muddy water. Brandon stepped onto the bow and fired cast after cast with a variety of flies, trying to tempt one the hulking shadows into striking.

After several unsuccessful attempts, Brian polled us quietly between rows of vacant boats tied along the docks. He instructed Brandon to cast deep into the back corner beneath the slips. Almost instantly a giant tarpon exploded on the fly. The fish launched into the air in a spectacular jump, drawing smiles from the nearby onlookers, before quickly throwing the hook. We couldn't help but speculate that the people gathering along the dock regularly tossed scraps from their snacks and lunches into that corner of the marina, and the tarpon had learned to wait below for an easy handout.

Fortunately, aside from the many poorly executed casts that never had a chance of attracting a fish, I managed to make a very good shot despite the numerous obstacles. It happened while I was fishing with our young guide, Andrew. He spotted a tarpon tucked deep in a narrow channel carved into the mangroves. Somehow, I managed to thread a cast through the opening in the branches and dropped the fly right in front of the fish. The instant I made a strip, the tarpon inhaled the fly and headed toward



Nils Pearson with tarpon



Brandon Rabke jumps a juvenile tarpon

the bushes. As Andrew shouted, “Pull him out!” I set the hook and because I was using 40lb leader I stripped line through my gloved hands and hauled that bad boy back out of the mangroves. After I bowed to the King for several powerful jumps, we finally brought him to the boat.

When the tides were right, our guide Casey suggested that Brandon and I explore the flats in pursuit of permit. Unlike the more stationary tarpon, permit are constantly on the move, sometimes following nurse sharks, cruising the shallows, or even tailing momentarily as they fed along the reef bottom. Because of this, we had to deliver fast, precise casts to stand any chance against such wary fish. Brandon and I had a few opportunities but came up empty-handed on this trip. Gordon, however, dedicated most of his time to chasing the elusive permit and was the only one in our group to land this prized catch. Here’s Gordon’s account of catching the permit. His experience highlights not only the challenges, but also the determination and teamwork required when fishing for this elusive prey in less than ideal conditions.

No Name Lodge is primarily a tarpon destination, but I chose to visit for the opportunity to wade to unpressured tailing permit. I was not disappointed in the multiple chances each day to cast to feeding permit with tails in the air as well as some cruising fish. However, I did not fully appreciate that the Puerto Rican permit are some of the most difficult to catch due to the ever pres-



Guide Casey Ponton with Brandon Rabke searching for permit on a reef



Gordon McHaney with permit  
Photo by Casey Ponton

ent current, breaking waves, sharp coral and maybe most importantly, the abundance of natural food available.

The success in landing a permit was in large part due to learning from my fishing partner, John, who lost his permit as it broke off on the coral while heading to deeper water despite the guide's best efforts. That taught me to put the brakes on harder on my fish than I might otherwise have done. All the guides were excellent, and I look forward to returning.

The co-founders of the No Name Lodge, Cooper Beckett and Matt Pourbaix, have put together an exceptional experience for fly fishermen seeking the thrill of targeting tarpon and permit. Their guides, knowledge of the surrounding waters puts fishermen on carefully selected locations each day. While fishing this stretch of the island's waters, it was striking how few other boats we encountered. Usually we had the entire fishery to ourselves. This combination of comfortable accommodations, competent guides, and abundant opportunities to pursue tarpon and permit in quiet surroundings, truly stand out as a unique fly-fishing experience. For more information go to

[Puerto Rico Fly Fishing Lodge for Tarpon & Permit - No Name Fly Lodge](#)



Guide Brian Scribner unhooks tarpon