

Suffering from an affliction to catch more fish in strange places, and an especially bad bout of tarpon fever, Field Editor **Graeme Field** heads to Cuba to find a cure.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY GRAEME FIELD AND JEREMY STEWART

CUBAN *crusades*

Let me just tell you that this is one of the best destinations I have ever been fortunate enough to fly fish. I loved it – the fishery, the fish, the fishing, the variety, the operation, the guides, the boats, the geography, the aesthetics. The place is just awesome, and I can highly recommend it to anyone with a passion for salt water fishing. Overall, we probably didn't catch as many fish (or as big) as we had hoped, but that didn't matter because this was an exploratory trip and we had a lot to learn. Besides, we'll be back next year. Had we another week, we would definitely have turned the tables more in our favour because we were just getting the hang of the place and the fishing when it was time to pack our bags and head for the swine flu centre of the world – Mexico. But that is a completely different story, so allow me to start at the beginning, when we finally touched down in communist Cuba at the end of a long flight from London.

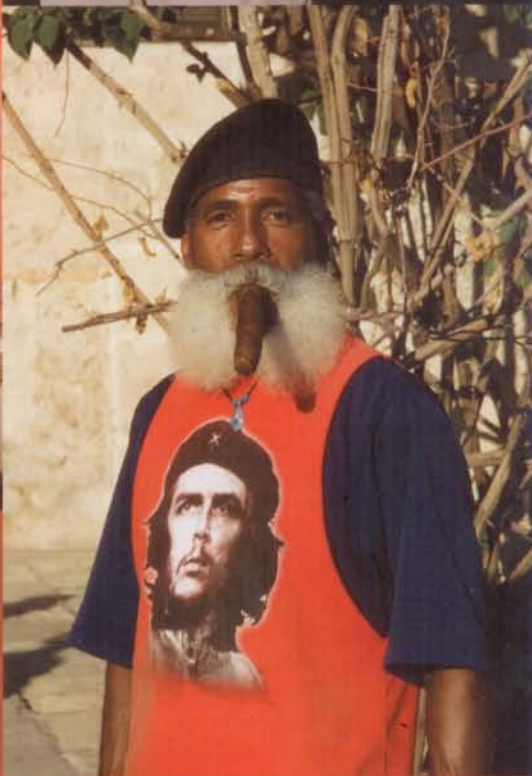
WELCOME TO HAVANA

For me, the city of Havana was a disappointment. In fact, it was a big, grey, run-down, stinky disappointment – and expensive, to boot. I think that, being a photographer of sorts, I had a preconceived idea that this was a truly photogenic city and that I would spend my time drooling as I lapped up and snapped up the myriad vibrant colours of the place and its people. I had visions of capturing the authentic, stuck-in-the-1950s feel as the old gas-guzzling American cars roared down cobbled streets adorned with communist slogans, the sidewalks lined with bona fide cello-wielding Cuban musicians. Instead, I wandered narrow, potholed and decaying streets, carefully avoiding the puddles of raw sewage and the mangy, emaciated and leper-like dogs, feeling very much like I could contract some terminal disease just by breathing the air. Occasionally I stopped and, before being accosted by yet another Cuban cigar seller, managed to point my camera and capture a splash of colour in an otherwise drab and somewhat distasteful city.

As you may have gathered, Havana wasn't my cup of tea. But love it or hate it, the Big Stink was quickly forgotten two days later as our air-conditioned bus whipped us across green, flat country, and deposited us – six hours after our (very) early morning departure from our hotel – at the port of Jucaro on the southern coast. Here we boarded the transfer boat for the final leg of our journey. And it was at the end of this boat ride that the pot of gold lay, which we had flown halfway across the world to find. Fifty miles off the coast of Cuba stretches an archipelago of islands that is one of the most dynamic and intricate salt water fisheries I have ever seen. Three hours after leaving Jucaro and passing countless inviting-looking islands, we steered straight into a seemingly random gap in the mangroves and found ourselves in a remote but self-contained floating village. A couple of live-aboard boats, a fuelling and diving station, a big floating mothership and an elaborate jetty holding a number of Dolphin flats skiffs were all moored in a little clearing in the mangroves. This would be

fishing terrains all rolled into one fishery. The entire archipelago falls in a marine protected area and the single operator has exclusive rights, so whilst you are there you feel like the only fly fisherman on earth. No development, no people, no netting, no other boat traffic and no unscrupulous fishermen – this really

mercivalised to a large degree, and this is reflected in the state of the fishery and the operation. However, it doesn't seem like it is going to last much longer, so I recommend that you get yourself there before a McDonald's pops up on every corner and the fishery is under pressure from hordes of visiting anglers.



our base for the next week. The excitement was palpable as at last we pulled up behind our boat *Cabellones*. None of us could wait to finally shake off the travel lethargy and hit the flats running.

JARDINES DE LA REINA

The Jardines de la Reina archipelago consists of a diverse collection of islands, mangroves, flats, reefs, drop-offs, lagoons and channels – a remarkable array of

is one special place. To add to that secluded feeling, there were only two other anglers on one of the other live-aboard yachts that week, so we really did have the place to ourselves.

A huge bonus is the distinct absence of Americanism – no offence to those reading this article, but the sanctions and trade restrictions against Cuba have prevented the country from being com-

Top: Perfect fly rod size tarpon. Above and above left: Some of the images Cuba has become famous for.



"True to form, the tarpon hit the fly incredibly hard and were difficult to land because they often threw the fly during their mad jumps. Expect to hook many – but lose many, too!"



TARPON

And what about the fishing, I hear you ask? The Jardines is primarily a tarpon fishery and, as it is out of the direct path of the big, migratory fish that come down past Florida each summer, the fish are generally smaller. There are plenty in the 50lb - 80lb range and they are surprisingly aggressive towards the fly. The biggest fish in the Jardines reach around 120lb, but these are the trophies

and don't come easily. Tarpon are found in all sorts of terrain and we caught them everywhere from the "surf" along the reef edges, in the deep clear channels through the mangroves, just off the long, sandy beaches and deep within the shallow, peat-coloured lagoons. Numbers ranged from singles to schools of 20 fish. Ninety percent of the fishing is done by sight-casting, but we did do some blind-casting into deep holes with good success. True

to form, the tarpon hit the fly incredibly hard and were difficult to land because they often threw the fly during their mad jumps. Expect to hook many – but lose many, too!

BONEFISH

The bonefishing is also world class, and there are hundreds of these grey ghosts roaming the flats – ranging from shallow-water tailing fish to small groups



Previous page:
Tarpon hit the fly hard and usually jump shortly thereafter. Here the author fights a fish hooked while sight-fishing to it cruising among the mangroves.

This page:
Tarpon have bone-hard mouths and they can easily throw a hook on a jump. But when you eventually land one, it makes all the hard work and sweat worthwhile.



leaders and claimed many that we hooked. One fish, in particular, had our guide in hysterics – I spotted a fish tailing in water so shallow I thought it was on dry land, and just had to catch it. The only problem was that the flats were powder soft and I wasn't wearing any shoes. To cut a long story short, some very determined and high-speed, bare-foot stumbling around in mud up to my thighs (while attached to a fish that managed to wrap itself around every dead mangrove branch) resulted in much mirth, a good lower-body workout, and finally a beautiful 4lb bone that I won't forget in a hurry!

ATLANTIC PERMIT

In addition to the excellent bonefish opportunities, the Holy Grail of salt water fly fishing – Atlantic permit – are consistently found on the deeper flats where many grand slams are achieved each season. The permit average 15lb, but there are plenty of bigger specimens and you have a real chance at a 30lb - 40lb permit if you focus on these elusive fish. We spent a few hours poling after permit but, bar one gentle take, didn't enjoy success. The techniques and flies are so different to our Indian Ocean fish that a totally new approach is required, and I'll definitely be better prepared next time.

and singles in calf-deep water, and even huge schools for those who want to catch their quota in a short space of time. The fish average 4lb but can reach up to 15lb – a trophy bone anywhere in the world. We didn't spend much time hunting for bonefish, preferring to look for tarpon instead, but enjoyed some excellent early morning fishing for big tailing fish. They aren't scared to pounce the fly, but the razor-sharp mangrove roots severed

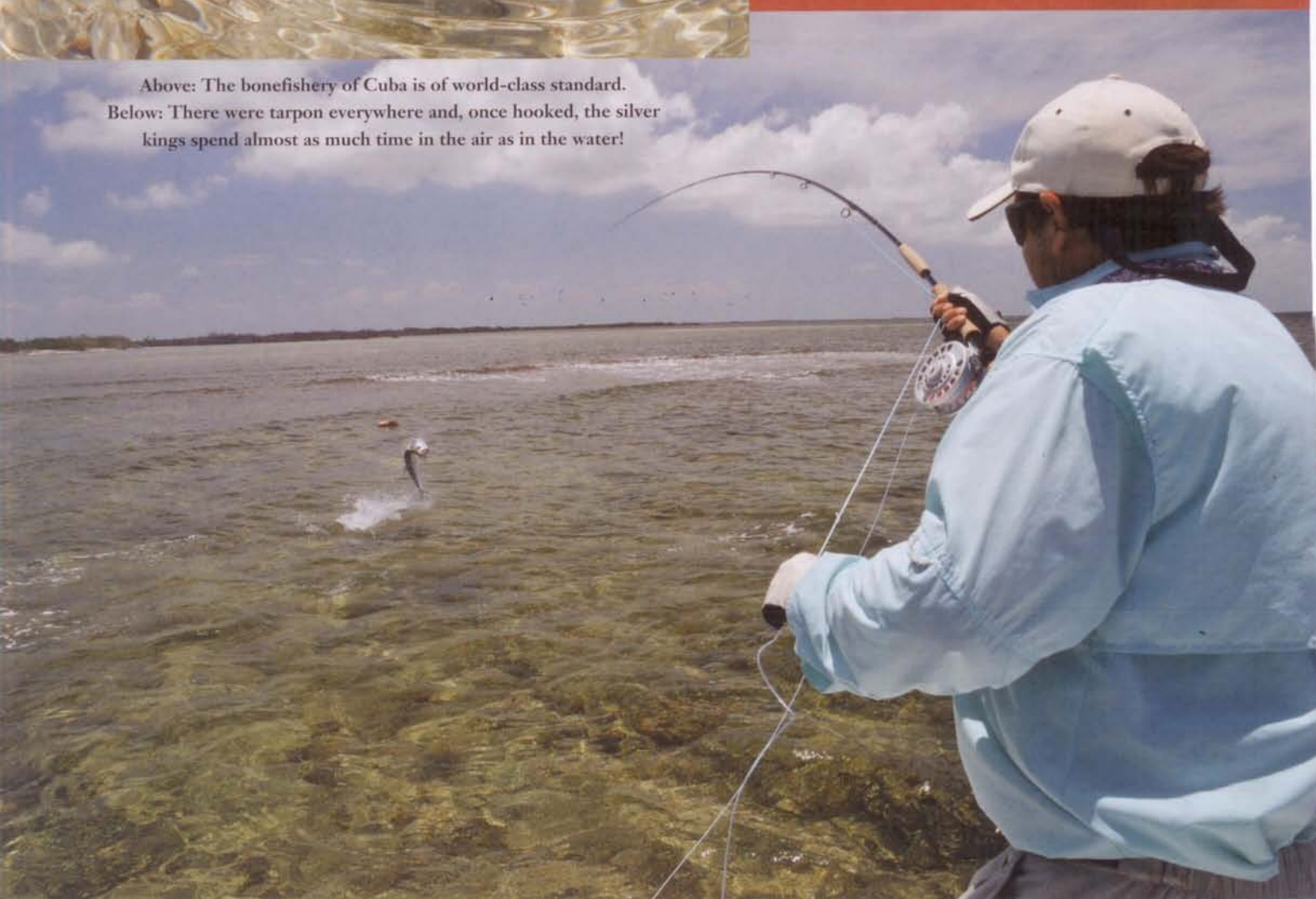


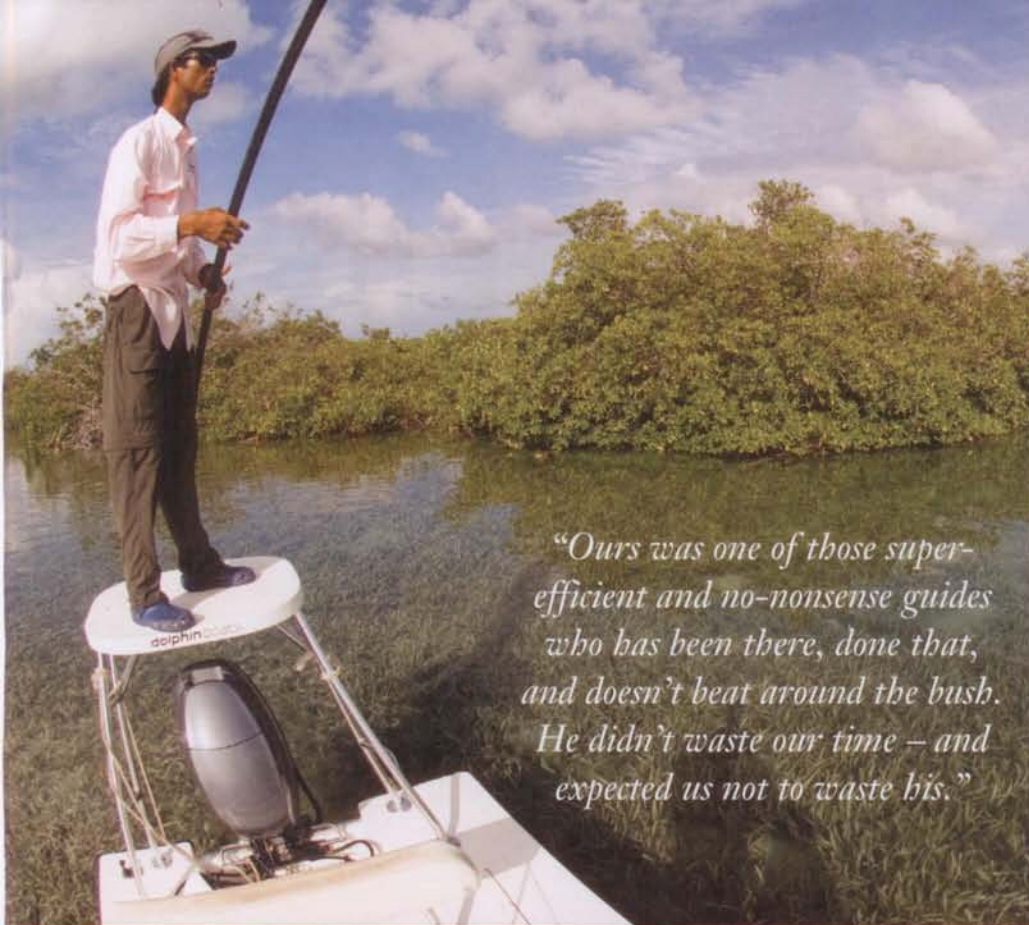
OTHER SPECIES

An aspect of the fishery that I found particularly appealing, was the huge variety of terrain available and the accessibility of a number of different species in close proximity to each other. At any given time in the day, you are never further than a few minutes away from an incredibly long coral drop-off into the deep ocean – and the fish roaming these depths are frightening! A few of the guys on our trip spent some time throwing oversized GT poppers on spinning gear and got completely sorted out by massive cubera snapper, cast after cast. And I'm talking broken rods, broken lines and broken spirits by fish in the region of 100lb - 150lb! I threw caution to the wind and dropped a fly down there with the same result. But there are many other trevally and snapper species, as well as a variety of predatory and reef fish that will readily take a fly, and this is one aspect of the fishery I intend to explore much more thoroughly on our next visit.

With all these options available, it's quite possible to sight-cast to tarpon in the mangroves for a few hours in the morning, then slip on some flats boots and stalk tailing bones on the low tide, before heading to the reef edges to drop a fly off the deep walls for cubera snapper and jack crevalle, and finally end the day stalking big permit on the white sand flats as the tide pushes. Chances for quick, opportunistic shots at jack crevalle and mutton snapper pop up periodically while one is targeting other species, which adds excitement throughout the day.

Above: The bonefishery of Cuba is of world-class standard.
Below: There were tarpon everywhere and, once hooked, the silver kings spend almost as much time in the air as in the water!





"Ours was one of those super-efficient and no-nonsense guides who has been there, done that, and doesn't beat around the bush. He didn't waste our time – and expected us not to waste his."

Above: An experienced local guide will certainly give you that edge.

IMPORTANCE OF A GUIDE

You can have the best fishery, the best boats and the best operation, but if you don't have a good guide you are not going to be able to make the most of your precious time (and money). And this is where the Jardines excels itself. When it comes to local knowledge and finding the fish, the local Cuban guides are brilliant. Many of them have been there for ten years or more and know every inch of the nearly 200km mind-boggling maze of mangrove channels and lagoons. They whip you at speed through the narrowest gaps, over impossible shallows, through full-on mangrove tunnels and deliver you unerringly to the fish every time. Ours was one of those super-efficient and no-nonsense guides who has been there, done that, and doesn't beat around the bush. He didn't waste our time – and expected us not to waste his. His attitude was entertaining and refreshing, and we knew we were in good hands. He had the confidence and experience to ensure we were always in the best place at the best time.

He continually amazed us with his knowledge and understanding of where tarpon would be and how they would behave. Tarpon have the annoying habit of cruising around deeply into the mangroves, in frustratingly inaccessible places. But do not fear – if they weren't

where we needed them to be, our guide would simply "call" them closer. Tarpon are inquisitive by nature and, whilst poling along as silently as possible is usually the best tactic for hunting them, sometimes a loud noise is all that is needed to bring them gliding out from the mangrove roots to investigate. Our guide would position the boat, explain where they were going to appear and then proceed to stomp hard on the poling platform, or start and rev the engine. On cue, the tarpon would make their grand entrance and it would be game on. There was no holding back on distances covered or fuel used – the guides worked hard to make sure we maximised our fishing time and opportunities.

From all perspectives, this is a brilliant destination. The boats and skiffs are top class, the guides are experienced and know the fishery like the back of their hands. The fishing is diverse and exciting and there is so much water to explore. Every aspect of the trip is well thought out and nothing is too much of a hassle. The crew on the boats are friendly and go out of their way to look after you. Cubans, however, are not renowned for their world cuisine, so the only area for improvement would be the food – but then, the free local rum makes up for any shortcomings in that department!

TEN FACTS about Tarpon

- There are only two species of tarpon: *Megalops atlanticus* (giant tarpon) and *Megalops cyprinoides* (oxeye tarpon). Outwardly, apart from size, they look very similar.
- Giant tarpon occur in the Atlantic Ocean, reach sizes of up to 8ft and can weigh in excess of 250lb. Oxeve tarpon occur in the Indo-Pacific and seldom grow heavier than 15lb.
- The biggest tarpon are believed to occur off the West African coast, in areas around Gabon and Angola.
- All tarpon (*M. atlanticus*) below 25lb are considered to be "baby" tarpon, while larger specimens are known as "giant" tarpon.
- Tarpon are also some of the oldest fish in the ocean, and fossil research shows that they have been around since prehistoric times.
- They are long-lived, some having a lifespan in excess of 50 years. The oldest tarpon in captivity lived to be 63 years old.
- When swimming in oxygen-poor water, they can breathe air from the surface using their swim bladder as a primitive lung. Typically, when stressed during a fight, they will stick their heads above the surface in an effort to obtain more oxygen.
- Primarily found in shallow coastal waters and estuaries, they are also found in open marine waters, around coral reefs, and in some fresh water lakes and rivers.
- In their larval stage, tarpon are transparent, have a ribbon-like body and prominent fang-like teeth, and are less than an inch long.
- From a fly rod point of view, any tarpon in excess of 80lb can be very taxing on the angler. Many anglers prefer to target smaller fish with lighter rods, and still enjoy the tenacity and aerial acrobatics tarpon are famous for.