




off the beaten track

Field Editor **Graeme Field** comes to grips with the fact that great fishing trips are to be cherished, because what is now your secret spot may soon become everybody's fishing hole.

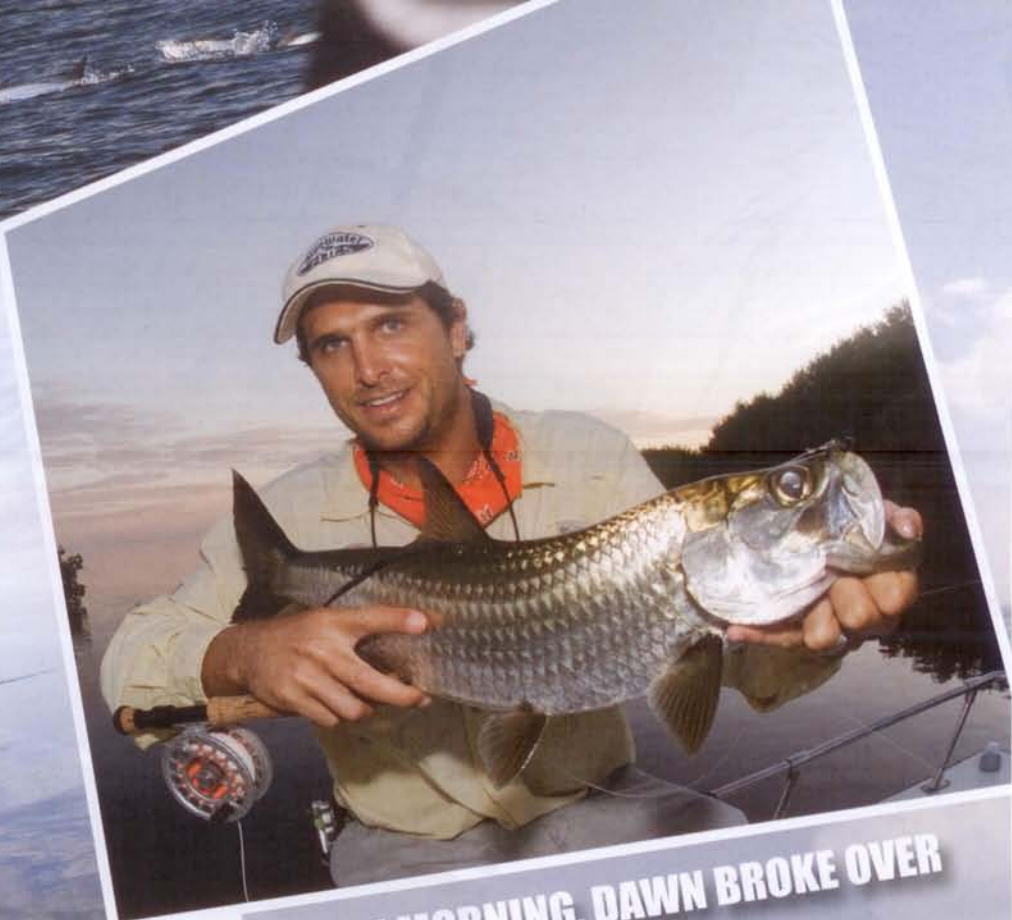


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A question I am often asked by my fly fishing clients – and one which I, too, find myself pondering – is whether it is better to revisit a specific destination, or to head off into the unknown and discover some totally new place. I'm not referring to local weekend trips here, but the more exotic, overseas locations where the question is usually money-driven. You have worked hard and saved up for your (second) trip of a lifetime and want to make sure you get the best value for money. Do you roll the dice and venture into the unknown, or do you play it safe and stick with what you know?

There is no easy answer to this. On the plus side, if you have visited a certain place before, you will be better prepared and have a much clearer picture of what to expect – but, as with a bad movie sequel, your expectations may be higher than reality and you might find yourself disappointed (especially if you had an outstanding trip the first time round). Things can also change; sadly, in our natural environment, very little change is for the better. So a place you revisit a few years later, may well turn out to be quite different from how you remembered it when everything was new and exciting.

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This is the quandary we faced when we decided to head for Mexico after our recent foray into Cuba. Back in 2005, good fishing friend Paul King and I spent a week at Isla Holbox on the northwestern Yucatán Peninsula, where we had some explosive fishing as we hooked big tarpon in the open ocean. The trip culminated in Paul's landing a magnificent fish of \pm 100lb. Four years later, the opportunity arose to visit Isla Holbox again, but we also had a chance to head to a different area of the coast that we hadn't been to before: Campeche, a renowned baby tarpon fishery. So there it was – decision time.

Well, we couldn't decide between the two venues, so we chose both! It was agreed that the journey was to start in Campeche, with some shallow-water, baby tarpon fishing in the mangroves, followed by a few days of going hard for the big tarpon offshore of Isla Holbox (and hopefully going out with a bang). Plans were quickly hatched, boats organised, cars and accommodation booked, and so began a good old boys' road trip through the swine-flu-ridden (and tourist-free) province of Yucatán, Mexico. I already had a group of legendary fly fishing adventurers in tow – Neil Ford, Dougie Taylor and Jeremy Stewart – and upon arrival in Cancún I gathered more troops in the form of Paul and his friend Fred Reeves, who had just flown in from the USA. This motley crew of South Africans, Scots and Americans was a fine mix of characters to squash into an undersized SUV sweltering in the tropical heat. After many sweaty attempts to fit ourselves and our (completely excessive) luggage into what was clearly far too small a space, we finally traded our car for a massive, orange gas-guzzler and hit the road.

CAMPECHE

Eight hours and some deserted Mayan ruins later, we arrived at the quaint Mexican town of Campeche, its cobbled streets and brightly coloured houses a welcome change from the drabness

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we had experienced in Cuba. Straight into Hotel America we went, and very soon it was gin, tonic and tackle time. Not long after we had settled into our rooms, the head guide arrived and prepared us for the next day's fishing. Following his advice, the 12-wts remained in their tubes and out came the 9-wts, floating lines and #1/0 Tarpon flies. The guide made the fatal mistake of bringing his own fly box to the party and his prized flies were soon depleted, spread among our greedy little fly boxes. With a 4.30am start scheduled, we put the lid on the gin and hit the sack, ready for whatever Campeche had to throw at us.



The fishing in the Campeche area centres around an extensive mangrove shoreline, bordering on extremely shallow flats, weedbeds and peaty-coloured water. The tarpon are generally in the 2lb - 15lb range, but there were a few 30lb fish around and Paul even managed a cast at a fish estimated at close on 80lb - not that he had much chance with a 9-wt and 20lb tippet! Each morning, dawn broke over perfect, glassy waters, the mirror-smooth surface disturbed only by the tantalising dorsal and tail fins of rolling tarpon. The period between first light and when the sun crept over the mangroves was by far the

most productive and everyone made the best of this golden hour. Unfortunately, by 8am it was already unbearably hot in the windless mangroves and everything seemed to slow to a crawl. The tarpon glided lethargically under the mangrove roots, showing frustratingly little interest in our flies, and the mornings seemed to drag on forever. Some of the guys did get into fish during midmorning, finding small pockets of tarpon and even some baby snook that were willing to take the fly, but the summer heat made it pretty tough going. I'm a big believer in fishing smarter, not harder, and would have been quite happy



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to head back to shore by 10am each day. However, hiring guides and boats is expensive, and there is a tendency to want to squeeze everything you can out of the time you have paid for – even if it means a few hours of hot and unproductive fishing.

After a few beers one evening, Paul and Jeremy arrived back at our hotel dressed like *banditos* in brightly coloured bandanas and enormous sombreros and, for a laugh, went fishing in them the next day. It turned out that they had inadvertently stumbled on the perfect answer to dealing with the debilitating heat. While the rest of us were melting in the unrelenting sun, those two *hombres* were happily fishing in the comfortable shade of their massive straw hats! Arriving back at the jetty at the end of the day, a very hot Dougie took one look at them and pronounced (in his characteristic Scottish accent): “Aaaah, ya poachin’ bastarrrrds!”, and hurried off in search of the nearest sombrero store.

ISLA HOLBOX

After a few days of baby tarpon fun, we piled back into the orange monster and headed northwards towards that cute, laid-back, little island of Isla Holbox,

home of trophy tarpon. Wow, things sure can change in a short space of time! Holbox used to be great because it was low-key and uncommercialised. Now it has gained popularity as a destination “off the beaten track” – ironic, since it seems people flock there to get away from other people, forgetting where the appeal of the place lay in the first place. One of the attractions of Holbox is the high number of whale sharks frequenting the area. When we first visited, there were only one or two boats that would take divers out to swim with these gentle giants, and also only a handful that would take fly fishermen out to the tarpon areas. Four years later, the Westerners have moved in and the prices have shot up. European-run restaurants and fly fishing operations have popped up, a million whale shark diving operators now compete for business, and the fly fishing boats charge around out at sea, racing each other in an attempt to cut off the fast-moving schools of tarpon.

The tarpon are still there though, and the excitement of seeing these big fish crashing and rolling will definitely bring a flutter to the heart and a shake to the knees. But it is clear that there is much more pressure on these fish nowadays,

and they are noticeably more skittish and erratic – and much more difficult to get close to for a decent shot on the fly. We spent two mornings chasing the schools around and had a few half-shots at them. Only Neil was able to elicit a take, landing a wonderful fish in the region of 60lb after a relatively short fight.

Being more exposed out in the deeper water of the Gulf, the fishery is easily affected by wind, and our last day was all but blown out. So we headed into the shallows to search for smaller tarpon on the flats, which is quite a productive fishery. We were just starting to hook into a few 10lb fish when a massive storm moved in and put an end to proceedings – for that day and for the trip.

As our ferry chugged towards the mainland the next morning, I looked back at the low rise of Holbox and thought, with some melancholy, that I had been fortunate to experience it when it was still relatively unknown, but would probably never be back. It’s still a fun place to hang out with your mates and you will get some fish if you put in the time, but for me it’s lost its appeal as I certainly felt like I was no longer fishing off the beaten track.