

# Isla Holbox

## *Island of the*

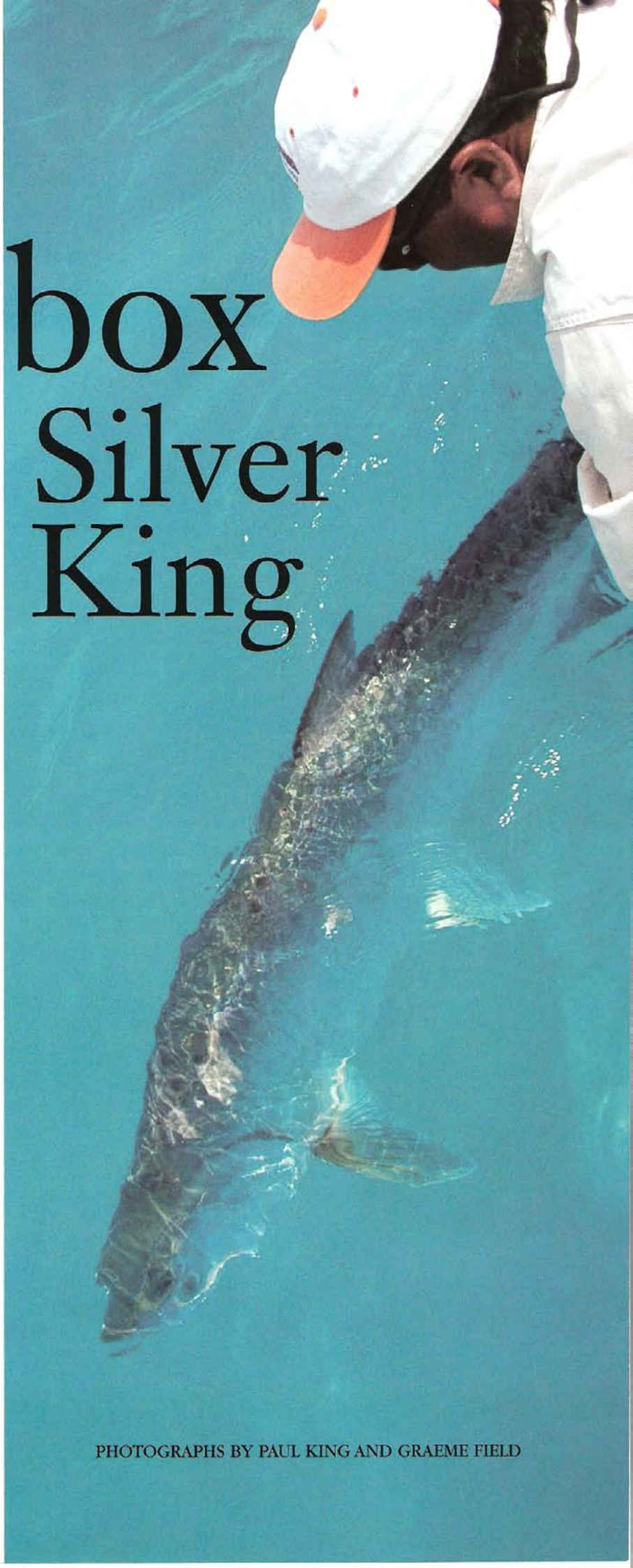
# Silver King

Field Editor **Graeme Field** goes in search of giant tarpon and finds a place where the tequila flows fast, the fish jump high and adventure lies in wait.

**J**ust off the northwestern tip of the Yucatan Peninsula in Mexico, lies a long and dusty island named Isla Holbox (pronounced Hol-bosh). Situated right in the Gulf of Mexico and deep in the heart of tarpon country, this little island is a relatively unknown gem, yet it's barely three hours' travel from the glitzy tourist capital of Cancun. At the invitation of my regular international fishing buddy and adventurer Paul King, I headed to Mexico for a week of exploratory fishing in search of the giant tarpon that frequent these waters between April and September each year.

Meeting up at Cancun airport, we were soon rattling and bouncing over endless speed bumps as we made our way through the Yucatan jungle towards the coastal town of Chiquila where we hoped to find a boat to run us across the broad lagoon to the island. Paul had visited the place years before, and had got me seriously champing at the bit with stories of schools of huge tackle-busting tarpon and big, ferocious jack crevalle that inhabit the area. We are normally quite organised travellers, but very little preparation had gone into the trip on this occasion – no accommodation, guides or transport had been arranged – which only added to the sense of adventure. Armed with a Spanish/English dictionary, we were ready to negotiate ourselves right into the mouth of a giant Atlantic tarpon!

PHOTOGRAPHS BY PAUL KING AND GRAEME FIELD





So far so good, and with two hours of daylight left we were roaring down the dusty main drag through the centre of Holbox in a diesel-powered golf cart that had been converted into a miniature New York-style yellow cabriolet taxicab. This is rural Mexico at its finest, and I fell in love with the place immediately. Quiet, sandy streets wind their way past quaint wooden shacks, outdoor restaurants and local islanders relaxing in doorways and hammocks as scruffy little Mexican kids played games on the dusty sidewalks. We were soon caught up in the laid back, mellow mood of the place, and later that evening as we sat at an outdoor restaurant and sipped a cold local beer, we knew we were in for a treat.

### THE SEARCH IS ON!

Shortly after our arrival, we managed to find some accommodation and secure the services of a local guide and his boat. Early the next morning found us on the beach sipping a cup of possibly the most revolting coffee I have ever tasted as we waited for him to arrive. The day had dawned still and calm, and before long we were skimming across a mirror-smooth sea in a Mexican-style panga boat on the way to the tarpon grounds. Tarpon fishing in this part of the world is not classic flats-type fishing, as the big fish are found in water anything from 5 - 10m deep. However, the fish stay up on the surface, and rolling schools of these big silver fish are visible as they chase the bait-fish. Sink tip lines are the norm, the objective being to get up ahead of a moving school of fish and cast your fly ahead of them sinking to their level as they invariably drop down a few feet as they near the boat. The tarpon remained elusive on our first day, but the wind unfortunately did not, and before long we were forced into the lee of the island where we had some fun catching baby tarpon in the numerous channels.



Not entirely satisfied with the standard of guiding by our non-English speaking friend, we were talked into signing up with his competitor the following morning. His services were slightly more expensive, but he could at least speak English and sounded more knowledgeable about finding and catching the silver king on fly. We signed up with him for the rest of the week and eagerly headed out the next morning, revitalised and optimistic about the day that lay ahead. A breeze was already rippling the water's surface and with the promise of more wind through the day, we headed straight for a spot where our guide assured us we would find the big fish we had travelled halfway around the world for. Sure enough, he was good to his word and suddenly there were fish breaking the surface and rolling towards us. These tarpon move fast and are in the "zone" for a

### ISLA HOLBOX – AN ISLAND PROFILE

**Location:** Situated on the northwestern tip of the Yucatan Peninsula, just offshore from the town of Chiquila (approximately 2.5 hours' drive from Cancun). Isla Holbox was settled by pirates who intermarried with local Mayans living in the area. The island is 43km long, bordered by Cabo Catoche on the east and separated from the mainland by Yalahao Lagoon to the south.

**Population:** 1600 residents, making a living mainly from fishing, although there are several other businesses on the island. Small boutique hotels have recently been built, but there are no high-rise developments, so life on the island is very relaxed.

**Language:** Spanish – very few Mexicans can speak English, so expect to have some difficulty in communication if you have no knowledge of Spanish.





## USEFUL TIPS FOR A DO-IT-YOURSELF FISHING TRIP

**Guiding operations on the island:** A local Mexican by the nickname of "Sand Flea" runs a guiding operation on 16 - 20ft panga-style boats. Rates vary from \$250 - \$375 per day, depending on the season and include fuel, food and drinks. You can contact him through Hotel Faro Viejo. Most guides speak enough English to get by. Hotel Faro Viejo does offer all-inclusive fly fishing/accommodation packages which include transport from Cancun, guided fishing and the hotel accommodation. These range between \$1150 (four nights, three days) to \$2100 (seven nights, six days) - pretty good value and hassle free.

**What to expect from the fishing:** Fishing is done in deeper water in the Gulf, and sink tip lines are recommended. Shock tippets of 60 - 100lb with 20lb class tippets are the norm. Most fish will be big, averaging around 60 - 80lb. Flies such as Keys-style Tarpon patterns (red/black, blue/white, purple, olive, tan) work well, as do Toad Flies in the same colours as well as various other baitfish imitations. A 12-wt rod is a good all round choice, although a 10-wt will get the job done at a pinch. For fishing in the mangroves, an 8 - 10-wt rod and floating line is a good choice. Flies that are effective for the mangroves include a variety of bonefish and small Cockroach patterns, baitfish imitations and small Tarpon Flies. Expect mainly snook and baby tarpon, however, bonefish, permit and snapper are also present.

**Currency:** There are no banking facilities on Isla Holbox and no ATMs. Exchanging money can be a hassle and sometimes impossible. The best place to exchange money is at the airport. Only US \$ or Mexican pesos are accepted currency and it is wise to carry small denominations. Many businesses accept only cash, although some of the hotels and restaurants do take major credit cards. There is also no cell phone service.

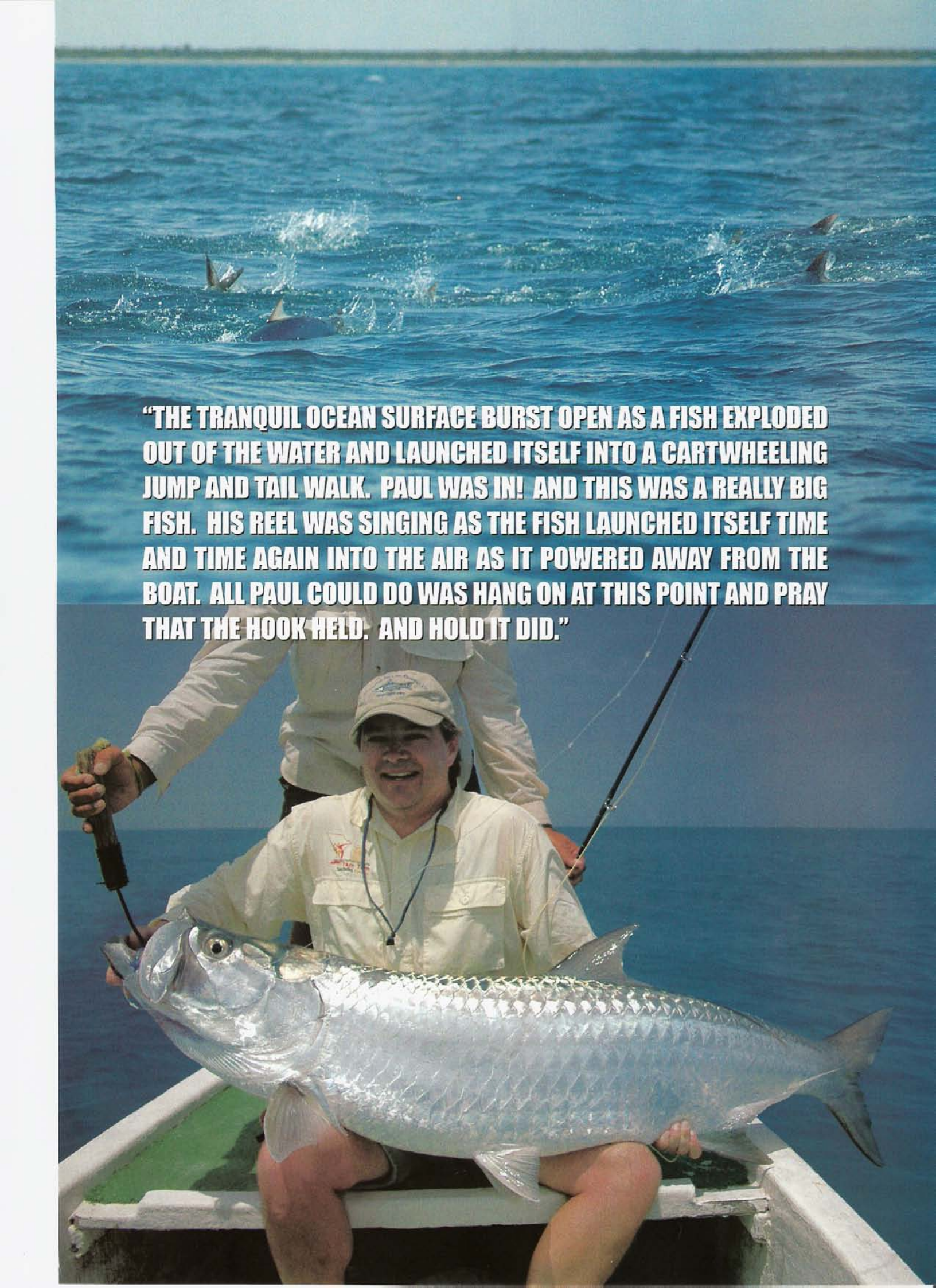
**Additional information:** A good website to visit for travel information is [www.holboxisland.com](http://www.holboxisland.com)

relatively short period, and although we had some fair shots, we couldn't entice a strike and the fish quickly moved off. Again the wind put paid to the rest of the day out at sea, and we reluctantly headed for the shallow mangrove-lined flats within the confines of the island.

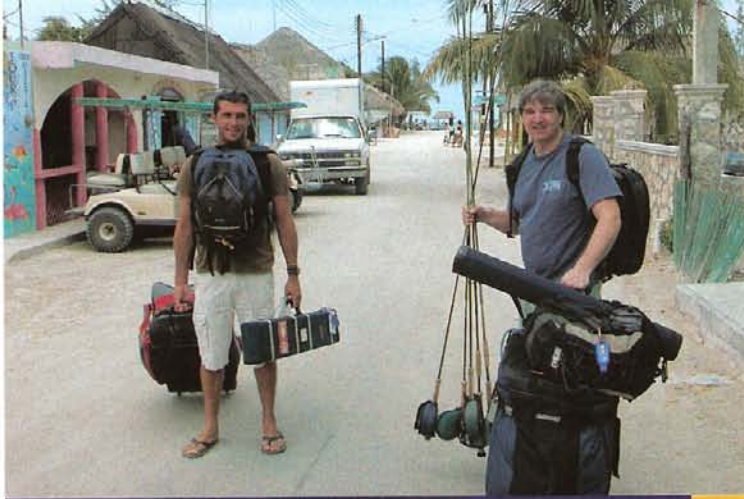
I have never fished such shallow water in my life, and it was an interesting and entertaining experience. We navigated through a maze of creeks and bays, sometimes lying prone on the deck as we slipped through tiny tunnels under the brush. We poled quietly along the edges of the mangroves, casting under overhanging branches and gnarled roots of the dense foliage. Snook are the main target in these sheltered waters, and we enjoyed some great sport with these feisty fish. Chaotic tussling ensued as the big snook ran in, around and under any obstruction they could find, requiring unorthodox fighting techniques. We landed some good fish and had a fun day out, but our hearts weren't in it as it was regarded as second choice. We wanted to be out in the big blue looking for *real* fish...

Paul and I have been fortunate over the years in that we have mostly enjoyed good fishing and successful trips, but after the sixth day of being relegated to fishing for snook and baby tarpon by the incessant wind, our tempers were running thin and we desperately needed a good day on the water to relieve some stress. Our day arrived in the nick of time. One look at the rosy sky and stable clouds and we knew it was going to be a beautiful, still day, so at 6am we headed out with renewed enthusiasm. But by 9am we still hadn't seen a thing. Paul and I had made a pact that we would stay out in the Gulf looking for big tarpon as long as the weather allowed, even if it meant not making a cast all day. Eventually we found some patches of bait activity on the smooth surface and hung around with them, hoping that the tarpon would eventually show up. I passed the time dropping a fast sinking line around the edges of the schools of baitfish hoping that there might be a jack crevalle or two lurking below them, but nothing moved. Paul cleverly decided to conserve energy and elected to sit back and let me do all the dirty work while the fishing was quiet.

Eventually, at around 11am, our drought finally ended when the first silvery back broke the surface as a big tarpon rolled nearby. Before long more baitfish appeared on the surface, the tarpon formed a loose school and were moving between the

A man in a white shirt and cap is smiling while holding a large, shimmering silver fish on a boat. In the background, several other fish are seen jumping out of the blue water, creating splashes. The scene is set on a bright day with a clear sky.

**“THE TRANQUIL OCEAN SURFACE BURST OPEN AS A FISH EXPLODED OUT OF THE WATER AND LAUNCHED ITSELF INTO A CARTWHEELING JUMP AND TAIL WALK. PAUL WAS IN! AND THIS WAS A REALLY BIG FISH. HIS REEL WAS SINGING AS THE FISH LAUNCHED ITSELF TIME AND TIME AGAIN INTO THE AIR AS IT POWERED AWAY FROM THE BOAT. ALL PAUL COULD DO WAS HANG ON AT THIS POINT AND PRAY THAT THE HOOK HELD. AND HOLD IT DID.”**



## TRAVEL TIPS: WHERE TO STAY AND HOW TO GET THERE

**Things to do besides fishing:** Swimming with whale sharks is a popular tourist activity and enquires can be made with Holbox Whale Shark Tours, their season being mid-June to end August. The Yalahau Spring, referred to as the “fountain of life”, is also a popular destination, while others explore Bird Island, a 30 minute boat ride from Isla Holbox. There is an Internet café, shopping and restaurants in town and most of these establishments are open late into the night. Isla Holbox is quite a popular hangout for independent travellers and is a really laid back place.

**Getting there and around:** From Miami International, it's a 2-hour flight to Cancun. There are plenty of taxis available at Cancun airport – expect to pay around \$140 (one way, three people) for the 2.5-hour taxi ride to the small seaside village of Chiquila. You can also take the bus or hire a car. If driving yourself, go west from Cancun on the free highway until you hit the town of El Ideal. Watch for the signs for Isla Holbox, then turn north to Chiquila. You can leave your car at a secure \$2 a day parking lot in Chiquila. Here you can take a ferry or water taxi across the lagoon to Isla Holbox. The water taxi is about \$14, and the ferry approximately 40 Mexican pesos per person and takes 20 minutes. The water taxi takes half that time and runs regularly all day, but is on a small open boat, so less comfortable. The ferry runs at hourly intervals, starting at 6am and ending at 7pm. There are no cars on Holbox, but plenty of golf carts and cart taxis. The town is really small and easy to walk around, but a taxi will meet you at the ferry terminal and take you to your hotel.

**Where to stay:** A variety of accommodation options exist on Isla Holbox, ranging from \$40 upwards per night. We stayed at Hotel Faro Viejo which was \$60 per night for a room, but I can recommend Posada Mawimbi, a cabana-style establishment right on the beach. This a lovely spot and run by a friendly couple, Onny and Carmelo.

- Faro Viejo: [www.faroviejoholbox.com.mx](http://www.faroviejoholbox.com.mx)  
E-mail: [faroviejo@prodigy.net.mx](mailto:faroviejo@prodigy.net.mx)  
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shimmering patches of nervous baitfish. Paul sneakily put forward the argument that it was now his turn to fish, as I had been “up” for an hour already, forcing me to relinquish my prime position on the bow of the boat. Our guide started moving us into a position to intercept the fish and surprisingly (because the schools of fish were still sparse) Paul soon had his first strike on a big blue-and-white Tarpon Fly. He missed it though. Still peeved at being ordered from the casting platform, I made sure he was continually reminded that one can't expect to hook big tarpon if one insists on striking with the rod...

## IT FINALLY COMES TOGETHER

The weather was still perfect, the sea glassy smooth, and I was admiring the perfect conditions when suddenly the silence was shattered. The tranquil ocean surface burst open as a fish exploded out of the water and launched itself into a cartwheeling jump and tail walk. Paul was in! And this was a really big fish. His reel was singing as the fish launched itself time and time again into the air as it powered away from the boat. All Paul could do was hang on at this point and pray that the hook held. And hold it did. A long 40 minutes later, after heart-wrenching jumps, head shakes and some questionable Mexican landing techniques, we had the lip gaff in and Paul slid a truly magnificent tarpon across his lap. Photographs, revival, release, high fives, hugs – what a fish, it completely blew us away! Estimating the size of tarpon can be pretty difficult, but we put the fish at the magical 100lb mark. If not, it was pretty damn close and I will gladly let him claim it.

Sometime between hooking and landing that fish, the ocean had come alive – there were tarpon everywhere. Big schools were moving back and forth in an area about the size of three rugby fields, crashing into the terrified baitfish. I was in the hot seat now and it was my turn to cop a bit of abuse as I proceeded to get myself into an overexcited, non-functional, shaking mess of fly line, fly and body parts. Basically, any big match temperament deserted me and for what felt like forever I couldn't get a cast into the water. I managed to get the fly and line hooked around anything and everything, much to the amusement of my video camera-toting fishing “buddy.” I did get it right (eventually) and finally hooked into a similar size fish, but after a huge jump that reached our head height, the fish shook the hook free. Paul kindly allowed me an extended run up on the casting platform during which time I hooked and lost another five huge tarpon, getting more and more frustrated in the process. The last straw was when I finally got a good one to stick and managed to hang on during the first crazed leaps, before losing the fish when my glove got snarled up in my reel and the tippet broke. I hate to admit it as I am normally fairly calm and collected, but I nearly threw my rod down in disgust at that moment, because I knew that my final chance had gone a-begging.

Sure enough, the next morning dawned blustery again, and I decided to give fishing a skip. I could not justify the US \$250-a-day guide fee to catch snook and baby tarpon in the mangroves again. So, for me personally, the trip was not a huge success, but it was another adventure with a good friend and fly fisherman, and another foray into a different country. There are always great experiences along the way and it was an honour to be part of Paul's magnificent catch. Well done buddy!