

Want to catch the mighty tarpon in exotic surrounds on a shoestring budget? **Graeme Field** did just that and came away enthralled by the experience.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY SALLY NORCROSS

Above: The stuff dreams are made of – jumping the Silver King on fly.

Next page top: Satisfaction guaranteed. The author releasing a tarpon taken from the beach.

Bottom: Marauding tarpon pushing a shoal of baitfish right up against the beach.



## CARIBBEAN 2003

**T**he powdery sand felt cool and damp underfoot as I crawled out of the small tent onto the beach. The first light of dawn was just beginning to spread slowly over the coral island, but already the tropical air felt warm and silky on my back. I rubbed sleep from my eyes and looked out across the bay, mesmerised by the sight that lay before me. It was the most perfectly still morning; nothing moved. The atmosphere felt like a vacuum – palm fronds hung limp and the surface of the water was so slick and glassy that sky and sea seemed to melt into one. Tendrils of mist rose like smoke from the water, and the reflections of the few scattered clouds seemed to emanate

from deep below the surface. As the new day dawned, the rising sun bathed the entire scene in a beautiful pale shade of pink; even the air seemed to glow. I became lost in the moment, suspended in time. Standing on the beach that first morning, I was transfixed by the surreal visuals around me, and felt as if I were the only person on earth.

Then a sudden explosion of water startled me and I stared in disbelief as a shoal of marauding tarpon launched an attack, shattering the mirror-like surface as they ploughed into a school of baitfish, trapping them up against the beach a mere 20 metres in front of my tent. Jolted instantly out of my dream-like state and into action, I charged around the campsite, frantically gathering my

tackle and yelling to my bewildered girlfriend to bring the camera, before running off down the beach after the tarpon, stripping line as I went.

We had arrived on this sparsely populated island in the British Virgin Islands (commonly known as the B.V.I.) the night before, and had pitched the tent randomly on a beach in the dark. I had no inkling of what sight would behold us when we awoke the following morning, but this had surpassed even my wildest expectations. We were literally the only living souls for miles around. A long sandy bay swept away to my right, a small coral flat lay off to my left, and right in front of me lay huge, dark shoals of baitfish, huddling together as they moved slowly up and down the



*Virgin Tarpon  
in the Surf*



beach. Beyond them, big tarpon milled around, the early morning sun glistening a pale yellow off their fins as they rolled on the surface. Every few minutes, a pack would suddenly break away and charge the helpless baitfish, crashing and slashing into them as they forced the shoals closer and closer to the beach. The shape of the bait ball would pulse and twist, big holes appearing in the shoal as the tarpon attacked them from underneath. These big predators often moved to within less than a rod's length from me, sometimes even launching themselves out of the water behind me – between me and the beach. It was exhilarating, crazy fishing, and I was the only fisherman there.

I had come to these islands in search of bonefish and permit, so I only had 8-, 9- and 10-weight rods with me, of which two were already rigged with floating lines. I wasn't going to waste any time re-rigging the rods, so just tied on an 80lb shock tippet and spent the morning casting the 10-weight into the

shoals of feeding fish. Despite the number of big tarpon that were gorging themselves on minnows right at my feet, they were not easy to entice with the fly. I spent a good part of the morning chasing the shoals up and down the beach, running along the shoreline to try and intercept the packs of predators as they hoarded the baitfish towards the beach. My first attempts at chasing these big fish brought plenty of frustration, and absolutely no success. After fruitlessly trying an array of Surf Candies, Tarpon Flies and various baitfish imitations, I decided that it was time for breakfast and a re-think of tactics. So we headed off down the beach in search of the one and only lodge on the island, and its legendary bakery.

A long walk and a satisfying breakfast of muffins and fruit juice later, we met up with an American friend, Paul King, who had been staying at the lodge for a week prior to my arrival. Originally a fanatical steelhead fisherman, Paul now suffers from a serious case of “tarpon

fever” and has been chasing these majestic fish all around Central America and the Caribbean for the last five years. The previous day he had hooked and lost a handful of tarpon, taking his lifetime tally to over 40 fish hooked, but not one landed. So Paul wanted a tarpon, and he wanted one bad! We discussed flies and tactics, and it turned out that he had hooked his fish on a 6/0 Cockroach pattern, but all had thrown the hook after a short fight. I have always preferred a smaller hook size for tarpon, and had landed a high percentage of the fish that I hooked during previous Caribbean trips. I believe that thinner, sharper hooks are easier to set in the concrete-like jaws of the tarpon when using a fly rod.

Sticking with my 10-weight, I decided to change to an intermediate line and target the fish around the edges of the shoals, rather than those fish right in amongst the bait. An attempt at “matching the hatch” earlier with smaller baitfish patterns didn't have the desired

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Above: Camping on the beach provided the author with an early morning tarpon.

Next page left: Taking strain – tarpon are formidable opponents. Right: Tarpon at sunset.

# BRITISH

effect, so I decided to try and imitate the larger ballyhoo (half beaks) that were also being preyed upon by the tarpon. I eventually settled on a 2/0 chartreuse and grizzly Tarpon Fly. Paul had already made other plans to go out to sea on a boat for the day, so Sally and I headed back to the bay and the feeding tarpon.

**T**he action had slowed during the heat of the day, but as the afternoon wore on and the sun slipped slowly towards the horizon, the tarpon started feeding strongly again, charging at the schools of baitfish, sometimes cart-wheeling clean out of the water as they crashed into them. Confident about my new tactics, I fished with a new sense of purpose, and this time it didn't take more than a handful of casts to draw a solid take as a 40lb tarpon finally engulfed the fly. The line slammed tight and I managed two hard strip strikes before the fish exploded out of the water, shaking its head vigorously as it tail-walked out to sea, ripping the line from my fingers. I concentrated on clearing the loose line in my stripping basket, back-peddalling up the beach as I frantically tried to keep a tight line on the fish at the same time.

When a tarpon hits your fly, you only have a second or two to strike. This you have to do as hard and as many times as you can, before all hell breaks loose and the fish launches itself into the air in an awesome display of gill rattling leaps as it tries to rid itself of the fly. At this point all you can do is hang on, try and clear the loose line and get the crazed fish onto the reel. Only then do you regain some measure of control, and the long seesaw battle begins. Known as the Silver King for good reason, you bow to them when they jump, bending your knees and thrusting your rod towards them, creating slack in the line in order to protect the class tippet and prevent the hook from tearing out of their cavernous mouths. Tarpon aren't lightning fast, but they are incredibly strong and can make sudden, powerful runs and unexpected jumps.

The fight is pure anxiety; you worry about knots, the hook coming loose in that bony mouth, about the line breaking and about tippets wearing through. They fight to the bitter end, and many anglers have been fooled into thinking that the fight is nearly over, only to find themselves still battling away 15 minutes later, the fish all the way into the backing again and fighting hard.

After 20 minutes, with an aching arm and the rod butt digging into my stomach, I finally had the tarpon close to the beach. I tried to keep the pressure on, working the fish and continually tiring it out. Eventually I managed to lift its head and roll it over onto its back. Keeping its head up, I waited for the right moment, and using the force of a wave, guided the exhausted tarpon gently up onto the sand. As the water receded I lowered the rod, and dashed down the beach to grab the fish before the next wave arrived. Holding that rough jaw open, I quickly removed the now tattered fly from the huge mouth and gently lifted the mighty, prehistoric creature up for a quick photo.

Despite their sheer power, aggression and the way they ruthlessly wreak havoc with the baitfish, tarpon are surprisingly fragile and vulnerable out of the water. I admired the magnificent fish for just a moment, before wading out, carefully reviving and releasing it, the dark green of its back melting away as it swam slowly back into the ocean. I stood there for a long time after the fish had disappeared slowly into the depths, savouring both the moment and the opportunity to catch tarpon in such a beautiful part of the world.



# VIRGIN ISLANDS

Incredibly, while I was fighting that first tarpon, the rest of the shoal had just carried on feeding, completely oblivious to the plight of the hooked fish. When I climbed out of the water, they were still crashing into the baitfish further down the beach, and after quickly tying on a new tippet and clipping on my stripping basket, I headed their way in search of another one. It's funny how one fish can break the drought and open the floodgates, and later that evening as darkness finally fell, I released my fourth tarpon, the biggest of the day. With a deep sense of satisfaction, I headed back to the tent to rest my weary arms and bruised stomach.

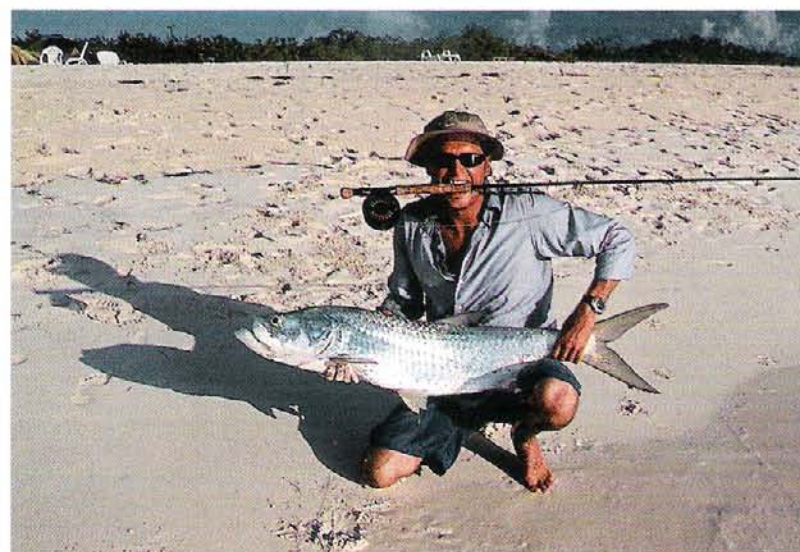
Paul joined me the next morning, and on hearing of my success, he too scaled down to a 2/0 chartreuse Tarpon Fly, and it wasn't long before he landed his first tarpon and finally fulfilled his dream. Again, one fish broke a long drought, and before I even had a touch, he was into another, which he quickly landed after putting on some real pressure with his 12-weight. Soon I too was into a good fish, and before we knew it, the morning had flown past in a blur of crashing fish, screaming reels and long whoops of joy. The shoals of baitfish

were strung out along the beach, and every few minutes, small packs of tarpon would gather together and attack them. The attacks were sporadic and short-lived, so it was a matter of anticipating where the fish would appear within casting distance, then charging up and down the beach to put yourself into position. The fishing was incredibly exciting but also tough and exhausting, as the tarpon were not easy to entice with the fly, and we worked hard for each and every fish.

**T**he shoals stayed in the bay for two weeks, and running up and down the beach casting a 10-weight into the surf all day long took its toll. We caught and released a number of decent-sized tarpon, but of course, there were also a number of bigger fish hooked and lost – some throwing the hook and a couple breaking the class tippet – just to make sure that we took nothing for granted. Sometimes the fish would move out of reach of the fly rod for a day or two, which we used as the perfect excuse to rest our arms, take out the lighter rods and head to the flats on the east end of the island for some bonefishing. The bonefish were rather

scarce. We waded miles of flats and saw only single fish, but they were all large, and we still managed to land a handful of these muscled speedsters.

Sally and I camped on that beach for the entire two weeks, and besides Paul, were the only people around. We strolled together along the deserted beaches, swam and snorkelled in the warm clean water, and Paul and I made the most of the empty flats and bays, enjoying having the tarpon and bonefish all to ourselves. I have always been a firm believer in budget travelling, and camping is an inexpensive way to experience many exotic locations. It may lack the comforts of home or a lodge, but you have the benefit of choosing exactly where you want to stay, and the beach we camped on was ideal. The bay in front of our tent was alive with a variety of fish and other marine life. We enjoyed the spectacle of watching manta rays clearing the water in spectacular jumps, turtles patrolling the beach and barracuda feeding on large mullet patrolling the shoreline. We experienced nature at her finest, unaltered and undisturbed, and it was an experience that will long remain in my memory as one of my greatest fishing trips ever.



Above left: The baitfish kept the tarpon close to shore and provided the author with many opportunities.

Above right: The Silver King in all its glory – some anglers pursue them for years before landing their first tarpon.