

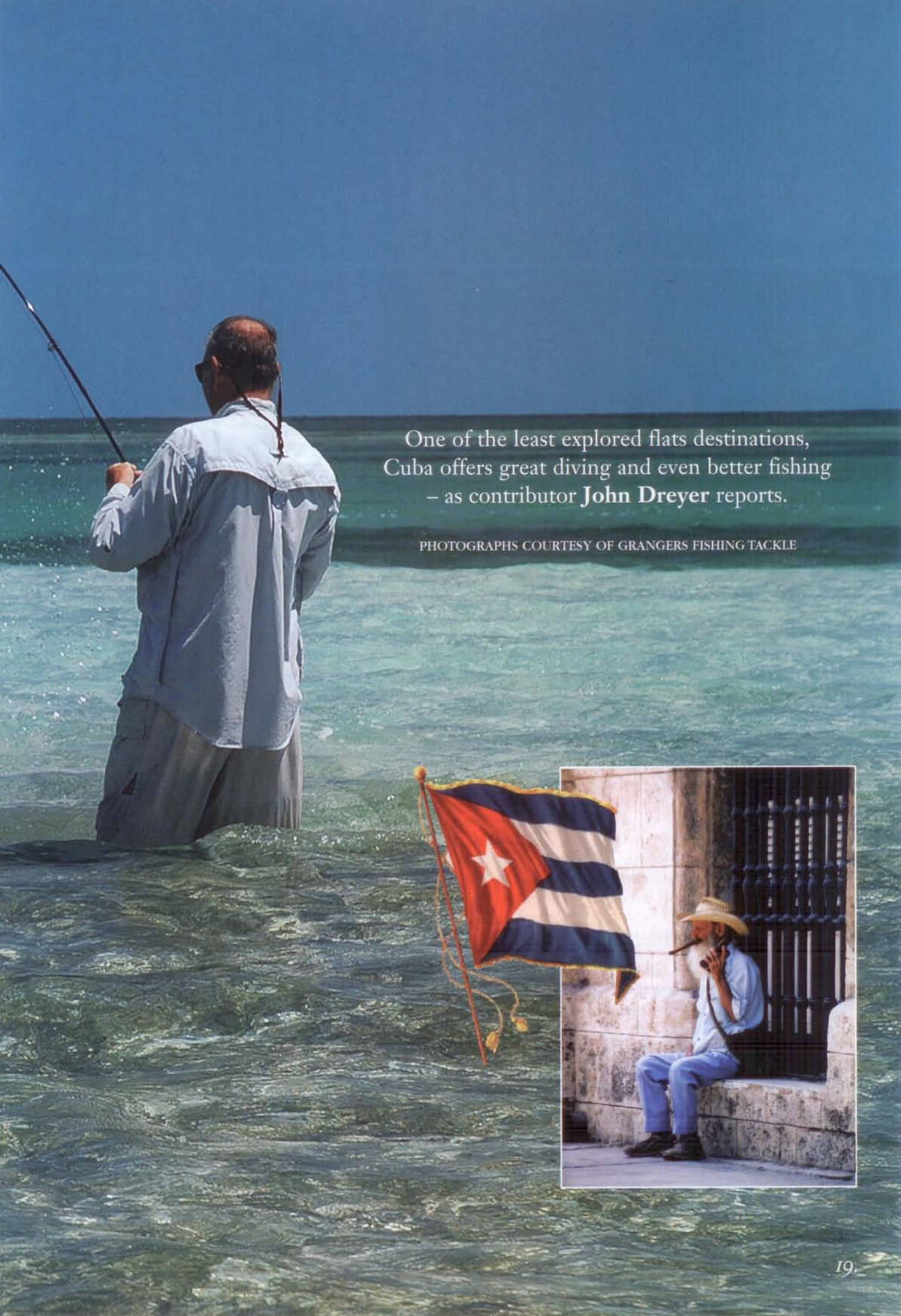
Cuba

uncovered

The attraction of world-class diving and experiencing Cuba enticed Mike, my fishing agnostic, Sydney-based son to join me at Avalon's Jardines de la Reina operation. The Gardens of the Queen are a 160km long string of sandy, tropical, scrub-covered and palm-fringed islands, mangroves, flats and coral reefs teeming with fish, a three-hour boat trip off the Cuban coast. These Gardens constitute a nature reserve from which all but the Avalon concession and a few lobster fishermen have been excluded. It is pristine wilderness, picture postcard beautiful with wonderful shades of blue turned almost psychedelic by my polarised sunglasses.

HAVANA - CUBA

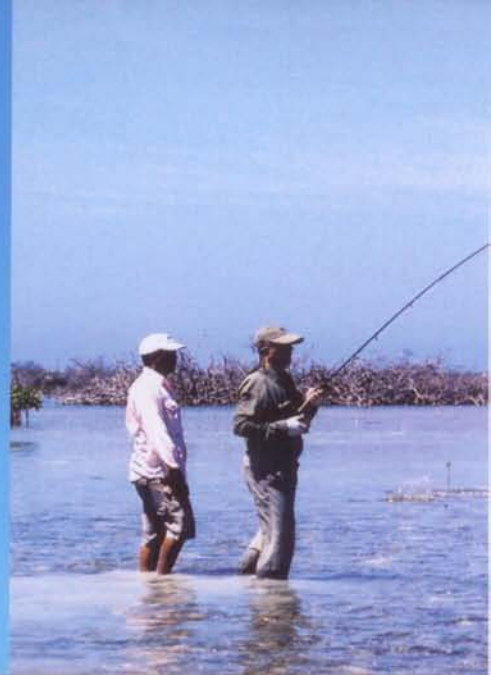
We arrived in Havana on Good Friday. Things had definitely improved since my last trip. This time we were met; the taxi was a modern Peugeot (one of a fleet recently imported), and our rooms at the excellent Parque Central Hotel had not been usurped for visiting statesmen (if the expression is appropriate for President Mugabe). Mike and I wandered through picturesque Old Havana inspecting the crumbling buildings, the imposing edifices of the forts built since the 1500s to prevent the privateers and the English from re-ransacking the city and old churches, some of which have been converted into museums or concert halls, while in others Easter services were being conducted. The area is being restored and I hope that this will not destroy the unified nature of its architecture. The shops appeared to be fuller than last time and the colourful crowd of people did not seem unhappy, although relative poverty abounds. We ate in street cafés watching the passing parade on the streets, which the residents generally kept clean. We had a few cocktails, but a 4.30am bus trip booked for the following day kept us away from the famed nightlife.



One of the least explored flats destinations,
Cuba offers great diving and even better fishing
– as contributor **John Dreyer** reports.

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF GRANGERS FISHING TACKLE





Above: Mike Dreyer showing what Cuban bonefishing is all about – lots of fast blistering action and well-proportioned bonefish.

MAKING OUR WAY TO THE JARDINES

The coach trip took over four hours through some farm land to the small harbour of Jucaro where we embarked on the good ship *Halcon* for the 60-odd mile trip to the Jardines. On my previous trip I had been accommodated aboard the *Tortuga*, a larger boat permanently moored in an inlet and serving as a base from which to explore the surrounding area. *Halcon* has the advantage of being mobile, thus making it easier to access the more remote fishing areas. However, given the limited number of people it can accommodate, unless your party of fishermen can take over the whole boat, you could possibly experience friction among guests.

The other anglers were two from Sweden, an Englishman and his son, and a French couple with their daughter who had booked another boat but transhipped when it arrived. These were enthusiastic, experienced fishermen – lavishly equipped. (I need to introduce some of them to my wife to put my tackle mania into perspective.) They regarded Mike's and my intention to dive with polite incredulity. They were there to fish and fish hard, none more so than the English who broiled themselves all day and were ready to fish at night. Their prime target was tarpon and they achieved considerable success. The Swedes boated some 76 tarpon and the French lady, after an epic battle, landed one of over 100lb. The English also hooked two permit, one of which was lost at the boat.

THE BONEFISH

Tarpon were not really an option for the Dreyers as we went diving most afternoons and in any event had only brought 9-wt rods. We were after bonefish, and Yenzi (our Cuban guide) took our 60hp 16ft skiff to the flats to search for the schools. Your eye needs to be educated to pick up the twinkles and flashes on the troubled waters created by the schools of fish. Occasional sightings of the fin tips of nearby bones or movement in the water are also good indications, and it helps if the water is clear and the surface is relatively unruffled.

On day one I discovered that a week in Chile spent casting a 6-wt rod was poor preparation for using a 9-wt off a boat. Our casting did, however, improve when Yenzi was moved to offer lessons in humility and how to achieve more distance in the wind – don't hold the rod vertically and shoot the line with the rod further forward, since you ask. On subsequent days we fished off coral reefs, alongside the mangroves and over the sea grass, including taking fish mudding in holes. We did a limited amount of wading, mainly due to the bottom being unstable, and targeted only an occasional single bonefish which was perhaps a commentary on Yenzi's estimation of our skill. On good days we took about eight bonefish in the morning, some of 6lb. The fishing was exciting with the bones making several runs deep into backing. One bonefish separated my (new) floating line from the backing with its run. Fortunately for the tackle shop which had attached





Above right: John Dreyer with a good-sized barracuda. Below: Show-stopping aerial displays are what make tarpon fishing so popular.

“A BIGGER FISH CONTEMPTUOUSLY BROKE MY PURCHASED 80LB SHOCK TIPPET TARPON LEADER ON THE TAKE, CONFIRMING THE GUIDE’S OPINION THAT SIMPLY JOINING THE FLY TO THE LINE WITH 100 - 120LB MONO IS PREFERABLE.”



the line, we were able to find it on the flats, pick it up, surreptitiously re-attach it to the backing and land the fish.

BARRACUDA, LEMON SHARKS AND TARPON

We also took several large barracuda with trace and popper. Yenzi would locate sardinas (baitfish schools), we would then cast out toward them, strip, watch for the swirl, then strike hard, and again. Barracuda are wonderful fighting fish – incredibly quick, hard running and they make multiple jumps. I also caught a lemon shark that was troubling the bones by flicking my bonefish fly at it in annoyance and then battling to get it to the boat, all the while being tormented by nearby schools of uncastable bones.

On the last evening Yenzi and I went to a flat that extended over the horizon. We had just taken some barracuda and were following a school of bones that only Yenzi could see. “Attention – cast, cast now. Eleven o’clock, no, no further right, long cast. Cast now, can’t you see?” he shouted, and then suddenly a huge school materialised. I felt like the British destroyer captain at Jutland witnessing the German fleet coming over the horizon toward him. I cast in front of the pack and one of the front-runners grabbed the fly. “Strike, strike,” Yenzi shouted unnecessarily, “now leave your line,” which was promptly ripped off the deck and then the reel. We were into backing faster and further than the barracuda had achieved, and this by a 4lb bonefish! That’s the beauty of bone fishing.

We did some tarpon fishing, mainly at night. Mike went out alone on a few occasions, and we fished together in a huge mangrove forest one evening before the mosquitoes drove us off. I also fished one night from 7pm - 11pm on a pushing tide. Yenzi and I anchored near a large channel leading into the mangroves. The moon was down and the sky sparkled with unfamiliar northern hemisphere stars and surprisingly large numbers of airplanes. I used a sink tip so I could feel when to end the retrieve and cast toward the mangroves. We caught lots of snapper and jumped about 11 tarpon of which three were boated, weighing between 12lb and 18lb - a lot of fun! The tarpon were

very strong and handling the jumps in the dark was tricky. A bigger fish contemptuously broke my purchased 80lb shock tippet tarpon leader on the take, confirming the guide's opinion that simply joining the fly to the line with 100 - 120lb mono is preferable. My 9-wt rod left me feeling distinctly vulnerable.

We went with Boris (a very professional dive master) every afternoon to dive off the world's third largest barrier reef. The whole operation was conducted to the highest of standards, and Mike compares the diving favourably to Australia's Great Barrier Reef. We were dropped off and drifted along the pristine

reef with great visibility and water warm enough to render a dive suit superfluous. While we did not see the schools of over 100 tarpon that I'd seen on my previous trip, there were plenty of barracuda (including one seemingly inspecting us as potential dinner, until shooed away by Boris blowing bubbles at it), lots of rays sleeping on the bottom, many turtles, sharks, jack crevalle, some large groupers, a peculiar sea horse-type creature, moray eels and shoals of multi-coloured reef fish everywhere. I particularly liked the school of small purple fish blending with the purple fronds. When a certifiable fisherman like me voluntarily forgoes fishing such prime waters for diving, it shows how good the diving is!

Below: Tarpon and kingfish are just some of the species that can be targeted on fly. Bottom: Fighting tarpon in a "sticky" situation.





The food onboard was excellent, and on the last night I skipped the lobster as the prawn risotto was so good. Generally, everything was clean, neat and well organised. The trip back to Havana was tiring and we arrived after dark. That night we accompanied the Swedes and the French to an Italian restaurant. I think mama was dismayed at her 15-year-old daughter's exposure to the large number of ladies of the night accompanying the tourists.

The flight back to Johannesburg via Sao Paulo was made bearable only by my recollections of the fishing. The fishermen onboard unanimously supported President Bush in his efforts to restrict the freedom of Americans to travel to Cuba so that the rest of us can continue to enjoy its world-class fishing!



CUBA – IF YOU WANT TO GO

The fishing: Almost all flats species are present. Bonefish average 3 - 4lb, but 12lb specimens have been caught. Resident tarpon up to 30lb are available year round, with the odd larger specimen in-between. From May to August big migrating tarpon of 100lb and more enter the flats. Kingfish, barracuda, mutton snappers and other flats species may also be targeted. The permit fishing here is considered by some to be the best in the world.

When to go: Cuba is an all-year-round fishery with November to January traditionally being the drier (winter) months. Fishing for resident tarpon and big bonefish is popular at this time of year, which is also prime holiday season in Cuba. The season for onboard accommodation on the *Tortuga* is from mid-October to the end of August. Prime fishing time is February to June, and if you are after big tarpon May to August is the time to go. September to October is hurricane season.

Who to contact: Avalon's Fishing and Diving Centre offers week long packages that are all inclusive – from Havana to the accommodation – and exclude only drinks and tips (visit www.avalons.net).

Accommodation: The floating *Tortuga Lodge*, which sleeps up to 14 anglers/divers in seven cabins.

Tackle: 8- to 12-wt rods and standard flats flies. Most fishing is done with a (tropical) floating line.

More about the location: The Jardines is a group of islands, which form part of the Cuban Archipelago and lie 115km off the southeastern coast of Cuba. These islands are protected by the third longest barrier reef in the world and have endless flats to explore with a fly rod. Some say that the fishery is similar to what the Florida Keys was many years ago. Cuba, the largest island, is 1200km long and between 35km and 210km wide. There are over 300 protected areas in the country, either on its insular shelf or on terra firma. Consequently, there is a wealth of flora and fauna with a high degree of preservation. There are no large predators or animals that constitute a threat to man, and no poisonous snakes.

About Cuba: Cuba is a Spanish-speaking country with a surface area of 110,922 square km and a population of over 11 million. The capital is Havana, with 2.1 million inhabitants. The currency is pesos (about 26 pesos = US\$1), but only Cuban citizens use these. Since November 2004 Cuba only accepts convertible pesos (CUC for travellers), and these have the same value as US dollars. This means that you can bring euros or pounds sterling and exchange them for CUC. You can also use your credit card to draw money from Cuban banks. As for US\$, you have to pay an exchange rate commission of 10%, so better leave those dollars at home. Cuba has 110-volt electricity outlets, but some luxury hotels also have 220 volts. Make sure that you check the customs regulations before your trip, as there is a ban on bringing certain goods like computers into the country since the government has forbidden Cubans to own one privately.

Informative website: www.cuba-junky.com