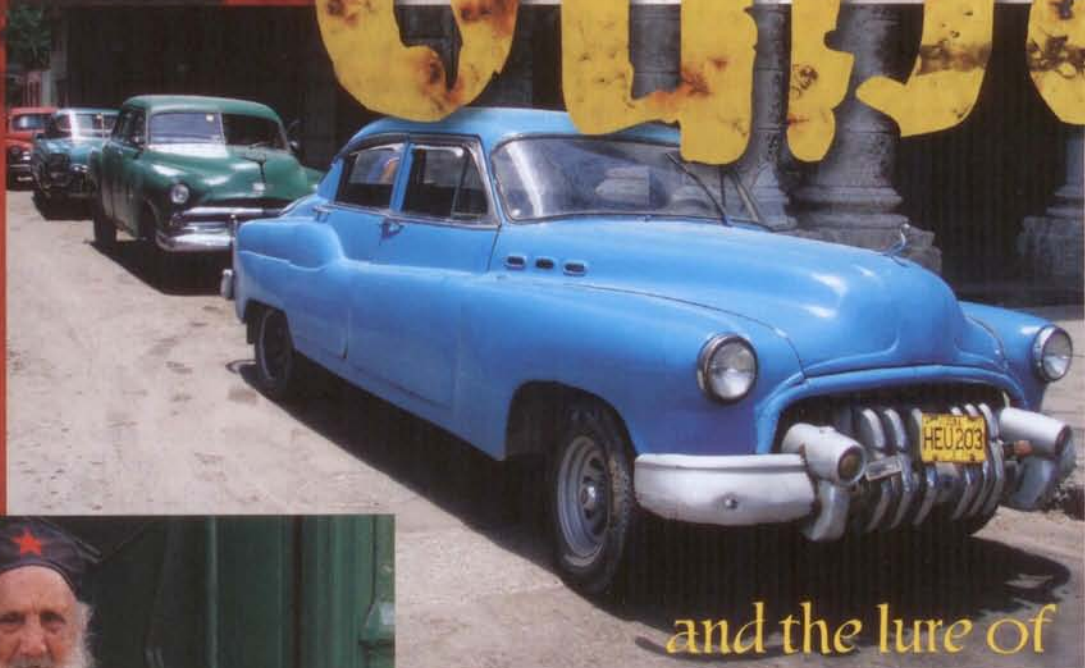


Cuba



and the lure of

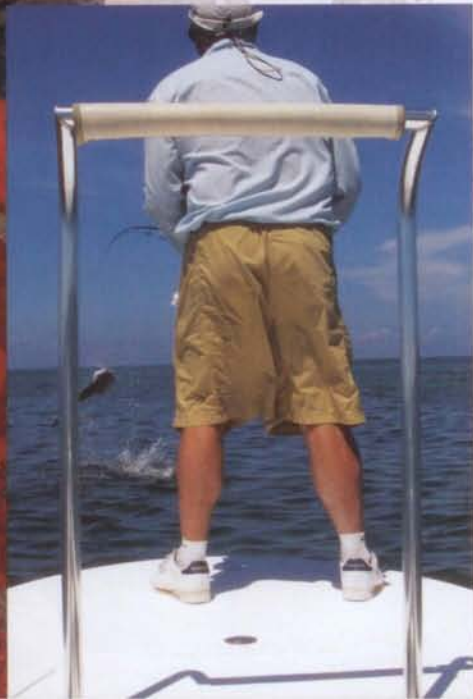
tarpon

Enthralled by the spell of an earlier trip to Central America, **John Neaves** this time heads for the land of Castro in search of tarpon. He is not disappointed.



Above and top: Cuba seems stuck in the sixties – not necessarily a bad thing.

Right: Jumping a tarpon. Still a long way from getting it to the boat.



When I was in Belize last year I saw a plaque on the wall at Belize River Lodge that read: "If fishing was easy, it would be called catching." During this trip I had caught two large tarpon under very difficult circumstances. The water was murky with no visibility and the only chances of catching tarpon were either by blind-casting in the hope of a hookup, or waiting for a tarpon to roll within casting distance. I opted for the latter and was extremely lucky to catch fish after spending hours on the front of the boat. The phrase, however, stayed with me and has taken on a whole new meaning following my recent trip to Cuba.



JARDINES DE LA REINA

On 20 May 2008, I departed Johannesburg for Havana via Paris. I arrived in Havana on the evening of 21 May with the prospect of having to spend two full days in the city (which, as it turned out, I really enjoyed). It was with great anticipation and thoughts filled with fishing for giant tarpon that I waited for my bus at 5am on Saturday to undertake the six-hour trip to the small port of Jucaro. The drive through the country was an experience on its own, complete with peasant farmers using ox-drawn ploughs, and locals queuing for transport and sponsored food. From here it would be another three-hour boat ride to reach the Queen's Gardens (Jardines de la Reina). This is a group of islands covering an area of about 2000km² and it is fully protected except for some commercial lobster fishing concessions and the Avalon fishing operations (which are all catch-and-release).

On arrival at Jucaro, I was met by Avalon's friendly representative Suli, who was the only person who could really speak English. She informed me that I was to be the sole guest aboard their luxury yacht *La Tortuga*, anchored in the middle of the Jardines. Suli introduced me to Bodi (the chef), Keko (my guide) and the rest of the *La Tortuga* staff. Keko turned out to be an exceptional guide, and after the first afternoon Suli arranged for a learner guide to accompany us each day. The guides could communicate fishing stuff perfectly well, but as soon as the conversation started going in another direction they would simply say "si, si" to everything, and it was clear that they understood not a word I'd said.



Top: The author with a nice-sized fish.
Insert top: *La Tortuga* lies anchored.
Above and left: The streets of Havana.



water as the tarpon leapt for freedom into the branches, ending up with the fly entangled in the leaves and a very frustrated fisherman (and guide). I also remember packs of tarpon gliding across the flats, seeing them compete for the fly, and the ensuing melee. At times I would cast blind into deeper channels, drop-offs and cuts. I must have hooked about 100 fish and landed about 40. Generally speaking, the tarpon that I saw and caught were in the 30lb - 40lb

Above and right: Jack crevalle added an interesting diversion to the mix.

Below: In Havana everybody smokes a cigar – what else would you expect?

Bottom right: A good tarpon can make any guide smile – Keko and friend.

The fishing in the Jardines is mostly sight-fishing, and I have vivid memories of rolling tarpon in the most perfect of settings, casting to them, seeing the flash as they took the fly and then witnessing their amazing aerial display and tussle. Many fish were jumped as they shook their heads vigorously in an attempt to rid themselves of the fly. Sometimes, when patrolling among the mangroves, I observed tarpon cruising in a mere foot of clear water and put delicate casts in front of them. This would often result in an explosion of

region, although I was told that other guests had lost a few of around 100lb. We fished for a number of other species and caught some very nice barracuda, jack crevalle and snapper. I also got a few shots at permit, but my impression was that the guides at the Jardines prefer to target the more productive tarpon.

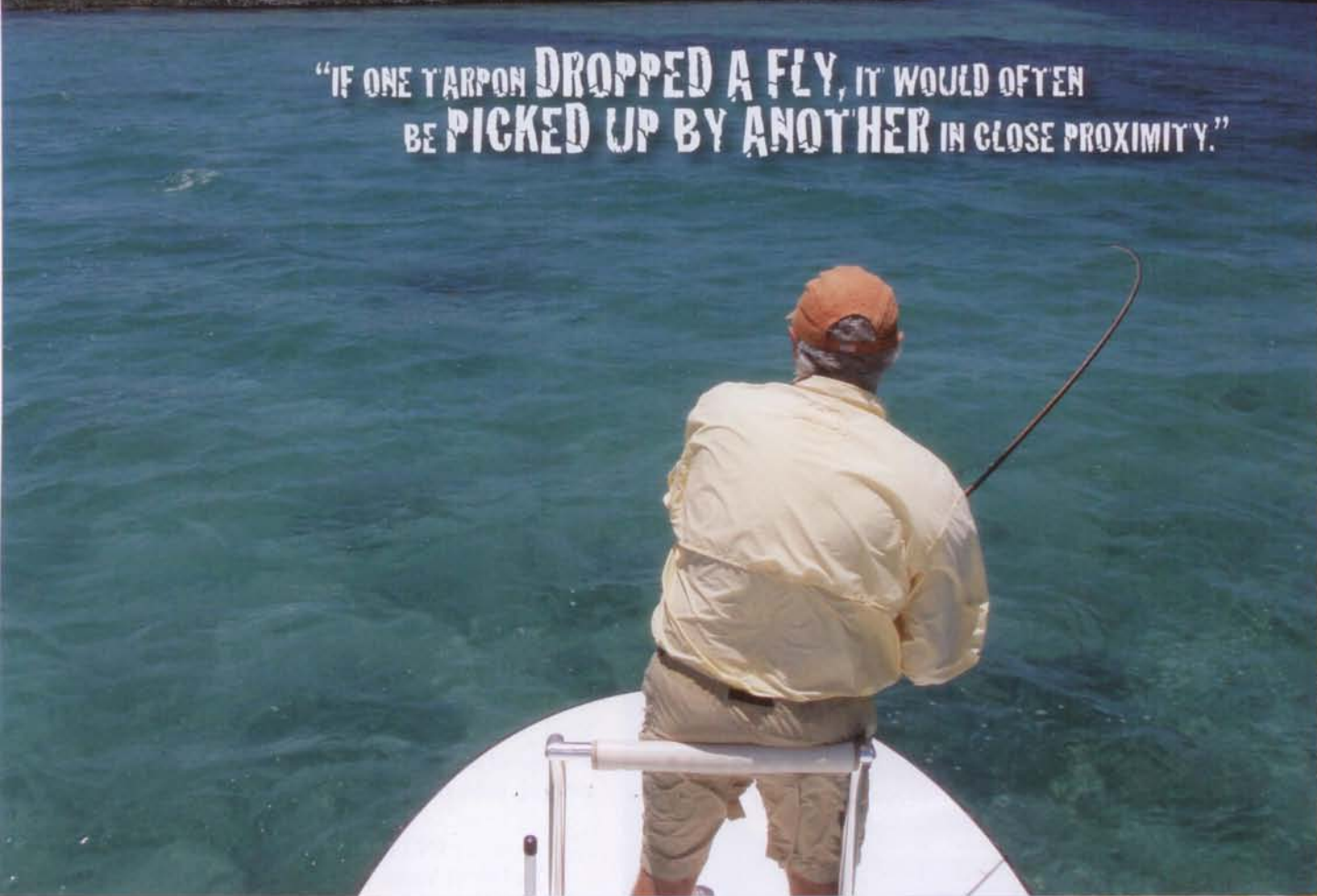


ISLE OF YOUTH

After six full days' fishing at the Jardines and a rather emotional farewell to my new friends, it was time to move on. Our flight to Havana was in a craft that resembled a panel-beaten sardine tin, but we thankfully arrived safely. Once at the Hotel Rancho, I was introduced to my new guide Koki and a young Italian undertaker from Turin, Marco Fanelli, who was to be my fishing companion for the week.



"IF ONE TARPON DROPPED A FLY, IT WOULD OFTEN BE PICKED UP BY ANOTHER IN CLOSE PROXIMITY."



I caught a number of bigger tarpon (several around 50lb, a few 70-pounders and two in the region of 85lb). But a lot of my success has to be attributed to Koki, who is undoubtedly the best guide I'd ever fished with. Besides being extremely hardworking, knowledgeable and friendly, Koki put me onto a number of the elusive permit in excess of 40lb, and I subsequently enjoyed the best permit fishing of my life. Although I never managed to connect with one, we spent many happy hours fishing for them.

Fishing at the Isle of Youth was a completely different experience. Here we did not spend as much time hunting for tarpon in the open water, and although we fished the lagoons and among the mangroves, we mostly worked the deep channels and cuts with sinking lines. This proved to be very productive and we would often find five or six fish over 50lb in the same area. If one tarpon dropped a fly, it would often be picked up by another in close proximity. On one occasion, we had four strikes on one cast!



Above, from left to right:
The Presidio Modelo prison on the Isle of Youth.

Fidel Castro's bed in prison.
An identification plaque was put up on the wall next to each prisoner.



Right: Tarpon among the sticks.
The author jumping a baby tarpon.

Below: A good tarpon from the Isle of Youth.

Bottom: Friends made, and forever remembered.



Koki and I even had a double on the last morning – I was onto a good tarpon when we saw another fish following. Koki picked up a spare rod, put out the cast, and to whoops of excitement the two of us had jumping tarpon on both sides of the boat.

INTERESTING FACTS

The Isle of Youth (Isla de la Juventud) was so named by the Russians who built large schools and universities here during the Cold War for students to study communism (amongst other things). The island is similar to Robben Island just off the South African coast, and also plays host to the now derelict but infamous Presidio Modelo prison where Fidel Castro was incarcerated prior to the Cuban revolution. I visited the prison and could feel the gruesome past of the place. The prisoners' dining hall was known as the Hall of 3000 Silences as no noise or talking were permitted. It had quite a sobering effect on me, in contrast to the excitement of the fishing. The final conclusion? Cuba is fantastic and I am already planning my next trip. It's a totally underrated destination, but one well worth considering.

