

BONEFISH,

THEN NOW

> ROSS PURNELL

New opportunities in the Bahamas

▶ **Bahama House** guests wade the flats and creeks of Harbour Island, Eleuthera (shown here), and nearby Spanish Wells.

Photo | Kelly Bastone



WHEN THE FIRST ISSUE OF FLY FISHERMAN HIT NEWSSTANDS IN 1969,

THE MEN AND WOMEN WHO WERE WADING SHALLOW SALTWATER FLATS FOR BONEFISH WERE PIONEERING A BRAND NEW SPORT. Fishermen are always guilty of seeing the past through rose-colored glasses when they talk about the “good old days,” but the facts are that 50 years ago, it was the dark ages, and we had cave-man tools for saltwater flats fishing.

The May 1969 issue says that guides on Grand Bahama disdained fly rods, and preferred to chum the bonefish flats with fresh shrimp. “They’re beginning to savvy fly fishing, now, but they still need to be humored.” The recommended tackle tip in that issue was to wear a surgeon’s mask to protect your face from the sun.

The third issue of 1969 has a bonefish story by senior editor Tom McNally where he describes the joys of chasing bonefish in the Florida Keys with a pull-start 10-HP outboard motor, a 7-ounce Fenwick fiberglass rod, and a reel that allowed a 6-pound bonefish to somehow run out 300 feet of line

and backing. Thankfully, those days are behind us. The bonefishing opportunities we have today in the Bahamas are the best we’ve ever had.

West Side Story

When our plane touched down at Congo Town on Andros Island at 7 A.M. we were only 50 minutes wheels up from Fort Lauderdale. Customs took about five minutes, and soon Capt. Tom Laughlin was helping us load our gear into a 26-foot Regulator with dual 300-HP outboards. This boat is for transport only, and quickly powered us through the South Bight with the low morning sun at our backs.

We paused at the 74-foot mothership *Eleven* (elevenexperience.com) just long enough to stow our belongings in the three state rooms, set up our rods, and then transferred to our waiting Beavertail skiffs. Within minutes, our guides were poling the white sand flats of the West Side, calling out shots at small groups of large bonefish.

The mothership was moored in a deep channel in the linear center of the storied West Side of Andros. It’s a pristine wilderness that fly fishers have visited for many decades, but not with ease or any level of comfort. Andros is the largest island in the Bahamas by a wide margin, and is the least densely populated. The rocky geography of the East Side of the island allows for human habitation—you can build houses, have a garden, or even construct a lodge. The West Side of Andros is

just hundreds of square miles of sand and mangroves. It’s perfect for bonefish, but not for human habitation, so over the entire history of fly fishing for bonefish on Andros, fly fishers have always wanted to get away from the busy flats of the East Side, and hunt the vast white sand flats of the West Side.

Due to the habitat, there are more opportunities for bigger bonefish (there are more of them). It’s been known as “The Land of the Giants” through three generations of Andros bonefish guides. And partly because there is less fishing pressure, the bonefish tend to be a little more naïve. On some hard-fished flats closer to the East Side, guides paw through your fly box carefully before handing it back to you with a smile that says “nice try.” Then they tie on their own fly.

When we set out from the mothership, guide David Russell (DJ) just reached in my box, and indiscriminately picked a fly. I quickly landed two bones of about 5 or 6 pounds, then lost my fly to a barracuda. There was another group of bones headed toward us, so with DJ sticking us in position from the poling platform, I grabbed my box full of neatly arranged rows of Gotchas, Bonefish Junk, Mantis Shrimp, and Spawning Shrimp, and asked “What fly should I tie on?”

My question was met with a deep belly laugh: “This is the West Side, Mon!” he said with a wide sweep of this arm. “It don’t matter what fly you tie on.”

► **Stand-up paddleboards** stashed in West Side National Park give adventurers access to miles of shallow salt ponds with no competition from motorized skiffs.



Photo | Alex Fenlon



► **The 74-foot** mothership *Eleven* has three double-occupancy state rooms and provides comfortable accommodations in the middle of the remote West Side of Andros. Guests fish from 17-foot Beavertail skiffs.

Photo | Alex Fenlon

Eleven crew has stand-up paddleboards stashed at inland salt ponds hemmed by mangroves. With just a five-minute walk from your skiff, you’re up paddling, casting, and reeling in bonefish from your own board in just inches of water. It takes a little coordination and determination to make it work, but it’s worth it, especially if you have an adventurous fishing partner. The fish in the salt ponds are absolutely gullible.

For after-hours fishing, *Eleven* also has BOTE Rovers for nearby intermediate waters. These are SUPs on steroids with a 500-pound weight capacity, 6-HP short-shaft outboard motor, and a Grab Rac you can lean against while quietly paddling or casting. These little one-person boats can run at 16 MPH, which is plenty for the endless flats that begin just 500 yards from the mothership.

Inside the newly appointed 74-foot Hatteras, there are three staterooms.

Each room has two twin beds that can be arranged into a single king bed; the master stateroom has two bathrooms and a shared walk-in shower with separate entrances. I could accurately write that the mothership is “opulent” or “luxurious” but those words ignore that fact that above all, the craft is efficient and thoughtful. Nothing seems overdone. The owner of *Eleven* is a fly fisher, his wife is a designer, and together they have chosen everything in the new interior to be comfortable, functional, and versatile. From the modern cockpit and electronics to the engine room and sparkling galley, you never have the feeling that you’re cramped on a boat. It’s a place you can stretch, unwind, be comfortable, and enjoy the solitude of one of the most remote places in our hemisphere. When the sun starts to set on the West Side of Andros Island you truly do have it all to yourself.

Harbour Island

Harbour Island has never been a destination for hardcore bonefish anglers, mostly because Dunmore Town is a small, very exclusive resort town—not an expansive wilderness like the West Side of Andros. There are trendy shops, boutique restaurants, and pink sand beaches that have been the locations for *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit edition photo shoots. It's not the kind of place that jumps to mind when you think "fishing trip." But beyond the cobbled streets and beachside cottages of Harbour Island, there are the disconnected but adjacent islands of Eleuthera and Spanish Wells, where bonefish tail on turtle grass flats and are mostly ignored by 99% of the non-fishing tourists who visit the region.

There are no casinos here, no large hotels, no rowdy nightclubs, and cruise ships do not visit Dunmore Town. It's the kind of place where A-list celebrities disappear for a week and no one bats an eye.

Eleven's Bahama House in Dunmore Town is centered in an iconic building constructed in the 1800s. There are two separate cottages on the property, and a tiki bar adjacent to a freshwater pool and sun deck. The beach is a two-minute ride in one of the many golf carts. This is the place where you can plan a honeymoon, or a 25-year anniversary, and you won't feel guilty at all about sneaking in a few days of quality fishing as part of your extracurricular activities. When you are not fishing, Experience Manager Giorgia Ravilli Simmons can help you plan activities like yoga sessions on the beach, snorkeling, bicycling through town, or taking Eleven's 35-foot Scorpion speedboat to a remote cliff-ringed beach for a cookout. Or you can relax by the private pool and read a book. The staff at Bahama House can arrange whatever kind of day you have in mind.

On fishing days, Simmons will escort you by golf cart to the dock two blocks away where you'll meet guide Patrick Roberts, a man whose father was a bonefish guide, as was his father before him. Bonefishing is in his blood. Roberts roams the creeks and inland waters sandwiched between Harbour Island and Eleuthera, and depending on the weather can run north and east along the Devil's Backbone past Tay Bay Beach and on to Spanish Wells. The north-facing ocean flats at Spanish Wells are near the rim of the



▶ **Most bonefish** in "The Land of the Giants" are 4 to 6 pounds, but if you ignore these little guys and focus on big fish, you'll have daily opportunities at double-digit bonefish.

Photo | Alex Fenlon

deepest trench in the Bahamas, and the blue water that washes onto these flats with each new tide brings nutrients and the possibility of flats foreigners like permit, mutton snapper, and other species.

These flats are perhaps the prettiest I've seen in the Bahamas, with expanses of white sand, turtle grass, and ocean coral, all jig-sawed around rock pinnacles sculpted by a millennium of wind and waves. It's breathtaking. Bonefish love to root and tail in these ankle-deep flats at low tide. You'll have to get out and walk because the fish are in just inches of water, and they move slowly with the afternoon light shining through their tails and dorsals as they sift for urchins, crabs, and worms.

Even while they are feeding hard, the bonefish are super wary in this skinny water. If you drop to one knee they'll belly crawl to within two rod lengths of you, but when they see the line, motion, or hear the kerplow! of a fly they'll bolt, and often take a stampede of other bonefish with them. But within minutes they settle down, and you'll see the same school circling back onto their feeding grounds in a familiar pattern.

Roberts is a master of this shallow-water bonefishing on grass flats, where you'll need lightly weighted, inverted flies with weedguards; long 14-foot leaders; and above all, accurate casts

where you don't measure the cast in the air with false casts, you shoot to the target to prevent the bonefish from seeing the line.

Roberts is a gem . . . an off-the-clock bonefish guide who knows what is going to happen before it happens, and organizes his days around the tides and the habits of the bonefish he has patterned over 30 years of guiding. We stayed out late enough that the water turned to a flat mirror, broken only by the tails and dorsals of bonefish that reached past the bend in the ocean.

Roberts ran us back to Bahama House with the sun hanging on the edge of the horizon, and when we arrived at the dock, Simmons was there worrying like a mother hen. She whisked us back to Bahama House where we replaced our rods with mojitos from the poolside bar and ate barbecue Bahamian chicken and smoked ribs. When the after-dinner cocktails were poured, we heard music on the otherwise quiet side street, and a Junk-anoo parade passed jubilantly through our walled security gates, turning the poolside deck into a Bahamas dance party/music carnival. Apparently, Eleven can take a day of fishing that was ten out of ten, and still turn it up a notch at the end of the day. 🐟

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