

Bahamian

A Bonefish Breakout on Harbour Island Holiday by Eric Kallen

The Bahamas have been synonymous with bonefishing since anglers began stalking the gray ghost. The list of fly fishing legends who've come to these islands in search of bonefish is long and distinguished. Well-known destinations on Andros and Abaco offer a host of world-class fishing lodges geared towards serious fly fishers with their sights set on bonefish.

But a bucket-list trip for hard-core anglers may not have the same appeal to a husband and wife looking for a luxurious getaway with

friends. That's how I found myself disembarking from a water taxi onto Harbour Island's Government Dock. As the main entry point for visitors to Harbour Island, Government Dock is a busy place—crates of goods being offloaded from boats, tourists arriving from the international airport on North Eleuthera, and Bahamians who live and work on the island that the locals call Briland, all sharing the same space.

As my wife and I stepped off the water taxi onto the dock, our hosts from The Eleven Experience greeted us and took us for a short golf cart ride to our hotel, Bahama House. Harbour Island is relatively small and golf carts are the predominant means of transportation when walking doesn't suit.

Chad Pike, founder of The Eleven Experience and a world-class fisherman who recently received Bonefish & Tarpon Trust's Lefty Kreh Award for Lifetime Achievement in Conservation, had invited my wife and me to Harbour Island for a few days of relaxation and revelry. Pike is a good friend, and we've shared a number of fly fishing adventures all over the world. Our plan this trip was to strike a balance between chasing bonefish and spending time with our spouses and non-fishing friends.

When people discuss Bahamian bonefishing, they typically refer to the more popular destinations on the west side of Andros or Abaco, where you can find 6-, 8- or even 10-pound bonefish. Harbour Island is known more for its beautiful pink sand beaches that stretch for miles along the east side of the island. The island's pastel-colored New England-style houses and flower-lined streets offer an elegant and laid-back vibe. Dotted with high-end boutiques and outstanding restaurants, Briland has plenty to offer those who visit under the guise of pure leisure.



An aerial photograph of a tropical coastline. The water is a vibrant turquoise color, with some darker patches indicating deeper areas or reefs. The shoreline is rocky and covered with lush green vegetation, including palm trees. A thin, light-colored path or road runs along the edge of the land. The word "Rhapsody" is written in a large, white, cursive font across the top half of the image.

Rhapsody

Bahama House, a boutique hotel located in the heart of Dunmore Town—Harbour Island’s only town and one of the oldest settlements in the Bahamas—was home base. It’s quaint and offers 11 well-appointed and tastefully decorated rooms positioned around a courtyard filled with palm trees, tropical gardens, and private sitting areas. A freshwater swimming pool is centered between the four buildings that house guest rooms, some of which date to the 1800s. The pool’s tiki bar provides a perfect setting for onsite relaxation. The Eleven Experience owns and operates Bahama House, as well as other exclusive adventure-driven properties in Colorado, Alaska, British

with no need for lengthy runs out to remote stretches of water. In fact, the flats right off of Dunmore Town offer great bonefishing for anyone who wants to wade out for some DIY opportunities.

With Pike directing our activities, we assembled on Government Dock equipped with our 9-weight fly rods and a cooler of the Bahamas’ own Kalik beer that our hosts at The Eleven Experience thoughtfully provided. After a late night at Bahama House’s tiki bar, I was grateful for polarized sunglasses that tempered the glare from the bright Caribbean sun.

As an infrequent bonefish angler, I find that the harder I look, the less luck I have in seeing the fish. Intent stares seem far less productive than a soft focus when looking for the gray ghost’s shimmering scales.

Columbia, Iceland, Patagonia, New Zealand, and the French Alps.

Chad and I planned to take a couple of half-day trips, leaving in the morning and getting back after lunch. After a quick shower we’d seamlessly integrate into that day’s leisure activities without missing a beat.

One of the great things about bonefishing on Harbour Island is that some of the best fishing is very close,

Our guide for the day, Patrick Roberts, is part of Harbour Island’s bonefish royalty. He’s a third-generation bonefishing guide, and his family has been guiding the waters around Harbour Island for decades. Roberts’ Uncle, “Bonefish” Joe Cleare, was a well-known and respected guide who died at age 79 in 2013.

As we loaded our gear onto Roberts’ skiff, Pike formally introduced me. Roberts had been waiting patiently

as we made the short trip to the dock from Bahama House. Our late arrival didn’t diminish “Bonefish” Patrick’s enthusiasm as we untied his lines and headed out for a short ride to the flats between Harbour Island and North Eleuthera.

It was easy to become immersed in the natural beauty of the area as we glided over the turquoise water, distracted only by an occasional sea turtle diving under the surface as





our boat passed. With Harbour Island within sight, it was easy for me to keep my bearings as we navigated between the small mangrove-filled islands and coral formations that marked the approaching flats.

Roberts slowed the skiff and climbed onto the poling platform, and I grabbed my fly rod and took a position on the bow. The flats were shallow, with hard sand and swaying turtle grass visible below the surface. With its silver and

gray coloration, the bonefish is well camouflaged and stealthy. Its deeply forked tail and powerful, streamlined body give it the ability to move in explosive bursts across flats, making placement of a fly in front of a moving fish very difficult.

With my fly rod in one hand and a tan Crazy Charlie in the other, I searched desperately for the signs of a cruising bonefish, or with luck a tail protruding through the surface. As an

infrequent bonefish angler, I find that the harder I look, the less luck I have in seeing the fish. Intent stares seem far less productive than a soft focus when looking for the gray ghost's shimmering scales.

Lulled into a reverie by the gentle rocking of the boat, Roberts startled me with a whispered command. "There they are. Bones at 3 o'clock, 30 yards out." Unable to spot the fish, I tried desperately to remember



where 3 o'clock was on the clock face. Quickly realigning, I dropped my fly into the water and delivered what I thought was a perfect shot.

Through Roberts' thick Bahamian accent, I quickly learned the outcome of my blind cast.

"Ah, man, you spooked 'em," he said. "You hit 'em on the head."

He issued the rebuke with a polite chuckle before going back to work, scanning the waters with his well-trained eyes. After spending 30 minutes on the bow, my eyes finally adjusted, and I was able to make out the silhouettes of approaching bonefish and fine-tune my casting.

As the morning progressed, a change in the tides dropped the water so we donned boots and waded out into the

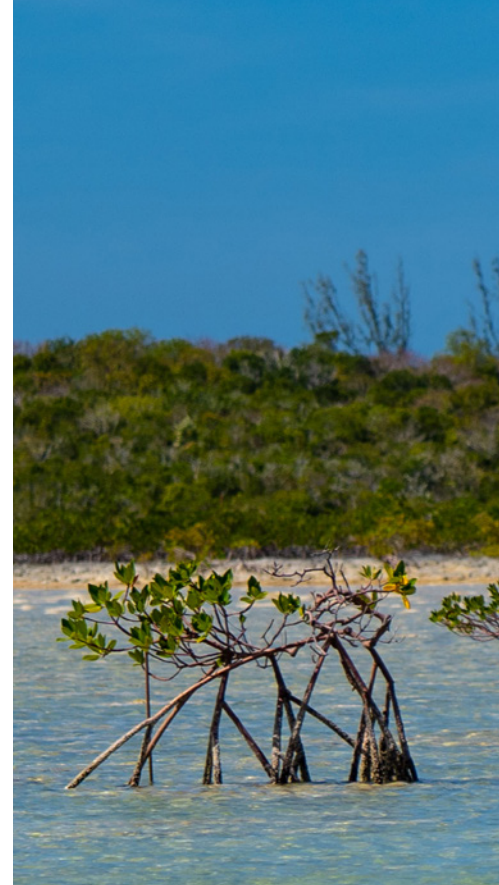
marsh. Roberts moved quickly across the backcountry flats, and his bare feet seemed immune to the coral and spiny sea urchins that dotted the landscape. Switching to a brown mantis-shrimp pattern, we quickly found a hungry bonefish that turned on my fly.

Responding to Roberts' calls of "strip, strip, strip," I felt a strong tug on my line as the bonefish struck my



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fly—hard. Somehow, I miraculously remembered to keep the rod tip down and strip-set. With the hook secured, the fish made a run that was soon into my backing. Under Roberts' direction, I landed a beautiful Bahamian bonefish, the perfect ending to a fine day on the water.

With fly rods stowed and cold Kaliks in hand, Pike and I sat back and relaxed as Roberts headed the skiff to Man Island so we could rendezvous with our friends and spouses. A small, uninhabited island located to the north of Harbour Island, Man Island offers pristine beaches and a beautiful setting for an afternoon barbecue.

We approached Man Island and saw our friends spread out in beach chairs, lounging by the water and enjoying themselves. Pike and I bid farewell to Bonefish Patrick and disembarked from his skiff to join our group on the beach, equipped with a few good stories of our bonefish



adventures and ready to create some memories of the non-fishing kind.

Eric Kallen is an avid sportsman and outdoorsman who enjoys his time on the water as much as he enjoys his time in the field with his Llewellyn Setter, Doc. Eric is an editor at The Virginia Sportsman Magazine, and his

writing and photography have also appeared in Strung Sporting Journal, The Pointing Dog Journal, The Mobile Press-Register and Medium Format Magazine. Eric lives in Charlottesville, Virginia with his wife, and they occasionally serve as hosts to their three adult children. 🍷