

The Bigger They Are the Harder They Fool

||| *Fishing the monster bonefish
of the Cook Islands.*
by Richard Chiappone

My three Alaskan fishing partners and I had spent a long winter scouring the internet for fishing reports about the mysterious Aitutaki lagoon posted by Kiwi and Aussie anglers. I say mysterious because it seemed that very few Americans ever fished there. So, on a cold dark Saturday, the last week in March, I flew a hundred miles from my hometown of Homer, Alaska to Anchorage to meet up with my friends Will, Debra, and Bob, at the airport there, where we would begin the long journey to the Cook Islands.

Thirty hours, three jet airplanes, two prop planes, and 7,000 more miles later, I landed on Aitutaki, a little-known and scarcely-fished atoll in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, where, it was rumored that ten, twelve, even fifteen-pound bonefish lurk.



Aitutaki is one of the 15 Cook Islands, which are just northeast of New Zealand and sprawl across nearly 900,000 square miles of the South Pacific. Despite having just 1,700 citizens, Aitutaki atoll is the second-most populous of the Cook Islands, behind only the capitol, Rarotonga. The Cook Islands are a representative democracy, closely associated with and protected by New Zealand. The very few other anglers we met there were almost all Kiwis. The people of the islands speak a Cook Island–New Zealand M ori dialect and Kiwi-inflected English.

Arriving on Sunday, we found the island largely shut down—most of the local New Zealand M ori people are members of the Cook Island Christian Church

and take the Sabbath seriously—and in the quietude, we fussed with tackle, ate a beach-shack dinner of whole fried parrotfish and Ika Mata (yellowfin tuna ceviche with coconut milk). Exhausted, we had nightcaps on our bungalow porches that overlook the huge lagoon contained within the continuous surrounding reef. Schools of mullet pushed nervous water across the flats under the red tropical sun. At times, the otherwise calm surface exploded as marauding gangs of golden or bluefin trevally smashed into the prodigious schools of bait cruising the shallows. Overhead, brown noddies pitched and wheeled across the evening sky. We collapsed into our beds with the sound of the reef surf rumbling in our ears, giant

bonefish gliding through our dreams.

Monday dawned clear and hot. Over breakfast on the bungalow porch, we watched a stately Pacific reef heron wading on stick-figure legs, stalking its prey along the shoreline. Delicate white fairy terns sailed past, baitfish wriggling in their beaks, on their way inland to nests in the jungle palms.

We weren't scheduled to start fishing with our guide, Itu Davey until Tuesday. So we acquired fishing licenses and rented motor scooters, which allowed us to explore the wadable flats along the atoll's entire 29 miles of road. We were confident that during our two week stay we'd catch huge bonefish under the expert tutelage of Itu, the premier fly-fishing guide in the Cook Islands, but we also envisioned stalking and landing one of those monsters entirely on our own.

Being Alaskans, though, none of us are expert flats fishermen. For us, it's a hell of a long way to the nearest tropical water, and we rarely get to it more than once a year. Still, we'd all caught bonefish before—from Abaco to Xcalac and many places in between. How hard could these unfished-for South Pacific bones be?

We rode our scooters along the narrow, paved road that encircles the island, through the small city center and commercial dock area, and out into the Aitutaki countryside. Small, incredibly



tidy homes sat amidst flowering hibiscus, avocado, and papaya trees. Chickens, goats, and pigs wandered the roadsides at will. Cats came and went everywhere—no dogs are allowed on the island. And everywhere we went, the ultra-friendly Aitutaki people waved and smiled. I've never felt more welcome, more quickly, anywhere on earth.

On the northern end of the island, we drove past grassy fields where dozens of golden plovers fed, and arrived at the shore of a gorgeous sandy flat. Aussie and Kiwi honeymooners lolled about in foot-deep water or swam in the channels, but there wasn't a single fisherman in sight.

We parked our scooters in a shady grove of frangipani trees, and set up our fly rods. Moments later I saw my first Aitutaki bonefish. I was standing in knee-deep water at the edge of a grassy trench, far from the honeymooners, when an enormous fish materialized on a patch of white sand as if it had been beamed there by a bonefish mothership hovering above the island. The thing looked to be as long as my leg—and as

thick. I thought it was a small shark or a big barracuda. It vanished before I got my wits together and attempted a cast. That's not the way to catch big bonefish.

It soon became clear that by the time our winter-weary Alaskan eyes identified the ghostly bones, they were already spooked and not at all interested in our ersatz shrimps. Over the next 10 days we would also learn that one of the big differences between Aitutaki and most other bonefish destinations is the lack of small, easy to catch schoolie bones common to Ascension Bay and Christmas Island and other popular places. On Aitutaki, a six-pounder is considered a little disappointing, and any bonefish bigger than that tends to be very wary and very difficult to seduce.

The next morning, our first day of fishing with the guide, the wind had picked up and pushed heavy seas over the reef and into the lagoon, clouding the shallow flats. But our guide, Rua Davey, Itu's brother, had grown up there and knew where to find clear water in the lee of one

of the smaller islands within the reef. This one is uninhabited, and covered with impenetrable green jungle, the vine-strangled trees reflecting upside down in the calm lagoon. I counted 11 reef herons, in both black and white phases, lining one rocky beach where a fat feral hog rooted through the underbrush.

As Rua poled, we began seeing fish in singles and pairs and groups of four or five at the most. But because they were cruising, not actively feeding, the sometimes very large bones mostly swam right past our flies, giving them brief, cursory glances. Obviously, they didn't grow that big by taking foolish chances. By noon, we hadn't boated a fish. I was beginning to wish for a school of babies.

That afternoon the wind really kicked up and sight-fishing became impossible. To pass the time, Rua showed us how some of his less fussy clients (typically honeymooners from New Zealand or Australia) caught what was often the very first bonefish of their lives. Using full sinking lines, 20-pound tippet, and size 2 flies with heavy lead or brass



write to fit. write to fit.

barbell eyes, we drifted the milks, which are called muds in most other bonefish spots. On Aitutaki, the clouds of turbulence caused by hordes of bonefish, goatfish, rays, and other bottom feeders takes on the hue of skim-milk because the lagoon bottom is pure white sand composed of billions of coral or shell fragments.

Drifting blind like that is not exactly a fly fisher's dream and not how we wanted to fish. But it did explain the Internet reports of novice anglers catching double digit bonefish. Even the wiliest old monster, feeding in the melee of predators and prey in the murky depths, might make a mistake. Later in the week, a friendly Kiwi who fishes Aitutaki a couple times each year (it's only a four-hour flight from Auckland) showed us the spinning lure he uses to drift the milks for ten-pound-plus bones.

We'd traveled a long way and wanted to fish. So with no other options at the moment, we let the ocean wind blow us across the milky lagoon and enjoyed the gorgeous Aitutaki scenery, dragging up a

couple hard-fighting bones in the five- or six-pound range and a nice golden trevally. I also broke off one monster bonefish I wish I'd gotten a chance to see up close—regardless of fishing tackle. But that kind of fishing bores fly anglers very quickly.

Sticking to sight-fishing the flats for the rest of our stay cut the chances of catching the truly big bones, but I did manage a matching pair of fish that each measured 28 inches from the nose to the fork of the tail and had 16 inch girths. Using the International Game Fish Association equation, they weighed in at well over eight pounds each. Although we occasionally saw fish much larger, they proved impossible to fool, and even the wary six- and eight-pounders required constant adjustments to our terminal tackle.

Late one day, after numerous refusals of a size 2 Aitutaki style Gotcha (a typical Gotcha with four rubber legs added for extra wiggle) that had been catching fish, I picked out the smallest fly in my box: a size 6, sparsely tied mantis shrimp pattern. I also switched from 20-pound to 14-pound tippet and quickly connected

with two fish.

That night, my friend Bob and I tied a half dozen small flies by the light of our headlamps and slept soundly knowing that we'd figured things out. Of course, the next day the bones refused our newly minted secret weapons, and I didn't hook up until later in the day after I switched to a big, shaggy Avalon permit fly, which they suddenly seemed to crave.

For a change of pace, Bob and I took two days off from flats fishing and went outside the reef and into the open ocean. We trolled for larger and more-willing game with Itu in his comfortable 30-foot aluminum boat. The first day out, we put a 225-pound black marlin onboard, and landed a double hook-up of 30-pound mahi-mahis. That evening we feasted on mahi ceviche, and marlin was on the menu of every restaurant on the island.

The second day out blue water fishing, Itu spotted birds feeding on bait on the horizon so far away they looked to

me like swarming flies. He fired up the two big Yamaha outboards and raced to the scene, and we discovered hundreds of red-footed and brown boobies diving into a maelstrom of baitfish and rampaging yellowfin tuna. Trolling along the edges of the frenzy for the next couple hours, we landed eleven tuna and hooked and lost many others. We and the tuna were not the only predators who had homed in on the bait ball. Several of the boated yellowfins had circular puncture wounds from marlin or other billfish, and one came in with a near perfect half-moon scar indicating it had somehow wriggled out of the jaws of a very big shark. That night we stuffed ourselves on yellowfin sashimi with soy sauce and wasabi, washed down with New Zealand Steinlager. It was a day to remember in a trip to remember.

While Bob and I were out I fishing the briny deep, our friend Will Rice ambushed a 30-pound giant trevally in knee-deep water on the flats. GTs are another prize fish the Aitutaki offers fly fishing an-

glers, and all in all, it's a magical place that has been called "the most beautiful island in the world" by the founder of the Lonely Planet travel guide. The people are friendly, the guides are great, and the fishing is as challenging and satisfying as anywhere I've ever been or heard of. And in spite of our mediocre skills, it gave us all some of the biggest bonefish we've ever caught.

I can only imagine what an experienced flats fisherman could do there. ■

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If You Go

GUIDES: We booked Itu Davey of Bonefish E2's Way, the best known guide in the Cook Islands, through Yellow Dog Flyfishing Adventures (yellowdogflyfishing.com). Itu and his two brothers proved to be supremely skilled, and incredibly patient and friendly at all times. They are



very experienced in both flats and blue-water fishing. It was a pure pleasure fishing with them and listening to their stories about life on this remote South Pacific island. And the good people at Yellow Dog, as always, handle travel details expertly.

GEAR: Eight-weight rods are perfect for Aitutaki bones. Bring both floating and intermediate sinking-tip lines. Because the

bonefish are big and the flats are full of coral heads, heavy tippet (generally 20-pound-test) is suggested. We found Gotchas, Ververkis Mantis Shrimp, Toga Shrimps, as well as Avalon permit flies in a variety of sizes and weights to be most successful. For giant trevally, almost any large (size 5/0 or bigger) saltwater streamer will do. E.P. Brush flies are favorites for

their durability.

There is no tackle or fly shop on the island, but the guides will provide all tackle and favorite local fly patterns for visiting anglers.

LODGING: Aitutaki offers everything from budget traveler shacks to all-inclusive high-end resorts. Be aware that this is as tropical as it gets and that means very hot weather. If you are not able to cope with humid high temps, spend the money for a place with air conditioning. Look online for options, or talk to the folks at Yellow Dog.

MEALS: there are many fine fish-and-chip places and several sophisticated restaurants on the island. Be prepared to eat lots of fish. You'll never find it fresher anywhere. Menus are priced in New Zealand dollars, and the American exchange rate makes it very reasonable. Also, there are plenty of good New Zealand wines and beers available. Groceries are limited and expensive; we found that cooking our own meals saved very little money.

TIPS: Bring rain gear. When it rains in the South Pacific, it comes down in buckets. Luckily it only lasts a short time be-

fore the sun comes out. Sunblock is also essential, and so are sun gloves, Buffs, hats, and UV proof shirts and pants.

When you are not fishing: Rent motor scooters and explore the safe and impeccably clean roadways of the island. You will never meet friendlier, more generous, and likable people than the Cook Island Mori citizens of Aitutaki. Their greeting, Kia arana, means good wishes, and you will hear it everywhere you go on the island—and they mean it. If you get a chance, take in a local rugby or soccer or volleyball match. And, if possible, attend one of the memorable native dance performances held nightly at rotating venues across the island.

HISTORY: Aitutaki was the last place that Captain Bligh and the crew of the Bounty made landfall, just days before the infamous mutiny. I think that, after seeing this tropical paradise, his crew probably decided they would rather risk hanging than go back to Dreary Old England. Or maybe they were a bunch of fly-fishermen who couldn't stand to leave those big bonefish behind.