

# Trip of a Lifetime

Ascension Bay, Mexico/By Joe Rotter

Every young kid who ever handled a bat, in every baseball-loving country, has dreamed about the moment when the bases are loaded and the opportunity for heroism is at hand. A grand slam is every kid's dream. Your heart pounds, adrenaline takes control, and the butterflies well up in your stomach.

As we age, however, Little League bats can evolve into fly rods, and the angling equivalent of a grand slam lures fly fishers from all over the world to the shallow tropical waters of the Yucatán Peninsula in Mexico. Rather than clearing the bases, the would-be hero seeks to land a bonefish, a permit, and a tarpon in the same day. The pressure of the situation and the tension are every bit the baseball equivalent. If you are fortunate enough to capture a snook in addition, you've accomplished the so-called super grand slam, the holy grail for inshore saltwater anglers. I've had shots at all four of these species, plus barracuda and jack crevalle, more times than I can count, and I can attest to the monumental challenge of landing three or four species of premier game fish in a single day. But landing each of these fish during the course of a week is not only more achievable but also fodder for unforgettable angling adventures.

While many areas of the Yucatán region offer shots at all of the grand slam species, no venue is so revered by fly fishers as Ascension Bay. This protected region is also called Sian Ka'an, which translates to "origin of the sky." One trip there and you'll see whence the name derives: dynamic cloud formations, stars that appear within reach, postcard-pretty sunrises, daytime skies so blue they look painted.

Ascension Bay is located about four hours south of Cancún, and about half the drive is on what we jokingly call the "Punta Allen Expressway," where the narrow, rutted, pothole-riddled road courses down a peninsula that is barely 100 yards wide. The road reaches way down to the quiet fishing village of Punta Allen and the heart of Ascension Bay and its several fly-fishing lodges.

## Permit

Typically, the most challenging leg of the grand slam is the permit, *palometa* in Spanish. These fish are spooky, suspicious, and elusive, but not uncommon. Nearly every angler traveling to Ascension Bay will get to try their hand at making a few clean shots at hungry permit, often casting to fish that are tailing in shallow water. That same rush of buck fever that has saved many would-be trophies in the hunting world has also saved many a permit from an inconvenient struggle against a fly rod.

The surge of adrenaline starts when your expert guides spot a permit and excitedly begin conversing in Spanish. This is intentional—they usually know enough English to get by, but you are not part of the planning process at this point. The fishing trip just became akin to a military operation. After the initial chatter, a battle plan is laid out. Your heart will be pounding as the guides settle on an approach, hoping to stalk the fish on foot if the water is shallow enough. They will politely tell you to shut up and be quiet no fewer than 50 times if you insist on chattering. Or maybe that's just me. I ask a lot of questions.

In deeper water you'll cast from the boat. Likely you'll be so excited that your cast will wind up in a giant tangle of line and leader, you'll hook yourself in the back, or the line will get wrapped around your feet. You wouldn't be the first tarpon rookie to be overwhelmed by the weight of the moment.

Getting a shot at a permit is always exciting, but try to keep your wits about you. Permit don't play fair. Even the perfect cast with a delectable crab pattern is often ignored, sometimes seemingly with a healthy heap of spite from the fish. A previously relaxed fish speeds off the flats like a rocket if you make one wrong move. Once hooked, however, permit prove to be among the strongest of all fish species, with their entire body acting as one giant propeller. Don't be intimidated: because permit don't play by any rules, a veteran flats angler can completely fail while a rookie hooks up on his first-ever shot. It's comforting

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to know at least a little luck is involved. Permit are probably what make Ascension Bay so much more popular than other flats destinations: there are better places to fish exclusively for tarpon or bonefish, but there may not be a better place to fish for all three.

### Tarpon

The jumper of the grand slam group is the tarpon, or *sábalo* in Spanish. Ascension Bay attracts large migratory tarpon at various times of the year, but anglers generally target smaller, more numerous—and very exciting—baby tarpon that weigh 5 to 30 pounds. Often these fish are found in mangrove tangles and mangrove lagoons, and all those branches can make things interesting when it comes to casting and fish fighting. A 15-pound tarpon may not sound all that impressive, but when you are the angler trying to flip a Suspended Shrimp pattern under a branch, such tarpon become trophies.

Fishing for tarpon in the mangrove channels of Ascension Bay is an adventure to remember. At times I have seen the guides take pangas into mesmerizing networks of nearly impassible channels that left me lost. You'll feel a bit like Indiana Jones hacking through some of these mazes. Machetes and saws are often the tools of the trade when exploring new tarpon lagoons. These fish can be incredibly aggressive, taking flies fished on floating lines off the surface in shallow water. I've seen hooked tarpon skyrocket out of the water and land amid the mangrove



branches and even in the boat, creating chaos. At rare times a long cast is required, but generally it's a game of short, accurate casts into openings in the mangroves—a good place for an 8-foot, 9-weight rod. These tarpon are not typically boat-shy like permit, so short casts catch fish. In fact, I've even had them take my fly after stripping all the way into my leader. If you can keep your tarpon hooked up during all those wild jumps, you'll be one step closer to the grand slam.

### Bonefish

Bonefish are what make the trip for most anglers. These fish generally do play fair; don't believe everything you hear or read about how hard they are to catch. They can certainly humble you at times, but if you can routinely make a fairly accurate 40-foot cast, you'll enjoy ample success with bonefish in Ascension Bay. You make the shot and the fish typically cooperates. Good, fair play—not like permit.

Ascension Bay bonefish average smaller than their brethren on some of the famous flats of the Bahamas or Cuba, but they are numerous and they often tail in the shallowest lagoons and on the shallowest flats, making for great fun sight-casting. A solid Ascension Bay bonefish is 5 pounds and will run into your backing multiple times. Fish larger than this can be found, but 2- to 3-pound bones are the usual targets. They occur in large schools in the deeper shoals, but after a day of catching numerous "schoolies" you will probably opt for targeting large singles and doubles in the shallow water.

Few fly-rod targets get the heart racing like a hefty bonefish slithering through 6 inches of water with its dorsal fin and tail protruding above the surface. In windless conditions these fish will push large wakes across the lagoon, visible from hundreds of feet away. Hunting these torpedoes with a 7-weight rod tipped with a Bonefish Scampi is among fly fishing's greatest experiences.



### Snook

Why snook aren't part of the grand slam, I have no idea. Catching four species is probably just too difficult. Snook most often live under mangroves, but during certain tides you may find them migrating from one zone to another, and they are often very aggressive in the open shallows along a sandy shoreline. When they attack a hapless baitfish or shrimp pattern, it looks like an explosive toilet flush on the surface—a huge boil and water displaced everywhere. They jump almost like tarpon, shaking their heads vigorously to ward off the danger. Expect snook to pull hard, but they lack the raw speed of the other species. Keep your rod low and you'll find snook much easier to land than the hard-mouthed tarpon.

### Paradise Found

Most anglers will complete three out of four super grand slam species in a week of fishing at Ascension Bay. Often the permit is the toughest catch to accomplish. Again, they don't play fair (can you sense a grudge here?). Expect to get shots at all of these great species on your trip of a lifetime to this remarkable fishery. It's got everything an angler could possibly want: vibrant scenery, excellent fishing, superb lodges, expert local guides, wonderful people, and a colorful Mayan history that enriches the experience. Wildlife abounds, including crocodiles, flamingos, and occasionally a manatee. The surrounding jungles are alive with the chatter of tropical birds.

On your first trip to Ascension Bay, expect to make a few of the same mistakes I've made. You'll get buck fever when casting at permit, you'll tangle your line at exactly the wrong moment, you won't be able to see all the fish the guides spot for you, and you may drink a bit too much at night, but you'll be laughing and having a wonderful trip all the while. Bonefish won't be in short supply, and opportunities are just one pole stroke away, success only a cast away. A super grand slam can happen in four casts or it may take a week, but, either way, the warm tropical water in this angling paradise cleanses the soul. 🐟



**Where is Ascension Bay?** Coastal Yucatán Peninsula, south of Cancún, Mexico. The primary outpost is the quiet village of Punta Allen, about 100 miles south of Cancún.

**What rods should I bring?** 7- through 10-weights; keep rods rigged for several species. Your best chance at a grand slam is to be ready at a moment's notice.

**Are there Mayan ruins?** The famous ruins of Tulum are on the way to and from Cancún. It's logistically challenging to visit Tulum for any length of time during a fishing trip; many people extend their visit to Mexico by visiting Tulum before or after their week of fishing, which also allows time to visit nearby Cobá and other area archaeological sites.

**Do the guides speak English?** Some guides speak fluent English, others only a bit of English, but all of them communicate very effectively in the language of fly fishing; you'll have some great conversations learning about local culture and life. They have a great sense of humor and are a lot of fun.

**What's the fishing season?** The peak season is late winter through spring; some of our best fishing has been in February and March.

**What form of currency is used?** Mexican pesos are most common, but U.S. dollars are almost universally accepted in the area. Be sure to bring small bills. Most restaurants and stores won't have change for \$50 or \$100 bills.

**How do I get there?** Fly into Cancún in the afternoon and transfer all the way to the lodge or stay in Tulum that evening.

**What is the food like?** Amazing. The Mexican cuisine is outstanding. Fresh fish, lobster, and other fantastic dishes are standard at most lodges and the good restaurants along the route to the lodges. Beware of the smoked habanero sauce: there is such thing as too much of a good thing.

**What does a trip cost?** \$2,995 per week as of this writing (see [www.redsflyshop.com](http://www.redsflyshop.com) for latest details). Additional expenses include airfare, tips for the staff (\$300 to \$500 per week), alcoholic beverages, laundry service, or any additional activities you might like to add.

**How do I book my trip?** Contact Red's Fly Shop, (509) 933-2300, [www.redsflyshop.com](http://www.redsflyshop.com). In 2019, Red's Fly Shop hosts trips in February and March, prime time for Ascension Bay.