

BONEFISH UNPLUG

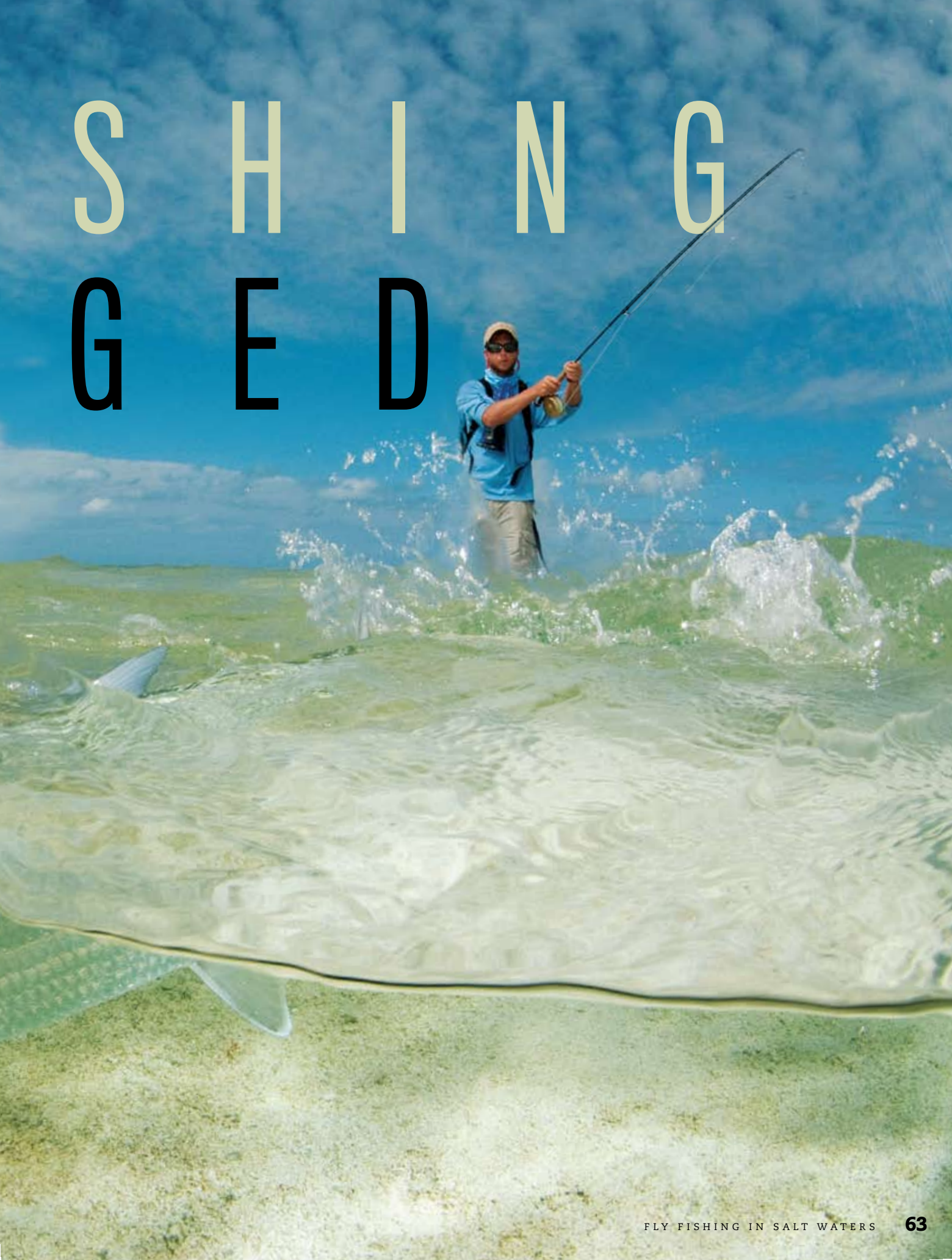
St. Brandon's Atoll is about as remote as remote can be, and the surrounding waters make a perfect playground for bonefish junkies

STORY AND PHOTOS BY **MARK B. HATTER**

We live in a hyperconnected world that demands instant access to everything. The pace of life is frenetic, and most of us are plugged in 24/7, thanks to a planet enveloped in a web of wireless access. We work hard all the time, so it makes sense that we deserve to play hard.



S H I N G G E D



My perfect world for play would contain a place where I could unplug. It'd be a black hole connectivity-wise, rendering most communication gadgets useless. It'd be utterly remote and have best in class fly-fishing and an outfitter with excellent cuisine. This would be a place where I could mentally spool down from the pressures of a competitive workplace.

Salty Sanctuary

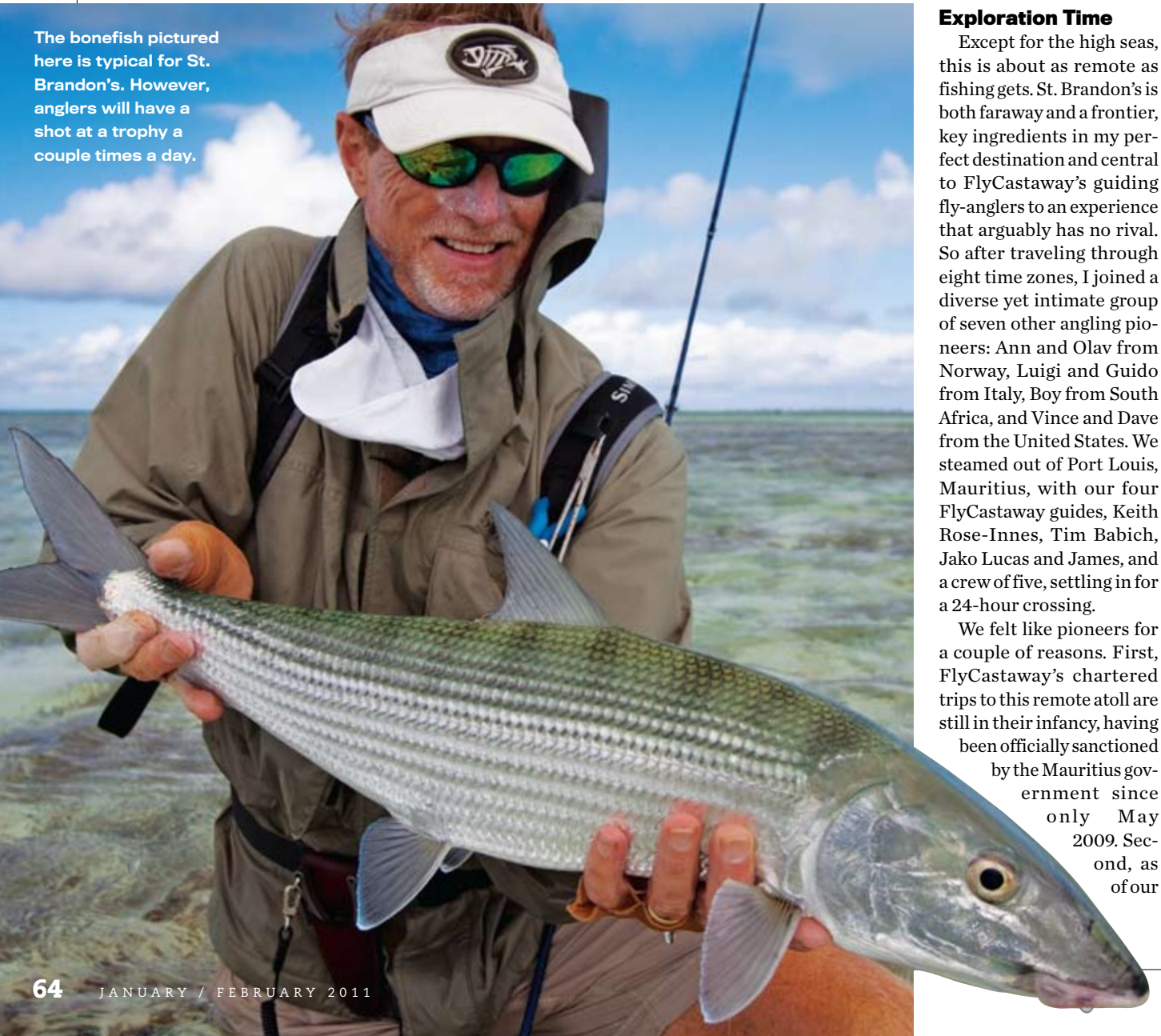
In October 2010, I found such a place: Cargados Carajos Shoals, or St. Brandon Rock, known in the fishing community as St. Brandon's Atoll. St. Brandon's is positioned 260 miles northeast of Mauritius in the south Indian Ocean, and not only is it a mere 24 hours from civilization by ship, but it's also "e-inaccessible," reachable solely by satellite phone.

The isolation of this locale was dramatized when Ryan Hammond of FlyCastaway, the exclusive outfitter for St. Brandon's, asked me a few questions about the insurance policy I'd looked at for my trip. "After closer inspection, your policy doesn't meet the minimal evacuation requirements should someone require such services while at St. Brandon's," Hammond said. "That's why we mandate Global Rescue; they're the only company with the

An angler prepares to exit the skiff and enter the flat to search for bones, trevally and permit.

means to reach us at the maximum 10-hour evacuation window." Should I or anyone else require emergency transport, the *Gryphon*, our mothership for the trip, would have to steam halfway back to Mauritius, reaching a point where a rescue helicopter could meet us – but only after refueling midair from a fixed-wing plane. Needless to say, I bought the required insurance.

The bonefish pictured here is typical for St. Brandon's. However, anglers will have a shot at a trophy a couple times a day.



Exploration Time

Except for the high seas, this is about as remote as fishing gets. St. Brandon's is both faraway and a frontier, key ingredients in my perfect destination and central to FlyCastaway's guiding fly-anglers to an experience that arguably has no rival. So after traveling through eight time zones, I joined a diverse yet intimate group of seven other angling pioneers: Ann and Olav from Norway, Luigi and Guido from Italy, Boy from South Africa, and Vince and Dave from the United States. We steamed out of Port Louis, Mauritius, with our four FlyCastaway guides, Keith Rose-Innes, Tim Babich, Jako Lucas and James, and a crew of five, settling in for a 24-hour crossing.

We felt like pioneers for a couple of reasons. First, FlyCastaway's chartered trips to this remote atoll are still in their infancy, having been officially sanctioned by the Mauritius government since only May 2009. Second, as of our

GERHARD LAUBSCHER / WWW.FLYCASTAWAY.COM (LEFT)

trip, fewer than 75 anglers had ever fly-fished St. Brandon's, with about half of that number being repeat customers.

Guided fly-fishing trips to St. Brandon's incubated for nearly a decade with the team from FlyCastaway before permission was granted. Time was necessary to wade through the licensing bureaucracy after initial exploratory trips, which indicated bonefishing was, as Rose-Innes says, "literally off the charts, better than in any location on the globe." FlyCastaway's greenlight to access was timely, though, occurring simultaneously with the closure of the Seychelles (a fly-fishery where FlyCastaway had a major presence) due to Somali pirating.

"We thought our mothership operations in the Seychelles were far enough from the Horn of Africa to completely avoid pirating," Rose-Innes told me. "We were wrong. While we're back in the Seychelles for atoll-based fishing, we consider the mothership operation still too risky, hence our efforts to establish St. Brandon's as a destination. Besides, St. Brandon's is 2,000 miles away from the Seychelles, and you will see for yourself that the bonefishing is better here."

Twenty four hours later, the *Gryphon* entered smooth water on the lee side of South Island, at the southern end of St. Brandon's. At South Island we picked up the four fast, shallow-running skiffs that would ferry us between dozens upon dozens of fishing spots over the next seven days.

We then made our way to the center of the C-shaped atoll, where *Gryphon* weighed anchor behind Avocare Island, our home base for the first few days of fishing. About midweek, the *Gryphon* moved to a lagoon behind Turtle Island, at the north end of the atoll, to afford us a broad perspective of the fishing sites.

Let the Fishing Begin

After settling behind Avocare, we eagerly loaded into the skiffs, two anglers to a guide, to witness St. Brandon's extraordinary bonefishing. Spring tides, wind and sun-obscuring clouds made for difficult conditions. Still, all four guides put their anglers on pods of agreeable bonefish. I was astonished when I landed my first fish, a guide-measured 28-inch, 8-pound bone. My experience was not unique: Almost every member of our group weighed in on fish that averaged larger than and were more numerous than any of us had ever experienced, in spite of the poor conditions. This surprising start was the low watermark of the trip; the weather improved, as did the fishing — dramatically.

Back on the *Gryphon*, while sipping single-malt Scotch whisky and dining on sumptuous mahi steaks, we compared notes with the exuberance of teenagers after a first date. Vince made an interesting but universally agreed with observation: "You know, all of the places I've fished, the guides have been overgenerous in estimating the size of the bones I've caught. I'd like to *think* I walked away from a lodge after a week's fishing with 8- or 9-pound fish, but in reality they were much smaller. The bones we caught today, 8-pounders plus or minus, would have been 10-pound fish elsewhere. And these

are average fish here!"

The next morning brought settled weather and perfect tides. As we fueled up on a hearty breakfast, the guides pored over a stitched-together satellite image of the atoll. Labels with pointers identified several dozen hot spots. Preferences were identified and selections were made to ensure that no guide encroached on another's territory during the day.

YOU WILL HAVE TO ACCEPT that I've never seen more and bigger bonefish at any other destination. And this was not only my observation but that of all the anglers on the trip.

Lay of the Land

For the most part, St. Brandon's bottom topography is variable. Ankle-deep water becomes thigh-deep over a tide, but some other piece of real estate then becomes ankle-deep with feeding bonefish. On average, we changed locations around three times throughout the day to stay on fish. The guides were phenomenal and managed to put us in continuous contact with fish that *willingly* ate, regardless of the tide.

There's no soft bottom at St. Brandon's — it's all packed sand,



[GETTING THERE, DOING THAT]

FlyCastaway is the exclusive outfitter for St. Brandon's Atoll. Working with the South African agency 360 Travel, they will book your fishing, hotels and, if you are traveling from South Africa, flights. However, it's important to note that due to the rules of the international aviation authority, FlyCastaway is unable to arrange international flights for guests. If you are an international customer, the best thing to do is book your flights using your local travel agent. If you are leaving from the United States, plan on three days travel time at both ends of the fishing (two in the air, plus one on a boat). There are no weight limitations for St. Brandon's since your only flights are commercial and the mothership has no restrictions. Emergency evacuation insurance through Global Rescue is mandatory; I bought a two-week policy for \$150. For booking information, visit www.flycastaway.com.





Indo-Pacific permit are in abundance on the flats of St. Brandon's and just like any other permit, they are just as tough to catch on fly.

coral rubble or hard sand with grass, which allows two anglers to fish independently within the limits of each flat, which in general are quite large. This provides freedom for paired anglers to separate, with one taking the guide, to fish their own territory.

More Than Bones About It

Though there is great appeal in wandering the flats on your own, there is a potential perverse downside to straying too far from your guide. If you're separated from your guide (who is totting your 12-weight) by any distance when a giant trevally suddenly makes an appearance, you are up a creek. More than once as we fished St. Brandon's, a few of us encountered GTs and were grossly undergunned. I can tell you from an encounter that I had that casting a light-tipped bonefish fly on a 9-weight to a GT is the same as showing up to a gunfight with a knife — you will lose.

The GT factor brings up a noteworthy point: While their presence is unpredictable to the degree that you shouldn't book St. Brandon's solely to target them, GTs *are* on St. Brandon's. Our group had the best GT fishing of all the trips booked to date. We typically had a shot or two each day, and in total four were landed over the course of the week. For perspective, only one

was landed during the previous charter.

GTs may be somewhat undependable when it comes to availability, but their size is certainly reliable. FlyCastaway guides have not seen fish under 3 feet (which translates to about 50 pounds). The four caught by our group ran 70 to 90 pounds, and Olav took top honors, landing a massive 50-inch fish on the last full day.

Another species commonly found in St. Brandon's is the Indo-

GUIDO REGISTERED A GRAND SLAM BY TAKING A PERMIT, bonefish and GT in a single day, and I was fortunate to achieve the simple slam by landing a permit, bonefish and bluefin trevally in the same time frame.

Pacific permit, and just like their Caribbean cousins, they can be decidedly reluctant to take a fly. Regardless, anglers do land at least a few during the course of a week. Rising tides put the fish in a tailing mood over both hard grass and coral rubble bottoms, and a good presentation with a lightly weighted cream-colored crab pattern will often entice a bite.

In the middle of our trip, the team achieved not one but two firsts: Guido registered a grand slam by taking a permit, bonefish and GT in a single day, and I was fortunate to achieve the simple slam by landing a permit, bonefish and bluefin tre-

vally in the same time frame. “Ironically, we normally see many more of the smaller bluefin trevally on the flats,” said Rose-Innes toward the end of the excursion. “This week we’ve seen only a few bluefins, but the GTs are showing in numbers we’ve not seen before.”

To be sure, while trevally of all varieties (GT, bluefin, golden, yellow spot, green spot) and permit are extra possibilities, along with lemon and blacktip sharks that will readily take a fly, the omnipresent bonefish are the main reason to consider a trip to St. Brandon’s Atoll. The sheer numbers of bonefish and the average size of the fish are difficult to convey. You will have to accept that I’ve never seen more and bigger bonefish at any other destination. And this was not only my observation but that of all the anglers on the trip. Honestly, it’s something you simply must experience for yourself.

Back to Bones

As we worked our way through a week of chamber of commerce weather, the disposition of our group matured — schooling bonefish were too easy. There were times all of us just stood still on the flat while as many as 500 fish milled right at our feet, seemingly oblivious to our presence. Getting past the average-size fish to target double-digit fish was nearly impossible because the smaller fish were so aggressive in a schooling environment. Consequently, we all elected to tar-



[TACKLE BAG]

FlyCastaway recommends bringing a 9- and a 12-weight rod (with spares). Floating fly lines are all that’s necessary. Make sure your reels are loaded with good, strong backing and that the drags are smooth. In the event you need something, FlyCastaway does offer excellent rental equipment, including G.Loomis GLX rods and Shilton reels. Extra fly lines and, of course, flies for all species can be bought anytime during the trip. I capitalized on the specific patterns required for permit and GTs while on board. In addition to the normal required items like spare sunglasses, waterproof sunscreen and backup rods, I strongly recommend wading boots with gaiters. I used wading shoes with neoprene socks and was constantly emptying my shoes of shell fragments. Also, don’t forget a rain jacket. While we had only a sprinkle of rain the first day, I got chilled, even in the tropical climate. My raincoat made an excellent windbreaker that kept me warm when needed. Finally, you will be a long way from home, so be sure to pack sufficient medications, if needed.

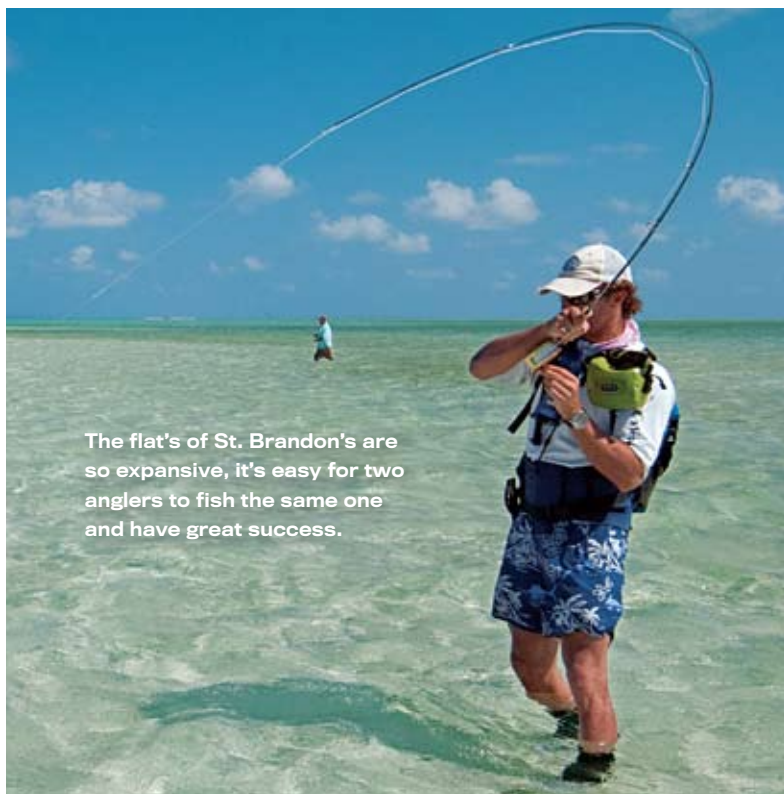
get singles, regardless of size, as they were more satisfying to take. We’d move to find permit on the favorable tides or hunt along known runways for a shot or two at GTs. Throughout, FlyCastaway guides accommodated our every desire.

Ultimately, the vagaries of moody permit and fleeting GTs drove us back to the comfort of the ever-present bonefish, if only to give us that much-needed scream of the drag before the end of the day. Had we fished exclusively for bones, our group could have easily scored close to a thousand fish.

On the last morning of the trip, we were offered an extra session of an hour and a half before the *Gryphon* needed to set out to allow us to make departing flights the following afternoon. As guides and pairings were selected, so were target species. Vince and I chose permit with Babich and were not disappointed. The tide was perfect, and so were our shots, but the fish were decidedly (and typically) not interested. With permit fishing anywhere, getting *opportunities* to cast is all one can really hope for.

So while Vince and I went scoreless, Boy and Dave experienced a last-minute marathon session of bonefish with James. They landed 20 fish between the them in just one hour. Rose-Innes was right — St. Brandon’s has *the best* bonefishing on the planet.

Back on the *Gryphon*, as rods were disassembled, the reels soaked in fresh water and the gear hung to dry one last time, Vince summed up the week rather eloquently: “I sure wish I could find a way to make work go as fast as vacation time.” I couldn’t have agreed more. Although the week was decidedly fleeting, the “e-absent” environment, peerless bonefishing and excellent *Gryphon* accommodations had left me relaxed and ready to replug into the reality of a connected world.



The flat’s of St. Brandon’s are so expansive, it’s easy for two anglers to fish the same one and have great success.



www.flyfishinsalt.com/st.brandons



Tag this gallery or check it out on the iPad version of **FFSW!**