

KAMALAME

(2004)

Each year, my law partner, Kevin, and I try to get away and spend a day or two together just as friends, to expand our shared experiences beyond the borders of work. Kevin and I live dissimilar lives but have forged a good working relationship. Kevin stands a lean six-three and has a head of thick, dark hair; the voice of a man who subscribes to *Southern Living*; two children; a wife who reveres Tennessee football; a large tract of land in the suburbs; a stable of horses; a tractor; a monstrous Lincoln SUV outfitted with DVD players and seats the size of couches; work boots; riding boots; dress boots; belts studded with worked silver; and the capacity and desire to strike up a conversation with anyone, anywhere, especially if the conversation may lead to sharing a story over a glass or two of whiskey.

One of Kevin's finer qualities is that he will call a son of a bitch a son of a bitch, regardless of the circumstances or likely effect. I respect him generally, but for this I admire him most of all, despite the discomfort his countenance has at times occasioned on me. What Kevin and I do share transcends lifestyles: we both carry a deep-rooted streak of anger, buried in our respective childhoods—now somewhat tempered by age—that provides the source of our independence, detachment, and drive to succeed. We do our best to channel our anger into a form of motivation, and our law practice has provided an outlet for both of us.

Our regular diversion is fishing. And our quarry is a medium-sized fish known as a bonefish, or *macabe* in Spanish, which lives in tropical waters and is best caught with fly-fishing gear.

In planning our escapes, we have tried to go somewhere fairly well out of the way so phones, faxes, and other disruptions are not an issue. A change in time zone and step down in technology usually help handicap our chance for distraction and, hopefully, peace. We have in the past years been traveling to a fishing lodge known as Cuzan in the remote area along the Yucatan Peninsula, in Mexico near the border of Belize, where anglers can fish in international waters. Cuzan itself consists of three *palapas*, or elevated, thatch-roofed huts, strung along the beach, and an open-air dining area in a fourth palapa set back from the beach that serves as the lodge manager's residence. The lodge is part of a village located at the epicenter of a federally created biosphere. Approximately four hours by jeep from any paved surface, there is little evidence of civilization beyond the narrow border of sand dividing the beach and

the jungle. The jungle serves as a breeding ground for mosquitoes; take a step into the dense greenery and you become a living oasis for the little demons.

While the fishing is good, the accommodations should best be promoted as primitive. The palapas have crude plumbing, and “central air” means propping open the front door and back window in hopes that a cool breeze from the ocean may penetrate the mosquito netting. The ferocity of the sun determines both the availability of hot water, warmed in a gravity-fed black water-tank, and the efficacy of the solar cells that power the fluorescent light strip inside the palapa. On the up side, you cannot stay any closer to a beach.

The surrounding village centers around a small wood pier that serves as a gathering point for the local lobster fishermen. Lobster fishing is the main source of revenue in the village, and most men are engaged in the lobster trade, directly or indirectly. The value of a lobster in the village, however, is cheap—less than that of a hamburger—so each night the lodge manager/cook apologizes again for the repetition of lobster on the evening menu. We don’t complain.

Combine four or five days of unabated heat, a limited diet, mosquito-induced anemia, and questionable sanitation, and a day at the office or the sight of an architecturally depressing strip mall may seem like a reasonable barter for civilization.

When our stay draws to a close at Cuzan, we load up our jeep, tally the marks on the blackboard representing the quantity of beer consumed, settle up, and bid our farewells. Remoteness and scenery get high marks, but food and lodging need improvement. As for the fishing, language has been a bit of a barrier, as our guides tend to know little English and our skills have reached a plateau without some professional instruction. We have also run into other issues in traveling to and from Cuzan. Two tall gringos driving through the jungle, half a day from the nearest pavement with long canvas cases hanging out of the back of a jeep, tend to draw some attention from the local military. Picture trying to translate rapid commands from a battle-faced, militario a foot shorter than you using stabbing gestures with a well-oiled machine gun to punctuate his sentences —did he mean for us to unpack the bag for his lieutenants to inspect or for us to stand still so they would unpack them? But that’s another story.

This year we decided to try a new place where English was offered as a standard amenity. We concentrated on locating a lodge in or near Andros Island in the Bahamas for our weekend away. (Andros Island—apart from being a known spot for bonefishing—claims to be the largest area of unexplored land in the Northern Hemisphere, but I don't know how to verify this fact.) Through our local fly-fishing store, we found a resort on a private island, Kamalame Cay, just off Andros Island, accessible only by boat, which promised well-appointed, beachfront villas and world-class fishing. Reservations were made, dates X-ed off on the calendar, and a month or two of day-dreaming assured. Time passed, and we hit the first X on the calendar.

Everything started well, unless you count missing the plane. We missed our flight to Florida by about five minutes. That led to our missing our connection to Andros Island. To our dismay, we learned the plane goes to the island only twice a week. Knowing we had only a few days, and we were missing some prime fishing time, we located, by phone, a plane to charter from Fort Lauderdale to the island. The important detail was that we secured our alternative arrangements by phone. We directed our effort toward finding alternative transportation to the island so we would only miss half a day of our vacation, rather than concentrating on what we were flying in. Maybe that the cost was only few hundred dollars should have been a sign.

When we hit the ground in Florida, we located a cab to take us to the address we had been given by the charter service, where we found a nondescript two-story building along the edge of a field off the main runway for the Fort Lauderdale airport. The tilt slab building appeared to be occupied by two tenants—the Columbian Air Force and a charter service. (Columbian Air Force?) We entered and found a reasonably well-appointed office, with framed posters of small planes on the wall and a clean waiting area. The staff exuded competence and efficiency; however, they did not have a record of our call. After a few minutes of whispering and raised eyebrows, they pointed us toward a metal staircase off to the side of the waiting area that looked like a passage to an upstairs supply room.

At the top of the stairs, we followed some signs past the bathrooms and storerooms to a little room in the back. We found *our* charter service. A couple of surplus metal desks, scattered plastic chairs, a moaning refrigerator, and ashtrays filled with mounds of cigarette butts provided the only evidence of an active business. The office offered little comfort as to the quality of the operation.

There we met our pilot—think Ernest Hemingway trimmed by a triple bypass—and presumably his business partner and drinking buddy, who probably is known to all but his mother as “Pancho.” Ernest stubbed his cigarette, put on his glasses—secured to him with a tie-dye lanyard that was a nod to the handiwork of either a Buffet or Dead groupie—and confirmed we had found our charter and that he was the pilot.

The luggage check consisted of Ernest asking us which bags were going with us on the plane. Processing his question at the time (which bags, huh?), I overlooked asking some basic questions you might ask of someone flying you solo over a large body of water, such as what kind of equipment we were flying in, number of hours he had been flying, previous training, current sobriety, and general health. But because sunlight and weather were key issues, we immediately exited the office down the back fire escape and walked across a parking lot toward something that looked just slightly newer than a biplane and not much bigger. At first I thought it was a joke and was playing along, not wanting to be the first to protest, until Ernest started loading our luggage into the various storage compartments of what looked like a converted crop duster, circa 1950.

Rusty labels inside the plane indicated that it had originally been manufactured by Piper, which presciently designated this model the “Geronimo.” My guess is that that’s the last word heard—or yelled—as someone exits the plane when things don’t go according to the flight plan. I think I heard the word “contact” just as the motor fired up.

As we rambled down the runway in the Geronimo, the pilot held one door open and instructed Kevin to hold the other door open, whether for air circulation, monitoring the engine, or for a quick exit I don’t know. I was instructed to hold the luggage fast. (I should note here that Kevin is a former military pilot, so in matters of air travel, I study his reactions as a barometer of whether I should feel some concern. I felt concern.) As the plane picked up speed and started to achieve lift, we pulled in the doors and secured them with leather straps. The one nod to modern aviation was the off-the-shelf-from-your-local-hiking-store GPS unit lashed to the control yoke with rubber bands. As we swung out over the ocean, I checked to see if the batteries in my camera would fit into the GPS unit in case the AA’s in the GPS went south—mostly to stay distracted.

We were aloft. And the view of blue ocean interrupted only by an occasional island was almost enough to help take your mind off issues such as the airworthiness of corrugated sheet metal, rusted rivets, and the exposure of the engine to planned maintenance. The flight lasted about an hour. Then, as we passed from one end of the island to the other, we descended toward the earth, and the runway came into view—a blackened strip carved out of the jungle.

Along its borders were the remains of three wrecked planes—planes like ours, only younger looking. What caused the crashes was not immediately apparent, nor did I want to inquire as to whether Ernest had any personal knowledge on the subject at that very moment. He did later report, however, that it was not uncommon for the DEA to force landings of drug runners in the area. Whatever the cause, the island's residents evidently just push any wreckage off the blacktop, where it is later claimed by the jungle.

Customs consisted of a repeat of our preflight baggage check. After we agreed that the bags from the plane were ours, the lady asked whom we were there to see; she meant on the island. We identified the lodge where we were staying, and she called them on a two-way radio. They dispatched a van to come get us. About half an hour later, we were dropped on a pier, and a boat picked us up to take us to the island. There were, of course, no cars on the island, but we were assigned a golf cart, shown the main house where meals were served and a good drink could be secured, and given some vague directions about finding our villa along the path at the other end of the island. They did not mention that the use of the path was subject to the tide tables, something discovered the next day when we found water instead of path, but they did maintain good plumbing, a well-stocked bar, and a stereo that continually played reggae records—all pluses.

One other detail we learned: “Kamalame” means, in some language, “curly tailed lizard.” Friendly little guys about six inches long, with little fear of humans. Given the trade, take lizards over mosquitoes. Over time, a lizard will take crumbs of bread from your hand, whereas a mosquito will try to eat your hand.

Bonefishing is a fairly solitary adventure. You eat breakfast, rendezvous with your guide, load your equipment into the boat—often called a *panga*—and set out toward your fishing destination before dawn.

A panga can hold only two anglers, the guide, a cooler for food and drinks, a five-gallon fuel cell, and a small amount of tackle. There is one storage compartment, maybe two feet by two feet, where you store your tackle, and it is in the bow. Fly rods, which average about ten feet in length, are carried assembled and placed in PVC tubes along the interior edge of the hull. The hull is almost flat on the bottom so that the boat does not run aground in low areas, but in the ocean a flat bottom also means you pound over each wave.

The guide drives you out into the ocean for about an hour or so—dried ocean spray depositing a detritus of salt all over you—until he locates a long, shallow area known as “the flats.” The flats are typically bright, sandy areas the size of several football fields, ranging in depth from about two feet to four feet, depending on the tide. Many of the flats are bordered by mangrove trees that grow like living islands in tropical waters and sometimes provide shelter for small fish and nesting areas for pelicans or other seabirds.

Once you locate an area of flats, the guide typically cuts the motor and uses a wood pole to propel the panga across the flats until some pockets of fish are located. Then, one angler steps out onto the bow of the boat—an area about three feet by three feet—and begins casting a fly thirty to sixty feet out into the water, aiming to set the fly just in front of a bonefish in hopes of attracting it while not startling it, while the guide continues to pole the boat toward the school or individual fish.

Periodically, you set anchor and both anglers bail out of the boat and wade out toward the fish. Then, one or both slowly begin casting toward the fish. Bonefish, sometimes referred to as “gray ghosts,” are naturally scared and, thus, prone to spook. They typically travel in small numbers but sometimes in large schools. But if you spook one, you spook them all. They are the gazelles of the water. Any sound, from a plop on the water to a sloshing footstep against the tide, will send them away at a very high speed.

Bonefish typically range in size from around two pounds to twelve pounds. Catching one requires some combination of patience, luck, and skill. It requires a trained eye to spot them and a fairly efficient casting technique to place a fly near the fish in such a manner as to not incite fear. The target casting zone is usually the size of a Frisbee.

Equipment consists of a long rod, a reel able to stand the rigors of exposure to salt water, some flyline that floats, a few flies, and a tub of sunscreen. Some emphasis is placed on fly selection, but bonefish tend to find anything that has a little sparkle attractive—they subscribe to the “bite and spit it out if it does not taste good” school. The value of using a flyline is that you can pick up sixty feet of line and recast in one quick motion, rather than reel in all of the line and rely on a weighted lure—which causes a frightful splash—to get the fly in front of the fish.

The routine goes: (1) unspool about sixty feet of flyline into the water; (2) sight the fish and determine the direction it is swimming; (3) lift up the rod quickly to pick up the unspooled flyline off the water; (4) cast the line over your head, sometimes making a false cast until the line extends out far enough and in the right direction to lead the fish; (5) release the line by pointing the rod in the direction of the cast, allowing the line to shoot out and away; (6) let the line roll out onto the water; (7) wait one or two seconds for the fly to sink from the top of the water to the sand; (8) re-sight the fish to make sure it is still moving toward the area where the fly landed—if it has changed course or your cast was thrown off by the wind, repeat steps two through eight, otherwise; (9) begin stripping line toward you in eighteen-inch increments in a quick motion with the left hand while holding tension on the line with the right; (10) after about four or five strips, stop to see if the fish has followed the fly—if it has not, repeat steps two through ten, otherwise; (11) begin stripping again until the fish takes the fly and begins to run.

To try to minimize the presence of the angler, you must learn to cast a good distance with some accuracy. Practice helps, but nothing prepares you for the ferocity of wind, the shadows thrown by clouds that obstruct your vision, the tug of water rushing under your feet, and the feel of adrenaline pumping through you as you try to concentrate on delicately placing a wind-resistant, hook-embedded, nearly invisible fly just in front of a fast-moving target some sixty feet away. Add the threat of sharks, a natural predator of bonefish, continually swimming around your legs, jagged-tailed sea skates that you cannot see in the sand, and miles of sharp coral, and, as you might imagine, the best side effect of this activity is that you lose track of space, time, priorities, and, most importantly, work.

Spending your days in an office does not help with your fortitude for walking through water for hours at a time or spotting small, moving objects at a distance. By noon you are exhausted and glad the guide has suggested something about lunch. You trudge back to the boat, crack open the cooler, and wash down a sandwich with a beer—well, maybe a few beers and the occasional bottle of water—that never tasted so

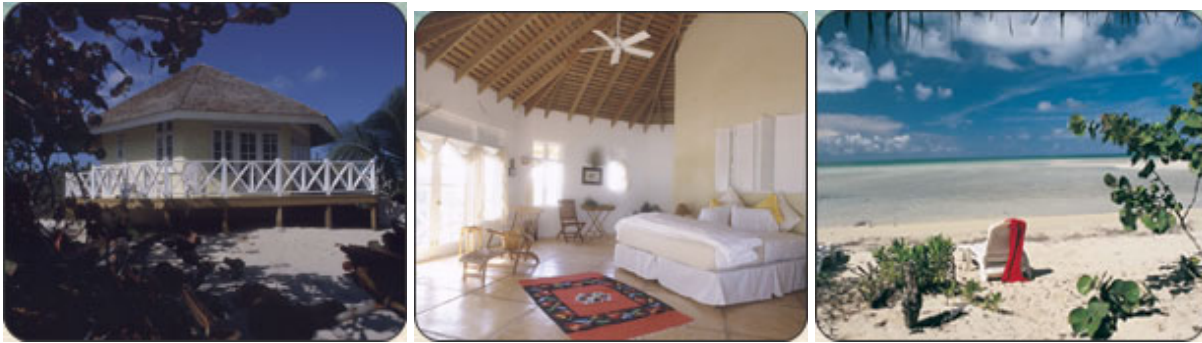
good. With any luck you have run into a few fish, which provides some basis for conversations along the lines of some modest boasting, or, if you have been less successful, strong winds, sun-stealing clouds, errant hooks, incompetent guides, and contemptuous fish. The food and drinks strengthen your belief that the second half of the day will provide even better fishing, and you go through the same routine again until late afternoon, when you pull the anchor for the last time and place your trust in the guide that he will know his way back across miles of unmarked ocean to the site of the launch. (They don't carry a GPS.) It is only then that you assess the fact that you are miles from other humans—you don't know where—in a boat that is only slight longer and wider than a standard canoe, and nothing you have witnessed suggests the ocean is a hospitable place.

No matter how far you have lived from an ocean, you become keenly in touch with weather, tides, and the obstacles of navigating the seas. But almost everyone makes it back—and you usually have a few good, mostly true, stories to tell of the ones you landed, the ones you hooked, the ones you almost hooked, and the scenes along the way. From days past, I vividly recall a dolphin almost jumping into our boat as we were cutting across a great swath of blue ocean about sunrise, freshwater sinkholes of limitless depth in the middle of the ocean, starfish the size of hubcaps in green lagoons that few will ever see, and witnessing firsthand the intelligence and prowess of sharks on the hunt.

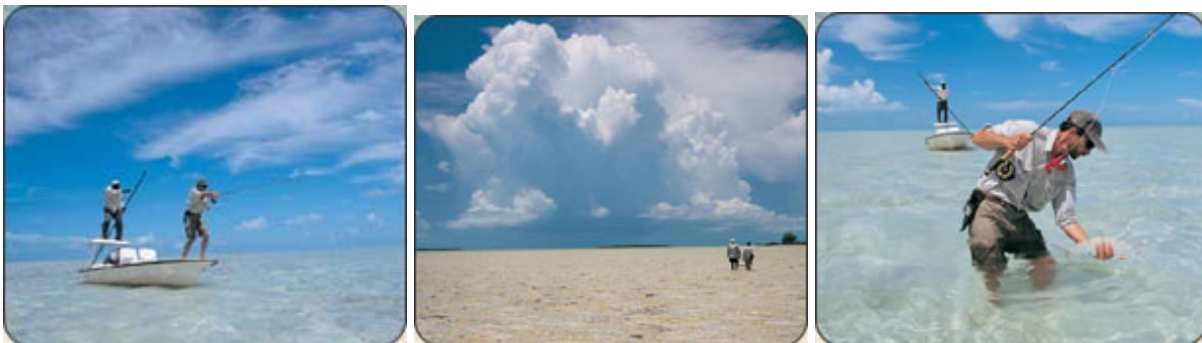
At Kamalame, the fishing was excellent, the food worthy of Michelin-star, and the other guests, mostly from overseas, a good inspiration for our evening dinners. Sadly, the one casualty of our trip was my digital camera. I recorded views from the plane, our accommodations, the people we met, and many of the wonders of the ocean. I kept a clear record of its whereabouts and know when and where it was last part of the luggage. Some TSA employee has some great stories to tell of a trip he or she never took.

Maybe it is a good excuse to go back.

Other pictures from Kamalame.



1. The villa on the beach
2. Interior
3. View from deck of villa



1. Poling along the flats, fishing from bow
2. Wading along the flats, stalking the fish; mangrove trees in background
3. A successful catch (note that fish is almost invisible against water)

May, 2004.