Tarpon Training Camp in Puerto Rico

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PHOTOS BY IVAN ORSIC



7:30 a.m. May 9. La Parguera.

THE MORNING'S FIFTEEN-MINUTE drive to the boat ramp rolls over hills studded with cacti, then past cattle ranches reminiscent of Montana, before dropping us beneath palm trees scattered along the coast. Our skiff hadn't been in the water five minutes before we spot some rollers.

While I've fished flats before, this is my first proper tarpon trip and I am a saltwater captain's nightmare: a Western Trout Guy; handy with a rod but holding a deep-seated trout-set and high-stick fighting technique, both sins in the salt. A stiff breeze is blowing across the Caribbean, and despite years throwing streamers into howling Wyoming winds on the North Platte, I'm feeling woefully unprepared. I pull my nine-iron from the gunnel and nervously step to the tee.

No Name's head guide, Melanie Gannon, quickly recognizes my edginess and instinctively repositions the skiff so I can double haul toward a patch of sargassum without burying a hook into anyone's skull or shoulder. My cast puts the fly close to where I want it. "Let it sit for a second to get beneath the weeds," Gannon says. "Remember, these are just the little guys," she adds, doing her best to sooth my nerves.



asset, according to Pourbaix, is the consistency of its tarpon. "You can go to Mexico and catch little tarpon until you're bored, or you can go to the Keys in May or June to chase big ones," he says. "These tarpon, *all* of them, are here every day of the year."

8 a.m. May 10. Boquerón.

We're with Pourbaix today and the vibe is a little different, partly because Matt is considerably more intense than "mellow" Mel, but also because we're heading to a big-fish zone. After a short run we enter a bay with calm, shallow water the color of turquoise. There's no wind, and visibility is good, which raises my confidence.

We were into them almost immediately, again, with Pourbaix spotting a fish before I'd even unhooked my fly from the guide. "Fish, eleven o'clock, up near the mangroves. Do you see it?"

I did not, which I made clear by my silence.

"Seriously?" Matt asks, incredulously. "He's *right* there, twelve o'clock now, cruising left to right. Sixty feet. He's right there!"

Finally, I spot it. The shadow dwarfs anything I'd ever cast to. Before my burgeoning nerves can take hold, I make a good shot with the eleven-weight.

Well, *I* think it's a good shot. The fly lands with only a tiny splash but the shallow water erupts as the tarpon torpedoes off the edge of the flat.

Pourbaix and Beckett's philosophy is simple: Build an operation that they and their friends would want to visit. "We're trying to build a place for both new and experienced anglers who may not really know where they fit in," says Pourbaix, adding that he wants to make a home for the angler who's in it for both the fishing and the cultural opportunities. "At some lodges, you might spend nine-thousand bucks and be stuck there the entire time, with the lodge controlling every minute of your experience. Here, we're sharing our lives with you—our favorite restaurants, bars, hangouts, everything. As soon as you show up, you're fully immersing yourself until you leave."

That's not to say that a visit to No Name is without structure. They provide professional guides, real skiffs, and an incredible knowledge of the location, yet still aim to capture some of the feel of an exploratory DIY trip. On most nights, you'll join the guides for dinner and drinks in town, just a handful of steps away. From there, the direction of the night is largely up to you. "We're not going to let you get into too much trouble," says Pourbaix, "but you might be out till two in the morning and wake up with a new tattoo."



THE NO NAME CREW DESCENDS UPON BOQUERÓN, A TOWN OF ABOUT 5,000 PEOPLE, SITTING ON THE EDGE OF BOQUERÓN BAY.

4 p.m. May 10th. Boquerón Beach.

As the day wears on, tarpon become fewer and farther between. Further complicating matters, a strong wind has picked up, turning the water. Sighting fish becomes next to impossible, and I feel I've squandered my chances.

Matt poles the skiff close to shore and begins creeping up the beach, approaching a small dock in front of a badly damaged beachfront home with foliage covering all but the sea-facing side. "You'll see this kind of thing all over the island," Matt says. "This isn't Florida. It takes a long time for anything to get fixed around here."

A moment later I spot a roller just beyond the dock and fire a quick cast. It inhales my fly the moment it hits the surface, then tailwalks across the water. I again fail to manage my line, which is now wrapped around the bow as the fish races away.

"Get in the water!" Matt yells. I jump in and promptly sink to my knees in mud, then frantically stumble toward the stern, my right hand holding the rod while the left reaches beneang t e rw a p 0 ▯ ▯s l▯cBTc▯ 0 0 ▯ ▯