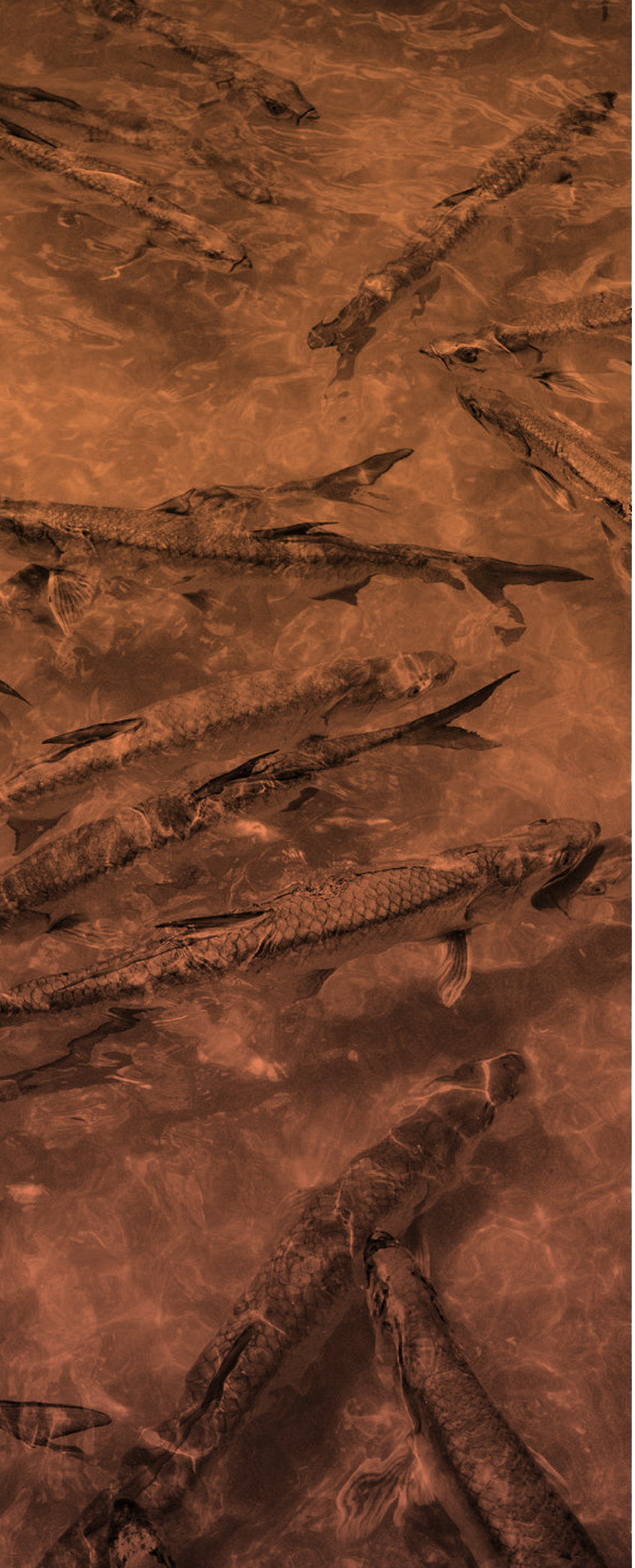


Puerto Rico offers high-flying tarpon action from February to October. These juvenile tarpon aren't migrating, they are actively feeding and offer the chance to hook four to six fish per day.

THE BEST TARPON FISHING IN THE U.S. MIGHT BE IN PUERTO RICO

BARRY BECK
PHOTOGRAPHY BY BARRY BECK, NO NAME LODG, AND DARCY BACHA





JUMP YOUR FIRST TARPON, AND YOU NEVER FORGET IT. That leaping slab of silver is an adrenaline rush. For most people, hooking your first tarpon is the first step to losing your first tarpon. It doesn't matter if it's a 25-pound baby or a massive 100-pounder, it can leave you shaking and immediately wanting another chance.

For an Eastern trout fisherman like me, learning to strip-set was unnatural, but I eventually got over it after much chastisement from several Florida guides. My late wife Cathy was a quick learner and brought the very first two tarpon she hooked to the boat. The first weighed 80 pounds and the second was estimated at 100. When the battle was over, Cathy sat down in the boat smiling, looked at me, and said, "Your turn."

Luckily for the tarpon, I never got another chance that day. I'm sure I would have hooked up. When we arrived back at the dock, a couple of other anglers asked Cathy: "How did you do?" She replied *we* (I appreciated the wording) landed two.

That was more than 30 years ago, and over those years we chased tarpon in Costa Rica, Belize, Mexico's Yucatan, the Bahamas, Cuba, and of course the Florida Keys and the Everglades with Ted Juracsik of Tibor Reels fame. Over time, Cathy and I agreed that while hooking a tarpon over 80 pounds was a thrill, actually fighting one eventually became more like forced labor. So, we began to focus on what saltwater fly fishermen call "baby" tarpon.

To some fly fishers, a baby is anything under 60 pounds. I prefer something in the range of 10 to 40 pounds. It still seems laughable to a trout fisherman like me to call any 20-pound fish a "baby," but these juveniles have amazing energy, love to jump, and fight like crazy. And they're just as much fun to fish for as their larger brothers and sisters. Once Cathy and I decided we preferred "small" tarpon, our 12-weight Sage rods stayed in their cases, and for two decades our tarpon gear most often consisted of 8- and 9-weight rods. Those are much more fun to cast!

U.S. TERRITORY

Last year my good friend Hank Ingram at Frontiers Travel suggested I consider hosting a tarpon trip to Puerto Rico. He began by telling me about a trip he and a friend had made a few months earlier to a place called No Name Lodge. They were jumping tarpon anywhere from 10 to 50 pounds— and a lot of them every day. These weren't sullen, migratory fish, but tarpon actually feeding on enormous schools of baitfish. And there were opportunities for world-class snook and permit as well. Hank said it was like Nirvana, and I've worked with him for enough years to know it takes something special to get him this excited.

The seed was planted, and we put together a trip in February 2026. A group of six friends and I geared up with 8-and 9-weight rods, and reels loaded with RIO Tropical Outbound Shorts and sink tips. We brought all the usual tarpon flies, including Tarpon Toads and a wide assortment of Lefty's Deceivers. Just in case we had an opportunity for permit, we carried a handful of Cathy's Fleeing Crab patterns from Umpqua. My late wife Cathy Beck's permit pattern is one of the all-time greats, and has caught permit for us throughout the Caribbean, from Los Roques to the Yucatan and the Bahamas.

Our nonstop Delta Airlines flight from Philadelphia to San Juan, Puerto Rico was simple and easy, and that's one of the best aspects of this trip. Unlike other locations in Mexico and the Caribbean, Puerto Rico is a



















U.S. territory, so this is a domestic flight. You do not go through passport control. And you don't have to deal with another country's border security—you don't even need a passport. The currency of course is U.S. dollars, and while the two official languages are Spanish and English, almost everyone I met spoke fluent English. Carrying on a conversation with locals or ordering in a restaurant was a breeze.

Boricua is the name the indigenous Taíno people gave the island, and today the term evokes pride in Puerto Rican culture and immersion in and exploration of the natural world. The U.S. acquired Puerto Rico in 1898, following the Spanish-American War. Puerto Rico has its own Constitution (adopted in 1952) and exercises authority over its internal affairs, including education, local law enforcement, taxation, and electing its governor and legislature. The U.S. federal government retains control over national defense, foreign relations, immigration, currency, and interstate commerce.

I love international trips and visiting foreign countries. But there is also a lot to love about a trip that is so close and easy. The flight was less than four hours, so for those of us on the East Coast, Puerto Rico is a shorter trip than going to Bozeman or Salt Lake City.

After we landed, it was a two-and-a-half-hour drive to No Name Lodge, in the village of Boquerón, a barrio of Cabo Rojo with a population of around 5,000. Boquerón is the most popular tourist town in southwestern Puerto Rico.

At No Name Lodge, we were greeted by two guides, who helped our group get settled in. After that was a quick orientation, where we learned we would have an early start the next morning. The lodge does not serve dinner, so we had the opportunity each night to visit a variety of restaurants. This gave us the advantage of mingling with the locals, as well as other American visitors. The food was always great.

THE FISHING

Our guides were exceptional, as were their skiffs, 17-foot Mavericks powered by 90-HP engines. Most rides to the flats were easy and short. Everything seems easy in Puerto Rico.

The usual plan was to find balls of bait, and that's most often where we would find the tarpon. When we couldn't find the bait, we poled the shorelines to look for fish. We occasionally did some blind casting, but for the most part this was sight fishing to cruising fish. We did fish one lagoon that was muddy and very shallow. It was difficult to see the fish, yet we jumped a few nice tarpon and landed a large snook.

Wherever we fished, we found really enthusiastic fish that ran from 20 to 40 pounds, and every one of them went airborne. There were some crazy moments in the boat with the guide yelling instructions about where to cast, and of course you're trying to stand up on a bow that is going up and down, the wind is blowing. Then finally you get your fly in the water, the guide begins shouting things like "Strip faster!" and when you set the hook it's an adrenaline rush no one gets enough of. And it often gets even more chaotic after you hook the fish.

And unlike Florida where you might have one hookup a day—on a good day—in Puerto Rico you have almost constant opportunities.

It was a learning experience for me, partly because I ended up using smaller flies than expected. Most were tied on 1/0 or smaller hooks. Regardless of the pattern, one thing was certain: It had to be black, or black and purple. I did manage to get a few takes on chartreuse and white flies, but on the days we fished, the darker colors almost always prevailed.

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GUIDE ADVICE

No matter where you go, tarpon are still tarpon. It was interesting to see how some fish responded to a fast retrieve, while others wanted it on the slow side. In every situation, the guides were quick to figure it out, and all you had to do was heed their advice. The tidal current, the wind, the boat's speed and direction, and the speed and mood of the tarpon are all factors in how fast you retrieve the line.

The guides at No Name Lodge are all professionals who have worked all over the world at places like Alaska, the Seychelles, Florida, Colorado, and Montana. They know exactly what they're doing. Co-founders Cooper Beckett and Matt Pourbaix are both from Florida, have done the South Florida circuit, worked together at Bonefish & Tarpon Trust as recently as 2020, and began their "market research" in Puerto Rico in 2021.

Our trip was in February and I'm scheduled to go back in February of 2027, but I asked Beckett what the rest of their season is like. He said the lodge opens Feb. 1 and runs to through to Thanksgiving.

"Our fishing reaches its apex in mid-June and then begins to plateau into fall," said Beckett. "Seagrass and heat are the two factors that accelerate the fishing. We usually see major seagrass pushes in June, which continues in waves through the season. Seagrass is essentially nitrous oxide for the fishery. These mats of sargassum hold massive quantitates of baby shrimp, crabs, and bait and create a tarpon feeding frenzy along the entire coast. It is what I consider biblical fishing. The brilliant part about Puerto Rico is that the fishing is still awesome without the seagrass, it is just becomes a tad more technical. Instead of slapping the fly in a ball of busting fish, we are stalking coasts, flats, and backcountry pockets for cruising and floating fish. Some anglers greatly prefer fishing without seagrass as you are selectively choosing your targets and still getting four to ten fish a day.

I also asked Beckett about the permit fishing, he said they fishing in completely different areas on pancake and backreef flats, and almost all the shots are to tailing, feeding fish. He said there's no shortage of tailing fish, and 10 to 20 shots per session is quite common but, "They are just as picky as any other permit to ever exist. There are no easy permit in Puerto Rico." Beckett says that their permit clientele mostly focuses on September and October so that's when most permit are caught. But he says the permit are there tailing all season, and since the tide fluctuation in Puerto Rico is only 8 inches, you can catch them at any phase of the tide.

Our tarpon fishing was so good that we didn't tear ourselves away from it. I didn't get to see the permit flats, but when I return with another group in 2027, that will be first on my list of things to do. Many photos of good permit adorn the walls of No Name Lodge, so this is a multi-species flats fishery for sure.

I have been fishing saltwater flats for more than 45 years, and while I had occasionally heard of the fishing in Puerto Rico, for whatever reason I never followed up on it. That was a mistake. It was refreshing to find somewhere new to explore that's so close to home. I'm certainly looking forward to my next trip to No Name. It's a comfortable lodge, and February is the perfect time for those of us in northerly latitudes who get tired of winter to get out of Dodge and go fishing someplace warm.

Our hostess, Sue Ramirez Cofresi was born and raised in Puerto Rico, and she went overboard taking care of our group. It was fantastic. The lodge was totally equipped with all the gear we needed, just in case our luggage didn't show up or if someone popped a rod. We didn't need it, but it was reassuring that everything we needed was right on site.

The cost is only $5,750 for six nights and five days of guided fishing. The evening meals are off site and not included, but the whole trip is quite affordable.

Most important—for someone who has undergone six hours of back surgery—our boat rides were always short, and never rough. The last thing I need on a fishing trip is an airborne boat crashing down on an incoming wave. Here there was no need for rough rides, and the experienced guides knew how to handle the boats. Another plus was that in the entire week I only saw one other independent guide on the water. There were no other fishermen cutting us off or running across our flat, no Jet Skis or party boats, just happily feeding tarpon. It was the perfect tarpon experience, and I will be back for more.

Barry Beck lives in Benton, Pennsylvania, where he conducts fly-fishing schools and offers guided angling on Fishing Creek. For more than 40 years he has traveled the world with his late wife, Cathy, with fly rods and cameras, documenting everything from African safaris to South American golden dorados and New Zealand brown trout. Visit *barryandcathybeck.com*. *Instagram: @barryandcathybeck*

Booking

Many major airlines offer direct, nonstop flights to San Juan, Puerto Rico, from Miami, Fort Lauderdale, Tampa, Jacksonville, Orlando, Charlotte, Philadelphia, Hartford, Washington, D.C., Baltimore, Newark, New York, Boston, Chicago, Houston, Dallas, Atlanta, Cleveland, Detroit, Minneapolis, Nashville, Raleigh-Durham, and St. Louis. No Name Lodge can also put together complete vacation packages for you that include golf, surfing, cycling, and other activities.

frontierstravel.com

Recommended Gear

Baby tarpon allow you to use rods that are fun to cast, but a 30- or 40-pound tarpon istill requires serious tackle. The lodge recommends Enrico Puglisi baitfish imitations with or without eyes in black, purple & black, red & white, chartreuse & tan, and tan & white. They should be on size #1/0 and #2/0 hooks.

- Sage Salt R8 9-weight, $1,150
- Redington Grande 7/8/9 reel, $370
- RIO Tropical Outbound Short 9-weight, $130
- Bajio Bales Beach Violet Mirror Lenses, $269
- Patagonia Capilene Cool Sun Hoody, $99

