

Backcountry Lagoons of the Yucatan



Photographs by Wade Duncan

Destination angling has long held a mysterious, romantic and adventurous appeal. I've always envied residents of Central American countries that remain, to this day, relatively secluded and unpopulated. I often wonder how one would ever get any real work done with miles upon miles of mangrove shorelines, creeks, channels, bays and lagoons beckoning.

I've been fortunate to have been commissioned by some Yucatan destination lodges for exploration, charting and reporting—by kayak—on the vast, inaccessible and overwhelming backcountry lagoons. These lagoons are primarily in the Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve in the southern Yucatan of Mexico. The Biosphere region begins only a few hours south of Cancun by car. The Sian Ka'an Biosphere, and the bays of Ascension and Espiritu Santo, are well known amongst traveling fly anglers for excellent opportunities presented by the usual suspects: bonefish, snook, tarpon, permit, barracuda, jacks, snapper and sharks. While most anglers tend to sample the resources by skiff or panga, a brave new world is really opened up by hitting the area with a kayak, a vehicle that puts you "up close and personal" with everything out there. Witnessing a 20-pound snook or a 40-pound baby tarpon inhaling your fly just a couple of feet off the nose of your kayak, in only inches of water, is the essence of reality fishing—a primal

experience that every angler needs to realize. The many lagoons in close proximity to the main bays with direct salt water access can support large populations of bonefish and permit.

Some of the more accessible lagoons have been fished before by a relatively small handful of intrepid anglers, yet many are so "skinny" and their access so restricted by the tangles of flora, acres of shallow mud flats, disorienting labyrinths and mazes of mangroves, that while they may be charted, they remain rarely explored and even less often fished. Even the locals are challenged finding access to, and getting in and out of, many of these hidden treasures. While there are certainly obstacles to overcome to access these remote waters, the process does not have to be arduous or fraught with misery and discomfort. The key to success here is in choosing the right gear and having a solid game plan.

The Gear

If you're going to the Yucatan, many of the well-known fishing and Eco lodges have kayaks available as an additional attraction for anglers and eco-touring guests. Almost any sit-on-top kayak is suitable

for fishing. They should not be overlooked, especially if they are lagoons and backcountry flats nearby. Kayaks are extremely portable, and most lodges will accommodate an angler wanting something different. For fly fisherman, this may not be the most comfortable or fluid method of casting, but these shortcomings can be dealt with, and are only slightly limiting at worst.

A kayak that allows you to stand up and visually scan the water looking for fish, the ability to pole into the most productive water with complete stability and to remain erect while fighting fish, will stack the cards for success in your favor.

My choice for backcountry exploration is the Freedom Hawk 14. This unique kayak is 14 feet in length, comes complete with a built-in push pole, a casting brace and anchor boom for setting up on fishy point and staying put. Its most remarkable feature is its split-tail—with the simple movement of a couple of levers, the stern opens out into a "Y" pattern, creating a perfect 3-point stance for stability. Think of it as the "tripod effect." The angler can scan water, stand and cast and fight fish with remarkable stability. The Freedom Hawk

is light enough to portage into or through those hard to reach waters, and the rear outriggers even detach from the main hull for easier transportation. There's plenty of room in front of the angler for a cooler, rods, cameras, and all other essential weapons.

Kayak angling is generally thought of as a minimalist endeavor. This may be accurate, however, in the backcountry an angler needs to be prepared for nearly any eventuality.

If it's going to be weird, it will be weird in the backcountry for sure. Fish that you would think have no business in a little mud hole may often be the fish of the entire trip. Under most conditions casting great distances is unnecessary. The kayaks themselves are stealth-mobiles and can afford intimate proximity to your target. Fly rods should be stout and fast. I often utilize the shorter varieties that have become available on the market, the G. Loomis Shorestalker (in 8- and 9-weight) being a prime example. This rod is 8' 8" long and suitably built for combat angling. It fits well in a kayak, and the shorter length allows one to work in tight to (or more appropriately, under) the mangroves. Stowing several rigged-and-ready rods will be a major benefit for any adven-

ture into the boonies. Depending on location, I keep 8-, 9- and 10-weight rods rigged for different species—snook, barracuda and tarpon, respectively. These three players alone will keep the adrenaline and pucker factor in high gear throughout your day. Consider carrying a spinning rod also. This concept is new to me, but the cross-over ability adds a versatile and effective dimension to "reaching out and touching someone." Many small lagoons, flats, mangrove walls and bends in the channels, creeks and shorelines can be covered very quickly and precisely with a spinning rod, making you multi-faceted assassin. Spinning rods can save countless hours of covering vacant water, and if you do move a fish, feel free to unquiver the long rod.

Reels should be suitable for harsh, briny and hot environs. Things get knocked around fairly regularly in the tight quarters of a kayak and backcountry, so be prepared with solid reels that are unlikely to get bent. Backing of 150 or 200 yards is usually sufficient. You can replace 20-pound backing with 30-pound to add a psychological advantage when brawny fish decide to slalom through the mangroves and oyster hazards. On some

I stare ponderously into the green hell in front of me. I have a plan. I've triple-checked the provisions and gear list. I repeat to myself this mantra: "You won't be fishing skinny water, you'll be fishing moist water." —Adventure by Trapper Rudd



Check out these **You Tube** videos for a sample of what to expect:

Flats Fishing Bonanza

www.youtube.com/watch?v=tU3yluTgrJQ

Giant Snook of Santa Rosa

www.youtube.com/watch?v=bGOUisQiORw

Freedom Hawk Adventures

www.youtube.com/watch?v=wSIIKVAH3tA



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occasions, however, you may find a sizeable lagoon and the extra spool volume and backing length provided 20-pound can be beneficial. Fly lines should be well suited for tropical conditions. I personally like many of the aggressive heads on the newer lines that can easily turn over large flies. You can drive the flies under the mangroves and into tight cover with short backcasts. Leaders and tippets are usually matters of personal preference. I prefer to keep it simple and short. Rarely do I use a leader longer than 8 feet in the backcountry. There are many variables with the different species involved, but generally speaking using 25- up to 60-pound (for massive snook and baby tarpon) will be sufficient. Have one rod rigged with knot-able wire to tackle the ever-present and solitary "mangrove wahoo" (barracuda).

Flies also are largely a matter of personal choice, confidence and local knowledge. I would highly recommend talking to as many local fisherman and guides as possible to learn their color palette. Some of the most productive flies I've had success with are Umpqua's Tarpon Toad in yellow, tan, olive, black and black. Did I already say "black"? These flies have seductive motion in the water and a robust hook that can hold onto an oil tanker. The large hooks have a wide gape and can catch the mangroves a bit more with an imperfect cast, but they also roll off the mangrove limbs easier.

Proper electronics are a vital tool in searching the backcountry. Even after many expeditions into familiar water, it's entirely possible to lose track of time and become unsure of your exact location. A good handheld, waterproof GPS unit, like the Lowrance iFinder Expedition C, is a real time saver. You'll want to purchase a Navionics SD card for the unit—the mid-America and Caribbean card covers the Yucatan perfectly. A water-resistant camera is a must. Many point-and-shoot cameras on the market today work very well for underwater shots also.

The Adventure

The fish found in these backcountry locations can be amazingly cooperative . . . and massive. Many of them are "residents" and can be found here year round, and it's not uncommon to find snook and tarpon well into the double digits. With just the disturbance of water by approaching a likely

holding spot, curious snook and tarpon will materialize from under the mangroves and literally swim right to the kayak. Mangrove wahoo will sit immobile in the thin water until you nearly paddle on top of them. Exploring shallow water in locations like this is very similar to probing for land mines while wearing spiked clown shoes—you just know there's going to be an explosion!

My great friend, Jeff Kean, and I have spent an inordinate amount of time exploring and chronicling some of the most intriguing water to be found near Espiritu Santo and Ascension Bays, as well as some little-known pockets of water heading south toward Chetumal Bay. Jeff has established a new and exciting venue for anglers to give this exciting style of flats fishing a try. It's safe, fun and all the hard work has already been done. The small and tranquil fishing village of Punta Herrero is perfectly situated on the eastern side of Espiritu Santo Bay. If you desire to step back in time, relax in comfortable and serene bungalows with the warm Caribbean literally steps away, then this could suit you well. This location is free of tourists, and most importantly, within a long cast of some seriously prime water. Within minutes an angler can be transported into some of the most pristine flats and backcountry water that can be found anywhere. The beauty of a program like the one Jeff runs is in its flexibility. Dolphin Super Skiffs are available for nearby flats fishing for hefty bonefish and permit, and pangas can be employed to transport kayaks and anglers who want to test their mettle against fish that are truly magnificent. For anglers who consider themselves more self-reliant and are looking for an elevated sense of accomplishment, this is the destination. For anglers who want to do it all, this is still your destination.

For more information on fishing Punta Herrero, Espiritu Santo Bay and Ascension Bay, visit www.sportinglifetravel.com or call Sporting Life Adventure Travel at (877) 611-7528.

By Fish America

TRAPPER RUDD is a contributing editor to *Fly Fish America*. Follow his adventures in our new column, *Where in the World is Trapper Rudd*, premiering in our July/August 2010 issue.

