

A wooden structure, possibly a fishing dock or pier, is the central focus. It features a railing made of thick, weathered wooden logs. Several fishing reels with colorful spools (orange, purple, green, white) are hanging from the railing. In the background, a tropical beach with white sand, green trees, and a clear blue sky is visible. The ocean is in the distance, with gentle waves breaking on the shore.

# PRE-TRIP FLATS PREPARATION

*A beginner's guide to the Pacific Ocean*

Words & Photos by James Laverty

It's been said many times before that the only thing more exciting than actually experiencing a new fly fishing trip, is preparing for one. You can't control the fish, the weather or the tides once you get there, but you can do everything possible before you depart to ensure that you are as well prepared as you can be, both on and off the water.



It may sound pretty bland and boring to some who prefer to wing it and see what happens, but the reality is that a little bit of well spent time in the weeks and months leading up to a fly fishing trip away with your mates, can be the difference in the end between a good trip and a great one.

For me it's also about the excitement generated reading fishing reports, articles, tying flies, checking out maps, tide charts, moon phases and weather forecasts. The list goes on. In fact, it probably starts when you write down the words "fishing trip" on the family calendar at home and your other half has to acknowledge the golden rule - **that if it's on the calendar it's a lock.**

For newcomers to Saltwater fly-fishing there is a bit to cover in terms of the variety of species to target and prepare for, however once you have experienced it, walking crystal clear sand-flats in the tropics and sight casting to fish with the fly rod is very hard to beat. For fly fishermen in the southern states, getting some sunshine and escaping winter on various Pacific flats ticks a lot of boxes. Those from up north who

probably spend more time to an extent in the boat or land based to avoid being eaten.

While we have some very good flats to fish in Australia on foot, there are plenty of reasons why fly fishermen, and those new to the salt, head to the Pacific Ocean to hone their craft in exotic locations. Kiribati, French Polynesia, New Caledonia, Cook Islands and Palmyra for example all have fantastic flats to fish with a range of species to target including Giant Trevally, Bluefin, Striped and Golden Trevally, Triggerfish, and of course Bonefish.

### *Scratching the head*

The most frequently asked question when guys are deciding on heading away or planning a trip is when should I go? It's been thrown around plenty of times before, but the fact remains that any time is a good time to get away fishing. It really can be a simple roll of the dice at times in terms of what weather and fishing conditions you are going to encounter.

The wet season in the Pacific is generally anytime from December to February, coinciding with the hottest and most humid times of the year. Seasonally with weather patterns all over the

place and as unpredictable as ever, sometimes the easiest and simplest time to plan a trip away is when it actually suits you best.

However, each fishery is unique and any perceived rules around tides and moon phases certainly don't apply uniformly across all flats fisheries in the Pacific. For example, some Bonefish flats may have more numbers on a rising tide as the fish move up onto new ground to feed, while other flats that experience an increase in water depth also experience an increase in predation risks by sharks. In these areas where shark numbers are higher, fish can prefer to feed on a falling or low tide in skinny water and are generally seen in greater numbers during these times.

## "IF IT'S ON THE CALENDAR IT'S A LOCK!"

Aitutaki in the Cook Islands has essentially no black tip reef sharks inside the lagoon, while Anaa in French Polynesia is full of them so the

Bonefishes behaviour can be distinctly different in terms of feeding, relative to tide or water level height.

Most flats close to the equator such as on Christmas Island see good tidal variation and water movement while flats within atolls further away from the equator see small amounts of tidal variation. Here they rely on swell heights which dominate and determine water movement in and out of a lagoon, so the cues for fish feeding can again be entirely different.

Spring tides around new and full moon phases may trigger better bite periods and activity of both fish and prey items, but they also result in greater water movement, poorer water clarity and make it more difficult to present your fly accurately due to drift. As such your optimal fishing windows for Bonefish are much smaller than fishing neap tides when the water variation is much less.

Sometimes success really depends on working out what your main or preferred target species will be, and planning around making the most of the conditions you have to target them at the right times of the day. For example, if you have a rising tide early in the morning you may target Bonefish and then at high tide switch over

to tailing Triggerfish which have moved up onto coral beds and flats to feed. As the tide is falling in the afternoon you may then switch to chasing GT's on drop-offs as they target baitfish that are drawn back into the deeper water.

On Atoll's with small tidal variation, large water movement caused by big ocean swells outside the lagoon can be great for providing cooler ocean water onto a flats system, attracting Bonefish into these areas. Big Bluefin and Giant Trevally also fire up during these events as they ride the swell in from the ocean, using it to their advantage to smash baitfish seeking refuge. So, it really pays to be prepared to target a range of species and switch up what your targeting depending on the conditions as well as the tides.

Of course, all of these tide and moon phases change throughout the week and you will always have a mixture of conditions when heading away for a full weeks fishing. With once weekly flights to many remote destinations you often can't pin point the exact tide or moon conditions you are after, that happen to also coincide with when you can get leave pass and pack the bags.

#### *A Fly Odyssey*

When preparing to head away on a saltwater flats fishing trip for the first time, there are a huge amount of questions that come to mind. It's probably easiest at this point to talk about the gear preparation aspect and then look at how you can maximise your chances of success once you are out on the water.

While it's great to have the latest & greatest fly rods, reels, boots, backpacks and camera gear, many of us when planning often work from these high-end items and progress through to the preparation of perceived lower value items such as leaders, tippets and flies. However, when the number one thing that's going to catch you that fish of a lifetime is the fly, then surely, we should be putting it front and square at the top of the list when it comes to our pre-trip planning.

If you are not tying your own or you are new to tying saltwater patterns, it certainly pays not to skimp on good flies that are well tied and have great

movement in the water. Yes, they may seem expensive off the bat at \$10 or more each for Bonefish or Triggerfish custom ties, however they are often proven patterns. They are also well balanced on strong hooks, with good materials and finished properly so that they will catch your fish after fish.

Many fly fishing retail outlets have a decent range of commercially tied and custom tied flies to help get you started or give you inspiration when first hitting the vice. Do your research on the destination you are travelling to and while many of us have the same affliction, it's always better to have more flies with you than you will actually end up needing.

If purchasing custom tied flies for a trip, you will need to plan several months out to ensure they are ordered, tied and delivered on time as many of these suppliers have back-logs of orders to process during busy times of the year.

If predominantly Bonefishing, get a good range of different weighted flies from small 1/8" bead-chain right through to heavier 5/32" and 3/16" dumbbell or real eyes in a range of colours, sizes and styles. Gotcha, worm, crab and crazy charlie style flies will all work well on the flats.

When Bonefishing, you generally need to match the over-wing or the top of your fly reasonably closely to the colour of the sand, while at other times you actually want your fly to have some contrast so that it stands out a little. Less flash is more as a general rule for Bonefish, however orange thread or UV colours including the addition of rubber legs at times for extra movement can all work well.

While I won't be going into details and specifics of different patterns, well-tied shrimp style flies can be great on darker broken flats with some coral or rubble, while also being dynamite on Triggerfish and bigger Bonefish near drop-offs.

Size #8, #6 and #4 would be the most productive sized bonefish hooks, however it pays to also have a selection of larger #2 in heavier weights, while 1/0 generalist sized patterns are also great for mid-sized trevally. Fish can be very size selective at times and it pays to be prepared.

It's good to be aware that saltwater hook manufacturers such as Gamakatsu, have different Bonefish hook styles and sizes. Meaning a size #4 bonefish hook in a Black SL45 is much smaller and therefore more similar to a #6 hook in a Silver SL11-3H... Confusing? Yes, it can be if you are just starting out however both are great choices and in the end as long as you have a variety of strong hook sizes I don't think it really matters which colour or specific style of hook you choose.

The great thing about Bonefishing on the flats is that there are no hard, fixed rules on fly styles or sizes, but it's certainly important to get the weight of the fly correct for the conditions and ensure it says on or near the bottom.

Similarly, baitfish patterns such as deceivers and brush flies and even poppers for larger flats Trevally should swim well and fit the size profile and colour of the fish you are imitating. 4/0 flies are a good size for bigger Bluefin and mid-sized GT's before stepping up to 6/0 and 8/0 flies for the trophies. Smaller Trevally can be targeted with #4 bonefish flies through to 1/0 for bigger Golden or Bluefin Trevally.

Make sure to rinse your flies at the end of the day in fresh water and continually check your hooks for sharpness and how they swim and sit in the water after landing fish.

#### *Start-up Inertia*

If you're putting an outfit together on a budget, I would recommend investing in the reel and line more than the rod. Sand, saltwater, and hard fighting fish - all combine to create an environment where low-cost reels simply fail. You could write an article on this topic alone, but the basics such as a sealed drag is essential, and a large arbor design also enables you to get your line back onto the reel quickly after a big run and stay connected.

The other important factors are range of drag adjustment, smoothness of drag and ideally a low start-up inertia... it can get as technical as you want it to be.

In terms of the drag, you will hopefully learn quickly that a big Bonefish can certainly rip out a lot of line, very quickly. For this reason, a low start-up inertia is great when the coil of line getting ripped from your hands and feet hits the reel, and your drag kicks in. In an ideal world, you basically want a reel that engages the drag very smoothly when going from zero to hero in the blink of an eye. You also want your drag to be smooth and I generally prefer a wider range of drag adjustment for newcomers to the sport. I've seen plenty of times when clients with small ranges of drag adjustment overtighten them in the heat of battle, resulting in bust offs or straightened hooks.

## *#Big Dogs*

It depends on the flats destination but ideally, you'd take an #8, #10 and #12 weight outfit to suit all applications you're likely to encounter. Sure, fishing for smaller bonefish on #6wt rods is great fun, but an #8wt investment will cover your bases better when catching bigger fish near coral. Being able to lean on the fish a bit harder in areas where there are a lot of sharks and landing them a bit quicker is also an advantage. Flats throughout the Pacific Ocean can get windy at times so fast-action #8wt rods will certainly assist with casting heavier flies in these conditions and hopefully have you connecting with more fish. If you are just getting started and you already have a suitable #7 wt, then by all means stick with it.

I prefer a #10wt rod as an all-rounder for Triggerfish, Golden Trevally and Bluefin which again allows you to cast larger profile flies and helps stop those big Triggers from reaching their holes. #10's are also fine for smaller GT's but for the Big Dogs, I want a 12 weight in my hand so I can try and turn the fish in in the initial stages of the fight and improve my chances of landing them. Large 6/0 or 8/0 Brush flies and Poppers also need a bit of grunt behind them for extend casting periods, and it always pays to have one rigged, ready to go.

It is advisable to take back-up fly rods because even experienced anglers have the occasional mishap, however if you're travelling in a group or





“FOR THE BIG DOGS  
I WANT MY 12WT IN MY HANDS!”

on a hosted trip, then you could potentially share back-up gear. The important thing to remember when putting gear together for the first time is to be open minded about brands, as no one brand makes the best of everything.

Match your bonefish outfit with a tropical floating fly line and smooth PE/braid backing. Braid backing is thinner, stronger and more abrasion resistant than Dacron, however you will pay more. If you're an average caster you may be better suited to a more aggressive front tapered fly line to deal with the wind and weight of the flies being cast. While if you're a good caster then a general-purpose Bonefish taper will enable more delicate presentation. Sink-tip or intermediate fly lines are fine for waist deep flats or drop-offs but as a general rule a standard floating line will be good for 90% of the flats fishing situations. And make sure to carry some spares!

### *Shorts and Slings*

Decent footwear is well worth the investment if you are spending a big week on the flats. While neoprene or dive-style booties are fine on clean flats, the advantage of them really lies with being light-weight and easy to get on and off. However, they can have a tendency to allow in small bits of coral and sand which can cause cuts and abrasions that will give you grief. Destina-

tions vary in the type of flats that you will be walking on and the main downside with booties is the sole which simply doesn't provide decent support from sharp coral, and can affect your comfort levels as the week progresses.

For this reason, I always advise to get a proven pair of lace-up flats booties if you can afford it. They provide great ankle support and have solid soles which mean that your back, legs and feet will thank you for it after a long week of fishing. They are far more comfortable and great if you are fishing a mixture of flat types or walking ocean reef areas throughout the day. Generally, a thick pair of socks will do the job or you can buy a size bigger boot and wear neoprene gaiter socks with them.

In terms of carrying your gear on the flats I like to keep it fairly simple. I prefer a waterproof sling if I'm not carrying too much weight or if lugging camera gear, then a bigger waterproof back-pack is preferred. Some guys like the ease of access a hip pack or bum-bag style can provide in terms of getting to your flies and gear, but you will most likely still need a backpack of some sort to carry items like water, sun cream, camera, spray jacket, and bigger flies etc.

A lot of the hip packs available are not that hip, or waterproof. I personally don't like anything that my fly line can catch onto when a



big bonefish takes off, so I stay clear of anything hanging around my waist. Some people love them, but not for me, particularly on deeper flats where your fly line is floating a lot closer to your waist than on an ankle deep one. Yes, you can use stripping baskets but again I like to keep it simple and carry as little gear as possible. If you want something small, try a chest pack.

The advantage of a sling is that you can swing it around from your back to your chest very quickly, and it sits at a nice eye height to enable you to quickly access your fly box or anything you need for that matter including water, or a large SLR camera. The downside is if you are carrying a bit of weight, you will get a sore shoulder on the side supporting the sling after a few days.

Decent backpacks are certainly the most comfortable option, however they aren't great for quick access, so having a small selection of flies in a waterproof box and tippet and tools in your shirt pocket or chest pack can overcome this. If you are not fishing with a guide, then backpacks also allow you to secure spare rods at your back and out of the way.

Waterproof packs also double as buoyancy devices if you are ever fishing reef areas or deep drop-offs, but just remember they are only good if you pull the zipper right to the very end!

Rounding off the gear, spare leaders and

tippet in a range of sizes, clippers, pliers, and sunglasses cleaner to wipe the salt and spray off your lenses is very handy. If you are chasing trevally and triggers then a box with your bigger flies and leader sizes, including cutters and nail knot tool will also need to fit in your bag. Small snacks are good while I also throw in some hydration electrolyte tablets to add to your water and keep you ticking along.

Long-sleeved shirts or tops in breathable, quick drying materials are advisable up top and if you are wearing gloves, don't forget to put some sun cream on your wrist where your glove ends and your shirt sleeve starts!

For some reason, I just can't bring myself to wear anything but a pair of shorts when wading flats in the tropics, particularly when escaping the winter back home. Provided that you are sun-smart then I don't think it matters what you wear, but a decent hat, gloves, buff and pair of good quality polarised sunglasses are non-negotiables. Spotting Bonefish on some days or particular locations can be very difficult, and they are certainly harder to see once there is intermittent cloud cover, wind or if you are fishing deeper flats.

Polarised glass lenses in a blue or green tint with a copper or amber lens are both good, but make sure to have them connected to your neck with a retainer to ensure you don't lose them. Buffs can take a bit to get used to but

aside from protecting your face and making you look like a gangster, they also enhance your vision by blocking out side-glare, if fitted up high over the sides of your glasses.

The bottom line is that you definitely don't want to get badly sunburnt in the first few days, as apart from looking like a battler, it can make the rest of the days on the flats very long and uncomfortable.

## *On the water*

You've done all the preparation, caught a few flights, changed time zones and possibly had one too many whiskeys the night before, but the day has finally come. You get to go fishing. At this point it's important if it's your first time heading out on the flats chasing Bonefish or being guided for the first time, not to put pressure on yourself. It's just fishing after all and you are on holidays so make sure to take the time to relax, soak it all up and enjoy it when you are out there.

At the start of the day, have your fly-rods rigged and ready to go. While you can tie your own, 9ft tapered leaders out of the packet are a simple and convenient way to get started. They are made with a perfection loop, so that you can easily and quickly attach to the loop on your fly-line. Generally thick and stiffer in the butt section they are formulated for saltwater fly fishing and designed to transfer the power

needed to deliver your fly. You can then tie a 3-5ft length of fluorocarbon tippet to the leader via a Double Uni Knot, and then Loop knot to your fly.

While tapered leaders are particularly useful if fishing into the wind, it's highly likely that for most of the time you are going to be positioned with the wind and sun over your shoulder. You can therefore get away with tying a 12-14ft length of fluorocarbon straight to your fly-line, eliminating the need for a tapered leader and tippet section.

You can fish longer or shorter but as a guide this will get you going and still leave you with a decent length after a few fly changes. You should carry fluorocarbon in 12, 16 and 20lb depending on the location and average size of the bonefish. For big Bonefish destinations like the Cook Islands, New Caledonia or French Polynesia I'll generally fish 18-20lb so that you can put the brakes on them and land them in a decent amount of time. For Triggers, the same is also fine. For the #10wt I'll fish 10ft of 40lb and for the #12wt 60-80lb Fluorocarbon straight through on the flats.

## *Guide craft*

It's no secret that guides that have grown up on Island and Atoll's in the Pacific have an amazing and uncanny ability to spot fish in all sorts of conditions, which at times defies logic. While it can be very





# “MIX IT UP AND SEE WHAT WORKS FOR YOU”

difficult when you first start out trying to spot Bonefish, you will have far more success in the long run if you take your time. Spending a moment to spot the fish yourself once pointed out by your guide including understanding its direction of movement before casting, will pay dividends.

Distance and direction calls by the guide are of course very helpful when you are starting out, but I would also recommend you ask the guide to point the fish out with one of your spare rods he will be carrying for you to assist with this.

When fishing with your guide, it's important to stand to their right-hand side, if you cast right handed and so forth. You should walk slightly behind them, not in front and allow them to set the walking pace. This will allow your guide to spot fish effectively and prevent you from spooking the fish. Yet you need to be close enough on their shoulder to allow them to point out the fish once spotted and give you a better chance of seeing them straight away. You will find that once you

get your eye in over the first couple of days, spotting bonefish will generally get much easier. There will be plenty of times however when you just can't see the fish at all, so listen carefully and pay attention to their guidance on moving and stopping the fly. If you are not understanding or missing fish, take the time to communicate as best as you can with your guide and sort out any issues early in the day.

The walking pace on flats is generally very slow, and casting distance can be anywhere from 10 to 60 feet. It's important to have some fly-line out of your rod tip, holding your fly and tippet in your left-hand in preparation for a quick load and cast. You should also have enough fly line already pulled off the reel to then execute with a minimum number of false casts.

Don't let your fly dangle in the water as you walk, as it will only hook onto a bit of coral at that all-important moment, and make sure you are managing the fly line floating next to you. Regularly check that it's also not wrapped

around your legs or the guide, and is drifting out of the way.

## *Mix it Up*

When casting to cruising Bonefish you will generally need to lead bigger fish by a few meters so that you don't spook it with the plop of the fly hitting the water, while with smaller or tailing Bonefish, you can literally try to land the fly as close as you can. There will often be some current on flats and it's important to understand which way your fly will drift when you make a cast so that you can allow for this accordingly. This is definitely the case when trying to fool tailing Triggerfish or Bonefish and you need to get your fly right under their noses.

Retrieval style and how fast you move your fly varies from location to location, size and mood a fish is in and what type of fly you are actually using. As a general guide, a few short strips to get a Bonefishes attention, followed by a longer continuous slow draw

once he has moved to your fly can work well. The main reason for this is it allows you to be in constant contact with your fly and feel for any takes. At other times, you will need a quicker, shorter intermittent strip as if the fly is fleeting and trying to escape however you can miss takes in between gripping and re-gripping the fly line.

Mix it up and see what works for you. Triggerfish like very short erratic movements of the fly, while Bluefin like the fly moved very quickly once they have spotted and committed to it. For bigger Bluefin when throwing larger flies, try and get the fly quite close to their head and strip like mad so they do not have time to think and give you a reaction bite. While with GT's you will need to lead them by a few meters and ensure your fly is swimming away at mid-pace.

Most guides are very patient and they will endeavour very hard to put you onto the fish. It's also important not to confuse their direct feedback and guidance with your ability. They

are very good at giving constructive feedback which assists with the learning aspect and hopefully connects you with more. And remember, that techniques and flies that work on one destination don't necessarily work on another, so it pays to do your research and get assistance with your pre-trip preparation so you can turn that good trip into a great one!

### Quick flats tips:

- When a fish is sighted, do not move your feet to cast. The water is clear and shallow, and the fish will spook easily. Keep them anchored.
- If the spotting conditions are difficult, you should be prepared for quick shorter casts or roll casting if needed as fish are often sighted close to the rod tip.
- Try and stay in constant contact with your fly when retrieving. Retrieving your Bonefish fly with a very slow long draw, feeling for the tap, can be very effective.
- Fish your flies all the way to your rod-tip. Takes will often occur at your feet.
- Use small loop knots to your flies to impart more movement. Ensure your knots are spot-

- on, and don't trim your tags too short.
- Always check and re-set your drag after fighting a fish.
- Fish barbless hooks
- Minimise fish exposure out of the water, particularly when sharks are prevalent
- When your guide says strike, strip quick and hard with a long full extension of your arm down and behind you. Strip-striking with your rod tip pointed down of course!
- Clear your line with your left hand and wait for it to hit your reel before lifting your rod-tip
- If you hook a big fish straight on and you haven't had the opportunity to really set the hook, use a couple of short high rod lift movements once its peeling the drag out to ensure its well hooked
- Use a reasonably tight drag in the early stages – you ideally want to minimise the distance between you at the fish, but back it off a bit once they have turned
- Drink plenty of water



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