

WHERE THE SEA MEETS THE SKY

GRAND SLAM LODGE ON MEXICO'S ASCENSION BAY IS AN IDEAL
BASE CAMP FOR CHASING PERMIT, TARPON AND BONEFISH

BY





There is no better way to wash off the annoyances of airline travel than to step aboard a boat. The long wait outside the Cancún airport and the bumpy stretch of road through the tourism zone in Tulum sailed off in the rearview mirror as we loaded our gear onto the Grand Slam Lodge panga and set off for open waters. A light drizzle fell as the guide, Gaspi, opened up the throttle on the Honda outboard and headed toward a small cut in the mangroves.

I glanced over at Corbin Blackford, whom I'd just met for the first time, and he was wearing a wide smile. Blackford, a 41-year-old fly fisherman from Houston, was the lucky winner of this trip to Grand Slam Lodge as part of a special promotion to celebrate

10-year anniversary. "I've never even won a game of bingo," Blackford said when we shook hands in Cancún. "But I'd happily trade all the bingo games in the world to win this trip."

You never know whom you're going to end up with when you run a sweepstakes, and Blackford proved to be an ideal fishing buddy. He is funny, affable and easygoing, and he showed up well-stocked. His fly cases were packed with every pattern the lodge recommended. He even made a pit stop at the airport's duty-free shop and picked up rum, tequila and cigars. We were off to a solid start.

The panga ride from Tulum to the lodge in Punta Allen provided but a glimpse of the diversity in Ascension Bay. This shallow-water paradise stretches 37 miles long and 14 miles wide. It resides within Sian Ka'an, a massive biosphere reserve and UNESCO World Heritage Site. The name comes from a Mayan term that loosely translates



to "a place where heaven begins." And when you look out on the expansive flats that melt away into the horizon, you can understand why the Mayans held these waters in such high regard. In many ways, the area reminds me of the Everglades, but the waters are more vast, with less vegetation and way fewer people. The protected waters remain mostly untouched. "You see the sheer diversity of the flats we have," says Vittorio Kier, the lodge's director of operations and fishing. "There's turtle grass, sand, mud, mangrove shorelines, and islands and sandbars."

The Mayans treated this land as sacred, and when conditions provide a glass-calm day with bluebird skies, the water and sky seem to meld, masking the horizon — a landscape awash in a beautiful blue. I can see why they thought of it as heaven's gate.

The captain relied on his decades of experience, not GPS, as we weaved through unmarked channels and mangrove creeks. After an hour or so, he slowed the motor and said, "we're here." We idled up to a small dock and wedged our way among the lodge's other 23-foot pangas rigged for fly-fishing. The crew said they'd gather our bags, and we hightailed it to a waiting Jeep to run us the short distance up a dirt road to the lodge. The mosquitos were about as eager to see us as we were to be there.

Punta Allen is situated at the southern end of a skinny peninsula that acts as a barrier between Ascension Bay and the Caribbean. This small town is ensconced in flats-fishing history. The waters teem with opportunities to catch bonefish, tarpon, snook and, perhaps the most notable foe, the elusive permit. Catch three or more of these species in a day, and you've landed a grand slam, one of the most coveted goals in fishing, hence the name of the lodge.

Grand Slam Lodge sits on a sugar-sand beach looking east over the Caribbean. Anglers stay in well-appointed rooms, all of which have views of the lapping waves. There's an excellent chef on staff who serves up Mexican-inspired meals, as well as dishes with an Italian or Japanese flair. It's a far cry from the Spartan eco-lodge that existed on this property when Carlos Kier, a hotel developer, acquired it in 1999. At the time, there were only a few huts with mosquito nets on the beach. A boa constrictor actually fell on Kier while he slept in a hut when he first came to see the property, but after spending a few days exploring by boat, he was sold.

The Kier family opened the lodge in 2009. "Since day one, Grand Slam has been my mom Alice's project," Vittorio says. "She's been the boss ever since. I manage the fishing and marketing."



The veteran guides know every inch of Ascension Bay.



Corbin Blackford, a 41-year-old fly fisherman from Houston, won a trip to Grand Slam Lodge and made good use of his time there.

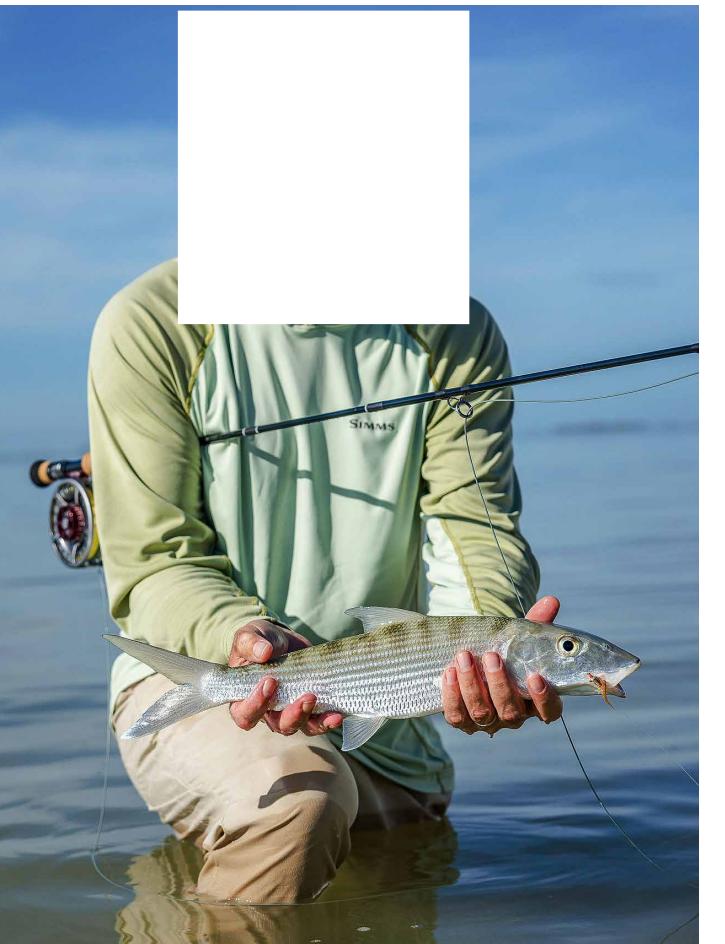


Vittorio, or Vito as most call him, at 24 is one of the fishiest guys I've met. Inshore or offshore, conventional or fly, this man can do it all. He often guides repeat clients and has a knack for finding giant snook. "I caught my first fish when I was not even a year old with my dad," he says. "Fishing has always been my number-one passion, along with anything nature-related. I've always liked animals, especially reptiles and fish and birds, very exotic animals. I was the kid who picked up snakes and all those critters. And I always walk around barefoot."

Growing up in Puerto Morelos, a small fishing village between Cancún and Playa del Carmen, Vito had plenty of access to the water. It was the perfect environment for the young angler. "I'd come back home from school and pick up a fishing rod and go fishing in the evening for snook and tarpon on the beach," he says. He loved to catch tarpon and jacks. When the family decided to build Grand Slam, the youngster was in a perfect spot to expand on his fishing prowess.

Miles of Possibilities

You don't realize how massive Ascension Bay is until you're barreling across it in a panga. The flats seem to run on forever. With Gaspi at the helm on our first day of fishing, we headed south for what felt like an hour, though the morning ride always seems longer than the afternoon trip home as anticipation mounts. After meandering through the maze of islands and fishy-looking points, Gaspi slowed the motor and cut the engine as we approached a mangrove shoreline and saw tarpon rolling along the edge of vegetation. The 63-year-old guide climbed to the poling platform and began to push the big panga perpendicular to the mangroves. The 10- to 15-knot winds didn't seem to phase him.



Blackford grabbed a 12-weight rod and a black-and-purple fly. He stepped up to the casting platform as Gaspi pointed and said, "10 o'clock, 40 feet." With one false cast, Blackford uncurled a tight loop that unfolded right on the edge of the mangrove. We stared at the fly until our gaze was broken by a massive blow up off the stern. Another pod of tarpon was busting bait, sending showers of silver cascading like ripples in a pond. Gaspi followed a pair of tarpon, and Blackford made a money shot, resulting in a bite.

"Set the hook!" Gaspi hollered from his perch, but Blackford already was on. We'd been fishing all of 15 minutes. The juvenile tarpon wasn't the largest fish in the pod, but it was a nice icebreaker. Blackford's trip to Grand Slam was already paying dividends.

"We get a migration of big tarpon from late May to early August," Vito says. "They're coming from the south, from Nicaragua and Costa Rica. They come up to Ascension Bay where they rest and come into the shallow water. It's such a big ecosystem, and they've known it for years."

After releasing the first tarpon of the day, we continued to work along the mangroves, finding acres of bait and shots at more tarpon. Taking my turn on the bow, I blind cast till my forearms burn, but it gives me time to dial in my cast. Gaspi spies more tarpon and sneaks up to them. At about 45 feet, I make my cast, and the smaller of the fish turns on the fly. "Strip! Strip! Strip!" the guide hollers. I speed up the presentation, and the fish hits the throttle to overtake the fly and launches into the air. I strip-set as hard as I can, but there's slack in the line. After a couple of jumps, the fish is gone. Setting the hook on a tarpon is like setting the hook into bone. It doesn't always grab hold. I am satisfied with my effort but bummed the fish shook free.





Grand Slam Lodge, in Punta Allen, Mexico, offers easy access to Ascension Bay, a protected body of water that spans roughly 200,000 acres.



I swap places with Blackford, and the conversation flows easily. We have similar tastes in music and plenty of fishing stories. He takes an annual fishing trip with his father to visit a new fishery. They had been in the Bahamas earlier in the year chasing bonefish. When I called to give him the news about winning the trip to Grand Slam, he asked if he could have 24 hours to speak to his wife, Kristin. Not two hours later, he booked a flight.

When fishing the mangroves slows, we pick up and move to a beach where tarpon cruise a trough just off the sand. The beauty of the uninhabited beach is slighted by the trash that washes up from places unknown to the east. The tarpon, however, don't seem to mind. Blackford makes a cast to a waiting school and hooks a bigger fish on the 12-weight. When we see the size of the fish, we decide to keep it in the water. I ask Blackford if he wants a photo of himself holding the fish in the water and releasing it, and he jumps right in. We spend a few minutes getting the light right and firing off photos. Blackford is in fishing heaven. "I always wanted to get a photo like that," he says.

He cut off the fly and put it somewhere safe in his bag, planning to frame the photo and fly together when he gets home. We end the day

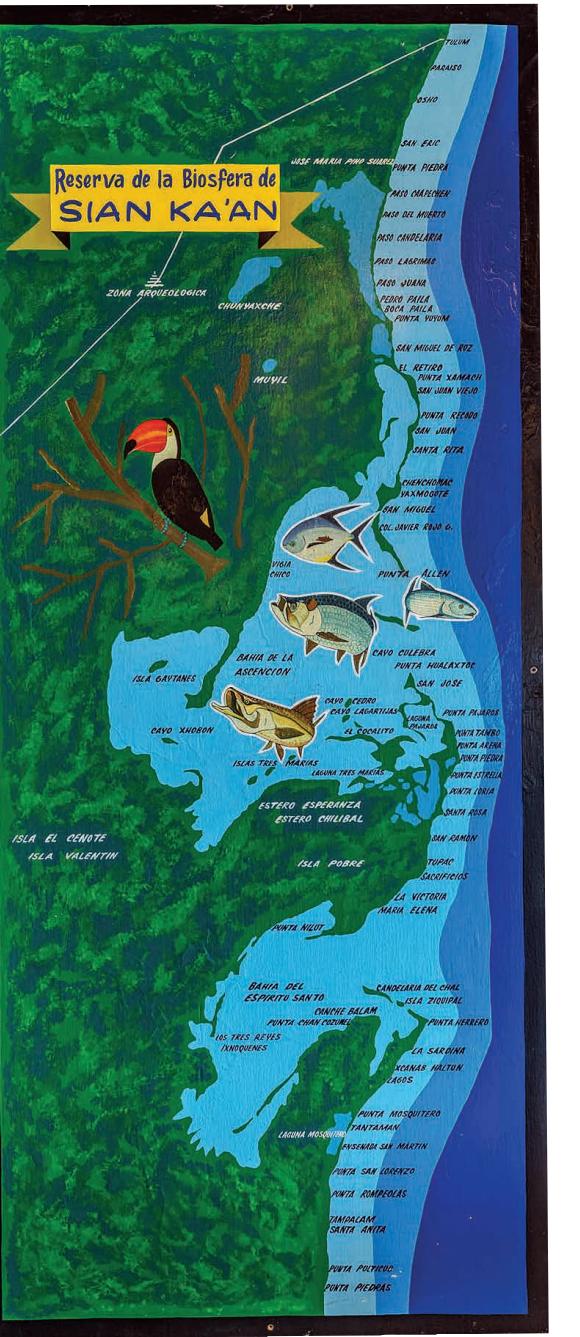
chasing bonefish schools. We also had a few shots at permit, but they were moving quickly and didn't want to play nice.

A Steady Supply of Fish

Most of Grand Slam's bookings occur between January and May. The lodge can accommodate 24 anglers or 12 boats, and often hosts large groups. While they do catch permit every month, Vito favors the less-busy summer period. Our trip was originally planned for early July but was rescheduled to mid-September because of Hurricane Beryl.

"June does get busy, but the weather is good, and there's a lot of fish in the bay," Vito says. "From June to September, that's my favorite time. It's hot, but the weather is usually very nice. Not much wind and a lot of fish moving in and out of the bay, especially when it comes to permit and tarpon — we have a big influx of them."

While we were fishing the tail end of the season, there were still plenty of fish around. After stalking the flats all day, we met a group of three friends who come together for a fishing trip each year. They flew in from San Francisco, Chicago and New York, and had already caught more than 40 bonefish between them. They also had shots at



permit, their main target. "I had a perfect cast at a permit. I was casting right in front of him, but he wouldn't eat," the New Yorker said. "It was super frustrating — I can't wait to do it again!"

False Casts Full of Hope

Our second day of fishing started slow. We motored to a different spot and worked a new stretch of beach for tarpon. We didn't see any fish or get any bites. We picked away at a few small bonefish before having lunch in the mangroves, where we befriended a giant iguana and fed it crust from our sandwiches. In the afternoon, the bonefish bite picked up, and Blackford and I both caught several fish.

Anytime I started to feel frustrated by my casting or the unwilling gamefish, I slowed down and soaked in the setting. The long, clear flats. The azure waters. The sound of windswept waves and birdsong. This fishery is an oasis of quiet that doesn't exist in many places.

When we got back to the lodge, we shared a drink with Thomas Connolly, a 30-something real estate developer on a solo trip from Chattanooga, Tennessee. Connolly had never caught a tarpon or a permit. He brought a single 10-weight rod and ended up renting an 8-weight from the lodge. He's a trout fisherman, and a lucky one at that. The next day he caught six permit, 12 bonefish and a tarpon. A grand slam on his first day, a feat he repeated on his next fishing day. The lodge manager ended up putting Connolly's photo on the wall of the restaurant. We all watched jealously.

Our final fishing days weren't quite as good as Connolly's action, but they were magical nonetheless. We explored new waters, and stalked tarpon, bonefish and permit. The vistas stretch for miles, like fishing in a Winslow Homer painting.

My favorite moment came on our final day of fishing. We headed toward a flat by the mouth of Ascension Bay. A thunderstorm was building in the distance, painting the sky with a thick swath of charcoal running vertically down the center. The guide spotted a large permit and staked out the boat. We jumped out of the panga with the mate, whose vision was nearly as good as an osprey's. He walked slowly with us as the permit moved about the turtle grass, head down, tail up. An onshore wind made casting difficult, swatting down the backcast. We tracked the fish a few hundred yards from the boat and finally made a cast. The permit lifted its head for a millisecond and glanced at the neutrally buoyant crab fly before turning and taking off. Frustrating, indeed, but beyond cool. We made it back to the boat just as the rain started. The rain felt cool and smelled like the sea.

That evening, we walked the quiet streets of Punta Allen after a delicious skirt steak at the lodge. We checked out the permit sculpture and improvements made to the local area by the fly-fishing community. I think the Mayans really nailed it. This town, this fishery, nestled in between the bay and the sea, is surely a bit of heaven. 