Standing in two feet of water along the northeastern coast of Cayo Romano in Cuba, I asked Raffa, our guide, for some pointers on stalking bonefish with a fly.

This was my first time wading for bones, and after hearing stories of bonefish getting spooked by an errant cast, or turning their noses up at a poorly presented fly, I wanted some advice on how to land these cagey speedsters. I handed Raffa my rod, and as he stripped off 70 feet of line he demonstrated how to “prepare” the rod when wading for these elusive beauties.
While he was talking, a school of bonefish snuck behind us near the bank. Raffa peeled off more line and cast the fly in front of the retreating school — 80 feet away. He then showed me how to “strip” the line so that the fly mimicked a shrimp or other prey. One of the fish turned and started following the fly.

Once the fish made a dash and took the fly, Raffa “strip set” the hook. The key, he said, was to set the hook without raising the rod — the exact opposite of my reflex when setting a fly for steelhead or trout.

With my reel screaming as line played out, Raffa handed me the rod. The first time I saw the 5-pound bone breach, it was 150 yards away. I started to palm the reel to add drag and slow the fish down as line squealed off the reel: would the 250 yards of backing be enough?

Raffa saw me and yelled, “Deja correr! Deja correr!” (“Let it run! Let it run!”).

Bob Bumstead, my fishing buddy from Eugene, chuckled at my rookie mistake as the bonefish raced across the flats.

“Yeah, Paul, let it run,” Bob chimed in.

After repeated runs of 50-plus yards, I reeled the fish in, unbuttoned the fly and released it. I stood there with my cheeks cramping from the grin plastered across my face. Stalking bones with a fly on Cuba’s tropical sand flats loomed as an enticing vision for the coming week.

Bonefish are some of the fastest fish in the ocean — their burst speed is six times faster than rainbow trout. And their habit of hunting prey on shallow flats makes them prime targets for fly anglers looking for a challenge with a huge payoff. In terms of sheer excitement, and the satisfaction of overcoming a number of daunting variables to lure these piscatorial marvels, fly angling for bones is one of fishing’s premiere experiences.

Sometimes called “ghost fish,” bonefish have small scales that act like mirrors reflecting their surrounding environment, making them difficult to see. Local guides who have sighted bonefish for years can see the fish long before most of
And then the fish would become visible at 20 or 30 yards — usually. One time I stumbled onto a school of fish that was all of 20 feet away before they spooked.

For years, traveling and fishing in Cuba has had an allure for me, partly borne of the convoluted history between our two countries, and heightened by the tales of fishing and life by Ernest Hemmingway, Graham Greene and John Dos Passos. When former President Obama relaxed diplomatic and travel restrictions in 2014, and President Trump started talking about curtailing Cuban travel, I took it as a sign to head for Cuba before its ports of call were quarantined again for American tourists.

A number of outfitters book fishing trips to Cuba, but many of those trips are based on a mother boat offshore of the island. On such trips, the clients spend their evenings and nights on board a ship, and local guides pick up and return the anglers for each day’s fishing. We wanted more contact with a local community in Cuba, so we booked a trip based out of the village of Brasil, in Cayo Romano.

I spoke with a number of anglers who’d fished out of Brasil and heard that some of them didn’t enjoy the one-hour bus ride between the lodge and the marina at the beginning and end of each day. However, Bob and I thought that a worthwhile tradeoff for basing in a local village and having some contact with Cubanos.

When we arrived at the airport in Havana for our 45-minute flight to Cayo Romano, two doctors from the Portland area, along with a father and son team from Moro, joined us. Another angler from Bend met us at the lodge the next day. By happenstance, all seven anglers were from Oregon, and each of us had an interest in staying in a village and getting a sense of the local culture while fishing for bones.

Tourism is one of Cuba’s major economic engines. Before the Soviet Union imploded in the early 1990s, the USSR provided financial and material support to Cuba for decades. That support ended with the Soviets’ collapse. As a result, the Castro regime faced daunting economic and social obstacles during what is now called the “Special Period.”

One of Castro’s responses was to invest in high-end tourism facilities that catered to international tourists. These places were designated off-limits for Cuban citizens.
The program became known as “Tourism Apartheid,” since the beaches, hotels, resorts and other amenities built for international tourists were barred to Cubanos.

That sense of discrimination is still apparent in Cuban tourism today, since most of the nation’s population lives on approximately $25 to $30 per month, which means they still can’t make use of the elite tourist facilities.

Waiters and tour guides can make more money today in Cuba than doctors or lawyers because those who work in tourism benefit from good tips, better food and other amenities associated with wealthy tourists. And seeing the abject poverty of the people in Brasil, where most transportation was either on foot, on a bicycle, or by horse and buggy, and where the people live in small, rudimentary housing, underscored how poor many Cubans still are. We tipped our guides the equivalent of seven months’ pay at the end of our six-day stay.

One morning, we had just anchored our skiff and walked across the isthmus of a small islet when Raffa pointed to two schools of bonefish “tailing” about 40 feet away.

“Paul, dos escuelas,” Raffa whispered. The fingers of his right hand pointed to the sky, and he wiggled them in the sign of “tailing” that the guides used when identifying fish feeding in the shallows. Bonefish hunt by keeping their noses close to the sea floor as they search for small crabs, shrimp and other prey, which results in the tops of their forked tails sticking out of the shallows as they feed.


I’d been watching Raffa for days as we waded across the flats and lagoons. A 54-year old man, he walked across the sea floor with impeccable balance and control — picking one foot up at a time, pointing his toes down as his foot cleared the water, and stepping forward with minimal splash and noise. He looked like a ballet dancer walking across a stage with exacting control: spine erect; each foot clearing and slicing the water in one, fluid motion.

Whether the lagoon floor was uneven, had rock outcroppings or coated with 4 inches of a slippery, gooey, clay didn’t matter: Raffa kept his poise.

Meanwhile, I lumbered across the soft and muddy areas like an old Russian tank, but I didn’t care. We didn’t want to be found and captured by others, so we hunted along the edge of the flats as the sun started to set.
Babuskha — feet spread apart, slogging through the mud with uneven, quick steps that kept both feet planted in the slick goo as much as possible. My upper body swayed from side to side to keep my weight over each foot while visions of landing into the muck with a bonefish-scattering splash haunted me.

The two schools of bones were feeding in a cove of dark grey mud, and I knew my ability to sneak up on them was suspect, given the slick bottom. I tread into the shallows slowly as one of the larger fish turned in my direction, making my cast easier in the prevailing 25 mph winds.

I cast the fly within 4 feet of the fish and began stripping line, only to watch that school of fish, along with the other nearby school, slowly swim away — as if they’d received notice that I was in the neighborhood and it was time to move on before the whole barrio went down the toilet.

Fortunately, not all of the lagoons and saltwater flats we fished were lined with gobs of gray goo. In fact, many of the flats were composed of white or golden sand on firm surfaces, and the expanse of aquamarine lagoons, trimmed by verdant mangroves under a cerulean sky, made for a gorgeous, tropical tableau.

As the week went on, I learned to lift my feet out of the water and take slow, controlled steps with minimal noise. We had lots of practice, since we waded four or five hours each day across miles of lagoons. Mornings were best. On a number of afternoons, the winds roiled the flats and kicked up a milky-white turbidity that nixed the fishing.

Still, we caught and landed fish with a frequency that kept us in the hunt. I landed an average of one fish an hour over the six days, and that success rate was enough to hook me on bones.

As the other anglers in our party talked about bone fishing in different locales around the hemisphere, I was all ears.