

ANGLING REPORT ARTICLE

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Bahia Honda Sporting Club Gets Rave Review

by Douglas Windsor

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(Editor Note: Subscriber Douglas Windsor recently returned from a trip to the Florida Keys, where he was hosted by Gordon Baggett of Bahia Honda Sporting Club thanks to our FREE Fishing Program. All Windsor had to do in return was write this review on the lodge and the fishing he experienced. See box on page 6 for details on how you can participate in our FREE Fishing Program.)

I had the great fortune this past May, thanks to the Angling Report's Free Fishing Program, to join Gordon Baggett at his Bahia Honda Sporting Club for three nights and two days of tarpon fishing in the Florida Keys. Having just completed a bonefish trip to Andros, my fishing friend and author, David Fowler, and I hoped our stay at Bahia Honda would top off our trip like the proverbial icing on a cake.

Bahia Honda Sporting Club touts itself as the only full-service fishing operation in the Keys. It's located in the Lower Keys, between Marathon and Key West, and is Baggett's answer to a number of problems anglers have voiced over the years about fishing the Keys. Those problems mostly revolve around the logistics of arranging a trip. Anglers in the Keys are pretty much on their own to manage every aspect of their trip, from coordinating the services of several independent guides, to finding hotel rooms, to renting vehicles, to catching meals around their guides' pre-determined fishing schedules. The latter can mean grabbing breakfast and a packed lunch at a convenience store on the way to the dock.

Once on the water, boat traffic can be heavy in the Keys and the flats crowded, especially during peak fishing and tourism season. Then, of course, there's the reputation guides in the Florida Keys have for being impatient and highly critical of their clients' fishing abilities. Bahia Honda Sporting Club eliminates all of that.

Baggett started his operation five seasons ago after guiding at the Flamingo Cay Rod & Gun Club on Andros Island for seven years. He didn't want his clients, like those of many other Keys guides, having to settle for dumpy hotels and fast food after a long day's fishing. So, he drew on his experience at Flamingo Cay to create the kind of operation that allows anglers, in groups or as individuals, to just enjoy themselves while someone else worried about logistics. The lodge he is currently using is actually a 10 million dollar estate on 16 acres of waterfront. It's a beautiful three-story house in Spanish-Mediterranean style with a majestic entrance way, multiple tiered patios and a beautiful pool surrounded by royal palms. It features five bedrooms with private baths, three lounging areas with televisions and a large kitchen and dining area. The views overlook the water and various islands.

A dock just outside means the boats are just steps from the house, and because guests at Bahia Honda get to set their own fishing schedules, there's no mad dash to meet guides at the boats by any particular time. As for the crowds and boat traffic you typically find around Islamorada, Marathon and Key West, the Lower Keys are relatively un-crowded due to local ordinances that discourage tourism and protect the area from over-development.

My fishing partner and I flew in from Andros to Fort Lauderdale, where we rented a car and drove the three hours south to Baggett's lodge. Arriving pretty late at 9:30 pm and starved, we assumed we had missed dinner and hoped at least for some leftovers we might warm up. To our surprise, we arrived to find the guides and anglers had just returned from their day of fishing and were enjoying cocktails and hors d'oeuvres while waiting for dinner to be served. It didn't take long for us to switch gears from the Bahamian bare essentials we experienced on Andros to enjoying the comfort of Bahia Honda Sporting Club.

Meals at Bahia Honda were excellent. That first night Chef Zohar served a fresh gazpacho for starters, followed by stone crabs, a shrimp and rice dish and crème brûlée for dessert. Wine, coffee and after-dinner drinks with fruit rounded out the cuisine. Lunches on the boat were nothing like the typical convenience store pickup purchased on the way to meet your guide; these were full lunches with fresh baked breads, homemade cookies, fresh crab cake sandwiches and such, not to mention plenty of whatever you wished to drink. Our final meal at Bahia Honda included two different elk roast preparations, frog legs, a to-die-for asparagus sauté and Chef Zohar's secret cheesecake.

So, what about the fishing? The report we got that first night was that four anglers had hooked 12 tarpon that day between them

and landed two. Wow! We couldn't wait to get into action like that! We were there not only during the prime tarpon season but during the palolo marine worm hatch, a phenomena in the Keys that makes tarpon go into a feeding frenzy. So, we hoped to have lots of opportunities at hungry fish. Unfortunately, however, the wind howled the next two days, and the seas picked up, an unusual occurrence for that time of year. Still, we were out on the water, and I managed to hook several tarpon, landing one despite the horrible conditions.

One of those hook-ups occurred the first day in a three-foot chop. It was all we could do to see the fish, let alone cast. Seems our guide suddenly pointed out to us a single we had all missed. By the time he saw it, it was swimming away from us. With nothing to lose, I threw a Hail Mary about 50 feet behind the boat with a secret fly Baggett and his guides use. Struggling with the wind to recoil the line back into the line tamer, I felt resistance, and wouldn't you know, I hooked up. I also had the line wrapped around the poling platform. Somehow, with a flick, I freed it, only to have a mess of a tangle end my chance of landing the fish.

My partner took a turn and made some casts without a take. Then, as dusk settled in, Baggett called our guide on his cell to let him know he was in the middle of a school of moving fish. We motored that way to find it was already too dark to spot black silhouettes; our only chance was in spotting a tail, a fin or a roll. It wasn't long before we saw some. A tail, a fin, and then I spotted a full roll. I immediately cast the 30 feet to where I thought the fish might be next. Stripping fast to keep the fly on top, the take was strong, and I set the hook.

He took off in a straight sprint for the shore, and it was 300 yards before I could turn him. Then whoosh, he was in the air with a full, straight-up jump. About 15 minutes later, waves splashing over the bow, I rolled the fish onto his side and to the boat, at minimum a 70-pounder. Exhausted, happy and with my hand cramped, we all smiled for pictures, a fine ending to a challenging but successful day.

On the second day, my partner and I fished with Baggett himself. Unfortunately, by lunchtime, the seas were so rough he called everyone back to the lodge for safety reasons. We spent the rest of the day lounging at the lodge, munching on sautéed shrimp and stone crabs and talking about fishing.

Unique to Bahia Honda is the amount of contact guests have with their guides. The guides actually stay on the property in an adjacent guesthouse. They dine and mingle with the guests and are a part of the overall experience. If you want to learn a knot, how to tie a fly or just talk fishing, they're there to do it. The four guides Baggett works with are all friends and it shows. They work well together, sharing information on strategies, flies, tides and even fishing spots. If one of them is not seeing fish, he is on his cell phone asking the others for advice. Likewise, if one of them gets into a large number of fish, the first thing he does is call the others to let them know where. This kind of communication is a huge advantage when multiple guides work together for the client's benefit.

Another plus is that the guides at Bahia Honda Sporting Club are supportive, helpful and courteous. Baggett and his group of guides represent a new wave of Keys guides who love what they do and are exceedingly competent anglers. There is not a 'screamer' among them. Fun is a big part of the recipe at Bahia Honda, and the place goes beyond what you would expect, with an unusually high commitment to the client.

Baggett has the finest equipment available for guests. I used a one-piece 10 weight nine-foot Loomis that handled more like an 11 weight. A number of other rods and reels were on hand, all top-of-the-line. The fly lines were in perfect condition and flies were custom-tied daily. Baggett provides all the flies, as he and his guides know what the tarpon are keyed on at any time. Boats were Hells Bay 17-footers, sparkling clean and in perfect order.

While Baggett has a number of regular clients, he is interested in growing his client base. Hence his offer of a free trip to The Angling Report. He told me he prefers parties of six or eight but will also work single anglers into the mix. This coming year, the minimum trip he plans to promote is a five-night package offering 4½ days of fishing. The all-inclusive price is \$4,350, two guests per boat. At first glance, that may seem a bit rich, but you would easily pay that much putting a Keys trip together yourself by the time you add up guiding, hotels, restaurants and car rentals. And the experience and services of Baggett's lodge are impossible to duplicate anywhere else in the Keys. Call early if you want to fish in May or June, during the prime tarpon fishing. Baggett will pick you up at the airport in Key West and drive you the 25 minutes to the lodge, so car rentals are unnecessary.

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