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Deep into Shallow Water

Discover the reasons to fish year-round at Deep Water Cay, Bahamas—PLUS, Bonus info on top saltwater and New Zealand fly-fishing lodges. *By Tom Keer*

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF DEEP WATER CAY

AS MY FLIGHT DESCENDED TOWARD GRAND BAHAMA, the water color changed proportionate to the depth, from lighter blues to dark emerald greens to pale greens and then shades of white. The pale greens and whites were where I was headed, to shallow flats and wadeable sand. Below, I could see a flats skiff and an angler on the bow. My fishing destination? **Deep Water Cay** (deepwatercay.com) and her 250 square miles of flats.

I flew into Freeport and hooked a cab to the festive port town. As the tide moved, boats bobbed in their slips, sleek offshore fishing boats with their tandem outboards, the center-console workboats with spiny-lobster cages and bait pails on board and the glass-bottomed tourist barges. The buildings resembled a combination of Mardi Gras and an Easter parade, brightly colored yellow, fuchsia, mango, coral, lemon and lime, sunrise, seafoam green and pink. Festive music played in the squares, and the smell of coconut suntan lotion and Cuban cigars wafted through the open spaces. You know when you're on island time.

My spin around town was the perfect transition from my state-side life to island life, and after awhile, a Deep Water Cay van picked me up and drove me across the island to a boat dock. I climbed aboard the ferry and in three minutes I stepped onto a floating dock, walked the gangplank and bellied up to the tiki bar. Later, as the sun descended, I walked to my digs, a comfy little beachfront bungalow with two full beds, a private bath

and a deck from which I saw tailing bonefish on the flat about 50 yards away.

A man approached. "They're tough to catch," said Dana Dribben, Deep Water Cay's general manager. "In the morning we'll show you some other areas, and if you want a shot at some permit they're around in good numbers. Take a swim in the Infinity Pool before dinner, we'll be meeting for cocktails at 6:30."

An appetizer of blackened red snapper accompanied our drinks. The real treat came from a pair of wahoo that were caught earlier in the day. After the most scrumptious slice of key lime pie I have ever eaten, I fell asleep to waves lapping the shoreline.

In the morning a fleet of new Dolphin flats skiffs waited at the dock. Dribben favors the Dolphins because they draw only eights inches of water, and his guides can cruise at full throttle during low water without running foul. Several of the boats were recently re-powered with new Yamaha 85s.

I climbed aboard Wendy's skiff and we headed out. Wendy's been guiding at DWC for nearly 30 years, and he took me to a variety of flats all within a short run of the dock. In synch with the tide, we started with a series of soft mud flats that were covered with turtle grass and surrounded by mangroves.

If you look hard enough you'll see that the water runs far

beyond the mangrove root tangles and into saltwater lakes. These lakes also have some freshwater sources, which make them a virtual baitfish factory. As the tides flood and ebb the baitfish move out of the lakes in on the flats.

“That is probably the single biggest reason that we have such consistently good fishing,” said Pat Worsham, DWC’s director of operations. “The fish always have an abundance of shrimp and crabs to feast on. And while our average-size fish is about five pounds, we see significant numbers of double-digit fish each year. The club record is 14 pounds, 10 ounces.”

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF DEEP WATER CAY



We cast to packs of fish, three to five in number, all in the five-to seven-pound range. I could have done this all day, at least until I heard an eruption in the water.

“What the heck was that?” I asked.

“A few thousand bonefish spooking in the lake,” Wendy said. “They probably got spooked by a bird’s shadow. Bones move up to feed and breed because nothing bothers them up there. The mangrove roots protect them from cudas and sharks. When they get big they drop out onto these turtle-grass flats. There are dozens of these lakes, which is why the fishing is consistently

good. Now forty feet, ten o’clock, cast.”

The sun climbed higher in the sky and the combination made for perfect wade-fishing conditions. The kicker is that the 2.2 square mile Deep Water Cay lies on an east/west tack and is situated below an archipelago of moderate-size cays arranged on a north/south tack. A series of channels connect the southern and northern fisheries, making DWC a close run to any.

In a flash we were on an expansive, hard-packed white-sand flat. Wendy dropped the engine’s skeg into the sand to hold the boat and we got out. I saw a number of different combinations. At first there were some small groups of half a dozen fish, with tail tips high in the air. I like picking out a specific fish to work, and watching them spot and pick up my fly.



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A large, striped fish is swimming in shallow water, surrounded by tall grass. The fish is the central focus of the advertisement, with its body and fins clearly visible against the green background of the water and grass.



Later on, an entire school moved up toward us all at once. There were hundreds of tailing fish, all a short roll-cast away. I kneeled down and roll-cast to the group. When one fish ate the others erupted and bolted off the flat. We saw them later, for there was a giant milky cloud drifting in a four-foot-deep channel on our way out.

In speaking with the staff, I learned that fishing at Deep Water Cay is great all year long, and the fishing varies according to the weather. March, April and May are peak Bahamian bonefishing months, and they are terrific for both numbers and size of fish. The summer months, June, July and August, are often perceived by anglers as too hot to fish, but that's not true. The annual temperature swing is minimal when compared to areas farther north of the equator. January's average temperature is 69 degrees while July and August both average 83 degrees. The average temperature in Boston in July is 82 degrees. You'll see big schools of bonefish up to about 8 pounds in the summer, and then the big fish return in the fall.

What changes is the wind. From January through May you'll want to have a 9-weight rod, and in the summer you can scale down to a saltwater 6- or 7-weight. If you had to bring three flies, bring a Mantis Shrimp, a Gotcha and a Meko Special. Bring some more to try, and tie them with plastic eyes and bead-chain eyes around a size 6. FYI the Meko Special was developed for these waters by a Deep Water Cay guide (that's right, named Meko).

To that point, all guides are excellent, and they start their training at a young age. Which means that by the time they're 38 they've got about two decades of fishing experience under their belts. Think about it: by the time the Deep Water Cay guides reach their 40th birthday they have spent more of their lives guiding than not.

You can catch other species of fish at Deep Water Cay. Three of the smaller cays hold permit all year long. Off-shore fishing for mahi-mahi, sailfish, and tuna is solid in March, April and May. Deep Water Cay has one of the better wahoo fisheries in the tropics and the best times are between October and February.

The club recently added a number of activities if you need a day off from fishing. Scuba and hookah diving, snorkeling, kayaking, naturalist excursions, sailing and spa services are popular. Or just hang out on the beach or by the infinity pool. Large groups often rent the 4 bedroom/4 bathroom oceanfront cottages. These recently reappointed cottages feature private baths, living and dining rooms and kitchens with all new appliances. Hard phone lines are in the main lodge, and for those who must stay connected, cell service and satellite Internet is available on the island.

Legendary anglers have come to Deep Water Cay in search of bonefish, permit, mahi-mahi, sails, marlin and tuna, heroes such as Joe Brooks, A. J. McClane, Curt Gowdy, Ray Bergman, Chico Fernandez, Stu Apte, Flip Pallot, Lefty Kreh and Sandy Moret. I now know why. 🦅

Tom Keer is a freelance writer and marketing consultant who lives on Cape Cod.