

Mexican Yucatan Peninsula –trip by Bill Marts May 22 – June 9, 2007

There are two events of world import associated with the northern Yucatan Peninsula. One occurred 65 million years ago with the Chicxulub impact which is credited with the demise of the dinosaurs and much of the other life on Earth. This interruption to many of our early life forms is said to have been caused by a comet or asteroid up to 6 miles wide crashing into the northwestern part of the Yucatan Peninsula and wiping out up to 75% of earth's species on land and in the sea.

The other event does not impact the world like Chicxulub did, but is no less important to avid, big-tarpon fly fishing addicts. This is the annual spring/summer migration of big tarpon to the waters surrounding Isla Holbox, Mexico located about 150 miles east of the Chicxulub Impact area. There is more known about the 65 million year old impact than about the present day tarpon in these waters. It is my guess that a 100 pound plus tarpon jumping and crashing back into the water has about the same effect on a tarpon angler as an asteroid would have crashing into the same waters. Life changing! It was with thoughts of tangling with one of the big tarpon that I arrived in Holbox on May 23, 2007, the beginning of my trip.

My plane trip to Cancun from Redding went without problems and I landed in the brand new (two days old) terminal #3. Very modern, clean, cool and fast through customs. Very different than when I arrived the first time in Cancun in 1989. Then, it was hot, slow, smoky and not very friendly. Not any more. When exiting the terminal, a left turn just outside the door will put one in front of the "Meeting Point" bar/café to wait for the transfer agent. He arrived about 15 minutes after I did and we took off driving through small villages and jungle country side, to Chiquila (about a 2 hour drive), where a boat was waiting to take me to Isla Holbox (about 20 minutes over) across Laguna de Yalahua. There, one of the many golf carts on the island (most can be driven by anyone who can see over the steering wheel), was waiting for me. This one was part of the taxis service on the island and actually had an adult driving, for which I was thankful. It took me to the beachfront Holbox Island Fly Fishing Lodge where I was met by Luciano Govi, the manager. His English is first rate and he does an excellent of job making sure his guests are comfortable and taken care of.

I was taken to my room (one of three on the second floor). On the large veranda in front of the room, to enjoy the ocean breeze with a cold drink, a hammock, table and chairs are available. Drinks, breakfast, lunch, guided fishing, transfers, late afternoon cocktails and hors d'oeuvres are included in the package price. Dinners are on your own, but it is fun to try different places in the town and people watch around the central plaza. It gives one a chance to see how life goes on in this small fishing village. I recommend the lodge wholeheartedly.

There were other guests at the lodge who had good fishing earlier in the week, but the wind had started up since then and it looked like there was no stopping it, now. For the next two days the wind howled:

*In Holbox, the wind was a blowing
But the Margaritas were flowing
The tarpon were deep
Obviously asleep
But it was better than being home mowing.*

We tried to spot big tarpon in the laguna, and we saw two, briefly, but not long enough to get a shot at them. We stuck it out until lunch on both days I fished there, but then we went to the shallow creek and flats in the afternoon and caught speckled trout (spotted weakfish), snook, snapper, sheepshead and baby tarpon. Not exactly what I was hoping for, but considering the wind, a fun time.

On the 26th, Manuel Angulo from Campeche Tarpon Bay, drove over to pick me up and take me back to his home to sample his new fishing outfitter business around the waters of Campeche. The drive is about 6 hours. He and his family were wonderful hosts and made me feel comfortable and part of the family. He put me up in the Campeche Plaza Hotel, close to the marina where his boats are kept. The hotel is clean, cool and has a restaurant for early morning breakfasts (included in the package price). Campeche is a beautiful city of about 250,000 people, although you wouldn't guess that it has that many people. It is full of history and culture and is declared a UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) World Heritage site because it is so unique and preserved. I would have loved to spend more time hanging out there and doing some sight seeing. Manuel picked me up at 5:30AM and we went fishing. We used his 23' panga with a casting deck on the bow and padded comfortable seats for travel. He also has an 18' panga he uses. Run time to the fishing areas around Campeche are 15 minutes to 1 ½ hours. Both boats are suitable for the fishing there. Manuel accompanied me and our guide was Belito (his son Rodrigo, joined us the second day). The fishing is done in the shallow open water in front of the city for several miles and along the mangroves that line the shore to the north and east. It is a baby tarpon heaven offering lots of protection and food for them to grow big and sassy. And then, unfortunately, they move away to who knows where. There are no (or at the most, very few) big tarpon around Campeche. Also, this morning (and for the next 4 days) there were very few baby tarpon around where we could cast to them. They were deep in the Mangroves where we could not get to them. We managed to get a few, sight casting to cruising fish. There had been a real lack of rains this May and this was the reason according to Manuel, and the next two outfitters I was to fish with, that there were not more fish. When the rains come, usually in early May, the fish are all over the waters in FRONT of the mangroves and in the open water. In normal times, 20 – 40 shots at sighted fish/day, and jumping 5 - 15/day can be expected. Anglers are usually back at the hotel between 3:30 and 4:30 PM. Dinners are on your own and one can feel very safe and comfortable making your way around Campeche and its many fine restaurants. Walking around the main downtown area is very safe and/or taxis can take you to any of the good restaurants and get you back to the hotel in the evenings. The hotels also have restaurants on premises if you don't feel like going out. English is spoken at the hotels and they can help you get around.

My next host was Alejandro Hernandez from Campeche Tarpon. What a charismatic guy, a real showman. He knows how to make his guests feel welcome and special. I had dinner at his home with him and his family and I had a great time with them. He told me he had a surprise for me the next day. When on the water getting ready for the fishing, he said "I have a special fly we use here and I want you to try it." Well, he pulled out my own pattern (Bloodshot) and smiled. I asked him where he got it and he said he had it tied special. What a nice thought and gesture. I thought that was the surprise. It wasn't. We kept making our way north eventually to a little fishing village on Isla Arena. This is a brand new sport fishing area. There are cabanas (air conditioned) on the beautiful sand beach. He is starting a satellite operation to offer a few days in Campeche and a few days there. You heard it first here. He had his Tarpon van driven up there with lunch and cold drinks. And what a lunch it was, complete with a siesta in a hammock afterward. Heaven? Close to it. Then the best news, I got to go back in the van, not in the boat pounding the afternoon waves for 3 hours. I had hurt my back a few days earlier and I was not looking forward to the return trip against the wind and waves. He told me to keep this one a secret for a while. This was the secret! The other outfitters haven't found this out yet (but each is talking about it on their own). He was so charged up with showing this to me that we didn't do much fishing. He has been fishing the area for several years now and his guides know it quite well. This will be a good addition. The cabanas are nothing fancy, but are clean and cool and right on the beach.

That night I met with Miguel Encalada who owns Campeche Fly Fishing Tarpon Bay and he took me to one of the better seafood restaurants I've visited anywhere, La Pigua. It was pretty much the same story fishing with him for the next two days. We landed three tarpon. We just couldn't find them. Miguel is a gracious host and speaks very good English. None of the guides, from any of the outfitters, however, speak English. Miguel and Alejandro are both sending their guides to school and Manuel is tutoring his guides so they can at least speak fishing English and then get better with exposure to American anglers.

I believe all of them when they say that the fishing can be very good. I have talked with several friends of mine who have all had very good baby tarpon fishing here. This year, in all of the Yucatan, crazy weather has been the rule and it still is, and I am sure it is affecting the fish. There is also a lot of pressure (4 outfitters) in the area. This may add some to it. This summer will be interesting to see how the fishing unfolds. I recommend this fishery for a 4 – 7 night package with 2 to 4 days of fishing or in combination with one of the other Yucatan destinations or the new destination, Isla Arena. We will be able to combine fishing here with Holbox, The Palometa Club or Paradise Lodge. There would be a travel day between lodges. Each of the outfitters will guide on a daily basis if anglers want to make their own arrangements for travel and lodging.

Miguel drove me (about 4 hours) to Tulum on June 1, where I met Dick and Kaye Cameron, owner/manager of the Palometa Club in Punta Allen on Ascension Bay. The lodge is about an hour and a half away on a mostly graded gravel and dirt road almost fully recovered from Hurricane Wilma. The Palometa Club is nicely decorated and

colorfully painted in tropical colors. It has a small shop to sell flies, leaders, buffs, etc. The food was very good, as were the cold margaritas and snacks in the late afternoon at the outside bar/patio. There is a phone at the lodge available for calls to the US at a small charge.

The boats are panga style with two guides in each boat. One guide helps the angler while the other poles and maneuvers the boat. If it is thought to be better, one guide and an angler will get out of the boat to wade up close to permit, otherwise it is fishing out of the boat unless you want to wade-fish, then they will take you to areas suitable for this. Dick joined me on both days I fished with them. I got lots of shots at permit, but no takers on either day. I managed to get two bonefish while putting the fly in front of permit. They each had my heart revved up to the red line for an instant until I realized what I was dealing with. Fun but no cigar.

I joined in a town party for the winners of a local fishing tournament the second night, live band and all. Kaye was on the second place team. It was fun. The whole town was there for the award presentations. I am looking forward to representing The Palometa Club. They are the new guys on the block and already have a great reputation. I have no troubles with it at all. They have a very good success rate with permit. Dick runs a tight ship. The boats are privately owned by the guides and are licensed by the co operativa. Everything is legal.

They took me to Boca Paila the next day where I got into my room at the lodge, unpacked and out on a boat with guide, Chico shortly after arriving. Chico was a fairly quiet guy, but a technically good caster and guide. He showed me several permit and I got several shots with no luck. We did this until the sun disappeared behind some clouds and stayed there the remainder of the day. We then blind cast for snook for a while with no luck then called it a day. The next day was very windy, but we got a lot of shots at permit. Again, I could find no takers. In the afternoon, we saw nothing.

The lodge that housed the bar, dining area and sitting area was comfortable and was a gathering area for all of the anglers for hors d' oeuvres and drinks before dinner and tell stories. The fishing was off for everyone. Wind and clouds were causing trouble and giving everyone excuses for not getting a permit on a fly. The manager, Chico (not the guide) was very helpful. I met the owner, Ricky, briefly at dinner (he was a quiet but very personable man). Chico drove me to Tulum the next morning to meet Katy and Brian from Paradise Lodge. A great meeting place at Tulum is Don Cafeto café right on the main drag. Great coffee and good food. After lunch, we hit the road south.

It is a 3 hour drive from Tulum to Paradise Lodge. Times can be a little longer if one or more stops are made due to routine police checks of vehicles. We arrived at the lodge at about 4:30PM. In time to unpack, shower and go down to the beach palapa for hors d' oeuvres and drinks. What a beautiful setting. The lodge faces the ocean looking out at the Meso-American Barrier-Reef, the second longest barrier reef in the world and the longest in the Western hemisphere at over 600 miles long. With the almost ever-present breeze sweeping in from the ocean into the lodge it made for very comfortable sleeping

with out A/C. Unfortunately for the fishing, the breeze was on steroids and 3 – 5 foot waves were crashing over the reef. Pretty spectacular to look at and listen to (especially at night), but it did not help the fishing. The winds were from the northeast. Not a good wind for this part of the world. The Yucatan has had more than its share of ill winds from the north this spring and it has had its effect on the tarpon fishing. But as soon as it settles down and the “normal” Southeast trade winds are blowing, the fishing should break wide open. This was sort of a long way around reporting below par fishing. The bays (Espiritu Santo and Chetumal) were out because of the strong winds. It is a two hour drive to Espiritu Santo Bay, which is longer than I thought, and 1 hour and 15 minutes to Chetumal Bay, but I am told anglers still get 6 hours on the water once you are there. The tarpon were “off” in the lakes that normally contain a lot of baby tarpon and snook. My fishing was not very productive, but it was good to get out on the lakes that were somewhat protected from the winds. I did get a few shots and I had a chance to show these guides what a proper trout strike looks like (again) and, of course, not hooking the tarpon. However, after 25 years of going after tarpon and having dozens take a floating fly, only to throw it several seconds later, I finally landed a popper hooked tarpon. A little guy, but a tarpon nonetheless. That was exciting. We didn’t even see many tarpon. I don’t know why they don’t like north winds and I don’t know where they go when one blows, but they weren’t out where one could see and cast to them.

The chef at Paradise, Carolyn, thankfully, doesn’t care which way the wind blows. She always put on a good show with the meals and hors d oeuvres with a variety of foods from lobster, to chicken to sushi to beef.

I would have liked to stay a few days longer, but it wasn’t to be this time. At 5:45 AM, on June 9, the driver from the transfer company arrived to take me and 4 other guests to the Cancun airport. We arrived on time and without incident.

Although the fishing was not what I was hoping for, it was an interesting and worthwhile trip to see the fishing around Campeche and the city itself, to meet and see the people and lodge at Holbox and The Palometa Club in Punta Allen and to see the remodel work and meet the new managers at Paradise Lodge. I’ve been fishing the Yucatan for 17 years and know what it can and can’t be like, so I know the fishing will be better and I am further ahead by meeting new friends in the business and seeing their operations, and meeting several of the guests I’d like to fish with in the future.

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