



Rocky Point Permit Camp

DIY, REFINED A new kind of fly fishing lodge
on Ambergris Caye in Belize
Text and Photos by Brian Clark

Occasionally you stumble into a place at exactly the right time, both in the evolution of that particular spot and in your own journey. Tagging along with a local crew heading to Rocky Point Permit Camp on the northern tip of Ambergris Caye in northern Belize last March turned out to be serendipitous for me, and having an opportunity to explore Jeff Spiegel's latest playground shortly after it opened felt like a rare privilege to witness the emergence of a special new niche in the fly fishing travel game.

In my head, fishing access to exotic tropical locations for traveling fly anglers breaks down into a few categories. There are the ultra-local no-frills "fish camp" dives that strive for frugality; they offer no electricity, food, or guides, provide questionable bedding and sketchy toilet facilities, and make no promises other than relatively direct access to a particular fishery.

At the other end of the spectrum sit the swank all-in ultra-luxury lodges replete with elegant transfer vehicles (supposing you didn't arrive via helicopter or private jet), air-conditioned villas, sumptuous beds, warm showers, gourmet food, clever cocktails, flashy gear, fancy boats, and highly skilled multilingual guides who insist on choosing every fly, tying every knot, spotting every fish, and coaching every cast.

Many flats lodges fall somewhere between those extremes, and most offer excellent service for the ardent angler. The rooms are clean, the beds are comfy, the food is tasty, the drinks are cold, the pangas are reliable enough, and the guides are competent. The furnishings aren't quite opulent, but it still feels like an indulgence for many of us. Most of those keep the focus squarely on the fishing, and the hosts work hard to keep you safe and put you on fish.

In many places it's also possible to go the mid-tier DIY route: book a vacation rental through VRBO or Airbnb, do your own driving and shopping and cooking, and try to figure out the fishery yourself. Having electricity, air-con, a flush toilet, shower, refrigerator, and a place to prepare food is a massive step up from the fish camps, but this approach requires logistical prowess and substantial advance planning. Even if the fundamentals go smoothly – securing local transport, procuring groceries, making meals, etc. – all of those activities consume time that could be spent on the water. Most challenging of all, trustworthy local fishing intel is scant and rarely addresses the most important issue: where the heck should you fish?

Rocky Point Permit Camp mixes all of those elements and strikes a balance between upscale lodge and DIY adventure that's pitch-perfect for a particular kind of angler.

Me, in fact.



Rocky Point Permit Camp's main lodge and cabanas are located in the clearing just to the left of the crease, roughly above this caption

Like most upscale lodges, the staff at RPPC will help with booking your trip, and they handle the local transfer to the property once you've gotten yourself to San Pedro (more on the geography below). They take care of all the food and drink, so you don't need to burn fishing time to shop or make grub – and the meals are easily on par with the full-fare operations. The cabins are new and very clean, and the beds are comfortable. The whole property runs on solar power, and there's decent Wi-Fi. The place is well-maintained and eminently civilized, and Jeff is a warm, genuine, generous, and altogether personable and professional host. Best of all, he knows where to fish.

Now for the contrasts: no air-conditioning, no hot showers, no power boats, and no guides. Sure, one or more of those will be deal-breakers for some anglers, perhaps many. But like I said above, RPPC hits just the right notes for the audience Jeff has tuned his operation to serve. If you've already learned that taking a cold shower before bed after a sweaty day of fishing in the tropics is absolutely the best way to sleep when there's no air-con, you're halfway there. If you're an experienced saltwater angler with an independent streak, good eyes, a competent casting stroke, and solid knots . . . well, just wait until you check out the camp's location as seen from space.

Why wait? Scan this QR Code or type in this URL to see the location on Google Maps: maps.app.goo.gl/97qhUrpkvowDn8iQ8 (or use these coordinates: 18°06'51.4"N 87°50'54.4"W)



See how undeveloped the northern parts of Ambergris Caye are? That won't last forever, unfortunately; the resorts creep farther up-island from San Pedro every year. But for now, RPPC offers virtues that even many of the most palatial lodges can't claim: seclusion and solitude. There just aren't that many places – fresh or salt – that offer easy accessibility for traveling fly anglers where you can expect to see pretty much nobody all day.

Jeff's really onto something here. Because they aren't providing guides and maintaining boats, the prices at RPPC are dramatically lower than the full-service lodges, almost down into the upper reaches of the VRBO / Airbnb league for the pure DIY angler. No guide tips, either. Not only does RPPC offer what are arguably the most cost-effective fly fishing excursions in the tropics, the opportunity for unmitigated self-directed exploration of utterly spectacular, diverse, and unpressured water on both sides of the island is a tremendous draw for veteran salty anglers.

I'll admit it: I don't always enjoy being guided. Mind you, I'm not going to turn down a guided trip to chase permit or tarpon – I'm not a complete idiot. And it isn't that I dislike guides or would undermine the importance of guiding to the community. Quite the opposite: I have immense respect for the hard work that guides do, often thankless and always underpaid. I know without a doubt that I couldn't do it myself, and I'm immensely grateful that those folks are out there doing backbreaking work as the front-line evangelists recruiting new souls for our sport.

For me it's a phase-in-the-flyfishing-life thing. I've been playing at the salty fly game for a few decades now, much of it as an unpaid pusher at the back of the boat. I'm comfortable rigging gear, choosing flies, tying knots, studying maps and picking spots, driving and poling various boats, spotting fish, making casts when I think I should make them, and working out how to feed fish on my own. Do I catch as many fish as I would with an experienced local guide who knows the best spots and can serve up the special sauce? *Not even close*. How important is that? *Not very*.

I'm no longer mad enough at the fish to feel a compulsive need to catch 'em all. Instead, pulling all the elements together under my own steam is a delicious challenge, exactly the kind of problem solving brain candy that hooked

me on fly fishing in the first place. Working it out for myself, on my own schedule, at my own speed, exploring the places that intrigue me – that's very much where I'm at in my personal fly fishing journey, and it's incredibly gratifying when it all comes together. No set schedules, no rush, no posturing, no pressure, no exasperated gesticulations, nobody worried that I won't tip if I don't catch fish. I'm certain that I'm not alone in enjoying fishing alone.

Doing that in my own backyard on the Texas coast is great, but getting an opportunity to test my mettle chasing permit on the famed flats of Belize? That's epic. And that's Rocky Point Permit Camp.

Before we talk more about the fishery, let's do a little backstory on Jeff and how the RPPC came to be.

Jeff Spiegel grew up in central Connecticut and got into the music world young. He started a record label in his dorm room during college in the Twin Cities; he was recording music for friends, booking tours, selling records, building credibility during the heyday of the pop-punk revival and grunge movements in the 90s. After his start in the Midwest, he went west and became a record label manager in San Francisco. Yes, he's partied with rock stars.

Naturally, with college degrees in English and history and work experience in the music industry, the obvious next

*Juvenile Tarpon in the “backyard” at Rocky Point Permit Camp on Belize’s Ambergris Caye
Check the Fall 2024 issue of OTFM for a review of the Bauer SLT reel seen here, and look
back to Summer 2024 for an in-depth review of this Winston Air 2 MAX fly rod
Photo by Jesse Males*





Left: Jeff holding court at the main lodge

Above: an untitled permit painting by Magnus Sodamin that hangs in the dining room of the main lodge

Below: one of the double-occupancy cabanas

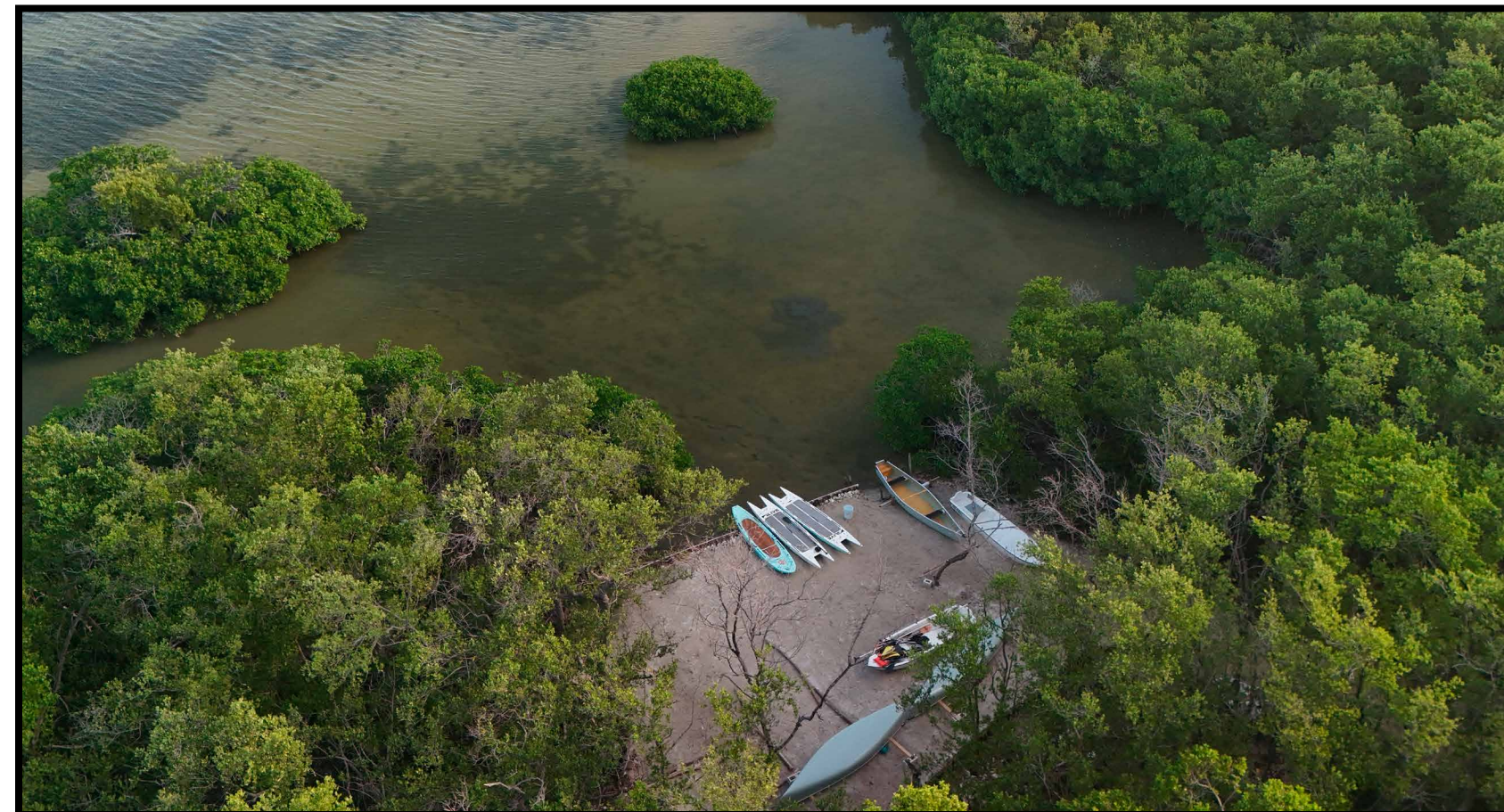
Opposite: the dock on the lagoon side that serves as the “backporch” for launching into the backyard



choice was a move to Belize for a career in hospitality. He and his then-wife bought a house north of San Pedro on Ambergris Caye and spent two years building a resort from the ground up. It was called “Azul” and featured a restaurant called “Rojo”, a fun play on colors associated with the Belizean flag (and the two main Belizean political parties). She worked the front of the house, he was the chef; they ran it for a decade and grew the business substantially – no small feat for an operation which could initially be reached only by water taxi. Fortunately, San Pedro was growing rapidly and tourism was on the upswing; once the road came along, things got seriously busy. Rojo became known as one of the best restaurants on the island.

By 2014, it was time for something different. In order to source produce for Rojo, Jeff had already purchased a farm property at Cayo Frances, a former Mayan site located on a quiet cove on the western side of the lagoons. He started building, and by 2016 the camp was open for business: a main lodge, two cabanas, a bunkhouse, outdoor bar and dining area, and a staff building. Momentum was growing by 2019 – just in time for the COVID lockdowns. Borders closed, the airports shut down most international flights, curfews went into effect, and Jeff’s fledgling tourism operation went completely dark for over a year.

On the upside, the fishing was great! Cayo Frances regained traction after the pandemic lockdowns eased, but Jeff already had his eye on property even more remote and much farther north. He and his crew started building what



would become Rocky Point Permit Camp in mid-2022, and it opened for business late in 2024. Although he'd planned to run both operations in parallel, an opportunity to sell Cayo Frances emerged right around the time the logistical strain of bouncing between two relatively hard-to-access places was starting to become a grind. He's now dedicated to RPPC and rightfully proud of what he and his team have built.

RPPC's weekly capacity is six anglers – just right for the operation, and for the fishery. As you can see from the map and aerial photos, RPPC sits on a narrow isthmus where both the beach flats and the lagoons on the west side of the island lie within easy walking distance. The fish in the “backyard” (as the lagoons are known) are thought to be residents, so it's important to limit fishing pressure. Fortunately, it's not easy to get a power boat into the lagoons from the west side of the island, and there's plenty of water back there. It's an extremely diverse fishery, offering everything from sandy flats and areas with abundant seagrass to narrow cuts, tight mangrove islands, and shorelines with infinite places for ambush predators to hide. Species-wise, it's home to plentiful bonefish, juvenile tarpon, permit, and snook.

Direct access to the lagoons is one advantage of staying at RPPC, but here's the real power move: the lodge makes a variety of personal watercraft available for guests wanting to explore the backyard. There are several SUPs and a Skanu, but most anglers pair up and paddle one of the three Backwater 15 canoes made by Wenonah. These are stable boats that pole and paddle well, although the most common approach is to team-paddle to fishy areas in the lagoons, then get out and wade. The RPPC team will provide waterproof maps, load you up with lunch and water in a cooler, help you launch, and keep track of you via Rockie Talkie (see review earlier in this issue). Note that wind is often a limiting factor when fishing the lagoons, both for transportation (paddling or poling) and casting.

Speaking of wind and wading, we turn now to the crown jewel of RPPC: the flats in the front yard on the beach side. Like the backyard, the front yard is also fenced off from boat traffic. As can be seen on the satellite images, RPPC is neatly tucked into a stretch of beach where the barrier reef touches the island both to the north (at Rocky Point) and the south. As such, the flats inside the reef are completely

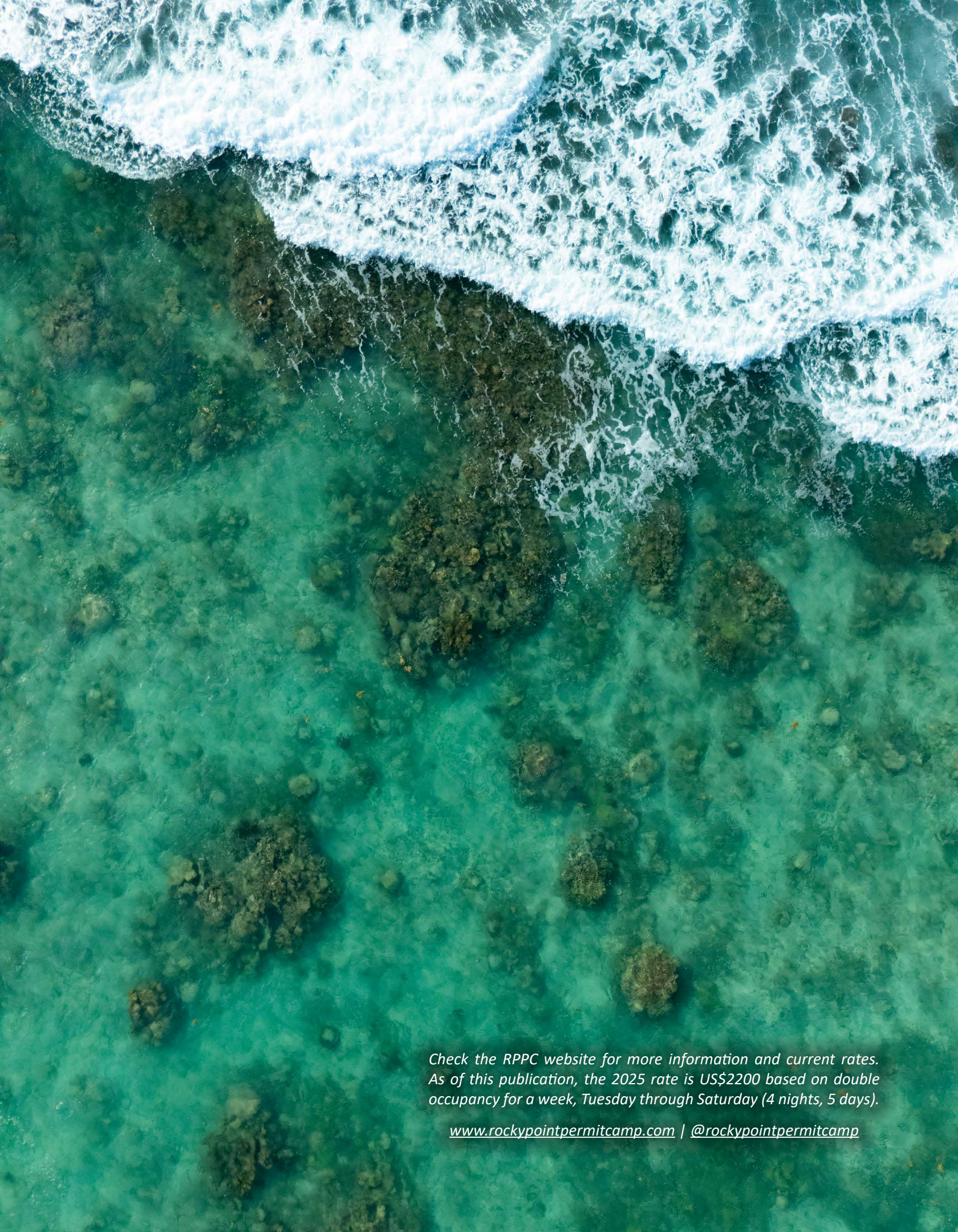
protected from boat traffic. Ever wanted unfettered access to miles of pristine permit flats? Here ya go.

The primary target species in the front yard are permit and bonefish, although both juvenile and migratory tarpon can sometimes be found. Triggers are common (and frustrating), as are barracuda and puffers.

A gentle reality check is merited here: although RPPC offers affordable and almost unparalleled access to two gorgeous and largely unpressured saltwater fisheries, make no mistake – this is fly fishing on hard mode. You might catch a calm day, but it's safer to assume that the wind will be blowing at least 15kts. The walking is challenging, and paddling or poling into the wind is real work, even if you're skilled and fit. The permit and bonefish aren't harder to see at RPPC than anywhere else, but that's already a high bar – especially when you're wading, and boating is prohibited on the front side because it's a live coral conservation zone within the Bacalar Chico Marine Reserve. Landing some saltwater fish solo can also be challenging, whether you're on foot or in a boat. Fishing solo while poling or paddling a small watercraft in the wind adds several more levels of difficulty. It'll help to arrive with at least some solo kayak or skiff experience and a practiced system for managing paddles, push poles, fly rods, fly line, flies, and anchors – but the truth is, it's still tough.

For these reasons, many RPPC guests fish with partners who can help to mitigate some of that chaos. But even a great partner can't help with your casting, so it's imperative to have practiced casting heavy saltwater rods in windy conditions where minimizing false casts is a high priority. Take some casting lessons and practice regularly!

I'm not saying that inexperienced saltwater anglers wouldn't enjoy a week at RPPC. The drive up from San Pedro (in golf carts) is interesting and fun and scenic, the scenery around the lodge is jaw-dropping, the gourmet food can be appreciated by anyone, and in some seasons there are sea turtles nesting on the beach! But the operation will appeal most to experienced, cost-conscious saltwater anglers keen to test their skills in a pristine fishery supported by a friendly, helpful staff offering great food and a safe, comfortable base of operations. If that's your thing, RPPC is breaking new ground in the DIY flats fly fishing travel niche. 🐟



Check the RPPC website for more information and current rates. As of this publication, the 2025 rate is US\$2200 based on double occupancy for a week, Tuesday through Saturday (4 nights, 5 days).

www.rockypointpermitcamp.com | [@rockypointpermitcamp](https://www.instagram.com/rockypointpermitcamp)

Eco-Museum Belize

by Brian Clark and Catherine Yao

Thanks to a series of unanticipated but fortuitous encounters with fishy strangers, our latest trip to Belize took on more local flair than previous visits. One of the best recommendations we received from our new friends was to visit a relatively new attraction on Ambergris Caye, the **Eco-Museum Belize** run by Mito Paz. It's located roughly in the middle of the island, more or less halfway between San Pedro and Rocky Point. This accidental side quest turned out to be exceptionally educational and enjoyable, and meeting Mito was a highlight of the entire trip. If you're making a run up to Rocky Point, plan to stop off along the way and visit Eco-Museum Belize.

Guillermo 'Mito' Paz was born in San Pedro in the late 1950s, back when the small village served local fishermen rather than tourists. After receiving a BS in Biology from Florida International University (FIU) in Miami, he returned to San Pedro and joined the family hospitality business. Not only has Mito witnessed the full trajectory of tourism on Ambergris Caye, he's written the definitive book on the subject: the *San Pedro History of Tourism*, available at the San Pedro Tourism Center for BZ\$30.

Mito also became active in local scientific and environmental education initiatives, eventually founding Green Reef in 1996, the first conservation organization in San Pedro. He went on to co-author yet another definitive tome, the *Field Guide to the Natural History of Bacalar Chico National Park and Marine Reserve* published in 2008. You'll find a copy of this book in the cabanas at Rocky Point; it's the go-to authority on the region's species, be they on land, in the water, or in the air. It's hard to understate the importance of this work.

Left: Mito discussing the importance of Queen Conch fishing to Ambergris Caye, illustrated here in a captivating painting by a local artist

Below: the origin of the name "Belize" turns out to be a minor etymological mystery with a number of competing explanations; a few of them are shown here along with the years they were first officially recorded

The Eco-Museum opened in 2024, and it's set in a shady grove across from Mito's house. It tells the history of Ambergris Caye from the time of the Mayans through colonization and the Golden Age of Piracy, then into the present via a chronologically progressive series of informative and tasteful exhibits built around a well-maintained walkway that winds through a lush ecological park featuring a diverse range of local species, some of which are endangered. The displays include artifacts, artwork, maps, photographs, hands-on exhibits, and more.

Although we were limited on time and couldn't do one of the longer programs (see below), Mito treated us to a tutorial on how to choose, husk, shell, and crack a coconut in order to extract the water, then walked us through traditional processes for harvesting coconut meat and making coconut milk. After a bit of work we were treated to delicious glasses of lightly sweetened iced coconut milk – with a dash of something stronger, for good measure.

In addition to guiding the walking tour through the Eco-Museum, Mito offers a number of other activities, including cooking classes, traditional crafts, birdwatching, and more. The admission fees paid by tourists fund maintenance for the museum and outreach activities, including historical, cultural, and environmental education for San Pedro's school children.

Reservations are highly recommended, but Mito is extremely responsive. Look up "Eco-Museum Belize" on Facebook or contact Mito via WhatsApp on +501 630-0152.



Above: a Yellow-billed Cacique enjoying a treat thanks to our hard labor with the coconuts

Top: a prominent deity in Mayan cosmology, Chaac Uayab Xoc is the god of fishing; his role is mostly benevolent, but try to avoid falling out of the boat

Middle: a display of local herbs traditionally held to have certain medicinal properties

Right: vintage bottles recovered on Ambergris Caye

