

COLOMBIA'S
PACIFIC
PARADISE

DARIEN LODGE IS AN UNEXPLORED
MULTI-SPECIES BLUEWATER
ADVENTURE



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PHOTOGRAPHY BY JESS MCGLOTHLIN



FORGET EVERYTHING YOU HAVE HEARD ABOUT COLOMBIA. A lot has changed over the last couple of decades. Most of the drug cartels have been undone. Today, Colombia tourism is gaining traction and visitors get to enjoy untouched beauty, friendly people,

and rich culture.

Colombia is one of the most biologically diverse countries in the world and offers an immense array of landscapes and geography. There is the jungle of the Orinoco Basin and Amazon Region, the dense rainforest of the Darien Gap that connects with Panama and links the American continents, and of course two coastlines. Colombia is the only South American country bordered by both the Caribbean and the Pacific Ocean.

Colombia is a fly-fishing paradise. Its jungles thrive with peacock bass, and both coasts offer outstanding saltwater fly fishing. I recently had the pleasure of visiting Darien Lodge on the Pacific Coast, where the rugged shoreline stretches for more than 500 miles and is free of any major infrastructure. The lodge is located 10 miles south of the Panama border and the famous Tropic Star Lodge on Piñas Bay.

I first experienced this fish-rich coast more than 30 years ago. My wife and I were shackled in the tiny fishing village of Jaqué, Panama, on the border with Colombia. It was one of our first “winging-it” trips. We got our butts kicked on that adventure. Nevertheless, we learned this was a mecca for offshore and inshore fly fishing for yellowfin tuna, dorados, sailfish, and a wide range of inshore species from snook to roosterfish.

Despite our desire to return, much time had passed. My curiosities took me around the world over the years. Finally, my chance to return came when friend Ben Furimsky invited me on a trip. Hours later I was swayed by the owner and founder of Darien Lodge, Alberto Mejia or “Beto” as he’s known.

In May I was on a flight from Medellín, Colombia to the coastal village of Bahía Solano with Ben and friends Jess McGlothlin, Scott Wessels, and Anthony and Tony Marrese. Upon landing we were greeted by Edward, our guide and lodge host. After breakfast and a rundown of the itinerary and fishing details, Edward led us to the boats, which were ready for action.

The tranquil Bahía Solano sits 66 miles south of Darien Lodge. Rather than run two hours north to drop off our luggage and then

go fishing, Edward had us rig up right at the dock so we could fish along our way to the lodge. I rigged my Winston 12-weight with a sinking line and a size 3/0 white Clouser—it’s my standard starting setup for blue water.

The boats are 36-foot center consoles and handle two or three fly anglers. I fished with Ben and Jess. Edward was our guide, along with Captain Wilmer. The ride was comfortable, and due to the length of these boats one angler can cast from the bow and another at the same time from the stern. Once we got in rhythm all three of us fished at the same time.

BLUEWATER FISHING

May is excellent for fly fishing. This is when huge schools of sardines migrate south, forming bait balls. True to schedule, they were there and we found our first activity only ten minutes into our ride.

Beto has been fishing this area for nine years. Exploring the fly fishing began five years ago. Bluewater fly fishing is an art unto itself, and takes time to master. Finding fish is one thing, but positioning a boat to cast a fly at a speedy bluewater predator is another. Beto’s crew is still learning. First we ran over the feeding frenzy, and the fish spooked. They resurfaced a quarter mile away. Luckily, after a few tries, Wilmer cut the engine just right and we glided to within casting range. I knocked off the first fish of the trip, a feisty little skipjack tuna.

The craggy coastline is stunning. Most of this uncharted shoreline consists of jagged rock outcroppings. Some protrude from the shore, while others form nearby islands. The mainland is the Serranía del Baudó Mountains, and the lush green foliage creates a one-of-a-kind backdrop for saltwater fly fishing. There are river mouths with beaches, and if you travel upriver, there are mangrove swamps and tarpon that, over generations, have worked their way through the Panama Canal and now reproduce on the Pacific Coast.

Though fishing pressure is minimal, Bahía Solano is a fishing village. Despite more bait balls, we traveled an hour from town toward the lodge. We could see our friends working frantically on busting fish. Everywhere you looked there were fish. This time Wilmer eased us in perfectly, and on Ben’s first cast I watched a 20-pound yellowfin tuna go completely airborne and then land directly on top of his blue and white popper.

Ben went tight and his 12-weight looked more like a toothpick than the broomstick all 12-weights are. In my opinion, pound-for-pound, yellowfin tuna are the hardest-fighting fish on the planet. Even if your drag is tight, they rip you deep into the backing at the speed of light. Ben is a fit and experienced angler, but the torpedo nearly pulled him over the gunwales several times, and it took him 15 minutes to land it.

That was only the start. During the afternoon we fished at least a dozen more bait balls with tuna working hard. I wasn’t keeping score but I’ll bet between the three of us we boated eight yellowfins. Most were in the 18- to 22-pound range. And trust me, those are large enough!



BUILDING IN PARADISE

As Beto dialed in the fishing of this magnificent coast, he saw the potential. He had to share this unique fishery with the world. In 2021 he began the daunting task of building Darien Lodge. There are no roads to bring people here—the only practical way to make it to the lodge is by boat. Incredibly, all Beto’s building materials were carried in by horses. The process took almost two years, and he opened the doors in May 2023.



With our muscles still burning from battling tunas, we were glad to be welcomed to the lodge with cold towels and well-earned fresh coconut water to quench our thirst. We tossed our bags in our top-notch rooms and returned to the deck, where there is a swimming pool. It's hot here. The lodge is close to the equator, and the freshwater pool feels splendid after each angling day.

Every morning, coffee is ready by 5:30 A.M. You may try to sleep longer, but the serenade of birds and jungle critters gets most curious anglers up. Mornings in the jungle are not quiet. Breakfast is served before 6:30, and fishing starts at 7 A.M.

I concluded midway through our week that anytime you wanted to find bait balls with yellowfin tuna crashing them, you could. Our first couple of mornings, that's exactly what we did. Usually by 10 A.M. we needed a break from the hard battles. I'm serious—nothing tests you or your tackle like yellowfin tuna. After we were exhausted from catching them, we explored for other species.

One morning Edward suggested blind casting along the rocky shoreline. Being a species connoisseur, I was excited. There are numerous inshore fish types in this nook of the Pacific. While continuing with the 12-weight was recommended thanks to tackle-busting cubera snappers, the more casts you make, the more fish you catch. Such effort with a 12-weight rod will wear down anyone. Unfortunately for me, I'm currently dealing with at least one torn rotator cuff, so I dropped to a 10-weight rod and an intermediate line, and took my chances.

Scott Wessels switched with Jess and joined Ben and me. It was fun because neither Ben nor Scott had done this type of fly fishing.

I was teaching ichthyology class because we caught a number of interesting species, including flag cabrilla, Panama graysby, Mexican hogfish, yellow snappers, striped pargo, giant hawkfish, and bluefin trevally. I caught two new (for me) fish species—the orangeside triggerfish and the spotted rose snapper. There are 40 species of triggerfish worldwide, and I've now caught 11 of them on a fly. Those two fish brought my total count of fish species caught on fly up to 458.

Every fish in the vicinity of a sardine bait ball partakes in the feast. There was one day where several breath-stealing 25-foot-long whale sharks were in the middle of the bait balls balancing on their tails. In one swoosh they rise upward, mouth open wide, and explode through the surface, inhaling hundreds of sardines at a time.

Other visitors to the bait balls include Pacific sailfish and of course dorados. While most fly anglers attract sails by trolling teasers, at Darien Lodge we had opportunities to sight cast to them while drifting. I hooked four, but each time it was with either my 10- or 12-weight. There was never time to grab the 14-weight we had rigged with a tandem-hook billfish popper. My single-hook tuna flies drew strikes, but I never landed one. The spectacular sails jumped several times before spitting my fly.

MULLET SNAPPERS

One particular phenomenon that had me dreaming about Colombia occurs when hungry mullet snappers (*Lutjanus aratus*)

The virtually untapped sport fishery on the Pacific Coast of Colombia is stable year round, both inshore and offshore. While some species are more prolific at certain times of year, at Darien Lodge there is always world-class fishing. The last of the notorious drug cartels was dismantled in 2012, and this stunning destination is eager to welcome visitors. Forget what you have heard about Colombia and be among the first fly fishers to explore this pristine corner of the world!

overtake the tuna bait ball blitzes. I once experienced such carnage off the Galapagos. I'll never forget it. The ocean turned red. The red was the color of hundreds of attacking snappers. I launched flies into the turmoil and came up empty handed. How, I'll never know, but that failure had me longing for a redo.

We searched for the snapper spectacle daily. When we were surrounded by feeding tunas, I didn't cast because if the snappers showed up after I was hooked to a tuna, I'd have no chance. Trust me, it was hard to just watch Ben and Scott fighting tunas, although they were sweating profusely and it looked like hard work. I stood by with my rod, ready and waiting for the red mullet snappers to appear.

On our second-to-last day, the mullet snappers finally showed. We were drifting between two islands. On the bow, Scott and I were waiting for action, enjoying a Colombian cold one. Ben held the stern. Our lines were out and ready. About that time, seabirds swooped in. A bait ball churned to the surface as a red glow of mullet snappers attacked from below. Not a tuna in sight—a textbook situation.

Sometimes things go wrong when chaos occurs. It doesn't matter how good you are with a fly rod, or how much experience you have. When big fish ambush you in a surprise feeding fury, it's hard to execute.

There was a slippery spot on the bow of our 36-foot center console—the one smooth surface on the entire boat. As I leaped to my feet to start fishing, my left foot planted squarely on that slippery surface, and I fell in the middle of my casting stroke.

We don't know why, but Ben yelled: "Nice! Jeff's hooked up."

Not exactly hooked up, Ben, but down on the deck. Sitting on my butt, I continued casting as I pulled myself back up. Thinking I was hooked up, Scott started casting from the middle of the boat. Our lines tangled instantly. Meanwhile, Ben's line went tight.

"Fish on!" he roared.

Luckily, Scott and I managed to free our lines. Mine was still a mess, but Scott got his fly in the water.

"On!" he shouted.

Finally, I had my fly headed directly toward a massive and feverishly feeding mullet snapper. My concoction landed with a splat,

and the toothy jaws grabbed my fly right before my eyes. I strip-set with all I had. And again. And again. The snapper was gliding toward me the whole time, and I never came tight. Last I saw, the fish wandered off into the glare. He must have spit the fly. I'd missed my chance and the blitz was over.

By now Ben and Scott were doubled over—both of them attached to dream fish. These snappers pull so hard at first that it's shocking, but they don't run far like tuna. No doubt these two bullies were diving for the rocks, but we were in 150 feet of water. Despite both brutes being over 30 pounds, they ran out of steam before reaching bottom. Soon Ben and Scott both had their prizes.

Mullet snappers are impressive creatures. They're more elongated than most snapper species, and their red coloration with horizontal stripes is striking. And look at the size! That was it for the day. Maybe I'd get one tomorrow.

THE RED GLOW

On the final day our captain was the lodge owner Beto himself, with his mate Grigio. We returned to where we'd left off the previous night. The Pacific was calm and the sky clear. We crossed our fingers for a breeze to knock down the rising heat.

Things were quiet. But even when it's quiet on Colombia's Pacific Coast, the yellowfins play. Across the horizon we could see individuals and pairs swirling, along with rainbow runners sending baitfish leaping for their lives. Ben and Scott landed a couple each. I nabbed a yellowfin, and swore to myself it was my last for this trip.

At noon we spotted the first bait ball. A few birds were circling. Beto fired up the engine and eased the boat in their direction. Then it happened. The sea exploded and the sardine killing began. And we spotted that red glow we were hoping for.

Ben and Scott gave me the first cast and watched and cheered me on. I launched, and the fly landed perfectly in front of a scary-size mullet snapper. My concentration was intense. There was no panic, and I avoided mistakes. But just as the behemoth snapper opened his mouth to eat my fly, the biggest yellowfin tuna of the week came out of nowhere and snatched it away.

Of course, the last thing I wanted was a tuna when the mullet snappers were busting bait. But I saw the width of that tuna's back, and the pectoral fins, tip to tip, were easily 2 feet apart. So I wasn't bummed—I was ready to take on what turned out to be my largest yellowfin on fly!

Beto saw it. Ben saw it. We all knew that this tuna was twice the size of any we'd seen all week. The fight began with a display of line and backing stealing we couldn't believe. It wasn't a 50-yard run or a 100-yard run. This yellowfin tried to take it all. In less than a minute this submarine was over 200 yards straight down.

When you've been in the industry forever, you often find yourself testing prototype fly-fishing tackle. My test model reel had been put through rigors few reels could survive throughout the week. The attractive blue reel was outstanding. But this time it weakened.

The handle seized, and the drag slipped.

It took me 30 minutes to get this muscular freight train to the boat, and that was with full pressure, mostly applied with my hand literally rotating the spool manually. It was excruciating. I was so relieved when Grigio got hold of this fish. The only problem, however, was that he was too heavy to lift and Grigio dropped him. The oversize yellowfin ran again.

I was in agony at this point, but held on. Beto suggested that we gaff him on the next pass.

“No big deal,” he said. “Fresh sashimi tonight, and tuna steaks to go with.”

But something about this fish made me say no. This animal was determined to live, and I was going to do my best to release him.

I say it occasionally: “Miracles happen in fly fishing.” And in a sense this tuna was a miracle: We landed him despite a fried reel and an overcooked angler. Ten minutes after our first attempt, Grigio got a BogaGrip in the mouth and lifted by the tail. The fly-rod fish of a lifetime, landed without a gaff!

The tuna loaded the Boga to 38 pounds. My fly was barely hooked. I yanked it before the tuna could fight back and stick the laser-sharp metal in me. You don’t manage a beast like this easily for photos. Grigio set the thunder in my lap, and I hung on for dear life. We cranked some pics and then, with the fish still strong, I released him. A personal best yellowfin on the fly. Now I was done.

We finished the day without another chance at snappers, but I was okay with that. You can’t win them all, and that’s what drives

me to keep fly fishing. We wrapped it up around 5 P.M. and ended an amazing visit to Darien Lodge with cocktails around the pool and a fantastic meal.

I’m sure we hardly scratched the surface here in terms of what you can find on Colombia’s rugged and beautiful Pacific Coast. I must return. And it’s easy. We did not even try for roosterfish, as I had mullet snapper fever, but Beto has photos of many 30-pound+ roosters caught by blind casting around the rocky shoreline or by using a teaser and a bait-and-switch technique. The best time of year for roosterfish is March through June.

Colombia’s proximity to the U.S. makes travel easy. The next day we made the short flight back to Medellin, Colombia, and enjoyed an overnight in the city. Medellin is a safe and beautiful modern city, full of fine restaurants and walkways. The next night everyone was home.

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You can follow Jeff’s global fly-fishing adventures, exploits, tips, advice, photography, and storytelling at jeffcurrier.com.

RECOMMENDED GEAR

Bluewater fly fishing requires heavyweight tackle. Most of the fish here are big, and even the small ones pull hard. Don’t bother with rods lighter than 10-weight. Honestly, 12-weights are the way to go. For my next trip I’ll bring two 12-weights, one with an intermediate line and a popper and the other with a fast-sinking line and the heaviest Clouser Minnow I can tie.

WINSTON / AIR 2 MAX 9-FOOT 4-PIECE 12-WEIGHT FLY ROD / \$1,245

BAUER / RX 7 11/12/13 / \$925

SCIENTIFIC ANGLERS / BIG WATER TAPER INTERMEDIATE 450-GRAIN / \$100

SCIENTIFIC ANGLERS / BIG WATER TAPER MAX SINK 700-GRAIN / \$100

COSTA / WITH YOUR FAVORITE FRAME AND COPPER LENSES / \$240

SIMMS / DRY CREEK ROLLTOP BACKPACK / \$200

YETI / PANGA 100-LITER WATERPROOF DUFFEL / \$400

KATE’S REEL FOOD BARS / WHITE CHOCOLATE MACADAMIA 12-PACK / \$33

AFUERA COFFEE / PACIFIC BREEZE MEDIUM ROAST



BOOK YOUR DESTINATION

Fly from Miami to Medellin, Colombia, where a Darien Lodge representative will pick you up and take you to the Diez Hotel. Enjoy your evening on the town. It’s safe to walk around at night, and there are plenty of good restaurants and bars. The next morning you’ll be transported to the local airport, and 45 minutes later the fishing begins. Learn more at:

FISHCOLOMBIA.COM/DARIEN-LODGE

