

Tabory on Strippers:28 Yukon Pike:64 L.A. Carp:94

TEN BUCKS
PER YEAR (EST. 1988)

The Drake

FOR THOSE WHO FISH



INSIDE: Punta Allen; 461 days of flyfishing; Justin Rea; Michigan dam removals; Nevada trout; Florida snook; recreation rigoff; first-year guiding; Georgia redfish; AK steelhead; tidal carping; smallie issues; GTs in Oman, and celebrating Silas Goodrich Day!

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GUIDES TAKING CLIENTS OUT FROM PUNTA ALLEN'S ICONIC BOAT DOCK.

End of the Road

What does the future hold for Punta Allen? BY TOM BIE

DRIVING SOUTH on Mexico's Highway 307 out of Cancun, visitors will spend an hour or two passing the mega-resorts along the Riviera Maya before turning left at Tulum, where everything suddenly changes. The scenery shifts to roadside restaurants, nightclubs, beachfront cabanas, and pharmacies selling low-cost knockoffs of Viagra and Cialis. The southern end of Route 15 then passes through a pair of stone gates marking the entrance to the Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve, where it all changes again: jungle surroundings, an occasional peak at the sea, and the most bone-rattling byway in the Yucatan. (A review from Trip Adviser: "They convinced us to take the Punta Allen tour. I would NEVER do that again. The road is horrible and beat us to death." *New York Times* writer Tessa Melvin once called it "a road paved mostly in theory.")

Sian Ka'an roughly translates in Mayan to "where heaven begins." Hellish road notwithstanding, it certainly seemed like heaven to Bill Huffman when he first arrived there in the early 2000s and discovered the village at the end of it: Punta Allen (PA). In a way, he's never left. "I spent a few days fishing while staying at the Sol Caribe, and I just fell in love with the town," Huffman says. "I was teaching in Aspen at the time and wanted to start taking winters off, so that's what I did." Huffman still spends several months each winter in PA, kayaking and fishing and cooking up ways to make the remote community of some 500 people more livable for the residents. He has become a fixture in town, his name gracing the walls of the "campo deportivo" soccer field he helped build in 2010. The idea came to him while he was watching local kids play, and noticed that they needing to stop the game every

time an overzealous striker sent the ball into the Caribbean.

Lily Bertram first came to PA in 2003 to work at the Cuzan Guesthouse—the first hotel in town, and one of the first fishing lodges. She was 23 years old. Bertram now owns Kay Fly Fishing Lodge with her husband, Jose, and she believes the incredibly unkept road helps keep Punta Allen protected. "As much as we lament that it batters locals' vehicles every trip to Tulum," Bertram says, "without it, PA would just be an extension of Tulum. It helps keep out the riffraff." Like all parents, Lily and Jose want the best for their kids, and being able to provide them with a good education in a safe environment is a high priority. "We're very fortunate that the town is still safe for our children," says Bertram. "I can send our two kids to the store and not worry about their safety."

As recently as 2016, the local schools didn't have bathrooms with running water, or even doors for privacy. This certainly surprised Neville Orsmond, owner of Thomas & Thomas Fly Rods, who was visiting Punta Allen on a hosted family trip with Yellow Dog Flyfishing's Ian Davis. During a tour of the school, Orsmond's daughter needed to use the bathroom. After seeing the state of the facilities, Orsmond asked Mike Ledezma, then manager of Grand Slam Fishing Lodge, why they were in such poor condition. Ledezma told him that the bathrooms hadn't been functioning for years. Back at the lodge that evening, Orsmond and Davis held an impromptu sale of their fishing gear, auctioning it off to the other families on the trip and donating the proceeds toward fixing the school's bathrooms. The improvised event was so successful that it led to the founding of a permanent entity later that same year: the Yellow Dog Community and Conservation Foundation (YDCCF).

Davis and Yellow Dog co-owner Jim Klug had been discussing ways to better assist the communities that have helped make

their company a success. But in truth, both already knew the answer because they had seen it play out in Montana for most of their adult lives: Establish authentic relationships with guides and their families, and do everything possible to ensure that those guides' livelihoods are supported and protected.

YDCCF started an annual fishing tournament in Punta Allen, and over the next several years, the event raised tens of thousands of dollars toward the school's needs, from ceiling fans and academic supplies to a palapa for social gatherings and more consistent sources of power—a constant battle in the remote village. What YDCCF didn't know at the time is that their fundraising efforts would soon become all the more crucial.

In February 2019, newly elected Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador announced that the Mexican government would no longer be funding NGOs, which in 2018 it had given more than \$320 million—much of it aimed at helping small communities like Punta Allen. Now these towns would be relying mostly on non-government grants, or private donations from groups like YDCCF.

A large part of Punta Allen's charm lies in its remoteness, being sheltered from casual visitors by sitting thirty-three miles down that potholed, wash-boarded road. During rainy season, the drive can take five hours or more. This can obviously be a challenge, but the more difficult Punta Allen is to reach, the less likely it is for developers to take it over. Most residents and business-owners want to keep it this way.

Daniel Marquez is one of those people. Originally from Austin, Marquez happened to be in Punta Allen in 2014 when the owners of the former Ascension Bay Bonefish Club—Punta Allen's first flyfishing lodge—were looking to move on. Marquez agreed to take on the lease, renamed it Ascension Bay Lodge, and in 2018 was able to purchase the property. He met his wife, Mari, in Punta Allen, and they are raising a family there. Marquez believes everyone in the village knows the benefits of living in such a beautiful place, and understands what the threats are, echoing the feelings of Lily Bertram: "If the road was ever to be paved, this place would turn into Tulum," he says. "Right now that can't happen because of the biosphere, but money drives the decisions in this country and the laws could change. The beach is the draw. It's so pristine and beautiful that development feels almost inevitable."

In some ways, it has already begun. In February, Casa Chablé—"where nature and luxury collide"—opened its exclusive doors on the site of the former Mukan Resort, just six miles up the road from Punta Allen. It is unclear what physical changes may have taken place on the property, but Casa Chablé guests needn't fuss about that pesky, bumpy van-ride from the airport: "Alternatively, it is also available via helicopter." (Four-night stay, April 16-20: \$4,980, plus taxes and fees.)



The case for leveraging traveling anglers' philanthropic tendencies was already well-established in Punta Allen, going back to Huffman's help with the soccer field. Huffman is now helping spearhead—along with Moises Godinez and his wife, Rubi, from Casa Vielo Chac—a complete redesign and rebuild of a children's playground on the town square, supported by YDCCF and a number of local businesses, including Ascension Bay Lodge, Grand Slam Fishing Lodge, and the Palometa Club.

Lodges and their employees in Punta Allen have played a major role in improving the daily lives of the children in town. Ledezma had been a key partner in helping manage projects on the ground before dying of cancer last June. Marquez stepped in and has been helping with the playground project, as well as putting the final touches on the recently completed teacher's dorm—part of a multiyear effort started in 2019 to attract and retain educators, many of whom must travel two hours from Tulum.

The lack of adequate housing had formerly turned away many applicants, and Marquez shared with YDCCF's Executive Director, Brooks Scott, that the volume and quality of teacher applications in Punta Allen is higher than it's ever been. "The teacher's dorm is a great example of how the private-funding model works with an engaged community," Scott says. "It effectively gives parents in town their choice of educators for their kids."

At the ribbon-cutting ceremony on Nov. 15, 2022, the structure was dedicated to the memory of Ledezma. Roberto Morales, a teacher at the middle school, spoke at the dedication ceremony: "From now on," Morales said, "teachers in Punta Allen can count on dignified lodging."

Flyfishing travel often leads to conservation efforts being focused on particular destinations and the fish that are found there. Indeed, this is a decades-long success story. Yet, too often, visitors don't give enough consideration to the quality of life that their guides and their guide's families experience when not on the water. People like Huffman, lodges like those in Punta Allen, and companies like Yellow Dog and Thomas & Thomas, understand that caring about these communities is not simply the right thing to do, but that a little benevolence can go a long way toward improving perspectives and sentiment on both sides.

While a variety of future projects are planned for Punta Allen, maintaining their way of life and the quality of the fishery remains at the top of residents' priorities. Local cooperatives have worked for decades to ensure that the lobster harvest is sustainable, just as the fishing community outlawed gillnetting before the Biosphere was finalized in 1986. The combined income from lobstering and guiding is the economic engine that has driven Punta Allen ever since. For the sake of that special community and the anglers from around the world who fish there, it seems wise to keep that engine running strong. 🐟