fisherman’s paradise?

The destination for the family reunion was a luxury resort in Honduras. But there was a catch.

by Richard Morin

DID YOU HEAR?” Kyle Heath asked as I walked toward her down the path through the coconut palms, which rocked in the stiff breeze. “The divers saw a whale shark. They’re at the bar arguing about how big it was.”

I followed Heath, one of the resident owners of the Utopia Village resort on the island of Utila off the coast of Honduras, to the open-air bar. Dive master Juan Carlos Molina, my sons Drew and Josh, and three other divers were toasting their luck with rounds of Honduran-brewed Salva Vida beer. “Just a small one,” Molina said. “Seventeen feet. Maybe 20.” “Not that big,” said Jim Hart, an accomplished diver from New Orleans who had come to Utila with his two nieces. “Maybe 15 feet.”

I had brought my family to vacation on this sun-bleached chip of limestone and...
Shortly before 9 a.m. on Sept. 11, 2001, Lukacsy caught a cab at the base of the North Tower of the World Trade Center. She decided to move to a place “where no one will want to attack... I was looking for my own version of Utopia. I found it on Utila.”

black lava 18 miles off the coast of Honduras. We were drawn here by the promise of adventure, by the novelty — who vacations in Honduras...in August? — and by the story of three strong and beautiful women from Texas who had beaten mosquitoes and machismo to carve a luxury resort out of the Honduran brush.

Drew, 24 and Josh, 26, came to scuba dive. My wife, Roxanne, and oldest son, David, 30, came to snorkel and relax. I came to fish, and to take my three sons fishing with me at least once more, and also, perhaps, for the last time.

The whale shark was a bonus. Leonard Cooper, the 25-year-old captain of the 39-foot dive boat the Miss U, spotted the cloud of birds a mile offshore at the end of the final dive of the day. "Find the birds, you find the tuna," Cooper said. "Find the tuna, you find the whale shark." He gunned the 370-horsepower marine diesel to a scene of perfect slaughter.

Wheeling sea birds dive-bombed small fish leaping into the air to escape the tuna. It was the climax of an intricately choreographed feeding behavior common to tuna and other pelagic species that hunt for food in the open ocean. It began when the school of tuna dove deep into the sea. The fish swam in a large and increasingly tighter circle, herding small fish and zooplankton to the surface, where they were trapped in a concentrated ball. Then it was time to dine for the tuna, as well as for sea birds and the whale sharks that followed the tuna, waiting for them to deliver dinner.


"We jumped," Drew said. "The shark was coming right at us 20 feet away, dark — almost black — with white spots on its top and side. It had a huge head, wide and flat — imagine a football stretched out so it’s longer and skinnier. And draw a line horizontally to connect the ends of the ball; that was its mouth. It stopped and looked right at me..."
Fisherman’s Paradise?  
CONTINUED FROM PAGE 16

The dark tip of a single tail broke the surface 50 feet away. Then another, and another, until there were a dozen tailing bonefish in water so shallow that the tips of their forked tails poked skyward when they rooted for food in the turtle grass on the bottom. I could now,” whispered Howell, my guide for the week.

One quick false cast, then a second. The tiny fly floated five feet ahead of the fish. I stripped in the line, and the fish rocketed through the rest of the school, which splashed in unison and bolted for deep water. It abruptly turned and raced in the opposite direction, then struck my fly. I set the hook, with the fly moving erratically just above the surface 50 feet away. Then another, and another, until there were a dozen tailing bonefish in water so shallow that the tips of their forked tails poked skyward when they rooted for food in the turtle grass on the bottom.

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One fish broke from the back of the pack toward the faux food, leaving a wake on the surface as he approached the fly from the rear. I stripped with a thrust of its powerful tail, the big bonefish overtook the fly and turned away. I set the hook, and the fish rocketed through the rest of the school, which splashed in unison and bolted for deep water.

“Got one!” Howell shouted. Not quite. Right now, it had me. In seconds, 150 feet of line vanished from my reel as the hot angled fish headed for the shallow water. It abruptly turned and raced in front of me toward deep water. The fish stopped and sulked, then slowly, grudgingly gave ground. A few short runs and the big bonefish overtook the fly and turned away. I set the hook, with the fly moving erratically just above the surface 50 feet away. Then another, and another, until there were a dozen tailing bonefish in water so shallow that the tips of their forked tails poked skyward when they rooted for food in the turtle grass on the bottom.

“Most of my fishing stories involve not catching fish.”

“Why don’t you get them to come fishing with us?” Howell asked. The wind is picking up. Howell’s question hung in the air.

“I’m trying.”

I grew up fishing. My sons did not. I was raised in San Pedro, the port city of Los Angeles. We lived three blocks from a rocky beach that lay at the bottom of 200-foot cliffs. As a little boy, I played in the tide pools instead of a park. As a teenager, fishing was my refuge from difficult parents, mediocre grades and indifferent girls.

I fished because fish did not judge you. Fish never told me to stop crying or they would really give me something to cry about. Fish did not care if I ditched school. And when I held a struggling calico bass or bonefish in my hands — catch or release? — I came as close as an 11-year-old boy can come to being God.

As an adult, fishing was my escape from a stressful job and a growing family. I only took my sons with me a few times. Not often enough for them to fall in love with early morning wakeups, long rides to lonely places, tangled lines, lurching boats and intermittent fish.

Then, suddenly, my boys had grown into men. And I had grown tired of fishing alone. So I made them this offer at Christmas: Come with me to Honduras. You can dive, I will fish. And maybe we can go fishing together.

UTILA IS THE WESTERNMOST OF THE THREE ISLANDS that make up the Islas de la Bahia at the southeastern end of the Great Mayan Reef, the second-longest barrier reef in the world. Utilla is less than 12 miles wide and approximately 2½ miles across at its widest point. Coral reefs encircle two-thirds of the island.

The island has only recently been discovered by tourists and developers. About 2,000 people live on Utilla. Most of Utillans are descended from British pirates who settled here in the 1700s. The buccaneers climbed 243-foot Pumpkin Hill, the highest point on the otherwise flat island.

Two of Utopia Village’s founders: Kyle Heath, left, and Angelika Lukacsy.

at Grapevine High School, was a cheerleader and dated the quarterback. Then off to college and a job as an interior designer for an Austin law firm to become Utopia’s legal and finance director. She had never set foot on Utilla when she joined the company. “I always wanted to live on an island and have a hot dog stand. My hot dog stand has considerably grown.”

Debbie Mylius, 38, the quiet one, sold her share of a hot Austin restaurant to become Utopia’s director of food and beverage. “I was ready for something different.” Mylius said. “Now, I wake up to the ocean and drink my cappuccinos on my patio watching the waves roll in.”

Together, the three women moved to the island. They finalized plans and bought materials. The locals did not help, at least at first. The women hired a contractor, who promptly quit. “He told us flat out, ‘My wife won’t let me work with you because the three of you are too sexy.’”

Ramirez circulated about the three single American women. “They said Debbie and I were lesbians … They must be building a lesbian resort,” Lukacsy said. I do not know what post-traumatic shock is,” Lukacsy told me. “I can tell you what it feels like. I would wake up every day on the sailboat and take the ferry across to Battery Park to go to work. My eyes burned and I had a headache for eight months that didn’t go away.” She tears up at the memory and clears her throat.

9/11 — the magnitude of it, the sadness of it, the realization of how your life could change forever and this all could end — was overwhelming.”

They cashed in their 401(k)s and made plans to quit their jobs and escape to the Caribbean.

“We are sitting on the windblown deck of her villa at Utopia. Lukacsy is wearing a long, billowy cotton skirt and wine-red tank top with a peace symbol on the front. A white-and-blue panga, a type of ski that is ubiquitous in the Caribbean, passes just offshore heading west to Utilla Town, its throbbing diesel barely audible over the wind blowing through the spindly coconut palms nearby.

“I said to myself, You know what, I will go somewhere and find a little place where no one will want to attack it … I was looking for my own version of Utopia. I found it on Utilla.”

She persuaded six longtime friends in Texas to invest in an eco-resort here. Kyle Heath, 46, tall and blond and abnormally cheerful, quit her job as an insurance fraud investigator for an Austin law firm to become Utopia’s legal and finance director. She had never set foot on Utilla when she joined the company. “I always wanted to live on an island and have a hot dog stand. My hot dog stand has considerably grown.”

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Lukacsy said.
"Little bit of home," I said to Heath after he tells me who is on the tape.

"Exactly!"

Like many who live and work on Utila, Howell is deep in the sea. He moved there after being a fisherman in Honduras and then opened a dive shop in Utila called the Utopia Village Hotel. The hotel is a mix of earthy and eco-friendly, with a focus on sustainability and protecting the environment.

"The hotel is all about preserving the natural beauty of Utila," Howell says. "It's about respecting the sea and the animals that live in it."
the dock at 6 a.m."

David groaned.

Back in the room I prepared to shower.

"Did you tell the boys I was disappointed
that they weren’t coming fishing with
me?"

"No, I didn’t," Roxanne said evenly. "I
would tell you if I did. It was their idea."

"I AM NOT BAITING MY HOOK,"
Drew declared, peering into the bottom
half of a plastic bleach bottle that served as
our bait bucket.

Howell had gathered hermit crabs for
bait two nights ago. A sharp hammer blow
had abruptly liberated each crab from its
shell home and exposed its soft pale-white
body, the size of a little finger. A few crabs
were intact, their flaccid bodies still atta-
tached to their hard heads, thorax and
claws. The putrid mixture had not aged
well.

"This is the best bait," Howell said,
as he fished out a piece of the crab from
the reeking bucket. I tentatively plucked
out a piece and threaded it onto the hook
on my small spinning rod and handed it
to Drew. Howell did the same for David
and Josh.

The first spot yielded one small
flounder, caught by Drew. Howell next po-

tioned the boat closer to a cluster of coral
heads. Instantly, the bite was on: The bot-
tom here was paved with fat, one-pound
porgies with a taste for aged-in-the-bucket
hermit crab. Howell and I couldn’t fish,
we were so busy baiting hooks.

At the bow, Josh was in the zone.
Armed with one of Howell’s tuna-sized
spinning rods, he caught one porgy after
another, unhooked them and tossed them
back. Porgies are tasty, but the meals at
Utopia were tastier, and they were paid
for. Besides, we had no ice to keep the fish
fresh.

"Ow!" Josh cried. A porgy had clamped
down on his finger. The fish eased its hold.
Josh unhooked it and dumped it over the
side.

"Uuuuuuuuuu." Drew was holding up an
iridescent-blue reef fish he just landed. A
pea-soup green rivulet ran down his fore-
arm. "It pooped on me."

David howled with glee. "Josh got bit-
ten. Drew got pooped on. This is the best
fishing trip ever!"

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