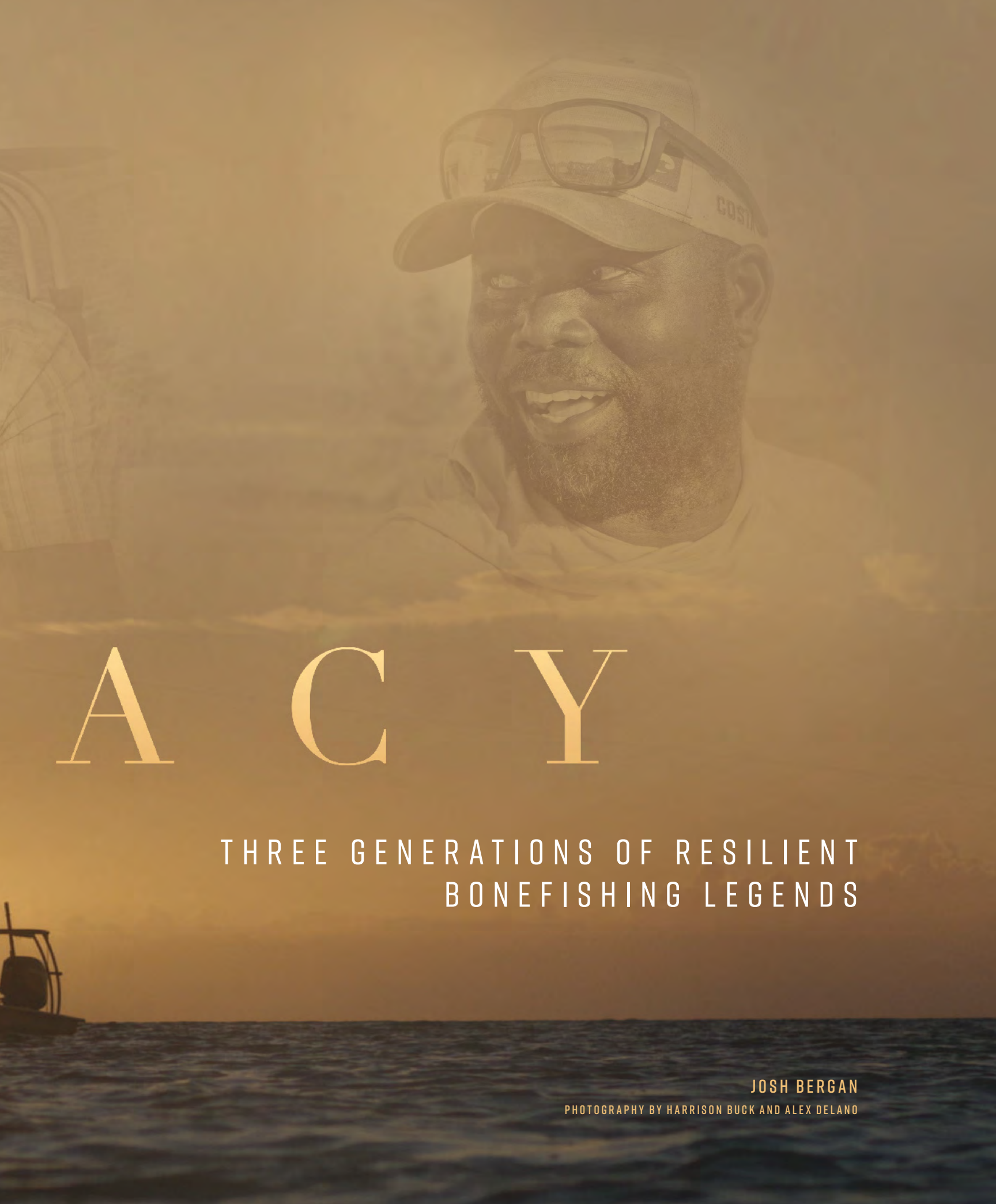




E A S T E N D

L E E G



# A C Y

THREE GENERATIONS OF RESILIENT  
BONEFISHING LEGENDS

JOSH BERGAN

PHOTOGRAPHY BY HARRISON BUCK AND ALEX DELANO

**I**N THE LATE 1950S, A WEALTHY SALT-WATER ANGLER NAMED GIL DRAKE OBTAINED A 99-YEAR LEASE FOR SOME LAND ON A BAHAMIAN ISLAND THAT WOULD SOON BECOME KNOWN AS DEEP WATER CAY, INTENDING TO START A BONEFISHING LODGE. But he needed guides, so Drake turned to the locals, whose knowledge of the water and fauna would be invaluable.

A chance encounter with a small group of young Bahamians led him to a 19-year-old named David Pinder, who would become his first guide. Thus began the famous Deep Water Cay Club, and a powerful legacy of overcoming and of bringing thousands of bonefish to hand for paying customers. David Sr., as he's now known, was the very first bonefish guide in the Bahamas and was widely known as the best. Once fly fishing for bonefish became en vogue in the 1970s, famous anglers including author and filmmaker Guy de la Valdène and *Field & Stream* Fishing Editor Al "A.J." McClane became repeat clients. Years later, the Bahamian prime minister would visit Deep Water Cay Club to thank David Sr. personally for his impact on the national economy.

Fast forward a couple of generations, through a devastating hurricane, the closing of the Deep Water Cay Club, and much more, and the legend continues with David Sr.'s grandson—Omeko "Meko" Ginton—embarking on a new adventure called The Meko Experience (TME).

Meko brings years of guiding know-how and generations of instinct to the seemingly infinite bonefish flats of the East End of Grand Bahama, and a dream to re-create the legends of the past. Meko started his guiding career at the Deep Water Cay Club before moving on to the North Point Riding Club. As of my visit in May 2024, TME hasn't yet been in operation for two seasons.

Meko's father, Stanley "Stan da Man" Ginton is also a renowned guide whose storytelling belies his seemingly stoic nature. (Listen for stories like his 54-bonefish day—the smallest being 5 pounds—or the time A.J. McClane caught a bonefish on a mayfly dry.)

But the thing you'll notice is that despite the hardships, the residents' spirits are as high as the frigatebirds soaring overhead. The attitudes of the Bahamians seemingly cannot be held down even, or maybe especially, in the face of adversity.



## THE EAST END

As you depart from the Freeport airport en route to TME, the tropical landscape comes into focus. TME guides on the East End of Grand Bahama, an area with a series of islands divided by narrow channels that creates some of the best shallow-water saltwater fly fishing in the world. A customary stop at Terry's Conch Stand for a salad and a Sands Light and you're on your way.

The East End is rural in a way somewhat similar to Montana, in which Freeport is equivalent to bustling Bozeman and the East End is like the Madison Valley. Freeport, which is about 37 miles west of where we stayed at Pelican Point near the fabled McLean's Town, is the big city around here, with the last population estimate 24 years ago at around 27,000. (That's likely come up since then, with many rural Bahamians migrating there since Hurricane Dorian.) There aren't many services, and you won't see many other boats or anglers while fishing.

If you had been there before the fall of 2019, you'd have driven through thick forests of Australian pines, planted to be used for lumber many years ago. But Dorian changed all that—now it's a truncated nursery of young growth amid occasional crooked, broken-off tree stems. This is only the beginning of the devastating effects of this massive storm from five years ago.

Even birds are currently scarce on the island, having lost their habitats in the storm. You'll see occasional vultures circling, though it's unclear what they find in this barren landscape.

But it's different out on the water. Swallows, red-winged blackbirds, and brown pelicans swoop and waft overhead; sea turtles rocket away; lemon, blacktip, and bonnethead sharks casually cruise, all while bonefish tails break the surface near the shoreline.

## SHADOWS & MOVEMENT

Ultimately, bonefishing is hunting. Scan the water until you identify a bonefish, then cast where you think the fish might go. There is very little blind casting—it's a little bit like fishing for gulpers on Montana's Hebgen Lake. The real challenges are seeing the fish, fighting the wind, and line management.

Bonefish are extremely sensitive to sounds, smells, and visible movements. Do not slam the cooler lid, try not to curse yourself out after botching a hook-set, and don't touch your fly if you've re-applied sunscreen. And while they are sensitive and spooky, most are not selective. If you can deliver your fly within a 4-foot radius of the fish without spooking it, they'll most likely eat it.

So how do you see bonefish? Look for shadows and movement. But even then what you're seeing could be a small shark or barracuda, which require different tackle. It takes good sunglasses and experience to reliably sight bones.

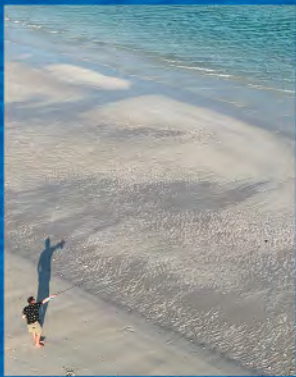
A guide is not entirely necessary, but they will give a substantial advantage, especially for neophytes. Not only can they motor you



The thesis of Buck's (dba Pandion Creative) movie *MEKO* has been revised several times out of necessity, as tragedy after hardship has regularly befallen Meko's gregarious family. As it currently stands, it's a moving portrait of Meko's plight, the remarkable family he emerged from, and Meko's future in a changing climate. The film is carbon neutral thanks to support from BTT's Mangrove Restoration Project.

There has even been chatter from Buck and Meko about trying to create a Bahamas bonefish festival to bring together local bonefish guides and other interested parties to share ideas and to celebrate bonefish, with hopes of accelerating the East End's rebuilding.

*MEKO* is slated to premiere at an event Nov. 9, 2024 on the East End, and has been accepted into multiple film festivals.



out to the best spots, they will stand on a poling platform to get a bird's-eye view of the moving shadows. And most experienced guides have a sixth sense for marking bonefish. Things like boat positioning are also crucial, relating to the wind and the tides and the locations of sighted fish.

Upon identifying a so-called “gray ghost,” try to lead the fish with your cast by 4 to 6 feet, then start long, slow strips according to your guide's instructions. When you see the fish key in on your offering, get ready for a long, hard strip-set and then let it run, hopefully deep into your backing.

Sunlight is a necessary evil. It will wear you out and potentially burn you, but you can't see fish without it. And count on 25 miles-per-hour winds. Most people would argue that you do need a double haul for the best fishing, but no worries if you don't. Meko can help.

Meko is a world-class fly caster who in his own charming way can help 99.9 percent of anglers tweak their delivery at least in some minor way. He's been a student of fly casting since age 14, learning from experts like Lefty Kreh, and even developed his own facetious cast called the MJ in which he does a Michael Jackson dance move amid his send—a sight to see. Meko says he wants people to think of TME as a “fly-fishing institution.”

“You will leave a better angler,” said Harrison Buck, bonefisher and creator of the upcoming film *MEKO*.

Even anglers like me who've never been terribly concerned with their fly casting, and who say, “I know my cast ain't perfect, but I'm catching fish so it's good enough . . .” can be inspired. After Meko's delicate advice to shift my feet and “rubber band” my hauling hand, I'm actually excited to work on my cast.

“If I see your feet face the wrong way, I know that one little step could help you,” he said. “We take a lot of pride in helping [anglers] to become better. And what I realized long time ago, if I can get you to be a better angler, we gonna end up catching a few more fish. And then I'm more engaged, I'm really there with you.”

He says he'll have two tweaks for any angler's cast so as not to overwhelm them. One of the fishermen we were with—a fishing guide from Virginia and an outstanding fly caster—reluctantly accepted a couple of Meko's tips and saw incremental improvement.

“The more I teach the more I learn,” Meko added.

Line management is another challenge in bonefishing. You first need to strip fly line off your reel in order to be ready to cast fast upon spotting an in-range bonefish. Then you cast the line that you stripped off your reel, but as you strip your fly back in during the presentation, you start piling the line at your feet again, giving all your attention to the fish. If you hook it and are either standing on the line or have it wrapped around your legs, the fish cannot take line from your reel and it will break off (as happened to me on a rather large bone). The constant breeze will also blow the line off the boat's deck into the water—it's a lot. This is why it's often recommended to go barefoot on the casting deck, so you can feel the line with your feet.

Another example of why line control is important came when my boatmate ended up with a couple of knots in his line as a fish tried to pull it through his rod guides. It wouldn't go. He had to

*His dream lodge, for which he has mocked-up architectural drawings, includes a putting green and pool but is still awaiting a major funding source. Specific location isn't of the utmost importance to the Meko Experience—Meko, his family, and the bonefishing are really what it's all about. Patronizing TME and fishing with the bonefishing legends means supporting a small business in an impoverished community rather than another corporate-owned lodge. It's authentic, wholly charming, and gives you an advantage in the bonefishing game.*

take the rod's cork grip in his mouth and handline the bonefish, which is far from ideal with a fish that can swim 25 miles per hour.

Unsurprisingly, fly selection is a matter of matching the naturals—crabs and shrimp in this case. Really what changes are the weight and color: weight to get the fly down depending on depth; color to match the bottom substrate because that's what the prey's color will be. A good plan is to have one rod rigged for bonefish with a size 6 shrimp and one rigged for permit with a small crab. Size 6 hooks are not generally strong enough for double-digit bones, so if you find yourself fishing to some big ones, size up your fly. Meko actually has two flies in production with Orvis: the Meko Special and the M2.

Late spring is the time of year for permit, and finding them depends largely upon the tide, according to Meko. Permit are not as common in this area as bonefish, but are regularly caught if you make a point to target them.

Having a quick, accurate, short cast is much more important than being able to lay out the entire line, especially when it's cloudy, according to Meko.

“A quick 30-foot cast is way more important here than a 50-foot cast,” he said. “Being quick on the draw is huge.”

In contrast to the traditional “clock” system of conveying where a fish is, Meko has you point your rod forward then says left or right until you are pointing at the fish and can see it. After you make your cast, he'll advise you to strip your line or hold steady, and when he says, “LONG!” that means strip-set as the fish has taken the fly. A good hard strip-set is required to set the hook into the hard cartilage of a bonefish's mouth.

The bonefish here are dealing with pharmaceutical infiltration, as studied by the Bonefish & Tarpon Trust (BTT). Up to 24 different pharmaceutical medications that entered the ocean through undertreated human wastewater were reportedly found in bonefish, crabs, shrimp, and other flats prey fish species in nearby Florida waters. On average, bonefish contained seven different medications, ranging from blood pressure medicines to antidepressants to antibiotics, pain relievers, and opioids. The effects of these drugs are largely unknown, but researchers have said that they likely affect the fish's feeding activity, sociability, and migratory behavior.

Buck, fishing with another guide one day, hiked into a small brackish pond known to hold bonefish, only to find them all floating belly up. No one is sure exactly what happened, but one theory is that the fish basically got too complacent from the prescription drugs to feed or seek appropriate habitat.

Anglers can have shots at permit, bonefish, tarpon, barracudas, and for more eccentric anglers, mutton snappers, groupers, and sharks. If you have a hankering for anything other than bonefish, let your guide know early so he can prepare appropriately.

Anglers can also wade the miles of sugar-sand beaches, but they are generally less fertile, with spookier fish.

"They feed differently," Meko said of bonefish over a sand bottom rather than turtle grass. "Because they're looking for a different type of food, most of the time the tiny little minnows along the beach. Now, if they do find a little crab, that's like a piece of steak. So that's when you might see them tailing. And they don't feel protected along the beach."

## THE MEKO EXPERIENCE

Because TME can currently host only about eight guests at a time, it's not your typical dinner-with-strangers mingle-fest. It's much more intimate with opportunities to get to know Meko's charming family who cook, pour drinks, serve, and clean.

The staff serves four-course meals with appetizers such as conch fritters, and entrees including fresh mutton snapper, lobster tails, and lobster bisque. They provide simple sandwiches and chips for fishing-day lunches. (Try the Bonefish Special sandwich, which is egg salad with bacon.) It's approachable cuisine that isn't intimidating for average middle-class anglers, but tasty enough for the most discerning. They serve beers like Kalik and Sands Light—both Bahamian, but Sands is the preferred, locally brewed option. And you gotta try the proprietary Meko Punch or a Gully Wash, which is a local concoction of fresh coconut milk, evaporated milk, and gin. It's more akin to staying with a small independent outfitter like Linehan Outfitting Company in Montana's remote Yaak Valley than something like the \$2,500-per-day Ruby Springs Lodge in southwest Montana.

As of now, things are still in a bit of flux. TME is wherever Meko and his team are. While he is still in the process of rebuilding his facilities at the site of his former home—where only the stilts remain

after the devastation of Dorian—TME moves to wherever it can find a quality property to lease (rest assured it'll be more than adequate). His dream lodge, for which he has mocked-up architectural drawings, includes a putting green and pool but is still awaiting a major funding source. Specific location isn't of the utmost importance to the Meko Experience—Meko, his family, and the bonefishing are really what it's all about. Patronizing TME and fishing with the bonefishing legends means supporting a small business in an impoverished community rather than another corporate-owned lodge. It's authentic, wholly charming, and gives you an advantage in the bonefishing game.

A note about staying healthy: Don't drink tap water—the lodge staff have plenty of bottled water. You'll want to drink lots of it in this oppressively humid climate, and you should consider supplementing that with some electrolyte tablets.

Wi-Fi is hit and miss, so be prepared to spend some money using your own international data, but Verizon's international roaming coverage is decent on the East End.

## REBUILDING THE FUTURE

Chris Dombrowski's marvelous book *Body of Water* about the Pinders/Glinton's and bonefishing on Grand Bahama quotes Meko as saying, ". . . not much has changed here in 35 years . . . or 200 for that matter." Unfortunately that statement, published in 2016, hasn't aged particularly well.

In 2019, Hurricane Dorian ravaged the East End of Grand Bahama. Dorian's 220-mph winds sat on the island for three days, at one point it was moving at a glacial rate of 1 mile per hour. Water levels reached nearly 20 feet in some places, homes were entirely flooded, and many people died, including some of Meko's friends and family members. Oil spilled from huge oil tanks. Residents were without power for 11 months. The school was destroyed, so residents with children were forced to move to Freeport, and businesses on the East End could no longer survive.

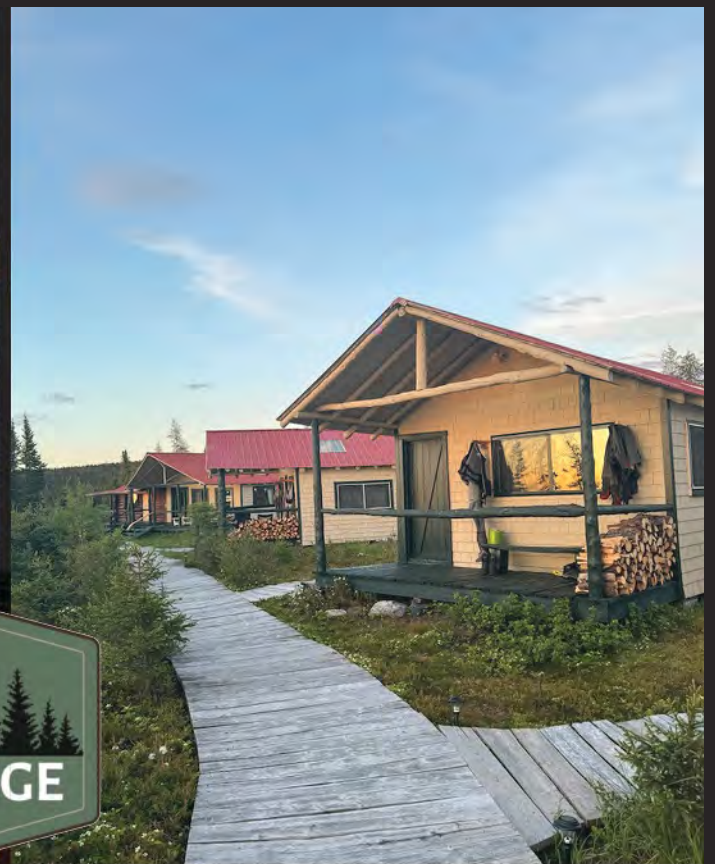
"There was a lot that the news didn't cover," said Meko.

As mentioned, what used to be dense forest is now a barren grove of upright pickup sticks, ripe for wildfires. There was actually an active wildfire we could see and smell on our way in from the airport.

And particularly devastating for the fishing: Once-lush green forests of mangroves are currently a series of defunct gray twigs, with occasional new green shoots resurfacing after five years. The loss of the mangroves has had a multifaceted effect because the mangroves filter salt and provide habitat for bonefish at high tide, playing an important role in the flats ecosystem.

While mangroves are suited to deal with salt water and tides, they weren't able to deal with the influx of water from Dorian, according to Buck.

"The pets that all went to the one-story animal shelter; the clerk's office with all of the locals' health records and personal data; almost all the plants. Drowned," said Buck. "The mangroves ultimately died



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from the salt. Once the salinity level of the soil, which is already high to begin with, reaches a certain amount nothing can grow for a while after.

“The topsoil needs to heal. Fortunately for mangroves, they don’t really need topsoil, which is why they are bouncing back faster than the pines or palms. The mangroves are critical habitat and the sole reason for biodiversity on these islands. They are also critical for the island structurally. They quite literally hold the sand and earth together. All life on these outer islands is reliant on the health of the mangroves. This is exactly why we invested in mangrove replanting efforts by the Bonefish and Tarpon Trust, as our way of not only retroactively negating our film’s carbon footprint, but to quite literally help rebuild the East End.”

“You can just feel how intense the storm was the further and further you get from Freeport,” Meko added.

Distrust in the corrupt government has created apathy among the locals, which slows the rebuilding process. If you need something done you do it yourself. But then all you can do is order it from Amazon, and it eventually arrives on a rat-infested pallet.

Through this and much more, Meko’s family has persevered with an inspirational perspective. In fact, his son “Big Mike” is poised to become the next great Bahamian bonefish guide and eventually take over TME operations, keeping it in the family for at least one more generation. The 16-year-old’s tight loops have humbled many guests.

“It’s good because he sees the challenges and how hard it is,” Meko said. “He’s a good teacher too. He knows enough already to tell people what they need to be doing.”

Meko has ambitions to train the next generation of bonefish guides, not only to support TME, but to reconstruct the local economy—possibly even through the school system. To that end, Meko created a nonprofit called the Meko Foundation, which aims to improve lives through “youth development, economic empowerment, education, outreach, social media education, development, and much more.” To support the Meko Foundation, visit [mekofoundation.org](http://mekofoundation.org).

“I always say faith, family, fishing—that’s sort of our motto,” said Meko. “Faith is obviously the foundation of my family and me, and that’s how we were able to survive so much stuff and be calm.”

Because for Meko, it’s not about wealth or fame, it’s about carrying on a familial legacy and rebuilding the East End of Grand Bahama, one hard-fighting bonefish at a time.

“It’s the place where everything started,” Meko said. “Where bonefishing started, where my family live. It was almost destined for me to end up back here.” —

*Josh Bergan is FLY FISHERMAN magazine’s digital editor. He caught his first bonefish on his third cast thanks to Stan da Man and was later spotted double fisting with a celebratory Meko Punch and a Gully Wash.*

## RECOMMENDED GEAR

Guides provide food and water, but not rods, reels, flies, leaders, tippet, or sunscreen. A fishing license requirement will be in place no later than October 2025—check before you go. Bring a small Ziploc bag for your carry-on liquids, or they will get tossed by security at Grand Bahama International Airport (FPO).

**SIMMS** / SOLARFLEX GUIDE COOLING HOODY / \$125

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