

THERE'S NOTHING  
EASY ABOUT DUPING A  
TARPON AROUND  
COSTA RICA'S RIO  
COLORADO. THE  
WATER IS MUDDY,  
THE HOOKSETS ARE  
TRICKY, AND THE  
FIGHTS ARE GRUELING.  
SO WHY TRY?  
BECAUSE THESE  
FISH ARE HUGE.



# DOWN & DIRTY TARPON



Story and Photographs **BY JOE CERMELE**

**MUD BATH:**  
Below the murky  
water near the Rio  
Colorado swim truly  
monster tarpon.

**This didn't look like tarpon country.** No aqua water in sight. No white-sand, sun-drenched flats. Just gray skies and misty humidity hanging low in a Costa Rican jungle village divided by the mighty Rio Colorado. Still, somewhere near the torn-up airstrip where we had just landed was the promise of trophy tarpon—lots of them.

As if I wasn't already certain that this place didn't fit the bill of a "sexy" tarpon fishery, I became convinced the minute our pontoon-boat shuttle departed for Silver King Lodge. Here, the Rio Colorado, one of the rivers that drains Lake Nicaragua far to the west, enters the Caribbean Sea, and entire forests come along for the ride with the river's muddy waters. And as we motored upstream, Mani, one of the lodge guides, deftly navigated the boat around logs, stumps and brush piles that would have made the average boater shudder with fear. If there were tarpon in these waters, I prayed they were blessed with keen eyesight.

#### MUDDY WATERS

"I've never seen this river clear," said Jim Kohl, manager of Silver King Lodge, our home for the next few days. "But I have seen everything from trees to cows float down." Then Kohl laughed before adding: "If coming upstream made you nervous, wait until your guide takes you through the river mouth."

An hour later, Joe Pax, an engineer



**TAKE ME TO THE RIVER:** Situated at the northeast corner of Costa Rica, the mouth of the Rio Colorado plays host to thousands of trophy tarpon drawn to the abundant bait.

for Penn Reels who joined me on the trip, and I got a taste of what Kohl was talking about as we approached the Caribbean roughly a mile downriver from the lodge. Clad in life jackets, the two of us sat tense in the bow of guide Clifford Ramos's 23-foot center console and looked on as waves barreled at us in the mouth of the river. Neither of us had experienced anything like this before. There were no channel markers—or a channel for



**CRACKING UP:** This plug has taken the savage strikes and violent battles of some brute tarpon. (above) Despite their size, these fish take to the sky with ease.



**WARHEAD:**  
Tarpon frequently  
come up to gulp air,  
allowing them to  
fight longer.

that matter. Just water that made chocolate milk look like gin and two barely visible sandbars that, according to Kohl, are never in the same place two days in a row. Ramos, and the rest of the lodge's guides, navigate solely by instinct and practice.

We slowly throttled into the chaos, then Ramos stopped the boat in the churning slop. Some activity ahead had caught his attention. He mumbled something in Spanish and then kicked us on plane. All I got out was, "Holy...!" before we were outside the mouth in the open sea, surrounded by rolling tarpon—all of which looked to be 100 pounds or more.

### **PULL YOUR WEIGHT**

I soon learned that there is a very good reason why these fish flock to the area. With thousands of gallons of fresh water pouring out of the Rio Colorado every minute, the river provides a constant feast of sardines, *machaquitas* and other small species attracted by the nutrients and shelter of the murky water. It's a tarpon buffet line that never ends, helping the resident fish pack on pounds and expand their girth.

First we tried pitching jigs, but five days of rain prior to our arrival made the water extra muddy. While the surface is usually dirty, Ramos said it's

clear on the bottom—but not today. We couldn't buy a strike.

Ramos suggested we try trolling, but the idea didn't sound too appealing—especially after I'd already experienced the thrill of leading a tarpon in the shallows. Turns out I didn't know what "thrilling" really meant until I tried my hand at hooking a whopper tarpon by pulling plugs on light tackle.

In this game, the rods weren't set in holders with the clickers on. We held them. And when we got nailed, a death grip was the only thing that would suffice.

"No, no, no!" Ramos shouted after

just ten minutes on the troll. He was quick to laugh during lulls in the action, but he was all business when a line came tight. And I had just ruined the first deal of the day when I reared back—intending to cross some eyes—on the first strike. “Three little pumps to the side,” he scolded. “If you don’t do that, you just gonna pull the lure out of his mouth.”

The second time around, just a few minutes later, I got it right, but now I made another mistake: I had thumbed the spool loaded with 50-pound braid, and I was so scared I’d burned off my thumbprint that I wasn’t even looking when the 150-pounder made its first leap. Despite the charring, I focused enough to bow on the next few jumps, and after a while, Pax and I got a glimpse of the first big tarpon of the trip when it rolled next to the

boat. It only took that one fish to teach me that down here, you’d better bring your A game, and have gear ready for a true torture test.

#### BATTLE SCARS

If the Penn Torque 200 and 760 Slammer reels and the Penn Guide Inshore rods that Pax brought down for us to use were our guns, then the big Rapala Shap Raps were our ammo. Silver King imports them by the case, because they last about as long as a box of shells on a good day of duck hunting. With tarpon this size, the strike is so forceful, the fight so violent, that the fish crack the balsa-wood plugs like they’re saltines and rip out the through-wiring

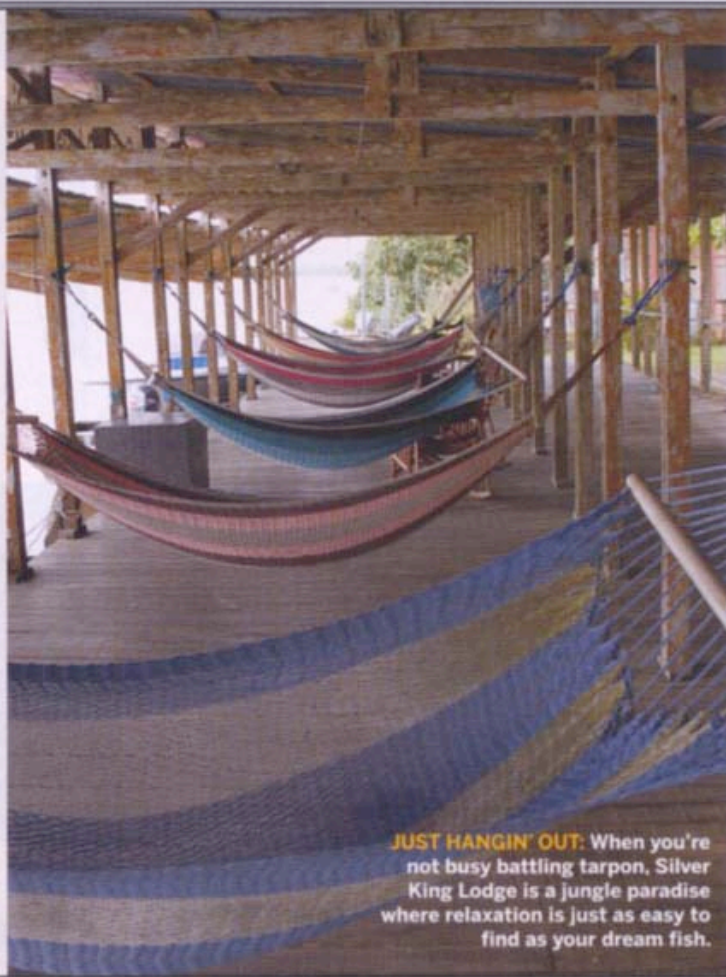


**LIP LOCK:** This fish exploded on an orange plug being pulled in 15 feet of water.

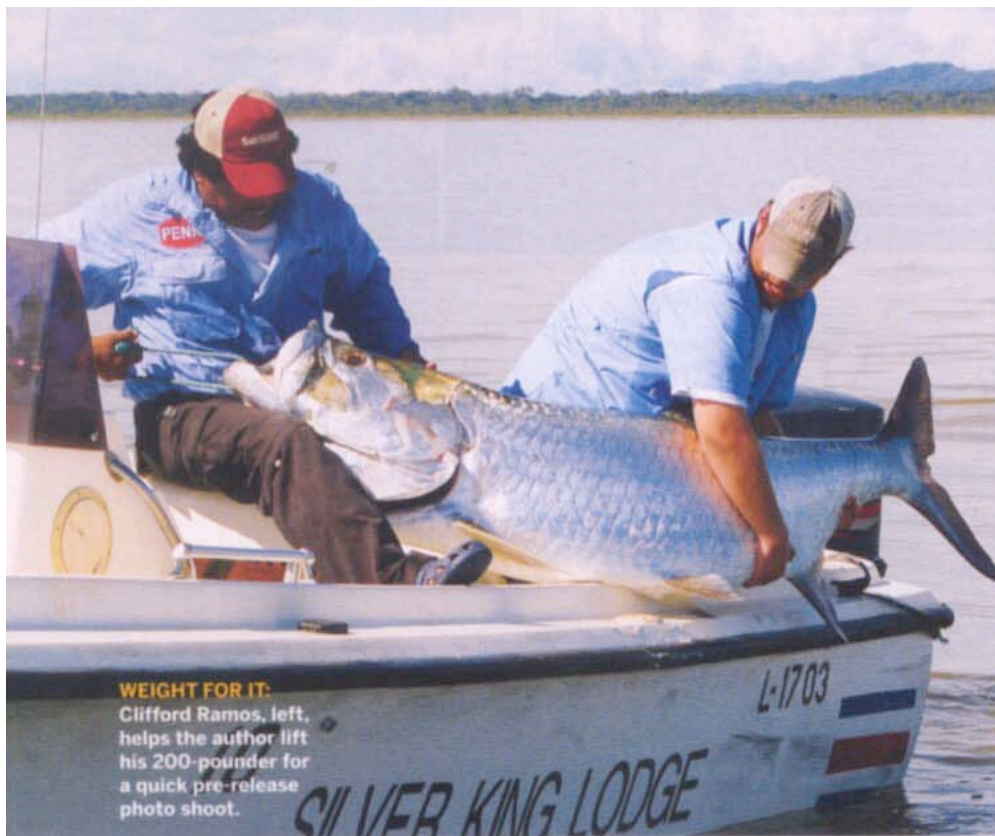
## Run to the Jungle

GO POSH FOR GOLIATH 'POONS.

For tarpon this big, I’d be willing to sleep on a blanket under a palm tree. Luckily the accommodations at **Silver King Lodge** are just as world-class as the fishing. Built on stilts with buildings connected by catwalks, the lodge sits on the marshy banks of the Rio Colorado just upriver from the airstrip. Spacious, **air-conditioned rooms** make for a good night’s sleep, while the pool and hot tub offer escape from the heat or much-needed muscle relaxation after a hard day of fishing. In-room Internet access, laundry service and a top-notch **massage spa** are all perks, but what really stands out is the food. Breakfast, lunch and dinner are served buffet-style, with a freshly prepared, changing menu that features everything from seafood stew to homemade pizza, to steak to *langostinos*. And of course, the bar is fully stocked with local and imported flavors. Between runs downriver or after a hearty meal, it’s worth taking a snooze in a hammock on the lodge’s dock or just hanging around, feeding the iguanas and talking tarpon with the guides. Silver King Lodge is closed from November through February, then in July and August, but it’s not because the fish are gone. The off months fall in Costa Rica’s rainy seasons, making comfortable, fishable weather hard to come by. Call (800) 847-3474 or visit [www.silverkinglodge.net](http://www.silverkinglodge.net) to book a trip. — J.C.



**JUST HANGIN’ OUT:** When you’re not busy battling tarpon, Silver King Lodge is a jungle paradise where relaxation is just as easy to find as your dream fish.



**WEIGHT FOR IT:** Clifford Ramos, left, helps the author lift his 200-pounder for a quick pre-release photo shoot.



**PENN PAL:** A tired Joe Pax, left, heaves a 140-pound tarpon taken on a ribbonfish.

like it's a pipe cleaner. And considering the inside of a tarpon's mouth is as rough as heavy-grit sandpaper, the fish can grind down the lure's lip so drastically, it won't run true anymore. On the troll, you get four fish to a plug—if you're lucky.

There's no denying that trolling puts up numbers around the river mouth, but there's more than one way to connect here. Running farther offshore, we eventually came to a rip where the water clarity improved. Ramos set up our rods

with jigs and broke out the fly tackle. If you're not an expert caster, have no fear. Fly-fishing at Silver King requires one lay-out, then all you have to do is twitch the line to make the fly "breathe" just beneath the surface. Ramos actually prefers fly-fishing for the resident tarpon, but on our

trip strikes were less frequent in the cleaner water.

The exception came when Pax got an odd nibble on a small MirrOlure. Clearly this was no tarpon, but Ramos was just as excited when Pax reeled in a shiny, writhing ribbonfish. "Sabalo love these," he said, referring to "tarpon" in Spanish. Ramos didn't re-rig the bait on a single hook, but instead removed the plug from ribbonfish's mouth and rehooked it in the back of the head to create a make-shift bridle.

"This won't last long," Ramos said with a sly grin.

And it didn't. Even though we had been in a lull, the offering was slammed within seconds. When Pax came tight, a 140-pounder broke the surface, throwing the ribbonfish off the hook and a mile high.

### KING FOR A DAY

By the morning of our last day, Pax and I had scored more 100-plus-pounders than we ever thought our arms and backs could handle. But the Rio Colorado had one more surprise in store. By now I had gotten the method down, and when my rod bowed to the brink, I threw three short pumps in the tip before we were treated to another air show so spectacular you could sell tickets. But when this fish came up, something was different. The look on Ramos's face said it all.

"Big, big fish," he muttered, never taking his eyes off the zigzagging line. "Two-hundred pounds."

Nah. Couldn't have been. To me, it looked no different on the initial jump than any of the other monsters we had hooked throughout the week. Then, an hour and 15 minutes later, after dripping enough sweat to water a garden, I started to believe him. Ramos had no less than 12 shots at leadering the king. Each time he touched the 120-pound shock tippet, the tarpon took another 50 yards of line. Why I had ever doubted his estimation, I don't know. A veteran guide, Ramos lands thousands of giants each year and can accurately call the weight of a fish to within ten pounds.

Once we had the tarpon subdued, there was no arguing: 200 pounds, easy. It may have never hit a scale, but I'll take Ramos's word.

After we shot a few photos and belted a few cheers, we released the mighty fish and I watched my trophy swim off and disappear beneath the muddy Caribbean at the mouth of the Rio Colorado. ~