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The Anaa Atoll is comprised of 11 small islands surrounding a shallow lagoon. According to the last census, the island is home to just less than 500 people. Although the main village is the atoll's hub, small huts and houses are tucked randomly around the atoll.

KIO-KIO ECONOMY

CAN BONEFISHING HELP ANAA ATOLL?

*Words: Joel Clement
Photos: Jessica McGlothlin*



“BIENVENUE À POLYNÉSIE FRANÇAISE.” Some of the islanders welcome us in French. Others welcome us in the Paumotu dialect. And even though we don’t understand either, it’s enough to signal that the day-and-a-half journey to the Anaa atoll, a 15-square-mile dot in the Pacific some 220 miles east of Tahiti, is finally over.

Cool salt air from the lagoon filters in through swaths of coconut palms, removing the delights of economy class from our noses. Flowered leis are draped around our necks, but these aren’t the chintzy adornments of a package-tour island—half-a-dozen varieties of local flora are plaited together in a level of craftsmanship that serves as our first clue to how the Paumotu locals do things.

We’ve arrived to the scrutiny of a small crowd that has assembled at Anaa’s tiny airport. There are few walls to this structure and villagers peer in from every angle.

Not all eyes are on us, however—a mother is looking for her son who’s returning from secondary school—a school that exists on another island. A man cradling a baby awaits a spouse who was lucky enough to land a civil service job on Tahiti. A few others are there simply to send a fish they’ve pulled from the stone trap in the lagoon to relatives on another island, packed on ice in a cooler that doesn’t look up to the journey.

Raotea, a 19-year-old giant among the islanders, steps forward in flip-flops half a size too small for his feet. He heaves the first of our huge duffels into the bed of

a roofless pickup truck as if it were a sack of *copra*—the dried coconut pieces sent to Tahiti to be pressed for oil. It takes a few more of the men to unload the rest of our gear from a salt-rusted luggage trolley and pile it into the other well-worn trucks. The amount of baggage seems disproportionate to the number of our group, and we’ll soon learn this raises questions of how long we’ll stay, and if our intent is as fleeting as the last flyfishing group to visit and make promises a few years back.

Al Perkinson, vice president of marketing for Costa del Mar, removes his sunglasses to study a mural of life on the atoll painted on the ticketing office’s wall. He’s assembled a team of anglers, a photographer, a marine biologist and a policy expert from Washington D.C. to investigate whether Anaa would be a viable candidate for their Indifly foundation. Indifly’s unique conservation outreach helps set up community-led flyfishing businesses to support local economies and help bring sustainability to area waters and marine life. But it only works if the fishery is strong and the locals have it in themselves to protect the fish and, of course, the fishing.

We’re off to the only lodge on the island in a Mitsubishi that is unapologetically missing its upper half. I’m told it was one of the only new trucks brought onto the island in years—it rolled the day after arriving, caving the roof in. The driver seems at peace though; it was nothing a heavy dose of optimism and a hacksaw couldn’t handle.

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◀ LEFT ▶

Raphael Jr., son of Anaa’s most accomplished guide, chills on his boat as anglers search for bones, bluefin trevally and snapper.



◀ABOVE▶

Bohar, also known as two-spot red snapper for the two white dots on their dorsal fin, are native to the Indian Ocean. Bohar can grow to more than 30 inches and are plentiful along the edge of Anaa's reef.

◀RIGHT▶

While a Bluefin trevally will never claim the same number of cover shots as his larger cousin, the giant trevally, a bluefin is a tenacious brawler on the business end of a fly rod. Members of the jack family, a bluefin is sexually mature by two years old and measures about 16 inches.

A DEEP SLEEP IN THE LODGE'S stilted bungalows comes to a halt. We're familiar with rural alarm clocks, but Anaa's version is a fierce and unforgiving battle between roosters and weighty iron church bells vying to outdo each other every half hour. It's all for a good cause though, because within minutes we'll be shuttled out to the flats in wooden boats that claim half their weight in coats of paint. We'll march in knee-deep water for bonefish rumored to be bigger, swim faster and fight harder than those we have chased anywhere.

Raotea gathers up the anchor and hurls it into the lagoon where cobalt water meets teal. Raphael, the lead guide is already out of the boat. The stout man is old enough to be Raotea's father. Light gray hair contrasts his sun-darkened face. He's as gregarious as he is professional, and seems revered by everyone we meet.

The flats have no limit, save for a long, thin strip of yellow-green coconut palms in the far distance. A narrow channel that leads to the reef—and the world beyond—only breaks the stretch of countless copra trees.

Raphael's eyes are calibrated to these waters, and no one else from the village can spot a bonefish among the shadows and reflections like him. He tells us his eyes have grown tired over the years, but the targets he delivers over the next few days prove otherwise.

He pauses for a second and calmly extends his arm to 11:00. "Kio-kio," he whispers the Paumotu name for bonefish, "15 meters." Maddie Brenneman, a guide from Colorado, is quick to release the shrimp pattern she's been pinching between her fingers and make her first cast. Something goes wrong—Raphael begins scanning again. The fish spooked and Maddie brings in line. As she does, she feels tension and lifts the tip of the eight-weight to see a two-foot-long needlefish dangling from the leader. The novelty of this surreal-looking creature quickly wears off—this is not the kio-kio or belligerent trevally for which we have traveled so far.

We wade for another 10 minutes, then Raphael repeats his motion. This time, a silvery shadow is headed right for us. Maddie lays the shrimp in its path. This shadow is fat and hungry. He gulps the fly and the eat

sends a charge down Maddie's line. The strip-set signals the beginning of the bone's run and it tears away even faster than expected. The buzz of the drag is so loud in this silent lagoon that Raotea stands up in the boat 100 meters away. There's no fear of getting hung up on anything—it's clean white sand for as far as the channel and the only obstacles are the ubiquitous sea cucumbers that litter the blank ground below. The bone makes two impressive runs and begins a path of submission. It's about a 10-pounder and within seconds we have the waterproof yellow tape laid from tip to fork.

In the moments when the sun isn't reflected off its scales into our eyes, we see the first number we need—22 inches. We enter the data into small, yellow waterproof books—GPS coordinates, time of day, whether a fish was alone or with others, its sex and recovery time. We're here for more than just the thrill of fishing the South Pacific; we have to gather enough information to decide if the fishery can withstand the pressures that sport fishing can bring. We also have to take a reading as to whether there are enough fish and fish varieties to entice anglers to make the same long journey we did.

We're familiar with rural alarm clocks, but Anaa's version is a fierce and unforgiving battle between roosters and weighty iron church bells vying to outdo each other every half-hour.



A FEW YEARS BACK, the Indifly model was introduced and implemented in the jungles of Guyana. Costa had learned about a huge prehistoric fish—the arapaima—that lived in the rivers of the rain forest. They took a chance that anglers would want to have a go at catching the largest scaled freshwater fish in the world. A sport-fishing business was set up along the Rewa River in conjunction with an eco-lodge. One hundred percent of the profits go to the village. The effort took a lot of convincing—meetings with locals and government—as well as a lot of donated resources and time. It was successful. It improved lives. It protected fish. It established that sport fishing is a sustainable, economically viable conservation model.

I tuck the logbook into the dry-bag as Maddie and Raphael continue to the far shore. Raotea is seated on the bow rolling a cigarette on his leg. His English is the best on the island, which he attributes to having grown up in Tahiti, where the schools have more to offer. I wonder what he's doing here if he's not from Anaa; after all, the island is having a problem with population decline because there just isn't any incentive for young people to stay. He explains that he came here to be with Teragi, Raphael's daughter, who he met while she was enrolled in culinary school in Tahiti's capital city. They decided life would be better on pristine Anaa than the hustle of Pape'ete. Raotea pauses, he has something else he wants to say, and I can't decipher if he's searching for the right words in English or the words at all. Suddenly, our talk is cut short—Raotea shouts to Raphael indicating a healthy bonefish that has crossed the shallows between us. Our conversation has been spooked. Only later will I learn of the dilemma ahead of the young couple.

SUNSET AT THE LODGE is the second-best part of a day on the atoll. Not so much for the sky's mystic green haze reflected from the waters below, but for the stories we'll exchange with those on other boats. Cold cans of

Hinano beer are passed, serving as an admission ticket to a great story. I hand a couple to Al and his partner Marguerite Meyer, who, in turn, relay the highlight of their afternoon.

The wind was against them when one of the shadows 30 feet ahead turned around, giving itself away. Cutting through the gust, Marguerite landed the shrimp close enough to get the attention of the kio-kio. He grabbed the shrimp and rocketed away on a jet-fueled run. Strangely, he came in close without even trying a second run. The guide knew before anyone else and started stomping his feet to scare off the determined blacktip stalking the fish. Normally this would be enough, but this shark was aggressive and launched razor-sharp teeth into the bonefish. The guide pulled off a flip-flop and hurled it hard enough to send the shark on his way. The effort was a little too late though, and the kio-kio's head seemed to gasp for oxygen to fill a body that was no longer his.

Not much goes to waste in Anaa, and Al was inspired to bring the fish head back to Alex Filous, a scientist from the University of Hawaii's Fisheries Ecology Research Laboratory. Alex will assess the fish populations and share knowledge with the Paumotu to help conserve the atoll's fisheries resources.

After dinner, meals safely digested, Alex grabs the fish head and borrows a cutting board and a hacksaw. We gather round as he explains that you can determine the age of a bonefish by finding the otolith, a small bonelike structure in the fish's inner ear. He saws vigorously through the skull until finally displaying a cross-section of the piece he was looking for. He wipes off the thick blood and counts the layers the same way you'd count the rings on a tree trunk and announces this fish was seven years old. The crowd is entertained, the evening air is cool and the breeze is strong enough to counter the mosquitoes. We'll all sleep well, despite the post-dinner butchery.

◀ LEFT, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT ▶

Raotea, an Anaa local who grew up in Tahiti, hunts for lunch while anglers ply the reef edge for various species.

On Anaa, bonefish are still sustenance and still business. This man and his wife live on a small *motu* with one chicken, where they dry bonefish to sell in the small local market.

Otoliths, the small bones found behind the brain of a bonefish, are used for balance orientation and hearing. It's also possible to determine the age of a bonefish by counting rings, similar to counting rings on a tree.



«ABOVE»

Bicycles are the preferred method of transportation on Anaa, and the local kids are experts at packing on as many bodies as possible.

IT'S MORNING and we mix up the groups, cross-pollinating different guides with the various members of our team. I'm in a boat with Alex and Hinano, a Tahitian native with a background in international law and experience running foundations for islanders. She doubles as our translator, and the fact that she shares her name with the local beer gives us one more reason to like her. Hinano has been helping bring the Paumotu and the Indifly expedition closer together.

Our guide Reubens swerves the skiff to bring us along a crescent-shaped beach with dark green water. He's a man of few words but many instincts, and he's a much easier read when he isn't wearing sunglasses with black lenses. Both Alex and Reubens decide the color of the flat doesn't feel right for bonefish so we cruise along the shore. Hinano points out that she thinks this is the part of the island where warriors in the 1800s would post the decapitated heads—and other severed unmentionables—of their enemies. She speaks to Reubens in French and he shyly confirms the tale with a nod of his head.

I walk the flat with Alex and find he's as knowledgeable about fishing as he is science. We aren't seeing any bones, so we decide to make a path for the channel

that leads to the reef. Alex is somewhat familiar with these waters and explains the various habitats of the lagoon. As we near the entrance to the deeper channel, there are dark patches of volcanic rock and he instructs me to cast out to the edge of the tract to my right. Within two casts something has eaten my shrimp pattern. It's not a strong fight, but it's not embarrassing either. I strip in to see I've got a work of art at the end of my line—a Picasso triggerfish. A pallet of yellow, white and green covers the body of this stunning fish, and colorful strokes trace the contours of its cartoon eyes and mouth. Its beauty is almost lost as he bares the powerful teeth he uses to crush shells. Atop his back, the namesake defense mechanism has locked into the upright position. Alex cautions me to be mindful of it as I unhook the fly.

We walk the bank of the channel toward the reef. Halfway through a thought, Alex breaks into a full sprint, flats boots crunching the shells along the beach. He casts toward a flicker of darkness in the water surrounding a coral head. Bang. From where I stop to pick up his fallen camera, I can't see what he's hooked, but there's a violent eruption in the cobalt water.

The fish's survival technique is more fight than flight, and it tries every possible convulsion of its body to resist the pull of the rod. Alex raises his tip to keep the fish from getting caught up on the lunar rock outcroppings and finally pulls in a beautiful blue trevally. In the strong sun it appears to glow in neon hues. I'm juggling Alex's camera and the tape with a lost sense of priorities. We sacrifice glory for data and I measure it at 18 inches.

The fish is released and is holding steady. We count the recovery in seconds—a statistic we're recording. At three-Mississippi he flicks his rudder and sluggishly moves into deeper waters. We're entering data and stuffing equipment back in the bag when Alex makes a second mad rush. He drops the bag again and I'm sure he's spotted something bigger, better. This time though, Alex runs into the deeper water and I see what he sees—a hungry blacktip headed in to take advantage of the exhausted blue. Alex is trying to scare off the shark and succeeds—the blacktip pivots 180 degrees and disappears while the blue takes refuge in the narrow crevices of the coral head.

We meet back up with Reubens and Hinano and take lunch on a small sandy island under the shade of

a coconut palm. We have chosen this particular tree as it has been harvested, sparing us the potential of a concussion—or worse. Lunch is raw fish mixed with coconut milk and lime juice and we revel in the notion that there is no sashimi in the world fresher than what we are eating at this very moment.

Translating Reubens' words, Hinano helps us understand the plight of the island. Copra is the only game in town. Coconuts are chopped, dried, bagged in sturdy burlap sacks and sent on the weekly barge to Tahiti for pressing. It is the sole economy, and if anything happened to this line of work, it would be a fate worse than the cyclones of 1983 that razed the entire village.

Kids are leaving the island seeking other ways to make a living and this doesn't fare well for such a communal people. The population of Anaa was once 5,000 but now hovers around 400, and I suspect it's even less if you don't include those working as maids in the hotels of Bora Bora or at the construction sites of Pape'ete. There are also the kids forced to go to school on bigger islands after they outgrow the limited educational programs of Anaa. The problem is, with no future to come back to, many will stay on or drop out of school to find an income.

«ABOVE»

An Anaa local who lives in a tent shack on a small motu gathers fresh coconuts for a midday rehydration break.

WE ARRIVE BACK AT THE LODGE a little later than the rest of the team and catch the end of Al and Oliver's daily tally. Oliver White is one of the team's anglers and a primary mover in the Guyana project. The two were fishing with Raphael and together hit eight spirited bonefish, one of them a whopping 10 pounds. Al also tricked a 26-inch blue trevally, which will take the honor of biggest of the trip. They've done well, but a huge day like this won't happen the rest of our week on the atoll and it's a concern among the group, because if the fish aren't here, the anglers won't come. I grab a cold beer for myself and a couple for Raotea and his girlfriend, Teragi, who have just finished unloading gear from Raphael's boat.

Sitting on the cement wall along the lodge's beachfront, I ask Raotea about his plans for the future. I intend the question to spur general ideas about what he might be interested in, but he surprises me with the announcement that he's headed to France for police training at the end of the week. Teragi looks down to her feet in the water. "Wow, that sounds great," I offer. He half laughs, "Not really. I'm scared." These words don't match up with the biggest man on the island, who I've heard is an accomplished boxer. "What are you afraid of?" I probe. "I'm scared of all the cars there. The buildings. The pollution," Raotea continues candidly. "But mostly, that there is no sea."

OLIVER HAS DECIDED we should go to the reef off the southeast perimeter of the atoll today. Walking from Reubens' boat presents a path of coral craters and phosphate rock that suggest we're not on Earth. It's a completely different environment than the tranquil postcard flats we have been wading the last few days.

The reef drops down like a vertical wall. The well-defined ridge protects the atoll from the attacking surf that crashes hard—white foam and black water tumbling over itself. Oliver is under the influence of the sea and moves to one of the jagged black rock outcroppings. He's equipped with a 12-weight and casts out to where some of the most exotic fish in the world are feeding. As he takes a few more steps and a swell mounts abruptly and smashes him. Instinctively, he puts his hand out to prevent landing on his head and takes a spill on the rough, sharp coral. The gash across his palm oozes enough blood to stir the lemon sharks patrolling the edge into frenzy—severe enough that even Oliver agrees it's worth getting it looked at. Reubens' aluminum skiff is the fastest of the island's fleet and our first casualty is rushed to the clinic in the center of the village.

LATER THAT EVENING we take Teragi up on her offer to come watch her volleyball match. We sit on the concrete bleachers of the modest, warehouse-like stadium. Two-dozen kids swarm us to try phrases in English. "Hello. Where are you from? What is your name?" Each word is pronounced with lengthy pauses in between, the sentences conclude with an uproar of laughter. We wipe out an entire bake sale and help another vendor unload a dozen grilled veal heart skewers. We buy up a coconut cake to share and an animated little girl stuffs three pieces in her mouth before she tries to braid Maddie's hair.

Oliver is back and eager to show off his stitches. Someone jokes it looks like he's been sewn up with five-pound tippet. A French nurse is stationed here for a three-week stint, part of a rotation through the islands. Oliver reports quick, top-notch care and no insurance necessary.



Two dozen kids swarm us to try phrases in English. "Hello. Where are you from? What is your name?" Each word is pronounced with lengthy pauses in between, the sentences conclude with an uproar of laughter.

◀ RIGHT ▶

The kids of Anaa are intrigued by visitors. At first a little shy, they soon began to hang around the bungalows, jumping on any chance to practice the few words of English they knew. They loved having their pictures taken and seeing the images on the LCD screen.



A coconut has been placed on a metal pole 20 feet up and 50 feet from a line drawn in the sand. This is the sport of Patia Fa, where a long spear is hurled through the air in an attempt to stick in the head-shaped target. The local women and men are equally skilled at this warrior's game—the only cringe-worthy throws come from our group.



IT'S SUNDAY AND HINANO has arranged some activities so we can get to know Anaa's people and their culture. We meet Reubens as he's leaving the unpretentious concrete church after Catholic mass. He tells the story of when he was 10 years old and the cyclone came. Everyone in the village was holed up inside the church praying. Reubens was trapped in his grandfather's house across the street. Ropes had to be thrown to him to keep him on course as he fought against the wind to make it inside. Mattresses were pushed up against the windows and doors to stop the flooding. The congregation panicked thinking they would drown inside, and the priest had to calm everyone down. Vicious winds, waves and debris thrashed the village. Everything was demolished—everything except for the church.

We walk behind the stoic building to where a contest awaits. A coconut has been placed on a metal pole 20 feet up and 50 feet from a line drawn in the sand. This is the sport of Patia Fa, in which a long spear is hurled through the air in an attempt to stick in the head-shaped target. The local women and men are equally skilled at this warrior's game—the only cringe-worthy throws come from our group.

Reubens invites a few of us to his house to show us his bees. He has seven hives now, with a goal of reaching 50. Tahiti has passed a ban on honey imports and he believes this is favorable news. Hinano confirms that stores on the bigger island can't meet local demand. Reubens does

the math for us—number of liters that 50 hives can produce times the going rate of a liter of honey. The total is promising—certainly enough that his daughter Martine wouldn't be waiting on a list for a job as a naval secretary in France. And this is the first time we learn that Teragi might not only lose her boyfriend to the lack of jobs here, but also her closest girlfriend.

THE NEXT DAY OLIVER'S WOUND is no handicap. He and Maddie are straddling the last inches of the long span of reef that seals in the familiar and safe lagoon. The two are casting big flies into the thunderous spinning water over the coral wall. He can see red bass—similar to bohar snapper—and a bluefin trevally in the 20-pound class, bigger than anything in the lagoon. He spots a huge blue finning off the reef edge and throws to him, stripping like mad only to be ignored. On second look he realizes it's a Napoleon—also known as a humphead wrasse—a rare and impressive fish on the long rod. Oliver casts well past him and lets the fly sink. He strips slowly and the Napoleon jumps on it. When the swell pushes in, Oliver uses the water's force to lift the fish over the reef edge. The whole group has gathered to study this awesome specimen, decorated in shades of blue that have no name and a red lace pattern laid over its face for a striking contrast. Its huge and puffed teal lips release the fly easily and we race to get photographs and measurements before it is given back to the water.

There is a hushed discussion and we don't need translation to pick up the differences of opinion. It is the most tension we have seen since we have been on Anaa.

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There is no Sunday football on Anaa. Instead, the locals practice Patia Fa—spear-throwing. Competitions are a big part of the local social scene. It's not easy to hit a coconut from 50 feet—unless you are from Anaa.

Anaa was once known for its fierce, tattoo-covered warriors and locals still pride themselves on their spear-throwing skills. Today, they use a coconut, but back in the day the contests were a bit more gruesome, as enemy heads provided the target.

Sunday morning church services are a dress-up event on Anaa.

Just a normal weekend on Anaa. A village woman named Elizabeth shows off her spear skills before relaxing in the shade and tending to her toddler.



Al asks the question we have all had on our minds. “What do you think about flyfishing?” Hinano translates but she knows the answer. She waits for it from the community council though, and delivers it as news to us. “They think you play with food.”

TONIGHT IS IMPORTANT. The team has waited a few days before suggesting a meeting with the elders of the village. There were facts the group had to gather and problems to understand before any discussion of a potential plan.

The gathering takes place outside Raphael’s house. A dozen chairs are arranged in a circle under a breadfruit tree. It’s dark, with only a fluorescent tube light so it is hard to read faces. Al asks the question we have all had on our minds. “What do you think about flyfishing?” Hinano translates but she knows the answer. She waits for it from the community council though, and delivers it as news to us. “They think you play with food.”

The villagers make the point that fish are sustenance, and they’re free. Alex asks if they’ve seen a decline in the bonefish population over the years. The older members of the village reluctantly confirm this is a worry. There are about two-dozen traps in the lagoon, both public and private. Intricate mazes of rock walls are laid out in the three-foot-deep water, funneling bonefish, goatfish, mullet and others into a channel so narrow they can’t swim out. It is first-come, first-served at the traps and the early bird gets the kio-kio. No export business is depleting the fish population, just an indiscriminate attitude of eating the fish—even large fish and fish with eggs.

Al and his team listen to the community talk about the problem of jobs on the island and the strain it puts on the families that have to separate. They share how Indifly helped Guyana. Oliver proposes that the bonefish of Anaa is the equivalent to the arapaima. The challenge is convincing the Paumotu that a fish is worth more alive than dead.

Raphael is quick to note that sport flyfishing could have a trickle-down effect on other businesses. The lodge’s four rooms are full, he notes, three guides and as many assistants have had work for a whole week, the villagers farming eggs and honey have sold out of their stock to fill our breakfast orders. Three trucks found work providing taxi rides and every bicycle in the village was rented out for a day tour to the island’s inner secrets.

The council still seems hesitant. Hinano translates the villager’s concern about other anglers that came a

few years ago. Another group of flyfishermen were interested in establishing a venture. Promises were made. There were handshakes. But they didn’t come back. Al counters that if the Paumotu are willing to change some habits to build up the bonefish population, his group will help. He offers to send Alex and another scientist to return in September to begin the early stages of a fish repopulation program.

There is a hushed discussion and we don’t need translation to pick up the differences of opinion. It is the most tension we have seen since we have been on Anaa. But this is how a communal culture works things out, and within minutes, the village council seems to relax in their chairs, smiles breaking across their faces. Raphael tells us through Hinano that they want to give this a go—they’ve decided to take the first step by self-imposing limits on both quantity and size of the fish harvest. Raphael concludes the meeting with the realization that this isn’t about playing with food, it’s a chance to keep their kids at home, their families together.

THE ENTIRE ATOLL seems to show up at the airport for our departure. They’ve adorned our necks with strings of tiny shells and there’s something about their permanence over the flower chains we received on arrival that tells us our friendships here will last.

We knew Raotea would be on our flight to go see his family for a week before heading off to France, but there are no tears of goodbye from Teragi. Raphael has used some of his guiding money to buy her a ticket to go to Tahiti as well.

With everything we have experienced, it’s hard to leave this place. It’s also hard to leave this place, literally. The once-weekly flight is so overstretched that a quarter of the passenger cabin is loaded with excess cargo. Someone didn’t calculate correctly and a few of us are standing in the aisle with no seats while the pilot sorts it out.

I glance down at the half-folded itinerary in my sunburned hands. Six airports are ahead of me, and when I try to work out how many hours it will take before I am home, I pause to recognize that the journey to reunite with my wife and son is nothing compared to the one to come for the Paumotu families. ☞

◀ LEFT ▶

Oliver White and Maddie Brenneman scout out the first flat of the trip, keeping a keen eye open for signs of bonefish and bluefin trevally.