



ABOVE: Three small boats prepared by Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve association  
BELOW: Monica with fishing rod in hand

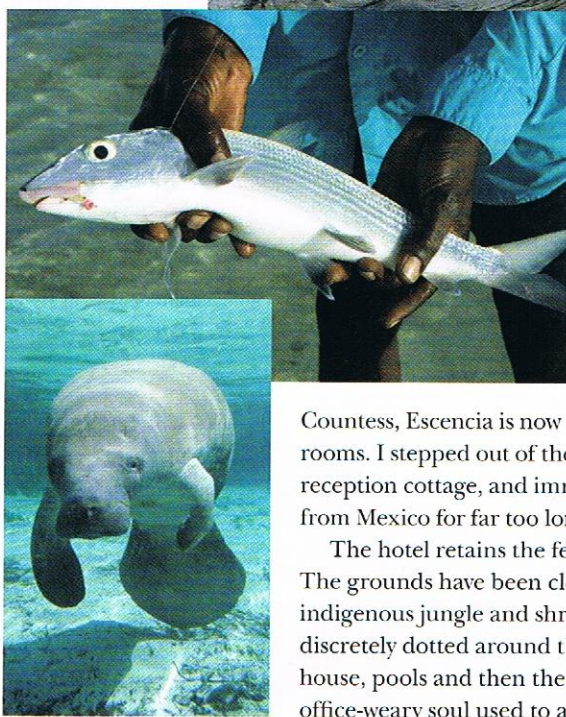
# HOOKED ON MEXICO

Returning with her family after many years to Mexico where she used to run a fishing lodge, jeweller **Monica Vinader** finds – despite her glamorous change of career – she can still hook a fish

**M**any years ago in what seems now like another life, I lived and worked in Mexico. My Husband Nick and I ran Casa Blanca Fishing Lodge, on a private island in Ascension Bay on the Yucutan Peninsula. I had already travelled extensively in Mexico in the Eighties but when we abandoned London for the Caribbean in 1993, neither of us could know the indelible impression Mexico and its people would leave on our lives. The vibrancy and colour of Caribbean Mexico made a huge impact on us, and it continues to set the tone for much of my design.

So when Nick, an independent fishing consultant, specialising in organising fishing and shooting parties to boutique international destinations, told me he wanted to research a new boutique hotel in Mexico and re-visit Casa Blanca for a fishing trip, it was a no brainer. He wanted Scarlett, our five-year-old daughter and I to act as 'guinea pigs' on what promised to be a fishing holiday with a difference.

We flew to Cancun, which has grown exponentially since the Seventies. The Riviera Maya is now a hotbed



of hotel development, but we wanted to find a secluded, low-key jungle hideaway, so we headed south to Escencia, an hour and a half down the coast. An extremely elegant seaside estate, once the beach house of an Italian

Countess, Escencia is now a boutique hotel with 30 rooms. I stepped out of the taxi and into the jungly reception cottage, and immediately knew I'd been away from Mexico for far too long.

The hotel retains the feel of a private residence. The grounds have been cleverly designed around indigenous jungle and shrubbery, and cottages are discretely dotted around them, all the way to the club house, pools and then the beach. To a pasty-white, office-weary soul used to a northern climate, the place

74 | COUNTRYANDTOWNHOUSE.CO.UK | Autumn/Winter 2012

## TRAVEL



nothing short of perfect. Exotic butterflies flit over lawns and iguanas stroll around the grounds in most proprietary manner soaking up the sun. Our room was huge and cool on the ground floor corner of main clubhouse facing the sea – and had its own plunge pool.

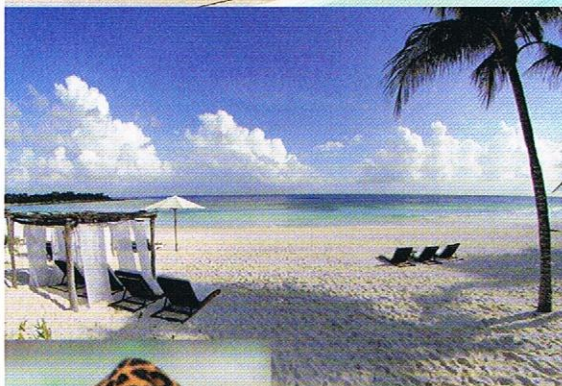
The days passed lazily. Tropical routine took root within hours of arrival and in no time at all we didn't remember why we needed a holiday in the first place. But that was just the starter to acclimatise ourselves before heading south to start our real Mexican adventure.

We took the road towards Ascension Bay, where Casa Blanca Fishing Lodge is located, in the heart of the Sian Ka'an biosphere, a world heritage site established in the mid-eighties. Sian Ka'an is the antidote to the high-rise hotel skyline of Cancun and the encroaching development in the south. A safe haven for the rich diversity of mangrove forest, shallow water lagoons, reefs and reef that encompass nearly the entire peninsula, the biosphere is home to jaguar, ocelot, several species of turtle, manatees, nearly 400 species of birds and countless other life. For us, who prize nature and authenticity, this was a good as it gets. Visiting fishermen usually fly into the grass strip of a small cay adjacent to the lodge but for old time's sake we took the scenic dirt road from Tulum. The road finishes in Punta Allen, a sleepy fishing village on the north side of the bay. Casa Blanca is like your own private hideaway in the middle of a National Park. On our boat rig, we passed frigate birds and pelicans and glimpsed swimming turtles. We skimmed across the water so clear we winced every time we whizzed across another coral head for fear we'd hit them. It is all possibly blue, all sea and sky.

Casa Blanca is one of the very few fisheries in the world where it's possible to catch a 'grand slam' on the same finny Macnab consisting of bonefish, permit and snapper all landed in a day. Our efforts in emulating



ABOVE AND BELOW: The white washed club house, pool and powdery beach at Escencia



this feat of angling prowess were tempered by Nick's desire to see Scarlett – a recent convert to fishing – start to accumulate some of her own fishing memories. Scarlett succeeded in catching her first

bonefish and was in awe of the toothy barracuda and mangrove snapper we reeled in.

Then it was my turn. Jose, our guide, pointed out some tailing bonefish. Having been sat behind a desk more than wading after bonefish, I fumbled with my line, wondering if I could still double haul in the stiff breeze. Jose positioned the boat so I could take a cast without removing him from his elevated position on the poling platform. To my amazement my line went out straight and true. A couple of shiny bonefish tails headed in the direction of my shrimp fly. 'Streep, streep, eeez coming, eeez coming!' Jose urged. The two fish altered course slightly to inspect my fly and then rushed it, fighting over it like spoilt children. The line drew tight and I set the hook, the fish fled for the horizon with customary zip, the reel began to scream and then quite suddenly the rod tip stopped arcing over, flicked straight and the fish had gone.

Neither Jose, Nick or Scarlett said a word. Jose span the boat around and there in the distance was another single fish idling along the shoreline of a little cay straight towards us. Grimly determined now, I began lengthening line as Jose patiently positioned the boat again. The fly fell about five feet ahead of the fish, he cruised over confidently, his head went down, his tail came up and I set the hook again. Off he went like a scalded cat. About five minutes later the sleek creature was in my hands. He wasn't a giant but there was a smile on my face as he swam from my hands and back into the bay. Scarlett was delighted and chirped, 'Mummy you can really fish!'



An idyllic sunset in Escencia