

# BlueWater

Boats and Sportsfishing

## Massive blue MARLIN

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## PANAMA

MAKE THE BUCKET-LIST TRIP FOR YOUR BIGGEST YELLOWFIN

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- ▶ REPOWERING WITH DIESEL – WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW
- ▶ TRAILERBOATS: PREPARING FOR THE ROAD TRIP

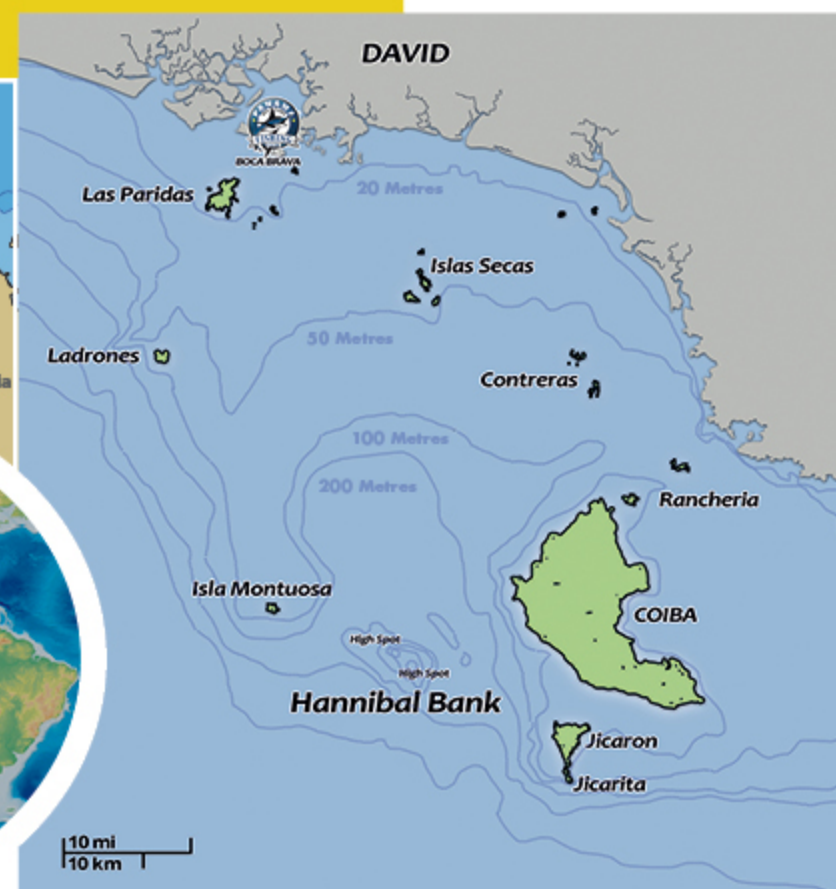
# Fast-track your bucket-list to PANAMA

Panama might seem a long way from home for many of us, but its extraordinary gamefishing – offering exotic treats, large numbers of big blue and black marlin, plus yellowfin tuna to more than 150kg – provides an irresistible lure. As Adrian Gray details, easy fishing from a luxury resort set amid exquisite wildlife and lush jungle will give you a trip that you'll never forget. It's time to take this one off your bucket-list and book it in – then start making a lot of space in your photo album!

AUTHOR AND PHOTOGRAPHY: ADRIAN GRAY

I felt completely rejuvenated lounging in the privately owned Panama Big Game Fishing Club's (PBGFC) infinity pool with cerveza in hand, listening to the distant echoes of howler monkeys as countless colourful parrots and hummingbirds hovered amid the canopy overhead. Taking stock of all the awe-inspiring beauty of nature around me, I began thinking that the average human lifespan in the US is 78 years, which gives us approximately 28,470 days to experience life, and about a third of that is spent sleeping. That's when I realised how important it is to seize the opportunity to go fishing in those special places on your 'bucket list' – before it's too late!

I was into my fifth day of a six-day stay experiencing a northern Panamanian fishing adventure on the Isla Boca Brava, a jungle-covered island only an hour from Panama's second-biggest city, David (pronounced 'dah-veed'). I had already indulged in a smorgasbord of fishing opportunities. This included being tethered to the biggest yellowfin tuna of my life, livebaiting sailfish, casting Halco 'Roosta' poppers to exotic roosterfish and cubera snapper in the rocks, and jigging for tuna, plus the biggest and baddest mullet snapper and almaco jacks I had ever seen. On reflection, the variety of fishing up to that point had exceeded my imagination, and little did I know at that moment that a once-in-a-lifetime experience the following day would surpass it all.



"Panama Big Game Fishing Club has been awarded BlueWater's Staff Choice-Favorite Central American Gamefishing Lodge for 2013"





Using modern high-quality spinning rods and reels, plus a clip-on harness designed for use with threadline tackle, anglers are often surprised by how effectively and easily large fish can be fought standing up; even tuna of more than 100kg can be caught using heavy gel-spun braid lines.

On my sixth day of fishing the Gulf of Chiriquí, Panama last September, the game plan was to scratch the 100kg-plus yellowfin tuna off my bucket list while using spinning tackle at Panama's famed Hannibal Bank (popularly called 'The Bank'). Only two days earlier I caught my biggest yellowfin ever – a dogged 65kg specimen on a 50W Shimano Tiagara from a fighting chair – and targeting an even bigger one on spin tackle sounded painful to me. Spinning gear, I thought, is hardly the preferred option to battle the brute strength and relentless determination of a 100kg-class tuna. But since we had already tussled with many yellowfin of 20 to 65kg using conventional tackle with livebait, and on spinning tackle with surface poppers, it was time to try a new challenge.

It is a safe bet to say that most of the marlin and tuna over Panama's Banks are caught on conventional tackle by the bump-and-go, slow-trolling of live oceanic and black skipjack tuna (known locally as bonita) or green jacks (known as cojinua). With spinning gear I was about to learn that the latest developments in braided line and high-torque spinning reels with capable drags – coupled with high-modulus graphite rods and a purpose-designed harness – make catching giant fish on stand-up spin tackle not only possible, but a whole lot of fun.

Spinning reels like the Daiwa 'Saltiga' 6500 and Shimano 'Stella' 10,000, 18,000 and 20,000 are capable of applying substantial drag upwards of 20kg, and together with a harness specifically designed for spinning rods, proved to be an unforgettable sporting challenge when going after the Hannibal Bank's behemoth yellowfin. So what I thought would be a feeble attempt at fighting a stubborn 110kg yellowfin became a learning experience and developed a new-found appreciation for today's high-tech spin tackle. Conventional sit-in-the-chair fishing might have met its match!

#### GIANTS UNDER OUR NOSES

After a 80km run to The Bank from Boca Brava, we came upon a small artisanal commercial vessel that was berleying with chunks of sardines for yellowfin tuna over one of the high spots.

What a thrill it is to slip into deep, crystal-clear ocean waters and swim with an inquisitive and harmless whale shark.

I was fishing aboard PBGFC's 28-foot Carolina Classic sportfisher with my new friend Tom Brymer – a US expatriate turned Panamanian real-estate broker. It did not take long to raise a school of 20 to 30kg yellowfin that had homed in on the flash and scent of slowly sinking silver-sardine chunks.

Then, unexpectedly, a 15-metre whale shark appeared. According to seasoned PBGFC captain Antonio Chombo (aka 'Skippy Chombo') it had been 10 years since he had even seen a whale shark on the Bank. Even as a captain, having seen it all, Chombo was touched by the beauty and grace of the giant sea creature. With underwater camera in hand, I had to jump in to get up-close and personal with the massive shark, now perched with its nose right up against the swim platform – almost as if it was waiting for a nose rub.

As if swimming with this gentle giant were not thrilling enough, being in the water also gave me a better perspective of what the tuna were doing below. The tuna were not shy, coming within three to four metres of me before veering off suddenly as they picked off chunks of drifting berley. Due to the water's excellent clarity, something other than the mystique of the whale shark and small tuna was able to grab my attention. A half-dozen bigger tuna were weaving among the sinking chunks; these fish were not just big, they were massive yellowfin, and experienced enough to know not to take either of the two large 18/0 circle-hook bridled, live black skipjack we had set out for marlin. The captain and deckies onboard had no idea that these giant tuna were practically under their noses!

With a blast of adrenaline I frantically kicked back towards the boat squawking the best broken Spanish I

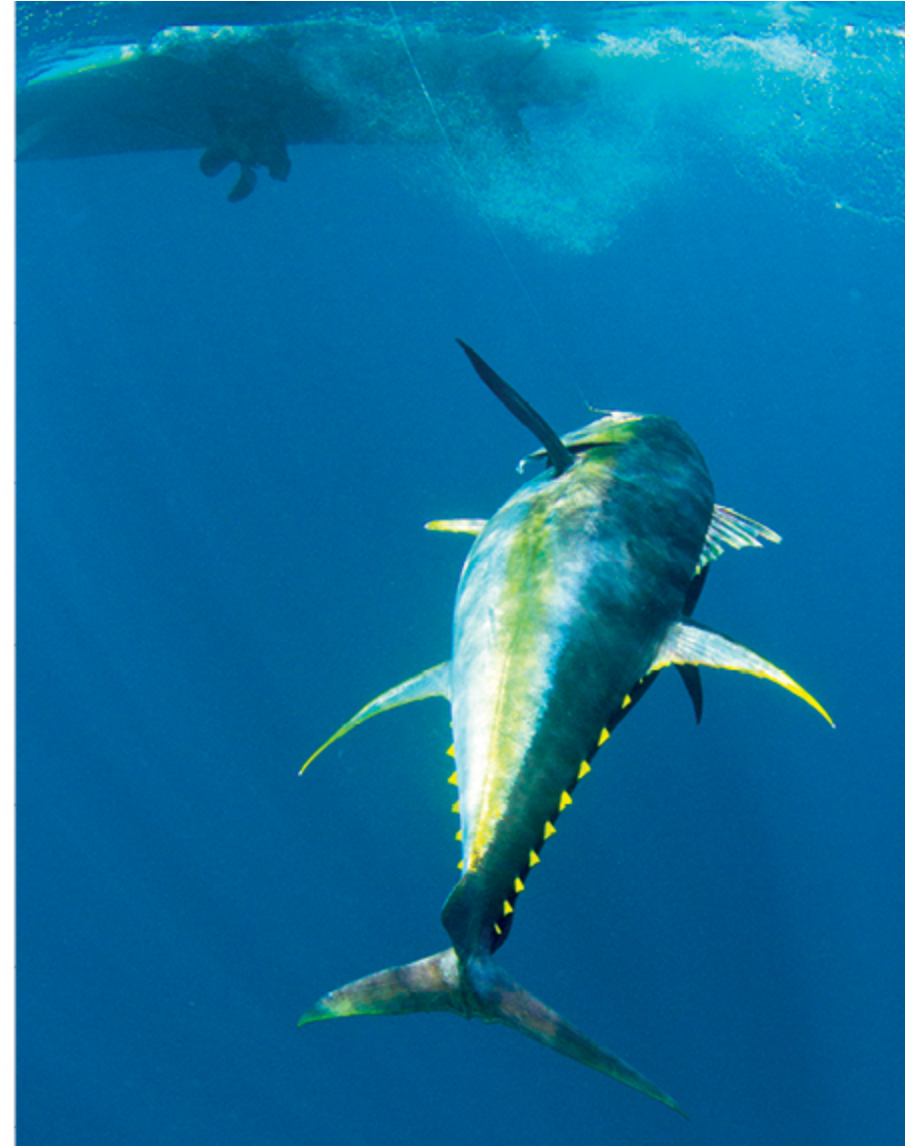


could muster, "Grande tuna! Muy grande tuna comer la carnada abajo!" Capt Chombo sprang into action and knew exactly what to do. He grabbed one of the 18,000 Shimano Stella and Terez spin combos and concealed a smaller 10/0 circle-hook rigged on a 100lb fluorocarbon leader inside three large, mashed-up sardines. I quickly jumped back in the boat as he handed me the rod and instructed me to cast the offering out as he scattered a few enticing chunks nearby.

#### MASSIVE YELLOWFIN

I paid out line smoothly to match the sink rate of the other descending chunks. We hoped our offering would be big enough to baulk the smaller tuna that preferred the morsel-sized pieces. It worked, and as I felt the pick-up, I let the fish run for a count of three, engaged the bail, and tightened the drag slowly to pull the circle-hook into place. At that moment, I experienced the reel's spool do what is best described as *Star Trek's* Capt Kirk initiating warp speed. Within seconds the tuna had torn off 200 metres of line against more than 15kg of drag. I feared that I had hooked into far more than I had bargained for with the spin tackle, especially when we had to chase the fish down.

However, it eventually settled, and once the fish began its upwards spiral Tom called to one of the crewmen and said, "Strap this on him," handing over the Black Magic spinning harness he had been using for popper-hooked tuna the day before. Deckies Jeffrey and Narciso made short work of fitting it to my waist



while I attached the harness to the rod. Akin to the larger conventional stand-up harnesses, the system was connected with an over-wrap ring strap-wrapped around the rod's reel seat. With the gear attached, I had the leverage and support necessary to help me lift the rod and gain a few centimetres of line as the fish grudgingly yielded in a circular ascent. After an hour of inching the fish in, I realised I couldn't have even thought about handling a 100kg-plus tuna without the proper harness gear.

After the fish was subdued boat-side by the leader, I returned to the water to capture a few underwater photos of my biggest yellowfin tuna ever – a whopping 110kg fish. What an experience!

#### LAY OF THE LAND

Discovered by the US Survey Squadron mission aboard the USS *Hannibal* in the early 1900s, Hannibal Bank is located between the islands of Montuosa to the west and Coiba, the largest in the Gulf of Chiriquí. While The Bank is historically a fishing mecca for black marlin and giant yellowfin tuna, the islands of Coiba, Montuosa, Ladrões, Secas, Paridas, Contraras, Jicarita and Jicarón also provide a variety of fishing opportunities with light or heavy tackle and fly fishing for species like roosterfish, cubera snapper, the smaller bluefin trevally, almaco jack, African pompano, sierra mackerel and wahoo.

According to Capt Chombo, The Bank runs about 8km long and 5km wide as it follows the continental shelf from northwest to southeast. The shallowest high-spot of The Bank sits at 40m below sea level with another 160 high-spots located about 3km further east. All year, around these two high spots, massive schools of bonita, cojinua and juvenile yellowfin tuna inhabit the upwelling currents that bring life to The Bank. Its 1000-metre drop-off along the southern edge is a haven of productivity, generating planktonic biomass that attracts smaller baitfish and the larger apex predators like giant yellowfin and blue and black marlin.

According to PBGFC owner Mark Charman ('Mr C'), the yellowfin tuna offer a consistent fishery for his guests, with the biggest tuna up to the 150kg-class,

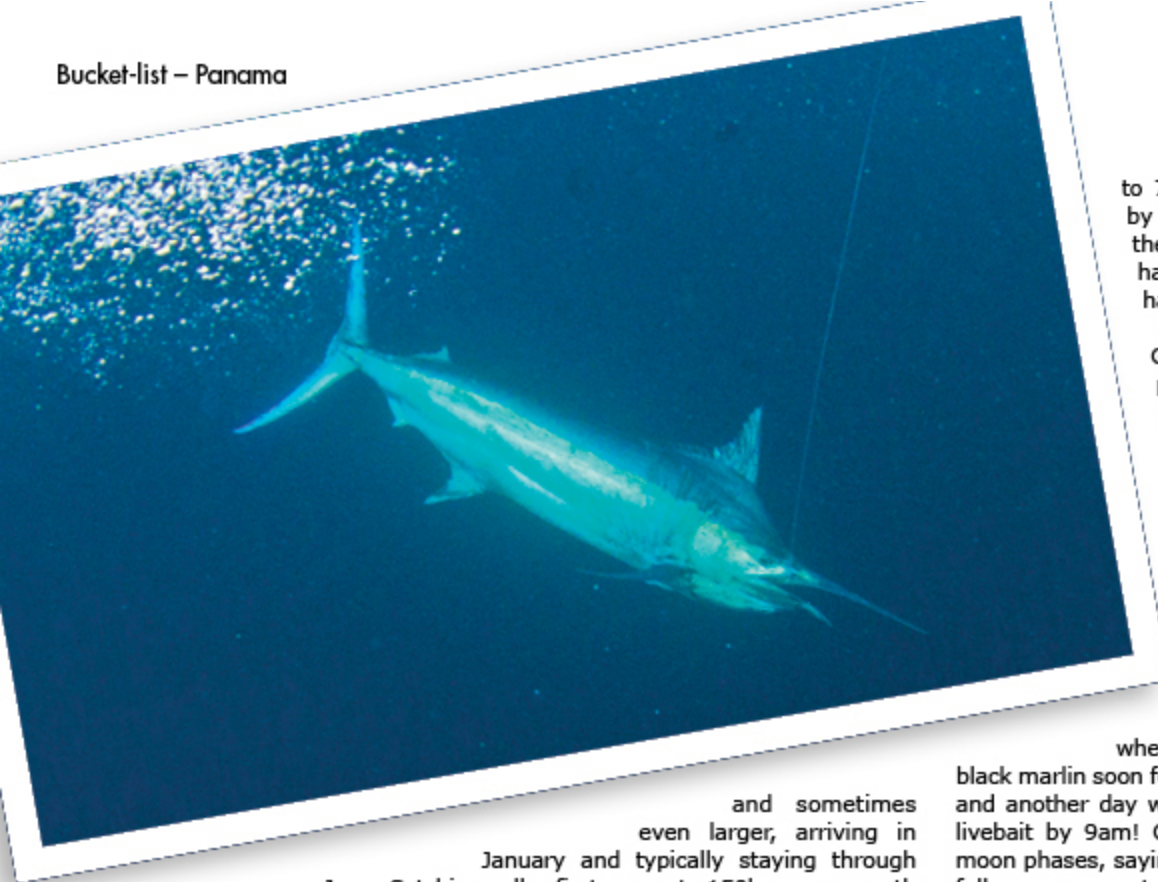


Panama delivers outstanding gamefishing for many species, and its plentiful yellowfin tuna are among the biggest in the world. Tuna of up to 100kg are consistent, and yellowfin of more than 150kg are always possible. Many anglers are now enjoying enormous thrills by catching them with poppers cast over the region's calm ocean waters.

"My biggest yellowfin tuna ever – a whopping 110kg fish."

The always glorious sailfish are also plentiful in the waters off Panama, and are a favourite with anglers preferring to fish with light tackle.





to 70kg-class, which is big for sailfish by most standards. During our week there, the dolphinfish and wahoo bite had picked up while the marlin bite had tapered off.

PBGFC regular and TV host Trevor Goudy, who travels the globe producing *Monster Fish* for the Outdoor Channel, told me, "I come back to fish with PBGFC at Hannibal Bank and Isla Montuosa each year because there is no place on earth that I feel provides as consistent a fishery for both black and blue marlin along with being in the same area where you can catch a 300-pound yellowfin tuna in the same day." He recalled a day in March 2007 fishing around the Montuosa Island drop-off

when he caught an estimated 360kg black marlin soon followed by a 146.5kg yellowfin tuna, and another day when he caught four blue marlin on livebait by 9am! Goudy plans his shows around the moon phases, saying that four days before or after the full moon seems to be the peak for number of bites.

#### INSHORE AND THE ISLANDS

Besides the world-class pelagic fishery around Hannibal Bank and off the Isla Montuosa drop-off, the cliffs and rocky shorelines of the many islands in the Gulf of Chiriquí provide year-round variety with roosterfish, cubera snapper, mullet snapper, broomtail grouper, pompano, the smaller trevally species, almaco jack (called amberjack locally) as well as the mackerel species, including the Pacific sierra mackerel and wahoo. Scanning the shoreline, I couldn't help but think of all the incredible fishing potential among the jigsaw-puzzle-shaped islands in the emerald green Pacific Ocean. My imagination was fuelled by fleeting daydreams of all the huge fish yet to be caught among the waves of clear blue-green water flushing in and out of the pockets of these roasted coffee-bean coloured rocks.

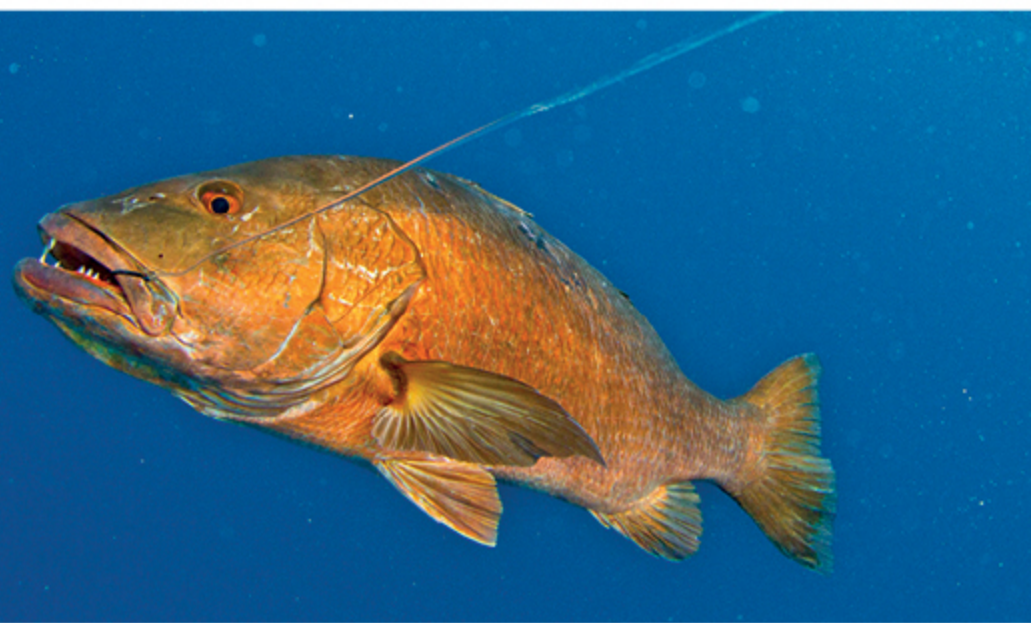
Whether you like light-tackle casting poppers or fishing heavier tackle with big livebaits, there is almost limitless opportunity here. Fishing bridled live cojinua

and sometimes even larger, arriving in January and typically staying through June. Catching yellowfin tuna up to 150kg every month is common on The Bank, and there are reports of fish up to the 200kg-mark on occasion. Most expert sources consider Panama's dry-season fishery to be from December until the end of April. Nevertheless, if you don't mind some wet weather associated with the tropical climate during the other months, then the fishing can be excellent, but be sure to bring foul-weather gear and ziplock baggies for your smaller electronics.

Capt Chombo also told us that the biggest marlin seem to be caught between September and December (although in smaller numbers), and giant sailfish show up around that time and stay through until February. We hooked three of the six sailfish we saw on livebait and I estimate that the fish were in the 50



Cubera snapper, a species similar to Australia's mangrove jack (but which grows to more than 45kg!), are just one of several extremely exciting species to be found in abundance in Panama's coastal waters.



on 15kg tackle off the transom, in combination with an angler or two throwing poppers off the bow, is deadly at maximising arm-wrenching strikes from both cuberas and roosters. The cubera snapper is a formidable species similar to Australia's mangrove jack, except that they grow to more than 45kg. They responded better to bigger surface poppers than I expected (like the Halco Roosta 'Haymaker' 195), using an aggressive pop-and-stop action. While the cuberas I hooked were 10 to 15kg, I'm afraid to think what fish were associated with some of the detonation-like strikes I missed.

I fished inshore with Capt Lorenzo Vernal, or 'Tati', the first two days, and he recalled cuberas in the 30 to 40kg-class crushing surface poppers only to have anglers left trembling with snapped lines, looking at their under-gunned tackle in despair. To consistently target the giant cuberas, Tati fishes the open water pinnacles with 24 to 37kg tackle and sometimes 60kg tackle using a 3 to 5kg circle-hooked bonita, dead or partially alive. Slow sinking the large baits to the bottom over the pinnacles that rise up within 15 metres of the surface produced the most strikes from cuberas, but slow trolling these baits alive on downriggers is also effective.

Once hooked, expect three to four minutes of knee-buckling tug-of-war battles with the good chance of getting 'rocked-up'. These cuberas are no joke and fight as mean as they look – with their 2 to 4cm canine teeth prominently displayed as you try to remove a circle-hook from their vice-like jaws. Once captured, the cuberas are typically released quickly. Be prepared for one or two boat-side photos as most lodge operations prefer not to remove the slow-growing cuberas from the water. They have low fecundity rates, only yielding a few surviving offspring with each reproductive cycle.

#### LOS PEZ GALLOS – ROOSTERFISH

With the cubera snapper and other smaller pargo (Spanish for snapper) caught casting surface lures along the rocky shorelines, one of the most exotic gamefish I've ever encountered is the papagayo (pez gallo in Spanish), or as it is more commonly called, the roosterfish. Enticing roosters on poppers and watching them come in from behind, with their dorsal comb flaring, as they track down the lure has to be one of the most exciting gamefishing experiences. The explosion of a rooster inhaling a popper with the backdrop of giant mountain-like rocks pushing out of the water provides a pure adrenaline rush.

Panamanian angler John Maynard taught me the ways of popping roosters. The surface lures he uses for cubera snapper and roosters all have wired-through construction and are armed with triple extra-heavy treble hooks or 8/0 to 10/0 single hooks, which make it easier to release the fish. Maynard prefers a sturdy, seven- to eight-foot fast-action popping rod, braided line of around 23 or 29kg connected to a wind-on leader or a metre of 24 or 37kg monofilament. The PBGFC provides all the tackle you could need. The roosterfish preferred a faster retrieve compared to the stop-and-go popping action suited to the slower-moving pargo species. You'll get more bites with a smaller popper like the Halco Roosta in the 135 or 160 sizes, or the Yo-Zuri 'Bull Metallic' series in both the 5-7/8-inch and 8-inch sizes.

The fighting style of a roosterfish is akin to a stubborn giant trevally using its broad sides and powerful tail to dig deep. Roosters sometimes jump when hooked on poppers, but not so much when caught on bait. I hooked a 20kg roosterfish three metres behind the boat and it greyhounded for five metres before diving below to slug out the rest of the 30-minute battle. When handling roosterfish for a photo, one must work fast since roosterfish don't do well out of the water for more than 30 seconds. The PBGFC realise the importance of having this gamefish around so take the necessary steps to ensure a healthy release.

"He caught an estimated 360kg black marlin soon followed by a 146.5kg yellowfin tuna!"

Roosterfish are another of the exotic thrills to be found in Panama's coastal waters. These exciting sportfish often greyhound across the surface when caught on surface lures, before slugging it out in a battle style similar to a giant trevally.

"One of the most exotic gamefish I've ever encountered is the roosterfish."





The Panama Big Game Fishing Club runs a fleet of well-maintained sportfishing boats that are equipped with the very best of Shimano tackle.



Along with protecting gamefish like billfish, roosterfish and cubera snapper, the PBGFC has also taken the initiative to support the Panama Marine Resource Foundation, a group committed to working with Panamanian Government agencies and stakeholders to improve sportfishing interests in Panama. Mr C realises that by ensuring there is a strategy in place for enhancing the local fishing resources, sportfishing operations like his will continue to exist. Neighbouring Costa Rica has seen a substantial decline in their fishing productivity because of the commercial take, and it is the visionary thinking of Panamanian clubs like the PBGFC that helps maintain the health of their world-class fishing.

### THE LODGE

What makes the PBGFC an exceptional fishing establishment in Panama is that the lodge not only provides state-of-the-art rods and reels, seasoned professional fishing captains and deckies, and five-star luxury accommodations and amenities, but it also handles all the critical details and logistics of ensuring a safe and convenient experience for international guests. This boutique resort/charter operation greets their clients at the Panama City airport and provides safe travel to the final destination. Although making the inter-Panama transfer arrangements yourself might save a few bucks, the convenience of having it all done for you the right way is invaluable.

From my arrival at Panama City to the short flight to David, Mr C ensured that a club representative was present, whether to assist me through Customs or drive me to the hotel. The logistics needed to get to the PBGFC were all taken care of; Mr C has made sure that his guests won't have to worry about anything once they are in the hands of the PBGFC.

When I arrived at the club, I was immediately impressed with the quality of the accommodation. The rooms are not the basic bed-and-bathroom type I was expecting to find, instead, the PBGFC has upped the ante by having the best of everything in each of the four cottages. Fully remodelled, from the bedding to entertainment system, PBGFC's rooms will impress. If you need WiFi or your children want an X-Box for gaming, the club has it. In June of 2012, the club was awarded the 2012 Certificate of Excellence by the world's largest travel website, Tripadvisor.com. According to Mr C, the PBGFC is the only Panamanian fishing lodge to ever be awarded this honour.

Amid the exotic tranquility of a Panamanian jungle setting, the PBGFC provides a comfortable oasis to base your fishing adventure in one of the world's most exciting and most productive gamefishing hotspots.



The club's

infinity pool with walk-up bar and hot tub are stunning. The PBGFC has even gone as far as to install a 60-inch flat-screen TV media station beside the pool as well as a portable 60-inch waterproof entertainment station to roll out beside the hot tub if desired. If you want to Skype a family member while in the pool or hot tub you can do it at the PBGFC.

As far as the food is concerned, expect nothing less than the spectacular. Chef Fidel will make anything you crave. From the flavoursome seafood pasta, to fresh lobster, tuna steaks and sushi from the day's catch, or the club's signature roasts, you will be well-fed for a hearty day on the ocean.

### TAILORED GAMEBOATS

PBGFC's recently updated sportfishers are well-maintained and equipped with the best of the best in Shimano tackle. The fleet consists of a Bertram 31; two Carolina Classic 28s (with full air-con); a 28ft Abermarle; a 27ft super panga custom-built for fly fishing; a 28ft Robalo (reserve boat); a 26ft water-taxi (also good for river fishing and near shore); and a 37ft Wavebreaker centre-console. The PBGFC sportfishers are arguably a better ride than many of the open centre-consoles found in other operations. If you prefer a sportfisher where you can cast poppers for tuna and roosterfish from a spacious bow or shelter from wet-season rain, then this is the fishing operation for you.

The vessels feature comfortable beanbags for a short siesta while journeying from fishing the world-famous Hannibal Bank, or the Coiba and Montuosa islands. From the Shimano Stellas and Terez combos for popping yellowfin tuna, cuberas and roosterfish on surface lures, to the Shimano Tiagra 30s, 50s and 80s for battling blue and black marlin or giant yellowfin tuna, you can have complete confidence in the tackle. The captains and deckies are world-class – Capt Tati and Capt Chombo took the extra effort to put us on fish, and the crewmen, Narciso and Jeffrey, are some of the most experienced deckies in Panama.

### JUST DO IT

Panama might seem a long way from home, but with its spectacular jungle and menagerie of enthralling wildlife as a backdrop, the Club as a base-station, and the extraordinary opportunities to catch many of the biggest and best gamefish in the world, then Panama and the Panama Big Game Fishing Club is simply a must-do for any adventurous gamefisherman.

Don't leave it on your bucket-list and let another year go by. Life is too short; get yourself there soon! 🐟

