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Chris Blankenship is Alabama's Top Fish Man.



Ozzy Delgado, left, with Captain Antonio "Chombo" Isaza and mate Maicol Rios celebrate with a beautiful Pacific blue marlin—a first for Delgado.



PANAMANIAN FIGHT CLUB

BY **OZZY DELGADO**
PHOTOS BY **JOSE ACOSTA**

The fishing is a 10, the service is five-star and there's not one good reason to miss out on fishing Panama's Pacific coast.

Panama, the skinny strip of land where the Americas meet, is known for its bustling economy, awesome natural wonders, international banking and a great salsa singer named Ruben Blades. Oh, and there's a canal or something, too. But among fishermen, Panama is best known for monster yellowfin tuna, hoss cubera snapper, roosterfish, and enough blue and black marlin that you sometimes have to use a stick to beat them back from jumping in the boat. It's the latter that excites me about a recent invitation to the Panama Big Game Fishing Club.

Our cover story for getting in is that we will be filming a TV show with Captain Diego Toiran, who hosts the Spanish-language fishing series *Pescado en los Cayos*. My job is to cover the expedition for GHM. We do both (you're reading this, aren't you?), but I am just geeked about going to a place known for having an obscene number of record-breaking fish. Some linguists have doubts, but most Panamanians agree that the word "Panama" actually means "abundance of fish."

It's their country, so I figure they can define it however they want. And after our experience, I'm a believer.

Our trip begins with the flight into Panama City (the capital city) where everyone with a window seat gets a good look at the ships waiting to go through the canal. I admit it is pretty cool. I wonder if there are some monster snook in there. Maybe that's another TV show. As we exit the plane, we get our first taste of the "VIP" travel treatment being provided by our new friends at PBGFC. "Welcome to Panama," says a dude holding an iPad with our names on it. He leads us through the airport to a VIP lounge where we hang out to wait our turn with customs. Once that's done, we're off in a limo to the Veneto Hotel & Casino where we stay the night before catching an in-country flight and heading to the Club itself.

The Veneto is a Wyndham Grand Hotel. It's in Panama City's business and financial district and offers all the modern amenities that high-rolling travellers

expect—a spa, sauna, fitness center, a Vegas-style casino and some seriously good eats. Their New York Steakhouse restaurant gets my vote, but there's a top-notch sushi lounge, too. The Veneto caters to fishermen traveling in and out of the country, and their chef will even cook your catch.

Our flight the next day is an afternoon departure, so our host, Ms. Corcio, arranges a quick tour of Panama City. Our first stop is Mercado De Mariscos (Panama City Fish Market), a swanky joint where we sample some awesome ceviche, a national favorite. Our tour also includes a stop at the Panama Canal. It's a major tourist attraction and well worth a visit if you've never been. This engineering marvel accounts for a huge chunk of Panama's annual GDP. Some call it the "the eighth wonder of the world."

We wrap up the sightseeing and catch the flight from Panama City to David, a quick 35-minute hop to the west end of the country. Victor Archbold, general manager of PBGFC, is there to pick us up. So far, the trip has been pleasant, but we've been in the country for 24 hours and I haven't wet a line yet. I am starting to get the sweats. I ask Victor about the bite.

"Ozzy, it's been slow all week," he says. I can feel panic starting to creep in, but I push it back. We are in Panama, after all, and I decide to keep a positive vibe and just enjoy things as they came. Forty-five minutes later, we arrive in Boca Chica where we board a boat to cross the river to the club. It's dark now, but getting on the boat makes it feel like we're finally in fishing paradise. And whatever qualms I had about the poor fishing report are being soothed by the sheer luxury of the resort. Within 15 minutes of hitting the dock, we enjoy our first beverage, toast a great week to come, and are ushered to a five-star dinner. It also doesn't hurt that the dining room is decorated wall to wall with pictures of past catches, trophy-size mounts and a big-screen TV playing videos of guests battling monster fish. Jose Acosta, our cameraman and the third member of our team, looks at me over dinner and says, "Ozzy, everything is going to be fine." I drift off to sleep that night hoping for the best.

Fishing happens early at the Club. Our wake-up call is at 5:30 a.m., but the staff is kind enough to supply lots of coffee. "Gentlemen, you will be fishing with Chombo today." This is good news. Fishing with one of Panama's best captains holds a lot of promise for the day. The Club's fishing fleet consists of Carolina Classics and Bertram sportfishing boats, and they are armed to the teeth with top-of-the-line gear—no need to bring your own tackle. After breakfast, we finally hit the water.

A typical day here starts with catching live bonito, which are like candy for

marlin and giant yellowfin. We load up on bait and then make our run to Isla Montuosa in the Gulf of Chiriquí. It's about 60 miles from the coast and sits just off the famous Hannibal Bank. Even before we get too close to the island, the fishing turns on. We see humpback whales breaching and porpoises are all over us—pods that number in the hundreds. I feel like I'm in a Discovery Channel special. Ever the vigilant captain, Chombo snaps us back into reality and tells us to get ready for some action.

We run to the front of the porpoise pods and cast in some live bait. Bam! We



Top: Captain Diego Toiran with a Pacific rock snapper. Below: Delgado shows off a monster cubera snapper. This species has made a comeback since local captains agreed to protect it through catch and release fishing.



These beautiful volcanic islands host the most vibrant marine habitats in the Pacific Ocean.

hook up instantly. Diego's reel starts screaming, and so does mine. We soon gaff a nice pair of tunas in the 40–60 lb. range and then hit the throttle to reposition for round two. We run with the porpoises and at the right time, pitch the bait in front of them again. We catch more fish and the pace is sometimes frantic. All the commotion starts to attract some other boats to the area, but it isn't a problem. We have a great crew that keeps us on the fish and there are plenty of those to go around. After an amazing day of rod-bending action and sore muscles, it is time to head back to the lodge. The ride in is a great opportunity to chat with Captain Antonio "Chombo" Isaza and our mate, Maicol Rios. Great captains and crews are not always known for being warm and charming, but that is not the case here. The camaraderie on the boat is easy, and more like old friends fishing together.

After an action-packed day on the water (this is slow fishing???), down time for the evening is all about recharging. We lounge around in the infinity pool, snack on passion fruit-infused wahoo ceviche and hang out at the wet bar, watching video footage from the day's trip on a huge flat-screen. Oh, and the grilled wahoo with pesto dinner, topped with crumbled apple pie and pistachio ice cream sends my taste buds into a frenzy. The Club knows how to entertain.

Our second day on the water, we arrive at the remote Isla Montuosa, and to our liking we are the only boat around. The bad news is there is no surface action as before. Captain Chombo improvises and decides to rig some live bonitos and

power-drift them close to the island in search of marlin. We work the baits and wait. Not long after, a shout comes from the helm. "The porpoises are coming!"

We pull in the baits and begin racing with the pods in a repeat of the first day. As soon as we cast in again, my reel starts screaming. "Ozzy, that one is not a small tuna," warns Chombo. Anyone who has tangoed with a big tuna knows their incredible power. I fight this one in stand-up gear with a conventional 30-class reel. After close to an hour, we get the fish alongside and put the gaff in it. I am feeling proud. It's the largest yellowfin I've ever boated. All the tuna we catch are in the 100–120 lb. range, and even the cameraman, Jose, lands his first big yellowfin.

When you hear about the fishing here, you start to wonder if it's all true. What makes this place so fertile and full of fish? The answer is awesome, underwater geography. The Gulf of Panama is a unique environment, fed by the nutrient-rich waters of the Humboldt Current, also known as the Peru Current. This large upwelling supports an extraordinary abundance of marine life. Nutrient-rich water creates a strong base for the food chain, starting with microscopic plankton and baitfish and moving all the way up to the big-boy gamefish. It's like a massive, well-stocked aquarium.

After wearing ourselves out on tuna for two days straight, we decide on day three to change things up a little and target some inshore species. Just a short ride



THE CLUB

The Panama Big Game Fishing Club is ideally situated on the country's southwest coast, and owner Mark Charman is a founding member of the Panama Marine Resource Foundation—a group dedicated to creating a sustainable marine environment in Panama. The Club hosts visitors year-round. The best time to pursue billfish is from December to April. Giant yellowfin tuna are most plentiful in the spring. That said, the best time to fish Panama is simply whenever you can, as the bite is always on. Guests are pampered and accommodations include all the must-haves of modern life. Villas include large, flat-screen Smart TVs, Wi-Fi service, coffeemakers, a mini bar and much more. Dining is a five-star culinary experience, and the staff offers warm, personal service. For its combination of red-hot fishing, strong conservation ethic and outstanding service, the Panama Big Game Fishing Club has earned the *Guy Harvey Magazine's* Editor's Choice Award for #1 Boutique Fishing Resort in Central America.

not only roosterfish, but Cubera snapper are prevalent. Mahi, wahoo and other gamefish come in very close to shore, too. "You could be 10 yards from the rocks and the depth could be 40 feet and then move another 10 yards and down you go to 100-plus feet," explains Maicol, our mate.

Not long after we arrive, Chombo shouts, "Fish on!" It's a roosterfish and it's reeled in by my friend Diego. Ten minutes later my reel gets a hit, but my roosterfish spits the hook. Captain Chombo takes us to another place and Maicol hands me a spinner with a top-water popper. "Cast around that rock protruding out of the water," he says. I hook up and this fight turns into an awkward ballet. I've

from the Club lays a string of lush, but largely uninhabited, islands. As we approach, I start replaying scenes from the *Jurassic Park* movies in my mind. "Islas Secas!" shouts Chombo.

We slow-drift a pair of live baits just 15–20 yards from the island. I ask what species of fish roam these waters. I'm shocked to hear that

got a giant Cubera snapper hanging on my line, wanting to run into the rocks. The captain keeps repositioning the boat to help keep the fish clear. It is coordinated chaos, but we land the fish. Chombo estimates its weight at 40–45 lbs. before we release it back into the water. "Captains in all the resorts got together and made a decision to release all Cubera snapper," he tells me. "We need to protect the ecosystem and this fish is vulnerable."

With three days of non-stop action, it's turning out to be the fishing trip of a lifetime—11 different species and the sore muscles to go with it. That night, getting ready for dinner, I sit down with Captain Chombo to discuss the plan for the next day. "We are going to concentrate on your marlin," he tells me. "Forget about any other species; let's go after your fish." He sounds confident and it's contagious.

In the morning, we head out to the acclaimed Hannibal Bank. It's known for spectacular marlin fishing with many blacks and blues caught here each year. The most productive tactic is bridling live bonitos, though trolling is also a solid option. The bank sits along the edge of the Pacific continental shelf and goes from a depth of 120 feet to more than 3,000 feet within a span of just three miles. With tuna tubes filled with fresh bonitos, we're ready for battle. Maicol drops a pair of baits into the depths and within five minutes, the reel explodes into action. Everyone works to bring in the other lines and I strap into the fighting chair. And just as fast as it starts, it is over. The hook pulls free. "It was a black marlin," confirms Chombo.

Undeterred, we opt to change to artificial baits and work the area. Trolling for marlin can be boring, but being surrounded by beautiful landscapes does make it better. Several hours pass with no luck. Everyone is gets lethargic and I start to doze. Suddenly, I hear Maicol shout, "Adelante, adelante!" It's Spanish for "move forward!"

Before I know it, I'm in the chair again. The rod is bent to the point I think it is going to break. In front of me is an unbelievable sight: a massive, beautiful fish



Above: Delgado and Jose Acosta display a pair of bruiser Yellowfin tuna. Right: Drag-screaming Pacific Blue trevally before release. Map Data: US Dept of State Geographer, Image Landsat, Data SIO, NOAA, U.S. Navy, NGA, GEBCO.

begins to greyhound in the distance and strip line at a rapid pace. About 30 minutes into the fight, Maicol asks me if I want water. I grunt out a desperate "Yes!" My mouth is dry, my back is tightening up and all I can think is, "Please don't pull the hook."

Finally, the fish is boat-side and Maicol secures the leader. It is a great moment and a great feeling. For the record, I don't cry. But something flies in my eye and I have to get it out. Just for a second.

We release the beautiful blue marlin. The crew estimates a weight of 400 lbs. I've been a fishing freak my entire life and this is a personal first. My time in the chair is just under an hour. I'm still reliving and enjoying every minute.

Special thanks to owner Mark Charman (Mr. "C"), Sherri Wilson and the staff of the Panama Big Game Fishing Club. 

