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Andy O'Shea with one of the big yellowfin he caught on Hannibal Bank.

"Several were simply on an adventure, almost certain they'd catch the biggest fish of their life."

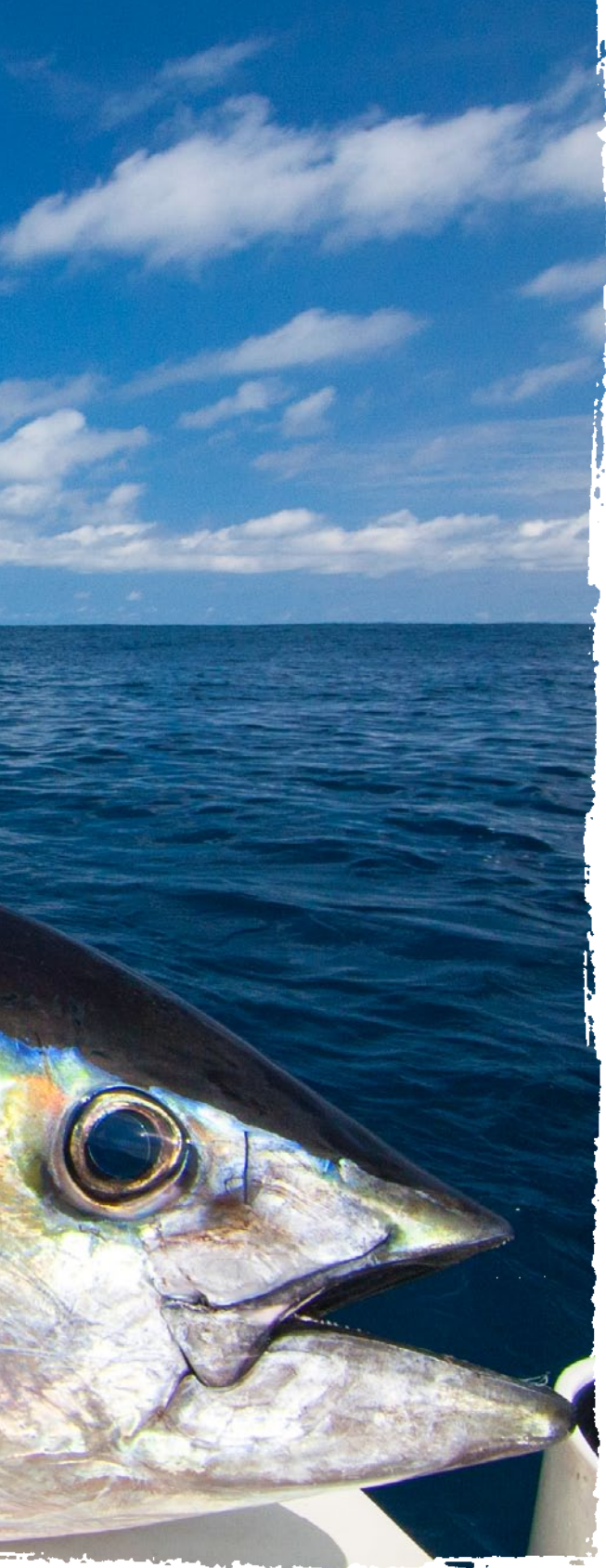
A head of us, scattered across 300 metres of glass-calm ocean, a mass of spotted dolphins burst through the surface in a low arc, their blowholes puffing small plumes of mist before rapidly sucking in a new breath as they tracked eastwards with purpose. High above them, frigate birds wheeled expectantly. Something was about to happen and we could all feel the tension rise.

Tall palms stood sentry nearby behind a golden beach flanked by jagged stacks of fractured black volcanic rocks that formed a dramatic fringe separating the dense green jungle above from the slick blue ocean and its brilliant white surf that crashed down upon

them. This was Isla Montuosa, known in these parts as 'Monster Island'.

We were only hours into the first day of the *BlueWater* Readers' Trip to Panama and already things were developing fast. Our team had booked out the entire Panama Big Game Fishing Club, and we had departed at dawn that morning aboard four 10m gameboats on a mission seeking some of the biggest yellowfin tuna on the planet.

Our captain skilfully assessed the dolphins as we scooted over the low, oily swells. He changed direction frequently, angling to position us in front of the pack. Then, with a sudden urgency he pulled the twin throttles



CHASING TUNA TO THE FAR SIDE OF THE WORLD

THE *BLUEWATER* READERS' TRIP TO PANAMA

For the 20 anglers and partners on the *BlueWater* Readers' Trip to Panama, a bucket-list dream became a reality in June. This amazing destination delighted all with its spectacular fishing, exotic species and historical wonders, all made easy and comfortable in an air-conditioned, tropical-jungle wonderland.

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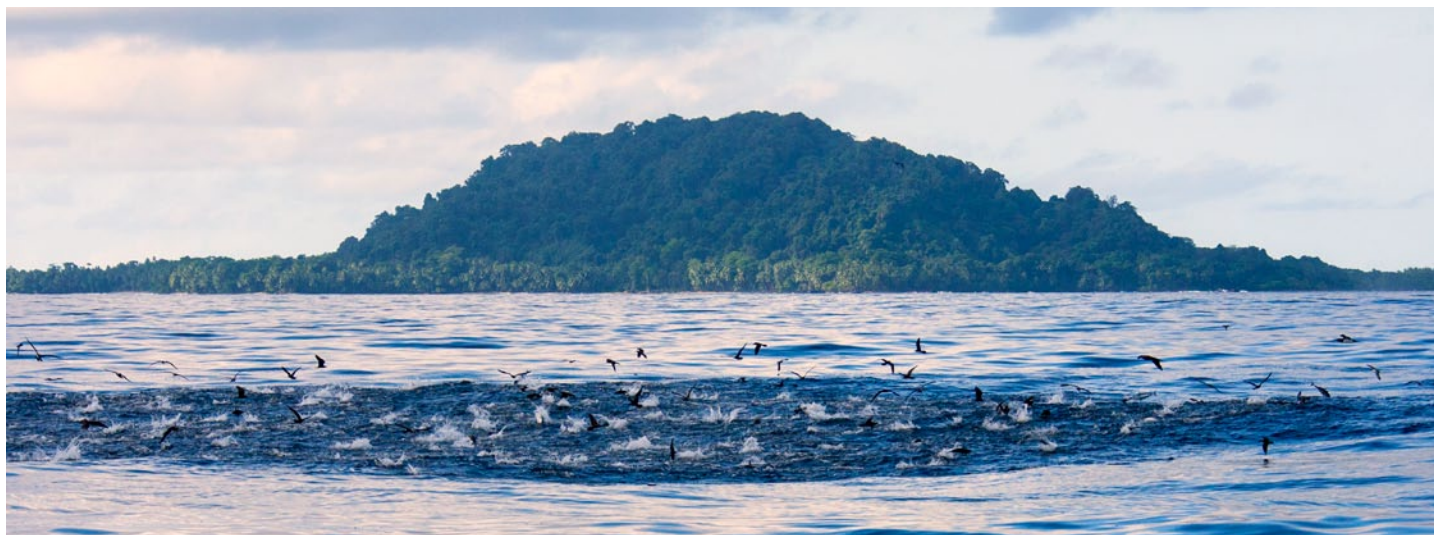


to neutral and called down to us in the cockpit; it was show time!

Beside me, Bob Ellis and Andy O'Shea braced themselves expectantly in each corner of the cockpit as a stocky trevally species known as a green jack was attached to the circle hook on each of their lines and dropped into the wake. Their 20cm livebaits immediately shot under our transom to shelter between the rudders; they could sense the danger lurking nearby.

After stripping several metres of line from the reels our deckie hauled the baits out, then hand-cast them far enough that they couldn't see in which direction their security lay. A few moments of hesitation were





The waters around Montuosa Island are often teeming with life, such as this frenzied school of black skipjack tuna.

all it took. As the lead dolphins drew close, Andy's line tore off with a violent jerk; he was hooked-up to our first yellowfin.

TUNA JUMPING AT BOAT

Meanwhile, on the other side of Montuosa Island, Scott Frasier, Joe Kolossa and Keith Vallabh also found yellowfin, and their tuna had pinned a school of baitfish against the surface.

As they arrived, the school erupted in a frenzied feeding spree all around them. All three anglers immediately hooked-up and were dragged to the transom as their speeding quarry powered into the depths. And so their challenging triple battle began.

Two big yellowfin at once is tricky, but with three on they were forced to duck under and over each other, constantly unthreading the tangles their tuna weaved with their lines. All around, close enough to splash

them, the unrelenting tuna continued their massacre.

Yellowfin and baitfish flew through the air in all directions, tearing the surface to seething white foam. Obsessed with their feeding, the tuna were oblivious to the boat and chased fleeing baitfish right to the hull, or snatched others sheltering underneath. Several misjudged their attacks and hit the boat, while others leapt wildly through the air and bounced off the hull. One airborne tuna landed on the gunnel right beside Keith, and had he not been hooked-up and straining on his rod at the time, he could have easily swept the 40kg missile aboard with one hand.

The other two boats found similar action, and after arriving back at the dock that evening to be greeted with waiting cocktails, we learnt that our Aussie and Kiwi teams had smashed the Club's record for the most yellowfin ever caught in one day. With the rest of our week still ahead of us, our excitement grew in anticipation of the region's many other delights!

"This was Isla Montuosa, known in these parts as 'Monster Island'."



Bob Ellis steers the chair and offers encouragement as Andy O'Shea battles another big yellowfin tuna off Hannibal Bank.

INTERNATIONAL HOTSPOT

There are many exceptional fishing trips throughout the world, some offering staggering numbers of a particular gamefish, others with exotic species. Still more are renowned for their historical significance, providing insight into new techniques or a rare opportunity to fish with masters of the craft.

For the majority of anglers these experiences remain little more than a dream, but some destinations deserve more than that. The really exceptional ones should be elevated to the top of our bucket lists – and acted upon. These are the spots we've read about and dreamt about and longed to visit for as long as we can remember, the ones with photos of amazing fish that remain burnt into our consciousness. These are the 'must-do' trips that adventurous anglers should somehow make a reality.

For me, the richly fertile waters of Panama have always been one of those destinations. Even its local Cueva Indian name, Panama, translates as 'An abundance of fish'. Lying between 7 and 10° north of the Equator and largely covered with lush, wild jungle, Panama remains an unspoilt fishing wonderland with a largely uninhabited shoreline.

This tiny nation is a narrow serpentine land bridge running east-west between the continents of North and South America. Only 772km long and between 60 and 177km in width, Panama lies nestled between Costa Rica in the north and Columbia to the south. On its northern side is the Caribbean Sea, and beyond that



the Atlantic Ocean, while against its southern coast lies the Pacific Ocean.

These two oceans were joined in 1914 when the US Government picked up the pieces of a failed French attempt and completed the creation of the Panama Canal. Now enjoying its centenary and a much-needed expansion to accommodate today's much larger ships, the Canal and its US involvement have transformed Panama into a bustling trade hub and financial centre, with a surprisingly large and modern capital city at its Pacific entrance.

GOVERNMENT ENCOURAGES GAMEFISHING

Along its Pacific coast, Panama's angling treasures include exotic inshore species like roosterfish and hefty cubera snapper, with bountiful yellowfin tuna, marlin, dolphinfish and other bluewater speedsters further offshore.

In recognition of the benefits of sportfishing tourism, the Panamanian Government has banned commercial fishing for billfish and has outlawed purse seining for tuna. It has also introduced substantial restrictions on the longline fleet. The commercial catches of yellowfin in Panama's territorial waters were artisanal and industrial until December 2010, when its government prohibited the use of longline vessels over 6GRT (gross register tons). Then, in December 2011, it introduced further regulations allowing only the use of a trotline with hand roller, with no mechanical, hydraulic or electric connections, and a maximum of 600 hooks.

Panama's commercial fishery for tuna is now 100 per cent artisanal and the gamefishing has only improved. In these waters, yellowfin of 50kg are common and tuna of 100kg hardly raise an eyebrow, particularly since brutes of more than 180kg have been caught there. Good tuna are caught over much of the year, but the peak of the big yellowfin run is between February and May.

DREAM BECOMES REALITY

My dream of fishing Panama may never have come to pass had it not been for Mark Charman of the Panama Big Game Fishing Club. The 'club' is actually a boutique-style fishing lodge nestled among the jungle on Boca Brava Island. It lies 40km east of the Costa Rican border and an hour's drive from the city and airport of David (pronounced Daveed) in Panama's south-western province of Chiriqui. Mark purchased the lodge a few years ago after retiring from a lucrative career in the computer industry in London. Well, what else would a wealthy English tech wizard do? To his great credit, Mark has injected substantial capital, transforming the lodge into an extremely comfortable air-conditioned and technology-laden

oasis amid the howler monkeys and steamy, tropical jungle close outside.

Of course, undertaking a successful fishing expedition to the other side of the world is not an easy task without significant logistical assistance from a team at the destination. That's where Mark and his team made the trip a huge success. They orchestrated pick-ups and transfers at both Panama City and David, and then delivered us to the lodge smoothly and easily. Once there everything was supplied, including chef-created meals, an inexhaustible supply of cocktails (complete with pool and spa service), a laundry service, plus a fleet of 10m gameboats, crews and an upmarket selection of tackle.

Mark's team works long hours to ensure that guests are attended to and that all is prepared for the next day's fishing. The fishing crews were often preparing boats and gear from 4am, and were still up at 10pm that night if repairs were necessary. Meanwhile, all we needed was a sense of adventure and the energy to fish from dawn 'til dark, then party at the swim-up pool bar until late.

The amazing Panama Canal is celebrating its 100th birthday this year. Through a progression of locks, and the gravity flow of millions of litres of fresh water, ships are raised 17m in a matter of minutes before traversing the 77km journey across the country. At the other end they are lowered to sea level once again.

"All around, close enough to splash them, the unrelenting tuna continued their massacre."



Left: Peter Babarskas, Roger Budd, Matt Verde and Dick Brown relax with a cocktail and plate of fresh sashimi as the sun sets over the Tall Tails bar after a tough day battling big fish offshore.





"One airborne tuna landed on the gunnel right beside Keith."

With the boat captains and crews looking on behind, the team from the second week hoist a few of the day's catch kept for fresh sashimi and steaks that night. From left: Geoff Harris, Tom Lee, Ara Kahramanian, Steve Bestwick and Neil Sinclair.

"We are already taking bookings for a return to Panama in 2015."

A HUGE SUCCESS

When we first floated the idea of a *BlueWater* Readers' Trip to Panama I was sceptical that we'd find sufficient participants to make it viable. How wrong I was! As soon as the first magazine promoting the trip hit the newsstands our phones and emails started buzzing with enquiries. Obviously, many were just waiting for an organised opportunity that made it easy. In the end, 20 men and women joined me on this year's adventure, but there were many others also eager to come that couldn't make it on the dates. Such was the interest generated by this trip, including from this year's participants now eager to return, that we're already taking bookings for another trip to Panama in 2015.

The motives driving participants on the trip varied from quests for a huge yellowfin, to exotics like roosterfish. Peter Babarskas, the Records Officer for the Game Fishing Association of Australia (GFAA), together with Darryn Hill, had travelled from Western Australia on a mission to catch as many new species as they could find. Peter added 13 to his extensive tally, but there were quite a few species he missed that he'll try to add next year. Several others, like Scott Frasier, Joe Kolassa, Keith Vallabh, Ara Kahramanian, Tom Lee, Geoff Harris and Steve Bestwick were simply on an adventure, happy with whatever came their way, particularly as they were very likely to catch the biggest fish of their life.

RETURN TO GOOD OL' DAYS

A number of this year's team either originated from Bermagui, on the NSW South Coast, or had spent substantial time there fishing for its big yellowfin tuna in the golden years of the 1980s. Like me, Bob Ellis (a past president of the GFAA), Neil Sinclair, Dick Brown,

Matt Verde, Roger Budd and Andy O'Shea, along with Alex Katralilas and his father, Stephen, remembered the excitement of big tuna and yearned to see it again. This Panama trip rekindled those memories and made them a reality once more. How exhilarating it was to once again see big yellowfin wheeling through our chunk trail at the back of the boat!

Our next few days were spent at the renowned hotspot slightly to the south-east of Montuosa Island known as Hannibal Bank. There we drifted and berleyed with chunks of sardines while feeding back strip-baits and live blue runners for big yellowfin.

Hannibal Bank is an oval-shaped seamount rising steeply from depths of 1000 to just 40m, with twin peaks of 16 and 28m at its crest. Reaching it involved a 50NM trip from the Club, but with idyllic mirror-calm seas and comfortable 10m boats, the trip became a pleasant two-hour cruise during which we spotted some of the region's abundant turtles, as well as occasional whales and dolphins. Best of all we discovered a new innovation for amazingly comfortable travel at sea. Mark had equipped all the boats with heavy-duty vinyl

Joe Kolassa and Bob Ellis get comfortable in their beanbags for the 90km dawn run out to Hannibal Bank. Thankfully, the ocean was usually as smooth as glass and the comfortable two-hour trip provided time to relax and watch turtles and other marine life swim by.





beanbags, and once snuggled into one of these – either in the breeze up on the bow or back in the shade within the cockpit – it didn't matter how far we needed to travel. Even when the breeze picked up on the second week, you could snooze or simply relax and watch the world go by, saving your energy for what lay ahead.

TUNA AND MARLIN

Hannibal Bank proved a popular spot, often with 10 to 20 other boats drifting or trolling its peak, including local timber longliners fishing for tuna.

Fish appeared soon after starting our berley trail of sardine chunks. First to show were large rainbow runner, but before long the yellowfin appeared and the next few days saw all boats land good tuna, several of which weighed more than 65kg. The biggest was Alex's 80kg fish, but a couple of larger fish were lost and one of the captains saw a tuna strike that he said was at least 150kg.

From October through to March the Bank is also a hotspot for blues and the even more prolific black marlin, some of which reach enormous sizes. Although largely out of season for our June trip, both Scott and Roger caught and released nice marlin on the Bank.

We also caught wahoo and dolphinfish, especially when we cast livebaits at one of the many logs floating far offshore. Frequent local thunderstorms wash logs of all sizes from the jungle, representing a serious navigational hazard. Some were full-size trees, with trunks so large you couldn't reach around them. Upon



inspection most harboured crabs on the exposed limbs and a school of fish sheltering beneath.

One very innovative approach that we saw the longliners use to great effect was slow trolling with live berley by tying one of the enormous trees alongside. As a school of baitfish dutifully followed their host tree, the boat could roam until they stumbled across a school of yellowfin. With a source of livebaits and live berley tied alongside, and a school of tuna eager to eat them, the longliners then fished with cordlines and soon got stuck into the action.

BACK TO THE ISLANDS

Oceanic fishing is always at the mercy of the wandering currents. As can happen at any location, by midweek the current changed and the tuna moved on. Hannibal Bank was deserted; it was time for 'Plan B'. Our focus then switched from tuna to the highly prized reef thugs – roosterfish and cubera snapper. Roosters look like a deep-bodied yellowtail kingfish, with a spectacular crest for a dorsal fin. Cubera on the other hand are more like a giant mangrove jack, with two prominent fangs at the front of their powerful jaws. The IGFA All-Tackle world record for both species is slightly over 50kg, and in these waters either is possible.

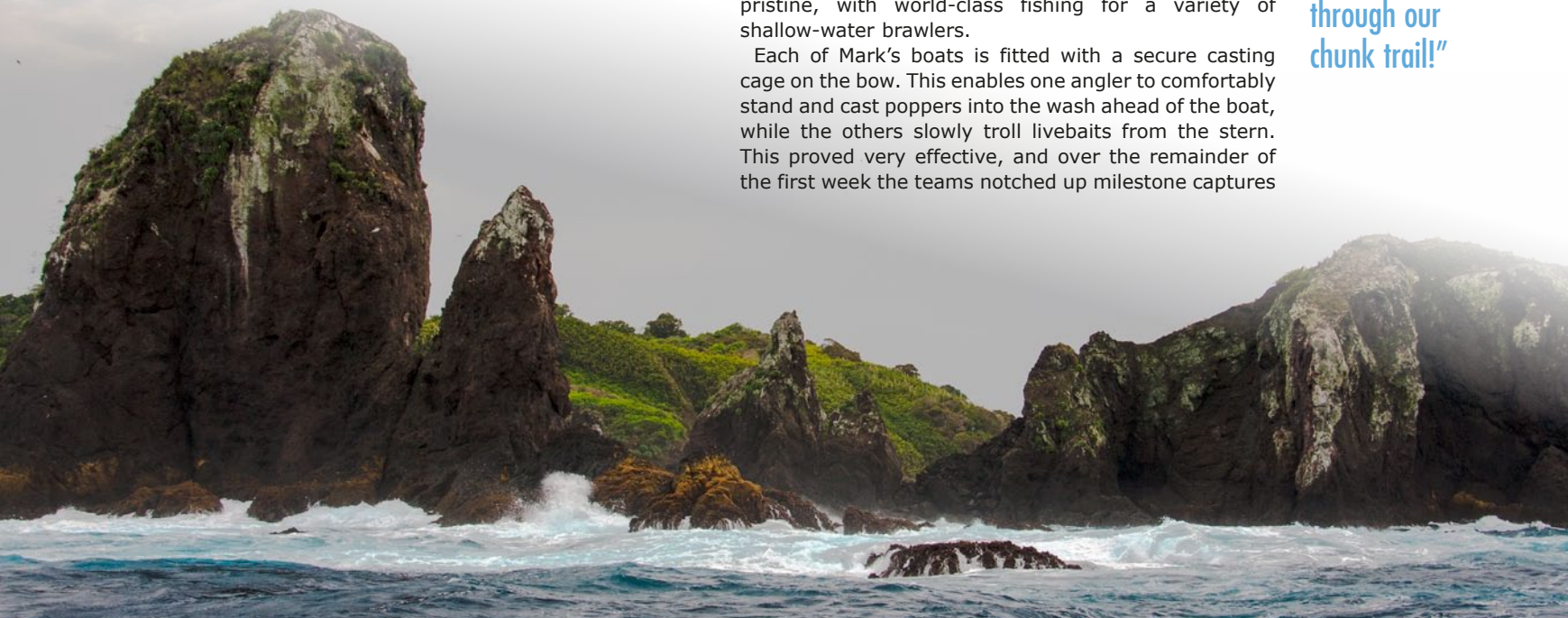
The inshore waters near the Club are studded with rocky outcrops and extremely fishy-looking washes, but we were assured they had been netted to death. However, the washes and reefs surrounding the various islands far offshore were remote enough to remain pristine, with world-class fishing for a variety of shallow-water brawlers.

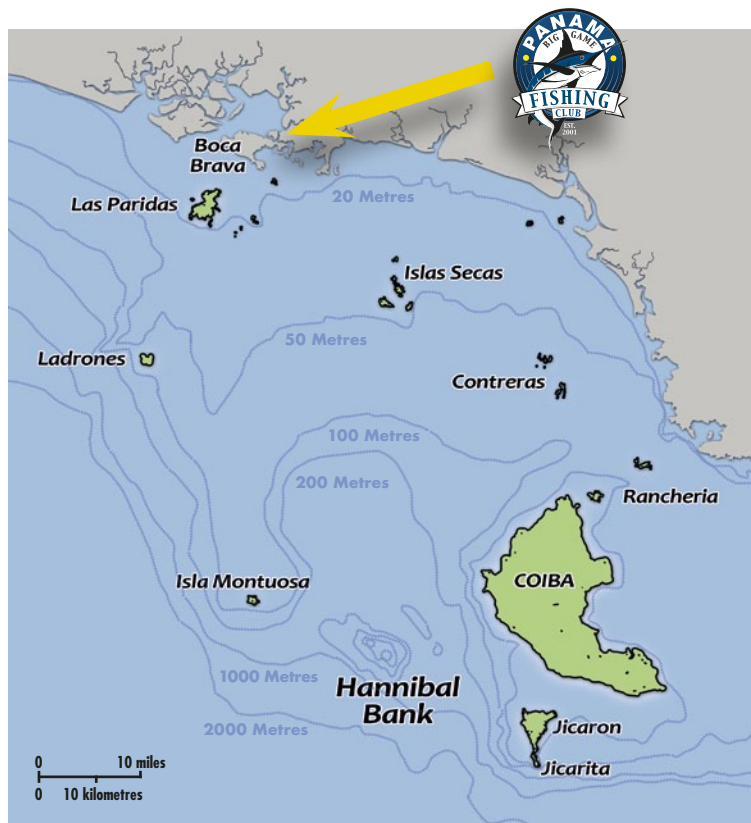
Each of Mark's boats is fitted with a secure casting cage on the bow. This enables one angler to comfortably stand and cast poppers into the wash ahead of the boat, while the others slowly troll livebaits from the stern. This proved very effective, and over the remainder of the first week the teams notched up milestone captures

Above: Alex Katralilas with his 80kg yellowfin taken on 24kg tackle while drifting a livebait in a chunk trail of chopped sardines over Hannibal Bank.

Left: This local longliner had tied up to one of the large trees found floating offshore, often with a school of baitfish accompanying it. The vessel then slowly drove it across the ocean until a school of yellowfin discovered the live berley – at which time the action hit high-gear alongside!

"How exhilarating to once again see big yellowfin wheeling through our chunk trail!"





The teams racked-up some impressive catches, but it was Neil Sinclair who stole the show. Not only did he release a cubera snapper of more than 17kg, he also scored the biggest roosterfish seen by any of the locals in years. Neil's estimated 35kg rooster took a bridled, slow-trolled, live black skipjack tuna and put up quite a battle before he could lead it alongside. That afternoon, Steve Bestwick hooked another beast on a live tuna, but this one – thought to be

Keith Vallabh, from New Zealand, with a richly coloured cubera snapper moments before its release back into the turbulent wash around the Secas Islands.

a large cubera snapper – won the day when it reached the protection of its rocky home not far below.

THE TUNA ARE BACK!

Later that week we received a radio call from a boat out off Monster Island. "The tuna are back!" came the excited report, so our teams quickly retrieved their lines and settled into the beanbags for the slog out wide.

When we arrived around midday there were a number of boats already into the action. A large pod of spotted dolphins was obviously shadowing a school of baitfish. A swarm of gannets circled overhead and one by one folded their wings as they turned to plummet, spearing deep into the surface to re-emerge seconds later shaking an unlucky baitfish down their throats. High above them frigate birds wheeled, ever watchful.

Suddenly the tuna rose and ignited the fuse. Baitfish

Below: Several of the roosterfish suffered barotrauma and floated when released, so we jumped in to revive and push them into the depths where they could recompress and survive. Steve Bestwick enjoyed the refreshing dip with his.

Below left: Neil Sinclair scored the biggest roosterfish of the trip when this beauty, estimated at 35kg, took his trolled black skipjack livebait at the Secas Islands.

with the prestigious exotics, as well as bycatch in the form of enormous needlefish, black skipjack tuna, jack crevalle (a large trevally species like a GT), large African pompano, mutton snapper, amberjack, bluefin trevally and Pacific sierra mackerel.

WEEK TWO

When the second week's teams arrived, radio reports confirmed that the offshore grounds were still shut down, so the focus remained on Cavada Island and the Secas Islands archipelago to the east and the Ladrones Islands to the west. This suited us well as by then the weather had turned a little fresh, with regular thunderstorms making the long trek offshore less inviting.

These island clusters are dramatically spectacular. Just being within close proximity was exciting, but casting to their jagged edges and swirling white-water invited hypertension. It looked so fishy that you found yourself holding your breath during each twitched retrieve, every second expecting a vicious fang-studded flash of red to obliterate your popper.



flipped through the air, swirls boiling the surface as they landed. Birds bombed like falling rain and dolphins kicked into high gear, racing fast to capitalise on the momentary confusion and snatch what they could. Our captain backed us close to the melee where we cast our livebaits as far as we could. If not far enough they raced back under the boat, but if they waited a second too long they were nailed in a ferocious boil and the rod in your hands came alive as line screamed from the reel.

Then, almost as fast as the action had started, it was all over and the players departed. We continued on to Hannibal Bank.

Once set up with a chunk trail streaming out, the rainbow runner were soon to arrive, closely followed by a pack of 1.5kg green jacks. They swirled through our chunks, inhaling morsels only metres behind the boat.

ARA'S GOLDEN DAY

Despite his light build, Ara Kahramanian is an enthusiastic and adventurous young angler. Before this trip his biggest fish had weighed less than 8kg. The offshore big fish scene was entirely new to him and throughout the week he had been content to catch the smaller fish, simply observing whenever the heavy-tackle or magnum baits were deployed. These large rainbow runner now presented an ideal opportunity for Ara, so we set him up with a medium-weight spin outfit armed with a light leader, a small circle hook and a small chunk of tuna. "Let it out no more than you can see it," we told him. The runners willingly played along and Ara had a ball, catching fish after fish. Whenever his bait drifted more than a few metres from the transom we reminded him to bring it back. We knew what was likely to happen if he didn't.

Sure enough, Ara's reel screamed with something far bigger and more powerful than another 4kg rainbow runner. He'd never hooked anything like it before and his face lit up like a Christmas tree. Thankfully, it was a tuna of manageable size and before long Ara had a 17kg yellowfin flapping on the deck. He was ecstatic; it had fulfilled his dream and crowned his trip with the most exciting catch of his life! But there was more to come...

On our next drift across the peak the runners returned and Ara was back raining them aboard. Once again he became a little overconfident and drifted his bait a bit too far out of sight. When his rod next folded over it stayed bent for a long time. Line rapidly streamed from his spinning reel's spool until its level became critical. Then it stopped and Ara got his first pump in what was the toughest battle of his life.

The tuna dictated the battle and at one stage ran beneath the boat, catching Ara's braided line around the



Above: Capt Kenneth hoists another yellowfin for unhooking and release out on Hannibal Bank.

Below left: Ara Kahramanian was overjoyed with his catches on that special day when a golden ray of light seemed to be shining down upon him.

back of one of the boat's stationary propeller blades. Knowing there was only seconds before his prized catch broke free, I dived out of the boat, followed the line underneath and unhooked it. As I bobbed back to the surface and scrambled aboard, miraculously Ara was still connected and the battle continued.

By the time we finally grasped hold of his leader, Ara's grin was long gone, replaced by the strained look of an exhausted tuna angler forced to break through the pain barrier to get the job done.

However, when his new 'biggest ever' tuna thudded to the deck, Ara's grin returned wider than ever and was still there late that night as the hero of the day swapped war stories with the other tuna anglers over cocktails at the bar. It was the perfect finalé to an amazing trip. 🐟



JOIN US IN PANAMA 2015

This year's *BlueWater* Readers' Trip to Panama was such an overwhelming success that we're doing it all again in 2015.

Many of this year's 20 participants are keen to repeat the trip, and many other anglers were eager to come this year but were unable to make the dates, so for next year we've added extra dates and refined the trip even more, including new tours and fishing experiences.

To find out everything you need to know, including dates and prices, please contact Ms Kim Bruce at the *BlueWater* office on (07) 5501 5400, or email: KimBruce@bluewatermag.com.au

"The tuna thudded to the deck and Ara's grin returned wider than ever."