



A CANADIAN SPORTFISHING COMPANY IS TAKING PANAMA BY STORM AND REWARDING ITS GUESTS WITH ONCE-IN-A-LIFETIME GAME FISH.

BY SHAUN TOLSON



ANGLING FOR ADVENTURE

“He always thought of the sea as la mar, which is what people call her in Spanish when they love her. . . . The old man always thought of her as something that gave or withheld great favours.” —ERNEST HEMINGWAY, *The Old Man and the Sea*

Operating from a home base aboard the *Pacific Provider* (bottom), West Coast Fishing Club sends guests out on 40-foot sportfishing boats (top left) in search of black marlin and other game fish.



OPPOSITE PAGE: JESSICA HAYDAHL/WEST COAST FISHING CLUB

IF THE SEA should be so benevolent, with the power to bestow great riches as Hemingway’s pious character believed, I hoped she might also look favorably upon me, as I traveled to the renowned fishing waters just south of Panama’s Las Perlas Islands with ambitions of catching a black marlin.

Captain Froilan Bermudez, known amicably as Junior by his fellow West Coast Fishing Club (westcoastfishingclub.com) captains and mates, pats the empty seat next to him and jovially welcomes me up onto the bridge. The sun has begun its slow descent to the west, casting the calm waters of the Pacific in a soft, amber glow. There’s a tranquillity to the scene, a peacefulness induced by the gentle rocking of the waves and the warming rays of the sun, but tranquillity is not what we’re after. We’re here

on the open water seeking what is not easily found, and it appears our efforts this day will be in vain.

As I sit next to him, Junior explains—in broken English—how to spot the black, blue, and striped marlin that congregate in these waters. Up until now, we’ve gone the entire day without a sighting, and with our lines in the water for only a few more minutes, it appears my goal to hook and reel in the quintessential saltwater sport fish will have to wait until another day. I scan the waters off to our right, hoping to spot a crescent-shaped tail protruding between the waves, but as Scot King, a former competitor in marlin fishing tournaments (and West Coast Fishing Club’s chief engineer), describes it, “Marlin fishing is looking for a needle in a haystack, but you don’t even know where the haystack is. You [first] have



to find the haystack and *then* you have to find the needle.”

During the previous days of this trip, I’ve marveled at how Junior and first mate Donar Vaquiaza can spot the slightest disturbances in the water, how the presence of a marlin in the area can be felt long before its fin breaks the surface or causes our live bait to frantically dart from side to side. Staring out at the abyss of gently rolling waves, I try my best to emulate their skill, but in my peripheral vision, every crest becomes a crescent tail. The mirage appears in every direction.

Suddenly Donar is abuzz down below and, in that same instant, Junior slides almost into my lap as he reaches for the throttle and begins to turn the boat around. “Marlin! Marlin! Marlin!” Donar shouts, and Junior points portside, guiding my eyes to a large tail protruding between the waves no more than 100 yards from the boat. However, it’s not the size of the tail that has me excited, but the distance between the tail and the tip of the marlin’s dorsal fin, which also has emerged from the water. The 500-pound black marlin that my fishing partner caught the day before was large, but this one—at least from my vantage point on the bridge—seems significantly bigger.

It’s now a careful race down the ladder and into the chair, in hopes that the massive billfish strikes our bait. As I get to the chair, Donar already has the rod in his hands and is standing

by the edge of the stern, coaxing the marlin toward the bonito at the end of our line. Both he and Junior mutter excitedly in Spanish, while I sit holding my breath, my eyes transfixed on the line and on Donar masterfully handling the rod.

The fish strikes with conviction, but I know only by Donar’s reaction. “Go! Go! Go!” he shouts, pulling back hard on the rod to set the hook. Junior throttles forward, keeping a strong tension on the line, and Donar brings the rod to me, setting it into the rotating gimbal between my legs. With the rod in my hands, I can feel the full weight and power of the fish. The reel hisses violently as the marlin takes out line and dives deep; and I, in turn, settle into the chair and plant my feet firmly on the footrest.

The fight is on.

LAST MONTH MARKED the one-year anniversary of West Coast Fishing Club’s sportfishing program in Panama, but the club has an extensive history offering unparalleled fishing opportunities in remote areas of the world. It began back in the late 1980s, when Brian Legge and Rick Grange—two business partners at a Toronto securities company (and avid fishermen, as well)—saw the potential to tap into the industry of corporate fishing retreats. Within two

Before heading out to open water for marlin, West Coast’s guides catch live bait in the waters not far from local fishing villages.



years, Legge and Grange had positioned Boston Whalers at two prominent lodges on the western edge of Haida Gwaii, an archipelago off the coast of British Columbia, about a two-hour flight north of Vancouver. By 1991, the club had evolved further and built its own clubhouse on Langara Island, one of the many isles that make up that archipelago.



That area of British Columbia boasts a thriving population of various species of salmon, as well as halibut and blue shark, but the season only stretches from the end of May until the middle of September. Soon, loyal West Coast clients were yearning for additional fishing opportunities. “After a while, people started asking, ‘Where is the next operation?’” recalls Rick’s son Brian, who joined the company in 2001 and currently serves as its vice president. “We started looking for a place that offered nine months of fishing so we could start offering year-round services for our clients.”

In keeping with the company’s mission statement (and its name), the Granges began exploring the rest of the North American Pacific coast in search of a relatively untapped destination that could offer a unique sportfishing experience. They knew they had found something special when they began scouting the marlin-rich waters 60 miles southeast of Panama City. “When we got to Panama we saw a country that is defined by a city, defined by a canal, and completely unexplored by groups like ourselves,” Grange says. “We decided that this place might be the next gem of the Pacific.”

Top: Marlin are the ultimate prize in the open waters of Panama. Above left: Sailfish also can be caught (shown here, hooked with an artificial lure).

“IF YOU WANT TO TARGET BIG BLACK MARLIN EFFICIENTLY, PANAMA IS THE PLACE TO COME ON THIS SIDE OF THE WORLD.” —ELLIOTT STARK, *Billfish Foundation*



From there, the company drew up plans for a land-based resort, which likely will break ground soon (see “Expanding Their Horizons,” page 81). Not wanting to deprive its clientele of great marlin and coastal fishing opportunities until the resort was complete, the company acquired the *Pacific Provider*, a 160-foot, 12-berth motor yacht, and moored it just off the coast of Isla del Rey—the island that eventually will be home to the company’s beachfront resort. Equipped with satellite televisions, air-conditioning, a large casual sitting area accented by leather couches, and both indoor and outdoor bar areas, the *Provider* offers guests a comfortable home base with upscale cuisine. And as Grange explains, it also provides the company with the flexibility to take guests on exploratory trips to other potentially strong fishing areas in the region.

FOR DECADES, Panama’s volatile dictatorship made the country an unlikely—and generally unappealing—vacation destination for foreigners, but the region always has been blessed with a robust billfish population. Since the late 1990s, however, Panama has adopted a democracy, and in recent years the government has taken aggressive steps to protect and propagate the area’s game fish. Panama established its commitment to marine conservation in 2008 with the signing of a Central American agreement to manage sailfish and marlin as game fish. Since then, President Ricardo Martinelli has prohibited purse seining and long-lining for vessels greater than six tons—two detrimental methods of commercial fishing that can deplete local tuna populations (a primary food source for marlin), as well as kill dolphins, turtles, marlin, and other fish in the process.

According to Elliott Stark, a science and policy specialist at the Billfish Foundation, by banning such practices, Panama is investing in sportfishing and recognizing that, through the tourism dollars that it attracts, it can be a vital part of the country’s economy. “It’s a positive feedback system,” Stark explains. “The more it benefits the government, the more the government promotes conservation. And the more the government promotes conservation, the better experiences fishermen are going to have coming back to Panama. It’s cyclical.”

In fact, the Panamanian government has hired the Billfish Foundation to conduct a two-year study to determine just how much money the sportfishing tourism industry brings into the country each year. In 2007, the foundation con-



ducted a similar study for the Los Cabos region of Mexico and reported that sportfishing generated more than \$1.1 billion annually. In 2009, it was reported that Costa Rica reaped annual economic gains of just less than \$600 million a year. Should the Billfish Foundation's Panama study produce similar results, President Martinelli likely will further intensify his efforts to conserve the area's marlin and sailfish populations.

In that respect, Panama, which already has a reputation for being one of the best marlin fishing locations on the planet, is distancing itself from Australia, the world's other black marlin-fishing heavyweight. According to Stark, the waters off the eastern coast of Australia provide anglers with the chance to land 800- to 1,000-pound black marlin on a fairly consistent basis. But as of April this year—when this story went to press—the Australian government was leaning



West Coast's *Pacific Provider* offers comfortable accommodations (top) and is moored just offshore from the site of the company's future five-star resort (above).

JESSICA HAYDAHL/WEST COAST FISHING CLUB

heavily toward a closed-zone approach, which would prevent sportfishing vessels from operating in some sections of the ocean. The legislation would do nothing to protect the area's healthy marine ecosystem, however, which is the factor, according to Stark, that most contributes to Panama's fishing success. "If you want to target big black marlin efficiently," he says, "Panama is the place to come on this side of the world."

"He came out unendingly and water poured from his sides. . . . He rose his full length from the water and then re-entered it, smoothly, like a diver and the old man saw the great scythe-blade of his tail go under and the line commenced to race out."
—ERNEST HEMINGWAY, *The Old Man and the Sea*

TEN MINUTES have gone by and still there has been no sight of the marlin hooked on the end of my line. We are in a standoff, this fish and I. Pulling back hard, I quickly reel in the slack as the rod returns to its original position pointed away from me. The fish, in turn, concedes a few yards of line before fighting my efforts and taking it all back. My legs grow hot under the direct rays of the sun, and my shoulder burns with each labored crank of the reel. Eventually the marlin seems to tire, and I make up enough ground to expose the leader above the waves. This is the moment of truth, the point during the struggle at which Donar takes a firm grasp of the leader and pulls up aggressively. It's a tactic that encourages the fish to jump; and until the marlin tires to the point that we can bring it near the surface and alongside the boat, a jump is the only way to see just how large it is.

On cue, the marlin seems to regain its strength and swims hard to the surface. Donar releases the leader just as the fish's bill breaks the surface, and in an acrobatic display of power and grace, the marlin is airborne, thrashing its head from side to side no more than 10 yards from the boat. One breach leads to a second, and a third, each taking the marlin out farther from the boat. Soon, it dives beneath the waves and resumes swimming against my efforts to reel it in.

"Oh, she's big!" my fishing partner exclaims. "At least 600 pounds."
"Bigger!" Donar replies.
"Seven hundred pounds!"
"Bigger!" Donar replies, again.
With more than two decades of marlin




fishing between them, Junior and Donar have become proficient at approximating the weight of a marlin. In the past, when the two would encounter a dead fish, they would weigh it. Knowing what those previous marlin weighed and the corresponding size of their bodies, the captain and mate compare them to the sizes of the fish that they currently catch. As I'm told by other West Coast Fishing Club employees, Donar and Junior are rarely off by more than 10 or 15 pounds. They estimate this particular marlin at 800 pounds—a new West Coast Fishing Club record—but I haven't caught her yet, and the fight is far from over.

Junior has the boat in reverse pursuing the marlin, and I work to keep the line taut with each jump that the massive fish takes. Waves crash over the edge of the stern, soaking the chair—and me in it—but the battle rages on. Soon she is alongside the stern again, but with one quick thrash of her tail, the marlin plunges deep, nearly pulling me out of the seat and into the ocean with her.

Finally, after a 30-minute fight, this record marlin is alongside our starboard quarter, where Donar tags her just below the dorsal fin, then cuts the leader and lets her go. The circle hook that we used—a safer form of tackle that requires more finesse but causes less harm to the fish—will dislodge from the marlin's bill in a few days. And should this beauty be caught again, the information from her tag will be sent to the Billfish Foundation for further studies on the migratory patterns and other habits of these sought-after game fish.

"You're one of a select number in a fraternity for fish that get that large," Brian Grange later tells me. "Everyone aspires to get that fish."

There are larger marlin out there, this much I know. And a time likely will come when my club record is overtaken. But for now, on this day, a record-setting black marlin is mine. On this day, the sea—in all her benevolence—was generous.

 VISIT OUR FACEBOOK PAGE TO SEE MORE IMAGES AND VIDEO FOOTAGE FROM THIS MARLIN FISHING ADVENTURE.

JESSICA HAYDAHL/WEST COAST FISHING CLUB



A preliminary rendering of West Coast's future Panamanian resort.

EXPANDING THEIR HORIZONS

How West Coast Fishing Club plans to take Panama sportfishing to new heights.

WHEN BRIAN GRANGE and the rest of the West Coast Fishing Club executive team committed to developing a world-class marlin fishing experience in Panama—one that would rival the club's salmon fishing lodge on Langara Island in northern British Columbia—they set in place plans that will deliver a true five-star experience. That experience includes a land-based resort on Isla del Ray, the largest island in the Las Perlas archipelago. The initial steps to begin construction are well under way, and the finished resort, according to Grange, will be built to emulate the success that the company has experienced at its northern, salmon-fishing clubhouse.

If you're one of the 18,000 fishermen who have experienced a West Coast Fishing Club trip over the past 25 years, you know what to expect from a future West Coast resort in Panama. But for those who are unfamiliar with the company and its suite of services, Grange finds it's easiest to explain what the Panamanian resort experience will be like by describing what it won't be like. "We're not building a Ritz-Carlton or a 500-room megaresort," he says. "We're building a boutique resort that specializes in fishing. We're a fishing operation and we never want to lose sight of that."

The land-based resort likely will be capable of accommodating up to 36 guests at one time, with a layout structured around private villas, swimming pools, a spa, and a fine-dining restaurant that will incorporate organic products grown and raised on-site. "We have to make sure that it's still a family environment," Grange says. "The

primary function of all of this is to create a resort experience that exemplifies fishing."

When all the elements of the resort are in place, Grange says the destination will provide couples with the best of both worlds—it will offer inshore fishing opportunities complete with beachside lunches; and on the days when the serious fishermen want to look for marlin out in open waters, their nonfishing spouses can spend an afternoon relaxing by the pool or at the spa. Some aspects of the resort, such as the spa, will come online after the resort's initial opening. As Grange explains, the timing of it will be dictated by demand.

Grange also has learned that, to this point, the necessary permitting steps are more time-consuming in Panama, due in large part to the country's relatively new representative democracy. With that in mind, it's safe to say that a grand opening for the resort likely is about 18 months away. Until that time arrives, West Coast will continue to offer the same high standard of service on board the *Pacific Provider*.

West Coast Fishing Club always has operated on a model of slow, controlled growth, and Grange says that the finished Panamanian resort is not the company's final fishing frontier. Far from it. "I'm 34 years old and I plan on doing this for the next 25 or 30 years of my life," he says, without giving away any specific company plans. "Let's tackle the marlin of the world. Search and destroy and take no prisoners . . . it's going to be fun." —S.T. 