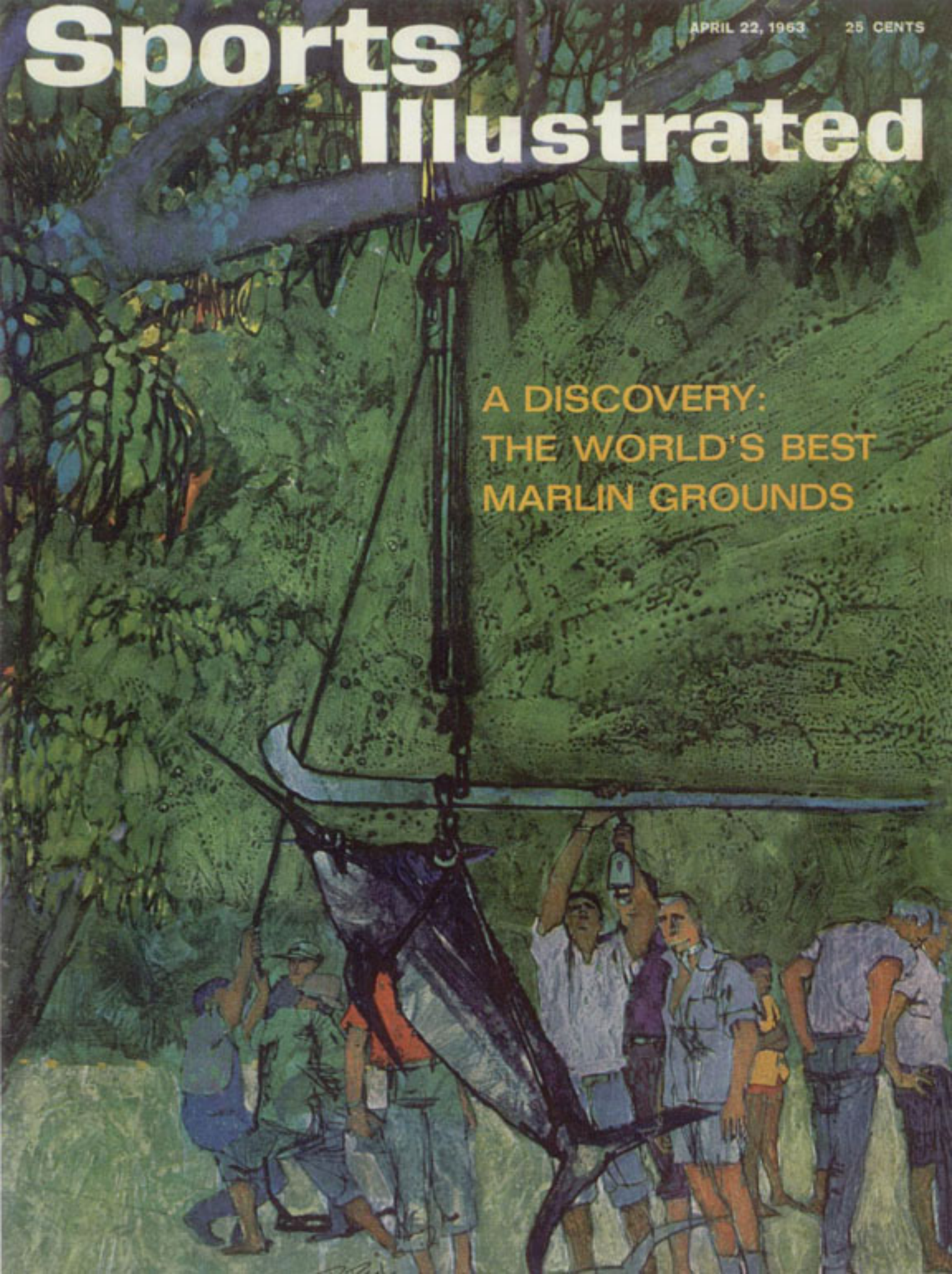


# Sports Illustrated

APRIL 22, 1963

25 CENTS

A DISCOVERY:  
THE WORLD'S BEST  
MARLIN GROUNDS





sees the indescribable luminescent blue-green-purple flash of a dolphin coming up fast astern, he shoves the throttles forward hoping to outrun the fish. Sometimes, but not often enough for the skipper's equanimity, this maneuver succeeds. Occasionally there arrives on the scene somebody who *wants* to catch dolphin, to the confusion of locals to whom anything less than a monster black marlin is a bullhead.

One such dolphin fancier is fondly remembered by John Doonan, pilot of the plane that now whisks fishermen from Panama City to Piñas Bay in 45 minutes. "His name was Marcel," Doonan recalls, "and, of course, he was a gourmet and, of course, he was a Frenchman. We'd go out trolling in the morning and before we'd even reached the fishing waters Marcel would have the butter melting in the frying pan, the parsley chopped, and a little packet of secret herbs standing by. The second somebody landed a dolphin, Marcel would be up on that deck with a sharp knife. In less time than it takes to tell it he'd straddle the dolphin, slash a couple of steaks off him and race below to plop it in the pan. For the rest of the day, Marcel'd just sit around with a smile on his face."

But not all the fishes of Piñas Bay are as benign as the dolphin. There is, in these waters, as astounding an array of sharks and other evil animal life as is to be found east of the Great Barrier Reef of Australia. It is not uncommon to see six or eight different types on one day's cruise: spinner sharks, which come whirling out of the water, all the better to stun schools of baitfish; great white sharks, the deadliest of the man-eaters; hammerhead sharks and shovel-nosed sharks, leopard sharks and tiger sharks, harmless whale sharks, nurse sharks, makos and blues. When marlin are being butchered, the sharks assemble in convention. Throw a loaf of bread overboard and they will take it, paper and all, in one gulp. They are also partial to humans. When boats go down off Panama, there are hardly ever any survivors. The current talk around Piñas is of an American who dived overboard a few weeks ago to unfoul a line twisted around a propeller. He survived, but it has been strongly

*continued*



## PANAMA TRAVEL FACTS

**GETTING THERE:** The first-class round-trip flight from New York to Panama City costs \$440 (economy is \$295). Pan-Am's jets leave nightly; Braniff has three jets a week. A twin-engined amphibian Grumman Mallard picks up the fisherman at Panama City airport and puts him down at the club's beach (\$80 each round trip). **STAYING THERE:** There are five duplex cottages, each containing two apartments with double room and a bath-dressing room. The bar has good drinks and there are good Texas steaks in the restaurant, where the chef also will cook your fresh-caught fish (even the black marlin). Cottages, restaurant and bar are air-conditioned. Although the sun beats down unmercifully, there are practically no mosquitoes. Rates are \$20 each per day, meals included, and reservations require an advance deposit of \$5 per person per day. For reservations and information write to Club de Pesca, Apartado 6813, Panama, R.P., or 300 Simons Bldg., Dallas 1. **PESCA CLUB** is the cable address. **FISHING THERE:** The record fish are caught in the Gulf of Panama round Taboga Island, the Pearl Islands and Piñas Bay. There is year-round fishing for marlin, Pacific sailfish, amberjack, dolphin, bonito, jack crevalle, grouper, sea bass, snapper, jewfish and

mackerel. The Club de Pesca's nine new fishing boats have diesel engines and ship-to-shore radio. Superb tackle, from the lightest to the heaviest, is provided. Single-engined boats (30 feet) rent for \$90 a day, twin-engined (33 feet) for \$100. A deposit of \$25 per day is required in advance. A native boy in a small boat will take you to Punta Molino, where you can fish from the rocks with light tackle for bonito, snapper, grouper and even the occasional dolphin. A license is not required, nor is there a limit. **HUNTING THERE:** The Darien jungle is just outside the Club de Pesca's backyard. There are deer, jaguar, wild pig and dozens of varieties of waterfowl waiting. But bring your own equipment. Information on hunting can be obtained by a letter to any one of the following tour operators in Panama City: Boyd Brothers Travel Service, Fidanque Travel Service, Jungle Jim Tours, Persons Travel Bureau and Tivoli Travel Agency. **SIGHTSEEING:** A 10-minute ride in a *cayaca*, the local dugout canoe, will take you to Santa Dorotea, as primitive a village (it is built on stilts) as you can find anywhere. A long walk in the jungle will take you to an abandoned gold mine, but be sure to take a guide—the Indians sometimes do not care for strangers.

The fifth fish hit at 11 a.m. and immediately took off on one of those trademark-registered tail-walking acts so characteristic of the breed. "Señor!" the captain shouted. "He ees a beeg one." He was, for a fact, somewhat larger than Kelso, and just as fast out of the starting gate. Line stripped off the reel and produced that whine which, to the big-game fisherman, is more beautiful than the *Erolia*. Occasionally the big fish would pause in his travels and allow himself to be pumped back toward the boat. Five times he was almost to the transom, while the eager mates stood by with the flying gaff and a lasso. But the marlin would count the house and take right off, wanting no part of this strange 33-foot floating fish. Each time he made a run, friction on the drag would turn the reel into an ingot of hot steel, and the mates furiously splashed water on reel and fisherman alike. After four exhausting hours, the marlin snapped the 250-pound test leader with one thump of his bill.

"Ay, Señor!" said the furious captain. "You lose heem."

"Yes," I said. "Just lucky, I guess."

**I**t goes without saying that this fish, like all fish I have lost, would have been a world record. Indeed, the waters of Piñas Bay have accounted already for 12 International Game Fish Association records for black marlin, amberjack, sailfish, blue marlin and silver marlin, and this despite the fact that the place has been scandalously underfished. Until recently, one had to beat one's way to Panama City, then hire a boat to make the two-day cruise southeast through the Bay of Panama to Piñas. Once there, one slept on the boat; accommodations were nonexistent. But those fishermen who were willing to make the effort were rewarded beyond all reasonable hope. Webster Merritt, a fishing captain from Jamaica who decided on living at Piñas Bay after seeing how life was lived in Philadelphia, Miami and Panama City, remembers a customer who fought a big marlin for 17 hours, until long after midnight, only to lose the fish on what was, incredibly, the

49th or 50th jump. Four days later the fisherman boated a 960-pound black marlin in four hours.

All stories about Piñas eventually get around to the Schmidt brothers, Louis, Ted and John, who have skippered boats in the area for years (it was Louis Schmidt who took the Walkers out on their recent orgy of marlin catching). They tell of the day Louis hooked into a big marlin and fought it for two hours before an ill-fitting harness cut into his back and forced him to give up the rod to his brother John. The marlin weighed 1,006 pounds and was, up to then, the first 1,000-pound black marlin ever caught on rod and reel. Since two men had handled the rod, the IGFA could not certify the catch as a record, but the group did send a certificate of honorable mention to Louis Schmidt who, because of a childhood accident, has only one arm and one leg. Big as this fish was, there are certainly bigger black marlin around Piñas. Dr. William T. Bailey, a marlin fisherman and specialist in radioisotopes at Gorgas Hospital in Panama, tells of one:

"John Schmidt hooked a marlin off Jaqué Point, and it came up and jumped right near the boat. When that fish plopped back into the water it was exactly as though somebody had dropped a yacht in there. Everybody gasped, but nobody said a word. They knew this was 'the big one.' You see him once in your lifetime; you have one chance. Well, John settled back for the fight. The fish began to take out line—zip, zip. John tightened down on the drag. He had 39-thread line, more than 100-pound test, and he knew he could give the fish plenty of pressure. The line kept going out. John gave the drag all he could without snapping the line, and they backed down on the fish as fast as the boat would go. The line settled down to a steady whirl. Without the slightest decrease in speed, the marlin stripped the reel and snapped the line. Five hundred yards of line against a 100-pound drag, and he ran it off as if he was just out for a Sunday stroll. *You figure out how big that marlin was!*"

The first lesson the novice fisherman must learn in dealing with monsters like this is that there is no small amount of danger involved. It is a difficult lesson to

teach. After all, the tenderfoot protests, that is only a *fish* out there. Yes, but it is a fish that can swim 50 miles an hour, and 1,000 pounds of fish proceeding at that speed can generate enough momentum to cause all sorts of mayhem. The great master Farrington himself tells of a fight in which he was yanked all over the deck, suffered a broken finger, a broken hand, a broken reel, a broken chair and numerous other injustices, and had to be admitted to a hospital for examination. A certain mate on a Piñas Bay boat had a habit of holding the line in his teeth while he snapped a loop of line onto the outrigger. One day a marlin chose that moment to strike, and now the mate has a smile like a professional ice hockey player. Not even the boat is safe from the wrath of the marlin. Sometimes one will spear a boat while trying to wrest free of the hook; at other times they will accidentally ram the side while chasing after the smaller fish that often congregate in the boat's shadow. The usual procedure, if the bill remains in the boat, is to saw it down flush with the hull, sandpaper and varnish it. Then it becomes a badge of honor, and the skipper will never tire of telling you the whole story.

**A**nother problem in fishing for black marlin in Piñas Bay may be characterized best by the offhand comment of a woman who proclaimed after a day's trolling, "I have never seen the sailfish worse than they were today!" By that she meant that the sails, certainly to be counted among nature's noblefishes, had been even bigger pests than usual. When one is expecting Beluga caviar, one doesn't want shad roe, and when one is fishing for black marlin one hopes that the sailfish will stay home in bed. Likewise with dolphin. Piñas Bay has a population of dolphin so dense that it would come as no surprise to see ichthyologists suggest some sort of a birth-control campaign. The dolphin are everywhere, hacking at marlin baits too big for their mouths and ripping and slashing at the two feathered jigs that are trolled on handlines to pick up live bonito for bait. When the skipper



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## PANAMA MARLIN *continued*

impressed on him that he should never attempt to repeat the feat.

And if the sharks are not enough to keep the fisherman from dangling his feet in the water, there is the sea snake. The sea snake is a cute little fellow, seldom exceeding three feet in length, colored in handsome shades of brown and yellow, with five or six dark bands on his tail. His occupation is chasing minnows, and nature has flattened his body somewhat to give him more maneuverability in the water. Nature has also provided him with a deadly poison and positioned him in the family of cobras. You spot sea snakes everyday in Piñas Bay, and it is said that they are so timid and docile that some of the natives remove them from fish nets bare-handed. (I am unable to document this, and I did not try picking them up bare-handed myself, as there was not sufficient time for such experiments.)

There is almost no end to the kinds and varieties of aquatic life in the rich waters of Piñas Bay, and one can never be sure what is going to hit one's bait or rise out of the depths to circle the boat ominously. For example, take the experience of one of the ubiquitous Schmidts. One night Ted Schmidt was sleeping soundly aboard his boat, anchored in the bay, when he was awakened by an almost imperceptible clanking sound. Schmidt became annoyed and climbed out of his bunk to tie down what he thought must be a loose piece of hardware rolling around on the deck above. But as he clambered to his feet, long experience on boats made him realize instantly that they were under way, though slowly. Schmidt grabbed a flashlight, played it around the deck and discovered that the anchor chain was taut and running dead ahead. The heavy fishing boat and anchor were being towed by a manta ray that had caught its horns in the chain and was now headed south for the winter. Schmidt started the engines, applied a burst of full speed astern, flipped the manta ray free of the chain and went back to sleep.

Ironically, these multi-ton mantas and the other monstrous inhabitants of Piñas Bay are there simply because the smallest organisms of the ocean are

there: plankton. The food chain starts with plankton, both the plant and animal varieties. It hangs in the water in great curtains, made visible much the same as dust is sometimes made visible in a room by a slanting ray of sunlight. Some of the planktons are phosphorescent; at night, boats leave long trails of glittering green and gold behind them. The zooplankton feed on the phytoplankton; tiny minnows feed on the zooplankton; from there the chain runs straight through sardines, anchovies, skipjacks and blue runners to bonito, grouper, amberjack and dolphin, then up through larger species like sailfish, jewfish and, hanging around the edges waiting for some baitfish to stray, the marlin. Sometimes the whole chain is starkly visible in one huge cloud of frenzied feeding activity, marked at the surface by the bonito stirring the water to a cauldron, corralling the sardines and the skipjacks like cowhands, hacking them to pieces in ever-diminishing circles of spray. Just above the surface of the water, gulls wheel in raucous gluttony, picking up the leavings and occasionally suffering a nip from an overanxious bonito.

**I**f you are lucky, you may see that slickest pirate of them all, the frigate bird, supervising the activities of his employees, the cormorants. The frigate bird hovers high overhead on wings six and seven feet long; you can watch him all day and never see a flicker of movement in the wings. He was built for gliding; his bones are filled with outsize air pockets to lighten the load. The frigate bird likes the same delicacies as the cormorant, but he does not like to exert himself. So when he sees a cormorant come up with a fish, the frigate bird swoops down and grabs the meal away. After this happens a few times the cormorant decides to go someplace else, whereupon the frigate bird descends once again, beats his wings about the poor cormorant's head and makes it plain that he had better stick around if he knows what's good for him. Now the cormorant may decide to sulk, but the frigate bird will have none of that, either.

*continued*



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He swoops down and pecks the cormorant on the back of the head until the poor bird goes back to work on behalf of the unequal partnership. Only when the frigate bird is stuffed with fish does the scene end. It is difficult to be annoyed with the frigate bird when one considers that the Japanese have been doing roughly the same thing with the cormorant for centuries. The lesson of history is clear: it is a tough job to be a cormorant for a living.

All of these sights were observed by a wealthy Texan, Ray Smith of Dallas, who liked what he saw (and caught) and promptly pulled off the impossible. He equipped 40 Choco Indians with machetes and axes and set them about the task of clearing a camp on Piñas Bay. By January of this year, Smith's camp had grown into the Club de Pesca de Panamá, a \$600,000 jungle fishing club featuring an air-conditioned saloon and the only natives with Texas accents on the entire Pacific coast of Panama. For the first weeks of the club's existence most of the customers were Texans, either friends of Smith from Dallas or friends of friends. The result (temporary, one hopes) is natives who refer to every fish, Texas style, as "big old" or "little bitty." The tiniest bit of Texas boastmanship has crept in, too, as in the fishing-boat crewman who introduced himself and immediately added: "I am a better fisherman than my brother." Or the one who said: "I have an uncle. He is a doctor. Plenty school. Plenty money."

Withal, the natives who run Club de Pesca de Panamá, some of them imported from Panama City and some of them from primitive villages around Piñas Bay, remain sweet and unspoiled, and as unlike most American fishing guides and hotel personnel as one could imagine. Out in the bay on one of Smith's nine deepwater boats, the crewmen seem motivated by a desire to keep the fisherman from having to move so much as a single digit. If one heads for the beer cooler, one suddenly sees a streak of brown intercepting one's path, followed quickly by a hand proffering a bottle of "Balboa, contenido alcohólico mínimo 3.30%, máximo 3.90% por peso," opened and

*continued*



## THE PIPE SMOKERS Miscellany

*Tidbits, Tips & Trivia from  
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wrapped gently in a napkin. The crewmen's campaign to keep the fisherman happy extends even to emotional matters. As Alejandro Anderson, skipper of one of Smith's boats, explains: "I tell my men, 'When the fishermen laugh, you laugh. If they frown, you frown.'" It is like looking in a mirror all day. There are disturbing signs, however, that this benign naiveté will not last forever, and before long all the natives will be as sophisticated as a New York City cabdriver. Bob Brister of *The Houston Chronicle* thought he might have seen the first indication on a recent trip to Club de Pesca. Three wild-looking Choco Indians, clad in loin cloths and fancy headdress, appeared near the club and Brister asked them if he could snap their picture. Said the Indians, "One dollar."

Despite the trappings of civilization that Smith has introduced—the water softeners, the drydock, the power plant, the air conditioners—he has done little to change the essential character of Piñas Bay. From the air one sees only a complex of buildings with thatched roofs (concealing aluminum roofs) landscaped with banana trees and coconut palms on a hillside running down to the beach. On the ground one sees wild orchids, egrets, sand crabs and cannibal ants. There is about the whole camp some of the mood of works by Joseph Conrad and Graham Greene: a heavy steaminess of air, a lushness of growth, a lassitude. One halfway expects to see Trevor Howard step from behind a eucalyptus tree and bum a light, his native girl lurking in the background, the police of three countries prowling the jungle for him.

For his part, Ray Smith, who made his money in trucking and oil, merely thinks of the place he carved out of the jungle as "neat but not gaudy," a place whose *raison d'être* is marlin. The club served a large part of its purpose a few months ago, so far as Smith is concerned, when he went out and nailed a 186½-pound black marlin on 12-pound test line, a new IGFA record. "I think there are going to be all kinds of records set here," he says, "now that the place is being fished a little harder." Meanwhile, he wages a constant fight against the jungle, which encroaches on the camp with

a diabolical tenacity. Four men are employed full time hacking away at the mahogany, balsa, cedar, hibiscus, coconut palms and just plain weeds that infiltrate the grounds. Less of a problem, but always lurking in the back of one's mind in the middle of dark nights, is the animal life of the rain forest to the rear. There are the moccasin and the coral snake, the *fer-de-lance* and the bushmaster. There is the cute little *meracho*, a lizard that moves so fast it can run across streams and ponds, its feet never breaking the surface tension. Thus he is more commonly known as the Jesús Cristo. The minute you find yourself growing attached to the fascinating little *meracho* you run into one who takes an instant dislike to you and bites you in the leg, sometimes chasing you at blinding speed to do it. At the other extreme are the mountain cows, domestic cattle that have gone wild. They weigh up to 800 pounds, have huge curved horns and think nothing whatever of charging you because of the color of your socks. Somewhere between these two mischiefs is the anteater, a big fellow who, upon sighting a human, stands upright and beckons with his arms, as though to tell you to come on in and mix it up. No one knows whether he really wants you to put up your dukes and fight like a man or not; no one has ever tried to find out.

**B**ut these denizens of the jungle, along with the puma, the jaguar, the ocelot, the iguana, the wild boar, are more the creatures of evening discussions in the bar than they are creatures of reality. They give human beings a wide berth; you would have to go out of your way to see them. And anyway, Club de Pesca de Panamá doesn't face backward into the jungle; it looks out to sea, where the bonito churn up the water and the wild black marlin dance on their tails and giant manta rays glide in ferocious-looking harmlessness. The name of the club is the tip-off. Translated from the Spanish and the Indian, Ray Smith's club is named: "Club of Fish of Abundance of Fish." Even for a Texan, that is an understatement.

END

PANAMA MARLIN *continued*



A school of bonito, breakfasting on sardines, turns the sea to foam

