Panama’s Tropic Star Lodge provides great fishing in an awe-inspiring locale

By John Brownlee

Billfish thrive around Tropic Star. Black and blue marlin (pictured) and sailfish are all common. Above right: Early visitors arrive via seaplane and are ferried to awaiting boats to head offshore.

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any exciting saltwater fishing destinations exist around the world, and each of them beckon to those of us who long ago chose the pursuit of big fish as our avocation. We have lots of places from which to choose where we can spend our time and our wherewithal, and the development of modern air travel and the Internet have flung the gates wide open regarding fishing travel. It’s never been easier to take what only a few decades ago was commonly referred to as “the trip of a lifetime.”

Exotic saltwater fishing trips are now within the reach of many fishermen, but destinations come and go based on many factors, including economic uncertainty, political upheaval and, sometimes, just the willpower of the operators of such places to keep doing it. It’s a lot of work to run a fishing operation in a developing nation; just ask someone who’s done it. In the midst of this constant state of change, one fishing operation has remained steadfast and true; Tropic Star Lodge of Piñas Bay, Panama, has provided consistently excellent fishing combined with equally impressive service since 1963, all in a remote jungle location more than 100 miles from the nearest road. To my knowledge, this remarkable accomplishment is unmatched in the saltwater fishing world.

A RICH HISTORY
Piñas Bay lies close to the Colombian border. Adventurous American fishermen discovered the area’s incredible fishing in the 1930s and ’40s, when anglers pioneers like S. Kip Farrington and the Schmidt brothers first visited the region in search of black marlin. They noticed a specific spot that held an unbelievable amount of marine life, and a military survey conducted after World War II identified the spot as a prominent section of reef just offshore of Piñas.

Currents from all over the Pacific Ocean converge over that natural reef, later referred to by some as the Zane Grey Reef after its alleged discoverer, though Grey never actually fished there. The reef attracts large schools of Pacific bonito and skipjack tuna, and this abundance of bait attracts large predators, namely black and blue marlin, Pacific sailfish, dorado and yellowfin tuna.

Texas oilman Ray Smith built the original lodge in Piñas Bay in 1963 as his private “home away from home;” but two years later, he opened it up to the rest of world as a fishing lodge named Club de Pesca. Smith caught one of the first International Game Fish Association world record marlin on 12-pound line shortly after that. “There are going to be all kinds of records set here now that the place is being fished a little harder,” Smith said, and since then, more than 250 IGFA world records and numerous junior angler world records have been set off Piñas.

THE WORD SPREADS
The area’s notoriety grew rapidly — Sports Illustrated did a feature on the lodge in 1963, showcasing the tremendous fishing opportunities to an entirely new international audience. In the mid-1960s, a Hollywood film producer shot a short documentary on the lodge and its fishing, attracting the attention of even more people.

Smith died of a heart attack at the lodge in 1969 and it was soon purchased by Edwin Kennedy, who renamed it Tropic Star Lodge. In 1976, Conway Kittredge of Orlando, Florida, purchased the lodge, and his family operates it to this day. Kittredge’s daughter Terri Andrews and her husband, Mike, have continually developed Tropic Star, maintaining the resort as a first-class hotel in the middle of nowhere — not an easy task.

BUSINESS AS USUAL
I eagerly returned to Tropic Star recently to see how the place was faring after celebrating its 50th anniversary, and the lodge was humming along in its usual state of efficiency, as I knew it would be. Raleigh Werking, Tropic Star’s vice president of sales and marketing, and I arrived together with our wives, Trish and Poppy, respectively, and immediately made plans to head offshore.

TSL operates a famous fleet of 31-foot Bertrams, and living with tuna in the name of the game here. Our first day, we headed to the reef where we loaded the unique tuna tubes on the Bertram, Florida with freshly caught baits and headed offshore. It didn’t take long to find a huge school of smaller bait fish, known as cohinos, balled up offshore beneath a floating log, with porpoises, sharks, sailfish and yellowfin tuna all crashing through them with abandon.

TAKE A SCOOP
We backed the boat right into the melee where the terrified baits climbed on top of the floating log and batted beneath the hull of the boat in an attempt to avoid the numerous predators intent upon eating them. If you’ve never seen a baitball under siege in the Pacific Ocean, it’s a stirring sight to behold, the kind of thing offshore fishermen dream about.

Our mate, Mario, dipped up several scopes of bait with a dip net and placed them in the livewell. We backed away from the log and rigged a couple of the cohinos as live bait, hoping to hook one of the dozens of yellowfin we saw crashing all around us. The smaller live baits didn’t last long, and both Trish Werking and Poppy hooked and landed yellowfins in the 35- to 40-pound range. But the third bite left a considerably larger boil on the surface as the fish engulfed the bait, and as line screamed off the Shimano Tiagra, we knew we’d tied into a much larger fish.

TUNA TIME
Poppy took the rod and settled into the Bertram’s fighting chair in the big tuna went deep. She struggled with the fish for almost an hour, gaining and losing line in a classic battle, but the tuna eventually began to tire, and we caught a glimpse of it far below the boat. “Over 100,” said Capt. Libardo Cabrera, and we realized the gaff as the fish slowly approached the surface. Mario executed...
Mario grinning in anticipation of just such a delicacy.

The bite came from a blue marlin, and it began a series of awesome jumps toward the horizon, taking a substantial amount of line with it. Raleigh Werking grabbed the rod this time, as Cabrera backed down to regain some line. Werking is a renowned light-tackle angler and the holder, at one point or another, of several dozen IGFA world records, so he put those skills to work on his blue. It didn’t take long before Mario had the leader in hand and the now-docile marlin swimming alongside the boat.

After a few photos, we released the fish and went back to live-baiting. My turn came next, as a huge dorado cut across the water and took down a surprisingly large bait. Dorado are voracious feeders and fearless attack just about anything that crosses their paths. The circle hook hit home, and I found myself securely hooked to the fish. After about 10 minutes, Mario executed a perfect gaff shot, and we swung the 50-pounder aboard.

There’s an old saying among Latin American fishing crews when a big fish like that comes aboard: “No chicken tonight!” Mario and I both grinned in anticipation of just such a delicacy.

TROPIC STAR LODGE

Getting to and from Tropic Star is easier than ever but sometimes requires an overnight stay in Panama City on one end or the other because of the remote nature of the lodge. But Panama City is a fun place, and that’s hardly an inconvenience. Most people take the opportunity to visit the Miraflores Locks on the Pacific side of the Panama Canal, something everyone should see at least once. Once you arrive at Tropic Star, you’ll be amazed at the level of comfort and the seamless service the Andrews family and their staff provide. It’s a remarkable feat, since running a lodge in the jungle is much like running a small city, but they pull it off with style and flair.

The staff here are all experts in sportfishing, and the tackle provided by the lodge is all in top-shelf condition, although you are always welcome to bring your own if you prefer. The food is excellent, as well. Raleigh Werking puts on an astonishing aerial display (top) before being released (left). Above: The Panama strip bait is a staple of the Tropic Star Lodge fleet’s trolling baits, and it’s also one of the most effective on a wide variety of species.

The bite remained hot.

Then there’s the inshore fishery. There’s nothing better than breaking up your trip to TSL by spending a day close to shore, targeting the area’s huge roosterfish, cubera snapper (now an all-release fishery), trevally, amberjack, mackerel and more. Coastal Panama’s breathtaking scenery adds to the overall experience and provides yet another element to an awesome trip.

LOCAL ACTIVISM

One aspect of the lodge that receives little publicity concerns Terri Andrews’ tireless efforts supporting conservation. She’s a longtime trustee of the IGFA, but her local accomplishments in Panama deserve mention. At the lodge itself, all billfish are released by TSL boats unless being taken for world-record consideration, and they have also universally adopted the use of circle hooks in a successful effort to eliminate gut-hooking billfish.

On a broader scale, working alongside her husband, Mike, and with Raleigh Werking, Andrews succeeded in creating the Conamar Foundation (Foundation for the Conservancy of the Sea, Nature and Marine Species) in 1994. Conamar has been responsible for protecting billfish from being killed for commercial use by establishing a 20-mile no-commercial fishing zone around Piñas Bay. Terri Andrews also worked with Panamanian President Ricardo Martinelli to secure the passage of a 2010 law that banned large-scale purse seine fishing from Panamanian waters. This monumental legislation is seen as a watershed event in Latin America, a move that other countries in the area hopefully will emulate in their own waters.

Progressive policies like these will help ensure that Tropic Star Lodge visitors can enjoy the spectacular fishing around Piñas Bay for another 50 years and more. It’s fun to think of my grandchildren witnessing the awesome power of a black marlin rising to a live bait for the first time, as I did at Tropic Star many years ago. In the come-and-go world of saltwater fishing, it’s good to know some things remain constant.

An expert gaff shot, and we hauled the big yellowfin onto the deck.

Great fishing like that has been the standard at Tropic Star since the beginning. The waters off Piñas Bay offer what most experts believe to be the very best shot at catching a black marlin outside of Australia, and the fishing for the other billfish species is equally impressive. Seasonal schools of tuna and dorado round out the catch, and even in the fall — considered the rainy season in Panama — the bite remains hot.

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