



PESCA GRANDE: Big black marlin, like this one caught and released by Jay Perez, attract many anglers to Tropic Star Lodge.

Make Mine Marlin

PANAMA'S PIÑAS BAY MAKES MARLIN DREAMS A REALITY
BY JOHN BROWNLEE

FISHING FOR LARGE BILLFISH ranks as one of the most exciting endeavors in all of fishing. No offshore fisherman can remain unmoved at the sight of a massive dark shape rising to a trolled bait or lure, or when a live tuna fastened to the end of the leader starts to panic because a large predator has arrived and is moving in for the kill. With any luck, that predator will be a marlin, the magnificent quarry which committed billfish anglers constantly travel the world to seek.

GUY HARVEY



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I'm one of those anglers and so found myself in Panama late last summer in search of a large Pacific blue or black marlin. Tropic Star Lodge, located along the remote south-east Pacific coast of Panama in Piñas Bay, has perfected live baiting for marlin over the years, and there's no better place to give it a try. Close to the Colombian border, Tropic Star's remote location enables you to fish waters teeming with marine life, swept here by the convergence of major currents from all over the Pacific. Baitfish school here in abundance, and that attracts large numbers of predators, including black, blue and striped marlin, sailfish and swordfish.

We visited Tropic Star at the invitation of Dr. Guy Harvey, the internationally acclaimed marine artist, scientist and conservationist. Harvey takes a group of friends and colleagues to the resort every year, and my wife Poppy and I eagerly signed on for last year's trip. "I have been going to Tropic Star since the early 1990s, when the lodge was struggling from the effects of Manuel Noriega's

CONSERVATION ORIENTED: Through the use of circle hooks, catch-and-release tactics and extensive tagging records, Tropic Star Lodge does everything it can to preserve its epic marlin fishery.

regime in Panama," Harvey said. "Since then it rebounded and over the next decade became the most sought-after big-game fishing destination in the eastern Pacific, if not in the world. A number of factors contribute to the unique Tropic Star experience.

"First, it is very remote, so just getting there is like going on a safari into pristine rainforest, set where a 4,000-foot mountain range meets the sea. It's very dramatic," he continued. "And then when sitting down for dinner in a beautiful air-conditioned restaurant with black-tie service after a day of fishing, you must remember where you are: 150 miles from civilization. Second, the fishing is very good. I have been to Tropic Star 35 times in 17 years and have been lucky on most expeditions."

The chance to tangle with a black

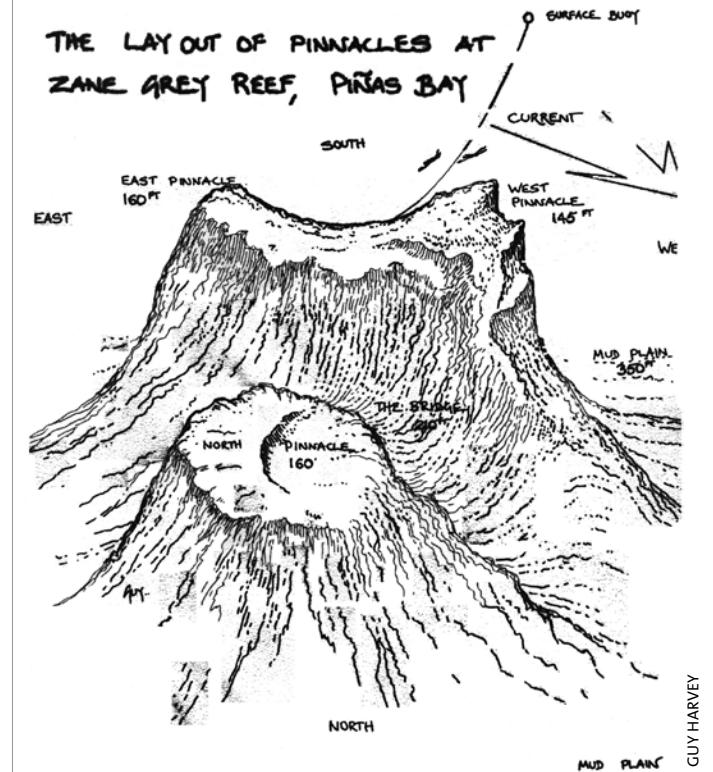
marlin brings many to Piñas Bay, including Poppy and me. Neither of us had caught a black, and this area holds large numbers of them. "Nowhere else in the eastern Pacific can an angler have such consistent opportunities to catch black marlin," Harvey explained. "The average size is 300 to 400 pounds, and a nice one is 600. There have been some bigger fish caught, and certainly a couple over 1,000 pounds have been released — notably the 1,200-pound fish caught by Neil Patrick in January of 2005 that was featured in one of my *Portraits from the Deep* TV episodes."

Given this illustrious background, we were understandably champing at the bit to get going. Our first morning, we headed to the dock and met Gustavo, captain of one of Tropic Star's 14 vintage 31-foot Bertrams. Gustavo has fished for Tropic Star for 25 years and drives the *Scandia*. At first glance I noticed the massive custom livewell occupying the center of the cockpit. The well has a conventional center section for smaller baits, and six tuna tubes, three on each side of the center well. These people are serious about live bait.

We headed out toward Zane Grey Reef, a rock shelf offshore of Piñas Bay which consists of three distinct peaks with deep valleys between them. When the currents collide with these peaks, which rise to within about 150 feet of the surface, baitfish get trapped in the eddies that form, making it center stage for billfish action. Just inside the reef line we came across a small flock of birds, and the mates put out bait-catching rigs consisting of several small feathers strung along a leader on dropper loops. As we trolled along, they jigged the line by hand, adding action to

the feathers. Within a minute we hooked several small tuna and a bonito and placed each carefully, head-down, into the tuna tubes. When all six were full, we resumed running toward the edge.

Once we reached a spot Gustavo liked, three tunas were retrieved from their tubes and quickly bridled, one by one, to very large circle hooks. The Panamanian mates rig a



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SWS TACKLE BOX

RODS: All tackle is provided, but if you bring your own, use 20- to 30-pound conventional outfits for sailfish and 50- to 80-pound conventional for marlin. Bring your own preferred casting tackle for roosterfish and other reef dwellers.

REELS: Big-game trolling reels with ample line capacity.

LINE: 30- to 50-pound mono offers the best compromise, whether trolling live tunas or dropping back when trolling strip baits.

BAIT: Live skipjack tunas or bonito, Panama belly-strip teasers and strip baits for trolling.

En Route

TROPIC STAR LODGE has an extremely efficient and organized staff that takes care of every aspect of your trip. You fly into Panama City and usually spend a night

there before boarding a morning flight aboard one of Air Panama's DeHavilland Twin Otters for the flight to Piñas Bay. On arrival it's a short panga ride to the lodge itself, which is strung along the shoreline in the innermost reaches of a secluded cove.



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Tropic Star provides a truly friendly and luxurious experience, rare anywhere and all the more amazing when you realize just how far from civilization you really are.

The resort is totally self-contained, with its own power generators, boat yard, carpentry shop, machine shop and extensive spare-parts department. It is, in essence, a small city in and of itself, and everything works flawlessly. "With the owners, Terri and Mike Andrews, investing back in the property and boats, the fleet of signature 31 Bertrams is modern and well maintained by crews who consistently out-fish any visiting hi-tech boats," according to Harvey. "The resort and the staff are first class, and they provide an exceptional, family-oriented experience."

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bridle by pulling a loop of floss through the forward part of the bait's eye socket with a bait needle. The hook then goes through both ends of the loop and is twisted to cinch the bridle tight to the face of the bait, between its eyes. When the hook is slipped under the tight part of the loop, the rig is finished, and the hook is held firmly to the bait's head. This is the same rig used by many south Florida sailfish experts, albeit on a different scale.



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BIG BAIT: Live black skipjack or yellowfin tuna bridled on circle hooks are a favorite bait for Pinās Bay marlin.

BLACK-AND-BLUE: Although blues, stripes and sails are caught at Pinās Bay, the area is known for its abundance of black marlin, like this one caught and released by Harvey Taulien (above, left).

We had two marlin in the baits that afternoon, but neither one ate. We did manage to catch several nice dorado (dolphin) on pitch baits. When fishing gets slow, the captains will pull in the oversized live baits and deploy a conventional trolling spread to cover more ground and try to locate the fish. The distinct disadvantage of live-bait trolling is that you must go slow and are therefore limited in the amount of real estate you can cover. While trolling conventional baits, including some beautiful Panama strip-baits made from both bonito and dorado bellies, we did catch several nice Pacific sailfish, including a beauty caught by my old college friend Steve Stock, who serves as president of Guy Harvey Incorporated. Still, the marlin eluded us.

Other boats had better luck. The next day, the radio crackled with reports from other Bertrams as several boats hooked blue marlin, and a nice black was caught and released by Harvey Taulien — his first — and the first of our trip. Then came the big news: A boat just down the line from us had hooked a very large black. Angler Jay Perez found himself on the right end of the rod when the big marlin ate, and most of us in the fleet could see the fish crashing across the surface from a great distance. It was obviously a big one. Perez, young and strong, settled in and fought the large black

gamely, bringing it boatside after a protracted battle for a quick photo session and a clean release. They estimated the black weighed between 600 and 700 pounds.

We were back to towing live tunas behind the *Scandia* when news came of the release, and we had barely finished celebrating Perez' catch when a huge boil erupted behind one of our outrigger baits. The mates shouted in excitement as the frantic tuna tried in vain to elude the large, dark shape that lurked beneath it. When the marlin finally crashed the bait — an event which seemed to take hours — it left a huge hole in the water where, moments before, our tuna swam.

Poppy grabbed the rod and dropped the bait back as line dumped from the reel at a furious pace. When Gustavo told her to, she threw the lever drag to "strike," and the fish came tight to the hook, greyhounding away from the boat in a series of spectacular leaps as it felt the hook point drive home. The big fish took a great deal of line from the 50-pound outfit on its initial run before settling in and going deep. Gustavo maneuvered the boat back to a point above and slightly to one side of the fish, keeping a good angle of pull at all times.

It took Poppy 45 minutes of relentless pressure to winch the fish to the surface, but the marlin was tired from its initial run and fight, and after several halfhearted leaps close to the transom, the mate had the leader. Once again, a clean release of a billfish hooked squarely in the corner of the jaw by a circle hook. It's amazing how well

these things do their job. Of course, as we all high-fived in the cockpit, the first question was, "Blue or black?" Gustavo and I thought it was a black for sure, estimating the fish at around 450 pounds, but Harvey later told us, after examining my photographs around the Tropic Star pool, that it was certainly a blue. Definitively determining the species of a mid-sized marlin is difficult, even among the experts, but Harvey is the trained marine biologist, so we went with his call.

No matter, it was a spectacular fish and an awesome catch. Both blue and black marlin are caught all year out of Tropic Star, with a smattering of striped marlin thrown in, and there's always the chance of catching a huge dolphin or yellowfin tuna. And although most people come for billfish, other species abound as well. "The inshore fishing for big roosterfish, cubera snappers and amberjack is second to none," Harvey says. "It is a tough choice to drag oneself away from the blue water to hit the rocks, but it will be very rewarding — with over 20 species available — whether you're fly-

fishing, using poppers or live bait."

This plethora of angling possibilities adds up to incredible opportunity, and once you've experienced it firsthand, you come to realize why many people, including Guy Harvey, think Tropic Star Lodge is the finest fishing resort around. It's hard to dispute their logic, and we will surely be back soon in search of that elusive black marlin. ~

SWS PLANNER

WHAT: Blue, black and striped marlin fishing, with dorado, tuna and roosterfish plentiful as well
WHEN: December through September
WHERE: Tropic Star Lodge, Piñas Bay, Panama



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LAND OF GIANTS: If you are looking to catch a big Pacific marlin like this blue, few destinations rival the action found at Terri and Mike Andrews' Tropic Star Lodge.