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FISH COLOMBIA?

Yes, Yes You Can
By Riley Love



Sailfish roam near to shore in the springtime



Morning ritual at first light on Playa de Oro. Preparing for the ride out to the fishing boats.



This is good water for blue marlin.

For every great fishery in the Americas, there has been a golden era. Whether you are fishing off the Florida Keys or Central America, life has changed in the last generation. Encroachment from resort living onto what was wild habitat, increased commercial and recreational fishing, and a general increase in the population of fishermen who with modern travel can access previously unreachable waters, has left these golden eras as wistful memories. This results in many destination fishermen seeking new horizons.

The rugged Pacific coasts of Costa Rica, Guatemala and Panama have been jewels in the crown of saltwater fishing in our hemisphere. But these fisheries' best times lie in their past, not in their future. Long have we waited for an opening of the western coast of Colombia, a land embroiled in the strife of drug wars and guerilla violence. It has lingered for us relatively untouched ... until now.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE VIOLENCE OF COLOMBIA

The Spanish arrived on the Caribbean side of the country in 1499. The first settlement was Santa Marta, then Cartagena. The discovery of gold both in the tombs of the indigenous peoples as well as trade sparked the brutal conquest of those societies with expansion and colonization reaching what would become Bogota. Records describe the blood of the Amerindians left upon the ground beneath the hooves of their horses. In 1717, Bogota became the capital of the Viceroyalty of New Granada.

The 1700s were marked by bloody rebellions from non-subjugated Indian tribes and subsequent retribution by the Spanish. This stoked further rebellion and was the birth of guerilla-style warfare. Spain was weakening through the century in Europe and these events weakened it in the colony. The stage was set for revolution.

Seizing on the opportunity, Simon Bolivar arrived from Venezuela in 1819. After defeating the Spanish, he used his "Decree of War to the Death," to justify multiple executions of the citizens of Spain. Bolivar, author of 100 battles, had liberated South America completely by 1821. Grand Colombia, a federal model, was thus formed and included present-day Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador and Panama. John Quincy Adams called it one of the most powerful nations on earth. Skirmishes and internal revolts caused it to dissolve a year after Bolivar's death in 1831, ending his dream of a federalist Latin America.

The background of modern paramilitary groups jockeying for control of Colombia dates to the 1850s. Most of the country was publicly owned land but private landowners developed their own armed groups and gained control over vast amounts of property. This plunged the country into a quasi-dark age of

hierarchical values when other parts of Latin America were developing more advanced social structures and diverse economies. Over the next three decades these groups struggled for control with the central government and Catholic church. Coffee prices collapsed in 1890 and the Thousand Day War of 1899 between the Liberal and Conservative parties led to a victory for the conservative groups and a weakened central government. An estimated 100,000 were killed.

Colombia entered the first half of the 20th century far behind its neighbors in the new world. In 1948 the recently elected Liberal president was assassinated and the country was plunged into the most bitter time of its history referred to as "La Violencia," lasting until 1957. Another precipitating event occurred in 1928 when Colombian troops, under orders from the United Fruit Company (now Chiquita Brands International) killed a large number of striking workers, alleg-

ing a communist revolution. This was a partial basis for Nobel prize winner Gabriel Garcia Marquez's "One Hundred Years of Solitude."

Liberal groups combined with communists fought conservative militias. More than 200,000 people, mainly rural peasants, were killed and about 1.5 million were displaced. The Conservative elite emerged as victors. They forged an alliance with the Liberals to alternate control of public office every four years, ceasing their conflict. All official posts were shared between them and others interest groups were excluded, an arrangement which lasted 16 years. This brings us to the 1960s.

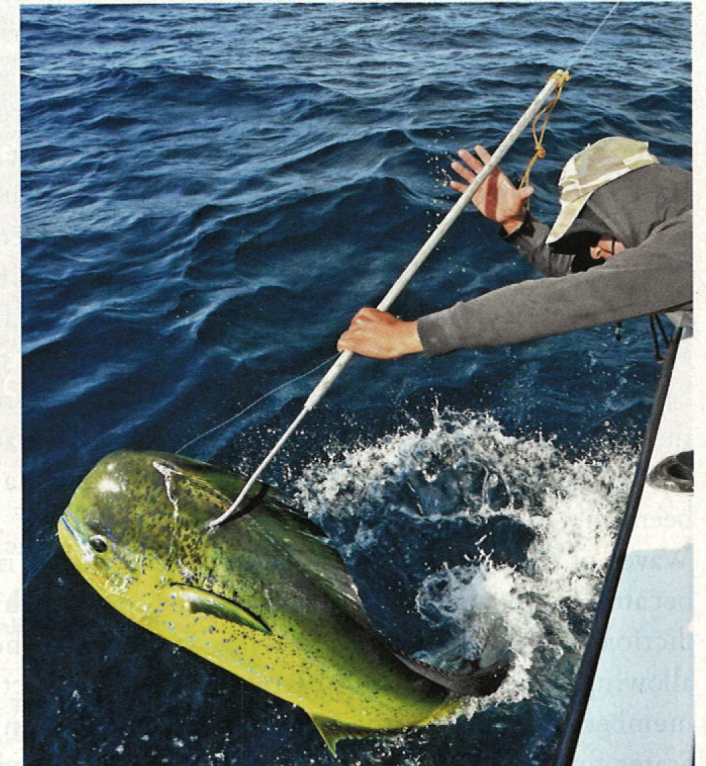
Today's conflicts largely stem from the emergence of far-left paramilitary organizations battling against far-right and government group actions against farmers in areas threatening to become independent. These organizations had not been granted amnesty after La Violencia. Foremost among these

was the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and then the National Liberation Army (ELN), which had been largely inspired by Che Guevara's foco philosophy for initiating revolution from Cuba. These groups financed themselves through drug trade, extortion and kidnappings.

The explosion of cocaine sales, which exceeded marijuana, tobacco and emeralds as exports, through organized crime into the United States marked the advent of the 1970s. M-19 rose as another paramilitary group impacting Colombian politics. Four major drug cartels became chiefdoms of power. Pablo Escobar formed the Medellin cartel and eventually made Forbes magazine's list of the richest men in the world. Story has it that the cartel spent \$1,000 per week just for rubber bands to wrap their stacks of cash. Escobar developed housing and other amenities for the poor and ran for a seat in the Colombian congress, winning an



LEFT: The excitement of Pacific sailfish.



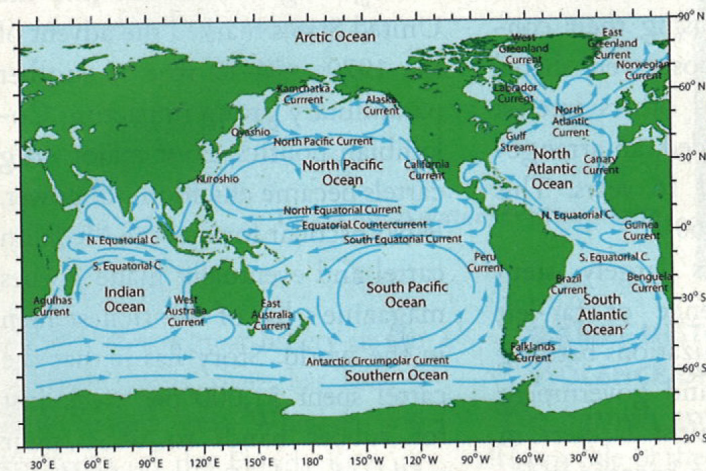
RIGHT: Lots of big dorado offshore here, waiting for a dinner invitation.



LEFT: Medellín is a beautiful and modern city.



RIGHT: Inshore fishing targets cubera snapper.



alternative position. But his growing list of atrocities became evident including the murder of policemen and judges. He was killed in a shootout with authorities in 1993. War between the cartels caused Colombia to become the murder capital of the world, as well as the cocaine capital. The cartels formed their own narco-paramilitaries, which dominated the countryside and displaced residents from their lands. Violence increased through the 1980s and 1990s.

The American taxpayer has been hip-deep in involvement. Waves of millions of U.S. dollars became billions as aid for interdiction. An extradition treaty allowing Colombian drug cartel members to be sent to the United States for trial where they could

exert little influence on their fate was also used to help dismantle the cartels. Success had the unintended consequence of pushing cocaine cultivation deeper into FARC-controlled land enhancing their funding and control. The country has been the world's leader in cocaine production. A fair description of the multiple conflicts through the decades and the effect on Colombia's culture and economy as well as the death of so many citizens, particularly the rural poor—one third of which were children, would more than take up the space of this entire magazine. It has been the longest ongoing armed conflict in the Americas.

In 2016 a lengthy peace process was negotiated with the help of

the international community, and a final agreement for a ceasefire and cessation of hostilities was signed by both FARC and the government. President Juan Manuel Santos was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts to end the 50-year-old conflict that had taken 220,000 lives and displaced more than 6 million people. Guerrilla conflicts continue to wax and wane. Cocaine production is high.

COLOMBIA TODAY

So, is Colombia safe now for the venturing fisherman? Tourism increased from 600,000 annual visitors in 2007 to 6 million in 2017. Reviewing the question through multiple travel advisories, the answer is yes. There are a number of

recommendations such as traveling in groups around the cities, avoiding bad areas, not flashing your valuables, which would be in effect anywhere. Medellín, once known as the most dangerous city now has a violent crime rate lower than many American cities including St Louis, Baltimore and New Orleans. There are areas to avoid, such as drug traffic areas near the borders and the city of Buenaventura on the Pacific coast, which is still a good town to trade a bag of drugs for an automatic weapon on the corner.

Flying into Medellín for the first time was a jaw-dropping experience. I have lost count of the dozens of fishing trips I have taken over the last 50 years into Latin American countries. Anticipating a third-world experience, the airport was an urbane example of modern design. Rolling up the sides of the Aburra Valley, Medellín is strikingly beautiful. Almost a mile in elevation, it is known as the "City of Eternal Spring," for its mild climate and low humidity. The new atmosphere of peace and prosperity is characterized by the mega-structure of the east tunnel: five miles of ventilated, fire engineered and lighted underground road, the longest in Latin America. It cuts the time from downtown to the airport from 45 to 18 minutes.

The hotels are modern and fashionable. We stayed at the Hotel Diez, which was as nice as a hotel in the United States and a real bargain. It sits in an area known as The Poblado, which is one of the safest areas in town as well as loaded with restaurants, pubs and other hotels. The restaurants are

SERIOUS SPORTFISHING HARDWARE



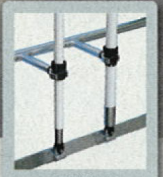
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Clockwise from top left: A brightly colored long finned seabass. The palm ruff bears some resemblance to a deep-water amberjack. Star studded grouper are not so bizarre as the Pacific bearded brotula.

a bargain as well and the traveler enjoys an excellent currency exchange rate. There is a really cool vibe in the restaurant scene at night. Young Colombians fill the tables; they are well-dressed and chic by American and European standards. You would be hard pressed to wear out the drinking and dining offerings of Medellin. The citizens love their city like San Franciscans and Chicagoans love their homes.

HEADING FOR THE COAST

There are two commercial flights per day to Bahia Solano, the target for Pacific seaboard fishing. We elected a charter, which opens some other destinations with an airstrip such as Bahia Cupica, just a bit north. This is the Choco region, a hotspot of

global biodiversity. Encountering a true work of art stirs the observer's soul forever. This is part of the experience of flying through the dry 15,000-foot Andes west of Medellin, as arid sierra landscape transitions to verdant jungle along the 126-mile air course. Colombia rates second in the world in biodiversity only to Brazil, which is seven times larger.

The strategy of selecting accommodations comes down to moving further out from Bahia Solano to minimize the morning run to the best fishing spots. This took us another 20 minutes by boat up to Huinas beach and the Playa de Oro Lodge. Nestled into a natural setting on the beach it was a perfect combination of reasonable comfort, good food and great personalities. Steve Peak was the owner of two

boats and our main man in outfitting an all-inclusive fishing package. Alejandro Linares and Camilio Marulanda were our guides. Both were great, experienced fishermen with good command of English.

THE FISHERY

The west-to-east flow of the Northern Equatorial Counter Current across the broad expanse of the Pacific Ocean is a key to the remarkable sport fishing along the coasts of Guatemala, Costa Rica and Panama. Running beneath the warm, still, poorly oxygenated surface water, it is cooler and contains much more oxygen and nutrients that are stairstep elements for phytoplankton and zooplankton genesis. This leads to the next step of small food fish for the great pelagic predators such as

billfish and tuna, which are also trafficked in their juvenile stages of development along the current's flow. These are the targets of the destination fishermen. Nearing the coast, as the current encounters underwater structure and as weather pushes away the top layer of warm lifeless water, upwellings are created. These are crucial in bringing this vibrant flow to the surface and they are a primary creative force in the wondrous fisheries of these countries.

Regarding the Choco coast, it is not so directly impacted by the same countercurrent. The Peru current, produced by Coriolis forces around the south pole brings cold water up the coast of South America from Antarctica and swings counterclockwise westward, contributing to the Southern Equatorial current. Far offshore, the conflicting flows of these two currents create a clockwise gyre called the Colombia current. Over the past two decades, a north-running countercurrent along the coast pushed by the Panama wind jet has been well described. This creates an upwelling of water in its center and has been named The Choco Countercurrent.

Like all Pacific coastlines of the Americas, it is rugged and volcanic. There are miles of inshore structure for casting for Cubera snapper, jacks and mackerel. Tarpon (*Megalops atlanticus*, denoting its Atlantic origin), which were first described migrating through the Panama Canal by Samuel Hildebrand in 1937, can be targeted along with large snook where rivers flow into the sea along this coast. Colombia does not enjoy underwater moun-

tains such as Zane Grey Reef and Hannibal Bank off Panama to the north. It does benefit from a steep ledge, dropping several thousand feet just a few minutes' run out of the harbor. The angler finds himself fishing in the current immediately. The "hot season" coincides with the arrival of huge schools of sardines and is several months later in the spring than the Central American neighbors to the north. This further opens the calendar for the destination angler.

EXCLUSIVE FISHING ZONES

Studies of the impact of commercial fishing on both coasts of Colombia began a generation ago and stressful overfishing was perceived. This resulted in the creation of four marine protected areas to protect biological integrity of the systems, between 1966 and 1981. Large trawlers were banned, and exclusive rights were granted to artisanal fishermen for much of the coastline off Bahia Solano. Three more were created between 1983 and 1991. The modern Choco Exclusive Fishing Zone was established in 2008 and extends 2.5 nautical miles seaward. It prohibits gillnets, seines and exploratory commercial trawlers. It does allow artisanal longlines. Hopefully, this will mitigate for a sustained sportfishing environment for many years to come.

The experience of fishing here is that the environment remains near pristine. Mile after mile of natural beauty, beaches without footprints and broad ocean horizons without other boats from sunrise to sunset strike an inner chord for the destination angler. It is the art of the natural world. 🐟

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



RILEY LOVE is a physician and writer living in Kentucky. Some of his first steps brought him to the water's edge and he has been traveling the world to fish ever since. Beginning with the lakes and streams of the Midwest, he is part of a three-generation tradition of discovering back-country destinations for sport fishing on multiple continents.

After 50 years of fishing travel, his only goals are to go somewhere new and try something different again this year. He also has a home in Key Largo, Fla., where he regularly fishes and also scuba dives. He has published more than two dozen articles on a variety of subjects but his chief interest is the fact and fiction of fishing. He is a member of the International Game Fish Association and The Billfish Foundation.