

# { There's only one cure for the Costa Rican blues }



Costa Rica, nestled in the thin strip between the bottom of Mexico and South America, is acknowledged as one of the best gamefishing destinations on the planet. Riley Love opens the door to this must-see adventure.

AUTHOR: RILEY LOVE  
PHOTOGRAPHY: RILEY LOVE; TIM SIMPSON; RHYS MARTIN

It is a sound that resonates like no other. Sometimes the sound pierces my dreams and I sit upright in the dark of night, awakened from a dream that has taken me far from shore. The sound is the high-pitched scream that a big Penn International makes when a heavy fish hooks up.

This time it's real. The morning is like many others before it. I'm a dozen miles offshore from the pristine forests of Costa Rica's southern Pacific seaboard, the strike is on and the reel's singing loudly. There really is only one animal in these waters that smokes a reel quite like it. As it erupts from the surface 300m behind us, the captain echoes what the reel's scream has already told us: "Blue marlin!"

I've been coming to Costa Rica on and off for 30 years. In the old days there were challenges with finding boats and accommodation, but now luxury hotels with big marinas are even overshadowing abundant fishing operations.

Costa Rica (which is Spanish for 'Rich Coast') is a world-class destination for ecotourism. Almost 25 per cent of the land has been delegated for parks and reserves, reputedly the highest proportion of any country in the world. It boasts almost 4 per cent of the world's biodiversity, with 500,000 species of flora and fauna.

Like all of the Americas, the Pacific coast is rugged. Tectonics have produced mountainous escarpments that fall dramatically into the sea, and the water becomes deep and blue right offshore. These waters of the Central Americas contain a spectacular number of sportfish.



Bull dolphinfish make a welcome addition.

### WHY SO FISH-RICH?

To understand why this area of Pacific coast is so productive for fishing, one must understand the effects of ocean currents. Evaporation causes water at the surface to become more saline and dense so it sinks, where it can typically spend one to two thousand years in the cold depths before resurfacing. Deep water has a greater content of nutrients. This deep water is put into motion by the earth's rotation, or the 'Coriolis force', which causes ocean currents to rotate in opposite directions in the northern and southern hemispheres – clockwise south of the equator, counterclockwise north. This twisting movement of water is called a 'gyre'.

The Peruvian Current (formerly the Humboldt Current) is the manifestation of the South Pacific gyre. It carries cold, deep water from near Antarctica out into the southern Pacific Ocean. This force causes the altitude of the water in the region to rise. As it encounters the warm, languid waters of the western Pacific, it runs back 'downhill' towards Central and South America, as part of the Equatorial Counter currents. They flow about four degrees south and north of the equator and are more than 300 miles wide. The temperature difference between the eastern and western parts of the ocean also causes strong winds to blow the water in an easterly direction.

These currents continue about 150m under the surface until they encounter shelves of underwater structure. This causes a massive upwelling of water towards the surface. The upwelling also replaces warm surface water that has been moved by the wind. The overly warm upper layer is always

present in the western Pacific, and without these forces would occupy the eastern area as well.

As long as these elements of nature work together, the seawater here has a greater content of oxygen and nutrients, and less salinity, compared to the Atlantic side of Central America. These ocean-water aspects contribute to the presence of many species of sea life that move both with and independent of the current. This oxygen and nutrient-rich flow carries the basis for the lowest strata of the food chain, which then transfers this bounty up to the next levels of plankton and smaller fish, and so onwards.

Thus, a path of migration of ocean animals is formed. Ultimately, the pelagic species, including the giant predators, are drawn towards the western shore of Central America. Here, they accumulate in areas rich with baitfish and on prominent features of underwater topography.

Near shore, wind and weather dominate the movement of the water. The calendar year is divided into the wet and dry seasons; cold currents create a dry climate, while warm currents produce wetter weather. In the north and the south, billfish migrate away from the equator as the water warms and moves.

### THE SEASONS

Gamefish appear with reasonable predictability. However, it is the northward migration of huge numbers of Pacific sailfish along the Central American coast that defines the fishing season. This largely coincides with the presence of marlin, dolphinfish, tuna and other game species. When the sailfish are present in good numbers, there is an opportunity to see 20 or 30 fish in a single day.

The southern and central shores of Costa Rica will experience this abundance of sails sometimes as early as December, but usually resolving in April or May. It is a season of about four months, ended by the time the wet season begins in June. There are exceptions, such as a resurgence of blue and black marlin in July and August. Inshore fishing, which mainly focuses on snapper species and the exotic roosterfish, persists all year round. And anglers interested in tarpon and snook can target the rivers that meet the Atlantic.

Information about sailfish movements in the region, gained from PSAT (satellite) tags, shows some variability in their movement. Some head back out to sea, a few stay in Costa Rican waters, but most move northward towards Nicaragua and Guatemala.



### COSTA RICAN TECHNIQUES

Whether you're fishing north of Flamingo or south into Panama, the fishing technique that all captains practise for sailfish is bait-and-switch. Typical spreads include deadbaits, often with skirts, well back from the outriggers. Frequently, another 'mop up' line even further back will be trolled from the flybridge to entice a fish that has fallen back in the spread. But the action is more often focused on the flat lines, which are always armed with skirted lures; usually medium or large heads.

Birds or other teasers are added to the flat lines, or pulled behind the boat. The emphasis is to get a turned-on sail into the spread behind the lures, and then to drop back a bait, which here in Golfito means a livie. When the fish is behind the lure, the deckie will typically retract the lure into the boat when the bait is presented, although Capt Rafael liked to leave his lures in place. The sailfish are extremely reliable when it comes to switching their attention to the new offering and striking right away.

### HEADING FOR BLUEWATER

Along the Pacific coast of Costa Rica, professional captains vary their technique to some degree, as all fishermen do; however, there is real consistency in several ways. They all practise bait-and-switch; they all focus on conservation of the fishery; and they use circle hooks in their fresh and live baits. Their hook-up rate is astronomical.

The exotic roosterfish is an inshore species that is available year-round in Costa Rica.

The Pacific shore of Costa Rica is divided into three parts. The northern aspect is the State of Guanacaste, where the main fishing destinations are the towns of Tamarindo and Playa de Coco, and the marina at Flamingo. In the central part, the village of Quepos and the big, new marina at Los Suenos are the primary targets. Fishing for sailfish along this coast during the season is only potentially surpassed by Guatemala in this hemisphere.

### FISHING THE SOUTHERN FRONTIER

The end point for my most recent trip was Roy's Zancudo lodge, located in the Golfo Dulce, near the southern frontier (with Panama). The prospects here were for excellence in variety, including inshore and offshore species. Capt Roy Ventura first came to Costa Rica in the 1950s, and the lodge boasts a history of 50 IGFA World Records. The area is accessible via a domestic carrier into Golfito or Puerto Jimenez.

The first order of business each

morning was acquiring livebait. Diving pelicans reveal the location of big schools of threadfin herring and blue runners across the expanse of the Golfo Dulce. Jiggling silver hooks while chasing the schools on the depth sounders gets enough livies to supplement a day of inshore or offshore strategies.

Our two boats were captained by Rafael Barrett and Danny Roberto. Capt Barrett has 35 years of sportsfishing experience, starting out at the legendary Club Pacifico of Panama in the 1970s. This was the first fishing lodge to exist in the western aspect of Central America.

The condition of the water itself is what brings the great schools of squid and sardines – and the sailfish follow. Capt Ventura thinks that a large, gentle whirlpool transpires out from the Golfo Dulce and gives this area its special quality. Twenty-mile runs to the north or south target hotspots of sailfish activity. Numbers of sails can sometimes be spotted sunning or jumping before the lines go out. To my eye, the water had been a very good colour of blue since we left the coast but, as we went further, it improved to a clean and azure hue that was beyond compare.

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“Capt Rafael takes bait-and-switch fishing to the next level.”

Among the Costa Ricans, the jury is in concerning the use of circle hooks – and there are no more arguments to be settled. When fishing baits, they are superior in hook-up ratios and result in fewer fish mortalities from internal hook damage.

### BAIT-AND-SWITCH STRATEGY

Capt Rafael takes bait-and-switch fishing to the next level. He trolls solely with artificial lures, a combination of skirted heads and bird teasers, from outriggers as well as flat lines. When a sailfish appears in his spread, he makes his switches exclusively with livebaits. These are tethered to a circle hook. There is a definite logic to his plan. He is able to troll at higher speeds, and manoeuvre freely, to cover more territory while dragging these lures. Then he is able to combine this with the excellent hook-up success of livebaits and circle hooks.

His plan was a killer. Of the first 20 sails that entered the spread, all were caught and all except one were taken on the switched-out livebait. Overall, nearly three out of four sailfish that were initially spotted behind the lures were landed. Additionally, with the

popularity of catching sails on fly, teasing up hot fish with lures is de rigueur to enticing them close enough to offer a feather or popper from a fly rod. Because of the number of sailfish available, Costa Rica is a great place to bring your fly rod for this type of adventure.

When targeting marlin, the plan is different. Along the Central American coast are intermittent underwater banks or seamounts. Some of these arise from depths of thousands of feet to very near the surface. Some have grown famous, such as Zane Grey Reef or Hannibal Bank. These structures stand before currents from the open ocean and hold marlin and other pelagic species. Marlin are usually caught trolling lures or on live, small tuna trolled with a large circle hook around the undersea pinnacles.

In Panama, many boats sport tuna tubes with automatic pumps to keep these baits alive and at the ready.

These are not frequently seen in the Costa Rican boats, where the sailfish outnumber the marlin.

### THIS IS LIVING!

Native Costa Ricans (or ‘Ticos’), use the Spanish term Pura Vida, literally meaning ‘pure life’, to explain the lifestyle here. When I asked Capt Ventura, “Why fish Costa Rica?” he answered like a true native.

“This is the Switzerland of Central America,” he explained. “Since the revolution in 1948, this has been the most peaceful and politically stable government south of the [United] States. They don’t even have an army. They emphasise education, and welcome visitors with open arms. If Costa Ricans are extreme about anything, it’s ecology. So coming here you get it all – a tremendous variety of fishing, the natural splendour of Costa Rica, and the warmest, friendliest people you’ll find anywhere.”

You can’t ask for more than that. ☑

Whether you hook them on trolled lures or switch them to bait or fly, Costa Rica’s plentiful sailfish are the main attraction. The scenery is also stunning.

